

TREK

Jack Verson

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To Thalia

Whoever She Is

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Forward

This is the second book in a series investigating unusual planets settled by the human race. The first book, *Prism*, deals with a planet where everything changes colors, continually, and where the native life communicates using colors, not sound. This book, *Trek*, is the second in the series and considers a planet, *Trek*, a perfect planet on which to just wander around, enjoy life, and relax. A perfect planet, yes, but perhaps too perfect.

While it's not necessary to read *Prism* to enjoy *Trek*, there is some information presented in *Prism* that's useful in understanding parts of *Trek*. A brief description of that information is presented here.

All planets in this series are visited by expert planet investigators from an Earth-based organization called Escape, which takes on responsibilities for discovering, analyzing, and settling new planets. The head of Escape is a person called Ikenga.

Travel to distance planets was made possible by invention of the PSD drive. The time to travel between planets is limited by the speed of light, which for planets discovered so far can take up to fifty years. The PSD drive does not remove this limitation, but allows half the trip to occur in the normal flow of time and the other half in reverse flow. People on a fifty-year journey are placed in stasis for almost the entire trip. They wake after spending the trip asleep but not aging. After traveling back and forth in time, they find that when they wake only one day has elapsed in the outside world. To people not on the ship, a PSD flight appears to take no time at all.

The first book in this series dealt with a planet called Prism that had a major problem impacting the viability of human life. That problem was solved by two veteran Escape investigators, Vernon (a male) and Sam (a female), a solution that required the unique skills of each. Vernon and Sam eventually got married and stayed on *Prism*. They had a daughter whom they name Sienna. Sienna inherited many of the abilities of her parents.

Happy Birthday

Sienna wakes as the first rays of the morning sun enter her room, a second story window in the town of Dara Baile on the planet Prism. She's actually surprised when she realizes how late she has slept, being that this is her twenty-first birthday. Twenty-one is a major birthday for anyone and especially so for Sienna, who feels she has been looking forward to it more than any of her friends. But that's not really true. All twenty-one-year-olds feel that way. She has yet to learn the little fact that twenty-one is the last birthday to which anyone ever looks forward. She'll figure that out eventually, but not today.

This birthday seems like so long since her last major birthday when she turned eighteen, even though that was just yesterday. It's unusual to have your twenty-first birthday the day after your eighteenth. Most people born on Prism have them on the same day. It's the treatment of leap years that cause them to be different for Sienna.

Birthdays were always a problem for people on Prism or as a matter of fact for anyone born on any of the many planets settled from Earth during the last few hundred years. People around the universe need a way of computing age that is the same regardless of the planet one lives on. Birthdays are always calculated based on Earth years. Where you actually live is not important, at least not from a legal point of view. From an emotional point of view, Prism born people are connected to their planet. They want to know how old they are in Prism years. A Prism-year is longer than an Earth-year since Prism takes longer to travel around the Prism sun than Earth takes to travel around its sun. Six Prism years are almost exactly the same as seven Earth years, more or less depending on leap year treatments on each planet.

So, people on Prism have two birthdays a year, a legal one based on Earth years and an emotional one based on Prism years. The problem that all children encounter is which one to celebrate, Earth or Prism. This turns out to be not one of the most profound problems of the universe, or to be more precise, the Prism-verse. It's easily solved. What child doesn't like a good birthday? Nary a one. The obvious answer to the celebration dilemma is that they celebrate both.

That's the solution for children. For adults, especially for older adults, the problem also has a solution. Don't celebrate either. What senior citizen likes to have one birthday creep up on them each year, much less two.

Back to Sienna's birthday. Today she's twenty-one Earth years old. Yesterday she was eighteen Prism years old. Next year she may not care.

Sienna pops out of bed, gets dressed, and runs downstairs wondering what her parents got her for her birthday. Her mom Sam gives her a big hug as she sits down to breakfast. Her dad Vernon is still in bed. He was never an early riser. He thought he was, but he also thought that ten o'clock was early.

Vernon was born on Earth as was Sam. They decided to stay on Prism after completing their assignment on the planet about twenty-five years ago. The decision to stay was one to which both Sam and Vernon agreed. We're not really sure why Sam agreed to stay. Everyone who knows Vernon surmises that the twenty-five-hour day on Prism, allowing for an extra hour of sleep each night, was a major factor for him. But that is only surmised and Vernon's not talking.

Sam and Sienna talk about the day over a simple breakfast of lox and bagels, onions, eggs, scrambled of course, duono juice, and coffee. Perhaps simple is not the right adjective to use. They think it's "simple" because there're no capers for the lox, but that's just them. Breakfast continues.

Time approaches nine o'clock as Sam and Sienna hear an unusual noise. Something rustling on the stairs. On a normal day it's way too early for Vernon to be awake. But it looks like Sienna's birthday has caused the impossible to happen. Down the steps he walks.

This suits Sienna just fine. Mom, Dad, her, and a birthday present. Only one of those four is missing. Every child is excited about birthday presents and especially so on their twenty-first birthday. That birthday present is special. By tradition it's always something major to help the celebrant make the transition to adult life. Perhaps something as big as an apartment in Dathanna, the planet's capital. Money is always a popular choice. Some people high up the political ladder on Prism might arrange for their child to be offered a choice job. Rewarding jobs on Prism are sometimes hard to get. The gift of a good job

is not always as high on the desirability level as other choices might be. It's high up there for the giver but not so much for the receiver.

The best gift possible is what the locals call a New Zealand jaunt. That's not a trip to New Zealand. It's based on what young adults from New Zealand, on Earth, want. New Zealand while an advanced country is somewhat geographically isolated from the rest of the world. Young Kiwis often desire travel to see other parts of the world before settling down to a responsible adult life. Prism is extremely isolated from the rest of humanity, so the desire to travel by its youth is much more intense. The fortunate few get a trip to Earth. The wanderlust trip to end all wanderlust trips.

So, Sienna, a 21st birthday present! What will it be? Money, an apartment in Dathanna, an escorted trip to parts unknown on Prism, an off-world adventure to Earth. Or maybe just a new set of clothes. This present is the final major parental choice that Sam and Vernon will make before Sienna leaves home. Sienna wants to know what it's going to be and she wants to know now.

Sienna

I hope you're not as impatient as Sienna is to find out more about her present. Before we get to that part of the story, we have a history lesson to teach. The history of Sienna or at least the important parts.

As said, Sam and Vernon were sent to Prism to solve a problem, a critical problem perceived as fatal to Earth life on the planet. If they hadn't solved that problem, the alternative would have been to return everyone to Earth. Obviously by the fact that they're still on Prism twenty-five years later the problem was solved. The reason Sam and Vernon were able to come up with a solution is based on their unique capabilities.

Vernon is intuitive, which is the best single word for it. Intuitive may be a euphemism for his actual abilities. Vernon can identify with nature. He can feel the world. He can sense the wind blowing, the waters flowing, and the colors changing. He can understand feelings of Prism life, an extremely useful ability since Prism life doesn't talk, verbally. They communicate with colors, by emitting lights. Vernon can draw meaning out of Prism and out of Prism life just because he can. Often meanings that cannot be obtained any other way.

Vernon's feelings led to the knowledge that Prism life was more than just the animals, more than just the plants, and the vegetation, and more than the combination. Life on Prism was everything. The air, the water, the rocks, the plants, the animals, and the planet. Everything was alive. The whole world was connected; was one big happy family.

Sam's ability is no less important and no less amazing. She observes. She absorbs information from her observations, from what Vernon extracts from Prism, from comments made by others, and draw conclusions. She figures out meanings and makes plans. She's a quiet person normally but has her say when there's something to say. And when she does people listen because it's always something worthy of attention.

Sam's abilities allowed her to analyze Prism through the knowledge gained by Vernon about Prism. An analysis that only she could have made, that was only possible by understanding Vernon's feelings. The observation led Sam to the only conclusion that could have been made to save Earth life on Prism. A

conclusion no one else made. Prism was happy with what Sam did and so was everyone else.

Sam and Vernon's abilities combined to solve the problem that needed to be solved. A problem unlikely to have been solved by others. It was not the first time Sam and Vernon worked together to resolve difficult problems. It was not the first time they were successful. It was their first time on Prism. During that time, they learned to love Prism and each other. They married, settled on Prism, and had a daughter Sienna.

It appears that Vernon's ability to understand, to feel, and to identify with nature, and Sam's ability to reason, to put two and two together when others can't even see numbers, are both abilities that are hereditary. Sienna was born. She inherited those abilities. Neither ability was as strong as in either of her parents, but both were present in significant levels.

Vernon and Sam did not retire when they finished their Prism assignment. They were too young for that. They started a university on Prism, the only one of its kind in the known universe because it offered a program in the field of Planetary Philosophy and Psychology. There was a big hole in competent investigative professionals within their old Earth-based organization once they both left. To fill this gap, they decided to try to teach their skills to others. That's what their university offers. There isn't a big enrollment but they do charge a lot for the people who do attend. Their old boss Ikenga sends several to Prism to learn from the best.

Not surprisingly Sienna enrolled in this program, somehow getting a tuition break. And not surprisingly she excelled, managing to complete the program in three years instead of four, and three Earth years at that.

Sienna is no ordinary person. She can sense nature, she can understand what it means, and when a problem is presented, she can decide what to do about it. Nine times out of ten she comes to the same conclusion and resolution as Sam and Vernon do, or did working together. Nine successes out of ten very difficult problems. Impressive. The three of them, Sam, Vernon, and Sienna when they work together as a team are better. They can be successful eleven times out of ten. No, that's not a typo. Certainly you've heard of someone giving 110%. Same principle here.

Now, this statement that Sienna can solve almost as many cases by herself that Vernon and Sam can do together is not entirely true, and not entirely false. Before settling on Prism Vernon and Sam were Earth-based and were sent to many different planets, human enclaves, to solve problems. Serious problems. Those that impacted the ability of humans to survive in their extraterrestrial environments. All problems were different. Rules on each planet had to be learned on arrival. Vernon and Sam were very successful. They had only one failure. But all their cases were real; they gained their experience in the field. Prism was their last assignment. They stayed there when that assignment was over, never returning to Earth.

Sienna on the other hand was born on Prism and has never left. She never solved any of the problems that her parents did in the same places where they were originally solved. But Sienna was the top graduate in her Planetary Philosophy program. She was presented with her parents' problems in a classroom setting. She solved them. A bit different than real life, yes, but somewhat the same.

Sam and Vernon teach their skills to others to the extent that skills can be learned from material presented in books, can be reduced to a formula, and can be quantified. None of this is a problem for Sienna. Sienna has innate abilities inherited from her parents. Abilities others don't have. She learns what is taught in class. She grasps what the others grasp, what is logical, what is quantifiable. Because of who she is she learns easier and faster than others. That's the "Sam" in her.

Then she goes a step farther. She sees qualities where others see only quantities. Tangible observations can be observed by anyone. She can make those observations with no effort. What she can do and what others can't is to follow those observations with understandings of why they're being observed. On Prism, plants vacillate in the wind and emit various colors while doing so. Like greens and yellows. Others can observe and describe those colors. That skill can be taught. It is taught. Just be observant. Pay attention! Sienna sees colors like others. Unlike others, she also sees why plants emit the colors they do. It's the "why" that can't be taught.

Sienna is a potentially valuable resource to an organization like the one that sent her parents to Prism so many years ago. There's only one such organization in the universe, called Escape, with headquarters on Earth. Escape sends many people to attend the Sam and Vernon University of Advanced Planetology Philosophy. Graduates are guaranteed jobs within Escape at a level based on how well they do in their studies. Sienna graduated at the top of her class with the highest scores ever obtained.

When the time comes Sienna should decide if she would like a career with Escape. She's sure to be offered one. But that can wait. Most people don't decide on a career until after their 21st birthday and after their 21st birthday present.

The Present

That's Sienna. A person with great abilities, an intelligent and intuitive person, and one who might make a difference in the universe. What do you get a person like that for her twenty-first birthday?

She sits at the breakfast table patiently contemplating that precise question. Her mom and dad sit there also, engaging in meaningless chit chat, like club meetings they need to organize, what to have for dinner, and what classes to offer students during the next trimester. The semester model doesn't work on Prism with its longer year like it does on Earth.

Sienna listens as she sits at the breakfast table. She keeps wondering about her present. She knows her parents have it ready but are toying with her by keeping it hidden. She hates it when they play games like this but she's not going to let them win this one. She can wait a bit longer. Her mind focuses on their discussions. Vernon suggests they offer a class on the philosophy and psychology of planetary attractiveness. Certainly a good subject to discuss on Prism. "What do you think about this topic?" Sam suddenly asks Sienna, shaking her from thoughts of her birthday gift.

"The game continues," thinks Sienna, who's intent on playing along. She considers the question briefly but can only respond with a terse "Yes."

"Yes," acknowledges Vernon, followed by a somewhat sarcastic, "Good comment." Then he continues with what he wanted to say all along. "Consider this. On Prism, the settlers are productive. They farm and support themselves through hard work. Prism allows them to live here. They live well. They have a society that teaches people, keeps them entertained, and challenges their minds. A normal society that advances the human race, that generates new knowledge where society is better off now than it was seventy-five years ago. Prism is a good planet, a good place to live. Enjoyable, challenging, instructive. All good.

"But what if we encounter a planet that is only partially good? Good as in providing an environment where humans can

survive and be nourished, nourished with food and water. A planet good in its ability to support human life, enjoyable, unique, and interesting. Good in every way except in providing challenges. A planet that provides everything we need to live and provides it without any effort on humanity's part. A planet where there's no need or incentive for advancement and where people and society will be the same in seventy-five years as they are now. We might come upon a planet like this. Who knows. What should we think about such a planet?

"I believe a university course should consider all possibilities and discuss how to react to them. If not, it may be too late when we do come across this perfectly attractive planet. If we're not prepared, we might find out we've settled a planet populated by Sirens."

Sienna perks up to this comment. A purely hypothetical possibility but the hypothetical nature makes the topic interesting. There're many planets that humans have discovered but never investigated, plus innumerable ones that haven't been discovered yet. Any type of planet is possible. If there were such a planet, one where humans could live out their lives comfortably but without challenges and without advancement, would I want to go there to live out my life in boring comfort? Good question.

She decides she wants to answer her dad, thinks about what to say, and starts to utter her first word. Too late! She's interrupted when both her parents announce, "Time for your Gift! We believe it just arrived and is right outside the front door. Let's go see what it is." Those words were said in unison, almost as if it was planned that way.

"OK, about time. Looks like I won this game," Sienna thinks as she internally congratulates herself on a well-fought victory. She opens the front door to see her gift. And there standing on the porch is Ikenga, her parents' old boss from Earth, old being a double entendre. Shocked would be an understatement. Sienna is definitely not impressed at getting a sixty-two-year-old man for her twenty-first birthday gift. Maybe someone around twenty-three or twenty-four

would have worked, but not sixty-two. Some things do not get better with age and in Sienna's mind men fall into that category.

"My, my," says Ikenga, "you look just as pretty as in the pictures your parents sent me over the years."

"Another thing that does not improve with age," Sienna thinks, "are expressions. It takes someone that old to start a sentence with the words 'my, my'."

Sienna greets Ikenga courteously saying how nice it is to meet him and then turns to her parents, especially her dad. "OK, joke's over, what's really happening here?" Sienna may have been raised right greeting Ikenga with respect but her patience definitely has its limits and those limits have been reached.

"I've no idea what you're talking about." responds Vernon. "What makes you think I'm not serious about your gift? Perhaps a little explanation from Ikenga will help. Let's give him the floor."

"My, my, I find it somewhat insulting that anyone would not be thrilled getting me as a twenty-first birthday present," Ikenga starts, jokingly. "But I am the present or at least part of it. I've been communicating with your mom and dad for the past year, as you've been completing your university studies with such high marks. Top results never before seen! High scores in intuition and higher scores on the philosophy and logic scales. Impressive.

"Your parents have spent the last twenty-five in retirement. Yes, they have been running a university but they were doing so in retirement. Retirement from the job they're so well suited for, planetary investigators for Escape.

"You may not be aware of this but I've talked them into coming out of retirement after your graduation. Our department has a problem with a planet. A problem no one has been able to solve although we've been confronted with it for many years. No one

has even got close enough to come up with an idea. In fact, we've lost three investigators that were dispatched to solve the problem. Lost permanently or temporarily. Not sure which.

"One of the investigators has not been seen since before she started her assignment. The other two were lost at one time but eventually showed up again years after their disappearance. They showed up healthy as if nothing happened. Probably nothing bad did happen, physically at least. Emotionally, we're not so sure. They didn't want to come back to Earth. They resigned and stayed where they were.

"For them, staying on that planet was different than your parents staying on Prism. Your parents formed a life here, a productive life. They work, they contribute, they have friends, and they have you. The other two who were lost and returned, they just exist. They have no apparent purpose in life. They have no community, no goals. They do nothing. No contact with others. An active vegetative state, to phrase a true oxymoron.

"Remember that question your dad just asked you a few minutes ago? The one you probably thought was hypothetical, about staying on a planet that offered nothing more than comfort. You might have decided what you would do in such a situation. You might have started to come up with an answer but you likely wanted to first know if such a planet existed and be told more about it.

"The planet exists. It's called Trek. Trek is unusual. I know, what planet isn't? Trek evolved just like it was constructed for humans. It's a perfect place to live. Its axis tilts only 1%. This means that during its orbit around its sun there are no seasons to speak of. The weather is constant all year long. For Trek that means highs that are comfortable and lows that are perfect for sleeping. There are no animals larger than a small cat. The planet is lush with vegetation. Edible vegetation. Fruits and

Trek

vegetables grow in the wild everywhere. And the trees bear nuts full of proteins. One can live out in nature forever if so inclined.

“When Trek was discovered, we investigated the planet as we always do. The factors presented above were observed. We then had to decide what to do with the planet. We decided something unusual, to make it a recreational planet for outdoorsy people. ‘Outdoorsy!’ There’s another word for us of the 60 and older persuasion. Since it costs a bit to book an interplanetary trip, it started out to be a recreational planet for rich outdoorsy people. At first those were the only people who traveled to Trek. Now there are ways to get grants to go to there, to study as well as to vacation. Some companies are even giving trips away as promotional prizes. While “rich outdoorsy” are the preponderance of people on Trek, they’re no longer the only ones.

“We established a small town to support the planet. The town is hardly needed since most people who go to Trek just bring a backpack and go exploring. There’s no significant cost to support visitors on Trek. The planet supports them with climate and with what can be foraged. Some people stay for weeks, others for months. Some are never heard from again. We can’t send a search party to cover an entire planet when we have no idea where people go. Can you imagine trying to find someone on Prism when all the information you’re given is that they’re out there somewhere and may or may not be alive? Prism is about 500 million square kilometers. The populated area is about 50 square kilometers.

“Sometimes people who we think are lost eventually show up, maybe five years later, happy as can be. Our Escape investigators were two of those. After five years they didn’t look a day older than when they left and they were ready to go out again. It’s an addiction.

“What should we do to cure an addiction? We did consider leaving the planet but we really can’t. Too many people are out there somewhere probably enjoying themselves. I doubt that all will ever return. Some might return to town and then want to return to Earth. Some might be dead. Others might just be enjoying themselves. We want to do something but we’re stuck. We’ve no idea what to do until we find out what is really happening.

“Your parents are the only ones who might be able to give us the answers we need. That’s why I’ve talked them into coming out of retirement. They agreed to work on the Trek problem. And here’s my gift to you. I am not the gift. I am the gifter. You are the giftee. And the gift is your first job. A job as planetary investigator just like your parents.

“I wouldn’t have made a trip all the way to Prism to recruit just anyone to work at Escape. We need to step this investigation up as high as we can and send our best. Our best team. That team includes your mom, Sam, your dad, Vernon, and you, Sienna. I have reviewed your university results. You have all the combined abilities of your parents. You have skills I have never seen in just one person. My gut tells me we need you on this team.

“What an opportunity! To start your first job, a job you’re well suited for, and to be on a team with the best there is. And a bonus, those best are your parents. If the three of you can’t figure out what’s happening on Trek and what to do about it, then we have no hope of ever figuring it out.

“That’s it. I’ll leave it to you to talk about this at home without me. Whatever’s decided about who will or won’t be going to Trek, let’s meet for dinner in Dathanna tomorrow.

“I’ve arranged for a ship to depart in four days. Normally ships only go to Earth requiring a second trip from there to Trek. But

Trek

rank has its privileges. This ship will be going directly to Trek. It's close, only eight light years away. Since PSD ships travel at two-thirds the speed of light, it will take twelve years to get there. But as you know, PSD ships spend half their trip traveling backward in time and half going forward. You may be on the ship for twelve years but everyone not on the ship will see you arrive only a day after you leave. And since you'll be asleep the entire trip, you won't be aware of those twelve years.

"Happy birthday!"

The Decision

As soon as Ikenga leaves Sam and Vernon turn towards Sienna with big smiles on their faces. You know the kind of smiles they are. Well, maybe not. There are many types of smiles. There are smug smiles where the smilers know that what just happened is great for everyone. There are eager smiles that try to be happy, hoping that what just happened deserves a “happy smile” response. Then there are affectionate smiles that express love, to let you know what just happened was done out of love, nothing else. There are cheery smiles that say “whoopee.” There are joking smiles that say “ha, ha, gotcha.” And which kind of smile was just on the faces of Vernon and Sam? It was definitely one of those or maybe not. They were just smiles of uncertainty. The smiles fade. Sam and Vernon sit down and wait for Sienna’s reaction.

“OK,” Sienna starts, “I must admit that this was not on the list of what I was expecting for a present. Or on the list of what my friends thought I’d get. I need to let the shock of the actual present lessen for a while. What you came up with is interesting. All I have to figure out is what ‘interesting’ means in this case.

“Considering everything, maybe what you’re offering is no different than what I would be doing if I were on Earth. I hear that some Earth kids take a gap year after graduation to explore the world. Earth offers many places to explore. Prism only offers two and I’ve already seen those. So, it makes sense. I can take a gap year to explore the world. In this case it would be a different world. Doable, I guess. Enjoyable? Maybe.

“Pros and cons. On the pro side, I’ll get a chance to go somewhere I’ll likely never go to otherwise. I’ll get to use what I learned in school. I’ll be starting a career and I’ll be getting paid. Paid well, right?

“On the con side, I have to spend all my time right after graduation with my parents. I won’t be seeing any of my friends.

And I'll have to grow up right away. Not sure I'm ready for all that just yet.

"I think I need to work this out with my friends."

With that, Sienna opens the front door and leaves. Sam and Vernon find themselves alone. To say Sienna's reaction went according to expectations is not quite accurate. Sam and Vernon had no preconceived notions about what to expect. There was no expectation one way or another. They might have formed one if they had any idea how to do so. It's not like they could have asked any of their friends how their university graduating daughters reacted when asked to take a long trip with them to an unknown planet to solve an almost unsolvable problem. The best they could have hoped for happened. Sienna's considering it.

Where exactly did Sienna go? As she said, off to see her friends. Not really friends, but friend. One friend in particular, one friend she shares everything with, one friend she can trust to discuss whether to go to Trek or not. His name is Acmon, the son of her parents' closest friend on Prism. Before you jump to any conclusions, her parents' closest friend is Thalia. Thalia's not human, wasn't born on Earth, and wasn't descendant from Earthlings. Thalia is a Prism-born peeper. So obviously is Acmon. Peeper is not what they call themselves. It's a name made up by humans. Thalia and Acmon have no idea that humans call them peepers. The name popped into Sam's and Vernon's minds when they first met Thalia and it stuck.

The real reason they don't know what they're called is because peepers don't use words. No Prism-born life can speak or hear. No ears. Prism life communicates by light and colors. Having a spoken word that describes them, well, that doesn't exist in their world. It's like them having a name for humans that's mostly shades of green. A human would have no idea what that would mean.

Thalia had a son, Acmon, born about the same time as Sienna. They grew up together and communicate well. Like Vernon and Thalia communicate. They communicate by thoughts. Spoken words are not needed. Flashes of color are not needed. They just understand each other.

Sienna asks Acmon, “guess what I got for my birthday?” And she goes over all of the day’s events in her mind. Acmon reads her thoughts. He understands. Besides letting out a peeper smile when he realizes that Ikenga appeared at Sienna’s open door, it’s a rather normal human-peeper exchange.

Then it gets more serious. Ideas go back and forth between the two friends exchanged at the speed of thought. Acmon would love to see another planet. He would even love to see Earth, a strange planet where trees and plants and animals all stay one color. Amazing as that can be. The same color all the time, everything, except maybe for leaves changing color in the fall and people turning red when they get embarrassed.

Acmon and Sienna go back and forth about the advantages of going to a new planet. That’s how her mom and dad got here. That’s how she got here. There might not actually have been a Sienna if there wasn’t a Prism allowing her parents to get married. Experiences on new planets can lead to many unexpected favorable events. And what about the excitement of a new planet when you’re only eighteen, eighteen in Prism years?

And the disadvantages? There’s one big one. Others arriving on Trek are getting lost, perhaps never to return. Sienna could be one of those. Yes, that’s a problem to consider.

They go over the pros for another hour and then the cons for five minutes. When the pros outnumber the cons by that much, it’s decided. Sienna will be seeing a new planet, Trek.

Sienna and Acmon communicate goodbye. Sienna runs home and enters the front door. Her parents have a nice dinner waiting for her. She eats, thanks them for the meal, and goes upstairs to sleep. No reason to tell them what she’s decided. They played a game making her wait for her birthday present. Turn around is fair play. They can find out her answer at dinner tomorrow with Ikenga, just like everyone else.

Dinner in Dathanna

Sienna's first dinner out as a twenty-one-year-old adult could very well be her most significant. It's hosted by the head of a major inter-planetary organization, Escape, who made his first trip away from Earth ever, and that was just to see her. Possibly not entirely true but she's going to go with it. Another reason the dinner is significant is that two of the universe's most renown planetary investigators are in attendance. Again, the fact that these two investigators happen to be her parents is only marginally significant. Dinner attendees are rounded out with her best friend, Acmon, and his mother, Thalia.

Of all the attendees, you can't really call them all people since that would not be true, but of all of them, Thalia has the most impressive credentials. She's a senior member of the Prism planetary-wide governing body. No one really knows what her exact title is but she's been a member for about thirty years so it must be pretty high. At one time her job was as the main liaison between Prism and some strange non-Prism beings. Strange meaning "from Earth." At first it was thought that just encompassed humans. Then it was observed that she also communicates with all the animals brought from Earth. How does she do it? No idea. She never discusses the matter. Her communication has resulted in a lot of the human population on Prism feeling a bit guilty about why those other animals were brought to Prism in the first place. Most humans are now vegetarians, at least the ones on Prism. Peepers are also, as is most Prism life.

Dinner starts with a round of famous Prism wine, famous all over the two towns that currently occupy Prism. No one has ever seen a peeper drink wine before or knew that they ever did. Apparently, they do.

The main course is fondue. Cheeses made from old Earth recipes and vegetables grown on Prism. It's a safe dinner to have with Thalia and Acmon present. You know, vegetarian. Fondue is not to Acmon's and Thalia's tastes. They partake in their own selection, a collection of Prism-grown leaves and vegetation. They offer some to the human population present at the table. A kind offer but no takers.

Thalia and Acmon can communicate with everyone at dinner except Ikenga. He has not developed that ability yet. Understandable. He's only been on Prism two days. But it does generate some good-natured comments about his intelligence. How come cows have learned to communicate with peepers but not Ikenga? One comment about that fact is made, then another. The comments are short-lived since Ikenga is, after all, paying for dinner.

Dinner ends with a round of Prism coffee and then all eyes turn toward Sienna. The question doesn't need to be asked. Everyone knows what it is. In a sort of anticlimactic way, she announces that, yes, she's interested in starting her career with an assignment to Trek, assuming the salary is good. Stares from everyone about this comment. No verbal response but Ikenga does smile as Sienna makes her announcement. That much is settled.

Then Ikenga makes a big announcement of his own. One of the other Trek investigators who was lost for five years and who returned is suddenly lost again. Ikenga was told that this made people who run the small headquarters on Trek nervous. Some of those, actually many of those, are asking to be transferred back to Earth immediately. So many that the entire planetary operation is in danger. This could impact hundreds of people who are there for recreation. Ikenga had talked about this incident to Sam and to Vernon. All agreed that whoever was going to go to Trek would leave tonight. Right after dinner. That was going to at least include Sam and Vernon. Now it looks like it's going to be Sam, Vernon, and Sienna.

Before Sienna even understands what just happened, Ikenga turns to her and says, "Sienna, your parents packed your suitcase assuming you would decide to go. The shuttle to the PSD inter-planetary ship leaves as soon as dinner is over."

"Huh!" was the only response Sienna could come up with. Not up to her normal witticisms. On top of everything else, her new job and how she managed the announcement, she was proud of having won the last two encounters with her parents. Now it looks like she just lost one that she didn't even know she was playing. A big loss. Not fair. Yes, perhaps it wasn't, but then again, it's a good lesson in how fairness operates as an adult.

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Sienna did commit to making the trip and she supposes now is as good a time as two days from now. A quick goodbye to Thalia and Acmon is all that remains before boarding the transport up to the ship. The others at dinner, mom, dad, and Ikenga, are all going to Trek.

The hop up to the spaceship in orbit around Prism is fast. Sam, Sienna, and Ikenga make the trip OK. A small problem was observed with Vernon as they arrive. He might have gotten a little sick from dinner so Sam and Sienna go to the viewport to wait for their departure. They're told that Vernon will be examined by the medical staff.

Looking out at Prism from the viewport windows, Sam realizes it's been almost thirty years since her arrival. Thirty years since she has seen this view of the planet that she now calls home. Prism, with colors all around, with forests of greens, blues, yellows, and reds, with oceans of undulating blues and whites, with clouds of continuously rolling whites, greys, and blues. Sam will surely miss this when she arrives on a planet of consistent colors, like every other planet in the universe except this one. There's only one Prism. There's only one home.

Sienna looks over the surface of the only planet she has ever known. The left side of her brain logically knows that Trek will not look like this. Her right side has no idea what that planet might look like and how she might feel being there. At least Sam has some memory of life on another planet, Earth. A planet Sienna has been told about but has never experienced.

The ship slowly and smoothly leaves orbit with only a little hint of movement, like an ocean ship pulling away from its pier. One last glimpse of Prism. There rising swiftly from the oceans to the East of Dathanna is a bright beacon of red light, starting as a soft red and perking up to a brighter and deeper red. Sam knows what that is. It's a goodbye beacon of hope, of happy joy-filled hope from Prism, from the planet. It's kind of like the Prism welcome beacon they saw on arrival so many years ago. That beacon was not a happy one. This one is. A wish of good luck. Sam's sure Thalia had something to do with it.

The ship moves farther away from Prism. Time passes. It's not too long now until they'll have to enter stasis for their twelve-year trip to Trek. Sam and Sienna decide it's time to check on Vernon. He'll be sorry he missed the

goodbye gesture from Prism. They find the ship's captain and ask about the whereabouts of Vernon.

"Like I said," replies the captain, "he's being looked at by the medical staff."

"OK," says Sam, "where are the medical staff?"

"You have been on a PSD ship before, right?" states the captain. "You should know we can't afford to bring doctors on a ship with a few people that will only be awake for a day or two. He was sick. The medical staff is on Prism and that's where we sent him."

"What!" exclaims Sam with a clear tone of annoyance, "You mean he's not on the ship and that we're on our way to Trek without him?"

"I guess that's true. Once the path has been entered into the computer and activated, which it has, it can't be stopped. We reach the iota threshold in five minutes. That turns on the interstellar drive."

"Why didn't you let us know that Vernon was headed back to Prism?" complains Sam. "We could have gone with him or you could have delayed the ship for a day or two."

"Ikenga can probably answer that question in more detail, but the two main points are that this ship is needed elsewhere and has to leave for Trek today. There aren't a lot of spare interstellar ships around. The second point is that Escape urgently needs help on Trek and you three, well, now you two, are the only ones who have a chance of providing that help."

Looks like we weren't told because they didn't want us to know. Irritated and resigned to the fact that there's nothing that can be done before they arrive, Sam and Sienna enter the stasis room for their twelve-year nap.

Trek Arrival

A short sleep later, a short twelve-year sleep, and Sam and Sienna enter orbit around Trek. First things first. They immediately look for the captain to find out what they can about Vernon. The response isn't what they were hoping for but is what they thought they were going to get. Yes, it took twelve years to get from Prism to Trek but that was twelve spaceship years. During that twelve-year trip, six years were spent going backwards along the time axis and six years were spent going forward. It took twelve years to travel between the planets. As far as anyone not on the spaceship was concerned it only took one day.

A message about Vernon? If one was sent at the speed of light when their ship left Prism, it wouldn't arrive at Trek for another eight years. Electromagnetic transmission only proceeds in one time direction, forward. As strange as it may seem, the fastest way to get a message from Prism to Trek is to place a snail mail letter on a ship from Prism to Earth and then move it to a ship from Earth to Trek. That would take about two weeks but would arrive a lot sooner than the eight years required to send it at lightspeed. This is a modern take on the race between the hare and the tortoise. Light is the hare. The space ship is the tortoise. Who wins? In this case, it's the snail who's not even as fast as a tortoise.

Sam and Sienna stare out the viewing port at what will be their new home for the next few days, weeks, or months. The planet is certainly different from Prism, Prism being a one-of-a-kind planet. But it's also quite a bit different from Sam's memories of Earth. Trek looks like someone took a large paint brush and drew bands of color around the latitudes. The middle of the planet is all dark brown. Areas to the north and south show a mixture of browns and greens, brighter greens as one looks farther away from the equator. Discs of white emerge at the two poles. The colors are likely a result of the one-degree slant of Trek's axis. It makes the weather within a given latitude more or less constant year 'round. The area near the equator, the dark brown, is desert, that area being permanently hot. The bands fading to bright green, brighter the farther from the equator one gets, show typical vegetation growth for the temperate parts of the planet. And the polar caps have ice. All normal for a planet with no seasons during its trip around its sun.

The bands can be explained from the temperatures. What's unusual and harder to explain are colored spots scattered haphazardly here and there around the planet. Each band shows the color predominate for its latitude, but not everywhere. Spots splattered within the bands look like Trek was involved in a paintball tournament with one of its planet friends and that it lost badly. Or maybe just that it contracted a form of planetary measles. Lots of dots. Each measles dot is a slightly different color, but for the most part not too different from the predominant color of the band where it's found. Within the band of brown, there are many dots of lighter and darker browns. In the green band, there are spots of other greens and maybe a brown or white. Mostly each band has its own color and then spots that are variations on that color.

Another obvious point to even the least observant person is the vegetation. In the green bands the vegetation is plentiful and thick. There's no seasonal growing here. If a plant or tree can grow, it can do so all year long. It looks like the vegetation on Trek evolved to take advantage of this. Where plants exist, which is almost everywhere between the desert and polar bands, they are so thick that it's almost impossible to see the ground. There are a few breaks in the canopy of leaves, but very few. People wandering around down there are safe from being seen by anyone or anything orbiting the planet. This may add to the reason why the Escape organization was called to help. There doesn't appear to be any easy way to find people walking about down there.

A final feature hidden from all but the most observant, and perhaps the strangest feature of the planet, are very thin black lines. Black lines surround each of the spots. The planet does not seem to smoothly go from the predominant color of a band to the color of a spot located in the band. There's always a border around the spot, a border that looks like black from the spaceship's viewing port in orbit. Each black border is extremely thin and faint, so much so that many may not see it. Sam and Sienna see it since they are more observant than most. But even they almost can't convince themselves that it's real since it's so hard to see. They know it's there. Why do they know that? They can't answer that. What are the black lines that they somehow know is there? They can't answer that either but they're sure to ask someone. Somebody on Trek must know.

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It looks like Sam and Sienna will soon get an opportunity to ask that question and to inquire about Vernon. The captain has announced that the shuttle to the surface is ready for boarding. Sam and Sienna are the only ones going to the surface. Ikenga is staying on board as the ship will be leaving almost immediately for Earth. It's needed to be part of the regular Trek to Earth weekly shuttle. Trek had to miss one scheduled delivery since the ship was commandeered by Ikenga to get the investigators to Trek. That's been accomplished. Sam and Sienna say goodbye to Ikenga.

The trip down is uneventful. The landing runway comes into view during the last minute of approach. It was clearly carved out of the thick forest, the kind they just observed as being predominant all over Trek. Sienna makes a note that the trees at this location are Kelly green. Being from Prism, she's very much tuned into the subtle differences between shades of green, well, of all colors actually. This shade is one of her dad's favorites being that Kelly is an Irish name and he identifies with the Irish, as much as someone born and bred as a 19th generation Illinois resident can be Irish.

The two travelers from Prism are met by the planet's ranger in charge, a woman whose name is Ms. K. No one here knows her full name. Ms. K was shorted to just Mick and that seems OK to her. It's a woman named Mick that's in charge.

The person with the top position on Trek has the title of Ranger, since Trek, as a recreational planet, is under control of the universal park department back on Earth. Ranger Mick greets her new visitors with a very brief orientation. They're shown their living quarters in the park rangers' log cabin guest house. They're told to get meals at the one and only restaurant on Trek. And finally, they're released until a more formal meeting in two days' time. Sam and Sienna have the day off tomorrow. Escape regulations allow for a day recovery after an interstellar trip and any good park ranger knows how to follow regulations.

Before they leave, Sam explains to Mick the details about Vernon and asks if there's any news. "No," is Mick's immediate, abrupt, and expected reply. She lets them know that an Earth shuttle is expected three days from now. There will hopefully be some news then.

Sam and Sienna enter their guest cabin which they note provides the basic necessities and besides that is, well, basic is the only word that comes to mind. A living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. All equipped with basic wood furniture. There's a basic stove in the corner of the living room. And a small screen that looks like it could be connected to a computer network. They turn it on to find it can deliver basic information on the planet: maps and instructional guides along with a small inventory of movies. The movie inventory could also be called basic, but it won't be because that might be overdoing it.

A space trip always tires one out. Must be recovering from a twelve-year nap that is the exhausting part. The trip from Earth to Prism so long ago was more relaxing, thought Sam. Probably because she was able to sleep for fifty-two years on that one instead of a measly twelve.

Before calling an end to their first day on Trek, they check out the restaurant. Most of the menu selections are vegetarian. Makes sense on a planet like Trek. The only Earth life that has been brought to Trek so far, other than people, are chickens. Those are used to produce eggs. The only choices for protein for meals are usually either eggs or nuts from local trees. Sometimes the Earth shuttle delivers meats and cheeses. Transportation technology has improved significantly over the last thirty years so more food products can make the spaceship journey. Dinner options that include food transported from Earth, when available, can be pricey. Not a problem. Sam and Sienna are on an Escape expense account so they can afford it.

They chat with the chef, a man by the name of Fred, about their dining choices. Fred is one of the older people on Trek. You can tell that just by looking at him. He was also one of the first arrivals. He likes it here and has stayed long past his trekking days. Trek needs a cook. The job is not that demanding as there are rarely more than a handful of people for meals. It fits Fred well and it fills a job that is hard to get anyone else to take.

No food shipments were included on the last spaceship that arrived from Earth, or on the one that Sam and Sienna arrived on. Looks like they are going to enjoy their first meal made from Trek grown foods. They peruse the menu. The first choice is a nut and berry omelet. There is no second choice. At least

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the dinner decision is easy. Omelet or nothing. Dinner comes with a side of greens. Local greens that look like nothing they have ever seen before. Drink options include a bottle of Sauvignon Trek. They try some. Part of Sienna's upbringing and training from her parents included the ability to determine what is a good bottle of wine and what isn't, and when a good bottle is being served, to enjoy the taste. Putting her skills to the test, Sienna can agree that this bottle is, well, basic. Sam agrees, but they finish it anyway.

