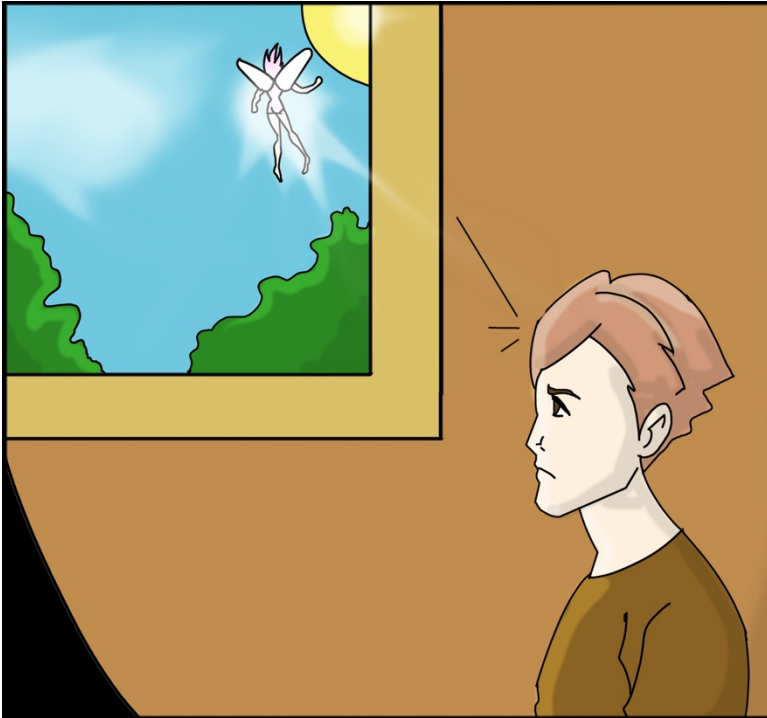


~ We FAILED until WE didn't ~

## CHAPTER 2



The sun stretched its golden arms across the horizon, painting the sky with hues of pink and orange as if giving the world a gentle morning kiss. It was the battering of Sun's wings that woke Phineas. It wasn't a loud noise, because she was pretty tiny, but it felt like a palpable buzz that vibrated on his chest every time she flew nearby.

When he finally opened his eyes, he found her by the window.

“Sun, what’s up?”

At the mention of her name, she quickly turned and hurried to his shoulder, sitting there as if nothing had happened.

Sometimes during the past years, Phineas had thought Sun was a creation of his imagination, like every other imaginary friend he’d had as a kid—he still did sometimes. More often than he could count, he thought he was going stark mad and hallucinating echoes of reflections that had no reality of their own. But on mornings like this, when he knew she’d been the one to wake him, it was hard to deny her undeniable presence by his side his whole life. She was like a familiar fixture in the tapestry of his life, a constant presence woven into every thread of his memories. Honestly, Phineas couldn’t remember a time Sun hadn’t been around—even if his parents had never seen her or acknowledged her existence, even when he was a little boy openly talking to her in front of them. He obviously stopped doing that when he grew up. Though all his other imaginary friends had disappeared, Sun stayed.

“Sun, don’t play the fool. I heard you flying all over the room. What’s up?”

The little fairy shrugged and poked her tongue out at him, making him grunt in annoyance.

“You’re insufferable.”

Sun laughed, again fully poking her tongue out at him. Each laugh was a burst of confetti, showering the moment with a shower of happiness and lifting spirits like colorful balloons into the sky. Through the years, they’d had plenty of fights. Sometimes, Sun had gone as far as disappearing for a while, but she eventually would always come back. Even when Phineas ignored her for many days at a time when he became a hormonal teenager, claiming that he couldn’t see her—which had led to Sun pulling on his hair constantly, until he’d finally admit she was there.

It’d been years since he heard her speak, though. He remembered her soft and squeaky voice from when he was a child, a voice that reassured him everything was going to be okay. That he wasn’t weird. That she was a genuine friend. A voice that repeatedly calmed him and made him feel like he belonged, somehow, to someone. But at some point, she’d started talking less and less, until he didn’t hear her anymore. It’d been at least a year or maybe more. He couldn’t even remember.

“You shouldn’t go,” she announced clearly as the memory of her voice came flooding back to him. They were the same exact last words Sun had said

to him before going quiet. He remembered the day vividly now. He'd been ready to head to University, and Sun didn't want him to leave. She said she couldn't follow him there, that she'd sit alone in the forest if he left. They had fought about it and the wave of memories came crashing back.

