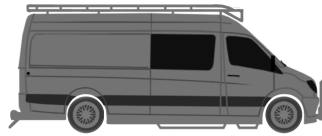


First Move Wins

A Heist Club Short Story

Chapter 1 - Change of Tides



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Heist Club© created, developed and published by Blauw Films©

First Move Wins

Humans have the ability to create the most pivotal moments in time; our decisions have definite impact. We put a plan into action, create art, build connections, or simply start a conversation. Actions create ripples that stretch into infinity.

Prelude

Somewhere along a certain cycling route at the foot of the Piedmont Alps, a man in black cycling gear stood on the edge of the asphalt road, staring through a pair of binoculars. A bead of sweat traced down his forehead as he closely observed a hillside across the valley. His hands had to be sweaty in his black gloves. Locals would say that high noon was an odd time of day for doing anything other than taking a nap. After a few moments of motionless staring, the young man seemed to have spotted what he had been searching for. He didn't waste another second. With swift movements he stored the binoculars in the back pocket of his cycling jersey, walked towards a striking carbon-fiber bike, grabbed the bidon and emptied its contents. Clear water splashed and sizzled on the dry, hot road. Done with these peculiar preparations, the man stepped on his bike and promptly started the meandering journey downhill.

...

The relationships of trade between nations are a millennia-old, perfected craft. From East to West and North to South, highly profitable trade crossed mountains, deserts and seas, causing the major cultural hotspots of Europe to expand and connect as early as 6000 BC. The modern megalopolis city-state of Europa is the result of those agglomerated cultural entities.

The Greater Alpine Districts played a fundamental role in the establishment of Europa's cultural wealth, fueled by tradesmen who connected the South of the continent with the North. The Greater South-West Alpine Districts of *Lyon-Genova-Turino-Genoa-Milano*,

seemingly divided but in reality connected by the Alps, formed a flourishing hub of cultural legacy that would attract arts, culture, scholars and businesses for centuries to come.

The quality and singularity of a nation's knowledge and craftsmanship is through which culture is developed. The accumulation of culture means legacy, and legacy is power. The governing elite of Europa know this.

Through the ages, as the elitists of Europa industrialised their archeological excavation, restoration and preservation capabilities, gate-kept education, and policed trade routes, the privatised capitalisation of cultural heritage was established.

To this day, Europa is governed by the direct lineage of those aristocratics, whose hunger to obtain cultural heritage, thus money and power, has yet to be satisfied.

...

A light morning workout was usually the most effective cure for a champagne-hangover, but the boiling hot weather made the idea of a run very unattractive. In the distance a lone cyclist was on his way down the mountains. Adventurous Northern tourists were always under the impression that they could beat the midday sun. A courageous, but laughable effort.

Åke Åkerman lounged around in the shade of his porch as he yawned lazily and scratched behind his ear. Time for an ice cold beer and a cig to keep his headache company.

Chapter 1

Change of Tides

The pressing heat must've been the worst yet this year. Everything that ever seemed romantic about living in nature, always turned out to be a pain-in-the-ass during a hangover. The lush trees surrounding the chalet could only keep the shade cool for so long. A weak mountain breeze distributed hot, humid air all around the place and made everything worse.

Åke wasn't even halfway through his first cigarette of the day and he already felt like all moisture had left his body. The loose tank top around his chest stuck to his skin and started to feel like an unnecessary amount of clothing. The perpetual hum of the cicadas was unbearably loud and split his dehydrated brain in two. He was just about to give up on smoking and withdraw into the safety of his air-conditioned chalet, when the crisp sound of footsteps and rubber on the forest floor made him turn back around. Only two people knew where he lived and if they showed up, he'd be pissed to see them. To his own surprise, he wasn't greeted by the usual faces. Instead, a stranger with a bike made his way to the cottage.

The cyclist-tourist. The bike by his side was unmistakably sleek and impressive-looking. Nice little thing. The cyclist raised his hand with a not-quite wave. Åke rubbed his eyebrow and returned the gesture with a nod. This guy better speak some comprehensible language.

"Sorry to bother you. English? French? My Italian is not great."

It was hard to find a distinct accent in the man's speech. There was a flatness in his tonality similar to those from Northern Europa, although he rolled his r's in a particular way that Åke couldn't immediately place. He estimated the cyclist to be in his late twenties, about the same age as himself.

"English's fine. What's up? You lost?"