Dinner and a real sleep. End of day one.

Acclimation

Waking up to the first full day on Trek fills our new visitors with a feeling of what can only be called strangeness. Perhaps this is an indication of things to come but more likely it's because the rooms stayed one color the entire night. Colors change constantly on Prism, colors of the plants, colors of the walls, colors of the water as it leaves the faucet. Not significant changes but subtle changes. Subtle changes that people living on Prism are used to, that appear natural. On a world where the color something appears as now is the same color it will be later, well that's just strange. And a little disconcerting. Just because that's the way it is on all planets except for Prism doesn't mean that it's still not strange to them.

Sam and Sienna go down to breakfast. At least there are more choices for breakfast than there were for dinner. There are eggs with berries, eggs without berries, and pancakes with or without berries. Four delicious choices. Trek is not the gourmet capital of the universe. Since almost all visitors spend only a day or two in town before leaving to explore the planet and to trek around, there are very few people who actually eat here. No need for gourmet selections. At least the coffee is good, brewed from some beans that are native to Trek. It's something Vernon should enjoy once he arrives.

After breakfast they look for Mick to get some idea of where to go on their day off. Mick's job as host occupied her time a few minutes last night and she expects to resume that activity tomorrow. Today, being a cordial host is not on her itinerary. She has already left to attend to duties requiring her attention in another part of the park. Our Prism-lings are on their own.

Sienna does manage to find an information stand, a brochure of the park, and a map with a "You are Here" indication. The map is a little bigger than most you might find on Earth or so Sam remembers. Then again, this park is a little bigger than most Earth parks. An Earth-park might be somewhere between one and a hundred kilometers wide. Here on Trek, the entire planet is one big park. The park map is a map of the entire planet. That does cause it to be somewhat larger.

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Finding a smaller insert that covers the area around the “You are Here” marker, Sam and Sienna get their bearings and start off on their first trek of Trek.

This part of the planet, being the starting point for all visitors, has developed paths. Available resources don't allow paths to be developed over the entire planet but enough were created here to give each future Trek-er an exposure to what can be found over the rest of the planet. And that is almost all positive. All good. All relaxing, nourishing, and enjoyable.

They read from the park brochure while navigating around headquarters, walking along paths leading through forests of various plants, trees, and shrubs. Plants that yield fruits, many types of berries, nuts, and vegetables. All edible. The brochure makes a point that these natural offerings provide everything needed to sustain human life. Some nuts and vegetables on Earth are high in proteins. Many on Trek are higher yet. Some plants have concentrations of starches. Greens are obviously in abundance. Even desserts. No ice cream trees, but there are some very sweet fruits. And a seed that resembles cocoa. Plants of every type are conveniently planted around headquarters to provide complete nourishment to any visitor just for the picking.

This part of headquarters is the training ground for visitors getting ready to spend days, weeks, or longer periods of time walking around Trek. Brochure pictures show which plants provide which nutrients. Walk around the park, find something that looks good, take a bite, and then read what it is you just ate. It's something the average person should learn before they leave but it isn't an absolute necessity. There's so much natural food on Trek that it's almost impossible not to maintain a somewhat balanced diet. Since Trek has no seasons due to its non-existent axis tilt, food is plentiful and available all year long. New arrivals might think they need to pack food and water for a day or two but that's not really necessary. Food is available everywhere for the picking. Unless someone tries to walk through the desert regions. There they might have a problem. But entering the desert is not recommended and no one goes there. Stay in the moderate latitudes and there's no reason to ever leave.

Sam and Sienna wander through the park. They see the plants, the trees, the food as explained in the park brochure. They eventually come to a brook, the babbling kind, and sit down to enjoy the day. Relaxing by the shores and just observing the planet, they eventually do get hungry. Using what they just learned, they find themselves a nice lunch growing only a few steps from where they're resting.

That's how life is on Trek. There are a few animals on the planet but not many and none of them are dangerous to humans. In fact, there are no predators of any kind. Any animal can always get something to eat wherever they happen to be, so why go to the trouble of hunting something harder to catch than what's growing right in front to you.

Sienna and Sam continue to relax by the shores of the brook. Sam leans back and soon falls asleep. Sienna stays awake and alert busy identifying with the planet, with Trek. The skills she inherited are bubbling to the surface. Like her father Vernon, Sienna can also feel synergistic with the planet. She can identify with the trees. She can imagine what a stream's currents will do as they flow in front of her. She can make herself believe she is part of clouds floating, ever so softly, overhead. Perhaps those same clouds are also sensing her. Sienna can imagine that they are.

Identifying with the world of Trek is certainly different than identifying with Prism. There are many reasons for this. Trek isn't Prism. That's the obvious difference. Trek doesn't have the color changes that Prism does. The biosphere doesn't use colors to communicate. But there's more than that. Trek is the only other world Sienna has ever been on. Her dad has been on many. As has her mom. But this is Sienna's first. Her first experience with anything different on any planet. She's not upset or concerned. She's an intelligent person and expects differences. Differences as well as similarities.

What's similar? Well, the water still flows. The trees and plants still grow and bend back and forth in the breeze. They absorb the rays of the sun that help them grow. The clouds still float overhead. There is still peace on the surface of the planet. An order to Trek nature that has existed for millennia, to which the entirety of the planet seems to be in tune and which ties all of Trek nature

together. At least this part of the planet is like Prism in that respect. Sienna can't sense what is happening on the other parts of Trek.

What's different. Here is where Sienna is confused. She might even be a little worried if it wasn't too soon for that. Confused works for now. Confused as when sensing something that can't be explained. Where there are no feelings or experiences in one's memory that can explain a difference. Not yet. Maybe there will be, but not now.

And what difference is this? Sienna sensed something strange as she ate her first orange berry picked from a bush right next to where they were resting. The fruit tasted good. Everything on Trek does. All the fruit and vegetables growing here are healthy. They ingest easily. But soon after eating her first wild berry, Sienna felt lost. Lost for a second and then everything was OK. But for a bit of time everything was not OK. Disorienting. For a moment, Sienna felt like she was somewhere else. Perhaps her small bite made her think of home. Perhaps her mind wandered for a moment. All is OK now. She's back on Trek.

After a few minutes Sienna is also back in the process of identifying with Trek. Her mind focuses on the water in the lake. All is well there. Her mind focuses on the clouds floating overhead. All is well there, too. Her mind drifts to the clouds floating far away, almost at the horizon, as far as she can see. All is not well there. Like when she finished eating the orange berry, not an identifiable problem, but confusing, disorienting. The feeling of uneasiness that she senses now, that feeling definitely emanates from the clouds. They are confused. They are unsettled. They don't know why. They might not even know where they are. Strange.

Very strange for a cloud. But clouds are not solid objects. They exist, perhaps for a long time, but they change. It's like scooping a glass of water from a lake. You hold the glass of water in your hands. It exists. This unified glass of liquid. Then you pour the glass back in the lake and scoop out another. Again, you have a glass of water. It looks the same as before but you know it's not. Some of the water in the original glass may be in the second glass, but it would be almost impossible for every water molecule in the two glasses to be the same. You have created a glass of water that will exist as a single unit for a very short

time. When poured back in the lake, it will continue to exist but never again as a single unit.

Perhaps that's why clouds feel disoriented. Maybe they're formed and reformed the same way so they get lost. Possible, but not a complete explanation. Clouds back on Prism don't feel lost. Clouds on Trek feel that way. There must be a reason.

All Sienna can do for now is to file this experience away in her memory. She'll recall it later when it might be useful, if it ever will be. That's another ability she inherited from her dad, the ability to compartmentalize her feelings. Sienna does precisely that now. First, she hopes this feeling isn't a serious issue. Then, she tucks it away and forgets it ever happened.

Back to the reason they are on Trek. She hopes she'll still be able to use her skills to help solve the problem they were brought here to solve. A problem they'll learn more about tomorrow. For now, the day of rest is over. Sam and Sienna return to the cabin, then down to a delicious frittata dinner and off to sleep.

Planning

Sienna is up bright and early and excited to learn why she has been brought to Trek. Excited because this is her first assignment in her first job after graduation. Sam is up and also eager to find out what all this is about. But not as eager as Sienna. Sam has been through this before. True, her last assignment ended twenty-two years ago but it's like riding a bike. Once you do it you never forget how. Even, such as when one is working for Escape, each bike is different. But a bike by any other name is still a bike. How different can it be?

So far the only idea Sam has about the assignment on Trek is that it looks like they are going to be asked to find a bunch of people who may or may not want to be found, who may or may not want to leave Trek when they are found, and who could be anywhere on the planet. Possibly not the easiest assignment she has had, but certainly one of the least well defined for now.

A quick breakfast, some of that delicious Trek coffee, and Sam and Sienna take the long hundred-step walk to Mick's office.

Efficient. Mick is definitely efficient and is waiting for the two of them as they arrive. She has videos ready along with handouts to explain the problem and to describe what she and Escape would like done about it. Mick greets the arrivals, offers some cordial conversation for another ten seconds, and starts her presentation. Not the most personable way to start but she does start it with a note of personal interest.

“Before we start, you may ask about Vernon. Just to get this off the table, we haven't heard anything yet. As I said, the first ship from Earth that may have some news will arrive in the next day or two. It may or may not have some news. You may or may not be here then. If not, we'll try to get whatever news there is to you wherever you may be. OK, that's out of the way.

“The first detail you need to know, before finding out why you're here on Trek, is to learn why everyone else is here. Everyone else being the visitors. You know why I'm here. It's my job and the same for the other forest department employees. But there

are others. Lots of others. Visitors. Mostly rich visitors but a few of all types. Regardless, for the most part, they're all here for the same reason. To relax. To enjoy nature. Some are here to escape. Escape from what? Who knows? But it takes a lot of initiative to board an interstellar ship just to find a new place to walk around and explore. So, as far as the real reason others are here, I guess I have no idea. And to be perfectly honest, I guess I don't really care. Their reasons are their reasons. It's none of my business.

"Except in this case, some of their business is getting to be my business. People come here to be outdoors. The most perfect place in the universe to just walk around, relax with nature, enjoy the world. This world, that is. Enjoy by yourself with no interference from anyone else. Actually, that part does appeal to me. I guess that might be why I volunteered to be assigned to Trek.

"So, we have people show up as singles, couples, or in small groups. We give them a brief introduction to Trek explaining the abundance of natural food and the consistency of the temperature. They get a day or two to orient themselves and learn as they walk around about food from the trees and bushes we planted nearby. Walk the paths around headquarters that I'm sure you found yesterday. They also get a rough map of the planet. It's not very accurate but close enough.

"After a day, two, or maybe three, the people leave. We have no idea where they go but there are some limits. We are near the middle of a temperate band around Trek that extends for about one thousand kilometers north and another thousand south. People can wander within that range and never encounter uncomfortable temperatures. If someone likes it a bit warmer, they can head south. People who like things a bit cooler go north. How far can one go east and west? There are also natural boundaries in those directions. There's an ocean about two

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thousand kilometers to the east and another one a little farther to the west. All in all, people can wander around in an area of about ten million square kilometers. More than that for those who want to explore the desert regions or the poles. I suppose some could even build a boat and venture out over one of the oceans. Like we have no control over where they go, we have no control over what they do.

“Right now, there are about 475 visitors, trekkers, trekking around. Most of them have been here for longer than we had anticipated. I’m guessing that the average stay on our planet is slightly over a year. Some have been here for over ten years. Sometimes a person disappears and all of sudden walks back into headquarters five years later. With no communication in the that time. No interim sightings from any other trekkers who returned before them. They return, often with no explanation of where they’ve been.

“OK, so what’s the problem you may ask. People arrive. Almost everyone likes it. No one is complaining. Requests to return home are rare. Rarer than new arrivals. We provide an environment where people can sustain themselves. Even I fail to see what problem might exist, at least one significant enough to send several teams from Escape, the most recent one being the two of you. Hopefully to soon be the three of you.

“When I said I fail to see the problem, I really mean that I fail to see it with only the information I told you so far. There’s more, and the “more” is confidential. It has to do with the people that return and the people that don’t.

“Trek has been open to visitors for about forty years. Most visitors go out for a few weeks, months, or up to a year or two and then return. Everything is fine. No problems reported. They just had a good time. Then there are some visitors who go out into this world and return twenty years later looking like they did on the day they left, with no recollection of what they had been

doing over that time. Others return after a few months looking like they barely made it back alive. The stories they try to relate about their time away are not very believable.

“Something unusual is happening to these people. Something we’ve been unable to explain. There’s clearly more to Trek than just a nice place to relax. We need information on what we really have here. We’re looking at two possibilities.

“First, Trek might be dangerous. What happened to the people who left and never returned? If there’s something out there that’s a big problem, we’ll have to consider closing the planet down if we can. There would still be a problem finding the 475 visitors out there somewhere, some who might not return for ten years or never.

“Second, Trek might be beneficial, hiding scientific knowledge, knowledge available only here. Perhaps just basic routine science, but it could also be science beneficial to human life. We know from talking to the returning trekkers that Trek is an unusual place, a place hiding secrets. We don’t know where the secrets are being hidden, how they are being hidden, or even what they are.

“We have particular interest in people that stay away for a long time and come back looking as healthy as when they left. We know that Trek provides nourishment by growing food almost everywhere. It all appears to be healthy. We’ve examined all we can. They have basic nutrients you would expect but nothing in addition. Nothing unusual or unknown. Maybe there are foods in some far reaches of the planet that contain something extra. Could there be a rejuvenation plant? Perhaps a fountain of youth? How long has humanity been looking for that?

“And what about the opposite, the people who look like they have aged years for every week they’ve been gone? Are there

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some dangerous plants? We really need to know that before we release too many more visitors.

“The real goal here is to try to find out what you can about what has impacted people’s health, good or bad. Is it some special food grown on Trek or something else? If just one or two people had returned with aging completely uncorrelated to their time away, then we might have considered it to be an occasional anomaly. But it’s happening too often to be coincidental.

“The way we propose to do this is to give you a list of all people who are still be out there somewhere. The list includes each person’s age and when they arrived on Trek. In some cases, we’ve added information learned since their departure, from people who have returned and run into those others during their time on Trek.

“How do you get around the planet, you may ask. The only way we can offer is by foot. Growth is occasionally thick making surface vehicle travel is almost impossible.

“When you do find someone, try to get them to return to headquarters. If we do decide to close down travel to Trek then we’ll want everyone to go back to Earth. At least if they return to headquarters, we can let them know what’s happening and what they risk by going out again. If we close down the planet, we’ll likely run weekly shuttles to Earth for another year or so. After that, we’ll post a sign at headquarters that there will only be four shuttles a year to pick up stragglers.

“But what’s more important when you find someone is to try to figure out anything you can about their history on Trek that might be significant. See if they look as old as they should. Ask where they’ve been, the type of foods they’ve been eating, and anything else unusual. I’m sure you’ll come up with ideas about what to ask when the time comes. Then give them directions on how to return here.

“That’s it. I suggest spending the rest of the day going over the guide maps and making some plan. There isn’t too much you’ll need to pack except a tent and a change of clothes. Food is plentiful everywhere. There’s no need to leave right away. Tomorrow is soon enough. Any questions?”

Sam and Sienna look at each other, then at Mick, and one more long look around the room. No questions pop into either of their minds right away. After thirty seconds, Mick figures she gave them enough time to ask whatever they want. She leaves.

The two Prism residents get up, walk to the restaurant, and enjoy what will likely be their last civilized lunch for a while, as much as you can call the food here civilized. After lunch, they spend the afternoon looking at the map and identifying locations where trekkers have been spotted as reported by other trekkers who had returned to headquarters. There seems to be a spot about a two-day walk away where several were sighted. That’s the best initial destination. They calculate a path to get them there.

Later that night they enjoy dinner and wind up the evening staring in the night sky. Tomorrow may be interesting or not but will definitely be different. The last thing Sam notices before going to their rooms is a slowly moving image in the sky. She has seen many of those on Prism and knows what she’s seeing. It’s the shuttle from Earth that’s due in tomorrow. When she wakes up, she hopes to get news about Vernon. But not now. It’s been a long day.

The First Trek

The next morning starts as the morning before did and the morning before that. How different can days be when there's only one room for guests, one restaurant with almost no choice of meals, and almost everyone on the planet out walking around elsewhere. This is adding to Sam's and Sienna's desires to get out of here and get on with their job.

But first, another delicious breakfast and a final meeting with Mick. Of course, they start by asking if there's any news about Vernon. And Mick responds. She does have news, both good and bad. The good news is that they did indeed get news about Vernon. The bad news is it's not what they had hoped to get. They had hoped to get news that Vernon is on his way to Trek. The news they got is that Vernon's sick, stable, nothing that appears major, but not well enough to travel. The doctors are still testing him and doing what they can. The only prognosis is that he can't be counted on to appear on Trek for the foreseeable future.

No imminent Vernon arrival. Just Sam and Sienna. It looks like those two are about to enter an extreme version of girl's night out. An entire planet, no timeline, and nothing well defined to do. It could be days of excitement or days of extreme boredom. They'll soon find out which.

They talk over hiking plans with Mick and a guide named Alan. Mick and Alan know how to get around the planet and what areas are more passable than others. Sam and Sienna show them where they decided their first goal will be. Mick and Alan map out a path that should get them there. They're given basic supplies including water bottles, coffee, matches, a tent, a rope to help pitch the tent, and a primitive navigation device called a compass. Some food is included. Food is not often carried on Trek as it's not necessary, but Sam and Sienna aren't used to that yet. They want to take something they're not likely to find growing outside of headquarters. That category includes eggs so they grab a few. Hardboiled of course. Some more idle chit-chat with Mick and a minute later they depart.

Trek is a beautiful planet. There are small lakes everywhere with creeks and brooks meandering between them and plants of every color. The multitude of

colors remind Sam and Sienna of home, except that once the plants are seen to be one color, they are always that color. At least there are colors.

After a few hours walk they stop for a late lunch near the shores of a lake, a small lake only about fifty meters in diameter. They deliberate over which of the local plants look like they're going to offer the tastiest lunch. Mick told them to rely on their instincts. They do. Their instincts tell them to reach for whatever is the easiest to get so they start with some berries and nuts growing right next to them. A good start. They finish those and notice, a few meters away, plants they remember from their walk around headquarters. Plants that are rich in proteins. Another simple choice. They try some and they turn out to be surprisingly tasty. Even more tasty than the meals back at headquarters. Of course, that's like saying that water is wet. Anything would be tastier.

After lunch they lean back and relax for a few minutes before continuing their journey. Sienna pauses to enjoy a new connection with Trek. She lets her mind drift over her new world. She senses the trees, the rivers, the plants, and the clouds overhead. Like Sienna noticed yesterday near headquarters, she realizes that here on Trek connecting with nature is different than on Prism, more difficult. Maybe because it was always fun connecting with nature on Prism. Now it's her job. That puts some pressure on what had only been pure enjoyment before.

Sienna feels nothing unusual in her initial contact with nature out here in the wilderness. Clouds are clouds, trees are trees, plants are plants. Then her mind drifts over the water in the nearby lake. It floats to one of the creeks feeding the lake and follows the creek upstream. Soon her attention is captured by a downstream current. Her mind turns to follow that current back toward the lake.

The current tugs at Sienna's awareness. This current is full of old water with knowledge about Trek. Sienna realizes that Trek has more streams and more lakes than Prism. Water, especially water that has been on Trek for a long time, has traveled everywhere. Water comes down as rain, flows in a stream, settles in a lake, and evaporates. Evaporates only to be carried by clouds and dropped as rain again. Over the years water eventually travels the entire

planet many times over. Water on Trek has the knowledge of ages. Water knows the world.

Sienna senses that she can learn a lot from this water, so she tries. She lets her mind flow over the water and meld with it. Except their minds do not really meld. Water doesn't have a mind but it has memories, feelings, and experiences. Sienna senses those. She draws on them. There's information to be had from memories, even random, non-cohesive, water memories. Water's memories are disconnected. A thought here and a thought there. A fleeting image of something seen a long time ago, or maybe yesterday, or maybe a month ago, or maybe an hour. Groups of thoughts here and none over there.

Like blades of grass. Each one by itself means something, but not much. After all it's just a blade of grass, one of millions in a field. But look at the field. It may stretch for a great distance. It may be beautiful. It may provide enjoyment. It may provide nourishment. Yes, one blade of grass may not be much. An entire field is so much more. One thought from the water in a creek may not be much. But a hundred thoughts, or a thousand, or a few million. Now you might have something.

Her concentration continues. Sienna is now part of the water. She flows down the creek. She's part of a flow, first this one, and then one over there. From one part of the water, she gets an image of a shore. That water must have touched on several shores during its journey. Another flow batters against a rock, splatters through the air, and lands in a sound, a splash. To others it may be just a splash. But it's a sound. While it was flowing through the air, when it landed, it made a sound that was more than just a splash. It reminded Sienna of human speech. It had a feeling of words. Water doesn't speak, does it? Maybe it does. Maybe it just remembers. The phrase "babbling brook" may have more meaning than one thinks.

What other thoughts and feelings can Sienna draw from the water? Time perhaps. There is a definite concept that Sienna identifies as time. From a nearby eddy she draws impressions of distance and direction. A feeling here, a thought there, many experiences the water has come across and ingested into to its being.

The water has all those thoughts. All disconnected, disjointed, meaningless thoughts. Meaningless to water. Sienna knows what they mean. She can put them together into a cohesive explanation of events. They mean that upstream a few days ago, the water flowed near a shore and heard speech. People talking. Follow this little creek upstream and there will be a place where not very long ago there were people, humans, who could speak the language of Earth. Sienna learned from the water that they are on the right path.

Sienna ends her trance, the wanderings in her mind. Sam also wakes up from a short rest. Sam listens intently as Sienna explains what she just learned or thinks she learned. Sam smiles. Vernon had told her stories like this so many times on so many different planets, including Prism. Sam knows that the knowledge Sienna gained is true, perhaps just partially true, but most likely a major part. Rejuvenated after a short rest, a good meal, and their newfound knowledge, they continue their journey upstream.

Two hours later they come upon a watery dilemma. A Yogi Berra moment of truth. The river going upstream forks. It looks like the main river heads to the right with a smaller tributary coming in from the left. Which one should they follow? Which one was the source of Sienna's perception of human life delivered to her a couple of hours ago? How can they make this decision. Sienna can't decide but Sam knows what to do. It should be obvious to Sienna also but it looks like she needs a nudge.

Sam takes Sienna a hundred meters up the tributary around a small bend and behind some trees. Far enough to be out of sight of the main river. She asks Sienna to sit down and communicate with the water. A few minutes later Sam asks Sienna to get up. They walk back to where the rivers meet and walk a similar distance up the main branch. Sienna sits and communicates with the water at her new perch.

After a few minutes Sienna knows they should follow the larger, main, river upstream. She had heard what she needed to hear from that water and not from the smaller stream. The banks of the larger river are where her fellow humans are or at least there they were most recently.

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They are not yet close but getting closer. Perhaps another day's walk. They continue until nightfall and rest by a grove of orange berry trees, a patch of asparagus plants, and a tree of large treknuts. Treknuts are probably the most delicious and healthiest nourishment grown on Trek. It seems that one could live forever on just those. The first day in Trek wilderness has ended somewhat successfully.

Encounter

Another beautiful morning on Trek. There was a little rain the night before, perhaps what one might call a heavy mist. Just enough to keep the plants happy and not enough to cause a real problem to hikers. The sunrise greets them along with the chirping of a flock of local birds. Sam gently wakes to the sound she remembers from childhood and an earlier life on Earth, a sound that is nowhere on Prism. Indigenous life on Prism makes no sounds at all save just the wind moving through the fluttering of wings. Sienna wakes with a start. “What was that?” she exclaims. It must be hard to imagine what it would be like to be twenty-one years old, seeing birds your entire life and just now hearing your first chirp. No comparison comes to mind.

Sam and Sienna are excited to continue their search, hopeful that they will reach their first goal today, that being another human. In their excitement to leave they skip breakfast. No problem. When they get hungry, they can grab whatever looks edible along the way. The three-meal a day habit that seems to have evolved in human nature may dis-evolve for people as they stay on Trek. Is “dis-evolve” even a word? Maybe it’s un-evolve, or de-evolve, or evolve-less-ness.

The morning goes by fast or so it seems. Walking along a pleasant creek on a beautiful day with plenty of food to eat right next to you and birds flittering overhead is not like work at all. Although it is a work assignment that they are on. Sam enjoys the walk. As does Sienna. Sienna’s connection with Trek is growing. She feels the clouds and the trees and, of course, the water and Trek. All that is part of this world is kind and encouraging. Reassuring that she’s on the right path. To where? To what? That she doesn’t know but it’s the right path to wherever they’re going.

They know it’s going to be a long walk and take frequent breaks. A brief shower slows them for about an hour as they hide under their tent. The rain is not really a problem, the air and water are warm, but they have limited clothes to change into and cannot afford to wait while one set dries out.

The rain soon stops. The sun reappears. The creek is running faster with the new supply of rainwater, encouraging them to hurry up less they miss their

liaison. Who knew they even had a liaison waiting for them. They didn't but it sounds like the creek did.

Then as the sun starts its descent, they see two images that both startle them. Sam sees one. Sienna sees another. Sienna first. She sees someone, probably a trekker, standing a few meters ahead of them on the far bank of the creek. The water has subsided quite a bit since the rain so fording the creek should be easy. Sienna smiles and waves. The newfound trekker waves back. Sienna feels that he must be the liaison they were told about earlier. Told? By whom? Somehow, they knew.

Sienna looks at Sam and starts toward the creek to cross. Sam, yet to let Sienna know what she saw, stops her from entering the creek and from crossing it. Stops her at least for now. Sam points to the sky. To a cloud floating overhead crossing the river from the side of their first human contact to the side they're currently on. The edges of the cloud are smooth, continual, like a cloud outline drawn on a piece of paper for a child to fill in with their crayons. Then the cloud drifts over the stream and the continual lines break. They shift ever so slightly, so slightly that Sienna didn't notice at first. She notices them now that Sam has pointed them out. The lines are smooth on the far side. They are smooth on the near side. Over the river they are disjoint. One can imagine that the cloud was drawn on a piece of paper and the paper was cut and glued back together. But the person who glued it back missed. Put the paper back just a slight bit off. Like an earthquake that causes a slight shift along a fault. What had once lined up doesn't quite line up anymore. An earthquake in the sky. A cloudquake.

Sam may be the only person who could ever notice such an anomaly. The shift is small, slight, but it's there. It's there only if you know to look for it or somehow know that you should. They pause and look as the cloud floats from one side of the creek to the other. The break in continuity does not flow with the cloud. The break remains over the middle of the creek. As the cloud reaches a position exactly over the middle of the creek, it shifts very slightly in the downstream direction. Then continues normally, only it's not normal.

What could cause this? What else is unusual? Anything? Yes, they both notice another difference at almost the same time. Being from Prism could have

helped them. The trees and plants on this side of the river are mostly green. As are those on the far side. But on this side, they are on the average darker, like a forest green or a fern green. Over there most plants are lighter, a shade of green that might remind one of an emerald or a jade. Not a lot lighter but somewhat. And not all of the plants. Perhaps there are just different varieties that make up the preponderance of plants across the creek but perhaps there's something else. And what could explain the cloud discontinuity?

Then Sienna's mind drifts to what she knows, what she has learned in the last two days. Her mind moves again to the water to the consciousness that the water has: the subtle, slight, quiet consciousness. It's uneasy. It's not happy as it flows from one side of the creek to the other. It's disjointed and incoherent as it crosses that middle line right under the break in the clouds.

Sienna tells this to Sam. They look at each other and both realize what they're seeing. The break in the clouds, a likely similar shift in the water, and color changes in the vegetation. The breaks form the thin black lines they saw from space as their ship approached the planet. The thin black lines that seemed to surround the spots of color splattered within each of the planet's broad bands of vegetation. Colors of plants inside the lines surrounding the spots were slightly different shades than the colors outside. And the lines they thought they saw are not lines at all. They are breaks of some kind, breaks in continuity, shifts in the fabric of the planet: permanent, small, elusive breaks.

Sam and Sienna both know that they need to cross the creek to meet the person waiting for them on the other side. It's their assignment and the person over there looks like he's in no danger so they should also be able to cross safely. They start. As they near the middle of the river, the water gives them a warning. Sienna feels the uneasiness as she approaches that point, a brief tinge as she crosses, and then all returns to normal. Sam feels it also, slightly different than Sienna, but a definite awkwardness of movement. She compartmentalizes the feeling, certain that she will need to recall it later.

The Other Side

Soon they're across the creek. Their greeter walks up to them and starts things off with a friendly "hi". He looks to be in his mid-20s and introduces himself as Aidan. Sam and Sienna reciprocate with introductions, Sienna's being clearly more cheerful than Sam's.

Now that introductions are over with, it looks like Aidan has as many questions as Sam and Sienna do. Before their conversation continues any farther, Sam pauses to look over the list of missing people that Mick gave her, the list of people they're tasked to find. She's fairly certain in advance that Aidan isn't going to be on that list. While people his age might be among those who would like to spend time on Trek, they normally can't afford the trip. There might be some who can, but Sam doesn't remember any that young on the list she was given. And as expected Aidan isn't there. One more question they need to ask Aidan once he's done with his questions is "Where did you come from?"

"Welcome," Aidan continues, "to our little corner of the world. As the youngest adult in our group, I was sent to greet you once we noticed your approach. We don't get many visitors but, every once in a while, someone shows up like the two of you. Where are you from?"

That was a friendly start but confusing and somewhat intriguing. How many places are there where Sam and Sienna can be from? Is that just a polite question or a real question? And if it's a real question, how can that be and how did Aidan get to be here to meet them in the first place?

Sam takes charge of answering Aidan's question so she can say just enough but not too much. There could be more information to be gained from future questions that Aidan might ask if they don't say too much now. "We're from Trek headquarters and originally from Escape. We're looking for some people who might have wandered past here," Sam responds, letting out what she thinks is just enough to allow the conversation to continue.

"Ah, yes," Aidan innocently responds. "I've heard of Escape. There are some people in our village who have used that name. Funny. Those people also have the same accent as you do. They say 'Trek' for our world, which is almost the

same as ‘Treak’ but kind of twang-less. It’s a cute accent though,” concedes Aidan looking straight at Sienna when he says that.

Sam now considers the second curiosity she noticed in Aidan’s greeting, that of him referring to Trek or Treak as “our world.” He sounds like someone who has never been on Earth. Of course, Sienna hasn’t so that thought should be clarified to sound like someone who hasn’t been anywhere other than Treak. Was Aidan born here on Treak? Sam thinks about that. It might be the case. Trek has had visitors long enough and visitors who have been missing long enough. Aidan is young enough that he could have been born here. From Earth visitors. Some of those original trekkers might have decided to permanently leave Earth and settle here. People have settled other planets. Of course, in other cases people left Earth with the intention of settling on the planet where they were heading. But there’s no reason why they couldn’t have made that decision after they arrived.

Sam, Sienna, and Aidan continue their discussions. For the most part they understand each other quite clearly. No accent-induced misunderstandings. In some cases, Aidan’s Treakian speech does come out with some strange words but those can be cleared up later. Speech patterns tend to diverge after being away for many years and new vocabulary words are often introduced over time. Speech differences, wherever they come from, do not concern anyone.

Aidan appears to have some questions he wants to ask as Sam and Sienna surmised, but Sam senses he’s hiding most of those probably to be asked by the elders they’re about to meet. Aidan did say he was the youngest adult in the group so there must be elders and it looks like those elders coached him well about what to say and what not to say. For his part Aidan seems to be following instructions rather well.

Then there’s the village nearby. Underlying all the conversation the fact that Aidan referred to a village is worthy of thought. Sam and Sienna might be on the verge of finding an entire group of long-lost souls all at the same time. Whatever and wherever this village is, it’s clearly a place that needs investigating. Maybe a “eureka” moment is about to be had.

Trek

As if Aidan can read their thoughts, he stands up and invites them to join him along with the entire village for a welcome dinner. Why not? The sun is almost ready to set and they have to spend their next night somewhere. They get up, start the walk to the village and talk along the way. Aidan talks about his parents, his mother Judy and his father Cormac. Sam falls back in the walk and looks up those names on her list. Even though Aidan has provided only given names, Sam still has something to check. And she does find someone named Judy who arrived twenty-five years ago. There's been no correspondence with her since about a year or two after her arrival. That would fit into the presumed scenario that has Aidan being born here.

There's no reference to anyone named Cormac.

The two kilometer walk to the village and dinner site goes along one of the many creeks on Trek. With no paths built on the planet, rivers and creeks act as natural thoroughfares; something to follow where one won't get lost. Since people need to live near water the village is likely right on the creek, so walking along it is probably the fastest way to reach it.

As they walk, both Sam and Sienna look at the sky over the creek for signs like the ones they saw over the creek entering Aidan's area of Trek. They look closely for small breaks in the clouds. They find none. Sienna tries to sense feelings from the flow of the water, perhaps anxiety of some sort like before. There's nothing there. This is apparently a normal part of Trek. Normal creeks anyway and normal clouds. The only place so far where things weren't normal was when they first met Aidan. It appears they're now inside one of the splats of color they observed from orbit. Inside there's nothing unusual. Outside there's nothing unusual. What they experienced crossing the boundary is still open for discussion.

About half way there Aidan hears some rumbling in the undergrowth near their path, stoops down, and claps his hands softly. A small animal walks out from under a bush and strolls up to Aidan. It looks like a small six-legged cat. Almost exactly like an Earth cat except for the extra pair of legs. The six legs make it look like a giant furry ant. Cross an Earth ant with an Earth cat, adjust for size, and there you have it.

Aidan smiles. “Say hello to my favorite caat,” he says as he gives it a big scratch under the chin. That much appears to be the same here as on Earth. Cats and caats both like to be scratched. He picks up the caat and hands it to Sienna who follows his lead and has soon made friends with her first Trek creature. Maybe her second if you consider that Aidan might be her first. Aidan takes the caat from Sienna and places it back on the ground. It looks around, smiles, and runs back into the brush.

The three of them continue their short walk. Soon they round a final bend and off in the distance see a village. Just as Aidan said. It’s primitive. About twenty houses with thatched roofs like you would find in Renaissance England. Perhaps they might find someone named William among the group and be able to talk to him about the *Merchant of Trek*.

There are many people standing around, more than Sam and Sienna had expected, apparently preparing the evening meal. It looks like a commune setting, one meal for the village. Or maybe they’re preparing a community meal just to welcome Sam and Sienna. Aidan said he knew they were coming so everyone must have suspected that they’d show up about now. There’re quite a few people of all ages from young children on up.

Aidan walks up to one woman who’s apparently his mother and introduces Sam and Sienna to Judy. Judy looks at the two newcomers with an expression that appears to be mixture of mild interest and resignation, lets out a little smile, and extends a warm greeting. They exchange some small talk for a while until Judy invites them inside to get washed up for dinner.

Sam and Sienna look at each other as they enter the house. Words are not exchanged but thoughts are. Here they are on a strange new planet, a two-day walk from where they started looking for people on their list expecting to maybe find one, and instead finding one on the list, two not on the list, and a bunch more of currently unknown classification. Even that isn’t as interesting as the fact that the person they just met, Judy, who probably knows who they are could say nothing more than the equivalent of “nice day, isn’t it?” They doubt something like this happens every day in this village. It should have inspired a response from Judy deeper than just a bland invitation to dinner. Sam and Sienna both know they need to find out something more about this

village they stumbled into. Maybe they'll get more information from Judy, maybe not. As they whisper these thoughts between themselves, they both agree that the investigation can wait until after dinner. They're hungry after a long walk or a long trek or a long treak, whatever it's called here.

Dinner is fascinating. There are about thirty or forty people seated at two long tables. The youngest appears to be about three and the oldest is older than Sam. That's about all that can be determined. The people appear to be of two heritages, maybe more but at least two. There's a group whose skin is of a lighter shade and others of a darker shade. Not a significant difference, but as subtle as it is, it exists. Judy's coloring is darker. That of her husband, Cormac, is lighter. It's obvious by looking at the two of them and then at Aidan that Aidan is their son.

Sam and Sienna take a seat near Aidan and his family. Introductions are made all around the table. Everyone appears to be polite and happy to meet the new arrivals, but not extremely interested or excited. Yes, they're aware that there are some new people here. And no, nothing special. Another routine day. To them apparently but not to Sam and Sienna.

Dinner includes an interesting choice of what must apparently be a selection of locally available food. Fruits, nuts, and vegetables as are found all over the planet. Plus some fresh meat, the first Sam and Sienna have seen since their arrival. They have no idea what it is, but in the back of their minds they both hope it isn't caat. Drinks include wine, which looks a lot like the wine they had back at headquarters, the Sauvignon Trek. But this wine has one major difference, it's drinkable. That's definitely the major difference between Sauvignon Trek and Sauvignon Treak.

Dinner is a long affair in this village. It's apparently the major social event of the day. People wander from table to table after everyone has finished eating, to socialize or just relax before calling it a night. The people who arrive at Sam's table ask where they came from and how they found this village. Sam's responses about Escape and Trek headquarters draw courteous replies. Their comments about wandering along a random stream, seeing Aidan and crossing the stream seem to generate more enthusiasm and attention. Neither Sam nor Sienna explain the break in the cloud that they noticed over

the stream, the anxiety in the water as they crossed, or the initial help they received from the water as they started their journey. That's information that doesn't need to be disseminated just yet.

Several times Sam reaches for her list of people to see if any of her conversation partners are on the list. Each time she tries she's told to wait until morning. Social norms of the village require that no business be undertaken at or after the evening meal. That's the time to relax and wind down from the day. Sam reluctantly agrees. Business can wait until the morning, as much as she wants to start it now. Besides she gets the feeling that everyone knows why she's here and what she's trying to do. Sam also gets a feeling she's not going to like finding out that her hunch is true and what it means. It must mean something.

Looking around the dining area and out into the village they both notice numerous poles with lights on top, torches. There's no electricity. The torches apparently generate enough light for people to see each other and to walk around the town. Judy and Cormac offer for Sam and Sienna to stay in their house for the night. They have a spare room, well a room they will make spare but is really Aidan's room. He'll sleep in the common area. Sam and Sienna thank Judy and Cormac for their offer, thank the group for a nice evening, and leave with Judy and Cormac to their house. Today was a full and interesting day. Tomorrow will be fuller and, they are sure, more interesting.

Encounter, Day 2

The next morning the sun rises early on Trek. No, that's not precisely true. It probably rises exactly when it should, neither early nor late. It's just sleeping in a thatched roof house with walls formed very thinly from sticks and leaves, that inside the sun lights up the room a lot faster and brighter than in a house made from other materials. Houses in which Sam and Sienna are used to waking up. Whatever the reason, it certainly seems like the sun is rising earlier here.

They get up, get dressed, and exit their room into the main part of the house. Everyone else is already at the table and they're offered some breakfast. Choices include eggs with or without berries. At least there are some consistencies all over Trek.

Breakfast ends. Cormac and Aidan leave to fix a problem in the village and Sam and Sienna are left at the table with Judy. Judy knows why Sam and Sienna have come to the village and all three know what questions are going to be asked and how the conversation will soon progress. With no reason to delay this any longer, Judy starts.

