



Comfort Is Just Another Cage

Two days later.

The cage door opens without warning.

Hands grip my arms and haul me to my feet, chains clinking, cuffs cold against my wrists. They don't yank my hair, sneer or spit nor call me a mutt. No one shoves me to the oor like usual.

They handle me as if I might shatter if they're rough—and that terries me more than cruelty ever did.

I stare at them, disoriented enough that I nearly trip over my own feet.

Since when do they walk instead of drag?

Is it my mother?

Did her threat nally sink its claws into their small, cowardly hearts?

We move through corridors I know too well, stone walls swallowing every sound. When I realize where we're headed, my steps falter.

This isn't the way to the throne room or my father's oce.

I had thought I was being summoned again. Instead, we stop at my door.

My real room.

The princess's chambers—the one with tall windows, velvet drapes, and a bed that doesn't feel as though it was designed by someone who despises women.

"What—" My voice is hoarse. "It hasn't been a week yet. The arranged marriage—"

No one answers.

The doors open, and warmth spills over me like a forgotten memory. Relief hits so hard my knees nearly give out.

They guide me inside and—shock of all shocks—kneel to remove the chains from my ankles.

I almost cry.

Dear Moon Goddess... am I dreaming?

The metal falls away.

My legs are free.

I stare down, stunned, exing my toes as if freedom might vanish if I don't test it.

But my hands—

Still bound. The cuffs gleam faintly against my skin, warm and hateful.

Why now?

Why this sudden mercy?

What game is this?

Before I can think too long, maids enter the room.

And not the sneering ones.

These bow. Deeply.

My lips part in disbelief.

"Your Highness," one murmurs.

I almost laugh from the sheer whiplash of it.

A tray is placed before me—real food. Meat cooked properly. Bread still steaming.

I don't bother with pride or pretend to still have little dignity.

I eat like I might never see food again.

My body is weak, my wolf silent, the effects of starvation nally catching up with me—but I don't stop. They watch me carefully. Not with disgust or mockery.

When I nish, they bring water. Then more food. They bathe me next.

Warm water. Gentle hands. Oils worked into my skin as though I am something precious instead of something meant to be broken. Fingers ease knots from my shoulders I hadn't realized I was carrying. I close my eyes despite myself.

Suspicion tightens with every kindness.

My father never gives without taking.

They dress me in silk. My hair is brushed and braided softly. My face is cleaned and lightly painted—not like a doll, but like a queen preparing for court.

When they nish, I barely recognize the woman staring back at me in the mirror.

The maids leave without a word.

Then the door creaks open again.

One maid slips inside, her eyes darting to the door and then back to me, as though she expects execution for breathing too loudly.

I recognize her instantly—one of my mother's personal maids.

She looks beyond terried. She crosses the room quickly, drops a sealed letter onto my table, and bolts without a word.

My ngers hover over the seal before breaking it. I already know this letter cost her something.

The paper trembles as I unfold it.

After reading this, burn it immediately.

My breath catches.

My mother's handwriting—neat, careful in the way it always is when she's afraid of being caught.

I read on.

> My precious Ravelle,

I pray this letter reaches you. I do not know how much time I have, so I will be quick—and honest—for once in my life. If your father discovers this, I will not survive his wrath.

I swallow hard.

> First, about the cuffs on your hands. You already know they are designed to suppress your wolf and your power. They are not something that can be easily removed. You may not know this, but I tried to remove them while you slept. It was impossible and it hurt me. I sought help afterward—healers who once worked closely with your father. I bribed witches. I even threatened one of the elders in secret. None of them could help.

My ngers curl into the paper.

> They all said the same thing. The cuffs are bound by a magical key forged by your father himself. Only he can unlock them—when he chooses to.

My vision blurs.

> He intends to give that key to Alpha Darius as a wedding gift. He calls it tradition. He says that after the mating—once your power transfers to your husband—he will become your superior. Your authority. Everything you are, everything you have, will belong to him. He will release you when he is nished.

I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood.

> I argued. I screamed. I reminded him that you are his daughter, not an object. He reminded me of my place with his st.

I draw in a sharp, shaky breath.

> I am no longer allowed to see you. He is suspicious. He believes I am growing... sentimental.

A humorless laugh slips from my lips.

