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# Eternal Magic

*by Clara Verone*

A Vampire  
Bites Novella

# *Eternal Magic*

***Clara Verone***



***RuneStone Publishing***

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## Chapter 1

Sunrise. If there was anything Gaven MacDade desired, it was to see the sunrise once more. In all these years he'd never forgotten the wavering tendrils of red and orange wiping away the blue of night. He snapped open his eyes. That was not to be. Gaven had lost his sunrise over two thousand years ago.

The dull groan of his casket lid being pushed aside vibrated through the dank cell. He shot through the air in a fine white mist. The roar of bloodlust pounded through his veins, making him ravenous to feed, to quell the incessant beast within. But the monster inside grew weak, for his kind lived and died under a curse. Gaven was of the Rayven clan, and in six months time he'd turn to dust and be no more.

\* \* \*

He crouched low on the balustrade, keeping to the shadows of the night, watching the mortals below. No longer as peers, but as prey. The sickle shaped moon hung low, draping New Orleans in a silvery glow. Even at this time of night mortals cavorted; it was so easy, too easy to pick them off.

He extended his canines. Eternal life was now his eternal torment, each day blending into the next, promising nothing but mediocrity. A vampire's life of leisure and merriment ceased to exist after the first thousand years or so. And yet, to have the option taken away from him--whether to live or to die--was something he could not accept.

Why he couldn't or wouldn't let this damned life go, he had no answer. But he had never been known to follow the rules of conventional society. An immortal his age should beg to leave this hell on Earth, and had he been given the choice, he'd have done so. But now, now he meant to fight.

Gaven closed his eyes and inhaled the wind, picking up the sweet scent of lavender and rosehips. He licked his lips, touching the points of his canines, imagining them piercing through tender flesh and drinking of the precious blood within. Excitement coursed through his body, making goose flesh skitter along his arms. He snapped open his eyes and watched her.

She was no different than any other and his excitement stemmed not from the woman, but from the ambrosia flowing through her, the sweet nectar of blood. Gaven's lips curled into a crescent shaped

smile, his body demanding to be fed. A familiar shiver of awareness rushed through his limbs. He spread his arms and dropped from the twenty-foot roof to the sidewalk, alerting none to his presence.

College students, tourists, and locals shouted and swayed through the streets. Barflies living up the New Orleans night, hopped from one pub to the next, glasses half full of spirits sloshed over the rims in their drunken stupor. Red and blue neon lights blinked through storefront windows. One read: *Ms. Lily Boudreaux. Voodoo Priestess of the Black Moon lounge.*

He never broke stride; his gaze never wavering from the pale blond studying her fire engine red nails under a lamppost. In two heartbeats, he was by her side. Her blue eyes widened and she gasped. Her fair skin warmed with the heat of a blush that rose up her neck and settled in her cheeks.

“Och, sweet girl,” he crooned, his finger slid along her tempting neck. The pulse underneath pounded furiously. Gaven gazed deep into her eyes, putting her in a semi-trance, making her aware of everything and nothing all at once. Tomorrow she’d have no recollection, but tonight he’d make sure to bring her to Nirvana. In this, Gaven still retained some of his more human emotions. He never wanted to bring pain to a feeding, only an awareness of bliss.

Her lips parted, and a soft, graceful smile tilted the corner of her mouth. She was ready. He closed his eyes as her intoxicating essence surrounded him. These were the moments he lived for, breathed for. This and only this, the only times he still felt...human.

\* \* \*

The feeding complete, his body hummed with life, with passion and with a need to find the talisman that would save his wretched existence. But where to start? The talisman was now reconciled to lore within his clan, his kind accepting without question that they--unlike other vampires--were fated to turn to dust upon their three-thousandth year. Gaven had read tome after tome, seeking information on the legendary Felis Concolor, with no luck.

He ground his jaw and cracked his fingers, a deep fire of need burning in his gut. With only six months left to live, he couldn’t afford to dawdle. The only place to start would be within the vampire clubs. Surely someone could show him, or point him in the right direction.

He shifted into a streak of mist and flew through the night, the land rumbling as he passed. People gasped as the chill of his touch settled upon them.

\* \* \*

His eyes adjusted instantly to the darkened room as he walked through, searching for a familiar face. Crossbones hung from the walls, chains and maces from the rafters. Candelabras lined the walls, the flickering flames of their candles adding to the mystique of the Howling Winds Club. The appeal of the medieval setting was not lost on mortals, and they arrived night after night in droves, fodder for the rapacious hunger of vampires and other nefarious sorts.

But for Gaven this place reminded him painfully of home. Not of his dank cell under Tree Stone Mansion that he now called home, but of the craggy cliffs of Scotland.

Strobe lights and music pulsed with the beat of pounding feet. A witch walked over to him, a serving tray in her hand. “Have you need of anything, Vamp?” She lifted a penciled eyebrow and popped a piece of bubblegum.

“Nay,” he shook his head.

“Fine then,” she shrugged. “Club’s crowded tonight, werewolves rented the place out for a party.”

He nodded, accepting the information. If the wolves were crawling all over the place then chances were he’d find few vampires about. Wolves and Vamps were known not to agree on many things.

As he turned to leave, he spotted a face crouched over a mug of blood. Gaven smelled the air and grinned. The blond-haired man was a vampire. A Lysandra to be exact, and someone he’d called friend many eons ago.

He marched over and cleared his throat.

“Damiano Arcangelo.” His thick burr became more pronounced. “What the devil are ye doin’ here, man?”

Damiano lifted his head, his silver eyes studying him. They were cold, ruthless, the eyes of a killer. His features were pinched and devoid of emotion. The normally jovial Italian was nowhere to be found. This Damiano was changed, more hardened, more cruel.

“Tracking,” Damiano said and took a sip from his mug, his silver eyes glancing over Gaven’s shoulders.

He sat and studied the object of Damiano’s interest. A woman, dressed in black leather, her nut-brown hair falling in waves down her back, shimmied on the dance floor.

“She’s a Semere, Damiano,” Gaven said. “Ye should strike her dead rather than look at her with lust in yer eyes.”

Damiano hissed. “And you’re Rayven, I’m Lysandra. What the goddamn difference does it make? I shouldn’t even be seen in your presence. Neither of our clans get along, why should hers be any different?”

Gaven clenched his jaw, his fingers twitched by his side.

“Besides, she has no affiliations with the Semere.”

“How do you know? She could be a Semere spy, infiltrating the Lysandra clan...”

"I just do," Damiano said in a broken whisper; he cleared his throat. "And don't call me Damiano. I'm Damien now. Damiano died a long time ago." His voice was a harsh whisper, then he turned and pinned him with a silver-eyed glare. "Open your senses, Gaven. I'm part Semere myself."

He had killed men for far less, but for the memory of their past friendship he stilled his fury. "What's happened to ye?" he finally asked.

Damien shrugged and took another sip from his mug. "I have neither the time nor the patience to retell this story." His Italian accent became thick with anger. "Suffice it to say Athena, the bitch goddess, has ruined my life. I live to follow Mercedes." He inclined his head toward the dancing Semere.

He clenched his jaw until it ached, spirals of numbing pain flared through his body with the force of a freight train. A sense of vertigo engulfed him and beads of sweat popped out along his brow. His heart stuttered in his chest. He clenched his fists until the stabbing needle sensation subsided.

"You're dying?" Damien asked without preamble. A look of a remembered friendship flitted across his face so quickly, Gaven wasn't even sure he'd actually seen it.

He shoved a trembling hand through his hair. He hated this weakness, this pain. "Aye."

"Have you found the Felis?" Damien scratched his head, his gaze followed Mercedes around the dance floor.

He sat up straight. "What do you know of the Felis?"

Damien turned liquid silver eyes to him. "I've seen it."

"You've seen the talisman?" Gaven feared to hope, feared to believe. Legend and rumors were all the talisman had ever been. Could it be possible? His body trembled at the thought.

"Yes."

"How?"

"Mercedes's life is in great peril. We can never stay in any one place for too long. I travel."

"Where? Where is it?"

"It exists in the deep jungles of Central America." Damien stood and set the mug upon the table.

"What else do you know?" Gaven shifted.

Damien started to walk away. "You can't find it. It will find you," he called over his shoulder.

"What the hell?" he ground out, and shot to his feet, watching Damien walk away without a backwards glance.

"Sonofabitch." His voice was laced with sarcasm. "Where in the hell in Central America am I supposed to go?"

\* \* \*

Apollonia Iolana ran; her face and cheeks scratched by the thick jungle leaves, the shouts of farmers and militia a resounding call behind her.

“Bruja! Bruja!” they yelled, the pounding of their feet traveling up the soles of her shoes.

They called her a witch, said all sorts of evil followed in her wake. She knew it was not true, she was different, but not a witch. She could kill them all, but it was more of a hassle than anything, and she’d rather not bring that type of notoriety upon herself.

*Dammit all to hell, why did I have to go and steal that chicken?*

Apollonia ran around the thick trunk of a tree and peeked out. The band of twelve ran with pitchforks and machetes held high; their bronzed skin gleamed burnished gold in the moonlight. She shimmied up the tree with an expert grace. She neither panted nor broke a sweat. Used, as she was, to the extreme exertion the jungle demanded of its inhabitants.

She raced from limb to limb, the cries of the men faded in the distance. Finally assured that she was safe, she threw herself upon a particularly thick branch and sighed. She really needed to stop stealing chickens.

Apollonia lay on her back, her arms crossed behind her head and gazed at the sea of stars bejeweling the night sky. The jungle was rife with the sounds of mating frogs and snoring monkeys. Then a sound unfamiliar to the jungle snagged her attention, and she listened intently. She lifted her nose in the air, attempting to detect the malevolent odor of the Red Eyes, the creatures responsible for the decimation of her kind.

The hairs on her arm stood on edge; cold chills swept down her spine. They’d been hunting her for days now, and it seemed no matter what she did, she couldn’t kick them off her scent.

The breeze carried no stench of death and rot; instead it smelled of danger and lust, dark nights and power. Incredible power. This thing was similar to the Red Eyes, whatever it was, and yet different at the same time. It didn’t pound the land like a giant oaf; its footfalls were gentle, barely rippling the underbrush. She bit her lip, her fear turning to curiosity. And it flowed through her. Curiosity rarely got the best of her, but when it did, she was helpless to resist the tug.

She pushed back a tree leaf and stared through the thick gloom. The jungle exploded with a rainbow of vibrancy, from the deep emerald green of the earthen floor, to the bright fuchsia of orchids. Apollonia narrowed her eyes and squared her shoulders. No matter who or what this creature was, she meant to defend her territory.

\* \* \*

This had to be it. After searching for three months, in heavy rain, withering heat, and mosquito-infested jungles, Gaven was about ready to give up. Central America was a mere speck of land on the



globe, but to have no idea where to start made the search seem futile. He'd already traversed four of the seven countries that made up the continent.

He ground his jaw and swiped at a tree branch; admitting defeat had never been something he'd done easily. And it infuriated him to even admit so.

A wracking cough traveled through his lungs, making him weak and dizzy with fatigue. He inhaled sharply as a firework of pain seared through his body, piercing his heart with the heat of a red-hot poker. Gaven lay his head against the trunk of a banana tree; beads of blood seeped from his forehead, a crimson streak slid down the tree's base.

*Shit! Shit! Shit!* He clenched his fists and pushed away from the tree angrily. No matter how much he wanted to deny the truth, the curse wouldn't let him. He was dying and still no closer to finding the legendary Felis.

The humid air stank of predator and prey; of rotted vegetation and ripe fruits. The jungle rippled with life and power; a harsh and ruthless Mother demanding much of her inhabitants and giving much in return.

He stopped, his gaze searching through the dense shrub. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on edge; a current of electricity sizzled through his veins. The musk of a stalking predator rode the winds. His canines lengthened, ripping through his gums, the flash of pain something he automatically ignored. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his surroundings, listening for any sign of danger.

Gaven heard the scamper of mice underfoot, the squeal of flying fruit bats and the soft hiss of a dormant constrictor wrapped around a spindly tree limb. And yet he knew it was there, a large beast watching him, waiting. A twig snapped; he turned on his heels and shifted to mist seconds before a panther dropped on him.

