

# **Godbloods**

Creative Media Capstone 2021

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# Chapter 1: The Dancer

Cyrus

The sun had burned away the late spring frost that coated the ground that morning. Cyrus clasped his hand in Rennard's as they explored the small area of the Miraculous Faire. Rennard's fingers were ice-cold in the chilly morning, but Cyrus didn't mind. Rennard always ran cold these days.

"Look, Renny," Cyrus said, pushing his shoulder against Rennard's, "there's plenty of time before the main show starts. A little detour to the candy stall won't hurt."

Rennard looked at the nearby covered wagon with a look of longing. The vendor leaned out the window to hand off a candy apple to a small girl, then turned to her mother for payment. Rennard sighed.

"Rennyyyyyy," Cyrus whined, batting his white eyelashes. "Pleaseeee? The longer we dawdle, the less time we have."

"Don't you have your own money?" Rennard asked. "Why should I buy you candy?"

Cyrus smiled sweetly. "It's more romantic if you bought a candy apple for us to share." He began to tug at Rennard's arm again.

Rennard sighed, running his hand through his messy bangs, and resigning himself to being pulled into the short line to the sweets vendor. "You know I haven't been partial to sweets lately," Rennard said, squinting to see the sign with the prices tacked to the side of the cart.

That was true. Cyrus missed the days when he could lead Rennard around by the nose with the promise of something sweet. But, those days were long gone, along with their childhoods.

Now Cyrus was twenty-six and Rennard a year older. The days of youth had been left behind with their old lives in the Nested Valley, far away in the Principalities. Although Cyrus was still laden with the memories of what happened and why they had to flee their home, the Grave Monastery, five years ago.

"Cyrus?" Rennard placed his hand on Cyrus's shoulder, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Yes, Renny?" Cyrus chirped, hiding his emotion under a smile.

Rennard narrowed his hazel eyes. "I asked you what you wanted."

"Candy apple," Cyrus said immediately. "Hopefully they make them right. You know, the way they only seem to make them when you're at a fair."

Rennard nodded. He stepped forward as the couple in line ahead of them left happily with their sweets.

An elven man smiled at them from inside the cart. His long blonde hair was tied up messily. "Hey fellas, what can I get you?" he asked.

Cyrus grinned. "One candy apple, if you would be so kind," he said.

The vendor laughed and turned to begin making the treat. "Only one?"

Rennard started to speak. "I'm not—"

"We're sharing," Cyrus interrupted.

Rennard gave him a tired look. Even if he couldn't eat an entire candy apple by himself these days, he would still be annoyed if Cyrus ate more than his fair share. The vendor laughed again as he turned around and handed Cyrus the stick of the candy apple. The glaze was still settling on the surface of the cooked apple. Cyrus admired himself in the reflection and fluffed his curly silver hair.

"That'll be three copper," the vendor said.

Rennard dug three coins out of his pocket and handed them over. The vendor thanked them and sent the couple on their way.

Cyrus blew on the apple, trying to get the glaze to cool enough, so he could eat it. "Now we can go to the show," he said as he bit into the apple. The glaze was gooey and salty sweet; a perfect contrast to the green apple underneath. Cyrus hummed and offered it to Rennard. "It's good," he said. Rennard looked at it and sighed longingly. "C'mon, it won't break your teeth. Probably," Cyrus said with a grin.

Rennard scowled, but took the stick and bit into the apple. He moaned, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. "You're right," Rennard said with his mouth full.

Cyrus giggled as he took Rennard's free hand. They walked towards the center of the Miraculous Faire; a large, striped tent that towered above the fairground. The show inside would start on the hour.

Cyrus and Rennard had never attended a circus before. Cyrus had heard about them, and seen one or two from afar, but this was his and Rennard's first true experience attending one. What the show held for them was unknown.

They passed various tents and attractions as they walked towards the large tent's opening. Two men flanked the sides of the entrance. A short, skinny man in a ridiculously tall top hat and wearing a light blue suit on one side, and a taller man wearing dark clothes on the other. He had a sword strapped to his hip.

"Welcome! Welcome, one and all!" the tall hatted man was shouting. His teeth were straight but yellowed by tobacco stains under his gray mustache. "Ten minutes until the stars of the Miraculous Faire perform! Ten minutes!" He grinned at Cyrus and Rennard as they passed. The other man, maybe a guard, didn't give them a second glance. Rennard's gaze lingered on his sword, and Cyrus caught his fingers pressing against where there was a hidden sheath in his jacket. He squeezed Rennard's hand, not blaming him.

"The guard is only there for when the audience gets rowdy," Cyrus said. He rubbed his thumb over the back of Rennard's rough hand. They began to climb the riser's stairs that surrounded the performer's pit. At the top, they began to look for open seating.

Rennard grunted at Cyrus's comment. "There's more guards than I would have suspected for performers," he said simply. He tugged Cyrus as they were walking down the risers, indicating that he found a pair of seats.

"It's a big troupe," Cyrus said. "I'm sure that they're here for when the show is on the road. There's got to be a lot of expensive stuff here."

“You aren’t going to steal anything from here,” Rennard grunted as they squeezed past several seated audience members to an empty space on the long benches.

“That’s *your* job!” Cyrus laughed as he sat next to a woman in a blue dress.

Rennard rolled his eyes. “I’m not doing that.”

Cyrus snorted and covered his mouth. He took another bite of his half-eaten candy apple, and leaned on Rennard’s shoulder and looked down to the center of the tent. The wide circle of dirt was surrounded on three sides by risers that held benches high above the ground. Even higher was two posts holding a taut rope between them. Trapezes and ribbons hung above that. The pit, so far, was empty.

Cyrus bounced his leg, eager for the show to start. The tent was dim inside, save for the diluted sunlight that came through the top. There were two contraptions on either side of the tent, sitting above the audience. Each one looked like a cone made of mirrors with a large bead in the center. Cyrus squinted at them, trying to see more. “What do you think those are?” he asked.

Rennard followed his gaze, then shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The woman next to Cyrus chuckled. “Is this your first show?” she asked.

Cyrus flashed a smile and picked his head off of Rennard’s shoulder. “It is,” he said. “You’ve seen these before?”

“At this fair, yes,” the woman said. “But I’ve seen something similar in theater. Those are spotlights. The handlers use the spell *Light* in the center and the mirror’s reflect and amplify it.”

Cyrus nodded. “Interesting,” he said. He turned his attention back to the center. The audience was chattering to each other, creating a loud drone. Cyrus yawned, then he offered his apple to Rennard again.

Rennard took the stick and began to eat. Cyrus watched his jaw move as he chewed. “You can have the rest, if you want it,” he said.

“You sure?” Rennard asked with his mouth full.

Cyrus nodded. “I ate more than half. Besides, we were *supposed* to be sharing it.”

Rennard shrugged and bit into the candy apple again. Cyrus smiled and leaned over to kiss his cheek before leaning his head on Rennard’s shoulder again. Rennard grumbled something that Cyrus didn’t hear.

They continued to wait. Rennard finished the candy apple and held onto the stick. It still had the core on it. They could find a garbage can after the show.

The spotlights on either side of the tent flashed on and focused in the center pit. The crowd grew quiet except for excited whispering. “Finally,” Cyrus said.

The man from outside waltzed into the center, twirling a black cane like a baton. He seemed small in the glaring lights, except for the tall top hat, which he adjusted. The man grinned under his mustache.

“Good afternoon!” he called, his voice amplified by magic. “How is my lovely audience doing on this fine, fair day?”

The crowd gave a cheer, and the man cupped his hand to his ear as if he couldn’t hear them. Cyrus joined them with a whooping cry. Rennard just gave him a look as he clapped along.

Cyrus nudged him with his elbow. “Have a little fun, will you,” he said, “otherwise, what’s the point of coming to a circus?”

The man continued. “I am your ringmaster today, and every day: the fine Derrick of the Miraculous Faire!” Derrick was already red-faced in the bright lights. It stood out comically against his baby blue suit. “I’ve a great number of performances for you all today! Are you ready to begin?”

The crowd roared again, louder than before. As Cyrus was yelling along with them, he spotted a white-haired figure climbing a ladder on one of the poles that held the tightrope. From this distance, he couldn’t tell if they were a man or a woman, or even what age they were. Most of their body was covered with a black cape and hood. Long wisps of white hair peered out and contrasted with the tan skin of their face. But that was all Cyrus could make out. This must be the first act! Cyrus’s stomach fluttered with excitement. He looked down in the pit again as six people came from the back entrance, all carrying various brass instruments. Cyrus was immediately more interested. It would make sense that there would be music. The band began to play something quiet and tense.

Rennard nudged him. “Going to take notes for your next song?” he asked.

Cyrus shrugged. “I don’t think trumpet motifs would translate well to a shamisen,” he said. The shamisen in question, a small stringed instrument that was played with a fan-shaped pick, was back at the inn that Cyrus and Rennard were staying at. Cyrus smiled at Rennard and looked back to the person climbing the pole’s ladder. He still couldn’t see them clearly from this angle.

The person reached the top and pulled themselves onto the small platform. Something gold flashed in the reflected light as they shifted back and forth on their feet. Were they nervous? Cyrus would be. He then realized that there was no net underneath them, and worry sparked in his chest. The woman next to him seemed to realize too.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Cyrus heard her ask the man on her other side.

Derrick raised his hand and struck a pose, pointing up to the cloaked figure. “Would you all direct your attention upwards to our first and most spectacular opening act!” The figure waved uncertainly to the audience. “Venus is a dancer with several years here under his belt! This time, he is taking it above and beyond by defying death and dancing on the narrowest of ropes, suspended high above the ground! There is no safety net, ladies and gentlemen!” Derrick grinned again and twirled his cane. “Oh, yes, and dare I mention Venus’s so-called *talent*, as you will see in just a moment.”

The cloaked figure spread his arms and took a step onto the tight rope. It dipped slightly under his weight as they started to cross. Cyrus held his breath. Derrick said that Venus was a dancer. Would he be dancing on the rope?

Venus reached the center of the tight rope and stood there, swaying unsteadily. They turned to face the audience one way, then turned to face the other side. Cyrus stared into the shadows of Venus’s hood, trying to make out more than just the color of his skin. He held Rennard’s hand excitedly.

Venus spread his arms wider, holding steady. Then, as if time held still, he pitched forward into the open air.

The woman next to Cyrus gasped and covered her mouth as screams burst out through the tent. Cyrus stood as he reached for his conductor's baton, his spell focus, in the sheath on his thigh. *I won't be able to get a spell off in time!* he thought desperately.

Venus, still in free fall, ripped off the cape and hood. White hair and feathers burst from his back and billowed out. Two great wings spread out and caught the air, stopping Venus's plummet. The cloak fluttered to the ground, revealing a black and gold leotard.

Cyrus's mouth dropped open. He gripped Rennard's hand tightly. "That can't be a..."

Rennard was gritting his teeth, eyes wide. "It can't be. He's—those have to be fake." He looked at Cyrus. But Cyrus couldn't look away from Venus as he hovered halfway between the ground and the tight rope.

"Venus is a *Godblood*, folks! A forgotten child of forgotten gods!" Derrick shouted. "Until we rescued him, of course! Rescued him and made him a *sideshow star!*"

The cheer from the audience was mixed this time. Some were ecstatic, others unsure. Some were completely silent.

