

Act II: Lance

The Daily Commute

The transport hub in Hayward¹⁰ awakened long before the sun. Not that anyone could tell.

A vast concrete platform stretched into the distance beneath a perfect blue sky. The color looked almost artificial in its intensity, as though someone had selected it from a catalogue and ordered a more reassuring version of reality.

Two tracks ran along the center of the station.

One was marked *HOME*.

The other was marked *WORK*.

No other destination was available.

Several hundred commuters stood in orderly lines waiting for transportation.

No one spoke. No one checked their phone. No one appeared impatient. They simply waited. The silence was almost complete.

Then the sky crackled. The sound lasted less than a second. For the briefest moment, the illusion vanished. The perfect blue dissolved into an ugly orange haze. Beyond the projection, the real sky revealed itself; smoke-stained, dusty, and oppressive.

Then the image returned. Blue again. Bright again. Beautiful again. Nobody reacted. Reality malfunctioned often enough that people had stopped noticing.

A calm synthetic voice emerged from hidden speakers. "Hyperloop¹¹ pods arriving. Please proceed in an orderly manner."

Rows of identical transport pods emerged from a tunnel at the far end of the station.

A green light flashed.

A door opened.

Twelve commuters entered.

The light turned red.

The door sealed.

The pod disappeared into the opposite tunnel.

Then the process repeated.

Again.

And again.

And again.

The station resembled an enormous machine designed to process human beings.

Lance Stephens shuffled forward with everyone else. Twenty-five years old, lean, and unremarkable, he moved with the same rhythm as the crowd.

Behind him stood his friends Alan Reed and Joe Martinez. If "friends" was even the right word. Modern life left surprisingly little time for friendship.

A green light illuminated the pod ahead. The doors opened. Lance stepped inside. Alan and Joe followed. Nine strangers entered behind them.

The doors closed.

The inside of the pod resembled the interior of an egg. Smooth white walls curved inward from every direction. There were twelve passengers and only ten seats. No windows. A single screen occupied the ceiling. Several cameras observed the occupants from discreet positions.

Joe claimed one of the seats. Lance and Alan remained standing. Nobody acknowledged anybody else. Not the strangers. Not the colleagues. Not even the people who shared the pod every morning of their lives.

The screen flickered. *DESTINATION: WORK.*

The vehicle hummed softly as it accelerated into the tunnel. Only then did Joe move. He drove his knee into a small maintenance cabinet mounted near the door.

The panel burst open.

Before anyone could react, he reached inside and ripped out a handful of wires. The ceiling monitor went dark. The green indicator lights beside the cameras disappeared.

Joe grinned. "Now we can talk."

Alan grinned back. "What's new?"

Joe leaned in. "You remember that internet outage last month?"

Alan rolled his eyes. "Oh no."

"You already know?"

"Another sex scandal?"

Joe nodded. "Hooli's CEO.¹² The disruption was intentional, designed to keep the news from spreading."

Alan's expression remained unimpressed.

Joe's face fell. Then he shrugged and addressed Lance, trying another subject. "Didn't you apply for that Sotho Industries job?"

Unlike Alan, Lance didn't answer immediately. He studied the cameras first, the blank monitor and the loose wires hanging from the cabinet.

Only after convincing himself that the surveillance equipment was truly dead did he risk an answer. "Still waiting for news."

"I applied too," Alan said. "Didn't make it."

Joe laughed. "I could've told you that."

"Thanks."

"Would've saved you the effort."

The monitor flickered. The three men froze. A brief flash of static crossed the screen.

Then it went dark again.

"Those tests were hard," Alan said.

"You passed the physical evaluation, at least," Lance said.

Alan rolled up a sleeve and flexed dramatically. "With flying colors."

Joe snorted. "Everybody knows you have the body." He tapped his forehead. "It's the rest they were worried about."

Alan pointed at him. "The same goes for you."

"I never claimed otherwise."

The argument might have continued indefinitely if Alan hadn't suddenly remembered something. "They kept asking weird questions."

"What kind of questions?" Lance asked.

Alan frowned. "Something like ata and taka."

Lance laughed. "Ana and kata."

Alan's eyebrows shot up. "Those are actual words?"

"They were explained in the essay."

"What essay?"

"The one we were supposed to read."¹³

"As if we have time to read essays," Alan said.

The pod began slowing before Lance could respond.

Joe plugged the loose wires back into the cabinet. The camera lights flickered to life, the screen illuminated.

The conversation was over. Faces became neutral and the commuters were model citizens again.

The flow of workers emerging from the transport pods never stopped. The pods arrived. The doors opened. Passengers stepped out. The pods departed.

No hesitation. No confusion. No wasted movement.

Lance exited with Alan and Joe, and the three men drifted apart. Anyone observing them would have assumed they were strangers.

That was the idea.

Ahead, a corridor of scanners waited. People filed through one after another. No visible human authority enforced the rules. None was needed. The workers simply obeyed. Lance joined the queue.

When his turn came, he stepped beneath a scanning arch. A pale beam crossed his face. For a fraction of a second the machine considered him. Then a green light appeared. Authorized.

Another wave of pods was arriving at the *HOME* platform. The night shift had finished its work. Rows of exhausted workers stood waiting to board. Lance lingered to watch their stained uniforms and tired faces.

The perfect blue sky stretched above them; flawless, but artificial. An isolated fleck of ash drifted lazily downward. Lance observed its slow descent. Halfway to the ground, it vanished.

Someone shoved him from behind. "Move on."

"Sorry, sir," he said automatically. "It won't happen again."

The man who had pushed him didn't respond. Nobody ever did.

Lance joined the flow once more. Ahead rose the factory. A vast gray structure of concrete and steel without any aesthetic ambition. It resembled a bunker more than a workplace.

Above the entrance hung a banner large enough to be read from hundreds of feet away: *NATU'S WORK IS GOD'S WORK!*¹⁴

The slogan had become impossible to avoid. Lance saw it at least twenty times a day. That didn't mean he believed it.

High on the outer walls hung enormous posters of President Dan Mathysen.

Time and weather had damaged many of them. Corners hung loose. Sections had torn away. Yet the imperfections somehow made the images more unsettling. The smiling face remained intact. The eyes seemed to follow every worker entering the building.¹⁵

Lance lowered his own eyes and walked inside.

Outside the dome, California was dying.¹⁶

The South Bay stretched toward the horizon beneath a burnt-orange sky. Large sections of land had become little more than dry scars. Wildfires smoldered in the distance. Columns of smoke rose into the atmosphere. Ash drifted endlessly across the landscape.

And over all of it stood the massive dome.¹⁷

Inside the artificial construction lay San Jose.¹⁸ The city existed within a carefully controlled environment of filtered air, regulated weather, and managed illusion.

Transport pods surfaced from underground tunnels and disappeared again with mechanical precision. People moved through predetermined routines. Life continued; contained, ordered, predictable.