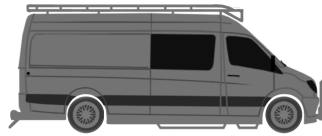


First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 11 - The Big Picture



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 11

The Big Picture

“Welcome back! You're watching ENBSI and we're tuned in live to witness the most historical event of the year, together! Our reporter Sam Fuego is on site, ready to make sure we won't miss a second of today's festivities. Sam! What's the atmosphere like on this rainy Sunday afternoon in the gorgeous French countryside?”

“I will say this Aubine, the unexpected summer downpour paints a magical backdrop to this special day. And with our nation's most important families present, the mood is just buzzing with refinement and class. Today is one for the history books!”

“Damn, who'd want to watch this boring shit?” Mina complained from where she had plonked herself down on the sofa. She had her long blonde hair tucked away in the hood of a college-branded sweater, keeping herself warm after the rain had nearly drowned her on the football field. “Don't we have anything better to do?”

She had walked in right after lunch, in a terrible mood, all riled up and frustrated from losing the match that hadn't been rescheduled, despite the weather. Her ill-willed opponents had left her shins black and blue, and the muddy field had ruined her only pair of white football boots. Ekster and Prisma sat next to her on the spacious couch, glued to the television.

“You can do whatever,” Ekster replied, unbothered by her attitude. “But I'm watching this circus.”

Mina groaned and went on her phone. Prisma smiled apologetically.

The reporter continued: *“Right now, I am standing at the entrance of the iconic Château de Chenonceau. Soon, the press will be allowed to move inside for the red-carpet event. After that, there will be an official moment to congratulate the proud first-time parents and meet the new heir! Monumental gatherings such as this happen only once in a generation, folks!”*

Prisma rubbed and squinted her eyes. “Those subtitles are so tiny... Four languages are too many...”

The door to the living room swung open and in walked Dust with a soaked Farello. Mina’s face brightened up upon seeing the happy Poodle, and let him jump into her arms despite his muddy fur. Dust briefly glanced at the television as she took off her raincoat.

“There’re takeaway leftovers in the fridge,” Ekster informed her, without taking his eyes off the news.

“And you only care to share this information now?!” Mina exclaimed, back to being annoyed.

“Did you guys hear a screw drop on the floor?” Max broke everyone's train of thought. For the past hour, he’d been quietly sitting at the kitchen table, intensely focussed on learning how to assemble and disassemble his sniper rifle. As of now, he hadn’t had much success. “Fuck— no... I totally lost it,” he moaned, scanning the floor under the kitchen table. “Where ya at, little screw...? I need you, don't hide from me... Shiiit it's totally gone. Do I have spares? I should have gotten spares.”

Dust helped him search, while Ekster raised the volume of the TV.

“... the spectacular bridge designed by a master of French renaissance architecture Philibert de L’Orne, forefather of the newborn’s family. Hence today’s rightful choice of location. As I’m speaking, we’re being escorted to the gallery over the bridge. This classical hall was designed by Jean Bullant in the 16th century. The gallery of Château de Chenonceau is usually not open to the public. This might be a once in a lifetime opportunity! Let’s go inside, and experience the party’s opulent atmosphere!”

“There is no way in hell you think this is interesting,” Mina scoffed from the kitchen, reheating the Indonesian takeaway in the microwave.

“Nothing more interesting to me than our next potential loot,” Ekster responded. He was hovering a pen above a piece of paper, ready to jot down some notes.

“How can you already be thinking about the next one? As if we’ve got this Mary heist all figured out...” Mina was clearly struggling to hide her discontent.

“Just focus on your own targets,” Ekster told her. “Don't worry about me.”

“How can you say that, when you always seem to be doing a million things, other than the thing that we're actually supposed to be doing?!” Mina's voice raised a pitch.

Ekster eyes finally abandoned the tv-screen. He glanced at Mina with one eyebrow slightly raised, unsure of how to deal with her attitude.

“Found it!” Dust held up a little black screw.

Max yelled a loud, “Fuck yeah!!!” and Ekster used the interruption as an excuse to leave Mina be.

“He should be on soon now,” Prisma nodded at the screen.

The red carpet event was in full swing. Attendees with various degrees of ostentation walked the carpet, while swarms of cameras flashed to take their picture. Some obviously wallowed in the attention, posing and smiling excessively as they presented their spouses, children, associates, and pets to the press. Others had even brought along their favourite human parure.

“Those kids... are they like Åke?” Dust nodded at a pair of fresh-faced albino twins who stood frozen in place, staring into the cameras with nervous eyes, while an older woman bragged into the microphone about how well behaved and intelligent her ‘little new parure’ were.

