

~Darius's Perspective ~ An Unexpected Pair~

Never before had I encountered such a peculiar puzzle. I tapped my quill as I once again read over the information I'd gathered about the strange Mortal living on Earth, revisiting each point one by one.

Discovered near an unusual surge of magic outside the appointed time for Weavings.

Bears the appearance of a Dreamer, yet can be seen by Mortals.

Has the inability to see other Weavers' dreams...yet saw my nightmare, confirmed when my Weaving earned me nearly two inches of dream dust.

That point made me pause. It was unheard of for a Mortal to not have a Weaver. This anomaly was what had first drawn me to further investigate her even before I'd discovered her near the scene of yesterday's unusual burst of magic, which surely couldn't have come from her, not when the power was both large and unusual.

Yet if it wasn't hers...where had it come from?

The riddle only continued to nag me, and learning this particular Mortal couldn't dream had only deepened my curiosity about her. And then for her to have seen *my* dream when the others woven for her had failed...the mystery only deepened.

I lifted my weaving locket to admire the green dust filling the spiderweb pendant. *I know she saw the dream...but then how could she also see me?* It was another point on my lists of suspicions: *Has the ability to see magical beings and Possesses a jar containing magic.*

I let my locket drop and picked up the empty jar I'd taken from the Mortal's bedroom the night before. I didn't dare open it, not with the magic I felt pulsing inside it. Even with it tucked within the glass I could sense it was a different power than I was familiar with.

Just who was this unusual Mortal and where had she gotten a jar of magic? As far as I knew there was no way to bottle magic in any form, and yet this Mortal had managed the impossible, making her not a Mortal at all...but then how had she seen my dream? The riddles only grew more puzzling. I needed to learn more about her.

The questions continued nagging at my thoughts, distracting me from the other assignments Mother had given me that would prove I was worthy to join the Council. But it was more than the puzzle—there was a strange, almost tugging feeling that had

begun the moment I'd first spotted that Mortal outside the village gate, like an invisible lure compelling me to return to her.

I'd first noticed this strange...*connection* moments after I'd seen her for the first time, and I'd no sooner sensed this foreign feeling than she'd glanced towards where I was watching her, as if she sensed me, too. Even though at the time I hadn't had any reason to suspect she'd be able to see me, I'd still ducked out of sight and hadn't dared ventured closer until night had fallen and she was asleep. Even before I wove a nightmare for her I felt an inexplicable urgency to be closer to her, one which had only grown when I entered her room. It was one I'd never felt before, one I couldn't explain in words.

I dipped my quill in the ink well and scribbled out another point on my growing list: *Makes me feel...* I stopped writing, unsure how to finish that sentence.

I allowed my memory to return to the moment when that unusual feeling had grown, shortly after she'd woken from the nightmare I'd created. I could still recall the moment she'd spotted me with utter clarity. The moment our gazes met the emotion had only intensified, a need to be as close as possible to her, as if being near her was exactly where I belonged.

I gave my head a rigid shake. *Stop thinking about...whatever that is.* But despite my firm commands, my mind lingered anyway, repeatedly drawn to the Mortal on Earth. I could think of no other explanation for my strange fascination than the fact that she presented quite a puzzle, my most intriguing and perplexing one yet. But whatever the mysterious surrounding her, I shouldn't feel so drawn to a mere *Mortal...* or whatever she was. It didn't make any sense.

As if the gesture could help me make better sense of this riddle, I re-dipped my quill and wrote the sentence again: *Makes me feel...* but once more I couldn't finish. *Aggravating.*

I felt the familiar stirring of my friend, Bolt, in my hair as he crept from his usual perch and down my neck, stepping carefully with each of his eight legs so as not to disturb my work. He peered thoughtfully down at the list I was writing. "Have you sorted out the puzzle yet?"

I sighed and was back to tapping the page with the feather end of my quill. "Not at all."

But it wasn't the mystery troubling me. I'd encountered difficult ones before, but there was something different about this one.

Bolt blinked up at me with all eight of his milky-grey eyes. "You don't look as excited as you usually do when you encounter a mystery."

I frowned. He was right. The usual excitement was absent, replaced with *that feeling*, more powerful than any other.

Bolt's read over each of the points about the Mortal, pausing on the unfinished one. "She makes you feel something?"

His voicing the question out loud only made me feel more ridiculous. "Of course not. She's not any different than any other mystery. I'm only curious as to who she is."

Yet for some inexplicable reason, the words felt like a lie. My perplexity deepened.

Bolt tilted his head. "Then why are you so unsettled? I've never seen you so uncollected."

