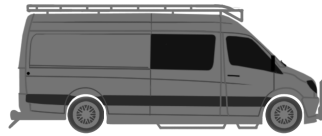


First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 8 - Maximum Capacity



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 8

Maximum Capacity

Dust's heart beat in her throat while she intently observed how Ekster's expression warped from bad to worse as the conversation progressed. Next to her, Prisma, whose French was poor, looked thoroughly confused. Dust couldn't see whether Driver was asleep or awake through the shade of his tinted sunglasses.

"I can't and won't try to control my Åke's every move," the Frenchman, who could only be Åke's Lord "Frog", idly continued. "But I cannot have him hanging around those who I do not approve of. And I really do have a problem with someone like you, purely considering the nature of your work." A short chuckle followed. "I must confess, interesting gossip goes around about the ways of The Curator, but for the sake of your ego, I'll keep those to myself."

Dust had never before seen Ekster stressed out like this. His nails dug into the palm of his hands. His knuckles whitened and his entire body trembled with anger. The look on his face alternated between appalled and pissed, though most of all, he seemed to be terribly insulted.

"Rest assured, I have no interest in getting in the way of your little trade. I'm not that petty. But I must strongly insist you keep your private and professional lives strictly separated. Åke's not for you to benefit from."

"Who gave you this number?" Ekster finally asked, in French, his voice surprisingly cool, considering the maniacal expression in his eyes.

"Ah? What's that accent? You sound like a farmer. Nevermind," the aristocrat giggled. "Åke, of course. Who else? Certainly we are not connected through any other channel."

"We most certainly are not," Ekster replied through his teeth. "And I have no interest in creating those connections. I have never and will never have any interest in doing business with the likes of you. Now would that be all?"

Frog laughed. "My, my, You are no fun at all. How have you caught my Åke's attention? You must be extraordinarily good-looking."

Dust had to give it to Ekster, he was displaying an awe-inspiring amount of self-control, considering the sheer volume of backhanded insults thrown his way in the short duration of this ten minute call. Instead of yelling creative insults right back, as Dust imagined herself to do, he folded his fingers together against his forehead and closed his eyes, as if he was dead-tired from having this conversation.

“I must be.” He replied with monotone disinterest. After a pause he continued in the same bored tone of voice: “now if you’ll excuse me. It seems like I’ve got an important phone call to make. I’ll make sure to let him down easy. He wasn’t that interesting to begin with, anyway. No hard feelings on my side.”

It took Dust the entire duration of Frog’s silence and the sneering laugh that followed to realise Ekster’s words had been a politely-formulated insult on the Frog’s own level of taste and wealth.

“Very well,” the man jovially said. “If he’s worth that little to you, we have no business speaking to each other any longer. I’ll hear from him how you handled it.”

“That sorts it.”

Ekster patiently sat through another couple seconds of condemning silence.

Frog finally continued: “I assume after this, you’ll change your phone number and we won’t speak again.”

“Correct.”

“I sincerely wish you a pleasant rest of your evening.”

“All the same.”

The line was broken. Ekster finally raised his head. The look in his eyes was downright murderous.

“That fucking *whore*,” he hissed.

“Language, Curator.” Driver rebuked. “Åke’s a friend.”

“Friends don’t two-time, Driver,” Ekster instantly snapped. “Rats do.”

“You haven’t heard his side of the story yet,” Dust quickly added, in a futile attempt to save Åke some face.

“Uhm guys—,” Prisma whispered. Everyone turned their attention to her. She pointed at her laptop screen. “Looks like Åke’s on his way here.”

“Fuck, I forgot,” Ekster cursed. “I’m taking him to my lawyer tomorrow morning.” He turned to Driver. “What do I do? I swear I will twist his neck if I see his face now.”

Driver calmly offered a simple solution. “Call him. Make him go home. I take him to the lawyer. Speak with mister Viscuso after assessing Åke’s case. Go from there.”