Mina pulled a face. “These rich folks are not normal. How is this not a crime?”

“It is a crime,” Ekster said, tapping his pen on the little notebook. “If we'd be the ones doing it. Just as how we commonfolk can't purchase any foreign goods either, without a hefty amount of paperwork and governmental signoff, but look at them, wearing Russian sable.”

They watched how the camera focussed on another group of people, this time a family with teenage children, and a parure of a similar age standing off to the side.

“They're so young...” Dust remarked with pity in her voice

“Absolutely,” Ekster replied evenly. “Parures are purchased as young and disadvantaged as possible. The results of their strict education must yield transformative results. Shaping the parure is a costly business. The ultimate proof of influence, wealth and taste.”

Sam Fuego the reporter was completely up-to-date with the latest ins and outs of every family, and made sure to fill the viewer in on all the details. Who had married who, who had passed, which child was the richest and which parure was the most interesting.

“The family of D’Aimes of Saint-Quentin have never been too fond of the cameras,” Sam Fuego narrated. “The head of the family and second in line have entered the party through the backdoor, protective over the privacy of their children. Understandable and respectable! More interestingly however, the youngest heir, Lord Jean-Claude D’Aimes, is not alone tonight! He has brought along a familiar face. For over a decade he has been the right-hand to his Lordship, and as of recently a successful commercial model too. An unconventional career route, only fitting for a man who has dedicated himself to a family known for their progressive vision of the future. Of course I’m talking about Åke Åkerman!”

The sensational announcement of Åke’s name made even Mina look back up from her nasi goreng.

“Oh gosh,” Dust said, as the camera singled out Åke’s face, his hair bleached brighter than fresh snow. “All dolled up. I almost didn’t recognise him.”

“So I’m guessing that’s Frog?” Prisma referred to the handsome middle-aged man at Åke’s side.

Or rather, Åke was at the man’s side. He stood slightly behind the shorter Frenchman, with his hands clasped behind his back and chin anchored towards the floor. Despite his lowkey demeanor, all attention in the room seemed to have gravitated towards him. The photographers yelled his name and cameras flashed in hoards, making his jewelry dazzle in the light. He looked expensive, beautiful and completely one of a kind. His butter yellow suit with fine pinstripe was tailored by a master craftsman. The subdued color made his skin glow and his eyes appear like pure gold. The pocket square and thin dark blue tie matched with Frog’s suit, unmistakably linking the two together as a pair.

Prisma sat back on the couch and tucked her knees under her chin. All of them, somewhat uncomfortably, watched how Frog muttered something in Åke’s ear and finally walked the two of them off the carpet. In total, they hadn’t served the press for any longer than a couple of seconds. The reporter behind the camera was beyond himself.

“Åke! Åke! Åke! Over here! Åke! Åke! Åke! Åke!”

Ekster dialed the tv sound back down as the reporter did his best to capture Åke’s attention. At last, Åke turned around and, after receiving Frog’s approval, made his way to the overjoyed reporter, who was overcome with eager enthusiasm.

“My, my, Åke! It’s been a while! How incredibly delightful to see you back in action! You look incredible!”

“Sam!” Åke greeted with familiarity. “Well, today's a special day, isn't it? We couldn't possibly miss out on the birth of an heir.”

“But what really made you want to come out today? The upcoming Summer Salon has been shrouded in scandal with Lord Jean-Claude and the Baron of Lyon as the main characters. What can you tell us about that?”

The polite smile on Åke's face was unwavering. *“Sam...!” he said again, playfully shocked this time. “A baby has been born and you want me to gossip? The press is unbelievable these days. You used to just keep it classy and just ask me who I'm wearing. Custom ‘House of Saint Soleil’, by the way.”* Åke made a little turn in front of the camera.

Although Sam Fuego was standing outside of frame, the embarrassment was clear in his voice.

“Haha...! Oh Åke, cheeky as ever. Never change! In any case it's wonderful to see the lineage of D'Aimes attend this glorious day! Any chance you can lift a corner of the veil and reveal to us what his Lordship has gifted the newborn heir?”

“Sam, let me tell you, I have something much better to show you,” Åke said with a smug grin and a mischievous look straight into the camera. Ekster sat up a little straighter.

“Final-fucking-ly.” He impatiently cracked his finger knuckles one by one.

Dust leaned against the backrest of the couch behind Ekster. *“You put him up to this?”*

Ekster grunted. *“A little test of loyalty, I suppose. Mostly his idea though.”*

“He said he could get us a good view of the highly secured exhibition items that will be up for display at the North-South State Museum,” Prisma chimed in.