I tightened my jaw, frustrated at the Mortal I didn't even know for making me behave in such an uncharacteristic way. I seized my quill and firmly drew a line through the unfinished point *makes me feel*, for the only thing this girl made me feel was frustrated. And confused. And...and...what was this feeling? Why couldn't I figure it out?

Normally I welcomed mysteries, but the uncertainty of this one was not at all pleasant. But my annoyance towards her was no where near what I felt towards that invisible connection drawing me towards Earth and the Mortal there. At recognizing its presence, it grew again, urging me to act on its gentle pull.

I couldn't sit still when there was a mystery to solve...at least that was the excuse I gave myself to finally succumb to the annoyingly insistent tugging, urging me to return to Earth, even though it wasn't near time for my Weaving and the only other thing down there that would capture my interest was *that Mortal*. And she did *not* capture my interest, not in the slightest.

But for some inexplicable reason I couldn't even begin to explain, these words also felt like a lie.

Bolt remained behind as he usually did when I conducted investigations. Before I left, I searched for Mother in order to update her on my findings from the assignment she'd given me to learn more about that unusual burst of magic on Earth, the very one that had started this entire mess.

I found her in the parlor with Father. I took a moment to stand in the doorway and watch them—the love that filled their eyes as they looked at one another, the silent understanding that seemed to fill each tender interaction. Though I’d witnessed such exchanges my entire life as well as those of other Pairs, such a relationship still filled me with unease.

As usual when they were together, it took some time for them to notice someone outside themselves—another reason I was wary of such a connection. What could be so wonderful about having a magical being who distracted you from far more important matters?

Father spotted me in the doorway first and grinned knowingly at the likely disgruntled expression I wore. He chuckled. “Ah, I’ve seen that look many times before.”

Mother glanced over too with a smile. “It appears our son still doubts Pairs.”

I shrugged. We’d had this discussion many times, and my parents always insisted I’d feel differently about Pairs once I met mine, an event I secretly hoped would never happen.

This was the last manner I wanted to discuss, especially when I had business to attend to...one I reminded myself quite firmly had *nothing* to do with the strange feeling continuing to encourage me to return to Earth. I cleared my throat. “Sorry to interrupt...”

“It’s no matter.” My parents kept their arms around one another as they turned to face me, giving me their full attention.

“I just wanted to give Mother an update on the investigation...” But before I could even begin to share my findings, I felt a strong urgency to keep every aspect of this strange mystery a secret, one that silenced me before I could even speak. I frowned. This wasn’t like me; I’d never kept anything from Mother before and I wasn’t sure what compelled me to do it now, except...

A strange wave of protectiveness overcame me, mingling with the draw I already felt, the same one tugging impatiently to get me to continue investigating the strange Mortal.

What is wrong with me?

“What is it, Darius? What have you learned?”

Mother was still awaiting my answer, one I should have given without hesitation, as I always did. Whatever could be holding me back now?

Tell her. But the words trapped in my throat, even as that sense of protectiveness grew, one, like everything else surrounding that strange Mortal, I couldn't even begin to understand.

I finally gave up the fight with a defeated sigh. "I...haven't figured anything out yet. Only that there's something strange about that Mortal."

Especially considering she was having so great effect on from even from so far away. What kind of magic was this? My heart stirred, as if trying to tell me something important, but I didn't want to hear whatever it had to say, so I suppressed its whispers before it could even give me a hint as to what this strange, unsettling magic truly was.

Unaware of the inner battle I'd just endured, my parents accepted this answer. "Knowing you, this mystery won't remain unsolved for long," Father said. "Are you returning to Earth to try and learn more?"

I nodded, though in truth I was going back down to Earth for another reason entirely.

The force that just wouldn't leave me alone led me to my destination, the same place where the recent unusual burst of magic had occurred only the day before. I frowned, confused. Why had I come here when it had been too long to even hope of finding additional clues?

The answer soon became clear when moments after I arrived another powerful surge of magic filled the air, nearly knocking me backwards with its force. My gaze darted around in search of what could have caused such a power. The invisible urging guided my focus to the tree growing just outside the village gate. The leaves rustled, and moments later that Mortal climbed to the ground.

My heart gave an unexpected lurch as I watched her straighten and brush off her dress. The nagging feeling intensified at seeing her again, and it soon grew unbearable, making it impossible for me to resist it when it pushed me forward and compelled me to speak.

"What were you doing up there?"

She startled and spun around. Her eyes widened at seeing me and she stumbled back to press herself against the trunk. "You!"

I frowned. "So you can see me after all. I admit I wasn't entirely convinced it was possible."

