

Chapter Seven

The new bipot's name was Klooi. He was a refurbished word processor similar to Dunei but with a stronger titanium cladding. Ka bought him on sale from InteliGents with the intention of deleting him that very night. The abbot looked forward to stamping out the bipot's annoying human traits and replacing them with a new core as impassive and analytical as NIMBUS. For the icing on the cake, Ka would ask Te to assist with the deletion.

When Ka disembarked from his hovercraft, he was surprised to find the entire household congregating in the garage. Where they here to welcome him home? Noting the dusty faces, he smiled gleefully and said, "Looks like everyone helped with our spring cleaning today. I'm pleased." He introduced the gleaming titanium bipot standing by his side. "Klooi is Dunei's replacement and will manage all of his chores." He glared at Vagoo. "And that includes housekeeping, if time permits."

Vagoo and Boogi both bowed, signifying their respect. "We're honored to have you in our household," the little chef said. "May your days here be as prolific as ours." This was standard boilerplate etiquette, and a meaningless formality.

"I'm honored to be here," Klooi said, bowing in return.

Later that evening, Ka sat at an empty table waiting impatiently for dinner to be served. He was the only monk in the entire dining hall. Klooi stood at attention by his side. Suddenly, the kitchen doors flew open and Vagoo dashed across the room. After skidding to a halt, she gave the abbot his place setting wrapped in a monogrammed napkin. The 'P' stood for Poowhi. "We're running a little late, master," she said.

"I can see that," Ka said tartly. "Where is everybody?"

"It was a hectic day," Vagoo replied. "The brothers are taking a nap."

"Very well," Ka said. He smiled sheepishly at Klooi. "At this monastery, every day's spring-cleaning

day. Sometimes the poor buggers wear themselves out.”

After Vagoo had fled to the kitchen, Ka tapped the table with his index finger, trying to remain calm. As the seconds ticked by, he glowered at the doors to the terrace, waiting in vain for the brothers to trickle in. When the new bipot realized that his master was becoming unglued, he went into the kitchen to see what he could do. When he returned, he brought Aiigo with him. The big ant’s suction-cup fingers were adhered to a large serving bowl overflowing with red lettuce and creamy nectarado dressing. A towel hung from his arm. As the greasy maître d’ tossed the salad with big silver tongs, Ka tapped his bracelet three times, summoning Ub. “My dear ant,” he said, “Have you seen Sister Te?”

Aiigo shook his head and continued to toss. After another baffling moment had passed, one of the terrace doors flew open and Ub rushed to his seat. While Ka waited for him to say something, the monk squirmed in his chair. Attempting small talk, Ub said, “Klooi really is the spitting image of Dunei, isn’t he?”

Ka gave the monk a withering look. “Why are we dining alone? Have we had a desertion?”

Sister Te plopped down in her chair and said, “They’re sleeping off hangovers. I’m afraid we all drank a little too much wine.”

Ub almost fell out of his chair when he realized that Te was spilling the beans. While Ka wasn’t looking, the monk shook his head and waved his hands trying to get her attention. He even moaned like a dying man in a desperate attempt to get her to stop.

Ka looked at Ub and said, “Brother, are you okay?”

Ub gulped and said, “We didn’t drink *that* much. Just a little bit more than we—.”

Te ignored him and continued her confession. “The picnic was my idea,” she said.

“Picnic?” Ka said. “And where was this picnic?”

Te smiled innocently and said, “Chasmae Point. It has a spectacular view.”

Ka was flabbergasted. Over the years he had learned to accept the difference between what he expected and what he got at Poowhi. But this was unforgiveable bacchanalian behavior. A severe punishment would be necessary. Unfortunately, Te was the culprit here and she was the apple of his eye. Perplexed, he asked Ub if there was any wine left. As he had suspected, the answer was no.

While Aiigo scooped salad onto his plate, Ka silently counted to ten. Then he said, “This revelation of self-indulgence is truly disillusioning. Whereas a picnic is inappropriate, the swilling of wine...and an empty wine cellar... is inexcusable.” The abbot took a long hard look at Ub and then said, “Since there’s no one here for dinner, dinner is canceled. Aiigo, please remove that salad and tell Boogi to turn off the lights.”

