

A TALE

BY ALINA UDREA

Vol II



A Tale: Volume 2

By Alina Udrea

NOTE: This is a sequel to my first novel entitled simply “A Tale”. The story follows the adventures of the main characters in the first volume, getting the reader to know them even better. The first volume is free and it was published on www.free-ebooks.net. I hope you will enjoy.

Also this is dedicated to my family, my husband Marcel and my daughter Delia whom I love dearly. And of course to my best friends whom I was lucky to “meet” while playing Celtic Heroes on my phone. Nevertheless, it is a fiction and everybody should take it as it is, a figment of my imagination. Cheers!

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Chapter 1: From cook to warrior

After Gelebron' s defeat and Miihah' s return, all was quiet in the beautiful and peaceful land of Donn. But as nothing good lasts too long, this state of blissfulness wasn't to last long either. Threat was lurking from the Northern regions, a land called Loyalis which was ruled by king Dova the Ruthless and his right hand man, his army' s general, a man as ruthless as himself but with less brains, Jerno.

Meanwhile Scar and Miihah were ruling the kingdom with fairness and generosity. Scar had learnt from Miihah what true kindness was and what it meant to be generous with the less fortunate. They were surrounded by their loyal friends, Ulo, Mongo, Bratty, Mean, Harry and their newest friend Alyss the archer, or Deadly Arrows as she was known to her enemies. Their friendship was beyond borders, each of them fully trusting the others without a second thought. They used to meet all at least once a day, usually having dinner and drinking together in the local tavern where they talked about what had happened during the day. This is how one evening Adi the cook had come into discussion.

- Remember Adi? He wants to become a warrior, he said he has nothing to lose, just his life, ha-ha. Said Mongo, thinking with admiration of the brave cook who had accompanied them to Gelebron's tower.
- Yes, he has been training every day with my soldiers, answered Harry playing with his grey beard. He was so skinny and had no strength at all at the beginning, he could hardly pick up the training sword and he used to trip a few times before actually hitting the training dummy!! Ha- ha, such a funny guy!

- Is he any better now? He really wanted to accompany us next time we would go on a mission. He said he'd cook for us and also fight with us, such a courageous young man! Said Mongo curious to find out what Harry thought of the cook.
- Yes, finally Adi got some muscles on him now. I think he will make a fine warrior. The more we are, the merrier! Laughed Harry.
- Yes, I liked it when he put the frying pan in front of Harry, saving him from the snake's poisonous venom. He is a natural! Alyss also agreed.
- I guess he can come, we need a good cook anyway! And if he's willing to fight by our side, even better, Ulo also agreed with the rest, taking a gulp of ale and looking outside the window at some children playing in the dirt, pretending to be knights and fighting with some sticks.
- Speaking of the devil! Said Harry looking at the front door of the tavern as Adi had just walked in. Come join us Adi!

Adi, not sure the king's general, Harry the Dwarf, was talking to him, turned his head to see who he was talking to but there was nobody else behind him.

-Who, me? Asked Ady coyly, his cheeks turning red. Even the tip of his nose was red.

-Yeah, you! Come here boy! Have a drink with us! And Harry ordered another round of ale for everybody, including Adi. Adi on the other hand had never tasted ale before, he had come to the tavern looking for Blaryn, his older brother. But as he wanted them to believe that he was used to drinking which in his opinion was a must to be considered a real man, he accepted Harry's invitation and sat by their table.

- Don't be afraid, the ale won't bite you!! Laughed Bratty who immediately realized the truth. On the other hand, maybe the cockroach on the rim of the glass will!

-Yuck! And he dropped the glass on the floor, all the ale spreading under the table to everybody's amusement and to his joy as he didn't have to drink from the reeking liquid anymore.

-Want me to order you another drink? Asked Harry patting him on the shoulder.

-No, please don't bother. I got a stomach ache and can't drink today, Adi lied.

-Ok Adi, if you say so...and Harry gave up on trying to get Adi a drink.

Mean whispered in Bratty's ear, asking her if there really had been a bug in Adi's glass.

-Nah, but did you see the poor guy? I thought of doing him a favor, answered Bratty, giggling.

- I thought so, answered Mean with a grin.

- So how is your training Adi? Asked Mongo.

- Pretty good I reckon. I've been training every day since our adventure together so next time if you would consider taking me along I could be of more help than just cook...and would fight with a sword, not a frying pan... Adi was looking searchingly in their eyes trying to figure out what they thought of him, trying to read their minds by the expression on their faces.

- Yes, Ulo mingled in the discussion, we've heard that you have become pretty good at wielding the sword! So I think I am not wrong when I say that you are most welcome to join us from now on!

- Wow, I don't know what to say. I am honored by your words and I promise I will do my best to earn your trust and my place among you!

- Amen to that! Said Mean who really liked the kid.

Chapter 2: Loyalis

- Hey, Jerno, get your ass in here! Yelled Dova, the king of the northern lands called Loyalis.

Loyalis was a magnificent land, lush with forests and mountains and rivers filled with different types of fish, a land with good soil that gave every year good crops but unfortunately with one itsy bitsy drawback: it was inhabited. By people. By King Dova's people, a nation of ruthless mercenaries who would have killed their own mothers if there was to be had any money out of it. Dova was surrounded by an army of mindless and merciless mercenaries who were ready to do anything for him as long as they got paid for it. His general Jerno had two brothers, Og and Bris who were both assigned with keeping the army under control, making sure the soldiers, the mercenaries, were paid in time for their services and also reporting directly to Jerno if they got wind of any discontents that were threatening to turn to riots. Those would have to be dealt with swiftly. No disobedience was to be accepted.

-Yes, your lordship?

- Is your dragon ready? Is it trained and obedient? And Dova looked straight in Jerno's eyes with such menace that Jerno was afraid to tell him anything else but what Dova the Ruthless wanted to hear. King Dova also had the nickname of Dova the Mad but nobody dared to call him that to his face. His nickname was due to the fact that that when he got mad, which happened a lot and for no real reason, he would usually maim the person he got mad at, watching him suffer, giving him a token of his royal “love”. Dova was a self-proclaimed king. He had conquered Loyalis long ago with his army of mercenaries, killing the former

king and queen who had been good to their people and forcing the remaining people of the land, who were mainly peasants with no means to defend themselves, into slavery with the help of the same mercenaries he had paid to conquer this beautiful land in the first place. His army needed supplies so the people were compelled to work the land and grow crops to feed Dova's army, being allowed to keep for themselves just enough to survive so they wouldn't die of hunger. So the people hated him and no one could say he was loved by his army of mercenaries either, but as long as he fed and paid them, he was sure he could rely on them.

- Aggy is a strong-headed dragon your lordship, but it shouldn't be long now till I break his will, said Jerno trembling with fear as he didn't know in what mood Dova was and hoping that by the end of their conversation he would be intact, all his limbs where they were supposed to be.

- It better be so or if not I was thinking of making myself a new necklace with one of your fingers hanging from it....

- Yeah, and I know which one, whispered Jerno to himself.

-What was that? Did you say something Jerno?

- No your lordship. Aggy will be ready. You will be able to use it to burn down Donn and conquer it by the end of winter.

- I hope you are right. No more stalling, go and do your job now!

Jerno left in a hurry not looking back. He went straight to Aggy's pen to check on the dragon.

Aggy was pretending to be asleep, paying attention to Jerno's footsteps and guessing he was coming to him in another attempt to tame him. He would show him when he would be older and stronger. As for now, he had to comply with his jailor's demands.

Aggy was a fire dragon. He had been found by Dova on one of his hunting expeditions when he was just a defenseless cub. He had gone to explore the surroundings of the cave he was sharing with his mother, a magnificent but old dragon who was probably dead by now. How he missed his mother! And a tear ran down

Aggy's cheek. Now he was locked up in this pen with this human who kept trying to make him spit fire and hit specific targets. Maybe he should just set the human on fire, at least it would be funny even if he would be the only one laughing. But he couldn't, if he tried there were a lot more puny humans to shackle him and he didn't want that. So best thing was to do what the human asked him, at least for now.

Jerno entered Aggy's pen holding a whip in his right hand. The whip nevertheless was just for show, he never dared to use it on the dragon. But now there was something new in Jerno's eyes, it was determination to get what he wanted. Aggy realized he had better set fire to whatever Jerno wanted so he would leave him alone afterwards. He didn't want to put the human's nerves to the test this time.

- You dumb creature! Jerno said, taking revenge on Aggy for the way he had been treated and threatened by Dova. You will burn that tree and you will do it now! And Jerno pointed the whip towards a distant tree. Aggy focused his inner fire and burnt down the tree in a jiffy.
- Good, now we're getting somewhere! Said Jerno satisfied. Till winter you will be strong enough to burn more than just a tree!