The next day, his father had a work accident in the shed and his leg had been healing for months. Phineas then stayed.

Still, he hadn't spoken to Sun for weeks afterwards and, when he finally did, she never replied.

Now, tired of her aggravation, he moved on. He got up, made his bed, opened the window a bit, and then remembered the light and the storm. The sky was as clear as could be, not a single cloud in sight. The grass across their property looked dry.

*Odd.*

After getting changed, Phineas left his room and went down the stairs. His feet glided down the stairs like whispered promises, leaving soft imprints



on the wooden surface as he made his descent. He found his mom in the kitchen, waffles and eggs already being plated.

“Morning, Phi,” his mother greeted him, using his childhood nickname.

“Morning, mom... Did it rain last night?” Phineas took a hand to the back of his neck, scratching away the weird sensation he felt.

His mother put a plate in front of him and took a seat across the table. “No, why do you ask?”

“Just thought I heard thunder last night... Well, no, actually... I saw lightning,” he corrected, realizing he’d never heard a thing.

His mom shrugged oddly, a motion that made her look a bit like his fairy friend. They started eating.

“Where’s dad?” he asked after two bites. It wasn’t usual for his father to be late for breakfast, but it wasn’t odd either. What was odd was that his plate wasn’t at the table, which took Phineas a moment to notice with how distracted he was by the morning’s events.

“Oh, he went to the shed early today and took breakfast out there with him. He said he had some things he needed to fix from yesterday.”

“Oh... Okay.” Trying not to be disappointed that he couldn’t at least have a word about University with his dad this morning, Phineas kept eating.

All day, Phineas waited. Time crawled. His heart became a pendulum, swinging between hope and uncertainty, as he clung to the belief that his father would soon appear. He waited and waited for his father to return from the shed while he did his morning chores, fed the chickens, and checked on the cattle. He waited as he got lunch ready while his mother fixed some woven baskets that had seen better days. Phineas then waited some more while the afternoon arrived and then the sun descended.

He continued waiting while he tried to study for University and attempted to write an essay. By the time the sun was dipping into the horizon, he was still waiting.

“Mom, do you reckon dad is okay? It's getting late. Should I... Should I go check on him?”

They were in the kitchen again, the place where the family spent most of their time. The oven was a patient guardian, holding the meal in its warm embrace until it was ready to be unveiled to eager diners.

“You know your father doesn't enjoy being bothered while he's working. Let's wait a bit more. Maybe you can finish that essay while we wait for him?”

Begrudgingly, Phineas went back to his room and sat on the office chair. His wooden desk was by the window that faced the shed. Sitting there, he could see a glimpse of the building through the trees. The shed loomed like a colossal titan, its towering walls reaching towards the heavens, as if daring to touch the sky. His father needed the space since he worked with wood he got from the forest, which he turned into all kinds of furniture. Phineas had never been inside, but he saw the finished pieces when the boats came to pick them up. Well, sometimes helicopters came. His father had a contact, Gus, who sold the furniture for him, so he

didn't have to deal with customers himself. He only sent pictures of the finished pieces to Gus, who did everything else for him—for a cut, obviously. The things that came out of that shed were magical, just like every piece of wooden furniture inside their home.

Lost in thought, but with his eyes still on the shed, Phineas saw a flash of light again.

“What in Hell?”

Standing up, he leaned closer to the window, watching and waiting. Another flash.



Phineas was no fool, and he knew something was going on. Perched on the window, Sun shook her head sideways when he looked at her.



“What do you mean, ‘no’? I have to go see what’s going on, Sun. Dad’s been there since very early and said something went wrong yesterday. What if he needs help?”

Again Sun shook her head ‘no’ and crossed her arms over her chest, sitting down on the windowsill with attitude.

“I don’t care if you don’t come along. I’m going!”

For the first time in his life that he had to do something reckless, Phineas slid down the stairs on silent feet. Of course, Sun followed. She always said no, but still followed him into trouble each one of the few times he pushed on against the rules.

Going to the back porch, and staying as far away from the kitchen as he could, Phineas snuck out. Sun was now standing on his shoulder, gripping a longer strand of her hair with one hand and tugging on it as if to tell him to go back.

“Look, if you don’t want to go, you can stay. But I’m going to figure out what’s going on,” Phineas insisted.

