

Chapter Nine

When Boogi didn't show up on time, a reluctant Vagoo began boiling eggs for the famished monks. "I don't know why I bother," she grumbled. "They won't appreciate this one bit." She had just completed her first batch of burnt toast when Boogi finally arrived. Needless to say, Vagoo was overjoyed. After tossing her blackened toast into the waste can, she helped the little chef whip up sixty servings of Ubana pancakes. They worked at robot speed, which is extremely fast. When the bipots finally served the breakfast, it was only fifteen minutes late.

Evidently, Aiigo's mind was somewhere else, because not once, but twice, he accidentally dropped pancakes into a poor monk's lap. Then, for his *pièce de résistance*, he poured syrup into a glass of milk.

"Slow down," Boogi said.

Aiigo was in an insolent mood. "Why can't they eat faster?" he said. "I need to get back to the garage."

"What's the rush?"

"I'm working on a super-duper project," he said. "And I've got a deadline."

After the monks had finished eating, the bipots collected the dirty plates and returned to the kitchen. Aiigo immediately asked if he could be excused. "What's more important than washing dishes?" Vagoo asked.

"Plenty," the ant replied. "Ka's seventy-fifth birthday is coming up. That's three quarters of a century."

Vagoo stopped loading the dishwasher and said, "So what?"

"So what??" Aiigo said. "Seventy-five's an important milestone for humans. The monks want to give Ka a super-duper present, but it requires restoration. And that's where I come in. I'm the restorer."

The housekeeper stuck three more dishes in the tray. "That's just what we need," she said, "another bipot who can't do chores."

When Boogi asked Aiigo what he was restoring, the ant dropped a bombshell. “An airbot,” he said cheerfully. “I’m practically rebuilding him from the ground up.”

Suddenly a dish slipped out of Vagoo’s hand and shattered on the floor. Boogi was dumbfounded. No doubt Vagoo was thinking the same thing: Givooi. It was common knowledge that his metal carcass had been stored in the garage for over a decade, ever since their disastrous fling.

Aiigo was smug. “I’m confident I can get him up and running within a week,” he said. “I’ve already ordered the parts I need, including the brain.”

A green light flickered in Vagoo’s beady black eyes. “Why don’t you use the brain in the crypt,” she said.

Aiigo hooted and said, “No you don’t! If I brought Givooi back to life it might be too big a temptation for the both of you.”

Feigning indifference, Vagoo vacuumed up the ceramic shards while Boogi continued to load the dishwasher. When she was done the housekeeper glared at Aiigo and said, “Go ahead. Work your magic on that old rust heap. Just make sure you wash your suckers before you serve dinner tonight. I doubt that our VIP will like grease on his plates.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the mechanic said. “By the way, that old rust heap used to be your lover boy, remember?”

“Of course not!” Vagoo squawked. “I was deleted.”

“Then let’s take a trip down memory lane. Back then the old rust heap was sleek and fast, with a metallic green finish and a plush vinyl cab. Whenever Ka wasn’t looking, that sexy airbot would take you for a spin. He even took you as far away as Olympus Mons, which became your love nest as I recall. And I reckon you’d be there still if NIMBUS hadn’t set a trap and blown Givooi clean out of the sky while you hid in the volcano. That’s one of the benefits of a deletion; no memory, no guilt.”

A furious Vagoo gave chase, whipping Aiigo with a towel. As he escaped through the door her black-on-yellow body trembled with rage.

“Are you okay?” Boogi asked, concerned.

The housekeeper slowly turned around and folded the towel in four parts. “Why does he torment me?” she said. “I hate hearing about my past.”

“Something’s bothering him, so he picked on you. If he does it again, I’ll tell the master.”

“No!” Vagoo barked. “Aiigo may be rude, but I don’t want him to be deleted for it.” She paused, and then said, “You weren’t here yet when this all went down. Still, I’d like your opinion. Do you think I’m guilty—?”

“Don’t beat yourself up over Aiigo’s version of events,” Boogi said. “We both know he exaggerates.”

Vagoo sighed and said, “But Dunei’s version of events matches his. If only I could make things right again.” Suddenly, the housekeeper rushed outside and disappeared up the path.

“Vagoo!” Boogi cried. “Wait a minute! Did I say something wrong?” Now where was *she* going?

