

## Chapter Four

Master Ka was surprised by the brothers' blasé response to 'the robot chain gang,' as Ub liked to call it. At breakfast, a contentious accident prone Vagoo served lumpy oatmeal, burnt toast, and hardboiled eggs *dans la coquille* to the outraged monks. Since this was supposed to be a morning of silent reflection everyone was using sign language to complain. Vagoo counted at least a dozen raised fists and middle fingers as she trundled frantically from table to table with her basketful of eggs. As the seconds ticked by her commitment to decorum fizzled. Finally, after throwing an egg at her most captious critic (she missed), the Bunyanesque bumblebee retired to the kitchen and refused to come out.

Meanwhile, at Ka's behest, the brothers pondered Boogi and Aiigo's fall from grace and whether there was a lesson to be learned from it. The answer was no. As far as the conventional wisdom was concerned Ka should have left the sand where it was so that Boogi could stay in the kitchen. At this point the brothers were in no mood for silent reflection. As soon as Ka's back was turned, one of the sillier young monks filled his cheeks with eggs and pounded his chest like a gorilla. In a heartbeat, the virtuous silence was overcome by foot-stomping guffaws. Ka twirled around and silenced the room in five seconds flat; except for one unfortunate monk who tried to bury his uncontained chortles under a fake coughing fit. When he was finished hacking, the master ordered him outside to replace a grateful Aiigo. Of more concern was the absence of Sister Te, and after refusing a hasty serving of sliced but unpeeled Ubanas, Ka slinked off to the east tower to find her.

The abbot rode the lift up to the nineteenth floor and knocked on the second of six doors surrounding the elevator shaft. When nobody answered, Ka unlocked the door with the touch of a finger and slipped inside. The monks' rooms were all alike and similar to his, but smaller and with only one balcony. Te's balcony faced north and had emerald green draperies over its door. The room's walls were concrete, white, and completely unadorned. The furniture was just as sparse as Ka's: a futon, dresser, and writing desk, all in the center of the

room. Te stood at the balcony railing in a revealing baby doll nightgown. She held a smoldering butt in one hand. While looking down, she stuck the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and puffed like a gumshoe; then stubbed it out in an ashtray on top of the handrail. The ashtray was overflowing with butts. Ka crept closer and closer without saying a word. As he stood in the balcony's doorway, the harsh aroma of tobacco smoke overpowered the sweet fragrance of lavender soap exuding from her pores. The abbot was grateful that the combined odors made him nauseous, for it freed him from temptation. Te must have sensed that she was being watched because suddenly she turned around with arms crossed, glaring at him.

Ka attempted a fatherly smile. "Sister," he said, "I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't," she said, "except when I'm angry; and right now, I'm angry."

Observing the usual decorum, the abbot kept his eyes downcast even though the sight of her bare shoulders was inspiring. The old monk had never seen so much nudity on a woman before. He wished that he could gently caress the luscious contours of her smooth flesh. Instead, he spoke like a proper man of the cloth, saying, "I apologize for my brash intrusion. When you didn't come to breakfast, I was concerned that you might be ill."

Te walked around him and went back inside. Ka could barely hide his disappointment when she snatched a bath robe off a hanger, slung it over her shoulders, and tied the sash. Then she plopped herself down on the futon and rested her chin on her knees. Even though the abbot was superior in rank, he found himself blushing when she scrutinized him with those exquisite violet eyes. "Why are you humiliating Boogi like this?" she said. "I've been watching from the railing since dawn, waiting for you to call off your childish charade."

Now Ka's dander began to rise. "Hold your tongue, young lady," he said. "What may seem childish to you is a necessary evil; practiced for thousands of years. It's called atonement."

Te rolled her eyes. "And pray tell, what is Boogi and Aiigo atoning?" she asked.

"Must I spell it out?" Ka said. "Curfew for robots is nine o'clock sharp. Ub was completely out of line allowing them to leave the premises."

"Then punish brother Ub. You admit he made the wrong call."

The master shook his head sadly. “You really don’t understand, do you?” he said. “You think those bipots are innocent children when in fact they’re Machiavellian machines with extremely high IQs. While they *are* programmed to obey the rules, sometime their human personalities get in the way. Boogi knew better, but he still went along with *your* charade. If I don’t make him pay a price for breaking one rule, then he will break more.”

“Machiavellian?” Te scoffed. “I can’t believe you actually said that. If I were Boogi I would sue you for slander. Except that he can’t because robots aren’t humans.”

“No, they aren’t. They may emote like a human but they’re still only a machine. You forget that acting and being are two different animals. A robot is a machine we’ve programmed to act like us, but they’re not flesh and blood. They don’t have a soul.”

