

Synthetic
by Holo

The Kenjodian and Diri Galactic Empires were at war. After a week-long war in the skies, the Kenjodian space armada had finally subdued the Diri interplanetary Navy. The Kenjodian ships had then sent in their ground troops to take the Diri's planetside military establishments. Among the deployed forces was a Kenjodian husky, Zulas, a combat medic. He was glancing up at the sky, staring at the silhouette of the ship high above as the infantry marched ahead.

A spray of laser blasts whizzed through the air, flashing red in Zulas' eyes as they narrowly missed him. He pulled his gaze from the sky and dropped to the ground and flattened his ears to his head, silently cursing his horns for sticking up so much and threatening to give him away. The rest of his body was clad in camo-print clothing with body armor underneath, which covered his rich black and blue fur which would have been all too easy to spot against the earthy brown and grey of this planet.

Lines of robotic infantry marched ahead of him, pushing back the enemy- the lizard-like Diri- with powerful, concussive, and bone-shattering blasts of kinetic energy. Zulas crawled forward on his stomach so as not to fall too far behind, but kept to the ground to try and stay clear of the air above that was filled with deadly lasers that had missed their robotic targets.

Zulas' ears twitched as he watched the robots march forward. Robot wasn't really a flattering term though, these were much more advanced than that. These were synthetics, or Synths for short. They were fully artificial, but fully sentient and sapient lifeforms created through the Kenjodian Directorate's unfailing dedication to technological advancement. Zulas was grateful for it. One of his closest friends was a Synth, someone who may never have existed if AI technology had not been pursued. He let his eyes linger on one of the infantry Synths longer than the others. That was his friend, TK-A1735-00, or TK for short.

Zulas was fascinated by the Synths, and admired them, so when the chance arose to join part of an experimental Synth-Organic brigade with TK, he jumped at the chance. He was fully aware of the advantages his fellow soldiers had over him. Tireless bodies made of incredible metal alloys, eyes with perfect focus and aim-assistance, arms with recoil compensation... the list of combat benefits was longer than Zulas was tall. The real kicker was the effective immortality. Even if a synthetic was destroyed, their consciousness was uploaded to a server, and could be downloaded into a new synthetic body at any time.

Zulas watched his brothers carefully. A laser struck a Synth next to TK in the leg, right in the knee joint where the armor was weakest, and the soldier collapsed as his leg gave out. TK looked down for a moment, and then to Zulas, before turning his attention back to the enemy forces. Zulas cursed and rose into a crouching position so he could creep forward. His hands were already rummaging in his med pack for supplies.

As Zulas got near, the Synth turned to look at him. The face of the Synth wasn't really a face, it was more of a helmet with a digital display stretched vertically down the length. A pattern of colored lights flashed on the display, and Zulas recognized it as the Synth version of a smile.

He smiled back as he looked at the injury. The joint was damaged, but it was a wound. "Alright buddy, you probably already know, but you're gonna be fine, okay?" Zulas said in a reassuring tone as he opened a tube of nanogel and smeared it on the joint. The nanobots

activated as the Synth's electrical current flowed through the gel, and the joint straightened out as the nanobots went to work.

"Thanks! We're really glad to have you here to support us. TK-A1735-00 speaks highly of you," the Synth said, using TK's full name. His voice was a bit robotic, but Zulas liked the sound. The Synth gave Zulas a pat on the shoulder with his metal hand, and Zulas placed his own, fur-covered hand over it and clasped it tight. The husky stuck around, keeping to light conversation as the nanobots repaired the damaged circuitry and removed the scorch marks from the Synth's armored body. It took only a minute for the fix to finish, and once it was, the Synth leaped to his feet and charged forward to rejoin the front line.

