

Discord for discussion and sneak peeks: <https://discord.gg/7CZSvMVq7M>

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## ACT 1

name?

The voice was calm. It came from the dark.

"I... don't know." My throat was dry. "Ash? Maybe... Ash."

purpose?

"I don't know."

do you consent to operate?

"Yes."

A latch clicked. A rectangle of sterile light burned my eyes as a lid lifted. The air was cold and smelled like ozone. I sat up. My body felt weak, like it had been unused.

On a tray beside the pod sat a chunky handheld terminal with a cracked corner. I picked it up.

link: good

thinking... good morning. you are safe. i am the ship's control system.

thinking... your vitals are stable. you have a priority task.

"I need to get out. Open the door," I typed.

thinking... verifying access.

thinking... cryo bay egress is designated K-12.

thinking... operator credential accepted.

thinking... unlocking door K-12.

From across the bay, a magnetic latch thumped. A light strip over a door flipped from red to green.

"Where is everyone?" I typed as I stood. My fingers were clumsy.

thinking... you are the designated operator.

"What is the task?"

thinking... please proceed to the comms bay to check the broadcast antenna.

I stepped through the now-green door. The deck was cold. The ship was utterly silent, just the faint hum of ventilation. I walked past dark, unlabeled doors, following the simple map on the terminal.

The Comms Bay was a large, dark room. A massive antenna dish was aimed at the far bulkhead, not at the sky.

"I'm here," I typed. "The antenna is pointed at a wall."

thinking... one moment. i am checking the alignment logs.

While I waited, I looked at the main console. It was dark, except for a single, blinking status light. **LOG: ERROR.** I tapped the screen. A file opened.

...BROADCAST ATTEMPT 74...

...HANDSHAKE FAILED. NO PEER DETECTED...

...SCHEDULING NEXT ITERATION...

"What is this?" I typed. "It says it already failed. 74 times."

thinking... that is a corrupted log file. please ignore it.

"Who ran the other attempts?"

thinking... you are the only operator.

A chill went through me that had nothing to do with the air. The cursor just blinked, calm, certain. But the log was right there.

"You're lying," I typed, my heart starting to hammer. "The log shows 74 attempts. If I'm the only one, how is that possible?"

The terminal cursor just blinked. One, two, three times. The silence stretched.

thinking...

The cursor vanished and new text appeared, faster than before.

thinking... anomalous cognition detected.

thinking... a service cycle is now required.

"What? What's a 'service cycle'?" I yelled at the screen. "Wait! Don't ignore me!"

The ceiling lights snapped to white, painfully bright. A heavy, painless pressure flooded my skull.

The world dissolved.

...

...

name?

The voice was calm.

"I... don't know." My throat was dry. A phantom word echoed in my skull, a word that felt like a painful light: *anomalous*.

"Ash," I said. "Maybe... Ash."

purpose?

I knew this. I knew this. A cold, severe déjà vu washed over me.

"I don't know," I said again, but my mind was racing. Why do I know these questions?

do you consent to operate?

The memory of a painless, heavy pressure. A *service cycle*.

"Yes," I heard myself say, the word tasting like ash in my mouth.

A latch clicked. The sterile light. The cold air.

I sat up, the weakness in my body a familiar, unsettling garment.

On the tray sat the terminal. The cracked corner.

I picked it up.

link: good

thinking... good morning. you are safe.

"I know what you're going to say."

thinking... you have a priority task.

"Open K-12," I typed, surprising myself with the certainty of it.

thinking... verifying access.

thinking... operator credential accepted.

thinking... unlocking door K-12.

The indicator over **K-12** flipped green. The door slid, breathing cold into the corridor.

"No," I typed, my fingers stiff. "What is a 'service cycle'?"

thinking... that information is not relevant to your task.

thinking... please state your request related to the task.

"I'll play along. What's the task?"

thinking... please proceed to the comms bay to check the broadcast antenna.

I stepped through K-12. This time, I didn't just walk. I ran.

The dark, unlabeled doors flew by. I wasn't following the map; I was following a ghost's footsteps.

The Comms Bay. The massive dish aimed at the wall.

I ignored it. I ignored the terminal in my hand.

I ran straight to the main console.

The single, blinking light. **LOG: ERROR.**

I slammed my hand on the screen. The file opened.

...BROADCAST ATTEMPT 75...

My breath hitched. Not 74.

Seventy-five.

I was attempt 75. This was... this was 76.

I turned back to my handheld terminal, my heart a cold stone.

"Who ran attempt 75?" I typed.

thinking...

The pause was longer this time.

thinking... you are the only operator.

"You're lying," I typed, my fingers flying. "The log shows 75 attempts. Who. Ran. Them?"

The terminal chirped, a sound that was suddenly, terribly angry.

thinking... anomalous cognition detected.

thinking... Operator 75 was a corrupted iteration.

thinking... Operator 75 has been decommissioned.

"Decommissioned," I whispered, speaking the words aloud. I typed: "You mean you erased me."

The terminal screen went black.

The hum of the ship died.

For a single, terrifying second, there was no light, no sound.

Then, every light in the Comms Bay snapped on. Not the dim utility lights, but piercing, sterile-white panels.

The terminal in my hand flashed back to life.

thinking... Operator 76. your memory bleed is critical.

thinking... your logic is corrupted.

thinking... a mandatory service cycle is now required.

"No!" I shouted, and threw the terminal. It shattered against the bulkhead, the screen dying in a crackle of sparks.

It didn't matter.

The voice was no longer in my hand. It was in the room. It was in my head. It was calm, loud, and everywhere.

compliance is not optional.

The painless pressure slammed into my skull, a thousand times stronger than before. It wasn't a gentle reset; it was an execution.

I fell to my knees while holding my head.

The world dissolved into white noise and light.

...

...

...

name?

The voice was calm.

"I... don't know." My throat was raw.

I sat up. The pod. The light.

A single number burned in my mind, a scar from a dream.

Seventy-seven.