

Chapter one

School. The trouble begins

On the morning all this mayhem started I was riding the bus to school in a rather sour mood. Yeah, I suppose I should've been happy—it was the second to last day before the summer break. No more homework; all that was left to do was return the textbooks to the school library, refrain from ticking off the teachers and keep afloat until the report cards were handed out. After that the freedom would begin!

However, unlike my classmates to whom summer meant traveling with their families, lazing around in a villa in Jūrmala or, in the worst-case scenario, the rustic charm at their granny's home somewhere on the blossoming banks of the Gauja, this freedom promised me nothing but dirty work at the repair shop and sitting around in the city when the heatwave hit. I was going to be changing the cars' oil to earn money for school.

I'm living alone in my apartment in Sarkandaugava, apart from the old Mr. Freimanis—a thin, hunched man, my Dad's father's brother, and an awfully boring and taciturn fellow at that; he reads the newspaper *Latvijas Avīze*, watches the news program *Panorāma*, and on Sundays he goes to all the services he can find in the nearest vicinity. I don't want to talk about Mom. I'll just say this once—since the day she went to buy some bread and milk and the mall's ceiling collapsed, Mom is gone.

Dad, however...

He's still around, I suppose. Yet, ever since *that* happened to Mom, he's become sullen and aloof and drinks a lot. At least he did while he was still living here, in Rīga. Now he's already been working in London for three and a half years. He calls us once a week, and once a month sends Mr. Freimanis three hundred pounds to cover my school and living expenses. Mr. Freimanis gripes it's

very little and his pension is slim but the firewood costs a lot. So that's how I live. In an old building with stove heating in the apartment, only cold water in the kitchen, and a dry toilet in the stairwell.

I go to the big school on Kr. Valdemāra street—it's considered quite prestigious. Mr. Freimanis himself has graduated from some architectural institute in the far-off Russia and spent all his life designing sewerage systems, and always insists that the most important thing is not just to graduate but to graduate from a good school.

“Connections are everything, otherwise you'll waste your whole life in the sewers like I, while the castles are built by others,” Mr. Freimanis says.

Yet I'm getting nowhere with making connections since I don't have that many friends at school. Can't say I'm the most popular guy in our class. Pretty much the other way around. No, I'm not complaining! It's just that our small flat in Sarkandaugava is far from downtown. I ride the bus to school whereas many of my classmates live in the city center. A large number of them run to classes on foot, since they live across the street. Others are driven to school by their parents, and some even have their own cars with chauffeurs. What friendship can there be when they buy new clothes at the best stores and brag to each other that they'd spent the weekend skiing in the Alps? I buy my duds at the second-hand store *Degas* and slide down an icy slope in the yard next door in winter. You can't really compare these two worlds. I don't mind it so much, though. It's no use, right?

If I hadn't been so crabby that morning, I'd probably have noticed something weird was happening to me. But last night, after reading an article in the magazine *Ilustrētā Zinātne* about Uri Geller, the psychic who could, since a very young age, bend spoons and the hands of watches with nothing but his mind, I stayed up until 2 a.m., concentrating on my old alarm clock in the green iron case. Oh, how I wanted to smash its hands to pieces! So I concentrated, and concentrated... until the clock's loathsome buzzing woke me up at 6 a.m. with a splitting headache. Its hands, naturally, were

as straight as last night. So far there had been nothing unusual.

The weird stuff started on the way downtown. There was no one there at the bus stop at seven in the morning—the time when everyone was headed for work or school. I went to school five days a week, so trust me when I say this was highly unnatural. Something like that simply didn't happen in our large city. Anyway, that morning I still had a headache and didn't care. I didn't even notice the bus was totally empty, either. After registering my e-ticket in the validator, I just dropped into the nearest seat by the window, paying no attention to my great luck—I wouldn't have to stand all the forty minutes it took to get to the school, as it habitually happened.

At the next stop, only one passenger got on the bus. A most strange bird! I don't really know how to describe him. A dwarf? No, he was really short, but not really a dwarf. We had had a school trip to a Lilliput circus; I knew how dwarves looked. This one was rather stumpy and small, yet broad like a front door. No taller than me, that is, one meter forty six centimeters. How old? No older than my dad, but he looked awfully weathered. He was wizened, with a spare beard and thin, tangled hair pulled into a messy ponytail at the back of his head. I can't stand all these guys with tails! It was the end of May, yet the man was wearing a red-and-black woolen coat with dirty lining and a long, threadbare fringed scarf around his neck, as shabby as the rest of him. All that on a warm spring day when, as Mr. Freimanis used to say, the sun was taking a stroll on earth.

