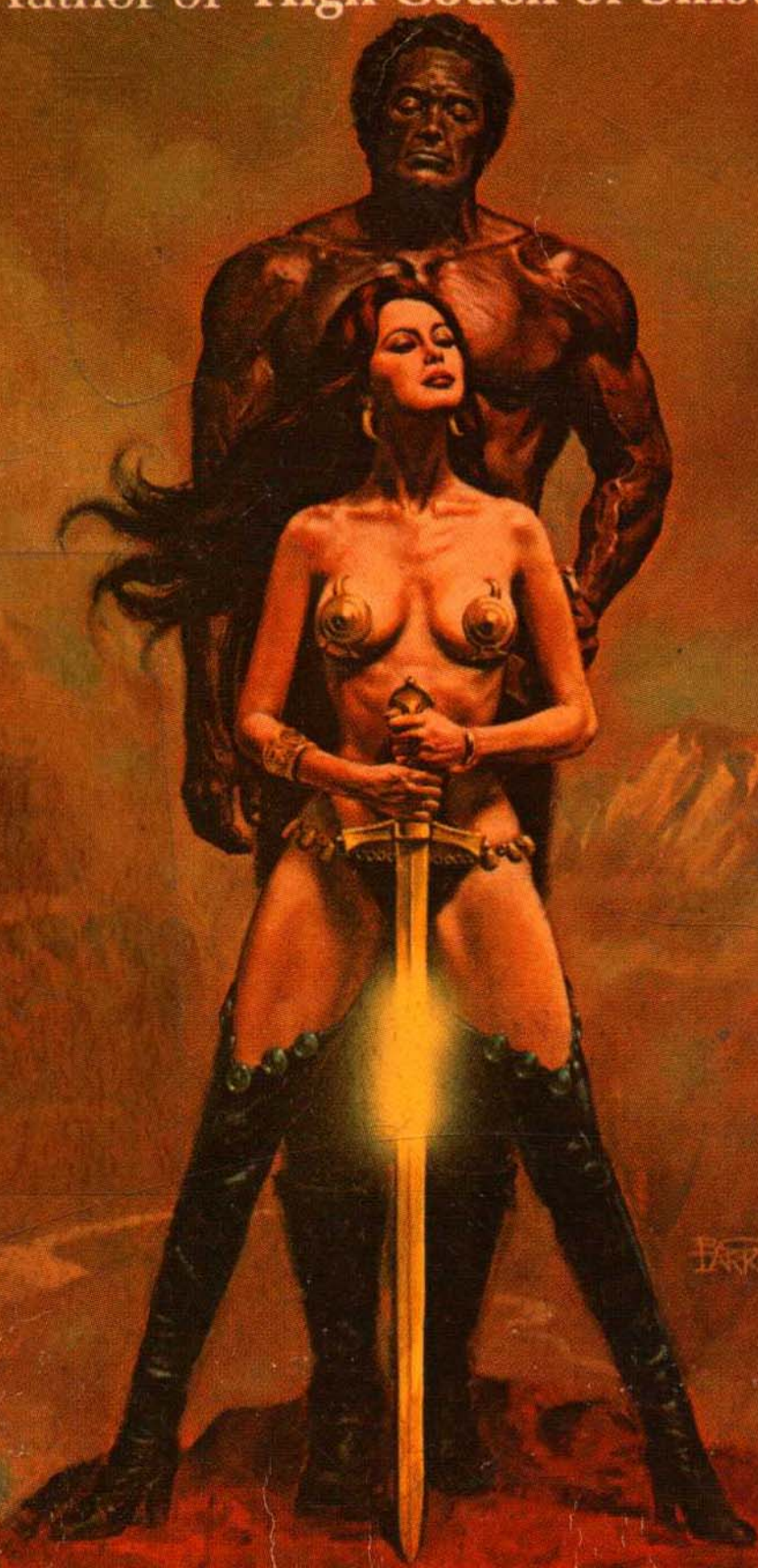


Enslaved on the planet Silistra,
tomorrow's most beautiful courtesan
unleashes the powers of the gods.

