

# Sawyer and the Drums of Free Will

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## PROLOGUE — The Question That Wouldn't Go Away

The courtyard of Calendor was usually alive with laughter—stable boys brushing horses, children racing wooden carts, royal guards pretending not to smile as they watched the chaos unfold. But that afternoon, something felt different. Something felt wrong.

Prince Sawyer had only gone to the stables to deliver warm bread from the kitchen. A simple errand. A quick task. But what he saw instead settled into his chest like a stone.

Three older boys stood in a circle, voices sharp, faces twisted with smug pride. In the center was Gerren, the smallest stable boy in the kingdom. His tunic was smeared with hay and dirt, his hands shaking as he tried to gather the apples the others had knocked from his basket.

“Oops,” one boy jeered. “Maybe if you weren’t so slow—”

Another shoved him lightly. “Or so useless—”

Sawyer felt heat rise up his neck. He stepped forward without thinking, fists clenched—  
“Hey!”

His voice cracked in that awkward way it sometimes did, but it didn’t matter. The boys scattered at the sound of a prince’s anger. Gerren looked up, eyes shining with embarrassment, bowing quickly as if apologizing for being seen.

Sawyer knelt beside him. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Gerren nodded, but his eyes said he didn’t believe it.

Sawyer helped him gather the apples, but the moment didn’t leave him—wouldn’t leave him—even long after he walked back to the castle.

That night, at dinner, he barely touched his stew. Marshy noticed first. She always did. “You look like someone stole your sword and replaced it with a noodle,” she whispered.

Rocco, sitting on the table with his stubby stone legs crossed, leaned in. “Is everything pebble-okay? You’ve been quiet. Quiet is suspicious. And suspense gives me stress cracks.”

Sawyer sighed, pushing stew around in idle circles. “I saw something... something awful today.”

Marshy's face softened. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He did. And didn't. His chest was full of feelings that didn't know how to turn into words. But they tumbled out anyway—the bullying, the humiliation, the helpless look on Gerren's face.

Alaric, who'd been reading a scroll nearby, closed it gently and turned his wise eyes toward them. "Sawyer," he said softly, "why does this trouble you so deeply?"

Sawyer swallowed hard. He hadn't meant to say what came next—not aloud. But the question had been burning in him for years, and today's injustice made it impossible to keep inside.

"If God is good... why does He allow bad things to happen?"

Silence fell. Marshy looked down. Rocco stopped shifting his pebbly feet. The question seemed to echo off the stone walls.

Alaric didn't look shocked or confused. He only nodded, as though he'd been waiting for Sawyer to ask.

"That," he said gently, "is one of the greatest questions ever asked."

Sawyer's throat tightened. "Do you know the answer?"

"I know parts of it," Alaric said. "And I know where we can begin." He stood, tucking the scroll under his arm. "Meet me at the practice hall tomorrow at dawn. Bring Marshy and Rocco. I will show you something that may help you understand."

Rocco raised a rocky hand. "Will there be snacks?"

"Possibly," Alaric said with a tiny smile.

Sawyer managed one too, but the weight in his chest remained. He didn't know if he was nervous or hopeful. Maybe both.

That night, as the torches dimmed and the castle quieted, Sawyer lay awake staring at the ceiling. The world didn't make sense. It felt unfair. Cruel, even.

And for the first time in his life, he wondered if his faith, once so simple and warm, had room for hard questions.

Alaric's words replayed in his mind—*one of the greatest questions ever asked*.

Tomorrow, he hoped, would bring something he desperately needed.

Not just answers.

But understanding.

## Chapter 1— The Practice Hall of Echoes

The next morning dawned with a haze of gold over Calendor, the kind of soft sunrise that painted the castle stones warm and made even the guards look softer, less severe. Yet Prince Sawyer barely noticed it. His stomach had been twisting ever since he stepped out of bed, ever since Alaric's promise echoed through his thoughts:

*Come to the practice hall tomorrow. I will give you an answer.*

Sawyer wasn't even sure he wanted an answer anymore. What if it made everything worse? What if the world was... broken beyond fixing? What if the unfairness he saw yesterday—two noble boys mocking the stable boy until he cried—wasn't a glitch but the way things *really worked*?

He shook the thought away as he walked down the long corridor toward the Practice Hall of Echoes.

Marshy walked beside him, hands in her pockets, eyes bright with curiosity. "You look like you're heading to a battle," she teased gently.

"Maybe I am," Sawyer muttered.

Behind them came the rhythmic *clack, clack, clack* of stone feet.

Rocco, the rock with arms, legs, and a face carved like a permanent "very concerned dad," rolled his stone shoulders.

"Whatever Alaric's planning," Rocco said, "it better not involve heavy lifting. Or lifting me. I do not get lighter with age."

Sawyer gave him a weak smile. At least Rocco being Rocco was consistent.

They reached the tall double doors, carved from ancient cedarwood. When Sawyer pulled one open, the hinges let out a soft groan—a sound swallowed immediately by the vastness inside.

The Practice Hall of Echoes was enormous.

Sunlight streamed through high windows, catching motes of dust that drifted like tiny stars. Instruments filled the space: rows of old harps, weathered drums, polished brass horns bent into elegant curves, and flutes carved from sparkling crystal wood. The soundboard floor was made of pale oak, designed so every step echoed like a heartbeat.

But at the center of the room—on a raised circular platform—sat a single object that felt alive.

A drum set.

Not just any drum set.

A *gleaming*, multi-layered, many-toned arrangement of drums, cymbals, and chimes made from materials Sawyer didn't recognize. The main drum looked carved from twilight—purples fading to blues—while the smaller toms shimmered like frozen lightning. The cymbals were etched with ancient runes, and the pattern across the bass drum looked almost like swirling galaxies.

Sawyer felt drawn to it immediately.

“What... is that?” he whispered.

Marshy lifted her chin. “That is not normal. I've never seen anything like that in the castle.”

Rocco nodded in agreement. “And I have been around since before your grandfather was born—literally. Someone dropped me on the courtyard wall and I woke up.”

Alaric stepped from behind the drum set, smiling as though he'd been waiting in perfect stillness for hours.

“Good morning,” he said, voice calm and warm. “Welcome to the Practice Hall of Echoes.”

Sawyer swallowed. “Alaric... what is all this?”

Alaric rested a hand on the largest drum, his fingers gentle, respectful. “This,” he said, “is an old tool. A teaching instrument. Older than Calendor itself.” His eyes twinkled. “It's called the *Drums of Free Will*.”

Marshy raised a brow. “You made that up.”

“I assure you,” Alaric said, “I did not.”

Sawyer stepped closer, heart thudding. “What do drums have to do with the question I asked?”

Alaric motioned for them to sit—Sawyer on a cushion, Marshy cross-legged, Rocco lowering himself with the sound of gravel shifting.

The hall fell quiet. So quiet Sawyer could hear his pulse in his ears.

Then Alaric spoke, voice low.

“You asked why a good God allows bad things to happen,” he began. “A question older than kingdoms. Older than language.”

Sawyer’s throat tightened.

“Yes.”

Alaric tapped the side of the drum once.

It let out a deep, resonant *bwoom* that seemed to pass through the floor and up into their bones.

“Before I explain,” Alaric continued, “you must understand something essential. Something about the way the world works. Something about us—humans, elves, dwarves, rocks who somehow grew arms...”

Rocco raised a hand. “My origin story is complicated and not the point of today’s lesson.”

Alaric chuckled softly. “Exactly. Complicated. Just like free will.”

He moved behind the drums, lifted the wooden sticks—smooth and worn with age—and struck a sequence of notes.

The sound blossomed.

Warm, bright, then suddenly sharp.

Gentle, then fierce.

A mix of perfect harmony and unexpected dissonance.

Sawyer felt it in his chest like a storm.

“The world,” Alaric said over the vibrations, “is a song. A grand melody. And every person is a drum in it.”

Marshy whispered, “So the unfair things... the bad things... the painful things...”

“Are not placed by God,” Alaric said, lowering the sticks. “But played by us.”

Sawyer’s eyes widened. “But why would God allow us to... make those choices? Hurt each other?”

Alaric stepped down from the platform and sat beside them.

“Because a world without choice,” he said, “is a world without love. Without bravery. Without compassion. Without the possibility of good that is freely chosen.”

Sawyer’s eyes burned suddenly—not with anger, but with something deeper. Something like fear. Something like hope strangled by confusion.

“But the stable boy...” he whispered. “He didn’t deserve it.”

“No,” Alaric said softly. “He didn’t.”

Silence gathered between them. Heavy, but gentle.

“And that,” Alaric finished, “is why you’re here. Because the Drums of Free Will don’t just teach *why* things happen. They teach what can be done about it.”

Sawyer sat still, breath shallow.

Marshy leaned forward. “You mean we’re going to learn to... fix the world?”

Alaric smiled—not a small smile, but one filled with pride, hope, and the kind of affection that made Sawyer feel steadier.

“No,” he said. “We’re going to learn how *you* can change it.”

Sawyer looked at the glowing drums again.

For the first time since yesterday, the twisting in his stomach eased.

Maybe the world wasn’t hopeless.

Maybe he wasn’t powerless.

Maybe the answer wasn’t about understanding why darkness exists...

...but learning how to create light anyway.

And the drums—silent now, waiting—seemed to hum with possibility.

As if they already knew the rhythm he was meant to play.

## Chapter 2 — “These Drums Are Your Life”

The Drums of Free Will were quiet again—still, polished, gleaming in the sunlight like gemstones half-awake. Sawyer stared at them, feeling as if they were staring back. Or maybe waiting.

Alaric stepped up onto the round platform again, his boots soft against the soundboard floor. Marshy and Rocco exchanged glances—Marshy curious, Rocco cautious—but Sawyer remained still, as though any movement might break the fragile understanding he had begun to form.

Alaric placed one hand on the largest drum, and the entire set shimmered faintly as if sensing his touch.

“Before I teach you *how* the drums work,” Alaric began, “I must teach you *what* they represent.”

He nodded to Sawyer.

“These drums,” Alaric said, “are your life.”

Sawyer blinked. “My... life?”

“Yes,” Alaric said gently. “Every person receives their own set of drums at birth. You cannot choose the size of them, or the shape, or the materials they are made of. Some receive strong drums with thick skins—resilience. Others receive delicate ones that bruise easily—sensitivity. Some drums echo loudly—confidence—while others must be struck softly or they break—fragility.”

He tapped the smallest tom with a fingertip.  
It chimed lightly, like a bell swallowed by the air.

“You cannot pick the world you are born into, either. Not your family, not your kingdom, not the struggles that will find you. All of that is the drum set you inherit.”

Sawyer lowered his eyes.

His chest tightened at the memory of the stable boy—alone, embarrassed, defenseless.

“So some people get better drums than others?” he whispered.

“Better?” Alaric repeated thoughtfully. “Or simply different?”

Marshy tilted her head. “So... we don’t choose our instrument. But we choose how we play?”

Alaric’s eyes warmed. “Exactly.”

He lifted the drumsticks and struck a short, simple rhythm:  
*boom — tap — boom — tap tap.*

Nothing special. Nothing impressive.

Then he played the same rhythm again—this time soft as falling snow.  
Then again—sharp as cracking ice.  
Then again—joyous, bright, playful.  
Then again—heavy as thunder.

Sawyer felt each one differently. Same pattern. Same drums. Different meaning.

“Your life,” Alaric said, “is a rhythm. And God gives you the freedom to choose how you play it—to choose your response to the world.”

Sawyer frowned. “But what about the bullying? The cruelty? The unfair things? I didn’t choose that. The stable boy didn’t choose that.”

“No,” Alaric said softly. “You didn’t. He didn’t. But the boys who acted cruelly? *They* chose their rhythm.”

Rocco crossed his stone arms. “And they played it terribly.”

Marshy nudged him. “Maybe they’ve never learned how to play properly.”

“Or maybe,” Rocco muttered, “they need to be hit by a drumstick.”

“Rocco,” Alaric said with a patient sigh, “that is not the lesson.”

Rocco nodded. “Right. Yes. Violence bad. Rhythm good.”

Alaric smiled faintly and continued.

“The world,” he said, “is full of rhythms crashing into each other. Some people play kindness. Others play cruelty. Some play courage. Others fear. Some strike with love; others with anger.”

His voice grew quieter, deeper.

“And every choice sends out a sound wave that touches others—sometimes gently, sometimes painfully.”

Sawyer let the words settle.

It was as though the room itself was holding its breath.

Alaric stepped off the platform and knelt before Sawyer—not as a tutor before a prince, but as a mentor before a child wrestling with truths far bigger than himself.

“Sawyer,” he said softly, “you cannot control the drums someone else plays. Not the stable boys of this world. Not the bullies. Not even the kings.”

Sawyer’s throat tightened. “Then how do we make the world better?”

Alaric held up a finger. “By mastering the only drum set you can truly control—your own.”

He placed the drumsticks gently in Sawyer’s hands.

Sawyer looked down at them, feeling their weight. Smooth wood. Warm from Alaric’s touch. Heavy with meaning.

“I don’t know how to play,” Sawyer whispered.

“Everyone begins not knowing,” Alaric replied.

Marshy scooted closer. “You can learn. I’ll learn too if you want.”

Rocco nodded. “I will be the moral support rock. It is my destiny.”

Sawyer’s chest tightened—not with worry this time, but with something bright and steady. Hope.

Alaric rose and motioned for Sawyer to take his place at the drums. Sawyer climbed onto the platform, his hands trembling as he held the sticks. The shimmering hues of the drum set reflected across his face—a swirl of twilight blues and starlit purples.

Alaric stood beside him.

“Your life,” he said, nodding toward the drums, “is full of moments—some small, some enormous, some joyful, some painful.”

He pointed to the various instruments in the set.

“This is your courage.”

Sawyer touched the largest drum.

“This is your patience.”

A medium tom.

“This is your anger.”

A sharp snare that glinted dangerously.

“This is your compassion.”

A soft chime drum.

“This is your voice when you speak truth.”

A cymbal that sang when brushed.

“And this,” Alaric said, pointing to the bass drum in the center, “is your heart. Everything else finds its rhythm from here.”

Sawyer swallowed hard, emotion swelling like a rising tide.

He didn't know if he was ready.

He didn't know what rhythm he was supposed to play.

He didn't know if he deserved such responsibility.

But the world didn't wait for readiness.

And neither did the drums.

Alaric placed a hand on Sawyer's shoulder.

“The unfairness you witnessed yesterday,” he said softly, “was someone else choosing to play cruelty.”

He gestured at the glowing drums before him.

“But what you do next... is your choice. Your rhythm. Your life.”

Sawyer raised the drumsticks.

The room fell silent.

Marshy leaned forward, breath held.

Rocco clasped his rocky hands.

Alaric's eyes shone with pride.

Sawyer struck the first note.

A deep, resonant *boom* filled the hall—steady, strong, and full of promise.

And for the first time, Sawyer felt the truth of Alaric's lesson:

He could not stop every bad thing in the world.

But he could choose his rhythm.

And maybe—just maybe—that choice could change everything.

## Chapter 3 — The First Bang

The moment Sawyer struck that first deep *boom*, something inside him lit up—like a lantern set aflame in a quiet room. The vibration hummed in his palms. His heart thudded back in response, almost as if it wanted to echo the drum’s rhythm.

Marshy gasped.

Rocco cheered, “YES! Hit it again! Hit it again but, like... hit it more heroically!”

Sawyer swallowed and tightened his grip on the drumsticks. He had no idea what he was doing. His hands were clumsy, nervous, unsure. He raised the sticks again—too fast, too tight—and brought them down in a clattering flurry.

*BOOM—TAT—CRACK—TING—CRASH—TUNK.*

The sound that exploded into the air was nothing short of chaos. A disaster. A catastrophic avalanche of pure, unfiltered noise.

Marshy clapped both hands over her ears.

Rocco wobbled backward and face-planted onto his rocky backside.

Birds on the rafters above took flight in a frenzy of feathers.

Sawyer froze, horrified.

“I— I’m sorry!” he blurted. “I didn’t mean to— I thought— I don’t know what I’m doing!”

But Alaric... only smiled.

A slow, warm, patient smile that made Sawyer’s panic soften at the edges.

“Perfect,” Alaric said.

Sawyer blinked at him. “P... perfect?”

Rocco, still sitting on the ground, squinted suspiciously. “Alaric, are your ears broken? Should we get the royal physician?”

Marshy elbowed him. “Be quiet, Rocco.”

Alaric stepped onto the platform and placed a hand on the rim of the large drum, steadying its faint vibration.

“That,” he said gently, “was the sound of free will.”

Sawyer frowned. “Free will sounds... horrible.”

Alaric’s smile widened. “Sometimes, yes. Especially at first.”

He motioned for Sawyer to stand and come closer. Sawyer stepped down, embarrassed, feeling the heat in his cheeks.

Alaric continued:

“You played exactly how you wanted in that moment—messy, confused, uncertain... but genuine.”

He tapped Sawyer’s chest with the tip of a drumstick.

“Your heart led your hands. That is the beginning of free will.”

Sawyer bit his lip. “But I sounded awful.”

“That’s the point,” Alaric said. “Free will isn’t about sounding good. It’s about having the *freedom to create sound at all.*”

He walked back to the drum set and sat down.

“May I show you something?”

Sawyer nodded.

Alaric struck the same drums Sawyer had—out of order, randomly, with no rhythm, no pattern, no art. Just noise.

*CRASH—BOOM—TING—TAT—BRRUMP.*

It sounded almost exactly like Sawyer’s first attempt.

But Alaric didn’t wince. He simply let the sound fade.

“Noise becomes music only when the heart begins to direct it,” he said. “But the heart can’t direct anything if it’s too afraid to play.”