The man stopped approaching him a few meters before the porch. Behind the reflective sunglasses his pale face was bright red. Strings of black hair peaked out from under the helmet and stuck to his sweaty forehead and neck. He was tall and lean, perhaps somewhat willowy and graceful even, definitely not specifically athletic, although looks could be deceiving of course.

“Not really,” the man replied. “I ran out of water. It's still quite the trip down.”

For a second Åke quietly observed the cyclist, before bursting out a laugh. Something about the absurdity of a lost cyclist running out of water at the height of summer. He pressed his cigarette down on the balcony's balustrade.

“You're damn right,” he replied with a tinge of amusement in his tone, trying to sound kind, not mocking. “You won't hit town in another forty minutes. Take a break in the shade. From the looks of it, you're downright overheated.”

With a tinge of hesitation in his step the man continued to approach the house while Åke yapped on.

“Water's great here. Straight from the source. Can't get any fresher. You're on holiday? Just assuming you're not from around here. Nice piece of gear you got right there, by the way.”

Åke couldn't help but mention it. A bike as pretty as this one sure got his attention. The man propped his bicycle against the wooden balcony and affectionately patted the seat.

“She's a pretty artful piece of engineering. Runs like clockwork and weighs less than a feather. I recently moved here, actually.”

Åke hummed with genuine interest and dragged his eyes from the bike's masterfully simple mechanics to the man's face. He had removed his helmet and sunglasses and was in the process of putting on a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. The fine oval design complimented his slim face and elongated features. Although he had good skin and could be considered handsome, he was simply too plain to be remarkable. Their eyes crossed and Åke nonchalantly pointed at a faucet just next to the porch. The man's cold blue eyes followed his gesture.

“Naturally filtered.” Åke clarified. These city-types could worry about the most silly things.

“That's great.” He didn't sound particularly pressed about it. He also sounded like he smoked a bit too much; dry and coarse.

Åke took a swing from his already mid-cold beer. He couldn't help but study the fancy bike yet again.

“Never seen anything like it.” Åke said to the bike. “Where did you buy this beauty?”

Normally, these types of objects would only be available to pros. The cyclist's lack of a tan and plain spandex strongly suggested that he was a hobbyist.

“East Asia,” the man answered. He splashed some water in his neck and filled up his bidet.

Åke whistled softly. “She’s a long way from home. Must’ve cost you a pretty penny to get past customs. How do you get your hands on parts? You shouldn’t stick counterfeit shit in her.”

The man huffed, sounding almost offended. “Naturally. I know a guy.”

Now that’s even more interesting.

“You know *a guy*? Like some shady import plug or do you run a shop?”

The answer came a second later.

“Neither,” he replied dryly. “Do you own a bike yourself?”

“Sure. Nothing fancy though. Locally made. At least it’s relatively cheap to maintain.”

A silence fell between them as Åke continued to gawk at the bike. He mindlessly grabbed his pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and plucked a second one out.

Åke’s thoughts drifted as he mulled over what was just said. He put the cigarette between his lips and lit it. “Theoretically...” he started slowly. “Could you hook me up with anything like this?”

“I believe just telling you I’m not a reseller.”

Åke licked his lips. “Yeah, I hear you. And yet you have her. I’m sure there’s more where it came from. Help a fellow aficionado out? I can offer good stuff in return.”

The man scoffed.

“I’m sure you could.”

“Excuse me?” The back-handed dig made Åke raise an eyebrow. He stared down at the cyclist. “We literally just met, sir. Why are you picking a fight? And between the two of us, you’re the one touring illegal imports. I could report you.”

“Who said she’s illegal? Such a baseless accusation.” The cyclist crossed his arms and leaned against the fence while he stared Åke up and down with an icy expression. “I can’t shake off the feeling that I’ve seen you before. Have we met?”

Åke silently smoked his cigarette and strained his facial muscles so as to not roll his eyes hard. “I doubt it.”

“Ah!” The man snapped his fingers seconds later, as the answer came to him. “How did it take this long for me to place a face like that. You’re all over town. What are you? A model? Now that I think about it, I even know your name.”

“Ain't that nice.” Åke said, bored. Damned be this mug of his. “Listen stranger, don't show up with a flashy toy and expect people to not get a little curious. You have balls by the way, parading her around.”

“I don't.”

“You don't have balls?”