The panther shrieked, its enormous canines gleaming like polished ivory in the moonlight. It lifted a black paw and swiped it through the air. Gaven shifted form, never breaking eye contact with the predator, his heart a steady thump in his chest. The last thing he wanted to do was kill such an extraordinary creature.

Its coat glistened like a black pearl in varying shades of gray and black. Its multi-colored eyes, one green and one blue, studied him warily. But the most arresting feature of all was the streak of white covering one ear.

The panther lifted its head in the air, reminding him of an overgrown housecat, and sniffed, then it threw its head back and arched its body. A golden light shimmered and surrounded the panther. The gold shifted to tendrils of fire, licking at the panther's coat.

Gaven stepped forward, his eyes widening then narrowing.

Out of the flames stepped a vision of perfection. Moonlight bathed her tanned, nude body in a silver glow, reminding him of warmed honey. Her breasts were high, round and perfectly shaped globes, the rosy-peaked nipples hardened nubs. Crimson stained lips and flowing ebony hair had Gaven sucking in a breath. Multi-colored eyes stared out at him, one green and one blue, both glittering as precious jewels. Amidst the black crown of hair was a streak of white.

The woman could rival the beauty of a goddess. Emotions long dead, rose to the surface, making him all too aware of her exotic scent, her perfectly shaped limbs and the sweet aroma of nectar flowing through her veins. His heart pounded in his chest, not from bloodlust, but from primal, animalistic desire. He clenched his jaw and curled his fingers.

She lifted a raven's wing brow, her mouth set in a straight line.

"What are you doing in my jungle?" Her voice was sultry, slithering down his spine. Images came unbidden to him, of dark nights and erotic dreams.

\* \* \*

Apollonia's gaze froze on the long, lean form. The muscles rippling under his white shirt quickened her pulse. His aquiline nose, tapered into firm, sensual lips, a square cut jaw and high cheekbones. Brooding blue eyes, nearly the color of deep violet, studied her. The only flaw marring the classic beauty of his face was a scar running the length of his cheek. Liquid heat crashed between her thighs, and she suppressed a groan of fierce need and lust. A stiff breeze blew and lifted his thick crop of golden hair like a crest. This man was dangerous to her senses.

He narrowed his eyes and took a step forward; the air around them sizzled with tension.

"You'd be wise to keep your distance," Apollonia said in a husky, broken whisper.

The stranger chuckled, though the laughter never reached his eyes. "What's a shifter doing in the deep jungle?" he asked with a sneer, as if the idea were absurd and distasteful.

His tone aroused and infuriated her. "That's none of your damn business, Vampire," she countered icily.

He lifted a brow, a challenging smile curling his lips. "Then I guess my reasons for being here are the same."

She licked her lips, the blood boiling in her veins, making her tingle, both from excitement and fury. "Get out of my jungle," she said through clenched teeth, and planted her hands on her hips.

"No," he said and licked his elongated canines. His gaze raked boldly over her.

Apollonia shivered, the heat of his stare filling her with longing. A tingle began in the pit of her stomach and traveled through her body with the force of a roaring river, cresting in wave after wave of sexual want and desire. He radiated a vitality that drew her like a magnet and made her want to know more, learn more about this man. And she hated him for it.

He smirked, his eyes meeting hers. “No,” he whispered again softly.

She curled her lips. *That arrogant beast.* Her fingers twitched as raw fury burned through her gut. “You’ll leave. Even if I have to rip your eyes out with my claws and feed them to the birds.”

The stranger threw his head back, a great belly laugh erupting from his lips, the sound vibrated straight to her heart.

*That’s it!* If there was one thing she couldn’t stand, it was being laughed at; she’d see him suffer for his brazenness. Apollonia shifted form. The fires of her ancestors fell on her, popping her bone and tendon, reforming into the limbs of a fierce jungle predator. Whiskers ripped through her muzzle, talons cut through her paws, and she pounced on him.

“Oomph,” he ground out, seconds before he fell to the ground.

His lips curled into a smile, and he grabbed her paws in his hands. “If it’s a fight ye be wanting, lass, then it’s a fight ye’ll get.” Those spectacular blue eyes blazed with excitement and passion.

She roared and kicked her hind leg out, but he was too quick and shifted before her talons could rip through his blue-jeaned thigh. He grabbed her by the ears, pinning her head to the ground and straddled her body.

“Now shift,” he whispered.

Apollonia struggled to get out from under him, but his power was absolute. She snapped her jaws, hoping to rip the flesh from his arms, but she couldn’t even reach him. Panting, she called down her spirits and shifted to human form once more.

“Beautiful,” he said, then his brows rose in startled shock. “Yer eyes?”

“Does it disgust you?” She wanted to kick herself as soon as the words were out. Why did she even care?

“That yer irises are shaped like a cat’s? Nay, lass, they are verra, verra beautiful,” he drawled in a low, gravelly voice.

Suddenly all too aware that this man was now straddling her naked thighs, Apollonia bucked against him, hoping to push him off. She heaved for air, wanting to slap the stupid smile from his lips, but he kept her arms trapped under the weight of his own.

“Do ye always run around in the nude?” His finger traced the lines of her palm; she closed her eyes as her heart flopped in his chest.

“Get the fuc...”

He laid a finger against her lips. “Such foul language for one as beautiful as ye.”

She lay still under him, no longer fighting, only feeling. His warm breath fluttered against her neck, the pounding of his heart beating a steady rhythm against her breasts.

“Damn you.” She pushed him off and shot to her feet.

“Donna worry, hen. I already am.” He stood and brushed his hands down the front of his shirt.

Apollonia turned, intending to leave, when the soft sounds of whispers caught her attention. She lifted her nose in the air and searched for a scent.

Evil.

Death.

Blood.

Her spine stiffened as the hairs on her arm rose. A curling tendril of fear twisted around her heart, choking the air from her lungs.

The Red Eyes.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

“Aye, lass, I smell them too.” His voice was low, lethal, and dangerous. The stranger’s presence was suddenly comforting, a peaceful balm to the real dangers of the night.

“They’re after me,” she said.

“You?” He laid a hand on her shoulder and turned her around, his brows knit together.

“Yes.” She shook her head, the fear becoming a growing monster inside her, threatening to consume her sanity. Apollonia licked her lips. “Follow me.”

She turned and fled, racing through the jungle. The footfalls of the stranger steady behind her.

\* \* \*

Gaven chased the exotic lass through the jungle, entranced by the sway of her hips and flexing backside. He wondered why two Semere assassins were hot on her trail.

After running nonstop for over an hour, she finally stopped by a river. Her body glistened like liquid gold.

She dropped to her knees, her obsidian hair clinging to her forehead and shoulders, and scooped her hands into the clear water.

Gaven leaned against the trunk of a tree as a dizzying sense of vertigo encompassed him. He needed to feed, desperately, but aside from the woman, there were none to feed on. All that met him was endless miles of thick, green jungle. He couldn’t understand why, but he didn’t want to use her in that fashion. Ever.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Ice spread through his gut, clenching and twisting it in knots.

“What’s wrong?” her gentle, soft voice asked. Her eyes sparkled with concern.

“I need to feed,” he hissed. The curse made him more ill than he normally would have been.

A fruit bat wheeled close to his head, and before she could blink, Gaven shot his hand out and brought the quivering, shrieking creature to his lips.

“No.” She pushed his hand aside and forced him to release the bat. “Some of these bats carry disease. I’m not sure if that would affect a vampire, but it makes me sick. Drink from me.”

Gaven’s heart nearly stopped beating, and his eyes widened. Had she really said that?

The beauty gazed at him, gave a slight nod, and tilted her head back, exposing the beating pulse in her neck.

“Och, honey, are ye sure?” He lifted a hand, traced her jaw.

She shivered in his arms and leaned into him. “Yes. But before we do, what’s your name, Vampire?” she asked in a low murmur.

“Gaven MacDade. And yours, lass?”

She blinked those huge cat eyes at him. “Apollonia Iolana.”

“Apollonia,” he rolled the name off his tongue. “Why are ye helping me?”

She searched his face and bit her lip. “I don’t know. Only that I must.”

Gaven groaned, the temptation of her intoxicating beauty and open surrender was more than he could withstand. Blood rushed to his cock, making him quiver with need.

He lengthened his canines and scraped them along the smooth lines of her bronzed neck. She moaned. He could smell the adrenaline spiking through her veins. Then he pierced her.

She gave a tiny shudder, and he was lost in her essence, in her taste, in her. Apollonia tasted of sweet dew, rolling hills and sunshine. Sunshine. She was his sunshine.

Gaven groaned as her precious blood slid over his tongue and down his throat. Sparks ignited inside him, fire rushed through his body, making him ache and melt into her. Apollonia whimpered and laid tender hands against his chest.

Gaven ran his hand down her nude back and over her bottom, cupping the firm flesh and kneading with an expert grace. Her skin prickled with goose bumps and bursts of white light exploded behind his eyes. His body hummed a crescendo, and he rode the orgasmic waves. She sighed, going limp in his arms.

Fear beat a crazy rhythm in his chest and he pulled back, cupping her head in his hand. He’d taken too much. “Shit,” he swore and listened for the beat of her heart. It was slow, but steady.

Her beautiful face was pale, her black lashes fanned against her cheeks and a slow, sexy as sin smile curled her lips. “Did you get enough?”

“Aye.”

“Good,” she whispered drunkenly.

Gaven lifted her and held her close to his chest. He’d never lost control before, ever, and it would never happen again. “Bleth’rin hell,” he cursed and clenched his jaw.

He picked up the faint scent of the Semere in the distance; he needed to get them to safety. He owed her that much. Gaven shot a glance toward the ever-lightning sky; the navy blue of night was giving way to soft pastel blues.

If he didn't inter soon, there would be no point in trying to find the Felis. But at least during daylight she was safe from the aggressive pursuit of the Semere. Maybe it was possible that this tiny vixen knew something or had heard some rumor about the Felis. After all, she had called this *her* jungle. His lips tipped at the thought; she was feisty, reckless, and perfect. Nobody in his many centuries of life had ever intrigued him the way she did, and for that reason alone, he knew he wouldn't be able to leave her side anytime soon.

He turned on his heels and ran; her blood coursing through his veins made him feel omnipotent, invincible. As if he could bend nature to his will, he soared on the wings of night.

He'd be damned if anything happened to her. Not on his watch. Then a more powerful thought shot through him; in three months' time he'd be dead. Suddenly his dreary life took on new meaning and he didn't want to just find the Felis out of boredom, but out of a deep-seated need to learn more about this enchantress who'd intrigued him with a mere glance and a whisper of eternal magic.

## Chapter 2

Apollonia walked into the chilly stream, her skin tingled as the icy water stabbed into her, making her lose her breath for a moment. She shivered and waited for her body to adjust to the cold. Finally able to breathe easier, she dunked her head and lathered her hair with soap.

She'd woken up this morning alone, under the shelter of a lean to with a folded pile of clothes, soap, and toothpaste next to her. Where he'd found all the stuff, she hadn't a clue. Gaven had been nowhere in sight, but she'd expected that.

His kindness was unfamiliar in a land where all she'd ever known was persecution in one form or another. Though it galled her to admit it, she'd grown fond of the Scottish brute. Her lips curled. He had his uses, and much more than that.

The memories of last night washed through her and she shivered, not from cold but from lusty desire. The feel of his strong hands rubbing along her nude back, his lips on her neck, and those teeth piercing her skin, *oh yeah*, she remembered it all.

Quivers of desire raced down her spine, a tiny groan escaped her lips. She shook her head and rubbed river silt over her body. The man was a woman's dream, all alpha male, with a tender side buried deep inside. She'd never gone for the pale kind, preferring instead the olive skin of her people. But Gaven was certainly the exception to that rule.

Apollonia glanced at the reddish gold streaks of sunshine fading behind the mountains; already the moon was a shadowy presence in the sky. She ground her teeth and wondered why she'd stayed. All day she'd debated with herself whether to stay or to go. She'd come close to leaving him many times, but every time she took that first step, something always stopped her. Some feeling deep inside urged her to stay. The same feeling that had made her decide to allow him to feast on her. She had to admit, that experience had been sinfully pleasurable. A warm heat nestled in the pit of her stomach, making her toes curl and the heat of a blush creep up her neck.

