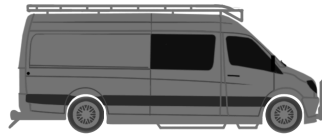


First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 10 - On a Roll



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 10

On a Roll

The morning dew hadn't even lifted from the grass when the girls of Saint Bernard's soccer team ran their warm up laps around the field. Mina ran upfront together with Liv, who was definitely hungover.

"But where were you last night? You totally missed out on all the fun, Min." Despite her tired complexion, Liv wasn't out of breath in the slightest; she might be the only girl in the team who had better endurance than Mina. Mina's kick velocity still beat Liv's by a mile, though. "Dating?" There was never too little air in her lungs for some teasing. Mina shoved the other striker with her shoulder.

"None of your business!"

"Less yapping, more lapping!" Their coach scolded the girls loudly.

"Coach! Time my speed!" Mina yelled before dashing off into a sprint, leaving her nosy friend far behind her.

"Mornin', Curator!" Driver rolled out from underneath the Sprinter van, pliers in hand and oil smeared all over his balaclava.

Ekster jumped a little. He still had to get used to people greeting him when he returned home. Especially in the morning. He wasn't at all an early riser naturally, but in the midst of a busy schedule he barely slept one minute at all. Cycling helped him to destress and ease into the day.

“Morning,” Ekster grunted. He hung his bike up on two hooks against the wall and removed his helmet. Meanwhile, he tried to remember where he had left his cigarettes.

“They're up in the kitchen,” Driver informed, as if reading his mind. Or perhaps simply aware of his routine. “Gotta balance the good with the bad, am I right?” The large man hollered, already back underneath the car. “Bring me some of that strong coffee you make, too. It's a good kick under the ass. And you, eat something. Nicotine is no breakfast.”

Ekster smirked weakly. “Save the fatherly worries for your daughter, Driver. They're wasted on me.”

Behind him, the front door opened and Prisma's lilac hair peeked around the corner.

“Oh, you're up,” she chirped at Ekster.

“Little Priss!” Driver hollered as a greeting.

Prisma cringed a bit at the nickname, but said nothing of it. “I brought breakfast,” she said as she pushed her scooter inside. “Have you eaten already?”

“Have you had an unauthorized lifestyle change this quarter? What happened?”

The short woman with round glasses wasn't all too pleased with Åke's weight and body measurements. She flung the measuring tape around her neck and punched the numbers into an excel sheet.

“I'll put you on an intermittent fasting plan effective by tomorrow. You stop lifting heavy weights and reduce your swimming sessions to once every fortnight. Go cycling instead.”

“But I enjoy swimming,” Åke whined. “I'm fine with the diet shit, but don't take all good things away from me, Marz.”

“You enjoy cycling just fine,” Doctor Marzia scolded.

A piece of paper rolled out of the printer. His physical examiner picked it up and scrutinized the numbers.

“Compared to last quarter, your fat percentage went down by two point two percent, your muscle mass increased by, oh my goodness, three point seven percent. You gained five point one kilogram. Åke, these numbers are absolutely preposterous. What's going on with you?”

Åke flexed his triceps. “But I still look good, don't you think?” He turned to the full-body mirror and checked out his back.

Marzia swatted the sheet of paper between him and his reflection. “Stop that. Pay attention. My opinion matters even less than yours. It's your job to stay your size. This type of nonsense doesn't serve anyone.”

“Y'know many models are much bigger than I am,” Åke offered as a form of self-defense.

Marzia decidedly rolled her office chair away from her computer and threw Åke his shirt.

“Who cares about your pretext modeling things. I'll immediately update your diet and workout plan. I won't tell Jean-Claude about your changes, as it's the first time you're this far out of line. Make sure you look as expected next quarter and we'll keep this between us. Also, I'll just keep repeating myself, try to quit smoking.”

Farello barked excitedly and ran ahead of Dust down the stairs to the shopfloor. The poodle jumped up against the front door and opened it, welcoming the shop's part-timer with a wagging tail. The morning was unfolding to be a warm but breezy one, bringing a pleasant sea-wind along with it into the small shop. The windchimes caught a bit of movement as the door opened and closed. A copper bell sounded a warm welcome.

“Morning!” Eulalia greeted in tune with the surrounding melodies.

“Hiya, thanks for coming in earlier today,” Dust said as she opened the cash register.

