

## Chapter Eleven

The next morning Brothers Ka and Ub failed to appear for breakfast. Vagoo was perplexed because Ub had never missed a meal before. While helping Boogi flip pancakes she said, “Do you think he’s fasting?”

Boogi was skeptical. “Nope,” he replied. “I bet he drank too much brandy last night.”

Dr. Night showed up on time and sat down next to Te. Since Ka was absent the dining hall was filled with the buzz of conversations, along with occasional outbursts of laughter. Boogi was constantly shadowed by Klooi as he served the pancakes and eggs. At one point he stopped and glared at Klooi, who said, “I’m supposed to analyze your routine. The master wants a productivity report.”

Taking Vagoo aside, Boogi whispered, “If he wants to improve our scores he should grab an apron and lend a hand. But he doesn’t fool me. He’s spying.” The little chef noticed a pin stuck to the housekeeper’s lip so he pulled it out. “You’ve been sewing,” he said.

Later in the kitchen Aiigo loaded the dish washer with dirty plates while Boogi stood at the other end of the conveyor belt, stacking the clean dishes as they came out of the dryer. “Slow down!” Boogi said. “I don’t have suction cups on my fingers.”

Aiigo stopped what he was doing and said, “Hey, what’s up with our VIP and Sister Te? She doesn’t waste any time does she?”

“What are you talking about?” Boogi said.

“Didn’t you notice? The two of them were chatting it up like old friends. Funny how our girl zeroed in on the big fish. Every monk’s tongue has been hanging out for months, hoping they’ll be the one who ends her celibacy. But so far it’s zilch and nada unless you’ve got seniority.”

Boogi realized that Aiigo was misinformed. He continued stacking plates and said, “FYI, they’re more than old friends. They’re married.”

Aiigo almost pulled a Vagoo and dropped a plate. “No kidding,” he said. “But isn’t that against the law; being married while you’re a monk?”

“I guess not, as long as you were already married when you volunteered.”

At that moment Vagoo burst through the dining room door pushing another cart full of dirty dishes. Aiigo checked the time\* and untied his apron strings. “I’m clocking out,” he announced, “and then clocking in again. I’ve got me some flying to do.”

“Hear that, Klooi?” Vagoo said, speaking to the door. “Aiigo always quits before we’re done. I hope you put *that* in your report.”

Brother Ka and Ub were AWOL all afternoon. While Aiigo flew Dr. Night into town to meet a law enforcement deputy, Boogi helped Vagoo clean house under the observation of Klooi the ever-present spy. His steady stare made Boogi nervous, but Vagoo seemed to be adjusting. She even included Klooi in their chat-chat. When they had finished mopping the thirty-nine hallways in the west tower, Vagoo invited the two bipots into her room to view a new treasure. “It came yesterday by special delivery,” she said proudly.

As they stood in front of her dresser, the housekeeper held up a gold picture frame with an autographed publicity still of the young Nicole. It was signed: *to my favorite fan: Vagoo. Love, Nicole. P.S. You’re WELCOME anytime.* “See that? I’m welcome,” Vagoo said, caressing her prize. “I found the frame in storage and I polished it real nice.”

Klooi peered at the photo. “The movie star?” he said. “When did you meet *her*?”

“We run into her all the time,” Boogi said, stretching the truth. “She lives in a crater about twenty miles due north.”

“Why would she give *you* an autograph?”

“Because I’m her biggest fan,” said Vagoo haughtily.

“You should go visit her,” Boogi advised. “It’s not polite to ignore an invitation.”

“I wouldn’t advise that,” Klooi said. “You would be breaking the rules.”

\*Every robot has an internal clock.

Vagoo placed the picture frame on top of her dresser, the only piece of furniture in the room. “Oh come now,” Boogi said. “Let Vagoo have some fun. A robot’s life is hard.”

Klooi was inflexible. “Section 5, line 27,” he said. “Servants are not allowed to leave the monastery unless they’re accompanied by a monk.” Boogi was considering a hostile reply when Klooi received a summons. “My master calls,” he said, and without another word he left the room and scooted down the hall.

“Finally, he’s gone,” Boogi said with a sigh of relief.

