

TANGLOR

A Tale of Destiny

He was alone. It was dark, and the air itself was dank. He could hear hollowly-echoing drips in the distance. He was alone.

He stood up from a sprawled position on the hard ground and suddenly felt throbbing, sharp pain in the back of his skull. His hand instinctively reached up to feel it, every bit of movement being easily heard in the empty silence.

His quick ascent left him a little dizzy. He groped about with echoing footfalls, trying to find something solid, something other than the black emptiness that surrounded him.

He was not sure who he was, but it seemed that his name ought to be "Tanglor." But he did not know what it meant. And he could not fathom where he was or why.

Eventually he felt a wall. As he felt along it, he came to a corner. But even as he felt that the corner was there, his foot bumped into something soft in the corner. It was soft like a person, ever unlike the hard ground and rocky wall.

At first he was unsure of what it was, and wasn't sure he wanted to touch it. But as he squinted in the darkness, it struck him as a person, curled up into a ball, its bare arms showing up in the darkness far better than its dark apparel and curly, light brown hair.

It promptly awakened from its slumber and stood to face Tanglor. Its somewhat groggy voice echoed slightly, the occasional dripping of water still being heard in the distance:
"I see they have finally sent you."

There was a pause while Tanglor thought. Then he answered:
"Who are you?"

The man paused for a moment, thinking, and then stood up. In the silent cavern even the moving of his back against the stones of the corner could be heard. He finally answered,
"I am Tanglor."

Tanglor was puzzled. He was sure of very little, but of the fact that HE was Tanglor he WAS sure of. Or at least, he had been. He said in a confused tone,
"But I am Tanglor."

The other man stepped out from the corner and spread his eyes across the empty black cavern. He was tall and a little bit lanky, and he seemed timid and uncertain. "I do not know who you are..." he began in a thoughtful voice, "...and there is very little that I *do* know...but...I *must be* Tanglor. I *must be*."

They heard light footfalls in the distance. Three or four yards away, something was slowly, carefully, moving toward them. They waited, wondering, and hoping that it was a man and not something horrible that would come to them from the black expanse before them.

The footsteps finally reached them, and another man stepped out of the darkness. His voice was rich, and even in the darkness they could tell that he was very handsome. But his echoing voice was also a little groggy, and his tone was one of pondering and confusement.

"I also am Tanglor. But I seem to have been struck over the head, or have lost my memory for some other reason."

The first Tanglor suddenly saw light in his mind, and knew something for sure: "Yes, yes: I have *lost* my memory. They took it from me, and I will never have it again, until ... until something." But he was not sure what that something was. "And it is the same with all of you."

The third Tanglor spoke, "There is very little that I can clearly see in my mind. But it was by no accident that we are all here. And I believe that each of us has a piece of the key to knowledge. And my piece is that fact, and that fact alone."

The second Tanglor now spoke more confidently, "I also know something of a surety: we are all sent. You were one of the first. We are all here for a great purpose, and we must not fail. But everything else is as a black, hazy cloud in my mind, and, though there are some vague ideas, I can be certain of nothing else."

The first Tanglor said, "When you awoke, you spoke to me of my finally having been sent. Are you sure you do not know more?"

"It would seem that when I first awoke I did know something...but now I cannot be certain. I believe that you were one of the last ones...perhaps you were unwilling. Perhaps you were unable. But it was a much easier matter for the rest of us to come than for you. But even of that I cannot be certain; my thoughts are so unfocused and my mind such a muddled mess."

The third Tanglor spoke now, his rich voice seeming almost as though it were authoritative. "All is a mystery. But there must be more of us, hidden in this expansive cavern, with more keys to knowledge. We must unlock the mystery of our purpose here. Let us go forth to find them."

"Yes," said the first. "Which way shall we go?"

The third spoke in a very authoritative voice: "Of a surety we must separate, rather than going one single direction together."

The second Tanglor spoke now. In meek unconfidence he stated the obvious truth: "But what if we should get lost, and not be able to find one another?"

The third Tanglor's eloquent voice stirred trust and unquestioned submission in the minds of the others: "For whatever unknown but certainly great purpose we have been put here, we must press forward with all that we have, and to delay unnecessarily in an endeavor for perfection that can not truly be attained in full, exemplified in such actions as staying together rather than separating, will *inevitably* leave us giving less than our best."

The second Tanglor's quiet, meek voice seemed very small in comparison to the flowing words of the third. "But wouldn't it be carelessness to split up? And mightn't we lose what we could have had?"

But to the first and even to himself, the second Tanglor's words seemed foolish defiance of the third Tanglor's unquestionable rightness. So they set off in their separate ways, though perhaps they would regret such an act. They were men without any solid memories, but acting upon instincts with hidden motives. They did not know themselves or each other on the surfaces of their minds, but something deeper drove them to relate to each other in certain ways that they would not have were it not for these subconscious,

unnoticed biases. The third Tanglor's capricious opinion was eloquently persuasive, and the second Tanglor had not the confidence to outwit him.

The second and third Tanglors set off to follow the wall, one in one direction and the other in the other direction, and the first set off alone into the darkness.

The distant dripping seemed quieter now than it had before, but gradually he began to notice it more and more. He had felt comforted and safe when talking to the others, but now he once again felt alone. He had been walking for a good while and was still in utter darkness. Once again he wanted badly to be able to touch something solid aside from the floor. After a while a fear built up in him. Not a fear of anything in particular, but an edgy nervousness of just being in this infinite black oblivion.

