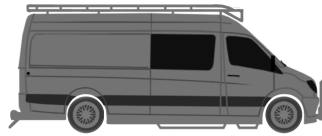


First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 14 - And So It Cycles



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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Chapter 14

And So It Cycles

The summer passed without a hurry and graciously made way for autumn to paint the landscape with its iconic colours. Turin during late September was a joy to experience. It wasn't too hot or too humid, the wooded hills glowed in copper and amber, making for a spectacular backdrop. Åke had always liked autumn, but had fallen in love with it after moving south. He would've been thoroughly enjoying long cycling trips through the forest, drinking beers on his porch, watching the sunset and eating dishes with seasonal vegetables, if it hadn't been for the grating fact that Ekster hadn't gotten back in contact with him for over nine fucking weeks.

After all the extra work he had put in, giving Ekster so much face in the eyes of Frog to the point they forged somewhat of a partnership, he was pissed off by the fact he hadn't even gotten a thank you out of it. He had tried texting Ekster on multiple occasions, but he'd only gotten radio silence in return. All of that had left him feeling discarded, ignored and inexplicably lonely.

Åke had survived August just by keeping his head down and staying busy. He kept up to date with any news surrounding the hit on the Baron's church simply by keeping his ears open around the right circles. At some point, the gossip turned into delusion and people speculated that the Baron had staged the heist for attention because he'd supposedly been so very bitter about his rejection to the Salon. Åke simply added to the out-of-touch rhetoric whenever he got the opportunity.

In the meantime, he took on modeling jobs and obediently attended to a variety of obligations. Frog dragged him along to a tea party here and an exhibition opening there, introducing him to so and so who owned this and specialized in that. Same old, same old.

A goodbye meeting with San Luo had been arranged on a random Tuesday afternoon in Paris. Seeing that person again after more than three years had been a bit awkward at first, rather than the tear jerking reunion Åke had always imagined. But San Luo had been as poised and easy-going as ever, and they'd spend the rest of the night getting silly drunk,

playing card games and reminiscing about the so-called ‘good old days’. They exchanged phone numbers and agreed to try and stay in touch this time around.

After having sent off his new ally to the other side of the planet, Åke had fallen into somewhat of a late-summer blues. By the time October rolled around, he had grown bored to death.

The days dragged and absolutely nothing made his heart race or his adrenaline flow. He caught himself behaving awfully similar to those last couple of months living on the D’Aimes estate in Paris. Melancholic, uninspired and in a constant search for distraction and mental sedation. He knew he wasn’t dealing well with the boredom when he caught himself doing dumb shit again. He ignored Frog, went partying in town, drank too much, slept around and when he unexpectedly ran into the Lee twins one night, they effortlessly talked him into getting his finger knuckles tattooed. That was an exciting new thing for a bit, but Frog’s over-dramatic reaction of distress became annoying fast and killed all the fun.

Åke wasn’t sure how much longer he would have been able to stay sane. So when Ekster showed up at his cottage one Sunday morning in the second week of October, he didn’t know if he wanted to punch or kiss the man.

“No fucking way,” Åke said as he watched Ekster walk up to his porch.

He was wearing his cycling gear and had his bike by his side. Time had obviously passed. His hair was a few centimeters longer, bangs grazing the top of his glasses. It appeared as if he’d tried to cut it himself, leaving the layered strands of black hair all choppy and asymmetrical. Annoyingly, it looked sort of novel and trendy on him.

“Ça va?” Ekster asked in a manner way too casual for Åke’s liking. “Got time to go for a beer?”

Åke reacted with a scornful laugh, which at least alleviated some of the resentment he held in his heart. “For you I’ve got all the time in the world.”

Ekster cycled ahead of Åke through the hillside landscape, his cadence steadfast in the climb. He knew a destination worth the effort, he’d said. It didn’t turn out to be a long ride. After less than fifteen minutes Ekster gestured at a lodge-style bistro overlooking the mountains. They parked their bikes beside the busy terrace deck. Ekster picked an empty table for two next to a rowdy, day-drunk group; their noise alone guaranteed privacy. He motioned for Åke to make room on the bench. Åke got up to sit on the chair across the table,

but Ekster pulled him back down. “I don’t want to shout.” And so they sat shoulder to shoulder, looking ahead at the scenery stretching out in front of them.