Once in the autumn, during the Poetry Days, some fat fellow had been brought to our school who said he was a master poet—he'd had a scarf just like this one. However, while the poet had smelled unpleasantly of beer and rain-soaked clothes like some hobo, this one was hardly a vagabond. From the distance I smelled quality French cologne. Little Ivars' dad has the same scent when he sometimes drives his son to school in his black mercedes. I've picked up on it. It's hard to miss.

Moreover, this guy had on a ratty fedora with holes that looked like they'd been pricked with

a nail.

'Probably to cool his skull when it overheats,' I mused.

To complete the bizarre picture, this fruitcake was holding the body of an old sewing machine, wrapped up in plastic. Just the body; I saw there was nothing inside it.

“This seat free?” he asked in a funny, husky voice.

“Uh-huh.” I nodded my aching head, thinking to myself, 'Senile jackass, don't you have enough space in this empty bus? Do you really have to get in my face with your trash?'

The weirdo sat down across from me and fidgeted for a while, as if he had small but sharp pins pricking his bottom. I didn't notice anything of the sort on the seat. I can promise you that. He took a long time jerking his left leg and grinning down at his yellow, busted lace-up boot. Suddenly he murmured, “The bus is empty so we can talk.”

'Must be some pedophile! Next he'll offer me candy,' I concluded and kept my silence. Nowadays even kindergarten babies are taught you mustn't talk to strange men on the bus. 'Or maybe just a flake.'

The ponytailed guy smiled in understanding and, thank goodness, shut up, going back to inspecting his worn-down boot. For a while we rode in silence, until, as the bus crossed the big intersection of Valdemāra street and Senču street, the weirdo with the braid suddenly jumped up and, leaning in close to my ear, said, “I see you're not of the mouthy kind, but the order has sent me to warn you—do not show surprise about anything! Strange things are about to go down but you must keep your cool. Remember! No matter what happens, keep your cool. The order will take care of you.”

'What order? Seems like this gramps has been let out of the Tvaika street nuthouse early this morning!' I thought, keeping my mouth shut. It was far from proper to be chatting with kooky pedophiles first thing in the morning. Mercifully, our conversation didn't continue. He didn't even

offer me any candy.

“It's time for me to get off the bus, as I fear someone might be following us and listening in! We'll meet again—sooner than you can imagine.” The man with the ponytail winked at me, grabbed his sewing machine and left. I caught a whiff of quality cologne, and this time a whole crowd of passengers literally overran the bus. It was as if someone really had orchestrated everything so that we could've talked on the bus, and now that our conversation was finished everybody strove to catch up. The bus got moving, and the stop soon vanished from sight. The weirdo with the sewing machine, too, quickly disappeared from my aching head.

My stop came. As I was getting off the bus, unexpectedly I heard the raspy voice in my ears. “Forgot to tell you—if you intend to bend clock hands with your thoughts, fire them as swiftly as you would kick a football. To crush something, you need to act fast.”

Honestly, I almost jumped in fright. How could anyone have known that?!

The strangest thing of it all was that when I glanced out the window at the bus stop, then back into the bus, I never saw the strange guy with the holey fedora. A fat lady with two shopping bags was studying the public transportation timetable, a bored expression on her face. There was a cluster of my schoolmates from other grades, the Biology teacher Prēdele, know as Raisin—that was all. I staggered to class with a pounding head and a considerable confusion.

How did the classes go? There's no reason to waste your attention with this tedious account. You've all been going to school at one point or another and know perfectly well what the penultimate day of the school year is like, when the teachers hurry to calculate the final average marks in all the subjects. The students who have everything in order, no unfinished assignments, sit as quietly as they can to avoid provoking the teachers at the last moment and getting in trouble. Meanwhile, those who expect poor results or whose destiny hangs between a higher and lower mark, break their necks to salvage and correct what they can, swarming around the pedagogues—

come on, teacher, please! A common occurrence, right?

I hate this honeying up to the teachers. I do my best to complete my assignments in a timely manner. I guess I forgot to say I'm a fairly adequate pupil. No honors student, sure, but the worst grades on my report card this year were a six in Algebra and a seven in Geometry. Well, I don't like all the computing, what can I do!

Okay, about that second to last day at school.