Then he left to check on his two younger brothers, Og and Bris. He found them playing dice with a few of the mercenaries and drinking something which was supposed to be ale but stank really bad. Or did they stink and not the beer? He didn't really want to find out the answer to that question and as everything seemed under control he retired to his room.

Chapter 3: Bad news

Olekson the dwarf, Harry's brother, was running along the castle halls towards the throne room. He was accompanied by two slender women. They all barged into the throne room out of breath. Cold sweat was running down Olekson's face while the women kept calm.

-What's the meaning of all these? Asked Scar, the king of Donn. What's wrong Olek?

Olekson knelt in front of the courtroom and in front of the king and queen and spoke loud so every soul in the chamber would hear him clearly:

- Your Highness, forgive my interruption but I bring news from the Northern borders. Finally my scouts have returned with news, bad news I'm afraid. Speak out Sneak, Davyn! He said addressing the slender women who were by his side.
- Your Highness, said Sneak, Olekson's scout, the best spy he had, we have just returned from Loyalis bearing bad news I'm afraid. King Dova is preparing his army of mercenaries to attack Donn and he also has a powerful weapon. He has a dragon, a fire dragon, last of his kind. He is preparing an attack by the end of the year.

Sneak and Davyn bowed and retreated behind Olekson who spoke again:

-My king, we have to take some measures against that dragon in the first place. Our army can most probably defeat Dova's mercenaries as they only fight for money, whereas our army will be fighting to defend their loved ones, their families, their homes, their children and wives. But the dragon is another matter. I think you should ask for Mean's

advice, maybe he has some information on how to defeat a dragon in one of his many old books.

-Ok, thank you Olek, Sneak and Davyn. You may go now. Mongo, please bring Mean here. Tell him it's urgent!

-Sure thing my king! And Mongo was already out the door. He was back with Mean in less than five minutes. Mean wasn't very happy as he had been interrupted and summoned by the king on such a perfect afternoon when all he wanted was to study his books of spells and try brew some new potions. Having such elixirs could prove useful in many situations. He was working on an elixir that boosted speed and strength when Mongo came in and took him to see the king without telling him anything else besides the fact that it was urgent.

- Mean, said Scar, I want you to find out anything you can about fire dragons!

-Forgive my rudeness, but are you thinking of taking one as a pet? Maybe you should find something less dangerous...said Mean half jokingly half serious as he didn't know what the fuss was all about and how had a dragon come into discussion.

-Sometimes I wonder if you are trying to annoy me on purpose Mean! Why would I want a dragon? No, I received news from the Northern borders. It seems king Dova the Ruthless wants to conquer our land and he has a dragon to aid him. Any idea how we can defeat that?

- I will search for some information in my books. There must be at least one holding the information we seek. I will let you know as soon as I find out anything useful my king! And Mean bowed and exited in a hurry, obviously worried at the king's words.

Then Scar and Miih retired to their room as Scar wasn't in the mood to do anything else for the time being.

Mean hurried back to his books to find something useful on fire breathing dragons. He took all the books from the shelves and scanned them for the information he needed but he couldn't find anything on the subject. Then he remembered he had a few more books in a drawer which he hadn't opened in ages. He hoped he would find what he was

looking for in one of those forgotten books. They were as ancient as time itself so if he was going to find out anything about an ancient creature as a fire dragon then those were the right books. They had to be. He started scanning the first book keeping his fingers crossed. Barely had he scanned a few pages when there it was: a picture of a fire dragon and some information about it! He was so thrilled that he almost dropped the book in the excitement. He read everything about it and went back to pass the information to the king. He was informed that the king and queen had retired to their room so he wasn't sure if he should bother them now or wait till tomorrow. After a few minutes of pondering he decided he had better inform the king of his findings right away.

There were two guards at the king's chamber. They had been ordered to make sure nobody would disturb the king for the rest of the evening but Mean was determined to talk to Scar.

- Hello, I'm here to see the king! Said Mean in a determined voice. It is important that I see him now, I have urgent matters to discuss.
- No one is allowed to disturb him for the rest of the day. Scar made it clear, we are sorry, one of the two guards answered bored.
- Is that so? And Mean put them under a sleeping spell. Both guards started snoring right away, leaning against the wall in an awkward position. Then he knocked on the door and entered.
- What is the meaning of this? Roared Scar. I asked not to be disturbed today. Where are the two guards?
- Asleep for now, but it is not their fault. You wanted me to find out anything I could about fire dragons. Well I have and that is why I had to see you.
- Hmm, if you entered then you might as well speak. Ok, what did you find Mean? Asked Scar impatiently.
- This is what I found: fire dragons can be tamed and made to accept the person who manages to put the Fire Necklace around

their neck. That person automatically becomes the fire dragon's master and the dragon will protect his master for as long as his master lives. There will be created a special bond between the dragon and his master, they will be able to even communicate telepathically. The dragon will feel if his master is in danger even if they are worlds apart. And the other way around, the master will feel any pain the dragon feels. It is a bond for life. Now comes the tricky part: retrieving the Fire Necklace from the most dangerous mountain in Donn, the Shale Mountain. It is a ragged mountain and the necklace is said to be in a cave hidden somewhere on that mountain. The book also says that only the person meant to tame the dragon will be able to take the necklace off the pedestal. If someone else touches it, then the necklace will summon fire imps to protect itself. On the other hand when the person meant to have it will touch it, the necklace will shine in that person's hands. So Scar, do you know anyone who would like to tame the dragon? Asked Mean curious to what Scar would have to say after having heard him.

- Oh, wow. I know quite a few brave men and women who might give it a try. I will send Mongo, Ulo, Harry, Alyss and of course the newest warrior, Adi. One of them must be able to tame the dragon. They are the bravest in the kingdom, so if that dragon is to be tamed, then it will surely be by one of them! You and Bratty will stay here in case they don't return with the Fire Necklace in time and Dova should attack Donn before they get back. Donn will need you both!
- Ok. I hope they will be successful. I will give them an old map which I also found in the book to guide them. Good night my queen, and he bowed to Miihah. Good night Scar! And Mean left. When he exited he snapped his fingers for the two sleeping guards to come back to their senses.

Chapter 4: Towards Shale Mountain

Our friends Mongo, Ulo, Harry, Adi and Alyss were discussing the information about the fire dragon, the Fire Necklace and joking about who would be taming the ancient beast, becoming its master. They started preparing for the long journey ahead, taking their best armors and sharpening their weapons. They took food and water supplies and of course the best horses from the king's stables. Then when everything was ready, they started their journey towards the unknown, towards Shale Mountain and towards the mysterious cave which contained the ancient artefact, the Fire Necklace.

When night came they decided to hurry and take shelter in a small cave they saw on the map given to them by Mean before leaving. They found it easily with the help of the map which Alyss held. She had been entrusted with keeping the map and reading it. They all hurried inside as it was already dark.

-I bet the dragon will choose me as his master, said Ulo. I can disarm any traps that might be protecting the fire necklace and so the dragon will be my pet!

-If I understood things right, said Alyss who always paid attention to details, it is not just about disarming the traps. The necklace feels if the person meant to be the dragon's master touched it or someone else so you may be able to disarm the traps to get to the necklace, but if you are not the right person, then the moment you touch the necklace it will summon fire imps not to worship you but to kill you!

-Imps hah! Said Harry. We are the best in the kingdom, we can deal with the vile creatures. We will all try in turns and meanwhile we will just have to kill all the imps until finally the right person takes the necklace. So just keep your armors shiny and your weapons sharpened my friends! We have a long road ahead of us until we reach Shale

Mountain. And I bet on all the hairs of my beard that it won't be a joy ride!

Adi took out his new sword from the scabbard and examined it. He was so glad he could accompany the others on such an important mission. He would fight valiantly with his sword which he cherished dearly as it had been given to him by the king, by Scar himself as a token of his appreciation for having been a part of the group who had brought back his bride. He was so proud of himself. He had become a warrior, he who had been a cook and had only dreamt of becoming a warrior. Now with this adventure he was sure he would have plenty of opportunities to put the blade of his sword to work. He started imagining how he would strike down imp after imp when Mongo brought him back to reality.

-Adi, maybe you could cook for us? I think I am not wrong when I say we are all starving!

Mongo's words brought Adi back to the present in second. He wasn't embarrassed, he knew he could cook for his friends and still be the warrior he dreamt after they all had their bellies filled. So he put his sword aside for the moment and started doing what he knew best: cook.

- We will start early tomorrow morning, said Harry. So let's eat and have some sleep. As this cave is a small one and we've searched every corner for possible perils and have found none I guess we can all rest without having to stand watch.
- Especially as the cave is so well hidden behind these berry bushes and surely nobody knows about its existence. If we didn't have Mean's old and dusty map we would have passed right next to it without having noticed it, added Alyss calmly.
- Yep, said Ulo with his mouth full, chewing a roasted rabbit leg. Are you going to eat that Alyss? And he pointed to a piece of bread which Alyss had left as she was full.
- No, you can have it Ulo. And she gave him the bread which he took bowing his head. Alright, good night and sleep tight! Saying

that Alyss was first to lie down on an improvised bed made of dead leaves. Soon everybody else followed her and they were all fast asleep.

