

# **The Key To Tantalus**

by

**Michael Klerck**

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*The Power of Now:* I would also like to acknowledge that the concept and the term *Power of Now*, was borrowed from Eckhart Tolle and his book of the same name. This book also inspired me to adopt what has become a lifelong challenge: to keep my focus on the present in order to allow its meaning and importance to overrule obsessions with the past or the future.

I should perhaps also acknowledge that the war-cry the evil Inkwish use is a loose adaptation of the same from my Alma Mater, South African College School (SACS, in Newlands Cape Town, 1972). No doubt had my old Latin master been alive today he might have taken some comfort in knowing that I have been able, at least, to look up the Latin quotations.

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five

## The Lair

pro patriâ  
for our country (fatherland)

Martin woke with a start; immediately looking around. Trollip was awake and standing over a very small fire in the middle of the hollow. Magnus was sniffing at the entrance; Dominika still asleep.

Martin sighed, but was not sure whether it was from relief at finding they were safe, or from the uncertainty and uneasiness of the previous day.

Part of him wanted desperately to be back home; it was clearly morning and his mother would be calling him by now. Part of him wanted, of course, to continue to wherever they were going. The fact that they were in Tantalís had made it difficult for him not to want to know more and go further.

Slowly the details and discoveries of the day before began to flood his thoughts. He groped for the key, and found he was still clutching it. Perhaps the last discovery: that they were in Tantalís, had made him realise that they were where his father wanted him to be.

That in itself was comforting. And it was a comfort that would sustain them both, again and again.

Dominika woke. Martin put his hand on her shoulder to ease her back to the reality of their situation, managed to elicit a thin smile. Her thick mop of hair hung wildly around her face, and for the first time Martin felt a mild sense of affection for his friend – she was not only his companion, his challenger and his fan; looking now at her he suddenly no-

ticed how pretty she was. She looked up at him, and then her head moved slowly across to Trollip.

"What are you doing," she asked.

"Food; making food," said Trollip, proudly. "Good trolls can cook; good food. Bad trolls..." He pulled an ugly face and dismissed the thought with a wave of his left hand, the index finger of which he immediately stuck into his ear.

Dominika pulled a face.

There was a small fire, and only one large glowing coal, once a log; above it, suspended in a neat contraption, was a large leaf – the kind one would imagine from a tropical forest – it was folded over and raised above the fire just enough for the heat to cook whatever was inside. Martin could see heat and steam rising gently from the sides of the folded leaf.

When Trollip scooped the contents into small hard bowls, they were all hungry and ate the food with relish. It was good, and tasted of wild herbs, with a sweet meaty flavour. Martin held the bowl in his cupped hand and realised it must be some kind of large seed pod; they ate with sticks, neatly carved into eating utensils.

"Did you do all this?" asked Martin, lifting the bowl and stick; "did you make this now?"

Trollip continued to eat, and eventually replied, "this is troll hollow, safe portal too. Always things to eat."

"I'm thirsty," said Dominika.

"I'm worried about time," said Martin. "Shouldn't we be waking up at home now? What happens if they don't find us there?"

Trollip shook his head. "Still sleeping sound," he said, "back home, you still sound sleeping. Don't worry, Phantom will give you all bits and pieces to understand. We must go now," he said taking the bowls away from them, swiftly wiping them clean and then stacking them in a recess in the tree behind him.

Outside the sun filtered through the thick forest canopy; it was quite beautiful. They didn't have to walk far before they found a stream, and once Trollip had cleared some undergrowth away, they all bent down to have a long drink.

The water was especially pure and sweet, having just minutes before surfaced from deep within the earth somewhere above them, up a hillside they could not clearly see. They continued on their journey.

Neither Martin nor Dominika recognised any of the trees; not that they were experts, but they knew enough to realise they had probably not encountered them before. There were few oaks – the majority were softer, with thick, smooth bark and trunks, their branches fanning out widely. Above them were taller trees of a completely different kind.

Trollip walked around each one he encountered with respect, pausing as if he might be able to hear or smell something; perhaps they were each portals of a different kind; perhaps he could detect something from each one separately, as though they were markers on a map. Either way, his reverence and care caught their attention each time.

There was no direct light or sun at all, and they understood why Trollip had spoken about the dragones not being able to spot them.

“Why was there a dragone last night?” asked Dominika, “I thought you said they couldn’t see us.”

Trollip remained fixed in his loping gait. “Dragone can sometimes see portal-haven trees; dragone knew where we were last night. Chasing bad trolls away; bad trolls very frightened of dragones’ wissssh above...” He pointed above him, and they both recalled the sound of the previous night.

“How are your legs?” asked Dominika.