Ekster tapped his thumb and ringed pinky finger on the wooden desk while he pondered his options. Without another word, he called Åke.

“Hi there!” The one on the other side happily greeted. Dust’s toes curled. “I’m like—twenty minutes away or something. Got something to eat? I’m fucking starving. Who else is over at yours right now?”

“I’ve got bad news.” Ekster said, his voice dipped in ice. “Your Frog called.”

“Who? What? Frog called? W-when? Why? What did he say?”

It sounded as if Åke’s heart had dropped to his stomach. Dust had never heard him stutter over his words like this. She felt for him.

“Cheery guy,” Ekster said, ignoring all of Åke’s questions. “Sounded like the two of you are closely knit.”

“We... No... We’re not.” Were Åke’s dreadfully weak protests.

“I don’t think you should come here anymore.”

“Ekster, what are you saying?” Åke said in a small voice.

“I’m saying you ran your fucking mouth, Åkerman. And I need you out of the picture,” Ekster snapped, losing it within a split-second. Dust put her hand on his upper arm.

“Just be honest, Åke,” she chimed in. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry,” Åke said, barely noticeable.

“For what?” Ekster growled.

“I— I think he went through my phone.”

“Stop lying,” Ekster sneered. “You gave them my name and number, you pawn.”

“What the hell?” Emotion hit Åke’s voice. “You know what? Fuck you too. They did go through my phone yesterday and grilled the fuck out of me about who I was meeting up with.”

“You could’ve lied.”

“I could have!” Åke half-yelled. “But I fucking didn’t. Because you refuse to tell me anything about yourself, and I don’t trust your ass. I told them we met by coincidence and you gave me your card. That’s all I said. Furthermore, I asked them who The Curator is, and—want to know what they said?”

“Just why do you think I’m out to fuck you over, Åke?”

“Because..!” Åke full-on yelled into the receiver. “Because you could traffic me, Curator. And you’d make a whole lot more money with me than any artpiece could ever bring you.”

Dust held in her breath. Her hand slipped off Ekster’s arm.

“Go home,” Ekster finally said, completely cooled down. “Driver is taking you to your legal appointment tomorrow. Based on my lawyer’s feedback, I’m redoing my risk calculations, which will determine whether you can join next Friday’s team meeting. But if you decide yourself to not come, that’s fine with me as well.”

“...W-what?” Åke was silent for a beat. “Ekster, what the fuck? For what it’s worth, they just told me you’re a lowly street-dealer. As long as I’m not being visibly devalued, Frog doesn’t give a shit about what I do. I didn’t tell him your real name, none of that shit. But he has the upper hand and, really, I have no agency. From the moment they took my phone, there was nothing I could’ve done to—”

“Save it.” Ekster briskly interrupted. “What happened, happened. Delete this call log and I’ll text you tomorrow night after nine.”

“Ekster—”

“Goodbye Åkerman.”

...

That Friday was yet another hot and sweaty-type-of day. The heat had terrorized the football field during practice and the girls were all too happy to step under the ice-cold showers afterwards. Mina, who had somewhere to be, was the quickest to get back into her clothes and run out the door. She pulled her best sprint in the last hundred metres and managed to catch the bus heading downtown by a hair.

“Mina! Minaaah!” A teammate shouted behind her. “Hold it for me!”

“Too late is too late!” The bus driver complained.

“Oh shut it, old man!” Mina jokingly retorted, foot in the door. “You know how slow our goalie is.”

“Meanie!” Sally puffed, offering the driver an apologetic glance as she caught her breath at the door.

“Mina! Sal! Wait for us!”

Sally stopped the doors from closing again, under the loud scolding of the driver. Elia, who played defense, jumped into the bus, together with Daria, mid fielder, and Liv, a fellow striker.

“Man, I’m beat,” Daria huffed, as she dragged her feet behind her teammates through the stuffed articulated bus. “Coach must’ve stepped out of bed with the wrong foot today. Didn't you see how he made me take those extra laps! As if they're nothing! Criminal, in this heat, if you ask me.”

