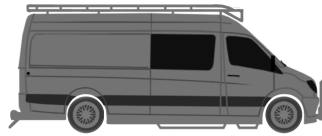


# First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 4 - Unholy Grounds



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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# Chapter 4

## Unholy Grounds

With Åke in his wake, Ekster led the way up the hill. He took a path familiar from his last visit, dodging low-hanging branches and snapping twigs under his foot.

The small white chapel slowly turned up from behind the hill. Now that he saw it again, Ekster recognised how the minimal security measures were only a result from years of neglect. Perhaps once upon a time, the building had been maintained with proper care.

“Not even a fence around it.” Åke mumbled behind him. “Anyone and their cousin could trespass.”

He was right.

“I’ll enter through the front gate.” Ekster said, as they walked up the beaten-down and overgrown dashboard stairs. “I made a duplicate of the lock and forged a key at home. Let’s see if it worked out.” That was only a rhetorical statement. He’d made about a thousand forged keys in his life, of course it would work out. Indeed, the key turned and the lock clicked open as if recently oiled.

Åke muttered “woah” under his breath.

Ekster slowly opened the door, still half-expecting an alarm to go off, before turning back to the other. “Check the surroundings,” he echoed the briefing. “Walk around the building and see if there’s another way in or out. Take pictures of any type of lock and hatch you see. Take pictures of the building. Look out for possible escape routes down the mountain that fit a car or small van. Stay on the lookout for unexpected visitors.”

Åke scratched his chin. “Ay, I’ll see what I can do.”

“We’ll meet here in fifteen minutes.” With that, Ekster wasted no more time, went in and locked the door behind him. Inside, he took a moment to control his breathing and calm his heartbeat. A cigarette would help, but he knew better than to smoke in the house of God, whether it had already been defiled or not. Although objects with themes of religion had indeed been placed in the nave and aisles, none of it fit the authentic architecture nor atmosphere of the church. Ekster pulled his nose up as he glanced over an array of

baroque-esk statues. Kitsch of the highest degree. This French Baron truly had a pathetic sense of taste. Between the golden clocks and child-sized chalices, it was truly hard to believe that a valuable rarity resided between them. Now that Ekster saw the entire collection together in one room, he truly understood the lack of security measurements. Even a beggar would find more value in a trashcan. Ekster cracked his neck in both directions. Time to dig for gold.

Although he had no idea where the statue was exactly located, and had only seen it in pictures, he found it surprisingly quickly. The church was small, but very crowded. Random bookcases had been placed left and right to create isles, completely destroying the natural flow of the floorplan. From the front door, Ekster hadn't been able to see the altar. At some point while walking through the bookcase maze, he came across a collection of life-sized statues. Close to twenty white statues of various stone materials had been chunked together, facing no particular direction. It took Ekster approximately one second to locate what he had been out to find. Smaller than he expected, dirtier than she should have been, more damaged than the others, but outstandingly beautiful nevertheless. She stood in the dead-center of the marble array, with her face turned to the ceiling's nook. Begging to be released from her prison.

With great care as to not touch anything, Ekster maneuvered past the stone bodies and polished limbs, putting a pair of silk gloves on as he moved closer to his target. Ending up with his nose against the aged white marble, he slowly rose to his feet, studying every inch of the material as he went up. She hadn't been cleaned in a while. Dark grey water damage had collected in the crevices, soiling her face with streams of black tears. Ekster tutted and brushed her chin with his thumb, inspecting the level of erosion. Backing off as much as physically possible, he observed the statue in its entirety. About seventy centimeters in height, placed on a presumably original pedestal of roughly the same height, both carved from fine white marble. The carving was of exquisite quality, and most of the statue had survived the test of time. Extremely remarkable. Her tender fingers folded together in a praying gesture, complementing the agonising expression on her face. Carved curls framed her delicate features and her body was wrapped in draping cloth, cascading down her body like static water. The pictures Ekster had seen from the statue had been of various quality, ranging from poor to bad. Seeing the figure up close in person, he wondered who in the world had determined this to be a depiction of the Holy Mary. Perhaps her praying position had misled

the amateur without a working pair of eyes. She wasn't wearing a headcloth, and as far as Ekster was concerned, Mary had never been depicted with curls. The lady's lips were full, her nose curved downwards with a gentle slope. She wore no jewelry nor shoes. Instead of praying, it rather looked like she was begging. The workmanship and the woman's strikingly pained expression fit the Hellenistic period, however he was hesitant to place the statue's origin in Central Europa. Ekster studied the damaged parts. He could be wrong all-together. It could always be a very, very, very good copy. His eye fell on a small, carved line of scripture, at the foot of the pedestal. Definitely not Greek. but weirdly similar. With a handheld magnifying lens, Ekster went up close and personal with the marble. He picked away some fragments with tweezers, and dropped them in a clear tube. With his phone he took pictures of as many details and angles as he could, before backing off again, to look at the artwork in its entirety. No matter how you looked at it, successfully stealing this piece would be a major kickstart of his new ventures. The increase in expected value would please the buyer, and the earnings would definitely boost team morale. He sighed. He really needed to throw some fuel on the fire and assemble that team together, sooner rather than later.

