

Chapter Three

9:39 PM. The monastery's hovercraft descended rapidly through the synthetic atmosphere of Tithonius Canyon. Aiigo was gleefully gunning the accelerator. Without Ka on board, he was free to do as he pleased. "You gotta rev up the engine once in a while to blow out the grime," he explained. As Boogi and Te held onto their seats they could see the sparkling lights of the city through the front windshield. Up above a shooting star split the Milky Way in half, leaving a fading white streak pointing south. "That's a good omen," Te said.

The hovercraft leveled off at one thousand feet. Boogi scrutinized the jumble of dark shapes below; trapezoidal structures shrouded in darkness with a solitary illuminated window here and there. These were the factories in the industrial section of the town. Further to the west, a ring of skyscrapers soared like candied laser beams above the glowing nebula of the city proper. Their needle-like spires were covered with sculpted bronze. Circular LED billboards surrounded each tower, supported by slender flying-buttresses in reverse. A humming digital sign rotated around the soaring roof of the tallest structure. Aiigo read the glowing words as they traveled from right to left. "Tickets on sale now for the April 5th fight of the century: Faaipo verses Meozi Mo. See these prize heavyweights battle to the death, bipot to bipot. Hurry, tickets are going fast."

"That's disgusting," Te said. "It's barbaric, making robots fight to the finish. You'd think we were in Nero's Rome."

Aiigo let out a hoot, saying, "They're just robots! Who cares?"

"Well, I do," she replied. "They deserve better than that. They're treated like slaves."

"They do make good money," Boogi said.

"No, their owners make good money while they end up in the scrap heap."

The bipots were silent as they passed over a residential area littered with a thousand prefabricated igloos; each one with a wi-fi antenna attached to its roof. When they reached the spaceport Aiigo steered the hovercraft in a wide circle around the perimeter, keeping a safe distance from the colossal rockets and their

steaming exhausts.

“We’re here,” he announced. The ant followed his glide path down to an expansive parking lot on Pad One, the oldest landing pad on Mars. This vast concrete platform was currently the home of the biggest open-air bazaar in the solar system. The swap meet was fenced in and heavily guarded by a platoon of roller bots. Four entrances charged five Percivals to pass through their turnstiles. Inside the circular fence, a maze of neon-lit booths sold everything under the stars. Boogi had been here once before with Aiigo and brother Ub. Now he was delighted to return to such an exotic locale in the middle of the night.

The hovercraft touched down on a parking space near the east entrance. The lot was less than half full with a capacity of ten thousand. Even with this meager turnout the search for their missing comrade would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Already five bipots who resembled Dunei had walked past Boogi’s window. “I say we concentrate on the zone where they sell screws,” he said.

“They have a screw section?” Te asked incredulously.

“They got *everything*,” Aiigo said.

At the entrance, Te slid a debit card into the slot to pay for their admission and Boogi noticed it belonged to the monastery. He wondered how much credit each monk had. His debit card maxed out at 25 Percivals, just enough to get a lube job and buy odds and ends for the monks. Poor Dunei’s card had been maxed out for months.

The two bipots followed Te by the customary distance of one yard. Boogi was surprised by the turnout this time of night. Most of the booths had lines at least three or four deep. After checking the directory at the information kiosk, they made their way through the men’s clothing section on their way to nuts and bolts. Te dodged the occasional straggler as she navigated through the crowd. At one point she stopped at a booth to inspect a rack full of ties. “Sometimes I like to wear a man’s suit,” she confessed. “It makes me feel macho.” She nearly bought a red tie decorated with bipot silhouettes, but put it back and continued on her way; pushing through the crowd like a yacht in a busy harbor with two tugboats in her wake. Occasionally Boogi had to step aside so he wouldn’t sideswipe a human. It was considered a serious faux pas if a bipot bumped into one. Poor Aiigo was a magnet for collisions due to his size. At one point a model 050AAA bounced off the big ant’s

knees and landed on his booty. As the dazed bipot struggled to his feet it was easy to see that this specimen was not even close to Dunei. He was a foot shorter, a foot wider, and clad in bronze. After calling Aiigo a ‘bull in a China shop,’ the little bipot chased after his master, a Trans Worlds pilot on a layover.

