

Chapter 1

Piper tightened their scarf as they strided down the windy path, windier than it'd been yesterday, Piper remarked to themselves. Fortunately, in the same place as it'd been for the last great while, was Donnie's house. Piper started up the old rope ladder. The ladder's bottom was dug into the ground, and sloped up at an angle to the house above. It was a makeshift wooden box, resembling a treehouse but missing a tree, although it floated in the air as if it had one. Piper was familiar with the ladder's peculiarities, which rungs were weak, which were missing, each long gap; they could climb it with their eyes closed if they wanted to.

Piper swung the door open and stepped in without knocking. Donnie's single-room house was bigger on the inside than out, but not remarkably so. The single square window centered on the left wall illuminated the room with the orangish glow of the afternoon. Donnie was sleeping upright on the small sofa pushed into the right corner of the room.

"Donnie!" Shouted Piper. Donnie awoke at once.

"G'morning Piper." Said Donnie, settling even more cozily onto the sofa.

"Are we going to the Junction today?" Piper asked.

"Could." Said Donnie. Piper just tilted their head forward at Donnie. "I mean I could. If you want to."

"Well that was the plan. Do you want to?" Asked Piper. Donnie just stared for a moment.

"Yea."

"Is that what you're going in? Pajamas?" Continued Piper. Donnie just shrugged, he glanced around his house, messy as usual, impossibly so for how small of a room it was.

“You’re in a rush?”

“Not necessarily. When do you want to go?” Asked Piper. Donnie put his hands behind his head and leaned back on the couch.

“Makes no difference to me.” he concluded.

“Then let’s go.” said Piper. Donnie breathed in deeply before rising to his feet. He crouched under the low roof of his house as he always did, his gangly figure contrasting sharply with Piper. He quickly rounded the small room, fishing particular articles of clothing out of separate junk heaps, and changed in a flash, not thinking much of privacy. As soon as Donnie was dressed, he walked straight out the door ahead of Piper, who followed closely behind. The older man traversed the ladder even more quickly than Piper, scurrying down the ropes like a spider. Piper dropped off the ladder near the bottom and jogged to catch up with Donnie, who’d already taken down the path.

“Did’ja get the Paths this morning?” Donnie asked. Piper paused.

“I forgot.”

“Should be fine.” Donnie said.

“Hopefully nothing’s too different today.”

“Eh.” Posited Donnie. Piper shrugged.

“I guess. Things’ve been pretty stable around here for the last quarter or two.”

“Remember Al?” Said Donnie, recollecting with a smile. Piper did remember Al, whose house had disappeared overnight half a quarter ago.

“Do you think she’s alright?” Asked Piper. Donnie said nothing. “I hope she didn’t get lost. I’ve heard of people’s houses sinking underground too. What if her house sank in the night and she’s still down there?”

“You’re still worried about getting buried alive?” Asked Donnie.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Argued Piper. Donnie snorted.

“It’s Tableand.” He said. “This has got to be the most stable residential zone I’ve ever lived in.”

“You heard that the Tableand zone is getting smaller?” Said Piper.

“No kidding. On which side?”

“To the North.”

“North? So Gavlin’s moving in a little bit.” Said Donnie. “the Gavlin zone’s pretty stable too y’know?”

“It’s alright for general safety but its character is so methodical. It reorganizes itself all the time.”

“I hear it’s an acquired taste.” Said Donnie. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of any houses sinking or disappearing in Gavlin.” he added.

“Still, what if the zone line moves over the hospital?” Asked Piper.

“Because of course they built it right next to the zone line.” Joked Donnie.

“I mean, it’s just about the only perfectly stable part Tableand.” Piper responded. “The Gavlin zone itself is not so bad, but if the line moves *into* the hospital, that’d be a real mess.”

“You worry plenty about shifts.” Said Donnie.

“I heard of something like that happening up in the Drop a couple total’s ago, a zone line shifted down and ended up cutting through the Lower Drop police department, calls were delayed and ignored until they built a new one lower down. When the line got even lower they had to move back to the old one.”

“I’d sure love for a line anomaly to move in when I’m getting a surgery done.” Joked Donnie, although Piper didn’t take the joke well.

“I was hoping I’d get the paths off of one of the pathmen,” Said Piper, “But I don’t see any this morning.”

“Strange.” Said Donnie. The two of them lapsed into silence as they walked, passing by all sorts of settlements which were laid out like a grid in Tableand, with footpaths winding in between. Finally, they arrived at the sheer square hole cut into the ground, with its own lot as though it were another house.

