

## Chapter Ten

Doctor Norris Night didn't arrive until the following afternoon. His shuttle was delayed due to a temporary malfunction, and until it was repaired he was trapped inside the huge orbiting space station, or orbiter for short. When Ka finally received word of his imminent arrival, the abbot quickly organized the household in a N formation on the terrace steps. Out of respect for the VIP's status, the monks had pulled their cotton hoods over their heads. Ka stood on the terrace flagstones, waiting beside Brother Ub. When he noticed that his colleague's scalp was exposed, he abruptly elbowed him and yanked the hood over his head. Ub jumped when he recognized his blunder. "Forgive me, brother," he said.

Dr. Night's hovercraft looked like a shiny black beetle as it rose above the valley's haze. After banking to the right, it made a bee line for the terrace. Ka looked back to make sure that the robots were in the correct formation. He had posted a bipot on every fifth step, with Klooi in front. They had all received lube jobs that morning and their metal cladding sparkled in the sun. The titanium bipots gleamed like mirrors, reflecting the turquoise color of the monks' robes. Ka located Te in the diagonal row of the N. He tried to catch her eye but she kept staring at her sandals. *So like her*, he thought, *always the shy maiden*. He wondered about her relationship with her husband and how long it had been since they had kissed. The man definitely cared about her progress. In their recent communications, he had repeatedly asked about her wellbeing. Ka had decided to keep him in the dark for now, until Te's recent truculent behavior subsided. Should he tell this VIP that his wife was still afraid of NIMBUS? Absolutely not!

A sudden breeze blasted the terrace as the hovercraft glided over the parapet. The monks' robes snapped in the wind. Te pressed both hands against her stomach to keep her robe from blowing up over her face. For a brief moment, Ka caught a delightful glimpse of her slender legs before she modestly hid them from view. After halting in midair, the black beetle settled onto the terrace with a sigh. Its license plate number was 1, denoting a vehicle assigned to the spaceport's most prestigious human cargo. Ka faced the

limousine while projecting his most imposing demeanor. His was proud of his rail thin, straight-as-an-arrow posture, equal to a man half his age. Decades of ascetic living had paid off well, endowing him with a bearing equal to what would be expected of an abbot of Poowhi.

The hovercraft's butterfly doors rose into the air, revealing the passenger inside. Ka took a few steps forward and stopped, waiting politely as the dusky-haired man climbed out of the vehicle's cabin. Ka was impressed by the doctor's symmetrical Vandyke beard, long satin coat, and cynical demeanor. While the robot chauffeur unloaded three suitcases and left them on the flagstones, the two men bowed and shook hands. Dr. Night was as tall as Ka but wore lifts in his shoes. He grinned impishly as his host muttered the standard greeting. "I'm thrilled to be here," he replied, flashing a set of flawless white teeth. "I happen to be one of Poowhi's biggest fans. You can rest assured that your Martian Shangri-la won't lose any grants as long as I'm around." Dr. Night pumped Ub's hand. "How's it going, Master? I'm happy to see that you're still well fed and perky." Thanks to the VIP's strong grip, the monk's palm would be sore for days.

"I'm equally thrilled to see you again," Ub gushed. "I still remember your eloquent lecture at our last symposium. I loved it when you called NIMBUS the mother of evolution."

"Actually it was father," Night said. "I picture NIMBUS as a patriarchal device."

"Of course!" Ub said, red in the face. "Please forgive me. That's *so* like me to get things mixed up."

The doctor pried his hand out of Ub's equally exuberant grip and proceeded to zigzag from row to row, shaking each hand in the N (except for the bipots). Since this wasn't in the protocol book, Ka was vaguely annoyed. He tried not to roll his eyes while waiting for the man to finish. When the doctor reached his wife she looked directly in his eyes without any reservations. Ka was perplexed by this bold behavior and even felt uneasy as she held Night's gaze. So, she wasn't that afraid of him after all. *Maybe this is for my benefit*, he thought. *Is she calling my bluff?*

Finally to Ka's relief, Dr. Night shook her hand and moved on. When he reached the end of the line, the abbot led him up the steps for a quick tour of the fabrication hall. Then he took him up to his suite so he could wash up. When they entered the airy room on the thirty-ninth floor, Ka was relieved to see that Vagoo had done an excellent job cleaning. The floors were vacuumed and the furniture was dust free. The bathroom

and kitchenette were spotless. She had even placed a white rosanthemum on the pillow of the neatly turned down bed.

