

## Chapter Fourteen

Later that afternoon, when Brother Ka went to the terrace to meet Dr. Night for their tête-à-tête, a gleaming black hovercraft sat on the flagstones with its butterfly doors open. A gold W was emblazoned across the vehicle's roof. Dr. Night sat in the back and the driver, a plastic drone with five eyes, sat beside Klooi in the front. As Ka approached the vehicle Night looked past him. The abbot turned to follow his gaze and discovered Te standing on a balcony near the summit of the east tower. The sister stared back at them and then turned away. Her turquoise robe fluttered in the breeze as she disappeared through the door.

The doctor invited Ka to join him. "Master, allow me to take you on a short trip to give you a glimpse of our mutual dilemma. I've commandeered Klooi because I suspect that he could be an integral cog in our wheel."

Ka slid into the plush back seat and said, "How novel for the guest to take his host on a scenic tour."

Night turned to the driver. "Take us north past the border," he said, "and then turn thirty degrees to the northwest." The butterfly doors dropped down and closed with a hiss as the hovercraft rose into the air.

"Thirty degrees should take us to the volcano Ascraeus Mons," Ka said, surprised. Ascraeus Mons was an inactive shield volcano whose humongous cauldron was visible from the north side of the bell tower. Even though its slopes were immense their angle only averaged seven degrees. With the low gravity and shallow inclines, mountain climbing on Mars was a breeze.

"Actually our destination is much closer than that," Night said. "Master, have you ever been on a hunt?"

"A hunt? No. Never heard of it." Ka watched as the twin spires of the monastery slipped away. To the south, the great canyon retreated toward a murky orange haze. Night played with the center console between their seats until its screen began to glow with a video of the Martian terrain below. The moving image showed an ocean of sand segmented in endless waves. Countless specks of iron oxide and silica

waited patiently for the cold Martian winds to return so that they could leap into the air anew.

“I dare say you’re in for a pleasant surprise,” the doctor said. “If this endeavor turns out to be as successful as the hunts back home it’ll be a satisfying catharsis. Hopefully we will extinguish a few sparks from the bonfire of rebellion that has blemished your landscape. Ah, look out the window. That must be Nicole’s crater. Now that we’re alone may I share my suspicions about your neighbor?”

“Please do,” Ka said, intrigued.

“While I admire her movies I don’t like her liberal bias. She claims to have moved to Mars because she wants to be alone, but the real reason is because she was blacklisted. She earned that dubious honor by publicly ridiculing NIMBUS on many occasions. She fled the repercussions of a subversive activities probe and has holed up in that crater ever since. Our watchers found out that she’s on familiar terms with another hermit; a robotist named Moses Moonspanker. What’s interesting is that he’s an old professor of mine, retired for some years. NIMBUS considers him to be one of the prime suspects behind the mysterious robot patch.”

“It *was* odd that Nicole showed up today,” Ka said. “We’ve had plenty of sandstorms before and she never said boo. I wonder... First Boogi wanders off in a storm and then she pays us a visit. A coincidence?”

“Maybe not,” Night said. “We know that Nicole entertains up to three hundred mechanized guests at night, performing plays. Some of her audience are away without leave. Could Boogi be one of them?”

“I will delete him as soon as we get back,” Ka said, “as a precaution.”

“Not so fast. Boogi might be the perfect trap. If he *is* wandering, before long he will lead us to the patch’s mastermind. All roads lead to Rome, as they say.”

Gradually the steel tower with the blinking lights receded into the distance. Nicole’s crater hid beneath its shadow, covered by a metallic wind shield which protected it like an eyelid. Ka neck cracked as he watched the movie star’s hideaway shrink in size. They were well past the border now, a demarcation that was easy to miss since the thin Martian air was as invisible as the manmade gases it replaced. Still, Ka knew that the border was roughly a mile past Nicole’s home. Outside their pressurized vehicle the natural

Martian air had replaced the denser artificial kind. Only machines could safely traverse the vast wastelands which they were flying over now. Night stared at the vibrant images flowing across the console's screen. "Until we can stamp out this patch hunting is a necessary evil, just like natural selection is necessary for evolution. NIMBUS depends on our vigilance."

Ka scrutinized the sand dunes rolling across the screen until he became hypnotized by their endless repetition. Even though he disliked the doctor the man's words gave him comfort. Here was an ally who shared his dedication to the preservation of NIMBUS. Ka was certain that with Night at the helm the patch's days were numbered.

