The Debut Project

by Vanya Bagaev

a novella



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 desperateLet'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 pulsated. 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 vivider, 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 coefelicients, 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 overheatermeter'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 pulsated... 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 pulsated 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-capillaried 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-a!' someone screamed.

'Ee-e-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-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-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-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-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 strabismal 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 waggled 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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