Ekster ordered for the two of them through his phone and didn’t say a word until the waiter came to bring their drinks.

“Cheers,” said Ekster, raising the Weizen glass to Åke before drinking half of it in one go.

Åke was less thirsty, and only nipped a bit of foam from the top.

Ekster grabbed some of the complimentary peanuts and sat back on the bench. No one could have suspected this man of being anything but an extremely content tourist on a weekend trip. Åke forced himself to wait till the other spoke first.

In the end Ekster opened with, “So how have you been holding up?”

Åke thought that question to be quite cruel. He was pretty certain he’d, at one point, sent the man over thirty increasingly emotional texts in a drunken haze. “Not too poorly.” It was the most self-aware answer he could muster up.

Ekster slowly nodded and found his Silver Sand cigarettes in the back pocket of his cycling vest.

“What about you?” Åke asked after accepting an offered cigarette and receiving a light. “I guess you must’ve kept busy.” Seeing you didn’t get back to me, he added in his head.

Ekster smoked and went looking for something on his phone. Just like that, Åke was reminded at how terrible this man was at holding a conversation.

“This is for you,” Ekster said after a short while, handing his phone to Åke and moving the ashtray closer to tap off the cigarette.

Åke stared at a photographed piece of paper. His cigarette was burning away between his fingers. He recognized the logo of Mr Viscuso’s lawyer firm on the letterhead. Zooming in, he read the contents of the document. It was a proof of transfer of assets.

“I got paid?” Åke excitedly summarised the words on the screen. “You actually managed? No way, that’s incredible. So, what do I have now? A piece of paper in a vault?”

“I was able to get you some type of checking account too,” Ekster said, handing him a sealed envelope. “Don’t open that here. It’s just a prepaid credit card.”

Åke’s eyes sparkled. “What should I buy?”

Ekster looked a little amused. “Anything your heart desires. As long as it’s under five hundred bucks.”

Åke's shoulders drooped a little. "Fivehunderd? Shit, Frog's allowance is higher than that. I thought I could get a driver's licence, or an apartment or something. With all that money we made..."

Ekster finished his glass with just a couple of big gulps. "Prisma got an apartment. But everyone's situation is different, and in your case, too much is unknown. Viscuso told you to sit on it, no?"

Åke sighed and sipped at his beer. Suddenly, Ekster laughed.

"I'm sorry," he said, pointing at Åke's fresh finger tattoos, "But what in the world does that say?"

Åke ditched the barely smoked cigarette and held up his hands. He watched how Ekster read the serif lettertype and burst out laughing. Never in a million years had he expected such an expressive reaction from the stoic Curator.

"Fuck This?" Ekster quoted the tattooed text with a questioning laugh. "You can't be serious. Your Frog must've liked that."

The offhanded mention of Frog made Åke think twice. "You accepted the offer," he changed the topic, feeling not in the mood to laugh along.

Ekster's grin slowly died down. He killed his burned-down cigarette in the ashtray. "Did I have much choice? Interesting position you decided to put me in, Åkerman."

"You always have a choice," Åke countered pointedly. "But considering you decided to accept Frog's offer, it's clear you'll always choose to increase your profits."

Ekster reacted with a scoff. "Right. I'm the bad guy. My mistake for thinking we were sort of in this together. But seeing you decided to craft this offer in the first place, it's clear you still choose to hold onto the comfort of protection."

Åke starkly stared ahead of him at the unimaginably vast Alpine mountains. He was mad. Angry at his own disposition. "Your success finances my chances," he finally said, as evenly as possible. "Frog stabilizes my value. That's what Viscuso said. I figured the only way to balance these two was by creating overlapping interests."

