

~ Rain Guitar ~

CHAPTER 1



The night wore a chill like a tailored suit, its seams snug against the skin of the forest. Clouds, the clandestine conspirators, veiled the moon, rendering the woods into a canvas of whispered mysteries. The clearing they were sitting at was not so much a clearing, but more like the only surface they could find that was flat enough for them to take a necessary break.

Sun stared at the flames dancing in front of her, their orange glow cutting through the gloomy blue that seemed to linger like an elusive fragrance. The little bonfire should have made her feel safe, grateful even, but she felt the gravitational pull of caution. She inched away, as if an unseen tether urged her to carve more space. A tremor, like an icy fingertip tracing her spine, echoed a silent warning.

The wind, a mischievous maestro, swept through the foliage, orchestrating a symphony of rustling leaves. Amidst nature's melody, a lone branch protested with a creak, adding its somber note to the wind's playful tune. Rubbing her arms up and down, she looked over her shoulder as if drawn by an irresistible force, trying to see through the endless sea of trees.

“Sun?”

The pixie jumped, her hand rising out of instinct, ready to throw a spell if needed. But upon lifting her eyes, she encountered Phineas, his countenance bearing a faint crease, a whispered worry etched in the gentle downturn of his lips. She seamlessly extended the motion of her hand, as though engaged in a clandestine dance with an invisible partner, disguising the gesture as a casual brush to rid her black skirt of non-existent dust.

“What took you so long?” she said nonchalantly, looking at her clothes to make sure none of those non-existent dust particles were left there.

“Chee almost fell into the river,” Phineas said matter-of-factly, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at their friend.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you can’t see a thing out there!” Chee grumbled, his shoes sloshing a bit as he walked to the other side of the fire and dropped

onto the ground with a subdued thud. The warmth of the flickering flames quickly embraced him. Like a weary traveler finding respite, he extended his legs in front of the fire, letting the radiating heat thaw his bones and letting out a happy sigh.

“Sit here.” Sun chuckled, shaking her head at Phineas.

Like a specter emerging from the mist, a hand materialized, presenting her a life-saving elixir—a bottle of water. Following the lines of his fingers, she glanced up and met Phineas’ smiling light yellow eyes.

In the short time they’d been away from school, he’d changed somehow. There was a steadiness to him that hadn’t been there before, a determination that roared like an unquenchable wildfire. It seemed in his nature now to take risks and look for danger. It scared Sun as much as it marveled her—and also made her feel a little lost, wondering how much he would keep changing. But then, a subtle incline of his head spoke volumes in unspoken inquiry, a silent query etched in the tilt of his crown, seeking answers with no need for words. The corners of his eyes crinkled a bit. There was the kindness she knew so well, the one that had always been there. It made her chest feel warm. It felt like a sunlit garden bloomed within her.

“Thanks,” she said with a soft smile, accepting the bottle and taking a long swig.



“So, where were we?” Phineas sat next to Chee and leaned forward. His posture mirrored his excitement, as if inching closer could bring the future into the present.

Sun beamed like a lighthouse in the darkness. Before

venturing outside of the protection of the University's borders, she'd promised Phineas she would give him answers, and that was what she'd been doing the past few days. She navigated the labyrinth of queries with an unwavering resolve, leaving no stone unturned, but she didn't have all the answers. She'd told him about life at the castle, about magic, what life had been like before the war, before the dragons destroyed it all. Memories cascaded like whispered tales from an ancient tome as she revisited anecdotes of his parents. She recalled the ideals they held in high regard and how much they had cared for the well-being of all their people.

There were things still too difficult for her to say out loud and things that Phineas still couldn't handle. Some stories remained too intricate to be woven into sentences. Yet, she honored her pledge, offering morsels of truth like scattered pearls, disclosing all she could within the confines of her promise. She held nothing back from the vow she made.

Luckily for her, Phineas' thirst for knowledge was insatiable, a hungry mind that devoured every detail she tossed his way. He mostly let her talk freely without interrupting her. It was when he started asking questions that things got harder. Always him and his damn curiosity! Obstacles were frustrating, but she never stopped to think she wouldn't overcome them.

"You're too impatient," she grumbled, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Her teeth pressed into her lip, a physical manifestation of the thoughts weighing on her.

Phineas stayed silent, knowing she was thinking of her next words. "Living in the castle was... intense."

A fond smile tugged at her lips. "It was so lively, there was always something to do. Your mother, Miranda, liked to move a lot. It was honestly hard to keep up with her. It drove your father crazy sometimes, but he could never deny her anything.

She had this power to slice through any shadow, revealing the light.”

Sun’s eyes remained fixated on the fire, as if it were a portal to another world. Lost in the fire’s mesmerizing embrace, Sun became a storyteller. Each flame-stitched silhouette unraveled a tale. She could see everything as if it had happened yesterday and not almost twenty years ago. Her vision grew foggy around the edges as the flames took a shape she knew all too well, a painful memory from her past coming to life.