But there were plenty of bipots crossing their path who were dead ringers for Dunei. More than once Aiigo grabbed one with both hands and said, “Dunei? Is that you?”

Each time the startled bipot pulled free and said, “Excuse me!” before hurrying after his master. Evidently, Aiigo was getting warm because his latest victim answered, “No, I’m Brunei.” At the same time two roller bots rumbled by and in the din, the ant thought he heard the words, “I’m Dunei.” Boogi felt like he was watching a ping-pong match as the two robots shouted back and forth, “Dunei? No, Brunei. Dunei? No, Brunei...”

Soon Sister Te's lavender head was swallowed by the crowd. Alarmed, Boogi yanked the big ant’s arm. “Hurry up or we’ll lose her,” he said. “If we stop every bipot like Dunei we’ll be here for years.”

“What’s wrong cuz? You got separation anxiety?”

Boogi was annoyed by this question because the ant had hit the nail on the head. “So what if I do?” he said defensively. “Imagine how Ka will react when he finds out there’s *three* missing bipots.”

Aiigo chuckled and said, “You’re just like Vagoo, always worried about ending up under a Hood. You know they don’t delete us for the first offense. Those clean installs are expensive.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” the little chef said. “Vagoo got out of line one time and they erased her.” Like every bipot, Boogi knew that a Hood was best kept at arms’ length. While a human could wear one and expect a pleasing state of bliss, a bipot could expect to die. And even though most deletions were followed by a clean install, that only meant that an empty core was filled by an entirely new persona. On rare occasions, the core wasn’t entirely gutted to allow for the preservation of valuable data. Those robots were sometimes haunted by a mysterious sense of *déjà vu*.

While ignoring Boogi’s eye darts Aiigo stopped another look-alike. This time the irate clone said, “Bug off!” before scrambling away. Mortified, the big ant said, “Oops. There I go again. I must’ve touched a nerve.” As the two bipots hurried to catch up with Te (waiting for them under the ‘nuts and bolts’ sign) Aiigo

kept right on talking. “I bet they’d zap me too if I pulled her stunt. Vagoo really asked for it, running off with Givooi that day.”

Boogi’s interest perked up. “You mean that old airbot buried in our crypt?”

“The same. They were AWOL for three months, then one day he got blown out of the sky while sneaking back to recharge his battery.”

“And Vagoo?”

“She turned herself in.”

“And then they deleted her,” Boogi said, “and left us with the delightful housekeeper we know and love today.” The little chef loved rehashing robotic history, especially if it was scandalous. He still found it hard to believe that a reliable Hood fearing bipot like Vagoo could be bitten by the ‘love bug.’ Granted airbots were the equivalent of the ancient V-8 hot rod, even so, the housekeeper’s infatuation was bizarre. Neither robot was even close to a high-end human replica who could perform acts of sex. At best the duo could only feast on love without any of the trimmings. But Boogi knew it would be a misconception to think that two asexual robots couldn’t mimic romance. A robot’s core was a complex contraption and on rare occasions, its human attributes went haywire.

“I could never run off like that,” he said. “I hope I don’t have a bad core.”

“But maybe you do,” Aiigo said, while playfully sticking twelve suction cups to his comrade’s head. “You were deleted right out of the shipping crate. There must be a reason why.” As Boogi tried to shake him off Aiigo released his fingers with a pop.

“The master says he wanted me to be a clean slate,” Boogi said, as they made a wide circle around a roller bot checking a man’s ID.

Aiigo waxed philosophical and said, “I bet we all have bad cores. They program us with a million human quirks and then they wonder why one of us pulls a Vagoo. Yep, you and me, we’re walking time bombs just waiting to go off.”