He looked at Sawyer meaningfully.

“You were brave enough to strike the first blow. That matters.”

Sawyer lowered his gaze. No one had ever called him brave for doing something... imperfect. Wrong. Clumsy. He’d always been praised for what he did *right*.

Never for the moment he decided to simply *try*.

Marshy stepped onto the platform beside him.

“Hey,” she said softly. “Being messy at first means you’re learning something real.”

Rocco clambered up aggressively onto the step next to her. “Yeah! You can’t be a legend without first being a disaster.”

Sawyer gave a weak laugh. “Thanks... I think?”

Rocco put two rocky hands on Sawyer’s shoulders and stared dramatically into his eyes. “Embrace the chaos.”

“Rocco,” Marshy muttered, “please stop being weird.”

“I will not. Chaos strengthens character.”

Sawyer smiled—a small smile, but real.

Alaric gently handed him back the drumsticks.

“Free will,” Alaric said, “means you get to choose your own rhythm. The messy beginnings. The courageous middles. The redemptive endings. You get to choose, not because you know the perfect way...”

He tapped the smallest drum.

“...but because God trusts you with the choice.”

Sawyer’s breath caught.

Trust.

God trusts him?

Him, a boy who couldn’t even play a single clean rhythm?

Alaric went on:

“If God wanted perfection, He would’ve created only one drummer in His entire world—Himself. But He wanted music. Real music. Music with heart and soul and choice.”

Sawyer swallowed hard.

Alaric stepped back and motioned to the drums.

“Try again.”

Sawyer stood on the platform once more. Marshy and Rocco stayed beside him, like twin pillars of encouragement—one brilliant, one bizarre.

He raised the drumsticks again, feeling his pulse race.

This time, he didn't aim for perfection.

He didn't try to impress.

He didn't worry about making noise.

He simply breathed.

And then he played.

*Boom... tap... tap... boom... ting...*

It was still uneven. Still awkward. Still far from music.

But it was no longer chaos.

It was something new.

Something growing.

Something his.

Alaric's voice sounded behind him, full of pride.

"That," he said, "is the beginning of choosing your rhythm."

Sawyer felt the faintest ripple of joy bloom in his chest.

For the first time since witnessing the bullying, the world seemed less impossible. Less confusing. Less cruel.

Because if he could choose his rhythm...

maybe he could choose to make things better.

And maybe his rhythm—messy or not—could one day change someone else's world.

The First Bang had been chaos.

But the second?

The second was hope.

## Chapter 4 — Marshy Steps In

Sawyer's second attempt still echoed softly in the Practice Hall of Echoes when Marshy stepped forward, her eyes glowing with that familiar, confident spark. She didn't ask for permission. She simply lifted one hand—her signal that she was ready to lead—and Alaric stepped aside with a knowing smile.

"Move over, Your Highness," Marshy said teasingly. "It's my turn."

Sawyer grinned and slid off the platform. Marshy climbed up with a kind of fearless grace—half scholar, half warrior, fully Marshy. Rocco scrambled after her, shouting, "DON'T WORRY, I WILL PROVIDE MORAL SUPPORT AND UNNECESSARY COMMENTARY."

"No commentary," Marshy warned him.

"...some commentary," Rocco bargained.

But she was already focused. Her fingertips brushed the drumsticks as if they were old friends. Then she sat on the stool, adjusted the snare, and rested her foot lightly on the bass pedal.

Marshy inhaled.

And began.

*Boom... tap... boom... tap... boom... tap... boom... tap...*

A simple rhythm. Gentle. Even. Steady as a heartbeat.

The sound rolled through the hall, soothing even the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams. The rafters seemed to hum along, and Rocco slowly lowered himself to the floor in an almost reverent silence.

Sawyer stared, mesmerized. "How do you do that?"

Marshy smiled without breaking her rhythm.

"It's just one choice after another," she said calmly. *Boom... tap... boom... tap.* "One beat at a time. Not perfect—just steady."

Rocco leaned toward Sawyer and whispered, "She's like a tiny, overachieving thunder goddess."

"Rocco," Marshy said, without even turning around, "stop being weird."

Rocco gasped. “How—HOW DOES SHE ALWAYS KNOW?!”

Sawyer giggled, but Marshy was already gently increasing the rhythm, weaving in the cymbal with a light *ting... ting... ting...*

Then she spoke again, her voice soft but clear enough to echo off the stone walls.

“Every beat is a choice, Sawyer. And every choice makes something.”

She tapped the snare—sharp but gentle.

“That’s a choice that supports.”

She tapped the cymbal—soft and bright.

“That’s a choice that encourages.”

Then she struck the drum with a sudden *crack*—not angry, but startling.

“And that’s a choice that can hurt.”

Sawyer flinched.

Marshy’s rhythm softened again—steady, calm, reassuring—wrapping the silence in warmth.

“We don’t always realize how big our little choices are,” she continued. “The boys who bullied the stable boy made hurtful beats. Maybe they thought it was funny or harmless. But every hurtful beat becomes part of someone else’s song.”

Sawyer swallowed hard.

He could still see the stable boy’s face—the way he hunched, the way he tried not to cry, the way Sawyer had frozen because he didn’t know what to do. The rhythm Marshy played now was the opposite of that moment—gentle, grounding, safe.

Marshy kept playing.

“Sometimes,” she said, “we make mistakes. Sometimes we hit the wrong drum, or too hard, or at the wrong time.” *Boom—CLACK—tap*. She demonstrated a messy jumble of sound before returning to her steady beat.

“That doesn’t make us bad. It just means we get to try again. The rhythm can always be repaired.”

Sawyer felt something in his chest loosen.

Like guilt melting into understanding.

Alaric stepped closer, folding his hands behind his back. “Marshy is showing you harmony,” he said quietly. “The way choices shape the sound around us. Free will is powerful... but it’s also incredibly kind, when guided by love.”

Marshy nodded, still keeping the beat.

“When we choose kindness, it’s like adding steady rhythm to a song that’s falling apart.”

Rocco practically melted into the floor. “This is SO emotional. I’m going to need to hydrate. Does anyone have water? Or oil? Rocks don’t cry, but we *leak*.”

“Rocco,” Marshy said, “you’re interrupting the metaphor.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Sawyer took a slow, deep breath.

The steady beat seeped into him like rain into dry earth.

He stepped closer. “Can I try again? But... this time, with your rhythm in mind?”

Marshy finally stopped and handed him the drumsticks.

“Of course,” she said, gently. “Your rhythm doesn’t need to sound like mine. It just needs to be chosen with care.”

Sawyer climbed onto the stool. Marshy and Rocco stood on either side of him, like his own personal rhythm guardians.

He lifted the sticks.

This time, he didn’t rush.

He didn’t tense up.

He didn’t try to impress.

He simply listened to Marshy’s steady beat still echoing inside him.

*Boom... tap... boom... tap...*

He played.

Slow. Uneven. But careful. Heartfelt.

And as he did, Marshy leaned down beside him and whispered:

“That’s harmony, Sawyer. Choices that help others instead of hurting them. Choices that make the world a little steadier.”

Alaric smiled from across the hall.

Sawyer felt something warm and hopeful rise inside him.

Maybe...

maybe he could learn this rhythm of kindness.

Maybe he could choose better beats.

Maybe he could become someone who helped the world sound beautiful.

One steady beat at a time.

## Chapter 5 — Rocco Makes a Mess

The Practice Hall of Echoes was still humming softly with the last notes of Sawyer's careful rhythm. Dust sparkled in the slanting afternoon light, floating like tiny lanterns above the instruments. Sawyer felt proud—maybe for the first time that day. Marshy had given him confidence. Alaric had given him wisdom.

And Rocco...

Well, Rocco had been suspiciously quiet for six whole minutes.

Which, historically, meant something catastrophic was about to happen.

Sawyer turned around just in time to see the anthropomorphic rock—arms trembling with excitement—hovering over the drum set like a bird preparing for takeoff.

"Rocco," Sawyer warned gently, "what are you doing?"

Rocco grinned. "I HAVE BEEN INSPIRED."

Marshy slapped her forehead. "That's never good."

"It is VERY good," Rocco insisted, puffing out his rocky chest. "I have listened to your emotional metaphors. I have listened to your deep wisdom. And now—NOW I WILL PLAY THE DRUMS OF MY DESTINY."

"Don't—" Sawyer began.

But fate had already rolled into motion.

Rocco leapt—LEGENDARY, heroic, wildly misguided—and landed squarely in the center of the drum set. His tiny stone feet struck three toms at once while his hands windmilled into the cymbals in what could only be described as an *overenthusiastic avalanche of chaos*.

***BOOM–CLANG–CRASH–THUD–TING–CRACK–WHUMP!!***

Marshy stumbled backward. Sawyer flinched. A tower of wooden sticks toppled. Two cymbals spun like flying plates. One bass drum rolled dramatically across the floor and smacked the wall with a mournful *bwoooooomp*.

Rocco froze in the ruins of his percussion catastrophe, hands still spread out like an orchestra conductor who had just banished harmony from existence.

Silence followed.

A long, dreadful silence.

Then Rocco squeaked:

“...I may have... altered the vibe.”

Sawyer’s eyes were huge. Marshy’s jaw hung open. Even the dust motes seemed stunned.

Rocco looked around at the mess—scattered sticks, tipped-over stands, a cymbal wobbling sadly on the floor—and his rocky face crumpled.

“I—I didn’t mean to break the rhythm,” he whispered, voice cracking. “Or the drums. Or the... the entire room.”

His arms drooped. “I just wanted to make something *good*. Instead I made... THIS.”

Sawyer knelt beside him. “Rocco—”

But Rocco was spiraling now, pacing in quick little circles, pebbles shedding from his elbows.

“I failed! I ruined the song! I ruined the metaphor! I ruined the EMOTIONAL LESSON! I am a disaster rock!”

Alaric finally stepped forward.

He didn’t scold.

He didn’t frown.

He simply crouched down until he was eye level with the trembling, panicking rock.

“Rocco,” Alaric said gently, “look at me.”

Rocco sniffled. “I...I am looking at your knees.”

Alaric tipped Rocco’s chin upward with one finger.

“There you go,” he whispered. “Now listen closely.”

Rocco gulped.

“Nothing you did ruined anything,” Alaric said softly. “Not the room, not the lesson, not the day. Mistakes don’t ruin the song, Rocco.”

“They don’t?” Rocco squeaked.

“No,” Alaric said. “They *teach* you. They show you where the rhythm needs gentleness. They show you how to grow. They even show you who your friends are—who helps you get back up.”

Marshy nodded firmly. “And who stops you from leaping onto fragile musical equipment.”

“Marshy,” Sawyer whispered. “Not helping.”

Rocco looked down at his hands. “So... this mess doesn’t mean I’m bad at drums? Or... bad at life?”

Alaric softened. “It means you’re learning. Every great musician has made a mess. Every person—every heart—has moments when they hit too hard, or at the wrong time, or without thinking.”

He placed a reassuring hand on Rocco’s shoulder.

“But learning from the mess... that’s what creates wisdom.”

Rocco’s voice trembled. “So... I can try again?”

“You must,” Alaric said warmly. “Because trying again is how we discover the song we want to play.”

Sawyer grinned. “Come on, Rocco. We’ll help clean up.”

Marshy was already lifting stands, muttering, “Next time, we’re bubble-wrapping you.”

Together—one human prince, one courageous girl, and one overly dramatic animate rock—they began restoring the practice hall, laughing as they worked. The room slowly returned to order, instrument by instrument.

And when it was done, the drum set gleamed again, ready for new rhythms, new lessons, and new hope.

Rocco climbed onto a small stool beside the drums, taking a deep breath. “I would like to try again,” he said formally. Then, quieter: “But... maybe one drum at a time?”

Sawyer squeezed his shoulder. “That’s all anyone ever needs to do.”

Alaric smiled.

The mess had become a lesson.  
And the lesson had become a moment of growth.

One beat, one mistake, one new beginning at a time.

## Chapter 6 — The Drum Teacher Metaphor

By the time the drums were cleaned, the sticks organized, and Rocco sufficiently calmed (and wrapped in a single precautionary layer of practice-hall towels), the afternoon sun had shifted to a deeper gold. The Practice Hall of Echoes glowed like a sunlit sanctuary, warm and still, as though waiting for the next lesson.

Sawyer sat cross-legged on the floor. Marshy perched on a stool, arms folded but smiling. Rocco sat very stiffly on a cushion, afraid to move even a pebble.

Alaric stood before them with that thoughtful expression he always wore when a deep truth sat on his tongue.

“Now,” he said softly, “it’s time for the part I brought you here for.”

Sawyer leaned forward. His chest tightened in the same place it had when he’d first witnessed the stable boy being bullied—the same place that had whispered the question that wouldn’t go away.

*If God is good... why does He allow bad things to happen?*

Alaric noticed the look and knelt so they were eye-level.

“Sawyer,” he began, “remember your question from yesterday?”

Sawyer swallowed and nodded.

“This lesson,” Alaric said gently, “is part of the answer.”

He stood again and walked to the drum set. With slow, careful movement, he picked up a single drumstick and tapped a soft, steady beat—*dum... dum... dum...*  
Calm. Patient. Sure.

“This,” Alaric said, “is what it’s like to have a teacher.”

Marshy tilted her head. “But you’re more like... you know... *you*.”

Rocco whispered, “I think she means he’s very tall.”

“No,” she snapped. “I mean—never mind.”

Alaric chuckled, then continued tapping the beat.

“When someone learns drums, the teacher does not grab their hands and force the rhythm. He doesn’t yank the sticks. He doesn’t control every movement.”

He placed a second drumstick in Sawyer’s hand.

“A teacher shows the rhythm,” Alaric said. “He demonstrates. Encourages. Supports.”

Sawyer tried mimicking the beat. His rhythm wobbled, clattered, steadied, and wobbled again.

Alaric didn’t correct him harshly. He simply smiled and nodded. “Good. Keep going.”

Sawyer tried again. *Dum... dum... dUM—*  
He winced at the loud off-beat.

But Alaric didn’t flinch. “That’s part of learning.”

He guided Sawyer’s hand gently—not forcing, just nudging. “Try it like this.”

Together, they found the rhythm.

Marshy watched closely. “So... God is like a drum teacher?”

“In many ways,” Alaric replied. “He doesn’t control our hands. He doesn’t force our choices, even when we make painful ones. If He did”—Alaric mimed grabbing Sawyer’s hands—“you’d be a puppet, not a person.”

Rocco gasped. “I would hate being a puppet. No offense to marionettes.”

Sawyer’s brow furrowed. “So God lets us choose... even when our choices hurt someone?”

Alaric nodded slowly. “Yes. Because choice is part of what makes love real. Without choice, kindness is meaningless. Courage is impossible. Growing wiser—learning your rhythm—cannot happen.”

He tapped the drum once more, letting the sound fade.

“But,” he continued, “a good teacher doesn’t simply watch you fail. He doesn’t leave the room. He doesn’t shrug when you hit the wrong beat.”

Sawyer looked up. “So He helps?”

“Exactly,” Alaric said, warmth flooding his voice. “He guides. Corrects gently. Sends people into our lives—friends, mentors, caring strangers—like extra hands steadying

the rhythm. And when the song becomes overwhelming, He steps in lovingly, the way any good teacher would.”

He picked up the fallen cymbal from earlier, setting it upright. “Even when mistakes make a mess, He helps rebuild. Not by erasing your freedom... but by teaching you how to use it well.”

Sawyer felt a strange stirring in his chest—like something heavy lifting just a little.

“So... when I saw that stable boy being bullied,” Sawyer whispered, “that wasn’t because God didn’t care. It was because... someone used their freedom to do wrong.”

“Yes,” Alaric said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “And you, Sawyer, also have freedom. You can use it to step in. Speak up. Protect. Comfort. You can play a different rhythm—one that brings courage and kindness.”

Marshy chimed in, voice firm and honest. “And sometimes the teacher teaches through *us*.”

Rocco raised a hand timidly. “May I say something? I... I promise I won’t touch anything.”

Sawyer grinned. “Go on.”

Rocco clasped his rocky hands. “If I had a drum teacher, I’d want him to believe I can improve... even if my first attempt destroyed half the hall.”

Marshy snorted. Alaric laughed.

“And that,” Alaric said, “is exactly how God sees you.”

Rocco glowed—literally, one of his minerals catching the light.

Sawyer looked around the practice hall—the shining drums, the echoing walls, the sunlight spilling over everything like a blessing—and breathed in slowly.

The question that had haunted him didn’t feel quite as heavy.

“A teacher doesn’t control your hands,” he murmured, repeating it softly. “He teaches you how to use them.”

Alaric’s eyes softened. “Exactly.”

Sawyer lifted his drumstick and tapped a gentle beat.

Marshy added a second.

Rocco tapped the triangle timidly—with no destruction, to everyone's amazement.

Together they made a rhythm that was messy, hopeful, and uniquely theirs.

A rhythm made not by force, but by freedom.

## Chapter 7 — “So God Doesn’t Force Us?”

The late afternoon sun slanted through the tall windows of the Practice Hall of Echoes, laying gold bars of light across the polished floor. The drums had been set right again—thanks to Rocco’s fervent apologies and Marshy’s meticulous organizational system (which included labels like “*Stick Storage: For Responsible Hands Only*”).

Now the four of them sat in a quiet circle: Sawyer, Marshy, Rocco, and Alaric. The air felt different—still warm, still safe—but heavier with questions Sawyer had held inside for far too long.

Sawyer played with a drumstick, rolling it between his fingers.  
His mind wouldn’t settle.  
His heart wouldn’t either.

At last he looked up, voice small but determined.

