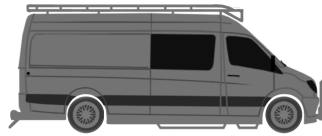


First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 13 - Entangled Affairs



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 13

Entangled Affairs

Max was thrilled. There was still hope for him. It was painfully obvious Ekster had less than zero interest in reciprocating any of the twins' feelings. Besides, the gap between his actual personality and the version the girls had built up in their heads was so stark it quickly became something to laugh about. Åke could barely endure the secondhand embarrassment when Eunseo finally told him, later that evening, what had happened over the radio.

“Oh. My. God. You did *not* tell the Curator you wanted his fucking babies,” he laughed with his head in his hands.

“I wish you could've seen his freakin' face,” Mina chipped in with a big grin. “I'm pretty sure he just wanted to perish right there and then.”

“It's freaking nuts to meet the Curator in real life,” Eunji said after everyone had a good laugh. “I think I was starstruck. His reputation is quite something. We should probably be proud that we managed to crack that scary facade somehow.”

Dust, Åke, Max, Mina, Eunji and Eunseo glanced back over their shoulders at Ekster who was sitting at another table, deep in conversation with Driver and Mr Lee. He had completely returned to his recognisably cool self. Farello's head also lifted, but ultimately wasn't sure what exactly everyone was looking at.

“International trade is policed and penalised so harshly,” Eunseo said quietly, as if she didn't want Ekster to hear her. “The Curator's practically the only gate our community has to get Korean cultural heritage into Europa. And not just antiquities. Our mother likely feels indebted to him for much of what we have at home, from fabric to medicine to books.”

Eunji nodded. “All this time, I worked so hard just so that one day I'd be able to thank him. It's awesome I get to do that... by teaching his team how to fire arms,” she added with a mischievous grin.

Around seven in the morning the next day, all of them were back on the field. The last day of training was mostly a repetition of what they'd done the two days before. Åke, Dust, Mina,

Max and even Farello went through physical drills together, after which Åke and Max refreshed their gun handling routines. Mina watched with intrigue how the two guys disassembled, cleaned, oiled and put their weapons back together.

“You really got that shit down, Max,” she complimented him.

“Ay, yo, thanks *chica*,” Max beamed, obviously proud of himself. “Took me a minute.”

Ekster told Max and Dust to get in position on the hill and closely watch their timing and positions on the field.

“Just be aware of what we’ll be doing,” he told them, handing Dust the time table he’d been drafting yesterday. “Tomorrow’s environment will be completely different, so keep that in mind. Most important will be to watch the surrounding area and make sure no law enforcement vehicles are nearby, especially not when we’ll be driving the Mary away from the church.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Max said, snapping a salute.

Åke was dragged away by Mr Lee, who was apparently still very much dissatisfied with his ability to hit a target. While Driver, Ekster, Mina and Farello ran the position plan for the millionth time, Åke was being scolded in the background. Apparently it had been a much needed scolding, because four hours later, long after the others had already taken a break, Mr Lee returned Åke back to the group. A conservative but proud and fatherly smile decorated the older man’s face. Åke looked mentally exhausted through and through. He dramatically dropped into the grass face down and didn’t get up anymore. Mina laughed at his antics.

“The youngster knows how to aim now,” Mr Lee told Ekster.

“You helped make a miracle happen sir,” Ekster patted the man’s shoulder. “Please go sit in the shade, you’ve worked way too hard. I’ll bring over some food and a drink.”

Driver picked Åke up by the collar of his shirt. “Ready to join us again? I felt like you were lagging behind a bit, yesterday.”

“Gimme a drink too!” Åke wailed. “And a cig!”

“You look like a crazy person,” Dust’s voice said through the radio.

Åke immediately composed himself, knowing he was being watched from a distance. “Fuck me, I’m dead though,” he mumbled so that only Driver could hear him.

“Just a little bit longer, comrade,” Driver reassured him. “I’ll make sure everyone gets back home at a reasonable time today. Since tomorrow, we’ll all need to be running on a full tank.”

*

Ekster swore Driver had slipped a bit of sleeping medication into his drink. He was startled awake the next day, barely remembering how he'd even gotten back home. The angle of the sun shining into his room told him it was already past midday. This situation would've completely stressed him out if it wasn't for knowing that Driver was fully aware of his horrific sleeping pattern. If anything, he was grateful he'd gotten a few hours of shut-eye in. It felt like it'd been ages since he'd slept at all.

