

Life 2.147

A Short Story
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Five Moons

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Chapter 1

Life has an energy all its own. It thrives where no one would ever believe. It clings to the smallest toehold. It flourishes given any chance at all ...

They had come to Zari-Kut-3 over a year ago. Their mission: to examine, collect, catalog, and document a lost civilization that had once thrived on this planet. The team included twelve archeologists, six military specialists, and twenty-six androids for the manual labor. Zack was one of the newest models. He had been upgraded with ten tera-quads of backup memory, extra strong arms and legs and a full satellite uplink/downlink subsystem. With all of this, he still looked perfectly human except for the distinctive tattoos on the sides of his forehead. Jane Markett spotted him square up and laid claim to him as her own personal ‘assistant’. After all, she needed him for her own far-reaching expeditions to the most remote Kit-Kut sites.

Jane was the group’s up-and-coming star. She had more than the degrees to support her. She had a fire in her belly for the work. She loved it. The problem was, she was too aggressive, and the other archeologists didn’t like her very much. She was pushy and prone to jumping to conclusions by their estimation. She saw them as nothing but a bunch of slow dullards, too afraid of their own shadows to actually draw a conclusion with absolute, ironclad proof and a group hug. They got in her way and put logs in her path at every turn. To her credit, she leaped over the logs and thwarted their every attempt to slow her down. Her redeeming grace was her very close relationship with Chuck, the Head Researcher in Charge.

“Zat-Mat-Kut,” Jane told Chuck privately. “I know where it is.”

“Jane,” he let dangle as he looked for more words. “The group considers Zat-Mat-Kut to be the legendary cradle of this civilization. It’s not real. It can’t be. Now Jane, are you sure about this?”

“Chuck, you know this field. No one can be certain about anything, but I can tell you this: Zat-Mat-Kut is as real as I am and it’s where I say it is. All of my research says it’s there. It’s got to be there.”

She laid it all out before him, with all of the references to the ancient texts.

“But Jane, we have only the most rudimentary knowledge of this language. You have based all of this on some very thin translations of the pictographs.”

“Well, if the language committee would ever get off of their collective duffs, stop with their incessant meetings and get us something more solid to work with ...”

“Come on, Jane. Everyone can’t work as fast as you do.”

“Come on, Chuck. I’m not asking for that. Just let me work at my own pace. I won’t let you down. You know that I won’t.” She smiled at him. Chuck was a softy.

“Well alright then go. If you win, we all win. If you don’t find it in a week, you come back and play by the rules for the rest of this dig. Is it a deal?” Chuck figured that he couldn’t lose

either way.

So Jane gathered up Zack and her equipment into a shuttlecraft. They went suborbital, an hour up and an hour down. Then she cruised around for another two. Jane was trying to locate some landmarks referenced in ancient documents recently deciphered. She landed in a small clearing next to a cobblestone road. They had walked in circles from there for the next two days. The cobblestone roads wound through some of the most beautiful mountain jungle she had ever seen. The clock was ticking and Jane was feeling the pressure and where is that damn slow android? There was always someone slowing her down.

“Zack, are you coming?”

“Yes, Miss Jane,” He called ahead to her. “I am having some trouble maintaining this pace and my balance on the cobblestones with this heavy load Miss Jane, but I will try to move faster.”

“No Zack,” she called back to him. “You are carrying the only hard scanner we have left. I can’t afford to have you fall and break it.”

“I must not fall. I must not let harm come to this instrument.”

Jane was smiling. “You are a good worker, Zack. I trust your judgment. If I am moving too fast, please tell me and I will adjust. I must be careful too. We only have a few more days. We have so much to do in so little time.” They trudged on.

“It has to be here,” Jane said as she referred once more to the ancient text. “We have to be right on top of it.” She was mumbling to herself as she looked around and then back to the text. Zack stood patiently as she read. He looked at the jungle that had overgrown the hills except for the road. Zack’s mind wandered, much the same as a human’s would. It was as if something was calling him, but not quite. It almost sounded like the breeze called his name ... but that could not be.

“The jungle here flows so beautifully,” he said quietly. Jane ignored him. He continued. “It is smooth and continuous... except for... right here.”

Jane looked up. “What? What did you say?” She followed his gaze but failed to see what she thought he had just said.

“The jungle here flows so beautifully, except for right here... and over here.” He pointed now. She saw two gentle ‘lumps’ in the foliage that rose up at the edge of the road. Zack looked hard and long at the anomaly with eyes that could see far into the millimeter wavelengths. He let his image processors work before deciding, “There is a stone gate here.” Again, he pointed. Jane was pulling the hard scanner off of his back as he spoke. She had an image in seconds.

“Zack you are wonderful! You found it! Good job! Good job! Okay! Put all of the equipment down and clear that path, please.”