The sister staggered to her knees and said, “I know a theologian who might disagree with you.”

“Enough,” the abbot said. “Let’s stop before we get bogged down in a bottomless theological swamp. I’ve got a monastery to run, and I call the shots as I see ‘em. You don’t have to like what I do but I would advise you to respect my authority.” He hoped he sounded strict but not too harsh. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her away.

Te snickered and said, “I’ll respect you more if you tell Boogi to stop.”

Ka raised an eyebrow and said, “Now look who’s manipulating.” The abbot was secretly flattered on two counts; one, that such a scrumptious young woman would even consider toying with him, and two, that he had tamed her fury. Should he give in and risk looking like an easy mark? For a moment, he struggled to make up his mind. Then, grudgingly, he raised his wrist and tapped his bracelet three times, summoning Boogi back to the kitchen.

A dazzling smile brightened Te’s face. “Thank you, master!” she said. “Despite what they say, you *are* a man of mercy.” When he frowned, she reversed course and said, “Well, you know, you *do* have critics and maybe one or two...” She trailed off, her face beet red.

Ka enjoyed seeing her discomfort because he was the only one who could alleviate it. Summoning the kindest, most fatherly smile on Mars, he said, “No worries. I didn’t get where I am today without some bad

press. But I don't want you to think Master Ka's an easy mark. So far, I've given you a long leash because you're still our newest newcomer at Poowhi. But that could change depending on your progress." The old abbot paused long enough to examine the widening gap in Te's robe. She noticed it too and quickly tightened the sash. With a gulp, Ka continued, "And I have my theory about where your robot ideation comes from—."

"You mean my neurosis," Te interjected, "my incurable psychopathology because my foster parents were bipots. Thanks to them, on some level I *am* a bipot."

The pompous abbot nodded his know-it-all head. "I remember those days," he said. "The great social experiment. Let's place our orphaned waifs with the robots! Program our machines to nurture and nourish, and a new era is upon us. Unfortunately, it didn't work."

"That's what the critics said, but they had an agenda."

"They did? Then why were you removed from your home?" Ka knew all about that period in her life. He had read her NIMBUS dossier a hundred times.

Te stood up and headed for the balcony. "Why?" she said. "Because our state religion was breathing down my social workers' necks. The church has always been against the mix and match school of robot-human relations. They want humans with humans, and robots with robots. Long story short, the Children's Bureau caved and tossed me back in the orphanage. Later I was sent to a human foster home where I was molested. Meanwhile the robots who raised me were deleted—."

"And you've resented humans ever since," Ka said, channeling as much compassion as he could muster.

"Wouldn't you?" Te said glumly. She leaned on the railing and lit another cigarette.

Ka stood at the French doors and continued being kind. "My dear, dear orphan," he said. "You've suffered more than your fair share of grief. It was a blessing that NIMBUS brought you here. You know you're only the second woman to take her vows at Poowhi?"

Te nodded. The lit end of her cigarette crackled and popped as she inhaled.

"And just like sister Mo, soon you'll find your niche here. Trust me, once the benefits of your meditation kicks in you'll really start to flourish."

“I hope so,” Te said. “But I don’t want to be like NIMBUS. I want to enjoy things; feel stuff when I do stuff. Most NIMBUS buffs are afraid of their emotions.” She paused, then said, “Oops. My big mouth strikes again...”

Ka was dismayed by her sacrilegious words. Just when he thought they were bonding, she had to ruin everything by being stupid. For a moment, he fought the urge to slap her pretty face. Somehow he managed to restrain himself, but his tone was stern. “You think NIMBUS is artificial because you don’t understand it,” he said. “It’s called contempt prior to investigation. You don’t mind building a Hood, but when it comes to meditating you resist. Last night I watched you during our evening session. You wore your Hood like everybody else, but you never turned it on.”

“I had a headache,” Te said.

“What are you afraid of? You’re not a robot. NIMBUS won’t delete you and install someone else.” Ka felt his lungs churning like a sandstorm, tugging at his heart. Was he despondent or was he feeling the symptoms of secondhand smoke? “You must give NIMBUS a chance,” he said. “Let me be your guide.” He tapped his bracelet and a hologram appeared, floating in the air. It was his daily planner. “Meet me at four in Boogi’s garden,” he said, “and bring your Hood. That’s an order.”

Then, without another word, he twirled around and left the room.

At three-sixteen in the afternoon a black hovercraft of the NIMBUS patrol arrived at the monastery. Ka hurried down the terrace steps to greet them as their ominous aircraft climbed over the parapet and drifted through the air. After the big black beetle touched down in the center of the courtyard, brother Ub crept up to it and tried unsuccessfully to peer through the opaque one-way glass. “Hello,” he said, “What brings you here?”