As Vagoo gazed fondly at her portrait of Nicole, Boogi was filled with compassion for the metallic bumblebee. After years of blindly obeying her master she had little to show for it, other than a single autographed picture in a golden frame. But without her Nicole fixation which added pizzazz to her daily grind she would be nothing more than a dull but efficient run-of-the-mill drone.

Boogi went to the window and looked down at the terrace; a platform with only a single concrete parapet to guard against a three-mile fall. He opened the window and felt a cool breeze against the sensors on his face. He thought of Dunei, strolling beside the cliff that day. Yes, Dunei had been a bipot with the courage to break the rules but look what he got for it.

Then Boogi noticed Sister Te sitting alone on a marble bench and meditating in her Hood. He prayed to the god of robots that she was still faking it with the cut wire. Suddenly, Aiigo’s hovercraft climbed out of the gauzy orange clouds and sailed toward the garage. Boogi could hear the dome’s metal wedges rumble as they slowly rolled back. Dr. Night had returned.

“Hey, Klooi!” Vagoo shouted. “Stop spying on Sister Te.”

Leaving Vagoo to her chores, Boogi went to the garden and hoed the vegetable patch. He felt guilty pulling up the weeds that were invading the tilled soil. They were a hardy lot, thrusting their tough thistles toward the Sun’s tiny orb and its precious solar nectar. The seeds of their ancestors had stolen rides on the first rockets and didn’t take root until the terraformers went online in the valley.

Suddenly, the bipot sensed the internal alert that notified him when he was summoned. Apparently he was needed in Master Ka’s room. After stepping out of his water-proof overalls, Boogi rode the elevator all the

way up to the abbot's private aerie. The bipot waited in the vestibule for ten minutes before Klooi finally invited him inside. Brother Ka was lying in his briefs on the blue futon with his head propped up on a stack of pillows. A dozen extra-long stainless-steel pins were stuck in his wrinkled skin at various strategic points. Beside him sat the always cheerful Brother Li, an acupuncturist by trade.

"Hello Boogi," Ka said with a groan. "I've not been well today. Brother Ub poisoned me with brandy last night and I still haven't recovered. Have you seen that dreadful man?"

Boogi said he hadn't.

"The wretch is probably snoring in peace while I lay here suffering. Anyway, tonight I want dinner served out on the terrace. The good doctor's mad about the view and if we throw in the Milky Way he'll really go bananas. Make sure that Aiigo brings out enough heating balls."

Boogi bowed and was preparing to depart when everything stopped. When he came to Ka was walking toward the north balcony, fully dressed in an embroidered blue robe. Brother Li and his needles were gone. Only Klooi remained.

Obviously Boogi had been paused. "What happened?" he asked. But he already knew the answer.

Ka stood silhouetted against the orange sunset outside. "I'm sorry Boogi," he said. "It was an accident. I meant to call Brother Ub and paused you by mistake. You may go."

Klooi followed Boogi to the elevator and waited outside as the doors closed. "Hope you enjoyed your slumber," he said coldly. "Next time you won't wake up."

It turned out to be a perfect evening for dinner under the stars. All night long the Milky Way's celestial chorus twinkled a merry tune while Japanese lanterns swayed in a gentle breeze, illuminating each table with kaleidoscopic pools of light. Over a dozen tungsten heating balls floated above the monks' heads, keeping them warm. Brother Li was seated at the head table in gratitude for his acupuncture. He quietly beamed at his colleagues, proud of his new position in the world. This time Dr. Night sat next to Te on Master Ka's right, with Ub on the left. Boogi couldn't stop spying on the married couple as they exchanged small talk and tentative smiles. He was mystified by Te's thaw and wondered if she was just being polite.

Unlike the previous evening, the conversation flowed easily and the air was filled with the sound of laughter. The three-course meal included truffled red asparagrapes with a yellow wine mousseline, warm smoked salmon with sun-dried peachatoes in jelly, and because Ub was rehearsing, crunchy cherryfruit, preserved and raw. But Ub was famished after sleeping all day. As soon as he sat down he helped himself to three servings of asparagrapes. Vagoo noticed the oversized heap on his plate and quickly moved the serving bowls out of his reach.

