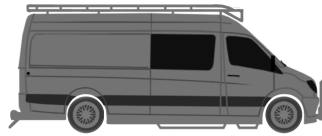


# First Move Wins

The Founding of Heist Club

Chapter 6 - Sweet Superstitions



First Move Wins© written by Charlotte

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# Chapter 6

## Sweet Superstitions

Five days after their trip to the church, Åke received a text from Ekster which stated they'd meet at Manzoni's, next Saturday, two o'clock. He mentioned Manzoni's as if it was some local hot spot, leaving no address or anything.

Turns out, it was some local hot spot. Saturday was a crazy day to come anywhere near the historical districts, but this particular area seemed especially popular. Flocks of people overflowed the narrow streets and cramped pavement cafes. Åke pushed his way through the crowd, keeping his head down and sunglasses on.

Before even noticing the "Manzoni's" signage, he spotted Ekster sitting outside at one of the cafe tables. He was hard to miss. The midnight-blue designer suit was in a league of its own against the surrounding sea of fresh summer colours.

"Hi!"

Ekster looked up over his glasses. "You're late." He had an unlit cigarette between his lips and was in the middle of typing an email on his phone.

Åke grabbed the bistro chair across from him and turned it ninety degrees, facing the sun. "Welcome to the south. How ya doin'?"

Ekster only replied with a short, low grunt. He continued to work on his email without any regard for the person he had invited, during which he lit the cigarette and cracked each individual finger knuckle a few times. He tossed a silver lighter on the table, but Åke wasn't offered a smoke. Terribly rude. From the looks of the two empty espresso cups and the overflowing ashtray, he'd already been here for a while.

Åke happily worked on his tan while politely waiting for that guy across from him to finish whatever he was doing.

Ekster was rather dressed up today. The tailored linen suit featured a tasteful selection of mis-matched silver buttons and was worn over a black collared shirt. Its unbuttoned neckline left little to the imagination. Quite the ensemble.

Åke's own wardrobe didn't hold much more than a bunch of jeans, plain tops with variable sleeve lengths and workout clothes. Never in his life had he ever had to think about what to wear, and, by now, getting dressed up at all seemed tiringly complicated. He had always been showered in couture and jewelry, but those things he considered someone else's preferred skin on him; a uniform for visual entertainment. They made him feel like a clown or some show-dog. The thought of asking Ekster where he got his clothes from fleetingly crossed his mind, but he let it go as quickly as it arrived.

However, after a while without any conversation whatsoever, Åke grew terribly bored. Why was he here again? He looked around for the waiter and waved him down, but the gesture was returned with a pissed-off 'Can't you see I'm busy?' signal. Åke sighed. This coffee date better not take the rest of his afternoon, his amount of dispensable free time was limited enough as it was.

"Excuse me, got a smoke?" He bothered the two girls at the table closest to them, too annoyed to ask Ekster. "*Gracias!*" He made sure to flash them his most dashing smile after the blonde one handed him a cigarette.

"Anytime, gorgeous," she winked and held up a light. The other girl leaned in over the table. Her pastel pink hair was intricately braided.

"Say, your friend doesn't seem like much fun."

"Pffft, tell me about it," Åke playfully rolled his eyes. "If he continues being bad company, can I join ya'll?" The girls laughed at each other in response.

"We're planning to check out this new spot that opened up last week. Should be fun."

"Oh where's that at?"

"Just across from Osteria Da Maurício, you know, the seafood bar down at the lake."

"Love that place."

Åke had actually already gone to the new private-beach club. In fact, he'd been invited to the opening night party last Saturday. He took out his phone. "Girls, tonight won't do. But I can get you two in for free to make up for it. How about that?"

"No way!"

While Åke exchanged contact info with the two girls, Ekster picked up a phone call. It was impossible to distinguish what he was saying, between the girls chatting in his left ear and the noise of the busy cafe terrace, but Åke noticed Ekster's expression was, however, quite terrible. He pulverized his cigarette in the ashtray and started rhythmically cracking his finger

and wrist knuckles again. Seemed to be a nervous habit of his. Åke tried his best to appear to be giving the girls his full attention, but his interest in the frivolous conversation rapidly declined. In the end he got them out of his hair with an apologetic white lie: “To be honest this guy over here is not exactly my friend. He’s my boss. And I don’t think he appreciates me using work meetings to chat with pretty girls.”