"Yes, my name is on the list you have. I came to Trek about twenty-six years ago planning to hike around for a couple of years and return home. My parents were rather wealthy, knew this is what I wanted, and paid for my trip. I was twenty-five when I left Earth. If you talk to the other residents of this village, you'll probably find that ten or fifteen of them are like me, perhaps a little older when they arrived. They left Earth intending to return home, found this place, and stayed. Their names will be on your list.

"In addition to the inhabitants on your list, we have maybe another ten or fifteen that were born here like Aidan. There are twenty-five left over. Where did those twenty-five come from? I'm not 100% sure. They all admit to being from Earth and all can describe their lives perfectly, explain places on Earth that I

remember or at least that I remember hearing about. But you won't find their names on your list. Why do I know that? It's because there's another Escape investigator here. She also stayed. She has a list likely almost the same list you have. We've checked that list. We know what you'll find if you go through your name-match exercise. We've already done that. Like I said, we know the results.

“So, we have a village here. It started as a few people and grows. Every year a couple more arrive. And they stay. How many people show up and eventually leave. I'm sure you're about to ask that. That's easy! None! At least none that I can remember. We don't keep them here. They just stay. Like we expect you to stay. It's up to you of course, but no one has left yet. This is why no one at dinner last night appeared too excited to see you. They were but it's no longer unusual. And they'll have their chances to get to know you better over the next few years.”

“I can guess your next question so I am going to give you the best answer I can as to why no one has left. That's always everyone's next question at this time. It was mine. Why hasn't anyone returned to headquarters and perhaps even to Earth. The answer is they don't seem to be able to find their way back. They get lost or maybe there's no path back. Perhaps you find that unbelievable since Aidan knew you were coming, waved to you, and probably acted like he saw you. He could leave, couldn't he? Well, he knew you were coming and waved like he was instructed to do when he sensed you were near. But see you? No. No one can see over the boundary creek. You can see in. I remember seeing in but not the other way. And crossing the creek. Nope, it can't be done because it isn't there. Not there from this side.

“Feel free to check out what I just said. I already told you no one is keeping you here. That's true. But although no one is going to

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stop you from leaving, something is. You'll accept this eventually. Feel free to stay at our house until you get used to the situation. Everyone in our community takes turns welcoming new arrivals this way. It's now our turn. Let us know when you want to live in your own house. People will chip in to build you one."

Well, what do you know? What were Sam and Sienna's last thoughts before they went to sleep last night. That today was going to be more interesting than yesterday. They were right, weren't they? Interesting can be good. Interesting can be bad. If one were to guess, I doubt this version would be considered to be one of the good ones.

One thing is for sure that Sam and Sienna aren't going to accept what Judy thinks is a foregone conclusion. They're going to leave one way or another. But not just yet. They have to verify who in this village is on the list they have and who isn't. And where did those others come from? Plus, answers to whatever other questions come into their minds before they leave.

The two of them could ask Judy for some more information like what do you see when you get to the border with the creek, the place where they entered this strange area of Trek. That can wait until later. They can find out for themselves by just going there. For now, they tell Judy they're going outside and leave to wander around the downtown area. If you can call it "downtown." At least they leave to wander around.

They soon encounter a handful of the villagers out for a morning stroll. Everyone is friendly and everyone knows about the talk Judy gave them at breakfast. It's always the same talk and always loosens up the rest of the town to talk freely to the new arrivals. They soon meet another couple, Laoise and Kyle, enjoying a late morning cup of coffee at the town's only café that appears to be the central meeting point. A good cup of Trek coffee is always appreciated and Sam orders one. Sienna just has water. Sam finds Kyle on her missing trekkers list. But not Laoise. Sam observes that Kyle's general complexion is slightly darker than that of Laoise, as subtle as it may be. Maybe Kyle has been out in the sun a bit more than Laoise.

Kyle asks, “So, how are you taking the news about our village? We’re always glad to get new members. I suspect, at this time, we’re a bit happier about the situation than you are, right?”

Sienna yields the conversation to Sam who has had more experience in this type of verbal interaction. “Yes, of course, we’re a bit surprised and shocked with what Judy had to say,” responds Sam. “We plan on leaving anyway so we’re here to gather some information about how to do that.”

Laoise and Kyle exchange knowing glances. They know what Sam is trying to do and know that she won’t succeed. But they go along with her request anyway. They’re willing to help. Or at least try to help.

Laoise starts. “Yes, Kyle had the same response when he arrived about ten years ago. I had arrived about two years before him. Kyle was sure he was going to leave. But he’s still here and we’re making the best of it. I miss my home in Kilkenny and would go back if I could, but it’s not really bad being here. You’ll get used to it once you realize that you’re staying.”

“And I would go back to Killarney,” says Kyle, “at least I would have if I could have right after I arrived. But now I have a life here. Now I’m not so sure if, given the chance, what I’d do. But there’s no reason to waste time and energy thinking about it. Returning isn’t possible.”

The four of them talk more about life on Trek. It’s definitely primitive but certainly comfortable. No problems with the weather. An occasional rain shower is about all the weather they have. And no problem with food. Like everywhere there’s plenty of fruits, vegetables, and nuts, and even some local animals to provide an occasional supplement. Sam and Sienna thank them for the conversation and the coffee. Actually, the coffee is free. It has to be. There’s no such thing as money here, either tangible or electronic. Electronic currency would certainly be a problem with no electricity or electronics.

They wander around the area occasionally bumping into people and chatting. Always the same chats. Kind of variations on a theme. Some people are on the list Sam has. Some aren’t. Those who aren’t appear to be just as normal as those who are. All have similar stories. The stories for the non-list people are always reasonable if not just a bit off, so to speak. Nothing Sam or Sienna can

identify. And they also note that most of the non-list people arrived before most of those on the list. Not always the case but more likely than not.

Sam and Sienna talk about their assignment. There were a few things that Mick had tasked them to do. The first was to find people on the list. That's been done as well as can be done at this location. The second was to find out about those people's history on Trek. OK, another goal accomplished. The third goal was to tell those found people about the possible change in shuttle schedule for transport back to Earth. I guess that information could be provided but it sounds like a useless task. People here can't seem to be able to get to the shuttle and don't appear to want to if they could.

Soon it's lunch and they sit down at the café to get some nourishment. They got used rather easily to the fact that meals are free for the asking. Nothing gourmet but good, as they have come to expect on Trek. They find a table, order a small plate of local fruit, and talk about plans. Now that their goals from Mick are understood and those that can be accomplished are accomplished, it's time to concentrate on getting out of here. Sam and Sienna have one piece of information that Judy does not have, and likely that no one else in this village has. They know that many people on Trek, many Earth visitors, disappear for a long time and eventually return. It doesn't appear that many do this, but some. And if any of those that returned after a long departure were ones who wandered into this village or villages like this one, then there must be a way to leave. The people here haven't found that way yet but it must exist. It must!

As they sit at the café going over their options, they're soon joined by Aidan. And right after that someone else sits down, a member of the village that they haven't met yet, Duncan. Duncan knows who Sam and Sienna are, as does everyone else here. Duncan is the newest arrival to the village, except for Sam and Sienna, but he hasn't been here very long. Duncan surprises them by starting off the conversation asking about the health of Vernon. What! How did he know about Vernon, much less know anything about him including that he's sick and related to them? How does he know more than Sam does? They ask Duncan what he means by his question.

Surprised a bit himself, Duncan says “It looks like you don’t remember me. Maybe Vernon talked about me to you, maybe not. I understand he’s suffering from cancer and I was wondering how he’s doing.”

Sam, a bit irritated, replies “No, Vernon never mentioned that he knew anyone named Duncan. We haven’t heard about his health. We haven’t heard about any cancer. How did you find that out? How could you even have found it out?”

Duncan looks a bit confused by this response and decides it’s time to back off. “I thought I’d heard that a while ago. Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe I got him mixed up with someone else. Sorry if I upset you.”

Duncan leaves, looking a bit befuddled. Befuddlement is the general theme around the table. Sam and Sienna wonder where Duncan met Vernon and when he learned about Vernon’s illness. And why was Duncan’s name not on Mick’s list?

At least Aidan is still here and he’s just the person Sam and Sienna want to see. Aidan can lead them to their entry point, to the place at the creek where they crossed to get to this strange place. Yes, this place is strange. Nice perhaps to some extent, but strange definitely. Sam is beginning to think this place is getting stranger every second. Sienna agrees. They ask Aidan to take them to the place they met so that they might leave. It’s not hard to see the smile on Aidan’s face, a smile he’s trying to stifle. The meaning of the stifled smile is obvious. At least his attempt to hold back laughter is more successful.

“Sure,” he says, “that’s the normal request, the normal progression of requests from people when they find themselves here. We can go. In fact I’ve already been told to prepare for the trip. We can go first thing in the morning, so there’s time to walk there, do whatever you want, and walk back when you find that you’re still here. We can leave right after breakfast.”

As this conversation is going on, they’re joined by yet another person, Anna. Anna says hi to Aidan. Of course. In a village this small, everyone knows everyone. Then she sits down, greets Sam and asks her about some people, some special people, Mick and Ikenga. That might be a surprise to many but Sam and Sienna both instantly realize who Anna is. Judy mentioned there was

another Escape employee who entered the village with a list of people, looking for those people like Sam and Sienna are. Also, Ikenga's briefing said that Sam and Sienna were not the first ones sent to try to solve the problem of the missing trekkers. Anna must be one of their predecessors.

Anna is impressed to meet Sam. She tells them that Sam is a legend at Escape headquarters back on Earth, as is Vernon. But mostly Sam, since she came up with the solution to the Prism crisis. Very impressive that someone could internalize the feelings of a stone well enough to see a problem and find a solution. The stone should have been red, but wasn't. Quite an insight! Anna doubts anyone else could have realized, in time, what Sam realized.

Sam's getting a bit red herself hearing the unending praise from Anna. Sienna is just smiling, listening to the accolades of her mother.

Then conversation with Anna progresses to talk about the upcoming attempt to leave this area of Trek and return to headquarters. Like the others, Anna tried to leave but couldn't. However, unlike the others, she still wants to leave, wants to give it another try. I guess she hasn't been here long enough to identify with this village as her permanent home. All of them, Sam, Sienna, Anna, and Aidan, agree to a plan. They'll meet here at the café tomorrow morning, walk to the creek, and see what they can do.

That settled, three of them say goodbye to Anna and walk back to their residence. Sam and Sienna hope this will be their final walk to the house and their last day here. They hope but are aware that it might not be.

Being as it's just the middle of the afternoon, Sam enters the house to see if she can help Judy with anything. Aidan and Sienna leave to explore the area and whatever.

The two of them stroll through the town and off into the countryside. After some time, they find a place to relax. It's a small clearing near a lake where local wildlife come to drink and with flowers and trees and plants of many different kinds. And clouds. Clouds rolling overhead. All possibilities for Sienna to understand. All the plants, animals, water, clouds, and Aidan.

Sienna sits back and takes in the nature of her surroundings. The water. It's like water everywhere for the most part. Much of it's like water on Prism, like

water near headquarters on Trek, like water on the far side of the creek before they entered here, wherever here is. But there's also something else in this water, something flowing and mixing with the normal drops of water. Like a thread of red woven into a sweater of blue. Sienna can feel that thread of water. That thread feels different than the water around it. It doesn't tell her anything, at least not yet. The fact that something is unusual, and that she can feel it being unusual, can be good or it can be bad. Or neither. It might just be. Sienna is a positive person. She's going to go with the good feeling. If nothing else, at least it relaxes her.

Relaxed, her mind moves from the water to the clouds. Like the water, the clouds appear normal at first. There's nothing special. They flow with the wind, with the individual breezes that make up the wind.

And the breezes. What of them? There're also like breezes everywhere. A breeze is not the deepest of nature's emotions. A breeze is simple. It may have some control over where it goes and what it thinks, but not very much and not very often. It just moves along. Moves where the other breezes move. Except for this one breeze. Sienna can feel that breeze trying to move somewhere else, trying to blow the leaves and the grass in another direction different from the other breezes. Like the thread of red in the sweater of blue, this breeze is also different, and the difference doesn't tell Sienna anything except that there's a difference. Again, Sienna has no idea why but she's going to pretend that the difference is good, so it is to Sienna, and it makes her feel good.

Sienna wakes from her trance with a big smile on her face. She started by feeling sad. Now she's not so sad. She's happy or at least happier. She looks around and sees Aidan staring at her. It's an unusual kind of stare. Aidan knows something. Aidan feels something. Sienna knows something is different about Aidan.

Aidan says, "I was watching you since we got here, since we sat down and rested. I rested, you worked. Or you did something. Your mind was too active to be resting. You were unsettled when you rested. You moved, you twitched, you were intent. Your eyes moved back and forth, up and down, looking all over the world, all around, taking in everything. Your eyes were open but you

acted like they were closed. You were awake and asleep. What was happening, Sienna? I've never seen anyone act like that before. Are you OK?"

Sienna stops and thinks a brief moment. What can she tell Aidan about her abilities? Nothing she concludes, at least not yet. She fabricates a response. "I'm concerned about us having to remain here. We came here on an assignment, on my first assignment at my first job after university. We need to finish it. I need to finish it. I need to get back to headquarters, to the other part of Trek. You do know there's another part of Trek, right. I mean from what we've been told and from our discussions and the fact you're helping us find a way out, you must know. I guess I was dreaming about that or maybe it was a nightmare, but it's been on my mind. And I'm trying to find a solution to a problem that no one here believes has a solution."

"No," Aidan continues, "that's not it. At least, that's not all of it. Yes, I understand you're upset. Everyone is when they first show up. I've seen some of them react but none of them react like you. Your movements were not like a dream. They were deliberate. Your eyes moved up and they focused. I sensed they focused even when I wasn't sure what they were focusing on. At first, they stayed in one spot and then they slowly moved. But then, later, they moved fast, aggressively, as if following a bird shooting past you, except there was no bird. But you followed something. And that something made you happy because you smiled. That's not how it works when someone is upset about having to stay here the rest of their lives. There's no happy emotion that comes from that thought. What's really going on?"

Sienna thinks about this response from Aidan. First, she's impressed that he noticed these things about her. He's observant. Not as observant as her mom, no one can see more than she can. And not likely more than Sienna herself, having inherited skills from her mom, but Aidan definitely sees more than most people Sienna has met.

"Let me ask you, Aidan," says Sienna, "do you think there's a way to leave this part of Trek, or Treak as you call it?"

"Well, I don't tell my parents this, but I'll tell you. Yes, there has to be. Other people have disappeared from our village before. True, this is a big area and those people could walk for days and weeks and still be here. I don't know

where they went, if they escaped, or if they're even still alive. But the chances that one or more of them have escaped, yes, that only makes sense."

There's another interesting thought, Sienna considers, escape. That's the first time anyone in the village has used that word for leaving the village, escape. Mom and I thought of that word but we're new here. We're not part of the community. It makes sense for us.

"These people who left?" asks Sienna, "the ones who never returned. Did you happen to notice which way they went when they left the village? Did they all go the same way? Is it possible that there's an exit somewhere, an escape hatch, so to speak?"

"No," was Aidan's unhelpful response, "I can't remember that they went in a specific direction. But, more or less, they started off heading for the creek. Different parts of the creek but the general direction was there."

His unhelpful response just got more helpful.

"And what do you think about us wanting to leave? I understand you think it's a normal reaction now, that everyone tries to leave right after they arrive, until they give up. What do you really think about us trying what we're told is impossible? Do you think we have a chance to succeed?"

Aiden responds. "I was waiting for that question and I might be able to help more than you think. I am about to tell you something no one knows. You have to promise not to share it with anyone, not even your mom. For now, at least until it becomes necessary. OK?"

Sienna doesn't like to keep secrets from her mother, but this secret sounds serious, significant, and intriguing. She wants to know, she feels she needs to know, so she agrees.

Aidan then continues, "I know what my mother told you about seeing the boundary creek from this side. I know she said no one can see over the stream, see to the other side. That much is true for everyone in the village except for me. I can see across the creek. I saw you as you approached, not just sensed you being there, but actually saw you. No one knows I can do this and I'm concerned about what I may be asked to do if they do know, so I keep

it a secret. I have never been anywhere except this village, where I was born. I think it's great that you're trying to leave, to go back where you came from, where your home is. I hope you succeed. I'll help in any way I can. And something else I can never tell anyone in the village, especially my mom and dad. I would love to go with you."

Sienna feels that Aidan just gave her the last piece of hope in solving the puzzle needed for them to get home. She jumps up and gives Aidan a big kiss. He steps back. He's stunned, but not stunned enough to not give her a kiss right back.

They head back to town, both ready to leave tomorrow.

Escape

A new day. Another pancake and berry breakfast. This time with green berries instead of yellow ones. And who said food on Trek had no variety? Obviously, someone who never tried yellow berries one day and green the next.

Judy and Cormac know what the plan is for the day. Everyone who is new to town has the same plan. It's OK that Aidan's going with them. They prepare a nice picnic lunch for the group; lunch only since they know everyone will be back by dinner. Sam and Sienna gather the backpacks of supplies that were given to them at headquarters, then say goodbye and thank everyone for their hospitality. Aidan soon joins and they head off through town in the direction of the creek, to the point where Sam and Sienna entered, entered into, well, into wherever they are now. They head toward that place.

In the middle of town, they pass the café where, yesterday afternoon, they planned to meet Anna. Anna is already waiting and joins them as they continue their walk toward the border. The walk is familiar. It was only two days ago when they arrived and their memories are still fairly good on which way to go to return. But not perfect. It's a good thing Aidan is with them as his memory is better. A couple of wrong turns by Sienna are soon corrected. They only pause is for a brief rest to play with the caats that have reappeared. That's how they really know they're on the right path, when they encounter the caats.

Rest time is soon over and the four of them continue the final short distance to the creek. Except that there are now five of them, not just four. The humans in the group are still just four: Sam, Sienna, Aidan, and Anna. Sienna knows there's a fifth presence. The breeze, the same breeze she sensed when she and Aidan were alone yesterday. The renegade breeze, the breeze that does not flow with the others. The breeze that is similar to the water, the thread of red woven into a sweater of blue. Sienna welcomes the breeze with a smile, a smile inside that only Sienna knows is there. Or so she thinks. She looks at Aidan. He smiles at her. Sienna wonders why. She wonders what Aidan really knows. Sometimes a smile is more than just a smile.

They walk for only a short time after they leave the caats. Soon Sam notices the group come to a field, a field of mist, of fog, of thick fog. But the fog is not everywhere. Here and there she can make forms across the field, forms of

large hills or maybe small mountains. Strange that she did not remember these hills from their walk into this land and to the village.

No one notices everything, right. That's usually true except for Sam. Sam does notice everything. Most of what she notices turns into memories that mean nothing more than just a pleasant day, a nice evening spent with friends, a quiet stream, or some caats. Most memories are not important. Some are. All memories are filed away for use later, compartmentalized in Sam's mind in case they mean something that was not obvious when they were first seen, first encountered. And Sam knows what she's seeing now, where they are, and that there's a problem staring them right in the face.

"This is the creek we crossed when we arrived. This is the place where the creek was two days ago. But it's gone. There's no creek. There are clouds, mist, and mountains. Unsurpassable mountains. Where's the water? Where's the creek?" exclaims Sam excitedly.

Aidan stares at Sam, understanding what she's saying. He's heard it many times before. Each time it's hard to understand, but each time the understanding comes to Aidan more easily. "This is the creek. It's still there. I can see it but you can't. No one can except for me. Each visitor to our land sees something different when they return here. Something that stops them from progressing further, some deterrent that stops them from walking that way into and through the creek."

"You described what you see, Sam. What do you see, Anna?" asks Aidan.

Anna describes her vision. It isn't a creek. No one sees a creek. It isn't a field of mist with hills and mountains in the distance. That's what Sam sees. Anna knows what's there, what she sees. It's the same view she saw the last time she was here when she tried to leave soon after her arrival. When she was here by herself two days after she first arrived. She doesn't see mist or clouds or a stream. Her view is clear. As far as she can see there's a wide canyon like the Grand Canyon on Earth, like the steepest drop into the Ngorongoro crater in Africa. Unsurpassable.

Who would dare to step into the vision in Anna's eyes. It would be immediate death to even try.

And who would proceed into the image in Sam's eyes. There's danger to try and nothing to be gained by success. Through the mist there are only other obstacles that can't be conquered: steep hills and mountains. And most significant, there is no creek.

Sienna hears what her mom and Anna are saying. She knows they are both wrong. She sees a river, a large river, as large as she imagines the Amazon to be. The river is flowing away from the land and only a short distance away is a waterfall. A wide waterfall, as wide as the eye can see. Rapid and dangerous. Like the Amazon River flowing over Niagara Falls. Unsurpassable! And like Sam and Anna, Sienna knows it's instant death to try. A different means to death but with the same result at the end.

Aidan listens. He knows their sights are real to them, but he sees just a creek. A gentle creek. One perfect to cool off in on a warm day. One perfect to spend a peaceful afternoon near while waiting for a lost traveler or two to come by and ask for help. How can Aidan convince the others that it's safe to cross. Or is it? Perhaps what the others see is reality for them. Perhaps what he sees is reality for only him. Maybe he can cross. Maybe the others can't. If their visions are real for them, then they could die crossing his peaceful creek.

He looks to Anna. He sees fear in her. He looks to Sam. There is fear there too, but also disbelief. Sam has confidence in something. She is confident that this is where the creek was. Where the creek should be, but that confidence doesn't yet override her fear of her new reality. She can't be sure that the creek is still there. Aidan looks at Sienna. Sienna's eyes are closed in the same trance she was in yesterday afternoon. Sienna has no fear, she has no emotion, she is off somewhere where only Sienna can go.

Sienna's eyes are closed but her mind isn't. She's connecting with the breeze, with the renegade breeze, the breeze that flows with a mind of its own. The breeze that wants Sienna to follow so they can play. Renegades want friends too, and this breeze has none. Except maybe Sienna. "Come play with me," it says. Should Sienna trust a breeze like this? Why should she? Or "why not" might be a better question. Can this breeze show her something she can't see herself?

Sienna's mind wanders from the breeze to the rapid river and the waterfall. There very near the shore is the thread of red water in the middle of the blue stream. The recalcitrant thread of water. This red thread is relaxed, flowing slowly like it would in a gentle stream. The blue water around it, water the color that water should be, is moving rapidly as it prepares to go over the waterfall. "Come play with me," the red thread of water says. Should Sienna trust this water. The blue water wants her to jump into the river and fall to her death. What does the red water want? Can it help Sienna do something she can't do by herself?

Sienna lets her mind go deeper into the minds of the renegade breeze and the recalcitrant water. She sees the world through their eyes, or how they would see the world if they had eyes. She sees a creek, a gentle creek, and she sees across the creek to the far shore to the place where she and her mother crossed only recently. She opens her eyes and sees the rapid stream and the wide waterfall. She sees its danger. She closes her eyes and sees the gentle stream. She knows she should trust the breeze and the water but she doesn't know how to do that.

With that realization, she wakes with a start. And there, as yesterday, is Aidan staring at her. But nothing needs to be said between the two. Somehow Aidan knows that Sienna believes this is a peaceful creek that can be crossed. Somehow Sienna knows that Aidan knows. How do they cross? How do they find the slow flowing place where they crossed into this land? And how does she convince the others that it's safe to cross? The others don't have the connection to nature that Sienna does and the confidence that it brings.

Sienna is still connected to the breeze, slightly, but enough. The breeze knows how to traverse the creek. It puffs and stirs some leaves. They float into the air. The breeze catches them aloft and nudges them ever so slightly over the edge of the land, over the bank that Sienna sees as a rapid river but which she now knows is a gentle stream. Sienna assumes the leaves are being blown all the way over the stream to the far shore. She looks at the river and sees the red thread flow under the path the leaves followed. Sienna knows how to cross. But she still can't enter the river with her eyes open. Her mind will not let her believe that can be done without danger. She looks at Aidan. He holds out his

hand for her to take. He will guide Sienna, with her eyes closed, safely out of this part of Trek.

That's the plan. She tells all she has seen, all she understands, to Sam and to Anna. Sam believes it. She knows it's true because she knows Vernon's abilities and knows Vernon's abilities have been passed down to Sienna. Anna is not as confident. But Anna wants to leave and this might be the only way. They agree to join hands. Aidan in the lead, then Sienna, then Anna, and finally Sam. Holding hands to form a parade to escape, as Aidan says. They start.

Sienna tells Aidan where to enter the water, takes Aidan's hand, takes Anna's, closes her eyes, and steps forward. First one step, then another. After several more, she feels the uneasiness, the lack of continuity that she felt when crossing the creek in the other direction. A few minutes later, she feels solid land again. There's no longer water under her feet. She opens her eyes and looks around. She's back. She knows she's back. She and Aidan and Anna are here. They were successful. They're on the other side.

But her mom. Where is Sam? Sienna looks back over the creek. Sam is still there. Anna never took Sam's hand. Anna sees her too. They both know that Sam can't see them. To Sam, they are on the other side of unpassable mountains.

They turn to Aidan and ask him to go back to get Sam, to cross the creek two more times, once there and once back. Aidan just stares at them. "What creek," he says. "I can only see mountains."

If ever the word conundrum ever fit into a situation, it was definitely a situation like this one. Here they are at the place they hoped to be, where they tried so hard to get, the place no one thought they could reach. But are they happy? No! There's only three of them here. Sam is there and there is not here.

What's more, no one can think of a plan to get Sam from there to here. Sam doesn't know for sure what's happened. She probably has some idea but can't know for sure. She can't see them, can't know all the details of what happened. She can't just cross by herself. Sienna somehow feels that there's only one path across the creek, one successful path that will lead Sam here. The one the breeze showed Sienna. If Sam tries to cross at another location,

who knows what may happen. She may enter the reality that is in Sam's mind, with the hills and mountains.

Aidan can no longer help her. For some reason Aidan can't see over the creek toward his home, toward the part of Trek where he was born. And no one else, Sienna or Anna, if they decide to walk back to Sam, could then see from there to here. They can cross the creek to get to Sam but would not be able to cross back. They have to try. Somehow. Maybe that's their only plan, for Sienna or Anna to cross back and hope to be able to return.

It's likely Anna wouldn't even want to try. She's been away for years. Having just recovered her freedom, she's not likely to be willing to give it up so fast. Sienna's a different story. That's her mother over there and she's not going any farther until her mother is with her.

It might take some time to come up with a plan. Since Sienna's not moving until she gets her mom, she takes her equipment from her pack and starts to pitch the tent. It may be her place of residence for a few days until an idea springs into her mind. Or into the minds of Anna or Aidan.

Aidan sees what Sienna's doing. Aidan understands why Sienna's doing it and he helps. As he's pounding the tent stakes into the ground and tying the tent firmly with the rope, it's time for Aidan to come up with an idea. He undoes all that he just did. That disturbs Sienna. That's her first reaction. But then she trusts Aidan, steps away, and waits.

Aidan leaves the tent on the ground, ties all the ropes together, the ropes they brought to hold the tent up, and forms one long rope. Perhaps he was in the scouts as a young boy. Whatever the reason, the knots that hold the individual portions of the rope together, those knots are strong and secure. They now have one long rope. Luckily, headquarters seem to have provided plenty of rope, an excess, more than was needed then. But not more than is needed now. The rope, the single rope tied with knots, is almost fifty meters long. Aidan hopes that's enough.

Aidan can help no more but Anna and Sienna can. Here's the idea. Sienna takes one end of the rope. Anna takes the other. They should both walk to the middle of the stream but stay on this side. Sienna knows where the divide

between the sides is. They can go as far as they can until just before that point, the discontinuity, just before the feeling of uneasiness as they pass from Trek to Treak. Sienna knows where this is. Then Anna stays there with her end of the rope. Sienna crosses to Treak holding the other end firmly. The rope must be kept taut. The rope will show Sienna the way back. Sienna can get Sam and walk back. The rope will give Sienna the confidence to walk into the creek, or the waterfall, or whatever appears in Sienna's mind. Sienna will hold onto Sam and they will both return. It's a plan. Hopefully it's a good one because it's the only one they can come up with.

As they're considering all the possibilities and finalizing the details, Sienna looks across the creek and screams. Sam's still there but it looks like she has given up waiting. She's gathering her supplies to return to the village. Anna and Sienna take the rope, rush into the creek, and Sienna crosses. She sees Sam. Sam sees her as Sienna yells to her to stop. They hug each other and cautiously, together, enter the creeks, or the mist, or the wide rapid river. They both close their eyes as they enter. Anna tugs the rope to guide them in the right direction over the path they must follow, and to give them confidence that they need to succeed.

Soon Sam is here, on Trek, along with Anna, Sienna, and Aidan. No one is there, on Treak, except perhaps for some caats. and Aidan's parents, and an entire village of friends they will never see again. But not Sam, not Sienna, not Anna, and not Aidan.

The day is over, the long day. Food is gathered for the evening meal. They sit down, enjoy what Trek has to offer, and drift off to sleep, Anna and Sam, and Sienna and Aidan. It will be an early day tomorrow for them to begin a two day walk back to headquarters.

Headquarters Again

A long walk starting the next morning and a shorter one the following day gets the group to Trek headquarters. Sam and Sienna have been gone five nights, five long nights, but feels like it has been a lot longer. Long and productive. Two people left on Monday. Four returned today, Saturday.

Mick sees the group as they walk into town. She's a little surprised to see Sam and Sienna so soon. She's really surprised to see Anna. She had grouped Anna into the "permanently lost" category of her mind. Sam and Sienna say hello to Mick, as does Anna. Sienna introduces Aidan, who for obvious reasons, is someone Mick doesn't remember.

Back to Anna. She arrived from Escape two to three years ago and hasn't been heard of since shortly after her departure on her first and only search outing. Mick's impressed that Sam and Sienna managed to find her. She would have been impressed if anyone was found, given the failure of all previous attempts. Finding anyone is definitely an accomplishment. Finding someone from Escape who might be able to help with future searches, well, that's a plus.

Mick is quite a bit more interested to see Aidan. Mick is familiar with everyone who ever arrived on Trek and who's still here. It's her job, especially since recovery of those people has suddenly moved up in importance, so much so that several people from Escape have been sent to Trek to find them. Aidan didn't arrive on Trek through any means by which Mick is familiar, any that she can remember. Aidan, being obviously too young to have been on an Earth transport, must have arrived on Trek some other way. Mick wants to know how that was. But that can wait until the morning. Mick is sure Sam will answer that question in her debriefing session.

For now, it's time for dinner. Seven people get ready to enter the gourmet Trek restaurant. The four who just walked into camp, plus Mick, Alan, and someone new, Seth.

Seth arrived from Earth about two hours ago on the weekly shuttle. He's from Escape, but not employed in the same capacity as Sam, Vernon, or, now, Sienna. Those three are troubleshooters, field operatives. Employees sent to a

planet and tasked with investigating the people on the planet, the indigenous life forms, if any, and the planet itself. They are sent to mingle, to find out what's happening, to solve problems, to find solutions. And to do so while communicating with the planet and nature. It's not a desk job. It's a detective job like investigating a murder. The assignment on Trek doesn't involve investigating a murder, but it could be something just as serious.

That's not Seth. Seth's assignment is a desk job. He has been sent here to gather whatever data there is, analyze it, formulate and ask questions, decide what data may be missing, and figure out ways to ask for and get that missing data. It's a job Sam would be well suited for if she wanted a job where she remained in an office, which she doesn't. Ikenga sent Seth as a final tool in the Escape arsenal to help, a last try to solve the problem of the missing trekkers and the missing Escape employees. Seth was sent to help Sam and Sienna. Ikenga knows that this is the final attempt Escape can make to solve the problem of Trek, and when Vernon was removed from the effort, Ikenga decided some more help was needed. He sent Seth. Seth can take over coordinating logistics with Escape, can report anything Sam and Sienna might uncover, anything worthy. Seth can handle that part while Sam and Sienna can go back out over the world and find more people, or at least try to find them.

At the current time, they really don't have much for Seth to do. Maybe Seth can help figure out how Sam and Sienna can cross a creek on Trek and not be able to cross back. And maybe Seth can find a reason for a small crack in the clouds over this creek. Also, Seth might be helpful in answering how a village of humans exists on Trek, a village where less than half are known by Escape and Mick. And after looking at those anomalies, maybe he can figure out why the people in this village, the people that Escape sent here, somehow don't want to return to Earth, or perhaps can't return. Maybe there are a few trivial problems Seth can look at.

Sam and Sienna go back to their room to clean up. Rooms are at a premium on Trek, so Anna joins them. Aidan and Seth get assigned a smaller room for them to share. Alan helps Aidan get settled by finding him some clothes. Aidan left on this outing all of a sudden, not even sure he was going to leave

with Sam and Sienna until he found himself still with them after they left. All he had was the shirt on his back, and some pants and shoes.

Now, with Alan's help, he has more.

An hour later the group is seated in the only restaurant at the only table large enough to hold the entire group. As the group is mingling enjoying a pre-dinner glass of wine, and while Seth and Sam are talking about incidentals, Seth offers Sam a letter, a sealed envelope marked personal. Seth has no idea what it says. He's just delivering it as a favor for Ikenga. This is how postal correspondence works between planets.

Sam finds Sienna, excuses the two of them for a moment, and opens the letter. For some reason, Sam thinks she knows what the note is about and what it says. Not the details, but somehow she knows the subject matter. They open the letter. She and Sienna read it together.

Sam,

I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you about Vernon, but he has developed cancer, apparently liver cancer. It's at an early stage. Nothing much is known yet. Medical treatments aren't available on Prism to handle this type of cancer. Since cancers grow very slowly, if at all, in stasis, we're bringing Vernon back to Earth for treatment. He'll be here in about 3 or 4 weeks, as soon as we can arrange what is needed for his transport. We should be able to tell you more soon. I'm letting you know via letter in case you don't want anyone else to know yet. Seth is not aware of what this note says.

As far as you and Sienna are concerned, I have instructed Mick that you are free to return to Earth on any transport you want, any time at your discretion. We hope you'll continue to stay on Trek and work finding other people who want to return to Earth, but what you do is completely up to you. We'll let you know whenever his situation changes, for the better or for the worse.

Ikenga

Sam and Sienna stare at each other for what might be a long time, or not. Time seems to stand still after news like this. Each considers to herself what this means. Liver cancer is curable in some cases but not always. The best that can be said is that the future is unknown. Sam's husband, Sienna's father, is in trouble. One of them, at least, should be there with him. But they both know that Vernon is the type of person who would feel better if they would remain on Trek and finish their job, finish the task they were sent here to do. They consider their options and both realize that for now, there's nothing to do but stay on Trek, at least until Vernon actually reaches Earth. Then they'll have time to decide further.

A quick attempt to regain some composure and they rejoin the dinner celebration. Not much of a celebration to them but it's what the others feel like calling it.

Of course, the big question regarding the chain of events with Vernon, besides questions about his cancer, is how did Sam know in advance what was going to be in that letter. She knew before it was opened because Duncan told her that Vernon had cancer. It was a statement she doubted when she heard it the first time, doubted on the outside, but deep down in that part of Sam that knows when something that seems impossible is not impossible, where Sam knows when something is not only possible but is true, she knew. Duncan had been in the isolated part of Trek, or Treak, for longer than Sam had been and for longer than anyone knew about Vernon's cancer. It was impossible that he knew or even that he could have known. But he did. That was the impossible thing that was not only possible, but was true as Sam felt it was.

When did Duncan actually show up in the village? Sam didn't know. No one actually gave Sam a date, they only told Sam that Duncan was new, that he had recently arrived. And who is Duncan? Again, no one actually answered that question either. There is a lot unknown about Duncan. A lot of questions that arose from a short five-minute meeting.

Sam decides to write a quick note to Ikenga, to ask him who Duncan is and when Vernon had met him. Clearly, that part of Duncan's story must be true. He couldn't know Vernon had cancer without at least knowing Vernon. They met somewhere. They had some channels, some back-connections, that

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allowed information about Vernon to flow to Duncan. Ikenga would know this. Or if not, at least he would be able to research Duncan, or ask Vernon about Duncan. Too bad Sam never got his surname, but she's definitely not going to go back now just to find that out.

The note written, she seals it in an envelope and finds Mick, asking that the note be given to the spaceship captain before his return tomorrow for Earth. Sam will have an answer in a week when the next ship arrives.

Back to dinner. One of the rare times that the restaurant can offer something more than standard Trek fare. The ship that just arrived carried some specialties from Earth. A Trek salad is followed by a salmon main course, asparagus, and San Francisco sour dough bread. It's amazing that a machine was developed that could maintain a sour dough starter through an entire flight from Earth to Trek. Not only amazing that a machine could accomplish that feat, but that the money was ever invested to develop the equipment in the first place.

A good dinner, a toast to everyone's success, and a long day is over.

Debriefing

Sam and Sienna were away for five days, arriving back Saturday night. Now, even though it's Sunday, there's a lot of work to do and time is of the essence. Especially since Sam and Sienna may decide to return to Earth sooner than expected. Mick knows about this, so a meeting is scheduled for this morning.

Anna joins Sam and Sienna for breakfast. Aidan is already there. A quick serving of eggs, coffee, with some leftover sourdough bread, and breakfast is soon over. It's only 7:45. The meeting is not scheduled to start until 9:00. Anna and Sam stay at the table and chat around a second cup of coffee. Sienna and Aidan go out for a walk.

Aidan finds himself in a strange situation. He has lived on Trek his entire life. He was raised in a society with very little technology, almost none. There's some electricity but not a lot, only what can be obtained from generators built in the village. And those do not run all the time. There are no electronics. There's plenty of food. After all, it's Trek. Life is simple but also easy. There's no technology, no science, but there's also no need for what that offers humanity in the rest of the universe, even in other parts of Trek. Even so, science is still not unknown to Aidan. His parents, Judy and Cormac, were born in environments where science and technology were everywhere. Their arrivals on Trek were only possible through use of the latest in such scientific advancements. They taught Aidan a lot of what they knew, what they used to encounter daily. A lot that, to Aidan, was make believe, fantasy, magic. Stories of wonder that would never be seen. Aidan's life was one giant step back from the pinnacle of human achievement that was prevalent elsewhere.

Perhaps this was why Aidan decided to leave his home and follow Sienna to the unknown. Unknown to Aidan, that is. The lure of the unknown. Maybe that was the reason. Another possibility was that Aidan just found himself in another part of the planet before he could do anything about it. Maybe having Sienna in that part of the planet had something to do with it. Whatever the reason, he was here and awed by what he saw. Even the simplest things were new to him. Like a speaker playing music or a video screen showing news and movies. Make believe movies, stories about events that never happened. More important, events that are not happening now, that are stored. Stored

somewhere! The entire video screen and all that is hidden within it, simply amazing. And the broadcast devices that Sam and Sienna and everyone else have. How do they work? Talk into one and someone else can hear, someone you can't see or even know where they are. Then there is the shuttle craft that, he was told, came down from a spaceship. Others point to where the spaceship is. He sees something that looks smaller than a fly. The existence of a spaceship is beyond his imagination.

Aidan sits down on the grass, lost in thought about all he has seen in the past day. Memories of stories told by his parents fill his mind. He's sure that some of what he's seeing now are items his parents knew about and had described to him. But he can't correlate any of those descriptions to what he sees in front of him. Everything he sees is completely unknown, completely unbelievable.

To start, that is. Then he looks again, looks at one object at a time and thinks about something his mom or dad told him a long time ago. And the unknown becomes known. Or if not known, at least slightly familiar to the fringes of his mind. It's like talking to someone on the phone, someone you never met. Talking often for many months, without ever actually seeing the person or an image of the person. Then meeting him or her. The person in your mind is never the same as the person you meet. The person in front of you is unknown. It's not the person you expected until you realize the person in your mind and the person in front of you are the same, just different than you thought. The unknown becomes known. It's the same process that Aidan is going through now, only with technology instead of people.

