

Accursed

an illustrated fable



Prologue



Cries and yells from the nearby woods startled Crimson. Another sound, a growl, snapped her head up from the book. Heart thumping, she pushed the door and froze. A beast stood on shaky legs then slowly sank to its knees before falling dead.

A mother had endured the ultimate sacrifice to save her young. Fear gripped, Crimson. Lycans had taken her grandmother and mother but everyone had thought the beasts long gone. Somehow they had returned. Shouts grew nearer. What to do? In a flash, Crimson made up her mind.

Chapter 1



Crimson's finger retraced to the sentence's beginning. 'Unlike werewolves who are cursed humans, Lycanthropes are creatures unto themselves'. She looked away. The village Parson had retrieved the book from the church's bowels but at first had been reluctant to release it. "The past is done, my child, and cannot be undone. Perhaps it is best to let it be."

All her life rumors had surrounded her family. Townspeople exchanged knowing looks and nods over her mother's red-colored riding hood, the color of an immoral woman. The hunter who rescued her spoke of finding the young girl lying alongside a Lycanthrope, unbothered by the half-eaten grandmother. Whenever Little Crimson and her daughter went into town, passing mothers gripped their children tighter. Many times Crimson had heard the snarled whispers behind them. "Wicked. Unholy. Depraved." Now she had brought a Lycan into her home.

Its size had doubled in the past month making her fret what further rumors the increased food purchases might start. Teaching it to hunt might become necessary. How? What? Certainly it could go outside whenever it wanted. Watching her, it learned to open the door.

Indeed, after a few accidents early on, and watching her, it went to the outhouse on its own. Crimson smiled, imagining the reaction some passing traveler in need of relief would have finding it occupied. But its silence often crossed into eerie. Could it bark, howl? Whatever the case, its intelligence astounded her. At night it sat, back to the wall, next to the fireplace. Only a few times had Crimson seen it close its eyes. Often times, she would waken at night and find it watching her. Thinking, what? Imagining, what? Planning, what? And why had the mother come here? Accident, convenience? Intent?

Movement caught her eye and she looked up to see it extend a hand toward the candle. She had never seen it reach into the fireplace. Maybe it wanted to learn if it was a different fire. She made no attempt to stop it. Lukas had a hard, harsh life looming before him. Best to learn now curiosity might hurt. Crimson returned to the book.

Chapter 2



"I see the stains are still visible." Crimson strained to remain calm, expressionless. Frayed, jangled nerve ends tightened her grip on the door handle.

"Indeed, Lord Mortus. Blood is difficult to remove." If not for Lukas' abrupt change in posture she would have remained unaware of the Manor Lord's approach. Right now Lukas would be dead and after having their way with her, she would be burned.

"The villagers spoke of two Lycanthropes. The one killed and a smaller one."

"I have seen nothing prowling about in the woods, my Lord."

"Perhaps I should come inside to assure myself nothing is amiss."

Complete vulnerability stared her in the face. She could do nothing to stop these men from doing whatever they wanted. She felt exposed, weak. As her mother had often said, "For a woman, wits and guile must rule." "My Lord, I beg you not to shame your humble servant. Not knowing of your visit, I made no arrangements for your august presence."

"Come, come, child. You know full well my right to enter any house."

"My Lord, I do not argue against your right, I argue for your pleasure." Her voice lowered to a throaty hush. "A welcomed visit would leave me better prepared to...receive you."

Drago's eyes narrowed. How dare this wench, daughter of a 1,000 fathers, defy him. He snorted. Given her regal, imperious bearing however, the sire could be a member of the royal court itself. Even now, the incestuous dog might be inside cowering under the bed. Still, who would deny her unmatched beauty and obvious charms so brazenly displayed? Nor the insinuation. Her scented body wafted aromas meant to entice and enchant. A vision of her naked and humbled before him made his blood thicken and swell.

But he did not need guards present. Their witness and gossip would of a certainty reach the Queen's ears. Drago had long learned how to pick battles. His voice lowered to a whisper. "If it pleases me, I will send word of my coming." Crimson took his cue and hushed a response.

"As you command, my Lord."

When they disappeared into the trees, Crimson closed the door, leaning against it to exhale a deep breath. On the far side Lukas still crouched, staring past her. Razor-sharp fangs glistened from between parted lips. Clawed hands hung from biceps bulging and flexing. He would make a fearsome, formidable opponent and at his astounding rate of growth that would be soon. Very soon.

She had bought some time for them but Mortus would return. Like all men, the desire and lust so plain on his face would turn him into a marionette. Still, how long could she twist and play him?

Her gaze turned toward the just finished book. Legends spoke of a land far to the west ruled by Lycanthropes. If she could find it and bring Lukas to safety, perhaps it would prove her trustworthy and lift the curse that plagued her family. She imagined they would face many obstacles and dangers. Most of them human.

A stone stillness overcame her. She stood in the room staring at the book. The morning's events had proved her feeble and impotent. And in the end, guile and wits had not helped her mother and grandmother. A clenched fist punched the air. Her voice erupted, fierce and determined. "I will learn to fight!"

Chapter 3



"What? Didn't expect me to punch you? Wasn't fair? You think on your journey battles will be fought in nice, neat squares? Out there brigands and highwaymen will pounce, have their way with you, have their way with you again, then cut your head off."

Crimson's body wanted to stop. Lie down. Not move. For weeks it had groaned and hurt. Bruises and swellings existed where none should have. A thought returned, each time more persistent than the previous. Why am I doing this?

Ages ago, the sound of shouts and galloping horses had sent a wide-eyed girl rushing to the window. Men on massive steeds raced past, hot on the trail of a wild boar. A mother's arm came to rest around her shoulder.

"Who are they, mama?"

"That is the Count, my darling."

"What is a Count?"

"An important and powerful person."

"Do you know him?"

When the silence continued, Crimson looked up to see her mother's eyes brimming with tears. "Why are you crying, mama?" She knelt down face-to-face, wiping away tears. "Sometimes love and a broken heart go together, sweetheart." She smiled, "One day you'll understand. Now listen to me and never forget what I'm about to tell you. When it is most important, when you need help, go to the Count." Only later, after the Lycanthrope had taken her, did Crimson learn of the doomed liaison between a royal and a commoner. But she never forgot her mother's advice.

