

Chapter Six

The next morning NIMBUS canceled the dust storm alert. The sky above Tithonius Canyon was a vivid eggshell blue and brother Ub had stopped sneezing. In the east tower Vagoo was stripping the beds and collecting dirty laundry for her weekly wash. Boogi was helping, in pay back for her work in the kitchen. The hamper was nearly full when they entered Ub's room on the tenth floor. The housekeeper was showing the strain of not only performing her chores, but Dunei's as well. Plus, Dunei had always helped her do the laundry, which is why Boogi was pushing the hamper today.

"I can't keep up," Vagoo complained. "If master doesn't get a replacement soon, I'll blow a fuse. I only got three hours of downtime last night because I was up at two AM to process words." Vagoo detested Ka's dictation because she didn't have Dunei's internal components. After memorizing the master's words, she had to visit the monks' library to type, edit, email, upload, download, and print. Then she had to track Ka down to get his signature on the official docs.

Boogi had to pull the hamper backwards because Vagoo was throwing the towels over his head. As she tossed the laundry in his direction, the bipot was supposed to catch and sort, catch and sort; separating the whites from the colors (Vagoo used old fashioned bleach to whiten her whites). As she dumped a basketful of Ub's soiled handkerchiefs into the hamper she said, "Humans are disgusting."

"Why doesn't he take an antihistamine?" Boogi asked, appalled by the size of the hankie heap.

"Who knows?" Vagoo said. "For once I'm grateful my schnozz is fake." Perhaps the housekeeper was uninformed, because the plastic cone in the center of her face was functional. Its surface was covered with tiny sensors that analyzed smells.

When they were finished in Ub's room the bipots rolled six hampers into the service elevator and took it down to the basement. The laundry room was at the far end of a dark tunnel. After Boogi turned on the lights the bipots filled two Jacuzzi sized washing machines to the brim. Then Vagoo measured the detergent and

bleach and poured them into the dispensers. Boogi pulled three turquoise robes out of the whites and tossed them in with the colors. Vagoo groaned and said, “See what happens when I don't get enough downtime?”

“It could be worse,” Boogi said. “Can you imagine this if we were in the middle of a symposium?”

“Fifty-nine monks are enough,” Vagoo said.

While the washing machines were filling up with steaming water, the housekeeper went completely limp. Her core had initiated an emergency pause, the equivalent of falling asleep on one's feet. Boogi tapped her and she came to with a start. “Yes, master?” she said, confused.

While the laundry was in the wash, the little chef hid Vagoo in the pantry so that she could catch up on her downtime. The housekeeper occasionally used this musty inner sanctum for refuge during times like this. After patting her on the head, Boogi turned the light off and left her standing like a gargoyle in the dark. He was planning the lunch menu when brother Ka burst into the kitchen with Aiigo close behind. “We're expecting a visitor tomorrow,” he announced, “a VIP, as a matter of fact. Please cook a dinner that will surpass even brother Ub's voracious expectations. You can order fresh provisions if you need them. Meanwhile, Aiigo and I are going into town to pick up my new word processor.”

“Would that be Dunei's replacement?” Boogi asked hopefully.

“Even better than Dunei,” Ka replied cryptically. “Tell Vagoo to clean thirty-nine west, or is it thirty-eight west, I always get them mixed up. Anyway, clean the suite that faces south. It's extremely important that our VIP's room is spic-and-span. And one more thing. Sister Te will be meditating on the terrace. I don't want her to be disturbed.” Before Boogi could even respond, the abbot twirled around and rushed out the door in a turquoise flash.

Aiigo waved goodbye, wiggling his suction cups in the little chef's face. “Ta, ta,” he said. “I'm off into the wild blue yonder.” Boogi knew that the big ant loved being a pilot above all else and would jump at the chance to play chauffeur at any hour of the day or night. Now, as he scrambled out the door, he sang an aviator's song.

I fly by day, I fly by night, I always aim for the highest height.

