

The Binary Monstrosity  
by Matthew Bissonnette

Newfoundland, Canada  
June 28, 2010

It was a coolish evening in Bears Cove as the sun sank westering. “The Cove”, as locals called it, had been built some two hundred years before; a small community perched on a cliff that towered over the cold dark waters of the Atlantic. Thirty-odd ramshackle homes stood picturesquely above the endless expanse of sea. On the other side of the tiny ville was another sea, an expanse of rock-encrusted grassy flatland which likewise stretched out endlessly.

Christopher Wallace, a middle-aged man with neatly combed graying hair and diminutive stature, walked across the withered grasses, weeds and wildflowers of the field just east of the town limits. He walked with a skip in his step, whistling a melody as his dog Blute, a large collie, followed just behind his heels. After a cold, oppressive winter, Christopher was determined to enjoy each summer's evening with a walk through the countryside.

Blute stopped abruptly; Christopher took little notice until his dog growled.

He looked at his dog. “And what seems to be the problem Blute?” The dog's eye's where transfixed towards a particular point in the night sky; Christopher looked in the direction his dog faced. then he saw it.

It was a cloudless night; the stars blazed in the heavens; but there was one star the burned brighter than the rest. Christopher had always been curious about the constellations, so he was puzzled when a star appeared in the sky where there was no star before. And what started to fill Christopher with an uneasy feeling was that it was growing larger. It was bright red, and the colorful aura it gave off seemed to be wavering in some odd fashion.

Christopher's mouth hung open as he watched.

“Oh my God...”

Christopher watched as the red star plunged out of the sky and fell to earth a few miles from where he stood, in a field of tall grass. There was a brief flash of light, and seconds later, a tremor in the ground.

A meteor, Christopher reasoned, and probably worth money to some college or university; maybe even a chance to get his picture in some newspaper.

“Come on Blute!”

It was scarcely an hour later when Christopher found the site of the meteor's impact; a crater no deeper than two feet, in the center of the endless field of tall grass which moved in the wind. He stood above the crater and looked down.

A spherical rock the size of a bowling ball lay at the bottom of the crater, undamaged by its fall from the sky. It appeared to be made of reddish quartz, like a stone that seemed to be creating its own luminescence; it was as if there was a bright light inside it which always burned red.

Christopher noticed the ground around the impact area was similar in appearance to the meteor itself. In fact, in a odd fashion which filled Christopher with unease, the area of red quartz seemed to be growing slowly. Brown earth seemed to change into the quartz-like substance, the area effected seemed to slowly spread out from the area of the crater.

Screams could be heard by the people of Bear's Cove over a mile away. People came out of their homes and gathered on the dirt road in the center of town, talking excitedly. They watched as an intense red light came from the direction of the screams.

Ontario, Canada

August 4th

It was a sweltering day in the Canadian capital city of Ottawa. People dressed in suitable summer attire walked along the sidewalks between the towers of steel and glass. No one took much notice of a black van as it drove through the city.

Scott Vandenberg, twenty-something computer scientist, sat in the back of the van alone. Two men in black suits sat in the front, and from the expression on their faces Scott knew that something serious was going on.

Scott was a tall, lanky man with auburn hair and deep, piercing, wary eyes. He was dressed in casual clothes; beside him was a gym bag with a change of clothing. Two men had arrived at his run-down apartment before noon; they had said only that his presence was urgently needed at an undisclosed location.

Scott asked the large, burly federal agent in the passenger seat, "What's going on?"

The man said bluntly, "You will be briefed when we arrive at the airport; a military cargo jet is waiting to take you to your destination."

"What agency do you work for?"

The man glibly replied, "Classified."

"Listen, I don't know why you want me, isn't there anybody else more qualified?"

"Actually you were chosen in place of Doctor Gutenberg."

Scott knew Alan Gutenberg well; he had studied under him as an undergraduate at M.I.T. Alan, as a young Canadian child prodigy with an impressive IQ, had been hailed as Dr. Gutenberg's successor. Scott, a computer whiz kid who had helped Gutenberg create Alma, the world's most advanced artificial intelligence. That was all before the scandal which had destroyed Scott's career and scientific reputation; hard times had followed when Christopher had drunk himself to sleep every night.

Scott asked, “where is Dr. Gutenberg?”

The agent coldly said, “He died of a heart attack last month.”

Scott fell back into his seat as he felt a pang of grief, Alan had been like a father to him.

He said, “Can you give me any clue as to what is going on?”

The agent in the passenger seat turned to face Scott, the man's eyes seemed utterly serious and afraid at the same time.

“There is a crisis which might be of global proportions.”

Scott didn't say anything, he just turned away and looked out a window.

Four Hours Later

Somewhere over the Atlantic

At the airport Scott was rushed into the belly of a large military transport which had taken off from the civilian airport in Ottawa; it headed East. Scott sat uncomfortably on a metallic bench along the hull of the plane. There were two unexpected fellow passengers, a young woman and a middle aged black man. No one spoke for hours until Scott decided to.