He rushed to the tree line so his mom wouldn’t spot him if she was looking out the window, and then strolled towards the shed draped within the shelter of the forest. Lanky pine trees surrounded him and the mulch, which formed a thick carpet, muffling him and his steps. The sharp, sweet peppery and refreshing smell of the pine trees surrounded them. When he got closer to the shed, the two-story building seemed bigger than the last time he’d seen it. He didn’t go close that often and had forgotten the eerie feeling he consistently got

when he was this close. As a kid, he'd snuck close a few times, drawn to the place like a moth to a flame, but always got caught receiving such a bad tell-off that he'd never dared to go close again. Until now.

"Okay, I'll just get straight to the point... I'll knock on the door and ask if everything is okay. Right?"

Phineas looked at Sun and she gave him such an annoyed look that he couldn't help but laugh. Her face clearly said, "I've told you I don't want you to go, but you're going to do whatever you wish anyway, so you might as well do it now."

"I know. I love you, too," he teased her.

Through the years, Phineas had learned to interpret every gesture and face Sun made. They could communicate, in a surreal way, without words. Even if her face was tiny, she was so full of facial expressions and raw emotions that it was impossible not to read her. For such a small thing, she had a huge personality.

With his heart as his shield and his determination as his sword, he mustered all his courage like a valiant knight preparing to face an unknown foe. Taking a big breath, Phineas proceeded towards the door. It couldn't be that bad. His father wasn't a person to get angry easily, so he'd just knock on the door and make sure everything was okay. As he got close to the door, which was a

big sliding door that routinely remained closed, he thought he heard a radio inside—or voices talking back and forth? The lights were on. It was getting



dark fast, and a glint of light escaped through a small gap, drawing a line of brilliant white on the ground.

Phineas was about to knock when he heard his father's voice and stopped, curiosity getting the best of him. Instead of knocking, he leaned closer to the doors, listening and expecting to catch his father singing along to the radio or something.

“I’ve told you everything I know,” his father was saying.

*Was he speaking on the satellite phone?*

Then, a reply came back, “I think it’s time to tell him what’s happening. You can’t keep him sheltered forever.” The voice was deep and rumbly, and Phineas tried to peek through the small hole to see where it came from. There couldn’t be anyone else on the island, as no vessels had arrived today, but he couldn’t be hearing the answer so clearly if his father was on the phone or radio, either. It sounded like the other person was right there in the shed with his father.

“I’ll walk you back. I need some papers from my office anyway,” his father said.

Then Phineas saw something, catching a glint in his father's back, as he headed towards the right side of the shed. By his side, he thought he saw a taller figure, but they vanished quickly out of sight. He debated whether to knock, to go in, or simply go away. But the last option wasn’t really an option. Phineas was tired of secrets and half-truths and he needed to know what was going on. As his hand closed around the handle of the sliding door, another flash of light blinded him.

Instinctively, he pulled the door open.

Nothing. The shed was empty, only a glimmer of light remained on the right side of the shed. It was

quiet. The place was enormous, with long work benches and a few pieces of furniture scattered here and there being worked on. To the left, finished chairs and carefully wrapped tables and bookcases, ready to be shipped. And to the right... nothing.

“Dad?” Phineas whispered. “Dad?! Where are you?”

Only silence greeted him. Phineas started roaming the room, looking for a door that would lead to a new room. *Hadn't his father mentioned an office?* But the shed was one big warehouse of a room, and Phineas couldn't see his father or the other man anywhere. Almost on intuition, he went to the right wall. On his shoulder, Sun was getting pretty nervous, flying and landing on his shoulder in quick succession, as if she couldn't stop moving. When they got closer to the wall, the buzzing of her wings got louder, overtaking any other sounds Phineas could pick up.

“What's going on?” he asked.

The wall at the end of the shed was made of stone on the inside, even though it was wooden on the outside. Phineas traced his hand over the boulders, some bigger and some smaller, until his eyes caught sight of a small marking on one of them. It looked like a circle with a triangle inside, and Phineas raised his hand, wanting to touch it.

“No!” The word seemed to echo inside his head as Sun grabbed a hold of his pinkie with both arms and legs and started yanking him backwards.

“Sun! What in the hell is going on? Chill! And did you just speak again? After all this time, are you really talking now?”

Phineas took half a step back, and Sun calmed a little, suddenly looking guilty. She looked down, flying in front of him and biting her bottom lip.

“Did you just speak?” he asked slowly, more calm than he was a minute before.

Without looking up, Sun nodded.

“I knew it! I’m not crazy! Why did you speak now? Why have you been quiet for so long? Do you know what this is?” Questions poured out of him as Phineas pointed to the marking on the wall and Sun released a fat sigh.

