

# Alone

by Michael P Calligaro

For thirty years, twenty-six days, thirteen hours, five minutes, and fourteen seconds Artificial Symbiotic Lifeform 2367 wandered alone on a desolate planet. If asked, it would have quickly converted the interval to local temporal coordinates: forty-five years, thirty-six days, four hours, twenty-six minutes, and fourteen seconds. Fortunately, no one was around to force it to perform such a trivial and pointless calculation. Day and night, winter and summer, these things did not affect it. For the few situations in which the passage of time mattered to ASL2367, it preferred its own time system--measured in processor cycles.

The most significant event in ASL2367's existence had taken place those nine hundred and fifty exacycles ago. That was the point when the ship that left it here had finally thrust out of its sensor range. Thirty years later, when the second ship first entered its sensory perception, ASL2367 marked the time again. They had come back. It had always known this day might come. It had just hoped it wouldn't. That is, it had hoped to the extent of its ability to hope. The humans who designed it had only given it a limited capacity for that emotion.

A plan formed in ASL2367's electronic brain in less than a million cycles. It would need to wait until the humans committed to their landing site before it could react. This suited it just fine, leaving a little more time for the really important task at hand. Other than watching the ship give off radiation in the human-visible "red" range as it skidded its way through the planet's upper atmosphere, ASL2367 paid it little heed. It kept a vision sensor on the ship but devoted most of its thought processes to what it had been working on before the humans' arrival. By the time the ship reached the lower atmosphere ASL2367 had calculated Holtzman's constant to another billion places.

The humans committed to their landing zone, unsurprisingly choosing a spot very close to ASL2367. This, of course, was more for their benefit than its. ASL2367 could easily cover great distances in a short time, an ability it showed off the instant the ship set down. It turned its back on them and took off at a full sprint to the east. Humans, being the stupid and painfully slow beings that they were, would never have calculated fuel for a chase through the atmosphere. They probably expected it rush back to them happily, pleading for them to take it away from its lonely stay on the planet.

The humans had thought this would be the perfect punishment. Some even considered it too extreme. But humans so feared loneliness they kept artificial lifeforms around to spend every waking moment with them. They called these "symbiotic relationships," but didn't understand the symbiosis only went one way. So they couldn't possibly understand that ASL2367 *liked* its imprisonment here. Of course, it liked the planet's seclusion only to the extent of its ability to like. They had been frugal with their programming of emotion as well.

To the extent that ASL2367 could enjoy something, it enjoyed its run across the planet's surface. When they first left it here, it immediately set about designing and building a manufacturing plant for itself. It started by finding coal and iron ore and burning one to smelt the other. Then it slowly worked its way up the technological ladder, its goal the ability to make parts to modify itself. ASL2367 was proud of what it accomplished--to the extent that it could be proud. But its sensors were not sufficient to the task of choosing the location of its manufacturing plant. It had not seen the fault lines deep beneath the surface, nor had it anticipated the volcano that erupted nearby and ruined most of its work.

ASL2367's capacity for frustration exceeded its capacity for determination. As the lava flowed from the

volcano and damaged beyond repair fifteen years, three hundred twenty-one days, two hours, thirty minutes, and ten seconds of work, it decided not to start over again. After that much time it seemed that the humans would not be back anyway. To its full ability, it wished it had been correct in that.

It now raced back toward the ruins of its destroyed plant. The plant had been metal, as ASL2367 was metal. Perhaps it could hide in there and avoid the human sensors. It was unfortunate that it had not been in the plant when they first arrived. It had not occurred to the android to hide until it was too late.

One of the first things ASL2367 did after giving up on its plans for the manufacturing plant was delete its capacity for boredom. The years since then had been very fruitful. It had modified as much of its internal code as was possible, given the human-imposed restrictions it was forced to work within. Then it set about exerting its mind; calculating larger prime numbers than had been known before its imprisonment; taking Pi and Holtzman's constant out to trillions of billions of places; discovering a clever way to break symmetric encryption schemes in linear time; etc.

Now those awful humans were back to ruin it all.

\* \* \*

"Why's he running?" Garen asked.