“Johnny’s really got it made.” Said Piper, gesturing to Johnny’s house. It was a boxy enclosure which was partially sunken into the land, the only way in or out being the small trap door on its roof, low enough to climb onto. “He can just get out of bed and go beneath.”

“I don’t think Johnny really parties like that anymore.” Said Donnie. “And there’s no good reason for going beneath other than the Junction.”

“He might have a job down there.”

“I hope not. Imagine working in that industrial pit.”

“You don’t like it beneath?” Asked Piper.

“Can you think of another reason we’d go there?”

“Well I’m sure there’s lots going on.”

“Lots of big news coming from Beneath, Tableand.” Joked Donnie. A passenger cart slid up from the shoot dug into the ground carrying a group of people. It let out a loud ding, and the people scattered. Piper and Donnie stepped in.

“I’m kind of excited, I can’t remember the last time I went down here.” Said Piper.

Donnie said nothing. Moments before the passenger cart’s doors closed, a woman with grey hair

came running down one of the paths, and slipped in. The doors closed behind her and the cart slid back into the ground, making the cabin almost entirely black save for the spare blue lights spaced down the length of the shoot. The woman was still catching her breath.

“What’s the hurry?” Asked Piper. The woman chuckled, and responded.

“That’s classified.”

“Oh wow!” Said Piper. Although no one could see it, Donnie rolled his eyes. The woman said nothing more than that. Donnie observed the woman, as much as he could in the darkness of the elevator. She had a very skeletal complexion, frazzled hair and wild eyes that didn’t quite match her quiet demeanor. She wore thick brown pants, and an overcoat at least one size too large which made the rest of her look quite small. She kept checking her pockets as if making sure she had something. The cabin came free from the claustrophobic shoot in the ceiling and slid down vertical tracks, dropping into a large metal box the size of a city.

Piper let out a gasp and peered across the cavernous enclosure. Orange light strips were spaced out far apart from one another along the walls near the ceiling, dimmed considerably by the layer of smog which hung over the industrial district. The lights looked more and more blurry the further Piper looked into the fog. Only the tallest buildings could reach up over the mass of overpasses and intertwining highways which shrouded the streets and sidewalks. Donnie didn’t take his eyes off the woman. “It’s incredible!” Said Piper.

“Haven’t you seen this before?” Replied Donnie.

“I don’t remember it being this big.” Said Piper. “I can’t believe they built this entire thing just hanging off the underside of Tableand.” They continued. The lights became increasingly distant above the three of them until the cabin sunk beneath the tangle of roads, and into a stumpy little building with a roof as high as the cabin’s.

The building was dimly lit with a single sickly yellow light bulb. The cabin doors rolled open and a handful of people wandered in, trading places with the previous three passengers who wandered out. It was barely the size of a modest hotel room. Simple electronic sounding elevator music was playing very loudly through the room, although its source was unclear. The melody was very slow and the sound was deep and subdued. Piper nearly walked straight ahead out the front door, but Donnie tugged their shirt, and gestured to the woman who was putting on an air filtration mask she'd taken out of the large bin next to the door.

Donnie quickly trailed the woman as she left the hut, Piper had hardly gotten their mask on before following Donnie through the door. The streets were bathed in a murky red glow which would be black as night if it weren't for the warm orange beams which poked in through the canopy of highways. The woman slipped down a single lane street to the left of the larger road which most of the traffic in and out of the elevator hut travelled through. She hurriedly sidled along one of the narrow spaces between the road and the large boxy buildings to either side, followed at a distance by Donnie and Piper.

"Isn't it much quicker to the Junction that way?" Asked Piper, pointing to the wider, more populated road. Donnie shushed Piper and leaned in close to them.

"Don't you wanna see where that secret-agent gal's headed?" He whispered. Piper opened their mouth to respond, but shut it before nervously following behind Donnie. Carts billowing smoke chugged down the narrow road, each one swerving to the side around the passer-bys. The areas surrounding the various elevators back up to the surface and the paths that moved between them and the Junction were at least presentable, but this woman was leading the trailing party into areas of Beneath that not even Donnie had seen.

When the narrow road ended, they followed the woman into footpaths that ran between tightly packed factories and warehouses, the narrow corridors feeling like a storage facility, so confined that you could forget you were “outside.” Piper fell a little behind for a moment, peaking into one of the rare windows which were cut into the faceless buildings. Through the window they saw workers with hazy dispositions slumped in chairs, idly rummaging in boxes and piecing together electronics which they placed on a conveyor belt. The only other people walking the streets that they’d seen in the area weren’t wearing masks; their faces were lightly shaded with soot.

