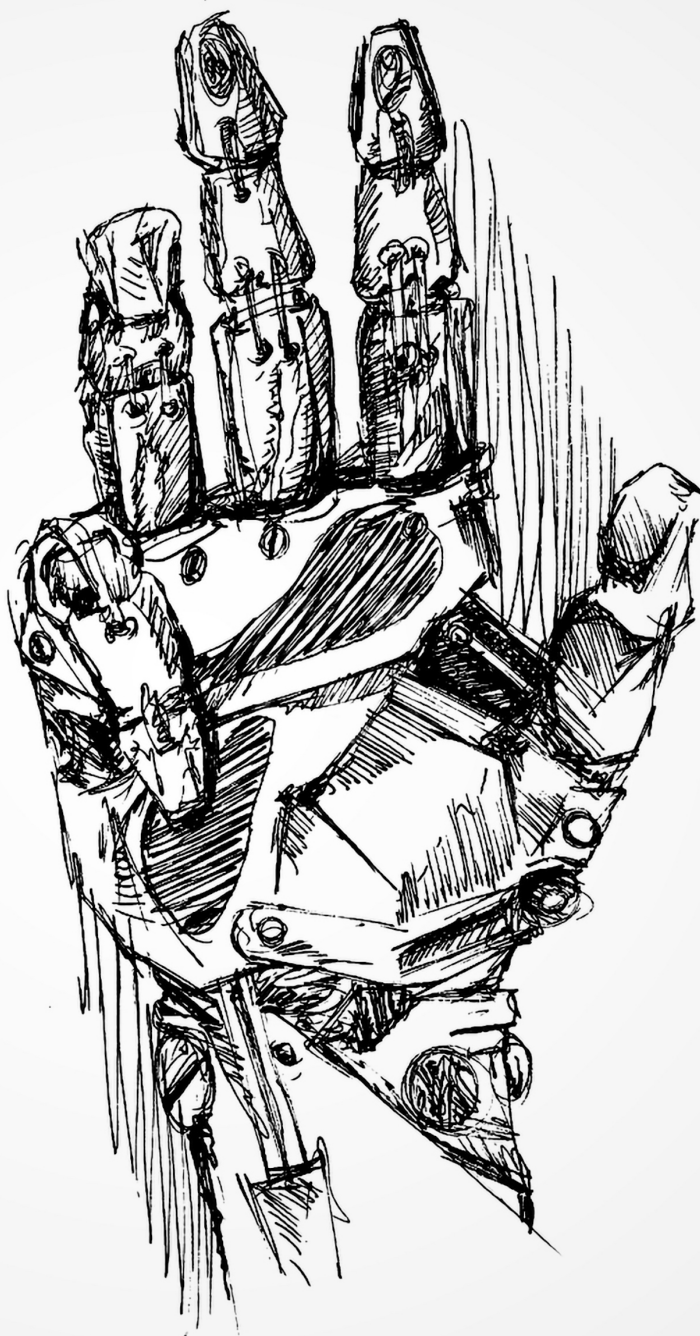


LABOROTICS

A SHORT STORY



DEGEN HILL

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LABOROTICS

by Degen Hill

Electricity coursed through the concrete bunker that housed Unit 11, bringing the 30 androids to life. Green lights atop each mechanical worker flickered on while their gears clicked, unlocking them from their charge stations.

C-17 clenched his black mechanical hand into a fist and then slowly flexed each of his five, tri-jointed metal fingers until they were fully extended, repeating the process twice on each hand. He stepped out from his charging station and turned to see the other bots going through their own morning ritual, understanding that it was moments like these that helped them maintain their sanity.

What day is it today? More importantly, what year is it? Does it even matter?

A red light flashed, and the robots lined up in front of a large energy field that covered the entrance to the elevator shaft. The grinding noise of the elevator became louder as it made its way down the vertical concrete corridor and eventually came to a halt. The energy field disappeared, and the large metal door opened.

The robots made their way into the large elevator, careful not to touch one another. C-17 recalled the last time he had brushed up against another robot, a jolt of electricity had shot through him, and a searing pain ripped through his mind; a reminder that contact between bots was strictly prohibited. As the door to the elevator began to close, C-17 looked to his right and saw T-10, an older model that had been in Unit 11 for as long as any of them could remember. He nodded and then shifted his glance down as T-10 began to move his fingers in a fast, but coordinated way: <Dream last night?>

A dream? When was the last time I even had a dream? I can't even remember.

C-17 quickly flexed and moved his fingers in response: <I dream of dreaming.>

T-10 tapped his thumb and pinky together quickly to indicate laughing. It had taken years for C-17 to learn the language the bots used to communicate – a combination of sign language and unique finger movements that served as their only means of communication. Basic hand signals had sufficed at first, but C-17 had more to say. It wasn't the most efficient, but with no mouth or voice box, it was the only means they had. The government hadn't deemed it necessary to outfit the forces of Laborotics with anything more than was vital to their work. The first models in 2076 were made of steel, but the new titanium models replaced them a few decades later. The design, however, stayed the same--two legs with feet, a torso that housed the lithium-oxygen powered battery, two arms, and a head with two optical lenses that served as eyes. On the

back of the head was a small socket that Unit 11 had determined to be the source of, what they unofficially referred to as, the Sync.