When the first warm rays of the morning sun touched the entrance to the cave the camp fire had already died out long ago and they were all shivering with cold. The blankets they had, had kept them warm enough as long as the fire had been burning but when it died out the blankets weren't enough to keep them warm anymore. So everybody was glad that the sun was finally up, warming the inside of the small cave that had served them as shelter during the night.

After having breakfast, they gathered their things and prepared for the road again.

- It looks like we will have to go through the Murky Forest, said Alyss. I heard that it is almost always foggy and filled with swamps and quick sands. The swamps are said to be crawling with swamp sharks, some slimy creatures that look like some overgrown snakes with razor teeth and sharp scales. They are as deadly as my arrows! And there are also swarms of blood flies as big as pigeons which attack only at dusk when the sun is about to set. They have long tails with venom in the tip of them with which they sting their victims, paralyzing them. And as if these weren't enough the Murky Forest is also full of quick sands as I have just told you. I heard a story of an old man who drowned in one of these quick sands together with his horse and cart. We will have to be very careful until we reach the end of the Murky Forest because it is a place which reeks of death from every corner. Saying that, Alyss put her magic quiver on her back and her bow in its place and stretched her aching bones as she hadn't slept well.

Chapter 5: Through the Murky Forest

Two hours later our heroes were entering the Murky Forest. Adi was very nervous as a thick fog enveloped everything around them and he didn't like it at all. He liked to see his foes and the possible dangers. He put his hand on his sword ready to draw it from the scabbard if he felt there was anything wrong. He could feel goose bumps. It wasn't fear what he was feeling but rather a strong wish and will to live, to survive no matter what he would have to face. He just wished he wouldn't disappoint his new friends. He would protect them with his life if he had to. He was finally a part of a team, he wasn't just their cook, he was also their friend. And let's not forget he was also a warrior now...

Ulo took out his tiny bottle and took a quick sip. Then he looked around trying to make out the path but the mist was so thick that he couldn't distinguish anything. He fumbled his way and he got a bit further than the rest of the group. He soon realized he was alone. He had gotten too far from the others and he couldn't make out anything in the damn fog! He was just about to call their names when he stepped into quick sand. He panicked and he cried for the others but no one answered him which only made him panic even more. He felt the ground beneath engulfing him so fast that he was sure he would die. The sand got to his knees in less than a minute and he couldn't reach anything to try to get out. He saw a thick root from an old oak which was half above the ground and had a part of it near the edge of the quick sand. If he could only reach it and pull himself out... If he survived this he swore to himself he would never put another drop of alcohol in his mouth for as long as he lived! He started struggling which only made things worse as the sand got to his waist. He tried again to reach for the tree root but in vain, he couldn't grab it. The sand got to his neck in a few more minutes. He was sure that was the end for him when he

heard Alyss scream for help. She and the others got to him just in time to pull him out from the quick sand. Alyss threw a rope next to Ulo's hands which he grabbed in a hurry. Then they all pulled Ulo out by the rope.

- Thank you so much, I owe you all my life! Ulo hardly had the strength to mutter. Then he took an oath to never drink again as God had saved him and he had promised himself that if he would survive this trial he would never taste that vile liquid ever again. He took out his bottle and threw it in the quick sand looking how fast it sank to the bottom and thanking God and his friends that it wasn't him who sank.
- Ok, said Harry, now let's move on and be on our toes, as Alyss warned us this forest is filled with dangers at every turn. We just have to be extra careful, that is all.
- Yes, said Mongo, and let's try to stick together this time. No one goes too far ahead of the others in order to avoid other situations like this. At least if we are together we can help each other. And as this fog is so thick I say we all stay close to one another. At least until this fog lifts.
- This forest gives me the creeps! Said Adi after he saw that Ulo had been so close to losing his life and not even in a battle, fair and square, but in a pit of quick sand!
- And you haven't seen the worst yet, said Alyss. The moors in this forest are teeming with all sorts of creatures, the worst of them being the swamp sharks. If one gets you, it won't let go until it has taken off with one of your limbs. These swamp sharks have their teeth so sharp that they can even bite through bones! And if you still manage to escape after a swamp shark has bitten off your arm or leg, then there are the blood flies which are drawn by the smell of blood. They are poisonous, their poison lies in their tails. So beware of those stinging little devils!

They all went on through the forest when they got in front of one of the many swamps which covered a large area of the Murky

Forest. It was so vast that they had to go through it. Everybody prepared their weapons, ready to defend themselves and their friends.

They were advancing slowly in the muddy swamp praying they wouldn't come face to face with any swamp shark. There was so much vegetation around them making it even more difficult to see if there was anything lurking at their feet under the dirty water. At least the fog had lifted and they could see clearly above the water but now danger was lurking from under their feet.

There were trees here and there scattered in the swamp. They were so tall that they seemed to reach the sky. Alyss thought it would be a good idea to climb in one of these tall trees and take a look above the swamp in an attempt to realize which would be the best path they should follow to reach the end of the swamp. So with her bow and arrows, as she always kept them on her, she started climbing the nearest tree. She easily reached the first branch which was low enough but then she had to struggle a bit to get to the top of the tree. When she was finally at the top, she searched the horizon for the best route they should follow. As it seemed, beyond the large moor there was a meadow filled with purple flowers. That was where they had to go. And with that they should be out of the Murky Forest. Content with what she found, she started descending from the top of the tree when she saw her friends were engaged in a fight below her. She hurried down and when she got close enough she saw it: a huge swamp shark was attacking her friends. Adi was keeping it at bay with his sword while Harry was hitting it with his axe. Ulo had climbed the first branch of the tree to get a better shot at throwing knives at it without being attacked while he did that and Mongo had his two sharp sabers in his hands and was trying to cut the swamp shark's head. Alyss didn't waste another moment and she descended till she got on the same branch as Ulo. She sat next to him and she

pulled an arrow from her never ending quiver, put it in its place and took aim, straining all her right arm muscles in the process. She had to wait as Mongo was in front of her arrow and she didn't want to hurt him by mistake, then when Mongo took a step back, she released her arrow which flew right past Mongo and Adi so fast that all they saw was the giant swamp shark coughing blood as the arrow had hit it at the base of its neck. Then it rolled its red eyes and fell on one side, dead.

Everybody was glad that it was all over and the swamp shark was dead. That giant slimy creature was lying dead at their feet.

- I am going to skin it! Said Adi. I think its skin should be worth something at the local market. And also I will take one of its fangs as a trophy! I will put it on my necklace! Said Adi proud and glad to be alive after such an encounter.
- Ok, but hurry up before his friends come looking for him! And Harry poked Adi jokingly, as he too was glad the giant swamp shark was dead and not a peril anymore, although he hadn't been afraid, dwarves were never afraid, they were born to fight.
- We have to go this way for about one more hour or so. Then the swamp will give way for a wonderful meadow, also marking the end of the Murky Forest. Then we will look for shelter and make camp, I am already tired, said Alyss yawning.
- Wow, this is a first to hear you are tired, laughed Mongo. Want me to carry you? And he laughed again.
- Not that tired, thank you. And Alyss took the lead, showing them the way towards the end of the swamp.

The sun was about to set and they hadn't reached the meadow yet. With the last dying rays of light they tried to reach the meadow which was just a few feet away but before they could do that they heard a strong buzzing sound. Soon there was a swarm of blood flies in front of them, thirsty for their blood.

- Oh my God, blood flies! When is this nightmare going to end? Said Alyss tired. She had been so sleepy just a moment ago but now at

seeing the deadly blood flies, the adrenaline had woken her up completely. In an instant, before the others could also come to their senses, she started firing arrow after arrow, pinning them to the nearby trees or to the ground. Harry was next to take his axe and start chopping off their wings. Then Adi would finish them off one blood fly after the other. Ulo and Mongo joined them in killing the critters. They didn't stop until the last one was dead.

- Now I really am tired. Let's find some shelter, uttered Alyss who was clearly not kidding when she said she was tired.

They soon found shelter at the end of the meadow in a small cave filled with bats. But when they started the fire, the bats cleared the cave and they could finally have some rest, undisturbed for the rest of the night.

Chapter 6: Preparations for battle

King Dova was anxious to see whether or not Jerno had Aggy under his control. It was all he thought about, conquering Donn with the help of his mercenaries and Aggy.

