

Chapter Thirteen

While Boogi visited Nicole the monks slept in their beds, consoled by the low-level storm warning. But this time Brother Ub's nose was wrong. In the wee hours of the morning everyone was awakened by a tempest of ferocious intensity. Dropping down from the north, a polar front had collided with the warm compressed air of the Marineris basin, spinning the terraformed gases like a top.

Since everyone was sleeping the new warning was overlooked. Around the time that Boogi was flying home Ka was jolted from sleep by the sound of French doors banging against the wall. When he sat up a continuous barrage of sand pelted his face. Instinctively, he tapped his bracelet to turn on the lights but nothing happened; the power was out. *This one's a doozy*, he thought as he stood up and staggered toward the balcony in the dark. Outside, the wind howled like a banshee. Ka's nightshirt was blown as high as his head as he unlatched the steel storm doors and pulled them away from the wall. He yanked at the latches, fighting a suction that pushed and pulled, until the doors finally slammed shut. *What a damn nuisance this is*, he thought. *Where's Klooi when I need him?*

As soon as he sealed the north balcony, the other French doors blew open. "Norris Night, what do you think of Mars now?" Ka shouted, as he leaned into the wind and stumbled out onto the next balcony. During a gap between gusts he pulled the east doors shut and then moved on to the south balcony and the full force of the storm. As the abbot approached the doorway he held up his hands in a futile attempt to shield his face from the airborne granules. During another brief lull he rushed outside, unlatched the steel doors, and pulled them away from the wall. Suddenly, a tremendous gust caught him by surprise and flung him to the floor. As he slid into his futon the south doors slammed shut and locked with a click.

With three down and one to go, Ka crawled toward the west balcony. Sand stuck to his knees and hands as he slithered across the floor like a snake. When he reached the steel door on the left he grasped the latch and pulled himself up. With one eye shut, he peered into the spinning wall of the vortex. It was pitch

black.

At that moment a hand touched his shoulder. Ka turned around and caught a glimpse of two phosphorescent globes swaying back and forth. “It’s about time!” he yelled, as angry as the wind. “Now lend me a hand!”

With Klooi’s help Ka shut the west balcony’s doors, and immediately the roar of the wind quieted down to a menacing drone, although the walls still shook and squeaked. While Klooi fired up a lantern Ka put on an oxygen mask* to counter the plunge in air pressure that usually occurred during a cyclone. The abbot took two deep breaths and then asked in a muffled voice, “Have you seen the doctor? We better make sure he has oxygen.”

“I’ve seen no one except Vagoo,” Klooi replied. “I passed her on my way up.”

“We need to find Brother Ub and do a head count,” Ka said, as he slipped into his daytime robe. After stopping to straighten the bronze crucifix he went into the hall. The elevator was out of service so they took the spiral stairway instead. Klooi held the lantern aloft as he followed his master downstairs and through an underground tunnel leading to the west tower’s basement. From there they hurried upstairs and into a dining room full of frightened monks in oxygen masks. Ka looked around but saw no sign of Dr. Night or Sister Te.

Ub was still dressed in his nightshirt and his feet were bare. “The fabrication hall is sealed,” he announced, talking through his mask. “Vagoo’s lips fell off in the mayhem and she’s still looking for them. Aiigo took the tunnel to the garage. I imagine he’s sealed all those doors by now. I haven’t run across Boogi yet.” When Ka asked about Night and Te, Ub was in a quandary. “Now where could *they* be?” he said, perplexed. “I haven’t run into either one of them. BTW, I took a nasty tumble on the stairs.” He pointed to a bandaged toe. “Thank goodness I landed on my tush and not my noggin.”

“What’s the difference?” Ka said with a sneer. After Ub did another head count the abbot snatched two lanterns and gave them to Klooi. “Follow me,” he said. “We must find our VIP. Brother, you can start the damage patrols, but make sure everyone travels in pairs. Oh, and put something on your feet.” At that moment the storm doors shook violently, testing their locks. Here and there puffs of dust burst through the cracks. The

*These masks had a small cigar-shaped, solid oxygen tank attached to the chin piece.

ceiling creaked.

“Here come my allergies,” Ub said with a snort. “And I’m out of allergy pills.”

