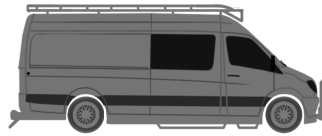


First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 7 - Match Making



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 7

Match Making

“Or... just write me a check, *genau*? Like a normal person.”

With his phone pressed against his ear Ekster headed toward the main street, twisting and turning his torso in an attempt to avoid touching any of the sweaty passersby in the crowded alley. God, how he hated spending Saturdays downtown. The brewing heat trapped between the city walls boiled his brain like minced meat in hot stew, slowing his cognitive thinking down to the point of making him feel silly.

“But where would be the fun in that, Mina?” He told the Bavarian girl on the other side of the line. She was a tough one to convince; nothing wrong with a little push-back.

“Donations are donations, sir. I don't really know why you'd have to make them more fun, per se. If you're not planning on simply donating money to the college sports facilities, don't contact me again. *Klar*? I don't have time to take on any side gigs.”

Ekster clenched his jaw. He felt the tension in his neck slowly build up.

“Final proposition.”

“Try me.”

“There will be a team meeting. Come and hear out the game plan. You can always drop out, no hard feelings. I swear you'll never hear from me again.”

A silence. He could just about catch the continuous tapping sound of a mechanical pencil.

“Where?” She finally said. The curiosity in her voice was unmistakably present.

“My place. Downtown.”

“Will you cover travel expenses?”

Ekster frowned. Students were something else.

“...Sure.”

“Will there be other girls? Around my age? How old are you actually? How will I know you're not some predator?”

Ekster rolled his head in his neck. Too many questions at once. She rambled like Åke.

“Meet me in person and judge for yourself. Twenty-eight. Two girls, younger than me, older than you.”

“*Ach zo!* Two girls? You should’ve led with that! I’ll come to your mysterious get-together. And just so you know, I have trained in boxing for seven years. Don’t think I won’t beat you up if you try something funny!”

“Can’t wait.”

“You have my number now. Text me the date. Emails are so lame. Ah, I have exams coming up, so no weekdays for me. My friend is calling me on the other line, I have to go. *Auf Wiedersehen!*”

“*Ciao, Mina,*” Ekster mumbled to a dead line. He put his phone away and immediately jerked his head to effectively release the tension in his cervical vertebrae, followed by a slow crack of each finger joint while he organised his thoughts. Mina should be locked now, as long as she joins the meeting. The redhead was still nowhere to be found. But everything else was pretty much in order. Driver was working on the car and Prisma was doing her thing. Ekster felt his stress levels slowly decrease as he leisurely strolled his way back to Manzoni’s. He made a little detour to a corner shop where he purchased two packages of Silver Sand cigarettes. At the counter he spent about two seconds wrecking his brain which brand Åke smoked, and paid for one that closest resembled the packaging that had been thrown in his lap back then. He supposed that Åke probably wasn’t too picky anyway. He also got some snacks for Farello.

Dust and Åke were deeply engrossed in a conversation when he returned. Åke snickered at something Dust said, who was the first to notice Ekster. She smiled at him and winked. Ekster nodded.

“Looks like the thing that was on your mind has been resolved,” she brightly commented.

He looked like that?

“I suppose it has.” He tossed the red and black cigarette package on the table and pointed from it to Åke.

“For me?” The blonde jumped in his seat. “You remember—?” His voice got stuck in his throat.

Ekster left Åke to deal with whatever he had going on, and showed Dust the dog snacks.

“Can he have this?”

Dust nodded enthusiastically, while Farello jumped and barked around like a possessed being.

“Farello, down!” Dust sternly demanded. The giant poodle immediately sat down in front of Ekster, his round black eyes begging like he had never received any food in his entire life.

“Good boy!” Dust praised cheerfully. “Try to feed him yourself.”

“There is something about this statue that still bothers me,” Ekster said in an attempt to bring the conversation back to business, while Farello nearly bit his hand off in excitement. “Fucking hell, animals,” he cursed under his breath and offered the remaining packaged snacks to Dust.

“Keep them at your place,” she beamed. “You’ll be best friends in no-time. Come again about the statue?”