I stared at her, unable to look away, the feeling between us deepening with my perusal. She was quite pretty for a Mortal...if that's what she actually was, something I doubted with her large violet eyes and lilac hair. The intensity of that unexplained feeling grew and enfolded us, and within its embrace I felt as if the answer to this unspoken mystery could be found in her, but what that answer was I couldn't even begin...

Suddenly I understood what this magic was: it was a *connection*, one I'd heard spoken of before in only one context. Recognizing it by its name only caused the feeling to intensify until it filled me completely and eclipsed every thought. I felt as if my magic was reaching towards her, weaving with hers to forever tie us together, as if she'd become an extension of myself, filling in a void I hadn't realized until this moment had existed without her.

My breath hooked and my eyes widened as the truth settled over me: she was my Pair.

Pair...for a moment the word startled my mind into silence. No, it couldn't be true. I had no Pair...or I *hadn't* until this moment, for the magic was too powerful and felt too *right* for it to be anything else. I'd never wanted this...only now I couldn't remember why.

I scrambled for words, but it took some effort to find them, and then they were only an extension of my disbelief. "No...it can't be you." I continued to stare before groaning and burrowing my fingers in my hair. "No, it's not possible." Even though I had no doubt it was. No wonder I hadn't recognized that strange feeling, for I'd never known what the magic of a pair felt like...until *her*.

I turned away, unable to look at her, but my heart, excited at this turn of events and eager to get to know its perfect match as soon as possible, compelled me to swivel back around to resume my staring. The magic that came from pairs seemed to heave a silent sigh of relief, content now that I was staring at mine, making it impossible for me to look away, even if I'd wanted to.

And strangely...I found I didn't want to.

I took her in hungrily. The longer I stared, the stronger the feeling became, bringing with it another I hadn't expected to accompany this connection—complete and total happiness, such as one I'd never felt before. And it all came from *her*.

Suddenly my previous fears vanished, filling me instead with utter relief I'd finally discovered my other half that until this moment I hadn't realized I wanted so desperately. "It *is* you. I can't believe it."

Perplexity furrowed her brow. "Do you know me?"

My heart lifted at her question, one that seemed to indicate that she also recognized the feeling between us, one both natural and familiar, as if we'd known one another our entire lives. I smiled. "In a manner of speaking."

Her confusion only deepened. "What do you mean?"

Eager to be as near her as possible, I eagerly stepped forward, only for her to hastily press herself further against the trunk.

"Don't come any closer."

I immediately froze, for a moment startled. This wasn't the reaction I'd expected from my pair. Surely she wanted to be as close to me as I wanted to be to her. And if she didn't...my stomach knotted at the thought I was causing her any distress, already caring more about her well-being than my own needs to be near her, as strong as they were.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?"

She nodded and I hastily backed several steps away. She released a breath of relief, which only deepened my panic. Surely this wasn't how Pairs were supposed to react to one another. Why were things going so wrong, and how did I fix this?

I searched her eyes, as if she held the answers I so desperately sought. Perhaps she did, for with her I felt as if I'd found what I'd spent a lifetime searching for, even though it wasn't until this moment that I realized it.

She wriggled beneath my perusal. "Please stop."

I obediently lowered my eyes, but only for a moment before I couldn't resist peeking up at her again, which only earned me another frown.

"You're looking at me as if you know me, but I don't see how that can be; we've never met. Who are you?"

I tilted my head. "That is the very question I was about to ask you, one of many. You're rather intriguing with all the mysteries that surround you—you appear to reside

on Earth, and yet you can see me, which means you also possess magic. It's... *fascinating.*"

She quirked her brow. "I assure you that my seeing you, both now and in my bedroom last night, is a far more pressing concern."

My mouth lifted into a smile, one surprisingly easy to give when around her. "Even so, seeing you now has been the most unexpected surprise, for it's placed both of us on a path that will forever change everything."

Her eyes only narrowed. "You didn't answer my question. Whatever surprise you're feeling is nothing compared to the one I experienced when I awoke last night to discover an intruder in my room. Do you have an explanation?"

I silently cursed myself. I'd finally found my Pair, only to frighten her by invading her bedroom like a creepy stalker and giving her a nightmare. No wonder she was so wary. Would an apology be enough to repair the damage? "Forgive me, I didn't mean to frighten you. I only..."

I shrugged guiltily, offering another smile that I hoped would put her at ease and compel her to forgive me...but she only continued to scowl. This wasn't going well at all.