*If you dare, I can get you there, with the tug of my yoke,
I'm your bloke. So, strap yourself in and close your eyes,
As we zoom through the air, I'll take you there.*

After the hovercraft departed, Boogi opened the pantry door and peered into the shadows. Vagoo stood next to the canned goods, as silent as a broken clock. The little chef closed the door and crept over to the automatic food processor. He entered a request for assorted canapés, sandwich rolls, and moonplant pasta. “Let them eat jukebox food for a change,” he said to himself. Within seconds the device began to click and hum, and the pleasant smell of puréed moonplant filled the air. Satisfied, Boogi crept on silent robot feet through the empty dining hall and out onto the terrace. Te was seated alone on a bench, facing the parapet and the grand vista beyond. Her pretty face was covered by the visor of her metal Hood.

Boogi hid behind a statue of Saint Sergey, waiting for a trio of monks to cross the courtyard before venturing out. As he leaned against the sculpture, Vagoo’s robot commandment echoed inside his head: “Thou shall not mingle in the affairs of humans.” Boogi ignored it; a choice that he would soon regret. When the coast was clear he scrambled down the steps and across the courtyard.

But halfway to Te’s bench, the bipot slowed down. His transistors were swamped with conflicting instructions in an endless loop. The loudest command screamed, “Warning! Stop! Go back!” Suddenly a loud buzzing sound caught his attention. Looking up, the little chef spied three black airbots flying north at tremendous speed. Where were *they* going? Their menacing crab-like bodies gleamed in the midday sun. Soon they disappeared behind the tower spires and Boogi continued on his way. With each step, he repeated the word ‘cahoots’ like a mantra. Finally, after what seemed like hours (it was actually two minutes) he stopped in front of Te’s bench. There was no turning back now. Throwing caution to the winds, he reached out and turned the knob by her ear until he heard it click. After a nerve-racking moment passed, she pulled her visor up. “Boogi? Is that you?” she asked, shading her eyes with her hand.

“Please forgive me,” he said. “Ka told me not to bother you.”

Te removed her Hood and brushed her hands through her buzz cut spikes. “You normally follow the rules,” she said. “If you break one, it must be important.”

“Actually, no. The master is gone for the afternoon, and I just wanted to chat. But NIMBUS is more important than what I want—.”

Te groaned and said, “No it’s not. That great big bully can wait.”

“Sister Te!” Boogi said, amazed. “You don’t sound like a monk to me.”

She smiled and said, “I’m an imposter. Didn’t you know? Ka might enjoy a targeted stimulation of his insular cortex, but I sure as hell don’t. That’s what meditation is, heroin for the masses. NIMBUS plays humans like a violin and presto! Soon everyone’s a devotee.”

“So, you’re not a devotee?”

“Never.”

“Then what are you doing *here*?”

Te gazed at the orange cliff at the far side of the canyon, like a sad Nyx surveying her fallen kingdom. “It’s a long story,” she said. “Let’s just say I didn’t come here of my own free will. It was either this or a laser lobotomy.”

Boogi was stunned. He knew that lobotomies were only administered as a last resort for an intractable diagnosis. Evidently Te suffered from some kind of psychosis and her condition had not improved after being subjected to conventional, or even experimental, treatments. Was Poowhi an experimental treatment? If so, what could it offer that her other treatments missed? The bipot glanced at the Hood. It’s smooth titanium surface gleamed in the morning sun. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Te shook her head and placed the Hood in her lap. “*This* is what they’ve prescribed to cure all my ills,” she said. “At least it’s less invasive than a neuro-knife, but the results are the same.” She stroked the helmet like she was petting a cat. “It’s actually quite elegant. Symmetrical. Smooth. Only three visible seams.”

The proximity of the Hood made the little chef uneasy. “I hope you don’t get brainwashed,” he said. “I like you just the way you are.”

“Why thank you, Te said. “I like me too. But don’t worry.” She pointed to the little knob. “I’ve rigged it, so it won’t turn on. I cut a wire.”

Boogi was amused by this sabotage, but it also made him nervous. “How long do you think you can

fool Ka?” he asked. “If you’re caught the penalty will be—.”

“Worse than a lobotomy?” Te said. “What have I got to lose?”

