

THE DEBUT PROJECT

by Vanya
Bagaev

a novella



The Debut Project

nova·nevédoma

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The Debut Project

nova-nevedoma.com/the-debut-project/

Dear wanderer,

Happy to introduce to you my novella called [*The Debut Project*](#)! It's divided into four chapters, 27 000 words in total, about 2 hours of reading time on average. This post serves as its table of contents.

The story follows two young debt-ridden engineers and their cat trying to finish their debut project and survive in a big fantasy city full of crime. If I were to assign genres to it, I'd choose *fantasy*, *comedy*, *crime*; it has some sci-fi and -punk-ish vibes, and presents a rather mix of different genres.

To give a better glimpse of it, here's an introductory remark from the narrator himself:

Events in the [Debut Project] are depicted more or less as they happened to commemorate the dead, but at the request of the survivors all names have been altered. The story features criminal activities of differing severity, including those made without malice and those made by a group of conspirators, minor derogatory and discriminatory connotations of Chudes and Zmeis, cruelty towards cats, ultraviolent and bloody mass

killings, and good portions of buffoonery and ribaldry. *An illustration made by Ilia Bagaev, featuring two central characters and their cat busy at work.* The table of contents:

- [Chapter the first, in which everyone has a lousy morning](#)
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And an epub for those who prefer to read it this way (only for patrons):

[The Debut Project epub](#)

The Debut Project: Chapter the first

nova-nevedoma.com/the-debut-project-ch1/

An introductory remark

This is chapter one of [The Debut Project](#).

Events in the following story are depicted more or less as they happened to commemorate the dead, but at the request of the survivors all names have been altered. The story features criminal activities of differing severity, including those made without malice and those made by a group of conspirators, minor derogatory and discriminatory connotations of Chudes and Zmeis, cruelty towards cats, ultraviolent and bloody mass killings, and good portions of buffoonery and ribaldry. You have been warned, so I can indulge in the role of a rascal raconteur and tell whatever sense and nonsense I desire.

Chapter the first, in which everyone has a lousy morning

Finally, she... works?

In the year unnumbered, in a shadowy part of City N, an hour before sunrise, the light fought its way through the thick curtains of a two-storey wooden shack with a sign—‘The Gadgeteer’s house. Freelance engineering work’—inviting us in. Felix Futzbucker, an agitated, dishevelled, lofty young man in a dirty apron and huge convex goggles, swept up to the first floor and swung open the bedroom’s door, where slept his colleague and comrade Kolya Kalachev and his cat Moros, together two snoring, slumberous bodies. Eager and exhilarated, Felix shook Kolya and juddered the bed.

‘Works! She works and perfectly functions!’ shouted Felix, an effervescent, feverish flame flickering in his eyes.

‘What damn time is it?’ Kolya muttered. He rolled over and waved Felix away.

‘Should be five-fifteen and just a couple seconds more!’

‘Oh, back off.’

‘Meow!’

‘She works! You hear me? Works! Works! Works!’ Felix squealed, continuing to shake Kolya.

‘Damn you! Stop it! In a minute—I’m gonna get up. Back off, I said!’

Satisfied, Felix immediately disappeared through the doorway and left Kolya and Moros with the last precious minutes of their morning lethargy. I must mention that Felix, of course, had not had his nightborne engineering epiphany for the first time, and there was no guarantee something in fact ‘worked’. The statistics suggested the opposite, and Kolya knew that—yet he knew he would still crawl out of bed somehow, pull on his clothes, and join Felix downstairs.

‘Oh, how I hate you.’

Panting, Felix spiralled down the pole to the ground floor, to the machine he claimed was ‘perfectly functioning’, started waltzing around her with a screwdriver in one hand and a sheet of scribbles of calculations in the other. Similar sheets, schemes, and blueprints carpeted the floor. Together with bolts, nuts, wires, and countless named cardboard boxes of spare parts piled to the ceiling, they painted a landscape similar to what Felix’s mind would look like if someone ever beheld it from the inside.

The machine’s pronouns were indeed ‘she/her’. She was far from an inanimate ‘it’, and she even had a name Felix lovingly gifted her—Felicia. Her mechanical body resembled a gun: on a lafette laid a metal contraption with a protruding rod topped with a shiny ball where a real gun would have a muzzle. From the root of the rod grew a ludicrous coil of wires encircling her body. Farther down from the ‘muzzle’, a transparent faceted crystal sat between two massive cylinders, glossing blue, red, both, depending on the angle. In Felix’s genius mind,

a concentrated ray of light was supposed to pass through the crystal, and the crystal, like a lens, should refract the ray and bolster it with the required optical properties, technologically miraculous. You may ask me, ‘What properties?’ Well, those depended on the settings board: a row of switches, an overheatmeter and a chargemeter, as Felix called them. Another important part of Felicia was the energy unit underneath. It nourished her with electrical power but was ready to explode at any reckless or unfortunate touch, or even without one. To emphasise this chaotic nature, Felix had adorned his contraptioness’s energy unit with a sign: ‘Stay out or die’. All of the aforementioned did not look like the innocent craft of an aspiring inventor but rather resembled the creation of a mad and villainous mind bent on blowing the world to smithereens. You know, exterminating laser beams, wrecking explosions and all, banal violations of safety engineering. Train Felicia on a living creature by accident—a cat passing by can alter her trajectory with its tail, for example—and BOOM. You have one living creature fewer. In a word, she was dangerous, which was a fact Felix’s elevated, pacifistic worldview refused to acknowledge. ‘What must go wrong for a system hazard to occur?’ you would ask him. ‘Literally nothing can go wrong if you aren’t a complete dullard’, Mr. Futzbucker would answer.

Meanwhile, Kolya and Moros staggered downstairs. They approached Felix and his contraptioness and both churned another long, loud yawn. Kolya was used to sudden early rises, but having such a habit did not appeal to him at all.

‘So?’

Felix looked at Kolya, his red-veined eyes froggy and googly beneath his protective gear, and pointed at the table.

‘Bring the apples!’ he proclaimed pompously.

Kolya shrugged, wobbled his way towards the table, and delivered a plateful of apples. Felix grabbed one and devoured it to its core, dropping seeds on the floor.

‘I’m just trying to understand. Did you wake me up at “five-fifteen and just a couple seconds more” to bring you apples?’

‘Yes and no! You are about to witness and take the most active participation in my marvellous demonstration! Please, feel free to position and secure the plate here.’ Felix pointed to a chair.

Again, Kolya shrugged and obeyed the gentle recommendation.

‘So, you woke me up to put a plate on a chair?’

‘Negative! Patience, my dear comrade!’

Kolya’s patience, whatever Felix’s dear comrade said, was his trademark and ultimate skill. Felix never praised that, of course, or many other things; despite his inherent talkativeness, he avoided a number of topics either deliberately or by chance. Felix’s ultimate skill was an ability to dwell in higher cognitive dimensions beyond the physical world. In

such a state, Felix could disconnect from his body and transport his genius consciousness somewhere far, far away, perhaps to some sort of engineering epistemic common, wherever from he borrowed his ideas. While Kolya was a normal human being who wanted to sleep, eat, and shit, and who at ease could be distracted by something just surfacing at the top of his mind, Felix was a productivus maximus: a robot, an alien obsessed with what he was doing—projects like Felicia, the contraptionness—more than anything else, including himself. If the truest true love existed, it would have occurred nowhere but between Felix and Felicia <3. They were made for each other, or rather, one of them was making the other—and who whom was the question.

Felicia's energy source was connected to her machine by a thick wire patched many times already with blue duct tape. This duct tape was a kind of safety rope preventing Felix and Kolya from falling into the void of mediocrity. Nothing was done without it in their engineering household. Why did so much blue duct tape appear on every wire? Well, it's quite proverbial—Moros ate them. He, a black shaggy creature with stud tomcat cheeks, yellow crystals of eyes, and the demeanour of a demon, was keen on scratching, biting, screaming, eating rats without chewing, molesting neighbourly dogs, and using Felix's boxes for various natural needs, all of which Felix didn't appreciate. He called the cat a personification of doom. 'One day, he will kill someone, or all of us,' said Felix. Kolya, however, disagreed. He adored his little comrade and defended him in every possible way. After all, Moros was just a cat.

Have you heard that pets often start resembling their owners? With

these two this was the case. Kolya and Moros both were bulky, grim, with bed and breakfast in love.

Felix grabbed the remote control and put a pair of dark lenses over his goggles.

‘A gentle safety reminder to take two steps back, please!’

Kolya shrugged—shrugging was often his only morning exercise—and stepped back. Whatever his comrade wanted. He cared only about getting a few more hours of sleep after the performance.

Mr. Futzbucker straightened up, put his finger to the big red button on the remote and solemnly inquired, ‘Shall we?’

In response Kolya yawned and thumbed up, and Felix, impatient as a randy adolescent, gave the red button a push. Felicia hummed, began to shake, and the arrow on the overheatermeter crept to the right. And then... nothing. The contraption stalled. Felix frowned, snatched a spanner from his belt pocket and hit one of the machine’s cylindrical parts—domestic abuse. The arrow on the overheatermeter crept to the right again, and Felicia hummed harder and... lasered, flooding the room with light. Kolya squeezed his eyes shut and covered them.

‘Shall I hate you, Felix?’

The remote control was left lying on the floor as Felix rushed to the plate covered with a thick, vapoury cloud. The apple-pie-smelling steam robbed him of vision, his goggles immediately fogging up. He waved the

steam off; the goggles did not plan to unfog, it seemed, and so he had to remove them.

Kolya approached the chair and stared at the still thickly vaporising *something*.

‘Puree?’

Kolya grabbed a spoon from a nearby desk and scooped the steamy substance gently to his lips. Straightaway, his face contorted as if he were a wrinkled old imp who’d just eaten a bag of lemons, wholly.

‘Well, what can I say? Sour, dry, two out of ten. Your restaurant would go bankrupt.’

A magnifying glass appeared in Felix’s hands. He took the plate from Kolya and started scrutinising the substance.

‘All wrong, it’s all wrong!’

Felix shook his head in frustration. He handed the plate back to Kolya and returned to the contraptioness. Instead of saying, ‘Take from me this acid crap,’ Kolya continued to devour the substance, wrinkling but clearly indulging himself in some strange esoteric delight.

‘Enlarge! The apple should’ve enlarged three and fourteen hundredths times according to the coefelicient set! Or shrunk... Whatever! A puree wasn’t part of my plan.’

‘Nor part of mine, Felix, nor part of mine.’

Goggles back on, Felix fiddled with the switches, knocked the instrument panel, checked the wires, took duct tape out of his pocket and rewound one—another Moros nip. Then he leaned closer to the crystal and gave it a gentle tap with the screwdriver. One of the crystal’s facets gleamed. Everything seemed to be in place. Correct settings, enough power, no overheating, all connected, the wires duct-taped, but alas, something went wrong. What that was, Felix would later find out.

Debtors

A few hours later, Felix was rummaging through and bouncing around Felicia, flapping his froggy, goggled red eyes, inspecting his contraptioness from every mechanically callipygian side. Wires were wiring. Indicator lights were indicating. The crystal was crystal clear except for some wee air bubbles Felix considered natural defects.

Wrong! What was wrong, what was wrong? He adjusted the crystal, removed and put it back, and did so a few more times. He had checked every scheme, every blueprint, every calculation. What was wrong? Something clicked, and Felix glanced fidgety at his watch. Something else startled him. Something yet more was wrong, too. Everything was wrong! The world was wrong! But despite being zonked by the time slipping away and the wrongness of Being, despite being edgy and twitchy, he continued to dance around the contraptioness, his limbs and thoughts aflutter.

Meanwhile, Kolya ‘I-want-to-sleep-ovich’ Kalachev fiddled with the energy unit. Moros played with wires nearby, yanking, scratching, gnawing them on occasion. Kolya bent over the device and checked each circuit and pin one by one with an indicator screwdriver, entered

the checkup's results in a notebook. The engineering frenzy of his overagitated colleague happening in the background didn't surprise him—Felix was being Felix as always. Somebody, everybody in fact, should've slept more, eight hours and blablabla.

Moros made another assassination attempt on the wire's integrity, and his fangs came through the rim, such that the cat was charged with electricity. Moros meowed with the loudness of a thousand cats, jumped and sprung far from the bitten wire. This unfortunate event distracted Kolya, his hand twitching and touching the wrong thing. The wire, the socket, and the energy unit itself flashed, assailing Kolya's eyes with sparks. Kolya shrieked, joining the screaming cat, and fell on his back.

'What have you done!?' shouted Felix. His eyes widened as if to fill his goggles, become them. Two enormous white spheres, capillarised and adorned with jerking hazels.

'Ahhhhh, my eyes!' screamed Kolya.

'Mreeee! Mreeee! Mreeee!' cried Moros, which according to my loose knowledge of feline translates roughly as 'Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!'

Kolya rubbed his eyes. The energy unit kept hissing and sparking. Moros ran around the room spreading demonic noises, summoning demons too perhaps.

Something clicked.

The electricity went out, the lights too.

‘WHAT!? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?’

‘Meow!’

‘Water! Bring some water!’

Felix staggered between cardboard barricades and vines of wires in the darkness to an electrical junction box on the other side of the room—he knew the route perfectly.

‘Water! Faster! Give me water!’

‘It’ll heal on its own. A head’s not an arse. Just tie it up and lie down. *You’ve* cut off the power! Unbelievable!’ Felix was furious. Making the power go out was his job.

‘Mreeee!’

‘Hey! Take your mind off it for just a second!’

Felix growled. Surrounding conditions and the looming collapse of his world weighed on him from all sides. Time was money, he knew. Just a second? He started calculating potential annual profit, divided by 365, then again by 86,400. Yeah, it wasn’t much—a second he could spare. Wait, what if he rounded it up? Nah, never mind. He grabbed the bucket by the sink and dragged it towards his colleague, whimpering, muttering. ‘It’s all your feline freak’s fault! I’ve told you fifty-seven

times, now fifty-eight, he'll kill us both or somebody else one day! Maybe today's that day! Or tomorrow! Chaos spawn!'

The bucket next to him, Kolya dipped his face in the water. He hoped the water was at least clean.

'Lock him up or chain him somewhere already! He always spoils the work!' shouted Felix, returning to Felicia.

Kolya removed his head from the bucket, relieved. He panted for breath, then blurted out, 'To hell with the work! My eyeballs almost burst out and poured down my cheeks!'

'Well, they didn't!' Felix didn't turn around. 'Time, Kolya, time! We're trailing behind it. Temporal fiasco!'

'To hell with time!' Kolya stood, shook himself off, fixed his now-wet blond hair and removed his toolpurse. 'Screw your nuts yourself! I'm done for today! I'm off to a kabak.'

Felix turned and stared at Kolya.

'Hey! I can't do this alone!'

'You can't? You're in charge here. Figure it out!'

Angry, with teary eyes and swollen cheeks that made him look even chubbier than usual, Kolya staggered towards the exit.

Then, a sudden, rhythmic knock at the door. A pause.

‘I hope the whole block hasn’t blacked out...’

‘Hush!’ Felix hissed, frozen.

The rhythmic sound came again. Knock knock-knock. Knock knock-knock.

Felix, hearing it, rushed to Felicia and pulled out the crystal.

‘Are you expecting someone?’

‘Quiet!’ Felix hissed. He shoved the crystal into Kolya’s hands. ‘Hide it!’

‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘Just do what I say! I’ll provide you with a detailed explanation later.’

Stunned, Kolya tucked the crystal into the inside pocket of his jacket.

‘It’s open!’

