



Chapter 2: The Verification

Seraphina stared at the half-eaten steak, the blood pooling at the edges of the white china plate. Her stomach had turned to stone somewhere between the first bite and the tenth. She couldn't eat anymore. Couldn't pretend to be present when her mind was already fleeing to that dissociative space where the next hour couldn't touch her.

Celeste's voice cut through the fog. "Ms. Weiss, the exam awaits."

Not a question. Not a request. A statement of fact. The exam awaited, and Seraphina would go to it, because that's what happened next in the schedule. That's what always happened.

Seraphina turned her head slowly to look at Celeste. Her assistant stood there with her tablet, her expression professionally neutral, waiting. Always waiting for Seraphina to comply.

And Seraphina always did.

She pushed the food tray away with a deliberate motion, the china scraping against the table. The sound felt too loud in the quiet room. The attendants had finished their preparations and left. It was just her and Celeste now.

And the exam that awaited.

Seraphina stood, her white silk nightgown falling around her like a shroud. She reached for the hem and pulled it over her head in one smooth motion, letting it drop to the floor. Then her undergarments—the delicate white pieces that had been selected for her, like everything else in her life.

She removed them without ceremony, standing naked in the center of her room. Celeste watched. She always watched. It was her job to watch, to manage, to ensure everything proceeded according to protocol.

Seraphina met her assistant's eyes, her own expression flat and empty. "No matter," she said, her voice hollow. "I'll not need these anyway."

The words hung in the air. She wouldn't need undergarments for the exam. They'd only have to be removed again in the medical facility. Efficiency. Always efficiency.

Celeste's expression didn't change, but something flickered in her eyes—concern, perhaps, or discomfort. It was gone before Seraphina could identify it.

"The robe is on your bed," Celeste said quietly.

Seraphina turned and found the white silk robe laid out with the same precision as everything else in her life. She wrapped it around her naked body, tying the sash with mechanical movements. The silk was soft against her skin, but she barely felt it. She was already leaving her body, already retreating to that safe, numb place.

She made her way to the door, her bare feet silent on the marble floor. Celeste followed a step behind, her tablet clutched to her chest.

The door opened automatically, and Seraphina crossed the threshold.

The security personnel were waiting.

Four of them—her DPT detail, dressed in their crisp uniforms, weapons holstered but visible. They straightened as she emerged, their faces professionally blank. They'd been standing outside her door all night, all morning, always. Protecting her. Monitoring her. Ensuring she stayed exactly where she was supposed to be.

The team leader—Commander Reeves, a woman in her forties with sharp eyes and a sharper jaw—gave a curt nod. "Ms. Weiss. We'll escort you to medical."

Not a question. Never a question.

The security personnel moved into formation around her—two in front, two behind, Celeste at her side. A human cage, mobile and efficient.

Seraphina walked forward, and they moved with her, a synchronized unit. She was the center, the precious cargo, the thing being transported from one location to another.

They moved through the corridors of the residential wing—white walls, white floors, white everything. The morning light streamed through tall windows, making everything glow with that sterile, perfect brightness. A few staff members passed them in the hallway, immediately pressing themselves against the walls and bowing their heads as the procession went by.

Seraphina didn't look at them. She looked straight ahead, her face a mask of calm, her mind somewhere else entirely.

They passed through a security checkpoint—biometric scanners confirming her identity, doors sliding open with a hydraulic whisper. Then down another corridor, this one leading to the medical wing.

The smell hit her first. That distinctive scent of antiseptic and clinical efficiency. Her stomach clenched, and she forced herself to breathe steadily. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Don't think about what's coming. Don't think about the cold instruments and the invasive questions and the way they'll document every inch of her most private self.

Don't think. Just walk.

The medical facility doors opened, and they entered a waiting area—more white, more sterile perfection. A nurse stood waiting, dressed in pristine white scrubs, her hair pulled back in a severe bun. She was young, maybe late twenties, with the same professionally neutral expression everyone wore around Seraphina.