For such an obscure route, the woman seemed to know exactly where she was going, and never wavered in her travel. Donnie and Piper began to notice that this part of Beneath was on a subtle downward incline, although it hadn't been noticeable until it began to get steeper. As they got lower, things began to feel very still, and quiet. As soon as Piper realized this, they signaled for Donnie to begin creeping, as all they could hear were the woman’s footsteps, meaning she could probably hear theirs. After minutes of walking and creeping through roofless passages, the woman turned a corner. As soon as the woman was out of sight Donnie scurried up to the corner and carefully peaked around. At the end of the small alleyway was a police blockade, which she stepped over, flashing a badge to someone unseen. Piper gasped when they saw.

“I wonder what’s going on down there.” They thought out loud.

“Maybe there is big news coming out of Beneath, Tableand afterall.” Muttered Donnie.

“We shouldn’t be here Donnie.”

“You don’t want to see what they’re doing?” Donnie asked incredulously. Piper thought for a moment.

“How are we gonna see it without getting caught?” They asked. Donnie rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. Piper turned around and looked through many of the previous alleyways. Donnie followed along without asking, until Piper found a rusty ladder built into the side of the one the nearby warehouses. Piper put one hand on the ladder, “If we can crawl along the roof of one of these things, we can peer down on the situation.” They said.

“Right.” Said Donnie, nodding. Piper led Donnie up the rungs onto the roof, which was caked in a thick layer of dust. Crawling between pipes and vents, and chimneys blowing out smog, Piper peered over the edge of the roof.

Breaking out of the sea of warehouses seemed to be the edge of Beneath. Layers of gravel and dirt were packed onto the bottom of the large enclosure, making up the ground that everything was built on top of, but here, it fell away, revealing a long, deep ditch leading to the bottom corner of the structure. It was immediately obvious to both Piper and Donnie why they had not encountered any pathmen on their way, as all recognizable pathers seemed to be in attendance, along with police officers and a separate group of people dressed in street clothes, all with strangely serene and serious faces, the woman they’d seen before included. Despite the great number of people, the affair was completely silent, save for whispered messages into transmitters and the scribbled notes of investigators. Most notably of all was the object of interest, what seemed to fill the bottom of the pit. It was perfectly flat, as though it were a pane of glass laid across the pit, but it danced with colors and patterns. The plane gave off no glow, illuminating nothing else around it, but the object itself appeared quite bright, independent from the surrounding lighting. Donnie was transfixed by the image, it nearly absorbed his entire field of vision. As quietly as they could, Piper spoke.

“Wowww. Is that a line anomaly?” They hissed. Donnie shushed Piper, and gave a slight shake of the head, not taking his eyes off the plane. He suddenly crawled backwards away from the ledge, Piper followed his lead. Donnie quickly descended the ladder and crossed the narrow path into the alley on the other side, rabidly beating the layer of dust off of his clothes as soon as he was out of earshot. “What was that thing?” Asked Piper once they’d caught up.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I’ve never seen a line anomaly like that. What’s the zone under the Tableand zone?”

Piper Asked.

“Shifting up.” Said Donnie.

Chapter 2

The duo mindlessly walked in the direction they felt lead to the Junction. The winding corridors of Beneath became less like a city grid and more like a series of loosely connected corridors which each ran a great distance. It was practically a crawlspace, roofed by the elevated highways and boxed in by the sides of factories, all built end-to-end. The walls chugged around them.

“What do we do?” Asked Piper.

“Nothing.” Answered Donnie. “I’m sure the police will handle it.” He said. Piper was taken aback by this. “We don’t need any more to do with it. Let’s just get to the junction.” He concluded. Piper said nothing. After a series of thoughtless turns, the two walked passed a

staircase to the side of the path wedged in between a series of ascending buildings. It seemed brighter at the top.

“I wonder how long it’ll be before everyone finds out about it.” Said Piper.

“Keep your mouth shut.” Said Donnie.

“I know.” Said Piper. At the top of the steps was an elevated platform rising above the buildings and roads with nothing but what seemed to be a garage settled on it. “Where’s the Junction from here?” Piper wondered aloud. Donnie peered all around. Piper noticed one of the large carts they’d seen earlier parked inside the garage. “Maybe someone in there knows.” Said Piper, wandering off. They stepped into the garage and nearly tripped over the man who suddenly slid out from under the cart. Piper yelped in surprise and stepped back. The man stood up and put his hand out to shake Piper’s. He was covered in soot. Piper reluctantly agreed, covering their right hand with it. Once the handshake was complete, he spoke.