"Psst! Ekster!"

Åke called out to him from the other side of the statues, behind a bookcase. He was crouching on the floor. His tanned complexion seemed bleaker than usual. "Get over here!" He forcefully whispered. "Someone is here!"

Ekster quickly chugged his tools back into the duffle bag, and maneuvered over to the other. He crouched next to Åke, behind a low cabinet. "How did you get in?"

"Found a backdoor."

"At the North or South Transept?" Åke's confused expression let him know he didn't possess the basics of church architecture. So much for those privatized history lessons. He reformulated the question. "Where?"

Åke gestured North, over his shoulder. Ekster nodded once.

"Who's here?"

Åke's expression warped. He grabbed the hem of Ekster sleeve, and tugged him along as he crawled over to the next cabinet. They peeked over the edge. The creaking sounds of the wooden gate filled the space and out from the Narthex appeared a skinny man in white suit.

He wore wireless headphones and with stretched arms held a portable screen out in front of him. He was chattering away in French, his sing-songy tone echoing through the space.

“Ahhhh! Look, look, Sir! Remember this marvelous chalice, remember the Salon in the Fall two years ago- yes, yes, of course we shouldn’t display anything twice. No, no. Of course, silly me.” He pointed the screen from left to right. “Let’s take a look over here. Higher? Can you see it now, sir? Isn’t it beautiful? Disgusting!? Yes! I see it now, it’s disgusting indeed... Don’t know how it got here, sir! I’ll speak to the curator, yes, yes, yes!”

The skinny man was tripping over his words, trying to appease his superior. He rushed around from left to right, pointing the screen’s camera in every direction.

“This one? This one? Which one sir? To the left? Ah, terrific choice sir! I’m marking it!”

He stuck a red sticker on a larger than life granite statue of Saint Petrus, and disappeared behind mountains of art in the opposite aisle from where Ekster and Åke were sitting. “What do we have here? Ah this seems to be your collection of Baroque paintings of Jezus bearing the cross. Very imposing indeed! The largest one? Let me find it!”

Åke tugged at Ekster’s sleeve again. “Time to scram.”

Ekster looked back at his statue. He quickly took some pictures from the piece at a distance, capturing the surroundings. He took pictures of the Nave and the Narthex. “Okay.” He confirmed. “Lead the way.”

Åke stayed low as he navigated back to the rear-exit. The obnoxious chatter of the Frenchman did not lessen a bit. Luckily it moved away from them, rather than closer. The backdoor was still open, hanging by one hinge.

Ekster frowned at the damage. “Don’t kick in doors.” Shouldn’t that have been obvious?

Åke pouted like a scolded child. “How else was I supposed to get in? Excuse my lack of lock-picking skills.”

“You could’ve called me.”

“I didn’t know if your sound was on!”

Ekster grabbed a screwdriver from his bag and gestured Åke to push the door back up.

“We have time for this??” Åke whispered aggressively.

“An unhinged door is a bit of an obvious trace to leave, don’t you think?” Ekster shot back. “Help me with this thing, before Suit grows eyes and ears of his own.”

Åke shouldered the door upright, while Ekster screwed a couple of screws back in with swift motions. Just enough to keep the door from falling over again. Ekster opened the door.

“Beat it.”

Åke nearly sprinted down the mountain, as if chased by fire. Ekster calmly picked the lock back shut, before returning to the car at his own pace, lighting up a well-deserved cigarette as he strolled down. He unlocked the car from a distance to let Åke in, who was impatiently tugging at the door handle.

“Dude you have all the time in the world, don’t you?” Åke remarked when Ekster finally sat next to him and started the car. He opened the car window to let the cigarette smoke escape, and started driving down the mountain without hurry.

“No need to shit your pants.”

“If that gopher found us, *my* ass would’ve been cooked.”

“You must know how to talk smart.”

Åke groaned. “And it wouldn’t have worked. Y’know *that* was the Baron, don’t you?”

Ekster said nothing. He hadn’t realised. “On the call?” He finally asked.

Åke groaned again, more dramatically this time, with his head on the dashboard. Ekster raised an eyebrow. Åke stayed in that very position for quite a while, probably questioning his current life decisions. Ekster silently prayed that he wouldn’t have to find a new team member. While Åke kept pondering, Ekster’s cigarette had burnt all the way down. He tossed it out the window and rolled it back up as they entered the highway.

