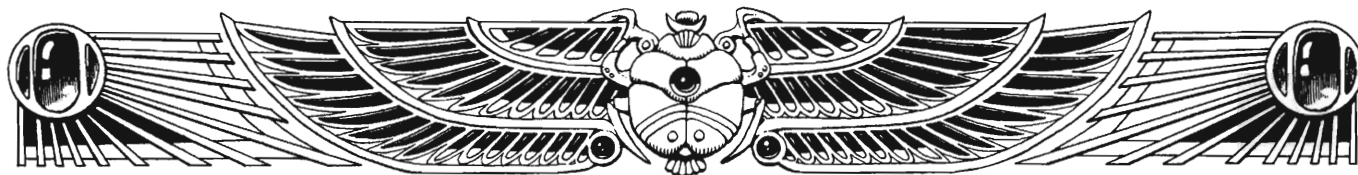


SHATTERED PATTERN

BY LOUIS J. PROSPERI



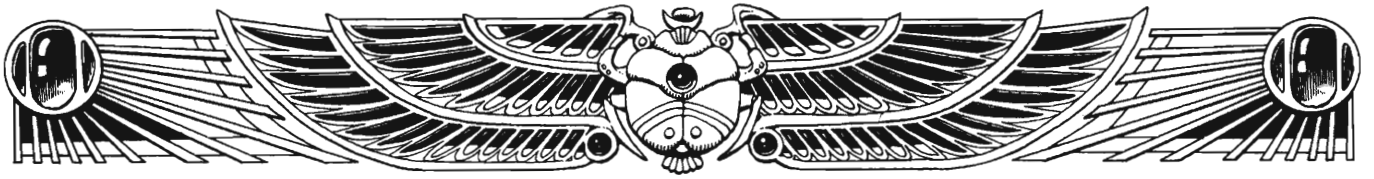
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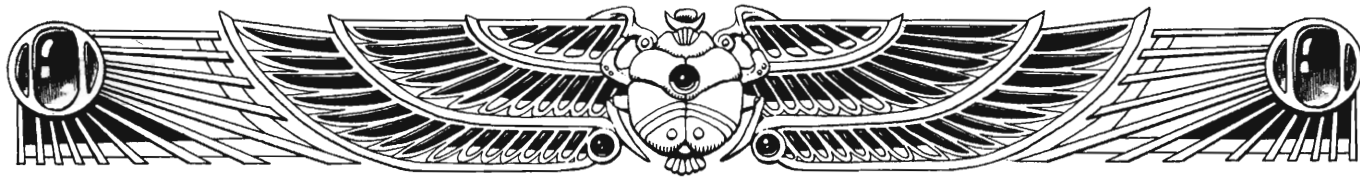
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EVIL IN THE SHADOWS



Escorted by two members of the Royal Guard, Tharr Strongfist strode down the wide corridors of the Inner Kingdom of Throal toward King Varulus's audience chamber. Tharr knew the guard on his left from several years back, when they had served together as green enlistees in the Army of Throal. Tharr was glad to see Reham doing well for himself, though a guard's posting was the last thing Tharr would have chosen for himself. But Reham had a wife and two babes to think of, and royal guard duty allowed him to remain in the army and serve his king without risking his neck. The guard on the right was a young one, barely dry behind the ears. He kept sneaking awed looks at Tharr, as if amazed to be walking alongside a real hero. Tharr smiled to himself. He could almost hear the youngling regaling his mates off-duty with an exaggerated description of "the great Tharr Strongfist, who singlehandedly routed a battalion of Zherans during the Theran War." The truth was somewhat less glamorous, but Tharr had done his bit. That's all this hero business was, really—doing your bit and then getting on with the next thing.

Tharr wondered what bit the king had in mind for him this time.

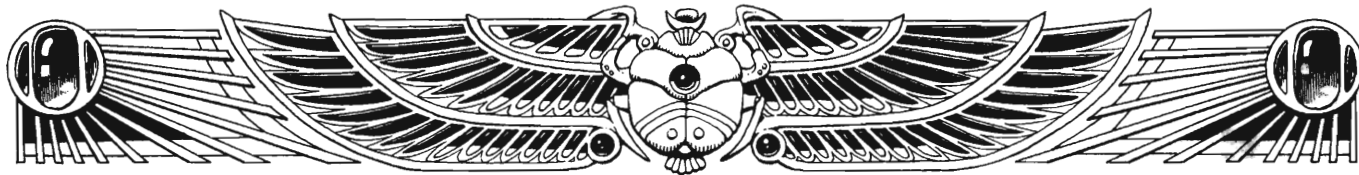
With a friendly goodbye nod to Reham and the youngling, Tharr entered the audience chamber and bowed to the king. "You sent for me, Your Highness?"

"Strongfist. Welcome," said King Varulus III, walking toward the warrior with a smile. The smile both warmed and worried Tharr. It reminded him how much his sovereign valued him, but the apprehension behind it made him nervous. If the king was worried, Tharr wasn't sure he wanted to hear what might be coming next.

Varulus's next words did nothing to soothe him. "Throal and I need your strong arm and quick mind again, my friend. I have heard of troubling events occurring near the Servos Jungle and the Badlands—I want you to take a few of your best soldiers and look into it."

Tharr Strongfist swallowed hard. Few places in Barsaive held as many dangers as the Badlands. Monsters and even Horrors lurked in its caves and gullies, waiting to devour the few travelers that the blasted landscape itself didn't kill. The wild Servos Jungle was little better, full of dangerous creatures and the Passions only knew what else. Any "troubling events" in such places must be truly dreadful.





To his Royal Highness Varulus the Third,
King of Throal, greetings.