The door creaked, let light in, and the small, round silhouette of Gennady Goldenstern by patronymic Gennadyevich—Geno Goldenstern, or simply Geno, for few could say Gennady Gennadyevich Goldenstern in full—appeared at the threshold. His being small was not a personal trait but a distinctive feature of his species. Gennady Gennadyevich was a Chude, a halfling if for some reason you don’t know what Chudes are. He was a local kingpin who owned all sorts of near-illegal or potentially illegal businesses: a couple of kabaks, a bordello, some laundries, a jewellery shop, and a small bank

that offered microloans to the desperate, two of which I have already introduced to you.

‘Dullard is silent. Dullard up shut as Commander say,’ said a voice outside. Felix swallowed.

Infuriated, Geno turned his silhouette around and raised a tiny fist.

‘I said shut up!’

‘Yes, shut up!’ said a second voice outside, rougher. This was Kazimir. If Dullard was here, Kazimir couldn’t be somewhere else, could he? Felix knew this, of course.

Geno smiled, though his smile was barely visible in the dusky room.

‘Good morning, Felix, little fellow!’ he said, lisping, turning Felix’s name into Felikth, serpentine. ‘Is it alright that I’m early?’

Despite there was no light in the house, on the picture I turned it on for you, dear reader, so can see these two beautiful fellows. ‘Of course it’s alright, Geno, comrade!’ Felix squealed, and he headed to his guest.

Geno’s silhouette moved inside the room, close to the table. Small, round, and bearded, Gennady Gennadyevich wore a low boyar hat on his head and a bear cub-skin cape covering his back and shoulders. He wielded a cane topped with a figure of the Golden Antelope, and full jewellery equipment manned his limbs—if there was a place to place an additional ring, Gennady Gennadyevich would do so without

hesitation. I must acknowledge, he really looked like a distinguished gentleman and respectable businessman.

Felix jumped to the table, approached the back of a chair and shook off the dust, preparing a seat for his sudden guest. His swollen face benumbed, Kolya stood in the middle of the room and watched. Kolya was silent, just as Felix had earlier hinted he should be, a finger to Felix's lips. Looking around, Gennady Gennadyevich sat imposingly in the chair and placed his hat on the table.

'Fancy some apple puree in the morning?' Felix presented his guest with an experimental plate of apple substance, which was long since first corroded.

Gennady Gennadyevich shook his head and reached for a papirosa.

'It's a bit dark, isn't it, little fellows? Easy to spoil your eyesight.'

'A cup of chai, perhaps?'

The guest flashed his lighter and let a few circles of odorous papirosa smoke waft into the room. His face lightened with every puff, showing his wrinkles, warts and old acne scars.

'I'm not here to drink chai with you. You know the purpose of my visit,' Gennady Gennadyevich said softly, then added with menace, 'Where's my money, Felikth?'

'Ah, the money, Gen... Gennady Gennadyevich... Well, it's... stored in a

bank. I just need to travel there and cash the money out.'

'Kathimir!' shouted Geno, and barely squeezing into the aisle space, a two-headed Zmei, a hefty, half-human, half-lizard eminence with a large tail, emerald scales, teeth, those dreadful teeth, crescent eyes golden and clear, and full ammunition, a cause of trust's attrition and of rectum-tightening fear, stumbled into the room. It was absolutely bloody terrifying.

Kazimir staggered through the tight and chaotic surroundings, bumped a head on one of the pendulous light bulbs and scattered boxes with his massive tail, and scared Moros, who allegedly wasn't fond of Zmeis. Moros shrieked and ran away into the darkness, his eyes flashing. Felix swallowed again. I must say, a fear of Zmeis wasn't unique to cats.

'And what bank do you speak of, if I may ask, Felikth?'

'Ehm, that, well... That one, just around the corner.'

'What corner, Felikth?'

'Eghm, that one. Exit the house and turn right, three hundred steps. All there. Yeah, all there.'

While one of Kazimir's halves stood languidly bored, the other half played with the bulbed vines hanging around the room, jabbing them with his finger and chuckling.

'Including what you owe me for making me wait?'

‘Of course, Gennady Gennadyevich! Absolute truest truth and nothing but truth. Give us five minutes. We’ll run over there in the blink of a laser beam and bring everything to you. You’ll only have to count it. Or I can count it for you, if you’d like.’

Gennady Gennadyevich continued to puff stinking smoke. He grew silent for just a few seconds, but Felix didn’t like it. Pauses ordinarily made him nervous: silences which prolonged themselves, time passing unutilised, and the silence of Gennady Gennadyevich worried him that much more. Gennady Gennadyevich knocked on the table and looked at Kazimir.

‘Maybe what we should count is your r-r-ribs,’ Kazimir growled. ‘Will we find all of ‘em in place?’

Dullard began curling the sausage-like green fingers on his side’s hand.

‘Dullard can count! One! Two!’

Kazimir smacked Dullard’s hand.

‘Dullard want count ribs-s-s!’ said he, offended.

‘No, wait! We’re comrades,’ said Felix.

Gennady Gennadyevich frowned. Ominous shadows played on his round face.

‘Now you dare to say we’re comrades,’ Gennady Gennadyevich said

slowly, rising from his chair and clutching his Golden Antelope cane.

The frightened Felix, meanwhile, had already begun to retreat backwards, looking for the emergency exit.

‘Gennady Gennadyevich! Give us more time! I’ll finalise the project in the nearest near future and pay you back in full. And for making you wait, yes, of course! All of it!’ said Felix, flapping his goggled eyes, pleading.

‘Time, Felikth, is extremely precious, especially mine. Geno’s first rule: “Time is money”. And take off these glasses! Terrifying.’

A dry scraping sensation appeared in Felix’s throat. He took off his goggles. His ears felt clogged, as if every sound had disappeared from the room at once. Gennady Gennadyevich was good at what he did, and he knew how to hold a pause.

Geno sighed heavily and said, ‘Seize him, Kaz.’

In the blink of a laser beam, Felix grabbed Kolya’s hand and dragged him towards the emergency exit.

‘Felix, you dullard! What are you doing?!’

‘Dullard doing nothing. Dullard silent. Silent, Commander said.’

‘Seize, Kahth, now!’ squeezed Geno.

Kaz and Dullard, both confused and completely dumbfounded, walked

up to Commander and tried to grab him.

‘Degenerates!’ Geno yelled. ‘Not me! Them!’

It was hard to understand the inner workings of Kazimir and Dullard. Sometimes, things in there worked, sometimes—but who was in charge? I don’t know, and I don’t think I want to know. They couldn’t agree who owned their body, and any lasting agreement was short-lived.

Reddening and inflating his cheeks, Gennady Gennadyevich struck Kazimir with his cane and pointed it at Felix and Kolya.

‘Dark, Commander. Dullard no see things.’

‘I don’t care! Kaz, you degenerate, deal with your soulmate!’

The engineers, meanwhile, ran to the door in the far corner and pushed on it with all their weight. The door didn’t give; it was locked. Felix’s fist woodpeckered the big red button to the door’s right—a high-tech-looking locking mechanism, developed to protect the household against robberies and other illegal house-infiltrating activities—but this invention refused to work too.

‘Maybe we should shoot their lil’ legs, Commander-r-r?” said Kazimir, and he pulled from his belt a maschinenpistole with a snail drum magazine.

‘Just catch them, or you’re fired!’

‘Yes, Commander-r, that’s r-right, Commander-r. Just catch ‘em, lil’ bugs.’

‘Commander s-s-ay, Dullard catch. S-s-simple.’

Kolya pushed Felix away from the button and tried opening the door himself but kept failing. Kazimir appeared at their backs, slapped Kolya with his heavy Zmei paw, and smacked Felix with his thick Zmei tail, all at once. The engineers sagged and attempted to crawl across the floor, but Kazimir dragged them to Gennady Gennadyevich. The force of the Zmei’s squeeze suppressed their breathing, and it seemed as if their eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. Kazimir threw the engineers to the floor in front of his Commander, drew his maschinenpistole, and with it poked them each in the back. The engineers, coming to their senses and getting hooked on air, put hands behind their heads and looked at each other. Kolya snarled at Felix.

‘Who the hell are you?’ Geno asked, squinting. ‘You’re not on my debtors list.’

‘None of your business,’ Kolya said.

His red cheeks ballooning even more, Gennady Gennadyevich gripped his cane and struck Kolya in the stomach with its Golden Antelope knob. Kolya curled in pain. Felix, frightened, reached for him, but received from Kazimir a preventive slam.

‘When I athk, you answer!’ Geno said.

Kolya coughed and spat on Geno's boot. Gennady Gennadyevich held his breath and seemed to puff up even more, then, inhaling, caned Kolya in the stomach again.

'Mreeeeeeeeeeeee!' Moros emerged from the darkness and pounced upon Geno with all his feline might and fury. He gripped Geno's shoulder and swished his paws like a tiny windmill in a storm, scratching, hitting, biting.

'Get this behemoth off me!'

'Dullard s-see no behemehe.'

'Degenerates! The cat!'

Kazimir inwardly agreed with Dullard as to their current perception of the world, then grabbed the cat and threw it far into the darkness, where it hit and scattered carton boxes. Moros meowed, went silent.

'Hey! Moros! My cat! What did you do?'

'Sh-shut up!' Geno hit Kolya again, adding more abrasions and bruises. He would have continued if Felix didn't grab his cane.

'Please! Gennady Gennadyevich! He's my friend! We work together.'

Deflating a little, Gennady Gennadyevich pondered for a moment, panting, and smirked.

'Well, you both owe me money then.'

‘What?! You...’ started Kolya, but Felix palmed his mouth.

‘Give us another week, Gennady Gennadyevich. We’ll finalise the project, find our first customers—you might be one of them!—then estimate and evaluate all the revenues and profits, financial forecasts, taxes and all, and surely pay you back,’ Felix begged. He pointed at Felicia.

Gennady Gennadyevich looked at the contraptioness, wrinkled, and shook his head.

‘Felikth, do you know how loans work? No? Let me explain. A loan is when someone gives you money you then pay back in the future—on time. So, I gave you money and time, the two dearest things to me. I came to you on the day we agreed I should come. This whole time, I have been patiently waiting. And what have you and your friend done? Nothing. You’ve done nothing. *Paid* nothing. Instead, you show me a pile of scrap metal, pretend to be my comrade, and right away ditch me, try to escape...’

‘Yeah, ditch. You know what happens to people who ditch Commander-r-r?’ asked Kazimir. Dullard ran a finger across his throat.

‘...and *then* you sicced your demon cat on me. He almost killed me. That’s attempted murder. You know what that means?’

‘Not quite.’ A lump ran down Felix’s throat.

‘Bring that bucket here, Kaz!’ Geno smirked. ‘I’ll show you.’

‘Wait, Gennady Gennadyevich! Please! We will pay! The promisest promise.’

Scattering boxes with his tail, Kazimir took the bucket and delivered it to his Commander.

‘Bath time,’ said Geno. ‘Get ready.’

Kolya shook his head. Kazimir stretched an eerie serpentine smile, two of them, and hit Kolya in the back. As if it was rehearsed, Geno immediately took the yelling Kolya by the hair and dipped him into the bucket again and again, splashing water all around. The bucket water gurgled with panic gulps of air as they left Kolya’s body. Kolya couldn’t scream. He could only moan, grasping the edges of the bucket and trying to pull out his head.

‘How’s my money doing? Can you see it in there?’ asked Geno, giving Kolya a second to gasp and dipping him again. ‘I’ve heard people can sometimes.’

Felix grabbed Geno’s arm and was promptly elbowed. Kolya rose from the bucket and coughed.

‘Geno’s first rule: time equals money,’ Geno said. ‘And Geno’s second rule: don’t touch Geno!’ He was panting, each breath inflating and deflating his whole body. His eyes, ears and cheeks reddened, looked like he was going to explode and splatter the room with his insides. Saying that something had genuinely upset him would not be saying enough.

‘Gennady Gennadyevich, please! We’ll pay! Give us at least a day. We’ll find your money!’

Geno kept hold of Kolya.

‘One day, Felikth. Twenty-four hours, not a minute more. Tomorrow, if I can’t see and touch my money... Well, I want you to memorise Geno’s third rule: debts before lives.’

Felix gulped, managing to get to his feet.

‘Thank you, Gennady Gennadyevich. All will be here.’

Gennady Gennadyevich let Kolya go and retrieved a pocket watch.

‘This morning started up lousy,’ said he, deflating and normalising his breath. He nodded to Kazimir and pointed to the door, then headed for the exit. Kazimir put his gun behind his back and glared at Felix and Kolya with crescent eyes.

‘You can break the third rule only once,’ Geno said. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Once. Dullard can count. Once, tooth, three...’

Gennady Gennadyevich stopped before the doorway and looked into a framed mirror on a chest of drawers near him. He grimaced and tried to fix his appearance.

‘I look like a dead man,’ said Geno. ‘That’s because you unnerve me all

the time, degenerates. All of you.’ He noticed a bloody line on his cheek. ‘And get rid of that bloody cat. Next time I see it, only one of us will leave the room alive. You have my word.’

He adjusted his boyar hat and left. Bending over, Kazimir stomped out after him. Kolya, swollen, wet and battered, soon got to his feet and limped towards the exit.

‘Where are you going?’ Felix asked.

‘To patent your Door-O-Lock button.’

Kolya’s answer confused Felix. Flapping his eyes, Felix shook his head.

‘Wait! The patent for the button is mine!’

Felix stumbled over the doorstep and ran out of the wooden shack after Kolya, the two of them facing the morning and possibly their last day in City N.

Visitors

That same morning, Nina sat with a dejected expression, face buried in a notebook. The kabak had yet to fill: chairs were stacked on tables, windows curtained, doors closed. Around, silence. Nina’s pencil rustled on paper. The embers of her eyes gazed at the endless columns of digits and, line by line, symbol by symbol, she circled negative numbers in red.

The dark, curly mop of her hair broke free of its tie and fell over her shoulders, again. Before she could fix it, someone knocked on the door. A second later the rising sun burst inside. Nina flinched and turned around.

‘Good morning to you, Nina. May I?’

Vitya was an evening regular. Nina hadn’t expected him. She nodded.

‘Morning.’

Vitya twirled his neatly trimmed moustache and smiled.

‘I’m so sorry to come this early. I won’t take much of your time, I promise,’ he said, removing his kartuz, revealing his dark ginger forelock.

Vitya, Victor Rosencrunts, was a Chude. His kindred fellows had founded City N long ago and still made within it a large population. The first stone laid in the city was laid by a Chude. The first bank was built by a Chude. The arena was built by a Chude. All of the majors were Chudes. Including Vitya, you’ve met two Chudes already, but if you are still confused about who they are, let me spend a few more words on that. All Chudes were short—half the average human’s height—and had disproportionately big heads, average legs and arms, and what made them distinguishable from other halfling kinds: light blue-grey eyes, pupils almost white. Vitya, however, was perhaps the only sane Chude Nina had met so far. This wasn’t a problem with

Chudes, no. This was a problem of the city they lived in. The very concept of ‘trust’ in City N was flawed, vague. For Nina, a businesswoman, it was even worse. Everyone, including the Chudes, was snide, a fraudster who wanted to deceive, rob, or kill you, whatever was the ultimate remedy to acquire your money. Vitya, however, wanted nothing from the list above. Nina read lies. It was a skill that helped her survive. Vitya’s alabaster eyes were friendly and free of cunning—at least when he looked at Nina—and his speech had no vicious notes or tones. If his words were pleasing, they were genuine—at least when he spoke to Nina.

‘I need your help today,’ said Vitya, approaching the bar.

‘Well, shoot.’

