

Stella Allen

*The World is Not Ours*

Ami stood in the dim light of her study, the candle's flickering flame casting dancing shadows on the delicate parchment before her. Her fingers trembled as she held the letter—the one Vera had left, the last gift of a love that had bloomed in secret. Her eyes swelled with stinging tears, and goosebumps tickled her slender back. She began to read.

*Dear Ami,*

*By the time you read this, I will already be far away, across the vast, cruel sea, shipped off to a nobleman in the northern region at his appanage. It feels surreal to write these words, knowing that each stroke of my quill brings me closer to a life that is not my own. My heart aches at the thought of leaving you behind, but I must share my thoughts with you one last time: the truth.*

The ink started to blur, creating a cluster of incomprehensible letters. Ami's breath became shallow, but she forced herself to continue.

*In these quiet moments, I reflect on the love we've shared—the laughter, the stolen glances, the warmth of your embrace. You have been my refuge in a world filled with expectation and duty. Yet, I've come to understand that my life is no longer mine alone. I have been chosen, and it seems I must fulfill this role, no matter how heavy my heart feels. And so, I hope you understand that true freedom is not just the absence of chains; it is the courage to pursue our desires, even when obligations weigh heavy on our hearts. As I embark on this path, I urge you to seek happiness. Surround yourself with those who cherish you. Life is too precious to be weighed down by regret. Remember, love can take many forms, and even though distance*

*separates us, my love for you will remain unwavering. I hope to one day return to you, even if it means causing pain to others along the way, for you are worth every sacrifice.*

Ami turned the letter over, hoping for more. But there were no further words—only Vera’s signature, an elegant flourish at the bottom.

*With all my love,*

*Vera*

Ami crumpled the letter in her fist, then slowly smoothed it out again. “*I must fulfill this role,*” she read again, the words sinking deeper into her heart. Ami collapsed onto her scarlet red, velvet, loveseat; her head burrowed in a pile of hand-embroidered pillows of blue. The letter slipped from her fingers, falling onto the cold floor.

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Ami hadn’t known it then, but the path her family had chosen for her would lead her to a love that was as impossible as it was consuming. Her family’s political alliances, the marriage she was destined to make, were all pieces on a board of someone else’s game. She had accepted that fate long ago. But she had never imagined that Vera would become the spark that would set her heart alight.

Vera was the daughter of the Duke of Elandria, a powerful nobleman from a neighboring kingdom. Elandria was breathtaking, nestled high alongside misty mountains with large glassy waterfalls and dark green forests. Floria, Ami’s kingdom, was rich in natural beauty—abundant in flowers and vibrant in wildlife, a paradise of color and life. Though their lands had long been rivals, the kingdoms of Floria and Elandria had a shared history of treaties and trade.

To solidify the fragile peace, the Duke of Elandria was summoned to Ami's court for a crucial negotiation, and he brought his daughter along. The visit was meant to secure resources and further cement the alliance between the two families.

From the moment Vera arrived, Ami was struck by her presence—not just her beauty but the quiet power that radiated from her. Vera moved with grace and confidence, but there was a restraint in her posture and an intelligence in her gaze that intrigued Ami.

That evening, the air was cool, fragrant with the scent of jasmine and roses, as the guests drifted into the garden after a long dinner. Ami had slipped away from her father's side, tired of the endless discussions on trade and politics. She needed a moment to breathe; just a moment where she could forget the weight of the kingdom pressing down on her shoulders.

She sauntered, her silken gown rustling softly, its pale green fabric blending with the mossy stones beneath her feet. The flowers in the garden were in full bloom, their colors vibrant against the setting sun. The air hummed softly with nature's song—a stark contrast to the rigid formalities of the evening.

Ami paused by a fountain, staring at the rushing water, lost in thought. It was a place of peace, a brief respite from the world's demands. But she wasn't alone.

At the far end of the garden, near the moonlit edge of the fountain, stood a figure clad in a gown of deep blue—a shade so dark it seemed to drink in the fading light of dusk, the fabric blending seamlessly into the shadows. Her presence was like a quiet storm in the stillness of the evening.

The woman was tall, her silhouette sharp against the garden's brilliant blooms. She held herself with unwavering poise, but there was a subtle tension in her body like a string pulled too tight, ready to snap.

The air around her seemed to shift, carrying a chill that contrasted with the warmth of the garden. Even the leaves of the nearby trees trembled as if in response to the women's quiet strength. Ami's breath caught in her throat, her heart quickening as their eyes met.

