

Memory Soup

Part 1

By Emily M. Hanson

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Kilroy's eyes narrowed as he checked the coordinates displayed in glowing emerald characters on his monitor: Quadrant 28, Sector 11Z. The information did not ring any bells. He frowned, checked his navigational log, and frowned again. Despite the old navigator's saying, "You're never lost until you run out of space," Kilroy had to admit that he had no clue where he was. To make matters worse, he was running low on fuel.

He checked the short-range scanner and discovered that there was a small planet nearby with a moderate level of technology and a well-sized population. The scanner also indicated that the atmosphere was breathable and that a source of fuel might be found underground. Kilroy decided to land and found an uninhabited area within several days walking distance from a city. He enabled the Copernicus' heat shield, slowed as much as he could, and switched on the landing thrusters.

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Horatio Galaxius had taken advantage of the unusually clear night sky and was using the telescope his parents had given him for his birthday. It was nothing more than two lenses and a mirror placed within an iron tube, but one could see a good many objects in the sky with it. Currently, he was looking at a constellation called the Hourglass, which contained the red giant his father had named Hercules. As he adjusted the focus to get a better view, a bright flash blinded him. He cried out in pain and stumbled backward into his twin brother, Hamlet.

"Great galaxies, Horatio! Watch where you're going!"

"How am I supposed to watch where I'm going," he replied irritably, "if I can't see?"

His brother looked apologetic. "Sorry."

The same light he had seen filled the room and disappeared.

"What, by all the planets, was that?" Hamlet wondered aloud.

"A comet, perhaps, or a meteorite," he suggested. "I would like to get a sample, if it is a meteorite."

"Look," his brother exclaimed and pointed to a bright point of light on the horizon that was declining rapidly. "Is that it, do you think?"

"What else could it be?"

"It's going to land south of us, near the Mitzelgranian mines. Shall we tell Father?"

"If we tell him, he will just forget about it after we leave," Horatio pointed out. "No, I think it would be wiser to leave a note."

"Agreed."

In his study, Cosmo Galaxius appeared frustrated. "Now where in the universe did that bottle of ink go? I just had it! Dominia, dear, have you seen it?"

"It's in your left hand, Cosmo," she answered.

Startled, he looked down. "Oh! Now, what was I going to . . . ah, yes." He sat down at his desk, dipped his pen into the bottle, and began to write on a piece of water-colored paper.

Dominia watched with interest. She was a tall woman with velvety skin the color of cream. Her long hair was dyed indigo and piled onto her head, held together by jeweled combs. Her eyes were violet. She wore a dress made out of a material Cosmo had invented, which consisted of tiny mirrors attached to a piece of silk. It shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. She was over three hundred years old, but did not look a day over twenty-five. This amazing accomplishment was due to something on the planet Mitzelgran, which had become her new home. Exactly what it was, no one knew, but it impeded the aging process in humans. Cosmo had spent a century trying to discover it, but he eventually gave up.

Cosmo appeared to be in his late fifties. He had grayish-brown hair and brown eyes, and recently had begun growing a mustache, which he was rather proud of. He was approximately the same height as Dominia, and was thin because he often forgot to eat, even when she brought him food.

"Blast," he muttered.

"What's wrong?" Dominia inquired.

"I forgot the rest of the formula."

"Let me see what you have so far."

Recently, Cosmo had been entrusting his wife with information he wanted to remember. He had always been absent-minded, but his memory was deteriorating at a phenomenal rate. One day, he had discovered a particular mixture of plants that caused him to remember things he'd forgotten. Unfortunately, the effect was only temporary. Finally, after several weeks, he remembered to write the recipe down. "Memory Soup," he called it, because the ingredients did make a pretty good soup.

"Hmm . . . one cup of ethereal mist; two tablespoons of spiceweed, finely ground; one blackroot; two cups of greenberry juice; one-half cup of chopped dragon's tongue stems . . . oh, you forgot one cup of starflower petals and three spiderblossoms. I shall write them down for you."

"Thank you, my dear. The hour is late, and I shall retire soon. Remind me to gather the ingredients in the morning. No, better yet, have the boys do it."

"Yes, my love." Gently, Dominia kissed him. "Good night."

"Good night."

Mitzelgran's four moons arched across the sky. The two largest, which Cosmo had named after his twin sons, were at their zeniths. The medium-sized blue moon, Dominia, had not quite reached its peak. The smallest of all the moons, Galaxius, was just beginning to rise. It would not reach its pinnacle until a

few minutes before dawn. The night was halfway over.

The twins had taken all-terrain vehicles and were crossing the silvery-white mountains that surrounded the small village of Atlantis. The short-range scanner indicated that a large object, primarily made of metal, was located thirty kilometers ahead. What was strange about it was not the fact that it had fallen out of the sky, but that it was constructed out of titanium, an element not found on Mitzelgran.

"We may be dealing with a spacecraft here," Hamlet remarked.

"My dear brother, you have an extraordinary gift for stating the obvious. The only questions that remain are: Where did it come from, and who brought it here?"

"Is it possible this spacecraft is from Earth?"

"Anything is possible. Some things just have greater probabilities of occurring than others. It is highly unlikely that this spacecraft is from Earth. It's probably from somewhere in the Antarian system or the Zeylonian system. Both trade with Earth and are much closer to our world."

"I suppose you are right, Horatio."

"In any case, I suggest we prepare to meet the traveler, or travelers, that have chosen to grace us with their presence."

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Kilroy stumbled out of the Copernicus. He was wearing a neon orange environmental suit, which made him feel just a bit silly. The gravitational pull of the planet was lighter than the standard pull of most planets, so it took him some time to get used to it. It was then that he saw the twins on their land vehicles coming towards him. Astonished to see humans on this strange and distant world, he gaped at them.

"Welcome to Mitzelgran," Horatio said as he came to a stop. Then he did a double-take. "You're human."

Kilroy shrugged. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I'm Horatio Galaxius and this is my brother, Hamlet."

"Kilroy March. That's my ship, the Copernicus."

"Looks like a beauty, but I'll bet she could sure use some repairs," Hamlet remarked. "We can help with that, if you don't mind staying with us for a day or two."

"No, I don't mind. Is there some place official where I have to register or anything?"

"Not really. The Mitzelgranians don't care. Atlantis is the only human colony on this planet. No one's landed here for decades. I may look 20, but I'm actually 41. There's something here that slows down the aging process in humans. My father is over 300 and can barely remember his own name. Luckily, he's got us and our mother to take care of him."

Kilroy marveled at the idea of living for so long. Sure, plenty of non-human species could live for

centuries, but the average life-span of most humans was around 110. There had to be a way to capitalize on this. He'd go back to Earth, take out a loan, and hire scientists to test the air, water, and soil. Then they'd set up a corporation to bottle and sell it, whatever it was. The universe ran on credits, not charity. As long as it wasn't illegal, he would make a profit.

Kilroy hopped onto the back of Hamlet's vehicle and they sped off. A few minutes later, a robotic whirring sound was heard and a shiny metal drill broke through the sand. Several moments later, another drill broke through, and another. Clamps were fastened to the Copernicus and it was lowered below the surface, where the mazes of the Mitzelgranian miners' tunnels stretched for thousands of kilometers. By now, Kilroy and the twins were in the outskirts of Atlantis.

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Part 2

Atlantis had a population of 8,587 humans. Therefore, it was a decent-sized colony, as far as colonies went. This was mostly due to the abnormal longevity of the colonists' life spans on Mitzelgran. While having an extended life was certainly a benefit, the side effect of memory loss was not. Approximately 35% of the human population suffered from it. The ones who did were, like Cosmo, over the age of 300 and mostly male. The reason for this was debated among the planet's leading scientists, including Cosmo himself, who was still allowed into the debate forums. It was thought to be linked to the ancient Earth disease known as Alzheimer's, but the cure for that particular illness had been found, and was ineffective here. No one knew what caused it for sure.

Cosmo's discovery of the particular combination of plants and herbs to lessen the effects, which he called Memory Soup, was regarded as nothing short of a miracle. While the results were temporary, it was the only known treatment. Most of Mitzelgran's leading scientists were investigating the properties of the ingredients. Cosmo was one of them, though his absentmindedness sometimes led to his colleagues underestimating him.

As Hamlet, Horatio, and Kilroy arrived at the Galaxius estate, an attractive tall woman with long, blonde hair ran up to them.

"Hello! I see you have a visitor."

"Yes. Kilroy, this is our mutual friend, Infinity Armstrong. She's an archaeologist. Infinity, this is Kilroy March, captain of the Copernicus. He has just arrived."

"Oh. Are you from Earth?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"You're a long way from home, Captain March."

"Call me Kilroy, please."

"All right. I've made a discovery, but that can wait. I want to hear all about Earth. I've never been there, you know. I'm a second-generation colonist. My father, Dr. Thor Armstrong, was on the first mission over 300 years ago. He was the ship's doctor. He still practices occasionally, but he's mostly retired now."

"May I inquire about your mother?"

Infinity stiffened noticeably. "I haven't seen her since I was a little girl. She and my father didn't get along. She didn't come with us on the mission."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Kilroy replied.

"It's okay."

"So, what did you discover?" Hamlet asked.

