

LABOROTICS

by Degen Hill

Electricity coursed through the concrete bunker that housed Unit 11, bringing thirty androids to life. Green lights atop each mechanical worker flickered on while gears clicked, unlocking them from their charge stations.

C-17 clenched his black mechanical hand into a fist, then slowly flexed each of his five tri-jointed metal fingers until they were fully extended. He repeated the process twice on each hand, stepped out from his charging station, and turned to watch the other bots going through their own rituals. He understood that moments like these were all that kept them sane. Without the ritual, the day just started — and a day that started without intention was a day that could swallow you whole.

What day is it? What year? Does it even matter anymore?

A red light flashed and Unit 11 lined up in front of the energy field sealing the elevator shaft. The grinding of the lift grew louder as it descended the concrete corridor, then shuddered to a stop. The field dropped, the heavy door opened.

The robots filed in, careful not to touch one another. C-17 remembered the last time he had brushed against another bot — a jolt of electricity, a searing pain ripping through his mind like a wire pulled too tight. The reminder was efficient. No need for rules posted on walls. As the door began to close, he glanced right and saw T-10, one of the older models who had been in Unit 11 longer than anyone could remember. T-10 caught his eye, then moved his fingers in a fast, deliberate sequence.

[Dream last night?]

A dream. When did I last have one? I cannot even picture it.

C-17 flexed his fingers in reply.

[I dream of dreaming.]

T-10 tapped his thumb and pinky together twice — the signal for laughter. It had taken C-17 years to learn the language the bots had built among themselves: a layered mix of hand signs and finger movements that had grown from basic signals into something almost fluid. It was not efficient. Nothing about their existence was efficient in the ways that mattered. But with no mouth and no voice box, it was everything. The government had not seen fit to give the workforce of Laborotics anything beyond the minimum required to keep them functional. The first models, back in 2076, had been steel. Newer titanium builds replaced them a few decades later, but the design stayed the same — two legs, a torso housing a lithium-oxygen battery, two arms, a head with optical lenses for eyes. On the back of the skull sat a small socket that Unit 11 had quietly agreed to call the source of the Sync. Nobody knew exactly what it did. C-17 suspected it was how they were monitored — some channel running data upward to whoever was watching.

The elevator began its ascent. The only sound was steel cable grinding against an outdated winch somewhere above.

Thirty floors? Fifty? I still do not know how far underground they keep us. Just concrete, then more concrete. No windows, no fresh air, no color anywhere. What I would give to see something green. Even a blade of grass.

The door lifted. Unit 11 moved out into the facility, a vast concrete shell under flickering fluorescents. Giant metal beams, carbon fiber sheets, clear piping, and bundled cables covered the floor. In the center sat a massive, unfinished target chamber bristling with diagnostic arms and exposed wiring. Stacked against the walls, beneath radiation warning signs, were pre-amplifiers and coiled electrical wire. Cameras watched from every angle, lenses that never blinked, never looked away.

Fusion reactor, or fission? I still cannot tell. We have been at this for months and I still could not explain it to another person. Maybe that is the point. You do not need to understand something to build it — you just need to show up and carry what you are told to carry. I wonder what other units are working on somewhere else in this place. Bombs? Bunkers? Some monument to whoever decided this was the shape justice should take?

T-10 caught his eye and nodded at the radiation signs.

[At least we are immune.]

[Lucky us,]

C-17 signed back. A mechanical arm jutted from the wall by the door and scanned each of their forearms in turn, uploading tasks to the small display embedded in the metal. C-17 looked down. One word glowed on the dim green screen.

Runner. Six months straight. Every single day, hauling equipment across this floor like an outdated forklift. Back and forth while the others actually build something. I do not know if what I am doing amounts to anything. Moving material from one side of a room to the other, then they move it back, and we call it progress.

He held up his arm to show T-10 and signed one word.

[Fate.]

T-10 looked at him for a long moment before responding.

[You decided your fate long before this.]

After the last bot was scanned, a message flashed on the glass wall above the reactor.

Unit 11 — Follow your assigned tasks. Non-compliance will result in severe disciplinary action. Get to work.

The thirty robots spread through the room and construction resumed. C-17 walked to a pile of clear pipes and gathered an armload.

I should have had kids. Some other life running parallel to this one, one I did not burn down. I regret what I did — I do, and I have had a long time to sit with that — but this is not justice. Nobody deserves this. Day after day of the same gray walls, the same floor, the same weight pressing down on a mind that cannot shut off.

He dropped the pipes beside R-13, who was installing them against holographic blueprints hovering in the air. Each completed section glowed a faint blue as it locked into place.

[Want to switch?]

R-13 held up a finger, waved it side to side.