Suddenly he felt something. It was a short iron post, with a lamp atop it. There were matches atop the lamp, as though they were there for him to find. Once he lit the lamp, the red glow it gave showed him that there was a wall only a few feet away. He put the matches in his pocket and found that he could pick up the lamp and carry it.

He followed the wall for a distance, and then heard, close to him but not in the light of the lantern, the deep growl of an evil beast. It sent chills down his spine, and made the darkness around him seem all the more foreboding, despite the new light of the lamp.

Then the sound changed to a snarl. Suddenly he heard the voice of a man, crying out in surprise and sudden fear. The snarl gave a sudden, ominous jolt, as though it were a beast giving a leap. The man let out a scream.

Tanglor dashed toward the sounds, holding his lantern high and feeling terror rising to his throat. His beating heart gave powerful leaps when he took in the sight of a large wolf clamping its teeth viciously on the vehemently bleeding arm of a struggling man.

In a sudden act of courage he ran toward the wolf and gave it a sound kick in the side. It let loose of the man's arm and backed up, staring into Tanglor with red, bloodshot eyes and snarling hateful sounds that drove chills of terror into Tanglor's quailing heart.

Within seconds, the wolf gave a hideous snarl and leapt toward Tanglor. As the furious beast leapt toward Tanglor's face, his arm instinctively raised to defend him. In a moment's thought, he took a firm grip of the lamp and dashed it soundly against the wolf's face. At the same instant he desperately ducked downward, hitting the ground with his hands.

The lantern gave a solid "thwack" to the skull of the wolf, which landed on its feet several feet from Tanglor. The lamp went out the instant it hit the wolf, leaving Tanglor and the wolf in a sudden inundation of blackness.

Tanglor quickly jumped to his feet and backed toward the wall, in desperate terror of the wolf's open mouth that bore long, sharp teeth dripping with blood. He could not see the wolf, and that made it all the worse. He took a firm grip of his lamp, hoping to bash the wolf once more, and perhaps kill it.

But before his thoughts took another turn, he heard a solid "THWUMP" as a stone hit the wolf's head, and then a light thud as it fell onto its side, dead.

The other man stepped up to Tanglor. When Tanglor relit his lamp, he saw the bleeding arm and a very grateful face.

The man looked eagerly at Tanglor and said, "I am Tanglor. I remember very

little, but I know with an absolute certainty that we must escape this accursed place. Another Tanglor told me with equal certainty that we are being tested here, but he is not with us: we were in another cavern, one with a tall roof, when he was swept away in the clutch of a mammoth bird, or some other creature of the air."

The first Tanglor reminded the newcomer of his wound, but he only said in response, "It is far worse than it looks. We have been dressed in apparel of strong constitution, as you may have noticed. The wolf only pierced my sleeve enough to bring a little blood." The first Tanglor now noticed, as he had not before, that they were all wearing very tough clothing.

The man went on, "But we must save the other Tanglor! His screams had no sooner ripped forth from his mouth than I was approached by this bloodthirsty beast. We must save him! Follow me!"

The first Tanglor followed the fourth into the darkness, carrying the lamp but not really going by it, and they presently entered a tunnel and came into another cavern, where the ceiling was much higher. "The great fowl went in this direction!" He then ran off into the darkness, the first Tanglor following.

But suddenly Tanglor felt the talons of a huge bird gripping him around the waist and pulling him up, up, up, into stale air above them. Its loud shrieks met his ears as a very unwelcome sound.

Looking up at it, he saw it was not nearly as big as he had thought by the feel of its talons and its powerful grip, but it was at least the same size as he.

Looking around him, he saw the other Tanglor also being risen into the air, struggling. They were both being taken in the same direction, the large birds shrieking capriciously.

Presently they arrived at a plateau, upon which the birds carelessly flung them.

After standing up, Tanglor realized that he was still holding his lamp, but it had gone out. He pulled the matches out from his pocket, finding only two left. Lighting the lamp he saw his companion nearby, and then, near the center of the plateau, another man: the other Tanglor. But standing over the fifth Tanglor in a threatening pose was a bird larger than both the others put together.

In the corner of the plateau, against the wall, was a little group of small birds, each less than half the size of a man. They rolled about weakly, as though not strong enough to do much yet.

Presently they began to make weak yet shrill calls. The huge bird turned its head as though it heard them, and then picked up the Tanglor in front of it with his beak, carrying it toward the chicks! Could it be preparing to divide the spoil among the small mouths?

The first Tanglor dropped his lamp and they both set off in a mad dash toward the huge bird. They had very little hope but could not stand aside doing nothing!

Both at the same time, they reached one of the legs of the great fowl, and with a flying leap they grabbed onto it, unbalancing the bird in a desperate hope to send it flying down.

In one instant, several things happened. First, the shocked bird's beak fell open and the man dropped out of it, landing unharmed on the plateau. Secondly, the bird tumbled over the side of the plateau and plummeted downward

rapidly. Thirdly, it, with an annoyed shriek, gave a powerful kick with its leg, trying to shake off the two Tanglors. And within a moment, its wings began to beat and it swooped upward from the plummet.

But with the first kick, the fourth Tanglor lost his grip and, screaming in terror, was flung across the infinite expanse. The first Tanglor could not even hear him land.

In terror, he clutched all the tighter to the hard, skinny leg of the massive bird. It gave a few angry shrieks and then turned about and flew back to its plateau, where it landed suddenly on the hard rock floor, and Tanglor let go and tumbled off onto the rock floor.