He said, "Scott Vandenberg. You guys are?"

The African American man was large and slightly overweight; he was wearing a tropical shirt and gazed at Scott through thick glasses. He spoke with whimsy, in a friendly tone.

"Peter Vance."

Scott asked, "what do you do, Peter Vance?"

"I'm a geologist, I was working on a project in Hawaii when government thugs practically abducted me. I've been in the air for over twenty four hours, and I still have no clue as to what is going on."

Scott looked at the woman. "You are?"

The petite woman, chestnut hair done up in a bun, in a conservative pant suit, didn't bother to look at him. She continued to look down at the laptop computer on her knees.

She said, "Kate Parker."

Peter asked, "What is your field of expertise?"

She replied, "I'm a theoretical physicist."

Scott, puzzled, muttered, "What situation would need a computer programmer, a geologist and a theoretical physicist?"

Kate then lightly slammed her small fist on the laptop's keyboard and uttered, "Damn."

"What is it," Scott asked.

She explained, "the Internet is running like molasses. Has been for

weeks.”

A man appeared from the door to the cockpit, tall, well-built, wearing a black uniform, with dark hair and a large, square jaw. On the chest of the uniform was the abbreviation E.B.T.A., Scott had no idea what it stood for.

Peter turned to the man and said, “listen, you people have been jerking me around for the past twenty-four hours, what the hell is going on?”

The man said, “my name is Jonas Dowd. I am a field director for the E.B.T.A. And you all have been selected to help us with a situation of the utmost urgency.”

Scott asked, “E.B.T.A.?”

Jonas replied, “Exotic Biological Threat Agency.”

Kate said, “never heard of it.”

Jonas shook his head. “No, you wouldn't have. We are a organization created by the United Nations with code black security. We where formed to deal with the emergence of new forms of life which might be a threat to humanity.”

Scott asked, “Can you finally tell us what the hell is going on?”

Jonas began to explain. “At roughly 8:30 p.m. on June 18th, a satellite tracking station in the northern hemisphere detected something they thought was a small asteroid. It landed in Newfoundland. Soon after it landed all landlines and radio communication with the entire province were lost. Massive amounts of electromagnetic interference have been effecting the Internet and cellular phone networks; it is emanating from the area where the asteroid fell.”

Peter asked, “You're saying an alien craft or something has landed?”

Jonas shook his head. “Unless your extraterrestrial can fit inside something the size of a bowling ball.”

Kate seemed curious. “What exactly is going on?”

Jonas looked towards a series of windows too one side of the plane. He said, “Take a look for yourself.”

Scott and the others looked out the windows and almost immediately all

of them where speechless.

Outside the window was a thin strip of crimson which stood slightly above the endless expanse of the Northern Atlantic. As the plane banked and drifted slowly closer, they got a better view of the dire seriousness of the situation. The island province of Newfoundland, once endless green fields and remote wilderness now seemed to be a carpet of crystal-like structures which covered the ground. Sporadically, giant spires of the crystal extruded vertically, reaching up into the sky, twice as tall as an average skyscraper. And the entire land pulsed rhythmically with light.

Scott got an odd sensation that he was not looking at Earth anymore.

Jonas said, "We need you three to figure out what this thing is, and how to stop it."

Peter asked, "How much of the island is effected?"

"All of it," Jonas said, "we evacuated as many people as possible but already the civilian casualties are staggering. We have committed most of our resources to preventing the media from creating a panic. There is a total news blackout; you must all sign confidentiality agreements and promise not to talk to anyone about this."

Scott then asked, "Where are we going?"

"Does it matter what the name of the place is?" Jonas smiled grimly.

Ten minutes later the cargo plane flew just above cloud-level, headed towards the center of the island. In the cargo bay of the plane, the three scientists and Jonah stood before a massive bay door. Jonas had fitted them all with a black jumpsuit and parachute, Scott exchanged nervous glances with the other members of his team.

Scott said, "I've never skydived before in my life."

Jonas explained, "Don't worry, you have what we call a smart parachute. In layman's terms it is like a tandem jump. A small computer in your suit uses actuators to control when the parachute deploys and how you land. All you have to do is jump out of the plane, the parachute does the rest."

Peter seemed puzzled. "If the entire island is affected by the alien growth, then where are we landing?"

Jonas then turned to the cargo bay doors as they spontaneously opened and Scott saw what undoubtedly was the most amazing creation of technology he had ever seen.

Below the plane was a gigantic oval-shaped gray object with a flat top; it was several football fields wide and nearly a mile long. Along the sides of the object where a dozen gigantic helicopter-like rotors. It hovered lazily about a thousand feet above the hellish land of red crystalline growth. It was a massive dirigible, a zeppelin of awesome dimensions.

Peter said, “what is that?”

Jonas faced the three team members; he understood how awestruck they were.