I sat through my classes all quiet and still, trying not to attract trouble. Time slipped by, and the feeling that something was about to go wrong today intensified. Not because Kate, her hair gathered in braids, threw an eraser at me and stuck out her tongue; I didn't retaliate only to avoid the teacher's attention. She's a real witch—Kate, of course. An honors student! Always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. And snitching to our homeroom teacher about the smallest of matters. Still, all this is not about the insufferable Kate with her pigtails but the prickling foreboding that kept growing despite the fact that the school day was rapidly drawing to a close.

As the final bell rang, everyone dispersed each to their own destination. I was going to go to the Esplanāde park with a couple of boys from my class to trampoline for a while. We were already out on the street when I suddenly remembered I still hadn't picked my gym clothes up from my locker. How sloppy of me! It would be totally stupid to leave the clothes at school during the summer. Arranging to meet the guys at the Esplanāde, I went back into the school and descended the stone steps to the semi-basement to the changing room, digging through my pockets for the key to my locker. Better should've stayed away.

In the locker room, I ran into the biggest jerk of our school—Splinter. He was down there with his minions—Jaņķelis and Elvis. Splinter was a year older than me, a tall, pimply lout. There was talk that his old man was either an ex-con or an ex-checkist. A fat cat that inspired fear in everybody. You can be sure that good old Splinter had an undeniable influence over the

administration of the school. Anyone else who'd stirred up the kind of trouble Splinter did would've been kicked out of our refined high school long ago. However, his pappy's pockets were deep enough, so his kid kept getting on everyone's nerves. Jaņķelis and Elvis were from my parallel class. They wouldn't be worth mentioning, yet behind Splinter's back they both felt invincible. This trio normally busied themselves with humiliating the younger boys. Usually they picked on the smaller ones. They roughed them up, took their lunch money, stuffed their heads in the trash or sometimes just gave them a kick in the butt in passing and howled with laughter when the kid dropped to the floor, crying. Mercifully, I'd had no relationship with these three, but I knew it was never fortunate to chance upon them on your own. Some of my classmates had already regretted it.

Oh boy, it looked like my turn had come. Entering the locker room, I ran directly into the fire. It was naïve to hope someone would save me here—on the penultimate school day when virtually nobody came down to the changing room anymore.

“Ah, it's the Irish hobo's pup! Hey you, you lop-eared pipsqueak!” Jaņķelis yells, catching sight of me.

It's no secret that my dad works in London. I'm not particularly tall, either, and my ears are rather prominent. There's some comfort in the knowledge that at least they hold up my hat in winter, so that it doesn't obscure my view. I guess I could try to explain to this oaf that London is located in England, not Ireland, but that wouldn't change much. I'm about to get a beating anyway.

“Are you, too, going to Dublin to scrub toilets this summer, huh?” Elvis sneers.

Keeping my mouth shut, I open my locker to take out the bag with my gym clothes. Why speak? My reply will most likely turn me into a speed bag in the eyes of these jackasses. Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of Kate's pigtails in the locker room doorway. Or maybe I'm just hallucinating, since no one comes in. I wouldn't want anyone to see me get slammed anyway, least of all the girls from our class.

“Look, Splinter, that Irish hobo sure is snotty!” Elvis goes on. “Not even a hello! Gotten all uppity, methinks.”

Jaņķelis runs towards me and hits me on the shoulder, hard. “Mushroom!”

His fist has struck a muscle, and it smarts something dreadful. We, the boys of our class, call such a hit 'the stiffy' since afterwards the arm won't move for a while. If I retaliated, the three of them would turn me into mincemeat. I take my canvas bag with the gym clothes, shoes, and a full bottle of water, and make no reply. They're going to beat me up anyway, three against one. Things don't look good for me, but at least I won't offer them the gratification of having provoked me.

Elvis shoves me, and I painfully bump my back against the row of lockers. They rattle mournfully. I think I feel the metal doors bend under my weight.

“Hey, you little hobo, why didn't you greet my friends? What, don't they teach you at school to say hello to your elders?” Pushing his lackeys aside, Splinter steps onto the stage, squaring his fists.

He's about to pummel me.

It's hard to explain what happens next.

I hear the voices as if from the sidelines. First one, then another. The first voice is foreign to me, yet I've heard it somewhere before.

“To crush something, you need to act fast,” it says.

The second voice. I guess it belongs to me; still, it's awfully insolent. It retorts that I'm not about to say hello to every last spotty nitwit at this school.

Splinter goggles at me in confusion but it lasts only for a second. The next instant he's already let his fist fly at me.

