



Chapter 1: The Night Before

Seraphina couldn't sleep.

She lay in her bed—white silk sheets cool against her skin, white canopy filtering the moonlight into something softer, safer—and stared at the ceiling she'd memorized over eighteen years. Tomorrow, everything would change. Tomorrow, she would sit at the head of the Council table. Tomorrow, three tiaras would be placed on her head, each one heavier than the last. Tomorrow, she would become what she'd been designed to be.

But tonight, she was still just... this.

Lonely.

The word felt dangerous even to think. She had people everywhere—her DPT team stationed outside her door, rotating in shifts that never ended. Her tutors, who had filled her mind with strategy and genetics and the weight of legacy. The staff who dressed her, fed her, monitored her. She was never alone.

And yet.

Seraphina turned onto her side, pulling her knees toward her chest. The motion felt childish, something the girl she'd been might have done. Tomorrow, that girl would be gone. Tomorrow, she would have to be strong—for herself, for the

Council, for the entire Weiss lulligarchy. Millions of people depended on the stability of her bloodline, on the purity of her inheritance. She knew this. She'd been taught this since before she could remember.

But who would be strong for *her*?

The thought cracked something open inside her chest, and she pressed her palm there, feeling her heartbeat. Steady. Controlled. Just like everything else about her life.

She sat up, letting the sheets pool around her waist. Through the sheer white curtains of her window, she could see the compound grounds—perfectly manicured, perfectly lit, perfectly secured. Somewhere out there, thermal cameras tracked every movement. AI systems analyzed every shadow. Her DPT teams ran threat assessments on the wind itself.

Safe. She was so safe.

So why did she feel like she was suffocating?

Seraphina stood, her bare feet silent on the white marble floor. She moved to the window, careful not to get too close. The motion sensors would alert her detail if she approached the glass. Everything she did was monitored, measured, recorded. For her protection, they said. For the preservation of the bloodline.

For control.

She understood the reasoning. She did. The Weiss family had maintained unbroken genetic purity for seven generations. Seven generations of women who had led with wisdom, with strength, with the kind of clarity that came from knowing exactly who you were and where you came from. The white gowns, the dietary protocols, the medical verifications—all of it served a purpose.

But understanding something didn't make it hurt less.

Her hand drifted to her lower abdomen, a ghost of a touch. Tomorrow, they would verify her again. The final certification before the ceremony. The Head of Medical would examine her, document her, reduce her to a set of measurements and confirmations. *Virgin. Pure. Suitable for inheritance.*

She hated it.

She hated the cold instruments, the clinical language, the way they spoke about her body as if it were a vessel, a container, a thing to be certified rather than a

part of her. She hated that her most private self had become public record, sealed in documents that would be read aloud tomorrow in front of thousands.

But most of all, she hated that she'd learned to endure it.

Seraphina closed her eyes, and the memory rose unbidden—she was thirteen again, her body betraying her with blood and cramps and a fear she couldn't name. She'd known it was coming. Her tutors had prepared her, explained the biology, the significance. But knowing hadn't made it easier when it finally happened.

What made it worse was the ritual.

They'd gathered—the medical staff, the Council representatives, her grandmother still alive then and presiding with that cool, distant pride. They'd examined her, confirmed her first menstruation, and then... celebrated. As if her body's readiness to reproduce was an achievement, a milestone in the Weiss legacy.

She'd worn white that day too. A white dress that felt like a costume, like she was playing the part of someone else. They'd placed a small tiara on her head—not one of the three she'd receive tomorrow, but a training crown, a promise of what was to come.

You are becoming a woman, her grandmother had said. You are becoming what you were meant to be.

But Seraphina had felt like she was becoming a thing. A checked box. A biological function wrapped in ceremony and white silk.

She opened her eyes, forcing herself back to the present. Tomorrow, she would have power. Real power. The kind that could change things.

