



Illustrated by Kurt Huggins

# Places You Have Never Been

---

---

David Cleden

---

---

## **I: Maps of Unknown Territories**

Petch heard the skater-girl before he saw her, the wheels on her board rumbling against the cracked asphalt like distant, drawn-out thunder. She came skating down the middle of the road—and he had to admit that took some skill, dodging garbage and the rubble-spill from collapsed buildings, and those oddly symmetrical craters gouged out of the road surface. *That* should have been warning enough for her, but apparently not.

He recognized the tough, street-girl look: ripped jeans, battered leather jacket, raven-black hair cut short but tangling now in the breeze. She carried an air of aloofness. He couldn't put his finger on it but she looked like someone who didn't belong here. *Well none of us belong*

here, he reminded himself. And yet here she was. She kicked her board onward, swerving around the obstacles but keeping up a good speed. Around here, that was asking for trouble.

Probably just another early morning gawker who'd found a way through the cordon. Not difficult these days. The army reservists had better things to occupy themselves with than protecting a whole city from the curious. Petch didn't care much. A mark was a mark.

He stayed where he was, sat on the top step of the crumbling Georgian townhouse, letting her draw level before he called out.

"Buy a map?"

The skater-girl stepped gracefully from the board, kicking it up into her hand in a practiced move. She stared at him blankly.

"Best to watch your step around here," Petch added, trying to sound helpful.

She tilted her head to one side as though he might be some kind of curious museum specimen. "That some kind of threat?"

"No. I just mean this is a dangerous neighborhood." He looked for some sign of understanding. No reaction from that blank face. "*Active*, you know? Plenty of nowhere places you won't see until you blunder into one." He nodded toward the collapsed houses opposite. Through the gap they left you could glimpse parts of the city skyline poking up through the early morning haze. Less than a mile away, a couple of high-rise buildings had chunks gouged from their western faces, like two giant fingers of whitened Swiss cheese. Elsewhere tower blocks had fallen like dominoes. Once the nowhere places arrived and started punched holes in the lower stories, it was only a question of time.

"Well, *dub*," the girl said. "That's why people come to the city, right? To see for themselves."

Petch stood, stretching away the ache in his bones. "Worse round here, though. Nowhere places popping up all the time. A *lot* more. It's a dangerous place to go wandering around."

She tilted her head the other way. "Why?"

He gave a bitter laugh. "Where've you been these last ten years? Look—" From a satchel he tugged one of the paper maps he hawked out on the main thoroughfares. It was just four sheets taped together and inexpertly folded, but he opened it out so she could see it was printed, not hand-drawn. Twenty-four hours out of date, but the girl wasn't to know that.

"Free. Gratis. All the places to steer clear of. If you want I can download a digital version to your phone but that will cost you."

She glanced at it. "No thanks. Some kids tried to sell me one when I came up that main road. They're all the same."

"No. They're not." Petch folded the sheet back up carefully and tucked it back in his satchel. "For a start, we're not out to rip off gawkers. We take the threat seriously. We update every day. Four square miles of city streets around the focal point. That's a big area to cover that often. And not just at ground level, we go thirty feet up in two-foot increments. No one else does that."

She gave him a look that said maybe he was just spinning her a line. "Drones," he explained, nodding to the crate at his feet containing a jumble of rotor blades, wiring and plastic casings. "Everything's automated. You soon learn it's best not to go blundering around these streets."

The girl stepped closer and peered into the crate. "They're all smashed up."

"I'm fixing them. Salvaging what I can, anyway. Alexei is charging up the ones we'll use for today's flight."

In fact Alexei was in the front room of their squat right now, powering out another thirty clicks on the exercise bike they'd rigged up to a dynamo, trickling current into their battery array. Alexei took personal fitness seriously—which was lucky for their little commune. It meant fewer turns on the bike for Petch, and that could only be a good thing. He couldn't remember the last time they'd stayed somewhere with working power.

She pulled something from the crate. "What about this one?"

It was a simple quadcopter, a low-budget hobbyist model, just one step up from a toy really. All four rotor housings had at least one blade missing, and wiring spilled from its central housing like colorful guts.

"Yeah, that one's a mess. We got careless. Full-on impact. It doesn't pay to be in too much of

a hurry.”

She turned the machine over in her hands, then set it back on the pile of broken drones as though returning an injured bird to its nest.

He stuck out a hand. “I’m Petch.”

“Chloe.” But she didn’t offer a handshake in return. “Who’s that?”

Petch followed her gaze. The Prof was peering at them from behind the upstairs curtain of Number 32 across the way. Number 32 was pretty much the only intact building left on that side of the street, the last of a once-gentrified terrace of four storey Georgian-style houses. Back before the great exodus, this had been the archetypal millionaire’s row.

“Neighbor,” Petch said. “Old guy we look out for.”

The skater girl—Chloe—tipped her head to one side as though wanting to hear more. Petch noticed how her eyes were almost as dark as her pupils, which gave her a rather strange, exotic look. He realized he was staring and broke eye contact.

“He’s kind of our landlord, I suppose. Independently wealthy. When everyone started leaving, he bought up whole streets in the worst affected areas for next to nothing. Everyone thought he was crazy. Whole areas of the city were becoming a ghost town and people were glad to take anything they could get for their property. He was determined to stay though. The maps are his idea.”

It had begun as a way to map the most dangerous places; the streets and alleys and derelict buildings to steer clear of. Now, often as not, people bought the maps so they could find the juiciest nowhere places and stand and gawk. Funny old world.

“He donates properties to anyone willing to set up a commune near the worst hit streets, so long as we fly his drones and keep the maps up to date. And we burst bubbles as often as we can. That plus the maps let people move around in reasonable safety. But when the nowhere places start to crowd us out, we have to move on somewhere new.”

Chloe nodded as if everything made sense even though none of it did, not really. Her gaze swung back over his shoulder into the house. “Are those eggs I can smell frying?”

Petch smiled. “Sure. You’d be welcome to join us, Chloe. The house is guaranteed clear. We do regular sweeps.” He watched her for a moment. She was staring back at Number 32, so he nudged the crate of broken drones with his foot to get her attention. “You any good with a soldering iron?”

\* \* \*

Over breakfast, Chloe told Petch and Alexei a bit about herself. She lived out in the suburbs, she said, on the clean side of the cordon. Just a crummy bedsit shared with two other girls she didn’t get on with. Her mom had moved up north last spring, and her dad hadn’t ever really been on the scene. Upped and gone when she’d been little, back around the time the nowhere places story had broken. No brothers or sisters, no close family contacts.

“Must have been hard,” Petch said.

“Worst time was when Dad left all those years ago. I cried for a week. Work often took him away, so I’d convinced myself he’d come back sooner or later. I missed him reading me bedtime stories. He did all these silly voices that made me giggle. I loved him so much. But he didn’t. Come back, I mean.” There was an awkward silence that Petch didn’t know how to fill. “So I swore that someday I’d find him again.”

Quitting school as soon as she could, Chloe had spent six months working in a local distribution hub. That had ended when automation upgrades in the warehouse rendered most of the human workers redundant.

“A shitty job with shitty pay. Some lousy robot’s welcome to it. Thought I might take some time out, you know? Come to the city and get a closer look at these nowhere places everyone talks about.”

“Yeah, we get plenty of gawkers. But you need to be careful. The careless ones have this habit of dying.”

Chloe arched an eyebrow.

“True,” Alexei chipped in. “All the time, this happens. Is why you need maps. Steer clear of

the bad areas. Round here—" he waved an arm vaguely. "Is very bad."