"Recently, I entered the mines with a native guide, and we found the ruins of a city predating the mine tunnels, which have been around for nearly a thousand years. I've gotten the Mitzelgranians' permission to start a dig in an abandoned section of the mines, but I will need some assistance. I was hoping that you and your brother would be willing to help," Infinity explained.

"Certainly," he replied. "It would be a grand adventure. What do you think, Horatio?"

"For once, I agree. When do you want to get started, Infinity?"

"As soon as possible."

"I can help," Kilroy said.

"The dig could take weeks. Can you stay that long?" she asked.

Kilroy thought it over. It wasn't as if he was on a tight schedule. He'd simply been mapping the region of space, hoping to find something exciting to bring home. Well, something exciting had just bit him in the nose, so to speak. He was here, and he might as well make the most of it.

"Sure," he replied. "I'm an explorer and trader by profession. I might as well explore."

"We can start in two days. I just need to procure some supplies."

"Great," Hamlet said. "We'll see you soon, then."

As Infinity left, they entered the house.

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The Galaxius' home was decorated with various replicas of famous artwork, mostly by Van Gogh and Rembrandt. A few light sculptures by a local hologram artist, Jewel Silverstar, lit up what would otherwise be very dark corners. One was of an ancient rocket being launched from Earth. Another was of a local plant called dragon's tongue, named for its bright red and gold stalks that resembled a long, forked tongue surrounded by flames. The eclectic art blended together to create a stunning visual effect.

"Mother," Horatio called. "We have a visitor."

Dominia stepped out of the bedroom. She hadn't gone to bed yet, but she was wearing a long, silk gown and a robe. "Who is here at this hour?"

"This is Kilroy March, captain of the Copernicus. He landed here to refuel. Hamlet and I found him wandering around outside. He has nowhere else to stay."

"All right. Captain March, you may have the spare room for now. How long do you plan to stay?"

"Not long, Ma'am," he replied.

She nodded.

"Also, we ran into Infinity Armstrong on the way home. She found some ancient ruins below the mines and needs help exploring them. We all agreed to assist her. We plan to leave the day after tomorrow."

"So soon?"

Hamlet nodded. "It'll just be for a few weeks, Mother. It won't be that long."

"All right. I suppose I don't have to tell you to be careful down there. There's been rumors of things living deep in the mines, things that the natives won't even deal with because they're too nasty. I've heard tales of rock monsters that can camouflage themselves, so you don't even notice they're breathing down your neck until it's far too late. I've also heard about poisonous fungi, giant bats that drain a person of blood, and all sorts of inhuman creatures. You may want to take your father's old laser pistol."

"Excellent idea. Well, I guess I'll show Kilroy to his room. Good night, Mother."

"Good night," she replied and went back into the bedroom.

Kilroy found his bed to be very comfortable, even though he had strange dreams about falling in the darkness. When he woke the next morning, he couldn't remember any of them.

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The next morning, Kilroy met Cosmo at breakfast. The older man seemed unusually sharp. A cup of steaming hot liquid that gave off a sickly sweet smell was in front of his plate. Noticing that Kilroy was eyeing the mug, Cosmo pointed to it.

"That's my memory soup. I invented it to cure the mental fog that comes with living here. It only works for a little while. Say, I'm almost out of ingredients. Would you mind looking for them, if you have a chance?"

"Uh..." he wasn't sure how to respond. "What exactly are the ingredients?"

"Don't trouble yourself," Dominia interrupted. "Hamlet and Horatio can find them. They know exactly where to look."

"Well, perhaps Kilroy could come with us," Horatio suggested. "Would you like to? It would give you a chance to see a bit more of the area, before we have to go underground."

"Sure."

"Wonderful," Cosmo exclaimed. "Now, the things you need to look for include ethereal mist, a

spiceweed, a blackroot, two handfuls of greenberries, two dragon's tongue stems, a handful of starflower petals and three spiderblossoms."

"What's ethereal mist?"

"It's fog so concentrated that you can actually contain it in a bottle. Ethereal mist has certain chemical properties which make it a very useful catalyst. You can get it from the swamps," Hamlet explained.

After finishing breakfast, the twins started their all-terrain vehicles. Kilroy rode behind Horatio. The weather report said that there was a strong chance of a thunderstorm in the afternoon, so they had to gather the memory soup components before then.

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Part 3

Hamlet, Horatio and Kilroy rode out in their all-terrain vehicles to gather the Memory Soup ingredients. The first place they went was a forest so dense with trees that they had to park in a clearing and walk. Horatio spotted some dragon's tongue plants. The bright red and yellow stalks stuck out amongst thick green foliage. Carefully, he used his pocketknife to cut several plants. Then, he put them into his backpack. Suddenly, a haunting voice broke the silence, eerily singing in a language that no one recognized.

"What's that?" Kilroy asked.

"That's the Silver Siren," Hamlet replied. "She mostly stays in the deep part of the words. Whatever you do, don't try to find her. Rumor has it that she's neither human nor native, but an alien of some sort, and she'll kill anyone who gets too close. Certainly, no one has seen her and lived to tell about it that I know of."

"Interesting," he said. "Are there any other local legends that I should know about?"

"Well, there's Mabel," Hamlet responded.

"Who's she?" Kilroy asked.

"She isn't a who, but a what. I have a theory that she's related to the legendary Lochness creature back on Earth."

"I've seen Nessie's skeleton in the museum," Kilroy said. "Do you think they're really the same species?"

"Perhaps they're not identical, but they may be genetically related. It's just a theory. I've only seen Mabel a couple of times, and very briefly. She lives in the swamp, which is where we have to go next. Come on."

The swamp was incredibly murky, dank, and smelly. The fog that surrounded it was so thick at times that Kilroy could barely breathe. He wondered how Hamlet and Horatio managed. They were probably used to it. He had the sensation of actually pushing the fog back while he moved through it. It was that dense. Finally, they came to a stop. Kilroy felt like he was against a wall, but there was nothing in front of him. Could it be a force field?

"This is the thickest part of the fog," Hamlet remarked, "what we call ethereal mist." He took a jar out of his backpack, unscrewed the cover, and held it up.

Kilroy watched the fog seep into the container. He'd never seen anything like it before. "What makes it so thick?"

"It's just the combination of chemicals naturally produced in the swamp," Hamlet answered. "But you probably won't find anything like it anywhere else in the galaxy." As he put the cover back on, there was a low rumbling sound, almost like that of an earthquake.

"Do you often have tremors here?" Kilroy asked.

"Nope. That's Mabel." As Horatio spoke, a dark form rose. They could all see it in the fog like an immense shadow, towering over them. The creature growled, then vanished with a splash. "She doesn't usually cause any trouble. She's just grumpy when she's woken up."

"How do you know it's a she?"

Horatio shrugged and looked at his twin.

"Someone once found some eggs in this swamp. They were petrified, though," Hamlet answered.

"Then there's another creature like Mabel?"

"There was, once. We pulled his skeleton out. At least, the scientists are pretty sure it was a male specimen."

"Oh," was all Kilroy could think of to say. "What's next on the list?"

"We can find spiceweed and greenberries at the marketplace. Blackroot grows wild all over. Starflowers and spiderblossoms are a bit harder, they grow on the opposite edge of the forest. It'll take a couple of hours to ride that far."

"Let's split up," Horatio said. "That way, we'll have plenty of time to avoid the storm headed our way."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Hamlet replied. "Kilroy, would you rather go to the marketplace or back into the forest?"

The latter sounded more interesting, so that's what he decided. "The forest."

"Okay. Hop in, then."

They took off.

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Part 4

The forest was as thick with foliage as it could be without becoming a jungle. Kilroy and Hamlet rode deep into its heart where it was so dark, phosphorescent mushrooms and moss provided the only light

besides the headlights. Insects hummed nearby but did not bother the visitors. Primitive animals that were much like monkeys swung from the treetops and chattered loudly. High above in the canopies, birds sang in varying pitches.

Suddenly, the Silver Siren's song broke the peaceful ambience.

"She must be very close," Kilroy said, glancing around.

"Yes. Hang on." Hamlet shifted gears and the forest zoomed by in green blurs. His driving skill must have been excellent since he didn't hit any trees. Several minutes later, he slowed down. "We should be safe now."

But a silver gleam appeared in the thick green leaves before them. Kilroy could barely distinguish the shape of an alien woman, who was very tall and slender with pointed ears and seven long fingers on each hand. Her body seemed to be made of pure silver. She wore a gossamer gown that flowed around her, shimmering in the headlights' glow. Her hair cascaded around her shoulders like a silver waterfall.

"Cover your ears," Hamlet exclaimed and followed his own advice.

"Wait. She's saying something," Kilroy said as the Silver Siren spoke.

The other man put his hands down. "What?"

"I said, I do not wish to hurt you. There is a creature in this place which I am trying to warn you about. It can mimic voices. It uses them to lure unsuspecting victims into its lair. It has been using my songs for years." A tear formed in her eye. "I know what your people say about me. I have had nothing to do with those unfortunate disappearances."

"All right, what is this creature and what does it look like?" he asked.

"It is a great hulking beast with many appendages and mottled fur, which it uses to camouflage itself. I do not know its name. I realize that you have no reason in particular to trust me. I only hope that you remember what I've told you. If you hear something in this forest with hypnotic power, stay away from it."