The dimly lit elevator began its ascent. The only sound that filled the shaft was the grating of a steel cable against the outdated winch above. C-17 looked up at the solid metal ceiling.

30 stories? Maybe 50? I wonder how far underground we're kept. It's just concrete and more concrete. No windows, no fresh air, no nature. What I wouldn't give to see something green. Even a blade of grass. God damn, how long has it been since I last saw grass?

The grinding came to a halt and the heavy metal door lifted. Unit 11 made their way out of the elevator into a massive concrete facility. Fluorescent lights flickered on revealing giant metal beams, pieces of carbon fiber, cables, and transparent pipes strewn around the room. A massive, unfinished target chamber with protruding diagnostic devices was situated in the middle. Bundles of clear pipes, pre-amplifiers, and electrical wires were stacked against the walls marked with signs indicating that the site was radioactive. Cameras embedded into the concrete walls oversaw their work.

The fusion reactor, or was it fission? I'm still not even sure what it is we're building. I wonder what other units are working on. Maybe a bomb, or bunkers? A mini-mall?

T-10 motioned to C-17, nodded up at the caution signs and then moved his fingers: <At least we're immune to radioactivity.>

C-17 signed back: <Lucky us.>

A mechanical arm shot out of the wall next to the door and scanned each of their arms as they entered, uploading their tasks on a small display on their forearm. C-17 looked down at his arm. The dimly lit green display showed one word: Runner.

I've had to be the runner every day for six months in a row! Dragging a bunch of equipment and tools around like some outdated forklift. Back and forth, day in and day out. I don't know how much longer I can take this.

He held up his arm to show T-10 and signed: <Fate.>

T-10 looked at C-17 and then slowly moved his mechanical digits: <You decided your fate long before this.> After the last robot was scanned, a message flashed on a glass wall that overlooked the reactor, the facility's control center:

Unit 11--You are to follow your assigned tasks. Any non-compliance will result in severe disciplinary actions. Get to work.

The 30 robots moved into the room and started construction on the reactor. C-17 walked over to a pile of clear pipes and picked up a handful.

I should have had kids. Maybe my life would have turned out differently. I might have fucked my life up, but I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I regret the things I've done, but this, this life... no one deserves it — day after day after day of the same old shit. We have to do something; someone has to do something!

He dropped the pipes off next to R-13 who was installing them according to the holographic blueprints displayed in front of him.

C-17 looked up at him and moved his fingers: <Want to switch?>

R-13 held up a finger and waved it back and forth.

C-17 signed: <Worth a try.> As he walked back to where the pipes were, he looked around the facility at the other 29 robots, each working on their own task.

I wonder who they are. I know most of them, as best as one can, given the current circumstances. But I mean to really know them, to have a real conversation with them. What I wouldn't give to hear my own voice again. To talk and communicate without having to move these stupid mechanical fingers. I want to go home, go outside, have a beer. I want to touch another human, hell, I'd even settle for touching another robot.

As he walked over to pick up a bundle of wires, he thought about what T-10 had said about him deciding his fate a long time ago and knew he was right. He looked down at his left thigh and saw the engraving C-17--Laborotics--Unit 11. He knew the choices he had made in the past had consequences, but he never expected to find himself here.

Life is supposed to end, and then that's it. Darkness. Or heaven, or hell, or whatever happens after we die, and now that's been taken away from me. Forget the right to life; where's my right to die?

The thoughts continued as he moved about the facility, dropping off and picking up that which the other robots signaled they needed.

Food. I'd kill for a hamburger. God, I miss salt. I don't feel hungry, but I remember the feeling of hunger and that first taste of food after a long day at work. And now look at me, I'm a walking piece of metal which doesn't even have a mouth.

His thoughts were all he had, and now, they were consuming him. A sudden urge to throw the sheets of carbon fiber he was carrying came over him, but he remembered T-10's advice from what he assumed was a few years ago. Time wasn't so much meaningless as it was impossible to keep track of.

You must stay calm and strengthen your mind. In here, that's all you have. There's no way out, and the work will continue. They'll break you, mentally, and believe me, working day in and day out is a helluva lot better than what they'll put you through.

The advice ran through his mind as he mentally breathed, remembering the feeling of filling his lungs with air and slowly releasing it. He paused for a moment before bending over to pick up more supplies. C-17 looked up at one of the cameras and pointed at it.

Who's there? Who's watching me? Have you no empathy, no humanity? Is that what society has come to? Enslaving those deemed inferior to do that which humans were incapable?

Carrying a cylinder of hydrogen in one hand, he walked over to S-18 who was working on one of the lasers.

With his free hand, he signed: <When?>

S-18 responded: <Soon.>

C-17: <I can't take this much longer.>

S-18: <Patience. I'm still trying to map this place out. An escape needs an exit. Besides, you know our batteries only have a max capacity of 12 hours for a reason.>

C-17: <I'm working on that.> He placed the cylinder next to him and flashed S-18 the hand signal they had created for freedom--a closed fist which then extended all his digits and closed back into a fist. S-18 responded with the same.