“There was a town,” she continued, “right down the hill where the castle stood. Miranda loved going there for leisurely walks and to see her people up close. But, more than anything, she loved spending time in that forest with other nymphs.” Sun didn’t look at Phineas. Her gaze remained ensnared by the hypnotic dance of the flames, captivated not just by the fire’s flicker but by the secrets it seemed to whisper, as if the inferno held visions meant for her eyes alone. “She took you with her a lot.”

“She did?” Phineas asked in a small voice, a bittersweet sense of wonder coating his tone.

The shapes clouding her vision kept growing, changing their form. Then, Sun was no longer seeing the autumn leaves where a two-year-old Phineas had loved rolling around with woodland fairies, but

something far, far more sinister. What started as a merry crackling crescendoed into a thunderous roar, overwhelming her senses. In the back of her mind, the screams began. The air reverberated with the cacophony of battle cries mingled with heart-wrenching calls for salvation, a haunting song of despair that painted the world in shades of anguish, each corner ablaze in the relentless inferno of conflict. Through it all, she heard a desperate voice calling her name, begging her.

Take him! I'll hold them back. Please just go! He's our only hope. Please, keep him safe, please, please—

“Yeah,” she answered Phineas’ question, perhaps a few seconds too late. She cleared her throat, a conscious effort to drown out the whispers of memories that clung to her. “You showed signs of magic from a very early age.” Looking at him down her nose, Sun poked her tongue out. “You’ve been a troublemaker since young.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Chee muttered under his breath.

“Hey!” Phineas said while nudging his friend's shoulder, a wordless invitation to engage in their usual friendly banter. Chee didn't budge, just raised an eyebrow.

“Are you going to deny it?”

“Yes!” Phineas huffed, jutting his chin out defiantly. “I don’t go looking for trouble. Trouble just finds *me*.”

“Right, which is why we’re in the middle of the woods on the Outside,” Sun deadpanned. A thread of uncertainty in her own words made the gooseflesh rise in her arms. She rubbed at them again, willing the feeling away.

“This is different.” Phineas crossed his arms, becoming an immovable pillar of stubbornness. “You know why I have to do this. I—”



A rustling behind them made Phineas stop short and all three of them shut their mouths at once, turning towards a path covered in undergrowth. A hand pushed some bushes aside and Lukas came into view, holding a pile of freshly cut wood. He halted when he caught the three friends staring at him and smirked.

“Don’t stop your chattering on my account,” he said, sneering as he unceremoniously dropped the dead branches on the floor. “What are the lot of you gossiping about now?”

Sun stole a glance at Phineas, finding his lips sculpted into a rigid line, a silent sentinel guarding emotions hidden behind the fortress of his clenched jaw. None of them said a word. Lukas scoffed.

“We’ve been traveling together for almost two weeks, and you still don’t trust me?” A derisive tug quirked his upper lip. “Do you think I don’t know you’re talking all the time when I’m not around?”

Sun winced. Finding the right opportunity to unveil the truth to Phineas had been like sifting through a vast desert in search of hidden oases. The task had proven to be a puzzle of elusive moments, each fleeting second slipping through her fingers like grains of sand. Sun thought they’d managed to find a few moments to tell Phineas everything he wanted to know without Lukas listening in. They’d wait until he was asleep, or when it was his turn to find provisions or some tree to relieve himself, and talk in hushed voices that the wind carried in the opposite direction.

She hadn’t realized he’d been paying so much attention, though. This was an uneasy alliance. The thought was like an ill-fitting garment, making her feel awkward and uneasy. *Had he heard anything without them noticing?* She didn’t want a dragon shifter of all people to know who Phi really was. The weight of his presence felt heavier in the desolation of unfamiliar terrain. Especially now, after those

memories had taken Sun by surprise, reliving the moments when her whole family had been taken away from her.

Chee rolled his eyes. “You can’t expect us to become friends just like that after everything you did to us at school. Not to mention, you blackmailed us into letting you come here. What have you really done to make us trust you?”

“I’m taking your sorry asses through this path, aren’t I?” Lukas waved a dismissive hand, though Sun sensed his shoulders tensing up. She wondered if he was as unbothered as he pretended to be, if it was anger making him clam up, or if it was something else?

“It’s still weird that you joined us so readily,” Chee pointed out.

“And annoying,” Phineas grumbled under his breath.

“School was getting boring,” Lukas said offhandedly. “I couldn’t let *you* three have all the fun.”

Sun sent Phi a sympathetic smile. Whenever Lukas was around, it was as if a rain cloud of irritation had settled above his head, though he tried to control it. It wasn’t just the history they shared from school, but also because Lukas had joined them out of nowhere without being prepared. He had brought nothing useful with him, so Phineas—who

was the closest size to him—had to share his clothes, at least until they could find somewhere to buy new ones. If there was even such a thing out here while the tribes were still very much at war with one another.

