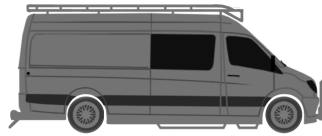


First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 7 - Match Making



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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

Chapter 7

Match Making

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

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

Phone pressed against his ear, Ekster headed toward the main street, having to twist and turn his torso to dodge the masses of sweaty sightseers. God, how he hated spending Saturdays downtown. The brewing heat trapped between the city walls boiled his brain like minced meat in hot stew, slowing his cognitive thinking down to the point of making him feel silly.

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

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

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

“Final proposition.”

“Try me.”

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

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

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

“My place. Downtown.”

“Will you cover travel expenses?”

Ekster frowned. Students were something else.

“...Sure.”

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

Ekster rolled his head on his neck. “Meet me in person and judge for yourself. Twenty-eight. Two girls, younger than me, older than you.”

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

“Can’t wait.”

“You have my number now. Text me the date. Emails are so lame. My friend is calling me on the other line, I have to go. *Auf Wiedersehen!*”

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

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

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

He looked like that?

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

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

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

“Can he have this?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Poetic,” Åke mumbled, gesturing for Ekster to hand him the lighter.

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

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

When no-one else knew what to add to the topic, Ekster simply shrugged. “It doesn’t matter too much, really. More importantly, I’ll have to cross-reference my research with Dust’s to determine whether cleaning the statue benefits her value at all. Whatever fits her best, I’d say. What’s your experience with marble from the Classics? Better restored or in its original state?”

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

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

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

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

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

Åke made some vague noises while trying to hold back his own laugh. “See, that really depends on *how* you sell it. I can make you want anything and everything.”

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

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

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

“Shoot.”

“Figure out who the property manager is.”

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

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

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

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

“Hm. Dedicated. I can’t promise any—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did he now?” Åke reacted with a veil of feigned disbelief. “Sadly I’ll have to miss out on that part of the date. But enjoy yourselves,” he added with a suggestive smirk while he put his hideously trendy sunglasses back on. This man’s head was deep in the gutter at all times, it seemed. Ekster opened his mouth to protest but Åke didn’t wait for a reply. “Think of me when ya’ll are doing it! *Ciao!*”

With those as his last words, he strutted off and disappeared into the crowd. Dust turned to Ekster with an amused ear-to-ear grin plastered across her face. “Well, well, well, Curator. And where the heck did you dig up that gem?”

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

“Hmmm?” Dust mused. “Big game. Quite the catch. Though it’s hard to gauge these finessed types. Who knows where his loyalty lies. ”

Ekster sat back. The parasol shielded his eyes from the sun, covering half his face with its shadow. “I tend to give my own judgement the benefit of the doubt.”

“As expected,” Dust grinned. “Any chance you’ve also been trying to involve a teenage boy with tomato-red hair?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Very smooth.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good.” Ekster waved down the waiter.

Dust grinned brightly and Farello.

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

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

Dust could only laugh her ass off again.

*

Around dusk that same day, his phone rang so unexpectedly loud it caused him a near heart-attack.

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

“Whoa, am I interrupting something?” Åke sounded on the other end of the line.

“No,” Ekster pinched the bridge of his nose and pushed his glasses back up. “No. What’s up?”

The other cleared his throat. “Well, I overheard some stuff. They’re moving objects to the Salon tonight. I don’t know if the statue’s included, nor do I have much information on the

property manager. But I've heard complaints that he only ever stops by once every fortnight, on Saturdays. So today. Hence the moving, tonight." He ended the message with a soft sigh. He sounded dead-tired.

"I see." Part of this information was not new to Ekster. From where he was hiding in the bushes, he was observing in real-time how selected artifacts were lifted into armored vans. "Thanks for the info."

He scanned the group of moving men through his binoculars. They continuously transported large wooden boxes from the church to the nearest van. There was no telling whether the statue had already left the building. One figure was standing off to the side, doing nothing but barking orders. There was a ring with keys around their belt.