But then the presence of mind of the fifth Tanglor, the one who had been there so long, saved them both. He grabbed one of the chicks, waited a second until the great bird's sharp gaze turned to him, and then with a heave threw it off the plateau into the darkness. While the mammoth creature stood calculating what had happened, he grabbed another baby bird and hurled it in the opposite direction, where it hit the ground near the edge, bounced softly, and then likewise fell down into the darkness.

The great bird gave a hateful shriek and dove down after the first chick, and the two Tanglors, the fifth now holding the lamp, ran off toward the wall, hoping to find a tunnel out. But there was none.

They ran to the edges and looked down. For the most part, the edge was almost vertical, but there was one point, very near the wall, where the precipice had jagged edges that could perhaps be climbed down.

They did not exchange words, but looked at each other with uncertainty. Neither had introduced himself, but they did not feel it was a time for speech.

The first Tanglor looked down. Even with his lamp he could not see the bottom.

Feet first, he began to descend. Each jutout was just flat enough to rest his shoe on, and sometimes round stones jutted out that he could grip securely with his hand. He slowly descended, carefully placing his foot on something he couldn't see, then gripping securely the next stone in sight.

Step by step he went down. He could occasionally hear choruses of shrieks in the distant darkness, but kept his mind focused on his task. Occasionally he would even hear the beating of wings and think that a bird was coming toward him, but none ever did.

His heart was beating so fast that he could hear it in his ears. He couldn't stop thinking of the distant ground, and occasionally his finger would slip on a jutout that was too smooth, or his foot would begin to slide on a stone that wasn't flat enough. Quite often smaller jutouts would break under his weight, adding horribly to the experience.

Stone by stone he lowered himself, feeling the sweat roll down his face. The other Tanglor had long begun to come down after him, but his mind wasn't on him.

Eventually he saw the ground below him. It was a relief, but it also gave him fear, for it was still very far down.

Finally, he was close enough to the bottom to jump. He gave a leap and landed on the hard rock floor. His knees bent too quickly for that height of a jump, and he ended up sprawled on the ground.

He lay there for a moment, panting, and being grateful for his life. But he

only had a moment of safety before he heard the snarl of a wolf stepping into the lantern light.

The large wolf slowly padded toward him, staring with bloodshot eyes, its leg muscles jutting visibly through its back with every stride.

Tanglor gave a start when his comrade dropped to the ground. Then they both stood there, watching with terror as the wolf moved slowly toward them.

They heard another growl in the darkness: another was approaching from a slightly different angle. They could tell by the sound that it was of the same breed: powerful, vicious, evil, and living on bloodlust.

Then a totally different sound pierced the darkness and met their ears: it was a clear, human voice, speaking boldly though with a hint of timidity: "Stand back, foul fiends, and taste no blood but your own!" It was the voice of the second Tanglor!

In a matter of seconds, the second Tanglor stepped through the veil of darkness, holding in his left hand an unlit lantern, and in his right a smooth sword that cleanly reflected the light of the glowing lantern.

He brandished it menacingly toward the wolf, which responded with a low, angry snarl. The second Tanglor slowly moved toward his friends, always facing the wolf.

Then, with a sudden, vicious snarl, the wolf leapt upon him. There was a sickening slicing sound as the sword pierced through the stomach of the wolf and the bloody tip extruded from its back. The wolf's unearthly snarls died abruptly.

"I see you have met another of us," said the second Tanglor as he wiped his sword off on his pants. "What have you learned?"

"This is all a test, and our goal is to escape this ... this place. But that is all that I have learned. This place is shrouded with mystery, as is my own mind."

The second Tanglor gave a contented sigh, and then said, "Yes. But I have seen something that certainly sheds light on the puzzle. Follow me."

And he led them out of that roomy cavern into the one in which they began, always following the far wall. Eventually they came to a place near where they began, where a door of stone was carved into the wall.

The second Tanglor pointed out where each of the first three had awoken, and then the first Tanglor saw that, had they stayed together, the most natural course would have brought them readily to this door. They had been meant to find the door quickly, but had split up and only the second Tanglor had found it.

Cut into the wall on the left and right of the door were four oblong niches oriented vertically, in each of which a dimly gleaming sword rested securely. A fifth niche was above the door, exactly the same as the others except that it was horizontal. The far left niche held no sword, for the second Tanglor had taken it.

On the door, from its left to its right, were five keyholes with several inches between each, and above each keyhole were two identical recesses the shape of a very small spike. Below each keyhole was a spherical recess the size of two or three fists.

On the bottom of the door and on the top of the door were carvings of images and runes of a sort that the first Tanglor saw to be mysterious, but looked

like they could be figured out if one gave it enough effort.

The second Tanglor said, "After studying those carvings, here is what I gather from it:

"This door is the only way out of these caverns. Each of the five Tanglors has a key that must be put into the door. Beside the key we need ten wolf's-teeth and five large bird's eggs to open the door."

"And then we can escape this place and finish the test?" assumed the first Tanglor.

"Yes. Unless there is another door beyond this one, which the runes seem to indicate. I believe we need a golden key to open the second door, and the golden key is defended by some great, evil monster deep inside the caverns."

Suddenly a blood-curdling scream met their ears, an unstopping scream of great pain and terror. It sounded unmistakably like the third Tanglor.