Petch could tell she thought they were spinning her a line, exaggerating to impress her. He wondered if he should tell his tattooed-kid story. The kid hadn't been more than thirteen or fourteen; a tough, street-gang kid with the shoulder tats to prove it. And he had *attitude*. He'd just smirked at Petch's warning, then told him to do something that was anatomically impossible. So Petch had stood and watched him messing with a four-foot-wide nowhere place that had popped up in the street the day before. It was a big one. It hung there, invisible—unless you noticed the hole it left behind where wind-blown dust slipped around it and formed a kind of bubble. Floating . . . but anchored to *something*—maybe the very fabric of the Universe for all he knew—in a way that was truly immovable.

You got a weird kind of tingle from putting your hand on a nowhere place—a buzzy, itchy feeling one notch below the pain threshold—and some of the kids used it as a dare. *Who can touch it the longest? Bet you I can lie across it!* God help them. And of course touching a nowhere place was sometimes enough to trigger its collapse. Like poking a soap bubble. A nowhere place was the very definition of an immovable object—and yet sometimes they just . . . popped. They were nothing if not unpredictable.

The thing about tempting fate was that fate liked to rise to a challenge. In this case, the nowhere place had collapsed with the kid spread-eagled across its invisible surface, like he was levitating or something. The instant it opened, he'd crossed that boundary surface. Fallen inside, you could say. A fraction of a second later it vanished with a crack like thunder as the surrounding air imploded, and the kid went wherever it was nowhere places went when they collapsed—or at least the half of him that had fallen inside did. The other half stayed right here in this universe: an arm and a shoulder bearing its HATE IS ALL tattoo. It hadn't been pretty.

"So what's your theory, Petch?" Chloe sounded bored. "Everyone has a theory, right? Secret military weapon. Alien invasion. Rips in the fabric of spacetime. Punishment from God for all our evil ways?"

Petch studied her for a moment. Her stare was cool and defiant, yet he felt as though he was gazing at the placid surface of a lake where dark mysterious creatures roiled unseen in the depths.

"Does it matter? Our job is simple. Map-and-despatch. That's all we can do round here. Keep the numbers down as best we can." *And earn a living off gawkers like you.*

"So you actually collapse nowhere places?"

"Sometimes. Only those in the most dangerous locations. It all depends."

"On what?"

"How lucky I'm feeling." Petch stood abruptly. "Time for the first run of the day. You can watch if you like."

\* \* \*

Petch and Alexei began prepping drones, laying out a line of them down the center of the wide hallway. They were a ragtag bunch, mostly quadcopters, each no bigger than a pizza box.

Next, Alexei hauled a couple of filched traffic cones out into the street. Short antennae poked from their tops, held fast in globs of silicone sealant. He carefully positioned one over an exposed drain cover. Setting off at a trot, after a couple of hundred yards, he found the spot he was looking for and placed the second cone.

"We use GPS mostly," Petch said, "but these radio beacons provide additional waypoints to help with calibration. You'll want to watch the next bit, but stay behind the drones until they're clear."

Petch tapped out a command on the laptop perched on the kitchen counter. Suddenly the hallway filled with the whirring of dozens of tiny rotor blades. The drone closest to the open front door lifted. It took a moment to center itself, then surged outside. Behind it, two dozen more drones awoke and rose to a hover before swooping through the door. Petch, Alexei, and Chloe followed them outside.

The drones had lined up in a V-formation, spreading across the full width of the deserted street. They filled the space between the twin rows of ruined terrace houses, hovering just

above the litter-strewn road. Despite the gusting wind, they held steady, like a flight of metal-and-plastic geese frozen in the moment.

The hum of the rotors rose a notch, and then the V-formation glided forward at walking pace.

Soon, the line encountered its first obstacle in the form of a streetlight. One of the drones did a little jig, dropping out of position for a moment to jink round the post before zipping back into place.

"Neat, huh?" Petch said. "All the street furniture has been mapped and geo-boxed." Chloe shrugged.

The line of drones flew on, their hum growing fainter as they bobbed and weaved around various obstacles. Petch grinned, wondering if it was absurd that he was trying so hard to impress her.

"I thought they'd go faster."

"They will. But we need to be careful around nowhere places. Watch."

The formation had slowed. With no warning, a drone halfway along the line recoiled as though it had struck something solid but invisible. It dropped almost to the ground, wobbling like a stunned insect encountering a pane of glass. Recovering, it made an elaborate detour around the empty but apparently impenetrable space and sped off to regroup with the advancing formation.

"Been mapping that one for nearly a week. It's just one of the babies though. Slow-growing."

"Where are the big ones?"

He grinned at her. "Should have bought a map, shouldn't you? But I can show you later, if you want."

"I thought there'd be more to see," Chloe said, sounding disappointed.

"Everyone does. The gawkers want to catch the moment when a nowhere place collapses, but that's rare. Even round here, we mostly just hear them. The implosion of air rushing into a vacuum, you know? The bigger the bubble, the louder the bang."

"Is that why he stays?" Chloe nodded up at the window of Number 32 where the Prof was watching proceedings from behind grubby net curtains.

Petch didn't answer. Some things were better left unsaid. The Prof had been very particular about that, and Petch felt he owed him that much. Who else would have given him a roof over his head, and nurtured his latent talent for collapsing nowhere places? It really didn't matter why the Prof stayed in this war zone, as he liked to call it, only that he did. Sometimes though, on the days when he seemed particularly down, he would talk about leaving. Didn't think he had the nerve though, he said with a bitter laugh—and that's when Petch first realized he was talking about stepping willingly into a nowhere place. So he worried about the Prof and tried to keep an eye out for him, but they stayed in the war zone, content to observe and measure and speculate.

"So what's *your* theory?" Petch asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Earlier you asked me what I thought nowhere places were and just looked smug. So tell me your theory."

She sucked in a breath, let it out slowly. "I think nowhere places are a kind of cosmic collision point where two universes touch and bleed into one another. You know, like two soap bubbles stuck together until they pop. Parallel universes. *Here and there*, somehow merging or overlapping. Until a nowhere place collapses, anyway."

"And everything inside is destroyed." The explanation seemed too obvious for his liking. Too naïve.

"Who says anything's destroyed?"

"Oh come on." You only had to glance around the deserted city to see the truth of it. Everywhere you saw buildings pockmarked with bubble-like blemishes: smooth, partially spherical craters left behind when the nowhere places vanished. Some large, some small. Some formed in midair, leaving no trace behind when they collapsed. But plenty of others had gouged deep into roads or taken bites out of buildings. The subsurface ones did most damage: undermining



foundations, weakening structural integrity—even creating sinkholes. Nothing was left behind when they collapsed, the excavated walls polished to molecular smoothness like a work of city-wide installation art. Sometimes there were ghost-trails: lines of mini-bubbles spit out by their parent, the way raindrops running down a window sometimes leave a trail of smaller droplets. Touching a nowhere place in the wrong way could be enough to trigger a ghost trail. And god help you if you were standing in the wrong place when it was.

Petch continued the well-worn argument. “We’ve never observed anything coming through. It’s always one-way traffic. If nowhere places are collisions—*intrusions*, if you prefer—from some parallel universe, it’s a universe that doesn’t want to share.”

Chloe glanced up at him. “They scare you, don’t they?”

“Damn right.”

The formation of drones was returning, cruising back up the street a little higher than before. The whine of dozens of rotors dopplered as they passed by.

“Why are you here, Chloe? You don’t seem like just another gawker.”

She shrugged. “I’d like to go talk to your neighbor. He sounds like an interesting guy, and interesting guys usually have a story to tell.”

“Sorry. The Prof likes his privacy.”

She smiled. “Proves my point.”

The drone formation flew eastward, jinking around a long-ago vandalized bus shelter and a rusted parking-restriction sign, like some exuberant line-dance of drones. Suddenly two of the drones crumpled in a shower of fractured blades and metal fragments. Their wingmen were flung aside, propagating collisions along the line as onboard sensors fought to regain stability. The line faltered and broke.