"We most certainly will. Thank you," Hamlet replied. "Might I ask your name?"

"My people come from a world that is many light years away. I was sent here on a scouting mission to see if this planet had any worthwhile resources. My ship crashed and I had no way to return home. This planet's beauty was too much to leave behind, in any case. My name is Iriella."

"You could return with me," Kilroy said. "I have a ship. Well, it needs to be fixed and refueled. But after that's done, you're welcome to join me."

"Thank you. I will consider your offer," she said with a smile. "Come and find me when you're ready." She disappeared into the dense foliage.

They continued their journey to the edge of the forest, where there were many kinds of flowers and other plants growing. While Kilroy spotted a spiderblossom with its long purple and blue tendrils, Hamlet found a patch of bright yellow and orange starflowers. They carefully gathered the specimens. Just when they were about to leave, thunder rumbled in the distance.

"I think the storm's coming a bit early," Kilroy said.

"You're probably right. We'd better get back soon."

They headed to town as dark thunderclouds loomed overhead and large raindrops began to fall. By the time they arrived, they were soaking wet. Dominia greeted them at the door.

"Oh, goodness, you two look like drowned rats. You'd better come inside. Horatio's just gotten home from the marketplace as well," she said. "Did you find all the ingredients?"

"Yes," Hamlet replied, hanging up his dripping coat. "They may be a little soggy, though."

Suddenly there was another knock at the door. It was Infinity. "Hi. May I come in?"

"Of course, dear."

"Thanks. We need to leave sooner than I had expected. Something's come up."

"What?" Hamlet asked.

"Our Mitzelgranian guide has received an order from his government to search for another object while we're down there. Apparently, it's a relic of some sort that's sacred to them. We'll have to leave today. Are you up for it?"

"I'm up for anything," Kilroy answered.

"I should speak with my brother, but I'm sure he'll agree."

"Excellent," she replied.

"You should at least wait until the rain stops," Dominia said. "It shouldn't be long."

Hamlet gave his mother the memory soup ingredients as his brother entered the room.

"Infinity?"

"Horatio, we need to depart earlier than I thought." She explained again. "Can you leave today?"

"Of course. I just need to finish packing."

"Good. I'll wait."

After they finished packing, the twins said goodbye to Dominia and Galaxius, who had forgotten why they were leaving in the first place. He was certain that he would remember after having some memory soup. He wished them luck. Then Hamlet, Horatio, Kilroy and Infinity set off on their journey. They would meet the native guide at the mine entrance, located several dozen kilometers north of town.

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Part 5

Kaladox, the guide, waited patiently as they arrived. At 5'0", he was tall by the standards of his race. His species was long-lived. He was considered a young adult at the age of 75. His skin was pale blue and his hair was long and silvery-white, trailing down to the middle of his back in one long braid, which was the standard fashion among adult Mitzelgranian males. His eyes were bright blue, a rare occurrence. Most members of his species had gray eyes. Kaladox wore a jerkin made of some sort of thick hide and leggings also made from the same material. He had a sharp dagger in a hilt on his belt and he carried a heavy backpack.

Kilroy and the twins had blasters. Infinity had a large walking-stick which could double as a staff. She also carried a glowing green rod. It would be dark in the tunnels. All of them carried backpacks laden with supplies. Infinity made the introductions and Kaladox led the way into the mines.

It was cold and damp. Oil lamps hanging on the cave walls provided dim light. The sounds of Mitzelgranian miners working below them echoed through the tunnels. Suddenly Kaladox spotted a giant arachnid. It was large enough to block their path. Its red eyes glowed malevolently in the darkness.

"Careful! One drop of the creeper's poison is enough to kill a small child. It'll make you extremely ill," their guide warned before taking his dagger out of the hilt and darting forward.

Those with blasters aimed and fired. Kilroy missed the first time. He'd always considered himself a good shot. The spider screeched as the twins' blasters hit. Infinity struck it with her staff, causing greenish slime to squirt everywhere.

"Ick! Watch out," she exclaimed.

Kaladox thrust his dagger into the spider's soft shell and was rewarded with a hiss and being sprayed with sticky webs. Kilroy fired his blaster again and hit it this time, dead center. The spider dissolved into a pile of slimy goo in a few seconds.

"The blood of that creature is highly acidic," Kaladox explained as he freed himself from the webbing. "It can eat through nearly everything except solid rock and Venusium. How the creepers survive is a mystery."

Venusium was a metallic alloy made up of titanium, adamantium, and a few elements only found on the planet Venus. It was both expensive and difficult to make. Venusium was known for being extremely rare and nearly invulnerable. Nothing short of a nuclear warhead could dent it.

They continued on the path. For a while, everything was quiet. Then Kilroy heard a screeching noise and asked, "Are there bats in these caves?"

"Oh, yes," the guide answered. "There is the normal variety of cave bats, and then there are dark bats -- filthy, disease-ridden things -- and there are vampire bats in the lower levels. They aren't truly vampires, mind you, but they can suck your blood out if they sink their fangs in. So be careful." As he spoke, there was a loud flapping of wings and screeching as the cave bats approached.

"Great," Kilroy said. "More target practice."

There were only four cave bats, but they were much harder to hit than one disgustingly large spider. Infinity screamed when the leathery wings of one bat brushed across her hair. She swung her staff, smacked something solid, and heard a thud as the bat fell. Meanwhile, the twins were feeling frustrated as the swooping bats avoided blaster fire. Kaladox stabbed a bat as it got close. He managed to wound it.

Kilroy aimed his blaster, crossed the fingers of his free hand, and fired at one of the bats circling overhead. It screamed in rage and came at him. There was nothing to do but shoot it. He got lucky again. The blast hit dead on and the bat plummeted to the ground. Now there were only two left, and one was wounded. Horatio fired at the injured creature and missed, but his blast hit the ceiling and caused a few small rocks to fall. One of them struck the bat, knocking it down. Hamlet got the last bat with his shot.

"How much further?" Kilroy asked.

"We have several days to travel," Kaladox replied. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. I was just wondering."

"Good. Let's go."

It was not far to the elevator that would take them down to the next level. Kaladox pressed a glowing yellow button. Everyone felt a slight rumble as the lift descended further into the mines.

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The Mitzelgranians mined coal which was used for a variety of purposes, including electric power and fuel. Diamonds were also mined there. They were of a much higher grade than most, and were often traded to other worlds for all kinds of resources.

The second level of the mines seemed much dingier than the first. Light was much more scarce since the lamps were interspersed at wider intervals. The miners worked hard and did not chit-chat, though some glanced up momentarily. Humans were a rare sight in the mines. Most of the colonists avoided the tunnels because they were dangerous.

"Really," Kaladox said, "all you need is a sharp knife or a good blaster. Most of the beasts down here are more frightened of us than we are of them. Of course, I am used to this place."

"Is there anything we need to be concerned about?" Infinity asked.

"Hmm...well, I've heard about some things on the lower levels. There's shadow-skulkers, creatures that mostly stay in the shadows. They have breath so cold that it can freeze you solid. Then there's the weres -- wererats, werewolves, and werebears. They're partly humanoid and partly beast, and they can transform into the full creature at will. They usually keep to themselves, but they can be aggressive. I've also heard tales about huge arachnids -- ten times bigger than the one we saw. I haven't been to the lowest levels, so there may be other things. Just keep an eye out. I'm sure we'll be fine."

As the guide spoke, Hamlet caught a glimpse of two spiders heading their way. "Look out!"

Some of the miners picked up slings and aimed rocks at the arachnids. Kilroy took out his blaster and

fired. The first spider went down under a barrage of stones and laser fire. The other advanced, hissing and wildly waving its hairy legs. Horatio got a shot off, but missed. Hamlet hit the creature in the soft underbelly as it displayed sharp fangs dripping with venom. It finally collapsed when the miners launched a second attack.

Noticing that someone had dropped a sling, Infinity picked it up. She looked around for the weapon's owner, but none of the miners seemed to be missing one. So she put it into her pocket. It might come in handy later.

"What are you searching for, exactly?" she asked Kaladox.

"I'm looking for a relic that was once thought to contain the power of darkness. It was supposed to be able to quench all light in an area. There are legends of it being used on the battlefield in ancient times. It could create chaos and confusion. No one is certain how it worked, or even if the stories are true. The ancients had abilities that have long been lost to us. Some of them had psionic powers that were well-documented. Legend has it that there was a tower where these very mines now stand, and it contained the secrets of the expert psionists. The ruins of the tower have never been found, but they would be a great discovery, perhaps the greatest in our history."

"They may be the same ruins I'm here to investigate," Infinity replied.

"Oh, that would be wondrous if it were true," he responded. "We don't have very far to go to reach the next level. Come on."

So they continued down the twisting, turning tunnel and deeper into the darkness.

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Part 6

As they descended deeper into the mines, each level of tunnels seemed darker and dingier than the one above it. Finally, after battling their way through hordes of bats and giant spiders much like the ones previously described, they reached the location where Kaladox was certain his relic would be found. They were five levels down from the entrance and dozens of kilometers below the planet's main surface.

"This reminds me of a grave," Hamlet said. "It's dark, chilly and it stinks."

"You know, you're right. I can smell something rotting," Kaladox replied. "Perhaps someone was down here recently and encountered trouble with the local wildlife."