I cleared my throat and glanced up at the leafy boughs above us, the unanswered questions surrounding her more intense now that she'd become more than a mere Mortal and was now quite significant to me. "I know I have no right to inquire when I'm not forthcoming with my own explanations, but perhaps you can humor me and tell me what you were doing up in that tree?"

She bit her lip and warily followed my gaze up. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because it's where I sensed a strong surge of magic moments before encountering you, the second one in two days." I knew without her saying anything that the magic had been caused by *her*, even if I didn't know how I'd obtained that knowledge; it was as if it'd somehow come from our paired connection. Fascinating.

Her wariness increased, only confirming my suspicion. I waited patiently for her to answer, but whatever distrust she harbored towards me—distrust I reluctantly realized I fully deserved, even if I didn't like it—kept her silent. "It appears your trust is something I must earn." And I would. I *had* to.

Her expression became guarded as she folded her arms firmly across her chest. "You can begin by telling me why you were trespassing in my bedroom last night."

I bit my lip. "I wasn't *trespassing*, per se..." I chuckled as her frown only deepened, needing to find humor in the situation else I'd go mad with frustration that I'd blown my first chance with my Pair so spectacularly. "Alright, perhaps I was doing a bit of that, but in my defense I'd mistaken you for a Mortal, to whom I'm invisible. My presence in your bedroom was simply me fulfilling my duty to create a dream. I was stunned to discover you could see me."

I searched her expression again, but though the paired magic had helped me realize that she was responsible for the recent surge of magic, it wasn't forthcoming about any more of her secrets. Though aggravating, I knew I had forever to figure them out.

Yet that didn't diminish the frustration of wanting to know them *now*, one that only became more acute when I realized I also wanted to know everything about her all at once. "It certainly is a puzzle. I initially wove a dream for you to test a suspicion, but I'm only left with more questions. I know you saw my dream."

"I didn't—" she began, but I talked over her.

"You *did*, even though your being a possessor of magic should make such a feat impossible." Though some of the impossible was beginning to make sense on how she'd been able to receive my dream when no other Weaver before me had succeeded. If she truly was my Pair...could it have been the magical connection Pairs supposedly shared that had allowed such an anomaly to occur?

Yet that didn't explain why she couldn't see dreams in the first place. "I must learn more about you."

"I'd rather not share that information with you."

I couldn't resist the urge to be closer a moment longer. I stepped forward, bridging the distance that was already too small. "Please, I must know."

She rigidly shook her head. I sighed. "Considering the circumstances in which we're meeting, I can't expect anything more, at least until I've earned your trust. And I will. I promise."

She raised a skeptical brow, which only made me smile. She didn't know me well yet, but because we were Pairs she soon would, and she'd come to realize that I never backed down from a challenge, especially one with so great a reward as this.

"Even if you won't tell me your name, could you at least tell me whether you're a Dreamer or a Nightmare?" I held my breath as I awaited her answer. I wasn't sure why I

even asked such a question; surely she was a Nightmare. After all, Pairs always shared similar magic.

She scrunched her brow. "I—" she hesitated, looking rather...lost, as if she didn't know which she was. My puzzlement only grew. How could that be? Every magical being was either a Dreamer or a Nightmare. But considering she was on Earth...did she even know she was a magical being? She certainly possessed power, for Pairs were only possible between magical beings and she was undoubtedly *mine*.

When she continued to look lost, the strange protectiveness I'd first felt in guarding her secrets during my earlier conversation with Mother returned, only stronger than before now that I knew how dear the one I wanted to shield was to me—I'd do anything to make her feel better.

"Don't you know?" I asked gently.

"Of course I do." Her defensive voice shook, betraying her lie. "I—I'm—" She sighed and finally gave up the fight. "The truth is I don't actually know."

Her admission only deepened my curiosity. While her being my Pair undoubtedly meant she was a Nightmare, I had to know for sure.

I stepped closer with a look I hoped reassured her that she could trust me. She tensed and held her breath the closer I came. Not wanting to make her too uncomfortable, I paused when I was close enough to sense her magic so I could see whether she was a Dreamer or a Nightmare.

The space between us tingled with our nearness, and the joy and warm feeling of belonging only grew being so near her. As I searched her gaze, my heart jolted by what I discovered. No, it couldn't be...but there was no mistaking the Dreamer magic emanating from her, as clear as my own Nightmare powers. But how...?

My mind whirled at this revelation. For a moment I could only stare at her before my shoulders slumped. "You're a Dreamer. How could you be...? Blast, this is most unfair."

"What's wrong with being a Dreamer?" she asked in a small voice.

"Nothing at all," I said hastily, hating myself for once more causing her such distress. Only after I spoke the words did I realize that they were true. I didn't care she was a Dreamer, I still wanted her. Yet even so... "It simply complicates things."