Apollonia blew out a disgusted breath. It was foolishness to stay, a death sentence. The Red Eyes never tracked her during the day and she'd always taken that time to keep one step ahead. Now, the race was even and she was not so sure she'd win.

She shuddered. The memory of a night long ago surged to the surface. Hot tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. Her mother had urged Apollonia to run faster, but she'd been frail and timid, tired of running. Their village had been burned down, the screams of dying brethren a chilling echo around them.

Apollonia clenched her fists, her nails tearing into her palms. She'd been so tired; stumbling over the mud and rocks, crying in confusion and near hysteria. The choking scent of ash and sulfur burning

her nostrils and her lungs, making her weak and dizzy with fear. When she'd stumbled over an uprooted stump, Lystria had turned to fetch Apollonia, and landed instead in the arms of a Red Eye.

Shame-filled tears squeezed out of her eyes and she sobbed. She'd hidden behind a tree like a coward, her ten-year-old mind reeling from the grizzly scene before her. The Red Eye had pulled her mother's head back, the tendrils of her corn silk hair scraping the ground. He'd grinned and trailed his fangs along her neck, his bald head gleaming like milk in the moonlight. Then with a deft twist of his wrist, he had ripped her mother's head from her body.

That familiar ache spread through Apollonia's gut like poison. A flash of wild and jagged grief tore through her, twisting her heart in her chest, and she choked on another sob. All of her sisters, her grandmother, aunts, mother, they'd all died by those monster's hands. That was the day she'd started running. She'd been running ever since. Now her people were scattered over the globe, barely surviving. Clinging to the hope that life would someday return to what it once was.

She dunked her head, letting the undulating waters wash away her tears, though it did nothing for the dull ache in her soul.

Apollonia stood and gazed at the setting sun, now a soft tint of pink and orange in the sky. She stepped from the stream. Her teeth clattered as the wind ran its cooling fingers along her flesh.

She closed her eyes. Why had she stayed?

"Do ye make it a habit, lass, to run around in yer birthday suit?" Gaven's warm breath fanned against the back of her neck, sending chills down her spine.

She turned quickly and gazed into deep blue eyes. Her heart sliding down to her stomach, she returned his grin. "Damn you, Gaven, don't rush up on me like that."

Apollonia brushed past him, heading for her pile of clothing.

His responding, throaty chuckle turned her knees to liquid. "I'm beginning to think, Apollonia, yer bark is worse than yer bite."

She shrugged, trying desperately to keep the happy laugh from spilling from her lips. Never, in her four hundred years of life, had she felt so alive. Her days had been nothing but hiding, running and killing. But suddenly this Scotsman came into the picture and turned her world upside down. And she reveled in it.

Apollonia bent at the waist to retrieve her clothing.

"Woman," Gaven growled, "ye don't want to be doin' something like that in my presence. Especially with no clothing on. I can only remain a gentleman for so long."

"Oh really?" She turned on him and lifted a brow. "Well I don't think I got that memo. As I recall, you were the one rearing for a fight last night."



“Oh ho.” His eyes widened. “Is that so, lass? I’m not the one who turned into a glowering shrew and nearly ripped yer head off.”

She shuddered at his choice of words, the smile on her lips vanishing in an instant.

Gaven took a step toward her, his blue eyes worried. “Lass, did I say something...”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

Gaven gave an almost imperceptible nod and looked away.

Apollonia sighed, pulled on her crimson colored tank top and daisy duke shorts. She needed to change the subject before the tension between them grew any wider. “Jeez, Gaven, could you have found me a little less clothing to wear?”

That toe-curling grin of his returned, the white of his teeth flashing brilliantly against the dark of night. “Ye don’t seem to be too fond of it to begin with.”

She rolled her eyes and patted her shirt down. Sure, he’d caught her naked as a jailbird too many times to count, but contrary to popular belief, she didn’t normally dress so skimpily in public. Apollonia huffed a curl of onyx hair out of her eye. “Well, how do I look?”

His gaze was somber, his eyes shifting over her form, and she feared he didn’t approve. That thought wounded her. How Apollonia had come to care about the opinion of strangers, especially this one, was beyond her. But she did care, and the longer he took, the more convinced she became that she looked dreadful.

Apollonia sighed and trudged forward, her heart breaking just a tiny bit. Gaven shot his hand out and brought her into his side.

“Ye look like an angel,” he whispered against her hair.

Apollonia trembled, her heart dancing in her chest, and inhaled the scent of rich earth clinging to his shoulders. “An angel? Really?” she snorted. “Even with this white streak in my hair?”

“The white streak, lass,” he cupped her chin, “is enchanting.”

She hated to admit that his words affected her, that they cut deep to the marrow of her, and that slowly he was walking past every defense she’d ever erected. “That’s not what the locals think. They call me a witch because of it.”

“Aye, and ye are at that.”

Stiffening in his arms, she turned her head away, but he brought her gaze back to his with a hooked finger under her chin.

“Ye’ve bewitched me. I don’t know why I can’t keep away from ye, Apollonia, but I can’t. Ye’ll be the death of me.”

She gasped at his words, his blue eyes and staid manner reflecting his sincerity.

“Aye, tis true.” He lowered his head and laid a whisper soft kiss against her temple.

Her heart jolted and her pulse pounded, her blood roared in her ears like the call of a trumpet. Apollonia slid her hands around his back and laid her head against his chest, the steady thump of his heart kept her fears and pain at bay. She never realized how much she'd needed this, a connection to another soul, but now that she had it, she knew she could never do without it again.

He hissed, his eyes flinching shut and he trembled in her arms. Beads of blood popped out along his forehead. Her heart twisted in her chest as fear raced through her with the force of a speeding locomotive. Icy fingers seeped into her pores. "Gaven," her voice trembled.

His eyes opened, shadowed with pain and glazed over. He gripped her elbow and nodded.

"Are you all right?"

His short bark of laughter lacked humor. "Never felt better."

"Dammit, Gaven, what's wrong with you?"

He opened his mouth, when suddenly a rustling in the bush alerted them to silence. Apollonia studied the black shadows, her heart kicking up in speed. The faint trace of Red Eye odor traveled the breeze.

Gaven ground his jaw. "Come on," he whispered.

"Where? We can't outrun them, not with you so sick."

"Ah, but ye've got a Vampire with ye now. Wrap yer arms around me, lass, and hold on tight."

Apollonia hugged him, clinging to his body. If she could have crawled inside his skin, she would have. A dizzying sensation started at her head and traveled down her body. Her eyes widened as she realized he was fading to mist, and taking her right along with him. With a burst of speed, they flew through the night.

"Why didn't you do this yesterday?" Apollonia asked him, as the shifting scenery whizzed by them.

"Because, ye had me entranced with the sight of yer rear, lass." He gave a low chuckle.

"Has anyone ever told you what a beast you are?"

"Aye, lass. All the time."

\* \* \*

Several hours later and finally satisfied they'd lost the tail, he landed and shifted back.

Apollonia rolled her neck from side to side and grimaced. She glanced toward Gaven and noticed his blue eyes were burning with fever. His head lolled and he dropped to the ground.

"Gaven," she screamed and fell to his side. "Why didn't you stop earlier? You needed to feed. Why didn't you tell me you were so weak?"

He coughed. The sensation of striking scorpion tails raced through him, making him gasp in shock. Never in all his mortal life had he felt this bad. Not even the first time he died. "I needed to get ye

far enough away from the Semere, lass. I've no doubt they'll catch our trail soon enough..." Another wracking cough tore through him.

Apollonia bit her lip, her green and blue eyes sparkling with tears. "You dumb bastard. I don't care. I can take care of myself. My fears are for you."

Her feisty retort made him chuckle weakly. Shivers wracked his body. He'd pushed himself tonight, he knew that. More than he should have, but he'd never admit that to her.

She growled and lengthened her canines, then tore into the flesh of her wrist and turned it over his mouth. "Drink," she ordered.

The ambrosia fell upon his lips and he groaned from the pleasure of it. Already her blood strengthened him, casting the chills from his body immediately. Gaven sat up and clutched her hand to his mouth, drinking her red elixir with the thirst of a dying man. Apollonia moaned and threw her head back, her lashes fluttering shut and her face twisting into a mask of pleasure and pain.

He breathed her in, her essence, her vitality, her health. But before he lost himself completely, he pulled away. Already the burning liquid was banishing the weakness of the curse coursing through his body and limbs, and he sighed. "Thank ye, Apollonia."

She pulled her hand back, the wound already closing. The pink flesh melded together until it was nothing but two pinpricks of raised skin, and eventually even that faded. She was smooth and free of imperfections once again.

Gaven's brows gathered into a vee, and his gaze shifted from her wrist to her face and back again. Shifters were not supposed to have such powers. The werewolves did because of their immortality, but not normal shifters.

"What are ye, Apollonia?" he breathed.

She sighed, her lips quirking, and she stood. "I'm hungry too, Gaven. I've got to go catch my dinner."

"I'll get it."

She shook her head. "No you won't. You already pushed yourself to the limit today. You need to rest."

"Dammit all to Hades," he growled and shoved a hand through his hair.

She grabbed his hand and laid it against her cheek. The innocent gesture touched his wretched heart as nothing else could.

"Why don't you build us a fire and find some shelter. I'll be back with my kill shortly. There's much we need to discuss tonight, I think."

"Aye, lass. That we do," he whispered.

She nodded, her cat eyes refracting the moonlight made them glow a tawny color. Apollonia quickly shifted form and stepped from her fire as a sleek, smooth panther. She tossed her head. Her tail curled sensuously through the air, and she slinked off.

Gaven closed his eyes. What was he going to do? He could stay with her and die or leave to search out the Felis. Neither option brought him peace of mind. To stay was to die an inevitable and excruciating death. To leave meant she'd most certainly die. Two Semere assassins were hot on her trail for reasons he couldn't yet fathom, and he knew by experience they wouldn't stop until either she was killed or they were.

"Bleth'rin hell," he ground out, and stood, walking with a clipped and furious pace into the jungle. Gaven fisted a hand at his side and snatched some moss off the jungle floor. He searched around for some dry wood, but everything he found was green and soaked. His inability to find suitable wood only added to his simmering temper.

He should leave her. He should. But he couldn't, and that enraged him. Gaven reared back and punched a hole through a tree trunk, splinters flew through the air, and the tree cracked down the middle with a dull groan. He stooped, seized the varying lengths of wood, and stalked back toward the camp. He knew why he couldn't leave her, because she hadn't left him. *God, why didn't she leave? Why? If only she had left...*

\* \* \*

Apollonia crept toward the flickering flames of the fire, a dead chicken clutched in her jaw. She kept her maw just slightly parted to make sure she didn't puncture the bird with her canines. Apollonia cleared her throat as the downy feathers tickled the roof of her mouth.

Her heart flipped over in her chest at the sight of Gaven's shadowy form. His blond hair whipped around his head, his blue eyes hooded and withdrawn, his broad shoulders encased by the white button down shirt. All moisture left her mouth and she wondered how she'd ever begin her tale. Telling him was inevitable. The longer she delayed, the harder it would be to talk. She just wished she understood this need to tell Gaven secrets she'd never uttered to another soul. She shook her head and huffed. It was now or never.

Apollonia trotted up, snapping twigs and crunching leaves underfoot so as not to surprise him. He glanced up, his morose features relaxing and a brilliant smile cut through his face. "Ah, lovely lass, I see the hunt was successful."

Opening her jaw, she dropped the chicken to the ground and shifted form, picked up her clothes, and hastily dressed. "Mmm, thank the gods, no echoing calls of *bruja* chasing after me." Apollonia curled her lip into a smile and made quick work of plucking the feathers.

The silence stretched around them, broken only by the crackle of the logs in the flames. The night whispered of secrets, the air smelled of rain and the black soil of earth.

“I’ve found a cave, not a few yards back, should keep ye warm tonight.”

Apollonia shoved a stick through the plucked bird and set it over the fire.

“Thanks. That was very thoughtful.” She gave him a swift, tight smile.