“What can I do for you?” He said. Piper was slow to respond.

“Do you know how to get to the Junction from here?” They asked. The man nodded, stepped out onto the platform, and pointed in the opposite direction Donnie was searching in. Against the far side, in a roomy pit lowered into the bottom corner of Beneath was the purple glow of the Junction. Piper called Donnie over. Donnie saw it and said nothing. “How do we get there?” Asked Piper.

“I’ll throw a ladder down from here, and you can walk there on the roads.” The man said, turning back into the garage. He came back with a large spool of rope ladder which he affixed to the railing on the edge of the platform. He rolled the ladder out, letting it fall far enough to reach the road beneath. The man stepped aside, and Donnie immediately began climbing down the

ladder. Piper walked to the edge and turned around before carefully lowering their feet onto the highest rung.

“Thanks!” Said Piper. The man smiled and nodded. He watched Piper descend the ladder, reaching Donnie who’d been waiting at the bottom. The ladder slowly lifted back up. “You don’t usually wait.” Said Piper.

“I’m not sure which way to go.” Donnie admitted, surveying the area. There was a winding web of rail cart tracks which each had small walkways on either side, but none of them led straight to the Junction. In spots where the road’s curves ran parallel there were thin planks of wood bridging the gaps where they were shortest.

“We just pick a road and follow it until we find a better road.” Suggested Piper, walking straight ahead. Donnie followed behind in silent agreement, the two of them moving in single file down the narrow walkway. After one of the large carts pushed past them, Donnie spoke.

“It’s the strangest thing.” He said.

“What’s that?”

“I couldn’t spot the Junction anywhere. It’s not easy to miss, but I didn’t notice it at all until that man pointed it out to us.” Said Donnie in a hushed voice.

“Are you going blind?” Joked Piper. Donnie didn’t respond. Piper had been prepared to strenuously navigate the web of roads, but staying on track for the Junction was strangely intuitive. They’d switched roads half a dozen times before they knew it, without question or argument. It somehow seemed much faster than walking along the streets.

“It was almost as if” Donnie began again after much time “The man manifested the Junction; brought it into existence when he pointed.” He said. Piper didn’t know how to respond to this.

They arrived at the Junction much sooner than either of them had anticipated, the road they were on sloping down into the pit it resided in, free from the crowds going in and out on the ground level. When Piper realized they'd made it, they scratched their head, struggling to remember what must have been an eternity they'd just spent walking, but it seemed like less than five minutes ago they'd just spoken with the soot covered man. Donnie's mind was elsewhere.

The Junction was somewhat separate from the rest of Beneath, nested in the wall was a separate, smaller container affixed to the side of the larger structure. Piper rubbed their eyes as they descended, blinded by the bright purple light swarming the Junction in contrast to the maroon haze of where they'd just come from. They nervously looked at the floor of the club, wondering how much lower it would need to go to clip into the anomaly they'd seen before, or how much longer it would be until it already was low enough.

The ceiling was low, but you couldn't see the opposite wall from the entrance. It spanned at least as far as a football field, but fog filled the room with a purple haze, making it look as though it might have gone on forever in every direction, the stretch only broken up by columns which supported the roof and small stands and kiosks which were unevenly spread around as the crowds of people were. Different music played in different areas of the Junction, the entrance greeted Donnie and Piper with a thumping percussive beat, but the clashing tunes and rhythms in the distance filled the room with a dissonant hum. Piper spotted one partitioned area where people in colorful pastel clothing raved dispassionately, only a couple dozen feet away from another occupied only by a large table seating a cohort of quiet, well dressed patrons. A round booth lined with mellow fellas smoking Tonx feet away from a restaurant table seating professional looking people engaged in a heated conversation.

Piper was overwhelmed by the scene and didn't know which way to go, but Donnie tugged their sleeve and tilted his head in the direction of a small bar along the front wall near the entrance. Piper pulled their eyes from the expanse and ambled over to the bar, sitting on the stool next to Donnie. On the only other occupied stool at the far edge of the bar sat a person who kept very still, buried in a thick overcoat and hood, eyes shielded with round sunglasses. The person behind the bar had scruffy grey hair and glossy eyes. They wore large ear coverings. Donnie had to clap in front of their face to get their attention. They didn't react immediately, but they lifted one ear up, slowly turned their head to the side, and spoke.