The two thought that was hilarious. “Oh no! Ha ha, mandatory work drinks... That sucks. We’re off anyway, time to party!”

“Have fun! And thanks for the cig. Leave your bill, I’ll cover it.”

As they walked off, the girls blew an over-the-shoulder kiss in his direction, and even waved at Ekster. “Bye boss!”

Ekster unwillingly waved back at them with a difficult expression on his face. Åke refrained from laughing by trying to find the waiter again, who was nowhere to be seen. Ekster tapped on the table to get his attention.

“You’ve got an hour around seven today?”

Åke shook his head. Every ounce of light-hearted humor seeped from his body once he was reminded of his work. “Outta town.”

“Six in the morning, tomorrow?”

Åke pulled a face. “Overnight trip. I’ll be back by Monday.”

“Free on Monday?”

“Give me a break, man.”

“So you’re free.”

“... After lunch.”

“Monday works,” Ekster informed the person on the other line.

Åke sunk back into the cafe chair. He wasn’t destined to enjoy any free time ever, it seemed. It’d been like this his entire life anyway, why would it be any different now? Nothing changed in the last two years, only his scenery. A prison with a view. Fabulous.

“— my lawyer, he’s figuring out how I can get you paid.”

Åke didn’t respond.

“Hello?”

“Hm? What? What do I have to do?”

Ekster’s fingers twitched. “Meet my lawyer. Get paid.”

“Oh!” Åke immediately sat up a little straighter. “That’s possible?”

“I don’t know. Give him as much information as you can, you’ll need people like him in the long run. He’s interested to learn about your specific situation, says he found cases similar to yours.”

“Similar to mine? That’s unlikely. Didn’t this lawyer cost you a fuckton per hour? How am I paying for that?”

“He owes me.”

The waiter finally passed their table, and Ekster ordered his third espresso. Åke just asked for a glass of water with ice and a lemon slice. After that, the silence returned. Ekster went back to whatever business he had on his phone and Åke’s thoughts drifted.

As a drastic change of pace, it was actually kinda nice to finally hang out with someone who didn’t expect him to be continuously entertaining. The past five days of his life had been a classic shit-show. Last Sunday had started off great, with a fun and easy modeling gig for a jewelry brand, followed by a two-day video shoot for a fragrance line, on Monday and Tuesday. Although the assistant director of the fragrance commercial had been way too touchy-touchy for Åke’s liking, the shoot location was gorgeous and the food fresh. Shit really started to go down hill after wrap-up, when the crew forced him to go out for drinks. Drinks turned into a party, and the party ended with him getting together with the assistant director anyway. A tad against his will, afin, guess he might as well add ‘being a total push-over’ to his list of most redeeming qualities.

The next morning had started off with pure regret and a call from Frog that he’d be flown over to the south of Calabria that very day, to attend an heiress’s eighteenth birthday party. Why? Her mother was completely obsessed with him ever since a twenty minute conversation they’d had at a summer Salon, five fucking years ago.

So less than three hours later he was situated right in the middle of a bloody south-Italian heatwave, at some child’s birthday party. To say that the mother was obsessed with him, turned out to be the understatement of the century. Åke very quickly got the impression that the mother was keen on him procreating with her daughter, even though her birthday celebration literally doubled as a wedding announcement. When he kindly, and professionally, declined to be intimate with the girl in any shape or form, the mother completely turned on him. To add insult to injury, the old hag tried to spike his drink, which, by accident, the soon-to-be wife slash birthday girl ended up drinking herself. As a result, an accusing finger was decidedly pointed in his direction. Who else could possibly be to blame but Åke?

Frog had to spend the rest of the night convincing Madam to not sue, which she would only agree to if Åke took her daughter's virginity. The whole thing had been beyond absurd, to the point that even Frog had been at a loss for words. In the end he was able to suss the whole ordeal down by promising Åke's attendance to the wedding (wedding night explicitly not included), free of charge, on top of a professionally curated wedding gift to suit the newlyweds' renovated mansion.

Frog hadn't been all that happy about the losses they were running as a result of the trip, but the mother's disgraceful behavior hadn't surprised him, nor had he blamed Åke for any of it.