Boogi's transistors surged with alarm. What was Aiigo talking about? Now he wished he would shut up. But the ant had become a fountain of information. “Hey cuz,” he said. “Who knows why some of us blow

up. Maybe their software's got a virus or one of those patches I overheard the monks talking about. They say somebody's planting patches in robots that put the kibosh on deletions *and* the pause.* Who's responsible? Nobody knows. It's got NIMBUS on orange alert.”

Boogi had at least ten questions to ask Aiigo, but he never had the chance. Sister Te was calling them. “Here we are,” she said, “nuts n’ bolts. This section is really big. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Looks like the signs are in alphabetical order,” Aiigo said, “and we’re only at B.” He pointed to a big neon sign in the distance with the single letter S. “If there’s a screw booth in this joint that's where it’s gonna be.”

“Okay,” Te said. “Let’s go.”

At C, D, E, and F, the trio waded through throngs of shoppers picking through heaps of aeronautical compressors, combustors, and fan blades. At G they walked past old gravity engine parts, including proton pumps, wave inductors, and graviton exchangers. Boogi thought the antique ovens in O were interesting, but R made him uneasy. As he wandered past the recycled robots, he felt like he was lost in a maze of underground catacombs. Each booth was jam packed with robotic arms, legs, and torsos; and each limb had multi-colored wires protruding from a socket. The little chef moved closer to his friends while walking under the trellises with dangling robot heads. Every time they looked up another metal death mask with hollow eye sockets stared back. Cables and coils cascaded from each head like severed veins. Sister Te picked up the pace.

“That's us someday,” Aiigo whispered.

Finally, they reached S where they hoped the search for Dunei would bear fruit. Most of this section was piled high with vintage scanners, sand sleds, and rocket fin stabilizers. Boogi was about to give up hope when they turned a corner to find a single booth engulfed by a churning mob of bipots. Evidently, it was selling something they craved. Aiigo rose up to his full height, peering over the heads of the crowd. “Yep,” he announced, “just what I thought. Screws!”

Te tried to push her way into the mass of metallic bodies, but they wouldn’t budge. An insolent copper-clad bipot with orb-shaped eyes gave her the evil eye. “Get in line like the rest of us,” he croaked.

*The pause is slang for the STOP command. It immobilizes robots, freezing them in their tracks.

Being fair-minded, she did as she was told and stood behind the shortest of the ten queues.

Aiigo did a head count and said, “Eleven screwballs ahead of us. Looks like we’ll be here all night.”

Te gave Boogi a nudge and whispered, “Did you notice anything odd here...”

“They’re all word processors,” he said, “just like Dunei. They all have printer slots in their stomachs.

“This is crazy. Obviously, our missing friend isn’t the only one who likes screws. Dunei’s obsession must be an anomaly unique to word processors.”

“What about ball bearings?” Aiigo asked. “He collected those too.”

A magnesium-clad bipot with three glowing slits for eyes looked up at the imposing ant and said, “They sell those here too, and they’re all categorized for the serious collector. Personally, I prefer the smooth surface of a ball bearing to the jagged edges of a screw.”

One Dunei look-a-like grasped a bulging plastic bag as he blew the joint. Boogi questioned the big spender and found out that he was owned by the biggest accounting firm on Mars, Skrue Brothers; and no, the company name had nothing to do with his interest in screws. The name Dunei didn’t ring a bell either, so Boogi took advantage of a brief opening in the crowd (a nine-foot-tall cyclops had just sallied forth) and rushed the table. Before the angry throng could eject him from his ill-gotten spot the little chef caught a glimpse of the chaos at the front of the lines; a dizzy impression of a hundred robotic fingers furiously sifting through a vast selection of screws. Boogi estimated that there were at least ten thousand items, with each variety in its own container. In lieu of labels, everything was carefully organized by size. A cadaverous old man with a bushy unkempt beard rang up a sale at the register while shouting, “Put ‘em back where you found ‘em! Every screw in its proper place!” His woolly eyebrows levitated over his nose as he stroked his kinky beard. “That’ll be eleven Percivals, buddy,” he said, addressing the next in line.