The other woman's face was striking—angular, with high cheekbones and a firm jawline. But her eyes—blue as ice—held Ami's attention. They were intense, full of something Ami couldn't quite name.

"Your Highness," Vera said, her voice low and smooth but laced with an edge that spoke of experience, of a life led under the watchful eye of a soldier. "I didn't expect to find anyone else here."

Ami smiled, though it felt fragile. "I needed a break from all the conversation."

Vera's gaze lingered on Ami. She took in the delicate features of Ami's face—the soft curve of her jaw, the porcelain glow of her skin, the chestnut waves of her hair that tumbled over her shoulders like autumn leaves. She looked like something born of nature, like a creature from the woods, bathed in sunlight, untouched by the world's complexities.

Her eyes then drifted to Ami's gown—an intricate piece of soft green silk embroidered with delicate floral patterns that mirrored the gardens around them. Vera felt a pang of envy, though she would never admit it. The beauty that surrounded Ami seemed to belong to a world far removed from her own—a world where the weight of obligation, unburdened freedom, and love.

Ami, in turn, took in Vera's appearance—the dark, regal gown of deep blue that seemed almost too somber for this peaceful garden. It was cut more sharply than Ami's, with a structured bodice and long sleeves that clung to her frame, outlining the strength beneath the fabric. Her black hair, glossy and straight, was pulled into a practical braid that hung just above her hips.

But there was something about the way Vera carried herself. The way her icy eyes softened when they met Ami's, the subtle relaxation in her posture, though it was brief, was a sign of the hidden vulnerability she tried to bury beneath the armored facade.

"You look different from what I imagined," Ami murmured, her voice barely above a whisper yet filled with curiosity.

Vera raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a faint smile. "Different, how?"

Ami hesitated, caught between the formality she had been taught all her life and her strange familiarity with Vera. "You seem..." her eyes traced Vera's features, the curve of her lips, the fire in her eyes. "Like you belong somewhere else."

Vera was quiet for a moment, letting the words sink in. Instinctively, Vera's fingers hovered near Ami's face for a moment, the loose strand of hair caught in the wind as if reluctant to be tamed. A brief touch—barely there—left a trace of warmth that Vera quickly withdrew, as though the contact had branded her fingers. She had grown up with the weight of her kingdom on her back, expected always to appear composed and sturdy. But something in Ami's gaze—a softness, an unspoken understanding—made her want to drop her defenses.

"My kingdom. It's not like yours. It doesn't allow for kindness, for softness," Her eyes flickered to Ami's gown again, and she added, almost regretfully, "But I suppose you know that too."

Ami swallowed. It was true. The world they both inhabited was one of duty, expectations, and choices made long before they had any say. She wanted to reach out and tell her there was more than this. But she knew better. Instead, Ami couldn't think of anything to say except comment on the garden's beauty.

Vera chuckles softly. "It's lovely, yes," Vera says, her voice slightly colder. "But nothing lasts, does it? The flowers will wilt, and the moon will fade. The wind will come and take everything away, leaving only dust. I suppose it's what makes things beautiful—knowing they're fleeting."

A stillness washed over them. "We should return."

Ami nodded, but she didn't want to move; she didn't want to leave this moment behind. But she did, stepping back into the light of the garden. Ami couldn't help but glance up at Vera one last time as they walked back. Her eyes were fixed tightly onto Vera's back, her heart in control.

Before joining back into the gathered group, Vera pauses at the edge of the garden, looking over her shoulder. "It's rare to find someone so untouched by the world, Ami," she remarks. "I think I'll enjoy watching how the world changes you."

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After that night, Vera and Ami began to see each other outside family meetings; they would meet each other secretly, sneaking away whenever they could, finding solace in their quiet moments together. Their bond had deepened in ways that neither of them had expected. The conversations that began with lighthearted exchanges soon turned into long discussions of everything they could never have. The hugs goodbyes would grow longer as they would part for the evening. Ami also began drawing Vera whenever she could, lounging on the windowsill, walking in the garden, wherever Vera was; Ami couldn't help but want to freeze the moment. Their longing was undeniable, but both knew such feelings could never be openly spoken.

