

CHAPTER 3: In The Realm Of The Chosen

The Dark Lord was oddly reluctant to let go of her soft, yet icily-cold, hand – it felt so right in his large, leather-gloved one...like it belonged there. But she tugged it out and he experienced another odd, unbidden sensation – bereavement, even though he wasn't sure what exactly he had lost. Still, his façade betraying nothing, he motioned for her to take the armchair facing his, his stomach fluttering a bit, as in one fluid movement she gracefully sank in it. He took his, trying to hide his suddenly erratic breaths, while, unnoticed, she crossed her legs, sapphire and coal-black once more locked in a silent quest for domination. Only this time the result was even.

“So, what will it be?” she asked him calmly, a coolness settling in her navy-colored gaze.

He drew a deep breath, his eyes resembling two shards of onyx-colored ice – as cold and as hard, as he finally found his voice, forcing it to sound just as collected as hers, “Simply a talk.” He realized she had turned her mesmerizing look towards the fire and was seemingly lost in the captivating dance of the flames and shadows.

“You know,” she whispered “we use Long-lasting Warming Charms, but not light fire in the castle, except for magical purposes.”

They were close, her mere presence so utterly intoxicating, his senses powerless to resist for the first time in years. He was leaning towards her and was sure she sensed it perfectly, but she didn't draw away, nor was there that usual dangerous gleam in her eyes. In fact, she didn't move at all, looking like she was somewhere far away, yet still aware of her surroundings...and of him beside her. This emboldened him and he reached and lightly caressed her icy hand, an action he immediately regretted, as it contrasted so sharply with his cold self. Oddly, she didn't flinch at his touch, nor took away her hand, or turned to slap him. As if she **liked** it – just as much as he had savored **her** touch, four days ago. Merlin, what had he got himself into!

“I got used to living with fire at Hogwarts,” his voice was deliberately flat, “even though we Slytherins were constantly considered the cold ones. But I have particular affection for it. Always had and still do...” *‘Especially now, that it so reminds me of you – of the veritable pyre living inside you...But it's almost dead, yet you aren't like me – a dweller in the darkness, who has always been this way... And you keep me wondering what has caused this? What is it that has*

made you so numb, and frozen your fire deeper than the ice of the most severe Northern winter...?

However, he rapidly chased away these out-of-place thoughts, and telling himself this next was in order to make her trust him, he dared to softly squeeze her fingers and she allowed it, her eyes still on the blazes. “And who knows – maybe the purpose could well turn out to be magical...” whatever madness made him blabber such nonsense, yet, it was at least some consolation, that it could be interpreted in more than one way. Still, she turned and their gazes met, with him finally seeing up close the sheer force of her cold, powerful determination. Yet, somehow, despite that demonstration of her iron will, that kept all her secrets buried, and his own equally strong resolve, he knew that the barriers they had built around each other had just dissolved into nothingness and whatever was left of his soul was unstoppably reaching out towards hers... Until, suddenly, his mind’s voice screamed at him to remember himself and he kicked himself mentally for allowing such weakness, as wanting to be close to another human being. Attachments had no utility, unless they brought **him** benefit, and that was exactly the reason she was here for, he recalled albeit reluctantly.

The magic, suddenly born in them both, was gone in a heartbeat, replaced with almost ridiculous ease by the harsh, cold, true purpose behind the whole charade he was trying to put. And startlingly even for him – failing so far. Yet, even so, he wasn’t going to give up - not now. And looking at her still form, which he could see once again resembled the frozen vision of an ancient goddess, he knew that, in fact it had never been a question of ‘not now’, but of ‘not ever’...

“Miss Snape,” Voldemort began in his normal emotionless tone, “I have, on more than one occasion, been assured by our Headmaster, that you are by far the most accomplished Chosen in this school, since almost thirty years ago.”

Thirty years. Her heart stiffened, though her face betrayed nothing. Why did he have to bring it up? Van Dyin hadn’t told him the details, she was sure, but it still caused her unhealed inner wounds to open full force. Yet, he noticed nothing, and simply went on, “Clearly, you are a young woman of considerable talents and...power.” Ah, there it was - the first subtle hints towards his aim. So, that was indeed why she was given detention with Riddle, instead of Black. All three of them were together in whatever conspiracy they were brewing, which explained their puzzling reactions and not fitting thoughts. Well, two could play this game...

“No, I am simply myself – plain, old Laura Snape, no more, but also no less, Professor.” Her gaze slightly narrowed, her tone dripping with ice, as well as bearing mere hints of sarcasm, yet not enough for him to notice. “There is

nothing special about me, I guarantee - neither on the side of Light, nor on that of Darkness, as you prefer to call them. But, I must agree with you – they aren't the same as 'Good' and 'Evil'."

Apparently though, he fell for her ruse and went on, expression all-serious, to say what she had expected. "There is no 'Good' or 'Evil', Miss Snape – only Power...and those too weak to seek it."

"Power? Trust me, Professor; it carries no more meaning, than such empty-by-definition concepts as 'Good' and 'Evil'." Funnily enough, she put much more feeling in her reply than she had intended to. And regardless of her mind's warnings, she continued on the same note.