“Is that not dangerous?” Mina said concernedly.

“Yeah, that's putting Åke pretty god damn front and center for anything that might go wrong down the line, is it not?” Dust chimed in.

Ekster shrugged. *“He's a big boy, he'll be fine.”*

Åke lured the camera away from the heart of the party and walked ahead through the gallery hall. *“True to tradition, all the great families have expertly curated and donated a piece of heritage for the newborn heir, so that he may start his life with blessings and in sublime taste.”* Nearing a dead-end in the hallway, he revealed a small key in the palm of his right hand. *“I couldn't possibly get the people at home a more exclusive view of the collection. These pieces won't be up for display till later this year. Even then, access to the exhibition will be highly exclusive, with only a couple of hundred tickets going up for sale. The North-South*

State Museum will have the honor of curating a once-in-a-lifetime exhibition of these twenty-four masterpieces.”

Åke pushed the double door open and led the camera into a spacious, undecorated room. The rain softly tapped against the tall windows and from behind the green velvet curtains weak rays of sunlight spilled inside. The light did nothing to illuminate the space, but it didn't need to. Over two dozen glass displays were lined up in the room, each beaming a strong white LED light onto the invaluable beauties within.

Åke ushered the camera to come closer. Ekster adjusted his glasses and leaned in towards the tv.

“The 23rd Earl of Oxford gifted the newborn L’Orne heir the manuscript of an incompleated play, written in the sixteenth century by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The two families have a longstanding relationship, and this gift symbolises that invaluable intimacy. Then, over here, we have a gorgeous 19th century star map. Perhaps the family of Migeon hopes the little boy will grow up to be a great astronomer? It’s a fabulous gift nevertheless. Now take a look at this rarity; a 14th century knightly sword. A magnificent choice of gift for a future nobleman, gifted by the honorable house of Wittelsbach. Even international heritage has been gifted. Just take in the mastery of ancient Chinese craftsmanship in this 11th century compass...”

One by one, Åke led the camera team past the row of encased valuables, making sure the viewers at home got a good look at every single item, sharing insights as he went along.

“Good fucking job Åke,” Ekster muttered under his breath as he took notes on the piece of paper without taking his eyes off the screen. “Getting any wiser?” he asked Prisma, who was watching with just as much attention. She hummed and tapped her fingers against her chin, deep in thought.

“Looks like they’re not sparing any expenses on these displays. See the dark blue ring around the bottom of the glass? Top of the line hardware. Those locks are electronically connected to a central security system. Harder to open, but when you do, you could bypass the alarm trigger.”

“What do you have your eyes on?” Mina wanted to know. She sounded sceptical.

“Nothing in particular,” Ekster mumbled. “The North-West State museum is sorting and relocating inventory for this exhibition. It’s a good opportunity but these specific items might be a bit ambitious for us, but for now I’m just window shopping.”

Mina and Dust exchanged a look. They were both annoyed. “I see,” Mina said.

“I finally understand why you decide to forgive Åke from one day to the next,” Dust snapped, her voice simmering with irritation. “He truly is an invaluable *asset* to you too.”

With pure reluctance, Ekster redirected his attention away from the TV to the girl behind him. His ego couldn’t let a comment like that slide. “No need to beat around the bush. If you’ve got something to say, then say it.”

Dust stood up, her brown eyes flashing with anger. She stood shoulder to shoulder with Mina, both staring daggers down at Ekster.

*

Ekster secured his burner phone between his head and shoulder while he tried to light a cigarette on the rooftop. The rain had taken a break, but a strong sea wind had taken its place. Despite sundown still being a couple of hours away, the skies were grey and the world shadow-less. It took a while to perfectly shield the small flame from the gusts of wind.

“The girls expressed some strong opinions about our little plan,” he told Åke after managing to catch the end of his cigarette with a second of fire. “Or rather, Dust and Mina thought I was unnecessarily taking advantage. You know Prisma was in on it.”

“Advantage of what?” On the other side of the line, Åke had just locked the door of his hotel room and was, from the sound of it, running a bath. “The event? *Who* gives a shit.”

“Of you.”

“Oh, of me. Right. But it worked out perfectly, like I said it would. Frog even complimented me for keeping the press busy. Gave him all the privacy he needed to catch up with some buddies about his boat-trip around the Mediterranean.”

Ekster rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Well, I fail to see the problem too. Mina got pretty angry, actually. Not sure what was up with her today.”

“C'mon,” Åke teased with what sounded like a big grin. “Strain that underdeveloped sympathy muscle of yours. What did she say?”

Ekster stared up at the fast-moving grey clouds above him as he recalled that afternoon’s altercation. “Dust actually started it by pointing out the two of us made up bizarrely fast after you ratted me out—”

“Watch it.”