The Diri were being pushed back as their front lines dwindled in the face of the incapacitating force of the Kenjodian's kinetic firearms. The Kenjodian weapons hit hard enough to disable, but were not specifically designed to be lethal. Occasional lulls in the firing from both sides allowed the Diri to safely retrieve their wounded, and gave Zulas and his fellow combat medics the same chance to patch up their Synth compatriots.

The battle raged on like this, ebbing and flowing, but always making progress toward the Diri encampment. Once they surrounded it, the Kenjodian army planned to negotiate a Diri surrender. Unfortunately for the Kenjodians, the Diri encampment was where the best of the Diri laser weaponry was held. As the encampment came into view, the Diri bastions came to life, and the laser fire more than doubled, forcing the Kenjodian Synths to activate their energy shields.

A dome of flowing blue energy rose up in front of each Synth and joined to the dome beside it to form an unbroken wall. The lasers struck the shields and dissipated against them, their energy spent against the force fields. The shields worked both ways though, forcing the Synths to stop firing as well. They were close enough now that they didn't need firepower, they just had to get into position. They started to march around the base, encircling it.

That's when the Diri fired their mounted laser cannon.

An ear splitting, toneless wave of booming bass kicked up dust from the ground just before a man-sized beam of energy exploded out from within the Diri base. It swept over a portion of the Synth shield circle, shattering the barriers with its raw power. The Synths staggered back from the force of the beam, TK among them. Zulas watched with his ears at attention and his tail between his legs. He hated how helpless he felt, but there was nothing in his med kit that could stop that cannon.

It charged up for a second shot, whining as it gathered power. The Diri focused their more conventional fire on the now unshielded and still stunned portion of the Synth forces. The fury of so many lasers was more than the Synth's metal bodies could take, and they started to go down one by one. A beam struck TK right in the digital display on his face, cracking it and knocking him down.

Zulas was already and the front lines before TK was down, dutifully attending to those that fell first. Mercifully, the Diri directed their fire away from the combat medic to focus on the still able-bodied combatants. Zulas was down on his knees with a pack of nanogel in one hand and carbon fiber patches in the other. The nanogel went to work fixing the more intricate parts of the Synths: small moving parts, wires, circuitry, and the like. The patches were used to seal up the larger breaches in the Synth's armored shells.

Zulas was quick, and experienced, but for all his ability, there was nothing he could for the Synths that had shut down before they even hit the floor. These were usually ones that had taken heavy damage to their torso or chest, where most of their vital functions were housed. Despite their metal bodies, the Diri lasers were powerful enough to punch through with concentrated fire. There was no pulse to check; Zulas only needed to glance at their face displays to see if they were still alive. If all the lights were off, then the Synth had already shut down and uploaded itself to the ship server.

It felt like ages before he finally got to TK's side, though it had really only been a minute. The Synth's head was damaged. A corner of the top of his metal skull had been blasted away, and his face was cracked and was displaying a frantic series of red warning lights. Zulas cursed under his breath repeatedly and surveyed the damage, biting his lower lip. It was pretty bad. He did what he could to repair the damage, but TK wasn't even capable of speaking beyond some static sounds scratching out of his vocalizer.

Zulas felt his heart sink. At worst, TK would get a new body later, but in this moment he felt like he was letting his friend down, letting him die. He turned away and punched the ground. "I'm sorry TK, I've done all I can, but..."

TK's flashing alert lights reoriented themselves into a soft, but broken smile, and he raised an arm to pet Zulas between his horns. Zulas nodded and sighed. TK was right. There were still others that needed help. The husky steeled himself and put on a brave face and moved to the next Synth, burying himself in his work to forget his pain.

In the end, the laser cannon was disabled, forcing the Diri to surrender. They were rounded up as prisoners, cuffed, and kept under tight guard as a portion of the Kenjodian space navy descended from low orbit and landed on the battle-scarred ground. The Diri were loaded onto a prisoner ship, and the Kenjodians all boarded the residency ship.

