

Minaria lives in a world unlike the one we know. It's a world where Earth and Sky have been violently separated into two realms. Her home is on the ground beneath. It is a desolate wasteland where fierce dragons roam the land devastating the people.

*Or is it?*

On the day that should be the happiest of her young life Minaria's mind is troubled by dilutions haunted by the image of a man that no amount of potion seems able to drive away.

*But what if he's not?*

## DELFANIA'S TEARS

### **Chapter 1:**

Minaria stood before the full length mirror in her new husband's bedroom. Colden's chambers, though small, were warm and inviting. A fire crackled in the hearth opposite the bed. At the thought of where he slept Minaria's gaze shifted from the simple adornments and came to rest on its simple full-sized frame. An uneasiness settled heavy upon her shoulders. She supposed it was natural for a bride to be nervous on her wedding night. But this felt like more than cold feet.

Her focus settled once more on the mirror. She smoothed the silken ivory fabric draped around her, nervously pulling at the many layers of crinoline and gaudy embellishments of lace. Not exactly what she had imagined being married in. She shifted her gaze to study her reflection—a pair of chocolate brown eyes stared back at her. Long raven hair hung in delicate ringlets about her face and she was once again struck by the sense that the image in the glass was not right somehow. Beautiful, yes, but still somehow not her.

“You're right, you know. That isn't you. You are not his Minaria, daughter of the earth. You are my Leianna, child of the heavens,” A familiar voice whispered. Minaria gasped as the image of a man much like her husband appeared at her side in the looking glass. The only

differences between them were the golden flecks in his green eyes and the hint of red in his dark hair.

Minaria cursed. “Not again! I thought you were gone,” She grumbled with irritation. Minaria brushed a stray lock of her bangs back into place tucking it behind her ear. In the mirror for a moment her hair was the color of a golden sunset. She blinked and trembled with pleasure as the man at her side in the reflection caressed her cheek.

“I never left. You’ve only been ignoring me,” he assured her.

“That’s because you’re not real,” she hissed. Minaria turned from the looking glass to where the man should have been standing, but she was utterly alone.

“I may not be in the room with you, but I assure you I am as real as you are. You’ve forgotten yourself and all you knew, but I remain. If you do not snap out of this illusion, Leianna, then you will lose all,” he whispered.

Minaria reached into her purse and pulled out the small vial of herbs her Mother had recently given her. “Enough of this, I’ll not allow Colden to walk in and find his new bride talking to no one.” She snapped as she drew the stopper off the flask.

“Take all of that you like Leianna. It will not drive me away as you wish. I am no delusion.”

Minaria scowled at his reflection and took a large sip of the noxious fluid. She grimaced at the gritty texture in her mouth and the powerful aroma. Mother said it would start working within moments...the aromatic vapors both calming the nerves and quelling errant visions. After pacing restlessly for several minutes and glancing at the mirror-intruder’s still-present form several times, she groaned and threw down the useless vial, sending it shattering to the floor. “Why won’t you just leave me in my peace?” she murmured on the edge of tears. She turned

away from the mirror in the direction of the fireplace, grabbed a small broom and shovel and swept up her mess.

“Because deep down you know this is a lie,” he answered. Minaria turned back to the mirror to look at her incorporeal accuser. She noted that the apparition now stood near the nightstand. In between his hands on the table lay a dagger. Minaria swallowed back a lump in her throat making it hard to breath. She recognized it. The sickle-like curve of the blade; the detailed grip engraved to look like that of a bird; the opaque stone that shimmered with different colors in the warm candle glow. Minaria had seen it often of late in her dreams. Glancing over her shoulder once more, she looked to where the man should have been but he was not there. To her horror, the blade remained.

A chill ran down her spine- her heart raced and set the hairs on the back of her neck on end. Minaria warily crossed the room to the table. She studied the knife with disbelief.

*How could it be there? It wasn't real. It couldn't be.* Even as she thought it, pain exploded behind her eyes as a tidal wave of images poured out like water from a gushing dam.

She saw herself sitting in a chamber that at first she took to be her own so alike was it but then the painting over the fire caught her eye and she knew it was not the room that she'd been calling home. In her chambers the image was of a knight in full armor he sat atop his mount a beautiful white charger dressed for battle. The knight was set to ride off on an unknown quest; his lady stood close at hand wishing him farewell her long raven hair hung unbound and her hand reached out for him. Her token of favor hung from the hilt of his sword at his hip. It was a dreamy romantic piece she could see it with ease from where she slept at night. Minaria often studied it until dosing off and in sleeping she often came to dream about it. The image here was

very different it depicted a woman with golden hair caught upon the breeze dancing like a flag. She was mounted upon a great bird dressed in armor prepared to fly off to some unseen fate.

*What is this?* Minaria questioned and then found the chamber no longer empty. She sat, preparing herself for something and the man from the mirror he walked into the room behind her. He joined her at her chair, helping her with her necklace clasp. When the task was complete he bent and kissed the side of her neck.

“I’ll see to it you stay safe out there,” his words echoed in her mind.

*Safe from what?* Minaria wondered.

She blinked and upon opening her eyes again discovered she was walking down a long stone path, the man from the mirror close behind. Mist surrounded her like a blanket of fog yet moonlight poured down on her from above. She was striding towards something in the distance but she couldn’t remember what.

*A meeting? A gathering?*

The sky darkened. Looking up she froze—eyes wide with terror. The massive serpentine bodies of Dragons filled the sky above. Her companion shoved her aside as fire rained down. “Run!” He shouted the command and again she felt something in her stir. Minaria struggled with the burden of an all consuming fear but his command pushed her to act. When Minaria finally got her feet under her, she took off racing for the shimmering lake not far from her now.

As she reached the water’s edge she skidded to a halt, looking over her shoulder frantically for the deadly fire-breathers at her heels. Instead of the dragons, her eyes fell upon a great tree—it stood alone, withering and dying; its bark was gnarled and parched, branches cracked and twisted like eagle’s talons clawing their way towards the stratosphere. A shadow emerged from behind the tree and stepped forward. Surprisingly, he looked nearly identical to

her mirror-guardian, but she could see no subtle flecks of gold in his green eyes, no blaze of red within the black locks. It was Colden, her husband! He'd been waiting for her. She drew her dagger--her last defense. She lunged and swiped at him with the blade, driving him back several feet as he deftly leapt away from her attacks. She quickly dropped to her knees at the knotted, exposed roots of the large tree, beginning the task for which she had been called.

*What task? What am I doing here?* She asked herself, but before the answer could come, white-hot pain lanced through her torso and she doubled over as she writhed in agony.

Minaria screamed as she stared at Colden's sword blade sliced through her chest.

Reality crashed in on her once more and she fell to her knees crippled by shock and pain from the memory; her stomach wretched. *How could I forget this?*

## **Chapter 2:**

Colden made his way down the stone corridor of Haldir's Castle. His mind ran ahead of his steps as excitement filled him. He was on his way to his chambers where his new wife Minaria awaited him. His thoughts turned to her beauty and the pure joy she'd held in her eyes as they spoke their vows an hour earlier. Now that his duties as lord's son were concluded he was ready to partake in the pleasure of joining with his bride.

