

Eirian's Adventures in the Musketeers - The Loup Garou

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The Creative Now

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Chapter One

The largest of the three musketeers drained the last few drops of thick red wine down his throat, belched, scowled, and shook the rough planks as he slammed his tankard to the table. “We deliver the ambassador’s children, and the king deigns reward us with battlefield commissions.”

René Massuet, a slim, blonde musketeer attired to fastidious perfection, shrugged eloquently. He tipped the jug and sloshed wine, refilling his companion’s mug without spilling a drop. His wispy sliver of a mustache twitched as he puffed a philosophical snort, “Life and death are but king’s whims. Be ye of good cheer, for we may once again experience the exhilaration of combat. The world will be done with us soon enough.”

In an age of longhaired well-to-do soldiering nobility, the third musketeer’s strangely silvered locks were cut uncommonly short. His exotic features, particularly his full lips, were so elegant he routinely turned down advances from Frenchmen queer for him. Setting down his mug, he pushed it away with a frown, eyes like twin chips of blue ice as memory overtook. “Better any battlefield than a return to that nightmare city. The smell of gunpowder is a fair rose beside the stink of plague,” he stated in a flat, hard voice. His odd name, Eirian Verch Arwyn, fit his lilting accent, but he was the best swordsman in the kingdom, and his fellow musketeers had long since learned the consequences of testing his too-touchy nature.

A shadowed smile recurved Eirian’s lips as her fellows saluted with their mugs and a chorus of heartfelt, Ayes! Their recent trip to England had been an unholy trial. From the moment they docked in a port every other ship was leaving—until the tide turned and they could flee that hellish place with their precious cargo, all had been madness and mayhem. Two months later, the fading light in the little girl’s dying eyes

yet ruthlessly hollowed the veteran warrior's dreams into bedraggled hours of pacing restlessness.

Eirian, an ages-old angel's daughter, survivor of a thousand fights, fell back to brooding. Her nature did not allow her to abide evil. Over the centuries, she had often played a man's role for the freedom it gave her to employ her blessed blade, Dyrnwyn, on the side of light. Hell's sins demanded retribution, and though she had killed often, she'd inevitably slept like a baby after. One innocent life lost to that same sword had destroyed her equanimity.

She brought her right hand up to her face. It remembered the slight pressure of the hilt as the child's mother, almost dead from the plague, with no warning hint, pressed her pestilent daughter full onto Eirian's extended blade. It was to save the nearly as sick girl from dying alone. The scene replayed with a grinding repetition in her head, and she always saw no other way she could have protected her own charges, mere children themselves. Intellectually, Eirian understood the great love the mother must have had—to give her daughter up to protect her. It didn't help.

Their table had grown uncommonly quiet as her two companions, who'd been with her that day, felt their fellow warrior's anguish. The serving girl, a barely grown wench with a cheery smile, came over to see if they needed more wine. Eirian pushed away. "My cares make for poor company. I am away to try to find a night's rest before the morrow. I will let the stable know to have our horses ready. Meet me there at first light. We ride to Rouen to find this commander, D'Artagnan, whom we are to serve under. I, for one, look forward to seeing if the man merits his legend."

Claude Justel waved his mug, spilling the wine René had so carefully refilled. "It's known that he fought five of Cardinal Richelieu's black suits and killed them all. They say he has fought duels with over a hundred men in his many years as a musketeer."

René sniffed delicately, "And I have heard that as a young soldier, this D'Artagnan was the queen's secret lover."

Eirian snorted, "Believe not every rumor. It is better to discover this man's mettle for ourselves as he will hold our lives in his hands till these commissions expire."

She noticed René's eyes widen. Before she could turn, two powerful arms encircled her chest and pinned her arms, then immediately jerked away. "Mon dieu, you're a gir..!"

The exclamation was cut short as her freed elbow whipped back and up, snapping a man's jaw hard shut. There was a meaty clack, a muffled gack, and the tip of a tongue sailed over her shoulder, splashing into the table's wine pitcher. As her friends rose to their feet with exclamations of disgust, she enshrouded the confused man's brain with a labyrinth of white light—even as her elbow's uppercut tossed him into oblivion.

Eirian spun and watched the bully Pierre D'forge crumple bonelessly to the floor. She smiled grimly and ruthlessly considered whether her attacker would talk with a lisp for the rest of his life. With a bit of luck, he wouldn't remember any of this when he awoke. Pierre had two troublemakers with him. Long-time musketeers who'd never be more than trench fillers. They recoiled wordlessly from Eirian's hard smile, backed away, and were out of there, leaving Pierre to lie.

She stared down at the unconscious man, running through the ramifications. The big bully had been a black coat until they'd been disbanded after Cardinal Mazarin's death. He'd joined the musketeers and quickly acquired a rep as a braggart and a coward. Eirian knew he'd only meant to scare her—and scare her he had. One more word and her life as a musketeer would have been over. She didn't intend to return to Paris, so Pierre was a null factor in her future plans. Lucky for him. She nudged his leg. He was definitely out cold. Good.

Turning back to her companions, smile still thinning her lips, Eirian glanced at the wine jug, "I've worked up another thirst, but this establishment's wine no longer appeals. Shall we adjourn to my rooms by way of the stables?"