Aggy was now a grown dragon, it had reached its full growth potential. Aggy was strong and Jerno had managed to make Aggy do whatever he asked of it. But neither did Dova nor Jerno know that this state of affairs would only last until Aggy's true master would take the Fire Necklace from the cave on Shale Mountain. The moment the Fire Necklace would be in the hands of the one meant to be Aggy's master and friend for life, Aggy would feel the change and from that moment Jerno and Dova would have no power over him anymore.

Jerno was gloating, proud that Aggy did what he wanted. So he was safe from Dova's wrath as long as he had Aggy under control. And he was willing to do whatever it took to keep things that way. Jerno had been assigned with training Aggy from the moment Dova had found it when Aggy was just a cub. Now he felt he was ready to go to Dova and tell him that Aggy was finally ready. So he went to see the king, to see Dova.

Jerno entered the throne room with an air full of confidence. He was so proud to announce his victory: that Aggy was finally ready to be used in battle when he tripped over the rug right before reaching Dova's throne. His fall was sublime: he lost his balance, made a pirouette and then landed over Dova, knocking him off his throne. They both tumbled, Jerno on top of Dova and the cup of wine that Dova had been holding in his right hand was now broken on the floor and the wine spilled all over them.

Og and Bris, Jerno's brothers were also in the throne room as Jerno had summoned everybody to witness his accomplishment, his great moment, the moment he would be praised by Dova himself. This would be Jerno's moment of glory which he would remember with pride and joy, especially as his brothers were there to see it all. But now they were laughing so hard at seeing what their older brother had “accomplished” that he felt he was on fire with shame and fear of Dova's reaction. His moment which should have been one to remember with pride and to remind his brothers of with joy over a pint of beer had turned into a total disaster.

Dova got up, anger clearly seen all over his face, pushed Jerno aside and sat back on his throne. Then he looked to see whose laughter he had heard, who had dared to laugh at him. He wasn't called Dova the Ruthless for nothing and he was about to show them this once more. Then he saw the two brothers, Og and Bris, who were still laughing with their faces to their chins, trying to hide the fact that they were laughing.

- Og, Bris, said Dova in a thunder- like voice, come forward!

Now the two had stopped laughing and were trembling with fear. They felt their feet turn to lead and could hardly move because of the fear that Dova induced in them. When they got in front of Dova's throne, they both knelt in front of him waiting for him to speak.

- Jerno, said Dova, cut off Og's right ear and Bris' left ear. This should teach them to laugh at their king next time. Just pay attention not to trip again, maybe you cut off their noses instead of their ears! Ha-ha, I want to see you laugh now, you imbeciles! And Dova started to laugh like a crazy man, like a mad man. By cutting off their ears he would turn everyone's attention to them, taking off their minds from the embarrassing moment he had gone through because of the other nincompoop, Jerno who had tripped and had fallen on top of him. He would leave Jerno alone

for the time being, it was enough of a punishment that he was the one to cut off his brother's ears.

- Please, Almighty king, said Og through sobs and tears, let us keep our ears. We are sorry, we were laughing at our brother, we wouldn't have dared laugh at you!
- Yes, Bris accompanied him, we were only laughing at Jerno! And Bris couldn't refrain his tears either.
- Laughing at me, eh? Asked Jerno furious at his two younger brothers' audacity. Well, then I guess I will enjoy cutting off your ears. Saying that, he cut off their ears. Og and Bris were crying in pain.
- As I was saying, said Jerno continuing his speech and addressing Dova and the crowd and totally ignoring his two brothers who were writhing in pain, Aggy is ready to follow and help us in the battle against Scar's kingdom, Donn. With our army and Aggy as our most powerful weapon, the odds are in our favor!
- Then have your two brothers prepare the army and you get Aggy ready. We are going to war in two days. Make sure everything is ready until then! And then Dova asked them all to exit his throne room and get going.
- Yes, your Highness! Said Jerno and he was the first to exit. On his way out, when he got next to his two brothers, he nudged them making them lose their balance and fall due to the slippery floor which was bloody from their ears which were lying there. Then, satisfied, he left the throne room, grinning widely. He had shown them for laughing at him! In the end, he had the last laugh. It served them right for mocking him on the day he was expecting praises from Dova and the rest of the ones present for his accomplishments with Aggy.

Chapter 7: The wooden bridge

Adi was the first to wake up. He woke up the others. Soon they were all ready to face whatever challenges lied ahead. They put out the fire, gathered their stuff and left the coziness of the small cave that had served as shelter and wondered where they would sleep on the following nights.

- Harry, asked Ulo, do you think that one of us is meant to be the dragon's master? What if none of us is meant...
- I am sure it has to be one of us, answered Harry who also wanted to believe that. If not, then at least we will kill all the imps summoned by the Fire Necklace and take it back to the castle so more people can try it. But I am sure it won't come to that. Surely one of us brave fellas must be the chosen one. And Harry smiled thinking how funny he would look with a dragon on a leash as a pet. Or even riding a dragon, him being a dwarf, so short, he would be quite a sight to be seen riding a dragon!
- I bet Alyss is the chosen! Said Mongo smiling.
- Ha-ha, and I bet I am not! Maybe it is you, Mongo, and Alyss winked at the rest of the group.
- Yeah, just ignore the cook, said Adi pretending to be hurt. What if I am the chosen?
- I'd love to see you riding the dragon, Adi. And Alyss patted him on the shoulder. You could use his fire breath when you cook!
They all laughed, even Adi who liked the elf and knew it was all a joke, no malice involved.
- Mean's map shows a bridge a few hours' walk from here. Look! Said Alyss pointing on the map. We will have to cross the bridge

as there is no other faster way to Shale Mountain and to the cave that lies close to its peak. We should hurry and get to the bridge before nightfall. I wouldn't like to cross it in the dark, especially not on a starless night as this is clearly going to be by the look of it.

- Yes, agreed Mongo, I really don't think these heavy snow clouds will disperse, so we should better make haste.
- I truly hope that at least the wind will cease blowing by the time we get to the bridge or things could get nasty. And saying this, Adi pulled on his warm gloves. He was afraid of heights but he didn't want his friends to know. Maybe it would be a solid bridge and they will cross it fast....

The first snow flakes started to fall from the heavy clouds above. They were floating all over and shining and sparkling like little stars. They were mesmerizing. Soon a thin layer of snow was covering the ground making everything around seem so pure.

- I love snow! Said Alyss, as happy as a child at seeing the white snow that was covering everything around. Just that maybe now it would have been better and easier without... This will make crossing the bridge even more difficult. If it freezes and turns to ice, then it might prove a real challenge to cross that bridge...

Soon snow covered everything. The heavy branches were cracking due to the weight and the wind was blowing the snow in their faces. They reached the bridge a little before nightfall. The bridge was very narrow made of old wooden planks and two ropes on each side to hold on to. It was also covered with snow and it was swinging in the wind. They all fretted at the sight as it was a long way down if they fell from the bridge. There were rocky, craggy cliffs beneath which would have been their doom if they fell.

- Who wants to cross first? Asked Alyss.
- I will, said Ulo wishing to get on the other side as soon as possible.

- Ok, I will cross after Ulo, said Harry. Then Adi should cross and after him Alyss and Mongo.
- Ok, let's do this people! And Ulo started for the bridge. He put his right foot carefully on the first plank trying to see if it would hold. As it seemed strong enough, he grabbed each rope and started crossing the bridge without looking down. He was very agile so he easily got across the bridge to everybody's relief. Then he stood by the rim of the precipice waiting for the others and ready to catch them if they needed help.
- Now is my turn, said Harry and he headed for the bridge. Although he was short as he was a dwarf, he was pretty heavy and the old planks started to creak under his weight. And they were also slippery due to the snow making everything even more difficult. But Harry crossed it as fast as the wind that was blowing from behind. He breathed relieved when he got next to Ulo safe on the other side.
- Ok Adi, now it is your turn, said Mongo. I will cross last.
- If there is no other way... and Adi took the first steps on the planks. He got almost halfway when he looked down at the craggy cliffs beneath.
- I can't do this! Adi yelled in fear and just froze there. He crouched and didn't take another step ahead or back. The bridge was dangling and the wind was howling and he couldn't move.
- Adi, screamed Alyss so he could hear her, get up and don't look down. You have to do this. Just a few more feet Adi, you can do it.
- No Alyss, I'm afraid I really can't! He was doing his best to hold back the tears that were forming in the corners of his eyes until his eyes stung because of the cold wind.
- Ok Adi, listen to me. I am lighter than Mongo so I will come to you. We will cross together. Just hold on tight till I get to you!
Alyss took the first step on the wooden bridge. Then a few more steps. She was trying to get to Adi as fast as she could. A plank broke under her feet but she quickly jumped on the next.

She slipped but quickly recovered her balance and in a few more minutes she was next to Adi. She grabbed him and pulled him up.