Boogi ran outside and chased Vagoo around the tower. As she sprinted up the steps that led to the garden she didn’t see Klooi standing under the asparagrape arbor. But Boogi did. As he scooted past the nosy servant, they briefly exchanged glances. But Boogi had no intention of stopping. He continued the chase, following Vagoo through the nectarado trees and up the stairs to the garage. When she reached the catwalk that circled the dome, she pulled off her apron and disappeared through a fire door. Meanwhile, Klooi stood on the ground below, watching with interest as Boogi followed Vagoo inside.

At first, the interior of the garage was pitch black. Boogi had to wait until his night vision took over before he could see. Gradually he was able to make out the hovercraft’s smooth oblong shape, perched like an egg-laying hen on the landing pad. Vagoo had taken the lift down to the soldering station and was now creeping toward Aiigo as he bent over Givooi’s charred remains. Sparks shooting from his blowtorch illuminated the garage with dancing shadows.

From Boogi’s vantage point the airbot’s scorched shell looked like an enormous ashtray. His titanium frame was dented and crushed. Scorch marks crisscrossed the metallic cladding, the unmistakable tracks of laser guns. As the bipot’s eyes refocused, he noticed the silver seams where soldering paste had glued everything back together. The interlocking segments reminded Boogi of the winding highways on a road map. The cab was completely gutted and the seats were reduced to blackened springs. A pair of empty eye sockets

revealed a tangled web of brand-new wiring (red, white, and yellow). Two dismembered cockroach arms leaned against a wall. The hands were missing fingers.

Boogi descended the stairs as quietly as a mouse and tiptoed through the darkness. He stopped next to Vagoo, but she didn't notice because her gaze was fixed on Aiigo and the sparks. At that very moment, the mechanic was soldering coolant pipes to the copper ring that would eventually surround the airbot's missing brain. Since the original brain was interred in the monastery's crypt, Ub would have to authorize the purchase of a new one. Boogi knew that a brain, and the core to go with it, would cost a pretty penny. But he suspected that the monks had already accumulated the necessary cash, because Poowhi had a surplus of donors.

The two bipots silently scrutinized the airbot's pitiful form as it flickered under the big ant's sparks. Finally Vagoo said, "Aiigo, please. Stop."

The mechanic turned around. Suddenly the garage turned completely dark as he extinguished the flame. His eyes gleamed like lanterns in an underground tunnel. Up on the catwalk the door slowly closed by itself. "What's wrong?" Aiigo asked.

Vagoo's tiny eyes scanned the battered mass of the inanimate flier. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said. "I don't want him brought back to life."

"It won't be *him*," Aiigo said. "That brain's buried in the mausoleum."

"But maybe I won't notice the difference and I'll be enticed by the new airbot too."

Aiigo relit the torch. "Relax," he said. "Lightning never strikes the same tree twice."

"Where did you hear that?" Vagoo said. "Last night I watched *A Woman Scorned*. Nicole plays Queen Cassandra of the Silicon Age; a royal who falls for a common soldier. The soldier dies fighting in the war and she mourns secretly, unbeknownst to her people. Later she marries a prince whom she doesn't love, bearing him a son. That might have been the end of it except one day she meets the dead soldier's brother and falls in love all over again. Disguising herself as a nurse, she follows him to the front and is killed by flying shrapnel. Aiigo, if you finish this airbot, he'll be Givooi's brother!"

"And you'll be a big fat queen. Ha!"

"Aiigo, listen," Vagoo pleaded. "Don't do this. It might lead to the same disaster all over again."

“It won’t,” he said. “You’re not the same robot either, and you can thank your lucky stars for *that*. After all this time I still can’t figure out what you saw in him.”

“How should I know? You told me that he took me for rides. That’s how it all started.”

“But I take you places, doll.”

“But only with Master. According to you, Givooi flew me ‘solo.’ He even took me as far away as Olympus Mons for privacy. We might still be there today if that volcano had a charging station. Can you imagine? Two tin bugs living happily ever after inside a big ol’ volcano.”

“Until it erupted!” Aiigo said with a sneer. “Then you would be like a moth to the flame.”

“That volcano’s extinct,” Vagoo said. “You might be a mechanic but that doesn’t mean you know it all. I bet Givooi was a gentlebot compared to you.”

“You might be surprised.”

“Surprise me.”

“Okay, I will,” Aiigo said, letting go of his soldering gun. It hit the cement floor with a clang. “If madam doesn’t want a new airbot then I won’t make one. The master will have to do without.”