Finally, Åke raised his head. He had an unexpectedly big grin plastered on his face.

“If that fucker would’ve known that I was right there... ha.” He laughed shortly to himself, before bursting out in full-out laughter. “Oh my God, I was *right there!* Hahahah! Right under his nose! Hahahahahah!”

Ekster silently let the other laugh it out. Whatever it was.

Åke continued to laugh to himself, while sending all the pictures he took to Ekster's phone. He flipped through them one by one. Photos of the church’s exterior, various entry routes up the mountain, places to park and even digital measurements of the front and back-door. Ekster had to give it to him; thorough work.

“Great Stuff.” Ekster commented. “Very good, Åke.”

“I only followed your stupid briefing. What's the big deal.” The other mumbled, with red ears.

Ekster had read in management books that different types of people needed different tactics to feel appreciated and stay motivated within a team.

“Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You better shut up now.” Åke snapped with a red head.

Ekster made a mental note. Compliments did it for Åke. He was very pleased with the results of his little campaign. He’d gotten some information on the artwork himself, but above all, Åke’s performance had exceeded all expectations. Ekster felt excited to continue this project, and bring the team closer together. There were still a few missing pieces left and right but... with patience and a little nudge here and there, everything should work out as planned.

“I need to make some calls.” Ekster announced.

Åke shrugged, still red in the neck. “It’s your party.”

Ekster pushed some buttons on the dashboard to open his address book. “Call Kim,” he told the car.

“*Calling Kim,*” echoed the electronic voice.

The dial tone sounded two times, before it was picked up by a coarse male voice, violently cursing at him in French.

“Fuck your mom, you prick. Call me again in the dead of the night and I’ll break your fucking balls.”

“*Coucou,* is this a good time?” Ekster smugly replied in a sugary-sweet tone.

“I’m about to fuck my girlfriend.”

“Say hi to her from me.”

“She says fuck you.”

“Lovely. Kim. Clean your ears and listen to me. Mary? Did you really think that was the Holy fucking Mary? Do you have dried shit for eyeballs? Do not pass me half-assed information, you’re not that retarded.”

“Don’t kill the messenger.”

“Better believe I will. You have one fucking job.”

“Go die, Curator.”

“That won’t benefit you. I’m calling to let you know that when we sell this thing, you and your girl can move out of that ratty-ass apartment of yours.”

It was quiet for a second on the other side. Ekster smirked.

“—you motherfucker. Don’t play with me.”

“When do I ever. Catch you later. Kisses.”

Ekster broke the line. Åke gaped at him.

“Sounded like a close friend.”

“Kim is an informant.” Ekster said. “Mostly useless, has a habit of passing on tips before fact-checking. When he does, I call to tell him off. In return, I get cursed at.”

“Sounds like you’ve got the upper hand though,” Åke mumbled. “This statue is... really *that* valuable?”

“Perhaps it will be.”

Åke hummed. “Your French is really good, by the way,” he suddenly complimented. “You barely have an accent.”

Ekster laughed without humor. “Barely? Fuck you. It’s my first language.”

“Heh!? I thought you were Dutch.”

Ekster pulled a face. “I’m from Greater Bruxelles.”

“Ohhhhh...” Åke sat back. “What’s that local Dutch dialect called again?”

“Vlaams.”

“Flamish! Yeah... That’s right. People still speak that? You speak it?”

“What an ignorant question.” He cut the conversation short by dialing the next number  
“*Calling Driver.*”

It took a few rings for the call to be picked up. An English-speaking man with a low voice and a thick eastern accent sounded through the speakers.

“Yes.”

“Driver! It’s Ekster. Is this a good time?”

“Hello Ekster! I’m just doing the dishes. Not a problem.”

“You had a late dinner tonight?”

“I cooked roast pork for seven hours.”

“Damn. I’m quickly calling to inform you about the marble Mary gig.”

“Yes.”

“I’m thinking somewhere between four and five weeks.”

“Yes.”

“Can you get a van? It should fit four to five people and the statue.”

“Yes. Not a problem.”

“I need you to park the van in my garage. Make that a van for seven people. I want to use it in the future. I’ll buy it from you.”

“No need. I’ll get you the van. Not a problem.”

“By when?”



“Tomorrow.”

“Great, I’ll be in. Give me a ring when you’re nearby.”

“Yes! Not a problem. Till tomorrow, Ekster!”

“*À demain.*”

This time, the other side broke the line.

“One more call,” Ekster said, before Åke interrupted him again. “I don’t think she’ll pick up though. Call Dust.”

“*Calling Dust.*”

“Driver... Dust.” Åke mumbled under his breath. “What kind of people have these names.”

The tone went straight to voicemail.