He noted the sudden bitterness in her voice and wondered what he had said so much, as to trigger her hidden pain. Finding himself in the dark again, the Dark Lord knew, however, something for sure – he needed to know the source of her hurt. Yet, the motive behind remained a dilemma. Of course, he told himself it was to use her pain to manipulate her. But his suppressed human remnants screamed again the truth. The truth he didn't dare even think of, so it was roughly pushed to the darkest, forgotten corner of his mind – that he had to know, because deep inside, for some completely baffling reason, he had found himself longing to take her hurt away...

But he all too quickly shook that off – it would bring him no benefit to suddenly become all-helpful he thought sarcastically, and snapping out of his dangerous musings, his face and voice both blank, he replied "Power is not 'empty', my dear, it can mean a lot. Control, influence over the weaker, knowledge that the rest of the world **fears** you, that you determine their faith. It is the strongest drive, the purpose of life. And, above all, fulfillment – you of all must know that full well. The Queen of Durmstrang - the sheer Power, that comes with your title!"

She, however, shook her head, her thick, silken tresses moving so fluidly, that they resembled sea-waves, the color of blood, her lips forming a curve way too bitter to be ever called a smile. "A title – that is all it is in the end. A name, devoid of any life, bereft of a soul of its own. Yet the power behind it is not founded on fear, but on genuine respect, be it grudging or not." And he had to admit she was right on this one.

"Still, its authority is by far its least prominent feature. What counts, is how you use it, not that you have it, and I have tried to the best of my abilities to do it, as it was done thirty years ago..." And against his will and better judgment, he found himself under the spell of her voice, drinking in every single utterance falling off her lips. He cursed under his breath - why did she have to be so infinitely captivating, even when performing such trivial actions...?

“I know what it means to hold another’s mind, or life, or both, in your hands and yes, it is to some extent fulfilling; for, the thrill, the taste of success and victory are truly indescribable!” her tone was close to dreamy, as strange as this sounded when used about her and he was a bit taken by surprise – she had her dark side, after all and by the sound of it, she liked it too.

“Yet,” she went on, her voice suddenly acquiring its characteristic coldness from before “it does not compensate for an otherwise empty life. For, what good is power, when all that matters to you is torn away again and again?” Her lips were trembling, her gaze so distant and full of silent shadows, from a past, he guessed, probably as painful as his own. “And, yes, I might have been blessed with talents, but the blessing turned to a curse, when in my hour of need, they couldn’t help me...They were too late...I was too late...Any other time I used them since, has just been an agonizing reminder of what could have been...”

He was on the verge of doing yet again something he would regret later, but he couldn’t stop himself as his gloved hand reached and gently took her chin, turning her face slowly so their eyes met once more. He made one last attempt to further his primary purpose. “You still can use your power, my dear, and, in time, you shall no longer dwell on past possibilities.” He couldn’t believe himself - there was almost *passion* in his voice “You will forget – we all do; whatever the memories...” (How big a lie that was, he himself knew all too well!)

“Do not discard your gifts – as Power, believe me, will manage to replace what you have been missing. Grab it now and relish in it – there is no ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’, the past is done, the future doesn’t matter yet, all that is important is Here and Now! And I will help you live in the present once again...”

She eyed him incredulously, her lips quirking sarcastically “Are *you* now whole, Professor – is the power you have truly everything you’ve ever wanted, needed? Dreamt of?”

For a split second his lips threatened to spill out the uncomfortable, inadmissible truth – the doubts he was starting to have, however small they still were. Yet, he caught himself on time and instead stated evenly “With time you learn to be and realize that nothing more is necessary. Your power makes you in a way immortal, since no one dares touch or threaten you – not even Death. You are irreplaceable – to the world itself...” Though, his words oddly sounded to him, as if it weren’t her that he was trying to convince...

In this moment however, she did what he least expected – laughed, a rich laughter that would have been infinitely beautiful, had it not been dripping with bitterness. “There are no indispensable people and, in fact, whether you are such to the world is of no importance. What’s really significant is to be one-and-only for those who matter to you in one way or another. And in this lies the real

power one has – the ability to get through anything, defeat all obstacles - even Death...”

Voldemort unexpectedly found himself looking at her, amazed. When had the roles been reversed, he marveled, making him the one enticed, and now even truly dumbfounded. What had wizard-kind done to deserve such amazing people as the Chosen, past, present or future, to shape and enrich it? He had wondered at their views on life before, albeit with his usual inescapable contempt, as they were in many ways too **noble** for someone like himself. But now, he realized startled that maybe, just maybe, he was willing to see life through their eyes and embrace at least some of what they saw...until he told himself that he'd rather do something noble, before he'd abandon his solid principles, in favor of such weakness-inducing nonsense... Yet, when he thought about it, he had to admit, despite himself, that **they** were **not** weak or pathetic - these words could **never** be used to describe them. The name they had earned for themselves, the young woman before him, were proof enough of that...

Laura could almost see the new inner tumult her companion was in – it flashed briefly in his eyes, but was gone just as quickly. Perhaps she had imagined it...? And most definitely the answer was positive – he was way too devoid of emotions to ever be truly in turmoil. But before she could muse longer on it, he abruptly stood and turned away from her, as if trying to hide a reaction he wanted to keep private.

“You can leave now, Miss Snape – our session is over,” he stated just as rigidly. Strangely, she felt like staying, she didn't know how or why, but her heart was somehow drawing her closer to that man of Darkness. His touches, even through the glistening black leather that adorned his fingers, had been...thrilling, making her skin tickle with a sensation she had long not experienced – exhilaration. And he had felt just the same four days ago, when **she** had touched **him**. Was this his way of getting even?