Ka pushed him aside and rushed up the spiral stairs, heading for the guest suites. Klooi followed with a lantern hanging from each fist and as they circled around each floor the abbot could feel the tower sway in the wind. Suddenly he heard a voice coming from the floor above. Ka stopped and grabbed Klooi’s arm. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes. I believe it’s Sister Te.”

“Quick, extinguish the lanterns!”

As the two conspirators crouched in the dark, Te’s voice said, “Don’t be such a baby, Norris. It’s only the wind.”

“Shut up,” Night replied. “If I had known Mars would be this inhospitable I never—.”

“You shut up. You knew about the sandstorms.”

The couple groped the wall as they came downstairs. Night noticed Klooi’s florescent eyes and shouted, “Who goes there?”

Te thought the glowing orbs belonged to Boogi, until Klooi fired up the lanterns. “Oh, it’s you,” she said, disappointed.

“Either Klooi is doing covert reconnaissance, or else you always climb the stairs in the dark,” Night said.

Ka replied, “My apologies. We know these steps so well we forget to turn on our lanterns.” He simulated innocence, but it was concealed beneath his mask. “Anyway, I’m relieved to find you both. Now everyone is accounted for.”

Truth be told, Ka was unsettled finding the two together like this. Since he fancied Te, he saw her husband as a threat, especially when they were both in their bed clothes. Had they been sleeping together when the cyclone hit? Ka gave them oxygen masks and said, “You need to wear these until the terraformers catch up.”

Te slipped hers on, and even though most of her face was hidden Ka could still see her magnificent

violet eyes through her goggles. The abbot was reminded of an angel of war, or a goddess of extermination, demanding immediate surrender. He would have dropped to his knees, but the sight of Night's hand on her shoulder chilled his heart. Maintaining the usual decorum he pointed downstairs and said, "Please, follow us. You'll be safer in the dining hall."

Klooi held the lanterns up in the air while Ka led the way downstairs. The light from the lanterns created long shadows on the steps below. The abbot looked back, checking to see if Night was still grasping his wife's shoulder. He was.

"These masks make us look like robots," Te said. "Klooi looks more human than we do."

"I beg your pardon," Klooi said. "I'm a NIMBUS clone. We aren't tainted by human singularities."

"I said you *look* more human," Te replied. "I know you'll never act like one."

The moment they entered the dining hall the wind suddenly stopped. For over an hour everyone huddled in the middle of the room, waiting for another onslaught. The only sounds were the inhalations of air inside the masks. Before long the patrols came back without any damage to report; just sand here, sand there, sand everywhere.

Finally Ka opened the doors to the terrace, but when he pushed against the outer steel doors they wouldn't budge. Even with the help of two strong monks the doors only opened a crack, but the slit was wide enough to allow sand to pour in. Then Vagoo showed up, still missing her lips and covered with a thick film of red dust. "Master, both towers are sealed," she announced.

"It's a shame the storm's over," he said. "Because now you'll have to unseal them. By the way, where's Boogi?"

"Beats me. I haven't seen Boogi all morning."

Ka decided it was time to summon the bipot. After tapping his bracelet he smiled at Dr. Night. "Severe, but short lived," he said. "Don't worry about the mess; we have plenty of vacuums in house."

The doctor peered through the crack between the doors. A narrow beam of sunlight illuminated his mask. "Fascinating," he said. "Until now I always thought you had dust storms on Mars. Where did all this

sand come from?”

“Here and there,” Ka said. “The cyclone recycles it.” As he watched Night sit down by Te, he came to the realization that he detested the man. But Ka was savvy enough to hide his feelings and perform the duties of a consummate host. He had learned a long time ago that the monastery’s protocols kept him out of trouble. If he veered too far away from them he would eventually self-destruct. Nevertheless, the abbot wished that Te would be as chummy with him as she was with Boogi. Why did she despise his good intentions and scoff at his obvious interest in nurturing her recovery? What a shame the poor girl was so warped by her childhood that she preferred the company of an inferior robot to someone as evolved as himself. And now, to add insult to injury, he had to watch while she and her husband performed a reconciliation dance. Ka wondered if he should remind Te of the vow of celibacy. Even though Poowhi was a monastery it was obvious that her husband had no intention of playing by the rules.