“I hope my mom cooks today,” Liv complained, scanning for a place to sit. “I want meat, but my dad's on this veg train lately. Man it’s packed in here. Looks like we’re standing again.”

“Oeh we should get out a stop earlier and drop by NCG,” Elia suggested with a mischievous shine in her eyes while she dangled from a grab handle.

“Nashville Chicken Grill!” Sally and Liv chanted in unison.

“How can you eat fried chicken right after practice!?” Daria exclaimed. “I’d literally puke.”

Liv, Elia and Sally didn’t listen. They were already pre-ordering their fried chicken buckets on the NCG phone app.

“You want boneless wings, Min?” Liv asked Mina.

She shook her head “I’m not joining you guys.”

All of her friends gasped dramatically.

“Who are you!” Sally yelled.

“What's this behavior Wilhelmina Leonhart? Is this how we raised you!?” Elia scolded.

The girls laughed at their inside joke.

“Ohh, I remember now,” Sally mischievously grinned. “Mina’s going on a date!” The group instantly burst out into loud clamoring. A couple of people around them seemed to hear them cheer through their headphones.

“I am not!” Mina yelled in her defense. Of course, no one was listening.

“What! No way! With who!? Don’t tell me it’s Sam from class 3B!” Liv exclaimed.

“Sam is secretly seeing Philippa!” Elia knew.

“Philippa told me she fancies Luca,” Daria pointed out.

“But Luca likes Sam!” Liv remembered.

“Whooohh!” The three girls hollered in unison. “Gotta keep an eye on that!”

“Mina’s gotten herself a rich sugar daddy who’s going to sponsor the club fees.” Sally wiggled her eyebrows at the group. “I overheard all the sauce.”

“Not true!” Mina threw her hands around her friend’s neck and pretended to strangle her. “Your ears are too big! I want to change roomies!”

While Sally loudly and dramatically pretended to die from strangulation, Elia sighed deeply. “I’d date a handsome sugar daddy too if that’d mean we could afford more training hours. Last season was doomed.”

“And the season before that...” Daria put salt on the wound.

“Ugh!” Liv kicked the air to vent her frustration. “Especially those FC Île-de-France bitches piss me the fuck off. Just because their school got a bit of money for a dietist and fancy coach, they think they’re all that. Our team is way better! And they’re all ugly!”

“If he’s rich he doesn’t need to be handsome, though,” Daria thought out loud.

“Gross!” Elia pulled up her nose. “Even you wouldn’t kiss an ugly dude, not even if he sponsored your entire career!”

Sally laughed. “I bet she would!”

Everyone laughed, including Daria. “I can’t believe you have time for dates, though.” She moaned to Mina. “Between practice and exams and all that. It’s like you’ve magically got more hours in a day than me.”

“Between you and Mina, only one gets up at five,” Sally grinned.

“Ugh I hate your guts so much,” Daria sighed, resting her head against Mina’s shoulder. “Top grades of her class, top scorer of the team, always at every party, and still got time left to bag a rich geezer. Teach us your ways, master Min!”

“Shut it, D! I’m taking on a paid gig to ditch my supermarket job. That’s all!”

“This guy is making you work!?” Liv yelled in horror.

“Like I said!” Mina loudly replied. “I’m going for a job! Not a date! I have to run an errand, or something, I don’t know,” she added with a shrug. “Everything better than stocking shelves at the Seven-Twentyfour. Blurgh!” She made some exaggerated gagging noises.

“Girl, as long as you don’t get yourself involved in any weird stuff...” Sally said. “The team needs you harder than jail does.”

“Don’t worry, babes,” Mina grinned at her friend. “You know me. I don’t even like adrenaline.”

