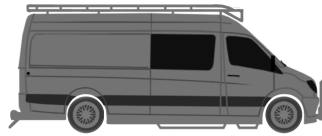


# First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 3 - Test Drive



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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

# Chapter 3

## Test Drive

Ekster tossed some random-looking objects in a leather weekend bag and changed into a dark blue tracksuit.

“It gets cold up in the mountains at night,” he clarified when Åke beheld the outfit change with a raised eyebrow. “You could put this on.” He threw a black zip-up hoodie at the other's head. It smelt of cigarettes, with a strong side note of copper, dusty attic and something resembling wet earth.

“Is this like, washed?”

Ekster shot him a blank stare.

Åke held back some snarky remarks about basic self-care and wrapped the hoodie around his waist. “We’ll see how warm my tanktop can keep me,” he snickered.

Ekster shrugged and grabbed his car keys. “What do you want for dinner? I can't stand the smell of fish.”

Åke navigated Ekster to a roadside San Fredo's, who's genius takeaway concept made it an obvious choice. The two-lane drivethrough shouldn't be too busy this time of the evening. Ekster watched with horror and disbelief as his pepperoni pizza was folded twice and served to him as a little triangle in a cardboard holder.

“I can't believe this blasphemy exists south of the Alps.”

“It doesn't change the flavor.” Åke argued. He grabbed both pizzas, so that Ekster had his hands free to pay and steer the car back onto the highway. He took a couple of consecutive big bites from his own pizza pollo topped with spinach, feta and extra minced meat.

“This is not how pizza is meant to be eaten...” Ekster protested weakly.

“Stop acting posh.” Åke shot back with his mouth full. Ekster pulled a face. “I swear this is the best pizza you’ll have, folded or not.”

Ekster switched the gears over to autopilot and cautiously took a bite of the slice he was handed over.

“Hm.”

From there on, he didn't speak anymore. Pizza approved, Åke assumed.

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They entered the first tunnel before the sun had completely set. When they came out on the other side, it was gone behind the mountains. A tinge of cyan was all that was left of the hot, summer day. The next tunnel dipped down under the neighbouring districts. There was always traffic around these roads, even in the dead of night. Since moving to the south, Åke had spent many hours being driven around the famously extensive Alpine tunnels. This specific tunnel was a long one and with the absence of a good view, car rides got very boring, very quickly.

The man next to him had his eyes starkly fixated on the road. Yellow tunnel lights cast rapidly passing shadows over his disengaged expression. Without much gusto he rhythmically thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel, in tune with the rock music that quietly played on the radio. As if forgotten he wasn't alone in his car, he hadn't made any attempts to initiate conversation. Seemingly feeling Åke's eyes on him, he stopped thrumming the wheel to briefly side-eye the other. Åke seized the split second of contact as an opportunity to start chatting. He sure as hell didn't feel like sitting in dead silence for another ninety minutes.

“So do you go biking often?”

Ekster raised his eyebrows. The deep frown between them disappeared. “Uh, Yeah.”

Åke nodded, “yeah. Me too. I love it. Cycling is great out here. The treks through the mountains are fantastic. What did you think of the forest route from the other day?”

“Not bad.”

“I don't think anyone really knows of it. It's a secret route that I found, hehe.”

“I see.”

“Where did you say you lived before?”

“Didn't say.”

“... Do tell!”

“Prague.”

“That's dope. I've never been to the Česko department. Good cycling around there?”

“Sure.”

“Have you attempted any of the Alpine treks again? They kick my ass too, not gonna lie.”

“... I haven't.”

“They're not my favourite either, haha.”

Silence again. The stiff small talk made Åke's brain throw a little tantrum. He bit the inside of his cheek. There were so many questions he wanted answers to. Usually he'd go about it smooth and suave before getting to the meat of a conversation, but trying to thaw Ekster felt like a fool's errand. Perhaps he just didn't like to talk about cycling.

“So...” It took no genius to see how clearly Ekster loathed the idea of more friendly chatter. What a prick. Oh fuck it. He might as well cut right down to the chase. “You must've done some research on me, haven't you? As you should, I guess. But I have no clue how much you know, and I know next to nothing about you. That unbalance of intel isn't the best foundation for a fruitful partnership, wouldn't you agree?”

Ekster's face didn't move an inch. “It was remarkably difficult to find anything on you at all,” he replied in a detached tone.

“I'm sure it was,” Åke dismissed the response. “You see, I'm not the sneaky-snake-type. It's not my style. So I'm just straight-up going to ask some questions. Lie if you want, but I'm an expert at smelling bullshit.” He leaned forward in his seat to watch Ekster's face. “First of all, what's your family name?”

