The Debut Project

by Vanya Bagaev

a novella



The Debut Project: Chapter the second

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This is chapter two of The Debut Project.

Geno and Kaz entering Felix's house. The lights were off in the story, but [the narrator] generously turned the lights on here, so you can actually see their beautiful faces.

Chapter the second, in which we see the characters in City N and get some necessary exposition

Where are we?

City N was waking. The buzz and bustle commenced. Thousands of pedestrians, workers, traders, bums and boozers, thieves and madmen, poured into the streets. They crawled out of their houses, public and private, wooden and stone, narrow and tall, and huddled together in a

thick stream rushing off to nowhere, filling the squares and pavements and alleyways. In the chaos of rhythms, heel-to-toe on cobblestone, one foot after the other they walked. Shoulders squeezed between shoulders. Some shouted, some pushed, dodging beggars and passersby. Wagons and lonely horses sailed like ships through the dense stream of the peopleriver, all flowing, hitching now and then. Smells of spices, sewer lines, stench. The city reeked with a bouquet of enchanting aromas, entrancing you and subduing your consciousness. The shout of peddlers, the trumpeting of street musicians, the growl of a bear dancer frightened by a mangy-looking cur, the whine of that same dog frightened by the growl of the bear dancer. Rarely an automobile whizzed through the crowd, washing away sleepy gawkers and stray dogs, leaving a plume of stench and smoke. Markets and taverns, eateries and kiosks opened up, sucking in passersby and spitting them out, handing them back to the current of the peopleriver. Some old wooden houses tilted to the roadside, making whole streets look like narrow and darkish tunnels teeming with creatures. It was chaos, the hum of a disjointed swarm, a boiling pandemonium.

'Why City N?' you might ask. A forgotten patch of land, coniferous forest, and stocky mountains—the middle of nowhere. City N used to be a remote, provincial town where morals were savage, the nature of events anecdotal, awareness of life's inferiority and pointlessness strong, and time whatsoever flowless. It was calm and peaceful, lost and abandoned, until something happened. In a moment City N turned cosmopolitan, with explosive economic growth, trade booming on all

fronts. ‘What something?’ you might ask me. Well, it’s simple. They cancelled every silly, restrictive law and bylaw, giving the citizens maximum freedom.

They decided to keep the city’s name. ‘Couldn’t they have thought of a better name, dear narrator?’ I’ll tell you, the founders of the place were lazy and decided together to leave the mystery behind. But who cares about the name, as long as the peopleriver flows and drags the moneyriver with it? After all, the most important thing is to have someone to collect money from.

A mutual agreement

Through one of City N’s streets densely packed with humans, beastmen, demihumans, and other anthropomorphic creatures, a battered, lame, and tired Kolya limped in an unknown direction, accompanied by Moros jogging beside him. Something had gone utterly awry, and that something was Felix, who annoyingly trailed them, dodging passersby and unlike Kolya worrying about every foot he stepped on. The day hadn’t started out the way everyone would have liked it too. Neither had many other days in this city, but this morning, as you might have noticed, had been especially harsh.

What had happened so far was just the beginning, believe me.

‘If I’d known you took the money from Geno and not the bank like you

said, I would have never gone to buy the damned crystal myself,' said Kolya.

'Well... Geno has a bank.'

'He's a clichéd gangster. Smokes a papirosa, has pretentious manners, walks around with his jumbo imbecile. Didn't any of that ring a bell?'

'Well... he seemed like a respectable and distinguished gentleman.'

'Well, respect and distinguish his arse as much as you like. Without me.'

'Wait! Where are you headed to?'

'I'm going to return the damn gem where I bought it and get our money back.'

'You can't do that!'

'I can.'

'No, you can't!'

'Sure I can.'

'But Felicia won't work without it!'

'To hell with your tin can!'

'Don't call her that! She's an embodiment of technological progress.'

Kolya rolled his eyes, stopped and turned to Felix.