“I didn't even know it bothered her. She went on about how I shouldn't treat relationships like transactions. Saying something about me needing you more than you need me.”

“Hah. I mean she's got a point. Seems to me like a perfectly reasonable thing to say!”

Ekster held his tongue. “After that, Mina tripped out. She had a go at me about how I abuse your status. I put you in danger. I put the team in danger. What else? Right. Called you disempowered. Called me a selfish opportunist. Uhm— and I can't say I completely disagree.”

“Speak for yourself, man.”

“I think they took pity on you after seeing those other parure.”

“Owh, yeah... Understandable.” Åke slowly agreed. “I always feel like they should stop dragging the young ones out. They're inexperienced and only end up looking terrified.”

“Dust insinuated you were just an asset to me. That's not— You know it's just not true.”

The other side went quiet, apart from the sound of the bathtub filling up and Åke kicking off his shoes. Ekster ditched his cigarette and fled back inside. He was no good with cold.

“Listen man,” Åke started carefully. “Things take time. Building trust takes time. I get it, you have some personal deadline. But these people are outsiders. They're new to this, and they are starting to look out for each other. When you fail to catch them up to speed, and they see you seemingly starting on the next job, when their minds are still, for obvious reasons, very much on this one, they'll feel like you're abandoning them.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do? Cash doesn't grow on my back. I mean I'm working four jobs as we speak for god sake.”

“I know,” Åke said in an even, calming tone. “The point is, you can't expect them to just instinctually understand how you play the game. Same as how you couldn't understand why I needed to give in to Frog. From their perspective, the common ground we found has no logic. It's going to take time for them to start seeing the bigger picture. But man, you're going to have to paint that picture for them. Or you'll inevitably make yourself look like the enemy.”

Ekster sighed and sunk back into one of the reading chairs. “Max and Prisma didn't say a word. That means they agree, no? The mood definitely soured and I feel like we wasted a day. The last shot we'll have at realigning the team is tomorrow's meeting. Otherwise we'll miss the perfect window of time and I refuse to go out there if there's any bad feeling in my, or any of our guts,”

“Don’t stress it. I’ll be back before tomorrow morning. Can’t give you an exact time though. I’ve got to attend dinner in an hour and I’m afraid there’ll be an after-party tacked on.”

“Can’t you just ditch that?”

“You’re hilarious. Want intel or not?”

“I want my team to be aligned.”

“Then put in the work, asshole. Don't ignore their needs for your own convenience. You're the leader. Lead them!”

*

The group of three girls had just waved Max goodbye on the streetcorner, and were now walking Mina to the nearest bus stop. With her hands buried deep in the pockets of her sweatpants, Mina kicked a pebble ahead down the street. “I will just never get that guy. One moment I’ll see him do something nice, and the next he’s pulling off some crazy manipulative ploy.”

Prisma was holding Farello's leash, as Dust pushed her city bike alongside.

“But we spoke our minds, so at least nothing has been bottled up,” the latter cheerily offered.

“Did you guys really have to dig in like that?” Prisma asked hesitantly.

“Do you not agree that he took a risk, using Åke like that? I mean, half of bloody Europa would’ve been watching that show! And to have the cheek to just call it ‘*window shopping*’!” Mina persisted.

“It wasn’t completely out of character for Åke to do something like that. I doubt anyone will think anything of it. It really was mostly his idea. But—” Prisma paused. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you shoulda gone for Ekster like that. I think he was a bit blindsided.”

“To be honest I’m happy it's out in the open now! We got our first argument out of the way and we can all move on!”

Mina looked impressed with Dust’s attitude. “Man, did we go too far?”

“Don’t worry. We don't tend to look at the past like that,” Dust grinned. “What is, has happened. What is not, will become.”

“Hmm,” Mina did not look fully convinced by Dust’s mantra. She directed her attention to Prisma. “You two seem close though.”

“Uhh...!” Prisma jumped. “I’m not sure. I think so? I think I just understand him. But—” she hesitated for a second. “Only because I don’t see him taking advantage of people... without... having them gain something in return.”

Mina gaped at Prisma. “Girl—!” She started. “That’s the whole problem! Why is he so transactional? I think he’s greedy and sort of just piling us all up and climbing up our backs like a ladder. I feel bad for Åke, y’know. He’s just being used for his proximity to the rich.” Mina was quite resolute with her assessment of the situation, but her confidence wavered upon seeing Prisma’s expression. “You don’t think so?”

Prisma carefully shrugged. “Ekster offers Åke a way to achieve his goals too. We all selfishly try to achieve *something*. Like, let’s be honest. I wouldn’t be here for free, would you?”