The nurse bowed. "Ms. Weiss. Dr. Kovač is ready for you."

Of course she was. Everything was ready. Everything was always ready.

The nurse gestured toward a door marked "Examination Room 1" in elegant script. The door was closed, but Seraphina could see the light glowing beneath it. Inside, Dr. Kovač would be waiting with her instruments and her clipboard and her clinical detachment.

Inside, Seraphina would be examined, verified, certified.

Inside, her body would once again become public property.

Commander Reeves stepped forward. "We'll wait here, Ms. Weiss. Celeste will accompany you inside for documentation purposes."

Seraphina nodded. She'd known Celeste would be there. Celeste was always there for the verifications, taking notes, ensuring everything was properly recorded. Another set of eyes. Another witness to Seraphina's humiliation.

The nurse opened the examination room door and stood aside, waiting.

Seraphina looked at that open door—at the bright light spilling out, at the glimpse of the examination table inside, at the future that awaited her in the next hour.

She could refuse. She could turn around and walk back to her room and lock the door and refuse to come out. She could say no.

But she wouldn't.

Because she never did.

Because this was the price of the tiaras, the price of the inheritance, the price of being Seraphina Weiss.

Because her body was not her own.

Seraphina took a breath—deep, steady, controlled—and stepped forward.

The nurse motioned her into the exam room with a gentle gesture, as if this were a kindness, as if Seraphina had a choice.

Seraphina crossed the threshold.

The door closed behind her with a soft, final click.

The examination room was exactly as she remembered from the last verification three months ago. White walls. White floors. Bright, unforgiving lights overhead that left no shadows, no privacy, no mercy.

The examination table dominated the center of the room—padded in white leather, stirrups folded discreetly at the end, a fresh paper sheet laid across the surface. Beside it, a tray of instruments gleamed under the lights. Speculums. Swabs. Measuring devices. All the tools necessary to verify her purity.

Dr. Kovač stood by the counter, reviewing something on a tablet. She was a woman in her fifties, with silver-streaked hair pulled back in a tight bun and the

kind of face that had forgotten how to smile. She'd been performing these examinations on Seraphina since her menarche five years ago. Quarterly verifications, every three months, like clockwork.

Dr. Kovač had seen Seraphina's most intimate self more times than Seraphina could count.

And yet they'd never had a real conversation.

The doctor looked up as Seraphina entered, her expression professionally neutral. "Ms. Weiss. Good morning. Please have a seat on the table."

Not "How are you feeling?" Not "I know this is difficult." Just instructions. Always instructions.

Celeste entered behind Seraphina, closing the door and taking her position in the corner with her tablet ready. The nurse moved to the counter, preparing the documentation forms.

Seraphina stood in the center of the room in her white silk robe, and for a moment, she couldn't move. Her body had frozen, some primal part of her brain screaming at her to run, to fight, to do anything but submit to this.

But she'd learned long ago that running didn't work. Fighting didn't work. Submission was the only option.

She untied the sash of her robe with steady hands—hands that didn't shake, hands that showed no emotion, hands that belonged to someone else. She let the robe fall open, then slipped it off her shoulders. It pooled at her feet, leaving her completely naked under the harsh lights.

She didn't try to cover herself. There was no point. They would see everything anyway.

Seraphina walked to the examination table and sat on the edge, the paper crinkling beneath her. The leather was cold against her bare skin.

Dr. Kovač approached with her tablet, her eyes scanning Seraphina's body with clinical assessment. "Any changes since your last examination? Irregularities in your cycle? Pain or discomfort?"

"No," Seraphina said. Her voice sounded distant, detached. Good. That meant the dissociation was working.

"Good." Dr. Kovač made a note on her tablet. "We'll proceed with the standard verification protocol. Physical examination, hymenal assessment, and documentation. The process will take approximately thirty minutes. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Seraphina had understood for five years. She understood that her virginity was a legal requirement for inheritance. She understood that her body needed to be certified pure before she could receive the tiaras. She understood that this violation was called tradition.