Cyrus bit his lip. "There's no way," he whispered. "There's no way he's—" All these years of never meeting a Godblood, yet he met one *here* of all places? No, those wings had to be fake, there had to be wires suspending him from the tent's support beams. There was no reason for one to be here, with no followers, doing this.

Venus's wings splayed out behind him and beat powerfully as he took off to fly a loop over the heads of the audience. Wind buffeted the closest patrons. Derrick held onto his hat, but he was grinning.

"Everyone, say hello to our favorite Godblood!" Derrick yelled. His voice was nearly drowned out by the crowd as the band began to play a jaunty tune.

Venus was smiling as he flew over Cyrus and Rennard's heads, close enough for the wind to tousle Cyrus's silver curls. Cyrus collapsed back onto the bench. He wasn't so sure that it was fake anymore. He wanted to leave. Seeing wings like that... The ghostly memory of burning feathers filled his nose. He ached, he couldn't breathe. Rennard grabbed his hand and whispered something urgently in his ear. Cyrus couldn't process it, still captivated by Venus, by confusion and terror.

Venus returned to the center of the tightrope, landing softly with wings spread to their fullest. They were almost as long as Venus was tall. The brass music kicked into full swing. Venus shifted again and began to dance. Each step was certain, confident that they would land in the right place to stop Venus from falling again. He expressed the music through not only his arms, but his wings. Every part of him was one with the music. But it fell on Cyrus's deaf ears. His body shook and he grabbed his head. Why were all these memories coming back now, and so strongly? His former life at the Grave Monastery, and its collapse. Rennard laying in the medical ward, dressed in his Death Priest garb, motionless, as the ceiling fell around them. Cyrus's voice giving out as he begged for mercy.

Rennard grabbed Cyrus by the arm and shook him. Cyrus looked at Rennard, into his yellowed, hazel eyes. He grabbed him back and hugged him tightly. Rennard held onto him through his panic attack.

“C’mon, Cy, let’s get out of here,” Rennard said, tugging at Cyrus for him to stand.

Cyrus nodded into his chest and followed him out of the tent, his steps clumsy and irregular. He needed air. He needed to get out.

## Chapter 2: The Oracle

Cyrus

Cyrus and Rennard ducked out of the tent and into the sunlight. They hurried away, the music following them faintly. Rennard pulled Cyrus to the side and ducked under a rope that led to where several tents and trailers were set up. There were no other people around.

“Breathe,” Rennard told Cyrus.

Cyrus nodded and struggled to take deeper breaths. “I—I wasn’t expecting to see a Godblood here,” he said as evenly as he could.

“Me neither,” Rennard said. “We haven’t seen one since... well, you know.”

Cyrus did know, and was not keen on talking about it. Thoughts raced through his head. He had finally found one. Not that he had been searching. Was he? No. No, Cyrus wasn’t searching for any Godbloods, although he longed to meet one. He’d longed to meet one for years. It worried him that there was one *here*.

“Do you think he’s here willingly?” Cyrus asked.

The question seemed to catch Rennard off guard. “I don’t know, honestly,” he said. He placed a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said with a tired look.

Cyrus stopped walking and faced him. “And what am I thinking?”

“You want to break Venus out of the circus, whether he’s here of his own violation or not,” Rennard said quietly.

Cyrus bit his lip. Was he thinking that? “I mean,” he said, “I’m thinking of it now. Why? Are you going to try and stop me?”

“No,” Rennard growled. He licked his perpetually chapped lips and looked around. “I want to get Venus out of here. I just remember—”

“Hey!” A loud voice startled them out of their quiet conversation. A man in dark clothes and a sword at his hip was approaching quickly. He was dressed like a guard. “You aren’t supposed to be back here!” he said.

Cyrus quickly wiped his face, ignoring how it smeared his eye makeup. He could always fix it later. “I came to cry in peace,” Cyrus snapped. Rennard frowned but didn’t speak.

The guard continued. “This is where the performers and the staff are. Patrons aren’t allowed to come back here,” he said. “Go back to the fairgrounds, or I’ll have to forcibly remove you.”

Cyrus sniffed loudly and tugged on Rennard’s sleeve. “Let’s go, Renny,” he said.

Rennard followed him back towards the rope that served as a border between the back and the fairgrounds. Cyrus could feel the gaze of the guard burning into his back the whole way.

They wandered past attractions and tents and people. “Do you want to leave?” Rennard asked. “We can go back to town.”

Cyrus sighed. “I... We’ve been looking forward to coming here since we saw the posters,” he said. “We haven’t even been here for an hour.”



“Let’s find something to distract us,” Rennard said. He looked around as they walked, but whatever he pointed out, Cyrus seemed uninterested.

Then, they came across a small royal blue tent with a different guard and a line out front. It was the longest line so far in the sparsely populated fairgrounds. “Looks like something that people are excited about,” Cyrus said. “I wonder what it is.”

Rennard smiled. “There we go, that’s something. There’s a sign in front,” he said. Cyrus took his hand again and led him to the tent.

The darkly dressed guard looked at them as they approached. “No cutting in line,” he growled.

Cyrus held up his hands and forced a grin on his face. “Woah, there. We were just curious about what this attraction was. It’s the only place that’s occupied with the main show going on,” he said.

The guard wiped the sour look off his face and replaced it with something that looked close to being enthused. Cyrus recognized the look of someone who really didn’t want to be there. Rennard wore it often. “This is Oracle’s tent,” he said. “One of our—”

“Wouldn’t it be *the* oracle’s tent?” Cyrus interrupted.

The guard didn’t falter. “Oracle is the name of the fortune teller.”

“Ah! I see!” Cyrus chirped.

Rennard smirked. “You want a love reading, don’t you?”

“You know me so well,” Cyrus purred. He tried to not think about Venus.

The guard cleared his throat. “Oracle is highly sought after for their accurate predictions that always come true. It’s said that—”

Cyrus squeezed Rennard’s hand. “We *have* to get a reading! Thank you!” he called to the guard as he began to drag Rennard to the back of the line.

As they reached the back of the line, Cyrus leaned out to look around the three people in front of him. Rennard pointed out the sign earlier. It was on the other side of the guard, colorful compared to his dark clothes. It was painted to look like swirling cloth with several tarot cards. On it was tall golden words.

*Meet Oracle, the side show mystic!  
The finest, most accurate fortune-teller around!  
Powers straight from Fate!  
5 silver for a reading.  
Love!  
Future!  
Wealth!*

Cyrus reread the sign twice. *Side show*, he thought. *Venus*, was also called a *sideshow*. Cyrus shook his head as his throat closed up.

“Rennard,” Cyrus said, “the sign says ‘sideshow.’”

Rennard went stiff and nodded. “I seriously doubt that it’s another Godblood.”

Cyrus nodded. “I’ve only ever met two my whole life before this. There’s no way that there would be two in one spot.”

Rennard squeezed his hand. Cyrus swallowed and squeezed back. No matter how unlikely it was, he couldn’t help but imagine. His heart beat faster as the line grew shorter.

Finally, Cyrus and Rennard arrived at the front of the line. The guard from before blocked the entrance as the person before them had their future read. From here, Cyrus could hear quiet music coming from inside. It had a grainy quality to it.

“You’re here for a love reading, correct?” the guard asked. “That’s five silver.”

Rennard dug a few coins out of his pocket and counted five out before handing them to the guard. The guard tucked them away in a coin purse. “The person ahead should be out shortly.”

A few minutes passed and Cyrus forced himself to stand still and not fidget. The tent flap opened and a well-dressed woman stepped out. She looked happy, almost wistful. Cyrus wondered what her future was.

The guard stepped aside and held open the tent flap. Cyrus took Rennard’s arm again, and they walked inside.

The gloom came at them hard along with a wall of purple incense smoke. Cyrus coughed and waved the air in front of his face. It made his eyes sting. But once they cleared, he could look around the small tent. The walls and ceiling were all covered in sheer and colored drapes. Carved hip height pillars held mostly burned incense sticks. A gramophone in the corner was playing low quality music. The stringed instruments that were playing were slightly out of tune. Or maybe the record was warped somehow. Cyrus wrinkled his nose in distaste.

The sound of cards being shuffled brought Cyrus’s gaze back to the center of the tent. There was a small table covered with a long, red cloth. Facing them was a veiled person who shuffled a worn tarot deck.

“Hello,” the person said, their voice as soft as the cloying, purple smoke. “Please take a seat.”

Cyrus smiled nervously at them and sat on the ornate couch. But he was also relieved. The fortune teller had no wings. Rennard sat beside him, their thighs pressed together.

The fortune teller shuffled their cards again. “Welcome. I am Oracle, the fortune teller of the Miraculous Faire. Are you here for a love reading?”

Cyrus clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. “Absolutely. Tell us our future together.”

Oracle looked him and Rennard over, and Cyrus did the same. What about them was wrong? The sign outside marked them as part of the sideshow, but Cyrus couldn’t see anything that would deem them part of that. Other than the veil that covered most of their face. Were they disfigured, somehow? Oracle had narrow shoulders that were bare above the type of shirt they were wearing, one that was tied around the chest rather than the collar. Their dark skin seemed matte, almost powdered. Black hair spilled over Oracle’s shoulders from under a thin bandana

wrapped around their head. A sheer veil rested under their vibrant green eyes to obscure their face. Cyrus was captivated by those eyes. Oracle was looking at him, quizzically.

Rennard nudged Cyrus with his elbow, and he startled. "I'm Rennard, and this is Cyrus," Rennard said. Cyrus blinked, confused, then realized that Oracle must have asked for their names while he was staring at them.

Oracle closed their eyes for a moment and breathed out slowly, their veil rippling, shuffling their cards. "Something about you two..." they trailed off. "It feels..." Oracle shook themselves. "No, it's nothing. Sorry for rambling."

"I would like to hear whatever a mystic has to say about me," Cyrus said, liltily.

Oracle stared at them and Cyrus met their gaze confidently. He faltered. What was it about Oracle's eyes? They were a bright sea-foam green with only the barest indication of a pupil. Cyrus's breath caught in his throat. "May I ask," he said, "why the sign outside labeled you as part of the sideshow?"

Oracle stiffened, their hands going still on their deck of cards. "I'm a Godblood. The guard should have told you."

Rennard tensed against Cyrus. "There *are* two here?" he asked.

Oracle looked them both over again before shaking their head. "Three."

"*Three?*" Cyrus gasped. It felt like he had just been punched in the chest. All his life, he'd only met two, *heard* of a third, and now there were three in the same place? At the same time?

Oracle cleared their throat. "Never mind all that. You're here for a reading."

"I want to hear more about the Godbloods," Cyrus said urgently as he leaned forward and put his hands on the clothed table.

"I'm afraid I'm not really allowed to talk at length about it," Oracle said with a nervous glance at the tent flap behind Cyrus and Rennard.

Rennard took Cyrus by the shoulder and pulled him back onto the seat. "We'll take a look around later," he whispered into Cyrus's ear. Cyrus nodded, his hands curling into fists under the table.

"Tell me something," Cyrus whispered. "Are you here willingly?"

Oracle smiled in a way that felt fake. It was barely visible under the veil, a slight shadow of tense lips. "A love reading for you two, correct?" As they spoke, Oracle slowly shook their head "no." They shuffled one more time before fanning the cards out and offering them to Cyrus and Rennard. "Please pick one each and set them face down, side by side in the center of the table.