‘Alright,’ Vitya said. He put his kartuz on the bar and ran fingers through his beard. ‘The two bastards you recruited for me last week have ditched me. Well, they haven’t ditched me yet, exactly, but those bloody morons are going to ditch me soon as the bloody business is done. Imagine the bastards!’ he wailed, waving his arms.

‘Why are you so sure of this?’

‘I made inquiries. Trustworthy sources.’

‘Am I not a trustworthy source?’

‘Oh, gods, of course you’re a trustworthy source. What are you even talking about? This has nothing to do with you. You will still get your

commission. You did your job.'

'Then why are you so sure they'll ditch you?'

'They ditched a Chude I know, a good chap. They don't like wee fellows. You know these kinds of bastards—they ditch Chudes. It's their bloody profession. And because of that, I can't take them to do that bloody job tonight, which means they've practically ditched me already! Smeared Zmei's shite all over my face!'

'Yeah, you seem upset.'

'Quite so, my dear Nina. Quite upset.'

'So, what do you want from me?'

'I need new guys.'

'You know that's not a one-day thing. How am I supposed to run anyone through my sources in just a few hours?'

'Just find the guys you trust, or someone so bloody naive or desperate they can't conceive of screwing me. The Arena Grand Finalé is tonight. Everything is ready. "Guards are already bribed," as they say, and I can't postpone it, you know that.' Vitya looked around suspiciously. 'All stars align today, just for me, but I have no bloody bastards to do the job!'

'I don't know, Vitya. You're just about asking me to fail you a second time. Do you know what a reputation is?'

‘Just find the guys. I won’t blame you.’

‘Well, I’ll blame myself, and that’s worse. Plus, if the guys I find for you get you busted, there’s a chance Geno will come to me.’

‘Nina, please! No way I can do this job alone. I need someone. Just find...’

Then, a sudden, rhythmic knock at the door.

‘Hush!’ Vitya hissed.

Knock knock-knock. Knock knock-knock.

‘Zmei’s shite, have you just summoned him? Hide me!’

Nina grumbled, looking in random directions, then pointed at two barrels behind Vitya. On both were signs each with a drawn cucumber.

‘A barrel?’

‘Yes, a barrel. You will fit, won’t you?’

Vitya grimaced deeply, wagging his index finger, but he then hurried to the barrels and hid. Nina heard water splash. Oh, they aren’t empty, she thought.

And it wasn’t water, for you to know. It was brine.

The door opened, and for some reason alone, on the doorstep stood the little round silhouette of Geno Goldenstern himself. Geno was the type

of Chude Nina would happily ditch herself.

The silhouette raised its hat, lit a papirosa and puffed.

‘Top of the morning to you, my dear Ninnette.’

Geno was never genuine. Nina imagined how he said ‘Ninnette’, sphinctering his little red lips, swollen and chapped, moving his eyebrows and grimacing as if he were trying to seduce a pig... Blargh.

‘You again? The hell do you need?’

Theatrically spreading his hands, Geno looked around at imaginary visitors.

‘Look at you, mademoiselle!’ said Geno. ‘Is that how you greet your customers now? Your dear old man wouldn’t have tolerated thuch an attitude!’

Sigh. Father. Again. Nina felt infuriated, inwardly.

‘Unlike you, my real customers can read,’ she said, and nodding leftwards she pointed at the door.

Geno looked at the ‘Closed’ sign hanging there and shrugged.

‘I was sure you could spare a minute or two for the most regular and distinguished of visitors,’ said he, advancing into the room, coming close to the barrels. ‘Who doesn’t fancy a bit of small talk early in the morning?’ He cracked a fake smile and continued chewing his papirosa.

Nina moved no part of her face. Her languid, dark eyes stared back, unblinking.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Geno, and he reached for the barrel in which Vitya was hiding. Nina swallowed. The barrel was the exact height of a Chude—in the case of Geno, actually a bit high—and he could barely see what was inside. Should he spot Nina and Vitya together right before Vitya’s ‘business’... He knew who Nina was. He knew about her ‘second job’. He would see the link. Perhaps he already does, Nina thought.

Standing on his toes, Geno took a pickled cucumber from the barrel before Nina could say anything and sniffed it, wrinkling his pimply nose. He devoured it wholly. Did he chew it? Did he chew at all? I mean, look at him...

‘So... If I may ask you one question...’

Sighing from tiredness, boredom, or relief, Nina rose from the bar and crossed her arms.

‘My answer is still no.’

‘Ninnette, you haven’t even listened to my new offer!’

‘I know perfectly well what you want. I’m not selling my kabak. Have a splendid day, good riddance, bon voyage, whatever,’ Nina said, and she turned back to the bar.

Almost every morning, the same question and answer, a game Geno never got used to. Who could say no to Gennady Gennadyevich? Just a girl... Every time he heard her refusal, he puffed in and puffed out, reddened and scowled. He started to look like a big bloated bubblefish, liable to burst in anger any moment. Yeah, imagine that—Geno’s stinky intestines hanging on this lovely chandelier. Nina shivered. Blargh!

‘If I may, let me tell you a story. In a small seaside town, there lived a young businessman, or businesswoman, who decided to run a kabak out of an old wooden building. And what a kabak it was! Such a beautiful one! Still, to nature the kabak’s beauty didn’t matter, nor did it matter how ambitious, witty, or clever the businesswoman was. Or was it a man? Never mind... One day, as it tends to happen, the weather broke badly, and a terrible thunderstorm came. The lightning hit only the roof of that kabak. And you know what happened? That kabak burnt to the ground. To the tiniest embers...’

‘Em-ber. Em-ghm-hm. Commander s-s-smart,’ said a voice from outside.

Not alone after all, Nina thought. Always with his imbecile. Imbeciles?

‘Shut up, Dullard! Interrupt me one more time, you’re fired! Both of you degenerates!’ shouted Geno.

You won’t fire them, will you? Nina thought. Kazimir, ‘Dullard’, went everywhere with Geno, from business meetings to sundry events like the daily debtor shakedown, one of which you, dear reader, witnessed

recently. They were almost like brothers, the three of them, or two and a half. Two bodies, three heads, you know. I can't much comprehend how to do maths nor count people, or Zmeis. In any case, for Kazimir the moniker 'Dullard' was only half-justified—Kazimir had only one dumb head. As Geno used to say, one head was good, and two were how luck would have it. Nobody knew how Geno and the Zmei met, nor how such a creature could possibly exist, except for Nina, who knew everything and always did, just like your marvellous narrator. If somebody knew, Nina knew, and if Nina knew, somebody knew if they paid good lucre. The bad thing about knowing was, if everybody knew you knew everything, sometimes that struck you in the back. Anyway, the legend held that when Geno was a wee chap he was gifted with a wee one-headed lizard, but then, once upon a time, Geno's new pet was exposed to his clumsy, clubfooted foot. The wee lizard's head turned to puree, and everyone thought it was dead, but in place of the previous single head two grew, and over time the magical creature turned into an adult Zmei with glimpses of intelligence. Or perhaps he was a two-headed Zmei from the beginning. Zmeis grow from wee lizards by default, from an egg and all, and maybe Geno's parents just made a small mistake, but Nina's version complete with Geno-cide was more flowery, and the regulars loved it.

'Dullard is s-silent, as Commander s-say.'

'Shut up!' shouted Kazimir outside.

'So the moral of my story is... You can't tell Nature what to do. Think

about it, Ninnette. You don't know how the real business is done around here.'

'I know how it's done, and perhaps better than you,' Nina said. She leaned over the bar and pulled a double-barreled shotgun from under it.

This made the bubblefish deflate. He shook his head.

'Noted, understood.'

Geno extinguished his papirosa on the barrel, spoiling the cucumber picture, and dropped the stub to the floor. He again reached into the barrel for a treat, drew and devoured it. No, Nina thought, he doesn't chew.

'Someday you'll crawl to my house,' Geno said, 'begging me to take this bedlam away from you for a few lucres.'

'I doubt that.'

Geno frowned, started bloating and inflating again, then turned around and almost walked out. Then he added, 'I'll check in again tomorrow! See you soon, Ninnette. And remember, every visit will be less pleasant than the last.'

'Come, but next time read the kabak's name above the entrance before you barge in.'

The globular ghoul disappeared from the entrance with a slam of the

door. Nina exhaled, replaced the shotgun under the counter, and fixed her curls.

‘Geno left, right?’ said the barrel, muffled.

‘Yes, finally. Come out, pickle.’

‘Not funny. I had to give him a bloody cucumber! I think he touched my finger! Imagine that! Not funny!’

‘Well, it is kind of funny,’ said Nina. She almost laughed.

Vitya crawled out of the barrel, splashing brine on the floor.

‘No it’s not! He busted me almost! In a barrel of bloody pickles! That’s a million times worse than simply being busted! Zmei’s shite, it stinks! I stink! Bloody hell!’

Nina couldn’t suppress laughter anymore.

‘See? I failed you again.’

‘I still don’t think so, even though I’m so bloody wet and salty right now. He’s going to pay me in full for a new suit and all once I get his bloody gems.’

‘I bet he will.’

‘But for that I need you to find me two brave chaps. I know you have a dossier on everyone. Just skim through the archives.’

Nina sighed and rolled her eyes.

‘I don’t want to overcommit, Vitya, I told you.’

‘Don’t you want to show Geno who’s the Commander?’

‘You robbing him with my help or without won’t make me the Commander. It’s risky.’

‘Life is bloody risky! Don’t you want to punish him for his capitalistic sins? Imagine Geno losing all his shinies. That would at least distract him from your kabak, wouldn’t it?’

‘It would, perhaps...’

‘So, Nina, please!’ said Vitya, folding his palms.

‘I will think about it, Vitya, I will.’

‘YES! Yes! Thank you!’

‘But I can’t promise anything!’

‘Alright, alright, don’t promise. Just find me two good-enough chaps. Good?’

‘Go already. Change clothes.’ Nina waved her hand towards the door.

‘This bloody brine! See you tonight, Nina!’

Vitya took his kartuz from the bar and left, bowing on his way out.

Nina sighed, cursed the Chudes once again, and returned to the counter. Thus began the lousy morning of a more lousy day at a kabak with a wooden sign: 'the Dead Capitalist'.

The Debut Project: Chapter the second

nova-nevedoma.com/the-debut-project-ch2/

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 people river flows and drags the money river 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. Futzucker 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 shrunk 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.

The Debut Project: Chapter the third

nova-nevedoma.com/the-debut-project-ch3/

Hello Mx. Reader. Welcome to the serialisation of my novella, *The Debut Project*. If you have no idea what it is, please visit [this page](#). If you've missed the first two chapters, here are the links for you:

- [Chapter the first](#), in which everyone has a lousy morning.
- [Chapter the second](#), in which we see the characters in City N and get some necessary exposition. Today, we're collectively enjoying (I hope) the third chapter, which is a penultimate one, so the story is trending towards its grand finalé.

As always, let's thank Ilia for his brilliant illustrations done for this chapter.

See you in the next one,

Bye bye,

Vanya

Chapter the third, in which the conflict intensifies and measures grow desperate

The kabak

Interpretation of the name ‘The Dead Capitalist’ made for a decent topic of study. Nobody knew whether it implied some arcane symbolism foreseeing future facts or was simply a melancholic and ironic reference to the kabak’s unprofitable reality. The kabak was never full enough to defray the costs of its maintenance: endless refurbishing of rotten floors and walls, new tables and chairs, lazy employees, pest control, non-puke-provoking ales and non-poisonous-make-you-blind vodka, pyrosafety measures, extortions and mandatory bribes—taxes—with which Nina wasn’t happy. Yet, she dreamed of returning the kabak to the place it had been when she was a kid, when she was helping her father by drawing labels and gluing them onto barrels, chasing off stray cats, listening to drunken anecdotes, learning to determine a cask’s content by the sound it made when you knocked it, and doing many other silly things. Alas, all of Nina’s futile attempts to revive the kabak led her to desperate measures that required blending in. She admitted that being a ‘source’ and ‘recruiter’ was the only reason the building was still hers and not just bought and demolished by someone like Geno. After all, land in City N was worth more than a pile of rotting wood in the shape of a kabak.

That evening the kabak’s patrons had already gathered and settled around the heavy oak tables on heavy oak chairs and along the heavy oak bar. Some just sat and sipped ales, ate snacks, including pickles. Others played cards, rolled dice, or listened to a gentle female voice caressing the

kabakroom's air. As usual, Vitya had found the musicians: two guitarists and a singer, all Chudes of course. They were professionals and all, but their repertoire always made Nina suspicious of something to say the least.

'Dark and passionate eyes / dark as midnight skies,

Oh, so fiery eyes / oh, so splendid eyes.

I'm in love with you / I'm afraid of you,

The first time I saw you / made me sad and blue.'

The patrons seemed to like it, which she thought was enough. After all, wasn't it all for the patrons?

To Nina's surprise, Felix, Kolya, and Moros had joined the regulars, and, sad and blue, they crumpled on stools in front of where she stood behind the bar wiping glasses. From the first second she saw them she knew something was wrong. Kolya and Moros looked almost as they usually did, but Felix, nevergrim Felix Futzbucker, had lost that energising, feverish flame in his eyes. They sat with glasses of vodka in their hands, Moros with a bowl of milk.

'It's not surprising to me that you're both quite distinguished degenerates, but tell me how a sane person living in this city doesn't know you can't place bets at the arena after the fight has started!'

'Nina, we didn't know how it works.'

‘Of course you didn’t.’

‘The bookmaker fooled us. He escaped with our money.’

‘The bookmaker? That Chude you met in the crowd, huh?’

Felix and Kolya looked down.

‘I have no words. Honestly, boys, no words.’

‘We need help, Nina,’ said Felix.

‘HE needs help,’ Kolya muttered.

‘I’m not giving you money, not anymore. Moreover, not after what you just told me.’

‘Wait, wait. It’s not about money. Let me tell you the story first.’

‘What else have you done?’

‘He did.’

‘I’m working on a new project...’

‘We are.’

‘Absolutely revolutionary device. But now...’ Felix looked at Kolya. ‘Our young and ambitious team is enduring some... financial difficulties.’

Oh really, she thought. She rolled her dark eyes and turned away, taking

another glass to wipe.

‘Wait, wait. Let me finish, please.’

Nina gave them a reproachful look. Kolya took a sip, averting his languid gaze. Moros lapped from his bowl.

‘I know not in vain / darkness you conceal!

That you mourn for me / I can always feel,

I can see the flame / of your victory,

How it leaves my heart / scorched in misery.’

‘All right. Go on.’

‘So...’

‘But only so I can hear another of the most ridiculously stupid stories I’ve ever heard. Don’t disappoint me, boys.’

They both finished their glasses and pleaded for refuels that Nina masterfully performed.

‘I—’ Felix coughed, clearing his throat. ‘We are building an innovative, groundbreaking device able to change the world, literally. A device that can increase or decrease the size of objects using a laser beam. I call her Felicia.’

‘Alright, I get it. Adolescent complexes. Are you gonna pay for the

drinks?’

‘Wait! I’ve only just started.’

‘I’m all yours,’ said Nina, sighing.

‘Alright, so it was a sunny morning.’

‘It wasn’t sunny...’ muttered Kolya.

‘After a night of hard work, I woke up Kolya, this grumpy guy,’ said Felix, patting Kolya’s evasive shoulder, ‘to make a demonstration of m—our invention.’

‘Yeah, and ruined my apples. I like apples.’

‘Stop interrupting me, please. So, Kolya took a plateful of apples, put it on a chair. I took Felicia’s remote control, set all the right settings—’ Felix pondered. ‘Wait. Maybe that’s not right...’ He waved a hand. ‘Not the point. I pressed the start button, a-a-a-a-and Felicia turned the apples into puree.’