At first, the castle guards had laughed when she asked to see the Count. Crimson responded by sitting down outside the wall, nibbling quietly on stale hardtack intended for the return trip, prepared to wait until he left or entered. Two days passed and in the pre-dawn light she awoke to the sight of a boot.

"Who are you?" Impatient authority laced the question.

"I am Crimson Ryder, if it pleases my Lord." Long minutes passed in silence. His voice took a gentler tone.

"What do you want?"

"If it pleases my Lord, I wish to learn to fight." His laughter bellowed past the gate, startling the guards. He turned around walking back, his head half-turned over his shoulder.

"Go home." Crimson sat down.

Two days later, she again woke to a boot. Crimson stood up, weak and pale. "Follow me." he commanded. Just inside the gate, he turned around to face it. "Every morning, I come to this exact spot. When the sun rises, its beams pierce the viewing portal and warm my face. Tomorrow morning after I greet the new day, I will tell the guards to open the entrance. If you are standing on the other side, we will see if you can fight as well as you can wait. Now, go home."

He departed without another word. New-found energy fueled Crimson's ten-mile hike. Once inside, any food her hands could grab went into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed, swallowed and chewed, noting the dried meat hanging from the rafters remained untouched.

When the hunger pangs subsided, she stepped out scanning the tree line. "Lukas!" Only quarreling birds twittered about. "Lukas!" He's not a dog, she thought. A half-flagon of mead washed down a slice of mutton and she fell asleep as her head plunged to the pillow.

She bolted upright after what seemed like only minutes, gasping at the thought she might have overslept. Her head snapped around. Lukas sat by the fireplace, forearms resting on bent knees, watching her. If possible, he'd grown bigger. What had he been eating?

"On your feet, woman!" The shout, echoing off the walls, broke the reverie. Her body ached from the punch that had taken her breath away. It wanted to weep and go home. And then what, she thought. Wait for the day your fate becomes your mother's? And if you have a daughter, pass the same terror to

her? Slowly, Crimson rose. She willed stiffened muscles into an offensive stance. Resolve blazed from her eyes as she hissed at the Count. "En garde!"

He fought against a smile but pride filled his eyes.

Chapter 4



She had spent so much time teaching her to be feminine and alluring, what would mother say about this, Crimson mused. Her eyes lingered over the lithe, sinewy muscles that draped her body. She had never lacked for self-confidence but a new fearlessness solidified it. "What do you think, Lukas? Do you think I'm ready to find your people and me my fate?" Crimson glanced at his reflection.

He had grown huge, immense. Ironic, given her family history, that she had never been afraid in his presence. Not once had he ever made an aggressive move toward her. But as usual, nothing disturbed his taciturn nature. Still, three days ago he had surprised her as she stitched her new outfit. She looked up to find him stretching a hand toward her with his forefinger extended. Slowly, she did the same until their fingers just touched. He jerked his arm back as if afraid of breaking some unseen barrier.

A week ago, running the return ten miles from the Count's castle, Lukas had burst from the woods to pace alongside her. Their synchronized footfalls echoed off the trees as they thumped along the road. Sunlight and a cool breeze brushed against their faces. Two beings flushed with the power and strength of their strides.

Of a moment, Crimson halted. Wide-eyed fear of their reality gripped her. Lukas continued a bit more before stopping to turn around. A puzzled expression tilted his head. She shook her head and stamped her feet. Hard. "No, Lukas, no. Never. You cannot be seen." She reached up, clasping his shoulders to shake him. "You must never leave the forest. Never!"

Crimson's gaze returned to her reflection. "Tomorrow will be my last day with the Count." She turned around to face Lukas. "The next morning we depart westward." His eyes locked into hers, alert, watchful. Did he understand? Crimson reached for the top needing to thread in just a few more armor plate rivets to finish her new fighting outfit. Crimson smiled. Her mother would approve its feminine allure.

* * *

Guards opened the Parlor Room doors as Count Verlon swooped in. Ahead, Drago Mortus stood gazing out a window, hands crossed behind him. A court maiden approached, two wine goblets balanced on a tray. Drago took one, raising it to the sunlight, twirling it. Watching the light beams refract through the liquid. Verlon sipped and waited.

"Thank you for receiving me on such short notice, Count." Drago continued twirling before pausing to inhale its bouquet. "The renown of your wineries is well-deserved." He swallowed half in one gulp before resuming his watch of the activities below.

"Two things bring me here, Count. I have reason to believe a Lycanthrope has settled in my province. Chickens, dogs, sheep, cattle have disappeared. One farmer found a half-eaten carcass in the field. The people are unsettled." He took a smaller sip. "History shows whenever a Lycan appears, the Ryders are in danger. The one we have left is quite comely. It would be a shame if something happened to her." Verlon tired of the cat and mouse.

"And the second?"

"I understand for weeks now the Ryder woman has been coming here. Why would a woman of my province walk ten miles every day through woods that may have a Lycanthrope prowling about?" Drago turned around to fix the Count with a cold stare. "Is she your wench?"

Verlon remained expressionless but fought against the rising tide of anger. "Whether she is or is not, is none of your concern, Drago."

"Oh I beg to differ, dear Count. Your actions could be interpreted as interfering with my territorial rights and prerogatives."

"Nonetheless, Drago, my statement stands. What I do or not do in my castle and province is none of your concern."

Their eyes blazed at one another. Drago stiffened, lifted his goblet, and head upturned, drained it. His demeanor radiated frigid fury. "Those words may come back to haunt you, Count. I shall take my leave now that I may refresh myself. Tonight I will visit the Ryder wench." He strode for the doors as the guards opened them then paused in the entrance, head turned over his shoulder. "Do not be surprised, Count, if tomorrow you find her a little...worn."