He rolled out of bed and put on the first thing he found tossed over a nearby chair. He washed his face, brushed his teeth and found his glasses. His studio apartment had a small kitchen too, where he made himself an espresso. With a coffee and a cigarette in the same hand, he put on a pair of flip flops and dragged his feet up the stairs to the roof terrace. To his surprise, six people and two animals had already gathered up there.

"Good morning sleeping beauty!" Åke was the first to notice him.

"Eyy, an Ekster appeared!" Mina exclaimed.

Everyone else turned to greet him, Farello and the nameless little cat alike.

"Morning," Prisma smiled, holding the cat in her arms. She held its paw and made it wave to Ekster. "Say hi, little one. We thought of naming her Mus. Because she's you, but a different species."

"Interesting outfit," Dust remarked with a grin while Ekster stiffly patted the cat on the head.

Everyone else was already wearing the proper getup for tonight. Ekster looked down at himself. Linen pants and a long, black and gray batik button up shirt. He wasn't sure if Dust was teasing him. Probably not. "I didn't expect anyone," he clarified anyway.

"That's mad. We've got a big game tonight and you didn't expect us to be here?!" Max couldn't believe it.

"Slept well, Curator?" Driver gloated. "Feeling ready and set?"

Ekster huffed. "Thanks to you. Thanks to everyone," he added in a low tone, assuming it would go unnoticed. Of course it didn't.

Despite everyone's ecstatic mood, they managed to have a sit down around the table, look over the details one more time and start preparations. The anticipation rose with each minute

that passed, but the night was still hours and hours away. Ekster hadn't been kidding when he had said they'd go over the plan until they'd be able to recite it in their sleep. They went over the timetable again and again, second by second, didn't stop while Driver was cooking food and ate dinner while Ekster explained to them how they'd split up and get home after the fact.

The second getaway car, the upholstered BMW, was parked in the garage next to the Sprinter van and Audi. Max and Dust loaded the inconspicuous gray vehicle with their gear and equipment. Åke and Driver made sure the hydraulic lift system was installed correctly. Mina was fully confident Farello was able to run along with her and Ekster had one last look at how Prisma managed to make the tracker data behave.

At one hour fifteen past midnight, everyone was well and ready to go. Each of them was equipped with an in-ear radio and synced casio watch. Dust was already seated in the BMW and Max was zipping up his new woodland camouflage bodywarmer. Åke rolled up the sleeves of his plum-coloured leather jacket, his UMP-45 strapped across his back. The excited chatter within the group had died down by now, and a more serious and concentrated disposition had taken place. Ekster drew the laces of his boots tight.

"Alright," he said, rising to his feet and looking at everyone in the garage. He knew he didn't need to say much else. "Let's go."

*

In the valley behind the Alps, clouds often seemed to get stuck on the far side of the mountains, as if the range itself was holding them back. Only a strong wind could force them over. On one side, the sky remained clear and brilliantly blue. The other side was caught beneath ever-changing, billowing clouds. As the sun rose on such days, those impressive cloud formations caught the light first, making them glow in hues of orange and bright magenta. Their contrast against the crisp morning sky was an impressive sight, reserved only for those who managed to catch this short window in time, before the sun inevitably moved along. Its light would then touch the white, everlasting snow, and travel over the dark, rocky surface of the Alps. With the city streets narrow and the buildings high, the sun wouldn't touch the ground until noon.

But it was far from that time of day. The moment the Curator unlocked the door of his apartment again, it was still too early in the morning for him to have even seen the sun rise.

*

Ekster kicked out his boots at the entrance of the garage. The adrenaline hadn't quite worn off during the ride back. His fingers buzzed with energy as he took off his leather gloves and put the sportsbag with freshly stolen jewels on the floor. He cracked his knuckles and exhaled a deep breath, slowly feeling the tension dissipate from his nervous system. The garage was quite empty, with only his own car parked inside. Still, there was a whole lot more clutter compared to not that many weeks ago, before Driver had started to bring over his tools and equipment.

Up on the first floor, Ekster was confronted again with how his life had changed now. He'd almost forgotten how empty it had been, when he'd just moved. The remnants of the team's last gathering were still scattered all over the place. A couple of dirty dishes were left in the sink, but Ekster wasn't bothered by them. He tossed his gloves on the kitchen table, and sat down at one of the chairs.

The silence in the house slowly dawned on him.

