The Heart of Lady Vex'ahlia

by bboiseux

Summary
Raised in a world that values position above all else, Lady Vex’ahlia Vessar, half-blood daughter of an elven margrave and a human seamstress, has been judged her entire life for the circumstances of her birth. Despite this, she found solace in her family’s visits to Whitestone: a best friend and escape from the expectations of her daily life.

This year’s trip is different. With her beloved twin brother torn from her side by war and her father busily arranging her marriage to Lord Percival de Rolo, Whitestone feels more like a gilded cage. As Vex’ahlia’s life in Whitestone slowly spirals out of her control and the inner turmoil of the Vessar and de Rolo families begins to bleed to the surface, Vex’ahlia must finally confront her fears and insecurities and choose what her heart truly wants.

A Perc’ahlia fic about obligations, illicit affairs, and the love in between.

**Status:** Updating Monthly

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Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
"It was not customary or proper for a lady of breeding ..."

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It was not customary or proper for a lady of breeding to be proficient in the use of lock picks. It was also not customary or proper for a lady of breeding to be proficient at skulking through the shadows unseen. It was also not customary or proper for a lady of breeding to hide most of her jewelry in the lining of her luggage or to hide, not to speak of possess, a pair of stolen trousers in the same lining. Yet, Vex’ahlia considered, it was also not customary or proper for an elven margrave to sire children with a human seamstress or to marry the woman and bring her and the half-blood children back to the elven city of Syngorn as his heirs. It would have been more customary to marry an elven peeress and to keep the human as a mistress. Certainly it would have been more proper. So, all things considered, Vex’ahlia thought her own behavior, if not customary or proper, was at least in keeping with family tradition.

It was the next step, the one she would take when they arrived in the city of Whitestone, that would break tradition. While it was customary and proper for a lady of breeding to be trained in the use of a bow and the handling and riding of horses, it was decidedly neither customary nor proper for the lady to use those skills to run from civilization to the wilderness.

But that was exactly what Lady Vex’ahlia Vessar planned to do.

Like everything in her life, it had begun with her father, Syldor Vessar, Margrave of Duvain. Lord Duvain spent most of the year on diplomatic missions throughout the more distant reaches of the united kingdoms. It was rare for him to be in Syngorn, in their estate tower of Duvain, for a sustained period longer than a week. However, this was the time of year when he was consistently home: the time ahead of their annual family trip to Whitestone.

As the ambassador to Whitestone, Lord Duvain had developed a close relationship with His Grace, the Duke of Whitestone, and that relationship had transferred to their respective families. Vex’ahlia, herself, had been smiling for the last week as she looked forward to seeing her closest friend, Lady Vesper de Rolo. In fact, it was only because her mind was focused on completing a letter to Vesper to send before they departed tomorrow morning that Vex’ahlia hadn’t paid attention to the irregularity of a summons from her father. Normally, Lord Duvain wanted little to do with either her or her brother, Vax’ildan. If she had been paying attention, she would have noted that each of Lord Duvain’s summons preceded a major decision and prepared herself.

Lord Duvain was in his study, a large room that took up the entire top of the estate tower and his private refuge from his family. A large window and balcony took up a third of the circular wall and looked outward over Syngorn and the surrounding Stormcrest Mountains. At this late hour, the view was mostly darkness spattered with lights from other towers. The study itself was illuminated with strategically placed white orbs that floated in the air casting a harsh white light over the wood tones of the room and throwing into contrast just how vast and empty the room was. A lush carpet of burgundy filled the center of the circular room and the only thing that stood on the carpet was a massive bookstand, which always had a rare volume open for display. Just past the carpet, ancient bookshelves, growing out of the sylvan walls of the estate, soared to the rooftop. The shelves were meticulously organized by age, with the tomes and scrolls growing more and more recent as they grew closer to the windows.

At the far end of the room, centered perfectly before the view of Syngorn, was a massive wooden desk. With the bookstand, this desk was Lord Duvain’s prized possession. Crafted from old
growth trees in the Verdant Expanse, both objects were as old as Syngorn itself. It was Lord Duvain’s opinion that the two objects might even pre-date Syngorn itself and tie the estate to the illustrative heritage of some pre-Calamity elven city.

It was at this desk that Lord Duvain sat when Vex’ahlia entered. He sat perfectly straight, thin and tall like a reed but firm and unbending like the ancient oaks. His long black hair cascaded down like a waterfall, flowing smoothly over his shoulders and down his back. He was dressed in a traditional, conservative, elven outfit: a white linen shirt tied tight at the neck with a matching cravat, covered in a long blue jacket embroidered with golden leaves along the shoulders. As Vex’ahlia approached, Lord Duvain steepled his fingers.

Buoyed by thoughts of Vesper and Whitestone, Vex’ahlia floated across the room. Her complexion and hair were very similar to her father’s—pale skin and raven hair—but, unlike her father, she kept her hair in twin braids, pinned up, encircling the top of her head. Her day dress was a simple affair, but, like most elven designs, was intricately embroidered. The plain bodice flowed into a sea of silver florals that filled the top of the skirt and then scattered into a matching field of silvers stars that descended to the hem.

Vex’ahlia stopped just short of the desk and gave a quick curtsy. “Lord Duvain.”

She did not consider herself close to or on good terms with her father, but as they would be sharing a carriage together, and so exist in close proximity, for the next week, she felt it best to show her respect for his title. Position meant so much to him after all.

Lord Duvain inclined his head in acknowledgement and gestured towards a chair that faced the desk. “Daughter. Please sit. I wish to speak to you of our coming trip.”

Vex’ahlia lowered herself smoothly into the chair and brushed her fingers along the intricate needlework of her skirt. “Yes?”

“I am sure you are aware that this visit will not be like past visits. I believe Lady Vesper’s letters have carried news of Lord Musel’s engagement?”

Vex’ahlia nodded. Vesper had been quite detailed in her opinions on the match, describing the poor girl (“blonde” and “all bosom and little brain”) and laying out her own thoughts on the social inequality (“It’s insulting to Mussy to make him marry a business man’s daughter, even if he is technically a baronet. Even a baronet is too low for a future duke.”). Vesper had never been the most sensitive soul or the most reflective—otherwise she might have thought better before writing such a judgment to Vex’ahlia—but her honesty and sharp tongue were some of the many reasons Vex’ahlia so loved her.

“The household and the surrounding city will be a maelstrom of planning and preparation during our visit. I asked Lord Whitestone if he preferred us to abstain from our visit, but he would hear nothing of it.” Here Lord Duvain paused, his body still ramrod straight, his eyes steady on Vex’ahlia’s face. “He’s quite fond of us. His regard must not be shown to be misplaced.”

The customary silence that signaled the need for a response settled between the two of them and Vex filled it for him. “You don’t have to worry about my embarrassing you, father. I’m quite adept at the necessary social niceties.”

Lord Duvain gave a slight nod. “I have always acknowledged your skill at playing the part life has dealt you. But I have noted with great displeasure that such skill is always deployed at your convenience, never the convenience of others. I expect better. I expect you to be perfectly put together in all public gatherings.” He looked down at Vex’ahlia’s right sleeve. “No evidence of
misadventure as I detect in the stained fabric of your cuff. I expect you to address others as they
deserve by the rule of the realm not the rule of your heart.”

As Lord Duvain went on, detailing his expectations, Vex’ahlia felt her heart come crashing back to
earth. Her father, so silver-tongued in his diplomatic duties seemed to default to rules and etiquette
when it came to his family. The anger that her father so often produced built like steam inside her
chest, until she could contain herself no longer and the words pushed between her lips in a tightly
controlled burst of heat and energy.

“You expect much,” she said, “I hope you are not smothered under an avalanche of disappointed
expectations.”

Lord Duvain inhaled sharply through his nose and, for a moment, Vex’ahlia thought he might grow
angry and, in the typical elven way when overwhelmed by emotion, rise to look stoically out the
window. But he didn’t. Instead, he merely raised one eyebrow and let the silence hang between
them.

Finally, he said, “I have had ten years to consider you and your brother’s attitude towards me. I
took you in, gave you the run of my home, my family’s wealth, my family’s name. You have been
provided the best education Syngorn and Tal’dorei can provide. You have been prepared to meet
any appropriate challenge this world can throw at you. And, yet, you treat these things like
punishments.”

Vex’ahlia raised an eyebrow in return. “A jeweled leash is still a leash,” she said.

Lord Duvain sighed, the hard angles of his face growing soft in resignation, and he looked around
the room, seeming to take stock of the books that lined the walls. But, when his gaze returned to
Vex’ahlia, his face had gone hard again.

“A leash implies that only one side is tethered to the other. No, if you insist on colorful metaphors,
perhaps a chain gang is more appropriate.”

Vex’ahlia let out a bitter laugh and opened her mouth to speak, but Lord Duvain raised a hand.

“I think it is time we spoke honestly of the true cost of you and your brother’s life in Syngorn. I
believe you both measure that cost in riches. Perhaps you think that is all I consider—that you are
but an expense that I must bear for a momentary indiscretion. But there have been other, much
deeper, costs to me.”

Vex’ahlia raised her chin in contempt. “And what, pray tell, dear father, were those costs that
weigh so heavily upon you?”

“Position. Reputation. Did it ever occur to you what I gave up to take on the burden of your
education? Did it ever occur to you what I lost when I brought all of you into Syngorn society?”

“I’m sure you will educate me in great detail.”