Chapter 5



A memory rose within the Count sending the drone of his chattering guests deep into the background. He and the King's coterie galloped after a deer that had raced off with an arrow buried in its chest. Something made him look back and his eyes widened at the sight of a huge Lycanthrope closing hard on a Baron bringing up the rear. The beast lifted the man out of the saddle and veered for the woods with its prey struggling and screaming to break the iron grip dragging him to doom.

Everyone stopped, riding back to the forest's edge where the mewling for pity and succor mingled with the crunching of bones. A cold fear gripped them long before the cries stopped and the eating continued. As one, the group turned away not a one ever mentioning the cowardice and shame they now bore.

For hours now, he had paced the court knowing what dusk would bring for the Ryder woman. Going to her aid would force him to travel through woods now hiding a Lycanthrope. Hard enough to knock his chair backward, Verlon stood up from the table, startling his guests.

Rare had the Countess seen him like this but their years together warned her not to interfere. He marched toward the doors thrusting one open. "Guard!

Saddle my horse and bring him to the gate. I ride immediately." He turned toward his wife. "I have unfinished business. If I do not return, I did my duty." The door closed behind him leaving his guests exchanging glances and the Countess with an awkward smile.

Soon enough, the trail opened to a small, moon-lit clearing. Beyond it, house lights flickered past intervening trees. A door burst open revealing a female screaming into the night before a hand closed around her mouth dragging her back inside. Verlon spurred the horse, giving it its head. Something furred flashed through the doorway. The Lycanthrope! It had made its move. Verlon swallowed hard. He would no longer hide truth or exist shamed by it. A life hung in the balance: his daughter's.

Howls and screams of terror emanated from the house. A man's voice began to shriek as if the bowels of the Pit had opened before him. The Count leaned forward in the saddle. "Ride, my steed. Ride!"

He pulled the reins tight, leaping from the saddle to dash inside. His daughter, unharmed and whole, turned toward him, eyes wide in shock. Verlon shifted his gaze toward the horror gripping Drago by the neck, shaking his lifeless corpse like a rag doll. A gasp escaped him. "My God."



Chapter 6



Crimson stood before the iron gate where still cool night breezes brushed against her cheeks. Pre-dawn shadows muffled the sounds of a castle waking. An excited tension gripped her. Today marked the first day of a journey into the unknown. A slow, deep breath filled her lungs.

The man beside her had become a source of continued confusion. Yes, the Count had carried off Drago's body leaving it miles away on a well-traveled road. Yes, he had escorted her back to the castle to avoid roving bands out hunting Drago's killer. And yes. Under his tutelage, brigands and bandits would not find her a defenseless morsel. But this same man had walked away from his lover and unborn daughter. "Did you love my mother?"

The question hung in the air. Sunbeams chose that moment to pierce the portal and warm their faces. Both enjoyed the sparkling rays and their promise of a new day, a new beginning, a new opportunity. "Come. Walk with me to the West Gate."

Cooks, stable grooms, carpenters, masons, chambermaids, as well as knights, pages, and guards smiled, bowed, and curtsied as they hurried to their appointed posts. Curiously, not once had Crimson seen the Countess nor had she been summoned to pay respects to the Lady of the House.

They passed the courtyard and ahead the West Gate loomed. "I was not raised for love. I was raised for duty. I did not have the freedom to indulge my whims and desires. I did not have the wisdom and experience to distinguish between love and a whim." He stopped and locked her gaze. "I am still duty bound. The people depend upon me to be so. I failed your mother but wisdom tells me I cannot undo the past. It also has restored me to love. I will not fail my daughter."

He turned and resumed his walk. Crimson followed and curled her arm around his. Both continued in silence.

As they crossed the moat bridge, the clomp, clomp of a horse drubbed behind them. A grin spread across Verlon's mouth. "Oh, I almost forgot." He turned, motioning toward an approaching groom leading a heavy-set, muscled horse. "This is Bayard. He is strong and true. He is not the swiftest but he will charge anything and trample it underfoot. He will keep his hooves and balance during battle and will never leave your side. He is yours."

Crimson gasped with surprise and delight. She turned toward Verlon, her eyes tearing. The two held their gazes, neither willing to end the moment. "I must be going." Verlon nodded.

"Each morning as the sun greets me, I will wonder if the day will mark your return. I will be eager to hear every detail of your adventure." His head swiveled toward the forest. "Does your friend await you?"

"I am sure he is nearby."

Sword sheathed to her back, Crimson mounted Bayard. His head and neck bobbed up and down, hooves clopped and danced on the wooden planks. Powerful muscles rippled in eager anticipation. Without another word, Crimson turned and trotted away. Ahead the dark woods beckoned. Fate's whisper rustled the leaves.

Chapter 7



Night had settled into its nocturnal rhythms. Insects chirped for mates. Furred creatures scurried through the underbrush. Overhead, the flap-flap of a bat's wings whisked by. Lukas sat still, the sounds converging into a brain that could apprehend but without understanding. His gaze turned toward scent-long-neck. The horse grazed and munched with its ears trained on Lukas. Theirs remained an uneasy relationship but each had settled into spaces defined by growls and snorts when the other got too close.

Lukas shifted toward scent-white-hair. A gentle heartbeat and soft breathing raised no alarms. He looked back at scent-long-neck then back to scent-white-hair. Eyes turned to his hand. He rolled and twisted it, watching the fire's light glint off its claws. He looked back at her then again at his hand before once more facing scent-long-neck.

A voice rose in his head of scent-white-hair making a familiar sound. Over and over he heard, "Lukas. Lukas. Lukas." A tingling sensation washed over his body. Every nerve pinged and hummed. He became faint, dizzy. "Lukas. Lukas. Lukas." Eyes darted toward scent-white-hair's hand then snapped back to his. Hers. His. Hers. His. A thought smashed through the fog. "Not scent-white-hair!"

He stood up ramrod straight, muscles stiff, unbending. Her voice shouted in his head, "Lukas." He turned and sped off into the woods. Lungs breathed deep and hard. Oxygen-fueled legs became pistons powering a freight train. Arms pumped in synchronized rhythm. Sharp, clear signals from a newly awakened mind ignited precision reflexes. He dodged trees, vaulted fallen ones, leapt over bushes. On and on he ran. His passage silenced chittering insects, routed roosting birds, scattered drowsing deer.

