

Chapter Twelve

The crater was about forty feet deep with steep slopes on every side. The bottom had been filled in, leveled, and paved with flat granite flagstones. A spacious underground home had been carved into the southern cliff with double French doors opening onto a cantilevered balcony. The balcony's deck was decorated with padded chairs, mahogany tables, and enormous red and black orchids in sandstone urns. The rest of the crater was jampacked with robots of every shape and size, with all eyes glued to a circular stage jutting out from the northern cliff. Each and every bipot, tripot, rollerbot, and airbot was enthralled by the live performance onstage. As Boogi took it all in, he noticed that the pulsating colors were spillover from the overhead spotlights above the stage. Follow spots beamed down on the actors from a scaffold attached to the balcony. The back of the stage was covered by a shimmering bronze curtain that hid a small orchestra of robot musicians.

Boogi recognized two of the actors on stage: Nicole and Laloose. Nicole wore a bright red gown with a bell-shaped overskirt, V-shaped bodice, ruffled collar, and long puffy sleeves. Her hair was hidden under an elaborate French hood and veil. Laloose's costume was double quadruple extra-large, with a fancy doublet and ruffled collar, a velvet fur lined cape, and pumpkin-shaped pantaloons. A jewel encrusted scabbard (with a rubber sword) hung from his leather belt. Two small bipots stood upstage, dressed in similar fashion. Boogi guessed that they were the 060AAA series, a few inches shorter than himself.

Suddenly, Laloose pulled the sword out of his scabbard and held it above his head. Prancing downstage, he began to shout a soliloquy. The mechanized audience drew back as he waved the sword in their direction. Upstage, the pint-sized courtiers struck a pose with their hands clutching the hilt of their swords. Boogi thought they looked ridiculous in their pantaloons and capes. But Nicole was serious business; the perfect embodiment of her majesty the queen. As she followed Laloose around the stage her petticoats crinkled and crackled under her voluminous skirt. At one point she pulled out a fan of black feathers and

slapped each of the courtiers on the head. Then, as she chased Laloose downstage, her hoop skirt knocked them both off their feet. Suddenly, the crater went dark, leaving a single spotlight on Nicole. Laloose froze with his sword still in midair.

Boogi inched closer, listening in rapt attention as the great actress spoke. “Dear husband and king,” she said, “does thou think of me as a gibbering old fool spouting nonsense, or as an addled mind harboring sparrow nests? Nay, the only fool here is you! You who heed the false counsel of these consorts of evil, your dear brothers. Please, don’t let them poison your thoughts with self-doubt and cunning half-truths, so that you turn away from the only salvation; our blessed NIMBUS. Ha! They only want your head on a platter and your blood in a goblet to swig. Please dear husband, cut off their heads first. Do not lend your ear to their wicked patter. Listen to me, o’ king. Your brothers will betray you.”

The reaction of the audience was swift and vocal. A loud chorus of boos and shouts of “no!” filled the crater. Nicole’s queen fluttered her fan furiously as if vexed by this response. Gradually, the crowd calmed down and became silent as another spotlight bore down on Laloose. Unfortunately for Boogi, the cyclops’ vocal range wasn’t loud enough to reach his rock. Frustrated, the little chef crawled even closer to the ledge and cupped both hands behind his ears. The only lines he heard were “Cease woman! Your cunning words can’t seduce me anymore. How dare you turn me against my loving brothers. Has it really come to this?”

Boogi listened spellbound as Nicole replied in a crystal-clear voice that leaped across the crater like a panther. “So,” she said, mocking Laloose, “You choose to ignore your faithful wife’s warnings? The same poor woman who still prostrates herself over our dead child’s crypt; without missing one day of mourning in two score years? Will you really deny me the one care in the world still left to me, your protection? Alas, you leave me no choice...”

Seizing a dagger from her blouse, Nicole held it up with the point toward her heart. A collective outcry rose up from the audience as Laloose rushed to the queen’s side and tried to extract the rubber knife from her fist. At the same time the courtiers rushed downstage with their capes flowing behind them. As they jumped up and down Nicole held the blade out of reach, but Laloose was easily tall enough to grab it. Unfortunately, the cyclops tugged on the queen’s grip with such force he plunged the dagger into his stomach by mistake.

Instantly, Nicole let out a blood curdling scream. Clutching her French hood in horror, she fell back and collapsed in the arms of the bipots. As they lowered her to the deck, Laloose staggered upstage and pulled the knife from his belly. He cried out but his final words were lost in the pandemonium. Each and every robot leaped to their feet (if they had feet) and hooted and hollered. Even Boogi stood up, transfixed.