She longed to say something to him and went for the first that came to mind, “You won't miss the opening match of the year, right...Professor?”

He turned, a puzzled look on his face. “Opening match?”

She nodded, but he shook his head, a couple of spills of longish, raven hair falling in his left eye, just like before. Her hand itched to brush them back again, but this time he was surely going to react, so she decided against it.

“I was never much of a fan of Quidditch, Laura.”

She saw that he realized his slip of tongue too late and was probably regretting it, though she wished he wouldn't. The sound of her name falling off his lips had been too good to pass. She gave him a mischievous smile that, unbeknownst to her, made him want to stay right where they were.

"Who said anything about Quidditch?" And with that last whispered phrase, she was gone, leaving a distressed Dark Arts Master behind.

And was he troubled! For the first time in his life, Humanity and Power were threatening to engage in a full-fledged battle inside him. And he knew that, if it happened, he'd do all in his control to let the latter win. Yet, secretly, in his wildest dreams, he was equally aware that now, he'd also yearn for the human to be victorious, even if just for one fleeting moment... And he knew all too well the source of these disturbing wishes – Laura, the fiery vision that plagued even now his innermost self...He had called her by her given name and she seemed to have actually *enjoyed* it...A simple fact that nonetheless made his insides twist violently with a sensation he thought impossible - gladness...

And by Salazar himself, he felt like he could talk to her forever, about anything, even the darkest, most unsettling bits of his past. Somehow he had the sensation he could lay bare before her his worst secrets and she would not scorn, nor judge him, but will try to understand... Because in that moment, when she had bared a bit of her heart to him, he had unwittingly started to do the same. Only his strongest willpower had stopped him from actually spilling his soul to her aloud. And despite himself, he wished beyond all reason that he had done it.

Cold fury suddenly ran like ice and fire combined in his veins, as he replayed the whole encounter in his mind again and again. He grabbed a heavy goblet from the nearby table and smashed it on the stone floor, a bit surprised at the force of his rage. She was toying with him, changing him – it was all her fault! That Hellish creature with the false looks of someone Heaven-sent; treacherous, vile manipulator who knew how to play him with ridiculous ease, as if he were her damn instrument! He could kill her without any remorse or hesitation, she meant nothing to him! And he hated her, hated all that she was for starting to ruin him!

He collapsed on his knees on the stone floor, his head in his hands, trying to hide from the horrible thoughts he had just had. For, he did not hate *her* – far from that! He hated himself for being weak, for letting his walls be chipped away, for being drawn to *her*...And deep inside he knew it was no game on her part. Just like he was perfectly aware it wasn't she who was ruining or changing him – it was his own doing, and that increased his self-hate even more, making him need to humiliate her in his own mind, in a vain attempt to reduce his self-loathing.

But now, with the coldness of the marble penetrating all his senses, the full extent and meaning of his thoughts settled in, and he was utterly disgusted with himself. For, he felt like he was desecrating her this way... And another foreign sentiment coursed through him, something he thought he was never going to experience, and now suppressed it as quickly and strongly as possible – guilt. Yet, he couldn't help but admit that he had no right to belittle her so, especially after experiencing for himself her inner nobility just now. She fully deserved her pedestals – not only the one people here had put her on, but also that she occupied in his own mind.

Because she never prided herself in the thrones, she undoubtedly knew she had; never boasted or behaved like she was different in any way. But she *was* different, profound and intelligent, fiery and strong. Truly unique - the very reason, why he was drawn to her so...And because of which he couldn't help but crave to awaken her frozen fire, to see it blazing full force once again – but this time its flames to be for him only...

The door almost slammed after Laura, as she entered the common area of their dorm. Sinking in the warm, blue plush of the large sofa, she lightly closed her eyes, recalling the events just passed – Merlin, did she need a Pensieve now!

He had simply been trying the ground – so he didn't press much. But he'd try again harder, until she gave in. Only she wasn't going to, not really at least – something he'd realize too late, when they had beaten him in his own game.

Power-hungry...Why was he so? What did his past hold, that had twisted him so much, made him give up his heart and soul, trade his humanity for power...? And immortality – he so desperately sought it, in one way or another. So longed to take an eternal Flight from Death, literally...but also to the most secure of places – people's memory...He would surely relish in that, just as he did in ensnaring souls.

Laura smiled, remembering a Muggle poem she had read when she was younger, 'Faust'. Riddle could as well have been the inspiration behind Mephistopheles. Had he lived, when Goethe had written his work and had the author known him, as Laura was starting to. Soul entrapper... Only the soul of Lady Firestar was a barren wasteland - way too frozen and empty, to ever be worth taking...

Settling himself in one of the teachers' stands of the gigantic stadium, Lord Voldemort found himself, actually, eagerly anticipating the game. Especially, seeing the six Quidditch rings slowly disappear in the ground. Everyone around him was chattering animatedly about the match, but he still had not even the

faintest idea what it precisely entailed. Yet, by the sound of the people filling the stands, it seemed it was to prove quite exciting.

