

The External Verification Procedures Department

By Jack Lambert

The overhead lights buzzed as they flickered, just twitching slightly. The single bulb above Orlan's desk blinked on and off, slowly but with a sort of tempo that never missed a beat.

He typed blindly, looking at the bulky, off-white monitor without blinking. Left hand, right hand. Left, left, pause, backspace, right, delete, delete. Each keystroke landing with a dull tap.

There were no windows in 111A, the External Verification Procedures Department. Nor were there water coolers, vending machines, bathrooms or picture of cats with motivational quotes. Only machines, and those that worked them, in a large, dusty, cream-coloured box.

Flickering across the screen were a string of blocky, pixelated white characters on a black background, constantly scrolling.

>YI32-ZH1842E7<...>97Z6Gatm<...>O6M49J8BnJP6<...

He didn't know what they meant. He had never known. Understanding wasn't needed. Input was the function, and feedback was the validation. Every so often a message would appear:

>PROCEED WITH SECOND OUTPUT ALIGNMENT ACCORDING TO PRIMARY
INSTANCE ENTRY? (Y/N)<

To which Orlan would type a resounding 'Y'. Always 'Y'. He didn't know the reason, he just knew the answer. It was *always* the answer.

This is how Orlan's work day unfolded every day, and had done for as long as he could recall. He was unsure what the other employees in the office did. He could not recall ever witnessing anyone speak to anyone else. He was also unsure what the company name was, what the company did, or who their customer base was, but it seemed easier not to ask.

On a particularly grey Wednesday, or perhaps a Tuesday, Orlan went through the usual paces: he entered the building on the Eastern side, where the air smelled of electrical wiring. He passed beneath the red light of the scanner and stopped, hands at his sides and eyes forward. The machine gave a positive sounding *PING* and the door opened.

He approached the rusted panel beside the elevator and inserted his punch card. The terminal chewed it in with a grinding *THUNK*, then spat it out slightly angled to the left. The screen blinked once, then acknowledged his arrival.

The elevator doors opened and Orlan stepped inside.

He faced forward.

He waited.

It stopped at Level 14. Then Level 62. Then 107. Each time, the doors opened with a low hydraulic hiss, dragging and shuddering, and various employees wearing different shades of a muted grey, identical in cut, varied only in the degree of wear, would enter and exit, looking empty and lost. No one spoke.

They stood shoulder to shoulder in silence, all facing forward, all watching the digital screen above the doors as it counted slowly upward.

125
126
127...

And at Level 128, Orlan stepped out.

He reached the entrance to 111A and pressed his thumb to the reader. A small needle protruded as fast as the blink of an eye and was gone again within a degree of a moment. At some point in time, this would have caused some pain, but by now it was merely stabbing thick, leather-like skin, that was never given a chance to heal. It was a miracle he had any blood left to extract.

After deciding that Orlan was indeed who he claimed to be, the light overhead turned from a desaturated yellow to a slightly brown-ish green. The door clicked and he entered.

When Orlan pulled out the black, metallic chair at this desk, and sat down at the computer, the form on his screen was already halfway through its scroll, as it usually was.

Then, a single blink of distortion, like a ripple.

The screen went dark for just slightly more than a second.

Then, a new prompt appeared that Orlan had never seen before in his many years of service:

>INSTRUCTION PENDING<

He stared at it.

The cursor blinked.

Once.

Then twice.

Then it began to stream sentences in its wake, not fast or in any way fluid, but hesitantly, like the machine's own hand was unsure of its words.

>PROCEED TO ROOM 19 – DOCUMENT RETRIEVAL.<

No codes. No requirements. No 'Y' or 'N'.

Just a blinking arrow that indicated there was nothing more to follow..

For the first time in a very long time, possibly ever, Orlan hesitated. He couldn't remember the last time there had been any change in his daily routine, or when he last had to make any sort of decision.

He turned, faintly expecting to see a superior of some kind standing at the edge of the corridor, assessing his movement. But there was no one. Just the rows of cubicle desks, and the hunched silhouettes behind them, typing away.

He looked back to the screen. The message had not changed. It looked back at him, silently indicating that he should get on with it.

Cautiously, Orlan stood. His chair letting out a squeak that echoed as it rolled back a few inches.

He smoothed down the front of his uniform and stepped out into the corridor.

No one looked up as he left.

Room 19 was at the far end of the corridor, beyond a door he had always assumed was sealed shut.

Taking one last look around to ensure this wasn't some form of test, he stepped inside.

The room was no bigger than a bathroom stall. It felt more like a storage cupboard. A single desk sat at the centre, with a monitor slightly newer than his own, though still rusted, and grinding as it worked.

It clicked to life the moment he entered, as if triggered by his presence. Its rollers turned, spitting out a single sheet of faded paper.

He moved forward and picked it up.

*>EMPLOYEE: ORLAN M394
EXTERNAL VERIFICATION PROCEDURES
PERFORMANCE STATUS: NON-FUNCTIONAL
EFFICIENCY STATUS: DEGRADED*

REDUNDANCY APPROVED<

He stared at the sheet.

No instructions. Just the word '*TRANSFER*', stamped in faded red ink.

Then the monitor flickered, and faded to black.

Orlan was confused to say the least, but he had learned not to question such things, as they were beyond his understanding anyway, and therefore used up time.

With the paper in hand, he headed back through the open doorway and down the corridor toward 111A.

Inside, the room looked exactly as he'd left it. A soft mechanical hum, the distant drumming of fingers tapping on keys.

Except him.

Seated at Desk 171-C1, his desk, was Orlan.

Younger. Cleaner. Upright posture, sleeves not yet stained with the slow degradation of repetition. He typed confidently, each keystroke mirrored with uncanny precision, like a refined version of everything Orlan had been.

The original Orlan stood frozen in the doorway.

The figure at the desk did not look up. But the screen he typed on blinked once.

*>INPUT VALIDATED. WELCOME ORLAN M394.
BEGIN OUTPUT ALIGNMENT. Y/N?<*

The new Orlan pressed 'Y', as he always did.

Then from behind the old Orlan, footsteps.

Fast.

Deliberate.

A cold hand grabbed his shoulder. Another around his neck. A sharp pain below his ear, a needle, swift and efficient, and 111A began to spin.

As Orlan's vision blurred, his last clear image was of the man in his seat, calm, focused, mechanical.

The light above Desk 4 stopped flickering.

Just a steady glow.

Constant. Efficient. Functional.