Sentimental.

For her own child.

> That is why I am writing instead. I cannot risk coming to you again.

My hands tremble.

> Ravelle... I sent the message. Your message. To Alpha Kei. Your mate. I sent word exactly as you instructed. I prayed to the Moon Goddess that he receives it—and that he comes for you quickly.

Tears sting my eyes.

> I hope he is a good man. They are rare among our kind. I hope he treats you well. I begged your father to move you back to your chambers. I told him a future queen must not appear broken before her wedding. He agreed—reluctantly—and asked for something in return. Something you do not need to know.

So that's the price.

> This comfort you have now is temporary. Please—behave. Endure. Do not give him an excuse to put you back in that cage.

My nails dig into my palms.

> I know I have never protected you the way a mother should. Obedience was easier for me than courage.

My hands shake violently now.

> But if saving you costs me what little soul I have left, I will pay it gladly.

The words blur.

> Live, Ravelle. Live so you can take revenge on everyone who hurt you. Be the king you were born to be.

That line nearly breaks me.

> I hope that one day, I am as brave as you are.

I stare at the page long after the words stop making sense.

This isn't kindness from my father.

It's borrowed time—bought with my mother's suffering.

I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the oor, and cross to the repit. The paper catches quickly, curling inward as the ames devour it.

I watch until nothing remains.

Ash.

Just like her hope if I fail.

My hands curl at my sides, the cuffs humming softly—mocking, possessive.

Kei.

I want to believe he'll come. That he'll tear through these walls like some arrogant, infuriating miracle.

And if he does—good.

But if he doesn't... I will still survive.

I will not stake my life on a man saving me. That is everything I am ghing against.

I am not a damsel in distress.

I am not dying in chains.

Three days later.

The walls feel closer.

Not literally—I know my room is the same size it has always been: massive, silk-draped, perfumed, built to cage a princess in comfort. But waiting does this. It presses in. Makes every breath feel borrowed. Like the room knows tomorrow is coming and is counting down with me.

Tomorrow.

My arranged marriage.

The words taste wrong.

I pace barefoot across the carpet for the tenth time.

I've walked every corner of this room so many times I could map it blindfolded. I've thought until my head aches. I've argued with myself, cursed the Moon Goddess, threatened the walls, negotiated with the ceiling.

Nothing.

No plan.

No miracle.

But I don't act out or scream or throw things.

Not because I don't want to—but because my mother's voice still echoes in my head.

Behave. Endure.

So, for once, I listen to her.

And that might be the cruelest punishment of all.

I play the obedient princess. I eat when told. I nod when spoken to. I let the maids brush my hair while they whisper behind their hands.

And every night, some stupid, traitorous part of me waits.

For Kei.

He should have come by now.

I hate myself for thinking it. For still hoping. For glancing at the door like it might suddenly swing open—or explode—and reveal a very naked, very arrogant Alpha with murder in his eyes and freedom in his hands.

Nothing happens.

No miraculous Alpha bursting through palace gates like a badly timed fantasy.

Not even his shadow.

By the fourth morning, I'm done curling in on myself like a dying thing.

Thinking in this room is useless. That's what's killing me. Maybe movement will shake something loose.

I stride to the door and try the handle.

Locked.

Of course.

I knock sharply, the cuffs clanking. A moment later, the door opens just enough for two guards to peer inside.

"I want to take a stroll," I say calmly.

They exchange a look.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," one says stily, avoiding my eyes. "You are only permitted to attend the women's class. No unsupervised movement."

I blink. "I can't even walk in the garden now?"

"No, Your Highness."

Then—surprisingly, even to myself—I smile.

"Fine," I say brightly. "I'll attend the class."

They stare at me like I've announced I plan to sprout wings.

"You... want to?" one asks, genuinely confused.

"So badly I might cry," I deadpan. "Shocking, I know."

They exchange another look in confusion, and eventually, they nod and motion for me to follow.

The walk feels like a parade. The moment I enter the women's hall, the chatter dies.

Every head turns. Dozens of women stare at me.

Whispers bloom—sharp, excited, venomous.

She's really marrying him tomorrow.

Second strongest Alpha.

Lucky b***h.

I'd kill to be her.

She doesn't look grateful.

I hear everything.

I always do.