Ekster sighed while he slowly peeled the plastic wrapper from his fresh pack of cigarettes. “When I found her, I didn’t think about it twice, but she’s covered in significant water damage. As if she has stood outside, or something. Which she hasn’t. Ever. According to my research at least.” Ekster lit one up and let the overly-familiar sensation of nicotine wash over him. “I checked the material composites. Found salt residue at the foot of the pedestal. The only thing that I can conclude, for now, is an insane mismatch between the statue’s paperwork and the story its body tells.”

“Poetic,” Åke mumbled, cigarette in mouth.

“If it came from Paros, seawater isn’t out of the ordinary,” Dust pointed out.

Ekster shook his head. “It’s Paros marble. We have no idea where the statue was made. Besides, this damage was relatively new.”

When no-one else knew what to add to the topic, Ekster simply shrugged. “I’ll have to cross-reference my research with Dust’s to determine whether cleaning the statue benefits her value at all. Whatever fits her best, I’d say. What’s your experience with marble from the Classics? Better restored or in its original state?”

The two last questions, obviously directed at Åke, were met with an oblivious look.

“You’re asking *moi*? I know balls about all that ancient shit.”

“Bullshit,” Ekster snapped. “Selling art is all you do.”

Åke laughed dismissively. “Oh, yeah, but no ancient statues. The only thing I ever sold is contemporary art.”

Dust broke out into a rolling laughter while Ekster exclaimed; “Contemporary!?” He was gobsmacked. “Contemporary is worth fuckall!”

Åke made some vague noises while trying to hold back his own laugh. “See, that really depends on *how* you sell it.”

Ekster sunk back into his seat and inhaled as much smoke in one go as his lungs would allow. Unbelievable. First the tracker, now this. Ekster wondered how many more curve-balls he could tolerate, before he had to kick Åke’s troublesome ass from the team. In conclusion, this man was useful for client vesting and general preparations, but an absolute waste of time when it came down to art research.

“I can try to piece together a neat little sales story for you,” Åke said after he and Dust had laughed it out. “But I’m afraid that’s all, in this case.”

“She’s already sold,” Ekster growled. He tapped his lighter on the table. “There is something else though.”

“Shoot.”

“Figure out who the property manager is.”

Åke’s confident grin dropped. “You haven’t yet?”

Why would he bother to ask if he had? “Can you do it?”

Åke shrugged. “I’ll attempt a little digging this weekend.”

“Great. Thanks. I was going to stake out at the church for a whole week, but this would save me a lot of time.”

“Hm. Dedicated. I can’t promise any—”

Åke was interrupted mid-sentence by the ringtone of his own phone, but didn’t immediately answer the call after grabbing the device from the back pocket of his jeans. With a deep sigh he put the phone to his ear. The person on the other side of the line spoke first.

“Lemme see,” Åke replied with a thick voice, after which he briefly glanced at the screen. “Like three minutes? Give me five though.”

Dust pulled her eyebrows up at Ekster, as if checking whether he understood what this conversation was about. Ekster shrugged and fixated his attention somewhere in the opposite direction.

“No, no, stay where you are.” Åke continued. “I’ll come to you. Bye.”

He crushed the half-smoken cigarette in the ash tray and got up from his seat. The confident grin was back on his face like it had never left.

“Well, lady and gent, it’s been great. But I’ve got to run.” He leaned over to Dust and kissed her on the cheek. “T’was lovely meeting you, Dust. You’re a doll. Can’t wait to see you again.”

Dust grinned at the superficial compliment. “Leaving already? Ekster planned on having dinner together.”

“Did he now?” Åke reacted with a veil of feigned disbelief. “Sadly I’ll have to miss out on that part of the date. But enjoy yourselves,” he added with a suggestive smirk while he put his hideously trendy sunglasses back on. This man’s head was deep in the gutter at all times, it seemed. Åke didn’t wait for anyone to regain the ability to speak.

“Think of me when ya’ll are doing it! *Ciao!*”

With those as his last words, he strutted off and disappeared into the crowd. Dust turned to Ekster with an amused ear-to-ear grin plastered all over her face.

“Well, well, well. And where the heck did you dig up this gem, Curator?”