‘Pardon my interruption, but am I getting this right? You “invented” a thing you call by name, and it can turn apples into puree?’

‘Not just apples. Anything! Gold bullion, theoretically even a human or a Chude. Haha! Imagine that!’

‘Into puree?’

‘Of course not! Enlarge or shrink. So, my idea is...’

‘Genius idea, by the way,’ added Kolya.

‘Thank you.’ Felix nodded. ‘So, it should work with any animate or inanimate object. I’m not entirely sure about animate objects yet—anything could happen, really—but theoretically, take a cat, for example, press the button, and voila! You get a big cat—or a small one. Depending on the settings. Say you wake up and want a big apple—a huge one, let’s say—but you have only little parodies of apples.’ Felix chuckled. ‘Kolya, imagine a big casserole full of apple puree.’

‘Oh my, oye, I’d stuff myself to death.’

‘This all sounds pretty cool, but what do you want from me?’

‘We need a big casserole so we can put all the apple puree there,’ said Kolya, grinning.

‘What?’ asked Felix.

‘What?’ asked Nina.

‘A pot. A big cooking pot.’

‘I’m totally confused right now,’ said Nina.

‘A casserole, for puree.’

‘I’m not giving you a casserole for anything.’

‘Ah, nevermind. Felix, please continue.’

Felix unfurrowed and continued: ‘To the business, then. We borrowed some mo...’

‘HE!’

‘All right, calm down, Kolya. I. I borrowed a very small amount of money at a very small interest rate from a very respectable gentleman. But it turned out we couldn’t finalise the work on time to repay this gentleman his money, and then the bookmaker fooled us.’

‘Wait, wait. I’m losing track of events. What gentleman?’

‘What I’m trying to convey here is that that respectable gentleman came to us this sunny morning as he wanted his money back, but by the paradoxiest paradox we didn’t have the money.’ Felix shrugged and threw his hands up.

‘And who, pardon me, is that “respectable” gentleman?’

‘I think he would really like to stay anonymous.’

‘Ah, I see. Don’t want to tell, don’t tell. Good luck, then. I have to get back to work. Ales wait for people, people wait for ales.’

Nina put another wiped glass on the counter, tucked a towel under her belt and pretended to leave.

‘Geno’s his name!’ shouted Kolya. His voice thundered across the

kabak, and the whole room, except for the musicians, went silent.

'But I do not grieve / and I am not sad,

I take comfort in / all the joy I've had.

All the best in life / gods have given to us,

I have sacrificed / for the fiery eyes.'

'Know this guy?' Kolya continued. 'A round Chude with a two-headed dullard Zmei trailing behind.'

Most in the room either twitched or ducked down in their chairs, but Nina only raised her eyebrows and laughed. The scared patrons looked around, acknowledged Geno's absence, and returned to their kabak deeds.

'What's so funny? You know him?'

'Everyone knows Geno. Don't you know who he is?'

Felix and Kolya shook their heads.

'Sometimes, I think about how hard it is for me to be genuinely surprised, but then you two appear. Gladiator gambling, loans from gangsters, apple puree in casseroles—what's next?'

'We've only been here a short while, Nina. How are we supposed to know what we can do and what we can't?'

Nina facepalmed.

‘Do you know what the law of supply and demand is?’

‘Er, yes?’

‘Well, it doesn’t work with you. I’ve lived here my whole life, and during that time the demand for degenerates hasn’t increased one bit, but the supply keeps coming. That is the true paradoxiest paradox!’

Kolya finished one more glass. Moros cleaned his bowl.

‘It’s because of all our smartarse guy’s genius ideas,’ said Kolya.

‘Hey, what do you mean, “smartarse”?’

‘It means what it means. We’ve been wasting time on nonsense instead of doing something useful. Now, we have no work done and owe money to people who’re going to kill us!’

‘So it’s all my fault now?’

‘No, I’m pretty good at screwing things up, too...’ Kolya took out the crystal from his inner pocket and showed it to Felix. ‘Here, look.’

Kolya swung, and the crystal crashed onto the floor. It crumbled and pieces scattered all over the kabak. Silence settled again. The patrons turned around, energised by what was happening, engorged with seeing a fight.

‘You know you’re going to clean that up yourself, right?’ said Nina.

Felix shuddered. His eyes opened wide, and a panic flame flickered between them. He turned slowly towards Kolya.

‘What... What have you done?’

Not waiting for an answer, Felix’s fist smacked Kolya in the face. Kolya fell off his chair, dropped his kartuz and his cat. Moros meowed. The musicians started playing faster.

‘Dark and passionate eyes / dark as midnight skies,

Oh, so fiery eyes / oh, so splendid eyes.

I’m in love with you / I’m afraid of you,

The first time I saw you / made me sad and blue.’

Felix pounced on Kolya and burst into a spree of punches. Kolya blocked and counterattacked. They tangled together and started rolling on the floor, exchanging clumsy strikes. Ruffled, Moros meowed, hissed and jumped onto the bar. The patrons forgot their drinks and watched the performance. Silently, they were cheering for both fighters.

‘No fights in here!’ Nina shouted. She ran out from behind the counter and started whipping them both with a towel. ‘Stop it!’

‘Dark and passionate eyes / dark as midnight skies

Oh, so fiery eyes / oh, so splendid eyes.'

They ignored the towel, so she threw it down and tried pulling the fighters apart. Sobering a little, they sprawled on different parts of the floor.

'Feel better, aye?!'

Felix found blood coming out of his nose.

Kolya replaced his kartuz, stood up, and mumbled, 'I've had enough. I'm leaving now.'

'Stop right there!' said Nina, throwing a towel in Kolya's face. 'Sit down, both of you! Are you trying to put on a drama here? Is this a play to you?'

Both of them bristled, pouted, but crawled back to their bar stools. They sat with heads down and looked at each other in anger. Moros hissed at Felix and hurried down to Kolya's lap. Nina waved to the patrons, signalling the theatrical performance was over. Respecting the hostess wholeheartedly, the patrons hurried back to their kabak deeds, and she returned to the bar.

'... Dark and passionate eyes / dark as midnight skies...'

The Chude band stopped singing but kept playing the slow-tempo melody.

‘Shake hands. Now.’

‘I’m not doing that,’ said Kolya.

‘Neither am I!’

They glanced at each other, frowning and nervously moving their eyeballs.

‘I said enough of that! Shake each other’s hands, quickly.’

They hesitated, but catching Nina’s drilling gaze with great reluctance they held out their hands.

‘Much better. You think drunken fights will help you?’

Felix and Kolya were silent.

‘What do you suggest, Nina? We messed up everything,’ said Kolya.

‘You messed everything up! You destroyed the crystal!’

‘Do you really think a gem that wasn’t fake would’ve shattered on a wooden floor?’

Felix turned aghast. ‘What do you mean, “wasn’t fake”?’ He paused, then realised what had happened and grabbed his head, pulling his hair.

‘The wrong crystal... You got us the wrong crystal... You... You had one simple quest... Why?’

‘I don’t know why, Felix! You gave me money, you told me where to go! That was what the jeweller sold me. When I went to him today to return the crystal, he said it was a fake and kicked me out.’

‘You and your cat! You mess everything up! Always!’

Felix stood from his chair and leaned towards Kolya. Moros hissed.

‘Stop! Sit down!’ Nina yelled. Felix sat. ‘It’s both you and this messed-up dynamic you have. One’s always baiting the other into trouble, and the other’s always grumbling but going along.’

‘We’re losers, Nina,’ Kolya said.

‘The wrong crystal... But...’ Felix kept squeezing his head, mumbling. His mind was compulsively calculating something.

‘You are not. Losers die in this city.’

‘Well, we’ll be dead soon.’

‘... What if I...’

‘You came to an unknown city on an island in the middle of the ocean with no idea what awaits you and yet you’re still alive, which to be honest still surprises me.’

‘Thank you for your support, Nina, but what should we do?’

‘... What if we...’

‘I don’t know, rob someone. A bank or whatnot,’ said Nina. She smiled and shrugged.

The feverish flame flickered in Felix’s eyes and he jumped off his stool.

‘Exactly! What if it’s time for us to stop bowing down to organised crime and organise it ourselves?’ said Felix.

‘Please stop. I was kidding.’

‘Actually, I agree. I thought maybe we could take revenge on the jeweller,’ added Kolya.

‘What did I just say about you two?!’

‘We must get our money back. Robbing criminals isn’t a crime, is it, Nina?’

‘That’s not what I meant!’

‘The jeweller cheated us. That’d be a fair thing to do, don’t you think, Nina?’

‘You’re both drunk.’

‘We’ll only take as much as he stole from us.’

‘Unbelievable. You better tell me where you bought this gem.’

‘Are you going to join us?’

‘What? No.’

‘Will you help us?’

‘I’m helping no one. Just tell me the address.’

‘8890 Elephant Street.’

Nina laughed.

Nightly affairs

Enlightened by the lucid disks and random flares of fireworks, three figures capped and coated manoeuvred through crowded streets against the current. They went arranged by height, a stocky Chude who led the group and then two young lads: one bulky, grim, the other lofty, fussy. All three were neatly camouflaged. Red noses, glasses, and moustaches; the lofty one carried an umbrella. They travelled through abandoned alleys, suspicious streets, and leery lanes, scaring off rats and bums, minding street lanterns and patrols, avoiding population. Three figures monikered as Messrs. Lofty, Bulky, and Chude, all capped and coated, manoeuvred in silence until their dialogue began.

‘I don’t like this idea...’ spoke Mr. Lofty in a slightly shaky voice.

‘This was your idea,’ responded Mr. Bulky. ‘In the kabak you said “Let’s organise crime” or whatnot.’

‘No, I mean the costumes. It feels weird. One thought clogs my mind...’ said Mr. Lofty, shivering.

‘Just one? Is it genius at least?’ Mr. Bulky chuckled.

‘I’m being serious here. What if we look like gangsters? My mom would be furious to learn her son dresses like a gangster!’

‘The point of camouflage is the opposite of looking like a gangster, for your information, Felix.’

Mr. Chude turned around and the three figures stopped.

‘Zmei’s shite! Shut up, both of you!’ exclaimed he. ‘How hard is it to memorise just three bloody rules? Tell me all three. Now.’

From the moment they met, Mr. Bulky had felt Mr. Chude’s voice was worryingly familiar.

‘Eghm... No names,’ Mr. Lofty said.

‘No talking,’ Mr. Bulky added.

‘Aren’t we talking now?’ Mr. Lofty asked.

‘Shut up!’ Mr. Chude countered. ‘And the third rule?’

‘No questions?’

‘How bloody annoying you are. Is it necessary to say “No questions” with a question’s intonation? No names, no talking, no questions.’

Follow my orders. That's gonna be the fourth bloody rule.'

'Meow!'

'What's that?'

'A cat.'

'A cat?'

'Yes.'

'Whose cat?'

'My cat.'

'You brought a cat on a robbery?'

'He's a clever cat. He can stand guard.'

'What?! I don't care. It's a bloody cat. Cats make noise.'

'He does what I say. Right, Moros? Shan't you make any noise?'

Moros purred.

'I said no names!'

'He's a cat. Who cares about his name?'

'Detectives.'

‘Why would they care about a cat’s name?’

‘Zmei’s shite! No names! No talking! No questions! Follow my orders!’
Mr. Chude growled. His red nose and moustache nearly fell off.

‘All right, all right... Calm down.’

Thus silently the four figures went: three coated gentlemen and Mr. Cat, his tail up like a chimney, trotting on the side. That night, the city didn’t fall asleep, but streets were growing empty, for each and all hurried to the arena to see the Grand Finalé. The group turned onto Elephant Street and met a narrow space of multistorey, overhanging wooden shacks. This time, no swarm of humming marginals, no shouts of peddlers, no bums, no rats, no drunks, no dancing bears, no cackling peopleriver—the street was empty and sedate.

When Mr. Chude’s pocket cuckoo clock ticktocked ten, the crew approached building 8890, which was attached to the hotelbordello, still open. Mr. Chude knocked three times. The slit on a speakeasy door swung open and revealed the frowning face of an old lady, who was monikered as Ms. Puffy. She questioned, ‘Who?’ She could see no one, for Mr. Chude’s height was not enough for him to be in her sight. Only when Mr. Chude raised his hand did she smile and open the door.

The hostess, swaying in her lush, exuberant dress, swishing her puffy mop of grey entangled curls, silently steered the crew of capped and coated gentlemen and one black cat through a tight, labyrinthine corridor eclectically made of tulle, bright carpets, empty space, small

doors to giggling and moaning rooms, and the thickness of a perfume haze. Further in they entered a small room: two beds, a round window. Moon shone through it and spotlighted a worn poster with a painted gate to a wondrous place. Mr. Chude bid farewell to Ms. Puffy and she disappeared. She knew the rules. She said no words. She saw no one. She couldn't keep track of every client hosted in her recreational establishment.

Mr. Chude had been rigorous in planning and preparation and readied everything for the operation. Firstly, he needed to be employed at the jewellery store. He had done that long before. Secondly, he needed to gain trust to get access to the gem chamber. That he didn't do. Hence he had needed another, more intricate plan. He found it—to break the floor in the staff room he could access and get to the gem chamber in the basement under the shop, then escape through the hotelbordello. For this to work, he needed perfect timing and fewer eyes everywhere—during the arena Grand Finalé, for example, the only occasion able to busy everyone in City N, even the scar-faced shop guard, who a few weeks prior Mr. Chude had generously gifted a pair of tickets. 'How convenient for the heist plot...' you might say. Well, Mx. Reader, that was what Mr. Chude had thought exactly.

Mr. Chude's robber motto was 'quick, quiet, qualified'. The only piece missing was 'quick', for by himself he couldn't break the floor fast enough. The first set of accomplices Ms. Dark Eyes recruited had been the opposite of 'qualified'. The urgently recruited second set was better, though their qualification and quietness had still troubled Mr. Chude

from the moment he saw them. Bloody better than bloody nothing, he thought. Zmei's shite.

To minimise risks, Mr. Chude prepared and double-checked everything: the tools under the beds, the camouflage, the rules. The crew was left only to enter the wondrous portal—a hole in the wall Mr. Chude dug beforehand behind the poster—and commence the operation. They proceeded without any further ado.

The crew entered the staff room. No light, smell of brine. Mr. Bulky sniffed, frowned. Mr. Cat sniffed, hissed. Mr. Chude switched on the light, pointed out the room's centre on carpet which Mr. Lofty and Mr. Bulky hurried to roll up and set aside, revealing the fractured concrete floor. Mr. Chude used a pickaxe. Mr. Bulky used a sledgehammer. Mr. Lofty used his umbrella, catching in its canopy the results of their fracturing and slamming. Mr. Cat stood guard. All this, by Mr Chude's contrived scheme, should have nullified all noise and mess.

The dimly lit gem chamber was built of racks and display cases of jewellery: rings; pendants; earrings; bracelets; gems in azure, emerald, amber, and ruby, translucent, cut and uncut, shiny and shimmering; gold bars; silver bars; pocketwatches; goblets; jewel-embroidered bonnets; ties; cufflinks; lingerie; intricate phallic objects; and other expensive items, all gleaming and alluring, turning the room into a kaleidoscopic labyrinth. One far wall was full of shelves stocked with boxes and safes. Another had a door, dangerously. The current stage of the plan involved looting everything that looked rich and weighed little

into bags provided by Mr. Chude, avoiding whatever seemed too conspicuous. The crew opened the bags and looted one display case after another, quickly, quietly, qualifiedly, and Mr. Cat stood guard.