She understood everything.

And she hated all of it.

"Please lie back," Dr. Kovač instructed.

Seraphina lay back on the table, the paper crinkling loudly in the silent room. She stared up at the ceiling—white, featureless, infinite. She found a small imperfection in the paint, a tiny crack near the corner, and focused on it.

That crack became her entire world.

"Feet in the stirrups, please."

Seraphina lifted her legs, and the nurse moved forward to help position them. The stirrups were cold metal wrapped in thin padding. They locked into place with a mechanical click, holding her legs open, exposed, vulnerable.

She was completely open now. Completely visible. Completely powerless.

Dr. Kovač moved between her legs, and Seraphina felt the doctor's gloved hands on her thighs—cold, clinical, impersonal.

"Beginning external examination," Dr. Kovač said, her voice flat and professional.

Celeste's fingers moved across her tablet, recording everything.

Seraphina stared at the crack in the ceiling and counted her breaths.

One. Two. Three.

Dr. Kovač's hands moved over her body, pressing, examining, documenting.

Seraphina felt it all from a great distance, as if it were happening to someone else.

As if her consciousness had floated up to that crack in the ceiling and was watching from above.

Four. Five. Six.

"External examination complete. No abnormalities noted. Beginning internal examination."

Seraphina heard the snap of latex gloves, the sound of lubricant being applied. She knew what came next. She'd endured it twenty times before.

She closed her eyes and left her body entirely.

Somewhere far away, Dr. Kovač performed the examination. Somewhere far away, instruments were inserted and measurements were taken and her most private self was inspected and documented. Somewhere far away, Celeste recorded everything on her tablet, and the nurse prepared the certification forms.

But Seraphina wasn't there.

She was in that crack in the ceiling, in that small imperfection in the perfect white surface. She was nowhere and everywhere. She was safe in the dissociative space where nothing could touch her.

Time passed. Minutes or hours, she couldn't tell.

And then Dr. Kovač's voice, distant and muffled: "Examination complete. Hymen intact. Virginity verified. Ms. Weiss remains suitable for inheritance."

The instruments withdrew. The stirrups unlocked. Her legs were lowered.

"You may sit up, Ms. Weiss."

Slowly, Seraphina returned to her body. She opened her eyes and saw the white ceiling, the bright lights, the examination room. She sat up, the paper crinkling beneath her, and reached for her robe.

Her hands were steady. Her face was calm. She showed nothing.

Dr. Kovač was at the counter, filling out forms on her tablet. "The certification will be sealed and delivered to the Council within the hour. You're cleared for the ceremony."

"Thank you," Seraphina said automatically. Thanking the woman who had just violated her. Thanking her for the privilege of being verified.

The absurdity of it would have made her laugh if she could still feel anything.

She tied her robe and stood, her legs slightly unsteady. Celeste was immediately at her side, a hand hovering near her elbow but not quite touching.

"Are you well, Ms. Weiss?" Celeste asked quietly.

Seraphina looked at her assistant—at the concern in her eyes that was probably genuine but felt hollow anyway.

"I'm fine," Seraphina said. The lie came easily. She'd been saying it for years.

The nurse opened the door, and Seraphina walked out of the examination room on steady legs, her face composed, her body moving with the grace expected of a Weiss heir.

Commander Reeves and the security detail were waiting, exactly where she'd left them.

"Examination complete?" Reeves asked.

"Yes," Seraphina said.

"Then we'll escort you back to your quarters for final preparations."

The security personnel formed up around her again, and they began the walk back through the white corridors.

Seraphina walked in the center of her human cage, wrapped in her white silk robe, and felt absolutely nothing.

She'd been verified. Certified. Approved.

Her body had been inspected and found acceptable.

In a few hours, she would receive three tiaras and become the leader of the Weiss lulligarchy.

