

Chapter 4

“Mr. Business Suit” sat on the bench with his feet flat on the floor and his hands palm-side-down in his lap. His back was ramrod straight. *Like a soldier*, Gertie thought. The strange Caslet robot had not said anything else: the least of which was his name, so Gertie dubbed him “Business Suit Man”. She stood, leaning against the interior wall, halfway between one of the metal double-doors and the corner of the room. This way, she could keep an eye on Mr. Suit and see if anyone else came in the front door leading out to the main Polipartopulos Station floor. If somebody came in through either of the metal elevator doors at the back of the room, she would at least see them (possibly) before they saw her.

Why am I suddenly so paranoid? She was in a strange place, in an “enemy” country, in a small room with a foreign drone-like robot. Her own luggage drone had been “kidnapped” – redirected along a different path in the station... to where? – and she had no directions of her own on how to board the train which she may have already missed.

It’s the Caslet government. The Hegemony broadcasts a “paranoia” signal to keep the public in a state of confusion. She scoffed aloud at her own crazy thoughts.

Her daydream was interrupted as the three functioning holovids all turned white, then began flashing red and yellow. The attention signal stopped, and the three-dimensional screens displayed a scrolling message in large characters: “Visitors to Outer Districts proceed to transport”. After a few seconds, both pairs of metal doors slid open. Indicator lights on the floor lit up, pointing towards both sets of doors.

Mr. Suit stood up and walked swiftly to the left elevator.

Gertie looked around, trying to decide what to do. Finally, she sighed, threw up her hands, and went into the same lift. Mr. Suit continued to face the rear of the elevator compartment.

Gertie had assumed this “lift” would take them up (or down) to another platform, where they would board the train. She was surprised when the doors closed, and the room began to move horizontally. It was slow at first. She could feel that they were making sharp turns left and right, then the motion stopped. There was an abrupt push of just a few meters followed by the distinct feeling of being impacted on the left and the right. Gertie had experienced this once before, when a train carriage was being added to the middle of a longer train. Was this room part of the “train”? She was lost, once again, in the details of a strange and foreign land.

Shortly they began moving again, slowly, in a single direction. Their velocity gradually increased. For the second time on this journey, the sensation of movement without a visual reference to where or how fast they were going, caused a fluttering sensation inside her abdomen. Thinking about what might lie ahead, added to that feeling.

Hold yourself together, Gert. This is the great adventure you’ve been dreaming about!

The train ran for a while and then stopped, presumably to take on and drop off passengers. But not in her carriage! Here, the doors remained closed. *This is one way the Hegemony controls people*, she thought. *You purchase a ticket to a specific destination, and they make sure you go to that place – and that place only.*

After ten more stops and about five kiloseconds, there was a feeling like the carriage was being disconnected from the rest of the train. Gertie felt the short pushes this way and that as the carriage was being transferred from the main train to its debarking station. The last push felt like a normal elevator which had just stopped at the top floor.

The doors slid open. Hazy skylight flooded in, and the thick silence was replaced by the sounds of a crowd of robots. Gertie could see through the doors a cluster of robots, standing in a queue to board the carriage. But there were many more voices and faces and noises.

Mr. Suit was already exiting the transport. Gertie wondered: Was this the right stop? Did she need to transfer to another carriage? Should she follow him? There were so many unknowns. “Oh, *join it!*” she swore quietly then headed out the doorway.

Outside the carriage did not lead to another train station. The carriage had detached from the train and popped up in the middle of an open-air marketplace which stretched out as far as she could see in all directions. Besides those waiting to board her carriage, there were hundreds – if not thousands – of other robots milling about. Spread out in a circle before her were four domed structures, each about the size of the air tender back in Gliddesh. Another queue of robots waited at the closed doors of one of the small buildings. Gertie turned around and saw that she had just exited an identical building. The train was nowhere to be seen, confirming that it ran underground through this part of the country.

Gertie wandered through the crowd, trying to get her bearings. All around, small booths were set up, with vendors hawking their wares. It was a marketplace, the kind that Gertie enjoyed downtown near the university she attended – except this was on a much, *much* grander scale.

An oily haze polluted the air, effectively blocking any view of the Wheel’s upward curves, and severely shortening the normal horizon lines. Gertie could barely make out the silhouettes of different shapes and sizes of buildings around what might have been the periphery of the promenade. From what she could see, they all looked archaic, and none were higher than two stories. The exception was a much larger building which overshadowed everything else around it. It was a squat octagonal building topped with an onion-shaped dome thirty meters in diameter and perhaps twenty meters tall, constructed of white stone, and surrounded by four skinny minarets. She guessed the structure was more than two kilometers away.

Based on the architecture and apparent age of what she *could* see around her, she figured this was someplace in the Ralstan area of Caslet. And that meant she was close to the Jian border.

Gertie started to eye members of the crowd. Most looked like ordinary robots, a few were obviously older models. Nearly all were dressed in dull, old-fashioned, and ill-fitting clothes, in a manner like Mr. Suit. Gertie’s flowing outfit with multiple colors and textures stood out like a bare wire. *Maybe I will have to get a new wardrobe*, she thought. *I will need to buy new clothes anyway if they continue holding my luggage drone hostage!*

One old machine, bargaining loudly with the skinny shopkeeper at a nearby booth, reminded Gertie of Miss Sarah from school, with his caterpillar tracks, rather than legs, attached to either side of a box-shaped body. Unlike Miss Sarah, whose cheerful face was made from animated pixels on a flat vidscreen, this fellow's head was normal, if not tedious and unadorned and showing signs of age.

Another very strange robot walked on four legs, a pair of which protruded from either side of an elongated, horizontal body; its arms resembled raptorial insect legs.

Small round airborne drones flitted about, like so many insects. She saw other robots with strange abnormalities or deformities. Some robots were just wildly different than anything she had seen before. Then it hit her.

These robots are Jians!

In fact, most of the robots around her were Caslets. However, there were enough aboriginals from inside the Great Jian Wall that it skewed Gertie's perception. It caught her off guard. She was frightened, being surrounded by robots who were remarkably different than herself. At the same time, she was awed by how casually those who looked so peculiar were able to interact with regular robots.