Ub watched with alarm as the salad bowl made its way back to the kitchen. Turning to Ka, he said, “But what about us? We’re here.”

“But you’re the reason everyone’s doing without.” Ka said. He reached out and patted Ub’s belly. “One night of fasting won’t hurt.”

A petulant Ub stood up and lumbered toward the door like a prisoner heading for the gallows. Te sat with her eyes downcast. “Very well,” Ka said. “Now I’ll finish my salad, and then we’ll go ahead with Klooi’s deletion. Sister Te can help, thereby proving she’s not a lost cause.”

“My deletion?” Klooi said, startled. “I don’t understand.”

Ka wiped his mouth with his napkin and said, “Don’t fret. At Poowhi, it’s customary to reprogram new robots.

“But my core’s already top notch. It would be a total waste of a perfect—.”

Ka shushed him and said, “Now, don’t fuss. I have an even better ‘you’ for you.”

Without saying another word, Ka went ahead and ate his salad. Te sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap, too scared to move.

The deletatory was located on the top floor of the west tower with a single window facing south. Because it was rarely used it had a musty smell. Ka went in first and waited by the door for the others to enter. Klooi’s round eyes flickered faintly as he peered inside. Since he was programmed to obey, he reluctantly stepped through the door. Te followed, but warily, like a cat. As she walked over to the window and looked out at the stars, Ka watched her like a cat would watch a canary. Now he would find out if her recent Hood sessions had thawed her resistance.

Klooi inspected the gloomy chamber, gazing up at the copper dome and then down again toward the

ominous swiveling recliner. Ka was secretly amused by the bipot's delayed reaction to that innocent looking hairdryer hanging above the headrest. On closer inspection, the hairdryer turned out to be a Hood. The recliner was usually the first thing a robot backed away from due to its sinister appearance. The steel frame and black cushions were standard features in any dentist's office, but the armrests were equipped with restraints. The abbot gently patted the seat, by way of invitation.

“What's *that* thing for?” Klooi asked, full of suspicion.

“It's your happy chair,” Ka replied. “You sit here for your transformation. Think of it as a communal experience. Some might even call it group therapy. You, me, Te and NIMBUS.”

Klooi didn't move. Te stood by the window with her back to the wall. Sensing their hesitation, Ka said, “Klooi, you need to trust me on this. When we're done tonight, you'll be a new and improved version of yourself. No more pesky emotions to trip you up. Instead you'll enjoy the perfection of a NIMBUS core.”

The bipot backed away. “But I won't be me anymore,” he said nervously. “Me will be dead.”

Ka's tone went from fatherly to stern. “Sit down, robot,” he said. “Then repeat after me: caterpillar, butterfly, caterpillar, butterfly. It's time to transform.”

The bipot took a step toward the recliner and began to repeat, “Caterpillar, butterfly...”

The abbot turned to Te and said, “You can help by joining in. Say it. Caterpillar. Butterfly.”

Te shook her head and mumbled, “But he won't be a butterfly. He'll be a moth.”

Suddenly, the terrified bipot bolted for the door. But Ka was prepared for this, and calmly touched his bracelet. Instantly the door slammed shut in the poor bipot's face. As Klooi frantically clawed at the smooth copper surface, Te covered her face with her hands and screamed. The frantic bipot stopped scratching and staggered across the room, “Please sister, don't delete me. I'm fine the way I am!”

Tears welled up in Te's eyes. “Master, please!” she cried. “Let him go.”

Ka was baffled by her deranged opposition. He had expected the bipot to rebel; they always did. But not her. Obviously, her Hood sessions had failed to dislodge her childish ideas. Damn that social experiment and her foster bots as well! Their ghosts were still in charge, like two metal idols guarding their temple. He wished that he could pound Te's sacred statues into a million shards!

“Let him go!” Te begged.