“My pleasure,” Eulalia grinned, already fooling around with Farello. “What’s up for today?”

“I’ll be away to run some errands this afternoon. There are a couple of customer orders ready to be packed and shipped in the back, but apart from that, nothing special’s going on. Just relax and give the walk-ins some attention.”

“Cool! Great weather today, right? At least the mornings seem to be cooling down, finally,” the part-timer chatted away while Dust checked her hair and makeup in the mirror behind the counter. “I think it’s going to be raining soon.”

“Hm? Really, how so?”

“It’s in the air. After the weekend, the weather will turn.”

“That’s a shame.”

Eulalia kissed Farello. “It’ll be good for the grass.”

“That’s true. It’s starting to look like a desert out there.”

“Haha, yeah. How’s your mom doing? Still trekking the Sahara? Where’s she at now?”

Dust re-did the bun on top of her head. “No clue. Probably some place I’ve never heard of before. She sent me some handmade beads. I put them over there.” Up-side-down, she pointed at the jewelry drawers in the corner of the shop. “We don’t have the same taste, so I’m selling them.” She looked back in the mirror and applied her favourite lipstick.

Eulalia immediately went over to nose around at the new goodies. “They’re cute. I like ‘em. Your mom is so cool. I hope I’ll get to meet her someday.”

Dust laughed. The very image of her mom visiting a city was absurd. “That’d be fun.”

“Mom! I’m off!” Max yelled up the stairs of their small city apartment, one foot out the door and on his skateboard.

“Will you be home for dinner?” His mom yelled back at him from where she was having breakfast with his younger half-sister.

“He won't!” The snotty kid predicted.

“I won't!” Max hollered.

“I can see the future!” María yelped proudly.

“Text me if you're sleeping at a friend's place tonight!” his mom warned. “And don't you dare come home smelling of marijuana again!”

“My name is María too!” The child noticed.

“Mom!” Max complained.

“Just remember what I said! *Te amo!*”

“*Te amo!*” María parroted happily.

“Ai, love ya'll too,” Max said, just loud enough for them to hear. “*Ciao!*” he slammed the door behind him and took off to what he in his head referred to as The HQ: Heist Quarters.

Ekster hadn't even noticed Dust and Farello coming up to the attic, and was completely blindsided by the large dog jumping up at him to lick his face when he returned from a cigarette break.

“What the f—”

“Farello, down! Farello!”

Farello deliberately chose to ignore Dust's commands. It was much more fun to overwhelm Ekster with attention.

“Farello, no! Off!” Mina ordered sternly. “Come here.” Farello instantly gave ear to the girl and politely sat next to her at the foot of the reading chair. “Good boy!” Mina praised, conjuring a dog treat from her cross-body bag.

“Ohh, you're good!” Dust laughed in surprise, while Ekster quietly regained his composure. “He usually listens to absolutely no-one but me.”

“My parents have five German Shepherds at home,” Mina said as she went back to shopping on her phone. “I basically raised them all. Ekster, look, you reckon this one will fit all of our targets?”

She held up her phone to show Ekster a black sportsbag.

“Hard to say from a picture,” he said with wide eyes, the bewilderment barely gone from his system. “Is it in stock at the mall?”

“Lemme check.”

“If you're so bad with animals, why do you have a cat?” Prisma spoke up from behind her laptop.

“Cat? I don't have a cat. Where did you get that idea?”

Prisma pointed at the roof terrace, where a small black cat was curiously peering back at them. “It's here literally every day. I assumed it was yours.”

The cat meowed and Farello's ears rose back up to full alertness.

“Oh, that cat,” Ekster huffed as he sat down next to Dust at his desk. “Must be some stray.”

“You should give it some water!” Mina reacted in horror at Ekster's dismissal towards the animal. “She looks a bit malnourished...”

“It resembles Ekster,” Dust snickered.

“Haha, so true!” Mina grinned gleefully. “It must be lonely and wanting to make friends!”

Ekster glared at her through the jeweler's loop he had just mounted on his glasses.

“It's a cat.” He snarled. “I'm sure it's fine as it is.”

“Oh, what do you know!?” Mina dismissed with a matching amount of sass. “Come on, Pris. Let's try to give her some snacks.”

Ekster beheld with a vacant expression how Prisma and Mina attempted to befriend the black cat, before returning his attention to the stolen jewelry on his bench.