“Hi Dust,” Ekster said. “It’s Ekster. I was in your shop a couple weeks back. Don’t know if you remember me. Sold you a bunch of bracelets. Anyway, I’m working a new gig. Got this statue I can’t quite trace back. You mentioned having an interest in antique south-eastern languages. There is some scripture carved on the pedestal I can’t make sense of. Perhaps you’d like to give it a go. Call me back when you have time. *Ciao!*”

He broke the call off and thought for a second if he needed to ring someone else. He’d call his lawyer tomorrow, to draft up some contracts.

“I’ll give you a contract somewhere in the upcoming weeks,” he informed Åke.

“Pardon me? I’ll be signing no goddamn contract,” Åke protested.

“You will sign this one. If you want any equity at all. Don’t worry you’ll have ample time to get it revised.”

“Dude, do you think I can just walk into a legal office and get a lawyer? They’ll be on my ass in no time.”

“They?”

“The fucking owner of all this bodily real estate, of course.”

Ekster only paid half-attention, his mind on planning the heist. “The what?”

Åke waved his hand in front of Ekster’s eyes. “Hello?? Anyone here? Keep your head in the game, will you. Forgotten who I am? I have no legal rights. I can’t hire a lawyer.”

“Why not?”

“Oh my God.” Åke actually started to sound annoyed. “For a million reasons, Ekster. I don’t have citizenship. I don’t own any identification. I don’t have a bank account. I don’t pay taxes. *Legally*, I’m not a person. I am property. I’m not supposed to be able to get a lawyer.”

Ekster finally diverted his full attention to the other. The gears in his head continued to turn at full speed. “That sure complicates things.”

“No shit.”

“You can have my lawyer.”

“Totally not shady.”

“He costs ten-thousand euros an hour, he’ll treat you just fine. I’ll just tell him to keep your name off the books.”

Åke sighed and crossed his arms. “Fine. Just, seriously, keep it off the books for real.”

Ekster thought it over. He had a hard time imagining how much control was being practiced over Åke. If he wasn’t careful, he could attract some major spotlights on himself.

“How close are you currently in contact with your...”

“Lord. I call him Frog. Because keeping frogs is literally his only hobby, he’s such a weirdo. Anyway, not too close, in physical proximity at least. But yeah, he keeps tabs on me and we see each other every now and then, of course. He practically raised me. Right now I run errands in his name. He gives me names, and I chat them up for business. Not much different from what I was doing inside of the estate, now that I think about it.” Åke scoffed. “Talking about work, I have a gig tomorrow morning. Let me crash at your place, it’s closer. Driving all the way up and down the mountains is such a bother.”

Ekster hesitated. “I don’t have a second bed.”

Åke waved it away. “I’ll sleep on the couch if you’re prudish. My manager will pick me up in the morning.”

“Don’t give away my address.” Ekster frowned.

“Address? He won’t know, he’ll just follow the tracker.”

Ekster froze. “The what?”

“Tracker.”

Ekster slowly turned his head to Åke who was pointing at his left wrist with an unknowing expression on his face. Ekster’s heart dropped to his stomach. “You’re fucking chipped!?”

Åke awkwardly held his wrist to his chest. “Don’t yell at me. I’m also a victim here.”

Ekster was about to kick Åke out of his car right there and then. The man he had brought to his house, to the very location they were plotting to steal from, was *chipped*.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he whispered to himself. “We need to detour that track.”

He thought of the hacker who he’d been trying to reach for weeks, to no avail. How fucking usefull that person would be, right now. “Who’s checking your location?” He snapped at Åke.

“My manager,” Åke replied sheepishly. “For pickups only. That was the deal. He checks in right before and right after a gig.”

“So we have till tomorrow morning.” Ekster growled. “Your Frog doesn’t have someone staring at that tracker all day and night?”

“I dearly hope not. I have my private rendezvous. Hey, don’t stress it too much. My manager picks me up from random places all the time.”

“I wasn’t planning to get my location geo-tagged, thank you very much. You’ll be hanging out at my place more often, if you want to continue being involved. You’ll not only put myself, but also others at risk.”

“Ahh, yes. *The team*.” Åke said. He sounded a bit sarcastic. “Is Driver part of your team? Dust? Kim as well?”

“Fuck Kim. The others, unofficially.”

“And we’ll all sign your contract?”

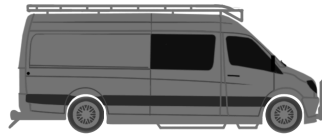
“I like to keep expectations transparent. Now can you shut up for a second, I need to think.”

Åke reluctantly quit talking, and kicked his feet back up on the dashboard, just as he had done on the way to. Only this time, his shoes were clad in earth and dirt. Ekster ignored it. He kicked the gears and sped up to way past the speed limit. First things first, get home as quickly as humanly possible, and get this problem sorted.

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END



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