

The Duke 637

Chapter 637 - [Bonus]The Lady in waiting

That morning after their first night, Florence awoke without Rufus by her side anymore. The soreness in her nether region was bearable since he cradled her with care. But the pain and disappointment in her heart was something that was hard to ignore.

It was better if Rufus was rough and cruel. For her, it was better if he made her feel she was simply a tool. However, his cruel words and his gentle actions were confusing.

How could she hate the man who looked at her passionately? Even though it was just brief and it was because of lust, she felt like Rufus was hers. That those sharp eyes could only see her for a moment.

Florence hugged her knees with her face buried in them. She couldn't stop the tears spilling from her eyes as shame slowly ate her inside. She didn't love Rufus, or rather, she was willing to love her husband.

Deep down, she wished to make this political marriage a lot bearable by learning to love the man she would spend for the rest of her life. But he clarified that was impossible.

Was her tears because of disappointment? Shame? Maybe a little bit of everything.

That morning, Florence had to force herself to get it together. She simply cried in silence and smiled when Lavina came. Although her eyes were swollen, she used a lame yet believable excuse to not worry her personal maid.

It was as though nothing happen or she wasn't in pain as she get by the day. And just like that, it had been a week since they had consummated their marriage. Florence didn't see her husband since then. Fortunately, her training to be the proper empress kept her busy and distracted her from her already failing marriage.

Knock knock

"Come in." She raised her head, eyes on the door while sitting behind the desk of the empress's office. Her brows rose when a female knight came in.

"Duchess Remington, what brings you here?"

"Greetings to Your Majesty, the Empress." Kristina placed her palm across her chest, bowing formally as soon as she entered the office. "I came here because of His Majesty's order about your lady-in-waiting."

Kristina marched towards the desk and placed the documents on top of her desk. "These are the list of candidates for Her Majesty's lady-in-waiting."

"Oh..." Kristina studied the empress as the latter picked up the documents and checked them one by one. "The Marchioness of La Lona is also one?"

"The Marchioness is His Majesty's recommendation to you. Considering her status, noble origin, and contribution to the empire, she was perfect. However, His Majesty wants to leave the decision to you," she explained, watching Florence nod in understanding.

"But why?" Florence inquired, making Kristina furrow her brows.

"Pardon?"

"I heard a lot about the Marchioness of La Lona. Although being my lady-in-waiting might be considered an honor for most noblewomen, I don't think she is the type." She pointed out with a kind and understanding smile, catching Kristina off guard. "Don't be surprised, Duchess Remington. I am simply gravitating whether the Marchioness would not find offensive."

"Of course not, Your Majesty." Kristina's eyes softened as it seemed there was more to the empress than what meets the eye. Well, she was Heliot's sister. It was no surprise that she had been doing her duties as the empress even before she could adjust to the new environment.

"The Marchioness is a wise lady. I'm certain she would be more than happy to assist you."

Florence pressed her lips while staring at her. "Then, if you say so." She shrugged, not checking the other documents anymore. "I will send her a letter."

"His Majesty can do that..." Kristina trailed off when the empress shook her head lightly.

"Please tell His Majesty that I would like to send a request to the Marchioness, instead of a royal decree."

"Uh... if that is what Her Majesty wants. I will relay the word to His Majesty."

"Thank you, Duchess."

Kristina bowed and smiled awkwardly before she left. As soon as the door closed behind her, she looked back and sighed.

'I can't expect anything less from Prince Heliot's sister. I feel bad for her she married a walking wall.' Another sigh slipped past Kristina's lips, thinking that Heliot offered his clever sister to be the empress. But the latter seemed the type to fall easily to men, especially to men like Rufus.

Someone who could make a lady fall for him with his charm. Not just by looks, but Rufus' actions usually confuse a lady's heart. Not that he was purposely doing it. He was just a natural rake.

'I used to like His Majesty, but... he is really not the type to risk his heart to someone,' Kristina trudged away while scratching the back of her head.

In the middle of the hallway, Kristina suddenly paused. She blinked countless times as realization kicked in just now.

"The Marchioness, the Emperor, and the Empress..." she gasped, covering her mouth with her palm. "... it will be fine, right? Silvia now has Lord Yulis and His Majesty already moved on."

Kristina ruminated about the situation, discarding the past as they all moved on already. Right now, they were all just friends, regardless of their duties and status. They all kept in touch, even though they rarely see each other in person.