Cyrus's heart pounded as he looked over the cards carefully. While the edges were worn and faded, the designs on the back were still beautiful. They were black, or perhaps dark blue, with twisting designs of gold leaf etched into the material. They didn't look like they were for performance. Cyrus drew a card from the right side. Rennard took one from the center. As he did, another card came with it and fell face down on the table.

"Oh, sorry," Rennard said.

Oracle shook their head. “If a card comes out of the deck on its own during a reading, it’s a message. Something that should be known to the one receiving the reading.” Their eyes twinkled. “Maybe something big happens in your love life. Let’s see.” Oracle picked up the card and flipped it towards Cyrus and Rennard. All three leaned forward to see what it was.

Oracle froze, eyes widening and lips parting slightly. So did Cyrus and Rennard.

The tarot card showed all three of them as well as two other people. Cyrus recognized Venus’s long, white hair and wings. There was also a small, young woman who also had wings, although they were much smaller than Venus’s. They stood underneath two arches bearing three pentacles. Cyrus and Rennard were standing on a bench and dressed in armor. Rennard was holding his shortsword and Cyrus was brandishing his conductor’s baton, which was the wand he used as his spell focus. They looked urgent and determined. In the other arch was Oracle, Venus, and the winged, black haired girl Cyrus had never seen before. They were all dressed in rags and simple clothes, panic etched on their faces. They seemed to be running to Cyrus and Rennard.

Cyrus looked up to Oracle. “What—what is this?” he asked.

“M-my cards show who I’m giving the reading to in their motifs,” Oracle stammered. “It’s p-part of my magic, but—” They gripped the red tablecloth. “This card—the three of pentacles...”

“What does it mean?” Rennard asked. “What’s going on?”

Oracle swallowed hard. “That’s me, Vanûm, and Julia,” they said.

“The three circus Godbloods,” Cyrus breathed. Of course Venus was a stage name. Vanûm, what a strange name.

Oracle nodded. “It—this card means collaboration a-and teamwork. Working towards a similar goal. Creating a larger group or project.”

Cyrus and Rennard shared a look. “What does that mean for us?” Cyrus whispered.

Oracle pointed at the card. “Look at this. Behind you, then behind us.”

Cyrus picked up the card to look closer. Rennard leaned over his shoulder to do the same. He smelled like the anise seed he always chewed.

Behind Cyrus and Rennard’s figures in the card was a bright blue sky. Behind the Godbloods were tents and people. They were running away from them, to Cyrus and Rennard, and that blue sky.

“You free us,” Oracle breathed.

Rennard stood suddenly., pushing part of the couch back. “I don’t think we can do that,” he said sternly.

“Renny!” Cyrus said, “we have to!”

Oracle shushed them. “Please! Be quiet! The guard will hear!”

Rennard bit his lip. “It’s a good way to get us both arrested,” he whispered.

“Look at them!” Cyrus whispered back.

Rennard growled. “Look, let’s at least get more information, or something.”

“Whatever it takes to change your mind,” Cyrus spat back. He stood as well. “Oracle, thank you for your wisdom. I have a feeling we’ll meet again, soon.”

“Eyriel,” Oracle whispered.

“Hm?”

“My name is Eyriel.”

Cyrus bit his lip but forced himself to smile. “Eyriel, then. We’ll see you around.”

## Chapter 3: The Godblood

### Vanûm

Vanûm was escorted out of the performance tent. Once outside, a rough blanket was tossed over his shoulders. He pulled it over his head and hid his wings and white hair. It did little against the chill of the afternoon wind. It was early spring, but the warmth hadn't begun to bloom.

The guards hurried Vanûm across the back of the fair grounds. This side of the performance tent was where the business of the Miraculous Faire was done. All the props, trailers, and everything that a circus could need was in this roped off section. It was busy with performers running around, gathering props, doing some last minute practicing, and getting ready for their acts. They all parted before Vanûm and the guards, sending them untrusting looks through narrow eyes.

The guards led Vanûm to a small tent. Without a word, Vanûm stepped inside and let the blanket fall around his shoulders before he hung it on a shabby coat rack. Inside the tent, taking up most of the room, was a tub of dirty water. Vanûm knew that the water would be cold and filthy from the other performers. Still, he stripped himself of his costume and stepped in. He knelt and scrubbed off the makeup from his face and the sweat from his body. As Vanûm washed, more makeup came off, but not just from his face. Bruises came to the surface of his honey-colored skin. Vanûm sighed and cleared the water from his eyes. He was careful to not get his hair wet, but the ends still fell into the water. It still got cold at night, and here, getting sick could be a death sentence. Vanûm frowned and pulled it over his shoulder.

"I need a haircut," he murmured. But he knew that his hair was part of the performance, part of the wonder. Vanûm's hair was hip length and got in the way of everything. Not to mention how tangled it got.

Vanûm flinched as one of the guards stuck his head inside the tent. "Hurry up," he said, tiredly. "Herbick is waiting for you."

Vanûm didn't say anything back. He rose from the water and stepped onto the muddy ground. He took the scratchy blanket from the coat rack and wrapped it around himself, shivering. Goosebumps rose on Vanûm's skin. He took his costume from where it hung and stepped outside. The air brushed against his bare legs. The blanket didn't cover everything. But Vanûm didn't care much. He already had no privacy or decency here.

The guards escorted Vanûm back to another tent. This one was larger but unadorned. The area around it was avoided. This was the tent for the Godbloods, and that was enough to keep other performers away.

Vanûm lifted the flap and ducked inside. It was empty except for Herbick, an older dwarven man that acted as the Godbloods's caretaker. Otherwise, there was only a large bed of straw piled with blankets, some crates, and a rack to hold costumes when they weren't being worn. This too was empty. Eyriel was out telling fortunes and Julia was being prepared for her performance.

Herbick turned as Vanûm entered. “Howdy, Venus,” he said. “How’d your dance go?” Vanûm shrugged. “Lulu won’t be after me for it,” he said.

“Well, that’s good at least,” Herbick said. “Hand me your costume and go dry off.”

Vanûm stuck his arm out of the blanket and handed Herbick his black and gold leotard. The decorative metal tabs on it clinked together. Herbick took it, threaded it through a hanger, and hung it on the rack. Vanûm took the blanket from his body and draped it over one of the crates, before he opened another and pulled out his clothes. They weren’t much, just a faded long-sleeved shirt and pants, holey socks, and a thin jacket. The shirt and the jacket had long slits in the back for him to fit his wings through. Vanûm quickly pulled them all on to avoid the chill air.

“How do you think Angel is going to do?” Herbick asked. He picked up a manacle attached to a long chain to the supporting post and approached Vanûm.

Vanûm bit back a sigh. “She’ll do fine,” he said stiffly. He sat down on the straw bed and outstretched his leg. This would be Julia’s first show without Vanûm dancing at her side. She was probably terrified. All Vanûm could do was hope that she didn’t mess up. Lulu would make the consequences known for any mistakes that were made, and Vanûm knew this from experience.

“You’re worried, ain’t you?” Herbick said, quietly, as he tugged up Vanûm’s sock and fastened the manacle around his ankle. “I’ve known you for too long to miss that look in your eyes.”

This time, Vanûm sighed. Herbick cared, it seemed, but Vanûm couldn’t shake the feeling that he was just like the rest of them. There was no kindness in them; only disgust. The ones who weren’t like that showed only pity as they stood idly by. It had been that way since before he had been abducted by the Faire.

It took him a moment to realize that Herbick was talking to him. Vanûm shook himself out of his thoughts and fought to not fall back into them. “What?” he said.

“I said that I could bring you something warm to eat. There’s some leftover stew from this morning.” Herbick shook out the blanket that Vanûm entered the tent in, and hung it on the clothes rack to dry.

Vanûm’s stomach grumbled at the mention of food. “Yes. Please,” he said, adding the “please” at the last moment.

Herbick nodded. “I’ll be back in a few,” he said before ducking out of the tent. Vanûm heard him greet the guard that stood outside, and then it was quiet. Vanûm fell back onto the bed of straw, rolled over onto his side, and pulled some of the blankets around him. His bruises ached and his stomach felt hollow. Vanûm had eaten before the show, but not much. The Godbloods were never given much.

He adjusted his wings under the blankets, and pulled his long hair out from under him. Maybe he would ask Herbick to cut a few inches off. Maybe no one would notice. Or perhaps Herbick would just say no.

Vanûm rolled onto his stomach, rested his head on his arms, and closed his eyes. There was no choice he had but to wait. Wait for the next show, for the next period of travel, for the

next inspection. Most of the time, he never even knew what town the circus had stopped in. It was just waiting for one thing after another. Now it was waiting for Herbick to return with food.

The tent felt empty without the other two Godbloods. The image of Julia's dance entered his mind. Vanûm knew her dance well enough to teach Julia her part when she couldn't get it right. They would spend time in their tent, going through the motions while Eyriel watched. It was hard in such a cramped space and chained up as they were, but they managed. That was the best they could all do. Vanûm, Eyriel, Julia; all they could do was manage and wait.



## Chapter 4: The Angel

Vanûm

When Vanûm next opened his eyes, the sun had turned the sky yellow. The color bled through the tent. After he ate, Vanûm tried to rest. He hadn't been asleep, not quite dreaming. He couldn't sleep without Eyriel at his side anymore. It had been that way for years.

It struck Vanûm that the main performance should have been over a while ago. The show was only about an hour long, and the sun was beginning to set now.

*Where's Julia?* Vanûm thought. The chain that attached him to the supporting post wasn't long enough to reach the tent flap and look outside. Vanûm sat up and called the guards. "Hey! Guard, where's Julia?"

Silence. Vanûm frowned. He could see the silhouette of the guard against the dirty white canvas. "Can you please find out where Julia is?"

The guard shifted and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I don't take orders from you," he finally said.

Vanûm huffed. "I'm asking a question, not ordering you to do anything," he said.

"Don't give me lip, or I'll come in there and beat your ass," the guard snarled. Vanûm knew he would, too. It had been done before, and not just by this guard. He kept his mouth shut. More waiting.

However, Vanûm didn't have to wait long before he heard the guard outside greet another. It wasn't hard to eavesdrop through the tent. He could hear Julia crying.

"What's wrong with the brat?" the guard called.

The new guard sighed. "Lulu," was all she said.

An intake of breath. "Nasty woman. Wish she would get out."

"That'll never happen, no matter what she does," the new guard said. "The owner wouldn't kick out his daughter."

"Wish he would, though, and I don't even interact with her! The horror stories I hear are enough to make me stay away."

The new guard escorted Julia inside. "There you are, Angel."

Julia's pale face was red from crying and her long black hair was in disarray. Like Vanûm, she had also been bathed and was wrapped in the scratchy blanket.

Vanûm turned away as the guard took her costume and handed over her clothes. Julia got dressed quickly in the same types of clothes Vanûm was wearing. As she was pulling the shirt over her head, it must have gotten caught on her wing. Vanûm heard the familiar fiddling to push it through the hole in the shirt. The guard crossed her arms, and Julia hurried to finish dressing.

"Alright, go sit with Venus," the guard said, bending to pick up the smallest manacle from the ground.

