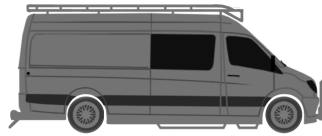


First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 3 - Test Drive



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Chapter 3

Test Drive

Ekster tossed some random objects in a leather weekend bag and changed into a dark blue tracksuit.

“It gets cold up in the mountains at night,” he clarified when Åke beheld the outfit change with a raised eyebrow. “You could put this on.” He threw a black zip-up hoodie at the other's head. It smelled. Of cigarettes, with a strong side note of copper, dusty attic and something resembling wet earth.

“Is this like, washed?”

Ekster shot him a blank stare.

Åke held back some snarky remarks about basic self-care and wrapped the hoodie around his waist. “We’ll see how warm my tanktop can keep me.” He snickered.

Ekster shrugged and grabbed his car keys. “What do you want for dinner? I can't stand the smell of fish.”

Åke navigated Ekster to a roadside San Fredo's, who's genius takeaway concept made it an obvious choice. The two-lane drivethrough shouldn't be too busy this time of the evening. Ekster watched with horror and disbelief as his pepperoni pizza was folded twice and served to him as a little triangle in a cardboard holder.

“I can't believe this blasphemy exists south of the Alps.”

“It doesn't change the flavor.” Åke argued. He grabbed both pizzas, so that Ekster had his hands free to steer the car back onto the highway. He took a couple of consecutive big bites from his own pizza pollo topped with spinach, feta and extra minced meat.

“This is not how pizza is meant to be eaten...” Ekster protested weakly.

“Stop being posh.” Åke shot back with his mouth full. Ekster pulled a face. “I swear this is the best pizza you’ll have, folded or not.”

Ekster switched the gears over to autopilot and cautiously took a bite of the slice he was handed over.

“Hm.”

From there on, he didn't speak anymore. Pizza approved, Åke assumed.

They entered the first tunnel before the sun had completely set. When they came out on the other side, it was gone behind the mountains. A tinge of cyan was all that was left of the hot, summer day. The next tunnel that followed dipped down under the neighbouring district. There was never no traffic around these roads, even in the dead of night. Since moving to the south, Åke had spent many hours being driven around the famously extensive Alpine tunnels. This specific tunnel was a long one and with the abstinence of a good view, car rides got boring very, very quickly.

The man next to him had his eyes starkly fixated on the road. Yellow tunnel lights cast quickly passing shadows over his disengaged expression. Without much gusto he was rhythmically thrumming his fingers on the steering wheel, in tune with the rock music that quietly played on the radio. As if forgotten that he wasn't alone in his car, he hadn't made any attempts to initiate conversation. Seemingly feeling Åke's eyes on him, he stopped thrumming the wheel to briefly side-eye the other. Åke seized the split second of contact as an opportunity to start chatting. He sure as hell didn't feel like sitting in dead silence for another ninety minutes.

“So do you go biking often?”

Ekster raised his eyebrows. The deep frown between them disappeared. “Uh, Yeah.”

Åke nodded. “Yeah. Me too. I love it. Cycling is great out here. The treks through the mountains are fantastic. What did you think of the forest route from the other day?”

“Not bad. Not busy.”

“I don't think anyone really knows of it. It's a secret route that I found, hehe.”

“Aha.”

“Where did you say you lived before?”

“Didn't say.”

“... Do tell!”

“Prague.”

“That's dope, I've never been to the Česko districts. Good cycling around there?”

“Sure.”

“Have you attempted the mountain treks around here again? They kick my ass too, not gonna lie.”

“I didn't.”

“I see, haha.”

“...”

Silence again. The stiff small talk made Åke's brain throw a tantrum. He bit the inside of his cheek. There were so many questions he wanted answers to. Usually he'd slowly warm up his “victim” before getting to the meat of a conversation, but trying to unthaw Ekster made him feel like a tool. Perhaps he just didn't like to talk about cycling.

“So...”

His attempt to re-engage conversation resulted in *the most* bored expression forming on Ekster's face. What a prick. Oh fuck it. He might as well cut right down to the chase.

“You did your research on me, didn't you? As you should, I guess. But I have no clue how much you know, and I know next to nothing about you. That unbalance of intel isn't the best foundation for a fruitful partnership, wouldn't you agree?”