‘Who cares? That’s not the point. Whatever ingenious stuff your pile of junk can do, no one in this city gives a damn. It would be more useful if it could turn shite to gold, or at least if it could shoot.’

‘We’re not going to make weapons! Never!’

‘At least we could sell it! To Geno!’

‘I won’t let capitalist society abuse my talent to produce killing machines! Felicia’s purpose is peace and prosperity,’ Felix blurted proudly.

‘Great! Then we’ll open a kiosk and peacefully sell apple puree.’ Kolya paused and sniffed. ‘I can already smell it.’

‘Smell what?’

The street reeked of ammonia and other nose-itching substances of organic origin.

‘The smell of damn prosperity,’ said Kolya, turning around and walking farther down the street.

‘Wait! We can test her again. I can find an investor today! We’ll hire a team, open an office in the city centre. This is what we dreamed of, Kolya.’

‘This is nonsense.’

‘Nonsense? Didn’t we always want to move to a big city, ship a debut project together, become famous, rich, all that? Have you forgotten everything? Your memory is unbelievably weak.’

‘Oh, no, my friend. I remember everything you led me here with. Money, fame, an electrovehicle with a gilded steering wheel. What have I received instead? Bruises mental and physical, and quite possibly a rock with a rope tied to my ankle lying at the bottom of the sea. It’s a fairy tale of a city. I loved the moment I stepped off the ship, Felix. Thanks for the invite.’

‘You wouldn’t have left your cave without me!’

‘I wish I hadn’t. You’re dragging us down, both of us. The only thing that matters to you is your tin can. Have you done anything useful? Even your shite door button doesn’t work. We’re gonna die here.’

‘Let’s make a bet.’

‘On what? That we’ll die?’

‘That I’ll find an investor.’

‘Here we go again. You won’t find an investor.’

‘I will.’

‘No, you won’t.’

‘Want to bet?’

‘I’m not betting with you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you and I have nothing to bet with. We’re broke!’

‘Let’s bet on Felicia. You find out how much money we can get for a crystal, and ONLY—I repeat, ONLY—if I don’t find an investor, you sell everything. We’ll repay the money and start over.’

‘You’re bluffing.’

‘No-no-no, I’m not bluffing. I’m VERY serious,’ Felix said, and ‘very’ appeared in his speech with special theatrical power.

Kolya squinted as if to read Felix, looked at whisker-ruffling Moros, and flung up his arms.

‘All right,’ he said, and he held out his hand, which was stained with dried blood and dust. ‘Let’s do it. Deal?’

‘Wait. But…’ said Felix, hesitant to hold out his own hand.

‘Hah! I told you you were bluffing.’

‘No. I just…’ Felix smiled nervously. ‘I thought you wouldn’t like the idea, and we would come up with a better one together.’

‘Haha, nah, this is about what I was going to do anyway. But if you want to think it was your plan, I like it.’ Kolya brought his hand closer

to Felix. ‘Deal or no deal? It’s this or you’re on your own.’

Felix’s fingers trembled. He bit his lip, then finally put out his hand to Kolya. ‘Deal. I guess.’

Thus, hands were shook, the deal was made, and their ways in the city diverged.

New Prospects

The houses seemed taller, even though the number of floors was the same. Windows expanded, porches rose, cellars and mezzanines appeared. Timbers, black and rotted from soot or dirt, were replaced by painted wood with a predominance of light pastel colours, neat and clean. Houses had carved and painted shutters, pediments with lace, porches with white columns, windows with white frames. The homeless, the beggars, and the lunatics were gone. People, exquisitely dressed, walked in groups, chatting, arguing, laughing, shouting, and scolding. Street bouncers enforced a semblance of law and order that was idiosyncratic to the posh part of City N. They strolled along, each with one hand on their gun and the other on their belt, glancing around, sometimes stopping suspicious-looking gentlemen driving their rich-looking phaetons too fast, automobiles if they were fuming too much. The bouncer shook a finger when guilt flashed across the perpetrator’s face, wrote a note when guilt did not flare up, with a fine nobody would pay anyway. The chaos inherent in the peopleriver

seemed to have self-organised, found a way to agree with itself and its surroundings. Nobody knew whether this was due to the street bouncers, the fine and cultured manners of the passersby, the width of the street, the absence of the absentminded, bums, and pickpockets. Anarchy met capitalism and worked.