How could she do this? Where should she even start? She’d never told anybody who she was. She’d never allowed anyone close for fear that they’d also die and leave her with a larger ache. And she knew if Gaven left, he’d leave the deepest ache of all. Something she wasn’t sure she could overcome. And how the hell was that possible with a man she’d only met the night before? There was magic at work here, she knew that, she felt it in her heart.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. “Do you want to talk first or me?”

Gaven turned his face toward her, his nearly violet eyes clouded with worry. “How about ye first, lass?”

She nodded. “Well, anything you want to ask me specifically?” she muttered.

“Let’s start simple. How about yer name? Apollonia is Greek. What’s the origin of the last name?”

She laughed, the knot of tension in her gut slowly lessening. “Iolana is Hawaiian.”

“And, tell me again, lass, why ye are such a mutt and living in Panama?”

She shrugged. “Now we get into the meat of my tale,” she whispered, her throat constricted and panic wormed its way through her heart.

“Ye donna have to tell me, Apollonia, if ye donna want to.”

“I know that.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and shrugged. Her gaze devoured the rugged planes of his face and a deep yearning took root in her soul. “But I need to,” she finally said. “I’ve kept this inside me for so long I think it’s time to trust someone. I don’t know why I trust you, Gaven, but I do,” she said quietly.

He nodded and laid a gentle hand against the small of her back. She nearly purred into him as he began to rub her stiff muscles.

Apollonia pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep, calming breath. Her voice broke as she began, “I’ve been running for centuries now.”

His eyes widened. “Lass, are ye an immortal? I’ve always thought shifters weren’t. Well with the exception of werewolves, of course.”

“No, shifters aren’t immortal. And neither am I. Not in the full sense of the word.” She gave a throaty laugh and watched the frown on his face relax. “I know this is going to sound so cliché, and whichever god up there thought this up must have had a sense of humor for sure, but we have nine lives.”

He snorted.

“Exactly.”

“How many have ye lost?”

“One. About fifty years ago. I got shot through the heart by a band of poachers.”

“Then why do ye run from the Semere in fright, lass? Even if they caught ye, they couldn’t really kill ye.”

Apollonia closed her eyes and shuddered. “Yes they could,” Her voice was a broken whisper.

“They know our one weakness and we can never come back from it.”

Gaven grabbed her shoulders and pulled her into his side, she bunched the fabric of his shirt in her fist. “Why? Why do they kill ye?”

She turned her face and gazed at nothing. “I have an idea.” Apollonia closed her eyes and remembered the shaman of her tribe telling the old tales. She was special; she’d always known that, and the Red Eyes wanted no one to learn her people’s secret. Her lower lip trembled and she turned to gaze at him. This was enough for now, she’d tell him the rest...later. Maybe. “But anyhow...” She waved a hand through the air. “Your turn.”

Gaven ran a hand over his head. “Not one for long speeches are ye?” He blew out a deep breath, his fingertips running up and down her bare arms, sent shivers down her spine. He stoked a gently growing fire. These emotions were frightening, exhilarating, and dangerous. She was playing with danger, but she was helpless to resist his magnetism. His potency. Him.

*This feels so good. Too good.* She knew this wouldn’t last. Nothing good in her life ever did.

“Well, my story parallels yer’s in some ways.” He began. “And, I’m also running from demons but they don’t chase me...they live inside me.”

Apollonia ran her hand down his back. He licked his lips and followed the flight of a macaw across the night sky. She waited, not wanting to rush him or make him feel uncomfortable.

Finally he sighed and turned his blue-eyed gaze to her. They shimmered with hunger, lust, and raw pain. “Me clan is cursed. In our three-thousandth year of life, we simply cease to exist, fade to dust and become a passing memory.”

She trembled, afraid to ask, to know. “How...old are...you?”

Gaven reached out a hand and trailed it down her cheek, her lashes fluttered and warmth spread through her body. “I’ve less than three months left, lass.”

Apollonia sucked in a breath and a bitter seed of anger slid down her throat. She couldn’t believe it. This couldn’t be happening. Not again. Why did it seem every time she let someone into her life they left her.

“But...but, I thought Vampires were immortal?” she stuttered.

“Aye, every clan, but ours. The sun has been our only nemesis for eons, but this, I cannot fight.”

“How did this happen?”

The smell of roasted chicken lit her senses; Apollonia gingerly shifted it away from the flame and allowed it to cool. Warm tendrils of steam curled through the air.

“My clan is the oldest of all the vampire clans. We grew conceited and belligerent, warring with any who dared to step in our paths. Our nature angered the gods and they gathered at Olympus to tell Zeus, demanding that he right the wrong.”

Apollonia’s eyes widened and her heart palpitated in her chest. A slither of hope curled down her spine, sending shivers of awareness through her form. This story was sounding very, very familiar.

“Zeus admonished them and refused to hear more on the matter. But Dionysus in his drunken stupor would not heed Zeus’ rule and cursed us all the same.”

Her mouth pulled down, waiting on tenterhooks for him to finish the story.

“Zeus was furious, but once a curse has been set, it cannot be taken away.” Gaven grew silent and scowled.

“And what happened after that?” she prompted him.

“Zeus gave us a loophole. But it’s been nigh impossible to find.” He lifted a blond brow. “None of us has ever found the talisman Zeus created, and I’m beginning to think it doesn’t even exist. They are tales, legend to keep us hoping. Nothing more.”

Apollonia licked her lips, knowing without knowing what he would say next. First she needed to find out one thing. “How long has this curse been upon your kind?”

Gaven turned morose eyes toward her, his face covered in the flickering light of the flames and shadow.

“Eight millennia. Our scholars have studied the tomes, sideways, backwards and any other way ye could think of. But to no avail. A vampire comes into his greatest powers after their three-thousandth year. Our clan weakens because of this curse. Many of us have taken vows not to turn others.” He shrugged. “What point would there be? We all die eventually, except we have over two-thousand years to fret about it.”

“Gaven,” she breathed, inhaling the rich aroma of earth clinging to his pores. In all her life she’d never forget his scent. He was ambrosia to her senses. “What is this talisman you seek?”

He clenched his jaw. “The Felis Concolor.”

Her eyes widened. The air knocked from her lungs and she gazed at him with newfound interest. It couldn’t be. Of course she knew the legend, her clan had told it countless times. Apollonia trembled. She’d hoped, always hoped, but never believed.

“Gaven,” she whispered. “If I help you, will you promise to help me?”

He gripped her upper arms, his calloused skin created a delicious heat through her core.

“Lass, do ye know of this talisman?”

She licked her lips, entranced by the rise and fall of his corded chest, his muscular forearms, his symmetrically perfect face.

“Yes, Gaven, I do.”

His eyes glittered with newfound hope and he gripped her forearm tighter.

“Tell me, Apollonia.”

“It’s too late to go searching now, the sun will be rising shortly. Tomorrow we’ll begin our journey.”

She bit her lip, wanting to change the subject, needing to, in fact. So she said the first thing that came to mind. “Would you like to go take a dip with me in the pond?” She suppressed a groan, why had she said that of all things? Apollonia nearly rolled her eyes. Never in all her life had she been so forward, she’d always preferred her own company to others. But Gaven was different, especially if the things he said tonight were true.

His brows dipped, his look unsure. “Are ye sure, lass? Won’t it be too cold for that?”

She waved her hand through the air. “Of course I’m sure. The water is wonderful at this time of night.” Her heart trapped in her throat. The thought that he might turn her down made a burning shame creep up her neck.

“Aye.”

She let out a deep breath, the knots in her stomach slowly unwinding. Before she had a chance to change her mind, she stood and stalked to the water’s edge. She didn’t turn around to see if he followed, she simply shed her clothes and stepped in. The frigid waters washed over her, making her breath hitch. A gentle ripple sounded behind her and her heart kicked up to hyper speed once more.

“Bleth’rin hell, lass. It’s bloody cold,” he ground out, and stalked toward her.

She turned, her lips quirking. He was a sight, his nude chest gleaming like ivory, his jaw clenching, and his teeth clacking violently.

Apollonia walked toward him, accustomed to the chill, and laid her hand on his shoulder. His corded muscles bunched under her palm. Her eyes widened as an electrical current traveled from him to her and she yanked her hand back as if burned. Why had she done this? What was she thinking? All common sense must have left her the moment this Scottish brute had walked into her jungle.

His mouth turned down and he rubbed his flesh as if he too had felt that instant connection. Sexual awareness crackled around them, making the hairs on her arms stand on edge. She coughed into her fist, to clear the suddenly overwhelming tension surrounding them like a bowstring ready to snap. “Just relax, Gaven,” her voice was a hoarse whisper. “Don’t think of the water as being cold, just accept it.”



He nodded and stilled his movements. "I thought cats didn't like water," he said in a low, gravelly voice.

She laughed and shook her head. "I'm more than a cat, Gaven. I'm human too."

His gaze roamed over her face and he reached out a hand, trailing his fingers down her jaw. She couldn't keep a sigh from escaping her lips. "I know, lass. I know."

Apollonia's heart skipped a beat. A sudden longing scorched her, making her want things she had no right to desire. "I think I need sleep," she breathed.

Gaven dropped his hand and sighed. "Aye. I suppose ye do."

\* \* \*

The next day Apollonia paced back and forth inside the dank cave, the sound of dripping water a steady tattoo in the background. She chewed on her nail and kicked a chunk of rock out of her way. She stopped and stared at the ever-darkening sky; her stomach twisted into a jumbled mess. She couldn't stand the waiting. She wanted to begin the journey. After all, he only had three months left to live, and she had much to do before that time came.

Apollonia laid a hand against the cool rock of the cave and stared at the lump of disturbed earth under which Gaven lay. The setting sun cast a shimmering veil over the treetops. She grabbed at her gut and began pacing once more. Had she ever gotten this nervous before? This is ridiculous, Nia, she chided herself silently.

A pebble skidding across the blades of grass made her freeze in her tracks. She turned and inhaled the fragrance of the breeze. The air smelled of bananas and coconuts, orchids and damp earth. Separating the scents, she reached out with her feline senses, something was out there.

The caws of birds and chatter of monkeys masked the intruder's stealthy advance. But the hairs on the back of her head rose. A natural instinct to defend herself and her territory took hold. Apollonia gritted her teeth and shifted form, feeling confident in her sleek, feline body.

Another kicked pebble disrupted the quiet stillness and she lifted her nose in the air, her eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. Then she smelled it. The faint trace of blood and malevolence that cloaked the Red Eyes as a second skin. She arched her body, her ears tapering flat to her head and growled, warning the intruder to proceed no further.

Apollonia glanced at the setting sun, still ten minutes away from masking the world in black. Why wasn't Gaven up? Weren't all vampires reconciled to utter darkness? It didn't make sense that the Red Eye was up and Gaven wasn't.

Thoughts of Gaven seared through her brain. She hated to admit that she wanted him. Wanted to hear his sexy-as-sin voice, and see the dangerous gleam that entered his eyes when he readied himself for a challenge. Just then the rush of feet brought her sharply back to focus and her heart turned over at the

sight of the Red Eye. Those sinister eyes glowed like a beacon in the night. A crop of jet-black hair spiked up from his head. Its white fangs gleamed in the moonlight, glistening with drops of saliva.

Apollonia dropped low to the ground, neither treading too hard nor shifting the blades of grass underfoot. Her heart pounded violently in her chest. She tasted the adrenaline coursing through her body, intoxicating her with a rushing mixture of excitement and fear.

The Red Eye stopped and turned to stare in her direction. She stilled her body, lying on the ground, neither breathing nor blinking. Waiting. Watching. Hoping it didn't catch sight of her.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are, shifter," it hissed. Its low voice coiled down her spine, making her tremble with rage. But she wouldn't give away her position.

The wind rustled through the trees, whispering of deeds done in the night. She closed her eyes and inhaled the harsh scent clinging to the rogue vampire. He'd killed a family not thirty minutes ago. A child, a mother, and father. Slashed their throats and drank of their blood. Their spirits clung to him, screaming for vengeance. Many spirits circled around him, shrieking and wailing with unrest, their bright, white orbs nearly blinding her with their brilliance.

The Red Eye lifted its head in the air and inhaled, its lashes fluttering shut as if in orgasmic ecstasy. Then it sneered.

"You were much too easy to find, tsk, tsk. I'd expected you to be better sport than this, considering you've managed to elude us for two weeks now. "The Red Eye's British accent was scathing and mocking, laced with sarcasm, and she trembled with roiling fury.