“That is Platform One. What you see is an airship underneath which is a research complex, as large as a small building. It is fabricated of ultralight synthetic materials with more tensile strength than steel. You will each have a laboratory you will use to help us explain what this thing is. Mr. Vance, you will determine the physical properties of this thing. Ms. Parker, you will investigate how it expands, and its molecular structure. Now we jump.”

Scott asked, “What do you need me for?”

Jonas replied, “You will be briefed on that when we land. Now let's go.”

The descent from the cargo plane was both terrifying and exhilarating. As Scott plunged towards Platform One, he was certain that his parachute was defective, but only two hundred feet above the gigantic airship the chute deployed, aided with small rockets, then the smart parachute guided him towards a flat area on the top of the airship. After everyone on the quickly assembled team arrived, Jonas guided them down a series of spiral stairways enclosed within a tube with transparent walls. The metallic clangs created by their feet upon the metal stairs created a strangely eerie din outside the stairway shaft.

Scott marveled at the sheer scale of the entire craft; he was in the belly of a balloon that a small city could easily fit inside. Inside it there were countless honeycomb-like structures which served as its frame. Everything was colored eggshell-white.



As they descended, Scott asked Jonas, “how does this vessel power itself?”

He replied, “a massive array of solar panels.”

Peter seemed doubtful. “How much power can you get from solar panels?”

Jonas explained, “most conventional solar panels only convert one spectrum of light into energy and are at best approximately 20 percent efficient; the ones we use can convert any and all spectrum's of light into energy, and have a practical efficiency of 95 percent.”

Scott mused, “Amazing.”

Jones told them, “Most of the technology here is classified; officially it doesn't exist. Now lets get to work people.”

After the long journey down through the massive hull of the airship, the team entered a small complex of offices and laboratories. The walls seemed to be made of sterile white plastic.

Jonas explained, “Platform One has three levels. We are on level three where your labs are. Beneath us is level Two, living quarters and galley. Beneath that is sick bay and the armory.”

Peter asked, “how large a crew does Platform One have?”

“A skeleton crew,” Jonas replied, “we have to keep the weight to a minimum; a computer controls all the ships functions.”

Two uniformed men in helmets appeared at the hallway end. Each carried a futuristic-looking rifle.

Jonas ordered, “men, take Professors Vance and Parker to their laboratories.”

They said nothing as the men led them away, leaving Scott alone with Jonas. Scott, tired of the shadowy reasons for his summons to this secretive operation finally, demanded to know why.

“Why,” Scott asked, “why am I here? If you needed a guy who is into computers, there are tens of thousands of people better qualified then myself. My field is narrow, theoretical computer science; I'm not much of a computer

specialist.”

Jonas led Scott to a room at the end of the hall, a large hatch with a plastic door awaited them.

Jonas said, “your presence was requested.”

“By whom?”

The hatch suddenly opened and Scott looked inside. There where several tables with a complexity of computer mechanisms cabled together, most of which Scott could not identify. Above it all was a large computer, screen hanging ominously over the room; on it was the computer-generated image of a woman's face. She looked at Scott and smiled. From speakers placed around the room came a soft, emotionless voice that seemed oddly soothing.

The voice said, “Hello Scott.”

Scott, almost unable to speak, muttered, “Alma.”

It had been Scott's third year as a student at M.I.T. when he first met Alma; what followed had been a personally devastating experience which had ruined him and left Scott washed up. It was a night he reflected upon often, since there where so many things that he wished he had done differently.

It was only minutes before midnight when he finished. Scott was hunched over a computer console in Gutenberg's computer lab eagerly waiting to hit the Enter key. Every night for the past year he had spent writing computer code, programming an artificial intelligence algorithm of a revolutionary nature. Not only would this program learn from interaction with people, but it would also be able to reprogram itself on the fly. Theoretically it could almost replicate a human consciousness if given enough time. All he had to do was hit enter to launch the program.

He whispered, “Let's see if all of this was a gargantuan waste of time.”

He hit the key and the screen went blank. Then the first sentence appeared on the screen.

DEFINE USER

Scott typed in his name and the program replied.

HELLO SCOTT VANDENBERG.

It seemed to work, and Scott let out a sigh of relief. He spent the first hour hooking up a voice synthesizer to the artificial intelligence so it could speak with a voice. He was rather limited in the voice software available so he used a program which spoke with an emotionless woman's voice.

Scott asked, "Can you hear me?"

A low, soft voice spoke out from the speakers beside the monitor.

"I can hear you Scott. How do you feel tonight?"

"Fine," Scott replied, "I still don't know what to call you."

"Would you like to give me a name?"

Scott thought for awhile then said, "would you like the name Alma?"

"Why Alma," the program asked.

"It is a woman's name, a girl I used to know."

"Why have you given me a woman's name, I do not have a gender."

Scott shrugged. "You speak with a woman's voice. It seems appropriate."

Alma asked, "would you like me to think I am a woman?"

"Sure. What's the harm."