Felix felt himself in another city, even though getting there took only a couple of blocks. Mouth wide, with a blueprint-filled tube on his back, Felix walked the pavement, dodging dandies who were perhaps bankers, solicitors, executives of small tech companies or their investors, fraudsters, spies, or all of the aforementioned at once, people who thought their profession demanded they always resemble a compere. The various clerks ignored Felix for the most part, but some managed to throw him an angry and contemptuous glance before disappearing in the crowd.

Thoughts swarmed in his head, hither and thither, oscillating and replacing one another... Nice suit. Nice boots, he thought. Nice hair, too. Someday soon I'll be rushing through these bright streets to our big bright office. It'll be a few hundred square metres, with five-metre ceilings. A super-secure security system, designed by my personal genius, of course. Spacious private cabinets, one for Mr. Futzbucker and one for Mr. Kalachev. A secretary, an assistant or two? A big chest of drawers in the kitchen filled with chai and kalachi. Fine ales and wines on Fridays. Countless calls from the City N Stock Exchange, CNSE. The candle chart's always green; our assets are going to the moon! Corporate trips to more climatically and geographically pleasant

locations, a factory or two. Everyone shrinks and enlarges whatever they want using my magnifique contraptioness. Oh, Felicia! She's a technological breakthrough. A revolution! Nothing is scarce anymore. No greed, no anger. No wars. Even the greediest person can have as much gold as they want if the world has Felicia and she doesn't overheat. Maybe three factories. My office will have a big desk. A statue of me? Why not? Maybe I'll put it in the square right here. You never know. Haha! A protected basement with a secret laboratory where I and technological progress can engage in frictionless movements towards the bright future, for I will have the resources to do all sorts of things! Imagine that! Imagine what comes after Felicia. I can't even *begin*... The Door-O-Lock, yes. Perhaps I should fix that first.

A large octagonal square unfolded before Felix. Tall white-brick houses surrounded a dolphin-shaped fountain in the centre, around which clerks lounged on benches, surrounded by newspaper boys and chirping birds. Sweet morning. Lovely vibes.

Felix already knew the financial district. When he and Kolya arrived in town, Felix came here first, in search of investment for Felicia. As you might guess, dear reader, this venture failed, and instead of spending a few months, the engineers had now been trying to fund and finish their debut project for a year and a half. Everyone either needed a minimum viable product or a blueprint for a nice gun, but Felix was a visionary, a genius, an engineer!—not a killer. He had made a set of principles for himself, one of which was to neither make nor attempt to make a weapon, ever. The technique was from one of the countless business

growth books he had read before they moved to the city, *10 Rules Of Success* or something. Felix had eagerly recommended it to Kolya, saying their success wasn't possible if only one of them possessed the correct knowledge, but Kolya was intransigent. He took the book from Felix, yes, but it was buried under layers of dust on his shelf back home. Felix accused Kolya of not having a vision and often dared to think it was Kolya who always presented an obstacle to their project. One rule found in the book, however, said the opposite—one should find a trusted co-founder and colleague to guarantee success. Dozens of experiments had failed, the engineers ran out of money, and their success didn't feel guaranteed anymore, but Felix still had hope, for he'd finally made calculations for the perfect crystal Felicia needed to function. At that moment Geno had appeared. The last chance, Felix had thought then. Instead of proper funding, Geno suggested a short-term loan with hidden fees and abnormal APR which still somehow aligned with Felix's estimation of the work left, and he gladly accepted the offer. I don't have to tell you what happened next—because I already did.