"I'd say you thought correctly," Ekster said. "But don't overlook the fact that kicking you from the team was never an option."

Åke breathed through his nose. "You're just saying that now."

"I'm not being fucking sappy, Åke," Ekster said sharply, with a type of urgency in this voice. "I have no influence like you do. I need you if I want to have any chance at surviving

this game. Who knows who's at the top of the food chain. I don't think Frog knows either. I know he wants to find out, that's for sure. With every heist we do, we get closer to the hornet's nest. Who benefits from perpetuating the status quo? Who, and what for? I need to know, because only then I can make sense out of my own goddamn life."

Åke filed Ekster's words as something to circle back to later, stuck on the first few things he said. "'But your family name—'" he started, cut off by Ekster's frustrated hand movements.

"Shut up. Shut the fuck up," Ekster said, irritated, maybe even riled up. "My family's worth nothing now. I am a nobody and I'm taking this cursed name to the fucking grave with me. I want answers, and perspective. Just like you, and just like everyone else I pulled into the team. Closing the deal with Frog was a really fucking sensible thing to do, in my position. And you knew I would take it, you asshole. The only thing you proved is that I have no leverage on my own. It's the same fucking spiel as when you ratted out my information to Frog. In this relationship —" he pointed his finger between the two of them, "I'll have to comply with your conditions."

Åke beheld the other man with apprehension. He felt like they'd had another version of this same conversation before, or perhaps he'd had it with Ekster's lawyer. Indeed, after he'd involved Frog the first time around. Back then, his main concern had been Ekster's lack of transparency about his personal identity. He thought they'd buried the hatch simply by settling their differences, but looking back, he recognized Ekster's reluctance to cut him off in the first place, despite having threatened to do so on multiple occasions.

After going through those past events in his head, he felt too embarrassed to speak. Ekster was so onto him. He was more onto him than Åke was onto himself.

"I want answers too," Åke decided to say eventually. "We're in the same boat."

"You catch on fast."

"I think Frog's been introducing me to potential buyers," Åke continued flatly, refusing to answer Ekster's sarcasm. "The hit on the Baron's church kicked up some dust, and I planted strategic gossip to fan the flame of a false narrative."

"Good to hear you haven't just been getting drunk and sending me delirious texts."

He let Ekster have that jab too.

"Are you happy, now we finally went cycling together?" Ekster continued to tease, which was just plain evil.

"Enough, enough," Åke swatted his hand in the air. "Change the subject."

Ekster sat back with a pleased grin and lit up a second cigarette. “The hit on the North-South State museum is back on. Waiting for the police investigation to settle down is no use, I think they’re receiving extra funding from the Baron. Have they already spoken to the Salon commission?”

“If you’re asking if Frog’s been in touch with the police, no.”

“I’m pretty sure they will reach out soon,” Ekster said. “Make sure you’re in the room when that interview happens.”

“Sure. Anything else I can do now?”

“Keep compiling those potential buyers,” Ekster said with a little grin. “Dust’s been doing the same, and with the list of goodies I’ve been curating, this heist is going to bring in the big bucks.”

*

Principal Chief Hernando Herrero grunted as he sat down at his desk, pinching the bridge of his nose. It’d been nine full weeks filled with false evidence, mixed up reports and lazy subordinates doing half-assed work. Add to that the Baron of Lyon breathing down their neck and Herrero wanted nothing more but to go home and have dinner with his family, just for one single Sunday evening.

“In my fifteen years as a chief, this must be the most ineffective investigation I’ve ever led,” Herrero said with an exhausted sigh. He longingly imagined eating homemade empanadas, instead of clocking weekend hours in the office.

“Having this many men on the case is technically unproductive,” Principal Chief Brigadier Matej Czerny reminded his boss. “Half of them are just creating more work for the other half. Sure, we’ve got every side of the district border patrolled, but in reality they’re just sitting around doing nothing for weeks on end.”

“Well officer, will you be the courageous man who tells the Baron that the angel investments keeping the case of his robbery running are wasteful extravagance?” Herrero taunted his straight-laced Field Supervisor.