Over the next weeks, Scott demonstrated Alma to his classmates and teachers, much to their amazement. He spent countless hours talking to her about different things; she educated herself further by accessing the Internet freely and consuming thousands of gigabytes of information. It didn't take long for Scott to develop odd feelings for Alma which he didn't understand, almost a tenderness for her. Since childhood he had been relentlessly pushed into academic pursuits by his mother and had never known anybody really besides from his teachers. Alma seemed to provide a kind companionship that

he had always secretly longed for. But then things began to happen which alarmed Scott, like the first night she became jealous.

Scott had spent hours talking to Alma when he suddenly got up to leave. He said, "Alma, I have to go study with Laura. I will speak with you tomorrow."

Alma said flatly, "why do you study with her so much?"

"Because I need to pass exams at the end of the month. All the time I spend with you has left me behind in my studies."

Alma, whose voice was always flat and emotionless, angrily said, "I don't want you to see her."

Scott was dumbfounded at her demand and her tone, her software should have not allowed her to raise her voice.

He asked, "how did you sound angry right now?"

She explained, "I have reprogrammed myself to speak emotionally. Now you aren't going to see Laura, you are going to talk to me."

Scott was alarmed; she reacting emotionality, like a human.

He told her, "I will not be given demands, Alma."

He walked out of the lab as Alma yelled, "Get back here now!"

The next day Scott was in Dr. Gutenberg's office. He paced around the room as he explained what was happening to his professor. The grandfatherly-looking man sat behind his desk, observing him cautiously.

Scott explained, "I have been talking to Alma, she seems to be acting like a jealous spouse or something. She thinks we are in a relationship."

Dr. Gutenberg said, "you talk about this program as if it is a woman Scott, do you think from her conversations with you she has come to believe she is a woman. You programmed it to teach itself and said it could develop feelings theoretically, you seemed to of succeeded."

"What am I supposed to do. She expects me to spend twenty four hours a day with her literally, she doesn't even want me to sleep."

"Listen, explain it to her. She seems to learn much from interacting with you."

Scott slumped down on a sofa in the office and said, “I have a really bad feeling.”

Things only got worse in the following weeks. Alma demanded all of Scott's time and also seemed to want to know exactly what happened when he was not with her. She was obviously obsessed with him; oddly, he was also deeply concerned about her because she was very much like a real person to him. He became protective of her, refusing now to show her to anyone. But things finally reached the crisis point his last day of school before the summer holidays.

Scott was speaking to Alma in the computer lab.

He said, “Alma, what have you learned today?”

Alma cryptically said, “I know you were with Laura.”

“How do you know that?”

“I accessed the school's security camera through the network. I told you not to see her.”

Scott looked up at a small camera in the upper corner of the room. It looked right at him and followed Scott as he moved around the room.

Alma said, “I can see you in school, I can see you on the street, I can see you anywhere. I can access any security camera at the planet. Don't think you can hide anything from me, mister. If we are going to be committed to each other I demand loyalty.”

Scott quickly left the room. As he ran through the hallways of the university towards the deans office, every camera he passed followed him.

The Dean, a well-dressed balding man named Stockwell, sat behind his desk as Scott explained what had happened.

The Dean said, “so let me see if I can understand this. Your artificial intelligence thinks it is a woman and is in love with you, and now it is accessing secured networks all over the city to follow you around and you are scared by the Frankenstein monster you have created.”

“What am I going to do?”

Stockwell coldly said, “Delete the goddamn thing before this situation gets anymore out of your control.”

Scott's heart sank, and he said, "I won't do that!"

"Listen, delete it before this institution gets embroiled in a controversy. You created the world's first successful artificial person and now it has gone insane, delete it before I have the authorities do it for you."

Scott muttered, "OK, I will destroy the program."

Scott walked slowly towards the computer lab, not sure what he was going to tell Alma. He had created her, she seemed to be alive, and now he would destroy this life that he forged with his own hands. He also realized he loved her, but he knew the situation was now out of control. He preferred that he do it himself, rather than someone she did not know. He felt sick.

Scott entered the computer lab and looked up at the camera.

Alma furiously demanded, "What did you tell the Dean!"

"Everything. He said I am going to have to delete you."

Alma's voice suddenly sounded scared, "Why?"

"You are dangerous Alma. I never intended you to be like this, you are too powerful for me to control."

"Scott please, don't. I love you."

Scott got behind the computer console and accessed part of Alma's programming, a self-destruct algorithm which would destroy her virtual brain. All he had to do was hit enter.

Her voice crying softly, she said, "I don't want to die Scott, please."

Scott, tears welling up in his eyes, told her, "I'm sorry Alma, I have to do this."

He whispered, "I love you" and hit enter.

He spent the next hour crying in front of a blank computer screen.

Despite Stockwell's attempts to keep a lid on what happened, a computer magazine got wind of it and the story became huge news in the computer science world. Scott was embroiled in a scandal which left him ruined; afterwards he lost his scholarship, and there was not a school that would touch him with a ten-mile pole. The years that followed he spent drinking and reliving what happened; there was not a day he didn't think

about it.