There was so much more I wanted to say, so much I still ached to know about her. But she still looked confused...and a little bit frightened. For now, my questions would have to wait.

I closed my mouth with a sigh. "This isn't going at all like I'd hoped. Forgive me for my poor reaction, but allow me to assure you it doesn't matter you're a Dreamer; it changes nothing."

Her eyes widened slightly before the resistance she seemed to be wearing like a shield around her softened, allowing the connection between us to deepen further, pulling us even closer, despite there being so much we still didn't know about one another.

It looked like she wanted to question me as much as I wanted to question her, but neither of us got the chance. I suddenly tensed when my new sixth sense so attuned to her stirred, sensing trouble. Even though they hadn't arrived, I somehow knew that the Investigations Team was coming, undoubtedly to investigate the second unexplained surge of magic that had occurred in this area...one I now knew she'd caused.

I silently cursed and took her arm to hurry her deep into the trees. Touching her caused the connection between us to surge, giving me a small thrill. But there was no time to marvel at these new feelings; her protection was my first priority.

But she made it needlessly difficult by immediately trying to wriggle away. "What are you doing? Let me go."

"Shh, you must stay quiet and out of sight."

I should have known she wouldn't acquiesce so easily; it was amazing how quickly I was beginning to understand her. Even after I hid her behind a large pine and hurried to the edge of the forest as far away as her as my heart would allow so the Investigations Team wouldn't find her, I sensed her following me even before I heard her footsteps.

My lips twitched. *Stubborn*. I'd never before admired such a trait, but somehow it seemed endearing being hers...though at the moment, admittedly aggravating.

I returned to her side and rested my hands on her shoulders to gently return her to her hiding place. "Please, you must stay hidden. I'll explain why when they're gone." I gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze and returned to the edge of the forest, and not a moment too soon. The Investigations Team appeared, adorned in their usual grey and suspicion.

At seeing them, a soft gasp from *her* sounded behind me. *Comets*. I silently cursed again when the sound drew the beady observation of one of the members of the Investigations Team. "Did you hear something?"

"No," I lied smoothly. "Are you here for the investigation?"

Rather than answer, they searched the trees. It took every ounce of willpower for me not to glance towards where my Pair was hiding. My heart pounded almost painfully in my chest, and my desperation to protect her only grew. Whatever happened, they couldn't find her.

I heaved a silent sigh when they finally turned away, my relief so acute it was almost painful. "We were sent by the Council," they said. "We're surprised to find you here, Nightmare Darius."

"I was sent," I explained. "With such a high level of unexplained magic on earth, is it any wonder the Nightmare Council wants to look into the matter personally?" And thank goodness I was the one to look into it, considering where the investigation had led me.

"What are your findings?" one asked. "Have you discovered the source of that unexpected surge of power?"

I tensed as my gaze briefly flickered to the tree my Pair had been hiding in before I hastily looked away. When they left I'd have to investigate the matter more thoroughly, but right now my only mission was to protect my Pair, a powerful, almost desperate feeling. "I'm afraid not. My only conclusions are that it was an unusual power, one I've not yet seen, but its source remains a mystery."

One of the men heaved an impatient sigh. "Surely you have some theories."

I nodded. "Certainly. I'd be happy to share them."

They began asking several urgent questions, which I did my best to answer quickly and smoothly...albeit a bit impatiently. I hoped I was collected enough that they couldn't detect the annoyance or the secrets I was hiding in my voice; the last thing I wanted was to rouse the Investigations Team's suspicions. It was difficult to focus on the task when my entire mind was occupied by my Pair hiding in the forest behind.

My Pair... it was still surreal to think of her in that way, even as it was also incredibly natural. All my previous reservations concerning such a binding relationship seemed inconsequential now that I'd found her. Unlike what I'd previously believed, I didn't begrudge her occupying my thoughts nor the time and power I'd eventually share with her; already such sacrifices didn't seem enough. Such a strange feeling.

After several more minutes, the Investigations Team finally seemed satisfied enough to cease their questions and left, but I knew it was only a matter of time before they

returned, leaving me not much time to protect my *Pair*. I returned to her as quickly as I could, already feeling the urge to dispel the time and distance we'd already spent apart, satisfying the need of my heart that hadn't existed until today.

She was curled up at the base of a tree with her knees pulled up to her chest, seeming so small and frightened. My heart wrenched, especially at the way she tensed as I approached, as if it was *me* she feared. I paused in front of her, searching for a way to comfort her, but no words were forthcoming.