As they both pondered the implications of her statement, a humming sound caught their attention. It reminded Boogi of a high voltage wire. As the vibration increased in intensity, the bipot recognized the sound and looked up. Te followed his gaze just in time to see three black airbots streak across the sky, heading south. This time they were flying at a lower altitude and Boogi could make out six red letters painted on their bellies: NIMBUS. As the ominous black scarabs receded into the haze Te squinted and said, “They’re turning west, probably heading for the military base at Syria Planum.”

A solitary brother in a bright red robe walked by, carrying a bronze candelabra in each hand. Boogi bowed, out of respect for the young man’s humble position. Red was the color of the acolyte, or candle-bearer, in service to brother Ub. “Hey Boo, what’s for lunch?” the monk asked. “And please don’t say Vagoo’s the chef.”

“Canapés with pasta,” the bipot replied, neglecting to mention that today there were no chefs.

As the brother skipped up the steps toward the dining hall, Te slipped the Hood over her head and frowned. “I better get back to my phony meditation,” she said, “just in case *he*’s up there spying on us.” Before closing the visor, she glared at the towers and stuck out her tongue.

“Ka’s not here,” Boogi said. “He’s in town getting Dunei’s replacement.”

Te opened the shield. “So, he’s gone for the day?”

“Affirmative,” the bipot replied. “Isn’t it a picnic when he’s gone?”

“Yep, it sure is,” Te said. After checking to make sure that the coast was clear, she took off her Hood and tossed it over the parapet. Astounded, Boogi leaned over a baluster and watched the helmet drop like a cannonball. After plunging for a thousand feet, it slammed into a granite ledge with a muffled crash.

“Sister Te,” the bipot said. “That was a dangerous move. I hope nobody saw you.”

The young anarchist-in-training stood up and stretched, raising her hands high above her tousled hair. “Since this is a picnic day,” she said, “I say a picnic’s in order. Everyone’s invited except for mister Ka. We can pack sandwiches, and cheese and crackers. We’ll have a grand old time.”

Boogi was hesitant, remembering what happened after their last excursion. “If Ka finds out, the punishment could be severe,” he said.

“But this time you’ll be on official business,” Te said, “doing your job, feeding the monks. If anyone ends up shoveling sand, it’ll be me.”

As if on cue, Ub trudged across the terrace like a turquoise armada blowing into port. Before he could inquire about lunch, Boogi beat him to it. “Sir,” the bipot said, “may we offer a suggestion?”

“Of course, my sweet chef. By the way, I loved your flaming Boogiberries Jubilee. The beetado sauce was divine.”

Boogi bowed and nudged sister Te. He had decided that she should do the talking since the picnic was her idea. Deploying her feminine charms, Te culminated a short sales pitch with tragic pleading eyes. Unfazed, Ub raised an eyebrow and said, “Hmmm... A Picnic. Where?”

Suddenly, Boogi remembered Nicole and Laloose. “What about Chasma Point?” he said. “We’ve never been and the view’s spectacular, I hear.”

Ub’s eyes lit up. “I’ve been there,” he said, “but not since Sister Mo died. She loved to push boulders off the bluff and watch them roll down the slope. We had a wonderful time.”

Boogi’s misgivings began to subside. “I can pack our lunch in no time,” he said, “and stuff everything in the dune rover, including blankets, pillows, and wine from the cellar.”

As soon as the bipot mentioned wine, Ub was sold on the idea. “Splendid,” he said. “Let’s do it. But first I better make sure that our VIP won’t arrive until tomorrow. Sometimes I get things mixed up.”

“VIP?” Te said, startled. “What VIP?”

“Don’t know,” Ub said. “Someone very, very, very high up; a board member, I reckon. I think Ka said he’ll be at the orbiter tonight.”

One by one, a flock of monks had gathered on the terrace, anticipating lunch. Finally, another impatient acolyte in a red robe said, “Brother, are we fasting today or what?”

“Fasting? I don’t believe so,” Ub said. He massaged his big belly, deep in thought. “Boogi, you are

the devil. Brother Ka says work before play, but I don't see the harm in a little play all day." Then, after tooting the whistle that hung from his neck, he marched up the steps like a scoutmaster leading his troop. "Brothers, follow me" he said. "We're going on a picnic. Everyone can lend a hand."