Sienna is there, talking to Aidan as he describes what he's thinking about. Sienna helps. She explains what she can. She tries to explain how an electric cart works, or a lawn mower, or the phone in her hand. Each takes some time to explain. Sienna is amazed about how much she knows. Not egotistical, but no one understands how much knowledge they have until they try to explain it to someone from the beginning.

This is the start of Aidan's exposure to another world. This new world has a lot that Aidan can learn. Aidan is learning, slowly perhaps, but definitely learning.

Aidan also knows a lot. A lot that the others can learn. And like Sienna, he has no idea how much he knows.

It's 9:00. The meeting starts. Sam takes center stage and gives a complete description of everything she and Sienna saw and encountered during their time away. In the description, the debriefing, nothing is omitted. Sam starts with the trip out. She describes the walk, what they ate, the delay for rain, the creek, the water telling Sienna which way to proceed from the fork, seeing Aidan for the first time on the other side of the creek, the break in the clouds, and the feel of uneasiness as they cross the creek.

Then they are into a new land, which Sam explains Aidan calls Treak. The people in Treak seem to have a minor accent, like English spoken in the U.S, or England, or New Zealand, or Australia. Not as much a difference as in Scotland or Wales. Slight, yes. Drastic, no!

Sam continues to describe the walk to the village, the encounter with caats, and the village itself. A commune settlement with more settlers than they had anticipated. As Sam and Sienna too, no doubt, realized, there were two types of people in the village. They were all compatible and all seemed to have the same basic personality, basic realization of where they lived, why they were there, and what they needed to do. They all accepted how their life was proceeding with an emotion while, if not happiness, at least revealed contentment.

People in the village felt like they were all one people. There were no serious differences. There were minor ones. One group had slighter lighter skin coloring than the other group. Not much, but something more than just random differences. Something genetic, perhaps. Plus, other differences. The lighter people, for the most part, spoke in an accent, an accent to Sam's ear. Their speech was slightly different from what Sam was used to hearing. Cormac, Aidan's dad, had an accent. And also, Duncan, the person who claimed to know Vernon. The people with the darker color did not have accents. They included Judy, Aidan's mother, and Anna. Sam and Sienna could also be included in that group.

Aidan, so that everyone knows, was born on Treak. As far as where Aidan falls into this general categorization, it's hard to tell. He has some speech patterns

like Cormac and others like Judy. I guess that makes sense. He grew up in a village and was exposed to speech patterns of all the villagers.

This observation is an aside from the chronology of their trip. Sam gets back on track with the welcoming dinner, the invite to spend the night with Judy and Cormac, the speech the next day where Judy lets them know that they will be remaining in their village forever. The talk with Laoise and Kyle. Meeting Anna. The understanding that Sam and Sienna would try to leave Treak even though everyone knew they couldn't. The eventual walk to the creek where they first entered Treak, but which did not appear to be a creek when they returned. The admission by Aidan, that he, and he alone, could see the creek, and eventually all the events that led to their escape, including the return to rescue Sam.

And finally, the relatively uneventful walk back. Sam did not mention meeting Duncan or the announcement Duncan made to them. That was not a subject she wanted to discuss yet.

Sam sits down. A few minutes after digesting all Sam has said, Mick gets up to speak.

“Thank you, Sam,” says Mick, “that is certainly the most in depth and intense presentation of a four-day trip we have ever heard. Actually, the only intense presentation of a four-day trip we’ve heard, but I’m sure it would have been the most intense if we’d had ever heard other ones.

“We all know how important it is to get going on finding other lost trekkers, so we appreciate you coming in on a Saturday morning after a tedious and somewhat scary four days away. Perhaps we should take a break for lunch and some contemplative time and resume tomorrow morning with plans on how to proceed from here.

Mick stays true to form. A 30-second conclusion to the report of the most significant trip ever taken on Trek. With that summary, Mick darts out of the room and everyone is excused for the day. Sam and Sienna look for Mick to correct an error but she's gone before they can even get up out of their chairs.

That's like Mick, never a delay for anything. Just a quick and concise statement of whatever it is that Mick wants to be concise about, and she's gone.

Mick has left. Sam, Sienna, Anna, Seth, and Aidan find themselves alone in an empty room where only a few seconds ago it seemed like an active meeting was in progress. Sam didn't even have a chance to point out to Mick that today was Sunday, not Saturday, and that they had been gone five days, not four. It was five days, wasn't it? Sam looks at some equipment she has that was set when they left on their journey. Indeed, it registers the day as Sunday. So does Sienna's. They check with Seth, whose device says it's Saturday, but Seth only just arrived on Trek so his could be in error. Anna has no such equipment, and for obvious reasons, neither does Aidan.

Aidan looks confused. "What are these terms you are using?" he asks. "What is a Saturday and how is it different from a Sunday?"

Sienna looks at Aidan and again searches for how to explain ideas such as weekdays and weekends to a person who was raised in a society where almost no one works. What use is there of weekends if there are no jobs from which to take a break? Sienna doesn't even know if Aidan's village has the concept of weeks. If not, then how can there be a concept of days of the week. Again, Sienna is aware that she knows so much and has no idea how to pass her knowledge on to someone who doesn't have the same building blocks that she does. How can she explain the difference between Saturday and Sunday to Aidan?

She tries anyway. Saying that days are grouped into weeks. Each week has seven days and the names of two of the days are Saturday and Sunday.

She gets a stare from Aidan. It's not a completely empty stare, but it is a stare that asks "why." Aidan's smart, understanding, and he understands some of what she has been saying.

"Yes," admits Aidan. "I do remember my mother saying something about weeks and using some of the words you're using here. That was a long time ago. Those were words from her youth, without usefulness on Trek. The words were lost and

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never used. My father had some words like that. He said before he came to Treak, that he lived on a planet with what he called 'seasons.' As time went on, the weather would become colder and then warmer. Consistently, more or less. At some times of the year, one would expect the temperatures to be colder than normal. At other times, it would generally be warmer. And the time of the day with sunlight would also change. Shorter daylight during the cold times and longer during the warm times. He said that the day of the year when daylight was the shortest would be called day 1. As time went on, each day would be identified with a higher number. There were 365 days, as I remember him saying, during which the length of sunlight would get longer, until it was the longest, and then shorter again. Day 365 would be short, almost as short as the next day, day 1, which would start the count over again.

"For mom, one day to the next would be given a name, like the names you use: Saturday and Sunday. For dad, each day was a number from 1 to 365.

"Both of those ideas were taught to me when I was young. They aren't used on Treak. On Treak, all days are the same length. All days are the same in all aspects, or can be expected to be the same. There aren't any cold times, no times when we can expect in advance for the weather to be colder. There aren't warm times either. There are just times. There are no days with less sunlight or more. There's no need to call one day by a name different from any other day. We only have 'today,' a number of days in the past, and a number of days in the future. If we want to meet someone in the future, we simply say '3 days from now'. If we talk about what we did, we say '3 days in the past'. Why worry about anything else?"

Before this talk, Sienna was going to ask Aidan if he thought today was Saturday or Sunday, but it seems like asking that question is not going to get a

useful reply. They go into the restaurant to get some sandwiches to eat outside. While inside, Sienna glances at the computer screen. It's Saturday.

Seth joins the group at lunch. Since Seth just arrived on Trek yesterday, he was entitled to take today as his day off, his day to relax after a long flight from Earth. He didn't. He worked by attending Mick's morning meeting. He had to, really. The meeting presented all the information Sam and Sienna collected, everything Seth needs to start his investigation, his work, his analysis. Everything known was presented in that meeting. He really couldn't take the day off.

He joins the group to try and enjoy some relaxed chatter with everyone, just like they're all long lost, eternal friends. Seth tries to start the conversation like all conversations he has ever been in seem to start. The weather. Seth comments on how he's lucky to start his stay on Trek on such a nice day. Perfect temperature, perfect weather. Aidan just stares at him somewhat incredibly. Sienna smiles. Even Sam lets go with a little grin. "You need to get used to this, Seth," Sam comments. "This is like every day on Trek. Luck is not involved."

"Not the right way to break the ice here," thinks Seth. "What works on Earth may not work here. I guess I'll try another approach," he considers.

"My home's in England. I was raised in Evesham, a bit of a train ride out of London. Where are you from, Sienna?" he asks.

"Prism," says Sienna, "About 43 light years from London," she responds, somewhat sarcastically.

Another tried and true ice breaker seems to fizzle.

But Aidan comes to Seth's rescue by responding to his comments. "*I have some friends back home, friends of my parents actually, Laoise and Kyle. They talk a lot about where they came from. I seem to remember that they mentioned visiting Evesham and talking about that area of England. It's near the Cotswolds, right?*"

“Yes, *that’s close to where it is,*” is Seth’s happy reply, glad that some form of a conversation is finally taking hold. “*Where did your friends say they were from?*” he continues.

“*They said they were from a place called Ireland,*” Aidan answers. “*I’ve never been there. I’ve never even been to Earth, but they both talked about their homes in Ireland back on Earth. They make it sound like it is a great place with great people. I would like to be able to go there someday. Well, I would except that they claim it can get very cold. Laoise says days 300 to 365, and 1 to 100 can be really cold. I think she said something about having to wear heavy coats just to go outside. Can you imagine that? I can’t.*”

“Yes, Aidan,” responds Seth, “*the weather can get pretty cold in Ireland during that time of year. It’s cold in England too. As far as heavy coats go, I suspect I had a few growing up. Still have a few. It’s part of life on most planets. Probably on all planets other than Trek. You’re lucky being here but being in the cold is fun too. It brings back lots of memories, like playing in the snow, for one.*”

“Snow?” was all Aidan could respond.

“*Not as bad as being in the hot parts of the world. Down in the desert it can get hot, over 40 degrees, too hot to live in for very long without just sitting down and waiting for it to cool off. Why, it’s like...*” And there, Seth stops. There’s nothing he can think of that he read about Trek, about the temperate zone he knows Aidan spent his entire life in, that Seth can use as a comparison.

Interested in still talking about Ireland, Seth moves the conversation back to its original path. “*Do you know where in Ireland your friends were from?*” he asks.

Seth does know or thinks he remembers. “*I think Klye said he was from a town called Killarney, and Laoise claims to be from Kilkenny.*”

“*Those are both great places,*” continues Seth. “*I’ve been to Ireland many times. I enjoy walking around the green isle in the summer when the weather is better. Coats aren’t needed then. Killarney has great national parks. And Kilkenny has one of the most famous castles in the entire country. I assumed that’s the town you mean, Kilkenny. It must be your accent, like we talked*

about earlier. It sounded to me that you had an accent there, like you were saying Kilkenny.”

And with that, the conversation ends. Aidan looks at Seth. The silence is a sudden change from the friendly banter that had been flowing back and forth. Not just between Aidan and Seth, but innocent chit chat was also going on among the other people. The conversation between Seth and Aidan was the most interesting. Everyone was paying attention to that conversation, plus trying to listen to their own. But all those other conversations were just background noise. When the conversation between Seth and Aidan stopped, all other conversations stopped too. Sort of an automatic reaction. Aidan’s silence was addictive.

At the moment when all the talk stopped, Sienna turned to look at Aidan. She felt something different about him. Aidan knows something and is wondering whether or not to tell others what he knows. Or perhaps he’s going to say something, but he’s just deciding how to say it. Or both. He has figured out what to say and doesn’t want to, yet. Something said can’t be unsaid. What was there in the difference in pronunciation of simple word, a city on some far-off planet, even if it is Earth? Why was that significant? Why did it stop the conversation?

Aidan looks over at Sienna. He appears to be a little embarrassed by the attention he’s receiving over such a simple act as not talking. Eventually Aidan turns back to Seth to continue his conversation.

“Sorry that I stopped talking for a while but your comment made me think of what has happened to me over the last couple of days. We were just talking about Kilkenny, right? Yes, we were. And that there are two ways to pronounce the name of that town. Back home, there are a lot of words that are pronounced two ways. I heard all those words spoken both ways. It didn’t matter to me which way. I usually don’t even notice. I know that people like my mom say it one way and people like my dad say it another way. But I didn’t notice any difference between my mom and dad, any difference of any significance. And I never noticed a difference in speech, in pronunciation. I mean, I did

notice, I must have because your comments made me realize I did. But I never thought anything about it until now. And why now? I'll tell you why. It's because I'm used to hearing two accents, two patterns of speech, all intertwined, all filling the air from the mouths of the people who talk around me, at dinner, in the town, all day long. Where is that now. There are no accents here. Here everyone speaks like my mom. No one talks like my dad."

Then Aidan stops talking again. Something bothers Aidan. Seth does not seem to see what the problem is. Neither does anyone, almost. Even Sienna just sits without talking. Sam, however, that's a different story. A spark of understanding comes to life within Sam. Like at many other similar times, she just sits on her feelings. There's nothing definite yet, so she says nothing. She does move the conversation along a bit by asking Aidan. *"Is Kilkenny an important place to you, Aidan? Does it mean something to the people in your town?"*

Aidan turns to answer Sam.

"I remember a discussion between Kyle and Laoise. Laoise is from Kilkenny. That's how she says it. Kyle says Kilkenny. Yes, they are the same word. It's the same place. Said differently but the same place. There are other words also, words that the two of them pronounce differently. My parents, Judy and Cormac. They talk differently from each other also. At first, they didn't know why. They thought it was just the way things were. As they talked more, they realized that where they came from back home on Earth, all the people they knew talked the same way. Everyone from my mom's town spoke like her. Everyone from my dad's town spoke like him.

"In our village, people talk about where they came from, about their homes on Earth. No one in our village can ever go back to where they came from. I'm not sure they would if they could, but they can't. So, they talk a lot, to each other and to just about anyone else in the entire village. And there are differences in

their speech. Accents, yes, but other differences also. Nothing significant, but it exists in our village. No one ever knew there was more than one way to say something until they got here. But now they know there are and it's OK. It's natural.

“Before coming here, I lived in a place where many things are pronounced in two ways. But no longer, not here, not among the people here. Just now, I started to wonder why. Then I realized something.

“People like Laoise and my dad, Cormac, people who talk like them. Those people come into our village from the north over a creek near the village to the north. Not the creek in the south where Sienna entered. People of one type enter from the north. Please of another type enter from the south. After they enter, they are all one people.

“Why does this happen? The elders just say that it's because Trek is at a convergence, a neither 'here' place nor a 'there' place. Both the 'here' and the 'there' places exist. Both the place where my mom came from and the place where my dad came from. Both are Trek. Those places may be different but to us in our village, we are one people living at the convergence.

“I've always been in that village, in that convergence place. But I'm not there anymore. I'm in another place, a different place. I don't know if I belong here but I can't go back. I can't ever cross that creek to go back home, and I'm scared.”

Sienna runs over to give Aidan a big hug. It must be scary to be away from home for the first time in your life. It was for Sienna when she took a trip into the wilds of Prism. What must it feel like to lose an entire world and never be able to return. It's not an emotion Sienna can understand and she's sure that it's not one she would ever want to experience.

The rest of the day is spent in silence on the lawn. Idle conversations take over. The serious one has ended. Dinner, bed, and a new day await.

Ready Again

It's the next morning, which is apparently Sunday, and decisions need to be made. Seth is investigating information gathered by Sam and Sienna, and enhanced by Aidan. Information from the trip where they first encountered Aidan and others in Treak. Sam and Sienna are ready to go out again, to try to find some more lost trekkers. Anna is still recovering from her two-year ordeal, one from which she thought she'd never return. It's hard to get back in the saddle, so to speak, after going through that. Mick seems to be OK with her staying at headquarters, at least for the time being.

The questions of the day for Sam and Sienna are where do they go, do they bring anyone else with them, and how do they best prepare for another adventure. An unknown adventure so far but they can at least prepare for the possibility of another Treak. For that possibility, they can't bring anything much more than they brought last time. It's still just them against nature. Planetary nature isn't very hard on Trek but they are limited in what they can carry. The best addition they can make to the gear they brought last time is a long rope. Perhaps a very long rope could be a great investment. It helped get Sam out of Treak. It could help again. And one more addition. The second-best addition they can make is Aidan if he's willing to go with them. He's the foremost authority on strange places on the planet. He may know something that could be helpful in their next encounter, whatever is in their future. And what he knows can't be disseminated to Sam and Sienna in advance. As was said, you don't know how much you know until you try to explain it to someone. Until he's presented with a specific problem, Aidan would have no idea what to explain. Aidan is a good insurance policy, especially when no one knows why they might need insurance. He may not be useful at all, but if they come across a situation where he's needed, it'll be too late to return to headquarters to get him.

It's agreed. Sam, Sienna, and Aidan will go out and look again. Where? Well, to answer that, they have Mick and Seth. Mick has gathered information talking to trekkers who returned. Many of those reported sightings of others. Places where they came across fellow trekkers, where they possibly shared a meal or had a short talk before they parted ways. No precise locations are available,

but certainly there are general directions where people are more likely to be found than not.

Seth uses that data and creates a map of the planet with dots showing “best guess” locations reported by the returnees. There’s a pocket about a day’s walk to the North slightly askew from the direction of Treak. Scattered around that location are a concentration of dots for reports of almost a dozen trekkers. Maybe there’s a good reason why so many people were seen near that area. That point might be a paradise, a utopia, a Shangri-la on Trek. Maybe. Or perhaps they found a Treak, a place where many entered and most couldn’t leave. Or maybe it’s as simple as an easy place to walk. Whatever the reason, that’s going to be their next destination.

Everyone in the group knows they need to be careful. Danger may await. The unknown certainly does. Excitement, the lure of a challenge, the draw of the unknown, and a definite level of anxiety all propel the group onward. For Aidan, all those and more. He is excited to start his first real adventure anywhere.

They gather their gear and leave. They are only about a kilometer out of town when they pass a hiker going in the other direction, back to headquarters. It’s a man. They stop to say hello and to ask the obvious set of questions. He stops also. Then before any words are spoken, he looks at Sam, rushes over to her, and gives her a big hug, a sentimental hug, almost crying. Sam steps away looking a bit confused.

The man backs away a bit, looks at Sam, at Sienna, back at Sam and says “Sam, don’t you remember me? It’s Paul. We met when I left, about two years ago. I’m so sorry about Vernon. I’m a little surprised to see you here. I guess you must have returned to Earth for the funeral and decided to come back. I hope everything is working out well for you.” Then he turns to Sienna and says a few words, a greeting, a comment about how young she looks, just idle talk.

Sam’s lost. A situation where Sam has no idea what to say never happens. Sometimes Sam has nothing she wants to say but she’s never at a complete loss. She knows something strange is going on. She never met anyone named Paul, certainly not here, and certainly not two years ago. She and Sienna have barely been on Trek for a week. And she doesn’t know anyone named Paul

from Prism. Sam knows all 3,000 people on that planet. Not hard to do after having lived there for over twenty years.

Paul says he's returning to headquarters after having been away for a long time. He's ready to return to Earth. He wonders if Mick is still at headquarters. Sam confirms that she is. Sam does get her senses about her well enough to ask Paul where he had just come from. If that happens to be in the direction they're going, maybe Paul can provide some useful information to help with their journey. But no, Paul had been walking from the East for the last few days. Sam, Sienna, and Aidan have their marching orders, which is almost due South. They say their final goodbyes and go on their own ways.

Sam hopes that this meeting is not another warning about what's already happened. If it is, then Sam should probably turn around now and head for Earth. But what actually did just happen? All she has is a statement made by someone who claims to have met Sam two years ago, a claim that's clearly not true. So how can his statement claiming to know something bad about Vernon be true? There's no way it can be. If Sam is sure of anything, she's sure of that. Sienna agrees. Sam just wishes she was as certain as she claims to be.

The rest of the walk is uneventful. Evening approaches and the group finds a nice hillside on which to rest for the night. Natural fruits, nuts, and other edible vegetation grow a little differently up on the top of the hill, possibly because it gets sunlight for a longer period of time. There are no tall trees blocking light from any direction so the plants grow bushier, fuller, vegetation with a richer body. A richer and tastier dining experience. All within the constraints of native Trek food, of course.

Sam, Sienna, and Aidan relax after an enjoyable meal and mindlessly stare in the distance away from the cliff. They see a breathtaking view extending for quite a distance over a beautiful terrain. It helps them get ready to call it a day.

Off in the distance near the horizon, Sam's sense of nature takes control of the view in her mind. She notes that the vegetation there is lighter, not a rich green like in the vegetation in the food they harvested for dinner. It's still green, but pale green. Sam remembers that she noticed that shade of pale green

once before, that different shade of green in the distance. The last time she saw it was right where Aidan was standing when she first saw him.

Sam is not the only person taken in by the surrounding environment. Sienna is too. She notices the breeze. It's getting windier. The clouds appear to be getting active. Tall clouds, rain clouds most likely. There's not a lot of rain on Trek, but some. Sienna remembers the last time they encountered rain on an outing. It was when the wind and the water were trying to tell her something, hinting that they would soon meet someone. A liaison. The liaison that was Aidan.

And what about Aidan? He's also staring off into the distance. At a point that looks like it's around a two hour walk from where they are now, from where they're getting ready to spend the night. He sees nothing that reminds him of the walk Sam and Sienna took to meet him. He was not on that walk. But he does see something that stirs memories of home.

And how about the rain, the breeze, the plants, or the rest of Trek? What are they thinking? What do they see? Something that's a warning, perhaps. Maybe an invitation, or a welcome.

Whatever is happening with everyone and everything, Sam and Sienna are sure they're on the right path. A greeting is waiting for them, or a greeter. The sun is setting. Anything that is there tonight will be there tomorrow. For now, they need to rest and gather their strength for their future. Tomorrow.

There

Exhilaration. Reluctance. Confidence. Trepidation. Those are the emotions of the day. It's rare to have a day in which all those emotions seem to fit. If there ever were such a day, today is it. Everyone feels exhilarated just thinking what they might find at the horizon. They're sure it's what they're looking for.

Everyone is sure they need to confront whatever is there, even if they are reluctant to do so. Why is that? It's because they're confident that it'll help them find other lost trekkers. Those emotions are prodding the group to leave, to move on. On the other side is the trepidation of the unknown that might be there. Is it safe? Exhilaration. Reluctance. Confidence. Trepidation. What should be done after taking all these emotions into consideration?

Discussions ensue. Pros and cons are considered. Finally, everyone comes to an agreement. It's best to stay here for a few minutes and have a second cup of coffee. Perhaps like a last meal.

Coffee consumed. Then in not too long a time, all the gear is packed and a path to the destination mapped. The destination is the location of the concentrated reports of some potentially missing trekkers. Now three more people are off to that location to possibly add to the count of the missing. But this group has something that the others didn't, something that fills them with confidence. They have a rope!

It's almost two hours later before arrival where they had set out to be, a place where everyone expects to find an anomaly. They encountered an anomaly at the border to Treak. Sam looks around searching for a crack in the clouds like the one they saw between them and Aidan, when they saw Aidan for the first time. Sam sees nothing. There are no clouds in the sky. It rained last night, but today all is sunny.

Sienna looks around too but not visually. She looks with her abilities, her affinity with nature, to try to sense something like she sensed when she first saw Aidan. She's hoping to get a feeling from the water or the hint of an emotion from the wind. But she'll settle for anything. Sienna does sense something, but not what she wants to sense. There's a breeze, a gentle breeze. Many different breezes. Happy breezes with happy sensations, nothing ominous. The same as breezes back home. And why not? There's nothing here

but a gentle forest. A dense thicket of trees. Hardly a place that exudes danger, that radiates a discontinuity like over the Trek-to-Treak stream. These breezes flow carefree between the trees, pushing leaves this way and that like all breeze do.

Sienna attaches her mind to one breeze, following it through the thicket as it wraps around one tree not very far away from where she's standing. And then, at that instance, Sienna notices something she never noticed before. The breeze stops. Like hitting a wall. It stops its forward motion, turns straight up, and then about ten meters in the air, turns back and blows straight over Sienna's head. Sienna's mind leaves that breeze and wanders to another. It acts the same way as the first breeze did when it reached the invisible wall. All breezes do. Some turn up, some down, or left, or right, or any direction except forward. Sienna tries to sense breezes on the other side of this non-visible, but somehow present wall. She can't. For the first time ever, she can see something with her eyes but not with her mind. Her mind stops at the wall just like the breezes do.

Is there a real wall there? One she can't see. A wall made out of glass, invisible glass, or for that matter, invisible anything. Sienna picks up a stone and throws it at the wall. It goes right through, landing with a thud on the other side. On the other side of where Sienna visualizes a wall to be. She looks around after throwing the stone. The others stare at her, wondering why she did what she just did but confident she had a reason.

Exhilaration. Reluctance. Confidence. Trepidation. The emotions of the day are all right here. Sienna talks to Sam and Aidan. She explains what she sees, what she senses, and why she threw the rock. Then she remembers that Aidan is different from Sam and Sienna. Aidan comes from a different part of Trek. She remembers that Aidan could see across a boundary that they couldn't, and then not see when they could. What does Aidan see here, at this new incongruity in the space of Trek? Nothing. He explains what he sees and it's exactly what Sienna sees, and what Sam admits she sees.

Now it's Sam's turn. She also notices something. She didn't before but she does now. And it's what you'd expect from someone who lives on Prism. The plant coloring on the other side of the wall-that-is-not-a-wall is slightly

different. It's a different shade of green. Very slight, extremely slight, but different. Just like what she saw when looking over at Treak. Now that it's pointed out, the three of them look up and down the row of trees. They can see a line where the color on the far side is slightly different than the color on the near side. They are at another boundary of color, at one of the splattered color spots they saw from space on their approach to Treak. An area they know they can enter as long as they enter carefully. An area they should only enter if they have a plan to escape. Here is the place where they can engage their special weapon. They open their case and take out the rope.

They need to find two trees as close together as can be, with the only limitation being that the first of the two trees is on this side of the wall and the second is on the other side. That's not hard to do. Two target trees are soon chosen. Aidan takes the rope and ties it firmly to the tree on their side of the wall. He takes the other end, walks over the boundary, and ties the other end to the tree there. Then letting his hands glide over the rope, he walks back.

"That was simple," exclaims Aidan on his return after being gone a long time, almost a minute. "It's great that we have a rope but I'm not sure it's really needed this time. I was able to see back to your side as well as I could see over to the other side. This should go smoothly."

Neither Sam nor Sienna believe in jinxes. If they did, they might think that Aidan's last statement initiated one.

Aidan walks back through the non-existent wall. Sam and Sienna follow, both feeling strange as they leave their home area of Treak for this new one. Another area. Of Treak? Possibly, but maybe not. The feeling they get as they walk through the invisible boundary is one of movement, of displacement. A feeling that they have moved more than just a few meters. Looking back, that's all it appears to be. However, they both know it's something more, something different than a ten second walk down a path.

That jolt of the ten second journey makes them pause and stare intently at their surroundings. They stare at the ground, at the trees, at the sky and sun. All appear to be normal but at the same time, not normal. Like looking at a puzzle presenting two similar pictures with the heading "Find five things that are different." Look at the picture and, at first, no differences are obvious.

There's none. There would be no incentive to look for any if the picture title didn't let you know some existed. Look again and differences slowly appear. Like magic. Or not like magic, but they do appear. A difference like a window slightly bigger in one picture than the other. A person with a leg bent more. A different hair style. The shadow of a tree longer in one picture than the other.

Differences like those comparing two pictures in a puzzle book are shown side by side to test how observant the reader is. Trek, this Trek, is also a puzzle. It's also time to be observant. Shadows! The shadows on the trees on this side of the wall fall away from the tree at a different angle than shadows on the far side of the wall. Sam notices that. She looks up at the sun. She walks back over the invisible wall to their "home" side and tries to find the sun again. It's not where it was a minute ago, if it was only a minute. That startles her but makes her think. Before returning, she breaks a few leaves off of a nearby tree.

Back on the side with her fellow adventurers, she breaks a few leaves from a similar tree. When she first looked across the divide and invoked her greatest Prism color sense, both she and Sienna, and even Aidan, had noticed the colors of the leaves were different. Slightly lighter on one side of the divide than the other. Now she looks at the two bunches of leaves in her hands. One from this side and one from the other. What were slight differences are now identical. They are absolutely the same. Neither is lighter nor darker than the other. The leaves aren't different colors at all. They thought they were different because they appeared lighter on the side where the sun was higher in the sky, and darker where the sun was lower. No color difference at all. Just an illusion caused by the lighting.

Sam first explains this to the other two and then tries to come up with a reason why the sun has shifted. Any reason. The reason doesn't need to make too much sense. It's hard to come up with an explanation for something no one has ever seen before. It's harder yet to come up with an explanation for something no one thinks should ever be seen. And an explanation with the restriction that it makes sense, that's even harder. But something is needed?

While Sam has been trying to explain the impossible, Sienna has been resting, contemplating, communicating with nature. The flowers here are closing up for the night, preparing to conserve energy as the sun sets. There will be more

sunlight tomorrow. Not much time left today. The flowers on the other side of the wall aren't closing. She can remember that they were opening, almost fully opened, absorbing all the sunlight they could. The flowers on each side must be in sync with the planet to survive. With the world in which they live. And the flowers on each side are in different patterns. Aligned to their own suns. Each side of the wall must be in its own world. Its own existence. Each side must have its own time. Time is flowing on each side of the wall but at different rates. It's now late afternoon here. It was noon a few minutes ago.

Sienna explains what she just realized and what she now knows. It's the only explanation that makes sense, as nonsensical as it is to believe that walking a few feet can cause time to change by hours. And who knows if it's even a few hours. It could be days or weeks or centuries. All that's known is that the time of day is different now. There's no way to determine if it's even the same day.

Then Sam takes this thought and expands on it, saying for the first time that it all makes sense. How? How can she come to that conclusion? It's because she recalls being on Treak for some time and returning. They were gone five days. It was Saturday when they got back. The next day they woke up and it was Sunday. They went to Mick's meeting. At that meeting, that Sunday meeting, Mick said it was Saturday. Sam assumed someone had made a mistake. That was the only logical explanation. At that time. It couldn't be both Saturday and Sunday. But she was wrong. There was no mistake. They were both right. The meeting was on Sunday for Sam and Sienna. It was on Saturday for Mick. Why? Because Sam and Sienna were in Treak. A place where time goes at a different rate than in Trek. Sam and Sienna had lived, had existed, for five days. For Mick, it was only four. They were both right. It was Saturday and it was Sunday.

One piece of a puzzle solved. A puzzle in which there are no questions, no answers, and no reward for being right. But it is something. Time travels differently on Trek, in each of the spots of color that were observed from their approach to the planet. One speed on normal Trek and another inside each area, like the one they are in now. Who knows if time travels the same in each of these alternate areas or differently. Only time will tell.

Time moving at a different rate is interesting and possibly useful, but for now it doesn't change the goal of their assignment. The goal is still to find people who came here from Earth and who might have gotten lost in, well, in wherever the three of them are now. This place might be Trek and it might not be. If time can change, so can anything else. All bets are off.

Nothing to do now but walk around and see if there's any information that can be gathered. Any useful information, to be more precise. Or any human contact. That would be useful and a great place to start. Lights from a town, or a camp, or anything to give a hint that there are others around would be great.

Even though it should only be mid-afternoon, it's not. It's evening here and it's getting dark. There's little time left to find this sign of civilization today, so the group starts to look for a place to camp for the night. No one really wants to waste another day when everyone is still wide awake, but wandering through an unknown area of the forest when it's dark isn't the way to accomplish anything, except perhaps a sprained leg by falling over some unseen logs.

At least this part of wherever-they-are looks a lot like the Trek they're used to seeing. Both the Trek of Sam and Sienna and the Treak of Aidan. That must mean that they're at least close to where they started. Close somehow, however closeness is measured in this case. The important part for this evening is that the land is providing food for them, as they have learned to expect. Edible fruits, nuts, berries, and a source of water. They can survive the night rather well without having to rely on the supply of food they brought with them, that they carried over the boundary from there to here. They gather some of the more interesting looking edibles, enjoy the harvest, talk until they are all tired, and call it a day.

The Meeting

Everyone wakes up early, extremely early, before the sun. They went to sleep last night when it was dark but no one had been ready to call it a day. Sleep did not come easily. A time change takes some adjustment. Like one caused by flying around the world to a time zone far different from the time zone of the start. In this case the time zone change didn't require air travel. It occurred after a walk of only a few meters but it was just as significant. No one had a good night's sleep. Everyone finds themselves awake, sitting around, wide-eyed, waiting for the sun to rise.

The sun finally shows itself on the horizon. By this time, the three have had their breakfast and are ready to get going to wherever the fates are planning to take them. And that's exactly where they go. The fates direct them away from where they crossed the wall last night and along a small stream. Remember that there are no paths on Trek, no human made paths, so a walk along a stream is useful. It marks the path forward, provides a marked path back, and it's more likely to find people near a stream than anywhere else.

The three walk, and walk some more, and some more, looking for any signs of human life. Nothing! They do find life, just not human life. Some small creatures that look like rabbits, and possibly some in the distance that looks like the coats they saw in Treak. But no signs that anyone else, any other human, has ever been in this part of Trek. They continue walking. The sun rises overhead, it gets hotter, its afternoon, the sun starts on its path back down, and sets. A whole day walking. No progress. Not only did they fail to see anyone, they failed to see any signs of life at all, something manmade and discarded, or broken branches, or even hearts carved into a tree saying MB loves BK. Nada!

Dinner. They sit over their evening meal and talk about what their plans should be for tomorrow. They're here to find other people. They have no proof that anyone actually entered this part of the planet. They do have circumstantial evidence from a concentration of reports of human sightings, reports from other humans, but no actual proof. How much time can they spend on something that just might be a wild goose chase? That consideration forms the basis of their discussions about tomorrow's plans.

Sam and Sienna agree that they can't give up just yet. Not after only one day. They need to try longer to find people. How much longer? That's somewhat arbitrary but they agree that four days of looking, if they don't find anyone, is a reasonable time to say they gave it a good try. They have spent one day. If they walk into this part of Trek another day, then turn around and follow a different path back to the wall, that will be their four-day exploration. Two days in and two days out. Four days is all they should invest. There are other places on Trek to try.

That's the gist of the conversation between Sam and Sienna. Aidan just listens and nods approval from time to time. It's not that he actually has a vote. Sam and Sienna eventually agree to this two-days-in-each-direction plan. They doubt it'll be successful but they hope it will. Aidan is the more optimistic. He doesn't tell anyone this because he has no idea why, but for some reason that even he doesn't know, he's definitely more hopeful. There's something vaguely familiar about the scenery. It looks like something he remembers being told about from someone. He has never seen it himself and has no idea who might have described the scene. It might have actually happened, him being told. It might have been a dream. Or just his imagination. Or nothing. But he feels there is something significant here and he's hopeful.

Another night.

Another morning.

Aidan is the first one up and makes morning coffee for everyone. He's learning the ways of his new world, his new world with Sam and Sienna who both like morning coffee. He thinks he should be useful some way and this is the way, doing what he has just learned to do.

They start their new day's walk continuing along the same river they followed all day the day before. It looks like it's going to be a repeat of the success they had then. But soon, after less than an hour, Aidan stops. Sienna and Sam follow Aidan's lead and stop too. They stop by a small stream, a tributary of the larger river they had been following. This stream looks familiar to Aidan even though it really can't be. He's never been here before. He's never been in this part of Trek at all but it still looks familiar. More dreams or more imagination, or reality?

Sienna notices Aidan's attention to the stream and glances down at it, trying to see or feel if there's anything there. Anything that feels different from your old mill stream. Something imploring her, them, to follow. Sienna really wants to feel something. Really, really wants to. Perhaps she's trying too hard. After a short while, she does sense a feeling of the familiarity she's looking for. Or so she thinks.

What is there about this stream that Sienna feels? Is it really familiarity? It's not the familiarity that Aidan feels. Aidan has been on Trek longer than Sienna. His whole life, actually. He knows better than Sienna what seems familiar on this planet and what doesn't. But there's something. She gets a feeling similar to what she sensed when they were heading to meet Aidan before they really knew who Aidan was or that he would be waiting for them. Now, like then, the stream gives her a vibe, a hint of encouragement that following it is the right thing to do. Encouragement is better than nothing, and nothing is all they have so far. Even if it's only listening to Aidan, it's something. Time to go where he feels they should.

They give Aidan the controls. He decides to turn and follow this new, smaller, less significant flow of water. He has his reason. He just doesn't quite know what that reason is. Sienna agrees. This new stream is the way to go. If the stream is trying to say, "Hey, follow me," everyone has to admit it's doing a good job. It's saying the same thing to two different people in two different ways. The same meaning to both and getting the same response. They follow the route of this small stream. Why not? Their choice of direction is arbitrary. Any way is as good as any other way, so this way now has been selected to be the best of equals.

It's a quiet peaceful stream, flowing East with a nice easy path on the North side. The farther along this new water-guided route they walk, the more Aidan feels at home. It's not Treak, that much is sure, but this scenery has a familiarity that somehow reminds him of Treak. The good news is that this makes Aidan feel better, happier, more content. The bad news is that happiness only goes so far. After a couple of hours of walking, there are still no signs of human life. No hints. Nothing. But they trudge on nonetheless.

They eventually come to a point where this stream meets yet another one. They were walking East on the North side of their coercive stream. A new stream is flowing up from the South. The two streams join and continue East, a slightly bigger stream formed from the influx of the new supply of water. Slightly bigger, but still not so deep that it can't be crossed.

Walking past the juncture, they continue on the north side of the same stream for an hour. Sam and Sienna look across the stream. It would be easy for them to cross if there's a reason for them to do so, which there isn't. They could have crossed the stream when it was smaller. They can still cross it now after the juncture, if they are so inclined. There's no barrier other than a small flow of water, but why? Why cross?

Things aren't the same for Aidan. He takes his first look across the water, his first look in the last hour since before the confluence. The terrain on this side of the stream is as it has always been. Flat and easy walking. The terrain on the other side is different. It must have changed recently but Aidan can't remember for sure when it changed. New terrain. Not on their side of the river, but on the other. Aidan knows that no one can cross this stream. It's blocked by tall, impassable mountains. He stops and stares at the mountains. Anxiety! Sam can see Aidan's face and sense the anxiety. So can Sienna. They ask Aidan what's wrong. He points at the water, points across the stream. Sam and Sienna look. There's no problem. Nothing has changed. It's the same as it has been all day.

Then Aidan explains what he sees and they understand immediately. He sees what he saw when they left Treak many days ago over the southern boundary. This must be the northern boundary of Treak. Treak is on the other side of the stream. Sam and Sienna can see into Treak from here. It's likely they wouldn't be able to see out if they cross the stream, which they aren't going to do. For Aidan, it's the other way. He can't see in. Exactly the same as the boundary they crossed on the south side of Treak.

Sam looks at the sky, at the clouds floating overhead and blowing toward Treak. She looks closely. The break in the clouds, the small shift, the slight discontinuity that she saw before on the southern boundary of Treak, she sees

Trek

again, here, on the North. It's a very subtle break, one you can hardly see if you aren't looking, and, even then, it's hard.

Aidan said there were two entrances. The one where they entered many days ago is at the south end. Now they are at the north entrance. They're here many days later. Who knows how many days since time seems to flow at different rates all over the planet. It's later, that's all that can be said.