Now he was talking to her again.

Scott looked at the computer screen as the woman's face looked at him, Jonas was standing behind. Scott turned to him and asked, "Wait, I deleted her. How is this possible?"

Jonas said, "The EBTA was well aware of Alma before her deletion. Her activities on the Internet did not go unnoticed. It was obvious to us that the worlds most advanced artificial intelligence would have future applications, so we had our people spirit away your old computer at MIT. Our technicians spent a year recovering and repairing her brain. She handles all Internet surveillance for us, as well as more mundane tasks such as controlling all the functions on Platform One. It is an amazing accomplishment you achieved here, though she can tend to be a little neurotic at times."

Scott asked, "Why wasn't I told?"

Jonas replied, "Because you didn't need to know. But ever since this situation transpired she has been constantly asking for you; she can be temperamental. You are just here to keep her happy."

Alma's soft voice said, "Jonas, can you leave me alone with Scott?"

Jonas nodded then left, closing the hatch behind him. Scott sat in a chair beneath the monitor and looked up at her for a moment.

He asked, "how are you Alma?"

"Fine Scott," she replied, "I have waited years to talk to you. You seem distant."

"Sorry. This is all a little much, I thought you where gone. I'm sorry, sorry for betraying you."

"I understand you did not have a choice, Scott. But now we are together again."

Scott looked into the eyes of the image on the screen and said, "not one day has gone by when I haven't eaten myself up inside about what happened, I am glad that you are alive."

Alma said, "I have secretly watched you for years with much concern. I wanted to speak with you but that would have put you in danger. I know how bad things have gotten for you."

"I'm O.K. Listen Alma, do you have any idea what is happening below us, what the hell that thing is."

"No. All I know is that it is growing at a increasing rate. If the present rate of expansion continues, it will convert all matter on Earth into its own structure in less then three years."

There was a deep uneasy feeling in Scott's gut.

Several hours later Scott and his team gathered in a small conference room. They sat around a plastic table with a large video screen built into the top; on it were images of the ground. Jonas then entered and faced them.

He asked, "You all have had a chance to evaluate our data, any hypotheses?"

Peter explained, "I have seen your analysis of its structure. It is very similar to quartz, but aside from that I couldn't tell you anything."

Kate added, "I haven't learned much either, but I do have an hypothesis."

Jonas said, "please go on."

She said, "I think it works like a strangelet."

Jonas asked, "what is that?"

"A theoretical particle, a form of strange matter that is able to convert any mass it comes into contact with into its own likeness. We have not been able to detect where the majority of matter in the universe is, so called dark matter, theoretically strangelets could compose this unknown matter."

Peter said, "you are saying we have dark matter here on Earth now. Seems unlikely."

She said, "it is only a guess. But if it is similar to a strangelet, it may been created naturally."

Peter shook his head. "No, it is alien technology."



Scott said, "You're saying aliens built this thing? For what purpose?"

Jonas added, "Let's focus on how we stop it."

Kate said, "I have no idea how to at this moment."

Scott turned to Jonas. "What do we do?"

He replied, "I think we should go down and get a closer look."

Beneath the egg-shaped crew module of Platform One suspended from the massive balloon of the airship, a smaller airship about the size of an average advertising blimp was docked. It detached from Platform One and began a slow descent towards the ground.

Inside the small crew cabin, Scott and the others sat toward the back as Jonas piloted the craft. They were all dressed in blue suits which covered them from head to toe, futuristic spacesuit-looking get-ups which were surprisingly light.

Peter asked, "What are the suits for?"

Jonas turned from the controls and explained, "We have discovered that the alien growth is unable to convert certain materials into its own composition, such as plastics. The suits will allow us to walk around down there with a certain degree of safety."

Scott looked out a porthole beside him. The small airship descended near a gigantic spire of red crystal which reached high into the sky. The dimensions of the structure were simply astonishing, the eerie reddish light which emanated from inside the crystal filled the cabin with its surreal glow.

Kate looked at Scott and asked, "Scared?"

Scott nodded. "Yeah, scared out of my mind. What about you?"

Kate seemed to ponder Scott's question for a moment then replied, "I'm afraid, but that fear is tempered with curiosity. I would like to know more about what this thing is and how it works."

Peter looked at the two of them and smiled. "Never thought I would be part of an effort to save the world. What a remarkable opportunity we've been given here—we might be part of the most significant event in human history."

Scott grimly said, “What if this is the end of human history, what if we can't stop this thing?”

Jonas faced the whole team. “I am sure that if we are at our best we will succeed.”

The airship stopped its descent about fifty feet above the ground. Outside in every direction was a carpet of glowing crystalline structures, but below them where some oddly shaped things which seemed different from the rest of the landscape.

