

From Griffin's Point of View

What happened in Velos stays in Velos...

Griffin watched Cat figure out their location from only architectural clues and the fact that there was a nearby forest. The way she put things together using a knowledge base most people didn't possess amazed him.

"How do you know so much about Velos?" he asked, curious. "The circus travels a route farther to the west."

"I've met people, heard things," she answered with a small shrug.

Annoyance ground against his earlier admiration. Cat knew the truth—always—and yet she lied to him constantly. He could see it in her face, knew when she was hiding something. He wanted what was best for Sinta. Griffin was convinced that Cat did, too, but for them to start making changes happen, he had to break through her animosity first. Sometimes, he saw flashes of something else in her when she forgot to guard her expression, something that made his chest clench. Maybe there was still hope.

"Help me, Cat," he said, trying not to sound like he was begging. Weakness wouldn't go over well with her. She responded negatively to force—that much was clear—but she respected strength. "Or at least tell me the truth. I know when you're lying."

"Oh?" She looked like her last meal was abruptly curdling in her stomach.

"Your eyes get twitchy."

"My eyes do not get twitchy!" she spat back, clearly horrified.

Did she really not know? She had so many tells, but he almost felt like he was alone in seeing them. No one else seemed to notice every nuance of her breath and skin.

"This one gets narrower." Griffin lightly touched the tip of his finger to the corner of her right eye. Cat jolted at the contact. He wasn't sure if that brought him satisfaction or regret. Maybe it was some of both. He couldn't figure out a lot of things when it came to Cat, but he knew his own heart and body. They didn't lie to him. He cared about her deeply; he wanted her madly.

"It's as if you're expecting the lie to hurt, but it doesn't because it's your own," he explained.

Still looking like there was a sour grape in her mouth, she leaned away from him and started walking again. "Thank you for telling me. I'll have to work on that," she said through clenched teeth.

“Cat...” he growled, stalking after her. “Everything would be so much easier if—”

“—you let me go.”

Griffin shook his head. “I can’t. You’re too valuable.” “Aren’t you the lucky despot? The one who caught the

Kingmaker. Forgive me for not being overjoyed about becoming your slave.”

“Not a slave.” Impulsively, he reached out and grabbed her arm, swinging her back to him. “One of us.”

Cat wrenched out of his hold, looking more than incredulous. She looked *furious*, her mesmerizing green eyes practically on fire.

Gods, he wanted to shake her. Kiss her. Make her believe him. It should have been obvious to her of all people that he was telling the truth.

Once again, the fact that he’d dragged her unwillingly from her home punched Griffin in the stomach, making his gut twist. What in the bloody Underworld had he been thinking? His logic and reason had seemed to melt in the heat between them and then abandon him entirely when they’d really begun interacting. In the end, he’d just known she had to be with him. They *had* to be together.

He inwardly grimaced. As far as choices went about how to make that happen, though, there were undoubtedly better ones. And now he was paying. Cat was making sure of it—as she should.

“I’ll never be one of you,” she bit out with enough conviction to almost convince him.

Almost.

Griffin dragged a hand through his hair, tugging it back. “You’re too stubborn for your own good.”

She glared at him. She was something fierce.

Emotion tore through his chest. *Would she ever forgive him?* The five of them—Beta Team, Cat, and him—eventually

reached the market rows, and Griffin pulled four silver coins from his money pouch.

Flynn’s eyes brightened as he rubbed his hands together. “Payday!”

Flynn, Carver, and Kato each took the coin Griffin owed them, leaving one in the palm of his hand.

“Cat.” Griffin extended the coin to her, an uncomfortable hesitancy making his heart pound. “Your pay.”

As he expected, Cat refused the money. He wouldn’t push her. He wasn’t out to prove she was part of their team with one gesture. It was a long-term effort, one that meant a great deal to him.

He put the coin away. “I’ll hold it for you. I know what you want. You complain about it often enough.”

She looked up sharply, and then her eyes narrowed. *Did she like it when he teased her?*

Cat moved along next to him while he bought her some fruit he thought she would like as well as some bread and cheese. Not goat cheese. He knew better than that. Griffin tried to keep the rope from pulling taut, but it wasn’t always easy. He hated to remind her it was there. Not that she ever forgot. He just didn’t want to make things worse between them.

He located a soap seller next and tried to find something nice-smelling to replace Cat’s shrinking bar. He’d been using hers, and there wasn’t much left.