Ekster shook his head in defeat. “Don’t even ask. I had to extort some characters I’d rather never meet again. The infrastructure around this man’s life is an iron cage. I mean, it’s crazy that I even managed to get a hold of him. Took me a hot minute. They make him live out in the fucking woods. And, as you can see—” he gestured at the direction Åke left in, “They keep him booked and busy all the fucking time.”

“Hmmm?” Dust mused. “You clearly have your mind set. Surely he doesn’t fly a little too close to the sun?”

Ekster sat back. The parasol’s shadow dropped over his face.

“I tend to bet on the benefit of the doubt.”

“Any chance you’ve also been trying to involve a teenage boy with tomato-red hair?”

Ekster raised an eyebrow. “How come you know?”

Dust giggled. “Some kid was here when you left to pick up that call. He said you’ve been *tailgating his ass* and asked us if you were a cop.”

Ekster was dumbstruck. “Me!?” He exclaimed, louder than he had intended. “Fuck me, do I look like a cop?” He whispered in exasperation after people around them had stopped looking.

Dust chuckled. “I wouldn’t have made that mistake. You must’ve left quite the impression.”

Ekster snorted. “Didn’t seem like the type that’d chicken out easily. I saw the kid nick a pair of three-thousand euro sneakers at Central Mall.”

“That’s what he said too. Åke gave him your phone number, told him to give you a ring if he was interested in stealing some more expensive things.”

“Very smooth.”

Dust shrugged. “He knows how to get a message across. The kid was excited.”

“That’s good,” Ekster mumbled. “Hey, would you come with me to that church?”

Dust laughed. “I’m not inclined to enter catholic churches,” she replied airily.

Ekster huffed. “Nothing holy about that place. And seeing as I haven’t gone up in flames yet, I’m pretty sure you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I’m too young and beautiful to face eternal condemnation from a cursed statue,” Dust joked.

“Don’t scare me,” Ekster rolled his eyes. “So I guess that’s a no.”

“Ask me again next week,” Dust mused. “I haven’t even crossed the Alps since moving here. It’s been three years. You sure are pushing my boundaries.”

“Good.” Ekster waved down the waiter. “And I’m not inclined to make friends,” he added off-the-cuff. “The more boundaries we push, the further we get in life. The bill, please.”

Dust grinned brightly and Farello barked at the waiter.

Moments later, Ekster was handed an enormous bill, which included at least eight cocktails from the table next to them.

“Ah, what the fuck,” he growled. “That fucking cassanova.”

Dust could only laugh her ass off again.

He heard back from Åke much sooner than he had expected to. Around dusk that same day, his phone rang so unexpectedly loud it caused him a near heart-attack.

“*Que?*” he hissed, failing miserably at not sounding annoyed.

“Whoa, am I interrupting something?”

“No,” Ekster pinched his nosebridge and pushed his glasses back up. “No. What’s up?”

Åke cleared his throat. “I overheard some stuff. They’re moving objects to the Salon tonight. I don’t know if the statue’s included, nor do I have a name for the property manager. But I’ve heard complaints that he only ever stops by once every fortnight, on Saturdays. So

today. Hence the moving, tonight.” He ended the message with a soft sigh. He sounded dead-tired.

“I see.” Part of this information was not new to Ekster. From where he was hiding in the bushes, he was observing in real-time how selected artifacts were lifted into armored vans. “Thanks for the info.” He scanned the group of moving men through his binoculars. They continuously transported large wooden boxes from the church to the nearest-by van. There was no telling whether the statue had already left the building. One figure was standing off to the side, doing nothing but barking orders. There was a ring with keys around their belt.

“Least I could do,” Åke mumbled in his ear. “Can we quickly chat about Monday’s meeting with your lawyer? Are you coming along?”

Ekster took a split second to recalculate the change of subject. “Are you a child? It’s none of my business.”

There was some rustling on the other side of the line. “Oh, I see. But I don’t know what to say.”

Ekster’s patience slipped away from him quicker than he managed to reel it back in. “What the hell, don’t be retarded. It’s your fucking life.”

“What are you so short-tempered for? Didn’t you get laid?”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

“Hmm? At least let me sleep over tomorrow.”

He was about to curse some ungodly things at Åke, but his hiding spot was sadly more important than venting his annoyance. “Stay at your own house,” he hissed instead.

“Awh, come on man,” the other whined. “Don’t make me get up at four. Besides, someone needs to drive me.”

