

Jack Verson

Prism

Journey to Prism, a planet settled from Earth, a planet that vacillates in color and where native life communicates by light, not sound. We soon find out that the colors are more than just beauty, they have meaning, a meaning that humans must solve to be able to remain on the planet where they have lived for over fifty years. The solution may require help of the native life. But how can humans communicate with creatures that cannot speak?

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To Vicki

The Sam in my life

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Prologue

Let me introduce myself. My name is Vernon Vining. There are many things I would like you to know about me. Maybe not many but certainly one thing and that one will be helpful understanding my role in this story. I'm assuming you are going to read the story, aren't you? Yes of course you are. So, I'll continue.

While I was growing up in a northern Illinois town I loved taking walks in the forest preserves. At the start I'd often go on these walks with my mom. We'd wander through the woods and along creeks near a northern suburb of Chicago. We knew which of the local paths would quickly take us away from the houses in our little village and off into the wilderness. Granted wilderness in our suburb was not the same as wilderness among the mountains of Colorado or wilderness in the northern reaches of Saskatchewan. One takes what one can get. For Chicago, it was wilderness. The paths would wind through trees so that, in spots at least, one couldn't see signs of civilization. It appeared as the world must have been before the arrival of Europeans in the New World. You understand what I mean. One can imagine when one is a child, can't one?

There were many things I loved about my days in the forest preserves. I loved looking at a stream as it slowly flowed through the woods. Streams didn't move very fast in Illinois where the flat terrain made it hard to determine which direction was up and which was down. It made it kind of difficult for streams to know which way to flow. It surprised me that they knew, which they did apparently, but they never moved with much conviction.

I loved watching leaves as they fell from the trees. Sitting by a stream I could spend hours waiting for one to start its descent. One that had turned a bright mixture of burnt orange, crimson red, with little of its original green remaining would be just the one waiting to drop. A playful breeze would come by and nudge it loose. I'd always look up at the leaf just a few seconds before it would break free. I'd watch it be buffeted back and forth by the same playful breeze that set it free. If it was extra playful it would try repeatedly to keep the leaf aloft before letting go and allowing it to finally find its own way to the ground. I never wondered why I was always able to look up just before one started to fall but I was.

I loved guessing which would be lucky enough to land in the creek and therefore to continue its journey riding on top of a downstream current. I'd watch each one float in the stream until it flowed out of sight or until another more interesting leaf got my attention. Falling leaves can be very competitive for attention. I always seemed to know which would land in the water and which would not.

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I loved seeing an insect, one that had been resting on a doomed leaf as the two would float down to the water. What was once a peaceful place to hide was now a private gondola. I'd often get up and follow the gondola and its floating passenger as long as paths along the stream would allow me to follow. I tried to imagine what the insect was thinking as it was rushed around a bend and whisked off to what probably seemed like a brand-new world to the six-legged traveler.

I loved looking at clouds floating above the lakes and streams. Illinois seemed to be a popular gathering point for all types. There were the high wispy ones that looked like transparent white silk and that always seemed to be present on the most pleasant of summer days. There were tall thick white ones that faded to all shades of gray at the top and could mean a storm was coming or not. Those could show up at any time just to tease me, make me think it was going to rain when it wasn't. Or they could be serious and bring a storm with rain, more rain, and even more rain, or maybe heavy rain one second and not a drop the next. Tall thick clouds always kept one guessing.

Watching them drift along was almost as much fun as watching the river flow. Many of my school friends would sit and stare at the clouds and imagine they were monsters, or friendly animals, or cars, or spaceships, or people they knew, or any of an unlimited number of shapes. I'd also often pass the time watching like they did. It didn't matter what my imagination would see. Just imagining was fun. As I was growing up, I would spend many an hour cloud watching. I could focus on one being pushed across the sky by the wind and, just before it went out of sight, a different one with a new shape and a new meaning would be blown into view and catch my attention. Clouds are better at getting one's attention than leaves. You probably already knew that.

Like many children my age, my mind would often invent games. Fun games. Some might call them games of nonsense. Not for me. One favorite game I played was with the clouds. I'd pick out a friendly one, then a second one, and pretend they were racing. Racing to whatever finish line I devised. I always knew which one would win.

I loved spending time playing these types of games with nature. They were games with no concerns nor worries. It was hard to be too worried about the winner of a race between clouds, especially when no one was even aware that a race was happening. Concerns of the world could wait until I grew up. There were none now.

Looking at nature was part of me. Observing what was available to everyone else, to those that were even interested in looking at all. Nature right in front of them,

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like water in the streams, leaves, insects, and clouds in the sky. I could see what everyone could see. Nothing special there, I thought until one day. One day I realized I also could also see what not everyone else could. It started when I noticed the wind itself or perhaps it was just a breeze. Funny how I noticed that. A breeze that blew through the leaves, that pushed the clouds on their way, a gust of wind that was part of the world. But to actually grasp it as anything even slightly physical was strange. I knew then that I could imagine what it was. I could imagine myself as that part of the world. The thought that it was something that had a perceptible form resided in my mind, the mind of a child, in a part of the mind that doesn't exist in an adult. An adult knows one can't touch a breeze. A child doesn't know that yet.

I wouldn't touch it with my hands. I would touch it with my mind. Either way it was just as real. It would race along playfully without a care in the world. It thought, but it had problems too. Problems that had to be addressed and solved. A breeze might be going merrily along its way and suddenly encounter a tree. It would then have to decide which way to go. Left, right, up, down? Those were not movements that just happened. They were choices that were made.

How would it decide which way to go? Sometimes there were clues. Once there was a big gust in front. The gust knew which way to go. It's nice when there is someone to help. There were also times when no help was available and a quick decision had to be made. If a breeze found itself heading toward a foliage of leaves, and if it was brave or stubborn, it could try to go right through the leaves, blowing them out of the way. Not so brave and it could take the easy way out and go around. I could feel each time a decision was made. I could feel the mind of the wind. I knew what it was going to do, before it knew itself.

But this time I did not wonder how I knew.

I was always what is called an outdoors person. I liked cities to some extent but liked the natural world better. Also, I was never a religious person in my youth or as an adult but I always knew that I appreciated what God made better than what was made by humanity. All these years, all this imagination, all this time spent outdoors, and all this youthful exuberance helped me learn how the world worked. Not the world built by humans with their artificial buildings and artificial vehicles, but the world formed by nature built by the planet on which we live. I learned how that world worked, how it had always worked. It understood that I was learning and helped me learn.

After I realized that I could understand the thoughts of a breeze, a random, unorganized flow of air that was, in my mind, not random at all and also very well

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organized, I realized that I could also understand other parts of nature, understand how they worked and what they were. I no longer wondered how I knew which leaf would fall from a tree, or which would land in the water, or how the current in a river would flow, or which clouds would win a race or release their supply of rain. Leaves did not announce their intent to others. Nor did clouds. Nor did streams. People thought they didn't but they did. They announced their plans to anyone willing to look, anyone capable of seeing. It was a sight that was hidden from most people but not from me. I could see.

I finally realized what had happened in my years of watching the world, in my years of imagining, in my years of playing games with nature, in my years of learning. I learned, to understand the world to some small extent. It was a sentient world that existed with purpose. A world I understood, that needed understanding, and that could understand in return. A world that was and is much more than just a physical reality. I had no control over it but I understood it and I was part of it. I could see what the world wanted me to see. I could hear what the world wanted me to hear. I could taste the nourishment that the world wanted me to have. Why me? I had no idea but I would never be the same.

I had developed a connection with that world and with nature. I just needed to figure out how to use that connection to help.

Chapter 1

I like to hear the melody of my favorite tune, Danny Boy. Whether I hear it when I've just gotten up for the day or when I'm out doing whatever it is that I do, it's always a welcome sound. It's even OK for it to gently prod me awake from a night's sleep and that's saying a lot since I'm a person who likes his sleep. I wonder why that tune soothes me so, being that I'm not even Irish? In fact, I was born on September 17th, as far removed as possible from the day that everyone in the world thinks they're Irish. Why indeed is a valid question. No matter. I admit that this is just a curiosity of mine, a question not worth answering or even pondering.

What's more important is where the music is coming from and why is it playing before the sun is up. Even being prodded awake to the sound of Danny Boy has its limits and those limits are defined by when I can see some daylight. The last time I remember waking up before the sun was when I was on the third planet of Lerna, a planet with a rotational period of 54 hours. Trying as hard as I could, I just wasn't able to sleep through a 27-hour night.

Yes, I hear, I hear! The pipes are calling and the pipes are getting a bit irritating. What's normally a nice song to start my day becomes not so nice when I realize where it's coming from. It's my phone's ring tone and, more specifically, my work phone's ring tone. This means that someone is calling me. At what time? 5:00 AM! Yes, definitely for this instance of time Danny Boy is not my favorite song. As a call for dinner and drinks at 7:00 PM, it can be very pleasant. At 5:00 AM, not so much. I need to change it to something more suitable. What would that be for a work call waking me up at 5:00 in the morning? Something obnoxious to be sure. I'll have to ponder this question but later, not now.

Now what could the call be about? I had left for my last assignment only five months ago and that had taken me almost eight years to complete. Anyone would have to admit that eight years of work packed into a five-month window is quite efficient. And that should include the "anyone" on the other end of this call. Whoever is calling me should realize that I deserve a bit of a rest. A rest well earned, if not just for the time spent, then at least for the success of the assignment, which was very successful.

Should I answer the phone or not? On one hand this is my job, one that I'm paid well to do. I should definitely answer it. On the other hand, there isn't really anyone else who can do what I do, at least not do it as well as I. What can my boss do if I pretend not to hear this call, this obnoxiously early call? One I'm almost certain is going to lead to my next assignment. On the third hand, I'll be much

better able to understand a new assignment after a bit more sleep. Of course, I want to be on the top of my form when I get briefed. I'm sure everyone wants that. Since being on the top of my form can only be accomplished by being well rested, it's obvious what a good employee must do. There's no choice. Any other action would be inconsiderate of my job and an insult to the company. It's not that I want to stay in bed, it's just that it's my duty to do so.

At 10:00 my work phone rings again and I wake up to the sound of my new ring tone, the Macarena. Time to get up, time to answer the call, time to see what they want.

It's Pat, Ikenga's secretary. In response to her first question, a question I already anticipated, I claim I didn't answer the earlier call because I accidentally left my phone turned off in the bathroom. It was either that excuse or one that my son had taken my phone to play with. I, of course, first checked my list of excuses to find one that hasn't been used recently. The bathroom excuse was at least 14 months old so it was eligible to be recycled. Besides, I don't have a son.

My bathroom explanation is accepted with what I detect as a subtle tinge of disbelief. It makes no difference; an acceptance is an acceptance. Pat called to let me know that a meeting is starting at my office building right away and informing me that my presence is requested. I'm also told that I'll find the meeting very interesting. That may or may not be true. I'm always told that. However, something in the conversation does make it sound a little intriguing and does motivate me to move a bit faster than normal. I rush through a quick breakfast, hop over to the transport hub, grab the first train in the direction of my office and, after a thirty-minute trip, arrive promptly at 2 PM. One can only move so fast.

The office building to which I'm referring is the headquarters of the Extraterrestrial Settlement Commission, or ESC, or more commonly just *Escape*. This name is somewhat appropriate since *Escape* as an organization is responsible for facilitating people who wish to leave Earth to colonize newly discovered planets. The exact office I'm requested to be at is the office of the *Escape* settlement director and the person to whom most people think I report. Among those who think this is the director himself, one Bill Ikenga Johnson.

Bill is one of many people who grew up disliking the name given him by his parents. Like most people who dislike their first names, he developed a fondness for his middle name. On his request people just call him Ikenga. Ikenga as a name has some mystique and pizzazz to it and a certain charisma that Ikenga thinks makes it a better match for his persona. Whatever the reason, he definitely prefers Ikenga to Bill so that's what he's called.

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Escape has three departments: analysis, logistics, and support.

Analysis is called into play when a new planet is discovered with an environment that appears to satisfy conditions necessary to support human life. This department then undertakes a detailed evaluation of the planet to determine if all aspects required to maintain a human settlement are met. If it passes that test, the next step looks at indigenous life, if it has any, to make sure a settlement can proceed without impacting that life. Once everything checks out OK, a settlement approval is issued.

I'm not part of the analysis department.

Once the analysis department gives a go ahead, the logistics department proceeds to make the actual settlement a reality. It selects a site, arranges for transport of all required equipment, and completes construction of a basic infrastructure that can support a minimal human settlement. Once construction completes, it advertises for people interested in being part of the Adam and Eve group and provides them transport to the new planet. Logistics also arranges for regularly scheduled post-settlement transports to provide a stream of supplies until the new settlement is capable of independent operation.

I'm not part of the logistics department.

The support department is where I fit in. The main responsibility of support is trouble shooting, looking at problems that always seem to occur after a settlement is up and running. The charter of the support department is to learn how to deal with the unknown; to come up with fixes for unknown problems on unknown worlds in an unknown universe. There are no givens in this department. Even though humans may have already settled on a planet, they're always outnumbered by the unknowns.

How can one prepare to solve an unknown problem on a planet with unknown rules of survival? It's almost like being asked to calculate the sum of two numbers without being told what those two numbers are. The answer is you can't. You solve a problem by going there, by guessing what's causing the problem, and by guessing on a solution. There are no rules. Most of the knowhow that goes into finding a solution is knowing how to get lucky. It helps to somehow figure out how to get the planet itself to help find the answers you're looking for, if that's even possible.

How did I get involved? It appears my ability to sense the winds on Earth, to know when a leaf is ready to fall, to follow the flow of a river, and to be symbiotic with the Earth is an ability that transfers to other worlds. I seem to be able to establish the same rapport with other planets and with the mother natures that developed

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there. It doesn't happen immediately, it takes some time, but more often than not I eventually bond. When I do, it allows me to reach an understanding faster than most of what unknown problem we are dealing with. It allows me to come up with a solution for that problem faster than most. Not always, but usually. Hopefully!

The skill that I have isn't unique. But it's rare. There are a few of us in the support group with this skill. Being part of a small group, I can afford to be a little late to urgent meetings and a little arrogant at times without fear of losing for my job. Not that I overdo it but I do have my fun.

Pat announces that the meeting with Ikenga is about to begin.

Chapter 2

As I enter the meeting room, I notice that there are only three people present including me. The other two are Ikenga, of course, and his secretary Pat.

I like Ikenga, not only as a person but as the head of an organization, especially the one in which I work. Ikenga has a unique quality for someone this far up the corporate ladder. He's competent at his job, very rare for someone at the top. The common saying in the corporate world is that once you get close to being good at whatever you're doing you get promoted. Promoted above the level of one's ability is the common punch line said about someone you report to especially someone with whom you don't agree. Ikenga is different. He acts like a person who was born to be in the job he has. I'm glad he finally got there. I'm happy to work for him.

Meetings Ikenga runs are run smoothly with no wasted time for idle chit-chat. I remember a meeting in another department in which I used to work. That meeting started out discussing an upcoming baseball game between the Chicago Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers. Not so much of a discussion as it was an argument. That topic took up the first ninety minutes of the one-hour meeting. While it might have helped comradery, it certainly didn't help efficiency.

Ikenga never lets a meeting get out of hand like that. Besides being one of the things I like about him, those other discussions always went places I didn't want to go. I'm a Cubs fan. It was hard having to make my "Just wait until next year" speech at the beginning of a baseball season. I was happy when my request to be transferred to Ikenga's group was approved.

Ikenga is always well prepared. His meetings start. He says what he has to say. He has answers to any questions that might be asked. His meetings end. Not a lot of time for comradery but he gets it done.

So, here I am in a meeting with only Ikenga and Pat. Then before the meeting starts, in walks a fourth person, Sam. Sam is a woman in our group. Her real name isn't Sam. It's her nickname. You may assume that her real name is Samantha. And if you assumed that you would have made a reasonable assumption. You would have been wrong. Sam is a nickname for Victoria. The nickname was her father's doing. Sam never liked her given name, Victoria. In that way she was kind of like Ikenga. But unlike Ikenga, Victoria wasn't given a middle name. Nothing to fall back on. When growing up, Victoria would keep changing her name, keep trying alternatives to see how they fit. One month it was Vicki, the next month it was Vita, or Violet, or Veracity. When she got down to Varsha, her dad said he'd

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had enough. He put an end to the naming nonsense. From that day on, he announced that he would just call her Sam. So, Sam it was!

Sam is short, just barely 150 cm. tall, with brunette hair, and weighing only about 45 kg. Of course, all that is a guess. Except her hair color. I tried to ask her about her weight one time and that didn't turn out very well. I should have known better. There are some questions it's OK to ask of anyone. Questions like how do you like the weather today, how did you like the weather yesterday, and what do you think the weather will be tomorrow. Anything else gets into uncharted waters, weatherly speaking.

Sam is also kind of quiet. Excluding, of course, her response when asked about her weight. But don't let that fool you. Some people are quiet because they're bored, because they aren't paying attention, or because they don't understand what's going on. At times, I have been guilty of all of those. Sam's quiet can be due to any of a number of reasons but not when she's in an important meeting like this one. Here, her mind doesn't wander. She pays attention. You can see behind her eyes that she understands all that Ikenga says. Her quiet demeanor is because she assumes that everyone else in the room understands too. Ikenga's presentations are thorough and there's normally nothing to add. Except when there is something to add, Sam is the first to do so.

Sam is a frequent participant in these meetings. I've known Sam for a long time, since we were classmates in fourth grade at West school back in Illinois. Sam has an ability to identify and solve problems with new worlds, like I do, but not in exactly the same way. My ability is in feeling like I'm part of the world, in sensing what's happening. I learned to do that on Earth and can learn to do that on other planets. What I learn is always different. I never know how I learn what I learn or what abilities I'll develop. But I'm sure of one thing, I'll be able to feel what a world wants me to feel.

Sam is more of a thinking person, a logical Dr. Watson type. She observes. She sees patterns. Some are obvious like a child going to a movie theater and wanting popcorn. If the same child goes to a movie five times and asks for popcorn each time, it's easy to guess that a popcorn request will be forthcoming on the sixth visit. That sounds simple. But the key is observing. Without observing you can't know what will happen. Sam observes. She innately knows when what she's observing is important and when it isn't. She stores all that in her mind and makes it available when needed.

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Sam and I have worked together on other assignments in the past. Many of them. We work well together. If I had to guess, my guess would be that one more mission is in the cards.

Chapter 3

As I've explained, but not yet in detail, our group is the support and troubleshooting group within *Escape*. Humanity has settled scores of planets in our galaxy over the last five hundred years. Before a permanent settlement is allowed on any new planet, that planet is fully vetted by logistics and a solid, well devised, well researched settlement plan written. The plan goes before a committee, a critical committee with experience on extra-terrestrial settlements. Approvals are made. Only then are the first settlers allowed to leave Earth for their new home. A trial period passes as those settlers establish a safe foothold on the new planet. Eventually other settlers arrive. Everything goes smoothly. Everything always goes smoothly. All live happily ever after.

All live happily ever after or until something goes wrong. Sometimes a problem occurs because logistics made a mistake. Sometimes the settlers find something new, something not encountered by the advance crew. Is it a shock that not every single contingency is accounted for and covered by the settlement plan? Of course not. It's another planet in another solar system and who knows how far away from Earth. Do you know that old saying "shit happens?" Some people think that saying was devised to describe life on Earth. Not true. That saying was invented by this department.

The "shit happens" phase is where our group, the support group, comes in. We're given these problems, given them to solve. Each problem is an emergency. Each impacts the ability to maintain human life on some planet. Solve the problem and human life on the planet continues. Don't solve it and who knows? We handle successes and we handle failures. The best solution for a failure is to evacuate everyone back to Earth. There are worse solutions for failures.

We're about to learn about another problem, another emergency on an extraterrestrial world. Ikenga starts his presentation. The first picture shows a planet I've never seen before. The picture quickly morphs into a video. Ikenga is about to explain why he needs to send a team to this planet. The planet's name is Prism.

Ikenga starts right to the point as always.

"Looks like we've got another problem reported from light years away and that I've got two of my best investigators right in front of me ready to solve it. Compared to the other assignments I've given you, this should be a piece of cake, a walk in the park, no problem at all. Right? We'll see!"

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“The planet reporting the problem is Prism. It’s a beautiful planet, perhaps one of the most so that we’ve discovered, clearly very colorful, and obvious that the name Prism fits well. That’s the good part. With good comes bad and the bad part is that it’s definitely very interesting and confusing. Interesting can often have multiple meanings. Confusing usually doesn’t.

“The interesting parts are its colors. Look at this shot taken from orbit out of a spaceship’s observation deck window. See anything unusual? The seas are blue, the sky is blue, the land is brown, and many of the plants are shades of green. Like Earth, right? Looks nice but not really interesting.

“Look closer. The land surface isn’t just brown and green. It contains many, many more colors than you think you see. The sky may appear to be just blue, but it’s multiple shades of blue. The sea also. It’s got even more shades. I hope I’m not repeating myself, but you need to get used to this. There are more colors on Prism than one can possibly imagine. Something that looks like one color isn’t just one.

“Let’s pick one of these. The sea. It does look blue, doesn’t it? Definitely blue, that’s true, but not like on Earth. From orbit you may think you can see ocean waves and currents. Ocean waves aren’t visible from orbit. And what does it even mean to see a current? What makes you think you can see something that you know can’t be seen? The answer is because the colors of the waters change. Yes, the sea is blue. Maybe royal blue one seconds, sky blue the next, then cyan, or turquoise. It’s all of those. Each drop of water is one of those at a time, mixed together with other drops and ever changing. The same shade doesn’t stay at the same place for long. It’s like... well, it’s not like anything else I’ve ever seen and I doubt you have either. There’s no way for your mind to process what is really happening so you think you’re seeing waves or current. Your mind is making a connection to something in your memory and that is the best you’ve got. For now.

“Let’s move on to the land. This next picture is taken from the surface of the planet. You can see grasses, trees, and plants of all sorts. They change colors the same as the sea and sky do. Each blade of grass, or leaf, or plant is green, but not the same everywhere. And this green changes also. What does your mind tell

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you you're seeing? Don't answer that. I bet you think you're seeing the grass waving back and forth in the breeze. Good guess. Wrong, but a good guess. It's each plant changing shades of green that your mind processes as movement.

"Everything on Prism changes color. There's no such thing as an object, an animal, even dirt, none that stay the same color for long. Colors seem to change at will. No reason. They just do. Scientists might eventually be able to explain how so many different shades of color developed, how they change, and why they change. That hasn't happened yet. And right now, no one seems to be worried about the how or why of it. The settlers think it's one of the best things about Prism. So, let it be. Sometimes things don't need to be understood, just enjoyed. It's something that you should know about Prism before going there but it's not the problem.

"Let's move on to native life. There are many indigenous life forms on Prism. Besides plants, there are animals. Many from about the size of a large Earth dog down to some ant-like creatures. Life is plentiful and colorful. None appear to be highly sentient. They have no language. They don't speak or even have the ability to make sounds of any kind. At least as far as anyone has noticed. Be that as it may, the good news is that no animal ever threatens humans. We don't know if this non-aggression applies between the various native Prism species. It might be that there are some aggressive species but that humans are just too big for them to attack."

OK, I think, Prism is certainly an interesting planet. I can work with that. But, colors or no colors, it's time to get onto the real reason for this meeting. It can't be just because Prism is hard for color-blind people to settle. What's the problem we need to solve?

Ikenga continues to answer this question.

"That's the basics for Prism. Why am I showing you all this? What's the problem? I'm sure you're getting antsy to know. I'll get to that soon enough. First, you'll need a brief history of the planet. Very brief.

"It was discovered about 100 years ago and, as with any potentially habitable planet, all the basic rules were followed. There's no need for you to look for any deviations from procedures

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to come up with a reason for the problem. Everything went by the book and the book hasn't changed.

“The first spaceship with people on board arrived about 50 years ago. They settled in an area near the shores of one of the inland lakes, which they named Sapphire Lake. Not because of the color, but because of the shape.

“A town was built about a half kilometer away. You know why, I'm sure. The town's name is Dathanna. Everything went smoothly as planned in the initial settlement process. Our presence seemed to have had no impact on the planet. People even made friends with some of the animals. We appeared not to bother any of them.

“I already said that no one has ever heard the local life make a sound of any kind. Maybe they can't. They seem to express whatever it is that they want by changing colors. Or maybe not. Maybe that's just what they do all the time with no reason. Whatever. Just watching them change colors at all appears to very entertaining for the locals.

“As I said everything went smoothly to start. The population on Prism grew, so much so that they decided a second town was needed. They found a site nearby for their new town to be called Dara Baile. The site is on the top of a hill about three kilometers from Dathanna. Construction started but soon after that a few people got sick. One, a construction worker in perfect health, reported to the hospital about three months ago with severe pains. He seemed to recover and was released. Last week he returned to the hospital again and this time he didn't make it out.

“Doctors don't want to release detailed information about his death to the other Prism citizens. It might be too disturbing. What I can tell you is that his internal organs were destroyed to such an extent that no one could come up with an explanation. What did they consider? Well, they ruled out anything caused by other settlers. There's no crime on Prism. Crime never exists with such a small population. His death was not caused by anyone. What about disease? The doctors' opinion is that there's no way a normal disease could have progressed as fast as it did to kill a healthy person of his age. He was only 33.

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“Since this is the first such case on Prism, the cause must be something new. We need to find the cause. That’s your assignment. Find the cause of his death and guarantee it won’t happen again. If it’s something we’re doing, we’ll stop. But we need to find what it is before we can stop, if indeed it’s anything under our control. No one has any ideas.

“You can find out more about what’s known when you get there. Other people were told that his death presented a problem that needed to be solved. That’s not a lie. People will be happy when they see you show up. The doctors feel that more people may soon be afflicted like the Dara Baile worker was. This is why the support department has been contacted. It’s our charter to help investigate problems such as these. If you can solve this, life on Prism continues. If not and if it starts occurring often, we’ll have to send ships to return everyone to Earth. Everyone who is still alive.

“You two are the best fit we have for this assignment. You work together like a well-oiled machine. Vernon, you can come up with information that no one else can, And Sam, you can figure out what it all means like no one else can. A great team! Get ready for a trip to Prism. You leave at 1800 tomorrow.”

Another Ikenga briefing. Short, to the point, not a lot of fluff. And nothing that is too much of a surprise. I mean, to know there’s a planet like Prism is kind of surprising, but all new planets have something unique about them. The problem we need to solve isn’t surprising. You can’t really be too surprised by anything that happens off-world. It’s also not surprising that Sam and I are being sent together. We’ve been assigned to cases like this before. It fits very well with our abilities.

The hope is that I can get to know Prism like I do Earth, that Sam can observe what I’m doing, and that together we can figure out what’s happening and come up with a solution. One can hope. At least we’ll get a chance to see Prism. If we’re successful at finding the problem and solution, we might even enjoy an extended and well-earned vacation there. It sounds like an interesting planet to say the least. If not successful, we might find ourselves in charge of transporting an entire planet’s human population back to Earth.

Another assignment is about to start. Sam and I will soon leave for Prism. It’s 43 light years from Earth, will take 52 years in elapsed time to get there, and we’ll arrive tomorrow night.

Chapter 4

My work day ended as soon as the meeting was over. I went home to pack and prepare for our trip. While you might think that one day is not much time to prepare for a trip of 43 light years, it's actually fine. I've taken trips like this many times before. I've never actually been to Prism, in fact I hadn't even heard of Prism before today, but the actual planet makes no difference. Trips like this are the reason I'm employed at *Escape*. They let me do what I enjoy doing and, if I'm being honest with myself, what I'm good at. And appreciated. At least appreciated enough to allow me to arrive at 2 PM for a meeting urgent enough to warrant a 5 AM phone call.

I love traveling to other worlds. Many years ago, when I was growing up, I had a grade school friend by the name of Renee. Unlike Sam, her real name was Renee. I remember how, even then, I had a desire to see other worlds. I assumed that was what everyone wanted. It's strange how I think my wants and desires are shared by everyone. So much so that I think it's strange when someone doesn't share them. Renee and I would sit outside some nights and just look up at the stars. I once asked her if she'd like to go to another planet when she grew up. Now I realize that perhaps not everyone is as adventuresome as I but I was still surprised by her rapid emphatic response of "no."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, spaceflight is still too dangerous," was her response.

Advancing this a bit more, I asked, "What if the spaceship was guaranteed to be 100% safe? Would you like to go then?"

"Nope," was her rapid reply.

"And why not?"

"It would take too long."

Getting a bit frustrated with what were, to me, unreasonable answers, I dug out an ancient fictional reference and asked her what she'd think if Scotty could beam her to a new planet instantaneously.

Another "nope" was immediately forthcoming.

Her third negative response was followed by my third "Why not?"

Her fourth follow-on, full of imagination, was, "What is there to do there?"

Did you note a little bit of sarcasm in my calling that response “full of imagination”? Who knows what she would have said if she had seen the same videos of Prism that I did. Probably “Nope, too many colors.”

That was her. It’s not me. Travel like this is what I enjoy doing. It’s right in my wheelhouse. I’ve no idea what a wheelhouse is, but I’m sure that traveling to other planets is right there.

The trip to Prism will be in a ship using PSD (pseudo-instantaneous drive). Physics isn’t my strong point but we did have to learn something about this antimatter-based drive in our college studies. It’s one of humanity’s greatest discoveries and inventions. And it was all the direct result of a thought experiment. Thought experiments are often just that: thoughts and nothing more. Ideas with no ways to prove them right or wrong. Some thought experiments are proven true many years later. A few, a very few, result in such an important and practical invention as the PSD.

The starting point behind the PSD was the theory that antimatter could alter the flow of time, a concept that was argued for many years in the physics community. Some thought the idea was absurd. Others obviously thought differently. But both sides thought the question was important enough to prove one way or another. Many ideas were put forward about how to test the theory. The first obstacle was getting enough antimatter. A breakthrough finally came when someone developed a technique to generate some in the lab. Then arguments arose about how to run the validation experiment safely. Testing with antimatter is like a child playing with dynamite. Playing with dynamite is dangerous, even worse than running with scissors.

The advantages in proving the theory true were tremendous. It was the only theory that could open up inter-stellar travel. “What were the disadvantages?” people asked. “What would be the worst that could happen if testing went wrong?” This was also an easy question to answer. The worst outcome would be a gigantic explosion that exterminated civilization, all life on Earth, and even Earth itself.

Finally, agreement on something. It was a unanimous consensus that this was the absolute worst scenario. Where to go from here? Obviously give it a shot but don’t tell anyone. The world would be thrilled if it worked and there would be no one to tell if it failed. Kind of like the philosophy that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission. If it failed, there would be no one left to ask forgiveness of. What could be easier?

In case you’re wondering about the origin of this theory, it was a side effect of discussions about the big bang. You know, the one that created the universe. It was

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agreed that the principles of conservation of matter and energy had to apply during the big bang. Since nothing existed beforehand then, whatever was created, something opposite must also have been created to even things out. Since matter was created, which we can see, then an equal amount of antimatter must also have been created. Where is this antimatter repository? We live in a universe almost entirely of matter. Small amounts of antimatter exist here and there but not enough, not in equal proportions to matter. Something is missing. There's a saying that once all logical possibilities have been examined and failed, whatever remains, no matter how illogical, must be the truth. We've looked for antimatter in our universe, in our spatial universe. It's not here! How about considering the fourth dimension, time?

What if antimatter was created in the same quantities as matter but that all, or most, antimatter went backward in time? And what if it started going backward from the instance of the big bang? Matter went forward, antimatter backward. This provides a consistent model. We observe life in our "normal matter" universe with time moving forward. Life in the antimatter universe observes itself similarly. Time might be flowing in the opposite direction in that universe but that's of no consequence. Maybe this is a new conservation theory, conservation of time.

Once that theory was developed, it was refined a bit. The refinement was not that antimatter was propelled backward in time since the big bang, it was that antimatter caused time to move backward. Antimatter was the cause. Time direction was the effect.

Let's go with that assumption. Now we can design an antimatter drive. An antimatter drive encloses something in an antimatter sphere. No more than that. All objects enclosed in an antimatter sphere move through time in a direction opposite to objects not enclosed. If a ship were encapsulated in antimatter, it would travel backwards in time. As long as it remained inside the sphere, time would continue to go backwards. When the antimatter sphere dissipated, the ship would resume traveling forward in time.

The current-day PSD design was conceived from these theories. A PSD consists of three concentric antimatter spheres surrounding a ship in space. The spheres are formed only when a ship is far enough away from a planetary system so that the density of normal matter is low, very low. The term for this density is the iota threshold. I assume everyone knows what this is.

Of course, no area in space is 100% free of matter, which is why the ship is enclosed in three spheres. It provides protection in case an outer sphere is impacted by a small amount of interstellar matter.

Whether the antimatter drive is active or not, the ship continues to travel through space towards its destination. Antimatter only controls the direction of time, not space.

Traveling in a ship when time goes forward or when time goes backward does not impact aging. People and objects always age. Consider two friends standing at the same place somewhere on Earth. One of them is tired and sits down to relax and enjoy the day. The other person decides to go for a walk and walks one kilometer north, turns around, walks one kilometer south, and finally comes back to the starting point. Their friend is still there. One person went for a two-kilometer walk. The other did not move. You would not say that the first person walked for one positive kilometer and one negative kilometer for a total of zero kilometers. No! The two friends are indeed in the same place at the same time but one walked two kilometers and the other didn't.

The same effect happens when traveling in a PSD ship. If one takes care to equalize travel when the antimatter spheres are active and when they aren't, it will appear to anyone outside the ship that the trip was instantaneous. That it took no time at all. For people inside the ship, the trip took the same time as a trip without PSD effects.

That completely exhausts my knowledge of antimatter and PSD. Don't worry, I won't be talking about it anymore. And there won't be a test on the subject.

The trip from Earth to Prism will take 52 years for Sam and me. As far as the people on Earth or Prism notice, it'll take one day. We'll arrive tomorrow night. For us, our travel will be in stasis so our bodies won't age. We'll be there for 52 years, not just overnight. We might think the trip was short but we'll know it wasn't.

One last thing. While the ticket price for a trip to Prism is high, it's not as high as one might think. Most of the cost of sending a PSD ship is covered by transport charges for mail and freight that includes quite a few products still made only on Earth. Charges to transport these products are quite high for most planets but not so much for Prism. For Prism they're significantly offset by revenue from Prism's large export business. Items that include sculptures, pottery, trinkets, and various pieces of art made from the colorful Prism biosphere. Color morphing characteristics remain active in art shipped to Earth. Since color changes in Prism-made products can't be duplicated in any Earth-made products, those from Prism demand high prices from rich Earthlings.

In thinking about this some more, I wonder if that has anything to do with the picture that I now remember seeing in Ikenga's office. One of a forest. When I

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looked at it, it seemed like the trees were swaying in the breeze. I thought at the time that it was unusual. No artist I know is able to create a picture with that effect. I remember I thought I saw waves moving in the water when looking at the picture taken of Prism from the spaceship. It must be the same reason I thought I saw the trees move in Ikenga's picture. He had artwork from Prism. Very interesting and possible significant. I need to file that away in my memory bank for later.

Chapter 5

Sam and I agreed to meet the next day for our ritual pre-trip shopping. You know I'm not a morning person and, since it would be a bit anti-climactic just to say I made it to our noon meeting on time, I won't say it. But not to brag, I will say I was early for once in my life and arrived at 11:57.

Sam and I are just friends but we do have a history between us from working together on many assignments on many planets. A history that includes a few traditions. The first of these is that, departing on a PSD trip, each passenger has the right to enjoy anything they want for their first onboard dinner. It'll also be their last and only onboard dinner since everyone is soon placed in stasis until arrival 52 years later. This dinner should be a good one. The right to have anything comes directly from the fact that everyone buys and brings their own food. Sky's the limit! You can spend whatever you want of your own money. The departure dinner tradition came to be because food can't be transported on the ship. The overnight trip does actually take 52 years and most food spoils in less time than that. There's only one edible product transported from Earth to Prism, honey. If there's anything else from Earth you want and like, this may be your last chance.

I hear that people on the ship we're taking will include a pilot and ten passengers. The passengers are Sam and me, five new settlers, two government employees, and a scientific researcher by the name of Eolai. Eolai is returning for his second tour of duty on Prism. We should make sure to keep track of him after our arrival. The settlers have been waiting three years for their chance to go to Prism. It was decided to let them go anyway, ignoring the problem we are traveling there to solve. I guess confidence is high that we'll solve it.

There are actually two pilots: a human one and a computer one. The human pilot starts the trip, enters stasis like the other passengers and wakes up every year to make sure the ship is still on course. The computer pilot handles things in the meantime.

Back to dinner shopping. This meal is the major social event of the trip. Since it's the only social event, as you might have guessed, that statement might lack some significance. Except that it's promoted as such. Almost everyone who knows anything about PSD travel knows how interesting a departure dinner can be. Everyone brings a unique meal, one of their favorites, and brings enough for more than just themselves. That way everyone can enjoy what they brought and get a taste of what others like. I've had quite a few delicacies on these trips that I might never otherwise have had the privilege to enjoy.

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For our selection we'll be bringing our favorites: a nice beet salad, a turnip pate, and Mille Feuilles for dessert. Our main course will be stingray in a spicy fermented soybean sauce. Now I admit that stingray is an acquired taste. Fermented soybean sauce needs a bit more acquiring. You should try this if you're ever on a PSD trip with us. We always have plenty. For some odd reason we never have to share much of this dish with the others. I guess there are not a lot of acquired-taste types on interstellar transports.

We're lucky to find all the ingredients we need at the local markets and make it to the spaceport in time for our routine shuttle transport up to the PSD ship in high Earth orbit. Departure from the spaceport occurs at 1800, right on schedule.

We arrive and soon find ourselves at the aforementioned dinner. Sam and I enjoy our selection along with tastes of what the other passengers brought. Some of those others don't understand the spirit of a departure dinner. It isn't like you're flying across the country. You're going to a new world. The idea of this dinner is to accept that you have left on an adventure and should start that adventure right by doing something adventuresome, like having an adventuresome meal. Stingray in a spicy fermented soybean sauce does that for us. People who think an adventure is having a steak done medium rare instead of medium should possibly not be the ones going to a new planet.

After dinner everyone settles in the observation room to gaze at Earth for the last time. We take a seat near a table not too far from the window and are soon joined by another passenger, Eolai. It turns out he knows why we're making this trip. Not that's it's a secret but we're curious where he got his information. The reason that he knows is because he was asked by his department to return to Prism and to be available to offer us whatever help he can. We mentioned that Ikenga never informed us of any involvement by another agency. "Well," Eolai says, "there's a good reason for that. He was never told. There are other departments that are interested in Prism and would like to keep studying the planet. That can't be done until the current issues are solved and that's why, just yesterday, I was asked to join you." I guess if we were just told yesterday then it's OK that he was too.

One hour remains until we reach the iota threshold and are asked to enter stasis. Until then we pass the last hour gazing at Earth through the observation room windows. Seeing the blue sphere that's Earth from this height brings a mixture of emotions to every part of your being. Sadness, fear, anxiety, apprehension, a desire to return, and excitement. Conflicting feelings to some extent, but all there. And they're always all there in every trip I've taken. Why would anyone want to leave Earth? We do, Sam and I, because it's our job. And the same for Eolai. But others, why? I know I'm going to return one day as does Sam. The others on this ship,

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they don't know that. And for many, they won't. I wonder what feelings they're experiencing right now. Mine are mitigated by the fact that a part of Earth I've known for a long time is coming with me: Sam. They have nothing to calm their minds.

The hour is up. Time for a 52-year nap.

Chapter 6, Day 1 on Prism

The antimatter spheres are deactivated for the last time as we're awakened, having just passed the iota threshold around Prism. We get our first view of the planet from the same observation room where it seems like, just yesterday, we were viewing Earth. The planet is still about a million kilometers away and appears as a disc no larger than the stars. Even so, it's a strange view. The star that isn't a star, but is Prism, seems to sparkle, like looking at bubbles blown from a child's soap bottle. I remember playing with those soap bottles when I was a child. I remember watching each bubble as it drifted through the air, sparkling as sunlight went through it at different angles. I could be mesmerized doing that for hours back home.