A magically augmented voice soon broke the air, as all had settled down. A voice, which he recognized as Elia Reinhard's "Ladies and gentlemen, fellow students and everyone else, who'd considered themselves able to stomach one more game in the annual competition, between the four final years of the Chosen program, by all means, welcome!" wholehearted laughter accompanied her words "Most of you should already be familiar with the atrocities you'd be witnessing, but for those who aren't, and still aren't green in the face, a quick explanation is in order." Approving giggles from the crowd, to which Voldemort couldn't help adding a slight chuckle of his own.

"The game consists of two stages: part 1, where our two teams – six members each, will face each other, testing their magical and combat skills. Wands or wandless – absolutely ANY spell is allowed, *even* Unforgivables and any other tactic, until all the opposing team's players are incapacitated, one way or another, and definitely off their brooms. Then, after a half hour break, so that all broken bones, severed limbs and out-of-place joints are healed – courtesy to Professor Linecker, we have part 2. Our players will be against the UNKNOWN...

"Any weapon they want, whatever talents they have, all the brains they possess, all the guts (or balls, in the case of our male contestants) they can muster, versus what they won't find out, until the very last moment. And most importantly – they all must work together, as ONE team. Just like they'll probably have to in the future...But without further ado, let's greet first, last year's runners-up – they've hopefully improved, or they're set to beat their own record of how many times can one break the same bone. Our 8th-years! Habberland, Lindern, Weimar, Trier, Erler and of course, the captain – McBryte!" And as they walked on the pitch, Voldemort easily remembered each of the young men from his classes. Now however, they all were clad in half-armor, like some warriors of old; their considerable agility was evident in the swift, but fluid way, they mounted their brooms - their surprising grace, in stark contrast with their tall muscular built.

The Dark Lord's suppressed taste for adventure now fully awoke, as he waited impatiently for the other team to appear. And, as if on cue, Reinhard's voice boomed again, "And now, here they come – the men, and women, of the hour! Champions of two years in a row, our most cherished 7th-years! Adams, Atkins, Länder, Tern, Gebhern," they too were similarly equipped as their opponents "and – Snape!"

His stomach fluttered - Merlin, Laura looked completely stunning! Her armor hugged her upper body and its curves perfectly, molding in it like second skin, made of silver and steel – a navy-blue tunic, with off-the-shoulder, strappy

sleeves underneath it. Tight-fitting, black, leather pants adorned her long, toned legs, disappearing into black, leather boots, with a slight heel, that reached to just below her knee caps. Her scarlet mane was braided in three long plaits, fastened together to keep them out of the way, only two strands framing her cerulean gaze and partially concealing a silver headband, with an ornate V in the middle of her forehead. Studded leather bracelets clasped her delicate wrists and her wand was strapped in a soft-steel holder on her lower left arm. She looked like a true warrior, a dark, steely gleam in her brilliant gaze – Salazar, he couldn't take **his** eyes off her! She seemed to somehow always manage to render him breathless... Reinhard's voice however startled him out of his reverie "And they're up and flying – so it begins!"

Amazing, totally remarkable! These were the only words fit describing what the Dark Lord had been witness to, in the past half-an-hour – a unique combination of wizard and Muggle dueling right in the air. They fought with such determination and bravery - a spectacular demonstration of not only impressive easiness in using even the most difficult of spells, with or without a wand, but also the most extraordinary acrobatic stunts and what looked like Muggle martial arts, mastered perfectly. What he observed was exceptional, wild, almost barbaric, but still, oddly exquisite - performed with incredible finesse, he had seen nowhere before. In fact, many of the spells they employed, seemed to be their own creations – experiments which, each of the young future Chosen used the opposite team's players to test on, like true guinea pigs; just the kind of entertainment he liked.

And true to Reinhard's word, there was quite the bloodshed too, with participants falling left and right, one after the other. Each invariably sported quite the gruesome results from hexes and curses thrown their way or, alternatively, from plain, normal, but still serious, bruises and cuts. His eyes were constantly locked on Laura, who was currently in a bloody battle with McBryde. A whiplash curse had left her with several deep and long gashes on the left side of her neck and face, and Voldemort cringed inwardly, hoping - so uncharacteristically for him, that she wasn't in too much pain.

She however had begun to understandably tire – still maintaining a High Shield, which barred all but Avada Kedavra, against McBryde, and now also having to duel Nick instead, was starting to be quite exhausting. Right then however, Laura abruptly turned for a split second sideways, as her intuition told her to, just in time to see the unmistakable jet of green light, signaling the killing curse, leave Jason's wand...

A cold invisible hand unexpectedly gripped Voldemort's insides so hard, that he couldn't breathe, when he saw McBryde release Avada Kedavra in Laura's

direction, but what she did, got his and everybody else's jaws to drop like rocks in sheer awe... In a flash she was standing on her broom, and she kicked herself off, guiding it backwards wandlessly, as her body made a cat-like arch almost two meters above it. The curse, however, changed its direction and was about to go a mere inch under the small of her back. Yet she pushed herself further upwards with a rising spell and it passed her safely, dissolving in the air, while she landed cleanly on the handle, balance undisturbed whatsoever.

The whole stadium, Voldemort included, erupted in thunderous applause, but she didn't pay any heed to it. Instead, she concentrated on ripping McBryte bit by bit, with a combination of Cruciatus and the cutting hex, while a very infuriated Adams dealt quickly with an already quite prone Dominic, leaving the 7th-years victorious in the match's first part. That particular development made raw cries of exhilaration burst from all, who weren't puking or passed out (and they weren't that many), and Voldemort himself felt strangely elated, as he went on the pitch, with the rest of his colleagues, to congratulate the victors.