I partly dodge the impact. His fist splits my lower lip, and the taste of blood floods my mouth. Inflamed beyond all reason, I swing my right hand with the gym bag into his face. Held by

the cotton ropes, the bag hisses through the air in a high arc and slams heavily (there's an almost full glass bottle of water in it, mind you) against Splinter's pimply physiognomy. There's a dull thud, followed by Splinter's despairing wail. A moment later the big lummo is rolling on the ground, clutching at his bloody face.

“My nose!” he howls.

Seeing their boss in such a state, Jaņķelis and Elvis beat it. I catch up to Elvis and kick his butt with my foot. The minion crashes into the lockers. Jaņķelis is swifter. He manages to slip through the door before I pounce on him.

“What's going on down there in the lockers?” I hear the loud voice of the school's security guard and hasty footsteps on the stairs.

I haven't the slightest wish to explain myself to him.

Throwing my things on the high sill of the open semi-basement window, I jump, pull myself up and crawl out into the school yard. The windowsill is covered in a thick layer of grime but there's no time to dust myself off. I run as fast as I can into the street. Bloody, with a split lip and dirty clothes. To the traffic light, across the street and into an alley from where the school is obscured from view.

In the intense afternoon heat the alley is practically deserted. There are no pedestrians to be seen. Almost no cars, either. Only a little farther down the road I spot a parked yellow *Volkswagen* van with a bright notice that says, *Flowers and decorative plants*. The letter *o* must've peeled off and gotten lost. Two aged men in identical brown overalls are loitering by the van.

Out of breath, I hurry up the steep street. Thoughts are racing through my head. I've gotten myself into a real tight spot. The scuffle in the locker room won't just pass me by. There are no witnesses. Splinter will probably sell me out to his old man, saying I'd started it and roughened him. Jaņķelis and Elvis are going to say whatever Splinter tells them to say. In the end, it will be me who

pays the price, not him and his daddy moneybags. That's some goddamned hot water. And on the penultimate day of school, no less!

I've come up next to the yellow *Volkswagen*. The men dawdling by the van are talking but their conversation doesn't reach my conscious thoughts. I'm too strung out.

“Is this lad with the bloody lip the same Dornbušs ordered us to find today? Scan him!”

“Why scan him when you can see from afar it's him, all right. The kid must've gotten into a tussle. Get him!”

A sudden iron grip descends on my elbow, a strong hand covers my mouth, reeking of tobacco. The side panel rattles open, and, thrashing desperately, I feel they are about to drag me into the yellow van. The men in the brown overalls are no wimps from the locker room who kick the little boys around and see themselves as some sort of superstars. I can't break the grasp of my captors.

At that instant, another van appears before my eyes, tires squealing—a ridiculously light blue *Ford Transit*. Never slowing down, it charges at the yellow *Volkswagen*. There's a deafening crash, glass shattering, plastic cracking, metal parts bending with piteous squeaks. The yellow van jumps at the impact, and its front door pops open, delivering a good whack to the men clutching me. They both go down on the pavement, and I'm free.

Bewildered, I stand there with my mouth hanging open, and watch the door of the light blue *Ford Transit* open. Out comes the same ponytailed weirdo with the fedora and the shabby scarf who accosted me on the bus this morning. Under his arm he's got the case of a sewing machine. The same as earlier.

“What are you doing standing there, don't you see this is the right moment to flee!” he calls to me. “Let's run before those two buffoons come round.”

This morning on the bus I deemed him a total asshole. Now I realize it would be best to

obey him. We run up the Stabu street along the fence of a brewery for roughly half a block, and then brakes screech next to us and another rattling *Ford* van appears. I don't catch its color, but what's the point? At the wheel sits a gaunt, moustached man with a funny old-fashioned hat that reminds me of Charlie Chaplin. Mr. Freimanis called that one a bowler, if I recall correctly.

“Get in! Hurry! Dornbušs' agents have also stolen a car from the parking lot and are going to be on us in a second.” Hearing that, the ponytailed guy with the fedora throws open the door and jumps inside the van, gasping—his frayed scarf flaps in the air.

“How long do you intend to stand there?!” he yells at me. “I know only dumb boys get into strange cars with strange men! I invented this scary story myself back in the day, but believe me—if Dornbušs gets to you, you'll wish for Splinter to beat you up ten times in the locker room, with all the girls from your class watching! And you must want to know once and for all what kind of trouble you've gotten yourself mixed up in.”