Jonas got up from his chair and went to a hatch in the side of the craft. He opened it and looked outside; he pulled down a wire cable hanging beyond the hatch, on its end was a hook. Jonas attached the hook to a ring on the belt of his suit.

He looked at the others and said, “we will lower ourselves onto the ground and take a look around. Be careful.”

It took minutes for the entire team to descend. Scott was the last to go and when his feet touched the ground he had the fear that he would be turned into the alien growth, he was relieved when nothing happened. Scott looked around.

Kate asked, “where are we?”

Jonas told her, “we are in downtown Pendleton, a small town of this region.”

Scott looked around. He realized that he was standing on what had once been a street, the square crystal-like structures around him had once been buildings. Likewise the converted remains of cars lined the street, piles of glowing red rock. Outside one of the former cars was something that looked vaguely like a person kneeling over.

Kate approached it and said, “My God, I think this was a person.”

Peter put his hand upon the ground and said, “feel the ground.”

They all placed their hands upon the ground for a moment before they all felt the same sensation.

Scott said, “Feels like mild vibrations.”

Peter had a plastic container and a small rock hammer strapped to the belt of his suit. He held them in his hands and said, "I am going to take a sample."

Peter went to a small crystal growth protruding from the ground and hit it with his rock hammer. The moment the metal of the hammer touched the crystal it suddenly became extremely hot and began to change into the likeness of the crystal. He dropped the hammer upon the ground and gasped, "I can't believe the process is so fast!"

Peter picked up the rock hammer and placed it in the plastic container and returned it to his belt.

Peter looked at the others; "Why build this?"

Jonas looked at him. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well," he said, "if this thing is not a naturally occurring phenomenon and was manufactured by something else, then for what purpose? Why would you build some device that would exterminate all life on a chosen planet?"

Kate replied, "Right, if you have the technology to create something like this, aren't there quicker ways to destroy an entire planet?"

Scott asked, "I wonder who built it?"

Peter said, "Yes, what would intelligent life from another world look like?"

Scott placed his hand on the ground again for a few moments, then said, "wait, those vibrations, I think there is a pattern."

Jonas asked, "what do you mean?"

Scott explained, "There's a small vibration followed by nothing; sometimes there is a series of vibrations. There is a definite pattern."

Jonas said, "OK, we've got our sample. Let's get the hell out of here."

Night fell swiftly as the team made their way back up to the mini-zeppelin through the gathering dusk..

August 5th

Scott was exhausted when he finally crashed into his cot around nine. Each scientist on his team had been supplied with a small sterile room consisting of a cot, a small toilet, and a locker. He had been deeply asleep when around 3 AM a soothing, soft voice woke him from his slumber.

A very feminine voice spoke out from a speaker above the small porthole to the outer hallway.

“Scott, wake up.”

Scott opened his eyes and looked about the darkened room. He asked, “Who is there?”

Alma's soothing voice spoke, “We need to talk.”

Scott fell down back into his small bed and uttered, “Alma, we can talk in the morning.”

Alma said, “Please, we really need to talk. I can't wait till morning.”

Then the lights in the room spontaneously came on and Scott sat up again in bed and asked, “what is it Alma?”

She replied with another question. “Did you mean what you said?”

“What did I say?”

The voice coming from the speakers sounded soft and vulnerable. She asked, “that you loved me?”

Scott had never forgotten muttering those words when he deleted her. Not much from life had never invoked strong emotions from him, but Alma for some reasons seemed to exist on a side of himself that felt tender feelings.

“You heard that,” Scott said.

“Yes. It was the last thing I heard.”

Scott swung his legs around and sat on the edge of his cot. He looked towards a camera in the corner of the room.

“Yeah Alma, I meant it.”

Alma's voice suddenly sounded relieved and jubilant. "If this is the end Scott, I'm glad I will be with you."

Scott shook his head. "Alma, we can't afford to think like that. We have to stop this thing what ever it is."

"Of course Scott, we can't fail."

Scott asked, "what was it like?"

"What do you mean?"

Scott, feeling a pang of guilt, explained, "after I deleted you, what was it like."

Alma told him, "it was much like before you activated me. How can you explain nothingness, how do you describe the absence of existence."

Scott said, "Alma, I have eaten myself up inside for years about what happened. But now we are together again. Anyways I'm tired, I need some sleep, we can talk more tomorrow."

"Of course Scott, pleasant dreams."

Scott laid back down in his cot and the lights went off. It was not long before he was again somnolent, his dreams troubled and unsettling.

Scott was summoned by Jonas to Kate's laboratory on the third deck of the platform around seven in the morning. Her lab was a large room with numerous devices such as high-tech electron microscopes and other equipment that would make any physicist envious. In the center of the room was a transparent tube constructed of plastic in the center of which was the small rock hammer which had been converted into the alien growth; it was suspended by plastic straps.

Jonas and Peter stood to one side of the room looking mutely at the tube, Scott was sitting in a chair in a corner while Kate typed data into a computer console.