He burst onto a clearing just as the clouds parted for a glittering moon. He stopped, slowly rotating in place; a heaving chest rose and fell. Everything his eyes lay on produced a single thought. "Not Lukas!" Legs spread, arms thrown back, his head rose to the heavens. A just awakened Lycanthrope's long dormant voice lifted. A howl, long and mournful emerged. Lukas howled and howled again. All who heard cowered in fear. All who heard bowed to the wolf.

Lukas stopped. Sudden silence blanketed the night. He looked up to stare at the stars and moon then strode back into the woods. Ears twitched to the sound of a tunneling earthworm. Eyes parted the shadows to individual leaves. His snout crinkled to the scent of anything that moved. But now an aware, sentient mind sifted and processed into categories created by the one thing he had not possessed: context. He walked through a world re-identified with every step.

After a while, a small fire flickered through the trees. He sniffed. Nothing disturbed the night or scent-white-hair's sleep. A hoof stomp and a snort identified scent-long-neck. He radiated out toward the horse. "Lukas not hunt."

He stepped into the flame's glow and checked once more for danger or threat, squatting down to gaze at scent-white-hair, reacquiring and re-familiarizing himself. Something akin to affection coursed through his veins. Lukas extended a clawed finger to touch her nose. Crimson opened an eye to take him in. She smiled.

Chapter 8



Ahead, the trees began to thin and beyond a large expanse opened. Crimson emerged, halting Bayard just past the tree line, scanning the low-lying hills. No chance to reach them, she thought, before the sun settled in for the night. Despite the rapid descent, it confirmed she traveled in the right direction.

Sunrise would begin her third month travelling. Crimson had expected and many had predicted the kind of dangers she would face. And yet, not once had she been accosted by highway men or robbers. Indeed, everyone she encountered, wandering minstrels, troubadours, tradesmen, and even a few knights errant had all been gracious and most hospitable. One however, had followed her into the woods where she had gone to relieve herself. His amorous advances stopped when a ferocious growl rumbled behind him. Before she could warn him not to run, he took off. The inhuman shrieks and cries that followed lasted only seconds. Crimson made her way back to the camp, the horrifying sounds of rending flesh and crunching bones ringing in her ears. Still did. Crimson shuddered but lesson learned. She no longer went anywhere without her sword.

Her gaze shifted to a solitary tree, its dead and gnarled roots so exposed Crimson marveled the wind had not toppled it. I'll stop there for the night, she decided. It will block one line of attack.

Great confidence sustained her as she gathered wood and checked for burrows that might hide serpents or scorpions. Four days ago she had encountered a band of minstrels travelling to the next town. A Druid priest whose dark and intense eyes had watched her every move, accompanied them. After sharing a meal, news, and laughter, Crimson offered her excuses and prepared to re-enter the forest. The priest stopped her.

"Stay with us for the evening. The woods are not safe." Crimson smiled.

"The only dangers I have encountered, Druid, are humans not trees. The forest gives me great comfort."

"Where are you headed?"

"I travel west."

"West? There is nothing there."

"I travel farther west." His eyes narrowed.

"There is even less there."

"Perhaps. But I have reason to believe the answer to a question I have awaits me in the west."

The Druid remained silent, his eyes staring into hers. "Continue west. You will come upon a line of hills. A few days more and you will come to the Forest of Myth. I sense the wolf. You may find more than an answer. One you might not survive."

Again Crimson shuddered, happy to see the kindling catch and a fire begin to crackle. If Lukas returned from hunting, he would remain in the nearby woods mindful of her warning to never expose himself. Darkness fell. Behind her the tree groaned. The wind, she thought, as the long day closed her eyes.

A sixth sense popped them open even as she struggled to shake the sleep preventing focus. A tree root penetrated the ground before her. Another slid overhead and it too burrowed into the earth. She tried to rise and banged into the tree crawling over her and lowering itself. In some distant reality she heard Bayard whinny and snort, stomping its hooves. Crimson screamed then desperately began digging the earth between the roots. The tree only penetrated deeper pushing her flat to the ground.

She opened her mouth to scream again then stopped. Silence blanketed the night except for the clear sound of footsteps. Eyes bulging, Crimson held her breath, peering out from between two roots. Before her a foot appeared then another. The fire's flames glinted and danced off the metal strips covering them.

"Who are you? By what right have you entered these lands?"

Chapter 9



Author's Note: Xiloi – hee lo **EE**

"Who are you? By what right have you entered these lands?"

Before Crimson could respond a howl pierced the air. Not mournful not lonely but the fierce howl of a predator that stalked the night and hunted its prey.

"I intend no harm and have traveled from far to the east. You must free me. You are in mortal danger. My companion rushes to my side."

"I am Maila Dragonrider. I fear nothing."

"Listen to me, Maila. The danger is grave. My companion is a Lycanthrope."

"Lycanthrope? What is that?"

Another howl, closer, darker, chilled the air. Something huge crashed through the dense foliage and limbs. Crimson became frantic. "Free me, Maila. Free me before it is too late." Maila spun around and sniffed then sniffed again. She turned to look back at Crimson before returning to sniff again. A sharp gasp escaped her.

"Xiloi!"

Maila twisted back to stare at Crimson. Fire burned in her eyes. "Gods of Drane. It has come to pass." Crimson screamed.

"Free me now, Maila!"

Deaf to her cries, Maila turned toward the woods. Lukas burst from the tree line and braked to a stop. His chest heaved and swelled, moonlight glistened off razor-sharp claws, drool dripped from its maw snapping four-inch fangs open and shut. A deep, frightful growl rumbled within his chest. Maila took two steps forward to bend on one knee and bowed. Lukas quieted and tilted his head. A look of wonder spread across his face. Maila stood, continuing to stare at the beast before her.

Eyes wide with fear, Crimson held her breath lest the sound break the moment's spell. As it lengthened, Lukas grew ever quieter but no less astounded. Maila turned and as she walked back to Crimson, waved a hand that pointed three fingers. With a groan, the tree began to rise and extract its roots before crawling backward. Crimson could not wait. She scrambled away from the mobile plant to stand face-to-face with Maila.

