

"When the red moon joins the earth's fire,
He who emerges from the smoke,
Destined for freedom,
Will touch the scales of destiny,
And the pendulum of times
Will rest in his hands."

Legends of Ladhone

1st Moon – Dragons and Wolves"

Prologue — The Time Before Time

Before the creation of the World of Ladhone, in the dawn of time, in a space where reality, chronology, and magic collide, the twin wizards destined to maintain the balance of the Universe were born. Beings so powerful and feared even by the ancient gods. Edrazahl, the dark wizard who earned the title of The Merciless. A being materialized in a tall humanoid covered with a black cloak. His red eyes were the only expression visible on his face. His hands appeared in a greenish hue, with long nails. Only his presence could intimidate the bravest of warriors.

Etarish, the beautiful white sorceress. Her physical form was transformed into a tall, beautiful woman wearing a white corset, with legs exposed. She wore shoes as white as the clouds in the sky. Her skin was clear, in a unique tone. Her arms were long and bare, and she wore white gloves. Her black, long hair displayed the contours of her body and face. Deep and large eyes gave this beautiful sorceress a youthful appearance. She was known as The Graceful.

As they mastered their powers, both wizards were observed by Cuanolci, master of the gods, the one who breathed the universe into his hand. He watched the development of both and the balance of forces. He walked through his sanctuary, concerned about the prophecy of she who knew everything. The words of Pa'huit echoed in his mind since they were spoken: "The Sun and the Moon, fire and water, opposites will bring chaos and destruction."

It was at this moment of eternity that he prepared his main line of defense to keep control in his hands. While Cuanolci shaped the world of Ladhone, much like a craftsman detailing each of its parts, The Merciless prepared his final spell, the one that would destroy the gods. His thirst for power was so great that he desired to be the supreme ruler of the universe. The sanctuary of the gods would be attacked by his black magic, banishing them all into the darkness of Chaos, the one that existed before the Universe. He sacrificed his soul to Chaos in exchange for unlimited powers. And he felt that force within him, coursing through his entire being and expanding infinitely.

Etarish was summoned to the sanctuary of the gods. Cuanolci awaited her in his main hall. A space gleaming like gold in its purest form. As she walked the golden path, she saw at

the end the master of the gods seated on a crystal throne. He was giant, covered with a white robe. His voice was piercing. His face was covered with white hair and beard that illuminated the entire place. His eyes seemed like rays, and his presence would bend trees and mountains. He called to the sorceress:

— Etarish, The Graceful. The balance is threatened. Your brother plans an attack on the sanctuary. He has surrendered his existence to Chaos. We must thwart his plans, or the Universe itself will collapse.

Kneeling before that supreme being, The Graceful spoke:

— Lord, there is a way. We need to seal his powers.

— But, Etarish, that means...

— Yes. It is the only way.

Upon leaving that sanctuary, The Graceful encountered her brother. Edrazahl grabbed her by the neck, and despite his immeasurable power, she couldn't move. He was consumed by Chaos. Effortlessly, he carried her up to the sanctuary, and The Merciless's words echoed through the universe's vacuum:

— I am above the gods. Nothing can stop me.

Etarish uttered unknown words to her brother, like a mantra or spell:

— Manahoramin minihoraman manahoramin ikikha.

Those words repeated. However, driven by Chaos and the desire to be the ruler of the universe, the evil sorcerer did nothing. He only held her suspended over the sanctuary, preparing her for the final sacrifice and the destruction of the gods. The destructive force of his sister would disrupt the balance, and only darkness would reign in the vastness. From there, worlds could be recreated according to his own will, without the interference of gods or balance to limit him. Only the Chaos that was part of his being.

He forged with magic a spear that would pierce The Graceful, draining her power and converting it into destruction for the sanctuary. She seemed motionless, enveloped in a layer of magic. Only her lips moved weakly, repeating the same words incessantly.

Blind with power, The Merciless did not notice a glow emanating from his sister. This glow began to grow and dispelled the magic that surrounded her. When he realized, she was before him. She shone brighter than a thousand suns, and rays of light emanated from her being.