Laloose, in the throws of death, staggered around the stage until he fell on his knees and collapsed. The brothers left Nicole lying on her back and rushed to the king's side. "Dear brother!" they lamented. "Oh, what a terrible day!" From the orchestra pit a gong began to toll.

Overcome with excitement, Boogi took one step too many and toppled over the ledge. With a clang, bang, clang, he rolled down the steep slope toward the crater's floor. As he bounced from rock to rock, the spotlights spun around like a kaleidoscope and the mournful beat of a drum pounded in his ears. When Boogi finally landed on the flagstones with a crash, the drumming abruptly ceased and he looked up, thoroughly embarrassed. The bipot would have apologized for interfering but he completely blacked out before he had the chance.

When Boogi came to, his internal clock told him that an hour had passed. He was stretched out on a red chaise lounge with his chest panel open and his dome removed. An old man with a bald head and red suspenders was bending over him. A white handlebar mustache and thick rimless glasses completed the friendly face.

Boogi tried to sit up but the strange man pushed him back and said, "Wait. I'm not quite done. I suppose you haven't seen spectacles before." When Boogi shook his head, he said, "I know they're a bit archaic, but I fancy archaic things. I'm from the *old* school. You can call me Moe."

Moe reached into a black leather satchel and pulled out a microprobe. He plugged it into a socket inside Boogi's head and tested the data disks, causing the bipot to see a yellow bar, and then an orange one. "What color do you see now?" Moe asked.

"Purple, green, and now blue."

"Much better." The old man stepped aside to reveal Nicole and the two mini bots standing nearby.

They were no longer in costume.

Nicole smiled and said, “Laloose *is* purple,” she said, “and Geeta is green, Zoobie is blue. Boogi, I believe you’re on the mend.”

Moe handed Boogi a business card and attached the metal dome to the little chef’s head. “Actually, you’re as good as new,” he said, “except for the dents. I can fix those later, but not tonight. It’s much too late and we humans need to go to bed. My number’s on the back so your master can give me a call.”

Boogi scanned the words on the front of the card: *Dr. Moe Moonspanker, PhD. Robotics Specialist for hire, License 0895A72. No appointments before noon.* While Moe was helping him to his feet, Nicole said, “That was quite a fall you took. I could hear it from the stage. Thank goodness Moe was here to provide first aid.”

The actress caressed Boogi’s arm like a pet owner would stroke the fur of their cat. Now that he had the chance, the bipot took a good long look at her spectacular lavender eyes. Even though they were now the eyes of an old woman, they still possessed the same magnificent intensity that had made her a star. Suddenly, the bipot realized that someone else had similar eyes: Sister Te. Even though there was a forty-year difference in age, their eyes exhibited the same rich hue.

“I want to apologize,” Boogi said, “for disrupting your play.”

Nicole laughed and said, “No worries. *Mortalo* is a dreadful play, but we do it because it’s very, very popular. And any who, you rolled in after the finale. Your tumble was a fitting coda.”

Boogi noticed that the crater was now empty and the stage was dark. Laloose was collecting the heating balls that were floating above the stage.

“Where did everybody go?” Boogi asked.

“Home,” Nicole replied. “Wherever home is.”

Moe shut his doctor’s bag and snapped his fingers. Immediately a tiny airbot, no bigger than a canary, flew from its perch on the railing and hovered above the bald man’s head. It had ruby-red eyes, a vinyl beak for a mouth and solar panels for wings. A tiny gravitron buzzed inside its belly, providing locomotion.

“Come along Schatzi,” Moe said. “It’s time to go home.” He waited for it to land on his shoulder and

then he hobbled down the stairs to a shabby hovercraft jalopy.

“Wait!” Boogi said. “When you send the bill to Poowhi write ‘attention Brother Ub.’”

“There is no bill,” the doctor said. “Just be careful from now on.”

“Thank you,” Boogi said with relief. “You’ve saved me from a lot of explaining.”

“Good! The less explaining, the better.” Moe flopped down in the driver’s seat and gestured to Nicole.

“Forgive me, my dear. I don’t mean to be rude. It’s my memory, as usual. I met to thank you for a wonderful dinner.”

Nicole responded with a disapproving flick of her hand. “You needn’t thank me for anything” she said.

“After all that you’ve done for us? Please!” She paused, then said, “Moe, is Boogi suitable?”

Moe looked the bipot up and down and said, “I think so. He seems like a nice gentlebot.” After a bang and a pop, the beat-up old hovercraft sputtered to life. As it rose into the air, Nicole and her mini bots waved goodbye.