Ka tapped his bracelet and the door slid open. Klooi immediately fled the room, but he didn't get far. The abbot tapped the bracelet again and the bipot froze in his tracks. “Sister Te, enough histrionics,” Ka said. “Help me retrieve this unruly machine. I'm too old to lift him myself.” He went into the hall and slid his hands under the paused bipot's arms. A minute passed, and then another. Exasperated, the old monk said, “Sister, if you don't lend a hand, I'll have no choice but to report this to our VIP.”

Te stepped out into the hall and her eyes narrowed. “Our VIP?” she said. “And who might that be?”

“The board member who sponsored you. Your husband, Doctor Norris Night.”

Ka had made a calculated risk in making this threat, but then how would she know that he was bluffing. If the good doctor found out that this abbot had failed to deliver a faithful NIMBUS devotee by the contracted deadline, his goose was cooked. Ka had already asked for one extension, and after tonight he would have to ask for a second. But as everyone knows, three strikes and you're out. Before Te had been delivered into his care, the abbot had known very little about this VIP's private life. Although he knew that NIMBUS' chief engineer was married, he had assumed that it was a happy affair. Now he knew different. Ka still found it hard to believe that a man of that caliber would choose the antithesis of himself for a wife. Granted, Te was a looker. Still, Night could have had any trophy wife he wanted.

Evidently, Ka's threat had worked because Te crept across the hallway and picked up Klooi's stiff legs. After they carried him back into the room and dropped him in the chair, Ka strapped him in and slid the metal helmet over his head. “It won't take long,” he promised. “First I undo the pause and then I activate his Hood.”

Te looked at the abbot in disbelief. “Why would you wake him up?” she said.

“Because NIMBUS prefers it that way,” he replied, oblivious to the sadistic implications. As the abbot turned the knob, Klooi began to struggle. “Don't fight it,” Ka said gently. “You'll be a better servant when this is done. Isn't that what you want?”

“No!” Klooi screamed. His little body tugged at the restraints.

Unable to stand another second, Te ran from the room. “Very well,” Ka said with a shrug. “We'll proceed without you.”

The abbot pulled another Hood off the wall and put it on. Then he quickly shut the visor and turned the knob by his ear. Soon a shimmering light pierced his mind. “Welcome,” NIMBUS said. “Shall we proceed?” Ka felt momentarily weak in the knees as the beam flashed through his consciousness like a searchlight in a dark field. Then, after NIMBUS had installed Klooi’s new core, it bathed Ka’s mind in a pulsing red glow, bonding master with servant. As the abbot swayed on his feet, NIMBUS announced, “Klooi has been deleted and installed. He is your servant, but ours to command.”

As soon as the abbot concluded their session NIMBUS vanished in a dazzling green flash of light. Gradually the radiance faded, and the visor reappeared in front of his eyes. Ka took the Hood off and unlocked Klooi’s straps. As he lifted the helmet off the servant’s head he felt like a nervous father at the birth of a child. Even though nothing had changed on the outside, something *was* different. As the bipot climbed out of the recliner, he glared at the abbot with his oval honeycomb eyes. “Hello,” he said in a weird hollow voice. “I’m Klooi, son of NIMBUS and servant of Ka.”

“That would be me,” the abbot said, excited. “Welcome to my humble monastery. If you have any questions feel free to ask.” He stood under the copper dome for a long time, pondering his new creation. Here was a robot he could truly relate to; not human-like, but NIMBUS-like. Ka gestured toward the hall. “Allow me to show you around your new home” he said. “The layout is simple, so it won’t take long for you to adapt.”

“I already have,” Klooi said. “Will you introduce me to the others? Boogi, Aiigo, and Vagoo?”

Ka nearly jumped out of his skin. “How did you know their names?” he said. “You were deleted!”

“NIMBUS preserved a gigabyte of old data so that I can integrate instantly. It’s more efficient that way.”

Ka stiffened. “No emotions were saved, I hope. I want you to be like NIMBUS, one hundred per cent.”

“That I am,” Klooi said. “One hundred per cent.”

The abbot grinned. “Thank heavens. You startled me for a moment. Remember, you’re my guinea pig. If you excel, as I suspect you will, then I can do this to the others.”

Feeling energized, Ka nixed the elevator and descended the spiral stairs. Klooi followed close behind, careful not to step on the hem of his master’s flowing robe.