

(p.174.-181.)

The deeper he drove into the railway yard crammed with warehouses, factories and zigzagging railroad tracks surrounded by fences, the more worried he became. This district didn't look anything like a residential area with blocks of flats where you might find a vehicle repossessed by the bank. And they had not been instructed to repossess factory equipment. He could only guess what Sergejs was doing there.

There was a vast and dimly-lit territory that appeared at the address in question, which was separated from the street by a high fence of concrete slabs. In the centre of this territory you could see the outline of a hangar. There was a railroad track that began behind it. Most likely the hangar had something to do with the railroad. The street lamps lit up the fence and the rusty metal gates. One door of the gate was wide open. There wasn't any sign that would have indicated what was located there. Stopping right in front of the gates, Ritvars peered inside for a moment to see what was there. Sergejs' telephone didn't answer. Ritvars got out of his car. He didn't exactly want to drive into the yard He didn't want to drive into the yard.

He slowly and cautiously went inside and into the territory. It seemed quite clearly that it was abandoned. Once again Ritvars called Sergejs's number and froze. A ringtone with the song *A nam vse ravno* rang out in Russian. The familiar melody could be heard close by. It was quiet but clear enough that you understood it was Sergejs' mobile. Ritvars slowly moved towards the melody. It wasn't only the phone melody that could be heard, but also that the phone was vibrating, so it must have been left on a hard surface. It didn't sound like it was on asphalt.

Suddenly light beams hit Ritvars right in the eyes, and for a moment he was stunned and confused. A motor growled. He had almost walked right into the car and was straight in front

of it. The lights, which were set very high, could not have come from Sergejs's car, unless he had driven up onto a platform. But why the hell would he do that?

There was a metallic groan behind his back. Someone closed the gates with a sudden loud slam. It was a trap! It was dangerous to run to the gates not knowing what was near them. The only thing he could do is hide in the dark and then try to jump over the fence. However he couldn't do that until he found out what had happened to Sergejs.

"You saved your friend's life. For now anyway." A deep and somewhat smug voice rang out from where the light was coming from. He didn't recognize it.

The car's bright lights were shut off, leaving just the side lights on. He needed a moment in order to get used to the dark and see something. Right in front of him there was a dark-colored jeep with three men next to it.

"Well, say hello," the deep voice ordered.

Someone pushed Sergejs in front of the car lights.

"On your knees!" shouted the person who pushed Sergejs and forced him down on his knees. His hands were tied behind his back, and his nose and face were bloody. It looked like he felt very uncomfortable in front of Ritvars.

Ritvars tried to grasp what was going on. It seemed that it was only the person that was next to Sergejs that had a pistol. The owner of the deep voice didn't have one. However there was also the guy or guys near the gates.

"So, you're not going to say anything?" the deep voice said, becoming more restless. Ritvars' silence was driving him up the wall. Ritvars still didn't understand a thing.

“Get down next to your little friend!” the deep voice thundered. This time the order was directed at Ritvars. He tried to look at the person ordering him around right in the eyes. In the semidarkness he could only make out the man’s silhouette. Based on his voice it sounded like he was much older than Ritvars.

“You didn’t understand. Get on your knees next to that moron or you’ll get a bullet right between the eyes!” The voice once again growled.

The man next to Sergejs aimed a pistol in his direction. That was a convincing argument. Ritvars slowly got on his knees, and frantically tried to understand what was going on. Who were these people making threats? Why? What was going to happen to them now? What did they want? He stood behind Ritvars with a weapon.

“Well, you see,” the deep voice began to speak calmly, “you stole something from me! You understand what I’m talking about?”

He stood exactly one step away from Ritvars. The light shining into his eyes still didn’t let him catch a look at his face. Ritvars didn’t have a clue as to what he was talking about.

“Hey, come here!” He turned towards the gates, and called someone. A moment later another one of them stood in front of them, shorter, but stockier, with his hair in a ponytail. The outline of his face seemed familiar.

“Well?” The deep voice continued. “You understand now? You robbed one of my men. You took his car! But there was one thing you didn’t think about – if you steal from him, you steal from me.”