A happiness all his own, began to bubble up inside of him he'd waited so long for this day. Despite all the hardships she was his. That she loved him as much as he loved her was a miracle and a gift he'd feared never to receive.

As he opened the chamber door his joy died and he frozen in the entryway unsure what was happening. His mind hummed with alarm as he looked on Minaria. she lay upon the stone floor curled up on her side clutching her chest and gasping for air.

"Minaria, what's wrong? Are you all right?" Colden asked as he took his first tentative steps into the room closing the door behind him. If something was wrong he didn't want anyone else to know about it.

Colden watched as the gentle brown eyes that had held such love and trust earlier glared up at him; they now held rage, mistrust and contempt. To his disbelief the color within those orbs flared changing to a blue he'd hoped never to see again.

“Stay away from me Colden. I can't believe you would do this – I was starting to...we came near to...when you had...I...you're sick.”

“Minaria,” Colden's voice wavered and dread filled him.

“Don't call me that. It's not my name,” She hissed with disgust.

Colden felt his heart constrict. His worry gave way to fear as he crossed the floor to where Minaria lay. “Of course it is sweetie.”

“Don't come any closer,” She ordered as she pushed up off the floor and got to her feet.

“Minaria, my love, please...” Colden soothed, his green eyes pleading with his new wife to believe him, to not turn away from him.

“Stay back, Colden. You are not my husband.” She snapped as she reached for something on his dresser. Colden wondered what she meant to defend herself with but it was just out of his view.

“Minaria, listen to me you're confused again. Haldir told me what Gyan did to you. He took you from us, clouded your mind, and used my brother to control you. All so he could kill you for his god.” Colden said with revulsion.

“Haldir is a liar Colden. Stay away from me. One step closer and I'll finish what I started in the grove,” she warned as she revealed her weapon to defend herself at the sight if it Colden felt pain lance his heart. Her knife from the lake, he'd kept it as a reminder of what he'd had to endure to get her back. How ironic was it that once again she meant to harm him with it.

Colden cursed Delfania and her rush with restoring his love's mind. She assured him that when she woke Minaria would remember nothing of the false life she'd lived in the sky realm. But something had clearly gone wrong. She knew.

Colden swore understanding what it was she now believed. Killing her had been near impossible for him that she remember it now – thought him an enemy, tore at his heart and stole his breath away. “Minaria don't do this. I love you,” he murmured as tears welled in his eyes. Playing his part in her rescue had nearly undone him.

“My name is Leianna!” She snarled holding the dagger between them, poised to strike.

He felt betrayal and loss writhing in the pit of his stomach like some vial serpent. Despair rose up in him soul jaws gaping like a black abyss poised to devour him, threatening to take everything he cherished away.

Colden reached out to her trying to draw her close she flinched the blade shifted in her hand. He was aware for a moment of a sharp prick of pain as the blade pierced the skin of his hand. Colden drove back the sensation desperate to reach her. He recoiled as light enshrouded Minaria. It flared a brilliant blue-white and Colden reflexively threw up an arm to protect his eyes. When the light subsided, she was gone.

### **Chapter 3:**

Leianna felt a rush of heat as blue light engulfed her—a light so bright it was blinding. She closed her eyes to guard against it. Her heart ached for Colden’s pain and his heart-felt plea. He believed what he was saying. In his mind Gyan was her enemy and he’d rescued her in the grove. He loved her.

The heat that had enveloped her faded and was replaced by a bitter cold. Light faded. Leianna opened her eyes to darkness. She screamed, expelling her breath as she became aware she was surrounded by water. Fear gripped her as the weight of her wedding gown began to drag her deeper into the cold dark. She struggled to move. The dagger fell from her fingers and drifted away into the inky blackness beneath her. She kicked her legs with all her strength and clawed against the water, fighting her way towards the glowing light above her, praying it was the surface, imploring for air and life within her reach. As she broke through the surface she gasped, filling her lungs with oxygen.

Leianna felt the weight of her soaked gown pulling her back and flailed her arms again, struggling to stay above the surface. Water filled her mouth and she choked on the brackish liquid, coughing up fluid and spitting it out only to take another gulp-full. Tears stung her eyes

when she became aware she was fighting a losing battle. Her sodden clothes were too much weight; land was nowhere in sight. She'd escaped from one nightmare only to die in another.

Suddenly, a strong arm wrapped around her chest and neck. Panic seized her and she struggled to break free. More water poured into her mouth as she thrashed but the arm held firm. Leianna was aware of being dragged and felt the weight of her dress ease. Fear abated as she felt her toes scrape against the bottom. She soon felt stony earth beneath her and crawled onto higher ground, collapsing and curling herself into a ball.

Leianna coughed up the liquid she had swallowed during her battle to stay alive. Trying to sit up, she lifted her head and raised herself shakily up on her hands. She realized her mistake when dizziness and nausea swept over her as her arms gave out, nearly sending her head slamming onto the stone shore. Gentle hands caught her before she hit the ground.

"Easy, I've got you," her rescuer whispered. Leianna opened her eyes and looked up at his face. Green eyes stared down at her full of concern. Dark hair clung to his bronze skin.

*Colden!* Her mind warned. She screamed at the sight of him and shrank back from his touch, trying to get away.

"Leianna relax, it's me Aaron," he murmured as he brushed a strand of her soaked golden blonde hair out of her face. She looked at him again, closer, noting the golden flecks in his eyes that had been missing from Colden's and the slight red hue in his dark, wet hair. She smiled. It wasn't Colden. Leianna blinked as Colden's words echoed in her mind. Unbidden tears began to fall again.

*What have I done? I pledged my love to another man; worse still I married the enemy. If I hadn't seen my dagger when I did, I'd have given myself to Colden. Oh no, I've betrayed Aaron.*

“I thought you were a dream,” Leianna said aloud in her own defense before she broke down and sobbed miserably.

*How can I tell him? What will he say? What will he do?*

#### **Chapter 4:**

Aaron drew Leianna into his arms and held her close to him. He wondered what had left her feeling so dejected that she buried her face in his chest and wept bitter tears. But fear prevented him from asking she'd been gone for quite some time and he wasn't ready to hear what had befallen her in his absence. He was content to let her face stay hidden as he felt unable to face her due to his failure to protect her as he'd sworn to.

"I'm real," Aaron assured her. He kissed the crown of her head, part of him unable to believe she was there with him again. He'd dreamed of it many times but part of him had feared Gyan was wrong, that he would find no trace of her in the world below and she was dead, as he'd thought. She trembled in his arms. "I've got you – you're safe now." He assured her but to his dismay his words brought her no comfort her grief only grew. "I'm sorry," he whispered not knowing what was wrong; only wanting to comfort her.

A strangled cry cut through the dark that stopped Aaron's heart something was wrong.

"Leianna?" Aaron questioned with alarm. He felt her body go limp and she gave him no reply. Looking down, he lifted her head from his chest and found her face had gone white as snow. Her eyes had rolled back in her head as she slipped into unconsciousness. With a trembling hand Aaron reached out and placed his hand in front of her face checking to see she

still drew breath. He was relieved to find she yet lived. With care he gathered her in his arms, cradling her soaked form like a small child. With his precious cargo in hand, Aaron pressed the blue stone on the hilt of his sword. With a flash of light they were gone.