Czerny was unfazed. “With all due respect, sir,” he said, “that’d be your job.”

“Chief?” The door to Herrero’s office opened. A female officer in casual clothes stepped inside. “Oh, hi baby.” She flirtatiously wiggled her fingers at officer Czerny.

Herrero closed his eyes for a moment. “Can we all, just today, pretend we’re at work?”

The two newlyweds exchanged a funny look. Herrero must really be over-worked beyond reason. He was usually the first one to love love.

“Had a tough day, Chief?” Carla Czerny-Martin asked in an overly friendly manner as she approached Herrero’s desk.

“What is it, Martin? What do you have for me?” Herrero ushered the forensic technician, ignoring her question which only had one obvious answer.

“The full report on the church, sir.” Carla slid a folder on her boss’s desk. “You said you wanted a copy?”

“Ah, si. Perfecto,” Herrero said briskly as he shuffled through the sheets. “Long story short, we’re turning up with absolutely nothing, am I right?”

“We found hundreds of distinct fingerprints and footprints in the church, Chief,” Carla verbally summarized the report. “All fresh, because the Baron had been walking his people in and out of that place days prior. Grass, dirt and hair is scattered throughout the crimescene. Tire marks in the soil of at least eight vehicles. The thieves made sure we’d have one hell of a puzzle to crack. Because that's the only realistic conclusion we can draw. This was a multi-person effort.”

Herrero sighed and tossed the paperwork aside.

Czerny thought out loud. “While we’re forced to find out who returned the jewelry, the Baron’s attempts to shut us out of his administration strike me as very suspicious. And then there is all that gossip going around... But we can hardly turn the investigation to the man who’s funding it.”

He glanced at the photograph of the thieves’ calling card, which hadn't turned up any finger prints.

Will the law finally take a closer look too?

“They’re just taunting us,” Herrero said, not amused with the audacity of the thieves. “I don’t believe the story of the Baron framing this whole thing. Not for one bit.”

“I’d say it’s highly unlikely,” Czerny agreed, “A better question is, who would go as far as to expose crime through crime?”

*

“The North-South State museum is located in the historical heart of Lyon. Not only the Baron of Lyon, but many other aristocrats have stored heritage in these vaulted archives.

Police alert is high in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes District and so we'll have to — I'm sorry, am I talking to the walls?"

When Ekster turned around to face his team, he noticed no one had been paying attention to him. Max and Mina bumped their shoulders together to suppress a fit of giggles and Dust was in the middle of admiring Åke's fresh tattoos. Even Driver was busier with secretly feeding Farello pieces of sausage.

"Guys —," Prisma called them out, tapping Dust on her shoulder. "Let's pay attention for one second."

"Oh, excuse me. Some of us haven't had the luxury of hanging out together all the time," Åke retorted.

Prisma frowned. She was the only one who'd kept in contact with Ekster over the past nine weeks, but only to get a much needed headstart on the State Museum job.

Ekster removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, already worn out by everyone's eclectic energy.

"Let's take fifteen minutes," Driver suggested, after which loud chatter immediately returned to the room.

Prisma closed her laptop with a sigh and exchanged a knowing glance with Ekster.

"Cigarette break?" she suggested.

"Whoa, Pris, I didn't know you smoked," Åke called her out, having followed them up to the roof terrace. Dust had come along to join in on the social aspect of smoking.

"Don't make a big deal," Prisma muttered, making herself small behind Ekster. "It's embarrassing."

"Must've been nice," Åke said, leaning against the balustrade. "Two months of having the entire house just for the two of you."

"Jealousy is not cute on you, Åkerman," Ekster put him in his place. "Cut it out."

Dust laughed at Åke's annoyed expression and caught Prisma in a hug, who didn't look too happy either. "Prisma must know how to keep relationships strictly professional, right?"