Ekster kept his eyes on the road. “It wouldn't ring a bell.”

“So what's the harm in telling me?”

“I reckon we could save some things for later.”

“Oh I see, you're playing hard to get. Guess I gotta be patient. Hypothetically though, if I were to ask around in higher circles, would they know you?”

“I thought you didn't want to hang around the upper-classes.”

“Sadly I see them all the time. And they tell me everything.”

Ekster's right eyebrow lifted for a second before speaking. “My family has neither legacy nor heritage that could be of anyone's interest.”

Åke hummed as if he had gotten precious information and sat back in the leather chair. He kicked his feet up against the dashboard, which got him the most judgemental side-eye he had ever received in his life. Åke ignored it.

“Can’t say I believe you, but okay. Let’s say it’s true. Your clandestine art dealership runs so well that without any family to back you up, it has bought you this fancy-ass car, the foreign bike, and a four-story downtown residence. With a roof terrace, might I add.”

Ekster scoffed. “It has. In fact. I’m good at what I do.”

“Impressive. Completely self-made. Congrats. I’m sure your bookkeeping is squeaky-clean.”

“You couldn’t even imagine.”

“Seems like you’re perfectly capable of running this flourishing business on your own. Why want me involved?”

“You have a specific skillset.”

Åke rolled his eyes. “No shit. I’m practically lab-grown. But what part of that multifaceted skillset is of use to you? Want to be on the list for private parties? To be introduced to the ultra-rich?”

Ekster exhaled through his nose, as if annoyed by the question.

“I’ll clarify, before you miscalculate one plus one. Everything I know about you, is based on assumptions. I’ve pieced together a story of a young boy whose identity was systematically exploited by powerful classes. I imagine you live to see that world burn. I need that energy. In my team,” he nonchalantly added.

Åke dropped his legs from the dashboard. “Team? What team? What do you, me and a bunch of other randos have in common?”

“A common enemy.”

“Ah yes, *the system*. What’s your vendetta here, Curator? Got anything to do with that coat of arms ring on your left hand and a family without legacy?” Åke brazenly poked around.

Ekster’s expression darkened. “I think I preferred the small-talk about cycling.”

Åke clicked his tongue. “Baby, we’re way past small talk.” He was annoyed how the other stubbornly refused to be straight-up, although he was pretty sure his jab had been right in the bullseye. “For your sake I’ll just assume it’s a tear-jerking story which I’ll hear when the time is ripe. For the time being I’ll trust you *this* much more.” He held his thumb and pointy finger up, very close together. “But you’re not out of the line of fire just yet. Let’s talk some more about *moi*. Where did you first hear about me?”

“Are you doing a customer’s survey?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Saw you on the cover of Face magazine.”

“That couldn’t have been very enlightening.”

“On the contrary,” Ekster snickered. “I saw the most fascinating headline. *‘From Poverty to Paris’ Beloved Gem’*, or something along those lines,” he quoted.

Åke said nothing.

“Don't you think that's an odd choice of words?” Ekster said in surprise after the lack of feedback.

Åke shrugged.

Ekster tipped his head in doubt. “It told me everything I needed to know. The article itself was garbage, of course. But, how does one go from poverty to being Paris’ Beloved Gem? No elitist likes the poor. As a model, you popped up out of nowhere. Your face seems to be in every fucking campaign these days. But you’re not signed to any modeling agency, the press says you used to work for some french family, your net-worth can’t be traced, and your name can’t be found in the Registry of Person.” Ekster scoffed. “Reeked of trafficking to me.”

Åke burst out laughing. “Oh I see, you're *smart* smart. So you saw an unfortunately phrased headline, did some basic fact checking and deduced that I was the man for the job?”

“Evidently.”

“How did you end up finding my place?”

“Pure coincidence.”

“Sure, that'll hold up in court.”

“Believe it or not.”

Åke snorted. This guy was a crafty piece of work. “Do you know what family I work for?”

“Long french name, can’t remember.”

“Want to meet them?”

“Not interested.”

“If not, what kind of people do you do business with?”

“I mostly deal with other dealers,” Ekster clarified. “We toss stuff around like a hot potato, wash the cash, everyone takes their cut, *et voilà*,” waving his hand in the air on the beat of the last two words. “I believe I already told you, my speciality is the paperwork. The boring stuff no one wants to do, look at or check. Clients are usually nobody remarkable. The influential have no use for me,” he added pointedly. “They have their own ways to bypass the law. As you must know.”