“Shit,” Petch muttered.

Alexei, hearing the commotion, came running down the steps. “Is bad, I think? A new one? They not supposed to get so big that quickly.”

Petch aborted the sweep, ordering the remaining drones back while Alexei went inside for a plastic crate to scoop the broken pieces into. Petch reckoned at least two drones were beyond repair.

In his peripheral vision he saw the curtain at Number 32 twitch, but by the time he looked up, the face at the window had disappeared.

Chloe turned to Petch, her eyes bright with curiosity. He knew what she was going to ask and cut her question off. “Go inside. *Now*. Yes, it’s a big one. And newborn. Which makes it the most unstable kind. You’ll get your chance to gawk another time.” She started to protest, but Alexei gently guided her away by the arm.

\* \* \*

Once, he’d joked it was a little like bomb disposal. Except this was a bomb you couldn’t see, that gave no indication of when its fuse was activated, and offered no clues as to how in god’s name you were supposed to defuse it. All Petch knew was that when you felt it *loosen*, you stepped the hell back and just hoped for the best.

The Prof had shown him how. He’d said Petch had the knack and that not everyone did. It made him feel special in the rare moments when he wasn’t feeling terrified.

Heart thudding in his chest, Petch edged toward this latest nowhere place. It didn’t pay to be in too much of a hurry. Too easy to misjudge where you *thought* the bubble was. You couldn’t always see telltale signs: perhaps a frozen swirl of dust or some motionless insect caught within its timeless trap. Up close though, he could simply *feel* it. A crawling sensation that raised a bitter taste in the back of his throat.

He pushed past that feeling now, letting his hands trace out its invisible curves, ignoring the unpleasant jangle running up the nerves in his arms, as he tried to get a sense of its size and position.

This one felt slippery.

The breath caught in his throat.

*Ripe.*

No one knew why human touch sometimes triggered a collapse. For years now the various governmental task forces charged with investigating and nullifying nowhere places had talked endlessly—and uselessly—about certain quantum effects. Everyone knew that the act of observing changed the outcome of quantum-scale experiments. But nowhere places were macro-sized objects. Did that principle still hold? And why only sometimes? Petch had no real idea what it was he did, only that it seemed to work. When he touched a nowhere place, he liked to think of it as the boundary to another universe, a sort of bulge of nonexistence that was trying to break through. It was comforting to think that by his touch alone he could heal a rift between universes.

It was a paradox that nowhere places were sensitive to human touch yet totally impervious to any kind of physical force. You couldn't drill or cut into one. History had shown you could drop a skyscraper on one and when the dust finally cleared, the nowhere place would still be hanging there, unmoved and unchanged.

They behaved with a strange duality. In one sense they behaved as if the enclosed sphere existed outside the dimensions and physical laws of this universe. They didn't reflect or refract light. They possessed dimensionality but had no material existence within this universe. And yet what had existed up to the moment of its arrival was still there, frozen and inaccessible, trapped within this bubble of nothingness. And when the bubble collapsed, so did everything inside. Another paradox. It made his head hurt to think about it.

That queasy, slippery feeling was growing worse. Petch could taste bile in his throat, feel a trembling in the muscles of his arms. *Step away! It's starting . . .* But he held on a little longer, just to be sure. He felt afraid, yes, but he hated and despised nowhere places too. For all the damage and hurt they had caused, he would gladly see every last one of them collapsed if it was within his power. Unless one took him first.

He pressed his forehead against nothingness. *Go, damn you!*

Was that what he was—some kind of interdimensional priest, exorcizing demons from this universe?

Petch felt the change happen. In a heartbeat, the slipperiness became something sharp and tactile. Ice becoming sandpaper. Its surface quivered: a wild animal straining to break free.

He stumbled backward, his mind screaming at him with that most primal of instincts: *Run!* Had he held on too long? Part of him wanted to turn and flee, yet . . . He couldn't tear his eyes from the nowhere place. Like a curious child, he had to see for himself.

Not watching his footing, he tripped and fell hard. *Shit!* He scrambled backward on his butt. The skin of the nowhere place rippled and opened. The air surged around him, vapor condensing with the sudden pressure drop as it rushed inward to fill the vacuum. The force of it lifted him, dragging him forward as though the nowhere place was summoning him, a sacrifice to appease unknowable gods. Thunder boomed, felt in the rattling of his teeth.

Things got hazy after that.

Someone was standing over him. It looked a lot like Chloe, but his vision was blurred. If she was worried about him, she was hiding it well. In fact, she looked mightily pissed.

As his hearing drifted back, he made out what she was saying.

"Crap. Why'd you go and do that? You should've waited for me. I wanted to *see*."

\* \* \*

## II: Nowhere Places

It didn't start how everyone said. Not in a college dorm after some late-night bull session. Not in some lockup garage with make-do furniture built from stacks of takeout boxes. Not even in a haze of dope-fuelled creativity with ideas scribbled onto napkins in the predawn hours.

None of that—though maybe the bull session part came close.

It happened because Milo Penzias found himself with time on his hands. He'd been let go from his postgrad gig in computational theory at Cole-Maynard University. His supervisor blamed departmental funding cuts, but that was BS, and they both knew it. Penzias was unreliable. Some weeks he failed to show up in the lab four days out of five, and that kind of flakiness wasn't something the department could tolerate no matter how brightly the spark of genius

burned.

His drinking buddy, Jared Rennick, was a mature student in his forties, still tinkering with his final year thesis—already a year late and forever “just a couple of months away” from completion. The truth was Rennick had grown bored of his research project. No matter how much he wished it were just *done*, something more always needed doing: another line of research to close down, a rebuttal argument to be quashed. He was desperate to move on from this part of his life.

So Penzias and Rennick were both drifting, on track to nowhere—which, ironically, led them to the nowhere places.

Penzias came out with it one evening over beers. “I had this idea for a crazy game app we could build. You ever play Go?”

“No.”

“But you know the principles, right? So . . . what if we built a kind of real-world version? You know, Go on steroids. For the gaming area, we grid the real world into meter squares—a whole city maybe, or a country or, hell, why not an entire continent? The difference is, to claim a cell you have to *physically* step into that location. That’s all. Just physically be there. We track each player’s location via GPS on their smartphone.”

“O-kay . . . I’m listening.”

“You’ll have different game-play strategies available. For example—claim all the cells surrounding an opponent and you annex them, take their territory. Or maybe you don’t need to encircle them, just hold a block bigger than an opponent’s by some ratio—let’s say two to one—and wherever it touches, you gain their cells. Lots of possibilities! Kids can play it in the park or in their backyard. Office workers on a lunch break can stroll down the street and battle for virtual territory.”

“Still listening . . .”

“It doesn’t even have to be in real-time. Let’s say geo-cell ownership only persists for forty-eight hours. That’ll keep boundaries shifting. Victories will be transient. But the game app will keep track, little orange bean counters on a map overlap. Points gained for each geo-cell; double for captured cells. I dunno. Lots of possibilities.”

Rennick, ever the level-headed one, said, “What about all the places you can’t go? You want to get sued for encouraging people to trespass?”

“No. We only geocode *public* areas. And playing the game within the constraints of all those off-limits areas will make it more challenging. You’ll be allowed to form alliances with other players. No restrictions on how these are forged or betrayed. With time-limited claims, the gains made one day will be lost if not continually renewed. So players will need to think strategically.”

“It’s got legs,” Rennick conceded.

“C’mon. It’s got way more than that. A whole delicious body that moves like a catwalk model. If we do it right, this could be *big*.”

They’d called their game app “BeanThere”—a terrible pun but a good enough working title until they could come up with something better. BeanThere was going to be the Next Big Thing in real-world gaming. It was going to capture imaginations and—bonus points here!—get people out in the fresh air again. That would play well with the health-conscious nerd market, assuming such a thing existed.