Zulas let out a relieved sigh as his feet touched the smooth metal floors. He was home. Before anything else, he had to debrief, clean up, and unpack. The husky undressed, shedding his dirt-covered uniform and tossing it in a laundry bin before heading to the showers. He took a short shower, eager to see TK again. Once he was clean, he grabbed the bin with his combat uniform in it and walked, nude, to the clothing exchange. He traded in his combat gear and medical supplies for his more comfortable civilian clothes: A short sleeve t-shirt, and a pair of shorts. He dressed and patted himself down, feeling refreshed and renewed, at least for the moment. He knew he would need sleep, and soon, but he had something to do first.

He bounded from the barracks and made a beeline for the medical ward, striding right past his apartment without giving it a glance. His hurried footsteps clanked against the metal floors of the ship, and he could feel it lurch under his feet as it lifted from the ground and returned to space.

Up ahead was the Synth hospital, separated from the organics hospital simply on the fact that one required doctors, and the other, engineers. Zulas was greeted by the Synth at the front desk as he entered. "Welcome! Are you here to visit someone?" they asked.

"Not exactly. My friend, TK, was killed in action down on the planet. I was hoping I could reupload him, if he hasn't been already," Zulas explained.

“Certainly. Please give me their full identification number and I can assist you more properly,” the receptionist requested.

“It’s TK-A1735-00.” Zulas had memorized it.

The Synth typed at their terminal. “TK-A1735-00 is still awaiting upload. He is currently in server block 03, which is down the left hallway.”

Zulas was already on the move. He waved a thanks to the receptionist and walked briskly down the halls, sidestepping the staff he encountered along the way. He rounded a corner and entered through an automatic door into the server block.

Basically the entire room was a computer. There were a few servers in the middle of the room that stretched from floor to ceiling like pillars, and the walls, ceiling, and even floor were all made of black metal frames with faces covered in blinking, multicolored lights. Safety glass covered them, allowing them to be safely walked upon. Inside the room was a Synth technician who was standing beside the server’s data port. She turned her attention to Zulas as he approached, looking a bit timid. “Hello sir. Are you here to retrieve someone?” she asked, face display blinking.

“TK-A1735-00,” Zulas said again.

“Certainly. Authorization?”

Zulas presented the Synth with his military ID that listed him as TK’s division’s field medic, which gave him authorization to restore Synths from his division that fell in combat. The Synth at the server looked at the ID, nodded, and plugged a cylindrical data drive into the server port. Her fingers danced over the command console, and within moments, the a blue ring on the data drive lit up.

“All done,” the Synth said as she removed the drive from the port and handed it to Zulas. “You know where the reupload room is, correct?”

“I do, thank you!” Zulas took the drive and exited the room, moving through the hallways again to the reupload room. He could feel the drive in his hands. It was warm, and humming lightly. He smiled. It was strange, sure, but he was currently holding his friend in his hands, or at least close enough to it.

The reupload room was a simple but large room filled with spare Synth bodies carefully put on display. This made it easy to find the right model of body to upload a Synth mind into. Zulas strode up to the military models and found the one with the serial number that matched TK’s old body. It didn’t look quite the same though, so he checked to be sure, and noted that this was actually a version number higher. Zulas wondered how TK would feel about that.

He fiddled around with the head until he found the panel covering the access port. He took the panel off, and then plugged the end of the data drive into the Synth body. The body jerked to life as it powered up, and the face display flashed a series of multicolored lights as TK was uploaded. The body moved forward, taking a couple unsteady steps before straightening out its posture. The face display settled into a soft purple, and it turned to look at Zulas. The entire display lit up, and TK rushed forward and wrapped the husky in a hug. The hug was a bit stiff due to the metal arms, but Zulas returned the hug all the same, wrapping his fuzzy arms around that metal body. The new TK was easily a head taller than Zulas.

“TK! How are you feeling?” Zulas asked as he pulled away from the hug to look at his friend.

“Great! Better, even. This body feels... lighter? Faster?” he said, twirling around experimentally.

