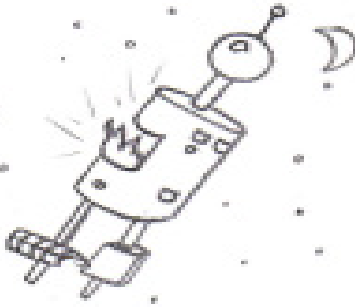


Fully Automated

Earth Year: 2031



8:00 AM

An alarm sounded.

A red strobe light interrupted the oily darkness – silent darkness, thick darkness, stale darkness. Two years of dry-rot and dust, and suddenly a deep breath of electric life pulsated through the warehouse.

But not just a warehouse, it was the resupply warehouse for the International Space Station, located thirty kilometers southwest of Paris, France. In an instant, death and abandon released their embrace on silent computer circuits, and the cold warehouse lit up like a torch. Lights switched on, popping and humming, blinking to life as if a magic wand just sliced through the dank air.

8:01 AM

Pop! Pop! Pop!

An army of halogen bulbs, blue-eyed and ready for a manifest, stared down from the ceiling at the mountain of supplies and equipment. The strobe signal stopped. Another alarm sounded. Eight robotic loaders emerged from contorted cocoons. Extremities made of carbon nanofiber, and hydraulic legs on feet with hundreds of magnetic bearings, fought against gravity, transforming into towering twenty-foot machines capable of palpating every inch of the inventory.

A rogue bearing broke loose. Within seconds, a vacuum cleaner scurried around the corner, hovering to the scene, gobbling up the broken part.

Whoosh!

The machine was gone, back to sucking the thick dust from the floor. Five more vacuums sped from closets, joining the battle against the unscheduled and unwanted disarray.

8:05 AM

The loaders raced down the aisles, picking precisely the required supplies from rows of boxes stacked neatly among the four-story metal shelves.

Like nuns chasing children, they corralled the merchandise around the transport trolley, pushing dried foods, bottled water, and toilet paper into every available opening. The loaders sped back for more supplies as the mainframe sent orders to all the machines in the warehouse. It was an eruption of latent electrical energy. It was two years of potential energy surging instantly through fifteen hungry automatons.

8:10 AM

Ten minutes later, the first step was completed. The transport trolley, towing six supply cars, pulled away on steel rails. It was a train filled with life-support, the bare essentials, the necessary ingredients to sustain human life in an alien environment – the Space Station. The loaders stood at attention as the train moved through the warehouse. The computer activated the doors, and the warehouse opened its mouth.

Sunlight poured across the floor. A warm April breeze rushed in, stirring the musty air. The trolley pushed through the opening, then sped up, crossing the tarmac to the awaiting space shuttle. Bay doors on the belly of the shuttle dropped open. Mechanical arms began feasting on the supplies. The toilet paper disappeared, the dried foods vanished, the bottled

water quickly evaporated from sight – the shuttle was packed and ready to fly. The empty trolley stole across the pavement, hurrying back to the warehouse to await the next order.

8:15 AM

A delay.

The computer mainframe waited. Something was wrong. A screen door opened on squeaky hinges. The door rattled, then slammed shut. A gust of wind danced across the empty runway. The door squeaked open a second time. It was the crew quarters on the edge of the tarmac.

The crew quarters, separate from the warehouse, were furnished with modern conveniences and the latest appliances. Gravity beds, photon communications, and an entertainment room for the pilots with a three-dimensional hologram television. It was the common ground for the jet-jockeys who flew the shuttle into the great serenity of space.

The screen door slammed shut again. Inside, the television hissed – the cubical screen filled with meaningless static. On the couch, with the remote held in curled fingers, sat two skeletons. The wind poured through broken windows. An empty bag of potato

chips spun across the floor.

Hydrogen and oxygen mixed, and the shuttle's engines exploded. Fire and steam and a dozen burning bird nests shot across the tarmac. The automated shuttle taxied to the runway, locked in the Space Station coordinates, then thundered down the runway past large uninvited weeds, abandoned cars rusting in a parking lot, and the empty shell of a spent biological bomb. The shuttle shook the ground and sent a shock wave through the silent countryside. Debris from the parking lot lifted like a peppercorn cloud. Moments later, the mid-sized delta wing climbed vertically into the atmosphere.

The skeletons watched as the shuttle and all its supplies etched the virgin blue sky.

8:20 AM

Twisting through the stratosphere, the shuttle rolled onto its back, commencing orbit around the Earth. Familiar with the flight plan, the shuttle circled the globe, increasing altitude, then redirected for a rendezvous with the Space Station.

A beacon of peace, a lighthouse built to weather the storms of human conflict and geopolitical strife, the International Space Station was a symbol of life, liberty,

and the reckless pursuit of cutting-edge technology.

Remodeled numerous times to keep up with modern invention, the Space Station was equipped for posh comfort and pleasurable human relations. A large docking area for the arrival of politicians and the affluent, first-class accommodations with fine dining, suites with a priceless view, and a quaint park adorned with trees and numerous bird species – all compliments of a warm international handshake.

8:30 AM

The supply shuttle eased into the locks, docile and submissive, while mechanical arms extended, hungry and stiff. Vacuum seals sucked against the ship's hull. The silence pressed closer. The machines waited for a command.

Automatic override.

The bay doors opened. Supply loaders leaped into action, reaching inside to devour the contents. Gear on gear, a hydraulic circus of movement, the automated Space Station happily embraced the automated shuttle. Boxes piled high on the dock. With speed and precision, the cargo was sorted and sent to a barren store room.

A separate climate-controlled walkway extended

to the cockpit to welcome the crew. The hatch opened, but no one walked away.

8:40 AM

The Space Station released its grip. The shuttle backed away. Platinum fire breathed from its nostrils, and the delta wing fell gracefully back to Earth. From the park, a sacred social altar built with a domed roof the size of a baseball diamond, two grey corpses watched from green park benches. Surrounded by dead and leafless trees, their dark sunken eyes stared at the flawless technology burning a hole through the atmosphere. Leaning against one another in a permanent embrace, held in an emaciated and malnourished hand, was a lifeless sparrow.

8:55 AM

Screech!

Wheels down, the empty supply shuttle hit the runway and taxied to the hanger. Past an awaiting fuel truck, past the stoic crew quarters, the auto-pilot guided the shuttle across the weed-infested tarmac.

A tow mule with a smoking Detroit diesel took command, easing the shuttle into the hanger. A dozen

electronic chocks wrestled themselves under the tires. A belt loader moved beneath the bay doors, and diagnostic equipment scurried inside. Metal mechanics converged on the craft like angry bees. An army of robot sensors the size of dinner plates examined the hull for weakness, while welders slapped on new layers of alloy. Nuts turned and new tires pushed into place. A complement of tools crawled into the engines and disappeared.

A comfortable staircase rolled into position. The cockpit hatch opened wide. A personnel transport emerged from the shadows and parked at the bottom of the stairs.

Five minutes later, the empty transport drove away.

9:00 AM

An alarm.

The hanger doors closed – the shuttle was safe and sound. Warm tools dripped from the engines. Hydraulic jacks lowered, cargo doors closed, fresh paint dried, and the staircase rolled away.

The transport sped across the tarmac to the crew quarters. It pulled up to the squeaky screen door and stopped.

A warm wind blew. A quiet storm was coming; it would rain today. Rain would fall to the ground and through the broken windows. Rain would continue to wash away the biological warfare. The fully automated warehouse would run as programmed, and the shuttle would fly on schedule, packing the Space Station full of useless supplies. The artificial intelligence would live indefinitely, automatically.