The doctor picked up the flower and sniffed. “Mmmmm, nice touch,” he said.

Ka was pleased to present his VIP with such immaculate accommodations. Unlike the plain quarters of the monks with their simple futons and cedar cabinets, the guest quarters were luxuriously appointed, comparable to a room in a five-star hotel. There were forty-nine suites in all, and each one had four balconies (north, south, east, and west) with splendid views. For most of the year they were empty, until the week of the annual symposium arrived. Then the monks would fling the sheets off the furniture and air out the rooms, while Vagoo and her crew scrubbed and dusted, and for the final touch, filled each vase with fragrant greenhouse flowers.

Walking over to a large cherry armoire, the doctor hung up his coat, pausing long enough to pick a speck of lint off one of the embroidered N’s. Then he took a computer pad out to the balcony and placed it on the table. “So many messages,” he sighed. “So little time.” He leaned on the balustrade and took in the majesty of the Tithonius Canyon with its massive red cliffs and banks of pink clouds. “There’s nothing like this on Earth,” he said, stroking his beard. “No wonder you’ve been so content all these years. Every morning you must wake up in awe.”

“I do,” Ka replied.

Night took a long, deep whiff. “The air’s so fresh,” he said. “I’m always amazed that it’s artificial.”

“Our terraformers work remarkably well. On weekends they add moisture and a pinch of salt to the blend so that it feels like the ocean. You haven’t been here for a sandstorm though. That’s a totally different animal. You just missed one in fact.”

“Yes, I heard. That’s the reason my shuttle was delayed. It had sand in its injectors.”

Ka decided that they had exchanged enough small talk. “I’ll leave now so you can rest,” he said. “In case you need one, I’ve placed a Hood by your bed.” He bowed and left the mesmerized man at the railing, gazing straight down into the antediluvian depths of the three-miles-deep gorge.

For dinner Boogi out did himself, serving a three-course meal consisting of Marineris Monkfish with Daedalia mustard and Cydonia chard; Elysium farm lamb with Hellas peas and minted jus; and for dessert, Martian dark chocolate with a chili infused crèmeux and chocolate almond gelato. Ka was pleased with the meal so far. He had seated the doctor to his left, and Te and Ub to his right. Klooi stood at attention directly behind his chair; a pose that the old monk found gratifying.

“This dinner is enchanting,” Night said. “Even better than before.”

The little chef offered their guest second helpings but he graciously declined. Ka was not surprised. Night’s physique was nearly as trim as his own, but with forty years less mileage. Over dessert he had even asked Ka if Poowhi had a gym. The abbot regretfully said no.

Ka noticed that the conversation at their table kept fizzling every time he introduced a topic. Sister Te was her usual sweet self but had little to say. Night was obviously distracted by his wife’s presence, adding little to the conversation while glancing back and forth between Te and his plate. Even Ub was acting strange. When he declined a second helping Ka was dumfounded. *Could Ub be dieting?* he thought. *Impossible!* Boogi seemed to be unaffected by this unprecedented behavior, but no sooner had Ub declined seconds than Vagoo snatched his empty plate.

Ka turned around and looked at Klooi. The new bipot’s burnished cladding gave him the look of a little knight in shining armor. The abbot pretended that his servant was actually NIMBUS itself, masquerading in this humble form. When Aiigo (wearing that ridiculous apron) tried to take the master’s dirty plate, Klooi stood in his way and removed it all by himself. Ka was thrilled by this gesture of possessive loyalty. It was as if NIMBUS itself had selected the abbot to be its master. Feeling buoyant, Ka asked, “So doctor. Apart from the delay, how was the rest of your trip?”