Ka already knew why they were here. He had received a bulletin from NIMBUS an hour ago while meditating in his Hood. Dunei had been found. As always, he found it disorienting when his self-induced trance was interrupted by priority alerts. It was like waking from a deep slumber to the ringing of an alarm. As the hologram came into focus and formed the face of a police lieutenant, Ka felt a jolt of panic. After the two

exchanged the usual pleasantries, the officer broke the news. They had found Dunei's body at the bottom of a gorge about two miles down. After tumbling and sliding and ricocheting off boulders, what was left was mangled beyond recognition. They found his right leg caught on a granite scarp further down. The initial point of impact was difficult to determine, but a massive compression on the bipot's dome made them think he had fallen headfirst. Of course, Ka had reacted with the appropriate horror. The only good news was that Dunei had tested negative for illegal patches. A positive result might have explained why he was out wandering around so close to the ledge.

The old monk stood at attention as the hovercraft's butterfly doors slowly opened like inverted seashells. Two police officers in black jump suits got out and removed a bulky canvas bag from a platform in the back. After they had placed it at his feet, Ka turned to brother Ub and said, "You better get a stretcher and wheel him down to the prep room." He smiled at the officers and said, "Here at Poowhi our servants are offered the same last respects as humans. They are interred in our mausoleum, but in their own chamber of course."

The lead officer smiled back and said, "It looks like we recovered everything. It sure was a nasty fall. What the hell was he doing hiking so close to your cliff?"

Ka shook his head sadly. "We'll never know," he said. "The last time I saw him was during dictation. After that, who knows what transpired? Dunei was a known wanderer. If only I had deleted him in time. He was a superb word processor."

The officer wrote something on a digital pad and said, "Yep, a clean install would have corrected the wandering. You have our sincere condolences."

"Thank you both," Ka said, suppressing a devious smirk. Now that he was apparently getting away with everything, he was feeling more relaxed.

By this time, a group of monks had assembled on the terrace to check out the canvas sack lying on the ground. Sister Te descended the steps followed by the bipots. Boogi's round eyes were fixated on the bag. Vagoo kept her eyes focused on her dainty feet. Aiigo pressed his fingers together and then pulled them apart, making the suction-cups pop. "I'm sorry to inform you that they found Dunei," Ka announced. "He is no

more.”

“What happened?” Te asked gloomily.

The same policeman, beguiled by this unexpected beauty, smiled and said, “Are you sure you want—?”

“Yes, I am,” she snapped. When he gave her the facts, tears welled up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, miss. The 070’s are notorious for wandering, as I recollect. May I suggest you go preemptive and delete the others before they wander?” The officer glanced at Boogi. “The 070’s do really well with new cores.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Te said. She took out a hankie and blew her nose.

Brother Ub returned, out of breath, pulling the stretcher down the stairs. Its back wheels went “clang!” every time they dropped another step. Boogi and Aiigo intercepted it and wheeled it over to the canvas bag. Ka wondered how they felt. He doubted if they felt real grief. If they did, it would be another mistake in the annals of robot evolution. He peered into Boogi’s honeycomb eyes. Then he looked at Aiigo and Vagoo. Their tiny black pinpoints glared back at him. A chill ran up his spine as he identified what irked him most about robots. They were designed to act like a human, yet their eyes were anything but. A human’s eyes were a window to his soul. A robot’s eyes were either impenetrable black holes or smooth white globes that reflected your face.

“Take him away,” Ka said. “I will prep him for burial later.”

As a tearful Te and her robot friends wheeled the bag away, Ka signed his name on the policeman’s pad. His hand shook as he held the pen, but the officer didn’t seem to notice. After more condolences, they climbed back into their hovercraft and took off. Ub stood forlornly on the steps, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief.

“Oh, come now, brother,” Ka said gruffly. “You’re as bad as Sister Te. I could toss all our Hoods over the cliff, and you wouldn’t blink an eye.”

“I’m a sensitive man,” said Ub, blowing his nose, “That’s why I’m a monk.”

Ka left him in tears and climbed the steps, shooing away the other monks like pigeons in his path.

Four o'clock sharp. The master arrived in the garden carrying the Hood that Te had lent him. He was pleased to find the sister already seated on a marble bench under an asparagrape arbor. He was not pleased to find Boogi tending the nectarados nearby. The bipot would be an annoying distraction. The abbot smiled at the young woman as he approached. She had put her Hood aside so that she could hold a bouquet of white roseantheums under her nose.