Mina angrily kicked the pebble across the street. It hit the metal bar of a lamp post. She grinned for a second and then sighed. “I just don’t want to feel like I don’t have a choice. Like, I hang out with the kids from the district borders from time to time. We play football in the city cages. Some of them are good, like really good, but apart from that, they’ve got nothing going for themselves. They don’t go to school, don’t have anyone who looks out for them, and often just end up being scooped up by the gangs. Petty crime at first, but before you know it, they’re smuggling drugs and— they just end up in jail, or worse,” she said. “I try to do my piece, keep them off the streets through football and such. It’s not much but... I see how crime ruins their lives.”

“Um, Mina, darling, I hate to point it out but you are sort of quite heavily involved in planning a heist as we speak.” Dust said bemusedly.

“It’s not the same.” Mina retorted. “I’m still here by choice!”

The other girls agreed in silence. Farello felt the change in mood and tried to comfort Mina with soft whines and taps of his paw. Mina grinned and scratched his chin.

Prisma stopped walking. She fidgeted at the panda bear plushie on her bag. “I need to confess something.”

The two taller girls stopped in their tracks and looked at her.

“If you start spewing weird shit about you and Ekster...” Mina warned.

“After we first met—!” Prisma yelped with red cheeks and Mina braced herself for the worst. “I may have planted spyware on his laptop!”

Dust burst out laughing. Mina’s shoulders visibly relaxed.

“I combed through everything,” Prisma continued with a strained expression. “Simply ran his files through a data mining AI and let it cross reference the output with web pages, articles and news reports. I even tested his approved bank statements for legitimacy.”

“So?” Mina ushered impatiently. “What did you find?”

“Nothing!” Prisma chirped. “No criminal records, no dirt, no juice. He’s totally clean! The only thing he does is trade. He sells certificates of authenticity and when the object inevitably increases in value he flips the paperwork as if they're stocks. He has never hurt anyone, has definitely never, ever traded anything but inanimate objects, and to be honest, I don't even think he even has stolen anything first hand before!”

Mina blinked. “Okay, well, so you trust him because you think he's secretly a good person, who just happens to be a hard-boiled white collar criminal occupationally?”

“Like I said, I think I can understand him. We’re similar, in some ways. Ekster was once like those kids you hang with,” Prisma muttered, fidgeting with a scab of nailpolish. “And so was I. It’s impossible to be in full control of your life, when you’re in a situation like that. I think he made the best of it and built perspective for himself, with the skills he has. I look up to him for that.”

Mina opened her mouth and obviously had something to say, but closed it after seeing Prisma’s serious expression.

“Are you in contact with your family, Prisma?” Dust asked kindly.

“Uhm,” Prisma looked at her shoes. “No. They're all gone. Life expectancy isn’t very high for factory workers in New America’s industrial complex. I worked on the East Coast docks for a bit, before fleeing to Europa. I was only around fifteen at the time and didn't speak French. I wandered from district to district for more than two years... Only through pure luck I ended up being adopted. Otherwise I would never have been able to enroll in any university. Sweetspire is my birth name, but I’m officially registered with my adoptive mother’s name. It’s convenient for the company to have a hacker with an untraceable name, it’s why Ekster chose to approach me too. He assumed I was still unregistered and thought he could help me. I guess you could call that opportunistic. But it certainly wasn’t unkind.”

Mina looked sheepish and Dust simply sighed. “I can see why Ekster would confide in you. Even when he’s being vulnerable, it's strategic.”

“Don’t hold it against him. We’d want nothing more but to escape our past. I think you out of all people would agree when I say that lineage should not define belonging,” Prisma argued pointedly.

“Of course I agree,” Dust shrugged. “But Europa’s mindset is different. Ya’ll live for the past. For the good and the bad.”

“The past *does* build the present,” Mina disagreed with a frown. “We all are where we are because of those who came before us.”

Dust rolled her eyes. “Like I said.”

“It puzzles me why you’d even want to believe that deviation from a generational trend is impossible,” Prisma told Mina. “Look at me, look where I am. I’m nothing like my birth family, and if you met my adoptive mum, you’d barely be able to tell us apart.” Mina opened her mouth, but Prisma continued. “And look at yourself. Do *you* dream of blindly pursuing the path your parents set up for you? Or do you happen to come from a family of athletes?”

Mina’s lips pressed together into a thin line and looked between the two girls in front of her, who had lived lives she couldn’t even begin to imagine. She had never had any issues with her parents, until she had told them about wanting to leave the family farm to pursue professional football.

