

## Chapter Five

The following day arrived with rosy streaks of high-altitude dust roaming overhead. Deep underground, at the bottom of a winding corkscrew stairway, Boogi and his fellow mourners stood in a drafty candlelit mausoleum. Each participant clutched a white long-stemmed rosanthemum in one hand. Brother Ub came late. “Is Master Ka here?” he asked, as he looked around the chamber.

“Nope,” Boogi said, “but he did prepare Dunei for burial, and we have his permission to seal the crypt.” The bipot handed the monk a flower.

The monk viewed the battered remains and blew his nose into a hankie. “The master’s restoration has surpassed my expectations,” he said with a sniff. “All four limbs are attached.

“We’re glad you’re here,” Te said, changing the subject.

“My pleasure,” Ub replied. “I represent all of the monks when I say, ‘We’re heartbroken.’” He sneezed into his hankie. “Ugh. Excuse me. My sinuses detect dust. I fear another storm’s a brewin’.”

Ub's handkerchief actually played a dual role. It was also at the ready for an onslaught of tears. Dunei's demise reminded him of another tragedy many years ago, when his sister and brother-in-law were killed in a catastrophic rocket crash. They left behind a young son, whom Ub still provided for from afar. Now, as he dabbed at his eyes, his grief was exacerbated by this past event. Within seconds, his tears had escalated into a serious bout of sobs and blubbing. He missed Dunei *and* his sister very much.

As Ub tried to contain himself, Te recited the Saint Terabyte prayer and Boogi delivered a touching rendition of the Robot’s Psalm (the short version).

*Ye robot who dwells under the star king’s mantle abides in the heavens.*

*Free to roam, free of fear, in the celestial house of the blessed master.*

*Thy robots say, ‘As I wander to and fro, you are my refuge and my fortress,*

*My haven in the stars. When you call my name, I answer joyously,*

*For I belong to you, as do the Moon and the Sun, and I am loved.'*

After a moment of silence punctuated by Ub's boohoos, Vagoo and Aiigo placed their flowers on Dunei's chest. Vagoo brushed a plastic finger against her plastic lips, then gently touched each shattered eye. She was followed by Te, who gently laid her flower in the crook of Dunei's arm. Ub put his flower in the broken bipot's hand. Then it was Boogi's turn. "Goodnight, sweet robot," he said, as he reached out and gently caressed Dunei's crushed head. Inside, a billion plus transistors waited in vain for an electrical pulse.

Suddenly, Boogi jerked his hand away. The taste sensors on his fingertips had automatically given him an analysis of the impact residue on poor Dunei's head. It was ninety-eight percent bronze, an alloy that was rarely found in boulders and rocks. Yet the bipot's demise was obviously due to the blunt force trauma that accompanies falling off a cliff. Boogi pondered this anomaly while trying to recreate the tragic events of that night. As he relived his friend's fate, he imagined what it must have been like to slip and fall, tumbling from rock to rock. He grimaced at the thought, like a chef who hated the soup after adding a pinch of salt. Coming to, Boogi dismissed his morbid reverie and rejoined his fellows in time to help them slide Dunei into the marble crypt.

Once Aiigo had sealed the cracks, the mourners filed up the winding stairs and stepped into the daylight. Ka waited by the door to the terrace, holding a Hood in his arms. Addressing Ub first, he said, "The brothers need your supervision. They're fortifying the windows. Evidently another dust storm is on its way, although I suspect it might be a false alarm. Still, better safe than sorry."

Ub held up the damp bundle in his fist and said, "My nose is never wrong!"

Ka regarded the handkerchief with distaste. "Please brother, spare me your weather reports." Then, turning to Te, he said, "I hope my funeral prep met your expectations."

"It did," she said, as she wiped away a tear. "We all had closure, thank you very much."

As Ka bowed, Boogi tried to rub the residue off his fingers. His sensors were still tasting the bronze. "At the very least, you could've wiped off the dirt," he grumbled. If Dunei had been a Hood, he would have been as clean as a pin.

Ka heard him and was not amused. "Boogi, I want you in the garden," he said. "Pick everything that's

ripe. That way if a storm does hit—.”

Aiigo spoke up. “Should I seal the doors?”

“Not yet. As a rule, I disregard brother Ub’s schnozz reports. Plus, the warning is only a level orange.”

Turning to Te, he asked, “Shall we visit the terrace? It’s time for another session.”

The sister’s face turned pale. “Shouldn’t I be helping the brothers?” she asked.

“No, I think I’ve got enough monks for that chore. I want you to concentrate on your meditations. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

“Okay,” Te said with a sigh. “I’ll go get my Hood.”

Later that afternoon, Vagoo and Boogi worked in the garden dressed in vinyl overalls and rain boots. The housekeeper stood in the mud hosing off a basket full of Kaflowers which she had just cut from their stems. Nearby, the little chef ripped another beetado out of the ground. Vagoo shut off the water and said, “Why oh why can’t I be waterproof like Aiigo? I’m already starting to rust, I tell you.”

Boogi shrugged and threw another beetado into a basket by his feet. Since the garden was at a higher elevation than the terrace one could gaze between the towers and see most of the balustrade below. For the last hour Ka and Te had been sitting on a marble bench with their Hoods on and their visors closed. Boogi found himself growing uneasy as the minutes ticked by. Each time he looked in that direction he mumbled to himself, “Don’t worry, dummy. It can’t delete her.”

Suddenly a Kaflower bounced off his head. “Stop that!” Vagoo hollered. When Boogi ignored her, she trudged through the mud and covered his eyes (or most of them) with her hands. “Stop worrying about Sister Te. She’s a big girl. I bet she could KO that dirty old man with *both* hands tied behind her back.”