“Alaric... earlier you said we have freedom to choose. To make our own... rhythms.” He swallowed. “But... if God is good, and powerful, and loves us... then... couldn’t He stop us from making mistakes? From hurting each other? From doing wrong?”

Rocco leaned forward, eyes wide, ready for a revelation. Marshy reached over and quietly squeezed Sawyer’s arm.

Alaric nodded, not surprised.

“That,” he said softly, “is one of the oldest questions the human heart has ever asked.”

Sawyer’s breath caught.  
He felt suddenly both very small and very seen.

Alaric continued, “Yes. God *could* stop every mistake before it happens. He could move your hands before they strike the wrong drum. He could shape your thoughts, your actions, your decisions—turn you into perfect performers.”

Sawyer frowned. “Wouldn’t that... be good?”

Marshy didn’t say anything, but her forehead crinkled with uncertainty.

Alaric picked up a small practice drum, setting it between them. “Sawyer... imagine you’re sitting here, excited to learn to play. But every time you try to touch the drum, I grab your wrists. I move your hands. I hit every beat for you.”

Sawyer imagined it.  
He wouldn't be learning anything.  
He wouldn't be playing anything.

"That wouldn't be teaching," Sawyer whispered. "That'd be... puppeteering."

Alaric nodded. "Exactly. You wouldn't grow. You wouldn't understand rhythm. You wouldn't create anything of your own. You wouldn't become strong. You wouldn't become *you*."

He paused, letting the silence settle like soft dust.

"If God were to force your hands," Alaric said quietly, "you would never learn to play the song you were made for."

Sawyer blinked hard. Something warm unfurled in his chest.  
Rocco raised a rocky hand hesitantly. "But—but sometimes people do really, *really* bad things, Alaric. Why doesn't God stop THOSE things?"

Alaric looked at him with the same tenderness he gave Sawyer. "Because free will is real. Not pretend-real. Not only-real-when-it's-convenient. Real in every way that matters."

Sawyer felt the weight of that.  
Marshy did too; she sat very still.

Alaric continued, "God wants love. Real love. True love. A love that chooses Him freely, chooses goodness freely, chooses kindness, mercy, courage—not because we are controlled, but because we decide it."

He placed his palm flat on the drumhead.

"If He removed every wrong choice from the world," he said softly, "He would also remove our ability to choose right."

Sawyer's breath shivered. "So... freedom means... the possibility of hurting? Of being hurt?"

"Yes," Alaric said, eyes full of compassion. "And the possibility of becoming brave. Of choosing compassion. Of protecting someone. Of apologizing. Of forgiving. Of loving."

He tapped the drum once—soft, steady, full of purpose.

“God does not force your hands, Sawyer. He guides. He teaches. He nudges. He helps. He strengthens. He heals. And when the rhythm becomes broken, He sits beside you until you find the beat again.”

Sawyer stared down at the drumsticks in his hands.

He thought of the stable boy being bullied.

He thought of his own choice—to step in or to stay silent.

He thought of how heavy it felt to know that people could choose cruelty.

“But why give us freedom,” Sawyer whispered, “if it causes so much hurt?”

Alaric smiled sadly. “Because without freedom, there is no love. And love is worth every risk.”

Marshy breathed out slowly, as if absorbing truth into her bones.

Rocco wiped the corner of his eye, though no tear could possibly fall from a rock. “This is... very deep. Even for sedimentary beings.”

Alaric chuckled softly, then turned back to Sawyer.

“You asked if God could stop you from making mistakes. The answer is yes.”

He touched Sawyer’s chest. “But He loves you too much to take away the dignity of your choices.”

Sawyer swallowed hard.

He didn’t have all the answers.

But for the first time, he understood the shape of the question.

Alaric leaned back, giving Sawyer space to breathe.

“You were created to learn,” he said gently. “To grow. To choose good even when it’s hard. To seek help when you need it. And to become someone capable of playing a beautiful, world-changing rhythm.”

Sawyer stared at the drums.

They looked different now.

Not like instruments—but like a calling.

And he thought, maybe...

maybe he was ready to learn how to play.

## Chapter 8 — The Lesson of the Missing Beat

The afternoon light slanted through the clerestory windows of the Practice Hall of Echoes, painting long golden bars across the polished floor. Dust floated lazily, like tiny dancers awaiting the conductor's cue. The drum set—newly repaired from Rocco's "enthusiasm event"—sat proudly at the center of the room, its skins gleaming like moons waiting to be struck.

Sawyer took his seat on the small stool again. Marshy stood beside him, arms folded, ready to assist. Rocco—determined to redeem himself—perched on a wooden crate marked "*SPARE MALLETS. DO NOT LET ROCCO TOUCH.*" He pretended not to notice the writing.

Alaric stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back.

"Now," he said, "it's time for the next part of your lesson. Today we learn about the missing beat."

Sawyer frowned slightly. "The missing beat?"

"Yes," Alaric replied. "Sometimes the problem is not when someone hits the drum too loudly... but when someone chooses not to hit it at all."

Rocco gasped. "You mean *not doing anything* can ruin a rhythm?"

"Exactly," Alaric said. "Choices matter. But *lapses* matter too."

He motioned to Sawyer. "I want you to play the rhythm I taught you before. A steady heartbeat. Nothing fancy."

Sawyer lifted the sticks. *Thump–thump... Thump–thump... Thump–thump...*

His rhythm filled the room like the pulse of a living creature—simple, grounded, warm.

"Now," Alaric instructed softly, "skip every fourth beat."

Sawyer hesitated, then tried.

*Thump–thump... Thump–*

Silence.

*Thump–thump... Thump–*

Silence.

The rhythm wobbled. It felt wrong—like a story with missing pages. Marshy winced.

“It feels... hollow,” she said quietly. “Like the rhythm can’t find its balance.”

“Precisely,” Alaric replied. “The rhythm is the community. Each beat is a choice someone makes. When someone refuses to do what is good, it affects the whole song.”

He pointed gently toward the drums. “Sawyer’s missing beats aren’t mistakes. They are *absences*. And absences echo.”

Rocco’s arms drooped. “Oh. Oh no. I have many absences. I often forget things. I forget to show up. I forget to think before I jump. I am a rock of interruptions.”

“You mean a rock of *inspiration*,” Marshy corrected with a loving smirk.

“Also interruptions,” Rocco whispered.

Alaric chuckled. “Rocco, this lesson is not about forgetfulness. It’s about responsibility. About how our choices—and even what we choose *not* to do—can influence others.”

He knelt beside the drum set so he was level with the children—and the animate rock.

“You saw what happened in the courtyard yesterday,” Alaric continued gently, referring to the bullying that had weighed so heavily on Sawyer. “Some boys chose cruelty. But many others chose to do nothing. Both mattered.”

Sawyer’s shoulders tightened. “I hated it. And I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t brave enough.”

Alaric placed a steady hand on his shoulder. “Sawyer... courage isn’t the beat you play perfectly. It’s the one you choose to play when it matters most.”

He picked up a loose drumstick and tapped a soft, steady counter-rhythm beside Sawyer’s.

*Tak-tak... tak-tak... tak-tak...*

It filled in the hollow spaces, restoring strength to the pattern.

“This,” Alaric said, “is what happens when we step in. When we choose goodness. When we choose to protect, to speak, to defend, or even simply to stand beside someone.”

Marshy nodded slowly, her eyes deep with understanding. “So every good choice adds to the music of the kingdom.”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “And when we choose *not* to act, the kingdom’s song falters. People get hurt. Injustice grows. Harmony bends out of shape.”

Rocco raised one rocky hand. “But what if someone is scared? What if they want to hit the drum of goodness but their stick feels too heavy?”

“That,” Alaric said warmly, “is why we play together.”

He motioned for Marshy to join Sawyer. She took a small drum beside him. Rocco, with Alaric’s gentle guidance, was given a soft mallet and a single drum only slightly larger than his foot.

“Now,” Alaric said, “play together. Fill in each other’s gaps.”

The room came alive with sound—not perfect, not polished, but unified.

Sawyer’s steady beat.

Marshy’s bright counter-rhythm.

Rocco’s hesitant *pok-pok* slowly becoming confident.

Alaric’s guiding taps weaving everything into one harmonious pattern.

“There,” Alaric said, smiling. “That is what goodness looks like when freely chosen and shared.”

Sawyer looked up at him. “So... the missing beat reminds us we matter to each other?”

“More than you know,” Alaric said. “Every beat changes the world a little. Every silence does too.”

Rocco puffed out his chest proudly. “I SHALL NEVER MISS A BEAT AGAIN!”

A cymbal behind him immediately crashed to the floor for no reason.

Rocco froze. “That... was probably not my fault.”

Marshy laughed. Sawyer laughed, too—his heart calmer than it had been in days.

The rhythm was back.

The lesson was clear.

And Sawyer felt, for the first time since yesterday, that maybe he could face the world’s unfairness—not alone, not perfectly, but bravely, one beat at a time.

## Chapter 9 — Marshy Questions Injustice

The afternoon sun was dipping low, turning the Practice Hall of Echoes warm and golden. The instruments glimmered as if listening—quiet guardians of the lessons unfolding inside. Sawyer sat cross-legged by the drums, turning a stick in his hands. Rocco perched on a nearby stool, legs dangling, swinging subtly like a metronome trying to calm itself down.

Marshy stood at the window, arms folded, staring at the courtyard below.

Outside, the stable boy—quiet, timid, always polite—was brushing a horse. Two boys passed by, pointing, laughing. Even from here, their cruelty was obvious.

Marshy’s jaw tightened.

She turned from the window abruptly.

“Alaric,” she said, voice trembling—not with fear, but with fire—“why do people choose cruel beats?”

Sawyer looked up. Rocco’s legs stopped swinging. The hall seemed to hush itself.

Alaric set aside a lute he’d been tuning and faced her fully.

“Because I don’t understand,” Marshy said, louder now. “Why would someone *want* to be unkind? Why do people use their freedom to hurt others? Why do they choose beats that break instead of heal? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Alaric walked toward her slowly, his eyes thoughtful.

“Marshy,” he began softly, “you are asking one of the oldest questions of all time.”

“I don’t want an old answer,” she muttered. “I want a true one.”

He smiled sadly. “The true ones are often the ancient ones.”

She sank onto a bench, frustration melting into sorrow. “I just... I wish God would stop people from being cruel. I wish He’d just—just keep their hands from hitting the wrong drum.”

Sawyer nodded, the stable scene still haunting him. “Yeah. If He’s good... why not stop it?”

Rocco raised his rocky hand timidly. “I, too, would like to vote for less cruelty.”

Alaric sat on the bench beside Marshy.

“You’re all asking about injustice—and about freedom,” he said. “And the reason they are always tangled together is because real love must allow real choice.”

Sawyer frowned. “Why?”

Alaric gestured to the drums. “Let’s imagine something. Suppose I wanted Sawyer to play a beautiful, perfect rhythm. And suppose I held his hands, forced every movement, and took over the beat entirely.”

Sawyer snorted. “That wouldn’t be *my* rhythm.”

“Exactly,” Alaric said. “It would be mine. And you wouldn’t have learned anything. You wouldn’t have created anything. You wouldn’t have grown.”

Marshy looked unconvinced. “That explains mistakes. But what about cruelty?”

Alaric nodded, acknowledging the depth of her question. “Let’s continue our imagining. Suppose I forced everyone—every child, every grown-up—to only ever hit kind beats. Suppose no one could choose anger, or selfishness, or cruelty. At first, that might sound wonderful.”

“It *does* sound wonderful,” Marshy said quietly.

“Until you realize,” Alaric said gently, “that kindness without choice isn’t kindness at all. It’s programming. Generosity without freedom is obedience, not love.”

The words hung in the air like soft bells.

Rocco whispered, “So... real goodness requires real choice?”

“Yes,” Alaric said. “God could stop our hands. He could take away every possibility of wrong or harm. But then—” he looked at each of them in turn, “—your hearts would never be free. And love that isn’t free... isn’t love.”

Marshy swallowed hard. “But... but people get hurt.”

“Yes,” Alaric said, grief in his voice. “And that is the tragedy of free will—the risk of it, the cost of it. God created a world where love is possible. That means courage is possible. Compassion, growth, repentance, forgiveness, justice—all of these become real only if choices are real.”

He touched the drum lightly.

“A drum that cannot be struck wrongly also cannot be struck beautifully.”

Sawyer looked at the polished surface, understanding dawning slowly.

“But what about when someone is mean on purpose?” Marshy asked, voice small.

“Does God just... stand back and do nothing?”

“No,” Alaric said firmly. “He grieves. He whispers to the hearts of those who choose harm, calling them to better beats. He strengthens the ones who suffer. And He sends people—good people—into the world to be defenders of the vulnerable.”

Rocco puffed his chest. “Meaning us?”

Alaric chuckled softly. “Yes, Rocco. Meaning you. Meaning all of you.”

Sawyer’s brows lifted in awe. Marshy blinked at him. Rocco looked like he might explode with pride.

“Every act of injustice,” Alaric continued, “is a wrong beat someone chose. But every act of courage, compassion, or kindness is a right beat someone also chooses. You cannot have one without the freedom for the other. But you can choose which side you add your beat to.”

Marshy looked down at her hands. “So when those boys hurt the stable boy... that wasn’t God’s choice.”

“No,” Alaric said softly. “It was theirs.”

“And when we choose to help him...” Sawyer added.

“That,” Alaric said, eyes warm, “is you joining God’s quiet work in the world. Strengthening the rhythm of love. That is what free will is for.”

Marshy wiped her eyes and took a shaky breath. “Then I want to make beats that help. Beats that heal. Beats that change something.”

Sawyer nodded. “Me too.”

Rocco raised both arms. “I WILL STRIKE ONLY THE BEATS OF JUSTICE!”

Alaric laughed. “Then the world is already a little better.”

The drums gleamed in the fading light—waiting for the next choice, the next rhythm, the next act of love freely given.

And the children knew:

Their hands were their own.

And so was the song they would offer the world.

## Chapter 10 — Rocco Asks the Hard Question

The Practice Hall of Echoes had grown quieter as the afternoon faded into gold. Long shadows stretched across the drums, the flutes, the polished wood floor. Dust motes flickered like tiny lanterns drifting upward with each breath the children took.

Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco sat cross-legged around Alaric, who rested on a wooden stool with the calm patience of a man who had answered difficult questions for many years.

But none of the questions so far had prepared them for the one Rocco held inside.

He had been fidgeting for nearly ten minutes—shifting pebbles, twisting his rocky fingers, clearing his throat with unnecessary volume. Sawyer nudged him gently.

“Rocco,” Sawyer whispered, “it’s okay. Just ask.”

Rocco swallowed so loudly that even the drums seemed to echo it. He pressed his small stone hands together and looked up at Alaric with wide, trembling eyes.

“Alaric,” he said softly, “I have the... the *big* question. The really big one.”

Alaric nodded. “I’m listening.”

Rocco’s voice cracked. “Why... doesn’t God stop the really big bad things? Not little mistakes. Not wrong beats. But the awful things. The heartbreak-things. The unfair-things. The things that hurt people who never did anything wrong?”

Marshy went very still. Sawyer lowered his gaze.

Alaric took a slow breath, as if pulling wisdom from the very air around them.

He didn’t rush.

He didn’t lecture.

He didn’t look surprised.

Instead, he leaned forward and said gently, “That is one of the hardest questions any heart can ask.”

Rocco’s bottom lip wobbled. “I’m scared you’ll say something that makes everything worse...”

Alaric smiled sadly. “No. I will never offer words that make a wound deeper. But I will offer truth—and truth often comes with mystery.”

He rested a hand on the top of Rocco's smooth head.

"First," Alaric said, "God *does* stop many big bad things—far more than we ever know. Every day, in ways we cannot see."

Sawyer blinked. "He does?"

"Of course," Alaric replied. "Every time a disaster is avoided, every time someone chooses kindness instead of cruelty, every time a person stands up for another—God's goodness is guiding that. But we only notice the tragedies, not the quiet rescues."

Rocco tilted his head. "But what about the ones that *aren't* stopped?"

Alaric's voice softened, deepened.

"For those, God gives us something just as powerful: the call to bring His goodness into the noise."

Marshy frowned. "What does that mean?"

Alaric stood and walked to the great drum set, placing a hand on its shimmering surface. "Imagine a song filled with harsh, chaotic beats—some caused by cruelty, some by suffering, some by selfishness or fear."

Sawyer shivered slightly. The image felt too real.

"Now imagine," Alaric continued, "that into that storm of noise, someone begins to play a soft, steady, loving rhythm. A rhythm of compassion. Of justice. Of courage. Of truth."

He tapped a gentle beat with his fingers. A warm, steady thump filled the hall.

"At first, the good rhythm seems too small. Too quiet. Too fragile to matter."

Thump... thump... thump...

"But then someone else hears it... and joins."

He tapped another drum in harmony.

"And then another. And another."

Soon, the room held a soft, growing chorus of sound—steady, hopeful, full of life.

Rocco's eyes sparkled. "So even when bad things happen... we help make the good beats louder?"

“Yes,” Alaric whispered. “We are not puppets. God does not stop every wrong because He also empowers us to be His hands. His helpers. His healers.”

Marshy’s voice trembled. “But why not just... stop everything bad Himself?”

Alaric sat back down, folding his hands. “Some suffering is prevented. Some is allowed. And some is transformed by those who respond with love. When we choose to step into the noise and bring goodness, we participate in God’s work. We become co-authors of healing.”

Rocco sniffed. “So... God doesn’t ignore pain.”

“Never,” Alaric said. “He grieves with us. He strengthens us. And He whispers the courage to make things better. But He doesn’t remove all darkness because some of the greatest light in the world comes from people—ordinary, fragile people—who choose to shine anyway.”

