

Chapter 1

A tuft of Elliot's auburn hair fell between his eyes, his voice lowering to a whisper as he leaned across the table towards his guest, his figure encased in the same shadows which draped across every adornment in the empty, dimly-lit tavern. It was quiet. No, it was silent.

"Surely," he said in a low voice, "*surely* you don't want me to do this."

His voice had to be a quiet one; every sound did. So quiet that every word, every action, every *breath* disappeared after it was spoken; as if it never existed. After all, it was night, and the night was the most dangerous. It was when they were the most vigilant... the most formidable... the most hungry.

Evelyn's gaze shifted, the reflection of pale light flickering out from her irises as she looked passively towards the boarded-up door behind him. Scraps of decaying fir looked back at her pitifully, hammered haphazardly over the doorway. It was a sloppy job, though sloppy hardly mattered when one's species was on the brink of extinction.

Evelyn pondered it for a moment; the purpose of their meeting. And in doing so she again picked her way through every possible alternative. Perhaps this wasn't the way. Perhaps there was some glorious, undiscovered solution that would save them all.

Her eyes flitted back to meet him, his expression emanating an immense and consuming desperation. She leaned forward, succumbing to the reality that after all this time waiting, hope was futile: mercy would not come.

"I must assure you that I do," she said, expression cold. "I am very serious. This time, it will work."

The look in Elliot's eyes was more reluctant than any other person she'd encountered in months – not that the number was high. There were three people on the mountainside excluding

her sister, Verna, and they never spoke more than a single word at a time, accompanied by a nod. Elliot pressed his lips into a thin line, letting his head fall back against his shoulders as he looked irritably up at the ceiling so as to not be facing her. Then he raised his hand, dramatically placing his index down on the paper between them. As he pulled it towards him with a speed that truly revealed how begrudgingly he was doing this, Eveyln wondered if he was in fact qualified for this task. Perhaps she should choose someone else.

Elliot let his shoulders rise and fall as he let out the heaviest sigh one could get away with in the quiet of a place like this, surrendering – albeit sullenly – to the request. Evelyn opened her mouth, an action contrary to her self-restraint.

“Need I remind you of the *urgency* of this —”

He shook his head once, eyelids fluttering as he brought the page to his face. He spoke plainly and with a frank tone that had a slowly dulling edge.

“You do not.”

Eveyln shook her head, exchanging the apparent duty of keeping watch over the old ceiling.

Elliot’s eyes darted between the words on the page for what felt to be far longer than necessary — in fact, what *proved* to be far longer than necessary. Agitation began to overwhelm Evelyn and she set her gaze back down onto Elliot’s head (now determined to ‘speed this up’, as her sister had advised her), the emotion that befell his face made her do a double take.

Those eyes, which were always so stern, were soft, reflecting the candlelight behind Evelyn’s head. As he blinked, one tear leaked from his left eye, painting his cheek in a reflective glow.

What one might not know about Elliott on first meeting was something that could be concluded from the two puncture marks just under his left ear, though they were long scarred over. However, what they *would* know was that the tattoo snaking around them — vile and detestful to the highest degree — was the product of an action from which they wanted to be as far away as possible.

Elliott probably knew this was embarrassing — this vulnerability — but he did not make any inclination of remorse. Raising a hand to run his fingers through his hair, he cracked a small smile at her.

“Not to sound... stupid,” he started.

“As if you have *ever* been.”

He shot her a look. “But as much as I wish it were true — and do know that I do — I don’t...” he paused. “...*believe* this to be true.” He set the letter down on the table, crossing his hands.

Evelyn had anticipated this response. Though, after so many years of practice, she knew that she would be able to resolve the issue of successfully persuading him with ease. Leaning towards him, she lowered her voice even further. To any other ear, her words were inaudible.

“*This is something I know you want, too.*”

He hissed through his teeth, the light of the room catching in his eyes, lighting up his bloody irises. “And for how long now have you convinced me to go on escapades such as this, which all inevitably end in failure —”

She snapped. “That is not true —”

He slammed a finger down on the page, shaking the table. “What is the validity of this?”

Their eyes flicked around them, trying to catch a response, but the wind outside continued to howl, and the night was silent. His gaze flickered in the light when she again met them, irises a shade of red so deep that they were nearly black. "...How do you know that it is even *true*, Evelyn?" He leaned towards her, almost earnestly. "News from Stockingholm? Why would you *trust* them? They are the *least* to be trusted —"

"Because they're the most competent. There have been reports; data."

Despite the unreadability of his face, his eyebrows twitched upwards ever so slightly.

Anyone who didn't know him would never have noticed. Evelyn did.

Leaning closer to him, to the point where she could nearly smell the sickness and death on his bones, she met his eyes with a fervent, indomitable strength that captured him as it had always captured.

"They claim to be very, very close."

His pupils constricted into slits, venomous and veiled. "And why would that be something you would care about?"

Evelyn reached to her collar, pulling down on the fabric. And when she exposed her neck, she exposed a galaxy.

Puncture wound after puncture wound, her skin was laced with marks of every size, shape and age. Some were in pairs; others were alone. If there had been a pattern in that constellation, it would have been of Moros: all-destroying.

Elliott gasped, jerking himself away from her to cover his mouth as if she was something infectious to him; as if she had something he could possibly still catch.

Her eyes flitted to a figure at the edge of the room, her fingers released the fabric and it fell back, concealing her secret.

“I am very close,” she whispered. “Come with me. Please. I need your help.”

His eyes flashed to the paper and the words on the page.

“If this is true,” he whispered, his gaze returning to her with a new strength. “And I will be unhappy if it is not...” his eyes flicked towards her, meeting her look. “Then *just* one time,” he said. “I will do this... with you... one time. Though,” he said. “know that it will be the last.”

She smiled, expression bound with a new determination. “Yes,” she said. “It will most certainly be the last.”