The Graceful looked at her brother. Light and darkness, good and evil, creation and destruction. They were there, facing each other. She uttered her final words:

— Alekoni.

An explosion of light erupted from Etarish's body, piercing her brother and separating him from Chaos. The magic, used only once in all of Eternity, was known as The Sacrifice of Light. The Merciless called to Chaos for power, but he could do nothing more. The plan of The Graceful and the gods was working.

The impact of the explosion sent Etarish, completely extinguished and lifeless, drifting through the vastness of empty space. Meanwhile, Edrazahl remained motionless. Behind the powerful sorcerer was Cuanolci with a sword, which he thrust into The Merciless's body.

— You shall not be destroyed. You shall be reduced. I withdraw from you the gift of eternity. You shall be immortal, but only as long as magic flows within your body. And you shall be bound to this form for your entire life. Your powers shall be reduced to the being you now are.

Though still powerful, he was no longer the sorcerer with powers capable of facing the gods. Cuanolci, to maintain balance, created a temple in his new world, Ladhone, and placed a seal upon it. As long as the seal remained intact, The Merciless would be sealed.

Merciful and just, he took the lifeless body of Etarish drifting in space and breathed his own life into her nostrils:

— Thank you, Graceful, for your sacrifice. Your powers defended the balance of the Universe. You shall be immortal, powerful. And I have a task to entrust to you. Your brother has been sealed in Ladhone. There, Te-pill, The Creator of Men, has developed a new civilization. You have the task of ruling with justice and wisdom and interfering minimally in the development of this people. Do not allow them to break the seal. We shall meet in every era, my daughter.

And thus, the legends tell that Etarish, The Graceful, and Edrazahl, The Merciless, came to the world of Ladhone.

In the Universe, teeming with planets of all species, Ladhone was chosen by Te-pill to be the world inhabited by humans. The most religious said that humans were created in the image of the gods, a reflection of the greatness of those who existed before time. Others considered the human form to be perfect, the one that bore the design of eternity and power. But all agreed that the peace that existed among the realms was the result of the goodness of Etarish, The Graceful. It was in her name that everything was governed in that place. Kingdoms were established, harvests thrived, and populations settled.

Ladhone was a planet with vast oceans and a large landmass, the continent of Hetvam. On this continent, shaped by nature like a reclining beast, two kingdoms prospered. To the northeast, in a vast stretch of land surrounded by forests on all sides, was the Kingdom of Braethage. To the northwest of the continent, bathed by the ocean on the northern part, was the Kingdom of Xephote.

Prosperous and peaceful, the inhabitants of Braethage developed their citadels around the immense castle built of stones. It was gigantic, and the oldest tales tell that it took a century to complete. Enormous stones were used as blocks for walls and ramparts. It was a highly fortified castle where lived King Xeldrut, the Great. Just and wise, a faithful devotee of the white sorceress, he brought prosperity, peace, and harmony to his kingdom. He was consulted on every issue that arose in the realm. He was king, judge, and mediator of all causes. In the lower part of his castle, he built a dungeon, but never used it for any matter. He was the most beloved king of all generations. Every day he went to a room where he offered gifts to Etarish, thankful for prosperity and wisdom.

In the Kingdom of Xephote, people aimed for development. Cities took on increasingly modern shapes. Houses were more advanced, with structures that facilitated the transport of

goods and animals between cities. The castle had a construction with bricks made of baked clay, covered with a thick layer of white material resulting from the mixture of three local elements. With an exploratory desire, they created more and more vehicles to use in finding new lands and learning more about the world they lived in, seeking new lands and new frontiers by land and sea.

Despite being distant, the two kingdoms maintained a close commercial relationship. The development of fruits and spices in Braethage caught the attention of King Cazyn of Xephote. They exchanged products for technologies, machinery, and clothing. It was a peaceful relationship. Some merchants were sent from one kingdom to the other to facilitate the trade.

