

Chapter 6: The Garden Walk

The Council session ended at 1547 hours.

Seraphina stood from her chair, and the Council members rose with her—a gesture of respect, a recognition of her authority. She nodded to them, her face calm and composed, and then turned to leave.

Commander Reeves and the detail fell into formation around her as she exited the chambers. Celeste walked beside her, tablet in hand, already pulling up the evening schedule.

"You have no further obligations today," Celeste said quietly. "The evening is yours."

Seraphina felt something loosen in her chest. Free time. Unstructured hours. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had that.

They walked back to her quarters in silence, and when they arrived, Seraphina turned to Celeste.

"You're dismissed for the evening," she said gently. "Go. Attend to your own personal affairs."

Celeste looked surprised. "Are you certain? I can stay if you need—"

"I'm certain," Seraphina said, and she meant it. Celeste had been with her all day, had held her through her breaking, had helped her rebuild the mask. She deserved time for herself. "Go. I'll be fine."

Celeste hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "If you need me, just call."

"I will."

Celeste left, and Seraphina was alone in her quarters with just the security detail outside her door.

She looked at herself in the mirror—still wearing the ceremonial gown, the three tiaras locked on her head, the perfect image of the leader.

And she was done with it.

She reached up and carefully removed the tiaras, one by one. The Genetic Crown. The Purity Crown. The Authority Crown. She set them on the vanity with reverent

care—they were symbols of power, after all, and she respected that.

But she didn't need to wear them every moment of every day.

Then she turned to the gown. The beautiful, suffocating white silk that had wrapped around her body all day. She found the hidden clasps and began to unfasten them, working methodically until the gown loosened and fell away.

She stepped out of it, leaving it pooled on the floor—something she'd never been allowed to do before. Attendants always handled the gowns, always folded them carefully, always maintained the pristine perfection.

But Seraphina was leader now. And she could leave her gown on the floor if she wanted to.

She removed the slip next, then the undergarments—the delicate white pieces that had been part of her uniform, part of the image. She stripped them all away until she was standing completely naked in her quarters.

Free.

Completely free, in the most literal sense.

She stood there for a moment, feeling the air on her skin, feeling the absence of fabric and structure and control. Her body was hers. Just hers. Not public property, not a vessel for genetic legacy, not a symbol of purity.

Just hers.

She went to her wardrobe and pulled out something simple—a soft, loose tunic in pale gray, and comfortable pants. Nothing ceremonial. Nothing white. Just clothing.

She dressed quickly, relishing the ease of it, the comfort. No corset, no structured bodice, no layers of silk. Just simple fabric against her skin.

She looked at herself in the mirror and barely recognized the person staring back. Without the gown, without the tiaras, without the perfect styling, she looked... young. Normal. Human.

She looked like a girl.

Seraphina smiled—just a little—and then left her quarters.

Commander Reeves was waiting outside, and her eyes widened slightly when she saw Seraphina's casual attire. But she said nothing, just fell into step beside her.

"I'd like to walk the gardens," Seraphina said.

Reeves nodded. "Of course. I'll have the detail—"

"At a distance," Seraphina interrupted gently but firmly. "I'd like a bit of space. You can do your work without invading my personal space."

Reeves paused, clearly processing this request. The protocols called for close protection, especially for the leader. But Seraphina was right—if she couldn't walk freely in her own domain, then perhaps it wasn't as safe as the DPT and PMC claimed.

Reeves met Seraphina's eyes and saw the quiet determination there. This wasn't a whim. This was a statement.

"Understood," Reeves said. "We'll maintain visual contact but give you space. I'll bring this up at the next Council meeting—we should discuss security protocols and personal freedom."

Seraphina felt a surge of gratitude. Reeves understood. She wasn't dismissing the security concerns, but she was acknowledging Seraphina's point of view.

"Thank you, Commander."

They made their way through the corridors and out into the gardens.

The gardens were beautiful—meticulously maintained, with white flowers and carefully pruned hedges and stone pathways that wound through the greenery. It was still daylight, the sun beginning its descent toward the horizon, casting everything in warm golden light.

Seraphina stepped onto the path, and the security detail spread out—still visible, still watchful, but no longer surrounding her. They gave her space.