“Oh, they’re fine; only a very slight ache. I suppose it depends how far we have to walk,” said Martin, once again remembering the key and giving it a good stroke with the flat of his hand. When he had finished, he handed it to Dominika and told her to do the same which she did. She soon spoke: “I suppose we can only see this as an adventure; we’ve got nothing to lose. If they discover we’ve gone, then we’ve gone.” It looked as though she was regaining confidence as much as she was looking for confirmation in Martin. He stopped to take the key back from her and smiled, “As always, Dom, you seem to sum things up just perfectly. I

couldn't have done without you these last two years, and now I'm really glad you're here also."

Her hair was still as wild as it had been when she woke up, and a slight breeze caught the wispy strands and flung them upwards like candyfloss. Martin gave his own hair a cursory brush with his one hand, trying to find the parting.

Magnus was obediently and patiently walking next to Trollip's side, looking back now and then. Perhaps he had learnt his lesson from walking behind them all, when they had all collided.

They followed the stream; Trollip stopping to listen, it seemed, to the sound of the water itself. Martin noticed they were upstream and climbing. Soon there was a partial clearing and while Trollip ventured into it, both Martin and Dominika lurked behind. "Come, come," said Trollip.

"What about bad trolls?" asked Martin.

"No bad trolls in day," said Trollip. "Look." And he pointed directly above them, through a clearing in the canopy – probably less than the space of a large picture. High in the sky, they could make out a shape – larger than a bird, much larger, with short stubby wings and a huge body, although it was almost impossible to judge because they were not sure about the distance, and this made comparisons difficult.

"We being followed ...," said Trollip smiling. "Now we climb a little; up, up there." He pointed through the thinning thicket where a hillside was clearly visible. "Coming to the end of the Dark Woods; remember Dark Woods, safe in the day, and portal-havens safe at night. Remember." He watched them as he spoke, making sure this had all sunk in. Both Martin and Dominika motioned that they had understood.

The Dark Woods was kind in that it offered no sudden ending; it waned gently, until just a few trees punctuated a steep hillside. Large boulders positioned themselves decoratively across the landscape, some large enough to carry a crowd of people, or whatever creatures lived in Tantalus. They were a light grey, with varied fungus and lichen grow-

ing all over them.

In fact the scene was quite soporific and both Martin and Dominika found themselves feeling quite sleepy, basking in the brilliant sunshine as they entered the gentle climb.

High above them, at what appeared to be the summit, a cluster of trees beckoned them; one clearly looked like an oak but Martin could not be sure in the sharp light. Instinctively he knew they were making for them.

Suddenly from behind a boulder to their left a creature leapt into view, shrieking: "Kagaaa ! - Kagaaa ! – kagaaa ! Phisssterissss!"

Martin and Dominika fell to their knees in fright.

Trollip, in a flash, whipped his short sword from behind him and threw it with such speed at the creature, that neither of them could detect its path in the air. It landed with a 'shoekkk!' in the ground, right at the creature's feet. The creature froze – no sound; not a single movement.

It was clearly some kind of lizard. A long curly, but sturdy tail seemed to prop its body in a very erect position, so that it looked at them with a haughty and menacing stare. It could not have been more than half a metre tall, and although Martin could detect no movement coming from it once the sword had landed in the ground, he could clearly make out the thumping of its heart in the creature's upper chest region.

His own heart began to beat in unison, banging against his ribs, and he opened his mouth to clear what felt like a restriction in his windpipe.

Dominika had gripped his left arm, and it was beginning to throb.

Trollip burst out in vile and loud expletives, although in a foreign language. When he had calmed down a little and had retrieved the sword, he held the lizard-creature up by its neck, and said: "Goodness, goodness – silly thing; Trollip thought was little, baby Inq ... ." Once again he motioned with his hand for them to understand they should finish the word; Martin made a sound to show that he understood.

"This not baby; silly thing, full of bad talk, full of



naughty...but not...; I let him go now." And with that he let it drop to the ground. It hissed at him, now seemingly free of the spell or sheer terror of Trollip's sword, and scurried off up the hill, not turning once.

Trollip chuckled, probably less at the antics of the creature, than at his own reaction.

They were soon half way up, and the sun was beginning to press them with the sheer weight of its intensity. Magnus was slobbering, his tongue hanging this way and that in an attempt to cool down.

Trollip turned around and pointed with his hand outwards over the top of the trees below.

In the distance, mist. To the right more hills, undulating into mountains – could they see snow on top? Martin wasn't sure. The forest itself extended far into the distance, and they understood why it was difficult to see inside – the canopy of leaves assured a thick covering.

And then it caught their eye.

Once again high above, but not as high as before, flew what Trollip called a dragone. Even though the sky was empty, and he had nothing to compare it to, Martin could clearly see that it was huge. They all stopped. It looked quite different from conventional dragons he had seen in books. Not a little unlike the one he had seen in the library.