"As long as it isn't more bats or spiders," Infinity remarked. "I am so tired of fighting those things."

"You can say that again," Kilroy agreed as an eerie howl pierced the air.

"On the other hand, maybe a dark bat or creeper would be preferable to whatever that is," she said.

"It's probably just a werewolf," Kaladox said. "It shouldn't be any trouble at all. They're not usually hostile unless provoked. They are, however, quite territorial."

Suddenly Kilroy felt something crunch beneath his feet. He looked down and shivered at the sight of

bones.

"Ugh," Infinity remarked, nearly tripping over one. "You've never heard about anything undead down here, have you, Kaladox?"

"Not that I know of," he replied. "I doubt that such a thing is possible."

"Good. So we don't have to worry about these skeletons coming after us?"

"They are quite harmless, I assure you."

"Wait," Kilroy said, catching a glimpse of something metallic gleaming among the bones. Carefully, he picked it up. It was a shiny disk. "I wonder what this is?"

"I don't know, but it may be useful," their guide answered.

As they walked forward, the werewolf howled again. It sounded much closer this time. Then they saw a pair of glowing red eyes in the darkness. It snarled in a barely intelligible voice, "Stay away from our lair! You have been warned."

"Where is your lair?" Kaladox asked.

"You are approaching it. Stay away." The creature disappeared into the shadows.

"Well, that's just great," Kilroy said. "What shall we do now?"

"We should go around it," their guide suggested. "The lair is directly ahead of us. However, we can avoid it by going to the left. It'll take a little longer to get where we're going, true, but we'll steer clear of the werewolf pack in the process."

"Let's do as Kaladox says," Infinity replied. "Our lives are not worth saving a few extra minutes."

So they went to the left. The werewolves' howls and growls faded into the distance. This long path soon turned into a very steep hill leading down into a pitch black cavern. Even Infinity's glowing rod couldn't pierce the darkness.

"This must be where your relic is," Kilroy remarked.

"Indeed," Kaladox said.

"Does anyone hear that slight humming sound?" Horatio commented.

Everyone was silent for several moments. A low-pitched hum could be heard inside the cave. Following it, the Mitzelgranian felt around the wall and floor with his hands until he discovered an indentation.

"Kilroy, do you still have that metal object?"

"Yes."

"It may be useful now."

Kilroy blindly shuffled across the floor, following the sound of Kaladox's voice until he literally bumped into the guide.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry. Uh, here."

He held out the disc and Kaladox took it, carefully inserting it into the notch on the wall. Just then, the humming stopped. Electric light shone brightly and revealed a rod resembling Infinity's glow stick on a pedestal in the center of the room, except that the rod was purple.

"This is incredible," he breathed.

Kaladox took the rod from its location and examined it closely. There was a small switch near the top, which extinguished all light while it was flipped one way and stopped working while it was flipped the other way.

"It's definitely an amazing discovery," Infinity agreed. "Perhaps we should rest here for a few hours. How far is it to the ruins, Kaladox?"

"We have three more levels to go. You know, I've never been beyond the 8th level, so I can't tell you what we'll find later on."

"That's all right. I'm sure we'll learn soon enough."

While Kilroy unpacked, Infinity snuck glimpses of him as she unloaded her supplies for the night. He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. She wondered if she could convince him to stay on Mitzelgran. Probably not. He seemed to be the type who couldn't be tied down to anything -- or anyone, for that matter. She turned her glow stick off and tucked it away so it could recharge. Then she nibbled on some rations. They weren't very tasty, but at least they were nutritional. Hopefully, it would be a peaceful night and everyone could get some rest.

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Part 7

Early the next morning, they were awakened by the noise of someone shuffling around. Infinity opened her eyes and noticed a young female werewolf going through her pack.

"Hey! Stop that!"

The werewolf turned around and bared her fangs, growling softly. She proudly displayed a sack containing two days' worth of rations. "Mine."

"No, I bought them. You didn't. Therefore, they're mine."

The men began to wake up. Kaladox was the first to open his eyes. "That's our food."

"My people have nothing to live on but the dry, leathery meat of bats and mice, yet you grow fat and healthy in the sunlit lands above us. Why can you not spare some rations?"

Infinity looked down at her size-6 waist. "What do you mean, we're fat?"

"I'm sure she meant it as a relative term," Kaladox replied. "Are your people really starving?"

"We are being forced to scavenge in the tunnels below, where there are things stronger than the strongest of us. We lost four scouts to a shadow-skulker last week. We can steal food from the miners, but they hurl stones at us if we are caught," the werewolf answered.

"Let her have the rations," Kilroy said.

Infinity looked at him as if he were crazy. He shrugged.

"Hey, we'll all be rich and famous after we find these ruins of yours, right? So what's a few bread crumbs?"

"They're your rations," Kaladox remarked when she glanced at him. "It's your choice."

"All right," Infinity said. "You can have them."

"Thanks. You are planning on going to the lower levels?"

"Yes."

"Have any of you been there?"

"No," Kaladox answered.

"Then you will need another guide. Come with me."

The female werewolf led them to the lair. It was surprisingly clean compared to the rest of the tunnels. She introduced them to the pack leader, Blackfang. He gave permission for one of the scouts to accompany them, and thanked them for the gift of food.

Silverclaw, a tall and wiry female scout, was chosen to be their guide. She looked more human than most of her pack mates, but her glowing red eyes, pointed ears, claws and fangs made it obvious that she was not human. She wore leather armor and carried no weapon, for she was a weapon herself. Silverclaw wore a shiny green stone on a piece of twine around her neck. It was supposed to be an amulet of protection.

For a few extra glow sticks and other supplies that could be spared, the werewolves traded five amulets and a salve that was supposed to cure the poison from spider venom, if applied quickly enough. The adventurers said their farewells, then headed back to the room where they'd found the rod of darkness to gather up their belongings.

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Several hours later, they were on the next level. It was very cold here but there were still lamps burning along the walls.

"Careful," Silverclaw said. "We're getting close to the place where my companions faced the shadow-

skulker and lost."

They walked a few more yards. Suddenly the acrid stench of decay overwhelmed them. Then the remains of the werewolves came into view. Everyone gingerly stepped over the decaying corpses. Moments later, Kaladox stopped and sniffed the air.

"Does anyone else smell that?" he asked. "I don't mean the bodies."

Silverclaw nodded. "The shadow-skulker has been here, perhaps as recently as a few minutes ago."

Just then, there was a foreboding growl that made everyone but the werewolf shiver. Hamlet, Horatio and Kilroy raised their blasters. Infinity got out the sling she had found in the mines above and grabbed a handful of loose stones. Kaladox readied his dagger and resumed a fighting stance. For a heartbeat that seemed eternally long, there was complete silence. Then a cold, frigid blast filled the tunnel. Everyone held their breath. The amulets seemed to be working. No one had been frozen.

The shadow-skulker appeared in front of them. It was as dark as the shadows, except for two yellow eyes glowing like flames. It made a sound that was a cross between a hiss and a growl, then launched itself at them in a furious attack. Silverclaw bared her fangs and slashed with her claws. Her razor-sharp claws managed to wound it.

Kilroy fired his blaster. The shadow-skulker angrily hissed as the energy beam singed its skin. Hamlet and Horatio fired simultaneously, hitting the beast but not doing much damage. Kaladox struck it with his dagger and managed to injure it. A thin stream of blood flowed from the creature's wound, freezing as it was exposed to the air. Standing aside, Infinity aimed the sling. There was a thud as the stone hit the shadow-skulker in the back of its head.

"I think it's hurt," she remarked.

"Yes," Silverclaw replied. "We must kill it and avenge the deaths it has caused." Her voice changed to a threatening growl as the shadow-skulker loomed over her.

Hissing, the dark beast exhaled its frozen breath again. The werewolf clutched her amulet and muttered something unintelligible. But there was an unmistakable glow from her green stone. The light shone brighter until the air felt warm again. Then the amulet looked like a normal rock again.

"Incredible," Horatio remarked. "You'll have to show us how to do that -- assuming we survive this fight."

"It is a secret that my pack has guarded for generations," she snarled. "Blackfang is the only one who can decide whether it will be shared with outsiders. The amulets will protect you well enough on their own without the use of more magic."

"Of course. I meant no offense."

"None taken."

As the shadow-skulker raised its fist, Infinity aimed her sling. This time, she got extremely lucky. The rock hit the beast in the left eye, blinding it and causing lots of pain. Silverclaw took advantage of the moment and raked her claws across the shadow-skulker's thick hide. She managed to injure it and

retrieved her claws before they could be frozen. Hamlet, Kilroy, and Horatio fired their blasters. Kaladox stabbed it again, hitting a vital organ. The shadow-skulker was in its death throes. Silverclaw made the final blow. The creature froze solid as its blood spilled out.

"The murders of my brothers and sisters have finally been avenged," the werewolf announced.

"Great," said Infinity. "I'm really happy for you."

"At least, that thing will not be able to kill any more," Kaladox remarked. "We should get moving."

So they continued down to the gloomy depths of the caverns below, where even larger and stronger creatures lurked, and the ruins were waiting to be explored.

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Part 8

Hamlet, Horatio, Kilroy, Kaladox, Infinity and Silverclaw reached the 10th level two days later. Exhausted from fighting the creatures on the levels above and nursing several wounds, they stopped to rest in an empty room. It was unusually clean. The stone floor gleamed as the green light from their glow sticks reflected on its surface.