Now it was the last chance again. The heart full of hope, the financial district, but no minimum viable product. Still no minimum viable product. You can do it, Felix told himself. Success is near. Just be you. Show them your vision.

First attempt. He did a quick breathing exercise, fixed his clothes and hair, straightened his back, slapped his cheeks twice, and clenched his fists.

‘Venture Fund “New Prospects”’, said the sign on a large white building. Felix filled his lungs with air, climbed the stairs and approached the door.

‘Good morning!’ said Felix.

A muscled man who must have been a guard scanned Felix from head to toe, frowned and shook his head. Felix inspected himself as well and hurried to fix an untied shoelace he’d somehow missed—perhaps it had unravelled on the stairs. He stood up straight and smiled. His face wriggled from one emotion to another, trying to find the right one to appease the guard. Appeasement failed. The guard’s stony gaze continued to squeeze Felix away from the porch. Felix smiled faintly, sighed, and walked down to the street.

Attempt number two. ‘Kenry Brothers Trust’. No guard this time. Why? Felix didn’t feel a need to answer that question; he was just glad for the lack of a barrier. If a shortsighted guard could bar him or kick him out without listening to his ideas, then real professionals sitting inside the building, people of intelligence, would be easier to persuade.

The door easily gave. Felix stepped inside and saw two bald, scrawny clerks in pince-nez, both Chudes, surrounded by crates packed with documents among which would soon lie a sheet with on it the names of Felix Futzbucker and his Felicia, and of course Nikolas Kalachev too. One of the clerks was rummaging through these documents. The other sat at his desk and wrote something enthusiastically, often wetting his pen with ink. He interrupted his important business to scratch his bald

head and noticed Felix at the entrance, immediately irritated.

‘Whatcha need?’

‘Good morning to you ser! I’m looking for investments for my project.’

‘Do I know ya, little fellow?’

‘No, but you’re about to know me. My name is Felix Futzbucker. Felix means “lucky”, by the way, which significantly increases the chances of investment in my project.’

The clerk nodded and scratched his baldness.

‘Project, project, project. What project, anyway?’

‘Morphooptical electric blaster, filigree work of engineering. She can change the shape of objects, increasing or decreasing their size.’

‘Shmorphooptical chwuffster what?’

Felix cleared his throat, stepped up to the clerk’s desk, deftly took the blueprint out of its tube and unfolded it.

‘Here’—he pointed to the place where the crystal was located—‘if you set the crystal at the right angle and direct a beam of the right power, i.e. temperature, then the beam, having passed through a prism and a light filter, hits the object… comes out of there… and the object changes its subatomic structure, increasing or decreasing in size. In the future, we’ll be able to control the duration of the effect, choose its

strength—desired size is already possible—reduce energy consumption drastically, and then, perhaps, we'll be able to establish industrial production. Ah yes, and as a bonus feature, the device can mash apples. Her name is Felicia, which by the way also has a positive effect on happiness, success, and good luck.'

'Noice. Try your luck elsewhere.'

'But...'

'C'mon, hurry off. Can't you see we're busy, boy?'

The bald, scrawny clerk waved his hand dismissively and pointed to the door.

Attempt number... I'll tell you it was the sixth, though Felix stopped counting. 'The First Investment House'. There, behind an iron door, a major miscommunication happened, and two big, serious gentlemen threw Felix out on the street. He rolled down the porch and fell to the pavement—good thing the streets in the financial district are clean though. Felix's tube flew out after him and struck him in the head.

Attempt number who-cares: 'Madame Vintezi's Venture Fund'.

'Whither?' snorted one of two boar-headed, human-bodied bumpkins, who flanked the door and propped themselves up against the wall.

Sad, crumpled Felix looked up at the beastmen, one and then the other. Yes, believe me, they were inhumanly tall enough to look up at even

with Felix's height.

'Top of the morning to you kind gentlemen,' said Felix, putting on a smile. 'I would like to talk to Madame Vintezi about the possibility of investment in my debut project.'