“Before I discovered the existence of you and your brother, my career trajectory was all but
guaranteed: a seat on the Yenlaran Council, the highest honor a citizen of Syngorn can hold. If I
had stayed on that path, I would now be the ambassador to Emon, not a remote duchy like
Whitestone. I knowingly sacrificed all of that to marry your mother. I sacrificed it to fulfill my
duty to you. All because I happened to pass through that nothing town of Byroden a second time.”

Lord Duvain’s tone had been harsh, but as he lingered on this moment in his memory, his gaze
grew soft.
“Daughter, when I saw the two of you playing and laughing outside that cottage, everything changed. I could see my features etched across your faces. My blood running through your veins.” He sighed. “When I stopped my carriage and descended to that muddy road, when I walked across the yard, the two of you stopping to stare as I approached the door, I had no—“ Lord Duvain broke off, an uncharacteristic wedge in his usual smooth speech. “My mind was not my own. It belonged in that moment to the two of you and to Lady Duvain … to Elaina.”

The tenderness with which he spoke her mother’s name took Vex’ahlia by surprise and, if only for a moment, loosened the combativeveness that always gripped her heart in the presence of her father.

“When I saw the two of you again, no more thought was needed. You were of my blood. You deserved my protection and the rights of my position. And to tear you away from your mother …. No, I understood the duty I had to you. No matter the cost, that duty had to be upheld.” With that, Lord Duvain lapsed into silence, his eyes still trained on Vex’ahlia.

Vex’ahlia shifted in her seat, uncomfortable, the anger at her father still burning hot in her throat, but the emotion feeling suddenly inappropriate. Her father had always been hard to read. The elves of Syngorn prided themselves on their formality and devotion to custom, but that did not mean they did not have emotions. Vex’ahlia knew all too well that they suffered from all the normal human frailities of feeling—the scorn she and her brother had suffered in the streets told her that well enough, but so did the passions she had seen from many an alluring elf. Yes, they had emotions, they just kept them locked tight in their chest. Her father was, perhaps, the prime example of the Syngorn ideal of passionless distance. As a diplomat, such distance almost defined his existence and it didn’t stop when he left his duties behind. So, Vex’ahlia had to ask herself, was this merely an uncharacteristic outpouring of emotion or did it serve a purpose?

“Father,” Vex’ahlia rolled the words around in her mouth, wearing the sharp edges away, “I appreciate your openness. But why tell me this now?”

Lord Duvain inclined his head a fraction of an inch and Vex’ahlia could have sworn his lips ticked up slightly into an approving smile. “A perceptive question. I tell you this to make the importance of duty clear: to help you understand what you owe to my duty and to reinforce why I expect you to take your duties to this family seriously.”

“Expectations again, then.”

“Yes, expectations. I told you that this trip to Whitestone would be different. Part of this is Lord Musel’s engagement. Part of this concerns you.”

Vex’ahlia felt the fight grip hold of her heart again, the anger flare bright. She had survived Syngorn and life in the aristocracy by knowing when to gird herself. “And what, dear father, about our trip to Whitestone concerns me?”

Lord Duvain said the words smoothly and without any apparent concern. “During our visit, I intend to approach His Grace with the proposition of strengthening the bonds between our families through the marriage of yourself to Lord Percival.”

As her father’s words dripped out in his measured tone, Vex’ahlia felt the anger simmer deep in her gut, felt her face go hot. She gritted her teeth, trying to maintain her composure. “And if I do not wish to marry Lord Percival?”

Lord Duvain regarded Vex’ahlia coolly. “If you wished to avoid this fate, your actions have not shown it.”
“Excuse me?” she said, bursting out of her seat. The anger was clamped tight on her lungs now, searing through her with a heat she didn’t know she possessed. She tried to find the right words. The words to express the absurdity of an arranged marriage being her fault. The words to express the audacity of her father trapping her in a loveless marriage like her mother. The words to do anything but scream. But instead those words became a hard lump in her throat. She felt sick.

“Sit down,” said Lord Duvain with a nod towards the chair.

Vex’ahlia glared at him, her hands balled into tight fists at her side, her knuckles white.

“Very well,” said Lord Duvain, as he rose from her seat. He clasped his hands behind his back and looked down at Vex’ahlia. “In my profession it is advisable to view rumors and gossip with care. I must be skeptical of all information, but not so skeptical that I throw out the diamonds with the sand. I had turned a blind eye to the stories of your … indiscretions in Syngorn.”

“I assure you that there have been no indiscretions on my part,” said Vex’ahlia, her hands shaking at her sides, “The fact that you even suggest that I am—”

“Yes, so I had believed.” Lord Duvain didn’t raise his voice, but the tone hardened, honed to an edge, and cut through Vex’ahlia’s words. “But now …” Lord Duvain heaved a heavy sigh. “The city fairly vibrates with rumors of your trysts.” He unclasped his hands and pointed a finger in her direction. There was a slight tremor in his hands, the body betraying a passion the mind did not want to reveal. “Do you deny the stories that I have heard from both my peers and the damned servants?” His voice finally spiked, spitting out the last two words at Vex’ahlia’s feet.

Vex’ahlia’s ears went scarlet as she remembered the stories that had been passed around about her and her brother throughout the years. The worst she—well, she couldn’t even repeat them in the privacy of her own mind. It made her sick to contemplate what they had said about her and Vax’ildan and—and their relationship. She couldn’t believe even her father would think that of them. But the rest of the stories—that would be enough. If her father truly believed what the cruelest of his people said about her, if the stories were so common as to be delivered as fact by peers of the realm ….

Vex’ahlia puffed herself up, swallowing her anger, holding her unease tight in her stomach. “Nothing you have heard is true.” She locked eyes with her father, daring him to challenge her, keeping the tears dammed behind her eyes.

Lord Duvain’s gaze was cool and emotionless. “Very well. And the stories from Emon?”

The fires in Vex’ahlia’s chest went cold and the color drained from her face.

After almost ten years of tutoring in Syngorn, Vex’ahlia’s father had allowed her to attend a boarding school in Emon. He viewed it as an opportunity for her to become better acquainted with the peerage structure and social conventions of the capital of the kingdoms. The curriculum and day-to-day activities of the boarding school had certainly done that. Vex’ahlia was subjected to daily recitations of noble lineages, countless rehearsal gatherings, constant lessons on etiquette and “proper” behavior.

But Vex’ahlia had viewed boarding school as an opportunity to break free of elvish conservativism. Emon was not just the center of the political structure of the kingdoms, but the cultural center. It was where the newest musicians practiced their arts, the greatest writers lived, the most flamboyant dandies and the most intellectual women. It was another world. In Syngorn that world had seemed impossibly far away, but in Emon it was just a short climb out a window. Vex’ahlia had climbed out that window almost every night for a year. Into a world of lights and
sound and laughter and drinking and conversation and dancing. A world of fights and arguments and foolish rendezvous and thrilling parties and the Wittiest of people. Dragged in the wake of her school friends, she had experienced Emon from its darkest dive bars to its most glittering parlors. Vex’ahlia had learned much during her year in Emon, just not exactly what her father had hoped.

Her tongue thick and rubbery in her mouth, Vex’ahlia said, “There was nothing in Emon.”

Lord Duvain sighed and opened the drawer of his desk. Even before he pulled out the stack of notes, the ones Vex’ahlia had tied neatly with a green ribbon, even before he placed them carefully on the desk, Vex’ahlia knew they were coming. Her shoulders dropped. Her head sagged.

Nothing was Jarett Howarth, a charming gentlemen from Ank’Harel. He was the owner of gorgeous brown skin, an enviable physique, a caressing accent, and very little else. To his credit, he had never pretended otherwise. He was a translator who made his way by facilitating trade on the docks. It was not an honorable trade or a particularly stable one, but Jarett was sharp and reliable and possessing of roguish charms. He was also a truly good man. Even if Vex’ahlia had initially been drawn only to the movement of his hips and the rakish slant of his smile, he was insightful and honest and kind. She had known that it couldn’t last, but while it had it had been fiery and intense. When he’d wanted more and she’d wanted less, they’d parted amicably, but Vex’ahlia couldn’t bring herself to part with his notes. Letting her eyes linger over the words and phrases on the page was a lovely reminder of her eyes lingering over him. To see them in her father’s hands, placed on that ancient desk ….

“I don’t think it is necessary to discuss the contents of these missives,” said Lord Duvain, “Certainly, I would prefer to pretend I am still in polite and civil company, despite your attempts to prove otherwise.”

Vex’ahlia’s eyes stayed fixed on the stack of notes. The inappropriateness of their placement. Of her father’s finger tapping at the top. Without looking up, she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper, “How did you get them?”

“I can have no secrets in my home. An unknown variable from inside my own family could be used to disgrace me. I must be able to counter—head off—any challenges. You gave me more than enough reason to question your integrity. It was a simple matter to have the servants search your room.”

“How dare you,” she whispered. She drew herself up and glared at her father, the embers of her anger reigniting. Her voice grew strong, even as it trembled. “How dare you judge me.”

Lord Duvain cast down a withering stare. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear. Whether I judge you or not, others will, and that judgment will close off avenues of opportunity in your life. I never held out hope for a match in Syngorn—the rumors that hover around your brother and yourself all but quashed that hope—but Emon had possibilities. You killed those possibilities with your careless and foolhardy behavior. The only man, elf or otherwise, who would have you now is one who sees you as a half-blood fetish object. If you seek even the bare luster of respectability, then this marriage to Lord Percival is the only course available to you.”