A sinister smile curled the Vampires lips then he whirled on her and charged. Her tightly wound body coiled, the muscles flexed underneath her and she pounced on the beast. The Red Eye hissed and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. Apollonia went wild, clawing, spitting, and raking her claws down his face and body.

It scowled, its brows bunching, but it never released her neck and squeezed all the harder. Apollonia stiffened the muscles in her neck, making them as thick and strong as steel bands, and with her hind leg she clawed the Vampire from sternum to mid-thigh. The Red Eye howled, its glowing eyes dripped with malevolence, yet he held fast.

Apollonia struggled as she felt her neck giving way under the brutal onslaught. She gasped for breath and twisted her body around his. The Vampire bit its lip, its fangs puncturing its own flesh, a crimson trail of blood flowing to the ground. Its eyes rolled to the back of its head and a look of unadulterated pleasure flashed across his face.

She shuddered. Lights flared behind her eyes, her mind became thick and uncoordinated, and panic consumed her as the black wave of unconsciousness crept ever closer. Her struggles became less and less as his hands gripped tighter and tighter. Apollonia's heart stuttered in her chest, beating slower,

more irregular, her limbs became numb and her mind fragmented into a million tiny stars. Her last conscious thought was of Gaven, then she stopped breathing and her heart beat no more.

### Chapter 3

Gaven's eyes snapped open. He stilled the beating of his heart and pushed the noise of digging worms and tunneling rodents to the back of his mind and listened. He listened for Apollonia's soft gait, for the sound of her breathing and the steady beat of her heart. Pounding footfalls and the shuffling of grass sent chills racing through him. That noise did not belong to her. She was light of foot and unassuming. These were different, heavy, thudding, and suddenly he knew what was up there.

With a roar of fury, Gaven ripped through the soil and flew high into the air. His mind saw red as his eyes witnessed the Semere kneeling next to Apollonia's prostrate feline form. The Vampire was licking its canines, its face and body a bloodied mess.

Gaven sucked in air through burning lungs, his body hummed with fury and shock. He could detect no rise and fall of her chest and his fingers clenched. When the Semere laid its hands on her neck, Gaven was spurred into action and howled with anger.

He shot through the air with preternatural speed, slamming his shoulder into the kneeling Semere. Before the other Vampire had time to roll around, Gaven had punched a hole through the Semere's chest and ripped its still beating heart out. He threw the heart to the ground and stomped it underfoot.

The Vampire shrieked as its body was consumed by the flames of the damned and faded into a fine black dust. The gentle breeze picked up the particles and carried them away.

His fury spent, Gaven genuflected and grabbed Apollonia's body, bringing her tight to his chest. Sadness, unlike any he'd ever known, washed through him, leaving him numb and sick with grief. She'd

said the Semere knew how to kill them for good. He'd failed her. His weakened body had not woken him up in time. He'd killed her just as much as the Semere.

Gaven rocked her back and forth. With her went the location of the Felis Concolor. He had nothing now. Nothing. The only things left were the raw sores of an aching heart.

He bowed his head. His voice breaking, he said, "I'm sorry, lass. I'm so sorry." He coughed.

Her body gave a slight twitch and he stopped rocking. Her soft, black pelt moved a fraction of an inch with the rising of her chest. Then she gave a huge gasp and shot up, her fires blanketing her body, transforming her once more into a flesh and blood woman.

Apollonia's eyes were wild and she screamed, pushing her hands against his chest as she attempted to run off. Her scream, the sound of a wounded and frightened animal, chilled him to the marrow, and Gaven grabbed her by the waist bringing her closer to his side.

"Nia, tis I," he whispered over and over, rubbing his hand over her hair and down her back until she stopped shivering.

Finally the terror slid out of her gaze, and she shuddered. "Gaven," she croaked, and buried her head into his chest.

"Sweet, Nia," he spoke around a knot in his throat. "I almost lost ye. I'm so sorry..."

She turned tear-filled eyes toward him and he nearly lost control. She looked so innocent, so frightened. "Kiss me, Gaven," she whispered.

"Och, sweet, sweet Apollonia."

The breeze picked up the strands of her snow white and raven colored hair. The rush of blood to her cheeks gave her a healthy glow. Her green and blue eyes glittered with shimmering tears, and in that moment, he knew she'd never looked more beautiful.

Gaven leaned down and inhaled the musk of her body; his hands ran down her bare arms, enjoying the sensation of the goose bumps underneath. Her lashes fluttered shut and he groaned.

He started first at her forehead, and trailed down her nose, to her cheeks and finally captured her sigh of satisfaction with his lips. Sparks of fire ignited through his blood, making him heady and drunk with desire and lust. The beating of his pulse roared in his ears, drowning out everything but him and her. She'd touched him like no other, and he knew he was lost for all time.

Apollonia shifted her hands to his back and dragged him closer as she moaned into him and parted her lips. Her tongue licked and nibbled his mouth.

An inferno of passion exploded inside Gaven, sending a rush of blood to his already engorged erection, and he dragged her closer. Her breasts pressed into his chest, her hair covered him like a cloak, and he darted his tongue inside her warm mouth. She tasted of sweet mango. He'd never get enough.

Apollonia broke away, her lips swollen from his kiss. "I need you tonight, Gaven," she breathed.

That was all she needed to say. He trailed his hand across her jaw and down her neck, his heart pounded at the sight of her beating pulse and the precious ambrosia he knew to be pulsing beneath. He wanted all of her, everything she had to give.

Her cat shaped eyes turned sultry and she tipped her head back. “Take me,” she whispered.

Gaven groaned and slanted her head back. His teeth scraped along her flesh and he watched with growing enthusiasm as her pulse beat faster. He pierced her and she cried out, arching into him, her hands roving over his chest and back. Her body became flush with sweat and she glistened like liquid gold in the moonlight. He drank, inhaling her spicy warmth, her blood drowning him in her passion.

Satisfied, but still yearning for her, he pulled away and lay her down upon the verdant bed of leaves. A soft, tender smile graced the corners of her lips, and she sighed.

Gaven shed his clothing, freeing his erection of the confining jeans. Apollonia bit her lip and trailed her hand down his velvet shaft in a fluid up and down motion. He shuddered, his body exploding with fire.

“I need ye, Nia. I always have, I think,” he said around a low moan.

Gaven ground his teeth against the intense pleasure. His body hummed. His blood surged through his veins with the force of a roaring river. He reached out a trembling hand and trailed it along her flat belly. Apollonia sucked in a quick breath and raised her hips to his questing fingers.

“Apollonia. My precious, Apollonia.” His words fell from his heart and tumbled from his lips, reverently, tenderly. He could never let her go. Never.

Gaven bent low, no longer able to resist the temptation of her perfect breasts and encircled one dusky peaked nipple with his mouth. Apollonia cried out, her eyes slamming shut. He licked and suckled, then shifted to the other breast and gave the same tender ministrations. Her hands were frantic, her nails clawing into his back. Pain mingled with pleasure, drawing a deep growl of satisfaction from his lips.

Gaven trailed kisses down between her breasts, over her belly, and lower still, until he encountered the black curls of hair nestled against the V of her legs. Apollonia panted and dropped her hands to the soft earth, dragging her nails through the dirt and grass. He smiled. Heat built inside his body, making him tingle and shiver with awareness. His body ached for her touch, her sweet caress, he nearly cried out when her hands slid down his back.

He kissed her inner thighs until they trembled, inhaling the scent of wild orchids clinging to her skin. “I thought I’d lost ye,” he groaned, his heart clenching in his chest. “I thought I’d lost ye.”

Gaven kept trailing hot kisses along her thighs, down her calves, to her toes. Apollonia moaned. Her fingers shoved through his hair and she massaged his scalp. Her touch enflamed him, branding him with her mark.

Gaven lifted her leg and trailed drugging kisses underneath, saying without words how much he cherished her. Once again, he found himself at the juncture of her thighs. This time he didn't move away. He gave her a long, slow kiss, flicking her nub with his tongue.

She cried out. Her body jumped as she clenched his head and pulled it closer.

"Ga...v...en!" she moaned, her breath catching on his name.

He couldn't take it anymore. He wanted her. Now. He slid up, his hands on either side of her ribcage. He laid a punishing kiss against her mouth. She growled into him, her warm heat nestled securely against his shaft.

Gaven clenched his teeth and slid in. Her body accepted him without protest. Their slick bodies glided against one another. A low moan of satisfaction pulled from his lips as their movements became harmonious and fluid.

Apollonia squeezed her pelvic muscles, clenching him harder. He growled and tracked kisses along her neck and face. His body humming louder and louder with near orgasm.

She dragged her nails across his back and arms. Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, and she wrapped her long, lean legs around his body.

"Oh, Gaven..."

He winced, drowning in her, and he never wanted to resurface. Gaven pushed himself to the hilt as she arched into him and screamed out his name. He lost what little control he'd retained, and let loose. His body shuddered with his release as he spiraled out of his body. "Apollonia," he whispered.

The world exploded behind his eyes and he held onto her; she was his safety net, she'd bring him back to Earth. He sailed on the wings of magic, slowly settling once more into his body.

Apollonia bit her lip but couldn't suppress a grin of satisfaction from washing over her flushed face. "Oh gods, Gaven, if I'd known, I'd have done this much sooner," she said around a giggled.

He smiled and laid his head against her chest. She cradled him to her breasts and he listened to the steady beat of her heart. He still couldn't believe it.

"Nia." He pulled back and stared at her calm face. "Ye died, didn't ye?"

The shadows crawled back into her eyes and she pulled out from under him, drawing her knees to her chest. "Yes," she said softly.

"Och, Nia," he pulled her to his chest and inhaled the scent of her body. "I'm so sorry. So sorry."

She wrapped her arms around his back and shuddered. "Will you wash me up, Gaven?"

He nodded. Apollonia draped her arms around his neck as he gently lifted her and walked toward the meandering stream.

"And, I'll tell you everything," she whispered.

\* \* \*

Apollonia turned around and leaned into his muscular chest, enjoying the sensation of him running silt over her body. The chilled water made her tingle with an awareness of the man behind her. She bit her lip.

“Apollonia,” his deep voice resonated through her chest.

She sighed and turned around and gazed into deep, fathomless violet eyes.

“I...” She choked and cleared her throat and started again. “I waited for you, Gaven. To rise, and...and,” she shuddered, “I heard him. There was nothing I could do, I was cornered and trapped. So I fought him, waiting, hoping for you.” She swallowed the thick lump in her throat.

“Baby.” His fingers dug into her shoulders, his blue eyes glittered with incredible sadness and relief. Her knees trembled and she clung to him for fear she’d fall.

“This damn curse,” he scrubbed a fist down his face, “leaves me much weaker than I normally would have been. Because of it, I couldn’t rise when ye needed me most.”

She licked her lips. “But, Gaven, he was walking around even when there was still a bit of sunshine left.”

“Aye, baby. The older ones of us can, the sun must be weak and nearly gone, but we can.” His nostrils flared. “I failed ye.”

“Ssh.” She laid a finger against his lips and shook her head. “Don’t say that. I’m resilient remember?” Apollonia gave a tiny shrug and put on a brave face. “I still have seven lives left.”

“Nia,” he groaned. “Don’t kid around about such things.” His heavy brogue became thicker and full of anger. “When he touched ye, I went crazy. I’ve never felt this way about anybody before in me life.”

She laid her hands on his stubbled cheeks, her gaze roaming his face and etched it to memory. From his blond hair to his pale complexion, his full firm lips that had licked and nibbled every inch of her body, to his penetrating and soulful blue eyes.

She knew why he felt the way he did, and why she felt the way she did. Their meeting was not accidental, and the spirits of her ancestors whispered to her that he was the one. They were meant to be together, and their feelings for one another were as natural as breathing air. It was simply meant to be.

*Tell me, Gaven. Tell me, and I could make this all better. Tell me!* She waited, the silence around them stretching, but he never uttered the words she needed to hear. Apollonia sighed and laid her head against his chest.

“How did it feel to die?” he asked softly.

She pulled back to look at him and remembered the terror, the abject fear, and the knowledge that it was all over. “Awful.” She shuddered.