And somewhere deep inside, in a place she couldn't quite reach anymore, a girl who had once stood on a balcony and imagined falling was screaming.

But Seraphina couldn't hear her.

She'd learned long ago how to silence that voice.

They reached her quarters, and the security detail took up their positions outside her door. Commander Reeves gave a curt nod as Seraphina entered, Celeste

following close behind.

The door closed, sealing them in the white sanctuary of her room. The breakfast tray had been cleared away. The bed had been made with military precision. Everything was in its place, waiting for her to step into the next phase of the schedule.

Celeste set her tablet down on the side table and turned to Seraphina, her expression softening by the smallest degree. "Have a moment to yourself, and we'll proceed."

It was the closest thing to kindness Celeste had offered all morning. A moment. A brief respite before the machinery started again.

Seraphina looked at her assistant—this woman who had managed every detail of her life for two years, who had witnessed her examinations and documented her compliance, who knew her schedule better than Seraphina knew herself.

"Thank you," Seraphina said quietly.

Celeste nodded and moved to the corner of the room, giving her space. Not privacy—there was never true privacy—but distance. It would have to be enough.

Seraphina turned away and walked toward the balcony doors. They opened at her approach, and the morning air rushed in—cooler now, carrying the scent of the gardens below. She stepped out onto the balcony, her bare feet on the cold stone, her white silk robe flowing around her.

And then, without thinking, without planning, she knelt.

Her knees hit the stone, and she bowed her head, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She didn't know why she was doing this. The Weiss lulligarchy didn't practice traditional religion—they believed in genetics, in science, in the perfection of their own bloodline. Prayer was for the weak, for those who needed comfort from invisible forces.

But Seraphina needed something. Someone. Even if it was just the wind and the morning light and the vast, indifferent sky.

She closed her eyes and whispered to whatever might be listening.

"My emotional wellbeing," she breathed, her voice barely audible. "After today, no more exams. That is behind me, other than my annuals."

It was a small mercy, but it was something. Once she received the tiaras, once she was officially the leader, the quarterly verifications would end. She would only have to endure the annual medical examinations—still invasive, still violating, but less frequent. Less constant.

One less way they could control her body.

It wasn't freedom. But it was a step toward it.

Seraphina stayed there for a moment longer, kneeling on the cold stone, letting the wind whip through her dark hair. She breathed in the morning air and tried to find some center of calm inside herself. Some place that was still hers.

Then she opened her eyes, stood, and turned back toward her room.

Her clothing was still there, waiting for her. The white ceremonial gown hung on its stand like a ghost, the delicate undergarments laid out beside it with meticulous care. Everything prepared. Everything ready.

Seraphina took a deep breath—in through the nose, out through the mouth—and stepped back inside.

Celeste looked up from her tablet as Seraphina entered. She studied Seraphina's face for a moment, perhaps searching for signs of distress or instability. Whatever she saw, she seemed satisfied.

Celeste moved to the bedside table and picked up a small porcelain bowl filled with warm water. Beside it, a pristine white washcloth and a soft towel had been laid out.

She handed the washcloth to Seraphina without a word.

Seraphina understood immediately. Even though she'd showered in the pre-dawn hours, even though her body was already clean, she needed to wash again. The exam had left its residue—not just physical, but symbolic. The lubricant, the touch of gloved hands, the violation of instruments.

She needed to be cleansed before she could be dressed.

Seraphina untied her robe and let it fall to the floor, standing naked once again in the center of her room. She dipped the washcloth into the warm water and began to wash herself with slow, methodical movements.

She washed her thighs, her hips, between her legs—removing any trace of the examination. The water was warm and soothing, and she focused on the sensation, on the simple act of caring for her own body in this small, private way.

Celeste stood nearby, not watching but present. Always present.

When Seraphina finished, she set the washcloth aside and picked up the towel. She dried herself carefully, patting her skin until it was completely dry. The towel was soft, luxurious—everything in her life was luxurious, even the tools of her compliance.