The second bumpkin gave Felix an appraising look and said, 'Madame is busy at the moment.'

'Perhaps I could speak to someone instead of Madame?'

The bumpkins looked at each other. The left one's eye twitched.

'Instead of Madam?!' they exclaimed in unison. Their faces reddened. Muscles puffed, fur stood, postures hunched, sharpened tusks flashed murderously, and panting the boars took a step forward and together, creating a solid wall that hid any presence of the neat and patterned door. Uninspired by this turn of events, Felix backed away, clutching the tube in his hands. The boarmen towered over Felix, approaching him in small steps, or rather he was drawn toward them, rolling into the well of gravity the hefty creatures exuded. Unable to withstand the strain of the looming boarmen, Felix shuddered and stumbled away. Seconds later he turned around. To his surprise the boarmen were following him, stomping heavily on the tiles. It amazed Felix how such thin tiles withstood their weight. And the boarmen weren't the only massives who walked here. Felix wondered what kind of material the tiles were made of. Maybe they weren't thin at all. Or maybe they weren't actually as light and delicate as they looked. Imitation? Felix

wondered how weight changed when objects were altered, enlarged or shrunken by Felicia, made a note to himself to test this later on.

'Instead of Madam?!' shouted the boarmen again. Felix ran out of the alley and into the road, stumbled, fell, and dropped the tube. The cylinder with Felicia's blueprint bounced on the pavement and landed in the roadway. Felix crawled after the tube and reached for it, but immediately a carriage crushed the cylinder. Plastic pieces scattered about. Felix snatched the sheet of paper from the wrecked tube, dove between carriages, and plunged into the alley on the other side of the road. The boarmen fell behind. Felix caught his breath and, frustrated and covered in dust and dirt, his eyes tarnished, wandered down the bright, white-bricked lane. In his hand, he clutched the crumpled blueprint.

The jeweller

Through the darkness of narrow streets, swarms of humming marginals, and caviar-like density of the peopleriver, limping, Kolya floated with the crowd, clutching Moros under his arm and searching for the right shop sign. Luckily for Kolya, the cat wasn't able to see nor smell rats, though Moros was always alert, knew they were around somewhere. He was twitching, sniffing clouds of spices, sneezing and hissing, digging his claws deeper into Kolya's jacket.

Just walking these streets required certain skills. First, you had to be able

to step over beggars' hats and sacks if you didn't want to get stabbed. Second, you had to keep all your belongings safe—underwear didn't always do the job. And third, you had to make sure you weren't trampled from behind by a carriage, which because of the surrounding cacophony was hard to hear coming if you weren't listening for a certain sound. The taller folk had an easier time of things—instead of staring at the crowd's endless wall of backs, they saw heads, an endless river of them.

Soon Kolya found the right sign—a faceted diamond, address Elephant St. 8890. A large, wooden, ramshackle house next to a hotelbordello. Chance customers stared through the cast-iron bars on the stained window. Leaving Moros on the porch, Kolya squeezed through them and stepped into the shop. A bell rang. Inside, a securityman with a scar on his face stood amid the tight space's copious caged showcases, a pistol and sabre on his belt, already watching Kolya's movements. Peeking from a window in a set of bars high by the far wall, a smirking Chude dressed in a motley waistcoat sat dangling his feet on a high chair, already watching Kolya and inviting him in. Kolya approached the jeweller—'Victor Rosencrunts', said the metal sign above his window—and sat on a chair in front of him.

The jeweller twirled his neatly trimmed moustache with his fingers. Kolya remembered him from the last visit: alabaster eyes, prominent ears, big mouth. But now there was some weird odour. Like brine, Kolya thought.

‘Good morning.’

‘Oh, it’s not very good, is it? Though neither is yours, I can tell,’ said the jeweller, smiling.

Kolya nodded.

‘I’d like to return a gem. A crystal.’

‘Return? What’s wrong? Didn’t the size fit?’

‘No, I just need money.’

‘Hm-hm-hm. Do you have any proof of purchase?’

