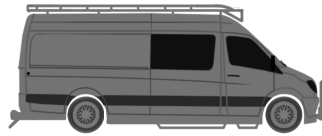


First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 2 - Friday Night Things



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 2

Friday Night Things

Even though most shops got ready to close down for the day, the Duomo Bianco Nordico Piazza was bustling with activity. It was late afternoon on a Friday, past rush hour, yet the 4-lane road that cut the Piazza in half was jammed with traffic. Car engines roared into action as soon as the traffic lights jumped to green. A group of excited teenagers took pictures with a lime green Lamborghini passing by at a snail's pace, to the annoyance of the owner.

The Duomo Bianco Nordico Piazza, or The Dubino as locals called it, connected the numerous downtown side streets to a main-vein road that led way to neighbouring districts. The pavement was just as packed as the streets. Children held onto their melting ice creams, groups of friends made their way to their favorite bar and overwhelmed tourists blocked the way of rushing locals. Soon, the families and senior day-trippers would make way for a sea of partygoers looking to get the first weekend night started right.

Under the white parasols of a small corner cafe, Åke sat at a round table with his back against the brick wall. The sun had just started to set behind the ornate tips of the white Gothic church. He had already paid and was practically ready to leave, but couldn't possibly do so before the sun had completely disappeared. Those last rays were always the warmest. The stylish couple next to him seemed to have a similar idea. Åke was about to lean over, ask for a light and see where that would take the night, when out of nowhere a black Audi A8 pulled up and came to a screeching halt right in front of him, two wheels parked on the narrow pavement. The car came in with such force that it slightly drifted in its brake path. A passerby was forced to jump out of the way and yelled, "You think you can fucking park here you fucking idiot?!" in aggravated Italian. Åke was about to ignore whatever jerk was behind the wheel, when the tinted window rolled down and he heard a familiarly unfamiliar voice.

"Fancy running into you here, Åkerman." Down at him peered a pair of pale blue eyes framed by oval spectacles and straggly black hair.

“You— what the fuck,” Åke managed to spit out. What was this guy's name again? Had he ever mentioned a last name? It'd been over three weeks since their first meeting and Åke had obviously held off on ringing the number on the business card.

“What are you up to?” Ekster asked, ignoring Åke's standoffish bewilderment.

“Right now?”

“Exactly now.”

Åke opened his mouth before closing it again. He unwillingly eyed the couple next to him, who observed the happening with perplexity. “...Why...?” He was a tad apprehensive to spend his Friday night with a guy who in all honesty didn't seem up to much exciting stuff.

“I picked up a neat little job. I think you'd want to hear about it.”

“Hey, hey,” Åke dismissively waved his hand as if to shoo the other away. “You can't just start involving me like this. I don't work that way.”

“I'm not giving you work. Think of it as industry gossip.”

Åke sighed. Too bad he was such a nosy motherfucker. There goes his precious free night. Ekster's lips curled up into an amused smirk.

“Get in. My place is five minutes from here,” he said, pushing the passenger door open.

Ekster never did a whole lot of small-talk, that much was obvious.

“You haven't called,” he stated, pulling back up into traffic before the other had even properly closed the door.

“Are you stalking me?” Åke shot back.

Ekster laughed a single “hah” without much humor. “That's funny,” he added. “Put your seatbelt on.”

With one hand on the wheel and the other on the gear shift, Ekster steered the car a sharp right into a narrow alley. Without a warning he kicked the gas and Åke moved like lightning to fasten his seatbelt. The man drove like he had lives to spare. Sitting next to him in this mad ride, it was clear as day that Ekster didn't just enjoy fancy bikes. The Audi's luxurious interior was absolutely spotless. The man himself was sporting a gray cuban collar shirt, finely woven and tastefully simple. There was no watch around his wrist nor any jewelry on his neck or ears, although Åke's hawk eye noticed a silver ring around his left pinky, one of those that featured an elaborate family crest. It was impossible to distinguish any of the carved details, but it did explain how this person got into art taxation. Perhaps he wasn't as much of a

back-alley-dealer as Åke had initially thought. Not that daddy's contacts brought in any less shady business. A business that wasn't running too poorly, judging from the executive car, tailored clothes and artisan bike.

Within four minutes of speeding through the maze of narrow side-streets and nearly running over a few more pedestrians, they arrived in a more quiet and residential area of downtown. Åke, who had held onto the grab handle for dear life, finally felt safe enough to breathe again. Before he got the opportunity to properly look around and see what neighborhood they were in, Ekster smoothly pulled up into a garage that he hadn't even noticed opening. The white folding door lowered while they got out of the car.

Åke blinked a few times to adjust his eyes to the dim indoor lights. Not that there was much to see. A spacious, split-level garage with nothing but Ekster's bike, a door to presumably a toilet or small storage unit and a staircase leading up to the second floor, which Ekster was walking toward. Åke followed.