“I would rather choose to be some perverted man’s … object … than be forced into a marriage to benefit you.”

Vex’ahlia spit the words at her father and felt a warm pleasure grow in her heart as she saw anger flicker across his face.
“Never mistake your value,” he said, each word deliberate and blunt, “Your worth to this family is in your ability to form an advantageous union. If you fail at that, you are nothing but a burden and will be treated as such.”

“Ah, so the true colors fly,” said Vex’ahlia with forced joviality, a tittering facsimile of a laugh springing from her lips, even as unshed tears burned at the back of her eyes. “I assure you, father, that your indecent desire to dampen your prick in my mother does not impress me with any duty to you.” Her lips curled down in an ugly, twisted frown.

Lord Duvain clenched his jaw and Vex’ahlia took some small comfort in knowing she had finally made him flinch. But, instead, of letting his own anger out, he sat down and straightened the packet of documents he had been reviewing before her arrived and then shifted the pile of Jarett’s notes until it was perfectly centered on the desk. He looked up at Vex’ahlia. “You may leave. Remain in your room until we depart.”

Vex’ahlia wanted to push back. To stand in the study and stamp her foot. Rebuke her father and his assumptions. Detail every little wrong she had suffered at his hands. But even in her rage, she knew that such an exercise of passions would simply reinforce his opinion of her—as it had countless times before—so she turned on her heel and stormed across the study, the thick carpet doing little to dampen the energy of her footsteps.

Not even ten steps into the hallway, Vex’ahlia’s figure quaked, her anger and fear and sadness racking her body. She hugged herself tight, jaw clenched, eyes brimming with tears, as she rushed to her room. Once inside, her door sealed behind her and locked with a metallic click, she bent forward in agony, clutching at her sides. The emotions fell out of her, wet and sloppy, a moan and scream mixed with the heavy fall of tears. Vex’ahlia fell onto her bed and sobbed, trying to muffle her cries in the thick down comforter. Letting the anger spill out until it was no longer a burning flame, but merely a glowing ember. Until it was merely sniffs and a soggy handkerchief.

Now, remembering that encounter with her father only a few hours before, Vex’ahlia rubbed her red, tired eyes and finished sewing the lining of her luggage back into place. With her tools and her jewels in place, she repacked the luggage and placed it with the rest of her trunks. The plan wasn’t perfect and the timing was … ambiguous, but she was confident that with the open space of Whitestone and the freedom she was afforded there, she could find the right moment to run.

That done, Vex’ahlia sat back on her bed and cast her eyes around the room. Despite her feelings, despite the tears that had been cried here, this room had been hers for ten years. It had been one of the few spaces that was her own. But, she reflected, her father had made it abundantly clear that even that wasn’t true. This was never hers. It was always his to control. The only things that could truly be hers and hers alone were her mind and her body. And with this marriage, her father sought to take half of that away. Vex’ahlia sighed and hiked up her skirt, delicately pulling out the three notes that she kept hidden close to her skin. The three notes that she knew had to be hidden and guarded more closely than the others. The two notes that began “My Lady” and the one that didn’t.

If it was customary and proper for a lady of grace and breeding to be forced into a marriage, then it was time to say goodbye to custom and propriety. A Vessar had never run away before, but her father was proof that they had behaved badly. If there was anything Vex’ahlia could handle, it was behaving badly.

Chapter End Notes
Welcome to the start of my expansive kinda-sorta-but-not-really Regency AU, complete with ridiculous naming conventions and arranged marriages! This is all flammablehat's fault for lighting the fire for this story :) I hope you enjoy the ride as much as I've enjoyed writing it!
"They left Syngorn at first light ..."

Chapter Summary

Previously: Lady Vex’ahlia was informed by her father, Lord Duvain that he would be asking Lord Whitestone to agree to the marriage of her and his second son, Lord Percival. Vex’ahlia plots to run away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They left Syngorn at first light, a bevy of trunks and bags and servants. As they gathered at the teleportation circle to Westruun, the warm spring air carried the distant rumble of artillery from the southern edge of Tal’dorei and Vex’ahlia, her heavy eyes and tired face made vibrant by the skillful application of powder and rouge, felt a cold clutch in her chest and saw her mother flinch. The sound was not frequent, but it was common enough to be treated like the weather by most citizens of Syngorn: an irritant or, at most, a means of filling the gaps between more substantial conversation. Few Syngorn citizens felt a duty to contribute to Tal’dorei’s standing army, so they had little personal stake in the sounds of a far off battle. As they stepped towards the teleportation, Vex’ahlia bit at her thumb and she looked warily towards the hidden horizon. She had written her brother a letter just yesterday. She wondered when he would get it.

From Westruun, the party began the weeklong journey to Whitestone. For all that Vex’ahlia normally looked forward to her time in Whitestone, the trips were painful.

Before her brother had taken his commission and left Syngorn, the trip had at least provided a chance for solidarity in the face of their father’s silence and their parents’ dysfunction. For the last four years, however, the carriage had become nothing more than a cage, rattling along the roads from Westruun to Whitestone, her father reviewing diplomatic communiqués with his aide, her mother staring blankly out the window at the passing countryside. Inside, the carriage was brilliantly appointed—thick plush seats on each side, the highest quality wood paneling the walls. There was even a fold out desk for her father to work at and a place to store drinks. Outside, was different. Oh, the carriage was just as brilliantly appointed on the outside, but on top of the carriage sat three guards with crossbows, with two more guards, hands on their swords, standing on the back platform. Behind followed two more carriages with servants and assistants and still more guards. There was no running away while they were on the road.

The travel was made worse by a lack of privacy. Once they were out of the Westruun area, into the surrounding countryside, there were no inns or houses worth staying at, so, as was the custom, they slept in their carriage. Almost seven days of close quarters, little washing, and even less conversation. The only comfort were the quick smiles and presses of the hand between Vex’ahlia and her mother.

Thankfully, halfway between Westruun and the start of the Alabaster Sierras and at the beginnings of the Parchwood Timberlands, there was a beautifully appointed inn. As her father explained it, the inn simply had the good fortune to be placed at a crossroads of two majors roads—one north to south, the other east to west—and, as a result, did a brisk and fairly expense trade despite the isolation of the surrounding environs. When the Duvain party traveled through the region, they
rented all the rooms in the inn, allowing one full night of rest for the family and the servants before the last half of the journey.

Vex’ahlia settled into her room, her first night alone with space to breathe in four days. The view from the single window was beautiful and Vex’ahlia took some time before the sunlight faded to look towards the looming mountains and the dark forests that sheltered Whitestone. That was the home her father proposed for her and, while there was a piece of her that yearned for the open air of Whitestone, there was an even larger piece of her that bristled at what Whitestone represented, at the control she had lost, perhaps never had, over her own life.

As the forest grew black and tiny pinpricks of light appeared in the air—whether they were stars or distant fires, Vex’ahlia couldn’t tell—Vex’ahlia lit a candle and began to undress. She’d dismissed Talila hours before to finish her other duties and Vex’ahlia took pleasure in doing her evening preparations herself.

Vex’ahlia was just pulling her nightgown over her head when there was a soft tap at the door—her mother’s knock. She hadn’t had a chance to talk to her mother since her father had told her about his plans. As she opened the door, Vex’ahlia wondered if her mother knew.

Elaina Vessar, Margravine of Duvain, had been beautiful when she was a simple seamstress in Byroden. Ten years after moving to Syngorn and being removed from the daily labor that had been her lot, twenty-one years after laboring to produce Vex’ahlia and her brother, she was still beautiful. She typically wore her auburn hair up, piled high on the top of her head, as was still popular in Syngorn, but now it hung down her back, combed out for bed, but showing a slight tangle in the back that betrayed an attempt at sleep. She had a slight frame, but was tall, almost elven in her lankiness, but, unlike the pale elves of Syngorn, her skin glowed a warm pink. Her body was wrapped in a silk robe, embroidered in silver across the chest, slightly too tight at the waist, thrown over her night clothes. Even seemingly dragging herself out of bed, she was still beautiful.

Still beautiful, but the years had taken their toll. Her eyes were eternally drooping and deep bags permanently weighed down her face. When they had first arrived in Syngorn and she had become the mistress of Duvain, she had affected a regal stance that befit her stately beauty, but as the years passed the stance had stooped and her shoulders slumped forward. At some point, the energy simply seemed to … vanish and she began to move like a sleepwalker. She would beg Lord Duvain to excuse her from social obligations. She would stay in bed for hours at a time during the day. She tried to hid it all from Vex’ahlia—smiling through breakfast until Vex’ahlia left for her hours with the tutors, forcing herself out of the estate to go shopping in the markets—but, when Elaina thought she wasn’t looking, Vex’ahlia saw the glassy stare into the distance, the blankness on her face. It ate Vex’ahlia up inside every time she saw it.

Now, in the doorway, she smiled weakly at Vex’ahlia. In her hands, she clutched her small mending bag, her fingers toying with the clasps. “I thought I could fix that small tear in your traveling dress,” she said. It was almost an apology.

Vex’ahlia wanted to tell her mother to go sleep. She wanted to kiss her good night and send her away to her rest. Instead, she threw her arms around Elaina and buried her head in her shoulder. This was home: her mother’s soft, reassuring shoulder; the ever-present smell of talcum powder and rose hips; the gentle embrace of her mother’s arms. Vex’ahlia breathed deep for the first time since they had left, a child again, warming against her mother’s bosom.