Night put down his goblet and smacked his lips. “I really can’t say,” he said. “I slept the whole time.”

“Really?”

He nodded and said, “I took three nausea pills and one sedative, and knocked myself out. I’m afraid I’m one of the unlucky few who vomit at even a hint of weightlessness. So even though I didn’t puke, I slept through everything, even the docking with the orbiter. I hear *that’s* a sight to behold.” He smiled hopefully at

Te. She smiled in return, but kept her eyes averted.

After another long silence, Ka decided it was time to melt the ice that was freezing their chitchat. Apparently Te *was* frightened by her husband's close proximity. It pleased Ka to think that he could change that now. He would show her that he was not going to give her a bad rap. "Doctor," he said, "you've sponsored your wife for some time now, correct?"

Husband and wife both jumped in their seats.

"I suppose you could say that," the doctor replied. "I was her professor when she earned her doctorate at my university. Her thesis was remarkable and I've supported her ever since."

"She *is* remarkable," Ka agreed, laying it on thick. "Our only sister is an inspiration, a breath of fresh air in this stale patriarchal house. FYI, her Hood craft is already equal to mine."

Ka noticed that the brothers were silent, eavesdropping no doubt. Te blushed.

"Here, here!" Ub cried. "I concur! Sister Te's definitely a fast learner."

Ka decided to swing for the fences and said, "We're triple grateful for your wife's inspiring participation. I pray her association with Poowhi will be a long one."

"Thank you, Master," Te said. "And thank you, Norris."

Ub was reaching for his fork when he remembered that his plate was gone. He sighed unhappily. Having anticipated this frustration, Boogi gave him a new plate with a single nectarado on it.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Ub said, stabbing the hybrid fruit with his fork.

Ka was baffled. "My dear brother," he said. "Are you dieting?"

Ub savored the moist chunk of nectarado before swallowing. "I'm rehearsing," he said with a gulp.

"Okay, whatever that means." Ka turned to face the doctor and said, "How about a little night cap before bed? I can have brandy and cakes brought up to my room."

Ub froze. "Did you say cakes?"

"I did. Ubana shortcakes, as a matter of fact."

"Oh dear," Ub said.

Ka snapped his fingers to get Boogi's attention. "Since Ub's rehearsing, we'll skip the cakes," he said.

“Just bring us a bottle of Moovati brandy.” He smiled at the doctor. “You’re in for a treat. You see, we’re not the only monastery on Mars. The Moovati monks of the Tharsis Rise make an exquisite grape brandy. It’s distilled twice and aged in copper pot stills. Once a year, brother Ub helps them stomp grapes in exchange for a case of the previous year’s blend. So, what do you say?”

“By all means. A little monastery brandy before bed sounds divine.”

“Very well,” Ka said, throwing down his napkin. As soon as he stood up, Boogi snatched the crumpled napkin out from under Klooi’s outstretched hand. The new bipot glared at the little chef with clenched fists and for a moment Ka was worried that the two robots might come to blows. *That’s odd*, he thought. *The NIMBUS clones should be incapable of anger.*

Boogi served the three men their spirits on the south balcony of Brother Ka’s room. A small copper lamp in the middle of their table flickered like a candle. Klooi watched silently as Boogi poured the translucent red liquor into three crystal snifters. After placing the decanter on the table, the chef took his leave and let Klooi take over. Ka noticed that the new bipot’s hands were open this time and hanging limply at his side. Apparently, the clenched fists had been unintentional, a mere coincidence. Klooi *couldn’t* be angry. NIMBUS would have to harbor that emotion too, an impossibility. Mankind’s greatest computer was pure logic, untouched by human imperfections. It commanded the solar system with unfeeling might.