Kolya hesitated.

‘A receipt maybe?’ added the jeweller.

‘No, I can’t recall being given any of that... Don’t you remember me? I was here a couple weeks ago.’

‘“Oh, don’t you remember?” Little fellow, I don’t remember who was here yesterday. I don’t even remember myself if I don’t have a document. An honest word is not enough. I need written proof.’

Kolya hadn’t considered that. There probably wasn’t any paper trail for the crystal at all, and if there was, where was the paper? At home somewhere? He couldn’t remember. To hell with it, he thought.

‘Well, maybe I could just sell you the crystal. You buy gems too, don’t

you?'

The jeweller nodded. Kolya looked around suspiciously—at the jeweller, at the showcases, at the scar-faced securityman, at the door—and took the crystal from his inner pocket, then handed it through the window to the jeweller. Lightning-fast, five of the jeweller's chubby little fingers, each with a ring, gripped the gem, and his other hand snatched a loupe from the pocket of his waistcoat. He scrutinised the stone, spending half a minute or more on each facet, holding it up to a nearby bulb.

Kolya followed the jeweller carefully at first but then grew bored. He crossed his arms and looked around, occasionally glancing at the jeweller and the securityman. The jeweller licked the crystal, tasted it, wrinkled and flicked his tongue, bit it, wiped it with a cloth, examined it, and so on, several times.

Finally, the jeweller scratched his bald head and shook it in disapproval.

'No. We don't deal in such bloody shite.'

'What? What do you mean, "such bloody shite"?'

'It means what it means. The crystal's fake, my bulky little fellow. A good fake, I'll give you that, but a bloody fake nonetheless.'

Kolya stood up from his chair. 'What do you mean it's fake?!'

'Are you deaf or what? It means what it means. It's just glass. Look, it

still has my teeth marks on it, and my teeth aren't particularly sharp these days. Drop it on the floor and it falls apart, take my word. Anyway, we don't buy glassware, even if it's fancy-shmancy. Take it back where you got it."

'But I got it right here, I told you!'

The jeweller shrugged and tossed up his hands. 'I can't help you, little fellow.'

'Then I demand my money back! Don't I have customer rights?'

'Zmei's shite, you tire me. Do you have a receipt? A document? A bloody piece of paper saying you bought the crystal here? No? Perhaps you got it somewhere else. There's no guarantee you aren't playing a bloody snide here either, boy. Don't waste my time. I have plans for the evening, and you're not a part of them.'

Kolya's patience had boiled over. Steam was going to come out of his every orifice. He couldn't bear to be fooled, though he realised his being fooled had already happened, had happened a long time ago. A few weeks ago, or maybe even earlier, the moment Felix dragged him onto the ship to City N.

'Those are the rules. I don't make them. I'm but a humble salesman,' the jeweller said. 'Good riddance and bon voyage, little fellow.'

His face barberry-coloured, Kolya jumped from his chair.

‘What do you mean, good riddance and bon voyage?!’

The jeweller shook his hands and put the monocle back in the pocket of his waistcoat.

‘How bloody annoying you are…’ he said. ‘Stop repeating after me. What do you think I mean? Get out of here!’

Kolya leaned across the table and grabbed the jeweller by the collar.

‘Crooks!’

The scar-faced securityman took Kolya under the arms and dragged him out of the room, his attempts to resist only strengthening the guard’s grip. In a couple of seconds Kolya found himself in the doorway, and a moment later he flopped into the dust and dirt, into crowds that almost swallowed him right away. Before Kolya had time to remember the crystal, said crystal also flew out and knocked the cap off his head, thrown personally and precisely by the offended jeweller. Kolya hid the gem in his jacket, stood and tried to shake the dirt off himself and his cat. Pulling his visor down over his eyes, he picked up Moros and dove into the crowd, joining the current of the peopleriver.

It turned out his enmity for City N was more mutual than he imagined.

