

The Chronicles of Magic

The League of Light

Chapter 1

A Glimpse of the Universal War

“Run!” shouted a desperate voice in the darkness. “They’re coming!”

It was a dream and he knew because he’d been in his dreams before, many times, seeing visions, memories and nightmares. Mostly nightmares.

War. Most of his dreams were of The Universal War; he was probably dreaming about it right now. He often had dreams with King Kerrasar, the ruler of Earth and leader of its armies. The one who had taken over Earth’s command when the rebels (as everyone called them these days) assassinated the president and most of America’s government, seventeen years ago.

The dream then cleared around Spartak Anderson. It looked like a battlefield, a city, a burning city. Then he heard big bangs and turned around: the sky was filled with hundreds of Space Stormers – giant, sword-shaped human starships, big enough for a hundred thousand people aboard. They were advancing, destroying rebel ships and dropping bombs on the city. Then Spartak saw how Stariots – human soldiers – chased a dozen wizards and other creatures of the Magical Universe.

They ran past Spartak, completely unaware of his existence. No one ever saw or heard him in his dreams; he was just a ghost. Feeling the smell of smoke filling his lungs, he ran behind them as the Stariots caught the rebels and brought them to the city square, leaving behind a few corpses. There were thousands of rebels there, rounded up by Stariots and being separated into two lines: men and women. When they were sorted someone came. Between the lines was a tall woman with black braided hair and cat-like grey eyes. She had a serious and fierce look that made everyone feel like tiny mice, which were looking into the eyes of a giant cat, which was hungrily staring them down, yet remaining emotionless. This was Sinera Black, one of the highest-ranking generals and Kerrasar’s most ruthless warrior.

She was feared and envied by many, including Spartak. After the first few victories against the Magical Universe rebels were taken as hostages, their powers were extracted and then given to army commanders and soldiers. Only they were allowed this privilege, and that is why so many signed up for the army, willingly, full of enthusiasm. With these powers and the technology humans already possessed, combined with the strategic mastermind of King Kerrasar, the people of the Magical Universe were easily defeated.

Sinera was his deadliest weapon. Her black lips and her malicious face perfectly came with her armour to complete the image of a battle-hardened, ruthless warrior. She was dressed in a sleek black battle dress with leather cuirass, faux mail sleeve and long black skirt – the uniform of the Hunters. She walked slowly, inspecting the lines of male and female rebels. The air of a feared woman was following her like a shadow. She just passed a few people when something attracted her attention – a baby’s cry. Spartak turned and saw a rebel woman clutching her baby tightly, desperately trying to make it quiet. Sinera approached the woman.

“What is its name?” she asked, looking into the eyes of the trembling woman.

“A-Alen,” the woman answered. Her voice was so small as if it had to be squeezed from the deepest depths. The baby stopped crying as Sinera looked into his eyes. Spartak felt a chill run down his body, and it wasn’t the cool wind that was blowing.

“Why is he crying?”

“He’s cold, my lady. And I think he’s afraid,” the woman mumbled.

“Then he’s wiser than most,” the general said, leaning over to the woman. “I am the reason children are afraid of the dark. Many fear it but I cannot stand the light. I hate it; it must be snuffed out of the world.”

Sinera turned away, looking at her army and emotionlessly said, “Kill them all.” The Stariots instantly started a slaughter. Thousands of lasers were fired from the silver blasters, each one meeting its target. People’s screams filled the air and all Spartak did was watch. He wanted to turn away but he couldn’t, the horror and shock had paralyzed his body. And because he hadn’t turned around, he saw how the woman ran towards Sinera, baby in her left hand, dagger in the other.

But Sinera proved too quick and in an instant, she was holding the woman by the neck. The Stariots ceased fire and looked at the scary scene along with the remaining rebels. They saw it, Spartak saw it, they all saw how Sinera’s hand burrowed into the woman’s chest, while a wicked thing resembling a smile consumed her face. In his dreams, Sinera rarely smiled. In public or in the news she didn’t as much as move her facial muscles a centimetre. Sinera was enjoying this, and the cries of the baby somehow made her smile even broader.

“You have a strong heart. I want it.”

Then she got it out – she was clutching a beating heart. The woman before her stopped breathing, collapsed on the ground, dead. The heart stopped beating. Sinera kept on smiling. She walked away from the scene, tightly holding the heart. The rebels screamed and panicked as the general stared at them, her face back to being devoid of emotion and impossible to read. Then the Stariots killed the last of them.

The scene changed. Nothingness engulfed Spartak and the next time he blinked, he was standing in a new place. He had seen this, just didn’t remember its name. Something like Ve... Var... Varrosaba. That was its name, Varrosaba, one of the main bases of Kerrasar’s

army and private fortress of Unetz Chort, one of Kerrasar's most trusted generals. It was positioned on the planet of Vyobragen: a huge black tower in the centre of a wasteland valley, surrounded by a ring wall. Built in the foot of a mountain, the black tower was the thing that stood out the most: a giant structure, which curved and twisted in the oddest places, and looking at it made Spartak feel like he was looking at a piece of modern art. The likes of which make no sense and look like an accidental splash of paint.

The sky was dark above Varrosaba and two things went up in the air every few seconds – poisonous black fumes and hundreds of battleships, both Space Stormers and smaller fighter ships that were meant for only one pilot, called Annihilators. The valley had endless caves and warehouses where battle droids and war machines were manufactured for The War, hundreds of thousands in just a day, from which the fumes came from.

Then an X-shaped space shuttle landed on a marked platform. Spartak recognised it as an *Epilson-class S-9* model, judging by the beak-like cockpit and the black stripes on the grey surface, which formed the symbol of a black crown, King Kerrasar's sigil. Only the people amongst the highest ranks were allowed to use this shuttle model. And surely enough Unetz Chort came down. A tall man with an unnatural smile that would haunt whoever saw it, forever.

He wore a dark yellow tailcoat that reached his knees and had a popped collar. He had big amber eyes and short, messy hair, but his most striking feature was his necklace – it was made of teeth. Not just human teeth, but sharp and giant ones, looking like they belonged to mighty beasts. Some of them were still red with blood.

He energetically skipped across Varrosaba's wasteland-scape, hysterically screaming, "I'm back, my darlings! Did you miss me?" A squadron of guards was trying to catch up with him. Spartak followed them.

"They're ready, sir," the closest guard said and Unetz frantically turned around.

"Pass it here, dearie, pass it here! Come on!" he squeaked impatiently and his guard passed him a small remote. Spartak recognised this as a remote for droids, and in a second, no less than a thousand droids were raised on a platform from the underground factories. Unetz giggled weirdly as he took the remote and pressed a big red button. The droids exploded in a symphony of chaos, causing a small earthquake. Spartak went down on the ground, feeling the effect in his insides, feeling how his bones shook and his teeth trembled. He covered his head as if the explosions could actually hurt him. But it was a dream. Yet he felt a pain in his ears. A real pain.

When he looked up, he saw a deranged sight: Unetz was slowly spinning on the spot, arms spread wide, smile even creepier than before, looking like he was greeting the destruction and chaos as if they were gods. Perhaps that was what he was really doing, Spartak thought. He had had dreams with Unetz in them before and the image he got for this person was a chaotic lunatic, who enjoyed destruction and found everything amusing, especially people's suffering. That's what creeped out Spartak the most.

“Sir!” one of the Stariots shouted. The explosions had died out and Unetz looked at the Stariot seriously. “These droids took hours and valuable resources to produce! Why would you destroy them?”

“Because it’s fun!” Unetz shouted back. “Fun is above anything and everything, fun is the ultimate thing in the universes. Anyone who stands between me and my fun will be cut in pieces and then rearranged in the weirdest way to make the most hideous lifeform in existence, which I will find *very* entertaining!”

The Stariot had shut up and didn’t dare even blink, while Unetz’s crazy eyes were staring him down. His smile had vanished, but then re-appeared again as he and his six Stariots walked to the tower. Spartak followed them, eager to see what was going to happen.

“Let’s put some music on!” Unetz cried suddenly, making his Stariots jump. “This is not a funeral; we need to shake it off. Come on, what music shall we put? WHAT MUSIC DO YOU LIKE?” he shouted and pointed at one of the Stariots, who was very short and frail-looking.

“Justin Bieber,” the small Stariot answered and Unetz’s face tensed.

“Execute him,” he said coldly, looking at his guards and pointing at the short Stariot, who was dragged away, screaming and begging for mercy. Unetz merely giggled, then walked to the black tower and Spartak followed him and his guards. Through a few corridors, down a few hundred stairs, around the corner and in front of a white iron door. The guards waited outside, while Unetz entered it, a wicked smile on his face. Spartak hastily darted into the room, just before the iron door slid closed. He saw a bruised, wretched-looking man in grey pants and a tucked-in grey shirt, a prisoner’s uniform.

“Darling, darling, darling,” Unetz mumbled, shaking his head reproachfully. “You’re in a lot of trouble.”

The man instantly crawled to Unetz’s feet, looking like a beggar, crying. “I haven’t done anything. I want to go, let me out!”

“Tom Macgregor, or as wizards’ call you, Omul Dosad, Minister of Democia and its biggest traitor,” Unetz said. “Betrayed your world at the beginning of The War and became our spy in exchange for safety and money. Betrayed your own wife to save yourself, betrayed your friends and hundreds of worlds, helped to massacre billions of rebels and enemies of King Kerrasar. And then they call me a monster.”

“I’ve done everything for the Black King! I’ve given you all the information you needed for your battles, why am I here?”

“You know, darling!” He laughed an insane laugh, while life shrank in Omul’s eyes. “Do you think we can be fooled? We know you’ve been giving information to the rebels. We don’t like traitors, not at all.”

