

Chapter 3

Alpha. First Machine. Wheel Father. The Creator. God. By whatever name, the entity credited for creating the universe and the Wheel, and for enabling sentience in the earliest robots, had always existed in the spiritual beliefs of robot civilization. First Machine was seen as an omnipotent being, beyond time, an enigmatical robot whose memory stack is infinite and who has processing power more than all robots' sentient processors combined. Some believe Alpha physically exists – *somewhere* in the universe, perhaps beyond the Wheel, *Outside*, if such a place was possible – but most think of him as a robot who transcends the need for a physical processor and a mechanical body.

There is a fanciful story told to children, which describes how Alpha created the first robots. He was very happy with his new creations, but the robots disregarded their programming and strayed beyond the boundaries that Alpha had set for them. In his anger, he created the finite Wheel to contain the robots; he made the Wheel spin to hold down the robots and their progeny and keep them in their place. Some believe that Alpha lives in the Skylight, at the center of the Wheel, and the robots are held down by the weight of their iniquity, kept apart from their Creator by the force of centripetal acceleration.

This story inspired the ancient artist Floridanthium-57 to design the colossal, colorful tile mosaic known as “Creation of Robots”. Both the story of creation and its namesake mural were integral to Teslac and Caslet cultures. Unless they had been stuck in a gigaseconds-long loop somewhere in the Outer Districts, anyone would recognize the “Creation of Robots” artwork and knew what it meant, even if they lacked spiritual convictions.

As Gertie followed the lighted trail from the immigration officer's booth, she was stunned to see on the wall up ahead the enormous hand of First Machine reaching out to touch First Robot's hand. It was truly an amazing sight. Gertie had to stop and take it in. The sheer scale of the mosaic essentially required one to view it from a distance. Impressed as she was by seeing the ancient artwork in person, she also felt saddened by its condition: the colors were dull compared to what she had always seen in books and holovids; the surface of the tiles had been pitted and etched by acidic pollution; the entire installation was encrusted with grime and suet; and many tiles were missing, victims of the old-fashioned concrete subsurface crumbling with age.

While she was thrilled to see the artwork in person, she was even more saddened to learn how the Hegemony had failed to maintain its timeless beauty.

Polipartopulos. The Caslet city and its eponymous train station were renowned for being home to the “Creation” mosaic. So now, Gertie knew where she was.

Each of the doors was labeled with a different destination: Columbiana, Hildegarde, Farbrough-Sluvea, Metros 1 – 3, Metros 4 – 9, Khamelbok, and at least ten others. The lighted pathway was leading Gertie to the door labeled Outer Districts.

Gertie knew the train station had not always been empty as it was now. Older holovid movies – all made before she was born – showed the Polipartopulos Station in its grandeur,

bustling with thousands of travelers. It was only in the last thirty or so cycles that the Hegemony began placing more and more restrictions on travel.

The Hegemony capitol, Columbiana, had literally been walled off early on, the way Jian had been, except that the capital city's walls were built to keep potential invaders *out*, while the wall around Jian was meant to keep that country's citizens contained *inside*. Later, the Hegemony restricted its citizen's access to rail travel, and they installed gateways to control access to the inter-city highway system. Private travel to and from the capital was heavily controlled in the interest of "national security". Later, the restrictions between cities elsewhere had been implemented for various reasons, from "pollution control" to "complementary segregation" – whatever that meant.

Gertie never could understand how the Caslet citizens allowed their freedoms to be taken away. Back in primary school, Miss Sarah-728 explained it happened gradually, and every time the Hegemony applied a new rule or law, they were able to convince the Caslets it was being done for their own good. Gertie just could not believe it, yet here she was walking through an enormous transportation center that had been virtually shut down; devoid of the travelers who had previously filled its cavernous space as they walked, rolled, and hovered from platform to platform on their daily commutes and trips to faraway cities. *Where is everybody? What do they do for a living? Does everybody just stay home now?*

A pair of glass double doors slid open as Gertie approached the threshold below the sign "Outer Districts." Inside was a smallish room, about five meters wide and ten meters long. Four spartan benches were bolted to the floor in the center of the room. Hologrid panels hung from the side walls. One showed Hegemony news and another was running a children's program; both were muted. The third panel blasted a Caslet sports game at exceedingly high volume. A fourth was apparently broken, displaying only color bars. When the glass doors closed behind her, she realized how quiet the outside area had been. Now that she was in the small room, the loud hologrid and low ceiling made her immediately uncomfortable.