Sawyer felt something warm rise in his chest. A tear slipped down Marshy’s cheek.

Rocco sat up straighter. “So when we help others... we’re helping God rewrite the bad parts of the song?”

Alaric smiled. “Yes. Exactly. The world is full of broken rhythms, but God invites each of us to bring harmony into the places where it’s lacking.”

Rocco breathed out slowly, his rocky shoulders relaxing. “That... actually makes sense. Scary sense. Big sense. But good sense.”

Sawyer touched Rocco’s arm. “You asked the hard question... and you’re still brave.”

Marshy wiped her eyes. “And we can help make the world’s rhythm kinder.”

Alaric nodded, proud and quiet. “And that,” he said, “is why God doesn’t stop everything Himself. Because you—each of you—carry a piece of His goodness into the world. And without your beat... the song would never be complete.”

The room felt full—not of answers alone, but of purpose.

And Rocco—tiny, rocky, earnest Rocco—whispered to himself:

“Then I will play my part of the song with everything I’ve got.”

And the Practice Hall of Echoes seemed to shine just a little brighter.

## Chapter 11 — The Broken Drumstick

The rhythm had finally begun to feel natural.

For the first time since entering the Practice Hall of Echoes, Sawyer felt his hands moving with purpose. He breathed in slowly, letting the beat guide him rather than trying to force it. Marshy stood nearby, nodding encouragingly. Rocco sat cross-legged on the floor—well, as cross-legged as a rock with stubby limbs could manage—watching with proud, sparkling eyes.

“Good,” Alaric said softly from behind Sawyer. “Don’t try to outrun the rhythm. Let it speak.”

Sawyer struck the snare. *TAP.*

He hit the tom. *TUM.*

He brushed the cymbal’s edge. *SHHHRRING.*

He smiled. The notes weren’t perfect, but they felt *true*.

Marshy leaned toward Rocco and whispered, “He’s really getting it.”

“I am EMOTIONALLY INVESTED,” Rocco whispered back.

Sawyer lifted his right hand for the next hit—

*CRACK!*

A sharp sound split the air.

The drumstick snapped cleanly in two.

Sawyer froze, staring at the pieces in his hands as if they had betrayed him personally. One half clattered dramatically to the floor, spinning in a sad little circle before collapsing with a tiny *plip*.

Marshy stepped toward him. “Sawyer, it’s okay—”

“No,” Sawyer said quickly, his voice tight. “No, it’s not.”

He stared at the broken stick in his hand, heat rising in his face.

“I hit too hard,” he muttered. “Or at the wrong angle. Or I... I wasn’t paying attention. I always mess up.”

Rocco gasped. "SAWYER, DO NOT DESCEND INTO SELF-BLAME. IT IS A DARK PIT. I LIVE NEAR ONE."

Sawyer didn't laugh. He clenched the broken stick, shoulders scrunching.

"It's my fault," he said, voice cracking. "I ruin everything. Even when I try, I break things."

He didn't mean the drumstick.  
Not really.

Alaric heard that truth clearly.

He walked forward, calm as ever, and gently took the pieces from Sawyer's trembling hands. He turned them over, studying the break—not with disappointment, but curiosity.

"Do you know," Alaric said quietly, "that even the best drummers in Calendor break sticks? Sometimes a dozen in one practice."

Sawyer blinked. "...They do?"

Alaric nodded. "Mmm. Because playing—*really* playing—means you are growing, stretching, learning. That kind of learning puts strain on the wood. On the drums. On your hands. On your heart."

He held up the broken half.

"This isn't a punishment," he said.

"This is a sign that you are trying."

Marshy stepped beside Sawyer. "It's true. My father says broken practice swords mean you're training hard—not failing."

Rocco raised a little rocky hand. "I once split myself in half trying to save a kitten. IT WAS ALSO NOT A FAILURE."

Everyone turned to him.

Rocco added, "In hindsight, it was also not helpful."

Marshy gently patted his head. "Poor rock."

Alaric knelt in front of Sawyer, meeting his eyes with kindness that made Sawyer's throat tighten.

“Listen to me,” Alaric said softly. “Brokenness is not always a sign of doing something wrong. Sometimes it’s simply part of being alive. Wood breaks. Hearts bruise. Mistakes happen.”

He placed a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder.

“God does not punish you through broken sticks, Sawyer. Nor through broken moments. He walks with you *through* them.”

Sawyer swallowed hard. “But it felt like punishment.”

“I know,” Alaric whispered. “Because when something breaks, it’s easy to assume *you* are the problem.”

He held up the drumstick again.

“But the truth is simpler and kinder: sometimes things break because they’re meant to be used. Life is not safe from splinters.”

Sawyer looked at the stick. “So... I didn’t ruin the rhythm? Or the lesson?”

“No,” Alaric said, “you lived it.”

He handed Sawyer a new pair of sticks, smooth and warm from the sunlight.

“Try again,” Alaric said. “Not because you must—but because learning continues. God does not expect perfection from you. Only willingness.”

Sawyer took the sticks carefully, holding them like something precious.

He stepped back to the drums.

Marshy stood beside him. Rocco held a tiny sign—he had made it while no one was looking—that read: *YOU ARE DOING GREAT EVEN WHEN YOU BREAK THINGS.*

Sawyer smiled.

A small smile, but a real one.

He raised the sticks.

He breathed.

He played again.

The rhythm wasn’t perfect.

But this time, Sawyer didn’t expect it to be.

And because of that...  
it sounded more beautiful than ever.

## Chapter 12 — The Melody of Helping

The forest of Calendor awoke with a shimmer that morning—sunlight scattering through the branches like golden confetti, birds humming their warm-up songs, and the faintest echo of drums drifting along the breeze. Prince Sawyer followed the sound with curiosity tugging at his steps. Marshy walked beside him, swinging her small travel drum at her hip, every stride making a soft *thump-thump* like a heartbeat.

They were on their way to the village of Elmwick, where rumors said the River Bells had gone silent. The River Bells—crystal stones along the water that chimed whenever someone offered kindness—were treasured by the entire kingdom. When they stopped ringing, it was usually a sign that help was needed.

Sawyer noticed Marshy’s worry. Normally she tapped little rhythms when she walked—sparkly, upbeat ones. Now her hands stayed still.

“What if we can’t fix it?” he asked quietly.

Marshy angled him a look, half-smile, half-thought. “Sage Alaric always says: *We don’t have to fix everything alone. God likes using people to help each other.*”

Sawyer nodded, though uncertainty still sat in his chest like a stone.

When they arrived at Elmwick, they found not a disaster, but a hush. Villagers stood by the river, staring helplessly at the motionless Bells. The water flowed calmly, but the crystals—once shining with soft blue light—looked dull and tired.

Old Mira, the village elder, approached with hands clasped.

“Something is wrong in the river,” she said. “All week, the Bells have been fading. We tried songs, prayers, offerings, but nothing wakes them.”

Sawyer knelt beside the riverbank. “Maybe they’re not hearing us,” he murmured.

Marshy watched him, then sat beside him, tapping the side of her drum with one finger. “The Bells respond to real kindness... real help,” she said softly. “Maybe they need to see it, not hear it.”

The villagers exchanged unsure glances.

“What kind of help?” Sawyer asked.

Marshy took a breath, then held out her drumstick—the one she always kept tied to her belt with a red thread. It was carved from oak, polished by years of small hands, and Sawyer knew it meant a lot to her.

“I want you to have this,” she said.

Sawyer blinked. “Marshy... that’s your favorite drumstick.”

“I know.” Her voice was quiet but steady. “You said you wish you could keep rhythm like I do. Maybe this will help you start. Maybe it will help *us* start.”

Sawyer hesitated, touched and confused all at once. “But... why give it to me?”

She smiled as if the sun had risen inside her.

“Because people forget something important. When we pray for help, we expect a miracle to fall out of the sky. But most times... God sends *people*. Sometimes the help we’re waiting for is meant to pass through our hands to someone else.”

Sawyer looked down at the drumstick, then back at Marshy. Something warm rippled in his chest—the same warmth he felt when he watched Alaric teaching children, or Mary tending the garden, or knights helping each other without being asked.

“God helps through people,” he repeated, tasting the truth of it.

Marshy nudged him. “So let’s help the Bells see it.”

Sawyer stood, gripping the drumstick with new resolve. “What should we do?”

Marshy tapped her drum. “Make a melody of helping. Villagers helping villagers. Friends helping friends. All of us working together.”

So Sawyer walked to the youngest children gathered near the river. He knelt, offering the drumstick.

“Want to help us make some music?” he asked.

The child gazed up with wide eyes, then nodded eagerly. Sawyer showed them how to tap small rhythms on a wooden bucket. Marshy taught others to clap patterns, or tap sticks together, or hum steady notes.

And slowly, the air began to fill with sound.

*Tap-tap... clap... hum... tap-tap... clap... hum...*

Not perfect, not polished—messy and warm, just like a village coming back to life.

As Sawyer helped an elderly man keep rhythm, the River Bells flickered faintly, as though remembering something. Marshy grinned and raised her drum, adding her beat—steady, strong, encouraging.

Villagers joined in. Laughter sparked. The water began to glow.

Then *chime!*

A single Bell rang.

Then another.

Then dozens—rising like a choir waking from sleep, shimmering blue light dancing along the riverbank. The villagers gasped, overwhelmed by the beauty of it, their makeshift orchestra still beating their mismatched, heartfelt rhythm.

Sawyer turned to Marshy, awestruck.

“It worked,” he whispered.

Marshy beamed. “Helping always does.”

The River Bells rang brighter, responding to the kindness filling the air. Enough kindness to light the whole river. Enough to remind everyone that when hope feels dim, sometimes all you need is for one person to hand you a drumstick—one small act that says, *You don't have to do this alone.*

Sawyer handed the drumstick back to Marshy.

“This belongs with you,” he said.

But Marshy shook her head and curled his fingers around it.

“No. Today, it belongs with you. That’s what helping is—giving what we can, when we can.”

Sawyer held it close. A melody hummed in his chest—made of gratitude, courage, and the rhythm of two friends stepping into their purpose.

And as the River Bells chimed louder than ever, the kingdom of Calendor learned a lesson that would echo for generations:

Sometimes the music of helping begins with one simple, generous beat.

## Chapter 13 — *A Visitor in the Practice Hall*

Sawyer was still replaying Marshy's lesson in his mind—the gentle way she'd placed the drumstick in his hand, the way the simple rhythm had quieted his stormy thoughts—when the echoing hallway door creaked open.

The practice hall of Calendor Castle was usually a bright place. Sunlight streamed through the narrow stained-glass windows, scattering colors across the wooden floor where dancers, musicians, and young nobles trained. But this time, the shaft of light revealed a small silhouette—one that wasn't walking so much as trembling.

A boy about Sawyer's age stepped inside.

His tunic was wrinkled, one sleeve stretched down to the knuckles as if someone had yanked it hard. His sandy-brown hair stuck to his forehead in tear-damp clumps. He clutched his messenger satchel, hugging it to his chest like a shield.

It was Henry.

Henry the page—quiet, polite, always early for lessons, always quick to help older castle staff carry scrolls and water jugs. Marshy liked him. Alaric respected him. Sawyer barely knew him, but remembered Alaric saying once, "*Sometimes greatness begins in those who serve quietly.*"

Henry sniffed loudly, and his voice cracked.  
"P-Prince Sawyer?"

Sawyer stepped forward, concern heavy in his chest. "Henry? What's wrong?"

At the sound of kindness, Henry crumpled. Tears spilled over, and he wiped his face with the back of his hand, smearing dust across his cheek.

"I—I tried to go back to the training yard... after what happened this morning..." He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking. "They were waiting for me again. The same boys."

Marshy and Sawyer exchanged glances. The morning incident—when they'd seen distant commotion near the servants' corridor—had seemed small then. Just raised voices. A bit of shoving. They hadn't realized Henry had been in the middle of it.

Marshy knelt beside the boy, her voice gentle but fierce in its compassion.  
"What did they do, Henry?"

“They called me names. Said I wasn’t strong enough to be a proper page. Said I’d never serve the king because I’m... I’m too small.” Henry swallowed, rubbing his wrist. “One of them shoved me again. And I... I ran.”

His shame echoed in the hall louder than the words themselves.

Sawyer felt a hot spark in his chest—not anger at Henry, but anger on his behalf. Nobody deserved that. Not a page. Not a prince. Not anyone.

He crouched to Henry’s height. “You did nothing wrong.”

Henry shook his head. “Running makes me a coward.”

“No,” Sawyer said, voice steady. “Hurting others makes cowards. Not asking for help.”

Henry looked up then, fragile hope flickering in his eyes. Marshy placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Why come to us?” she asked gently. “Did something else happen?”

Henry nodded. “One of them said... said they’d find me this afternoon too. That I should ‘know my place.’” His breath hitched. “I didn’t know where to go. I just... saw the door open... and came inside.”

Sawyer felt something shift inside him—something that felt like responsibility, but also purpose.

Alaric always taught him, *“A kingdom is not measured by its towers, but by how its strongest protect its smallest.”*

Sawyer took a slow breath.

“Well, Henry,” he said, offering a small, reassuring smile, “you came to the right place. Marshy and I aren’t going to let anyone hurt you again.”

Marshy nodded firmly. “And we’ll help you figure out what to do next.”

Henry blinked, surprised. “You... will?”

Sawyer stood tall, shoulders squared the way Alaric had been teaching him. “Yes. We’ll stand with you. You’re not alone anymore.”

For the first time since he entered, Henry’s trembling eased.

Outside the hall, the drums from the festival rehearsal thumped faintly—a reminder of rhythm, of unity, of the lesson Marshy had just given Sawyer.

*God often helps through people.*

And sometimes, those people had to choose to step forward.

Sawyer looked at Henry, then at Marshy, a new determination rising inside him.

“This morning wasn’t the end,” Sawyer said quietly.

“But maybe... maybe we can make sure the next part ends differently.”

And in that quiet practice hall—filled with colored light and scattered drumbeats—the three of them stood together, ready to face whatever came next.

## Chapter 14 — *Alaric's Challenge*

The sun dipped low over the palace courtyard, splashing gold across the stone floor of the practice hall. Dust motes drifted through the air like tiny sparks, swirling around Prince Sawyer and his tutor, Alaric, as the echoes of earlier drum practice faded into quiet.

Sawyer still held the drum close to his chest. This time, he wasn't practicing a rhythm for himself. He was thinking of Henry—the small page with trembling hands and tear-streaked cheeks who had appeared in the doorway only moments ago. The bullies hadn't left him alone after all. The problem had followed him right into the heart of the palace, right into Sawyer's care.

Henry had been escorted back to the infirmary by a guard, but the weight of his hurt still hung in the air.

Alaric watched Sawyer with a gaze warm and steady, the kind that could see straight through to the heart. He clasped his hands behind his back, pacing a slow circle around the young prince.

"Your Highness," he began in a voice that was quiet but impossibly firm, "what rhythm will you bring into Henry's life?"

Sawyer blinked, unsure. "Rhythm?"

Alaric nodded. "Every action is a rhythm. Every word, every choice, every silence. You can bring calm, like a soft drumline before a lullaby. Or you can bring courage, beating strong. Or kindness, steady and warm. Or—" He paused. "—you can bring nothing, and let the rhythm of fear from those bullies play louder than yours."

Sawyer's stomach twisted. He hadn't thought of it that way. He had comforted Henry in the morning... but then he had let the day sweep him along. Sword drills, etiquette lessons, drum practice—everything pulled him forward, while Henry remained behind in the shadows of someone else's cruelty.

"What would *you* do?" Sawyer asked.

But Alaric shook his head. "My rhythm is not yours. A future king must decide the beat he wants his kingdom to march to. Compassion? Justice? Protection? Indifference?" His voice softened. "Remember, Sawyer—leaders do not choose only for themselves. They choose for those who have no voice."

Sawyer's grip tightened around the drum. A small drumstick mark smudged across its surface—Marshy's mark from earlier, when she had handed him her own stick to teach him a new rhythm. It was a sign, she had said, that God often helps through people, through shared gifts and shared courage.

Sawyer swallowed hard. "I think..." He took a breath. "I think I want to bring safety. And hope. I want Henry to feel like he belongs."

Alaric's eyes lit with approval, but he did not speak.

Sawyer continued, thinking aloud as though the rhythm was forming inside him. "I want the bullies to know that hurting others has no place here. And I want Henry to feel strong enough to stand without shaking."

Alaric stepped closer and rested a hand over Sawyer's shoulder. "Then you must choose actions that match that rhythm. Real rhythms are not played only on drums. They're played in the world."

Sawyer nodded slowly.

He had comforted Henry once—but that was not enough.

He had promised Marshy he would listen for God's melody—but he hadn't realized that sometimes that melody sounded like a small boy crying in a doorway.

"Master Alaric," Sawyer said with a steadiness he did not feel, "I want to help Henry. Truly help him. Not just once. I want to stop the bullies, I want to make the halls safe, and..." He hesitated. "And I want to learn how to bring a good rhythm into people's lives—just like you do."

Alaric smiled, a rare, gentle smile that made Sawyer feel ten feet taller.

"Then, my prince," he said, "your challenge begins now."

Sawyer lifted the drum. Its surface felt smooth and warm beneath his hands, as though waiting for its next note.

But the real rhythm wouldn't come from the instrument.

It would come from Sawyer's choice.

And though fear flickered at the edge of his thoughts—fear of the bullies, fear of making the wrong move—something deeper rose inside him.

Courage.

A steady beat.

A rhythm of his own.