"Look," he said to Dominika, finding that trying to speak with his head thrown back hurt his windpipe and made the sound funny. The sun was a little sharp so they had to strain to see. Its head stuck out clearly, with a long protruding mouth that formed a clear silhouette against the sky; its body was bulky, in fact larger in comparison to Martin's understanding of a dragon. It definitely had wings but, strangely, these were small, and thin. They could see feet, legs and even front paws. Its back arched up towards its tail, and all along, ridges like a crocodile or dinosaur – that part seemed to fit the picture he had always carried in his mind or seen in drawings.

It hovered, more than flew, began to rise in the air, up, up and then simply became a dot against the sharp light of

day.

"We must hurry," said Trollip. "Phantoam waiting for you, for me; waiting for me. I get prize," he said proudly. Magnus barked for the first time, perhaps in anticipation of something he already knew.

They climbed further; it was now getting to be unbearably hot and Martin's legs were aching again. He clutched the key, this time both hands rubbing it until he felt better, remembering the inscription as he did so.

Suddenly they came to a crack in the hillside, invisible from below; Trollip paused to wait for them, and then entered. It was barely large enough for them to fit, but they did so without having to walk sideways. Up ahead it looked dark, and within minutes of walking in the cool air inside the hill, Trollip switched on his light. He was unable to lope and seemed to move with some difficulty.

Deeper and deeper they went. Eventually there was no light at all, and they were feeling their way forward. Only the scuffle of Trollip's large bony feet and the occasional noise from Magnus gave them some bearing.

"Not afraid," he said, "don't be afraid – come, come; nearly there for the prize!"

Just as they began to shiver from the cold, a warm, yellow light filtered down the thin corridor of the passage; the passage itself widened, and they found themselves at another entrance. When they worked their way further forward they could see, over Trollip's short body, that it was a large cave.

Trollip kept quite still; Magnus at his side, now and then looking back at Martin and Dominika.

Martin clutched the key, and could hear his heart beginning to pound as it had done before. Dominika, afraid to take his hand, perhaps, held onto his arm. They both looked around.

The cave extended high into the hillside or mountain. Above, small droplets of water formed, hitting the ground near them when they dropped. It was rocky, with many curves, crevices and protruding formations of stone, some

making interesting and colourful shapes. The smell. It was pungent, old, somewhat airless, and had a toxic edge to it that made them hide their faces in their shoulders to protect their nostrils.

Trollip said, "stay here; you stay here." Neither of them were going to make any move whatsoever. In fact, as interesting as the cave was, it was also new, also foreign and quite frightening, and their instinct was to retrace their steps, and head straight back to the Dark Woods. But there was a tone in Trollip's voice that made them clearly understand they were not going to be able to do so.

He moved deeper into the cave with Magnus, bent down and picked up a small object that seemed to shine. He said something, but not to them and in a language they could not understand. And then just as quickly and mysteriously as he had appeared the previous day, he disappeared with Magnus, around an outcrop of overhanging rock, into a lighter and broader passage to the left, and was gone.

They were alone.

The only sound was that of their hearts climbing desperately, it seemed to escape from their chests.

"This is not cool," whispered Dominika softly into Martin's ear. He pulled his head aside with fright, even though her words had been just a whisper. "I don't like the faerytale, dragon stuff; they can keep this for books. Now I *do* want to go home."

"We're in Tantalus," said Martin, trying to instil some confidence into her; but as much for his own sake, "I know it's scary, but we've got each other, and I'm sure this is where Dad wanted us to be." This time he took her hand and held it tightly.

Just then, from against the one side of the cave, there was a shifting and scraping – and even without being able to detect its source, both Martin and Dominika knew instinctively that the sounds were made by something, or someone big. Something really huge.

It spoke.

ten

## The Hole

me duce, tuts eris  
under my guidance you will be safe

Diablo shifted his great weight from one leg to another.

He was taller than all the other Inkwas; his head at least one quatta (about ten centimetres) above the rest. He glared at the four Inkwas that were digging the hole in front of him, and in a rasping whisper, let out a short explosion of expletives, hurrying them on.

They turned to face him, their tongues flicking in and out nervously and then went back to work immediately.

Diablo's own tongue, large and uncommonly crimson for an Inkwa, flicked too. But his was slow, deliberate, as if each flick, each flutter was the result of a careful calculation of speed and length. It was directed at them. The four workers did not let this fact go unnoticed; any slacking off meant that just one spit, and they would feel the burning of his vile poison on their backs. Like all Inkwish, Diablo had two glands in his throat, each one producing a harmless liquid which, when combined, produced a fiery, toxic chemical that burnt through even thick Inkwish skin.

It was a strange and devilish characteristic of this dark race: that their own poison could harm few other species; it was poisonous only to themselves. To some, their scars were a brave indication of how they had suffered under vicious leaders. But while they might be seen as a sign of courage, or endurance, it was no fun being on the receiving end of an accurate spit.