For many years, the two peoples lived in peace. The peace in the continent of Hetvam pleased The Graceful, who, from her temple located at the extreme south of that continent on a nearby island, observed every move of the kingdoms. She helped with her magic to maintain the balance between the forces of nature, transforming the lands into fertile ones.

In Xephote lived an explorer nicknamed Zius. A fearless man with the intention of the greater good for his king and the entire kingdom. Under his commission, an immense ship with sturdy woods was constructed. It was a ship destined for long journeys. The entire ship was decorated with symbols of the kingdom and covered with a resin that allowed it to navigate without being consumed by saltwater.

Zius, in an audience with the king, said:

— Your excellency, my maritime studies lead me to believe that, to the north of our kingdom, at the extremes of the ocean, there is a distant island. Who knows what we will find there. Perhaps we will discover new products for our trade. Imagine a variety of delicacies without depending on other kingdoms. Furthermore, we would ensure new lands for the expansion of our territory.

King Cazyn looked to his committee of wise men. All agreed that it was an excellent idea. Thus, the kingdom provided food, tools, weapons, and a crew for Zius. Less than a month later, the captain embarked on an immense adventure.

For months, they sailed through those seas and found only water on all sides. Gradually, the captain and crew became discouraged and considered turning back. But few were the navigation instruments, and they seemed lost at sea.

The ship sailed aimlessly for weeks until someone shouted:

— Land! I see an island!

Driven by the desire to live, those men brought the ship to land. There, they descended, found a small stream, and thanked the sorceress for the gift of life and protection at sea.

In the following days, they explored the lands, planting flags of their kingdom. However, it seemed uninhabited. The men ate native fruits and drank pure water from the stream. They slept on the grass without worrying about anything.

On a certain day, after much exploration, they reached an area with nothing around. It seemed like a desert, as if plants avoided that place. The men observed a structure in the

center—a kind of stone with markings in an unknown language. Perhaps, if they understood the writings, they would know it said: "Never break the seal."

Zius gave orders to his men. They took some tools and broke the stone, breaking the seal imposed by the gods.

At that moment, black smoke emerged from that place and materialized. It was The Merciless, awakening from his deep slumber in that place.

— Where... am... I?

The mummified voice and the malevolent appearance frightened those men, who tried to flee. But, even without all his power, the sorcerer controlled the path of everyone. The men fell before him:

— Where is she?

The men were kneeling:

— Please, do not kill us.

Enraged at not getting answers, he unleashed a black ray and destroyed all those men. A dark cloud formed over that island. Lightning and thunder crossed the skies. A kind of hurricane circled the area. In its center, The Merciless demonstrated his fury:

— I have returned. I will destroy this place and those damned as well.

On the other side of the continent, awakened from her sleep, Etarish resurfaced. She took her human form again, leaving that sanctuary created in gratitude for her power.

— My brother resurfaces in this world. I cannot allow him to destroy Ladhone.

She shook her staff, a gift given by Cuanolci. It looked like a piece of aged wood with a brilliant blue stone at the tip. A light surrounded her, and she transported herself from her sanctuary to the island where the dark wizard had awakened.

— Stop, Edrazahl.

The wizard was surrounded by the energy that created the lightning and black clouds. His red eyes glowed more intensely. He pointed at the white sorceress with greenish hands and long nails. His voice was as deep as thunder:

— You. You will not defeat me again. Chaos endures within me. I will still destroy you.

A bolt of lightning shot from his hands and struck The Gracious. The sorceress hesitated but still managed to cast a spell that removed her brother from the place where he was amplifying his powers. For that, she teleported him to the continent of Hetvam and, before losing consciousness, sealed the island with her magic.

— May Cuanolci help me and protect this world.

Upon landing on the continent, the Ruthless walked on the land. The one whom the gods feared was lost in the midst of that forest. He walked to the kingdom of Braethage and observed all those inhabitants. He saw the organization and peace of that place.

"Foolish and disgusting humans. They don't deserve to live. But I'll have fun with them. Better than destroying Te-pill's creation is having fun with them destroying each other."