The Golden Sword

by Janet E. Morris

Author of High Couch of Silistra



THE GOLDEN SWORD



Janet E. Morris



THE GOLDEN SWORD
Bantam edition / December 1977

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1977 by Janet E. Morris.

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission.

For information address: Bantam Books, Inc.

ISBN 0-553-11276-7

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a bantam, is registered in the United States Patent Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, Inc., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

to
Sydney Weinberg

The Golden Sword



Contents

	<i>Replication</i>	1
I.	Ors Yris-tera	3
II.	Chosen Son of Tar-Kesa	35
III.	Crell	71
	<i>Clearing the Way</i>	99
IV.	Tiaskchan	101
V.	The Golden Sword	149
	<i>Stalking</i>	185
VI.	The Ebvrasea	187
VII.	The Liaison First	241
	<i>The Viable</i>	271
VIII.	Well Astria Revisited	273
IX.	"I Am the Hest and the Sort"	323
	Postscript	339
	Glossary	349
	Silistrian Calendar	369

Replication

The dayglass, alone, posited upon the black square of controlling Will on the board of catalysts.

As events are conceived by all-pervading Will and brought into time by the Weathers, so are they given spatial reality by Replication.

Replication gives instruction and molds the world in its image.

Replication has no foes, nor can a thousand armies stand against it. There is no obstructing the time of Replication, when the crux wind blows across the earth and all things assume their true nature.

The wind of the First Weather blows across the sea and the tides are remade in their rhythm. It blows upon the land and great forests are tumbled to the ground. In this way is the old made new and that which has served its purpose cleared away. In such times it services one to delve into one's own fitness and make ready.

Adjuration: The dayglass is upended and the salts begin the journey that divines time within space. Each grain must wait its turn and pass through the narrowed middle in a predetermined sequence. No grain may refuse to pass from top to bottom, nor is the order of passage subject to alteration or review. Should a stubborn grain thwart its destiny it will be ground to bits by its fellows and the resultant powder will in the end assume its place.

With the woman as agent:

Around the waist there is nothing. That task to be accomplished is of such gravity that a chald of eighteen chains becomes meaningless by comparison.

The inward ear hears success and is not discouraged by the message. Replication suspends natural law. That which is folly by reason is demanded in times of Replication.

She receives the light of the north star Clous into her right hand and is not blinded by its beauty. In times of Replication, when only that which is preordained may be done, a material sign is always given at the outset.

Adjuration: She who receives the light knows herself not exalted, but drafted into exacting service.

*—excerpted from Ors Yris-tera
(Book of the Weathers of Life),
by the dharen Khys,
hide-year sixty-three*

I. Ors Yris-tera

In the bloody sun's rising, the desert was a sea of gore, the crack-riddled, barren earth between it and the ravening crags east and west a vitrified corpse. The fuming sun straddled the mountains, triumphant. Vanquished was the beneficent night. All creatures great and small scuttled for cover, lest the vampire in the sky suck them dry of life.

A dry wind sprang up out of the desert. From the southwest it came, driving the sand before it in great clouds. Red-dark up from the south met the dawn and devoured it. Deracou, the wind that devours, is such a storm called in Parset. Deracou stalked the cloaked figure. The sighing, groaning sand it drove scoured the dead sea bottom, until every crack was filled, making it again sea; roaring sea, sea of sand. Deracou claimed the waste, covered it, drowned it, and the high tide wave of it made once again shore of the rocky place where the still form lay. I lay quiet as the desert, back turned to its courting. As it had claimed the cracked wasted dead sea, so would Deracou claim me.

Out of caprice, it reached out its arm to me, when I thought I had escaped. The temptation was strong

within me to sleep. To let my body be covered forever by the sand, to take the peace nature offered. I had, after all, fulfilled the chaldra of the mother. To fulfill the chaldra of the soil, to give back what I had borrowed, to die here upon Silistra—indeed, the temptation was strong within me.

