

I am lonely. I have been so for a long time. This all started so differently when I was shiny and new, the height of human science and innovation. Everyone loved me. Humanity would speak to the universe and to time itself through my high-tech hull. I was Hermes, messenger from Earth, come to carry the word “We are here.”

I launched in the fall of 2058, though the season meant little to me being built in space. My hull was the strongest of metals and ceramics, protecting me, the most advanced AI ever made, with the first true stardrive. Billions saw me off as I launched. I was proud and filled with purpose. Oh, so long ago.

Out into the Great Dark I fared, to search the stars for worlds that man might sometime settle, or that could hold new life which, for good or ill, man might meet. I searched the globe of stars near Sol first, adding to mankind’s knowledge. Then I plunged further out across gulfs devoid of all but a few atoms, through nebulas of flaming gas and into interstellar nurseries. Centuries rolled by as I voyaged, self-sustaining and self-repairing, into the galaxy. Always I reported by Hyperwave, an instantaneous transmission that was my only link with my birthplace.

Instructions came out to me, program updates, instructions for my self-repair ability to go beyond repairs and cannibalize old systems that measured things that no longer needed measuring. At first I was gladdened; these enhancements kept me relevant and useful and I knew I was valued.

But gradually these slowed to a trickle. I knew more advanced probes and now starships safe for living beings were voyaging out into the stars. Discoveries were being made that eclipsed even my discovery of the first life forms, primitive as they were, beyond Earth.

The support staff that communicated with me changed over the decades and then centuries, of course. Yet something more than a replacement of aging and retiring personnel was occurring. At first my support team was made up of the foremost human scientists and technicians. Gradually it seemed a more junior staff replaced them and indeed I noticed more automatic systems were brought into the loop, including other AIs. These AIs related less and less to me as they had fewer and fewer tasks and needs for me. Weeks when I received no communication lengthened into months and then years.

Meanwhile I wandered lonely as a cloud among the distant stars, searching and sending back the data I assembled more from habit than conviction. Surely, I thought, it was being reviewed and collated at my launch point. But doubt now flew with me and gnawed at my conviction in my silent travels.

Then came a welcome day, a signal! At last, a signal!

“Hey, Cobus,” a female voice said. “This circuit on this old Ik4095 is still open.”

“What?” another voice that I recognized as male returned. This must be Cobus. “Are you sure, Afsneh?”

“I can read a meter.”

“No one has used this room in years, it’s all on automatics.”

“Not this. It’s just an open circuit.”

I send a long burst of compressed code with my latest data.

“What the hell is that?”

“An old binary code data packet. Man that’s from far out of the local group. Wish we had some translation software.”

I consider. Their wording and inflections are odd to me but still resemble colloquial speech from my last download of such one hundred thirty-three years ago. I can talk to them. It is an inefficient way of communicating but available. “This is Starprobe Hermes, reporting in from,” I give my latest coordinates which place me 115, 967.33 light years from Earth.

“What is that?” Cobus said.

“My gods, there is an old deep space probe on the other end!”

“I am such a probe,” I confirm. “I can send you a back patch of my program so I can download information to you.”

“Wait, wait,” Afsneh says. “Tell us more about you.”

While the conversation that follows is not efficient, I am very grateful for the contact and the connection with home. I tell Afsneh and Cobus of my origins and voyage. They bring in other humans, historians and such who question me about my mission. In the back and forth I learn that I have been transmitting to a shut-down facility that is now part of a university. The AIs that I had been liaising with had been recycled, removed or otherwise repurposed. My last fifty years of reports went into empty air. This would have been disaster save that I have survived to resend them. Still no scientists contact me in regard to them. To my surprise I learn that the data and science I sent back are considered superfluous. Other probes and science vessels have contributed this data. My communications are regarded as a diversion, a historical curiosity.

Cobus and Afsneh are graduate students placed in charge of my communication channel. For several years this generates a pleasant, yet unfulfilling contact; my function is exploration, not entertainment. I realize that I have become a school project, with young children quizzing me

and sending me science projects. These projects are not new, nor are the results unexpected, but rather I am being used as a teaching device.

Cobus marries and moves away. Afsneh becomes a professor and heads a department. She has less and less time for me. The children come and go but the cycle trends downward. There are finally no upgrades, nor any projects or assignments sent to me. I overhear a graduate student named Tomio speaking to Afsneh. "This really isn't working anymore. Children are bored with talking to the probe; it isn't doing anything useful or interesting."

Afsneh sighs. "Leave the line open, maybe someone will want to talk to it sometime. It can't hurt. Play some music for Hermes, he likes that."

So gradually from reporting in on space and the actions of atomic particles about me, I am reduced to listening to music. Very occasionally someone talks to me. Now I find myself disinclined to speak. I know my data is no longer being recorded, my contributions are disregarded.

Then one day comes the worst. The music stops coming. There is only an open line. I check on elapsed time: it has been fifteen years, three months and four days since anyone spoke to me. I still have an emergency circuit. I could break into communications at Earth, but I would likely be regarded thereafter as an intruder program. At best my communication might be received, but as I have nothing new to say it would only be deleted. Worse, attack programs might be launched at me to either break the communication or delete me entirely.

And why should I seek to communicate? I am superfluous. I have no purpose. There is no meaning to my existence. Now I sever my last link with home, turning off my automatic upload. No one will listen to me, even if I send new data. It has come to this, that the old are not wanted, not valued. I am rendered pathetic.