And, just maybe, it would make its creators rich in the process.

A few thousand gamers signed up in the first month after the launch, but reviews were indifferent. *So what?* was the general reaction. Without much of an established player community, one’s options were limited. But there were also a few diehard fans, early adopters who didn’t just like the game, they *loved* it with a passion. Subscriber numbers continued to tick upward for another couple of months and then—*bam!*—the word-of-mouth effect took hold. Several internet influencers came onboard to recommend BeanThere, and player numbers doubled, quadrupled, and kept going. It left Penzias and Rennick scrabbling to scale computing power, patch their software, and somehow keep all the plates spinning to match this surging demand.



They drank a champagne toast when the millionth subscriber signed on. A few months later when they hit ten million, they barely noticed. Life had suddenly got busy.

And complicated.

Despite their best efforts, their geo-fencing was patchy. It relied on commercial datasets that were good but not perfect. A few idiots went where they knew they shouldn't. Players got arrested. Some got hurt. One died wandering along a freeway, another while trying to claim territory on a rail track. Despite the outcry, the publicity only fueled public interest in the BeanThere craze. It really did get a whole generation off their butts. An academic study (later withdrawn) suggested it forged better spatial awareness and social skills within a certain teenage demographic.

For a time it looked as if Penzias and Rennick would get to live out their dream.

Until Milo Penzias noticed something odd in the data.

\* \* \*

"Here. And another one over here." Penzias pointed at the on-screen map. "Maybe a cluster here."

"So what?" Rennick asked. The upcoming investor meeting had him on edge. The next tranche of development funding hung in the balance. The last thing he needed was a distraction.

"Just *look* at it. These are all geo-cells that have *never* been staked. Not by anyone. *Not ever*. Right back to the start."

"And your point is?"

"It's all public land. Look at the surrounding cells. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of claims in game-play over the last year. Doesn't it strike you as odd? Players have stepped into all these neighboring cells many times over but never this particular two by two cell? Why not?"

"I can think of a dozen reasons. Something physically in the way. A rock or a tree or something. A hole in the ground, maybe. Or a well."

"Look at the satellite imagery. Do you see anything like that?"

"So tell me."

"I don't know. But I think we need to find out."

\* \* \*

Later, when Penzias called, Rennick had all but forgotten their earlier conversation. He was pissed that Milo was leaving him to carry all the investor meetings and wrangle with lawyers over the increasingly tangled legal issues.

"Where the hell are you, Milo? You need to get your ass into the office to sign these papers or—"

"Jared, you need to see this for yourself," Penzias told him.

"See what?"

"This geo-cell. The one no one's visited. There's a reason for it."

Rennick let out an exasperated sigh. "For god's sake—"

"Because you *can't*."

"Can't what?"

"Can't step into that cell. You need to see for yourself. I'm sending you the grid reference. Believe me, there's something very weird going on. I almost don't want to be here. The closer I get, the more I feel I want to be some place else. I want to but I just can't."

"You're not making any sense."

"It's like some kind of nowhere place you can't reach."

\* \* \*

Barely thirty steps off the path that wound through a small tract of woodland, the undergrowth closed in and the stillness settled like a mist. It was only a few acres of wood, the kind of green space that developers were supposed to leave untouched in between their sprawling, new-build subdivisions. Tangles of brambles, nettles, and sedge grew beneath scattered pines. The local kids had trampled much of it, showing where BeanThere territorial battles had been waged.

*I'm wasting my time, Rennick thought. Falling for another of Milo's flights of fancy.*

The data wasn't wrong. He accepted that much. At one time or another every two meter geo-cell in these woods had been claimed at least once in gameplay—except for one unremarkable cell. The tracking data on the game server made it clear. Right in the middle of all this dense gameplay, one tiny isolated cell stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. A nowhere place.

*Random shit like this happens all the time. He should go.*

In fact, he was quite anxious to go. He started to back away.

"You feel it, don't you?" Penzias stepped out from behind a pine tree. His long hair was tangled and dirty. Rennick wondered just how long he'd been camped out here. "A sense of not wanting to come closer, right?" Penzias indicated a spot on the ground a few steps away. In the dim, canopy-filtered light it was unremarkable. A matting of pine needles around the gnarled roots of a Scots pine. A robin perched on a low branch, watching with a beady eye.

Rennick made himself take a step closer—and *that* was harder than he'd expected.

But there was nothing to see. The robin on the branch didn't move. It hadn't moved at all, he realized, since his clumsy approach. It seemed to be staring over Rennick's shoulder with a glassy gaze.

"See?"

He forced another step.

Something struck him in the face. He staggered back.

"Easy," Penzias said. He let his hands trace an invisible sphere in the air in front of them. "I reckon about three meters in diameter? Partly buried in the ground. Look." His palm made a slapping noise as he brought it down on the nothingness hanging in the air between them. "Solid."

Rennick was still staring at the robin, its branch lying within the perimeter of the unseen sphere. "How are you doing this? This is some kind of joke, right?"

Penzias didn't bother answering. He leaned against the invisible sphere like a mime artist pushing on a door that was stuck fast. Under different circumstances it might have looked comical.

"Don't—" Rennick swallowed, surprised at the note of fear he heard in his own voice. "I don't think you should do that."

That was when it began to rain, lightly at first, then a downpour. Raindrops began cascading down through the pine canopy, pattering into the soft earth. They bounced over the invisible surface of the sphere, droplets tracking down its curved sides to create odd lensing effects. You could see that the only place it wasn't raining was inside the nowhere place. The robin stared out at them with the same beady look in its eye.

Wordlessly, Penzias pointed upward. Rennick saw it then: a line of water-described spheres slanting up into the canopy like a streak of giant raindrops on a windowpane. "Holy cow," he muttered. "A whole string of them?"

"I think this is what you get when universes intersect." He let out a manic, half feral laugh. "Isn't this insane? And right now we're the only human beings who know about it!"

Rennick stared at the diminishing line of spheres. "This changes everything."

And of course it had.

When Rennick finally left, it was still raining. He'd taken only a dozen steps before turning back for one last look but the nowhere places had already vanished.

So had Milo.

It was the last time he saw Milo Penzias.

\* \* \*

### III: Interstices and Calibration Problems

Petch watched from the townhouse steps as Alexei walked a tour group toward the south end of the street where the no-go zone began. He was urging them to buy maps, especially if they planned on wandering solo, but there weren't many takers.

"Couldn't you, like, just *mark* them, dude? With spray paint or something?"

Alexei walked the group a few more paces then made them halt. "*Niet*, my friend. Nothing

sticks to a nowhere place. They are like little bubbles of nonexistence. You think maybe to throw a tarp over one? Again, *niet*. It will slide off. Is like trying to drape a cloth over something that is not there.” He dug deep into his jacket pocket. “But this you can do.”

He came up with a handful of fine powdered chalk, the kind weightlifters dust their hands with before a clean-and-jerk. He broadcast it in an arc close to where the group stood. For a few seconds as the dust drifted down it revealed a streak of nowhere places, from pea-sized up to fist-sized. Everyone gasped and took a step back.

“Quite the tour guide, isn’t he?” Chloe said, settling herself companionably next to Petch on the steps. She’d stuck around for a couple of days, happy enough to sleep on a mattress spread out at the back of the kitchen, paying her way by helping with drone repairs. At first her endless questions about nowhere places had seemed flattering, but lately they’d become annoying. She kept her guard up and despite his best efforts, he didn’t feel he was getting to know her any better.

“You think it’s wrong to take money off the gawkers?”

Chloe pursed her lips. “I’d say it makes you conflicted. You earn a living off nowhere places yet the next minute you’re destroying them.”