He had never had any issues with silence. Most of his childhood, he'd spend in solitude. But it felt strange to sit in this apartment without people. Especially because their presence had left visible traces.

Perhaps for others this was a normal, every-day thing. But Ekster was experiencing a first. Coming back to a house and finding other people's things, left behind so casually that they could only be proof of their intention to return, wasn't something he was used to. He tried to not attach too much meaning to what he was feeling, but the realisation he wasn't so alone anymore, even though he was by himself in this moment, felt strange.

He didn't touch anyone's things. Not the laptop charger Prisma had left in the socket. Not the hoodie Åke had draped over the couch. He didn't move Farello's empty food bowl and didn't organise any of his books that Dust had gone through. It was obvious where on the couch Max and Mina had hung around, but he didn't shake up those indented throw pillows either. It was all too much to deal with right now, and so he closed the door behind him and walked up to his atelier on the fourth floor.

After unpacking the jewelry and storing it away, he felt a pair of eyes on his back. He wasn't really sure why that cat insisted on visiting the house every day. As he opened the terrace door to let the thing in, he thought it'd probably get bored quickly now that others weren't around. Nevertheless, the cat seemed pleased to see him, curling its tail around his leg

and jumping onto its favourite reading chair. It yawned and curled up into a little ball, clearly demonstrating how to enjoy the good things in life. Ekster went outside into the emerging daylight to smoke.

The roof terrace felt just as unnaturally empty as the living room. Ekster couldn't help but laugh at himself. He really didn't think he had it in him to get all sentimental about empty rooms. He thought he'd grown desensitized to such a thing. There was something conflicting going on just under the surface, but he didn't have the energy to give it the scrutiny it needed to be understood. The situation was all too similar to things he didn't like remembering.

Having sat side by side in the van with the Marble Mary, he did recall the promise he'd once forced himself to make in that church. The muscles in his body felt numb, because he knew he wasn't going to follow through. *Visit your mother, you coward.*

He went back inside and felt even more like an idiot, looking at his entire collection of books, all of which his mother had sent over. It was impossible to fit an entire library into an apartment, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her to stop sending stuff. He'd rather choke to death before dimming her excitement.

Even yesterday, a box had arrived. Still unopened, it stood in a corner of the room, next to a couple of other unopened boxes. Lifting the cardboard folds of the box, he immediately wished he'd just left them shut. On top of *Local Gods and Deities in South-East Asia*, his mother had left a family picture. With a frown on his face that was created by something between pain and anger, Ekster sat down on a stool at his working bench and stared at the five faces in the picture. He didn't own any pictures of his family. He wasn't really sure if he wanted to have this picture either. Tucking the photograph away beneath a pile of books on his bench, he thought he should at least call his mother tomorrow. As he resisted the urge to already start making up excuses, his burner phone buzzed. A text from Prisma.

Just got back. Tip to law will be wired through in 37.5 hrs. Dw about it. I keep in touch w Driver. Sleep tight X.

He smiled at his phone. He could quite literally count on this girl with his eyes closed.

*

Ekster crashed out and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. He woke up a bit disoriented and very dehydrated, unaware of what day it was or how long he'd really slept. A couple of days, possibly. He had a habit of doing so after highly stressful periods of time. The only thing he

could say for certain, is that it was late in the afternoon, close to sundown. After finding his burner phone wrapped up between the bedsheets, he checked for messages. Nine hours ago, Driver had sent him one.

Mary's handed over. All good. OMW to Mr V.

The clock on his phone told him the current date. Saturday nine thirty PM, meaning he'd been sleeping about thirty eight hours. Not too bad. Law enforcement would've only received their tip about half an hour or so ago. He hadn't missed a thing. Ekster quickly texted everyone in the team that the job was cleared and that he'd get back in contact when needed, before throwing the phone off to the side again.

He took a quick shower, shaved, got dressed, went down to the first floor, drank two glasses of water, made himself a double espresso, sat on the couch, opened a nearby window, lit a cigarette and turned on the television. Upon concluding that the theft had not yet reached the press, he left the TV tuned to the news channel at low volume and stared at how the sky outside darkened.

Laying low was not new to him, but he briefly wondered how the others were experiencing their first days after a job. He'd heard that sleeplessness was common, though interestingly enough, that had never really applied to him. Whereas his part of the work was just getting started, the others had nothing to do now. They could only wait. He had worked with some idiots in the past, who'd gotten really antsy and impatient. Most mistakes were not made during the heist, but rather after the fact. The true psychological endurance test started now. Very soon, the police would start their investigation and word about the crime would likely come out. During the upcoming weeks, he'd slowly and carefully handle all the money laundering and in the meantime, everyone else had to stay as far out of the picture as possible.