"Right... everything will be fine. Silvia and His Majesty were just friends now; good friends." She patted her chest, resuming in her steps. "Her Majesty will not misunderstand. The Marchioness is a lot more sensitive than His Majesty. So, I'm certain she will clear things up before a misunderstanding can even happen."

Kristina wasn't wrong with her conclusion. Silvia was mature and a woman, just like Florence. Hence, she wouldn't do anything to put a wedge between Rufus and his wife. It may be a political marriage, but the Marchioness wouldn't do anything that could purposely hurt another woman.

However, a misunderstanding should be the least of their concern.. Because sometimes, even without a third party involved, a marriage was bound to doom if only one was willing to reach out.

Chapter 638 - [Bonus]The First Sign She Denied To See

"It is my honor to be chosen as your lady-in-waiting, Your Majesty."

Silvia curtsied in front of the empress inside the latter's sitting room. When Silvia raised her head, a gentle smile appeared on Florence's face.

"Marchioness, you don't have to be so formal. Take a seat." Florence motioned her hand to the settee across from her seat. As soon as Silvia sat down, the empress sized her up.

Just by looking at Silvia and the air surrounding her lady-in-waiting, she could tell the rumors were true. Before the empress, Silvia was known to be the noblest woman on the continent. With her enchanting beauty aside, Silvia's contribution to the empire was something that empowered a lot of women — one of them was Florence.

She had heard and was very interested in news about the Marchioness of the empire even before she became the empress. The reason Florence didn't even check the other candidates was because of that. Silvia was already the best, and she already liked her even before she met her in person.

Florence was more like Silvia's admirer. She felt a bit shameful that the latter was ought to work for her.

"I prepared tea that came from our Karo Kingdom. I hope it is to your liking, marchioness." She broke the silence after a minute and smiled.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"No, thank you. I am in your care from now on."

Silvia's brows raised as she studied the empress briefly. "Your Majesty, I am your lady-in-waiting. A person who will assist you and give you advice on official matters if necessary. I appreciate your kindness, but you shouldn't be too soft on me."

"Haha. I know, but I still want to be kind because I like the Marchioness a lot." Florence giggled while keeping her reserved attitude. "I was certain you had a lot on your plate already. But I appreciate you accepted my request, regardless."

"How dare I refuse...?" Silvia's heart softened the more she talked to her. Now, she was certain Florence invited her for a very innocent reason. The latter made her feel bad for accepting it with an ulterior motive.

"You see, Marchioness, since you are my lady-in-waiting, I would like to chat with you for a while. Would you indulge with me?"

"Well, of course."

It didn't take long when the two of them relaxed in each other's company. Florence was easy to like as a person. She was kind and wise; someone who was perfect for being an empress.

At first, Silvia thought Florence invited her to be her lady-in-waiting because she had heard about her history with Rufus. Not many knew about them, but she was Heliot's sister. So, she assumed Heliot told his sister about it.

That was the main reason Silvia accepted the invitation, even though she didn't want to. She wanted to clarify to the empress that there was nothing between them anymore. But it seemed there was no need.

Florence invited Silvia for a logical reason. Or rather, she just simply used a logical argument.

"I truly wish we get along, marchioness."

"Silvia, Your Majesty," Silvia corrected with a subtle smile. "If you feel comfortable addressing me by my name, I would appreciate it."

Florence's eyes softened. "Then you can call me --"

"Please, Your Majesty. Although it is alright if you call me by my name, I will feel burdened if you tell me to call you with just your name." Silvia intercepted even before Florence could finish her sentence. "As the Empress, even your family cannot call you by your name. I simply asked you to call me by my name was because I am your subject."

"Oh..."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean it will change our relationship, Your Highness." Silvia offered a kind smile. "I hope you understand my disposition."

"It's alright. It's my fault for forgetting that I am now an empress and I must adhere to certain rules."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Not at all." Florence waved her hands as she chuckled.

For her, she already liked Silvia even before. But she liked her even more now. Talking to her relieved a lot of stress because in between their chats, Silvia would tell her informative advice. One of them was how, as the previous queen, became a marchioness instead of being banished after her 'previous' husband, the emperor's death.

The answer was simple, and Silvia was very nonchalant about it. It was all thanks to the 'late' emperor Rufus' adoptive father. He was a tyrant, and his decision was absolute. But how Silvia was accepted was because of her own efforts — Samael simply opened the door for her.

"I will excuse myself first. I will see you tomorrow, Your Majesty." Silvia prepared to leave after over an hour of just chatting with Florence. She just arrived this morning, and she needed rest before her official duties tomorrow.

"Very well. I hope you rest well."

