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VAST ALIEN CRISIS

**ICEFALL
CITIES**

Deranged robots, aggressive space ships, & quarreling AIs
clash in an icy outpost at the edge of Settled Space

Prologue - Zephyr

An error of one.

Bees, hummingbirds and sun offering ample distraction from data checking. Outside, the sunbaked lunar surface beckoned. Time for tobogganing down gravelly crater walls later.

Concentrate.

Although the colony city on Icefall would not be finished for another hundred years, getting the parameters correct was, if not urgent, then important.

Zephyr's daughter ran past, chasing butterflies.

"Wynd Knowlitch!"

The girl paused and looked round, her mother striking the '1' key so an entry increased from '1' to '11' as she laughed at her daughter's angry expression.

"Nearly had it," said Wynd, bottom lip thrust out, eyebrows creased.

"You certainly did."

Zephyr tapped 'Confirm and send.'

1 - Checkani (Day 1)

Machine murmurings echoed from deep down the spiralling passage. A sharp blade scraping. Light tiles scattered over the walls, floor and ceiling, glowing dimly orange. What should have been a straight corridor instead curled upward and to one side for another hundred metres before dropping away. Heat dissipated from low-profile cooling veins at Checkani's back as her power armour fought against Icefall's high gravity. She ran forward, feet smacking hard on the polished concrete floor. Checkani slowed; the power armour made it easy to lose balance in the high gravity as it fought to compensate.

Sounds from over the peak of the passage's upward curve were getting louder, the metal blade scrape more frantic. A smell of ozone and oil.

"Damn it." Checkani glanced at the universal screwdriver in her hand. The head was randomly switching as it tried to detect a screw or bolt head to attach to.

A confusion of metal, taller than Checkani, lurched into view on nine legs; each leg sharpened to a hardened point. Stalked lens clusters turned to lock on Checkani. It paused and there was a sudden silence. Checkani also stopped. A momentary standoff. There was something spiderish about the machine, but also something of a caterpillar. A central chrome cylinder held within a tangled cage of struts, plates, pistons and motors. An articulated hose probed forward.

This Autono[mid]con had evolved somewhat from the original orderly autonomous constructor that had been printing buildings on Icefall. A little black coagulate oozed from the hose as the machine

shifted its weight backward and reared its front end up, three forward legs taking defensive postures.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Checkani muttered.

She dodged round the side of the machine, looking for the box that would contain the machine’s power source and useful ‘Emergency Shutdown’ button. As she moved, one leg struck at her, glancing off her armoured thigh, making her stumble. She grabbed at the machine with one hand to steady herself and pulled. Falling backwards, Checkani’s high gravity weight dragged at the machine, overbalancing it. The Autono[*mid*]con responded to this perceived attack by withdrawing its legs on her side so it could push her against the passage wall. The outer scales of her armour tensed protectively as Checkani ended up wedged under the side of the machine. A face mask extruded and clicked into place, just in time to stop her cheek from being ripped off. She still had hold of the universal screwdriver in her free hand and pushed it between machine ribs. The business end locked onto a bolt head and unscrewed it. Checkani tried to turn her head against the metal leaning against her, so she could see what she was doing. No ‘Emergency Shutdown’ switch in sight.

Unscrewed, the bolt came free and clattered to the floor. Nothing happened. The machine remained still, apparently its programming deciding the current impasse was an effective way to combat the threat posed by Checkani’s power armoured efforts. Perhaps even realising keeping its prey trapped for some hours would disable it.

Checkani pushed hard, muscles straining against the suit, which did its utmost to amplify and add to the pressure she was exerting. The machine shifted marginally, but the pointed leg ends had chipped small craters in the floor and did not slide. Apparently, the storage cylinder was full, making the machine too heavy to move. Especially as Checkani had ended up half twisted round with one arm pinned against her and the other now stuck in the machine. She continued to push, trying to shift the pressure in different directions. Trying to find a weak spot or a fulcrum she could use to tip the machine away from her.

A sound of metal blades scraping together from the far side of the machine. Heat bleeding through from the cooling veins, trapped between Checkani and the wall. Something oozed over Checkani’s vision. Briefly she saw the hose swing closer before coagulant pulsed over the faceplate. Darkness. The sound of the blades got louder and Checkani felt something saw against the armour over her shins.

“Shit, shit, shit. Trimmer blades. Fucking thing’s trying to take my legs off.” She blinked on her heads-up display.

Indicators, bars, numbers and letters appeared, glowing round the edge of Checkani’s visual field. Power was draining fast as the suit worked to maintain its shape against the pressure from the machine that had toppled against it. The temperature of the cooling vanes was rising. In a body outline, she could see the first few leg scales failing, turning from green to yellow and a couple, already, to red. The display helpfully emphasised how little time she had left before the armour failed and she’d be squashed against the wall, cooked as the heat venting failed. Or maybe first her legs would be cut off as the trimmer blades finally sawed through the protective scales.

Checkani continued shifting and pushing, shifting and pushing.

In the seconds she’d been scanning the display, the machine had settled slightly, so now she could move nothing apart from the hand holding the screwdriver. Continuing to push at the machine with all her dwindling energy, she moved her free hand, pushing the universal adaptor against different

internal machine parts. There was a click as it locked onto something. In the dark, the screwdriver motor hummed. The machine's blades continued sawing Checkani's legs.

The bit came free, then the sound of another small metal component chittering down through the machine and hitting the floor.

A pause. Checkani held her breath. Just the sawing sound of metal on metal. Her muscles quivered and burned with effort as the heat from the armour made her sweat beyond the point the under layer could wick it away. Perspiration dribbled into her eyes and she had to squeeze them shut, no longer able to see how her suit was failing.

Frantically, Checkani felt round for another component to undo. Nothing. Her body briefly shook violently and her muscles gave out. She went limp, relying on the structural integrity of the armour to protect her as she paused her fight for a moment while she recovered.

The sawing slowed and ceased.

Checkani stopped breathing, listening. Then the smallest sip of breath. The quiet pulse of her racing heart. A deep whirring, clicks that could be sharpened machine leg ends connecting with the floor near her, and the machine shifted slightly. Checkani stayed still, barely breathing, blinking sweat from her eyes. Looking at the tear blurred heads-up display, she could see her armour slowly reducing its energy demands.

The machine slowly shifted its weight off her. She risked pulling her arm out from the machine interior. Seemed it no longer perceived her as a threat now she was no longer fighting against it. Blindingly simple machine logic, though the We Print Cities constructors should never have attacked a human, even if that human was tasked with shutting them down.

Checkani wiped the coagulant from her faceplate and retracted it.

The deviant Autono[*mid*]con lurched away down the passage, the way she had come. Heading for the entrance. In the centre of its rear a bright red 'Emergency Shutdown' button. Checkani dashed forward and slapped it. The Autono[*mid*]con legs paused in mid-stride; lens clusters swung to gaze at Checkani. A shiver ran down her spine, and she kept absolutely still as adrenaline flooded her bloodstream. The machine's legs started moving again as it continued on its way. Apparently the 'Emergency Shutdown' button was as messed up as the rest of the robot.

Suddenly, she was aware of pain.

Checkani looked at her leg to see blood glistening down her left leg and over her foot; dribbling from a tear between armoured scales where blades had been sawing at her shin. The other leg had some torn scales, but had held against the blades. She leant against the wall, taking steady breaths as she tried to calm her heart's frantic drumming, hands clenching and unclenching.

Quality assurance sure was turning out to be a dangerous business to be in.