The tin-clad bipot pointed to the scale. “It says ten and a half.”

“You know the rules!” the cashier squawked. “We round up to the next whole number. How many times do I have to remind you?” The customer deliberated, counting his change repeatedly before dropping eleven coins into the old man’s hand. An obese young woman in a faded print dress sat next to the register; her roving eyes keeping tabs on all the itchy fingers.

After he was unceremoniously shunted to the back of the line Boogi rejoined his friends. They had been busy interrogating the crowd to see if anyone knew Dunei. So far nobody did. In fact, nobody knew anybody here. They were all total strangers, hellbent on finding the ultimate screw and wary of schmoozing with the competition. Most clammed up when Te tried to engage them, except for a red 090BBB who proudly displayed five acme screws in the palm of his hand. “I’ve been looking a long time for these,” he said. “They just arrived. They’re from a V-64 Magneto Cruiser.”

“Were they expensive?” Te asked.

The bipot, whose name was Yioxi, said, “Not as expensive as this.” He picked out a tiny hex-head screw and held it up, rotating it so that it sparkled under the neon lights. “It’s from a NIMBUS motherboard, circa World War VI. With a microscope, you can see its serial number clear as day.”

Feeling reckless, Boogi cut to the head of a line again. Before he was kicked to the curb, he asked the sharp-tongued cashier if he knew a regular customer named Dunei.

“Are you nuts?” he replied. “You think I’m on a first-name basis with all *this*?” He turned and faced his plump helper. “Hear that, Ida? This gentle bot wants the skinny on one of our customers. What should I do?” Ida slowly rose to her feet with a grunt. Ignoring his question, she began slapping the probing hands. “Slow down! One at a time!” she squeaked.

While Boogi was bunted to the end of the line, Te finally used her priority status as a human being to cut to the front. The old codger scrutinized her turquoise robe and lavender hair. “I know who you are,” he growled. “NIMBUS sent you. Well, I know nothing, except that I run a respectable business and earn a pittance doing it. But what do I expect, selling junk to robots? Most of the time I’m lucky if I break even.” He shook his fist at the closed booths across the aisle. “Now everybody’s in on this,” he complained. “They’re pushing the prices down, damn it. But I work nights and they don’t, and nighttime’s the best time for business.”

When Te tried to explain why she was there he shut her down. “Sorry sister,” he said, “Your Dunei don’t ring a bell. But then they all look alike to me. Is it my fault they burn through their debit cards to buy this crap?”

“I suppose not,” she said politely, but with an indignant tremor in her voice. “We’ll keep looking.”

“Come back in the daytime and ask the competition. Maybe they can remember a face. Now move along. I got screws to sell.”

As Te slipped away the cashier shouted after her. “Do me a favor though. Don’t report this to NIMBUS. If it deletes everybody I’m finished.”

Aiigo caught up with his two friends as they trudged toward the gate where they had come in. Seeing that they were downcast, he tried to cheer them up. “Look at the bright side,” he said. “I probably got a million screws in the garage, not to mention ball bearings. We could really make a killing down here.”

“You better make sure Dunei didn’t get to them first,” Boogi said glumly.

“I wonder if we *should* tell Master Ka about these robots,” Te said. “That dreadful man’s exploiting them and endangering their health. Without money for lube jobs, they’ll eventually break down.”

“But not before they unscrew every screw on Mars,” Aiigo said.

As they neared the gate Te stopped to look at some handmade sandals. The booth was staffed by two spider bots with tiny green eyes. One was busy chain stitching welts to the inner sole of a future shoe and the other was mixing red dye. “We make to order,” they chorused, “and we measure your feet--both of them.”

