The Debut Project

by Vanya Bagaev

a novella



The Debut Project: Chapter the first

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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 contraptioness 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 overheatermeter 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 cogitative 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, whereverfrom 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 contraptioness—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 contraptioness 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.

'Ahhhh, 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.

'Mreeeeeeeeeeee!' 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, waggling 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’.

Read next part

The Debut Project: Chapter the second

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