The turn of his thoughts reminded him of bathing so close to her, only a few feet apart. Gods, he wished he could see her. Just a glimpse. Just the slope of her bare shoulder while her hair was slicked back and water slid down the column of her throat..

Taking a deep breath, Griffin tried to control the jagged, unsatisfied heat prowling through him like a caged beast.

Cat rolled her eyes. “You’re worse than a woman. Just take the yellow one. It’s always the best.”

He reached for a block of bright-yellow soap, picked it up, and sniffed. “Lemon.” He closed his eyes and inhaled again, imagining breathing against Cat’s smooth skin. “Smells like you.”

“And *you*,” she shot back, her color rising. “My soap should have lasted another month.”

Ignoring the bite in her tone and doing his best to redirect his blood to his brain, Griffin handed over payment to the vendor. “We’ll take two,” he said in a voice like gravel.

“There is no *we*,” Cat muttered irritably as they continued down the row of market stalls. “Don’t act like I have a say in any of this.”

Now *that* wasn’t true. Griffin turned, frustrated again. Yes, he’d willingly pay for his highhanded stupidity. He’d pay forever if it kept Cat with him, but short of letting her go just to watch her walk away from him, from Sinta, and from everything they could accomplish together, he’d give her anything she asked for. And she damn well knew it.

“You *could* have a say,” he growled at her. “And you could bloody well choose your own soap!”

“I did! I told you to take the yellow one.”

“And I did!” Cursing under his breath, Griffin stalked toward the next vendor, somehow forgetting about the magic rope. The bloody thing pulled taut, and he accidentally jerked Cat right into someone who suddenly stumbled in from the side. The man looked innocuous enough, but off-balance and dazed. High from some spell, no doubt.

Griffin was about to intervene when Cat gasped and reached out to the stranger with a visible shudder. Her face lit up as she grabbed the man’s shoulders and pulled him even closer.

Griffin scowled. What in the Underworld was she up to now?

“Cat?” Griffin stepped closer to her. “Cat! What are you doing?” Laughing, she finally released the stunned-looking man. She turned and stumbled straight into Griffin, sucking in a sharp breath when he caught her bare arms to steady her. Her eyes

flared, then softened.

“You’re pink!” She giggled, the sound seeming strange and

unnatural coming from her.

Griffin frowned, which apparently made her laugh harder.

Her eyes unfocused, Cat splayed her hand over his chest. He thought it was for balance. She probably wouldn’t have touched him otherwise. He still reveled in the warm, light weight of her fingers. He’d longed to have her hands on him.

Cat stared at his chest. She seemed fascinated. She slowed her breathing to match his.

“*Poseidon’s balls!* What in the Underworld did you do to me?” The man who’d stumbled into Cat didn’t look dazed anymore; he looked infuriated.

Cat blinked. She blinked again, tilting her head to one side. She stayed right next to Griffin, her hand still on his chest.

The man staggered, fighting tremors and hiccupping down a series of short, disjointed breaths. His overly lean, unhealthy frame spoke of dependence and bad choices. Griffin tensed in case the addict got any stupid ideas about accosting Cat—who had clearly done something to him with her magic.

“That dose was supposed to last all day!” the man snarled. “I paid good silver for it. Give it back!” He lunged at Cat.

Griffin wrapped his arm around Cat's waist and swept her out of the man's path. The addict howled, and she laughed, leaning into Griffin in a way that warmed his entire side. Enraged, the addict drew a knife and waved it in Cat's direction, a crazed light sparking in his already frantic eyes.

No one threatened Cat. Griffin shot out his hand and knocked the knife from the other man's grip. It wasn't hard; the addict already shook. He had no intention of stopping there. He leapt forward and wrapped his hand around the man's throat. He held on to Cat as well. There was no way he was letting her go.

Her gaze bright, almost rapt, Cat stared fixedly at Griffin's arm until he tossed the man to the ground. Kato, Flynn, and Carver formed a perimeter, keeping everyone else away and the addict in. Cat clapped and smiled, wiggling in apparent delight.

"Dose of *what?*" Griffin demanded in a hard voice. He needed to know what was wrong with her, and he needed to know now.

Cat shivered, and he couldn't help gripping her tighter. He was self-aware enough to know he didn't pull her closer solely for her protection.