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“It was the bank’s car. The bank said it needed to be repossessed.” Now it was clear to Ritvars who this man with the ponytail was and he had hunch as to who the owner of the deep voice was. Sergejs had mentioned before that Ļists sometimes worked for the Beard, a racketeer in the 90s. He just was wrong about the word “sometimes.” It looked like it wasn’t just sometimes, but the entire time.

“That was Ļists’s car, which means it was mine as well. If you wanted to repossess it, then you should have asked my permission. You understand? All of Riga is talking about how Ļists was fleeced near the Alfa shopping center. I can’t allow some rookie debt collectors taking cars away from my men without my permission and go unpunished. Especially an idiot like this.” The Beard kicked Sergejs in the head. Ritvars tried to jump up, however the man behind him pushed him back on his knees, and put the barrel of his gun on his temple. It was smarter to keep a cool head.

“Can you imagine that? He worked for me before. Help him!” The Beard gave an order to Ļists, who unwillingly obeyed and forced Sergejs back onto his knees.

“I don’t care whether that moron,” the Beard said, pointing at Ļists, “drives a Mercedes or a Zhiguli. It’s his own fault. You can’t joke with the bank, but those things have to be dealt with through me. Now you’re in debt to me.”

“Listen, Rich didn’t have shit to do with it. It was my idea.”

“And that is why you are now all bloody and snivelling. Shut your mouth when I’m talking! So...” the Beard took a step closer. The car’s side lights finally revealed his face. The Beard didn’t have a beard! Clean-shaven, with very short hair, about 50 years old. With a hooked nose and beer belly. “Now you are in debt to me. For that car. We’ll take 10,000 for it. That

car is three times more expensive than that, however I won't ask for all that money back. But I also can't just let you go – either you pay, or you'll rot away in a swamp. Got it?"

"We don't have that kind of money..." Ritvars replied. He didn't have the strength to lie.

"But we could get the money together in a couple months' time," Sergejs suddenly corrected him.

Still, the Beard had a gun. He pulled a pistol from his shoulder holder, and put the barrel right on Ritvars' forehead. Ritvars felt the cool metal and fear. Genuine fear. Until that point he had only been confused and desperate, but now that fear had dug right into his bones.

"They're lying, they have money – those cars. That guy drove here with a yellow Mazda, but that moron has a BMW 5 Series!" Ļists said, grovelingly trying to help his boss.

"What do you mean, didn't you see that BMW's technical passport? The car doesn't belong to him, but some guy. You want to fuck around with another guy's car?" The Beard said, peering at him.

"What about yours?" He turned to Ritvars.

"That's the bank's, and that's just the kind they'll look for. And if we don't look for it, someone else will."

The Beard fell silent for a moment. Ritvars started to have a feeling that he wasn't planning on killing anyone. Intimidating and shaking down someone, yes.

"I know that you're poor as beggars, which is why I will give you three months."

"So long?" Ļists cried out in disbelief. "So what will I drive with during that time?"

“I couldn’t give a rat’s ass what you drive with,” the Beard said even louder than Ļists. “Shut your mouth and listen. So,” he once again turned to the two men kneeling, “the money has to be given in equal parts each month. And you will give the money to me. Not to Ļists, Gariks, or some street sweeper at my door, but to me. Got it?”

Both nodded at the same time. At that moment Ritvars was ready to take a gun from one of the men and shoot Sergejs in the head. Where were they going to get that kind of money? He already had a mortgage on his family’s flat.

“And if there’s any sort of attempt to go to the police or cheat me, you won’t live very long. If you don’t believe me, you can go look at the news archives and see how I deal with people I don’t like.” The Beard bent over close to Ritvars and looked him straight in the eye. “You got it?”

He turned once again to him. First Kerašs and now the Beard. Biting his lips, Ritvars nodded in agreement.

“Good. We have an agreement.” The Beard grumbled satisfied, and Ļists prepared to kick Ritvars as a parting gift, however the Beard held him back. “Don’t hit him in the face. It might be useful for work. It would be stupid if both of them are walking around with black eyes.”

Lifting his leg high, Ļists kicked Ritvars in the stomach and then punched Sergejs in the face. Ritvars flailed backwards and fought for breath for a moment. Sergejs rolled on the ground as the small pieces of old asphalt road squeaked under him.