Chapter Two

They rode into Rouen late the following day. After brushing off the road dust and caring for their steeds, they relaxed with a simple dinner at Le Élégante Volaille's brasserie. It was a comfortable establishment serving as both a restaurant and brewery. After dinner, they made their way to the newly constructed musketeer's barracks. The concept of shared space was strange to these soldiers, who had ever housed themselves however they could. Still, the two men settled in gratefully, bidding Eirian adieu as their disguised friend pretended distaste of the premises and took herself off to find a hostel.

Cocks were greeting the dawn when they met again. Obtaining directions from the stable master, they rode out to D'Artagnan's country manor. The senior musketeer was on his back porch enjoying biscuits and sipping coffee, a new drink very much in vogue at the king's court. A sturdy figure of medium height, his hair was shot through with grey, but he was battlefield fit. Eirian was most impressed with his eyes. Their greenish-grey oceans encompassed the newcomers—from horizon to heart. She shivered slightly as an emotion she hadn't felt in too many years stole through her, then ruthlessly quashed the feeling as the older man invited the three soldiers to join him for breakfast.

After their repast, D'Artagnan wordlessly regarded his new recruits while he enjoyed the last of his coffee, and a rather stern-looking couple, an older man and woman, came out with a cart to clear the dishes. After they left, D'Artagnan got down to business. "There have been a series of murders in the villages surrounding Roeun. Victims have been badly mauled, even dismembered. These murders occur during nights of the full moon but never in the same village twice. Because of their savagery, people fear they are wild animal attacks. I disagree. I discern an intelligent pattern and believe I know where the next attack will occur."

Eirian regarded her new Captain appreciatively, “The next full moon is two nights from now. I take it we are here because your men have been sent to the front?”

D’Artagnan gave her a broad, white smile. “Yes, indeed. The louts left to me would as soon drink as work. I requested a few of the king’s best, and he sent me you three.” He set his cup down and leaned back, his smile lingering as he mused, “Would that you display the qualities of another three of the king’s musketeers I met once upon an adventure.” He steepled his forefingers and pressed them to his lips, memories swimming, submerged beneath the depths in his gaze. “They were boon companions for equally tricky circumstances.” He stared directly at Eirian, then pulled himself back to the here and now, “But those are tales for another time.”

His quiet smile faded, and Eirian found she missed it as D’Artagnan gave his orders. “Meet me at the stables midday on the morrow and be ready to ride for Rosay-sur-Lieure. It is forested on both sides, and I am hoping these trees will help us surveil and so root out our killer or killers who imitate bears and wolves with impunity.”

A chorus of “Aye, Captain” made him smile again, and Eirian went away wishing she could have heard more of his adventures and basked a bit longer in the fathoms-dappled light of his ocean-filled gaze.

Chapter Three

The four musketeers arrived in Rosay-sur-Lieure as the light was fading, stabled their horses, and were treated to a fine dinner by their captain. Afterward, they made their way into the woods. Eirian stood with D'Artagnan in a cluster of trees skirting the modest hamlet's eastern edge. Claude and René concealed themselves on the opposite side, in the forest proper. While they waited, same as she had done for her friends earlier, Eirian loaded D'Artagnan's pistol with a fresh cartridge.

D'Artagnan whispered, "Quite a feat in the dark."

He thought he glimpsed a glimmer of a smile, but her return whisper was grave. "Captain, have you heard the term loup-garou?"

"Naturellement. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me a tall tale of a loup-garou to keep me from wandering too far from home."

The earnestness of her muttered reply alarmed him, "In this case, it may be more than just a scary story."

D'Artagnan frowned. "What are you telling me?"

A silence ensued while Eirian finished loading his pistol and thought about how to phrase her foreboding in a way this man would take seriously. "You have also heard of sensitives?" She handed the pistol back to D'Artagnan.

"Aye?" His answer was a question.

"I sense evil in these woods. It feels animalistic. If it is the same as what has recently been manifesting on nights of the full moon, it is most apt to be a loup-garou—a werewolf."

D'Artagnan snorted, but his response was thoughtful. "You are a sensitive? Eirian, you are in hiding for a reason. Is that it?"

“If only it were that simple.” Her answer popped out unbidden, but the honest reaction startled her.

His grin was hidden by the night. “Must be it is a fascinating story, but I have a more urgent question. You believe we’re after a werewolf, so you replaced the lead ball in my musket with a silver one?”

“Yes,” she responded simply, wondering where this uber-perceptive man was headed.

“Do you have more?”

Eirian stifled a laugh. It came out as a pleased sigh instead. She dug into a pocket, and turning his hand up, she slid a half dozen silver spheres into his palm. Like a stallion ready to run, his skin was warm enough to heat her thoughts. Eirian pondered her heightened awareness of the man as, with a muttered thanks, he closed his fist around the ammunition.

A set of matching explosions shattered the night’s calm, and a distant voice swore, “Putain de merde!” D’Artagnan and Eirian sprung from their hiding spot simultaneously and sprinted across the sleeping village’s main street—swerving right when they heard someone or something crashing noisily through the trees.

They chased the heavy footfalls into the shadowed forest and perceived an immense shape bulking against the darkness. D’Artagnan’s pistol came up, but Eirian pushed it back down on the run, calling out, “Claude, where is René?”

There was no answer. They stopped before him. Claude stood frozen, staring mutely at the brace of pistols in his hands, moonlight illuminating his grief. “I hit the beast, but it did not slow.” He looked to Eirian and his eyes were wild. “You were right. It was a werewolf, a monster such as I never imagined I would see in this world. It ran between us and took René, but I am sure I hit it. Give me more rounds. I will finish it yet!”