Banking on sheer intimidation as the best way to handle the addict, Griffin drew a knife and threw it with precision, sticking it a mere inch from the man's ear. "The next one lands somewhere that hurts," he snarled.

The addict paled, his mouth going slack as his eyes darted to the blade next to his face.

"Brutal," Cat commented. She didn't sound averse.

Griffin glanced at her. "No one touches you."

She bit her lower lip, looking adorably confused. "You're

touching me."

Griffin's eyes fixed on her mouth. "I'm the exception."

She seemed to stop breathing, to maybe even like what she

heard. Hope jerked in his chest. Smiling, Cat swayed toward him, and his fingers tightened on her hip. It took an almost herculean effort to resist hauling her up against him and kissing her like he'd wanted to since the moment he'd first laid eyes on her, weeks ago.

Griffin briefly closed his eyes. Cat wasn't herself, and he wouldn't take advantage of her.

Focusing on the addict again, he ground out, "I'm waiting."

Cat turned back to the man at their feet as well and pointed her finger. "Answer or die!"

She did menace with absolute believability, and the man's face went cloud-white. Cat burst out laughing.

“Euphoria,” he finally answered, pushing himself up to sitting. “Paid five silvers for it, and the little leech stole it with one touch.”

The addict spat at Cat, and a low growl rumbled in Griffin’s throat. He wasn’t in the habit of beating on people weaker than himself, but right then, he was sorely tempted.

“*You bumped into me,*” Cat announced, although she didn’t look entirely certain. She peeled Griffin’s arm off her waist and then stumbled away, unsteady on her feet.

The rope snapped tight, and she swayed. Following her, Griffin put his hand on her lower back to steady her, and the slight, momentary hitch in Cat’s stride was the only indication that she’d felt him behind her. She ignored him otherwise.

“What about the addict?” Carver asked, handing Griffin back his knife.

“Leave him.” Griffin stayed close to Cat as he sheathed the blade. “Make sure he’s not following.”

Cat hummed as she walked, almost dancing. Without her usual dark cloud of cynicism and understandable fury in place, there was a brightness to her that riveted him. Griffin wanted to enjoy it, enjoy *her*, but he was too worried about what she’d done to herself—and how it would end. Highs inevitably came with lows.

She stumbled, dizzy and distracted, and he easily caught her around the waist. Gods, he loved the feel of this woman in his hands. He wanted her under him. Over him. Everywhere.

“You’re high on euphoria.” He slid his hands up her rib cage to better balance her as she swayed. “A strong dose, calibrated to a man twice your size.” Their eyes met, and Griffin felt her soft, dreamy gaze straight down to his groin. “How did that happen?”

Cat beckoned, and he lowered his head. Their faces brushed, and he wished he could turn and capture her lips with his. It was torture to hold back, especially when Cat pressed into him, seeming to enjoy the contact.

“I can steal magic,” she told him in a conspiratorial whisper. “If you had any, I’d steal yours.”

Griffin kept a steady expression, even though her words shocked him. He’d never heard of that. He’d known Cat was valuable, powerful, but *good gods*, was there nothing she couldn’t do?

Without his immunity to harmful magic, he could never hold on to a Magoi like Cat—magic rope or not. Although the rope certainly helped.

Helped *keep* her, he thought grimly. It didn’t help their relationship.

Her sudden smile nearly winded him.

“I can give it away, too.” Cat laid her hands on his chest and then shuddered. She frowned, seeming baffled. “You don’t want any?” She pushed on his chest again before dropping her hands. “There’s something very strange about you.”

The realization appeared to delight her. Laughter bubbled up straight from her belly. Griffin felt his own mouth twitch.

Her amusement cut off abruptly, and she scooted out of his arms, reaching for Kato. Kato’s eyes glazed over the instant she touched him. He grinned like a fool.

“Everything’s pink!” Kato turned, lost his balance, and knocked over an entire table of leather goods.

“For the gods’ sakes!” Griffin muttered. Now there were two of them.

The irate vendor started grumbling curses, so Griffin handed over some money. Nothing was broken, and the silver coin would more than pay for the mess.

He turned to someone who still had his wits intact. “Flynn! Take care of him. Take him back to the inn. Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid or kill anyone by accident.”

“Oh, no!” Cat sang out in a loud voice. “We mustn’t kill by accident. Only on purpose.”