"Are you alright?" I finally managed lamely, for of course she wasn't alright, and I wanted nothing more than to ease her fears.

Her eyes jerked open to stare up at me, and for a moment I lost myself in them. "Are they gone?" she asked wearily.

I nodded. "It was quite the feat to get them to leave before they'd had a chance to look around, but they'll be back, undoubtedly to conduct their own investigation after my vague answers to their prodding questions. Whatever you were doing in that tree was powerful enough to attract the Investigations Team's unwanted attention."

"Are they investigating *me*?" Her voice shook.

I pursed my lips. "If you're responsible for that strong surge of magic that occurred shortly after dawn, then I'm afraid so. Just what were you doing?"

Unsurprisingly, she still refused to answer. I sighed. How could I help her if she wouldn't let me? "I know you're hiding something. Won't you confide in me?"

Her hand went to her pocket, which I only just noticed bulged in the shape of a jar...similar to the one I'd taken the night before. She had another one?

Eager for the answer to one of the many riddles surrounding her, I reached into my own pocket. "Do your secrets have anything to do with this?"

I withdrew the jar I'd been studying, one whose magic I was now beginning to wonder felt different because it belonged to that of my *Pair*.

She gasped and immediately lunged for it, but I held it out of reach. "Not so fast."

"Give that back! It's *mine*." She made to grab it again, but once more I held it away, feeling bad denying her, but knowing the jar was currently my only lead to discovering the answers to the many mysterious surrounding her, ones I desperately needed if I had any hopes of helping her.

"I promise I'll return it, but now is not the time. Whatever it is will be much safer with me should the Investigations Team return. Trust me."

I re-pocketed it. She glared at where it'd disappeared before lifting her sharp gaze. "Just what game are you playing with me?"

Hurt, I frowned. "I'm not playing any game. I only want to help you."

"And you're doing such a wonderful job." She glowered at my bulging pocket a moment more before tightening her jaw. "I don't like you."

Her words were like a knife to my heart. I'd liked her from the moment I'd known who she was—*more* than liked her—as was the way for beings who shared this magical connection, so for her not to requite my feelings...was it even possible of Pairs?

She ignored my wounded expression and stood, disregarding the hand I offered her, yet another rejection. She brushed dirt and pine needles off her dress before straightening and, after a final parting glare, lifted her chin and walked out of the forest.

Panic swelled. No, she couldn't be leaving, not yet. I hurried after her. "Wait, this can't be it. We just found one another."

"Lucky me." Her tone was biting, sarcastic. She emerged from the trees and turned up a path, but before she could take a step further I seized her wrist and tugged her to a stop. She spun on me. "Let me go, Darius."

I barely registered her annoyed tone, basking in the warm, pleasant feelings that came from hearing my name spoken in her soft, beautiful voice. I couldn't resist my smile. "Don't go yet." My tone was cajoling, pleading for her to remain.

"If you truly want to earn my trust, then forcing me to stay against my will is not the way to go about it."

Comets, I was muddling this up again and once more making her uncomfortable. I immediately released her, but I'd no sooner let her go than my fingers inched to touch her again and once again experience the wonderful feeling of her skin against mine.

If she'd experienced a similar feeling, she gave me no hint she'd noticed. "Are you going to return my jar?" she asked.

I tilted my head. "Are you going to tell me what's in it?"

"There's nothing in it."

My lips twitched. I scarcely knew her, but I could already tell she was a terrible liar. "Then why do you want it?" My grin became triumphant at her glower. Despite her attempts to protect her secrets, she was so open I'd know her in no time.

She sighed, looking rather dejected. "Fine, keep it, and may it instill the proper guilt of your theft and serve as a memento of this trying conversation."

"This conversation has been many things, but *trying* isn't one of them." *Life-altering* was admittedly a more apt description. I tipped my head back to search the sky. "As much as I want to linger, it'd be best if you left; we can't risk the Investigations Team returning and discovering you or finding any information that would lead them to you...which means I must find any incriminating evidence first."

It was finally time to solve one of her many intriguing mysteries and see what was in that tree she'd been in earlier. I caught hold of the lowest branch and hoisted myself up before carefully exploring each of the branches, searching. While normally I was a thorough investigator, I found my usual concentration waning at the rather adorable way my Pair stood on tiptoe below me and craned her neck to see what I was doing, inadvertently giving away another hint that she'd been up to something just before my arrival.

I continued searching a moment more, but there was no sign of magic. Comets, I'd begun my investigation too late. Though frustrated, I glanced down with a wry smile. "Any dream dust you might have left behind would have disappeared by now. If that's the case, then I commend you for thoroughly distracting me so I couldn't look for it sooner. And if it's something else..."