I must have been thinking out loud because a demonstrative blurt of sarcastic disbelief comes out of Sam's mouth. "You have got to be kidding me!" she says in a combination of annoyance and humor, drawing me away from my bubble fantasy. "Look at Prism and you see bubbles! Not right, definitely not right. Seeing Prism is like seeing the sun refracting through a diamond, or an emerald, or sapphire, or ruby. Or possibly all of them at the same time. A planet as interesting as Prism can't be a simile for soap. What could possibly make you think like that?"

I do detect a smile on her face as she makes her comments. At least I think it's a smile. It might be the face behind the smile that I see. A face formed by a stifled sigh and a feeling of resignation that I am what I am. She's learned to deal with my comments, ones I've made many times before. She has to if we're to work together. My eyes see soap. Hers don't. No sense carrying this discussion any further. It's what I'd call a "no win" situation.

As we approach Prism the view of the planet grows bigger. We begin to see more detail on the surface, more interesting variations in the colors. Blues of the sky and whites of the clouds are everywhere. Patches of all colors can be seen on the lands: reds, greens, browns, yellows, and many more. I can easily imagine Jacob somewhere down there thrilled at the type of coat he could make his son.

We look toward the edge of the planet and see the local sun starting to drift from view, the atmosphere refracting sunlight as it slowly settles below the horizon. There's a soft glow of red like I remember from many sunsets on Earth. I also remember people telling me I could see beautiful reds in sunrises but I just had to take their words on that. A sunrise isn't a phenomenon with which I am familiar. There are sunsets, that I do know, and the sunset on approaching Prism is just as beautiful as I remember about those on Earth. At least this part of the two planets appears to be the same.

As we continue to look out the viewport we notice a change. The glow of red which was a soft glow now becomes a bright glow. It becomes a red beacon and is no longer coming from refracting sunlight. It's coming from somewhere on the surface of Prism. Soon the red disappears and is replaced by other colors, many colors, bright colors, very bright colors. These new colors exist for only a few seconds but, during that time, they seem to fill the entire surface of Prism. Then all of a sudden, they're gone. One second the colors are everywhere and the next nowhere. Sam and I stare at each other wondering what it was that we've just seen.

We look around the observation deck to check if anyone else saw the display; anyone who might have an idea of what it was. Eolai is nearby, still staring in the direction of the light or where the light had been a few seconds ago. And yes, he's been to Prism before and he does know what we just saw. "It's called the Prism Welcome. No one has yet figured out exactly what makes it appear. Our best guess is that it's somehow caused by a disturbance in Prism's thermosphere as the ship deaccelerates to orbital speed. But so far that's just a guess. We do know that the Prism Welcome isn't seen by every ship that arrives. Since we're one of the fortunate ones to have just seen it, I guess it follows as my responsibility to say 'Welcome to Prism.'"

Orbit is established and we're the first to enter the shuttle for a short trip to the planet surface.

We're met at the space port by Mia, the mayor of Dathanna and the governor of Prism. When the entire populated area of a planet is as small as on Prism, one person can have two titles. In fact, one person often needs to have two titles as there are just not enough people yet to fill all the jobs. In this case the titles of mayor of Dathanna and governor of Prism are embodied in the same person, Mia. Mia has a lot to do in this double capacity. Having to assume the responsibility of both jobs keeps her busy at least an hour a day.

We're immediately escorted to the best hotel on Prism, the Phantom. It's the only hotel on Prism as there don't seem to be a lot of tourists in this part of the universe. Kind of far for a weekend jaunt. The Phantom was opened to accommodate new settlers as they arrive from Earth and before they obtain permanent lodging. For a few days the hotel will be busy. But not for long. Others will find their own places and after that it'll only be Sam and I. Until the next spaceship arrives, that is.

My room is basic but nice. A bed, chair, dresser, bathroom, shower, and Internet connection. Internet on a planet of 3000 doesn't offer a lot but there's a library of information imported from Earth and always a large collection of books and movies. And of course, daily updates posted to PrismTube.com.

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Much of the material used to build the hotel was imported from Earth. Not directly imported on PSD ships as that would have been extremely expensive, but harvested from trees grown from seeds brought on the first ship. The first transport brought seeds for vegetables, fruits, and trees. And flowers too. Earth trees were planted when the first settlers arrived fifty years ago. By now there are local forests full of maple, walnut, empress, and oak. Careful harvesting provides enough lumber to build houses and furniture entirely from Earth woods. Earth woods do not exhibit the changing color features that woods from indigenous Prism trees show. Some early houses were built from Prism trees. The constantly changing colors in those walls turned out to be a major hinderance to a good night's sleep. Construction using Prism wood did not go on very long.

Life on Prism isn't much different from life on Earth but there are some differences. Some subtle, some not so subtle. For example, taking a shower. It's the first real indication that you're not in Kansas anymore. If I can put a description to it, I guess I can say it makes me think I'm taking a shower in champagne. It doesn't feel like taking a shower in champagne but it looks like it. Before you ask the question, the answer is, "No, I've never taken a champagne shower." So, I guess I can't really say for sure that a shower on Prism is like a champagne shower. But it sure looks like what I imagine it would look like. The water shimmers like a bunch of bubbles. It doesn't feel like bubbles, just looks like them. It shimmers ever so slightly. When I look closely, I can see a faint twinkle of color change as the water flows out of the faucet, over my body, and down the drain. To the untrained eye of a non-Prism resident (which I guess I still am), the subtle color changes look like they're caused by bubbles in the water. And what does the untrained eye of a non-Prism resident think of when they imagine bubbles in the water. Right, champagne. So, there's the connection.

A shower on Prism reminds me of an experience I had years ago at a hot spring in Colorado. It was winter, there was snow in the air, the temperature was barely above freezing, and I was in the water like a fool. At least I was a warm fool. I could feel the minerals in the water. I thought I could. It might have been the snowflakes landing on my head. As I think about it now, I would guess that I really wasn't feeling the minerals at all. My imagination said I was, so at that time, I was. That's the same as taking a champagne shower on Prism without champagne.

We had a small lunch on the ship, so I'm not really hungry. My shower made me a little sleepy and on top of that, I'm still recovering from a time change of about 455,000 hours. Time to call it a day.

Chapter 7, Day 2 on Prism

Escape agency rules allow a day to recuperate after a 52-year trip. They're very generous that way. The next morning Sam and I decide to enjoy our day off by exploring Prism. We start in the town of Dathanna. There's definitely something different about walking through a town of 3000 people when it's the only town on a planet and when it contains 95% of the planet's population. There are a few people living on farms or at mining locations, but it's really just here for civilization. If you want some conversation, this is the place to get it.

The citizens of Dathanna all know each other. The town has developed into a friendly place to live. With such a small population, everyone has a job to do and must do it well in order for the community to be successful. This leads to natural friendships. All working for the common good. There's no competition and no envy of the job others are doing. That's not part of this society. Society can't risk the damaging impact emotions like that might bring. This atmosphere of cooperation brings to light the meanings of many quotations attributed to famous people throughout history. People who espoused the virtues of working together. Like the Three Musketeers saying "All for one and one for all", or Tevye's "Everyone knows who they are and what God expects them to do," or many a dad saying "You better do that right now if you know what's good for you."

I can feel, intensely, that small-town comradery just by walking through the streets. It's like being in an old Midwest farming town, everyone sitting on their porch and greeting friends as they walk by. It's like a small Italian village with people enjoying their morning espresso at the local piazza and waiting for their friends to stroll up. It's the same in Dathanna. It's hard to walk more than a few steps before hearing a friendly "hi" or "buongiorno." Even Sam and I are welcomed. Everyone knows us as the newcomers to town, so easy to identify. Newcomers immediately get the title of friends. It helps that everyone knows why we're here and are hopeful that we can solve their problems. It's nice to become part of a community so fast. It makes this town a very pleasant place to which around in, and that's a good thing since it's the only place.

After enjoying a morning espresso and bagel and having a bit of free time (all day actually), we wander out of town into the countryside. There are very few paved roads here as there's currently nowhere to go except to the farms and mines that I mentioned before. There won't be anywhere else to go until the road to Dara Baile is finished. And that will only be finished if Sam and I are successful at our job. For now, most of the planet is just one big nature preserve. The few paths that do

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exist are not planned paths, just ones trampled down from frequent use. That's all there is since that's all that's needed.

We walk out of town on one of the more obvious paths through growths of trees of various colors. After a while we stop, pause, and just look at the trees. Still only the first day and we're already getting used to the fact that everything on Prism changes colors. However, here on the planet surface, the color changes don't look as significant as the changes we saw when first approaching Prism in the ship. From up there we could see a large area of the planet with many colors, all different, all constantly changing. Down here in our local neighborhood, the color changes are subtle. We just walked through a grove of red trees, trees that changed through different shades of red but always reds. That grove is far behind us and all but forgotten. The trees where we are now are changing from one shade of green to another shade of green. Someone who's adapted to Prism life may not even notice these changes, thinking of them as run-of-the-mill. But we're new and we definitely notice.

As we continue to walk through the various groves, we continue to see color changes but always of one basic color, one hue. These localized changes make it hard to envision what's happening over the entire planet, a planet with trees and plants of many colors. It's like the proverb "You can't see the forest for the trees." Only here, it's more literal than idiomatic.

After a while we come to a place where we have a choice of two paths, one to the left and one to the right. It's a fork in the road, we'd better take it. To help in our decision of which way to go, we seem to have stumbled on one of the many places on Prism where we can let color help us. The path to the left leads through a grove of low-growth trees that are all shades of brown. That path appears to be well used and I think goes off toward the proposed site for Dara Baile. The path to the right isn't as well defined and leads through a grove of trees of softer colors, mostly shades of beige or yellow. In deference to Robert Frost we take the path to the right.

Before we know it, we're quite far away from town. This path must indeed not be one of the commonly used paths since, probably due to non-use, grasses are starting to reemerge through the hard packed dirt. It may soon no longer be a path but we continue onward nonetheless.

We come to a stream, walk down to the shore, and just relax. As we sit and do nothing, I get a feeling that there's something strange about Prism. I know there are a lot of strange things about Prism but this is a feeling of an elusive difference.

Something missing. We can't identify it yet but it's definitely eerie and makes us feel like we're in a science fiction story.

And by 'we' not being able to identify it, I mean that 'I' can't identify it. Sam can. Why do I know that? I look at Sam and see the same expression of resignation on her face that she had on the spaceship when I espoused my opinion of bubbles.

"Listen to the sound of the wind through the trees," says Sam.

"Yes," I note, "there's a small breeze."

"No, you don't understand what I'm saying. Listen to the breeze and the leaves rustling."

"Gotcha! Yep, there it goes."

A long sigh from Sam. In a frustrated tone, Sam continues. "What would you expect to hear if we were on Earth? Something other than the breeze, that is?" Sam waits for a response. She's clearly irritated that I don't get it, although I'm not sure what there's to get. I have to say something. "The shoosh is more melodic?" I guess, still not knowing where this is going.

"See that bird nesting in that tree over there and those birds flying overhead?"

"Yep, there they are," I respond also getting somewhat frustrated.

"Anything strange or funny about them?" asks Sam, clearly even more frustrated than before.

"Aw come on, everything on this planet is strange or funny," is my obvious response.

Sam gives up.

"OK," she says, "I'm not surprised you haven't figured out what I'm getting at. We're too new here and it often takes more time for it to fully dawn on us that we're on a new planet. You might be able to get in tune with the planet better than I can but I can also. You figure out what's here. I figure out what isn't."

"Here on Prism, we hear the sound of the wind, but that's the only sound we hear. Where are the sounds of the birds? Can you hear those? No, you can't, because there aren't any. I also suspect that there might be some animals nearby. I haven't heard any animal sound since we've been on Prism and, more important, since we've started this walk."

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“I was told that nothing on this planet makes a sound. I can understand that rationally but it’s still a bizarre thing to experience. Or maybe to be a bit Shakespearian, I should say ‘to experience it not,’ as we’re experiencing ‘no sound.’

“I didn’t notice the fact that the birds don’t make a sound. I noticed that I missed those sounds, I noticed what isn’t here. Walking together by the banks of a river is nice. Always. Hearing birds singing in the trees is one of the most relaxing parts of a walk. We’ll never hear that on Prism. I miss Earth. Don’t you? All of a sudden, I do. On Prism, we’ll never wake up to the sounds of birds. Just to the sounds of the stupid wind.”

Well good point. Nostalgia is a part of the job. I must be better at burying that sentiment than Sam. Nothing bad either way, just a difference. Not sure it means anything but Sam is here because she’s more observant than I am and I guess she just proved that. I’ll grant her one point for what she observed. Keeping track over the years we’ve known each other, that makes the score 257 to 0.

Walking farther along the stream we find a good spot to stop and have lunch. Our first picnic on Prism. You can’t really have a good picnic without a picnic table but we manage. What’s to eat I wonder? I’d really like a tuna salad sandwich, my reliable lunch back home, but seafood is not yet available on Prism. They’re just getting around to building the first aquariums that will be able to hold Earth fish when the fish eventually arrive. Luckily spam is plentiful and rice. We enjoy our first picnic on Prism complete with spam sushi. I don’t know about Sam but it’s my first spam sushi in any venue on any planet. Quite a tasty welcome.

In the middle of our meal, we look into the river and see another sign of Prism life. It’s some silver-colored, sparkling fish. Life throughout the universe, at least on the planets I’ve seen, seem to have all evolved in a similar manner. There are some subtle differences and some not so subtle but it’s almost always possible to come up with an Earth term that fairly accurately describes a life form found elsewhere. In this case, a fish by any other name is still a fish. On Prism, they seem to be centerboard fish. OK, that’s not an Earth term, rather one I came up with that seems fitting. Fish on Earth have dorsal fins. Dorsal fins go up from the back. These have no dorsal fins, at least not above their body. They have centerboard fins projecting down as if they had a dorsal fin and were swimming upside down. Whatever, it’s still a fish.

While looking at the school of fish, we notice they’re also looking at us. I can understand why. We might be the strangest things they’ve ever seen. I certainly

consider them to be in one of the top ten of the strangest things I've ever seen. That kind of evens things out, doesn't it? Why do I think they're strange? Because each has three eyes on the front of its head. All three eyes are in a row. I remember seeing pictures and reading about this in one of the online links Ikenga gave me about Prism. What looks like three eyes are really two. The outer two are the real eyes. The middle one is like a flashlight, or a beacon, or a LED lightbulb. It can generate colors, flashes of colors. The term used in the book for this middle eye is an eyeled.

With an eyeled Prism fish are kind of like underwater fireflies, although an Earth firefly would surely lose an illumination competition to its Prism competition. An eyeled can generate any color, not just yellow like a firefly. Lights from Prism life are much more elegant.

As one of the fish and I look at each other, it suddenly flashes its eyeled in kind of a red color. It looks like it's trying to tell us something, maybe a warning of some kind or possibly just a friendly 'hi.' We just stare at it. Then we notice the other that also flash their eyeleds, each in a different color. It's a fascinating display. We watch for a few minutes until they eventually get bored and swim away.

All in all, it's quite a nice treat for our first full day on Prism. Sam and I spend the rest of the afternoon together. We reminisce about our past adventures on almost a dozen other planets each with its own peculiarities. Each is fun to talk about and adds to the enjoyment of the day. Sam admits that today, right now, is her favorite part of a new assignment when we can just sit, relax, and talk about problems solved. That's now. Soon there will be a new problem with an unknown solution. Not as relaxing.

But it's getting late and time to return to town. How do we get back? There are no satellites around Prism so no GPS. We're not really lost, just kind of lost and could use some help. Luckily Dathanna has a water tower and we're not that far from town. With the aid of an underused technology called sight, we turn around and start walking in the direction of the water tower and back toward Dathanna.

Chapter 8, Day 3 on Prism

Good morning! Our vacation is over and it's time to get to work. From now on our task is to solve the problem we've been sent here to solve. I meet Sam for a quick breakfast at the Phantom restaurant located on the piazza just outside the hotel, and then head over to Mia's office. The briefing is scheduled to start at 10 AM. I expect that it'll give us more or less the same information we got from Ikenga on Earth, but I hope with some more detail.

The meeting starts right on time. Mia explains that she knows we are here to solve a problem, a problem with something on Prism. She is going to give us a history of human life here. Perhaps not everything she'll say will be relevant to our assignment. No surprise. She has no idea what will be. No one does. She'll tell us what she knows and we can decide for ourselves.

“The situation,” Mia explains, “is pretty much as Ikenga told you. Not much new since then. I mean, that was only three days ago so what could have happened? Ikenga probably filled you in on the basics of Prism. Let me add a few details about our town.

“Development of Dathanna progressed without any real problems. For about the first 15 years people lived in primitive dwellings like tents. Then seeds brought from Earth grew into trees that could be harvested for lumber. We built houses and stores and we're still constructing more buildings. As time goes on, the town is getting to look and feel like a real town, whatever a real town on Prism is supposed to look and feel like.

“Along the way we found a need for many things that were common back on Earth and a need to manufacture them here. Requests in the early days could be satisfied by construction on Prism as long as we had the right tools. Luckily tools that were needed could also be made here. Eventually demands increased to include more items, such as plates, glasses, silverware, and other kitchen paraphernalia. And then more furniture was required as more houses were built. The list kept growing.

“Those new requests could usually also be satisfied by Prism-based manufacturing. One problem we encountered early on was finding necessary metals. We managed to solve that by locating the materials nearby, building a mine outside of town, building a small

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factory to process what was mined, and then opening a shop to make the final products.

“As we became successful in building the commodities we needed, people started to want more. Not surprising given human nature and all that. They wanted some of the luxuries they remembered from home, from Earth. Not luxuries as people on Earth are used to calling them. We aren’t talking about fancy cars or boats or perfumes. Most of the items people wanted were what they missed from home; a want not based on greed as much as on sentiment. Someone may have missed a favorite picture they remembered taken along the Danube, a piece of Nambe, a crystal figurine from their youth, or really just about anything.

“As the years progressed, we had time to consider how we could get those items. We knew the only way would be to import them from Earth and that we’d have to figure out some way to pay for them. Prism needed to find something to trade that Earth wanted and all we had to trade was Prism. But Prism had colors that Earth didn’t have, changing colors. From Prism materials, woods and metals, we built our own pottery, our own crystal, and art objects of many types. The colors of these objects varied but the property that made them valuable was that the colors changed. The color changes continued when the products arrived on Earth. That in itself was interesting. It became even more intriguing when people realized the color changes and the timing of those changes couldn’t be predicted.

“Shipment of Prism produced products started about 20 years ago. It was very successful, very profitable, and allowed us to trade for many of the items our people wanted.

“Life thereafter continued pretty much without incident. We were able to make more of what we needed and import more of what we couldn’t. Prism life became comfortable. Prism became home.

“The population of Prism grew, both from immigration and from births. Just a few months ago we reached a significant point. For the first time, more people living on Prism were born here rather than on Earth. This population growth is both good and bad. The good part is that, with the extra people, we have a stronger

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foothold on the planet. The bad part isn't really that bad but it's still something we need to solve. Dathanna is getting too crowded.

"We needed a second city and started a study to find a place for one. The study used the same rules as were used to find the site for Dathanna. We found such a site about 3 kilometers from here, which we decided to call Dara Baile. Construction began.

"A few months into the building process we discovered an increase in illnesses of our residents. At first, we thought it was normal. The number of people impacted looked to be reasonable. It looked that way until it wasn't. The numbers grew. We were wrong to think it was normal. Too many people were getting sick.

"Who were those who got sick? Initially it was mostly Dara Baile workers. They were the first to show signs of sickness. All showed the same signs. Our medical staff will fill you in on the details. Later we saw those problems in some Dathanna residents, residents who never left town, were never at the Dara Baile site. Even then we weren't too concerned since the issues didn't appear to be too severe.

"About a month ago, we had our first death, a worker who spent a lot of time at Dara Baile. We stopped work there while we tried to find out the reason for his death and while we investigated what was going on in general. We were still looking at that when about three weeks ago someone reported to the hospital very ill, with advanced and very serious symptoms similar to those of the person who died. The new person is someone who might never have been to Dara Baile. We're not sure yet but she's not a worker there.

"Construction at Dara Baile hasn't resumed. We contacted Earth to help us in the investigation and here you are."

Yes, that's about what I expected to hear. Almost the same as Ikenga told us plus a little bit more. I thank Mia for a good presentation. Neither Sam nor I have any questions. Normally we'd go off to talk about what we learned but, in this case, I feel like I need to go back to my room and gather some thoughts by myself. Sam and I agree to take the afternoon off and meet again over dinner.

Back in my room I lay down on my bed to think about the presentation. It was thorough. I can't really think of anything that was missing. On the other hand it was incomplete. Not that I think Mia forgot to tell us something she knows. I already said I didn't. But something definitely was not there that should have been.

What I realize was missing was any concept of a reason. The presentation was purely factual. This happened, then that, and then something else. There was no theory proposed as to why. There was nothing to push our investigation in any direction. Mia is the one who lives on Prism. I haven't, or I should say Sam and I haven't. Mia should have added some idea. She should have pointed us in some direction. If she didn't have any idea, she should have asked around to get an idea from someone who did. Regardless of what she said, I assume someone on Prism has an idea. If not, it's asking quite a bit for us to come up with that when Prism people can't.

Where can we go to get an idea? Let me think this through. The meeting did give us some sort of a starting point. It gave us several questions to ask. First, we can ask for more details about the actual medical issues involved. Second, we can find out what the people who have gotten sick have in common. That might help us find out how their problems came around in the first place. Maybe these questions are too obvious but they're something. If the meeting gave us anything, it gave us questions to ask. Asking questions can be done. That'll be the easy part. Getting the answers might also be easy. The hard part will be what to do with the answers if we get any. What answer would we want that would lead us to finding a cause for the illnesses?

And with that thought I fall asleep.

The alarm goes off at 6:00 PM. I'm really confused for a moment, waking up to something other than Danny Boy. On top of that, waking up in a strange room on a strange planet. It takes me a while to get my bearings. Finally, my stomach helps me find them. It's time for dinner and for Sam and I to discuss what to do next. Dinner and possibly some wine.

Dinner is great. The wine is confusing. Prism wine is produced from something native to Prism resembling grapes. The wine is not bad. I mean it's the best wine I've had here. What's confusing is the way it changes colors all the time. Picking up a glass of white wine that changes to red before I take a sip is OK. As I said, confusing but OK. Picking up a glass of red wine that turns blue as I'm drinking it, well that's a wine of a different color. All part of getting used to this planet, I guess.

The talk between Sam and me is a start. I summarize the meeting with Mia by succinctly saying we need to gather some more facts. After considering all the information presented in our meeting this morning, I'm indeed the one to come up with that brilliant conclusion. Sam listens politely to what I have to say. She grunts. Maybe it's a groan but probably a grunt.

Sam then adds her own take, not on the meeting, but on how we should proceed. She starts by talking about many of the other assignments we've had on other planets. We talk about the successes and about our one failure. After discussing those for a while, she asks, "Do you remember the one thing that was common with all those assignments, the successful ones as well as the one that failed?"

"No, not really," I respond, knowing that's not exactly the answer she wants. Then I stop and think about her question some more and finally add, "I did manage to use my ability to connect with each of those planets." I'm sent on these missions for a reason, to use my abilities and that's what I do. I mention this even though having that in common with all our assignments is obvious. I'm sure she's looking for something more.

"Yes, a good start," she continues, acknowledging that my answer is what she was looking for, at least part of it. What more can there be? She prods further, "Why were you able to connect with each planet? What's the one thing we did to help develop your ability?"

Now it dawns on me where she's going. I'm here to understand the planet as only I can. We always come up with a plan that lets me spend the first few days to make a connection and to establish this understanding. Once I do, we attack the real problem, the reason we're sent here. It's not yet time to look at the real problem. A groundwork needs to be laid first. I need to introduce myself to Prism.

I admit to Sam that I understand her point and she clarifies it some more.

"The most obvious explanation about the illnesses is that there's something unusual about the Dara Baile site. Even though both Dara Baile and non-Dara Baile people seem to be getting sick, the fact is that the first wave of illness correlates to when Dara Baile construction started. We need to find out what is abnormal about that site.

"But first, as has always been our plan, you have to get familiar with the new planet, with Prism. This needs to be done before we can address the main problem. Even though we think the problem has something to do with Dara Baile, we can't look there yet. You have to learn about Prism, about it as a whole. Prism is, just by being Prism, an unusual place. We need to learn what normal is on this planet. If we want to find out what abnormal is, what's unusual about Dara Baile, we need something to compare it to.

"What we really need to do is to spend some time learning about Prism, just studying it out in the wild. The wild means away from

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Dara Baile and away from Dathanna. I doubt that Dathanna with all its Earth construction is the right place to learn about Prism-normal. I'd say it's time for a road trip except there are no roads. Let's just say we need a trip, a fact-finding trip, and we need to take that trip right now."

Of course she's right. This is the way we start all our assignments. I'd forgotten. Sam didn't. Sam has a plan to help me develop a relationship with the new planet that we need. I agree. It's indeed the time to use my skills and there's one way to do it.

Chapter 9, Day 4 on Prism

The next morning, we tell Mia about our plans. She must have already realized what we were going to say because she opens her cabinet and gives us both camping kits she prepared. Each includes food and water for our excursion into the wilderness, a camera, a map, and an ancient device called a compass. The map is limited as it only covers the part of Prism near Dathanna but we'll only be gone for five days and our mode of transportation will be foot. How far can we get? Certainly, a map of the entire planet isn't needed.

Even so, using a map is a bit strange. I can't remember ever using a paper map. Since we can't be sure the batteries on our computer pads will last for five days, since there's no electricity away from town, and since there are also no satellites and therefore no GPS, the maps might come in handy. Handy if either of us can figure out how to read a map or how to use a compass.

There's not too much else to tell us before we leave. Prism is safe so we don't have to be concerned about encountering wild animals. We hope. No one can offer any helpful hints about where to go or where not to go since people have hardly ever wandered as far from Dathanna as our plans might lead us. With no one to tell us what to do and no one to tell us where to go, we're as ready as we're ever going to be. There's no reason to delay. We say our goodbyes, choose a path leading North out of Dathanna, and leave.

North is the logical choice. The other day on our day off we headed South. South is the general direction of Dara Baile and since we want to learn about Prism without any interference that might be caused by Dara Baile, we head North. Our walk initially takes us through a grove of walnut trees. While walnut trees may be nice, they're just Earth trees. Not what we're looking for. However, no harm in stopping long enough to add some walnuts to our food stash.

We continue walking for several hours until we're far away from Dathanna. Our route takes us through meadows of various grasses and plants and groves of native trees. Each meadow or grove consists of a single kind of vegetation, all of a similar color. And in all of them, each individual plant changes color often and randomly. Slightly randomly, that is. A new color is always close to the initial color. There are groves after groves and meadows after meadows. As soon as one ends, another one starts. The plants in each are always all the same and always different than those in the one before.

We try to figure out what causes a plant to change color. At first we think it might be triggered when we walk past one, maybe even when we touch it. But there's

more than just that. All plants in the area we're in change colors, even the ones too far away to be affected by our motions. And all plants we can see in other areas also change all the time. They might be more likely to do so with us nearby but it's hard to tell. There seems to be no logic to predict their action. The only thing that's certain is that they all change.

Eventually we come to a group of small lakes that remind me of the lakes and rivers in the forest preserves of my youth back in Illinois. Like on Earth, here on Prism there are clouds overhead, leaves falling into the water, and winds blowing through the branches of the trees. My connection to Prism is starting slowly. I can begin to sense the wind, the leaves, and the breeze like I could sense them on Earth. I close my eyes and imagine I'm back home, happy and relaxed being there. But this image lasts only until I open my eyes again and can see where I really am. Not in Illinois. Here all the clouds, trees, and leaves are as I have come to expect on Prism. They all change colors. Nothing like that happens back home in Illinois, I'm sure. Probably not even in Wisconsin. Even so, it doesn't appear to bother me. I remain relaxed. I remain happy. My skills are starting.

We stop next to one of the lakes to enjoy our second picnic on Prism. We couldn't bring anything perishable with us since there's no way to keep it cold. But Prism cheese and cured meats seem to last long enough. We prepare ourselves a charcuterie and cheese tray. Well almost. We have everything except the tray. And the wine. That's missing too. Wine is too heavy to carry. Even considering everything, the choice today is more appealing than the last picnic we had. And it's that much better when we remember the walnuts collected earlier. Walnuts, cured meats, and cheese. Still wish we had some wine.

By the time we finish, it's late in the day. The sun looks like it's going to set in the next hour or two. Since we aren't well equipped for traveling at night, and since even if we were, why would we? We decide to make this our campsite for the night.

Enjoying a meal by the shores of an unknown lake on a strange planet with bizarre plants that change colors for unknown reasons. It's all strange. The strangest thing of all is that, for some reason, I feel oddly at home here. Perhaps it's just the thoughts of my home on Earth coming back to me. Or perhaps it's the fact that I'm finally spending time outside by myself, by ourselves, and just being here is awakening my love of nature. I recognize this as an opportunity to enjoy this world as almost no one else ever has before. And here I am. Here we are.

Whatever my feelings are and whatever is causing those feelings, I'm quickly jolted back to reality by Sam's exclamatory "Look!" About ten meters away

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walking slowly toward us are a group of some form of local Prism life. They remind me of large newborn chickens but that's just the first impression that jumps into my mind. They look kind of like chickens with enhancements. Instead of feathers, they have soft spongy bodies. I wonder if those bodies might grow feathers later on. Not likely. That's just a memory of Earth chickens filling my imagination.

These Prism ones look like that's the way their bodies are meant to be. They all have the same spongy bodies. None have feathers. Another difference from Earth chickens is that these Prism ones have small bumps on the top of their heads, bumps that aren't ears but are where one would expect ears to be. And colors, they're all different colors. Each one is a single color, a single-color family but not always the same as the next one. There are quite a few of these spongy looking, earless, chicken-like, multi-colored, non-birds around. I guess that's as good a description as I can come up with now.

I can also see three button-like circular objects on the upper part of their heads that remind me of the fish we saw a few days ago. The button-like objects must be eyes, at least I assume the outer two are eyes. I make an educated guess that the middle one is an eyeled. It helps that Eolai told me all native Prism life have these. I like to be sure when making educated guesses. And then as if to prove me right, one of the chickens blinks its eyeled at me. Kind of a quick green light that turns on and is gone in an instance. The other chickens follow, each one blinking in a slightly different color.

“You know what they look like?” I said to Sam. “They look like Peeps with M&M eyes. The type of Peeps you see around Easter. If I were in charge of designing a cute cartoon character, I certainly couldn't come up with anything better. Perhaps Walt Disney was born on Prism and no one ever knew.”

Our M&M-eyed Peeps are friendly and obviously not scared of humans. They also appear to be quite curious. They walk right up to where we're sitting, jump into our laps, and flash wildly at us. With these guys around no one on Prism would have to decorate their homes for Christmas. Just invite a bunch over in the evening and watch the show.

Our poultry pals appear to be hanging around for a while and I go to record their actions in our trip notes. That causes a small problem, what to call them. We have to give them a name. What fits? Simply calling them chickens doesn't seem right. Up close as they are now, I must admit they don't really look much like Earth chickens. Besides there are Earth chickens here on Prism and we don't want to

confuse the two of them. These have spongy bodies so sponge-hen is a possibility. But not a good one. Actually, it sounds kind of insulting.

I'm out of ideas and hand the assignment over to Sam. She thinks a while and suggests "peepers." Well, that was easy. I agree. In fact, I don't think there could be a better name.

I should possibly be wary of the unknown and keep an eye on where these peepers are going and what they're doing. One never knows if they might be up to something. One doesn't actually know anything at all about them yet. But I don't watch them too closely because their presence is very soothing. My Prism awareness says there's nothing to be concerned with here. Or maybe it's my Earth training that tells me not to be concerned since I've never heard of an attack peeper. Whatever. As I sit by the side of the lake, it's time to relax and watch the clouds overhead, the trees bending in the soft breeze, waves from the lake splashing softly on the shore, and an aimless army of peepers in Brownian motion all around us.

As I relax, my connection with Prism seems to get stronger. I sense the spirit of the planet. I'm slowly engulfed in a feeling. Awareness of my surroundings drifts away. I fall asleep. I dream. I drift off and dream of my life as a little boy growing up in a small town in Ohio. I'm playing in the front yard. My dad walks out of the house and announces it's time. I get excited although I can't remember what it's time for. The next thing I know, I'm on my bicycle. I don't remember ever having ridden a bike before but here I am. My dad's holding on. I'm not afraid of what might happen. I feel that I should be but I'm not. I look to my left and see the tulip garden my mother planted. They're all newly in bloom. The garden is one of the most beautiful things I remember from my childhood. Tulips of all colors all around me. They're both beautiful and peaceful. I know they'll only be in bloom for another week or two but that doesn't matter. They're in bloom now. I look away from the tulips, turn to my right, and see my dad in the distance. He's no longer holding onto the back of my bike.

Then I remember when this was. It was the first time I rode a bike without training wheels. I feel now how I felt back then. I was thrilled and happy and proud of what I'd just done. Tranquility. The joys of childhood. Life didn't get any better than it was then, a time before worries. There was only joy and part of that joy was riding a bicycle.

I look toward where my mind imagines the tulip garden to be. I sense that these are different than the ones I recall. I don't remember the colors being as bright as they appear now. Nor do I remember the colors glowing like they glow now. And I

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definitely don't remember the tulips walking around the garden. The ones I see now appear to be very happy tulips indeed, wandering all about. As I continue to return from my world of imagination to my world of reality, the tulips also continue to return slowly, just a bit at first, then a bit more, and eventually those wandering tulips are peepers. I'm not riding my bike for the first time. I'm not looking at the tulip gardens of my Ohio childhood home, I'm no longer in the euphoria of my youth. I'm on Prism.

But you know what else? I'm still happy. I'm feeling happy knowing I'm on Prism because something on Prism is happy knowing I'm here. The symbiotic bond is starting to form from somewhere. I don't know from where and I can't assign any meaning to it yet but it did relax me and sent my imagination back to a happy place in my childhood. Perhaps the peepers did that. It's possible. They happened to arrive at just the right time. Or perhaps it was something else and the peepers' arrival was just a coincidence. That's also possible. As they say, time will tell.

I look at the strange creatures all around me. They all look back and flash their eyeleds brightly for brief moments. I wish I could do the same back to them.

Sam reminds me that establishing a bond with Prism is the main goal of our trip but not the only one. We also need to observe and document whatever we encounter. Mia included cameras in our travel kits for a reason. It's time to start our visual documentation process and the first entry is going to be some peeper videos and some peeper photos. I agree. We need to document this for our records. And also, because I want the people back in Dathanna to believe me when I describe these guys. Of course, even without pictures, this Prism life is so unusual that they'd have to believe my descriptions. I mean, I could never make something as crazy as this up, right?

I take out my camera and aim it at the peepers. I tell them to smile. No reaction. I ask them to say cheese. No reaction. I get a bunch of leaves that seem to glimmer when I pick them up. That does it. Smile! Click!

It's time for dinner. All of us. Sam and the peepers included. They seem content enjoying a meal of local leaves and grasses. Sam and I get out our Mia-prepared dinner. It's certainly a good meal but we feel we have to hide what we're eating from our new friends. We've no idea what their thoughts would be about us dining on chicken sandwiches.

The sun sets. The day ends peacefully as we drift off to sleep guarded by an army of peepers.

Chapter 10, Day 5 on Prism

The sun rises. Day Two of our trip starts as we wake up bright and early in the morning. I see our new found friends still wandering in the grasses near our camp. It's almost as if they want to become part of our group. Well, perhaps group is not an accurate description since there are only two of us. That's kind of small to be a group. Whatever we are, it's nice to see the Prism welcoming committee still among us. But as nice as it is to have them here to help us greet the dawn, we'll soon need to continue our exploration of the planet elsewhere. After a lazy breakfast and a last stroll around the lake, we say adieu to the peepers and we're off on our pursuit.

The land past the lake district continues through meadows until it eventually starts to rise along a pair of hills. The hills form fairly steep ridges on either side of a rather wide valley, a valley that appears to have been carved by a river we can see meandering below. It's probably one of many rivers that feeds the lakes we camped by last night.

As we climb into the hills, the vegetation changes from the low grasses predominant near the lakes to a large number of unusual trees of various heights. The bigger trees appear to be about nine or ten meters tall. The shorter ones are only about five or six. Their leaf arrangements are similar to those on most Earth trees, but the shapes of the leaves are somewhat unique. They're smooth on the edges instead of spiky and remind me of canoe paddles, small and straight at the base, expanding into large ovals just before the end. The ones up close appear to be green, a shade common to Earth flora. As all Prism leaves do, their colors vacillate among various shades of green, changing subtly but constantly. The more time we spend here, the more these changes begin to feel natural. So natural that I can no longer even convince myself that life back on Earth doesn't behave the same way. My memories tell me it doesn't but those memories are starting to fade.

After climbing about 500 meters, we reach a small vantage point where we can see for quite a distance, all the way to the hills forming the other side of the valley. The valley itself contains many small meadows, each meadow with plants colored differently than those in the meadow next to it. The view reminds me of our first sight of Prism from the observation deck of the spaceship. Now as then, we're no longer looking at just one meadow or just one type of plant. We're looking at many meadows and a multitude of colors. The effect of all the colors changing over such a wide area is quite striking.

We decide that this is a good place to set up camp and a place where we can expand our knowledge of Prism. As we look around for a campsite, our eyes turn

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toward the path we used to walk up here and we're surprised to see a parade of sorts, or more precisely, a parade of peepers. It looks like four of our valley peeper friends have followed us. I guess curiosity is a more significant driving force on Prism than I thought and these guys seem very curious indeed. Curious about us and about what we're doing here. As I thought before, it makes me wonder if I should be a bit concerned that these actually might be Prism spies. Of course, we have nothing that a spy would want so having a spy isn't really that bad. It's just that I'm intrigued by them being here.

They reach the place we selected for our campsite. All my concerns vanish after a friendly flash hello. Nothing is cuter than a peeper's hello. All is well with the world, with this world at least.

Our friends seem to be fond of us, like they want to become our lifelong Prism buddies. They're already our best friends in the entire world, the entire world of Prism, and we're getting fond of them too. We're even able to tell them apart now. Not just by their colors but by their looks and by their personalities. Sam and I decide we need to give them names. All friends deserve names. It'll help us know which one in the group we're talking about if we ever do talk about them. How do we give them names?

They don't talk so they can't tell us. We need to name them ourselves and they have to be appropriate ones. Sam and I deliberate this most serious of issues. We both agree that their presence appears to be helping us learn about Prism. I started my connection with Prism last night when they arrived. My bond definitely grew stronger then. Maybe these peepers are our Prism muses. Yes, that's it, muses! With this realization, coming up with appropriate names just became simple. The one with the yellow coloring and frequent orange-like blink from its eyed appears to be the leader, so we call that one Clio. The others are Euterpe, Melpomene, and Thalia, obviously. Nothing could be more fitting.

The one we named Thalia appears to be particularly fond of me. She spends a lot of time following me as I explore the hills and areas around our current campsite. We're allies. My first true Prism friend. She walks over as I find a good vantage point to view the expanse of the planet below, to relax, and to take it all in. I like to capitalize on my ability to relax, it being the area of my greatest expertise.

The main purpose of this trip is to give me the opportunity to let my feelings become attuned to Prism, to Prism life, and to Prism nature. That process started. I felt it yesterday when we spent time by the lakes. I can sense it continuing again, here, as I relax and view the planet with my friend, Thalia. I can feel the breezes overhead as they flow through the trees. I can sense the leaves as they're buffeted

by the wind, feel them as they cling to their host tree, and understand them as they get ready to fall. I can sense the currents flowing in the stream below, through the valley it carved by repeated trips taken over so many years. I can feel the water, anxious to flow down the mountain, but not so anxious that it can't also enjoy the journey. Getting there and being there are both parts of the life of water.