She set the towel down and turned to the undergarments laid out on her bed.

They were exquisite—white silk and delicate lace, handmade by artisans who specialized in clothing for the pure families. Each piece had been selected specifically for today, for the ceremony, for the moment she would become something more than just an heir.

Seraphina picked up the first piece—a delicate silk bralette with intricate lace detailing. She slipped it on, adjusting the straps until it sat perfectly. Then the matching panties, high-waisted and elegant, the lace trim sitting just below her navel.

Next came the garter belt—white silk with small pearl clasps—and the stockings. She sat on the edge of her bed and rolled each stocking up her leg with practiced precision, attaching them to the garter with small, efficient movements. She'd been taught how to dress herself in formal attire from a young age, though usually attendants did it for her. Today, she wanted to do it herself. Needed to do it herself.

Some small claim to autonomy, even if it was just putting on her own underwear.

The slip came next—a floor-length white silk garment that clung to her body and flowed like water. It was nearly transparent in the morning light, the outline of her undergarments visible beneath. But it didn't matter. The gown would cover everything.

Finally, the gown itself.

Celeste moved forward to help, and together they lifted the ceremonial gown from its stand. It was breathtaking—white silk and organza, hand-embroidered with intricate patterns that represented the Weiss family legacy. The bodice was fitted,

structured with boning that would hold her posture perfectly upright. The skirt was full and flowing, designed to move like liquid light.

Seraphina raised her arms, and Celeste lowered the gown over her head. The fabric cascaded down her body, settling over her curves, the weight of it substantial and grounding. Celeste moved behind her to fasten the long row of tiny buttons that ran down the back—each one secured with patient, practiced fingers.

As the gown settled into place, Seraphina looked down at herself. The hem of the gown just barely touched the floor, and when she moved, she could see the delicate peek of white lace from her undergarments at the very edge. A glimpse of what lay beneath the perfection. A secret only she would know.

Celeste finished the last button and stepped back to assess. "Beautiful," she said simply. "Now the shoes."

The shoes sat beside the bed—white silk heels with pearl embellishments, elegant and impossibly high. Seraphina had been trained to walk in heels like these since she was young, part of her ballet training. Balance, posture, grace—all drilled into her body until it became second nature.

She slipped her feet into the shoes, one at a time, and stood. The heels added four inches to her height, changing her posture, elongating her silhouette. She took a few steps, testing her balance, and the gown swirled around her legs like water.

Perfect. Everything was perfect.

Celeste circled her slowly, checking every detail—the fall of the gown, the fit of the bodice, the placement of the hem. She made a small adjustment to the neckline, smoothing a wrinkle that Seraphina couldn't even see.

"You look every inch the heir," Celeste said, and there was something in her voice—pride, perhaps, or satisfaction at a job well done.

Seraphina looked at herself in the full-length mirror across the room. The girl—no, the woman—staring back at her was a stranger. Tall, elegant, draped in white perfection. Her dark hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders, contrasting beautifully with the pristine gown. Her face was calm, composed, regal.

She looked like a princess. A queen. A leader.

She looked like everything she was supposed to be.

And she felt nothing.

"What's next?" Seraphina asked, her voice steady.

Celeste checked her tablet. "Hair and minimal cosmetics. Then the DPT briefing at 1000 hours. The procession begins at 1100."

Seraphina nodded. The schedule marched on. The machinery continued.

She stood in her white gown and her high heels, and she waited for the next instruction.

Because that's what she did.

That's all she'd ever done.

Celeste guided her to the large vanity that dominated one wall of her quarters. The mirror was enormous, framed in white-painted wood with ornate carvings of the Weiss family crest. Seraphina sat in the cushioned chair, and Celeste moved behind her with practiced efficiency.

Hair first.

