

## Chapter Eight

Boogi and Vagoo were in the kitchen secretly preparing midnight snacks for the starving monks when Ka appeared. Klooi was at his side. The new bipot's dome shaped eyes reflected the neon light, scattering it into a hundred sparkling diamonds. Boogi found it hard to believe that this wasn't Dunei; he wondered what Klooi would be like. Most robots' faces were static enigmas, with cameras for eyes and speakers for mouths. Unless a robot spoke, their mind was a mystery. Tonight Vagoo was trying her best to be a mystery, blocking Ka's view of the nectarado canapés on the counter. Ka stood on his tiptoes and looked over her striped head. "What's this?" he asked gruffly. He reached around her extra-wide waist and snatched a sandwich.

"A snack just for you, Master," Vagoo said slyly.

Ka held the canapé up to the light. "For me?" he said, taking a bite. "But there's enough here to feed an army. I hope you're not disobeying; the brothers, and especially Ub, must fast tonight or else. Put those dainties in the refrigerator and I'll come back later."

As the bipots piled the remaining canapés (fifty-eight) on a tray and shoved them in the refrigerator, Ka wiped his hands with a dish towel. "FYI," he said, "Klooi has been reprogrammed and is ready to serve. I hope you'll be as delighted with his new core as I am."

The three bipots bowed back and forth again, until the abbot stopped them with a wave of his hand. "No need for formalities," Ka said. "He knows who you are. I've been told his software retained a smidgen of his past. Just enough to recognize you. Otherwise, he's brand new."

"In that case, welcome back," Boogi said. So, the old man thought Klooi was something special. But why? Was it a ploy to make a deletion seem benign?

"Charmed," Vagoo said, raising her hand for a kiss. When Klooi just stared at her, she said, "Welcome aboard. And thanks, ahead of time. I desperately need help with the laundry."

Ka smiled fondly at Klooi and said, "Actually Vagoo, I've decided to postpone his chores. Since he's a

test model, I want to keep him under wraps for a bit—for observation. Until I deem otherwise, he will only work for me.”

Boogi and Vagoo were underwhelmed by this news. The old monk noticed and said, “My dear bot, you and Boogi have been doing a superb job up to now. And Aiigo can continue as waiter.”

“Wonderful,” Vagoo said sarcastically. “That is, if you don’t mind motor oil smeared on your plates.”

Ka chuckled and said, “Vagoo, Vagoo! Make him wash up first. It’s time Aiigo learned some manners.”

“Okay, whatever Master wants,” Vagoo said. “But I may blow a fuse without Klooi’s help. I’m not getting enough down time.”

The abbot raised an eyebrow. “Why do you need more?” he asked. “So you can stream Nicole movies? Don’t look so surprised. I know all about that.”

“Master!” she said, appalled. “I spend all my down time asleep. I *never* cheat.”

Ka turned to Klooi and said, “Ah, the idiosyncrasies of the human-centered bot; something you won’t have to worry about. But despite a few loose screws, Vagoo has always been reliable. Speaking of screws, may I show you Dunei’s old room? It’s all yours; provided that you don’t stream movies.” Ka smirked at the housekeeper.

Vagoo said nothing while aimlessly moving a stack of plates from counter to counter. The abbot beamed at Klooi and said, “On the off chance that you’re prone to Dunei’s obsession, I confiscated all of his screws so that they won’t be a temptation.” Evidently, the new bipot had awakened Ka’s paternal instincts because the abbot rested his hand on Klooi’s titanium dome as they headed for the door.

After the odd couple had left the kitchen, Boogi peeked through the door to make sure that they were gone. Then he turned to Vagoo and said, “Can you believe this?” he whispered. “Ka expects us to pick up the slack while the new guy gets to cool his heels and look pretty.”

“I no longer question,” Vagoo said, mimicking Nicole in *A Woman Aspires*. “I only serve.”

“Aiigo won’t stand for this, that’s for sure,” Boogi said, as he scrubbed a sink.

“You mean the big talker? Ha! He would grovel for the chance to shine master’s sandals. I go now to

turn down the beds, provided the brothers aren't already in them.”

As the queen-sized bumble bee trotted out of the room, Ub barged in through the other door. “Any tidbits lying about?” he asked hopefully. Boogi opened the refrigerator doors and pulled out the canapés. The rotund monk's mischievous eyes popped. “Are those sandwiches nectarado?” he asked.

“Yes, but you better hope Master Ka didn't count them. He made me put them away for later.”

“Drats!” Ub said, snatching a plate. “I better be crafty and only take two.” While Boogi's back was turned, the monk erected a stack of ten canapés to the count of two. “Math has never been my forte,” he said, mumbling under his breath. Boogi caught a glimpse of the wobbly heap as Ub slipped through the door on his way out. “Nighty-night,” the contented monk said.