Laura had won and for once, albeit reluctantly, he let himself freely delight in the pride that swelled his insides – pride *in her*, its source unknown, but for a time, he didn't care about how inexcusable to his coldness this experience was. It was just there, making him feel better and more *whole*, than anything else had in years... And as if on cue, she looked at him, while absently accepting the praises of the others.

Salazar, she was every inch the epitome of one of those warrior-goddesses from Muggle mythology – a true Valkyrie... Now he knew she carried it inside her – in her very blood. The thrill of domination, the seduction of victory, had ignited her numbed, inner fire, albeit, sadly, only for the duration of the game, awakened fully her hidden darkness, caused power to utterly intoxicate her, brought her almost to ecstasy. But, despite her more than willing, in fact close to desperate, embrace of her dark half, the small, sarcastic smile she gave him, when their eyes met, made it all clear. She wouldn't forsake her humanity for it, regardless of how pleasurable the sensation, no matter that she herself felt unusually complete, when she experienced it...

“Fellow friends, who have hopefully survived Part 1 of our game, we're now starting Stage 2.” Elia's voice boomed again, an hour and a half later. “Our players are all up and coming – every missing bit in its appropriate place, and they will have to enter the Forest of Mists, North of here, just at the heart of the Island. What will happen there...well, wait and see!” And on that note Reinhard's voice disappeared, while a giant whirlwind of silvery-white, liquid haze flowed slowly from Van Dyin's wand in the midst of the stadium. Twisting and twirling wildly, it finally formed something akin to a huge three-

dimensional screen of sorts, through which, Voldemort knew, they were going to be following the players' movements.

And promptly, all twelve young people entered once again their view, wands still strapped to their lower arms. However, now they wielded normal weapons, too - long bows, daggers, spears, crossbows, even whips and in McBryte's case, an axe, each holding tightly on their chosen armaments. Still, the Dark Lord paid heed only to what Laura was clutching, yet found out, taken aback, that she had nothing but her wand.

Though, only for a moment - for, she flexed her delicate fingers and appeared to close them securely around something invisible, until her hands were grasping two, twin, double-edged silvery swords, which she seemingly drew out of thin air. On their blades were engraved ancient symbols, which he recognized with a barely stiffened gasp. Only one set of these existed, but they were a mere legend...no, it was impossible - they **had** to be copies... He shook his head, chasing away these completely useless thoughts, and silently, still fighting himself about this simple gesture, he wished Laura good luck with whatever was waiting for them all...

“Okay, everyone - one last thing before we go in!” Nick glared at his lot and at the TA's and Lukas, “NO and mean NO fighting between ourselves! We've done this before, so working together, WITHOUT killing each other, shouldn't be that difficult now either, I believe?” He got understanding gazes from all of them, except McBryte, who was as sulky as a cloudy day. “I DO mean it, Jason - that stunt of yours back there with the Avada Kedavra **was** unnecessary!”

Laura put a hand on his shoulder “I think he learned his lesson about that one, Nick - Linecker was the busiest with **him**. Practically needed an hour to get him back in **one** piece...” She sent Jason a slightly cruel gaze, feeling a tad of savage pleasure at the pain she'd inflicted him. Maybe Riddle **was** rubbing on her after all? Or was it her own darkness speaking again? Perhaps, even a mixture of both - because Riddle somehow managed to awaken her dark half with his mere presence. Whatever it was though, truth be told, she rather liked it... “On our brooms, everyone!” she called mounting her own, and they flew into the thick mass of very tall trees, that was the Forest of Mists...

The tree-trunks were constantly shrouded in a sort of sticky-looking fog, from which came the place's name, with only a few feeble sunrays bleeding through it here and there. The sheer height of the trees made it impossible to have a good view of the ground ahead, so flying was the only option to keep a decent lookout. Each had strapped their weapons to their waist or back, so they weren't in the way and were now stealthily soaring through the fog's waves and

between the thick trunks of the Demon Trees, as they were called. For, in each, story went, a spirit lived.

Yet, unlike those of usual magical woods, the inhabitants of the Forest of Mists weren't normal Dryads, but the cursed spirits of all those who had died on the Island, while trying to harm it or its or any of its rightful residents. Remembering this, Laura shuddered with distaste – that meant Danninos' ghost could be somewhere close. She wasn't afraid – nothing of the sort, simply not wanting to ever see the man again, vision or not!

“Lindern, Weimar, watch out!” Laura suddenly heard Vera's worried cry and whirled to her right, where she knew her friend was, only to see that they were spotted. Several of the trees had all of a sudden woken – energy bolts running up and down their large trunks, their tops and branches coming to life, as they became long demonic arms, vicious claws extending, sharp as sabers, from each of their many fingers. The tortured cries of their spirits broke the previously still air, as their faces – male and female alike, swam like reflections on a lake surface, on the now almost transparent bark. Axel and Lars had deftly avoided the razor-like claws and were now, together with Georg Erler, expertly dealing with them with some freezing, burning and vaporizing hexes. Flames, ice bits and shards of the talons flew everywhere in the air around them, causing all the rest to duck with the speed of light or, if they were lucky enough to be farther – conjure shields to spare them any cuts or burns.