As I continue to feel nature on Prism in the same way I remember feeling nature on Earth, my mind opens to a new feeling, a feeling I never had on Earth, a feeling of color. My mind drifts to the Prism trees and to their leaves. I consider that, perhaps, the color changes are not as random as I thought they were. Could there be a pattern, could they have meaning, could there be a method to their madness? I don't have any idea. What could there be about these changes that makes them meaningful, makes them more than just random changes? I'm starting to get in touch with Prism nature, more so than I was a few minutes ago, enough to ask a question like this but not enough to know the answer. A good start. Close but no cigar.

As I contemplate what I'm learning, I look down and see my friend Thalia in my lap. She smiles a peeper smile, fires up her eyeled and sends me a bright blink, which fades fast like the others always did. This causes my thoughts about Prism to deepen. I can feel there was something special about this flash of light. I know that. It made me feel good. Why did it? It was a happy blink. I know that. Why did I know that? It's because I'm learning about nature on Prism. I don't know how I'm learning but I am. It's part of the process. Maybe Sam has an idea. Sam is the Sherlock Holmes of the trip. I need to think about all I really know so I can describe it in the best way to Sam. I should be ready by the time we have dinner tonight.

Dinner. This is the second dinner with what I'm calling "The Prism Six." Sam, me, Clio, Euterpe, Melpomene, and Thalia. It feels like we're all family now. Not bad for just two days wandering Prism. It makes me feel good for many reasons. The main one is that I have a family I can support. All that peepers seem to eat are bunches of grass and leaves. Plus, water to drink and dirt to sleep on. If I'm going to be part of a family, it's good that it's one I can support within my budget.

Sam and I have the talk I planned, the question about happy flashes of light and why do I know they're happy. We discuss Thalia and the others and what they might be projecting from their eyeleds. I let Sam know I can tell which flashes put forth a sense of happiness, of contentment, of a generally positive feeling about life. When I ask Sam what she feels when she sees them, she pauses. I can feel her mind desperately trying to formulate a response. A problem was posed and she has to solve it. She's trying to figure out something about any flash that's significant,

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but can't. She examines the videos we took in the last two days and plays them back to me one at a time.

"Look at this one," she says. "There's a bright yellow flash that lasts for about a second and then fades. How did you feel when you saw that?"

"I felt happy. But you have to realize that was the first flash of light I saw from the peepers. I think I felt happy because I was seeing something new that was fun. It's like going to an amusement park with flashing lights and noise and people walking around enjoying themselves. The feeling is contagious. Whenever I walk into a park and see lights for the first time, I always feel a rush of endorphins and the happy feelings that go with them. Maybe it was the same thing happening here."

"OK," she continues, "look at this bright green flash from Euterpe. What's your reaction to that?"

I look at the video of a green flash. Except for the color, it's basically the same as the yellow one. A bright flash lasting about a second and then fading away. "I have to make the same comment as before," I say. "It may be that the flash is emanating a sense of happiness. But it may still just be the novelty of the whole situation. I don't think we have enough information to come to any conclusion. Perhaps it's just too soon."

Questions about most of the others draw the same responses. For each one, I can't detect anything unusual about them, anything that might remind me of a happy situation. I admit each of them makes me happy to watch. Each contributes to my sense of contentment. It's very strange. There's even something strange just in the questions I'm being asked. Who could have imagined I'd ever be sitting on a mountain on a planet I'd never heard of, a two day walk from the closest civilization and talking about lights coming from the heads of creatures who look like crosses between Easter and Halloween candy? As I said, just being asked this question is strange.

Enough of that. Back to dinner. For me, I'm enjoying the meal. Not for Sam. Her mind is not ready to give up on this line of questioning yet.

"From what you tell me," says Sam, "it seems like you experience happiness, almost a feeling of euphoria when you see each of these flashes of light. I don't get the same feeling. In fact, I experience nothing more than I would if someone were shining a flashlight in my face. If I'm to make any sense of this or be able to figure anything out that might help, I need a bit more insight. What else can you say?"

"Well," I conjecture, "I guess you could say I experience an 'Ahhhh' moment. Does that help you understand?"

Sam looks at me like I'm crazy, which might indeed have some truth in it. "I know you're going to find this somewhat unbelievable but I have no idea what an 'Ahhhh' moment is," she says.

"Ah," I say. "I thought everyone knew what that was. I can explain it to you. Let me give you some examples. You're at home in Illinois. It's the end of March and the month is indeed going out like a lamb. You've been cooped up inside for a long winter and finally have a chance to get outside. You do. You get on your bicycle and go for a 50-kilometer ride along the lake. A couple of hours later you get back home. You feel great although your muscles are complaining from having had to exercise again. They had gotten used to a more dormant lifestyle. Giving into those complaints, you lie down in bed for a well-earned nap. Ahhhh!"

"Another example. After saving money for a couple of months, you finally treat yourself and a friend to a nice dinner at one of the better restaurants in town. You start off by ordering a bottle of a good Bordeaux or perhaps a Brunello. You wait a while and the waiter finally brings the bottle of wine, opens it, pours you a glass, you sit back and take the first sip. Ahhhh!"

"Ahhhh! Is the feeling that life's good. That things are going right. That all is well with the world. That's what I felt when I saw the lights."

"Ah, I see," was all that Sam could muster as a response. But her "Ah" clearly sounded like it was missing a few h's. "Definitely not what I get out of the peepers. But I guess that's OK. You do sense things others don't. Let's just remember to talk about this with Mia and the others when we return to Dathanna."

For now, that seems to end our dinner, our discussion, and wraps up our second night in the wilds of Prism. No conclusion yet but we definitely have something more to think about than we did last night. I hope our friends will turn off their lights so we can get some sleep.

Chapter 11, Day 6 on Prism

Dawn surely comes early on Prism. I guess that's just one of the things planets do, make you wake up early when you're outside camping. Well, "up and at 'em," my mom always used to say. Yep, she said that a lot but it wasn't one of my favorites. My favorite saying of hers was "always start the day off with a good breakfast." In memory of my mom and thanks to Mia, that's exactly what we do.

As this excursion was planned for five days and we've been going north for two, we need to set off on today's trek by heading east or west. That'll put us in a position to be able to walk back to town in the two days remaining and to cover a different part of Prism returning than we did leaving. The more we can see of Prism, the more knowledge we can gain.

We say goodbye to our muses. It's a sad goodbye for two reasons. The main reason is that we may never see them again. Who knows if they'll continue to follow us. And the second is we don't know how to say goodbye to someone who can't talk and can't hear. Well, it might be a problem for us but it doesn't seem to be one for them. They walk up and flicker what is obviously their way of saying goodbye. I wish we had a flashlight so we could flash goodbye to them. I wonder what "back at ya" is in blink-a-nese.

So, which way do we leave camp, east or west? East continues up the mountain; west goes down into the valley and eventually up the other side. After some discussion we decide the ecosystem of the valley and river offers the best chance to see something new. That's why we're here, right? We pack up our things and are off in the blink of an eye, so to speak.

The trip down the valley and across the stream doesn't surrender any new information about Prism as we hoped. Anything other than the fact that the slopes are steep and the valley is thick with brush. The thick undergrowth makes the trip a lot more effort than we thought and takes more time than we had hoped to take. But all this is not really a concern. When there's no schedule and no destination, we only have to get as far as we get and I'm sure we'll get there.

We eventually climb up the other side, which opens onto a high and wide plateau. It's several kilometers in any direction and everywhere is populated sparsely by low lying bushes. The bushes are all a soft blue color, unlike anything seen on Earth outside of a Dr. Suess book. They aren't just plants with blue flowers. That would be too plain to qualify as Suess-like; there are plenty of blue flowers on Earth. These are plants with blue roots, blue bodies, blue stems, and blue leaves.

Not like anything we've seen before on any planet. This plateau is definitely a place where Dr. Seuss could have gotten some of his ideas.

We walk through the outcrop of blue for about an hour. For the first time we don't see any rivers, lakes, or other sources of water. The ground is very dry. We aren't that far from the mountain streams, but even so, there must be very little rain in this part of Prism. I know there are areas of Earth with localized microclimates. I'm guessing that this is also true here, that we're walking through a Prism desert, and that these blue plants are the equivalent of cacti.

It's time for lunch. We find a clearing that has very few plants and where we can sit down and enjoy a meal. The lunch selection for today is a fine filet of salami sandwich with sides of cheese and carrots. Food choices on Prism aren't as varied as on Earth and we're limited to what we can carry. But beggars can't be choosers. Anything tastes good after hiking for a few hours. We sit down and dig in.

Not much time goes by before Sam, always the first to see something new, states a somewhat surprising, "Well, look at that." No, it's not the peepers. It's a larger animal about as big as an average-sized dog and looking a bit like an earless blue bulldog. Maybe no one has ever seen an earless blue bulldog before, but if you had, this is what it would look like. I'm going to guess that this one weighs about 8 or 9 kilos and is a little over a meter long. It has the standard Prism issued set of three eyes across the top of its head.

Sam and I assume that the blue color is for camouflage since the blue dog seemed to have popped out of nowhere, having blended in very well with the plants. We aren't sure why such an animal would need to be camouflaged. It walks slowly over to our lunch, apparently attracted by the smell of our food. My feelings try to tell me that animals on Prism are too sophisticated to be attracted by the smell of salami, so I assume it's attracted by the aroma of the cheese. As there don't seem to be any "Do Not Feed the Animals" signs, we try to make a blue bulldog friend by offering it a piece of cheese.

That works! The cheese is gone in a flash. I literally mean a flash since that's what we get after he snarfs it down. A quick flash of blue light. Presumably it's the dog's way of saying "Thank You." Life on Prism appears to be very polite. After finishing his lunch or actually our lunch, he curls down on the ground a short way off likely waiting to see if we're going to make another offering.

While Sam and I discuss the possibility that we just made another friend on this planet, we suddenly realize we're about to be offered more opportunities to do so. Looking over in the direction where we saw the first blue bulldog, we see his whole family slip out from behind several bushes. Apparently, their method of

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camouflage is effective. The new ones stroll over, ostensibly curious or maybe hungry. We've no idea what to do. We have nothing to offer them. Our cheese resources are very limited.

We just sit and watch. There are five of them in total. We take videos of their eyed flashes as they approach us. These videos may be needed back in Dathanna. When we talk about them, we'll need something to call them as a group. Blue Bulldog doesn't seem right. An Earth name doesn't do justice describing a Prism animal. We need to call them something unique so we decide on the first logical name that pops into our minds, madra. Probably just what you were thinking, right?

We add madra to our list of known Prism animals, a list that now has three entries: peeper, madra, and some type of fish. The madraí look like rather powerful animals. If I met a pack of them back on Earth away from civilization, I might be scared. But I've been told many times that no Prism life is a danger to humans so I'm not really that concerned. On the other hand, I hope that at least someone on Prism has seen madraí before and has officially lumped them in the non-dangerous classification.

I pause to consider the effect that their welcoming flashes had on me. It wasn't the same as the peepers. And by that I mean that the flashes looked the same, quick flashes lasting about a second, but the feeling I got was definitely different. The happiness, the joy, was missing. I wasn't sad. Each flash left me without feeling. They were kind of blasé flashes.

I wonder why. Their flashes are mostly blue like the plants. Maybe a blue flash works differently than a yellow or green one. Maybe the madraí aren't trying to tell me they're happy. Maybe they are and I just can't feel it. Maybe I'm a little concerned about the madraí. Maybe that's one too many maybes. The madraí do appear to be friendly enough, but as the saying goes all over Prism, a madra is not a peeper. That's probably not actually said anywhere on Prism but it should be.

I make a mental note of the difference of feelings from their flashes. As a backup to the mental note, I write the same thing in the trip log. I've learned a long time ago that a mental note often gets lost but a written one doesn't unless I forget to look for it. But's that a subject for another time.

We finish our lunch, get up, stretch, and look around to try to get our bearings. In the East, West, and North as far as we can see, there's nothing but outcroppings of blue plants. If we leave here in any direction other than south, we'll be opening ourselves up to getting lost and will need to come up with a plan for keeping track of where we go. I seem to remember playing a video game like this many years

ago. I also remember telling my mother that all those video games were teaching me good life skills. See, I knew I was right!

For now, we remember that the goal of our journey is to discover what we can about Prism. We're here in a place that looks like it can provide a lot of information and nowhere nearby looks much different. Since this is as good a place as any and since continuing on has a good chance of getting us lost, it appears that here is where we're destined to spend the day. We pitch camp and I go into my mode of studying Prism.

My subject for contemplation today is blue: blue plants and blue madraí. I relax trying to feel what secrets Prism is ready to reveal out here in the desert. I sit for some time but nothing comes to me. It's not as easy as it was the first two days. Perhaps I'm just not feeling in a blue mood.

What can be done about that? To help me get into that proper mood, the pack of madraí sit down next to me. I guess they're probably hoping to get something more to eat but the important point is that they're here. I don't give them any food, not only because we don't really have much extra but also because I shouldn't have given them anything in the first place. At least not something made from non-Prism ingredients. I haven't been told how that might affect native life. However, the madraí appear to be happy and healthy. So far, so good. All appears OK with them. Plus, the madraí seem to not be concerned about the lack of food and drift off to sleep. They do sleep well, not as well as I do, but we can't all be perfect.

I'm tired too and return to my contemplation of the world. My mind drifts. It starts dreaming. Dreams that return me again to my home in Ohio when I was little, very little, about five years old. I see my parents coming into my room with good news. They got me a present. I'm always excited to get presents. What child isn't? But this time is different. I don't know why yet but it's different, that much I do know. They take me outside to show me my present, a puppy. One young, cute, adorable, hyperactive, extremely hyperactive beagle. This beagle makes Snoopy flying his Sopwith Camel look like Jeremiah Tortoise. Be as it may, the beagle is mine. I walk up to my new pet and try to become its friend. It runs away. I try again and it runs up, leaps, and jumps all over me. Now it's my turn to run away scared. I'm just five years old.

Then my parents tell me the really good news. It's going to be my responsibility to take care of the puppy, take it for walks, feed it, and housebreak it. They explain what all this means, especially what responsibilities are included in the "housebreaking" chore. I look at them like I don't know what they're saying. I do, I just don't want to know.

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That was a short daydream. All of a sudden, my mind is back on Prism. Some shock brought me back to reality. Probably cleaning up after a puppy's accidents was the icing on the cake. Maybe not a good analogy but you get it, right? As I return to Prism, I recall a bit more of what happened back then, on Earth, in my childhood. I was sad when the puppy was returned to its breeder three weeks later but I wasn't ready for a dog, not yet.

I'm sure the meaning of that dream has something to do with the madraí. It's part of the process of learning about Prism. Prism life, the aura around life on this planet, seems to affect what I dream. But what I learned just now, what I felt during that dream was so much different from what I felt in the dream I had when I was with the peepers. That one was pleasant, an Ahhh moment type of a dream. This one with the madraí wasn't pleasant. It wasn't bad but not particularly good either. It just was. Did that happen because I was more in tune with Prism and could sense some aura emanating from the madraí or was my memory jogged that way because the madraí look like dogs? Whatever the reason, it was definitely my first Prism experience that wasn't uplifting.

I stand up to stretch and contemplate more about what all this might mean. Sam and I talk about how my connection with Prism is developing. That's good. It's what we're hoping will happen. No conclusions. It's too soon to make any yet but progress is being made. She suggests we take a walk to talk some more. Maybe the change of scenery will help us formulate some ideas. Maybe, but there's nothing here but blue bushes. I guess we could try walking down a path, taking a left turn at the fifth blue bush, and seeing what's there. We start walking to do just that. But I'm guessing what we'll see are just more blue bushes.

The walk seems to help clear my mind. At least it gets my mind off the madraí problem and lets it drift to be more in sync with the rest of Prism. It's a relaxing feeling, one that's becoming familiar. The walk is good. After walking way past the fifth bush and maybe up to the ninth or tenth, we notice something moving. At first, it just looks like bush number eleven is swaying in the breeze but then it moves more, too much for the calm wind. It's probably just another camouflaging madra but we investigate anyways.

Well, look at that! Yes, something is causing the bush to move, but no, it's not a madra. I see a friendly face peeking up at me. Or maybe I should say peeping up at me. Hi Thalia! She has followed us again. I guess the peeper-person bond is stronger than I thought. All of a sudden, I feel happy.

Thalia blinks her eyeled at me, long enough for a short transmission of light to escape, but it's not the same light as at our last meeting. This one doesn't fill me

with joy. I think it looks the same as the one that caused me to be happy last night. Sam does too. But there's something different about this one. Not the color, not how long the blink is, but something. Sam can't feel it. Only I seem to be able to be able to differentiate a happy blink from one that isn't. This one is sad.

I sit down and let Thalia climb on my lap. She looks as sad as I have ever seen a peeper look. Not that I have much experience with sad peeper expressions but I can feel what's there. Some other bushes come to life and out pop Clio and Euterpe. All three blink wildly at me. Colors that come on for about a second and then suddenly go dark. Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe look straight ahead as if searching for something. Or someone. They see nothing. They turn their head to the left then to the right. It's apparent that they're anxious. Maybe the desert is not for them. I wonder why they came if they don't like it here,

Then from a bush a few meters away, a madra emerges. Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe look over and their lights go wild. A constant flashing of lights of all different colors. It doesn't stop for what seems like forever. Sam looks in the direction where the peepers are looking. All of a sudden, she screams. I assume that's what the peepers are doing in their own way. Their rapid succession of lights must be the Prism equivalence of a scream. Finally, I look over too and see the reason. A madra is standing only a few meters away, smiling. Behind him are the remains of something. Something I know. Something I don't want to let myself believe, but something I have to since I know exactly what it is. And I realize, as Sam already has, that we won't be seeing Melpomene again.

During all this, Sam manages to keep her senses about her. She has been taking videos of the peepers since the time I picked Thalia up from the bush until a few moments ago. Part of learning about Prism is learning both the good and the bad. All that needs documenting. The videos could turn out to be very valuable.

It doesn't take too much awareness to now realize that madraí are predators. I guess we're safe because we're so big. Then I realize that us being safe includes Sam and me but not all five of us. We have to protect our friends, our friends who followed us all this way into the Prism desert. What can we do since we've already set up camp?

There are still a few hours of sunlight left and neither Sam nor I have any desire to stay around here any longer. We place our peeper friends into a thick carrying case for protection, the case we were using to carry our cameras. Then we walk back to camp to pack up the rest of our food and gear. Not only do we want to leave this part of Prism, we no longer have any desire to complete the rest of our trip. We decide to return to Dathanna as fast as possible, even though as fast as possible

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means two or three days. The peepers may not want to go all the way back to town with us but we at least owe it to them to get them out of this part of Prism.

We're ready in a matter of about 30 minutes. Everything we brought with us is packed, plus three additions. Off we go. We walk until the sun is almost down. In that time, we finally manage to get to the edge of the blue desert. We're back into the low grassy area with vegetation similar to where we first encountered the peepers. We walk for another couple of kilometers until, hopefully, we've walked out of the madra habitat and left them far behind us.

The peepers are still sad as I can sense, but also appear to be enjoying the free transport in our carrying case. That much is good. They walked quite a distance following us around Prism to places they may never have seen before and never have wanted to see. By following us and losing Melpomene, they paid quite a price.

We reach what looks like a good spot to camp for the night. Even if it didn't, we don't have much of a choice. The sun set about a half-hour ago and it's getting hard to see. I don't think I could get our three peepers to light a path with their eyeleds well enough to continue walking. We're back in the land of lakes and find a nice one at which to spend the night. Not actually in the lake, but right by it.

Sam and I enjoy another Mia-prepared dinner, relaxing after the longest and most tiring day we've spent on Prism. Tiring both physically and emotionally, and the combination means we're completely exhausted and our work's done for the day. Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe seem to be enjoying their own gourmet meal, dining on a fine selection of what appears to be an assortment of the most delicious looking leaves I've seen in a long time. None of those awful canoe-paddle leaves. This is the good stuff. I'm glad we're able to provide that much. I mean we did spend the entire day carrying them here. We should be able to get some credit.

After dinner and before falling off to sleep, I look up at the sky. If there's anything to make people feel like they're on a different planet, it's looking up at a night sky. Most people look up and just see stars. Some know there are constellations. A few of them know what some of the constellations are called. I could always find the Big Dipper, the belt on Orion, and maybe even Cassiopeia. But that was it. I don't think I even knew the names of any other constellations. I remember losing a bet to a college friend of mine when I was unable to find the polar weasel constellation. I was quite embarrassed.

One week back on Earth, I had to take a trip to New Zealand. It's a beautiful country and I was very comfortable being there, but I still felt out of place. And why was that? I realized the reason when I went outside after dinner and looked

up. All the constellations whose names I knew, and all those whose names I didn't know but could recognize, were gone. The sky wasn't the sky I was used to seeing. The sky in the southern hemisphere looks out at a different part of the milky way than the sky in the northern hemisphere. Very disconcerting.

That's how it is on Prism only more so. I know I won't be able to see any familiar star patterns even if I try to look over the horizon for what might be up North. There's no Big Dipper. There's no Orion. There's no Cassiopeia. Maybe there's a polar weasel constellation in the Prism sky. Who knows? An unfamiliar night sky adds to a feeling of loneliness, to a feeling of isolation. It adds to the awareness that we're not home on Earth.

I'm again interrupted from my thoughts by an exclamatory "look" from our ever-observant Sam. Not that my thoughts are anything that don't warrant interruption, it's just that Sam is always the first to see things. I guess I need to get used to that. I actually should be. I need to get used to it again.

Sam points at the sky to an area about halfway between the zenith and the horizon. I look. There's a star that's a bit brighter than the others. I ask Sam if that's what happens to be so interesting. No response. She waits. She looks at me with a sense of disbelief and waits. As much as that appears to be a common look from her, I don't like it and she seems to be doing that more and more. She knows something I don't, something that's obvious to her and not to me.

With a realization that I have to figure this one out for myself, I take another look. The star is still there and still bright. So far, nothing new. But then it looks like it's moving a little. Yes, definitely moving. What gives? It looks like a mobile star. There's no such thing as a mobile star and there are no planets in this system close enough to see with the naked eye from the surface of Prism. It might be a comet, but I doubt that. Sam knows something and knowing there's a comet in the area is not worth the smug look on her face. It might be worth a ha-ha or a gotcha, but not total smugness.

One more look. This time, not only does it move a little bit but it seems to change its trajectory, moving a bit more toward us. Still no idea. I look at Sam and she comments that it's been almost one week since we showed up on Prism. OK, that was a good hint. Ships from Earth arrive about once a week, more or less. That mobile star in the sky isn't a star. It's the weekly transport from Earth delivering goods and maybe some new settlers. The change in trajectory that I noticed is the ship entering orbit.

For those keeping score, it's now 258 for Sam. My score remains unchanged.

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We gaze at the ship for a couple of minutes. The peepers also seem to be interested. It may just be that they're just looking at the sky and coincidentally in the direction of the Earth ship. Maybe not. Maybe they're attracted to some disturbance caused by the ship's entry into the ionosphere. That's also a possibility. Prism life could easily be more attuned to electromagnetic radiation than we Earth-born creatures are. It would make sense, given that they're always generating their own electromagnetic radiation by flashing eyeleds at us.

After a while, the ship makes what looks like its final course correction and enters orbit. Off in the distance, close to the horizon, I see a soft red glow come out of nowhere. The glow changes to a red beacon for a short time and then to a bright flash of light. I don't wonder what that is. I remember our approach to the planet and remember seeing a similar bright flash of light. Eolai called it the Prism Welcome. It looks like our new arrivals just got one too. Although I know what it's called, I still wonder what it is.

As the Prism Welcome fades, my attention is drawn to Clio. She looks at Euterpe and Thalia. Then they start blinking at each other rapidly. Not as rapidly as when they found out about Melpomene, but pretty fast. As quickly as I can, I grab my camera and start recording. I've no idea what's happening but it could be important. I manage to get a few seconds recorded before, as suddenly as they started, they stop.

These flashes from the peepers mean something. I can detect emotion. I can detect feeling, mixed feelings. Some of the flashes make me happy, some make me sad. Maybe the Prism welcome is welcoming them too. Maybe that's the happy part I feel. Maybe the sad part are their thoughts about Melpomene. I can't really know what they're feeling. I'm not that tuned in to the planet yet. It would be great if I knew for sure. It might be important that I know. I'll know someday. For now, it's just part of the puzzle.

I don't mind Sam giving me a puzzle. I know I can always get an answer from her if I don't figure it out for myself. I might get teased a little in the process but I'll always get an answer eventually. I hate not knowing and I hate not knowing what the peepers are saying. Even if they wanted to, the peepers have no way to let me in on their secret. I imagine that at least part of their flashing is their reaction to the Prism Welcome.

Show's over! A wink, a blink, and a nod from the peepers and they're all off to sleep. We follow their lead almost immediately.

Chapter 12, Days 7 and 8 on Prism

We get up the next morning, determined to find our way to Dathanna without any more investigation of Prism. We think we've met the goal of this trip by my progress toward establishing a connection with the planet and by our impressive collection of very significant pictures and videos. There must be a reason why they're significant. A lot to consider when we get back. We head back to civilization, be as it may on Prism.

We're no longer sure if the peepers want to follow us. Following us to strange places in the undeveloped area of Prism is one thing. Prism is their home. But going into a metropolitan area, well, we aren't sure that's also their thing. We look for them to see what may be our final goodbye flashes of light. They look back at us and, as if they understand everything, make their intentions for the immediate future clear by springing into our carrying case. Either they like us, like being carried, or want to see Dathanna. Whatever the reason, the end result is going to be the same. To make sure it's a pleasant journey for all, Sam and I pick up a bunch of what appear to be some of the tastiest looking leaves, put them in the case with the peepers and off we go. We're definitely getting our training on the path to become expert leaf sommeliers. Something to consider if we ever want a career change.

After about an hour walk, we come upon a set of lakes. Time to check the map Mia gave us to get our bearings. There is indeed a lake system on the map that consists of two large lakes and a third smaller one between the larger two. The group together look like the letter H when seen from above. While not looking at them from above, we can nonetheless recognize those as being the lakes that are right in front of us. This gives us the information we need to be able to confirm if we've been walking in the right direction, toward Dathanna. And as said, it does confirm the way we've been walking. It's a confirmation that contains some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that we weren't walking toward Dathanna. The good news is that we weren't walking totally away either. If one could draw a circle around Dathanna, you could say our path was on a tangent to that circle. A lot of wasted walking. At least we now know the right way and set off on a new, hopefully correct, course. A simple left turn, a two-day walk, and we should be home.

After an uneventful, but as advertised two-day trek, we triumphantly enter Dathanna. To be more accurate, I guess I could simply say we enter Dathanna. We do speed up as the hotel comes into sight, like horses enthusiastically rushing to the barn. In my case, this enthusiasm is enhanced by my vision of a clean room with a

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soft bed and a nice champagne shower. It's been an exhausting trek. Peepers don't look like they'd be much to carry but they sure seemed to have put on some weight during the trip. Probably our leaf sommelier expertise in action.

We bump into Mia and Eolai just before reaching the hotel. They ask a few questions, admit we look exhausted, and agree to wait until the morning for a meeting about what we learned. I nod my head in agreement but am a little non-committal on exactly what morning I've just agreed to meet. As we stroll past them, they turn around to take a second look just in time to see me bend down, pick up a few leaves and throw them in my case. They stare for a bit longer, look like they want to say something but have no idea what, and eventually continue on. They might be concerned about my mental condition after our trip, or might be considering the possibility that I had caught some Prism disease. We did catch something, but not a disease, and not what they think. Or maybe you can say something caught us. Whatever they think, I can already hear them at the meeting tomorrow saying "Jeepers creepers, where'd you get those peepers?"

I get to my room and set the case down. Thalia and the group jump out, probably relieved to be somewhere after a long trip. They walk around a bit appearing to be disoriented. I suspect they've never been inside a building before or in any area without dirt and plants. They appear lost and quite uneasy about something. More uneasy than just because they're inside. I'm betting it's the walls. They're made from wood harvested from Earth trees. No color changes. Yes, I'm sure that's right. What a strange sight. A single-color wall that stays that way.

I find a corner of a closet and give them their dinner, the leaves I just picked up outside. They nibble a little bit then look around, stop eating, and sit down. Hardly moving. I record a few very dull disheartening flashes and then for the first time since we met, there's nothing emanating from their eyeleds. Something is definitely bothering them. Or like me, maybe they're just bushed. I fall asleep and am quickly lost in dreams of our trip.

Chapter 13, Day 9 on Prism

The next morning after our first hot breakfast in five days, we head off, peepers in pouch, to talk with Mia about what we learned on our journey. The peepers perk up during our walk to Mia's office. Now that they're outside again, their spirits appear to have improved. I get a friendly flash in a nice yellow and a feeling that they might actually be happy to be here.

On arrival at Mia's office, we're not surprised to find Eolai there. We're a bit surprised to find a third person, Oscar. Oscar is the head of development for Dara Baile, the new town where all construction remains halted until we solve the problem that's causing the Prism population to become ill. Oscar is here to answer any questions we might have about the new site.

We start the meeting by introducing Clio, Euterpe, and Thalia to the group. Mia, Eolai, and Oscar look at them without much enthusiasm. "Ah! I see you befriended some of the native pullum spongiae," exclaims Eolai. "They're a very friendly species, aren't they?"

That took some wind out of my introduction. "Jeepers, creepers, where'd you get those spongiae" just doesn't have the same ring to it. It would make me look a bit uneducated to correct Eolai and say they're called peepers, so I just nod my head and smile. As I think about it some more, how educated can someone from Earth be about the names of native Prism life? It's not like that was a subject in school. And there's no way in the world I'm calling them by a name I can't even pronounce. To me they'll always be peepers. I wonder what the Latin word for peeper is?

Clio, Euterpe, and Thalia look at them, look at me, and do nothing. Whatever caused them to be depressed last night, whatever depression I thought had dissipated on the walk over seems to be back. They're clearly not happy here, like I felt they were outside. Inside is not their thing. They sulk to the bottom of the pouch and sit there without moving. It's a bit disheartening to see them so sad and that's taking some of the joy out of having them here. Their depression is being broadcast to the entire room and beginning to affect me. It kind of makes me want to call them pullum spongiae.

After that start the presentation continues in a routine manner. I comment about befriending the pullum spongiae on the first night and ...! "Wait," I say, "I can't call these delightful animals by their scientific name, no matter how accurate or official it is. We have common names for everything on Earth so we should on

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Prism too. The common name for these guys is peeper. Remember that name. It will be used all over this report.”

“Peeper it is then!” exclaims Eolai. Mia and Oscar just grunt “hmm” and we continue.

I explain how the peepers flashed their eyeleds at us when we met and how we found them to be happy creatures. How they appeared happy and I, when I was around them, was happy too. I continue to explain what we did that night, our hike the next day up into the hills above a valley, our second day camping, and our surprise to see that they’d followed us.

Then the next day. I explain our careful walking down one hill, struggling through the valley, grumbling up the other side, and finding ourselves in a desert where we encountered several large dog-like creatures, kind of the size of a bulldog, and all in blue.

Eolai interrupts, “That must be an *alterum caeruleum canem*, or as you would call it, a?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I say, “a *madra*.” To which I get a well-coordinated “hmm” from all three.

I continue explaining about the fatal interaction between a *madra* and *Melpomene*, the reactions of the peepers, and the sadness I felt emanating from the peepers’ flashes. I finish it up by explaining our rapid departure from the desert and our long walk home.

And we have videos of the entire trip. At least the important parts.

“That ends the presentation. Comments anyone?”

No response from Mia or Oscar. But Eolai has something definite to add.

*“I guess I do have something to add. A few comments about your trip and what we already know. Perhaps the combined information will lead us somewhere. First, we’ve had a lot of interaction with the *pullum spongiae*, uh, I mean, the peepers. Yes, they are friendly and very curious creatures. Quite a few have been seen hanging out near other settlers. But friendly is one thing. This is the first case where one, or more than one, have followed anyone anywhere, especially over such a long distance. The other settlers here don’t think much of the peepers. I mean, they’re OK, but there are no pet peepers in town. You on the other hand have established a connection. There’s definitely something there between them and*

Jack Verson

you, or maybe between them and you and Sam. It's a very unusual bond and we need to keep an eye on how it develops.

“However, this connection may only be a side effect of what's more significant. No one else has ever been able to detect emotion in peepers or in any native Prism life. But you can. You can detect something. Once you develop this further, you should be able to detect significance in other parts of Prism. I suspect this may be the start of what we need to know to move forward on the main issue, the sudden illness onset.

“Do you have any idea how you managed to establish this connection with the peepers? Do you have any idea what it means? Do you think the peepers can sense something about you? There are a lot of questions we can ask. Maybe there are some tests we can run to gain some insight.

“Then there's the fact of what you can detect, feelings. And you think these feelings are related to their lights. Some other people here have suggested that may be the case. They've long surmised that flashes of light were a way for Prism life to exchange feelings, thoughts, information. We've had no basis for this belief other than the fact that our guts said it was so. Now we have a bit more to make us think we were right and that bit gives us the incentive to investigate it further.

“The most obvious finding you brought back was the continual, almost nonstop, light emissions after Melpomene's unfortunate and unexpected demise. Clearly an emotional event. If anything can make us think that the lights mean something, it's that incident. That is significant. What's more significant is that until now, we've had no idea on how to evaluate what the peepers, or any Prism life form meant when they emitted a flash of light. We still can't but you seem to be able to.

“We now have the opportunity to study some light flashes, to look deeply at what you recorded to correlate those patterns to some meaning. What is there about a light pattern that gives it meaning. There's the color. That's one possibility. Maybe there's something else. Something we can't see. Who knows what. An open mind is important in solving this question. And now we have the opportunity to figure it out.

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“This game of ‘what’s different’ is hard in the Prism world. It’s easier back on Earth where everything adheres to Earth rules. There we might consider a case comparing two boulders. One appears heavier than the other so we weigh both of them. That’s easy. We know what the difference is, weight, and we can quantify that difference with a scale. Here with the Prism light show, we start off with two flashes of light that look the same. Like a happy flash and a sad flash. When we look at these two flashes, we can’t see any difference. Only you can. What is it that’s different? Who knows, not even you. We don’t know what to measure. That makes it hard. Without you saying that a difference exists, we wouldn’t even spend the time looking.

“So, there you have my take on the subject. The peepers have the ability to tell us something. We need to learn how to listen.”

Eolai finishes with his thoughts on the subject and sits down.

“This’s all great,” says Oscar, “but how does this get us any closer to being able to continue construction on Dara Baile? We need more housing just for the people already here and another three arrived on the ship two days ago. Are the peepers trying to tell us how to build houses? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know yet how this will help,” responds Eolai, “but it’s a start. Vernon is here to understand Prism. We’ve already decided that’s the best path toward finding the solution you need. He’s started and we appear to be closer. There are more possibilities to consider now than there were before he showed up. The next step is to go with what he’s uncovered and learn how to understand Prism life. If we do, then maybe Sam can figure out what it means, how it’s impacting us, and what we can do about it. We need to follow the process. We need to brainstorm some ideas. Sam can’t start her job until we give her something to work with and we can’t give her something to work with until we understand Prism better.”

Silence. Everyone who has anything to say has said it. A fairly good meeting. At least this is a good breaking point. Everyone has something to think about to prepare for the meeting continuation tomorrow. The meeting today adjourns. Sam and I grab our notes, our basket of peepers, and head back to the hotel. As soon as we get outside, we start the brainstorming process Eolai suggested. The obvious first step is to look at the two peeper light flashes that appear identical but that we know are different. More precisely, that I feel are different.

Before we get too far in our conversation, the peepers look up at us and smile. I see the smile. Sam does not. You know why? Because they didn’t smile. I’m not sure

any of them even moved a muscle in their faces this time, but I know they're smiling. They smiled as soon as we got outside. Maybe because they didn't like being indoors or maybe because they didn't like someone at the meeting. No, they had no problems with the people. They just don't like the indoors. I recall the walk from the hotel to the meeting this morning. They didn't like the hotel room. They didn't like the meeting room. The outdoors makes them happy.

I discuss this with Sam. We admit that the peepers have been through some rough days. It started when they decided to follow us up the hill and then into the desert. Looking at the size of the peepers, that's probably the most exercise they've ever had. It's quite a distance to travel on legs that short. And after all that travel, they lost Melpomene. Then a stressful two day walk back to Dathanna in a human-made carrying case, a night inside a human-built hotel room, and a long meeting inside another human-built structure.

Possibly the most stressful week in their lives. Sam and I decide we should do something to cheer them up. But what do we know to do on Prism that would cheer up a peeper? It's still fairly early in the day and there is a nice place near a river just south of town. The spot where we saw the Prism fish. It's just the type of place where a peeper could kick back and relax. I bet Clio, Thalia, and Euterpe would like to go there. So would we and we can organize a picnic for all of us. All we need is some food. We pick up a couple of sandwiches at the store for us and arrange for delivery of a fresh bunch of leaves to the river for the peepers. We're on our way.

Just kidding about the leaf delivery.

It takes us little time to find the stream where we picnicked our first day on Prism. We let a happy group of peepers out of the case and the five of us relax by the water. It's a nice day to be out with the family. I can tell they're happy. And I can also tell that they want a family portrait of the event.

OK, maybe that last assumption was a bit of a stretch. I'm the one who wants a picture. I take out my camera, ask Sam to pose in the middle of the peepers, and take two pictures and a video. The pictures are sure to go in the hallway of my home when I get back to Earth. For now, we sit back and enjoy the day.

Sam and I are enjoying our sandwiches. Enjoying a little bit of what life should be like near the shores of a quiet stream, being able to forget our problems for now. Sam looks at me with a happy smile. I can tell her thoughts are the same as mine.

Thalia bypasses lunch for the time being and seems to be content just investigating her new surroundings. She has really perked up for the first time since the Melpomene incident. It's a good start to what promises to be a pleasant afternoon.

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And, so as to make the day that much more enjoyable, we get company. Our silver fish reappear.

To be fair to these fish, we need to give them a name since we did that for the other Prism life we encountered. Sam and I discuss what name we could make from the words silver and fish? I know what you're thinking, but the name silverfish has some bad connotations to it. Silverfish is out. How about something simple that emphasizes the silver of their scales sparkling like everything on Prism sparkles. Just a bunch of silver sparkles swimming through the water. Maybe a simple name like "sparkles." Yes, Sam and I agree, "sparkles" is a good name. I wonder what dumb name Eolai gave them.

Euterpe is off exploring somewhere but Thalia and Clio see the sparkles and perk up. They act as if sparkles and peepers are the best of friends as they exchange flashes of light. Flashes that look like the flashes the peepers used when they first greeted us. Who knows. Maybe they are the same and maybe not. Interesting that they seem to be able to connect with each other. Does this mean there's one method of communication on all of Prism? One language? Can all animals talk to each other? Another piece to the puzzle, maybe.

Whatever is happening, I'm fast enough to capture the light exchange in another video. The first video I've ever seen of a fish talking to a peeper. I'm actually fairly short on videos of fish talking to anyone. I wonder how many other people on Prism have seen this. I might post it to PrismTube.com when I get back to the room tonight.

For now, back to relaxing. I fall asleep for a quick 30-minute snooze. When I wake up it's apparent Sam had drifted off also. I turn toward the stream to look for our sparkles, who seem to have swum away. Even though I'm enjoying my relaxing afternoon with Mother Prism, it's getting late. The sun is low on the horizon. It's time to return to the hotel. I wake up Sam and go to gather Clio, Thalia, and Euterpe so we can all be well rested for the resumption of the meeting tomorrow. Euterpe, who wandered off earlier, hasn't returned yet. She's nowhere in sight. And guess what else. Neither are Thalia and Clio!