Located right next to the crew was a large, rectangular glass case with a transparent faceted crystal that glossed blue, red, both. Mr. Lofty noticed it and with a newborn, feverish flame in his eyes elbowed Mr. Bulky.

‘Hey,’ he quipped through his teeth. ‘Look, it’s the same crystal. Same crystal we had, the one you so unfortunately broke. It looks the same!’

‘And?’

‘I bet it’s not fake. I bet it’ll work. It’s our last chance!’

‘That’s your favourite phrase, and saying it’s paid off not even once.’

‘We must take it.’

‘How do you know it’s not fake too?’

‘Why store fakes in a secure vault?’

‘Hey! No talking there,’ said Mr. Chude.

Mr. Lofty and Mr. Bulky flinched and pretended to keep looting. Upon making sure Mr. Chude wasn’t looking, Mr. Lofty tiptoed towards the crystal. Mr. Bulky followed him, squeezing out, ‘Hhheyyy, shhhhtop.’

‘Hey! Stop!’ shouted Mr. Chude, and he approached them. ‘Don’t you dare touch that one!’ He had no facial camouflage anymore.

‘Wait,’ said Mr. Bulky, squinting. ‘I know you.’

Mr. Cat hissed.

‘Yes, I am Mr. Chude. You work for me.’

‘Don’t you remember me?’ Mr. Bulky took off his facial camouflage too. ‘We talked today above ground in this exact shop. I knew that brine smell was familiar. You sold me the fake crystal!’

‘What?’ said Mr. Lofty, baffled.

‘I sell whatever they have in here, lad. I’m a salesman. Well, mostly a robber, but we’re all here for that, aren’t we?’

‘We’re here because of you!’ said Mr. Lofty and Mr. Bulky in unison. In a mutinous mood, they encircled Mr. Chude. Mr. Cat hissed, preparing to attack.

‘Zmei’s shite!’ Mr. Chude stepped back from the growling cat. ‘You all really want to do this now? You’re undermining the whole operation!’

‘I’m taking the crystal! You owe us one,’ said Mr. Lofty.

‘Wait! It has an alarm on it.’

‘Why should we believe you?’ Mr. Lofty said, and he reached for the

crystal.

‘Zmei’s shite! You dullard, I work here!’

Just then, eerily loud thudding sounds filled the room—from below, like something was knocking and scraping. Right behind Mr. Chude, the floor cracked apart and coughed up a shiny white shovel amid pieces of concrete. Mr. Lofty, Mr. Bulky, and Mr. Cat, terrified, hid behind the crystal’s glass case. Mr. Chude, on the contrary, turned around and froze, dumbfounded.

Stones, soil, and dust erupted from the open hole, the blows stopped, and the shiny white shovel flew out fully and fell to the side. In a second, a wee skinny Chude dressed like a garden gnome—red cone cap, red cape, fake white beard, long blue shirt with a strap around the waist that was fitted with a sheath—climbed from the hole. He was much smaller than a normal Chude. He was a midget Chude, a half-halfling, a Chudic, which meant a wee Chude and a ‘weirdo’ at the same time—thinking dwarfism unique to humans is a big mistake, Mx. Reader. Right after him, another Chude of the same height and dress but with no cape climbed out, then another, and another, and another, and another, and another. Seven Chudics in total, as far as my maths skills go.

The gang of Chudics lined up evenly on their way to one of the racks. The first started raking jewellery into his bag and passing it along chain to the others, who loaded it down the hole, all quick, quiet, qualified, which was quite impressive to Mr. Chude.

The first intruder—allow me to call him Chief Chudic—patrolled around his cronies, checking the clock. Glancing over the chamber, he noticed the hole in the ceiling and the rope hanging down from it, shuddered, and adjusted his red cone cap.

‘We’ve got a problem, lads. Hurry up.’

The Chudics, busy handling the goodies, hastily saluted their chief and returned to robbing.

‘Oi!’ called Mr. Chude from the dim darkness. ‘Have you noticed me by any chance?’ He stood crossing his arms, pondering how anyone could be as daring and as professional as himself.

‘Daffuque! Who the fuck are you?!’ exclaimed Chief Chudic, chaotically checking his pocket watch. ‘You’re not supposed to be here!’

‘Is that so? Who the fuck are you, if I may? Have you all just escaped the circus, cunts?’

‘Shut up! We’re the Garden—Gnome—Gang,’ proclaimed Chief Chudic with dignity.

Behind Mr. Chude, all three of Mr. Lofty, Mr. Bulky and Mr. Cat peeked out from behind the glass case, scared but curious. After a few seconds of bewildered squinting, Chief Chudic noticed them too.

‘Hehehe! What are you all doing here dressed like that?’

‘Robbing the gem chamber, you bloody asshole.’

Chief Chudic brought his hands to his waist, assuming an imposing pose, and with absolute certainty and pomposity added, ‘Actually, we’re robbing it today.’

‘Nope, we are,’ responded Mr. Chude, shaking his head.

‘Nah.’ Chief Chudic waved his hand dismissively.

‘Yeah. We came here first,’ said Mr. Chude, wagging his pocket watch in front of Chief Chudic.

‘Who cares, lad? Time is a bitch, entropy is a witch. There are more of us than there are of you, so shan’t you be so kind and get the fuck out of here, queue up outside?’

‘Queue up?’ queried Mr. Chude. ‘Shall we book a bloody appointment, you cunt?’

‘Call it whatever you fucking like. I’ll give you a chance to leave the premises alive while I count to ten.’

‘Your fat mom would be proud you can count, cunt, but we’re staying here,’ said Mr. Chude, looking at his accomplices, who all that time patiently waited behind the rack, trying not to emit a sound.

‘Ten!’ came Chief Chudic.

‘Wait, let’s share the loot,’ said Mr. Chude.

‘What? Why would I share anything? Nine!’

‘There’s a bloody lot of stuff in here. You can’t carry it all anyway.’

‘You underestimate us. Eight!’

‘We’ll fill our small bags and leave. We aren’t greedy.’

‘Well, we are. Seven!’

Meanwhile, Mr. Lofty whispered to Mr. Bulky, ‘We have to take the crystal before any kind of irreversible fiasco occurs.’ Not waiting for an answer, he got on his tiptoes and reached for the glass case above.

Chief Chudic noticed him, drew a toyish acid-green mini-pistol with an acid-red tip from his mini-waist, and shouted, ‘Hey, you there!’

Mr. Lofty’s hand twitched.

‘Haha, a water pistol? Are you cunts serious?’ Mr. Chude laughed.

‘I’ll just take this crystal,’ said Mr. Lofty.

‘What if I want it? Six.’

‘I need it for my work.’ Mr. Lofty ignored Chief Chudic and reached for the crystal.

‘I said it’s mine! Five!’ Chief Chudic fired into the ceiling, the shot echoing through the chamber and leaving all twenty-two ears humming. Everyone flinched. Mr. Lofty and Mr. Bulky almost fell over. Mr. Cat

meowed and jumped on Mr. Bulky's lap.

'Four!'

'Mreeee!'

'What was that?!'

At the same time, Mr. Chude dug out a six-shooter from his coat's inner pocket and aimed it at Chief Chudic.

'Mr. Cat,' he said.

'Mr. Who?'

'Our bloody bestial accomplice. He ain't gonna hesitate to eat you cunts alive.'

'The fuck is going on here? Who brings a cat on a robbery?' The image of Mr. Cat made Chief Chudic nervous. 'Three!'

'Bloody hell! A gun's pointed at you and you're still counting!'

With one eye Chief Chudic followed Mr. Chude's movements, with the other those of hissing and growling Mr. Cat, who, to remind you, Mx. Reader, was a damn large cat, especially compared to Chudics—a panther of sorts. Chief Chudic swallowed and grabbed his green pistol firmly with both hands. Now he and Mr. Chude were aimed at each other, their guns, their eyes, their intentions clashing in suspenseful combat.

‘Alrighty,’ said Mr. Chude, ‘we’re both armed now. There are seven of you, and we have a rabid cat. Let’s make a deal before someone gets hurt. This crystal is really precious, my sources tell me. You take it, we fill our small bags, and everyone strolls home with happy robber smiles. What do you say, aye?’

The Garden Gnome Gang kept looting the racks, filling their bags, transporting jewellery to the hole. They were unperturbed, unwavering. They had a job and they were doing it. Simple. Chief Chudic, though, had a difficult choice to make. He looked at Mr. Chude, at Mr. Cat, at Mr. Lofty, at Mr. Bulky, at his own gang. He sniffed, nervously, and nodded.

‘Deal. I’m taking it. Back off, you beanpole!’ said Mr. Chudic, aiming his mini-pistol at Mr. Lofty.

‘Hey!’ exclaimed Mr. Lofty. He stepped back beside Mr. Bulky, and Mr. Cat, still hissing, followed. ‘That’s not fair!’ Resentful, he looked at Mr. Chude, who was grimacing him to shush.

Chief Chudic walked towards the crystal, keeping Mr. Chude at target, twitchingly running his eyes around the incandescent entourage. At the crystal’s case, he took the mini-pistol in one hand and elbowed the glass, shattered it to pieces. No alarm. The loot was right next to him, beguiling and beautiful, glossing blue, red, both. While Mr. Chude, Mr. Lofty, Mr. Bulky and Mr. Cat watched, he cautiously took the crystal and stepped sideways away from the case, keeping Mr. Chude at target until he returned to his previous position.

‘Two!’ he shouted. ‘You’re leaving now!’

‘Zmei’s shite, you cunt!’

Then the heavy door on the far wall slammed open deafeningly, revealing the dark silhouette of a two-headed Zmei with a maschinenpistole ready to wreak havoc and bring death. It was Kazimir. Indeed, it was him. Everyone in the room, all of the Chudics included, shuddered, keeping both eyes on the sudden intruder.

‘See? I told you!’ shouted Mr. Chude at his crew.

‘In the name of the law, stay where you are, you dirty criminals!’ yelled Dullard, intoning pretentiously, as if he had spent years memorising the sentence without understanding what it meant.

‘What law, Dullard? Shoot already,’ said Kazimir, who overturned the table near the door and started the ordnance cacophony, shooting randomly in all directions. The Garden Gnome Gang took cover behind the nearest racks, all pulling their mini-pistols and entering their wee defensive cannonade.

‘Hurry up, lads!’ shouted Chief Chudic. He dropped the crystal where he stood and, pulling a rifle from his back, ducked behind the nearest rack and shot at Kazimir, covering his cronies, who were preparing to escape.

‘Ar-r-r-r-gh!’ screamed Kazimir, both of them.

Bullets whistled and ricocheted, shattering glass cases, scattering gems. No gunfire seemed to hit the Zmei, or else the bullets were ignored, such an invincible creature was the Zmei.

The indiscriminate firefight ended when both sides ran out of ammo. Chief Chudic shouted, ‘Fall back! Down the hole, lads! Fall back!’ and the Garden Gnome Gang attempted one by one to leave cover down their hole of entry. Kazimir noticed and, instead of reloading his maschinenpistole, entered berserker mode, grabbing two axes from his girdle and charging the Chudics, roaring in rampage, deafening and frightening everyone in the chamber.

Meanwhile, right after the disastrous debacle started, Mr. Bulky, Mr. Lofty, and Mr. Cat had sheltered behind the crystal’s display case, handshielding themselves—Mr. Bulky had also shielded Mr. Cat. Moments later, the sounds of shooting stopped and changed to the sounds of metal entering flesh, fatal wounds, desperate screams, and splashing blood that rained on them hither and thither. Peeking from their cover, Mr. Bulky looked for the crystal. He knew it was near, having seen how Chief Chudic dropped it. He soon saw it lying just a few steps away.

Mr. Chude crawled up beside the crew, startling them.

‘We gotta get out of this bloody bloodbath!’

They heard the savoury sound of the dissection of Chudics’ flesh, blood pulverised, and a Chudic’s mini-arm landed near the crew. They bulged

eyes and hurried on all fours towards the rope still hanging from the ceiling, first Mr. Chude, then Mr. Lofty, then Mr. Bulky with Mr. Cat. Mr. Bulky tarried, keeping eyes on the crystal, and at the right moment, when the massacre moved just a few steps farther away, pointed it out to Mr. Cat. The bestial accomplice rushed it, jawed it like a ball, and brought it to Mr. Bulky, all quickly, quietly, qualifiedly.

Amid the whirling turmoil, the Garden Gnome Gang kept jumping down their hole, dumped their loot and the shiny white shovel. Chief Chudic unsheathed a large machete and, shrieking, began dancing, flashing his red cape, slicing at Kazimir busy chopping his cronies into Chudic mince. The machete entered green skin beneath Kazimir's knee. The Zmei shuddered, howling in pain, and with an elbow threw Chief Chudic over to the hole. His cronies immediately dragged the unconscious body in and disappeared. Limping and bleeding, Kazimir tried in vain to cease them. The Garden Gnome Gang had gone back where they came from, which put Kazimir, both of his heads, into a state of boiling, primal fury. He noticed Mr. Lofty, Mr. Bulky and Mr. Chude climbing their rope and charged towards them. Mr. Lofty was the only one already up. He was in the middle of hoisting Mr. Bulky when Kazimir reached them. The Zmei swung his axe into Mr. Chude where he dangled and plunged the weapon deep between his scapulae, after which Mr. Chude howled and crumpled. Mr. Lofty and Mr. Bulky saw blood run from his trembling lips and life leave his alabaster eyes.

'Zmei's shite...' he whispered, and died.

Mr. Lofty crawled frantically out of the breach.

‘We forgot Mr. Cat!’ shouted Mr. Bulky.

‘No time!’

Mr. Bulky didn’t listen and peered down in search of Mr. Cat. Kazimir’s hand gripped him and sent him tumbling back into the gem chamber.

‘Kolya!’ Mr. Lofty called. His voice filled the lonely staff room of the jewellery shop.

The Debut Project: Chapter the last

nova-nevedoma.com/the-debut-project-ch4/

Dear wanderer,

This is the last installment of my novella called [*The Debut Project*](#). If you for some cosmic reason missed the previous three chapters, here are the links:

- [Chapter the first](#), in which everyone has a lousy morning.
- [Chapter the second](#), in which we see the characters in City N and get some necessary exposition.
- [Chapter the third](#), in which the conflict intensifies and measures grow desperate. Let's all thanks for his wonderful illustrations again—you'll find two. Please enjoy chapter the last, or chapter the fourth, where the story of Felix Futzbucker and his friends and foes terminates.

Chapter the fourth, in which everyone has a lousy morning again

Finally, she works

The finalé was near. Fireworks still flashed in the firmament, wrecking

the night's darkness and painting the starry sky with kaleidoscopic colours, shapes, and patterns, illuminating all around—the arena, countless spectators, empty squares, streets, alleys, lanes, and Felix. He swerved through the labyrinth of City N, breaking through thick slices of night, seeing nothing but Kolya's face in front of him. Time felt like a scab you could peel all at once to expose the underlying wound. Just a few minutes or even seconds ago the escape had been smooth, per the plan of the deceased Mr. Chude. Felix had left the empty staff room, left growling Kazimir in the hole below with Kolya and Moros, flew through the wondrous portal in the wall back to the hotelbordello, pushed aside Ms. Puffy whom he encountered in the tight corridor, and whirled out of the building. Ms. Puffy probably said something or even tried to stop him, but like time, like everything he now felt, her words too had jumbled and clotted in his mind and hardly registered as meaningful anymore. Had she asked him about Kolya? 'How is he? Is he alive and well?' She probably hadn't. She couldn't have asked about Kolya, since she didn't know his real name. Or did she?