Aidan knows now why this looks familiar, why he thought he knew this place although he had never been here. He was never here, right here, but he has seen this place many times. It's across the stream from the point in Treak where he would go to await new arrivals. He could see out of Treak at the scenery and at the people crossing the stream to join him. Crossing and not knowing that by doing so, they could never leave. This is the place. The place where people enter Treak, never to leave. One of two such places. No one who enters Treak can ever leave. Except for Sam and Sienna, and Anna. They managed to escape from the South side. But they were the only ones. The only ones who were known to escape.

Clearly, they're not going to cross this stream to look for people. But the view is interesting and Treak is always a good topic of conversation, something to talk about while enjoying a good meal. It's time for lunch. They sit to enjoy what Trek has to offer in this part of the planet. They sit well away from the stream for safety. It's not really necessary but it can't hurt. Sam and Sienna just don't feel they should get too close to Treak, and Aidan can't because of the mountains.

Lunch is a fine selection of nuts and berries. And something that looks like kale. A kale salad is a welcome change from most Trek food. They look into their backpack and manage to find something to suffice as a salad dressing. Aidan needs a relaxing meal following his major bout of anxiety. It helps. Either the food or the relaxation, or both, but he feels better. Lunch is over and the three start to talk about where to go from here. They need to make some significant progress because the agreement is to start back to the entrance wall if nothing of interest happens today.

The conversation adds to the relaxation. There's no stress in the discussions, probably because no one really has a good idea of anything new to talk about.

Everything significant has been said. On top of that, Sam and Sienna are quieter than usual, trying to treat Aidan gingerly. It's different for him than for Sam and Sienna. Quiet is the name of the game for now. All three sit around for almost an hour, not talking. While not talking, they hear a small crackling noise in the bushes, probably some small animal foraging for food. And splashing. They hear splashing. Fish in the stream, no doubt. But then there's speech. They hear speech in a dialect that's all too familiar to Aidan. They look toward the stream just in time to see a rock fly over the water and come close to hitting Sam. A large rock with a rope tied to it. Someone has figured out the secret weapon for crossing boundaries. Undefined boundaries as found in Trek. A rope the same as the one, they hope, is still back at the entrance wall that they crossed.

Their eyes follow the rope across the river. Two people, two women are attempting to leave Treak. Two women are successfully leaving Treak, hanging onto the rope for guidance. These must not be Treak-born people like Aidan. Treak-born people wouldn't need the aid of the advanced technology afforded by a rope. Treak-born people, if they are like Aidan, can see across the stream. These new arrivals must be from here, from this part of Trek, returning home. The two that are now on this side of the stream and now in sight. Sam and Sienna look at them as they walk up for a greeting. It's like looking in a mirror. Everyone knows these two new arrivals. Knows them all too well. They're Sam and Sienna.

What's just happened? No one knows. Certainly not Sam. Certainly not Sienna. Certainly not their doppelgangers. Aidan might have an idea but he doesn't say anything. No sense hesitating any longer. Sam extends a hand and says, "Hi, my name is Sam. And this is my daughter, Sienna, and our friend, Aidan. Welcome back."

The two new arrivals are clearly aware of the similarities between them, Sam, and Sienna. They apparently also see no reason not to continue with the friendly formalities. "Hi," the older one replies. "Thanks for the welcome home. My name is Victoria, but people call me Sammy. And this is my daughter, Sinopia."

Sam and Sienna sit down. They know there's something more to this meeting than four random people passing in the night. Sammy and Sinopia also sense something. They're not sure what either but they appear to be patient people, so they sit down and await developments. Aidan is here doing what he does best. Observing.

Sam thinks and has an idea. When is Sam at a lack of ideas? Almost never. There was once, recently, when Sam heard from Paul that Vernon had died. Or perhaps when Paul implied Vernon had died. Now Sam realizes that maybe, just maybe, that comment from Paul might be related to the current situation. As strange as it may be, things may be falling into place. Sam starts investigating her theory by posing a simple question to Sammy and Sinopia. "How's Thalia?" she queries, asking about their best friend from Prism, their best native Prism friend.

To anyone who has never been to Prism, this question would mean nothing. Even to those who have been to Prism, only a select few know Thalia. Of those select few, Sam knows them all. One could reasonably assume Sam knows everyone who knows Thalia. That's certainly what it seems like. Sam didn't know Sammy before today.

The question about Thalia clearly means something to Sammy. Sammy's acting like she knows Thalia and that concerns her. She jumps up, walks around, thinks, contemplates, ponders. Sammy is obviously a member of this elite "I know Thalia" group. Sammy also knows what this question means and she doesn't remember meeting Sam.

Sammy seems to have done some of her own figuring. She responds to Sam's question with another question, "Is your real name Victoria, too?"

OK, turnabout is fair play. That question means they both seem to know what's going on. No one else does. Sienna and Sinopia are beginning to come on board with the thought process. They're not there yet, but getting close.

For now, it's a game between Sam and Sammy. Sam's turn. She asks Sammy what day this is. Remember that the days are out of sync from when Sam and Sienna started their current outing, their current trek, and now. They got out of sync when they crossed the non-existent wall, the wall breezes can't breach.

Time wasn't continuous over the wall. After the one step that transversed the wall, it was at least several hours later, but could have been several days or weeks, earlier or later. Sam wants to know what day it is now.

Sammy's response doesn't surprise Sam at all. Sammy says that it's day 145. Exactly what Sam expected. Not necessarily 145, but some number.

That makes it Sammy's turn. "Sixteen days," she says to start her question. "Did you leave Treak sixteen days ago?"

To which Sam makes the obvious reply, "I have no idea. Time moves differently in Treak than it does in the place I was before getting to Treak. Yes, I was in Treak. I was probably there around sixteen days ago, more or less. I was in Treak looking for people from Earth that might have gotten lost in Treak, lost and stuck, unable to return. Why were you in Treak? Did you go there looking for Duncan?"

Sammy smiles at that question. There's no need to answer. Sam smiles. They give each other a big hug. Like they were long lost friends. It might be the strangest hug either of them ever gave or received, but it was also one of the nicest, the most familiar. The world of Treak, the world that Aidan called a convergence of here and there. This might be the first meeting of convergees outside of Treak. Time to relax and get acquainted. Sam, Sammy, Sienna, and Sinopia. They probably know most everything about each other already. But not everything. There are likely some things left to learn.

What Just Happened

Sam and Sammy are a lot alike. They know many things about each other, such as where they were born, what they like to eat and drink, who they work for, why they're on Trek, how they got here, and who they married. They know a lot of the details about these facts. Most of the details. But not everything. Some things they don't know. Facts that they don't know are likely to shed the most light on, well, on whatever the light shines. Sam and Sammy are about to examine these unknown areas that include where they were born, what they like to eat and drink, who they work for, why they're on Trek, how they got here, and who they really married.

Why do they know what they know about the other? It's obvious, a conclusion they both came to almost immediately. Sam knew when she asked Sammy about Thalia. Sammy knew as soon as the question was asked. They both know Thalia. They both know everyone who knows Thalia and they didn't know each other. How is that possible? There's only one way. There must be two Thalias and therefore two Prisms. Two places that are different but the same. Not two separate planets, but one planet that exists twice. There must be two universes, two parallel universes. Sam and Sammy are the same person with one slight difference. They each came from their own universe.

There are many theories that assume parallel universes exist and many that assume they don't. For right now, from this moment on, it's time to go with the theories claiming that they do exist.

There are boundaries in Trek that facilitate themselves in different ways apparent to only the most observant. Boundaries such as those that appear as discontinuous breaks in clouds floating from Trek to Treak. Boundaries that allow people to cross, but not breezes. Boundaries of subtle types that Sienna and Sam can see. Traverse one of those boundaries and you've moved only a meter, but a meter from one universe to another. Why do those boundaries exist on Trek? Do they exist elsewhere? Where are Sam and Sienna right now compared to where they were? Are they in Sam's universe, or Sammy's, or possibly Aidan's? Where is Aidan actually from? And what about Sienna and Sinopia, and Vernon? Or maybe a better question is "Vernon and Vernon." It's nice to get answers but not so nice when the answers come with more

questions. There are a lot of questions now. Maybe it's always the case in situations such as this that more questions appear than answers? It's certainly to be the case now.

The first thing that's apparent is that parallel universes, if that's really what we have here, aren't really parallel. There are differences. Maybe subtle, but differences nonetheless. For example, Sam is named Sam and Sammy is named Sammy. That might be obvious but why is that? A second difference. Sam named her daughter Sienna. Sammy named hers Sinopia. Look at the two of them, Sinopia and Sienna. They could be twins. In some sense, they are. But not exact twins. It's not a perfectly parallel universe. It's sort of a parallel universe as one might imagine to exist in a non-Euclidian space.

Sam and Sammy and Sienna and Sinopia sit down to a fine Trek afternoon snack and talk about themselves. Yes, they want to get information that can be used for getting their people home, but that can hardly be the most pressing need for information at the current time. It's not often when people get to meet themselves. The opportunity to learn about oneself can't be glossed over. It's not the time to knock this knock of opportunity.

What to talk about? Where to start? They start to talk about the two of them growing up but it's a fairly boring discussion. Sam says something she did, or learned, or saw, and Sammy just says "me too." Then Sammy talks about her life, and Sam says "me too." A lot of "me toos" floating around.

They want to find differences. Similarities are all over the place and expected. Nothing to learn there. Differences may prove to be the most enlightening. What's different? That's what needs to be discussed. Find something different and why. Something different where nothing should be.

There is one obvious case, and that is why is Sam called Sam and Sammy called Sammy. They both admit to a given name of Victoria, to the fact that they didn't like the name, to the fact that they kept trying to change it, and to the fact that their father got annoyed with all the name changes and decided to call each of them Sam.

Sam was called Sam all her life.

So was Sammy. She was called Sam all her life until she wasn't. "One night I went to a high school dance. It was raining that day, almost snowing, and very cold. My dad was driving. The car slipped on some ice and skidded off the road. Luckily, we weren't hurt and there was no damage to the car, so I got to the party a little late. I met a boy and we spent a lot of time together at the party. I can't remember his name but we talked. He asked about my name, which was Sam at that time. I told him the story about how I got that name. He said that Sam was not a girl's name but Sammy would work. I didn't think too much of that, but he spread the idea around at the dance to all my friends. Everyone started calling me Sammy. It stuck. I've been Sammy ever since."

"Hmmm," thinks Sam out loud, "I remember one night my dad drove me to a high school dance. I remember it being rainy and slippery, and I remember skidding off the road and being stopped by a tree. There wasn't a lot of damage to the car but it wouldn't start again, not right away. We had to call for help. By the time someone arrived, the dance was over so we went back home. I never made it to that dance. A little patch of ice, a little difference in our two worlds. In mine, it was just slippery enough to make the car slide into a tree. Almost missed it, but only almost. The car hit it. A little longer of a skid than for you. Because of that, my name is Sam instead of Sammy."

That was one difference. They look for others as they compare other events growing up. The cities they lived in, their university, their favorite teachers, their favorite foods, who they married, their trip to Prism, meeting Thalia. All that was the same. Well, almost all of it. Seems like Sammy never developed a taste for a good stingray steak like Sam did. Must have been some issue with menu choices when Sam had her first taste. Not a major difference. Seems like most people think the phrase "good stingray steak" is an oxymoron anyway. But it is a difference. So, differences can exist, but not a lot.

Then they start talking about Vernon, their husband, or husbands. That conversation is strange. How can you talk about one person, the person you're married to, and be detached enough from the conversation to realize you're talking about two different people. Two people that are different but at the same time, not different. Any comment about one probably applies to the other. Not always, but almost always. The compassion, the interest, the

attention to detail by each of them to every word said by the other, everything said and heard is heard with an intensity not possible to elucidate. The conversation causes an emotion to percolate to the surface as each word is heard. An emotion never before felt because it can't be felt in any reality other than the one that exists now, that they know exists now, that neither of them thought could ever exist.

The conversation moves to their daughters. There's a big difference, how Sienna in one reality is named Sinopia in the other. Vernon and Sam, or Vernon and Sammy, must have talked about names and come to different conclusions. Somehow. Possibly an inter parallel universe semaphore prevented the same name from being used twice. Not likely. Maybe. Another difference.

The conversation between Sam and Sammy next takes the obvious turn. They talk about the elephant in the room, Vernon's health. Did he come with Sammy to Trek? If not, why not, and what has she heard about him since her arrival? Is Vernon one of the many similarities or one of the rare differences?

Similarity is the short answer. Vernon is not on Trek in either universe. The reason he's not here is the same for Sam and Sammy. He never made it. They both heard strong hints of him being sick with some form of cancer. That hint came from Duncan, who they both met in Treak, and who both got the same story about Vernon being sick. The same story with a major difference between Sammy and Sam. Sammy knows Duncan. Duncan was one of her trekkers, a recent arrival on Trek and Treak. Duncan was on the list that Sammy's "Mick" gave her. Only Sammy doesn't know anyone named Mick. There is a head of the forest service on Trek, on Sammy's Trek, a woman called Mickey, but no Mick.

Duncan was going to leave Treak with Sammy just now, but got scared when he was at the boundary and saw the Amazon-sized waterfall. The same image that Sienna saw when she was at the border trying to leave Treak. Sienna was successful. She had the courage. Duncan was too scared to try to cross to leave Treak. He walked back. He gave up. Just like a man, Sam and Sammy agree. Duncan is still in Treak. But his knowledge now has some credibility. He likely did communicate with Vernon. With the Vernon of Sammy's world. And

that is likely to carry meaning into Sam's world. Sam hopes not, but her fears now have some foundation in reality.

Besides hints from Duncan that Vernon is sick, there were hints of him possibly now being back on Earth. Sam had read that in a note from Ikenga, a note delivered to her before she left on this current outing.

Sam wonders about other people who gave her information about Vernon, at least about some Vernon. For example, what about Paul? He seems to think Vernon had died a long time ago. Sam asks Sammy about Paul. Sammy doesn't know Paul, never heard of anyone named Paul. There's another difference.

The differences seem to be piling up. What about Aidan? Sienna found a friend, Aidan. What kind of friend? That's not important. What is important is that Sinopia doesn't have an Aidan or anyone like him. Sam and Sienna were in Trek before Sammy and Sinopia. They wound up with Aidan. There appears to be only one Aidan. And only one Paul. And only one Duncan. Sammy knows Duncan. Sam doesn't. Sam met Paul. Sammy didn't. Sam and Sammy may be similar, almost identical people from different universes, from parallel universes. But here on Trek, the parallelism diverges. What happens on Trek seems to happen to Sam and Sammy as individuals, not as parallel doppelgangers. That's true in most cases, but not all. They both stumbled into Treak. They both managed to escape. At least while they're on Trek, they may be similar, but they're taking separate paths. What happens to one might no longer be indicative of what might happen to the other. I guess what happens on Trek stays on Trek.

Breaking out of her thoughts, Sam turns to Sammy to try to decide what to do next. What they should do next and what's important to do next. Important now that they know what they know, what they only recently learned.

Sammy starts.

"As far as our job is concerned, it just got easier. Before we met, I wondered why there were so many people on the list Mickey gave me, but also so many not on the list. Now I know. Some came from your universe and some from mine. Like Duncan

and Judy and Cormac. That explains why more people know us than we know. Some know you. Some know me. Most of them don't know there are two of us.

Now we know if we find someone who wants to go back to Earth, that we need to send them to the right Earth, yours or mine. We can do that by asking who they met when they arrived on Trek. If they say Mick, then we send them to your Earth. If they say Mickey, well then, they belong with me. You know how to send people you might meet to our universe. You need to tell me how to send people I meet to yours. Where did you cross? How do we get there? This all means we can both work to help each other. With more success, I hope.

“So, that takes care of our job. But that job is no longer the most important task we have. The most important task is finding out what's wrong with Vernon, or Vernons, and see if there's anything we can do about it. We have two universes to work in. We should be able to find something, right?”

“To get this started, we need some coordination. We can do it. We can work well with each other. If I can't work well with myself, who can I work with? Let's start by both having a meeting with Mickey. We might learn something and I really want to see her expression when I return to headquarters, twice.”

Sounds like a plan. No objection from Sienna or Sinopia. And nothing at all from Aidan. Another intriguing day. Time to forage for dinner and get ready for whatever these worlds have to offer tomorrow.

Headquarters Two

Another morning on Trek, waking up to a good morning wish from yourself and giving yourself a good morning wish right back. Perhaps not like all other mornings, but you have to admit starting the day off on a good foot with yourself is one of the better ways to start a day.

Breakfast with the group soon ends and the journey toward Sammy's headquarters begins. Headquarters is a lot closer to the north entrance of Treak than it is to the south. The five of them should be able to arrive at headquarters by early afternoon. Remember it required Sam almost two days to walk from the south entrance to her headquarters.

A walk of only a few hours is a bargain. The leisurely stroll provides time to relax and enjoy the planet that has been their home for the past few weeks. A planet that has consistent temperatures, is never too hot or too cold, and provides nourishment for the taking wherever and whenever needed. Everyone can see why visitors from Earth might be inclined to visit Trek and inclined to stay. Everyone except Aidan can see this. To Aidan, it's how the world always is and how it should be. Nothing special to be seen here!

Besides food, berries, nuts, and vegetables of all types, there are flowers. Flowers are in bloom all year long here. There are no seasons so there is no one time of year that flowers bloom and pollinate. Each flowering plant sets up its own schedule, some not even annual. It's not important to get into an annual cycle when nothing repeats on a yearly basis. At any time of the year, some flowers are in bloom and some aren't, but there's always color somewhere. And bees. Bees on Trek look almost like bees on Earth. There are more variations and more colors than blacks and browns and yellows, but they are definitely bees. There are probably more bees since there's more work to do. Pollination job requirements exist all year long. The bees are many and they are happy. Why not. It's a perfect world to be a bee.

Yes, plants and flowers. The stroll also occasionally uncovers a covey, a fluffle, a flock, a scurry, a skulk, a squabble, or a lounge of some animal. If one looks, there's life everywhere. The planet is a happy place not just for bees. Aidan knows all the wildlife and explains each as they are encountered. He seems to always know what they're called, in what sort of habitat they live,

and what they do. The name is not always an Earth name, the animals don't always have an Earth equivalent, but he always knows what it is and is always able to explain that to the Earthlings. One learns a lot growing up on Trek.

Sienna and Sinopia are also getting along quite well enjoying nature. It's their calling, their ability. As they walk, they decide to use their ability to commune with nature. They start a game with each other over who can be the best at observing the new world. Sienna's attention focuses on the ground. She notices the flow of the water in the stream as she has been doing a lot on Trek. Sinopia's attention goes to the sky, to the trees, and to the leaves. She notices one leaf starting to fall in the general direction of the stream. Sienna senses the stream, senses that it knows it's about to get a new visitor, Sinopia's leaf. She notices a new current in the stream, a shift in the water's flow, speeding up to catch the leaf as it floats on its downward path. Sinopia senses the leaf shifting in the breeze, aiming toward the welcoming current. They meet. The falling leaf lands and is swept away by the current on a joyful ride downstream.

As the leaf disappears in the distance, Sinopia's attention moves from the tree to another object in the sky. A cloud. A big fluffy cloud floating way up high, right overhead. Sienna is still observing the earth. Earth is a misnomer. She is observing the Trek and the plants growing in it. Flowers. The colors of the flowers bring back memories of Prism, happy memories of Prism with its numerous and everchanging colors. She identifies with the flowers and becomes concerned that the ground is too dry. The plants are thirsty. But not for long. Sinopia's cloud notices this too. It has moisture, a significant amount gathered from hours of floating over the world absorbing the planet's evaporation. The cloud seems to also care about the flowers as it releases its moisture, only some of it, enough to provide what the plants need but not enough to force the human group to take shelter and delay their trip. The water refreshes the plants and is also refreshing to the travelers. The air is warm and the long walk is making the group warmer. The rain cools them and is welcome to all.

Sinopia and Sienna enjoy the brief shower and smile at each other. The game they started is fun. Trek is providing insight, providing puzzles, providing

Trek

entertainment. Trek is playing this game with them. But Trek is not just playing. Trek is also taking care of itself while Sienna and Sinopia are just watching. So, they assume. It never dawns on them that they might have anything to do with the events. They are just observers. Happy observers. Observing Trek in action.

Time goes by fast when you're having fun. Before long, Sam looks up and recognizes Trek headquarters. She's anxious to get back to her room and relax. It's been a long trip and some down time is what she needs. Mick is off in the distance noticing her return and waving. Sam will even welcome some of that super mediocre Trek headquarters restaurant cooking. One of Fred's specialties. Probably eggs, but eggs served by a familiar face.

Yes, it's good to be back. Good until the shock of reality enters Sam's awareness, enters Sam's mind, and that of Sienna. Headquarters is in front of them. True. All the buildings and people they know as their home on Trek. Familiarity and the comfort that brings. Only it's not. They're not home, not their home. They're in their parallel home on Trek, just not on the Trek they were in when they started. They're as far from home as they have ever been.

Sam and Sienna, dejected, look at each other as they walk away from the group to find a place to sit down and talk. The others see what's happening. See that they wandered off, but somehow don't understand why. Sinopia starts to join them. She's quickly stopped by Aidan. He knows Sienna by now. Knows her well enough to grasp what's going on in her mind. And that of Sam's. He knows they need their space and time to be alone, just Sam and Sienna by themselves. It's nice that he knows this, that he can sense it.

It's strange that Sinopia can't. Sinopia, more so that anyone else, should know what to do here and what to do is to do nothing. Sinopia does get the hint after a small nudge from Aidan. A nudge she shouldn't have needed but did. Leaving Sam and Sienna to themselves, the rest wander into the headquarters building. Sam and Sienna are given the time they need to recover. As well as they can.

Eventually they stand up and join the others in the Trek headquarters restaurant. They say hello to Mick and are corrected that her name in this reality is Mickey. She and Sammy have had time to talk. Mickey was

completely briefed on the events that happened since she last saw Sammy and Sinopia. Those events include their walk through Trek, their trip into Treak, their attempts to escape, success, their meeting Sam, Sienna, and Aidan, and their realization what that meeting meant. Mickey appears to have been given quite a briefing in a two-hour period of time, the two hours when Sam and Sienna were consoling each other. That briefing covered a significant transfer of information that Mickey was expected to absorb in only two hours. She did, much to her credit, but for anyone else it would have taken at least three.

Onward. It's now into headquarters and into what Sam was told is the only restaurant on Trek. That's not completely true anymore, although it is kind of true. To make it absolutely true, one just has to say it's the only restaurant in this reality of Trek. Other realities, other Treks, other restaurants.

Sam and Sienna enter the restaurant for dinner, a restaurant they know everything about even though they have never been here before. They smile at Fred as he offers them a menu. They both choose to order an egg and vegetable omelet. Along with some wine. It's been a long time since they've had any wine and the events of the day seem to make this a requirement. Something is needed to help them relax. Whether wine does or does not produce this result physiologically, it certainly does emotionally. And that's where the need is tonight. What type of wine goes well with eggs? Not an important question but if asked, the answer would be wet. Any wine that's wet will work.

There appears to be an unspoken rule adopted at this dinner. Maybe in deference to the new arrivals. That rule is no business talk. No talk about Vernon. No talk about parallel universes. No talk about other worlds. No talk about creeks or hikes through Trek. No talk about work. However, when you are on a planet to investigate that planet, then anything you talk about is work. And when work is off limits, the conversation can get very quiet.

Sam sees Fred and tells him how well he looks. He actually does look a lot younger than Sam remembers, younger than the other Fred. Fred thanks her. It's about all that's said during the meal. Anything else falls into the off-limits classification.

Trek

Dinner ends. There's a spare room for Sam and Sienna. Aidan bunks in with Fred. All that has not been discussed tonight will be on the agenda at the 0900 meeting tomorrow.

Trek Two

Sleep. Morning. Breakfast. Meeting. Sam and Sienna go to sleep in a fog, wake up in a fog, and that fog continues through breakfast. Not like them. The meeting today is important, a lot will be discussed, a plan of action will be formed. A plan that should be formulating in their minds now. It isn't. Not yet. All that happened yesterday is a lot to grasp. So far that required grasp of events hasn't happened. Events are easier to grasp when reading about them in a book, when it's something happening to others. Not as easy to grasp when it's happening to you. In their fog, they feel that time no longer exists, that it flows but flows together into one big body of time, like water in a lake. There is no then, no now, no later, only time. One ocean of time. One large fog. In the fog, time doesn't exist. For now. And into the meeting.

The group takes their seats around a circular conference table. The center of the table is occupied by a globe showing a projection of a map of Trek. A map built from pictures taken from the spaceships that bring people to Trek, people from this universe, from this reality's Earth or Prism. The map is composed from pictures taken as those spaceships approached Trek. Not all ships enter Trek over the same location. Not all orbit over the same area. Pictures taken from many spaceships approaching over different areas of Trek are consolidated into a single image of Trek. A three-dimensional image. The image is projected on the inside surface of a translucent globe from equipment inside the globe. The projections make the globe look like a live miniature version of the sphere that is Trek. Rotating in real time. The bands of colors are there at the appropriate latitudes denoting different temperature zones: desert, cold, moderate. And the different colored spots that Sam and Sienna first saw on their approach. Those spots are seen scattered haphazardly on the surface of Trek. It's like looking at the real planet, the exact feeling Sam and Sienna had when they first saw Trek from space.

The sight of the sphere of Trek catches Sam's attention at the corner of her mind. And Sienna's. The rotating sphere of Trek breaks through their fog. Brings them back to reality. Time begins to flow again, flow normally. Sam and Sienna open their eyes and open their minds. The fog disperses. They are ready to consider what to do next.

Trek

Mickey starts the meeting with a simple question, “What should we talk about first?” A simple question in most meetings. It could take some thought here, but it doesn’t. Sam, fresh out of her fog, answers this inquiry without the slightest hesitation.

“When we first arrived on Trek from our Prism in our universe and we first saw the planet, it looked exactly like the sphere in the center of this table. We landed about here in this band,” she adds, pointing to one place on the globe.

“Most of the planet appeared to belong to the place where we landed, to our world, to our reality. The colored spots that you show are ones we also remember seeing. From what we learned since we’ve been here, I now suspect each one of these represents some ‘other place.’ I’m not yet sure what ‘other place’ might mean, but Treak is one of those I’m sure, and I suspect where I am now, this alternate Trek, is another.

“Sienna and I spent a lot of time walking on the surface of Trek. Most of it was in our area, in our world. Not one of the ‘other places.’ Even so, we became aware of these ‘other places.’ During the days we spent walking, we developed a feeling of how big they are. We’ve now seen both sides of one of those spots, Treak, the north end that connects to this Trek and the south end that connects to our Trek. I have a feeling for how big Treak is. Most other spots shown on the globe are alike. All of these spots of colors, these ‘other places’ are about the same size.

“Since we’ve been here in your reality, we’ve walked, Sienna, Aidan, and I. Walked in this reality, in this ‘other place,’ for several days. The distance we walked is much farther than the distance across Treak. Our walking should have taken us across your part of Trek. We should have walked completely across your reality, your spot of color. We should have reached another

border that would take us back to our Trek. We should be back home, to where I call home, but we aren't. Why not? Something is wrong here. I would say that something doesn't make sense, except that it's been a long time since I've seen anything that's made sense. I'll go with accurate. Something is inaccurate. Your map can't be accurate. You think it is. I don't. It isn't. What's going on here? That should be what we talk about first."

This sounds like a good place to start in understanding parallel universes. There should be an explanation, an answer to Sam's question that any expert could offer. An answer that would simply and expediently address Sam's concern. Unfortunately, the group is lacking an expert in the area of parallel universe theory. Who's going to answer the question? There's a brief pause around the table as people contemplate this exact point. Who has a good answer to Sam's question? It appears that no one does. No good answer and no answer at all.

Time passes, slightly awkwardly. No comments for about three or four minutes. Then one person stands up ready to advance the discussion. Who else? Who better to answer a question posed by Sam than Sammy? Kind of like having an argument with yourself. Whether you win or lose, it's sure to be interesting.

"Sam," Sammy addresses her parallel universe twin, "I couldn't have said it better myself." It's always best to start a discussion by complementing yourself.

"If I had the same experience that you did, I would have said exactly the same thing you did. Somehow, I'm sure of it. You believe that your part of Trek is the main part of the planet. You are an intelligent person and whatever you saw before you arrived here supported that opinion. If I were you, having been given that evidence, I would believe my area of Trek to be the main one. Just like you said. If your area is the main one then mine is just a spot. I understand you believe that too.

Trek

“I know I would have said exactly the same thing you said because I did have the same experience as you. Of course I did. And I will say it. Your part of Trek isn’t the predominant portion. Your area is one of the colored spots. If I look at where Treak is, which I know since we entered and exited at the northern entrance, and then follow a path through Treak to the south to where you entered, I should be able to find your Trek on our globe.” Sammy approaches the globe and points to the spot that is Treak, moves her finger to the South and finds, at the south end of Treak, a second spot of color, a bright shamrock green area.

“You’re the colored spot right there. You’re not the predominant area that you think you are. Just look at what we have before us. It shows that we’re in the main Trek and that your Trek, your reality, is just a spot.

“Why do you believe what you do when the evidence is clear that you’re wrong? All I can add to make both of us appear to be sane is that I do agree with your comment on sense. It’s been a long time since we have seen anything significant that has made sense. This may be one of those senseless times.”

Sammy sits down. No one really thinks that this has solved anything. What was presented were two contradictory views, each adamantly presented as correct when they both can’t be. They’re contradictory. That’s not progress.

Someone needs to get this meeting back on the right track. That responsibility belongs to Mickey as the head of Trek. She stands up. It seems appropriate for her to add her thoughts to firm up the direction of the meeting. Everyone looks at her and waits. There has to be something she can say to explain this apparent conflict between Sam and Sammy. The fact is that two identical observations that are the same must be different. Mickey needs to say that it all makes sense. Mickey knows there must be an explanation and that this is the time to say it. She opens her mouth to speak. No words come out. She sits down.

During the time that Mickey has been trying to say something, Sam and Sammy seem to have gone off to talk in a corner of the meeting room. They compare notes, mental notes, visions about what they know to be true. All's quiet in the rest of the room. And soon, all's quiet in their corner. It's quiet as they both come to an understanding at the same time. A comprehension of the facts that's not easy to explain. At this time, "not easy" becomes simple in comparison to what's been thrown at them the last few days. The last few days were full of impossible. "Not easy" may not be easy, but it's possible. After a few minutes of corner mumbling, they stand up to explain what could become the introductory chapter in a "Parallel Universes for Dummies" book. They start their explanation together.

"We both have the same image of Trek in our minds. We both view Trek the same way. Basically, the same, but contradictory. Contradictory because of a different place each of us use to originate our view, a different anchor from where we observe Trek. Each of us has an anchor, a mental anchor located in our own Trek.

"Let's put that aside for a moment. Let's consider what we know. We know there are two Treks, one in each universe, in each reality. We know we each came from a different one and the one we came from is our reality. Each of us has, as a reality, a Trek that occupies the major part of this planet. Each of us knows about an alternate Trek, the Trek that the other one of us came from. We each believe that this alternate Trek resides in some colorful spot on the surface of our Trek, the real Trek.

"Neither of us can accept what the other thinks because that would conflict with our thoughts and our own knowledge of what's right. I can't accept that my Trek resides only as some spot on the surface of a larger Trek, that larger Trek being where the other one of us came from. It's completely opposite to what I know to be right.

"It may appear that this is a conflict, but it isn't. Both of us are right at the same time.

Trek

“Let’s consider what’s different in our two universes, but the same. Like two Earths, or two Prisms, or two Vernons. When one of us looks at our Vernon, we see exactly the same person as the other one sees when she looks at her Vernon. Talk to Sam in one room. Have her describe Vernon, her Vernon. Put Sammy in another room and have her describe her Vernon. Compare the descriptions. They are likely to be the same, almost the same, but close enough so that it will seem like the same person is being described in both cases. And they are. There may be two different people, but to each of us, only one is the real Vernon.

“How is that different from Trek? Put Sam in one room and have her describe Trek. Have Sammy do the same. Compare the descriptions. They’ll be the same!

“There may be two different Vernons but they look like they’re the same. Physically different, but each the same as the other. Look at two Treks. They’re the same as two Vernons are the same. Most likely, as two Earths or two Prisms are the same. Both Treks are the same. Physically different only because they exist in different realities, but otherwise the same. From one Trek, that Trek looks like the real Trek and the other Trek looks like an alternate Trek. The Trek we are in always occupies the majority of the planet surface. The other Trek always occupies only a small spot.

“What happens when we walk across the boundary of realities between the two Treks, the parallel reality boundary that divides one Trek from the other? What happens is that we travel. But we travel much more than a few meters. We travel to a new reality. Everything changes from the old reality to the new one. Here’s one example. Time changes. It’s one time in one reality and another time in the other. But time means nothing. That’s no different than being a different time zone. So what?

“Time is part of reality, the reality of when. Only a part. What actually changes is reality itself. A ship in orbit around one Trek will see the same image as a ship in orbit around the other. If you can somehow see those images in real time, they would be the same. The major part of the planet always belongs to the current reality, whichever reality that is. Some smaller area belongs to the other reality, the one we might have just left, or the one we might be about to enter. By crossing the boundary, we have entered a new universe with a new reality and a new worldview. The view adjusts to conform to the new reality. It’s the same view as the one we had before we left the ‘other place.’ We just have to realize that it’s a view from where we are, not from where we were.

“Reality is not a constant that remains unchanged across universes. Each parallel universe has its own parallel reality.

“Which brings us to the colorful spots that we call ‘other places.’ It appears that Trek is unique or at least rare. We can’t say unique in the universe because we aren’t really sure where Trek is. Trek appears to be a place where parallel universes, parallel realities, whatever this is, it’s where they meet. We know there are two Earths and two Prisms. There must be two Treks or possibly more. There are likely more than two. If there are more than one, why would there only be two. There’s an unknown number. Trek is unique in that the Treks in each universe are close to each other. Close how? That’s not for us to decide. Probably close in some dimension of which we’re not aware. A thin dimension. Each Trek is poking through this dimension slightly. As one Trek broaches the boundary of another, it appears as a spot on the surface of the other Trek. Each of these spots we see on the surface of our Trek is what we see of some other Trek, some other reality. We are on Trek in a region of existence that was created, not at the creation of the universe, but at the creation of many universes.

“And that explanation is the simple answer to the original question we asked, the question of ‘what’s going on here.’”

The pair of Sam’s take their seat. Each smiling exactly like the other. What else could be expected.

“Well, that clears it up, then, doesn’t it, eh, maybe, I think,” stammers Mickey a few minutes later. “Quite a presentation. Thanks. And now that that’s over, let’s take a break.”

A good summary, indeed. The meeting moves to the restaurant.

Sam and Sienna seem to have completely recovered from the shock of not being where their minds and emotions said they were when they arrived at headquarters yesterday. Somehow understanding this dual-reality Trek has eased their minds about the entire situation. Isn’t it amazing how the human mind works? At least some human minds. Yesterday, realizing they were in a parallel universe was very upsetting. Today, understanding that they’re in a parallel universe is calming. Is there so much difference between realizing and understanding? Apparently, there is.

There is much that’s the same in both Sammy’s Trek and Sam’s Trek. No surprise there. The understanding reached just a little while ago means that everything, or almost everything, should be the same. Some differences are possible, minor differences, but nothing major. Like Sam being named Sam and Sammy being named Sammy. A non-consequential difference.

Now that they’re enjoying lunch, Sam notes that the food in this universe is one of the more significant differences. Fred seems to be a much better cook in this reality. Quite good. There’s some flavor in his food that Sam has not tasted since she ate at one of the better restaurants on Prism. Maybe not even then if her memory serves her right. It’s a flavor she doesn’t think she remembers from Prism. Maybe it’s from Earth. Earth’s culinary options are still far beyond anything that can be tasted on Prism. Whatever it is, it’s delicious, and delicious is not a word she has used to describe any meal since her arrival on Trek.

With increased interest, Sam decides to ask Fred how he prepared the meal. It still consists solely of locally sourced vegetables. This might be another

difference between the two Treks. Something that grows here and not in Sam's Trek. Something tasty. It's possible. Planetary evolution could easily have diverged in the two realities. Sam wonders if she could bring plants over the wall when she and Sienna return to their real home.

She enters the kitchen to talk to Fred and notices Mickey is there also. Mickey's telling Fred how good he looks, how he looks much younger than he looked just yesterday. Funny. That's the same impression Sam had even though Sam had not seen this rendition of Fred before. Sam was comparing Freds of two universes and also thought this Fred looked great. Moreover, as if to read Sam's thoughts again, Mickey compliments Fred on the food and wonders what's different now than yesterday or any time before. Very tasty meal indeed.

Fred thanks Mickey for her comments and greets Sam with a cheerful "Hi, Sammy" salutation. A cheerful greeting and a smile, a smile that diminishes into temporary confusion as he sees the real Sammy enter the room.

Confusion turns to understanding as Fred remembers the events of yesterday, when Sam and Sammy arrived together. On to the question of the food. He says he tried a new spice brought to him by one of the Earth trekkers. A woman who returned a couple of days ago from a year walking around Trek. Someone named Roisin if he remembers right. It's not a spice he'd seen before but it looked harmless and Roisin said it made her food taste better. Fred tried it yesterday and his culinary expertise gave it an OK. Not that this means too much. Fred's acceptance is a low bar to pass. Fred once gave yellow mustard an A rating. The new spice was likely the secret ingredient that added taste, pizzazz, to the meal. Unfortunately, he can't give Sam a sample to take back. Roisin had only a little left and Fred had decided to save it for today's special occasion. What could be more special than having two Sammys at the same meal, not to mention a pair of Sinopias.

Interesting that so many people are curious about the food. There's something about this new spice that made enough of a difference to pique the interest of anyone who had tried Fred's cooking before. A fact without meaning for now, but something to file away in the ol' memory banks.

When the meal is over, all agree to take a short break before getting back to the meeting's afternoon session. The breakthrough just before lunch, the parallel universe vision, necessitates some time for contemplation.

Contemplation or whatever else is important. To Sam, Sienna, Sammy, and Sinopia, there is something important to do. Find Roisin and ask her about the new spice, ask her what it is and find out where it came from. Besides tasty, they all feel refreshed, full of energy, boisterous. A big meal should make one feel tired. Quite the opposite of how they feel now. This is worth investigating. They walk into the headquarters building and ask Alan if he knows Roisin and where they could find her. As seems to be a common answer around Trek, the response has both good news and bad news components. The good news is that Alan does know Roisin, at least he met her about two days ago. That was one day after she arrived from her first one-year trek around Trek and the same day she left again. Where? No idea except that she appeared to head east, commenting that she was returning. No idea to where she was returning, but it was definitely east, maybe.

Oh well, it's only a tasty spice. Would have been nice to get some but not the end of the world, or worlds in this case. They spend what time is left before the afternoon meeting sitting on the grass and enjoying the warm rays of the sun. Sienna is seen off in the distance relaxing with Aidan. And talking. The two of them appear to be in the middle of a calm but intense discussion. They must have a lot to talk about. All that happened has been overwhelming to Sienna; arriving in a place she thought was home but wasn't. And Aidan, what about him? This journey must be more overwhelming and even terrifying for him. There's nothing that's the slightest bit familiar. Maybe Trek looks like Treak, that much is good, but any similarity likely ends there. Life at headquarters is unusual, not familiar. And parallel universes. Who knows how Aidan is reacting to that. Sienna and Aidan have a lot to talk about. They have much more in common than one might imagine.