Uh oh! I could actually have said something a bit more profane here, but "uh oh" captured the essence of what I was thinking. We spend an hour looking for them. For the first time in days, it looks like we've been abandoned. We can't call them since they can't hear anything. We have no choice but to return to the hotel and hope they show up later.

Chapter 14, Day 10 on Prism

The meeting this morning is at Eolai's office. Both he and Mia are there. The start of the meeting where I announce how we misplaced the peepers isn't the most enjoyable start I've ever had. In my defense, I remind my Earth compatriots about the rules of settlement on Prism. The main rule being that we're not allowed to disturb native life. We've no right to imprison Prism life against their wills. We only brought the peepers back to Dathanna because they wanted to come. They hopped into our carrying case before we got going. And yesterday at the river, it appeared they wanted to leave. We let them go. We didn't really let them go as much as they went without telling us but we would have had to let them go anyway, as much as we didn't like doing so.

I begrudgingly get nods of approval from the others. Without experimental subjects to generate flashes of light, we have a new limit on what we can do. It makes the brainstorming session a bit harder. Looks like we'll need a fresh pot of Prism coffee before we can get going. As everyone knows, caffeine stimulates the storming portion of the brain.

Brainstorming session 1A is about to start. The first thing to decide is what we're trying to find out. What question are we trying to answer? We know the final answer we're looking for, what's causing health issues with the settlers. How do we get there? We've already assumed the illness is caused by some change in the ecosystem and that we collectively caused that change. We need to ask a question about what changed.

But we're not at the point yet of knowing how to find out what changed. We've been looking for an answer to that question for a long time. To get that answer, we first have to come up with a plan to be able to detect a change. We can't find out how to do this until we have some idea about how to even look for one. Baby steps. How do we determine that something is different if we can't even tell if there is a difference?

Step one is then to find out how to detect a difference, any difference. Luckily, we do have one we can start with, a happy peeper versus a sad one. Maybe being able to detect this will lead to the ability to detect other differences and eventually to more answers. Remember what we saw with the peepers and the sparkles. Maybe all of Prism has one way to communicate. Maybe what makes a peeper sad makes all of Prism sad. If we can measure these feelings in a peeper, we can walk around Prism with the peepers, see what makes them happy, what makes them sad, figure out from there what makes all of Prism happy or sad, and hopefully in the process come across what's really wrong.

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OK, how can we decide when a peeper is sad? We know peepers can express emotion. We know that because I know that. I sense it but I can't tell anyone, even me, how my senses work. All we have to go on now are their flashes of light. I can sense when a peeper is happy when they emit a happy light sequence through their eyeled. I can sense when they're sad the same way. I might not be able to decide why their happy or sad, but at least I can tell one from the other. There has to be a way to measure a peeper's emotion by the light emissions that other people can use to figure out what I can. Without me being there, that is. We need a way other than just trusting my feelings.

I put that out as our goal for this meeting, figure out what's different between a flash from a happy peeper and one from a sad peeper. Once we find out what this is, we can consider ways to record and analyze it and start looking for causes.

Eolai concurs that this is a correct first step. The easy part is done, coming up with a goal. "What do we know?" Eolai continues. "What cases can we study where we know the peepers are happy? What cases can we study where we know they're sad? The most obvious cases are before and after the time when Melpomene died. The peepers were happy the day before and sad afterwards. We have recordings of both times."

"And," I add, "we have another case. They were sad when they were indoors in my hotel room and in the meeting yesterday. They perked up as soon as we went outside. Also at the river, just before they wandered away, they were extremely happy. I'm sure we have other cases somewhere in our video library."

"OK," Eolai offers, "it appears we have enough to get started. Let's get going."

I go back over my notes and the log of videos. I find quite a few actually. Mostly they correspond with the cases we just mentioned. One set was taken when we met the peepers by a lake on our first day out from Dathanna. Happy. The second set was taken by Sam when we discovered the remains of Melpomene. Definitely sad. The next set was taken in the hotel room two days ago, sad again. The last set was taken by the river just yesterday, about an hour before they wandered off to who knows where. That time was happy.

We show the videos from the first set on a monitor in front of the room; the videos of our initial peeper encounter. First there's Thalia and the happy flash when she sees us for the first time. A bright but brief emanation of yellow, fading rapidly at the end. OK! Let's remember that.

Next there's Clio. She emits a similar flash of light but in a slightly different color, some shade of orange. Same pattern. A bright brief flash of light and a sharp rapid fade. Videos of light emissions from Melpomene and Euterpe are similar. They all

appear to use slightly different colors, but besides that the patterns and sequences all look the same. For the record I confirm what everyone knows I feel. All the flashes we just saw were happy flashes.

Next it takes me some time looking through the video library to find the sad videos we want to look at. Those taken just before we discovered what happened to Melpomene. It's only after I remember that Sam was the one who took those that we finally find them. The first was when I found Thalia in a blue bush and she looked up at me with a sad flash. We hadn't yet found Melpomene at that time but she knew something was wrong. We watch that video. It's the same quick flash of yellow and a quick fade. It looks exactly like the happy flash, only I know it wasn't. It was sad.

The same batch of videos have recordings of all three peepers right after they saw what was left of Melpomene. That's when they all sent many flashes at each other in rapid succession, like a scream. There are so many that it's hard to focus on just one at a time but we manage. All of them look just like the happy flashes, quick on and quick off. Again, I confirm they're not happy flashes. They're definitively, unequivocally, sad.

Although not said out loud, I'm sure we all consider this first exercise a bit disheartening. We're all looking at flashes of light trying to see differences, differences we know are there, yet all we can determine is that they're exactly the same. Even I, who knows they're different, can't see what it is. What are we missing?

That's all the videos for now. I ask for ideas and get the same response from everyone: blank stares into the distance. Total silence. Maybe everyone is asking for divine insight. Maybe, maybe not, but apparently that isn't working either. I wait. Still no comments. Then some people start to talk about what to do next. From this we get one serious suggestion to which we all immediately agree. We unanimously decide it's time to break for lunch.

Lunch, as it turns out, is more than your ordinary lunch. We sit in the oldest restaurant in Dathanna. It has a fixed menu every day and today we hit the jackpot: a delicious broccoli and cauliflower stew. As much of an oxymoron as that might sound, it really is well prepared and is definitely very tasty. Much tastier than any broccoli and cauliflower stew I ever had back on Earth.

While on the subject of oxymorons, the oldest restaurant in Dathanna may also sound like an oxymoron. What's so significant about being the oldest on a planet that was only settled fifty years ago? There's a good answer to this question. In this case old doesn't refer to years, it refers to ambiance. Decorations in the restaurant

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are patterned after life on Earth hundreds of years ago. There are pictures of old churches from renaissance Europe and of gondoliers on the canals in Venice before Venice was swallowed up by the Adriatic Sea. There's a replica of some old statue that the French gave to the United States back in the 19th century. The room is even illuminated by some old and hard to find incandescent lights. And they're real. So real, in fact, that a few of them have problems that cause them to flicker all during the meal. Most of us aren't bothered by this but Sam appears to be paying quite a bit of attention.

After a crème brûlée dessert, we go back to the office full of vigor and ready to solve the problems of the world, this world. Sam is the first to speak and Sam doesn't normally speak unless she has something significant to say.

"Did anyone notice the blinking lights at lunch?" she opens. Of course! We all did. "Well," she continues, "Did the lights blink on-and-off or off-and-on?"

Now no one can answer this. It's hard to come up with an answer when you don't even understand the question. Sam fills us in on what she's getting at.

"Let me explain why I asked that. I don't normally ask impossible-to-answer and seemingly confusing questions. I leave those to Vernon. But this time the question seemed appropriate. When I walked into the restaurant for lunch, I thought the lights were broken. Probably like all of you did. They flashed. Each flash looked like every other flash. Can anyone here say what was different from one flash to another? There's no need to answer that. Of course, you can't. Why? Well, first you probably weren't even looking for a difference. Even if you were, I doubt you could come up with anything. Was one flash brighter than another or did it last longer? Perhaps the sound one made was cracklier than another. Maybe yes, maybe no. Is it important that you couldn't tell? Yes. Because even if you wanted to see a difference, you wouldn't be able to because you would have no idea what difference to look for. Kind of like deciding if the lights flashed on-and-off or off-and-on. What does that mean? Nothing!"

"To determine a difference between flashes, we need to make measurements. We need to gather data about the flashes. Data that measures something. What data? It's meaningless to collect random data so we have to first decide what we want to measure."

And to do that we have to guess about what might constitute a difference.

“For example, let’s say I make a guess that some of the flashes stayed on for an eighth of a second and others stayed on for a quarter of a second. It’s too fine a difference for me to notice by myself. I need something that can measure time. Let’s say I make a measurement. If my guess is right, then I just found something. A first step. Now I can use what I found to look for a cause. Maybe the lights flash because they are loose in their socket, the looser they are the longer the flash. A good guess. Right or wrong, it’s a guess. I’m on my way to finding a problem, a cause, and a solution.

“The problem with the lights is, of course, irrelevant. It doesn’t matter why the lights flash or if they can be fixed or not. What it does mean is that we’re looking at the peepers’ flashes the wrong way. We asked if anyone could see any difference between a happy and a sad flash. No one did. The same response I got when I asked about why the lights in the restaurant flashed, or would have gotten if I’d waited for a response.

“In the peepers’ case, we have no ideas what might be different. So, we have to come up with some ideas. Maybe the difference is in the length of the flash. Maybe it has to do with intensity. There are a lot of possibilities. The question we should be asking ourselves is not ‘What is different?’ but rather ‘What could be different?’ The difference we’re looking for probably isn’t one we can see, but we hope, one we can measure.”

Isn’t it amazing how no one can come up with an answer but when an answer is finally presented, it’s so obvious that everyone is embarrassed they didn’t think of it themselves. Everyone except Sam, that is.

We have a new marching order to make a list of what we want to measure. What differences should we consider? Three immediately come to mind: brightness, length of flash, and wavelength. We’re pretty sure that wavelength by itself doesn’t matter. Different wavelengths mean different colors and we’ve observed happy and sad feelings from one peeper using the same color, happy flashes from all the peepers using different colors, and sad flashes of different colors. We’ll measure wavelength anyway. Maybe there’s something there.

We start with the various measurements, which takes a lot of time. There’s analyzer equipment on Prism to measure everything we want to measure but it isn’t

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state of the art. The analysis takes a while. We know it would be best to be analyzing flashes generated in real time by real peepers. But our sources of real time flashes have left us. We have to work with the second best, videos Sam and I took in the field. The quality of those videos is questionable but it's all we have. Better than nothing.

For each of the properties we measure, we have to first look at multiple flashes that project the same emotion, like two happy ones. Then we need to look at multiple flashes for the other emotion we have, happy and sad. Any differences between flashes showing the same emotion should be ignored. The only differences that can be significant are those that occur between different emotions and which aren't also observed between flashes of the same emotion.

We start by looking one at a time at brightness, intensity, and wavelength. Brightness first.

The brightness analysis is easy and fast. Looking at one peeper, brightness is almost identical in all flashes regardless of emotion. Even after looking at all flashes from all peepers, there's no difference between the luminosity of a happy and a sad flash. Sometimes there may be a slight, very slight, difference, but it appears to be random. We can rule brightness out. Strike one.

On to duration. Here our start is more successful. Thalia's happy flashes are slightly longer than the sad flashes. We get somewhat optimistic until we look at Euterpe. There, the sad and happy flashes are about the same length. Actually, a happy flash might be just a little bit shorter than a sad one. And Clio's show nothing. We look closer at all that we have but nothing is consistent. Duration is not a factor that we can see. Strike two.

OK, wavelength, or color, is next. As I said before, each peeper has its own color so we can only compare emotions emanating from the same peeper. We start with Thalia, whose flashes always start off as yellow. Happy or sad, always yellow. We look at the wavelengths very closely. Always the exact same wavelength, the same shade of yellow. Nothing here.

We look at Clio flashes that are orange. Like Thalia, happy or sad, no difference, same shade of orange.

Same for Euterpe. Green, but the same.

No differences as the flashes start and no differences as they continue. No differences, that is, until Sam and Eolai seem to blink while staring too long at the flashes. They both think they might have seen something at the very end of Thalia's. Nothing they can identify with certainty but they feel like something

might be different. They take a close look at the analyzer results, at the wavelengths at the very end, the very tip of the flashes, as they're fading away. And here is the first real difference. The trailing part of a happy flash is different than the trailing part of a sad flash, almost imperceptibly different, but definitely different.

We see that the wavelength shifts at the end of Thalia's emanation of happiness. A slight shift to a wavelength a little bit longer than normal. It looks almost like the same yellow but modified slightly by the superposition of a second color with a longer wavelength, a wavelength closer to the red end of the spectrum. We compare this to a sad flash from Thalia. That starts off the same as a happy flash until the very end. The sad flash also looks like it ends by a second color superpositioned on top of the yellow. In the sad case, the end looks like it was changed by a color of a shorter wavelength, closer to blue or violet. The part of the flash with the color shift at the very end is very short in duration, almost undetectable. It's not long enough for us to notice without a lot of luck or with the aid of an analyzer like the one we're using but it's definitely there.

That works for Thalia. What about Clio? We look at the ends of the orange flashes and see the same shift, a bit of red added when happy, a bit of blue when sad. A very little bit, again too short to be seen but not too short to be recorded.

Same for Euterpe.

So, a red shift is happy and a blue shift is sad. Kind of gives some meaning to singing the blues, doesn't it?

Can Prism life really sense such subtle and short-lived color changes? Yes, this makes sense. We see that all life on Prism is based on color. All life evolved with the ability to change colors and all life has the ability to transmit colors. It appears to be their way of communicating. Color is important to everything on the planet, all animals, all plant life, and everywhere else as well. It makes sense for Prism life to be much more sensitive to colors than we Earth born creatures are and therefore to be able to sense color changes, rapid color changes.

I give some more thought to the idea that color shift shows emotion. It makes sense. The same thing is true with humanity. We do not put that much faith in color but we do in sound. We express emotions in tone. Consider a boy on his way to an amusement park on Earth on some Monday afternoon. Let's assume someone asks him, "Would you like some ice cream when we get there." His reply "ah!" is sure to be a happy "ah," one that ends with an increase in volume and probably higher in pitch. I can hear that sound in my mind. It is a squeaky, happy "ah." Next, he gets to the park and discovers that the ice cream vendor doesn't work on

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Monday. We hear another “ah.” This “ah” falls off in volume and gets deeper in tone as it progresses out of the child’s mouth. A very sad, quiet “ah.” Not much different here on Prism. What we do with sound, Prism life does with light. It all makes sense.

In an attempt to reinforce our discovery, we look at some of the other videos. An interesting video is the one where Clio, Thalia, and Euterpe exchange their bunch of rapid flashes after seeing what happened to Melpomene. All those flashes end with shifts to blue or violet.

This is very significant for at least two reasons. For the first time we’ve determined that Prism life, at least peeper Prism life, can express emotion through their eyeleds. Second, we can measure that emotion. We can’t measure the extent but we can measure the basic happy or sad feeling. It might not be all we want but it’s definitely a start. The main problem in knowing this is that we also know our eyes aren’t sensitive enough to detect the emotion. I can feel it but others can’t without first taking a video to analyze. Slow work. At least it can be done. Maybe I can eventually train others how to notice without a video, but not now.

As a last check we look at videos of the peepers when they saw the fish down by the river, the sparkles. I show Eolai the fish pictures, to which he says “I see you found our sparkles.”

My response starts, “No, we call them ...”, and then I stop in surprise. “Yes,” I say, “sparkles indeed.”

We examine the peepers’ flashes when they were interacting with the sparkles. They’re all happy flashes. I knew that at the time. I sensed it. But now it’s confirmed. I still don’t know why they were happy. So many unknowns. Another thing to file away in my compartmentalized memory bank.

Good work for the day. Everyone feels that something was accomplished. There’s a good reason for that, something was accomplished. Now we have to decide what to do about it. It’ll be the first topic of conversation when we continue the meeting tomorrow. I suspect we’ll decide to somehow apply this new knowledge to Dara Baile. That was the plan to start with, wasn’t it? Find some way to measure Prism emotion and then see if anything at the construction site evokes an emotion. We need to make sure Oscar attends the meeting tomorrow. We’ll need him for the Dara Baile visit discussion.

A good place to break. The meeting is called for the day.

Sam and I decide we should share our thoughts on the day’s events, just the two of us before the entire group meets again tomorrow. The best way to do this is over

dinner. We make reservations at the Prism Life restaurant, an outdoor restaurant surrounded by native Prism plants and trees. The temperature tonight is forecast for 24°C, perfect for dining outside, and outside at the Prism Life presents the perfect ambiance for dining.

Besides the great food served there, albeit derived from Earth recipes, I'm looking forward to another glass of Prism wine. The taste may not be the best but there's something about drinking a wine that changes colors right in front of you. It reminds me of going to an ethnic restaurant with a friend of mine many years ago. The type of restaurant is not important but my friend ordered a bottle of a beer imported from a country closely associated with the restaurant's ethnicity. I asked him how much he liked that particular beer. His response was, "Oh, I don't like it at all but it's the only place I can get it." That's a comment said by a person who gets a thrill just by experiencing something out of the ordinary, kind of like me and kind of like Sam. And it could easily be said about Prism wine.

A major part of the ambiance of this restaurant is that it lets you feel what it's like to live on Prism. The native plants that surround every table don't just sit passively in the ground. They, like everything else on this planet, fluctuate in color. Not much, as I've said many times before, but enough to be noticeable. A soft green to a light green to a lighter green and back again. When we first got to Prism the color change was interesting. Interesting as in "May you live in interesting times." The constant change could keep you awake at night. Now I find it very peaceful. Very relaxing. Still interesting, but interesting now has a much better connotation. Perhaps I'm becoming Prismatized.

I get to the restaurant a few minutes before Sam and have a bottle of wine in place on the table by the time she arrives. As has become our dining tradition, well, actually our drinking tradition, wine is poured in both glasses. We hold them up to the light and wait until hers is white and mine is red before we toast and take the first sip.

Dinner is a great kale salad and a Gruyere and Emmentaler cheese fondue. Some of the vegetables provided for dipping in the fondue are locally grown from Prism plants. It's fun to watch them change color slightly as we coat them in the hot cheese. A sparkling fondue as you can only find here.

Dinner is followed by a delicious after dinner liqueur made from a local duono fruit. I'm sure you have heard that duono is the perfect drink to have after a good fondue dinner. We heard about it before we got here and we can both concur wholeheartedly as to its excellent taste. Next time you're on Prism, I recommend trying a glass.

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But I digress.

It's a peaceful night helped along by the temperature, color changing display of the plants, great food, wine, and, of course, the company. Especially the company. And the drinks might also be contributing something. It's finally time to talk about the meeting tomorrow, a conversation required to qualify this dinner as a business expense.

I start with a brief and obvious summary of the meeting. "We now know how to sense emotions from Prism life. At least happy and sad emotions. We want to use this sense to discover more about the problem we came here to solve. Our best guess is that the problem is due to something that happened at the Dara Baile construction site. Let's visit that site and walk around. Maybe we can get a sad emotion in one place or another during our walk. If we get happy emotions from the other places, then we can examine the sad places for why they're sad, find the reason, correct it, stop the illnesses from occurring, and go home. How does that sound?"

Sam with her all-too-often unimpressed look, responds in a fully ironic tone "Yep! That sounds like a great plan. A great plan that's already been said a few times. But who or what on Prism do you plan to use to generate these happy and sad emotions? The last time I looked we were still peeper-less."

"Irony well noted," I concede. "I guess we'll have to go find some other Prism life to help us."

The conversation pauses while Sam finishes a long sigh and calms the expression on her face to be able to continue. Finally, a somewhat forced smile forms as she asks, "Some? What do you mean by some?"

"Well, some is some, isn't it? We should be able to find something. Eolai probably knows where we can get this something we need."

Sam has the face of a thousand expressions. Over the years, I have come to be able to recognize all of them. Words are not needed. The one on her face now is 60% sarcasm, 39% subtlety, and a skosh of annoyance. I've seen that one the most. It means we're making progress. But first I need to hear how the facial expression translates to speech.

"Not exactly," says Sam. "There are two types of Prism life we're familiar with. The first is a type that we know generates happy and sad flashes of light. That type includes the peepers. The second type may or may not generate happy and sad flashes of light. That type includes everything else. What do you think we have to

do to be able to have confidence in the results of our study? I'll give you one guess."

Did I call it or what?

"So," continues Sam, "we'll present our plans to use the sad and happy flashes to study points of interest in and around Dara Baile, but we'll also say there's a preliminary goal. And that goal is to hire some peepers to help us."

"Right!" I concede as I notch Sam's score up to 259. There's nothing else to say. What's obvious is obvious (obviously).

In recognition of an accurate analysis, I agree to pick up the check and pay for dinner. To be more accurate, I agree to be the one to submit the reimbursement request to Mia tomorrow.

We walk back to the hotel. The sun has set and the walkways are illuminated by a very soft light; light not generated from electricity but from Prism vegetation planted along the way. Quite cost effective and beginning to seem quite natural. Another example of Prigmatization. The powers that controlled Prism evolution did a good job. I must remember to congratulate him when I meet him, or her, or them.

Sam catches me from falling as we enter the hotel. It appears the duono liqueur has not yet completely worn off. A quick goodnight and a not so quick search for my room. It takes several minutes for me to find the stairs and the right way to turn once I get to the top.

Chapter 15, Day 11 on Prism

The meeting starts the next morning, right on schedule one hour late. That's my schedule for the day. One of us needed time to recover from some duono-induced side effects when they got up this morning. As Sam would say, I'll give you one guess who.

We start the meeting by asking for ideas on how to proceed. Everyone appears to have the same thoughts as I did last night and makes the same suggestion: let's go investigate Dara Baile with our recently gained knowledge. My faith in our group just went down. You'd think someone would be smarter than I was when I completely ignored the peeper situation. Sam waits until everyone has had their say and then takes the floor.

Sam is a good speaker especially when she knows she's right. She says basically the same thing she said to me last night although a bit softer on the irony. Her presentation ends. Everything appears settled. We should go to Dara Baile but we need to take along some Prism life to be our source of happy and sad flashes. We first ask Eolai the obvious question: does he know of any Prism life, other than the peepers, that emit emotional flashes? His response is just as obvious, "How am I supposed to know that? I just learned about emotional flashes yesterday."

Eolai is not bad at subtlety either. Not as good as Sam but not too sleazy.

That's settled! We need to find the peepers. The course of the meeting changes to brainstorming ideas for attracting peepers. Mia starts this off by verifying that the local general store is all out of peeper homes, peeper feeders, and peeper calls. That may just be intended as a humorous off-the-cuff comment but it does give us something to talk about. At least she presented some ideas, humorous or not.

Idea one, peeper homes. The first thing we noticed about a possible peeper home is that they definitely don't like being indoors, as observed in the hotel and in the meeting room. I can't remember noticing anything that might be home to a peeper in the wild, like a nest or burrow. There was nothing when we first encountered them near the river. I suspect this idea isn't going to be a significant attraction except to an up-and-coming peeper family, and we don't know any of those.

Idea two, peeper feeders. The peepers' cuisine of choice seems to be Prism vegetation, especially leaves. The best feeders appear to be the ground and there's no shortage of ground or leaves on a planet of this size. The only thing we could offer is to serve them leaves on porcelain dinner plates and I doubt that would impress them too much. The feeder subject is closed.

Idea three, peeper calls. I can state the obvious on this one. A peeper call is a non-starter. Peepers have no ears and can't hear anything. Three ideas down, right? There's not too much discussion, just friendly nods of approval from almost everyone. Almost! I get a feeling I may have spoken up too soon. Yes, there were nods of approval from almost everyone, except from one person. That one person who failed to make a nod of approval gets up to talk. When she does, I get a strong feeling the score will soon become 260 to 0.

“A peeper call is a great idea,” says Sam. “Thanks for bringing it up, Mia. We know that nothing born on Prism hears sounds. Kind of hard with no ears. But every creature born on Prism still hears. They hear by seeing. Sight is their sound. They speak emotions with colors. Their friends see those emotions, just like we hear what our friends say. Isn't that what we proved yesterday?”

“We can make a peeper call by transmitting what they hear, colors. What kind of colors would they like to see? What attracts peepers? It's what everyone likes. They like to be happy. Who doesn't? If you were wandering around town and saw something that would make you happy, a waterfall, an ice cream vendor, or perhaps a craft fair, would you stop and take a closer look? I assume so. What if you didn't know for sure what was going on but you thought something interesting was happening because you could hear happy sounds behind a building? Would you investigate that? Again, I assume you would. I know I would. When you got there, you might find something interesting or not and so you might stay or not. Staying is not important. What's important is that you went over there in the first place.

“We've got to go on the assumption that peepers are similar to us, that curiosity is one of their traits. It certainly appears to be one from what we've seen so far. If we build something that emanates happiness to a wandering group of peepers and if we project those sights, then our hypothetically wandering group might be interested in an investigative detour from wherever they were headed. If so, it follows that they would come over to us.

“And what do we know that looks happy to a peeper? Right! Happy flashes! We have several recordings of happy flashes made from real peepers. All we need to do is to build some equipment that can play those back to them. That'll be our peeper call.”

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I may have said this before, but why does it always sound so obvious when Sam says something? Looks like she has earned her 260th point.

On to the next step. We talk about how to build the universe's first electronic peeper call. Too bad they don't have a patent office on Prism. I'm sure a peeper call will be worth millions one of these days. Eolai admits it shouldn't be too hard to fabricate one. We already have the ability to view peeper recordings. The problem is in the playback. Playback now appears on a monitor. It doesn't project. It's just there. We can't really invite a peeper to a home viewing, so we have to have a way to project the light images. We need to connect the video output to a projector, kind of like one of those used in old movie houses. We need to make the first human eyed.

All in all, building a peeper call is a great plan. Eolai says it'll take him a day or two to finish the project and during that time we'll be free to relax and enjoy the sights of the town. Those sights that I haven't already seen, that is. I know what's left won't take the two days we might have but at least it'll pass some of the time.

Just before we leave the room excited to get a start on the promised time off, in walks another person I haven't met yet. It's the town's first and foremost doctor and he's introduced to us just as Doc. His real name is Jim but he likes Doc. Dathanna isn't known for originality in nicknames.

Why is Doc here? To see us, it appears. Remember the main reason we came to Prism was to investigate causes of a new illness spreading around the town. We've yet to see anyone who was sick although we've heard reports. It appears we're going to get a chance as Doc announces that there's another person who's extremely sick and exhibiting the same symptoms as the person who died three weeks ago. Doc's done all he can for his new patient, who's resting for the time being. Doc knew that Sam and I were here so came over to find out if we wanted to talk about his patient as part of our investigation.

We should. We might be able to find out something more than we already know. I try to think of reasons why I need to take the day off instead of investigating this new case, but they all quickly transform from reasons into excuses. I look at Sam. She looks back with that "we need to check this out" look. Another one of the thousand looks of hers I've learned. My last chance to do something else just vaporized. We get ready to leave for the hospital, but first Mia fills us in about medical care on Prism.

"Medical care does exist," she says, "but it's somewhat limited. So far, three doctors have decided to be part of our small group of settlers. We also have six nurses and a hospital with ten beds. I

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guess, all in all, that's not bad for a population of slightly over 3,000 people.

“Of these three doctors, one, Jim, was in general practice back on Earth. The second was an obstetrician and the third was an anesthesiologist. They try to limit their practices to their areas but, with only three doctors, they do what they can when they have to. We have a reasonable supply of anesthetics for being so far from Earth. Whatever we need is regularly included on the weekly Earth transports. Anesthetics seem to last OK even when transported in stasis.

“I guess the medical disciplines we have fill our basic needs. There's no university on Prism that can train new doctors, so the only way to increase our medical staff is to hope others want to make Prism their new home. We lack doctors who specialize in critical areas but we're thankful for everyone we have and we're always optimistic that someone new will be on board when the weekly transport arrives.”

After this briefing, Mia and Doc walk us over to the hospital. Now I know that constructing buildings on Prism takes a lot of effort and a lot of community involvement, so there must be compromises made. Out of necessity. Even so, I'm not sure I knew the hospital was just ten rooms and an office in the back of the hotel where we're staying. I guess that's OK. At least I don't have far to go if I require medical assistance. I wish I'd known that last night when I was recovering from duono.

We arrive at the hospital area of the hotel and after passing through all the medical clearances, which consists of Doc saying “hi” at the entrance, we go into his office and talk about his patient, Clara. Doc explains.

“Clara has been on Prism for about fifteen years. She was perfectly healthy when she arrived. All settlers on Prism have to undergo a fairly rigorous health check before they board their ship to come here. With our limited medical facilities, we really can't afford to accept anyone who we know in advance to be a health risk. Anyone with health issues and in their right mind wouldn't want to settle on Prism anyway. The immigration briefing video is very clear in describing health care limitations.

“At any rate, we started with a healthy Clara fifteen years ago when she arrived. Nothing significant changed for most of the time

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since then. About a half year ago, she came into the office with nausea, a headache, and some intestinal problems. It wasn't thought to be more than just a simple viral infection, however rare viral infections are on Prism. Part of the health screening to get onto a Prism transport tends to rule out people with infections. We don't have the number of diseases here that are common on Earth. About the only infections we see are from sources that existed on Prism before we arrived and most of us are immune to those. Taking all this into account, when we do get what appears to be an infection, it's often more significant than if contracted on Earth. Not necessarily so but the possibility makes us watch people a bit longer.

"In Clara's case, her symptoms disappeared a couple of days after she came in and she went home feeling fine. Everything was OK with her for a while. Then she started coming back, more than once, and each time a little sooner than the time before. The first time was about three months after her initial visit and she was still just exhibiting flu-like symptoms. The time just before this most recent visit she had new skin rashes. And this time she appeared to have trouble maintaining consciousness. She slipped into a coma last night. The person who died a couple of months ago had the same pattern of issues as Clara."

We'll remember this history when we talk to Clara. One thing is sure, we won't be able to ask her any questions today. Not until she's out of her coma.

I'm curious about the name of the other person who had what Clara has, the person who died. I'm told his name was Bob Jones. There's an unusual name. Doc, Doc Jim that is, obviously anticipates where my questioning about Bob is going. He explains that, no, Clara and Bob were not especially good friends. Everyone on Prism knows everyone else so they did see each other occasionally, but no more so than any random two people here.

Regarding Dara Baile, Doc notes Bob was a worker there which led to the theory that the site had something to do with the increase in illnesses. Clara doesn't work at Dara Baile. She works at one of the small restaurants in Dathanna. She owns it. Jim surmises that Clara might have been to Dara Baile a few times delivering lunches to the workers. If I'm looking for a connection between these medical problems and the construction site then, yes, Clara's case could be part of that, but not as solid as Bob's.

I still think it's a good idea to investigate overlaps between Bob and Clara, places where they might have run into each other. I ask Doc about social interests of people on Prism. He says there are quite a few hobby and interest clubs. There needs to be so everyone can keep their sanity. There aren't really a whole lot of other things to do. There are reading clubs, card clubs, nature clubs, star gazing clubs, knitting clubs, and many more.

No "Friends of Peepers" club yet, but maybe I'll start one. Who knows?

We're here to do a job and investigating overlaps between the interests of Clara and Bob is something that falls into our job description. It'll take quite a bit of time to check all possibilities. Sam and I agree it needs to be done. We look at the list of clubs to try to figure out where to start. I haven't exactly convinced myself that it would be significant if we found out that both Bob and Clara were knitters but some of the others might prove interesting.

There's nothing much else to talk about now. Clara is still in a coma. I ask Doc to let us know if she wakes up and is healthy enough to talk. In the meantime, Sam and I decide we should start our club investigation. It'll give us something to do until the peeper call is ready. I get one small concession from her. We can start our search tomorrow. She says it's so she can be fully refreshed to be able to spend the day together. Not sure if that's because she's looking forward to doing that or because she thinks she'll need extra energy for the task. As for me, I'm going to dedicate the rest of the afternoon to a quest for the perfect nap. I felt I've been deprived of a longer one, so a short perfect nap is what it'll have to be.

Chapter 16, Day 12 on Prism

Today is the day to investigate membership of the Prism clubs. All those clubs that have published membership lists, that is. We're looking for clubs where Clara and Bob both belonged. Anything in common is a place to discover reasons why they both got sick.

We meet at the Phantom restaurant, order breakfast, and look over the lists presented on our computer pads. Wow, there are a lot of clubs here! A lot of normal ones. I mean ones you might find on any planet, like chess, cooking, knitting, reading, physics, bridge, and pickleball, to name a few. There are some pretty unique clubs too. Where else can you find a frequency scavenger hunt club. The members of this club pick a random color frequency every week and then have one hour to find something on Prism that radiates the selected color. The person who gets the closest wins. I think first prize is a scoop of ice cream in the color of the day.

It turns out that Bob and Clara had two clubs in common. Those were "Old Earth Cooking" and "Star Gazing." Not too surprising that we would see an overlap in the Star Gazing club. That club seems to appeal to science minded people, which are most of those who settle Prism. Bob and Clara apparently had that much in common. As for the cooking club, Clara did own a restaurant and I presume Bob liked to eat, so there you go again with common interests.

The cooking club meets tonight and we arrange to attend. The star gazing club meets three times a week with tonight also being one of those times. Luckily the star gazing club meets after the cooking club is finished so we're able to arrange to see both in action.

With no afternoon clubs on our schedule, we have the entire day free until dinner to learn more about life of the Earth settlers on Prism. There is still a lot to understand. Where do we start? As our breakfast arrives, a Dathanna muffin and egg sandwich and coffee, Sam suggests we spend the day visiting the financial engine of Prism. Places that manufacture and sell collectable and artistic items for export to Earth. All exports accentuate color changing phenomena of local materials. It's easy to get materials that do this since almost everything on the planet changes color in some manner. The items that draw the most interest and therefore demand the highest prices are art and craft pieces that incorporate color changes in the most impressive way. Jewelry, paintings, figurines, and dishes are just a few. This trade provides the funds and ability for Prism to get many of the items they need, items that are still only manufactured on Earth such as medical supplies, engineering equipment, Earth art, and a good bottle of Cognac.

Cognac is an interesting product. Two-year old Cognac is placed on the PSD ship. It's always sent in an oak barrel, a small oak barrel, but still oak. Cognac aged for only two years is your basic Cognac, not particularly impressive. By the time it arrives on Prism, it's fifty-year old Cognac; a well-aged, exceptional, and costly offering. That's one of the side benefits of a PSD drive. Cognac can age 50 years overnight. Some might even think it's the main benefit of a PSD drive. There's no such thing as a bad Cognac on Prism.

We check in on Clara before we go to the shops. Why not? She's in the same building as the hotel. Doc's there, as he always is. Clara appears to be doing a little better. Her signs are stable but she's still not awake. "Should we try back later in the day?" I ask. "Sure. Anything is possible," replies Doc.

It's on to the shops. Our first stop is a store that produces water colors and offers water color paintings for sale. We stroll around the studio looking at paintings hung on the walls. There are many, the preponderance being Prism nature scenes. The first two are of trees in the meadows around Dathanna. I can recognize one of them as a place we passed on our walk down to the river the first day here. The greens of the leaves in the picture shimmer, giving the painting a Prism-like look just like real leaves shimmering. Next to those two paintings is a one of a lake in the shape of a large jewel, possible a diamond or sapphire. The caption underneath says "Sapphire Lake". I guess that's the lake near Dathanna, the reason the town is located here.

After looking around a short time longer, we're welcomed by one of the owners, a man by the name of Wassily. He's an artist and also helps manufacture the water color paints. As said earlier, it's quite common for people on Prism to have two responsibilities. At least these are related.

Wassily explains that the technique for making water colors on Prism is almost the same as on Earth, with a difference that suits Prism. On Earth you make a water color by starting with a base and then adding the color you want. The key is adding the color. Kids can make water colors at home and often do that by adding a few drops of easy-to-get food coloring. Professional water colors use more sophisticated color bases for a wider range of colors and a higher quality. Not that food coloring isn't high quality but it's possible to do better.

On Prism, color is added by grinding up a plant of the color one wants. More precisely of the general type of color one wants. For example, green. One can start with a green plant but all such plants change color slowly and continuously among various shades of green. Always within the green family and about the same shade, but they move around. If an artist wants an olive green, that can be a good starting

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point. The artist needs to keep in mind that what's olive green now might be pickle green later, moss green even later still, and eventually return to the original olive green.

The same for other colors. One can't use Prism paints to paint a picture of a precise color. Painting with modulating colors takes skills that need to be acquired over many months. The results can be startling. To get an idea of what such a painting would look like, imagine a normal painting having a spell cast over it by an artistic witch. Some of us may not know any artistic witches but seeing a painting made on Prism would make you believe in them.

After his explanation of the manufacturing process, Wassily takes us in the back room to do just that. Today he's making a blue paint and the plant he's making it from looks a lot like the blue plant we saw in the desert where we encountered the madraí. He gives us a demonstration of the grinding and mixing process. I look as the leaves are placed in the grinder and processed until a usable water color is produced. There's really not much to it. Just grind the plants and mix. Maybe I'm getting more sensitive to colors on Prism the longer that I stay here but it looks to me that the final paint produced is bluer than the leaves were going in. Maybe not. It could just be the visual impact of the color variations. It sure looks that way.

Next, we watch Wassily as he uses the blue and other colors to produce a painting. The canvas slowly comes to life. There's a rocky shoreline with waves splashing up on a sandy beach. I've seen many seascapes like this on Earth but this one is distinguished in its own way. With the blue paint he just made and the definite touch of the skill he's acquired, the waves look like they're washing up on the shore. Washing up in real time. I know it's just the effect of the color changes in the blue paint but it's still quite amazing. This painting should demand a high price on Earth. It's not possible to duplicate the same effects with any Earth medium.

I ask Wassily about the seascape and if it's a real place or something from his imagination. Obviously, it's his imagination now since we aren't anywhere close to the sea, but he admits it's his memory of one of his favorite places on Prism. The sea is about fifty kilometers from Dathanna. Not many people venture that far since the only way to get there is to walk, but he did once and it appears to have left a permanent impression on him.

I look at the painting again with his comments in mind. It's excellent and unique and I feel it should bring me some pleasure just looking at it. But I can't say it does. It doesn't make any impression on me at all. If anything, it leaves me a bit sad for some reason. Art appreciation has never been my strong point.

The paint presentation takes all morning. Sam and I thank Wassily, head out to lunch, and talk about what we've just seen. Sam appreciated the beauty of the painting more than I did. Not surprising. She found the paint making process fascinating and at the same time boring. Same as me. But unlike me, she didn't notice any color difference between the blue paint and an unprocessed leaf.

Our next stop after lunch is a shop that makes transparent bowls, plates, and similar items out of acrylic. The owner, Vetreria, greets us and is eager to show us her art. It's a very simple process. Simple is good if the results are good too and that's what we have here. She always starts with parts of many local plants, mostly leaves. In this case she takes a group of five leaves and places them on the side of the table. Then she makes two bowls, two almost identical bowls, out of two pieces of acrylic. It takes her some time to carefully craft them to just the right shape, one slightly smaller than the other. The smaller bowl needs to eventually fit precisely into the larger. All this fabrication needs to be done while keeping them both warm enough to remain pliable.

As soon as the bowls are ready, she puts the leaves in the base of the larger bowl. When they are positioned where she wants them, she places the smaller bowl into the larger over the leaves and presses them together. The result is a three-layer bowl, acrylic on the outsides and Prism plant life in the middle. I'm sure by now you can visualize what the end product looks like and the impression the changing colors of the leaves make inside the bowls.

Sam seems very interested with this process, with the art, and with the presentation of the final product. She looks around the shop, probably for something to buy, but agrees it's best to wait until it's time to go back to Earth. Who knows what other souvenirs one might encounter before then. I also agree that the process was interesting but the final product didn't excite me. I guess that's just me again. I never did well in my college art appreciation class. It's been a long day and, all of a sudden, I feel like I need some fresh air. We thank Vetreria and leave.