"Yes."

With that being said, Silvia left the room. When the door closed, a bitter smile resurfaced on Florence's face.

"She is so beautiful," she whispered. "And very noble. I hope we get along well."

Dinner came quickly. It was one of those days that the emperor and the empress must share a meal together. After days of not meeting each other, they had to fulfill their duties since it was part of their hectic schedule.

Sitting on both ends of the long dining table, she glanced up at him. Just like their first dinner together, Rufus wasn't speaking as he simply ate.

'I should talk,' she told herself. Even if Rufus told her she shouldn't expect anything from him, it was better if their relationship wasn't this distant. At the very least, they should be at least comfortable with each other's company. Florence took a deep breath as she mustered her courage to speak. "I met with Lady Silvia today." He paused as soon as her voice reached his ears.

"Mhm. I heard." Rufus raised his eyes, holding his cutleries still. His lack of reaction was already expected, so she ignored it.

"I could tell she is a remarkable lady. Thank you for recommending her to me, Your Majesty."

"Mhm... she is." Rufus pressed his lips into a thin line while rocking his head. His answer put an end to the conversation almost instantly. But that wasn't the reason Florence went silent.

'Huh?' she blinked, watching Rufus continue eating his meal. *'Did I just imagine it?'* she wondered.

Just now... did she see it correctly? How did her husband's eyes soften for a split second?

'No. I'm probably exhausted myself.' Florence mentally shook her head, throwing that idea at the back of her head.. Little did she know, she shouldn't have disregarded that first sign to protect her fragile heart.

Chapter 639 - Envious Of Not Being Part Of That Circle

Time was fleeting and before Florence knew it, it was already been one month since she arrived in the imperial palace. To be truthful, she was also confused. Sometimes, she would think the time was ticking slower than usual, but then it was already nighttime.

Aside from their first night, the emperor didn't visit her chambers again. They would still eat together once a week because they had to. But other than that? Florence wouldn't even see her husband's shadow.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?" Silvia inquired, seeing that the empress was zoning out.

Florence blinked and laughed awkwardly. "Yes. I was simply thinking of something." She gazed down at the tea on the table. They were currently in the Avolire Garden in the empress' palace, drinking some afternoon tea.

"If there is something that is worrying you, please do not hesitate to tell me." Silvia kindly offered with a smile. "I can lend an ear or give advice if it's something about an official matter."

"That is so nice of you, Lady Silvia." A deep sigh slipped past Florence's lips, holding the teacup while rubbing her thumb against the handle. "Lady Silvia, weren't you already married?"

"Uh?"

Florence raised her head, seeing that Silvia seemed she was caught off guard. "Apologies if that is too abrupt and made you uncomfortable."

"Uh... not at all. I was simply surprised, but yes, I am married. Although we live separately since we cannot leave our fiefs just yet." Came out an awkward laugh, huffing as her complicated marriage with Yulis was something she hadn't talked about to others for a long time; unless Kristina probed.

"Lady Silvia, was it rude of me to ask why? Did you marry out of convenience as well?"

"Uh... no, Your Majesty." A subtle smile appeared on Silvia's face as her soft eyes lowered. "My husband and I got married because we want to. However, love isn't the only factor that is important to us. We had our own people, our own goals, and our own opinions."

Florence tilted her head to the side while Silvia raised her head. The latter wasn't surprised at the confusion in the empress's eyes. She got that a lot. Many wouldn't understand why Silvia and Yulis lived separately despite being married.

"Our relationship is more than the fluttering feeling we have in the pit of our belly. Our love is not something we just fell right into; it was something that we grew in. Although it is nice to live under the same roof, he didn't have the heart to ask me to leave everything I built behind and choose him. Neither did I have the courage to ask him." Silvia paused, staring at her reflection on the tea.

"Before us, there was just Yulis and Silvia. The Duke of Grimsbanne and the Marchioness of La Lona. You might've had a vague idea of our family, so I assumed you already knew how messed up the La Crox's were. I am forever grateful that my brother, the previous emperor, gave us the opportunity to choose the life we want.

And this might sound selfish, but I want to keep it that way. I am already glad that my husband appreciates our similarities, but also, respect our difference and decision. To others, our relationship looked like nothing but a marriage of convenience, but to us, we are happy for each other.

We grow separately as individuals, but at the same time, the distance also strengthened our marriage. We can love each other because we can love and embraced ourselves and our flaws. I guess the phrase, absence makes the heart grow fonder, is effective for the two of us."