The dark-coloured SUV drove away from the territory of the hanger.

The Debt Collectors by Aldis Bukšs

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“Forgive me for calling you here. They said nothing was going to happen to you, but they were going to shoot me if I didn’t call you here.”

Ritvars didn’t hear Sergejs’s excuses.

“We are screwed.” He was still on his knees. “We don’t have that kind of money. What did you get me into, you idiot! You manipulative son of a bitch!” In his rage, Ritvars grabbed Sergejs by the collar. He couldn’t resist, as his hands were still tied together. A part of his face had become a bloated and bloody piece of meat. This image, which didn’t fit with Ritvars’ idea of a normal life and career at all, drove him even crazier.

“Me? Don’t you remember why we got Ļists’ case in the first place? Because you weren’t able to hold your tongue.”

“It wasn’t because I couldn’t control myself, but because I agreed to take part in this shit. Because I was stupid and asked you to help me.”

“And I helped you!”

“By pushing me into even bigger trouble? Don’t you think I have enough problems the way it is with the flat?” Ritvars pushed Sergejs hard. Sergejs swore and slowly tried to get up.

“Listen, untie me.”

Ritvars needed to ask again so he would listen.

“I will go to the police. They will help us.” Ritvars, untying Sergejs, had already managed to think ahead.

“How will they help us? You’ve never heard of the Beard? He’ll kill us as soon as we step out of the precinct. No, man, don’t even think of having problems with him.” Sergejs said, wiping the end of his bloody nose on the edge of his shirt.

“So why didn’t you say that when we took that car from that longhaired dick!”

“Well, I didn’t know that they were such good friends.”

“And your godfather? He’s on the police force...”

“No, I’m not going to get him involved here. We’ll manage it on our own. We’ll get the money together. It’s safer than getting involved in some sort of war. I’ll raise the money. Leave it to me. I won’t take money out of your salary in order that you got it for your flat.”

“Of course!” Ritvars walked towards his car. “Tomorrow you’ll be singing a different tune.”

“Where is your car?” He didn’t see Sergejs’ BMW anywhere.

“I was just getting home, when they suddenly cut me off. The car was left there.”

“How did they know that it was us that took back Ļists’ Mercedes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Gariks recognised my car. Maybe Edgars told everything to one of the guys working at Dūkans Legal Services. They’re definitely jealous of our success. If we go to the police, you think Kerašs will ever want to work with us again? He doesn’t need extra problems and that’s why he also doesn’t need to know about this.” Sergejs said, following Ritvars, trying to talk him out of going to the police.

“But where are we going to find that kind of money?” Ritvars stopped and turned to Sergejs.

The Debt Collectors by Aldis Bukšs

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“I wrote you. Today Kerašs got something good, a job for four luxury cars. And we will have a lot of small jobs like that. We’ll earn money, give it back and then live in peace. The Beard just wants to show who the real boss is around here. Let him. We’ll give back the money, and he’ll turn into our best friend.”

“I don’t need that kind of friend!”

“As you haven’t dealt with your flat yet, it’s not just that kind of security that you need. He will be our Plan B if something goes south with Kerašs.”

Though he didn’t want to admit it, Sergejs was right. It sounded like, if you didn’t take into consideration the beaten-up face and humiliation, Sergejs was happy about this meeting. Sergejs hadn’t had the chance yet to approach the car and Ritvars had already locked all the doors.

“Hey!” Sergejs knocked on the car window. “I don’t have a car!”

“You got money in your wallet?”

“Yes...”

“Then take the bus.”

(p. 232.-239.)

“Man, your moralizing is really starting to get on my nerves,” Sergejs said, becoming angry, with Ritvars’ wide-open eyes full of surprise. They flew past the sidewalks of the luxurious

houses built near Baltezers Lake. At that moment he was not only not moralizing but wasn't even talking. Sergejs mentioned that today they would get a sizeable wad of cash. But Ritvars only sighed more deeply in reply.

Sergejs was worried about Ritvars' sighing. Ritvars had acted like this during the entire trip from Spain all the way to Latvia. He couldn't rid his mind of Sanita's words that he was a liar and a thief. Maybe at the beginning it seemed a little exaggerated, but when Ritvars found out about the deal with Kuzmins, they became prophetic.