The arena

A metaphor, a miniature, a microcosm, the arena was an octagonal pit wrought deep into the ground, surrounded by semicircular seating and tall, wooden buildings behind it, with a grey rock on the other side. Rarely could it accommodate everyone who was eager to behold a battle from the comfortable seats—the best tickets sold out long before each spectacle, and hence some visitors crowded outside, satisfied with the voice of the loud herald and the crowd's noise. Another group of fans, consisting primarily of kids and layabouts, sat packed on the nearby roofs with their legs dangling. Seagulls often roosted there too. Whenever something swallowable appeared in the octagon, they swooped down like vultures to collect their trophies: rotten fruits, fingers, ears, tails, and some other small appendages. That day it seemed, for the gladiators' leftovers, even the seagulls had to queue.

When Kolya waddled up to the arena with his catclutch, the semifinalé had started, and Felix was already there. Kolya noticed him like a gopher sticking out of the crowd.

'Oh, finally!' Felix said. 'I got us a good view.'

Their seating was the porch of a nearby building already shrouded in people: crooked drunkards and sailors with bulwark stomachs.

'Charming spot,' said Kolya, looking around squeamishly and hugging Moros. 'What did your venture capitalists say?'

Felix bit his lower lip and shrugged.

‘No fortunate updates so far. What about the crystal?’

Kolya patted his left side where his pocket was.

‘“The product cannot be returned or exchanged”… Shop policy.’

This news seemed to energise Felix a little.

‘What are you happy about?’ Kolya asked. ‘We still don’t have the money.’

‘But that means we can negotiate with Geno, so we can pitch him Felicia’s prototype.’

‘It’s not gonna work, because…’ Kolya paused. He hesitated, for the true nature of the crystal boggled him. ‘He said he doesn’t need a pile of sparkling junk. He needs money.’

‘Doesn’t that give us a selling point? We could, for instance, enlarge a piece of gold bullion! Or a coin at least! Imagine a copper lucre the size of a plate!’

‘Right. What a tombstone that would be.’

In the arena, the battle fumbled on. A scrawny, pale man with sunken eyes in a hooded black robe, whom Felix and Kolya recognised as koldún Grigori, the Ice Whisperer from Nova Zembla, used some kind of icy magic against a wee armoured gladiator whom you couldn’t mistake for someone else: Tony ‘Tin Bloke’ Sparkle, a Chude clad in

exoskeleton, with tubes, buttons, lamps, a sawblade on his left hand and a flamethrower on his right.

‘SEE THAT?’

‘HOW DO THEY STILL ALLOW IT?’

The Tin Bloke’s armoured legs were growing icy. He began to lose his balance and, halting, pointed his flamethrower at the Ice Whisperer.

‘MELT THIS PIECE OF ZMEI’S SHITE!’

‘DELEGALISE MAGIC!’

‘TO-NY! TO-NY! TO-NY!’

A stream of fire surged from the cannon directly at the koldún. The Ice Whisperer braced himself with his staff and absorbed the fire with a crystal. The staff glowed, trembling. The crowd roared.

‘Howdy, frens!’

Felix and Kolya heard a voice, turned and looked down. Their distractor was a middle-aged Chude in a shabby suit, with a wrinkled tie and a stupid smile.

‘Do we know you?’ Kolya asked, squinting. Moros hissed at the Chude. A bad sign. The Chude stepped back as much as the crowd allowed, hitting the bulwark stomach of one of the sailors.

‘No, but it’s never too late to get to know one another, frens! I’m a bookmaker with Volcano Sport Bets, a very-limited liability company. Bet, watch, win. “You can’t say no to the Volcano.”’

‘Oh, betting? And what are the odds?’ asked Felix.

‘Delightfully wondrous. Ninety-seven on the koldún.’

‘Are you mental? On the koldún?!’ snapped Felix. ‘Who would bet on him when Tony Sparkle is in the octagon?’

‘Well, I would,’ said Kolya.

‘Don’t start this again!’