D’Artagnan paused, heard, then leaped ahead. Eirian dribbled silver metal balls into a pocket on Claude’s uniform, patted it, then spun to her right and broke free of the forest. She could follow the light of the human soul buried beneath that bestial exterior—but it was a fast diverging line as the werewolf fled deeper into the woods with his prey. She ran along the perimeter and reentered the tree line at a more direct tangent, flying with light steps over the decomposing detritus, her God light guiding her speeding footfalls. She knew if René was not dead, she was his only chance, and the branches seemed to part before her like the sea before Moses.

Then the creature's cunning, lost between human and beast, heard her approach and chose to fight rather than flee. Eirian stepped into a small moonlit clearing where the werewolf stood—looking like a portrait of a nightmare. She had never seen a loup-garou, and her first thought was the fey magic that created this creature added an unholy amount of mass to its human host. Even in the dark, she could see its too-broad chest bowed beneath massive shoulders and its towering eight-foot height. Claws flexed wickedly in the moonlight and deep vibrations, as of distant thunder, rumbled threat of attack.

The werewolf's baleful red eyes were fixed on her. At its feet was a puddle of darkness that could have been human. She called "René" and heard a groan. *Dieu merci!* she thought. The beast started and placed a heavy, clawed foot possessively on its prey. In a single fluid motion, Eirian pulled her pistol and shot the werewolf in the chest. The creature staggered back a single step, roared, and charged.

Eirian drew her slender sword and prepared to meet the loup-garou. She had never battled such a creature in her long life, and the speed of its rush nearly gutted her—extended talons gouging holes in the stomach of her leather tunic as she jumped wide. Her sword did no more than nick that same arm—the coarse, woven hair covering its body as effective as a suit of armor. The beast gave a roar of mingled fury and frustration, landed on all fours, then twisted into an impossible sideways leap.

Eirian verch Arwyn went to the ground under three hundred pounds of werewolf, and its long jaws reached down to tear out her throat. Her sword, blessedly true in her expert grasp, pierced the magical creature's heart as she fell. The canine jaws drew away, distending as the werewolf threw back its head and howled with pain. Thick ropes of saliva blinded her, and a horrible stench overwhelmed her senses. She'd managed to coil her legs as she fell, staving off the great weight crushing her. Now she heaved blindly, shoving the beast off. It swayed above her—a monstrous incarnation of evil, indomitable, magical savagery—held at bay by the strength of an angel's child.

There was a nearby explosion, and the werewolf jerked as a silver bullet chunked into its back. Eirian swiped her eyes clear with her free arm and spied D'Artagnan at the clearing's edge. Without hesitation, she drove Dyrnwyn through the beast's heart a second time. The werewolf's skull strained toward the full moon, howling red agony—pierced through and through by blessed blade and argent balls. Then Claude's dual matchlocks exploded in unison from the clearing's edge, and another pair of pistol balls thunked into the creature's broad back.

With unholy vitality, the nightmare being jackknifed off Eirian and stood facing them all, spitting blood, growling its uncertainty. Frustration and pain intermingled in one last furious howl, then it turned and loped into the woods. She rolled onto her side and watched wearily as adrenalin drained and one of the most formidable creatures of her experience ran from their fight. Then D'Artagnan was there, holding out a hand, relief evident in his face. Before she could grasp the proffered palm, a harsh voice demanded, "You are surrounded. Lay your weapons down and surrender."

Chapter Four

Eirian accepted D'Artagnan's hand, rose slowly, then hobbled over to check on René. She ignored the twinge in her back, as well as the dozen-plus men stepping out of the woods. Claude had rolled René onto his back and was kneeling helplessly by his side. She laid a hand reassuringly on the big man's shoulder.

Though no healer, she bent and placed her palm above René's chest, feeding her friend with God's light while using her hidden ability to search him for internal injuries. Except for the blood welling sluggishly from claw marks gashed in his tunic, René appeared unmauled. The musketeer coughed weakly, trying to sit up. Eirian pushed him down gently but firmly and turned to the strangers, "I need to clean and bandage his wounds. Can anyone help?"

The leader of what surely must be a bandit gang was of average height, his swarthy features slightly redeemed by a square jaw. He stared into the unyielding demand in her cobalt eyes, then dropped his gaze and shook his head disgustedly. "Henri, go help with her wounded." Henri was a slight and slightly bent middle-aged man. He approached without hesitation and opened his rucksack. Eirian muttered her thanks and surreptitiously checked the lights around her. There were no black auras, none even dark. These were farmers and villagers who had fallen on rough times.

While she helped Henri dress René's wounds, Eirian called out introductions. Then she asked the swarthy man his name. "Jehan," was his gruff reply. The silence stretched until he bristled, "You know my name, and we yours. What you are doing in our forest?"

"What do you know about the loup-garou?" Eirian peered over her shoulder and saw several bandits cross themselves. Yeah, they were well aware of werewolves. Rumors must be circulating like wildfire.

Jehan came over to gaze at the fallen musketeer pensively. “You are saying a werewolf is responsible for his wounds? I suppose the same beast made similar gashes in your tunic?”

Eirian glanced down in surprise. Narrow incisions had been neatly sheared into her leather doublet. She ran a fingertip through one rip and slid it across her stomach. No blood and no pain. Thank God. She stood to face the bandit leader. “I take it you are familiar with the full moon murders.”