## Chapter 15 — The Rhythm of Courage

Sawyer's heart thudded like a lone drumbeat echoing in an empty hall. The practice room still smelled of polished wood and chalk dust, but now everything felt different—sharper, heavier. Henry's tearful face lingered in Sawyer's mind, trembling like a fragile melody on the edge of breaking.

Marshy squeezed his shoulder. "We don't have to do this alone."

Rocco, who usually cracked jokes or tried to impress the knights-in-training by lifting barrels, stood unusually still. His small griffin wings twitched with anxious energy. "Bullies hate when you face them," he murmured, "but they *really* hate when you're not alone."

Sawyer swallowed. His throat felt tight.

"I know," he said quietly. "But what if I say the wrong thing? What if I make it worse?"

Alaric—who had stayed just long enough to observe, then stepped back to let Sawyer choose—spoke with a calm warmth that always made the world feel steadier.

"Courage," he said, "doesn't always roar. Sometimes it whispers, 'Do what is right.' Free will is your gift, Sawyer. You get to decide the rhythm you carry into the world. A harsh rhythm can echo harshness. A kind rhythm can soften even the hardest hearts."

Sawyer looked down at the drum still tucked under his arm. His fingers brushed the stretched leather skin, remembering Marshy handing him her drumstick earlier, telling him that sometimes God helps through people—through shared tools, shared hands, shared courage.

"I don't want Henry to feel alone anymore," Sawyer whispered.

Marshy smiled. "Then let's write a new rhythm together."

Together, the trio walked out of the practice hall and into the courtyard. Sunlight filtered through banners, turning them into golden waves fluttering overhead. Near the well, the three older boys who had shoved Henry that morning lounged in the shade, laughing—careless, loud, never thinking about how far their shadows stretched.

Sawyer felt his knees wobble. His thoughts spun in every direction except forward. What if they shoved *him* next? What if Marshy or Rocco got hurt?

The bullies noticed them approaching.

“Well, well,” sneered Branton, the tallest. “If it isn’t the little prince and his fan club.”

Rocco bristled, but Marshy touched his wing gently.

“Follow Sawyer’s rhythm,” she whispered. “Not theirs.”

Sawyer lifted his chin. His fear didn’t disappear—not even a little—but he felt it settle into place instead of spinning wildly. Like a drumbeat holding a song together.

“Why did you hurt Henry?” Sawyer asked, voice steady though his hands trembled. “He didn’t do anything to you.”

Branton’s smirk faltered. The other boys shifted, glancing at each other as if unsure how to answer.

“He... he got in our way,” Branton muttered.

“No,” Sawyer said softly. “He didn’t. You hurt him because you could. But you don’t have to keep choosing that rhythm.”

The words surprised even him. They didn’t sound like a prince lecturing or a hero boasting. They sounded honest. Human. Hopeful.

Marshy stepped beside him. “You have the free will to choose differently. Everyone does.”

Rocco crossed his arms. “And if you don’t, Sawyer’s going to keep standing up for Henry. And so am I.”

“And so am I,” Marshy added.

Sawyer felt warmth spreading in his chest—unexpected, beautiful, like a harmony forming around the simple melody he had dared to start.

The bullies stared, unsettled. Not intimidated—just... uncertain, like they had never been spoken to with courage and kindness at the same time.

Branton looked away first. “We... didn’t mean to make him cry,” he muttered gruffly. “We were just messing around.”

“You did make him cry,” Sawyer said gently. “Which means you have the chance to make it right.”

A long silence followed.

Then Branton sighed, shoulders slumping. “Fine. We’ll talk to him.”

It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t a magical transformation. But it was a start—one Sawyer had walked toward even while shaking.

As the bullies wandered off, Marshy turned to him with shining eyes. “Sawyer... that was brave.”

Rocco nodded fiercely. “Yeah. Really brave.”

Sawyer exhaled shakily. “I was terrified.”

“Courage,” Marshy said, “is doing what’s right while scared. You didn’t follow fear’s rhythm—you chose your own.”

Sawyer looked down at his drum. For the first time all day, he felt in tune—not just with himself, but with Marshy, with Rocco, with Henry, with the entire kingdom he would one day serve.

A new rhythm began forming inside him, steady and strong.

The rhythm of courage.

## Chapter 16 — Confronting the Bullies

Sawyer felt his heartbeat pounding like a war drum as he and his friends stepped out into the afternoon courtyard. The sun was beginning its slow descent, painting the stone walls of the Academy in molten gold. Students' voices drifted around them—laughter, footsteps, the clatter of training gear—but all of it blurred into a single muffled hum. Sawyer's focus narrowed to one spot.

The bullies were there.

Three of them, leaning against the practice fountain as if they owned it. Their uniforms were rumpled, their boots dusty, their expressions bored and confident—like boys who had grown far too comfortable causing others discomfort.

Henry wasn't with them this time, but Sawyer could almost feel the boy's trembling from earlier. The memory flickered again—Henry's tear-streaked face, his small hands shaking as he held his bruised arm. And before that, in the morning, the quick moment Sawyer had seen something wrong but brushed it off.

No more brushing anything off.

Sawyer swallowed, but his throat felt thick. Marshy stood at his left, clutching her drumstick tight, ready to lend rhythm to his courage. Rocco was on his right—a little scruffy, a little sarcastic, but loyal all the way to the bone.

“Okay,” Sawyer whispered. “This is it.”

“Yep,” Rocco muttered. “Try not to faint. If you do, I'll pretend it was part of the plan.”

Sawyer almost smiled. Almost.

They approached.

The biggest bully, Brant, looked up first. His expression shifted from boredom to annoyance to amusement the moment he saw Sawyer. “Well, well. Prince Pretty Boots comes marching in with his little band.”

Rocco's cheeks puffed. “First of all, my boots are spectacular. Second, shut up.”

Brant rolled his eyes.

Sawyer felt Marshy gently nudge him. It was that same quiet gesture she'd used earlier when she'd handed him the drumstick—a reminder that doing the right thing didn't require perfection, only willingness.

Sawyer stepped forward.

"I need to talk to you," he said. His voice wasn't loud, but it carried. Clear enough that even the kids training a little farther down turned to look.

Brant raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"Henry," Sawyer said. "You hurt him. Again."

A beat of silence. Then the smirks returned.

The second bully, Marek, scoffed. "He's being dramatic."

"He's weak," added Joss, the third.

Sawyer felt heat rise in his chest—not anger exactly, but something heavier. Something older. A sense of responsibility, like a weight the crown placed there long before he was old enough to wear it.

"You don't get to call him weak," Sawyer said quietly. "You hit him when he couldn't defend himself. That's not strength."

Brant pushed off the fountain. "What are you gonna do about it, Prince?"

Sawyer hesitated.

This was the moment Alaric meant—the rhythm he wanted to bring into Henry's life. The one he had to choose himself.

He felt Marshy's presence beside him, steady and brave. Felt Rocco's tense readiness, like a short drumroll before a choice. And somewhere in the warm breeze that swept across the courtyard, he felt the melody Marshy had spoken of earlier—the idea that maybe God helps through people who choose to help.

Sawyer took a breath. Then another.

"I'm not here to fight," he said. "But I am here to say this: what you're doing is wrong. It hurts people. It hurts Henry. And it hurts the kingdom, whether you realize it or not."

Joss snorted. "Hurts the kingdom? What, is Henry secretly the king's son?"

“No,” Rocco cut in sharply, surprising even himself. “But he’s part of the kingdom. We all are. When you hurt one person, you mess with the whole kingdom’s song. And honestly?” He glared. “Your beat stinks.”

It was quiet.

Marek blinked. Brant actually tilted his head, thrown off. No one ever expected Rocco to say anything serious.

Sawyer stepped in again, realizing the moment was open, just enough.

“I don’t want to punish you,” he said. “But you can’t keep doing this. If you’re angry about something... fine. But don’t take it out on Henry.”

Brant’s jaw tightened. “You think you understand? You don’t know anything about us.”

“Then tell me,” Sawyer said. “Or don’t. That’s your choice. But hurting people won’t fix whatever’s broken.”

That word hung in the air—*choice*—the same word that had guided Sawyer’s steps since Marshy reminded him what free will truly meant. Not a burden. A direction. An invitation.

Brant’s eyes flickered with something—confusion, maybe. Or doubt. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

“We’re done here,” Brant muttered. “Move.”

Sawyer didn’t move.

Brant paused.

Sawyer’s heart felt like it might leap out of his chest. But he stood his ground—not to fight, but to be seen. To be heard. To carry courage even without a sword.

“You don’t have to like Henry,” Sawyer said. “But you do have to stop hurting him. This ends now.”

Brant stared at him. Really stared. Then, with a frustrated growl, he turned away and walked off. Joss and Marek followed, not quite as confidently as before.

As soon as they were gone, Sawyer exhaled so hard his shoulders sagged.

Marshy grinned. “You did it.”

Rocco rubbed his arms. “I was ready to jump on them if they swung at you. Just saying.”

Sawyer let out a shaky laugh. Relief washed through him, followed closely by pride—not in himself alone, but in the small harmony they created together.

He had chosen courage. Marshy had given rhythm to his bravery. Rocco had given voice to the kingdom’s song.

And somewhere, Sawyer knew Henry’s life just got a little bet

## Chapter 17 — The Bullies' Beat Changes

For a long moment, the practice yard felt strangely quiet—quiet in the way a drum quiets after a loud strike, when the echo still tingles in the air. Sawyer watched the three bullies stand there, shifting like they weren't sure what to do now that someone had actually spoken truth to them.

The tallest boy, Bram, kept his arms crossed, trying to look confident. But his foot tapped fast and uneven, like a nervous rabbit. The second boy, Joss, chewed his lip, eyes flicking between Sawyer, Rocco, and Marshy as if he was calculating escape routes.

But it was the youngest of them—Talen—who stopped moving altogether.

His shoulders slumped. His eyes drifted downward, no longer darting around for someone to impress. When Sawyer looked closely, he saw something shift in the boy's expression, something faint but unmistakable. It wasn't fear. It wasn't anger. It was... realization.

Softening.

Talen's voice came out small, barely a whisper.

"I... I didn't know he cried."

Henry, who had been hiding slightly behind Marshy, looked up. His red, puffy eyes blinked in surprise.

Sawyer felt the whole moment tip—just slightly—like a scale shifting because of one tiny weight.

Sometimes change begins quietly.

Sawyer didn't speak right away. He remembered Alaric's words: *A leader listens for the rhythm beneath the noise*. So he listened. He listened to the uneven breathing, the small sniff Henry made, the rustle of Marshy's sleeve when she gently nudged Sawyer as if to say, *Go on*.

"Talen," Sawyer said quietly, "he shouldn't have had to cry at all. But... thank you for saying something."

Bram scoffed. "We didn't do anything that bad." But even he didn't sound sure anymore. The bluster had cracks in it.

Rocco stepped forward, tail swishing with both nerves and bravery. “Sometimes,” the raccoon said, “you don’t hear someone crying because you’re too loud making trouble.”

Bram’s eyebrows shot up. “Did... did the raccoon just insult us?”

“Not insult,” Rocco replied, standing tall—or at least as tall as a raccoon can. “Just truth.”

Marshy crossed her arms, firm but kind. “You may not think you hurt him, but the kingdom’s song isn’t just made of what you *meant* to play. It’s made of what actually comes out.”

Sawyer watched the bullies take this in. Joss’s shoulders sagged a bit. Bram looked away. And Talen... Talen finally lifted his eyes and met Henry’s.

“I’m sorry,” he said, voice wobbling. “I didn’t mean to make you cry. I just... I guess I wasn’t thinking.”

Henry swallowed hard. “It... it scared me.”

For the first time, Sawyer saw the tiniest flicker of guilt move across Bram’s face. It was quick, like a spark, but real.

Sawyer felt a quiet strength rising in him—not loud bravery, not battlefield boldness, but something gentle and steady. *This* was the rhythm he wanted to bring into Henry’s life. One of courage, mercy, and truth.

“This can be the start of a new beat,” he said. “If you want it to be.”

The bullies didn’t respond right away, but none of them mocked him, and none of them walked away. And sometimes, Sawyer realized, the very first sign of change is simply staying still long enough to hear a new rhythm.

The kingdom’s great song had shifted—just a little, but enough for hope to slip in like a soft note starting a new melody.

## Chapter 18 — Returning to the Drums

The practice hall felt different when Sawyer stepped back inside—brighter somehow, as though the very sunlight pouring through the high windows had softened in approval. His hands were still trembling a little, not from fear anymore, but from that strange, warm feeling that comes after doing something brave. Marshy and Rocco came in behind him, their footsteps echoing faintly on the polished stone floor.

Alaric looked up from where he'd been sorting sheet music. The old tutor didn't say anything at first. He simply studied Sawyer with those knowing eyes of his—eyes that always seemed to see the *inside* of a moment instead of just the outside. Then Alaric smiled and began to clap, slow and steady, like a rhythm meant for only three listeners.

Sawyer felt his cheeks warm. "Was... was that okay?" he asked softly.

"Okay?" Alaric stepped closer and placed a hand on Sawyer's shoulder. "My prince, what you did was a braver strike of the drum than any beat you've played here."

Sawyer let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Marshy grinned at him, and even Rocco—the gruffest, toughest one of their trio—looked proud enough to burst.

Alaric motioned to the circle of drums arranged in the center of the hall. "Come," he said. "Return to your instrument. For your rhythm has changed today."

Sawyer walked toward his drum and sat on the small wooden stool. The drum felt familiar beneath his palms, like an old friend who had waited quietly through all the morning's events.

But something was different.

He lifted one drumstick, paused, and looked at Alaric. "I didn't think I could do it," Sawyer whispered. "My hands were shaking so much. And I kept thinking... What if I make things worse?"

Alaric nodded, folding his arms thoughtfully. "Courage doesn't silence fear," he said. "It sings alongside it—and chooses the next note anyway."

Sawyer considered this. Marshy leaned her elbows on the drum beside him. "And you didn't do it alone," she added softly. "God helps us through people. Just like I helped you earlier, and just like you helped Henry."

“And like you helped *me*,” Rocco muttered, looking down at the ground. “I—I didn’t know what to say to those kids before. But when you stepped up, it felt... easier to find my voice.”

Sawyer blinked, surprised. Rocco was never one to admit something vulnerable. The drummer prince felt his heart swell a little.

Alaric cleared his throat and tapped gently on the rim of one of the instruments. “Every act of love,” he said, “teaches you how to play God’s melody. Today, you learned a new movement—one that required courage, compassion, and truth.”

He kneeled beside Sawyer’s drum. “Now play.”

Sawyer hesitated, then lowered both drumsticks. He struck a soft beat—*dum... dum... dum*—a rhythm steadier than he felt. Marshy joined in, tapping lightly on her own drum. Rocco added a deeper tone from a large bass drum. The sounds blended, weaving together like different threads in a tapestry.

Sawyer closed his eyes.

He heard more than music.

He heard Henry’s courage in returning to the hall.

He heard Rocco’s voice shaking but strong.

He heard his own heartbeat calming with each strike.

He heard a kingdom’s song—fragile, hopeful, and growing.

Alaric stayed silent as the rhythm rose and fell, his expression one of quiet reverence. When the trio finished, the sound lingered in the rafters like a benediction.

Sawyer opened his eyes and looked to his tutor. “Was that... the right rhythm?”

Alaric placed a hand over his heart. “It was the rhythm of love, Sawyer. And that,” he said gently, “is always the right one.”

Sawyer felt something settle inside him—not pride exactly, but peace. A melody he hadn’t known he was learning until now.

He took a deep breath, lifted his drumsticks again, and prepared for whatever song came next.

## Chapter 19 — *When the World Sounds Off-Key*

The Practice Hall of Echoes was quiet when Sawyer finally asked the question that had been burning inside him since the very beginning.

Not the question about bullies.

Not about choices.

Not about free will.

A deeper one.

A heavier one.

One he had been afraid to even name.

He sat on the drum platform with his hands resting on his knees, staring at the shimmering skins of the Drums of Free Will. Marshy sat a few steps below him, legs crossed, listening carefully. Rocco sat so still he could've been mistaken for an actual rock—if not for the tears threatening to pool in his pebble-shaped eyes. Alaric stood nearby, arms folded, watching Sawyer with a tenderness that felt like a warm cloak.

When Sawyer finally spoke, his voice trembled.

“Alaric... everything you’ve taught makes sense. Choices matter. Beats matter. Harm and kindness... they come from people’s rhythms.”

He swallowed, hard.

“But not all pain comes from people.”

The air in the hall shifted—like even the walls leaned closer.

Sawyer took a shaky breath. “What about the things no one chooses? Storms that destroy homes. Illness. Accidents. Things that break people’s hearts even though no one *played* a cruel beat.” His voice cracked. “If God is good... why do those things happen too?”

Marshy looked down. Rocco sniffled loudly.

Alaric lowered himself to sit beside Sawyer, folding his legs with slow, deliberate calm.

“That,” he said quietly, “is one of the most difficult questions any heart can hold.”

Sawyer stared at the drums. “Do you have an answer?”

“I have a truth,” Alaric said. “Not a simple answer. But a truth big enough to hold your pain.”

Sawyer nodded.

He needed the truth.

Even if it hurt.

Even if it confused him.

Even if it changed everything.

Alaric lifted a drumstick gently and tapped the smallest chime-drum.

It let out a single, pure *ting*.

But then—without him touching any other instrument—the hall filled with a sudden gust of wind. The candles flickered. Clouds blocked the sunlight pouring through the tall windows. Shadows stretched long across the floor.

Sawyer shivered. “What’s happening?”

Alaric nodded toward the windows. “The world has storms of its own.”