So far, they had encountered no one on their journey, only miles upon miles of woods that draped the land like an impenetrable curtain, obscuring the distant horizons. Sun did not know how Lukas could tell if they were headed the right way, but she couldn't deny they would have been even more lost out here without him. Some days, it seemed like they were marching off the edge of the map. The journey's genesis lay in their serendipitous encounter with an unassuming road, a stroke of fortune that marked the starting point of their adventure. It was an auspicious start on that first day outside of the school grounds, but it would lead them to the Pethosyus Castle. Since then, their path had diverged at countless crossroads, each junction a pivotal moment demanding a choice, with moments when the road vanished entirely, forcing them to navigate unmarked trails and carve their own passage through the unknown, sometimes even forging paths amidst unyielding obstacles.

The forest they were traversing was nothing like the one near the school, or any other from Sun's memory. She was used to life sprouting everywhere,



with magical creatures frolicking around. But this was the pulse of something bigger, greater than all of them, humming between the leaves, branches, the very air, with a power so ancient she'd only heard about it in stories.

For the past few days, though, they'd barely seen any signs of magic. It was dark and quiet here, the foliage so thick that sometimes Sun had to fly over the treetops in order to get some much-needed sunlight.

Their days came in many different shapes and sizes. Sometimes they walked in silence. Sometimes Phineas and Lukas bickered all day until Chee couldn't bear their nonsensical behavior any longer, prompting a firm intervention where reality became the antidote to their senseless sparring. And on other rare days, they could coexist together without a hint of trouble, which was almost as weird as the mix of people on this adventure: a dragon shifter, a fairy godmother, a wizard who was half minotaur... and Phineas.

Sun stole another quick look in his direction. He whispered something to Chee and pointedly

ignored Lukas as he roasted a rabbit with a puff of fire from his mouth. At one point, Phi caught her eye and smiled back, but Sun's glance quickly averted, seeking solace in the subtleties of her own feet.

It was as though he had pressed the 'reset' button on his emotions, carrying on as if nothing had transpired. Like she hadn't pretended to be someone else all those years, like she hadn't let him think he was going crazy and imagining things. Like she hadn't hidden the truth from him. Hell, she'd been lying for so long that at one point, even she believed her own lies. Her falsehoods had become a comforting cloak, and she had lost touch with the naked truth buried beneath. She forgot she was a fairy godmother and not just an imaginary friend who was there to protect Phineas, to make sure he was truly happy. She had reminded herself of her duty many times. Retelling the truth now, coming clean about everything, was as draining as it was therapeutic. She'd been barely a few years old herself when she was paired with Phineas. Even if fairies matured fast, she hadn't been more than a child when they'd left the castle.

Sun knew she'd made mistakes, but even though she'd hurt him, Phi accepted her flaws. He not only stood up for himself and for the truth they owed him, but he also gave her another chance. Phineas let her stay by his side. His steady presence

was a balm that soothed her own insecurities. It baffled her how someone could give so much love so easily. Hate had never been Phineas' way.

Sometimes, she could still feel his arms around her, remembering the way he'd held her as she cried her eyes out. She felt anger melt away as she buried her face in his chest. She could almost taste the security and comfort of his arms, a refuge during her most vulnerable moments. They'd always been there for each other, and it surprised her it took so long for her to realize she needed Phineas as much as he needed her. Like the clouds, he was so gentle. It all felt possible.

"We should get moving," Lukas said after they'd rested for a while. Phineas' head immediately shot up, his eyes narrowing.

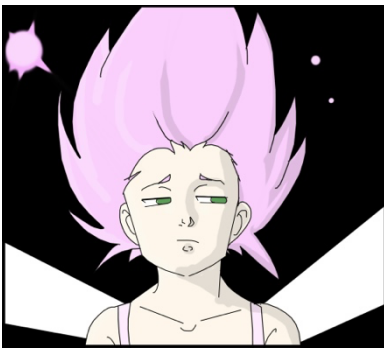
"Why?"

Lukas didn't turn to him, just got up from his spot and started gathering their stuff. "There's a storm coming, so, unless you want to get caught in the rain, I suggest we find another place to sleep."

Sun could hear the thunder rolling somewhere not too far away. In the stillness, there was a tranquility that felt more like a reassuring friend than a harbinger of danger, a calmness so pure that it cocooned them in a sense of calm, devoid of any looming threat. The storm wasn't threatening to them yet, but it would probably pour soon. Without

another word, they all got up and started picking up their bags, putting out the fire, and making sure they left no traces behind of their presence.

Sun's eyes lingered a bit on each of them, savoring the diversity of faces and stories while she shoved a blanket inside her satchel. In this tranquil interlude, she thought about how they all brought something useful to the group. Phineas used his powers to get them food, the trees telling him what was edible and what was poisonous, or even where to find small prey. Chee was good at hunting and keeping the peace. And Lukas could make a fire out of nothing to make sure they were always warm and to help cook their food. They might not get along, but they worked well together.



And Sun... *what was her purpose in all of this?* The only reason for her existence was to keep Phineas safe. Looking around, she couldn't help but wonder... maybe she wasn't doing an outstanding good job at that?