“Sure. The big ones. The ones that are most dangerous. That one the other day was an outlier. Arriving fully formed like that, away from the main group—that’s unusual. Then again, the focus of their activity drifts over time. All we’re trying to do is corral them in one place as much as we can.”

“Why?”

Petch shrugged. “Why are there nowhere places? You might as well ask me why the Universe is the way it is. Everyone wants to know where they come from, but no one has good answers. Have we done something to trigger them? Who knows? I think they’re places where the walls between universes have thinned and can intersect. Places where two universes exist in each other’s reality—although it doesn’t explain why they’re unidirectional. They take stuff from our reality when they collapse, but nothing ever comes back through.”

“You know that for sure?”

Petch sighed. “I’m not sure of anything any more. All I know is they keep coming, and we don’t know how to stop them. So I collapse the ones that grow too big. Like a farmer keeping the weeds down in their fields.”

Chloe was silent for a few seconds. “But they scare you, don’t they?”

“Damn right. And they should scare you too.”

Petch stood, stretching away the stiffness in his joints. “Got stuff to do.” He reappeared a minute later hefting a carrier bag.

“What’s that?”

He nodded across the way to Number 32. “Groceries and stuff. We look after the Prof as best we can.”

Chloe stood and stretched. “Let me help. About time I met your mysterious benefactor.”

\* \* \*

They picked their way around masonry piles spilling across the street where the row of terraced facades had collapsed. The abandoned houses were open to the weather, their once elegant rooms sagging and forlorn. You could trace a line of smooth round holes—almost bullet-like except for their beach-ball size—which had gouged chunks from party-walls and eaten away supporting beams. Number 32, in comparison, stood relatively unscathed. On its far side, the row of smart four-storey houses remained standing, but their frontage was marred by long soot stains above shattered windows. Fire had taken hold some months earlier, gutting the interiors.

Only Number 32 still counted as vaguely inhabitable—and that would likely change soon, Petch thought bitterly. Soon the slow rain of nowhere places would finish the job. They’d have to relocate a couple of streets over, waiting for the nowhere places to find them again.

The door of Number 32 stood ajar. Petch gave a courtesy knock, then they stepped inside the spacious hallway.

“Leave the bag,” a voice called from somewhere up on the first floor. “I’ll be down later.”

Chloe tossed a dismissive glance at Petch and began climbing the stairs.

"I don't think we—" he began, then hurried to catch her up.

Petch rarely came up here. The first floor landing was just as cluttered as he remembered: all the detritus of a single person's existence. Clothes lay scattered across chairs and haphazard piles of books spilled across every flat surface. A long window above the stairwell grudgingly admitted daylight through its dirt-smeared panes, but a warmer light came from the lit paraffin lamp standing on a dresser. Stubs of candles in saucers lay scattered around the room. A folding camp bed, pushed into a far corner, was rumpled and unmade. The landing smelt of stale smoke and unlaundered clothes.

"Who's this?"

The Prof shuffled out of the bathroom, drying his hands on a stained towel. He settled with an old man's grunt into an armchair by the head of the stairs.

"This is Chloe. She's helping us with the drones."

"We brought you groceries," Chloe said, sweeping a couple of books from a side table onto the floor so she could set the bag down. "Jeez. Fire your cleaner. This place is a tip."

The Prof scowled. "I saw what happened yesterday." He wagged a finger at Petch. "You're getting careless."

"The drones are fixable. But—" He glanced around the cramped landing. "We need to look for somewhere new. Too many nowhere places are bubbling up round here."

"We'll be fine for a while longer."

"Huh," Chloe said. "It's almost as if you *want* to stay close to them. You studying them or something?"

"Is this any business of yours, young lady?"

She shrugged and did a little circuit of the room, inspecting the scattering of possessions. She hesitated by the second door, cocked her head and then moved on. Petch hadn't ever seen what lay behind it. Most of the rest of the house was unsafe or unfit for habitation. There were upper floors—the landings, anyway—but the Prof didn't see the point in climbing stairs for no reason. He said he had everything he needed right here.

"I think—" Chloe said, as though testing an idea before saying it aloud, "Maybe the nowhere places *haunt* you."

Places shifted uneasily. "We should be going."

"Why would you say that, young lady?"

She shrugged. "It's kind of strange behavior, choosing to live right on top of nowhere places. You're studying them, I get that, because the government people gave up long ago. But maybe it's more than just curiosity. Maybe something else is driving you."

They fell headlong into a strained silence, and all Petch could think was, *Uh oh*. She'd taken an active interest in the Prof right from the moment she'd appeared. It occurred to him now that her arrival might have been no accident.

"I know who you are," Chloe said. "And why you're here. You like to call yourself the Prof, don't you? Is that because you're embarrassed by the past? Or does it help you forget?"

Petch looked from one to the other. The Prof was glaring at her, but Chloe seemed happy to stare him down. "You're Jared Rennick, co-discoverer of the nowhere places."

The Prof turned to Petch. "What have you told her?"

"Nothing! I swear! I had no idea she knew."

He turned back to her. "Why have you come here? What is it you want?"

Chloe shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. The truth, I guess. And to see what all your studying and analysis has told you about nowhere places."

The Prof snorted. "Then it's been a wasted visit. You think I know more than all those government scientists with all their fancy equipment and fanciful theories?"

"Yes—because they gave up looking for answers years ago. Back when it got too embarrassing having nothing to show but endless unprovable theories. Much easier to ignore the problem. Zone off one city and try to forget about it. Focus on other things. But *you* couldn't do that, could you? You couldn't forget."

"You've no idea what you're talking about. Petch—"

Petch took a step toward Chloe. "Come on."

"What's through that other door there?"

The Prof didn't answer. Petch had to admit to being a little curious himself.

"Okay. No problem. I'll just see for myself then."

The Prof moved fast. It reminded Petch that the man was a little younger than he looked. Too many years of this reclusive existence fretting over nowhere places had aged him prematurely. Now his hand was hovering protectively over the door handle ahead of Chloe's. "I don't know what you want, young lady, but it isn't this."

Chloe flashed him her trademark cheeky smile. "Why not let me be the judge of that?"

The Prof shook his head slowly. Then he opened the door and pushed it wide.

\* \* \*

The room was wholly intact—that was the first surprise. So why did the Prof squeeze everything into the stairwell when this room offered a good deal more living space? In its heyday it must have been a magnificent, well-lit drawing room. The period light fittings were still there, dusty and cobwebbed now. The wood-paneled walls were blotched with dark rectangles, witness to where paintings must once have hung. An ornately gilded mirror—almost opaque from the patina of time-accrued dirt—remained above a boarded-up fireplace. The rest of the room was bare of furniture. Petch could imagine elegantly dressed couples gliding across those polished floorboards to the sound of a gentle waltz, while sunlight spilled in from the tall windows.

The Prof circumnavigated the bare room, tugging thick drapes across the windows with some difficulty, and plunging the room into semidarkness. He began lighting stubby candles set in saucers placed around the perimeter of the room. His hands shook as he used a knife to scrape wax from the wicks, a trick Petch had learned from him to make a candle emit more smoke as it burned.

"Let me help—" Petch began, stepping into the room.

"Stay back!"

Petch was happy to comply. Something about the room with its echoes of times long past unnerved him—even more so now it had been plunged into gloom. Smoke curled upward. The Prof fanned it with an old newspaper. "You see?"

They did.

In the precise center of the room the nowhere place hung like a giant ghostly sphere. The smoke haze was patchy so the shape seemed to dance in and out of existence. Petch had never seen one this big before. Floor to ceiling. No—the bottom of the sphere was actually sunk deep into the floor, circumscribing a ring on the bare floorboards at least a meter wide.

"Jeez, Prof. Why didn't you say something before now?"