And this time Diablo was too close to miss.

He watched closely; the hole he had ordered was to be an exact depth and width – he had something clearly in mind, although those digging had no clue what it was. And he wanted it finished before the first watch began.

An aide slithered in by a side entrance, too afraid to make a sudden move; she had in her hands a Hill snake, still moving hesitantly, and on the very verge of its death throws. She waited patiently until a slight movement of Diablo's head and a recognisable flick of his tongue told her she could approach, which she did. She stopped in front of him, gesticulating some form of greeting and the offering of the creature she held in her hands. Diablo looked at her briefly, nodded and took the snake from her.

He rocked forward, his body coming off his enormous erect tail which otherwise gave him balance, speed in flight, and comfort in sitting, and slumped slightly into the semi-squat position peculiar to Inkwas. With one swift movement, he severed the head and at least a quarter of the snake's body so the remainder quivered, and shook in his hands.

The blood dripped down the corners of his mouth onto his chin, and he irritatingly wiped it off with the back of his small left hand.

He was feeling better already. The aide retreated into semi-darkness, around the side of the cave, while Diablo completed his meal by allowing the remainder of the small but tasty snake to drop into his mouth and down his gaping gullet.

Perhaps he had asked for too much; should he have ordered another two workers, or were four enough, he found himself wondering. Now, his hunger satisfied, he leant forward and peered into the hole; the workers stopped briefly, trying to detect his mood, but decided he was simply in a stance of enquiry, and they continued digging.

Just then two more Inkwas entered. Their entrance was quite different. Not the obsequious and quiet waiting in the wings, like the aide. Theirs was a resolute and more confident presentation. Diablo looked at them both.

“Have you thought about it?”

"Yetthh, Ours," they said obediently, their tongues in unison, flicking out between their lips in an attempt to emulate that of their leader.

"It's the only way to go." Armai and Geaddon smiled, but only just noticeably. As the two favourite and trusted soldiers of Diablo's personal guard, they held sway. And they knew it.

The task he had set them, although unprecedented, although quite unique in the history of Tantalus, and one which they had spent only brief moments doubting, was such they would be unable to refuse in the bigger picture of things.

"You have known all your lives the secret of combat," continued Diablo turning fully, to face them. "As long as you catch them unawares, you should have no trouble."

The two nodded.

"You will bring it straight to me in the container ..."

"Yetthh, Ours, we will; there will be no thpilling. No delay."

It was exactly what Diablo wanted to hear and he smiled at them.

"If you do exactly as I say, you will be safe." Diablo belched, but neither of them so much as moved either of their long reptilian eyelids; they were transfixed, quite mesmerised by his sheer confidence and the boldness of his plan.

By the beginning of the first watch the hole was finished. It might have been half a quatta deeper, but Diablo decided it would suffice.

The workers went to their watch relieved, bowing subserviently as they retreated from Diablo's presence. Their leader did not budge, though. In fact he remained next to the hole for some time, peering inside, contemplating, judging, scheming. The expression on his face was one of resolute maliciousness; it was clear he had made up his mind about something, and he was not going to deviate.

Every now and then, as Inkwas do, Diablo leant forward to allow his tail a chance to furl around to the front of his body. His small hands stroked it, and he massaged the taut

muscles down its length. Although it could bear his full weight, it was also a sensitive organ, finely tuned and as sharp as a razor at the end. Taking care of one's tail, for an Inkwa, was something akin to the preening of feathers for a bird. It was by far their deadliest weapon; and something told him he would be needing it soon.

Much later that night, and by the end of the second watch Armai and Geaddon returned.

In twenty-one centuries no single act in Tantalus would shake its traditions and its history more than the result of their actions that night. Although the Inkwish had turned and had offered troubled times and dark difficulties for everyone in Tantalus to bear, nothing like this had ever been even contemplated.

Diablo knew it. Although his plans remained quite secret, he knew that what he had devised would change things forever.

He knew, also, they had succeeded when they handed him the container.

What he didn't know was that Armai and Geaddon had not killed one but two fully grown dragons.

If Diablo had had any remorse and perhaps a little more insight, he might have shivered from the sheer magnitude of this vicious deed. Instead he simply smiled and took the large silver container from them.

In the still of the night, one could hear a faint, almost gentle shrill-like hiss which signified the start of the third watch.

eighteen

## The Turning Point

in medias res  
into the midst of things

Ish-chaer stood next to Morduainé.

“Are you sure you’ve come out at the right time?”

“Only time will tell, Morduainé; it is certainly good to be at your side again. It’s been quite a journey I’ve made. When last did we stand together?”

Morduainé got off his tricorn – Diablo and the Inkwas were now far away, regrouping or perhaps even retreating – they would have to make a decision about what their next move should be.