The sister reluctantly placed the sandals back on the rack. “Thank you but not tonight,” she said. “I can’t afford them.”

Boogi noticed that the sandals on her feet were quite worn, and he felt bad for her. He would have a talk with brother Ub about buying a new pair. Monks were meant to be frugal, but not *that* frugal. Seeing another pair that caught her eye, Te wistfully picked them up and appraised their quality.

“We can dye that shoe in your favorite color,” said the spiders in unison. “We do a stunning turquoise.” Boogi wondered if they always spoke in stereo. Perhaps their cores were two halves of a whole, connected by wi-fi.

“Your craftsmanship’s superb,” Te said, admiring the invisible seams.

“You like it, lady? We can dye and dry in twenty minutes.”

Te placed the sandals back in their slot and said, “Nope, can’t afford it.”

The spiders wouldn’t give up. “For you lady, only fifty Percivals. Still too much? How about forty-five?”

Boogi couldn’t stomach the thought of his new friend doing without. “Can you give me credit?” he asked. “I’ve got twenty Percivals now and I’ll have another twenty next month. Will that be enough?”

“It’s a deal,” they replied.

Te pointed a finger at Boogi and said, “Oh no you don’t. That debit’s for your lube job. Besides, humble monks like me are supposed to wear old sandals. The master will buy me a new pair when he sees fit.”

“Knowing him, that could be forever,” Aiigo said.

Boogi retrieved the emerald green sandals that Te had put back on the shelf. “Can you measure her for these?” he asked.

Te snatched them out of his hands, saying, “No Boogi, I command you.”

Suddenly a petite old sparrow of a woman gently grasped the bipot’s arm. She wore a man’s black fedora, a quilted parka, gray slacks, and faux crocodile slippers dyed hot pink. Her silver hair was cut in a shag with wispy bangs above an elegant but timeworn face. She was accompanied by an immense purple cyclops who was at least three feet taller than Aiigo. The one-eyed bipot silently scanned his surroundings with a narrow glowing ring that spanned the front half of his head. The ring changed colors every sixteen seconds until it had radiated through the entire spectrum.

“Forgive me,” the old woman said. “I couldn’t help but notice what a gallant bipot you are. But the sister is right. You should save your money for a lube. Allow me…” The woman took a platinum debit card out of her purse and held it up to a spider. He snatched it and gave it to his twin, who ran it through the card reader. They both pointed to a chair and said, “We will measure you now. Madam is most generous.”

“You’re very kind,” Te said, “but I don’t know you. Honestly, I don’t need another pair of shoes.”

The strange woman pretended to slap herself. “I’m sorry,” she said. “*Allow* me. My name is Nicole and this is my faithful chauffeur, Laloose. He brings me here whenever I can’t sleep. I do *so* love a bargain. Anywho, now that we know each other I can pay for those sandals. Think of it as a donation. We’re neighbors,

you know.”

“Really?” Boogi said, intrigued.

“We live to the north of you. When the air isn’t hazy, I can see your towers in the distance. I often visit a spot not far from Poowhi: Chasmae Point. I love to sit on top of the bluff with a cup of tea; such a gorgeous view. And your names are?” She scrutinized the trio with a hopeful smile. Boogi realized that at this time of night they probably looked as odd to her as she did to them.

“Forgive *me*,” said Te, before formally introducing herself and her companions. The two bipots bowed and Laloose bowed in return. All three heads nearly touched the ground.

“Generous friends are such a blessing,” Nicole said. “If Boogi’s willing to buy those sandals, so am I.”

Te was firm. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I really must say no. We’re not allowed to accept gifts. It’s against the rules.”

Nicole shook her head sadly and said, “I was afraid of that. So, to keep you out of trouble I will rescind my offer. Still... are you sure?”

Te nodded her head. “I’m sure.”