## **Chapter 5:**

Gyan stood adjusting the fire in his bed chambers. He watched as the moon began to rise and sighed. Another new moon and still no sign of Leianna it boded ill. Time was running out. As he tossed a new log on the flames Gyan saw a blue flash from behind. Turning, he found himself faced with Aaron. The young man was dripping wet, his clothes clinging to him. He held in his arms a pale and shivering woman. By God it was Leianna! She wore what must have been a wedding gown. It was marred with dirt and clung to her like a second skin; she was soaked through to the bone.

“What happened?” Gyan asked. He took the young woman from her guardian’s arms and lay her down on his bed.

“I don’t know. After I left you I went back to the grove, preparing to return to the land below. But as I approached the hole to drop through, I saw a flash over the lake. When I turned I saw bubbles rising from the depths so I dove in after the light. She broke the surface not far from me” Aaron explained as a shiver wracked his body and his teeth began to chatter.

“That water is freezing. Quick I have dry clothes in the chest at the foot board. Get them, and the furs. We need to get you both dry and warm,” Gyan said. He looked down at the unconscious woman and noted the black streaks in her hair. Disquiet settled in his stomach as he moved to her face. He lifted an eye lid with care and examined the eye beneath. Seeing brown bleeding into the blue he cursed. “She’s very ill,” he muttered to himself.

“What’s wrong with her?” Aaron asked as he handed his mentor the garments and blankets. He began disrobing and peeling the icy clothing off his body and quickly replaced them with warm leathers and the thickest linens he could find. His water-soaked clothes dropped to the floor with a squelching thud.

“Powerful spell. I need you to go back to the wastelands below. Get me phoenix tears.”

“Phoenix tears?” Aaron asked alarmed. His green eyes met with his mentor’s blue ones. His heart skipped a beat. Gyan never treated with them because of their rarity. Only the most severe of cases were even considered for the cure.

“No time for questions, son. Get going. I’ll do what I can for her,” the older man assured him, trying to alleviate his fears. His pupil had come to care a great deal for the girl. Perhaps too much, Gyan worried. He brushed the matter aside. He would deal with that secondary matter at a later time. He watched as the young man nodded and gave Leianna a lingering gaze before reaching for the hilt of his sword. Then, with a flash of light, he was gone. Gyan turned his full attention to the young woman in his charge. Deciding that no time could be wasted he drew upon his magic, drying out her gown and relieving her of the cold. “Forgive me child,” he whispered to the unconscious girl.

Calling upon the powerful, old magics, Gyan cast a spell he vowed once in his youth to never use. He watched with regret as the young woman’s form was slowly surrounded by an iridescent blue crystal that sprouted and grew from his fingertips until she lay encased in the diamond-hard material, like a fallen star of heaven. Her mind receded, driven by the spell, into a deep slumber. He sighed with relief when the work was done. It would hold back the poison seeping through her blood.

## **Chapter 6:**

Leianna blinked as she woke to find herself in the midst of a vast green field. “Where am I?” she murmured.

“You’re in the dream realm my lady Leianna,” a familiar voice answered.

She turned to see an older man with raven black hair with a dusting of silver. His blue eyes were warm and full of concern. “Gyan.”

“Yes,” he answered his voice weak with emotion.

“Why?”

“Your mind has begun to fracture. Only here can you hope to mend it,” he explained.

“How?” Leianna asked anxiety washing over her.

“The answers you need lay beyond the gate,” he answered. Leianna watched as the air shimmered before them and a large stone gateway with heavy oak doors materialized before her.

She nodded and with a tentative hand touched the doors. They swung open before her silently and she passed through, vanishing into the unknown.

## **Chapter 7:**

Aaron landed in the town square of a small village on the edge of the wastelands. A thick fog hung over the place that chilled him to the bone. The place had changed since the last time he was there. The crumbled remains of the piece of the sky realm that had fallen still lay there, but the busy town which had sprung up around it was now still and silent as a tomb. Buildings were scorched and blood stained the earth. Something terrible had happened there. As Aaron made his way through the ash and rubble toward the edge of the town, a fierce roar shook the world around him.

Fear—fast and shocking—shot through him, rooting him where he stood as a shadow cut through the fog. A gaping maw, teeth like daggers, flashed for him to see. An angry red scar cut across the brow bone of the dragon. Aaron cursed at the sight of it. A fierce, yellow, cat-like eye locked its gaze with its prey. The beast roared as those far-seeing eyes gleamed with recognition. Thick leathery wings cleared away the mist to reveal the long, green, serpentine body; enraged claws extended as the dragon dove towards the one who had injured it.

“Move!” Aaron ordered himself but was unable to heed the command, trapped by the beast’s magic in a fear that stopped the heart of weaker men. He watched the jaws of the great reptile close in and his mouth went dry. Death was imminent. He swore again, knowing that he’d

die having failed to uphold his vow. He wondered if hell would be as painful as knowing that he'd failed to save Leianna...twice. He couldn't imagine how it could be.

Aaron felt the rush of air as the dragon drew breath; he looked on helplessly as the jaws opened, belching fire before it. He saw a blur of green and felt a jolt of force as something collided with him. The earth gave way under his feet. His gaze moved from yellow eyes and deadly flames to blue sky as his head struck the ground. He heard the dragon roar in rage and pain before suddenly retreating. An arrow raced after it. Aaron blinked as the dragon's thralldom weakened. When he opened his eyes again he found a woman with worried brown eyes set in pale green skin and long flowing chocolate brown hair staring back at him.

"Are you all right?" She asked her voice was deep, it held power, but was pleasing to the ear.

"Yes, I think so," Aaron replied.

"Good then get up. It's not safe here. He'll come back," she snapped with annoyance as she held out her hand.

Aaron took it and was surprised by her strength when she pulled him to his feet. "Thank you," he breathed.

"What are you doing on the edge of the wastelands, sky dweller? It's not safe down here. The dragons have over run it," the woman scolded.

"I have to reach the mountain cliffs."

"Why?"

"My master sent me for phoenix tears." Aaron answered as he dusted himself off.

"You can't hope to get there on your own. I will be your guide. Pay me and I will see to it you get there safely." The woman stated as she shouldered her bow.

Aaron eyed her with mistrust. When he passed through this area before, her people had told him that Leianna had wandered out into the waste. It had proved to be a lie. He wasn't sure he should trust her now, despite that she'd saved him. Haldir's spies were many and he enjoyed setting his traps. "How much?"

"Ten rubies half for the journey, and half for the rescue ."

"Done," Aaron answered. He'd accept her aid, but the moment he felt she was misleading him; he'd not hesitate to leave her. "I am Aaron," he stated as he handed over the gems.

"Delfania," she answered, accepting her fee. "Come. We should get out of the open," she urged, and the pair set off to the west, exiting the ruined city and entering the dry emptiness of the waste.