"Are you a witch?"

"Long ago, a wizard grateful to the Xiloi for their aid at a critical moment in a battle of succession, made my family emissaries to the Xiloi and granted solely to us the gift of Xiloi speech that we might speak as their voice and eliminate misunderstanding and fear. The one you call Lycanthrope tells me his mother spent her dying moments to secure her offspring's refuge. Is this true?" Crimson's eyes widened. She nodded in response. Maila knelt on one knee, took her hand and kissed it.

"Our legends speak of an orphaned Xiloi, coming from the east guided by a human female. He will be sovereign over his people and bring them to refuge." Again Maila kissed her hand. "The prophecy is true and now fulfilled." She pressed her lips to Crimson's hand once more. "I kiss the hand of the Maiden that I too may regain my rightful place among the Xiloi."

Crimson gently grasped her shoulder to pull her up. "Stand, Maila. I am Crimson Ryder. I know nothing of your legends. I have come to secure Lukas' safety and perhaps my own. Xiloi have killed my mother and grandmother. Our legends say one will kill me and if I have a daughter, she will inherit this curse. I wish only to be free of a terror I do not understand."

"Then let us ally ourselves to reach our goals. I am exiled to this barren wasteland by one who in the absence of a rightful heir has enthroned and enriched herself and not served the Xiloi." Crimson grew wary.

"I bear no ill will to anyone."

"Then return whence you came. Even the air this woman exhales is wicked. Because the Xiloi can speak only through her, she has beguiled them against all humans. She sends Xiloi into the surrounding provinces then reaps a ransom in return for ridding them of the horror in their midst. If she learns

that the Maiden and the rightful heir have entered the Forest of Myth, you will not leave the forest."

"What do you propose?" Maila's shoulders fell.

"It will not be easy. I have dominion over plants. She has dominion over stone. Within the forest, I am strong but she rarely steps foot outside the Stone Throne from which she draws power. We will have to lure her out."

Maila drew herself up, exhaled a long breath, and fixed Crimson with a look. "If we do, you will have to kill her." Crimson stared back.

"Why not you?" Maila's voice broke.

"Because she is my sister."

Chapter - 10



“You are weak. You are outcast. Of what importance can your words have?”

Maila felt strange burning wood and sensing nothing. Her sister kept the Forest of Myth immune from sorcery. It did make her weak. She poked a half-burnt log and watched it crumple into the fire, crackling and sizzling. Reignited embers floated up on heated air.

No words had disturbed the night’s stillness. Her ears had processed no sounds because an image of two fingers crushing an ant had entered her mind, the classic Xiloi ‘word’ for weakness.

Another picture of guards dragging her through the woods and casting her out to the Barrens swelled within her mind’s eye. The same scene followed, then again and yet again as one by one the Xiloi elders imaged their agreement.

“I have not come to give words. They indeed have no importance. I have come to show you what my eyes have seen.” Maila closed her mind. A rude gesture to be sure but meant to show she had no fear. That courage belied any weakness. The eldest emerged from the trees even as a gust wafted smoke from the fire separating them.

“Show me, Maila Dragonrider. Show me what you have seen.”

"A human female has come and is near." Maila poked at the fire. "She travels from the east." Again she poked. "An orphaned Xiloi accompanies her."

For a moment, stilled silence greeted the declaration. A passing breeze caught loosened embers. Mental chaos erupted. Around her Xiloi elders rushed into the small clearing. Mental imagery flew everywhere accompanied by grunts, barks, and snorts. Some waved arms, others stomped feet. Their agitated frenzy intensified. Maila poked the fire.

"Halt!" The blasted image silenced the clearing. One by one, the Elders slinked back into the tree line. Betraying his own nervousness, the Eldest dropped to all fours and paced in a slow circle. He stopped to face her. "Did he speak? Is he Boulka?"

"No. He is not werewolf. Of course, his vocabulary is primitive but he saw my imagery and I saw his."

"Why do they not accompany you? Where are they?" A long pause followed. He spun around. "What do you want?"

A stream of imagery flowed from Maila showing how her sister had lied, plotted, and deceived the Xiloi. Showed the deception that caused humans to fear, hunt, and kill Xiloi. Showed how with reckless, malevolent intent she had sent cubs and siblings into provinces to wreak havoc then enrich herself by betraying their locations to human hunters. From the surrounding trees fanged jaws snapped, growls rumbled and deepened.

"What better proof can you have of who the humans are then that the Maiden has arrived from the east and delivered unto us our rightful heir. The Xiloi prophecy is fulfilled. By a human." Excited Elders repeated her image of Lukas and Crimson. The Eldest turned around and moved closer before rising to his full height.

"What do you want, Maila Dragonrider?"

"Long ago a wizard bequeathed my family to the Xiloi that through our voices you would know peace with humans. I want to regain my family's honor and restore to the Xiloi the legacy earned in battle and deserved in life."

Elders reinforced her image with every repeat. Maila rose to her feet. "Follow me, Xiloi. Follow me to the East Boundary that you may see with your own eyes the prophecy fulfilled."

* * *

The ground had been leveling for some time and as Crimson descended from the hills she pulled the reins and scanned the open ground remaining. A vast forest lay ahead and it already blocked the sunlight that had only minutes left. Maila had said to enter but only one word came to mind as she looked in:

foreboding. "Must be the Forest of Myth." she said, more to bolster her own courage than to break the dead silence not even insects interrupted.

Lukas turned his head to look at her. He stared hard, squeezed his eyes, and Crimson watched as frustration again surfaced. "No, Lukas. I cannot speak Xiloi but soon you'll be with those who do." Crimson looked away that a passing breeze would dry her eyes and prevent the emotion of once again losing someone close.

They entered the tree line and everything darkened. And yet, an eerie, low-level, blue-green light with no discernible source permeated everything. Crimson doubted it would prevent her losing all sense of direction but nothing could approach she would not see. Still, she loosened her sword and the straps holding her shield.