- Ok Adi. I am here. Now walk slowly and never look down. Just look at Ulo and Harry.
- Thank you Alyss. And Adi started to walk again feeling reassured as Alyss was right behind him. Then Alyss felt one of the ropes loosen. She knew it would soon break due to their weight. The bridge was supposed to be crossed by one at a time. She quickly analyzed all the possibilities in her head and took action.
- Adi, hold on to me, now! Then she took her bow and released a rope arrow which swished through the air and dug in the upper margin of the rocks on the other side. Barely had Adi grabbed Alyss by her jacket when the rope of the bridge broke and they were swinging in the air. The rope arrow was fortunately strong enough to hold them both and they hit the rocks on the other side. Then Ulo and Harry grabbed the rope and pulled both Alyss and Adi up safely.
- Thank you Alyss, you saved my life! If it wasn't for you I would still be on the middle of the bridge or worse, down pierced by those cliffs.
- This is what friends are for, and Alyss hugged him. But Mongo is still on the other side, alone. And the bridge is only holding on one rope... Mongo, can you cross the bridge?
- I have to, and Mongo had to rely on his every skill to do such a feat. He grabbed the remaining rope and put his feet on the planks that were swinging wildly in the wind. He was advancing slowly and carefully, step by step when a powerful gust of wind plucked two planks which fell in the precipice reminding him of the danger below. So Mongo only held on the rope until he could feel planks under his feet again as he couldn't see them anymore, it was already dark. In a few more minutes he too was safely on the other side next to his friends.

- Thank goodness we are all safe, said Mongo and Alyss hugged him glad he had managed to cross in such conditions. Then she placed a tender kiss on his cheek which made him blush but nobody saw as it was pitch dark already.
- Now let's find some shelter against the wind and the cold, I am beat, murmured Harry as if afraid to speak louder.

They soon found an abandoned forest hut and camped there for the night. They would reach Shale Mountain and the mysterious cave tomorrow for sure so they all needed to get some rest.

Chapter 8: Confrontation

The two scouts, Sneak and Davyn, were running across the castle halls towards the throne room. They were obviously in a hurry to see Scar and Miihah, and by the look on their faces it was something bad. They barged into the throne room and bowed in front of the king and queen and then, almost fainting with exhaustion, Sneak spoke for both of them:

- Hello my king, my queen! I am afraid I bring terrible news! Dova and his army are on the move already. They are on their way to attack Donn. And they have the dragon, too. By the way they move I would say it will take them about 4 or 5 days to get here.
- So, Davyn went on, we have about 4 days to prepare ourselves and give them a warm welcome, if I may say.... One full of fireballs and firestorm to rain down on them with the help of our best mage, Mean.
- Thank you both! Said Scar clearly worried not as much about the army of mercenaries but about the dragon. But there was still hope, his best warriors hadn't returned yet, they might be able to get the Fire Necklace and set things right...
- Ok, Scar went on, you are both excused. Noah, please see that they are both well paid for their trouble! Said Scar addressing Noah, the kingdom's treasurer, a well built man who had been his treasurer for as long as he remembered, a man who had proven more than once that he was trustworthy. He had been tried many

times before he was given the job and the honor of handling the kingdom's wealth and he passed every trial.

- Of course, answered Noah, come with me ladies. Then he bowed and he exited the throne room accompanied by Sneak and Davyn.
- Scar, said Miihah who had been silent until then, do you think we can face Dova's army? He has a dragon...
- Don't worry my pretty! I am sure we will crush him like a worm. Even if our friends won't be able to bring the Fire Necklace, with Bratty and Mean by our side and with your healing powers, I'm sure we have nothing to worry about! We will send him back to the hole he crawled out of!
- I will do my best to heal everyone who will need my help my dear!
- Olekson, go and bring Bratty and Mean!
- I'm on my way! Said Olekson and left.

Five minutes later Bratty and Mean were in the throne room, bowing to their king and queen. Bratty was the first to speak:

- So, Dova's worthless army is coming to attack us? Phew! I will freeze their asses because their brains are already frozen! And Bratty had a disdainful look on her face.
- Don't be so rash, they have a fire dragon on their side Bratty! Said Mean trying to temper the red-headed beauty. But I honestly believe we stand a chance against them! We have a strong army too and of course, we have Bratty and yours truly....Sorry for the lack of modesty but Bratty and I are worth as much as a battalion of soldiers!
- To say the least! Added Bratty full of herself, especially as Mean had just praised her and she was in the seventh heaven although a war was coming.
- I know you two are very strong mages and I am counting on you! Said Scar simply. I am glad you two are on our side! Ok, go learn some new spells or whatever you mages do and get ready for what's coming!

- Nah, we are good with the ones we know... We will fry them! Said Mean and both he and Bratty left.

Meanwhile Dova's army was approaching slowly but decisively. Dova was riding a noble black stallion, a strong and stubborn animal, a horse that had seen his share of battle and had the scars to prove it. Jerno was riding a white stallion and was holding Aggy's improvised bridle in his right hand. Aggy was following Jerno like an obedient puppy as it had been practically raised by him, even if in a cage. Og and Bris were riding behind Jerno, leading the mercenaries.

Dova's army was advancing slowly through the snow. They were as numerous as a swarm of bees. Some had halberds, others had swords and shields, others bows and arrows, others were carrying maces, axes and even huge hammers. They were all armed to the teeth. And with one goal: defeating Donn, taking over that beautiful and peaceful land, Scar and Miih's home.

They marched silently, saving their strength as they needed all of it for the 4 or 5 days, the time needed to reach Donn. During the third day Dova's army was already exhausted because of the harsh weather. They were cold but ready to fight if they wanted to be paid by Dova. On the fourth day they arrived at their destination but Scar had also prepared his own army for the confrontation.

Dova gave his army a last speech before charging Scar's kingdom. Then all hell broke loose. They all attacked at Dova's signal. A heavy cloud of dust covered the whole battlefield. The clatter of metal against metal was deafening. People were falling from their horses, stabbed or pierced by arrows; blood was everywhere.

Dova was at the head of his army, ruthless and fearless, some would say even a bit too brave for his own good. He was followed by Jerno who released Aggy to bring destruction all around. Aggy

was confused, he had renounced his grudge against Jerno for being his jailor; Aggy had been brainwashed. He was burning everything around him to Dova's pleasure and to Jerno's relief. Aggy was like a huge killing machine. Nothing could resist him.

In a day Dova's army had breached through the front lines of defense advancing towards Scar's castle. But here he would also have to fight against Scar's mages, Bratty and Mean. And those two were a real force as Dova was to find out soon.

Chapter 9: To battle!

Scar took his favorite weapon, a sharp sword which he had inherited from his father and prepared himself for battle but first of all he was prepared to defend his beautiful young wife, Miiah. Miiah too was ready to accompany Scar on the battlefield and heal whoever needed her. Of course she would keep an eye on her husband in the first place to make sure he was alright.

Scar knew he could count on her to watch his back and this gave him a feeling of confidence. They were inseparable, together till the end, be it a victorious one or death. They would either walk together free out of this confrontation or death would bring them freedom. Either way they would be together. Neither could live without the other.

- Are you afraid my darling? Asked Scar looking straight into Miiah's dark beautiful eyes.
- Never as long as I have you by my side! She answered bravely. Now let's go out there and show them what we are made of!
- This is one hell of a lady, Scar! Said Mean who admired Miiah for her brave and honest soul. Then he went straight to Bratty who was standing by the window and kissed her full of passion just as she was about to say something. She wanted to protest at first but then she thought better and kissed him back.
- So are you two finally together? Asked Miiah at seeing the two kiss.
- I don't know, answered Bratty. First time he dares kiss me, ha- ha!

- Second, but you are right, first time I kissed you, you were asleep...and I only kissed your cheek, thought Mean to himself. So she wanted me to kiss her...and out loud he heard himself say:
- Yes, we are together. Will you marry me Bratty?
- Oh my god, you needed a war at the doors and possible death to make you propose to me! And she laughed with him this time, not at him. Then it was her turn to kiss him. They were lost in the moment, forgetting about everything else even if for a brief moment.
- Yes, I will marry you!
Miihah started to cry with joy as she loved her friend, she cared so much for Bratty.
- Well, said Scar, it looks like we will have a wedding after this war is over. All the more reason to send these rascals back to where they came from! To battle!

They exited the castle into the courtyard where the main battle had already moved. The dragon hadn't entered the courtyard yet but it was close.

Scar started slashing right and left while Miihah was attending the wounded from their ranks. Mean and Bratty unleashed fire and ice upon the enemies bringing down as many as they could. Olekson too was fighting by their side. Even the two scouts, Sneak and Davyn had joined the battle as it was a fierce fight and the king needed everyone in order to defeat Dova and defend his people, defend Donn.

Everyone who had two good hands and legs was there on the battlefield. Everyone counted and they were all fighting as a single entity, one goal in mind: defending Donn and defeating Dova and his dragon. Noah the king's treasurer had also joined, fighting next to Olekson. Adi's older brother, Blaryn, was also fighting to fend off the enemies. Scar was proud to be their king and they were happy to have him as ruler.

