

A Pause in the Perpetual Rotation - Chapter One

The car slowly came to a stop at the curb, its door opening automatically. Lansing stepped out with difficulty, checking his balance on the cane before starting to walk. The rain had ended, but the reflection of the tall building's lights showed that the sidewalk's bricks were wet and slick.

Although the summer night was warm, he'd worn the tan raincoat over his suit anyway. A brimmed black fedora completed the ensemble, a look that had gone out of style and come back so many times that he simply stuck with it now.

"Shall I wait, Inspector?" The car's accent was flat American, like his own.

"No, I'll be here awhile." The door shut, and the vehicle rolled away. It was a motor pool car, even though Lansing rated one of his own. He wondered if it was already receiving instructions for another pickup, and then decided that was unlikely at this time of night.

The wide stone steps were empty, but during the day they were usually dotted with workers from the other departments in the building. Sitting. Eating. Talking. Staring into their slims as if the devices were alive. All of them staff in the Ministry of Education, which occupied every inch of the structure except for Lansing's office in the basement. He went up the steps steadily, ready with the cane if his quirky leg muscles fired in the wrong sequence. Twenty years of walking like this, and every step a crapshoot.

Two Mech Marshals stood guard on either side of the building's long row of main doors, silent and motionless as stone lions. This version of the robot law enforcers was

seven feet tall, black armor, and somewhat humanoid in shape from their block-like feet to their broad shoulders. Above that, however, was a drum-like head only eight inches tall with a dark red sensor screen that ran all the way around.

Lansing had seen the pair move once, a benefit of his odd hours, when he'd chanced upon an unexplained changing of the guard. Two identical marshals flew down and landed in the park across the street, to keep the jets in the soles of their boots from scorching the stone at the top of the stairs. Looking like a pair of weightlifters as they lumbered forward with their massive arms swinging. They took the places of the original pair, and those two clomped down the steps before lifting off from the park. Scheduled maintenance, or perhaps a weapons upgrade. Somebody was always making the things a little more dangerous.

Inside, Lansing shambled across the inlaid marble of the lobby and onto the dark blue carpet that led to the elevators. A beep inside his jacket sent him reaching for his slim. The screen held a greeting from his partner in their basement office, alerted when the lobby's sensors had confirmed his identity.

Whatsamatter? Miss me?

Lansing smiled, stepping into the elevator. He always heard Partner's deep voice when reading these messages, a gruff amalgam of private investigator characters from a hundred ancient noir films. Although Partner had no body, Lansing imagined the Investigative Artificial Intelligence with a bald head, bulging muscles, two days of beard, and a drooping cigarette.

Exiting the elevator, he went down the hallway to its only door. Hidden bolts retracted with a muted thud, and he passed down a short passageway as the heavy door closed behind him. The room he entered was a twenty-foot tall cylinder done up in brown wood. A railed walkway ran around the walls three feet above his six-foot figure, and the floor was a thick rug with an intricate pattern of maroon,

beige, and gold. An imitation roll-top desk stood off to the side, and coffee was already brewing in a wall unit. Lansing went to hang up his coat and hat.

“Didn’t you leave here fifteen minutes ago?” Partner growled, the voice all around him.

“More like five hours.”

“After you’d been here for twelve.”

“That’s me. Dedicated.” Lansing set the cane against the desk, and settled into a big leather swivel chair.

“Everybody else in this building comes to work when they’re supposed to, leaves when they’re supposed to.”

“That’s because they have no work to do. It would be different if they had actual jobs.”

“Being here *is* their job, Boss.” The AI argued. “You ever gonna understand bureaucracy? What you *do* isn’t half as important as the size of your department.”

“Well then I’m afraid you and I aren’t very important.”

“You can say that again. We’re the only cops in the whole complex.”

“Forgetting the centurions guarding the main door?”

“They’re not cops. Mech Marshals are just muscle.”

Partner was programmed to hold up his end of the banter, so Lansing decided to cut it off. “Where’s the latest feed from our friends on The Unused Path?”

All around him, wood paneling faded and then brightened into a collage of photographic images. Graffiti on an alley wall. Doodles and letters on a discarded napkin. Words chalked beneath a stone bridge. All of them selections from the last twenty-four hours of surveillance footage across Capital City. Captured by stationary cameras, high-altitude drones, and even mini-recorders that looked and flew like insects.

“Some of the painted ones look pretty old.” Partner explained. “The chalk one’s new.”