Ka turned to Te and said, “Why don’t you help Brother Ub vacuum the fabrication hall and let me settle our good doctor’s nerves? Once Vagoo gives his suite the once over and he has a warm bath, he’ll forget about our little storm.”

Suddenly the power came back on and the LED candelabras lit up the room. “Hallelujah!” Ub cried. “Now Boogi can start breakfast. Where is he anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Ka said, feeling hungry himself. “I summoned him. He should be here by now.” He glanced at Ub’s bare feet. “I thought I told you to wear your sandals, brother. You look destitute.”

Ub was in a contentious mood. “Saint Francis walked barefoot,” he said.

“Believe me, you’re no saint. Now run along and find your sandals.”

After Ub and Te left the room, Dr. Night stood up and fumbled with his mask. “How long do I have to wear this?” he asked impatiently.

“It won’t be long,” Ka replied, secretly amused by the man’s discomfort. “Our terraformers are quite efficient.” He felt around in his pockets. “Looks like I left my air monitor upstairs. I’ll have to go get it.”

Ka was just leaving when Vagoo strutted into the hall. “Boogi’s not in his room,” she announced, “and he’s not in the garden either.”

Dr. Night spoke. “That’s your robot chef, correct? Teri and I saw him late last night. He came out on the terrace while cleaning up. I gave him an empty wine bottle and then off he went.”

“Is that so?” Ka said, more interested in the doctor’s late-night rendezvous with Te than with Boogi’s whereabouts. He glanced with suspicion in the direction of the terrace; the scene of their tryst. Then he summoned Boogi again.

After ten minutes had passed with no sign of the bipot, Ka summoned Aiigo. When the big ant showed up he was covered with a film of fine red dust, just like Vagoo. “Relax. Everything’s under control,” he said.

"Have you seen Boogi?"

“Nope. But oh boy, wait until he sees the garden. It really got thrashed.” Aiigo noticed that something was missing on Vagoo’s face. “Girl, you look terrible,” he said. “What happened?”

Vagoo shook her fist and was about to speak but Ka beat her to it. “Settle down, you two,” he said. “I want you both to keep an eye out for Boogi. His transponder is off so I can’t locate him.”

“Gotcha,” Aiigo said. As he left the room he pointed at Vagoo’s truncated face and giggled.

Ignoring Vagoo’s humiliation, Ka turned to Klooi and said, “I’m afraid your hiatus is over, my friend. Since Boogi’s MIA, you’ll need to step up and help Vagoo in the kitchen. Hopefully four hands will be better than none.” He addressed Dr. Night. “You can take your mask off when you eat, but it will be at your own risk. Who knows what Vagoo will annihilate for breakfast.”

While the housekeeper and Klooi left for the kitchen a handful of monks pushed against the outer steel doors. This time they opened them all the way and a mound of sand poured into the room. Outside the sun was partially hidden by a murky yellow haze and the sound of roaring vacuums filled the air.

Later that afternoon Ka sent out a search party for the missing bipot. Aiigo flew above the sand dunes in the hovercraft, buzzing back and forth over the terrain. Vagoo searched the area beyond the garden using a metal detector set to titanium. After spending nearly two hours hiking over the sand the bumblebee bot was ready to call it quits. “Dear Yaboo*, where could he be?” she said out loud as she started up another steep

*Yaboo is the traditional god of robots.

slope. When she reached the top she sighed and turned around, preparing to head back. Suddenly the detector started to tick. Following the signal, Vagoo trudged down another slope and continued eastward across a huge, almost level, sand drift. With each step the detector ticked faster and louder. Then, as she approached a small outcrop in the sand, the detector began to buzz ferociously. The housekeeper climbed over the rocks until she came upon a pair of wind chiseled boulders that stuck out of the ground like fangs. When she crept between them she found Boogi wedged face down in a crevice. “Please wake up,” she said, as she gently turned him over and pushed the boot button under his chin.

When ten minutes had passed without a response Vagoo decided that it would be futile to wait any longer. Her only hope was to carry Boogi back to the monastery and see if the monks could help. With the tenderness of a mother, the housekeeper scooped the bipot up in her arms and retraced her footprints in the sand. Thanks to Boogi, she knew that Te had a doctorate in robotics. Hopefully the sister had the expertise to reverse the damage, which was probably due to the dreaded MRC (microscopic rock contamination).