After checking into one more of the local shops, one that makes jewelry, we see it's time for the Old Earth Cooking club to meet. Sam reluctantly agrees to leave the shop for this meeting but promises to come back at least once before she leaves on her return PSD flight. The jewelry shop has definitely drawn her interest more than the others. Imagine that! I think Vetreria may have just lost out on a sale.

It's a short walk across town to the home of Terry Cooke, the Old Earth Cooking club member who is hosting the meeting tonight. As we approach, the door opens to the greetings of a cheerful Terry. He immediately impresses us as the kind of a

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guy who always sees the glass as half full, or completely full since the glass is obviously taller than it should be. You know the kind of person who just seems to make you happy by being there. That's Terry.

Terry explains the origin of the club. "The Old Earth Cooking group is as much a nostalgia club as it is a culinary club. Every week, a different member is selected to prepare a meal they enjoyed growing up back on Earth. Or now with so many people born on Prism, a dish their parents enjoyed back there. Each is one whose origin could have extended back through family lines for centuries, as early as perhaps the year 2000. And maybe even farther back than that, who knows.

Ethnic and cultural recipes have been handed down for many generations and for each member those recipes provide a bridge to their heritage. People often feel they're losing this bridge. This club provides everyone a chance to keep that connection alive, to share it with others, and to perhaps ensure its continuation into the future. Each meal is a happy time, happy for the member who was given the honor of preparing the night's meal and happy for the other members who get to enjoy a new taste treat."

Even though we're not members we're invited to stay and enjoy the selection prepared for tonight. We're told, actually warned, that the migration of Earth citizens over the years has resulted in some interesting intermixing of heritage and recipes. Buyer beware. All might not be as one expects but it will always be a meal to remember one way or another. Tonight, we're enjoying one of those intermingling of recipes, linguini and lutefisk.

After a lengthy period of time filled with good food, good drink, and very unique conversation, we finish an excellently prepared meal. Who would think you could get such good lutefisk in this part of Prism?

After dinner we take advantage of the chance to talk to Terry and the other members. We bring up the subject of Bob and Clara since that's the reason we're here. No one has a lot to say. They both belonged. Clara still does but obviously not Bob. Neither of them came often They did show up from time to time. No one remembers Bob and Clara spending any time together or even if they ever showed up on the same nights. They might have or maybe they didn't. It just wasn't anything people paid attention to. Not what we were hoping for but that appears to be all we need to hear and we say our goodbyes.

The other club Clara and Bob both belonged to was the Star Gazing club. Luckily and obviously, that club can only meet well after the sun sets so it's just starting when we arrive. We had contacted the club's president, a woman by the name of

Danica, to let her know we'd be showing up. She walks over to greet us as soon as we enter the area where the club is meeting.

Danica explains that we are just in time for the nightly kickoff function. Each meeting starts with a break-the-ice event that has become a mainstay for this club. For the first few minutes as the sky finally gets dark enough, everyone looks at the Prism night sky to try to come up with an idea of a constellation ancient humans might have devised if they had grown up on Prism. There are no right or wrong answers. It's just a fun thing to do and a good social outlet. The night sky is amazingly clear here. There are no artificial lights to diminish the view. The plants around this spot reduce their luminosity after sunset and don't seem to radiate enough to interfere.

As I'm trying hard to find some star pattern that my imagination can envision into a constellation, Danica comes over and points out a star low in the western sky. "That star is Sirius," she informs us, "the closest star to Earth that can be seen in the Prism sky. The sun, well the sun around which Earth revolves, is too far away and too dim to be seen from here. Sirius is bigger and brighter but it's only visible low in the horizon during a short part of the year. You're lucky to be here now."

Suddenly I feel lonely for home. I think about how far away from Earth we are, so far that we consider a star 8½ light years from Earth to be close to Earth. I pause to think about my friends and family on a planet so far away that I can't even see the star that planet is revolving around. Loneliness is a feeling that comes with the job. It's always there. Not the best part of the job but one gets used to it.

Back to constellation-ing, coining a new word. To sharpen my mind, I think about some of the actual ancient constellations I remember from back home. People who lived in Greek and Roman times and originally fabricated names for those constellations must have had quite an imagination. I remember seeing pictures of the constellation Leo, or at least pictures of the set of stars that someone had decided was a lion. A vivid imagination was definitely needed to form that star pattern into such an animal.

And what skill in ancients allowed them to visualize the constellations? Artistic license is what they would call it today. In Greek and Roman days, they probably called it divine insight. Channeling some of that ancient wisdom, I look up and my eyes focus on a set of seven stars close to one another. I focus more, arrange the stars in my mind, and pray for divine insight, the modern kind. A constellation suddenly appears. The form of a peeper is up there in the stars, as clear as day. Well as clear as night. And not just any peeper, it's Thalia, the constellation of

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Thalia the Peeper! I proudly announce that to the group, before I remember that “peeper” is a name Sam and I made up.

I immediately get congratulations from everyone. Before my announcement, the rule was that there were no right or wrong answers. A rule no more. I was the first, the first to come up with a wrong answer. At least the ice is broken.

Sam and I mingle with the other members of the club. There are about fifteen here tonight. We ask about Bob and Clara. Several of the members are interested that we know Clara and ask how she’s doing. None have heard about her recent setback and all are rather concerned that she might not be able to recover. After all, Bob didn’t. They all remember Bob. Nice guy. Bob and Clara did spend time together at these meetings but no more than any of the other people. They can’t remember anything special about their lives outside the star gazing club.

As these conversations are going on, the group almost in unison turn to look at the western sky. It’s another popular activity, one that happens about once a week. The mobile star that Sam pointed out to me last week, the weekly Earth transport, comes into view. Everyone waits as it decelerates and enters orbit. Over toward the horizon, a red beacon appears and then changes to different colors as we’ve seen before. The Prism Welcome lights up the sky. Danica explains that this is a highlight of the week as the Prism Welcome is not seen every night. Everyone in the group enjoys this sight, making them feel like the planet is welcoming them once again. It makes them feel like there’re home here on Prism.

The group continues by setting up their telescopes to look for objects in the local solar system. We’re tired. It’s been a long day and tomorrow may turn out to be longer. Also, we’ve probably learned everything we’re going to learn about Bob and Clara. Time to return to the hotel and prepare for what the morning might bring. Sam and I start the long walk back to the Phantom, talking about all we’ve seen and learned during the day at the shops as well as the clubs. The distance to the hotel must have been shorter than I thought. Before hardly any time at all, we’re back.

Chapter 17, Day 13 on Prism

The next day is a good day for two reasons. First (and I'm sure you saw this coming) the peeper call is ready. Second, Doc tells us Clara is beginning to show signs of improvement. He still thinks it's not a good idea for us to talk to her yet but she's no longer in a coma. It's great that she's improving and it's OK that we can't talk to her yet. We have peepers to find.

Sam and I head over to Eolai's lab. Mia is already there. Eolai has done a good job engineering the peeper call. It can actually do more than call a peeper but for now that's all we want it to do. He first shows us how to load videos from our camera into the peeper call. Next, he gives us instructions on how to play them back. Videos can be scheduled to play automatically at intervals configurable from once a second to once a day, and any video can also be selected to play at the push of a button.

Eolai already loaded some of the videos we took: one from Thalia, one from Clio, and one from Euterpe. All of them are happy red-shift greetings. No sad ones. He gives us detailed instruction on how to operate the peeper call and then some time to practice. The operation is rather easy and the practice time lets us prove something very important. I get to see the peeper call transmissions and I can verify that they do accurately transmit what we want them to transmit. When a happy flash is transmitted, I see it as a happy flash. I'm the foremost authority in the science of peeper call interpretation. The flash makes me happy so it works. That's all we have to go on.

OK that does it. I'm sold and am almost out the door before I hear a big "whoa" from Eolai.

"It's great you're all excited but before you leave, I think it might be a good idea to have a plan in place," Eolai interjects. "Like where are you going, how will you use the peeper call when you get there, how long will you stay, and what will you do if it doesn't work?"

"Most importantly, what will you do if it does work? How will we move forward after getting re-peeped? I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that the plan forward wouldn't be just saying 'Hi, nice to see you again' and then coming back to Dathanna. What do we want from the peepers, other than friendship, and how do we get them to do whatever that thing is we want? We need to make a plan now before the peepers wander off again."

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Those are all valid points. I give it some thought and realize my plan once we found the peepers was just to ask them to join us on a visit to Dara Baile. It's obvious to me that they'd be glad to help so I'm sure they'd come with if I ask, if I ask politely. Maybe, just maybe, that may not be a well thought out plan. One thing is that peepers can't hear so how can I ask them? Need to think this out a bit more.

I suggest for now that we forget about what to do when we find the peepers. First things first. We should talk about where to go to find them, which is the easy question. The obvious place to start looking is the river where they disappeared four days ago. All agree that makes sense. I mean no other place is reasonable. Even Sam agrees.

Next, how often should we use the peeper call? There's some pro and con discussion on this. Is often like once a minute reasonable or not? The consensus is no, once a minute is too often. The peepers only emit happy feelings occasionally, when there's something to be happy about. Once a minute might be too often, kind of a happy overload condition. We do need to use it often enough to attract them since they might wander by our area for only a short time and we wouldn't want to miss that opportunity. But not too often. Suggestions are all over the place, from every five minutes to once an hour. Without any agreement there's only one highly scientific way to solve this. We write each suggestion on a piece of paper, put them all in a bowl, and pull out a winner. Done and done. Once every ten minutes it is!

Getting closer to going out the door! The next item we need to agree on is how long do we try to find the peepers before we give up. Maybe it doesn't really matter if we have a firm time here. Something on the order of a few days makes sense. We'll try our best and decide when to return based on what feels right. Again, there are no objections because no one knows what's right. There's no precedence to go on. We'll start our search at the site where we last saw the peepers and stay there for maybe two days. If we have no luck, we'll walk down the river a few kilometers and try again for a day. No luck, repeat in another spot. Then, if we still fail, we'll come back to town because we'll be out of food.

Now it's time to get back to the big question, what to do if we find them. The reason we want the peepers is to get them to wander Dara Baile where we can record their flashes and hopefully find something that can be identified as making them sad. Getting them to go there is the eventual goal. First there's a timing problem. We won't want the peepers to go to Dara Baile as soon as we find them. The site will need some preparation so we can make it look and feel like it did when the illnesses started. We'll need to get a few people operating construction equipment, materials to use to build something, and meals and break periods scheduled as normal. Basically, bring it back as a real, active, construction site. We

want them to react, so we need to give them as much of the original setting to react to as we can.

All this will take effort to get into place. To give us time to get it staged once the peepers appear, Sam will come back to town to let everyone know the good news. I'll stay and keep an eye on the peepers. When the site is ready, Sam will return, we'll spend one more night and start walking to Dathanna the next morning. Hopefully the peepers will follow us like they did before. If not, we'll need to think this out another way. For now, that's the only plan we have.

"Agreed?" I ask. Yes, everyone agrees to the plan. Mia goes off to get food from Clara's restaurant for our excursion. Clara's staff is still able to keep it open. We go back to our rooms and pack what we need. Back in the meeting room later that afternoon, Mia hands us our food, we add it to the pack, and we're ready. Hi ho, hi ho, to peeper land we go.

The river isn't far but it's very late in the day before we get on our way. Even though not very far, it still takes a while to walk there. We get to the shore just in time to unpack everything, set up camp, and have dinner.

Sam and I have our normal run of the mill conversation over dinner. Part of it is what I consider to be a very interesting thought. "You know," I start, "when peepers are sad, they emit a flash of light with a trailing blue shift. I wonder if that's a trait for all creatures. Even on Earth. Don't people who are sad often say they're blue? And in many parts of the world, people sing the blues. I wonder where that adage came from, the blues. Do you think that blue is a sad color for the entire universe? Or do you think that, maybe, people on Earth are channeling peepers from Prism?"

For some reason I get no response to any of my very profound questions. But even with no verbal response, one thing about Sam I'm able to recognize is her expression when she thinks I'm crazy. That's definitely her expression now. A long sigh and a smile, all together. It's the secret code between us that we both know. It's kind of like the score we keep, the one that's now 260 to 0. Same with this look that means "you're crazy." Sam has given me that look several times.

With that, dinner abruptly ends. The sun has been set for a long time. We agree to wait until the morning to place our first call to a peeper. I guess I can wait one more day but I'm not happy about it. I get in my sleeping bag, fall fast asleep, and start dreaming. Happy dreams, probably because I like it here on Prism. The soft changing colors of the trees have lulled me to sleep and invaded my dreams.

A few minutes later, I wake up apparently because I forgot to turn the light off. I sit up to find the light switch and it suddenly dawns on me that we don't have any

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lights out here. I must have been dreaming about something with light. Perhaps about when I was a little boy.

I've been having a lot of dreams about my youth since my arrival on Prism. I had trouble sleeping in the dark back when I was young. There was always a night light on in the hallway. I can see it now, in my mind's eye. That comforting image fills my thoughts as I lean back, close my eyes, and drift off to sleep again. I envision the comfort of the night light of my youth, a very realistic envisioning as it turns back on. The light wakes me up again. This time, as I open my eyes, I feel a weight on my chest and look down to see Thalia. Thalia? Yes, Thalia! I would recognize those eyes anywhere, all three of them.

I get up to talk to her but then realize I can't. No ears, remember? Ah, but I do have something that I can say this time, something I could not before. I activate the peeper call and flash a happy 'hi.' Thalia looks at me with a look I have never seen on her before. We just stare at each other.

Some more movement. The flash seems to have drawn Clio and Euterpe out of hiding. The three peeperteers are back! They all look at each other with strange glances, confusing glances, the same as when Thalia just looked at me. I feel they're confused. Not a bad confused, just not knowing what to do. Well join the party. I've no idea either.

They walk over to the peeper call, walk all around it, and examine every piece there is. Clio looks up at me, then at the peeper call, then at me again. Then she takes a step closer to the machine and repeats the process of looking around at me and the machine.

I think she wants me to show her how it works. I load the video of her happy flash so that it can be activated by pressing the button and then I press it. They all immediately jump back and start flashing madly at each other. I have no idea what they're thinking. I hope I didn't insult them or make them mad. I wouldn't be happy if they ran away again after all this time.

Good news. They don't run away. They look at me and sigh. Not a verbal sigh since they don't talk. But each of them emits a long soft light that slowly fades into darkness. If I were capable of inventing a peeper sigh, I think that's what I would come up with. One thing I'm sure of though, is that the idea people have that no Prism life is sentient is clearly not the right idea.

The peepers sigh again, a shorter sigh this time, then walk over to the closest tree and fall asleep. It looks like they know it's too late to do anything more tonight or maybe they just need the night to think some more about what this all means. I'm exhausted too. We should all take advantage of a good night's sleep to refresh

Jack Verson

ourselves. But I can't fall sleep since all I can think of now is how I'm going to tell Sam in the morning. Whatever words I use to tell her, I'm sure "surprise" will be one of them.

Chapter 18 – Day 14 on Prism

I get up early the next morning feeling well rested and immediately aware of the world, which is unusual for me this time of day. I guess my awareness is due to some extra adrenalin flowing in anticipation of telling Sam the big news. I haven't been this excited in some time. It's ironic that we spent so much time building a peeper call and planned so carefully how to use it correctly when it turns out we didn't actually need it.

But that's not important. What's important is how to tell Sam we have peepers again and I think I've got that figured out. We'll start breakfast this morning, talk for a while, and then I'll say I need to get the peeper call so we can start. I'll walk back to my tent, pick up the peeper call, put Thalia on top, and walk out saying "surprise"! She might be irritated when she realizes I knew all along but I'm sure she'll admit it's all done in good fun. And she'll be happy to see the peepers so it will be doubly OK. I can't forget to say "surprise!"

I hear Sam get up and leave her tent. Great timing. I turn around to ask her about breakfast. The next word I hear from her is "surprise!" She's walking toward me carrying Clio in her left hand. Well, I was right about one thing. The word "surprise" was definitely part of the morning conversation. Some thoughts about best laid plans enter my mind and just as quickly leave it. I do, however, feel cheated because the smile on Sam's face is bigger than mine.

The five of us enjoy breakfast together. Our coffee and muffins and their leaves. I think I might have been offered a leaf by Euterpe at breakfast. Maybe not, but if I were, then she's either really friendly today or has a good sense of humor. Whatever, being offered a leaf is a grand gesture. Strange also. All three of our Prism friends seem to be acting strange today. Perhaps strange is not the right word since we still don't know what normal is, but they're acting differently than they were acting a few days ago.

Breakfast eventually ends. As planned, Sam gets ready to walk back to town and arrange for resumption of activities at Dara Baile. However, as is often the fate of well laid plans, they're forced awry. The awryness occurs when we're stopped by Thalia. To be more precise, when Sam is stopped by her. Not aggressively but she does stand in the middle of the path as Sam starts to walk away from breakfast.

We both stare at Thalia. Then she looks at Sam and her eyed lets go of a one or two second burst of color. It's not a happy flash. It's not a sad flash. It just is and it's nothing we've ever seen before. I don't think it's anything we've seen before but I can't actually say I remember everything that Thalia has emitted in the past.

Then she walks over to me, looks up, pauses a moment, and another flash of light emerges. Non-emotion laden light. It means something. I've no doubt of that. I try to get a feeling from the peepers of what they think they're doing. I feel something, kind of a vague feeling of "back at you." What does that mean? It must be our turn to do something.

A minute passes while Sam and I talk. Clio, appearing to get frustrated, eventually walks over to me, gives me a look like I should know something that I don't, and lights up. It feels like her light pattern was similar to Thalia's. Clio's sequences start off in a shade of orange like all her flashes do. Thalia's are yellow. While they could never be exactly the same, something was similar. Then Clio goes to Sam and lights up and sits. The three peepers look at each other and sigh. Sam and I look at each other and sigh.

Now this is getting scary. An interesting type of scary. It sure looks to me like the peepers figured out something. They know we somehow cracked their code. We can send happy flashes. We couldn't before. We must have figured something out, right? What would they do if they thought we were smart enough to understand them? I know that's a far fetch for creatures that look like us but that's the only thing that makes sense. I ask myself what I would do in that situation if I were a peeper. What else, try to teach us something new.

Sam and I suddenly realize we've been slacking on our duties. We should have been recording these flashes all along. Better late than never, we take out our camera. The peepers look at us and seem to know what we want them to do. Thalia walks over to me, waits, and eventually lights up. Then she almost immediately looks at Sam and lights up. Thalia is trying to tell us something, that there's something similar with each of us but also different.

Clio and Euterpe get up and act like Thalia did, sending signals to both of us. We add those flashes of light to our recordings. No clue what they mean but it's pretty clear that they're trying to say something about Sam and me, something they figured out that we already know. They want us to know that they now understand something like we now understand something. We just have to figure out what that something is.

I load the six flash sequences we have into the peeper call, three flashes directed at me, one from each peeper, and another three for Sam. We look at them all again. I really think the ones addressed to me are more sophisticated than those for Sam. I tell Sam that and she responds with some insulting comment about male egos. I've no idea what she means.

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I decide to try an experiment to gather some more information. I ask Sam to step aside for a moment. I look at Thalia and from the peeper call, play back one of the light sequences that was originally addressed to me. She looks at me and lets out a short pulse of light. I was ready for that and my camera records the response. Next, I do the same thing, except I play back a sequence originally addressed to Sam. This evokes another response that I also record.

I walk away from the camera and peeper call and ask Sam to do the same thing I just did. Exactly the same. The look on her face lets me know she understands where this is going. She does as I ask. She stands in front of the peeper call next to Thalia, plays the light sequence addressed to me and records Thalia's response. Then she does the same thing by playing the light sequence originally addressed to her.

Time for a break. We examine the flashes. The results are what we both expected, what we both hoped for, and nevertheless what we're both startled to find. I thought that the flashes sent in my direction were for the name the peepers gave me. The flashes aimed at Sam were the name the peepers gave Sam. When I played the flash for my name in front of me, we got a response from Thalia. That was the same response we got when Sam's name was played in front of her. It's like we were asking Thalia if the names were right and Thalia said "yes."

We look at Thalia's response when I played Sam's name in front of me and when Sam played my name in front of her. As expected, those responses were also the same. The same but definitely not "yes." My name is not Sam. Sam's name is not me. We just learned four new peeper words: Vernon, Sam, yes, and no.

The peepers can speak, not with words but they can speak with lights. And now we can start to speak back to them. We know six words. Not exactly six words but we do know six thoughts. We can be happy. We can be sad. We can say my name and Sam's name. And we can say yes and no. Understanding the words in real time as they say them is hard. They speak fast. Well, they flash fast. We can't understand them at the time they say them but we can understand by recording the flashes and analyzing them later. Maybe Eolai can work with this to build the first peeper-human, human-peeper translator.

This finding is significant enough to justify changing our master plan. Dara Baile can wait. We need time to study what we learned and recorded today. We have to analyze the words said by Clio, by Thalia, and by Euterpe. They all said Sam and they all said Vernon, or whatever names they gave us. Each peeper said the same thing with different colors but definitely the same, somehow. There has to be something in common that will let us understand their language. I doubt it will

matter that one started out as orange, one as yellow, and one as green. That's not any different than hearing the same word spoken by someone with a high voice and then someone with a low voice. The peeper code has been handed to us to crack. We need to do just that. I'm excited to be part of this discovery and find the entire process very illuminating.

I want to tell the peepers the good news. I turn to them, get the peeper call, and send out a happy message. They understand. I somehow know they do.

We decide I'll return to Dathanna and Sam will stay with the peepers. The decision for me to return to Dathanna alone is a careful calculation by Sam and me. The hope is by having Sam stay with the peepers, that we won't lose them again. Sam will keep track of them if they wander off. Hopefully they'll want to stay with her. Either one works. Of course, Sam can probably not follow them if they run off into the Prism vegetation but it's the best we can do. I take my camera, leaving Sam with the peeper call, and head back to town.

I wonder how long it'll take Eolai to analyze all the peeper sequences we recorded. On the walk back, I try to think what to call these sequences. They're more than just flashes of light. Are they words? No, that isn't right either, they're more than words. The six light patterns we know from the peepers are more like six thoughts. Four of them, yes, no, Vernon, and Sam, could be thoughts or words. But the other two, happy and sad, aren't just words, they're thoughts or possibly feelings, but not words. The way the peepers use those two don't easily translate into words. But the idea that they're feelings does seem to fit. Happy and sad light patterns are definitely feelings. "Yes" might not be just "yes," it might be their way of feeling positive. Likewise, for "no." And how about my name and Sam's name. We don't really know how that translates to Prism talk but I'll bet it has something to do about how they feel about us. Didn't I say that I felt my name was more sophisticated? Quite insightful peepers we have here. These peeper light flashes are feelings. We need to call them that.

Eolai and Mia are surprised to see me, just me that is, as the original plan was for Sam to return and for me to stay or for us both to return together. The option of just Vernon was not on the table when we left. I explain the reason and they appear to be almost as excited as I am. What we have, or potentially have, is something more than was hoped for when Sam and I left on our peeper search.

Eolai, professional that he is, knows what he has to do to start finding meaning in a peeper feeling and he's eager to start. Mia is also excited, not surprisingly. What is surprising is that Mia wants to be in the lab when the peeper emissions are analyzed. It's a big thing and she's going to be there. A gubernatorial edict or a

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mayoral edict. Take your pick. It's already late afternoon but no one wants to wait until the morning to start. So, off to the lab camera in hand we go.

The first thing that needs to be done is to compare feelings from each of the three peepers; feelings we know have the same meaning. We have the most videos for what we believe to be them saying "Vernon." That's where we start. We have to go on faith that they're all saying "Vernon" and that each of them feels the same way about me, so that the light flashes turn out to somehow be the same. If not, we're probably lost.

That decision marks the first step in our analysis. We'll look at the three peepers saying my name and we'll assume they are all saying the same thing. Step one. A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. Whatever a mile is, we've started.

Step two. We decided what to look at, now we need to know what to look for. We have three flashes, one per peeper. What to look for? That's already been answered. We solved happy and sad flashes by looking at wavelength, or frequency, which are more or less the same thing. We can only assume that's the way it works with all peeper feelings.

The third step is how to measure wavelengths. We'll need to measure these in much more detail and much more accurately than we did before. Before for happy and sad, we only looked at changes in wavelength and noticed red and blue shifts. This time we'll need some more precision. And again, we have only one answer for how this can be done. We need to use Eolai's spectral analyzer.

By now it's really getting late. We look at the clock to see how much time we have to do this analysis. It's almost midnight. Although no one really wants to, the best thing to do is to get a good night's sleep. We agree to break until morning.

Chapter 19 – Day 15 on Prism

Everyone's up early. It's hard to sleep when this could be the most significant day in the history of human-peeper relations. Early means 6:00 A.M. Even for me and that says a lot. Down to breakfast to get energy for what I hope is going to be a big day. I enjoy my final morning cup of good Prism coffee and apparently enjoy that along with a surprise. Sam is sitting at the table next to me enjoying her morning coffee. She sees me and I wait. I know she's going to say "surprise." I wait for it, wait a little more, and a little more, and finally, there it is, she smiles and says – "hi." Only hi? That may be the first time I'm surprised by not being surprised.

She's here because the peepers decided to leave camp last night. She didn't want to lose them so she followed and wound up following them all the way to Dathanna and to the hotel. They didn't come inside, they don't like insides, but they were apparently willing to relax outside while she went to her room, got a good night's sleep, and eventually came down to grab some breakfast. She points to the window and there outside are Thalia and the group having their own breakfasts. "Surprise!" is her gleeful exclamation.

We wonder why the peepers decided to come into town. Maybe they think something important is going to happen and want to be here when it does. Or maybe they just want to watch, possibly to help, to observe, or to laugh. Or maybe it was just time for them to move on. Who knows but here they are.

Sam ran into Mia when she arrived late last night. Sam knows about what happened yesterday and is ready to join the group.

Everyone else is already in the lab by the time we arrive. We bring out the same three peeper produced "Vernon" feelings we had yesterday. Now how do we do this analysis? All we have are peeper feelings and they're just colors. We somehow have to measure those colors. How do we measure colors? We can measure their wavelengths. That's a start. But the flash that a peeper emits contains a bunch of different colors and they look like they're always changing. Does a peeper send one color at a time or many colors at the same time, how often do the colors change, and what does a color change mean? A lot of questions.

The spectral analyzer can help to answer those questions. It can look at a light sequence from one peeper and determine what color or color combination is transmitted at the start. And how long that set of colors is transmitted before it changes to a new set. Once the original color set changes, it can reset and analyze the sequence from that point on for a new set of colors. And on and on for the

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entire light sequence. This converts a peeper feeling into a series of colors and associated durations.

For our first test, we feed Thalia's light sequence when she said my name into the analyzer. The analysis produces a series of colors and times as we expected. My name starts with a single color of wavelength 568 nm and that lasts for 15 milliseconds. 568 nm is a wavelength we see as yellow but not what we'd call pure yellow. There are many shades of yellow. We're going to call this one "Thalia Yellow." Following this is burst that's a combination of a shade of green and a shade of cyan. That burst is a bit shorter, lasting for 10 milliseconds. The entire list is quite lengthy. There are many sets of colors and durations. The most significant take away is that each color burst remains stable for a long time, at least a few milliseconds. Even one millisecond is a long time in light waves. It proves that waves being generated by the peepers are intentional. Colors are generated consciously, not randomly.

We're getting somewhere now. We learned that a feeling consists of a series of stable bursts of color. We really need to come up with a term to call these bursts. What name can we give them that'll describe them accurately? Suggestions of mini-waves and mini-feelings are made. Possibly accurate but something doesn't seem right about either of these. I come up with a combination of peeper and feeling and suggest calling them peelings. People are getting tired of my sense of humor so that one is quickly voted down. Then Sam suggests the obvious, "peeps." Unanimous agreement! A light emission from a peeper is, from now on, defined to consist of a series of peeps. Each period of time where the set of colors remains unchanged is a peep.

We've already run Thalia's "Vernon" feeling through Eolai's equipment and came up with a series of peeps. We do the same thing for Clio's. One thing is immediately obvious and very interesting. Both feelings contain exactly the same number of peeps. We run the feeling from Euterpe. Her peep count is also identical. Another reason to believe this isn't random.

Now the hard part. Comparing peeps. Well, we get lucky again. Each peep, and there are almost 100 peeps in my name, each peep is about the same length. Not all the peeps but peeps in the same position. For Thalia, remember that the first two peeps were 15 and 10 milliseconds. That's also the time for the first two peeps from Clio. Euterpe's were 14 and 9 but that's close enough. She must be a very fast talker. This similarity continues for the entire feeling, for all peeps.

That was the hard part. Now it's time for the real hard part. Comparing colors in the peeps. We know that the colors are different between the three peepers.

Everything they say is always different since they always start with a different color, yellow for Thalia, orange for Clio, and green for Euterpe. How can we prove to ourselves that this doesn't matter and that they're all really saying the same thing?

Eolai seems to think he has an answer or at least something he wants to try. "There must be something significant about the color that each peeper seems to prefer, that each feeling starts with. Let's take a look at that, starting with Thalia. Her first peep is yellow, what we just decided to call 'Thalia yellow.' Maybe this is her basic pitch, like a person who talks in a high voice as compared to another person who talks in a low voice. What can we do to base Thalia's speech on this color? There may be several ideas here but one that makes sense is to see how the colors in her feeling change, how different they become from Thalia yellow as her feeling progresses."

What Eolai does now is very perceptive. He reruns Thalia's feeling through the computer but doesn't have the computer calculate the wavelengths of each color in each peep. Instead, he has the computer tell us how much those wavelengths differ from Thalia yellow. Differ by percentages, that is. Eolai has the computer analyze her entire feeling to produce a sequence of numbers that describe what Thalia is saying, just like the sequence of numbers before. But the new numbers no longer describe exact light wavelengths. They describe how her voice goes up and down in pitch as she speaks. These new numbers tell us how Thalia actually says what she does. It's kind of like a tenor and a baritone singing the same song. Each singer sings different notes but we can recognize them as the same song.

Once we have Thalia's new analysis, we get a new one for Clio, and one for Euterpe. And voila! We have a major breakthrough. The new numbers, the ones where we calculate colors as percentage differences and not as absolute wavelengths, show us what we hoped we'd see. These numbers are almost the same for all three peepers. All three peepers said "Vernon" and all said it the same way, only in different pitches. It turns out that Clio is our baritone, Thalia is our tenor, and Euterpe is our soprano. And we can now understand them all.

Where does this put us? What can we do now that we couldn't do earlier and what can we still not do? What we can do is take a video of a feeling, feed it into a computer, and figure out its peeps. We can compare feelings between two peepers to see if they're the same or not. And if it's a feeling that's already in our dictionary, we can understand what it means.

What we still can't do is quite a bit. We can't understand the meaning of a feeling by looking at it in real time. We need to record it so it can be analyzed by a

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computer. We can't understand anything at all, even with the help of a computer, unless it's already in our dictionary, and that dictionary right now is very small.

Considering that there's a lot we can't do, what we found out today is still a lot more substantial than anything we found out before. While it may be substantial, there isn't much we can do with it yet. Our Prism vocabulary dictionary is quite small. It takes a long time to understand what we do know and a very long time to add new words. If Thalia were to look at me and say "Yes, Vernon," I could figure that out. It might take me an hour but I would eventually understand. Is that good or bad? If I asked Thalia that question, she would probably say "Yes, Vernon."

Another good day's work. We must be a little closer to solving the problem we came here to solve. We need to put this peeper knowledge, as they say, in our back pocket. Tomorrow, we go to Dara Baile. Tonight, we go get dinner to celebrate.

Chapter 20 – Day 16 on Prism

At breakfast the next morning, Sam and I talk about all that was accomplished the day before. The conversation is mostly filled with compliments of each other on a job well done. It feels good.

When we've done that long enough, Sam says, "I know we've just started finding out about Prism-speak but it's hard to stop just when we're getting on a roll. I've a strong feeling that there's so much more that we can find out by examining the few speech videos we already have. I really want to continue. Besides, this sort of stuff is fun. Isn't it time we had a little fun?"

My sentiments exactly. It surprises me that they're also Sam's sentiments. She's normally very level headed. All business. At least that's how she comes across most of the time. It's nice she's letting me see another side of her. Be that as it may, now it's my time to wait this out until reality sinks in. Yes, it's fun. Yes, I would enjoy breaking a few more peeper codes with Sam. But there is this thing called reality which unfortunately is going to win in just a few more moments.

Sam finally starts speaking again "But I also understand why we came here, that we have to go to Dara Baile, that we have to solve this sickness issue, because that's our job. Right? Yeah, I know it's right. But, right now I wish it wasn't."

So, it goes. We finish our breakfast, finish complementing ourselves, which takes a bit longer, and get ready for our trip to Dara Baile. We have to decide how to best take advantage of what we hope will be the presence there of Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe. Before we get to that point, we decide to stop in and see how Clara is doing.

For the first time, Clara is awake and we're allowed into the hospital room to talk to her. Small talk to start, comparing where we came from back on Earth, the PSD trip to Prism, what it's like living here, and things like that. We're supposed to find out what was unusual about Clara's activities on Prism that might contribute to her illness but no questions pop into my mind to ask.

Sam's a little better. She asks what Clara had been doing in the weeks before she got sick, if she remembers Bob Jones, if they did anything together, and if she remembers Bob ever complaining about getting sick.

Clara responds but not with any information that might be helpful. Yes, she remembers Bob. They bumped into each other often at the star gazing club. She doesn't remember anything interesting that they saw, just that she enjoyed looking at the sky and doing the normal activities scheduled by the club. Bob did take her to Dara Baile one time to show her the site. That time was before either she or Bob

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got sick. Maybe about three months before. Then she was back a few more times delivering lunches. She was sad about Bob's death. Bob was a nice man. She didn't really know him that well but what she could remember was all positive.

We thank her and leave. Doc is outside the door and updates us on Clara's condition. She appears to be recovering but still has some digestive issues that seem to come and go. He's going to keep Clara in the hospital for a few more days. He hopes she'll be able to go home soon. That's about all we can do here. Not really anything new but at least it's good that she's recovering. I make some notes, mental as well as written, to refer to later if needed. For now, on to Dara Baile.

We pack a couple of sandwiches since the walk there and back, plus the time we'll spend on site, should be a few hours and it's already 10:00. We go outside at 10:30 and meet Thalia, Clio, Euterpe, and Oscar. Remember that Oscar is the head of Dara Baile construction. Besides a sudden flurry of work over the last day trying to get Dara Baile up to full construction activity, or at least to a facsimile of that level, he has had a lot of time on his hands. That allows him time to act as our tour guide today and he's certainly the best person to do so.

We start our walk and are happy to see that our best friends on Prism have decided to tag along on the trek. We didn't really have a good plan for convincing them to come if they hadn't volunteered themselves to do so. Luckily, we don't have to worry about that now. On to Dara Baile as part of a Prism parade of people and peepers. It's the most alliterative thing that has happened since our arrival. Sam and I are armed with the peeper call, cameras to record any peeper feelings we might see, and, of course our sandwiches.

The three-kilometer walk takes us about an hour. Much slower than expected. We could have made it in less time but peepers are not the fastest walkers on Prism. Also, the destination is on a small hill overlooking the river where we saw the sparkles. Walking uphill slows us down.

When we get near the top just before entering Dara Baile, we look down the hillside over a breathtaking view all the way to the river. The view is one of the most impressive sights on all of Prism. One of the most impressive local sights that is, looking down over the softly sloping hill from the Dara Baile highland to the river. The hill is full of wild flowers or possibly just wild plants. It's sometimes hard to tell the difference with all the colors on Prism. There are reds and greens and whites and yellows and blues. As we've seen wherever we go on this planet, the reds are not just one red, they're all reds. The blues are not just one blue, they're all blues. They vacillate, they shimmer, they glisten. The greens gleam

green always, but different greens. Even the whites manage to glow in different whites. For each of them, we see one color slowly morphing into another.

The view reminds me of tulip gardens near Amsterdam in the early spring. Rows and rows of tulips. A row of red bordered by a row of yellow, or of orange, or white. All rows together forming a bright blanket of different colors that extend for what seems like forever. Even in comparison to the beauty of The Netherlands, the sight on Prism is spectacular; more spectacular than anything you can see anywhere on Earth. The colors are brighter. The borders between colors are not as rigid as those formed by rows of something planted by humans since nothing here was planted by anyone. There's nothing on Earth that can match such a display.

Sam and I stop for several minutes to enjoy the sight. I'm sure we could stay here all day if we had the time. At least I know I could. I need to remember this sight. To show my friends when I return to Earth, I take a video starting on the hillside and panning down all the way to the river. As I finish, I look down to see Thalia by my side. She's also enjoying the view, at least I think she is. She looks at the hillside and then at me and then back to the hillside. I sense something from her. Something I can't place exactly yet, but something I can feel to a greater extent than I could a few days ago. Perhaps it's happiness, or contentment, or just the effect from thoughts of home. She's part of Prism so I can't know exactly what it is, but I know it's stronger than just being happy.

Eventually we realize we have to move on to Dara Baile and complete the short walk up what remains of the hill. The town looks active as promised. There are people walking in the streets. There are builders working on adding new floors to buildings in the town. There are painters. There are food vendors with snacks and lunch and drinks. Looks like we didn't need to pack sandwiches after all.

The town is being built but there's not very much finished yet. Looking past the people, Dara Baile itself reminds me of pictures I've seen of old wild west towns in the United States. Ghost towns. A dirt road leads through the main part of town. A dirt road lined by small wooden buildings, each one or two stories tall. Most of the buildings in Dara Baile aren't finished. They look like they could have been old buildings that were completed once but have now decayed over time. I can't see a horse hitching post anywhere, otherwise the picture I envision in my mind would be complete.

The peepers also glance around. They don't appear to be too impressed. Certainly not happy like they were on the walk up here, but also not sad or upset. They flash some feelings among each other. None that I can sense as good or bad, but Sam

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and I still both record whatever it is they're saying. Eolai may want to look at it later in case it might mean something.

Oscar explains the buildings to us. Most of them are just houses that residents will eventually live in and stores to maintain some of their basic needs. Nothing will actually be too important to maintain in Dara Baile at the start. If something is urgently needed, it won't be difficult to get it from the great metropolitan town of Dathanna only three kilometers away. Keeping stock of some items in Dara Baile will be a convenience but not a necessity.

There's one smaller building that Oscar says is a post office. I just nod, not thinking much about it. Oscar says this will be the first post office on Prism. Right now, there's only one town. There's no need for an organized way to send items anywhere else since there's no "anywhere else" to send them to. If someone has something that another person needs, they just walk over and hand it to them. Soon they hope, there will be two towns. People won't want to walk between them to deliver every little item. One post office will be built in Dathanna and another one here. Whatever is dropped at one will be delivered to the other a few times a day.

There you go. A lesson about progress on Prism.

We continue to walk around the yet-to-be-completed town. Behind the partially finished buildings, we see some abandoned shovels, tools, and a small bulldozer-like piece of equipment. There's someone on top of the bulldozer as it starts to move. One of the actors pretending to restart construction operations in Dara Baile. Beyond these abandoned tools is the start of a residential area with the beginnings of a few small two-story houses. I hear the plan is to build enough houses to hold 1000 residents.

The peepers continue to be fairly unanimated in their lights and disinterested in what the town has to offer. If the trip here is to find something we're doing terribly wrong so we can correct it, then the trip here seems to be a complete failure. Either that or the peepers do not have the ability to sense what the problem is.

As we walk around the last row of partially built houses, something seems to catch the eye of Euterpe. Sam and I also notice movement in the distance. Oscar sees it too. Walking towards us from the side of one of the buildings are four, uh, four somethings.

What we have here is another form of Prism life. At first glance, they kind of look like rabbits. They are pure white and remind me of rabbits some people might keep as pets or that others would raise for a 4-H project. Right size, right shape, same type of fur. This Prism animal is close to a rabbit, but, as we can't expect to find Earth rabbits on Prism, there are some differences. I notice one. The basic shape is

that of a rabbit except that both front and rear legs are small and appear to let them walk. There are no oversized back legs. These rabbits don't hop.