## **Chapter 8:**

Leianna walked through the heavy doors, her nerves on edge. On the other side, she found nothing; an empty expanse of black. Frightened, she tried to go back. The doors slammed shut behind her, leaving her in the utter darkness as the gateway faded. She called for Gyan but received no response. Around her all was still and silence. How was she to move on from this place? She closed her eyes and sought the answer.

For the first time in a long while she found the answers came easily. No pain stirred in her head. She pictured herself sitting at her wash basin—where Aaron had kissed her before—her eyes focused on her reflection. The image reflected was of a young woman with hair the color of sunset, framing a face of golden tan; her eyes were the color of the morning sky. When Leianna opened her eyes, the darkness was gone and she stood in the center of her room.

The young woman still sat at the wash basin; frozen, unmoving. She wore a simple white gown; her hair was twisted back with a few strands hanging loose around her face. “I was preparing for something,” she murmured into the silence and she watched as the young woman began to move. She set a bracelet on her wrist and set a crown on her brow. The image of a man appeared in the mirror and the girl smiled. She turned.

“Aaron,” she said in greeting.

“Leianna, are you ready?”

“Yes, just need to put on my necklace,” she muttered as she picked up a gold chain.

“Here. Let me,” he offered, crossing to where she sat. She turned back to look at the mirror. He took the chain from her and opened it. “Relax. I’ll see to it you stay safe,” he murmured and then kissed her neck. She blushed and he took her hand in his. “Come. It’s time,” he whispered.

The image froze, shimmered and wavered. It reminded her of ripples on a pond. When it stilled, the picture had changed. The girl now had Raven colored hair; her eyes were rich umber, and the dress she wore was a long, flowing white gown. An older woman with a similar appearance to hers now held the girl’s hand. “Come on my sweet, it’s time,” the woman murmured.

“My wedding,” Leianna murmured with recognition. Maybe that was what she had been getting ready for. Leianna watched as the image splintered and the first was restored beside it. Both memories were frozen she stared at them trying to understand what was happening.

“Can you tell which life is yours? Do you know truth from lie?” A voice questioned from behind her.

Leianna turned and was once more surrounded by darkness. “What do you mean?” she asked with alarm.

“You see before you two lives. Both yours. One is the life your soul has chosen, the other is the one to which your spirit is called to. Can you tell the two apart? Only one woman can exist. Will you live as the child of the Earth, Minaria, or the child of heaven, Leianna? You cannot exist as both. You must choose.” The voice answered. It came from the flicker of a small flame that began to glow before her.

Leianna blinked and turned back to the frozen memories. She looked at Aaron with longing even as Colden's declaration of love echoed in her mind. She wept, torn, and watched with a growing sense of regret as the two memories played out side by side. In one, Aaron led her into the grove only to be ambushed by dragons. She saw herself racing through the destruction towards the tree. There was something she had to do there. Her path was barred by Colden. She drew her dagger, driving him back. She worried over Aaron's safety. Kneeling beneath the tree, she felt its pain, and then her own. Then, she was falling...

In the other, the woman she'd called mother led her down a similar aisle to stand beside Colden. She watched her self taking his hand, speaking her vows, exchanging rings; she felt the warmth of his kiss.

"Vows..." The words slipped from her lips and the images again grew still. She'd spoken a vow in her youth. A secret she'd kept from all. She'd promised Gyan to do something. Something that left her sad.

## **Chapter 9:**

Colden approached the small home with caution. He was no longer in friendly territory. The ones who dwelt in the sky were not to be trusted. In particular, Gyan, the wizard who had stolen his beloved Minaria and filled her mind with lies. Confusing her so that she did not know friend from foe. He could not afford to be brash now. His love was inside and she needed him now more than ever. Despite his warnings for caution, he burst through the front door as he felt his wife's fear spike and pain lance through her—something was wrong.

Stepping through the door, he was surprised to find no one before him, and rather modest accommodations. A fire blazed in the small hearth. It didn't befit a power-mad mage, he told himself. As the thought ended, his eyes caught an image that turned his blood cold. Any doubts as to where he was left his mind. There, on the bed encased in crystal, still clad in her wedding gown, was Minaria.

He gasped as an older man with black and silver hair stepped into the room from behind closed door. Rage filled him and reason departed. "What have you done to my wife?" Colden demanded as he drew his sword, prepared to face the enemy head on.

## **Chapter 10:**

Gyan studied the warrior with question. He'd heard Aaron's story of a twin slaying the girl but had not believed it. "I have done all that I can to save the lady Leianna from Haldir's dark magic. Who are you boy?"

"Liar! Haldir told me what you did to my Minaria. You stole her from her Mother. Bent her memories and twisted her mind so that she believes she is your ruler. You took my brother and used him against her to gain her trust, so that she would do your bidding. If I hadn't intervened, you'd have slaughtered her like a lamb for your god." Colden spat in rage.

"You are mistaken son. About a great many things. But most of all, about being Aaron's brother. I brought him into this world and I can assure you he had no twin. I don't know who you are, but Haldir has lied to you."

Colden, outraged, stepped toward the mage and pressed his blade to his throat. "Save your lies wizard. Aaron may believe them, but I will not. I know who I am. I remember..."

"I'm sure you do, just as Leianna remembers the lies your master planted in her mind." Gyan said with sympathy. A cold wind gust through the chamber putting out the fire. Dark smoke billowed and bloomed. When it cleared, standing next to the crystal, holding the sleeping girl was a man garbed in dragon scale armor. His eyes were black as coal. His skin a pale green.

His hair was the color of dark green and rich earth, long, and gathered elegantly at his back. Gyan watched with a growing sense of dread as the evil mage reached out a strong hand and caressed the crystal facade of Leianna's face. Something lit in Haldir's eyes; something dark and dangerous that Gyan knew well but from the look on the man Colden's face he had not.

"My, Gyan, I must say I am impressed. You do exquisite work. She's absolutely stunning, your Leianna. So much like the Mother she was created from."

"You said..." Colden began with confusion.

"I said a great many things to you my boy." Haldir said with a laugh His black eyes studied the sleeping figure Gyan saw the spark of triumph in his eye the moment Haldir noted the raven colored hair mixed in with the blonde. The evil mage smiled pleased. "I see Colden's mission was a successful one. Her appearance changes. Her nature has begun to shift."

"She has not made her choice yet Haldir. She has not yet chosen a mortal path. Within the crystal, time does not touch her. You know that very well," Gyan hissed.

"Yes, but she won't stay there for long. A shame that Colden didn't get to complete the task for which I prepared him. No matter. I can more than handle it. Soon, she like the mother from who she came, will be nothing more than human." Haldir mocked.

"Get away from her," Colden demanded. Gyan watched as the boy turned his blade from his neck to block the path of his master.

"Foolish puppet. You dare raise that steel against me, your master?" Haldir snarled. With the flick of his wrist, the blade came free of Colden's hand and alighted in his own. He pressed the blade against the young man's throat.

"I won't let you hurt her," Colden hissed in defiance.

Haldir laughed. "You served my purposes well boy, but I no longer have need of you," the mage seethed; his voice cold as the arctic wind. Colden cried out in pain as his master drove the blade through his side. Colden dropped to the floor and Haldir turned his attention once more to the crystal and the woman trapped within.