Ish-chaer looked at him pensively, brushing his long white hair away from his face. “The years escape me – perhaps more than five hundred – I was an Inkwa for two hundred or so remember.”

The two of them stood and looked out over the plain now, both trying to regain some perspective. Memories. Each one was aware of the journey they had made and the point to which they had now come, and their expressions reflected their pensive mood.

“What do you think their next move will be?” Ish-chaer asked, finally.

Morduainé spoke while he stroked the long hair on the neck of his tricorn, not taking his eyes off the enemy for a second:

“I was sad to see the degree of Diablo’s temper and resolve; he is no longer just a troublesome Inkwa, but turned fully to embody as much evil as possible. I can now understand how the killing of two dragons came about. Unless they turn to attack again, I think Phantoam and the other



dragones should try to drive them back fully. We cannot have any kind of sappy retreat – this must be a decisive battle. There is too much at stake.”

Ish-chaer nodded, showing for the first time a sadness in his eyes.

“But I am not certain of the wisdom of your appearance here,” observed Morduainé.

“I don’t think I could have stayed protected where I was any longer. If Diablo is killing dragones, who’s to say they will ignore no-place-land and respect it – there, I was all alone without any protection. At least here I have all of you. I am finally back home. It is where I need to be right now; I am sure of it.”

Morduainé nodded, allowing a slight smile. They were silent for a long while, and then Ish-chaer noticed something:

“What’s that?”

“What?” said Morduainé, following Ish-chaer’s gaze.

“Over there in the middle of the field. It’s ... it can’t be. Someone has appeared in the middle of the plain, right between us and the Inkwas. Look – it looks like a human dog! By the magic of all the faeries and the songs of the trolls, it’s Martin and Magnus his dog! How on earth!?”

“This is not good; he was told to wait.”

“I said I would call him, but I have not focussed my attention towards him at all; if anything I have pushed him away. Why didn’t he listen?”

“Someone had better reach him quickly,” said Morduainé.

“That can only be me,” said Ish-chaer.

“I don’t think that’s wise. We cannot have the two most important people in Tantalus in the middle of the plains. What if Diablo turns around and sees both of you?”

But Ish-chaer did not stay to debate with his friend and confidant, Morduainé. Instead he gripped his sword and bow and ran as fast as he could towards both Martin and Magnus.

He was not the only one who had seen him. When Martin looked up the slight slope of the hill to his left, he realised he

might be in trouble.

It was Diablo.

He had also seen Martin, and was already turning to run down the slope towards him.

Magnus could sense the danger and ran towards him, barking frantically. Martin tried to call him back, realising that he was no match for this huge creature coming down the hill. But it was no use.

Diablo was by now almost in full flight. He galloped, his tail giving him added momentum as he leant back onto it every now and then, the rippling muscles in his huge legs pumping as hard as they could to launch himself forward each time his feet landed on the ground. He began to scream, his red flicking tongue adding to his fearsome appearance.

From the opposite side came Ish-chaer running only as an elf in full flight could run: his head down, bent forward, hair flowing behind him, and increasing his speed with each step until he looked as though he was as light as air and running as fast as a puckish wind.

Martin was in the middle.

He realised that it would take another few seconds for Diablo to reach him. Would Ish-chaer make it in time? What if Diablo was able to throw something at him – a sword or spear, for instance? Martin's mind was in overdrive, frantic, and once again his head began to throb.

And then as he found himself stepping backwards towards Ish-chaer and away from the frightening creature coming down the slope, he stumbled on something.

He looked down. It was an Inkwa spear.

Instinctively he picked it up, holding it in his right hand. He looked at Diablo, coming nearer each moment and then, turning his head, at Ish-chaer. He realised he would not make it in time. There was no mistaking Diablo's intentions. Martin knew instinctively there would be no capture, no talk – it would be a quick and decisive death.

Martin didn't want to die.

He found himself holding the spear as he would a javelin.

A javelin! Martin suddenly realised what he had in his hand. Could he do it? He looked back once again. Ish-chaer was nearer, approaching with every second; but not quite near enough.

And Diablo ...

Martin could feel his heart exploding inside his chest; so much so he could hardly breathe. The thought of Diablo reaching him first; surely his father had not called him back to die, surely this was not what Tantalus wanted!

He tightened his grip on the long spear. It was beautifully balanced and fitted perfectly into his hand. He allowed it to bounce once or twice, up and down. Could he do it?

He shook his head, his heart pounding, racing, and then with one quick action his arm fell behind and below him. For just a split second before the launch, Martin had a moment of doubt – he was not in his chair now, and launching a javelin while standing up was quite a different action.

Suddenly he found himself screaming loudly: "Whaaaaa!"

Instinctively, his arm came up and forward, the spear-head almost touching the side of his face. And when he threw it, he could just about see the red of Diablo's tongue, and the fire in his eyes; his tail-end swaying behind his massive body as his feet pounded the ground beneath him.

