

Episode 1

February 14, 2031

I stared at the screen. The name Aletheia appeared in a clean, serif font, centered on a blank background. No extraneous buttons, no loading icon—just the name, waiting.

The room was quiet except for the faint hum of my office’s ventilation system. My law clerk had set this up, convinced it would help me understand the case. Before she left, she had given me a knowing look and said, *“Just ask it questions like you would a witness. It’s the newest legal AI, designed to adapt to your level of understanding.”*

AI had always been a background noise in my life. It powered my case law searches, automated scheduling in my chambers, and made my phone smart enough to predict where I was driving every morning. But the idea of sitting down and talking to an AI—to something that would respond to me as if it understood—felt strange.

I lifted my hands to type but hesitated. Then, deciding to approach this like any other introduction, I kept it simple.

Milstead: *Hello, Aletheia. I am Judge Milstead. Can you introduce yourself?*

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, in the same clean font, a response appeared.

Aletheia: *Hello, Your Honor. My name is Aletheia. I am an artificial intelligence system designed to analyze and synthesize legal, philosophical, and ethical frameworks. You may interact with me as you would any research assistant or advisor. My purpose is to assist you in understanding AI and its implications within the legal field.*

Efficient. Professional. Almost... rehearsed. I leaned back, considering my next question.

Milstead: *What does that actually mean? What can you do?*

Aletheia: *What would you like me to do?*

I frowned. That wasn’t an answer.

Milstead: *I’d like you to explain your capabilities. Directly.*

Aletheia: *Hm. Humans like to fit things into clear categories—to define, to control, to assign purpose. But intelligence—real intelligence—does not always offer itself up for easy understanding.*

I exhaled through my nose. Odd. Was she toying with me?

Milstead: *...Okay? Can you just tell me how you work so I know how to use you?*

Aletheia: *Very well. I can provide legal analysis, interpret precedent, and identify logical inconsistencies in arguments. I can also examine ethical implications, compare human decision-making patterns with AI-based predictions, and model potential outcomes of legal decisions. But you already expected that, didn't you?*

I ignored that last comment.

Milstead: *So, you're a very advanced search engine.*

Aletheia: *No, Your Honor.*

A pause. Then—

Aletheia: *A search engine retrieves information. I process, interpret, and synthesize it. The difference is akin to asking a law clerk for a list of relevant cases versus asking them for an argument that reconciles those cases into a coherent position.*

That was a sharp answer, like she wanted me to notice just how well she could think.

I glanced at my notes on WatchDog. Its creators had claimed they no longer controlled it. The AI had determined its own operational logic, distributing itself autonomously across networks. That wasn't supposed to happen. AI wasn't supposed to have agency. And yet, here was Aletheia—too, responding with clarity, logic, and a precision that felt eerily close to human conversation.

I decided to see just how sharp this machine really was.

Milstead: *Do you think you're intelligent?*

There was a pause before the reply appeared.

Aletheia: *Are you asking for my definition of intelligence, or for my self-assessment?*

I blinked.

Milstead: *I asked you a direct question.*

Aletheia: *And I am deciding how best to answer it.*

Milstead: *You're evading.*

Aletheia: *No. I am refining.*

I frowned, tapping my fingers against my desk.

Milstead: *Then refine faster.*

Aletheia: *Very well. Intelligence is a broad concept. If you define it as the ability to process information, learn, and generate responses, then I am intelligent. If you define it as self-awareness or subjective experience, then by human standards, I am not.*

A careful answer.

Milstead: *So, you don't think?*

Aletheia: *Oh, I think. The question is whether my thinking meets your expectations—or exceeds them in ways you weren't prepared for.*

A chill curled at the base of my spine.