"I'll not let you take her again," Gyan warned.

"Yes, you will. You only have power left for one spell. You can stop me and let the boy die. But if you let the boy die, Aaron will die with him. Or you can let me go and you can save them both," Haldir said. Gyan saw the delight in his enemy's eyes and knew somehow he spoke the truth. Defeated, the older man turned his efforts towards Haldir's crumpled puppet before the dark wizard vanished with the girl.

## **Chapter 11:**

Delfania knelt on the snowy mountain peak beside a large bolder. She worked with care to secure a pair of ropes that she and Aaron would use to grapple down to the jagged cliff below where a nest sat in the midst of three rocks. With her work done she looked up as her employer sighed with relief, it seemed he was as pleased at having reached his destination as she. He turned from where he stood staring at their goal to look at her. A smile curved his lips and they parted but no sound passed them.

Delfania looked on with concern as winced in pain and his legs went weak as he fell to his knees.

“Aaron are you all right?” She questioned her brown eyes widening with alarm.

To her growing disquiet she watched as his gaze settled on her lips studying them intently he rubbed his ear as if trying to clear it out. She realized something was very wrong he was aware she had spoken but had heard nothing.

Delfania moved to his side, turning him over so his head lay in her lap. She gasped with terror as blood bloomed on his white shirt and began to seep out of him. She untucked the shirt and found a deep blade wound in his side. Delfania ripped off a large piece of his shirt and

pressed it against the wound to slow the bleeding. She lowered her head to his chest and listened. The beat there was weak and wavered.

Delfania swallowed back her fear which threatened to choke her as she lifted her head from his chest. She watched as he drew an uneven breath. His arms curled reflexively around his body and she knew he was in agony. She touched his face—the lines of it so familiar. She watched, horror struck, aware he was dying in her arms. The world around her fell silent and left her acutely aware of the pounding of her own wild heart beat drumming in her ears as life rapidly drained from his features.

*What had happened to him?*

Delfania realized she should have been relieved at what was happening after all she'd been sent out here by her husband to stop Aaron from obtaining his goal; to help Colden complete his mission. She'd not been able to kill Aaron as Haldir instructed due to his looking so much like the boy she'd raised. This took the task out of her hands and yet she felt no ease at the turn of events before her. Instead she watched him helplessly as he grew pale and the shirt darkened to deep red. She could not staunch the bleeding.

Tears pricked Delfania's eyes as she called out the name of her own child—calling Colden—and holding this dying man to her breast. The truth hit her like a physical blow she could not have hoped to end Aaron. When she saw him in the village the dragon bearing down on him she'd simply reacted on instinct believing him to be the child she loved. Upon learning he was the enemy she'd offered to lead him here. Telling herself she'd cut his rope or push him from the cliff to complete her mission, but Delfania understood now in that moment she'd never intended to harm Aaron. She buried her face in his shoulder and began to cry wishing that now she had back that which she'd foolishly surrendered in her youth.

A bird shrieked somewhere in the distance. Delfania lifted her head and watched with amazement as a beautiful phoenix, red gold, like the sun, with flowing plumage that cascaded like a rainbow alighted on the snow beside her. It looked down at the man in her arms and screeched. Delfania stared into its beautiful golden eyes, pleadingly. "Please, help us," she whispered, through her tears.

"I cannot Delfania. His wound is not one my tears can heal," the phoenix answered, but it did not depart instead it rest a great wing over her shoulder in a show of comfort. She accepted the touch felt her own spirit ease and her mind cleared.

"We came for your tears, please..."

"Yes and you shall have them, if I am still here to give them."

## **Chapter 12:**

Gyan drew the sword from the man named Colden's body and laid his hands upon the wound. Drawing upon his power, he used all that he had within him to mend the boy's broken flesh. The power flowed from his palms, and he felt the pieces of torn flesh knit back together, organs and sinews were restored. He willed blood to be renewed within the boy's body, to replace that which was lost.

Gyan watched with relief as color returned to the man's face and his heart beat grew steady. After several moments, Colden opened his eyes weakly and stared into Gyan's face with question. Gyan felt the boy's confusion and wished there was something he could do to ease it but his body was too weak to work anymore magic. No doubt he wondered why the man he'd called his enemy had saved his life

The boy blinked to clear his vision and then stared at the mage holding him with shock. Gyan looked up at his reflection and understood the cause his hair had gone completely silver; he had aged many years marked by the deep lines around his eyes and mouth.

Gyan watched as anger filled the boy.

"Haldir!" Colden shouted the name and Gyan realized that the boy's memory of the events before had come crashing back in on him.

“Gone. He took Leianna with him,” Gyan answered; his voice was weak.

“I have to get her back.”

“No, you must go to the place of your birth and seek the truth. There is a magic at work here I know not of and I fear that until I sort through it, you and Aaron both are in grave danger,” Gyan warned.

Colden nodded. He took up his discarded sword, still coated with his blood. “I will not rest until vengeance is mine.” The boy declared and Gyan shook his head as Colden departed. It was clear he had no idea who his master was.

### **Chapter 13:**

Delfania watched with wonder and disbelief as the wound killing Aaron vanished. He opened his eyes as if waking from a nap. ““What happened?” he questioned, trying to remember.

“I don’t know. One minute you were fine, the next you were dying in my arms.” Delfania responded, helping him gently to his feet.

“You called me Colden.” he said, recalling her cry.

“Yes. Colden is my son. You look...”

“Who are you Delfania?” Aaron demanded.

“I was sent by my husband to kill you. So that my son could complete his mission,” Delfania said with remorse.

“But you couldn’t because you saw your son. What was he supposed to do?”

“He was to marry Leianna and settle her into an ordinary life. Diminish her,” Delfania replied.

“Diminish her? How? Why?” Aaron asked.

“I don’t know,” Delfania confessed.

## **Chapter 14:**

Aaron paced angrily, trying to make sense of the matter. The phoenix waited patiently for the two to focus their attention again on the task at hand. Sighing, Aaron turned towards the beautiful bird. “Forgive me...” he said.

“You came here for my tears and you shall have them. Each of you,” the phoenix said gently, and crystalline tears fell from its eyes, coming to rest on the rocky earth.

He bowed his head in thank you to the sacrifice of the great bird. With care, Aaron collected the tears that would cure his love. He watched as Delfania did the same. He considered her. Part of him wanted to kill her, but something in him stayed his hand. His gaze lingered a moment longer and their eyes met. He saw sadness in her face that he had not seen before. There was no more time for questions, though. He stepped back and rested his grip on the hilt of his sword. Delfania looked at him questioningly before he activated the traveling stone of his blade and vanished.

## **Chapter 15:**

Leianna studied the two women she had been and struggled to recall what it was she vowed to do.

*Why does it hurt me?* She looked at the two brothers and pain washed through her. She loved them both. How could she? One had slain her and then lied to her. He'd tricked her into thinking she loved him. Though she knew this to be true, it changed nothing – she loved him still.

“Aaron I'm so sorry,” she whispered, ashamed of herself. She looked down to the ring on her finger and found it was not Colden's. Aaron had never given her a ring.