I think out loud, "Something else is missing, something I know I've seen on all Earth rabbits, but I can't quite figure out what it is."

"Oh, come on," says Sam who can hear me, "you really can't figure this one out? Let me ask you a question. What was the last time you saw a rabbit without ears?"

Good thing I stopped keeping score. This comment might not have earned Sam a point but I definitely would have lost one, and I'm already at zero. Of course, no ears. There's no reason for ears on any Prism life. Especially this one, which is definitely a Prism rabbit. It has the standard row of three eyes on its forehead. No ears, but three eyes.

We look at our four earless rabbits. They walk over and look at us. I sense they are amazed at seeing something this strange. They must have seen workers before, but I imagine every sighting of a human is weird from their point of view. I still think it strange every time I see some animal with three eyes. They think the same for only two eyes. On top of that, an animal with weird things growing from the side of its head must be quite a sight.

The peepers walk over to the rabbits and talk. Or flash at each other in obvious Prism-talk. That would have been quite surprising if we hadn't seen the peepers and sparkles talking to each other a few days ago. Now not so surprising. Nothing like that exists on Earth. There are no cases of two different species talking to each other. Maybe one can make the case that some people talk to their pets. But how many pets talk back to their people in a way that people can understand? I bet very few. Here we have peepers talking freely to rabbits and rabbits talking freely to peepers. And why am I not surprised to see that rabbits and peepers are good friends? Rabbits and peeps are often seen together on Earth, are they not? On Prism, it now seems almost certain that everyone talks to everyone else.

I just stare at all that's going on among our new hoard of Prism life. Should I be doing something more than just staring? Nope! Staring is what it's all about for me. For Sam however, as someone from the head-on-straight persuasion, there's something more important. She has been recording all this inter-species conversation since the start. That's what we agreed to do. We both should have been doing it for backup or in case one of us sees something the other doesn't. If anyone asks why these recordings only exist on Sam's camera, I'll say I acted in my management capacity and delegated that job to Sam. Two recordings are good but not needed this time. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. I'm just not going to tell it to Sam.

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I do actually have one important management responsibility I need to attend to and I get right on it. It's lunch time. I unpack our sandwiches, hand one to Oscar, one to Sam, and sit down with the other and with our rabbit and peeper life to share a meal.

As I'm enjoying my sandwich, one of the rabbits whom I'll call Peter, walks over, looks me in the face, and flashes some feeling at me. I have no idea what he said, but he looks confused when I don't reply. He jumps onto my lap and looks me straight between the eyes. I can sense he's shocked when he remembers that we don't have that third eye. He looks to Thalia and they say something to each other. Peter looks at me and emits one of those long soft sighs, the same as Thalia did when we reconnected a few days ago by the river. I guess I can add "sigh" to the list of known Prism vocabulary. And it's still the only one I can recognize as it's being said without the need of Eolai's analyzer.

We spend the rest of the afternoon looking through all the buildings, looking at the equipment, looking at the construction site. All this is done with willing peeper escort. No reaction from them. Either I'm losing my touch with Prism life or there's nothing in Dara Baile that makes any difference. Before we know it, it's late afternoon and, even though we have plenty of time to walk back to Dathanna, we decide to leave now. There seems to be nothing left to do here and no reason to stay any longer. We pack up and head out.

Sam, Oscar, and I start to walk down the path to Dathanna. Then we stop. Something is missing. The walk up to Dara Baile was a parade of Prism and Earth life. The start of the walk back just has Earthlings. Some very intelligent Earthlings if I do say so myself, but only Earthlings.

I look back and see Thalia. She looks at me with another new expression and another new outburst of light. While I've never seen this feeling before and have no idea exactly what it says, I do know what it means. If I thought I was getting out of touch with Prism life, I no longer think that way. I'm getting more in touch, at least with Thalia. As sure as I could feel which way a leaf was going to fall back in Illinois, and as sure as I could feel which way the wind was going to blow, that's how sure I feel now about what Thalia is saying. She's saying she wants us to spend the night in Dara Baile. She's demanding we do so.

Thalia is getting quite pushy. She and her cohorts aren't the same timid peepers we met about two weeks ago. I've no idea why we should spend a night in this incomplete town. I'm not certain what we might learn but I'm interested to find out. I know we're being asked to stay, that we better, and that most importantly, it'll be worth our time if we do so. Finally, I know that I'll regret it if we don't.

I mention this to the group, the human group. Oscar isn't interested. He's going back to Dathanna. Sam knows she's here for a reason and that staying in Dara Baile is part of that reason. Sam and I stay. Oscar leaves. Sam, Euterpe, Clio, Thalia, a fluffle of rabbits, and I say goodbye to Oscar.

The show is now run by the peepers or maybe the rabbits. We aren't really sure what the hierarchy is here. Neither of us studied Prism politics in school.

If we're going to spend time together and if we're going to document what we learn, we need to come up with names for the rabbits just like we came up with names for the peepers. This time we decide to let them tell us their names. If they have names, we should use those. It would be an insult to make up our own.

I know how to ask them for their names. I use the same method we used to get the peepers to divulge our names, the names they use for us. I get out the peeper call and find Thalia. I point to myself and play one of the peeper feelings we recorded, the one for the name the peepers call me. Then I point to Sam and play her name. Finally, I point to one of the rabbits and wait. Thalia understands and sends a short pulse of light to the rabbit. He waits, looks at me, and sends a longer pulse of light in my direction. I record that, assume it's his name, and play it back. The rabbit smiles. That's enough for me to go on. I got it right.

Not sure what to do about it yet. We have a name that is a sequence of colors, not words. It's a name nonetheless. We'll worry about how to handle such a colorful name later. For now, I repeat the process and get names for the other three rabbits. It works. We have four names.

Before we start analyzing the names, we make notes so we'll be able to associate each with the right rabbit. Then we talk about how to translate those names to words we can say. Sam and I look at them hoping to get some idea. Nothing pops into our minds right away. We look at each other and shrug. Absolutely no idea. Maybe we'll just call them shrug one, shrug two, shrug three and shrug four. Just sayin'. I know, that won't work. But I had to say it.

We look a little closer. Interesting that all names seem to end the same way. The start of each is different even if the ends are not. What is there about the starts that we can use for verbal names. There's a main color in three of the names, some shade of yellow. A little different for each one but still kind of yellow. Digging into our minds for items that are yellow, we come up with appropriate names for the rabbits. We decide to call those three Lemon, Sunrise, and Banana. The fourth rabbit's name doesn't have too much yellow and we can't decide what the main color is, so we agree to stick with the name I originally called him, Peter. We now have four new friends, Lemon, Sunrise, Banana, and Peter.

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That part is done. Now we wait to see what's planned for us. After a short time, all the Prismlings get up and go for a walk into Dara Baile. They appear to be chatting as they walk and looking up at us. Thalia walks up to our case, looks at the cameras, and then at Sam and me. It's obvious she wants our cameras running. We start them.

Next Thalia looks at me and I see that expression again, the one that convinced me to stay in Dara Baile for the night. I can again feel what she wants. She wants us to follow them as, all of a sudden, they leave Dara Baile and walk through the meadows on the hill above the river. The colorful meadows that remind me of a Netherlands tulip field. Those were happy fields in The Netherlands. These are happy fields on Prism. As I continue to record all the Prism life talking to each other, Peter to Clio, Euterpe to Lemon, and Thalia to Banana, I know the fields are special to them too. We spend a lot of time on the hillside. So much time that we see the sun getting low on the horizon. There's only about an hour before the sun sets and we'll need to settle down for the night. I hope they hurry up and finish whatever they're doing.

Then, as today is full of surprises, I'm surprised when we don't go back to Dara Baile. We continue down the hillside to the river. The sun is very low by the time we arrive. It looks like we'll be spending the night here, which is a fine by us. The river is our happy place. There are few places on Prism we have visited as often as this local stream. It's a place full of warm fuzzy feelings for Sam and me.

Enjoying the river, I get a little lackadaisical and start slacking on my responsibilities. I've stopped recording. A quick glance from Thalia is all it takes to make me start again. Once she sees me recording, she scoots the rest of the way to the river and starts talking again to the sparkles who have decided to join us. They're happy to see us. Happy to see the rabbits. All is at peace with the world.

We look up at the stars. Sam and I try to make out constellations as we did when we were at the star gazers club. I can't seem to find Thalia the Peeper constellation, although Sam seems to be able to identify a new rabbit constellation. It's nice to spend the night in a make-believe world of stars and fake formations in the sky. Kind of like playing in a gigantic coloring book as a child. All the cares of a lifetime suddenly dissolve into nothing. I relax spending time with Sam by our favorite river. She does too. We both forget the rabbits and the peepers and even Prism. We are in our own world for the time being. Just the two of us.

As we gaze across the skies, we reenter the reality that is Prism as we see again that one mobile star, the star that shifts and moves in the sky, our weekly Earth transport. The peepers see it too, as do the rabbits, and the sparkles. The happy

feelings increase. For a short time. And then I get a sense of those feelings dissolving. They're replaced by sad feelings, or maybe something stronger, perhaps disappointment. It appears that the Prism life doesn't like the ship. Maybe they don't like anything from Earth. We watch for a long time as the ship enters orbit.

Feelings eventually return to normal. Then Thalia looks up at me and smiles. By this time, I'm certainly able to sense a peeper smile even without facial movement. Sunrise looks at Sam and smiles. It's obvious that they like us, Sam and me.

What are they trying to tell us? They like us so they can't have a problem with everything from Earth. They probably don't know where we're from but I'm sure they know we're not from Prism. They want us to know there's something we need to be concerned about with the spaceship. They were happy when they first saw it but then they weren't. They were clearly bothered by something the spaceship did, or was about to do, or by what it represents.

I get a feeling that Thalia and company are on our side. They're trying to tell us how to find our problem and how to fix it. We're being told that the answer to our big question is related to the spaceship. We're being told what's significant. And that we can make a change. They want us to help us. If not, then why are we being given all these hints?

Thalia had us stay the night so she could point us in the direction we want to go. She's trying to tell us what the problem is but can only go so far. The lesson for today, the ship, might not be the entire answer, but it's a start. As I said before, "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step." I now feel we've taken another step. There's nothing much more we can do tonight. Everything has been recorded for later. Thalia made sure of that. We definitely have our work cut out for us.

Thalia, Clio, Euterpe, Banana, Lemon, Sunrise, and Peter have all settled down for the night. The show's over. Sam also seems to have drifted off to sleep. I'm on my way there too. Just before I fall asleep, I realize we didn't see the Prism Welcome this time. Probably not a big deal. I was told it doesn't happen every time. This time it didn't. Something else to file away in a mental compartment for later.

Chapter 21 – Day 17 on Prism

It's the next morning and it's a great day, waking up by the shores of the river. I'm still happy from having learned so much last night about Prism from Prism natives. Or so I think. I do feel good about something. What was it? I just need to go over what I learned. Let's see. I saw a lot that made me ask a lot of questions. I know that the peepers have a way of giving us information and not giving us information at the same time. I remember some feelings about the spaceship. There's something there that's the cause, or somehow related to the cause, or might point us to the cause of the illnesses that triggered our travel to Prism. What does it all mean? The spaceship is clearly the answer. What's the question? That's something we need to work on. I wish I were a better Jeopardy player. At least "spaceship" is a better answer than "42."

It still feels like I learned a lot so that's good, and enough to make this a great day. Although as great a day as it is, there's one major problem. And that's hunger. I still had only one sandwich for lunch yesterday, nothing for dinner, and no breakfast. My stomach is telling me that curing hunger should be first on the agenda this morning. I can and will remedy that as soon as possible. I wouldn't want my stomach to be mad at me all day.

Sam and I pack up our cameras and our peeper call and leave for Dathanna and breakfast. I know Thalia would offer us something if we asked, if we knew how to ask that is. Even so, Prism leaves are not way up there on my list of favorite foods. Hunger can wait a bit.

As far as checking where the peepers are, I'm not concerned if they follow us to town or not. We have a lot to work with and to sort out from what we saw and recorded yesterday. We won't be needing any peepers, or rabbits, or fish in the immediate future. I'm beginning to think that we don't need to keep track of them anymore. I feel that they know why we're here and they want to help. I'm sure if we need them again, that they'll just magically appear, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat, as reliably as getting help by shining a bat light into the night sky in Gotham City.

In a very short time, we're in Dathanna at the Phantom restaurant enjoying a good breakfast along with a couple of cups of that old reliable coffee. A little while later we find ourselves in Mia's office for a debriefing and planning session. Eolai is there and Oscar. Time to talk about what we did, what we learned, and how to go forward.

Before we start, we see Doc enter the meeting. “I have some sad news,” Doc starts, “Clara passed away this morning. I know that she seemed to be getting better when you left yesterday. I thought so too but I’m sorry to say it looks like I was wrong. Her passing was under similar circumstances to that of Bob Jones. Things appeared to be improving until, all of a sudden, they weren’t. Clara complained that there was something tearing up her insides. It was the same comment Bob made. She said that early this morning. It wasn’t a very precise complaint so I started to examine her to see if I could find out anything more. I didn’t get too far before she was gone.”

The day started great. I didn’t think there was any way it wouldn’t continue to be great. Guess I was wrong. I didn’t know Clara. Not well, at least. I just talked to her once in the hospital. But I have been talking about her so much at the club meetings and with Jim and others, that I felt I knew her better than I actually did.

We all offer our condolences to each other. Clara had no direct family on Prism. Most first-generation settlers come by themselves and that was the case with her. People with close family ties, for the most part, stay on Earth. People who want to get away from it all come to Prism and getting away from it all means not bringing any of it with you.

I suggest we postpone whatever was planned for today. Pick it up tomorrow. My drive to be productive has vanished. I look around at the others. No comment, which I take to be acquiescence. At least I assume that as everyone sits still and contemplates what has happened. It’s as close to a religious service as one is likely to find on Prism. Eventually when reason has again taken over emotion, Jim points out that Clara’s death has increased the necessity to find a resolution soon. If it was meant to tell us anything, that would not be to pause. We need to continue with our plans out of respect for Clara,

Let’s move on then. I ask Doc if he has the ability to do an autopsy and if so, would he be willing to do one on Clara. If we want to find what’s causing the new illness on Prism, it’ll probably help to find the reason for her death. And to check if the reason for her death and that of Bob’s are related. Doc says he’s somewhat limited by the medical equipment he has but will do what he can. And he leaves.

We pause a while more to contemplate what has happened. Eventually we realize there’s nothing to do besides get on with our plan. What we planned to do first involves a presentation by me of what transpired since we left Dathanna.

“We learned quite a bit yesterday, so much that I’m not sure where to start. I guess I should provide details on what we learned. But

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before I can discuss those, I have to talk about what we didn't learn. We didn't learn how to speak Prism. We didn't learn what's causing the illness we came here to investigate. And we didn't learn about any issues at Dara Baile.

“What did we learn then, you may ask? We learned, or I should say confirmed, one big item we suspected, that there seems to be one means of communication on Prism. One voice, if I can use that word for flashes of light, that all Prism beings understand. Maybe not all, we haven't met them all, but certainly among the ones we have met. It's an inter-species language. We encountered some new Prism life on our outing. I presume not new life to Eolai and Mia, but new to Sam and me. For these, the ones we did encounter, the best I can do to describe them is to say they looked like earless rabbits. The peepers and the earless rabbits talked to each other like they were the best of friends. We saw both talking to some sparkles when we went down to the river later. We still have no idea what they said but they did seem to understand each other. Another ding against the theory about lack of sentient life on Prism.

“And while it's true that we can't understand what they're saying, I can sometimes sense their emotions. I seem to have refined that ability more during the last day. We already know that I can sense happy feelings and sad feelings. While in Dara Baile, I was able to refine my ability to sense other feelings, especially those from Thalia. She was able to direct me in a few actions, to tell me where she wanted to go and to let me know she wanted me to go with her. No new words, but definitely a deeper connection from where I had been.

Back to my ability to sense happy and sad feelings. I used this ability in Dara Baile. What I felt was a big nothing. The peepers didn't appear happy being in Dara Baile. They didn't appear sad. There may have been a tingle of feeling when they were near some of the construction equipment but not much. I could have understood if they were upset about us building on their planet. I would have expected to sense something stronger if that was really a major issue. So, when I said before that we didn't learn about any issues at Dara Baile, what I meant to say was a little stronger than that. I feel we learned the Dara Baile isn't the issue so there's nothing to look for there.

Jack Verson

“We left Dara Baile for a walk down to the river. The walk took us through fields, beautiful fields, the kind you see over much of Prism. I sensed a feeling of happiness from the Prism natives as we walked through those fields. I sensed contentment. The contentment you feel from being at home. Their home is Prism, all of Prism.

“We eventually made it down to the river which turned out to be our destination for the night. As I said, the sparkles came around and conversed with the peepers and rabbits. After their conversation was over, the group of us relaxed for the evening, sitting near the shore and gazing out at the sky just like we were one big happy family on a camping trip. Not a care in the world, this or any other world.

“Then to recall a line from a movie a long time ago, there was a disturbance in the force. A disturbance that seemed to be emanating from the weekly Earth transport that had just come into view and entered orbit. I wonder if the Prism folk knew that it was due to arrive or if it was just a big coincidence. Regardless, I sensed a change in the feelings of these Prism folk. A feeling that started off happy, well happier, but only for a short time. Then sadness and quiet, lasting longer than the happiness lasted. Then all returned to normal.

“That perturbation of emotion left a very uneasy feeling in my mind. Prism was telling me there’s something unsettling about the weekly transport. I started to feel a bit blue until Thalia walked over to try to make me feel better. Thalia has an ability to cheer me up. I felt she was telling me that a problem existed but that it was one we could fix. I guess that’s what we knew all along or at least hoped. Now that might be confirmed. That was the last activity for the night.

“The next morning was a day like all other days as if nothing had happened the night before. I knew something did. We packed up and returned to Dathanna, leaving the peepers and other Prism life at the river. We may not need them again but I’m sure they’ll show up if we do.

“Sam and I, mostly Sam, made recordings of almost all the light emissions from the peepers and some from the rabbits. The recordings covered times from when we left town yesterday until we

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fell asleep last night. We should examine those recordings. I'm sure there's something significant hiding there that we need to know."

"Well done," says Mia. "Good presentation," says Eolai. And I even get what looks like it might be a smile from Sam. We all agree to take a break and to meet again first thing in the afternoon to start looking at the recordings.

Lunch is fast. Everyone is anxious to get going. I return after lunch equipped with our cameras and the peeper call and prepared for a long afternoon of work. Where should we start?

Eolai takes care of the answer to that question as he announces that he had already started. He studied some more of the peeper feelings recorded before our outing to Dara Baile and learned a few things. "Remember," he said, "that those recordings include what we think are peeper feelings for yes and no." I analyzed those feelings and found something interesting. There are a series of six peeps that form the feeling "yes." There are also a series of six peeps that form the feeling "no." The peeps used for "yes" are the same as the peeps used for "no" except they appear in reverse order. It looks like if the Prism language has a feeling that means something, then you can say the opposite by emitting the same feeling in reverse.

A good observation, and a good start for the day. But it's like everything else we learn. It looks to be quite interesting but is also like being presented with another piece of a big puzzle with no instructions on how the puzzle is supposed to be assembled. I'll just file that piece of information away with all the others. Maybe one day they'll all fall into place.

We go on to examine the recordings Sam and I made yesterday and we begin with the ones from Dara Baile. From those, we start with the ones whose meanings we know. We might be able to use what we find in their analysis to help understand the other recordings, the ones whose meanings we don't know. The ones we don't know are most of them.

The ones we do know are the names of Lemon, Sunrise, Banana, and Peter. We load these feelings into Eolai's analyzer, break them down to individual peeps, and look at what we have. I remember Sam and I noticed that all the names ended the same way. We mention that to Eolai who looks closely at the endings. He confirms that they do, indeed, end the same way. In fact, it looks like the final two-thirds of each name is the same in all the rabbit names. The first third of each is definitely different.

The peeps comprising the names for three of the rabbits are primarily in the yellow part of the spectrum. That's what we saw when we recorded them initially. Peeps for the name of the one we call Peter start in the indigo range.

This just adds to the puzzle. Is it significant that one name out of four starts in a non-yellow color? I doubt it. It's probably just that Peter is from another part of the planet and his use of indigo for the start of his name is his local accent, kind of like an American back on Earth speaking French when French isn't his native language. I remember I took French lessons once before a trip to Alsace. When I arrived there and finally got up the nerve to try out my new skill, speaking something in French, the only response I got was "I don't understand your accent." And that was said in English. I guess it was a polite way of saying "huh?"

Sam looks at the rabbit names. She looks closely at the ending, the part that matches for each rabbit, and has an idea. She has lots of ideas. I'm getting used to them. She asks Eolai to compare the rabbit names to the peeper names. The ones the peepers call themselves. I remember way back when we became aware that the peepers had names for us. At that time, the peepers also had names for themselves and we recorded those.

The peeper names turn out to be formed more or less the same way that rabbit names are formed. The final two thirds of the name are the same for all peepers. Only the first third differs. There appears to be more difference in the first third of the peeper names than there is for the rabbit names. All of the peeper names are in different colors. Maybe our peeper friends are all from different parts of Prism.

Good catch, Sam! More puzzle parts.

Sam isn't done. She asks Eolai to compare the ending two-thirds of the peepers' names to the ending two-thirds of the rabbits' names. Interesting. When the endings are divided into halves, we see that the second half of each ending for a peeper name is the same as the second half of each ending for a rabbit name. The first half is different. That is, the first halves of all the peeper endings are the same for all peepers, the first halves of all rabbit endings are the same for all rabbits, but that part of the rabbit and peeper names are different from each other.

What did we just see? It looks like a name is made up of three parts. The first part is unique for each individual. The second part is the same within an animal group. The third part is the same for everyone. These Prism names appear somewhat similar to Earth names. Each has a first, middle, and last name. Add that to the list. What list you may ask? The list of things we know but don't know what they mean.

What about the names for Sam and me? Why should we be different than everyone else? Well not surprising, our names also have the same pattern. The first third of the name for Sam is different than the first third of my name. The ending two thirds are the same. Is there anything significant about the ending? Eolai looks

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closely at all the peeps in everyone's names. He spends quite a bit of time looking at the endings, the final third of all names, us, the peepers, and the rabbits. The analysis is so involved, it even causes Eolai to rely on pencil and paper. Finally, it looks like he is having an Ahhhh moment, whatever an Ahhhh moment is for a scientist.

Eolai announces happily, obviously even to someone who can't sense happiness like I can,

“The endings, the last third, of the names for the peepers and the Prism rabbits are a series of peeps. That series is the same for both of them. We already know that. The last third of the names for Sam and Vernon are also a series of peeps. That series is also the same for both of them. It isn't the same sequence as for the peepers and rabbits, but it's the same for Sam and Vernon.

“These two endings, the Prism one and the people one, are exactly reversed from each other. What does this mean? It means the Sam and Vernon are the opposite of anything on Prism. If the series of peeps at the end of the Prism life names means 'Prism,' then the series of peeps at the end of Sam and Vernon must mean 'not Prism.' Remember the feelings we identified as meaning 'yes' and 'no?' The peep ordering within those feelings were reversed from each other and they had opposite meanings. That's what we have here for names.”

This may be the first significant breakthrough. The peepers and probably everything on Prism know we aren't from here. Fascinating. More than just fascinating. This is something we might be able to use. In examining other names or feelings, we should be able to determine if the feeling is associated with something from Prism or something not from Prism.

Getting back to the entire name, we noted that each name contains three parts. A first, middle, and last name. My name must be “Vernon Human Not-From-Prism.” Thalia's name must be “Thalia Peeper Prism.” Prism language is so easy once you get to know it! From now on, you can just call me Vernon Not-From-Prism. I never use my middle name.

Another good day. Are we any closer to solving the problem we came here to solve? It feels like we are. We now know a lot more than was known when we arrived on Prism. And what exactly did we learn that's moving us closer to that goal? Well, here I have a problem coming up with a concrete answer. But I feel it's something we can use. I suspect that the problem, if and when we ever find it, will

have a name ending with a “Not-From-Prism” suffix. This time I feel there’s a question out there that can be solved. Time for us of the “Not” family to call it a good day’s work. Time to step back and think about what we’ve learned. It’s all settled and we agree to meet back at Eolai’s in the morning.

Sam, Eolai, Mia, and I all go to the hotel restaurant for dinner. A celebratory bottle of Prism wine shows up first and we take our time ordering the actual meal. The atmosphere at dinner is relaxed. The conversation doesn’t address what happened today. We talk about Earth, where we came from, what we did growing up, and why we decided to move to Prism. Sam and I join in the conversation freely, except that last part seems a bit of a stretch. We didn’t decide to move to Prism. We were sent here.

The conversation moves from there to Prism itself. To the wonders of the planet. We discuss the colors of the trees, the colors of the fields, and the quiet of a planet with almost no inhabitants, almost no Earth inhabitants that is. Sam and I talk about becoming friends with peepers and about all the other animals we saw during our journeys. We all talk about the glistening waters that glisten in ways that they don’t, and can’t, glisten on Earth. We talk about paintings of one of Prism’s seas we saw in Wassily’s art store. Eolai and Mia talk about their trips to that same shore, about how long it takes to travel a few tens of kilometers to get there.

What is a one-day or two-day trip on Prism can be accomplished in about an hour back on Earth. That may be true but it seems better the Prism way. We’re told the enjoyment when you reach the sea here is so much more intense than you would experience on Earth. You earned your magnificent view by the extra effort you put into getting there. And you end up staying and enjoying the shoreline for a longer time. No one wants to travel a whole day to get somewhere and then just turn around and go home. You savor what you see. And last but not least, there are the Prism views themselves, full of colors and more colors. Views of fields and water on Earth don’t come anywhere close to views seen everywhere on Prism.

The conversation makes this one of the most enjoyable dinners we’ve had since our arrival. Sam and I have been here so long that talking about Prism seems like talking about home. Talking about Earth seems like talking about an unreal world. An unreal world we were last at so long ago. Sam and I look at each other with private smiles. It’s clear we are both having the same thoughts and the same relaxed feelings of contentment.

A perfect dinner, a quick glass of duono, and another day on Prism is complete.

Chapter 22 – Day 18 on Prism

Back at Eolai's lab. I didn't want to get up this morning. The conversation last night was the type you never want to end. It was fun. It stayed in my dreams and my dreams didn't want to go to work. I wish I had a list of excuses like the ones that worked so well with Ikenga back on Earth. But I don't. And no one on Prism would buy the fact that I was late because my son had taken my cell phone. No son and no cell phone being two major flaws in that excuse. Sigh.

OK, the lab, work! What's still remaining that we have to look at today? What epiphanies are in store for us? It appears that we still have to look at recordings of feelings that the Prism population had as we walked around Dara Baile, as we strolled through the fields on the hill, as we arrived at the river, and as we saw the Earth ship in orbit.

We load what recordings we have and Eolai starts his analysis. There is a plethora of recordings. Many recordings from many Prism beings from many locations expressing many feelings. Sounds like a lot, right? Actually, we don't have as many as I may have led you to believe. I said that because I wanted to say the word "plethora." It's one of my favorite words.

I digress again. We do have quite a few recordings and it'll take Eolai the entire morning to parse out the peep strings from each of them. We're all fine letting him do the work and agree to leave him alone for the morning. We'll be back after lunch.

This gives us a morning to enjoy more of Prism. Sam and I sit on the lawn outside the lab, enjoy a third cup of coffee, and watch the grasses change color. And the clouds. They're not like any clouds in Illinois. We watch the clouds change colors. We watch Thalia walk by with Peter. We watch the leaves fall from the trees. It must be getting close to autumn on Prism. Watching leaves change colors on Prism in preparation for their departure from their host tree is different than on Earth. The leaves change color all year long here. They just change in different ways in the autumn.

We talk about the seashore painting we discussed last night. We talk about taking a trip to see the shore ourselves if we have time when our assignment is over before we take our 52-year overnight trip home. Yes, we'll leave eventually. We know that's true but it still makes us a little blue to think about it. There's a lot to like on Prism. We're here now. We should enjoy it and we decide to spend the rest of the morning looking more at offerings of the Dathanna artists. When we do depart,

we'd like to have something to take with us. What could be better than some local art?

We get up to stroll through the commercial district. And, yes, if you're curious, I do remember that I saw Thalia and Peter and that I hadn't seen them in a couple of days. The fact that they're here doesn't surprise me. I'm used to them. They're just a part of Prism now. They're here and that seems natural. It's part of this world.

We walk into the same shops we saw on our tour of the town so many days ago. We say hello to Vetreria and look at her acrylic bowls. The colors are beautiful. Browns and yellows and blues, all changing all the time. Wassily is also around with his paintings of the seashore. The whitecaps on top of the blue waters are a startling contrast to the whites of the clouds in the blue sky. Color changes in both give the impression of movement. Truly amazing. Harry Potter couldn't have done better.

As we continue our stroll through the shops, we come across the jewelry store we stopped at briefly before. The window display presents what looks like a line of emeralds. Rings and necklaces and beautiful butterfly pins. Inside we see topaz and aquamarine and something that looks like tanzanite.

The only problem I'll have in bringing back a souvenir is selecting which store to buy it from. Each form of art looks more impressive than any other. The problem for Sam is different. The only problem she'll have is selecting which piece of jewelry to buy.

It's time for lunch. We grab a sandwich, something to drink, wait around and enjoy the weather, the sky, the plants, and whatever else is in sight. I might be getting a bit complacent about my assignment here as I'm in no hurry to get back to the lab. Enjoying this meal outside reminds me of the hours I spent looking at clouds during my youth, at a time when there were no worries, no responsibilities, and no planet-wide problems to solve. Now at this instance, there are no worries.

Eventually, since time decides not to stand still, the time does come when we have to go back and the worries start to return.

"Ok, what have we got," I ask Eolai. He indicates not too much. The feelings we recorded were just that, feelings. Happy feelings, sad feelings, nothing special at all, just feelings. Sounds exciting, right? But we have an assignment and so we take a closer look.

There is actually something to look at. I first sense a pattern in the videos of Clio and Thalia saying hi to me. I know they like me, at least I feel that they do and I feel it in their flashes. I look a little closer at the endings of each "hi" feeling and

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see what I expected, a slight red shift. A shift to the red is a happy feeling. We learned that a few days ago. I'm glad they're happy. I have red feelings for them, too.

I look a little closer at feelings the rabbit had when we first met them. I remember when Thalia introduced me. I look at one of the rabbit's feelings when he first greeted me apparently with the same flash of "hi" that Thalia used. But I didn't feel the same fondness in his greeting as I did in the one from Thalia.

I look closer at the ending of what the rabbit said. There's no shift to the red. There's no shift to the blue. Just "hi". In fact, his greeting seems to be one peep shorter than the greeting from Thalia. Why is that? It looks like the missing peep is the red shift. It's OK that he feels no emotion toward me. I just met him. But we now learned something by looking at this new feeling from the rabbit. A feeling of "hi" followed by a red shift means "Hi! Glad to see you again." One followed by a blue shift means "Oh no! Not you." The rabbit one with no shift apparently just means "hi."

That makes me think some more. I go back and look at all the videos I can find of Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe saying my name, or Sam's name. Before I actually look at the analyzer output for each of the individual peeps in each feeling, I play it, look at the feeling and try to feel, myself, what type it is. I try to feel the underlying emotion inside each of them. Then and only then do I look at the peep analysis. It's as I suspected. When I feel happiness, there's a red shift peep at the end of my name. It's very short, almost undetectable, but it's there. When that emotion of happiness is missing, the red peep at the end is also missing.

This means that the three forms of "hi" are really one. There's only one way to say hi, only one way to say Vernon, and only one way to say Sam. However, Sam, Vernon, hi, or probably any feeling can be said, can be transmitted, with a red or blue shift at the end. Those shifts are feeling suffixes. Any feeling is no more just than a feeling to start. But a feeling with an extra red twang at the end makes the feeling happy. A feeling with an extra blue inflection at the end makes the feeling sad. A suffix can be added to anything.

We look at the rest of the videos with the goal of reenforcing what we just discovered. There are red and blue shifts everywhere. Not exactly everywhere, but often. And most of the shifts are red. There's apparently a lot to be happy about. We notice that some of the shifts are very slight. Even I might not be able to notice them if it weren't for the spectral analyzer.

Most of these extra-short shifts also have very short feelings before them. What are these? They look like emotions from someone who isn't thinking too hard about

what they're saying. Just a lazy feeling of happiness or sadness, contentment or not, but nothing more. There seem to be a lot of these. Quite a lot compared to the stronger feelings with firmer emotions. There's also a plethora (there's that word again) of feelings with no suffix. Just feelings drifting in the wind. The mere quantity of these feelings makes me want to go back and look at the original video. Where did these feelings come from? Whose mind is so busy as to be filled with so many feelings and feelings with, for the most part, no emotion. Just feelings.

I look. The answer may yet be the most amazing thing we have seen on Prism. These feelings, perhaps these mini-feelings, are coming from the color shifts of the plants, from the meadow of plants that remind me of tulips in The Netherlands. The pattern of colors from the plants is the same as the pattern of colors from the peepers, or from the rabbits, or I strongly suspect, from the sparkles. The only difference is that while the plants have feelings, their feelings don't seem to be as deep as feelings from the animal life. Animals can have strong feelings for someone and think, "Yea! Here they are!" Plants can just be aware. But awareness is not nothing. Everything on the planet can feel, can be aware, can know what's happening. I'm sure that's significant, very significant. And like most of the other things we've learned about Prism, I've no idea why.

Chapter 23 – Day 19 on Prism

The next morning arrives. It's time to put the Prism speech lessons aside for a bit. We've a lot to think about here but the real issue we have to solve are the illnesses and deaths of the settlers. Time to make a call on Jim and see if he found anything in the autopsy process.

We knock on his door. Jim answers after a few minutes looking a little concerned, actually looking a little scared, perhaps quite a bit scared. He found something during his autopsy of Clara. He's now looking at the remains of Bob. He doesn't want to tell us what he thinks he's found until he examines Bob's body more closely to see if Bob and Clara both died for the same reason. Without a sound or even a hint of what he's thinking, we're invited to join him in his office and observe as he continues his examination.

I can never get used to looking at a dead body especially one that's been dead for a few months. It's outside of my comfort zone. It's probably one of the reasons I never became a doctor. Probably one of the main reasons. The other being a lack of ability. Even so, the queasiness I'm feeling now is the real reason I never considered the medical profession as a career, ability or not.

Jim announces he has some information that he is getting ready to explain. Since I can't keep my eyes closed and see what Jim is trying to show us, I grit my teeth and open them. I wish I had a bullet to bite on. The first thing Jim does is point to the skin. There are rough patches at several places on Bob's back and arms. It looked like Bob was a big fan of sun bathing which, as it turns out, he wasn't. No one is anymore. Damage from long exposure to the sun is well known and that applies to the Prism sun as well as the Earth sun. Sun bathing stopped centuries ago.

Bob's hair, what's left of it, shows significant signs of loss. Much more than normal for someone his age. And spotty. His hair loss is spotty. Not consistent all over. Jim had recorded this as part of his report at the time of Bob's death. Bob's friends had also begun to notice the strange hair loss just before his death. Jim goes over the notes he took when Bob first came in to see him to report his medical concerns. The important points include nausea and digestive problems. Bob seemed to have recovered from those issues a few weeks after his first visit to Jim. Then all of a sudden, he got sick again, very sick, and died.

What Doc is examining now, what he omitted looking at before, are Bob's bones especially the bone marrow. I don't know much about medicine but something looks pretty wrong with what I'm looking at. It may be because death occurred a

while ago. But Doc seems to think it's more significant than just that. Doc is very thorough and looks everywhere inside the body. He says nothing except for an occasional hmmm, uh oh, or oh no. I sense each of these comes with a blue shift at the end.

Doc is done. We sit down and he explains.

"I've examined Bob, perhaps a bit late but I've seen all I need to see. I looked at Clara too. Her case is a lot like Bob's. Same symptoms, same internal damage, same complaints while they were ill. It's hard to be certain. There's more than one reason someone can have the same symptoms as were reported by these two and die because of them as they did, but it looks like radiation poisoning. My belief is that both Bob and Clara were exposed somewhere to radiation like x-rays. That's why the skins of both look like they've been out in the sun for too long. It's not likely that they were but it looks that way. If they had been doctors or nurses, if they had worked in an imaging department, and if we had an x-ray machine on Prism, I'd say that might be the place they could have been exposed. But none of that's true.

"Maybe this exposure was from their nights at the star gazing club. They were together then. That's my only guess for now. It's unlikely since no one else in the club is reporting a problem. At least not yet. If not there, then I have no idea where the exposure could have occurred which is why I'm not sure of the diagnosis. On the other hand, nothing else makes sense.

"The major concern here is locating the source of the problem. It could be just an isolated incident. Now, two isolated incidents, which makes it not as isolated. It could be something more serious that's a danger to all settlers on Prism. Maybe there's a breakdown in the atmosphere somewhere. I remember a long time ago that Earth inhabitants were worried about a breakdown in the ozone layer, especially in the Southern hemisphere. I also remember reading that some changes were made and the problem was resolved. Could be something like that's happening here. Not too likely since our population is so small, but maybe. Maybe the spaceship has something to do with this. Is that what we're being told? If there's something we can do, we need to fix it. If we're the cause, we need the solution. If not, we may need to abandon Prism before everyone is killed."

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Sam and I look at each other. The problem we were sent here to solve just moved up to another level. A level that neither of us has any experience dealing with. We don't know how real the threat is, how severe it is, if a cause can be found, and if we can fix the cause if we do find it. On top of that, we've no idea where or how to start looking for answers to any of these questions. The spaceship idea seems possible but unlikely. If spaceship interference with the atmosphere was the real reason, I would expect the same problem to be happening on many of the other planets we've settled, and even on Earth. At least we can agree on two things. First, we need to tell Mia, and second, we'll need more people than just the two of us to work on this problem.

We thank Jim for his information, his work, and his insight, even though it's not the type of information we wanted to hear. What next? We have to tell Mia and let her decide how to move forward. A meeting with everyone might be the best way to get the most ideas on the table to consider. Or a meeting with just a few people might also be OK to keep the others calm while we come up with a more well-defined plan. It's Mia's decision to make at this point. They don't pay her the big bucks to be the governor of Prism for nothing.

We take a slow walk to town hall and to Mia's office. She's filled in on what has just transpired and we wait for her decision on what to do next. Not an easy one to make, is it? Eventually she tells Sam and me to be in her office at 9:00 AM tomorrow. Others will be there but she doesn't yet know who the others will be. Just that we should be there and be prepared for a lot of questions.

I think that will be easy. I have never had a problem standing in front of a crowd and getting asked questions about anything. It's only the answers that have ever given me a problem. And tomorrow I'm not going to have any.

We leave and walk to our usual thinking place downtown. Another afternoon with nothing to do. And that's exactly what I want to do, nothing! Talk about taking the wind out of your sails. One second, Prism is a great place, a planet I'm really happy to have seen. The next, it's a place that may be doomed to human life. And I've no idea what to do. I ask Sam. For once, she has no idea either. If she doesn't, I don't hold out much hope for anyone else figuring this out.

Lunch time again. Neither of us is hungry so we just sit around and mope. Moping is actually one of my strong points. I used it often as a way to get out of doing something I didn't want to do and I learned it when I was five years old. No one wants to bother a moping kid. Reminds me of a book from ancient times that's still being read today, "Everything I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." It's true. I learned to mope there.

“How do we solve this problem?” I ask Sam for the third time. I don’t expect an answer from her or from anyone. Even Thalia suddenly popping up on the chair next to mine doesn’t improve my hope that a solution is possible. The only thing I do feel is that I should learn how to say goodbye to her as I might well have to do sooner rather than later.