“My sentiment exactly.” Griffin gripped her hand and led her away from the growing crowd of staring people.

Cat giggled. Carver kept pace behind them.

“Where are we going?” Cat asked, starting to dance in circles around him. Griffin turned as well to keep the rope from tangling—not that he’d mind if it drew her right up against him.

Her hands suddenly flew up, and she started almost frantically taking apart her braid.

“We have one more thing to buy,” Griffin answered, wondering if he should help her with whatever she was doing.

“I knew it!” She seemed to forget about her now-disheveled hair and clapped, beaming. “What?”

“A drying cloth.”

Her face fell. Griffin knew a drying cloth wasn’t very exciting, but she needed one, so there was that.

Cat’s head swiveled around, and she walked off to the right, taking Griffin with her.

Her expression brightened once more. “A sword! I want a sword. Can I have a sword?”

The way her eyes glittered when she looked up at him punched a hole of happiness straight through his ribs. Right then, he knew he could deny her nothing—except the freedom she wanted most.

“You can’t even lift a sword.” He followed her toward the table of blades anyway. Maybe the vendor had something small.

“I can. Watch me.” She reached for a huge monstrosity of a weapon. It looked big, even to Griffin’s eyes. “That’s odd. Someone must have glued it.” She bent over the sword for a closer look and ended up hitting her face on it.

Griffin’s heart spasmed. *Was she hurt?*

“Ow!” Cat popped up, rubbing her nose and nearly falling over backward. His hand shot out to steady her, but this time, she didn’t need him.

She frowned ferociously at the blood on her fingers, but Griffin breathed a sigh of relief. The cut was a small thing.

Cat eventually shrugged and then wiped the red smudge from her hand, laughing again. The euphoria must still have been strong in her system.

Brushing flyaway hair out of her face, Griffin leaned in for a closer look. The nick had already stopped bleeding.

In a move that startled him, Cat’s hands shot up and gripped his face. Griffin’s heart stopped dead in his chest. She held on, her grasp tight at first. Then it loosened, and she trailed her fingertips down his cheeks.

Heat rushed through him. He wished he’d shaved for her. He didn’t dare breathe.

“Hmmm.” Her eyelids seemed to grow heavy, her lashes dipping to shade her beautiful eyes. “Scratchy.”

Griffin swallowed hard. Cat was touching him, and circumstances made it so that he couldn’t reciprocate.

He captured her hands in his and slowly lowered them. He couldn’t help the light caress he gave her knuckles. He didn’t do it consciously.

“The cut’s nothing.” Hardly recognizing his own voice, he released her. If he’d held on to her much longer, his skin would have caught fire.

With what felt like an Olympian effort, Griffin turned away from Cat and nodded toward a small blade at the end of the table. The merchant handed it over, and he tested it, only partially to distract himself. If it wasn't a quality blade, it wasn't for Cat.

The sword turned out to be sturdy, well-crafted, and straight. "We'll take it," he announced. "And your smallest sword belt with dagger loops."

Cat looked thrilled, and Griffin felt his chest expand.

"You're buying me a sword? And a belt for my knives?" Grinning, she astonished him by leaping on him.

Griffin caught her as her arms and legs clamped around him. His heart thudded hard, his lungs seized, and his whole body ignited. She felt painfully perfect in his arms.

Unable to resist, he angled his head toward her and inhaled deeply. Cat smelled like frosted lemons—fresh and tangy, with a hint of acidity. He loved her bite. He was fairly certain he loved her.

As he breathed her in, his chest pressed against hers. The contact was exhilarating. His long, slow exhale shuddered over her neck, and Cat shivered in his arms.

Breathy laughter fluttered against his ear. "Ack! That tickles!" A strained chuckle was Griffin's only response.

He forced himself to unlock his greedy arms from around

her and set her back on her feet. He knew Cat—an *undrugged* Cat—wouldn't want to be in his embrace.

Staying close to him of her own accord, she smiled up at him in a way she never had before, like she meant it, rather than like she wanted to chew him up, spit him out, and then stomp on him until he was good and bloody.

Was this how things between them could be if she trusted him? If he'd *convinced* her that night at the circus fair instead of capturing her?

The thought made his chest ache, and Griffin cleared his throat, chasing out regret and need with a gruff sound. He'd figure out a way to win her over. He had to.

"The sword's really for me?" Cat asked.