"I thought ye were truly dead, lass," he choked out.

Apollonia chewed on her lower lip. It was time to tell him everything. "Gaven," she began and grimaced.

She'd never told anybody this. Her one true secret. As she gazed at him, she took in the sincerity and utter devotion of his face. This would be her greatest act of trust.

"We can only die for good if we are beheaded."

His brows knit and he moaned, pulling her roughly to his chest. "Nia, if I could take this away, I would."

"Take what, Gaven? This is what makes me, me. And I love who I am. The Semere slaughter my kind for their own twisted pleasures." It wasn't the whole truth, but she couldn't tell him that. If she did, she'd negate the prophecy. Apollonia burned to tell him, now more than ever, but to save his life, she held her tongue.

"Lass, there was only one of them. I smelled two the other night."

"I know." She clenched her jaw until it ached. That meant there was still another, tailing them; still more danger for her. But danger was nothing new. However, she definitely didn't want to die again. That was very unpleasant, to say the least.

She plastered on a swift smile. "Let's not talk anymore of the Red Eyes."

He nodded, his chin rubbing along the top of her head. "What do ye want to talk about then?" he questioned.

"The Felis Concolor, for one," she whispered against his chest and squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart trembled with fear for him and for her. Would he ever see?

Gaven picked her up and walked from the stream. She shivered and nestled further into him. Her heart and soul were at peace for the first time in her life.

"Aye, sweet Nia, that's a great place to start," his gravelly voice rumbled.

\* \* \*

"Just let me catch my breath, Apollonia," Gaven panted and placed a palm against a coconut tree. His body trembled with fatigue; his mouth had a ring of white around it.

She nodded and swallowed the lump of tears threatening to choke her. They'd been searching aimlessly, through the wilds of Panama, for the past two and a half months. And each day that slipped by, Gaven grew weaker and weaker. Cementing for her that she could never live without him. Gaven had broken past every barrier she'd ever erected and she knew now, it was love, pure and simple. She loved him. His kind ways, his gentle and passionate lovemaking, the way he knew and understood her as nobody else ever had. The warm tendrils of pleasure that confession elicited, mingled with the pain of

reality. No matter how many times she tried to push his pending death to the back of her mind, he'd do something to show her just how weak he really was.

Apollonia pasted on a brave smile and placed her arm around his chest. "That's fine, baby," she whispered. "Let's go sit by the lake and just relax for a little bit, okay?" Her voice trembled for a split second, but she kept the fake smile, more for herself than him.

"Aye." He shuffled toward the calm lake that reflected the moon's silver glow, and shoved a hand through his hair. Gaven gave her a crooked, self-effacing smile which made her heart flip.

He dropped to the ground and sighed. "Lass, I'm sorry. I feel as weak as a kitten," he ground out through clenched teeth and turned his head away.

She knew this weakness was killing him, especially having to admit it to her. "Damn Dionysus, Gaven. You'll survive this, I swear it!" her voice rang with authority and anger.

He turned to her and closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of the wind. "We shouldn't be stopping, lass. I still smell the Semere..."

Apollonia held up her hand and shook her head. "He's still a few days away. I've made sure to backtrack and cross paths, to throw him off our scent. We'll be fine." She assured him, though her heart wasn't in it. They were losing this battle, and she knew it.

He gripped her hand, his eyes clouded with fatigue and the beginnings of fever. "Are we nearly to the cave?"

She nodded, her mouth pursed into a thin line. He opened his mouth to speak, then his face contorted and beads of blood popped out along his forehead. His body was wracked with a bout of coughing. Tense seconds passed and all Apollonia could do was rub his back and murmur soothing encouragements.

*Damn this curse! Damn the gods!* She wanted to shriek her fury. Panting, she clenched her jaw and silently counted to ten, hoping to quell the anger and mounting frustration festering inside of her.

Gaven's tense shoulders relaxed and he exhaled with a weak chuckle. "And ye're...sure, lass, the Felis is in...there?" he stuttered.

Apollonia studied him; the tired lines around his face, the hope glittering in his nearly violet eyes, and though she didn't want to, she nodded. "Yes, Gaven, the Felis will be in there."

His gaze locked with hers and he trailed a trembling hand down her neck. Her chin quivered and she grasped his hand within her own.

*Tell me, Gaven. Tell me. I know you feel it. Tell me, damn you! Tell me!*

Her nostrils flared, and she waited. The silence around them stretched into a tense bubble. If he would only tell her, then she could fix everything. Maybe she was wrong, but the way he touched her, the way her name fell from his lips like a reverent prayer, made her believe otherwise.

“Och, sweet, Nia,” his voice broke. “I’ve been thinking abot’ it, and I think ye should leave me.”

Her jaw dropped and her brows dipped. “How could you?”

“Nia, listen to me...”

“No!” She jumped to her feet, clenching her fists by her side. Her body trembled. “You listen to me. I would never leave you. You can’t ask me that. You’re not going to die, damn you!” Apollonia fell to her knees and started pounding on his chest, fat tears rolled out her eyes, blinding his handsome face. “Just tell me,” she sobbed.

Gaven grimaced and grabbed her hands. Apollonia fell into his chest, her heart a twisted and raw mess. She couldn’t do it without him. She was tired of losing the people who meant the most to her.

His large, callused hands cupped her chin and he laid a tender kiss against her lips, almost a whisper of love. She whimpered and clutched at his shirt, pouring her heart and soul into the kiss. Telling him without words how much she adored him.

Gaven groaned and pulled her down on top of him. Her heart froze in her chest. “Gaven, I don’t want to hurt you,” she whispered.

“Nia,” he said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Ye could never do that.”

“Oh Gaven,” she breathed, and tipped her head back. “Feed on me, build your strength.”

Her body tingled as his hands slid down her bare back and over her rear. A delicious, curling heat spread through her body like wild fire. He ran his finger down the curve of her neck, her pulse pounded at his touch and she shivered into him, her body turning into liquid and heat. Then she felt the scrape of his teeth, she hissed as his canines pierced her. Her face twisted into a mask of pain, her brows lowered, and her mouth parted. It was like being stabbed by a red-hot poker. But ever so slowly, the pain sifted away, to be replaced by euphoric spikes of ecstasy. Apollonia purred, her body arching into his. The sweet death consumed her and she rode the orgasmic waves. Liquid heat crashed between her thighs, making her ache and want.

Her body tingled and she felt as if she could float out of her body. Before she reached heaven, he pulled back. She licked her lips; her head lolling from side to side and she nuzzled his neck.

“Nia,” his voice shook. “Mmm, how can ye’re precious blood make me feel so much better? Ye’ve bewitched me, lassie.”

Apollonia shut her eyes and laid her head against his chest, a slow smile spread across her features and she curled her toes. “Because I’m special, Gaven. Very special.”

She held her breath. Would he catch the hint? Again, the fears returned, and her stomach twisted in knots. God, she wanted to tell him everything, but if she did, he was lost.

“Aye, sweet Nia, that ye are.”

She opened her eyes and stared morosely out at the still lake, a ballad of croaking frogs surrounded them. She'd told him all she could; there was nothing more she could say. "Do you feel able to continue on?"

"Ye make me feel invincible, Apollonia. I could walk a thousand miles."

She chuckled and slapped at his shoulder. "Don't you push it. That's your problem, Gaven. You're too damn proud to tell me when you're feeling bad. And..."

Gaven rolled his eyes, grabbed the sides of her face, and laid a devastating kiss against her lips, stilling the words mid-sentence.

Apollonia moaned and ran her hand down his chest, a delighted shiver coursed through her at the feel of his thick hardness nestled against her lower stomach.

"Don't ye ever stop blathering?" he whispered against her lips amidst gentle pecks.

She couldn't still the smile from curving her lips. She jumped to her feet. "You're a beast, Gaven MacDade."

"Aye," he stood. "And, ye love me for it."

Apollonia sucked in a breath, her throat squeezing shut.

"Come on then." He grabbed her hand and began the trek through the jungle.

She released her breath and sighed. Of course he wouldn't have. What was she thinking?

\* \* \*

The skies opened up, pouring sheets of rain over the landscape and soaking them completely. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, the wind shrieked like a banshee's wail. The land was being assaulted by a massive Typhoon and they were right along with it.

Apollonia turned, swiping at her face, the water blinding her. "Gaven, we're almost there. How you doin'?"

His jaw was clenched, his hair tapering to his body as he trudged through the mud and deluge. "I'm fine, lass, stop worrying abot' me," he shouted through the wind.

She bit her lip. He was furious at his weakness, but he'd stumbled three times already, and she was afraid to push him too far. If only Gaven would tell her, she could fix everything. Why wouldn't he tell her?

With a heavy heart, she turned and crested over a gentle slope. Not twenty yards from where they were stood a cavern, their safety from the storm, but not from their inner turmoil.

The black sky lit with a blinding streak of lightning, cracking against the thick leaves of a banana tree. Apollonia shielded her eyes. Suddenly the jungle was alive with orange and red flames, licking at the tops of the trees.

Her lower lip trembled as a time long ago flashed through her mind. Her mother running through the thick sludge, the screams of the dying behind her.

Apollonia froze, her eyes widening with horror, and she couldn't tell if the screams came from her mind or from her.

Gaven's warm hands grasped her elbow and flung her around. "Nia."

She stared without seeing, her mind alive with a scene from her past.

"Mother," she screamed, her heart trembling. Fear, thick and cloying, surrounded her, leaving her breathless and immobile.

"Nia," he yelled louder, penetrating the fog of her brain. Gaven gave her a tiny shake and she yelped, her heart crashing against her chest.

"Stop that, Nia. Stop that." His burr was thick with anger. "Yer not there, yer here with me. Safe. Safe with me." He dragged her to his chest.

Apollonia clutched the back of his shirt, bunching the fabric beneath her hands. "Gaven," she whispered slowly. "I'm...I'm," she hiccupped, "sorry."

He frowned, his eyes shaded and drooping with fatigue. Then he winced, his body shuddering into hers, and he dropped to his knees.

"Gaven," she screamed and fell beside him. "Oh God, Gaven." Her fears for him made the demons of her past completely fade away.

A ragged moan tore from his lips and he doubled over, clutching at his stomach.

Apollonia frantically ran her hands over him. "Come back to me, Gaven. Don't give in. Don't give in."

His eyes opened and he grabbed her hand. "Take me to the Felis, Nia. Take me there and rid me of this wretched curse."

She wiped the water, mingled with the blood, off his forehead, and nodded. The words of truth, lodged in her throat. There was no Felis in those caves, there never had been.

Apollonia helped him to rise, and they slowly made their way toward the caves entrance. The shifting winds brought the faint smell of blood and they both stopped. She closed her eyes and searched for the direction of the scent.

The hairs on her arms rose as she recognized the scent of humans. The wind whispered to her of wicked deeds and gruesome killings. Apollonia turned and gazed into Gaven's eyes.

*He's here,* she mouthed.

His jaw set with grim determination and he nodded. "Aye, lass. I knew he would be."

"But, I set a trail."

Gaven cupped her chin. “Sweet, Nia. He’s been toying with ye. An assassin is trained in the death arts. He’d led ye to believe ye were safe, so as to catch ye unawares.”

Apollonia squared her shoulders. So this was it. It was nearly over, for both of them. She held no illusions, never had. If Gaven had been at full health, then maybe they’d have stood a fighting chance. But she wouldn’t cry, she’d face this with honor and give it all she had. The Red Eye would taste her fury before she died. Of that she vowed.

## Chapter 4

Apollonia knelt by the scattered and dismembered bodies lining the entrance of the cave. All of them had been brutally killed, their throats slashed, their sightless eyes gazing toward the heavens in silent terror. The sheen of rainfall glistened upon their skin.

She shuddered and stood. She felt him out there, the Red Eye, watching her. The air sizzled with anticipation and fear. He was probably filled with glee at his handiwork; he'd laid the bodies out for her to find them.

He wanted her afraid, and dammit, she was. Apollonia licked her lips, her heart thudding painfully against her ribcage, threatening to punch a hole through her chest. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead.

Gaven gripped her shoulder and she leaned into him. "They're gone, lass."