I look at her and I seem to feel that she’s reading my thoughts. Maybe she’s feeling what I feel. She flashes something at me. It’s a feeling that’s easy to detect as sadness. I must be emanating a feeling of sadness and she must be picking up on that. I wonder if she has some of the same ability to sense feelings that I do or if it’s just so obvious looking at Sam and me that something is wrong.

Then her expression changes and I can sense hope. I’m sure she’s trying to make me feel better. Almost the same as what happened by the river just after we saw the Earth shuttle. This time it’s not working but I appreciate the effort. I’m sure going to miss her when I return to Earth, whatever the reason for my return may be. She looks at me again, gives me her peeper sigh that I’ve seen plenty of times before, and wanders off.

Sam and I sit there for a long time watching the world until the sun sets. We say nothing during all that time. We just think. There’s nothing to say. Finally, our stomachs complain enough so that we’re forced to get dinner. Then call it a night.

Back in my room, I’m tired. The day was exhausting. Mental exhaustion is more tiring than physical exhaustion. Surprisingly I’m able to relax. The problems of my job on Prism seem to melt away. At least for now. I get into bed and drift off to sleep. I fall asleep and I dream. I’ve been dreaming quite a bit since my arrival on Prism. My dreams have always returned my mind to my childhood, to happy times. I need that. This appears to be another such dream. But now I’m a little older. I feel like I’m ten years old at least. Not a little child. I’m more mature. I can see more of the world as it is, as it really is. I open my eyes in my dream and look around. There’s the tulip garden again. My happy place. It’s sure to be a happy dream. Why do I even know that I’m dreaming? No matter. I’m happy to be here and don’t want to leave. The real world can wait.

My parents are here. Just like before. I can’t see our house but they have joined me wherever we are. I feel that they have something important to say, like when I was told about my puppy. But I’m excited this time. I’m not sure what it is, but I know I’ve been waiting a long time. First, we sit down and enjoy a meal. A picnic! I love picnics. The food is delicious. Crunchy and delicious. And I can eat all I want. There’s food everywhere.

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It's then that I notice the rest of my family enjoying the day with us. Of course, why would it be just me? My brother and sister are both here. That's strange. I don't remember having a brother. But it's a dream. Anything can happen in a dream. The other dreams were memories of my youth. Memories of events that really happened. This is different. That's OK. It's just a dream.

The meal ends. I wait for the talk, for the exciting news, whatever it is. And then I'm told that I've been accepted. Yes! That's what I've been hoping for. Very few my age are accepted into the training program. Very few have the ability needed to even be considered, much less accepted. To work for the world. It must be that my ability to sense nature, to be symbiotic with every part of nature, that ability must have been recognized. I'm being rewarded with an opportunity to do what I'm sure I'll love doing.

My family smiles. They're proud. I smile back. Everyone smiles as the announcement is made. There are hundreds here. I look over to the tulip garden like I did in my prior dream. All the tulips walk over to congratulate me. They light up like lights on the Las Vegas strip. Each light is saying something. I can understand each one. There are no words, only lights. Then I notice that the entire planet is here. Not just my parents, not just my family, but everyone, all the plants, all the animals, all the water and rocks and hills and streams. I can sense them all.

I look at my parents, my green dad and my orange mother. What? I look at me. I'm not Vernon. My name is Thalia and my career is about to start.

The shock wakes me up. I rush to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. Yes, only two eyes. Had I expected to see three? What just happened? I know I feel like I've been learning more about the planet but my dreams have always been about me, about what happened to me. Could I possibly have just had a Thalia dream? Is any of what I dreamt true? It would explain something if Thalia were working for the planet Prism. It would explain how she met me in the first place, why she's been following me around, and why I can understand her more than I can understand anyone else.

Looks like I might have trouble going to sleep tonight after all.

Chapter 24 – Day 20 on Prism

Sam and I meet the next morning for breakfast. I don't mention anything about my dream. I need to think about it some more. There might be nothing to it, just a strange dream. Or maybe I'm going crazy. Crazier, that is. But I can't say anything yet. I don't exactly know what to say and anything I say can't be unsaid. I act like nothing happened for now.

We force ourselves to eat even though we're still not very hungry. Over this minimal meal, Sam announces that she has a couple of ideas. Nothing she feels very strongly about so she'll wait until after the meeting this morning to decide whether to bring them up or not. It's OK with me. I trust Sam will say something if it's important to do so.

We walk to Mia's office and open the door. Inside are Jim, Mia, and Wassily. Looks like she wants to keep this simple to start. Simple is good. Simple is probably the right way. I agree. I just can't help but wonder why Wassily has been included. Then I look around and see it's not as simple as it could have been. I have no idea why but I see Thalia over in the corner. She must certainly have shown up by herself. How did she even know we were having a meeting? I'm beginning to understand that I don't understand what's happening. Maybe I don't understand anything. I pull out my camera, look through all the old videos, and show Thalia one of a happy hi. She smiles and replies. This may be my first two-way Prism conversation. Short and sweet.

I look at Sam. She can read my thoughts. Those thoughts are how can Thalia be in this meeting. Thalia can't understand what we're saying. She has no ears. She can't speak, verbally that is. I, we, don't understand her feelings except a few. She can say happy, sad, yes, no, Vernon, and Sam. I wonder how many meaningful sentences you can make out of those six words? Beside the fact that we can't communicate, I wonder again how and why she got here.

Another thing. I wonder why Sam's sitting there looking smug in her all-knowing sort of way. I don't know now but I bet I will soon.

Mia starts the meeting by going over everything I told her yesterday. There's a bit more detail than what we knew then. She must have talked to Jim but the gist of the situation is unchanged. She asks for questions. Jim and Sam have none. Neither do I and neither does Wassily. I assume he was also thoroughly briefed by Mia before the meeting. Looks like Thalia also has nothing to say. (That was a joke, in case you didn't get it.)

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I look over at Thalia before Mia continues. Or to be more accurate, I suddenly get a feeling that I'm supposed to look at Thalia and I do. As I look, the feeling gets stronger. I've been on Prism for almost three weeks. I seem to be able to understand Prism more each day, or maybe it's Prism that's making me understand it more each day. I noticed a strong connection at Dara Baile. It's even stronger now than it was then. I can understand that Thalia is here to help us. Like many times before, I can't understand why but I do now understand that she might be our only hope to learn what needs to be learned, good or bad as it may turn out to be.

That train of thought is broken by Mia's words as I turn to hear what she has to say.

“Vernon came to me yesterday with the reasons behind Bob's and Clara's deaths. You all know that. I spent the rest of the day trying to think about what could be done, what we as a community could do about it. The radiation has only killed two of us so far. It's not fair to Bob and Clara to say 'only two' when they were the two who lost their lives, but so far, that's where we are. It may not seem as serious as it really is. It may be more serious. What if all of us are slowly being poisoned by the radiation? Maybe we are and don't know it. Maybe there's something on Prism that will slowly kill us all. Slowly, as in twenty, thirty, or forty years. We don't know. I have sent a request on the ship that will leave tonight for Earth. That request is for radiation detection equipment. Nothing I thought, before yesterday that is, that we would need. Nothing that would be worth the cost of transportation from Earth but we need it now.”

“If and when we get it and if it shows there's radiation all over the planet, well, we may have to pack up and return to our ancestral home. That's one possibility. Not the one we're hoping for, but we have to realize that it's the one that might turn out to be our only choice.

“What's another possibility? A possibility that would allow us to remain here? This other possibility is that something we're doing or some change we're making is causing the radiation to be released. What would do that? I've no idea and it looks like no one here has any idea either. Even after living here for almost fifty years, we have to admit that we don't know enough about this planet to answer that question. Sam and Vernon have certainly

helped us extend our understanding of Prism significantly but not yet to the level of understanding that we need.

“Which brings up the subject of our surprise guest, formally Thalia Peeper Prism. I said no one here knows enough about the source of the planet’s radiation. That’s true when we only consider the not-from-Prism part of this meeting. I suspect Thalia knows. I suspect she does know because I saw her this morning and when I did, she smiled and followed me into the meeting. Why? Again, I’m not sure. We all know peepers don’t like being indoors, especially inside something built from Earth wood and materials. It’s un-Prism.

“The fact that she’s here voluntarily means something. We have to hope it means something positive. Vernon appears to be the only person who can communicate with Thalia on some level, any level. The only chance we have to remain on Prism, to remain here comfortably, is for Thalia and Vernon to work together.

“I can’t feel what Vernon does but I do feel that Thalia wants to show Vernon something. I hope, we hope, that this something will be significant. So, I suggest that this meeting end and that Thalia and Vernon work together. Any comments?”

Wow! I didn’t see that coming but I bet I know who did. I look at Thalia. I can feel a strong connection with her. I feel that she understands. Then I look at Sam. She understands too. She understood ever since Thalia jumped up on the chair next to us yesterday. Sam understood then and is not surprised now. Sam doesn’t have to confirm that this is what she’s thinking. I can read some things with certainty. What her expression means is one of those things.

No questions from anyone. The meeting ends. People leave the meeting and go their own way. Except for Sam, Thalia, myself, and Wassily. I never did understand why Wassily was here. What now? I guess that now it’s my job to listen to Thalia. How I do that? I’m not sure but I listen anyway. I said my connection with Prism was getting stronger and my connection with Prism seems to always flow through Thalia. I look at her and see her differently than I ever have before. I can’t get thoughts of last night’s dream out of my head. I can’t help but wonder who Thalia is.

As I look, as I try to concentrate on her feelings, a picture forms in my mind. It’s blurry at first like a picture seen in an out of focus camera that needs adjustment. There are lots of forms. None I can make out yet. None that seem to mean anything yet. I concentrate more. The forms coalesce, they come into focus. The picture has

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a bright sky, lots of water, and no buildings. The entire image comes together in my mind. I sense Thalia's feeling of the place. A happy feeling of a happy place. We're going on a trip, perhaps a long trip, and somewhere we've never been before.

Then my mind turns to Wassily. It focuses on a painting we saw in his studio. The painting of the seashore. I sense Thalia's feeling of that painting. It's not a happy feeling but it's a painting of the same place that Thalia just told me was happy. Happy to be there but not happy in the painting. Now it's obvious why Wassily is here. We're going to go to the shore, to the ocean, to the place Wassily went when he made his painting. I remember Wassily telling me that the shore is about fifty kilometers from Dathanna. There are no real paths but Wassily knows the way. It'll take about two days to walk there. I wonder what we'll find.

Thalia smiles. We find Mia to tell her what I saw. She had already started to gather what she could for our journey. We take the rest of the day to gather other things we'll need, food, water, a peeper carrying case, and we can't forget batteries for our cameras. There will be plenty to record, of that, I'm sure.

Chapter 25 – Day 21 on Prism

Another morning on Prism. Three weeks here and every morning brings new anticipation. Every night brings a realization that I learned something new that day, something new that I never expected to learn when the day started. Today is going to be another one of those days. I'm definitely glad I brought my hiking boots. It would be a long way to go back home to get them and the selection of hiking equipment on Prism isn't the best.

We meet at the usual place where we normally get breakfast and that will be our departure point for the shore. We have to leave early to be able to make it there by the second night. Leaving early is a concession I'm not happy to make, but I make it anyway.

When I was thinking yesterday about the walk to the shore, I realized that I was actually looking forward to it. I know it'll be long and that it might be a difficult walk at times but that's not a hindrance to my enthusiasm. I'm looking forward to it a lot. Remember that I said I like what God made better than what we made. Here's a chance to enjoy another wonder of the universe. An opportunity as unique as anything I've undertaken before. I'm ready. Let's get this trip going! I open the same carrying case that Sam and I took on our first long outing on Prism. In hops Thalia. She's certainly not planning to walk all that distance when her personal taxi is available. It makes sense. Her strides are so short that we would need another day or two if she was walking.

We're off. I'm enjoying the walk as I expected and as I hoped for. I enjoy Prism. I don't think I'll ever cease to be amazed by the colors of this world and the ways they change. And now that I know the color changes are actually feelings, I'm even more amazed. The walk starts along a small river. There are a lot of rivers in this part of Prism. Perhaps all over Prism. I assume that this one is leading us to the shoreline. If it's one of those that eventually empties into the ocean, then it's certainly a good one to follow.

As we walk, as we get farther away from Dathanna, the native Prism life appears to become more abundant. We see animals that look like foxes, some that look like small voles, and some more rabbits like the ones at Dara Baile. I'm glad that I don't see any madraí in the mix. I see some chameleons in the distance. My subconscious tells me they're chameleons because they look like lizards and can change colors. I think about this a while and laugh. I always like to tell myself a good joke, especially one I haven't heard before. Those are the best kind. Why would I think they're chameleons just because they can change colors? I just saw plain Prism lizards. Every animal can change colors on this planet. Maybe

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somewhere there are Prism chameleons that don't change colors, kind of an anti-chameleon. That would be strange.

I look up to see birds flying everywhere. There are orange ones just overhead, and way up high are some yellow ones. Farther down the path to the ocean I can see green birds. They look like they're the same type of bird. Maybe they are, just changing colors. All other animals seem to be able to change colors only within the same color group. I wonder if these birds are special.

We stop for a break mid-morning. All of us are tired and welcome a chance to take a break and rest. All except Thalia. She definitely has a good deal and is well rested. As we stop, she gets out of her limousine to stretch her legs. All the wildlife we saw along the way walk over to look at us a bit closer. I'm sure they're interested in investigating what, to them, are such strange creatures, just as interested as the rabbits of Dara Baile were. Animals this far away from Dathanna have probably never seen anything quite so strange.

It turns out there's another reason the wildlife approach; to talk to Thalia. Thalia talks to all of them. Everyone on Prism is Thalia's friend and everyone speaks the same language. The discussions are mostly happy. That much I can sense. It's beyond me if there's something special going on.

Break time is over and as interesting as Thalia's conversations might be, time's up for her too. We have to get going to meet our goal today of thirty kilometers. We say goodbye to quite a gathering of local Prism life. Thalia says goodbye, that is. I hope she included best wishes from us not-from-Prism creatures as well.

We continue following the stream. Eventually we come to a small waterfall that forces us to take a detour toward gentler slopes at the bottom. There the vegetation changes colors to what looks like a preponderance of Earth tones: browns, yellows, oranges, and greys. Not just those colors but they're the main ones. And yes, you might have caught my faux pas. The colors change to a preponderance of Prism tones.

Time for lunch. As far as I was concerned it was time for lunch when we stopped at our last break. Thalia hops out again. There's lunch for her everywhere. A wide assortment of local vegetation. We have to see what was packed this morning. The short rest period after lunch follows the same pattern as it did on our morning break. The local Prism life come up to observe our strangeness and to confer with Thalia. I hope they're saying something nice about us. I wouldn't feel good if one of them stood up, pointed to us, and started laughing. Not sure what a laugh would be but I bet it would have a lot of red in it.

Then something interesting happens. It wouldn't be interesting on Earth but strikes me as being so here. One of the animals that looks like a fox, sort of, walks up to one of the animals that looks like a vole, sort of, and eats it. Foxes are omnivorous on Earth so this isn't a surprise. And we certainly know what a madra can do, so no surprise again. But still almost everything we saw so far on Prism has been peaceful, very "all is good with the world" sort of peaceful. As natural as this is, it's still unexpected.

And what's even stranger is that the other animals, the other voles, the other small creatures, the other foxes, and Thalia, none of them appear the least bit concerned or upset. The other vole-like animals don't get scared and run away. It may all be part of life on Prism but I know, at least for me, that I wouldn't want to be eaten. And I am again one-upped by Sam. While I'm sitting there just taking in what's happening, it looks like Sam was aware of what was going to happen before it did. She captured the entire sequence on camera as we're supposed to be doing. Good for Sam.

Another delicious lunch on Prism. We have twelve kilometers to go to meet our goal for the day. My passenger is right at my feet. She hops into the transport and we continue our journey to the shore.

Chapter 26 – Day 22 on Prism

Another day, another, uh, day. There's no tangible currency on Prism, it's all electronic credits, so completing the quote by saying "another dollar," like I originally wanted to, makes no sense. We made good time yesterday and managed to walk thirty-four of the fifty kilometers to our destination. We can probably thank Thalia for her part in maintaining our fast pace. She was prodding me the entire time from her carrier with feelings of "walk, walk, walk." It kept our cadence going at a good clip. We all know that peepers don't like to dillydally. You do know that, don't you? We wake up, eat breakfast, get going, and finish our trek to the shore, arriving mid-afternoon.

I'm again astonished and thrilled by what I see on Prism. Maybe my early morning comment should have been, "another day, another wonder." There's no lack of wonder anywhere on this planet as the shoreline view again proves. I look out at the ocean and can recognize the scene from Wassily's painting. He obviously painted it right here. The water in the ocean is a wonderful tint of blue with whitecaps formed by the brisk breeze. Just seeing the ocean is quite impressive. I wonder how wide it is. I don't remember anything from the map I saw of Prism. Whatever. It makes no difference. The ocean is wide enough so that we can't see the other side. Whether it's 100 kilometers or 1000 kilometers, it would still look the same and still be breathtaking.

The whitecaps are also a sight to behold. Earth whitecaps are white and break into a mist, possibly reflecting some blue for an instant before dissolving into the underlying water. They do almost the same thing on Prism except that the mist is blue here, and orange there, and red over there, and also a little green. It's like looking at the ocean through a kaleidoscope. I guess that could have been a good name for the planet, Kaleidoscope. Possibly, but I admit Prism fits it better.

So here we are. Now what? While waiting for Thalia to show us why we're here, I'm content just to relax, to stare at the ocean and relax. Thalia is not content just to relax. And why should she be? She needs some exercise after her long carriage ride. Thalia wanders down to the shore. She seems to have found some crab-like creatures and has struck up a conversation. Again! Everything on Prism talks to Thalia.

The crabs here have evolved very efficiently. They walk sideways like crabs on Earth, but can walk either way without turning around. They've grown the typical Prism row of three eyes that we've seen on all other Prism life, but there's a row on both sides of their head. Saves trouble not to have to turn around, eh?

A few meters out in the water, I see some sea life, some large sea life, probably the Prism equivalent of whales, or porpoises, or just fish, or actually anything. They also seem to be conversing with Thalia. One thing about not having ears or relying on anything verbal is that the roar of the ocean and the sound it creates, which does exist on Prism, doesn't drown out a Prism voice. Thalia and her sea friends have no problems conversing with light. Sounds waves do not drown out light waves. I wish our Earth-bound evolutionary forces would have considered that. I'm beginning to feel deprived having to rely on verbal speech.

Farther out the peak of the waves reveals something floating, likely some Prism seaweed. Maybe it's the Prism equivalent of plankton, but if so, these plankton are many times larger than Earth plankton. Nope, probably just seaweed. It doesn't really matter what it is, so I'm just going to go with seaweed. Like everything on Prism, the color of the seaweed oscillates. Like everything else on Prism, the oscillations are really feelings. Not that seaweed is sentient, it isn't. At least I don't think it is. For the first time, I don't think I can answer that question. OK, maybe not for the first time.

Then the whales, or porpoises, or fish, or, well let's just say something that lives in the sea, come up for dinner. They enjoy a hearty meal of seaweed. That looks natural, doesn't it? But then I think about what I just saw. Looking at a fish eat seaweed doesn't bother me. Shouldn't it? Is it really any different than seeing a fox eat a vole? That bothered me. This doesn't. I think I'm going to go crazy thinking about this on a planet where everything has feelings. Everything has good, clean, red feelings. Everything includes animals and plants. Come to think of it, everything also includes rocks and minerals. If I were to ever play a guessing game, a version I last played as a child, and if I were on Prism when I was playing that game, and if it started off with the question "Is it an animal, vegetable, or mineral?", I think I'd only be able to answer "yes."

I look around and see Sam and Thalia. Both of them observed the fish dine on seaweed. Neither of them seems the least bit concerned. I guess that's the end of this thought process. Nothing to see here!

As the walk took some time today, as we took some time to pitch our tents and arrange what will be our home until Thalia tells us when we can leave, and as we have been here for a while on top of that, it's now time for dinner. I'm going to enjoy dinner and not think about what I'm eating.

We all enjoy our meals without any annoying thoughts. Afterwards I stroll away from the campsite to a place where I can be by myself, on a bluff overlooking the shore. Everything about this place is peaceful. A welcome respite from the

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problems on Prism, the problems that caused us to come to this shore. Here peace emanates from the drifting clouds overhead, it emanates from the waves slowly rolling onto the shore, it emanates from the gentle wave of color changes all around. My mind wanders as I look out over the waves. Relaxing here reminds me of home. I have no idea why but it does. Nothing back on Earth looks like this. I wonder what home I am thinking about. From what deep parts of my mind does this association with home come from?

I stay for a long time, for what feels long, but I admit that my sense of time has left. It could have been five minutes. It could have been hours. I'm here by myself. No one has come over to bother me, respecting my need for solitude, which I appreciate. Or so I think until I notice out of the corner of my eye that Sam is here also. She might have been here the entire time. I have no recollection of her showing up. She obviously recognized my need for quiet. Quiet can be shared by two people. She notices my quiet reawakening and we enjoy the quiet together. Quiet conversation of nothings, the nothings of all the planets we have visited. The serenity of the shore, the ambiance of Prism, the enjoyment of time with a friend. This is where my association with home has come from.

Eventually we get up, stroll slowly back to the group, and sit down to enjoy being with everyone. The sun moves lower toward the horizon. We sit looking out over the view we have been given. All of us. Wassily, Sam, me, Thalia, a small group of various animals that seem to have appeared out of nowhere, a group of fish staring at us from slightly offshore, some seaweed, and the plants. On Prism, the phrase "all of us" takes on a totally new meaning. All of us are here and all of us are at peace with Prism.

And all of us are waiting for something to happen. I can sense Thalia. I can sense her feelings. Either her feelings or feelings she's channeling from somewhere. It's time. Thalia brought us here for a reason and whatever that reason is, we're about to see it. The sea continues to roll back and forth. Eventually the sun sets. The flowers on the plants close up for the night. The animals close their eyes. The fish float just below the surface. All like a scene from a child's book. Perhaps all like a scene from a Dr. Seuss book. Looking around at this scene on Prism, I doubt that your average Dr. Seuss character looked any stranger than the characters here. I'm even sure, if I keep very, very quiet, that, off in the distance, I'll be able to hear a Who.

Nothing happens. Nothing to disturb the mood, I wait. Eventually, I fall asleep.

Chapter 27 – Day 23 on Prism

Well, that was anticlimactic. We walked all this way to the ocean just to spend another night like every other night we spent on Prism. Maybe a little different because of the scenery. Maybe a little different because there were many more in attendance. More Prismings, that is. As I wake up, I see Thalia by my side. I look at her and try to get a feeling about what happened. Nothing. I can't sense anything. I'm sure we didn't come all the way here just for what happened yesterday. There must be more but no hint what it is. I only know we're not heading back to Dathanna today. If we were, Thalia would already be hopping into her transport because, as we know, peepers don't like to dillydally.

Sam comes over to talk to me and asks what I think. I respond that I've no idea. What does she think is going on? No idea there either. Wassily comes by. His thoughts make it unanimous. No one has any idea why we're here. All we know is that we're going to be spending another day at the shore. Not the worst thing to happen to us, just that we have a problem to solve and we're not getting any closer to a solution.

Wassily brought a canvas with him. Not a real canvas but something he can paint on. He guesses he might as well spend the time making another painting for his gallery as long as he's here. The seashore is the obvious choice. He sets up and starts. His work is beautiful. He seems to be able to capture the blue of the water perfectly. He captures the whites at the top of the whitecaps just before they break. He didn't bring his entire set of paints, so can't capture the multitude of colors generated by the spray from the whitecaps. Even so, it's a wonderful painting. It takes most of the day but we had nothing else to do while he was painting. Now that he's done, it does give us something very exciting to do. We can sit around and watch the paint dry.

Thalia comes over to look at the painting. She pays close attention for a peeper. I'm not quite sure about her level of artistic appreciation, but she definitely seems interested. I try to detect her mood. Does she think it's a good painting, one that makes her happy? Or not? I can sense some emotion. A new emotion. She's not impressed. She's concerned. I definitely detect a feeling of concern. Uneasiness maybe. Fear, a little bit.

My ability to channel Thalia's feelings is getting more refined. She looks at me and projects an image into my mind like she did with the image of the seashore that convinced us to walk here. This image is more of a dream, a daydream, an image of a recurring dream I have had many times as an adult. A dream many people have had. I'm taking a test, an exam for a college course I need to pass to graduate.

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I look at the exam paper and realize that I'd never gone to any classes for this course. I can't understand the questions. I have no idea how to answer them. It might be a calculus exam, or maybe French, or history. The subject doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm not prepared.

What could possibly be the meaning of this dream? The many times I had it before, I was upset. I was upset that I might not graduate. Passing the test was not possible. It was out of my control. Unfair and uncontrollable. But then I woke up and realized it was all a dream. Did I feel better? Yes, eventually, but for some reason, not right away. I thought about college. I had a good time in college. But not with the test even though it never existed. It could have, possibly, but it didn't. I was still upset.

Why did Thalia ask my mind to reimagine this dream? Does it have something to do with Wassily. Is he part of the problem? It's interesting that this dream full of anxiety for an otherwise happy memory, came to me as Thalia was looking at Wassily's painting. There must be a connection. That's part of the test. I need to study his painting. I need to pass. What is there to study? It's only a painting and a painting of what I can see in real life. I want the dream to go away and for me to be able to stop thinking about its meaning. I walk with Thalia on the shore and watch her chat with some more sea life. Thalia is quite chatty with them. Not so much with me. I feel that she's giving me time to contemplate.

The day goes by fast. Another dinner like last night. Tonight, we're all in a very relaxed mood so we add some wine to the dinner menu. We enjoy our wine, our dinner, the evening, and the Prism life. More Prism life than last night have found their ways to join us. More land animals. More sea life of every type or at least of every type that I've seen. There even appear to be more varieties of seaweed. But who really knows. It's been quite a while since I spent my time counting seaweed varieties. I don't even know why I said that in the first place. Must be the wine talking. They have very chatty wine here on Prism.

We sit by the shore as the sun drops lower toward the horizon. It seems like the only difference between last night and tonight is the extra Prism life in attendance. I wait and realize that there might be more tonight. The wind picks up as the sun sets. The ocean is buffeted by the breeze. The wind increases. The water becomes more agitated, continuously so for the next hour as the sun finally goes out of sight. I look up in the sky. The weekly ship from Earth comes into view. It's been eight days so I guess this one was delayed. It should have arrived yesterday. But as I've said many times before, a ship can be a little late after a 52-year trip.

The ship gets closer. I look out over the water. I can see a light form below the surface about a kilometer off shore. It's dull, barely glowing, but something is there. Something is going to happen. I look at Sam as she starts her camera and aims it straight out to sea. I do the same with mine. A few minutes later the light becomes brighter, much brighter. I get the feeling of an underwater volcano building up magma; lava about to break through the surface. Enough to form a new island. For now, it's still below the surface. We look closer. Everyone knows that we're about to learn the reason for our trip.

The waves get higher as the ship enters orbit. The whitecaps get much bigger. The colors of the whitecaps glow brighter, possibly reflecting the emerging eruption from below the surface. The sun has long since fallen beneath the horizon and the sky is dark. The whitecaps are now so bright that they light up the area around them. The water swirls aggressively, ready to erupt. Then the water and sky light up by themselves, not needing any help from the whitecaps.

All this happens offshore. There's no wind on land where we are. There's clearly a gale over the water. If I were in ancient Greece, I'd expect to see Poseidon rise out of the sea holding his trident. But I'm not. I'm on Prism and not even ancient Prism. The sea seems to part as a beacon of light appears and shoots straight into the sky. Although I'm still getting used to the world of Prism, I know what this beacon is saying. It's so bright and the light is so intense that the feeling overwhelms my senses. It's a beacon of hope. Hope for what, I've no idea, but it's full of a red hopeful light.

The hope lasts for but a moment and fades. The light dies. There's a pause. The sea is again dark. Then without warning another blinding beacon emerges, so bright that I need to shade my eyes to be able to look at it. The light is white, pure white to start. As the outsides remain white, the beacon's middle fades to blue, and then to violet, and then goes dark. The perimeter of the beacon is still white but the core is dark. And this one is also full of emotion. But not hope. The opposite. Despair.

The second beacon lasts for only a few seconds. Then everything is dark again. The sea is calm. The winds have died. Poseidon has gone back to his underwater cave.

There's no doubt what we've just witnessed. We've all seen the Prism Welcome. It doesn't greet all transports from Earth but it obviously greeted this one. Thalia is by my side looking very serious. This is what we came to see. It was very interesting. Frightening yes, but also interesting. And meaningful. Just one problem, the same problem as with all the other meaningful things we found out about Prism. What exactly is the meaning? No idea now but I strongly suspect

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we'll find something when we examine the videos more closely in Eolai's lab. I'm sure we will.

Chapter 28 – Days 24 and 25 on Prism

Another quiet morning of what looks to be the start of a long quiet day and of a two-day hike back to Dathanna and back to analyzing questions uncovered at the shore. More questions, no answers. Seems like that's status quo on Prism. This time it's the opposite of playing Jeopardy.

Thalia rides back as a passenger in the business class cabin of my carrying case. Sam and I walk together and try to talk about what happened. We try. Neither of us can think of anything worthwhile to say although I can see Sam's wheels grinding up there in the depths of her mind. We take our normal break and meal stops on the way back. Whenever we do, Thalia always attempts to start a conversation with me. She flashes feelings of all shades of colors, looking at me or at Sam or at Wassily. Her feelings are interspersed with shades of red when she looks at me. That's nice, I think. Colors are darker when she looks at Wassily. Sometimes she just looks at the sky, or the ground, or at the other animals. All sorts of animals always seem to show up at our stops. Who knows what she's thinking at those times. Or at any time? Quite the chatterbox. I'm sure it all means something.

Sam and I take care to record everything she says. We might need it for analysis later. We're willing to use it all, all that she says, every piece of information Thalia is giving us if it'll help us put two and two together and get to a solution. But there's so much. By the time we're finished looking at all that Thalia's saying, the answer is going to have to be a lot more than four.

The first night on our way back, Thalia walks over to where I set out my sleeping bag. I can tell she's trying to make me understand. She's aiming her feelings at me. She's trying to convince me that I can feel what she's feeling. She knows that I can sometimes. But right now, I can only feel that she desperately wants me to understand her feelings and is frustrated that I can't.

The most frustrating thing is that I know this much about Thalia; she's trying to help us. I'm sure she knows what the problem is and how to solve it. She just has no way of telling us. She must be as frustrated as we are. She's probably thinking "how can I communicate with such strange creatures who can't even understand a simple flash of an eyed?" I look at her again. She's trying harder to make us understand. The illuminations of her feelings are brighter. I remember back on Earth when I met somebody who couldn't speak my language, I tried to make them understand by speaking louder. Louder is the same as brighter, it won't work! Sometimes I think all I have to do is to figure out which of Thalia's flashes is telling me what I really need to know. If I could, then all the problems would go

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away. I would just walk into Mia's office and say "yellow, yellow, red, green." There you go, problem solved.

Hey! I'm the one getting frustrated. If I don't figure this out, or Sam, or someone else on Prism, it's going to be a few crowded transports back to Earth. I'm not even sure how many people can fit on a ship at once. But it won't come to that. I'm sure we'll solve this problem. Yeah, right! Even I'm not so sure about that statement.

Actually, I do feel something from Thalia. I feel a few things. The strongest is that she wants me to know that she's speaking for everyone on Prism, maybe even for Prism itself, and not just for herself, Thalia. I can believe that. I can believe that because of what I felt when I was her, when I was her in my dream. She has been working for Prism since she was ten. I wonder how old she is now. I wonder what her responsibilities are now. It would be pretty amazing if Thalia were the supreme ruler of Prism. I wonder what I would call her. Would "Your Peeperness" work?

The other feeling from Thalia, a feeling I've felt so many times before, is hope that we can change whatever it is that we're doing wrong. We just have to realize what it is. Kind of like wearing shoes in a house when it isn't allowed. Anyone would be OK removing their shoes as long as they were told to. If one weren't told, it might not be easy to know a mistake was being made. Here on Prism, I suspect there's some sin that is even more serious than wearing shoes in a house, and is harder to guess.

There are a couple of other feelings I'm getting from Thalia that appear to be significant. Not actual feelings, but pictures in my mind like the one she projected of the shore that convinced me to take this trip. I wonder if that's how Prism beings actually communicate with each other. Not by light, not by feelings, but by sights, by pictures. One picture I see is of a bunch of stars, plain stars, twinkling stars. One in the middle is twinkling brighter than the others, more often, and is moving. I assume it's our weekly shuttle. That's what the shuttle looks like from the surface of the planet. It's not surprising to see that. The "Prism Welcome" we just saw was quite a display. We thought it was a friendly greeting when we first arrived on Prism. Now I'm not so sure. It acted up when the shuttle came into view. It does that often.

That picture fades. Another comes into focus. It's Wassily painting his picture of the shore. Wassily joined us for some reason other than to just be our guide. We could have found the ocean ourselves. All we did was follow a river as it wound its way down to the shore. We certainly could have done that without Wassily. Thalia

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arranged for Wassily to come along for a reason. Quite a peeper coup. I wonder how she managed that. We need to pay close attention to him and his paintings.

We keep walking, maintaining our Thalia cadence and finally enter Dathanna late on the afternoon at the end of our second day of hiking. We come armed with plenty of stories, a plethora of videos to back them up, and a hint to pay close attention to the Prism Welcome and to Wassily. Thalia hops out of the transport and goes off to find her friends, I assume. Wassily goes home. Before he does, I ask him to be available for the debriefing meeting tomorrow. Sam and I go off to tell Eolai and Mia that we're back and then to get dinner and a drink, or two.

Chapter 29 – Day 26 on Prism

The meeting starts the next morning at 9 AM. The group is as expected, Sam, Eolai, Mia, and I. I'm not surprised to also see Thalia in her observation corner. A few minutes later, Wassily walks in and Jim also joins us. That makes the meeting complete for now. If we're not successful, we may have to call a meeting of everyone on Dathanna. That would not be a fun meeting at all.

Before we start, Mia announces that the radiation detector she requested has arrived. The weekly transport was a day late, delayed departing Earth as it took some time to locate and load that piece of equipment. We might not need the radiation detector but we have it if we do need it. And I feel the chances are high that we'll need it.

I get up and give quite a lengthy presentation about all that happened on our trip. Everything including Thalia's fan club, which seemed to be everywhere, the voles, the fish, the seaweed, Wassily's painting, the letdown of the first night, and finally the big item, the Prism Welcome. I cover the walk back, what I thought Thalia was trying to tell me during that walk, and what it felt like to be Thalia's personal chauffeur. I left out no detail. I was so thorough that even Sam said she had nothing to add. I felt good about that. If I were still keeping score, I would have awarded myself my first point.

“So, that sums up the trip. We have videos to back everything up and which can provide more detail if needed. I know there's a lot to talk about. Where should we start?”

Jim stands up first. Interesting that he should be the first as he hasn't been very involved before now. This time he has a lot to say.

“While it may not have anything to do with the cause of radiation, I find one of your first comments from Thalia to be the most interesting to me as I'm a doctor. I remember you saying that at one time you thought Thalia was trying to tell you something. I believe your comment was 'Thalia wants me to know that she's speaking for everyone on Prism, maybe even for Prism itself.'”

“That may explain some things I've been noticing since my arrival here. Here being Prism, that is. Soon after I arrived, I noticed that the fields, the plant growth, and even sometimes what I would consider completely inanimate objects, would seem to glow a bit more when a Prism animal walked by. A plant would also seem to bend more in their direction.”

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“When I noticed that, I tried an experiment. I walked the same paths that the Prism life walked. I had been observing animals like rabbits and peepers a long time before you and Sam showed up. The plants didn’t react to me. Then I watched the local life again. I thought I hadn’t seen them right the first time. But I had. The plants knew whenever they walked by. There was a definite attraction, a definite awareness that the plants had whenever anything else walked by, anything native to Prism that is.

“Then just a few days ago you figured out that all creatures and even all the vegetation speak the same language. Some years ago, I first noticed that an animal would usually flash at another animal when the two got close to each other. I never assumed anything of it. Dogs and cats growl and hiss at each other on Earth. It doesn’t mean they’re saying anything that the other can understand, other than ‘get out of my way.’ Here, on Prism, you taught me it means something. That is amazing by itself. And now Thalia indicated, or at least you thought Thalia indicated, that she can speak for everyone on the planet. How can she do that? Somehow everyone is connected or there’s some single entity connected to everyone, and that entity can talk for everyone.

“There’s no logical explanation that allows something like that to exist. Life didn’t develop that way on Earth, not even close. Even without an explanation, what I observed, what you observed, and what you believe you heard from Thalia, well, all that points to one conclusion that there’s something here on Prism that operates like a planet-wide consciousness.

“As scary as that is, perhaps that’s what we’re dealing with. We should keep that in mind if we ever come up with a plan of action. Whatever plan that is, it has to be a plan that works for everyone and everything.”

Jim sits down and everyone takes some time to think about what he said. There are times when people say things. Things that sound crazy. Things that make no sense. They continue to make no sense until they do. That Sherlock Holmes quotation I mentioned earlier seems to be applicable again. “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” I keep thinking about what Jim said about a single consciousness. I’m sure the others do too. Alternative ideas, alternative interpretations of the facts pop into my mind. Maybe all of Prism isn’t somehow intertwined. Maybe all creatures are acting by

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themselves and what we've seen is just a coincidence. Those same ideas disappear almost as fast as they appear. All the facts, everything we observed leads to the conclusion that Jim reached. We're dealing with Prism. Not one thing or one set of things on Prism, but Prism itself.

After giving everyone time to come to the same conclusion, I continue the meeting. "OK, good start, Jim," I understate. "Who has anything else to add?"

Mia is the next to stand up.

"I want to talk about your feelings when the vole was eaten or when the seaweed was for that matter. How does that fit in with the theory of a planetwide consciousness? Whatever we're doing, we have to assume it's injuring the planet or something on the planet. Does it matter what part we're harming? What if we're doing something that hurts the seaweed, or a plant, or the soil? Do we have to be concerned at that level? How about small animals? How about peepers or rabbits? Do we have to look at anything we can be doing or only major things? And what is a major thing?"

"Should your feelings, Vernon, be considered when we look for what we're doing wrong? When I say 'your feelings,' I don't mean to be inconsiderate and imply that your feelings don't matter or aren't important. What I do mean to say is that you, Vernon, appear to have the ability to channel feelings from Prism. At least feelings from Thalia, which we've just decided are the same as feelings from Prism. When I say 'your feelings,' I don't mean how you feel about something. I do mean how you feel that Thalia feels about something. If we decide we're doing something we shouldn't and you ever figure out how to relay that to Thalia, and if you sense that she feels it's not a big deal, then it isn't. Thalia speaks for Prism. We have to assume that. On the other hand, if you get a sense of pure joy after letting Thalia know of one of our plans, then we're on the right path."

Mia sits down. Sam says she wants to answer Mia's question about what is major and what is minor. Sam gets up and takes the floor.

"Thanks, Mia. That's exactly what I was thinking about the last couple of days as we all walked back from the shore."

"There were three cases that seem to follow on to what you said about the feelings of Prism. Two of these happened just the last couple of days. One was when the foxlike creature dined on the

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volelike creature. And two was when some fish dined on seaweed. What did I think what I saw these? I just thought I was observing the basic Prism food chain in action. The fish have to eat to survive and seaweed is around for that purpose. Foxes have to eat and voles are there for that. The larger animals need food to live. Voles are that food.

“This is why there was no sadness detected, no outrage of any sort, when the seaweed was consumed or when the vole was consumed. They were just living out their purposes on Prism. The Prism food chain in action is known by all of Prism. All was OK.