The skin of Mr. Lofty felt like a cage, a snare. The false nose and moustache hindered Felix's rapid breathing. Under his heavy coat, his body distilled gallons of sweat. It felt wet. His eyes were wet. Everything was wet. He was scuba-diving in a large aquarium called City N but the water was on his skin, covering it with a thin layer, slimy and salty, ice-cold. He ditched the nose and moustache and his cap and ran, ran, ran, stumbled, raised and ran, ran, ran again. His heart clangoured, punctuating every step with a bang and an inflow of blood to his head,

toes, fingertips. His whole body pulsed. He could hear it flowing, pounding, all the blood. He could hear nothing else: not his thoughts, not the fireworks, no surrounding sounds, as if they didn't exist and didn't matter. He didn't look back—whether someone chased him or not didn't bother him. He was escaping from the event itself, from splashing blood, from the roaring Zmei, from the click in Mr. Chude's eyes when they stopped moving and seeing, from Kolya's face looking back as he was pulled down the hole. Was Kolya even alive? Felix was terrified of the answer and preferred to run.

At the end of his infinite race, Felix reached the shadowy part of City N and a two-storey wooden shack with a sign—'The Gadgeteer's house. Freelance engineering work'. Fast as a fly's wings, Felix opened and closed the door and propped it with a chair. Nearby, he went limp against the wall and sat on the floor, on one of many large blueprints. His adrenaline dissipated, and with it Felix felt his life leaving him. From red, he turned ashen; even his lips lost colour. His vision vignetted more with each blink of the eyes. Time was still damaged. If the seconds had ever been chained together, the bond was broken. What happened felt like photographs tossed on the floor and reassembled in the wrong chronology, with some missing. He tried not to blink and focused on the rays of moonlight falling from a window, one of which fell on Felicia. She was beautiful, as always, but now there was something different about her. White light shone on all of her parts, glimmered on lenses. The shadows made her look eerie. She looked at Felix with mechanical indifference, that level of neutrality that makes one scream

in desperation and resentment. He felt cold. His sweat and tears had cooled to sub-zero temperatures and were freezing him now. He clumsily took off and dropped his coat. It rang.

It rang as if something heavy had struck the floor. Felix grabbed the coat and rummaged the pockets. The crystal. The crystal was there. The crystal! But how? He'd seen it in the midget Chude's hands, thought he saw Moros fetch it for Kolya. He saw the midget Chude drop it on the floor, and then... then... They were hiding behind the rack together... then... Somewhere amid a shrouded mash of moments, Kolya could have put it in Felix's pocket... Did he? It couldn't be the old crystal. That one had shattered. This one could be a hallucination. Felix slapped himself on the cheeks, then bit the crystal. It felt real. He bit again. Still real. Felix looked at the crystal once more. It was clearer than the one before. Its translucence wasn't reluctant, the colours were vivid, and there were no tiny chinks inside.

He knew what he had to do. If Kolya is still alive... Felix thought. Of course he's alive. I can save him. I can negotiate. I can...

A lonely tear dropped on the crystal, and Felix squeezed the gem so hard its facets almost cut his palm. Though weak and fidgety, the feverish flame flickered in Felix's eyes.

Felix waltzed with Felicia all through the night. First, he fixed the electricity, as it had been down all day. He examined wires, including those bitten by Moros, and duct-taped them so they looked even more like striped snakes slithering among the blueprints on the floor. He

checked settings, recalculated coefficients, firmed up connections, ensured the right voltage and stable energy flow, and ran the first test. Wires were wiring. Indicator lights were indicating. Correct. Everything was correct again. He gently fixed the new crystal in its seat. The crystal was crystal-clear: no grease stains, no streaks, no air bubbles, as it should've been always. Now Felicia stood in the centre of the room, shining, ready to shrink and enlarge.

Felix took an apple and placed it on a chair. This was a pivotal moment. Again he was trembling and breathing rapidly; his heart clangoured. With shaky hands Felix put on his goggles, trained Felicia on the apple, grabbed the remote with both hands, and put his thumbs on the big red button. He straightened, took a deep breath, and pressed firmly. The overheatmeter's arrow crawled right. Felicia started buzzing and vibrating. A concentrated ray of white light emerged inside the machina, pierced the crystal, changed colour to red, flew into the rod, and from there struck the apple, illuminating the room. The green fruit gained a glow, and the glow embraced the fruit in the ray's colour red. Nothing happened for a moment, but then the apple pulsed... once... twice... and enlarged. Per Felix's design, it increased in size, almost ten times. The chair beneath it rattled, the legs snapped with a painful crunch, and the gigantesque fruit fell to the floor and rolled atop the blueprints around the room. Felix froze, flapping his froggy eyes. His jaw chose a downward direction. He removed his goggles and rubbed his eyes. The apple kept rolling. In a second he dropped the remote and chased after the fleeing fruit. He stopped it and rolled it back to its

original position, onto the chair's remnants. He picked up the remote, changed from '+' to '-', and hurried to press the red button. A concentrated ray of white light emerged inside the machina, pierced the crystal, changed colour to red, flew into the rod, and from there struck the gigantesque apple, illuminating the room. The green fruit gained a glow, and the glow embraced the fruit in the ray's colour blue. The apple pulsed two times, and on the third shrank back to its original size. The chair remained broken.

Felix squealed and hugged Felicia. He kissed her, and she burnt his lips with a blazing engineering passion, for the contraptioness's metal was still hot from use. Pulling away, he pressed his lips together and licked them, then embraced Felicia again, tighter this time, without kissing. You don't have to kiss when passion comes from the heart, he thought.

Nevertheless, the idyll was destined to be short-lived.

A sudden knock at the door. Felix flinched and almost fell on Felicia. The knock repeated but had no recognisable rhythm. It couldn't be Geno. Felix swallowed and approached the door, peered through the keyhole. He saw a young boy in a cap with a big sack, smiling and flapping his round, kind eyes. The boy smacked the door a second time, so hard the door shuddered and hit Felix, made him ouch.

'Oh, I can hear you, mister! Mail! In person. Felix Fatzbaker. Is he here?'

'It's Futzbucker, and I didn't order anything.'

‘I don’t care. My job is to deliver.’

‘What’s to deliver if I haven’t ordered anything?’

‘It’s a postcard, idiot. Nobody orders postcards. People send them as a surprise.’

Felix opened the door, peeked out, and held out his hand.

‘Are there any adults at home?’

‘I am. Here’s my adult hand. Give it to me.’

The boy handed him a small postcard with pink flowers. Felix was about to close the door, but the boy stopped him.

‘What about tips, mister?’

‘For what? For a postcard? You called me an idiot.’

Felix tried to close the door, but the boy put his foot into the passage.

‘Tips, I said. Do you disrespect honest child labour, mister?’ he said, and he flashed a knife, pulling it from his pocket.

Felix sighed and scooped out a few coins he’d left in his pocket somehow.

‘All I have.’

The courier tucked the coins into his sack and removed his foot.

‘Thanks! And say hello to Gennady Gennadyevich for me.’

‘Yes, I will—wait, what?’

The courier was heading off.

‘Hey! Boy!’

‘Enjoy your day, Mr. Fatzbaker,’ said the boy, turning around, smiling and saluting.

‘It’s Futzbucker!’

On the doorstep, Felix, still puzzled, flipped the postcard and saw a message. It read like this, literally:

Dear Felix,

I hope you are doing well.

The past day has shown me that trust in this city is reflexive. The list of people I can trust is the same as the list of people I can respect, people I can admire, people I wish to partner with, people I simply like. Those people are all me. True business must be done in solitude. Remember that, Felix, and save this letter. If one day you get lucky enough to do true business, you will need this advice.

If this letter finds you in the early morning, your comrades (and the cat) are still alive. For how long, I can’t say. Remember, Felix, time is money. Always. But in the case of you and your comrades, time is also life. I’m

waiting for you and all that you owe me in ‘The Dead Capitalist’. For how long, I can’t say.

Imagine if the courier were late.

Kind regards,

Gennady Gennadyevich Goldenstern

Cattus Et Machina

It was peaceful on streets filled with morning orange glow—the avenues had not yet woken from the night’s debacle. Howbeit, ‘The Dead Capitalist’ wasn’t empty. There, amid the morning’s blissful slumber, at an old oak table strewn with cards, under clouds of odorous papirosa fumes, in a notoriously tense and dense atmosphere so thick you could feel it, in their meagre but meaningful lineup sat Gennady Gennadyevich and his henchmen, Kazimir and Dullard, all fanning away the boredom. Squinting, sighing, smoking, squeaking chairs and teeth, swallowing salty cucumbers and dripping brine on the available surfaces.

Looking over his cards and those on the table, Gennady Gennadyevich said, ‘What I never expected is such a vicious setup coming from you.’

‘It’s all Dullard, Commander. He keeps peeking at my cards and scheming against you,’ said Kazimir.

‘Dullard no scheming. Dullard no guilt.’

‘Well, you’ll do something about that, or I’ll fire you, you know? How am I supposed to play against you? I mean, which one of you is bluffing?’

‘I never bluff. Not when playing against you, Commander. I’d rather lather myself with shite.’

‘That’s lovely, Kaz. What about your brother? You, Dullard. Do you bluff?’

‘Commander smart. Commander see all. Bluff is a meaningless construct of life.’

Amazed and bewildered, Gennady Gennadyevich and Kazimir stared at Dullard.

‘True that. Such a good brother you’ve got. And why are you always scolding him? In spite of his name, he’s not a feeb at all,’ said Gennady Gennadyevich. He chose two cards from his fan and dropped them on the table. ‘How about this, my brainiacs?’

Dullard wiggled his googly eyes. Kazimir squinted and said, ‘So good you are, Commander, at building up a strategy and all that. Every turn is a puzzle. I’m only left to rack my head over it. Or two. Or one.’

‘Don’t worry, Kaz. One day, I will teach you both all I know about this game. Perhaps you’ll even beat me!’

‘Dullard never beat Commander. Dullard loyal.’

‘That’s lovely, Dullard. I appreciate your loyalty wholeheartedly.’

Dullard blushed.

Gennady Gennadyevich looked at his pocket watch.

‘What about you fellows? Do you know how to play Fool?’ said he, addressing the other people at the table. On three chairs sat Nina, her dark eyes now swollen, sore, and red; Kolya, bruised, still in Mr. Bulky’s coat and right next to Gennady Gennadyevich; and Moros, with one ear torn, his fur ruffled. All three were roundroped and mouthgagged.

At the end of the table lay Vitya’s head, at which Nina, Kolya, and Moros glanced from time to time.

‘You’re good at scheming against me, so I suppose you have high chances of succeeding at this game, too.’

The captives were silent.

‘I asked a question. Can you play Fool?’

Kolya shook his head.

‘You, Ninnette?’

Nina repeated after Kolya, squirming in her chair. Moros blinked languidly.

‘Young people these days. Such a disappointment. Can’t do business, can’t even play Fool. Kaz, let’s teach the youth.’

Somebody knocked on the door. Knock, knock-knock. Knock, knock-knock.

Gennady Gennadyevich turned and raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh, here he is. Kaz, please open the door and greet our guest.’

Disgruntled, Kaz rose from his stool and opened the door. In the doorway stood Felix, behind him Felicia, who was mantled with a large, black piece of cloth.

‘Good morning, Felikth. Please, join us.’

Felix spotted his tied comrades and the cat sitting at the table and swallowed.

‘M-morning.’

‘Come now! Where’s your enthusiasm? Aren’t you happy to see us all together?’

‘Good morning, Gennady Gennadyevich. I finished the project. As promised.’

‘Driving off that joker straight away, huh? Give the boy a chair, Kaz.’

Felix trudged into the kabakroom, sweating, dragging Felicia on her

lafette while the captives stared at him.

‘Oh, leave it there, Felikth. We’ll come to that later. Please, sit.’

Felix landed next to Kolya. They looked at each other with eyes full of fear and regret.

‘Let’s start over, Kaz. Shuffle the deck, please.’

Kazimir, with the pomposity and equanimity of a croupier, started shuffling. Dullard watched, his eyes spinning.

‘Would you play Fool with me, Felikth?’

‘I couldn’t possibly do that. With you, never,’ said Felix, his forehead dripping.

‘Degenerate... Would you play Fool—a card game—with me?’

‘Ah, a card game... Yes, yes, I would.’

‘Do you play Fool well?’

‘So-so. I’m not a good player...’ said Felix, his face crooked.

‘Nah, you all say that and then leave me in epaulettes! Your comrades,’ said Gennady Gennadyevich, shaking Kolya’s cheek, ‘don’t even know how to play. It boggles my mind. Like, what’s wrong with you little fellows? And you can’t play Fool either.’

‘Young people these days,’ Dullard said.

Gennady Gennadyevich stared at him in surprise and with a glimmer of admiration.

‘Indeed.’ Gennady Gennadyevich turned to the captives. ‘You two’—he interrupted himself, looking at Moros—‘or three, watch us play. I thought you should play too, but your hands are tied, so...’ He shrugged. ‘Anyway, Kazimir! The cards, please!’

Kazimir dealt each player six cards, and the rest to the talon. Then he took the bottom card and placed it faceup on the table. The Ace of Spades: spades would be the trump suit for the current game.

‘What are you waiting for? Take your cards.’

Felix spread his fan of cards in front of his face. Not many pictures. Mostly numbers.

‘See, fellows, the reason I like this game is that it’s simple and follows the same rules life does. You might argue, which you have the right to do, and I can understand given your yesterday, but just know that you are wrong, too young and naive to think any other way. This game, Felix, and all of you,’ said Gennady Gennadyevich, spreading his own fan of cards, ‘is about chance and how well you handle it. All in life is a chance. So, you draw a card from the talon, like this...’ He picked up a card, showed it, put it back. “... and add it to your other five cards, if you have less than six. This card, like the rest of your cards, is emblematic of your bad luck. You don’t have a choice as to what card you get each turn—but you do have a choice as to how you take charge of your fate. I

go first, for I have the lowest trump card. See? Six of Spades.’ He took the card from his fan, showed it, put it back. ‘Next, I select one card to attack you with, Felikth.’ He put the Ten of Hearts on the table. ‘You must defend yourself with a higher card of the same suit, or with any trump card. You know that, right?’

Felix nodded and picked the King of Hearts from his fan.

‘Wonderful. If anyone has a card of the same rank, they can attack you immediately, together with me. If your defence is successful, like it was just now, my turn ends. Next, you attack Kaz, and so on. We go clockwise, and we play until the talon is exhausted and we run out of cards. Now, if your defence is unsuccessful, you put each attacking card in your hand—plenty of bad luck. At the end, fellows, whoever is left with any cards becomes a “fool”, hence the game. For just like in life, if you can’t get away from the bad luck dribbling onto your head from all directions, you are a fool indeed.’ Gennady Gennadyevich paused. ‘All clear, Ninnette?’

Nina nodded.

‘You, boy?’

Felix nodded.

‘I don’t even know your name. What’s his name, Felikth?’

‘Kolya is his name.’

‘Oh, Nicolas. Lovely name. What about the cat?’

‘Moros.’

‘Terrifying.’ Gennady Gennadyevich shivered a little. ‘Alright, let’s start. Watch us. One day, we will play all together.’

Thus the game commenced, and it continued for a few minutes in silence, to the sizzling of Gennady Gennadyevich’s papirosa. Dullard frowned and grimaced. Nina, Kolya, and Moros sat still, staring round at the players, squirming at itches provoked by firmly tied ropes. Three players exchanged cards, attacked and defended, and drew from the talon. No one seemed to be winning or improving their position until Gennady Gennadyevich’s fan started to grow.

‘To relieve the boredom, so to say, let’s talk business while we play, Felikth. It’s what respectable businessmen do. Time is money, after all.’