Apollonia narrowed her eyes. How she wished things could have ended differently. She turned toward him and nodded. "I know." Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

All she had left was her love for the Scottish brute before her, and she clung to that. If only things didn't have to end this way, she thought.

"Let's go inside the cave, Nia. Get out of the rain and find the Felis."

She cast her gaze toward the ground and nodded. The wind stirred with the scent of the Red Eye. He was coming for her.

Gaven grabbed her hand and entered the cave. Apollonia shivered and listened to the melodies of the jungle, the now soft and steady drone of the rain, croaks of frogs and shifting wind.

She blinked and studied Gaven's pale face. Lines had etched their indelible mark around his eyes and mouth. His golden hair lay plastered to his face. His powerful shoulders and rippling biceps caused her heart to skitter with excitement. To her, he'd never looked more attractive. She imprinted this moment in her mind and held fast to it, they would be her anchor in the final battle to come.

\* \* \*

Gaven walked ahead of her, his steps lighter, his body trembling with a surge of renewed energy. After his endless months of searching, they'd finally settled upon the Felis's location. He could hardly contain the swell of excitement coursing through his veins. Now he could focus not on death, but on his

new life with Apollonia. If she would have him. He'd keep her safe always, cherish and protect her. And most of all, love her unconditionally.

The cave was filled with shadows broken only by holes in the roof, through which bits of moonlight filtered through.

"Nia," he turned to stare at her. "Ye must show me, lass. I'm afraid I'm too full of nerves to find this on me own."

She was beautiful with the moonlight casting a white net of light around her head and shoulders. He sucked in a breath and trembled. Soon he'd get to show her just how much he cared. Without the weakness standing between them.

Her green and blue eyes sparkled with something akin to sadness, her golden skin shimmered, and her jet-black hair clung to her shoulders, the streak of white standing out in bold relief.

His brows knitted as her eyes began to glitter with unshed tears, and he took a step forward. "Apollonia," he whispered, his heart caught in his throat. "Yer shaking like a sapling in the wind."

"Gaven," she croaked. Her nostrils flared and her chin quivered.

In two heartbeats he was by her side, pulling her into his chest. "What's wrong, Nia?" Her fear tore at him, made him feel things he'd never felt before.

Apprehension. Fear. Unease. Mostly, apprehension. Something was wrong, very, very wrong.

A fat tear rolled down her cheek and he knuckled it away. "Nia?" he asked around the lump lodged in his throat.

"I...I have something to tell you, Gaven," she whispered.

"It canna be too bad, tell me."

Apollonia broke down and shook her head. "That's just it, Gaven. It is terrible. I lied to you. I've lied to you all along."

He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step back. His shoulders and back tensed as he waited for her to continue.

She gave a stuttering sob and wrapped her arms across herself. "The...the-,"

"Spit it out," he growled. He knew what she was going to say and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Oh Gaven," she cried out and ran toward him.

He held out his hand and pushed her away. "Why did ye lie to me? Why keep me hoping? Why not tell me the truth?"

A hollowness took root in his soul. There was nothing here for him, there never had been. And the one person he'd ever trusted completely had betrayed him. That hurt worst of all. Gaven plopped down on a smooth rock and stared at her, wondering why he hadn't left.

Tears rolled down her cheeks unchecked. "I didn't want to lie, Gaven. I couldn't tell you."



He blew the breath out of his nostrils forcefully and jumped to his feet as the adrenaline coursed through him, leaving him breathless with rage. “Aye, so I suppose it was better to string me along. Why not?” he lifted a brow and glowered. “Stupid, barbarous Gaven hasn’t a clue...”

“Stop it,” she yelled, and shook her head. “That’s not true at all. You have no idea.”

Gaven couldn’t stand to look at her, to see her eyes shaded with sorrow. He turned his back to her and placed his hand against the stone wall. The steady drip, drip of rainwater seeping through the cracks caught his attention. “Ye deceived me. Why not let me die? I’d rather that than be lied to, led to believe I could be healed. Why, Apollonia. Why?” he choked, then ground his molars and laid his head against the cold, wet stone.

He felt an instant squeezing hurt. *Damn her! Damn her! I should never have allowed anybody into my heart. Damn her!*

She moaned, a sound so gut wrenching he grimaced. He wouldn’t look at her. He couldn’t.

“Gaven, please look at me. Turn and face me.” Her voice was muffled by the sounds of her crying; she laid her hand against his shoulder.

For a split second he wanted to melt into her, draw comfort from her. He shrugged her off. “Donna touch me,” he growled.

A low pull in his chest suddenly turned into a spider-web of flaring pain and he hissed. His blood felt like it was boiling him from the inside, his body heated and his arms and chest began to seep blood. The world shifted in and out of focus.

“Gaven! No. Fight it, don’t let it defeat you now. Not now!” Apollonia’s hands drew him away from the wall and she laid him upon the cool floor.

His stomach twisted in knots and he groaned as the great black void of death slowly consumed him.

“Baby, baby,” she murmured.

Her voice brought him back from the comfort of oblivion. She grabbed his hand and laid it against her cheek, rubbing back and forth against him. “I love you so much. I love you,” she choked out. “Please don’t leave. Don’t leave me.”

He gasped as the tendrils of pain subsided and her words slowly sunk in. “Nia,” he croaked.

“I didn’t mean it, lass.” Faced with his death now, he realized she’d done it all to spare him, to keep his hope and spirits alive. “I...”

She bit her lip; her eyes shimmered with tears and the beginnings of a smile laced the corners of her face.

A black shadow with burning red eyes crept behind her and suddenly flung Apollonia against the far wall. “Hello, precious,” a thick German voice echoed around them. “I didn’t mean to interrupt this touching moment,” he spat.

Gaven clenched his fists and pushed the pain to the back of his mind. He scrambled to his feet and ran for the Semere. If she died without him getting a chance to say he was sorry... He roared and shoved the Semere from behind.

The assassin turned, a wicked gleam cutting his features. “What do you think you can do to me Rayven?” He sneered. “You stink of death. Weakling.”

Then the Semere shoved his booted heel into Gaven’s sternum, knocking the air from his lungs. His body came alive with pain, as if the dead fingers of the spirits were ripping into him, peeling his skin from his form. His body was encased in half ice and half fire. He crashed against the stone wall and landed with a sickening thud. Gaven ground his jaw against the excruciating pain. What a fool he’d been. He loved her and now he’d never get the chance to tell her so. Sorry, Nia, he thought silently, and slid into the black waves of unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

“Gaven,” she shrieked, her ears ringing and her head throbbing. Apollonia sat up and gazed at Gaven’s inert form, her heart shattered into a million tiny pieces. It was over, it was all over.

She screamed, the agony of her loss washing through her and she jumped to her feet, shifting instantly to feline.

The Red Eye chortled with glee and licked its salivating canines. Its face was still covered in thick shadow. “Here, kitty, kitty,” his mocking words slithered down her spine with their malevolence.

Apollonia hissed and spit, swiping her paw through the air. She’d probably die, but it no longer mattered. His glowing red eyes reminded her of a demon, full of anger and fury. She plastered her ears to her head and stalked his movements. He danced around her, always keeping one step ahead of her sharpened talons.

“I’ll kill you the same way I killed the others in your village.”

Her spine stiffened and shivers wracked her body.

“You do remember that night, don’t you? The fire, the ash, the screams?” He licked his lips and sighed, his eyes nearly rolling to the back of his head.

Apollonia’s breathing turned ragged and harsh, ripping through her lungs with the force of a stabbing knife. She wouldn’t give into his taunts; he was touching on her sensitive side, hoping to draw her into a blind rage. She wouldn’t give him the pleasure, even though the words slithered through her heart with the sting of a venomous snake.

He threw back his head and guffawed. "I know what you're thinking, shifter," it spat. "That I'm just retelling myth handed down to us from those that were there. Well guess what, bitch! I was there." He inhaled. "I can still smell the sweet blood. Do you know that your blood is like honey? There's nothing better."

Her heart rate spiked and it took every ounce of restraint Apollonia possessed not to pounce on him and rip his throat from his body. But that's what he wanted. She needed to keep a cool head.

The Red Eye smirked and walked toward her. Her heart plummeted to her feet. This one was much more sinister than the last assassin she'd dealt with. Apollonia closed her eyes for a second and prayed. Prayed to the gods, to her mother's dead spirit, to her people, to change what was sure to be an inevitable death.

The Vampire lunged at her, its fangs exposed points, lethal and deadly, ready to rip into her throat and suck the life out of her. Apollonia reared back, trapped against the wall. The Red Eye kned her in the gut, the blow was so forceful she heard a dull ripping sound and knew he'd torn an organ. Apollonia expelled a long breath as a stabbing sensation covered her chest, she fell to the ground, panting and huffing, trying desperately to draw a breath that didn't hurt.

"Did you like that?" The Vampire asked, its face pinched and pulled into an ominous mask. "Why don't you just give up? Lie there like a good girl and let me finish."

Apollonia growled low in her throat, her body humming with anger. She closed her eyes and limped to her feet, white lights flared behind her eyes, threatening to choke the life out of her.

The Vampire slapped its knee and shook its head. "Why are you such a glutton for punishment? If it's a battle you want, shifter, I'd be more than happy to oblige."

She drew off the memories of Gaven. His love. The way he held her and showed her without words how much he loved her. She'd fight. For Gaven, she'd fight.

Apollonia ignored the pain and pounced on him, her talons ripping into his chest. She was wild, her hind legs digging into the flesh of his legs, her teeth clasping onto his thick neck.

The Vampire howled and wrapped his arms around her midsection, squeezing tighter. She let loose his neck and howled, the pain an indiscriminate monster devouring her.

He pinned her against the wall, the vile blood of his body coating her fur, nauseated her. Then he grasped her neck and tipped it back, she bristled and struggled against him.

Mother, she pleaded silently. Help me.

A great bolt of lightning flashed right outside the cave's entrance, lighting the interior in a stark brilliance. What she saw made a fury grow inside her; she trembled, her chest heaving for air and a numbing shock took root in her soul. His pale, bald head gleamed like milk in moonlight. His lips were curled into an evil sneer. The memories of her mother's hair trailing along the cold, wet ground shot

through her with the force of a juggernaut. Her eyes widened even as the remnants of breath left her aching lungs.

He leaned in and whispered in a thick, husky voice. "That's right. I killed your mother. I enjoyed the sweet taste of her blood, her lush curves, and especially the sight of her head rolling down the hill. Did you know that? I let you run that day. I knew you'd be a prize worth savoring."

She roared, an upwelling of untapped energy flowed through her veins and she pushed him off. His eyes widened as she stalked toward him. Apollonia hissed, near to tears for her mother and the knowledge of who was before her.

The Vampire shuffled against the ground and stood firm. She jumped on him and raked her claws down his face, peeling the skin off in her fury. He screamed and clutched at his face, but she was ruthless and hissed, the years of hatred roiling off her. Apollonia dug her talons into his thighs, digging them deeper and deeper, snapping tendon and muscle. He arched against her, bloody tears rolled from his eyes down his cheeks.

*You killed my mother, you damn bastard!* She wanted him to suffer the way he'd made her suffer for the past four hundred years. *I'll kill you, I'll kill you!*

In a blind rage, she shredded and ripped into him. His low moans only added to the fire of hatred in her soul. His blood saturated her, thick and cloying with its metallic, slightly salty scent.

Finally, her anger spent. She dug her canines into his chest and ripped into him, yanking his still beating heart from his chest, and threw it to the ground.

Apollonia shifted form and gazed into the hollow eyes of the Red Eye. All she felt now was emptiness and utter desolation. This Vampire had taken everything from her that she had ever loved.

She walked over to the beating heart. "This is for Gaven and my mother," she whispered, then flattened the heart with her heel.

The Red Eye screamed and howled as the black flames licked at him. She stared on, detached from the sight. Then the Vampire exploded into a fine, black mist and faded as fog over rolling waters.

It wasn't over. It never would be. If it wasn't him, then another would come along. Apollonia dropped her head to her chest, her black curls cascading around her like a cloak. She wept bitterly.

A low moan in the corner drew her attention and her head snapped up. She wiped the tears from her eyes and limped toward Gaven's crippled form. Her midsection twisted with pain and she coughed into her fist. Bright crimson streaks of blood escaped her lips.