"My dearest, people just always seem to lose their mind around you. You've always had that effect." It had only taken a hug and a soothing "It's not your fault, Åke" for him to start bawling his eyes out. The whole ordeal had only made him realise that in the entire whole wide universe, in the end, Frog was the only safe space he had. Since the very thought nearly drowned him in pure misery, he had to spend the entirety of Thursday drinking to stay afloat. Which, guess what, caused a pathetic, day-long hangover on Friday. Sometimes he had a hard time seeing where the consequences of his own actions exactly began and where they ended.

The waiter interrupted Åke's self-deprecating train of thought by finally serving their order, but Ekster's lack of social initiative steadily persisted. Åke knew better than to try and entertain the man and so spared his efforts. He yawned extensively and stretched his limbs, before finishing his drink with a couple of long drags through the straw. He really felt like smoking another cigarette, in this rare moment of leisure. His torturous morning workouts had left him sore all-over and he wasn't looking forward to his upcoming schedule. Tonight's dinner would be boring, tomorrow's gallery opening could surely kill him from boredom and tomorrow evening's cocktail party would hopefully be serving some hard liquor. There were a couple of people he hoped to be seeing, but even more he'd rather not run into. He'd have to wait until Frog gave him the guest list to see who he'd have to hang out with for the night. Eyes on the prize, he reminded himself. The two percent debt collateral was a whole hundred percent more than what others in his position had going on for themselves.

He closed his eyes against the sun and tried to guesstimate how much he'd have to sell in the upcoming weeks to make up for the deficit he created due to the engagement party disaster. The number was getting scarily close to six figures when in his peripherals, he felt

Ekster rise from his seat. Before Åke could ask where he was going, a cheery female voice called out to them.

“Hiii guys! Both of you here already? So happy to see you again, Ekster!”

Ekster gave the girl a quick kiss on the cheek and mumbled a curt “*ça va?*”, while a large spotted poodle caught Åke off guard by enthusiastically jumping in his face. He absolutely adored dogs, and was immediately cooing right back at the animal’s cute snout, scratching behind his fluffy ears with both hands.

“*Ça va bien!*” the girl cheerily replied. “*Et toi?* You look like you haven’t slept in days. Lovely suit, though. Curious buttons. Farello, stay!”

Farello gave Åke one last lick on his nose before obediently sitting down on the floor. His fluffy tail wagged from left to right at rapid speed. He looked incredibly happy to be meeting new people. Ekster didn’t pay the dog much attention, and was already sitting back down at the table.

“Dust, Åke, Åke, Dust,” he unceremoniously introduced the two with a nonchalant gesture from one to the other. So meeting Dust was the purpose of his attendance today, Åke thought.

He put his sunglasses on his head and extended his hand to greet the newcomer. Henna-dipped finger tips with metal jewelry answered the handshake.

Dust was a tall, brown girl with an artful knot of dark curls gathered on top of her head. She beamed down at Åke, heavy gold earrings dancing against the sun. Her large, deeply brown eyes sparkled brightly like the Mediterranean ocean at the faraway horizon. Åke was no poet, but he quickly started to feel like one. Dust was simply an absolute stunner to look at. Smudged maroon kohl framed her long, dark lashes and a deep shade of warm brown painted her full lips. A flowy, terracotta-colored jumpsuit draped around her curves and tied up in the front. The cheeky peekaboo made Åke wonder why everyone was shoving their chest in his face today. Not that he was complaining.

Nevertheless, what caught his attention the most was the cascading network of fine tattoos that decorated her neck, shoulders and arms. He immediately recognised the scripture-like linework as markings the No-man people were known for.

In the past, Åke had only theoretically heard about the cultural communities commonly referred to as ‘No-mans’; people living on the outskirts of society, unattached to the megalopolis cities and their established cultures. Having never met a No-man, Åke had thought of them as fables. Romantic interpretations of what life away from the megalopolis

would be like, freed from oligarchical structures and the inescapable weight of legacy; striving to be intrinsically connected with an organic sense of self.

Ekster sure liked to surround himself with a particular selection of people.

Before Åke could properly introduce himself, or sneak in a little *bisu*, a short, round Italian man captured Dust's attention by calling her name.

