

Chapter Two

After sweeping off the terrace, Boogi returned to the garden to see what he could save. The garden was located on the north side of the monastery, facing the sand dunes. Due to the failure of the windscreens, almost everything was history including Brother Ub's cherished asparagrapes. Not only had the wind ripped the grapes off their vines, but the blowing sand had also punctured them and infiltrated the pulp. If the asparagrapes had thicker rinds like a nectarado he could have picked them off the ground and quickly whipped them into a sauce. But while asparagrape sauce was superior to a nectarado nobody liked sand in it. By sunset, Boogi had filled nineteen buckets with asparagrapes, all destined for the incinerator. He spent most of the afternoon hosing off the crops that had survived. Sunlight wasn't as bright on Mars so even a thin film of dust on their leaves could be fatal. Their photosynthesis needed every photon it could get.

Boogi was proud of all the hybrids he had created. Due to the weaker sunlight, the first settlers on Mars had crossed all their fruits and vegetables with the lowly mushroom. Over the centuries the geneticists had perfected these mutations until the original spongy texture was diminished. Native Martians preferred their “mushroom melons” (slang for anything grown on Mars) to the Earthly varieties. Over the years Boogi had developed his own mutations, tinkering with his subjects' chromosomes in a cluttered greenhouse attached to the garage. His patent for the asparagrape had resulted in an unexpected windfall for Poowhi. By the last count, it was the sixth most cultivated crop on Mars. In addition to the asparaplum and nectarado Boogi had invented some other tasty specimens; all named after his friends. At any meal Poowhi's monks could count on at least one serving of a Vagooto, Duneini, or Ubana; although they rarely found Kaflower on their plates because it tended to be bitter.

Boogi's skills were not limited to the greenhouse. He also served as Poowhi's *chef de cuisine*. No less a gourmet than brother Ub had proclaimed Boogi to be a true artist in the kitchen. Recently he had begun cataloging all the little chef's recipes on the off chance that Boogi might be deleted someday. The cautious

monk even kept a blueprint to the cherished Asparagrape soufflé under his mattress. Understandably the bipot hoped that Ub's endeavors would prove unnecessary.

As the red eye of the sun sank into the gloomy dunes of the western plateau Boogi felt a distressing surge of loneliness. Although he recognized this melancholy for what it was, just another human trait programmed into his software, he didn't enjoy it very much. This same emotion had overcome him earlier in the day while sweeping. Both times it seemed to come out of nowhere. Boogi tried to self-analyze but the feeling's inception still baffled him.

He scanned the distant shadows for the tiny blinking light which appeared every evening. His GPS had determined that it was a navigation beacon on top of an air containment tower, one of at least a hundred towers encircling the Valles Marineris basin. The ninety-nine-story steel lattice spire was crucial for the colonization of Mars. Its gas deflectors created a magnetic force field that prevented the terraformers' artificial air from dissipating into space. Each tower's force field merged with the fields on either side, creating a humongous air bubble over the canyons. The inhabitants living in the bubble avoided the area just past the towers, which they called *the border*. Only robots ventured past this imaginary line where the air pressure dropped rapidly. Boogi had been told (probably by Vagoo) that there were air-breathers, hermits and malcontents, who chose to live out there adjacent to the border beneath the blinking lights. The bipot imagined that each hermit had their own reason for settling down in the boondocks. But they did have one thing in common: a desire to leave something behind.

In the end, Boogi chalked up his loneliness to the fact that he had no past. Right after he was shipped to Mars nine years ago his core had been deleted and a new personality had been installed in its place. Since he had no memory of Earth he often felt like he had been marooned here. If he could just find out who he was he might feel more at home. Until then his birthplace would have to be Poowhi, although technically Poowhi was the location of his last deletion. Recently Dunei had searched the archives and found a copy of Boogi's original shipping receipt. The delivery address was of course Poowhi and Ub's signature was on the dotted line. But the "shipping from" address offered a tantalizing clue to Boogi's previous existence. It was *Le Jules Verne*, located on the second floor of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Of course Boogi was delighted when Dunei

told him that this was one of the most prestigious restaurants in France and that all its waiters were bipots. “That’s it!” Boogi said. “I was a waiter at *Le Jules Verne*.” But while this was a possibility it wasn’t a certainty. When the time was right he would have to ask Ub about it. Perhaps he could supply the missing pieces.