“I said there were three incidents. The third occurred a long time ago when a madra decided that Melpomene was lunch. Here the reaction was quite different. Clio, Thalia, and Euterpe were clearly upset. And I might say, Vernon and I were too. Not that that matters since we’re not Prism-born. Clio, Thalia, and Euterpe are from Prism and they knew that Melpomene was not supposed to be a meal. Maybe that role was supposed to have been filled by something close to her size but not by Melpomene herself or by any peeper.

“I believe this shows there’s an order on Prism. Likely everything on the planet is designed to work a certain way. Prism protects that order. We humans only arrived fifty years ago. We’ve yet to learn what this order is. Sure, we know some things now but we can’t jump to any conclusions. The only fact we can rely on is that everything is important. Any change that might upset the order of Prism, the interdependency of the parts, is a potential issue for us. We need to look everywhere for a problem and a solution. We need to keep all this in mind as we move forward toward a decision.”

“Thank you, Sam!”

Wow! We’re getting lots of insight from information gathered on our trip. It looks like Thalia was smart in proposing it, however she managed to do that. Before we just had questions. Now we’re starting to get answers. All that’s progress. Real progress except for one thing. We still have no answer to the one question we need answered.

Eolai indicates he should be the next to talk but he doesn’t have much to say yet. He makes a brief comment about the elephant in the room, the Prism Welcome. The real answer must be hidden among what happened there. Anything else we

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observed on the trip could have been observed without going all the way to the shore. Thalia dragged us to the shore to see the Prism Welcome. That's where the answer lies. Eolai says he's going to look at our videos and run them through his analyzer. That'll take some time. He suggests the rest of us call it a morning and resume in about three hours to give him the time he needs to do his work.

Three hours later. The afternoon session starts with a smile from Eolai, one that reminds me of the smile he had when he told us about peeps, when he figured out that each feeling consisted of a series of mini-feelings and that he could understand what they meant. A smile like that would indicate a breakthrough here, a major breakthrough. I almost feel a surge of optimism begin to form inside me. That surge does not last very long. I look again at Eolai as he starts to talk. His smile disappears. As they say on Prism, if they could speak on Prism that is, "the red shift has become a blue shift."

"I'm glad to say that I've found something significant about the Prism Welcome. At the same time, I'm not happy to have to say what that something is. But perhaps it's not that bad. As I tell you, please keep in mind that this may be the clue we're looking for. It doesn't feel that way to me right now. Since some of you here may have different insights into the finding than I do, we can at least hope.

"Recordings of the Prism Welcome were intense. There was a lot going on. The light beacons were very bright and overwhelmed the cameras used for recording or they almost did. It was good that Vernon and Sam were both recording. Where there was a gap in one camera, I was able to fill it in with data from the other. More importantly, when I saw something that was unusual and at the same time important, I was able to confirm my finding by looking at both videos. I needed confirmation to be sure of what I saw.

"Nothing significant was observed at the start of the Prism Welcome sequence when all activity was just below the surface. Nothing within our current scope of understanding. There might have been something in those underwater lights but nothing that made any sense to me. Even Vernon didn't report that he sensed anything at that time. If he did feel something, I suspect the suspense, apprehension, or the anxiety from knowing something major was about to happen but not knowing what it was overloaded his senses. Any feelings he might have had at that time were coming from his human side. It overrode anything he might have been able

to sense about Prism. For now, we need to assume that the preliminary underwater light show was nothing more than a warm-up act.

“Then we have the start of the actual Prism Welcome: the beacon of light that burst through the surface toward our ship. It was red but it also had a red shift at the end. The kind of shift that we understand to be associated with happiness. I think there was a red shift. The light of the beacon was so bright and the shift was so slight that it might not have existed at all. The brightness of the light came close to overwhelming the camera sensors. Since both Sam’s camera and Vernon’s camera recorded a minor shift at that point, I can only assume the shift was real.

“The red beacon lasted a short time. Eventually it was replaced by a beacon of white light, white on the circumference and blue inside. In my analysis, the white part is not important. But the blue part is very important. The color starts off as blue, then changes to violet, and then goes dark. I looked closely at the recording as the color shifted from blue to violet. It was a smooth shift, not a sudden color change. What do I mean by a smooth shift? Blue light has a short wavelength compared to most of the visible spectrum. The wavelength of violet is shorter. The transition from blue to violet was smooth. The blue wavelength continuously and steadily got shorter and shorter until it entered the range for violet.

“That’s OK or would have been OK if it had stopped there. But it didn’t. From there the color became dark, only it wasn’t dark. It was dark only because we couldn’t see it anymore. The wavelength grew shorter than the shortest wavelength in our visible spectrum. Not dark. Dark means there’s no light. The light was still there, just too short for us to see. What is shorter than the wavelength of visible light? The answer is ultraviolet, x-rays, and gamma rays. The type of radiation that can cause serious injury and deaths in humans. Deaths like the kind that killed Bob and Clara.

“The Prism Welcome is a very strong, very intense beacon. Anyone standing in the way of the Prism Welcome at the height of its despair, the height of its anger, and that’s what I’m calling it when the wavelength is shorter than violet, would probably not live more than a few hours. This radiation was directed toward the Earth spaceship. Luckily the ship still had its full electromagnetic shields

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up and those were strong enough to deflect the radiation. No one on the ship was in danger.

“There may be, but probably aren’t, any medical issues caused directly by the Prism Welcome. Its beacon goes straight up from the planet into space and disappears. Even so, keep in mind it’s not a welcome, at least not to us. The thing to be worried about is what we said earlier, that all of Prism may somehow be joined. That a single force may control all life on Prism, or at least be able to communicate to all life, or that some coordinating force exists. If that’s the fact, then we need to consider that anything on Prism could be capable of generating the same harmful radiation as generated by the Prism Welcome.

“Maybe Prism life has no control over this radiation. Maybe they accidentally release it from time to time and have been infecting all of us slowly, very slowly, over the fifty years since we arrived. Maybe Clara and Bob were just the first two to be seriously affected by what’s happening to all of us. If that’s the case, if Prism life can’t control this radiation, then we had better all go back to Earth as soon as we can.

“Or maybe they want us gone. Maybe they can control the radiation and send it at any time. If that’s the answer, then the case for return to Earth becomes stronger.

“The only case where we can stay is if they don’t want us gone, if they can control the radiation, and if we’re doing something wrong that’s the cause for the radiation. In this case, the radiation may be like a shot across the bow. We have to assume, at least as a start, that this is the actual case. I suspect this is the most likely case because we trust Vernon’s feelings of Prism. Vernon said Thalia felt that we were all welcome on Prism and could stay as soon as we stopped. Stopped something and we don’t know what that something is. As was already said, we need to find out what we’re doing wrong, what the rules are for staying here, and abide by those.

“That’s all I have to say.”

Eolai sits down. As each presentation ends, the period of silence in the room gets longer and longer. This one lasts almost an hour. I’m not really looking at the time. I’m just trying to digest all that’s been said. Eolai’s presentation is clear about one

thing. At least clear in my mind. If the Prism Welcome can generate dangerous radiation, then I'm sure there's something else on Prism that can too. Not a good feeling.

Eolai at least gave us one of the answers that we were looking for. We now know how people on Prism are getting sick. We don't know where the radiation is coming from or why, but we do know what the problem is. On top of that, we know that we need to find out how to stop it soon or leave Prism. And that doesn't mean just Sam and me. It means everyone.

Wassily is still here. And it's his turn to ask a question. "Are we sure, I mean 100% sure, that this radiation can be generated by some way other than by the Prism Welcome?"

No sooner is this question posed than I feel there's someone willing to give us an answer. I definitely feel an answer coming from Thalia. She can sense what has happened. Of that I'm certain. I look to her corner and see that she now has a friend, Sunrise. Thalia gets up, walks to the center of the room and Sunrise joins her by standing a few meters away. She looks at Eolai. She must be sending a feeling to Eolai. She sends the same feeling to me too. Eolai leaves the room and gets the radiation detector. He aims it between Thalia and Sunrise. I enable my camera and aim it at the same place.

They start talking, Thalia and Sunrise, or so it seems. They stop and look at Eolai who walks over to the detector. Thalia and Sunrise were talking as we all assumed. Talking via electromagnetic radiation. The only way Prism life talk to each other. Before now we assumed such a conversation always used visible light, only the visible light portion of the spectrum. Not true. Thalia's and Sunrise's conversation used x-rays.

They pause for a few seconds and then talk again. And again, they talk in the x-ray range. This time the talk is so soft, the transmission is so slight, that the radiation detector can hardly register that anything is sent. If we hadn't been looking at the right spot because Eolai was told to look there, then we might have missed everything.

That answers the question posed by Wassily. All of Prism can generate x-rays. Not a happy answer but it comes with a ray of hope when Eolai takes some time to examine my camera recordings of what they said. Remember that the actual wavelength in Prism speech is not important. Only shifts in wavelength matter. With this knowledge, Eolai can interpret what was said. Thalia and Sunrise sent a simple feeling to each other, one we already understand. That feeling was "Yes" and it had a red twang at the end.

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What does “Yes” mean? It could mean, “Yes, you can correct the problem, please fix it.” It could mean, “Yes, we can send dangerous radiation, please leave.” It must be one of those two. There’s no middle ground. They can either kill us or not. Being occasionally submitted to harmful radiation is not an option we’re looking for. It’s like being a little bit pregnant. It could be either one but it’s not. The red shift at the end means that the first interpretation is the right one.

I look to Thalia to confirm all this. She walks over to me, jumps on my lap, smiles, and she says “Prism.” The word Prism that we’ve seen at the end of her name and at the end of Sunrise’s name. The feeling “Prism,” full of Thalia generated colors with a red shift at the end. She wants us to stay. Prism wants us to stay. How do we do that?

The meeting today doesn’t end now, this afternoon. We’re at a critical point. Either it’ll always be dangerous for humans to live on Prism and we should leave now, or it’s only dangerous now and we can do something about it. In both cases, humans are at this time in danger. Something has to be done soon. There will be no chance later. Sort of a “speak now or forever hold your peace” type of situation.

We take a short break for dinner. Dinner tonight is an assortment of fine Prism-made cheeses. Made from milk produced by Earth cows, or to be more accurate, from the descendants of Earth cows. And from cows that grazed in fields grown from Earth grains. This is as protective of Prism as we can get. Admittedly we’re eating something that includes some nutrients from Prism soil but one can only be so careful. If that’s the problem, then there’s no solution and we might as well enjoy the meal tonight. Perhaps our last meal here.

Dinner’s over. How do we find out where the radiation is coming from and how do we then convince Prism to stop it? One idea is to walk around with the radiation detector, kind of like walking around with a Geiger counter. We might find some radiation by accident or not. We might be right there where and when it appears or we might miss it because the signal is too weak. Or we might not find anything because the signal isn’t where we’re looking, being generated halfway across Dathanna. Or the day might wrong. Nothing today, but tomorrow, yes. Using the radiation detector is like finding a needle in a haystack. Not what we need to give us results in the time we have to get them. Maybe someone can do that as a backup plan but we need something better as a first choice.

Here’s another thought we come up with. How about just asking Thalia. The all-knowing Thalia. The one who’s in touch with all of Prism, who knows what we need to know, and who wants to help us. Sounds good, right? We still don’t know

how to ask Thalia a question and we still don't know how to understand her answer. Besides that, it sounds like a great idea.

Except that it is a great idea. If not great, it does have one advantage. It's the only reasonable idea anyone can come up with. We tried something like that at Dara Baile. That was not a success. But we have more of the planet to look at. It's worth a try. Since I'm the only one on Prism who seems to be remotely able to communicate with Thalia, it's up to me to follow through on this plan, this "only plan that can save the entire Earth population on Prism." Hey! No pressure, right? I accept the assignment since we have no choice. Starting tomorrow, Thalia and I will work together and will solve the problem of the hidden radiation. I hope Thalia knows that too. As they say on Prism, I hope Thalia and I are on the same wavelength.

Chapter 30 – Day 27 on Prism

Another day I feel obligated to get up early. I've been doing too much of that lately. This won't be one of my favorite memories of Prism. Getting up early is important as it may turn out to be a long day. Then again it may be also turn out to be a good day. Although I have a good feeling about Thalia and our search today, it can never hurt to get a little insurance. For that insurance I pull out my old reliable good luck remedy that never failed me back on Earth. I go to the kitchen, get a clove of garlic, string it around my neck, and walk around the hotel seven times. Clockwise. Now it's guaranteed. Absolutely nothing can go wrong.

I have breakfast, get a large insulated container of coffee, and go outside. I'm not surprised to see Thalia there. The more time I spend on Prism, the closer I feel to Prism life. Especially to peepers, and at the top of all the peepers, to Thalia. We seem to be able to read each other's feelings more and more as the days go on. Today better be one of those days.

What are we humans doing to Prism that we shouldn't be doing and how does Thalia let me know what it is? I have to get Thalia to walk past a place of problems where I can sense her becoming unhappy. I can just walk around randomly and hope she follows me or I can wait and see where she wants to go and follow her. As Thalia is more tuned in to the problem than I am, I choose the second option. I sit down and wait for Thalia to lead me somewhere. Thalia comes over and gives me a strange look, not like there's anything other than a strange look from a peeper. She just stands there. No action. No movement to that "somewhere." What now?

Well, to answer that "What now," question, Sam joins us. She like everyone else in the group knows my goal for the day. She's here to see what's happening, which she sees. Specifically, nothing is happening. Time to take action. She motions for me to follow her and walks down the street to Wassily's shop. "Remember," she says, "you got the feeling that Wassily had something to do with our Prism faux pas so let's go see him." I follow her. In the far distance behind us, Thalia gets the hint and scurries along.

We reach Wassily's shop and walk in. Thalia is right behind us. Wassily's shop is well organized. I like all of Wassily's paintings, especially the way his paints glisten like Prism life. I see the picture he recently painted of the seashore. That scene is permanently etched in my mind as the night I saw the Prism Welcome. The painting does a pretty good job of matching what I remember of the waters but not the Welcome. The blues look a bit darker but otherwise it's a good rendition. Wassily is quite an artist.

Thalia walks over and takes a look. She does not appear to be impressed. I try to read her feelings. There's nothing strong. I sense again that she's concerned and maybe uneasy. The same reaction as at the shore. Her eyeleds say something which I record although there's no reason that it needed recording. Her eyeleds let out a long sigh. A sigh I can understand.

Sam leads us to the next store in the artists' district, the one that makes jewelry. Again, Thalia follows us in. This time she stays close to Sam. That makes sense. Sam is more tuned into what's for sale in this store than the others. Sam and Thalia walk down the aisles. The ones in the front are full of offerings, all of which seem to pique Sam's interest. We wander from there to view the aisles in the back but none of those have anything to show. All the stock is in the front. I'm hopeful that Thalia's attention to Sam is significant but nothing appears to happen. It looks like another red herring. Maybe not an apropos phrase for Prism. I should have said that it looks like another blue herring.

We leave the jewelry store having learned nothing and walk into the others, one that makes the acrylic bowls we saw, another that makes dinner plates, and one that does a good job on crystal. In all of those Sam and I admire the art, the art form as well as the finished product. And in all of those Thalia appears to be unimpressed. Maybe because she doesn't like being inside a human building. That much we know. Or it might just not be a day for Thalia to be impressed about anything.

We leave the shop, the last shop, and talk about what to do or where to go next. Nothing pops into our mind as a logical choice. Eventually Sam suggests going back to the hotel. We remember that Thalia and her fellow peepers weren't happy when they spent the night there after our return from the madra infested desert. Maybe Thalia will show some emotion at the hotel. We walk over. Thalia stops at the door and won't go inside. My guess is that the hotel isn't made of Prism material and she's tired of entering those places. She wants nothing to do with the hotel.

The next idea is to walk back to Dara Baile. We've been there before without much luck. It's worth a try as we're running out of ideas. We take the short walk to Dara Baile. Thalia knows where we're going, three kilometers away, and happily accepts my offer of a ride.

Our visit to Dara Baile is like a reunion. Lemon, Sunrise, Banana, and Peter run over to greet us. Well, they run over to greet Thalia. The five of them talk. Sam and I record their conversations but I can already tell they don't contain anything

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useful. We're looking for discontent, some feeling where I can sense sadness. Something, anything, from any Prism life would give us a clue. There's nothing.

We go back to Dathanna. We have spent an entire day walking around the human inhabited areas of Prism. We can feel nothing. I can feel nothing. Thalia didn't let me know anything. Today has been a waste of time. Maybe I should have started the day off by walking around the hotel counterclockwise with my garlic. Maybe that would have helped. I know that's just silly but I'm frustrated. I've nothing to report from a day's work.

We meet the rest of the group for dinner to tell them what we found. It's a simple report. Nothing! Eolai even shows up with the radiation detector. He was hopeful that it could have been used to confirm something we uncovered from our day's search. Yes, it would have been nice but, no, we found nothing.

We have dinner as the sun sets and talk about our options for tomorrow. What could we do differently? What new places could we search that weren't searched today? As we talk, we see the Earth transport appear again. We wait, knowing what to expect. The Prism Welcome does appear this time. It may be a bit brighter but otherwise just as we expected.

Eolai gets a look of terror on his face. The radiation detector that he brought with him registered something at the height of the Prism Welcome. Not a dangerous something by itself but radiation at a level that would be dangerous if repeated over and over again. The Prism Welcome is getting brighter and stronger. And some of that extra strength is showing up on the planet surface. The detector tells us so. The Prism Welcome light is so bright that not all is going straight into space. Some is being reflected back to Prism. Reflected by something in the atmosphere. Maybe something in the atmosphere that's being controlled by Prism, by the Prism consciousness. Prism is upset. Prism is getting madder.

What does this increase in radiation really mean? There's only one answer to that question. Everyone on the planet is now in danger and we know what the danger is. There's no time left. We must all go back to Earth.

Chapter 31 – Day 28 on Prism

The night before it was decided to come up with a plan to evacuate Prism. It's dangerous to live here now and who knows when that danger level might increase to a fatal level. We know there's no option. We must prepare now for what's inevitable.

A meeting will soon be called to tell everyone on Prism what has happened and what has been decided. Rumors are already going around everywhere. People either know what's happening or suspect something. I'm sure people who don't know for sure wonder what it is. Deciding how much to tell them is like walking a tightrope. You want them to know the urgency but saying that they all could be exposed to harmful radiation would just scare them. Or worse. They might start killing Prism life from fear since that's where the radiation might be coming from. And an action like that could have serious repercussions. Besides simply being the wrong thing to do, Prism might just decide it's sick of us Earth invaders and get rid of us once and for all.

For now, the people are just being told that the Prism Welcome is the source of the radiation. That much is true and the Prism Welcome isn't something that can be attacked. A partial explanation is best.

The first part of the plan is to send someone back to Earth with the news, with information to make a case for sending enough ships to Prism to pick up everyone and everything. Everything meaning all the Earth animals. It's not fair to leave them here. Other possessions can remain on Prism. Those aren't important. I wonder if there are even enough ships on Earth to accomplish what we need to do. We might have to get Earth to allocate ships used for travel to other inhabited planets. I hope those planets can miss one or two of their weekly transports.

That someone needs to go back to Earth soon is obvious. The ship that arrived yesterday is ready to depart tonight. Our envoy must be on it and the only logical choice to be that envoy is Sam. That realization is quite a shock to me. I like having Sam here. She's my emotional contact with Earth, with recent Earth. She's intelligent and someone I can trust to make good choices and to see things I might not. Confidence in actions we take is greater when we take those as a team, much greater. At a time like this, when every action might be critical, I'm afraid I'll make mistakes. Mistakes that wouldn't be made with Sam here, even to just support me with a "yes" or "no."

We've worked together, Sam and I, for many years on many assignments. Having her not around is more than just losing a coworker, even knowing I'm going to see

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her again in a few weeks. But I know having her be the one to return to Earth is the only choice that can be made so I'll have to live with it. I'd like to spend the last few hours with her before she takes the shuttle up to the ship in orbit and eventually back to Earth. I make this suggestion to Sam and she smiles. That's another thing I'll miss, her smiles. You don't know what you'll miss until it's gone. With that thought, we go off for our final walk through Dathanna.

Sam's sad about leaving, even sadder than I am about it. She knows she'll never be back to Prism. No one will. She likes the planet and wants something to remember it by, some memento, something that proves she was here on Prism. We walk through the artist area where we were just yesterday. She considers getting a painting from Wassily's shop but decides against it. We were warned that Wassily or his work could somehow be a problem. She doesn't want to tempt the fates anymore by taking a painting of his back with her.

The next store sells jewelry. No doubt about what's going to happen here. As we enter the store, I see another smile from Sam. Her Prism souvenir is as good as purchased. Only a small stone is needed. Even small stones sparkle with changing colors like everything on Prism. A ring is Sam's choice, a ring with a solitary stone. There are stones of many types. The showcases in the front are crowded with sapphires, turquoise, onyx, and aquamarines. Those appear to be the most common stones in the store. Then we walk down one of the far rows. Down an aisle she walked yesterday with Thalia. The display cases there were empty yesterday. Today one case shows a single red ruby ring, a single perfect ruby in a setting that fits Sam's hand perfectly. She wants that ring. Red will remind her of happy times on Prism. The other stones are all shades of blue. Looks like Sam has become empathetic with Prism. Red is happiness, blue is not.

She makes her purchase. We have our last meal together, lunch at our favorite place. Some Dara Baile cheese and a glass of wine. This time I wait for mine to turn white and she gets the red. It all tastes the same but it seems the right way to enjoy our final drink on Prism. She walks back to her room, packs, and checks out. Thirty minutes later I walk her to the spaceport.

Everyone is there to see her off. Jim, Mia, Eolai, Thalia, Clio, and Euterpe. And me. There's a lot of sadness as everyone says their final goodbyes. I can especially sense sadness from the peepers. That's a good sign, I guess, but a bit too late. Their feelings aren't going to change what's inevitable.

I'm the last to say *à bientôt*, the French equivalent of see you soon. Soon will be two or three weeks or 52 years, depending on how one looks at it. Any of those is

Jack Verson

too long for me. I give Sam a big hug and she seems to hold on to me for a long time. Eventually someone comes over and tells her it's time to go.

She boards the transport. It takes off. A chapter of Prism has just ended.

Chapter 32 – Prism, The Final Days

I go back to my room and do nothing. I know that this isn't the ending I had hoped for when we first came to Prism. I feel like a failure. It's a rare assignment from Ikenga when I fail to deliver a solution that makes everyone happy. I have a solution here but not a happy one. It's getting late and I try to sleep. It will be a big day tomorrow starting with the planet-wide meeting. Planet-wide meeting of Earthlings. I'm one of those but Earthling almost seems like a bad word now.

As I fall asleep, I dream that I was asleep and woke up in a house. A house that's my home, my place of comfort, my place of safety. There are no dangers in this house. There's no radiation. All dangers are elsewhere. I hear that the purpose of dreams is to remove the worries of real life. A mind needs a place where it can go to relax, where all the worries of the world are, as once was said, left at the doorstep. That's where the worries are here, left outside the house, not inside.

There's a knock on the door. I get up to see who it is. I open the door. My best friend has come over to chat. I enjoy these chats. As I step aside to let Thalia enter, I look outside the house. I'm in Dara Baile in one of the new houses. It's two stories but small. Certainly, big enough for me.

Thalia sits down and we start talking. That seems strange since we can't talk the same talk. Thalia can't speak and I have no ability to broadcast the common language of Prism. But we communicate regardless. We read each other's thoughts. In my dream, I've finally perfected my ability to communicate on Prism to Prism, and Thalia to me. We communicate about all that has happened in the past few years, how lucky we are to be such good friends, and how the fates of both planets have managed to arrange events to have us meet.

There's a noise on the stairs. We look over to see Sam walk down. She goes into the kitchen and prepares a tea for Thalia, a fine canoe-leaf tea. A warm drink for a cold day but only for Thalia. Sam and I each get a cup of Earl Grey.

A mind is a strange thing. Some people drift off to a dream world full of dangers. A nightmare. Others drift off to a dream world where everything is happy. A place that can be used to put one's mind at ease until it's time to wake up and let the real world take over. That's the bad thing about dreams, they end. And when they do, reality reappears. It must have been a long dream for me. Even before I open my eyes, I realize that morning has dawned. The sun has come up and that the sky is bright. Time to get the day going. I roll over to get out of bed but I can't. I'm blocked. I open my eyes and see something that shouldn't be there, someone who shouldn't be there. I see Sam.

“What are you doing here?” I exclaim, and “What are you doing here?”

Sam looks at me, leans over and surprises me by giving me a kiss. She smiles. “Nice to see you, too,” she responds. “I’m here as you can see. But what do you mean by ‘here here’?”

“What are you doing here on Prism? Even with the PSD drive, you couldn’t have gone to Earth and returned. You just left. And what are you doing ‘here here’, meaning ‘here’ in my room? This is a first. A welcome first but, well, it’s good to see you too.”

Sam is wearing her ruby ring. It looks a bit worn but is unmistakably what she bought yesterday, if it was yesterday. She still hasn’t said how long she’s been gone. Almost anything is possible with a PSD drive.

She smiles again. A smile that I realize melts my heart. Sam admits she just left yesterday and boarded the ship. As she was in the observation deck waiting for the ship to depart, she solved the problem. The epiphany of all epiphanies. She knows why Prism is mad at us. She knows how to correct the problem. There will be no more radiation and no one will have to leave Prism. She hopes.

“OK, tell me,” I anxiously ask.

“Nope, not yet.” She teases in response.

“What, not yet, why?” She should be able to sense some irritation in my voice.

“I have to be sure. And to do so is going to take a few days. If I’m right, the problem is already over. If I’m wrong, well, it’s been nice knowing you.”

Women can be so irritating. Sam can be the most irritating of them all. Smart, cute, possibly even correct, but irritating.

I have no choice but to go along. I go to gather everyone for another meeting.

It’s 10 AM. We’re all back in the meeting room. Eolai, Jim, and Mia are there, as are Sam and I. This time the crowd is bigger. Thalia joins us, of course, as does Clio, Euterpe, Lemon, Sunrise, Banana, and Peter. The whole group. No doubt people are surprised to see Sam in the group. I don’t sense that the non-people attendees are surprised. Why is that?

Sam announces that the problem is solved, definitely solved, maybe. She can prove whether it is or not but to do so we’ll have to travel back to the shore to see the next Prism Welcome.

“That’ll take another week,” we all seem to shout in unity.

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It'll actually take more than a week. The ship just left yesterday so it won't return for six more days. And then there's the two-day walk back once it does arrive. The people here in Dathanna won't know what happened for eight days.

Sam acknowledges that this is a long time to be in suspense but she doesn't want to get people's hopes up even though it's apparent she thinks she knows what's about to happen and that the danger has passed. People here don't know the real issue yet, don't know what the real danger is if, whatever Sam did, doesn't work.

Sam gives us a little information, kind of a teaser of things to come.

"I was nervous last night and wanted to make sure I had all my bases covered. Before the Earth transport ship left Prism orbit, before I caught the return shuttle back to Prism, I told the Earth transport pilot what was happening, what I thought the problem was, and what needed to be done to help. He'll bring word back to Earth. The ship that arrives in one week will bring what we need to solve this problem. If I'm right, that is. If I'm not right, it'll be prepared to start returning settlers from Prism. There's nothing else we can do or say for the next week that won't make people worry more. Except maybe to have Vernon do another garlic walk. That may help. Seriously, let's just keep calm and hope.

"In three days, we start our hike back to the shore. We should leave early in case we have problems on the way. This is one Prism Welcome we don't want to miss."

All leave the meeting and all the humans are a bit disgruntled. Even I am. It's only the peepers and rabbits that appear grunted.

Three days pass. They pass faster than I thought they would. It probably helped that Sam moved into my room. She had checked out of hers if you remember. I kept trying to get her to tell me what she knew but she was stubborn. Almost as stubborn as I can be. Not quite, but she surely made her case. At least we found things other than talking about the Prism Welcome to keep us busy.

The day is finally here. We'd be ready to leave for the shore if a last-minute hitch wasn't delaying the departure. It turns out some unexpected interested parties want to go on the trip with us. Specially three peepers and four rabbits. None of them can walk as fast as we need to in order to get there on time so we talk to Oscar. He goes to the construction site in Dara Baile and returns with seven canvas bags and a piece of wood, Earth wood, about two to three meters long. We tie the bags to the wood at equal intervals. Placing the wood on the ground, one Prism-born animal hops in each of the seven bags. With me at one end and Oscar at the other, we lift

and there you have it. The first bus on Prism made for Prism. We're going to expend a lot of effort transporting a whole congregation to the shore instead of just Thalia but I have my official Prism chauffeur's license so I'm up to the task.

Off we go. Most of the trip goes smoothly. Some parts prove more difficult. Navigating a bus around fallen trees and large boulders presents some of the more difficult problems. Our passengers help. They agree to get out and walk around each obstacle as we take care of their transport. I know that's going to hurt our Yelp rating but sacrifices have to be made. Besides, a bad rating can't hurt too much when there's no competition.

We eventually get to the shore a day early. The ship will appear on the second night. We're all content to relax and look at the sea until then. It's so relaxing, actually, that I'm not even in a hurry to see what's going to happen. Amazing. My whole career riding on something I don't know what, something I don't have any control over, and something I'm not in a hurry to see.

The first night passes. The next day is again spent looking at the ocean. What else is there to do here? We look at the fish and animals talking to Thalia. And not only to Thalia, they talk to the entire group of Prism life we brought with us. It must be special to be part of a planet when the planet is also part of everything. Hard to even contemplate what that means. A nice thought but we're not part of it.

The second night is upon us. Sam and I have our cameras ready and Sam makes a strange request. She doesn't want me to aim my camera at the Prism Welcome. We've done that before. This time she asks me to aim my camera at the ship as it enters orbit. That's where the proof will be that everything is OK, if it is OK. Sam will take care of recording the Prism Welcome but someone has to record the ship.

The sun moves low on the horizon and the ocean breezes rise. All like we saw before. The water offshore becomes agitated and continues to get more agitated until the sun sets. It gets darker. The weekly ship from Earth finally comes into view. I aim my camera as accurately as I can to keep the ship in my line of sight.

Offshore the Prism Welcome light forms beneath the surface. It gets brighter, then brighter, and finally the red beacon appears, the beacon that I sensed was full of hope. I sense that again now. It lasts but a moment and fades just like the last time. The light dies. There's a pause. The sea is again dark.

But now there's a difference. A red light emerges from the ship. A faint red light. Almost undetectable. I see it. I record it on my camera only because Sam told me to. How did she know? Was that light there the last time we recorded the Prism Welcome? It could have been. We didn't know or think to look for it.

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Apparently, it wasn't there before. Apparently, this is the first time because this time there's no bright Prism light that follows. Only the red light. The second beacon of bright white light, the beacon with the blue interior that shifted to violet and then into dangerous wavelengths, that beacon never materializes, is never sent. Poseidon has returned to Amphitrite apparently happy and content.

I look at Sam. I see the biggest smile I've ever seen, a smile bigger than her face. And relief. All her tensions are gone. They had gripped her soul during the week and more so during the last couple of hours. She had a lot riding on what she guessed to be the problem, what she had obviously guessed right.

And Thalia and the group. Even if I had never seen a peeper smile before, I would now know what one looked like. Did you know rabbits can smile too? I do. And there's also relief. The group of Prism life was safe no matter what happened here. No matter if this problem was solved or not. But they're happy that it's solved. Happy that we can stay on Prism or so I assume.

I ask Sam if she can let me in on her secret now, on her ship-based epiphany. She says OK. Mia, who didn't join us, already knows. The people on the ship, the weekly transport from Earth, should also know. Sam told the pilot on the ship that returned to Earth just last week and that pilot told the pilot on the next ship what to do. And how to check to see if it worked, which it did. That information will soon be relayed from the newly arrived ship to Dathanna. Mia will tell everyone there. Everyone there will know so Sam will explain it to everyone here.

“Life on Prism is not so much different from life on Earth. I expect from life everywhere. The main difference is that all life on Prism is related. All life is part of the planet. Everything and everyone are individuals but all individuals are related.”

“There are relations on Earth. Not one that covers every being but ones that are strong nonetheless. There are relations between brother and sister, between husband and wife, and between a mother or father and their children. Most of these relationships are close ones. You can be devastated if you lose someone that you're close to.”

“One of the most devastating losses imaginable is when a parent loses a child. It happens but it isn't supposed to happen. A child is someone you can rely on to be there for your entire life. But even losing a child isn't the worst. The absolute worst case is when a child goes missing, is kidnapped, runs away, is lost. The reason a child goes missing isn't as important as the doubt. What does a

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parent do when they don't know where their child is or if they are even alive or dead?

“Let's continue with that thought. A child leaves. There's no word. No news for years. Then all of a sudden you hear something that makes you believe you might know where they are. You look, you investigate, you follow every lead. And finally in the end they aren't found. They're still lost. How did you feel when you received the initial news that perhaps your child was still alive and well? You felt hope. And how did you feel when that hope was dashed? You felt sadness, you became depressed. Your feeling of sadness at that time was probably deeper than when you first realized that your child was gone.

“Let's continue with that thought some more. What if more time goes by and you get news again, more news that your child has been located. Again, you search. Again, you are disappointed. How do you feel now? Of course you're depressed. Each time you get news, each time your hope returns, and each time you're disappointed. Each time that happens you're more depressed than the time before. If it happens too many times you may eventually enter a pit from which there's no return.

“OK, time to put that thought aside. Now what happened to me on the ship before it left for Earth? I had just purchased a beautiful ring from a shop in Dathanna. A beautiful red ring, a ruby red ring. It glistened like everything on Prism. It changed colors like the plants, like the tulips on the field sloping down from Dara Baile to the river. The tulips that we now know are part of Prism and as part of Prism, tulips that can express feelings.

“I looked at my ruby ring as I was in the ship's observation room, as it was getting ready to leave for Earth. It was no longer a red ruby. It was a blue sapphire. Stones and flowers and plants on Prism don't change colors drastically. They change colors slowly. Something that is red looks red always. It may be ruby red, it may be scarlet red, it may be crimson, but it's never blue. I knew it was blue because it was shifting blue, because it was sad. Stones are part of Prism. They can show feelings. This one did.

“Then it dawned on me what the problem was. It was so obvious. I should have seen it sooner but I guess I only think that because of

Prism

what I know now. Everything on Prism is related. The planet is the parent of everything. Prism is the parent of the peepers, of the rabbits, of the fish, of the tulips, and of the stones in the jewelry. I was taking a stone with me to Earth and its parent was Prism. A parent should never lose a child. Prism was sad that a child was being taken from her. The child was sad because it was leaving.

“This was not the first time a child was taken. Most of the trade from Prism consists of exports. Exports of paintings such as the ones by Wassily, exports of art from Vetreria, and exports of jewelry like the ring I purchased. We were told many times that Wassily’s paintings were problems. The paint was produced from Prism plants. Even when ground up for paint, the essence of the plant that is part of Prism is still in the paint.

“Exporting items to Earth was bad but the bigger problem was that Prism had no idea where they went. They were gone like a child stolen from her parents. All Prism knew was that they were on the ship and then the ship was gone. What happened when the ship reappeared? Hope rose in Prism, in the planet Prism. When Prism sensed the ship enter orbit, it sent a beacon of hope, a red beacon of hope, in the hope that the returned ship had returned its child, or children. It never happened. With every failure, Prism got sadder, got more depressed. Depression that it showed through the second bright beacon with shorter and shorter wavelengths until it became radiation deadly to us.

“Why was there no such radiation tonight with this ship’s arrival in this rendition of the Prism Welcome? I’ll tell you. I told the pilot on the last ship that left Prism, the one I was supposed to be on, that the souvenirs of Prism already on Earth could become death traps. They could start generating fatal doses of radiation at any time. I told him the only way to stop that was to send everything back to Prism. This ship that just arrived returned some of those Prism artifacts, some of the children of Prism. Not all of them, but some. Hopefully a large number. This time when Prism sent out its red beacon of hope, those children on the ship answered. The slight red beam that came from the ship was a signal from them that they’re back. Prism is starting to return from the depths of depression she had

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entered. Human life has nothing to fear as long as we continue to return whatever was taken from Prism.”

The silence as Sam finishes is deafening. There have been many times like that in the past few days. This was the loudest of them all. The loudest silence of them all. I walk over to embrace Sam. I'm no longer upset that she didn't tell me. I'm proud of her. As proud as I have ever been of anyone in my life.

Two days later. We're back in Dathanna. Mia knows, Eolai knows, everyone knows. All is good. More than that, everyone is relieved and happy. A new Prism banner flies from many windows. It's a banner that includes all shades of red. We can use Prism material to make those banners as long as they never leave Prism.

The only problem is trade with Earth. How can Prism get what it needs from Earth without being able to send anything back? That problem can be solved. No one is worried. Maybe we can export videos. I wonder how popular a show with peepers doing an Irish stepdance might be. I'm sure there are other options.

Our assignment here is finished. It finished successfully thanks to Sam. I still can't help but think how close we were to evacuating everyone from the planet. Sam and I say our goodbyes and pack up to leave. The next ship from Earth is scheduled to arrive tomorrow and leave the day after. We'll be on it.

We make our round of goodbyes. We have many of them to do. We've become known to everyone in town. We're the biggest name on the planet. Sam should be. I'm but a tagalong.

Thalia is the hardest goodbye we have. She walks up and we start talking. I feel like I'm in the dream I had a few nights ago. How can I be talking to Thalia?

Sam looks at me. She looks at Thalia. How can Sam know what's happening even when I don't. Thalia aims a feeling right at me. Not a colorful feeling but a real feeling. She explains to me that I had been developing the ability to talk to her all along. I knew that. I sensed many times a complete connection to her coming closer to the surface every day I spent here. And finally with the return of the Prism children and Prism being happy again, the last block to that connection was removed. I only had to convince myself that I could talk to her. Like Peter Pan asking Wendy to say "I can fly, I can fly, I can fly."

Thalia and I spend more time with our goodbyes. Eventually Sam and I return to our room where we talk about everything. Everything includes what we're going to do with the rest of our lives. It's a simple conversation. A lot simpler than one would expect. When people know what they want and when that something is the best for everyone, it becomes a simple thing to discuss.

Prism

The next morning, the morning of the day that the Earth ship will arrive, we all meet in the local park. Eolai, Mia, Oscar, Jim, Wassily, and Vetreria. Also, Thalia, Euterpe, Clio, and all the rabbits. Sam and I stand side by side. I take her ring which has returned to its full and bright ruby color. Thalia turns, faces us, and starts the first marriage ceremony ever performed by a peeper.

Epilogue

Three years have gone by. Sam and I have a child, a daughter we named Sienna. We live in a beautiful home overlooking the hill from Dara Baile to the river. The town now has 500 residents. It's the second largest town on Prism. There are still only two. There's a knock on the door. I let out a feeling of "Come In" and Thalia enters. Sam joins us with cups of tea. Thalia sits down and enjoys hers. Canoe leaf is her favorite. We chat about being friends and about how fate has allowed us to meet, just like in my dream. She asks me to get out Eolai's old spectral analyzer, which Eolai had given me as a gift. She sends two feelings into the machine. One is my name. The second is Sam's. Thalia smiles. We activate the machine and look at the names, at all the peeps. It's our names, that much is true. But the endings are different. The endings now say "from Prism."

Trek

Sam and Vernon take a long vacation. A permanent vacation as they stay on Prism to raise their daughter. To fill the gap created by their departure from Escape, they start a university to train new investigators. Ikenga sends many people from Earth to attend this university, many bright men and women.

Time advances. Many years. Sienna grows up and is ready to pursue her higher education. She does and turns out to be the brightest student in the university, apparently having inherited many of her parents' skills. Sam and Vernon were the best that Escape had when they worked there, especially when working as a team. No one since that time has ever reached their level. Maybe Sienna hasn't either, but she's close.

A problem has been simmering for many years on a planet called Trek, one that Escape has sent multiple investigators to solve. None have solved the problem. Not even all have returned. Ikenga cannot not afford to send anyone else. Out of options, Sam and Vernon are asked to come out of retirement. Sienna can join them. Can this team solve a problem no one else could?

Read *Trek* and find out.