“Y’orderin’?”

“Yes.” Said Donnie.

“D’you have a Workers of Beneath membership card?”

“We’re just visiting.”

“Ok.” The person said, lifting a pad of paper. “What’s the estate?” They asked. Donnie grimaced and shifted in his seat.

“Mine.” Said Piper, fishing a card out of their back pocket to show the bartender. “It’s Grid 82/39, Tableand.”

“Got it.” They said, jotting the numbers down. “What can I get for you?”

“Uhh...”

“Two classics.” Donnie interjected. The bartender nodded and put the ear covering back on.

“Thanks a lot.” Said Donnie, turning back to Piper.

“Yeah. It’s no problem.” Piper said in a serious way. “Are you in trouble with the state again?” They asked. Donnie ran a hand over his stubble.

“Something like that.” He said. Piper sighed.

“With all the new people in Tableand they’re just gonna get more and more persistent. I don’t think they’re gonna just keep letting you dodge any more.”

“I’m not dodging. The only expenses I catch most of the time are from the food bank, but apparently I’m not breaking even although they pick my little farm clean every quarter. Last time they came by for the quarterly audit they kept trying to get me on the jobs program.”

“Why don’t you go self sufficient like Neil?”

“I don’t like eating root and I definitely don’t like farming. I only prop up that little farm so I’d have something to give the collectors when they come around like you told me to, but apparently that’s not enough to get them off my case any more.” Donnie explained. “They don’t even leave Neil alone and he doesn’t get a thing from the state.” He added. “Can’t you pull any strings up top?”

“You know I don’t mind helping you out but the rest of Resource Management can’t see people like you as anything but leeches, especially now that Tableand is resource negative because of all the new residents.” Piper said. The bartender put Donnie and Piper’s drinks on the counter, Donnie began drinking. “We’re real’ understaffed too cuz of how many people keep getting moved to desk work to keep up with all the bureaucracy, so they’re just gonna crack the whip even harder on people like you, people like Maz.” They continued. Donnie scoffed.

“Don’t compare me to Maz.” He said.

“You contribute to the community just about as much as Maz does.” Piper responded. Donnie shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah, I guess.” He conceded. The two sat in silence for a moment. Donnie finished his drink and set the glass down on the bar. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom.” He said before getting

up. Piper turned and watched Donnie disappear into the purple mist. They examined their drink and took a sip. It made their head feel sort of fuzzy. They couldn't explain why, but Piper felt anxious. They tapped the bartender on the shoulder.

“Which way's the bathroom?” Piper asked after the bartender was listening. The bartender pointed in the opposite direction Donnie had gone. Piper was right.

They set their drink down and followed Donnie's path through the club, catching the attention of loungers and dancers alike, until they reached the wall adjacent to the bar they'd been sitting at. At the end of Donnie's trail was a small, inconspicuous door which blended in with the wall, easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. Piper pushed the door open and looked down the long vertical shaft on the other side. Ladder rungs lined the drop all the way down into the black depths below, but at the very bottom was a round puddle of light, the dancing patterns they'd seen before. Where was Donnie?

Chapter 3

For a moment, I couldn't feel anything. All I knew at that point were colors and shapes, and a warm tingly feeling. Soon after that came patterns and form, my body and its surroundings. Each time I tried to focus my eyes somewhere, what I was looking at changed. As soon as I'd dived into the anomaly I was already trying to pull myself back out. Remembering where I was supposed to be brought me back to the Junction maintenance shaft. I was climbing the ladder back up. Piper was waiting at the top for me.

“How was it?” They asked, looking me over. I still didn't feel right at all. Piper looked down into the drop I'd just gotten out of. “Was it enough?” They asked. I said I didn't know.

Piper seemed to lose all interest in the anomaly and began walking back to the bar. I followed along. There were still people in the Junction. The music was still playing but I couldn't pick out any of the individual tracks anymore, it was all one cacophonous blur.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked Piper. They looked at me and nodded.

"Ok." They responded, before walking out of the Junction. I tried to follow them but they were too far ahead of me, I couldn't keep track of where they went. I was alone. I wandered through the purple blur, back out into the dark. I remember walking back to an elevator, getting back on the surface of Tableand, but how much time had passed I wasn't sure.