“I think it’s the new version of your old body, if I was reading the version number right,” he explained as he watched TK spin in a circle.

“Oh, really? Let me check...” TK’s face panel changed to blue, then green, then back to purple. “Firmware confirms this. I’ve gotten an upgrade!” He seemed delighted by this, despite the fact that it meant his previous body being damaged beyond repair in battle.

“How does it feel? It’s okay if it’s not the same as your old one, right?” he asked.

“Hmm. It will take some adjustment, but I like it! It’s brand new and more advanced, and really shiny! Plus, I have more color options!” TK pointed to his face on which he briefly displayed a rather detailed rainbow of color.

Zulas chuckled. “Well that’s great! I was worried about... ah, I dunno really! I guess I was just worried about you.”

TK pet the husky on his head. “I appreciate it, Zulas.”

The two stood together for a bit, just taking in the moment.

Zulas shifted his weight from one leg to the other and broke the silence. “Soooo...” he began, timidly. “What was it like?”

“Hmm?” TK tilted his head to one side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, after you shut down, on the Diri planet.”

“Oh. It was normal.” He paused to think for a moment. “It was like, blinking and being somewhere else. I was with you, and I closed my eyes, and then I was just, sort of... floating in the server. It was nice in there though. Comfortable, weightless, good company. And then I remember a gentle sort of tugging sensation... and then I was here!”

“Huh.” Zulas looked thoughtful, and took a step back towards the door. “Let’s uh, let’s get out of here huh man? I haven’t even been home yet!”

“Really? You came straight here? You’re the best!” TK followed the husky, and the two of them left the Synth medical ward and headed home.

“So after I take a nap, do you want to meet up and hang out?” Zulas asked as they walked together.

“Definitely. Can we go to the cafe?”

“The... cafe? You can’t drink! Or eat.” Zulas pointed out.

“Yes! Correct. However, it amuses me to watch you do so,” TK told him.

“Really? Psh, weirdo.” Zulas teased TK and nudged him with his elbow.

TK nudged him back. “Tiny,” he joked, pointing out the new height difference between them.

Zulas rolled his eyes. “Giant!”

“Is that supposed to be a bad thing?” TK made a face, his best approximation of sticking his tongue out at the husky.

Their bantering was brought to an end as they reached the junction that separated their living quarters. Zulas turned one way, and TK the other.

“Enjoy your nap!” TK said with a wave as he headed off.

“Thanks! See you in a couple hours!” Zulas waved at TK and then headed off himself. His apartment was calling.

Zulas let out a sigh of both relief and exhaustion. He was more than ready to flop down into his bed at home for a couple of hours before meeting up with TK again, but as he walked along the metal corridors of the ship, he couldn't keep his thoughts at bay. There was definitely something odd about consciousness transfer.

Sure, TK's consciousness had gone from the field, to the server, to the disk, and then into the new body, but there was just something about that that felt off. Could it really be the same mind, if all the circuitry was different? Zulas thought about waking up in a different body tomorrow and wondered if he would feel the same. Well, he definitely would *feel* the different, he thought. But would he *be* the same? He lingered on the thought for a moment longer. He thought back to the barracks, where he had changed out of his combat gear and into his civilian clothes. He looked different, but he was still the same. He wondered if Synths felt the same way about changing bodies as he did about changing clothes. He hoped so, but he had made up his mind. TK was TK, no matter what body he was sporting.

Zulas finally got to his apartment, and he went straight for his room where he flopped face down on his bed. His bedding smelled like clean laundry. Housekeeping must have come through while he was away. He tried to linger on his earlier thoughts more but his bed was too comfortable, and he focused more on trying to sink into the comfortable softness of it. His last thought was of the battles ahead. That fight had been won, but there were more ahead. He wasn't able to worry about that. In minutes, the husky was curled up in a ball of blankets, and snoozing away.