For most of the evening Boogi dodged his titanium nemesis, Klooi. The little chef was sure that the pause was no accident because it had lasted for a long time. But why did Ka do it? He had done nothing to deserve it. As Boogi worked his way down the table filling goblets with wine he read Ka's lips.

"Doctor, you may get to see a sandstorm yet," he said. "During my meditation I received a NIMBUS bulletin. The alert's only a level two, but that could change on a dime."

"I wouldn't worry," Ub said with an air of superiority. "My nose is dry and up to now it's been an infallible gauge."

"Then we should really watch out," Ka said, "because your gauge is usually wrong."

Later, while Boogi was serving the cherryfruit tarts, Ub summoned him to his side. The little chef, expecting a thumbs down for the low-cal dessert, was pleasantly surprised when the monk proceeded to give it raves. "If this is a diet dessert," he said, "then I'm definitely signing up for more." Boogi thanked him and was about to move on, when Ub stopped him and said, "Wait. I've got some good news. You remember my nephew, Gabe Beamer, whom I raised from afar?"

Boogi nodded and said, "Of course I do. You put him through the finest schools, like the Comet Chasers Boys Academy and the Rich Strike Lunar Flight School. Is he still a pilot for Trans Worlds Spacelines?"

"Yes, for almost a decade. Three years ago he started flying the Moon Europa Callisto route and I haven't seen him since. But that's about to change because he's on vacation *and* he wants to pay me a visit." Ub was so happy he had to wipe tears from his eyes. "Also, he says he's been offered a promotion, although it's a total hush-hush and he can't talk about it yet."

“That’s wonderful news,” Boogi said. He noticed Klooi staring at him from the other side of the table. “Oops, I gotta run,” he said, “The spy’s breathing down my neck again.”

Ub grabbed the bipot’s arm and said, “Might I have seconds? After all, it’s a low-cal dessert.”

“Okay,” Boogi said, relenting. “But you better not tell Vagoo.”

The dinner ended at nine but it was close to midnight before the wine-soaked monks finally abandoned their crumb littered tables. One by one they staggered up the terrace steps, groggy phantoms in search of their beds. After the last robe slipped through the doorway the bipots came out, scrambling down the steps like wooden soldiers rolling out of a cuckoo clock. Boogi and Vagoo cleared off the tables at a robot’s pace, which is almost too fast to see. Then they made five round trips in five minutes flat while transporting dirty dishes to the kitchen. Aiigo fished for the heating balls, pulling them down with a magnetic pole, while Klooi spied on everyone from a balcony facing the terrace. After Boogi folded the tables and put them away he rushed upstairs to find Sister Te.

He knocked at her door but there was no answer. Where could she be at this hour? Boogi meant to go up to his room, but instead found himself in the garden searching for Te under the nectarado trees. Her favorite marble bench was empty, its only occupant a fallen leaf. At that moment a cloud drifted over the towers’ spires, blotting out the Milky Way. The robot promptly tripped over a row of Kafowers. “Clumsy bipot,” he grumbled. “Why aren’t you up in your room?” Once his night vision had adjusted to the gloom he hurried down the sloping path between the two towers and stopped at the landing above the terrace. As he scanned the courtyard he noticed two figures leaning against the parapet. They were bundled in dark thermal cloaks.

“Hello, Boogi. Is something wrong?” The voice belonged to Te.

“Please excuse my interruption,” the bipot said, mortified. “I was looking for, um—stray bottles. The master hates it when he finds empty wine bottles on the ground.”

His little white lie made Te laugh. “You’re *so* dedicated,” she said. “I expected you to be upstairs by now.” She turned to the cloaked figure beside her and squeezed their arm. “Norris, allow me to officially introduce you to Boogi, our celebrated chef *and* my favorite robot on Mars.”

The doctor's face was hidden in the shadow of his hood but Boogi recognized his voice. "Your cooking is fabulous," Night said, "I actually look forward to gaining ten pounds."

Encouraged, Boogi crept down the stairs. "Thank you, doctor, he said. "But I didn't do it alone. Vagoo and Aiigo are indispensable."