She watched with acute, and loving anxiety. "Gaven." She spoke low, afraid to shatter the stillness of the moment.

Her heart caught in her throat, butterflies dove in her gut. She reached out a trembling hand and ran it over his cooled forehead.

“N...i...a,” he said around a whimper.

She cried out, a silken cocoon of euphoria wrapped around her. “Gaven, oh baby,” she sobbed, and planted a million kisses on his brows and forehead.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

She grabbed his hand and laid it against her cheek. “I love you, Gaven. I love you so much.”

This was it; he needed to tell her now. She licked her lips. She hadn’t much time, she was dying, too. If it was going to happen, then she needed to be ready. Apollonia bit her lip and called down the spirits of her ancestors. They engulfed her in fire, changing her once more to feline. Needles of pain flared through her brain, unconsciousness mere seconds away, death soon after.

Gaven lifted a trembling hand, a crescent shaped smile cutting through his face. “Apollonia Iolana,” he coughed, his body wracked with shivers. He gasped and gazed at her.

She drowned in their violet depths. No matter what happened now, she knew she’d never love another. Gaven was her everything, would always be, and she’d always carry his memory in her heart. He’d never be forgotten, not to her.

“I...love...ye,” he gasped, his warm hand cupping her furred cheek. A cry of relief broke from her lips. Then his hand dropped to his side and he closed his eyes.

Her eyelids fluttered shut and warmth spread through her core. The chants of her ancestors filled her ears like a quiet buzz, the room lit with a bright blue glow and Apollonia crawled on top of him, laying her head against his still chest.

*I love you too, Gaven.*

She closed her eyes as the fires of the Felis Concolor fell on her, encasing her and Gaven in their heat. Tendrils of light pulsed through her body, shooting out like bullets and running through him.

Apollonia smiled as her heart began to slow. They were lifted high in the air by invisible hands. Apollonia wanted to kiss his lips, but settled instead for a tiny lick of his neck. He was safe. Thank the gods he was safe.

Then she blew out a deep breath and died.

\* \* \*

Gaven groaned; a heavy weight centered on his chest. Where was the pain? The fireworks of lancing hot pokers running through him? He knew it should be there, but he felt nothing. He felt alive, whole, and healthy. Better than he’d ever felt.

He cracked open an eye, a smile curling his lips and he gazed around. The heavy weight on his chest was Apollonia, her black hair splayed against him.

Fear clutched at his heart and he sat up. He dragged her to his chest. “Nia,” he whispered frantically.

Her lips were tinted blue; her golden skin was littered with angry red welts. “Oh Gods, Nia.” He rocked her back and forth, cradling her head in his palm. “Wake up, baby.”

Gaven gave her a tiny shake, his heart trapped in his throat. . “Come on, Apollonia,” he growled. “Wake up, damn you.”

Her head lolled back and forth, listless, lifeless, like a doll’s head. Tears blinded his eyes, choking his voice. “I need ye,” the words tore from his heart.

Then he crushed her to his chest. She’d given her life for his. It all made so much sense now. He’d been looking for a talisman, not a flesh and blood woman.

Damien’s words echoed in his mind. *You can’t find it. It will find you.*

“No,” he groaned, and dug his fingers into her arms. “I was so stupid. Nia, please. Please if ye hear me, come back, baby. Come back.”

Gaven squeezed his eyes shut against the overwhelming pain. The things he’d said to her. He was such an idiot. He opened his eyes and gazed at her, blinking twice rapidly. Was it possible? Or just hope?

Her lips were no longer blue, and the welts looked to be smaller. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes and held his breath. No, no trick of the light. Her wounds really were healing. The welts were now just a tiny scratch, and then unblemished, golden skin.

He ran his hand over her face in awed shock, waiting for her to take that first breath. But as the seconds ticked past and nothing happened, he knew. She’d truly given her life for his.

Gaven dropped his head, his thoughts jagged and painful.

Her body arched against his and she gasped. Apollonia clutched at his hands. “Gaven,” she croaked, her huge cat eyes blinking up at him.

“Nia.” He crushed her to him and peppered her forehead, nose, and eyes with kisses. Absolute joy swept through him, leaving him breathless with rapture.

“Why didn’t ye tell me? Nia, I can’t ever lose you like this again. I swear it kills me each time. Why didn’t ye tell me?”

She sat up and then straddled his hips with her thighs, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I couldn’t tell you, Gaven. I wanted to so badly, but if I did, it would negate the prophecy. You needed to come to me.”

“But, Nia, ye knew I loved ye. I’ve loved ye since the first.”

She placed her hands against the stubble of his jaw. His body hummed with an awareness of the delicious woman sitting upon him. He wanted her, with a need that rivaled their first tumultuous mating. Gaven ran his thumbs over her hardened nipples.

She purred and rubbed herself into him. “You had to tell me with your mouth, Gaven. You had to love me, and then your curse would be lifted. You are bound to me forever now.” She raised a black brow, a wicked gleam cutting her features.

“Sweet, sweet, Apollonia. I think it’s the other way around.”

He moaned when she ran her hands over his chest and ripped off his shirt, the buttons popped every which way as tiny projectiles. Her skin touching his flesh was more than Gaven could stand and he sucked in a deep breath. “Nia,” he groaned.

Apollonia’s eyes were dark pools of desire. She lowered her head and circled first one nipple than the other. He pulled her down with him to the ground. “Ye lost another life, Nia. I’m beginning to think I’m a bad omen for ye,” he ground out, his head swimming with lusty thoughts, his body screaming for him to take this feisty woman and never let her go.

Her tongue lapped against his neck and down the hollow of his throat. She bit and nibbled at the flesh of his shoulder. A hot rush of blood shot to his erection, making him shiver and quake for her touch.

“I would have lost one anyway, Gaven. Your curse falls upon us.”

“What does Felis Concolor mean?”

“Means panther.” She smiled.

He groaned.

“I’m such an idiot, lass. Such a fool for never realizing. All those hints ye kept dropping.”

“Ssh.” She laid a finger against his lips and shook her head. “It’s over, Gaven. You did right in the end.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I left ye alone with that Semere. Ye could have died,” his voice broke.

“No, Gaven, you’re wrong.”

He cocked his head and trailed his fingers through her obsidian hair, curling a tendril of white around his finger. “How so?” he asked.

“That...that assassin was the one who killed my mother.” Her voice broke and she cleared it. “She helped me. I prayed to her and she helped me.”

“Och, lass.” The last of his pent up emotions came tumbling out and he shuddered. “I need ye.”

\* \* \*

Apollonia gazed at the man that she loved, his nearly violet eyes glittering with passion, his blond hair framing his drop-dead gorgeous features, and her heart flipped in her chest. She leaned in and laid a tender kiss against his firm lips, melting beneath the onslaught of his passion. His calloused hands ran up her bare back and made shivers of delight skitter through her veins. Goose bumps skimmed along her forearms, making the hairs stand on end.

His throbbing erection against the smoothness of her belly made all sorts of wanton thoughts flash through her mind. She couldn't believe it. He was hers. For all time.

"Gaven," she breathed and nuzzled his neck. He groaned and wrapped his arms tighter around her. She pulled back and pushed her hand against his smooth, firm shoulder. The muscles bunched underneath her palm and she trailed her fingers down his corded chest.

"Just relax," she whispered, "and let me love you."

That heart-shattering, knee melting smile crossed his features and he nodded. Apollonia bit her lip; she couldn't get enough of this virile man before her, his touch, his scent. He was no longer weak; this man was crackling with power and health. And she knew she'd never run in fear again.

She pushed her hair out of her face and threw it behind her shoulder, exposing herself to him completely. Gaven shuddered, his warm hands traveled up her ribcage, casting the chills from her heart. A wicked smile touched her lips.

"Och, sweet lass. Ye make me lose my mind. How did I ever make it without ye?"

Apollonia threw her head back, her fingers running through her hair and she wiggled her bottom on his hard shaft. She'd show him how a feline loved, with wild abandon.

His roughened palms grabbed both her breasts and he kneaded, eliciting a low moan from her lips. Her skin prickled, as if the icy waters of the streams had been poured over her. Even her scalp rose with goose bumps. Nothing had ever felt so good.

Her hands slid up the fabric of his jeans and she hooked her fingers under the waistband, giving a gentle tug. She unbuttoned and unzipped him. "Lift your hips, Gaven. I need to see all of you."

He did as she asked. Apollonia stood and pulled his pants down to his knees.

Gaven grabbed her wrist. "Just leave it, Nia, and get back on me."

With an adventurous toss of her head, she dropped back down on him, trapping his legs with her own, and rubbed herself into him. The liquid between her thighs reaching uncontrolled levels.

"Oomph, lass," he chuckled, his laughing blue eyes turning smoky with sexual awareness. "Ye are a little vixen, aren't ye?"

Apollonia threw her head back; bubbling laughter fell from her lips. "You have no idea, Gaven."

She trailed hot kisses along his collarbone, down his sternum. His body clenched in response. She dipped lower and rubbed her jaw against his velvet smoothness. His body convulsed for a second and he sucked in a deep breath. Apollonia closed her eyes and laved her tongue over him, humming as she did so.

He hissed, his brows lowered, and a low, rumbling moan tore from his lips. Gaven ran his hands through her hair in an agitated manner as he bucked underneath her.

"Now, Nia. Now," he ground out. He pulled her roughly, almost violently to him.



Her heartbeat skyrocketed and the blood rushed through her veins like an awakened river. Slithering back up his body, she centered her core over his shaft. The anticipation made her body tingle.

Gaven placed his hands on her hips and pushed her down. She hissed as his sleek, hardness rammed into her. They moved in unison, their bodies melding perfectly into one whole. One entity. He captured her lips with his own; his tongue darted out, demanding entrance to the warmth of her mouth.

Apollonia breathed into him, parting her lips a fraction of an inch. Gaven groaned, his body arching deeper into her hot center, his tongue swirling around hers.

He tasted of dark nights and endless passion. Their bodies slid against one another, the friction it created building a low hum of near orgasm in her lower abdomen. His body trembled underneath hers, sending tremors through her own. Apollonia hissed; rose-tinged nebulas exploded in her mind and her world slowly fragmented.

Gaven groaned. "Apollonia," he breathed, and he pumped, harder, faster into her.

She threw her head back, gritting her teeth and howled his name.

With one final thrust, Gaven cried out, a sound like that of an animal in heat. He panted and rolled them over, still connected, and laid his head on her shoulder.

She exhaled and stretched her body under his, enjoying each dip and curve she felt. Gaven laughed, the sound filled with joy and excitement.

"Och lass, ye'll be the death of me for sure," he whispered into her hair, planting a tiny kiss against her forehead.

Apollonia grinned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You sure you can handle me, Gaven?"

He growled and pinched her rear. "Is that a threat, lass?"

Her lips quirked and she hugged him. "My life will never be easy. This will not be the end. I'll be tracked for the rest of my life."

Gaven sat up and wrapped her legs around his waist. "Ye never did tell me, Nia, why they slaughter ye."

She gazed deep into his soulful eyes. "You haven't figured it out yet, Gaven? The Semere are a violent race who want total domination. They know that by killing off the talisman capable of healing the Rayven Curse, they kill off your clan as well."

He trailed his hands down her arms. "I swear to ye, Nia. They'll never touch ye again. Someday we'll get yer race back to the glory it once was, and save my people in the process."

She sighed and kissed his cheek. "You promise?"

"Aye. I promise, baby. I promise."

And in her heart she knew they would.

## *About the Author*

So let's see? The real Clara?

Well, she's married to the perfect husband; her "muse" she likes to call him. He's a tall dark-haired man with brilliant green eyes. Sound similar to one of her characters?

Yep, he was the inspiration for Nikolas, but that's where the similarities end. Her husband doesn't turn into a shaggy black beast when the moon goes full, though she's not sure she'd mind that. Two years ago they had a little boy, she like to call puppy, because he gets into everything.

Someday she hopes science will get to the point that we can learn to breath underwater and fly through the air. Until that day comes, feel free to join her in her dreams.

She loves to hear from her readers. Please visit her website at [www.claraverone.com](http://www.claraverone.com) for news on contests and information on upcoming books. Or email her at [songbird72180@aol.com](mailto:songbird72180@aol.com)