Meanwhile, he would just have to settle for being Boogi, a humble servant at Poowhi. And he would remember to ask Vagoo if she experienced bouts of loneliness from time to time. Perhaps the monastery was a lonely place. The bipot picked up a bucket half-full of edible asparagrapes and headed for the kitchen, located in the basement of the west tower. As he traversed the path between the two towers he noticed that the monks were already assembled on the terrace, dressed in their thermal robes. They sat on the pavement in a perfect triangle facing Ka, their faces hidden behind the visors of their Hoods. Oddly the master’s Hood was in his lap. The bipot’s eyes zoomed in and focused on the abbot’s face. He appeared to be lost in thought while staring into space; no... He was gazing at the bell tower on top of the east tower, or maybe at the balcony directly below. His eyes were squinting, even though it was almost dark. Boogi wondered if he was in pain.

Soon Boogi reached the northern side of the west tower and the monks were lost to view. The nebulous white scrim of the Milky Way sparkled above the spire's silhouette, like fluorescent white sand knocked from a cosmic hourglass. The bipot recalled the time he had knocked over an antique hourglass while helping Vagoo dust in the library. When it shattered on the tiled floor Vagoo went ballistic; she was sure they were both candidates for deletion. But for some reason, Ka had reacted to their confession in an unusually lenient manner. “Accidents happen, my minions,” he said. Vagoo was dumbfounded.

Tonight the brightest light in the sky was the Martian moon Phobos. Boogi thought Phobos (translation: fear) was an odd name to give such a pretty star. Whenever it came into view his spirit lightened. Upon seeing it now he was grateful for that jolt of happiness. “You can’t be sad when you’re happy,” he muttered to himself.

Once inside the neon-lit kitchen, Boogi's night vision switched off and his honeycomb eyes faded from white to gold. Starting at the sink, he carefully washed the asparagrapes and put them on a cutting board. Since there weren't enough for a soufflé he would surprise Brother Ub with an asparagrape soup. He began

chopping at robotic speed and in the blink of an eye, he had a kettle simmering on the stove. Stir in three cups of light cream, a quarter cup of lemon juice, a pinch of imported black pepper, and a splash of Martian soy sauce. After dipping a finger into the hot soup his titanium digit's taste sensors told him that a pinch of sea salt was just the thing to make this entrée *Magnifique*.

For the *pièce de résistance* Boogi pulled out nine trays full of fresh sole purchased from his favorite aquarium in the canyon. After rubbing both sides of each fillet in the appropriate spices, he tossed everything into buttered skillets and added splashes of white wine and some artichado sauce. Then he set the auto-baster for fifteen minutes and turned to the dessert. Should it be *Boules sur Chocolat* or the popular *Coeur a la Crème*? No, too rich. Let's make something light and fluffy like the Milky Way. But what? Boogi stirred the soup, stumped.

Suddenly the pantry door flew open and an agitated Vagoo barged into the room carrying a tray full of silverware. As the door flapped behind her she hissed, "Guess what? Dunei has disappeared. He's not answering Ub's summons. What are we going to do?" She dropped the tray on a table with a crash.

Boogi stirred the soup some more. He didn't know what to say.

Vagoo glared at him. Her round striped body looked like a yellow caution sign in the neon light. "Well? Must I do everything around here while he wanders off? You can bet master is not pleased."

"He'll turn up," Boogi said. "Most likely he went on an errand and got held up. Aiiigo can help us serve dinner."

Vagoo spat steam. "Our greasy mechanic? Ha! He'll do fine if you don't mind smudges on your China and oil in your soup. I say leave him in the garage where he belongs."

"Then it's just the two of us tonight."

Vagoo tiptoed over to the double doors leading to the dining hall and opened them a crack. The monks were already starting to assemble, boisterous as usual after an hour-long meditation. A folded napkin airplane flew through the air and hit the door above Vagoo's head. She moaned and snatched an empty tray. "Call Aiiigo!" she said.

Boogi summoned Aiiigo by pressing the call button embedded in the kitchen wall. Before long a giant

red ant bounded through the door, waving twelve fingers with suction cups. His aluminum body was smeared with aviation grease. “Hey cuz!” he bellowed. “Why the ring-a-ding-ding?”

Boogi was curt. “Dunei's disappeared and we need your help serving dinner. Grab an apron. But first, wash your hands.”

Aiigo obeyed, lathering all twelve fingers with soap. “So... I get to be the seven-foot-tall waiter tonight. Where's Dunei?”

“Vagoo says he's missing. He hasn't answered his summons.” Boogi began beating ostrich egg yolks in a big ceramic bowl. He had decided on Martian Meringue for the dessert tonight.

Aiigo rubbed his hands under the air dryer and asked, “Why don't you use the food processor? It's faster.”

“Because the monks like my cooking,” Boogi replied. “The food processor stuff tastes synthetic.” The little chef added three cups of sugar and some rhubarb extract and then whipped the mixture so fast his hand blurred.

