

Chapter 3: The Procession

The sound was the first thing that consumed her.

The rhythmic clicking of her heels on marble—sharp, precise, echoing through the white corridors. The heavier thud of boots—six pairs moving in perfect synchronization, the DPT detail marching in formation around her. Commander Reeves to her right, boots striking the floor with military precision. Celeste to her left, her softer footsteps nearly drowned out by the security personnel.

They moved as a single unit. Lock and step. A human machine, choreographed and controlled.

Click. Thud. Click. Thud. Click. Thud.

The sound of their march filled the corridor, bouncing off the white walls, amplifying until it felt like the entire compound could hear them coming. The heir and her protectors. The future leader being delivered to her destiny.

Seraphina kept her eyes forward, her posture perfect, her face composed. But inside, she was taking everything in with desperate intensity.

The corridors she'd walked a thousand times suddenly felt different. Foreign. Heavy with new meaning.

She looked at the white walls—pristine, perfect, unmarred. How many times had she traced her fingers along these walls as a child? How many times had she run through these halls, her footsteps echoing, before she'd learned that running was undignified? Before she'd learned to walk with measured grace, always controlled, always watched?

These walls had been her entire world. And soon, she'd be responsible for all of it.

The thought hit her like a physical weight, pressing down on her chest, making it hard to breathe.

She was eighteen years old. Eighteen. And in less than two hours, she would be the leader of the Weiss lulligarchy. She would sit at the head of the Council table. She would make decisions that affected thousands of lives—the staff, the territories, the genetic databanks, the biotech patents, the agricultural holdings, the medical facilities.

All of it. Hers. Her responsibility. Her burden.

Inside, she wanted to scream.

The panic was rising in her chest, clawing at her throat, demanding release. She wanted to stop walking, to turn around, to run back to her room and lock the door and refuse to come out. She wanted to scream that she wasn't ready, that she was just a girl, that they'd made a mistake, that she couldn't do this.

But she couldn't show it. Couldn't let anyone see.

So she kept walking. Kept her face calm. Kept her breathing steady.

Click. Thud. Click. Thud.

They passed through a security checkpoint—the doors sliding open automatically, biometric scanners confirming her identity. The guards stationed there snapped to attention, their eyes forward, not daring to look directly at her.

Seraphina's gaze swept over them. Young men and women in DPT uniforms, trained to protect her, to die for her if necessary. They didn't know her. She didn't know them. But they were hers now. Her responsibility.

The weight pressed harder.

They continued forward, and the corridor opened into a wider hallway—one of the main arteries of the compound. Here, the walls were lined with portraits of previous Weiss leaders. Her ancestors. Women who had worn the tiaras before her, who had sat at the Council table, who had carried the burden of leadership.

Seraphina's eyes moved from portrait to portrait as they walked.

Her great-great-grandmother, stern and unsmiling, the three tiaras glittering on her head.

Her great-grandmother, younger, more beautiful, but with the same cold eyes.

Her grandmother, who had died when Seraphina was five. She barely remembered her—just impressions of white gowns and the scent of antiseptic and a voice that never raised, never softened.

And then her mother.

Seraphina's steps faltered for just a fraction of a second—so brief that only Celeste noticed, her hand twitching as if to steady her.

Her mother's portrait was the largest, the most prominent. She'd been beautiful—dark hair like Seraphina's, pale skin, delicate features. The three tiaras sat on her head like they'd been made for her. Her expression was serene, confident, powerful.

She'd worn those tiaras for twenty-three years before the illness took her. Twenty-three years of leadership, of decisions, of carrying the weight of the lulligarchy.

And now it was Seraphina's turn.

Seraphina forced herself to look away from her mother's portrait and keep walking. The sound of their march continued, relentless and steady.

Click. Thud. Click. Thud.

They passed staff members in the corridors—attendants, technicians, administrators. All of them immediately stopped what they were doing and pressed themselves against the walls, heads bowed, as the procession passed. Showing deference. Showing respect.