Omul turned into a sobbing coward, and Spartak looked at him with disgust and pity, almost seeing a giant rat.

“Don’t kill me, please!” Omul pleaded, crying in front of Unetz, whose smile was growing beyond creepy and unnatural. “I’ll do anything! I’ll give you what you want. I’ll spy for you, I’ll serve Kerrasar, I’ll bring down the Rebellion.”

“You think that’s what I want!” Unetz laughed his head off, while Omul stared at him, confused and scared. “No, dearie, I just want to watch the world *burn*. I want to pour down a giant tub of gasoline onto a burning planet and watch the flames grow!” Spartak pictured a man, watering his flowers and enjoying seeing how they grew, but Unetz’s twisted mind had turned this tranquil and beautiful image into one of destruction. “You know, something? Destruction is amusing! Suffering is hilarious! Chaos is rollicking! All of them combined make fun. All I do is for fun! And now, let’s make the situation hilarious.”

Unetz raised his hand and Omul’s teeth flew from his mouth, directly to the sadist’s hand. Unetz giggled, then waved his hand and suddenly – suddenly – Spartak couldn’t believe what he saw. Omul’s face was cleaned, his eyes, mouth, nose, they were all removed, as if a rubber had erased them. Omul screamed, but no screams came out, they couldn’t come out of anything, just horrible muffled sounds, as he ran around the room. Spartak pitied him, even though he was a pathetic coward, any human being would pity him: running around the room, blind to the world around him, being laughed at by the crazy Unetz. And then, all in a flash, Unetz stabbed Omul with a wooden spike he had conjured.

Spartak screamed, but no one noticed. Unetz giggled madly, but then he fussed like a little child. “Now look what you’ve done!” he shouted at Omul’s bleeding corpse. “I wanted this room yellow, now I have to paint it red. You have to compensate.”

He clicked his fingers and suddenly Omul disappeared. Spartak looked around and saw one of the creepiest things in his life – a doll. Omul Dosad was now a faceless wooden doll. Unetz giggled, picked it up and talked to himself. “My parents never allowed me to play. Because they knew I played rough. But they’re gone, now. I can play as much as I want.”

Then a Stariot came into the room. “Sir, the prisoners from the battle on Mallu are here.”

Unetz smiled his unnatural smile and happily said, “Let’s play.”

The scene changed again. Darkness, and then Spartak saw a tall figure, standing on a raised platform, arms folded behind his back. He was looking at a besieged city, bombs tearing it apart while Space Stormers were taking the sky from a rebel fleet.

“I’ve been struck with the thought that you don’t know who I am,” said a cold and grating voice, very familiar to Spartak. Then the figure slowly turned around and the regal, yet devilish smile of King Kerrasar was revealed. A huge man with short brown hair and cold dark-brown eyes, engulfing you like a chilling night and their darkness then becomes your biggest fear. His black armour gave him the air of regal elegance. Spartak turned to see an army of at least a thousand rebels who were facing Kerrasar, while he was wryly smiling. “I am Kerrasar, ruler and conqueror of the Magical Universe, leader of Earth and commander of its infinite legions, the all-powerful Kamrak and the Black King.”

The army of rebels took battle positions, and Kerrasar’s smile vanished.

“You must know me because everyone knows me,” he said. “So I’ve reached the conclusion that you’re all demented since no sane person would dare go against me. And that’s why I’ll offer you a deal: Kneel before me, kneel before your king and I might spare *some of you*. Join me or perish.”

One of the rebels stepped up, looking like their leader and fiercely said, “We know who you are, Kamrak. But you’re no king, only a mere servant of darkness. And we will never surrender to –”

“Yes, ah, I’ll stop you right there, I get the picture.” He rolled his eyes in annoyance. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Rebels Rise!” their leader roared their battle cry as they stormed forward.

Kerrasar charged at the rebels. The archers released a rain of flaming arrows and spells but Kerrasar dodged them easily or grasped them with his power, firing them back at the rebels. He attacked the soldiers, ferociously slaying them. A mighty clash, a sea of corpses, a legendary massacre.

Spartak closed his eyes for a few seconds, hearing the screams and agonizing yells of the rebels. He knew he was supposed to hate them but when he witnessed a massacre like this, he couldn’t help but pity them. And when he opened his eyes he saw Kerrasar, standing amidst the corpses of a thousand slain rebels, obviously enjoying himself. “Oh, that sure feels nice, still, it’s a shame there aren’t more. Oh, one’s still alive.”

Spartak followed the Black King’s eyes to the rebels’ leader, injured, his entire face covered in blood. He rose from the sea of bodies and sternly looked at the Black King.

“Will you kneel, now?” Kerrasar said slyly, a wicked smile consuming his face.

“Go back to whatever abyss you crawled out of, you filthy demon!”

And then Kerrasar nailed the rebel to a spike he conjured from his hands. He turned to Spartak as if he could see the young boy. Spartak screamed as Kerrasar appeared in front of him and the boy felt something cold clutching his heart.

He woke up, screaming.

His sodden sheets were stuck to his skin. He took some deep breaths, trying to relax as he felt how his heart was nearly going to jump out of his chest. He put his hand on the chest, just to make sure that it was still there. It was. Then sunlight hit his brown eyes and he walked to the window; it felt like a long journey because of the sleepiness: out of the huge oak bed, stepping on the white carpet, past the black sofa and the giant TV screen and to the large and high windows; it was dawn. For some reason as soon as the sun was up he was up, always, every single day of his life. He saw how the sun’s rays shined upon the giant city of New York, which covered all of North America.

Spartak looked at the clock on the midnight-blue wall, and there was at least an hour and a half before he could have his breakfast, so he spent it in his favourite way – drawing. This always brought relief. No coloured paintings, only black and white pictures. They were his speciality.

He sat down on his cloud-soft chair in front of his oak desk, his sketchpad waiting for him. He looked up at the wall and saw his hundreds of other drawings: maps of magical worlds, scenes of battles, ruins of once huge buildings, castles, King Kerrasar, his minions and two people. For some reason, they were his most common drawing, the two people. A tall man with copper-brown hair, bright-blue eyes and tanned skin, and a beautiful woman with long golden hair, olive skin and captivating green eyes. He didn't know why but he had called them Aaron and Isabel, just two names that had randomly jumped into his head while drawing them. He always associated the names with those two people. Weirdly, he particularly liked the necklace Isabel had, of the sun and the moon.

He started drawing.

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"Spartak, time to wake up!" he heard the housekeeper's croaky voice and looked at the clock; it was already seven o'clock. Time always flew when he drew. "Spartak!"

"I'm coming!" Spartak yelled. He stood up, slapped on a red t-shirt and a pair of jeans, put on his father's leather jacket, and faced himself in the mirror. He styled his hair into a quiff and then looked at his necklace. It was the only thing he had from his real parents and he never took it off, not even when he slept. It was a symbol of the sun, and it was partly the inspiration for Isabel's amulet.

It was Thursday and today was his seventeenth birthday. He hated his birthday, nearly more than everything else. The only thing he hated more was Malia Ashworth, his classmate. He had big plans for her today, ones that were going to hurt her.

He walked down the huge corridor, sketchpad in his hands, headed for the elevator. There was a line of floor-to-ceiling windows, which made Spartak's six-foot body look puny. He passed some droids, who were cleaning the marble floor and said, "Good morning, Master Spartak."

He hated the way they said it: the vibrating voices were empty and programmed to just say that and clean; even if Spartak cursed them, punched them, even commanded them to cut off their legs, they would still say, "Good Morning".

He passed the metal clunks, ignoring them and entered the elevator, which was the size of a standard living room and that's what it looked like. Spartak pressed the button, labelled F1. It would take time to reach the first floor since his room was on the ninth (out of the thirteen floors of the mansion). He sat down on a red sofa, touched the glass-flat surface of the table in front of him and a soda instantly came from the table. He'd drunk it by the time he reached the first floor, the ride coming to a shaky end.

Out of the elevator, into a giant corridor that was the size of a house. If all the decoration in it were sold, the hunger in the galaxy would end; everything was gold and silver, more valuable than the jewellery in the national museums. Spartak walked past the portrait-lined, kilometre-long hall and saw some of mankind's most valuable paintings: Mona Lisa by Da Vinci, Starry Night by Van Gogh, The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo and many others. His mother had bought them, along with the critics that chose them, the servants, both humans and robots, which were passing and countless other things Spartak couldn't be bothered to remember. She knew nothing of art, she couldn't even name the things she had bought, but she enjoyed telling everyone that some of humanity's most valuable possessions were possessed by her.

Spartak sat on an oak chair in the dining hall and put his book on the marble-smooth table, avoiding the servants' eyes as they served breakfast. As always, there was more than enough food to feed a small town for a month. Spartak's mother always wanted to have everything he liked at breakfast so that he can choose and then throw away anything he didn't like. Just because they could afford it.

He started drawing, barely finding any room for his sketchpad on the overflowing-with-food table. His little brother, Peter, came down the stairs, rushing to see Spartak's drawings, as he did every morning. His smile was a ray of sunshine painted all over his face, which brought more light to Spartak's life than the sun, moon and stars combined together. People couldn't help but love him; he was purer than a fresh raindrop and his sparkling blue eyes made people smile.

"Wow, this one is amazing," Peter said, sounding a bit too impressed. He was looking into Spartak's drawing of the woman, Isabel, looking out of a castle window, holding a rose in her hands. She was beautiful. "I wish I could be as good as you. Maybe one day I will be!"

Spartak smiled and gently said, "No, you'll be better." Just when Peter least expected it, Spartak grabbed some icing from one of the cakes and painted it all over his little brother's face. The little boy crossed his arms, over-exaggerating his anger in the cutest way possible. "I'll get you one day, Sparky," Peter said, knowing this will annoy his brother, which it did, but only because Spartak wanted it to. He ruffled Peter's fluffy brown hair and together they sat to enjoy the breakfast.