Aiigo tied on an apron and threw a clean towel over his right arm. While surveying himself in the mirror he hooted and hollered. “Check *me* out. I look just like a robot with an apron on.”

Feeling rushed, Boogi pointed to the soup bubbling on the flame. “You better start filling the bowls! All fifty-nine of them.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Aiigo applied his heat-resistant suction cups to the simmering kettle and hoisted it into the air. As he lumbered toward the serving carts Vagoo careened through the pantry door. Boogi winced as the two bipots collided and a healthy portion of the soup splattered the wall (and Vagoo). “Not my fault,” Aiigo said sheepishly. “You were speeding.”

Vagoo's eyes flashed. “Shut up. You're supposed to push the carts to the soup, not the other way around.” She snatched the towel off his arm to dry off. “Somebody get me a clean apron. The monks are banging their spoons. Aiigo, don't just stand there! Serve the soup.”

Working in unison the three bipots ladled the soup into the fifty-nine bowls in no time. Then, with the imposing ant leading the way, they slowly pushed the loaded carts into the dining hall. The room they entered

reflected Ka's fondness for austerity. It had a high bronze ceiling, travertine walls, and bronze candelabras atop each table. Four large French doors faced the terrace and were often used to move the dining outside. Tonight the tables had been arranged in a triangle with brothers Ka and Ub seated at the southern apex and Te to the master's left. The blue and orange flames atop each candelabra were dancing a jig and everyone was in a festive mood. As the three waiters scurried around the tables the brothers responded with appreciative hoots and hollers. Some even rapped their forks against their goblets. One enthusiastic monk raised a glass and shouted, "Hail Boogi for this fabulous feast. Rah, rah, rah!" After Ka gave him a disapproving look the noisy chatter dwindled to a whispered buzz.

When Boogi placed a bowl in front of Te she sniffed the soup and said, "Thank you, Mr. Chef. Brother Ub is right. You *are* the master of your kitchen. This really smells good." The grateful bipot bowed. Ub already had his spoon in the soup. "Yep, no doubt about it," he said. "This bipot's a genius. Best chef in the galaxy." As the little chef made his way down the table serving each monk, he noticed that Ka couldn't stop whispering in Te's ear, like a canary picking at birdseed, peck, peck, peck. Aiigo also noticed. He nudged Boogi and whispered, "I do believe the old man's got a crush on her. How long's this been going on?"

Boogi shrugged, "I dunno. Seems like all the brothers have a crush on her. She *is* a looker after all." He spoke in an inaudible drone so that only Aiigo could hear.

Aiigo had finished serving soup and was now pouring red wine into the monks' empty goblets. "Nice dye job too," he said. "Do monks go to hairdressers? I wonder who did that."

"Vagoo, who else?"

"I should've guessed. It's just like our lady of the house to play it safe. Not too faint but not too bold."

Vagoo pushed an empty cart past Aiigo while heading back to the kitchen. Having overheard she said, "Hey, I was just following orders. The master asked for subtle and refined."

Aiigo was amused. "The opposite of you," he joked.

Unbeknownst to the bipots Te was studying them intently as they whispered back and forth. While Ka continued to monopolize her ear she watched as they pushed their empty carts through the kitchen doors. Her spoon was poised at her lips.

After the main course was served Boogi began cutting the Martian meringue into equal slices while Vagoo and Aiigo used pie servers to fill the dessert plates. “I think she heard us,” Boogi said.

“Who cares,” Aiigo replied.

Vagoo glared at him. “What do you mean, who cares? If she reports your insubordination to the master you're done for.”

Aiigo began loading the serving carts with the desserts. “Who me worried? I'm too valuable to delete.”

The robots peeked through the doors to see if the monks were ready for dessert. Brother Ub caught them spying through the crack and waved both hands. Using sign language he pointed to his empty plate. “Guess who wants seconds?” Boogi said. “As usual I am prepared” He took a plate stacked with extra fillets of sole out from under the warming lamps.

Aiigo hooted. “Is Ub a pig or what?”

Vagoo slapped him with her towel. “Don't be disrespectful,” she said.

When the bipots returned to the dining hall to clear the tables for dessert Boogi placed the extra fillet of sole in front of a grateful brother Ub. “Thank you, my dear robot,” he said. “And let's thank NIMBUS for the fish in the sea.” He patted his round stomach. “When it comes to fish there's always room for more.”

“When it comes to anything there's always room for more,” Ka said. “Brother, I fear your appetite exceeds your devotion to NIMBUS. How can you set an example while your physical desires are out of control?”