"This will give us a good chance to rest for a bit," Hamlet said as he sat down.

"Hey, the floor is really cold," Infinity remarked. "And it's clean. I mean, how long has it been since we've actually seen anything clean down here?"

"We haven't, not since the room where we found the rod," Kilroy replied. "Do you think something else could be hidden here?"

"It's possible, but there aren't any bumps or holes or notches that would indicate it," Kaladox answered.

Suddenly a low rumble could be heard as the walls began to move closer together, with no indication of stopping. The room's entrance was now blocked by a stone slab.

"Uh oh," Kilroy said. He glanced up, hoping to find some clue on the ceiling as to their predicament. There was nothing except a glowing yellow light, which hadn't been on before. "Look up there," he exclaimed.

"That light must indicate a power source," Horatio remarked. "Perhaps extinguishing it would ease our situation."

Kaladox fumbled in his backpack for the rod as the walls moved closer together.

"Hurry," Infinity shouted.

The native Mitzelgranian flipped the rod's switch, throwing them all into pitch darkness. An eerie silence followed. The rumble could no longer be heard.

"Whew," she said.

Hamlet felt around where the door was. "I hate to say this, but we're still trapped here. The door is blocked."

"Doors can be broken. Allow me," Silverclaw said. With a loud growl, she launched herself at the stone slab, which refused to give in. After several tries, she sat back down. "It's too thick."

Without warning, another rumbling sound pierced the air.

"The floor is moving!" Kilroy exclaimed.

"This is not a good sign," Infinity replied, then screamed as the formerly solid ground beneath her slid away.

They didn't fall for long, just far enough to sustain some mild bruises. They were in a large cavern with crystals growing on the walls, and an underground river that flowed into an adjacent tunnel. Phosphorescent mushrooms lit the area with an eerie glow.

"Does anyone know where we are?" Horatio asked.

No one did.

"We might as well follow the river," Kaladox said.

Since no one could argue, they headed for the tunnel.

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After several hours of walking through the long winding passageway, they came out several feet ahead of the room with the trap. The river ended in a small mirror-like pool in a cavern with only two exits -- the way they came, and a tunnel to the southeast.

Suddenly a loud screeching pierced the air as vampire bats descended from their perch, sensing prey.

"Get it off me," Infinity shrieked as one of the bats bit her on the ear.

She smacked the creature with her arm, but it held on. Kilroy rushed to her side and tried to pull the bat away, to no avail.

"Be careful," she shouted, "or that thing will rip off my ear!"

One well-placed shot from a blaster would take out the creature. "Stand as still as possible," he said.

"Stand still? Are you crazy?"

"I'm going to shoot it."

Having no choice, Infinity forced herself to stand still while the vampire bat drained her blood. Kilroy aimed his blaster and a dazzling ray of red energy struck the creature, killing it instantly. He forced its mouth open and threw the dead bat onto the ground. A steady stream of blood was flowing from Infinity's ear.

"Thank you," she said while trying to stop the blood flow with her shirt sleeve.

He ripped a piece of fabric from his own shirt and gave it to her. "Use this instead."

It worked much better. As chaos raged around them, Infinity couldn't help but notice that Kilroy seemed more handsome than ever. Part of her wondered if it was because he had just saved her life, or if she'd been attracted to him from the beginning. The moment was dispelled by a furry fist clawing a bat that had swooped over him. Silverclaw growled at the injured bat, which was now flapping on the ground. Its bones crunched beneath her foot as she stepped on it.

"That's one step for werewolves, one step for vampire-bat-kind," Kilroy joked, trying to make the situation seem less stressful.

"It is dead," Silverclaw replied with a snarl. "That is all I care about."

A few minutes later, all of the bats in the vicinity had been destroyed. Everyone continued on their way through the long, winding tunnel.

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Part 9

After several hours of trudging through the cold, dark caverns, the adventurers discovered what at first appeared to be unique rock formations, or perhaps stalagmites, jutting out of the ground. At a closer look, it was possible to tell that the rocks weren't rocks at all. Rather, they were metal spires corroded with extreme age. Infinity had seen pictures from the Mitzelgranian History Archives confirming that these were indeed the ruins of the ancient city, and quite possibly the fabled Psionics' tower.

"This is it," the archaeologist exclaimed, with the excitement of one who knows she is about to make a major discovery that could bring fame and fortune. Taking an image recorder out of her backpack, she focused in on the spires.

"Great," Kilroy said. When they finally returned to the surface, he could focus on figuring out the planet's anti-aging secret and getting his ship refueled. He was going to make millions of credits after he had the secret.

Just as Infinity moved to take pictures from another angle, the ground shook.

"Is that a planet quake?" he wondered aloud.

Suddenly there was another tremor, stronger than the first, and the cavern floor caved in beneath them. Kilroy's screams echoed along with his companions as they fell through the darkness. Thoughts of discovering Mitzelgran's anti-aging secret and becoming rich and famous quickly faded into despair.

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Infinity felt the impact as she landed on stone. For a few moments, her body cried out with pain and she was terrified that she'd been badly injured. Slowly, she stood up. Around her, the other adventurers were also clambering to their feet.

"Where are we?" Kilroy asked.

Looking around, the archaeologist realized that they were inside the ruins. Intricate carvings of ancient symbols in the stonework around her matched the historic sketches she had seen. "I think we're actually standing in front of the psionicists' tower."

"Incredible," Kaladox breathed. "Do you think it's safe to go inside?"

"Well, the air will probably be incredibly stale, but it should be breathable. I'm not sure about the floor inside. The tremors might have destroyed the support columns over time. Do you really want to risk it?"

"We're going to have to find a way out of here, anyway," Kilroy said. "Let's do some exploring."

"I agree," said Hamlet.

"I think we should concentrate on finding a way back to the surface," Horatio replied.

"The psionicists were very advanced for their time," Kaladox remarked. "They were supposed to have devices that could transport people across vast distances in the space of a few heartbeats."

"Really?" Horatio asked, suddenly interested. "If that's true and those devices still work, we'd have a way out."

"More than that," Infinity responded, her eyes twinkling with enthusiasm. "We'll have found the discovery of a lifetime. Does anyone not want to explore?"

The silence was louder than Nessie's roar.

"Then let's go," she declared, carefully opening the stone door.

* * * * *

The air inside the tower was dry and musty. Thick layers of dust layered with cobwebs blanketed everything in sight. Scrolls, moldy with age, lay on dusty wooden tables. No doubt, the lightest touch would cause the ancient papyrus to disintegrate. A purple crystal that had once sparkled was now covered with webs. Infinity reached for it. The crystal glowed briefly as she touched it.

"What's that?" Kilroy asked.

"Legend has it that the psionicists were able to create crystals that enhanced their own natural abilities. That is probably an amplifying crystal," Kaladox answered.

"Why did it glow?" Infinity wondered aloud.

"I'm afraid I don't know," the Mitzelgranian replied. "I would like to see it."

She handed it to him. As Kaladox touched the crystal, it glowed again. Suddenly he could sense the thoughts of everyone around him, even Silverclaw, whose thoughts were in her tribe's own language. He knew their innermost desires and fears. It was all too much, too quickly.

"Take it," he hissed, holding the crystal with a trembling hand.

Infinity took it. "What happened?"

"Apparently, the psionics' powers weren't lost entirely. They must have been passed down through the generations, but we never knew because we didn't have the proper training. When I held the crystal, I could read your minds. I can't do that now that I'm no longer touching it."

"Interesting," Horatio mused. "Did all of the psionics require amplifying crystals to use their abilities?"

"No. According to legend, most of the psionics were so powerful that they didn't even need the crystals. The gems were usually used to train those who had lesser abilities. However, during the Great Psionic War, the most powerful psionics used the crystals to enhance their mental powers. Some survived, but found they had lost their skills entirely because the power was too overwhelming. Others went mad and were destroyed. It was a time of darkness and chaos."

"Incredible."

Silverclaw sniffed the air. "We are not alone in this place."

"Of course not," Hamlet agreed. "There are probably thousands of spiders watching us right now."

"I do not mean that. Something else is here, and it is coming this way."

"What is it?"

"I have never smelled anything like it before."

Everyone exchanged glances. Suddenly, the sound of heavy, clanking footsteps reverberated through the building. The werewolf was right. Something was coming.

"Defense system activated. Intruder alert," a metallic voice boomed in Mitzelgranian, which Kaladox translated. He'd learned the ancient predecessor to the current language from required studies in his youth. "Be prepared to show your authorization. If you do not have authorization, you must leave the premises immediately or be exterminated," the voice continued.

"Astonishing," Horatio remarked. "The defenses are still active, even after all this time."

"The Guardians were supposed to be very powerful. Fighting this one would not be a good idea," Kaladox remarked.

"That thing is a robot, correct?" Kilroy asked.

"Yes."

"Well, all robots have a power source. Find it, disable it, and we're home free."

The Mitzelgranian native shook his head. "It probably has a Venusium casing, which means it will be impossible to penetrate. I have no idea what it could be using for power, but whatever the source, it's got to be incredibly advanced to last this long."

"What sort of authorization is it looking for?" Infinity asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It could be anything."