Maybe she could end the rituals. Maybe she could make it so no other girl had to endure what she had. Maybe—

But even as the thought formed, she felt the weight of it. The Council wouldn't approve. The traditions were sacred, they'd say. The purity protocols had kept the Weiss bloodline strong for generations. Who was she to dismantle what had worked for so long?

Who are you? a small voice whispered in her mind. *Do you even know?*

Seraphina wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold despite the climate-controlled perfection of her room. She knew what she was supposed to be. She

knew her genetic sequence, her lineage, her role. She knew the speeches she'd give, the decisions she'd make, the image she'd project.

But who was she beneath all that? What did *she* want?

Companionship. The word surfaced again, and this time she let it stay. She wanted someone who saw her—not the heir, not the genetic legacy, not the symbol in white. Just... her. Someone who would sit with her in the dark and not need her to be strong. Someone who would hold her when the weight became too much.

But that wasn't how it worked in the Weiss lulligarchy.

Men were assets. Genetic material to be selected, screened, and utilized. They served the women who led, provided what was needed, and remained in their designated roles. Seraphina had been taught this from childhood—women were the leaders, the decision-makers, the ones who carried the weight of civilization. Men were... lesser. Necessary, but controlled.

She'd never questioned it before. It was simply how things were.

But lately, she'd started to wonder. The male staff who maintained the compound—were they happy? The men who provided genetic material for the carefully curated pregnancies—did they have dreams? The security personnel, the advisors, the ones who existed in the margins of her world—did they ever wish for something more?

Did she?

A soft chime interrupted her thoughts—the midnight alert. Her AI assistant, synced to her biometrics, monitoring her sleep patterns. *You should rest*, the gentle voice suggested. *Tomorrow is an important day.*

Seraphina almost laughed. As if she didn't know. As if she'd thought about anything else for eighteen years.

"I know," she whispered to the empty room.

She returned to her bed, slipping beneath the white sheets that had been turned down by staff she'd never seen. Everything in her life happened like that—invisible hands arranging her world, making sure everything was perfect, controlled, safe.

She pulled the covers up to her chin and stared at the canopy above her.

Tomorrow, three tiaras. Tomorrow, the Council. Tomorrow, the weight of the entire Weiss legacy settling onto her shoulders like a crown made of lead.

But tonight, she was still just Seraphina. Lonely. Uncertain. Afraid.

And wishing, desperately, that someone could hold her hand through what came next.

She must have dozed, because when she opened her eyes again, the quality of darkness had changed. Not quite dawn, but close. That liminal space between night and day when the world held its breath.

Seraphina sat up slowly, her body already anticipating the routine. In a few hours, her attendants would arrive. They'd help her bathe, dress her in the ceremonial robes, prepare her for the final medical verification. Then the procession. Then the ceremony. Then everything would change.

But right now, in this stolen moment, she was still herself.

She rose and moved to her private bathroom—white marble, white fixtures, white towels folded with geometric precision. She turned on the shower, letting the water heat while she studied her reflection in the mirror.

Eighteen years old. Pale skin that had rarely seen unfiltered sunlight. Dark hair that had been carefully maintained, genetically optimized for thickness and shine. Eyes that looked older than they should.

She looked like a Weiss. The resemblance to her mother, to her grandmother, to the portraits that lined the Council chamber—it was undeniable. She was the product of seven generations of careful selection, genetic screening, controlled reproduction.

She was perfect.

She was exactly what she was supposed to be.

So why did she feel like a stranger to herself?

Seraphina stepped into the shower, letting the hot water cascade over her. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine tomorrow. Tried to picture herself wearing the three tiaras, sitting at the head of the Council table, making decisions that would affect millions.

Tried to imagine feeling anything other than this hollow ache in her chest.

The water ran over her skin, and she thought about purity. About what it meant to be clean, untouched, preserved. About whether virginity was really about her

body or about control. About whether the white gowns were symbols of honor or erasure.

About whether she'd ever get to choose.

She stayed in the shower until the water began to cool, until she heard the soft alert that meant her attendants would arrive soon. Then she stepped out, wrapped herself in a white robe, and began the process of becoming what everyone expected.