Vera's father had begun speaking more seriously of the alliance with Ami's kingdom, urging her to stay focused on their goal. "You must fulfill your role, Vera," he would say, each

word like a stone sinking deeper into the pit of her stomach. "Do not get distracted. Remember the plan." Although Vera had not been officially promised to the nobleman from the north, to secure her family's wealth, it was only a matter of time before she would have to leave the Kingdom of Floria. Vera had not told Ami of her impending departure, struggling with the weight of her silence. Every time she saw Ami, her heart twisted with the knowledge that their time together was running out. She had wanted to tell Ami the truth and share the pain, but fear and love kept her quiet. She couldn't bear the thought of shattering the innocent Ami's hope, of seeing the light in her eyes dim when she learned the truth. Vera had already been forced into too many decisions that tore her apart. She did not want to let this new feeling go. This act—leaving without warning—was the hardest yet. But what could she do? The alliance was not her choice. Neither was her fate.

A part of the deal between their kingdoms was that Vera would be sent to marry Lord Aleron, a distant cousin of Ami's, in exchange for a share of Eldria's resources, which her kingdom was abundant in. Her father had accepted the arrangement without regard for Vera's happiness—only for the good of his kingdom. There were times when Vera wished she hadn't left Eldria, never met Ami, and didn't know what it was like to love someone. In her mind, she wished she could go back in time and become one of Eldria's knights as she was expected to before the sudden alliance. For what purpose did she train if not to do what she was trained to do.

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Vera and Ami lay on the castle roof, adoring the stars above them. Their fingers softly intertwined, with Vera's hand on top. She rubs Ami's knuckles with her thumb. Ami turned over onto her side, her eyes wide and sparkling as they gazed at Vera. "Do you ever wonder what life would be like if we could start over? A new place, a new identity, you and me."

Vera doesn't answer immediately, her gaze fixed on the sky's constellations. The moonlight caught the sharpness of her features, making her look like someone carved from stone.

"No, I don't think about that."

"What, never?" Ami was sitting upright now, hovering above Vera, her body casting a shadow onto Vera's face. In an attempt to shake Vera, Ami grasped her shoulders tightly, Vera's braid came undone.

Vera's lips twitched. It wasn't quite a smile, but something close to it. She tilted her head slightly, voice laced with quiet amusement. "If I did, I'd never get anything done, would I?"

Ami rolled her eyes, letting out a dramatic sigh. "Well, I suppose you wouldn't. But, come on. You *must* have some wild daydream. What if you just disappeared? Go somewhere where no one knows you. No one expects anything from you. Maybe you could be a painter. Or, I don't know, live in a little cottage by the sea?"

Vera shifted slightly, half-propped with her elbow resting against the stone roof, her long black hair draped over her face like a perfectly crafted mask. "Saltwater ruins everything."

Ami gaped, her lips parted in disbelief. "What? How could you—" She threw her hands up in mock exasperation. "The sea is *perfect*! It's... it's vast, it's free, it's—"

"Cold."

Ami huffed, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're impossible, you know that?" She looked up at the stars again, her voice softening. "Do you ever want more, Vera? More than all this? This beautifully painful life?"

There was a long silence. Vera's gaze softened, but her lips remained pressed together tightly. It wasn't a no, but it wasn't a yes, either.



Ami stared at her, something heavy settling in her chest. She couldn't figure out what it was, but she thought maybe she was angry. She opened her mouth to say something but stopped herself.

Instead, Vera shifted closer, her hand still resting lightly on Ami's. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind Ami's ear, her touch lingering just a second too long. "I love you, Ami," Vera whispered, her voice steady but filled with something that felt like a secret, like a promise wrapped in sadness. "I always will."

Ami's breath caught in her throat. Vera's words hung in the air. Ami stared at her, heart racing, but the words wouldn't come. She couldn't say it back—not yet.

Vera waited momentarily, her eyes lingering on Ami's face, but she stood when the response never came. "I love you," she said again, her voice soft but final.

Ami could feel the weight of everything between them, but something inside her resisted. She wasn't ready. Ami's throat felt tight. Her pulse raced, but she couldn't move. She knew it was right to grab her, but what would her father say? What would her people say?

Vera stood then, brushing the dirt from her gown, glancing down at Ami. Her gaze was solid for a moment, but when Ami didn't speak, she turned and started to walk away.

The world around Ami seemed to hold its breath as Vera's silhouette grew smaller, swallowed by the shadows of the night, just like when they first met. Ami laid back down on the roof, arms sprawled wide, staring at the stars, her body heavy with things she couldn't name. Maybe if she had known this would be their final moment together, she would have mustered up the courage to pull Vera close and never let her go. But, she didn't.