“I hope you’re right,” Boogi said. “But I’m more worried about the Hood. Have you ever seen a monk who was late for a meditation? I bet they’d mediate all day long if they could.”

Vagoo snorted. “It makes them happy,” she said. “And if it makes them happy, I’m happy. Less work for me.”

The two bipots took off their overalls and rain boots and hung them up to dry. Then they carried their

baskets to the kitchen. Boogi got one final glimpse of Te before the tower's curvature blocked his view. "Now that we're in cahoots," he said, "I feel very protective of her. It's kind of like I've chosen her to be my master, if you know what I mean. While Ka is my legal master, I've picked Te to be my master of choice."

Either Vagoo was unsympathetic or else she just plain disapproved. "There's no such thing as a 'master of choice,'" she said. "You're forgetting one of our ten commandments, 'thou shall not mingle in the affairs of humans.' Ka is your master whether you like it or not. Our job is to do our chores and then get plenty of downtime\* before we do our chores again. Then do it again and again."

"The robot commandments were written by humans," Boogi said. "But don't worry. I won't get uppity. I know my place." Vagoo's admonishment infuriated the bipot because he knew that she was right. And he had only confessed the half of it! Little did she know that 'in cahoots' had become his favorite phrase. He found himself reciting its definition over and over: *plotting or making plans together in secret*. The whole concept made him feel important. And then there were his daydreams. His favorite was the one where his culinary skills were so fabulous, Te bought him outright (for an exorbitant sum). Then there was the one where he got to inform everyone that yes, he, of all robots, was a servant of Madam Te. Sometimes Boogi magnanimously added his comrades to his purchase price in a package deal. How happy they would be when they all could say goodbye to the detestable Ka.

After entering the kitchen, the bipots washed their plastic hands and began preparing dinner. Boogi mostly kept to himself as he scrubbed the beetados under the steaming spray bars. The menu tonight would begin with a salad instead of soup, followed by the main course: *Langoustine*, prepared as a ravioli, with Parmesan cream and beetado jelly. The little chef chopped beetados while Vagoo rinsed the greens in cold water (on Mars the lettuce was mostly red). Then, while the housekeeper chopped Kaflovers and sauteed them in oil and vinegar (to hide the bitter taste), Boogi simmered the beetados in water. As Vagoo watched solemnly, the bipot strained off the hot liquid into a large pot and stirred in lemon juice and pectin, bringing it to a boil. Then, as Vagoo watched incredulously, he dumped twelve cups of sugar into the pot and stirred.

"So, what do you really think of Sister Te?" Boogi asked nonchalantly.

\*Downtime is the seven-hour period, usually at night, when robots hibernate.

Vagoo was frank. “Personally, I think any human who likes to hobnob with bipots is probably missing some marbles.”

“Don’t you like her?”

“I don’t understand her. You, I understand, because you’re a robot.”

“I like her,” Boogi said, as he ladled the beetado jelly into glass jars. “She’s the first monk to pay attention to us. She took us to the swap meet and she helped us bury Dunei.”

Vagoo hooted. “And you ended up shoveling sand,” she said. “If I were you, I’d keep my honeycomb eyeballs on my chores. Hand me those Vagootoes please; my favorite plant.”

As the housekeeper sliced the plump round vegetables and tossed them in with the greens, Boogi continued his interrogation. “Have you noticed the special attention Ka gives her?” he asked.

“You keep out of that,” Vagoo snapped. “It’s none of your business. The master’s only human and she’s a pretty woman. Te’s the first female here since sister Mo.”

“What happened to *her*?” Boogi asked, intrigued.

“She’s in the mausoleum with Dunei and all the rest.”

Boogi contemplated her remark while boiling the pasta and frozen langoustines in separate pots. At the same time, he poured the Kaflower dressing over the salad and tossed it. Vagoo was already wiping down the cutting boards. Out of nowhere, she said, “You shouldn’t have given her those flowers. Master was not happy.”

Boogi glared at her as he removed the first langoustine from the pot. “You spy!” he said. “So much for sticking to your chores.”

Vagoo ignored his accusation and said, “I saw master snatch the bouquet right out of her hands,” she said. “You better watch your step. If Ka decides she likes you more than him, you could end up under a Hood.”

As Boogi drained the pasta he pondered Vagoo’s words. Suddenly the prospect of being in cahoots seemed hazardous. Obviously, the robot commandments were words to the wise, even if they were the words of humans. “I just don’t understand,” he grumbled, “why being in cahoots is wrong. But I do get your drift.

As long as Ka's in charge I better not mingle. For now on, I'm sticking to my chores." Looking up, Boogi decided the neon lights were too harsh. As he dimmed them, his night vision took over and everything became bright again. He sighed.

Vagoo caressed his titanium dome. "Be careful, Boogi," she said. "Take it from Vagoo, she knows. Half my life was deleted in the blink of an eye, and now Aiigo knows more about me than I do." As she slipped through the pantry door, she said, "Summon the ant. We need help!"

While serving dinner, Boogi noticed that Te was still seated at Ka's side. The favoritism was out in the open now, but nobody seemed to mind. As the little chef gave Ub another plate of *Langoustine*, the grateful monk blew him a kiss. Meanwhile, Boogi's newest dessert innovation was waiting in the pantry, something rich and delicious: 'Flaming Boogiberries Jubilee,' served in a sweet beetado sauce. Whether it was apparent to Ka or not, Boogi's devotion to his master of choice was plain to see in the artistry of his dessert. Like Te herself, the bipot's sentiment was not too subtle but not too bold.