After completing some minor chores, Boogi retired to his humble abode. A servant's room was smaller than a monk's, with only a small window where the balcony should have been. There was no futon either because robots spent their down time on their feet. A servant was allotted one cabinet, which is where Dunei hid his screws, and Vagoo her cinema pad. It was after midnight, and the stars outside Boogi's window phosphoresced like mad. Tonight, like every night, he stood facing the window and the Milky Way. As his down time commenced, he could feel the burdens of the day dissolve. First, his L3 cache unwound, followed by L2. When he got to L1 he noticed a shooting star streak across the heavens. Should he make a wish like the humans? No, that was simply superstition. Instead, he reviewed the events of the day. He was glad when the memory of the avalanche was banished to his hard drive. He had a harder time letting go of Nicole and her robot Laloose. She materialized front and center in his mind's eye, standing near the rim of a rocky crater on a sunny afternoon. Her baggy slacks flapped in the wind. The timeworn actress spoke words that only Boogi could hear. “We look forward to your visit,” she said. “Remember, you're welcome day or night.” Her dark cat-glasses were as opaque as Aiigo's beady eyes, the perfect shield for a reclusive movie star. The bipot had never met her before and suddenly they had crossed paths twice in one week. Should he pay her a visit?

After Boogi dropped through L1 he entered the slumber zone, a robot's version of sleep. As he flirted with Morpheus, he thought about Te and then Klooi. Klooi, Klooi, Klooi... Do robots have a soul? Of course

not. We're machines... Above the horizon, another meteor bolted through the starry sky, trailing sparks. But Boogi didn't notice; he was asleep.

Boogi was awakened at 6:09 AM. Outside, Eos had painted over the Milky Way with a coat of cobalt blue. At this hour the monastery was so quiet the bipot's sensitive ears could have heard a pin drop. Instead, he heard his door open and close (robots are not allowed to have locks). The little chef turned around and saw a familiar silhouette tiptoeing across the floor.

"Sister Te!" Boogi whispered. "Good morning."

He wondered if she was sleep walking because she was dressed in her nightgown and her feet were bare. That hypothesis was put to rest when Te put a finger to her lips and cocked her head, listening for footsteps in the hall. "I hope no one noticed me come in," she said. "I must look like a mad woman. I took the stairs because they're less traveled. I'm sorry if I woke you up. I had another sleepless night."

Even in the dark Boogi could see that she had been crying. Her eyes were puffy and damp, and she was sniffing. The bipot crept over to his cabinet and brought back a hankie. Te thanked him and blew her nose.

"Last night was tr s gruesome," she said, "and I behaved like a spineless coward."

"You're not a coward," Boogi said. He reached out and gently caressed her wrist.

"Oh, but I am," Te said. "I could've stood up to Ka and protected Klooi from that horrible deletion chair. Instead, I ran out of the room. That poor bipot pleaded for my help and I chickened out. The master is an evil bastard. He knows how I feel about robots, yet he expected me to help extinguish one."

The little chef cringed when Te told him about the recliner's straps and how Klooi had fled the room, only to be paused by Ka. "So far, that new Klooi hasn't said a word," Boogi said. "He just stares at you while Ka does all the talking. He's not a gentlebot at all."

Te wiped her eyes and said, "I'm not surprised. Ka installed a NIMBUS core, and who knows how that'll turn out. But that's only the half of it. The rest is the icing on the cake. Because I refused to help him send Klooi to the guillotine, Ka's going to tell my husband that I'm not cooperating. And you know what *that* means."

"Your husband?" Boogi said. "Why would he care?"

Te grabbed his arm and said, “Because Norris was the one who pulled the strings to spring me from the nut house. He made my shrink prescribe a year’s worth of meditation, under the thumb of Master Ka. So, if Norris finds out that my Hood isn’t working, he’ll pull out the neuro-knife.”

“But you can fake it,” Boogi said. “As long as they don’t discover that cut wire.”

“And I was faking it,” Te said, “until last night. Now Ka knows that I haven’t improved. And it gets even worse. Guess who our VIP is?” She didn’t wait for Boogi to answer. “Yep. My husband, Doctor Norris Night. So, if I suddenly disappear, you’ll know what happened. Your master spilled the beans.”

Boogi was floored by these revelations. The more he learned about Te’s predicament, the more he felt like he was getting dangerously close to an entanglement in her affairs. But was that really so dire? Since Vagoo’s warning the bipot had read the robot commandments. He had found at least one that contradicted, ‘thou shall not mingle in the affairs of humans,’ and that was ‘honor thy masters and help them flourish.’ As far as he was concerned, Te was one of his masters, and his master-of-choice as well. In addition, he had mingled in the affairs of all the monks for many years, cooking three meals a day with midnight snacks for Ub. “What I don’t understand,” Boogi said, “is why you would need a lobotomy in the first place. You’re not crazy.”