Florence's eyes softened while listening to Silvia's solemn voice. When the latter looked up, she understood Silvia was content with their setup. As expected from a strong woman like her.

"Although there were times I wished he was lying beside me to embrace me, I was certain he also thinks of that sometimes. He might not come to me immediately during those lonely nights. But I'm certain he will come running to me whenever I truly need him the most." The side of Silvia's lips stretched. She could talk about her husband the whole day and night without a problem. "And I will do the same. I might not come to him during those lonely nights, but I will come running to him whenever he truly needs me."

"I am glad to hear that you are happy, Lady Silvia." Florence expressed from the bottom of her heart. "At first, I thought it was also a marriage of convenience.

But after listening to you, I might not fully grasp everything, but I'm certain this works for the both of you."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Silvia smiled, closed-lipped. Her brows rose as the space between them wrinkled when she noticed the bitterness in the empress's sad eyes.

"I'm a bit envious, honestly," Florence admitted, lowering her eyes. "To get married out of love and not because it is convenient. I wonder how that feels."

"Your Majesty..."

"Don't fret. I am not sad, just a little curious about how such a marriage feels like." She sported a reassuring smile. "It's not that His Majesty is mistreating me. Actually, he does everything an empress wants from her emperor. I am already satisfied with that."

A shallow breath slipped past Silvia's lips and yet she kept her mouth shut. She did something wrong, she thought. She spoke too much without thinking for a moment. Silvia should've known what sort of marriage Rufus and Florence had. That man was cruel, after all.

'Her Majesty is very kind and understanding as if she's an angel,' she grumbled internally, feeling sorry for her and angry at Rufus at the same time. *'He should treat her better.'*?

"His Majesty had arrived."

Florence and Silvia snapped their eyes when a servant came in and announced. Florence was a bit surprised by this sudden visit, holding her breath with her eyes wide open. Seeing the empress's reaction, Silvia blinked cluelessly.

'Ahh...' she mentally rocked her head, sporting a gentle smile. "I will excuse myself first, Your Highness."

"Ah, yes."

Silvia assisted herself up and bowed. Holding her hand in front of her, she walked away from the pavilion in the garden. On her way out, she glanced up at Rufus. And then at Dominique, who was following behind the emperor.

The two paused, raising their brows as soon as they saw Silvia's glare. Rufus titled her head, baffled at this sudden source of hatred from her.

'You two... dead.' That was what her eyes told them before she huffed and stormed away.

As she did, Rufus looked back at her with confusion plastered across his face. The side of his lips slightly curled up as the fuming Silvia was quite a sight to behold.

"Dom, should I raise security from now on?" he inquired in a low tone.

Dominique, who was also staring at Silvia's back, sensing the anger in her aura, nodded.

"Your Majesty, did you, perhaps, offend her?"

While the two mumbled to each other, cracking what made Silvia so angry with them, Florence was just watching from her seat. She had seen it again.

'So it wasn't just my imagination the first time?' she thought, noticing the slight change in her husband's eyes at the sight of Silvia. When they bumped into each other, the usual stiff expression on the emperor's face was replaced by genuine wonder.

It wasn't something she would consider as desire. But Florence was certain Rufus had a special relationship with Silvia. No. Actually, it looked like the three of them had this bond that an outsider like her could never intrude on.

'It's just like Duchess Remington,' she whispered in her head. *'They didn't have the same boundary I had with my husband. It's as if.... they were all inside a circle no one else could enter.'*

Chapter 640 - The Faint Scent Of Danger

Florence wasn't even surprised that Rufus came to her that day to talk about official matters between the Karo Kingdom and the empire. Their discussion didn't last that long.

It had been three months since then.

It was amusing how the days went by in a blur for her. For four months, Florence could count the times she had seen her husband. If not for the fact that they

have to eat dinner together at least once a week, they wouldn't see each other at all.

There was a benefit for not meeting Rufus that much, though.

Florence got used to their setup and was able to focus on her duties as the empress. Although she still tried to have a good relationship with her husband, it felt like pounding against a thick concrete wall with bare fists.

"Your Majesty, I am surprised that you participated in the hunt." She turned to Silvia, who was fixing her sleeve. With her ebony hair tied up, revealing her slender neck, and giving a refreshing sight of her stunning face, Silvia was even more stunning in her hunting suit.

"Well, it is better to encourage the women in the high society to take part in such activities." Florence smiled. "You look even more beautiful, Lady Silvia. Ladies and men alike can't take their eyes off of you."

"Your Majesty, they were simply adoring you in your hunting suit."