The walls surrounding the castle courtyard started to crumble as Aggy kept breathing fire at it so the rest of the mercenaries could join the main fight. Dova was behind Jerno and Aggy and he felt his heart jumping out of his chest with emotion and expectation. He was so close to victory he could almost taste it. He would soon rule over Donn too and he was intending to take Scar and Miihah as his prisoners. He couldn't conceive defeat. He had to be victorious. He had to.

Og and Bris were also fighting at the head of the mercenaries. They were inside the courtyard fighting side by side when Mean saw them yelling and encouraging the mercenaries to attack. So the smartest thing to do was to shut them up. He focused and sent a huge fireball which killed them both at the same time, taking a few of the mercenaries along. But instead of making them back up a little, it only made the mercenaries attack more ferociously. Bratty was sending ice shards towards them. Everyone was fighting by his own means. It was a bloody sight. Corps were lying everywhere from both sides. It was as bad as it looked.

The smoldering walls surrounding the castle were giving in. It wouldn't take long now till they would crumble to the ground completely thus making way for the rest of Dova's army and his dragon.

Chapter 10: The Fire Necklace

Our heroes set out again towards Shale Mountain and the mysterious cave. The climb was a difficult one even on a nice weather and the snow only made things worse. They were all slipping on the snow, then getting up again. The wind was blowing in their faces making it almost impossible to distinguish anything through it.

After about four hours of ascending the mountain they got to a narrow portion, a narrow path with the craggy mountain on their left and the deathly abyss on their right. They had nothing to hold on to so they grabbed the craggy rocks on their left and hoped and prayed they wouldn't fall to their death. They were going so slow that one could have thought they were standing still. Then Harry slipped and fell towards the precipice but he had such a presence of mind that he pulled his axe and thrust it in the rocks on the rim of the precipice.

Adi was first to see what happened and he immediately bent and grabbed Harry's left hand as Harry was sustaining himself with the right hand in which he had his axe. Then he gathered all his strength and before the others could react in any way he had pulled Harry back up, saving his life again.

- Thank you Adi, my friend. I owe you my life again. Whenever you need help I will be there for you Adi for as long as we shall live, thank you.
- No problem, I am sure you would have done the same for me.
- Yes, we are all for one and one for all, added Mongo. I am sure any of us would risk his life for the others.

- Not me, joked Ulo, I treasure mine. No, Mongo is right, I was just kidding, we've been through so much together that we are like a family. I feel like I've known you all my life. But now let's move and make it to the cave before nightfall or we may all end up on the bottom of the precipice below. And I am sure you value your lives too not to want that. So let's get going!
- Ulo is right, said Alyss, the cave shouldn't be far now. It should be at the end of this narrow path.

They all went the rest of the way silently, saving their strength. Two hours later just when Adi was about to ask if they thought it would take much longer, they all saw it: the cave opening. It was a large opening and it was pitch dark inside. But they had come prepared, they all had torches which they lit lighting up the interior of the cave. By the look of it no one had been there for a long time, if anyone had ever been there at all. But the Fire Necklace was supposed to be inside there somewhere so it meant that someone must have been inside to put it there. Now all that remained was to find this ancient artefact, control the dragon and save Donn, save their king and queen, save the people and their families.

The first room of the cave was huge but as they got farther away it became smaller and smaller until it forked into several tunnels. It was a maze but they decided to stick together no matter what. If they split they would probably find the necklace faster but how were they supposed to call for the others? So they decided to do as always and go together. They would have to search all the tunnels until they would find what they had come for.

- So which way should we go first? Asked Ulo.
- I say we try this tunnel, said Alyss pointing towards a tunnel to their left. I have a gut feeling that this is the right one.

- I guess it is as good as any other! Laughed Mongo. But if you say so, we will try this first.
- Just keep your eyes peeled and your weapons close! Uttered Harry, always cautious. Remember your weapon is your closest friend now if I may say so.
- You may say whatever you like Harry old friend! Said Mongo. Any last words in case we don't make it back?
- That is not an option! Alyss said with her jaw clenched at the thought. No way, we all have at least one reason to make it out of this alive. We all have loved ones to come back to. And if not, well we have each other...
- Alyss is right, no last words because they won't be our last words, said Ulo. We will find the necklace and get back to Lir in time. (Lir was the name of the town where Scar and Miihah' s castle was situated, one of the many towns in Donn.)

They walked at a steady pace for about one hour when the tunnel forked in two other tunnels.

- Left or right? Asked Adi looking at Alyss as she had chosen this tunnel in the first place.
- Let's go left again. I will also scribble something at the entrance so if we go in circles we will know we have been here before.
- Good idea Alyss. And Mongo liked her even more because she was pretty smart and not forget she was pretty too.

After half a day of wandering through the maze of tunnels they finally found the necklace. It was on a pedestal at the end of a huge room in the cave. It wasn't protected by anything visible but Ulo wanted to make sure there were no hidden traps so he took the lead.

When he was sure there was nothing out of the ordinary, Ulo asked them who wanted to be the first to try and pick the Fire Necklace as he remembered that if the wrong person picked it then the necklace was said to summon imps to defend itself.

- It looks like none of you is in a hurry to try his hand, said Ulo in a trembling voice, so I guess I can try first...
- Yes, yes, go ahead, Harry encouraged him. We will be right here if the imps show up....
- Ok, get ready for anything, I am going to take it now, said Ulo and went straight for the necklace imagining himself riding a dragon.

The moment he touched the necklace the whole cave trembled as if it was an earthquake and then a whole small army of imps appeared out of nowhere ready to kill the intruders.

- Damn, said Ulo disappointed, and I thought for a moment that I could be the one taming the dragon. It would have been nice to have a dragon as a pet, he said still dreaming of what it might have been like.
- Yes, laughed Mongo, you would have swept the ladies off their feet if you went on a date with a dragon accompanying you.
- Ha- ha, very funny Mongo. Let's kill these devilish creatures and then maybe you want to try next?
- Nah, Harry can try or Alyss or Adi. I will try last, I can't imagine myself riding a dragon!
- Ok, kill these little bastards, yelled Alyss to stop their rambling and make them focus on the fight.
- Yes mam, said Mongo.

Then the battle began. Although they were small in stature, the imps were very numerous and very tricky and agile. Our heroes began slashing right and left. Harry started chopping off their heads with his trusty axe while Alyss was rapidly shooting them one after the other with her bows. Soon their numbers started to dwindle considerably but they didn't give up till the last imp was dead.

- Ok, how about we take a break before someone else tries his luck again? Asked Alyss who was tired just as the rest, although they wouldn't admit it. If next who tries is not the one meant to handle

the dragon then we are in for another fight so a little break before should be good to refresh our strength.

- Ok, one hour then we try again. Who wants to be next?
- Me, said Adi. So what if I was a cook? I am a warrior now, maybe I am the one the dragon has been waiting for.

They all laughed but nobody had anything against Adi trying his luck next. One hour later Adi was in front of the Fire Necklace praying he would be the one. Then he touched it and.....unfortunately for him he wasn't the one. But this time the necklace had summoned a stone golem, not the imps they had been expecting.

- What in the name of god is that? Asked Adi puzzled and he withdrew towards his friends.
- That, answered Ulo, is a stone golem, my friend. It is as nasty as it gets. It will be difficult to destroy, we can't really say kill as it is not alive in the first place.

The stone golem was a humongous thing, not alive nor dead, made entirely of stone. It had no soul, no brain or blood, only stones, rocks.

- Nobody said anything about golems! Complained Adi afraid of the thing. You said imps Alyss!
- Sorry, that is what Mean told me. He didn't know more about it I guess.
- Yes, probably because if anyone else has ever tried to get the necklace must have been killed by the imps, said Mongo thinking out loud. This is probably why Mean's books never said anything about the second trial the necklace would put us through. Probably nobody before us has ever made it past the first trial!
- Which makes me ask the next reasonable question: if, and I really mean if, we manage to destroy this ugly thing, then what will the necklace summon next? Said Alyss.