Then they heard the hoarse voice of their mother, shouting at someone. "You let it slip! If they find out, we're dead. You... Who gives a damn you have four children and you're a single mother? I don't and they won't when they ruin our lives. I'm coming in an hour and you better pray they haven't found out, otherwise I'll strangle you myself!"

And there she was, their mother, Catherine Anderson, a tall woman with short blonde hair and sharp green eyes. She was already dressed in a red blazer and an official skirt, her hair straightened and her makeup on; Spartak didn't recall ever seeing her un-officially looking, she always had the air of a businesswoman around her. And as always, she was staring at her rectangular, glass portscreen and talking to someone.

People often said she was beautiful, probably because of the many surgeries she'd had, yet her beauty looked perfectly natural.

Spartak hated her. Ever since the New York raid on November 9th, 4789, eight years ago, she had done the thing that made Spartak hate her – she hated Peter. She blamed him for her husband’s death.

On the night of the battle, on the night of Spartak’s ninth birthday, thousands of rebel ships and hundreds of thousands of rebel troops besieged New York; nothing like this had happened before and the city wasn’t ready. Spartak’s dad was a General and was called to fight, but he never reached the fight. While they were running for the bomb shelter in the garden, Peter, only five years old, ran back to the house to get his biggest treasure – a rabbit Spartak had given him as a birthday present. Their dad followed him into the house, while Spartak and his mother watched as a bomb fell on it. A few minutes passed and they stood tightly hugged, paralyzed, but then the small figure of Peter emerged and Spartak ran to hug him. But his mother had stood in front of the shelter, crying, unable to even breathe, realising that Peter would be the only one to come out.

Since that day, his mother detested Peter and she had not shown any signs of love for him. For that reason, Spartak hated her, even though she loved him and tried her hardest to reach him. To her he was the most perfect human on this planet, every mistake he did was ignored and often blamed on Peter, which was one of the many injustices done to this little boy. Spartak praised his little brother for one thing: staying happy all these years, while his mother tormented him in every way.

Spartak once loved her. But his love for her was sleeping like a bear in the winter, and this sleep would not end, ever.

He returned to reality when his mother’s voice stopped and he noticed that her conversation was over. She sat down.

“Sorry,” she apologised, still staring at her portscreen. “Some idiot has shown information to the competition, and if they find out the business is a goner.” She then took some toasts, spread some butter, chocolate and strawberry jam on four them, but threw the rest away. The fact that she was as rich as anyone could get had made her too wasteful and that was another thing Spartak hated. She was the owner of one of the most successful highly-advanced-weaponry factories and The War had made her one of the richest people on Earth, if not in the entire galaxy.

“Well, what do you want to do on your birthday, sweetheart?” she asked, taking a sip of coffee. “We have a week to plan it, so you can choose anything you want. I can get you out of school if you want.”

Spartak groaned quietly so she wouldn’t notice. “It’s today,” he said and she nearly choked on her coffee. *She could’ve at least remembered his death*, Spartak thought angrily to himself. Then he remembered that all the meetings and the stuff that was going on in her factory was driving her crazy; that was also a good thing because she paid little attention to her sons and they were left alone, in peace.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” she cried, looking as though she had committed a crime. “I’ll compensate! I’ll buy you the new *Hoverscooter, S82L Model*, I know you’ve always wanted one! I can get you some ice cream and anything you want!”

“Can I come, too?” Peter asked sweetly and his mother gave him a death stare. One of freezing fury that replaced her guilty expression.

“Well, have you done something to deserve it?” she asked, smiling wickedly, walking to the little boy who now stared at his porridge to avoid her glare. “Have you been just as perfect as your brother? Oh, no, you haven’t. You’ve just been a tiny spiteful thing which deserves nothing!”

Spartak wanted to stand up and punch her, as he saw how Peter raised his little head, his eyes sparkling with tears as he was about to cry. “I’m sorry,” he said, nearly sobbing, not even knowing what he was sorry about. His mother raised her hand as if she was about to slap him and he cowered in his chair. Spartak stood up and went to hug him; he felt Peter’s shaking.

“I know you are,” their mother said, kneeling down to look Peter in the eyes. “I am sorry for many things, too. But my biggest regret is that you’re here.”

Spartak’s face tensed and he was about to shout, but he only said, “I just remembered: I hate ice cream. I’ll be out with friends, so you can forget about the family afternoon.”

His mother backed away, realizing her mistake. While she was walking away, a small and murderous voice whispered, *Kill her*, and echoed in Spartak’s head. It often happened – when he was angry or sad the voice, a familiar yet foreign and cold voice whispered things in his mind. Dark things. Death, murder, revenge.

The voice faded away in his head and then Spartak was able to hear his brother’s sobs. Peter looked up and revealed his broken face. Spartak’s anger grew bigger but he covered it, knowing he had to use his kindness to comfort his little brother.

He rubbed his hands through Peter’s fluffy hair, hugging him tightly, feeling the heat coming from his tiny body; Peter was almost like a torch, which refused to stop glowing and to emit warmth from his entire being, despite the freezing darkness of his mother’s hatred. Then Peter removed his head from his brother’s shoulder, while Spartak looked into the watery, red eyes, filled with pain; he managed a smile and wiped the falling tears from Peter’s face.

“Listen, you are not alone and you never will be. People love you. I love you, more than anything. And you will always have me.” Peter hugged his big brother, resting his little head on Spartak’s big and broad shoulders, letting tears of mixed feelings slip. Spartak felt the heat of the little body as if Peter was an electric blanket.

Peter removed his head and Spartak saw how a tear was falling down from his red eyes; he wiped it off with his fingers, and said, “Want a piggyback?”

Chapter 2

The Good and the Evil

Peter nodded and his smile returned. He mounted Spartak and together they climbed the stairs to Peter's small bedroom. If it wasn't for Spartak their mother would've made Peter sleep in the basement or in a really dark storage-room, but Spartak's wishes were equal to laws in that house.

"I'll drive you to your bedroom, then to school and when we finish we'll have the entire day for ourselves. Why don't we go to Shock Island?" he said and Peter smiled. Shock Island was his favourite theme park and they always went when they could, them and the guard squadrons their mother sent to guard Spartak.

He dropped his little brother outside the door and waited outside the bedroom, guarding him against danger, like a lion who protected his cubs. He heard slow footsteps and saw the tall figure of his mother approaching him as gently and silently as the night.

"Why?" she mumbled. He ignored her. "Why do you love him? He murdered your father."

Spartak looked at her with cold hatred. "No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did, and you still protect him. I gave you everything, I loved you more than anything and still, you hate me. I don't understand this. I don't understand why you love him." A tear fell and her eyes reddened.

"He is your real son, while I'm adopted and you hate him; I don't understand this. It would've been better if you hated me instead because he doesn't deserve it," Spartak answered with a bite in his voice, giving no attention to his mother's sobs.

"Please, Spartak, give me another chance. I love you. Remember those rings you made for me, ten years ago, for my birthday?" she lifted her arm to show him the glistening stones on her fingers. "I – I never took them off. Please, just give me a chance."

He didn't think it through, didn't plan it, just said what he wanted to say. "Listen, I think you should stop trying. You want me to love you, tough luck because once I did but I don't think I ever will. Peter, I will protect him from you, from everything and everyone, at all costs. So you better go to work, shout at some people, ruin more lives, because I have to take my little brother to school and right now you're wasting our time."

That defeated her, crushed her, just like a juicer crushing fruits. She was left speechless and then she walked away from Spartak, leaving a small trail of water droplets on the red carpet. Without glancing back Spartak stood outside Peter's room, no reaction, perhaps a pity and a small urge to say sorry. But he wasn't even afraid, as some people would be, that she might kick him out of the mansion or rid him of her money. He didn't care, at all.

Peter came out and Spartak instantly softened his expression, replacing it with a smile; that was almost an instinct, as Spartak had so many occasions to be furious and sad, but whenever Peter was around, he couldn't afford that, he had to be strong for both of them. They walked out of the mansion, into the school field of a garden and down a golden path. The very air was different outside, reeking of smoke and feeling almost corrosive.

The path was lined with Kerrasar's police-like force, meant to ensure order in his empire – Blood Taxers. It came from the punishments they gave: whipping for breaking a Class 1 Law, cutting off a hand for breaking a Class 2 Law, a tongue for Class 3 and a head for Class 4. "In times of war order is sacred and must be protected at all costs, or we'll be destroyed from the inside, as if from a virus," were Kerrasar's words when he introduced the Blood Taxers to the world. They were the reason even the richest and most powerful didn't think of themselves above the law; there was a period five years ago, when the Blood Taxers were executing the powerful people, publicly, the ones who thought themselves above Kerrasar. This was set as an example, to show the people no one was more powerful than their king and his minions.

His minions guarded the entrance of the garden and the floating golden limo that was awaiting the masters; Peter hopped in quickly and just before Spartak followed him, John, a bodyguard with scars covering his entire face, stopped him.

"Mistress Anderson doesn't want us to transport Peter," he said in a low, leathery voice.

"I don't care," Spartak said firmly, barely making any eye contact.

"You should know better than angering your mother, Spartak."

"And you should know better than angering me." John scowled. "If anything happens to my little brother and I learn about it, no one, not even the almighty King Kerrasar will find what's left of you after I'm finished."

The bodyguard scoffed because he knew it was pointless to argue; he knew that Spartak would do anything for the last person he had left to love.

So he boarded the ramp and got on the vehicle, which blasted off into the sky with incredible speed, flying past the endless cityscape of New York.