"By now you're probably aware of the tragedy of my brilliant wife," the doctor said. "Teri is the victim of a delusion that's deeply implanted, almost like a patch. It gives her a childish faith in humanistic robotics which is inferior to the evolving superiority of my NIMBUS clones. So far every attempt to smash this delusion has failed. Even your monastery has failed. I think it's time to send her home for a laserectomy."

"Please, give me more time," the abbot said, frightened by the prospect of losing her. "I admit my efforts have failed up to now, but I believe the egg has begun to crack. Another month under a Hood and we'll have an omelet. Trust me, NIMBUS *will* prevail."

"To be honest, I've given up all hope."

"Just one more month," Ka pleaded.

"OK, one more. Then if Poowhi can't help her, the laser awaits."

Ka relaxed, slumping in his seat. "You're a wise man," he said.

Suddenly Klooi's eagle eyes saw something moving on the plain below. "Gentlemen, look!" he cried. "It's a bipot. No, there's two. And they're running."

The hovercraft banked in a wide circle three miles above the ground. The two men's noses touched the windows but they saw nothing. Klooi pressed his plastic finger against the glass. "There and there," he said. "They're running in opposite directions now. They must see us."

Night barked at the chauffeur. "Driver! Descend to five hundred feet and do a fly by. I want to get a

good look at them first.” He turned to the console and pointed at the screen. “Aha,” he said. “See? Those silver dots. It won’t be long before they find cover. We must begin at once.”

“Wanderers,” Ka whispered, watching intently as the tiny figures rushed across the screen. Gradually the two parted ways in a widening arc. Soon one of them would disappear off screen right. Now that they were descending Ka could make out their spindly legs racing across the sand. “Doctor, what happens now?” he asked, feeling a surge of excitement shooting up his spine.

“We begin the hunt, of course,” Night said. “Driver, make the bipot on the left target one, and the other target two. Get closer. I want to see their faces.”

Ka fell back into the cushions of his seat as the hovercraft accelerated toward their prey. Night's fingers danced over the console's keyboard, setting the coordinates for the attack. His eyes, reflecting the glowing screen, shimmered with a cold blue sheen. “Ready, Klooi?” he asked.

The bipot held up a small silver ball with four buttons on its surface. He tapped two of them and said, “I’m ready. Should I request backup?”

“Sure,” Night replied. “But I want our airbots to hold back until I give the order.” He smiled like an innocent schoolboy. “Being a fair man I like to give my prey a sporting chance. Unless they’re armed of course. Then we shoot without delay.”

The doctor pressed a key and a white grid like a spider’s web covered the screen. At the same time the hovercraft’s camera zoomed in and the fleeing bipot filled the frame. A blinking red dot inched its way toward the target until it was centered on his back.

“I wonder what Sister Te would think of all this,” Ka said, feeling whimsical.

“She must never find out,” Night hissed. “Understood?” His reaction was so vehement it made Ka cringe. “This hunt’s top secret. Besides, we both know that she wouldn’t approve.”

Mortified, the abbot leaned toward the screen to better observe the figure filling up the screen. The bipot looked like a model similar to Klooi himself. As he turned and looked back his round eyes sparkled in the sun. Suddenly he dropped to the ground and pointed a long metal tube at the hovercraft’s camera.

“He’s armed!” Night shouted. “Driver, retreat! We’ll make another go-around but not so close.”

Ka was about to look out the window when three large explosions shook the hovercraft, knocking him back into his seat. He quickly strapped on his safety belt. Meanwhile the doctor frantically typed new coordinates while staring at the screen. The bipot was back on its feet and running away. As the hovercraft climbed at a sixty-degree angle Ka could hear the camera buzzing around underneath, keeping their target in range.

“He's got a plasma rifle,” Night said, “and I suspect the other does too. We'll retreat and then circle back round. Too bad we didn't bring our Hoods. With the help of NIMBUS we could hit a bullseye every time. Still, I prefer the old fashioned by the seat of your pants chase. It's reckless, but much more fun.”

“To a cleaner Mars!” Ka said, shaking his fist. No sooner had he spoken then another plasma bolt roared past. The white pulse almost blinded him when it exploded, missing them by yards.

Klooi peered out the window. “Target two is also armed,” he announced.

Dr. Night remained fixated on his screen. “Okay,” he said. “Let's try it again. Driver, descend from the north this time and stick to my coordinates precisely. Klooi, signal the airbots. I want them to protect our flank as we go in for the kill.”