By the time Vagoo returned to the monastery the air pressure had returned to normal. Ka was collecting the oxygen masks when the housekeeper burst into the dining hall with the lifeless bipot in her arms. Without saying a word, she took Boogi to the fabrication hall and gently placed him on a table. Both Te and Night had followed her, but it was Te who took charge of the resuscitation, due to her credentials. Night stood by to assist when needed, otherwise he quietly observed her work. First she removed all of the panels in Boogi’s cladding so that his internal components were exposed, then she blew out the loose sand with a compressed air gun. Once that was done she put the gun in reverse and vacuumed Boogi’s interior, being careful not to suck up any solid-state circuitry. When she was satisfied that she had removed all of the loose dirt she proceeded to micro-mop every socket with a melamine swab. The follow-up required painstaking accuracy when reconnecting the plugs, otherwise nothing would work if a wire ended up in the wrong place. For the next hour Te dusted, vacuumed, and sponged Boogi from head to toe. By the time she had finished this phase of the operation the entire household had gathered around the table in a silent vigil.

Ka was the first monk to break the silence when he sniffed the air and sneezed. After wiping his nose

with his monogrammed hankie, he turned to Ub and whispered, “I know we all loved his cooking, but this prayer circle is ridiculous.” The abbot was upset that Boogi’s predicament had distracted his household from what he considered to be an equally important job: vacuuming Hoods. Finally, having reached the end of his rope, he clapped his hands and said, “Everybody back to work. Now!”

Ub protested but Ka was adamant. One by one, the brothers reluctantly sat down at their workstations and began cleaning their Hoods, using the same type of air gun as Te. The abbot ordered Aiigo and Klooi to clear off the terrace with sand blowers, but when he asked Vagoo to report to the kitchen she wouldn’t budge. “I’m sorry, master,” she said, “but I can’t leave Boogi, at least for a little while.” Ka relented, but inwardly he longed for the day when he could delete her again

As Te tested the integrity of Boogi’s core Dr. Night acted as her assistant, frequently handing her the correct probe even before she asked for it. Ka couldn’t help but be impressed as he watched her analyze specific ports, each one an enigma to his untrained eye. Her pretty face radiated a serene confidence as she bent over the bipot’s dismantled frame, searching for anomalies. Chosen for their longevity and affordability, Boogi’s limbs relied on old style hydraulics instead of the more elegant but expensive walk-by-wire systems. Unfortunately, hydraulics were easily incapacitated by sand and Boogi was no exception. The tedious task of flushing his valves now fell on Te, and to nobody’s surprise she performed this procedure with finesse.

Ka was doubly impressed while watching her drain, blow-dry, and refill each valve. Now that he had seen her in action, her obvious accomplishments in the field of robotics made him feel unworthy of her affection. Even though he was proud to be the abbot of Poowhi, he also felt like his accomplishments were minuscule compared to hers. As a result, his secret passion was submerged under a cold wave of shame.

Once Te was confident that she had done all that she could to revive the bipot, she said, “You can summon him now. I hope I didn’t miss anything. The poor guy was chock-full of sand.”

As Vagoo moved closer, Ka tapped his bracelet. When there was no response he tapped it again. Te leaned over the bipot and looked into his dormant honeycomb eyes. Suddenly, a tiny buzzing sound like the purring of a cat reverberated inside his chest. Te smiled with relief and said, “His memory’s loading. He

should be with us in a minute. Boogi? Do you know where you are?” She placed a hand on his head and gently stroked the titanium cladding.

“Is this Poowhi?” he asked.

The housekeeper couldn't restrain herself and said, “What about me! Who am I?”

“Vagoo, of course.”

When the brothers realized that Boogi was awake they stopped working long enough to applaud and cheer. Ka was appalled by this undeserved love fest for a robot who was a potential wanderer. “Where have you been?” he asked coldly, “and why were you outside in the storm?”

“Please Master Ka, now's not the time,” Te said. “His memory's still fragmented.” She held onto Boogi's hands as he sat up and wiggled his toes. When he was assured that his feet were responsive, the bipot slid off the table and stood up. He was wobbly for a moment but after walking around the table a few times he exhibited a healthy spring in his step.

“Boogi!” Ka said, raising his voice. “Why were you outside during the storm?”