Each Tanglor grabbed a sword and set off with full speed toward the sound. As they ran, the second Tanglor panted, "By the map carved in the door..." he stopped to gather more breath and then went on, "the scream came from the cavern of the ... whatever it is ... with the golden key."

They finally approached a cavern from which the terrified scream, now very close and very loud, echoed toward their ears. They stepped through the archway that divided that cavern from the huge one, and the first Tanglor held up his lantern.

At the other end of the cavern they could, vaguely, make out the shape of some sort of hulking monster holding tightly onto the struggling form of the third Tanglor! As they came closer, its grotesque shape became more visible to them: it was the size of an elephant, and had a wide-open, round mouth dripping with green saliva. It stood on countless foot-high legs like a centipede's, which occasionally shifted their position, forcing a shudder from each observer. From its sides extruded four long, spidery arms, two of which wrapped around the third Tanglor like a snake, moving him slowly up to the mouth that was lined with sharp teeth and dripping with the saliva of expectation.

The three Tanglors raised their swords toward the monster and one of them shouted out to it with a bold voice but a quailing heart, "Drop him or declare war on us all, foul monster!"

The creature suddenly spun its colorless body around toward them, focusing its round gaping vacuole of a mouth on them. Then they saw, in the center of its mouth, where the throat ought to be, a huge squinting, oblong eye. The mouth itself was a round hole lined with teeth, and with its occasional twitching they saw that its ordinary state was to be open in a perfect circle, and the creature's attention was required not to open it but to close it.

Upon seeing the newcomers, its eye quivered rapidly, showing no sane emotion so far as humans judge sanity. Its millions of legs scurried suddenly, and in an instant it was upon them, its unblinking eye not moving from them for an instant.

In a sudden motion that gave each of them a start, the mouth clamped shut and then open again, twice, each time giving a clank when the teeth met unevenly.

Then another pair of spidery arms appeared from the top of its head and swooped down to grab the second Tanglor, lifting him high above the head of the monster!

The spare long, thin arm it had on its left spun out and coiled around the first Tanglor, and the one on its right took a tight grip of the fifth Tanglor. A lantern clattered onto the ground but did not go out.

All three were now madly swinging their swords, each desparately trying to hack off that foul, furry appendage that had grabbed at him. But with every swing of a sword, the thin, long arm would bend at that point and move from the blow.

A raspy sound of hideous anticipation erupted from the mouth of the monster, sending with it a foul stench that sent some of them into a coughing spell.

The third Tanglor's screaming had long since stopped, but he was still staring into the mouth of the monster, in which he could see, below the eye, a deep throat, from which sloshed up the green acidic saliva that dripped from the mouth's lining of razor-sharp teeth and occasionally washed down from the roof of the mouth over its unblinking, hideous eye.

The second Tanglor, still suspended above the monster's head, suddenly gave a wild cry and, with all his power, gave his sword a powerful thrust downward toward the head of the monster. When the arms pulled him suddenly higher, he bent his entire body downward to continue the strike, and then cast the sword's handle from his hand, sending it flying downward and piercing the monster's gelatinous exterior.

From the creature's hideous mouth erupted a deafening, raspy scream that was not even remotely like a human one, and with it came another billow of foul stench.

The others felt the grip on them suddenly loosen, and the first Tanglor gave a sudden, powerful swing at the spidery arm that coiled around him. With a snap it broke in two, and he tumbled to the ground, landing on his side. The severed part of the arm was still coiled around him, but he ignored it and gave a lunge toward one of the arms that held the defenseless third Tanglor.

It likewise broke with a snap, but then the monster, still screaming, used the remaining arm to jerk the third Tanglor closer to its mouth with amazing rapidity. The third Tanglor's face began to turn green at the stench coming from the foul creature's mouth, his legs about to pass the barrier of the creature's razor-sharp teeth.

But then the sword of the fifth Tanglor, on the right, met with the arm holding the third Tanglor, and the third Tanglor landed on the set of teeth. Just before the mouth snapped closed, the third Tanglor slid off from the set of teeth and rolled safely onto the ground, his clothes partially eaten through by the acidic saliva and his side bleeding from landing on the teeth of the monster.

Moaning pitifully in its deep and unearthly voice, the creature hurled the second Tanglor, its last captive, onto the ground and then, with its horribly scurrying millions of legs, zipped off into the huge, central cavern that the Tanglors had come from.

Panting, all four Tanglors dropped their swords and collapsed onto the ground, trying to force out of their minds the hideous memory and yet at the same time trying to decide what to do next.

They needed to finish their test and escape this world of monsters and darkness. They needed to find the golden key.

Quickly, the first Tanglor ran off toward the opposite end of the cavern. But holding his lantern high, he could see nothing except

a thin puddle of the monster's green saliva. There was no golden key.

The second Tanglor walked up to him and said in a quiet voice, "The runes suggested that it might be ... IN the creature. We may need to confront it again to find the key."

"But first," said the fifth Tanglor, "let us open the first door. Perhaps there will be something beyond it to aid us."

"Yes," said the third Tanglor. Then, after a pause, he said in a voice that was much humbled compared to how it had been in the beginning of this story, "And I see that I was wrong in my dealings with you so long ago: I was wrong to insist that we separate, and that it would be foolish not to. Had you not come to my aid, I would be serving as that creature's finest meal. We should have stayed together, and I offer my humble apologies." Turning to the second Tanglor, he said, "You were right. I was wrong."

