

## Dragonslayers

By Jason Molesky

A faint, but frightening, noise could be heard from deep within the cave, but the brave adventurers did not turn back. They looked at each other, and silently agreed to continue with their daring plan. The three companions then walked from the light of the forest into the mysterious, almost alive darkness of the Cave of the Lost. They entered the mythical place in a single file line, for that was all the space the entrance would allow. First was Marathas, a fine and valiant warrior. The tallest of the men, he wore a coat of shining gold mail, which was ornately decorated with ancient runes and symbols. He brandished a large broadsword, and was not hesitant to use it to settle disputes. His long blond hair flowed freely onto his broad shoulders, and his handsome face and bright blue eyes made many women swoon. His true power, however, came from the red medallion that was draped around his muscular neck. It was the legendary Medal of Sampson, and it gave him the biblical hero's prodigious strength.

The next to enter was Axaron, a thin and pale man clothed in a shabby gray cloak. His appearance had deceived many into thinking that he was weak, but the cunning sorcerer did not mind this. Although he was not large in stature, his knowledge of ancient rituals and charms gave him more power than many could comprehend. In his cloak there were countless hidden pockets that contained the secret and mysterious ingredients that he needed for his spells; ingredients that would startle even the most battle-hardened of men. In his long, agile fingers he carried a straight wooden staff, and he leaned on it as he entered the cave. He was a man of much mystery, but his companions knew that even if his methods were evil, his heart was good.

Although he was the last to enter, Rangard was the leader of the group. He was average in height and build, but his intelligence and virtue were recognized wherever he went. A wise and wholly good man, he had no fear of any man or creature. He could hit a moving enemy in poor light from 400 yards away with his enchanted, elf-made bow, and had eyes comparable to a hawk's. It had been his idea to venture into the cave that day, for he wanted to vanquish the evil dragon that lived there once and for all. He crossed himself religiously before he entered, and promised God that he would either succeed or die trying.

Deep in the bowels of the cave, there was a large chamber lit by eternally burning torches. The light from these torches illuminated an enormous, hulking beast; a creature that only Hell itself could have spawned. To describe its horror is impossible, for no words evil enough have been invented by men. The dragon had lived in the cave for longer than anyone knew, even before Adam was exiled from the Garden. It had been in a state of deep slumber, almost hibernation, for many years, but raised its head sharply when the men entered the cave. It had sensed a new presence entering its lair, and wondered how anyone could be so foolish as to disturb it. The creature resolved to give these trespassers a rather surprising welcome, and something like a smile passed across its fiendish lips at the thought. It laid its head back on the ground and waited anxiously for the intruders to find its chamber.

Meanwhile, the men were slowly making their way through the labyrinths of the cave. The air was damp and stale, but the brave trio was so focused that they barely noticed. Although it was as dark as a moonless night, the companions were able to see quite well because of the bright light that emanated from Axaron's staff. They had been walking in silence for many miles when Marathas stopped abruptly. "What devilry is this?" he said in his deep voice. Looming before the three men was a large stone statue of a strange creature. It had the head of a serpent, and the body of a man. Large bat-like wings hung menacingly on its back.

"It is a Septiris." Axaron answered, for he knew much of such things. "They are very rare on the Earth now, but long ago these servants of darkness were widespread. They have poisonous fangs that can kill a man with one bite, and deathly sharp claws. What is most horrible about them, though, is that they have the ability to fly. I hate even mentioning

their vile name."

"A stone cannot attack a man, but a man can attack a stone. I hate the very sight of the repulsive creature." Marathas said as he pulled his broadsword from its sheath. "No man will ever have to cast his eyes upon this wretched sculpture again." At that moment, a green glare, seen only by Rangard's keen eyes, passed ominously across the body of the stone Septiris as the warrior struck the stone with the might of Sampson.

"What in God's name..." Marathas said, bewildered. At that exact moment, a crack formed in the stone and it began to split. "Ha! The mighty sword of Marathas conquers once again!" he exclaimed triumphantly. The sculpture crumbled into many pieces, and the broken body of the Septiris lay at the feet of its muscular attacker. As the stone fell, it revealed a wooden stand with a very old-looking stone tablet on it. Axaron and Rangard approached the structure cautiously.

"I wonder what is written on such an ancient tablet?!" Marathas said, now very excited. "Read it at once, Axaron!"

Axaron was already studying the tablet with interest. "I have not seen this language for many, many years. It is an ancient form of an old Mesopotamian tongue, and has not been spoken on Earth for centuries. Shall I attempt to read it?"

"Yes, I think that you must." Rangard said. Marathas loudly agreed.

Axaron, concentrating deeply, began to read softly. "*Venture left, but not very far. Walk until you see the yellow star. Say the words, but they may bring death. For you will feel the dragon's breath. That is all that is written. I do not understand it.*"

"What is the meaning of this ancient rhyme?" Rangard wondered. He paused and thought for a few moments. "It seems to be the directions to the beast's lair. We must follow them, for they are the only hope that we have. We will keep walking deeper into the cave, and perhaps there will be a path that veers off to the left. We will take it, and we will look for a yellow star. After that point, I am not sure of what to do."

"Alright, friends, enough." Rangard said. "We have spent much time here already. There will be time for celebration later. Now we must walk."

After a few miles, they arrived at a fork in the path on which they had been traveling. There was an offshoot to the left and one to the right. "Ahh, the tablet was correct. Let us go left as it said," Rangard said.

Following Rangard's guidance, the friends took the path on the left. His wisdom proved true, and soon they found themselves standing on a large yellow pentagram. It was the only colorful thing in the cave, and was therefore very easily seen.

"Now what shall we do?" Marathas asked.

"The inscription said to speak the words, but what words I do not know," Rangard replied. "Axaron, have you any idea?"

"If you wish, I can stand on the star and attempt to chant some magic incantations. Perhaps one will be successful." the wizard replied.

"That sounds like a wise suggestion, sorcerer. Marathas and I will rest and eat of our provisions while you make your attempts, if you do not mind."

"No, I do not mind. Refresh your bodies, my warrior friends. You will need your strength if I am successful," Axaron said as he began his chants.

Axaron the sorcerer then spoke, chanted, and sang unintelligibly in many ancient languages. As he did this, Marathas and Rangard talked and ate the salted venison jerky they had brought with them.

"How will we kill the creature if we find it?" Marathas asked his friend.

"I have thought of this as well, my friend, and I believe that I can kill the abominable beast." Rangard answered. "I have a small spear in my pack

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