The little chef bowed and said, “I was picking asparagrapes for Brother Ub.”

“Picking *asparagrapes* in the middle of a cyclone?”

“Yes, master. I was trying to harvest them before they were punctured by the whirling sand.”

Ka considered this alibi to be dubious at best. He turned to the doctor and sighed. “Here we go again,” he said. “It's that atrocious humanistic software at work.”

Night shrugged but said nothing as Ka gave Boogi a withering look. “Your priorities are all wrong,” he snapped. “The Hoods always come first, and where did you get those dents?”

“I don't know, master. Maybe when the wind knocked me off my feet?” Boogi attempted another servile bow but Te placed her hand on his shoulder to block it

“Enough!” she said. “This robot almost perished and all you care about is a ridiculous Hood. I think *your* priorities are all wrong. Go right ahead. Order him to shovel sand, or even better delete his core and replace it with a Klooi!” As soon as she spoke everyone turned off their vacuums and froze. Overcome with anger, Te shoved the abbot out of her way and stormed out of the room.

“Sister Te, come back!” Ka screeched. He meant to sound stern but his voice sputtered with desperation as his worst-case scenario played out. Not only had Te defied him but Night had witnessed it all. Turning around, the abbot asked Boogi if he was fully operational. When the bipot nodded Ka said, “Then go help Aiigo on the terrace. I’ll deal with you dents, and your core, tomorrow.” After the bipot had left the room Ka attempted some damage control. “Doctor, I hope you don’t get the wrong impression,” he said. “These sandstorms bring out the worst in everyone. Who knows why. Maybe it’s the change in air pressure.”

“You’ve got my sympathy,” Night replied. “Teri’s always had a mind of her own and that’s why I sent her here. But let’s not worry about her just yet. I’ve got a bad feeling about Boogi. I believe there’s more to that bipot than meets the eye.”

This unexpected empathy buoyed Ka’s ego, but Night’s use of Te’s given name grated on his already frazzled nerves. Every time the doctor said *Teri* it was a reminder that he enjoyed an intimacy that Ka envied and desired. Pretending to be calm, the abbot led the way into the tower’s sandstone foyer. “Do you think Boogi’s become a wanderer?” he asked.

Before Night could answer Ub barged through the gothic archway. He was followed by a strange woman and an enormous purple cyclops that had to lower its head to come inside. Ub was in an exuberant mood as he approached; huffing and puffing the terraformed air. “Brother, look who I found in our garden,” he said.

Responding with a world-weary sigh, Ka turned to face a woman of similar age. She was dressed like a man in floppy pants, a knee length coat, and a red beret. Her silver hair was cut short in a blunt bob with bangs, and her eyes were hidden behind a pair of Jackie O. dark glasses. The head monk smiled vacuously. “Let me guess,” he said. “Are you trespassers?”

Ub stamped his foot and said, “Brother! This is Nicole Norr, our neighbor. She was kind enough to drop by to check on our welfare.”

Ka recognized her but played dumb. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” he said. “Welcome to Poowhi. I apologize for all this sand.”

Ub was astonished by the abbot’s pigheaded greeting. “Nicole’s an actress,” he said, fuming. “You

know, like in movie star.”

Ka responded with a blank look.

“I guess we *don't* get out much,” Ub said. “Nicole, may I introduce Brother Ka, the head of our order. And this is Dr. Norris Night, from the NIMBUS Foundation.”

“I recognized you,” Night said, as he politely kissed her hand. “I’m thrilled to meet you. *The Library of Lotta Lo* is in my top ten.”

“Charmed,” Nicole said, as she took off her dark glasses. “I’m glad somebody likes it. I don’t remember much about the production except that I caught a nasty cold after a weeklong shoot in a bikini.”

Ka covertly examined Nicole’s famous lavender eyes. They reminded him of someone else, but he couldn’t remember who. Following Night’s lead, he said, “Please forgive me. Brother Ub’s correct. I don’t get out much. But now that I think of it, I believe you used to visit Sister Mo.”