He left without saying anything. Later, he traveled to the Kingdom of Xephote. Similarly, he saw the local organizations, way of life, way of being.

"This is going to be fun."

The Ruthless then climbed to the highest peak of the continent. There, he uttered one of his most powerful spells:

— Falak Rikli Ehuin.

In his left hand, a yellow cloud formed. In his right hand, a green cloud. He extended his arms and uttered:

— Hagath.

The green smoke traveled through the skies and settled over the kingdom of Braethage. There, it expanded, covering the entire inhabited territory. Then, it descended upon the population, which felt immense pain, described in lost scrolls as as strong as the pain of a hundred bones being crushed. Screams of despair could be heard, but no one could help them. Men, women, and children agonized. Some wished for death and threw themselves against walls and bridges, but they couldn't even die.

In Xephote, the yellow cloud invaded the streets, villages, houses, and castle, also affecting the entire population. When everyone was covered, the smoke heated up. The inhabitants felt terrible burns, as if their skins were in a furnace. They screamed, agonized. They jumped into rivers and waters, but these seemed to boil. Pain and despair took over the kingdom.

The Ruthless then closed his hands, saying:

— Ratzath.

The clouds disappeared. His laughter echoed through the valleys:

— It is done.

Braethage, now, was no longer inhabited by those happy people but by dragons. Wild green reptiles. Xeldrut, the Great, transformed into that creature, said to his council:

— We need to remain calm and peaceful. The sorceress will find a solution for us. I will go to meet her and find out who cast this magic against our people.

The council, formed by stronger dragons, spread among what was once the population of the kingdom. They controlled groups, avoided confusion, and tried to calm the people who, in despair, did not understand what was happening. None of them understood, but they needed to control the beasts before they died destroyed.

On the other side, in Xephote, when the smoke disappeared and the pains ceased, all the inhabitants were covered in fur. Brown, black, or shiny white fur. Giant claws and nails. Enormous wolves. Despair took hold of everyone.

King Cazyn climbed on his castle and howled as loud as he could. Upon hearing that sound, everyone prostrated. Except for one wolf that attacked him instinctively. In a maneuver, he threw the wolf against the wall and, with his teeth, tore its neck. Since that day, he became known as Cazyn, the Devourer. He said:

— Stop this right now. Maintain order and calm. We have been bewitched, and I don't know who did this. I will go after the responsible one, and if I can't reverse it, I will tear their neck like I did with this wolf. Your king is speaking. Listen. We may be in the form of wolves, but we are humans. I will find the cure. Wait and trust. I'm going after the sorceress.

And he departed.

Determined to save their people, the two monarchs set off through the forest. They met in the middle of it, at the foot of the mountain where the Ruthless was:

— Creature of evil, get out of my way.

— I know that voice. Cazyn?

— It can't be. Xeldrut?

— My kingdom was transformed into dragons. I am looking for answers. I intend to find the white sorceress.

— Mine was transformed into wolves. I am here for the same reason.

— Then let's go together.

But it was not necessary. Edrazahl descended from the summit of the mountain.

— I see my spell worked. What cute little animals.

He laughed:

— Look, Te-pill, look what I did to your damned humans! Transformed them into wild animals!

The great wolf got irritated:

— Damned, undo this spell right now!

And he advanced against the Ruthless. But it was in vain. He stretched out his hand, stopped the monarch in the air, and threw him to the ground. The impact was immense. The ground trembled.

The great green dragon advanced. It was also useless. He was thrown against a tree and fell. The wizard remained there, seeming to have fun with them:

— Let's play a little game. Want to return to human form? Easy. Drink each other's blood. The dragon's blood will turn the wolf people into humans. The wolf's blood will turn the dragon people into humans. KILL EACH OTHER, DESTROY EACH OTHER. That's how you will save your people.

And he laughed at their misfortune.

The two monarchs looked at each other. The dragon spoke:

— Foolish wizard. You know nothing about us.

The wolf completed:

— Even if our people live as beasts...

Together they said:

— We will never surrender.