Felix swallowed.

‘Have you read my letter, given it your full attention?’ said Gennady Gennadyevich, starting a new attack in his turn.

‘I have.’ Felix was sweating, pondering both the answer and the best card of defence.

‘What have you learned from it?’

‘Er... I don’t know.’

‘What, nothing at all? Am I a bad writer?’

‘Er... Solitude is... the best business partner.’

‘Right. And would you agree with what you’ve learned?’

‘I... I...’ Felix looked at Kolya and Nina. He would have looked at Moros too, but the cat lay tied on the chair, invisible from the other side of the table. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Oh, why is that? Some of my comrades, or people whom I considered as such, ditched me but good. How have your comrades helped you recently?’

Felix was silent. Among all other things at that moment, what he least wanted was an argument with Gennady Gennadyevich. He chose his defence card and ended the turn.

‘You fellows. How have you helped him? Or helped each other? You’re all silent on the matter. But of course—your mouths are gagged. See, Victoire is silent, too.’ Gennady Gennadyevich pointed to Vitya’s head. ‘He worked for me. I almost trusted him like I did the lot of you. What about my offer, Ninnette? I offered you a business deal, but you chose to work with Victoire. You thought I didn’t know? I know everything. I came to you in peace... but where are we now? Yes... where are we now?’

Kazimir had two cards left, picked one—the Jack of Hearts—and attacked Gennady Gennadyevich. Felix added his last card, the Jack of Spades. Now Felix was out of the game, and Gennady Gennadyevich,

sitting with his three cards, had to beat two jacks. He looked at them, put his cards on the table, and puffed his papirosa, glancing philosophically.

‘So, where are we now?’ said Gennady Gennadyevich, looking at Felix.

‘In a kabak, Commander,’ said Dullard.

‘It was a metaphorical question, degenerate! And I wasn’t addressing you!’ Gennady Gennadyevich exhaled and inhaled through his papirosa.

‘Damn me, you’re all tiresome.’

Meanwhile, Kazimir tentatively put down his last card, a Jack of Diamonds.

‘Commander, it’s your turn.’

‘Et tu, Kaz? You needn’t tell me every time it’s my turn.’

‘Commander’s tuuuuurn...’

‘Shut up!’ shouted Gennady Gennadyevich, and he slammed the table so the cards jumped, the talon swayed and scattered, and Vitya’s head rolled on the floor.

Dullard flinched, and his face turned to a mixture of resentment and frustration.

‘I don’t have time for you degenerates.’ Gennady Gennadyevich stood up, pouting and reddening. ‘Better, tell me! Where’s my money?!’ he

shouted, leaning over to Felix.

Felix almost fell off his chair. He swallowed instinctively, but his mouth was so dry he only scratched his throat.

‘Where’s what you owe me? And where’s all you stole from me yesterday?’

Whitening, Felix turned to Kolya, who was sitting still, barely breathing, blinking languidly.

‘We... I only took... one crystal. The group of midget Chudes stole the rest.’

‘No wonderous midget Chudes were reported to me. Kaz, were any midget Chudes there?’

Kaz grinned and nodded to Vitya’s head on the floor.

‘No living ones. And dead ones don’t steal.’

‘Indeed, and they don’t pay debts either. This fact, Felikth, has been your most vital advantage by far.’ Gennady Gennadyevich nodded to Kaz.

The Zmei stood and drew a pistol from his belt.

‘Is it time, Commander-r-r?’

‘Wait, wait, Gennady Gennadyevich. The project... I have something

better than money,' Felix pleaded, and he pointed to Felicia in her black outfit. 'I have something that can make money. I can magnify all your physical assets. I can enlarge them, make anything ten times bigger, including gold.'

'Should we make your pain ten times bigger?' asked Kaz.

'Pa-a-a-in.'

Geno wavered between genuine interest and deep distrust. He deflated a little.

'Wait, Kaz. All physical assets, you say?'

'Yes. Gold, jewellery, anything. Only the crystal I took from you yesterday made it possible. Now, with Felicia functioning, I can make you the richest person in this city, or even the whole world.'

'Dullard want enlarge.'

'Shut up, I said!' Geno turned to Kaz and poked him in the stomach with the tip of his cane—which sprang back. 'How many times have I told you to shut up while I'm doing business? Fired! One more time, and you're fired!' Each time he shouted, his cheeks inflating, everyone in the kabakroom hunched, dodging the sound and Geno's spritzed saliva. 'How are you going to make me rich, Felikth?'

Under Kazimir's glare, Felix approached Felicia and pulled off her black mantle, revealing the machine to the spectators. The crystal gleamed red

and blue, beaconing.

‘It’s simple. Our debut project, Felicia, can—’ Felix coughed and cleaned his throat, then swallowed, trying to moisten it—speaking felt like eating sand. ‘She can empower your assets with the power of size. In the blip of a laser beam, she can enlarge any object. It may seem like magic, but...’

Geno tapped his cane on the floor, interrupting Felix.

‘Let me be frank, Felikth. If you’re playing a fool with me and it’s not a card game, you’re dead, and your comrades likely are too.’

Felix gulped down more sand.

‘No, zero fraud. Only high tech.’

‘Well, alright, alright,’ Geno waved his hand. ‘Show me. You have five minutes. Make this...’ He detached his cane’s head, the figure of a golden antelope, and put it on the table. ‘... ten times bigger.’

‘I... I...’ Felix hesitated, looking at Felicia, the energy unit, Kolya, Nina, Geno, Kaz. ‘I think I can, but... I need an assistant.’

‘Assistant? Kaz is a perfect assistant. Kaz, could you assist him?’

‘No. I mean, I need a trained assistant.’

‘Do you have something against me?’ grunted Kaz.

‘Just tell him what buttons to push, Felikth. He’s a smart boy, almost two even. He’ll figure it out.’

‘Dullard smart. Dullard like buttons,’ said Dullard, jerking a black one on his vest.

More sand.

‘That’s fine and all,’ Felix said, ‘but I need someone to keep a hand on Felicia’s pulse while I start her up, to watch for any strange deviations in metrics and make sure everything’s stable. Otherwise, I’m afraid the figure might turn into... puree.’

Geno shuddered.

‘I only conduct my engineering operations with Kolya,’ said Felix. ‘He’s an electrician who knows how to operate high-voltage hardware. Gennady Gennadyevich, if you don’t want to risk your gold, you really should follow my advice.’

Geno pondered for a moment, puffing the papirosa.

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘Kaz?’

Kazimir approached Kolya, ripped the tape off his mouth—‘Ouch!’—and freed him from his ropes. Grimacing and wiggling his numbed lips, Kolya stood from his chair. As he came near Felicia, Felix hugged him, squeezing with all his might and energy, not even giving Kolya a chance to hug back. In a second, Felix directed his

comrade to the indicator panel. Kolya looked at it, at the energy unit duct-taped in blue to Felicia's lafette. His eyes focused on the 'Stay out or die' sign still swaying on a single bolt. The engineers nodded to each other in turn.

'Alright,' said Felix. 'We need some space for the demonstration. Everyone, please clear the beamway.'

Geno stepped back. Felix approached Felicia carefully, afraid to creak the floor. He aimed his contraptioness at the Golden Antelope. Felix checked all the switches, the indicators, making sure nothing would spark or fire when he turned on the energy unit. He performed most of his experiments with Felicia connected to electricity directly, and there was no guarantee the power accumulated in the accumulator would be enough for the demonstrations. And what if Felicia failed to work, overheated too fast, or broke halfway through? What if some of her parts had been damaged while trudging through the city? Felix tried to assess each of these outcomes probabilistically, and doing so made him calmer. He exhaled and inhaled and swallowed more sand. He should have had something to drink—dehydration was no good, especially after such a boozy and adventurous night.

Kolya turned on the accumulator; it sparkled, slightly, and he squinted for a second, making Felix shudder. But all was right. Energy flowed into Felicia and she woke up. Indicators started indicating. The overheatermeter's arrow fidgeted near zero. Felix leaned over the control panel, set the wavelength and beampower, took the remote, checked

aim one more time, straightened his back, and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

‘Everyone, please get ready! Behold the demonstration of the most remarkable technological breakthrough of our era. Oh, and please turn away or squint your eyes! It’s quite flashy,’ said Felix, nervously. He put on his goggles. ‘Get ready... Three...’

Gennady Gennadyevich covered his eyes. Kazimir repeated after him.

‘Two... One...’

Felix pressed the button.

Nothing happened. He pressed it again.

Nothing.

A couple more nothings.

Eyes uncovered, Gennady Gennadyevich looked at Felix and Felicia.

‘Well? Where’s my pile of gold?’

Twitchy, Felix leaned over Felicia once again.

Ah. Safety lock.

‘Pardon my absentmindedness. Excessive sleep deprivation the past few days made me a little bit cranky. Let’s try again, shall we?’ said Felix, back to his presenter’s pose. ‘Everyone, please get ready! Behold the

demonstration...’

‘Shoot already!’ shouted Geno, and he waved his hand.

Kazimir continued squinting; Dullard doubled his eyeshuttering efforts.

Felix shuddered and pressed the button. A concentrated ray of white light emerged inside Felicia, pierced the crystal, blued, flew into the rod, and from there filled the room with light. The Golden Antelope shrank a few times.

Well, not puree at least, Kolya thought.

‘What have you done, you degenerates?’

‘Oops, pardon me. Wrong mode. One more time.’

Back at the control panel, Felix changed the mode to enlarging, then aimed at the now-small Golden Antelope.

‘The first crepe is always a failure, hehe.’

He pressed the button again, and a concentrated ray of white light flashed inside Felicia’s body, infiltrated the crystal, turned red, went through the rod, and filled the room with light. The Golden Antelope increased in size twice that of its original size, which meant in practical terms Gennady Gennadyevich now had four Golden Antelopes instead of one, glowing and shining, dappled with lavish condensate and slightly steaming, like fresh-baked bread when you tear into the loaf,

crunchy and soft. This particular yumgasm appeared on Geno's face, a greedy glare glimmering in his eyes. Swaying, he reached out and, with the curiosity of a puppy, touched the Antelope milliseconds before Felix shouted, 'Careful, it's hot!'

Geno felt the high temperature himself.

'It's real!' he exclaimed, and he touched the Golden Antelope again. 'Ouch! Fellows, it's really real! Now that's some hardware!'

As it turns out, to enliven and soothe a Chude, one need only enlarge his gold thingy twice over. Nina, who'd thought the shrinking device was a drunk fairy tale designed to scam her, was just as astonished as everyone else. She sat flapping her long black eyelashes, tilting her head hither and thither to look at the Antelope.

'Shiniee-ee-s, shiniee-ee-s! Wee-ee-ee-ee like shinie-ee-ee-s,' ee-ed Dullard, while his brother sniffed the air. It smelt of gold, he thought, of wealth.

Only Moros, a poor cat so cocooned in rope that he looked like a busy caterpillar, couldn't see the marvellous performance unfolding around him, and he lay in regret on his chair.

'Can you make it bigger, Felikth? I like your hardware.'

'Yes, but... could you free the rest of my comrades first?'

'You're playing a dangerous game, Felikth. You owe me money, remember? A lot of money.'

‘I mean, this is business, Gennady Gennadyevich. It’s quite a large golden animal, I imagine. If it’s not fake gold...’

‘Of course it’s not fake gold!’

‘Well, this figure alone should cover my debt to you now, right? Any further enlargement would be a luscious bonus to that.’

‘A bonus? What about hedonic damages?’

‘Gennady Gennadyevich, we will enlarge it. I’m not saying we won’t. I just thought untying my friends would be a step towards resolving our conflict.’

‘That would be a lavish leap, Felikth, my fellow.’ Geno richly puffed his papirosa, fuming the room; licked his red lips, swollen and chapped; and smooched. ‘I’ll allow it.’ He exhaled and tapped his cane. ‘Kazimir, free ‘em, but keep the gun ready. If I feel like you’re trying to escape, scheming against me and conspiring your sinister plans, you’re all dead, including mademoiselle and the cat. In fact, I’ll start with the cat, so you can all see and feel the suffering coming for you.’

Kazimir removed the ropes from Nina, but when he reached for the tape on her face she twitched and ducked. She left the chair and slowly and carefully peeled the tape off herself.

‘Don’t you ever touch my face with your shite Zmei paws!’ she hissed, and she moved away from the table.

Kazimir then took up the captive cat caterpillar, but instead of untying Moros, rolled the catcocoon over to the machine.

Those who torture cats will perish in hell, thought Kolya, looking at Kazimir angrily. He hurried to pick up Moros and unbound him, receiving a gentle purr and meow. The cat sat near the machina and started licking himself.

Finally, Moros thought.

‘What are you waiting for? Shoot, shoot!’

Felix increased the enlargement coefelicient, checked the aim, gave a sign to Kolya and pressed the button. The machina hummed and shuddered, the energy unit sparkled once, the overheatermeter’s arrow climbed rightward and almost reached critical levels as the part of the machine’s corpus responsible for ray production redglowed. The thick, bright ray pierced the crystal, the almost incandescent rod, and struck the double-sized Golden Antelope. When the spectators stopped squinting, they beheld a double-sized double-sized Golden Antelope that took up the entire surface of the table. Geno dropped his jaw. His eyes widened, and a greedy golden glare glimmered in his eyes.

‘More shinee-ee-ee-s,’ ee-ed Dullard, walking to the Golden Antelope and hugging the statue.

‘See that? The public demands more! Please, continue!’

The indicators were indicating any further demonstration could lead to

unpredictable results, so channelled Kolya to Felix with his eyes.

‘It’s dangerous, Gennady Gennadyevich. She’s going to overheat,’ Felix said.

Immediately Geno rolled over to Felix, sulking.

‘Don’t overheat our relationship, Felix. I’m just about ready to respect you and your hardware, write off your debts, and now you’re initiating your cowardice smartarsery. Dangerous shmangerous. I said shoot already!’

‘I can’t, Gennady Gennadyevich, Commander. It’s not reliable.’

‘Give me that bloody thing! I’ll do it myself. Kaz! Get away from there!’

Geno reached for the remote control, but Felix reeled back.

‘Hey! You’ll break it!’

Geno sulked and reddened more, pulled Felix’s sleeve so he almost dropped the remote.

‘Give it to me,’ panted Geno. ‘Give it to me!’

Kazimir approached Felix from behind and grabbed him by the arms. Kolya tried unsuccessfully to pull them apart. Finally, Geno punched Felix in the gut and took the remote. Nina observed these happenings, sighing heavily and rolling her eyes.

‘Degenerates!’ Geno said, stalking towards the Antelope.

‘No! Don’t touch anything! It’s gonna blow up!’

‘Shut up! Kaz, calm them down!’

Kaz pointed his gun at Felix, Kolya, and Moros. They stepped back, hands in the air.

‘Tell me what I press to shoot,’ said Geno, still panting, puzzled, looking at the remote with its switches, indicators, and one big button. ‘This red thingy?’

Everyone was silent, staring at each other. Kolya gave a look to the squinting Moros, and a sinister look it was.

‘Yes. It’s always the red one,’ Kolya said.

‘STOP!’ burst out of Felix, but Geno didn’t listen. He pressed the button, and Felicia started grunting, pushing the overheatermeter’s arrow right. The moment Felicia birthed another beam, the cat, Moros, meowed and jumped on her—and warped her trajectory.

The ray pierced the crystal, the rod, and lasered Geno. He inflated and ballooned in size, reddening, looking more and more like a bubblefish. His clothes stretched and began to tear, buttons springing one after another. The bear-skin cape fell from his shoulders. He turned into a globular red ghoul and lost all traces of neck and any connection of limbs to his body. His eyes, two crimson-capillared balls, could neither

blink nor move in any direction and almost popped from their orbits. Geno tried to open his mouth and say something, and then...