Right now, it'd take Driver another twenty hours or so to get the signed paperwork back to his lawyer, Mr Viscuso. Whereas he hadn't been nervous about transporting a piece of stolen cultural heritage, he was always anxious the moment paperwork was in transit. Having Driver take care of it was by far the most reliable, but he'd not feel at ease before getting a call from his lawyer that everything had been received in good order.

Twenty hours was a long time to sit around feeling anxious, so he reckoned he might as well kill time by ripping the metaphorical bandaid off. In his atelier he found his personal phone buried somewhere underneath the mess and, after a bit of procrastination, he called his mother.

Ekster put the phone on speaker and waited for someone to answer. It took a while before she picked up.

“Ekster?” It finally sounded on the other side. The surprise in her voice, as if she couldn’t quite believe he was calling her, was a painful punch to his guts. Paired with the nostalgia of hearing his name pronounced as it should, he started to feel a bit nauseous. “What’s wrong?” she followed up with concern.

“Nothing.” He managed to choke up. “I’m all good. Just thought I hadn’t called in a while. How are you?” Despite it being his mother language, Dutch always felt a bit alien to him for the first few words, before the rhythm settled in.

“Oh, I see. What a surprise. You always call out of the blue, it makes me think something’s wrong.” She chuckled softly. Her tone was low, but she was close to the receiver. It created an intimate sound, as if she was right next to him. “I’m happy to hear from you, though. Tell me how you’ve been doing.”

They spoke for a little while, about this and that, avoiding some type of larger topic.

“You’ve been working?” She asked carefully. She was trying hard to not make her worry be heard.

“Uhm, yeah. In the process of wrapping something up. Nothing crazy. Nothing to worry about.”

“Did your move to Turin get you what you were after?”

“Not quite. But I’m getting there.” Ekster hesitated. “Soon, I’ll come to...”

“It’s okay,” his mother interrupted him soothingly. “You don’t have to promise me anything. Just do what you have to do.”

Ekster closed his eyes for just a moment. He knew he should thank her for sending the picture, but in the end, he couldn’t bring himself to talk about it. Though his mother was braver than him, apparently.

“I’m sorry that I keep sending you books,” she said, as a way of indirectly talking about the topic he was avoiding. “But you used to love some of these so much. The thought that you can now keep them in your own home makes me so happy.”

“Yeah I— I don’t get around to unpack them all,” he said. “Keep some for yourself, too. Otherwise the shelves are so empty.”

She laughed again. His mother's laughs were always these sort of airy, hollow sounds that didn't really hold much joy at all. "A couple of books I can miss... There are so many left behind."

A short silence followed.

"Did you see the picture..." she started, and Ekster couldn't help but hate her for bringing it up. "I found it somewhere. It's so sweet. I thought you should have it. Give them an altar in your home, or—"

"I'm not making an altar," Ekster briskly cut her off.

His mother remained quiet.

"And stop calling it a home," Ekster added. "It's an office. It doesn't need an altar. I'm sure I'll visit soon." Which was a weird thing to say right after.

"You know I'd love to see you again," she said with a raspy voice. "I'll be here."

Great, now he hated himself for talking to her like that.

"Take care of yourself, *mama*." He decided to bring the call to an end. He hoped he was able to sound kind. "Try to sleep at night."

"You too, my dear... Thank you for calling me." She added something in Chinese, which Ekster horrifyingly enough wasn't paying enough attention for to fully understand. Something about eating well.

"You too..." he replied bashfully, ashamed of his abysmal command over his mother's father language. She'd never berate him for it though.

"Call me more often... I love hearing your voice."

"I will try. Bye *mama*. Speak to you soon..."

"Speak to you soon, my son."

Ekster knew she'd never break the line first, and so he quickly ended the call and just sat with himself for a moment. He felt terrible for feeling so guilty, and felt terribly guilty for making his mother suffer. He knew she only put up with it because she'd already been through so much in her life, before he'd even been born. But left as her only family, only he could be the cause of her current misery. Paradoxically, that same truth meant that only he could help her, which was ultimately what kept him going down his current path.

Ekster had never, not even for one second, felt sorry for himself and the situation he ended up in. He had faced every challenge in his life with a raised head and intense determination. He wasn't a pessimistic person, and never allowed his circumstances to turn him into one.