Both of them exchanged flatteries, showing how they had grown close for the past months. It was not that Silvia looked better or Florence looked better than her. If anything, both women were gorgeous in their own way.

With Silvia, looking like a war goddess; strong, stunning, and capable. Her beauty could rile up anyone's emotion. Florence, on the other hand, was akin to a moon: beautiful yet flawed. Just looking at her brought this soothing sensation to one's heart.

"This humble subject greets the only moon of the empire."

Silvia and Florence turned their heads to the side, eyes landing on Heliot, who arrived a day ago in the empire for official matters. He placed his palm across his chest, bowing at his little sister, who was now the empress.

"Good to see you, Your Highness." Florence sported a smile that didn't reach her eyes. Meanwhile, Silvia still curtsied to Heliot.

"Greetings, Your Highness."

Heliot smiled subtly, darting his eyes between Florence and Silvia. He didn't say anything, which only made the air around them awkward. Well, not that Heliot knew what awkward was. He simply approached them for formality.

"I am glad that you took part in the hunt, Your Highness. Will you indulge with me once the hunt starts?" Florence broke the brief silence, keeping her smile as she had been meaning to have a talk with him.

"It is my honor."

Just then, voices from the crowd at the outdoor banquet, where ladies who didn't participate, volume up. The three obviously shifted their attention to the source and instantly understood the peaceful commotion.

The emperor had arrived with Dominique.

They were already in their hunting suits, talking to a few nobles who approached them. Horses were being guided to a place, some were already coming out from their tents. The noble ladies handed out handkerchiefs or handmaid trinkets to their chosen knights.

The usual sight one would see during a hunt. The ladies would gift their chosen knight with a handkerchief or a trinket. In turn, the knights would offer their trophy hunt to them. The one who hunted more would be the victor of the season's hunting competition.

Although that was still a tradition until now, women could also now participate. The numbers were smaller, though. But it was still better than the previous hunting season.

Silvia, Florence, and Heliot approached Rufus to greet him. They had to, especially the empress, to show to the public she had a good relationship with her emperor.

"Greetings to the shining sun of the empire." Florence curtsied. Behind her were Silvia and Heliot, who also performed a curtsy and a bow.

Rufus smiled, closed-lipped. "It's good to see you doing well, Empress." He then shifted his eyes to Silvia and then to Heliot.

"I didn't know you are participating, Your Highness. I thought you will rest since you just arrived last night."

"I thought it will be rude to refuse Your Majesty's invitation."

"You're still..." Rufus trailed off when he heard Kristina not far away. He glanced at where her voice was coming from, sporting a disdainful look as soon as he caught his aide.

"Kyah~! My husband! I will surely win this season's hunting competition and offer the trophy to you~!" Kristina, from being a fearsome knight, suddenly had a complete change of attitude. She was fawning on her husband, the Duke of Whistlebird, Noah Remington.

Noah chuckled gently, blushing as he felt a bit embarrassed at his wife's energy. "Wife, please keep it down. His Majesty might hear... you." He froze as soon as he caught Rufus' eyes on him.

"Let him," Kristina mumbled, hooking her arms around him. "Since my husband isn't taking part in the competition, your wife will bring honor to our house."

"You shouldn't taunt him like that." He leaned to her side as they approached the emperor to greet him.

Silvia couldn't help but chuckle seeing the two approach their standpoint. In many people's eyes, Kristina and Noah's relationship was also abnormal. Obviously, that was because Kristina was a remarkable knight. Something like participating in this type of competition that the duke should take part in. But the duchess participated instead.

"This humble subject greets His Majesty." The two of them bowed as soon as they greeted Rufus. They then shifted their attention to Florence and greeted her as well.

Florence's eyes softened. Her first time seeing Kristina lose her composure with her husband's presence.

"I wish you luck, Duchess." She tilted her head down slightly.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Rufus let out a shallow breath and cleared his throat. "Empress, I will have to excuse myself first. I'll see you on the hunting grounds." He then set his attention to Heliot.

"Prince Heliot, indulge with me for a while."

"Happily."

With that being said, Rufus turned his back against them while Heliot followed. At this point, Florence was already used to watching her husband's back as he headed to his tent. So, she smiled and refocus her attention on Kristina and Noah.

Meanwhile, Silvia's eyes remained on those two's backs. *'There's something wrong,'* she thought, knowing Rufus was being secretive. She could ask Kristina, but the latter wouldn't just tattle an important matter to others, even if they were friends.

'I have a bad feeling about this.. I should ask him later.'?