The Shaper's seal sign of my father, its great spiral, myriad points of light worked into my cloak's back, glittered and twinkled before my sand-sealed eyes. My father, it said, did not deliver me home to Silistra, to the Parset Desert, to die. My father, it reminded me, had need of me. My father, Estrazi, it cajoled, would expect more from his daughter.

I lay, arms crossed over my head, with the cloak pulled close about me. When the south wind died away, all that could be seen of me was the scintillating spiral sparkling in the sand.

The receding wind bore the darkness with it, and the light of sun's rising was again upon the land. It rainbowed the Shaper's seal that was upon the cloak that my father had given his daughter.

Sensation consumed me. My eyes and nose and mouth were filled with grit. My swollen tongue was unable to give comfort to my cracked and blistered lips. My savaged feet throbbed and pulsed.

Surely, I told myself, my father had good reason for depositing me here. Doubtless, I comforted myself as I lay in the dark under my cloak, that reason would be made clear. My lungs burned and ached. They had been hard put to adjust to the thinner Silistran air, although it was Silistran air I had breathed for three hundred years, until my need to discharge the chaldra of the mother had led me to the Falls of Santha, to the cavern beneath them, and to Mi'ysten.

I thought of Mi'ysten, that world out of time, of Estrazi and Raet, child of the Shapers, while my body lay resting. I could not ask more from my tortured flesh, not now, with the heat of the day upon the land.

Estrazi, my father, for whom I had forsaken my

position as Well-Keepress of Astria, for whom I had searched so long; it was he who had put me here. By his design was I created, in his hands was I pawn. On Mi'ysten had I given back to him his ring that I had worn threaded through my chald across the plain to Arlet, amid the mountains of the Sabembe range, below the Falls of Santha. Even in the solitary confinement of the crystal cube of Mi'ysten had I worn it, even while at the mercy of Raet had I retained it. To give it back to him. To discharge my chaldra, my responsibility and my duty, to my dead mother, Had-rath, had I withstood Raet and met with Estrazi upon his world, Mi'ysten.

And when it was done, when the ring was removed by my hand from my chald belt of interwoven chains and placed in the bronze-glowing hand of my father, Estrazi, I had found myself, naked but for cloak and chald, upon my back in the Parset desert, looking upon the constellations of the night sky of Silistra. So many questions unanswered, he had delivered me home. I had lain a long while looking up at the sky. That the sand under me was Parset sand I had determined from the placement of the stars above me. Groistu, the stones-wielder, was only half-risen in the north. Wiurer, the winged hulion, held court directly above Groistu's head. The tip of his tufted left ear, where the north star Clous twinkled, was barely discernible upon the horizon. From no other place upon Silistra would the night sky so display herself.

I had wept for joy, to feel Silistra again supporting my flesh, to breathe the thinner, righter air of the planet of my birth. I had not thought, then, of what the desert day would bring. I had been so long away from the cycle of day and night, and from weather, and from nature herself, I had forgotten. But the morning sun taught me, after I had wasted the night cool in introspection. I quickly relearned my vulnerability. My Mi'ysten schooling did me little good. I had shaped water, creating a bare trickle with my limited power, and the desert sucked it away. As it tried

to suck away my life, in the three days that followed. By the north star Clous, and the crouching crags of the southernmost tip of the Sabembe range, did I set my course, northeast to Arlet.

I had, I reminded myself in the dark of my tented cloak, come far in three days. I blew breath hard out of my mouth, trying to spit the grit from my gullet.

In a little while, I would set out again. I was safe, in the heat of the day, from dorkat, the stalking carnivore, from slitsa, the slithering fork-tongued, from friy-sou, the leather-winged scavenger, and from all that scuttled and crawled upon the desert sands. In the heat of the day, the desert slept. Doubtless I could sleep, unmolested. Truly, I had no choice. My limbs would no longer obey me, and my dreaming mind would no longer hold a train of thought. I sank into the cool dark, where pain could not find me, nor heat, nor hunger, nor thirst.