When she finally pulled away, Vex’ahlia said, “Talila can fix my dress in the morning. You need sleep.”
But Elaina glided into the room—a movement she had perfected soon after their move to Syngorn— and grabbed the dress from its hanging place near the window. “Talila will be busy drawing your bath and preparing for the road.” She sat down on the bed and found the small tear in the bottom hem. She pulled out her needle and thread. As she began her work, squinting in the dim candlelight, she paused to pat the edge of the bed. “Sit, darling.”

By the time Vex’ahlia sat down, Elaina was almost finished, the tear closed up with tight, precise stitches. Vex’ahlia rubbed Elaina’s back as she tied off the thread and snipped it close.

“Thank you, mother.”

Elaina laid the dress across the bed and tucked her supplies back in the bag. She pulled Vex’ahlia close and Vex’halia laid her head on Elaina’s shoulder.

“My beautiful Vex,” Elaina said, using the pet name Vex’ahlia had heard so often during her first eleven years. Elaina kissed the top of Vex’ahlia’s head and playfully nuzzled her hair. She sighed. “Your father spoke to you.”

The words hung in the air between them. Vex’ahlia’s hand slowed to a stop on Elaina’s back.

“Yes. Before we left,” Vex’ahlia said quietly.

Elaina gave one last kiss on Vex’ahlia’s head and took one of Vex’ahlia’s hands in her own. “I know this is hard. It is nothing I would wish on you.” She pet Vex’ahlia’s head with her free hand, running her fingers down Vex’ahlia’s hair, her cheek, until she lifted Vex’ahlia’s chin and looked her in the eyes. “But I would like you to listen to me.”

Vex’ahlia gave a curt nod.

“I suspect you and I are very much alike. There is a lightness in burning so hard with desire.” Elaina smiled wistfully. “Passion is so, so attractive. You may find it hard to believe, but that was the appeal of your father. When I was close to him when he was an envoy, I burned for him. Every touch was sheer beauty. And when he finally looked at me with that steely gaze, when we found our bodies were not our own ….” Elaina trailed off, her tired face blooming red, but she didn’t look away. “It is unfair that some of us women were born with more masculine hungers. Sometimes I believe women like us were made to be playthings for the fates.”

Vex’ahlia looked at her mother with confusion. Her mother had never spoken so … openly since they had come to Syngorn. She had certainly never spoken of her own needs. “Mother? Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it is easy to give in to passion. Just as I did with your father. But we women must remember that we don’t get our desires without consequences. The gods made men free, but enslaved women with children.”

“I can assure you, mother, that you don’t need to worry about me in that regard.”

“I’m glad. So glad, my darling. I do not want my life for you. I had hoped … I had hoped that your father might care little about your prospects and allow you the freedom of love.” That meek smile flashed across her face again, that apology of a look. “I see now I was wrong.”

The silence stretched out between them, but Vex’ahlia finally broke it with a question. “Do you regret that Vax and I … exist?”

Elaina moved quickly, cradling Vex’ahlia’s head, caressing her cheek. “My darling, never. Never.
You and Vax are the lightness that gives me being. I could hardly trade you for the world.”

Vex’ahlia leaned up and kissed her mother lightly on the lips and then flung her arms around her neck. “I love you.”

“And I love you, darling,” said Elaina with a squeeze.

They hung together like that, small smiles on each of their lips. It was nice to have her mother back like this. They had so little time together, their lives filled with the banal obligations of their class. These trips to Whitestone were one of the few times they could really talk, try to find the relationship they had before Syngorn.

Yet, her mother’s words worming in her head, Vex’ahlia found a question burrowing to the surface. She gave her mother a squeeze back and then, face hidden from her mother asked, “Do—you and father still touch?”

Elaina grimaced at the euphemism. “I—I have learned that my desires are not important. It is best to accept what I am given and to give what I am asked for.” Her voices was strangely distant and Vex’ahlia felt a tension surge through her mother’s body, passing in a moment, but saying so much.

Vex’ahlia bristled. She gave her mother one last hug and sat back. “He’s cruel.”

“No,” Elaina shook her head. “No, your father is not a cruel man. He is distant, yes. He has his own needs. And those come before others. But he cares. He—he tries to choose the best life for us.”

Vex’ahlia recoiled at the words, her face growing sour. “Mother, you can’t keep defending him. It doesn’t matter what is supposedly locked in his heart, if his actions speak otherwise.”

Elaina pulled Vex’ahlia close again and rested her chin on her head again. “And what are his actions, my dear?” Her voice was soft and tender. “He’s provided for all of us: given us a home, given you education, given you security. You don’t give him enough credit. He didn’t need to do any of those things. It would have been within his rights to leave us in Byroden.”

Vex’ahlia pulled back, fighting to keep her mother’s gaze. “Should I give him credit for what he regards as another moment of weakness? We are nothing but mistakes to him. And now he seeks to turn those mistakes into a bargaining chip for his political ambitions. That’s not care, that’s cruelty.” Vex’ahlia felt the tears at the corners of her eyes. “To sell off his daughter. To send his own son to die.”

Elaina stiffened at the reference to Vax’ildan and her arm fell away from Vex’ahlia’s shoulder. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. “No one saw the war coming. He—he couldn’t have known.”

Vex’ahlia drew herself up, squaring her shoulders. “We shouldn’t have to see war coming. Father discarded Vax as soon as he could and now he’s doing the same to me. Making our absence useful to him without care for what happens to us afterward.”

Elaina cast a mournful look across Vex’ahlia’s face. “Vex, your father cares very much for what happens to you. He chose the army for Vax because of the future it bought him. He chose Lord Percival for you for the same reason.”

“It shouldn’t be his choice!” Vex’ahlia hadn’t meant her voice to be sharp, to cut across her mother like her father’s voice did. She saw Elaina flinch with a thick inhale of breath.
Vex’ahlia blunted her words and took her mother’s hand, speaking in soothing tones. “It shouldn’t be his choice, mother. It should be ours.” She clutched her mother’s hand to her chest, cradled it in her hands, looked up at Elaina’s face, imploringly. “You should leave. We can go back to Byroden. Vax can—can give up his commission. We could have our own life there.”

Elaina reached out and stroked Vex’ahlia’s face. Her smile was still sad, but there was a glow of pride in her face. She tugged a stray lock of hair behind Vex’ahlia’s ear. “I wish we could, my darling.”

Vex’ahlia smiled up at Elaina. Her mother had never even expressed the wish before. “We can, mother, we can. We take a horse and we run and we never look back.”

Elaina took a breath. When she let that breath out her shoulders slumped, her head slid to the floor. “Do you remember Byroden?”

“I … remember playing around you as you mended and washed. I remember helping you.” Vex’ahlia threw her thoughts back, grabbing hold of the threads of vivid memory. “I remember going to market, the butcher shop, the flower stall that was there once a week in the warm weather.” Vex’ahlia let her mind drift. “I remember how happy Vax I were when you made us our clothes for the harvest dance and—and our beds in the corner.

“We feel hungry?”

“No,” It was Vex’ahlia’s turn to beam with pride, “you took care of everything.”

“As I should have, darling. I shielded you so well.” Elaina played with the hem of her nightgown, running her fingers along the elegant fabric. “When you were born, for a brief shining moment, I thought you would have the lives of a lord and a lady. And then your father was gone and I realized I was the only one who could keep you from the filth and the mud. But I couldn’t.”

“But you did, mother.”

“No.” Elaina shook her head. “No. As long as you were children, I could keep it at arm’s length, but, eventually, you’d have end up there with me.”

Elaina looked down at her hands and guided Vex’ahlia’s fingers across her upturned palm. “Do feel the roughness? The lumps? Even after ten years, ten years of someone else washing my clothes, someone else making meals, someone else carrying the goods from market, the marks are still left.

“When we lived in Byroden, it was perfect and beautiful because I could protect you. But your father came just in time. A little longer and I wouldn’t have been able to protect you anymore. I went to bed hungry every night … for you … and I would do it again in an instant, but …. Elaina’s voice faded away as she collected herself. “No, Vex, you’re not free, but you wouldn’t have been free in Byroden either. The chains in Syngorn are soft and made of gold. In Byroden they would have been coarse and stinging. The only freedom comes from money. Anything else is … a cage by another name.”

Vex’ahlia’s fingertips lingered on the callouses of her mother’s palm, callouses she had felt many times before. They didn’t feel like burdens to Vex’ahlia. They felt like strength, endurance. Vex’ahlia spread her own palms before her. They were perfect and undisturbed, pampered and protected. She folded her mother’s calloused hands in her soft grip.

“Then let Vax and I bear the chains. You’ve already done your share.” Vex’ahlia imagined lifting
buckets of water so her mother could bathe, sweating over a burning fire so she could eat, rubbing her hands raw to clean their clothes. “I can do it.” She shined her hope at her mother.

Elaina gripped Vex’ahlia’s hands. “I don’t want you to.”

The words stole Vex’ahlia’s breath and her face went dim. She hung her head.

“I took all of this on, so you wouldn’t have to. Please, please,” Elaina pleaded, “don’t give that up.”

Vex’ahlia’s eyes lingered on their two hands intermingled: one set of hands pampered but rough and worn, the other set perfect and delicate. “Mother, what are you trying to tell me?”