“I wish you could convince my husband of that,” Te said. “But you couldn’t because you’re just a robot. He would laugh in your face. And that’s why I’m crazy and he’s not. I *do* listen to robots. In fact, I’d be perfectly happy if I never talked to another human being again in my life and let me tell you why.” As the window’s color brightened from cobalt blue to teal, Te told Boogi her story. Before she was half-way through, the bipot realized that in some respects she *was* a bipot, trapped in a human being’s body. So, by being her friend, was he mingling in the affairs of a human or was he mingling in the affairs of a robot? Let Vagoo figure that one out!

Te seemed to glow when she talked about her formative years with her foster bots, Zeldii and Zong. She was already four years old when the orphanage brought her to their humble shack on Oak Island, near Cape Fear. The two Z’s were specialized prototypes, developed by the Children’s Bureau to nurture a child. Like Boogi, they were manufactured by InteliGents, and they both shared the same model number: 080AAB.

This model was almost identical to Boogi, but five inches taller and clad in a smooth padded vinyl, ideal for cuddling. It even had the same titanium head and the same limpid honeycomb eyes. Until she grew too big to fit, the child spent most of her days sitting in the Z's spacious laps, playing hologram shooter games. "I was making up for lost time," Te said. "I'd never been in a lap before." Zeldii was as good a cook as Boogi, although her menus were simple and pleasing to a child (hello, corndogs dipped in mustard). Te would never forget her ground beef tacos, with grated cheese and tomatoes; nor her warm chocolate pudding, straight out of the oven.

Zong never met a screw that he liked, but he did love baseball. His card collection numbered in the thousands. Twice a week he took Te to watch a baseball game in the robot league. They would sit at the top of the stands as far away from the crowd as they could get. While Zong kept score, Te would eat cotton candy with sticky fingers and bounce from seat to seat. She was usually a fan of the Astros, and sometimes the Blades. Zong was a fan of all the teams; that way he was never disappointed when one team lost.

Two other children had been assigned to Te's foster bots, but they only lasted a year. De and Lew were twins, and only three years old when both parents were sent to debtor's prison, where one of them died. Despite their neediness, the twins refused to bond with the two Z's. Instead, they clung to their big sister with an urgency proportionate to their robo-phobia. Te could never figure out why they were repelled by their foster bots. When asked, neither one could think of a reason.

Te looked out the window and sighed. Ten floors below, the terrace flagstones were damp with morning dew. A solitary acolyte in a red robe was meandering up the steps leading to the west tower. Boogi's ears picked up a distant roar; the spaceport's first launch of the day at seven AM.

"It's true," Te said, "I've had a chip on my shoulder ever since the Children's Bureau shut down the foster bot program, *and* my home. They literally kidnapped me one day, without warning and without even a 'hello, excuse us but we're going to f— you up.' Before I knew it, I was back to scrubbing toilets and mopping floors at the orphanage of broken dreams."

"That really sucks," Boogi said.

"And it went from bad to worse," Te said, "from age eleven to thirteen. That's when I lived with the

marvelous Mortimers of Nags Head. Those scars will never heal, even if I meditate a thousand times.”

Te kept the details of that painful time to herself. Instead, she talked about her resiliency and determination to survive. Somehow, and against all odds, she even managed to flourish by concentrating on the one thing that she could control: her education. Te learned that if she studied really hard, she could excel in academics. Even though she hated cleaning toilets, she remained at the orphanage until she was eighteen, the maximum age allowed. When the administrators finally kicked their bookworm out, her fistful of scholarships saved the day. After graduating from college at the top of her class, she received her best grants yet, from InteliGents and (ironically) the NIMBUS Foundation. Then, within a span of three years, she completed her doctorate in humanistic robotics at Eldorado University. “Those were the best of times, and the worst of times,” Te said, “because Eldorado is where I met the soon to be professor, Norris Night. They say opposites attract, and I must say Norris and I were polar. We were even in opposing schools. I was in the humanistic branch, and he was in the logical. Without fail, we disagreed about everything; yet somehow, we still fell in love.”

“We had nothing in common,” Te said. “He liked people and I liked robots. He liked people who were like robots, and I liked robots who were like people. That is, robots who were like people *on the inside*. I don’t know about you, but I want my robots to look like robots. The less people-like the better. I’ve always thought those human clones are creepy.”

“Me too,” Boogi interjected.