Ekster's face didn't move an inch. “It was remarkably difficult to find anything on you at all,” he replied in a detached tone.

“I'm sure it was,” Åke dismissed the response. “You see, I'm not the sneaky-snake-type. It's not my style. So I'm just straight-up going to ask some questions. Lie if you want, but I'm an expert at smelling bullshit.” He leaned forward to watch Ekster's face. “First of all, what's your family name?”

Ekster kept his eyes on the road. “It wouldn't ring a bell.”

“So what's the harm in telling me? If I were to ask around in powerful circles, what would they say?”

“I thought you didn't associate with the upper-classes.”

“It's what I aspire to. Sadly I see them all the time and they tell me everything.”

Ekster's right eyebrow lifted for a second. “My family has no legacy that could be of anyone's interest.”

Åke hummed as if he had gotten precious information and sat back in the leather chair. Sounded like family was a pain-point for the guy. He kicked his feet up against the dashboard, which got him the most judgemental side-eye he had ever received in his life. Åke ignored it.

“Can’t say I believe that, but okay. Let’s say it’s true. Your clandestine art dealership runs so well that it has bought you this fancy-ass car, the foreign bike, and a four-story downtown residence. With a roof terrace, if I may add.”

Ekster huffed. “It has. In fact.”

“Impressive. Completely self-made. Congrats. I’m sure your bookkeeping is squeaky-clean.”

“You bet it is.”

“Seems like you’re perfectly capable of running this flourishing business on your own. Why want me involved? Seems risky.”

“You have a specific skillset.”

Åke rolled his eyes. “No shit. I’m practically lab-grown. But what part of that multifaceted skillset is of use to you? Want to be on the list for private parties? Want to have a foot in the door to the ultra-rich?”

Ekster exhaled through his nose, as if annoyed by the question.

“I’ll clarify, before you miscalculate one plus one. Everything I know about you, is based on assumptions. I’ve pieced together a story of a young boy whose identity was systematically exploited by powerful classes. I imagine you live to see that world burn. I need that energy. In my team.” He nonchalantly added.

Åke dropped his legs down. “Team? What objectives do *we* have in common?”

“A common enemy.”

“Who are you trying to pick a fight with? I thought it was weird you want to bring down illegal trade, while it’s your own line of work as well. Seems risky. Or are you just *that* arrogant? What’s in it for you? Does it have to do with that coat of arms ring on your left hand and a family without legacy?”

Ekster’s expression darkened. “I think I prefer the small-talk about cycling.”

Åke clicked his tongue. “Baby, we’re way past small talk. But for your sake I’ll just assume your family was murdered in cold blood and you’re simply out for revenge. Just so that I can trust you *this* much more.” He held his thumb and pointy finger up, very close together. “But you’re not out of the line of fire just yet. Let’s talk about *moi*. How did you hear about me?”

Ekster snickered. “Saw you on the cover of Face.”

“That couldn’t have been very enlightening.”

“To the contrary. I saw the most fascinating headline. “Rescued from Fate: Paris’ Beloved Billion Dollar Gem”, or something along those lines.” He quoted.

Åke said nothing. Those combinations of words sounded like absolute newspeak to him.

“Don't you think that's an odd choice of words?” Ekster said in surprise, from the lack of reaction.

Åke shrugged.

Ekster tipped his head in doubt. “I mean the article itself was garbage, mostly about your modeling career, but how does one go from poverty to being “Paris’ Beloved”? No elitist likes the poor. And the mention of a billion dollar evaluation, with literally zero publicly registered assets to your name is just absurd. What net worth? More like stakeholders’ assets.” Ekster scoffed. “Reeks of trafficking to me.”

Åke burst out laughing. “Oh I see, you're *smart* smart. So you saw an unfortunately phrased headline, did some fact checking and deduced that I was the man for the job?”

“Well, yeah.”

“How did you end up finding my place?”

“Pure coincidence.”

“Sure, that'll hold up in court.”

“It's true.”

Åke snorted. This guy was a crafty piece of work. “Do you know who I work for?”

“No.”

“What kind of people do you do business with?”