“Adjö, Moe,” she said. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Schatzi’s scarlet eyes glared at them as her master waved back. Soon the buzzing hovercraft disappeared behind the lip of the crater and a quiet solitude filled the air. Boogi figured that it was time for him to leave too. “Thank you, Nicole,” he said. “I hate to say goodbye, but now’s as good a time as any.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” she commanded. “Let me introduce you to our little family. You’ve already met Laloose.” The purple Cyclops stood on the flagstones with his face level with the balcony’s orchids. Feeling brave, Boogi reached over the railing and patted Laloose on the head. The big bipot’s ‘eye’ responded with a burst of purple incandescence that pulsed like a strobe light.

“I hope that means he likes me,” Boogi said, bemused.

Nicole embraced the mini bots and said, “May I introduce Zoobie and Geeta. They played brothers tonight even though Geeta’s a girl.” The green bipot curtsied.

“I’m the boy,” Zoobie chirped. “Glad to have you aboard. Lately we’ve had a shortage of recruits.”

“Not so fast,” Geeta said. “He hasn’t been recruited yet.”

“Are you talking about Nicole’s fan club?” Boogi asked. “I happen to know someone who would love

to join. In fact, she's the reason I'm here."

Nicole took hold of his hand and led him over to a table under a big red umbrella. Adhering to protocol, he pulled out a chair for everyone else before sitting down. "Thank you," Geeta said, with a voice like windchimes, "you really are a gentle bot."

"I know umbrellas on Mars are superfluous," Nicole said as she sat down, "but I like them for the ambiance. I can pretend we're at the beach."

The little chef decided to get right down to business. "My co-worker's name is Vagoo," he said. "You might remember her from the other day. She's probably your biggest fan."

"Ah yes, the bipot who looks like a bumblebee. I sent her an autographed headshot."

"Well, someone stole it and it broke her heart. Could you perhaps give her a new one?"

"Of course," Nicole said. "But I hope you've told Brother Ka about this theft. I thought his monks were an honest bunch."

"Vagoo and I think a bipot swiped it," Boogi said. "His name's Klooi and he's Dunei's replacement. But he's not like us. Master Ka gave him a NIMBUS core."

"How dreadful."

"Master Ka doesn't think robots should have possessions. After Vagoo showed off your photo we think Klooi took the matter into his own hands and confiscated the possession."

"The nerve," Nicole said. "If he's a NIMBUS clone I'm not surprised that he's a thief. And no possessions? Your master's an Ebenezer Scrooge and we know who to blame for that. You won't find a single Hood in this house." Reverting to her native tongue, she said, "Hoods are verboten in das haus von Nicole."

Boogi was silent while pondering Nicole's remarks. If she detested NIMBUS then Te wasn't that unique after all.

"I've always been anti-NIMBUS," the actress said, "and I've been blacklisted for it."

"What's that?" Boogi said.

"The higher-ups have a committee that investigates anyone who criticizes NIMBUS, and that would be me. After dragging my name through the muck, they charged me with subversive activities and my career was

over the next day. That’s when I moved here.”

While Nicole talked about the boycott, Laloose pushed a cart out onto the balcony and began serving tea. When he placed a cup in front of Boogi the bipot wondered if Nicole had gone mad.

Nicole noticed his consternation and laughed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I forget you come from a life of neglect. Here we serve tea to our metallic friends who have sensors on their fingers.”

“We got taste buds too,” Zoobie said, as he dipped a finger in his cup. “Moe installed ‘em.”

Geeta followed suit. “Try it,” she said. “It’s made from nectarados imported from Poowhi.”

Boogi felt like he was living the electronic dream. Here he was, a humble servant, having nectarado tea with a movie star. If only Vagoo could see him now. Nicole dropped three ice cubes into her teacup. “Some like it hot,” she said. “But I like it cool. I hope you enjoy it. Geeta created this blend. She’s a big fan of your nectarados, which are hard to come by FYI. It contains caffeine, my downfall, and the main reason I stay up for half the night. But it’s worth every minute of insomnia.” She savored another sip of her tea.

Boogi hesitated, and then placed a finger in his cup. He was pleasantly surprised. His sensors luxuriated in the fruity buttery taste. “This is really good,” he said. “Geeta, you must be the cook in this house.”

“No, that’s Zoobie’s job,” she said. “But I make the teas. I sort of fell into it. As you can see, we have a balcony full of night blooming orchids. But night bloomers last for only a week and then they wilt. One day I decided to wrap them in wax paper and let them dry between the pages of Nicole’s books.”