She walked slowly, breathing in the fresh air, feeling the slight breeze against her skin. The gardens were quiet except for the sound of birds and the rustle of leaves. Peaceful.

She'd walked these gardens before, of course. But always with attendants, always on a schedule, always with a purpose. This was different. This was just... walking. For the sake of walking.

She passed a fountain—white marble, of course, with water cascading down in perfect symmetry. She stopped and watched it for a moment, mesmerized by the

movement, the sound.

She thought about the Council meeting. The newborns. The pair bonding incentives. The surrogates.

She thought about her own birth. About the woman who had carried her, whose name she didn't know.

She thought about the system she'd inherited—this beautiful, terrible system that created perfect genetic offspring and controlled every aspect of reproduction and treated women's bodies as vessels.

And she thought about what she wanted to do with the power she now held.

Did she want to maintain the system? Strengthen it? Or change it?

She didn't know yet. It was too soon. Too overwhelming.

But she knew one thing: she would structure her life in a more relaxed fashion. She would claim some freedom for herself, even if it was just the freedom to walk in the gardens without being smothered by security, or to wear comfortable clothing instead of ceremonial gowns.

She knew she'd get pushback. The Council would have opinions. The protocols would be cited. The traditions would be invoked.

But she was leader now. It came with the job.

And if she couldn't make small changes for herself, how could she ever hope to make larger changes for the lulligarchy?

Seraphina continued walking, her steps slow and deliberate. She passed beds of white roses, perfectly arranged. She passed benches where citizens sometimes sat, though the gardens were empty now—this was the leader's private time, and no one would intrude.

She walked until she reached the far edge of the gardens, where a low stone wall marked the boundary. Beyond it, she could see the compound stretching out—the residential buildings, the medical facilities, the administrative centers. Her domain.

She leaned against the wall and looked out at it all.

This was hers now. All of it. The responsibility, the power, the burden.

And the freedom to shape it, even if only in small ways.

She stood there for a long time, watching the sun sink lower, feeling the evening air cool around her. The security detail maintained their distance, giving her the space she'd requested.

And for the first time since the ceremony, Seraphina felt something close to peace.

Not happiness. Not joy. But peace.

A quiet moment of stillness in a life that had been nothing but structure and control and performance.

She closed her eyes and breathed.

And she let herself just be.

When she finally returned to her quarters, the sun had set and the compound was bathed in the soft glow of artificial lights. Commander Reeves walked beside her, and the detail reformed around her as they entered the building.

"Thank you for the space," Seraphina said quietly.

Reeves nodded. "Of course. I'll draft a proposal for adjusted security protocols and present it at the next Council meeting."

"I appreciate that."

They reached her quarters, and Reeves opened the door for her. Seraphina stepped inside and paused, looking back at the Commander.

"Commander Reeves," she said. "I know the protocols exist for a reason. I'm not trying to undermine security. I just... I need to be able to breathe."

Reeves's expression softened—just slightly. "I understand, Ms. Weiss. We'll find a balance."

Seraphina nodded, grateful.

She closed the door and stood in her quarters, alone again.

The ceremonial gown was still on the floor where she'd left it. The tiaras were on the vanity. The room was quiet.

She looked at the gown for a moment, then walked over and picked it up. She folded it carefully—not because she had to, but because she wanted to. It was a beautiful garment, and it deserved respect.

But she didn't have to wear it every day.

She placed it in the wardrobe and then turned to the bed. She was exhausted—emotionally, physically, mentally. The day had been overwhelming in every possible way.

She changed into a simple nightgown—soft, comfortable, nothing ceremonial—and climbed into bed.

As she lay there in the darkness, she thought about everything that had happened. The ceremony. The breaking with Celeste. The Council meeting. The walk in the gardens.

She thought about the girl she'd been this morning—terrified, alone, screaming inside.

And she thought about the woman she was becoming—still terrified, still alone in many ways, but also stronger. More determined.

She would get pushback. She would face resistance. The Council would challenge her. The protocols would be cited.

But she was leader now.

And she would find a way to be both the leader they needed and the person she wanted to become.

Seraphina closed her eyes and let sleep take her.

And for the first time in years, she slept without nightmares.

To be continued...