

Chapter 2

“Next in line!” the Caslet officer said, his baritone voice sounding tinny, amplified through a speaker below the glass partition of the security booth. Gertrude-55 assumed the Caslet was a real robot, but it was impossible to tell based only on the officer’s appearance – he might have been a drone. His head was covered completely by a helmet with an opaque glass face shield; his arms and torso were enveloped in a suit of thick armored plates attached to black nylon fabric; his body below the chest was blocked from sight inside the security booth. He looked like a soldier prepared for the battlefield rather than an officer checking travel documents.

Gertie thought it odd how big the customs and immigration area was. The space where three short lines of travelers were waiting was large enough for twenty lines, much longer too. There were at least twenty security booths to process each line but only three were currently staffed by an immigration officer.

The ceiling soared thirty or more meters overhead, and most of the waiting area’s lights had been dimmed. There was something familiar about the surroundings, but she could not place it.

Gertie stepped toward the officer's booth. Her luggage drone hovered behind her automatically. She looked upward sheepishly to the faceless robot.

“Papers,” the officer’s buzzy disembodied voice demanded.

Gertie produced the memory chip from a hip pouch. She scanned the booth’s rough metal wall and looked carefully at the window but could not see any obvious way to hand the chip over to the officer. Instead, she held it up in front of the glass and offered a shrug. The faceless officer shook his head in frustration.

There was a loud pop from the officer’s speaker followed by a feedback whistle which suddenly cut off as the officer stepped backward from the glass and dropped out of sight. It looked as though he had fallen through a hole in the floor.

Gertie was taken aback, wondering if she had done something wrong. She became fearful what the consequences might be for a visitor who unwittingly transgressed a Hegemony immigration rule. She was not in Teslac anymore! The traveler at the head of the next line over gave Gertie a look while maintaining what seemed to be a normal dialog with that officer.

There was a hissing sound as a panel on the side of the security booth opened. Gertie leaned sideways to peer around the corner. She nearly jumped when a short, black-clad fellow stepped out of the dim opening. It was the immigration officer, but he stood less than a meter tall! Gertie’s worry turned to amusement, and she forced herself to stifle a laugh. Despite his short stature, the officer stomped to the front of the booth with a decidedly hostile posture and used one outstretched finger to press a spot below the glass partition. Apparently, where he pushed was a very innocuous release button: a silver-gray metal drawer sprung out next

to the speaker grill. The officer spun around sharply to face her. This time, she had to look down at the robot, but she still could not find any hint of a face behind the helmet shield.

The short man held out one hand in front of the drawer. Gertie delicately placed her travel chip on the officer's upturned palm. The officer's posture drooped, and he swayed, as if to faint; Gertie thought he might fall right over. Shaking his head, he plucked the chip from his palm and held it like a piece of wet, rusted metal, then dropped it unceremoniously into the drawer and pressed the hidden button. The midget robot looked Gertie up and down, then marched back through the booth's tiny doorway, shaking his head all the while. Momentarily he appeared back inside the enclosure, once again looking down on the Teslac young lady.

Somehow, he had managed to retrieve Gertie's chip from the drawer and began to review her documentation. Gertie wondered why he had not just carried the chip with him back into the booth; she supposed he was trying to teach her how to use the conveyance drawer. *All they needed to do was label the sparking button!* He typed furiously on a keyboard that was below Gertie's line of sight, occasionally pausing, swiveling his head back and forth, apparently reading information from multiple head's-up displays which only he could see. Several times he seemed to stare at Gertie; it was hard to tell without seeing his eyes.

As the time dragged on, the queues to her left and right grew shorter. Robots waiting behind her shuffled with their luggage drones to one of the other lines. Eventually, only Gertie remained in front of the security booths.

Gertie stepped towards the glass nervously.

"Excuse me?" she asked, then waved gingerly, unsure if the officer could hear her.

The mirrored black and gray helmet paused its side-to-side motion and stared in her direction. The audio speaker crackled, and the officer spoke a monosyllable which Gertie did not understand. *I guess he needs more time?* she wondered.

She backed up and nonchalantly looked around the room and over her shoulder. Two guards decked out with similar all-black armored suits and faceless helmets were standing at attention near the entrance far behind her. They were much taller than the officer in the security booth before her. It was the rifles slung across their shoulders which made her uneasy.

I am going to Jian. I am going to Jian. Gertie repeated the mantra and forced herself to concentrate. She would complete this journey despite all obstacles. *They can't keep me here forever, right? I'm just passing through.* She glanced at the armed guards again.

A loud *bang!* startled her. She turned to see the drawer sticking out from the security booth.

"Papers!" the officer grunted through the noisy speaker and sat back from his console. He touched a control; a dark screen slammed down inside the window, leaving Gertie staring at her reflection in the glass.

She quickly grabbed her documentation chip and pushed the button to close the drawer, nodded to her luggage drone to follow, then hurried past the security booth and followed

yellow directional arrows on the floor. The indicators lit up in front of her as she walked and blacked out again behind her. After a short distance, she heard the drone make a *buzz-buzz* sound. She turned to see the drone had stopped as a red symbol glowed on the floor in front of it. Slow-flashing arrows pointed a different path going off to the drone's left.

Oh, great! Gertie thought sardonically. *They are probably going to search my luggage.* "It's okay," she spoke to the drone. "We'll meet up at the next transport."

The luggage drone lacked arms and shoulders, so it could not shrug. Instead, its head snapped left and right, mimicking a double take, before it floated off in the direction of the new indicators.

Hopefully, we'll meet at the next transport!

Gertie continued following the floor guidelights.