“Ha!” Vagoo said. “I don’t trust you, and do you want to know why? Because Dunei told me about the batteries. You know, the ones you were supposed to bury in the sand for safekeeping.”

Aiigo held the blowtorch so that the blue flame was pointing at the ceiling. “Not my fault,” he said. “Ka was on to you and confiscated every battery in the place. I might have buried a charging station for you too, but Ka had those under lock and key as well.”

Vagoo hissed and said, “Why don’t you just admit it. You were jealous of Givooi and betrayed him.”

Aiigo’s eyes flashed in the dark. He lowered the torch and pointed it at a line of soldering paste on the airbot’s flank. “Never mind,” he said. “I take back my offer. Why don’t you two scam. I got me an airbot to build.”

Boogi was about to say something when the catwalk door slammed shut. Three pairs of glowing eyes looked up in alarm.

“Who goes there?” Boogi said. No one answered.

“It’s that new robot,” Aiigo said. “He’s been spying on me all morning. I keep looking over my shoulder and there he is, watching.”

“He must be the master’s spy,” Vagoo said. “He never speaks, just stares and stares. He gives me the creeps.”

“He’s not one of us anymore,” Boogi whispered. “Sister Te says his new core channels NIMBUS.”

Aiigo shook his head in disbelief. “We better watch out,” he said. “Klooi’s the eyes and ears of NIMBUS now.”

Suddenly the catwalk door flew open and a ray of light hit the opposite wall. Two silhouettes stood framed in the sunlight: one big and one small. The large shadow floated over to the landing at the top of the stairs. It was Master Ka. “Excuse me,” he said. “I apologize for interrupting your little confab, but we have a problem up here. Somebody was supposed to clean the suite on thirty-nine west yesterday, but it’s still a filthy dusty mess. Vagoo, would you be a darling and tidy it up? Our VIP is due any minute.”

Boogi froze. He had forgotten to tell Vagoo about the master’s request. With all the excitement yesterday it had completely slipped his mind. But before he could speak on her behalf, Ka said, “It shouldn’t take too long, my dear. We wouldn’t want to interfere with your precious down time, would we?” Vagoo rushed up the stairs in a panic. “Master, no!” she cried. “I’ve had plenty of down time!”

As she brushed past Ka, he said, “And when you’re done with that suite, go see Brother Ub. Evidently, he’s outgrown his robes again and needs another fitting. Yesterday he couldn’t get into any of his formal vestments and the banquet’s coming up.” Ka exchanged glances with Klooi and said, “How does one *not* squeeze into a robe, for goodness sake.”

Vagoo bowed and hurried past Klooi, muttering to herself as she went.

Boogi walked to the stairway and confessed, “Sir, it’s all my fault. I forgot to give Vagoo your order.”

“Ah ha,” Ka said. “That makes more sense. Vagoo usually doesn’t ignore my orders. By the way, I’m still waiting for my breakfast. I believe Klooi asked you to bring it up on a tray?”

Boogi was dismayed by his screw ups; not one bungle, but two. He waited for Ka to announce his punishment and was amazed when Ka changed the subject instead. “Never mind,” he said. “Time is of the

essence. I want you to concentrate on tonight’s dinner. It’s very important that we impress our VIP. There’s a lot of money riding on it.”

“No. Yes!” Boogi said, rattled by the abbot’s capricious moods. Just to be safe, he bowed. “Thank you, Brother Ka.” Boogi hurried up the stairs, but when he got to the top the old man stuck out his hand.

“One more thing.”

“Sir?”

“It would be nice if you could refer to me with my correct title: Master Ka. After all, you’re not a monk and I’m not your brother.”

“Of course, *Master*,” Boogi said, unnerved. “I meant no disrespect.”

“Of course.”

Boogi went straight to the kitchen and placed an order. Then he spoke to Aiigo over the intercom, and within the span of three minutes he could hear the rumblings of the garage’s dome as it opened bit-by-bit. Soon Aiigo would be racing toward the valley below to pick up the chow. The word processor who took Boogi’s order (another Dunei) had patiently recorded his lengthy grocery list, including Kumamoto oysters, but no lobsters because the little chef detested boiling an animal alive. He also remembered to order Asiago and Parmesan cheese, and most importantly, a cellar full of wine. Wait until Klooi got the bill! Now that would surely please Brother Ka when he eyed the five digits that followed the ‘P.’ Oops. Correction: *Master Ka*.