But as she dried her hair, as she prepared to face the day that would define the rest of her life, one thought kept circling back:

Tomorrow, I'll have power. Real power. And maybe—maybe—I can use it to become something more than what they made me to be.

It was a dangerous thought.

It was a hopeful thought.

It was the only thought that made the weight bearable.

Seraphina looked at herself in the mirror one last time—the girl she'd been, the woman she was about to become—and made herself a promise.

I will be strong. For the Council. For the lulligarchy. For all the people who depend on me.

But I will also be strong for myself.

And maybe, somehow, I'll find a way to be both.

The first light of dawn filtered through her window, turning everything golden.

Her last sunrise as just Seraphina.

Tomorrow, she would be so much more.

And so much less.

She moved to the balcony doors, her bare feet silent on the cool marble. The doors opened at her approach—biometric sensors recognizing her, always watching, always knowing. The early morning air hit her face, cool and sharp, carrying the scent of the compound grounds below.

Seraphina stepped onto the balcony, and the breeze immediately caught her long, dark hair, whipping it around her shoulders. Her white silk nightgown—because

even in sleep, even in private, she wore white—flowed and rippled in the wind like a ghost's shroud. She gripped the railing, feeling the cold stone beneath her palms, and looked out over what would soon be hers.

Her domain.

The Weiss compound stretched below her—perfectly manicured gardens arranged in geometric precision, white stone pathways cutting through green lawns, the medical facilities gleaming in the distance. Beyond that, the agricultural territories where the carnivore diet that sustained the pure families was produced. Further still, the residential sectors where thousands of people lived and worked under Weiss authority.

All of it would be hers by sunset.

The thought should have filled her with something—pride, excitement, fear. Instead, she felt only that familiar numbness, that emotional distance that had become her default state.

A drone zipped past her balcony, its sensors tracking her presence, its camera recording her for the security logs. Even here, in the pre-dawn quiet, she was watched. Monitored. Protected.

Controlled.

Seraphina closed her eyes and let the wind wash over her face. For just a moment, she imagined what it would be like to climb over this railing and simply... fall. Not to die—she didn't want that. But to fall into something unknown, something not predetermined, something that wasn't part of the plan that had been laid out for her before she was even conceived.

What would it feel like to choose?

The door chime rang—a soft, melodic sound that shattered her reverie.

Seraphina's eyes opened. The moment was over. The machinery was beginning.

She turned from the balcony, from the view of her future domain, and walked back into her white room. The doors closed behind her with a whisper of hydraulics.

"Enter," she said, her voice steady and controlled. The voice of an heir. Not the voice of the girl who'd just been imagining falling.

The doors opened, and her attendants flowed in like a choreographed performance. Three of them today—more than usual. Of course. Today was not usual.

The first attendant, an older woman named Margot who had been dressing Seraphina since she was a child, carried a large white garment bag. She moved with practiced efficiency, her face professionally neutral. She stopped three paces from Seraphina and bowed—a precise forty-five-degree angle, held for exactly two seconds.

"Your gown is prepared, Miss Weiss," Margot said, her tone respectful but distant. Always distant. "Have you bathed?"

Seraphina nodded. "Yes."

She didn't mention that she'd showered hours ago, in the dark, while trying to wash away thoughts she wasn't supposed to have. The attendants didn't need to know that. They didn't want to know that.

Margot's eyes flicked over Seraphina's body with clinical assessment—checking her hair, her skin, her presentation. Evaluating the canvas they'd be working with.

"Good," Margot said. "We'll begin preparations immediately after you've eaten."

As if on cue, another attendant entered—younger, carrying a silver tray laden with breakfast. The scent of cooked meat filled the room. Steak, perfectly rare. Bone broth in a delicate china cup. Nothing else. Never anything else.

The attendant set the tray on the small table by the window and turned to Seraphina with a practiced smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Consumption is everything," she said, reciting the familiar phrase. "No denying a hearty meal before your big day."