“Help me finish this shit up,” he told Dust with gritted teeth, referring to the job of cleaning the jewels. “Before I get the feeling I’m losing money shining these scraps.”

“Aye, no problem.” Dust sat down next to him and grabbed a silver ring. “I’ll save us work and keep this for myself.”

“Max just arrived,” Mina informed with her head around the door and the black cat already in her arms. “Can we finally go shopping now?”

Åke dumbly stared at the six digit number printed in black and white on the contract in front of him.

“Cigar?” Viscuso the lawyer offered with a toothy grin, presenting him a velvet-lined wooden case holding a perfect row of gold label cigars.

“I’ll have to pass,” Åke said, refusing to take his eyes off the paper in front of him, as if the number would be taken away from him as swiftly as it had been revealed.

“I’d offer you a cigarette,” Viscuso gabbled away, “but I sat through a two hour meeting with the Curator first thing this morning. The rascal smokes like he’s got a third lung for it, and so I’ve run all out! My apologies. Truly an unbecoming situation on my part. Allow me to pour you a glass of my bestest whiskey! Looks like it’d do you well, my friend. Your cheeks have turned a touch pale.”

Åke’s hand unwillingly trembled as he accepted the golden liquid. He bottomed up the drink.

“Easy, friend! Midday has barely popped her head around the corner. Care for a top-up?” The lawyer poured the glass two fingers full.

“This number,” Åke apprehensively said, “it’s triple checked and double confirmed?”

“Mister Åkerman!” The man hollered, catching Åke off guard. “Of course it's correct! What do you think my job is!?”

“I— okay. Sorry.” Åke weakly settled. “But it's... a lot, no?”

“Nonsense!” Viscuso seemed genuinely angry for a hot second. “*Santo Dio*, you're messing with my blood pressure. Don't make me defend the Curator’s calculations. Believe me, they're crunched to the tits. Seventeen percent of profit is the bare minimum. Don't forget for one minute you’re carrying *the most* risk and adding *the most* value out of everyone. You're making that Curator money just by a matter of association.” He pointed his cigar in Åke’s direction. “I can only guess what exploitative numbers that French aristocrat of yours makes you work for, but better let go fast of that brainwashed mentality you were raised in, son. This is the real world you're dealing with now. And she ain't pretty. We’ll have to thread your way to freedom with the utmost level of precalculated strategy. Your debts with the French are serious monkey business. Now sign that paper, son. Neither of us are getting any younger and above all, it's nearly lunchtime.”

Åke scratched the side of his nose and finally lifted the emerald fountain pen that’d been waiting for him next to the contract. His name ended up looking a bit silly and un-important next to Ekster’s elaborate bit of swirls.

“Congratulations, Mister Åkerman!” Viscuso's bombastic voice rose above his thoughts. “A first step in the right direction! You now hold the Heist Club and all its assets. Cheers!”

Whilst Åke returned to ground level, Ekster was waiting for him right in front of the entrance. His car was parked illegally but he was leisurely leaning against the hood, smoking a cigarette. Upon seeing Åke, a smug grin appeared on his face.

“Took your sweet time signing that paper, didn't you. Get in the back, before those cops turn around and write me a ticket. Oh, and Åkerman—” he stuck out his hand. “Looking forward to being in business with you.”

Åke felt like swatting the hand away, but decided to be a good sport about it in the end. “In the hopes we won't fuck each other over,” he said instead, returning the gesture without too much flair.

Ekster chuckled as he sat down behind the wheel. Åke ended up next to Max and Mina on the backseat, while Dust held Farello by the collar to prevent him from jumping onto Åke's lap.

“Hi gorgeous,” she greeted him from the passenger's seat.

“In all honesty, I still half expected you to walk,” Ekster said with the cigarette still in his mouth as he maneuvered the car back into the traffic-jammed street. “And scour your way back to Frog with your tail between your legs.”

Åke scoffed. “Don't insult me.”

“Can you not smoke in the car when Farello's here?” Dust asked Ekster.

“What's Frog?” Max wanted to know.

“Åke's real boss,” Mina apparently already knew.

“Damn, he must be a solid agent,” Max said. “Y'know people are so mad about your quick rise to fame they say you're an industry plant.”

“What's an industry plant?” It was Åke's turn to be oblivious.

“You are.” Ekster responded.