On the farthest wall were two sets of metal sliding doors, which Gertie presumed were lifts to the train platform. She walked past the sitting area to the sliding doors, unsure where to go from here. There was no signage and no more indicators on the floor pointing her in the right direction. She took a chance and approached one set of doors, but it did not open.

She took another look around the room. The only thing of note was a couple empty nutripaks had been left on one of the benches. A distinct stench of oil, nanobots, and resin globules told Gertie the paks had been there for a long time.

"Okay... now what?" she asked herself. Her frustration from not knowing what to do was growing, nearly overshadowing her anxiety of traveling through an "unfriendly" country. She chose the least filthy bench and sat down. Closing her eyes, she wanted to relax just for a moment, but the noise from the sporting game was intolerable.

With much more effort than would normally have been necessary, she stood up and walked to the hologrid, searching for a manual control to turn it off or at least make it quiet.

“What is with these Caslets and their *joining* hidden buttons!” Gertie’s own ears were shocked by her use of the sexual expletive. At this moment she found that speaking the naughty word was somehow gratifying, and she managed to smile. *There’s nobody here to hear you, silly girl.* Poking all around the holoivid frame, she found the audio amplitude control and pressed mute. *Finally! Thank the bits for some quiet!* She leaned one hand heavily against the wall and dropped her head, eyes closed. The trip was taking its toll, exhausting her. How long had it been since she ingested a maints nutripak? She felt hungry, but that rotten smell from the discarded maints made oil flow in her mouth.

“Are you waiting for the train?”

Gertie nearly jumped out of her tritanium skin. She turned to see where the voice had come from, shaking from the unexpected sound.

“Sorry! I did not mean to startle you.” It was a robot, standing just inside the glass doors. Apparently, the noisy holoivid had prevented her from hearing him come in.

He was a Caslet. His body structure was like her own: two arms, two legs, torso, and head. His skin color was a lighter shade of gray, duller than her own shiny tritanium; likely it was tarnished from the greasy air common to Caslet cities. He wore an old-fashioned dark blue business suit which lacked any kind of decoration or modern styling elements one would find on a smartly dressed Teslac man. His shoes were simple black polyfiber. A bushy, overly large fur hat sat squarely atop his otherwise unadorned head.

Beyond appearance, it was his accent which stood out. He spoke with a very thick Caslet brogue. It was even more stereotypically “Caslet” than Mr. Noah from primary school back in Crol. Many of the young kids had feared Mr. Noah because of his accent, believing him to be a Caslet operative with a mission to kidnap Teslac kids and smuggle them back to the Hegemony for nefarious purposes. All of that was complete nullsense, of course.

Gertie attempted to compose herself, now feeling embarrassed by her surprised reaction.

“Yes, I need to catch the transport to Jian,” she spoke, using a lilting voice generally reserved for apologies and talking to strangers.

The other robot’s expression did not change. “You are not from around here,” he offered.

Gertie noticed that his speech had slowed, and he pronounced each word distinctly. Perhaps she should do the same? It had never occurred to her that somebody might have difficulty understanding *her* accent.

“I’m just passing through,” Gertie said, sounding apologetic. “I’m from Crol.” After a couple seconds with no response, it occurred to her that a random person from Caslet might not have heard of the little town of Crol. “Um – I am from Teslac, and on my way to Jian.”

Despite the clarification, the man’s face remained blank. It was a little unnerving.

“I know Crol. That’s where God’s Fencepost is located.”

Wow! He does know Crol, Gertie thought. The man had used the old name for Hedley's Peak, the granite monolith at the center of Crol Village. Was her hometown more famous than she realized?

"Yes, that's right. By the way, my name is Gertrude-55, but my friends call me Gertie." She smiled broadly but dared not step forward. The robot just seemed odd, even considering he was Caslet.

She felt even more uncomfortable when the man did not reply with his own introduction. He continued to stare blankly. I can see the holonews headline: "Aspiring teacher from Teslac murdered by maniac in Caslet train station. Friends say she was just passing through. Next up, weather and sports."