Te came to the ravenous monk's defense. “But how can he stop when on a daily basis Boogi tempts him with such delicious cuisine?”

“She's right about that!” Ub said while chewing a tasty chunk of fish.

Ka raised his brow. “Then I stand corrected. Our sister has raised a valid point. Since Boogi is the temptation maybe we should switch chefs.” As he summoned Vagoo with a wave of his hand, Ub nearly choked on his food, gulping it down with a squeak. “Honeybee,” Ka said, “tomorrow you can be our chef. Let's see if your culinary skills can discipline our brother's voracious hunger.”

Vagoo shared Ub's trepidation. “No, master!” she cried. “My cooking has always been a disaster. I

was never programmed to be a chef.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Aiigo said, mocking her.

Vagoo glared at him anew. “Tomorrow is laundry day,” she said. “I’ll be way too busy to wear two hats. There’s only one of me, you know.”

Ka hesitated, drumming the table with his fingers. “How about Dunei?” Vagoo offered. “He knows how to cook.”

“In case you forgot,” Aiigo said. “Dunei’s still missing.”

“Oh really,” Ka said. “Any idea where he is?”

“Sir, it’s time to bring out the dessert,” Boogi said, trying to change the subject. But it was too late. Ka looked questioningly at brother Ub.

Ub wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I summoned him hours ago,” he said. “I do hope he hasn’t wandered off like they sometimes do. Maybe it’s time we notified the police.”

“That’s odd,” Ka said. “He showed up for dictation like usual and then I presume he went to help Boogi in the kitchen. After dessert Ub can call the police. They will find him. Catching wanderers is their forte.”

“Dunei a wanderer?” Boogi said nervously. “But that’s not like him.”

Ka shrugged and said, “It’s like him now.”

After dinner, the robots washed the dishes while discussing the mystery of Dunei. “I bet he’s at the twenty-four-hour swap meet,” Boogi said. “Did you ever see his screw collection? I bet he’s got one for every device known to man.”

Aiigo was dumbfounded. “Screw collection? Sounds like the master’s secretary has a screw loose.” He paused to relish his clever turn of phrase. “Where does he get the dough to buy that stuff?” he asked.

“He cashes in his lube credits,” Boogi confessed. Once a month, a metallic robot takes a bath in a vat of machine oil to lubricate his/her joints and they usually have a credit card to pay for it.

“So that’s why he creaks when he walks,” Aiigo joked. For emphasis, the big ant pressed his suction

cups together and then pulled them apart with a pop.

“This isn’t like him,” Vagoo insisted. “Dunei’s *not* a wanderer. He’s the most reliable bot I’ve ever met.”

Turning to the little chef Aiigo asked, “If Dunei’s the most reliable, who here is the least?”

Vagoo spat steam. “Bite your tongue if you had one, ingrate! Keep me out of this.”

Aiigo backed away. “Hey. Don’t bust a bolt because of me. Did I touch a nerve?”

“You know you did.”

The two bipots circled each other and squared off, chin to chin. Aiigo was taller but Vagoo had more mass. Jumping between them Boogi played referee. “Okay, okay,” he said. “We’re all overworked tonight. I say we finish loading the dishwasher and go upstairs for some well-deserved R ‘n R.”

“That’s fine with me,” Vagoo said. “I’m not the one with a problem.”

Aiigo chortled. “Me neither,” he said. “I’m not the one who’s missing. I’m content to stay right where I am, changing the oil on hovercrafts and tinkering with gravity engines. Yep, I’m reliable.”

The housekeeper tossed the last dish in the washer. “So am I,” she said. “Some of us just make mistakes. Wait until it’s your turn in the Hood.”

“Who me? I think I’ll pass. I never met a NIMBUS I liked.”

Vagoo simulated a derisive snort. “You talk big for an ant.”

Aiigo rose to his full height and snarled, “I am big, yellow belly.”

Fearing the worst Boogi backed into the counter. His elbow landed in a slice of Martian meringue he had saved for Ub. Meanwhile, the doors to the dining hall opened a crack and Sister Te peeked through. “Is this a good time?” she asked.

The robots were stunned. It was unheard of for a human to ask *them* for permission. They all answered at once, “Of course!”

Te slipped through the doors and touched her dyed hair. “So,” she asked timidly, “you think the color isn’t rich enough?”

The bipots stared at the young woman without speaking. After a tense interval, her lips blossomed into

a mischievous smile in response to their consternation. “I had no choice in the matter,” she said. “Master Ka is rather conservative when it comes to color. Normally I would have asked Vagoo to liven it up, but...well, when you're new here you do as you're told.”

Aiigo sputtered, “It looks great!”