With another tap—this one softer—the wind died down. The sun peeked through again. The hall warmed, one degree at a time.

Alaric turned toward Sawyer.

His eyes were steady, full of something deep and ancient.

“The world,” he said, “is alive. It grows, shifts, erupts, quiets, warms, freezes. Not because God wishes to harm His children... but because creation itself is unfinished.”

Sawyer frowned. “Unfinished?”

“Yes. God made the world good,” Alaric explained, “but He also made it *free*. Like a child learning to walk—full of beauty but still capable of stumbling. Mountains shift. Storms form. Bodies get sick. Not as punishments... but because we live in a world still becoming what it was meant to be.”

Sawyer thought of the stable boy.

Of Henry in tears.

Of his mother, who once spent a week ill with fever.

Of the sinking feeling when he heard of a shipwreck in the eastern port.

“If the world is unfinished,” Sawyer whispered, “why doesn’t God finish it?”

Alaric smiled softly. “He will. One day. But not yet. And in the meantime, He promises something greater than protection from suffering.”

Sawyer looked up, confused. “What could be greater than protection?”

And Alaric answered with a truth that felt like both a sword and a salve:

“His presence *in* the suffering.”

Alaric stood and gently hit the bass drum—the one that symbolized the heart.

*BOOM.*

The sound was deep, steady, grounding.

“When the world shakes,” Alaric said, “God sits with the shaken. When the world aches, He aches with the wounded. When storms rage, He whispers courage. When illness strikes, He sends strength. When accidents shatter, He holds the broken until they mend.”

Sawyer’s eyes burned.

“But why doesn’t He stop the storm?”

“Sometimes He does,” Alaric said. “Miracles do happen. But more often, He strengthens the person standing *in* the storm.”

He tapped the drum again.

*BOOM.*

“Courage.”

*BOOM.*

“Endurance.”

*BOOM.*

“Compassion.”

*BOOM.*

“Hope.”

“Those,” Alaric said, “are miracles of the heart. And often bigger ones than the miracles of circumstance.”

Sawyer felt those beats vibrate through him, as if the drum was speaking directly into his bones.

Alaric inhaled slowly, then spoke in the low tone he used for stories too real to be legends.

“When I was young,” he said, “a storm destroyed my village. Homes were flooded. Fields washed away. My neighbor lost his sheep. Another lost her father.”

Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco listened without breathing.

“I begged God to make the storm stop. It didn’t. But in the days after... people who had never spoken became family. Strangers shared bread. Tears. Labor. Love.”

“And God?” Sawyer whispered.

“He was in every act of mercy. In every hand that lifted debris. In every shoulder offered to cry on.” Alaric’s voice gentled. “Storms may break buildings. But they reveal the strength inside people.”

Rocco wiped his rocky face. “I’m leaking again...”

Sawyer looked down at his hands—at the drumsticks resting across his palms.

“So the world’s ‘off-key’ moments... the accidents, the sicknesses, the storms...” He swallowed hard. “They... don’t mean God isn’t good?”

“No,” Alaric said. “They mean the world needs Him *closer*.”

Sawyer blinked. “Closer?”

Alaric nodded. “Some people think suffering means God has left. But the truth is the opposite: He draws near. The more the world trembles, the tighter He holds His children.”

Sawyer felt warmth spread in his chest—slow, like dawn breaking.

“And what about us?” he asked. “What are we supposed to do when the world goes off-key?”

Alaric’s smile was small but radiant. “We become instruments of comfort. We show up. We sit with the hurting. We lift the fallen. We hold the frightened. We pray. We protect. We love.”

He touched the heart-drum again.

**BOOM.**

“That is how God turns suffering into something that can be endured—and sometimes, transformed.”

Alaric leaned forward, looking Sawyer directly in the eyes.

“God may not stop every storm. But He *never* lets you walk through one alone.”

Something inside Sawyer broke—  
not like a wound,  
but like a seed.

Tears spilled quietly down his cheeks.

Marshy placed a hand on his back.

Rocco climbed into his lap, determined to comfort him even if he weighed more than a bucket of bricks.

And Sawyer whispered, barely audible:

“So when life sounds off-key... God plays the harmony that holds us together?”

Alaric nodded.

“Yes. And often through the people who love you.”

Sawyer closed his eyes, letting that truth settle deep in his soul.

The world wasn't perfect.  
It wasn't finished.  
It wasn't always kind.

But he was not abandoned in it.

And neither was anyone he would ever meet.

As the hall slowly brightened again—sunlight returning, warmth seeping back into the floor—Sawyer lifted the drumsticks.

This time, he didn't play to control the world.  
He didn't play to fix it.  
He played to answer it.

A soft rhythm.  
A hopeful rhythm.  
A rhythm that said:

*I hear the brokenness.*  
*I see the pain.*  
*But I will not let the song end there.*

Because even when the world sounded off-key...  
God's harmony was steady.  
And He invited Sawyer to join the melody.

One beat of courage at a time.

## Chapter 20 — The Silent Drum

The Practice Hall of Echoes felt different that morning. It was quieter—not the calm quiet of early dawn, but a sacred, listening kind of quiet. The sunlight slanted through the high windows, painting long golden beams across the polished floor. Dust drifted through them like tiny floating galaxies.

Alaric stood in the center of the hall beside a single, unusual drum.

At first glance, it looked ordinary—smaller than the others, round and pale, almost delicate. Its surface was smooth, too smooth, without the stretched hide or carved wood grain the other drums had. It almost looked like a piece of moonlight carved into shape.

Sawyer approached slowly. Marshy and Rocco followed in step, each puzzled in their own way—Marshy with narrowed eyes and a curious hum, Rocco with his entire rocky face scrunched in suspicion.

“What drum is that?” Sawyer asked softly.

Alaric placed a gentle hand upon it. “This,” he said, “is the Silent Drum.”

Rocco gasped. “Is it broken? Do we need glue? I can get glue!”

“No, Rocco,” Alaric said with a quiet smile. “It’s not broken.”

He lifted one drumstick and struck the drum firmly.

Nothing.

No sound.

No vibration.

Not even the faintest hint of an echo.

Marshy blinked. “That... doesn’t seem useful.”

“And yet,” Alaric replied, “it teaches one of the most important truths you will ever learn.”

Sawyer stepped closer. “If it doesn’t make sound... what does it teach?”

Alaric motioned for them to gather around. They formed a small circle—Sawyer seated cross-legged, Marshy crouched on her heels, Rocco sitting with his rocky knees pulled to his chest like a child at story time.

Alaric lifted the drumstick again—but this time, he tapped the drum so softly it was barely movement.

A whisper emerged.

Not exactly a sound, but a sensation. A faint flutter that brushed Sawyer’s chest like the memory of a breeze.

He leaned forward. “Was that...?”

“Yes,” Alaric said gently. “This drum only speaks when touched with gentleness.”

Rocco raised a rocky hand. “But why? That seems ridiculous. Drums are supposed to go BOOM! Not...” He imitated the tiny whisper. “...whatever *that* was.”

Sawyer, however, felt something stir deep inside. Something familiar.

Alaric knelt beside the Silent Drum. His voice dropped to a reverent hush.

“This drum is like the voice of God.”

Sawyer’s breath caught.

Marshy’s eyes widened.

Even Rocco went perfectly still.

“What do you mean?” Sawyer whispered.

Alaric tapped the drum softly again.

Another whisper.

Barely there.

Yet unmistakable.

“God’s guidance,” Alaric explained, “is not usually a thunderclap forcing your hands or demanding your obedience. If He wanted control, He would not have given you freedom. His voice does not shout over your choices.”

He placed the drumstick in Sawyer’s hand.

“Go on. Try it.”

Sawyer touched the surface gently, hesitantly.

A whisper of sound brushed the edges of hearing—not loud, not instructive, not demanding. But present. Warm. Steady.

Sawyer's throat tightened. "It's... comforting."

"Yes," Alaric said. "Because God's guidance is like that—quiet, persistent, and offered with love, never force."

Marshy leaned in, fascinated now. "So... God doesn't usually tell us exactly what to do?"

"If He did," Alaric replied, "you would have no free will. No growth. No courage. No responsibility in the world's song."

He tapped Sawyer's chest lightly.

"And no chance to develop the rhythm that belongs uniquely to *you*."

Sawyer looked down at the drum in front of him. The whisper still lingered in his memory, like a thought rising gently from the heart.

"So God speaks softly," he murmured.

Alaric nodded. "Most of the time. He invites. He nudges. He encourages. He whispers truth into the inner places of your soul—through conscience, through compassion, through wisdom, through the voices of those who love you."

Rocco squinted. "So when Marshy tells me not to eat rocks from the garden... is that God speaking?"

Marshy sighed. "Rocco, that's just common sense."

Alaric chuckled. "But sometimes, Rocco, God's guidance *can* come from a friend's caution, or a parent's wisdom, or a teacher's counsel."

He tapped the drum again, this time a little harder.

It made no sound.

Alaric looked up at Sawyer.

"And this, too, is part of the lesson."

Sawyer frowned. "What lesson?"

"That sometimes," Alaric said, "when you try to force God to speak... He remains silent."

The hall seemed to deepen in stillness.

“Why?” Sawyer asked, voice trembling.

“Because forced answers are not real answers,” Alaric replied. “And sometimes silence is an invitation—to listen more carefully, to trust more deeply, to step forward in faith, not certainty.”

He nodded toward the Silent Drum.

“God often guides you not with commands, but with whispers. Not through pressure, but through presence. Not by overriding your will, but by shaping your heart.”

Sawyer touched the drum again—gently this time, reverently.

The whisper returned, faint but unmistakable.

Something warm bloomed inside him. A kind of peace. A kind of knowing that didn't need full clarity to feel true.

Marshy placed her hand on Sawyer's shoulder. “It's like the difference between being dragged and being invited.”

“Yes,” Alaric said, eyes bright. “Exactly that.”

Rocco nodded solemnly. “So God is not a volcano roaring orders. He is more like... a gentle breeze that says, ‘Hey. Maybe go this way.’”

Alaric actually laughed. “Unexpectedly accurate, Rocco.”

He turned back to Sawyer, his expression growing tender.

“If you want to hear God's voice, Sawyer... you must learn to listen not only for the loud moments, but the quiet ones. The pauses. The hesitations. The small tugs of conscience. The soft rhythms that rise in your chest when you choose love over anger, courage over fear.”

Sawyer breathed deeply.

The Silent Drum shimmered in the sunlight, almost glowing now.

“Remember,” Alaric finished, “God does not force the rhythm of your life. He whispers the melody. You choose how to play it.”

And as Sawyer sat before the gentle, whispering drum, he felt something settle inside him—

Not a final answer.  
Not perfect understanding.

But a deep assurance:

He wasn't playing alone.

And the One who guided him... guided softly, patiently, lovingly.

Always whispering.  
Always near.

Even in the silence.

## Chapter 21 — Sawyer's Song Emerges

The Practice Hall of Echoes was quiet when Sawyer arrived the next morning—quiet in that special way only sacred places feel. Sunlight poured through the tall windows in gentle beams, illuminating floating dust like drifting stars. The great Drums of Free Will waited on the platform, their surfaces shimmering with the faint colors of dawn.

Sawyer stood in the doorway for a long moment, listening to the silence.  
Not an empty silence.  
A *waiting* silence.

Marshy and Rocco followed behind him, but even Rocco—usually a one-rock symphony of sound—felt the tone of the room and remained still.

“You ready?” Marshy asked softly.

Sawyer nodded. He felt... different lately. Not fully grown, not fully wise—but more awake. More aware. More connected to something bigger than himself.

Alaric stepped from the shadows of the hall, his robes rustling like turning pages.

“You have come far,” he said. “And you have questioned deeply. Now comes the part only you can do.”

Sawyer took a slow breath. “You said a drummer eventually finds his own rhythm. His own... song.”

Alaric smiled warmly. “Yes. Not the song others expect. Not the song fear demands. Not even the song you *think* God wants you to play. The song He planted in you from the beginning.”

Sawyer approached the drum set.

The great bass drum at the center seemed to pulse gently, like a living heart. The toms shimmered—twilight and sunrise woven together. The cymbals glowed faintly at the edges. Every instrument on the set felt alive, expectant.

For the first time, Sawyer didn't feel intimidated.  
He felt welcomed.

Alaric stepped aside and folded his hands.  
“The hall is yours,” he said.

Marshy squeezed Sawyer's shoulder. "We're here."

Rocco thumped his rocky fists together. "PLAY YOUR DESTINY, HUMAN CHILD."

Sawyer laughed—a warm, relieved laugh—and sat on the stool.

He held the sticks loosely at first, feeling their weight.

He listened.

He breathed.

Then he struck the first beat.

*Boom.*

A deep, steady sound vibrated through the entire room.

Not perfect.

Not planned.

But honest.

Sawyer let his hands move again.

*Boom... tap... tap... boom... ting...*

He wasn't trying to copy Marshy.

He wasn't trying to impress Alaric.

He wasn't trying to be brave. Or strong. Or wise.

He was simply... *being Sawyer.*

His rhythm began forming like a river carving a path through a valley—slow at first, then steadier, then blooming into something recognizable.

A pattern emerged.

Brave.

Gentle.

Steady.

Hopeful.

He added a cymbal—light and warm.

A snare—soft, not sharp.

The bass drum—strong, grounding.

It wasn't flashy.  
It wasn't loud.  
But it was unmistakably *his*.

Marshy's eyes widened. "Sawyer... listen to you."

Rocco sat down, utterly transfixed. "He has unlocked the rhythm of his soul. I must paint this moment on a wall."

Alaric stepped forward, his expression softened by pride and reverence.

"Sawyer," he said quietly, "do you hear it?"

Sawyer kept playing, nodding slowly. "Yes."

"That," Alaric said, "is your song."

The rhythm grew, weaving through the hall. Not perfect. Not seamless. But alive. Beautiful in its sincerity. Sawyer closed his eyes and let the music flow—not from his hands, but from his heart.

Images rose in his mind:

Gerren, the stable boy, crying alone.

Henry, running into the hall with tears in his eyes.

The bullies' surprised faces when truth softened their hearts.

Marshy's steady beat guiding him.

Rocco's messy bravery.

Alaric's patient wisdom.

And above it all—a sense of Someone watching with gentleness, not judgment.

Sawyer felt tears prick his eyes.

He kept playing.

When the song finally slowed, then stilled into silence, the hall remained hushed for several long breaths.

Alaric stepped closer. "Sawyer..."

The prince looked up, eyes shimmering.

"...God delights in you," Alaric said. "Not only when your rhythm is perfect. Not only when your song is strong. But when you are *yourself*. When you discover who you were meant to be—when you live out the beauty He placed within you."

Sawyer wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve.

“I didn’t know I had a song,” he whispered.

“You did,” Alaric replied. “You always did. God doesn’t force your melody—He invites it. And today... you answered the invitation.”

Marshy climbed onto the platform and hugged him. “Sawyer, that was incredible.”

Rocco sniffed loudly. “I AM MOVED. I AM MORE THAN A ROCK. I AM A *FEELING* ROCK.”

Sawyer laughed again—but this time, the laugh was free.

Light.

Full.

He looked back at the drum set—the drums of courage, patience, anger, compassion, truth, and heart.

He knew now what they were meant for.

He knew what *he* was meant for.

Not to fix everything.

Not to control anyone.

Not to erase all wrongs.

But to choose his rhythm.

To choose goodness.

To choose love.

To choose God’s melody woven through the world.

And to play it—

again and again—

as Sawyer of Calendor,

a prince who finally knew his song.

## Chapter 22 — Marshy's Harmony

The Practice Hall of Echoes had changed over the past days. Not physically—the walls were the same moonstone gray, the instruments still rested in neat rows, and dust still glittered in the golden shafts of afternoon sun. But something *invisible* was different.

The air felt fuller.

As though the hall itself had been listening to Sawyer learn, watching him struggle, absorbing his questions and his courage.

And now the room waited with a kind of sacred expectation.

Sawyer stood before the drums—his drums—hands resting lightly on the sticks Alaric had given him. His posture had changed. Not rigid and determined like before. Not unsure and frightened, either. There was a new quiet confidence, a peace rising slowly inside him like the dawn's first light.

Alaric watched him with calm pride.

"You've begun to hear your rhythm," he said softly. "Your soul is finding its own voice."

Sawyer exhaled.

"It... feels like something inside me is waking up."

Marshy grinned. "Told you you'd get it."

But Alaric wasn't finished.

"Sawyer... life's song is never meant to be played alone."

The prince blinked. "What do you mean?"

Alaric nodded toward Marshy.

"Her rhythm matters too. And yours is meant to blend with the rhythms of those God places beside you."

Marshy hopped onto the platform before Sawyer could protest.

"Move over," she said. "It's my turn to show you something."

Rocco scrambled after her, announcing, "I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR THIS MOMENT MY ENTIRE GEOLOGICAL EXISTENCE."

"Sit down, rock," Marshy ordered. "Your part is later."

Rocco drooped like a disappointed boulder. “Okay...”

Marshy settled in front of a smaller set of drums positioned beside Sawyer’s. Her instruments were not like his. They were lighter, higher pitched, delicate in tone—almost like dancing leaves.

She twirled the sticks between her fingers, the gesture graceful and natural. “Listen,” she said, and began to play.

Her rhythm emerged soft at first:

*tap–tap... tap–ting... tap–tap... ting...*

Sawyer’s eyes widened. It was gentle, hopeful, playful—just like Marshy. Her rhythm felt like sunlight on a window, warm and steady and full of bright energy waiting to burst.

But as she played, her eyes flicked toward Sawyer.

“This is who God made me,” she said.

*tap—ting—tap—tap.*

“He made me sharp enough to see truth...”