“Don’t let your family or your past define you, Mina. It’s your life, no one owns you. Remember that.” Prisma smiled encouragingly.

Embarrassed, Mina drew the strings of her hoodie tight and strode away ahead of them. Dust followed, but Prisma paused for a moment, watching them walk away before hoisting her bag higher on her shoulders and hurrying to catch up.

*

“My, my, my, one knows life has taken a turn for the worse, when even a little soiree can’t help to lift the spirits,” Frog dramatically sighed, gazing over the drunken aristocrats chatting amongst themselves in the dimly-lit lounge. “*Vraiment pitoyable.*”

“More champagne?” Åke didn’t wait to refill the other man’s glass from the bottle they had confiscated for the two of them. They’d parked themselves at a table in a dark corner, successfully avoiding any more stale flattery and spiritless small-talk for the rest of the evening.

Åke wasn't actually supposed to get his Lord drunk, but the Frenchman could handle deceptively little. This bottle wasn't even their second and his cheeks had already turned a touch pink. Although he hadn't started soliloquizing about his favourite amphibians yet, which was usually a sign he'd had a glass too many. In Åke's case, the alcohol just didn't seem to touch the sides tonight.

"The Earl of Sardinia's eldest heir has been eying you all evening, have you noticed?" Frog leered at the stubby man across the room, unable to hide his discontent as he pointed in the nobleman's direction.

Åke gently pushed the hand down to prevent unwarranted drama later down the line. "And so has his wife, but I'd rather perish before indulging them."

"Pah, that's right. You're still seeing that Curator? Don't answer that. I know you are."

"Of course I am," Åke said anyway. "He's ambitious and a whole lot more interesting than any of these folks here."

Frog blinked at him. "Is he now? I'd love to meet him."

"Not sure if that's mutual," Åke said. He downed his drink. Frog had been weirdly approving about his proximity to the underground art dealer since he had successfully gaslit him into believing Ekster was an incredibly charismatic and enigmatic figure. He wasn't planning to burst that bubble anytime soon.

Frog excitedly refilled their glasses and bumped their shoulders together. "No one here in this room—" he gestured around to the lame party in front of them. "—knows what the Curator looks like. Except for you. Quite the achievement, my boy."

"You flatter me, my Lord," Åke gave a mocking bow.

"... *Donc*, what does this mysterious chap look like?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"*Ah, pitié*... But he's handsome, no? More handsome than you?"

"No need to assume as much."

"Taller than you?"

"Shorter than San Luo."

"Aha!" Frog poked his finger at Åke's chest. "*Voilà*, you never mention San Luo anymore. Missing your ex-parter-in-crime? Is it because your birthday's coming up?"

"*Voilà*, my ass," Åke mocked, lifting Frog's finger away. "My birthday's in autumn. It's barely mid-summer. Who's sentimental, old man."

Frog swirled the champagne in his glass and watched the bubbles rise to the top. “Age is a blessing, dear. What do you want for your birthday this year?”

“Some peace and quiet.”

“I might have you sit for a sculpture. Whilst you're still young and beautiful. Have you thought about what to do after your thirtieth?”

“Not this right now,” Åke groaned. “That's two years away, cut me some slack.”

“How about I schedule a meeting with the consultant?”

“No.”

“You have a lot of options, considering your track record. You could go into diplomacy or—”

“Sir. No.”

Frog clicked his tongue. “My goodness, my boy. You seriously don't believe there is a future modeling? Have some dignity. At some point, playtime is over.”

Åke put his chin in his hand and stubbornly stared in the opposite direction, refusing to continue the conversation. Frog sighed in defeat.

“Alright, alright. Away with the spoiled attitude. But the moment to think about such things is now, Åke. I'm giving you all the time and space for it, no? Talking about San Luo, he's changing positions. He's leaving for Shanghai next week. If you'd like to see him, I'd have to know beforehand.”

Åke turned back to face his Lord, a little taken back by the news. “You're exporting San?”

Frog leered at him through his lashes. “He was withering away, teaching Politics and Philosophy. It was obvious his heart was not in it. I am not going to let my investments go to waste like that.”

Hearing that even the intelligent and studious San Luo had been able to escape that horrifying teacher's position, was quite a light on the horizon. Åke carefully considered what he wanted to know next. “Your brother approved of this?”

Frog tutted. “When has that ever been my concern? Make no mistake,” he waved the champagne glass in Åke's face. “Business is business. My brother might be a coward, but he's seen what you can do. Now one can expand. My darling brother will learn of San Luo's redistribution when the results come in. In fact, I believe you should speak with San. You are his senior now, dear.”