Eventually, the meeting continues at 1500. The afternoon session is more businesslike. A lot was resolved, technically, scientifically, emotionally in the morning session. If not resolved then at least agreed upon. One can't resolve the science of parallel universes in just a couple of hours. But one can decide on what to accept as being true for the time being. That much was done. A

theory, a model has been accepted. Future actions are going to be based on this presumed truth. That may be a mistake but options are limited. Either do nothing or assume that the theory is true and do something. Doing something is better than doing nothing. Right? That's another theory everyone is accepting.

For the time being, the decision is to continue trying to find people who might be lost and see if they want to go back to Earth. This time there's a lot more information known about where and who these people might be. A lot more known, making the task more complicated and easier at the same time. Huh! That doesn't necessarily make sense. This time it's Mickey who gets up to explain what's going to happen from here.

“Sam and Sammy are proof that Trek is a parallel universe meeting point. For at least two Treks, maybe more. Which brings us to the problem of where people who left headquarters to wander around Trek are tight now. They might have found some comfortable scenic location in the universe in which they started and decided to stay there, enjoying the planet. Or they might have stumbled through some reality boundary and found a comfortable location there. That makes finding people problematic and what to do when they're found even more problematic. Where do we send them to go home, to our Trek or not. Each of us has a list of people from our universe. It's interesting that for the most part, names don't seem to overlap these lists. There are almost no identical names on both Sam's and Sammy's lists. If we find someone on our list, the odds are high they are one of ours. Can't know for sure, so we have to assume. If we find such a person and they want to go back to Earth, we know where to send them. If we find someone on the other known list, we can also send them home. More of a problem as we have to explain parallel universes and we have to know how and where to tell them to cross back to theirs. That should be doable. What if we find someone not on either list? Tell them what we know, wish them the best of luck, and bid farewell.

“We should make some attempt to find as many people as we can but we can’t do that for too long. Parallel universes make the problem of finding people hard. There are too many places to look, too many people we may never find, and confusion about what to do with people when we do find them. That’s the part that got harder. It’s also the part that got easier. It’s easier because it got so hard, so hard that we have to accept we can’t do a thorough job so we’ll do what we can. We should set a goal, admittedly an arbitrary goal, but a goal regardless. Let’s have Sam and Sammy come up with a plan for telling people how to get back to a different universe. A plan we’ll use when we have to use it, if at all. Then we’ll look for people for twenty days. There’s the arbitrary part. Whoever we find in that time, we’ll take care of the best way we can. After that we stop looking. Diminishing returns take over. We can only do so much but we’ll feel good because we did something.

“Good luck.”

Can anything else be done? Maybe, but what Mickey says sounds like a good idea. Difficulties dealing with the topology of Trek make this a reasonable compromise between doing too much and not enough. Meeting adjourned. Sam and Sammy go off to make plans for tomorrow. Sinopia joins them but not Sienna. Sienna and Aidan find a nice path to walk and continue their conversation.

Sam and the others have a short and simple discussion about what should happen tomorrow. Sam and Sienna will go back to their universe in search of people there. Sammy and Sinopia will stay here and do the same. And that’s it, except for the point of showing Sammy how to send people to Sam’s universe. Sammy and Sinopia will have to join Sam and Sienna on the walk back to their universe. That should do it.

Another day ends.

The Trek Back to Trek

The last morning in this Trek. Sam is happy to finally be going back to her reality. And also, a little sad. Why? It's not that she's saying goodbye to Sammy and Sinopia. That will happen but not until they get to the border in a couple of days. There are other people she'll be saying goodbye to today. There's that, but also that she's aware this Fred is such a good cook and the Fred back in her universe isn't. That food is better here is not a major factor, but she did enjoy the meals yesterday.

Knowing this, Sam looks forward to her final prepared breakfast on this side of the wall. She sits down excitedly at the breakfast table and orders the full meal, eggs, scrambled, and vegetables. After a careful and attentive preparation by the local expert chef, she takes her first bite with anticipation. The taste is exactly what she remembers. Unfortunately, it's what she remembers from her Fred, from the Fred back in her Trek. This isn't the culinary experience she had last night. She looks around the room trying to read expressions from the rest of her party, those who are also likely expecting something out of the ordinary. There appears to be unanimity in expressions. The meal they had the night before was unusually good, unusual in that it had never happened before and likely won't happen again. Especially today. Today's food is the normal, Trek normal, no matter which Trek one happens to be in. At least Sam is no longer sad to be leaving for this reason.

Sam, Sammy, Sienna, Sinopia, and Aidan all meet after breakfast, ready for a two-day hike to the area of this Trek where Sam and Sienna entered. Goodbyes are said and they leave.

Sam and Sammy walk together at the front of the group to talk and plan what's going to happen when they get to the wall, to the boundary of realities. There are several arrangements they need to finalize before they arrive. The most important one is what to do after Sam returns to her Trek. Do Sam and Sammy say goodbye forever? Perhaps that's the right plan. There are many unknown problems that could arise from interactions between renditions of the same person in two universes. Like something that could seriously alter the continuum of either. As everything else having to do with parallel universes,

these interactions are, as was just said, unknown. Nothing to worry about until they happen.

Sam and Sammy don't really want to say goodbye forever and for good reason. It hasn't been talked about a lot, but Vernon, both Vernons, have health issues. And there is a curiosity that everyone had noticed the last couple of days. A curiosity that might help. That curiosity has to do with Fred. About how much better he looked in the Trek of Sammy than he did in the Trek of Sam. Everyone else looked the same, every other doppelganger was visually interchangeable. Only Sam can state this with certainty. Only Sam has been in both Treks. But Sam noticed this and Sammy believes it. Plus, Sammy can add an observation that Sam can't. Fred looked a lot better yesterday than he did ten days ago when Sam and Sinopia first left on their hike that led them into Treak.

What is there about Fred? Sam and Sammy discussed this subject yesterday but quietly, low key. Their thoughts jelled overnight. They are only now ready to talk about it in detail. The obvious explanation is the spice. The spice that Fred got from Roisin. Fred said he tasted it. He also used it in dinner preparations last night. That dinner was delicious, unusually delicious, a word not used to describe meals prepared on Trek. Everyone at that dinner enjoyed that meal. It made them feel good, happy. There might be nothing there but that spice has all the indications of being the "something" that made a difference. It made a noticeable difference in the taste of the food, a small difference in the contentment level of everyone who tasted that meal, and a big difference in Fred who ate some of the spice directly. If that's really what changed Fred then it could be a powerful drug of some sort, and hopefully a curative drug. Sam and Sammy, or at least one of them, should try to find this Roisin trekker. Whoever does, if either of them does, they need to let the other know. They need a plan to meet again at least once after Sam goes back to her universe. They need to set a time and a place to make that happen.

Which leads to one final point. How do they coordinate a meeting time and a meeting place? The place should be easy. Wherever Sam crosses to her reality, she'll cross back some time later. The second criterium, time, is harder to determine. They both know by now that time moves at different rates in the

two universes. A time of twenty days in one universe could be twenty days in the other, or one day, or one year, or any time. Synchronizing clocks is hard when the clocks go at different rates and when those rates are unknown. Something to ponder. Some answer is needed before Sam returns.

Sam and Sammy agree that this is a lot to think about and they have thought enough for one day. They want to spend the rest of the day enjoying the walk. They have had little time for enjoyment. One should have more time to appreciate a planet like Trek with so much to offer. So much at peace with nature, so much beauty in the flowers and plants, a rare opportunity for solitude walking along the streams, being at one with the planet by listening to the playful patter of forest animals. Time to relax.

The day moves forward. The group takes their normal break for lunch, after which they find the stream that they followed to headquarters shortly after Sam and Sammy met. The stream that is the border between Trek and Treak. They're walking near the north entrance. Aidan glances occasionally over the stream except, to him, it's not a stream at all. It's mountains and high borders. Impassable borders. Impassable to his eyes, to his emotions, to his feelings. His feelings say the wall cannot be crossed. The logical part of his mind is trying to remind him that he has been at this entrance many times. He has been here from the other side but still here, a place he has seen many times. Logically he knows that there is nothing more than a stream beside him. His emotions do not concur.

They come to the point where the rock with Sammy's rope attached flew out of Treak and almost hit Sam. A place that should be a monument of some sort. A remembrance to the meeting of two universes. A cornerstone to the science of parallel universes. This should be the picture on the cover of the first book about the science of parallel universes, as soon as one is written. In fact, right up ahead is the perfect location for a picture and the perfect subject matter. It's Sammy's rope. In the excitement of everything that happened so many days ago right after they left Treak, it appears Sammy forgot to take her rope. It's still attached to the rock she threw and still tied, she's sure, to the tree inside Treak used for her other world anchor. A perfect picture to take. A scene that has meaning to everyone in this small group.

Sammy calls everyone over to be part of the picture. Sam and Sinopia join her almost immediately. Sienna and Aidan walk away by themselves. They embrace. But not an embrace of joy, one of sorrow. They're both crying. The others assume Aidan is emotional. He's near Treak, his home, and the memories are making him sad. Sienna is empathetic. She can feel Aidan's pain, his sorrow. She's comforting him. There may be a long delay here but all will pass sooner or later. One last view of home is always sad. Everyone can wait.

And then what happens is not what anyone is expecting. Except Sienna and Aidan. It's what they were talking about in private over the last two days. One final kiss and Aidan walks away from Sienna. He walks over to the memento of the crossing, the symbol of Sammy and Sinopia leaving Trek, the cover of the new science book, the rope. Aidan knows the rope is anchored inside Treak. He remembers Sam and Sienna following a similar rope. holding tight as Sienna went back into Treak to rescue Sam, and the two walking back out both holding tight to the rope. Aidan knows how it worked for them, how it helped them leave Treak. He knows it will allow him to go back to Treak. His logical side is triumphing over his emotional side. It's his emotional side that's telling him about the unsurmountable mountains at the border to Treak. His emotional side is also telling him how much he misses his home, his parents, the world he grew up in, and the world he knows. His emotions are tied between staying here and returning to Treak. His logical side is the tie breaker. Aidan is going home. He grabs the rope still anchored in Treak and slowly, carefully, pulls himself across the stream and back to Treak. On that side, he can see the people he's spent so much time with over the past few weeks. He can see them, all of them, but he looks only at Sienna for a moment and then waves goodbye, turns, and walks home.

All eyes turn toward Sienna. Sam knows how she feels but has no idea what to say. Sammy somehow knows too. No one knows as well as Sinopia. She had the same feelings for Aidan that Sienna did. Obviously because of who she is. Although Aidan did not share those in return, toward Sinopia, Sinopia still knows how Sienna feels, knows it all too well.

Life goes on and the four that are left need to get to the Trek-to-Trek gateway by tomorrow. That's only possible if they make significant progress today. They walk farther along the stream until they get to the fork where they meet the larger stream. They turn and follow it back in the direction of the wall they walked through, and to the rope they left to help them find that wall again. They walk until the sun is at the horizon and then a little more, making as much progress as they can that will let them reach the wall before tomorrow's sun sets. It's finally time to call it a day. There's been almost no conversation since Treak, since Aidan left to return to his home. Tomorrow it will be Sam's turn to return home, and Sienna. Today, tonight, a simple meal is enjoyed and everyone calls it a day.

Back To Reality

The next day begins early. Everyone believes it's important to get to the place where Sam and Sienna can return to their reality, to the wall, to the border they crossed to get to this reality, and it's important to get there as soon as possible. Good time was made yesterday. With an early start the boundary wall can be reached by early afternoon. Everyone is in such a hurry, is so anxious to reach this goal, that they all agree to skip coffee. What are these worlds coming to?

A determined group breaks camp and starts by following the creek they know will lead them to the crossing point. At least they think they know. This time Sienna and Sinopia walk together to communicate with each other. Not communicate with words. They walk together and play their games, their fun with nature games. Like the game they played a few days ago examining nature, watching the leaves fall, watching the stream catch the leaves, and having the clouds drop rain on the dry land. Those were games, right? Sienna and Sinopia were just playing, observing, communing with nature. Well, more of that's in store for today. More nature, more communing.

During the games they played the other day, Sinopia had concentrated her mind on the nature above her, on the leaves on the tress and the clouds in the sky. Sienna had focused her attention down on the ground, on the flow of water in the creek, on the plants, on the soil. They observed facets of nature, playful facets. The leaf and the stream, the clouds and the plants. All just having fun. It starts that way again today. Except for one difference. Today both Sienna and Sinopia turn their attention upwards. Sienna sees a leaf all brown and yellow getting ready to fall to the ground. A slight nudge from a playful breeze is all that's needed to cause the leaf to detach itself. Sienna sees a breeze, a small but determined breeze getting ready to do just that. Except that "see" is not the right word. Not exactly, but almost. She doesn't see it with her eyes. She sees it with her mind. She knows the breeze is there. She knows what it's about to do. She waits. And just as the breeze gets close to the leaf, just before it actually gets there, it changes its mind. The breeze swerves, missing the critical branch. The leaf remains attached to the tree.

Sienna was looking forward to following the leaf on its wobbly descent to the ground like she's done so many times before. The breeze deprived her of that. A little frown appears on Sienna's face. Too bad but there will be more. Sienna wonders if Sinopia saw the breeze too, sensed it blowing toward the tree and then, suddenly not. She looks at Sinopia and points to the leaf that has just been spared. Sinopia confirms that she had been following the same breeze, and also that she noticed the leaf evade its fate for now. But Sinopia is smiling, not frowning.

They continue on their journey quietly. Nothing exciting happens. They forget about the leaf. Their attentions are drawn to the ground and the plants. Fairly nondescript plants, the kind you find all over Trek. But it's now time for lunch, so the group stops to forage for something good to eat. There's food all over Trek. Everyone knows that. They find an orange berry grove. One of the tastier berries on Trek. Several are soon harvested for the noontime meal. A routine harvesting except for Sienna and Sinopia. They both head for the same bush and they both reach for the same cluster of berries on that bush. There's almost a fight over it until the two of them realize what's happening and agree to share their goal. All are enjoying their lunches but Sienna and Sinopia know that they're enjoying theirs more than the others. They picked a sweeter cluster than the rest, the sweetest cluster around.

Not much time is allotted for lunch. There's still a goal to reach. No dawdling except for maybe one minor dawdle. Sam and Sammy insist on a little extra time to finally have their morning coffee. The first cup of coffee in a day is always morning coffee even if it happens in the afternoon. A few quick gulps and they're on their way again.

By now, Sienna and Sinopia have turned their attention to the creek. Playing with the water. Like before, not physically playing but mentally, emotionally, feeling like they're part of the water. Sienna focuses her attention on a small flow of water moving across the creek from the far bank. She observes it speed up as if in a hurry to cross over and meet them, Sinopia and Sienna. Meanwhile Sinopia is concentrating on a different flow of water. One on the near bank but one about to change direction. A stubborn flow about to turn upstream for only a second. It does. Sienna's flow of water and Sinopia's

stubborn current meet, they collide, a crash of wills. When two contrary currents collide, the obvious happens. They splash. Water rises from the stream and heads directly for Sam and Sammy. Ha! That was fun. Both Sienna and Sinopia smile.

Sammy sputters as she shakes the water off her and her clothing. And guess what? Sam lets out an almost identical sputter. How did such a slow-moving mild creek manage to get these two so wet? They look around for some clue and see the two girls smiling, almost laughing at each other. The four exchange animated jovial glances before realization jolts the joviality from all four.

How could water in a calm creek manage to jump up and soak Sam and Sammy? All four now suspect how. They don't know for sure but they suspect. Sienna has the ability to identify with nature, to know what nature is doing and thinking. Sinopia is Sienna's equal from another universe. She obviously has the same ability. What happens when the two of them get together? Could it be that they feed on each other, that their abilities get stronger? The two of them can sense nature, the winds, the leaves, and the water. Can they control, can they manage nature's actions, when acting together?

Sienna considers if that was what just happened. Was this the first time? Has it happened before? She goes over in her mind the last time it may have happened. Her mind shows her a scene from when the four of them were walking into Sammy's headquarters area for the first time. At least the first time for Sam and Sienna. Sinopia was watching a leaf fall to the ground. Sienna was playing with a current in the creek below. The two met. Sinopia's leaf landed perfectly in the middle of the creek, caught by Sienna's current. They both knew what was happening at the time. They both thought it was a nice coincidence, not something they had control over. And later when Sienna noticed that the ground was dry and the plants needed water. Right after that, a cloud provided needed rain, a cloud being watched by Sinopia. Another coincidence? Perhaps. They both thought it was a coincidence when it happened.

The events of today. The breeze that wanted to dislodge a colorful leaf from its branch and then at the last second changed its mind. A breeze changing its

mind! That by itself is strange. How it might have done so is stranger. Then there were the berries. Sienna and Sinopia picked the tastiest berries. How did they manage? And the coup de grâce, the splash of water from the creek. Too many coincidences. Sienna and Sinopia have an ability they can use together only, not by themselves. Great! A new found ability that may be useful. They better find a use for it in the next few hours before they separate into their own worlds. It's an ability that will cease to exist then, but one worth remembering even if it may never be used.

As interesting as that is, as much potential as it may carry, there's still a goal for the day. A slightly damp pair of Sams and their daughters continue on their way. For the rest of the journey, conversation becomes more serious especially between Sinopia and Sienna. Their ability. An ability they didn't know they had even when it was being used. An ability they inferred after the fact. How do they control it? A subject of conversation. A conversation with some success. By the time they reach the wall, the two of them are able to summon a breeze to move leaves off the path in front of them as they walk. Not powerful breezes and not all the leaves. If they concentrate on one leaf, then that leaf can be moved, usually. They learned something. Enough of a skill to qualify as the introductory act in a magic show. Perhaps with a stage name of "The Two Trekkers!"

The wall! In front of them they see the rope that Sam and Sienna were hoping was still there. Without a rope, returning would be a more difficult task. Not that they had trouble breaching this wall but they did not remember exactly where it was. Sam and Sienna get ready to go back home. Before they do, there's the also the question of meeting again in twenty days according to plan. The plan is to try to find people for twenty days and then call it quits. A second goal is to help Vernon by finding the spice from Roisin. They need to look for that too. Two goals. They will meet again in twenty days to compare notes on success. But twenty days where? Time moves at different rates in each universe. Twenty Sammy days are not likely the same as twenty Sam days. What's the conversion and who determines when twenty days has passed?

One of those questions turns out to be an easy answer. Mickey came up with the twenty-day rule, so Sammy's universe is the basis. Twenty "Sammy" days from now, they'll meet again. Sam and Sienna will cross back into Sammy's world at that time for the four to meet. How can Sam know when twenty "Sammy" days have elapsed? Again, easy. Synchronize watches. Sam and Sienna will go into their world, wait exactly one hour, and then return to Sammy and Sinopia. Once Sammy tells them how much time passed for her, they'll be able to convert Sam time to Sammy time. Sam may have more or less than twenty days to complete her work, but she'll return after twenty days in this reality, according to Sammy.

All's settled then. They say their goodbyes, although they'll see each other again in an hour, more or less. Sam grabs the rope with Sienna, ready to cross, and stands still, not moving. The rope falls to the ground. Or more precisely, half the rope falls to the ground. Sam holds onto half the rope, the half that has always been on Sammy's side of the wall. The other half is nowhere in sight. Where's the wall? Where's their Trek? Sienna looks for a breeze she knows will be stopped as it tries to blow across the wall, the dividing line of realities. She finds one. Not hard. There're a lot of breezes nearby. She follows the breeze to the wall to where the rope ended before it fell when it was grabbed by Sam. The breeze goes to that wall, that invisible wall, and keeps going as if the wall isn't there. And that can only mean one thing. The wall isn't there. That, in turn, can mean one of two things. Either the wall moved or it's gone, possibly forever.

Where did it go? They have to assume it still exists, moved but still somewhere. And it can't be behind them. They would have noticed if they had breached a wall of realities, had walked into a different universe. Sam and Sienna always felt something as they made that transition the three times they did so far. Perhaps not always a significant feeling but always noticeable, always a strange feeling unlike anything else. Especially Sienna. She feels it more intensely than Sam. Sinopia should have felt it to if they had passed through such a barrier. They hadn't.

The agenda has changed. They now need to find a missing universe. Can't enter something unless you can find it. How hard is it to misplace an entire

universe? Apparently easy, like misplacing glasses. This is another case where an expert on parallel universes would be handy. Although there is nobody like that around, there are clues, ways to investigate. Wherever the wall is, the universal divide, is a place where breezes can't cross. And while there are no parallel universe experts around, there are two breeze whisperers. Sienna and Sinopia can track breezes to find ones that turn suddenly for no reason, except for a wall stopping their normal flow. Sienna noticed this before they entered this Trek so she should be able to do so now. Sinopia can help.

There are still about three hours of sunlight left. That should be enough time with both of them looking. Assuming there is a divide, a wall, and that it's near here. It's a good idea to start looking now. Sienna goes off one way, forward, the direction they were going, and a little to the left. Sinopia tries looking to the right. They search, sensing all the breezes, flowing with this one and that one. No luck to start. No luck the first hour, or the second. And then just before the sun sets, just before dinner time, Sienna and Sinopia meet back where they started with Sam and Sammy. They meet but still no luck. It will soon be too dark to search any longer tonight. The mothers had been preparing the site for dinner as a precaution, so they say, but maybe because they had a feeling about the search. A feeling of fate, that the gods were not with them at least tonight. Whatever gods there are on Trek are clearly not in the mood to help.

They four of them have dinner, eat, but don't enjoy the meal. Sinopia and Sienna didn't even join forces in the forage to try to find something extra tasty. They take what's given to them, eat it without enthusiasm, and eventually drift off to sleep.

And then it's morning. Sinopia and Sienna are refreshed. They feel better today. They take charge of the hunt for breakfast fruit and whatever else they might find. They look at each other and smile, joining forces to try to find a meal to be remembered. One that would make Fred proud, even when he was at the top of his form for that one day. And they do manage to find what they want. The sweetest berries, the freshest vegetables, the tastiest plants that this part of Trek has to offer. A good way to start the day but not the reason they're happy. Yes, finding the food is fun but what it means is more important.

Sinopia and Sienna realized they were going about the search yesterday all wrong. Going their own ways, looking separately, that was wrong. They realized earlier that they have extra strengths and abilities when they work together. Separately is not the best way and it's too slow. They know how they should have searched, together, and that's how they'll do it today.

Today they won't look for a breeze, they won't follow a breeze as it decides which way to go, they won't be passive observers. They'll take charge. Find a passive bundle of air, a breeze in the making, wind just waking up for the day, and tell it where to go. Together they can control nature. They can't cause anything major to happen. No avalanches or storms or Trekquakes, but they can pilot a breeze, coax it this way or that. And they don't even have to move to do it.

Breakfast ends. Sinopia finds a breeze, identifies with a breeze, knows where it's going, where it wants to go. Sienna finds the same breeze, merges her thoughts with those of the breeze, like Sinopia. The breeze wants to move slowly, wants to play with the trees, wants to bend plants growing from the ground, bend them ever so slightly. It's a day to have fun. But not this breeze. This breeze has work to do. It has a change of plans. It rises just over the tree tops and whooshes off in the distance. Before long it's a kilometer away from where it started. Sinopia and Sienna are still there, still part of the essence of the breeze. They're still in control. The breeze continues, not of its own will, but because it has no choice. It continues for another kilometer, and then another, and another, and into its fifth kilometer. It's almost five kilometers from where it started, still being controlled. Sienna and Sinopia have never done this before. They have no idea how far away their captive breeze might go before they lose contact and control. Then as if their thoughts are transmitted to the breeze, they do lose control. Only they don't, or do they? They're still aware of the breeze. They know where it is. They know the breeze can't go its own way, down to the ground and the play with the plants like it really wants. They control that desire. At the same time, it can't go forward where its being commanded to go. It's blocked by something solid like a wall. Yes, the breeze can't go any farther because it's at the wall they've been looking for, the wall dividing here, Sinopia's Trek, from there, Sienna's Trek.

They look down through the mind of the breeze that's stuck at the boundary of realities. They look in the distance and see themselves. They map a path from here to there, and finally release the breeze to again enjoy the world as it wants to enjoy the world. They turn to Sam and to Sammy with the good news and depart to start the next part of their adventure.

An hour later they arrive at the place they saw with the help of the breeze just before they released it. It's the right place, of that they're certain. It looks normal. Strange how a boundary between one universe and another can look so normal, like nothing more than looking at scenery during a pleasant stroll on a beautiful morning. No wonder so many trekkers get lost stumbling away from everything they know. Once you cross, you have to cross back at the same place. One can't walk around and try to return by another path. Another path might lead them to a place they think they know, a similar place, but in a different universe. Like an alternate headquarters, confusing the trekker more. They think they're back, but no. The reality in front of them is not the reality they want.

That was the idea before today. That one had to return the same way they entered. Now, even that's no guarantee. Sam and Sienna noticed that the boundary moved. The way home was not where they expected it to be. Without the skill of Sienna and Sinopia, the way back might never have been found. They managed to find it. If not for their skills, they might have stumbled on the way sooner or later. Or not. No wonder so many people are lost.

Now, here, at this point, is the wall. Sienna and Sinopia both know exactly where it is. They can sense the winds, the breezes as they rush towards the wall and then stop abruptly, turn up, down, left, right, or reverse, but not forward. People can walk across with no problems. Workings of nature that are the part of one universe or another, like a breeze, are blocked. But not them. And as if to reinforce what's known, Sam looks across to her original Trek and sees a long, slack, relaxed object. It's an end of the rope they used to cross, with the other end resting five kilometers behind them.

OK, synchronization plan in action. They all note the time as Sam and Sienna plan to cross into their world. They'll rest there for an hour, exactly an hour, and return. Sammy and Sinopia will do nothing, just wait. And that's what they

do. Sam and Sienna leave. Sammy and Sinopia wait. An hour passes. Sam and Sienna haven't returned. It's strange. Sam and Sammy can see each other. They're in plain sight only a few meters apart. They can't talk to each other. Soundwaves are carried by air and air can't cross the boundary of realities. Sight? No restriction there. They can see each other and see that there's no attempt to return.

Ten more minutes pass. All quiet. And another ten, and a third ten. It's been an hour and a half of Sammy's time. What if one hour in Sam's universe is an entire day or longer to Sammy. Could be a problem but that's apparently not the case. In another two or three minutes, Sam and Sienna stand up and cross back to join Sammy and Sinopia. An interesting experiment, no doubt. All four are surprised at the difference. They shouldn't be. It was expected but sometimes something that is possible, even expected, unusual but possible, is still surprising when it's measured. A bit of math, advanced division, and the results are in. Twenty days of time in Sammy's universe will pass when only thirteen have elapsed in Sam's universe. The four will meet here at this exact spot in that period of time as measured in their own universes.

It's finally time to say goodbye. Not forever, they hope, but for now. A strange parting. It's easy to wish good luck to each other. It's like wishing yourself good luck. That said, Sammy and Sinopia turn to go back to search their world. Sam and Sienna cross over the boundary to touch base with Mick.

The long walk starts, another long walk. Sam and Sienna wouldn't be surprised if they suddenly woke up to find out that none of this had actually happened, that it had only been one long dream. That fills their thoughts as they walk toward headquarters. They walk all that day. It's a little too far to make it back in one day, especially because of the late start and time spent synchronizing clocks. They finish the day's walk, somewhat surprised that they haven't woken up yet. Could everything they experienced be true? They surmise that stranger things have happened. Or maybe not. This might be the strangest thing that has ever happened. Strange, but true.

The night's rest is full of dreams. Sleep is uneasy. Anticipation of what the next few days will bring cause thoughts to enter their minds as they sleep. They wake early before the sun. And they look at each other, knowing now for the

first time since their return, actually knowing that the last few days were real, not imaginary, not in their minds. They eat, get up, pack, and continue their walk. Before long, before noon at least, they see headquarters in front of them. This time it's the real headquarters, the headquarters on the Trek in their universe. Real or imaginary, it's been a long time. It'll be nice to have a meal prepared by this world's Fred.

Headquarters Three

Mick looks up as Sammy and Sienna approach. It's late morning, right in the middle of her daily routine. Mick hates being interrupted from her routine to handle mundane tasks. Not that talking to Sam and Sienna is a mundane task. It's just that, to Mick, any task other than the one she she's currently doing is mundane. She'll make an exception in this case since Sam and Sienna were gone such a long time, so long that Mick thought they had succumbed to the same fate as many other trekkers. Lost, or not wanting to return, or killed, or any of several possibilities. All possibilities that result in never returning. Looks like she was wrong. She takes a short break to welcome them back and to ask how things went.

They respond with a terse "fine." There's no way an appropriate answer can be said now, one that explains all that's happened. Clearly more will be said later. Mick does let them know a handful of trekkers had returned in the last few days and offers her thanks, assuming they had something to with those returnees. Another terse acknowledgement is offered. Mick then adds that she knew many of the returnees, many were on her list, but not all. That bothers Mick who prides herself on an excellent memory. Mick thought she remembered everyone who had landed on Trek. Apparently not all, she surmises.

This time before Mick has a chance to say anything else, Sam forcefully offers three comments. First, that a lot has happened and a meeting is needed right after lunch. No, it can't wait until tomorrow. Today, after lunch, a meeting! Second, as a carrot to attending the meeting, she tells Mick that the people who returned who Mick didn't know can be explained. And, third, she asks if there's any news about Vernon?

Mick's expression was somewhat combative after hearing the first demand from Sam, the strong insistence on an afternoon meeting. It softened after hearing that Sam could offer an explanation to something that was bothering Mick, all those unknown people. And finally, after hearing the question about Vernon, she softens completely. "OK," she replies, "we'll have a meeting at 1400. Until then freshen up and have something to eat. Your room is still available. It's still yours."

That appears settled for now. Time off until 1400 and then it's going to be time on, a big time on. Sam and Sienna go to their room. The first thing they do is take a shower. The second is to get into some different clothes. They've been rotating between two outfits each since they left. Every day started by putting on the outfit they hadn't worn the day before. Sam had lived like that once on a trip back on Earth when the airline lost her luggage. She got the luggage back eventually, the day after she returned home. Those days in between were not the most pleasant. At least it helped prepare for her time here.

Those basic tasks accomplished, the two of them head for lunch at the Trek headquarters restaurant. Lunch, expertly prepared by Fred, the local Fred. Expectations aren't high. They greet Fred who looks like he's aged somewhat in the last several days. Fred's happy to see them, and as anticipated, does an excellent job in preparing lunch. The taste is also as expected and as they remember, unfortunately.

Lunch is over. Sienna and Sam remain sitting at the table, chatting with Fred. Sam remembers she met a man named Paul who they ran into briefly as they were leaving. He's the person who seemed to have some news about Vernon, some upsetting news, but at least he seemed to know Vernon. They ask Fred if he had met someone named Paul. "Yes," was the response, "but he left on the shuttle back to Earth about two days ago. You can ask Mick about him. They seemed to have talked a long time. Definitely, you should ask Mick about him. From what I think I understand, his story is something you would want to hear."

Another item added to the afternoon's agenda, to ask about Paul. Sam and Sienna leave the restaurant to rest on the lawn outside until meeting time. There hasn't been a lot of time for pure relaxation since they arrived on the planet. Sienna relaxes. For Sam, relaxation is not in the cards. Too much mental preparation is needed now for the presentation at 1400.

The meeting starts on time. All of Mick's meetings start on time. In attendance is a slightly tired Sienna, a completely exhausted Sam, and a disgruntled Mick. Mick is still upset at not being able to do what she does every day, at being forced to do something different. Routine is important to some people. Also present to take meeting minutes, but possibly to act as a mediator, is Alan, the

Trek guide. And there's Anna, the Escape employee that Sam and Sienna rescued from Treak. Looks like she has been hanging around here ever since her return. One final attendee joins just as the meeting is about to start. It's Seth. Another Escape employee who was sent here as a liaison from Escape. He started working just before Sam and Sienna left on their most recent outing.

All eyes are on Sam. She called this meeting so she gets the right to start. Plus, everyone knows she has a lot to report. It would have been her turn to start even if she hadn't called the meeting.

Sam starts by going through everything that happened on their trip. She's thorough, has a good memory, and is a very good talker. In addition, she has been formulating this presentation for the last couple of hours so is even better prepared than normal. She misses nothing in her summary. Nothing on purpose. There are some points she doesn't want to bring up just yet. Those can wait.

She covers their walk out, meeting Paul, wandering into somewhere else, as she is calling the parallel Trek universe for now. She describes walking to the far side of Treak, Aidan's anxiety at looking in the direction of Treak, the sudden appearance of a rock flying out of Treak, and seeing two people pull themselves over the stream with the aid of a rope, just like Sam and Sienna did. Then she talks about meeting herself, two people called Sammy and Sinopia, but really herself and Sienna. She tries to continue talking, describing her walk away from the boundary of Treak, but is stopped, abruptly, by Mick. At least it's a sign that Mick's listening.

"You won't believe what I thought you said," starts Mick. "I thought you said you met yourself. Silly me. What was it you really said?" Mick didn't want to be here in the first place and she really doesn't want to waste her time with a bunch of nonsense.

"Good to know you aren't having any problems with your hearing," is the obvious Sam response. "I did, indeed, meet myself, and I did it without smoke and mirrors. Meeting myself may not make much sense right now so I'm going to ask you to hold any questions and comments, especially comments, until I finish. Some hard to believe facts might just become more believable when

I'm done. Please wait. Then I'll answer everything. No! that's not exactly right. What I should have said is, please wait, then I'll try to answer everything."

Mick stands up to protest and is rapidly stared back to a sitting position by Sam. Sam can be quite persuasive when she wants to be, like right now.

Sam continues. She talks about the back-and-forth dialog between Sam and her doppelganger, Sammy. The obvious conclusion that they entered a parallel universe, the decision to walk back to Trek headquarters, doing just that, and meeting two familiar faces there: Fred and Mick. Sam pauses, stares at Mick, waits while she finishes squirming in her seat and continues.

The local Fred calls himself Fred and looks a lot younger than the Fred here. Mick looks just like Mick but calls herself Mickey. She winds up this part with a teasing comment "I kind of like the sound of Mickey, don't you?" which is soon followed by another pause and then, immediately by another squirm session.

"Now we get to the interesting part," continues Sam. "A trip report that has an interesting part after announcing the discovery of a parallel universe is quite a trip report, isn't it? In the alternate headquarters meeting, Sammy and Mickey brought out a globe, an ingeniously devised globe with a map projected on it from the inside. The map was a conglomeration of pictures taken from above, from spaceships as they orbited Trek. The pictures were projected onto the globe in the correct position to form a complete and accurate map. I saw, we saw, a rotating globe of Trek as seen from above. The entire planet Trek with all the climate bands and all the splashes of color that we saw on our approach. Remember when you saw them from your ship as you approached? The majority of the planet seemed to be connected. On top of that main area were several color spots scattered here and there. We landed in the main area, not one of the spots. Turns out that main area is our area, our universe. Those other spots of color are other universes somehow breaching the surface of our universe. As we cross into one of these areas, we cross into another universe. I know, it seems strange, but just stay with me for a little longer.

“The globe that Sammy and Mickey showed us was almost the same as what we remember seeing on our approach. Almost exactly the same. Why is that interesting? It’s because to them, their universe occupies the majority of Trek and our universe is just one of those little color spots. We believe our view to be true, that we occupy the majority of the planet surface. They believe their view to be true. Contradictory views, contradictory beliefs. They’re both true! As we cross from our universe to theirs, reality changes. And that’s part of the change.

“I’m not done with my report but this is probably a good time for questions. Who has any?”

One would think that this presentation, the supposed “facts” presented so far, would draw a lot of questions. Parallel universe! That by itself is a question. A statement that is a question. And how about “Reality Changes?” Another statement or another question, or both?

Seth does ask something. He asks how did Sam and Sienna know that they were in a difference universe. What did they feel as they left ours and entered a new one. Are they sure this is what happened?

An expected question. Sam answers it as best as she can. She first addresses the question about how they knew they were in a different universe and what did they feel. She describes the sun, how it was high in the sky until they crossed a boundary, at which time it was immediately several hours farther on its ecliptic. Such a movement would normally take hours but occurred in an instant, after a single step across a boundary. They could go back, walk the other way over the boundary, and the sun position would revert. It was so strange that at the time they were not thinking “parallel universe.” But now, with all they know, that’s all it could be. She also notes on return to this Trek, that they timed one hour here against a waiting Sammy and Sinopia who they could see as the hour was passing. An hour here was over an hour and a half there. Circumstantial evidence of parallel universe, maybe, but fairly convincing circumstantial evidence.

“Further proof,” Sam says, “to answer your follow-on question. A question you have yet to ask but I know you’re thinking it. You are going to say that you might accept another universe but ask why is it a parallel universe?” She answers that implied question with a description of Sammy. Sammy had an experience growing up that was almost the same as Sam’s experience. Differences existed but were minor, like the amount of ice formed one day. Sam and Sammy had the same parents, grew up in the same town, went to the same school, had the same job, married the same person, and both settled on Prism. These are not just alternate universes, they are parallel universes.

Sam finishes her answer and waits. Hearing no more questions, she continues her presentation.

“The fact that I think we need to admit is that Trek has at least two parallel universes and is likely inundated with them. This impacts our search for lost trekkers. Because trekking from one universe to another is easy. Getting back to the one you started in is not as easy. Not easy because the way back might have moved. Not easy because trekkers might not even be aware they went anywhere. Parallel universes look the same, both structurally, visually, and the personnel. When I arrived at the parallel Trek headquarters, I thought I was back here. And that’s me and Sienna who knew what was happening.

“How about other trekkers who cross universes but don’t know they do. If it hadn’t been for us noticing the change in the sun’s position, Sienna and I might not have noticed. Even so, we were lucky. With different clocks we could just as likely have crossed when the sun was at about the same position in both universes. We might not have been aware of anything if that had happened. These other trekkers might come to headquarters and ask to be sent back to Earth. It might be the right headquarters but it might not be. That, Mick, is why you don’t seem to remember all the trekkers who return to you. Because, some of them didn’t start here. They think they did but they started as far away as they could have, another universe away.

“Anyone not on your list that you don’t know, you don’t know for a reason. You shouldn’t. You never met them. I have a list of people from Sammy’s universe. Some of those unknown people might be from her universe or somewhere else.

“The next question you should be asking is what do we do when someone comes in asking to go back to Earth? The answer is to do one of three things. If we know them, we can send them home. If they are on Sammy’s list, we can try to explain and try to instruct them on how to return to her universe. If they are on neither list, well, we can explain and wish them luck. There also might be many of our people who are stuck in other universes. More good luck wishes are needed there.

“Which brings me to the conclusion reached by us and Sammy and Mickey. Getting people back to Earth was hard to start with and is much harder now when we don’t even know which Earth is right. Way too complicated. It was decided to try to find people for a limited amount of time, thirteen more days, and then give up. Why thirteen days you may ask. Because we decided that twenty days in Sammy’s reality was a reasonable amount of time. And in answer to your next question of why twenty days there is the same as thirteen days here, I’ll just say that the proof is obvious and left as an exercise to the student.

“Now it’s time to break for some more questions.”

Seth appears ready for this part of the meeting. It’s his job to get the group organized and that’s exactly what he’s doing or trying to do. “Let’s assume we give up looking after thirteen days as arbitrarily agreed upon. Do you have anything in mind after that?”

Sam anticipated the question and has a ready answer. “Not sure,” she says to add to the confusion. “But I have some ideas,” she adds to somewhat lessen the confusion. “Before I answer that question, I need some answers to my own questions. Can we start with Vernon? Is there any news about him?”

It's Mick's turn to talk. She acknowledges that there's something to say and that something is in line with the general theme of the day, confusion. She starts.