Vagoo woke to turmoil in the kitchen. As soon as she discovered what was up, she broadcast dire warnings, hopping from monk to monk. When her exhortations were met with deaf ears, she surrendered and helped pack the picnic baskets with fatalistic verve. She even took charge of the wine, organizing the brothers into a relay race on the spiral stairs, bringing wine up from the cellar. It only took twenty minutes for the monks to pile everything into the rover. Then, after switching from sandals to hiking boots, they set off on their trek to Chasma Point.

Having volunteered to sit behind the wheel, Ub gleefully steered the off-road EV over extremely rough terrain. The other monks followed on foot, except for Sister Te. She sat next to the driver, hand feeding him crackers and slices of Marineris cheese. Boogi and Vagoo were perched precariously on top of the picnic baskets. As the rover's massive tires bounced over each rock, Vagoo jiggled and swayed. Occasionally, Ub drove over a large boulder, forcing the entire EV to pitch and yaw as its inflated tires bounced up and down. "I'm sliding off, I tell you!" Vagoo shrieked.

As the housekeeper hung onto Boogi for dear life, Te turned around and said, "How we doing back there?"

"We're longing for seatbelts," Boogi replied, only half in jest.

After Vagoo regained her balance (and composure), she rocked back and forth like a sultanness on an elephant. Her tiny opaque eyes surveyed the barren scenery with displeasure. "We'd better arrive soon," she warned, "or I'll be coated in dust."

"Stop complaining," Boogi said. "You're due for a lube job anyway. The master will want us all shiny for our VIP." As the picnic baskets oscillated beneath her, Vagoo whimpered and made the sign of the cross. The little chef stared at her and said, "What's that?"

"The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," she said scornfully. "Master Ka taught it to me when I was

dusting his room. It protects me from financial ruin.”

“Isn’t that superstition?” Boogi asked suspiciously.

“Absolutely not. The master told me all about it. It’s like a prayer. My forehead is the Sun, and my chest is the Earth. My shoulders are the Moon and Mars. Did you know that Ka is a scholar? He studied archaic religions at a university.”

“... at a university!” Boogi said sarcastically, parroting Vagoo’s haughty tone. “If Ka studied it in college, it must be archaic.”

“Oh my god, robots *do* make fun of their masters,” Te said. “I better stay on their good side for now on.”

Vagoo was less amused. “Say that to the master’s face,” she warned, “and we’ll see how long you keep your sense of humor.”

“Yep, I’m having a wonderful time,” Te said, amused by the robots’ bickering.

Chasma Point was roughly a mile east of Poowhi and was usually visited by air. Its most prominent feature was the wind-chiseled outcrop that pointed toward the canyon like a caveman’s spear. This massive rock formation sheltered a huge sand dune that sloped down to a narrow ledge. At that point the precipice plunged straight down at a depth of three miles. The view from the top of the bluff provided a spectacular panorama of the entire Tithonium Chasma, including the city and its spaceport only ten miles away. After a rough ride down a craggy hill, Ub parked the rover on a bed of gravel at the base of the outcrop. It was a clear day and Boogi could see all the way across the great ravine to the southern cliff. He could even make out the wavering plumes of mist rising from the gigantic terra formers on the valley floor. Ub took a deep breath and exhaled. “Ah!” he said. “The air’s good today.”

Since Martian gravity is only two-fifths as strong as Earth’s, the unpacking was an easy affair. At Vagoo’s behest, the brothers stormed the rover like thieves robbing a Brinks truck. As soon as they deposited the picnic baskets and ice chests in the sand, Boogi organized them in a single row near the top of the slope. The housekeeper strutted about like a commandant as the hungry monks unfurled their multicolored bedsheets

over the sand. Once the blankets had settled, they took off their boots and used them to weigh down each corner. Pillows were tossed willy-nilly. Ub was the first picnicker to uncork some wine. After plopping down in the middle of a turquoise sheet, he wiped the bottle's rim with a napkin and poured a sample into a fluted glass. The monk sniffed the bouquet and then took a quick sip. "Sweet and full-bodied," he said, pursing his lips. "Too bad you can't enjoy this, my dear bot. 2569 was a good year."