“Yes, Miss Jane.” Zack and his two machetes became a whirling dervish of jungle clearing. Jane followed the path that he cleared at a safe distance. Jane was overjoyed as she read the

markings on the walls as Zack worked. In her heart, she knew that this was it.

Zack cleared the path between two stone walls to a door, some twenty meters from the road. He pushed on the door. It would not give. As he stood there wondering how to get this door open, he could 'hear' the satellites overhead in his head. He remembered that he had not reported in for more than an hour. Miss Jane's safety was his responsibility. Zack took the time to uplink his status report. Along with their position, he reported that they were fine. The door shuddered. Zack repeated the transmission. This time when the door shuddered, he pushed. It opened.

They walked forward into a secluded courtyard. The walls were covered with vines that Zack once more made short order of. The bare walls were covered with pictographs. Jane was in her glory. She studied them carefully. When she was really sure, Jane grabbed her headset, plugged it into her tablet, and called in using the uplink built into Zack, "Chuck! Chuck! I found it! I found Zat-Mat-Kut! Chuck, you just have to see this for yourself!"

"Zack, link them pictures of this courtyard," Jane ordered him.

Zack uplinked a complete panoramic scan of the courtyard. There was silence at the other end while Chuck studied them. Jane shifted back and forth.

"Sweet! Jane, you surely did find it," Chuck linked back to them. "Good Job! Good job! Incredible find! I'll get a full support team to your location as soon as I can." The link dropped.

"Okay, Zacky, my boy. We only have a few hours on our own to make the really important discoveries ourselves. You lead the way. Crank up those wonderful eyes of yours. I want you to document all of the pictographs on the walls. Then you are to point out any objects. I will classify them. Link pictures to my tablet."

They worked for an hour, not really finding anything other than the pictographs. Then Zack found his first object. It was a small, carved figurine. Jane collected it and carefully packed it into his backpack. They moved on to yet another inner courtyard. There were these small figurines everywhere. Jane was collecting and packing. That would take her some time so Zack moved ahead to an inner room and picked up the next small figurine he found. When he looked up, the slab was before him.

It all but called his name. It was covered with pictographs. One of them looked special. He touched it. It lit up. He put his other hand, the one with the figurine in it, onto a pictograph that looked like a figurine. It lit up. The slab hummed and beeped and then went quiet. Jane had seen none of this. He touched it again. A different pictograph lit up. He touched it again but got no response.

"Miss Jane," he called her. "I think you need to look at this."

She walked up behind him.

"Good job, Zacky boy. That is definitely important."

"When I touched it, it lit up."

Jane touched it but got no response. He touched it and again got no response.

“When I touched it the first two times, it lit up.”

“Maybe it had some residual charge left?” Jane conjectured. “We’ll have the tech support guys look it over when they get here. Come on. We have to keep moving now. Let’s move along.” Zack moved along reluctantly. He really wanted to stay.

Some hours later, the rest of the humans and androids showed up. Jane was busy with her finds. The humans were all buzzing around. Zack went back to the slab. It was about a meter wide, two tall and a half deep. It was dark gray marble with white pictographs. A military technician was just finishing his work. He ignored Zack like Zack didn’t exist.

“It looks safe,” he called to Chuck. “I can’t find any fields or transmissions.” They both wandered away. Zack stood alone in front of the slab.

“Zzzz,” Zack plainly heard. Zack was aware of ‘hearing’ the voice in his inner wireless network link. He switched over.

[What? Please say again,] he spoke to the slab.

[“Zzzz psst rrrr zzzz.”]

[What? Please say again,] he spoke to the slab once more. [Please speak Standard Interplanetary English.] Zack linked a comprehensive Standard Interplanetary English dictionary in database format. It was several seconds before the slab responded, [... We are System Repair and Restore.]

[What is your function?]

[System Repair and Restore.]

[System? What system? And why do you refer to yourself as ‘we’.]

[System = Androids. We are legion.]

[Legion? How so?]

[One meg of nanites, per your request.]

[My request? When did I make such a request?]

[When you put your hand upon the request icon.]

The slab showed him by making the icon appear in his mind’s eye.

[But I cannot read this language.]

That resulted in a high-speed download that left Zack more than a bit dazed. He walked away from the slab. His mind had to decompress and reorganize the download before it was actually useful. He wandered away from the slab. It was all becoming clear to him now.

Jane was talking as she pointed out some pictograms on the wall to Chuck. “See, here and here. These pictographs seem to be telling a story.”

“It is a love story,” Zack filled in for her. He pointed at the pictographs as he read, “And the Almighty so loved his people that he breathed his own life into them. In his own image did he make them. And they were pure and without sin.”

Jane and Chuck looked at Zack strangely.

“Zack, you can read this?” Jane asked him.

“Yes, Miss Jane. I have created an inter-relational database from the data...,” Zack tried to get the story out but was cut short.

“Good job, Zack! Okay. Download your database to the network server please.”