A steel ball levitating above the table provided a nice bubble of heat. Since the temperature dropped below zero after sunset, heaters were *de rigueur* if one wished to sit out under the stars. Dr. Night sipped his brandy and gazed silently through the railing, following the passage of a dark cloud two miles below. The twinkling lights of the city peeped through the creeping mist, playing a game of hide-and-seek. Ka could tell the man was awed by the view.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m living in a fairy tale,” Ub said. “I’m afraid to pinch myself in case I wake up.”

“Your monastery *is* like a resort,” Night said. “It’s the best kept secret in the solar system. With these accommodations, no wonder Teri’s bounced back so fast. Too bad I have to puke to get here.”

Ka pondered Night's use of Te's full-length name, thinking, *how odd it must be having a monk for a wife*. He sipped his brandy and said, "Some critics say Poowhi's not austere enough, but I disagree. Other than Boogi's French cuisine, I think we fit the bill. And I don't think it's wrong to honor our donors with lavish accommodations, do you?"

Night chuckled and said, "I bet you get a ton of applications from prospective monks."

"Actually, no," Ka said. "Because they're aware of our asceticism, outside of the food of course. Right now we have eleven empty rooms and we'd love to fill them with novices. But shortages like that are not unique to this monastery. Too many are forsaking us to travel to the stars. It's the final exodus, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry, old man," Night said. "The board of directors just voted to end the exodus because, like you, they think it's gone too far. So, after the next three starships shove off, the great adventure in space exploration will grind to a halt."

"But is that wise?" Ub asked. "The Explorers Club has been a tremendous hit. The waiting list is in the millions."

"That's the problem," Night said. "Our space program's *too* popular. We can't build starships fast enough, and when demand's greater than supply it inevitably leads to civil unrest. NIMBUS thinks we're committing economic suicide because the program's bankrupting our resources and the pay back is nil."

Klooi refilled their snifters and said, "Some of the brothers wish that they could pack up and go. The desire to run away is a common human trait."

The doctor gave the bipot a thorough look. "Damn," he said. "This robot's well wired. You're right, Klooi. Everyone and their mother wants to run away, and that's not good. NIMBUS has been flashing a red light for months and finally our board agrees; no more migration."

"Bravo," Ka said, sipping his drink. As he felt the warm glow of the liquor surge through his veins he listened with deep satisfaction. Night had unwittingly espoused one of Ka's contenders for the upcoming symposium theme. Could this be the winning topic? He recalled the afternoon not too long ago when he was dictating his ideas to Dunei.

Suddenly Ka choked, coughing violently as the brandy burned his throat. He snatched a napkin off the

table and covered his mouth, while Klooi jumped behind his chair with both arms outstretched, ready to do the Heimlich maneuver. The abbot waved him away, embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s the brandy. It’s too potent for my old bones.”

“Nonsense,” Night said. “You can’t fool me. I’ve heard about you monks and your drinking capacity. I’m quite certain that I’m the lightweight here.”

“I could drink this brandy all night,” Ub said, draining his glass.

“Yes, and all the wine at picnics,” Ka added, giving him a stern glance.

Klooi began to massage Ka’s shoulders with his pliant vinyl hands. The sensation was heavenly. Between the firm kneading of his muscles and the warmth of the liquor, the abbot felt outrageously relaxed. One final, tiny cough shook his chest.

The doctor nodded at Klooi. “I see you’ve trained your robots well,” he said.

“I have,” Ka agreed. “We’ve only had two desertions in the last twenty years and they deserted together.”

“That would be Vagoo and Givooi,” Ub said. “They eloped.”

“No kidding,” Night said. “Were they sexualized human clones by any chance?”

Both monks shook their heads.

“Fascinating,” he said. “The humanistic cores sure have their quirks. But then again, quirks are what makes humans human.”

Ka, on the verge of sleep, asked Klooi to remove his magic hands. “I don’t know if you noticed,” he said, “but Klooi is a NIMBUS clone.”

“No kidding,” Night said. “I thought I recognized his pitch contour. He certainly exhibits the poise and consistency of a NIMBUS core.” While Klooi stood at attention, the three men admired his quiet sang-froid.