Vera had to rush and get Travis out of harm's way, as for some reason he had seemed a bit dazed and hadn't seen a severed claw dashing for him. “What possessed you to stand there like a stone griffin, you moron?!” she shouted, enraged by him not paying attention.

Normally he would have had some witty comeback, but to her and his own surprise, he only managed to blurt out “I...I don't know – it was as if I was paralyzed. I couldn't move and my mind was like blank.”

Both Vera and Ale Tern, who had come to her side with Trev, eyed each other in confusion – there was nothing in the Forest known to have such effects.

“Maybe it's part of the task.” Trevor shrugged, while the eighters and Lukas tackled several more demon hands, with Laura slashing some of the rest with no effort at all, as if they were butter and burning off the others to cinder, in mere seconds.

“Wow!” Julian von Trier exclaimed. “That was one helluva fire spell there, luv!”

Laura simply rolled her eyes. “Stop exaggerating and let's get going – is everyone all right?”

They all nodded, sporting only minor cuts.

Nick joined her side, surveying the group. “Good.” he acknowledged. “And as for Adams’ sensation – we have to fight this. If any of us feels it again, use all your willpower to push it away.” Common approval followed his words, as they continued further in.

Julian was the first to break the silence. “Did you hear their warning?”

Most of the others eyed him puzzled. “We heard the howls and threats all right, but that was pretty much it.” Lukas retorted a bit annoyed.

Julian shook his head. “There was more...”

Nick’s gaze immediately grew dark, as he, together with Laura, Axel and surprisingly, Ale too, turned to Julian, comprehension dawning on them.

“What was it, bro?” Dominic prompted his cousin to get out whatever was worrying him. Young Von Trier’s gaze was distant, almost trance-like “**Another danger, a new threat arises... A Fire burns, where it should not. Beware! Beware of the traitor in your midst!**” he shook the daze off. “I mean it does sound serious.”

Everyone’s brows furrowed in contemplation – Julian was never wrong, when it came to his abilities.

“Why would **they** want to warn **us** though?” Vera was incredulous. “After all, they had wanted to harm the Island or its people – it’s just out of place.”

However, to all’s surprise, it was Jason who managed to put word first, “It’s because we’re in an older part of the Forest – whoever is imprisoned here have been part of it and the Island for quite the time already. It forges a bond, whether they like it or not.”

“True,” Laura went on, “the connection makes them one with the Island’s very soul and bits of it are imprinted on these spirits, making them responsible for those of us, rightfully living or present here. So, they warn us, for they now sense the danger and are obliged to help us prevent it. Yet, they couldn’t stop from attacking us too - the murderous thoughts of old are quite hard to forget...”

“Still – a traitor among us, in our teams?” Vera shot, not caring to mask her dislike for McBryte and his men.

But, Julian explained, “No – when they, as well as every other Guardian, speak, it’s all permanent inhabitants they refer to. Just the students and teachers.”

Travis added thoughtfully, “And the Headmaster. Yet, he’s really one of the staff too.” All heads shot to him in shock.

“No way – Van Dyin will never betray us! None of them will!” Trev countered and the rest vividly agreed, but then a thought occurred to Julian “Never **willingly...**”

Discarding this remark though, Axel Lindern added, “But who is the enemy then – I don’t get the Fire bit?”

“It’s simple.” All eyes turned to Laura, whose own had strangely started to change color, going from midnight-blue to almost flaming golden, with treads of scarlet, as if blazes danced in them. “Someone, who shouldn’t have it, wields the Power of Fire. As the only ones who are entitled to, not only on the Island, but in the world, are the Supreme Guardians...and me.” Several gasps of surprise were heard from the 8th-years.

“You have one of the Four Powers?” Lars Weimar couldn’t hold back a wow.

Laura nodded – she didn’t like telling around, but they had to trust each other, and the people here were as reliable as it got, McBryte included.

“Two actually, but I want this to stay here and between us only.” And the others nodded, seriousness and fierce loyalty oozing in vibes from them. The redhead couldn’t help but smile, showing her gratitude – so much for the rivalry... “Yet, if there was someone else here controlling the Fire, I would’ve felt them...unless...” she trailed off, dread settling in her gut, as she remembered something, “Unless they were negated, so I can’t sense them. All six Supreme Guardians are a combination of three of the Powers and have enough of that of Darkness to counter me and each other. For another with the Fire, there must be someone else on the Island controlling the Darkness. And we don’t know who...”

“Is it part of the game, though?” Ale asked.

But Nick countered, “Can’t possibly be – this is way too serious to be left to deal with only for such short time. It’s something separate, that we must start working on, once we’ve finished with the match. Plus, Van Dyin’s instructions were, the core of the task was in the Centre Clearing, in the heart of the Forest. So, let’s hurry, but be on your guard, ‘cause it’s still probable to encounter demons. And stay together!”

“And if you start feeling strange, fight it and call to me at once!” Laura added, as they flew past the rows of trees and through the mist. It got thicker by the minute and they had to use an Illumination and Tracking spell combination not to lose each other in it. Finally, the fog became less dense and, weapons at the ready, the team prepared to land in the Centre Clearing.