Julia sniffed and then coughed into her elbow before she miserably sat next to Vanûm. The guard fastened the manacle around her ankle and stood back up. Without a word, she left the

tent. Julia immediately fell into Vanûm's chest, gripping his worn shirt and sobbing. Vanûm hugged her close.

“Shh, what happened?” he asked.

Julia coughed again and tried to speak, but was overcome by her tears. Vanûm held her close, feeling how small she was compared to him. Julia was only sixteen, as she once told him. Sixteen and stuck in a freak show. It was younger than Vanûm had been when the Miraculous Faire took him in. He had been. . . Vanûm didn't quite know how old he was. He had been at the Faire for several years, though. Eyriel even longer, as they had been taken from their orphanage. They had discussed with Vanûm that they might have been eighteen at the time. Neither Eyriel nor Vanûm knew how old they were, let alone anything like birthdays. Vanûm guessed that they were both in their twenties and around the same age, but nothing was for sure.

“I—” Julia hiccuped and sniffed loudly. “I messed up during my dance.”

Vanûm's heart sank.

“Lulu—” Julia coughed loudly. “Lulu hit me.” She pulled away from Vanûm's chest and turned her hands up. The pale skin of her inner wrists were covered in straight white welts.

Vanûm hissed. He recognized the marks of Lulu's switch right away. The pain of old scars left by her on Vanûm's body stung at the sight of Julia's. “I'm sorry,” Vanûm murmured. “I wish I could have been there to protect you.”

Julia sniffed again and wiped her eyes. “No, it's my fault. I messed up.”

“It's *not* your fault,” Vanûm insisted. “Lulu is a cruel woman and likes to remind us of that.”

Julia nodded, then coughed hard again. Vanûm frowned and pulled Julia closer to him. Her cough was worrying. It had been a week, and it still hadn't passed. The circus's doctor had given her something to remedy it, but it hadn't worked. Unless Julia got seriously sick, there wasn't a chance that the doctor would prescribe any kind of costly medicine to a Godblood. Even if the doctor wanted to, there were probably rules in place to stop him from doing so.

After ten minutes of silence broken only by Julia's coughing, the tent flap opened again and Eyriel was escorted in. They went through the same procedure that Vanûm and Julia did: come in, hand off the costume, get dressed, and be manacled. But Eyriel looked excited and was failing to keep it off of their face. When the guard left, they burst.

“I met two people today,” Eyriel whispered. Their green eyes were shining bright.

Vanûm raised an eyebrow. “You meet lots of people nearly every day,” he said.

“No, no, these two were different,” Eyriel said, struggling to keep their voice down. “I read their fortune—they wanted a love reading, but Fate had other ideas—and,” they paused to breathe, “Vanûm, they're going to *rescue us*.”

Vanûm froze and Julia covered her mouth in shock. “Really? Are you sure?” she asked.

Eyriel nodded. “I pulled the three of pentacles, a card that shows people working together towards a certain goal. It showed us *esc—mmph!*”

Vanûm slapped his hand over Eyriel's mouth. "You're getting too loud," he whispered. He took his hand away and sat back. "I know you trust your cards but..." Vanûm glanced at Julia. "Aren't you getting your hopes up? You said that nothing in the future is set in stone."

Eyriel's expression fell. "Well, yes, I-I did say that but..." They looked at Julia's heartbroken face. "I just have a good feeling about them, that's all."

"I believe you," Julia said. "I want to get out. I want to see my brother and sister again. And my father."

"Not your mother?" Vanûm asked.

Julia went quiet. "No," she said, softly.

Vanûm and Eyriel exchanged glances.

"I won't ask," Vanûm said. "But you're welcome to talk to us anytime."

Eyriel nodded in agreement. Julia also nodded, but didn't speak. She buried her face in Vanûm's chest again.

"We'll get out," Eyriel whispered.

Vanûm nodded slowly. He didn't want to get his hopes up.

## Chapter 5: The Tavern

Cyrus

Cyrus and Rennard were silent as they returned to the city. The dirt path was nearly indistinguishable from the still unsown soil. Cyrus knew that would soon change. The seeds would be planted and carefully tended, and the plants would grow. So much like children. So much unlike the Godbloods of the fair, who had been uprooted long before their time.

It reminded Cyrus of himself in a way. He hadn't been ready to leave his home in the Grave Monastery. He had no choice but to leave with Rennard at his side. Cyrus had always regretted what he had done then, even though he hadn't had much of a choice.

"Why were you against freeing those Godbloods?" Cyrus asked.

Rennard sighed heavily. "I'm not against it—"

"It sounded like you were," Cyrus interrupted.

Rennard gave him a tired look. "It just... it seems dangerous. And a good way to get arrested. We don't even know if that reading was real, or some type of illusion magic."

Cyrus looked down at the dirt path and kicked at a small stone, sending it spinning away. "You know how I feel about stuff like this," he said. "And those three still need our help even if you don't trust Eyriel."

They walked a few steps before Rennard kicked the same stone, sending it ahead of them. "I know," Rennard said, sadly. "We would need time."

Cyrus kicked the rock back. "Time?"

"To plan," Rennard said. "I know you want to just storm the circus and heroically save them." He kicked the rock, and it was sent spinning off into the dirt of the field with a cloud of dust. Rennard crinkled his nose. "That's just not possible."

"By *myself* it isn't," Cyrus said, starting to grin. "But if I have my big, strong Renny at my side..."

Rennard gave him another tired look. Cyrus stopped walking to stare back into Rennard's yellowed, hazel eyes, and batted his white eyelashes. Rennard finally sighed. "How long is the Miraculous Faire staying in the city?"

Cyrus cheered internally. "There was that poster in Chestnut that we saw," he said. The Twelve Chestnut Inn was the tavern that Cyrus and Rennard had been staying at for the last two days. It was the most popular tavern in the small city of Ribbon that they had passed through. Cyrus and Rennard discovered the Miraculous Faire in the first place through the job board inside the tavern. The advertising poster had promised wonders, and wonders it had given them, just not the ones they expected.

Rennard sighed again and continued walking. Cyrus hurried after him, plans already spinning inside his head.

The dirt paths turned to gravel as they passed into the outskirts of Ribbon. As they walked further in, the buildings grew taller and closer together. The Twelve Chestnut Inn was a towering three stories. It was only the late afternoon, so the bar on the bottom floor was not busy,

except for four men eating a late lunch. Three different women were getting ready for the nightly patrons, cleaning tables and walking in and out of the kitchen where the smells of roasting meat wafted from. Cyrus's stomach growled and he looked up at Rennard.

"I'm hungryyy," Cyrus whined, tugging on Rennard's sleeve. Besides for breakfast, he had only had a candy apple at the fair.

Rennard nodded. "It's been awhile since you've eaten, hasn't it?" He dug out his coin purse from his pocket and handed a couple copper to Cyrus. "Buy me a beer?" Rennard asked.

Cyrus giggled. "Renny, it's not even four," he mock scolded.

Rennard just shrugged with a rare smile. "I can drink whenever I want."

Cyrus knew Rennard did just that. It was hard to get him drunk, or even tipsy. He stepped up to the bar and waved at one of the women who were preparing from behind the counter.

"Scuse me, beautiful," Cyrus cooed.

The oldest woman dried her hands off on her apron. "There's three beautiful women behind this counter, son," she said, not unkindly. "You looking to eat or you looking to flirt?"

Cyrus laughed. "I don't swing that way," he said. "I'm just looking for lunch."

The woman raised her eyebrow with a smile. "Of course. What are you hungry for?"

"Whatever is cooking now smells delightful," Cyrus said, leaning on his elbow on the bar. "That ready yet?"

The woman shook her head. "Sorry, darling, that's dinner. We have vegetable stew from earlier."

Cyrus shrugged. "Guess I'll have to come back for dinner, then," he said. "I'll take a bowl of that stew, and a glass of beer."

The woman raised an eyebrow again. "Isn't it a little early?"

One of the girls giggled. She looked like the older woman's young daughter.

"That's what I said!" Cyrus laughed. "It's for my partner. He drinks what he can, when he can."

"Better be careful," the girl giggled. "He'll get rowdy."

Cyrus placed a hand to his chest, mock scandalized. "*My* Renny? Rowdy? Never!"

"Must have yourself a good man, then," the older woman said. She turned and shoed the daughter into the kitchen for Cyrus's stew, before turning around and grabbing a tall glass mug from under the bar and filling it from a tap behind her. The bitter smell clouded over like the foam head of the murky, amber liquid. She set it on the counter with a smile. "Altogether will be one silver," she said.

Cyrus counted out ten copper coins and let them drop into the woman's open hand.

The woman recounted them and stuck them into a coin purse at her side. "Your stew will be out soon."

"Thank you kindly!" Cyrus chirped. He returned to the table that Rennard claimed near the door and placed the mug in front of him. "They called you a good man," he chuckled as he slid into the chair next to Rennard.

Rennard grunted. “They don’t know that,” he said. He took the mug and drank, then wiped the foam from his upper lip.

Cyrus leaned into him. “I know that,” he said.

Rennard huffed, and wrapped his arm around Cyrus’s shoulders. “Yeah, I suppose you do.”

The girl came out from behind the bar holding a steaming bowl, brought it over to Cyrus, and set down in front of him. “Did you go to the circus?” she asked eagerly. “Was it fun?”

“You don’t even know if we went,” Cyrus said with a smile.

The girl smiled. She had a gap in her teeth. “You smell like candy apples,” she said slyly. “They only have those at circuses!”

Rennard hid a smile in his mug. “Very clever,” he said as he placed it back on the table.

The girl looked at them expectantly.

Cyrus and Rennard looked at each other. “Well,” Cyrus said carefully, “it was... interesting. The performers were—” Rennard squeezed his shoulders in a way that meant “careful.” Cyrus continued, not careful. “There was an upsetting act where I thought a dancer fell from a tightrope.”

The girl gasped. “Oh no! Are they okay?”

Cyrus nodded. “He flew back up.”

“Flew?” the girl asked with wonder. “He had wings?” Her voice lowered. “Was he one of those Godbloods?”

Rennard squeezed Cyrus again. “Yes, he was,” Rennard said.

The girl looked back to her mother at the bar carefully. “Mama said that those are cursed. That they bring bad luck.”

“Is that why you couldn’t go?” Cyrus asked.

The girl nodded. “Mama saw them on a different poster. She doesn’t like them, but I’ve never seen one before.”

“I met one at the circus,” Cyrus said, quietly. “They were really nice.”

“You aren’t cursed?” the girl asked. “You talked to one, and they didn’t curse you?”

Cyrus bit back a retort. Godbloods didn’t do that! But this girl was only a child, maybe twelve or so. She didn’t know any better.

“Not at all,” Cyrus said with a smile. “Don’t believe everything you hear, okay? Especially about Godbloods.”

The girl nodded. “Okay, thank you mister!” She left the table and returned to her mother behind the bar.

Cyrus sighed and dug a spoon into the vegetable stew. “Cursed,” he muttered, mood now even more soured. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be used to people outside the Monastery viewed Godbloods. “Godbloods don’t curse people.”

Rennard rubbed Cyrus’s back. “I know,” he said. “She was only parroting what she’s been told.”

“What about the famous Godbloods?” Cyrus continued. He shoveled stew into his mouth. “No one would say that about the Lord Under the Stars!” he said with his mouth full.