BOOM!

Geno's blood and slimy giblets spurted about the room as if a bomb had gone off inside a voluminous viscera tartare. Fresh, warm, steamy intestines attacked chandeliers, curtains, doorhandles, tables, chairs, people, cats, everything, hung afterwards like a truss of dead snakes or swollen worms havocked by a whirlwind and sent into vol libre. The thick, dark blood quaquaversally pulverised, as if from an exploded spray can or a punctured purulent abscess, and walls, windows, floor and ceiling, spectators were all painted scarlet. In place of where Geno had stood lay a card leftover—the Six of Hearts.

Eerie silence reigned for a few seconds. Then:

'A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!' someone screamed.

'Ee-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e!' another shrieked.

Yet another one wailed, 'O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!'

'Mree-ee-ee-ee!' someone else meowed.

The symphony of holler, yell, and shriek bansheed through the scarlet room and lasted until any remnants of air had been used up in the screamers' lungs. Morning light metamorphosed into a crimson sunrise accompanied by bloody haze as the tiny, lively droplets of liquid left

from the disintegrated body settled down, a scarlet blanket scalding the cold-sweat bodies of witnesses silent and shivering, too terrified to move, afraid to breath in the mist and suffocate.

Felix stood up and, upon examining his bloody palms, wiped them on his apron, then looked at Kolya and Nina. They were busy shakily removing Geno's remnants, pieces of guts and meat stuck around their orifices, hair, and clothes. Moros's fur had gone sticky with blood, and he now resembled a red sphinx or a naked mole-rat, for he couldn't blink his clotted eyes. He spun around, sat up, and started licking himself, relishing the process.

Seeing all, Felix became dizzy and vomited.

'Bloody hell,' said Kolya, squeamishly pulling yet another of Geno's entrails off his head. 'Seems we might need that big casserole after all, Nina...'

Nina in response said nothing, glancing around her kabak. Her jaw trembled, and she started mumbling, raking her hair in attempts to pull out one long, thin length of intestine.

'Dark and passionate eyes,' she hummed, wiping blood from her eyebrows and eyelashes, *'dark as midnight skies...'* She pulled her hair back. *'Oh, so fiery eyes, oh, so splendid eyes...'*

'Ah-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!' cried Dullard, sobbing, with tears welling in his eyes. 'Ah-aa-a-a-a-a-a...'

Nina, like everyone else, noticed this and looked at him, continuing her lilting opus.

‘... But I do not grieve, and I am not sad, I take comfort in all the joy I’ve had...’

Kazimir, silent, looked over bloodied selves, his weeping brother, the kabakroom, and people whom now numbered one person fewer—maybe Geno was still there, just sprayed around—and fell on his knees, searching for something or someone in a puddle of blood and pieces of meat afloat like raw frikadellen in extreme carnivore soup.

‘... I can see the flame of your victory, How it leaves my heart...’

‘Where is-s-s Commander-r-r?!’ the Zmei exclaimed in unison.

‘I think he’s dead,’ said Nina. She continuously nodded and bit her lips, unblinking. ‘Yep. He definitely is. *Scorched in misery.*’

‘Hey! How dead?’

‘Well, quite dead... My pops told me... Chudes can’t live with their guts out, you know?’ she said, giving a nervous chuckle.

‘Guts out?!’ inchoired the Zmei. ‘What have you done?!’

‘His fault, I warned... Yes. Dangerous. I warned him,’ Felix muttered in a trembling voice. ‘Dangerous, it was... She’s capable of something like this... Can’t believe it... She’s not a weapon, not a weapon...’

All four eyes twitching, the Zmei looked down as sticky, bloody sludge dripped from their hands to the floor. The Zmei panted, accelerating their breaths, and growled at Nina, Kolya, Felix, and Moros with all primal anger available at that moment in the universe.

‘You’re fucked, little ones. Say goodbye to each other and hello to my little comrade,’ said they, then drew their maschinenpistole and started shooting. ‘Ar-r-r-r-a-a-r-r-a-a-r-r-ra-a-r-r!’ they growled in a lament of fury.

Amidst the chaotic, roaring gunfire and bullets whistling around, Felix, Kolya, and Nina hugging Moros hid behind the bar. They all thought this was the end. It often felt close enough, but now they were inside its very core, experiencing it. They squinted, plugged their ears, and self-hugged, each preparing to enter the antechamber of Death. Then, for a moment, silence invaded the room. The ammo in the Zmei’s gun had run out, and now they fumbled with their belt for another snail drum magazine with which to reload. Felix peeked over the bar.

‘Kaz, Dullard, wait!’

‘Ha! Time is money! There’s nobody to pay us now, so no waiting! You killed Commander! No waiting!’ shouted the Zmei, and finished reloading they started shooting again, moving toward the bar.

At this point, through a thick, bloody curtain settling down, Felix noticed Felicia unharmed and intact with blood dripping from her, beaconing with her indicators. The feverish flame flickered in his eyes,

this time mournful and bittersweet.

He prepared to rise, but Kolya grabbed his hand.

‘Where are you going?!’

‘It’s our last chance.’

‘I have a damn weird sense of déjà vu that says this one is not gonna end well.’

‘This one is one hundred percent bulletproof.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Shrink him.’

‘What?!’

‘There might not be enough energy for anything else, but still. You’re gonna help me.’

‘What?!’

‘You’ll have to push the button,’ said Felix, and he handed Kolya the remote. ‘The red one.’

‘Everyone knows it’s the red one.’

‘Good! After that, take Nina and get out of here.’

‘What if it doesn’t work?!’

At that moment, the Zmei’s gun clicked when they pulled the trigger, and Felix rushed to Felicia.

‘Wait!’ Kolya screamed.

The Zmei, spotting the saboteur, tried to reload faster and dropped the magazine. Felix, meanwhile, his hands shaking, checked the energy unit’s energy levels—low—and switched Felicia to shrinking mode. He aimed her at her new target, kissed her, and, drawing a wrench, shouted, ‘Guns for show, wrenches for a pro. Let’s do it one-on-one if you aren’t a chicken!’

Perplexed, the Zmei exclaimed, ‘Chicken!? We are no chicken! We are Zmei!’ Failing to pick up their magazine, they dropped the gun and drew an axe instead. ‘Prepare your guts, little fellow!’ they added, and roared thunderously with both of their heads.

Felix waved, and Kolya pressed the button. Felicia buzzed, the overheatermeter’s arrow climbed right, and a beam was born that pierced the crystal and, now a vivid blue, cut the crimson mist like lightning and struck the Zmei. Shivers ran through their spiky back, and the Zmei, squeezing eyelids and creasing faces, shrank by 31.876 percent—which was less than Felix had expected, a percentage which made the Zmei no less horrifying.

‘Prepare your guts for cuts, little fellow! Gu-u-u-u-u-ts for

cu-u-u-u-u-u-u-ts,' they roared, and they charged towards Felix, who was frozen aghast.

The plan was indeed terrible. The chance indeed seemed last. Felix shrieked in falsetto and threw his wrench at the Zmei. It hit one of their heads, and they screamed and swore but continued their onslaught. Felix dodged the Zmei's first blow and hid behind Felicia, grasping her hot carcass like a lifebuoy with shaking cold hands. He evaded another attack, then one more, dancing around the machina, splashing blood, stooping, stammering, slipping on Geno's intestines as if even now Gennady Gennadyevich did not loosen his grip, his ghostly hands crawling from the ground like wicked gophers to grab at Felix's feet—and finally those hands caught him, and Felix stumbled and fell over. The Zmei's axe whistled past and jammed its sharp tooth deep in the wooden floor. Felix crawled rearwards, to Felicia.

'Goodbye, dear,' he mumbled. He kissed the contraptioness, pressed one of the buttons on her corpus, and crawled away, trying to rise. Felicia warmed, hummed.

Felix clamped his eyes shut so he couldn't see the end, but then a gunshot boomed, and from above wood splinters showered on him. Nina had risen from behind the bar, squeezed a double-barreled shotgun with her sticky, shaking hands. The shot missed the Zmei but distracted them for a second. They turned around, growling, and noticed Nina and their imminent end.

'BOOM!' rang the second gunshot, and one of the Zmei's

heads—Kazimir’s head—turned to puree, blown to pieces, and, after splashing blood on Felix, Felicia, and Dullard, mingled with the remnants of Geno’s remnants around.

Dear reader—you didn’t think this gun wouldn’t shoot at all, did you?

‘A-a-a-a-a!’ screamed Dullard. He was alone.

But not for long.

At the raptured Zmei’s ruptured stump of a neck, where once there had grown Kazimir’s head, something started budding and pulsating, exuviating excess blood and the blasted head’s minced pieces.

In a second, two new heads bloomed.

‘Meat, hungry,’ said the first infant head, which licked the blood from the Zmei’s forearm.

‘Ee-ee-at...’ ee-ed the second head—the middle head—and with his long, triangular tongue he licked Dullard’s face, cleaning Kazimir’s leftovers.

‘Brother... -s-s?’

‘Zmei’s shite,’ said Nina, and, panicked and overdosed on adrenaline, avidly gulping for air, she dropped the empty shotgun and backslid.

‘Foo-oo-d. Foo-oo-d...’ mumbled the new heads.

‘Fight! Dullard now Commander!’ shouted Dullard, and he picked up

their axe. ‘Him!’ He pointed at Felix. All six serpentine eyes flashed and stared Felix down.

Felix crawled backwards and inadvertently knocked over Felicia, then moved away from her and further from the Zmei. Felicia’s energy unit, its ‘Stay out or die’ sign swinging, gave birth to a bouquet of sparkles that hit the Zmei’s serpentine eyes and made them yell in anger and pain. They swung their axe, fending off sparkles like they were flies, and accidentally dug the weapon into the energy unit. The unit flashed, spreading fire. All sparkling, Felicia kept humming, while the overheatermeter’s arrow, at its rightmost limit, tried to break its frantic way through.

Felix, Kolya, and Nina saw all this with widened eyes, and Felix fainted. Kolya and Nina rushed him towards the door of the kabak. The Zmei chased after them, only to slip on a length of intestine like it was a banana peel. They attempted to stand up and fell again, faces smeared in a puddle of blood and guts. Nina and Kolya saw the Zmei fall and rise again, get up on all fours and suck in the length of intestine like a long, thick, dribbling pappardella.

‘STOP, YOU, BUGS!’ they roared, screamed.

Kolya and Nina kept dragging Felix to the exit. The Zmei kept crawling. Fire spread around Felicia, and it grew to consume the wooden kabak and surround the Zmei, cutting them off from those who had fled. The Zmei pawed and clawed at the floor, trying to rise, leaving long, sloppy cuts in the boards.

‘Dullard no ready to die,’ said one of the heads, tears rolling down his cheeks from strabismic eyes. The other two heads looked at their brother; they were sad and frightened too.

There came a bright flash.

An explosion.

Fade to black.

Felicitá

The sea was still. No wind, just gentle breeze; no waves, just ripples. Above, no signs of clouds; the sun a radiant, pale disk with no clear bounds; the infinite, blue firmament spreading down to the hazy horizon that glued things together with a gradient of dark to light aquamarine. Leaving a bubbly trace on the water and a smoky column of black fume, and leaving City N, the steamship slithered forward—yes, only forward. Those aboard the ship knew not their new destination and barely wanted to know it, so boggled were their minds by past events. The more time and distance they put between the chaos and themselves the better. Seagulls, gliding sideways still and seeing off the travellers, perhaps saying goodbye in their squeaky bird language, were the only links present to City N, that gutter of civilisation, pearl of progress lost and found, a dream and a nightmare reeking of adventure, of that odour which is odious in the end, charming and entrancing at

the start.

On the steamship's deck, Nina rested, wrapped in a wool blanket, petting Moros on her lap, watching the vast blue nothingness and everythingness, from time to time skittishly shrugging off the sea's chill. Kolya sat lazily rubbing her feet, while Felix filled and refilled her cup with steaming chai from the samovar on the nearby table. Eyes closed, she inhaled the chai's warming aroma, took another cautious sip, and started talking.

'Life is so fragile, so unpredictable. Imagine. You do your honest work, sell ales, pour vodka into those cute little faceted tumblers you and your father picked out at the flea market together, listen to gypsy songs ordered just for you by a Chude who thinks you a goddess and is the only Chude who you have some weird sense of affection for, and stroll around the city, eating fruits and vegetables from all around the world; you enjoy the sunshine, the street musicians, the yelling peddlers, you smile at wretched bums and throw them a lucre or two, close your eyes and inhale the aroma of the oecumene through all its cuisines, some bad aromas too, yes, but again, everything is normal—every day is just a day, gods damn it, but you enjoy that chaos around you, that chaos which has already settled in and become fully aware of itself and what it is, comprehensible and manageable, the chaos which is water to you, fish, but then once, just once, on a normal day, you get involved with two blithering degenerates, and your life lurches, tilts, falls, and breaks like an ancient vase when a cat paws it—it's a fiasco you aren't prepared for, an unpredictable mess you can never prepare for, and afterward you

realise that doing business with degenerates is a slippery fucking slope. That's my lesson learned—long setup, but take it or leave it. It is what it is,' Nina said, finishing her monologue to sip more chai, though not before inhaling its invigorating vapours.

Moros purred and continued to lounge.

'When is this going to end, Nina?' Felix asked.

'When is what going to end?'

'All of this. You calling us degenerates, us being your servants, us carrying things to you. Your chai, your blankets, your chaise longue... This foot massage.'

'You're a hero now, Felix. This is what heroes do.'

'I don't mind this foot massage,' said Kolya with a shrug.

'Oh, really? Then that will be Felix's job.'

'What happened isn't just our fault, right?' said Felix. 'You were part of all that too, Nina, behind the scenes.'

'Was I? I've suffered some extraordinary emotional damage here. You burnt down my kabak. I had to rake all those greasy Chude pieces out of my hair with my own fingers, and I can still see them in my nightmares. Ew! I think I'm gonna vomit... Ew... Don't you see that I'm mentally crippled? Ah, no! Not those horrid images! Not again! Ah...'

Nina

closed her eyes dramatically and sighed. ‘How is any of this unclear to you degenerates?’

‘But it’s Geno’s fault! He pushed the button!’

‘Of course. “It’s not us, it’s him! He suicided!”—no way I’m ever buying that. I saw everything with my own eyes. Tear-drenched and blood-stained, but I saw it. You owe me a new kabak, one made from red brick. And a psychiatrist, for my very severe posttraumatic disorder... And the cat. I’ll take the cat too. They calm me down.’

‘Hey!’ said Kolya. ‘You can’t just take my cat!’

Both Nina and Moros hissed.

‘Unbelievable.’ Kolya scowled. ‘Well, I think I know what I’ve learned.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘Cats are treacherous, rascal animals. You can feed them, bring them with you on a robbery, save them from a Zmei, and they’ll still leave you for a woman. That’s what it means when we say life is fair.’

Moros purred and wagged his tail.

‘Sounds like a fine lesson to me.’ Nina smiled. ‘Your turn, Felix. Have you learned anything from your disastrous debacle? There must be some sort of lesson to it, all the more so for you.’

‘Kolya?’ asked Felix. ‘Have I learned anything from all this?’

‘Why should I know what you’ve learned?’ said Kolya with a shrug.

Felix shrugged also.

‘Well,’ he said, squinting and frowning and looking into the twin dark abysses of Nina’s eyes, ‘I guess we shouldn’t do anything like that again.’

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