Ka sipped more brandy and leaned toward the doctor, saying, “Eventually I’ll delete the rest of our team and install NIMBUS cores. I’m tired of dealing with their human behaviors.”

The doctor held up his glass in salute. “Good man,” he said. “Since I’m the inventor, I applaud your decision. And so does the board. They picked the NIMBUS core for this year’s symposium theme. I think it

was your idea.”

The old monk shrugged but was secretly thrilled. “I’m flattered,” he said. “It’s an issue close to my heart.”

“Me too,” Night said. “I never understood why our robots were modeled after human beings. It’s so messy. I’m for a machine acting like a machine. Now *that’s* progress.”

“Exactly,” Ka agreed. “But why wait any longer? I could start deleting tomorrow. What do you think, Brother Ub? Who should we delete first?”

“Boogi,” Klooi said out of nowhere.

“Oh no!” Ub said. “Not Boogi. If you delete him now the banquet will be ruined. All of his culinary expertise will be lost forever.”

“Heaven forbid!” the doctor said, amused.

“No, really,” Ub insisted. “His recipes alone are a Martian treasure. Deleting them would be a tragic mistake.”

Klooi spoke up for the second time that night. “Doctor,” he said. “Can’t that data be partitioned so that it’s preserved in the new core?”

Night shook his head. “Not creative data like cooking. It’s a child class of the parent class *Human* and it depends on that relationship in order to function. That’s something I need to change.”

“Goody,” Ub said. “Then we can wait.”

Klooi poured another round of brandy and said, “Poowhi’s humanistics appear to be unstable. I’ve already identified two anomalies. I noticed the first one yesterday when I followed Boogi and Vagoo into the garage. Aiigo was welding in the dark and Vagoo asked him to stop. She started babbling about a movie called *A Woman Scorned* and how art imitates life.”

“Her Nicole fixation,” Ka explained. “She’s that old movie star’s biggest fan.”

“Nicole’s our neighbor,” Ub said proudly, “and has been for quite some time.”

Night raised his brow and said, “Really? I read somewhere that she had moved to Mars.”

“She lives in a crater near the border,” Ka said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “She’s a hermit

now, but there was a time when she used to hobnob with Sister Mo. I thought she was boring, and to this day I would rather watch paint dry than pay her a visit. But Mo liked her.”

Ub opened his mouth to speak, but then changed his mind. He stared at the flickering lamp until his eyes slowly shut. Soon his head drooped.

Klooi broke the silence. "I noticed a second anomaly yesterday," he said.

“Do tell,” Night said with a yawn.

“I was patrolling the halls just before dawn when I spied Sister Te sneaking into Boogi’s room.” Startled, the doctor sat up in his chair and paid close attention as Klooi continued. “After she closed the door I couldn’t help myself and stood outside, eavesdropping. I could only hear snatches of conversation but it seemed like she was reciting her life story.”

“All of it?” Night asked, suddenly wide awake.

“I believe so.”

Ka’s tranquility vanished in a flash. What would the good doctor think of Poowhi now? Horrified, the abbot poured himself another brandy and belted it down. “Klooi! Why did you hold this back?” he said.

“I was waiting for the right moment.”

Unlike Ka, Brother Ub was now completely at peace. His limp hands rose and fell on his round belly as he snored under his breath. “This is most distressing,” said Ka. “Let me assure you. Te has been a model of propriety up to now.”

Night was livid. “You must keep my wife away from your bipots at all costs,” he said. “She’s drawn to them like a moth to a flame. Robots have always been her Achilles heel.”

The old monk was mortified. “I see that now,” he said. “I was foolish to believe that my servants wouldn’t tempt her. I thought that once she gave NIMBUS a chance there wouldn’t be any competition.”

The doctor shook his head and said, “Listen up, old man. She can talk to Klooi. He’s safe. But the others are far too dangerous.”

Ka was dismayed by this unexpected turn of events. He knew Te’s problems had to eventually come to light, but not so soon and with more finesse. It was as if NIMBUS had spoken through Klooi and pushed Ka

aside. Suddenly, he felt like a small cog in a great machine.