The second floor wasn't much better. A small kitchen that showed no visible signs of use and a whole lot of moving boxes. Åke scratched his chin as he observed the only piece of furniture in the room: a large, olive green, velvet chaise lounge. Tasteful and obviously ancient, but painfully out of place in the undecorated room. A pile of books that didn't look like light reading piled up higher than the backseat of the lounge. Across the room was a door with frosted glass. The remaining space was occupied with yet more boxes. Some of them looked to have been unpacked, or at least opened. No mirrors or paintings were hung up on the walls, and the lightbulbs were left exposed. There was another door without blinds.

"Cozy spot," Åke mumbled, growing regretful he had come along. "Is this where you'll kill me?"

Ekster huffed. At least the jokes seemed to land. He opened the door without blinds, which led to a long and narrow staircase that went two floors up.

"How long have you been here?" Åke asked as he followed the other up the stairs. He looked over his shoulder, at a front door all the way at the bottom of the staircase, noting the weird layout of the apartment.

"Little over three months," Ekster replied.

"Too busy to unpack? Business must be thriving," Åke said. "Seriously dude, what's with this sad-ass place? I get that you're single and all but where's all your— stuff."

Ekster opened the door to the fourth floor, a spacious attic, which was packed with things in every nook and cranny. Two floor-to-ceiling industrial shelves, chucked full with antique objects in every shape and size, one additional wooden bookshelf held a collection of books, with even more books on the floor next to it as the shelves were already overflowing. The middle of the space was taken over by a large standing desk, about three by two meters in size, although the thing didn't offer much more than twenty square centimeters of freed up working space. The surface was completely cluttered up with tools, disassembled objects, open books, paperwork, empty coffee cups and a laptop. Multiple adjustable lamps were mounted on the desk, pointing at a working area, which was cluttered with loops, brushes and pincers. In the corner of the room was a little seating area with two leather reading chairs and a variety of coffee tables. Both chair seats, as well as the tables and floor were completely occupied with more books, scribbly notes and newspaper clippings. Other than that, there was a wooden door which led to god knows where, and a double glass door opening up to an empty roof terrace.

For someone with such a refined aura, Ekster's place was a hot mess.

"I still have to get settled in," Ekster clarified. He didn't seem embarrassed in the slightest. "Have a seat."

"I think I'll stand."

"Suit yourself."

While Ekster moved some of his stuff around on the desk in an attempt to create some space, Åke had a peek at the books spread out over the coffee table. They had absolutely horrific titles such as "The Cultivation and Trade of Marble across the European Plains", "The Conservation of Ancient Marble" and "Religion and Artistic Expression in Europa's Early Medieval Age". Ekster seemed to have read most books from cover to cover, the pages thickened with folded corners and colourful sticky notes.

"Are you into religious art or something?" Åke asked for the sake of conversation.

"Not particularly." Ekster glanced over in the other's direction to see what he was referring to. "I skimmed through them earlier to check some info."

"Riveting."

Ekster scoffed with self-aware sarcasm. "If you can refrain from mocking me, I'll try to do the same for you, pretty boy."

Åke threw his hands up. “I ain't judging. To each their own. Reminds me of my late art history teacher. He was big on religion. Took the class to see churches and shit. Good memories, actually.”

“Went to fancy school didn't you?” Ekster asked with a knowing grin. Åke grunted noncommittally but did not elaborate. As with most kids in wealthy circles, he had gotten the curated education to fit his future's needs. Politics, economics, history, art history, art theory, philosophy, music and in his case even public speaking, debate and etiquette. All provided to him when he was brought to the estate. His Lord's family was in the business of education too, so he'd been especially privileged in that department.

“Sounds fun,” Ekster said. “Most of my teachings came from no one but a 94-year-old historian.” He pulled a face as if he smelt blue cheese. “Anyhow. Let's not summon the deceased. Have a look at this.”

Ekster had apparently made a satisfactory amount of free space, which he was now cluttering back up with a variety of newspaper clippings. Åke walked up to the desk and glanced over the material. Between the discolored pictures of statues and museum openings, an all-too familiar face stuck out like a sore thumb.

Åke side-eyed Ekster, who was already staring back at him. The innocent lift of Ekster's brows completely ticked Åke off. It sure started to look like this guy was involved in some business which he himself had no interest getting back into.

Åke crossed his arms. “What do you want me to say?”

“Something that stands out to you?”

“Don't play with me. What's this about?”

Ekster adjusted his glasses.

“This is a curated selection of printed media, following the passing of hands of a very specific marble statue.” He pointed at the most upper-left clipping. A yellowed piece of newspaper. It featured a short text and no images. “The oldest article dates back to 1715. It was thought that the untitled marble work by an unknown artist was made on behalf of the district church of Alpes-Côte d'Azur in 1710. However, this text suggests it's much older than that. I strongly believe that the statue's far older than ever officially documented, but I couldn't say for sure without a sample of the material. However, based purely on theoretical speculation, I would date the statue to at least two millennia old. Which is highly remarkable. The statue is thought to depict the Holy Mary, but if my research checks out, it's older than

the idea of Mary herself. Which would obviously make her... pretty fucking valuable.” Lost in his own thoughts for a split second, he impatiently thrummed his fingers on the metal desk before continuing, “As for why the real age of the statue has been continuously obscured, I have my suspicions but no facts. Could be for any reason. Personal, financial, religious, whatever. Most likely financial. *Allez*, it’s besides the point,” he waved the line of thought away with his hand. “In the 1780’s, the statue was transferred to the Temple of Arts, Bank of Southbank depot,” he gestured at another clipping. A front cover with bold letters spelled ‘OVER 500 PIECES BROUGHT TO SAFETY’.