It was not a question. Jehan rubbed a palm across his stubbled chin, then nodded.

Eirian pointed, “The fight that brought you here ended when we injured the loup-garou. It fled in that direction. We must finish the beast now or it will kill again.”

“Oui,” Jehan muttered reluctantly.

D’Artagnan stepped close, keeping his voice low. “It is an hour before daybreak. I assume the creature is going to ground?” Eirian nodded as Jehan shrugged. D’Artagnan turned a hooded gaze on the bandit leader. “We are free to resume our hunt?”

Jehan shivered, “I did not recognize the King’s musketeers in the dark. I cannot imagine my men will be willing to hunt a monster, but we will help how we can.”

D’Artagnan shrugged. “We need to move fast. Three of us will be enough.” He gestured toward the now bandaged René. “Can you keep our injured man safe until we return?”

“Mon dieu!” the other man exclaimed, offended, “But, of course.”

Eirian turned to her Captain. “I will retrieve our mounts.”

D’Artagnan nodded. “And I will get what sleep I can.” So saying, he lay himself down on the grass and was snoring gently before Eirian finished updating her friends.

Chapter Five

D'Artagnan awoke to the aroma of brewing coffee. The first tentative rays of dawn were seeping through the forest boughs, and his senses were preternaturally clear as the thrill of the chase heated his blood. He had not felt so alive in years—not since his adventures with his three beloved friends. “All for one,” he murmured under his breath as he sat up and accepted the cup of coffee Eirian proffered.

“Beg pardon?” she inquired politely.

D'Artagnan gave her a long look, then shrugged a dismissive smile, “A tale for another time.”

“I look forward to hearing it.”

D'Artagnan chided, “Be careful what you wish for; it is a multi-flagon tale.”

Eirian grasped D'Artagnan's arm and pulled him to his feet with startling strength and an amused smile, “When this grisly business is done, I shall hold you to that as to a promise.”

She thought D'Artagnan's return grin devilishly handsome. He walked over to tell René they would return for him shortly. Then seeing his two musketeers equally poised for the hunt, he tossed the last of the coffee from his cup, nodded in the direction of the bandits, and set off on the werewolf's path. At first, the blood spatters allowed him to track at a trot, but those ready signs petered out too soon—as if the werewolf were healing as it ran. He slowed, but the track remained steady as a bird's flight. This beast had a destination. He shared his insight, then rotated between trotting and pausing to confirm the trail.

Claude was a steady tramping presence, but D'Artagnan had to periodically glance over his shoulder to ensure Eirian was still with them. The musketeer moved effortlessly through the underbrush, not

even breathing hard. He began to understand how she had managed to fool so many. The sun was high in the sky when they came upon a cottage in a small clearing. There was no track in the shorter grass, but a strangely forbidding atmosphere hung as heavy as a condemned man's chains about the tight shut door and shuttered windows.

From beside him, Eirian asked, "What now?"

D'Artagnan shrugged, "We knock." He strode across the open space and rapped his knuckles against heavy wood planks. Stepping back a pace, he placed his hand on his sword hilt as the door swung inward. A pretty maid, perhaps seventeen, stood framed against the gloomy interior, gazing at him mutely with wide blue eyes.

Eirian stepped around her captain and said, "Hello, young lady. Are you here alone?" The lass shook her head, her blonde hair crashing like waves about her. "Your father is here?" Her thick golden locks bounced and jiggled this time. "May we come in and speak with him?"

Her eyes looked troubled and a tentative, "He's sleeping," finally emerged as a bare whisper.

Eirian frowned, "This is king's business. Please wake him."

The youngster backed away warily, then disappeared into the darkness. The three musketeers followed cautiously and found the teen shaking a heap of skins piled atop a platform in a back corner. She glanced fearfully up at the musketeers and redoubled her efforts. Another tousled head of curly blonde hair popped out of the furry accumulation, and two eyes as blue as the girl's regarded them. It was a boy no older than the lass. He yawned blearily, and Eirian considered the two. They were definitely related. Thinking there must have been a misunderstanding, she asked, "Your brother?"

"Me pappa." She replied, backing away from the young man.

Something was wrong here. Eirian checked and found two simple peasant auras. Restudying the boy, she thought there might be a too faint trace of lurking darkness. The girl started to sniffle, and the lad leapt nimbly from beneath his fur blanket—his concern emotionally sideswiping Eirian's assessment. The boy folded the girl in a quite fatherly embrace, then turned to the musketeers. "What are you doing in my home?" Belying his immature face, his voice was resonant, rich with years.

"Who are you?" D'Artagnan demanded.

The boy didn't reply directly. Instead, he hugged his daughter, whispered in her ear, and headed for the open door, indicating that the musketeers should follow. When they were out of earshot of the cottage, he turned and held his hands out beseechingly. "I am Olivier Heroux. My daughter is innocent and does not know anything, but I remember the pain of your pistols and your swords."

Eirian glanced back. The girl stood in the doorway, one hand over her mouth. "Olivier, I believe she knows more than you think, but why do you voluntarily condemn yourself so?"