He hadn't fully let her go since she hadn't stepped back, and his fingers pressed lightly into her sides. "You said you wanted one."

Cat's smile grew brilliant. "In that case, I want *two*! One for each hip."

He chuckled in spite of everything, imagining it all too well. The problem was, Cat was dangerous enough already.

“Let’s start with one,” he answered, drawing her a fraction closer.

Her breath caught, and it was agony not to lower his head and kiss her.

To avoid temptation, Griffin turned and paid for the sword.

Cat hopped along next to him when he began walking again. “Can I have it? Can I? Can I, please?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You can have it when I can trust you.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“*Okay?*” Griffin’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “That’s it?” “What’s it?” She flapped her hands, swatting at something.

“Did you see that?”

He frowned. “See what?”

“The bee. The centaur bee. The pink one.”

Glancing briefly toward Olympus for guidance—and to keep from laughing—Griffin took Cat’s hand and led her through the market. It would have been easier if she hadn’t been dancing— not that he would ever stop her.

When she looked up at him again, the joy in her eyes almost blinded him. “Thank you.”

Her simple words punched the air from his lungs. “You’re welcome,” he answered gruffly.

“Not *you*,” she declared in an exasperated tone.

Griffin was content to not comment and watch her dance some more. She stumbled over Carver’s feet. Quick, as always, his brother helped her back up before he could reach for her, and Griffin’s hands clenched with the need to steady her himself.

In thanks for Carver’s aid, Cat dipped into a deep and grace-ful curtsy that looked like it could have been executed in any royal court. He was surprised she managed it so well, given her current state. The ease with which she moved smacked of years of practice and raised questions he knew she wouldn’t answer.

Carver bowed back awkwardly enough to make Cat laugh until she could barely breathe. They weren’t used to such pomp in the south. Court etiquette was something he and his family still had to figure out—preferably fast.

Feeling a rush of worry for his family right now trying to integrate into royal life in Sinta City without him, Griffin guided Cat toward a table covered in drying cloths. Cat jumped, trying to catch the hanging ones while he looked through the selection on the table, suddenly ready to be done with the market in Velos and get back on the road.

“This one,” he said, selecting a yellow one about the same shade as Cat’s usual soap. She’d like that, wouldn’t she? It was almost like having a set.

“Is that for me?” she asked.

Griffin nodded, his stomach sinking at how disgusted she looked by his choice.

“Not that one. It looks like Cerberus threw up on it.” She glanced from side to side. “I want *that* one!”

She seemed ecstatic about a flashy red cloth big enough to cover four of her, so he put the yellow one back and bought the red.

He couldn’t think of anything else she—or anyone—needed, so Griffin steered Cat back toward the inn. Without warning, she sat down in the street, yanking the rope tight between them and pulling him to a sudden stop. Griffin let out a grunt of surprise.

Cat looked up at him, her nose scrunching. “Serves you right. You could just untie me. Or let me go.”

There was the usual Cat. Her tongue was still sharp, even if her mind was fuzzy. “And miss all this fun?” he teased.

Her laughter shook her all over. Griffin smiled back, wishing things could always be this easy and enjoyable between them. Maybe they would have been if he hadn’t been such a colossal arse the night they met.

He opened his mouth to apologize for capturing her, to solemnly ask her forgiveness, for another chance, for a better *them* he was desperate to have, when Cat’s head snapped around, and she jumped up, already running.

Bollocks! He’d missed his opportunity. He knew himself; there was a good chance he wouldn’t take it again. Cat’s barbed tongue could make even him hesitate, and she’d be back to her normal self soon. And in the end, he wasn’t sorry they were together. He’d never be sorry for that. Griffin ran after her.

“Where are you going?” he asked. Carver jogged next to them on Cat’s other side.

She didn’t answer but then veered off and ran up the steps of a bathhouse, crashing through the doors and nearly plowing into a couple. She reached for the woman but then pulled back before Griffin had to intervene. She kept going.

Chortling with glee, Cat raced toward what Griffin suspected was the men's pool from the artwork on the walls. She didn't seem to notice the increasingly explicit mosaics lining the corridor.

They arrived at a tall door that Cat tried unsuccessfully to open. She repeatedly groped for and missed the very prominent latch.

Griffin reached around her to open the door, not sure he shouldn't have been barring the way instead. "I get the feeling you've never been high before."

She glanced up at him. "Have you?"