“I don't *parade*.” The man didn't even flinch. “And even if I did; everyone and their dog flaunts their imported supercar in this God's forsaken city. I'll have to do a little more than cycle good design to raise eyebrows.”

Åke clicked his tongue.

“Ay, I'll give you that. This thing is so tasteful it's almost invisible.” He sighed. “Forget it. I don't need a prettier bike. Can you take back that I look like some highbrow snob? That really hurt my feelings. I can't help that *they* love this face. I'd rather have nothing to do with it, but... oh well.” Åke flicked cigarette ashes into the air and ran his free hand through his freshly bleached buzzcut. His skull still itched.

“You don't gel with the upper-class?” The cyclist asked, the sharp edge in his tone gone. “This does look like a good hideout.” With a turn of the head he gestured at the wild nature around them.

“Nothing clears the stench of the pretentious like a big dose of free and fresh mountain air.” Åke spread his arms and took a big breath, cigarette in his mouth. Suddenly, he felt a certain optimism surge through his body. It started to look like he himself had been too quick to judge the visitor by its cover. It wasn't everyday he got to meet a guy his age who wasn't all pretentious about aesthetics despite riding a cool bike.

“Hey. Fancy a smoke? How about a beer?” Åke offered jovially.

The man huffed, wiping some sweat and hair from his forehead with the back of a gloved hand. His shoulders relaxed.

“I guess a break wouldn't hurt.”

“Nice! Time for an early siesta.” Åke gestured to the swinging bench on the porch. “Make yourself comfortable and imma grab some beers. All this chatter turned mine completely warm, hahaha!”

With his head in the fridge, Åke realized his hangover had practically disappeared. In fact, he was buzzing with energy. After a full week of work and social obligations, having *one*

conversation that wasn't absolutely soul-crushing and energy draining, turned out to be extremely uplifting! Åke whistled a tune as he walked back outside, finding the cyclist sitting stiffly on the wooden swinging bench.

“Yo, stranger. Catch.” Holding the beers in one hand, he tossed his lighter and cigarettes to the other, who bewilderedly managed to catch them.

Åke sat down next to him and waited for the man to light one up. He gestured for the lighter, and used it to open the beers. “Here ya go. To new friends!”

Åke raised his bottle and cluck it to the other's, before taking a big swig. The cyclist mirrored his actions and drank the beer like it was fresh water.

“I don't know how to pronounce your name,” the man suddenly said, after downing more than half of his beer.

“Oh.” Åke said, surprised. “Well. Just like that, actually. Oh-ke.”

“I see. Åke Åkerman, right? Easy to remember.” The man stuck out his right hand. “Ekster.” Ekster wore a faint smile on his face as he introduced himself. Åke wondered what was so amusing.

“Ain't that an unusual name.” It was a compliment. He had met *a lot* of people, and never heard this name before. He shook Ekster's hand. “What does it mean?”

“Magpie.”

“Hah. Cute. What language?”

“Dutch.”

“So you are Northern!” Åke mentally congratulated himself for his outstanding observational skills. “Is this your first time living in the south?”

“Yes. Although I've lived all over the megalopolis. Moved here from the eastern departments. Lived in the Parisian districts before that, too. Haven't been home in a long time.”

Åke nodded compassionately. “Sounds similar to my story. I'm originally Nordland,” he declared proudly, feeling somewhat akin to this stranger. “You wouldn't know it, it's way up north. Can't say I've visited that place ever since I was a child.”

Ekster hummed. Without looking at Åke he said; “that reminds me of something. It's personal, I guess. I don't mean to be nosy. Can I ask you about it?”

“You're drinking beer from my fridge and smoking my cigarettes, so I'd say that's at least second base. Ask away.”

Ekster snorted.

“About two decades ago, the travel magazine World of Nature published that famous cover image. A portrait photograph of a child from the Northern Excavation Sites. A young boy with amber eyes and a bloody nose. Are you that boy?”

Åke fell quiet. He wasn't often reminded of that specific photograph. He couldn't really think of a reason why this random guy would want to mention it, either.

“I only just connected the dots.” Ekster added quickly. “Since you said you're from way up north.” He glanced over Åke's crooked nose bridge, “Figured you look the same.”

“That sure is a personal question,” Åke said half-jokingly, turning his head straight ahead to avoid eye-contact.

“Forgive my curiosity.” Ekster said, in a matter-of-fact type of tone.