The young man shrugged helplessly. "I was mauled by a wolf twenty years past—but I recovered. My life returned to normal until the next full moon when she first sang her siren song. I left my wife in our bed, stepped out our door, and there she was, full and round as a succubus, vivid and fey as a fairy princess. Love for her overwhelmed all reason, and I ran far from the haven of our home—my bones on fire, my flesh melting. I remember falling to my knees in an open glen, bathed in her radiant white heat. My love churned to lust as mistress moon took my humanity and cursed my flesh with an animal immortality.

The change was pain like nothing I had ever experienced. After that, all was as a dream. I remember the sweet savor of the hunt and the triumph of hot flesh filling my jaws. When I came back to myself with morning's light, my wife was shaking me, her dear eyes filled more with concern than fear. I was lying next to our cabin, naked and caked in dried gore. She helped me to the river, and as she washed the blood away, I shared with her what I am now describing to you."

The two male musketeers were spellbound by the young lad's story, told simply and with quiet conviction, but Eirian was moved again to ask, "After fighting so desperately, why are you now submitting to our authority?"

"Please, bear with me but a moment more and all will be made clear." The young man gazed at her, a hopeless question in his rain-shrouded blue eyes, and Eirian mutely shrugged. Olivier studied them all, then sighed. It was such a misery-filled note, it broke her heart, and Eirian had to remind herself that this lad-looking, man-monster was their supernatural serial killer.

"Maybe goddess moon cursed me because I was a trapper of wolves and other animals. There is a cage behind our home large enough to hold two at a time, and my dear wife put me to bed for the day, then locked me in that cage when darkness fell. She said my howling kept her company at night. That's how much she loved me." Tears welled and fell from the aged teen's eyes as he continued in a choked voice.

“My trapping skills allowed us to keep it fed, and eventually, the beast habituated itself to the cage. My wife bore our beautiful daughter Safa, and we enjoyed every precious moment raising her.”

Olivier choked to a stop, his eyes wretched, then he finished his story between clenched teeth. “Last year, the beast broke free of the cage. My wife, brave soul, dared face my werewolf. It carried her into the woods and murdered her.” Olivier turned tear-filled eyes to the sky and shook his fist at the hidden moon. “When I recognized your musketeer’s uniforms and remembered your weapons, I knew you were on my trail. I hoped maybe you could help me end this curse, and I could join her.”

Disgusted, Claude snorted, drew, and put the tip of his sword against Olivier’s breast. “You want us to kill you? Suits me.”

D’Artagnan reached out one gloved hand and pulled Claude’s sword down, making a subtle slicing gesture with his other hand. “She is watching.”

Olivier leaned toward Claude as if yearning for his blade. “Earlier, I whispered that if Safa saw me threatened, she was to run to her betrothed.”

The musketeers turned, and the space where she had stood was empty. A low rumble of thunder rolled across the meadow, and all looked up. Thick grey clouds were stampeding across the clearing’s opening. They listened while the deep sound ran on and on, like the hooves of a skyful of stallions. Eirian murmured. “I have heard this type of thunder once before. A big storm is coming—likely with hail. Possibly even tornadoes.”

D’Artagnan spoke into the silence. “Justice is not as simple as a sword thrust, but we have a decision, and neither darkness nor the approaching storm will abide delay. Opinions?”

Frustrated with his new captain, Claude spat and growled, “This one’s admitted he’s the killer we seek, and the werewolf within him will awaken soon. I say, kill him now while we still can.”

A white light blinded her, and the sharp crack of thunder interrupted what she was about to say. When Eirian could see again, the point of Claude’s blade protruded from Olivier’s back. The man who was a monster looked down at the sword through his heart—a smile touching his lips. Then his eyes slid closed, and he slipped off the sharp steel length, crumpling to the ground. D’Artagnan looked at the big man in amazement. Claude shrugged. “He began to run.”

Another crack of thunder and lightning partially concealed a distant wolf's howl. D'Artagnan gave Eirian a sharp scowl, then took off his hat and stared down at the body, ignoring the wind as it began to echo that forlorn cry a hundred times over. Finally, he commanded, "Claude, pick up the body and carry it back to the cabin."

Claude protested, "It will get my uniform bloody. Let the beasts have the body."

D'Artagnan struck the big man. The musketeer wobbled, then went to one knee. "Be careful. Your next action could condemn you as certainly as you murdered this man."

Claude sputtered his rage and looked to Eirian appealingly, but she knew her friend had stepped over the line. There was both weariness and warning in her headshake. Claude subsided, then hoisted Olivier's corpse over his shoulder as he rose. They all set off for the cabin while the wind whipped about them like a horde of shrieking, circling ghosts.

D'Artagnan pulled an ax from a nearby tree stump and led the way inside. The interior was cozy with the bright embers of a dying fire. Setting the ax down, he fed new kindling into the hearth, then watched in silence as Claude unloaded Olivier's body into a far corner of the room with a grunt. Eirian stood with her arms crossed, hugging herself. She knew what was coming. D'Artagnan glanced at the ax by the hearth, then calmly addressed his musketeers, "We have to stay here tonight and keep watch. If his body begins to change, we have to be ready."

Claude sneered, "Now you're worried about zombie werewolves."

Eirian wondered when and how her friend had taken such a dislike to their captain that he would risk his career and his life to provoke him, but D'Artagnan ignored the big man's words. "You will take first watch." The older musketeer disregarded the bed, wrapping himself in his cloak on the opposite side of the room from the corpse, and settled immediately into sleep.