"But I can," Boogi said, holding up his index finger.

"Excuse me," Ub said. "I forgot." He held up his glass so that the bipot could dip his finger in the dark red liquid.

"A superb vintage," Boogi agreed.

The moment Te sat down by Ub, his bedsheet mysteriously filled up with monks. Even after the last available spot was taken, a determined few squeezed in anyway. Before long, the blanket was buried under a tangle of arms, legs, and giggling faces. "I must say," Ub said, as an acolyte sat down in his lap, "you *are* a popular gal." When Te demurred, he refilled her glass and said, "if this is too crowded, we can always move. The blankets close by are full, but further away they're quite empty." When another acolyte thrust a bottle of Merlot in his face, Ub held up his glass. "If you insist," he said. The candle-bearer (a youth named Zuko) evidently did because he filled Ub's glass to the brim.

Once Boogi had unpacked the picnic baskets he let the ravenous monks help themselves to the canapés, sandwich rolls, and pasta. Vagoo balanced a cutting board on a flat rock and began to violently chop cheese with reckless abandon. When the chopping was done, she poked each cube with a toothpick. As the monks snatched them off the cutting board Vagoo could barely keep up, like a rattled peon versus a fast conveyor belt.

The picnic was well under way on Ub's blanket. As a bottle of Zinfandel was passed from monk to monk, they all took turns telling ribald jokes. Nobody laughed harder than Te, although she had many runners-up. When Zuko told the one about the one-legged jockey everyone screamed with laughter. Suddenly, a powerful hiccup silenced the crowd. "Excuse me!" Te said. "That wasn't very ladylike of me, was it?" Then she hiccupped again, even louder this time. "I think I've had enough," she said, pushing away a bottle of Chianti. Ub grabbed it and filled his glass. "Imported from Earth," he announced, "from one

monastery to another.” He pointed to the label. “It says here these grapes were stomped by the most devout feet in the worlds.” As he downed the whole glass, another flock of monks began pulling more bottles out of the ice chests. Ub noticed and jumped to his feet. Waving the bottle of Chianti, he shouted, “Back off, brothers! This wine is too fine to be swilled like beer. For now on, *I’ll* do the pouring.”

This unexpected proclamation was met with an onslaught of boos and groans. When he realized how unpopular it was, Ub compromised. “Okay, one bottle at a time,” he said. “Everyone get in line.”

The compromise was deemed satisfactory and even prompted one huzzah (Zuko). As Ub handed out the last bottles of cabernet sauvignon, Boogi poured boxes of crackers into bowls. Vagoo was back at her cutting board, chopping sandwich rolls this time. As she swung her knife in the wide arc of a murderess, the monks gave her plenty of room. Suddenly, Ub stood on an ice chest and proposed a toast. “To Boogi and Te, in appreciation. May this blessed day become an annual event.”

“We’ll call it Te Day,” Zuko said, raising his glass.

“To Boogi and Te!” everyone screeched.

Ub filled his glass and raised it aloft a second time. “And to Vagoo,” he said, “who makes our beds and tucks us in at night!” This was followed by another toast and then another. Soon there were multiple toasts going on simultaneously as one brother after another popped up and down like a jack-in-the-box. The bipots rushed to the baskets to pull out more food, hoping to calm things down. When an acolyte in red asked for a bottle of Chardonnay, Boogi looked in each ice chest in vain. There were nine empty chests in all. The tenth chest only had three bottles left, all of them Chenin Blancs.

Boogi was surprised by how much wine they had packed. He hadn’t really paid much attention, relying on Vagoo to take charge. Now, as he stared at the ten ice chests, he began to have misgivings. “Vagoo,” he said, “How much wine did you pack?”

“Enough,” she replied innocently.

“I know *that*. But did you keep track?”

Vagoo grabbed another sandwich roll and began slicing furiously. “I took everything on level one,” she said, “and left the other levels untouched.”

Horrified, Boogi said, “The wine cellar’s only on level one. There are no ‘other levels.’”

The housekeeper stopped chopping and rubbed her round head. “Oopsies,” she said. “Ub better restock before Ka gets back.”