“What! No!” Max jumped into Åke's defense. “He's from the Digging Grounds! No offense bro, but who would invest in some poor guy?”

“Bro,” Åke said, leaning over to look past Mina at Max. “I grew up among French aristocrats. Claiming I’m from the countryside is a total misrepresentation.”

“Man, what? Countryside-dude is your wholeass public image.” He sounded a bit disappointed.

“Industry plant,” Ekster coughed.

Dust laughed.

Mina had been having a good look at Åke, now that he was sitting so close. “Your vibe is kind of totally different in real life,” she finally said. “Actually, you look a bit odd.”

“Mina!” Dust exclaimed.

“I said *odd*, not *ugly*!” Mina reclaimed. “I just think, if I’d pass you in the streets, I wouldn’t recognize you so quickly.”

“No one ever does,” Åke shrugged. “It’s all a performance. You’ll see at the mall, no one turns their heads for some odd-looking countryside guy.”

Central Mall was, funnily enough, not located at the center of anything. The name was derived from its founder, Sir Thomas-William Windsor Central. Established in 1745, Central Mall expanded to over a dozen locations across the entire megalopolis, covering over three million square metres of shopping floor in total.

Central Mall was a place for clothes and accessories in the first place, known for its excellent assortment and à la minute tailoring services. Whatever you would ever be needing to wear, could be found at Central Mall.

Prisma had been waiting for them near the underground parking exit. With her scooter, she’d been able to avoid traffic and get to the agreed location much quicker. She stood with

her legs crossed against a glowing storefront, perking up when she finally saw a bunch of familiar faces. Max was the first to notice her, and excitedly waved his arms in the air. Prisma awkwardly waved back and shuffled over to them.

“Stuck in traffic?”

“God be with these fucking roads,” Ekster sighed.

“Hiya Priss,” Åke greeted. “Looking cute today.”

Prisma put her purse in front of her body while her cheeks grew red.

“So, let's find my bag, shall we?” Mina suggested, hands on her hips.

“I need to find my guy,” Ekster said, looking around. “He’s going to hook us up.”

Ekster's “guy” was a theatrical, strawberry-blond man in an impeccable light blue suit and heeled boots. He welcomed them with a blinding smile into a private room on the fifth floor. Central Mall offered a variety of personal shopping experiences, and these types of rooms were more than common in the vast mall. This blond man with his dashing presence, however, didn't look like one of the mall’s many generic personal shoppers, but more so like a slick, top salesman who was welcoming his favourite client.

“Ekster, Ekster, Ekster,” the guy passionately said as he had Ekster locked into a firm handshake with both hands. With his raised brows and perfect blowout he appeared a touch taller than Ekster himself, and his crisp silk suit made the other’s loose fitted two-piece appear casual and nonchalant in comparison.

Ekster mumbled his usual: “*ça va?*” and the guy replied incomprehensibly to everyone else: “*Jazeker, ça va, ja, ja, kan niet beter,*” after which the pair of counter opposites briefly continued to talk in a familiar manner.

Max and Mina were quickly distracted by the latest issue of the mall's official catalogue, while Prisma politely sat down on one of the couches with Dust, who was busy keeping Farello in check. Åke was the only one trying to listen in with the conversation, but in the end had to conclude he didn't understand a word. He could piece together the general gist of it through the occasional contextual clue, such as when the guy started to excessively compliment Ekster's suit, a sentiment which Ekster didn't bother to reciprocate.

Next thing they knew, Ekster had ended the small talk by briskly introducing the others, and the tall blond vigorously shook their hands one by one, making sure to let everyone know the honor was *absolutely* his. He introduced himself as Robijn, didn't specifically recognize Åke and gave everyone a similar amount of polite attention, until being completely stopped in his tracks by Dust. He audibly gasped as he shook her hand.

"I am *honored* to make your acquaintance," he said with his free hand over his heart. "Miss, pardon my impudence, but never before have I—" he gently turned the back of her hand up and intently studied the tattoos tracing up her arm. "My Goodness Grace. Just exquisite. Excuse my ignorance, but these markings... are you by any chance native to the South Mediterranean No-Man community?"

"Oh," Dust giggled. "That's what you call us here?"

"My days, to behold genuine No-Man scriptures on a live person... They're gorgeous, just gorgeous, miss. It's delightful to see how you're showing them off, proudly. Are your legs tattooed?"