Then the fifth Tanglor, not really part of the discussion, put in abruptly, "Now let us hurry: we need five pairs of wolf-teeth and five of those giant bird eggs. I think I saw some eggs in the nest when I was captured, and with our fighting skill and quick reflexes, we should make quick work of the wolves now that we have swords."

The first Tanglor told them about the wolf that the fourth Tanglor had killed with a stone, and set off to lead them to it. On the way they ran into another lantern on a short post, like the one from which the first Tanglor had gotten his lamp, and one of the others took it, along with the pack of matches that was atop it.

When they reached the wolf, the second Tanglor noted to them that only two of the teeth on the upper row of the mouth would fit into the door's lock. This they had all suspected, but hadn't been certain of (if this were not true, they would have needed only one or two wolves to open the door).

After using their swords to remove the teeth from the formerly vicious animal, they set off toward one of the beasts the second Tanglor had killed before meeting back up with the others.

On the way there they heard the distant snarling of another wolf. They agreed to leave a lantern at their current location, and then two would, after taking and lighting a lamp they could see in the distance, proceed to harvest the teeth from the dead one, while the first and third Tanglors would proceed to kill the other brute.

But as the first and third Tanglor approached the large wolf, the third noted to the first, "Do you hear that padding of feet in the distance? It is another wolf."

"Perhaps a mate--"

"Yes, perhaps, but listen...there is another, coming from the other way. These know our power now, and are being tactful. They have surrounded us."

At that moment, they reached the wolf they had heard snarling. It was the same as the others: larger than most, and with a lust for human blood. But upon seeing its crazed, red eyes, they both had trouble imagining wolves of that nature being able to purposefully lure and surround humans--if wolves of any sort could do such a thing!

But the time for thinking suddenly vanished when two wolves

leapt toward them from behind. Swords swung through the air and bloodthirsty snarls met the Tanglors' ears. In a matter of moments all the wolves had joined the fight, and before either Tanglor could think clearly, four wolves lay dead and one had taken a small bite out of the first Tanglor's sword arm. The wolf that had lured them there then fled into the darkness.

There was nothing to be done for the first Tanglor's injured arm except to rip a sleeve and bandage the wound with it. But it was not a very deep wound, thanks to the resilience of the Tanglors' armor-like clothing.

After gathering the wolves' teeth, they headed back to the distantly-glowing lamp from which they had come.

They soon converged with their companions, and, now having more than enough sets of wolf-teeth, set off toward the door.

On the way there, they could hear in the distance the hideous moans of the monster echoing off the cavern walls. They presently began also to hear the howling of wolves, as if in response to the monster.

They finally approached the door and pushed the teeth into their slots. Then each reached into his pocket (which they, for some reason, had not realized until hearing the interpretation of the runes) and took out a key, then slid it into the door. It was then they that they realized that they needed one more key, for the fourth Tanglor was in the high-roofed cavern, where the giant bird had flung him.

After exchanging a few words, they set off together to find the body and take the key back to the door.

On the way there, the first Tanglor made a very important point. "But how are we to obtain the eggs of those giant birds? I and he" (gesturing to the fifth Tanglor) "were upon their nesting plateau but once, and I see not how, within reason, we could venture unto such a place and return again unscathed."

"Yes," said the fifth, "for we see what the power of those massive beasts can do." They all knew that he was referring to the dead fourth Tanglor. "And there is no way to reach the place without putting ourselves once again into the hands of those massive fowls."

"Could we not simply climb the precipice by the same way that you two came down?" inquired the second Tanglor.

"Nay, not for value of life: it was a sheer cliff with jutouts that I would never trust without absolute necessity."

Then he said slowly and thoughtfully, "But is this not a matter of absolute necessity?"

No one answered that question. For none were certain as to what answer could BE.

Ever since they had entered the high-roofed cavern, the calls of high-flying birds had occasionally met their ears. But now, as they approached the dead body of the fourth Tanglor and took the key, the nearby triumphant shriek of a massive creature of the air met their ears!

But this was not one of the smaller birds, seeking a trophy to take to the nest. This was the mother bird, swooping down upon human prey for vengeance upon the death of one of its babies, who it had not been able to save before it hit the rock floor and died instantly.

One talon gripped the second Tanglor and the other talon the third Tanglor, and with its beak it took a firm grip on the fifth Tanglor, the object of its hatred.

Then it looked at the first Tanglor, as though trying to decide what to do with him. But in that short moment that the bird glided instead of taking to the air, the first Tanglor took his sword in an overhand grip, raised it over his head, and with all his strength, cast it through the air at the great bird. It flew truly and drove into the side of the powerful creature, which gave a loud wail of a bird-call and then crashed down onto the ground.

As its grips weakened, the three others fell out and then ran back toward the first Tanglor.

Together they all then set off toward the central cavern, fearing lest the other birds might take after them to avenge their dead queen, or whatever the giant bird was.

Then they proceeded on to the door, slaying a few mad wolves on their way. They pressed in the fifth key.

Then they all stood around for a while, thinking and talking, with one or two of them occasionally looking around at the huge cavern and listening for any creatures coming near them.

The third Tanglor said, "If only you'd taken those birds' eggs when you had the chance." Then he paused for a second and said, "If only we hadn't split up." For then they would have all found the door, and if and when they happened to be on that plateau, they would have known to grab the eggs.

The second Tanglor, who was standing right in front of the door and had been fingering the runes and keyholes for a while, said slowly, "Think about the way these things must work."

Intending for them to watch, he used his sword-tip as a wedge to remove one of the wolf-teeth. Then he showed them how the tip of the tooth triggered a mechanism that caused the entire recess to push like a button when pressed on with the general shape of the tooth.