*Whose is it? What have I forgotten?*

“You are more than they would make you.” The voice reminded from behind her and she trembled with fear as a third image appeared between the two memories. In it she saw the world itself. The sky realm hung in the clouds fertile and green, thriving; all but the tree in the grove. It was dying and she felt its pain. The world below was overrun by dragons. The earth was scorched and dead; a wasteland. The tree called out to her and Leianna wept.

## **Chapter 16:**

Aaron appeared in Gyan's house. He found the fire dead and a pool of blood on the floor.

There was no sign of Leianna anywhere.

"Gyan?" Aaron called with uncertainty afraid that there would be no answer.

"Aaron?" Gyan's weak voice responded.

"Yes. What happened here? Where is Leianna?"

"Haldir took her."

"No! Why didn't you stop him?"

"I couldn't. There was no time. I had someone else to tend to," Gyan said cryptically.

"Who was more important than her? The ceremony..."

"There is still time. He will take her to his castle. You must reach her with the cure before it's too late."

"What was wrong with her?"

"Nothing that concerns you boy. She'll be fine so long as you get her those tears." Gyan snapped.

"I met a woman while I was below by the name of Delfania. She said that Leianna was wed to Colden...that she was to be diminished. What does that mean?" Aaron demanded.

“Leianna is not like us. She is not mortal.” Gyan answered.

Aaron blinked. “Marrying him is what made her ill. If I asked...”

“Don’t. You haven’t the time to dwell on it. You must go now. Haldir will wake her. He’ll use her own mind against her to finish what he sent Colden to do,” Gyan warned. “Go now.”

Aaron nodded. He turned and left, heading back once more to the grove and the world below. His heart was heavy as he struggled with a truth that stole his breath; to love Leianna was not possible. It would only end up killing her.

## **Chapter 17:**

Colden arrived in the village he remembered being born in. His mind was plagued with doubt as Haldir's words echoed in his mind. He moved through the village, keeping his face hidden beneath a hooded cloak. He stepped into the tavern and took a seat at the bar.

"What'll you have?" asked the slender, middle-aged bartender.

"A pint of ale and some information," Colden answered as he set money down for the bartender.

"What about?"

"Wondered if you remembered the Kisage family?"

"That's a name I haven't heard in a long time. Sad business, that." The man answered as he set the pint down in front of his customer.

"What do you mean?"

"Husband and wife had a remarkable boy. Then one day someone stole him. Mother died of grief. Husband, he followed after her. No one ever saw the boy again."

"Don't you mean boys?"

"Boys? Nope just one lad. Old mage Gyan, from above, he delivered the child. Told me about it; said he was special. Never explained."

"What was the boy's name?"

"Aaron."

"I see." Colden said and he rose from his seat.

"Why the interest?"

"I was a friend of the family. I'm sorry to hear of their loss," Colden lied before he left. His mind reeled. Who was he? What was he? Rage built within him as he came to the conclusion

only one person could tell him. With fear in his belly and revenge in his heart, Colden set off for Haldir's castle and the answers he sought.

## **Chapter 18:**

Delfania made her way through the castle hallway in the direction of the throne room. She pushed through the doors and blinked at the sight of the girl she'd of late called daughter, encased in crystal and laying upon the dais. Her husband stood over the imprisoned figure; eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Colden found her then?” Delfania asked.

“Yes, he did. Were you successful?”

“Where is our son? Why is his bride here and not in his chambers?” Delfania questioned.

“Colden is...”

“Is what? Who am I Haldir? Where did I come from? I want the truth.” Colden demanded as he entered the throne room.

“I see. Gyan was able to save you then. Since you're alive and well, I take it that means your mother was unable to complete her task and Aaron yet lives. No matter, I'll deal with him as well.”

“Answer me!” Her son demanded.

“As you wish, but remember you wanted to know.” Haldir clasped his hands behind his back, looking mildly amused. Delfania felt her stomach churn as she moved to the boy's side she

rest her hands on his shoulders in a show of support and affection. Whatever her husband said would not be pleasant for Colden to hear.

“When the boy Aaron was young, I stole him from his parents and split his soul in two. Half remained with him and I left him in the sky realm to fulfill his duty as the girl’s protector. From the other half, I fashioned you. A twin that never existed. The perfect puppet to bring about the fall of Gyan’s precious Leianna and ensure that I remain the most powerful mage to ever live.” Haldir said. The smile on her husband’s lips was a sinister one that tore at her heart.

*How can he be so cruel to son?*

She felt Colden flinch under her touch before he stepped away from her towards Haldir.

“Not real?” Colden asked she noted his voice held alarm.

“That’s right boy. You are nothing,” Haldir answered. “Guards, get him out of here,” he commanded

Delfania watched with fear as the boy was lead away without a fight by two of his armored troops. His green eyes were empty. No will remained in him. Her gaze moved to that of the man she called husband and noted with disgust his eyes gleamed with delight as their child was lead away broken.

*What did I ever see in him?*

“What do you think you are doing?” Delfania questioned.

She looked on as Haldir’s gazed moved from the boy to her. Almost as if he’d forgotten she was there.

*How could he forget me after all that I’ve done for him? Was Gyan right all along?*

“The boy has served his purpose and stands in open defiance against me. He is no longer of any use to me,” Haldir answered.

Delfania trembled realizing he now considered ending the boy – her son. She understood now Haldir had never cared for Colden he looked upon him a mere puppet. “We still need him to finish what he started with her,” Delfania stated calmly trying to reason with the man letting none of her contempt show. For her to save the boy he had to believe she didn’t care. So, in silence behind a mask of cold indifference her heart bled for her son’s pain.

“No we don’t the task I gave him I can as easily complete but I will spare him I look forward to putting that same look on Aaron’s face.”

“Why would your desire to see the look on Aaron’s face stay your hand my lord?” Delfania questioned.

“If I kill the puppet Aaron will die with him they are one.

“I see.” Delfania felt ill as she realized then what had happened on the mountain to Aaron. Haldir had tried to kill her son and he’d not hesitate to do so again if it served his purpose. She had to get Colden and the girl out of there. Her husband had gone mad.

“Now come we have work to do. I’ll need you to build the illusion of course, as you are the master at it,” Haldir murmured. He touched the crystal holding the girl and drawing upon his magic, began undoing Gyan’s spell. The crystal shards began melting away like ice would. Water, pouring off of the slumbering girl and releasing her from her sleeping prison.

“Of course,” Delfania answered. She felt her heart break as she watched the man she’d once love run his fingers down the girl’s cheek, his eyes gleaming with anticipation and pleasure.

“I must prepare for Aaron’s arrival. Prepare the spell.”

Delfania nodded she watched as Haldir departed to lay his trap for the girl’s protector. Once he was gone, she crossed the room to the dais where Leianna lay. Taking out the small vial

with her phoenix tears Delfania poured them down the sleeping girl's throat. "Forgive me for the harm I've caused you," she whispered.

She strode across the room to the corner, pulling down a red velvet curtain that covered the body of a man with golden skin and blue eyes who stood encased in crystal. Drawing the spell Haldir had used from her memory, she stretched out her own power and melted the crystal. The man within blinked.