He shook his head. Never—and he didn't plan on it. "Looks like fun," Carver chimed in, rather idiotically in

Griffin's opinion. It looked like a dangerous loss of control to him.

Cat teetered toward Carver. "Want some? It's fabulous!"

Carver grinned. "No thanks. Offering anything else?" he asked so smoothly that Griffin had to do a double take before the urge to punch his brother hit him.

Cat laughed, blushing prettily. Then she sighed. "Don't flirt."

"Why not?" Carver asked, completely ignoring Griffin's hard stare.

"Don't you know? Poseidon sent your incredibly annoying brother to me with an oracular dream. Once-in-a-lifetime thing. Except for most people. Most people never have one. Anyway"—she rolled her eyes—"he probably thinks it *means* something." She snorted like that was beyond ridiculous when it was likely the most important thing that had ever happened to him. "I'd rather eat goat balls. Or goat shit." She frowned, clearly confused. "Or goat cheese!" she abruptly shouted.

"Oracular dream?" Griffin turned the term over in his mind and in his mouth. He hadn't known what it was called, or that it occasionally happened to others, but he'd known it was life-changing. He'd known it meant he was supposed to be with Cat.

"She's a wealth of information," Carver murmured.

"What? Never heard of one?" Cat shrugged. "I'm hot." She turned, tripped, and went down before Griffin could catch her. He helped her to her feet again and then followed as she ran straight into the men's bathing chamber. Three naked men

looked over, startled.

Cat yanked her tunic over her head.

Griffin's eyes widened. "For the gods' sakes, Cat!" He wanted

to look. He knew he shouldn't.

Everyone else needed to get out *now*.

She kept stripping, and something roared inside him. "Out!" he shouted to the other men. What in the Underworld

was he supposed to do? He couldn't leave her alone in here. Not looking seemed impossible, especially when he needed to keep her safe. And because he desperately wanted to.

The need to protect her, even from himself, battered his chest. At the savage look on his face, the three men scrambled out of the pool and ran. They averted their gazes from Cat, obviously knowing what was good for them.

Cat turned back to him, completely bare. Heat built in his groin and crept through his abdomen. Griffin wanted to reach for her, to cover her. To cover her with *himself*. He nearly groaned.

His brother moved in his peripheral vision. What in the gods' names was Carver still doing here? A growl ground deep in his throat.

Before his narrowed eyes could snap to Carver, Cat reached up and swept her fingers through his hair. Her touch was light but sure. There was no hesitation, and even some gentleness. He wished she would never stop.

She smiled and patted his head. "Good Beta."

The growl meant for Carver turned into a grunted laugh. "Woof!" she barked back. Gods, she was amazing. And fun. And strong. The knowl-

edge made him grin and hit him square in the chest—which made his eyes automatically drop to hers.

Griffin froze, balling his hands into fists to keep from reaching for her.

She flushed. Her nipples hardened as he watched, and the tension inside him exploded into something nearly unbearable—hot and urgent. Griffin felt a muscle tick in his jaw as he clenched his teeth, fighting to tear his eyes away from her. He lost the battle, and his eyes dipped, sweeping over her. He swallowed hard. He wanted this woman more than his next breath. But he wanted her to *like* him first.

"Untie me or get in." Cat's throaty whisper, her invitation, nearly brought him to his knees.

Griffin stepped closer to hide her nakedness from Carver. He didn't watch Carver leave the room, but he did watch Cat blow his brother a kiss, and Griffin practically saw red. He'd never felt so barbarically possessive in his life.

Finally alone with her, Griffin lifted his eyes to Cat's. "Give me your binding word you won't leave without me."

"All right," she agreed.

Could it be that easy? "Say it," he insisted.

She rolled her eyes with extra exuberance and then bowed dramatically. "I won't leave the bathing chamber without you, O Imperious One."

It was hard not to laugh. His ire deflated instantly. Cat was his only concern.

Griffin untied the rope, trying to keep his hands to himself. He accidentally brushed Cat's waist at one point, though, and his fingers almost caught fire. His whole body tightened with the need to claim Cat for his own.

The instant she was free of the rope, Cat turned and dove into the pool. She stayed underwater for so long that Griffin started to get anxious. He realized he shouldn't have worried when she popped up a moment later, whooping and laughing.