Bayard snorted and Lukas' fur bristled. Her eyes widened trying to pierce the dense foliage. Something flickered through the leaves. A light! A torch light. The trees gave way to a small clearing. The far side showed Maila holding a torch, an immense, gray-furred Xiloi, and others strung out on a line. Barks and grunts shot across. Lukas grew agitated, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Before Crimson could shout for them to stop and not overwhelm him, they raised their heads and howled as one. Long and hard they howled as if their lungs would never empty. Their voices lifted beyond the trees and rose to the heavens. Without warning, they stopped.

Lukas' chest swelled and answered with a howl that rolled over limbs and leaves and reverberated across a forest. A howl that claimed all unto itself. The elders joined in affirmation.

* * *

Chattering ceased and heads turned. Marlen gave the courtiers a dismissive wave as she stepped away, her shoes echoing off the throne room's stone floor. She leaned out the window just as the howls died. A moment later a lone Xiloi voice sounded. She marveled at its power rising above the impenetrable canopy and bridging a distance beyond any chance to image. It echoed off the trees making location impossible. Try as she might, the howl remained unrecognized. A chorus joined in and the leaves seemed to vibrate. Marlen could not remember the Xiloi ever doing such a thing. What happened? A chill raced down her spine.

Chapter 11



The room quieted as the doors swung inward. Marlen turned her head, curious who would walk in. An eyebrow rose. She had not expected a woman. The stranger's every stride bespoke confidence and a regal bearing. Lithe, rippling muscles could not hide a most feminine body. Perfectly balanced as she walked, Marlen noted the casual ease with which the sword at her side hung. Most importantly, this woman had entered through the Forest of Myth. Marlen rose from the throne and stepped to the dais' edge. She would not underestimate anyone who had emerged past the Xiloi unscathed.

"Welcome, traveler. Welcome to Xilo. Visitors are a rare delight. Whence come you?"

"I am Ann of Gaitlin. I thank you for receiving me and for your hospitality." Marlen stepped down to stand eye-to-eye. Crimson's steady gaze betrayed no guile or discomfort.

"Gaitlin? Just beyond the Southern Mountains?"

"Indeed."

"You have traveled far. How did you come to find us? As with the surrounding forest, many believe Xilo to be a myth, a legend."

"I am the daughter of a Druid priest. My father collected old books. It is how he taught me to read. A Lycanthrope came to Gaitlin and terrorized the

province before a band of villagers killed it. I remembered as a little girl reading about a land far to the north from whence Lycanthropes came. My father thought it more than legend and I decided to find it." Without question an outsider, Marlen thought. Only they so described the Xiloi.

"So you came here on a lark, an adventure?" Crimson's face sprouted a half-smile.

"I've come to make a proposal." Marlen leveled her a look then gestured with an arm.

"Come. Walk with me to the garden where we can refresh ourselves."

As they did, Crimson scanned the interior. "The architecture is phenomenal. Who built this?" Marlen took her turn at a half-smile.

"It built itself." She stopped and turned to stare at a pillar. Within moments, it took on a sponge-like quality and moved four feet before the sound of grinding concrete signaled it had re-solidified. Marlen's grin accompanied a side-long glance. "I have the power of stone." Crimson remained impassive and they continued.

"Tell me of this proposal, Ann of Gaitlin."

"As the daughter of a Druid priest, I had much occasion to travel and knew that Lycanthropes were not unique to Gaitlin. It occurred to me that if this land existed, it would provide an opportunity for mutual profit. If you have influence over the Lycanthropes, you can send one to a province I designate to begin terrorizing the locals. One which will have a particularly fat treasury. I will appear before the Manor Lord and offer to rid them of this pestilence for a fee you and I can split. As my record of success grows, so will the size of the fees."

Marlen coughed but remained impassive.

"What makes you think I have influence over these...Lycanthropes?"

"Before I entered the forest, I encountered a woman named Maila Dragonrider who guided me into the forest and told me of your existence."

Marlen almost missed a step but concentrated to keep her voice flat.

"Where is this Maila Dragonrider now."

"In the forest, awaiting my return. We have an arrangement. She told me the woods are filled with Lycanthropes but that she could guarantee my safe passage."

Marlen walked on as if digesting the offer but thoughts and implications raced through her mind defying any attempt to organize them. This naive outsider had walked into a maelstrom of Xilo politics blinded by visions of gold. Maila too had seen an opportunity and pursued her own angles. Perhaps as naively thinking the introduction would curry favor. And what of her proposal? Marlen had no intention of sharing anything with her. Still, she would string Ann along for the chance to confront Maila face-to-face.

"Your offer intrigues me, Ann of Gaitlin. However, you'll understand if I first ask for proof you are up to the task."

"Of course. How may I offer such proof?"

"There is a province due west of here in which I have a legacy arrangement with its Countess."

"Countess?"

"Yes. The wife of the Manor Lord, Count Verlon. Do you know them?"

Crimson's breath froze in her throat and her eyes became emotionless discs as she shook her head.

"Apparently, she is quite the jealous woman and when the Countess learned where he spent many an evening, she arranged with me to eliminate the mistress and her mother and have it look like the work of a Lycanthrope. I believe the fruit of that illicit relationship is now of age and so I must again fulfill my end of the bargain. Your timing is most propitious. If you fulfill this compact for me I will give you the lion's share of the price as a show of good faith."

Time had stopped. Crimson's mind narrowed to the singular revelation. Perhaps the shock of it, or its unexpectedness, or the mind-numbing jolt of the perpetrator's identity. Whatever the cause, Crimson would forever rue not killing the woman right then and there. As if making up her mind, Crimson looked up to an expectant Marlen. "I accept your offer."

"Excellent, Ann of Gaitlin. Now, permit me to accompany you as I would very much like to meet this Maila Dragonrider."

Chapter 12



Two by two, the riders passed beneath the fortress' iron gate. In the fourth row, Crimson flanked Marlen's right as they emerged to the sight of workers tilling the fields. Beyond, the Forest of Myth loomed, brightened by the waning afternoon sun.