The little chef slammed the last ice chest shut and sent the poor acolyte off empty handed. Then he tracked Ub down and gave him the bad news. At this point the monk was feeling no pain and could care less. “Only three bottles left?” he said. “But we *can’t* stop now. I’m in charge here and I say we finish it all.” He squinted at Boogi like he was seeing him for the first time. “If I didn’t know better, I could swear you’re Master Ka in robot form. The confiscation of wine is usually an act of Ka.”

Te snickered and popped a cube of cheese into Ub’s mouth. “I agree, brother,” she said. “Boogi’s acting in a very unrobot-like manner. How can we tell who he really is?”

“That’s easy,” Ub said. “If he hands over those last three bottles, he’s our bot. If he doesn’t; he’s Ka.”

Zuko held up an empty bottle and said, “Hear! Hear! So what will it be?”

Boogi relented and relinquished the last of the wine. But from then on, the picnic began to wind down. Everyone seemed to be at that stage where they were ready to sleep it off. Some monks were propped against a stack of pillows, enjoying the view, and some were flat on their backs. A few of the later were even snoring. The two bipots began to clean up, assisted by a still tipsy Te. As Vagoo pulled empty bottles out of the sleeping monks’ hands, Boogi began dumping icy slush into the sand.

Suddenly a purple hovercraft climbed above the ledge at the bottom of the sandy slope. For a brief moment it floated over the precipice before advancing toward the startled monks. Anyone who wasn't sitting up did so now, and some even leaped to their feet. After completing a full circle over the sand dune, the hovercraft returned to the edge of the precipice and drifted in place. As Boogi looked up with alarm, its butterfly doors slowly opened, revealing a king-sized cyclops in the driver’s seat, and a woman in dark glasses in the back. The woman was waving frantically and shouting something, but it was impossible to hear over the drone of the hovercraft’s motor. Te was the first to recognize her. “Hello, Nicole!” she cried, waving back.

Ub staggered to his feet. “Join us!” he hollered. “We’ve got a nice bottle of Chenin Blanc.”

Nicole continued shouting while pointing to the edge of the cliff.

“Boogi, can you read her lips?” asked Te.

“Maybe,” he said. His robot vision zoomed in on Nicole as she continued to point to the ledge. She seemed agitated more than anything else. Boogi followed the movement of her lips and said, “I think she’s saying...the sand dune’s shifting. Yep, that’s it. The sand dune we’re on is sliding—.” Dismayed by his own words, Boogi raced down to the edge of the cliff and stood on a solitary rock sticking out of the sand.

Te called after him, “Boogi, you get back here right now!”

The bipot looked over the ledge and said, “Oh no.” Orange sand was pouring over the edge of the cliff like a waterfall. As Boogi trudged back up the slope the flowing sand rose up around his knees. Nicole was waving both hands now and shouting even louder. Heeding her warning, Boogi continued up the incline, struggling to keep his legs from sinking into the rising sand. “Brother Ub!” he said. “The whole dune’s starting to go! We must move to higher ground!”

Te staggered as she crept up the slope. “Get out of here *now!*” she screamed at the brothers. “We’re in an avalanche!”

One by one, the monks began to head for solid ground, fighting their way through the tidal wave of sand. Ub staggered around in circles, confused. Soon he was up to his waist in sand and looking about in disbelief as everyone else grabbed their boots and fled. When Vagoo looked down and discovered that her ankles were buried, she dropped the last bottle of Chenin Blanc and followed Te up the slope. With each step her feet sank deeper into the sand. Looking back, Boogi noticed that Ub was stuck. He was obviously too intoxicated to know what to do. The robot ran back down the slope and said, “Brother Ub, come quick. The party’s over!”

At that moment, a jolt like an earthquake shook the sand dune. Te, having reached the safety of the rocks, began to scream. Instantly Ub sobered up and dropped his bottle of Chianti. As the wine bottle drifted downhill, Boogi grabbed both hands and tried to pull Ub in the right direction. But the monk outweighed him three to one. It was like pulling an aircraft carrier away from the top of Niagara Falls. Slowly but surely, the bipot and the monk advanced toward the precipice, trapped in the sand. Up on the rocks, Vagoo had to be restrained from going after them. Te found a rope in the rover and tossed it with all her might. Unfortunately,

it disappeared beneath the churning sand before Boogi could grab it.