“You’re asking questions you don’t want answers to,” she said, her voice so small that he barely heard her.

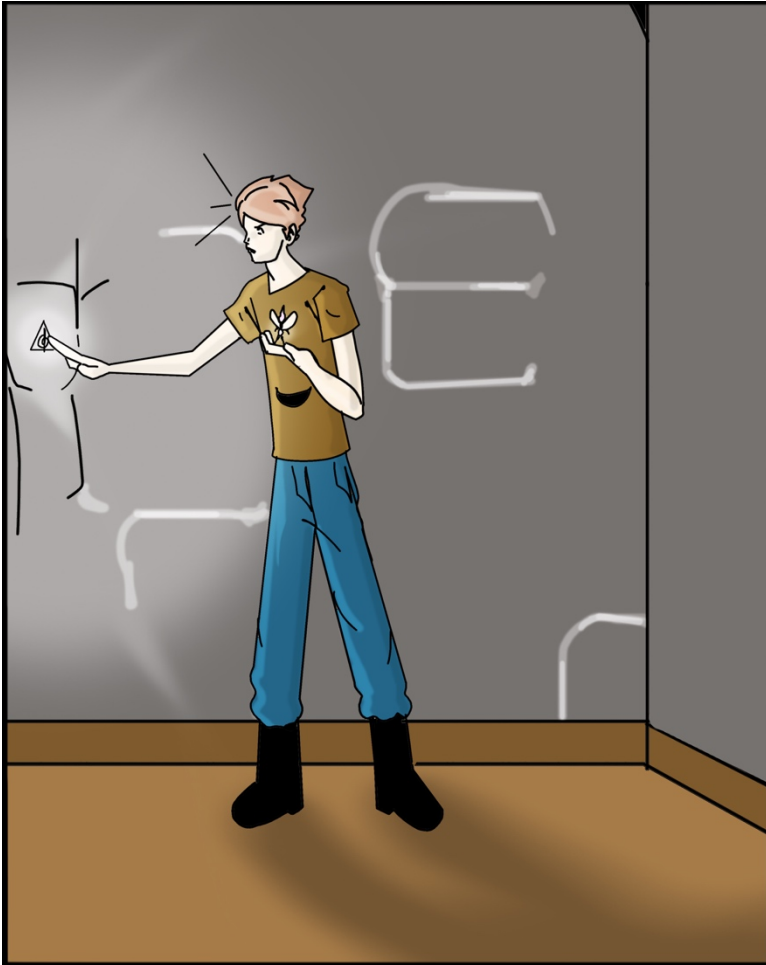
“If I’m asking, it’s because I want to know,” he replied, trying to remain calm. “Sun, I have so many questions. My thoughts are like a puzzle, scattered with countless pieces of wonder, each question a missing fragment waiting to complete the picture. It seems questions are all I have, and no one is giving me any answers. Please, I’m begging you!” Phineas’ eyes threatened to fill with tears as he longed for the

truth. Every day, he tried to be happy and live life as if it was an adventure, just like his father always told him. But, he often felt Sun was the only one that understood the thoughts that ran around his crazy head and was there for him—and she didn't even talk back. It was nuts. He felt crazy. Delusional.

Sun made a cupping motion with her hands, so Phineas copied her, knowing she wanted a place to land. She stood on his palm, looking up at him and smiling sadly. “You know I care, okay? And believe me, it's safer this way.”

“Safer? Everything I always hear is about being safe. I'm tired of 'safe.' I want the truth, Sun.” Without waiting for Sun to reply, Phineas pointed his free hand to the marking, barely touching it. “What's this?”





Sun's thoughts were dancing on the edge of her tongue, hesitant to take the leap into the open air of conversation. She couldn't reply in time. The moment Phineas' finger touched the symbol, a warm light invaded the room, seeming to come out of the rock itself. The symbol lit up and then the rock it was on started shining too. One by one, the surrounding rocks crumbled into light energy, a grand doorway

opening up. It was pure light, warm and inviting, and Phineas watched it with his mouth hanging open.

“What in Hell...”

“We should go back, Phin,” Sun said, his name so soft and hypnotically from her lips that he almost thought about obeying for a moment.”

But he'd been waiting for too long. Waiting for answers he wasn't getting.

So, feeling braver than ever, Phineas touched the wall of light. The moment he did, a flash of brightness took him in. He felt the light gently pulling, his arm then being yanked as the light swallowed his body whole.

He heard Sun scream his name, and then it was all white and silent.