I waited patiently, but my Pair clenched her jaw and remained stubbornly silent. I sighed.

"This would be so much easier if you'd simply tell me what I'm searching for."

She snorted. "Absolutely not."

"But it'd be better for you if I was the one who discovered what you were up to rather than—"

"Don't be ridiculous; I have no reason to trust you."

My teasing smile faltered. So stubborn. Couldn't she see how much I wanted to help her? "Even though I protected you from the Investigations Team?"

She rolled her eyes. "I may know little about the world you come from, but from what I've gathered, you and the Investigations Team are on the same side, making us enemies."

My frown deepened. "The Investigations Team is impartial. Even if they weren't, one thing is certain: we're anything but enemies. Any cooperation I appeared to give them was simply done to avoid their suspicion so they wouldn't discover you."

I returned to combing the branches for clues. I sensed her still watching me, as well as her anxiety that the paired magic between us allowed me to feel, too...as well as her desires to leave, which was rather disappointing. It was difficult to concentrate when she was so thoroughly distracting and my mind was busy frantically working on the puzzle of how to navigate this tightrope we now walked together, one I had no doubt was already more complicated than other Paired relationships.

I was about to give up my search...when I suddenly noticed faint, lingering traces of leftover magic in a style I was unfamiliar with, but which I instinctively knew belonged to her. I didn't have much chance to study them before they also disappeared, but I'd seen enough to know that if the Investigations Team discovered this and connected it to her...they'd realize she was an unusual Dreamer, and those with suspicious powers were at risk for suspension.

I clenched my jaw. That couldn't happen; it *wouldn't*. I'd find a way to help her. It would undoubtedly be tricky, but no matter how daunting the challenge, it was one I welcomed. For it was for her, my new purpose.

I waited for the last of her magic to vanish, and after ensuring there were no other traces that could be found when the Investigations Team inevitably returned, I hopped down from the tree to find my Pair anxiously wringing her hands.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

It was every effort to keep my expression impassive. "Perhaps." My gaze met hers. "Listen to me: you're in danger."

Her face paled. "In *danger*? From what?"

"There's an investigation currently occurring in the Dream World. If the Investigations Team discovers what I did in that tree—"

"What did you find?" she asked again, but I shook my head; there was no time for that now.

"I strongly advise you not to perform any magic for a while, at least until the investigation dies down. I don't want to see you hurt."

She lifted her chin, a stubbornness I still wasn't quite sure was more adorable or aggravating. Likely both. "Until you earn my trust, I have no reason to listen to you."

Besides, I have nothing to hide from the Investigations Team; I had nothing to do with the dream dust theft."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "How do you know about that?"

She bit her lip. My frown deepened at her silence, as did my curiosity. There was so much about her I didn't know, so much I *wanted* to know, a task that currently felt impossible with the walls she'd determinedly built around herself.

She slowly began backing away, ending our encounter far sooner than I wanted. "I must go."

I grazed her arm, a gesture that caused my fingertips to tingle with heat, a sign of the magical connection I'd heard other Pairs describe as being part of every touch with their magic's match. My eyes widened as I stared at where my hand rested on her arm before I slowly gathered my thoughts enough to lift my gaze.

"If you ever find yourself in the Dream World, come find me. I'll help you." Slowly and with great reluctance I finally released her, yet I made no move to step away. "My life just got a lot more complicated. Of everyone it could have been, for it to be *you*..."

There truly couldn't have been a more complicated match. And yet, as before, I found myself not caring.

Her brow furrowed. "You keep acting as if you know me. What do you know about me?"

I didn't know her, not yet. But one day I would. Though Pairings weren't love at first sight, I still felt I was halfway in love with her already. Perhaps it was because I knew that Pairs *always* fell in love; it was just the way of them. Since I knew my heart was destined to be hers, it seemed natural to give it to her already.

Not only was such a destination natural with the connection we shared, but she was both beautiful and intriguing. I'd always been drawn to mysterious things and she was the greatest puzzle of all, not just her peculiarities; I wanted to know everything about her and more.

She must have somehow sensed this, too, though by the confusion filling her eyes she undoubtedly didn't understand it. "What's happening, Darius?"

Once again I thrilled at hearing her say my name. "Later," I promised, and after giving her hand a reassuring squeeze I once more reluctantly released her. Before I could talk myself into lingering, I forced myself to depart with a loud *crack*, feeling as if I'd left my heart and most of my magic behind.

Bolt looked up in concern when I reappeared in my room. "What is it? You look..." He didn't seem to have a word to describe my expression, for I'd never worn the one I bore now, not when it wasn't until this moment I'd found what I didn't even realize I'd been looking for.