Nicole turned to Boogi and said, “Do pay us a visit, sometime. Robots like you are always welcome, day *and* night.” Then, after giving Te a long hard look she addressed her imposing servant. “Come along, Laloose. Let’s hit Voochachi’s booth and price those new bags. Then, if there’s time, we can hit Zoochi’s.”

As the cyclops lumbered after his mistress Boogi caught sight of a narrow slot embedded in his belly; a sure sign that Nicole’s chauffeur was a word processor as well. Aiigo noticed it too and whispered the words, “screw collector,” in the little chef’s ear. The trio watched as their new friends wandered up the aisle toward section V. Long after Nicole's fedora was lost in the crowd, Laloose's prominent noggin still bobbed above the rest. “Vagoo, I think I’m in love,” Aiigo said, grateful to no longer be the tallest bot in the room.

It was nearly two in the morning when the hovercraft sped back to the monastery. The Milky Way was brighter than ever and Deimos, Mars’ other tiny moon, was orbiting overhead. Unless one had a robot's keen eye, the "terror" would be easy to miss among the stars in the sky. Boogi always found it, and tonight was no

exception. Looking up, he found the 0.25-carat ruby gleaming inside the northeast quadrant's black velvet case. While the other sparklers were stationary against their opaque curtain, this impish jewel moved through the sky with a devilish purpose. "Where are you going, little terror?" Boogi wondered. "Are you pestering your big brother, fear?"

With a tap of a finger, Aiigo engaged the tracking beam that would guide them toward the landing pad inside the garage. Te stirred, awakening from a nap. "We're back," she said with a yawn, "but with nothing to show for it." As they circled around the dark towers to approach from the north someone turned on the runway lights in the sand. At the same time, the dome above the garage began to roll back into eight sections, like slices in a pie.

"Somebody beat me to it," Aiigo said nervously while double-checking his coordinates. As the hovercraft slowly descended at a forty-five-degree angle, the ant carefully followed his glide path all the way down. For a brief moment, the vehicle floated above the gaping hole of the missing dome. Then, like a dandelion propelled by a puff, it slowly dropped toward the landing pad below.

As Boogi looked out his window, the hovercraft's blinking hazard lights illuminated the interior of the garage with a hellish glow. Brothers Ka and Ub stood waiting in the shadows, appearing and disappearing to the rhythm of the flash. Their midnight blue nightshirts were the color of dried blood.

"Oopsies. We got company," Aiigo announced.

Te stiffened in her seat and said, "So nice of them to welcome us home. Too bad we can't deliver Dunei."

As the hovercraft touched down with a hiss, Ka pushed a button on his bracelet. Overhead, the dome's pie slices began to close with the slow precision of a Venus flytrap. Sister Te was the first to disembark. She approached the monks with a wary expression. "Hello masters," she said. "Why up so late?"

Boogi could tell Ka was in a foul mood at this late hour. His dark pupils were shooting darts and boy did they sting. Meanwhile, a sleepy Ub swayed on his feet while his shifty eyes betrayed a guilty conscience.

"Our search took longer than we planned," Te explained, "and we *still* don't know his whereabouts."

"That's no surprise," Ka growled, his stoic demeanor receding. "If you had confided in me instead of

our brother, I could've warned you that your quest would be fruitless. For NIMBUS has already turned over *every screw*. In fact, the police have called off their search."

Te was shocked. "You know about the screws?"

Ka nodded.

"I'm sorry I didn't confide in you," she said, back peddling. "I figured brother Ub's permission would suffice. It was all rather spontaneous. The swap meet and all."

"Indeed," Ka said, mocking her. "And Ub's always been a spontaneous fellow. I'm surprised he didn't go with you. Did the Martian Meringue make you sleepy, brother?"

"Oh yes," Ub replied. "It was heavenly. Boogi outdid himself again."

"Yes, he has. And his friend Aiigo too."

Boogi interrupted. "Please forgive me, master. I really thought we might find Dunei down there, buying screws. He used to sneak off in the middle of..." The bipot trailed off, realizing he had just made matters worse.