On his way to the sewing room to visit Vagoo, Boogi took a detour through the fabrication hall. As he crossed the room, the bipot looked for Te but she wasn’t there. He counted forty-seven brothers, including Ub who immediately waved. *He probably wants to inquire about tonight’s menu*, Boogi thought.

Where could Te be? He ignored Ub and went outside. Looking up, he noticed a large bank of puffy clouds floating overhead. As their shadows crossed the canyon, the bouldered cliffs turned purple. It looked like rain might be in the cards.

As he descended the steps to the terrace, he finally found Te sitting on a marble bench in front of the

parapet. Ka was at her side and they were both wearing their Hoods. The bipot turned on a dime and headed back up the stairs, but not fast enough. Ka turned in his direction and opened his visor. His gleaming gray eyes stopped the bipot in his tracks. “Hello, Boogi,” he said. “I take it dinner will be on time tonight.”

“It will, and the appetizer is hot oysters in a creamy *beurre blanc* sauce. The rest is a surprise.”

“Yummy,” Ka said. “I hope Dr. Night arrives in time.” He lowered the shield and turned away.

So, the visitor *was* Te’s husband. She really wasn’t making this stuff up. Boogi wondered if there might be fireworks tonight when the two met face to face. If Ka carried out his threat and reported her misconduct the fireworks could turn into napalm. Boogi wondered if Te had cut the wire in this new Hood. The bipot couldn’t stand the thought of NIMBUS casting its spell over her. He wished that he could obliterate the evil computer and remove the threat of its domination forever. But he was powerless over the radio waves that connected the earthbound NIMBUS to its disciples on Mars. If only he was brave enough to pull the Hood off her head and toss it over the cliff just like Te had done the other day. Discouraged, he continued on his way, climbing the steps to the east tower’s entrance. Looking up, he discovered Klooi watching him from a balcony on the fifth floor. Startled, Boogi quickly slipped inside.

Vagoo sat next to her sewing machine, cutting fabric for Brother Ub’s new garment. Eleven pins protruded from her vinyl lips (the industrious robot used her phony appendage for a pin cushion). Yards of various red fabrics were tossed around the room. When Boogi entered, she was lamenting Ub’s most recent weight gain. “This is all your fault,” she said. “You’ve got to stop giving him extra helpings.”

“I would stop but I’m not allowed to say no to my masters,” Boogi replied. The bipot rolled up a bolt of thermal knit cotton which had been flung across the floor. Vagoo usually lined the monks’ evening robes with this type of fabric to counter Mars’ frigid nights. Right now Vagoo was making Ub a robe of embroidered red satin with a fuchsia thermal lining.

“Ka’s right about one thing,” Vagoo said. “I should be Ub’s cook so that this never happens again. Poor man, I don’t envy the human body’s betrayals. Look at the master. He can eat all he wants and stay thin as a rail. But poor Ub can eat half as much and still get bigger and bigger. Somehow we’ve got to stop giving

him everything he wants. He thinks his cholesterol pills allow him to eat twice as much. But look!” She held up the monk’s new long johns. They were as wide as they were long. “I could wear this and it would fit,” she noted.

“Okay,” Boogi agreed. “Starting tomorrow I’m cutting his carbs in half. Less butter in his asparaplum soufflés, and absolutely no more whipped cream. But for this to work we’ve got to find a way to keep his fingers out of the other monks’ pies.”

Vagoo sewed a button to the front of the pants, keeping the holes directly under the needle with effortless precision. Boogi admired the formal vestments hanging from the racks. These were only worn at official ceremonies like the upcoming symposium and banquet. The style was more ostentatious than the daily work robes worn at Poowhi. The garments for the symposium featured padded black vests with gold buttons, worn over red satin. The vests were embroidered with ones and zeros, using atom red thread. Gold skull caps completed the look. When the monks wore these splendid outfits Boogi was proud to be serving under their ranks. He looked forward to the banquet, a night with a dinner as sumptuous as this attire.

Remembering the reason for his visit, Boogi said, “I want to apologize for getting you in trouble. I was supposed to give you his orders yesterday but I forgot. No excuse.”

Vagoo shrugged and said, “You’re forgiven. We’re all probably doomed to deletions anyway.”

Boogi did a double take. “Why do you say that?”