Already as they were flying to Spain, he knew that if they were lucky, they could take advantage of the situation and make more money. However selling cars to criminals had greatly exceeded their initial figures.

He had most definitely disappointed his mother and father already. And if one of them found out about this? That would be even more disgrace and shame for his mother to suffer through. Three nights through all of Europe in a souped-up convertible had been enough time for Ritvars to conjure up horrible scenarios from the stories of TV shows and the evening news, articles on news sites about swindlers that work on behalf of the bank. He heard how the newscaster scornfully uttered the words "Ritvars Leidums" and then saying just a tiny bit happier - "was arrested."

He didn't have the balls to stop the course they were on. The promised profit for Spain had grown to 5,000 for each one. Enough to pay off the Beard before the agreed-upon date. That bastard the Beard! If he wasn't there, he could pay the mortgage on his flat. Or direct a part of it towards the mortgage, but use the rest to buy new clothes, take Anda on holiday or at least to a restaurant. He would pay off the remaining part from the next deals. Or maybe buy a motorcycle? Anda loved motorcycles. And he also liked them. He imagined himself driving

up to her building on Dzirnavu Street with a nice motorcycle. Not too expensive. You could buy a decent motorcycle for about 1,500. And at the moment he almost felt responsible for making Anda happy.

“We’ll show Kerašs that we’re on the same team. Honest and trustworthy partners. The goose that lays the golden eggs!” Sergejs laughed.

They had just arrived in Riga yesterday evening, however Kerašs wanted to meet both of them already the next day, even though it was a Saturday. There was also a reason – the money. Sergejs had already told him about their success while they were on the road. He also told him about the large sums of money they were bringing. Kerašs was to get seventy percent of it. The meeting place was a shooting range about ten to fifteen miles outside of Riga, close to the highway to Tallinn between Ādaži and Saulkrasti. As he had explained, there was supposed to be a family event.

Kerašs, just like his regiment of close relatives, were already there. A few SUVs basked in their luxurious glory in the parking lot. Clearly the crisis hadn’t affected the Kerašs much, if they could afford to rent out an entire shooting complex for a few hours.

Situated in a thin cover of pine forest, the complex took up about two hectares. Right behind the gravel parking lot there was a two-storey building with wide windows. It was that building which housed offices for the shooting range management, as well as something along the lines of a cafe and a conference hall. Thanks to the glass walls, a wonderful view towards the shooting range opened up from the cafe – a territory that was about one hundred and fifty metres long and wide with barriers and raised mounds where the shooters stood. The targets were scattered throughout the entire range. There was a ten metre-high wall that circled the

area, which didn't allow bullets that were shot with a deadly speed to hurtle farther beyond the borders of the shooting range, provided they didn't shoot into the air.

There were also women that had come to this family shooting event. There were at least three of them who were spending their time with their children in the cafe. For these women the success of their husbands, brothers or fathers in shooting the flying clay pigeons was not important in the least.

Ritvars and Sergejs reached the edge of the shooting range Six men in camouflage hunting gear with double barrel shotguns all standing in a row shot at the flying targets one by one. Sergejs and Ritvars had to admit that a part of this group were better marksmen than they themselves. At least in this form, as a sport. A discipline when you shoot with pellets at clay pigeons, which fly in the air from a few places on a range. The instructor stood behind the row of shooters. Every once in a while he would call out to one of the shooters, so he could be sure of their readiness to shoot the next target. His deferential voice didn't suit his tall stature or this event.

Kerašš was standing on the left end of the row of shooters. Every second clay pigeon disappeared from sight without getting its share of shot. The shooter compensated for his failure with a tirade of coarse curses. Either the sun was shining in his eyes, or the instructor let off a clay pigeon too early or too late, or the laughing of the rest didn't allow him to concentrate, and so on. Inside Kerašš thanked his lucky stars that he had come to his senses and didn't invite Ericsson. That old Swede was going to see how big of a hunter his right-hand man really was.

Ritvars and Sergejs' visit to Kerašs came like redemption. Loudly shouting to the rest that he couldn't hold his gun anymore, he threw it over his shoulder and with determined steps went to meet his guests that had just arrived.