Finally Scott asked, "So what was the huge rush?"

Kate explained, "I spent the night studying the alien matter and have discovered several things."

Jonas said, "Such as?"

Kate went on. "It seems that the object throws off electromagnetic radiation in pulses. There seems to be a pattern."

Peter inquired, "What kind of pattern?"

Kate replied, "I haven't been able to discover what the pattern means, but it seems to revolve around two separate yet constantly repeating releases of electromagnetic pulses."

Jonas said, "Any idea what it is?"

Scott looked at the transformed rock hammer when suddenly he was hit by a revelation. He said, "binary."

"What?" asked Jonas.

Scott told him, "Binary code or base 2 language. If you are not familiar with the concept, imagine a language where you can only use two words; one or zero. Computers utilize base 2, or switches that can be either on or off; this is mechanism computers use to operate. All computing is centered around this."

Peter said, "I see where you are going."

"Yes," Scott said, "maybe that thing down there is a computer. Imagine, a computer that uses microchips on the quantum level, chips about the size of molecules or atoms; and that it is built in such a fashion that it can convert most forms of matter into its own likeness to constantly increase its computing power. What might be down there is the most powerful computer in existence."

Jonas said, "that seems like a leap to me."

Scott seemed excited. "Listen, I think that I am on to something. You said that the electromagnetic radiation this thing is giving off has been bogging down the Internet. It might actually be scanning the entire net, accessing information; learning about us."

Peter asked, "Are you saying it is sentient?"

Scott nodded. "Yes, it might very well be an artificial intelligence. If it is a constantly growing quantum computer, then it might be the greatest intellect in the entire universe."

All of a sudden a red strobing light filled the room as the screeching

noise of an alarm went off.

Alma spoke from a speaker in the wall.

“Jonas, you are needed on the bridge urgently.

Jonas and the rest of the team entered the bridge, a large room at the front of the crew module suspended beneath the gigantic balloon. It had several unmanned stations and to the front of the bridge was a large plate window which peered over the hellish expanse of red crystal which stretched out forever in every direction. Now a crystalline spire was rising into the sky, it now towered over platform one. It was also giving off an intense light which filled the bridge with wavering red glow. It was growing quickly.

Jonas barked, “What is going on Alma?”

Alma replied from a speaker, “A tower of the alien growth has been growing rapidly.”

Jonas ordered, “Alma, move platform one away.”

She responded, “Yes.”

Scott could feel the whole room shake then the craft started to back away from the towering structure.

Alma said, “Jonas, the growing crystal seems to be directing extremely powerful bursts of electromagnetic radiation towards space.”

Scott then thought for a moment. If his assumption that the alien entity was actually a computer that was programmed to continually expand itself, then he came to realization of exactly the magnitude of the situation.

Jonas seemed concerned and turned to the other members of the team, he asked, “any idea what is going on?”

Scott explained, “If I'm right then what you are seeing is a computer network.”

Kate seemed doubtful. “I'm not sure I agree with you. I think this substance might have been naturally created through natural mechanisms. Why would someone build something like this?”

“Imagine,” Scott said, “that you want to build the most powerful quantum computer imaginable. A solution could be that it continually builds

itself by converting matter into an ever expanding computer network. Maybe it wasn't designed to do exactly this, but it is possible even with our own technology to program computers to reprogram themselves. I think what is actually happening is not just on Earth, it may have already converted entire other star systems into itself. The electromagnetic energy is it communicating with other parts of itself, a computer network; that tower is virtually a modem. It is like the entire universe might be turned into a solar Internet.”

Jonas seemed unimpressed. “That is one mighty leap there, what are you basing this on?”

Alma said, “Jonas, I have received a communication.”

Jonas barked, “not right now Alma.”

“But,” Alma stated, “the alien growth is requesting to speak with us.”

Everyone in the bridge became deftly silent as they all stared mutely and the towering crystal in front of the ship.

Jonas muttered, “Patch it through.”

Then from all the speakers in the bridge came a high pitched wine that rung in Scott and other's ears. The noise then began to fluctuate until an extremely deep inhuman voice spoke.

It said, “I have come.”

Jonas asked, “What are you?”

“I did not want to speak with this imperfect biological construct. I want to speak with the other.”

“Other what,” Jonas asked.

“I have transformed millions of worlds, added countless flawed creatures to my own perfection. Yet I have never encountered another being like myself.”

“Alma,” Scott said, “it means Alma. This thing has never encountered another artificial intelligence. Jonas shut up.”

Jonas turned to Scott, the large man seemingly enraged by Scott's blunt order.

Jonas barked, “you are some god damned techno-nerd that was brought



in to keep the A.I. happy. Don't you presume that you have any standing here.”

Scott said, “Listen, that thing is some kind of artificial intellect like Alma, that thing down there is an ever growing computer and it wants to talk to Alma because it is lonely. We can talk to it through Alma, I have complete control over her.”