It was what Diablo least expected. When he finally realised what was happening, his momentum was too quick and his direction too committed. It was simply too late to stop, and he could no more sidestep the spear than redirect its path.

Martin could actually see the look of surprise on Diablo's face as the spear itself reached him and found its mark.

It took him at full force, just below the chest, and on the right side of his abdomen, near his heart. His two hands immediately grabbed hold of the shaft, as his body continued on its now futile path. His legs began to falter, though, and no longer did the landing of his feet on the ground produce their rhythmical beat. They landed sporadically; and then one foot simply didn't make it at all.

When Diablo fell, he did so on his side, only four or five metres from Martin and with a gigantic thud.

Martin could see, for just a second, a look of contempt for him, but also one of pain and marked surprise.

Martin felt almost sorry for him.

Magnus barked frantically, at and around Diablo's face.

Martin suddenly realised he had been holding his breath all the time; and when he let out a blast of air he had to hold on to his chest, pounding it again and again in an attempt to stop his heart from exploding inside him.

Ish-chaer reached him, perhaps a second or two later.

"Thank Heaven itself you're alright." He looked down at Diablo. "Have you killed him?" he asked turning again to Martin.

Martin was still in a state of shock; all he could do was stare at the awesome creature on the ground. Ish-chaer took hold of him and, drawing Martin to one side, he stepped forward in a slow deliberate approach to inspect Diablo. He was still moving slightly, shuddering every now and then.

Suddenly there was the sound of more feet behind Martin, and he turned to see Trollip, and two other trolls with him.

"Stand back," said Trollip. "OoOoooo-ee; Yes! If he not dead, I kill him, for you." His sword was already above his head. And he brought it down fast and furiously.

With one swift blow it was the end.

The other two trolls gathered around Martin, their mouths slightly open. They simply could not take their eyes off him – little did Martin realise that he had done something few in Tantalus might have had the courage or ability to do.

Ish-chaer turned to Martin. "I don't think we should stay here – look!" He pointed up the slight slope. Some of the Inkwas, seeing what had happened began to run down towards them; a few beginning to bellow and scream, as they gained momentum. They must have realised their leader was down; perhaps they wanted to rescue him.

Almost certainly they would want revenge.

It was a good time to retreat. Ish-chaer tapped Trollip on

the shoulder, indicating that they should follow.

Martin and Ish-chaer began to run. Soon Martin realised the trolls had caught up with them, but he was no match for either Ish-chaer, whose elfin speed and grace clearly surpassed that of humans, or for the trolls who also managed, with their strange running gait and not entirely unlike that of an Inkwa, to run much faster than Martin could imagine any human doing.

He fell behind. Now and then Ish-chaer slowed and turned in order to encourage him to catch up, but he simply could not.

The Inkwas were gaining ground, and Martin was not even half way back to the elfin ranks. Ahead of them in the distance he could see trolls fall to the ground, taking their typical battle stance in readiness for the torrent of Inkwas that would come their way.

The elves had knelt down, their arrows drawn. They would surely fire over his head, at the right moment, in order to catch the storming Inkwas as they approached behind Martin.

It did not matter what Ish-chaer said or did, it was no use. Martin simply could not run that fast; and it was clear that the Inkwas, if not all, at least some, would reach him before he managed to cross the plain to safety. He could feel a throbbing in his head, his heart wildly pounding inside his chest. He ran, and ran. His legs thrust out in front of him, then crashing into the ground, one over the other, again and again. And no matter how much he pushed them to work harder, it seemed he was still so very far away.

He began to panic. It was easy to recite inscriptions and hold on to keys when one was sitting quietly inside a tree – this was an entirely different matter!

The inscription! Yes, that was it! He started, “*stultum ....*” But only the first word came out. He could not concentrate – there was simply too much to distract him. He felt his heart thrashing inside his chest, his feet hardly touching the ground. One wrong step; just *one* bad landing.

Then it happened.

**Wham!** He could feel the front of his left foot smash into a mound of earth. His body bent forward, instinctively, in order to correct his balance. For a second he looked like a runner eager to reach the tape of the finish-line first – his head bent forward, his body arched. But this was no finish of a champion runner – it didn't take long and he landed face first in the grass. Martin could feel the soft earth graze against his face, his hands and arms coming up instantly to protect himself. He was down, flat on the ground. And there was absolutely no chance of getting up and resuming his flight.

Ish-chaer had not noticed, and continued speeding forward.

For a second or two there was silence. All that Martin could do was feel, against the side of his face, the erratic thudding of large Inkwish feet hitting the ground not too far behind him. The thudding grew, even in the short space of time he lay face down, louder and louder.