Celeste's fingers worked through Seraphina's long, dark hair with gentle precision. She didn't pull or tug—her touch was professional, careful. She gathered sections and began to style, creating something elegant but not overly elaborate. The tiaras would be the focal point, so the hair needed to frame her face without competing for attention.

Seraphina watched in the mirror as her hair was transformed—pulled back from her face in soft waves, secured with nearly invisible pins, a few loose tendrils left to soften the look. It was beautiful. Regal. Exactly what an heir should look like.

She felt like she was watching someone else being prepared.

"Minimal cosmetics," Celeste murmured, more to herself than to Seraphina. "You need to look pure, not painted."

She opened a small case of cosmetics—all in neutral, barely-there shades. A touch of foundation to even out Seraphina's skin tone. A hint of blush to add warmth to her cheeks. A subtle highlight on her cheekbones. Mascara to define her lashes. A nude lip color that was barely darker than her natural lips.

The effect was striking—Seraphina looked flawless, but in a way that seemed effortless. Natural. Pure.

Celeste stepped back to assess her work, then reached for a small velvet box on the vanity. Inside were a few pieces of jewelry—delicate, understated. A pair of small diamond studs for her ears. A thin white gold chain with a single pearl pendant that settled just below her collarbone.

"Small amount of jewelry," Celeste explained as she fastened the necklace. "Since you'll be wearing the tiaras later. We don't want to overwhelm."

Seraphina touched the pearl at her throat. It was cool against her skin, smooth and perfect. Like everything else.

Celeste met her eyes in the mirror. "You're ready."

Ready. As if readiness were something that could be achieved through hair and makeup and jewelry. As if the external perfection could somehow prepare her for what was coming.

But Seraphina nodded, because that's what she did.

The briefing came quickly.

Too quickly. Seraphina had barely had time to process her own reflection before Celeste was checking her tablet and announcing that it was time. Commander Reeves and her team were waiting in the conference room adjacent to Seraphina's quarters.

Seraphina stood, her gown swirling around her, and followed Celeste out of her room. The security detail fell into formation around her immediately, escorting her the short distance down the corridor.

The conference room was small but efficient—a long white table, chairs arranged precisely, a large screen on one wall displaying the Weiss family crest.

Commander Reeves stood at the head of the table, her uniform crisp and perfect, her expression all business. Three other DPT personnel flanked her, and two men in different uniforms—darker, more tactical—stood to the side.

Private Military Company representatives. The external security.

Seraphina entered, and everyone in the room straightened, their attention snapping to her. She was the center again. The precious cargo. The thing they

were all here to protect.

Celeste pulled out a chair for her, and Seraphina sat, arranging her gown carefully. Celeste took the seat beside her, tablet ready.

"Ms. Weiss," Commander Reeves began without preamble. "This briefing covers security protocols for today's ceremony and your transition to leadership. We'll keep it concise."

Seraphina nodded, folding her hands in her lap.

Reeves gestured to the screen, which shifted to display a detailed map of the compound. "External perimeter security will be handled by Sentinel PMC." She nodded toward the two men in tactical uniforms. "They'll maintain a three-layer defensive perimeter around the ceremonial hall and all access routes. Air space is restricted. Drone surveillance is active. Any unauthorized approach will be intercepted immediately."

One of the PMC representatives—a man in his thirties with a shaved head and cold eyes—spoke up. "We have forty operatives deployed, Ms. Weiss. Sniper positions on all high points. Mobile response teams on standby. You'll be the most protected person in the territory today."

Seraphina nodded again, though the words felt abstract. Snipers. Response teams. It was hard to imagine that level of threat, that level of danger. She'd lived her entire life in this compound, protected and isolated. The idea that someone might want to harm her felt distant, theoretical.

But she supposed that was the point of all this security—to keep the threats theoretical.

"Internal security," Reeves continued, "will be coordinated between DPT teams and PMC personnel. My team will maintain close protection—we'll be with you at all times during the procession and ceremony. PMC will handle crowd control and facility security."