"Approximate arrival time: 10 minutes," the car's system said, as it went deeper and deeper into New York. Spartak drank a coke that helped him to wake up, while Peter got a water bottle from the freezer, and they both looked beyond the windows: weird forms of vehicles and spacecraft were invading all the free space in the air, flying fifty stories above the ground. But the sky was already filled with impressive structures, which seemed to go up beyond the clouds; on the ground, millions of people were walking, tiny ants to the two boys.

Then they flew right past the Parliament Building: a stupendous silver construction with tall domed spires that stood out amidst the encircling cityscape. It was surrounded by a high, thick square wall with many turbolaser-cannons on the top, leaving a big courtyard on the

inside, big enough to have at least a million people in it. Kerrasar's fortress. It didn't exactly say *'Suffering'* or *'Death'*, but Spartak knew of the things that were going on in there, and that's why he hated seeing it every day.

He turned his back on the endless city, looking at the screen on the other side of the limo. The daily news was being shown.

"King Kerrasar easily took the city Tevetna on the world of Neabia, destroying the last rebel stronghold on the planet," the reporter said, moving aside and revealing the background: chained rebels were walking and wearing special neck-collars (AM Collars) that prevented them from using magic, supervised by Stariots as they entered hovercrafts that were going to take them to death camps, where they would face a choice – join Kerrasar or die. Most were slaughtered. They refused to help their enemy. "Some soldiers recorded the battle, hidden by our king's invisibility spells. Here's the footage." What was shown was an exact copy of Spartak's dream. The same place, same soldiers, same movements Kerrasar had in the dream. The same deadly look he'd had when he'd seen Spartak.

Spartak turned it off and commanded the car system to play *'Say Amen'* by Panic at the Disco. Smiling, he was glad that Peter had just watched the city this entire time; he was too young to realise the full horror of the world.

"What's this?" Spartak said, as Peter suddenly passed him a beautifully ornamented wooden box, which had a giant *S* carved into it.

"Happy Birthday," Peter said, unexpectedly hugging his brother.

Spartak smiled, opened the box and saw a silver medallion-locket with *SPARTAK* written on it. When he opened it and a holograph displayed pictures. Pictures and videos of Peter and Spartak, every single one the pair had ever made. The first one was the day when Peter had been born. Spartak was sitting next to his mother, smiling, holding an adorable little baby, while their father was making a silly face and their mother was exhausted but still smiling. They were all there, happy. The good times, the calm before the storm.

Tears flooded his eyes, but he tried to make it look as though they were happy tears and thanked Peter. There was another medallion-locket, which had *PETER* on it.

"That way we, em – we'll always be with each other!" Peter said, beaming as he put on Spartak's locket. Spartak put the one with Peter's name on it. That was the best gift. They hugged and stayed like that for a long time.

"We've arrived at Greenville Elementary School."

Quietly, Spartak cursed the system and the super-fast car.

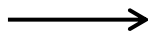
They walked down the car's ramp and stood before Peter's giant school. Spartak gave him a tight goodbye hug and let him run to his friends.

As soon as the little body was out of sight, Spartak's smile disappeared and turned to a cold look. Every time he left Peter felt like he was leaving a sheep near to a forest full of wolves. That was the world. But Spartak was the one with the gun.

He walked inside the limo and ordered a big glass of wine, which teleported on the table next to his seat instantly. If he was going to go through today, he might as well make it easy.

The car flew over the dried-out and building-infested bed of Hudson River, then to the centre of Manhattan State-Borough (which covered what once were the states of New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont) where Spartak's school was. Each state-borough had four assigned schools to it: an elementary, a secondary, a college and a university. Spartak loved the idea of people going to private schools when they could afford it; no, he was forced to be with the peasantry folk.

But that had its benefits. He was always close to Malia and her cockroaches (her friends, as he called them) and he could hurt them. What's better, he knew how to hurt them; they were weaklings, freaks and outcasts, which was enough to set everyone on them. What was even better, they cared about each other and if one drowned, the others would come to the rescue and Spartak would be there to drown them.



Malia struggled to keep awake, seeing how the snake-like bus moved fifty stories above the surface, surrounded by the sky traffic. Spaceships and private vehicles filled the smoky air like insects, a never-ending swarm of flies. She played with her necklace, wrapping the chain on her finger, seeing how the symbol of the moon glistened in the bus's artificial light.

"You okay, Mal?" Vyara asked. Rather reluctantly, Malia rubbed away the crust that glued her brown eyes together and opened them fully. The girl that sat next to her had a polished ponytail that reached her waist and a pair of angelic blue eyes, but Malia knew better than to confuse Vyara for an angel. Grease stains were splattered over her short denim jacket and flowery dress.

"I'm alright," Malia mumbled, shutting her eyes as a headache started creeping up her right temple. She had been travelling from the outskirts of Manhattan for three hours now, and the stifling air was mixing with her tiredness to completely finish her off.

"We'll arrive at Destination: Brooklyn High School, shortly," the bus's system announced. Malia groaned; that was one of the last things she wanted to hear. Another day of long lessons that were barely interesting. Another day of people praising, "The almighty and magnificent King Kerrasar!" for being an inhumane monster. Another day of being stuck with Spartak Anderson and his bully gang.

"Vyara," she said, glancing at her friend, who looked up with her angelic eyes. "You're one of the best inventors I know. Can't you make something that, like... makes you look sick so you can stay at home?"

“Tried it last year. It exploded.” Vyara furrowed her freckly face and Malia smiled: Vyara’s inventions often exploded, but when they didn’t people would easily mistake her for one of the smartest people in the universe.

“Hello there!” Malia’s eyes opened as though she’d heard an explosion: the bus had landed at the last stop before the school. As soon as she saw Adriana and her twin, Jack, she acknowledged them with a lazy nod and closed her eyes. “MAL!”

“What?” Malia screamed back at Ana, who smiled.

“Hi,” the twins chorused.

“Oh, bog off,” Malia groaned.

“Buy one, get one for free; sure, what do you sell?” Jack responded, booming with laughter like Ana. Malia heard how Vyara shared the laugh. ‘*Cheeky Devils*’, that’s how everyone in their friendship group called them. Jack and Ana shared many features: both had sky-blue eyes deep into their heart-shaped faces, devilish dimples and golden hair, but Jack’s was spiky like a thorn-bush and messy while Ana’s was short and wavy.

Sadly, Malia realised that soon they were going to reach the school and she needed to wake up. Lifting her iron-heavy lids was hard, but she managed. Devilish dimples had deepened in the twins’ faces.

“What have you planned?” Malia asked as Ana fished a pack of gum from her pocket. Malia then noticed that their bags looked very full as if they were about to explode, and she quickly remembered that the twins had been doing their usual thing last night.

Jack leaned forward from the back seat and quietly whispered, “Adam Drake’s house will get a visit today.”

Malia’s golden-brown eyes widened with worry. She glanced at Vyara, who was even more worried.

“You can’t!” Vyara said, her voice a harsh whisper so no one would hear. “If Adam finds out he’ll tell his master, and if Spartak finds out he will destroy you.”

“He hates us anyway,” Ana said, popping a thin white stick into her mouth.

“Then we shouldn’t give him something to use against us,” Malia said, waving away the gum that Ana offered. “You can’t risk getting caught.”

Jack groaned. “Ugh, you sound like Grizelda.” The sour landlady of the twins’ orphanage. “We never get caught.”

“And I have abnormal luck,” Ana added and smirked.

“Jack, no!” Vyara said reproachfully, this time almost shouting. “They already speak things about you in school and—”

“To hell with people’s gossips!” the twins chorused, their smiles absent for the first times since they had gotten on the bus. “People are going to judge us, always,” Ana started, “and because we’re too awesome for them, we’ll ignore them,” Jack finished.

Malia managed a slight smile. “That’s the way.”

“But-but you—” Vyara staggered, “people will never leave us alone, and I can’t ignore them.” Malia saw a tear glistening in her friend’s right eye. “I’m not as good as you.”

“Here’s a fact,” Ana said, taking Vyara’s hands into her own. “Once you’ve accepted that the entire world is weird and crazy, the world can’t use the fact you’re unique against you. Plus, when we rob Adam’s father, I promise you something highly technological that you want.”

The tears lost their power, and Vyara beamed at the seduce, her look drifting away.

Malia grinned. “Aren’t you meant to be childish?” she asked Ana.

“That’s Jack, I’m the mature and breath-taking and practically perfect one.”

Malia turned around to Jack’s glare at his sister while she smirked broadly. Ana then poked his cheek and said, “Boop.” Jack jabbed her cheek back and, as always, it ended up in a poking battle, which came to a shaky end as the bus landed on the bus stop.

The teenagers waited until all the people had flushed out, and then they went into the cold air.

Malia saw her friends, Asen and Ilarion, standing in front of the bus shelter and Ilarion was coughing. “You’re late,” said Asen, tying his grey scarf around his neck.

“And you’re not German,” Ana replied. Asen scowled; his impressive height and a faint stubble made it easy to mistake him for a man grown, yet there was a tiny childish spark in his grey eyes.

“Do shut up, *Adriana*,” he taunted and Ana fussed.

“Do not call me Adriana.” Her voice was rock-hard. “Adriana Paris Gibson, it makes me sound so posh.” She cringed at the last word. “I am not posh! So I would appreciate if you call me Ana, thank you very much.”

“Okay, okay, whoa,” Asen said, overreacting the way friends do.

“You should’ve known better than that.” That was the first time Ilarion had spoken in his thin and quiet voice. He was a tiny boy with shaggy brown hair, feverish hands and skin as pale as snow. “She is a creative genius, after all.”

“What about me?” Jack fussed.

“I’m sorry,” Ilarion said, looking ashamed.