"And Klooi?"

"Klooi, not so much," Boogi said, throwing him under the bus.

"Boogi could easily win the most valuable robot award," Te said, "if they had one."

"I resent that," Night said with a huff. "After all, Klooi's core is my creation."

"Sorry, but Boogi's got my vote."

The little chef halted at the bottom step. The doctor's tone didn't sound threatening, but he wanted to make sure. "Teri, there you go again," Night complained. "You *know* you're wrong, but you keep barking up the wrong tree. The humanistics are a dying fad, the next antique." Night pulled back his hood and smiled sheepishly at the bipot. "Please excuse us," he said. "We're two entrenched technocrats with opposing views. It's nothing really, just shop talk." He held up an empty wine bottle. "Here you go. Your inspection was not in vain."

The robot took it, recognizing the gesture as a signal for him to go. He bowed, turned away, and hiked up to the kitchen. When he got there, he felt like smashing the bottle over his head but he tossed it in the recycle barrel instead. "Leave the humans to the humans," he muttered, "and stick to your chores."

As Boogi climbed the winding stairs he thought about what he had just seen. Te didn't act like she was afraid at all. She seemed relatively calm sitting next to her husband, as if past events had never taken place. Had she suddenly forgiven him? Her husband didn't seem cruel; in fact Boogi sensed the mannerisms of a man still very much in love. But had he forgiven *her*? Apparently so.

One thing the bipot had learned, with humans anything could happen. Boogi replayed Vagoo's words in his head: *thou shall not mingle in the affairs of humans*. Soon the thought of the black and yellow robot led him to her room. He knocked on her door and waited, hoping that she was awake. When no one answered he peeked inside; the room was dark.

Suddenly he heard a soft moan, gradually rising to a heart-rending wail. Then the wail abruptly stopped and the moan began again, rising from the floor. Looking down, Boogi was shocked to find Vagoo lying on her back in the middle of the room. The little chef entered the room and quickly closed the door. “Vagoo, what happened?” he said. Whatever the malfunction, it sure looked serious.

Boogi rushed to the window with the intention of calling for help. But the terrace was empty and Te and her husband were gone. As Vagoo continued to whine and groan Boogi bent over her and repeatedly called her name.

Finally she raised her hand and pointed to the bureau. “Look,” she whispered. “It’s gone. Why did they take it? Why?”

Boogi noticed that the framed portrait of Nicole was missing. “Who took it?” he said, as he grabbed Vagoo’s hands and helped her sit up.

“I don’t know,” she said. “When I came back from turning down the beds it was gone. Nobody knew about it but Klooi and you. I want it back.” She started to moan again.

“We know that I wouldn’t take it, so that leaves Klooi. But why would he do such a dastardly act?”

“Who knows? Maybe Ka doesn’t want us to collect stuff anymore because he’s worried it’ll get out of hand.”

“But that picture was a gift,” Boogi said. “It wasn’t his to take.”

“The frame wasn’t mine. It belongs in storage.”

“Then Klooi should have left you the photo. Klooi had no right to take it.”

“But I’m just a clunky old housekeeper. I have no rights,” Vagoo said.

Boiling with outrage, Boogi helped Vagoo get back on her feet. Seven days a week the poor housekeeper worked like a slave to make her masters comfortable and what did she get for it? Nothing, except for a tiny room with a solitary cinema pad in her bureau. Boogi decided the time for diplomacy had passed. “I’m ready to rip off Klooi’s shiny titanium head,” he said.

“No! Please, no violence,” Vagoo pleaded, blocking the door.

“But I want that little monster to return the photo right now.”

“Don't talk like that. Master will delete you. Nicole isn't that important.”

Boogi relented and gave her a big hug. “You scared me to death,” he said. “I thought your core had crashed.”