Claude's expression was sour, but he put the ax near at hand, wrapped himself in his own cloak, and sat against the wall, a few feet from Olivier's body. Eirian took the room's only chair, then stared at her companions while her worries kept circling from Claude to the supernatural corpse, then back to the weirdly ongoing growl of the thunder and the ever-increasing winds.

A strange new sound intruded on Eirian's dreams, and she struggled out of her fitful rest. Claude was sitting statue-still, staring at her strangely. The wind outside was shrieking louder than before, and she

could hear the staccato chattering of the thatch roof as it protested angrily. But what had awakened her was an approaching noise of destruction, a massive cracking and splintering—as though great swaths of forest were being uprooted.

Realization flooded in, and Eirian flopped to the cabin's floor, calling the others to do the same. The urgency in her voice brooked no question, and the two men followed her example. They lay still, barely breathing, listening as a living mountain of wind crushed trees underfoot, moving with the inevitability of an avalanche closer and closer to the tiny cottage.

At the last moment, Claude, who had fought fearlessly on so many battlefields, bellowed like a mad bull and jumped up to run. Even as he stood, the roof flew off the cottage and the big musketeer, flailing and screaming, was sucked up into the blackness of the storm. Olivier's corpse flapping like a loose sail chased after. A moment later, the walls flew apart, and one leg of the chair she'd been sitting in whacked her painfully in the back as it soared past, picking up speed, then breaking into shards as it veered and struck the stone fireplace.

Eirian was willing her light to hold her to the Earth when she heard a violent oath. She glanced up to see D'Artagnan floating into the air. She knew he would pick up speed and be gone in another instant. More reflex than conscious thought, Eirian pushed forward on her stomach and reached for the musketeer's flailing hand. The wind unmoored her, and together they were dragged up into the heart of the twister—Eirian with her arms and legs wrapping around the older man as she shielded them both with her God light.

In the light's reflected glow, D'Artagnan's wide eyes stared at her in utter astonishment. Then all was storm and madness. They were whirled around and around, first above the frenzied branches, then high into the sky. Caught in a massive vortex of wind, nausea clenched her stomach as up and down madly switched places, and an endless army of broken splinters assaulted her tiny bubble of bound light.

It might have been minutes or mere moments before the disgusted tornado hurled them to the side and tramped on its destructive way. Her light shield bounced them off a massive tree trunk, and they slid down through canopy after canopy of dancing boughs. Perfectly protected, they crashed to the forest floor before Eirian, exhausted, finally let her God light dissipate. She fell back, and the two soldiers lay side by side. D'Artagnan whistled, "That was the wildest ride."

Not sure how her captain would react to her supernatural abilities, Eirian breathed a relieved laugh and murmured, "In all my long life, I've never."

Her words trailed off, and she waited on the inevitable question. D'Artagnan sat up suddenly and stared down at her with solemn eyes. "What are you?"

Eirian replied simply, "I am human on my mother's side. My father was an angel."

"And a woman. You forgot to say you are a woman."

She quirked a sad, small grin that encompassed lifetimes of veiled intentions. "What gave me away?"

D'Artagnan returned a smile the older Nephilim thought she could too easily fall in love with. "Oh, I've known from the first time we met. Your eyes gave you away. Then not your sweat...shall we say your scent. Finally, a woman, not a man, walked away from my breakfast table. I would say, rather—I cannot comprehend how you've been able to fool so many for so long."

She let go an exasperated sigh. "Not all men are as perceptive as you, dear captain."

It was D'Artagnan's turn to snort, "Fools." He paused, then, without looking away, said in wonder, "You must be an angel. You saved my life."

"Our lives," Eirian corrected as she stood, brushed off her pants, then put out a hand to help D'Artagnan to his feet. The storm was a dwindling violence—the forest around them still and silent. The air grew heavy, and Eirian's voice sounded too loud to her sensitive ears. "I do not believe the storm is done with us."

As if on cue, there was a lightning strike nearby, and hail began to fall—sporadically at first, then in a storm of pebble-sized pellets. D'Artagnan, by some odd miracle, still wore his broad cavalier's hat. He pushed Eirian flat against the massive tree trunk and swept his cape over her head. She crouched, her face level with his chest, and she could swear his beating heart was an audible thump vibrating the sliver of space between them. Her heartbeat sounded even louder—D'Artagnan's musky maleness powering the pulse of her blood. The hail formed a background rhythm from within the cloth folds, and she lost herself to a drumming heat she had not felt for far too many years.

As the brief hailstorm slowed to a stop, she raised her face to his, and the emotions she saw heating his oceanic eyes parted her lips with anticipation. D'Artagnan didn't hesitate. Their kiss held a long, lingering progression that led inevitably from the first song into the ever sweeter, most satisfying rhythms of the next.

Chapter Six

Claude came to jammed between three intertwining branches of a forest giant. In the storm's aftermath, lit by the full moon, broken limbs and leaves made their way into shadowed distances. Hurting all over, but with nothing broken, the big musketeer considered himself blessed and lay quiet for a space, simply glad to be alive. He recalled the helpless feeling of being swept into the air—amid the debris, the monster's corpse flapping disjointedly past like a broken-winged bird.

He spat to one side as that made him consider his captain's unholy stance and the subsequent blow that had brought him to his knees. He'd been insulted in front of his friend, and he seethed with silent curses until his anger made him wonder if Eirian was still alive. He filled with dread as he realized he had to get out of the tree. Warily he wriggled onto his stomach for a better look below—and felt himself sliding off his rain-soaked perch. He scabbled madly, but slick limbs eluded his hold, and he fell. Disorientation and pain from breaking branches made him cry out. They also slowed his fall, and he landed hard but unhurt.