“Actually Mo visited *me*,” Nicole said. “I only came here once to attend her funeral. What a dear she was. Mo knew everything about Mars; the craters, the volcanoes, the polar ice caps, and least we forget, the treacherous Chasma Point.” She smiled at Ub when she said, ‘Point.’ “It’s a shame Mo was taken from us so soon. I never worried about her bouldering because she had been scaling some of our highest cliffs for a long time. It’s ironic that her last precipice was under Poowhi because that very same canyon was also her first. But at least she died having fun. Such a dear. It was Mo who selected the crater where I built my home.”

“How interesting,” Ka said, feeling nothing of the sort. “I hope your home weathered the storm better than Poowhi. It’s a shame we were asleep when it hit, otherwise we could have been ready. Still, there’s nothing we could have done to prevent *that*.” He nodded at the brothers vacuuming sand outside.

“Any who,” Nicole said, “I wanted to be a good neighbor and drop by on my way into town. This isn’t the first storm since Mo died, but it was unexpected just the same. Are all your robots accounted for?” She glanced around the room as if she were expecting someone.

“Yes, everyone’s here,” Ub said. “No harm done except for poor Vagoo. Her lips fell off.”

“Thank goodness,” Nicole said. “Lips are easily replaced, but a bipot buried in the sand...”

“Woe is me!” Ub said. “I nearly forgot. We almost lost Boogi. He was outside the whole time and his

core crashed.”

“Really? Has he been repaired yet?”

“Of course,” Ka said, feeling miffed. “Our very own Sister Te took care of him at my behest. You see, our robots have always been our most cherished commodity, after Hoods of course. We wouldn’t survive one minute without their loyal service.”

Nicole nodded and said, “A good commodity is hard to come by nowadays.”

“I didn’t lift a finger,” Night said. “Teri’s the robotician in our family. I’m just the software guy.”

When Nicole looked confused Ka explained that Sister Te and Teri were one and the same. “I know that married monks are frowned upon,” he said, “but her credentials were exemplary so we accepted her application on the spot.” The abbot paused, hoping that the doctor would take over. There were still enough unknowns in Te’s history to make him jump at the chance to steer the conversation in her husband’s direction.

“We met during my first year as a professor,” Night said. “She was in my data structures class and I’ll leave it at that. I always wished that she could develop a deeper understanding of NIMBUS and that’s why I sent her here. Brother Ka’s the highest authority in that regard.”

Nicole was coy. “You’re awfully young to be a professor.”

Night chuckled and said, “That’s what Teri thought but I can assure you I’m not. Will you be coming to our banquet next month?”

“Brother Ub invited me,” she said. “As a rule I avoid parties, but Ub is such a dear I just might attend.”

The rotund monk gave Ka an affectionate jab in the ribs. “Did you hear that?” he whispered. “She called me ‘dear.’”

“I wish you’d come,” Night said. “Our symposium’s attended by la crème de la crème. You’ll fit right in. Plus I’ll be there along with a few other boring computer nerds, reinventing the wheel.”

“Ah, the wheel,” Nicole muttered, “which in your case would be NIMBUS, I suppose.” When the doctor gave her the thumbs up she stepped back and said, “I think I’ll do a raincheck. But the banquet might be fun. I suppose the wives will be wearing the latest haute couture.”

At that moment Vagoo rushed through the archway dragging a vacuum behind her. As she rushed up to

the actress her bull-fiddle voice squawked with excitement. “Ms. Nicole!” she said, “I saw your hovercraft so I knew you were here. Remember me? We met at Chasma Point.” The globate housekeeper curtsied like a prima ballerina, completely unaware of anyone else in the hall.

“Of course I remember,” Nicole said, beaming with delight. “You’re my biggest fan.”

Vagoo inched closer and whispered, “Thank you for the photo. You’re an angel in disguise. I put it in a gold—.”

“You know each other?” the puzzled abbot asked.

“Yes, master,” Vagoo said, feeling compelled to confess. “Nicole sent me an autographed picture. I put it in a gold frame that I borrowed from storage, but it disappeared.”

“It disappeared?” Nicole said.

“I didn’t lose it, Ms. Nicole. It just up and disappeared.”

Then it was Boogi's turn to rush in through the archway. Upon seeing Nicole, he instantly froze.

Nicole smiled at him. “Hello robot. You must be the troublemaker.”

“Well done,” Ka said. “How did you guess?”

“I introduced them,” Ub said, telling a little white lie in order to keep the bloodhounds at bay.