*TING!*

“...but gentle enough to help others feel safe.”

*tap tap.*

“And that is my rhythm.”

Sawyer felt his chest swell with affection and awe. “It’s beautiful,” he whispered.

Marshy shrugged, cheeks turning pink. “It’s mine.”

Then Marshy nodded toward Sawyer. “Now you join.”

Sawyer hesitated.

“What if I ruin it?”

“You won’t,” she said firmly. “Because harmony isn’t about being perfect. It’s about *blending honestly.*”

Sawyer exhaled—slow and steady—and raised his sticks.

He began his rhythm—quiet at first, then with growing confidence:

*boom... tap... boom-tap... boom...*

Marshy listened, then shifted her beat around his.

*ting-tap... ting... tap-tap...*

Sawyer shifted slightly to match her.

She shifted to match him back.

The two rhythms began weaving—first clumsy, then curious, then beautifully intertwined.

The hall filled with music that wasn't Sawyer's alone or Marshy's alone—it was *theirs*. A shared sound. A shared heartbeat.

Alaric's eyes glistened as he whispered, "This is why God made more than one person. More than one heart. More than one voice. Life's beauty grows when rhythms blend."

Sawyer felt tears build—unexpected, powerful.

Is this what it meant to create something with someone?

Is this what God meant when He said love binds people together?

"It's... beautiful," Sawyer whispered.

Marshy winked. "Told you."

"And NOW," Rocco announced dramatically, "it is time to unleash THE ROCCO RHYTHM!"

Marshy groaned. "Please don't break anything. Or everything."

But Rocco was already climbing onto a tiny platform, an absurdly small drum set arranged for him—a single drum and a cymbal the size of a frying pan.

Rocco raised his stone arms in a triumphant flourish.

"BEHOLD! MY ARTISTRY!"

He struck.

***BOOM–CRACK–WHOMP–TING–CLAAANG!***

The sound was—  
loud,  
enthusiastic,  
chaotic,  
and somehow... perfect.

Sawyer burst out laughing.  
Marshy covered her face.  
Alaric chuckled, shaking his head in warm amusement.

Rocco froze mid-stroke. “Was it... harmonious?”

Alaric’s smile softened.  
“It was *honest*.  
And God delights in honest rhythms.”

Rocco dropped his sticks, overwhelmed. “I AM A THEOLOGICAL PRODIGY.”

Marshy put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re loud, that’s what you are.”

But Sawyer—still laughing—said, “No, Marshy... listen.”

Because when they all listened, they realized Rocco’s heavy beat had landed *between* their lighter beats—like a grounding, anchoring pulse.

Marshy’s bright rhythm danced above.  
Sawyer’s steady rhythm carried the foundation.  
Rocco’s booming beat gave the music weight and warmth.

It was harmony—  
imperfect, bizarre harmony—  
but harmony nonetheless.

Alaric stepped closer, voice soft as the dust settled.

“This,” he said, “is the beauty of God’s design.”

He gestured to all three of them.

“Each life has its own rhythm. Its own strengths. Its own flaws. Its own tone.  
Yet God made us so our songs intertwine—so that where one of us is loud, another is soft. Where one is steady, another is bright. Where one is confused, another is wise.”

He touched Sawyer's heart.

"Your life was never meant to be played alone."

Then Marshy's.

"Your rhythm lifts others."

Then Rocco's.

"And yours... reminds us to be brave and joyful."

Rocco sniffled loudly. "I'm so moved I might chip."

Sawyer laughed, wiping his eyes. "So this is God's plan? That we play together?"

"Yes," Alaric said simply. "Love is the harmony God teaches us to create with one another."

They sat together—three friends, one teacher—surrounded by the fading echoes of their shared song.

Sawyer realized something profound:

He didn't just have a rhythm.

He belonged in a symphony.

## Chapter 23 — The Great Jam Session

The Practice Hall of Echoes had never felt more alive.

The sunlight slanted through the high windows in golden sheets, dust motes swirling like tiny dancers above the polished floor. The drums glowed with warm color, the cymbals sparkling like small suns. The practice hall had held their mistakes, their fears, their breakthroughs—but today, it felt like it was holding its breath.

Because today, for the first time, Sawyer wasn't practicing to *learn*. He was practicing to *belong*.

Marshy tightened the strap of the little side drum she had adopted as her own. Her eyes shone with excitement. "Okay, Sawyer," she said, rolling her shoulders. "Show us your rhythm."

Rocco hopped onto his own low drum—more a padded platform than an instrument—its surface already scuffed from earlier attempts. "I am READY," he declared. "I am warmed up. I have stretched. I have hydrated. I have emotionally prepared."

"You cannot hydrate," Marshy reminded him.

"I emotionally hydrated," Rocco clarified.

Sawyer shook his head through a smile, then sat before the Drums of Free Will. He felt different now. Not because he understood everything Alaric had taught—far from it—but because the drums no longer felt threatening. They felt inviting, like an open door.

Behind him, Alaric stood quietly, hands folded behind his back, the same patient warmth in his eyes he'd had since the first lesson.

"All right, Sawyer," Alaric said gently. "Whenever you're ready."

Sawyer inhaled deeply.

*Boom... tap... boom-tap... tap... BOOM.*

His rhythm emerged—not flawless, not perfectly steady, but undeniably *him*. A rhythm that carried courage, hesitancy, hope, and the new strength he'd found within himself. The drums responded, their skins vibrating like living things, resonating back into his bones.

Marshy listened for a moment, nodding.

Then her rhythm joined—lighter, quicker, dancing along Sawyer’s like a bright thread weaving into a tapestry. Her beat filled the spaces he left open, lifting his rhythm without overshadowing it.

Sawyer glanced at her, and she grinned.

“We’re making harmony,” she said over the sound.

Rocco watched, frozen with admiration.

And then—Rocco *leapt*.

“MY TURN!”

He slammed his drum enthusiastically:

*KA-WHOMP! WHOMP! THUDKA!*

Marshy staggered sideways. Sawyer almost dropped his sticks. A cymbal above them vibrated in alarm.

“Rocco!” Marshy cried. “You’re throwing off the—”

But Sawyer suddenly laughed—a bright, ringing laugh that startled even himself.

“No,” he said, still laughing. “Let him play.”

Rocco froze mid–arm swing. “...really?”

“Yeah,” Sawyer said, adjusting the tempo to make space. “Your beat isn’t wrong. It’s just... bold.”

Rocco puffed up like a proud boulder. “I *am* bold! I was carved bold!”

And with careful enthusiasm (but mostly enthusiasm), Rocco joined again—loud, clumsy, but heartfelt. Sawyer and Marshy adjusted their drums around him, shaping a rhythm that accepted Rocco’s chaos instead of resisting it.

And slowly—miraculously—  
the messy became musical.

The Practice Hall filled with sound: Sawyer’s steady courage, Marshy’s nimble harmony, Rocco’s joyful thunder. Their rhythms collided, bounced, and rearranged, until

something new emerged—a living pulse that made the candles tremble and the sunlight flare brighter.

Sawyer's chest swelled.

For the first time, it felt like the world made sense.

Like the unfairness he saw, the pain that confused him, the questions that frightened him—all fit somehow into a larger song he couldn't fully hear yet but could finally *feel*.

Alaric watched with soft pride.

Then he stepped forward.

And he picked up a drumstick.

The hall fell instantly quiet—a silence like a held breath.

“You have learned well,” Alaric said. “Now... let me join you.”

He struck a single note.

*BOOM.*

But the sound carried *wisdom*.

It wasn't louder than Sawyer's, nor softer than Marshy's, nor steadier than Rocco's. Yet it blended perfectly, like a missing color completing a painting.

Then another note.

A third.

And suddenly—Alaric's rhythm didn't override theirs... it *lifted* theirs, drawing each of their beats into something richer.

Sawyer's courage grew brighter.

Marshy's harmony grew deeper.

Rocco's chaotic thunder gained a surprising sense of timing.

Together, something holy happened—something Sawyer felt more than understood.

A jam session.

A real one.

A living symphony of free will, guided freedom, and chosen love.

The hall trembled under the weight of their shared rhythm.

Marshy laughed.

Rocco shouted, "I AM A MUSICAL LEGEND!"

Sawyer felt a lump rise in his throat—a sacred joy he couldn't name.

Alaric raised his voice over the music.

"The world," he said, "is full of people learning to play—each with their own rhythms, their own strengths, their own mistakes."

*Boom, tap, boom*—his rhythm answered his words.

"That is why it sounds messy."

His next strike was soft, tender.

"But that is also why it sounds beautiful."

Sawyer felt tears sting his eyes.

Because he heard it—really heard it.

The beauty in the mess.

The harmony in the imperfections.

The divine patience in the chaos of free will.

And for the first time in his life, he understood the answer to a question he hadn't even known how to ask:

If God gives freedom... then the world will always be a mixture of dissonance and delight.

But God also joins the song—whispering rhythm, guiding hearts, playing alongside His children.

Sawyer struck his drum with renewed certainty.

Marshy followed.

Rocco roared triumphantly.

Alaric wove their rhythms like threads of gold.

And the Practice Hall of Echoes filled with a joyful, imperfect, beautiful song that sounded—

not like perfection,

not like heaven,

but like *hope*.

Like the world God imagined.

Like the world they were learning to shape.

One loving rhythm at a time.

## Chapter 24 — *The Hard Truth*

The Great Jam Session still echoed faintly in the grand Practice Hall of Echoes. The drums, chimes, cymbals, and resonant wooden floor seemed to hum with leftover joy, like the stones themselves were remembering the music the four of them had created. Sawyer felt lighter than he had in days—a warmth blooming in his chest he hadn't felt since before the bullying in the courtyard.

But that warmth didn't erase all questions.  
And Alaric sensed it.  
He always did.

The old tutor rested his hands on the shimmering twilight drum, his expression gentle yet serious. Marshy and Rocco settled beside Sawyer—Marshy cross-legged on a cushion, Rocco perched stiffly like a worried gargoyle.

Alaric took a long breath, as if preparing his heart before he prepared his words.

"Children," he said quietly, "I need to tell you something true. Something important. Something... difficult."

Rocco clasped his rocky hands together. "Is this about taxes? I *hate* taxes."

"No," Alaric said softly. "This is harder."

Sawyer swallowed. He already felt the softness of joy beginning to tense again. "What is it?"

Alaric walked slowly around the drums, letting his fingertips skim the edges of each instrument as though speaking to them too. "We have spoken about free will," he began. "About choices. About rhythm. About how God gives each person the freedom to play their own song."

He paused, looking at the children with a sad, wise tenderness.

"But there is a hard truth you must understand."

Silence fell like a veil over the hall. Even the dust motes seemed to stop drifting.

Alaric's voice lowered to a solemn murmur.

"Some people will choose destructive rhythms."

Sawyer's heart tightened. He remembered Henry's teary face; he remembered the older boys snickering; he remembered the helplessness he'd felt in the courtyard.

Marshy wrapped her arms around her knees. "But... why would they choose that? Why would anyone want to ruin someone else's song?"

Alaric sat down on the nearest step, his robes pooling around him like a soft halo of light. "Some people choose cruelty because they are hurting. Some choose it because they were taught it. Some choose it because they fear being weak more than they fear being unkind."

He sighed. "And some simply do not yet understand how their beats echo into others."

Rocco nodded sagely. "The echo is real. I once accidentally knocked over a stack of bells. It echoed for *two villages*. And also maybe broke a tower."

Sawyer tried to smile, but the heaviness in his chest didn't allow it. "So... what happens? Do they ruin the whole song? Forever?"

Alaric looked at him tenderly. "No. Not forever."

He lifted a single drumstick and tapped a quiet beat—slow, steady, like a heartbeat that refused to stop.

"God never stops guiding hearts back to harmony. Never."

"But how?" Marshy asked. "What if they ignore Him?"

"Many do," Alaric said softly. "But that never stops Him from trying. God whispers through conscience, through love, through community, through truth. Through consequences. Through people who choose kindness instead of cruelty."

He rested a hand on Sawyer's shoulder.

"And sometimes... He whispers through you."

Sawyer's breath caught. "Through me?"

"Yes," Alaric said with certainty. "When you comforted Henry, God was guiding through you. When you stood up to the bullies, God was trying to soften them through your courage. When you chose to play a loving rhythm instead of a hurtful one—your song became a teacher."

Sawyer stared at the drums, suddenly feeling their weight and meaning all over again.

“What if,” he whispered, “someone keeps choosing bad rhythms? No matter what?”

Alaric’s eyes saddened. “Then God grieves for them.”

A beat passed.

“And He keeps trying.”

Sawyer had never imagined God grieving. The thought both broke him and comforted him.

Marshy nudged Sawyer gently. “So... God doesn’t give up?”

“No,” Alaric said firmly. “Not on anyone. Not ever.”

Rocco sniffed. “That’s...that’s actually very beautiful. I might be crying? Or sweating? Rocks can’t cry. But something emotional is happening.”

Marshy pat his shoulder. “It’s okay, Rocco. Even boulders have feelings.”

Sawyer felt tears prick his eyes, but not out of sorrow. Out of understanding. Out of relief. Out of the quiet, deep truth that he wasn’t responsible for fixing everyone—but he *could* be a voice of harmony in the noise.

Alaric stood and gently tapped the cymbal, just once. Its note shimmered, sweet and brief, then dissolved into the air.

“Remember this,” he said as the note faded:

“No matter how messy the world becomes, God is always working to draw every heart back toward good.”

Sawyer whispered, “Even the bullies?”

“Even them.”

“Even me?” Sawyer said softer.

Alaric smiled sadly. “Especially you.”

Sawyer let out a shaky breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. The truth was heavy—but also freeing. The hard truth wasn’t that some people choose harm. It was that God never stops trying to guide them. Never stops loving them. Never stops whispering the melody of goodness into their souls.

“The world’s song isn’t perfect,” Alaric concluded, “because people aren’t perfect. But God’s melody runs beneath everything. Always. Soft, patient, persistent. A song strong enough to carry us home when we’re lost.”

Sawyer felt Marshy’s hand slip into his.  
Rocco leaned against Sawyer’s leg with a quiet *clink*.  
The hall glowed warm with late sunlight.

And Sawyer understood:  
Even in a world full of off-key noise,  
every loving beat mattered.

Every choice nudged the melody closer to harmony.

And God—always—kept the rhythm alive.

## Chapter 25 — Sawyer Finds His Answer

The Practice Hall of Echoes was quiet.

Not silent—never silent, because the hall always held onto vibrations of every rhythm played inside it—but quiet in the way a heart becomes quiet after wrestling with a heavy question for too long. Afternoon sunlight slanted through the tall windows, painting long gold stripes across the wooden floor. The dust in the air looked almost like glitter suspended inside a still breath.

Sawyer stood at the center of the hall, facing the great drum set. Marshy and Rocco sat on the platform steps behind him, watching with steady, supportive eyes. And Alaric—wise, gentle, endlessly patient Alaric—rested his hands on the railing, observing Sawyer with an expression of pride and tenderness.

It had been a long journey to reach this point. Longer than Sawyer had expected. Longer, perhaps, than he had wanted. The hall had seen his fear, his frustration, his confusion; it had heard his clumsy first beat, his panicked mistakes, his questions shouted in anger and whispered in tears.

But it had also seen growth. Courage. Love. Choice.

And now, Sawyer felt something inside him—a stirring, as though the song Alaric spoke of so often was beginning to hum inside his chest.

He lifted a drumstick, then the other.

He rested them lightly on the head of the central drum, feeling its quiet pulse under his fingertips.

“Alaric,” he said softly, “I... I think I understand now.”

Alaric stepped forward, eyes warm. “Tell me, Sawyer. What do you understand?”

Sawyer took a slow, deep breath.

“When I first asked why God allows bad things to happen, I thought there had to be one answer—some perfect reason that made the world make sense.” He pressed the drumstick gently to the surface of the drum. “But now I think... it’s many things.”

He struck a single note—*boom*—steady and thoughtful.

“People make choices,” Sawyer continued. “And God gives them freedom so that love can be real, not forced.”

He struck a second note, softer—*tap*—a beat shaped by compassion.

“So when people do cruel things,” Sawyer said, “it’s not God who causes it. It’s people misusing the gift they were given.”

Alaric’s smile deepened. Marshy folded her hands in her lap, her eyes bright with pride. Rocco sniffed loudly—even though rocks don’t cry, he insisted they could become “emotionally moist.”

Sawyer kept going, the rhythm building gently under his words.

“But I also learned something else.”

*Boom.*

“That God helps us learn.”

*Tap.*

“And God helps us heal.”

*Boom.*

“And God helps us choose kindness even when it’s scary.”

Marshy nodded eagerly. “That’s the rhythm of courage.”

Sawyer smiled at her, then turned back to Alaric.

“And... I learned that God doesn’t stop all the big bad things right away—not because He doesn’t care, but because He teaches us to help each other. To bring His goodness into the noise.” His voice trembled. “Like you said.”

Alaric bowed his head slightly, acknowledging Sawyer’s growing wisdom.

Sawyer’s voice softened, becoming almost a whisper. “And even when there’s suffering that no one caused—storms, sickness, accidents... when life just hurts—God doesn’t leave us alone in it. He stays closest then. He whispers. He strengthens. He cries with us.”

Rocco wiped an imaginary tear from his stone eye. “Beautiful,” he whispered dramatically. “I am overwhelmed.”

Sawyer let his drumsticks hover. Then he spoke the final truth—not from Alaric’s teachings, not from the metaphors, but from somewhere deeper, somewhere new.

“I think... God gives us free will so we can learn to love like He does. And sometimes that means choosing the hard thing. Sometimes it means choosing to fix what someone else broke. Sometimes it means fighting darkness with light. And every time we choose

love... every time we help someone feel seen... we're learning the song He created us for."