“I don’t think many people outside of Caelum *know* about the Lord Under the Stars,” Rennard said. He sipped at his beer.

Cyrus sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “Still...”

“He’s your idol,” Rennard stated.

Cyrus nodded and leaned on the table. “That’s one way to put it. I’ve always heard stories about how noble and heroic and kind he is. The son of Magic, itself. What a looker he must be.”

Rennard snorted into his mug. “You’ve been in love with him since the Head Abbot first told you that he existed.”

Cyrus swatted Rennard’s arm. “Just because you’re right, doesn’t mean you have to say it!” he said.

Rennard chuckled and leaned away from him. “You wrote a *song* about him,” he said.

“I was *twelve!*” Cyrus protested.

“And I still haven’t heard it,” Rennard teased. “When are you going to perform it for me?”

“Rennyyyyyyyyyy,” Cyrus whined. “Stop teasing meeeee.”

Rennard was grinning but hid it in his mug. Cyrus felt happy as he caught it. It wasn’t often that he got to see Rennard smile anymore. Rennard tipped back his beer and swallowed the rest of it. He wasn’t smiling when he came back up. He wiped the foam from his mouth, and replaced it with his natural scowl. Cyrus took the hint and started to eat a bit faster.

“Are you still performing here tonight?” Rennard asked.

Cyrus nodded. “I plan to, but it’s up to the owners,” he said.

Rennard thought for a moment. “While you’re doing that,” he said, “I can check out the Miraculous Faire. See where they’re keeping the Godbloods.”

Cyrus looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Scouting is step one of any plan,” he said after swallowing. “You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“I’m always careful,” Rennard said, evenly. “When have I ever gotten caught?”

Cyrus laughed quietly. “Do you want me to answer that?”

“No.”

Cyrus leaned against Rennard again, and Rennard pushed back gently. “If you’re not back by morning...”

“I’ll be back by morning,” Rennard promised. “I always am.”

## Chapter 6: The Dance Instructor

Vanûm

Vanûm kept waking up during the night by the sound of Julia coughing and wheezing in her sleep. She sounded like she was getting worse, and Vanûm could only hope that wasn't the case. The doctor wouldn't help much.

By the time the early morning came, Vanûm's fears were confirmed. Julia's pale skin had gotten paler, and she was shivering under the blankets. Eyriel placed a hand on her forehead.

"She's burning up," they said.

Vanûm bit his lip. "She has dance practice with me today. Lulu won't let her rest."

Eyriel looked fearful and looked down at Julia. She was sweating despite her chills.

"Julia, it's time to wake up," they said as they placed a hand on her shoulder.

Julia groaned and rolled onto her back. "M awake," she murmured. "Eyriel, I don't feel good." She sniffed and wiped her nose. "It's cold."

Eyriel quieted her. "Vanûm, can you get the guard to call the doctor?"

Vanûm nodded and stood to move towards the tent flap. "Hey, guard," he called.

"Julia—Angel needs a doctor."

The guard groaned sleepily and stretched. It would be near the end of his shift about now. "What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"She has a fever," Vanûm said.

"Is that it?" the guard asked.

Vanûm bit his lip. "She's definitely sick."

The guard sighed. "I'll get someone," he said. He rose from his chair and Vanûm watched his shadow retreat, leaving the Godblood's tent unguarded. It happened often. The guards tended to be lax around them, knowing that the Godbloods were chained and were too scared to try to escape.

Vanûm returned to the straw bed. "The doctor should be here soon," he said.

"I don't need a doctor," Julia whispered. "It'll pass."

"It's been a week," Eyriel said. "Julia, this is only getting worse."

"I have practice today," she said as she pushed herself into a sitting position. "Lulu won't let me miss it."

Vanûm bit his lip.

"Don't push yourself," he said. "You'll only make it worse."

"He's right," Eyriel said.

They were interrupted by the tent flap opening and the doctor, a small, balding, human man with thick glasses entering. He was covered in soft liver spots and wore a medical mask. The doctor, whose name Vanûm could never remember, dragged the guard's chair over to where the three Godbloods were sitting. "Hello, Angel, I hear you aren't feeling well."

Julia bit back a cough. "It's nothing. I just don't feel good," she said.



“She has a fever,” Eyriel said, “and she’s been coughing for almost a week now. She woke up with chills.”

The doctor hummed, and opened his bag. He took out a thermometer and shook it down. “Open,” he told Julia. Julia leaned forward and the doctor placed the thermometer under her tongue. He looked at his pocket watch, then began to rummage through his bag again. Vanûm watched him take out a dark green bottle and a spoon, then patiently waited for two minutes to pass. The doctor took the thermometer out of Julia’s mouth and inspected it from under his glasses. “You do have a fever, Miss Angel, but it shouldn’t be too hard to fix.”

Vanûm sighed in relief. “You have something for her, right?” he asked, eyeing the green bottle.

The doctor nodded. He replaced the thermometer into its alcohol bottle and placed that back into his bag. Quickly, he uncorked the bottle and poured a thick liquid into the spoon. Julia was looking at it doubtfully. “It’s mostly honey,” the doctor said, glancing down at her. He shook the bottle, trying to get it to come out faster.

“Okay,” Julia said softly. “What else is in it?”

“Medicine,” said the doctor, helpfully. “It’s something of my own making.”

Vanûm narrowed his eyes. He didn’t trust what this doctor made very much. At least, from his experience, it always tasted good.

The doctor gave Julia the full spoon, and she carefully placed it in her mouth and swallowed the medicine. “Oh, it *is* honey,” she said, quietly delighted. “I haven’t had honey since I came here. Thank you.”

If the doctor smiled under his mask, Vanûm couldn’t see it. He took the spoon out of Julia’s hands, wiped it down with a cloth, and placed both items into his bag which he snapped shut. “Well then,” said the doctor, “that should take care of it for now. Send someone to fetch me if you get worse.”

Julia nodded. “I will.”

The doctor stood and left without another word. Eyriel turned to Julia. “Did it make you feel better that quickly?” they asked.

“Well, not exactly,” Julia said. “But it’s already making my throat not hurt. I’m sure that I’ll be well enough for dance practice soon.”

Vanûm wasn’t too sure about that. He felt like something was going to go wrong.

It wasn’t long until Herbick was summoned to gather Vanûm and Julia. The Miraculous Faire wasn’t set to open until late morning, so just after dawn was the perfect time to squeeze in the last bit of practice. Or, in this case, torture.

Herbick led Vanûm and Julia through the busy encampment to their regular practice stage; a wooden platform that was slightly raised above the ground with posts that rose above it by ten feet. A large net hung from the posts and draped down to the ground. It was to keep the Winged Godbloods from flying away.

Lulu was standing in the middle of the platform. She was tall and striking, wearing a red jacket over loose pants and a tight shirt. Her bobbed blond hair was pulled back and pinned behind her ears. Her ever present switch was holstered at her hip.

Herbick gave Vanûm and Julia a sympathetic look as he held up part of the net from them to climb under. He waited for them to mount the stage before he left. Lulu gazed at the Godbloods with disgust, like she usually did.

“Good morning,” she said with feigned politeness. “We’re working on your duet.” Straight to the point. Vanûm and Julia nodded. Vanûm knew not to speak unless addressed by her. “Start your warm-ups,” Lulu said, curtly.

Vanûm sat on the ground and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Julia followed his lead. Vanûm kept an eye on her as they stretched. Her breathing still sounded rough, but she wasn’t coughing as much. He guided Julia through his basic stretches as he did every practice. Legs, then arms, then wings.

“Are you ready to begin?” Lulu asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Vanûm said.

Julia nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” she said much quieter.

Lulu stared them down. As always, Vanûm felt very small despite being as tall as Lulu was. “You are performing together this afternoon, and as always, it has to be up to the standards of the Miraculous Faire!” she said. “This is your last practice.” Lulu clapped sharply, and Vanûm and Julia flinched at the sound. One of the brass sextet, a trumpet player who had arrived a few minutes ago during their stretches, snapped to attention. “We’ll work our way through the performance. Robert! Start at *Star of an Era*.”

Robert, a black-haired half-elf with a comb over who was standing beside the wooden platform, nodded and placed the trumpet to his pudgy lips.

Vanûm and Julia scrambled to get into the first form’s position. Robert blew out the first note and began the music. *Star of an Era* was a song that started with a bang. Fast tempo rushed Vanûm through the steps and the forms like wind. Julia was keeping up, but was always a half step behind. She was breathing heavily.

The end of the song hit hard, and Vanûm stopped with his wings spread behind him. Julia was in her last form, trembling to hold it. They held for the imaginary applause of a crowd that wasn’t yet there.

Lulu motioned for Robert to continue with *Dreams*. This song was slower, much to Vanûm’s relief. He could keep a better eye on Julia during this piece, although this was the dance she was most confident in. It was a back and forth routine, while the first was a true duet. Vanûm slid from form twenty-eight to form twenty-nine with an elegant leg lift, held it for eight counts, then entered form thirty. Julia daintily swayed through her forms, but the effect was ruined by her heavy breathing. Vanûm frowned. She looked exhausted. Then she stumbled, but corrected her stance before Lulu could descend on her. The song ended with a longing note and Vanûm holding Julia in a low dip.

“Are you okay?” Vanûm whispered.

Julia nodded as sweat dripped down her pale face. They held for the silent applause.

The final song was *City to Change*, another fast-paced and upbeat song. Vanûm let go of Julia and spun away, flaring his wings out at the end. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Julia doing the same. Form four to five to six. The tempo grew faster, their feet stamping on the wood platform to create a percussive beat that the other two didn't have. Vanûm leapt up, and flapped his wings in time with the trumpet's notes. Vanûm was focused on himself. He landed, lashed out, and held out his arms to catch Julia as he dropped to one knee. But Julia never hit his arms.

"Stop!" Lulu shouted.

The trumpet faltered out, and Vanûm untensed from the dance position. *What's...*

Julia had collapsed onto the wood, breathing fast and heavy, clothes darkened with sweat. She was coughing hard.

"Up!" Lulu yelled. "Get up before I hit you!"

Julia tried to push herself up, but fell back to the floor. "I—I can't breathe," she whispered.

Lulu either ignored her or didn't hear. She grabbed the switch from her belt, and swung. The switch cracked across Julia's shoulder, and Julia cried out then devolved into coughing.

Vanûm stared and quickly sprung to his feet. Lulu struck Julia again. Julia was coughing and heaving. Vanûm didn't need to have medical experience to know that Julia couldn't breathe.

"Stop!" Vanûm yelled, shooting forward. He grabbed Lulu's wrist, the one that held the switch.

Lulu spun and snarled, jerking her hand from Vanûm's grip. "How *dare* you touch me!"

"We need the doctor!" Vanûm urged. "She's choking, or—or something!"

"She's fine!" Lulu snapped. "Stand up!" She grabbed Julia by the bicep and dragged her to her feet. Julia promptly folded and fell. Lulu made a frustrated sound and kicked Julia in the leg.

Vanûm shoved Lulu to the side. "Stop touching her!" he yelled. His panic had overtaken his fear.

Lulu screamed in disgust. "Robert! Guards!" The terrified looking half-elf scurried away. She lashed out at Vanûm, striking him across the face. His head snapped to the side. "I'll see that my father hears about you two!" she snarled.