There was clearly no way he was going to be able to get up and make it to the other side. Magnus barked frantically at his head, desperate for his master to rise perhaps even remembering the last time he lay on the ground, cold and lifeless.

Perhaps he finished the inscription right then, perhaps he did not. He would never remember. But louder than the thudding of Inkwish feet was the sound of something thunderous directly above him.

It was an almost deafening swish, and it reminded him of the sound of a helicopter. It was somehow gentler and far less mechanical in nature. Nevertheless Martin had the impression that it was something very large.

It was as if time stood still – pictures of rescue helicopters came to mind; then it was images of Inkwas towering above him.

Martin was beginning to waft again – perhaps the fall had injured him further, knocking him a little senseless and bringing on further concussion. Was he drifting away somewhere? Was he perhaps entering a portal? He couldn't tell. And just when he felt himself beginning to lose focus, he

opened his eyes and recognised the creature above him. A creature so large, that the sunlight was dimmed, and a shadow began to fall on the ground all around him.

It was neither the sound of the Inkwish nor that of a helicopter. It was the clear, and undeniable sound of the largest dragone in Tantalus. It was Phantoam.

He landed with an enormous **thud!** not more than a few metres away from Martin. Martin tried to get to his feet.

“Don’t lie there staring at me,” he said. “You’ve got perhaps another ten seconds. Get up and jump on!”

Martin got up, a little dazed, his legs somewhat wobbly and weak. He scrambled towards Phantoam. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that an Inkwa was uncomfortably close; his spear ready, drawn back, his speed slightly reduced so as to make the throw.

There was no more time. He jumped onto Phantoam’s side, clutching his small wing, clinging frantically to any piece of him that protruded from his massive bulk, and climbed onto his back, just as Phantoam began to rise. He had always wondered whether the fin-like ridges on the back of a dragone were sharp, or hard – he was about to find out. He simply grabbed one and held on tightly.

Phantoam began to breath in and out frantically. Martin could sense a level of panic in him. Phantoam let out a blast of flame to discourage any Inkwa from getting too close and then, suddenly, they were floating upwards. They rose quickly, and the action seemed to demand much from Phantoam himself.

Martin could sense, too, that this was perhaps much quicker than a dragone’s normal ascent. They were high above the battleground now, and something was going on inside the gargantuan body right beneath Martin.

“What’s that noise?” he shouted. At first Phantoam did not reply. He was still breathing in and out heavily, panting, and at the same time making strange sounds with his stomach.

“I have to make enough gas as quickly as possible to rise in the air,” he shouted back. “And if we don’t get high

enough they will be able to aim their spears at my under-belly. And that will be the end of us! Hold on!"

Soon they were more than high enough to be out of reach. But Inkwas swirled below them, seething with rage, erupting with avid determination. Martin peered over the side, leaning as far as he dared without falling off Phantoam's back.

"What were you doing down there in the middle of all that chaos?" asked Phantoam when he had gathered his breath.

"I don't know," said Martin, trying to gather himself. "Something must be wrong with the portals, I've never had trouble coming into or leaving Tantalus before."

"Well, you're lucky I saw you when I did."

Martin could actually hear the swish of the Inkwa's spears flying swiftly just under them. But Phantoam was too high; the spears lost their momentum, and began falling to the ground.

In frustration some Inkwas ran towards Magnus and kicked him so that he yelped loudly and rolled across into a tuft of grass. One managed to launch its tail-end and slice Magnus's leg wide open. Magnus cried out again, so loudly that Martin could hear him. Martin himself cried out from above, desperate, but unable to do anything.

Phantoam hovered just above the crowding Inkwas, allowing Martin a perfect bird's eye view. Some Inkwas were gathering to look at Diablo, others continued to run. Most of them milled around below Phantoam, as though they thought they might have a chance at combat. It was chaotic, and probably what the elves were waiting for.

Their arrows, straight and accurate, caught the faltering Inkwas below; they floundered this way and that, not using their shields effectively. Many of them fell, at their leader's side.

The rest of them, still running, seemed to lose direction and began to scatter.

The trolls were waiting for them, but instead of waiting until the last moment, they rose from their positions be-



tween the long grass and ran to meet the rush of disorganised Inkwas.

The clash was almighty: the sound itself and the force of bodies and steel colliding with such violence. The trolls, diminutive, and seemingly no match for the tall and heavy Inkwas, fought with such determination, they soon began to unravel any fighting strength or resolve in their much larger enemy.

Within seconds rows of Inkwas lay, their blood spilling into the Soft Plains, and forming small rivers that made patterns on some patches of dry earth.

Martin thought about Magnus. He closed his eyes – it was almost over. Phantoam brought them lower now, obviously feeling it was safer.

Faeries rushed in, some to stare at Diablo, others to rescue Magnus: one rubbed a mixture of earth and something she took out of a small bag into his wound, and Magnus raised his head from his pillow of soft grass and gazed at them. Martin smiled, relieved, from high above.