"Dust~! *Ciao bella!* Gorgeous, how are you doing on this sunny day?"

"*Buongiorno* Signor Manzoni!" Dust exclaimed, accepting the hug that Mr. Manzoni was offering her. "What's on the menu for today?"

"Ah for today~! Today my wife and I made *Zeppole di San Giuseppe*. I've made them extra large, that's how my son likes them! They're heavy on the stomach, perhaps you and your friends would like to share one?" The little baker kindly smiled over at the two men sitting at the table. Åke was about to decline the fried custard dessert, but Ekster was quicker.

"I'm dying to try one."

Manzoni chortled in delight. "I see you're enjoying our espressos?" He collected the empty cups and glasses from the table.

"They're exquisite," Ekster replied earnestly.

Manzoni laughed away some more and firmly patted Ekster's shoulder in rhythm with each hollering laugh. "That warms my heart, young fellow! They go well with the Zeppola! I'll bring two Zeppole! One on the house! Espresso? Yes! One for Dust? Needless to say! Fresh water for Farello of course! And what would delight this handsome *Signore*?"

Åke waved his hand in a politely dismissive gesture. "I'm quite fine, sir, thank you very much."

"If you're on a diet, I can recommend the fresh lemon juice."

Åke laughed in an amicable manner. "Then I guess I'll have lemon juice."

"*Perfetto!* It'll be here in an iffy. Yell if you're in need of anything else. Dust's friends are my friends! *Buongiorno tutti!*"

"Now I see why you wanted to meet here," Ekster said as he pulled up an extra chair for Dust to sit on.

Dust laughed and ordered Farello to lie next to her. "I just adore this place, and Mr. Manzoni. His family is incredibly dedicated." She smiled up at Åke, who was instantly all ears to the beautiful girl. "I feel like our introductions got interrupted just now. It's lovely to finally meet, I've already heard a thing or two about you."



Ekster purposefully turned his head in the opposite direction as Åke threw him an offhanded look.

“Nothing too incriminating, I hope.”

Dust laughed cheerfully. Her voice had a bright and pleasant ring to it. “Nothing that beats Ekster's own reputation,” she said cheekily. “The other girl couldn't come?” She directed the question at Ekster.

“Prisma's tied up with work. How was your week?”

“You people, always laboring,” Dust grinned. “Though I've been busy too. All sorts of exciting things are crossing my path these days. Something's shifting in this timeline. New energies are taking their position. Had a look at that magnificent statue you showed me. Intriguing stuff. Quite the rabbit-hole.”

Ekster leisurely lit yet another cigarette before saying, “What have you got?”

Dust grabbed a black folder from her tote bag and handed it to Ekster, who immediately started scanning its contents.

“You were right from the start. My girl ain't Mary. Which is great for us.” She popped her elbow up on the table. With her head in the palm of her hand, she nonchalantly angled her body in a way that made a couple of passersby turn their heads. “As you can see, there is much more to this beauty than they want us to see, as always,” she continued with a conspiring grin, “we could significantly bloat her value, especially if your buyer is superstitious in nature.”

Ekster closed the folder with a smack and handed it, to his mild surprise, over to Åke.

“Have a look at that,” he instructed. “I'd say it can hardly be categorised as a religious artifact.”

“I'd say it definitely should be,” Dust countered happily.

Ekster pensively tapped the ash off his cigarette and was about to say something when the waiter served their order.

Two espressos, two complementary glasses of water, a tall glass of cold lemonade, the sweet Zeppole, each topped with an impressive swirl of custard cream, three dessert forks on a little plate with napkins, and a side of Maraschino cherries. And water for Farello.

Ekster cut a soft Zeppola in two with a butterknife. The round, overstocked table dangerously balanced on the uneven pebble road.

“You just *have to* try a bite,” Dust told Åke. “Nothing beats Manzoni's desserts.”

Åke was about to decline again, but quickly changed his mind when Dust held up a small piece of the Zeppola. He ate the pastry from Dust's fingers.

"Hmmm!" he exclaimed with feigned delight, hating the taste of sugar and cream with a burning passion. He quickly took a few big sips of the tangy lemon juice to cancel out the greasy sweetness. Ekster shoved the entire pastry in his face with two bites, while Dust happily nibbled away at the thing with her fork.