Ekster could almost hear him pouting. There were little things he despised as much as helpless grown men and he was slowly finding out that Åke was really fucking good at acting a little pathetic.

“Fucking hell, you’re useless. Get yourself a taxi, or something. Figure it out.”

Åke mumbled some inaudible things that sounded like insults without much passion behind them.

“See you tomorrow?”

Ekster sighed. “Fine. I’m hanging up now.” He didn’t wait for Åke’s reply as he watched how doors of the last van in line were thrown shut and the keyholder closed down the church.

Ekster waited for a good ten minutes after all vans had left the property, before he crept his way out of the bushes. Time to see if his statue was still where she should be.

Of course she was. The Salon preparations had made his job even easier than it already was, by clearing away a couple of the worthless marble works that had surrounded her. He quickly took a few pictures of the updated scene.

The atmosphere inside the small church had slightly improved after the decluttering. Ekster sat down on the cool granite floor with his legs crossed and stared up at the marble statue. She was as beautiful as ever, in her immovable state. The moon softly illuminated the space through the church's modest stained glass. Just like last time, there was just enough earth-shine to see. Ekster summoned a small but powerful light torch from his bag and looked up into the vaulted ceiling. It had crossed his mind that the water damage could be attributed to a leakage in the roof, but studying the space now, that seemed unlikely. Although the fresco was definitely up for restoration, no visible signs of external moisture painted the flakey, colored plaster. He redirected the light to the statue. As he traced the masterfully carved silhouette from top to bottom, a sudden memory from childhood uninvitedly crept up on him.

The weight of cold marble in his hands, the grainy texture of wet sand and the sensation of gushing water washing over. The reveal of ominous creatures, crudely but intentionally carved in a slab of red stone. The depth of the crevices, the hollowness of their eyes. The impending doom.

Ekster blinked away his own recollections. He wasn't superstitious, but to regard art as man's immortalized manifestation had been integral to the teachings of his forming years. Humans chant and build. They dream, pray, revere, submit and create. We perish, and art prevails. He thought of his mother's hands. Of her fingers tracing lines of unreadable words at night and with her voice clear as day in his head, she spoke to him in his mother's tongue:

"For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made...
My son... Understand we are capable of creation too. Have I not created you? Have your hands not brought forth music? We create, and ought to protect what has been created before

us. Know where you come from, cherish your forefathers. It is through the burden of our creations that we live forever.”

Ekster fought back the nauseatingly nostalgic homesickness. Mentally, he challenged himself to travel north after this job was done. Go see your mother, you coward, he thought to himself. Guilt could be immobilising.

“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son.”

Reassuring words to tell himself, in theory. In practice, his father’s sins had driven him into a life of crime. He laughed hollowly at the condemnation of his own fate and got up from the chalky floor.

On his way out, he walked past a couple of interesting-looking amulets, there for the taking. Just a little something to keep him busy at night.

The rhythmic clacking of Prisma's nails on the keyboard filled the silence of the attic. Ekster, who was used to working alone, appreciated Prisma’s quiet concentration and was a bit disturbed when Dust and Driver loudly entered the room, in the middle of an apparently hilarious conversation. Prisma, too, nearly jumped off her seat from Driver’s boisterous laughter.

“What a story!” Driver hollered with his loud voice. “Reminds me of that time when I hunted down a bison for four days in the Balkan mountains near—bahahaha! Looks like we have pissed off The Curator!”

“No please, make yourselves at home.” He kind of meant that, but Dust and Driver's immediate shut-down made him think he’d made it sound a bit more sarcastic than intended.

Dust snickered softly as she sat down on one of the workbench stools next to Prisma.

“Did you manage to move the furniture in?” Prisma quietly inquired.

Dust had been completely appalled by the empty state of the apartment when she had walked in two days ago, and had impromptu started to browse through secondhand furniture websites. More than happy to have one worry less, Ekster had given Dust his card and all creative freedom, a task she had excitedly taken on with both hands. With Driver and the new Mercedes Sprinter she picked up the purchased furniture from all over town, which then had to be lifted up to the first floor of the apartment.