"Julia did nothing wrong!" Vanûm protested.

"*Angel* is disobeying instruction!"

Vanûm screamed in frustration and swung his fist. It connected with Lulu's cheek with a dull thud and sent her sprawling onto the wooden stage. Vanûm panted and looked at his hand.

*I'm in so much trouble*, he thought. Vanûm rushed to Julia's side. Her breathing was labored and interrupted by violent bouts of coughing. He looked to where Lulu was sitting up, over to Julia, then to the stairs leading off the platform. Vanûm bit his lip and lifted Julia into his arms. But before he could rush to the stairs, there were guards ducking under the net. Swords were pointed at Vanûm.

“She needs a doctor!” Vanûm pleaded. “Please!”

One of the captains of the fair’s guard looked Julia over. He turned to the guard next to him. “Get the doctor,” he commanded. The guard nodded before rushing off. The captain turned back to Vanûm, but before he could speak, Lulu stormed up to him.

“This *thing*,” she snarled, “attacked me without reason!”

Vanûm bristled. “You were hurting Julia!”

“Shut your mouth!” Lulu snapped. “Captain Justin, do something about him!”

Captain Justin didn’t look amused by Lulu screaming in his face. He looked to Vanûm and sighed as he pulled manacles and a chain from his belt. “Venus, you *did* strike Lulu. I saw it.”

Vanûm bristled. “I’m not leaving until the doctor gets here.” He and Captain Justin stared each other down. Then the guards parted and the doctor from before hurried onto the platform.

“Put her down,” he commanded.

Vanûm gently placed Julia on the ground. The doctor placed a hand on her chest and cast some sort of healing magic that Vanûm couldn’t put a name to. Immediately, Julia’s breathing eased. “I need to bring her back to the medical tent,” he said. The doctor turned to one of the guards. “Carry her for me, I’m too old for it.”

The guard nodded and knelt in front of Julia, lifting her roughly into his arms, and following the doctor out.

Vanûm watched them leave. The weight of what had happened sunk in his stomach like a stone. He’d attacked Lulu. He’d attacked the ringmaster’s daughter. His mouth went dry as he thought about the repercussions that were coming.

Captain Justin grabbed one of Vanûm’s wrist and clasped the cuff around it. Vanûm didn’t resist as his other wrist was cuffed. “Alright, Venus, come with me, and we’ll see what we do with you,” Captain Justin said.

Lulu stormed past them with a glare. “I’m telling my dad to punish you,” she snarled.

Captain Justin yanked on the shackle's chain, and pulled Vanûm forward. “Come on, we’ll see what happens.”

## Chapter 7: The Escape

Cyrus

Cyrus's performance that night at the Twelve Chestnut Inn was successful and brought in the normal amount of money. After splitting it with the owner, he was left with four silver. Not great but not bad either.

Throughout the performance, Cyrus worried about Rennard. He shouldn't be, he was a competent man and amazing at sneaking around. But between chords of *Lover Lay Me Down* struck on Cyrus's shamisen, he had visions of the guards of the Miraculous Faire tackling Rennard to the ground. This worried him and effected the quality of his performance.

Around one in the morning, Cyrus bowed to the drunken crowd, collected his money, split with the barkeep, and retired to his and Rennard's room upstairs. Cyrus unlocked the door and slid inside, closing and locking it behind him.

...

Cyrus woke when Rennard opened the door to their room. He opened one eye just to see who it was, then smiled sleepily. "You're back," he purred.

Rennard looked up as he was taking off his boots. "Why are you awake? It's past four in the morning," he said.

"I heard the door open," Cyrus said with a yawn. "Did you find anything?"

"The Godbloods all sleep in one tent that has a single guard," Rennard said. "The rest of the guards are protecting other more valuable stuff and the ringmaster's tent." He finished his boot and undid the belt holding his wrap tunic in place.

Cyrus smiled, watching Rennard strip down to a fresh shirt and pants, ready for tomorrow. "Renny, come here," he said.

Rennard came to sit on the bed, then lie down at Cyrus's behest. Cyrus wrapped himself around Rennard and set the coolness of his body comfort him. "Missed you," he said.

"I was only gone for a few hours," Rennard said.

"I know, something just felt different," Cyrus mumbled. "Don't judge me."

Rennard kissed the top of Cyrus's head. "I wasn't," he said. "You should get back to sleep."

Cyrus nodded and pressed his face into Rennard's chest. Rennard's heartbeat was slow, but it was strong enough that Cyrus could hear it. Rennard wrapped his arm over him and Cyrus soon fell back asleep.

...

The morning came and Cyrus and Rennard returned to the circus. Rennard guided Cyrus through the grounds, pointing out where guards were stationed, what tents came down overnight, and what the best routes for escape would be.

"You can't see it from here," Rennard whispered, "but the Godblood's tent is next to that tall green tent with the red flag."

Cyrus nodded. “We’re coming from the other side, though, right? Should we go around the outside of the fairgrounds to look at the personal tents?” he asked. The Miraculous Faire was set up in two sections, cordoned off by festive-looking ropes. The largest performing tent was in the center of the space, and coming off of that was split in two. That was where Cyrus and Rennard had been caught by a guard yesterday. The entrance in front was open to the public, where the events, and food stalls were held. In the back were supplies and where the private tents where the performers got ready and slept in. It was the business end of the fair.

Rennard rubbed at his red sideburns as he thought. “I think we need to save that for last,” he said. “Unless we want to pay the admission fee again.”

“That’s fair,” Cyrus said. He was growing more and more excited about the plan. He’d never done a jailbreak before. Who knew when he would have another chance to do one? He could write an incredible song about this later.

After another few hours of walking around and discussing their plans in hushed voices, Cyrus and Rennard exited the grounds and looped around the back. Rope sectioned off the edge of the fairgrounds from the rest of the fields. There were a few guards patrolling along the border. However, it didn’t look like there were many inside among the tents themselves.

“The guard placement doesn’t really change at night,” Rennard whispered as he and Cyrus were leaving. The sun was setting, and they would need rest before tonight when they freed the Godbloods. They returned to the Twelve Chestnut Inn and prepared.

...

The two of them returned late that night. The clouds drifted by on a light wind, covering and uncovering the moon. Cyrus and Rennard crept through the tall grass towards the back of the Miraculous Faire. As there were in the daytime, two guards patrolled the edge of the tents.

They waited, tracking the guards’ movement until there was a gap where they weren’t looking at the corner of the boundary. Cyrus and Rennard slunk forward and ducked under the ropes that sectioned off the tents from the field.

Then they were among the sea of tents. Cyrus stayed quiet, keeping his eyes on Rennard. Rennard guided him, keeping low to the ground. The guards were much more sparse than Cyrus would have thought. Rennard had said that they were mostly centered around the circus’s supplies and around the ringmaster’s tent.

They ducked and weaved through the tents and the odd guard. Soon, they came across the green tent with the red flag. “The Godbloods’ tent should be that one,” Rennard whispered, pointing at an off-white tent. There was a single guard.

Cyrus nodded, eying the guard. “You distract him, I’ll go in,” he said. “Give me your lock picks, just in case.”

Rennard pulled three metal prongs from a small case on his belt and handed them to Cyrus. He placed a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder and squeezed it gently before sneaking off around the tent they were hiding behind. Cyrus watched the guard carefully, waiting for Rennard’s distraction.

A rock flew past the guard and tumbled at his feet. The guard straightened. “Who’s there?” he called.

Rennard didn’t respond, but another rock was tossed at the guard’s feet. The guard drew his sword and began to approach the direction that Rennard was hiding. Cyrus held his breath and hurried to the Godbloods’ tent. He could already imagine the shock and glee on their faces. Then they would have to get the three of them out. Cyrus ducked under the tent flap. His excited grin fell. There was only one person, not three. He recognized Eyriel’s—the fortune teller’s—dark hair splayed around their head like a halo. They were curled up under a thin blanket on a straw bed. Cyrus’s heart plummeted, and he knelt beside Eyriel, placing a hand on their shoulder.

Eyriel immediately shot up. “I’m awake, I’m—”

Cyrus clapped a hand over their mouth and placed a finger to his lips. “Shh. Where are the others?” he asked.

Eyriel’s eyes widened. “You came,” they said. Tears beaded in their eyes. “They aren’t here. I don’t know where they are.”

Cyrus bit his lip and worried at it. “Shit. Do you have any idea where they could be?”

“Um,” Eyriel looked around. “When we are... punished... we’re sent to a place next to the guard’s tent.”

“Was one of them punished?” Cyrus asked urgently. He was listening carefully in case the guard outside was returning. So far, it was silent.

“I-I don’t know, but it’s likely,” Eyriel stammered. “Oh! Julia was sick this morning, she could be in the medical tent. She and Vanûm never returned from dance practice this morning.”

Cyrus took a deep, calming breath. His anxiety was building. This wasn’t how the plan was supposed to go. “Where’s the medical tent?” He looked around and took note of the chains and shackles attached to the supporting pole. One of them snaked into Eyriel’s blanket. “Show me your chain,” Cyrus whispered.

Eyriel threw back the blanket, revealing the thin, plain clothes they wore. Cyrus scooted forward and picked up Eyriel’s foot to place it on his lap. The shackle was made of dark metal and had a keyhole on the side. Cyrus took out Rennard’s lock picks and began to work. He wasn’t as good at picking locks as Rennard was, but this lock was simple enough.

The shackle clicked open and Eyriel removed their foot, quickly bringing it to them and rubbing their chaffed ankle. Cyrus stood and offered his hand to help Eyriel up. Eyriel looked at it warily, then pushed themselves up on their own. Cyrus frowned and withdrew his hand. But if Eyriel didn’t want to be touched or didn’t trust him, that was okay.

“Rennard is outside distracting the guard. We’re going to sneak out, okay?” Cyrus whispered. Eyriel nodded. Cyrus poked his nose out of the tent flap and looked around. The guard wasn’t to be seen.

He turned to motion to Eyriel but saw them digging through the pockets of one of the costumes that were hanging near the canvas wall. They pulled out a thick deck of cards bound

together with a leather strap. Cyrus recognized the tarot cards that Eyriel used to tell his and Rennard's fortune. "Sorry," Eyriel whispered. "I'm ready."

Slowly, Cyrus crept out of the tent with Eyriel close behind. They slunk to the tent that Cyrus and Rennard were hiding behind before. Cyrus cupped his hands around his mouth and blew. A sound like an owl came out, startling Eyriel. Cyrus then began to head back toward the tall green tent that was his and Rennard's meeting point.

Cyrus and Eyriel crouched out of sight and waited for Rennard. A minute passed and Rennard slunk out of the shadows. He looked worried. "Where are the other two?" Rennard whispered.

"We don't know," Cyrus said. "Eyriel thinks that one of them is in the medical tent, and the other could have been punished."

Eyriel nodded, still looking wary. "Knowing Vanûm, he's the most likely to get pulled away. He would be next to the guard's tent."

"I don't know where that or the medical tent are," Rennard said, quietly.

"I do," Eyriel said. "I can show you. The guard's tent is closer, and the medical tent is just behind that."

Cyrus let out a breath, nervous. "Lead the way," he said.

Eyriel swallowed hard. "Okay," they said. They began to creep out from behind the tent, but Rennard immediately pulled them back.