"Therefore," concluded the third Tanglor, "we need not a wolf-tooth to trigger this, but rather the two elements that make up the wolf-tooth: we need a sharp end to set off the first trigger, and then any shape that can transfer enough pressure to each equal side of the tooth-shaped indent."

The second Tanglor said, "Exactly my point. Now if we can figure out how the bird's egg would affect ITS recess, perhaps we can simulate it with something else."

They soon saw that when a very small amount of pressure was applied to the round indent, a tiny slab jutted out, perfectly rounded to be able to set a bird's egg on, but flat on the end so that it could slide out without pushing away the bird's egg. They noticed that this jutout wasn't steady vertically, but could be pushed upward and downward, but then when there was no pressure, it would level back to the way it had been, as though by a hidden spring.

"The weight of a bird's egg," mused the second Tanglor.

"Yes," said the fifth.

"Then by all means, let us proceed," said the third Tanglor. "each of us will slide out a moveable slab and then, in unison, gradually apply more and more pressure to it, until we are applying the same amount of pressure that the weight of a bird's egg would!"

"And since there are only four of us," said the first Tanglor, "I will take the first TWO slots."

So, with the five keys and the five wolves' teeth in their respective niches, the Tanglors began to gradually apply pressure to all the egg-mechanisms, in unison.

It took a matter of minutes to finish this effort, and by the time they were done everyone's arm was sore and the patience of every man had been tried exceedingly.

But then, suddenly, they heard a distinct "Click!" and an unseen handle popped out from the door. The fifth Tanglor hastily reached for it, but then, as soon as his hand moved from its egg-perch, there was another click and the handle popped back into the door.

With a sigh, they all went through the belaboring process again, until finally they once again heard that comforting "click." This time the fifth Tanglor carefully reached for the new handle with his other hand, and then slowly swung the door open, everyone backing up so as not to stop giving that perfect amount of pressure.

When the door was finally all the way open (and none of them could see what was beyond the door, for they were all behind it), they all pulled their hands from the egg-slots. There was that "click" again as the door locked itself, and the handle popped back into the door, but the door remained open.

When they finally stepped around the door to see what was on the other side, they were sorely disappointed. There in front of them was nothing but another stone door, this one with a single keyhole in the center. Atop the keyhole was carved a simple picture of the monster that presumably held the golden key.

Everyone sighed. The first Tanglor found a large stone to prop the first door open, in case the build of the door would cause it to eventually swing inward.

They did not like this thought, but there was no escaping it: their next and final goal was to kill that powerful, evil monster that held the golden key.

* * *

The monster was lurking in the corner of a small cavern, seething in hatred for those little squirming bipeds that had jabbed a sword through its head. The top of its head was forming a pussy scab of a disgusting yellowish color. Its spidery arms moved back and forth and around as it impatiently sat in the corner resting.

Then it decided it had had enough of rest and wanted to go find the little things that had attacked it. Then it would eat them very slowly, savoring every little juicy bit, and making their insolent little selves die a slow and painful death.

Its millions of centipede legs started to scurry slowly as the creature paced the back wall of the cavern. Then it turned its head, looked out through its venom-dripping circular mouth and teeth, and saw, of all things, that one of the little creatures was at the door to this small cavern, insolently wielding one of the shiny, sharp things that had hit it. It also had a light-giving device that made the creature's eye squint while it adjusted.

It hissed and snarled insidiously, letting out its noxious breath and causing the scab on the top of its head to pulsate methodically. Its teeth clamped

together several times and its eye burned hatefully at the human.

The man at the door was the second Tanglor. He was speaking to the creature, but the creature did not have ears and hence could not hear him.

"Come on, you big fat brute. Bring your snakey little arms and come devour me, if you find yourself brave enough to face as small a mongrel as I."

It was soon apparent that the second Tanglor intended for the monster to chase him. Of the four, the second Tanglor had the longest legs and, though perhaps wasn't as athletic as the others, could definitely run the fastest, by far.

But when the monster's millions of legs began to scurry and it, like a centipede, zoomed across the cavern floor in half a second, the Tanglor's fast bounds seemed very slow.

The Tanglor could hear the monster's lustful voice as it chased him, and soon could even hear and feel the noxious breath enveloping him. But then he gave one final bound forward and knew he had succeeded in this small part of their effort.

For then, suddenly, two lanterns lit up on the left and right of the monster, and two Tanglors cried out at once, "En garde, beast!"

It spun around instantly, trying to observe them both, but unable because its eye could look only straight forward. Uneasy and not liking anything so dangerous being at its back, the monster reached out to grab the one on its right.

But then suddenly all the lanterns went out in an instant and the creature could see nothing. While the endangered Tanglor rolled out of the way and sliced off the spidery arm, another ran up from what had been the darkness and hurled a stone into the monster's mouth, intending to hit its eye. At the same moment, the Tanglor on the monster's left bounded toward the creature and leapt onto its back, where were sharp pulsating spikes like those on dinosaurs, set on a column of reptilian scales that nothing could pierce.

The creature lurched upward when it felt the air move as the stone passed through its mouth, and the stone missed the eye and went straight down the creature's throat, landing with a thud that bruised the creature and caused an unearthly monster's scream to erupt from its throat.

But in a moment the other Tanglor had climbed the monster's back and was mercilessly jabbing and cutting at what would have been a neck if the monster had been more like a human.