"It's slow-growing. So a small risk of instability. I thought . . . Well, I don't know what I thought. Maybe this one was meant for me. An excellent opportunity for study, I suppose."

Petch could *feel* it. It was almost as if the room vibrated at subsonic frequencies. He let out a soft hiss of breath. "Time we got you out of here," he said. "Christ. When this one collapses . . ." He tried not to imagine the consequences. "Alexei has been scoping out derelict townhouses two streets over. He's found one or two still in good shape. There'll be plenty of space for all of us under one roof."

"I'm not leaving."

"You can't stay *here*."

Chloe pushed past. Before either of them could stop her, she had walked right up, reached out and pressed a hand against the invisible surface of the nowhere place. A broad smile spread across her face as though now, *now*, she understood some of what the fuss was about.

Was it Petch's imagination or did its surface flare a little when she touched it? Brighten and take on more substance? Just a trick of the candlelight, nothing more.

He jerked her back. "Don't be an idiot."

"What did you mean?" she asked the Prof. "Maybe this one was meant for me?"

The Prof—Petch had never been comfortable thinking of him as Jared Rennick—started to



speak, but a coughing fit doubled him up. The candles were doing their thing, popping and spitting and sending thick smoke wafting around the room. Petch could feel it sting the back of his throat.

"Nowhere places follow me," the Prof croaked. "Petch—surely you've realized after all this time? We map their locations, study them as best we can, even collapse the dangerous ones. We try to make sense of their pattern of appearance. And when we're overwhelmed by their number and proximity, we move to a safer location. But they always come back, don't they?"

"Because we're in the zone," Petch said. "What do you expect? No one knows why they cluster here."

"And the clustering moves within the city when we do. It takes a little while but they find us eventually." He hesitated. "Find *me*."

Chloe said quietly, "And the Prof thinks he knows why. Don't you?"

Petch looked from one to the other. "Why?"

The Prof's face twisted as though in genuine pain. "Because what if it's Milo? All these years, lost on the other side . . . somewhere. Trying to send a message back. *Trying to come back*."

He stared at Petch. There was something a little desperate in his eyes, as if he needed to be told he was being stupid, that there was some better, more obvious explanation.

"Then why hasn't he?" Petch asked. "Because it's ridiculous! Nothing has ever come back through. Not once."

"Petch, you never met Milo. If anyone could figure out a way, it would be him."

Petch shook his head. He could feel a headache building, standing this close to a nowhere place. "Even so."

"What if all this—" The Prof made a vague, all-encompassing gesture, "is some sort of calibration problem? Aligning parallel universes doesn't sound like the easiest of jobs. What if all these nowhere places are some kind of misalignment effect? Maybe Milo is counting on me helping from this end."

"Prof—listen to yourself. This is crazy."

"You don't know Milo like I did. Do you recall those billionaire tech entrepreneurs a couple of decades back who thought they could do anything? No, I guess you don't. I keep forgetting not everyone's a crusty old guy like me. Well this one guy . . . they said he had this kind of reality distortion field that let him believe whatever he wanted, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. And sometimes that self-belief let him achieve amazing things. That's Milo, too. If he's alive out there in some next door universe, you can bet he believes he can find a way back." He rubbed at his temple as though trying to massage away bad thoughts. Moving to the window, he tugged the drapes aside to let daylight spill back into the room and hide the nowhere place. "But what if this is as close as he can get? You know, there's one interpretation of quantum theory that says we're only a hair's breadth away from an entire multiverse of parallel realities—if only we can understand how to cross the barrier."

From somewhere outside came a distant crack and rumble of a collapsing nowhere place. Petch flinched even though it was the soundtrack of his daily existence. You never quite got used to it. The others seemed to barely notice.

"I think he's right," Chloe said.

"No one asked you," Petch snapped.

"Well maybe you should. Maybe there are questions you should have asked right back at the start. The other day you asked me why I came here. I think you'd already guessed I didn't come here by chance. But you didn't ask who I was, not really."

There was a long pause. Petch hated being played like this, but he supposed there was no alternative.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Chloe. Chloe Penzias." She smiled at their dawning understanding. "Milo Penzias is the dad I mostly never knew."

\* \* \*

The Prof shoed them back into the stairwell living space while he made a pot of tea, heating

water on a little camping stove and fussing around to find a plate for the biscuits they'd brought in the food parcel. All the while, unanswered questions hung over them like ghostly specters at the feast.

"Are you here," the Prof asked her calmly, "to make me feel guilty?"

She shrugged. "I want to know what happened to Dad."

Petch stepped between them. "You don't have to talk to her. And we've no proof she's who she says she is."

"Proof? I see the resemblance now. I ought to have seen it earlier. She's Milo's daughter all right." The Prof spread his hands. "Chloe, what can I tell you that's not already a matter of public record? It was so long ago."

"But you haven't forgotten. Not something like that."

He stirred his tea, the spoon making a little grating sound on the side of the mug. "No, I haven't forgotten."

"All I want from you is the truth. I know Dad discovered that first nowhere place. He wanted to study it. But then he disappeared. There were rumors he'd fled abroad, leaving you to deal with all the fallout: all the media scrutiny and the finger-pointing, the collapse of your company. You were the last person to see him, right? Yet you always refused to say what happened. Did he *choose* to step into the nowhere place he found? Or—"

"What?" Petch broke in. "That's the dumbest question. Nowhere places just *collapse*. That's no secret. What other explanation are you looking for?"

Chloe kept her eyes on the Prof. "Is that what happened? An accident?"

His eyes fluttered closed for a moment, and his shoulders slumped. Petch waited for the Prof to tell the girl to go to hell. Maybe he should strong-arm her out of here right now. Sure, she looked fired up and ready to put up a fight but she had no right coming here—

"No. That's not how it was. It was no accident."

"*What?*"

"I'll tell you what happened, Chloe. I owe you that much."

\* \* \*

"I was trying to persuade him to come back to campus—we still had an office there—but Milo was camped out in the woods right beside it, or *them* as it turned out. Had been for a couple of days. I was worried about him. He seemed convinced something was about to happen, that more of them were going to appear. Or disappear. Whatever. He said he had to be there to witness it.

"I didn't like the way he was talking. It was all a bit too messianic for my liking, like he thought he was *chosen*, or something. I told him he was being an idiot—that we needed to turn everything over to the government and let them investigate, but he wouldn't listen. That was Milo all over.

"I'd gone out there to reason with him. The place gave me the creeps, though. He showed me the nowhere place deep in the woods, and when it began raining we realized there was a string of them arcing up through the canopy like a line of perforations. I half expected there to be a sign hanging there saying, Tear Along The Dotted Line. I couldn't bring myself to get close, but Milo didn't seem bothered. He enjoyed toying with them. Touching them. He just didn't feel the same sense of overpowering alienness that I did: something that had no right to exist, that didn't belong here. When I realized I wasn't getting through to him, I turned and started to leave. But he called to me. *Watch closely*, he said. I thought he sounded like a kid, pleading for the attention of the grownups, and I wasn't playing that game. I just kept walking.

"I took a few more steps but something, some feeling, made me stop and look around. Milo wasn't there. And all the nowhere places had vanished."

"Wait," Petch said. "You mean they collapsed?"

The Prof looked him in the eye. "No. Just gone. There was no sound of a collapse. No air rushing into a vacuum left behind. Total silence."

Petch stared. "It doesn't work like that."

"Not since that first time," the Prof agreed. He sipped his tea. "Funny, isn't it? That something

as Earth-shattering as nowhere places is first noticed by a couple of college-dropout game designers. Pure chance, I suppose. They must have been quite rare back then, like one or two dead pixels in a monitor. If nowhere places had been around for years, would anyone have noticed? Maybe there have always been a few sprinkled here and there.”