"So?" Dust chirped at Åke, who had slowly started to skim through the stack of papers in the black folder. "What's your bet on our not-Mary? Relic of a lost religion or not?"

Åke glanced over Ekster's high-resolution closeup images of the statue. The unreadable, chiselled scripture. Dust's cross-references to various alphabets and their archeological sources. A map of the ancient islands of the Eurasian Sanctuary in the Aegean sea. Followed by pages and pages with reference images. Archival drawings of Byzantine churches, ancient texts with their approximate translations, images of Byzantine sculptures, images of hellenistic sculptures, all tagged with a date and location. A couple of timelines and more old maps. At the end, a short hand-written conclusion, which simply stated; *'30 BC, Paros, haunted.'*

Admittedly, he had never loved art theory. It hurt his head a little. "Girl, I believe anything you tell me. But... haunted?"

Dust wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "Exciting isn't it? Did you stare into her eyes? They say that those who do, will have their soul trapped in a maze without exit, doomed to—"

Her ominous prophecy was interrupted by the sound of Ekster's phone loudly buzzing against the metal table and Farello barking once in surprise.

Ekster glanced at the screen and said, "I need to take this." He one-shotted his espresso, promptly rose to his feet and disappeared into the sea of people.

Dust giggled with the dessert fork pressed against her lips. "What a figure. The bearer of opportunity and monetary fortune." She calmed Farello down with a few loving scratches behind his ear. "Åke, do you believe in coincidences?"

Åke, who didn't believe he'd ever had a grain of influence over his day-to-day life, replied, "I suppose."

"Well, I don't," Dust said, in that same foreboding tone as earlier. "Everything happens for a reason, the universe is infinitely interlinked. I know we were destined to meet; a meeting

that marks the cusp between the past and a future marked with abundance. I'm not just talking about money."

Åke raised a skeptical eyebrow at her. She laughed it off.

"The day I met Ekster, he sold me a dozen golden bracelets for a very friendly price. Gold prices have been through the roof lately. Told me that they'd sell quickly in my store. Next thing I know, some madam walks in and buys them right out of his hands, without hesitation! It didn't even cross her mind to haggle the price down. Now those kinds of coincidences just don't happen out of nowhere."

Åke sipped his drink, a curious expression plastered all over his face.

Dust continued, "And guess what. Just yesterday, I saw your face on a huge billboard. They were putting it up right behind my apartment. I'm not even shocked to see you here today. How long have you known Ekster for?"

Åke put the drink down. "Met him a couple of weeks ago. Got caught up in his little scheme."

Dust nodded slowly. "Just because there is something in it for me, doesn't mean I'll just follow him blindly. You must feel the same." She bore her large eyes right through him.

"He hides his family background," Åke off-handedly responded. "As of now, I don't have any reason to trust him."

Dust hummed and tipped her head with a touch of doubt. "It doesn't feel like he's on good terms with his family name."

"He wears a fucking signet ring."

"Just a little keepsake."

Åke scoffed. She must know more than he did. Or less. "Not where I'm from."

Dust sat back in her seat and tucked some rogue curls behind her ear. "I wasn't taught to judge based on what I think to understand. As for Ekster, I see an empty soul."

Åke bit the inside of his cheek. Neither the emptiness nor the fullness of Ekster's fucking soul would change the matter of his privileged heritage. Momentarily they might have an overlapping objective, which in any case was the only reason to do business with anyone ever, but getting friendly with someone from a higher class was in reality nothing but a skewed relationship that inevitably led to pure abuse of power. Åke sat back in his seat. He didn't feel like talking about Ekster any more than necessary.

Out of the depth of the crowd, a voice cautiously but urgently called out to them.

“Yo. Yo! You two over there!”

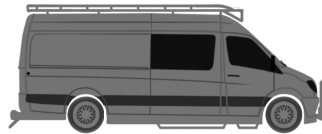
They turned around to face a stocky teenager on a skateboard. His sneakers were ridiculously eyecatching despite being utterly destroyed. His baggy jeans distressed from the belt to the hem and his neon-green shirt more than a couple sizes too large. His freckled skin tan and his spiked hair artificially red. He kept a safe distance from the two at the terrace table.

“That guy who just left. Do y’know him?!”

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END



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