"The guard is coming from that way. Go around the other side," Rennard whispered.

Eyriel looked panicked. "O-okay. Sorry, I'm sorry," they whispered.

"Shh, you're okay," Cyrus said. He was beginning to sense that the circus had left a deep-rooted trauma. That made sense. He wondered how long the Godbloods had been here.

Rennard guided Eyriel this time, keeping a careful eye out for guards. Eyriel directed them through the tents. The guard presence grew thicker.

A large tent came into view and Eyriel stopped and hid. They were shaking. "That's the tent where the guards sleep," they whispered. "I can see Vanûm from here."

Cyrus peered around the tent they were hiding behind. At the side of the guard's tent was the dancer that Cyrus and Rennard saw yesterday, the one called Venus. But now that majestic facade was broken down. Vanûm was kneeling in the dirt with short shackles around his wrists connected to stakes driven into the ground. Angry red welts were slashed across his bare chest, stomach, and arms. He was hunched over, making the injuries hard to see. His wings drooped, hanging in the dirt.

Anger boiled in Cyrus's chest, and he reached for Rennard's hand and squeezed it tightly. Then he hurried forward and crouched in front of Vanûm. He quickly began to unlock the shackle around his wrist.

Vanûm lifted his head. His messy white hair still hung in front of his face. "What are you doing?" he asked, weakly. "Who are you?"

"Quiet," Cyrus whispered. "We're getting you out of here."

Vanûm's eyes widened. "Eyriel said you were coming. I didn't believe them."



“I’m here now,” Cyrus said. The lock clicked open, and Cyrus moved to the other side. A minute passed and the other lock popped. “Can you stand?” he asked.

Vanûm pushed himself to his feet and winced. The dried blood on his chest cracked and fresh blood speckled along the welts.

Cyrus bit his lip as he looked at them. “I know some healing magic. Can you hold out until we get out?”

Vanûm nodded. “I’ve had worse.”

Cyrus didn’t want to know what “worse” was. How dare they treat him this way? “Follow me,” he said. They snuck back to the tent that Rennard and Eyriel were hiding behind. As soon as they were out of sight, Eyriel hugged Vanûm, being careful of the wounds.

“We still need Julia,” Eyriel whispered.

Vanûm tightly hugged Eyriel back, ignoring the pain. “She’s in the medical tent. She collapsed during dance practice.”

“Which way is it?” Rennard asked.

Eyriel and Vanûm pointed past the guard’s tent. Rennard nodded and peered out to look for guards. Then he beckoned everyone forward, and they darted from tent to tent.

They were almost to the medical tent when they heard a whistle. Eyriel and Vanûm turned pale. “That’s a guard’s whistle,” Eyriel said.

“They saw I wasn’t there,” Vanûm said. “We need to hurry!”

Rennard ran forward without a word. Cyrus followed, keeping close to the ground. He checked to make sure that Vanûm and Eyriel were following. Thankfully, they were. The whistle sounded again. A commotion was beginning to build as people began to wake up.

Rennard threw open the tent flap and Cyrus darted inside. The two people inside didn’t wake up. Vanûm hurried inside past Rennard and knelt beside a low bed where a small teenager with black hair and white wings was asleep. He shook her gently. “Julia, wake up, we need to go,” he whispered loudly.

Julia stirred and opened her hazy eyes. “Vanûm?” she said, quietly. “Wha’s going on?”

“We’re leaving,” Vanûm said. He took her hands and pulled her into a sitting position. “Come on.”

Julia swung her legs over the bedside and stood. She wobbled and grabbed onto Vanûm. Vanûm frowned and lifted her into his arms. He ducked outside and Cyrus followed. “Where now?” Vanûm asked.

“Hey!” A voice shouted from their left. A pair of guards were pointing at them.

“Run!” Cyrus yelled. He sprinted past the medical tent. The guards were blocking the closest path out of the Miraculous Faire. They had to find another way out.

Rennard ran ahead of Cyrus. “Keep an eye on them,” he said.

Cyrus slowed and fell into step beside Vanûm and Eyriel. They both looked panicked, sweating and eyes wide. “Follow Rennard!” Cyrus said.

He heard a clamoring and turned. Four guards were running towards them with swords drawn. Cyrus’s hand shot to a slim holster on his thigh and withdrew his wand. It was plain

wood, and disguised as a conductor's baton. He twirled it between his fingers, and faced the approaching guards, preparing a spell. "*Fragor!*" Cyrus clapped his outstretched hands together and the air in front of him exploded with the sound of a thunder crash. The guards yelled and clapped their hands over their ears. Some of them fell to their knees. Cyrus stuck out his tongue and kept running.

Vanûm, Eyriel, and Julia flinched at the loud noise. Cyrus pushed them along as they ran. "Hurry! Follow Rennard!"

Vanûm stumbled under his touch but he kept running. He was panting hard.

Cyrus fell back behind Vanûm and Eyriel. Rennard was pulling ahead. The shouts of the guards chased them as they began to appear from around the tents. Rennard skid to a halt as guards rounded the corner in front of him. Rennard backed up, drawing his shortsword.

Cyrus unsheathed his rapier as the guards rapidly surrounded the five of them. His mind raced. "Do either of you know how to fight?" He asked.

"I'm a *fortune teller*," Eyriel said. Their eyes were wide with fear.

Vanûm held Julia close and whispered something to her. But his face was twisted with worry.

Rennard took a dagger from his boot and handed it, handle first to Vanûm. "Give the girl to Eyriel," he said. "Hurry up. Well protect you."

Vanûm looked at him doubtfully, but handed Julia to Eyriel. Then he held the dagger in front of him, trembling.

A man pushed his way to the front. He wore a patch on his chest. Vanûm and Eyriel paled at the sight of him. "Well, well, well, look at this," the guard captain said. "This is your first escape attempt in a few years. How did you find help?"

Cyrus stepped between Vanûm and the guard captain. "They're leaving with us," he growled.

The guard captain laughed. "Really? You're going to fight through all my men?"

Cyrus grinned. "We've taken more men than this," he said.

Rennard pulled another dagger from his other boot and launched himself at the wall of guards in a whirl of blades.

Cyrus stuck his rapier in the dirt and clapped his hands together again. "*Fragor!*" The crack of thunder rang out again. The guards cried out. Blood began to trickle from some of their ears. Cyrus pocketed his conductor's baton and took his rapier from the ground and ran at the guard captain. His focus narrowed down as he thrust his blade forward.

The guard captain yelled as Cyrus's rapier pierced his shoulder. He backed away and parried Cyrus's next blow with his own sword. The captain grinned and whipped around, but Cyrus danced away. Each time, the swords were blocked or dodged.

It wasn't until Eyriel yelled, did Cyrus's concentration break. He whirled and saw Rennard trying to protect them and Julia from three guards that were approaching. One ran around him and grabbed Eyriel by the arm.

Vanûm yelled and ran at them, stabbing the guard in the stomach. The guard screamed and doubled over. But there was more of them. The guard captain took the moment of distraction to slash at his back, and dart towards the Godbloods. He reached them and ripped Julia from Eyriel's arms. They both screamed.

Cyrus rushed for the guard captain, but he rested the edge of his sword against Julia's throat. "Stop where you are!" The captain yelled.

Cyrus, Rennard, Vanûm, and Eyriel froze. "Julia!" Vanûm yelled. "Let her go!"

The captain laughed. "You're all coming back with me," he said. "Derrick would have my head if all three members of his side show escaped. Now get back to your tent and Angel won't be hurt."

Cyrus grit his teeth he backed up slowly to join Rennard and the two Godbloods. "What do we do?" Rennard asked.

Cyrus's mind was reeling. He was panicking. "We can't just cut our losses," he said. "We can't leave without her."

"We might have to," Rennard said.

Vanûm grit his teeth. "I'm not leaving without Julia," he said.

"You won't," the guard captain said. "You'll all be staying here. And you two," he jerked his head towards Cyrus and Rennard, "are going to die."

Rennard grimaced. "No, thanks," he grumbled.

The guard captain scowled and pressed the blade into Julia's throat. A thin line of blood beaded up underneath it. She gasped and grabbed at the guard captain's arm. "Vanûm, Eyriel, help me!" Julia pleaded.

Vanûm started forward, but Cyrus grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Stay behind me," he said.

"But—" Vanûm protested.

Cyrus shushed him. He closed his eyes. What could they do? Julia was in danger, but there were too many people here to wrest her free without her throat getting slit, and the rest of them needed some sort of cover if they were going to get out at all. Slowly, Cyrus palmed his conductor's baton and called upon the magic in the air. It slowly began to take form as shards, invisible in the darkness. Cyrus brought them around his group, facing out. Then he ripped his baton from his pouch and launched the shards into the surrounding guards. Blood sprayed from the sudden wounds. The guards stumbled out of formation.

"Run!" Cyrus yelled. He grabbed Vanûm's hand and yanked him into a sprint.

"Wait! Julia! No, we have to get Julia!" Vanûm yelled.

"We'll come back!" Cyrus said. He looked behind them and saw that Rennard had grabbed Eyriel and were following close behind.

Faintly behind them, Cyrus heard Julia screaming. "Don't leave me! Stop, please! Come back!"

Cyrus bit his cheek and kept running. He vaulted over the rope separating the Miraculous Faire from the fields. The guards stopped at the border, but Cyrus and Rennard didn't stop, dragging Vanûm and Eyriel behind them.

They reached the city boundary and finally slowed down. Vanûm was trying to jerk his hand from Cyrus's grip. "Let me go! We have to go back for Julia!"

"Cyrus, what's our plan?" Rennard asked, pulling a sobbing Eyriel behind him.

Cyrus didn't know what his plan was. "We have to go back for Julia, but not right now," he said.

"The circus is going to move soon," Vanûm said. "We won't be able to find them after that!"

"We'll find them!" Cyrus snapped. "But we won't be able to if we lose you two first!"

Vanûm fell silent. He yanked his hand out of Cyrus's but didn't run away.

Eyriel sniffed and wiped their nose on their sleeve. "Where are we going?"

When Cyrus didn't respond, Rennard sighed. "We're picking up our stuff from the inn, and we're going to travel as far as we can out of the city," he said.

"We aren't going to rest first?" Eyriel asked.

"Do you *want* the circus guards to find us?" Cyrus said without turning around to look at them.

Eyriel hiccuped as they tried to not start crying again.

"Cyrus, be a little gentler with them," Rennard said. "They've just escaped from what must have been hell."

Cyrus took a deep breath. "Sorry," he said, curtly.

Vanûm said nothing back. Rennard spoke instead. "We've gotten some rations and bedrolls for you two. So we should be set to leave immediately."

The Twelve Chestnut Inn came into view. Inside, the clerk jerked her head up like she had been falling asleep, but gave them a smile. The smile faltered as Vanûm and Eyriel entered. Her eyes were glued to Vanûm's wings.

Cyrus gave her a slight wave before continuing up the stairs. Vanûm and Eyriel followed looking at everything. They unlocked and entered the room that Cyrus and Rennard were staying in. Eyriel sat on the bed as they gathered their stuff. They packed a few hours before.

Eyriel laid back on the bed and closed their eyes. "A bed feels...so nice," they murmured. "Vanûm, come lay down with me."

Vanûm hesitated before sitting down next to Eyriel. There was a look of longing in his pale eyes. His wings fluttered softly.