The words were meant to be encouraging, Seraphina supposed. But they sounded hollow, scripted. Because they were scripted. Everything was scripted.

Seraphina moved to the table and sat, her silk nightgown pooling around her. She picked up the fork—sterling silver, monogrammed with the Weiss family crest—and cut into the steak. Blood pooled on the white china plate.

She ate because she was supposed to eat. Because her body needed to be fueled for the long day ahead. Because consumption was everything, and she was nothing if not compliant.

The meat was perfectly prepared. It tasted like nothing.

As she ate, her assistant arrived—Celeste, a woman in her thirties who had been assigned to Seraphina two years ago when her mother died. Celeste carried a tablet and wore the efficient, no-nonsense expression of someone managing a complex operation.

Which, Seraphina supposed, she was.

"Good morning, Miss Weiss," Celeste said, not waiting for a response before launching into coordination mode. She turned to the attendants, her fingers flying across the tablet screen. "Margot, we'll need her dressed by 0800. Hair and minimal cosmetics—she needs to look pure, not painted. The gown should photograph well but not overshadow the tiaras."

"Understood," Margot replied.

"The medical verification is scheduled for 0830," Celeste continued, her tone brisk and businesslike. "Dr. Kovač will perform the examination personally. The sealed certification must be ready by 0900 for Council review."

Seraphina's hand tightened on her fork. The medical verification. Of course. She'd known it was coming—it always came before major ceremonies. But knowing didn't make it easier.

Celeste glanced at Seraphina, her expression softening by a fraction of a degree. "I know it's uncomfortable, Miss Weiss. But it's protocol. The Council requires—"

"I know what the Council requires," Seraphina said quietly.

Celeste nodded and returned her attention to the tablet. "The procession begins at 1100. Your DPT detail will brief you on security protocols at 1000. The ceremony itself starts at noon. Estimated duration: ninety minutes. Then the first Council session at 1400."

Seraphina listened to her own life being organized, scheduled, managed. She took another bite of steak and chewed mechanically.

"Do you have any questions, Miss Weiss?" Celeste asked, finally looking up from her tablet.

Yes, Seraphina thought. What happens if I say no? What happens if I walk out of this room and keep walking? What happens if I refuse the examination, refuse the tiaras, refuse all of it?

"No," Seraphina said. "No questions."

"Excellent." Celeste made a note on her tablet. "Please finish your breakfast. We're on a tight schedule."

The attendants moved around the room with practiced efficiency—laying out undergarments, preparing the cosmetics station, checking the gown for any imperfections. Their movements were smooth, coordinated, impersonal.

Margot approached to refill Seraphina's bone broth, and her hand brushed Seraphina's shoulder—a brief, incidental contact.

The touch was cold. Alien. Functional.

Seraphina felt nothing.

She watched them work—these women who had been caring for her body for years but had never once asked how she felt. Who dressed her, fed her, maintained her, but didn't know her. Who touched her constantly but had never held her.

She was so emotionally removed from all of it. From them. From herself.

It was like watching a play about someone else's life. Seraphina Weiss, the heir, was being prepared for her coronation. And Seraphina, the girl who'd stood on the balcony imagining falling, was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere unreachable.

Somewhere safe from the cold, alien touches and the scripted words and the life that was happening to her rather than being lived by her.

"Miss Weiss?" Celeste's voice cut through her dissociation. "You've stopped eating. Are you unwell?"

Seraphina looked down at her plate. Half the steak remained, congealing in its own blood.

"I'm fine," she said automatically. "Just... thinking."

"Try to stay present," Celeste said, not unkindly. "Today requires your full attention."

I'm never present, Seraphina thought. I haven't been present in years.

But she nodded and picked up her fork and took another bite of meat that tasted like nothing.

Around her, the attendants continued their choreographed dance. Celeste coordinated. The schedule marched forward. The machinery of her inheritance ground on, indifferent to the girl at its center.

And Seraphina sat in her white silk nightgown, eating her carnivore breakfast, and felt absolutely nothing at all.

End of Chapter 1