1080 Rewires



The hum of the overhead fluorescent lights pressed against the inside of his helmet, as if the light itself had a sound. Dr. Tennati shifted the briefcase to his other hand and forced his boots forward over the damp carpet. Each step sank just slightly, enough to remind him that the floor was wrong; too spongy for what had once been an office complex.

Behind him, Salvatore's butyl suit squeaked with every motion, the rubber brushing rubber. The man hadn't said more than three words since they'd swiped into the sector, but 1080 kept telling himself that that was a relief. Silence was easier to carry than chatter in these endless halls.

The yellow walls stretched on in every direction, one corridor folding into another like a badly shuffled deck of cards. There were seemingly random load-bearing pillars around the complex. Some lights flickered and dimmed, dropping whole corners of the labyrinth into half-darkness. A table with a singular candle tipped on its side leaned against the wall of one alcove; an abandoned cigarette carton rested beneath a vent; an old-fashioned wooden chest of drawers, two handles (on separate drawers) missing, hunched in the corner of a room that had no windows, no purpose. The objects were scattered like accidents, or warnings.

1080 tightened his grip on the case. "*Calcinator Repair Request, Priority Level 14D.*" That was the line in the form that had signed his name into this maze. The red tape on the ground that showed them where to go in the beginning, was long gone. Now, each corner folded into the next, each hallway hummed with the same chemical stink, and the maps that'd been given were little more than sketches.

"Left", he muttered, mostly to himself. His own voice sounded thin inside the protective suit.

The buzzing grew louder as they passed a junction. Somewhere in the ductwork, water dripped steadily; one drop, then another, then silence... as if the pipes were hesitating. The air smelled like bleach masking mildew. His gloves felt slick against the handle of the case.

"Sal?" he asked over his shoulder, trying the man's name for reassurance.

No answer. The squeak of rubber boots was gone.

1080 stopped, his pulse climbing. He turned, his hazmat visor reflecting the yellow glow back at him, but the corridor behind was empty. Just the damp carpet, stretching away into parallel halls. No trace of Salvatore, no footsteps fading, nothing.

“Protocol 31”, 1080 muttered, trying to sound official. He clicked the comm on his wrist. Static hissed. No reply.

He pressed forward, faster now, because standing still in this place felt worse than moving. His breath fogged the inside of the visor. The lights above trembled, buzzing so loudly he imagined the filaments snapping.

Then, at the edge of his sight, he saw it.

Through a doorway at the far end of the corridor, past another alcove littered with a single overturned chair, sat the calcinator. A hulk of steel and copper, wires fraying from its open panel. It looked too far away, like a mirage, a box caught between one room and the next.

He gripped the case harder, trying to swallow the dryness in his throat. He had found it, finally, but... something in his chest told him he *hadn’t*. That the wandering never ended. That the corridors might go on long after the wires were patched, long after his gloves cracked and the carpet grew mold over his boots.

The fluorescents above shivered again, once, and for a moment, all the light bent around him, yellow bleeding into the seams of his visor.

1080 stepped forward. But he paused when he heard a loud '*Thunk*!' from above, and then something fell with the hollow '*clang*!' of metal from the drop ceiling, several meters ahead of him. From afar, it looked metallic, and about six feet tall. As he approached the fallen object, 1080 muttered "Oh... ***shit***" in realization at his now statue-like comrade staring blankly at him, frozen.

"Goddamn this job. Goddamn the calcinator."

And now 1080's gut feeling came back. "I will never leave", he muttered to himself. "I will never leave", he continued to chant.

The fluorescents buzzed, louder than over. The carpet's stench grew worse. The case handle squeaked once more in his grip, and then the chanting drowned out everything else.