The hovercraft rolled to the left and dropped down toward target one. As it slowed down, Ka was pushed against his seat belt. He could see their target through the window now, making a run for the safety of a narrow ravine. But halfway there he fell to his knees and aimed his rifle in their direction.

“Fire both missiles!” Night commanded.

Klooi pushed a button and the hovercraft shook. Down on the ground the bipot fired his weapon, rolled over and leaped to his feet. As he sprinted toward the ravine the homing missiles slammed into the sand on either side, exploding in huge fireballs which immolated him instantly.

“Gotcha!” Night hollered. “Now for target two.”

As the hovercraft circled around again the last plasma bolt from the destroyed bipot's rifle veered harmlessly off to the west. Soon it burst into a thousand sparks, followed by a loud bang which rattled the skylight above Ka's head.

“Yep, Teri would be aghast at this hunt,” the doctor said. “But what she doesn't know won't hurt

her.”

“My lips are sealed,” the abbot said with a smile.

Now target two appeared on the screen. It was a larger yellow bipot similar to Vagoo, and as the camera zoomed in, he scrambled across the sand. While Night entered new coordinates he said, “You can run, but you can't hide.”

Suddenly the bipot turned around and aimed two plasma blasters at the camera. The screen flashed white. “Abort!” the doctor screamed. “Go up! Go up!” Outside, two bubbles of pulsating light shot toward them at tremendous speed. For a second Ka feared the worst, but gradually the pulses dropped beneath them. Before long they exploded, expanding in the sky like blooming orange lilies.

“So these robots are rebels?” Ka asked nervously.

“Of course,” Night said. “They're armed.” The hovercraft stopped climbing and turned around. Below a huge crack opened in the plain and zigzagged toward the east, deepening as it went. “He'll attempt to hide in that canyon,” the doctor said. “Driver, go after him and hurry!”

Below, the tiny speck of metal was moving toward the gorge. Ka tried to keep his eyes on the screen, but he was pressed back into his seat by the surge in velocity. “What's gone wrong?” he wondered aloud. “Why do our servants shoot at us?”

“It's that damn humanistic software,” Night said. “Add a patch and voila, you've got a rebel.”

The camera zoomed in on the fleeing rebel until the blinking red dot covered its face. For a second time Klooi pushed a button that sent missiles shooting through the air. Two trails of white smoke curved in a gentle arc as the deadly payload descended. Ka counted under his breath as the missiles overtook the bipot. In a split second he was obliterated in the twin explosions that erupted around him. But to everyone's surprise out of the fireballs came a last shout, a single plasma bolt aimed with precision. As it tore through the air on a collision course with their hovercraft, Night pounded a fist against the console and shouted, “Driver, abort!”

Brother Ka was thrown back into his seat by their sudden acceleration to maximum speed. The doctor tried to type at the keyboard but he was held back by the centrifugal force. Klooi accidentally pressed

a button and two trails of white smoke shot out in front of them.

Their driver had to dive to avoid catching up with the missiles that Klooi had erroneously sent off. As Ka rose toward the ceiling, restrained only by his seat belt, a stupendous boom shattered the windows and sent shards ricocheting through the cabin, slashing his face.

“He hit us with his last shot!” Night shrieked.

The cabin shook violently and filled with black smoke as the onboard computer calmly announced, “Warning, warning, warning.” When the abbot touched his face his fingertips were wet with blood. “Oh dear,” he said. “I’m hurt.” The smoke was so thick Ka was unable to see the doctor. He tried to press his palms against his cheeks to stop the bleeding but he was bouncing around too much. The soles of his feet felt hot. “Klooi!” he cried out. “Help me! I can’t breathe.” He gulped for air, but there was none left in the depressurized cabin. In desperation he reached out with groping fingers, straining against his seat belt. Suddenly something soft and rubbery was jammed into his face. A rush of cold air blew into his nose and mouth. Someone (Klooi?) had provided him with an oxygen mask. He grasped at it for dear life, inhaling desperately.

“Klooi! Please help the doctor,” Ka sputtered. His voice was drowned out by the gravity engine’s deafening whine. He could feel his body rising again, pressing against his seat belt as the hovercraft spiraled toward the ground. “Thank goodness Mars has lots of sand,” he said to no one in particular. “With any luck we’ll crash into a dune.”