His sword, hat, and cape were gone, and there were rips in both his shirt and breeches. His hair hung heavy over his face, and he was parched with thirst. The dark was denser and much more worrisome at the tree's base. He struggled to his feet with an oath and stumbled off into the forested night. He hadn't gone far when, from behind, an angry howl staggered him into a run. He fell, and the hungry hunting note sounded again, much closer. He arose with a sob, spurred into terror by visions of a werewolf returned to life, but only a few yards on, the forest floor tripped him once more.

Still on his knees, a furious weight struck him, its hot breath caressing his cheek like the kiss of death as fangs latched onto the neck of his leather doublet. With a strength born of desperation, Claude flipped onto his back. There was a startled yelp, then he was running again, adrenaline pouring speed into his flight. He made it through an opening in the trees, and a peaceful glade with a gurgling stream

appeared in the moonlight. Spying a heavy, splintered branch, he grabbed it up and turned to face his attacker.

His breath caught as a different werewolf, smaller than Olivier, stepped into the open air, the full moon shining golden on its coat. Even though it was magically enhanced, Claude stood a foot taller and four stone heavier than the loupe-garou. The musketeer reasoned it must have been a very slight person before the change. He considered its blonde pelt and asked, "Safa?"

The werewolf growled and began to circle him. His makeshift weapon ready, the man kept his face to the beast and felt his confidence trickle back. He grinned as he goaded the daughter's were-shape. "Safa, it was I who killed your father. I ran my blade through his heart." He spat, never taking his eyes off the stalking predator. "I say, good riddance! You are all demonic spawn, all affronts to God. I will be twice blessed when I pull your heart out and eat it. If you go back to being a pretty little lass after you die, maybe I'll make love to your corpse."

The werewolf's scream was all beast, and it launched itself at the musketeer in pure rage. Claude swung the branch with all his might, and it shattered against the elongated skull. The creature curled into a ball, rolling to a limp stop a dozen yards away. Claude went to the stream, waded in, and found a rounded rock that suited him. He turned, but Safa crashed into him, and staggering, he fell facedown in the shallow water. He sat up, sputtering as the werewolf backed up and then launched itself at his throat.

Savagely, Claude raised the rock and pounded it into the werewolf's snout inches from his neck. The magical beast tore the buttons off his jerkin with one flailing claw swipe as it fell away, and he followed, one hand wrapped around its throat, the other still holding the rock. Ruthlessly the big musketeer hammered Safa's golden fur to a bloody mess. He beat her head to a pulp, only stopping when her body quit jerking.

Claude sat in the stream, staring at the werewolf's corpse as the moonlight glimmered on random yellow-blond patches that gradually transformed into a teenage girl's nude form. The moving water spread her fingers, and he had the momentary impression Safa was waving goodbye. He shivered, then dropped his rock and stood. Before he could leave the stream, a figure on the bank arrested his attention. Olivier's werewolf stood there, his baleful yellow eyes as accusing as Hamlet's ghost. Claude heard the growl start low in the unholy creature's throat, and he cursed the world and everything in it to Hell as he bent to pick up the weapon he'd just used on the damned beast's daughter.

He never had a chance.

Chapter Seven

Their interlude was short but intense. Eirian thought surviving the tornado's disasters might have been responsible for the unexpected power of her passion. Still, the man's charisma was undeniable and his lovemaking fierce, just as she liked. She donned her uniform, absently wishing for the freedom of a dress, then giggled at her own incautiousness. They had a pleasant rambling discussion as they backtracked the storm's path guided by the bright moon, searching for Olivier's body and their own missing musketeer. D'Artagnan finally admitted that having to "think like a man" was a far more strenuous task than he'd imagined.

In the near distance, an inhuman scream broke into their conversation—spitting rage and pain. The two musketeers exchanged glances and ran toward the sound. They were close when a forlorn howl began rolling through the forest. They came to a clearing and stopped in their tracks. Like an eerie spotlight on a dark stage, the full moon illuminated a tragic scene. Olivier's werewolf was kneeling in front of this daughter's mutilated body. As though in witness, Claude's skull lay next to him, staring with empty eyes. Eirian searched but could not see the musketeer's body.

D'Artagnan touched her arm, and they stepped back into the trees to hold a whispered conversation. "I don't know what happened to his daughter, but that werewolf should have been dead a dozen times over. We only have one sword, none of our pistols, nor even your magic silver bullets."

Eirian gave her captain a glimmer of a smile. "Well, as to that." Lifting its loop over her head, she gently laid her blade on the ground and untied a leather pouch firmly affixed to the stiff leather of the scabbard. Unrolling it, she extracted four knives whose blades flashed pale silver in the wan light. She handed two of them to D'Artagnan, then put another in her belt and stood, sword in one hand, knife in the other.

D'Artagnan gazed at her with undisguised admiration. Eirian was glad he couldn't see her blush as she hastened to explain, "I found these silver bladed table knives while waiting on the smith to finish my ammunition. Likely from some noble's table, they were hefty enough to prove potentially helpful in a supernatural fight, so I bought them."

"Helpful indeed!" D'Artagnan whispered with enthusiasm. He considered, then told her, "Keep the beast busy, and I will put them to good use."