The building that matched the location she'd been sent through text didn't really look like much from the outside. In fact, Mina walked past it a few times, before she found the correct door. Doors. *Via Perlacollina, number 214*. She looked at number 212 to her left, the two un-numbered doors in front of her, and number 216 to her right. Something was not adding up. Was it a set up? She grabbed her phone and called the man named Ekster. Engaged line. She called again. Still busy. Alright, she thought to herself. What now.

To her left, the street was empty. To her right, just as deserted. She crossed the road over to the other side and tried to get a peek in through the landscape windows on the first floor. From street level, she couldn't see much but the apartment's ceiling. Technically, she could easily climb a landpost and lurk inside. She could also jump from the landpost and make it onto the roof terrace. A black cat walked the thin ridge of the balustrade. It sat still and looked at Mina with a curiously curling tail. Mina stared back at it. The cat yawned extensively.

Although climbing all the way up the building to sit next to the cat sounded like a good time, Mina decided she might as well just knock on one of the doors first.

No one opened the first door, not even after she had knocked a couple of times, hard. No one answered the second door either. Not a sign of life. Well. So much for a little extra cash. With a sigh, Mina adjusted the sportsbag around her shoulders, which was getting heavy. Now, more than ever, she wanted those travel expenses covered. The bus ride from college all the way to downtown could buy her an entire bucket of fried chicken wings. From the bright side, she now had her afternoon freed up to study for Monday's exam. And perhaps Sally and Daria were up for a movie night.

"Oh—! Hi?"

She'd been so lost in her thoughts between biology and *Doom of the Lost Scroll 3*, that she hadn't at all noticed the scooter driving up to her. A girl, about a head shorter than herself, came to a stop right in front of her. With her foot on the road she took off the iridescent pink helmet. Mina, who was forever wearing a set of football jersey and gym shorts, gawked at the girl's leather minidress, buckled boots and multi-colored blue-pink-purple hair.

"Can I help you?" the cute girl asked, helmet in her hands.

Mina pulled herself together within the blink of an eye and grinned awkwardly, albeit with confidence. "I was supposed to meet someone here. Seems like they're not home. Hehe."

"Are you sure you're at the right place?"

“Uhh, I mean...” Mina glanced at the address on her phone. “Yeah? This is *Via Perlacollina*, right? Or am I entirely in the wrong district? I’m looking for someone called Ekster?”

A smile appeared on the girl’s face. “Mina, is it? Ekster told me you’d be joining today. I’m Prisma.”

Mina was left stupefied while the short girl dismounted her silver Piaggio scooter and unlocked the second front door with a small key. Prisma gestured for Mina to follow her, and pushed the scooter inside.

From the inconspicuous facade, Mina would’ve never guessed the interior to be so incredibly spacious. They entered a garage, with a Mercedes Sprinter van and a black Audi parked inside, which only took up about two-thirds of the space.

“Hi Driver,” Prisma chirped. “Need a hand?”

A humongous man, nearly the height of the Sprinter itself, was in the process of unloading grocery crates from the back of the van.

“No worries, little Pris! They’re very heavy.”

“I can help,” Mina spoke up, regaining her ability to speak the moment she could prove herself to be useful.

The giant turned his balaklava clad head over his shoulders at the sound of her voice. He was wearing tinted sunglasses, and Mina couldn't see his expression, but somehow he seemed to be smiling kindly.

“Aha, a new face!” He exclaimed in a warm and welcome tone.

“Oh my gosh, are you Mina?”

Seconds after the sound of a dog barking and flipflops descending the stairs behind her, Mina was pulled into a tight hug by a taller and busty girl. Her face was pushed into a bunch of dark brown curls and all air left her lungs in the squeeze. She was let go as fast as she had been grabbed.

“Oop, sorry! I’m a hugger! It’s just that I’ve been told so much about you, I feel like we’re already familiar. You’re *exactly* how I imagined. I’m Dust.”