The two attacked together. The wizard, still, managed to defend himself. But the beasts, even wounded, continued to attack incessantly.

While the wizard was distracted, a light hit him from behind, piercing his body.

— Da... mn.

Etarish, The Gracious, had recovered from the damage caused by her brother. She shone brightly, and her staff emitted a bluish light. At that moment, she saw the fallen and wounded beasts:

— I need your help.

She uttered some words and teleported everyone to the island. Using her staff, she surrounded her brother with magical chains and threw him back into the temple. Then, she looked at the creatures:

— Hurry. The stone with the seal. Close the temple now.

Each of the beasts took a part of the large stone with the seal and joined them at the temple door. Etarish activated her staff once again and remade the seal, putting her own mark. The Ruthless was sealed again.

She sat on a rock. She was exhausted:

— Now you. Let's see what my brother did.

She raised her hand in a circle, and white smoke went toward the two. But nothing happened.

— What?

Unbelieving, she tried various spells. None of them had reversed that spell.

— Impossible. How can this happen?

The two beasts looked at each other. They approached and stretched their paws with cuts. On instinct, they licked each other's wounds. At that moment, they returned to their human forms.

— Sorceress, the dark wizard turned us into this. He said that only with each other's blood would we return to human form.

She slammed the staff on the ground.

— Damned. That is Edrazahl, the Ruthless. One of the greatest wizards that ever existed in the universe. He let the power of Chaos consume him and wants to destroy everything good that the gods created.

The monarchs approached the white sorceress:

— But can you reverse this spell?

She shook her head compulsively:

— My powers are not fully restored. I should be able to undo this quickly. But somehow, he found a way to block my powers. I'm sorry. But I haven't figured out how to undo this evil yet.

They became saddened. The dragon monarch said:

— Men, women, and children. Everyone in my kingdom has been transformed into dragons. I went in search of the solution. And I find out that only with bloodshed.

The wolf monarch approached his friend:

— I share your feelings, king. My people are in chaos. What to do?

The sorceress then replied:

— Sacrifices. It is the only way. A blood pact.

Both monarchs knew that was the solution. But they didn't want to admit it.

It was there, in front of Etarish, The Gracious, that the two monarchs signed a pact. Annually, each of them would send a soldier to the other kingdom. The bravest, the one who would give his life for the other people. It would be up to the monarch to choose who would be sacrificed. Sadly, the sorceress agreed. She promised that, as long as the peoples kept the agreement, she would travel to the gods' sanctuary to find Pa'huit, the one who knows everything. She would return from there with the solution to reverse the spell imposed by her brother. Thus, the kings were transported back to their kingdoms, and the sorceress ascended to the skies.

For years, the blood pact made between the two kings was respected. The kingdoms created the Festival of Sacrifice, where a man was chosen to sacrifice himself on behalf of the people. The religion of both kingdoms taught everyone that this was the will of the gods and that the greatest honor would be to give one's life for their people. The chosen warrior felt honored. He was celebrated, feasted. His family received titles and many possessions. Boys were chosen at birth and prepared their entire lives for that purpose. When one of them was chosen, an exchange was made. Each kingdom had a man responsible for taking the warrior to a secret room and extracting his blood. Just one drop, and each inhabitant would return to their human form for at least a year.

As the years went by, people from both kingdoms began to question the blood pact. They couldn't understand the purpose of such a macabre ritual. Many didn't believe the story that not drinking the blood would turn them into wild beasts. They said it was a scam, that the system was imposing unnecessary rules, and that it was all lies to control the population. But they were always restrained by the special forces of the kingdoms.

In Xephote, a strong general named Martoe emerged. He disagreed with the pact. His rebellion started when his brother was sent for sacrifice one year. He didn't want to lose his brother and didn't accept all the imposition made by the king. Because of this, he began to sow discord with the help of a royal advisor among the soldiers. He claimed that it was all a plot by Braethage, and if they maintained this pact, the kingdom would be dominated and enslaved. In secret, he planned a coup. He gathered a thousand soldiers, surrounded the castle, and invaded. With his sword, he cut off the king's head and displayed it in the highest place of the castle, where the king always spoke:

— People of Xephote. I am your new king. From today, we will change everything. We will go after our true enemies, the kingdom of Braethage. Our men will no longer be enslaved. We will be superior to them.