"Be careful," Was all the Nephilim warrior could think to say.

The moon highlighted D'Artagnan's raised eyebrow. "And you as well. After all, we are taking on a nigh immortal magical monster with table knives."

Eirian grinned broadly, her blood rising to meet her captain's evident eagerness for battle. They stalked out of the woods together, then separated as they neared the grieving werewolf. When it finally noticed them, Eirian thought she spied a faint tinge of blue at the back of the beast's yellow eyes. She checked—an equally pale hint of sunlight was hanging over the eastern edge of the treeline. The werewolf stood, corded forearms straining, palms out, to show them Safa's corpse. The dents in her deformed skull were hideous, and Eirian glanced at Claude's head. Olivier rose from the monster's id long enough to nod bereaved confirmation, then with a deep, dreadful scream, the loup-garou charged.

Its rush was inevitable—an engine of doom. It came directly for Eirian, but the musketeer was a Nephilim warrior, an angel's child who'd perfected her blade's art over long centuries. Dancing away from its reaching claws, Eirian's silver knife slashed the beast's neck. Blood sprayed as the werewolf dropped to all fours and shook itself. D'Artagnan ran and threw himself on the monster's broad back, stabbing his silver blade into one wide shoulder.

The werewolf unexpectedly flipped over, and as the monster's great weight landed atop him, D'Artagnan's breath left his lungs. The loup-garou twisted, claws ripping leather, and he felt their burn as he desperately tried to get air back into his lungs while stabbing blindly upward with his other blade. The beast's weight suddenly disappeared, and he rolled onto his side, gasping for breath. He saw Eirian locked in a deadly embrace, one forearm holding off the gnashing fangs while her other kept jabbing the silver knife into the werewolf's chest. Enraged by his helplessness, unable to draw enough breath, D'Artagnan made a herculean effort to rise.

He'd made it as far as his knees when the monster toppled backward, Eirian still held in its grasp. Straining, D'Artagnan threw back his head and was finally able to drag in a blessed lungful of air. He lurched to his feet and staggered to Eirian's side. He pulled her off the werewolf with a single heave and set her on her feet. They both stood looking down at the loup-garou. As the first rays of the sun streamed over the treetops, the beast convulsed, diminished, and became a man.

Olivier lay there staring up at them. Eirian's silver knife was buried in his heart, D'Artagnan's blind blade beside it. Weakly turning his head, Olivier found his dead daughter, and a bloody sigh bubbled from his chest. He tried to speak. Both musketeers kneeled, straining to hear. In a dwindling voice, he said, "Your soldier severely damaged her brain. I cannot say how she became a werewolf; maybe it was her tainted blood. No matter, she will not return to this world."

He coughed blood and lay still, eyes closed. Eirian put a hand on his chest, trying to comfort him with her light and his eyes suddenly popped open again. "Safa has shown me how to join her and her mother." He grimaced as pain washed over him. He spoke once more, words faint but unmistakable. "Cut off my head." His warm blue eyes turned distant and cold. Death, with cunning speed, reached into his flesh and fled, his soul in tow.

A last rattling breath escaped the lungs, and Olivier, who had been cursed as a beast twenty years before, was finally at peace. Eirian was determined he would remain that way. She drew her knife from his still chest and began sawing. After a bit, D'Artagnan drew her hand away and continued sawing the dead man's head off with his own knife. Eirian went to the stream to wash away Olivier's blood and found Claude's body. She dragged it from the water and some ways from the bank. Averting her eyes, she picked the head up by its long hair and lay it down next to the body.

She walked over to study the dead girl, and was still standing there when D'Artagnan rejoined her. Solemnly, she said, "Sorry to put you through that. I don't know if he was correct, but he made sense, and it was his last wish."

Her captain stood with her and stared silently down at the dead girl for a long time before he reluctantly asked, "Do we have to do the same to her?"

Eirian started, thought about it, then decided, "I don't believe so. If we abide by his logic and his wishes, he was sure she was gone." She looked at her blood bespattered companion. "Why don't you clean up. I will find wood for a fire and sharp sticks to dig the graves. We stand

watch tonight, and if this drama truly is done, we bury the bodies in the morning.” She added, remembering he was the captain, “If that is good by you.”

D’Artagnan laughed—deep and rich.

It was the first one she had heard from him, and her heart warmed—just a bit.

Chapter Eight

Two days later, a troupeau of a dozen deer invaded the once again peaceful glade to drink from the stream. Fawns chased each other while the senior females kept alert. Their heads raised in unison, and the fawns froze as a scrabbling arose from the littlest grave. A slim hand broke the surface, then dirt-encrusted blonde curls, and finally, a naked teenage girl emerged from the ground gasping for breath. It was too much for the herd, and they bolted for the woods. Safa crawled to and into the stream. She drank deeply, then lay on her back, basking in the refreshing coolness of the meandering stream as much as the sun's heat.

After a long, long while, she began methodically scrubbing away the dried blood. When she was satisfied, she emerged from the stream. Their scents hung over their graves, and Safa prayed before one, then spit on the other before she headed off into the woods—in search of, in no particular order, clothes, sustenance, and human beings.

Renee stopped by to visit D'Artagnan a few years later. He was well entertained by the captain and Anaïs, his surreally beautiful mistress. She had long red hair, dancing blue eyes, and was such a refined and elegant lady that he never did figure out she was simply Eirian undisguised.

The End