Lost in thought, heightened tension and nervousness caused Crimson to miss Marlen's question directed at her alter ego. "I'm sorry."

"I asked, Ann of Gaitlin, if you were confident of finding your way back to Maila Dragonrider's location?" Crimson smiled and nodded, pointing to a few trees.

"I marked them on the way in. I already told the lead guards to watch for the crossed notches." They rode on a bit, the horse hooves muffled by the mossy ground and vegetation though saddle groans and clinking armor added to the squabble of bickering birds and chittering insects. Marlen betrayed her confidence and lack of suspicion.

"Once my meeting with Maila Dragonrider is concluded, I would very much like you to proceed on to introduce yourself to the Countess and complete my business with her." An expressionless Crimson kept her voice flat.

"I am looking forward to meeting her."

Ahead the trees parted for a broad meadow. Across the way just past the tree line, Maila waited. She acknowledged Crimson with a glance, then fixed her focus on Marlen. The twelve guards arranged themselves in a semi-circle. Crimson and Marlen dismounted, approaching on foot. The Stone Queen sprouted a cold, wicked grin. "Well, sister. I see your obstinacy remains undiminished. Your presence here in defiance of my banishment is an affront. What is your business with Ann of Gaitlin?" Maila returned the grin.

"She is Crimson Ryder not Ann of Gaitlin." Marlen's eyes widened. She turned toward Crimson, realization shining through them. Maila continued. "She came from the east. In the company of an orphaned Xiloi." Marlen's expression became one of shock. Behind Maila, Lukas emerged from the woods. With each stride, powerful muscles rippled across his massive frame. Maila pressed on. "Your reign is over, sister. Your continued abuse and exploitation of the Xiloi is at an end."

Exploding anger darkened Marlen's face. Before anyone could react, a dagger appeared in her hand. She plunged it into Maila's chest right to the hilt before pulling it out with a sucking sound. Maila staggered, eyes blinking, mouth gasping. She collapsed onto her back. Crimson rushed over, holding her head up, calling her name. Lukas growled then let loose a howl that trumpeted across the forest. The woods came alive as snarling, barking Xiloi burst from between the trees.

Guards reaching for weapons had their arms ripped off by knife-edged claws. Fresh stumps spewed blood everywhere. Others found themselves with 4-inch fangs buried in their necks, vise-like jaws cutting off breath and sound. Some ran, some begged, some prayed. All died with swords half-unsheathed, eyes reflecting the horror that had befallen them.

Maila looked up at Crimson. "It is finished. I am done." Eyes brimming, Crimson wordlessly shook her head. Her strength fast draining, Maila gripped Crimson's arm. "You must take my power. You must take my gift. The Xiloi will stand no chance without someone to aid them." Crimson's tears flowed.

"How can I? How can I?"

"Just say you will. Say it. Do not let me die with no one to bear my family's honor." Maila spit up blood. "Say it."

"I will. I will." Maila smiled through her pain.

"It is finished. I am done." Her face froze. Light fled her eyes.

"Maila! Maila!"

She wiped her eyes. Maila remained lifeless. Once more fate had taken someone close from her. Crimson lifted her head to scream the rage engulfing her. Eyes ablaze, she looked for the only thing that would sate the vengeance fueling every cell. Halfway across the field, Marlen and horse galloped away with Lukas hot on her trail. She leaped atop Bayard, spurring him forward, lashing his reins. "Ride, Bayard, ride. Ride like you never have before. Bring me to her."

From the trees ahead of Marlen, two huge Xiloi emerged on a collision course with the onrushing Stone Queen. The impact exploded across the meadow. With one Lycan's jaws clamped to its neck and the other twisting its head around, the horse went down leaving Marlen to continue sailing through the air, landing hard twenty feet away. Lukas pounced.

"No, Lukas, no!" Crimson leaped from the saddle before Bayard stopped. Sword unsheathed, she gripped the front of Marlen's tunic, lifting the stunned woman to her feet. As daze and confusion cleared away, Marlen looked up to see fury and hate blazing at her. Held fast with one hand, Crimson pressed the sword point against her gut. "My face will be the last thing you see on this Earth."

Marlen raised her arms outward. Malevolence and spite oozed from her. "I am unarmed." Crimson pulled her face-to-face. Rage cooled her words to a slow hiss.

"So was Maila."

Crimson ran her through. Watched her mouth open and close, open and close. "It will not be quick." She gave the blade a sharp twist then pulled it with a slurp. The disemboweled woman collapsed. Crimson turned and walked away, the sound of agonized screams ringing in her ears, weakening with each passing step.

She continued to walk, her mind numbed by the violence, horror, and loss that needed only minutes to unfold. She lost track of place and time. Even of Bayard following quietly. Maila's face would not leave her.

It vanished. Something touched her. Not her body or her head. Something inside it. She stopped, hands reaching up to press against her temples. Calm, peace, suffused her. She spun around.

The Xiloi filled the field, each one gazing at her. Lukas stood before them. "I knew you once as 'scent-white-hair'. You are Crimson Ryder." Crimson stared in astonishment. No sound or voice had pierced the quiet. Habit caused her to speak.

"Is that you, Lukas? Can I hear you in my head?"

Lukas walked up to raise his arm, finger outstretched. "We can hear you and you can hear us." Crimson raised her arm, finger extended. They touched.

Chapter 13



Crimson imaged the Xiloi gesture for an interrogative, a curled pinky, accompanied by a picture of a rock. "Are you sure?"

They waited just inside a copse of trees edging the open space surrounding Verlon Manor. A two-man patrol walked past the thirty-foot high east wall. Lukas returned an image of him facing her. "Yes." His back turned would have meant, no.

The three-month return trip to the Manor had provided ample opportunity to improve their communication. Irony of ironies and courtesy of Maila, she possessed a far greater vocabulary than Lukas and spent the time teaching him.

Two days they had hidden here watching the routines and confirming the Count's presence. Both guards rounded the corner and as one Lukas and Crimson dashed for the wall.