And in a matter of seconds, as the monster's eye adjusted and he could see vague shapes, he saw the Tanglor that had thrown the rock rearing back to heave another, and the Tanglor he had chased was rushing upon him with his sword held high!

Its snakelike arms once again spun out to grab both of the offending creatures, but then it remembered the one to its right that it had been grabbing before. Turning slightly, it could not see that Tanglor. But then it felt a powerful stab on its right side, and sent two of its arms to grab the one on its back and the one that had just stabbed it.

They coiled around the two offending bipeds and lifted them high in the air, and then it sent two other arms to grab the two in front. But just as its arms spun out, another rock sailed through the air, through its mouth, and right onto its single eye!

Its monstrous moan rang through the cavern loudly as its blind arms grabbed

the two other Tanglors. Its uneven teeth clamped down and stayed that way for a few seconds, then popped back up and together again. The creature's head pulsated from the strain, and then suddenly the scab on its head began to expand, and then exploded, sending the yellowish substance flying to the cavern's roof and in all directions.

It squeezed its captives harder and harder, but then suddenly each arm was cut off. Its hideous scream rang louder and louder through the cavern as it scurried around with its millions of legs, blindly trying to find the human creatures that had wounded it.

The Tanglors ran off as far away as they could and lit their lanterns. They watched the creature run in huge circles nearby. Sometimes it would swing around near one of them, and one would have to jump out of the way.

Then it suddenly bumped into the fifth Tanglor, and in an instant what was left of all its arms snaked around the Tanglor and lifted them rapidly to its open mouth. But all it took was a single mighty swing of the third Tanglor's sword, and all the long black arms were severed, and the fifth Tanglor dropped to the ground unhurt.

As soon as the creature stopped moving for a second, all four Tanglors leapt upon its back, avoiding the spikes, and drove their swords into its neck. They cut and sliced mercilessly, trying to put an end to this horrific monster, but seeing not how they could. All their efforts brought nothing but more unearthly, raspy screams, and faster scurrying of those horrible little legs.

But then the second Tanglor, despite finding it difficult to be heard above the deaf monster's raspy screams, got the attention of the others. He had a theory, and it was that this creature had a heart or something much like it that the scales and the spikes on its back were there to protect.

He drove his sword in diagonally to the right of the column of scales. Another volley of unearthly screams ripped from the monster's throat. The next Tanglor drove his sword in atop it, pushing the other in further. The monster's screams became even louder and more pained yet.

Finally the third did the same, and soon they had to cover their ears at the hideous sound. The fourth hastily drove his in as well, and then the scream was so loud that they all jumped off and ran into the darkness as quickly as they could.

Standing from a safe distance, they saw greenish and yellowish blood oozing out from under the sword-hilt that stuck out from the monster's back. And then they saw a pulsating shape throbbing in and out, in and out, inside the monster. Then there was a deafening explosion and the monster collapsed motionless onto the ground.

The screaming had stopped. The scurrying had stopped. Everything had stopped. It was calm.

The four Tanglors cautiously approached what was left of the hideous monster. Their stab-marks had left its head area a mess, but their attention was focused on its back. Where they had stabbed there was an uneven, round hole, where something in the monster had exploded and left terribly-smelling guts on the ceiling and the floor of the cavern.

And there, lying on the floor next to the creature, was a little glass ball in a puddle of blood. The first Tanglor picked it up and walked a little away with it. Wiping some of the blood off, he could see something golden in it, shaped at least vaguely like a key.

All of them crowded around him, quieted by the horrible sight they had

witnessed, and watched as he took a large stone, held it over his head, and let it down to shatter the glass ball.

There, inside it, as clean and shining and golden as anything could be, was a polished and perfect golden key.

Then with a smile the Tanglor, after wiping his sweaty and grimy hands on his shirt so as not to taint the beautiful key, picked up the key and slowly stood up and walked over to the ancient stone door that had barred their way for so long.

"It almost seems a shame to put something so beautiful into a keyhole," he said as he slid it into the lock and turned it. Click. The door swung open.

The smell of fresh air flooded into the cavern along with bright sunlight. The first thing they noticed were distant trees, a clear blue sky, and the calls of graceful birds.

But right in front of them, coming out of the cavern, was a smooth road polished with real gold, and walking up to them was a handsome man in royal apparel, wearing a broad smile. And as they stepped out at the man's beckoning, they saw that this polished golden road was elevated above the ground, like a bridge, and below them, on the rich green grass, to the left and right of the golden surface they stood on, were crowds and crowds of all sorts of people, all looking straight at the Tanglors, and suddenly beginning to cheer ecstatically, lifting their voices in pure excitement.

The Tanglors were bewildered but knew something wonderful was happening, and they were all excited and wondering what would happen next.

The richly-dressed man beckoned them to follow him as he walked down the golden platform. The crowd cheered all the louder as they watched the short procession.

At the end, four or so yards from the door, the road-like platform ended in a circular platform with a parapet, where the man then stood, motioning for the four Tanglors to stand behind him. This small circular platform was, like the long platform, polished with true gold. With the bright sun shining on it and the chirping of the birds and the smell of the sea, the beauty of this place was beyond imagination, especially after having so recently been in that dank cavern!

"Friends! Citizens!" said the man so that everyone could hear, "The hour has come! The trial has ended!" He ended with a dramatic gesture.