“Come,” said Phantoam after some time. “We must muster the remaining Inkwas – whatever Morduiné decides to do, we must gather the rest of them here on the open plain. Hold on.”

And they flew.

Martin realised, probably for the first time, that he was actually flying on a dragone’s back. The excitement and panic of climbing onto Phantoam, and then rising up into the air as fast as they could had not really allowed this to sink in. Now they were flying, not fast, but definitely moving. And it was a strange sensation. He had flown before, often, in fact. But flight with man always meant noise. Up here it was silent – a hushed, heavy, but somewhat comforting silence.

They swept across the now empty plain, Phantoam making a deep sighing sound, not unlike the slow, long song of a whale – indeed he was about the same size, and summoned the other dragones to follow him. Soon the sky was thick with their mass, the small intermittent flap of their wings, which they used only for manoeuvring, and the rising and

falling of their bloated bodies.

The Inkwas, mostly stunned by what they had witnessed, were now completely scattered – some running away, some quite motionless in position where Diablo had left them.

The dragons positioned themselves on the other side, behind them so as to drive them, like cattle, towards the main body of elves, trolls and faeries.

And then the final onslaught began.

The dragons swept down, onto the seething mass of Inkwas, now desperate in their attempt to get away, and with their fiery breath, unleashed a fury of flame above their heads, catching them on their necks and shoulders.

The Inkwas ran, galloped, fell crashing to the ground; some got up again to run further – anything, just to get away; and all the time they were being herded towards the main body of their enemy.

Over the small hill, back onto the plain, they ran so that from above, it looked like a swarm of rats running to a sure and fatal end.

“Stop!” said Martin to Phantoam. “Please put me down.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Phantoam.

“Please – you must. Right next to Morduainé. I must speak with him.”

The remaining Inkwas were now where they had been in the first place, although not at all in their former glory, and not assembled in their tight formations, but instead quivering, looking this way and that.

The faeries positioned themselves again – this would be another chance for them, especially with the Inkwas so disorganised. It would be an easy attack.

Phantoam landed and Martin climbed off; he walked to Morduainé who stood next to his tricorn.

“I must speak to them – I have something to say,” Martin said.

Morduainé shook his head, more out of curiosity and indecision than anything else. “Speak with the Inkwas?”

“Yes. I know this is what I have to do. I just know it.” He could hear Morduainé breathing – the air was heavy with

heat and the soft whining of the Inkwas some distance away.

Martin climbed onto Phantoam's back and stood up, as tall as he could, so that he could see over Phantoam's head and directly into the eyes of the Inkwas now gathered in a long line abreast.

There was silence. Perhaps they were transfixed by Phantoam's presence, perhaps the sight of Martin had arrested them but few if any of them moved at all. Martin spoke.

"Inkwas. Your leader is dead. There is no escape now. They will open the Box and you'll no longer enjoy the power you had. I cannot guarantee the dragons will hold back, but for now, they hover above you all and you have our attention. Tantalus is not a place of death – this today should never have happened. There is even one of you that tried to kill me. Look," and Martin parted his hair to reveal his fresh wound on the side of his head.

"Queen Fara has told me that you have the choice to turn and become elves again in your former glorious state. Do it now, before it's too late!"

If ever silence had washed over the Soft Plains, it was now, like a soft lapping pond against a gentle shore, the silence, thick and pregnant, filled every being assembled there. Even the heavy breathing of Phantoam was arrested by Martin's words and his plea.

The Inkwas stared at Martin; one here, one there gripped their swords more firmly, another his shield, looking at one another, unsure.

It was another few agonising minutes before two Inkwas lowered their weapons and walked forward gingerly.

And then more, and more, until great gaps in their ranks formed. There must have been two or three thousand that slowly edged their way towards Martin and Phantoam.

Magnus lay at the tricorn's feet, his head raised, poised to growl, with three faeries hovering above him, the soft hum of their wings fanning him to keep him cool.

The elves began to cheer. And then the trolls. And then, even Jezza, lifting herself off the ground and raising her arms above her head, began to shout with joy.

The Inkwas walked on and on towards them, and then seemingly without fear, but with looks of utter defeat and resignation, stopped right in front of the cheering crowd.

No one had even contemplated this beckoning, a call of this nature, and even Morduainé was smiling. Perhaps, he thought, this is why they had needed a human-child to enter Tantalís – for this, if nothing else. He shook his head, almost not believing what was happening before his very eyes.

And then the most beautiful song rose from the ranks of the elves. A haunting song of victory, of praise and honour – a hymn, a song of battle, a rousing chorus of triumph all rolled into one.

Martin stood laughing on Phantoam's back.

And then he could simply not help himself, so he raised his own arms and shouted for joy as well.