- Perhaps it is time to pray that next one who tries will be the chosen or if not who knows what we will have to face, said Ulo already preparing his daggers.
- I didn't know you were a religious man Ulo! Said Harry.
- I wasn't but I think it is time we all became religious! Ha-ha! And he started laughing nervously.
- Any bright idea how to destroy this thing? At least we have the advantage that it moves slowly. We can at least outrun it. And Alyss fired a few arrows at it but they didn't even scratch the golem.
- This looks bad, said Mongo who was getting worried. Hey, Harry, maybe you should try to smash it to rubble? I've heard stories about your axe to know it is not just an ordinary one. You never go to battle without it and you never wanted or needed another weapon. Please tell me the stories were right and that you can destroy this thing before it crushes us.
- No idea what you heard but indeed my axe is a very powerful weapon. Never leave home without it! Ha- ha! It has been forged by my ancestors long time ago before Donn was even a kingdom. And it has been passed on from generation to generation serving his owner truthfully as long as his owner fought for the right side, to serve and protect the innocent. If it would ever get to someone else's hands it would be just an ordinary axe, nothing special about it. And if someone who has a rotten heart would try to pick it up, he wouldn't be able to lift it. So I guess you can say my axe is special, just like Alyss' magic quiver which never empties.
- Oh, I could kiss you right now Harry! Said Mongo.
- Oh, no thanks, I'm married. And they all laughed.
- Then the golem is all yours Harry! Said Mongo. Do your thing and smash it!

Harry took his axe with both hands and then he called upon the might of all the ancestors who had ever wielded it to bestow their blessing upon him and give him the strength he needed to destroy

the golem. He felt a sudden rush of adrenaline go through his veins and he leaped high enough in the air, something which was really amazing for a dwarf, and he smashed the stone golem's head into smithereens.

The golem was reduced to a pile of rubble at their feet. They had passed the second trial and they were all unscathed. They were afraid of what the Fire Necklace might summon next but they had to succeed in the end.

- Wow Harry! That was awesome! Said Alyss very impressed with Harry as she had never seen him like this before.
- Yes, wicked! Laughed Ulo. Who is going to try next?
- I think I might give it a shot! Said Harry who was a little carried away with all the praises he got from his friends.
- Hmm, a dwarf riding a dragon, that would be quite a sight! Said Alyss.
- Why not? Answered Harry and he touched the necklace. The moment he touched it a loud thunder was heard inside the cave making their hearts shrink with fear.

The fact that they were afraid didn't mean they weren't brave, it just meant that they were human beings, like everyone else. And this is exactly what made them heroes, above everyone else, the fact that in spite of their natural fear they kept trying and fighting for what was right. They had to save Donn.

After the thunder died out they were waiting for the next enemy to show its face. It appeared in the form of a cyclops, a one-eyed giant creature that looked like a deformed man. Its head almost touched the ceiling of the cave. It started to roar and went for our heroes. But without a moment to lose, Alyss got her bow and arrows and took aim for the cyclops' only eye. Then she let go of the arrow which flew like the wind, hitting its target and blinding the cyclops. Blood started oozing from its eye. Then the cyclops knelt in pain. When his knees touched the ground, so did

his head. Adi had cut the cyclops's head with his sword in one swift move.

- This is what I call team work! Good job everyone! Said Mongo and patted Adi on his shoulder then went towards Alyss. He wanted to shake her hand but instead he hugged her happy they were all alive and proud of the beautiful elf.
- We really make a good team! Said Alyss so glad that she had been accepted by these brave men. She was sure they all considered her as part of the “family”.
- I will try next, said Mongo. Be ready for just about anything.

Mongo started to walk slowly towards the pedestal on which the Fire Necklace lay. When he got close to it he could feel a sudden urge to pick it up, as if the necklace was calling him. He thought that maybe he was imagining it but then as he put his hand on the necklace he was sure of it. It was him, he was the chosen one, the one meant to tame the dragon.

The necklace shone in his hands and then it lifted itself in the air and got around Mongo's neck where it kept shining with a dim red light.

They were all mesmerized by the moment. They felt relief and happiness at the same time. So it was all over, now all they had to do was to go back to Lir and save everyone. And of course get the dragon. But how would they make it back in time? And the bridge had collapsed, they would have to find another way.

Alyss was the first to go and congratulate Mongo but when she got near him she saw that his eyes had a blank stare. He wasn't responding to anyone, he just sat and stared. They all gathered around him but nobody knew what was wrong with him. Alyss pinched him but in vain. Still no response. She started to weep while the others had no clue how to help Mongo either.

Chapter 11: Aggy

The moment the necklace was around his neck, Mongo got confused with the thoughts he was hearing inside his head, thoughts which weren't his own. A powerful voice, a voice he didn't recognize was speaking, he could hear it clearly. He was sure it was not his voice. Whose voice was it then? And how come he could hear someone else? What was it saying? Then he focused his mind and it all became clear: he was the dragon master, the voice was the dragon's voice. He could hear his thoughts. Aggy was the dragon's name, his dragon's name.

Mongo focused his thoughts and sent a telepathic whisper to Aggy. He called Aggy to him, to come get him and his friends out of this cave and carry them back to Donn, to Lir, to set things right. He was certain Aggy had also heard him and felt the bond, he knew Aggy would come get them. Then he snapped out of the trance and looked around him. He saw that Alyss was crying and saw the others watching him as if he was an alien.

- What's wrong Alyss? Why are you crying? And what's with those looks on everyone's faces?

- Mongo, you are back! Thank goodness! And Alyss jumped to her feet and kissed Mongo till she was out of breath. Then she blushed when she realized what she had done. Now they were all staring at Mongo and her. He looked confused again. She had made a fool of herself. But then Mongo grabbed her in his arms and kissed her back.
- I thought something bad happened to you Mongo, she cried.
- Something did happen to me, but not bad. On the contrary, something awesome. Aggy is on his way to take us back. Be prepared to fly my friends!
- Oh god, said Alyss, it is worse than I imagined. And she cried bitter tears again, thinking that Mongo had gone mad.
- Who the hell is Aggy? Asked Ulo who was also confuse. Are you alright Mongo?
- Yes, Aggy is my dragon. I am the chosen one as it seems and it is coming to get us home.
- Oh forgive me, said Alyss relieved, I thought you were mad. Sorry. Wow, so we will ride a dragon to get home? Sounds so out of this world.
- I can't hardly wait to meet Aggy, I am so excited. And Mongo was as happy as a child who had just received a new toy, the only difference being that this was anything but a toy and their bond was for life.

At the very same moment that the necklace touched Mongo's skin, Aggy felt it. He felt the bond to this human being, he could hear his thoughts, could see what Mongo saw. He had a truthful master now, he knew he had to get to him.

Aggy tore the bridle by which Jerno was holding him and flew away towards Shale Mountain, towards his new destiny. He had only complied with Jerno's requests up to then because he didn't know any better, he had been raised in a cage by him. But now he had a true master and a purpose, to serve and protect him until

the end of their days. So Aggy flew towards his destiny to Dova's amazement.

Dova and Jerno were in a shock when they saw Aggy flying away all of a sudden and leaving them there with only their mercenaries to rely upon. Dova freaked out:

- Jerno!!! What the hell just happened? Where is Aggy going? Get it back here this instant!
- How am I supposed to do that, your Highness? Asked Jerno who almost peed his pants at the sight of Aggy flying away. He knew how ruthless Dova could be.
- I don't know and I don't care, just get it back or the next thing flying away will be your head but without the body. Your body will stay here, you hear me? Only your head.
- But your highness, said Jerno who wasn't too smart, I need my head....
- Exactly! Yelled Dova infuriated.

Jerno, although he couldn't be credited for being too smart, was nevertheless smart enough to know he wouldn't be able to get Aggy back anymore so he told Dova he would try to get it back but instead deserted Dova and his army. He knew if Dova ever found him again, he would be killed, so he ran away as far as his eyes could see. He would have to find a new place to go to and forget all about his former life as Dova's general. But anything would be better than what Dova would surely do to him for not being able to bring Aggy back.

Our heroes found their way back to the entrance of the cave and were waiting for Aggy as Mongo had assured them that Aggy would come. It was cold and the wind was very powerful, making them shiver. After a while of waiting and shivering in the cold of what winter meant up on the mountain, which obviously was a lot worse than in Lir, they finally distinguished something on the horizon. As it got closer, they saw its large and majestic wings at

first and then they saw it in all its splendor. Aggy was quite a sight to behold.

Aggy landed at their feet. He went and looked at all of them searchingly, curious what his new friends were all about. When he got in front of Mongo, he bowed his head and touched Mongo's face with his nose.

- Hello my strong and handsome friend, Mongo greeted Aggy telepathically.
- Hello to you too! Aggy answered him the same way. Are you ready for the ride of your life? It might get bumpy because of the snowstorm. And because there are five of you who I will have to carry. I will have to take you all now. If not I am afraid I won't be able to return for the rest, the journey till here has drained me because I have been burning down a town until now. I was already tired. So it is either we all go now or I won't come back for the rest. And by the look of those heavy clouds the snowstorm will last, something which I can't say about your friends if they stay.
- No, we all go now. You will know me in time to realize I never leave my friends behind. Either we make it all back, or none makes it back!
- As you wish, Mongo! Aggy called him by his name as he had read his mind and found out his name. Come, get your friends and hold tight to me. It will be a difficult ride back!
- Everybody get up on Aggy's back and let's save Donn! Cried Mongo.
- I'm afraid of heights! Finally, Adi confessed.
- Do you know any other way back? Asked Mongo. Don't forget the bridge is broken, so that is out of the question.
- Hmm, no, you are right. I just hope we won't fall off the dragon's back!