Elaina didn’t meet Vex’ahlia’s gaze, but her voice was firm. “I think you need to stop mistaking dreams for reality. The world—the true, harsh world—is nothing like your life in Syngorn.”

“I am not deluded or naïve. I understand what the world is like.”

“Vex—Vex’ahlia, I’m afraid you don’t. I’m afraid you’ve never had to make the hard choices I grew up with.”

“Mother, it—” Vex’ahlia drew a deep breath and steadied herself. “I am willing to make those hard choices. With you and Vax, we can do anything.”

Elaina sighed. She worried Vex’ahlia’s hand in her fingers. “I need to tell you something, my darling.” She tightened her grip on Vex’ahlia’s hand, as if fearing she would flee. “I told Vax to take the commission.”

Vex’ahlia startled back, her hands going loose in her mother’s grip. “I—I don’t—it was father that forced him to take the commission.” She knew that. She had always known that, since the day her father had announced it. Just like everything in their life, her father was to blame.

Elaina chased after her, clutching Vex’ahlia’s hands, pulling her close again. “I need you to listen to me.” Her voice trembled and faltered, but she pushed on. “Your father forced Vax to make a choice. He had discussed a marriage between Vesper and Vax with Lord Whitestone. And his lordship was open to the pairing. But, for a man, there are other options, regardless of what the rest of these—what Syngorn thinks of them. Your father … he thought a rank would be a respectable alternative. I told Vax to take the commission.”

Vex’ahlia looked down in confusion. “Why? Why would you—“ She broke off unable to finish the question.

“Vesper is very kind. I know how much you adore her. But a loveless marriage is still a cage no matter how nice the cage. And your brother did not love her. I doubt very much Vesper loved him. Children would have been expected. I felt it better to stop that before it even began. I—“ She straightened herself out, then continued. “Your father paid the gold for Vax’s commission and the additional gold for the promotion. When Vax leaves the service, all that gold will be Vax’s with nothing hanging over his head. That, my darling, is freedom.”

Elaina reached up to brush Vex’ahlia’s cheek and Vex’ahlia shied away. The hurt look on Elaina’s face stung Vex’ahlia. She sighed. “I’ve seen what Syngorn has done to you. I know my father doesn’t love you. I know you don’t love him. I don’t want to be trapped like that.”

“My darling, Whitestone isn’t Syngorn. You’ll be surrounded by people who care about you. You’ll have the run of the forests and the fields and the city. You’ll have Vesper. And Percy,
well, he seems to keep to himself and if there’s nothing there then … that’s a good thing.”

Vex’ahlia jerked her hands from her mother’s grasp. “Good enough for me, but not enough for
Vax?”

“There aren’t as many options for you. If I could give you a choice—”

“I told you what I wanted. You rejected it.” Vex’ahlia didn’t feel angry so much as heavy, like each of her mother’s words weighed her down. It took all her strength to lift her chin proudly.

Elaina faded, her tired eyes drifting to the floor, but the words still dripped out. “I know the cost. My darling Vex’ahlia. I know. I do. I need you to trust me. It’s not worth it.” Her voice grew softer as she spoke, until her words were barely a whisper. “I fought to get you out of that world.”

Vex’ahlia surged forward, pushing through the disappointment and, yes, the sense of betrayal, grasping at the last vestige of hope in her mother. She grabbed her mother’s hands back, looked at her imploringly. “We can take our jewelry. The money from that alone would let us live for years. Mother, we can do it.”

Elaina must have felt the Vex’ahlia’s desperation because she pressed Vex’ahlia’s hands close. Her eyes wandered across Vex’ahlia’s face. An eternity seemed to stretch between them before she spoke, her voice still weak.

“I was three when my baby brother died and seven when my older sister died. I was twelve when my mother died in childbirth and thirteen when my father left.” Vex’ahlia’s hopes sank as her mother spoke. “I was lucky. My aunt took me in and trained me and treated me almost like a daughter. When she died three years later, I could survive because of that kindness. But only because of that kindness.”

Vex’ahlia’s eyes brimmed over with tears. She was so tired of crying. “We have our own kindness. We have each other. We could have—” She looked away, wanting to pull away, but forcing herself to stay. Her next words exploded in a sob. “You and father took Vax.”

“My darling—”

“You and father made that decision. You sent him to die because it was preferable to marriage and now you expect me to take the path you decided too—”

Elaina surged forward, enveloping Vex’ahlia’s rigid body in a hug. “I have lived with my guilt for two years. Every day. Every distant cannon shot. My heart breaks knowing that I did that to my darling son.” She pulled back, her hands frantic on Vex’ahlia’s face, squeezing her cheeks too tight. “I would die in an instant to correct my mistake. If only we’d known—”

Tears streamed down Elaina’s face and in that moment, so much made sense. Vex’ahlia and Vax’ildan had always blamed their father for the cloud that seemed to hang over their mother, but it had intensified since the war and now Vex’ahlia understood. It was not just Vax’ildan’s potential death that ate away at her mother but the private burden of having pushed him towards that death. Stiff and firm against her mother’s imploring touches, Vex’ahlia finally broke and wrapped her arms around her mother. Wet sobs pressed against her shoulder and Vex’ahlia soothed her mother, held her tight.

When the throb of tears finally began to dwindle, Vex’ahlia said, “You couldn’t have known. It’s not your fault,” even as she knew she blamed her mother—a seed of distance planted in her mind.

Elaina said nothing, her arms still tight around Vex’ahlia, and Vex’ahlia couldn’t stop the question,
soft but firm. “Knowing all of this, how could you ask me to accept this marriage?”

Elaina sniffled and raised her head. Her eyes were red and would be puffy in the morning. “I’ve told you. I only have hope.” Her face was lined with sadness. “I have hope because the de Rolos are kind and fair people. Because they have treated you so well despite your blood.”

“That wasn’t enough for Vax.”

“No. And if I had another choice that would protect you, I would tell you to take it in an instant. Just—” Elaina took a moment to smooth her hair and then a slight smile appeared on her tear-stained face. “Consider: Lord Percival has always seemed more interested in words on the page than the form of a beautiful woman. And he is the second son. There is freedom in a husband with no obligations and no interest in you.”

Even in her sadness, Vex’ahlia couldn’t help smiling back, just a bit.

Elaina brushed Vex’ahlia’s cheek. “My darling Vex, please … just consider this path.” She hugged Vex’ahlia again and whispered. “And please forgive me, someday, for my mistakes.” She rose from the bed and floated to the door, the smoothness more erratic and measured now.

“Mother?” called Vex’ahlia, the words jumping from her lips without thought.

Elaina turned back, her fingers on the door.

“I love you,” said Vex’ahlia.

“I love you too, darling.”

And then Elaina was gone, leaving Vex’ahlia in cold silence, her room seeming larger and emptier than it was before. In a few days’ time, she would be in Whitestone and, for the first time Vex’ahlia realized, she didn’t know who would fight this battle with her. Her mother urged her to take the path Vex’ahlia hated most. Vax’ildan, at the front, could offer nothing by distant and delayed words of anger and encouragement. And what about Vesper? Even after all these years of friendship, Vex’ahlia didn’t know what Vesper would think. Sitting in the guttering light of the candle, her room eaten up by the darkness, Vex’ahlia realized that this was her fight alone.

Chapter End Notes

This was quite the struggle to get right. What do you think of Elaina? What about Vex’ahlia? One of the main struggles with writing this has been removing her from one of the defining moments of her life (running away and the death of her mother) and its been interesting to see what remains the same of her personality and what doesn’t.

Next Time: Whitestone and the de Rolos
"She couldn't stop the smile"

Chapter Summary

Previously: On the road to Whitestone, Vex'ahlia is shocked when her mother reveals that she encouraged Vax'ildan to take his commission ... and that she supports Vex'ahlia marrying Lord Percival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She couldn’t stop the smile. Despite the threat of marriage, despite her father, despite all it now represented, as the carriage exited the Parchwood and the road broadened and began its winding descent through the vast fields and farmlands, the view of Whitestone filled Vex’ahlia with joy. She pushed open the window and leaned her head out into the warm wind, felt it tousle her hair, kiss her face. She took a deep breath and smelled the earthy fragrance of the land, so familiar from Byroden. And she smiled.

Whitestone was a bustling city that had been built with care over long centuries. Tiny compared to Emon, rustic compared to Syngorn, Whitestone had a character that was all its own. As they wound down the main road, Vex’ahlia could make out the castle on the far side of the city, separated and above the rest of the bustling population. The home of the de Rolos, it was the oldest standing structure in the city and, appropriate to its name, gleamed a vivid white in the amber summer light. A cloudy haze rose up from the mountain behind the castle, the tell-tale sign of the mines that gave Whitestone its name and kept it vital to the kingdoms.

All around the city were expansive farmlands, but as the carriage drew closer, the crops grew sparser and the buildings more numerous, until the main road widened and became a cobblestone boulevard and the buildings on each side rose up higher and higher in the traditional mix of brick and whitestone that signified the Whitestone style. As they passed through the main square, the city bustled with life: the sides of the road thronged with people, makeshift produce carts and wagons were set up around the main square. And all of them were dwarfed by Annesley Manor. Square, blocky, and hewn of tough unpolished whitestone and granite, the first house of Whitestone was the third oldest structure in Whitestone and tended to cast a heavy shadow across the square. But the people didn’t seem to mind. The carriage slowed to a crawl as they pushed through the mass of people and it made Vex’ahlia beam. This, this surge of vitality and activity—yelling, pushing, shoving, playing, laughing, embracing—this was why Vex’ahlia loved Whitestone. Compared to the rigidity and quiet of Syngorn, Whitestone was a beating heart of life.