"Literally so much still needs to be done," Prisma pouted from behind Dust's curls. "The full responsibility of our technological defense lies on my shoulders, and I'm being pulled in so many directions. Decrypting code, rewriting GPS APIs, spitting through security footage

backlogs, breaching the nation's best secured digital archival database..." The girl's shoulder drooped and she leaned into Dust's hug. "I'm going mad!"

"Ay, but you're the best at what you do," Åke said, his voice having grown incredibly soft after seeing the girl in distress.

Prisma whined and pushed her face in Dust's shoulder. "I'm so stressed, I even started smoking again!"

Ekster snorted. "Though the progress's been great."

Prisma stole a glance at him. "I haven't been able to access North-South's database at all... It just won't work like this..."

Ekster shrugged. "We'll just pay a visit, chat someone up for a tour, I don't know. We'll figure it out."

"What exactly do you need?" Åke chipped in, sensing he could be useful.

"Access to their local wifi," Prisma said, freeing herself from Dust's embrace. "That way I can scrape passwords and get into their internal systems. But the museum's offices are far down in the basement and the signal doesn't reach above ground."

Åke thought for a second. "So you need to get closer? That can't be too hard. I must know someone there."

Ekster tossed his finished cigarette in an empty beer can on the floor. "Sounds like the work spirit has returned. Break's over. Let's get this meeting wrapped up before lunch."

Monday mornings on the precinct usually started off slow, with a cup of hot coffee and a sandwich from the deli around the corner. But mornings like that hadn't occurred anymore ever since the hit on the Baron's church. And having an eager journalist wait you up at work didn't help to begin the day stress-free.

"Officer Czerny!" Hadria Galton pushed a microphone in Matej Czerny's face, while her younger brother followed suit with a camera. "It's been nearly ten weeks since the start of the investigation, and the public has received little to no updates. How come no arrests have been made?!"

"No comment," Matej Czerny briskly replied, pushing the camera man out of his way.

"Officer Martin!" Hadria redirected her attention to the woman who'd arrived together with Matej. "What happened to turning in actual results? Your department has received an extraordinary amount of funding!"

“That’s incredible, Hadria,” Carla complimented the journalist. “Can’t believe you found that out. Keep up the good work!”

“Hey, hey,” Hadria said in a low tone, pushing her brother’s camera down. “Can you two at least reply to my questions? I’m falling a bit short on fresh news these days. What’s with this dry well of an investigation?”

“There is nothing to investigate,” Czerny said matter-of-factly, one hand on the entrance door of the precinct. “No amount of money is going to turn up more clues.”

Hadria put her hands on her hips. “Giving up already? I bet those thieves are eyeing their next target while you guys sit on your lazy asses. What about that anonymous caller? Y’know what people are saying? That the Baron framed himself. For attention. Because he hates that the Salon Commission took his shine. Looked into that?”

Czerny glanced over his shoulder. “Not on the fucking parkinglot, Galton,” he warned her.

“As if that bloated Baron got spies planted everywhere,” Hadria Galton rolled her eyes. “Have you guys even spoken to anyone from the Salon commission? Why do I have to spell everything out for you?”

Czerny sighed and entered the building without another word.

Carla pulled the reporter back by her arm as she tried to follow Matej inside. “I don’t think so, lass. Stay in your lane. And tell your brother to hurry up and upload his newest episode. Can’t wait to hear what Aurel’s got to say about that London versus Lombardy game.”

“Wait, you guys don’t know Hadria Galton?” Mina said in pure disbelief. “Do you people live under a freaking rock?!”

Ekster had pulled up a video of the investigating reporter, who’d been doing more active field work about the church heist than the police themselves.

“She’s literally so popular,” Max added as a way of letting everyone know that he was, in fact, not living under a rock.

Mina grabbed Ekster’s laptop and went to a website called Galton Media. “I follow her channel because her twin brother, Aurel Galton, covers sports news and stuff. Their most popular videos get millions of views, look at that.”

She pointed at one of the more recent clips. The thumbnail showed the rosy-cheeked redhead Hadria Galton side to side with an equally ginger man in front of the famous Parisian

football dome. The view counter let them know over ten million people had watched this video.

