The Debut Project

by Vanya Bagaev

a novella



The Debut Project: Chapter the third

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> 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 revolutional 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 spotlit 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, shhhtop.'

‘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 arsehole.’

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-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.

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The Debut Project: Chapter the last

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