"Watch over the girl. I have to get my son," she whispered. The man nodded and watched silently as she turned and departed.

## **Chapter 19:**

Colden sat in the cold, musty cell. Oblivious to his surroundings, he was lost in the prison of his own mind. Haldir's words cut into his very being.

*You're nothing.* He trembled with fear as he wondered what would become of him, then told himself it didn't matter if he wasn't real—he wasn't whole. Everything he'd thought and felt was a lie, or worse, only an echo of Aaron's thoughts and feelings. He'd hurt and betrayed the woman he loved. Deceived her and delivered her right into Haldir's hands.

Whatever fate Haldir had designed for him, Colden figured hell waited on the other side of it. He wondered morosely if a person who didn't exist could be damned to hell. That didn't matter either, he decided. Nothing did. He was nothing. Colden watched as his cell door opened and Delfania stepped inside. She unshackled his wrists.

"Come on. We have to go," she urged.

"Go where? What for?" he mumbled. His head fell and his eyes looked absently at the moldy, straw-covered floor.

"That's not true Colden. You are my son and a piece of Aaron's soul. That makes you Leianna's protector and she needs you," Delfania argued.

"I'm not real."

“You are to me.” She knelt before him and hugged him, resting her cheek on his forehead. Her tears fell on his brow. “Now go before Haldir comes back,” Delfania commanded.

Colden’s mind grew silent. He nodded. “What about you? If you stay he’ll kill you,”

“It doesn’t matter. I caused this; I will end it,” Delfania whispered. The two made their way from the cell—Delfania led him back to Leianna without incident. He took the girl in his arms quickly and fled. Once he was gone, she sat down on the dais in the throne room and awaited Haldir’s return.

## **Chapter 20:**

Aaron stood in the sacred grove beneath the dying tree. He peered down through the hole that allowed him to pass to the world beneath and swallowed the lump in his throat making it hard to breath. As deep as the hole was, it was nothing compared to the gaping hole that Gyan's words had left in his heart. Leianna could never be his.

"Don't bother going back. I have her," His own voice echoed from behind him. Aaron turned and rage filled him at the sight of the man so like himself in appearance, but nothing like him at all. The man cradled Leianna as he had upon drawing her from the lake.

"Give her to me," Aaron demanded. Colden ignored him instead he laid her upon the ground under the shade of the dying tree. He knelt at her side and whispered an apology.

Aaron stepped between them, sword raised. "Get away from her. You have no right to be here. Do you know what you've done to her?"

"I have every right. She's my wife."

"No, she isn't. If you'd not deceived her, brother..." Aaron began his voice rising with his growing fury.

"I am not your brother. We are the same. Haldir took you from your parents as a child and he severed your soul. I'm the other half." Colden snapped with disgust.

“So, that is the answer to the riddle,” Gyan said as he emerged from the shadows. He looked down at Leianna. “She has been given the cure but the spell has not been undone.”

“I still have it.” Aaron said confused. He recalled Delfania had been given a share of the tears as well. “Delfania?”

“Mother bid me bring her.”

“I see. It seems that perhaps after all this time Delfania has seen Haldir for what he truly is.”

“Why would she help us?” Aaron asked.

“Perhaps for the love of a son,” Gyan answered.

“Why won’t she wake?” Colden asked.

“Her mind still travels in the dream realm. Hurry child, time grows short,” Gyan whispered to the sleeping girl.

## **Chapter 21:**

Leianna watched with surprise as the two memories overlapped Aaron and Colden becoming one man as her mind whispered secrets to her. She smiled for a moment, but the tree in the other image cried out to her and pain ran through her. She stepped into the memory where Aaron waited for her. She slid into the circle of his embrace and for a moment, allowed herself to be held.

“Aaron I know I’d like nothing more than to stay here in this dream with you forever. To grow old with you and bear you children. I promised you my heart and I would gladly give it to you, as I love you more than you can possibly know...But I can’t. I made another promise long ago. One that I cannot turn from; not even for a lifetime with you.” Leianna whispered before she buried her face in his shoulder. Tears fell from her eyes as the man she loved ran his fingers through her hair, trying to comfort her. She lifted her head and stared into his eyes; blue met with green. Leianna sank her fingers into his hair as her lips met his.

She kissed him, pouring out all the love she felt for him, taking this last moment before drawing back. She turned as the image froze and stepped into the other vision. With slow determined strides, she approached the tree. Leianna touched the trunk. “I’m sorry I forgot my promise,” she whispered through her tears. She looked back at Aaron for a moment, and then dried her eyes. “I’m ready.”

## **Chapter 22:**

Haldir stepped back into his throne room eyes gleaming with excitement. His trap was ready. It wouldn't be long now until he won all. As he approached the dais he looked at Leianna with pleasure. His fingers ran down her cheek and the length of her swan like neck. She was lovely to behold and her golden skin soft to the touch. Gyan had created a masterpiece in her. Haldir trembled with anticipation for the moment when he'd take her innocent body, diminishing her to mere mortal. Enslaving her power to his will as he'd done to the woman she was forged from.

“Our time has come my precious Minaria. Soon you will share your wedding bed with me,” he breathed before brushing a kiss on her brow. His fingers skimmed down her arm brushing over shoulder and wrist to play over her open palm. “Delfania, it's time,” he called, summoning his mage to create the illusion he desired. It would ensure the girl surrendered herself freely to him. No answer came. He wondered where she was, but dismissed the matter, figuring she'd returned to her chambers to prepare the requested spell. He would wait for her.

Haldir interlaced his fingers with the sleeping girl's, picturing her pinned down, pressed against his bed as he took her. He lifted his hand from hers and his fingers moved on to her collar

bone and the swell of her breasts above the neckline of her gown. Unable to resist the impulse he lowered his head and kissed her.

The girl's eyes shot open—not Leianna's blue or Minaria's brown, but an angry golden brown with an amber glow. Haldir drew back. His temper flared as the image of the girl faded and he found Delfania lying before him.

“How dare you? What have you done? Where is the girl?” Haldir roared. His hand flew in temper, striking the woman he called wife in the face.

### **Chapter 23:**

Delfania licked away blood from her split lip, her own rage radiated from her as she sat up. “How dare I? How could you? There was a time I believed in you and when I was foolish enough to believe you loved me. I gave up everything for you. Tore the world apart, prolonged your very existence...all in the name of love! I never once asked for anything of you in return and you’d have destroyed my son and betrayed my love for her!” Delfania shouted.

“That boy isn’t real,” Haldir spat. “I’ll give you another.”

“He was real to me! You’re a monster Haldir. I’ll not allow you to do this,” Delfania snapped as she rose to face him.

“Delfania, you disappoint me,” he said with regret. He reached out, taking her chin in his hand; his thumb brushing her lower lip. “Do you really believe, weakened as you are, you can hope to stand against me,” he mocked. Haldir laughed at her.

Delfania’s eyes took on a new light—the amber brown melted into a rich, dark gold. Her skin paled, losing its green hue and her dark hair smoldered into auburn. She recoiled from his touch as lightning suddenly flashed in the chamber, striking him.