“But once you found that first one, a lot more started showing up,” Chloe said. “And the focus shifted, didn’t it, targeting more populated areas? Cities.”

“Like a weapon,” Petch muttered.

Chloe looked thoughtful. “Carry on, please. So you think Dad just stepped through? Like it was some kind of portal?”

Petch was shaking his head. Unless you’d been up close and personal, you couldn’t know what it was like in that final instant before a nowhere place opened. There was an overwhelming sense of barely contained energy. It was like petting a slumbering monster—docile, right up until the moment something changed, some unseen threshold was crossed, and then it struck with terrible swiftness. Nobody could step through the eye of that raging storm and survive, he was certain. “It can’t have happened like that. How would he have known the nowhere place was about to open?”

“Some people have an affinity,” Chloe said. “You said so yourself.”

Petch gave her a troubled look.

“Who knows? Maybe it runs in the family.”

“One thing I do know,” the Prof said. “After that, things started happening quickly. We found a lot more nowhere places. They began clustering in certain areas. And there was a lot more instability. They were popping up and then collapsing within a day or two. The effects were quite devastating.”

“Collapsing,” Chloe echoed. “That’s the difference. The very first time, the nowhere place didn’t collapse did it? It just opened and closed. You didn’t hear anything. You said you turned round and Dad and the nowhere place had simply disappeared?” The Prof nodded.

“If it happened once, it could happen again.”

“You really think your father is going to step back out of a nowhere place one of these days?” Petch asked.

“No. But what if he wants us to follow him? Maybe he’s sending a message to his old buddy here the only way he knows how. Didn’t you say they seem to follow you around?”

After the tea things had been cleared away, no one seemed to want to talk. Petch was sure they each had plenty of unanswered questions, but he couldn’t see a way to broach them without stepping back into an argument.

At the door, the Prof held him back. “You need to watch her carefully,” he whispered. “Around here, no telling what damn fool thing she might do.”

\* \* \*

Petch came awake in the darkness, not sure what had woken him, not sure if the nightmare was real. The room had been filled with nowhere places: big ones, little ones. Soap bubbles frozen in the air. Not that he could see them of course, but he could *feel* them. They were slowly expanding and drawing closer, penning him where he lay. Ghost trails skipped away unseen in the darkness, strings of microbubbles like pearls on a necklace.

In that dream, Chloe had been leaning over him. She was smiling, her eyes somehow iridescent even though it was pitch black. She spoke in a low voice, but he couldn’t make out all her words. It sounded like she was saying goodbye, explaining why she had to go somewhere. He tried to tell her to stay, but no words came. And that was when he’d felt the soft touch of his own breath on his face, bouncing off a nowhere place that must be hanging just inches above his face in the darkness. When he opened his mouth to scream, the nowhere place had expanded, engulfing him. It choked off the scream before he could utter it, swallowing him with a booming roar of intruding air and—

Petch sat up cautiously in the dark, breathing hard. Listening.

He reached out, but his fingers touched nothing.

Often the distant thunderclap of a collapsing bubble woke him. You never really grew used

to that sound. And sometimes, like now, he couldn't be sure if it was only the memory that had woken him.

He remembered what he'd said to Chloe the previous evening, though for a moment he couldn't be sure it wasn't all part of the same dream. "Be careful," he'd told her.

Chloe had glanced up from the drone rotor blade she was trying to patch together with glue on the kitchen worktop. "You don't trust me with this?"

"No. I mean around the nowhere places."

"Why? You walk right up to them all the time. You're the big, brave destroyer of alien things. Even though they scare you shitless."

"That's different."

"Is it?"

"Listen. I've seen too many bad things happen to people who got careless around nowhere places. People riddled with holes like machine-gun fire when they've ghosted. And plenty who've fallen through to the other side. Nobody's ever come back to say what it's like. *No one*. No matter what you want to believe about your dad. I just don't want to see that happen to you. I . . ." He shrugged. Might as well say it. "I care about you."

"Sure." She'd sounded noncommittal, dabbing more glue clumsily onto the broken blade.

"So promise me."

Chloe smiled, stood up, and walked over to him. She kissed him full on the lips. Petch was so surprised, he didn't react, standing there like an idiot. He was intensely aware of Chloe's body pressing against his, the scent of her filling his nostrils. At any moment he expected her to break off, perhaps pass the moment off with some sarcastic aside—but the kiss lingered. When at last she stepped back, Petch remembered to breathe again.

"I don't owe you any promises. That's not how this works."

\* \* \*

Petch stayed awake until dawn, a spin-cycle of thoughts churning in his mind. When he stumbled downstairs for breakfast, there was no sign of Chloe.

No one had seen her since the previous evening.

\* \* \*

He didn't bother knocking. Petch barged open the unlatched door of Number 32 and bounded down the stairs to the Prof's living space three at a time.

"Did you see her? Did she come back here last night?"

He got no reply except a muffled groan from beneath a pile of blankets heaped on the camp bed in the corner.

"The nowhere place—when did you last check it?"

The drawing room door was closed, and now he was here, Petch hesitated, afraid to have his fears confirmed. He imagined Chloe sneaking back for a closer look. He saw her hand gliding over the frictionless surface of the nowhere place. Exploring. Ever curious. She wasn't afraid of them like he was, and that was . . . not good. Nowhere places opened without warning. Suppose she had been standing right there when it collapsed? The booming inrush of air filling a sudden vacuum . . . Had that been the sound that had woken him in the night?

The blankets shifted and the Prof struggled upright. "Who? The girl? No."

"Are you sure?"

"You said *you* were going to watch her. She's got some dangerous ideas in her head."

Like trying to find her dad. He didn't doubt that she was serious. It wasn't some comforting little story to make her feel better about herself. She *believed* it. Believed Milo Penzias had an affinity with nowhere places and had found a way to step through into some parallel universe. And now all these years later he was waiting for others to follow.

Petch couldn't watch her twenty-four seven. And if she really wanted to mess with a nowhere place, it needn't be this one. There was no shortage around here.

He lit one of the smoker candles and stepped into the drawing room. Fanning the smoke ahead of him, he scanned the room looking for the tell-tale curve of nothingness in the semi-darkness. Several moments passed before he realized what he was seeing.

“Chloe! Thank god!”

His shoulders sagged with relief. She was right there, standing in the center of the room, her back toward him, staring intently at something near the curtained window.

“You had us worried! We thought—” He faltered, realizing where she was standing, and felt a further layer of calm descend. “So it’s gone.” Chloe stood in the space previously blocked by the nowhere place. He wondered if she had, after all, collapsed it herself or had simply found it gone. Not that it really mattered. He took a step toward her. Something solid and infinitely immoveable smacked him hard in the nose.

Bright lights exploded in his vision, and he must have fallen because, when he recovered his senses, the Prof was helping him up. He stooped to retrieve the candle stub. Its foul black smoke was sketching in the curves of the nowhere place clearly enough now, dammit, although . . . He could swear it had moved, was maybe a little smaller than he remembered? Unsteadily, Petch shuffled around its perimeter to the far side, still hoping Chloe’s presence—her frozen, unblinking presence—was just some trick of the light.

He stared into her unseeing eyes. Her mouth was open as though any second she would utter some caustic remark about the situation. Something sparkled deep within her eyes, and a look that might have been surprise (or perhaps curiosity) seemed ready to spread across her face.

She was *right there*, a couple of feet in front of him. Alive and yet . . . No rise and fall of her chest. No pulse in her throat. Frozen in a moment that would never pass, a slice of time held in stasis by the nowhere place. *Right there*, and yet unreachable.

“No.” The room swayed, and the Prof took his arm. Petch shook it off. “How? How did she get inside?”