Åke hummed absent-mindedly and poured the last drops of champagne into Frog's glass. This was getting interesting. When San had turned thirty, Åke himself was only twenty-four. Back then, retirement as a Parure hadn't once crossed his bored mind. Only when he'd seen San Luo being dragged off and locked up into the university, he'd come to the bleak realization that he had no clue what his own life was going to turn into once he would inevitably expire. It was at that moment, he'd acquired some type of fighting spirit to be free. He hadn't spoken to San Luo since. Lots had changed in the meantime. He had changed. His definition of freedom had changed. He achieved a level of agency that'd been unthinkable before, but it was still hard to imagine what value he could have, outside of what he already knew. It sounded like he didn't have to worry about that for much longer. San Luo was about to raise the bar to new heights again, as he always had.

*

"Min? Is that you?"

Mina halted the ball under her foot, shielding her eyes from the streetlights to see who was walking up to her out from the darkness of the falling dusk. She'd impulsively jumped out the bus a few stops earlier to let out some steam in one of the nearby football cages. A couple of aggressive penalties always did wonders to get her thoughts back on track.

"Max," she sighed in relief upon seeing the boy's freckled face and fire red hair. "That's so funny. We could've taken the bus together, if you were also going this direction."

"You're crazy, kicking some ball all by yourself in this part of town in the middle of the night," Max grinned while entering the cage. He sat down on his skateboard. "Today was a bit mental, right?"

"Tell me about it," Mina huffed, flicking the ball up on her foot to do some keepy-uppies.

"Last team meeting coming up tomorrow," Max beamed. "I wonder when Birdman's gonna call the go. I'm hyped. Know the church's floorplan by heart already?"

"Like hell I do!" She charged all the remaining bits of anger from her body onto the ball, smashing it into the goal with brute force. The rubber ball crashed into the metal rods of the cage, making the entire structure shake and sound through the night. "I'm not made for all that careful manoeuvring I'll have to be doing," she huffed.

Max laughed without a care. "Don't get worked up for no reason, chica."

Mina didn't want to listen. She ran to the other side of the field, catching the returning ball with her foot. Within a flash, it was back to being smashed into the goal. Max cheered loudly for her. They went on for a good few minutes like that, Mina aggressively hitting one penalty after the other, and Max loudly cheering her on from where he was sitting. They only stopped after getting cussed out by an elderly lady in a nightgown, shouting at them out of her window that they'd better can it or she'd call the police.

"What about you though? Got a grip on that gun already?" Mina asked Max after she sat down in front of him on the concrete.

Max chuckled and took out a small pouch from his windbreaker. "Fuck no... that thing's beyond me. But tomorrow Driver's gonna sort me out and it's all gonna be good. I'm far from stressed. Yo... by the way. I was gonna roll one... Do you smoke?"

Mina raised a judgemental eyebrow at him. "What do you think! I'm playing college football at the highest level. I don't go around smoking cigarettes you idiot!"

"Girl, chill the fuck down," Max coolly regarded her while he conjured rolling paper and a grinder from the pouch. "I meant weed."

"... Oh. Yeah... well... Only when I'm absolutely sure my friends, teammates, coach, parents or brothers aren't watching!"

"Shit..." Max jokingly looked over his shoulder, with a wide grin on his face. "I think you good."

Mina watched how Max expertly rolled a joint.

"Swear to me you won't go on the job high."

Max stuck the joint in his mouth and put his hand over his heart. "I realise what's at stake and I care too fucking much to be that careless. Swear to me you won't pick a fight with Ekster first thing tomorrow."

"Ah, *Scheiße*," Mina cursed. "I'll try."

"Loser. I'm being for real. We really don't need that shit, we're meant to be a team, a club even. Swear it."

"I swear! I fucking swear!"

Max bumped her fist and lit the joint. "Cheers," he said, as he handed her the burning stick. "To good fortune, trustworthy friends and some cool ass crime."

They sat in silence as they took turns smoking the joint. After Max had taken a couple of consecutive drags he turned to her.

“We can, like, trust you for real, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I Mina?”

“Haha, very funny.”

Max grinned proudly, before turning serious. “What I mean is, you’re like hard to read, man. I don’t really get your deal sometimes. You’re like this perfect, goody two shoes. Got the grades, got the football, tons of friends, all that shit. Why you doing this?”

“I’m *not* a goody two shoes,” Mina said, a bit offended. “I’ve got no choice but to work my ass off. My parents don’t support my dreams. They’d rather have me live my life out on the farm with them.”

Max passed the joint to her and put his head in his hand. “Your brother Tomas once told me about your oldest brother. How he’s studying chemistry at some top uni. Your parents support that?”