However, as they flew out into the sunlight again, their determined expressions changed to puzzlement. “That doesn’t look like the Centre.” Lars started.

Georg put in, “Resembles it a bit, but not completely – maybe the trees have shifted, when we fought them, so we have to look for the signs. Everyone – you know what to search for!”

All landed, but for Laura and Julian, who were to keep a lookout, and scattered around the wide grassy patch. Minutes later, they have found most they’ve been looking for, yet not all, which meant their battle had indeed changed the Forest’s position. However, a feeling of danger overcame Laura again, and she met Julian’s gaze, as they hovered above the others.

“I know,” he put in. “I sense it, too. It was way much too easy to get here...”

“Over here!” they heard Ale’s voice from below and flew to join the others, who had already gathered around whatever she had found.

“What do you think this is?” Trev asked no one in particular, making a move to touch the small puddle of dark liquid near the trees, but Vera grabbed his arm.

“Don’t! We don’t know if it’s dangerous, and considering we’re still in the game, it probably is.” Instead, Laura dug the tip of one of her swords in the substance and raised it, letting the fluid slide slowly down to mid-blade, leaving a brownish-black trail behind. “It looks like the blood of a Guardian. And look – it’s left a trail going deeper to the South and we know what’s there...”

“The entrance to their lair,” Georg murmured “Perhaps they’re hurt – that must be the task! To find out and deal with what’s causing the harm.”

Still, Julian shook his head. “But none of them had been out for a long time – we would’ve known, if it was otherwise. How did the blood get here, then?”

“Unless it’s meant to confuse us...” Laura remarked, as she suddenly moved to examine closer the liquid on her blade and then that in the puddle. “That’s not their blood – look here! It’s supposed to be a completely black trail, but it’s actually closer to auburn. It’s a sham!” and with that she performed a Revealing spell and then an Illusion-breaking hex and the fluid regained its normal, very dark red color, with slight golden tint.

“It still resembles blood, though,” Georg remarked, making Laura open her eyes, which she had closed during breaking whatever spell was used for concealment. Her gaze widened, as it fell on the puddle.

“It can’t be...”she whispered. “That’s the Blood of Fire...Can’t have come from a Guardian – it’s too pure. Hell, even mine isn’t as clear as this here, though it comes really close! Which means...”

“It’s from the Source,” Nick finished for her. “Probably preserved for centuries, but spilled, who knows why, here.”

Travis shivered unwillingly, adding, “Well, I truly hope it’s just that, though.” while Julian was seemingly in a trance again.

“Back off – all of you!” he suddenly yelled, his eyes snapping open and they dared not disobey.

Still a bit stunned, they stepped well away from the puddle, when out of nowhere the ground started to shake violently and everyone ran, calling their broom and flew up.

“The Guardians are awake!” Lukas shouted through all the noise of earth cracking.

“No, it’s not them – look!” Vera and Ale pointed towards the cracks, which had swallowed the blood and now from them, like a solid wall, erupted amber-colored flames, causing the group to fly further up to avoid burns.

“Vera’s right – it’s something else! There’s no Power of the Mind!” this time it was Laura, who had just probed the openings thoroughly. “Only that of Fire!” her eyes widened in disbelief and the others followed her gaze, seeing now a tall figure starting to get formed by the flames.

Vera barely stiffened a gasp, only managing to say, “This isn’t a game – it’s for real...Oh my God...”

Laura whipped around only to see the flames swallowing the other ten of their team, each trying to combat them magically, but to no avail, and she quickly summoned her control of the Fire to make the blazes lower to a safe distance and kept them there. She cursed under her breath – this was no ordinary magical fire, since only she could defeat it. She and Vera then rushed to check the rest for injuries, yet surprisingly, there were none. Breathing a sigh of relief, however Laura noticed their closed lids and the fact that they were floating, despite the singed brooms.

“Oh no...” she whispered, probing each psyche and finding them completely void and their bodies paralyzed, when she tried to move them from inside their minds. Suddenly, an inexplicable sensation made her turn towards the mysterious figure. She fought the feeling and managed to quickly and relatively easily chase it out of her mind, locking her gaze in a silent struggle with that of the intruder.

“Laurie! No!” the shriek from her friend finally caused Laura to look at her left hand, which had, half-consciously, found its way to just below her right shoulder, and she barely withheld a gasp – blood was dripping from her armor onto her marble-white skin...

Before she knew what had happened, Vera was out cold too, leaving her alone and bleeding against the creature in front of her. *‘What did you do to them?’* her mental voice spat defiantly.

The flaming being projected back *‘Worry not, my dear Goddess of Fire – I have no intention of killing them. Yet. But shall you refuse to embrace your destiny; I may be forced to take more drastic measures.’*

‘It’s me you want, demon! Release them and fight!’ she raised both her swords, thrusting them into him as quick as lightning. Yet, their tips were violently pushed off the fiery surface that bathed his form, seemingly having hit a solid barrier, and he only looked amused at them.

‘I remember these, you know – as if it were yesterday, when I forged them. Just as I recall perfectly who were the first, and the last, to wield them before you. Two of the most powerful...and beautiful, weapons ever made. Take good care of them – for, they are invaluable...’