Nicole didn’t miss a beat and said, “Those dents gave him away. Poor thing. I hope you’ll remove them soon. *My bipots* are self-conscious about even the tiniest scratch.”

Ka resented her presumptuous advice. Even though he wanted to slap her, he retained his calm façade.

“Of course we’ll fix him,” he growled. “I believe Sister Te will handle that job.”

“Good. I abhor seeing robots in such a shabby state.” She turned to address Boogi, “You’re a lucky robot to survive such a violent storm.”

“He was picking asparagrapes when the storm hit,” Ka said derisively.

“That just breaks my heart,” Ub said, “to think that Boogi risked everything for my benefit. I do love an asparagrape soufflé, but not enough to bury him in the sand for it.”

“That’s very good of you,” Ka snapped, “but somehow I don’t buy his story. I suspect that Boogi has finally become a wanderer just like Dunei. Until now he was content being a gazer; frequently stopping his

chores to gaze into space. Isn't that right Boogi?"

Boogi nodded reluctantly.

Nicole came to his defense. "And what's wrong with that?" she said. "I think it's miraculous whenever a machine's software can appreciate the nuances of our worlds. Laloose is a wanderer and I encourage it. He's discovered at least a dozen fascinating features on Mars. If only Sister Mo were still alive to see them. If not for Laloose's travels I would have missed out on the endless mazes of the Noctis Labyrinthus or the hidden hot springs of Pavonis Mons. They're beyond the border so one needs an oxygen mask to see them, but they're well worth it. Robots have most of Mars all to themselves for one simple reason: they don't have lungs."

"You're assuming that robots are more efficient because they have such interests," Night said.

"Actually the opposite is true. My NIMBUS core doesn't allow distractions. I believe that the pursuit of pure logic should be the only goal of computer science, and a robot's only desire."

Ka agreed. "Mars isn't a vast sandbox for robots to play in," he said. "Robots were designed to be our servants and nothing more. Their selfless service frees us to pursue our goal; to be one with NIMBUS and bask in its brilliance."

"And to attend a fabulous symposium once a year," Night added.

"I guess you're not as ascetic as you make it out to be," Nicole remarked, as she put her dark glasses back on. "It's a shame you didn't make automatic storm doors your goal so that your poor robots could play in an empty sandbox instead of vacuuming it."

"Why don't you make a donation?" Ka said coldly. "Then I could."

"Sorry, but I don't consider Hood construction to be a valid charity. But I'm sure NIMBUS doesn't feel that way, provided it *can* feel. Poowhi will do fine without my financial support. Any who, regardless of our differences I'm glad you survived the storm. Neighbors should keep an eye on each other, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," Ub agreed. "I like to think of us as one big happy family."

"Well then, that's that," Nicole said. "Laloose, it's time for us to run along. We've got some shopping to do. So nice to meet you Dr. Night, and likewise Master Ka. Who knows? I might show up at your banquet after all. I hear Boogi's menus are scrumptious. Even without an asparagrape soufflé it should be divine."

“Do come,” Ka said. “Boogi will be honored to prepare his last supper for you.”

“What do you mean last supper?”

“I mean I’m deleting him after the banquet. We can’t have our servants wandering around Poowhi. I would hate to find another Dunei at the bottom of the cliff.”

Suddenly Klooi appeared in the archway and approached Brother Ka. Once he had stopped at his side, Ka smiled and patted his shiny titanium head. “I want all of my bipots to be like Klooi; logical, not human.” He paused to let his comment sink in. “It’s a shame that Boogi’s cooking expertise is an acquired skill because it will all be erased during the delete.”

“I’ve been pondering that dilemma,” Night said, “and I think I know how to recalculate the parameters so that we can preserve that data. We don’t want to lose the instructions for the asparagrape soufflé, now do we?”

Ka noticed that Nicole looked pale and he was inwardly pleased. He had found her surprise visit to be unsettling. It was very unusual and a first on his watch. Unlike Ub, the abbot was unimpressed by her fame, dismissing her as an opinionated old bat who should mind her own business.

Ub accompanied Nicole and Laloose out to their hovercraft while Boogi and Vagoo followed close behind. The doctor turned to Ka when they were out of earshot. “My good man,” he whispered. “We must talk privately. My suspicions are aroused.”

“Really? So are mine.”