“It never left the depot again for nearly two centuries. Perhaps forgotten. Although someone must’ve been keeping tabs, because the statue was stolen from the heavily secured depot in 1994. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that no other pieces were taken. It was then illegally traded between private parties, of which I was unable to secure any paperwork. I can only assume that’s because no piece of valid documentation traded hands. I managed to pull some bank loan statements, which is enough evidence to me, to come to a final conclusion, that this thing really is worth a *fuck load* of money.” Ekster paused to catch his breath and with practiced movements cracked his finger joints one by one.

“The statue remains in private property till this day,” he finally gestured at the collection of most recent articles. “It’s currently in the possession of this very man; the Baron of Lyon, Marcus Maximilius de Lyon. Unregistered, of course.”

Åke stared a hole into the picture of the rosy-cheeked man in tuxedo proudly posing between an assembly of statues. The toothy golden smile made him sick to his stomach and his brain instinctively recalled the smell of Cuban cigar. His skin crawled and he felt like spitting on the floor. Instead, he threw the man next to him a pissed-off look.

“Fine story. What’s it got to do with me?” he snapped.

Ekster’s steely eyes examined Åke over his glasses. “Nothing, really. But I know that you know, this man is of the highest degree corrupted scum that our sophisticated city has to offer. What if I told you... that I have a way to get back at him. To play him using his own game.”

Åke took a deep breath through his nose and continued to glare back at Ekster. Anything better than looking at that goddamned Baron. Åke knew he must be flashing some crazy eyes right now, but didn’t feel the desire to control his expression anymore. His thoughts ran a hundred miles per hour. This guy was a neat liar, setting him up with a job after all.

“Explain.”

Ekster held up a picture of the Marble Mary. Although touched by the wear of time, her eyes were full with expression. Hope, and agony.

“I am going to steal her.”

“You're mental.”

“I have a buyer.”

“All of this shit for *a bit of cash?!?*” Åke breathed in disbelief.

“I believe I said she was worth *a fuck load* of money,” Ekster snapped. “I’m doing this for a wide variety of reasons, and yes, one of them is most certainly cash. Which I’m willing to give you a good share of, by the way.”

Åke’s eye twitched. “You *are* mental.”

Ekster shrugged. “Think of me what you want. But the art trading industry is worth trillions, run by fat barons that don't look after their trinkets. I’ve dealt with stolen pieces my entire life. Thought it’d be time to take matters into my own hands. I know good stuff when I see it, better than anyone else. This statue is currently being held in a little museum. It's deserted, abandoned even. You wouldn't believe how a piece like this could ever end up like that. No signs of any sophisticated security system. I’ll be visiting the property again, tonight. What I need is a second pair of trustworthy eyes.”

“The Baron of Lyon owns more ancient trinkets than there are letters in your dusty-ass books,” Åke grumbled. “What's the theft of one piece gonna do?”

“Come on Åkerman, you can’t be as stupid as you look,” Ekster hissed unkindly. “We steal the piece and forge legit documentation. When they find it missing, it's already too late. Reporting the theft would only expose their own crimes. I sell the statue to my buyer and tip law enforcement. You can trust me to cover my trading tracks.” A barely noticeable smirk appeared on Ekster’s lips. “We make money, the police get off their ass. Now you tell me what the theft of one piece can do.”

Åke started to feel dizzy. Perhaps there was a lack of oxygen in this dusty attic.

“You’re not snitching on your own crime.”

“Gotta stay close to the fire to feel the heat.”

Who in the world thinks like that? “I need a cigarette,” Åke faintly concluded.

His chalet in the mountains had the best birds-eye-view over the entire district. But from the fourth floor of a city apartment, the atmosphere was completely different. Alive and

magnetic. Åke watched streetlights flicker on, and listened to bars turn up the music. Chin in hand, he leaned on the balcony and stared at the scenery in front of him, at nothing in particular and everything at the same time.

He had made up his mind. He trusted his gut instinct blindly to recognize an opportunity when one presented itself. It had taken him this far. There was a promise he had made to himself the day he was allowed to set foot outside of his Lord's estate: he'd do anything to never end up in captivity ever again. His twenty-eighth birthday was coming up fast, and he had to make some moves soon if he ever wanted to have a shot at real freedom. The last three years had been fun, but fun hadn't gotten him what he wanted.

Although right now he might not completely trust or understand Ekster's personal motivations, he could side with a man who recognized a corrupted system and was planning to fight it head on. Åke crushed the cigarette butt under his foot and turned to that very man, who had given him all the time and silence to organise his thoughts.

"You said tonight?"

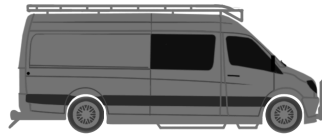
"It's a two hour drive across the Alps."

"Let's grab some food on the go."

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END



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