

Sara Phillips

about 1000 words

sara.phillips118@gmail.com

EARLY SUNSETS

by Sara Phillips

Soft humming accompanies the gentle strumming of a guitar, its delicate melodies warming a room too often kept cold. Finn sits on the floor by his bed, eyes closed in some semblance of peace as he lets his fingers pick out a wandering tune.

Time to himself runs in short supply—shorter still, it seems, as a squeaky floorboard by the door gives away his audience. Finn’s playing continues uninterrupted, though his eyes peel open, and he slides a honey-gold gaze toward his bedroom door. It remains closed, just as he left it, but a frozen shadow lingers in the crack at the bottom.

Finn’s humming picks up in intensity, taking shape as a low croon that sings to the door: “You can come in.”

For a moment, he receives no indication that he’s been heard, and if not for the lingering shape at the bottom of his door, he may have attributed the squeaking floorboard to a strange twinge in his guitar. But then the shadow shifts, just enough to identify itself as living, and Finn

sighs a soft breath at its apparent hesitance. After another moment, he lays his palm flat against his strings, cutting off their vibrations and throwing the room into abrupt silence.

“Milo,” he calls again, the musical lilt to his tone abandoned in favor of candor. “Are you gonna open the door?”

His room hangs off-balance in the seconds that follow, as though caught in the space between two breaths, waiting for the next sign of movement. Fortunately, this time, it needn’t wait long; Finn watches as his door handle twists down, and a tuft of brown hair appears in the widening crack as his brother peers into his space.

“Do you want to listen?” Finn prompts, gentle in the way he trails aimless fingers across his strings once more, floating a chord toward Milo, not unlike the way he might cast a lure toward a fish.

He knows he’s got him when Milo pushes further into the room, even as one hand remains curled around the door like it might slam in his face if he let go. “Is it okay?” he asks, eyes not quite meeting Finn’s own.

Finn pulls a smile onto his face, and it’s not wide enough to force his eyes shut but he closes them for the moment anyway, lest the way they shatter with heartbreak be visible to Milo. “Of course,” he says, willing his voice to stand firm even as something deep in his soul aches and quivers at the faint distress lining his brother’s actions. “You’re always welcome here.” His eyes flick open again, and there’s something desperate stirring in their depths as he adds, “You know that.”

Milo’s gaze stays locked on the floor, doubtful, but Finn takes it as a victory when he slips the rest of the way into the room, pushing the door closed behind him with a quiet *click*.

“I didn’t know you’d be home tonight,” Milo says, quiet, like a confession. “I thought I’d be...” Finn watches him hesitate, watches him bite his lip like he’s snagged the word he wants to say between his teeth. A beat passes and he amends, “I thought it would just be me and Dad again.”

Finn adjusts his grip on the neck of his guitar to disguise the way he flinches at the word ‘again.’ He shouldn’t, and he knows he shouldn’t, but there’s also a shadow to his brother’s face that shouldn’t be there, either, and he can’t help but feel responsible. The truth is, it doesn’t matter how many days he fills; the one he misses will always be the one remembered. It’s inevitable.

And yet, that feels like writing off Milo’s discomfort as unavoidable, when Finn has only ever wished to relieve him of as much of it as possible. So he sets his guitar aside, songs forgotten, and opens his arms, sighing softly as Milo folds into them without another word.

“I’ll be home earlier now.” Finn eases a hand across the nape of Milo’s neck, thumb rolling a soothing pattern into the base of his scalp. “It’s getting dark quicker now, and it’s not safe to stay out after that, remember? So I’ll be here every night.”

“Forever?” Milo mumbles, muffled by the shirt he’s dug his face into.

Finn hesitates. “The days will get longer again next year,” he says, lips thinning as he debates the balance of truth and comfort. “I’ll be able to stay out later again.”

“Oh.” Small hands fist tighter into the folds of his shirt. “So you’ll be gone again.”

With Milo’s face hidden in his chest, Finn makes no attempt to disguise the way his face twists with anguish, head falling back against the bed behind him. “Not really,” he forces out, voice light despite the vice closing around his throat. “I’ll always come back, you know. I just—sometimes I have to stay out an extra hour or two. That’s all.”

“I don’t understand why,” Milo admits, and there’s an edge of frustration to his tone, one uncovered by hope’s slow erosion as it’s fought time and time again to get Finn to explain.

He never has before, and he can’t now. The thought alone makes something ugly like guilt rear its head, and Finn can’t look his brother in the eye before confronting that beast on his own first. “I know,” he says instead, hoping it sounds like an apology. It bears all the weight of one. “But I’ll always come back to you.”

“You promise?”

He shouldn’t, really. Promises are heavy enough as it is; they’ve nothing to gain from the added pull of words like ‘always’ and ‘never,’ particularly in a world so untamed and cruel. If any gods exist, Finn knows them only to have a sardonic sense of humor, one that would see any such vows cast back in the faces of their holders so that those beyond might point and laugh.

And yet.

Perhaps it’s spite, or arrogance. Or perhaps it speaks to the devotion and love he tends, overwhelming and all-consuming in its strength. In either case, there is not an ounce of hesitation to his movements as Finn tips his head forward until his nose brushes brown curls.

“I promise,” he whispers, heavy like an oath and meant only for one set of ears. “I’ll always come back.”

(In five years, when his words are screamed back at his grave, accusatory and mournful, somewhere far away, perhaps, an unjust god will laugh.)