Without being asked, Partner highlighted the words in each picture that had earned them a spot in Lansing’s gallery.

In the middle of the graffiti he read the words, DEVELOP YOUR MIND. ALWAYS.

“Second lesson in their canon.” He swiveled the chair to view the chalk message. “And this one is the very first sentence of their whole philosophy.”

A simple question. WHOSE LIFE ARE YOU GOING TO LIVE?

“Napkin’s got one that’s paraphrased.” Partner zoomed in on the letters. ROBOTS MAKE GOOD SERVANTS, BUT POOR MASTERS. “The actual words are ‘tools make good servants, but poor masters’.”

Lansing nodded, having memorized the entire dogma. It wasn’t long, and could be found all over the web. “If it’s different, what qualified it for the intelligence skim?”

“It wasn’t alone.” Partner changed the picture to show five similar papers, neatly laid out side by side and photographed. The doodles and handwriting were different, but the words were the same. “This distribution was scattered on the tables of an outdoor food court.”

“Video of the culprits?”

“They’re somewhere in the body mix, but can’t be identified.” The screen jumped into high-speed motion, focused on two dozen four-seater tables in an open air setting. Automated food kiosks lined two sides of the square, and Lansing watched the frenetic flow of diners. Getting their meals and drinks, carrying them to the tables, munching, talking, leaving. Partner periodically halted the playback to show that almost every vacated table had extra napkins on it.

“Clever. We couldn’t be lucky enough for this to be in a guv zone, right?”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Partner now showed him a schematic of the city, the nation’s new capital ever since the Reorganization a generation earlier. The AI then overlaid a familiar color pattern on the schematic. A single aqua blue blotch indicated Tier One, the community where

top government ministers and their families lived. It was entirely surrounded by a much bigger smudge in forest green, one of several inside the city limits. The green zones indicating the neighborhoods where administration employees of the government lived and worked. The rest of the map was a light tan.

Aqua blue for the people at the top of the society, known as the Swells because they were afloat in a sea of power and luxury. Green for the Shoals, not as privileged as the Swells but bobbing along happily and only occasionally touching bottom. Tan for the majority of the Citizens, the Sands, who received everything they needed but more slowly than the others. Their world was also referred to as the beach because the water touched them too, after passing the Swells and the Shoals. Sand folk were also known as Grains.

Red lines grew over the schematic, completely outlining the blue area and then creating a tight network of blocks and rectangles inside the green smudge that surrounded it. Those were the ministry complexes, the nation's government, and they included the one where Lansing was seated. Constant electronic monitoring occurred inside the red boundaries, recording every detail on every slim. A blinking cursor showed the location of the food court, near an office complex in the green but outside the red.

“Even if they'd come under our monitoring, a tweaked slim could beat that.” Lansing exhaled with a light whistle, leaning back into the leather. “We'd be chasing our tails, investigating everyone who ate there.”

His mind blanched at the idea of scrutinizing the daily activities of so many gov workers and mere Citizens. The dreary details of their contented, stagnant lives contrasting so darkly with what he'd learned from studying the Unused Path philosophy. A wall back at his house displayed every maxim in their creed, and they were now burned into his memory.

Develop your mind. Always.

Spend time alone with your thoughts.

Specificity contributes to accuracy.

Those aphorisms, and their increasing promotion, suggested their advocates were anything but stagnant and none too contented. Spreading discontent was a crime, and that was why he'd been told to look into it. The potentially subversive seeds of thought had so far been ignored by the Citizens, but the planters' success at remaining anonymous was no small feat.

The words needled Lansing, walked with him, and sent him back to work at odd hours. To sit here in this round tower office, encased in counter-surveillance electronics while the words rebounded inside his head. Like some friar in a Dark Ages fortress-monastery, copying scroll after scroll while the outside world suffered in ignorance and despondence. The thought made him smile just a bit. The structure above his office took up two city blocks, but the hundreds of staffers who worked there by day were hardly despondent. Happily idle was more like it. Willing to go with the flow wherever that took them.

"Whose life are you going to live?" Lansing hadn't meant to speak out loud.

"You ought to be careful, Boss."

He understood Partner's warning, but pretended not to anyway.

"Last time I was being careful, I got a thousand-volt kiss that turned my legs into Pinocchio's."

"That fits. After all, you were born with his nose."

"You saying I'm a liar?"

"The nose didn't make Pinocchio a liar. It just ratted him out when he was fibbing. But you do that all on your own. Whenever you lie, it's really obvious. Remember that, Boss."