She swam forever, and Griffin couldn't do anything but watch and make sure she didn't hurt herself. She played, frolicking in a way that made him long to join her. But she wouldn't like that. She might like it *now*—she'd even splashed him and tried to coax him in—but she wouldn't like it later. He wouldn't make the inevitable end of her fun worse by joining her and giving her something more to regret from today.

Besides, how would he keep from touching her? From showing her how hot he burned for her? If he got in, the whole damn pool might evaporate just from the fire inside him.

Another long hour of torture later, Griffin pulled up short. He saw the exact moment Cat's high burned itself out and fatigue and reality came crashing back to take its place.

She gasped, paling to near translucent. She started to sink.

Griffin stepped forward, but then she seemed to recover enough to float. He hesitated. He wanted to help her, but she probably wouldn't want him touching her.

Cat's face went from white to red so fast it was blinding. She bowed her head, looking defeated, and Griffin's heart clenched hard.

"That's why addicts stay high," he said softly. "It's too awful when it ends."

She sniffed but didn't look up.

"Come." Dropping his gaze to the marble floor, Griffin held out her new drying cloth. It was more than big enough to cover her up and warm her.

He didn't look directly at Cat, but he could still tell that she crawled up the steps, shaking, shivering, and almost too weak to make it to the cloth he held. Griffin was going to hand it to her, but then she just oozed into the material and waited. He wrapped it around her and began gently patting her dry.

"Why did you take it?" he asked when she closed her eyes, looking mortified, weary, and utterly alone.

Right then, Griffin wished more than ever that he'd earned the right to take her into his arms and comfort her. But he hadn't, so he wrapped the cloth more firmly around her instead. She trembled.

"The magic wanted to be inside me." She spoke so softly he barely heard. "I couldn't control it. I-I didn't even try."

Was it just his imagination, or had Cat leaned into him?

He cleared his throat.

"It wasn't his magic. It was a spell." Griffin straightened, wanting a better look at her. Pale face. Gray lips. Blank eyes. The sight of her made his chest ache.

"It doesn't matter." She slumped, hardly even upright. "It's the same to me."

Not knowing what else to do, Griffin made sure the cloth was secure around her before trying to guide her toward her clothes. "Let's go."

Instead of walking, Cat dropped to the floor and curled up in a ball.

Watching her, Griffin's gut sank. He'd put her in a position where she'd felt compelled to steal unknown magic, undoubtedly to help her escape. Now she was sick and miserable, and it was in good part his fault. No wonder she hated him.

Griffin gathered their belongings and then carefully picked Cat up off the floor. She surprised him by not protesting. She even rested her wet head on his shoulder, her breath a sweet warmth against his neck. He cradled her against him. He'd build trust one heartbeat at a time if he had to.

"You never smell bad," she murmured, barely forming words around her fatigue.

"Should I?" Griffin asked.

"It would make you mortal, like the rest of us."

"I am mortal. That's why I need—"

"—your help," she finished with a sigh.

"This isn't a game, Cat."

“Just leave me here,” she said despondently. “You can’t carry me all the way back.” Griffin grunted. That was absurd—in more ways than one.

“And leave behind my most valued treasure?” She hesitated. Her breath seemed to catch. “I won’t be used.”

Ah, the usual rhetoric. He smiled vaguely. Was she coming back to herself?

“Egeria will win you over,” he said. And he would, too.

She yawned, bringing the tip of her nose into contact with his neck. He wished she’d let herself come even closer, thought maybe a small part of her even wanted to, but suddenly she stiffened in his arms.

“It won’t get that far.” Those five words were sharper than anything she’d said in hours.

Griffin’s mouth flattened. And so it began again. “You’re wrong. You’re wrong about a lot of things.” And somehow, someday, he would prove it.

“I bled on that sword and didn’t dilute it.” The panic in Cat’s voice shot tension through his body. “They’ll track my blood. It’s been hours. They’re already on their way.”

“Who?” he demanded.

Wilting again, she yawned, exhaustion seeming to drown her fear. “It’s your fault. You exposed me.”

Griffin held her tighter, his heart hammering out adrenaline-laced beats. “I’ll protect you.”

She closed her eyes, looking alarmingly weak. Almost unconscious. “You could try,” she whispered just before her head lolled, and her body went limp in his arms.

Grim-faced, Griffin carried her toward the inn. He had to do better than try. The fate of Thalyria and both of their futures depended upon it.