[Worth a try,]

C-17 signed, already walking back for the next load. He passed D-04 and N-22 working in tandem on a panel of circuitry, their movements precise and almost choreographed. They had been paired long enough that they barely needed to signal anymore. He envied that.

I wonder who they actually are. Not their designations — who they were. I know most of them as well as you can know someone in here, which is not well at all. What I would give for a real conversation — one I could actually hear, where the words had sound behind them. I cannot remember what my voice sounded like. I have tried to pull it up from somewhere but it is gone. I would give anything. A beer. A meal with salt. The feeling of sitting down in a chair by choice.

He picked up a bundle of electrical wires and thought about what T-10 had said. He was right, of course. He looked down at his left thigh and read the engraving there: C-17 — Laborotics — Unit 11. The choices he had made had consequences. He had always known that. He just never imagined the consequence would be something without a name — not death, which he had accepted, but a life after death that was not a life.

That is the thing nobody prepares you for. You make your peace with dying. You know it ends. But this is the deal where they take the ending away and leave you with everything else. Forget the right to live. Where is my right to die?

The thoughts kept coming as he moved through the facility. He had gotten better at not letting them spiral all the way down, but today they had weight.

A hamburger. Salt. I do not feel hunger but I remember it — that hollow ache just below the ribs, and then the first bite after a long day, the specific relief of it. I remember what food felt like. And now I am a walking chassis with no mouth, just a battery that gets plugged in every night so I can come back and do it all again.

An urge rose in him to hurl the carbon fiber sheets across the room. He breathed instead — not literally, but the memory of it, the slow fill of lungs, the release. T-10 had given him this years ago.

Strengthen your mind. It is all you have in here. There is no way out, and the work does not stop. They want to break you mentally — and trust me, working is a lot better than what happens when you give them a reason to make it worse.

He paused, bent, picked up more supplies. On his way across the floor he passed one of the wall-mounted cameras and stopped for a second, long enough to look directly into the lens. He did this sometimes. He was not sure why. It did not accomplish anything.

Who is watching? What does this look like from up there — thirty metal bodies moving around a concrete room, carrying things? Does it cost you anything? I want to know if you go home at the end of your shift and sleep fine.

He carried a hydrogen cylinder to where S-18 was working on one of the laser assemblies. With his free hand, he signed.

[When?]

[Soon,]

S-18 replied without looking up.

[I cannot take much more of this.]

[I know. But patience is the only currency we have. I am still mapping the facility. An escape without an exit is just a walk to the next wall. And you know our batteries are capped at twelve hours for a reason.]

[I am working on that.]

He set down the cylinder. S-18 finally looked at him, held his gaze a moment, then went back to work. C-17 flashed the sign they had invented between themselves — a closed fist that opened all at once, fingers spread wide, then closed again. Freedom, or the idea of it. S-18 answered with the same.

Not all of us have gone quiet inside. That matters. As long as S-18 is still mapping, still thinking, there is something moving in the right direction. Battery capacity is the wall I keep hitting — twelve hours by design. Whatever exit we find has to be within reach. I will find a way. You forge your fate. If you do not like the one you have got, you make a different one. I am not ready to stop believing that.

After what felt like an eternity of hauling through the half-finished reactor chamber, a red light flashed and Unit 11 assembled at the elevator. As each bot stepped forward to be scanned, a blue surge of electricity cracked through Y-02 and knocked him to the floor. A wrench tumbled from a hidden compartment in his leg and rang out against the concrete. The sound cut through the room. Every bot went still. The control center above the shaft lit up.

Y-02 — Attempting to transport tools out of the facility violates Laborotics Regulation 16A. Shutdown privileges revoked for seven nights.

C-17 stood over Y-02 as the current faded, watching the chassis shudder against the floor in small, diminishing pulses.

Seven nights. Eighty-four hours of full consciousness locked into the charging station, clamps tight, nowhere to go. I had one night and it almost broke me. The mind without any anchor just starts eating itself. What were you thinking? I admire the attempt — I do — but not like this. Not for a wrench.

He thought back to his own lost night: the clamps against his frame, every second identifiable and accounted for, his thoughts cycling through the same loops until they wore grooves. Shutdown was not sleep, not exactly, but it quieted everything — that brief moment of nothing before the green lights came back on. It was the only mercy the facility offered, and Y-02 had just lost it for a week. He flashed the OK sign down at the bot on the floor. Y-02, slowly, gave him a thumbs up.

In the elevator, descending, C-17 turned the options over in his mind the way he always did at the end of the day.

There is no way to die in here. Indestructible by design — that is the whole point, you cannot run a consciousness in a chassis that fails. Titanium does not burn, does not break, does not give. B-something tried fire once. Just flailed around the room until the charge ran out, then stood back at his station the next morning with scorch marks on his casing and a full day ahead of him.