"There are a few things I can say and I'm going to start with the easiest to explain. The two Earth ships that arrived since you were last here delivered some news. The news wasn't good but it wasn't all bad either. Vernon made it back to Earth safely. He's been admitted to the hospital for evaluation and that evaluation has confirmed the same diagnosis that was made on Prism. He has liver cancer, which at this time, is in the early stages. Possibly treatable, perhaps even probably treatable. They're doing what they can. Nothing definite yet but news will be sent as soon as there is news to send.

"That was the simple explanation. The non-confusing part. The next piece of news is from the man you met on the path just after you left. His name was Paul. You asked about him. Interesting fellow. I'm going to tell you something about him, actually a lot. He seems to know Vernon. Now, from what you said, this could be your Vernon, or one from another universe. I say that because Paul was not on any of our lists to date. I couldn't confirm he was from our universe. I don't remember him coming to Trek but his recollection of events here was accurate. Accurate as if he had been here in this headquarters. I'm not familiar with how different other universes' headquarters may be, but he did report everything correctly.

"I say this because of the fact that he's under the impression that Vernon did pass away. He knew Vernon and claimed to be a good friend. He knew about his cancer. He seemed to know more than we've been told so far. You might hope that he's from another Trek. A Trek following the same path as ours but not exactly.

"You can hope that until you hear the next fact about Paul. It's where the confusion enters. Another presumed fact that begs

an explanation. As you might be aware, Trek is a desirable place to be, to explore, perhaps to live. But we do not have an advanced infrastructure that can handle a large number of visitors. Applications to come to Trek far exceed our capability to receive people. There's a waiting list back on Earth. I hear that the waiting time is around five years. The difficulty handling this number of applicants is one of the reasons we are considering changes. But that's really beside the point. What is interesting is that I said Paul, this Paul, was not on any of our visitor lists to date. That's true, but he is on a visitor list, just not a past one. He's scheduled to arrive here in 23 months, almost two years from now. I checked. Both his first name and his surname are the same as on the future arrivals list. I compared him to his picture. Definitely the same Paul. He's either from another universe, arrived in that one earlier than scheduled here and stumbled into ours, or he's from here. From talking to him, I really don't think he's from another universe. If he's from this universe, I don't have any idea of what's happening.

"OK," finishes Mick, "there's the information you asked for. Now what? You can ask me questions but I don't have any answers."

Quite an unusual meeting. Meetings like this are normally held to solve problems, to look at facts, to fill in the blanks for what's unknown, and to come up with a plan of action moving forward. They follow a normal sequence: present a problem, discuss possible resolutions, and decide on one. In some of the less productive meetings, discussions take place without a conclusion. At least not immediately.

But this meeting is different. The people in this meeting are about to take a long break. What progress was made? Seth looks at his notes. The result is that there were more questions posed. There are more problems to solve now than there were when the meeting started. It's like a meeting held in reverse.

No one has a good idea how to proceed and, more than that, everyone is too exhausted to think anymore today. A breaking point, good or bad. The meeting will resume at 10:00 tomorrow. Mick has other work she'll need to take care of

tomorrow. She'll get an early start so she can be ready to continue here at 10:00. It's not a meeting she can miss.

The meeting today breaks. Everyone moves to the restaurant area in anticipation of a relaxing evening and good conversation. And they hope, maybe something tasty from the kitchen. A rare delivery on the last transport brought a treat from Earth. It had been saved for Sam's and Sienna's return and so is being served tonight in their honor. Dinner should be fun. The best part is an agreement to not talk business at the dinner table. Just relax.

The meal starts with an Ahi tartare salad made from a mixture of various Trek lettuces and Earth Ahi. This is followed by rack of lamb and Trek asparagus, and finished off with a chocolate fondue. The dessert is made entirely from Trek plants. There are a lot of beans grown on Trek that taste like chocolate, so much so that they might actually be chocolate. And who is to say that Trek chocolate is not up to the quality of chocolate offered on other planets? There are certainly no complaints from these diners.

Ending the meal is a digestif of a fine Danish aquavit. Even those who don't normal engage in that type of liqueur enjoy this one. A fine dinner, perfect for removing tensions of the day and the past week. It's almost like this Fred had some of the same spice that the alternate Fred used. The dinner was that good.

The group retires outside to end the evening with some friendly conversation. As is not typical, there are a quite a few other people on the patio enjoying the evening. Mick did say that many people returned to headquarters while Sam and Sienna were away. A fine Trek evening. Of course, for this latitude, almost all evenings are pleasant. Sienna and Sam separate. They mingle with the crowd. A crowd by Trek standards. It's fun to just be themselves for a change, an escape from everything that's happened since they left their Prism home.

The other people they meet are apparently trekkers, mostly people who have already been here for some time. Sam and Sienna know everyone who works for the park department so anyone else must be a trekker. Conversations Sam finds herself immersed in seem to all be about the walks taken around Trek, the weather, what they found to eat, and other discoveries and adventures

people had. Not a surprise. What else would people who spent the last several months walking around Trek have to talk about?

Sam listens to the conversation held by a small group of three people. They're talking about food. Typical. Finish one meal and the conversation seems to go directly toward what one is going to have for the next. Is that part of human nature or has it developed though the advent of civilization? Sam notes how different the people's comments are, how food changes around the planet. She had thought all the food was about the same but she is only used to one part of this temperate zone. She's learning that food changes as one goes north or south, farther north or south than they've walked.

That's interesting although somewhat boring. The talk is great to pass the time to get one's mind off one's worries, but not information that warrants remembering once the evening's event is over.

Sienna finds herself with another group that are also talking about food selections. She finds that this conversation warrants attention. These people are comparing food offered at various other restaurants on Trek. They talk about it being more or less the same everywhere. One restaurant is just like any other. Even the staff look the same. A chuckle arises from the group at the mention of the staff. One of those all-knowing laughs. Almost a "Duh! You just stated the obvious" type of chuckle. No one knows why that is so obvious except Sienna. She knows why the food is the same and the staff looks the same. These people had stumbled into a parallel universe, or parallel universes. They had run across headquarters in those universes not knowing what had happened. And those people had either found their ways out of the alternate realities and back here, back home, or not. Some, Sienna suspects, are here in a different universe than where they started and not aware of it. More than suspects, Sienna knows.

Sienna joins in the conversation with enthusiasm. She feels that there's information to be gained. Here are a group of people who have been to alternate realities merged onto the surface of Trek, and apparently to more than Sam and Sienna have been. More than Sam and Sienna will be able to be in before they leave. Some of these people are, no doubt, alternate reality

people, like Sammy and Sinopia. Sienna is sure she can learn something and anything could be useful.

Sienna listens. A comment from a man named Edvard draws her interest. The comment is that he feels like he's getting increasingly confused the longer he stays on Trek. He thought he was astute, an accurate observer of the world, of what happens. For example, he can always keep track of time, remember all his days. He prides himself on his memory. Here on Trek, he can't seem to do that. He's forgetting days. Something is obfuscating his thoughts, muddling his mind. He doesn't think as straight here. Maybe because he's more relaxed and not as concerned about day-to-day facts. Edvard was sure that he has been here for sixty days. He'd landed on day 145. It should now be day 205. It should he thinks. But at the last restaurant he was at, they said it was only day 180. I enjoy Trek but I don't think straight here. It's time to get back home, to Burn.

Sienna immediately knows that Edvard is not from this universe. She'll tell him before it's too late that he should not get on the transport back to Earth. If he does, he may find things not exactly as he left them. One difference is that Sienna suspects his hometown in this universe is called Bern. Sienna notices some of the others in the group are about to open their mouths to question Edvard, ask him what day 205 means when it's July 24th. Before anyone asks Edvard this, before he starts to understand why his mind is being muddled, Sienna wants to get some information from him. She wants that information before he learns about parallel universes. He can be told about them but not yet. Once you say something, that something can't be unsaid.

Sienna pulls Edvard out of the conversation, nudges him slightly so he won't think he's being manipulated. Sienna, taking no chances, gives him a charming little smile to help convince him to join her, only her, in conversation. It's so easy to influence a certain subset of the human race to inspire them to think that their actions are their own. Edvard is part of that subset. Sienna helps him make a choice to go outside. Not manipulation, no, just a little nudge.

"So, where are you from, back on Earth?" Sienna starts.

“I’m from Burn, or nearby Burn. I’m actually from Ittigen, but not many people have heard about that place so I just say I’m from Burn. Have you ever been there?” he asks.

“No, I haven’t. In fact, I’ve never even been to Earth. I’m from Dara Baile.” She pauses, watching his response. Seeing what she expects, she adds, “It’s on Prism, the planet Prism. Most people haven’t heard of Dara Baile so I just say Prism.” Sienna watches Edvard again for his reaction. It looks like he’s at least heard of Prism. Either way is OK. Sienna got a bit of enjoyment from one-upping Edvard. Not that there’s anything wrong with him implying that Sienna had not heard of Ittigen. It’s true that she hadn’t but Sienna still likes her response.

Getting to what she really wants to know, she asks, “Why don’t you tell me where you’ve been since you landed on Trek? What direction did you walk? Did you see anything unusual?” she asks, finishing with an engaging smile. She wants Edvard to answer this with as much information as he can remember so a little more non-manipulation on Sienna’s part is fully warranted.

“Well?” Edvard starts, clearly trying to form his presentation, incentivized by Sienna’s interest in his activities and in him.

“The trip here was pretty routine, as routine as a trip on a PSD ship can be. I was joined by three others. We started our trek together. I was concerned that we were given almost no directions. Here on a new planet, light years from Earth, and no more help from the park department than there would be walking around a city at home on Earth. We give more information to visitors to my country who just want to take a day to see the Alps. But here, to help with a trek of a few months, we’re given just a backpack, bis später, and that’s it.

“The four of us stayed together for five or six days observing Trek on our walk. Enjoying the peace. Happy about the weather. Amazed that we could find food to eat anywhere. We all got used to Trek after a few days. Isn’t it wonderful that a new planet can seem like home after so short a time. We all felt like we’d

been here all our lives. Then we realized that we all wanted to explore our new home in different ways. On a planet that sustains human life naturally, with no apparent expense, there was, of course, no hurry to go this way or that way or any way at all. Even so, we all wanted something different. One person wanted to find a lake and to relax by the shores. Something they always wanted to do. Another person saw mountains in the south that attracted her. She was soon off on her own. Another decided to follow the river we were on to the west. No reason was given. West seemed best to him. I had an unexplainable desire to go east. We all were confident in our decisions. We said our goodbyes and that was it. I never saw them again.”

“So,” interrupts Sienna, “wherever you started from, you eventually found one of the many rivers on Trek and followed it east. Right? Rivers are interesting on Trek. At least that’s what I noticed. Did you ever see anything on a river you thought was unusual?” Sienna could see Edvard’s mind working on that question. He might just be considering what to say or it might mean something more. Sienna waits patiently for Edvard to continue.

“Yes, I guess I did see something unusual. More than unusual, really. A river behaving as no river on Earth ever did. I’m sure of that. No river could ever behave like that. It’s impossible. Impossible on Earth. I have no idea why rivers act like that here on Trek. I came upon this river after walking for almost ten days to the east after I separated from the others. Or I think it was ten days. I also realize I can’t keep track of time on Trek. Maybe it was five. Maybe it was fifteen, but it was definitely after at least a few days of walking by myself. I could see the sun rise every morning in front of me so I know I was going east. I assume the sun behaves like it should on this planet. I’m beginning to doubt even that.

“After some time, I came to a river. Not the one I had been following but one flowing north and south. More or less north and south. The water in the river in the side closest to me was

flowing north. The water on the far side was flowing south. Somewhere near the middle of the river, the water flow changed direction. Like there was an invisible boundary and I was really seeing two rivers right next to each other.

“I looked at this for more than an hour. I just sat there and watched. Trying to see the separation. Trying to see what was built, what existed, in the middle of this river to allow to happen what shouldn’t be happening. I never did see anything. After another hour, I knew I needed to check it out for myself. I needed to cross the river. And I did. I was very cautious as I neared the middle. I still could not see the boundary. I kept moving forward slowly. As I walked, I was sure I would see something or feel something soon. Any second now. I kept thinking it was imminent. I kept that thought until I realized I had reached the other shore. The crossing felt strange, but I made it uninjured and unaffected. I walked up on the shore and looked back at the river. My side was still flowing north and the other side south. I had crossed the river, successfully crossed the river that can’t be.”

Sienna grasped at what Edvard was saying. In her mind, she digested his every word and knew what it meant. She knows a lot more now than when she first landed on Trek. Obviously, Edvard had left one universe for another. That part is easy to figure out, although Sienna is somewhat amazed at how easy it is for her to accept walking between universes as a normal event. Her adventures have led her over two such boundaries. Each a little different, but with some similarities. A different universe, a different way to get there, always different. Nothing about Edvard’s crossing seems to indicate a special new universe. Each one should be special in some way, but what’s special about this one he just described? Nothing comes to mind. Sienna makes a mental note of what Edvard said. Then she sees if there’s any more information to be had.

“What happened after you crossed the river? Was there anything unique or different?” Sienna prods Edvard to continue his story.

“Surprisingly no. Everything remained the same. I would not have been amazed to see dragons or unicorns or cheshire cats materializing out of thin air. Nothing really changed. Perhaps some new vegetation, some new foods to eat, but nothing I can identify. I walked for three or four days and came upon a building that looked a lot like the headquarters here. They must be scattered at many places around the planet, all of the same architecture. After a couple of days, I decided I wanted to leave and get back to where I started. I met a man named Paul. He seemed to be in the same situation as I was. He described crossing a river like the one I did many days ago. We talked about the river, how the water’s flow was impossible, and both came to the same conclusion. We concluded that trying to explain a lot of what was seen on Trek could drive a person crazy. We didn’t try to figure it out anymore.

“Later, we did talk about leaving. Paul wasn’t ready yet. He had made some friends and wanted to stay. Not me. I was ready to go. I was about to return the way I had entered but Paul told me of a closer crossing, a shorter walk to the bidirectional river. Just to the north, only a half-day walk. I thanked him and left. A few hours later, I came to the river he described. Not the same one I don’t think, but I knew I could cross it to leave that part of Trek. The part that made me feel uneasy for some reason. I did.

“I was back. The feel of uneasiness I had was no more. I wandered around for many days. I enjoyed the land, the planet, and relaxed. Just what I came to Trek to do. It was all I had hoped for. Eventually some other trekkers walked past and I joined them. Being alone is great for a while, but conversation and companionship is also great. I had missed that. We continued to wander until we all decided it was time to return home. My companions seemed to know the route back to headquarters. I tagged along and here I am.”

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Sienna pauses again to digest this part of Edvard's story. Another smile, a thank you smile, and a few words from Sienna that she enjoyed hearing Edvard's story. After a minute or two, they both wander back to the rest of the people partaking in other after-dinner conversations. Those people include Sam. Sam and Sienna excuse themselves for the evening and walk to their room. Sam excitedly tells Sienna she learned a lot from the evening, but will wait until the morning to tell her. Sienna's face forms a "back at you" grin. She'll also tell her story. Tomorrow. It's already too late tonight.

The Plan

Next morning comes early. Either they're waking up in a universe where time flows faster than expected or they're still too wired from last evening's events to sleep longer. Even for Trek, the second of these options seems the most likely.

How to start the day? Both Sam and Sienna seem enthusiastic to tell the other what they've learned the prior night. It does seem like the right way to start the day except for one thing, hunger. Hunger wins the battle of what to do first. Wins it by a little but a win is still a win. The two of them rush to get ready for breakfast, go to the restaurant, order enough to satisfy their appetite, and find a quiet place outside to sit, eat, and talk.

A few bites into a Trek-seed bagel, Sienna starts by announcing she wants to be the first to speak, to talk about what she learned. Sam makes the same announcement at almost exactly the same time. Here we have a typical mother daughter play for power. It's been done before. Every family has established rules for handling the hierarchy of a mother daughter dispute. This one is no exception and they follow the long-established family rules. Sienna starts. Who else?

Sienna tells Sam about Edvard, the highlights being that he's clearly from another Earth, possibly Sammy's Earth. She continues with stories about the bidirectional river, and about Edvard meeting Paul.

Sam leans back to let her mind digest what Sienna's saying. A reverse-flow river must be significant. She contemplates this for a moment. The two of them might want to find this strange river-bordered reality that both Paul and Edvard seemed to have reached. Sam tries to remember where they were when they first ran into Paul. That memory should help them find the crossing, when and if the time comes. Sienna waits patiently while Sam's thought process completes.

OK. Sam's ready. She tells Siena to continue her story, but Siena can't. She's told Sam all there is to tell.

"That's it?" asks Sam.

Yes. As excited as Sienna was to start, her story is not that long. What she described was interesting but nothing that's going to alter their immediate goal. And that goal, regardless of what Sam said or implied in the meeting yesterday, is to find a way to help Vernon.

Which brings us to the point of finding out what Sam uncovered.

"I also met a person obviously from another universe, a parallel reality. I doubt this person was from Sammy's reality. If I'm right, that makes three universes we've seen or heard about here on Trek. We always expected there were more than two, several actually, and for right now, we have three. The reason I think it's a third universe is because this person was a friend of Roisin. Remember she was the woman who presumably gave a spice to Fred, the other Fred, the spice that made Fred appear younger after he tasted it. Maybe it didn't actually change his age, but it sure made some improvement. We tried it, a little, and it made the food tasty. Any spice that can make Fred's food tasty is clearly some kind of miracle spice.

"Roisin is not on our list of Trekkers and is not on Sammy's list. The person I met, the friend of Roisin, his name is Petros. Petros talked of Earth and of his home in Greece, but that's not important. The key is that Petros is not on our list of trekkers and not one of Sammy's trekkers. That makes two people we don't have a record of.

"Identifying a third world is also not the important part. The important part is that he was with Roisin in a different reality, neither this one nor Sammy's. Petros and Roisin both landed on their part of Trek linked to their reality of their Earth. Petros remembers that the people who worked at his headquarters building all looked healthier than the people he observed here. And the food was better. And he had the impression that his people were smarter. Then he corrected himself. No not smarter he said, they just appeared to know more, to be more knowledgeable. Like their schools taught them facts about

realities that aren't taught to our people or Sammy's people. Or possibly those people learned something by being on Trek. Petros mentioned that conversations with those people talked about realities. Alternate, parallel realities like we observed in Sammy's world. They talked about realities in the plural, not reality in the singular.

"Here's the best part. The best part is he remembers a spice of some sort that was used there and was offered to him and Roisin. The spice Roisin had with her. Petros didn't take any. Apparently not interested. He admitted it was something he probably should have taken, but if he took everything that was offered to him, well, he wouldn't be able to carry it all. Besides, why take something to make food taste better. When one is on Trek, there are many delicious foods that can be found naturally.

"As the evening went on, we wandered outside to talk, just the two of us so no one else could hear. I told him that his story intrigued me and that I thought I would try to go to the place he had just described. I asked him about his headquarters. Could he tell me how to get there? I also asked that, if I headed in the right direction, would there be any landmarks that might help me find it?

"His memory was good. He provided fairly good directions and said it was curious that I should ask for a landmark, because there was one, an unusual landmark. I would know I was close if I could see an ocean. Not a lake, but an ocean coming out of nowhere. There would be trees and vegetation like normal, and then a sharp break and an ocean. You can tell an ocean by the pattern of the waves and currents. He also remembered he could see all the way across. On the other side about a hundred meters away was a beach, a sandy beach. The waves were washing up on the beach like one would expect. That side, the far side of the ocean, was normal. His side wasn't. His side just

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started out of nowhere. There was no sand for the waves to wash up on. In fact, waves always started and rolled away from his side. They broke only on the far side.

“We know what he saw, don’t we, Sienna? It was the boundary of a parallel universe. I have come to accept that all boundaries are different. Probably based on what exists in each universe where they meet. Different but always unusual. Petros didn’t know what it was except that he knew whatever he did see was something he shouldn’t see. It was something that shouldn’t exist. He asked me if I had any ideas. I didn’t volunteer any information, but it seemed to satisfy him when I responded with an enthusiastic shoulder shrug.”

Sienna concedes that Sam had the better encounter. But Sienna’s encounter could also be important. Sam agrees. “What should they do with all this new information?” they contemplate. They need to form a plan now. A plan on how to proceed. A plan that needs to be finished before the 10:00 meeting.

Eventually a plan does emerge. They’ll agree to look for lost trekkers until they need to meet Sammy and Sinopia. Mick will insist on that. It makes sense to give it one final try and it’s only eleven more days. They’ll look for lost trekkers by walking around Trek, an obvious approach. While looking, there’s no reason they can’t arrange to also try to find other things that might be useful for other purposes. Like entrances to the two other universes that they learned about last night. They’re going to find those two universes sooner or later. There’s no reason they shouldn’t look for them while finishing up their other work.

When the eleven days are up, they’ll meet Sammy and Sinopia to exchange whatever information was gathered by all of them and decide how to use it to help Vernon, both Vernons. Next, they’ll do whatever is decided, be successful, travel to Earth, and cure Vernon.

A good plan. All that remains is going to a meeting and convincing Mick that this is the right plan.

It’s 10:00 and the meeting is ready to start. Sam and Sienna are there. Alan is there. Anna is there. Seth is there. Everyone except Mick. That’s not like her. If

anything, Mick is punctual. Never late for a meeting. They wait. Finally, at 10:03, in walks Mick, a little embarrassed and apologetic for being so late. Mick being late is enough by itself to make one believe in parallel universes.

Mick starts. "Sorry I was late, but I was coming up with an idea on how to proceed from here. Not easy with all the information that seems to have surfaced recently.

"Originally the authorities on Earth wanted to scale back visitation to Trek so they could scale back support for the planet, which they thought was too expensive for what they were getting in return. As the senior employee here, it was my job to come up with a plan to do just that. A plan to implement this goal. To scale back our presence on Trek. But that was the goal before yesterday. It won't be our goal any longer, I am almost sure, after our new information is shared back on Earth.

"The existence of parallel universes is a game changer. If we have actually discovered parallel universes and if we can investigate them here on Trek, then I doubt anyone on Earth will want to curtail our presence. So, no cutting back on anything until we've told people on Earth what we found. No need to find lost trekkers. No need to do anything for now.

"What we do need to do is to present our discoveries as soon as possible to the people back on Earth, and not in writing. It's too important for that. We need to tell them in person. Seth and Anna will do that. They're leaving on the shuttle tomorrow. Seth has notes on all that's been uncovered, as complete notes as anyone here has compiled. Anna is an Escape employee and one who has spent some time not only on the original Trek, but also in Treak. Anna is as well-equipped as anyone to answer questions about 'other' Treks. Anyone except for Sam and Sienna, that is. I suspect that I can't ask Sam and Sienna to leave Trek just yet. I have a feeling they are going to stay for their own reasons. I've got that right, haven't I?

Mick looks over in their direction and pauses a few seconds.

“Since I don’t hear any comments to the contrary, I’ll continue. I apologize again for being late. The reason is that, once I came up with this plan, I needed to relay this news to the Earth shuttle. They were scheduled to leave today. I needed to make sure they delayed that departure a day to allow Seth and Anna to join. That’s been done.

“Well, that’s all I have to say. Any other comments?”

Sam and Sienna look at each other. Sam stands, says a quick “Nope, sounds good to us,” and sits down. Why argue against a plan that’s actually better than the one you were going to present.

Sam does add, “I can talk to Seth after the meeting. We learned some more information last night that may be useful in his presentation back on Earth. Sienna and I are planning to spend the next few days investigating Trek some more before our agreed upon rendezvous with Sammy and Sinopia. After that, who knows. We’ll be back and tell you what we learned, if anything.”

The meeting ends. Sam pulls Seth aside to tell him what they had learned the night before from Edvard and Petros. Sam has a motive for debriefing Seth. A motive based on the fact that Seth had been talking to everyone who came back to headquarters. He may already know what Sam and Sienna have dug out of those two people or not. Regardless, Seth might have other information from his routine interrogations. Like more detailed information on where those people have been. Sam wants this information. It could help them draw a map of Trek. It might help Sam and Sienna find those other universes, ones they feel they will, sooner or later, have to find and explore themselves.

Getting mapping details about Trek, as sparse as those details might be, is the last piece of information Sam and Sienna want. They need to gather what they can before they leave. Seth understands Sam’s concerns and tells her what he knows, which isn’t much.

They are almost ready to leave, but first Sam goes into Mick’s office to see her. Sam has decided Mick has something they need. Parallel universes are close

realities. Events in one universe follow events in the other. The universes have the same history almost. Not 100% the same, but very close. There are Sam and Sammy, Sienna and Sinopia, Mick and Mickey. In addition to similarities between people, there are similarities in events. What exists in one universe likely exists in another. There's more information to be had about locations of the new universes that they have been told so far. Sam walks into Mick's office and asks, forcefully, knowingly, asks to see the map of Trek comprised from a conglomeration of pictures taken from Earth transports as they revolved around Trek. Mickey showed them hers. Mick must have one too. She wants to see the one Mick has.

Mick hesitates. A delay from Mick. Very rare. A first. She was caught off guard.

"How do you know we have one?" she asks.

That response is a typical counter when trying to figure out if someone is bluffing or not. But Sam doesn't let Mick see any doubt in her mind that a map exists. "We need to see it to help us in our final search and to help Vernon."

Mick admits, "Well, yes, we do have such a map, but we never give it to anyone or even admit we have it. Not because we want to keep it a secret, but because it's very confusing and always inaccurate. Every time a ship approaches and takes new pictures to help us compose the map, we see differences. These spots of color, parallel universes as you call them, move. Some of them remain where they were originally recorded. Some of them move. They shift, or grow larger, or smaller. We don't want to release the map to anyone, not even to you, if that would be providing inaccurate information. We keep the map a secret from everyone. I guess now that you know these spots are fluid, we can let you have a copy. You know what you're dealing with. But please do not let anyone else see it. We don't want trekkers walking around with a map representing land that changes."

Sam understands, but Sam and Sienna have two universes they want to find. They know that a map may not show them exactly where the new universes

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are, but they will show something, proximity at least. It'll help. It'll be better having a map than not having one, just to point them somewhere. Maybe the map, the information from Seth, and what they were told by Edvard and Petros, maybe altogether it will tell them where to look. Sam thanks Mick and waits for her to return with the map. After the map is delivered, Sam and Sienna leave to have a final meal from Fred, a final sleep, and to start what will likely be their final trek on Trek.

The Search for Reality, 1

Sam and Sienna get up early the next morning, finish deciding what two outfits to pack for their upcoming long outing, have breakfast, say goodbye, and leave. As uneventful and as emotionless a start of any day they can remember since leaving Prism. Probably because they no longer have any responsibilities. After the meeting yesterday, they are now free to roam around Trek like any two tourists. An entire planet to enjoy. They mosey on out of town, two people without a care in the world. Shortly they realize that mosey is not really their style, increase the pace to a ramble and before long, to a full saunter.

An hour later, the informal trampled down path from headquarters ends as they enter the Trek wilderness. Then reality sets in. Not the reality of another universe, but the reality that they are not actually on a carefree outing. They have goals and a timeframe. Carefree was good while it lasted. But there's Vernon to think about.

They think. They left Sammy and Sinopia three days ago agreeing to meet up after thirteen days. That gives them ten days to accomplish whatever they can before the reunion, a reunion during which they hope to form a master plan to use newfound knowledge to help Vernon. The only goals that Sam and Sienna know they want to accomplish before that meeting are to locate other universes. Or to find people who might have any knowledge about other universes. In both cases, to learn what they can.

They pause to consider the two universes they've heard about, the one from Paul and the other from Petros.

Paul's is interesting because he seemed to know something about Vernon that Sam didn't. Something that no one knew. There could be something to learn in that universe. Learn by talking to other people. Universes may be parallel, may be similar, but they aren't exactly the same.

Petros's is interesting because of the spice. A spice they hope will be beneficial to Vernon if they can find some and bring it back.

Sam and Sienna sit down, recall directions they were given to the other universes, look at the map Mick reluctantly gave them, and plot their route. If

the universe entrances still exist, if they ever existed at all where they were told, and if they haven't moved, the route will take them first to the suspected portal to Petros's universe, from there to Paul's, and eventually back to the place they need to be to meet Sammy. If all goes well, they'll have a day or two to spare. And if all doesn't go well, they won't. With no other good option of how to spend these next ten days, they start.

Their first goal requires a two-day walk. It seems like a long way but that's not a problem. In fact, the realization is appreciated by Sam and Sienna. Two more days to just enjoy Trek. They have an agenda and are on a mission to accomplish that agenda but they can only do so much. On the way there, they are free to cherish their temporary time away from the stresses of responsibility.

The first day starts and proceeds in an uneventful manner. A gentle stream here, a grove of trees a little farther along the way, trees with tasteful fruit growing low on the branches. An easy reach for a delicious lunch. Lunch is followed by a short rest and a long beautiful walk on hills overlooking a series of lakes.

Sienna spends her time quietly communing with nature as only she does, or as only she and Sinopia do. Occasionally a breeze touches her mind. Now and then, trees and plants make her aware of their presence. Later a few drops of rain land on her hair on purpose. A cloud seems to wink at her from above. A wink likely just in Sienna's imagination. All this makes the day move fast. Time moves fast when one is having fun.

Before long the sun is low on the horizon. Sam and Sienna have been walking the entire time without talking to each other, each lost in their own thoughts. Better call it a day. Sam looks at the map and decides they have made good progress, walking faster than they thought. She can't know for sure as the map she was given was known to possibly be inaccurate. Even so, Sam is pretty sure they're getting close. Some lake formations and hills she can see in front of her also appear on the map and it gives her hope. Hope enough to relax by the lakes, forage for a good meal, and sleep. Sleep to be able to start early tomorrow.

And they do get a good night's sleep. Sam wakes early, naturally. Sienna is coaxed awake by something. No matter. They're both up and ready to start the day and find a universe bounded by an ocean appearing out of nowhere. By now, that seems like a natural Trek landform. They start the day as usual, waiting for their billy to boil so they can enjoy morning coffee on another beautiful Trek morning. Breakfast is enhanced by some freshly picked fruit and a couple of hardboiled eggs they packed for their trip. Every once in a while, food not naturally grown on Trek is a welcome treat.

Sam guesses that they have about a four-hour walk to their first goal. They start. Before long, they look in front of them and see another trekker approaching. Not too unusual that they should encounter someone else this far away from headquarters. That's why the planet was opened, wasn't it? To let people enjoy themselves walking around an enjoyable world. Maybe it's just unusual that it took them so long to find someone.

Meeting new people is always fun, or it should be. It's fun to talk to people, learn their experiences, and share yours. This time it may still be fun, but for the first time, Sam and Sienna are aware of knowledge they didn't have the last time they met a stranger. They know that this person is likely from Earth, but now they know it could be any Earth. It's a strange feeling when you think you may know everything about a person except for the universe that they were born in. Before they meet, Sam and Sienna decide to make a game out of the meeting. They challenge each other to see who can be the first to figure out the answer to just this question, the new trekker's home universe.

Their paths soon cross and they meet a woman. Sam and Sienna introduce themselves. Their new acquaintance, Ismini, reciprocates. Even when you have a goal, even when you have an agenda that needs fulfilling, a meeting of souls on Trek is still a significant event. One always takes time out of their day to chat and just be friendly. It's an unspoken rule of the planet. One, as unspoken as it may be, is still an obvious rite of being on Trek. Their conversation follows the normal course of inquiry; how do you like Trek, where did you come from, where are you going, how long have you been here. Standard chit chat.

Pleasantries are soon over. Time to get down to the business of a mother daughter competition. Sam starts by asking Ismini more about where she's from, to which she answers in an expected manner. She's from Santorinia. An innocent answer and also a clue that she's not from Sam's universe. Sam suspects that she's really from Santorini, a place Sam is familiar with. The extra "a" sound at the end of the name Ismini pronounced is, Sam suspects, not an error or an accent. It's the name that developed for the island in Ismini's universe. One point for Sam. She might not have discovered where Ismini is from, but she did discover where she's not from.

Next up is Sienna who asks "Did you travel here with anyone else, perhaps a friend who might be on Trek?"

"Yes, I did," responds Ismini, "my brother and I travelled here together. I'm not sure exactly where he is now but I hope to run into him soon. His name is Petros."

Bingo! Here we have game, set, and match for Sienna. Ismini is from the same Earth as Petros. A good question for Sienna to have asked since it looks like Ismini left her universe recently and it's the universe they're trying to find. They hoped they were close and that hope is enhanced by the presence of someone from there, Ismini. Sam, Sienna, and Ismini talk some more. They ask Ismini for help in getting to her part of Trek, just to make sure they are headed in the right direction. Ismini talks about an ocean, one that starts on a peaceful shore near her headquarters and then ends, just ends, abruptly about a hundred meters off shore. Another good answer. She can direct Sam and Sienna there. She points to the west, close to the way they were traveling, with a slight slant to the north.

It's Sam's turn to help Ismini. They let her know that they met Petros. They give her directions for finding him and let her know it's more than a day's walk away. She appears grateful for the help. They say their farewells and each go their own way.

Following the path Ismini described, they soon see a body of water in the distance. Anywhere else, they would think they were just seeing a lake. A large inland lake. On Trek they know different. Perhaps this is the first inland ocean

they have ever seen. That's because anywhere else, the phrase "inland ocean" would be an oxymoron.

Another hour walking through some thick growth finds Sam and Sienna by the edge of the ocean. Not the sandy shore that exists only at the far end. This end is a new reality, a boundary of a parallel universe. That universe starts at the edge of an ocean. Sam sees some swimmers in the distance and believes she and her mom could probably just jump in and swim safely to the far shore if they wanted to do that. Or body surf on the waves rolling in that direction. Probably, but not definitely. Whatever the chances are, they don't try. For many reasons. One is that they don't really have time to explore a new universe just yet. They need to do some more exploring in this one before they meet Sammy and Sinopia. Another reason is that they aren't sure if leaving that universe will be hard, like it was to leave Treak, or easy. So far, the only place they had problems leaving was Treak and they suspect that was because Aidan called Treak a "convergence" of realities, not its own universe. Was that the reason Treak was hard to leave? Sam thinks it was. That's her thought. Not a thought they can really rely on, but a thought nonetheless.

The third reason they do not enter Ismini's and Petros's universe is time. Not time as in the time they have to meet Sammy, but time as in they have no idea how time flows in that universe. If they enter and stay a day, it might only be an hour here in their current universe. That would be OK. But what if a day there is two days here, or a week, or a month. If they enter and return, they would have no way to know how much time elapsed back here. They would not know how long they had remaining until their scheduled meeting with Sammy or if they had missed the rendezvous altogether. No, they can enter this universe later after the meeting with Sammy occurs. For now, just knowing how to get there is enough.

There's one more thing they can do. Sam smiles at the planning she put into this moment. Planning she hasn't even told Sienna about. Sam reaches into her backpack and pulls out an object that looks like an orange. Not a real orange, but a ball, a round ball that looks like an orange. An orange with a stem that makes it look like an apple. She brought four of these orange-apple

whatever they are objects with her. Sienna notices as one is removed and held in Sam's hand. Sam explains.

This is a timer. I had some made at the shop back at headquarters. Remember when we were with Sammy and measured how time flowed differently in our two universes? We couldn't hear Sammy across that reality boundary. Air didn't cross that boundary so sound couldn't either. But sight was OK. We could see each other. I want to measure the flow of time over there in the reality that starts at the ocean. I figured we could see time flow, if not hear it. How does one see time? For that, I asked for some time bombs. Not dangerous, but little balls that dissolve in a "poof" in a known amount of time. That's what I have here. Once I arm this device, it dissolves in exactly one hour. I can arm it, throw it into the new reality, and watch. It will dissolve when one hour has passed in its new reality. Once we see that happen and how much time has passed here, we can measure how time flows differently in that universe. It's something we'll need to know before entering and something we'll need to discuss with Sammy.

Sam feels proud that she thought about this problem and how to solve it. Sienna gives her kudos. One can never get too many kudos. Sam walks up to the edge of the ocean, arms one of her devices, and throws it as far into the universe as she can. It lands with a small splash and floats. Sam thought of everything. They wait and watch as the orange that wants to be an apple bobs up and down in the low waves. Luckily it stays in sight, failing to be washed away to the distant shore. They wait the rest of the day until the sun sets, about five or six hours. The object can still be seen floating on the surface of the ocean. Perhaps moving somewhat farther away but still in sight. And still intact. The sun sets and they can no longer see it. They eventually fall asleep for the night. When they wake up, their timing device is gone.

That did not work out as planned. To make sure the devices really work as they should, Sam activates one in their current world and waits. Exactly one hour later there's a "poof" and the device dissolves. Nothing left except what used to be the outer covering of a perfectly spherical device. It's now lying flat on the ground. Sam guesses that the ocean water somehow stopped the timing device from operating correctly. A failure, but, success also. A universe was

found, a portal to what they hope will prove to be a useful world. Sam had hoped for more but they will take what they have. Enough for this universe. Time to concentrate on the next goal, to find a bidirectional river and the second universe.

The Search for Reality, 2

A close look at Mick's map, a quick adjustment for where they ended up after the slight redirection from Ismini, and a plan is agreed upon for reaching the entrance to Paul's universe. Sam and Sienna aren't as excited about that one as they were about finding the one that they already found. If they had to find only one, they both thought a place that could provide a spice, possibly a curative spice, was the more important of the two.

They aren't even really sure why they're looking for the universe that Paul had entered. Except that Paul seemed to know Vernon and key facts about him. Facts that might have been learned in the universe he visited. Finding a universe that might yield some Vernon-related insights has definite value, even if it's just potential value. That's the main reason Sam and Sienna are readying themselves to start another search. That and the fact that they have time to spare until they need to meet Sammy and Sinopia. Why not look for Paul's place? There's nothing to lose and it could prove valuable.

The distance between where they are now and where they want to go is farther than they first thought, looking like it'll take about three days to get there. Then three days from there to the Sammy rendezvous point. That's still plenty of time. If they start now, they'll have a couple of days to spare for emergencies. Besides, it's a nice day on Trek for a walk. Even though every day is a nice day for a walk, there's still no reason not to enjoy one.

Taking one last look at the inland ocean, Sam and Sienna start on their long journey. They head off in a mostly southern direction. An uneventful three days later, days spent without meeting a single person, they arrive at the place on the map where they were headed. Even just walking, one can cover a significant distance in three days.

The map shows a series of low hills, rivers, and a small lake. They look at the scenery of Trek in front of them. Hills, rivers, and a small lake are all right where the map shows they should be. The only minor point missing is a different universe, one bounded by a bidirectional stream. No indications of anything like that around here. Sam sees nothing, but more important, Sienna doesn't see or sense anything either. It's Sienna who is able to detect breaks in nature, unusual topographies, strange geographical features, water or wind

or clouds behaving in ways they shouldn't. All of that being nature's clues to new universes. Sienna, the foremost authority on inter-universal boundaries, can't find one.

She tries by first perusing the water in the stream where they're resting. She lets her mind flow with the water. No luck, so she tries the wind. The wind was how she found the border to Sammy's universe. No luck there either. She converses with the plants, trees, even the soil. All is as it should be. All is normal. It's not what she wants. Things shouldn't be as they should be, not here.

Sam tries too to find what shouldn't be. She looks up at the thick clouds. It might actually be getting ready to rain. Rain on Trek is common. It never lasts long but there's nothing unusual about a little bit of rain during the day. It's even expected. That's the reason Trek can be continuously bountiful and provide nutrition everywhere. The clouds are moving with the breeze from the west to the east, the prevalent direction of the wind in this part of Trek. Clouds follow the wind and the prevailing breezes are out of the west. Up to the north Sam sees clouds moving east to west. Sam imagines that the breezes up north are blowing the opposite way. And why not? That question floats through her mind as she relaxes and almost drifts off to sleep, lulled by the long period of inactivity, helped along by the exhaustion from many days spent walking.