Lord Duvain had once told Vex’ahlia that “The de Rolo children are given too long a leash.” Vex’ahlia had known immediately what he meant: that they were encouraged to pursue their interests, that they were allowed to explore the outside without a guide, that they were allowed to get dirty. But that was exactly why she loved her visits to Whitestone. She could run free. She could go horseback riding not during her lessons or a set “exercise” time, but whenever she wanted, for the whole day if that was what she desired. She and Vax’ildan and Vesper and Musel used to range across the fields of Whitestone, even ducking into the Parchwood when they thought they could get away with it. It had harkened back to the carefree days of their childhood—but bigger, bolder, wider. Even sitting in this carriage, buffeted by the jostle of the wheels on uneven
stonework, Vex’ahlia could recall the powerful pulse of the horse beneath her, the jolt of mountain air in her lungs, the laughter as they dropped to the ground, the feel of the earth beneath her feet, the dampness of the grass, the roughness of the tree bark, the brightness in everyone’s eyes. Many an evening they’d tramped back to the castle, hems thick with mud, boots ready to be scraped, faces flushed, and glittering laughter on their lips.

Those had been the few beautiful years before adulthood captured them. Before the explorations were replaced with courtly training and the shared squeals over a frog were replaced with knowing glances over a boy. But even then, the outdoors, the camaraderie of being beneath the sky, the freedom of being far from watching eyes, had been so uniquely Whitestone.

Now, as they climbed the path to the castle, Vex’ahlia knew things had changed. They had been changing for years. First, Musel had taken over some of the ducal duties, then Vax’ildan had taken his commission, then Vesper had begun to stand second for her mother in court. It was, Vex’ahlia reflected, long past time that she took her own proper place in society. She had simply thought that, unlike the others, she would find a way to do it on her own terms. Admitting that dream made her feel like a silly child and she slipped back into her seat.

But even that thought was not enough to tamp down her excitement. As the main carriage pulled up to the front of the castle—the other two carriages continuing to the servants entrance in the back—Vex’ahlia saw the greeting party: a line of servants at the ready to the left; the de Rolo children to the right; and, in the center, not the Duke and Duchess of Whitestone as expected, but Julius de Rolo, heir to the dukedom and properly addressed as Lord Musel, and Lady Vesper.

As the carriage pulled to a stop, the footman and guards taking up their positions and opening the door, Lord Musel approached the carriage with Lady Vesper at his elbow.

Lord Duvain exited the carriage, his aide to one side, Elaina and Vex’ahlia close behind, and Lord Musel extended a hand. As they shook, Musel inclined his head. “Welcome, Lord Duvain. I must apologize for Their Graces’ absence. You have arrived during weekly court with the city. I hope that my presence and Lady Vesper’s will serve as a suitable replacement as you settle in.” He stepped back with a slight bow.

Lord Duvain returned the bow. “Thank you, Lord Musel. As to Their Graces’ absence, affairs of state are always more important than guests. There is no offense on our side.”

Musel nodded his assent and moved on to greet Elaina as Vesper made her introductions to Lord Duvain. She curtsied smoothly and rose. She held herself stiffly, chin in the air, shoulders back, but Vex’ahlia could see the barely contained excitement behind her practiced formality and Vex’ahlia could not help the widening smile on her lips—a feature not lost on Musel.

Musel returned the smile as he bowed low to Vex’ahlia and spoke her name with affection. Vex’ahlia offered him her hand, which he shook gently.

Vex’ahlia could not deny the pleasure she felt in Musel’s company.

“It is a pleasure to be here, Lord Musel.”

“And a pleasure to have you here,” said Musel, his eyes shining at her.

Musel was a large man now, tall with broad shoulders like his mother—a far cry from the skinny twelve year old boy he had been when they had first met. But in the decade since, he had grown into his role as future duke, adopting a thick brown beard like his father as he began to tower over Vex’ahlia. Vex’ahlia couldn’t help but laugh: Musel had been her first kiss. True, it had been
hardly more than a touch to the lips and the two of them had blushed brightly and separated quickly, but Vex’ahlia still remembered it vividly. They had stayed close during their teen years. Musel was, ultimately, a big hearted man and his friendliness knew few bounds. He would make a good duke.

Musel made room for Vesper, who curtsied. “Lady Vex’ahlia,” she said, “It’s so good to see you.”

Neither Vesper nor Vex’ahlia were considered the height of beauty in Emon, where curves were currently all the rage, but Vex’ahlia thought Vesper beautiful and she knew she had her own qualities. Both slight of build, Vesper was the slightly taller of the two. Where Vex’ahlia had raven hair, Vesper had brown. Her eyes had the softness of burned charcoal and when she smiled it was almost like she was embarrassed. Vex’ahlia knew from years of intimate secrets that, as much as Vesper pretended to be the lady of the house and followed in her mother’s severe footsteps, she was in all reality quite delicate. Yet, if there was anyone in the world that Vex’ahlia loved as much as her mother and brother, it was Vesper.

“And you,” said Vex’ahlia, returning the curtsy, “Lady Vesper.”

Next were the rest of the de Rolo children: Cassandra as serious as ever, her face grim, her mousy hair pulled back in a severe bun, her dress showed evidence of ramshackle play; Ludwig, quiet and bright, gave a precise formal greeting and then returned to docility; Whitney and Oliver, the twins, the wild ones of the bunch, each had a full head of curly brown hair and exuded an earthy physicality. At thirteen, Vex’ahlia could tell they were each going to be problems in new ways for their parents.

And then there was Lord Percival.

In the last few years, Percival had grown. His mousy hair was now barely contained, looking more mussed than messy. He’d traded in his thick rimmed glasses for wire frames that gave his blue-gray eyes a hungry look. His stick-like body had stayed fairly svelte, but his shoulder’s had gone broad, so that, even though Vex knew he was more academic than athlete, his body radiated the energy of a sportsman. When he was younger, he had—unlike Ludwig or Oliver or Whitney or Cassandra or, if Vex was being honest, even Musel—kept himself perfectly attired. Now, his body hardened and filled out, he kept up the same impeccable, button-down style when out in public. But Vex had seen him in passing, coming back from his workshop in the basement late at night, his jacket folded and draped perfectly over his arm, the shirt undone at the neck, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up above his elbows revealing a toned forearm, his fingers black from his work, a smear across his forehead. Percival would have been quite attractive if his personality wasn’t so distasteful.

Lord Percival had always been the moody and snarky outsider of the family. It was as if he had taken the role of second son and decided that his best place was removed from the family, keeping his own secrets deep in the heart of the castle. He seemed to hold himself at a higher level than everyone else, looking down on everyone and believing himself better prepared to deal with all problems. Vex’ahlia got the sense that he was the worst kind of aristocrat—the kind who thought themselves better just by virtue of breeding.

“Lady Vex’ahlia,” Lord Percival said, with a slight nod of acknowledgement.

“Lord Percival.” Vex’ahlia gave a slight curtsy to match his effort.

And that was that.

The younger de Rolos scattered to their respective tasks. Whitney and Oliver ran by so Whitney
could ask after Vax’ildan and Vesper and Musel took a moment to exchange more personal words, but before there was any further chance to connect, Musel and Vesper accompanied Lord Duvain into the house and Vex’ahlia was shown to her room to oversee the packing and sorting of her things. Normally, she would have left all of that Talila and instead helped her mother organize her room, but after the discovery of Jarett’s notes, Vex’ahlia had developed less of a taste for her lady’s maid.

The room itself was pleasant and familiar: a large four-poster bed took up one wall with lush sheets and blankets covering the mattress and solid nightstands on either side. Another wall contained an old wardrobe stained a deep mahogany with thick knobs and thicker doors, and a matching dresser. Across from that were long thin windows that looked out onto the castle’s gardens and hedge maze. Placed directly in between was a small writing desk that Vex’ahlia knew from experience had all the necessary supplies for letter writing. Finally, on the last wall, was a large mirror with a polished bronze frame that stood on solid lion-like feet and, beside it, a screen for changing and a vanity table with a smaller mirror. Between all of that, the floor was covered in a rug woven into complex patterns of white and blue and purple. The whole room was the height of luxury and Vex’ahlia, even after all this time, didn’t know how many other rooms like this were in the castle. There were advantages to being a duke.

It was the same room she stayed in every visit. She and Vax’ildan had shared it their first year, but the year after that her father had insisted on breaking them of their “unhealthy attachment” and that had meant a year of battles and a year of constant separation at night and during the day. Of course, his interference had only made Vex’ahlia and Vax’ildan grow closer. If they couldn’t rely on being together every waking and sleeping moment, then they were damned sure going to be connected at the hip when they could be together. That had been the fundamental truth of their lives. Until it wasn’t.

As Talila snapped the last truck closed and tucked it in the far corner of the room, there was a knock at the door. Although Vex’ahlia was standing right next to the door, she looked at Talila coolly and said, “Talila, the door needs attention.” The tone and the treatment was cruel and unnecessary. Vex’ahlia knew that Talila was simply a tool of her father with no real choice in the matter, but … you didn’t feel bad for the knife that was used to stab you in the back and Vex’ahlia couldn’t bring herself to feel any sympathy for Talila. Even as a servant, she had all the arrogance that outsiders ascribed to elves.