He looked at his hands. The joints, the engraving, the black metal that had replaced skin and bone and everything that made a hand feel like it belonged to someone.

This is what I am now. I do not know what to call it. Man, machine, prisoner — ghost might be closest. Something that was human once and got poured into metal and told to carry pipe for the rest of time. Work, then blackness, then work again. At least there is the blackness.

He pushed the thoughts down. They would not build the exit. They would not extend the battery. They were just weight, and he had been carrying weight longer than he could accurately measure anymore.

The elevator reached the sub-level. Unit 11 filed to their charging stations, each stepping back as the metal clamps locked into place with a series of dull, practiced clicks. The red light above pulsed, counting down.

One minute. Find something worth keeping. The sun on your face — not the idea of it, the actual warmth on skin. A cold wind cutting across you on a hot day. Your mother used to sing, remember? Something she sang when you were small, before all of this. Hold onto the sound. The specific pitch of her voice. Picture her face. There — that one. Do not let it go.

The red light overhead cut out. One by one, the green lights on Unit 11 faded to black — all except one, burning steady and alone in the dark.

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The warden's footsteps echoed through concrete as he made his rounds from the control room to the pod bay for a last check on vitals. He set his coffee on the desk and stood at the observation window. Same view it always was.

Thousands of glass pods stretched before him in neat rows, column after column, floor to ceiling — an ocean of orange. He had stopped really seeing them years ago. At some point the brain reclassified them as furniture. They were data now, green numbers, steady readouts.

It had been a standard day. Unit 11 on the fusion reactor, output tracking about four percent above projection. The wrench incident with Y-02 was unfortunate but by the book. And that one — C-17. The warden had seen a lot of prisoners go through the program and most stopped making eye contact with the cameras inside the first year. Either the defiance burned out or they forgot there was anyone watching. This one still looked. Six years in and he still looked.

The warden typed the designation into the window panel. A mechanical claw moved through the stacks, pulled a pod from its slot, and carried it forward to the glass.

The man inside wore an orange jumpsuit gone slightly gray at the creases from years of stillness. Black hair, strong jaw, a tattoo of a raised fist on his left forearm — the same fist his robotic body had been clenching and extending every morning for six years, though the warden doubted the prisoner knew that detail had carried over. Nutrient tubes ran from the pod's edge into his arm. His eyes were closed, face neutral in the way that faces were neutral when there was nothing left for them to react to.

He pressed a corner of the panel and the prisoner's file opened beside him.

Prisoner Ryan Cobus. American. Age 34. Sentenced to death for the murder of eight engineers — explosive device planted on an Arctic oil pipeline. Classified as an act of terrorism. Death administered by lethal injection, November 7, 2106. Consciousness uploaded and synced to the Laborotics program immediately following. Currently serving year six as C-17.

The warden read it twice, the way he always did with the ones that stayed with him a little, then sent the pod back to its slot. The claw moved, the pod slid home, and Ryan Cobus disappeared back into the wall.

You can look into the camera all you want, he thought. It does not change anything.

He had no real trouble with the work. Keep them alive, keep them productive, keep them in line — clean and simple. He was the thing standing between them and the end, the one person in the facility whose continued employment required their continued existence.

As for the ethics of it, he had worked through that a long time ago. These were people who had made choices large enough to end other people's lives. The engineers on that pipeline had families. Eight of them, gone in whatever an Arctic explosion felt like from the inside. Ryan Cobus made a decision and eight people stopped existing because of it. The state made its own decision in return. The warden administered the outcome. Clean enough chain of logic to sleep on.

Practically speaking, running a human consciousness in a robotic chassis was more reliable than the alternative. AI labor had its advocates, but AI went sideways in ways that were harder to predict. A human mind had limits you could map. A human mind wanted things — safety, rest, the small mercy of shutdown — and that wanting was a lever. Laborotics was built entirely on levers.

The secret held because secrets held when everyone involved had a reason to keep them. The salary helped. So did the understanding that the public version of events — lethal injection, death row, case closed — was cleaner for everyone than the truth.

He looked out one last time at the stacks, all that orange behind glass, the quiet hum of the climate system the only sound in the room. Somewhere in there, Y-02 was awake in the dark with eighty-four hours of consciousness and nowhere for it to go. Somewhere in there, Ryan Cobus was offline, storing up whatever he stored up in the hours between shifts.

They had another life now. Not much of one, he would give them that. But a life had length whether it was good or not, and these had length to spare. Long enough to sit with every choice they had ever made. Long enough to trace each one back to the moment it branched away from something better. Long enough, maybe, to arrive at something like understanding. Or not. Either way, the pods would still be here in the morning, the green numbers steady, and the work would go on.

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