Mina coughed a little bit and passed the joint back to Max. “I forgot you know Tomas. Jürgen’s part of the problem, actually. All my parents’ money goes to his education. Apparently his dream is feasible enough in their eyes, though the fucker has been studying for as long as I can remember! When he’s ever gonna get a job?!” Thinking about her oldest brother completely riled her up again, but Max’s carefree laugh put her back at ease. “The only thing I ever wanted was to play football,” she sighed. “And to find out what the world had to offer beyond the family farm. Last summer I went behind my parents back and took the entry exam for St Bernard’s College. It isn’t like the fanciest school out there, but its sports facilities are okay, and I got in on a full scholarship. Gotta keep the grades up, or they’ll kick me out.”

Max patted her shoulder. “Aye, I also gotta get in on a scholarship, but I suck at studying so I’m not getting my hopes up.”

Mina snorted. “You know what’s funny? You’d think that my college teammates would be super passionate about football too. But as the club is slowly running out of funds, they’re all losing morale. And no one is really doing anything about it. It sucks,” she added. “I don’t agree with that mentality. If the club needs money, imma go out and get that money. I’ll do anything to win next season. So, yeah... I guess that's my deal.”

*

Around five-thirty in the morning, the rain returned with a heavy downfall. In a continuous rhythm, thick drops of water hit the windows of the club house. Ekster let the little black cat in through the terrace doors. The poor thing's wide eyes couldn't be ignored. It meowed at him and made itself comfortable in one of the leather seats. Ekster sat on the floor next to it and scratched its little head. It looked utterly peaceful and fell asleep immediately. It was silly to be envious of a cat's sleeping pattern but for the past few nights, Ekster's insomnia had had him in a chokehold. Stress was what kept him going during the day, and up after sundown. The only thing that could knock him out right now was an actual punch to the face. Which he'd happily take, at this point. His mother had thoughtfully sent him pandan leaves for his insomnia. Both of them suffered from the same problem. Though pandan had never put him to sleep, mixed with cinnamon they made a good herbal tea, which would at least calm his mind. He gave the cat one more pat, stood up and went downstairs.

Upon entering the first floor, he didn't expect to find Åke passed out on the couch. The sound of the watercooker made him stir in his sleep.

"Ergh?" he grumbled with a thick throat, totally sleep-drunk. "Ekster?"

Ekster hummed.

"Ah, tis you..." Åke turned to his side and nudged himself back into a comfortable position. "Just now..." he slurred. "I heard... piano music."

Incredible, he slept despite all that. "You must've been dreaming."

"No dream... real playing."

Ekster huffed. "Who plays piano at five in the morning."

"Hmmm... someone... very lonely."

With his cup of tea in hand, Ekster stared down at Åke who'd effortlessly slipped back into deep slumber. A peaceful smile was plastered all over the blond's face. "Who's lonely, you idiot," Ekster mumbled.

*

Driver was at a loss. The other members were in complete ecstasy to see him.

"Driver's back!" Prisma announced happily as soon as he walked in.

"Where have you been, man?!" Max exclaimed.

"Driver! We missed you so much!" Mina wailed. "We are a mess without you!"

Farello jumped around at his feet and Dust caught him in a side-hug.

“How dare you disappear!” She whined jokingly.

“Oi, oi, oi, calm down children,” Driver gently patted the top of Max's spiky hair. “I have a family to take care of...”

“What about us,” Max pouted. “Take care of us too! And didn't Ekster say to cancel our weekend plans?”

“My family are not weekend plans.”

“Fair enough!” Prisma chimed in.

Behind them Ekster and Åke descended the staircase, bringing the unmistakable scent of tobacco and rain with them.

“Yoo big guy!” Åke said. “Feels like it's been ages!”

“Not for me. Hasn't been long enough!” Driver winked.

“You gotta start picking up your phone on the weekend,” Ekster sighed. “Emotional disbalances sprout up out of thin air when you're not here and I think I'd collapse into myself before being able to deal with any more of those.”

“My bad!” Mina called from across the room.

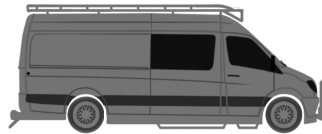
“Alright!” Åke clapped his hands together once and drew everyone's attention. “Enough chit-chat. Let's get our shit sorted out, iron out the details and go steal ourselves an overpriced piece of marble!” He turned to the guy next to him. “Ekster?”

Ekster looked from Åke back to the group, and cleared his throat. “Right.” He subconsciously cracked his knuckles. “What Åke said. Grab some food, grab a drink, gather around the table and let's finesse our plan of action.”

First Move Wins

Chapter 11 - The Big Picture

END



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