“Whoa, I was only kidding, mate.” He grabbed his friend’s shoulder and rubbed his fist into Ilarion’s thin shoulder. Ilarion managed a slight smile. Malia wondered how he wasn’t shivering in the cool wind since he only wore a black t-shirt, then she remembered that somehow he had always been immune to the cold.

When they reached the grounds in front of the school’s gate, where Blood Taxers were guarding the perimeter while hundreds of thousands of students were lined to get in, Malia saw something and cursed, “Oh, sugar.”

That got everyone looking: Spartak Anderson was there, wearing his usual sneer as the rest of his enormous and brainless cronies noticed Malia and her friends.

“Quickly, go,” Ilarion said nervously and everyone speed-walked to the school, but their way was suddenly cut off. Spartak and his cronies stood in front of the others, towering above everyone in Malia’s group.



Spartak grinned sardonically. His mates followed as he walked to Malia and her cockroaches, all of them big and wearing spiteful faces, covering the vermin with their huge shadows.

“Aren’t you going to say hello?” said Nathan, a thickset boy with a pair of mocking brown eyes. He sent a strong push at Asen’s chest that nearly made him fall. Asen did not look up.

“I mean, we all know you’re too poor to afford good manners, but at least you can try,” Spartak teased them and heard his friends’ guffaws behind him. He didn’t turn around. He just stared. Stared directly into Malia’s golden-brown eyes and her rock-hard face that didn’t break under his glare.

“Is there any trouble?”

Spartak lifted his gaze to find a big Blood Taxer, with a quelling look on his tight and hard face.

“No, sir,” Spartak said with a sweet smile, walking away from the cockroach gang. The smile did not leave him as he scanned his fingerprint at the gate and went into the huge school; it just turned sinister. Even evil.

People looked at him as he walked into the building. Menacing, disgusted and angry looks followed him like a shadow, but he barely paid attention. Most of the people in the school did not like him: their families *had* worked for Spartak’s company, or rather his mother’s. She fired them and he got the blame, but he did not care. He didn’t care about people’s opinions, he was quite happy with himself, and if someone came at him he would destroy them. Easily.

“What are we going to do now?” said Adam after a few minutes. They were already at the back end of the seemingly endless building, where Blood Taxers weren’t present.

Spartak checked his golden watch, which displayed 8:32. “It’s nearly time for Maths,” he said, grinning at Nathan and Adam, who returned the grin.

“Are you sure?” Tim asked worriedly. He was the smallest and palest of the four, as well as the smartest. “The teachers patrol the corridors and – er – they don’t *particularly* like you.”

“The teachers can go to hell,” Spartak said light-heartedly, as though he was simply talking about the weather. “Most of them and their families depend on my mother’s company, while the rest are rightfully afraid that if they give me detention they’ll end up in a container... *in pieces*.”

Tim’s face was nearly cleansed of worry, then filled with delight. “Well said. Nevertheless, the bad guys always lose, or have you forgotten Star Wars and Marvel and basically every big pop-culture franchise?”

Nathan groaned. “Okay, A, we don’t watch relics, B–”

“Both Star Wars and Marvel are still going on,” Tim interjected.

“Screw that, they’re still *ancient*.” Nathan obviously got irritated. Spartak and Adam laughed, and then comfortably leaned against the lockers, eager to watch. “And B, we’re not the bad guys, are we. We’re just having a little *fun*.” Spartak and Adam nodded, standing behind Nathan to show their support.

“Fine,” Tim surrendered. “I have Biology, so see y’all later.” He fist-bumped Adam, Nathan and Spartak in a row; Spartak sent a painful punch that made Tim hold his left hand with the other one. Tim smiled anyway and walked away.

“Let’s go, boys,” Spartak commanded. “The vermin is not going to clear itself up.” Nathan and Adam sneered, and off they left.

They lined at the teleporters at the end of the narrow corridor and pressed the code that would teleport them to the Maths Wing. They couldn’t be bothered to walk there: it was at the other end of the school, which was built to have nearly a billion students.

Destiny was kind; as soon as the trio of friends reached their maths classroom, Malia and most of her cockroaches arrived. Asen and Vyara weren’t with the others.

“We meet again!” Adam sneered. “Are you following us?”

“Just move out of the way,” Malia said coolly, trying to get past the buff giant that towered above her. He blocked her way.

“Whoa, that’s not a way to speak to friends,” Adam drawled, loftily approaching Malia. She did her best to keep a hard and impassive face, which she was good at.

"Are you going to move..." Jack said as he walked up to Nathan and Adam, backed by his equally short sister, "...or shall we move you ourselves?"

Nathan and Adam boomed with laughter. "You kidding, right?" Nathan retorted, looking down at the twins with his arrogant face. "The last time you losers tried to crush a cockroach in the shithole of a home you have, it knocked you to the ground and went away with the last dollar you had. I remember that well."

"Yes, you were the cockroach, after all," Ana said wryly. Nathan went scarlet. "It's no wonder that when you're near it smells like garbage... and your parents tried to get rid of you with poison."

Nathan's face tensed and burned with fury. Ana and Jack kept smiling cheekily. Spartak hated those cheeky smiles and would love to erase them. Then Ilarion went to the twins and whispered, "C'mon, let's just go."

Suddenly he was grabbed by the collar of his blue polo. Nathan bared his teeth as he hissed, "You're not going anywhere. Wha', you gonna crying, little piggy?" Spartak chuckled; that's what they had called Ilarion for years, oinking every time when they passed him. Ilarion started coughing and hyperventilating, and Spartak thought that he might run out of air at any moment. "As for you..." Nathan glared at Ana and Jack, "you won your friend here a few punches." Viciously, he prepared a punch, leaving his stomach so vulnerable that Malia did not resist the urge to kick him hard.

Nathan collapsed on the floor, Ilarion scurried back behind Malia's back as Spartak approached her with a grim face, fists clenched.

"You do not threaten my friends," she said fiercely, while Adam helped Nathan, but Spartak didn't notice. He didn't care about them: right then, the only people in the world were him and the girl that he hated. As though they were having a staring contest, they remained silent for a long time. No one said a word, as the leaders of the two packs glowered at each other.

"You'll pay for this," Spartak said finally. "My mother will hear of this and she will destroy you all."

"Just because she's your doting dog. Have you actually seen your mother, Sparky?" Malia wrinkled her nose as Spartak glowered at her. "She looks like she always has shit under her nose. Was her expression always like this, or did she get it after she adopted you?"

Heat flared in Spartak's face. He approached the pack of cockroaches, fists clenched.

"Hey, not a bloody step closer!"

Spartak turned around and saw Emma, another one of Malia's cockroaches, walking down the empty corridor. A skinny girl with strong jawlines, greasy black hair and a scar that span from her forehead to her cheek on the left half of her face. She glared at Nathan and Adam

with eyes as dark as starless nights, reminding them who had crooked their noses. They backed away.

“Ya looking for a fight?” she said in the accent of the Manhattan slums, revealing her fist and her swollen knuckles. “Cos I’m right here and I can use the practice before today’s match.”

Spartak took a step back from Vyara, knowing it was better than picking a fight with Emma, especially where the Blood Taxers wouldn’t hear or see anything. He and his three friends were outnumbered, mostly by weaklings, but there were still some good fighters; Emma had fought formidable creatures three times the size of her in her matches, and her knuckles were swollen because last week she’d punched a tooth, the size of a teacup, out of a beast’s mouth.

They all walked into the classroom, which had a thousand weird smells in it, indicating that it was a chemistry room, but now they had maths. Light came from the floor-to-ceiling windows, reflected by the glass jars that were filled with species from all across the two universes, which were staining the blue walls. Spartak would like to see Malia in one of those jars and dissect her, tear her apart limb-by-limb, organ by organ.

They joined the class in sitting down as the bell rang.

“Wonder what I’ve planned for our birthday?” Spartak asked slyly when he had sat behind Malia; she didn’t turn around. He stretched his legs under the table and kicked her chair a few times, broadening his smile each time. “Come on, *Mal*, talk to me.” She still ignored him. “Well – I just wanted you to know that it’s not just *our* birthday.” Just like he’d expected, she turned around, her fiery eyes now filled with cool anger, and worry. “That’s right.”

“Don’t come anywhere near my friends,” she replied with freezing fury.

“Why? I won’t be mean... *not too much*.”

“Let me tell you something,” Malia said fiercely. “You think we’re afraid of you? Well, guess what, I’m not. And if you think I don’t have the guts or balls to kick you in yours, you’re gonna jump to one *very* different conclusion *very* soon.”

“Sit down, class.” The teacher came into the room and set his stuff on his wooden desk. Malia sat down without breaking the eye contact. When she had turned her back on him, Spartak spun around to grin at Nathan and Adam (who were right next to each other).

Then Nathan mouthed, “Today?”

“Today,” Spartak mouthed back.

The bell rang and the lesson began. The teacher, Mr Petko, stared down the class from his raised platform with a pair of brown eyes that were full of fake hardness. He tapped the board that then lit itself with holographic life. “Can anyone solve this?” The board displayed the problem: *Expand and simplify $(3n - 1)^2 - (3n - 1)^2$.*

No one answered. The teacher wasn't surprised, so he ran to his fail-proof student.

"Miss Graham, can you help us?"

He looked at a girl who was hiding behind the cover of her brick-thick book: Erika Graham. The scapegoat who's smart enough to mentally break people before they even speak to her, and one of Malia's friends. She put the book down and revealed her ocean-blue eyes, flaming red hair and empty face.

"Seeing as though I have answered every question you've asked me for the past six years, I think you've made a dumb question. But then again there are no dumb questions, only dumb people."

The class started laughing to themselves, but Erika remained impassive, not smiling or giggling at someone as others would've done; that's how Spartak knew she had done it for herself, not for someone else.