Showing fear, perhaps.

Seraphina looked at their bowed heads, their submissive postures. These people worked for the Weiss lulligarchy. They depended on it for their livelihoods, their security, their futures. And now they would depend on her.

She was responsible for them too.

The panic clawed harder at her throat. She swallowed it down, forced it back into the dark place where she kept all her fear and doubt and loneliness.

Not now. Not here. Not where anyone could see.

They turned a corner, and the corridor began to slope gently upward. They were approaching the ceremonial wing—the heart of the compound, where all the important rituals took place. Where she'd been presented as an infant. Where she'd undergone her menarche ceremony. Where she'd been verified, again and again, quarter after quarter.

Where she would receive the tiaras.

Seraphina's hands were trembling. She clasped them together in front of her, hidden in the folds of her gown, and squeezed until her knuckles went white.

Control. She needed control.

Commander Reeves glanced at her—just a brief flicker of her eyes—and Seraphina wondered if the commander could see through her mask. If she could see the terrified girl beneath the composed exterior.

But Reeves said nothing. Just kept marching, boots striking the floor with unwavering rhythm.

Celeste, on her left, moved slightly closer. Not touching, but near enough that Seraphina could feel her presence. A small comfort. A tiny anchor in the storm of panic.

They continued forward.

The corridor widened further, and the ceiling rose higher. The architecture here was more ornate—carved columns, intricate moldings, everything designed to inspire awe. To remind everyone who entered this space that they were in the presence of power.

Seraphina looked up at the vaulted ceiling, at the elaborate designs carved into the white stone. She'd studied the history of this place. She knew that her great-great-great-grandmother had commissioned this wing, had designed it to reflect the glory of the Weiss bloodline.

Glory. Legacy. Power.

All words that felt hollow when you were the one expected to embody them.

They passed through another set of doors—massive, white, carved with the Weiss family crest. Beyond them, Seraphina could hear the murmur of voices. The Council members were already assembled. The guests were seated. Everyone was waiting.

Waiting for her.

The doors ahead led to the ceremonial hall. The final destination. The place where everything would change.

Seraphina's heart was pounding so hard she was sure everyone could hear it. Her breathing was shallow, controlled, but barely. The panic was a living thing inside her, screaming, clawing, demanding to be released.

But she couldn't let it out. Couldn't show weakness. Couldn't fail.

So she kept walking.

Click. Thud. Click. Thud.

The sound of their march. The sound of inevitability.

Commander Reeves raised her hand, and the procession slowed, then stopped. They were at the entrance to the ceremonial hall. The massive doors were closed, but Seraphina could see the light glowing beneath them. Could hear the voices inside falling silent as they sensed the arrival.

Reeves turned to Seraphina, her expression professional but not unkind. "The doors will open in thirty seconds, Ms. Weiss. When they do, we proceed directly to the center aisle. I'll be at your right. Celeste at your left. The detail will follow. Walk at a measured pace. Eyes forward. You know what to do."

Seraphina nodded. She did know. She'd been trained for this. Rehearsed it. Practiced the walk, the posture, the expression.

She knew exactly what to do.

She just didn't know if she could actually do it.

Celeste leaned in slightly, her voice barely a whisper. "You're going to be magnificent."

Seraphina looked at her assistant—this woman who had managed every detail of her life, who had witnessed her most vulnerable moments, who had never once offered empty comfort.

Until now.

"Thank you," Seraphina whispered back.

And then the doors began to open.

The light spilled out, bright and overwhelming. The murmur of voices ceased entirely, replaced by absolute silence. Hundreds of eyes turned toward the entrance, toward her.

Seraphina took one last breath—deep, steady, controlled.

Inside, she was screaming.

Outside, she was perfect.

She stepped forward, and the procession moved with her.

The march continued.

To be continued...