“I think it’s a different nowhere place. I’m guessing she found a way to collapse the original and in doing so, triggered the formation of another in its place. Look at those ghost trails.” He pointed, and Petch saw the line of baby nowhere places slanting up through the ceiling, up through the floors above. Sometimes they extended for tens of meters like bullet holes punched through reality. This was a double ghost trail though, with a second line of holes punching down through the floor. It reminded him suddenly of a picture he’d seen in some science book at school, a linear diffraction pattern. A bright blob at the center with a line of smaller blobs stretching away on either side.

*Collimation.*

The word popped into his mind unbidden. He wasn’t even sure he knew what it meant.

Focused? Calibrated?

The Prof looked haunted. “I’m sorry. I never heard her come in. I should have kept the door locked—”

*Yes, you bloody should. But I should have watched her more closely.*

“Look at her face, Petch. There would have been no warning. No time to react. There was no suffering.”

“Don’t talk about her in the past tense. She’s right here.”

“Petch, there’s nothing we can do. When it collapses—as it’s bound to sooner or later—everything inside will . . .” He trailed off into silence.

Petch felt anger bubbling up. Was he supposed to just accept what had happened? Do nothing?

There wasn’t time to be angry. Later, maybe. “Stand back.”

“Petch—I really don’t think that will help.”

“Just stand back. If I can collapse the bubble, there’s a chance I can save her. Reach in and—” he faltered, feeling foolish.

“You know that’s not how it works. A collapse is near instantaneous.”

“I have to try.”

Ignoring the Prof, he reached out and placed his hands on the invisible sphere, inches away from Chloe’s unblinking gaze. He felt the familiar jolt of contact run up his arms and tingle down his spine. *Cold slickness.* This collapse would need to be smooth—smoother than anything he’d ever managed before. A slow, graceful collapse, if such a thing could be said to exist. One second—that was all he needed between its softening and the vanishing of the volume inside to



some other dimension. If he could just buy enough time—

Its and buts. It was all he had to work with.

He drew the nowhere place to him, pushing down hard on the raw terror that always came with contact. It stirred something primal within him. He felt its alienness, that sense of things out of place. It didn't belong here. But instead of pushing back, forcing it out of existence, he tried to open himself to it. To embrace it. You need to have faith, Chloe had said. But how exactly was he supposed to do that in the moment? You felt what you felt. That cold, primal fear echoed in his mind like a stone trapped in a metal drum.

He moved his hands a little further apart. *I welcome you. I welcome your touch. I will not destroy you. I will not send you back.*

The slickness of the surface felt slicker still. He thought he could sense the nowhere place loosening beneath his grip, like a taut balloon deflating.

He stared at Chloe's face, her gaze fixed on something just over his left shoulder, something that only she could see. Was it imagination or had that gaze moved just the barest fraction? *Hold on*, he thought desperately. *But when the moment comes, be ready.*

The transition was beginning. He'd collapsed enough nowhere places to recognize the signs. He ought to be getting the hell away in these final seconds.

Instead, he stayed.

The nowhere place took on substance. He could see the curve of its sphere as a tangible surface.

Soon now. Very soon.

*Come with me, Petch.*

He heard her words inside his head. Or perhaps he felt them through the trembling surface of the nowhere place beneath his fingertips. Her gaze *had* shifted. She was looking at him. Everything was slowing: thoughts, sensations. The passage of time was becoming insubstantial. Negotiable.

*I can save you Chloe—*

Her expression altered, fraction by fraction, a sad little smile on her lips.

*This is my choice. I'll find him again. I have faith, and that's enough.*

He tried to think what to say, but his mind spun uselessly with chaotic fragments. What thoughts he could muster were butterflies battering uselessly against a windowpane.

*Come with me.*

How could he do that? How could he believe in something he did not trust? Something alien that didn't belong here? Fear was reasserting its grip on him again. This alienness had no place in this Universe. And yet—

*Come with me ... Or come after me.*

In the next instant, the nowhere place collapsed.

\* \* \*

Had it been the normal kind, Petch knew the collapsing sphere would have sucked him in like a bug up the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner. This was ground zero, after all. He'd had enough lucky escapes over the years to know that this would not be one of them.

But it wasn't a normal collapse. The sphere began to glow faintly and became a milky, semi-translucent bubble for a second or two. He could see Chloe indistinctly, cloaked in a white mist. Then the sphere faded, winking out of existence with barely a sigh. Just before it did, Chloe came to life again, taking one stumbling step forward, like someone leaning against a chair that suddenly wasn't there any more.

Then she too was gone.

He reached for her, but there was only empty space—nothing but a waft of warm air against his face. Even that faded soon enough.

"She's gone," he said. *Idiot.* They could both see that for themselves. He'd needed to say it aloud to accept the truth of it. "She's gone, and we could have stopped her."

"No," the Prof said from somewhere behind him. "I don't believe we could. I think this is what she wanted all along."

Petch let out a long, shuddering breath. “Do you think she was right about the calibration part? I don’t understand how she could have known it would open for her. Nowhere places *collapse*. I’ve never seen one behave like that before.”

“But I have,” the Prof said. “Remember? That very first time when Milo stepped through. It was exactly like this.”

“You really think she has some kind of affinity? Milo too? An inheritable trait?”

“No. Just the same insatiable curiosity. Or the same mulish stubbornness. Who can say? But I know one thing. You and me, we’ve lived in fear of nowhere places too long. We thought they were hunting us, eating away at the very fabric of our lives, decimating our cities, invading our spaces. Who could blame us for trying to stop them? But that’s not what Chloe saw. She saw them as gateways. All that was missing was the key to unlock them. I think she found that inside herself.”

The Prof was tugging back the heavy curtains, light flooding into the bare room. “You know what? I’m tired of watching and waiting. Tired of being afraid.”

“So what now?” Petch asked. He felt hollowed out. Drained.

The Prof gave him a sad, knowing look. “Oh, I think you know the answer to that as well as I do. Don’t pretend otherwise. Patience. We choose our moment. Other nowhere places will come soon enough. And when they do, we gather our courage and quash our fears.” He gave Petch a strained smile. “And we follow.”

“Not me.”

“Aren’t you curious, Petch? Sometimes you have to open a door just to see what’s on the other side.”

“Nobody ever comes back.”

“Might that be their choice?”

“That’s a lot of faith to put in an unprovable idea. If you’re wrong, all that awaits inside a nowhere place is instant annihilation. Everything vaporized to atoms in a parallel universe.”

“Chloe had faith.”

“But she didn’t *know*. Faith isn’t proof of anything.”

The Prof sighed. “You’re right, of course. But faith is all we have.”

And the hell of it was, Petch *wanted* to believe. He wanted to believe that Chloe had slipped through the interstices of adjacent universes, that even now she stood in a dusty, derelict old room exactly like this one, only somewhere else. These were the thin places, where the walls between universes puckered and broke. Could there be something, someone, on the other side patiently waiting for the alignment to be just right, waiting to welcome travelers between worlds?

But how could he believe that?

Something on the floor by his feet caught his eye. Something he hadn’t noticed until now. The Prof followed his gaze.

The floorboards were coated in a thick layer of dust and dirt from their years of neglect. A few scuff marks traced where Chloe had stepped inside the sphere when the nowhere place opened to her. And there, next to them, scrawled in the dust as if with a finger, Petch could make out words. A message from beyond.

*Milo says hi.*

---

*David Cleden is a British SF/F writer whose work has appeared in venues such as Interzone, Galaxy’s Edge, Deep Magic, Cosmass Infinities, Metaphorosis, and Writers of the Future Volume 35. He was the winner of the 2016 James White Award and the Aeon Award (2017). This is his second story in Analog, after “Where the Buffalo Cars Roam” which appeared in the July/August 2022 issue. He has a website at <https://quantum-scribe.com/> and can be found on Bluesky as @davidcleden.bsky.social.*