“When you work with me, you have to observe punctuality, gentlemen!” Kerašs said, turning his attention to Ritvars and Sergejs in an exaggeratedly loud voice.

They looked at one another. If they had arrived later than the agreed-upon time, then they weren't late by much. It wasn't clear whether Kerašs had set a time. The other shooters had stopped shooting to throw an inquisitive glance towards the arriving visitors.

“I told you all beforehand, they're my guys. Someone has to work!” Kerašs explained boisterously.

“Alright, Gunārs. I will take a look at another gun in the meanwhile. It seems to me that you really do have a bad gun,” the instructor said self-effacingly to Kerašs' back as he was leaving.

Kerašs went on and on, saying “When were you supposed to be in Latvia? If you want to work with me, then you have to do quality work!”

The reasons for this boisterousness became clear with a few short glances by Kerašs in the direction of his relatives. It's hard to know if Kerašs was conscious of it, but all of this show of power was designed not for his underlings, but for his close ones. First and foremost for his father and brother, which, if not totally openly, were looking at the three of them near the door of the entrance to the cafe. It was hard not to see the faint smirk on the face of Kerašs' brother. It wasn't totally clear what that was for.

“As soon as we got the cars, we hightailed it back to Latvia. We would take turns sleeping in the car,” Sergejs replied angrily. He didn’t understand the showing off.

“I don’t care about your reasons,” Kerašs said, opening the door of the cafe and continuing in the same vein, however then he stopped. The attention of the women sitting next to the table had been directed at him and his guests. Thinking for a minute, Kerašs turned around.

“Alright, let’s go to the gazebo,” he showed in the opposite direction. “We have to take care of some business.” The last sentence rang out just as loud as the one before.

In the gazebo, the banker’s tone suddenly changed. There wasn’t a trace of the previous bravado and arrogance. Now it was rather more like flattering than instructing or authoritative. However that was just in relation to Sergejs. He ignored Ritvars, as if he wasn’t even there. The friction that had arisen the first time they met had not been forgotten. For Kerašs, Ritvars was an irritating appendage of Sergejs. Someone he could not live without. The banker was very conscious that there was not a promising future for Sergejs without Ritvars. At least for now. The Leidumses’ flat was Kerašs’ guarantee that he wouldn’t try to back out of the deal.

Kerašs counted the wad of cash that had been put on the table in the gazebo. Ritvars and Sergejs had brought only precisely what they had promised – 20,000 euros. It wasn’t seventy percent of the real price, however Kerašs didn’t have to know that. Even though he whined a little at the beginning about the fact that he can’t check how much money the transaction had really been, after seeing the money, he grunted satisfied.

The Debt Collectors by Aldis Bukšš

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“Now I’ll give you a little job in Rēzekne. You ain’t going to cheat anyone there. Actually you could, but don’t you dare. I have to show those Swedes and their little servants that you’re effective. Everything has to be done quickly and effectively.

“So one car in Rēzekne?” Sergejs screwed up his face in dissatisfaction. They had just come back through all of Europe, however Rēzekne now seemed even further.

“Let me finish!” Kerašs growled dissatisfied. “There isn’t any car. It’s a dumpling factory. You must take the production equipment. They haven’t paid for half a year already and what’s more, they want to start legal protection proceedings. And you know what will happen then?

They didn’t have knowledge of such legal nuances.

“We can forget about that equipment or money for several years. Taking the equipment from the factory quickly and effectively will raise your stock in the eyes of management. And that means that we can safely continue our joint undertaking. I promise that then, when Ericsson finds out that only one car was brought from Spain, he won’t be happy. However I could say that “Hey you Swede, look how those guys did in Rēzekne. They saved our bank from substantial losses!”

“Yes, by the way,” Sergejs started cautiously, “about that one we drove back from Spain. I had an idea to keep it for a little while. Could we arrange something like that?”

“Forget it!” Kerašs exclaimed disgustedly. “You came back from Spain with just one car and it isn’t going to be in the bank’s parking lot? You want to make problems for me?” Rage shone bright in Kerašs’ eyes. “Just think about how it would look if the bank’s debt collectors came with a car like that into a city with 20 % unemployment and take away equipment that’s

giving work to about a hundred and fifty people. That's just the kind of stories journalists need. They'll eat us alive. But we don't need any extra problems. And you, if you want that job, need them even less so. We'll find other possibilities, don't worry."