“At least *she's* safe,” the little chef thought, as the sand swirled even faster around his waist. An empty ice chest floated by like a canoe in the rapids. “I’m beginning to think this picnic was a bad idea,” Ub said.

Looking up, Boogi noticed that the hovercraft was now directly above them and slowly descending. Laloose had left his seat and was hanging onto the door frame with one hand and reaching down with the other. Nicole was driving. Little by little, she maneuvered as close to the ledge as she dared, while Laloose reached out as far as he could. Boogi almost touched the cyclops’ big hand.

“Let me grab hold first,” said Ub. “You’ll never be able to lift my bulk.” The monk began to snatch at the air while Boogi held tight to his other hand. They were now at the very brink of the ledge. Boogi could hear the roar of the sand as it hit the ground after plunging for three miles. Suddenly he felt a tug on his arm and up he went, clutching Ub’s hand as the monk held onto Laloose’s hand for dear life. As the bipot and the monk dangled in midair, the hovercraft slowly climbed above the avalanche and circled around toward the bluff. The bipot looked up at Ub and said, “Thank goodness I’m lightweight.”

The purple hovercraft flew over the rover and descended toward the safety of the rocks. Boogi was the first to touch the ground. Te ran up and gave the bipot a big hug at the same time as Ub landed on his backside. The stunned monk was immediately surrounded by his cheering brothers. Together they promptly hoisted him aloft. In the commotion nobody noticed that the sand dune had stopped sliding.

As the brothers sang, “For he’s a jolly good fellow,” the hovercraft came to rest on the rocks nearby. Nicole and Laloose climbed out of the cabin and waited patiently while the monks tossed the fat monk in the air. They caught him on the way down, but only after they had all collapsed in a heap. After the revelers got back on their feet, Ub did a quick head count to make sure that everyone was accounted for. Satisfied, he turned to Nicole and bowed, saying, “Thank you for saving all of our lives, kind lady.” Nicole took off her dark glasses and waited patiently as the monk scrutinized her. “Aren’t you our neighbor to the north?” he said. “You live out by the border and your name is Nicole.”

“That is correct. And you would be...”

“Ub. I must say, I’m as thrilled to meet you as I was to be rescued by you.”

Nicole laughed and said, “I believe I know two members of your household. Is it Boogi and Te?”

The sister curtsied and said, “You have a good memory.”

“I do,” Nicole said. “But I’ve had a lifetime to practice, memorizing dialogue and what not. You’re lucky we decided to visit Chasma Point today. I was rather shocked when I saw you picnicking on such a treacherous terrain. I’ve always wondered why they haven’t posted warnings.”

Suddenly a timid voice said, “Nicole?” It belonged to Vagoo. The housekeeper crept up and slowly raised her hand but stopped short of touching the woman’s face. “Nicole?” she said, “Is that really you?”

“It is I. And who are *you*?”

“I’m Vagoo, a humble servant of Poowhi. I’m also your biggest fan. A long time ago Sister Mo gave me a cinema pad* and that’s how I found you. I’ve streamed every one of your movies at least a hundred times.” Suddenly it dawned on Boogi who this woman really was, and he was nearly as flabbergasted as Vagoo.

Nicole was amused by the housekeeper’s adulation. “Charmed,” she said. “And I’m a fan of all my fans who are robots. For some reason, most of my fans *are* robots. Don’t know why. First thing when we get home, I’ll autograph one of my stills and have it sent to you. A hundred times? Brother Ub, your robots should get a life.”

“Master Ka doesn’t think they should have one,” he confessed. “He believes a robot’s place is in the home, serving his master.”

“Kaaaaa?” Nicole said. She sounded like she was clearing her throat.

“That’s right,” Ub said. “Ka’s been our abbot for almost nineteen years.”

“I know the name well,” Nicole said. “Do you still make Hoods?”

“Oh yes. We’ve already donated a thousand just this year alone.”