I regret that this letter must bring Your Highness grave news, but I have recently made discoveries of which I must inform you before it grows too late to take action. As you know, the land of Barsaive is home to many different secret societies, some of which serve the people of Barsaive and some of which most emphatically do not. I fear I have stumbled upon one of the latter, a group whose activities place our entire province in great danger. I refer to a certain Horror cult—the Cult of the Great Hunter, whose adherents serve the fearsome Horror Verjigorm, Hunter of Great Dragons.

In my recent travels through Barsaive, I have heard scores of tales of incidents attributed to the Cult of the Great Hunter. Many of these tales clearly come from the overactive imaginations of Barsaive's Scourge-worn people, but the stories I have heard of the cult's activity between the Badlands and the Servos Jungle have the ring of awful truth. Careful study of these tales strongly suggests that the incidents in question are the work of a single group, because many of the reported incidents have similar methods of execution. I am convinced that the Cult of the Great Hunter exists and may be responsible for these happenings, but the truth of the matter remains a mystery.

We must find out the truth. If I am correct in my conclusions, then the Kingdom of Throal cannot stand idly by while this cult does as it pleases. The cost to us all will be far too great. I urge you to take action toward ridding our land of this plague—the fate of Barsaive may depend on it.

Your most humble servant,

Ardinn Tero
Scholar of the Great Library of Throal, 1506

Before Tharr could reply, the king handed him a piece of folded parchment. "I received this letter just a day ago from the Library of Throal."

Tharr unfolded the parchment and began to read.

Tharr slowly refolded the letter, then looked at his king. "When do we leave, my lord?" he asked, handing the letter to Varulus.

"As soon as you can put together the necessary force. I have arranged for you to meet with Ardinn Tero; he can tell you precisely what he saw and learned on his journey so that you can choose the best course of action."

Tharr nodded, bowed once more and turned to leave, his mind racing. He had faced danger before, but nothing as insidious as a Horror cult. How might he find this enemy? How should he fight a Horror's worshippers?

"Strongfist!" called the king.

Tharr turned. "My lord?"

"May the Passions follow you, old friend."

Tharr gave the king a small, mirthless smile. "If your scholar is right, sire, may the Passions help us all."

As the doors to the audience room closed behind him, Tharr began drawing up a mental list of soldiers to take with him. He would take Joran for certain. A scout by Discipline, Joran was among the finest in the entire army, and his loyalty was unshakable. He was also a good friend—and if this mission might well end in death, Tharr wanted a friend by his side.

Rathann the elf hesitated outside the immense cavern, fiddling with the straps on his shoulder pouch to make it hang more comfortably. He pulled his leather tunic straight, adjusted the belt and ran slender fingers through his graying hair to untangle it. His master hated personal disarray in his servants, and Rathann was determined not to give him any more cause for anger than he could help. The news he brought would provoke fury enough.

Rathann patted down his hair a final time, then took a deep breath. He couldn't delay any longer. Squaring his narrow shoulders, he stepped inside the cave.

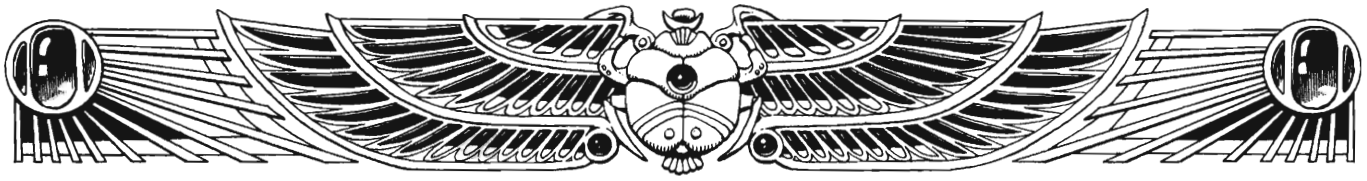
"What is it?" his master rumbled, his voice echoing like thunder off the rocky walls.

Rathann looked up at Icewing the Great Dragon. "Your suspicions were correct, sir. Someone must have used the sculpture—"

The dragon's roar cut Rathann off in mid-sentence. "Don't tell me the eggs are gone!"

Rathann swallowed. "Not all, sir."





"How many?"

"Seven." Rathann braced himself for another outburst of dragon fury, but Icewing remained silent. Emboldened, Rathann continued. "I'm afraid I could discover nothing about the fates of Arondry and Tellanion." After another brief silence, Rathann said awkwardly, "I'm sorry, sir. I wish I had better tidings."

"He has them," Icewing rumbled softly. "The one who has my eggs. Who but my own servants could enter my lair and take seven of my eggs unnoticed?"

Though afraid of the answer, Rathann felt compelled to ask. "What shall I do, sir?"

"Find the eggs. Find Arondry and Tellanion and kill the one who has done this to me!"

Rathann blinked, startled. "You do not wish to slay the criminal yourself?"

Icewing snarled. "If I could, I would tear out the culprit's heart and liver and feed them to the vultures.

But my remaining eggs are near to hatching, and I must attend them."

The enormous dragon disappeared, and in his place stood a young elven male similar in looks to Rathann. Pulling a piece of parchment and a stylus from a nearby cabinet, the young elf scratched out a map and marked three "X's" between the Servos Jungle and the Badlands. "Our adversary has taken Arondry and Tellanion to all of these places—I can feel that they have passed there. The criminal and the two others are sure to be at one of these sites. Go and do not fail me."

Rathann put the map in his shoulder pouch. As he walked out of the cavern, he looked back over his shoulder and saw that the dragon had resumed his former shape.

Rathann stepped outside the long tunnel that led from Icewing's lair to the surface of Mount Vapor. His elven body disappeared as he assumed his true form. The small dragon spread his leathery wings and took to the air.