"Why not indeed?" is the thought that jolts her from her lethargic thinking. Clouds can't simply drift one direction here and completely opposite only a short distance away. A planet's climate does not work like that. Today the wind goes as it goes in one direction. Maybe tomorrow, it may switch. It cannot go two ways at the same time. Breezes pushing clouds in two directions! That's as strange as a bidirectional river. A river reported to be the boundary of the universe they are trying to find. A universe that has revealed itself by its clouds, by its wayward, backward-drifting clouds. Sam tells Sienna. They pick up their belongings and wander a short distance to the north.

And there only one hundred meters from where they had stopped is a stream. It appears to be a normal stream until one looks at it closely. As Paul had reported, the water on this side is flowing in one direction. Halfway across the stream, the water is flowing in the opposite direction. That's impossible, right?

It's the thought they would have had if they had they seen this stream just after their arrival from Prism. Now with all that they've already seen, anything is possible. Why? They can't answer that, but they definitely have a bidirectional stream in front of them. Right above that stream are clouds. Clouds immediately overhead are moving one way. Clouds over the far side of the river are moving the other way.

Sam and Sienna have found what they came to find. Another goal met. They take some time to stare at the river. Definitely one of the strangest sights on a planet that's not lacking for its strangeness. They draw in the sight for a while until it's back to work for Sam. She was never a dawdler when there was work to be done. She takes out her timing orange-apple ball so she can measure how time advances in this new across-the-stream universe. How time differs from the universe that she and Sienna are in now. Sam moves her arm back as far as it will go, ready to throw. Sam wants to make sure the ball clears the river and lands where she can see it on the other side. She doesn't want the mechanism to be ruined by water as it appeared was the fate of the last one.

She lets go with a hard throw as if trying out for the major leagues in baseball. The ball rises as it moves forward, high and far, clearly a throw that will easily carry it over the river. She and Sienna follow the ball with their eyes as it climbs higher. Gravity forces the ball's trajectory into a typical parabolic path. It should reach its apex right over the middle of the river. A perfect toss. All is going well until Sam and Sienna look past the river to where they expect the ball to land. From that point, they see an object fly up from the other universe. An object that could easily be another ball of the same shape and size flying up to meet the one Sam threw. And it does. The two balls meet right over the middle of the river as each reaches the apex of their paths. And then they both disappear. There were two balls. There are none now. No noise, no explosion, no remnants of either ball. They were and now they're not. As simple as that. As complex as that.

Sam and Sienna stare at each other. What just happened? Nothing they've seen yet on Trek matches what they just saw. They call up thoughts and mental images from other universe boundary crossing. They try to remember comments made by others, by Paul, by Edvard, by Petros. They try to

remember any subtleties, any thoughts that might be hidden or implied by their words. Nothing! What Sam and Sienna saw was like looking in a mirror. Perhaps that's it. Maybe the area over the river acts like a mirror. Maybe they can't actually see across the boundary to the new universe. When Sam threw the ball, she saw the ball and its reflection. It met as the ball passed over the boundary and then the ball could no longer be seen. That might explain everything except for Sam and Sienna themselves. If the boundary acts like a mirror, Sam and Sienna should be able to see their own reflection when looking over the river. They can't. And the trees. A reflection should show the same trees and plants on both sides of the river. It doesn't. Somehow it worked for the ball and only for the ball. Perhaps the ball's movement, or speed, or height was the cause.

Success can be sweet. Sam and Sienna were excited to find the second universe they set out to find. That was success. That was sweet. Calculating the flow of time in the new universe successfully would have been the icing on the cake. They failed to do that like they failed to measure time in the first universe days ago. Failed for a different reason, but still a failure. A minor setback perhaps. It's easy to be happy with success. They need to also learn from their failures.

The time for learning will come but no longer today. It's been an exhausting day. Physically exhausting getting here. Mentally exhausting thinking about what just happened. Enough for today.

Rendezvous

They wake up again. A good start to any day. Waking up each day on Trek, even though that's what they've been doing for quite a while, can still be disorienting. It's not like being on a tour back on Earth where every day might begin in a new city. At least there, people are told where they are. It's information one can use to orient themselves. Here it's always waking up on Trek, always someplace new. A place that looks like almost every other place on the planet and no one to say where that is. Even if there was someone, there's no way to describe a place other than to just say Trek. The start of the day always needs time to adjust.

Sam and Sienna can still see the bidirectional river since they spent the night near its edge. As concluded at the last reality boundary, they need to stay on this side. Discretion is the better part of valor. Unknowns await if they cross the river, unknowns that might hinder their ability to meet Sammy and Sinopia. They want to learn more, but they can't right now. Maybe the four of them will return later. For now, it's onward to the next goal. A planned rendezvous with themselves, their alternate reality selves. A three-day walk to reach the meeting point. They have five days to complete it, but with no reason to stay here, they leave. At least they know where Sammy's universe is or where it should be. They crossed that border twice and Sienna knows how to detect where it is now in case it moved again.

On the way, Sam and Sienna discuss what they're going to talk about with Sammy and Sinopia. Sienna thinks it might be a good idea to team up and go together to the spice universe first. That appears to be the more hopeful of the two. Too bad they didn't really come up with anything more significant in the time since they left Sammy. They have what they have.

Maybe Sammy and Sinopia found something else. They've been on their own for twenty days. The advantage of living in a fast-moving time universe is that one has more time for investigation, more time for discovery.

One day and one night pass. Then a second. Finally, the third day arrives when they expect to reach the boundary to Sammy's universe. They have been there twice already and know what the area looks like. The surrounding area and the boundary wall. That is close to where they are now, but not yet at the actual

boundary. They haven't made as good time as they hoped and know it will take another day, four altogether, to reach that boundary. Good thing they had two extra days when they started. One of them is being used.

A third night passes and a fourth day starts. They walk and finally reach the top of the rise where Sienna first noticed the wall to Sammy's world. Where she sensed it in the distance, the first time, just before they entered that universe. The second time, when they exited Sammy's world, the boundary had moved. That location, the last known place, is only a kilometer to the northeast. The wall may have moved again but it should be close to the second point. They approach it slowly. Sienna wants to detect the boundary between the two realities before they cross. They still need to wait another day but it has to be another day of their time. They need to stay in this universe until then.

Sienna starts her synergistic investigation of nature. She finds a friendly breeze and joins it as it blows around the trees and through the branches. It's easy to do this. All breezes are friendly. She follows her new breeze as it flows toward the anticipated location where the wall was last known to be. The breeze whooshes through the invisible boundary, which means the boundary is not there anymore. It's moved. As expected, not a problem.

Sienna wonders where it went. She looks at her mom for advice. They decide to try the place where the boundary was the first time they arrived here. That place is five kilometers to the west. They walk slowly in that direction, not wanting to cross the border without knowing they're doing so. Sienna finds another breeze going in her direction. Not quite in her direction, but close. She manages to push the breeze with a little coercion, a trick she learned when she and Sinopia teamed together. She gets that one breeze to follow along up in the tree tops as she and Sam walk to their goal.

Goal reached. A goal that, as it turns out, is not a goal. They are where they want to be, but where they want to be is not where they are. All the same universe in these parts. Time to regroup again. Where should they try if not here and not there? Sam and Sinopia consider the alternatives until an idea pops out. Of course. They are where they first entered Sammy's world. When they came back to leave, the boundary had moved five kilometers to the east. How many days had they been in Sammy's world? They remember. And how

many days have they been out of Sammy's world. About twice as long. If the boundary moved east by five kilometers the first time and if it continued the same progression, it should have moved another ten. Fifteen kilometers from where they are now is where they should go. It's too far and too late to reach that place today, but they have another day. If they start now and get up early tomorrow, it can be reached. A quick decision, an about face, and they are off again toward a new goal.

The next day Sam and Sienna continue to get closer to their destination, Sienna connecting with breezes the entire walk. A little breeze here, a stronger willed breeze there, and occasionally an outright wind. Never does she note a boundary, anything that would keep a pocket of moving air from advancing. Not that she expects it yet, but it would be nice. All this connecting with nature is getting to be exhausting. It's hard to really understand how exhausting a task can be when it's a task someone can't even understand how to do. And the number of someones who can match consciousness with a breeze are quite few in number.

Eventually Sienna sits down to rest. She's forced to do that for a few minutes at least. They have about another hour until they reach their goal du jour. Sienna picks fruit from a nearby tree and sits down for a rest and some nourishment. Sam does the same. As always, they talk. More than just idle chat, they talk about the progress they're making, about how close to the goal they are now. It's said to make them feel better, be more hopeful. Hope seems to have left them. They should do what they can to get it back. The journey has been hard. Thirteen days of walking, of doing all this to try to help Vernon. They aren't even sure if Vernon can be helped or, if he can, if they can be the ones to provide that help. And now near the end of this journey, they are having problems in an important step that might be needed to find this help. Where is Sammy?

Encouragement from each other is what they need to move on to continue the search. They support each other but both are very intelligent, intuitive, and practical people. This period of rest is allowing their logic to surface and override their emotion. They both know that Sammy's world is gone. The entrance could be lost forever. When they exited Sammy's world, they did so

from a portal that had moved east. It was no longer where it was before so they assumed it moved farther to the east. They were now approaching that presumed portal from the west. If everything was as they surmised, if the boundary had continued to move east, then the place they are now would be in Sammy's universe, not their own. They are not in Sammy's world. Sienna's senses would have made her aware if they had passed through a reality boundary. They hadn't. They are not in Sammy's world and they will not find a portal to Sammy's world at the place they're walking towards. The portal has gone, moved, disappeared, perhaps forever.

A depressing realization but one they know is true. They turn and start to walk back to headquarters. They need to rest. And they want to check if there is any news about Vernon. That can only be done at headquarters. Then perhaps another trek. They'll decide that later. For now, returning to headquarters is the only plan they have.

Headquarters Four

They arrive at the only place they can call home on this planet, be that as it may. A place to recuperate. It doesn't give them a warm fuzzy feeling being home. It's more of a tepid fuzzy feeling. But it allows them some peace.

Sam and Sienna consult with Mick. They update their map from what they found on their trip. The spice universe has moved a little bit. The reverse flow river has moved a bit more. Sammy's universe is gone.

They ask for news about Vernon. There is some. It's not good. His condition is getting worse. The doctor's still have options that they are trying, but there hasn't been any luck with those treatments so far. On the other hand, there's nothing firm yet. There's still hope. All they can do now is hope or return to Earth.

That's all Sam and Sienna need to hear. The window of time to act is quickly closing. In the morning, they set off to find what can be found.

Enter The Spice Universe

A few days later find Sam and Sienna back at the inland ocean, at the entrance to the universe where they hope to find some spice. Where they hope to find spice, or medicine, or whatever it's called in that reality that will help Vernon. They hope.

They've managed to pack a small inflatable boat. No idea how deep the water is at this end of the ocean. They inflate the boat and step over the boundary of the new universe into the ocean and the boat. Tingles rush through Sam and Sienna as they transit the boundary. A tingle like those sensed during their other transitions. A sense of time standing still for a split second, an infinitesimal fraction of a second, almost no time at all, but only almost. An instant later they're paddling to the distant shore in their new universe. The water feels warm, a little warmer than one would expect at this latitude. Perhaps they are farther south in their new reality than they were in the one they just left. Not that it really matters.

It takes about a half hour to reach the sandy beach that Petros described. It's a nice day here and the shore looks popular. For the first time since arriving on Trek, in any of the Treks, there's a crowd. Not a big crowd but definitely a crowd by Trek standards. There're about thirty or forty people enjoying the beach. More people than they have seen at any one place during their entire time on Trek. This shouldn't be a surprise, not if they take the time to think about the clues they'd been given. Roisin said she was offered a spice. Petros was offered the spice also but didn't take it. Why? Because he had been offered lots of items and couldn't carry all of them. He clearly met many people and he clearly met them here, here being in this universe.

"There's something special about this place, something that makes it different from any of the other universes they've been in so far. Whatever makes this universe special is the reason we've so many people here. We need to figure out what that is." Sam says out loud to Sienna.

"Yes, Sam, my thoughts exactly," is uttered by a strange voice approaching Sam from behind. A voice that's not Sienna's. Who in this universe could know Sam? The surprise at hearing someone call her name makes her turn around suddenly. As she does, she realizes why the voice sounded so strange. Who

hasn't listened to a recording of their own voice and been surprised at how strange they sound? Her voice is the same as the person speaking to her, Sammy. And next to Sammy is Sinopia.

The next few minutes are spent exchanging hugs. The day has suddenly improved. A moment ago, Sam and Sienna were operating in an atmosphere of anxiety, in a race against time to find a spice in a world of pure tension. Now that world has changed. Those tensions are gone for at least a few moments.

Sammy explains that they went to the portal to Sam's reality and, like Sam and Sienna did, realized it was no more. They understood what had happened. Realities on Trek float, they rise and fall and move relative to one another. When one reality moves too far from another, there's no longer an area of overlap. One reality no longer pierces the existence of another, a piercing that shows up as a bubble of color on the reality being pierced. But just because Sam and Sammy's universes are no longer close to one another doesn't mean that either one of them doesn't exist. They both still do. And while they may no longer be close to each other, there still might be a third universe that is close to each, that overlaps both the reality of Sam and the reality of Sammy. That's what happened. Both Sam and Sammy managed to reach the spice reality through different piercings. Each piercing made its own path. Two paths that ended up at the same place.

Was it strange that this happened? That Sam and Sammy, isolated from one another, still both managed to get here. Why would that be strange? It shouldn't. Sam and Sammy have a connection unlike other people. Their history is intertwined. In sync. A synchronization that meant they would both arrive here. And so, they did.

Sam and Sammy and Sienna and Sinopia are together again. Together with one goal in mind. How do they find the spice that made Fred's food taste so good and made Fred look so young? It's here somewhere. And there are people here that would be glad to give them that exact spice. Someone offered some to Roisin and to Petros. Surely the spice is not a secret. How can they find such a person?

They start talking about finding some help to reach this goal. As they start, a grin forms on Sammy's face. She knows the answer to this question! How?

What one clue could Sammy have detected that wasn't available to Sam? And look at Sinopia. She's stifling a smirk too. Sammy definitely knows something that Sam doesn't. This isn't supposed to happen.

Then from a short distance away, Sienna hears "Hi, Sienna" in another strange voice. A voice that can't be Sammy or Sinopia. They're both right here in front of her. Sienna turns around to hear Aidan say "I've missed you."

Aidan explains how he spent the days since leaving Sienna thinking about her world, thinking about all there is to see outside of Treak, and getting island fever. Staying on Treak, limited to what that confluence of two universe can offer is island fever. When he left Treak the first time, the genie was out of the bottle. Sure, his family is in Treak and all the people he grew up with. All the people important to him are in Treak. All except one. The one person who showed him what he could see outside of Treak, what he could learn, what his life could be like. The one person he needed to be with to enjoy that life. That was Sienna.

"I had no idea how to find you," continues Aidan, "but I had to try. So, I moved. I camped at the entrance to Trek at the last place I saw you. I waited, hoping you would walk past. Knowing I could leave Treak if I saw you, but also knowing that I couldn't reenter Treak without your help. I waited. And waited. And eventually I saw Sammy walk past. They were walking to meet you and the path to do that took them past the portal to Treak.

"She knew you. Could she tell me how to find you? It was worth the risk. I left Treak and joined Sammy and Sinopia. I was happy. Until we realized that the gateway to your universe was gone. I stayed with them anyway. What else could I do? I wasn't as excited as before, but I stayed. And it's good that I did. We came here just this morning and here you are."

A pause in his speech allows Sienna time to rush over to Aidan's arms. Another happy reunion. This one is perhaps a bit happier, at least to Sienna. Then Aidan continues with his important news.

Trek

“I know what this spice is called and how to get it. I saw what it can accomplish. I know how to ask for it. Several people have brought samples into Treak. I talked to many of them over the years. They all said they got it from an unusual place, from the part of Trek that we’re in now. I’m not sure they realized it was a different reality but they did realize that it was special.

“They all described it as one place on Trek that appeared to be home to several generations of people. Not all came from Earth. Some did come here, but others were born here like I was. And for those who came here, not all did so to enjoy the planet. Some came to live knowing what that meant. They formed a society in this part of Trek, a civilization that might have originated on Earth but is now Trekian. They built an infrastructure with industry and a health system. They researched and developed medicines from what grows naturally on Trek.

“Bottom line. We need to ask how to get to a hospital, and when there, tell them we would like some athnuachan. That’s the name of the spice I believe you want, so I was told.”

The day has moved from somber, to pleasant, to happy, to exuberant. All in the course of an hour. What started out with only a hope to find a spice became a belief that one could be found, and then a belief that the spice is actually a medicine, and finally a medicine that can help. Athnuachan can be found in a hospital. Unless this athnuachan is a spice used in the hospital kitchen, it’s a drug. And what hospital uses a spice to make tasty food? None! It’s clearly a drug.

Aidan gets a smile and a kiss from Sienna. The expression on Aidan’s face shows that was a good start. The four of them are encouraged by the news Aidan gave them. Aidan is encouraged also.

They leave the beach area and shortly walk through what looks like a small village. A few houses, some small gatherings of people and buildings that looks like retail stores. Sammy enters one. The others watch as she talks to a

worker in the store, or perhaps the owner if stores are even owned on Trek. She exits after a few minutes to explain that there is no hospital here but there is one in the next village, only three kilometers away. They can walk there in under an hour. Which they will right after lunch. They start along a path between the two villages and soon find an orchard with standard Trek offerings. Food here is free for the picking as it is everywhere else on the planet.

Thirty minutes later, well fed, they're back on their way. Another thirty minutes after that, a small building suddenly comes into view just past a grove of trees. Not the type of building one would normally associate with a hospital. Perhaps this hospital is smaller because there are so few people on Trek. Or perhaps people on Trek are healthier. Is it even a hospital? It is, which becomes obvious as they walk up to the building and see the word "hospital" on a sign over the front door. Good clue! They walk inside and look up and down the corridor off the main entry lobby. No one is in sight. That might be another indication of a generally healthy population. A short walk down the corridor leads them to an office entitled "Administration."

They enter and finally see someone. Someone who looks like they could be a doctor or any person who wears a white coat on his job. He looks up at the noise of the door opening, peruses the faces of the five visitors, and grins.

"Hi," is his not very original greeting. His more original follow-up is "Looks like we have another Sam here, don't we?" A slight pause and then "Nope, I'm wrong. Looks like we have two Sams. Or Sammys, or Victorias, or whatever you call yourselves."

Well, there you have it. Sam has been recognized by four people since she arrived in a universe she's never been to before. Sammy, Sinopia, Aidan, and Doctor ...

"Hi," says Sam with an equally unoriginal start. "I'm Sam. Who are you?"

"Ah, yes. I don't suppose you would have any idea who I am. You can just call me Takuta. No one here uses the formality of doctor. Are you surprised I know who you are? Probably. I would be if I were you. But I bet it doesn't shock you to know that you

are the sixth Sam I've met. Make that the sixth and seventh. I know you understand about parallel universes. Maybe not everything but you must know they exist. That much is obvious since you both showed up together. The knowledge that I have also met other Sams just like you shouldn't be a shock once you think about it. Yes, there you go. Why should there only be two and why shouldn't the others have also stumbled in my front door. All of you follow the same path with little variation. You will all find your way here eventually. I don't really know how many of you there are. You may be the last or not. No matter.

"There's no reason to explain why you're here. It must be the same as all the other Sams that have shown up. I know that Vernon is in trouble with an as-of-yet incurable cancer. Incurable in your reality. Not in ours. We've been around much longer than either of you. A random event in our universe allowed us to invent interstellar drive sooner, arrive on Trek sooner, experiment with the natural plant life on Trek sooner, and discover many cures for serious ailments. Vernon's cancer is one of those whose cure we've found. I know this because we already cured the other Vernons in response to requests from their advocates. We know what we have works the way both of you want.

"There is a medicine we call athnuachan. You can have some. You only have to wait. It needs to be made and that process takes about three days. I'll start it right away. You can come back here when it's ready."

The day that started as somber, moved to pleasant, happy, and exuberant, has just advanced another level. A great weight has been lifted from Sam and from Sammy. They had a goal. One they weren't sure they could reach. That goal was to find this reality and find the spice Aidan called athnuachan. They did that. Then they had another goal. More than a goal, they had a hope. The hope was that this spice would be able to help Vernon. Hopefully cure, but at least help. Now both those goals have been met. All that's left is to get the drug,

return to their own reality, catch a 50-year flight, more or less, back to Earth, and give the drug to Vernon. All within ten days. That part sounds easy in comparison.

The five of them thank Takuta and agree to return in three days. Takuta smiles as they start to leave. Then gets up slowly and walks over to Sam and to Sammy. “Take the night off,” he says, “but please come back tomorrow so we can talk. There’s more to this process than simply getting the drug and leaving. I’ll need to explain what problems you may encounter when you leave. And there’s one other strange thing about your visit. All other Sam’s have showed up as two, her and her daughter. You have an extra, a straggler, the boy. The one you call Aidan. That’s a first. Probably it’s not a problem but we do need to talk. Tomorrow is fine.”

With that the group departs. They find a field only a short walk from the hospital. A field with a fine selection of fruits, nuts, and vegetables. Sienna and Sinopia work together to find the tastiest selections from each plant. As they sit down, Takuta walks up and gives them a couple of bottles of the local wine. Wine that they know will be the best they’ve tasted on Trek. They’re sure this world has invented some enhancement for the vinting process. Another thanks. Another good Trek meal. A delicious bottle of wine. The meal finished, the five of them lean back to sleep. Sam, Sammy and Sinopia, Sienna and Aidan.

The next morning starts in a relaxing manner. There’s no hurry, so Sam and Sammy take their time to enjoy their morning coffee. And a second cup. Later the five of them agree to go they own ways to explore. They’ll meet back here for dinner. It’s an opportunity to experience a universe they will likely never see again after the next two days.

Sam and Sammy leave together to take this opportunity to visit Takuta. As they enter his office, Takuta looks up with a friendly smile and asks them to sit down.

“Hello again,” he starts, only slightly more original than yesterday. “The athnuachan manufacturing has begun. It should be ready in another two days, as I said. Then you can

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leave and take the drug to Vernon. But a warning. Be careful when you leave here. You need to leave at the exact spot you entered, otherwise you may not return to your universe. The areas of overlap are unforgiving. The two of you both entered this reality possibly close to the same place. Overlap areas move. You should leave as soon as you can and at exactly the same spot you entered. It's your best chance of returning to the right home and to where you want to be.

“When you leave our universe, make sure the place you reach is as you expect, as you want, in all aspects. You may see changes, unexpected differences, odd observations. Remember there is much that is unusual about Trek, especially when changing realities. If you see something that appears strange, that poses a problem. Try to figure out what you really see. Try to understand how what you see can be. Come up with an explanation and an understanding. There is usually one. Understanding a problem is the first step in solving the problem.

“When you finally get back, you may see some things that are impossible. You may convince yourself that what you see is not possible. Can you see an impossible something? Even on Trek, the answer is no. An impossibility means you need to change your assumptions. Stretch your imagination. Imagine some case where the impossible becomes possible. It's an understanding that, like all others, provides the key to a solution.”

“I can't be any more helpful than that. We in this reality have studied parallel universes for a long time. We understand more than you do, but not everything.”

A pause to let Sam and Sammy consider what Takuta is telling them. It's confusing at best. Sounds like they are being told they will encounter

problems that will need to be solved. Nothing new there. And nothing helpful either. Sam and Sammy do wonder about parallel universes and why it's so easy to move from one to another. How far do they really move when they enter a new universe? And how is that movement even measured? They ask Takuta.

“Yes, just as the other Sams asked. We know something here. The distance between universes is less than any distance you have ever traveled, smaller than a single step. The time it takes to move from one to another is shorter than any time imaginable. That's because all the other universes are right here, hidden from you by the quantum reality of your own universe.

“Scientists have often considered how space might exist in the quantum world. When an object moves from here to there, it might not do so continuously. It might jump along its way, move in a large number of small jumps.

“Confusing? Maybe a thought experiment will help. Let's conduct one. Consider an object that moves a distance of one meter but does so in a thousand leaps each one millimeter long. A leap where the object moving never exists in the space between the millimeter points, only at those exact points themselves. A millimeter may seem like a long distance for a thought experiment like this, and it is. However, these types of movements on smaller scales are not so farfetched. They have been observed. An electron moving around a nucleus is one case. Electrons appear to be able to exist only at certain quantum distances from the nucleus but nowhere in between.

“Electrons leap over distances that are quite small. Much smaller than a millimeter but not zero. Infinitesimally small, almost. What exists in that small space electrons skip? The answer is another universe. Multiple universes. They are all right here but not at places we can reach. We move over those other universes all the time because it's all we can do. Those other

universes move over us in the same way. To get from one universe, from one reality, to another only requires moving a distance shorter than you are able to move. Quantum movement prevents it. It can't be done. Except on Trek. Universes collide on Trek and form boundaries that can be traversed. As one moves over a boundary, they reset their quantum positioning. They have moved a distance far shorter than can be imagined. Shorter than is allowed. But only here on Trek. For some reason, only here.

"This may sound strange. I'm sure it does. Few people understand the science. As unbelievable as it sounds, it's only one part. Space is quantized. So is time. We exist now and we exist a short time from now. But the time in between, we don't exist. This leaves openings for more realities. Time and space both existing in quantum units. The strange feeling you experienced as you entered our universe was your transition from one quantum reality to another. You stepped over a small distance in space, or a short period of time, or both from where you were to where you are. It felt strange. Felt only slightly strange but was much stranger than it felt."

Another brief pause draws no comments from Sam or Sammy.

"Now we need to talk about Aidan. While we know what transitions between parallel universes are, we're not really sure why or how they work. We know about the quantum gaps but that's only where the universes exist, not how to get from one to another. We're working on a theory that transitions have something to do with the fact that universes are similar to each other. Something or someone that exists in one universe can travel to another without the slightest disruption to the reality of either. A person who has a match in another universe can make a transition between the two easily. Such as you Sam and you Sammy. There are the two of you. And there are Sienna and Sinopia. That should be no problem. But Aidan. It's unusual that

there is only one of him. He made it here OK so possibly there will not be any problem with him returning but we aren't sure. It may be nothing, but I have to warn you to look out for changes more unusual than you might expect."

Again, a pause from Sam and Sammy. After some time, Sam asks Takuta if he can let her know anything more than just "watch out". Sammy is not so concerned. Aidan will be returning with Sienna and not with the two of them.

"No," replies Takuta, "that's all I can say for now. We've never had a solo visitor like Aidan. All I can say for reassurance is good luck and we doubt it's a problem. At the same time, we just don't know."

A final pause and Sam and Sammy stand up, thank Takuta for the conversation, and depart. The one take away from the meeting that is under their control is to be sure and leave as soon as they receive what they came for, the athnuachan. That will be in two more days.

Exit The Spice Universe

The next two days seem to speed along. While anxious to get the spice back to Vernon, all are enjoying a relaxing time in their current reality. The anxiety is on hold for the time being since there's nothing to do but wait. Waiting here is the best of all possible worlds, which is saying a lot on Trek. The people here are healthier, they're more relaxed, and they appear, as Petros opined, more knowledgeable. Sam and the group know why. They are. This Trek has advanced beyond the others they have seen. They know about parallel universes. They understand the underlying justification for their existence. There are probably many more subjects that people in this universe know and can talk about. But they are not arrogant. They treat Sam, Sienna, Sammy, Sinopia, and Aidan as they would treat anyone. That also comes from knowledge. They know that some people in their world were not born here. They are aware that some arrived by traveling across the division of a reality. People in Sam's reality and people in Sammy's reality are not aware of this yet. It will be a shock when they find out. People here understand.

Fun time ends at the middle of the third day when Takuta lets them know the athnuachan is ready. They are each given a sizeable amount and instructions for administering the drug. One dose a day for five days will cure just about anything. And if not anything, at least certainly what Vernon has. The drug does not expire but time is still important. They need to get it to Vernon as soon as they can. And time is important for another reason. Neither Sam nor Sammy wants this reality to drift so far that they are unable to return to their own.

They take the drug, thank Takuta, and leave to return to their worlds and finish what has to be done. They walk together to the other town three kilometers back on the path. From there, they turn toward the beach. Sam, Sienna, and Aidan then turn toward their entrance to the north. Sammy and Sinopia turn south. Each entered from their own reality at a different location. Each needs to return the same way. This time they know their goodbyes will be forever as they return back to different Treks and then to different Earths. Different Earths where reality proximities do not exist. Those exist only on Trek. Tears in their eyes, they exchange final hugs, turn, and walk their own ways. Two people walk south, three walk north.

A quiet walk. A somber walk. A reflective walk. And a quick walk. They reach the place where they arrived. They recognize everything about that part of the beach, but particularly their inflatable boat which is exactly where they left it. Luckily, it's big enough for three. The three board and paddle out into what should be an endless ocean. The ocean may be endless if departing from other places along the shore. This is not one of those. It's a half hour of paddling away from shore when trees and grasses start to appear in the distance. The ocean abruptly ends in what they hope will be their home world, the reality they left a few days earlier. The home to Sam, the home to Sienna, and the new home to Aidan. They get to the far shore and walk across the reality boundary. All goes well.

A few days later, about as long as it took them to walk from headquarters to the inland ocean, they approach headquarters again. They walk to the main building, enter and look for Mick. Everything has gone as smoothly as plans can go. They find Mick resting in her office. Looking a little bit older, but definitely Mick. Her looking older is, no doubt, only because they were used to seeing healthier people in the universe they just left. The advanced medicines of that reality made everyone look younger.

Mick looks up to see who just walked into her office. The expression on her face, the shock of seeing the three of them enter, is the first sign that perhaps this part of their adventure is not really progressing exactly according to plans.

"What are you doing here, Sam?" an excited Mick questions, loudly. "I haven't seen you for two years. I thought you had returned to Earth. I wasn't told you were coming back. Why did you? Is Vernon still OK? What exactly is going on?"

Not the words one expected to come out of Mick's mouth. Sam and Sienna and Aidan all heard the questions Mick asked. They aren't questions that are easy to answer. How can you answer "Why did you return from Earth?" when you hadn't gone back there. What can you say to Mick, who claims she hasn't seen you in two years, when you just saw her a week ago?

Sam tries to remember what Takuta told her. Takuta told her to be prepared for the unusual. The first guidance he gave her was to pause when experiencing something strange. He said to try to come up with an understanding of the problem.

How can she understand that Mick hadn't seen her in two years? The answer to that question is much easier than it sounds. Sam remembers the first time they approached the inland sea. She tossed a ball over the reality boundary, a ball with a timer programmed to explode in one hour. It never did. They waited in their original universe watching the ball in the new universe, waiting for it to explode. It never exploded. They assumed the water had damaged the ball and they left. But it hadn't. Sam considers that it has actually been two years since they left like Mick said. But they know that they were only in the spice universe for three days. If three days of time in that universe is the same as two years here, then one hour there is about five days here. No wonder we never saw the ball explode. We would have had to wait five days to see that happen.

Sam knows this is what happened. They had been gone two years in Mick's universe. More important, they have been gone two years in Vernon's universe. Vernon could not be alive anymore unless another cure was found other than the one Sam is carrying with her. The effort to save Vernon, all the effort to obtain the athnuachan, all that was a waste of time.

Sam explains this to Mick, and at the same time to Sienna and Aidan. The enthusiasm they experienced in the spice universe is no more. It is all despair. There's nothing to do now except to go back to Earth. Or maybe not even there. They need to go back to Prism. If Vernon is still alive, he undoubtedly returned to Prism. But as there are no shuttles from Trek to Prism, they will still need to return to Earth first and then decide what to do.

They ask Mick if they can have a room and when the next shuttle is scheduled to depart. There's no reason to stay on Trek and certainly no desire to do so.

Then Mick surprises them by saying she can help. How can that be? The time for help has passed by two years.

"No," says Mick, "listen. What I have to say is important. I didn't understand this when I first heard it but I now know it must be important. It's important because I heard it from you, Sam.

"The last time I saw you was two years ago as you were leaving to return to Earth. You were getting ready to board the shuttle.

I'm sure that was your plan. I never saw you actually depart but I have to believe you did. The last thing you said was to tell you to remember Paul. And that if you see something that's impossible, that's really impossible, well then change your assumptions.

"I thought it was strange when you told me to tell you that. You telling me to tell you something you didn't know. Ridiculous. What could that mean? I discarded the comment as a joke. I never thought about it again until now. Could that comment made so long ago really mean anything? There, I said it. I guess it's up to you to make sense out it.

"In response to your other question, I do have a room you can use. We've built several rooms for visitors that are studying the parallel universes you uncovered before you left. Rooms are available. In response to the second question, the next shuttle leaves in three days. Do what you want and let me know if you would like space on that shuttle. There's a lot more traffic now, a lot more passengers. I need to reserve space for you in advance."

Sam thanks Mick as the three of them leave to find the room they were offered. Sam and Sienna look like all the joy in the world has been taken from them. Aidan is sympathetic but can't feel what they feel. Aidan doesn't even know Vernon.

An hour elapses and not a word is uttered. Just an air of depression and defeat. As more time passes, they finally start talking. Random thoughts to pass the time. They talk about entering Treak and finding Aidan, about the problems they had leaving Treak, and how Aidan helped. Aidan enthusiastically joins this part of the conversation. After all, he was a key part of it. They talk about finding Sammy and Sinopia. They wonder how the two of them are handling their time displacement problem. Although maybe they don't have a problem. Takuta told them transitioning between realities might be different with Aidan along. Maybe Aidan had some impact on the time. It's

possible but there's no way that they'll ever know that. They'll never see Sammy and Sinopia again.

They talk about visiting the spice universe. They even consider that maybe they should have stayed there. They might have, in fact, if there was a way that Vernon could have joined them. But of course, there wasn't. So here they are. They talk about the reality bounded by the river that changes its direction of flow in the middle. It might have been fun to visit that reality. Who knows what might be on the other side of an impossibility. After all, there's no way that a river can flow one way on the near side and the other way on the far side. Not possible, right?

With that thought, Sienna and Sam stare at each other. Even Aidan realizes something significant has been said. The river's flow is impossible. When something is impossible, assumptions need to be changed. Another word of wisdom from Takuta. What assumption can that be? The river is flowing in two directions, isn't it? But it can't. That would be impossible. The river must be flowing one way and one way only. We just see it as two ways. To understand, to believe that it's flowing in one direction only requires us to change an assumption, right? Yes.

Sam assumes that the river is flowing one way, just that she was seeing it wrong. How? She has clues. The ball she threw across that same river. When she tossed it, another ball, a mirrored image, rose from the far side, met her ball over the middle of the river, and then disappeared. And the clouds. They acted like the river, blowing different ways. Those must be clues. All these observations are inexplicable under the current assumptions. Assumptions that need to be changed and when they are, will explain everything.

The last clue is Paul. He went into that universe and returned. But he returned before he entered. That clue, when she thinks about it, makes Sam realize what assumption is wrong. It's all obvious. Time in the universe on the other side of the river must flow backwards, in the opposite direction that time flows here and in all the other realities they visited. Time flows at different rates in different realities. That's why twenty days in Sammy's reality is only thirteen days in Sam's. Time's flow is only consistent until a new reality is entered. If

this is true, which it is, why can't time flow backwards in one reality or even in many. There's no reason. It can and it does.

The river is flowing one way. On our side, we see the water flow from where it is to where it's going to be. On the other side, we see the water flow from where it is to where it was. The water is flowing the same way but because time isn't, we see the water flowing backwards. The same with the clouds. And the ball that Sam tossed. When the ball reached the boundary of the backward-time reality, it crossed and then continued backwards in time. That meant the ball was falling in its new reality at the same instant that it was rising in its old one, in the reality it was thrown from. An effect the same as seeing a reflection in a mirror. There's no mirror. It was wrong to assume that there was. There's only backward flowing time.

The three of them storm into Mick's office. "What was the exact date we left on our last outing. Not when you thought we returned to Earth but the time before that?" demands Sam, "and what is the date today?"

Mick answers. They have been away exactly seven hundred days. Sam thanks her and they immediately leave for the one universe that can solve their problems. The one with the river that only looks like it flows both ways.

They arrive four days later. Plans were made during their walk. They had plenty of time to decide exactly how this would be handled. They reach the river, find a large log, and drop it near the shore. They wait exactly one hour and cross the river. On the far shore, they sit and watch the time as they concentrate on the log. They are now going backwards in time, but how fast? Pretty fast as it turns out. After watching for exactly six minutes, they see their images on the far side in the universe where they started, images that look like they're picking up a log. They're not really picking one up, they know since they really dropped it, but in a backwards time world, that's what it looks like. Six minutes in this reality is one hour in the reality where they started the day. They're going backwards ten times faster and they need to go back seven hundred days in the universe they just left. They need to stay in this reality for seventy days, and a little bit more. The extra time is needed to allow for days spent walking to the boundary and the days that will be required to walk back.

It's the longest seventy days of their lives but they don't dare leave the river. How could they leave considering it could move. They can't lose their path home, not when they're so close. They stay and count the days and wait.

Seventy days pass. They reenter their home reality and walk back to Mick. Mick is there, looking not as old as in their last encounter which is now two years in the future. Mick is happy to see her and happy to learn they were successful in obtaining a drug to help Vernon. She arranges for transport for the three of them on the next Earth transport, leaving tomorrow.

They say no more until they get ready to board the shuttle for a ride up to the interstellar ship. Then Sam thanks Mick for all she has done to help and gives her one final instruction. "Mick," starts Sam, "if you ever see me again, tell me to remember Paul. Also remind me that if I ever see something impossible, something really impossible, that nothing I see is impossible. Tell me to change my assumption about what I see. Please do that. Don't forget. OK?"

Mick looks at Sam as if she's crazy but Mick knows Sam's been through a lot. She agrees. They hug goodbye. Possibly the only hug Mick has ever given or received. The three board the transport and leave.

Home

Once more Sam is sitting in a PSD drive ship viewing lounge waiting for someone to tell them it's time to enter the stasis room to start their fifty-year sleep. This time she's with Sienna and Aidan. She looks out at the surface of Trek, sees the contour of the land and the spots of color. She knows a lot more about those spots than she did the last time she saw them. It's knowledge that can generate a lot of thought. It's also knowledge she no longer wants to think about. Instead, she fills her mind with thoughts of returning to a planet she used to call home. She's been away for almost thirty years. But most, she thinks about seeing Vernon again and, of course, delivering the athnuachan.

And then there's Sienna. Her thoughts are filled with a trip to a world she knows about but has never seen. Her home planet, but not really. What will it be like, a planet with so many people. It's not Trek. That's good. But it's not Prism either.

Aidan's mind is filled with thoughts that only his imagination can produce. He's never been in the real universe. Not for long and not to live. For now, he needs to rely on his imagination. That's the only source that can tell him the truth about what's about to happen. Unfortunately, his imagination is as clueless as he is. Neither has experience with civilization like he's about to see on Earth. The apprehension of what his future will bring is calmed only by thoughts of spending that future with Sienna.

Whatever thoughts are going through the minds of Sam, of Sienna, and of Aidan, there is one thought they all have in common. They are about to go to sleep for fifty years, travel over forty light years, and wake up tomorrow morning. To anyone else, that might appear bizarre. To these three who have just experienced Trek, the trip to Earth is just another normal day.