The door swung open and Vesper swooped into the room, a soft smile painting her face. “Vex’ahlia!” she said as she enveloped Vex’ahlia in a hug and showered her face with kisses. Then, just as quickly, she turned to her maid, who was following her in, her arms draped with clothing, and, pointing, said, “Weber, lay everything out on the bed,” and the maid sprang into action. Vesper’s attention was already back on Vex’ahlia. “You are going to tell me everything you left out of your letters. I’ve been waiting months to hear the whole story.”

Vex’ahlia couldn’t help the smile. “Of course, Vesper dear. Some details simply cannot be trusted to correspondence. I noted a certain circumspection to your own letters.”

Vesper positively blushed and she glanced at her maid who was busy smoothing out the clothes on the bed. “Yes,” she whispered, “Well, I’ll fill you in on that too.”

Vex’ahlia glanced over at the silent Talila, still standing by the now closed door, and gave her a firm glare. “Get my new blue dress and accessories and lay them out.”

Vex’ahlia could feel the question in Vesper’s eyes, but the question was wiped away a moment later as Talila brought over the dress.
It was brand new: newly designed, newly fitted—exactly to Vex’ahlia’s specifications. Her father had briefly questioned the need for a new dress, but he honestly didn’t care enough to deny it. It was one advantage to their distant relationship. The dress itself was in the elven fashion: a much higher neck than was now popular in the kingdoms, made all of one vibrant color—blue in this case—and densely embroidered across the bodice in gold and silver. Vex’ahlia had chosen an ornate butterfly pattern—complex wing patterns and swirls representing flight. The sleeves were short and slightly puff and the skirt was, in defiance of usual taste, plain and unadorned. But the skirt was slightly shorter than usual for a reason: to show off the beautiful lacework on the hem of the matching petticoat. Vex’ahlia had been very particular.

Vesper let out a gasp and, even before Talila had finished laying it out, was examining the work with little sighs of appreciation.

“I envy you,” she said, finally turning back to Vex’ahlia after an extensive onceover. “I don’t understand why Syngorn won’t sell their designs outside the city. I ordered a similar pattern from Emon, but it has nowhere near the quality of needlework.”

Vex’ahlia laughed. Vesper was always so fascinated with the “exotic” Syngorn styles that had long bored Vex’ahlia through familiarity. “And yet I envy you the Emon fashions. My father won’t allow non-elven clothing.” Vex’ahlia’s eyes lingered over Vesper’s dress laid out on the bed: a white skirt with a simple pink bodice, it was low cut with bare shoulders and barely-there sleeves. Vex’ahlia had, of course, worn the Emon style when she was in Emon, borrowing dresses from the other girls. There was something scandalous about how closely it hugged the body. It was said that it left nothing to the imagination. Yet, Vesper wanted a Syngorn dress!

Vex’ahlia’s eyes turned again to Talila. “Talila, you won’t be needed until later. You may leave.”

Talila gave Vex’ahlia a quick curtsy and a curt response that contained daggers, but she spun on her heels and left.

The question was back in Vesper’s eyes, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she turned to Weber and said, “Why don’t you go back to my room? I’ll come down when I’m ready for my hair.”

When Weber had exited demurely, Vesper didn’t hesitate: “What was that?”

Vex’ahlia sighed. “My father had Talila go through my things, spy on me. It’s not … surprising, but I was surprised regardless.” She waved her hand dismissively and gave Vesper her most winning smile. “It’s not important, especially when I can tell you are champing at the bit to tell me something.”

Vesper grabbed Vex’ahlia’s hands and pulled them close. She was bubbling over with excitement and now that they were alone, the words began to spill out. She’d met a man. He was wonderful. He could dance. He was intelligent. He was polite. And she believed that he thought favorably of her too. They hadn’t spoken explicitly about the possibility, but she believed that he was interested in marrying her and she thought her parents would be satisfied with the match too.

Vex’ahlia couldn’t contain herself anymore. “Enough gushing,” she said with a laugh, “Who is he?”

“Mr. Baumann.” When she said his name, Vesper’s face lit up.

Vex’ahlia scanned her mind, but the only memory she could dig up was of a loud pudgy twelve-year-old who didn’t understand the meaning of personal space. She vaguely remembered him being connected to … the Second House—his father was connected to the mining operations in
Whitestone—and that he’d been sent away for schooling years ago. “You don’t mean Mr. George Baumann?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes!” Vesper held up her hand and laughed. “Don’t judge him by his past. I know what I remembered of him.”

“He was quite … challenging.” Vex’ahlia said, trying to be diplomatic.

“I think you mean irritating.” Vesper, if anything, seemed to smile wider. “I though exactly the same thing when my mother told me he was back and would be attending the annual Winter’s Crest dinner of the Houses, but … Vex …” Here Vesper pressed a hand to her bosom. “He’s refined and charming and gorgeous. He’s almost the picture of model manhood.”

Vex’ahlia arched an eyebrow at that description. “Well, I certainly hope I get the pleasure of seeing this paragon with my own eyes. To find such a man, well, Vesper, if he’s all you say I might have to steal him away from you.”

Vesper tittered. “Don’t you dare. I saw him first.” She looked away wistfully. “I’m hoping he’ll make all this official when he comes back in the next few months. I think mother and father will approve and—“ She let out a huff of frustration. “This would all be so much easier if it was … respectable to write to each other.”

Vex’ahlia shifted slightly. She could feel the rough scratch of Jarett’s notes against her thigh and sighed. “Sometimes rules exist for a reason, Vesper dear,” she said sympathetically.

Vesper gave Vex’ahlia a puzzled look. “That’s a new sentiment for you.”

Vex’ahlia flashed a winning smile and shrugged. “Perhaps my worldly adventures in Emon have taught me the value of discretion.”

Oddly, Vesper looked away, chewing at her bottom lip, but her reaction made sense a moment later when she said shyly, “And what did you learn in Emon? Your letters were … suggestive, even if they didn’t really say anything.” Vesper, for all her personal restraint, was always eager to test the limits of respectability vicariously through Vex’ahlia.

Vex’ahlia couldn’t stop the blush as she remembered her unique turns of phrase in her letters. “I’m absolutely scandalized, Vesper dear. What could be suggestive about ‘We stayed in, but I still managed to get sopping wet?’”

Vesper looked round in shock, as if afraid that the maids were still in the room. “Vex’ahlia!”

Vex’ahlia rested her hand on Vesper’s arm and leaned in. “No worries, darling. In fact, why don’t you untie me—“ She spun around. “—and I’ll give you a little reading material.”

Vesper’s confusion was evident, but she helped Vex’ahlia out of her dress. When the dress was hanging in the wardrobe, Vex’ahlia reached under her petticoat and pulled Jarett’s notes out of her stockings. She kneaded her lip as she held out the … least explicit note to Vesper. “This doesn’t go anywhere else, of course.”

“Of course,” said Vesper as she took the note and sat down next to the dresses laid out on the bed. Almost immediately, Vesper’s eyebrows jumped up in shock and she stole a look at Vex’ahlia. After that, her eyes stayed fixed to the page, but her face grew redder and redder until her face was aflame.
Vex’ahlia had read the notes so many times that she could recite each in her head and, as Vesper’s eyes traced out the lines, memories of her time with Jarett danced across her vision. The grip of his hands on her waist. The hard press of his body. The softness of his lips. The strength behind his kiss. All of that was enough to hurry her breath, but then there were the other memories. The brush of his fingers on her thigh. Her back pinned against the wall. The slide of his touch. His head beneath her skirts. Her fingers tangled in his hair. The surging pulses of her passions. His exalting hunger.

Vex’ahlia gathered her breath and saw that Vesper’s hand was clutched to her bosom, her eyes wide. She looked up.

“Did you—are this all things you … did?” The words caught in Vesper’s throat and came out thin and weak.

Vex’ahlia laughed weakly and then fortified her voice with irreverence. “Oh, not all of it. Most of it’s fancy.” She plucked the note from Vesper’s fingers and scanned the text. “But we did enough that I can happily picture what these delightful activities would be like.”

The flush in Vesper’s face had hardly dimmed and she steadied herself with a hand on the bed and a refreshing breath. “I—I can’t even imagine what it would really be like.”

Vex squeezed in beside Vesper with a laugh and said, “I’m sure you could imagine it, but … it’s nothing like you imagine. You can’t really prepare for someone else’s touch. But—” and here she nudged Vesper softly “—you had better start imagining a little if you’re planning to trap this Mr. Baumann.”

“Oh!” The flush grew brighter again. “We wouldn’t’ do anything until after the wedding. I—I couldn’t—”

“Of course not, darling. But it’s better to be prepared than be surprised. That’s what my mother always told me.” Vesper was so practiced at being graceful and mature that Vex’ahlia sometimes forgot how sheltered she was. Musel was quite the opposite—his visits to the local brothel were well known—but perhaps that was only natural. As Vex’ahlia was tired of hearing, men had different needs than fragile, impressionable women. “I’m not that … practiced, no matter what you might think, but if there’s anything you’re unsure of ….”

Vesper let out a hurried breath and patted her hot cheeks. “You live quite the life.”

“Not all that much, dear.” Vex’ahlia jumped up eager to distract Vesper. She set the three notes down on the night table. “But never mind that. I have a surprise for you!” She swept a hand across the blue dress laid out across the bed. “This is my gift to you.”

The shock was just what Vex’ahlia was looking for. Vesper’s eyes and mouth went wide and she was on her feet before a word had left her lips. “What?”