“I mostly deal with other dealers.” Ekster replied. “We toss stuff around like a hot potato, wash the cash, everyone takes their cut, *et voilà*.” He waved his hand into the air on the beat of the last two words. “I make sure to thoroughly assess pull requests before committing to the job, so as not to burn my hands. Clients are usually nobody remarkable. The influential don't need me.” He added pointedly. “They have their own ways to trade.”

Åke hummed in agreement and slouched back into the carseat. No lie spoken. Not many, at least.

“So what's tonight's briefing?”

...

Before every *Salon*, the estate's *Parures* would be called to gather in the dormitory's common room. Everyone was handed a personalized briefing. Every seasonal edition of *Le Salon* had a purpose and every guest was invited for a reason. Some *Parures* worked for months, years, on the same guests.

Surface-level speaking, the role of the *Parure* was to act as both decoration and entertainment. To be a representative, and part of the *mise-en-scène*. But experienced and notable *Parures* directly represented the estate itself and were responsible to filter and recommend new business partners to their Lords, as well as to tend to trusted friends.

It was expected of the *Parures* to study their appointed guests with great attention to detail. The more you know about someone, the easier it is to see right through them. Any weak spot in any organisation could be directly traced back to the person running that organisation.

Åke would often end up knowing *everything* about a person, before ever meeting them. Consequently, he knew *everything* there was to know about Baron Marcus de Lyon and his portfolio of cultural assets.

...

Ekster handed him a thin stack of papers with images of a small white church, the statue and a clipping of the Baron. Åke took the photograph from the paperclip and threw it over his shoulder.

"I don't need to look at that," he grinned. He continued to flip between the two pages. "Bla bla. Okay... Ekster, there is not much here for me to work with. What does this say? 'Obtain samples'." He glanced back up at the other.

"Yeah," Ekster replied plainly. "That's the main objective. I need a sample of the marble to determine the age of the statue. Last time I couldn't get up close."

"Sure..." Åke turned his attention back to the paper. "And what's this? 'Check surroundings'?"

"You'll see."

Quality briefing. "So this—" Åke checked the notes. "Museum? It's not a museum, Ekster."

"What else is it supposed to be?"

"A storage unit."

“Called a museum for tax purposes.”

“Among other reasons.”

“Why is it so badly secured?”

“Because the building is an old church, not an actual depot. Marcus doesn’t do any upkeep on his assets. I bet he hasn’t visited the place in years, and couldn’t name a single object inside. He owns *a lot* of property. You couldn’t possibly give a fuck about every single piece of land your lineage has ever owned. You’d go mental. Anyway, I can imagine that a financial advisor might’ve told him to put religious art in the church. It’s like playing cards. You try to make the right combinations to get the highest amount of points. Lyon is also known for religious works, y’know. He *should* collect them, whether he cares for it or not.”

Ekster hummed. “That clarifies some things.”

Åke went back to the notes. “Did you find out who manages the building day to day?”

“Accidentally. I nearly ran into this kid last time. He had a clapper board and took pictures of all the items. Did some kind of inventory check.”

Åke frowned. “You picked a great time to steal art. Sounds like *Salon* preparations. Art viewing parties,” he quickly added when Ekster opened his mouth. “That’s not the property manager, though. Just an errand boy.” Åke crossed his arms behind his neck. “You’re in a hurry to steal this thing?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’d recommend you wait at least four weeks, till after the *Salon*. They only do these inventory checks once every season. You take the piece right after, the next best moment they could notice that it’s missing is in the Fall. However, you should still try to find out who the actual property owner is. They’re the keyholders with actual responsibility over the assets.”

“Interesting. I will do that. Thank you, Åke.”

“Don’t mention it,” Åke mumbled, suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed, for some reason. At the very least, the end of the tunnel finally turned up as a small dot in the horizon.

After leaving the main highway, a zigzag road let them up into the mountains. Instead of parking like a normal person, Ekster shoved his shiny executive car in the roadside bushes. Better to walk the last bit, he said. Åke’s legs hurt like crazy after two hours in the car. He kicked some life back into them and stretched his back. The temperature had dropped a few

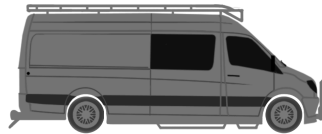
degrees for sure so Åke reluctantly put on the black hoodie. Ekster grabbed his leather bag from the backseat and pointed up the hill.

“I suggest we cross through here.”

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END



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