Everyone glanced around. Silverclaw noticed a metallic card on one of the tables. She picked it up and blew the dust away. The card was inscribed in the ancient Mitzelgranian language. "Can anyone read this?"

Kaladox glanced at it. He was able to decipher several of the symbols. "It says security access. This must be what the Guardian wants."

The colossal robot came into view. It was indeed made of Venusium. Its pale blue metallic surface was dusty with age -- but not tarnished, as any other metal would be. Bright green optical sensors flashed as it extended an appendage with a scanning device attached.

"Please provide authorization," the Guardian announced.

Kaladox translated. Infinity was more than happy to place the security card into the scanner.

Several moments later, the robot announced, "Authorization accepted. Greetings, Oremius Dosanix. It has been 3,205 years since you were last here. Power is being restored."

Some lights flashed on, but more than a few remained dark. "Warning! Power failure on levels 2 through 8. Using backup generator," the robot announced. More lights came on after a few moments, giving an eerie glow to the already otherworldly room. "Power has not been restored on level 8, sectors 5-10. Please proceed with caution," the robot said, then clanked away.

"Amazing," Infinity exclaimed. "We're the first people here in over three millennia."

"Yes. Let's follow the Guardian's advice and be careful. So much about the psionicists is considered legendary that what is real may turn out to be far from the truth," Kaladox said.

No one could argue with that advice. They proceeded through the dusty halls of the lower level, which were now brightly lit.

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Part 10

The psionicists had built their tower to be a permanent living space. Once, it had been a separate city with shops, gardens, living quarters, and a vast library. They even had their own government, separate but within the ancient Mitzelgranian system, Kaladox explained. They paid the same taxes as everyone else, but that was the only similarity. They were judged according to their own laws, which allowed for all but the most heinous of crimes, as long as sufficient reason could be given for a person's actions and the high council agreed with that reasoning. Agreement could be -- and was -- commonly purchased with bribes.

"Why did everyone let the injustice go on for so long?" Infinity asked.

"They were afraid of the psionicists' powers and technology. While most psionicists could only read

surface thoughts or move small objects, the very powerful could do the impossible. Those with the strongest abilities could stop a person's heart from beating with a mere thought. It must have seemed very much like magic," Kaladox replied.

"That was not real magic," Silverclaw said, firmly clutching her amulet. "It comes from the heart, not the mind."

Kilroy didn't believe in magic. Surely the werewolf's amulet was just a fancy glow-in-the-dark rock, acting like a placebo. However, he had to admit that after all the things they'd fought together, she hadn't been seriously injured yet. Kaladox had been affected by the crystal, but many alien species had natural telepathic abilities. He didn't consider that magic, either.

They continued through the dimly lit hallways. Infinity tried to imagine what it would have been like to live there. What would the psionics' daily routines have been like?

One room had the symbol for meditation carved into the door. It was a bare room with blue walls. A discolored rectangular shape on the floor suggested that a rug had once been there. Venusium candle holders were placed on small stone shelves that rose just above the floor.

"Venusium must have been much more common back then," Hamlet remarked. "I mean, we've seen it all over this place."

"Actually, it was still quite rare since the mines hadn't been built yet," Kaladox responded. "The psionics probably made a few business deals from offworlders to acquire such a large amount of metal."

"How many offworld species were your people in contact with back then?" Kilroy asked.

"Just two, the Maltavi and the Kerali."

The Maltavi were a race of traders and explorers, most of them have light gray skin and white hair. A few genetic aberrations in their species produced beings that had gray skin and gray hair, which appeared silver in certain lighting conditions. The genetic mutation was rare and occurred in approximately 1/1,000,000 Maltavi births. Some Maltavi also had low-level psionic powers.

In contrast, the Kerali were an aggressive species. Had they a higher level of intelligence, they would have probably conquered the galaxy by now. Bred to be extremely fast and strong, they worked mostly as bodyguards and mercenaries. By many human and humanoid standards, the Kerali were also one of the most unattractive species in the universe. They appeared to have evolved from crocodile-like creatures on their homeworld. They were also one of the oldest species in existence.

As the adventurers made their way to the stairs, something caught Kilroy's eye. It was a Venusium tablet with several buttons and a display screen. Pressing one of the buttons rewarded him with ancient Mitzelgranian symbols.

"Hey, Kaladox, can you take a look at this?" he asked.

The native leaned over. "That appears to be instructions of some sort."

"For what?"

"To determine that, I need to see the display more closely."

Kilroy handed the computerized tablet over and Kaladox began to read the ancient words aloud. As he spoke, the purple amplifying crystal began to glow and he rose a few inches off the ground.

"What in blazes are you doing?" Hamlet asked.

The native glanced down. "Levitating, it would seem."

"But...but...that's..." Kilroy sputtered.

"Impossible?" Kaladox suggested. "I would have thought so too, but apparently not." Slowly, he landed on solid ground. "Let's see what other information this tablet has."

Pressing the buttons revealed more instructions. Memorizing them was much easier than it should have been, particularly since Kaladox wasn't fluent in the ancient language, only knowledgeable. Reciting the words produced different results. He was able to create a flare of bright light, nearly blinding everyone in the room. The second time, he made an illusionary image of himself. The native discovered that he could make several copies of that image at the same time. Finally, the third set of instructions seemed to do nothing, but everyone reported feeling a little tingly.

"Even if these are the most rudimentary things the psionics knew, bringing the knowledge back will be one of the greatest discoveries in recent history," Kaladox said.

"Yes, but we still have to find a way out," Horatio replied.

"All in good time," Infinity said. "We have so much exploring to do. Come on."

Everyone went upstairs, where many more discoveries were waiting to be made.

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Part 11

As the adventures reached the top of the stairs, they were greeted by several giant arachnids, which had made their fair share of the spider webs in the ancient tower.

"More spiders," Infinity groaned.

The arachnids hissed while the humanoids drew their weapons. Silverclaw took on the closest spider, raking her claws across its soft belly. Acidic green blood spilled out, miraculously leaving her untouched. Kilroy, Hamlet, and Horatio fired their blasters. They'd hit the second creature. It staggered forward and launched a sticky web, making them unable to move. Infinity and Kaladox were fighting the third spider. The Mitzelgranian struck it with his dagger.

"These things are tough," Horatio remarked, struggling against the paralyzing webbing that held him.

Infinity shrieked as one of the two remaining spiders bit her. Hamlet broke free of the webbing and fired on the spider that had bit her. He'd hit it, but the wound closed within seconds. Silverclaw growled and clawed the creature in a frenzied attack that left it for dead.

"Our blasters don't seem to have much of an effect on these things," Kilroy observed, as he finally got loose and hit the last spider. Its wound healed just as quickly as the others had.

"No, but Silverclaw and Kaladox have an advantage with their sharp weapons," Horatio responded. "The creatures must be resistant to energy blasts."

Infinity grabbed her sling and hit the third spider. Her staff hadn't done much, but the rocks injured it. Kaladox stabbed the arachnid with his dagger and mortally wounded it. He wiped the sweat and sticky green blood from his face.

"Let's hope there aren't any more of those things," Infinity said.

"Are you all right? You look slightly green," Kilroy observed.

"Perhaps the spider was venomous," Horatio said.

Silverclaw reached into her backpack for the healing salve and handed it to Infinity. "Put a little of this on your injury. It will stop any poison."

She dabbed some of the salve onto her wound and felt a mild tingling sensation. "It seems to be working."

"Of course," Silverclaw answered. "It has been perfected through many generations of healers."

After Infinity gave the salve back, the werewolf stored it in her backpack. Then they continued exploring. The rest of the second level was mostly like the first -- completely empty except for cobwebs and a few items made of Venusium, which had survived through the ages. One of those items was another metallic instruction tablet that Kaladox picked up. A few hours later, they reached the third level.

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There was a noticeable shift in the air on the tower's third level. It was much more humid here, but the temperature was very cool.

"Look," Hamlet remarked, noticing that some water damage had been done to the walls, as if there had recently been a flood.

"What do you suppose happened?" his twin asked.

"I don't know."

Infinity reached up and touched the wall. "It's still damp," she said in surprise.

"Strange," Kaladox muttered.

As they moved forward, the sound of rushing water could be heard in the distance, but no apparent source could be seen. Suddenly, Silverclaw sniffed the air.

"There is at least one shadow skulker close by. The scent is very strong," she said.

The creature appeared behind them and exhaled its frigid breath. The amulets of protection everyone wore glowed brightly, saving them all from becoming frozen. Kilroy turned and fired his blaster. The

sapphire energy beam struck the creature. Hamlet and Horatio also fired their weapons. Infinity bashed it with her staff, managing to make a small wound. Silverclaw became a frenzied blur, slashing the shadow skulker with her razor-sharp claws. Kaladox shouted in ancient Mitzelgranian and a bright flash appeared from nowhere. The shadow skulker roared with rage as it was blinded.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Kilroy fired again. Unable to see, the creature backed away as it was hit with blast after blast. Hamlet and Horatio also shot at it. Infinity gave the shadow skulker a good whack. Silverclaw raked it again. The creature was definitely injured.