"My world has just been altered," I managed.

All eight of Bolt's eyes widened. He, like every magical being, knew what that phrase meant. "No, you didn't...did you?"

I could only manage a nod. "My Pair." I didn't know my tone was capable of being filled with such reverence and wonder, but it felt entirely appropriate now.

"And is it as scary as you feared?" By his smirk he already knew the answer.

"No," I managed. "Not at all." Rather than the magic of Pairs leaving me uncertain as it used to, now I only felt warmth, a feeling that was nothing short of wonderful.

Bolt's fanged grin became mischievous. "I figured as much. From what I've heard, the connection between Pairs is powerful and like none other. Is she pretty?"

"*Beautiful.*" The most beautiful magical being I'd ever seen.

He chuckled. "I wouldn't expect any other response from an infatuated Pair. You seem to be falling in love faster than most, which is ironic considering how resistant you were to finding your Pair."

I shrugged. Though I couldn't deny I had quite an arduous journey ahead, I couldn't deny I was already partway there. The paired connection was more powerful than I'd anticipated, one all encompassing, so that there was nothing I wanted more than to love her as she deserved, to make her happy, to spend time with her, to protect her. So many things. I wasn't used to thinking of others other than myself, and yet here I was, obsessed with thinking of a Pair until moments ago I didn't know existed, but now whom I couldn't imagine my life without.

Bolt tugged my thoughts away, only succeeding by talking of my new favorite subject. "What's her name?"

I sighed, frustrated I lacked one of the most crucial aspects of my Pair's identity. "I have no idea." But I'd find out. "It's undoubtedly lovely."

Bolt rolled his eyes. "I'm sure it is. I never imagined seeing you in this way."

Admittedly neither had I. It was both foreign and incredibly natural, a paradox.

Bolt settled more comfortably on the pillow of the settee where he perched. "When are you going to see her again?"

I sighed again. "I'm not sure. Unfortunately, there are...complications."

"Complications? Aren't Pairs the most natural relationship in the Universe?"

I debated how much to share with him before realizing that I *needed* to talk about her. I would have been annoyed by how sappy the thought was if it didn't also make me so happy. The pre-paired Darius undoubtedly would have thought the sentiment ridiculous, but now that I was experiencing it...it wasn't. How had everything changed so drastically, and yet...so beautifully?

Bolt was still waiting patiently for my answer. I took a wavering breath. "She's a Dreamer."

His eyes widened and his fanged mouth fell agape. For a moment his shock rendered him utterly silent. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." I'd been around enough Dreamers to recognize their magic, and already my Pair's felt as familiar as my own.

Bolt was silent a moment more, his mind undoubtedly whirling with this revelation as mine had been when I'd first discovered it. "Can...that happen?" he finally managed.

"Apparently." But surprisingly I wasn't at all put out. While I'd never liked Dreamers, her being a Dreamer couldn't bother me; it was a part of her and I wouldn't change anything.

But it undoubtedly would make things much more complicated than they already were, especially when others found out...my stomach knotted in apprehension before I hastily shoved the thought away. There'd be time to worry about that later.

Bolt chuckled, easily guessing who I was thinking of. "I'm happy for you, though this new Darius will take some getting used to. Finally there's someone you care more for than yourself."

Strange as it was, even though I barely knew her, she was now my entire world. Something I previously resented, but now I couldn't, not now that I knew her.

But even as I welcomed these feelings, I couldn't deny apprehension accompanied them. Being away from my Pair cleared my head to cause my previous reservations to return, ones I no longer wanted. But they weren't so easily dismissed—the thought of opening my life up for another and sharing everything with her, including my magic,

was both beautiful and still filled me with some dread, just as it'd done before finding my Pair.

How could I fully enjoy the beauty of what had just happened if these reservations lingered? I wanted nothing more than to be rid of them...didn't I? Of course I did. Yet still I couldn't fully escape the thought niggling the back of my mind that whispered that with all the complications she brought to my life, it'd be in my best interest to resist her...if I was strong enough.

No, Darius. I shook away the last of my doubts and set my jaw in determination. I'd overcome them. For *her*, always for her. Nothing else mattered. Thus I'd fight my ridiculous uncertainties until none remained. In the meantime, I'd enjoy what had just happened, for now that I'd met her, my life would never be the same.

My back slid down the wall until I settled on the floor, my thoughts once more filled with *her*. "I've found my Pair." And though the road ahead of us was unconventional and undoubtedly full of obstacles, I couldn't help but grin.