"So maybe in order to avoid those problems, we should let the equipment and people in the factory work?" Ritvars said, unable to stand it any longer.

The others looked at Ritvars like he was a massive idiot. Kerašs didn't think it necessary to even reply.

"Yes, the long-term backwardness today is a widespread problem. It's from that the damn crisis started. But for us, Sergejs, it will only be for the better that so many have fallen behind, right?" Kerašs said, bursting out laughing. Ritvars accidentally glanced at the shotgun at Kerašs' side. All it would take is two quick steps to grab it and hit that vermin in the face with the butt of the gun. Or himself. In reality he didn't know who he wanted to hit more – himself or Kerašs.

Sergejs tried his best to control himself. At that moment he didn't know who he hated more. That cretin Kerašs, who had acted like the big boss in front of him, or that moron Ritvars. Sergejs had imagined this conversation going in a totally different way. After all, they had brought so much money. And Sergejs had a plan how to get even more. Quite tempting although at the beginning it seemed improbable. However – as they drove back from Spain, the more he began to think about it. Now it seemed like a very real plan.

"Gunārs, the crisis will end at some point," Sergejs said all-knowingly. "That means that there will be significantly fewer people with loans."

"Where are you going with this?"

The Debt Collectors by Aldis Bukšs

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“To a place to where the gravy train will have run its course. It’s time to think about retirement.”

“What retirement?”

“Everyone’s retirement. We have to ensure our lives so we could also live well after the crisis.”

“You want to rob a bank?” Kerašs laughed pretentiously.

“Well, not like Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Listen, I don’t have time to play games.” Kerašs prepared to go back to the shooting range.

“Go the fuck home and wait for info on Rēzekne.”

“Gunārs...” Sergejs tried to summon his strength. It wasn’t the best moment to introduce his idea to them, but he really wanted to. Sergejs couldn’t keep it to himself any longer. “You saw how much money we brought you today. We could double that sum, no, even triple it! I have a deal in mind that could make us rich in one go.”

“What kind of job?”

Sergejs told them about his idea. The plan could be described very briefly – the acquisition of a large business, which would be under your control. Ritvars listened with his mouth wide open. He had heard something like that for the first time.

“Listen, boys,” having listened to the beginning of what Sergejs had to say, Kerašs laughed scornfully, “Raiderism by Scandinavian banks in Latvia is a myth. Maybe some loser businesses whom the banks ask to pay their loans back complain about it, but in reality the banks don’t organize such things. At least the ones that belong to Europeans. Sometimes

owners fight it out and then try to push each other out of the business, for example, in Ventspils, but there isn't anything like that in the banks. Believe me, I worked there.

Based on the Kerašs' expression, he very well could have said "Believe me, if there had been, I would have used it long ago."

"At the moment there isn't," Sergejs said, not giving up. "That doesn't mean that it can't exist. Gunārs, think about it. We acquire a large business with substantial property. After that we sell it off piece by piece or even better – we let them work and make a profit. Make a profit for us! Then you wouldn't have to slave away in that little bankers' office and slave away from morning to night for some Scandinavians, who don't care in the slightest about your existence. You could lie on the beach in Majorca and watch how money is flowing right into your bank account. Or isn't that what you want? The taking over of such a company isn't much different from those jobs that we've had before. Just so much more profit. Much more!

"It's too big of a risk."

"But sometimes you have to take a risk! You said that yourself. You take a risk, and you will have money and influence, and your wife will be satisfied, and your children will be provided for. And, what's most important, your father will be proud and sure that you are a real man."

Kerašs had already readied himself to protest furiously, when he suddenly stopped and became lost in thought. Sergejs had hit him right in the bullseye. It took a moment for Kerašs to start up the conversation again.

"But you don't understand what you're talking about. It's not the same as stealing an SUV in a small town. You need a lot of people and a boatload of money. We wouldn't be able to do it with just the three of us."

The Debt Collectors by Aldis Bukšs

Translated by Jayde Thomas Will

“Who said that it would be just us three?” Sergejs glanced at Kerašs with a devilish look.

Sergejs had his next idea.