She just stared at Mr Petko, who looked as though he had swallowed a lemon. Then Erika's eyes shifted to the holographic board. She smiled dryly at the teacher.

"The answer to the question would've been $12n$, had you written the first - as a $+$. So sorry, but your question is unsolvable, as you've made a stupid mistake."

Mr Petko blinked in surprise and checked the equation. He turned around, anger flaring in his cheeks. "Err... Out! To the Principal's Office!" he barked at Erika. "We'll sort out your detention later."

"Punishing people for being smarter than they're expected to be and showing that rebellious intelligence has no place in society? Do you really wanna set us this example?" Before the teacher had even opened his mouth to counter-argument, Erika was already speaking. "Of course you don't. You want to get good recommendations, from both teachers and students, so that you can leave this school and go to a better place with higher wages. But that won't happen if a girl wrote an angry letter and backed up her points with evidence, such as the recordings from the cameras in this room." Erika pointed at some small round cameras, spread in the four corners of the rectangular room.

"I-I—" Mr Petko staggered.

"No need to apologise," Erika said. "Let's continue with the lesson since we've lost valuable time in which we could've been learning. Also, I advise you to read Cudworth's *The Key to all Maths Doors and Problems*, it'll help a lot."

The teacher obeyed like a well-trained dog and got on with his lesson, as did the rest of the class. Mr Petko dared not talk to Erika again, for fear that his non-existent authority might be reduced to nothing.

Maths was a boring subject; one hour passed like a week and that's exactly how Spartak felt it when the teacher said it was the end and stood at the front of the room, on his raised platform.

"As you know," he began and half the class groaned; they knew it off by heart, "tonight there'll be a match, which provides a chance to show your bravery and your killing skills, as well as win a prize of two hundred dollars, food supplies and something the victor chooses, so long as not too extravagant." Mr Petko rolled his eyes as he lifted a piece of paper in the air. What he said next was unnecessary. "Any volunteers?"

Emma's well-trained hand shot up in the air, slicing it like a knife. "Miss Irving, have you no intention of *ever* letting someone else fight?" Mr Petko asked sarcastically, as Emma dashed across the classroom. Nathan tried to trip her, but she jumped over it as though she had seen his foot from a mile.

"No," she said as she quickly grabbed the piece of paper and went to pack her backpack. Mr Petko gave her a huge bag, full of the usual rewards for the "Magnificent bravery that is required to do such a thing!" as Kerrasar had said. Some food, water and a few cards full of a hundred dollars each. The rest would be given to Emma when she killed tonight's monster.

The bell rang.

Spartak realised that the lesson had flown, but he worried not; he had an entire day left to hurt Malia and her friends.

Chapter 3

Wars Everywhere

The day was quick.

PE was the next lesson everyone had. Spartak (and the rest of the class) easily accused the teacher of favouritism. Miss O'Connor was a tall and strong woman and resembled a sabre-toothed tiger with iron-hard face and a rock of a heart.

Today's lesson was a preparation for their exam: how to take down a giant from the Magical Universe. Emma was going to win this, just like every other fight. She was the class's master with swords, axes and all other existing weapons, as well as with a dozen or so martial arts. She was Miss O'Connor's favourite since they shared the lust for fighting and mania for collecting weapons.

This lesson Miss O'Connor spent half an hour fussing over the sword Emma had brought. By the way she talked Spartak would think that she was an enthusiastic collector that had been beaten at the greatest auction of her life.

“Ye two, stop messin’ an’ try to actually strike the target!” she yelled when she saw that Spartak and Nathan were hanging above Ilarion, pretending to be shooting with their blasters.

Like people that shared one mind, the two boys symphonically made a rude hand gesture when she turned her back on them. They threatened Ilarion and returned to aiming at the droid targets, while the cold sports hall continued drumming with the annoyed growls of the people that missed their targets and the cheers of those that hit their droids. Emma tried firing, but blasters were the only weapons she couldn’t use properly, thanks to her bad aim. Jack, on the other hand, was the cockroach band’s best shooter, hitting the moving droids each time.

Most of the lesson was spent practising techniques that might confuse a giant and make it easy to attack, then practising with real weapons.

Beaming, Spartak continued imagining how Malia and her cockroaches’ faces replaced the blank metalheads of the robots; he hit the target each time.

There was a short break between lesson two and three, which was Computer Science. Miss Turner was a short but young woman with a kind face and emerald eyes. Yet another teacher that had a favourite and that was Vyara, the best inventor and hacker and programmer...

Spartak spent a lesson of playing games online in the far corner of the room, and whenever the teacher glanced in his direction whoever was on post would warn the other three. Miss Turner didn’t glance often, she was busy admiring over Vyara’s work.

“She’s not even that good,” Adam said, and Nathan and Tim laughed. Spartak remained impassive; once he had – or thought he had – seen that girl try to hack into his mother’s company and succeed, but as soon as she had seen him she had shut off the holographic computer screen. She was that good and better.

Another twenty-minute break.

Then Flying. Asen was the class’s best pilot of nearly everything, just like his disgraced father had been, before Kerrasar had sliced off his head. They revised some of the key theory: fighter-class ships were faster than the cruisers, but the cruiser-class had cannons that inflicted large-scale damage and were the only ships that could jump to hyperspace. Alpha-class cruisers were meant to send signals to the smaller cruisers and fighters, providing them with an encrypted channel for communication and shields, so if the alpha cruisers went down so did these things. Smiling as he shut down his book, Spartak prepared for the practical: piloting an Annihilator into a simulated battle. He was good too, but Asen was the best, and that irritated Spartak a lot. Malia’s cockroaches were better than him in nearly everything, and they would pay for that.

Finally, Spartak’s favourite time arrived: lunchtime. An hour in which he could execute his plan.

He ate his lunch in the corridors (despite the weak warnings of the teachers) and headed for one of the locker-areas. When his group were around the corner of a heavily crowded corridor, a hand with long red nails suddenly stopped Spartak. He looked down and, as if it was a reflex, he smiled at Alexa Clarise, the most popular girl in his year.

“Hello, there pretties,” Adam called out to Alexa and the group of girls behind her. Most of them blew kisses to him or giggled awkwardly, while the others looked away.

“Out of words, are ya?” Alexa said, looking at Spartak as though she was a queen and he needed to bow.

“You can hardly blame me, those blue eyes are just too *enchanting*,” he said with a devious smile.

Alexa allowed a ghost of a smirk on her pale face. “You promised that we would go to a bowling club yesterday.”

“And you lied,” one of her girls said accusingly, furrowing her makeup-loaded face.

“We were a bit busy, so—” Tim said, before Alexa’s authoritative hand cut him off.

“Not interested in your lives, darling.” She eyed Spartak, who was looking at something else. “I want you to apologise.”

Spartak smirked. Without caring that there were a thousand people in the corridor, Spartak wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. After what seemed like days, they broke apart, hearing the wolf-whistles of Spartak’s mates and the nervous giggles of Alexa’s girls. “Does that compensate, sweetie?” Spartak asked.

She smirked as though anyone would love to be in her place. “For now,” she said briefly, as she walked off with her friends. When she had turned her back on Spartak, one of her girls (whose name he didn’t know but whose face he recognised) winked at him. The other four winked at his friends, two of them exchanging glares after they had both smiled at Nathan.

The four boys walked down the corridor. Spartak suddenly stopped, his eyes focused on one particular locker. He got out a piece of paper with some scribbles on it, passed it to Adam.

Adam stuck the note to Erika’s locker and quickly sprinted back to the corner, laughing like mad. Spartak couldn’t help but laugh either, especially when Erika emerged from the crowd, hunched down like an old lady.

She saw the note.


She froze. Staring at the note must’ve been a thing she liked because she did not stop. Spartak chortled, stretching out his left palm behind his back and feeling the impact of his friends’ high-fives.

Today was five years since Erika's mom had mysteriously vanished, after supporting charities that helped rebels: in this world, that meant that Kerrasar and his Blood Taxers had killed her, exactly on her daughter's birthday. Everyone knew that. *What better present than making sure she remembered*, Spartak thought.

And what else to make this situation even better: Malia fighting her way through the overcrowded corridor to see the small tears on Erika's cheeks.



Malia saw how anger flared in Erika's cheeks and how hot tears glistened in the corridor's lamplight.

"You okay?" she asked and saw the note on the locker that read: Happy Anniversary! Hope one day You Disap  Too

Looking around, she wasn't surprised that Spartak and his gang were just around the corner, sneering at her. She did a rude hand gesture at them and Spartak merely scowled, while she grinned back: she knew he didn't have one.

Then she turned to Erika.

"He's never gonna stop impressing me! He does rock at one thing, though: being the world's biggest ass." Erika faced her. Tears had pricked her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away.

"Tell me something I don't know," she answered dryly.

"Hard."

Erika exited the conversation, trying to blend in the crowd and slip out of Malia's line of vision.

"Erika, wait!" Malia yelled, grabbing her, but nobody noticed them since the corridor was drowned in shouting and loud conversations. She was glad; she did hate people's gossiping.

"What?"

"You're not alone." Erika groaned in annoyance, facing Malia with her blue eyes, which had turned a darker shade. Like the night sky. "I know you prefer to think that humanity has turned its back on you, but not all of it has."

"Sadly," Erika answered. "I would give anything so that humanity could simply forget I exist and – erm... Finally let me live!"

The air seemed to get hotter around Malia as an icy hand clutched her stomach – awkwardness. Asen came, and Malia was very happy for the backup; Erika was a hard person to help.

“Not another one,” Erika groaned. “Look, I wanna go to the library and read my books, so if you don’t mind–”

“I’m not here to stop you,” Asen said quickly. “I just want you to know that we’re your friends, and we’re here for you.”