“Yeah, yeah,” she nodded. “Through the window! Go check it out in a bit! I found this, just gorgeous, leather couch for you-would-not-believe the price. A wooden dining table too, with a dozen sort-of matching chairs. Some decoration, you know, something to bring a bit of life into this place.” She contentedly flicked her hair out of her face and looked over at the amulet that Ekster had just refocussed his attention to. He had brushed up the weathered gold, which was now brightly shining back at him under the spotlight of his desk lamp. He held it up for Dust to see.

“Medieval brooch. Has some inscription in old-French.”

“Cute,” Dust commented with a tilted head. “What does it say?”

“Not sure. Gift of Love, or something. I think it's an amulet with love-magic. I've seen a couple of these, but not often as a brooch. They're usually pendants.”

He went back to look at the object through his jewelers loupe. Pretty cute indeed. The silence returned to the room while Driver made himself comfortable for a nap in one of the reading chairs and Dust's curiosity got the best of her as she nosed through the objects on the shelves behind Ekster. She inevitably couldn't sit still, nor quiet, for all that long.

“You really like jewelry, don't you?”

Ekster hummed. “I enjoy workmanship with raw materials and displays of true skill.” He turned around on his stool and handed Dust the brooch, to which he had attached a little paper tag for identification. “Third rack from the right, second shelf from the top.”

“Oehh, more gold things! This one's pretty!” She held up a circular brooch of a snake eating its own tail.

“Want to have it?” he shrugged away Dust's surprised expression. “I collect just for the sake of it. If you see anything worth selling, I wouldn't mind giving some things a second life. Here.” He picked up a hairpin with ornate silverwork from a shelf nearby. “This is cute too. Looks kind of trendy, right? Twentieth century.” He twisted the pin around between his gloved fingers and observed how its hanging ornaments danced in the light. He extended the jewelry out to Dust, who carefully received it with amazement in her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

Ekster waved his hand in the air. “Make someone happy with it.”

“It's so beautiful, I might steal it from you and wear it myself,” she said with a smirk.

“Don’t break it,” he warned with a serious expression. “The chain-work is a pain to mend correctly.” He caught Prisma staring at them from the corner of his eye. “Want to have something too?”

Prisma jumped. “No! No, that's not— I’m good.” Her voice trailed off as she spoke.

Dust grinned excitedly. “I’ll find you something cute!” She turned back to the storage units and went over all objects one by one. That’d keep her busy for a bit. Ekster shot Prisma an amused look before opening his laptop to catalogue the brooch.

After a while, Prisma joined Dust on her quest for a suitable trinket and Ekster got up for a stretch and a cigarette. Just when he found the silver-colored box underneath a pile of paper, his phone rang. An unknown caller. Behind him, Dust stopped chattering.

“New business perhaps?” She suggested, after glancing at the calling screen.

“The area code is from Greater-Paris,” Ekster noted. A foreboding feeling crept up on him, forcing him to crack his fingers before accepting the call. He put the phone on speaker and waited for the other person to speak. A heavy moment of silence followed.

“Am I speaking with The Curator?” a buttery-smooth male voice started the conversation in French.

Ekster gave it a second, before answering in English: “You are.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the man stubbornly replied in his own language. “I heard you spoke French.”

“From who?”

The Frenchman laughed as if he had heard a great joke. “Right, right. See, I don’t nose around in business that isn’t mine. I expect the same from the sophisticated folk around me. But. Well. I guess you’re different.”

Ekster sat back down on the stool at his desk and looked around the room. Everyone present was intently listening in.

The man smoothly continued: “Over the years, I’ve heard a lot of whispers going around about The Curator. Now usually, words from the streets have little to do with myself, of course. But recent unfoldings have, how should I say, brought the streets a little too close for my liking. Curator, you’re in your twenties?”

Ekster kept his mouth shut.

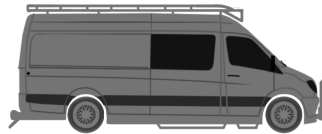
“Oh, la, la, you’re difficult to work with,” the person tutted, unfazed. “Want to get down to business? It seems like our paths have finally crossed, but through something I’m extremely

protective over. Parental, perhaps? Young people are a pain, you just can't control them. Curiosity gets the best of them. Not much I can do about that. Now please tell me. How have you been enjoying my Åke?"

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END



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