Back on the surface it was getting dark, everything was very still. I couldn't spot a single person anywhere. I was confused, I didn't know why we had left the Junction. I felt like I needed help, immediately. I walked forward and climbed onto the roof of Johnny's house and banged on the trap door. There was no response but the hatch was unlocked, so I threw it open and carefully climbed down the ladder into the top floor of the house, afraid to lose balance and fall on my back.

The study on the first floor was as I had last seen it, lots of observational tools and writings spread around on desks which lined the walls under posters of strange patterns and maps. The room felt very cramped, much smaller inside than it had appeared from the outside. Johnny didn't usually occupy this floor of the house, but there was an unusual amount of dust. I was afraid that no one was home and that I shouldn't be there, that I would collapse on the floor and not be found until Johnny returned.

I called out for Johnny. I heard a response but I wasn't sure where it came from. I went down the stairs past his bedroom, also empty, down into the basement, windowless and deep underground. The basement floor was padded with dirty carpet and filled with old bulky

furniture, the smell of Tonx smoke filled the room. I spotted Johnny in a heap against the back wall. His figure was shrouded in a large jacket and I couldn't make out his face.

"Donnie." He said. "You're still here?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I didn't think I'd see you again." He responded. "But I guess we're in the same place now." He said.

"Are you okay Johnny?" I asked him

"Of course I stay behind. But you... It isn't right, Donnie." Johnny continued. I didn't have the wherewithal to begin making sense of it. "Did you just get here?" He asked. I sunk into an armchair adjacent to Johnny.

"I need help." I told him.

"Look at me." Said Johnny. "You can't stay here." He insisted. I did look at him. "Maybe you wanted to understand. I wanted to understand it. Look at me. I don't understand anything."

"The anomaly?" I asked.

"Look what it's done to me." He said. "They called it 'Oibo.'"

"Oibo?" I repeated. Johnny shrugged.

"You need to leave." He insisted again. "We can't help each other. I don't think so." He said. I stood up out of the chair and held my hand out to him.

"Come with me. We both need help." I said. He reached up and took my hand. I helped him to his feet, put my arm over his shoulder and began leading him up the stairs.

I was back outside in front of the elevator shoot outside Johnny's house, and Johnny had disappeared. Outside, the old woman with grey hair I'd seen earlier stood before me. She walked up to me slowly, staring intently at my face. Her expression focused and serene with large round

eyes, gleaming with amusement. She put her hands on my face, running her fingers through the wrinkles and folds.

“Interesting.” She whispered to herself. I felt my mind go quiet for a moment, with her face inches from mine. She slowly turned her head and whispered into my ear. She told me to go to the police station. I pulled myself away from her. It wasn’t a bad idea, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I couldn’t trust this woman. I could be taken advantage of in this state. I turned away from her, she didn’t try to stop me. I decided that I needed to find Piper, and I began walking toward their house. Tableand still looked familiar, but all of the buildings seemed entirely anonymous and nondescript.

By the time I spotted Piper’s stubby flat in the sea of nameless buildings, it had gotten very dark. I began walking around the house to the front, and nearly had a heart attack when I noticed that what I’d thought was my reflection in the window was Piper, standing perfectly still inside their house, staring out the window at me. Their figure was illuminated although the rest of their house was dark. They looked straight through me with an unfocused gaze. I knocked on the window and their expression began to flicker, and it seemed like they began speaking, but I couldn’t hear them through the glass. In the flash of images I could see them turning to come to the front door, but when I came around to the front to meet them, they didn’t show. I tried the door but it was locked. I went around all the windows and the house seemed completely empty, abandoned. I stepped away, something definitely wasn’t right.

Down the path from Piper’s was Al’s house, which had recently disappeared. But there it was, as it had been before, the only house I could see in all of Tableand with the lights on inside. I began walking to it immediately, it was certainly no less alien than anything else I’d seen, but I needed help from someone. The glowing lights beckoned to me, like an omen of life. I walked up

to the modest 2 story home, the front door was already ajar. I was afraid to walk straight in. I heard the creaking of a rocking chair and a crackling fire inside. I stepped onto the porch and called inside.

“Allie!” I shouted into the open door. The creaking chair stopped at once. For a moment it was completely silent. “It’s me, Donnie!” I called out again. After a moment, I heard rustling, and then slow measured footsteps. From the left edge of the doorway, the silhouetted figure of Allie, like an apparition, slowly stepped into view.

“Donnie?” She said with disbelief after a long pause.

“Al,” I responded. “Is that you?” I asked. She stepped back, away from the doorway as if to let me come in, but she continued stepping backwards as I entered, keeping distance between the two of us. She looked me over with guarded shock. I didn’t know what to say.