“I dunno. Just a feeling I’ve had ever since that new and improved Klooi hit the ground running.”

“So you think Ka will want to reprogram us so we’re like *him*?”

“I do.”

Vagoo was scaring him so the little chef changed the subject. “You were right about Te,” he said. “Robots shouldn’t mix in human affairs.” While keeping his voice down, Boogi proceeded to tell Vagoo everything she wanted to know about Te but was afraid to ask. The housekeeper stopped sewing halfway through the tale and gave Boogi her full attention. When he finished he expected her to respond with disgust and dire warnings of repercussions to come. Instead, she surprised him by saying, “Well, well, well. I owe Miss Te an apology. I feel different about her now. Unfortunately, her fondness for robots has sealed her

doom. And even though her husband is a bad man, I can understand why she loved him.”

“Really?”

“The first time I laid eyes on her, I thought, *Vagoo, now that’s the splitting image of the young Nicole*. And FYI, Te’s monk outfits are almost identical to what Nicole wore in her first starring role, *The Fragile Flesh*. Now that I think about it, that tragedy reminds me of Te’s situation.”

Boogi was taken aback. “Tragedy?” he said.

“Yes, tragedy. The movie’s about Simone, a young nun in an ancient religion who befriends an atheist insurgent in the midst of a civil war. He falls in love with her and convinces her to forsake her vows for a role in the rebellion. So she enlists, but right away during a violent demonstration she’s shot by the national guard. As she dies alone on the steps of her old cathedral, her lover flees into the raging mob.”

“That’s awful,” Boogi said. “Does every Nicole movie end with her death?”

“Usually,” Vagoo said. “*The Fragile Flesh* is one of my favorites. Like me, Simone left behind a saintly vocation for a man. Soon Te will have to make the same choice. Will she stay with her husband or will she stay with us?”

Boogi was shaken by Vagoo’s words. “Te’s meditating in a Hood as we speak,” he said glumly. “I hope she had a chance to cut the wire.”

“Poor little robot,” the housekeeper said. “You *have* bonded with her. But I’m afraid you’re stuck with Master Ka.” With a sigh, she turned back to her sewing.

Suddenly, Ub bounced into the room with his hands clasped, threatening to burst into song. “My dear bots!” he said. “So nice to see you both. How’s my new outfit coming? I hope it wasn’t too vast an undertaking.” The monk chortled at his own joke.

“Ha,” Vagoo said, “the only thing vast is your waistline. But lucky for you there’s a handy invention called elastic.”

Ub rolled his eyes. “I know,” he said. “If I only had Brother Ka’s metabolism. Mine’s just too slow.”

“That, and you eat too much,” Vagoo said. “But we have a solution. Tell him, Boogi.”

The monk was delighted by the prospect of a solution until he heard what it entailed. At that moment

his chin sunk. “Woe is me,” he grumbled. “My own servants are plotting against me. What am I to do?”

“Eat less,” Vagoo suggested.

Ub was despondent. “You’re a cold one, madam V! Please Boogi, don’t do this to me. I can’t imagine life without asparaplum soufflés and butter.”

The bipot shrugged and said, “You’re the master, not me. But a diet would be for your own good.” When he promised to make Ub’s new cuisine as tasty as before, even with half the calories, the monk still shook his head. After a couple go-arounds, Boogi backed down. “Okay,” he said. “We won’t start your diet until the VIP leaves, because I know how much you look forward to my high-calorie symposium menus.”

The monk rubbed his big belly and frowned. “At best I feel like a doomed sailor about to walk the plank. At worst—.”

Vagoo interrupted and said, “We’ve risked offending you because we have your best interests at heart.”

“Cold robot hearts,” he muttered. “Okay I’ll do it, but only after our VIP leaves. I couldn’t bear watching him eat my favorite soufflés, with butter, while I’m sentenced to celery and water.” Then, with a devious wink, Ub said, “Maybe I can get him to extend his stay.”

The robots stared at him with disapproval.

“Just kidding,” he said. “I do trust your culinary skills, Boogi. It would be nice to shock everybody and shed a few pounds. Maybe I *shouldn’t* wait. I could attempt a trial run... Sort of slide into it. What do you think?”

“It might work,” Boogi said. “Vagoo, what’s your opinion?”

Sticking another pin in her lip, she said, “Okay, but no cheating.”

“No cheating,” Ub promised, and with that he bowed and swaggered out of the room.