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

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

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

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

"What are you so short-tempered for? Didn't you get laid?"

"I'm hiding in a fucking bush, Åke! Shut your mouth!"

"I bet you are! At least let me sleep over tomorrow."

He was about to curse something ungodly at Åke, but his hiding spot was, unfortunately, more important than venting his annoyance. "Stay at your own house," he hissed instead.

"Awh, come on man," Åke whined. "I'd have to get up so many hours earlier. Besides, someone needs to drive me. Can't ask my manager, can I now?"

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

"Fucking hell, you're useless. Figure it out. Get yourself a taxi, or something."

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

"See you tomorrow?"

Ekster sighed. “Fine. I’m hanging up now.” He hung up.

He watched as the doors of the last van in the line were thrown shut and the keyholder locked up the church. Ekster waited for a good ten minutes after all vans had left the property, before he crept out of the bushes. Time to see if his statue was still where she should be.

*

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

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

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

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

“For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made...

My son... Understand we are capable of creation too. Have I not created you? Have your hands not brought forth music? We create, and ought to protect what has been created before us. Know where you come from, cherish your forefathers. It is through the burden of our creations that we live forever.”

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

“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father,” he muttered out loud.

Reassuring words to tell himself, in theory. In practice, his father’s sins had driven him into a life of crime. He laughed hollowly at the condemnation of his own lineage and got up from the chalky floor. No need to sit here just to feel all sorry for himself.

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He went back to look at the object through his jewelers loupe. Pretty cute indeed. Silence settled once more. Driver made himself comfortable in one of the reading chairs, ready for a nap, while Dust hovered restlessly behind Ekster. Her eyes kept drifting toward the shelves, curiosity tugging at her, but she forced herself to stay put. She inevitably couldn't sit still, or remain quiet, for all that long.

“You really like the shiny stuff, don't you?”

Ekster hummed. “I just respect skilled craftsmanship.” He turned around on his stool and handed Dust the brooch, to which he had attached a little paper tag for identification. “Third rack from the right, second shelf from the top.”

Dust almost skipped to the shelf, she couldn't keep her hands to herself any longer. “Ooo Shiny! More gold things! This one's pretty!” She held up a circular brooch of a snake eating its own tail.

“Want to have it?” He shrugged away Dust's surprised expression. “I collect just for the sake of it. I wouldn't mind giving some things a second life. Here.” He picked up a hairpin

with ornate silverwork from a shelf nearby. “This is nice too. Looks kind of trendy, right? Twentieth century.” He twisted the pin around between his gloved fingers and observed how its hanging ornaments danced in the light. He extended the jewelry out to Dust, who carefully took it with amazement in her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

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

“It's so beautiful, I might steal it for myself,” she said with a smirk.

“Be careful though,” he warned with a serious expression. “The chain-work is a pain to mend correctly.” He caught Prisma staring at them from the corner of his eye. “Want to have something too?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ekster gave it a second before answering in English, “And you are?”

“Oh, excuse me,” the man stubbornly replied in his own language. “I heard you spoke French.”

“From whom?”

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

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

The man smoothly continued, “Over the years, I’ve heard a lot of whispers going around about The Curator. Now usually, word on the street, *as they say*, has little to do with myself, of course. But recent...” He paused, “Developments have, how should I say, brought the streets a little too close for my liking. Curator, you’re in your twenties, correct?”

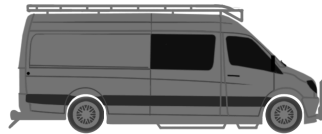
Ekster kept his mouth shut.

“Oh, là, là, you are difficult to work with,” the person tutted, unfazed. “Want to get down to business? It seems like our paths have finally crossed, but over something I’m extremely protective of. One could almost say...parental. Young people are such a pain, you just can’t control them. Curiosity so often gets the best of the lot of you. Not much one can do about that. Now, please tell me: how have you been enjoying my Åke?”

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END



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