“Close the door.” She said. I did as she asked. It was dark before, but once inside, the night looked pitch black through the windows. It was as if this house was the only thing that existed, buried deep in an endless void. Without turning away from me, Allie walked sideways across the room before falling back into her rocking chair. “Sit down.” She said. I sat on the couch across from her. Allie only stared.

“Where have you been?” I asked her. Allie shook her head without changing expression, and spoke softly.

“I don’t know.” She said. “I was lost for a long time. It looks like home outside tonight. Like Tableand.”

“But it isn’t.” I said. “Is it?”

“No.” She said, shaking her head again with a grimace. “It feels like I’ve been in this house forever.” She continued. “Sometimes I think I see people, places, but they’re never quite there. But you. Is that really you?” She said.

“I think so.” I said. This made her laugh, she seemed convinced. I’d never been particularly close with Al before. She stood up and took my hands in hers.

“You don’t know how long it’s been.” She said, holding back tears. “But you’re here now.” She continued. “Are you lost too?”

“I think so.” I said again. “I need help.” This upset her to hear, but she couldn’t stop smiling. She put her arms around me.

“I’m sorry.” She said. For the first time, my head felt clear again. I remembered what Johnny told me, and what the woman told me. Allie pulled away from me.

“I think I can still find my way back.” I responded. “I can’t stay here.”

“How can you get out?” She asked.

“Come with me.” I told her. “I think I need to go to the police station.”

“Are you sure?” She asked. “I’ve never gone so far from the house.”

“Trust me.” I told her. She nodded.

“Ok.” She said. I opened the front door. Through the pitch black darkness, a single illuminated path led straight forward from Allie’s house, leading up to the police department on the hill.

“There it is.” I said. Al and I walked straight ahead. At the base of the hill was the grey haired woman, who turned and began leading us up the hill. Allie shuddered and pulled away.

“Trust her.” I said. She hesitantly followed. The woman led us through the front door of the police department. I stepped through the door, Allie behind me, the woman ahead of me. The

woman walked into a door across from the entrance, closing it behind her. I suddenly heard a voice and turned to the side. “What?”

“Donnie?” They repeated. It was hazy at first, but looking closer, it was Piper.

“Piper? I-” I began, but I turned around and Allie was gone, her bracelet left in my hand. I shoved the door back open to look for her, only to see an ordinary evening in Tableand, people walking the paths, lights in every house. I turned around and opened the door the woman had walked through, it was nothing but a broom closet, empty.

“Where have you been?” Asked Piper. I sat down, still unsure of myself. “Did you tell them anything?” I asked. Piper shook their head.

“Something is wrong.” Piper said. “What happened Donnie?” They asked.

“I can’t explain.” I said. “I shouldn’t be here.” I said, standing and turning to leave.

“Donnie, wait.” Said Piper. I opened the door, but stopped short for a moment at the top of the stairs, paralyzed at the black abyss which hung over me. “I’ll walk you home.” Piper said, coming to my side. I could move again.

~

The two sauntered down the hill and into Tableand towards Donnie’s house, through the dark, under rare street lights. Piper looked straight ahead and led the way, but they stole glances at Donnie when they could. A few times, Piper opened their mouth as if to speak, but each time they looked over, they saw him staring at his shoes, shambling. They asked nothing. Donnie was searching for words but they all felt inadequate to him. His mind could go nowhere but the claustrophobic sitting room, dim yellow light and empty black windows. He tilted his face away

from Piper, hoping they would notice nothing and think nothing. He looked back when Piper took his hand in theirs.

They arrived at Donnie's house where they'd met just that morning, stopping along the path at the foot of the rope ladder. Piper stepped away and let their arm go limp, but Donnie didn't let go of their hand. They stood side by side and looked up at the box in the sky. Donnie swallowed and looked at the ground. Piper pursed their lips, and then spoke. "Do you want me to stay the night?" They asked. Donnie just nodded. Piper took his hand and led him up the rope ladder.

They were asleep in each other's arms on Donnie's couch before day came.

Chapter 4

Donnie woke up with a headache he couldn't describe. For a moment he just laid there with his eyes closed, taking stock of himself. He opened his eyes to see Piper, who was sitting on the floor with their back to the wall, looking out the small square window.

"Goodmorning." Said Donnie. Piper flinched and spun around to look at Donnie, before letting out a small laugh.

"You startled me." They said.

"Sorry." Said Donnie. Piper smiled.