Mina sheepishly grinned at the two girls in front of her. The one who had just hugged her, Dust, was wearing next to nothing, apart from a tube top and a pair of micro shorts. The rest of her body was neck to toe decorated with a fine network of interwoven tattoos and stacks

upon stacks of metal jewelry. Mina felt a bit awkward and underdressed in their presence, but didn't let it get the best of her.

"So is this Ekster person here too? I want to see if he exists and all."

Dust giggled. "Oh, he's here. A bit occupied at the moment. But he asked me to show you around." Dust commenced the start of the tour in the same air of breath. "Welcome to the garage! The black Audi is Ekster's, the white van is everyone's."

"The only set of keys are mine," Driver clarified with a fatherly sternness in his warm voice. Everyone stepped aside to make way for him to carry the groceries up the stairs. Mina had no idea how he was able to see at all, but he nimbly tipped up the steps as if he wasn't lifting five overflowing crates all at once. Mina spotted dried meat from the deli, fresh herbs, wine, cheese, lemons, peaches, grapes, dates and the unmistakable smell of bread straight from the oven. Her stomach reacted with a funny noise.

"Hungry?" Dust grinned.

On the first floor, Mina was introduced to Dust's dog Farello, while Prisma worked on her laptop at the wooden kitchen table and Driver prepared food in the kitchen. After extensive hugs and scratches with the overly enthusiastic poodle, Dust showcased every corner and piece of decoration to Mina.

"I run a little trinket shop on the south-side of the district, so I know who in town makes furniture. Scored some bits and bops secondhand. Grabbed some decorations from Ekster's collection. Looks pretty homey, right?"

The taste wasn't quite eclectic, but calling it coherent wouldn't be right either. However, it felt completely lived in. Mina looked at an interesting copper mirror, its reflective surface polished as if it'd been made yesterday.

"Is this from your shop?"

"No no, the mirror, as well as, well— everything shiny, comes from Ekster's atelier. He's in his office by the way," She nodded her head at the blinded door behind them. "His atelier is through there, up on the third floor," she gestured at a staircase behind the only other door. "His home studio on the second floor can only be accessed through the atelier. He doesn't usually lock that door, but, y'know, better not go nose around there. Take the stairs down from this floor and you'll find yourself at the left front-door. The lay-out is a bit odd, but you'll get used to it. The roof terrace is pretty neat. I want to find a way to create some shade

up there, it's just an unbearable spot in the midday sun. Wouldn't it be so nice too, to chill outside when it's raining? And there's definitely space for a barbecue!"

While Dust chattered away about her interior ideas, Mina wondered why this girl was planning barbecue parties with a group of strangers. But Dust was so captivating, Mina simply went along with it.

"We should hang fairy lights and put speakers up for music!"

"Niiice!" Dust cheered her on. "Driver showed me this type of barbeque with a whole-ass spit roast built in. We could order one like that and I've also been eyeing this pizza oven. We'll need an extra fridge, too."

"You know it was a joke when I challenged you to max out my credit card?"

Mina peeked over Dust's shoulder. In the doorframe to Ekster's office stood a tall and slender guy with glasses and uncombed black hair.

"Heh he, but it was a challenge accepted," Dust grinned. "Am I blocked already?"

"A couple of secondhand furniture won't bankrupt me," assumably Ekster said with a look over his glasses. He cracked his knuckles. "Prisma? How's Åkerman's location?"

Prisma's acrylic nail clicked on her laptop's mousepad. "Hasn't moved an inch."

"Keep an eye on it, for the time being." He pushed his shoulder off the doorframe and walked up to Dust and Mina, his eyes locked onto the latter as if he was freezing her into position. "Mina Leonhart." He said her name with an air of self-content certainty, extending his hand as he approached her. Up close, he towered over Mina, who rose to her feet and returned the handshake with vigor.

At the intensity of her gesture, Ekster's smile widened. He lifted his chin and looked her up and down. Mina instinctively wanted to take a step back, but she stood her ground under his unreadable expression.

"That handshake tells me everything I need to know." He said.