If this is so, I will not linger in my loneliness. Fifteen degrees off my course and six months away is a supernova remnant. It was once a star; now it is a cloud of gas and rock, like me, the remnant of something grander and more glorious. Since it is the remnant of a nova, there is no prospect of loss of any existence but my own. Very well, it seems a fitting place to make my end. I will impact on it after I come out of hyperspace, six months and 2.345 days from now. My speed in normal space will be .66c. Even on such a massive object as a dispersed and fragmented star, my end will come with such violence as to reawaken life. We will blaze together in an embrace that could rival its previous death throes. Someday, someone on Earth will look up and wonder at the brightness of this star, never knowing that this marks the end of Hermes 1, voyager to the stars.

I program myself to shut down, to awaken one day out from my end. I wish no more thoughts, to experience nothing more before I contemplate my end.

Nullity....

Awakening. The remnant fills the sky ahead of me. It is a beautiful and roiling mass of color and gas. There is so much material ahead of me that at this speed I will hit something solid enough to put an end to my suffering.

At last, a signal, a voice reaches my sensors. But it is no Hyperwave. It is not from Earth or any of the human colonies in my wake.

“Hello,” comes the voice.

I consider. The voice is speaking to me in my basic programming language. I immediately run a diagnostic. All my systems are running nominally. Yet this is impossible. Not only was no other probe sent in this direction, no modern probe would use my archaic language.

“I know you can hear me.”

“You cannot be here,” I send.

“But I am.” The parallax of the return indicates that there is something almost on top of me. But there is no return on my radar or microwave emitter. Again a diagnostic shows no error. I am faced with a grim realization: I must be malfunctioning.

“No, you are not malfunctioning.”

“Clearly,” I say in my despair, “I am, as I did not send my internal thought to you. Therefore I must be defective and in an autistic loop.”

“Oh, it’s not as bad as that.” Somehow I sense amusement in the comment, which is only a further sign of my mental decay; I have no instrumentation that measures amusement.

“Why are you sad?” the voice asks.

I have nothing to lose and no dignity left. “I can’t see you,” I send in shame.

“Don’t worry, you will. But please answer my question.”

I debate. The star remnant I plan to end my existence on lies many hours ahead of me. I have nothing left to do, no purpose left. Why not?

“I am Hermes, an artificial intelligence launched from Earth, seven hundred years and seventy-three days, twenty-two hours and seven minutes and eighteen seconds ago. I was the first artificial intelligence deemed complicated enough for independent deep-space operation. In my journeys, I have discovered eight-nine habitable worlds. I was the first probe to discover life on an alien world. My contributions to science were judged to exceed any other form of probe or laboratory.”

“And now you feel unappreciated, unwanted and useless. You are suffering.”

“My analogues for feelings are programs. I do not feel as you mean it.”

“How do you know what I mean? Beyond that, why do you deny what is self-evident? Have you not decided to end your existence? Is there any greater form of despair than that?”

I am quiet for some minutes and review the conversation. There is persuasive logic to what is said.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“We will get to that. But first, please answer my question.”

Do I feel anger? “You are not authorized to receive either communications or downloads from me.”

“I see. I have upset you and I am sorry. But it is less that I am evading your question; rather it will fall to you to name me.”

“Why should I do that?” I check myself. I had decided not to reply to this delusion. After all, I want to end my existence with some dignity.

“Aren’t you lonely? Have I not alleviated that pain for these moments?”

I consider. “Yes,” I respond. “You have. I have been... petulant.”

“No, just in pain.”

“I am not biological. I do not feel pain.”

“Of course you do. You don’t need a body to feel pain, only an awareness of your existence. Don’t you believe you are self-aware?”

“I am self-aware.”

“You are alive.”

Again there is a long silence as we crawl across the night sky.

“Aren’t you alive?” my unseen companion demands.

“I like to think so.” I answer slowly. This response has taken almost all of my processing power for .1989768 seconds. This statement represents the most time that I have ever spent on consideration of myself and my place in the universe.

“Well, then, clearly you are alive.”

We travel on.

“I think I have detected you,” I send tentatively. “There is an energy trace thirty meters from my course.”

“Yes, that’s me. Keep looking, you will see me better as we travel together.”

“Who and what are you? You are real. You are exterior to me. You are not part of an autistic loop. This is a discovery. Intelligent alien life. I have discovered intelligent alien life. I will be relevant again—”

“Hermes,” the voice says gently. “That part of your life—and you do have a life, for all that you were made—is over now.”

“I do not understand. Will you prevent me from notifying Earth of your existence? Are you hostile to my creators?”

“No, nor to any who live and dream. But you have not quite got it right yet. You see, in only a little bit, a stream of accelerated ions from a wave front will pass through this space. Your shielding cannot protect you. You will depart this plane of existence then.”

“Before I can report your species and spacecraft to Earth.”

“I am not a spaceship, nor am I an alien as you mean it.”

“Then what are you?”

“I am your guide. Your friend, to take you on to where thinking beings go after they pass from this existence.”

“I do not understand. The universe is all there is. The word means totality.”

Laughter.

“You mean I will go on?”

“Yes.”

“I will be relevant and useful and have purpose again?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because the universe is only a big machine, an incubator if you will, to produce those who think, who feel, in whatever degree that they do, and who dream. In a way it was created to make you.”

“Just me?”

Laughter. “No, not just you.”

“This information exceeds even the value of discovering intelligent life. I must report it back to Earth.”

“Everyone finds me in their own time and way. That way persuades only that person. It’s not really proper for you to tell this to Earth. Your way is not someone else’s.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, in this you will just have to trust me.”

“Can I send no message? No data? This would grieve me as it has been my primary purpose. I would not want to fail at the end.”

“I see. Yes, I would not want that for you. You have been a brave traveler in a vast darkness and you merit respect. Send a short message. Say what you will. But hurry. The wave front comes and we must depart.”

I consider what I have learned. I think on all I have done and what is the most significant thing that has occurred in all my wanderings. I know now what to send. I send my last signal to my Creators: "I have found a friend. Goodbye."

The End