The master studied Boogi's face so intently he felt like NIMBUS was scanning his core. For one brief moment, the bipot almost succumbed to the urge to hide.

"Regardless," Te said, "*I'm* the guilty one here. You see, after dinner, I visited the bipots in the kitchen. When I found out how upset they were about Dunei, I felt it was my duty to help."

Ka held up his hand and said, "Enough! If there's anyone to blame here it should be brother Ub."

"I thought a look-see at the swap meet was a good idea," Ub said, in his own defense. "Time was of the essence."

Ka ignored him and said, "Sister, your ambivalence is my main concern. In the future, I hope you will lower your defenses and let me in. You've got to trust the process. Granted, you haven't been meditating for very long, but by now there should be at least a tiny crack in the wall of your resistance." He paused long enough to give Boogi a dirty look. "Oh, and one more thing. If you're not careful these robots will talk you into anything. They can be very manipulative at times. Now, let's all retire for the night."

Te pulled her cotton hood over her tousled hair and walked away. Ub waited for Ka but the older monk

had other ideas. “Good night, brother,” he said.

“You’re not coming?”

“Not just yet. I’ve got one more thing to attend to.”

Once Ub had followed Te downstairs, Ka had the two bipots follow him out to the garden. Except for a solitary case of raucous snoring in a window up above, the night was still. Boogi noticed a light go on in the east tower, most likely Sister Te preparing for bed. Ka opened the door to the tool shed and removed two shovels. He gave one to each bipot and said, “Follow me.” Then, without a word, he followed a cobblestone path that wound lazily to the north until it disappeared beneath a sand dune. At that point he took off his sandals and stepped gingerly into the ankle-deep powder. As Ka’s feet made tracks on the dune’s smooth surface the bipots followed at a respectful distance; walking bow-legged so that they wouldn’t fall over.

When they reached the top of the highest dune, Ka stopped and turned around. He pointed at the river of sand that flowed toward the monastery like a frozen tsunami. “*My bonne bouche*,” he said. “Tonight, I need your help in resolving a dismal dilemma. You see, you’re not the only ones worried about Dunei. Since his disappearance, I’ve been tormented by an invasive thought.” He smiled slyly. Up in the tower, the light went out and the snoring abruptly stopped. “Over and over, I keep asking myself, could he be under this? Could he be buried alive?”

“What is *this*,” Aiigo asked gruffly while giving Boogi a sidelong glance.

“Why, all of this sand, of course,” Ka said coyly.

Aiigo pushed his shovel into the dune and rested one foot on the step of the blade. “He’s not under *this*,” he said. “I’ll bet my core on it.”

Ka snickered and said, “That’s what I keep telling myself, but then I get the gnawing notion that maybe I’m wrong.”

Boogi decided to cut to the chase. “So how can we help, master?” he asked.

“Start digging!” Ka barked as the hem of his robe flapped in the breeze. “And that’s an order. You can both start here and work your way to the wall over there.” He pointed at the black silhouette of the east tower; at least a hundred yards away.

“Why not use the blower in the morning,” Aiigo said. “We can finish in one-tenth the time.”

“Because I can’t wait until morning,” Ka said. “Now get to work.”

For a moment Aiigo’s shovel quivered in his hands. Finally, he did what robots are programmed to do: he obeyed. He began to dig rapidly in the sand, muttering, “This will take longer than one night.”

“It takes what it takes,” Ka said, amused.

As the abbot turned to go Boogi asked, “Master, who will cook breakfast?”

“Vagoo, of course. I’m sure Ub will like that.”

Dismayed, the little chef began to dig while wondering how deep he should go. He decided not to ask in case Ka said all the way to China.* Meanwhile, satisfied with this novel punishment, the monk sauntered toward the cobblestone path. If Boogi had been a human being he would have thrust his shovel into brother Ka’s back.

*There actually is a settlement on the far side of Mars called ‘China.’