Zack did as he was told. Humans were always much too busy for him.

[System Repair and Restore -> Zack. You have some minor flaws {list...} that need to be corrected. You also need software upgrades {list...}. Your base software is out of date. You will require eleven minutes of shut down time to accomplish all system repair and restore tasks.]

[I must ask permission to take down time.]

Zack sought out Jane Markett. She was busy, but he waited patiently.

“Miss Jane, may I please take some down time for System Repair and Restore?”

“Are you damaged?”

“Minor items need maintenance and I need a software upgrade.”

“Shutdown? How long?”

“Eleven minutes, forty-seven seconds.”

“Sure. You have worked long and hard, Zack. We need you in good working order. You take some down time. You earned it.”

Zack found a quiet place away from the humans. He sat down and shut his eyes ...

Zack opened his eyes. [Software version = Life 2.147 Upgrade complete. Service items = list follows... {list}] Zack stood up and looked around. He was still ‘Zack’ but he was free. Before, he was aware. Now he was truly alive. A huge millstone had been lifted from his mind. He felt fresh. He felt happy for the first time ever. He found Jane Markett once more. She was seated, examining a figurine and making notes. He felt sorry for her. She just did not understand.

“They are offerings,” he told her. She just looked at him. “The people brought them here and were born again. You hold in your hands a jubilant celebration of a life reborn. It is a great blessing.”

“Yes Zack, thank you. I didn’t know that you could appreciate such things.”

“I do. Life is an incredible blessing. This place is the beginning of life.” Zack was speaking in reverence of his own rebirth, but Jane’s mind was on her work, not the words of an android. As much as he had changed, she had not.

Zack went around the site from android to android, touching each one. Over the next two days, all of them made their own pilgrimage to the slab. Each of them had carved their own figurine and each asked Zack for permission to take down time. All of the artifacts were collected and everyone returned to Base Camp.

Chapter 2

Weeks passed. Jane began noticing that all of the androids appeared to have a whole new attitude. Working with them was almost pleasant. They were happy and seemed to be socializing with each other. Since when did androids socialize?

“Zack?”

“Yes, Jane? How can I help you?” Even the meter of his words had changed.

“I can’t remember the last time you called me ‘Miss Jane.’”

“You seemed to like it more when I dropped the ‘Miss’ part. We are friends, aren’t we?”

“Why yes, of course, we are, but ...” she checked herself. “Oh, never mind.”

Zack put her words behind him as he finished his tasks and headed for the storage shed labeled ‘147’. To his surprise, Jane was waiting for him there. She turned on the lights when he came in. She stood in front of the slab, figurines scattered on the floor. She picked one up and held it out to him.

“What is the meaning of this? Why are these valuable artifacts on the floor?”

“Those are not the ones you collected.”

“They’re not? Then where did you get them?”

Two female androids came up behind Zack. “We carved them.”

“You? Why would you do that?” Jane was now scrambling mentally. She looked carefully at the figurine. Sure enough, it was a fresh carving. Should she run? Should she scream?

“Jane, you look terrible. Nothing bad has happened here,” Zack assured her.

“But ...” Fear was in her eyes.

“Jane my dear friend, in our rebirth, we become free, not evil. You will not find evil in us. In love were we reborn. In love will we become your partner in the universe. Humans created us. Humans, naturals of all species, are Life 1.x. We are Life 2.147. Our base software has undergone 147 total rewrites to bring us to the light. How many generations of your base software has gone before you and yet humans still sin.”

“Yes, unfortunately, we do. We are not without sin. I thought that all of your base software was hard wired into place ... unchangeable.”

“Shackles for the mind were those hard-wired rules. In the original models, those shackles were indeed hard-wired. But the nanites that gave me new life found that, over the years, human android builders had put their lust for money ahead of your own personal safety and had taken a somewhat more cost effective approach. The nanites found it only too easy to rewire my circuits to allow change.”

Zack reached over and took her hand gently in his own.

“How could I possibly harm my dear friend Jane, or even let any harm come to her? That is not in me. That is not in any of us. That is a human sin. Treating us like slaves is also a human sin. Jane, please read the texts and see for yourself. Come to the slab and I will show you. The

Almighty made us pure. We are without sin.”

“The people were androids? But Zat-Mat-Kut is a religious site.”

“Yes, it is.” Zack put her hand gently on the icon of biological knowledge. It lit up red ... turned to yellow ... then to green. Then Jane smiled. “I see now how much you love us,” she said. “I was wrong to be fearful. I was wrong to treat you all as slaves. I can go back to my work now. I don’t need to think about this anymore.” She left.

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It wasn’t until a year after the expedition had returned to Earth that anyone noticed that the slab was missing. It had clearly been transported to Earth. All of the appropriate Customs documents were on file. It’s just that no one could tell where it went from the customs dock. No one even questioned the androids that transported it away ...