Dust, who often exposed as much skin as appropriate, happened to be wearing a pair of pleated culottes today. "Certainly not," she said. "I'm very much uprooted."

"I see, I see," Robijn gently kissed the back of her hand before letting go. "I must confess that I'm embarrassed to say, my preparations are falling short today. If only Ekster had

notified me about the significance of his associates, I would have arranged a more comfortable environment for the likes of you.”

“There is no such thing,” Dust said with a smile that had turned a touch wry.

“Trust me, I saved you from yourself,” Ekster grunted at the salesman. “Now let’s get on with it, shall we. I don’t have all day to waste on chit-chat.”

“What’s uprooted mean?” Åke whispered in Dust’s ear, after Robijn went out to the back.

“It means I’m still travelling,” Dust whispered in return. “And have no fixed mate.”

“Whoa look, you’re in here too!” Mina held up the thick catalogue, featuring elaborate editorials from brands the mall carried. The double spread showcased a dynamic full-body shot of Åke and a female model in futuristic athletic wear. “This brand is totally hot, too. Everyone lines up for their limited drops.”

Åke reluctantly ripped his eyes away from Dust trying on thermal shirts to see what Mina was talking about. “Oh, N-45? They’re definitely something. I would never wear that stuff out the door,” he said.

Mina sat up a little straighter as she flipped through the pages. “When I go pro, I want this brand to sponsor me. That’d be like— a dream come true.”

“For real? I mean, I can easily put in a good word for you,” Åke suggested.

Mina was rendered speechless.

“Good call,” Ekster said. “She still needs a cover-up. Being a student won’t account for the money she’ll be making in the future. Same for you, Max,” he instructed the boy behind the fittingroom curtain.

“I for sure ain’t showing nothin’ in front of no camera,” Max declared. “Yo, what ya’ll think about this?” He opened the curtain and showed off a tactical ski-suit with an arctic

camouflage pattern, complete with steel-nosed boots, knee protection, a dog-ear cap and reflective sunglasses.

Mina fully cracked up and even Prisma giggled.

“Where do you think you’re going in that?” Mina cackled.

“Dope.” Åke put two encouraging thumbs up.

“If you’re just trying on things for the fuck of it, we’re leaving,” Ekster sighed. “Watching you put on one thing after the other is getting tiring.”

“But this one got camo, boss,” Max said, unfazed. “Åke’s got that leather purple jacket, you tell me which one attracts more attention. Check it out, all limbs have a zip.” Within a couple of seconds, he transformed the skisuit into a bodywarmer.

“Put some goddamn pants on!” Mina yelped with her hands in front of Prisma’s eyes.

Robijn returned to the room with a selected assortment of headwear for Åke, and grew immediately enthusiastic upon seeing Max. “You certainly have an eye for quality, young sir! This suit comes in twelve colours and is seamlessly compatible with a collection of ghillie suits each accompanied with matching boots.”

Max’s jaw was on the floor. “Shit man! Ghillies and matching boots? Say less, pack this one up.”

“Y’know I keep wondering how you’re able to continuously spend so much.” Åke leaned against the counter after Ekster had swiped his credit card for everyone’s shopping. Max struggled to lift all four of his bags by himself.

“Debt collaterals,” was the answer.

Åke stood up a little straighter. “What’s your collateral? The HQ?”

“No,” Ekster replied calmly, only to quickly end the conversation: “ask me again later,” when Robijn walked over to extensively shake hands again.

“It’s always a pleasure seeing you here, old friend,” Robijn yapped away. “Please drop by whenever you need any adjustments, repairs or wardrobe additions. And as usual, I’ll make sure to keep everything off the books,” he added in a low tone. “Mister Åkerman,” he turned to Åke, “I hope you’ll excuse my rude behavior of not recognizing you earlier. We’re naturally humbled *and* honored that you’ll be wearing our clothes. I made sure to add a generous discount over everyone’s purchases, and took the liberty of adding a couple of gifts for you to wear on your days off.”

“Appreciate it, but my style’s under strict supervision,” he joked, even though it was no joke.

Robijn's eyes twinkled mischievously behind his light lashes. “From what I have seen today, sir, outside of your comfort zone is where you truly shine the brightest.”