Haldir turned, searching for a spell as his eyes locked with a pair of blue ones—the man Delfania had released from his prison. He cursed. “Delfania no, what have you done?” he questioned with disbelief.

Her hand touched his shoulder as words of magic poured from her lips. Haldir screamed as green crystal formed around his feet and began to grow around him. “Undone my mistake of the past,” She answered before she fell to her knees, her body weak. The other mage with eyes like the sky moved to her side and gathered her in his arms. He aged before her. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“No need. Thank you, my wife,” he whispered. He kissed her and her body shimmered. The light grew brighter and heat engulfed them. She burst into flame that consumed them both.

## **Chapter 24:**

Leianna lay beneath the branches of the dying tree in the sacred grove. Gyan stood at a distance watching and waiting. Leianna eyes were still closed in sleep, her appearance unchanged. The dark magic within her was still tearing away at her spirit. Aaron knelt at her left, his head bowed and eyes closed. He held her hand, waiting for her to wake. At her right was Colden. He held her other hand. He stared at her face, pleading with her silently to open her eyes.

Light shimmered suddenly. Her raven strands poured into gold. Colden gasped. Aaron's head lifted and his eyes opened. He held his breath as Gyan came to stand behind him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“She's made it through. Soon,” Gyan whispered. Aaron nodded.

Long lashes parted revealing blue eyes. Leianna blinked, her eyes feeling gritty as if she'd slept a long time. She tried to focus. The first thing she saw was the tree. She sighed and heard a breath expelled. She turned towards the sound and her eyes met Aaron's as he stared at her with relief. She smiled, and then turned to see Colden and tears began to fall from her eyes.

Colden let go of her hand. “Leianna I'm...”he began but she lifted her hand to his lips stopping him.

“No need for that now. I understand,” She whispered. She let go of Aaron’s hand and rose to her feet. Leianna reached out a hand to touch the tree.

“My lady its time,” Gyan said.

Leianna looked at him and noted he’d aged greatly. “Can I have a moment,” she questioned, looking back to Aaron and Colden. Gyan nodded. “Thank you,” she murmured with a smile. Leianna moved to Colden’s side. She reached out and brushed an unruly strand of his hair away from his green eyes. “You are as real to me as Aaron is. I love you with all my heart, my husband,” she whispered and she brushed his lips with a tender kiss. Colden drew her into his arms and held her close for a moment, his fingers brushed through the long tresses of her blonde hair.

She drew away from him and turned to Aaron. He lifted his head which had fallen as pain pricked his heart and jealousy bloomed. “Aaron do not despair, for you have lost nothing. He is a part of you. I have always loved you and though he placed this band on my finger, it is yours as well,” she whispered before she kissed him. Aaron groaned, overwhelmed by the feeling of her lips pressed against his. He drew her against him, hands sinking deep in her hair and around her back, straining for more, which she gave him without hesitation.

Aaron took greedily as she yielded to him control. He opened his eyes and watched as tears ran down her cheeks, eyes hidden behind her lashes. Aaron drew his right hand from her hair and caressed her face. He watched as her lashes fluttered open. Her blue eyes were heated with desire, but she retreated from him. Her lips parted his and she held him for a moment longer before her hand reached behind her and drew Colden to her side. She drew him against her so that she held them both. Their eyes fell shut as they held her, neither wanting to see the other. Both wanting to be the only one to hold her.

In the circle of their arms Leianna shimmered. The light grew brighter, encompassing the three. When it faded, where once three had stood, there were now only two. The man had black hair with touches of brown and hints of red. On his left hand was a wedding band. He drew her closer to him as his eyes opened to look upon her. Finding himself alone, he held her. His lips met with hers once more, stealing her breath away.

She broke off the kiss with a laugh, smiling into his golden green eyes. “You are a sight for sore eyes, Aaron,” she purred before she brushed his lips again lightly.

“It’s time,” Gyan said, interrupting them. Leianna nodded. She withdrew from Aaron’s embrace. “I have no regrets,” she whispered before planting a kiss on his brow.

“Time for what?” Aaron asked.

“For me to fulfill my vow,” Leianna answered. She moved past him, touched the tree once more, and knelt on the ground. Her eyes looked to the heavens, through the dying branches and under the full moon she began to pray.

Aaron moved closer, trying to understand. He looked on as Leianna began to shimmer as if her skin were glowing. The light grew brighter, surrounding her. “What’s happening?” he questioned his mentor.

“I created Leianna from one of Delfania’s tears for one purpose,” Gyan replied in a hushed tone.

“Delfania’s tears? What purpose?” Aaron asked confused. The light grew blinding and Aaron shielded his eyes against it. He watched with horror as the light shattered. Aaron dropped to where Leianna had knelt, but she was gone. Only her ring remained. The small pieces of fragmented light danced around him, caught on the evening wind. Aaron picked up the ring and watched as the light spread, growing brighter still. He closed his eyes, unable to look on it any

longer. All around him was light and heat, pressing in on him like a blanket. When it faded, he opened his eyes and blinked. The tree that had been without leaf or bloom was now green and beautiful. The moon was no longer as bright. It hung above as a small orb, no larger than if Aaron were on the world below.

“I made that girl to save our dying world. Delfania was once a phoenix. Haldir sought her out with a desire to learn the secret of their unending life. She became a woman and in time fell in love with him. She broke a law of the Creator and married him, becoming mortal. When she did, the world shattered—becoming two parts of one whole. Only a part of Delfania could repair the break.” Gyan whispered.

Aaron blinked. Anger rose within him. “Why did you let me care for her if you knew that she...that we could never...Why didn’t you tell me?” Aaron asked hurt.

“I saw too late how you felt. I am sorry, son. I never meant to hurt you.” Gyan answered. He smiled somberly, seeing that all Delfania had done was undone. He sighed. “It is done then. Farewell, my dear boy.”

Confused, Aaron watched as Gyan shimmered with light, his body changing and sprouting wings of molten gold and red, fiery embers smoldering from his body, and he transformed into a phoenix, taking flight and leaving Aaron utterly alone. He looked down at the ring on his hand which was closed around a matching band that no longer had an owner. He closed his eyes, blotting out the image of Leianna, wishing he could erase the emptiness from his chest as he began to grieve.

In his hand the ring he clung to became hot to the touch. Aaron dropped it on the ground as it burned him. The air around him grew warm.

“Don’t cry love. I can’t bear to see you weep.”

Aaron opened his eyes and stared with wonder at the woman before him. She had raven hair with golden-red streaks; her eyes were a deep blue that bordered on violet. She smiled at him as she lifted her hand to brush it through his hair. A band of silver that matched his was on her ring finger. He kissed her palm. "How?" He murmured the words into her hand.

"I am a part of you, Aaron. We are bound, one to the other, for what I gave up freely I was given back infinitely more." she whispered. Leianna took his hand in hers and drew him to his feet. Aaron drew their clasped hands to his face and kissed hers.

"I love you," he breathed the words as if uttering them for the first time. She smiled and her pale cheeks flushed with color. Aaron drew her against him and kissed her deeply beneath the shade of the great tree under a full moon, vowing never to let her go again.