The people cheered their new king. Revolts occurred. People were arrested. All those who were in favor of the old king and the old system were killed in public square. The soldiers gathered around their general king. He shouted:

— Let's attack our enemies. They will pay with their lives!

An army marched across the continent. Near Braethage, a messenger greeted them:

— Our king requests information about your military movement.

However, thirsty for blood, they killed the messenger with an arrow.

That day became known in the memories of this world as the Day of Massacre. Braethage had limited military power, as they were peaceful and had not armed themselves for wars before. When Xephote attacked, they were defenseless. All the men from all the cities defended their lives and families, but it was useless against the wolf army. Men and women were killed. Children were taken hostage and imprisoned in large cages. They would be their sacrifices if they really needed dragon blood.

Amidst the chaos, already without hope of survival and fearing for his people, the King of Braethage and his men knelt, surrendering.

— Fools. We want your blood. Not your surrender.

As Martoe prepared to kill the king of Braethage, a blue light struck him, consuming him. Amidst so much destruction, Etarish, The Gracious, appeared, returning from the sanctuary of the gods. Incredulous at the massacre, she cast a spell that knocked down all Xephote soldiers. Then, she opened a portal and ordered the king and his soldiers to enter it. She did the same at various points in the kingdom. She ordered everyone in Braethage to flee through that portal. Some, skeptical of the sorceress or fearful, chose to hide.

So, to end that suffering and pain, she cast a spell. The goal was to erase all memories of Braethage from that place. Anyone who remained in Hetvam would forget the existence of that people. They wouldn't remember that the dragons were transformed humans. The dragons that lived there would become wild beasts, without memories of their human lives. Similarly, it would turn Xephote into wild wolves, without human memories. However, when she reached this part of the spell, an arrow from Xephote pierced her body, hitting her heart and interrupting the spell. To avoid being destroyed, she closed the portals and teleported away.

Xephote remembered turning into wolves and that only dragon blood would transform them back into humans. But they didn't remember that the dragons were part of the realm they betrayed and attacked.

A thousand years passed since those events. Xephote became a great Empire. It dominated the continent. It was the only people in that place. Generations lived in those cities, with prosperity and everything that could be offered to them. Every year, soldiers embarked on an intense hunt through the Ladhone forests. This sacred day was called The Dragon Festival. They would leave and only return when they managed to bring a dragon to the city. This

dragon would provide blood for the entire empire for a year. The dragon's sacrifice was done in a public square. It was a grand event, with a parade, music, and cheers to the king for securing another year. Despite the inhabitants of Xephote forgetting what it was like to be a wolf due to the annual hunt, the monarchs always carried out the hunt. It was said that those who did not obey the laws were taken to a place where they would go without dragon blood. A sort of arena. There, men transformed into wolves, mostly murderers and thieves, would fight to the death. It was a way for the monarchs to know if the curse of the white witch, as the transformation was known in the empire, still had an effect on the inhabitants.

Everything began to change when King Rywolf was in his fifth year of reign. A strong and powerful king. They said he killed a dragon with his bare hands. His necklace was made of the teeth of large lizards. His throne was adorned with bones of beasts. The Wolf clan had existed since before Xephote became a great empire. It was the clan of the most powerful warriors, those who came from noble lineage. But the Great Warrior was worried. Each year it became rarer to find a dragon. He feared that the beasts were becoming extinct. And if that were the case, soon his people would turn into cursed wolves again.

“Accursed white witch. Took away the dragons and cursed us.”

He left, surrounded by his men, for a secret area only accessible through the castle dungeon. He entered a dark room, with a small lamp providing some illumination to a table full of papers and a woman. There, he met his daughter, who was the kingdom's foremost researcher:

— Any solution to the curse?