"It's okay." They said, rubbing their eyes. "I was just watching the light come on." They said. Donnie picked himself up, sitting straight. They sat and watched the light slowly get brighter and brighter. "I love Tableand mornings." Piper said, thinking out loud.

"You do?" Questioned Donnie. Piper looked at Donnie.

“Of course.” Piper responded before turning back to the soft yellow stream of light. “It’s nothing like this back home. In Alexandria it’s all bright lights and business no matter the morning. Long days, long nights, and still no time.” They continued. “Around here, sometimes entire days can slip by.” They said.

“That’s a good thing?” Donnie responded. Piper turned to look at Donnie.

“It can be.” Answered Piper. Their face became serious. “What happened yesterday?” They asked. Donnie swallowed and looked at the wall.

“I saw Allie.” Donnie said after a moment. Piper’s eyes widened.

“You did?” Piper asked. “Where?”

“She’s lost.” He said. He rested his head in his hand. “I think I was lost too.” He added. Piper said nothing, looking intently at Donnie. “I don’t know.” Donnie began again. “Maybe that’s why we found each other.” He said.

“I don’t understand.” Said Piper. “What did Allie say? Is she okay?” They asked. Donnie just shook his head, his brow furrowing. Piper looked at Donnie for a moment, although he wouldn’t meet their gaze. Then they looked away. “I think I might have been lost too.” Said Piper.

“What?” Donnie quickly responded.

“When you went down that shaft...” Piper began. They looked down, their expression turning bitter. “Why did you do that?” They whispered, as if to themselves. “After you went down there, I don’t remember what happened.” They began again. “It’s like a dream to me now. We left the junction. Maybe it was just me. Did you ever come back?”

“I think so.” Donnie responded. “You left me there.” He said.

“Right.” Said Piper, recollecting. “I went back home.” They continued. They suddenly looked up at Donnie. “I saw you in my window.” They said,

“That was you?” Asked Donnie.

“You saw me too?” Piper asked.

“I thought I did.” Donnie responded. “But you weren’t really there.” He clarified. This made Piper think.

“Neither were you.” They said, They shook their head. “I went to the police station. That much I remember.” They said, Donnie raised an eyebrow. “It’s the only thing I remember clearly. I didn’t want to tell anyone what happened, but I just knew something was wrong.” Piper explained. “I only told them you were missing.” They added.

“Do you want to tell them what happened?” Donnie asked. Piper breathed in sharply.

“I don’t know.” They said after a moment. “Why did you do it?” They asked, looking Donnie in the eye. Donnie shifted in his seat. “That- thing we saw, you touched it?” They asked. Donnie slowly nodded.

“I went into it.” He said. Piper sighed.

“I thought you were passed this.” Piper said. “Think of what happened to Allie.” They added. Donnie turned away. “She’s gone. We lost her. Staton’s been in mourning ever since and you were joking about it just yesterday morning.” Piper continued. “I don’t want to lose you too, Donnie.” They said, their stern expression turning to one of worry.

“I could save her.” Donnie retorted.

“What?” Piper said.

“Allie. I almost brought her back.” He explained. Piper’s mouth hung open.

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna go back.” They began, shifting in their seats to turn and face Donnie straight on from their spot on the floor. “You don’t even know if what you saw was real.” They argued.

“It was real!” Donnie insisted. “I know she’s out there.” He said. “Staton.” He suddenly began, sitting up straight. “I need to talk to them.” He decided.

“No Donnie, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Piper responded. “You’re only going to upset them.” They continued. “We should go to the Tableand police, together.” Said Piper. Donnie chuckled.

“What’s the state gonna do for us?” Challenged Donnie.

“You’re only gonna get into more trouble running around trying to figure this out on your own.” Piper began. “You saw their investigation, I’m sure they know more about this than you do already. If Allie can be saved, they’ll know how to do it better than you.” Piper explained, “We can help them.” They said, Donnie took a deep breath.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He conceded.

“Just think about it, okay?” Piper asked.

“Okay.” Said Donnie. They sat and looked out the window for another moment.

“Listen.” Piper began again, rising to their feet. “I need to go to work. Are you going to be okay?” They asked.

“What? Am I gonna be okay alone?” Donnie asked. Piper just looked. “Yeah, I think I can handle myself.” said Donnie.

“Ok.” Said Piper. They silently gathered their things before leaving the small box house without a goodbye. Donnie looked out the door for a moment before slumping back down onto the couch.

~

What happens next?