“I'm sorry,” Vagoo said. “When I saw that she was gone I just went to pieces. Boogi, please don't rip off anyone's head. I don't want you deleted. One Klooi is enough”

When Boogi was satisfied that Vagoo had calmed down enough to start her downtime, he left her alone. But he didn't return to his room. Prompted by a restless melancholy, the robot bolted down the spiral stairs and out through a back door into the garden. He halted under the nectarado trees and looked up at the shimmering river of stars. Northwards, the endless sand dunes swelled in overlapping shadows like ripples in a pond, and Boogi's favorite red light flashed in four second intervals atop the distant air containment tower.

Suddenly he understood why he felt so lonely; it was from resisting the beacon's call. Tonight the blinking light seemed irresistible, with every pulse reminding him of Nicole. Should he pay her a visit? Only if he could return before he was missed, or no later than 6 AM.

Despite the inner red flags that were popping up like toasters, Boogi tiptoed over to the garage and slipped inside. As he crept past the repair bay Boogi discovered a motionless Aiigo asleep on his feet with a wrench in his hand. Evidently, the big ant's core had triggered a new downtime session before he could get to his room. The bipot had to walk around the landing pad to get to his destination: the storage bay, or as Aiigo liked to call it, hoarders' heaven. After he had inspected all the gizmos and doodads (including a jar full of ball bearings), Boogi selected the right gravitron for his weight and strapped himself in. Then he rushed up the stairs and out the door.

The bipot walked a good distance before he was certain that the monks wouldn't be awakened by the sound of the gravitron. Heading north, he walked along the winding stone path until it disappeared under the first sand dune. From there, he hiked over a long succession of dunes and left behind a tell-tale trail of footprints. Hopefully the morning breeze would shift enough sand to fill the gaps and make them disappear. As he trudged up and down each hill, Boogi's round honeycomb eyes glowed in the dark. If someone had seen

him they would have said, “Where’s that crazy robot going? He’s in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.”

But nowhere was exactly where Boogi wanted to go. As he marched under the stars he whispered to himself, “Sweet dreams, Vagoo. Soon you’ll have a new autographed portrait.”

After he had walked for approximately one mile, the bipot pushed a button and shot into the sky. It only took him a few seconds to soar above the manufactured air and into the thin Martian troposphere. The gravitron’s motor buzzed like an alarm bell as he hurtled toward his destination. At his current altitude Boogi could see the entire air containment tower from the ground up. The flashing beacon that was visible from Poowhi was merely the highest of five red lights blinking in sequence.

As he approached the massive steel tower, Boogi slowed down and descended feet first. He could tell when he had reentered the manufactured air because it swirled past his aluminum cladding and buffeted his sensors with a frigid blast. His foot pads tingled as he dropped through a thick dark cloud of icy dust. For a moment everything was pitch black and then he broke through the bottom of the cloud. The bipot almost smashed into a huge crossbeam as he swooped down into the tower’s interior. As he slowed his descent he could see massive steel girders sloping outwards on all four sides, supported by crisscrossing beams that increased in size as he approached the ground. Every section of the tower was enormous; the crossbeams were fastened together with rivets as big as his head. The last beacon disappeared into a curling swath of mist as Boogi glided under a latticed arch and prepared to land. He aimed for a small crater that was nestled between two of the tower’s giant legs. Strange pulsating lights emanated from within the rocky bowl.

The bipot guided the gravitron onto a rocky crag to the west of the crater. He landed with such a jolt, his knees gave out and he sat down hard. After he turned off the motor, he rose to his feet and felt for dents. There were none, thank goodness. Relieved, the robot climbed to the top of a gravelly knoll. Standing on tiptoe, he tried to see into the crater but his view was blocked by a pile of boulders. Their silhouettes stood in sharp contrast to the shifting array of glowing lights: red, purple, pink, and blue. At one point a green laser beam rose straight up through the tower and into the stars.

But what about those strange sounds? The crater reverberated with clangs, dings, and bongs, followed

by shouts and the pounding of a drum. Curious, Boogi slid down the hill and climbed up another incline toward the crater's lip. As he jumped from stone to stone he was careful not to slip and fall. Even so, by the time he reached the craggy ledge he was completely coated with a fine layer of dust. Hopping onto the last boulder, he slipped out of the gravitron and put it aside. Then he crouched down on all fours and peered inside the crater.

“Oh, Vagoo,” he said to himself. “I wish you were here.”