The screen shifted to show the route of the procession—from her quarters, through the main corridors, into the ceremonial hall. Red dots marked DPT positions. Blue dots marked PMC positions. It looked like a military operation.

Which, Seraphina supposed, it was.

"The procession begins at 1100 hours," Reeves said. "You'll be escorted by a six-person DPT detail. I'll be at your right. Celeste will be at your left. The route has been cleared and secured. Estimated walk time: twelve minutes."

Twelve minutes. Twelve minutes of walking through corridors while everyone watched. Twelve minutes of being on display.

Seraphina's stomach tightened, but her face remained calm.

"The ceremony itself will last approximately ninety minutes," Reeves continued. "The Council will be seated on the dais. You'll approach from the center aisle. The three tiaras will be presented in sequence—Genetic Legacy, Purity, and Authority. After the final tiara is placed, you'll take your seat at the head of the Council table."

The screen showed a diagram of the ceremonial hall—the seating arrangements, the dais, the approach path. Everything choreographed. Everything planned.

"Post-ceremony, you'll have a brief recess before the first Council session at 1400 hours," Reeves said. "Security protocols will remain at maximum level throughout the day. Any questions?"

Seraphina looked at the screen, at the maps and diagrams and security positions. It was overwhelming—layers of protection, coordination between multiple teams, protocols she didn't fully understand.

Military and security weren't her wheelhouse. She'd been trained in governance, economics, genetics, history. She understood policy and strategy in the abstract. But this—tactical operations, threat assessment, security coordination—this was foreign territory.

And she'd have to learn. Learn quickly. These matters would be important for a new leader. She couldn't afford to be ignorant of the systems that kept her safe, that kept the lulligarchy stable.

But right now, in this moment, most of it flew over her head. She caught the broad strokes—external perimeter, internal coordination, procession route, ceremony sequence—but the details blurred together.

"No questions," Seraphina said, her voice steady.

Reeves nodded, satisfied. "Then we're ready to proceed. We'll escort you to the procession staging area at 1050 hours. That gives you thirty minutes."

Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes until everything changed.

The briefing concluded, and the security personnel filed out, returning to their positions. The PMC representatives left to coordinate with their teams. It was just Seraphina and Celeste again, sitting in the quiet conference room.

Celeste looked at her, concern flickering in her eyes. "How are you feeling, Ms. Weiss?"

It was the second time Celeste had asked that question today. The second time she'd shown something that might be genuine care.

Seraphina wanted to say: *Terrified. Overwhelmed. Like I'm about to step into a role I'm not ready for. Like I'm going to disappoint everyone. Like I want to run.*

But she didn't say any of that.

"I'm ready," Seraphina said instead.

The lie tasted like nothing.

The thirty minutes passed in a blur.

Seraphina returned to her quarters with Celeste and the security detail. She stood by the window, looking out at the compound, trying to steady her breathing. Celeste made small adjustments to her gown, checked her hair, ensured every detail was perfect.

And then it was time.

1050 hours.

Commander Reeves appeared at her door. "Ms. Weiss. It's time."

Seraphina turned from the window. She took one last look at her room—the white walls, the white bed, the white everything. Her cage. Her sanctuary. The only home she'd ever known.

After today, she'd still live here. But everything would be different.

She walked to the door, her heels clicking on the marble floor, her gown flowing behind her like a river of white silk.

The security detail formed up around her—six DPT personnel, all in crisp uniforms, all with weapons visible. Commander Reeves took her position at

Seraphina's right, exactly as planned. Celeste moved to her left, tablet clutched to her chest.

Celeste stood close. Closer than usual. As if her presence could somehow shield Seraphina from what was coming.

Seraphina appreciated it, even if it changed nothing.

"Ready?" Reeves asked.

Seraphina took a breath. Deep. Steady. Controlled.

"Yes," she said.

And they began to walk.

The procession had begun.

To be continued...