Te gave him the thumbs up and continued her narrative. “But the real sticking point,” she said, “was robot emancipation. To this day, Norris still thinks robot civil rights is an oxymoron. He says I’m the only one who believes in it, other than robots, and that’s why I’m nuts. Meanwhile he teaches courses in NIMBUS this and NIMBUS that and how NIMBUS is superior to the human brain. If we would only turn our lives and our wills over to what is essentially a glorified computer, then we’ll finally know peace.” Te stuck out her tongue and wiggled her ears. “Who’s crazy now?” she said.

Boogi had only one question, a logical one. “So, why did you marry him?” he asked.

Te snickered and said, “Because he’s a very sexy man.” When the bipot stared at her, she said, “Sorry,

but you asked. Hey, it was an honest mistake. Marriage, oh boy. That’s when everything really went downhill, although there really wasn’t any down left to hill. As Norris moved up in the world, he expected me to shut my trap and be the perfect trophy wife hostess of cocktail parties for the elite. Meanwhile, I had become quite adept at planting illegal patches in the robots who wanted them. When Norris found out through an anonymous tip, I fled to Nevada. I hocked my wedding ring and bought a tumbleweed infested computer junkyard about sixty miles south of Reno. To keep busy I harbored runaway robots, camouflaging them among all those rusty old PC’s and iMacs. When the NIMBUS patrol caught up with me, we had a laser gun shoot-out. That’s when I lost most of my hearing in one ear.”

Boogi was beginning to find Te’s story hard to swallow. Try as he might he just couldn’t picture her as a laser toting underground railroad conductor. But then again, he had a hard time picturing Vagoo as a mobster airbot’s moll. Suddenly, the bipot heard a muffled buzz on the other side of the door. A bipot? He crept over to the door and opened it. No one was there.

“What was that?” Te asked nervously.

“Nothing, I guess.” Boogi shut the door.

“For a minute there I felt like I was back in the sanitarium during head count.”

“Maybe it was Vagoo walking to the elevator. She would be on her way to the kitchen by now. I better join her. Soon the brothers will be banging their spoons.”

Te took hold of Boogi’s plastic hands and squeezed them. “Thanks for listening,” she said. “I know it must all sound très bizarre. Anyhow, I hope we’ll always be in cahoots. It makes it all bearable having a friend like you.”

Then, without saying another word, the sister tiptoed out of the room in her humble nightie. As she gently closed the door behind her, that pesky robot commandment replayed inside Boogi’s head. ‘Thou shall not mingle in the affairs of humans.’ With a sigh, the bipot crept back to the window and looked out at the morning unfolding below. The canyon’s vast purple and orange panorama stretched across the horizon for as far as the eye could see. Its immense southern cliffs shimmered in the morning haze, rising from the irrigated fields on the valley floor to the desolate pink summits at the very top. An Easter egg sunrise was crowned with

the midnight blue halo of outer space. Somewhere in those depths, Te's husband was reclining in a rocket ship headed for Mars. The little chef scanned the vast dome of heaven but saw nothing except a few fading stars.

Suddenly, the door opened with a creak. Boogi spun around only to find Klooi standing in the hall. The titanium bipot stared at him silently with his cut-diamond eyes. While the two machines observed one another, the purring drone of their inner mechanisms filled the room. Finally, Klooi broke the silence. "Master Ka wonders why you aren't in the kitchen," he said. "The monks are eager for breakfast after their fast."

Boogi bowed cautiously. "My apologies," he said. "For some reason I spent way too much time in slumberland. I just woke up."

"The master requests your immediate service. He could have asked Vagoo to cook, but her burnt toast didn't go over well. The brothers demand the fruits of your culinary skills."

"That's because they recognize the importance of my human touch, a discipline I learned over time. Vagoo still relies on automation. She doesn't have the patience for anything but buttons and dials."

"I wouldn't call it the *human touch*," Klooi said. "After all, you're a robot. The work you do is a computer's work; a computer walking on two legs. May I suggest you try on a Hood to sharpen your skills. NIMBUS knows a thing or two about cooking as well."

Boogi was floored. He had never heard a robot recommend a Hood before. But the thing that really irked him was Klooi's nerve; even Ka wouldn't think of telling him how to improve his cooking. Insulted, Boogi marched to the elevator without bothering to reply.

"Meanwhile, I will be taking dictation from our master," Klooi said coldly. "Please bring his breakfast up on a tray."

"Yes, of course," Boogi said, as he entered the elevator and pushed the down button. So, this was what the new bipot was going to be like. Sister Te was right. NIMBUS *was* bossy. At the thought of his human friend, Boogi's spirits began to sink even faster than the elevator. Was her story the stuff of fiction? The ramblings of a paranoid mind? Or was she really in trouble? What *was* certain, Boogi had reached the point of no return. He was now mixing in the affairs of humans.