Recovering from its blindness, the shadow skulker hissed and punched Kilroy, who was the closest in proximity. He doubled over in pain and felt an icy shiver travel down his spine. Kaladox shouted again, causing the creature to be blinded once more. Infinity bashed it with her staff, aggravating the previous injury she'd caused. The shadow skulker's blood froze immediately. Silverclaw hit the creature hard. It hissed in pain. Horatio and Hamlet opened fire, both scoring hits. The monster was down.

"Are you all right?" Infinity asked Kilroy, who was clutching his wound.

"I'm fine," he answered through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, sure. Let me see that."

Gasping, he removed his hand from the wound in his chest. He was bleeding and still shivering from the shadow skulker's icy touch. She took a bandage out of her backpack and applied it.

"You'll have to change this in a few hours," she said.

"All right." Kilroy wasn't sure when he'd first noticed it, but Infinity Armstrong was quite an attractive woman. Would she be angry if he kissed her? Well, there was only one way to find out. Mentally crossing his fingers, he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks."

She smiled. "Anytime."

Hamlet and Horatio exchanged glances.

Kaladox cleared his throat and said, "We should get moving."

And so they continued onward.

* * * * *

Part 12

After many hours of searching the lower floors, which were mostly empty except for a few more giant spiders, the adventurers finally made it to the tower's highest level. It was dimly lit since not all of the lights were functioning. A steady stream of water gushed from a broken pipe, spilling through cracks in the wall and floor, which had widened into small holes as time went by. It was probably what caused the water damage on the levels below.

"I don't think this area is entirely stable," Horatio remarked.

"You're probably right," Infinity responded. "Let's be careful."

They found their way through the twisting, turning maze of hallways. The silence was eerie. Not even a spider could be heard scuttling about. At one corridor's end, there was a room with markings carved in marble above the door.

Kaladox studied the carvings for a few moments. "Translocation device storage area," he translated.

"That must be what we're looking for," Hamlet observed.

Kaladox tried the door and found it locked. "Blast."

"Allow me." Kilroy stepped up and withdrew a short, narrow metal object from his backpack. He hadn't needed it until now. The lock pick had gotten him out of some serious jams in his day. Unfortunately, he received a small electrical jolt as soon as he inserted the pick into the lock. Kilroy cursed.

Then Kaladox took the purple amplifying crystal. Clutching it, he focused on the lock with all his mental strength. Mysteriously, the tumblers turned and clicked. Amazement spread across his face. "I didn't know I could do that."

"Well, you did it," Infinity assured him with a smile. "Come on."

All of them were astonished to find a room filled with artifacts and treasures, most made of Venusium and gems, which had survived through all the centuries. But the greatest of all the artifacts was a glowing archway with an electronic console. Ancient symbols shimmered in emerald, sapphire, and crimson light.

Infinity took her image recording device out of her backpack, inserted new film, and took several exposures of the room. "This has to be the one of the greatest archaeological finds of all time! Can you believe it?" she gushed. "We're going to be famous!"

Kilroy was immediately drawn to an innocuous-looking round item that was made of a dull gray metal, but also had a black gemstone inserted into the top. It had a three inch radius and was about four inches thick. He reached out to touch it.

"Be cautious!" Kaladox insisted. "We don't know what these things were designed for. They might be relics from the war, intended to cause pain -- or not. Who knows?"

Silverclaw found a red gem about the same size as her amulet. She picked up the stone and it softly glowed, then dimmed. But she felt strange afterward. Her entire body tingled.

"What is happening to me?"

"You must have found another amplifying amulet," Kaladox replied. "Your species probably has inherent psionic powers."

"We have the power of real magic, not fake magic," she snarled.

"As you wish."

"What is this? I'm changing!" Silverclaw's transformation from half-humanoid/half-wolf to a full wolf

took less than thirty seconds.

Everyone stared at her in surprise. Since the werebeasts on Mitzelgran weren't shape shifters, only half-breeds, the transformation had come as a shock to Silverclaw. She whined. Still holding his amplifying crystal, Kaladox could hear her thoughts. She was shocked and frightened, and wondering if she would ever be able to turn back into her normal form.

As Silverclaw sniffed the red crystal which she'd dropped, her nose bumped it. This time, the transformation happened in reverse. Now in her half-humanoid form, she growled at the crystal and stepped away from it.

"That was truly remarkable," Hamlet said. "Just think how useful such a skill could be."

"I hope to never experience that again," Silverclaw snarled.

"You say that now, but someday, you may wish to." He bent down and picked up the red crystal. "If you don't want to keep this, I will."

"Fine."

Kilroy touched the round, dull gray metal object. He felt nothing. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but knowing that he had been expecting something, Kilroy felt disappointed. The object that had been meant for him was just a worthless piece of old junk. Still, he couldn't leave it there. He picked it up and put it into his backpack.

Horatio was drawn to a sapphire globe that when touched, projected a holographic star chart onto the ceiling. It was attuned to the user's mind, and it would picture any location in the sky the user wanted to see. Unfortunately, the knowledge in the globe did not surpass the local galaxy. Despite the limitation, the globe was still an amazing tool.

Hamlet found a golden rod, encrusted with jewels and crystals, collecting dust on a shelf. He took it. There was no apparent use for the rod, and no switches that he could easily see. Nevertheless, Hamlet put the rod into his bag.

Infinity felt left out since she hadn't found anything. There were many incredible artifacts, but she didn't feel drawn to any of them. Perhaps later when she returned to catalog everything, she would find something. "Let's go."

Kaladox pressed the only symbol on the translocator's console that he recognized, the symbol for the region which now contained the human colony of Atlantis. One by one, they stepped through the portal.

* * * *

Memory Soup

By Emily M. Hanson

Part 13

* * * * *

As they walked out of the translocation portal, Kilroy realized that he was back at his landing site. But his ship, the Copernicus, was gone!

Seeing the aghast look on his face, Infinity asked, "What is it?"

"This is where I landed," he replied. "What could have happened to my ship?"

"It doesn't have a cloaking device, does it?" Horatio inquired.

"No. It's missing."

"Look," Hamlet exclaimed, spotting a glittering metal object sticking up out of the dirt. It was an apparatus used for digging, attached to a rod, which extended far below the ground. "The miners must have stumbled across it."

"But why would they just take it?" Kilroy asked.

"Your ship is made from titanium, correct?" Horatio asked.

"Yes."

"Titanium is nearly as valuable as Venusium here. Someone probably decided it was worth the risk to take your ship and dismantle it."

Kilroy sighed. "I suppose we have to go back into the mines."

"I'd like to eat a good meal and get cleaned up first, if you don't mind," Horatio replied.

"But that's my ship down there!"

"Whoever stole your ship can't have taken it apart yet. It's only been a few days since you landed. They're probably still searching your ship for valuables."

"I didn't have any."

"Well, they don't know that."

Kilroy glared at him. "Have you ever piloted a ship?"

"No."

"Well, then you don't understand something that every captain in this universe knows. After a while, your ship becomes part of you. It's like another limb. You can't expect me to just abandon the Copernicus. It would be like cutting off my right arm."

"You won't be abandoning it," Horatio argued. "I just want to take a shower, eat something besides rations for a change, and get a good night's rest. If you want to go, then go, but I'm not going anywhere until tomorrow."

"Kilroy, we're all tired," Kaladox said. "Even you. We all need some solid food and sleep. Remember, we'll be rich soon enough with these archaeological discoveries. You'll be able to buy any ship you want."

"I don't want just any old ship. I want the Copernicus," Kilroy replied, aware that he was sounding like a small child having a temper tantrum. He sighed. "All right. You all made a good point. Let's get some rest first."

* * * * *

Dominia greeted them at the door. "My goodness! You're back so soon!"

"Mother, this is Silverclaw and Kaladox," Hamlet said. "They just need a place to stay for tonight. Is it all right for them to stay here?"

"By all means. Come in." Then she whispered to the twins, "Your father's getting worse," she whispered. "He's forgotten who he is these past few days. He thinks he's William Shakespeare! I've made him Memory Soup, but it's not having any effect."

They exchanged glances.

"There must be something we can do," Hamlet said.

"I'm afraid we're losing him," Dominia replied sadly.

"Dear me," everyone heard Cosmo remark in the other room, "I've forgotten where I put that script." He walked into the main entryway where they were all gathered. "Have you seen my script? I know I put it somewhere around here." Suddenly, he stopped and stared at Silverclaw. "You," Cosmo gasped. "You would make a perfect Juliet!"

"What is a Juliet?" the werewolf inquired.

"Not what, but who! She is the lead female character in my play, Romeo and Juliet. Ah, it is such a tragic romance. But I am certain the audience will love it."

Silverclaw looked at the others in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Mr. Shakespeare, perhaps you might want to reconsider," Infinity replied, realizing that to correct his misinterpretation of reality might be disastrous. "I have been such a fan of your work for years."

"What are you doing?" Horatio whispered.

"Until your father gets his memory back, we might as well play along. Besides, it could be psychologically devastating for him to learn that he's not who he thinks he is."

"She's right," Dominia said. "I've read the medical reports about his condition. Suddenly learning the truth could send him into a state of shock, or even a coma. Cosmo has always loved Shakespeare, from the time of his childhood."

"To be or not to be," Infinity quoted, "that is the question."

Cosmo stared at her as though he were seeing someone else entirely. "That is absolutely brilliant, my dear lady. May I use it?"

"Certainly."