"I, the Judicator of the Crown, show you our new leaders! They have all escaped the Caverns of Tempering and have proven their mettle. Though I must sadly say that there are only four here: the fifth met a noble death in the rescue of his comrade. But now let us rejoice, and lift up these ones who have shown their might and resilience and once again brought honor to the Tanglor name."

He turned to the fifth Tanglor and motioned for him to stand beside him. He stepped forward. "Behold Territias Tanglor, the Quick and Dutiful. His mettle has been proven by his calm and quick thinking. He is and will remain Tanglor, to be honored and obeyed and to lead the kingdom!"

Then the crowd burst into cheering and applause while the fifth Tanglor, Territias, smiled in wonder and joy. "Congratulations, Tanglor!" said the Judicator as he motioned for him to return to the others.

Then he beckoned for the third Tanglor to come forward. "Behold Kastardinaeus Tanglor, the Learned. His wit and quick mind have made him known well to you all in his years as Prince. And assuredly I know that many

of you expected him to become the Great Tanglor, the King of Laria.
"But Kastardinaeus misled the others for a short time during the trial, and used his persuasion abilities frivolously. But then when the truth was seen, he not only stood up to his mistake, but also endeavored to use his abilities more carefully in the future, and to acknowledge his lack of position and of ability. The knowledge and arrogance that was built up in his years as the sole Prince of Laria he, with great temperance, set aside, and stood with the other Tanglors as an equal, and for that he is to be honored.
"Kastardinaeus has proven his mettle not only by all that but also by his great acts of a skilled warrior in battling the creatures of the Caverns of Tempering. He is and will remain Tanglor, to be honored and obeyed and to lead the kingdom!"

Once again the crowd cheered and clapped exuberantly while Kastardinaeus looked on with awe and amazement, though he was a bit ashamed at having his foolish actions revealed before everyone. The Judicator congratulated him and he went back with the others.

The the Judicator beckoned the first Tanglor. He came forward.

"Behold Dirinias Tanglor, the Reliable. Despite his insistence that he was unworthy and unable to enter the Caverns of Tempering as a Tanglor equal with the others, once put to the true test Dirinias has proven his mettle by being consistently reliable and brave, and by his excellent combat demonstrations. The only fault that one could ever find in the actions of Dirinias in this trial is that he did not put forth the effort to make of himself a leader of the Tanglors, though he had the ability to do so, as a man with a mind able to make quick decisions based on others' opinions.
"Dirinias is a reliable man and a warrior, and he is and will remain Tanglor, to be honored and obeyed and to lead the kingdom!"

A third time the crowd cheered and clapped. Though they were probably tired of giving applause, the Judicator had wisely saved the best Tanglors for last, to keep any one from receiving less recognition from the crowd.

Dirinias went back and the Judicator then beckoned the second Tanglor to come forward. He did.

"And now I present to you Balnori, the wise, the Humble. Balnori demonstrated in this trial a wisdom and meekness that far excelled that of any of the others. He treated all others with respect, and never once hounded Kastardinaeus for not hearing his wisdom in a time of pertinence.
"The only fault of Balnori, like that of Dirinias, was that he did not extend his wisdom to lead the others. Though he had less apparent leadership abilities than Dirinias and Kastardinaeus, the potential was and is within him.
"Balnori, the wise, the Humble, has proven his mettle in wisdom, in humility, in battles, and in courage, and it is with great honor that I bestow on him the Crown of the Great Tanglor! All hail Balnori, King of Laria!"

The crowds cheered deafeningly, shouting out "Balnori, King of Laria!" several times in unison. Balnori, the second Tanglor in our story, looked out at the crowd in quiet gladness, a joyful smile spreading across his face.

After that was a coronation festival, in which the Tanglors received much more honor and were put in their positions as Ruling Tanglors over Laria. Balnori served to be the best Great Tanglor the kingdom had known in a little over a century, and the Judicator of the Crown later said that he had great difficulty choosing between him and Dirinias (the first Tanglor). Ironically, the majority of the citizens had automatically assumed that Kastardinaeus (the third Tanglor) would have been chosen: he was the son of the late King of Laria, and was well-known for his intellect. But the Judicator chose well, knowing that it is wisdom, not intellect, that make a good leader, and that a proud man put into authority will become even more proud, but a humble man put into authority will rule with consideration and love for his people.

Ever since the Tanglor dynasty had been established, the Caverns of Tempering had been used to test and temper its future leaders. Though there was the occasional casualty like the fourth Tanglor, whose name was Martol, the Caverns proved a good place where future leaders, stripped of any prestige or power, and even without their memories, could show their mettle and demonstrate their abilities and courage.

In the years that followed, the four Ruling Tanglors never forgot their trial in the Caverns of Tempering. Through the rest of their lives they carried with them maturing memories of seeing themselves through blind eyes, seeing their actions without the pride and bias that comes with power and priveleged birth. The Caverns had not only earned the Tanglors their position, but it had prepared them for it.

For how can one be a king before he has been nobody?

“Tanglor: A Tale of Destiny” by Damien Riegel, 2008

Pronunciation guide:

'täng-lör	Tanglor
də-'ri-ni-as	Dirinias
kə-,star-də-'nā-us	Kastardinaeus
ta-ri-'tī-əs	Territias
'bal-nə-rī	Balnori

- ☒' primary accent
- ☒. secondary accent
- ☒ə quick "uh", as in /pickle/ = /'pi-kəl/
- ☒- syllable break
- ☒¯ long vowel, as in /tape/ = /tāp/

- ☒a as in care
- ☒i as in lit
- ☒u as in utter