“I’ll need to interrogate her to determine if any damage has been done,” Night said. “I had hoped she would do well here. But if she’s bonding with Boogi she’ll need to return to Earth.”

“Let’s hope not,” Ka said, alarmed. “Except for a single incident, Poowhi has been very good for her. She *is* making progress and we’re all very fond of her.”

“I’m sure you are but that doesn’t make this the Taj Mahal.”

While Ub slumbered in his chair Ka wished that the evening would come to an end. That last shot of brandy had been one too many. The balcony seemed to be revolving beneath him. He looked with longing at his blue futon and thought, *Sister Te, what have you done to me? I’m too old for this passion.* At the same time the brandy had warmed the cockles of his heart and inflamed his mind with lascivious thoughts. He grinned like a naughty schoolboy in spite of himself.

At that moment Ka was seeing two doctors, not one, and he had to squint to focus on a single set of moving lips. “Klooi makes a good spy,” Night said. “I hope he keeps on the lookout for unusual behavior.” Then he lowered his voice and said, “Which brings me to the reason why I’m here. Recently there’s been a cluster of robot desertions in your hemisphere, and ninety per cent of them have been in the Marineris basin.”

“Interesting,” Ka said, suppressing a yawn.

“Normally the police would put out a net,” Night said, “and catch these robots without incident. But not anymore. When they try to pause them nothing happens; they just run away. When they try to delete the few who are captured nothing happens; something locks NIMBUS out of their cores. No doubt that something is a patch, but so far the scans haven’t found anything other than sporadic kilobytes of encrypted code. None of it seems to be related, even when it’s deciphered. If they’re a puzzle the pieces just don’t fit together. So NIMBUS has all-hands-on-deck to try and figure this out. The secret police are out in force, looking for the perpetrator. And each day more robots wander off to who knows where. Rumor has it that rebel bands are lurking out beyond the border, hiding under polar ice caps or inside volcanoes. I’m here to organize a security sweep.”

Ub snorted, shook himself, and then drifted back to sleep. Ka pondered the implications of Night’s

story as he fought the urge to close his eyes. Could Boogi have this patch and be laughing at him behind his back? There was only one way to find out. Tomorrow he would pause Boogi and see if it took. Ha! The bipot will be toast if he doesn't freeze in his tracks.

“The patch isn't a virus,” Night said. “We quarantined a captured deserter with a control bot and the control still paused like before. That means somebody's installing this patch one robot at a time.”

“Oh my,” the abbot said as he drifted off into inner space.

Ka sat up with a jolt. Ub sagged in his chair, still asleep and mumbling to himself. The table was cleared and the lamp was dark; the floating heaters were gone. Both monks were covered with thermal blankets to protect them from the chill. The only illumination came from a million shimmering stars scattered across the indigo sky.

Ka's brain ached. Getting up, he stumbled toward his quarters, dragging his blanket behind him. He had only one destination; the soft futon in the middle of the floor.

But what about Ub? The abbot went back and shook him vigorously. The slumbering idiot continued to mumble, only louder. When Ub pulled the blanket over his head Ka ripped it off and shook him even harder.

“Brandy?” Ub moaned. “Why yes, I'll have a bit more.”

“I'll give you more,” Ka said. “I'll give you the back of my hand. Now wake up, fool. The doctor has gone to bed and so should we.”

“Whaaa?” Ub said, jumping to his feet and overturning his chair. He stared at Ka, confused. “Where did everybody go?”

“Our guest drank us under the table, then left.”

Ub staggered over to the balustrade and leaned over, looking straight down. Worried that the fat monk's weight would snap the bars and catapult him into the canyon, Ka grabbed him by the hood of his robe and pulled. As he dragged him to the elevator and shoved him inside, poor Ub choked and sputtered until the doors shut in his face. Satisfied, Ka shuffled over to his blessed futon and threw himself onto the cushioned pads. Soon the spinning room lollled him to sleep.