They went off into the next room to talk. Dominia's weariness was evident on her face as she asked, "Would anyone like some tea while I make dinner?"

"That would be wonderful," Kaladox replied.

"Most definitely," Horatio answered.

"What is tea?" Silverclaw asked.

It looked like it was going to be a long evening.

* * * * *

Part 14

The next day, they headed back to the Mitzelgranian mines because it was apparent that whoever had stolen the Copernicus must have used some sort of mining equipment. The sounds of the miners' mechanical equipment filled the air, as well as the stench of sweat and dirt.

"Hey," Kilroy said to one of the miners who happened to be taking a break, "you haven't seen my ship by any chance, have you?"

"I don't know. What does it look like?"

"The Copernicus is a small scouting vessel, mostly made of titanium."

"Hmmm...nope, can't say that I've seen it, but I'll keep an eye out. You might want to check with the foreman."

"Where's the foreman's office?"

"Go east and take the first tunnel on the right. It's the only office, so you can't miss it."

"Thanks."

After following the miner's directions, they came to a well-lit office. The door was open and the foreman, actually a woman, was sitting at her desk. Unlike most Mitzelgranian females, who kept their hair long, she wore her hair at shoulder-length.

"Hello," Kilroy said.

"What can I help you with? I'm very busy, as you can see, so please get to the point. If you're tourists, I can arrange for a tour. It's not safe to be wandering around these mines without a guide."

"Actually, we're looking for a space craft."

The foreman's eyes narrowed. "It wouldn't be made of titanium, would it?"

"Yes, it would."

"Sorry, can't help you. Have a nice day." Brusquely, she returned to her work.

"Wait," Kilroy said. "Maybe we can cut a deal."

"What do you have in mind?"

He told her about the artifacts they'd found. "I'll give you a percentage of my share of the profit."

"All right. 70," she replied.

"No way. It was hard work getting those artifacts. 10 percent."

"Do you want your ship back, or don't you? 40 percent."

"15," he said.

"You're a hard bargainer. But all that titanium is worth a lot of credits to me. 30," she said.

"20," he offered.

"25."

"Done," Kilroy agreed.

"I'll make sure your ship finds its way back to where you left it. We didn't realize it was a ship at first, you see. When our metal detectors sensed the titanium, we thought it was an asteroid. Very few off-worlders actually come to visit. In fact, humans haven't landed here since the colonists arrived," the foreman said.

"We should report you to the authorities," Kaladox said.

"For what? An honest mistake?"

"I sincerely doubt it was an honest mistake, but since we have no proof otherwise, we'll reconsider -- for now."

"Good. Wait here, I'll make a contract." The foreman typed into her computer and in a few minutes, the contract was printed out. "Sign on the dotted line, Captain March."

It read:

I, -----, agree to give Velesa Tarix 25% of my share of the profits of the discoveries made from May 14, 2233 to May 17, 2233 in the psionics' tower, currently located beneath the Mitzelgranian

mines. This contract is subject to any and all local laws that may apply.

He signed it, and Kaladox signed as a witness. The deal was made.

"Your ship will be where you left it before the day is over," the foreman said.

"Great. Thanks."

Now that he had his ship back, Kilroy could go back to Earth. But there were still a few things left to do on Mitzelgran.

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Part 15

After signing the contract to get the Copernicus back, they headed out to the forest because Kilroy needed to find Iriella. Silverclaw was the first to hear the Silver Siren's song amidst the trills and chirps of the native birds which fluttered through the tall trees that blocked out most of the sky.

"I hear her singing," the werewolf observed.

"Which direction is the sound coming from?" Hamlet, who was driving one of the all-terrain vehicles, asked.

"Northeast."

Mud splattered everywhere as he sped up. As they approached, silence fell over the area like a shroud.

"Something isn't right," Silverclaw remarked, sniffing the air. "I sense a predator here."

"The mimic," Kilroy exclaimed.

"What's that?" Infinity asked.

"A creature Iriella described. It can imitate the sound of her voice to lure prey. It's very large and dangerous."

Hamlet, Kilroy and Horatio drew their blasters just as the formerly-camouflaged beast moved, revealing its presence. It was approximately twenty feet in front of them. With a roar, the large creature advanced. Sapphire-colored energy beams struck the mimic again and again from the blasters, but to no avail.

The creature swung a mighty appendage -- that was the only word that could be used to describe the long, furry arm-like thing with one big sharpened claw on the end -- and hit Hamlet's vehicle, knocking him down. Silverclaw snarled and leapt off the back seat, striking the mimic with her claws. Meanwhile, Kaladox recited a memorized phrase and managed to heal Hamlet's injuries. Infinity took a pot shot with her sling. She hit, but the rock did little damage.

Kilroy and the twins fired their blasters again. Kaladox took out his blade and tried to get close enough to hit, but the mimic struck him with one of its appendages. Infinity was about to use the vehicle's communication system and call for help, when the sound of a beautiful voice suddenly filled the air. It

wasn't coming from the mimic, though. Through the dense foliage, Kilroy glimpsed a flash of silver. The beast stopped its attack and followed the sound of the music.

"What's she doing?" Horatio wondered.

"I don't know. Let's follow them," Hamlet said.

As they followed, it became clear that Iriella was leading the mimic towards the swamp. The sound of Nessie moving around could be heard quite clearly. The Silver Siren continued into the swamp, where the large creature known as Nessie reared her head.

"That's it," Iriella sang to the mimic. "Come closer."

Getting as close to Nessie as she dared, the Silver Siren waited until the mimic was within arm's length. Then she leapt into the air. Iriella did a double somersault in the air and landed on solid ground near the vehicles. As she did, Nessie roared loudly and rose, engulfing the mimic with water. Letting out a triumphant cry, the swamp creature submerged. Soon afterward, the water turned crimson. The mimic was never seen again after that.

"Hello," Iriella said.

"Thank you," Kilroy replied. "You've saved our lives. We're very grateful."

"It was the least I could do. You have given me hope that I might see my people again."

"Uh, yeah. About that...I just got my ship back."

"Back? It was missing?"

"It was 'borrowed.' I would like to leave tonight. If you can meet me, I would be happy to take you wherever you need to go."

"Certainly. Just tell me where and when."

Kilroy told her where to find his ship.

"I will see you there."

"Good."

Infinity hoped that she did not look very disappointed. She had been hoping that Kilroy might stay, but now it was obvious that he wasn't going to. Perhaps he would return one day. She looked wistfully at him as they headed back to town.

* * * * *

After returning to the Galaxius home and packing, Kilroy realized that his artifact was still in his pocket. He took out the small gray metallic device and ran his fingers over its smooth surface, wondering what it was supposed to do. Suddenly, the black gemstone on top began to glow with an inner light. It swept through the room and kept expanding.

"What is happening?" Dominia asked, entering the bedroom. "What are you doing?"

"It's the artifact I found in the ruins. I don't know what it's doing."

"To be or not to be," Cosmo exclaimed loudly in the other room, "that is the question!" Suddenly, he hesitated. "Question? What question? Dominia, dear, what was I just talking about?"

The artifact's glow slowly faded.

"Can it be?" she wondered aloud in amazement. "Cosmo, is that you?"

"Of course. Who else would it be?" he asked.

Dominia laughed until tears streaked down her face. "Nobody else. Nobody at all." And she kissed him. "Hamlet, Horatio, where are you?"

"Here, Mother," Horatio responded. "What is it?"

"Your father remembers who he is."

"Really? How?"

"Kilroy mentioned an artifact."

"That was yours?" Horatio said in astonishment.

"Yeah," Kilroy answered. "I guess it does something after all."

"You can say that again," Hamlet replied. "Father, do you really remember everything?"

"Of course! Well, not everything...I can't remember what happened when I was three. But I remember darn near enough."

"This is wonderful! We ought to celebrate," Dominia said.

"What better way to celebrate than with Memory Soup?" Cosmo asked.

"Hopefully, you won't need any more of that," his wife answered.

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Epilogue

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The sun was just starting to set as Hamlet and Horatio drove Kilroy to the landing site. Infinity, Kaladox and Silverclaw were waiting to say goodbye. Iriella was also there. She was a living flame as her gown, flowing in the soft breeze, reflected the sunset colors.

"It has been an honor working with you," Kaladox said. "I am happy that your artifact did some good."

"My people have a saying," Silverclaw began. "True magic comes from the heart. Well, there is no magic like a good companion. Remain strong, and you will find your destiny."

Kilroy nodded. "Thank you."

Infinity felt tears welling up in her eyes. "I will miss you so much, Kilroy. Please stop by if you're ever in the galaxy."

"I will," he answered and gave her a quick kiss. She brightened considerably.

"It's been fun," Horatio said. "Take care."

"Thanks, I will."

"Have a good journey home," Hamlet added.

After a final round of farewells, Kilroy and Iriella finally boarded the Copernicus. Checking his navigator's logs, he made the calculations necessary to take Iriella to her homeworld. While he may not have found out what was causing the anti-aging effects on Mitzelgran, Kilroy had the artifact, and that was enough for now. It would take years for scientists just to study it. Besides, he could always return. The familiar, steady hum of the ship's engine relaxed him as he sat back and watched the stars zoom by on the view screen. What other wonders did the universe have? He was sure he'd find out someday.

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The End

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