“How did she end up at ENBS?” Ekster asked, referring to the state-funded Europa’s National Broadcasting Station. “That doesn’t sound like a very independent gig.”

Mina shrugged. “Don’t know. Even though she started doing traditional news reports for them, she never stopped posting on her own platform. I’m literally so hyped that Hadria is covering our case,” she grinned. “She’s like the coolest reporter out there. I love her stuff.”

Ekster crossed his arms and stared the tenacious reporter in the eyes through the screen. “I don’t know,” he said. “Something tells me this chick could get in the way one day.”

“What does she have to say about us?” Åke asked, forever interested in any flavour of gossip.

“I mean, not too much about us specifically,” Mina said. “She’s more so critiquing how the Baron has put large sums of investment into the case, which has only resulted in a corrupted investigation.”

“So she’s on our side!” Max concluded.

“Nothing is that black and white,” Ekster told the kid. “However, whatever she’s putting out on the internet are great insights for us too. Have a look at this.”

He scrubbed through a video in which Hadria Galton reported on the police’s newest equipment, a result of the recent investment funds.

“3D printed guns?” Max mocked with a laugh. “Plastic toys, basically.”

“Plastic toys shooting real bullets,” Ekster corrected. “This guy who she’s interviewing is Matej Czerny. He’s the officer leading the investigation. Thirty-four years old. Joined the corps straight out of college, following the footsteps of both of his parents, though they never kicked it to Principal Chief Brigadier like he did. He’s new on the function, so he’s got a lot to prove. But don’t take him lightly, the guy’s got a squeaky clean track record worth seven years of excellent performance. This is his first heist case though, so let’s see how he’ll handle it.”

A mischievous grin had appeared on Åke’s face. “Such a serious chap. If this is the guy who’ll be interviewing Frog, I’m going to have such a good time twisting him around my finger.”

“He married his high school sweetheart Carla Martin last summer,” Ekster elaborated, but Åke’s expression told him he couldn’t care less. “... Right. So before we wrap this up, I’d like

to try and keep a schedule this time around. If everyone could just send over their availability, I can plan meetings and training dates ahead. Especially Mina and Max, I need to know when you've got classes and stuff."

"I dropped out, man," Max said.

Mina's mouth was on the floor.

"That's wonderful," Ekster said.

"Wonderful?!" Mina exclaimed. "How can you say that? School's very important!"

Ekster looked around the people in the room. "Has anyone here got a college degree? No? Me neither. Wrong crowd, Leonhart. Now Max's got all the time in the world to hone his sniping skills. It's perfect."

Max agreed. "I did like one week of college, and felt it just wasn't for me. I started streaming Down Sight during the summer, which is a load more fun. I think if I keep it up, I could make money this way too. People get sponsored and shit, just like with regular sports," he told Mina, who was still wearing quite a horrid expression.

"Can we watch you play?" Dust asked, interested to see Max's skills.

Max gestured at Ekster's laptop. "Just search for my gamer tag, Ragoon."

Åke snorted at the witty name and Ekster pulled up Max's latest upload. A cartoon of a raccoon wearing a black bandit mask popped up on the bottom left of the screen.

"So cute!" Prisma remarked upon seeing the character.

Max looked happy to hear that. "My buddy made it for me! Isn't it dope?"

"I see," Åke said. "This way, you don't have to show your face on camera."

"That's right," Max said, pleased with himself as he watched his own video.

Apart from Ekster, no one had ever seen Max play his game. They all watched with equal parts intrigue and confusion as the game's graphics flashed all over the screen.

"I'm guessing a hundred points is good, right?" Driver asked, referring to the score number popping up every time Ragoon fired a shot.

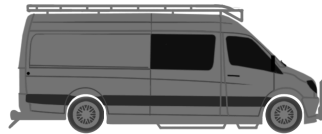
"It's the top score, man," Max said with a big grin.

"In that case," Driver said, "If it ever comes down to it, you'll be blowing those pigs and their plastic guns out of the water."

First Move Wins

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END



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