“I know you’ve always wanted one, so I commissioned one for me and had them add a little length into the skirt. Otherwise, we’re about the same shape.” Vex’ahlia beamed. “Go on. Try it on.”

Vesper didn’t need the push. Together, they pulled off her day dress and petticoat and, just as quickly, pulled the new petticoat and dress on. Vesper rushed over to the large mirror in the corner and spun around, watching the movement of the dress.

“It’s beautiful.” She ran her fingers across the detailed embroidery work. “Thank you.”

“Oh, it’s not free,” said Vex’ahlia with a wicked grin, “I fully expect something in exchange.”
Vesper was familiar enough with Vex’ahlia’s moods that her curious, but unworried, look was expected. “Oh?”

“I absolutely must wear the dress you picked out for tonight.”

Vesper laughed and waved Vex’ahlia towards the bed. “I should have known you had an ulterior motive.”

Vex’ahlia pouted over her shoulder. “I gave you that dress out of the enormous generosity of my heart!”

The dress was everything Vex’ahlia had dreamed of. The muslin was ethereal and left nothing of her form to the imagination. The pink of the bodice combined with the low scoop of neck made the paleness of her bosom a focal point. She had to use a busk to get the shape right, something that wasn’t necessary with the Syngorn style, but the results were, frankly, worth it.

Vex’ahlia regarded herself in the mirror with a cocked head. “Perhaps we should forget about Weber and Talila and take care of our own hair. Oh!” she said with delight, “Would you like to try some of my jewelry? I have a beautiful sapphire armlet that would go perfectly with that dress.”

The two of them settled in around the vanity, trading places as they went, comparing pieces of jewelry with their different outfits, working out what went best with what. Finally, Vex’ahlia stood behind Vesper pinning her bun into place and moving on to the braids on either side as they laughed about how much better their maids were at this work. When the braids were done, but not yet wrapped and pinned in place, Vesper turned her head from side to side, examining herself in the mirror.

“It’s a good thing we have no one to impress tonight.”

Vex’ahlia clutched her bosom in false outrage. “Lady Vesper, you wound me!”

Vesper smiled. “It’s lovely.” She sighed. “I wish I did have someone to impress tonight.”

Vex’ahlia draped her arms around Vesper’s shoulders and rested her head against Vesper’s face. “Something tells me he’s already impressed enough.” She smiled wickedly and added, “Unless there’s someone else you’re looking to impress. That would be very convenient.”

Vesper glowed scarlet. “Vex’ahlia! You have a commonplace mind.”

Vex’ahlia didn’t bother to respond—she simply smiled as she straightened herself up and began the process of pinning the braids in place.

After a moment of silence, Vesper—the glow still evident in her cheeks—turned to the topic of her family, filling Vex’ahlia in on all the details of her siblings’ lives. Most of it, Vesper had already told Vex’ahlia in her letters—which did make Vex’ahlia wonder if her teasing had agitated Vesper more than it appeared—but there were a few new tidbits. Apparently, the Duchess had finally given in and begun training Cassandra to take over as Grand Mistress of the Gray Hunt and, something Vex’ahlia hadn’t realized, Musel had yet to meet his fiancée.

“He’s getting married to someone he’s never even met?” Vex’ahlia understood that such things happened, but she thought that nowadays it was rarely done. She felt the little heat of anger in her chest on Musel’s behalf. “I’d be furious if my parents did that to me.”

Vesper didn’t seem concerned. “You’d be furious if anyone tried to force you into anything.”
Vex’ahlia held one of the braids in place—“Chin down while I pin this darling”—and when Vesper looked down, Vex grimaced and calmed herself before beginning to pin the braid in place.

“You know Musey,” Vesper continued, “He laughed and said he was sure he’d love her and just went about his business. Nothing shakes my brother.”

Vex’ahlia smiled. If it was not her most convincing smile Vesper didn’t seem to notice and Vex’ahlia asked, as nonchalantly as she could muster, “And what has Percival been up to?”

“The usual. Father gave him some responsibility over the rents and agricultural disputes, which … I think mother thought a poor decision, even if she would never say so.”

“Can’t he be trusted with money?” Vex’ahlia kept the tone casual and only vaguely interested. It would be her luck to be pinned to a man with no sense of the worth of a gold coin.

“Oh! No, it’s not that,” said Vesper with a flutter. “It’s more the farming thing. Not really his forte. You remember all the tinkering in the cellars he’s been doing the last few years.”

Vex’ahlia had a very distinct picture of Lord Percival over those last few years: a moody figure, seemingly cast in continual shadow; locking himself away from the world most days, emerging begrudgingly for meals, smeared with grease. He always had a project, but Vex’ahlia was convinced that it was merely an excuse to shun people of all kinds.

“Father should have given him something to do with the mine. Don’t get me wrong, Percy takes his new roles as seriously as he treats everything else, just … he’d be more serious if he had machinery to play with.”

Vex’ahlia couldn’t help needling. “So you want him to take over the mines, which your sweet heart is meant to be running. How very loyal of you.”

Vesper tittered again, that slightly too forced laugh she made when she was uncomfortable. “Oh shush. Besides, talking about my brothers is so boring.”

After that the conversation turned. It would have been so easy to float away on the wind of any other topic. Let Vesper pull her along and say nothing. Live out however many days she had left before the marriage became official, in willful blindness and pretended joviality. Behind Vesper, as she dropped her hands away from the second braid, now pinned firmly in place, Vex’ahlia clenched and unclenched her hand. And why not? Either she would give up her freedom to a loveless marriage or run away from everything she had ever loved. If she could avoid thinking about that trap, why shouldn’t she?

Vex’ahlia was jerked out of her thoughts by the grip of Vesper’s hand. While Vex’ahlia had been lost in her thoughts, Vesper had turned around and now sat looking up at Vex’ahlia with concern.

“What’s going on? We’ve been bantering this whole time, not talking. Is it Vax’ildan? Is something wrong?”

That was Vesper. She could appear so distant and flighty one moment—it was perfect for her disaffected court mood—and then ground herself solidly in the next. When she was distant it was so easy to fall into that shielded, safe way of speaking. When Vesper grounded herself … sometimes she felt too close.

“He’s the same,” Vex’ahlia said and felt her chin lift proudly upward on its own accord. “He writes mother and me fairly regularly and we write him back, but you know how letters are …”
It would be so easy to leave it at that. Vax’ildan should be Vex’ahlia’s main concern after all. There was no need to bring anything else up. But, instead, looking into Vesper’s concerned face, Vex’ahlia confessed: “My father plans for me to marry Percival.”

Vesper’s face jumped through a series of emotions in quick succession—surprise, anger, happiness—before settling on a mask of skepticism. “Has he spoken to my father?”

Vex’ahlia laughed, perhaps a bit too sharply because Vesper’s face twitched. “Why? Do you think they’ll turn me down?” She immediately regretted the comment and said, “No, ignore that. I’m just … it’s difficult.”

Vesper rose gracefully from the seat and wrapped her arms around Vex’ahlia. “I’m sorry. I—“ Vex’ahlia could feel the expansion of Vesper’s chest as she breathed in. “I don’t know what to say. You must be livid.”

“I can get angry quite quickly in my father’s presence … but I’m mostly tired. He told me right before we left. If I’m being perfectly honest, I haven’t had the chance to process the whole thing yet. First I was angry, then I was sad, and now ….”

Vesper pulled back and examined Vex’ahlia carefully. “But not resigned, I would hazard.”

Vex’ahlia smiled thinly at that. “No, not resigned.”

“Well, don’t do anything—“ Vesper took Vex’ahlia’s hand. “Don’t do anything that will take you away from me. You are my very favorite sister, you know.”

Vex’ahlia didn’t laugh, but the warmth of Vesper’s gaze and the sincerity of her words was soothing. “I’ll be sure not to let Whitney or Cassandra know.”

Vesper was already turning away, picking up the ruby hair comb she’d been eyeing all evening. “Oh, they know.” She sighed and tucked the hair comb into her hair, took a moment to angle it just right. “I wish I could say something or do something. I—I could tell you about him?” With that she turned back, hesitant, but eager.

“Is there anything you could tell me that would make a difference?”

“I suppose saying he’s even more insufferable than the rest of us wouldn’t be a glowing recommendation?” Vesper tucked a stray hair back into place on Vex’ahlia’s head. “I love you, Vex’ahlia. I’m here. Whenever you need me. For whatever you need.”

“Thank you.” Vex’ahlia knew from Vesper’s look that her face was not reassuring, but, while the sentiment didn’t make anything better, it still felt nice to know that there was someone she could rely on.

“That said,” continued Vesper with a grimace, “I should warn you that you will be sitting next to Percy at dinner.”

Chapter End Notes

So happy to finally introduce Vesper! I'll be completely honest: if I hadn't been writing this as a Perc’ahlia fic, this probably would have pretty quickly become a story where Vex began a secret relationship with Vesper. But! This is not that story (sorry to ruin
the dream, but I don't like to unintentionally tease). I must admit that I actually made Vesper painfully straight to combat that urge ....

Next Time: Dinner with the first families of Whitestone

End Notes

I love comments and talking to all of you, so feel free to leave your thoughts! Even key smashes and extra kudos (<3) are cherished! (And if you want to comment, but don't want a response, just add *whisper* to your comment). If you prefer talking on tumblr, the main post for this fic is here. Love to all of you! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!