“Ay, whatever happened, happened. It was just an image. It's in the past.”

Ekster stared at the trees above them and took a long drag from the cigarette.

“Just an image.” He repeated after blowing out the smoke. “The photographer...?”

“A hobbyist.”

“An aristocrat?”

“... Yeah. Obviously.”

“Is that how you ended up here in the south?”

“Actually, I was brought to Paris, at first.” Åke confided in the stranger. “Paid for me in cash.”

Ekster clicked his tongue in distaste.

“Vultures,” he cursed at the rich and powerful.

Åke simply shrugged, as if it didn't matter to him. “Value is value. My family's poor and couldn't refuse the offer. Alternatively, I could've never been where I am now. I received proper education and was granted a future outside of the Northern Digging Grounds. Life there is simple but isolated.” He gestured at the chalet behind them and the nature surrounding it. “Isn't this what freedom looks like?”

Ekster's gaze was back on Åke. There was no such thing as judgment or pity in his eyes. He seemed to truly, objectively observe him. In the end he said: “And even though you live here and wish to have nothing to do with the upper-classes, you choose to pursue a career in fashion?”

“Ayyy!” Åke playfully pushed the other man’s shoulder. “Now you're getting nosy. We’re not that close, yet.”

Ekster laughed lightly and shook his head. “I clearly overstepped.”

“So what do you do, Ekster?” Åke smoothly changed the subject. “With that foreign designer bike, thorough knowledge of vintage photography and strong opinion on the trades of the aristocrats. Curious collection of interests.”

The other shrugged his shoulders lightly. “I appraise art.”

“Interesting.” Åke said, not quite interested. In this city, art appraisers were literally a dime in a dozen. Not that they were all legit. And so he prompted the most logical next question: “What type of art do you specialise in?” Perhaps this guy could be of use to him in the future.

After a beat, Ekster flatly replied: “Stolen.” They stared at each other. Ekster's eyes gleamed behind his glasses. He was dead-serious. “I specialize in determining the value of stolen artifacts and forge certificates of authenticity.”

Åke didn't really know what to say. Unwillingly, he side-eyed the bicycle.

“Interesting...” He said, much slower and much more genuine. “So... you’re self-employed?” He added sheepishly.

Ekster let out a genuine, unfeigned, laugh. “Want my card?” he said after readjusting his glasses.

Åke accepted the black card with white print that was suddenly presented to him. It didn't have much information.

The Curator — +32689900978

The Curator? He didn't recognize this trade name at all, despite being exceptionally well-connected throughout the art-trading elites. Ekster's business must be fairly... underground. Although it wasn't completely unimaginable that they were somehow secondarily connected anyway. Many, many types of certificates for all types of goods were forged and sold behind closed doors. Åke knew this all too well. He stared at the card as if the printed text could somehow reveal the intent behind the business it represented. The problem with forged art taxation was the corruptible nature of the trade in the first place; greed can make the law turn a blind eye. Who knows how Ekster worked, passing what to who through where. Chills ran down Åke’s back. If this Ekster was engaged in the type of business he had seen done before, he’d rather not get too cozy with the guy.

“Anyway.” Ekster suddenly said, breaking Åke away from his overthinkings. “Thanks for your hospitality.” He placed the empty beer bottle on the table next to the swinging chair. Åke hadn't even noticed Ekster finishing the drink. “I won't hold you up any longer.”

“Oh, yeah, no worries. T’was nice meeting you,” Åke quickly replied. “Thanks for your card. I guess.”

Ekster walked towards his bike while he put his helmet and cycling glasses back on. “Feel free to call. In case you need a new bike. Or some forged paperwork.”

“Very considerate.” Åke stiffly said. “Hey, Stranger.”

Ekster looked back up at him. Åke cleared his throat. “There is a track starting from behind my place. It takes a bit longer to get downtown, but it's a nice ride through the shade. You’ve got the tires for it.”

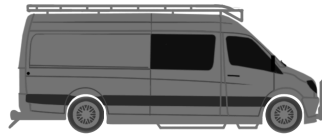
Ekster smirked. “Sounds like a plan.” He mounted his bike. “It was nice meeting you too, Åke Åkerman. I’m sure we'll run into each other again.”

With that, he took off to the trail leading into the woods. Åke scratched his nose as he watched the cyclist in black meander away through the trees. What a peculiar meeting, he thought to himself.

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END



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