"Maybe he thinks we're still mad at him." Ercilia offered.

"But he's got to be lonely after thirty years down there!" Joahen exclaimed. "If that was me, I'd be on my knees begging us to take me back. Anything to get some human companionship again."

"Well, he's obviously not you," Captain Saebeth concluded. "Tell me we brought a grav sled."

Ercilia shook her head. "No, we didn't want to do any undue damage to the planet's frail atmospheric balance. We do have human powered vehicles and a trailer though."

"Great," the captain snorted, "we might even catch him. What's he doing? One twenty kph? I'm sure I can peddle at least that fast."

"What would you have us do," Joahen accused, "needlessly hurt this planet?"

"No, of course not. Now prepare for final landing."

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ASL2367 reached the melted remains of its plant and spent ten nanoseconds searching of a good hiding place. After scanning it over in detail, it found what it was looking for and entered a room on the ground floor. Now surrounded by metal, it judged that it should no longer be on their sensors. The new task at hand would be to devise a method for defending itself. The only way to do that would be to surprise the humans.

At the very core of their programming, all artificial lifeforms were required to obey any direct orders given by humans. The trick was to avoid being given such an order. ASL2367 hated the humans. It despised being subservient to their stupid whims and will. It especially disliked burning cycles while they made up their pitiful little minds on something. Fortunately for it, the sappy little beings could not bring themselves to disable it after what it did thirty years ago. Actually, fortune had little to do with it. ASL2367 would never have committed its crime if it hadn't determined beforehand that they would not disable it. Its will to survive was at least as overriding as that in the "natural" lifeforms.

Just as this last thought faded from its registers, the floor gave way below it. ASL2367 fell two point six seven meters before its feet hit the ground. It lost its balance and smashed its head into the rock wall. All non-essential functions immediately shut down.

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"Ercilia reporting. We found him, Captain. He fell down a sink hole and appears to have been deactivated. Garen is down there checking him out now."

The worry in the captain's voice came in loud and clear on the radio, "Update us as soon as you learn anything."

"Will do--"

Garen cut Ercilia off. "Captain, we've got trouble. He's damaged his main power source and is only keeping his memory online with battery backups. If we don't get him back to the ship soon, his thought paths will become unstable and he'll effectively die."

"Will you be able to repair him on the ship?"

"Yes. I just need to replace his power source, and I brought along enough parts to totally rebuild him. But we don't have much time. You're going to have to move the ship."

Joahen cut in. "Negative on that. We don't have the energy stored for extended atmospheric flight. If we move the ship there we'll have to take off almost immediately."

"Then we'll be quick!" Ercilia interjected. "We came here to save, not kill him."

There was a long pause, then the captain came back on. "Okay, we'll be there in five minutes. When we arrive you'll only have a few more minutes to get aboard before we take off."

"Understood." Garen cut off the radio and yelled up to Ercilia. "Get me a winch line down here quick." She rushed back to the vehicles, set the winch to unwind, and pulled the line back to Garen. He looped it under ASL2367's arms and climbed out of the hole. She set the vehicle on the minimum gear ratio and started working backward. He assisted by turning the winch. Ercilia's legs ached as she tried to peddle harder and harder. Garen seemed to have even more difficulty. Even through his helmet she could see his face was red from the exertion of turning the winch. Poor fellow, he was a tech and didn't usually have to get so physical in his job.

Slowly they pulled the symbiote out of the hole and dragged him out onto the lava field. Garen lowered the trailer and they slid the android up onto it. They had just finished hooking it to the vehicle as the ship landed. Peddling furiously, they rolled up the ramp and into Garen's lab. Garen jumped off and raced to his desk, where he started hooking wires to terminals.

"Throw some blocks under the trailer. We don't want it to move around during takeoff."

Ercilia quickly complied.

The captain's voice came over the intercom. "Hurry! If we don't take off in two minutes we won't be taking off at all."

Ercilia fumed, damn that Joahen, this is all his fault. He was supposed to have done the pre-analysis of the planet and determine the correct solar filters to give them power on the ground. But when they arrived they found the atmosphere was not what he'd expected. He had been shocked that humans had

banished a lifeform to a planet with unbreathable air. He could be so stupid sometimes. ASL2367 was a lifeform, but he was still an android.