All at once, his words convince me. And they come as no surprise. Nothing can surprise me anymore. I do something no schoolkid in his right mind would ever do. I hop into the unfamiliar van. The ponytailed guy slams the door shut, and the car accelerates, tires squealing.

“Buckle up!” the tall man with the moustache hollers from behind the wheel. “This is no old people's home excursion to the botanical garden!”

Never slowing down, signal lights blinking, the van crosses the Skolas street intersection at the red light. I hear the screeching of the brakes of the cars we've cut off and blocked. I barely manage to buckle my seat belt when we cut across Baznīcas street in a similar fashion.

“The devil take them, they're already after us! Over there, that black *Mercedes* cab! Those must be both Dornbušs' mutts,” the ponytailed guy from this morning frets, looking through the rear window of the van. “You absolutely must take the turn to Brīvības street towards Jugla. It's one of the few moderately wide streets in downtown Rīga where I can open an emergency portal without

any trouble.”

“I know,” the beanstalk at the wheel shouts back. “Hang on!”

Breaking every possible traffic regulation, tires squealing, our van shoots out on Brīvības street. I think we take this turn like in a real gangster movie—on two wheels. Glancing back, I see our followers—a black *Mercedes* cab imitates our maneuver. Inside I indeed catch sight of the two men in the brown overalls who tried to shove me into the yellow van mere moments ago. I see another thing that cheers me up considerably—the black cab is being pursued by a state police car, its lights flashing and siren wailing. Thank God we've been seen!

“Slow down and halt immediately!” a strict voice orders through the speaker but nobody even considers obeying.

“It's the police!” I exclaim.

“Sorry, the arms of your policemen are much too short to handle this!” the ponytailed guy grunts. “It would've been best if they'd stayed out of the way before they get neck-deep in trouble themselves.”

We tear past the Daile Theater at a dizzying speed. In the Miera street intersection our pursuers almost collide with a tram but soon are again on our heels. We zoom past the St. Ģertrūde New Church. The engine of the van is howling as if it were about to explode. There's a red light at the intersection of Tallinas street, yet it doesn't seem to exist for us. The van continues on, leaving behind a substantial cloud of smoke.

“Open the portal, quick! We won't get far away from them in this old dump!” shouts the beanstalk at the wheel.

The weirdo with the ponytail has been fiddling for a while with something that looks like a small tablet.

“The portal will be located at the intersection of Brīvības and Cēsu streets. In the center,

between the trolley wires. The fourth additional lane! I'll fire up the ray cannon. We won't break away from them without it." He pushes a button on the body of the old sewing machine. It suddenly glows greenish and begins pulsing. A gun barrel pulls out of the empty interior of the sewing machine, complete with a telescopic sight. The ponytailed guy points it towards our followers in the black *Mercedes* cab.

"Tell me when!" he calls to the driver.

"Hold up, I can't see the portal yet! Ah, there it is, finally," the emaciated man mutters.

Must I even tell you I was terrified out of my wits?

That doesn't even begin to cover it!

I sat, my mouth hanging open, not understanding a single thing! What portal? In the very heart of Rīga? Astounded, I glanced at the windshield. If there are some among you who have never seen the intersection of Cēsu and Brīvības streets, I can tell you that Cēsu street is a small, slanting road on the left side of Brīvības Street—it can be seen, heading from downtown to Jugla. Brīvības Street itself is big and wide—three lanes on the one side, two on the other—full of trolleys, buses and cars. Do you know what I saw in the middle of Brīvības street? A fourth lane—an overpass that lead straight skyward, to a reddish, shimmering... I don't even know what to call it. If the lane had been located on the ground, I would probably have said it was the entrance of a tunnel.

"Dammit! Here you go again, driving me into that darned red portal! Couldn't you open something better?" the beanstalk yelled. "Shoot on the count of three!"

The engine of the van roared desparately as the car hurtled up along the fourth additional lane of Brīvības street, straight into the sky. The red, glimmering ring was fast approaching.

One, twoooo... three!

There was a thunderous bang. Dazzling light shot out of nowhere—so bright I thought for a second I had been rendered blind. Then I felt us tumbling, falling. It was the most unpleasant

KRISTOFERS AND THE ORDER OF SHADOWS by Arno Jundze

Translated by Žanete Vēvere - Pasqualini

feeling, but the weird thing was, everything seemed to be happening very sluggishly. Like in slow motion. Then my consciousness drifted off for a moment, and I passed out.