Keeping up this attitude in the face of hardship required unwavering discipline and a strict moral compass. He was aware these philosophies hadn't turned him into an easy-going person, but his goals were his lifeline, and his sole reason for even walking this earth.

As he went back downstairs, he saw that the cat had followed him. Mus, as Prisma had so cleverly named it. Sparrow, in Dutch. The cat wasn't even brown.

Ekster plowed down into the couch and moments later, Mus curled up next to him. He scratched the little thing behind its ears and hadn't even noticed he had drifted off, until he was awakened by the sound of his phone ringing. Not the burner phone, which was still in his studio apartment. He stared at the caller ID, and thought twice before picking it up anyway.

"Oh? So you didn't cancel this number after all?"

Out of all the people in the entire world that could be calling him, he truly hadn't expected Jean-Claude D'Aimes of Saint Quentin, or *Frog*, to get back in contact. Now that he had a face to put with the name, he felt a lot less intimidated by the Frenchman.

"Thought I'd leave a line open."

"My days, how terribly considerate of you, Curator."

"So what's this? You've changed your mind and want to call upon my services? How about you go and eat shit." The melancholy he'd been feeling moments ago had seamlessly turned into anger, which he gladly took out on this man.

"How audaciously hostile! After all the blind eyes I've turned to your relationship with Åke! After I've had your back, and kept the Baron of Lyon in the dark about the true value of his treasuries."

Ekster turned to look at the television, which he'd been ignoring up until now. "Looks like news has hit town," he said evenly. An image of the white church showed up behind the news anchor.

"Neat little trick you pulled there," Frog complimented him, with remarkable genuinity. "Especially since, well, I don't reckon they will ever be able to figure out what you were truly after. They're that disorganised, and you created quite the discombobulation. Say, was my Åke involved? To what degree? Mind if I ask him about it when I see him again, tomorrow?"

"I assured him I'll kill him if he runs his mouth ever again."

"Oh yes, he told me that. But taking his life would be a terrible, terrible crime, which you aren't the type to commit. However I must confess, I am very curious about what you have done with the statue of Saint Helena?"

Ekster opened and closed his mouth. He really didn't want to go around saying ignorant things such as 'Saint Helena?' or 'that cannot be, Saint Helena always bears a cross', or, even worse, 'how did you know?', but exactly those simple questions sat on the tip of his tongue right now.

Frog caught on quick enough. "That is correct, Saint Helena. Made by a contemporary of hers, depicting her early life as a young woman born in poverty. Even without that information, you sold her?"

"The buyer must've known," Ekster responded. "It's not always my business to find out too much."

"Oh, are you not the very image of a seasoned professional," Frog teased without hostility. "I just cannot wait to see the paperwork on this thing, Curator. I have been studying your oeuvre, you must know. Quite impressive. Inspirational, even."

"And now we arrive at the reason for your call," Ekster dryly said.

Frog laughed with verve. "Oh, oh, oh. Åke keeps insisting you are so charming, but I — I must be missing something here. Is it the sarcasm that he likes so much? Or does the thrill of the job blind his judgement?"

There was little Ekster despised as much as responding to rhetorical questions. He considered such a thing to be absolutely beneath him.

"Alright, Alright, we shall play on your terms," Frog settled with a small laugh. "I believe by now we can conclude that I have got something that is of use to you, and you have something that is of use to me. Besides, the public humiliation you have caused my competitor makes us something along the lines of allies."

Ekster raised his eyebrows. This conversation was taking a turn in an odd direction.

Frog continued to elaborate his offer. "I believe I have gotten to know you a little bit, by studying your work. You are driven, driven by a strong need for transformation. There is something about the current state of affairs that is in your way. You are looking to reach higher grounds, in order to be the catalyst for radical change. You are making money, that much is undeniable. But not enough of it. Some doors remain permanently shut, do they not, Curator?"

Another rhetorical question.

“My bad. I will rephrase. What I meant to say was; I will help you open said doors. My enemies are your enemies, and what I want is for their political ideologies to die off. They are outdated and keep people like you and me from building a future.”

Ekster frowned. “Excuse me, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re a human trafficker. I don’t know what your ideologies are, but I’m pretty sure they don’t align with mine.”

Frog clicked his tongue. “Truly, so rigid. Do not make the mistake of clinging onto the past, it shuffles you in with the rest of them. Do not think I would have made you this offer, if it was not for Åke. He is trying to find out what he wants, and he is finding out that what he wants is impossible for him to obtain. I certainly couldn’t give it to him, as his value is simply immense. It’s as if I’d ask you to cut off both your hands.”