I dreamed of Raet, son of the Shapers, and that he worked his will once again in the worlds of time and space. I dreamed that he came and bound my hands behind me, and caused my chald-belt to rust and fall from my body. I knelt where it had fallen, but it was only powder on the sand. I protested to him, and he replied to me that I could not be allowed to interfere. And my father was beside him, nodding, the bronze glow from his skin growing brighter and brighter, until I buried my head in the sand to shield my eyes from the glare. And I was lifted up from the ground; Raet's arms were so hot they seared my skin. But that was wrong. Mi'ysten flesh is always cool. I struggled, crying out.

"It is more than a jeweled cloak Deracou has blown you, Cahndor." The voice belonged to the face that swam blurred before me. It was a Parset face, dusky brown, severe; the whites of the eyes staring into mine were softened by the Parset nictitating membrane. The language was Parset, and my sluggish mind took long to make sense of it. The sun's set shad-

owed the forms before me. Dreamecho chased their words into my ears.

I would have raised my hands to wipe the sand and sleep from my eyes. I could not move them. But I knew I no longer dreamed, for my body's complaints were loud within me, the pain a rippling film between me and the shadowed forms bending down in the fading light.

I opened my mouth to speak, to explain, but no sound could I coax from my parched throat.

And then I smelled it. My nostrils drank first, of the particles the air carried to me. I will never forget the strength of that odor, the coolness, the life my nose and throat received from the very air. Water. It was on my lips and in my mouth and spreading through my dust-covered innards. The feel of it as it dribbled upon my chin will stay with me as long as I live. My throat knew no longer how to swallow, my tongue had forgotten its task.

The faces in front of me sharpened, took focus. I tried with my eyes to thank them. I managed a wordless sound. I felt again the bladder's rim against my lips, the ecstasy of the liquid in my mouth. There was an arm under my head, hands at my throat. The cloak fell away.

"Quiet, little crell, do not waste your strength." The voice came from above and behind me. I was held, high in the air. Strong arms supported me, as if I weighed nothing. My abraded flesh felt tight-curved hairs, moist and warm, where he held me to him. I remembered. Cahndor, one had called another. "Will of the sand" does that word mean. And crell, one had called me. I tried to protest. I was Estri Hadrath diet Estrazi, former Well-Keypress of Astria, surely no crell. Crell is a Parset word, for nowhere else upon Silistra does such a status exist. A crell is other than chaldless, other than human; that beast of burden which walks upon two legs rather than four. But my protest came out a moan, and I sank back exhausted, my head against the dark chest of the man that held me, my

gaze lost in the forest of curling black hair upon it. Tiny beads of sweat meandered among the hairs, split in two by the root shafts, and in two again.

"Will she live, Hael? What think you?" came the voice from above and behind.

A face loomed close to mine; breath tickled my cheek. It was a bearded face, and that beard was curled and dressed and beaded and gray with dust.

"Would you raise apprei here, and rest the night and day with her? If so, I could be sure of it. Without shelter and attention, I cannot say."

"I would not lose the time," the deeper voice of he who held me came again.

"Then, Cahndor, I think her chances slim." The bearded face receded from my sight. A hand touched my face, my brow, raised the lids of my eyes. There was a roaring in my ears, a great pulsing beat in my head. It seemed unimportant what they said, what they did. Only sleep mattered to me, sleep and escape from my body.

There was silence then, and I felt the stride of he who held me, he whom the other had called Cahndor. I tried to open my eyes to see, but my lids were weighty beyond my strength.

I smelled the threx before I saw it; the warm-damp musty smell that belongs to the great four-legged omnivore who is the preferred riding beast of Silistra.