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When Vera left, the world seemed to fall into a profound silence. The grand halls of Ami's estate, once brimming with the laughter of shared secrets and hushed conversations, now felt empty and abandoned. The polished marble floors echoed under her footsteps like the castle had lost its heart. The tapestries that once seemed alive with color now appeared faded, their rich textures dull in the absence of their vibrant conversation.

Ami wandered the hallways, her fingers brushing the cool, smooth edges of the ancient stone walls, the touch sensation a cruel reminder of the absence lingering in every corner of the castle. The once-joyous scent of fresh flowers—roses, lavender, and jasmine—was replaced by the sterile, musty smell of dust and neglect, a reminder that life had moved on without her. Even the light seemed to lose its warmth, the sunlight filtering through the stained-glass windows casting muted colors on the cold stone floor. The season was changing and the summer breeze soon turned to a harsh and cold bite.

As time passed, letters from Vera began arriving at Floria:

*My dearest Ami,*

*I write these words with trembling hands, though I fear they will not be enough. I have tried, time and again, to silence the thoughts that haunt me. The thought of you—your laughter, the softness of your touch—lingers in my mind like a sweet poison I cannot escape. How cruel it is, this life we are bound to. My heart longs for freedom, to be with you, to choose my own path. But I am not free. I never was, not in this world. You must know, Ami, that the silence I leave behind is not because I do not love you. It is because I am afraid. Afraid of what I might do if I told you how I feel. Afraid that the weight of my love might crush you and destroy everything we've fought for. How do I explain that my soul aches whenever I hear your name, knowing I can never claim you? How do I explain that, even in my absence, I am still tethered to you, and*

*though the chains are invisible, they are no less real? I must go, for duty calls louder than my desires. But the truth remains locked in my heart. I will always love you, even if the world never allows us to be together.*

*Forever yours,*

*Vera*

With each letter that arrived, Ami felt herself slipping further into a maze of confusion. Vera's words seemed to unravel in ways that made little sense until they eventually became a blur of conflicting emotions. How could this be? How could Vera love her but leave her without a single word of explanation? Ami tried to piece the fragments of their love together, but the more she read, the farther she felt from the truth. She paced through her study, the letters scattered around her like remnants of a life she could no longer grasp. Vera had never been so clear in her affection, but now, her silence felt louder than anything she'd ever said.

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As the days turned into weeks, their silence grew until it swallowed everything that had once been. The letters, once so full of warmth and longing, stopped coming. Ami would stand by the window each morning, waiting for the familiar seal of Vera's handwriting, but the only things that arrived were matters of state—letters of duty and diplomacy, sealed with the royal crest. Each one felt like a jagged shard piercing her heart. Her hands would tremble as she tore open the official letters, only to find herself longing for the words of someone who had long since disappeared. The world, it seemed, had moved on. But, Ami was stuck in the past clinging to the old letters that would come through.

*Ami,*

*I think of you, sometimes. Often, I wonder if you think of me, too. It doesn't matter, does it? We are both where we need to be. The world is full of noise now—of people, of things that must be done. I hear them all. But none of it is louder than the silence between us. You are still in my thoughts. Perhaps you always will be.*

*Vera*

Months later, Vera was lost in her new life in the northern kingdom, bound to a man she did not love and a life she did not choose.

Yet, Ami couldn't forget how Vera had looked at her in the garden, the softness of her touch, the quiet understanding between them. Ami knew that Vera, too, had felt the weight of their separation. But the world was never kind to women like them, to women who dared to love outside the boundaries of what was acceptable. When their hands brushed, it felt like an act of defiance, a silent challenge to the rules that bound them. It was *exhilarating*. They could not publicly touch or speak of their longing without risking scandal or tearing apart everything their families had worked for. It was *agonizing*. Every stolen moment, every quiet touch was a rebellion against the world that told them such love could *never* exist. And yet, neither of them could stop. Because in those fleeting moments, they were free when the weight of duty and obligation disappeared. It was a *dream*. Now, Ami wanted her back more than ever, she was stuck in Vera's web.

Ami's hands trembled as she folded the letter one last time. The inked words danced before her eyes, but she could no longer read them. It didn't matter. She had already read the letter a dozen times, each time hoping that this moment—this finality—would change, that Vera

would somehow return, that her absence would be temporary. But now, with the last words sinking in, the truth settled like a weight on her chest. Vera was gone. Gone, and she wasn't coming back.