"How long were you part of the Miraculous Faire?" Rennard asked.

The two Godbloods went silent. "Five years?" Vanûm said after a long pause. "Eyriel's been there longer."

Cyrus's stomach twisted. These two probably hadn't slept in a proper bed since the circus took them in. "I'm sorry," Cyrus said softly. "Vanûm, let me look at your wounds before we leave."

Vanûm nodded. Cyrus dug through one of his bags and produced some cloth and bandages. He knelt in front of Vanûm, placed them on the bed, and drew his conductor's baton. Cyrus began to hum as he worked, the music aiding his concentration as he focused on Vanûm's cuts. Under his careful magic, the cuts scabbed over. Cyrus stopped humming and began to bandage Vanûm's chest and arms. "Are your wings hurt at all?" Cyrus asked.

"No," Vanûm said. "I think I lost a few feathers, but that's about it."

"Are you hurt, Eyriel?" Rennard asked.

Eyriel shook their head. "Nothing recent. Only bruises," they said.

"Bruises are still an injury," Cyrus said.

Eyriel shrugged. "I don't require any healing." They sat up and looked between Cyrus and Rennard. "You never told us your names," they said.

"I'm Rennard Gabriel, and that's Cyrus Ashe," Rennard said. "We're Death Priests."

Cyrus was focused on finishing Vanûm's bandages, and didn't correct him. *Former Death Priests*, he thought.

"What's a Death Priest?" Vanûm asked.

Cyrus finished pinning the bandage in place and stood. "We're monks who work with the Grave Monastery. We offer services from funerals to exorcisms," he said. They didn't have to know that the Grave Monastery collapsed almost five years ago now, and that he and Rennard had fled instead of helping their friends and colleagues. The memory struck an ever present pang of guilt in Cyrus's chest.

Rennard dug through one of the smaller packs and pulled out two pairs of clothes. "Here. It'll be warmer in these," he said. "We bought shoes too. I hope everything will fit." He didn't acknowledge the third and smallest bag and bedroll. They were supposed to be Julia's.

Vanûm took a deep and shuddering breath. "I can't believe we just left her like that," he said. He clenched his fists hard. Eyriel blinked away tears.

"There's too many guards for just Renny and I to take, and security will likely be tighter for awhile now that we've got the two of you out. We're going to get help, then we'll return for Julia," Cyrus said. Where would they even get help? Local police or soldiers wouldn't help, no matter which person they begged. Raid a fairly innocent looking circus for a single Godblood? Anyone would laugh in their faces. Cyrus bit his lip as he stood and swung his pack over his shoulders. They needed to get out of the inn before people from the Miraculous Faire showed up at the door.

Rennard must have been thinking the same thing. "Come on, you two," he said to Vanûm and Eyriel. "Get dressed in the other clothes."

Vanûm and Eyriel looked at each other. They stood and began to strip down. Cyrus startled, not expecting them to take off their clothes in front of them. He and Rennard turned away to give them privacy.

The clothes weren't a perfect fit. Vanûm's shirt and pants were slightly too short, and the holes for his wings were quick cuts in the back of the shirt. Eyriel picked at their pants, looking uncomfortable. Cyrus turned back around when he heard them sit to put on the sturdy boots.

Vanûm sat back and wiggled his toes. Cyrus watched the movement and realized that they were too small.

“We can buy another pair for you when we get to the next town,” Cyrus said.

Vanûm looked up. “That’s not necessary. They fit fine,” he said quickly.

“Same here,” Eyriel said.

Cyrus felt like they were lying. Eyriel sat up silently, wiping the tears from their eyes. They and Vanûm stood from the bed and gathered their new packs. Rennard took the extra one. They would need it someday soon.

## Chapter 8: The Way Out

Cyrus

The group of four left the inn quietly. The city streets were silent and barely lit. Oil lamps loomed on every corner, and Rennard led them from shadow to shadow. Besides for them, there were no signs of life this late at night. Rennard brought them through the city, heading for the edge. Cyrus followed behind Vanûm and Eyriel, bringing up the rear.

What was their plan now? They needed help. Normal people wouldn't understand their plight.

They broke out of the city limits. The gravel streets turned to dirt as they ran through the fields. Rennard ran ahead, quick and alert as always. Vanûm followed, breathing heavy, reaching back to pull Eyriel behind him. Eyriel was gasping for breath and stumbling. Cyrus followed them to make sure that they didn't fall too far behind. He had a feeling that they wouldn't make it far with the way the two Godbloods were running out of stamina so soon. He'd thought Vanûm, as a dancer, would fare better, but Vanûm was still injured and clearly hadn't had a proper meal or rest in a very long time. And Eyriel clearly wasn't used to much physical activity.

Rennard glanced back at Vanûm and Eyriel, then at Cyrus. The city still less than half a mile away. He slowed to a walk, letting everyone catch up. "We can walk for a while," Rennard said, not even winded.

Eyriel bent over with their hands on their knees, breathing heavily. They opened their new canteen and drank deeply. Vanûm did the same. He stopped and put a hand on Eyriel's arm. "Save your water, he said, "we don't know when we'll get more."

Eyriel lowered the canteen. "You're—right," they said, still panting.

Cyrus looked them over. Travelling was going to be hard on them. "We're going east," he said. "We can go to a port city where they're usually more friendly to different species." He began to walk.

Vanûm, Eyriel, and Rennard started after him. Rennard came up to Cyrus's side. "Where are we going to get help?" he asked. "Because I have no idea." He was speaking quietly so Vanûm and Eyriel couldn't hear.

"We need to find someone who can empathize with us. Someone who knows our struggle," Cyrus whispered.

"Like another Godblood?" Rennard asked.

Cyrus's eyes widened. "Renny, you're a genius!" he said, excitedly. "I know where we're going!"

Vanûm blinked in confusion. "You... didn't know where we were going before this?"

Cyrus grinned as he turned to them, walking backwards. "Well, I did before we needed help to rescue Julia," he said. "Renny said that we need another Godblood to help us." Cyrus's sparkling eyes were wide. "We need help from the Lord Under the Stars."

Vanûm and Eyriel looked at Cyrus blankly. Rennard snorted. "You just want to meet your childhood infatuation," he said.

“Who’s the Lord Under the Stars?” Eyriel asked.

Cyrus cleared his throat. “The Lord Under the Stars is a Godblood in one of the last remaining holy temples. He resides in Nightstar Temple on a mountain in Caelum by the same name. He’s the son of Magic.”

“The Lord Under the Stars is about Cyrus’s age. There’s a couple of myths and rumors that circle about him, mostly in Caelum, but some made it to the Nested Valley where the Grave Monastery was,” Rennard explained. “The Head Abbot was in contact with the Light Bearer—the priest leading Nightstar Temple—for a few years when we were younger.”

“The son of Magic...” Vanûm said. “I wonder...”

Cyrus finally stumbled over something while walking backwards, and turned around to face forwards. “Copper for your thoughts?”

“Oh,” Vanûm said. “Well, Godbloods are supposed to be born or descended or whatever by certain concepts—”

“Gods,” Cyrus interrupted.

“—by gods,” Vanûm continued, annoyance and doubt in his tone. “I wonder what Eyriel and I are coming from?”

Cyrus hummed. “I don’t know. There are less gods than there were a thousand years ago. So you might be descended from one that has been forgotten.”

“If there’s Fate, that’s probably what I come from,” Eyriel said, “But... I don’t know why Fate would let one of its own children have the life I’ve had.”

Vanûm only sighed. “Not that it matters too much. Concepts or gods or whatever you want to call them don’t want anything to do with us.”

“That’s not true,” Cyrus said with a frown.”

Neither Vanûm nor Eyriel said anything back. Cyrus didn’t push the matter, but the thought upset him. He worked for Death. He knew that they cared. Even if the majority of the populace had disregarded the gods after the Great Awakening hundreds of years ago, they were still out there. They still did their jobs. Death, Magic, Weather, Sun and Moon. All of them were certain and inevitable.

The group continued to walk in silence until morning started to break. The fields had become spotted with trees, and a forest could be seen on the horizon. “Let’s get into the trees before we stop and rest,” Rennard said.

Cyrus nudged him. “I don’t think that they’ll make it there,” he said. Vanûm and Eyriel were staggering behind. “Not everyone has your endless endurance.”

Rennard gave them a glance. “Good point. Okay, let’s get off the road and find someplace to rest.”

Vanûm made a groaning noise that might have been a weak cheer. Everyone waded into the field of knee-high grass towards a scraggly tree about one hundred yards off the path. They created a flat patch in the grass, and settled down. Vanûm and Eyriel immediately laid down.

“You have sleeping bags, you know,” Cyrus said.

Vanûm groaned. “Too tired,” he said.



Rennard set his bag down and sat. “You two get some rest.”

Eyriel rolled over and shrugged off their pack, so they could use it as a pillow. It occurred to Cyrus that even without using their bedrolls, the wild grass was surely softer than the pile of straw he’d found Eyriel sleeping on.

Vanûm curled up next to them. He pulled his wings over both of them to hide them from the rising sun. Soon, their breathing deepened and they fell asleep.

Cyrus sat next to Rennard and leaned his head on his shoulder. “What a night,” he sighed.

Rennard hummed his agreement, looking at the tangled mess of wings, legs, and arms that were Vanûm and Eyriel. “What are we going to do with them?”

“What do you mean, ‘what are we going to do with them?’” Cyrus asked. “We’re going to help them rescue Julia.”

Rennard shifted, not looking at Cyrus, but taking his hand. “After that. Are they going to travel with us?”

“Afraid that one of them will steal me away?” Cyrus teased.

“As if they could,” Rennard snorted. He began to massage Cyrus’s hand, stretching the fingers apart and rubbing the palm. “But they’re so weak. Who knows if they’ll even *make* it to Caelum? It’s halfway across the continent!”

“We just have to teach them how to survive,” Cyrus said. “We can’t just set them free into the world. They’d die. Right now, these two are canaries. Not ravens like we were.”

Rennard sighed and took Cyrus’s other hand to massage that one. “I know. And I know how you feel about them.”

Cyrus giggled. “Do you?”

“You see yourself in them,” Rennard said. “You see who you used to be.”

Cyrus fell silent. He looked at the Godbloods. “Yeah,” he said finally. “I miss the monastery. Sometimes.”

Rennard sighed and wrapped his arm around Cyrus’s shoulders. “I do, too.” They grew quiet, each lost in their own thoughts. Rennard spoke again after ten minutes. “You should get some rest, Cy,” he said.

Cyrus nodded. He was exhausted after the events of last night. Now that morning had come, his body had slowed down enough for his thoughts to catch up. He wasn’t feeling any regret for rescuing Vanûm and Eyriel. Cyrus only felt regret that he didn’t try harder to rescue Julia with them. He sighed, and unrolled his sleeping bag next to Rennard. He laid down on top of it and rested his head on Rennard’s lap, looking up at his face and the branches of the tree above them. The barest bits of green leaves were budding with the beginning of spring. There would be a long time of travel before they reached the border of Sinura and Caelum. By the time they reached Nightstar Mountain, it would be summer. Cyrus smiled, listening to the breathing of Vanûm and Eyriel. He wondered if the Lord Under the Stars remembered the letter he’d written him once, years ago. With him on their side, they would reunite with Julia in no time.