Åke hummed in agreement and slouched back into the carseat. No lie spoken. Not many, at least. Nevertheless he was somewhat relieved to hear that Ekster wasn't at all trying to squeeze him for business contacts. That made him feel a bit better.

“So what’s tonight’s briefing?”

\*

In preparation for the seasonal Salon parties, the estate’s *human parure* would be called to gather in the dormitory's common room. Everyone would be handed a personalized briefing. Every guest was invited for good reasons. These reasons had to be studied.

Surface-level speaking, a parure was a respectable and tasteful part of the *mise-en-scène* during parties organised by the house. However, a strict hierarchy was in place between the working parure. The experienced and notable parure took on the role of a representative, and directly served a family heir. They were responsible for filtering and recommending new business to their Lord or Lady. Representative parure were the heart of a party, desirable conversationalists and the doorway to business with the family. With their eyes and ears open for gossip and conspiracies, it was expected of them to be all up in everyone's business, and extract information to protect their family.

As a result, Åke would end up knowing *everything* about a person. Consequently, he knew *everything* there was to know about the disagreeable Baron Marcus de Lyon and his extensive portfolio of cultural assets.

\*

Ekster handed him a thin stack of paper with some text, images of a small white church and the marble statue and a clipping of the Baron. Åke took the photograph from the paperclip and threw it over his shoulder.

“I don’t need to look at that,” he grinned. He continued to flip between the three pages. “Blah blah. Erhm... okay... Ekster, there is not much here for me to work with. What does this say? ‘Obtain samples’?” He glanced back up at the other man.

“Yeah,” Ekster replied plainly. “That’s my main objective. I need a sample of the marble to determine the age and validity of the statue. Last time I didn’t manage to enter the building.”

“Sure... Guess you’ll take care of that.” Åke turned his attention back to the text. “And what’s this? ‘Check surroundings’?”

“You’ll see.”

Quality briefing. What part of his skillset was he supposed to put to use here? “So this—museum? It’s not a museum, Ekster.”

“What else is it supposed to be?”

“Just some storage unit.”

“Filed as a museum for tax purposes.”

“If you say so.”

“How come it’s so badly secured?”

“Because the building is an old church, not an actual depot. Marcus doesn’t bother with much upkeep on his assets. I bet he hasn’t visited the place in years, and couldn’t name a single object inside. He owns *a lot* of property. You couldn’t possibly give a fuck about every single piece of land your lineage has ever owned. You’d go mental. Anyway, I can imagine a financial advisor might’ve told him to chuck religious art in a church. This game is like playing cards. You try to make the right combinations to get the highest amount of points. Lyon is also known for religious works, y’know. He *should* preserve them, whether he cares for them or not.”

Ekster hummed. “That clarifies some things.”

Åke went back to the notes. “Did you find out who manages the building day to day?”

“I nearly ran into this kid last time. He had a clipboard and took some pictures. Did some kind of inventory check.”

Åke frowned. “You picked a great time to steal art. Sounds like Salon preparations. Art viewing parties,” he quickly added when Ekster opened his mouth. “That couldn’t have been the property manager, though. Just an errand boy.” Åke crossed his arms behind his neck. “You’re in a hurry to steal this thing?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I believe this year’s summer Salon is planned in like three weeks. You take the piece right after, the next best moment they could notice that it’s missing is in the Fall. However, you should still try to find out who the actual property manager is. They’re the keyholders with actual responsibility over the assets and the only ones standing in your way. Luckily for you,



Marcus tends to overwork his property managers. They're all edging on a burnout and only pretend to be doing routine inventory checks."

"I see. Interesting. I will make sure to look into it. Thank you, Åke."

"Don't mention it," Åke mumbled, suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed, for some reason. At the very least, the end of the tunnel finally turned up as a small dot in the horizon.

\*

After leaving the main highway, a zigzagging road let them up into the mountains. Instead of parking like a normal person, Ekster shoved his shiny executive car in the roadside bushes.

"Better to walk the last bit," he said.

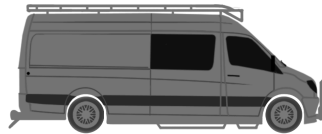
Åke's legs hurt like crazy after two hours in the car. He kicked some life back into them and stretched his back. The temperature had dropped a few degrees for sure, so Åke reluctantly put the black hoodie on. Ekster grabbed his leather shoulder bag from the backseat and pointed up the overgrown hill.

"I suggest we cross through here."

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END



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