“Am I meant to be grateful? Oh, and I have no friends so there’s no need to lie.” They had been friends, and Malia remembered it well. But that was before Erika’s mother disappeared (killed by Kerrasar’s men) and she isolated herself from humanity.

“Spartak and his cronies won’t stop bothering us,” Asen said sharply. “We should work together. How will you manage on your own?”

Erika allowed the faintest possible smile. “Don’t worry, I’m very good at bullshitting my way out of things.”



Spartak and his friends walked deeper into the gigantic school, past the stinking cafeteria, the overcrowded locker-areas and corridors, into the History Wing. Adam had departed a few minutes ago, going on a different route that would lead him to the end of the corridor Spartak and Tim were currently strolling down.

Ilarion, Vyara and Emma were walking down it, talking about something Spartak couldn’t hear because the corridor was overflowing with people’s conversations. There were a lot of students, no teachers and no Blood Taxers; it was perfect. The trio of cockroaches stopped by Ilarion’s locker. While he was getting something out of it, Emma and Vyara had pressed their backs against the other metal doors, looking at Spartak and Tim; they had picked up on the threat.

They told Ilarion and tried to walk away, but Adam and Nathan appeared from behind the corner in front of them, blocking the way.

While Emma was scornfully looking at them, Tim sneaked up behind her and grabbed her left arm, while Adam grabbed her right one.

“Let go, NOW!” she shouted, but that merely thrilled the two boys that were barely holding her. Spartak picked up the hundred pair of eyes that were gazing at and through him. His back burned from all the attention, but he was glad.

Vyara had run away to grab a teacher, while Ilarion was left defenceless; he shrank further into the shadows of the corridor’s corner, looking sheepish, taking breaths so short that Spartak thought his insides would burst open any second. Spartak laughed bitterly.

“Fight, fight, fight!” everyone cheered.

“You hear them?” Spartak shouted, leaning closer to the weakling, who sobbed. “You fucking scared for, piggy? I just wanna play!”

Abruptly the shouting stopped. Spartak cocked his head backwards, staring at Vyara and Mr Petko, who was right behind Spartak and was sharply looking at him. “This is enough,” he said calmly. “Let them go, Spartak, and then we will discuss your punishment.”

“I think not,” Spartak said with a smile. The wrinkles in the teacher’s head deepened with anger and worry. “Your brother works for my mother’s company, does he not? And your wife, and your oldest son?” Mr Petko nodded apprehensively. “The wages of someone who works for that company are high, but a teacher’s payment is *quite low*. If *you* were the only one to work your family would starve, would it not?”

“Maybe,” Mr Petko admitted.

“Then we better make sure your relatives keep their jobs.” For a moment, it seemed as though Spartak was taller than Mr Petko, taller than anyone in the silent corridor. “You will turn around and you will leave, *now*.” Mr Petko looked remorsefully at Vyara, Emma and Ilarion, and then he left the scene.

Before Vyara could grab another teacher, Spartak seized her arm. “No one will help you,” he said and saw how her eyes were glistening with tears. He let go. The crowd had formed a circle around Spartak and the others. Tim seized Vyara from leaving the fighting pit and getting help. Spartak went to Nathan: together they grabbed the weakling by the legs and chest and put him inside a rubbish container.

Everyone laughed, Spartak high-fived Nathan and got out his portscreen. “You don’t mind, do you?” he asked Ilarion, who was sobbing now. “No, okay then.” Within a few seconds, everyone would see a picture of a scared Ilarion in his rightful place, with the rest of the garbage. But that didn’t feel good enough; he kicked the container on the ground, making Ilarion fall.

“Leave him alone!” Vyara shouted, fighting against Tim’s grip. Emma was barely withheld, kicking Adam and Nathan like a wild animal, even headbutting them, but they still held her.

“Say you’re the weakest thing in the world, *little pig*,” Spartak spat. Ilarion gave no response. Spartak started punching the little cockroach, feeling the sticky blood on his knuckles. “Say it!”

“Leave ‘em ALONE!” Emma roared. Then, hearing their screeches, Spartak turned to see two rats biting at Adam and Nathan’s feet until Emma was free, then they scurried back to the hole in the wall.

Emma went for a Spartak.

“Wha’ the hell’s goin’ on?” roared a raging voice.

Miss O'Connor was pushing her way through the crowd, Miss Turner behind her, both with flaring faces. "Back off!" Miss O'Connor grappled Spartak by the neck, pushing him away from Ilarion. Miss Turner tended to him, as did Vyara and Emma as soon as they were released. They helped him stand up and took him to the nurse.

Miss O'Connor grabbed Adam and Nathan by the collars of their clothes. "Get to the Principal's Office, NOW!" She sent Tim after them as well, then looked at the stunned crowd. "Wha' the hell is this?" A pause. "OUT! All of ye! Lookin' at ye makes me sick."

The crowd dispersed as though they had seen a Blood Taxer coming. Spartak tried to blend in and escape, but the PE teacher put her hand on his shoulder and spun him around. "Wha' ye did's punishable by whippin'," she said. He averted his look. "Look at me when I'm talkin'!" Spartak looked at her. "Spartak, if ye continue bein' a mean guy it's eventually goin' teh backfire. I sugges' ye improve your behaviour, otherwise there'll be consequences."

The bell rang and Spartak slid off Miss O'Connor's grip, taking the left turn and going down the History Wing, cursing her under his breath.

He entered History, one of the few subjects he liked. An hour filled with interesting strategies, slightly boring figures, wars and bloody battles, the likes of which would scare little children and entertain violence-obsessed teenagers.

"Sit down, please," said Miss McCarthy, a tall woman with lilac eyes and the air of a high-authority woman clinging onto her like a perfume. She was the Principal, after all.

They were learning about the first Battle of Sarkellan, on Cyris, where it all began. The first victory for mankind, securing them a seat of power; Cyris was the capital world of the Magical Universe, full of riches, fertile land and magic. What was even better was the fact it contained portals to nearly every other magical world, making it easy to transport troops and take out the powerful enemies swiftly and quickly.

Spartak sat next to Malia, smirking as she gave him looks of pure loathing. "I trust you know *what* happened?" he asked.

She faced him briefly and looked down, but her clenched fists revealed what her eyes did not – anger. Spartak smiled broadly, wondering what will turn the anger to scorching fury.

"Now, let's start with the lesson," Mrs McCarthy said. "Today we have a revision lesson before you write your essays, tomorrow, answering the exam question: Why did Kerrasar win the Siege of Sarkellan. Can anyone recall one of the three main reasons?"

No hands were raised. They had studied it three days ago, and people had more important things than revising for a revision lesson. Mrs McCarthy tried to keep a sweet smile to hide her disappointment. "Never mind, we can – oh, yes Miss Graham."

Erika's hand lazily hung in the air. "The reasons are: Luck, because we attacked when the enemy's leaders were distracted and had little time to prepare; Equipment, since our

weapons created bigger losses, despite some of them being our own men; and Strategy, because while most of the men were fighting a small portion of our soldiers went to the enemy's prisons and freed their prisoners and enemies that joined us, so we outnumbered and overpowered wizard armies."

Despite going through this nearly every day, Miss McCarthy was still astonished. "Couldn't phrase it better myself. We have to thank our King, the magnificent Kerrasar," she said, her voice gradually dropping to an admiring tone (if not a romantic one).

Spartak heard Malia growl; Miss McCarthy gave her a death-stare. "Miss Ashworth, do you have anything to say?"

"That our king is a monster," Malia answered, and the teacher's lilac eyes widened with loathing. "I heard that he killed the High King of the wizards and delivered his body to his wife. There is *no* honour in that."

"And how many did the rebels kill? Our king was honourable beyond imagining; he gave the body of the enemy to his wife so she could bury him and—"

"We all know that's a lie," Erika cut in, from dark corner at the back of the classroom. "He gave it back and he laughed, then the rebels' High Queen nearly killed him," she said, her voice growing to a harsh shout. "As the bastard rightfully deserved!"

"No," Vyara said, her voice strong and loud for the first time since Spartak had met her. She had stood up, drunk in hatred. "He deserved a slow and painful death!"

"Enough!" the teacher shrieked. "You three, you'll pay for this insult. King Kerrasar saved our entire race from an invasion and made us lords of two entire universes. *He is our hero.*"

Malia and her friends didn't calm down, but their anger was quiet. Yet Malia leaned from her desk to Spartak, and whispered, "You're just like him."

He didn't know how to react.

The rest of the lesson was boring: after an eternity of rereading causes for the victory and writing a practice essay, the class watched a real recording of the battle. It had happened on the burned fields before the giant capital city of Sarkellan on Cyris, the capital world. When the High King had been killed, the human army had descended upon Sarkellan, burning its magical buildings and slaughtering its people, headed for the royal palace – Aidanur Hissar. The castle was built atop a mountain in the centre of the city, its many pointed towers and turrets giving it the look of an eccentric crown. After the video showed a few soldiers going into the palace, something happened: light and power exploded around the palace, making the camera and the man holding it fly into the air until they were out of the city walls, where they landed and died.

The bell rang. Rather reluctantly, Spartak stood up, wanting to watch a little more.

Adam and Nathan pushed everyone out of the way so Spartak could leave first. A few things happened: Spartak went under the door, he heard the sound of metal clanging above him and when he looked up, something fell on his eyes. He wiped away the grey goo from his face, feeling the reek of dead animals and fresh garbage.

The entire class was laughing at him; even the teacher was enjoying this. When he looked around his classmates, Spartak spotted something – the bucket above the door had not been there before. He remembered glancing around the room, longing to leave it, and in his fresh memories, the metal bucket that was being held by a metal hand wasn't there. Someone had put it there.