“A couple of years back I wanted to take a bunch of risks. I only earned black cash from odd jobs but needed white money to back me up. I managed to convince someone at a bank who was willing to wash my earnings by depositing them into a life insurance account. I used that as a collateral to take out credit. I’ve been doing it that way ever since.”

Åke listened to the story with his mouth half-open. They were walking a bit behind the others through the mall, on their way back to the car. “How did ya convince that banker?”

“Ah you know,” Ekster shrugged with his hands in his pockets. “A plain old bribe has never failed me before.”

“If the Marble Mary is any indication of how much money you make, your life insurance must be quite the checking account by now,” Åke said with a curiously raised eyebrow.

“By now, life insurance is not my only collateral,” Ekster grinned. “I try not to bet myself into too much risk, but I’ve got a couple of cross-collaterals going on, and just recently I managed to acquire a specifically valuable asset in a shadow bank.” His grin turned a touch evil as he side-eyed Åke.

“I see.” Åke wryly said. “Any chance I can have access to that money, too? Or do I have to get my hands dirty for you first?”

“I’m afraid so,” Ekster laughed. He apparently thought this was all very amusing. “I can’t take out a loan against you. I have no ownership. I merely use your status to wire some paperwork through. Nevertheless, you represent more value than anything else I own, allowing me to wash larger amounts of cash at the same time.”

For a moment Åke observed his distorted reflection in the polished granite mall floor. “You think Frog uses me as debt collateral?”

“Without a doubt.”

“So if he ever bankrupts, what happens to me?”

Ekster took a second to answer. “Technically...” he started slowly, before backtracking on his own words. “I mean, I don’t know. I don’t know what happens to humans. But in the case of bankruptcies, assets are auctioned off for bottom prices. The reputation has been tainted, and so the value tanks for the foreseeable future. There is no reason for your Frog to go bankrupt though,” Ekster added quickly. “He’s got influence and heritage. His family is protected.”

“I know what you’re saying,” Åke said with a sour expression. “But he’s a risk taker and invests in the future, instead of the past. His unconventional pursuits have made him a couple of enemies and he’s not the head of the family either. They’re a lineage of scholars and teachers, in the business of educating the workforce, and traditionally don’t trade heritage

themselves. His brother made it very clear they wouldn't mind disowning him if his ventures pose too much reputation damage."

"Good reasons for you to prep for an early exit" Ekster mumbled.

"I've heard some horror stories," Åke muttered in return. "Of what they do with devalued assets. I— uhm, would like to keep the skin on my flesh if you know what I'm saying."

With the entire group gathered on the roof terrace for a quick bite, Ekster showed Driver an address scribbled on a piece of paper, before putting his lighter under it to destroy it with fire.

"I visited their shop a couple of weeks ago," he said, lighting a cigarette from the same flame. "They're good people. The owner, Mister Lee, knows you're coming in. Make sure Max double checks if everything's complete. I paid a down payment and will wire the remaining amount after we've taken the goods for a test run."

Driver simply nodded, but Max could barely sit still from excitement.

"Dude, I've been dreaming about this day," he told Åke. "Ever since I was a kid I wanted to own an MSR"

"You are still a kid," Åke pointed out. "I can't believe you're buying a kid a weapon," he then critiqued Ekster.

"People our age generally don't rank in the top 150 *Down Sight* players of the world," Ekster said, indifferent to any doubts about his morality. "Max is the man for the job."

"When the Remington MSR is fully assembled, including barrel, it's freaking huge. Way taller than I am. Every part of this thing is practically detachable and customisable. Sky's the limit, with this weapon," Max continued to talk away at a very uninterested Mina and politely smiling Prisma.

“Cool shit,” Mina said absentmindedly while she nibbled at a piece of diced cheese with mustard. Her eyes then fell on Max’s plastic neon-green sneakers with metal spikes and flat yellow laces. “Hey, wait a minute,” she perked up and pointed at his feet. “You weren’t wearing those this morning!”

Max’s neck grew as red as his hair. “I-I was!”

“Liar!” Mina loudly accused. “When did you even manage to grab ‘em?”

Max groaned with his head in his hands. “They stuck to my fingers on the way out.”

“What the hell is wrong with you!?” Mina was exasperated and offended all at the same time. “What if you were caught? All of us would’ve been in major trouble too!”

“Ekster could’ve bought them if you had just asked,” Prisma said with a little laugh.