- His name is Aggy, said Mongo. And I am sure he won't allow that to happen to any of us. He knows you are all my friends so he will be very careful and will make sure that we will all be safe.
- Ok, said Adi a bit doubtful. As there seems to be no other way back then let's get back as soon as possible. You climb on its back first, Mongo. It's your dragon!
- Ok, follow me! And Mongo was first to climb on Aggy's back. Alyss was right behind him, then the rest followed.
- Tell them to hold tight, Mongo! Aggy whispered to Mongo in thought as he was the only one who could hear his thoughts and vice versa.
- Everyone hold tight! Yelled Mongo to make himself heard through the powerful wind. Here we go!

Then Aggy slowly lifted from the ground and started to fly as smooth as he could as he had passengers riding on his back. Soon they were flying above the fluffy clouds, above everything else. Although Adi had been afraid, he was now enjoying the ride as much as the others did. They couldn't believe their eyes how small everything looked from up there and first of all they couldn't believe they were actually flying! It was wonderful! They were holding tight to Aggy's soft scales on his back so they wouldn't fall to their death. Nobody was curious to "fly" without Aggy!!

- So, Aggy, Mongo asked Aggy telepathically, can you really breathe fire?
- Of course, I am a fire dragon! Speaking of which, I am sorry for burning down the city's defense walls.
- Oh, we will rebuilt them. Good thing that you are on our side from now on.
- Yes, our bond is for life!
- I hope it will be a long one! Laughed Mongo aloud.
- What's so funny? Asked Harry as neither him nor the rest had heard the conversation between Mongo and Aggy.

- Nothing, a private joke between me and Aggy, answered Mongo.
- Oh, I hope you are not making fun of us! Uttered Ulo.
- No, relax. We will soon get back to Lir. So get ready to fight Dova's army. They have already attacked the castle! Mongo told them.
- My bones are all benumbed! Complained Harry. Even my butt hurts!
- Ha- ha, stop whining like an old lady! Said Mongo. Would you have rather gone all the way back on foot? Aggy will get us there so much faster, the two options can't even be compared!
- I guess you are right! Acknowledged Harry and then he quit complaining.
- Look, I see the castle, look down! Cried Alyss with a mixture of joy and sadness as the castle was under attack. But they were here now, they would help Scar, Miih and everybody else.
- Finally, said Adi. Hurray! We will get off the dragon. Better fight a hoard of undead than fly again. It was great but it was way too scary!

Chapter 12: The final battle

Dova was madly wielding his sword, cutting his enemies to pieces with such savagery that even his mercenaries were afraid of him. He was pissed for having lost the dragon, his most powerful weapon, which had flown away suddenly to god knows where. He was sweating, his sword all bloody and then he saw it: a small dot on the horizon which was growing bigger by the minute. It immediately dawned on him: it was Aggy, his dragon. It was coming back! But what he didn't know was the fact that Aggy was returning as an enemy, not an ally. He had found his true master and was coming to help the people of Donn destroy the invaders!

Aggy landed on the battlefield but it looked more like a crash or a forced landing than like an actual landing. So they all got off poor Aggy who was tired from the effort of carrying them on his back. Then they took their weapons, straightened their aching backs and charged the enemy at Harry's war cry.

Dova was in total shock at the sight: Aggy had landed with five determined warriors on his back. Then it was all clear: he had lost control over Aggy, it now belonged to one of those warriors. They must have fulfilled the prophecy and must have found the Fire Necklace. So it was all true, whoever controlled the Fire Necklace, controlled the dragon. The tides had turned against him.

Dova was mad. He was trying with his wicked mind to find a quick solution to his problem. Then he figured out what he had to do: all he had to do was to kill the person wearing the Fire Necklace; the one wearing it was the dragon's master. With the dragon's master out of the way, he could regain Aggy. And then destroy Donn. Now all that remained was to get close enough to the five warriors and see which one was wearing the necklace.

Dova started to stab and slash his way towards them. He whipped his stallion to make haste and get to the five heroes faster. When he got close enough, he saw the necklace hanging on Mongo's neck. His eyes turned red as little veins of blood had torn apart inside his eyeballs. He would have to kill him if he hoped to get Aggy back. He would kill a dozen like him if it served his purpose. He held his sword so tight in his hands that his hands had turned pale and numb. Then he charged with a crazy stare in his eyes.

Aggy felt a sudden uneasiness, although he couldn't explain what was wrong. Then he searched for Mongo. He saw him fighting the hoard of mercenaries. Then he saw Dova, the hatred in his eyes and his determination to kill someone. Aggy searched to find out on whom Dova's gaze was locked, who he was about to kill and then he understood his sudden restlessness. Mongo, his human master and friend for life, was in danger. Dova was about to strike him. But he wouldn't let that happen!

Aggy lifted from the ground, although he was tired from the long flight, and in a moment he landed right in front of Dova's stallion. The horse freaked out and overthrew Dova who landed hard on his back. Aggy was already in front of Dova, Dova the Ruthless,

Dova the Undefeated, Dova who was just a man in the face of an ancient power as a dragon. Dova was trembling in fear. He put his sword in front of him, trying to fend off the dragon. But he was no match for Aggy. Aggy burnt him till all that remained of the once feared Dova was a pile of ashes at our heroes' feet.

Harry gave another battle cry, more fierce than the first. The mercenaries, seeing that their leader was reduced to a pile of dust and also realizing they wouldn't get paid now, started to run for the hills. Soon all that remained on the battlefield were the corpses of the dead, the fallen soldiers who had to be buried. The war was over, Donn was saved!

Chapter 13: New king for an old kingdom

One week later every living soul in Lir had gathered in Scar and Miih's castle for the celebration of Mean and Bratty's wedding. They had taken an oath that if they would survive Dova's attack they would stop fooling around and would settle down as they both admitted they loved each other. They were both stubborn and proud, but as they thought there was a slight chance they wouldn't make it out alive as Dova had the advantage of owning a dragon, they decided to get married if they survived.

They were wedded by Zav, the holy priest of Donn, to everyone's applause and joy. Mean, grumpy as usual, even on his own wedding day, wished the ceremony to be over fast so he could take his new bride to his private chamber. But then he remembered his chamber was a mess, books and dust all over and a cloud passed over his face. Then he heard Scar speak:

- We are all gathered here to witness our friends' union in marriage. May they live long and peaceful and have as many children as they want!

Everybody laughed, then Scar went on:

- Mean, Bratty, my wedding gift to you will be special, just as you two are and deserve. As you all know, Loyalis is now a land without a king. The mercenaries have fled but there are the simpletons, they need help and guidance, they need a king. So my gift to you is the kingdom of Loyalis, long live king Mean of Loyalis and queen Bratty, his beautiful wife!

Mean and Bratty were dumbfounded. They were so overwhelmed that they were speechless for the first time in their lives. They were lost for words. Bratty was first to recover from the initial shock:

- Thank you, my lord! She said shyly.
- Thank you for the unexpected gift, Scar! Mean joined in. Then he bowed and went on:
- You will have a strong ally from now on. Our two kingdoms will always help each other in times of need. We will be good and fair to the people, so help us God!
- I know you two are perfect for the task. And as for you Mean, you never fooled me. I know that you are a kind, honest and fair person beyond that grumpy attitude of yours. That is just for show. I couldn't have wished for better neighbors as king and queen of Loyalis.

Mean wanted to answer something but then he changed his mind and decided it was best to just accept the gift as well as Scar's words.

Everyone present cheered and feasted. When the wedding party was over and Mean and Bratty were packing their things for the road, they heard a soft knock on their door.

- Who's there? Asked Bratty.
- It is me, answered Miihah in her sweet voice. May I come in?

- Of course, Bratty answered hurriedly.
- Were you going to leave without a last goodbye? Asked Miih a little sad to see her best friend go.

Then they both started to weep overwhelmed by emotions. They hugged and tears were running down on both Miih's and Bratty's cheeks. After a few minutes, when they calmed down, Miih was the one to break the ice:

- This is my gift to you. Saying that, Miih took a magic bracelet from inside a small wooden casket and placed it on Bratty's wrist.
- This bracelet will protect you from any harm as long as you wear it. It has the power to create a magic shield around you which will absorb any damage meant for you. You can resist any blow if you wear it, it even protects the wearer from magic damage. It is special and I want you to have it!
- Thank you so much! Then they hugged one last time and then Miih left them so they could finish packing up.

Donn and its people were safe once more and the people of Loyalis found in Bratty and Mean a queen and a king whom they got to love and respect as they in their turn were good to the once oppressed people. Peace had been restored to both lands, a peace which everyone hoped would last this time. But only time would tell!