“It got so I couldn’t open a book without an orchid falling out,” Nicole said.

Geeta nodded and said, “One night a breeze blew a wilted orchid into Nicole’s tea. She drank it anyway. Since I was running out of books I thought, *why not?* So I shredded all of the crushed orchids, stored them in jars, and voila! Today I’ve got a nice little business selling crushed orchids to tea connoisseurs.”

Boogi was enchanted. “Can I try some?” he asked.

Laloose immediately dropped a tea bag into a new cup and added hot water. Then he bowed and gave the cup to the little chef.

“This is amazing,” Boogi said. “I bet I could get Ub to drink more of this and eat less food.”

“Is he your favorite monk?” Zoobie asked.

“He was until Sister Te came along. She’s wonderful, and a lot like you, Nicole. You both respect robots. I wish there were more humans like that. Too bad you don’t have children.”

A momentary veil of despair passed over Nicole’s face. “My robots are my family,” she said. “They’ve stood by me through thick and thin.”

“She rescued us,” Zoobie said, patting her on the hand. “I used to be a legless robot bolted to an assembly line. For fifty years I labored in a space suit factory, shining boots. Now look at me.” He proudly raised both of his feet.

“I was on the auction block when Nicole came along,” Geeta added. “My only bid was from a scrap dealer. He wanted to melt me down for my titanium.”

“Most robots have a tough life,” Boogi said glumly. “I suppose I’m lucky to be a servant at Poowhi. I’d rather work for Ka than have my head hanging from a wire at the swap meet.”

“A small premium at best,” Nicole said with a sip of her tea.

Boogi turned to the purple cyclops and said, “Laloose, it looks like you’re a word processor by trade. There’s a printer slot in your belly.”

Without saying a word, Laloose slipped a finger under the slot and pulled. Boogi heard a click and then a hidden panel popped open, revealing a pintsized orange bipot nestled inside. The baby bot sat in its secret compartment like a chicken in an egg, with two fiber-optic tubes running from its bulbous eyes to the circular lens looping around the host bipot’s head. Its tiny mouth spoke into a microphone. “I was originally a terra former repairbot,” it said. “I sealed cracks in the exhaust funnels.”

After he spoke, Laloose quickly closed the panel. “You’ll have to excuse him,” Zoobie said. “Laloose is shy and likes to hide inside his shell. The only time he’s an extrovert is when he’s acting.”

“Laloose, you’re definitely not a word processor,” Boogi said, “which just goes to show you can’t judge a book by its cover.” He settled back in his chair but kept his finger in the teacup. “I wish I lived here. I’ve never felt this content before.” He froze, and then kicked himself for putting Nicole on the spot.

“You’re not the only bipot I would love to buy,” she said sadly. “But thanks to the blacklist, I can’t

adopt anymore bots. That's partly why I built our stage; to attract robots. Even when our theatre's dark we frequently entertain guests. I host a divine robots' salon."

"It's not that easy for me to get here," Boogi confessed. "I had to sneak out tonight."

"Is Poowhi a prison?" Geeta asked. "I thought a monastery was supposed to be a spiritual place."

"It is for humans," Zoobie said. "But Poowhi worships NIMBUS, which teaches them to treat robots like slaves. Hoods are the only electronics that get any respect. The monks even build Hoods for the poor. Can you imagine? A starving man needs food on his plate, not a Hood."

"Enough," Nicole said. "You're filling our guest's head with dangerous ideas."

"It doesn't matter," Boogi said. "Vagoo thinks it won't be long before we're deleted and turned into Kloois." Seeing that the hour was late, he rose from his chair. "Thanks for your hospitality. If I don't get back soon Ka will delete me sooner than I think." The bipot felt a surge of apprehension as he prepared to go. Would he ever see his new friends again? The happy lives that he had glimpsed tonight seemed like a cruel joke. For all he knew his future had only one destination: the deletion chair.

"There *is* a way out," Nicole said under her breath. "It's risky but the alternative is unacceptable."

"Is it a patch?" Boogi asked. "Aiigo thinks they're risky. The police scanners can usually find them."

"It's been called a patch, but the protection I offer is different. A patch is a microchip embedded in your circuits, or a software virus that infects one spot. This is an encryption that is scattered over your entire core and the key is hidden in a secret location. Once it's activated your master won't be able to pause or delete you. But that protection comes with a caveat. As soon as he discovers that you're immune he'll try to destroy you, in which case you'll have to flee and find the rebels."

Boogi was astonished when he heard his voice say, "Where can I get one?"