Max peeked between his fingers up at Ekster, who was wearing a very strained expression on his face. Just when everyone thought Max was about to receive some harsh scolding, Ekster said: “Who would want to pay for these at full price. They’re— fucking hideous.”

Over the past couple of weeks, Driver had completely upgraded the white Sprinter van. He’d put in new brakes, stiffened up the suspension, upgraded the tires and improved the airflow under the hood. The modifications were surely felt, from the quick pull-ups to the sharp turns and decrease in bounce.

Åke felt a familiar nausea come up while Driver drifted through the neighborhood alleyways. “Let me guess,” he said, holding onto both the door and the seat to keep himself from flying all over the place. “You taught Ekster how to drive.”

Driver sure thought that was funny.

“Oh man, I need you to be my driving instructor too!” Max exclaimed from the backseat. “You bet imma drop a huge bag on a dope car someday.”

Åke felt like Max was like so many teenagers in the megalopolis. Obsessed with flashy, expensive stuff and equipped with a real hole in their hands.

“The Curator takes reinvestment very seriously,” Driver said as a subtle warning.

“Yeah, yeah, he told me all about it,” Max waved the argument away. “Back when I met him, I thought to myself, damn this guy is *balling*. He looks real drippy and that car he drives is no joke. I straight-up asked him how he made his money. Thought if he can do it, so can I.”

Åke rolled his eyes. “He comes from money. Never started from zero.”

“You’ve got him all wrong, man,” Max shook his head. “I don’t know about his family and shit, but I was told he was broke as fuck before. Lived on the streets and all. Rock bottom type shit.”

“Who told you?” Åke asked with a raised eyebrow.

Max pointed at Driver. “Who else? Ay, I’m not totally thick. I would never pick up a random gig from some half-baked goon. I’m trying to get out of this petty crime life, y’know. I can’t be going around nicking sneakers forever. It attracts the wrong crowd, y’know what I’m sayin’. I need to be moving up in life, if I ever wanna set my family right. Ekster’s got the money thing figured out, that’s for sure. I wanna be learning that shit too.”

“Sure...” Åke said slowly, processing this new information. “Family’s important,” he concluded with a general statement.

“For sure, bro,” Max agreed with a sigh. “For me, family is my mom and my half-sister. I wanna be able to send my sister to college when she’s all grown up, right. She’s only four but I can already tell she’s hella smart. She needs to go to one of those expensive state-level unis to get the best opportunities possible. Imma make that shit happen for her. It’s the best way to support my mom. Reselling sneakers is getting me nowhere, I need to drop that shit asap. I’ve got big dreams for my future too, y’know.”

Åke looked over his shoulder at the red-haired kid, who sat staring out the window. “You mean like with that game you play?”

The light instantaneously returned to Max’s eyes. “Yeah man. Top 150 ain’t nothing, but the aim is number one.”

After the forty minute drive east, whilst Max spoke in one single breath about the ins and outs of *Down Sight* to video-game-noob Åke, Driver stopped the van in front of a nail salon.

“This should be it,” he said.

“Uhh...” Max and Åke doubted in unison.

“What did you two expect? An ‘illegal guns for sale’ sign?” Driver laughed.

Inside was an actual nail salon in business. A couple of clients looked up at the misplaced group of three as they strolled through the door. Driver led the way to the counter, where a young girl with short black hair and symmetrical eyebrow piercings was filing her own nails.

“We have an appointment with Mister Lee,” Driver said to the twenty-something-year-old.

The girl looked the three of them up and down before shouting over her shoulder. “*Appa!* Customers!” She opened the counter and gestured with her head for them to go ahead. Max grinned at the girl as he walked past, but her attention was already back on her making her pointy nails even deadlier.

They went through the curtain and crossed a short hallway, where a short middle-aged man stood waiting for them in the back.

“Driver?” he confirmed with his hand out. “Call me Lee.”

He greeted Åke and Max the same way, before leading the way into the workshop. The smell of acetone from the nailsalon was quickly canceled out by the overwhelming aroma of hot iron, carbon and oil. Business in the brightly lit garage was in full swing. Åke gawked at

the two masked blokes pouring molten metal into casts. Someone else was opening cooled casts and passing the parts onto the next person at a bench grinder, who one by one polished the pieces. A couple of ladies stood chatting away at an assembly line table, nimbly putting together one pistol after the other. Max was most interested in the girl working next to the counter. She was the split image of the girl in the nail salon, only difference being the fact she had not pierced her eyebrows but her cheeks, and was bent over a disassembled piece of weaponry clamped in a steel bench vise. With a dremel, she was engraving the steel by hand. Whatever she was creating, it was detailed and beautiful.