Laura gave him a murderous glare. *‘Of course they are – to me!’*

He, for it definitely was a he, softly chuckled, *‘And to me too, my dear Flame...Though they can never harm **me**.’* his hand reached out to caress her cheek almost tenderly and she winced a bit at his touch, expecting it to be scalding, yet the blazes were harmless on her skin. Then it struck her; the impenetrable shield, the fact that no fire or spell could harm him in this form – he was like her, his current self resembled her own, when fully empowered. But it was impossible – she was the last one left who could do it...

As if having sensed her thoughts, the flames around him slowly died down and were seemingly swallowed back into the tall, strongly-built form of a man with long copper-blond hair, his eyes – mismatched blue and green. A man all too familiar to her...Now Laura was sure the flames around him had been an illusion, however the results from her wandless employment of the same spells,

she had used mere minutes ago, and her own Power were more than controversial. Still, that didn't stop her from firing several curses in his direction, her eyes now blazing with fury, as she was unable to withhold the sheer pain, which the mere fact of seeing him brought her. However her spells vanished when they hit their target, with no effect on him at all - as if they were absorbed into his body, which made her grit her teeth in frustration.

"Why..." was all she could bring herself to ask, swiftly biting back the tears swelling up in her eyes. In a flash, he was so close to her that she inhaled his scent - burning embers.

"All in good time, my dear - all in good time..." His right hand's long fingers interlaced with hers, which clutched tightly the handle of her broom. "You have grown in quite the beauty - just like you were promising to, when I last saw you. And you're strong - so powerful...There's no one like you...**My Firestorm...**" His other hand gently took her left one, which Laura had been holding on her wound, and brought it to his lips, tasting the blood on it - her blood...

"Now you can safely say we are almost one - but till our next meeting..." he touched the source of her bleeding. "My crest shall stay with you..." And with that he vanished seemingly into thin air, like a specter that had never existed and Laura finally managed to see from her position in the air that the ground was whole. No cracks, or even the faintest hint there had been fire around. Her friends lay there unconscious still, but their minds were no longer blank - in fact, there were no signs of interference with them at all, just as there was no Blood of Fire anywhere near.

Laura wandlessly scanned the area with the strongest Revealment spells - absolutely nothing, as if it had all been simply an ... illusion, but one which left no traces... And then, feeling something warm and sticky trickling down her fingers, she, till then completely oblivious about it, finally remembered she was bleeding...

The improvised 3-D screen, the stadium had been watching the teams' progress on, unable to hear what they were saying though, had all of a sudden went completely empty, when the players entered the Centre Clearing. Uproar of discontent had erupted from the crowd and Van Dyin, with several others, had in vain tried to fix it. Some minutes later, they just gave up, and reckoning something might have happened, Linecker, Malfoy and the Headmaster had readied their brooms to fly there, since the shifting nature of the trees made it impossible to Apparate with precision.

Just as they were set to leave, however, the screen flared back to life on its own and the whole stadium gasped in horror. For, they saw the unconscious bodies of eleven of the team and Laura, still hovering on her broom, but with her right shoulder bleeding profusely and her - turning paler and dizzier from the blood loss by the second. Losing no time, the would-be rescuers, joined also by Professor Black, immediately set off, adding extra-speed spells to their brooms and in the resulting chaos on the stands, no one noticed that one Professor Riddle had disappeared somewhere, too...

Laura knew she was quickly losing blood, but the resulting light-headedness she felt prevented her from being able to stop it. Landing was to prove equally problematic, since she could barely hold on to her broom. Growing weaker by the second, she finally sensed herself slip off the handle and fall towards the ground.

Face turned upwards, just before she closed her eyes, no longer able to hold back her heavy lids, she saw the skies darken with a blackness never seen before - no clouds, no sun or stars, or light whatsoever. She vaguely wondered what the Hell had happened before and whether this was part of it too.

Expecting to soon hit the surface, the last she felt however, before unconsciousness claimed her, were instead two strong, distinctly male arms taking her prone form and a unique yet strangely familiar scent - mixture of leather and darkness, ensnaring her senses. Then, the world finally went blank...

The soft touch of smooth fingers on her cheek, trailing down her neck, was what Laura first became aware of, when she finally slipped out of oblivion. Not opening her eyes, she savored the simple sensation of skin against skin, basking in the soothing scent of leather and darkness. It was so familiar, yet she couldn't place it. Still, it was truly pleasant, only to have it vanish, for the fingertips, whoever they belonged to, were abruptly gone as she began to stir.

Opening her gaze, she saw she was in a four-poster that clearly wasn't hers or the sick bay's, the sheets were black as were the drapes, which surprisingly looked as if they hadn't been drawn at all, for a long time. She tried to sit up, but a searing pain below her right shoulder brought her back on the two big feather pillows, making her rapidly remember the events at the match.

She peeked at where the brand was burned in her otherwise flawless skin. Someone had stopped the bleeding and bandaged it - probably the same

person, who had removed her armor and torn blood-soaked tunic. Which made the alarm flare in her mind – whoever had taken care of her had seen the brand. And as she lay there, still slightly weak from the blood-loss, she couldn't decide which was worse – having her secret exposed, or being in the same room with the Fire knew who. Though, she was aware of one thing for sure – whoever it was, the guy was more than in for a real, full-blown demonstration of just how fiery her temper could be...

A/N: My biggest apologies for not updating for so long - bloody writer's block, but finally Chapter 3 is here! And of course - Read and Review, no matter what you think, all opinions are welcome!