“What a shame.” She turned to Boogi and smiled. “Kind bipot, my invitation still stands. I hope you and your friends will visit us someday. It’s only twenty miles from here as the bird flies. And my dear miss Te. I hope Kaaaaa will buy you a new pair of sandals.”

*A cinema pad projects a 3D hologram approximately three feet away from the lens. It streams movies via Wi-Fi.

After gamely shaking hands with each and every monk, Nicole took her leave. Holding onto Laloose's finger, she climbed into the hovercraft's plush back seat and waved goodbye. As the butterfly doors closed around her, the aircraft rose through the haze like a hot air balloon.

Sunset arrived with a pink and lavender glow. The tired revelers trudged back to the monastery in silence while the bipots rode in the rover. Te was at the wheel because Ub was suffering from a terrible hangover. Since Boogi's feet were too short to reach the pedals, she had volunteered to drive.

Vagoo was the only one in a talkative mood. For the past hour she had given Boogi a master class in Nicole trivia. As far as Vagoo was concerned, the appearance of this movie star was the highlight of their day. The avalanche was insignificant by comparison. Boogi wondered if Vagoo's infatuation with the famous Swede was akin to Dunei's love of screws. Could it be that the star owed her fame to a million Vagoos?

While the housekeeper babbled on about Nicole, Boogi was preoccupied with what Ka would do when he found out that his monastery was plum out of wine. The twilight had already covered the northern plateau with its dark cloak when the bipot spied the navigation light blinking in the gloom, inviting him to flee from Ka's wrath.

"That's where she lives," Vagoo whispered.

Boogi was curious. "Are you sure?"

"Ha! Everybody knows that Nicole lives out there under the flashing light. Isn't that right, Master Ub?"

"Yep, it's common knowledge," he said. "Nicole's been living out there for as long as I've been at Poowhi, and that's going on twenty-four years. But she only visited the monastery once that I can remember, for Sister Mo's funeral."

Boogi kept his eyes on the mysterious red light as it disappeared and reappeared in the darkness. Now it took on a whole new meaning. It was an arrow pointing to Nicole. "So, she lives under that light?" he asked.

"Aiiigo says she lives in a crater," Vagoo said. "He's flown over it a hundred times." She spoke with a tone of superiority as though the information she was divulging was the precious gossip of an elite few.

“I should invite her to our symposium banquet next month,” Ub said. “But I doubt if she would come. She’s a recuse.”

Te steered the vehicle onto the gravel road that wound down to the monastery’s garage. The tower windows glowed like red stars in the sunset. The hydraulic valves in Boogi’s limbs began to vibrate, a consequence of his growing anxiety. Looking back, he noticed that some of the more lethargic monks were falling behind as they plodded along the dusty road. No doubt the first aid room with its supply of hangover cures would be their first stop. Boogi wished there was a medicinal cure for Master Ka.

“I can’t get over how humans age,” Vagoo said. “Nicole’s face has wrinkles and crow’s feet now, nothing like her smooth creamy complexion in *A Woman Desires*. I hate to say it, but the human face is like a time bomb waiting to go off.”

Boogi groaned and said, “What a wonderful observation. And you’re her biggest fan?”

Vagoo ignored him and continued her dissertation. “Nicole was still beautiful at forty. But she refused a face lift at fifty. Too bad. If she had gone under the knife, she could have stayed in pictures for another twenty years.”

“Maybe she was ready to retire,” Te said, as she guided the rover into the garage.

“That’s the one good thing about being a robot,” Vagoo noted. “We’re ageless, as long as we get our lube jobs on a regular basis.” Boogi didn’t say anything, but he suspected that the housekeeper, like Dunei, had neglected her lube jobs in order to pay for her obsession. If it was true that she had streamed each film a hundred times, then she would need to cancel twenty lube jobs to pay for it. No wonder she was always worried about her joints getting rusty.

After Te parked the rover in its space, the two bipots jumped down and stood next to the empty landing pad. At the same time, the domed roof began to open, its eight sections separating like the petals of a lotus. As the petals spread further apart, they revealed Ka’s hovercraft floating in the air, its blinking hazard lights illuminating the concrete silo below.

“Oh dear,” Ub said with a groan. “He’s back.”