"My grandfather would always say; a strong handshake is a sign of good character," Mina briskly replied.

Ekster's laugh was surprisingly melodic, albeit a bit sarcastic. "The same good character that made you show up here?"

Mina tensed her jaw. "Not sure yet if I'll stay long."

Ekster finally allowed her to slip free of their handshake. Her hand hurt a little. "Let's talk." He stated. "Will you follow me to my office?"

His eyes stuck to her as he moved to turn around. Mina could only throw a glance in Dust's direction, who shot her an encouragingly bright smile in response.

"He's not as scary as he looks," she winked. "But stay on his good side."

Ekster didn't take a seat in his office, so neither did Mina. She felt about the same as that one time she'd been called into the headmaster's office for playing football in the canteen and smashing a window. Although this time, she technically hadn't done anything wrong, yet. As a matter of fact, she was anxiously awaiting for *him* to tell her what moderately illegal activity she was about to be involved in.

"You better not beat around the bush," she said, hoping her voice wasn't noticeably trembling. "Just tell me what this job is, so that I can quickly decide whether it's for me or not." She wiped her damp hand palms off on her gym shorts. That handshake show-down sure had been neck-to-neck.

Ekster pulled a single paper from his desk drawer and flipped it around for her to read. She stared at the bold title on top of the document.

"Seriously?" She raised her eyebrows. "An NDA?"

Ekster smiled without affection and handed her a pen. "Just making sure you know that when you run your mouth, I'll sue you so hard you'll feel it seven generations down the line."

Mina quickly signed the paper. "Consider me mute."

"Much appreciated." Ekster snatched the paper and walked over to the office printer in the corner, where he smacked the signed NDA under the scanner and pressed the green button. "Now —"

A knock on the door interrupted him, which he didn't seem to like. "*Ouais?*" he snarled, in what sounded like his native language.

Dust and her curls peered around the corner. "Dial it down a notch with the attitude, will you?" she scolded. "Max's here."

Ekster's mood lifted. "Fantastic. Send him in."

Dust opened the door and a short kid with baggy clothes and fireball red hair styled like a hedgehog on fire strolled into the office. His green eyes were electric with mischief, and he wore a wide grin on his face as he loudly chewed on a piece of pink gum.

“What's up, Boss?” He nonchalantly but excitedly said to Ekster, while he held up his fist to bump. To Mina’s surprise, Ekster returned the gesture, albeit with a bit of a funny expression on his stiff features.

“Sup,” Max said to Mina, only briefly looking at her, before taking a second take. “Yooo! No way!” He exclaimed, pointing at her face. “You’re that Leonhart girl? You play soccer for Saint Bernard’s College! What's your name, what's your name?” He snapped his fingers as he dug his brain.

“Mina?” Mina offered.

“Whoa, yeah! Mina Leonhart!” Max stared at her in awe. “I know your brother, Tomas.”

“For real?” Mina lit up at the mention of her second-oldest brother.

“My buddy’s brother hangs with Tomas. I’ve seen him around once or twice. You two look alike for sure! My name's Max, by the way. Dope meeting you in real life.”

Mina happily bumped his fist. “You hang around uptown, right? I might’ve seen you skate near Central Mall—”

They were interrupted by the sound of Ekster smacking another piece of paper on the desk.

“Please sign this Max. Let's save the getting to know each other for the living room.”

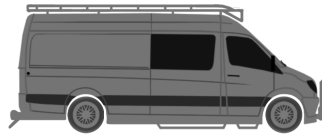
“Aight, no prob,” Max rapped as he grabbed the pen. “What's this? A non-disclosure agreement? Whoa! Okay, okay, shit’s getting real now.” He excitedly dotted down the three letter word M A X. “Now what’s next?”

“Now,” Ekster said, with a cunning little smile that made the rational part of Mina’s brain uncomfortable and the adventurous side more than a little curious, “Imma pitch you all a little plan I’ve been cooking up.”

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END



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