The letter slipped from Ami's fingers, fluttering to the floor, but she didn't move to pick it up. Her gaze was fixed on the space beside her bed, where Vera should have been, where they should have been together. The room around her felt wrong. It was as if the walls were closing in, and everything that had once been a safe haven had now turned on her. The air was stale and heavy, and an unbearable silence tightened her throat.

The once neatly organized space—her books stacked in perfect order, her clothes hanging gracefully in the wardrobe—had deteriorated into a mess of discarded items. The curtains that once framed the windows now hung in tatters, one side torn where Ami had yanked it down in a fit of frustration. The soft, warm light from the lanterns now flickered weakly in neglect, casting long, erratic shadows that seemed to move of their own accord.

Ami slowly rose from her chair, her legs unsteady, and walked to the window. Her eyes were red and puffy from the tears that had yet to stop flowing, but she didn't care. She was numb.

Outside, the sky had darkened. Thunder rumbled low in the distance, the first sign of a storm. The wind howled against the palace's stone walls, as though it were mourning with her. But inside, the storm was already raging, louder, fiercer.

Papers torn and mutilated, were scattered across the rug on the floor. Some were fragments of letters, others were drawings of Vera—drawings that were no longer perfect, idealized. In some, Vera had been shaded too harshly; her smile turned into a frown, her eyes distant. In others, Ami had scribbled over them with frantic strokes as if trying to erase the truth.

The bed was a mess of tangled sheets; the once soft linens were now a battlefield. One pillow was half off the bed, and the other lay in the center, crushed beneath Ami's weight from where she had collapsed the night before, hugging it tightly as though it could offer her the warmth Vera used to provide. But it couldn't. It never would.

Ami's hand shot out, brushing against the shattered remains of a porcelain vase on the nightstand, the fragments a sharp reminder of how she had thrown it in her rage days ago. The pieces, like her, were broken, scattered across the floor, unable to be pieced back together.

Her eyes fell to the small mirror on the wall, its surface smudged with fingerprints. She stared at herself—at the face she barely recognized. Her skin was pale, her eyes sunken with exhaustion. She had stopped caring about her appearance long ago, not when there was no one to impress, no one left to love her the way Vera had. When did Vera wrap her around her finger?

"I can't..." she whispered, her voice cracking. Her fingers curled into fists as her nails dug into her palms. "How could I have been so blind?" She turned back to the bed, her gaze again landing on the space where Vera had once sat, posing for her portrait. The memory was fresh, too fresh, and it sent a spike of panic through her chest.

"Vera's gone. Vera's gone, Ami. Stop pretending." The thought, like a slow poison, seeped into her mind. She dropped to her knees beside the bed, her arms stretching as if to embrace an empty air. "No," she whispered, her voice a raw sob. "No. You can't leave me. You said you'd never leave me."

Tears spilled from her eyes as she buried her face in the torn sheets, choking on the grief. It felt as though her entire world had collapsed in on itself. She couldn't accept it. She wouldn't.

From the corner of the room, a soft wind blew in through the broken window, rustling the pages of old letters and papers strewn about the floor. It felt like a whisper, like a breath that

wasn't hers, and Ami's heart skipped. She jerked her head up, expecting to see Vera standing there, smiling, telling her it was all just a cruel joke. But there was nothing. Only the storm outside. Her hands gripped the edges of the bed frame, her knuckles white. "Vera..." she whispered.

Outside, the first heavy drops of rain began to fall.

*"I will wait for you,"* Ami whispered to the night, her voice barely audible in the empty castle.

But as she said the words, she realized they were no longer a promise; they were a sentence she had imposed on herself. The nights had blurred together, each one indistinguishable from the last. She no longer felt the passage of time, only the relentless, aching emptiness that filled every waking moment.

Every piece of Vera's clothing she had kept, every letter she had reread a thousand times, and every place they had shared was a tether that bound her tighter. The memories no longer brought her comfort; they became her prison, the walls closing in around her as she clung to them like a lifeline. Her thoughts spun in endless circles. What if Vera was still waiting? What if Vera loved her the way she had always dreamed but was too afraid to say it? What if their worlds would one day collide, and everything would be different again?

Vera was gone, she knew that. But in her heart, she could never let her go. "I will wait," she whispered once more.

And she knew, without a doubt, that she would never stop.