Thank god not all of us have lost hope. There's gotta be a way out, and I have to find a way to expand our battery capacity. It's the only way we'll ever get out of here. Never surrender. You forge your fate, don't forget that. If you don't like this one, forge a new one. Life is what you make it.

After what seemed like an eternity hauling materials back and forth in the half-finished reactor, a red light flashed, and Unit 11 assembled in front of the shielded elevator shaft. As the robots were scanned before entering, a blue surge of electricity surged through Y-02, knocking him to the floor. A wrench hidden in his leg clattered to the floor, and the control center above the elevator flashed:

Y-02--Attempting to transport tools out of the facility is a violation of Laborotics regulation

16A. Your shutdown privileges have been revoked for seven nights.

After the electricity subsided, C-17 stared down at Y-02 who was still pulsating from the shock.

What were you thinking? Of every possible way to get a tool, and you try to sneak it out of the work facility? I admire your bravery, man, but that shit is not worth it. A week of straight consciousness, that's what, something like 56 hours of being locked in your charging station, and awake for all of it. Torture.

He thought back to when he had lost shutdown privileges for one night for failing to enter the elevator on time. Trapped, immobilized, the metal locks tight against his metal body, his mind had raced, searching for a way to remain calm. Dreams weren't possible, but shutdown allowed him the chance to quiet his mind, the brief opportunity for nothingness. C-17 flashed the sign for ok, and after slowly getting to his feet, Y-02 gave him a thumbs up.

Once in the elevator, C-17 reflected on the limited choices he had.

I could try to kill myself, but what options do I have? There's just no way. I'm indestructible. Fucking titanium... Other bots have tried and failed. What was his name? B

something or other tried to set himself on fire. Didn't work. Just flailed around and then had to get back to work.

He looked down at his metal hands.

This is what I have become. I'm cursed. I'm a cursed man, or what's left of one. I'm a cursed robot, sentenced to life within these concrete walls. A perpetual life of work and then a brief moment of blackness before I'm back in this shell of an existence.

He tried to push the thoughts out of his head, knowing they wouldn't get him anywhere, but his thoughts were all he had. All that remained of a life he had once led.

The elevator reached the sub-floor, and the robots exited, making their way to their assigned charging stations. Standing in front of each station, a red light flashed above, and each robot took a step backward as metal clamps secured them into place.

One minute left in the day before we shut down--well, everyone except Y-02. Think of something happy, think of the sun touching your face. A cool breeze passing over your face on a hot day. Think of your mom singing you a song when you were a kid. Her voice, think of her voice, don't let it go. Picture her face; it's important to remember. Hold on to your memories; think of her smile. There you go, that's it...

The red light overhead turned off, and the green lights on the robots of Unit 11 slowly faded to black, all except one.

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The warden's footsteps echoed across the concrete as he made his way out of the control room and towards the Laborotics pod room to do one last check on vitals before he ended his shift. He set his coffee on the desk and looked out of the window in front of him. Thousands of glass pods were neatly stacked next to each other, row after row, column after column. The day

was typical. Unit 11 had worked on the fusion reactor, but who was that that had pointed at the camera? C something, C-17 he recalled. On the window, he typed in C-17, and a giant claw moved to grab the pod from the shelf, bringing it from its resting place up to the window to give the warden a better view.

As the pod approached, the warden stared back at a man in an orange jumpsuit with black hair, a strong jaw, and a tattoo of a black raised fist on his forearm. Small tubes which provided nutrients ran from the edge of the pod into the man's left arm. A digital readout on the upper area of the pod displayed his vitals. The warden pressed an area on the window, and a digital readout of the prisoner's file was displayed:

Prisoner Ryan Cobus. American. Age 34. Sentenced to death for the murder of eight engineers due to an explosive device planted on an oil pipeline in the Arctic. Deemed an act of terror. Death staged by "lethal" injection. Proceedings held November 7, 2106. Consciousness uploaded and synced to Laborotics program immediately following. Officially served six years as C-17.

He finished reading the file and pressed a button to return prisoner Cobus with the rest of the inmates who had, as far as the public was aware, officially died as sanctioned by the U.S. government. You can point all you want, he thought with a smirk on his face, but it won't change the fact that you're in there, and I'm out here.

The warden had no qualms with his job. He got paid to keep the prisoners alive and in line. He was the only thing standing between them and death, the guardian of their immortality. As far as he was concerned, these felons had their chance at life within society and one way or

another had thrown it away. Besides, experience proved it was a lot easier to control a human mind in a robotic body than risk AI going haywire. The warden knew Laborotics was kept secret for a reason, and, with the salary he got paid, it would remain one. He looked out one last time at the endless stacks of glass pods before him, an ocean of orange. The prisoners now had another life, not much of one, he thought, but one in which they'd have an eternity to think about the choices they'd made that had forever sealed their fate.