"Hey look, Sparky is covered in sparkles!" someone called out. One of his ex-girlfriends (which he had ditched).

"Sparkly Sparkles!" Ana called out and the room boomed with laughter.

They're going to pay, the voice in his head growled. All of them will suffer!

Yet something brought him joy: watching how Malia and her friends stayed behind to be taught a lesson, not abashed but just angry. When he left to go to his locker and change, he imagined the looks on their faces.

Then he hurried to get out, eager to leave school and visit another place. A special place. One that he missed much.

Unexpectedly, just a few metres from the school gate, he felt a hand grab his shoulder. Upon turning around his face met someone's fist; as he spat some blood he looked up and saw Erika, flaming hair all over her face, breathing deeply.

He laughed and punched her back.

"Hey, pick on someone your size!" Asen said, just before he elbowed Spartak, shielding Erika.

Then Adam and Tim grabbed Asen by the arms, put them behind his back and bent them as he screamed in pain. The people around the four boys cheered for the fight and violence. They wanted a show? Spartak was gonna give them a show.

He clenched his fist and collided it with Asen's stomach too many times to count, his fist becoming bloodier with each punch; the vermin didn't give up, didn't stop fighting and hissing.

"Come on!" Adam shouted, grabbing Asen's hair and lifting his bloodied face. "Show him what happens!"

Spartak heard and obeyed.

Suddenly he felt a raging pain between his legs. As he fell on the ground, he turned around and saw how Malia was standing behind him, smiling.

“So you do have one!” Ana sniggered behind Malia.

Malia smiled coldly. “Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.” All her cockroaches were behind her, clenched fists, gritted teeth and they all entered the fight. Spartak swallowed the pain and stood up, firing punches and kicks at everything he saw, his sight clouded by his tears. All he heard were screams, battle cries and the wild, animal-like, never-ending cheers of the audience. Ilarion stayed out of the battle, crying, “No – enough, stop it all of you – please, STOP!”

“Let’s go, weaklings!” Adam shouted, going for Emma, which was a poor choice.

Grunting, Spartak tried to hit Jack, but he was too quick, dodging every hit as if Spartak was moving in slow motion, then sending powerful kicks. He realised Jack was moving in a rhythm; eventually, he caught him by the chest and tackled him. A cracking sound reached Spartak’s ears, sounding like breaking bones. He enjoyed it. Thrilled with all the adrenaline in his head, he raised his fist in the air but someone caught it. He turned around, expecting someone he would enjoy to strike and the fiery blood froze in his veins.

Staring blankly, he saw a familiar uniform: a white-and-red armour-suit, which had a golden pattern going over it and Kerrasar’s sigil on the scarlet breastplate. This was the creature of nightmares and horror stories told to keep children from misbehaving – a Blood Taxer. A Blood Taxer that eyed him with a cold, impassive glare.

Time ceased just like the fight as two more Taxers appeared and fired warning shots from their blasters, dispersing the crowd like wolves with a herd of sheep.

“Who started this?” said the one that was holding Spartak, forcing him to stand up, as he drew to his full height and showed everyone he was the tallest of the Taxers. Certainly the most intimidating as well.

But Spartak wasn’t afraid. He knew who had started the fight.

Joy flooded in him, as he imagined the tortures Erika was going to be put through. Moreover, he imagined Malia’s face when she saw someone she cared about suffering.

“I did.”

Spartak turned towards Asen, who was barely rising from the bloodied floor. “I started the fight,” Asen said.

Adam, Tim and Nathan looked at Spartak for clarification. Beaming, he nodded, and so did they. Asen was someone Malia cared about too. Even more than Erika.

And so, the crowd was forced into the school field, where they would witness Kerrasar’s justice. Spartak and his mates forced their way through the crowd so that they could be at the front. Asen was bound to a steel post, his clothes ripped apart so that his back was ripe for the whipping. Already the Blood Taxer had removed a metal handle from his belt and ignited a blue laser whip: a weapon that wouldn’t only leave burning scars, but it would also

cause electrical signals in the brain to trigger the worst pain one's body could endure without dying. It would only make them beg for death.

The punishment required ten whips.

One. Asen couldn't hold back his screams, and they filled the chilling air.

Two. It was impossible not to pity him, but Spartak still enjoyed the ear-piercing howls.

Three. His back was a bloody, ripped meat, like that of a skinned animal that was about to be butchered.

"Stop!" Malia screamed, running to Asen and shielding his body with hers. "You'll kill him!" The Blood Taxer stared at her with a hard, cruel face.

"Step aside, girl!" he snarled. Malia glared back, not moving an inch. "I've heard about you. You insult our king, your king! You insult all of us and you call us monsters. So you better step aside, or I'll show you just how much of a monster *I can be.*"

Malia looked at Asen. Spartak could see him lift his face, which was nothing more than a mess of blood, sweat and dust. One of his eyes had changed from brown to bright blue, a side effect of continuous laser whipping. The crowd was just five metres away from him, and they could all hear him say, "It's alright. I can manage."

Malia shook her head and looked at the Blood Taxer – who was getting very impatient – with ruthless defiance. "Give me his lashes."

"He started the fight. The punishment is his and his alone."

"I was in that fight. I'm just as responsible as he is! Give me his lashes!"

Everyone saw how the Blood Taxer's enjoyment made his face curl up into a smile. "Gladly."

"Give me a few lashes as well!" Emma said, walking out of the crowd and standing next to Malia.

"Hey, one to me!" Ana joined in and the Blood Taxer obviously got irritated. Then Jack and then Vyara and then Ilarion came. They grabbed each other's hands, ready for the pain.

Erika came and stood next to Asen, whispering something. What Spartak got was: "Thanks – so sorry – ever do that again, please. Never."

Then the lashes came; the screams proved to be Spartak's favourite part, as even Emma couldn't hold them back, but the ones that really danced in his ear were Malia's; so painful, so prolonged, so well-deserved.

...

Spartak continued walking. Super-fast transport and a hundred squadrons of private bodyguards were things he did not want today; he wanted to be alone.

Manhattan was giant, big enough for the three billion people it contained, and Spartak thought he would never reach its ends, but he was beginning to see the last of the sky-high towers. Soon he would be out of the hideous city, lying on the soft grass in front of the forest, which separated Manhattan from Brooklyn State-Borough. His body pleaded for the sweet forest air, for the gentle dancing of wind in the trees' leaves, for the perfect silence.

"Aren't you going to say hello," said a voice that Spartak loved. He turned around with a mischievous smile, to find one of the few people in the universe he actually liked – Mr Paul Greensit.

"Hello," Spartak said, as the old man looked up: a ripped hat that had covered his wrinkled face was moved backwards to show his green eyes and his kind smile. He was sitting where he always sat - on the ground, against a bank building, huddled in his thin jacket, a small cup with money before his legs.

"Well, don't just stand there, seat yourself into my castle." Spartak stood next to the king of the castle with no walls, no windows, and no furniture except for the money cup. "How has your day been, m'boy."

Spartak shrugged, feeling the hard and cold concrete underneath his butt. "Pretty good, actually. Yours?"

"Nothing special. You're the birthday boy, so what happened on your special day."

Spartak beamed for a moment; he had remembered. He'd hoped: the two of them had known each other for years, saw each other every day, and Mr Greensit felt like family. "I had the best present." Mr Greensit's face lighted with joy and curiosity. "I beat up the people I hate, and they got whipped for it."

"Oh," Mr Greensit said, clearly disappointed. His sad expression made Spartak feel rather bad. "Violence isn't the way, although it is a valuable tool against people who deserve it. Did the people you hurt deserve it?"

"Yes," Spartak said coolly, without hesitation.

"All of them?"

This time Spartak hesitated. Slightly, only and very slightly embarrassed, he admitted, "Not all. But it still felt good."

Mr Greensit's green eyes seemed to x-ray him. He got a leather bottle from his belt, held its lid with his white teeth and spat it in his hand. "Drink."

"What?" Mr Greensit passed the drink and Spartak – without even knowing why – received it.

“That helps.”

Spartak could not agree more, so he drank some of the horrible alcohol and instantly spat it away. “That’s disgusting.”

Mr Greensit chuckled and took his bottle back. He drank what must have been all of its contents, then made a satisfied sound. “Maybe, but so is life, even more. Now, do you want a piece of advice from an old man?”

“Wouldn’t mind.”

“Don’t hurt people.” Spartak leaned to the side, looking into the old man’s wise eyes. Mr Greensit looked to the ocean of people that walked past the two of them. “Hurting people is bad, even when they deserve it. You hurt someone and it starts a feud that destroys *you*.” Spartak lowered his eyes, rubbing his left brow and the headache that started forming there. Mr Greensit continued staring into nothing particularly, and Spartak got the impression that he was talking to the both of them. “When you start a feud, be ready to finish it. It is hard, almost impossible, there’s no denying that, but you’re the one that gets hurt the most.” He took a sip of what remained of his drink, then finally faced Spartak. His face was now serious. “Peace is where happiness starts. Value it, for it is so easily broken, and war is a word for ‘piles of bodies and needless pain’.”

Spartak did not smile, but instead got up (slightly dizzy from the alcohol) and looked down at Mr Greensit. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Will you remember it?”

Spartak grinned. “The drink was bad, but it was quite strong.”

That put a smile on Mr Greensit’s face. Spartak walked off, leaving behind a five-hundred-dollar note, happy that he had someone to talk to; he didn’t want to talk to his mother, Peter was too young and innocent and Spartak could not ruin his blind happiness and his friends did not understand him. Only Mr Greensit understood. Only that old man knew Spartak well and even felt like family.

Speaking of family, Spartak walked out of Manhattan’s edges, and the hill where his father was buried was already visible.