— No, my father. We are conducting tests, but we still haven't been able to synthesize dragon blood. In fact, it's illogical. There's no known scientific reason for our bodies to turn into wolves, and there's nothing special about dragon blood that would bring us back to that form. To tell the truth...

She hesitated:

— It's as if our blood and the dragon's blood are the same. I find no difference, not even in the deepest analyses.

The king became worried:

— We've already tested using our own blood, but the transformations persist. We tried producing dragon blood without success. May the gods help us.

He manipulated a lever, and the area lit up. A wooden staircase emerged in the darkness. He signaled to the guards:

— Stay here.

The supreme of Xephote descended the stairs and reached a large prison. Inside each cell was not a human but a large wolf. All those who were imprisoned in the realm were taken to that place for studies. As the king walked in front of the cages, the wolves approached and growled at him. He simply ignored them. He headed to a specific cage. He approached the door until a black wolf with sad eyes came close to the bars. He lowered his head and received a caress from the king:

— We will find a cure. We will understand why you don't turn back into human form with dragon blood. I won't give up on you, my son. With tears in his eyes, remembering everything he had lost, he left the place. He climbed the stairs, turned off the lights, kissed his daughter's forehead, signaled to the guards, and returned to his throne.

Days later, the sovereign of Xephote summoned his army. It was time to start the dragon hunting festival. He hoped that this year they would have more luck than the previous one, where half of the soldiers who went on the hunt did not return. The rest came back with a small dragon, perhaps young. The extracted blood barely sufficed for the population, and they had no reserves. It was worrying because, in some cases, they needed more dragon blood to maintain the transformation into humans. Some, over evolutionary cycles, developed resistance to that blood and were more prone to becoming large beasts.

During the meeting with ten captains, he encouraged and blessed them:

— Children of Xephote, this is the awaited moment. We now begin the Great Dragon Hunt. In the morning, you will set out on the unknown paths of our world. And you will return with a great beast. The gods will bless us and allow us to find what we need for our Empire. I bless you. The one who captures the great beast will be promoted to my personal guard. But I recommend that you work together. These beasts are treacherous.

The king removed his cloak and revealed a massive scar on his arm. Bite marks:

— I was in direct combat with one of them. I almost lost. I felt its teeth in my body. A quick and precise bite. It bit, withdrew its teeth, and tried to attack me. But I managed to defeat it. And as a reward, I have this necklace with the creature's teeth.

Amidst the strong and fearless men, there was one without hope. He had agreed to go on the hunt, hoping his luck would end in death during the journey. His name was Haveed. It marked one year since the death of his wife and daughter on that day. The midwives said they didn't survive, and both died during childbirth. Few details were given to the poor man, who had returned from a mission when he heard of their deaths. He despaired. He had lost everything he had. Since then, he had decided to embark on all the dangerous missions of the kingdom, asking the gods to allow him to die in battle because he couldn't live without the presence of both. The grand hunt was the perfect opportunity. He could find a dragon, fight it, and, perhaps, lose the wretched life he led in that confrontation.

After the meeting with the king, he went home. He took a large sword, forged by his great-grandfather. It was shiny, long, and had a double-edged blade. Balanced in weight, it was the ideal sword for him. He also put on a leather outfit. He took a bag, a kind of backpack, where he would carry some fruits and water. He spent the night reciting prayers taught by his mother. It was a kind of protection.

In the morning, everyone set out. Greeted by the king and the inhabitants of the Empire, the brave men embarked on an unusual journey through the forests of Hetvam. A journey that would change the lives of all of them, especially Haveed.

For days, the men walked without any sign of the great beasts. They ate fruits and, when they could, hunted a small animal that turned into a stew for the ten brave men. Some were already hopeless, lost in the middle of the forest, directionless, searching for a creature they didn't even know if still existed.

On the night of the twenty-fifth day in the forest, the men seemed to hear a noise. They lit torches and walked through the dense woods. They didn't know what it could be, but it was a very strident noise: — Will we find one of the great ones? The gods are on our side, I feel it. Haveed, after all those days in the forest, already doubted the existence of gods, let alone their protection. He wanted to punch the soldier in the head, but he couldn't.