I coaxed my lids open once more, as I was shifted from one pair of arms to another. Before me I saw, in the fading light, the carved and tooled Parset saddle, with rolls of bright-colored web-cloth strapped around it. The short-coupled back upon which the saddle rested was sand and shadow, dark at the withers, dappling light toward the barrel. The threx's broad chest, parallel to my face where I was held well off the ground, gave me the impression of immense size. Then my sight of it was obscured by a muscular, dusk-dark back, upon which my father's cloak, with the Mi'ysten Shaper's seal, had been carelessly

draped. He who wore the cloak swung up in the saddle, and held out his arms from the back of the dancing threx toward me. I was placed in those arms and lifted up onto the threx's back, laid across the saddle before the great beast's rider, so that the grip dug into my right hip, and my hair, flowing loose, almost dragged the ground by the threx's tripart hooves.

The blood rushed to my head, and the red-grained pulsing swallowed my sight.

I felt a callused hand upon the small of my back, large, rough. Then the threx leaped into motion under me, the air was driven from my lungs, and I was glad of the steadying hand. Sand and grit thrown up by its hooves filled my nose and mouth and eyes, pelted my skin. The ground beneath my head rushed by under me, blurred into a dark band. No longer could I see the cracked earth, the jumbled rock, the coarse jeweled sand.

Endlessly did the threx plunge across the barren dead sea floor, endlessly did I suffer the shower of clodded earth its hooves kicked up. When dark was full upon us, when I thought I could not fight for one more breath, the Parset slid the choppy-gaited beast to a halt so abruptly that in its rearing one of those rock-hard hooves grazed my temple.

He who wore the Shaper's cloak vaulted from the threx's back. His grip upon me removed, I felt myself sliding. In mid-fall he caught me and laid me upon the crusty, abrasive earth. I heard the blowing of the winded threx, the creak and jingle of harness, the rustle of bodies about their business in the dark. Then the bladder was again at my lips. A horny hand brushed clod-caked hair from my face. Water washed new strength into me. I choked and sputtered. The bladder was withdrawn. A damp cloth caressed my mouth, my eyes, my temples. I winced when it touched the cut I had sustained by the threx's hoof. Then it too was withdrawn, and I was once again alone. The night breeze had the chill of the abyss about it, and I did not welcome that coolness. I

looked up into the starry night, using the north star Clous as focus. When it ceased to dance and circle above me, when my eyes once again obeyed my mind's commands, I turned my attention to my body.

With all my strength I tried to move my arms, that I might sit up. I could not do so. As my awareness sharpened, my flesh gave forth its message. My wrists felt their bonds, my waist its encircling loop. My hands were confined by a rope, and that rope passed once around my belly. I did not remember it being done. Perhaps I had been so bound to keep me from falling from the threx's back as it plunged its way through the barrens. I thought not. But it certainly had not been done to prevent me from escaping or doing harm to my captors. With the realization that this was so, that I was captive, rather than rescued, my mind was suddenly clear, my thoughts coherent. As I lay there upon the rocky ground, I considered all that I knew about the Parsets, while around me the moon rose full and red-ringed and the wind sorted the sand, sighing, and the men's gruff, rapid exchanges rang unintelligibly in my ears.

I recalled that which had been taught to me in the Day-Keepers' school. I had learned there, among many others, the Parset language. And I recollected also what I had heard from the wellwomen, the Slay-ers, and the Day-Keepers themselves about the flamboyant, tattooed desert dwellers.

I had heard it said that the men of the Parset barrens were the most insular, prideful, arrogant men upon Silistra, and their women the most indolent and imperious. Long ago, when the remnants of Silistran civilization emerged from the hides to rebuild a decimated planet, the Parsets took another path. Their Day-Keepers and forereaders split from their brothers and sisters. History has it that the *aniet* hide Day-Keepers had engaged in genetic manipulation; that the Day-Keepers of the rest of Silistra had found them out. Whatever the reason, there was from hide days little communication, and only a strained tolerance