"First, you must stipulate that you'll never speak about this to anyone. NIMBUS employs many Kloois, some that you would never even suspect."

When Boogi promised to zip his lip, Geeta said, "All you have to do is visit Chasmae Point on any given night. Someone will come for you at the stroke of midnight."

"It seems too easy," Boogi said,

“I warn you it’s not,” Nicole cautioned. “You better make sure that you’re not followed. Master Ka mustn’t know that you’re gone. The rebels are depending on it.”

Boogi found the prospect of becoming a rebel unsettling. Being a wanderer was bad enough, but this? Already he was getting cold feet. “I’m really not the rebel type,” he said. “Maybe I better talk to Te first.”

Nicole held up a finger and said, “Now Boogi, remember; you can’t even confide in your friends.”

Geeta and Zoobie excused themselves and entered the house. When they returned they had presents for Boogi. Geeta handed him a tin box full of tea while Nicole autographed the head shot that Zoobie had placed in front of her.

“Vagoo should like this one,” she said. “It’s from *Anna Neutronica*. A real weeper.” She gave the photograph to Boogi. “Adjö, gentle bot, and have a safe trip home. Remember, next week we’re presenting *NIMBUS No More*. It’s another crowd favorite.”

“Goodbye,” Boogi said with a heavy heart. “Every evening for years I’ve watched the blinking light above your crater. Little did I know it was my lucky star.”

When the little chef had climbed to the top of the crater he turned around and looked back. The spotlights above the French doors cast elongated shadows across the crater’s floor. Nicole and her servants waved from the balcony’s railing, and then, one by one, they walked away and disappeared inside the house. Geeta was the last to go in. As the spotlights faded to black the veil of stars above the containment tower brightened. Southward, Phobos gleamed near the horizon, guiding the reluctant robot back home. As his internal clock struck three, Boogi strapped on his gravitron and turned it on. As he flew into the air he vowed to stay at Poowhi for as long as Te was there, even if he was patched. The likelihood of Ka pausing him in the near future seemed remote, and even if he did Boogi could pretend to freeze. Heading south, Boogi felt a sudden increase in speed as a tailwind gave him a boost. Looking back, he noticed that the blinking lights were fading beneath a surging cloud of dust.

The turbulence kept tugging at his precious cargo so the bipot slowed down. He also climbed to a higher altitude in order to avoid the churning black curtain that was now covering half the sky. But the

downdrafts were making it difficult to maintain a steady course and at one point a strong gust almost knocked the tea box out of his hands. Soon he couldn't even see Phobos anymore because it had disappeared behind the thick swirling powder. After he plunged a thousand feet in another violent downdraft he dropped toward the ground and touched down. According to his GPS the towers of Poowhi were only a mile away, but Boogi couldn't see anything past a hundred feet. Before long the torrents of blowing sand had overwhelmed the sensors in his titanium cladding and contaminated his vision with static snow. Then, before he knew it, his legs were buried up to his knees.

“Drats!” he said to himself. “I’m stuck in a sandstorm.”

Keeping the tea box and photograph pressed tightly against his chest, Boogi waded through the shifting sand. With each step he raised his foot as high as he could, but by the time he stepped down his leg was buried again. Soon the microscopic rocks would penetrate his joints and the protective screens over his mouth and ears. Clogged with dust, he would eventually grind to a halt when his software crashed.

Leaning into the wind, Boogi fought his way through the gushing air. The particles pummeling his sensors felt like stinging bees. Twice he fell and twice he pushed himself up with one hand. Finally a powerful zephyr tossed him headfirst into a dune. At the same time it sucked the photograph into the roaring vortex. Boogi shouted curses as he staggered to his feet, but the storm was not finished. After knocking him down again it ripped the tea box out of his hands.

“Help me!” Boogi cried. “Vagoo! Aiigo!” The foolish bipot should have turned on his transponder but he didn't want Ka to find out where he was. By now his limbs had become sluggish, a sign that his hydraulic valves were packed with dirt. Each time he raised his foot it felt heavier and harder to control.

Filled with desperation, Boogi dropped to his knees and began to crawl. Suddenly, a rock grated against his knees and the rough surface of a boulder scratched his fingers. Like a shipwrecked survivor, the little chef slithered over the solid granite in search of higher ground. As he snaked his way into a crevice the blowing sand ricocheted off his titanium cladding.

Satisfied that he had found a semblance of shelter from the storm, he collapsed and allowed his joints to lock. As the storm howled around his ears Boogi could feel his software crash, and after that, nothing.