Alaric stepped forward.

"And what is that song, Sawyer?"

Sawyer lifted the drumsticks one final time.

He struck a new rhythm—gentle, steady, courageous, hopeful. A rhythm that sounded like him. A rhythm shaped by every lesson, every mistake, every kindness he had offered or received.

The hall filled with sound—warm and alive and full of promise.

Sawyer whispered:

"The song is love. That's what God wants us to play."

The rhythm slowed. Stopped.

Silence followed—peaceful, golden silence.

Then Alaric spoke, voice barely above a breath.

"And now, Prince Sawyer... you have found your answer."

Sawyer nodded. His eyes shone with tears—not of sadness, but of clarity.

"God allows free will because love without choice isn't love at all.

Bad things happen because people choose the wrong rhythm.

But God never abandons us.

He teaches us.

He strengthens us.

And He invites us to help heal the world."

He placed the drumsticks down gently—no longer tools of confusion, but symbols of discovery.

Marshy wrapped him in a fierce hug.

Rocco hugged both of them, shouting, "GROUP EMOTIONAL MOMENT!"

Alaric placed a hand on Sawyer's shoulder.

"You have learned the lesson most adults never understand," he said softly. "The world will still confuse you. Suffering will still hurt you. People will still choose wrong beats. But

now... you will know how to choose your rhythm. And how to guide others toward harmony.”

Sawyer wiped his eyes, but he didn't feel ashamed.

He felt... whole.

He felt steady.

He felt ready.

The drums behind him shimmered, as though blessing the moment.

Sawyer exhaled softly.

“I'm ready, Alaric. Whatever song comes next... I'm ready to play my part.”

And high in the long windows of the Practice Hall of Echoes, the sunlight glowed brighter—like God Himself smiling at the boy who had finally found his answer.

## Chapter Twenty-Six — The Final Note

The sun was lowering behind the castle towers by the time Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco returned to the Practice Hall of Echoes. The sky glowed with the soft rose-gold of early evening, casting warm light across the stone floor, across the shelves of ancient instruments, and across the great shimmering drum set at the center of the room—the Drums of Free Will.

The hall was quiet.

Not hollow, not empty—quiet the way a cathedral is quiet, full of presence rather than absence.

Sawyer stepped inside and felt the familiar tremble in his chest, the mixture of awe and belonging that had grown day by day since their first lesson.

Alaric stood near the platform, hands folded, watching them with a soft, almost fatherly warmth. The old sage didn't speak at first. He simply looked at Sawyer with a knowing smile, the kind that held joy, pride, and a gentle question.

Sawyer took a deep breath.

He knew what Alaric was asking without words.

He walked toward the drums.

Marshy and Rocco stood at his back, as they always had—Marshy steady, clever, and brave; Rocco jittery, loud, and loyal to his rocky core.

Sawyer touched the largest drum, feeling its cool surface, feeling the faint hum beneath—like the memory of a heartbeat.

“So,” Alaric said quietly. “What have you discovered?”

Sawyer swallowed. The answer rose slowly, like dawn over the mountains—steady, inevitable, full of light.

“I understand,” he whispered.

Alaric nodded. “Then say it aloud, Sawyer. The world needs the sound of truth as much as it needs the sound of music.”

Sawyer inhaled, stepped onto the platform, and sat before the drums that had challenged him, confused him, humbled him, and taught him.

He lifted his drumsticks.

Not to play. Not yet.

But because holding them felt like holding the shape of his life.

“When I first came here,” Sawyer said, “I thought God wasn’t doing enough. I thought... if He was really good, He would stop every bad thing. Every cruel beat. Every wrong choice.” He glanced at Marshy and Rocco. “I thought... maybe He didn’t care.”

Marshy’s eyes glistened.

Rocco sniffled loudly. “Oh GREAT, I’m leaking again!”

Sawyer continued, voice steady now.

“But now I understand that God didn’t make the world broken. People did... with the rhythms they choose. And He doesn’t force us to choose the right beat. Because if He forced us, we’d never learn. We’d never love freely. We’d never grow into the song He wrote into our souls.”

Alaric’s eyes shone with quiet pride.

Sawyer turned to him. “When Henry was bullied... when storms wreck homes... when sickness hurts people... I used to think God was far away. But you taught me something.”

He tapped the bass drum gently—a *heartbeat*.

“He’s closest then. Not always stopping the pain... but giving strength to endure it. And asking us to help fix the world with Him.”

Alaric nodded slowly. “Yes. God’s melody never forces—it invites.”

Sawyer lifted one drumstick and brushed it lightly across a cymbal. It shimmered with a soft golden ring.

“And now I know my role,” Sawyer whispered.

“And what is that?” Alaric asked gently.

Sawyer rose from the stool and faced him fully.

“To use my drums—my life—for good. To play kindness, courage, compassion. To add harmony to other people’s songs. To keep choosing beats that build people up. To help guide others just like you guided me.”

Rocco pumped both rocky fists in the air. “THAT’S MY BOY!”

Marshy wiped her cheek and pretended she wasn’t crying. “You finally sound like the prince you were meant to be.”

Sawyer looked down at the drumsticks—simple wood, but now heavy with meaning.

“I promise,” he said, voice unwavering, “that I’ll play my rhythm with love. Even when it’s hard. Even when the world sounds off-key. I’ll keep choosing good beats. I’ll keep listening for God’s melody. And I’ll help others hear it too.”

A profound stillness filled the hall, warm and holy.

Alaric stepped forward, placing both hands on Sawyer’s shoulders. His voice was soft, almost reverent.

“Then you have learned the greatest lesson of all, Sawyer. Your life is your song. And when you choose love freely... you become part of the masterpiece God is composing across all creation.”

Sawyer felt a warmth spread through him—a deep, glowing certainty that he was not alone. That he had purpose. That every choice, every beat, mattered.

He returned to the drums.

Lifted the sticks.

Closed his eyes.

And struck a single note:

*boom.*

Clear.

Strong.

Steady.

His.

Alaric’s voice whispered like a blessing:

“That, Sawyer, is your final note—and your first true one.”

Sawyer opened his eyes.

The world, suddenly, sounded full of possibility.

## **Chapter 27 — *The Walk Home***

The late afternoon sun spread amber light across the courtyard stones as Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco stepped out of the Practice Hall of Echoes. The great wooden doors swung shut behind them with a soft, reverent thud—as if the hall itself were bowing in gratitude for the rhythm they had played within its walls.

For a long moment, none of them spoke.

Sawyer stood still on the steps, drumsticks tucked carefully into his belt. His chest rose and fell slowly, not from exhaustion but from awe. Everything inside him felt *different*—opened, steadied, strengthened. Not because all his questions were gone, but because he finally understood how to live with them... and grow through them.

The air smelled of warm earth and distant pinewood smoke. The low hum of castle life played around them—horses snorting in the stables, pages rushing with scrolls, laughter drifting from the training yard. A whole kingdom, full of its own rhythms, beats, choices... and now Sawyer could hear it differently.

He smiled, soft and small but real.

Marshy nudged him with her shoulder. “You look like someone who finally solved a riddle.”

Sawyer chuckled. “I think I did. At least... my part of it.”

Rocco marched proudly ahead of them, puffing his rocky chest. “WELL, I certainly feel wiser. My rhythm was clearly the highlight of today.” He paused. “Although the cymbal I launched into the ceiling may disagree.”

Sawyer laughed aloud—a bright, unburdened sound. Marshy joined him, her braid swinging as she shook her head.

As they started down the path toward the castle, Marshy slowed her pace until she walked side-by-side with Sawyer. Her voice gentled.

“Your rhythm will teach others,” she said. “The way you talked to Henry, the way you confronted the bullies, the way you... opened your heart in there.” She nodded toward the practice hall behind them. “People notice that stuff. It changes things. It changes *people*.”

Sawyer looked down at his hands—the same hands that had once trembled with anger and confusion, now steady and warm around the drumsticks at his side.

“I hope so,” he murmured. “I want to play a rhythm that helps. One that brings peace... or courage... or healing... or whatever someone needs.”

Marshy smiled. “You already did.”

Rocco turned around and marched backward so he could look at them dramatically while walking. “And don’t forget the MOST important part,” he said, waving his rocky arms. “You’re not playing alone! Free will doesn’t mean God watches from far away.”

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“No!” Rocco threw his arms up as if announcing something profound. “God’s the drum teacher who’s always there—even when we forget. Even when we make noise instead of music. Even when we break sticks. Even when we jump into the drums like a majestic rock comet.” He coughed. “Hypothetically.”

Marshy snorted. “You mean literally.”

Sawyer’s smile deepened. “He really doesn’t give up on us, does He?”

Rocco shook his head so vigorously a few pebbles dropped off. “NEVER. Even if you play the wrong beat for a long time, God never stops tapping out the gentle rhythm that leads you home.”

Sawyer let the words sink in.

God didn’t force the rhythm.  
He didn’t control the sticks.  
He didn’t stop the wrong notes.

But He stayed.  
Whispering guidance.  
Offering strength.  
Placing people like Alaric—and Marshy and even Rocco—into Sawyer’s life to help him learn the melody he was made for.

They walked through the castle archway, the shadows lengthening behind them, the warm glow of torchlight welcoming them home. For once, Sawyer didn’t feel overwhelmed or confused.

He felt *invited*.

Invited to choose.  
Invited to grow.  
Invited to play the rhythm God had always known he could create.

Marshy stretched her arms overhead. “Come on, Sawyer. Dinner’s soon, and you know Rocco will riot if the bread runs out.”

“I DO NOT RIOT,” Rocco protested. “I simply cause minor seismic events.”

Sawyer laughed again—light and unburdened, like a beat played with confidence for the first time.

As they walked the final stretch toward the castle doors, the evening bells chimed a steady, comforting rhythm. Sawyer listened carefully—truly listened—and felt something inside him echo back.

A rhythm.

His rhythm.

Chosen freely.

Guided gently.

Growing steadily.

And as the three friends stepped into the warm glow of home, Sawyer whispered to himself—not as a question now, but as a promise:

*“My life is a song. And I will play it with love.”*

The rhythm of free will had begun.

And Sawyer was ready to play his part.

## **EPILOGUE — Sawyer’s Real First Lesson**

The sun dipped low behind the castle walls, painting the training yard in soft hues of amber and rose. Evening bells chimed gently in the distance, calling servants to finish chores and signaling the guards to begin shifting their posts. The air held that warm, golden stillness that only comes after a long day filled with hard questions and even harder answers.

Sawyer walked slowly toward the small practice room near the stables—a modest side chamber with simple drums, wooden benches, and a window that opened toward the

pasture. He felt tired, but not in the heavy, confused way he had felt that morning. This was a different kind of tiredness—the kind that comes from learning something true.

Henry was already there.

The young page sat hunched over a practice drum no bigger than a dinner plate, clutching two wooden sticks so tightly they shook. His cheeks were still pink from crying. When he saw Sawyer at the doorway, he sat up straighter in a panic.

“I—I’m sorry, Your Highness,” Henry stammered. “I know I was supposed to help muck the stalls, I just— I didn’t mean to—”

Sawyer held up a gentle hand.

“No one’s in trouble, Henry. I’m here for something else.”

Henry blinked, confused.

Sawyer stepped into the room, closing the door quietly behind him. The small space seemed to hold its breath—waiting. Outside, a horse exhaled softly. A cricket chirped. The whole world felt... still.

He sat beside Henry on the wooden bench.

“I was thinking,” Sawyer began, rubbing the back of his neck, “that maybe today shouldn’t end with... pain. Or fear. Or whatever you’re feeling right now.”

Henry’s head lowered.

“I feel... small.”

Sawyer nodded slowly. “I’ve felt that way too.”

Henry turned toward him, startled. “You?”

“Me,” Sawyer said. “Just this morning, actually.”

Henry didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. In his eyes was something new—recognition, fragile but real.

Sawyer pointed to the small practice drum.

“Have you played before?”

Henry shook his head vigorously. “No. I don’t know how. I’ll probably mess up everything.”

Sawyer gave a soft smile—one he hadn't known he had inside him.

"That's perfect. Because messing up is how we learn."

He placed one drumstick gently in Henry's hand and kept one for himself.

"Let me show you something."

Sawyer tapped a slow, gentle rhythm.

*Tap... tap... tap-tap... tap.*

Henry watched, wide-eyed.

"This," Sawyer explained, "this is like choosing to be kind. It doesn't have to be perfect. It just has to come from you."

Henry tried copying the pattern.

His first attempt clattered.

The second missed entirely.

The third was a chaotic mash of hits that made even Sawyer wince.

Henry's face flushed.

"I—I told you. I can't—"

"Henry," Sawyer said softly, "look at me."

Henry looked up.

"You're learning," Sawyer said. "That's all God ever asks of us. Not perfection. Just... learning to play a better rhythm."

Henry stared at him, breathing shakily, and then tried again.

This time, he landed the first tap.

The relief in his eyes shone like lantern light.

"Good," Sawyer whispered. "Now again."

They played together, slowly at first, then with growing confidence.

Sawyer guided Henry's hands only when needed, tapping lightly on his wrist.

Not forcing.

Not controlling.

Just guiding.

And suddenly—quietly—Sawyer felt a shift inside himself.

*This is what Alaric meant.*

This was the heart of every lesson—

Not big ideas.

Not perfect knowledge.

Not even theological answers.

But this:

Sitting beside someone who hurts,  
guiding gently,  
loving patiently,  
helping someone discover their own rhythm.

Henry laughed nervously after a particularly good attempt—a short, sweet sound that Sawyer felt in his chest like a blessing.

“You did it,” Sawyer said proudly.

Henry shook his head. “No... we did.”

Sawyer swallowed. Hard.

A warmth spread through him, deeper than the glow of any lantern, stronger than the thunder of any drum.

He suddenly understood something he hadn’t understood even after twenty-six chapters and all of Alaric’s wisdom:

Alaric hadn’t just taught him why God allows free will.

He had taught him what to do with it.

Sawyer tapped the last soft rhythm of the night—just three notes.

*Tap...*

*Tap...*

*Tap.*

Henry mirrored them perfectly.

Sawyer smiled at him, eyes bright—not from sadness now, but from something far more powerful.

Hope.

“Henry,” he said softly, “you’re going to be okay. And I’m here. I’ll help you learn.”

Henry’s eyes glimmered as he whispered, “Thank you, Prince Sawyer.”

And in that small practice room, lit only by dusk’s golden afterglow, Sawyer felt something sacred wash over him:

God wasn’t asking him to fix the whole world.

Just to guide one heart at a time.

Just as God guided him.

Just as Sawyer would guide others.

With love.

With patience.

With rhythm.

With harmony.

And so, without realizing it, Sawyer’s true first lesson had finally begun—  
not at the legendary Drums of Free Will,  
but here,  
beside a hurting boy,  
playing gentle beats that carried the promise of healing.

A promise Sawyer would spend his whole life keeping.

### **Author’s Note**

When I first imagined *Sawyer and the Drums of Free Will*, I knew it needed to be more than a story. It needed to be a conversation—a gentle, thoughtful, and deeply compassionate exploration of the questions children (and adults) will eventually ask:

*Why do people hurt each other? Why is life sometimes painful? Why doesn’t God stop the bad things? And what does my life mean in the middle of all that noise?*

These are big questions, ancient questions, and sacred questions. They deserve answers that don't shame or silence them, but *hold* them—softly, honestly, and with wonder.

In this story, Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco become companions for readers facing those questions. Through the metaphor of music and free will, Alaric teaches that God does not control us like puppets nor abandon us in chaos. Instead, He gives us the dignity of choice, the gift of creativity, and the steady presence of a Teacher who guides with love rather than force.

We see that:

- Free will is real and powerful.
- Love cannot be compelled; it must be chosen.
- Our rhythms—our choices—shape the world around us.
- God walks with us, especially in pain, whispering harmony back into our hearts.
- Every person has the ability to bring beauty, courage, kindness, and healing into the world.

I wrote this book for young readers who feel confused by unfairness. For parents and teachers who want to explain faith and suffering in ways that are safe, loving, and theologically sound. And for anyone who has ever wondered why the world feels off-key sometimes, despite believing in a good God.

My hope is that Sawyer's journey reminds you that your life has a rhythm—unique, needed, irreplaceable. That mistakes don't disqualify you. That broken beats can be redeemed. And that even when the world grows noisy or unjust, God is never absent. He is present like a drum teacher at your side, guiding your hands with gentle wisdom, helping you create a melody only *you* can bring into the world.

And perhaps most importantly:

You are part of the song. Your choices matter. Your life has purpose. Your rhythm can change someone else's.

Thank you for stepping into this journey.

May you leave it with hope.

In the kingdom of Calendor, young Prince Sawyer witnesses an act of cruelty that shakes his heart and faith. Searching for answers, he turns to the wise tutor Alaric, who takes Sawyer, Marshy, and Rocco the anthropomorphic rock on a journey through the mystical *Practice Hall of Echoes*.

There, Sawyer learns that every person is given a “set of drums”—their life—and the freedom to choose the rhythms they play. Through mistakes, courage, forgiveness, and music, he discovers how free will shapes the world, how choices create harmony or hurt, and how God guides gently rather than forcing anyone’s hand.

As Sawyer confronts bullies, comforts the hurting, and finds his own rhythm, he finally understands: God allows freedom so that love can be real, goodness can be chosen, and people can help heal the world’s broken songs.

Tender, thoughtful, and full of heart, *Sawyer and the Drums of Free Will* invites young readers to explore big questions about goodness, suffering, courage, compassion, and the beauty of a life freely lived in harmony with others.