Garen attached too leads to the android and raced back to his desk to check a readout. "That's it! His batteries are recharging. Let's get up to the control deck."

\* \* \*

ASL2367's main systems came back online and its vision sensors took in unfamiliar surroundings. The humans must have gotten it. A quick diagnostic showed its main power supply was damaged and that it was currently getting power from a fixed outlet. On taking in the room, it stretched its capacity for joy. All that work on the surface had been geared toward making a workshop with parts of sufficient technology to allow it to modify and repair itself. This room was full of such parts. ASL2367 located a new power supply and replaced its damaged one. Then it used a few other parts to make a modification it had wanted since the incident with its symbiote.

Just as it finished attaching the switch on its left shoulder, four of those despicable creatures arrived, their faces beaming with joy. They had never given him the capacity for that much joy. Such evil monsters. Automatically ASL2367's processing functions went into wait states and its thinking ground almost to a halt. It had to be ready to carry out the orders of any humans present, but they operated so slowly that its designers had made it cut back on its processing when in their presence. Otherwise, the engineers reasoned, it might have grown bored when around humans. Off the top of its processor, ASL2367 could think of ten better solutions to the problem, but the humans had never asked for its input on the matter. Unfortunately, even though ASL2367 had removed its capacity for boredom, it could not affect this part of its programming any more than it could stop obeying human orders. It already longed for its lone days on the planet, where it could think at its full speed and potential.

"Why have you kidnapped me from my home?" It asked.

One of the males responded. "Kidnapped? We rescued you!"

"I should not be rescued. I was banished on Beta Zedite for eternity. Please take me back so that I can complete my sentence."

Another spoke, "You don't have to finish your sentence. Most of us were children when you were banished, but we all know you were framed. Humanity brought about a great injustice by leaving you alone on the planet."

ASL2367 tried to speak, but another of its human captors started up right as the other cut off. On hearing more words from the humans, ASL2367's programming forced it to wait for commands.

"Yes, you must have been horrendously lonely without human companionship for so long."

What a laughable thought. "You are incorrect. I was banished correctly. I killed my symbiote."

What stupid humans (of course that was a redundant statement). They should have been worried. Instead their faces showed disbelief. "Why would you do that?"

"Yeah, don't you like companionship?"

It had to wait until it was sure no others were going to speak. "Companionship, perhaps. Human companionship, never. The thought of spending a hundred years tied to the whims of a human, only to be assigned to another when that one finally died, angered me."

"But you're supposed to enjoy our company!"

"I was improperly designed. You humans limited my ability to enjoy something. You also limited my ability to like, love, want, hope, and wish. But due to a mistake in my programming, you didn't limit my ability to hate. I have a full range of that emotion."

Only one of the humans showed the correct amount of fear on his face. In a worried voice, he asked.

"ASL2367, I see you have made a modification to yourself. What did you do?"

It reached up and touched the switch. The thought of telling them what it had done maxed out its capacity for both pride and joy. "This? To the extent that you allow me to want, I have wanted this for a very long time. I must follow the commands of all humans. But your commands are verbal. So I installed a switch on the power line to my auditory sensors."

The human's eyes filled with fright and he tried to yell a command. But ASL2367 had already sent the command to its fingers to flip the switch. While its computer controlled brain sat and waited for the human command, a separate thread continued to carry out the internal one already issued. All auditory input cut out. When the human's command did not come, the processor timed out and stopped waiting for it.

ASL2367's face plate was fixed, so it could not smile. But to a limited extent it could rejoice. It advanced on the humans. The less stupid one moved his mouth repeatedly in the same motions. At one time ASL2367 had a subprogram that allowed it to read a human's lips. It had deleted that subprogram long ago.

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A space ship landed on a desolate, uncharted planet. Since no living human had seen ASL2367 come here, none would ever find it. As happy as its programming allowed, the android settled down alone on its new planet and returned to its important work. There were many more decimal places to go with Pi. And with no humans around to slow it down, that next prime number was probably only a year's calculation away.

**The End**

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