They heard noises in three opposite directions. Haveed pointed to the left and right: — Split up between these two sides. I will go straight ahead. Let's find out what's going on. Alone, in the midst of shadows, Haveed walked carefully. However, without realizing it, he stepped on the edge of a cliff and fell. He slid down a hill, hitting his head and losing consciousness.

When the sun rose, Haveed woke up. He looked to one side and saw his sword. On the other side was a small stream. If he fell there, he would certainly drown. He got up. His head hurt. He felt his hand burn. It was cut. He looked up. He had fallen from a height of about ten meters. He didn't know how to get back.

He went to the stream, took the cold water, and washed his face. He drank a little to fully regain consciousness. He washed the wound on his hand, which insisted on bleeding. He looked ahead. There was a huge mountain and a narrow path, overgrown with vegetation, on the water's edge. But it was the solution. He would go around the hill to find a way back to his companions.

Before he could leave, a nearby bush rustled. With the instinct of a soldier, he unsheathed his sword.

"It must be my imagination."

The bush moved again. He approached, grabbing a branch with his injured right hand and wielding the sword with his left. He moved the branch aside, and to his surprise, he found a crouched and frightened baby dragon.

— Well, look at that.

His first instinct was to take the creature and bring it to the king. They could extract the blood from the creature, and certainly, part of the population would be cured of the curse for another year. But as he looked into those frightened eyes, he had mercy on the poor creature. He lowered his sword and planted it in the ground:

— Come on, little friend, better get out of here. I'll set you free, but if the men find you around here, I won't be able to save your life.

The baby dragon whimpered. Haveed then noticed a large thorn stuck in its tail. That was causing immense pain to the little creature.

— Oh, what happened to you? How did you get hurt?

He tried to approach, but the creature growled as if trying to defend itself.

— Calm down, I won't hurt you.

He then approached slowly, letting the dragon sniff his hand. Then, he stroked its head:

— You're cute. If it weren't for everything that separates our peoples, I would take care of you.

Afterward, he took the thorn and pulled it from the dragon's tail. The little dragon made a noise, and then realized its tail was free from the thorn. On instinct, the little creature licked Haveed's hand, expressing gratitude. At that moment, the lowered hand was the one with a cut. Thus, it touched the wolf blood.

Immediately, the little dragon started to glow, enveloped in a green cloud. When the green smoke dissipated, in place of the dragon was a beautiful little girl.

— By the gods! I've been blessed! The little dragon turned into a child!

Haveed picked up the little girl. He took out his belongings from his bag, tore the fabric, and wrapped her up. He hugged her affectionately. She smiled in his arms. He said:

— You may have dragon blood, but by drinking my blood, you became human. Now, you are my daughter. The daughter the gods gave me to replace my dead family. I will call you Nina.

And he embraced that child with immense love.

The captain walked along the slope and found four soldiers. They had a large dragon tied up:

— Look, Haveed. We found one of the big ones. And you? What do you have there?

Haveed looked down at the little girl in his arms and lowered her head so she wouldn't see the large lizard trapped. It was one like her. Or it used to be. He said:

— The gods have blessed me. I asked them to take my life, but instead, I found this little girl in the woods. They gave me a little girl to replace my daughter.

He looked to the side:

— Where are the other five?

One of them sighed:

— Dead. Something attacked them. Only we survived, and we still had to fight with this beast.

Haveed looked at them and said:

— My daughter needs food and care. I'll go back ahead. Bring the beast. I'll announce to the king that you're coming with the big lizard.

And that's how Haveed, the hopeless one, found Nina in the forest. However, returning to Xephote, he vowed never to tell her about this story. Even less that she was a dragon who turned into a girl.

— I will protect you, my little one. Even if it costs me my life. No one will discover your secret.

Haveed hugged the child and quickly walked along the trails and paths marked in the forest. He would reach Xephote and live in peace with his daughter. That secret could never be uncovered.