“He is a *person*,” Ekster hissed.

“Yes, yes, of course he is. No one is denying that. But you’re completely overlooking the grand scheme of things, and I can’t defend myself against the methods I have to employ to stay in business. I, too, desire to have a touch more sovereignty in my life. Which I can really only obtain by bringing fundamental change to the systems through which our city trades value. *Now* I believe we are speaking the same language again. Let us think about this realistically, Curator. You possess great skills and good ideas but a limited view of how politics keep the wheel turning. No need deny it, I am certain you were born in a lower standing than myself. But I am *by far* the biggest fish in the pond. And it’s precisely the fat fish that need frying. I am not saying you could not do it on your own, but I am sure I can accelerate your access to change. And our mediator has already been doing his job all this time, keeping two balls in the air at the same time. Do not take Åke for a helpless fool. It is him who will get you to the top. Although I believe that is exactly why he was already of interest to you.”

Ekster twisted his wrists and cracked his finger knuckles as Frog spoke.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally said.

“Well, I could not deny you that,” Frog responded, a tad underwhelmed. “But do not think too long.”

“I won’t,” he said.

He hung up the phone and threw it off to the side. Never would he have predicted to receive such an offer from someone like Frog. Ekster stared ahead into the distance for a while as he twisted his signet ring around his pinky finger and organized his thoughts. While

he wagered his options, he mindlessly grabbed a cigarette from its package, tapping the bottom of the stick against the silver cardboard. To judge the best way to go about this fork in the road, he mentally constructed a strategy around every possible outcome. In the end, he put the cigarette aside without smoking it. He had come to a conclusion and thus reached for his phone again.

“I thought about it,” he told Frog, eyes fixed on the televised news. “I say we have a deal.”

At that moment, six other people, each alone, were all following the same news report on the heist they’d carried out together. The news reporter on site, a young woman with curly red hair and a radiant voice, spoke to the camera.

“The Alpine District Police department received an anonymous tip around seven in the afternoon, informing them of the fact that a small depot in the south-west of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Department showed visible signs of break in. Most curiously, this church, property of the Baron of Lyon, Marcus Maximilius de Lyon, already fell victim to theft no longer than two weeks ago. This news has only come out now, as the Baron had attempted to sweep the heist under the carpet, in order to cover up the illegal nature of said stolen jewelry. Tonight, the truth is being revealed after all, as it looks like the thieves have returned the stolen jewelry! Local policemen were the first to reach the scene of the crime, after which they called in reinforcements. An immediate investigation started, as many details remain yet unclear. Have other items been stolen? Who are the thieves? And why have they returned this jewelry? The Baron of Lyon has not yet answered to the press, but right we do get the opportunity to speak to the Principal Chief of the Alpine District Police department: Chief Herrero.”

The camera turned to the side to reveal a stocky and mustached police officer, flanked by a fresh-faced younger man in uniform.

“Thank you very much, Chief Herrero and Officer Czerny for addressing the press tonight. When you found out this was a case of returned stolen goods, what was your reaction?”

“Well, Miss Galton, as you can probably imagine, we were baffled! Most of all, we didn’t even know the jewelry had been stolen in the first place. Upon receiving an anonymous tip about the damage to the security measurements of the property, we immediately informed the property owner. My team had already started investigating the crime at the scene, and found no signs of disturbance, apart from a little note that had been left at the entrance.”

“A little note, sir?” The reporter, Miss Galton, egged on.

“Its contents are classified, but I can tell you it was a note from the thief themselves, exposing their own crime and framing the Baron for forgery! Never before in my thirty-five years of being in service, have I witnessed such a thing.”

“Any idea who the anonymous tip was from, sir?”

“That’s certainly a good question, Miss Galton! My gut instinct is telling me the call came from inside the house, and we are looking into the identity of this caller.”

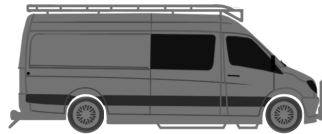
“Many people might be feeling uneasy now, knowing a thief is out on the loose. What could you say to those at home, worried that their inheritance might get stolen?”

“To all residents of the Alpine Districts, I can say, rest assured! I, Principal Chief Hernando Herrero and my team will swear that by any means necessary, we will catch this thief!”

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END



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