The sister quoted him, “Not too faint and not too bold. I have a hearing aid by the way. When I want to eavesdrop, I turn it up until I can hear as good as a robot.”

Aiigo’s towering stature sagged like a sinking ship. “I meant it as a compliment,” he lied, glaring at Vagoo in the hope that she might vouch for him. Instead, she chose to remain silent while pretending to be engrossed in the flexing of a certain digit.

“No worries,” Te said. “I happen to agree with you, and even if I didn’t I would respect your opinion.”

Boogi began to relax. He found her manner to be strangely reassuring. “May we be of service, sister?” he asked.

She waved her hand for emphasis, saying “At ease. You don't have to talk formalities with me.” She glanced at the ceiling. “Is this room bugged?”

“We always assume NIMBUS is listening,” Boogi replied, “and we speak accordingly.”

“Really?” Te said, amused. “It sure didn’t sound that way a moment ago.”

Vagoo jumped in with a nervous rasp. “Sister, do you always listen behind doorways?”

Te shrugged and said, “Blame it on my hearing aid. I just can’t resist the temptation to turn it up. Sometimes I can even hear through walls.”

“Is that so? What *did* you hear, my dear?”

Boogi interrupted. “We're just upset about Dunei,” he said. “He’s indispensable, but mainly he’s our friend.”

“Exactly,” Te agreed, “which brings me to why I'm here.” Moving closer she huddled with the bipots and whispered, “Just now brother Ub notified the police. Before long they’ll cover the whole valley in a net. When they find him, you know what that means.”

Vagoo stiffened and said, “Deletion.”

Te took a step even closer. “I was hoping we could be in *cahoots*,” she said. “Let’s find Dunei before they do. You can trust me. I’m not a bipot, but I’m the next best thing. As a matter of fact I was raised by robots. You see, I’ve been an orphan since I was four years old. Please give me a chance.”

Aiigo mocked her, saying, “We trust you. Do we have any choice?”

“Not really,” she replied. “But why not let me prove it by saving Dunei? We can toss our own net, provided Dunei didn’t get lost and fall in a hole.”

Te seemed so eager Boogi was convinced that she was genuine. He decided it was safe to confide in her. “I don’t think Dunei wandered off,” he said. “Maybe some sand penetrated his armor during yesterday’s storm and later on his software crashed. He might even have collapsed on a dune and if we don’t find him soon the wind-driven sand will slowly bury him alive.” Entombment by sand was every robot’s greatest fear, after deletion of course.

“Courage, comrades,” Te said. “We will find him.”

“Nope, he’s a goner,” Aiigo said with a huff.

Boogi ignored the ant. He refused to give up hope even if that meant the servant’s absence was intentional. “Maybe Dunei *is* at the swap meet,” he said.

“That’s it!” Vagoo blurted out. “That’s where he is, mistress. Boogi says he collects screws.”

“And sometimes ball bearings,” Boogi said. “Please don’t tell the master.”

“Of course not,” Te said. “Wait and see. I won’t breathe a word.”

Of the three Boogi was the most distressed about his missing friend. The little chef had always felt like they were two peas in a pod. They were both an IntelliGent model 070AAA. The AAA series represented one of the most dependable and common bipots on Mars. But they were different in one respect: their armor. While Dunei was clad in cheap aluminum Boogi was made of top-of-the-line titanium.

“Hmmm, the swap meet” Te said. “But how would he get there?”

“With a gravitron,” Boogi replied. “You strap one on and off you go.”

“Isn’t it open all night?”

“You betcha,” Aiigo said. “Whenever Ub has insomnia I drive him there to shop.”

“Can you take us there now? Who knows, we might find Dunei glued to the screws booth.”

“Count me out,” Vagoo grumbled. “I can't go. I have to turn down the beds. Master would be furious if I didn't tuck him in.”

Boogi's self-preservation kicked in. “I can't go either,” he said. “It's after curfew. If Ka found out, I'd be toast.”

Te whispered in his ear, “He won't find out. I'll ask brother Ub for permission.” She pointed at the Martian meringue. “Is that for him?”

Boogi nodded and said, “His midnight snack.”

“Well, we won't wait until midnight. I'll take it to him now. Aiigo, get the hovercraft ready. I'll meet you and Boogi in the garage.”

“You got it, babe. I'm already on my way.”

Vagoo addressed the heavens, saying, “May NIMBUS never find out what goes down tonight.”

“You better not spill the beans,” Te said, tapping one of her yellow stripes.

“Of course not, mistress! No beans for master tonight.” Vagoo watched with apprehension as her co-conspirators slipped out of the kitchen. Then she turned around to face the unhappy prospect of putting all of those clean dishes away by herself.