“Good afternoon, sister,” he said. “I hope you’ve recovering from the shock of Dunei’s demise.”

“Not really,” she said. “These cheer me up though. Boogi is so thoughtful. He gave them to me even though his grief is the worst. How are *you*, Master Ka? You don't fool me with your stoic demeanor. I could tell that you were tied in a knot.”

“I suppose I was,” he replied. “I may seem heartless sometimes but let me assure you, I do have a live one tucked away somewhere.”

As he sat down, she punched him lightly in the chest. “I think it’s in there,” she said.

Her youthful charms pierced Ka like a syringe of adrenalin, and in a heartbeat the day’s stress evaporated into thin air. But as Te sniffed the flowers a suspicion formed in his mind, buzzing around like an irritating fly that he couldn’t swat. “So, those are from Boogi, heh? I’m surprised that there were any left after the storm.”

“So was he. But he discovered a bush sheltered under a fallen wind screen. Most of the blooms were in good shape.”

As Boogi raked the leaves under the nectarado trees Ka was sure that the wily bipot was observing them through the corner of his eye. Using a rake instead of a noisy blower was a crafty choice, all the better for robot ears to pick up human conversations.

“Yes, thoughtful indeed,” Ka said, lowering his voice. “But remember, he’s coded for that. A human being is behind every robot’s virtue.”

“Who cares where virtue begins? I’m just grateful to receive it.”

All of a sudden, Ka became nauseated by the roseantheum's fragrance. An old memory that he was loath to recall had crept out of the cobwebs in his brain. Te's bouquet smelled just like the flowers Ka's mother used to put in vases when he was a child. But these bouquets were not gifts from his father, who was stationed on the Moon. They came from his wealthy mother's favorite servant, a humanoid bipot that replicated the ideal man. This charming substitute for Ka's father was irresistible and one day she ran off with him, never to return. From then on, the poor boy grew up alone in private boarding schools nursing the savage pain of abandonment.

Ka knew that Boogi's bouquets would never be a threat because the little chef was not a human clone. He could think like a human, but he didn't resemble one. He lacked the essential elements that the controversial pleasuroids possessed. The abbot snickered at the small titanium bipot raking leaves. He was definitely no gigolo.

"Sister, will you share these flowers with us at dinner?" Ka asked. "They would make a wonderful centerpiece at our table."

Te was a bit put out by this request, but because Ka was her superior, she felt it was best to comply. "Of course," she said reluctantly. "I'll give them to Vagoo to put in water. I believe there are a few more that Boogi can pick for Dunei's funeral. That is, if it's customary to provide flowers for robots..."

"I don't see why not" Ka said. "There aren't any traditions that I recall. Dunei will be only the third burial on my watch."

"Only three?"

"Nowadays robots are traded in before they get old enough to expire."

"And a properly cared for robot can last for centuries," Te said.

Boogi had moved closer and was raking under the adjoining arbor. He was obviously eavesdropping. Ka made a mental note to trade him in too. "It's exceedingly rare for a robot to expire at Poowhi," Ka said. "But Dunei was a wanderer and they always come to a bad end." Finally, he decided Boogi had annoyed him enough. "Boogi!" he shouted. "Will you do me a favor and take these flowers to Vagoo so she can put them in a vase?" He snatched the bouquet and held it up for the bipot to take away. When Ka was certain that Boogi

was gone, he slid closer to Te and held up his Hood. “This my dear is the solution to all your ills. I guarantee it won’t let you down. But it only works if you turn it on.”

“I have, but NIMBUS is so vast it feels like I’ll lose my mind in it.”

Ka grew excited. “Precisely!” he said. “You’re supposed to lose your mind. When I engage my Hood and surrender to the greater mind all my fears melt away. I’m reborn.”

“But I’m afraid,” Te insisted.

“Only of your past.”

“No, I’m afraid of NIMBUS!”

“Please trust me,” Ka said. “If you can just let go and be in the now of now, NIMBUS will show you things you’ve never seen before. You will come to a better understanding of your place in the universe. At Poowhi we are taught to master mediation so that we can master ourselves. Please. Let’s put on our Hoods and meditate together. Ready?”

Ka didn’t wait for an answer. Hoping that she would follow by example, he pulled the Hood over his head and closed the visor. Then he turned a small knob by his left ear. Closing his eyes, he waited for NIMBUS to appear. First the blackness deepened and became the void. Then a tiny piercing light in the center of his brain whispered, “Welcome.” After that first soothing word was spoken it took all his strength to break free. But he did. Opening his visor, he glanced at Te and smiled.

The sister sat silently with the Hood over her head. The visor was shut, and the knob was turned to the on position.