Lukas reached up stretching past his 7-foot height. Like steel cords, muscles stretched taut along his furred arm as one clawed hand began digging into the mortar between the large, irregular wall stones. When dug-in feet could

hold his weight, he signaled Crimson. She leaped atop his back, arms circling his neck. In an incredible feat of strength, Lukas began to climb.

Just below the parapet they paused, ears straining for any sound. Nothing. Crimson clambered up and over, landing on the walkway with a muffled thump. "Wait here. It might be that I'll return needing to get down fast. Here in the shadows anyone looking up will never see you."

Already oriented to the Manor's general layout, Crimson assumed a casual pace. The few people she passed, including guards, nodded and smiled at a familiar face. As a man of habit and routine, the Count and Countess would be seated for their evening meal. Entering the interior, Crimson paused before a turn, took a deep breath, loosened her sword, and stepped into the hallway.

Halfway down, two guards stood at the dining room's entrance. Both nodded at her approach. She stopped, smiling at one.

"Greetings to you, good sir."

Good evening to you, Lady Crimson." She nodded toward the other guard.

"Is he a friend, do you know him well, is he a good man?" Puzzlement creased the guard's face.

"Yes, Lady Crimson. Yes to all your queries."

Crimson's hand became a blur before it stopped with her unsheathed sword point pressed under the other guard's chin, freezing him in place. Her voice iced over and her eyes became intense focal points. "Then open this door or I assure you your friend's head will be on the ground."

For the briefest moment, the guard paused. He opened the door. Keeping the sword pressed under his chin, Crimson prodded the other inside. The Countess turned her head even as shock covered its face. Count Verlon rose from his seat. "Ryder! What is the meaning of this?"

"Order the guard to leave the room and lock the door or I'll open his neck right here."

Furious eyes ablaze, Verlon assented. When the lock clicked, Crimson screamed at him. "Did you know? Was all your help a setup? Did you pray I would never return?"

"Did I know what?" Verlon yelled back. Crimson's arm rose, sword pointed at the Countess.

"Your wife killed my mother and my grandmother. Jealousy drove her. Did you cover for her?" A slow swivel turned Verlon's head toward his wife. Her voice became indignant.

"Who is this woman? This is utter nonsense."

"Nonsense? Does the name Marlen Dragonrider mean anything to you?" Crimson retrieved a letter from her tunic, tossing it onto the table. She switched focus to the Count. "That is the agreement between the Stone Queen and the Countess. You will recognize her seal. Ask your Bursar to confirm the

withdrawal of 7,000 Crownes from your treasury. To buy what? Unfortunately for your wife, though the sum flatters me, it bought her nothing. Marlen's corpse feeds the carrion birds." Crimson's voice lowered to ice. "Did you know of this?"

Verlon watched the color drain from his wife's face. His head lowered and his eyes closed at the realization of the massive betrayal and lie he had lived with. And yet, the treachery could not deny his love for her. His voice, just above a whisper, spoke of the agony roiling within. "I knew nothing of this."

The moment lengthened, deepening the emotions filling the room. Crimson locked her gaze onto the Countess. "My great-grandmother truly was a victim of happenstance. A terrible but random encounter with a vicious werewolf. When you found yourself a betrayed woman, you used that as a convenient backdrop to disguise your own treachery. You spread lies and rumors about a curse that had descended upon my family. My mother and grandmother died horrible deaths because of your insane jealousy. Even I believed the curse and that it would eventually consume me. It was no curse. Only a tawdry, scorned, vindictive, woman."

Crimson tightened her grip on the sword and stepped toward the terrified Countess. The enclosed room swelled Verlon's clear voice.

"No! I will not have my wife's blood spilled in my home." Again his voice lowered, filled with regret and sorrow. "I love my wife."

His eyes brimmed and gazed into Crimson's. "And I loved your mother. But a man cannot be a slave to two masters. I failed both. It is my weakness and infidelity that started this terrible chain of events." He looked at his wife. His voice hardened. "Innocents died. Neither of them deserved it. Guard!"

The door swung inward. "Escort the Countess to her chambers. Allow her to take only the clothing she can carry. No jewelry. No money. Take her to the province's boundary and see her off. She has family to go to but is permanently exiled from this land." His gaze shifted back to her. "If you ever step foot again in this province, I will have you killed on the spot."

Weak and shaking, she stepped toward the doorway. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed and wept. She turned in the entrance. "I love you, Verlon." He looked away. The door closed behind her. Verlon slumped in his chair. Quiet filled the room.

Crimson walked over to lay a hand on his shoulder. "Forgive my doubt." Verlon's hand gave a dismissive wave.

"Under the circumstances, I would have thought the same. I have lost a lover and a wife. That is my regret and I will have to live with it. And my daughter? What of her?"

"You have not lost me but my destiny lies elsewhere. I am sworn to help the Xiloi, the ones you know as Lycanthropes. We will be your allies. Your friends will be our friends. Your enemies will be our enemies."

He rose to grasp her shoulders. "Will I see you again?"

"Whenever I am needed. And you are always welcome in Xilo." They hugged and let the moment lengthen. "I love you, father."

"I have always loved you, my child." Verlon pulled back. "And always will. That love will see me through the coming days. Now, may I escort you to the gate?" A smile brightened Crimson's face.

"I have a faster way out. But come. Walk with me."

They reached the east parapet where Verlon had a good scare when Lukas rose from below the wall. Verlon smiled at Crimson. "It eases my heart and soothes my soul to know such a powerful friend is by your side." They hugged again. He whispered into her ear. "Good luck. And fare thee well."

Crimson clambered onto Lukas' back. Verlon's eyes widened as he watched them climb down a wall intended to prevent just that. The two raced one another across the expanse, exuberance and joy etched on their faces. They disappeared into the woods and entered an uncertain future. A howl, long, fierce, and defiant rose to the stars.

The End

Maila Dragonrider

in memoriam



Author's Note:

What became of the Xiloi? They have often been laughably mistaken for Abominable Snowmen, Sasquatch, Bigfoot, Yeti. However, though their numbers are small, they continue to thrive in one of the wildest, most remote regions on Earth: the Kunlun Mountains of Western China. How do I know this? Well, that's another story. :-)