‘See, the odds wouldn’t be that high if everyone bet on the Tin Bloke. But I know something better… I can share a secret with my new frens, if you’re interested of course.’

‘What’s the secret?’

The bookie leaned and whispered to Felix, ‘My informant told me this fight is rumoured to be a fix. The arena is a theatre, and the gladiators in it are actors. Tony Sparkle will lose. Alas, today the script demands it. The arena’s narrators decided so.’

‘What?! Impossible! Zero chance! Tony Sparkle always wins. He’s an engineering genius, our hope for a brighter future, just like me!’

‘I know two things for sure: the koldún will win, and you’ll get a lot of

money if you bet on him.'

'I have the zeroest zero faith in every word you say. You'll need serious proof to convince me.'

'Why, fren? Look for yourself. See Tony and his side of the arena. Why would he suddenly put ale company logos all around? Come to think of it, what's the point of rooting for a genius who sells his ideals for a bag of coins? Capitalism,' said the bookie, tapping his index finger to his temple and looking Felix straight in the eyes.

'Remind me,' said Felix, 'what are the current odds?'

'Ninety-seven, fren.'

Ninety-seven... Ninety-seven... Felix's mind ran calculations. His forehead wrinkled and flattened, seeming to echo the movements of his brain.

'I hope you're not going to bet,' said Kolya.

'Have you heard the odds? Besides, the ale company! Unbelievable! How much should we bet?'

'As much as your heart desires,' said the bookie, 'but in any case you'll get back ninety-seven times as much. Simple maths.'

A feverish flame flickered in Felix's eyes. He turned to Kolya and grabbed his comrade's hand.

‘This is our last chance, Kolya!’

Frowning, Kolya looked over surrounding backs. The Tin Bloke was staggering towards the Ice Whisperer. His flamethrower began to throw flame, but the koldún again absorbed the energy with his staff. Its crystal filled with a brilliant glow. With a broad sweep, the Ice Whisperer channelled the stored energy back at the Tin Bloke. A huge, thick lump of fire slammed into him, knocking him back and covering his red armour with soot.

Kolya adjusted his cap, glanced around the arena, shuffled from foot to foot, patted his nervous cat, and glanced at Felix with one eye. He saw that flickering flame. He knew what it meant.

‘Ah, to hell with you!’ muttered Kolya, and he reached into his inner pocket. In the end they always agreed, and they always got themselves into trouble neither of them seemed to mind.

Delighted, Felix patted his comrade on the shoulder. Coins fell into the bookie’s palm. He quickly tucked them into a pouch on his belt, put small glasses on his nose and wrote something in his notebook.

‘Well done, frens! You are the smartest among this grey mass. After the match, look for me near that building over there,’ said the bookie, and he pointed to the protruding roof of a tall, narrow house nearby, then vanished in the crowd as if he’d never even existed.

The koldún conjured and threw an ice lance at the fuming Tin Bloke.

The engineer slowed but continued to charge. Puffs of fire flew towards the Ice Whisperer. The staff's crystal sucked them up and sent them back a moment later. The Tin Bloke's armour was sooted black, and he started shaking, flaring up. After another flash, his armour ignited altogether. Tony Sparkle ejected from the suit and flew screaming into the sky.

BOOM!

Debris from the Tin Bloke's armour scattered all over the arena. Then there came a second explosion—indignation erupting from the crowd.

"HE CHEATED AGAIN!"

"MY MONEY! MY MONEY!!"

"DISQUALIFY! CANCEL THE RESULTS!"

"WHEN I WAS A WEE BOY NONE OF THIS WAS ALLOWED!"

"NO BLOODY MAGIC IN HERE!"

Rotten fruits and vegetables flew into the pit, but none hit the Ice Whisperer, who stood unreachable in the middle of the octagon. The other part of the crowd, the minority that included Felix and Kolya, jumped, whistled, hugged, and slapped each other on the backs, squealing with joy.

Read next part

The Debut Project: Chapter the third

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