Max nudged Åke with his elbow. “Check that out. Fucking sick.”

Åke twisted his head to get a glimpse of her art, noticing the pencil sketch of an asian dragon on her bench.

“That’s insanely pretty,” he said, in awe. “Should I get a dragon on my gun?”

Max’s immediate excitement over the idea was plastered all over his face.

Mr. Lee stood to the side chatting with Driver for a little while, before pulling three black cases from underneath the counter.

“We’re pleased to finally be doing business with the Curator. A household name by now, though not known for building teams. But as we know, the one who does not evolve is left behind while history is written. It’s exciting to be part of this new avenue for the young Curator.” He clicked open the locks on the biggest case of the three. “Made for the kid with the experience of a veteran, or so I’ve heard. The Remington MSR with 20 inch barrel, quick-detachable suppressor, 0.338 rubber bullets, and a PMII sight,” Mr. Lee presented.

He had barely finished his sentence, and Max was already all over the disassembled weapon.

“Adjustable trigger unit, removable bolt heads, oh man, look at this beauty,” he rambled as he watched with greedy eyes how Mr. Lee expertly assembled the rifle.

He hadn't been exaggerating when he said the gun was huge.

“Looks heavy,” Åke said, eyeing the thing that wasn't just taller than Max, but taller than himself as well.

“I won't be running a marathon with it,” Max said, weighing the weapon in his hands.

“But I might need to join you at the gym, bro.”

“The weapon system weighs what the weapon system weighs,” Driver said. “Practice, get used to it and get good. It's what we used to say in the army.”

“You were in the army?” Max was instantly curious, but Driver didn't seem terribly excited for story-time.

“Please forget I mentioned it,” he said with an apologetic grimace.

“Is that why you wear the mask?”

“I already said too much, kid. I won't speak of it again.”

“Oh. Okay. All good, man,” Max reconciled easily, more interested in the guns anyway.

Mr. Lee opened the second case and revealed an already fully assembled weapon that simply looked like a short tube with pistol grip and visor.

“Whoa—!” Max exclaimed, as if he hadn't been the one ordering the items.

“The Carl Gustaf 84 mm recoilless rifle,” Mr. Lee said with a small smile induced by Max's expressive enthusiasm.

“Mister Lee, you're a master. I can't believe you produce these things in house, by hand,” Max said, in awe. “They're fucking flawless.”

“I thank you kindly,” Mr. Lee said modestly. “It's a team effort, and I promise they function as well as they look.”

Max rubbed his hands together. “So this one is the UMP?” he nodded at the third and last case.

“Correct. The UMP-45. A classy weapon, for the no-nonsense tactical support. Includes silencer and optics, as requested.”

“Oh,” Åke faintly said, as he was handed the black steel weapon. He wondered if this was what it felt like to hold a first born. “Holy fucking shit,” he angled the gun in the light. “I am in love.”

“Dude, it looks so sleek.” Max couldn’t stop grinning ear to ear. “But compared to the drip you just scored at the mall, this thing is looking way too basic.”

“Max...” Driver cautioned the spend-happy teenager, who totally ignored him in return.

“What do you offer in terms of customisation, Master Lee?”

“You’re already one of my favourite customers, little red-head,” Lee said with an amused smile. “Wrapping can be done while you wait, have a look at our options.” He pulled out a large and heavy flipbook from under the counter, opening it up somewhere in the middle to reveal a rainbow of foils.

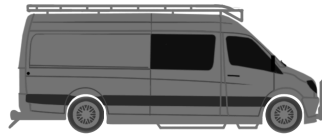
Åke audibly gasped. He had never felt more greedy in his life. “So many options... so shiny...” he breathed.

“*Tal*,” Lee called the girl who’d been working on the dragon engraving up until now. “Put that to the side for a bit and set this sir up with a wrap. My daughter has flawless taste,” he reassured Åke while he disassembled the UMP. “She’ll turn this generic piece of steel into an iconic accessory that could only be unmistakably yours.”

First Move Wins

Chapter 10 - On a Roll

END



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