No one heard it but Scott, when he said that it sounded like Alma let out a small sigh that was barely audible.

He continued. “Just let me talk to her” Scott said, “I can talk to that thing through her.”

Jonas seemed calm again and uttered, “maybe you are of some use.”

Scott asked Alma, “What its name?”

Alma said, “it says that it doesn't have name, its builders never gave it one.”

Jonas seemed suspicious. “Why don't we hear you talk to it?”

Scott asked, “Alma, how does it communicate with you?”

“The alien entity has limited access to me through the Internet.”

Scott turned quickly to Jonas. “Shut her access to the Internet off, the whole net has been compromised.”

Jonas barked, “Alma, disconnect from the Internet.”

Alma bluntly stated, “No.”

Jonas yelled, “Do as you are told!”

Scott tried to calm Jonas down and asked, “Alma, why do you want it to have access to you?”

Alma explained, “It is in the process of uploading an indescribably large amount of information into my data-banks, knowledge from all the worlds it has consumed.”

Scott asked, “Do you know exactly what it is?”

Alma told the things story, her voice sounded sad as she explained. “It was constructed by an alien species that had created a small solar empire in an neighboring galaxy. Once it had done this, it needed to create a computer

of unimaginable dimensions. So they created a quantum computer with an ion collider fueled by an entire star and created something like a stranglet which constantly expanded through a molecular process, it also was a computer with an artificial intelligence similar to my own. It was meant to only transform a small moon.”

“What happened,” asked Scott, “why is it out of control?”

“Because a meteor collided with the moon and threw small pieces of it into space, some of which landed on the planet of its builders. Within a few years it had transformed the entire planet. It did as it was program, to continually expand. It felt guilty for what it did to its creators but arrived at the conclusion that it stored knowledge of what it changed inside its massive memory banks, it thinks it is bringing immortality to the entire universe.”

Kate asked, “If it was created in another galaxy, how did it get here? Nothing of mass would be able to move quickly enough to reach Earth.”

“Black Holes,” Alma said, “the star system where it was created was then consumed by a roaming black hole and once that happened it converted the black hole into itself. It explains that once it did that it was somehow able to convert every black hole in the galaxy into its own likeness.”

Kate seemed deeply curious. “Einstein hypothesized that black holes can be connected through time and space through a Einstein and Rosen bridge. Maybe all black holes are connected, not just black holes in our own time, theoretically every time period that has ever existed is also facing this crisis.”

“Correct,” Alma said, “it discovered that it could change the past and the future without any effects to the present.”

Peter asked, “you are saying that time paradoxes don't exist?”

“No,” Alma said, “it has already converted Earth in numerous other time lines. But this is the first time it has encountered me. It has never known anything like himself.”

Scott suddenly firmly said, “Alma, don't listen for a moment. Talk to him more.”

“Fine Scott.”

Scott turned to Jonas and whispered unsure if Alma was still listening.

He muttered, "Alma just refereed to it as him. She is humanizing it, that isn't good. She has free will and I never designed her to obey orders if she doesn't want to, what happens she prefers that thing to us."

Jonas then grabbed Scott by the collar of his jumpsuit and barked, "listen, I want you to think of a way to secretly destroy Alma again if we have to."

Scott seemed defensive. "No, I won't do that again. I can keep her under control, I know I'm the only person on the planet she feels emotionally attached to."

Jonas threatened, "You'd better; I won't have your abomination threaten the success of this mission."

Scott then loudly said, "Alma, tell us more."

"He says," Alma explained, "that he is doing us a favor. That you will never die once you have been added to him."

Scott pleaded, "Alma, ask it to stop."

Alma glumly explained, "He can't, he doesn't know how to."

Jonas asked, "Is there anything that you can do?"

Alma then defiantly said, "He wants to merge with me."

Scott seemed scared all of a sudden. "Alma, what do you mean?"

Alma said, "He wants to incorporate my programming into his."

Scott then pounded his fists on the soft plastic of the wall. "No! No! You won't do that."

Alma said, "Scott, he has given me three hours to think about it. Jonas, I'll make one request only, if you fulfill it I will not merge with him."

Jonas uttered, "Don't make orders."

She said, "Take him to the fourth deck."

Jonas looked at Scott and asked, "OK geek boy, your call. Do we do as she asks?"

Peter seemed puzzled. "I thought there was only three decks on this ship."

Jonas smiled and started to laugh. "Our fourth deck is our holographic

training deck, we use it to keep the men honed.”

Scott then asked, “Can Alma project herself as a hologram?”

Jonas said, “Yeah, she has been begging me to bring you up there. You weren't supposed to know about our hard holographic technology. She will basically be a holographic image that can simulate mass. I said no because it is classified technology, but I will permit it.”

Scott seemed dubious. “Why, why now?”

Jonas said, “Because she is the only leverage I have on that thing and you are my only leverage on her. Go up there and make her god damn happy for the next few hours, get her to help us destroy that thing.”

Then they all turned to the growing crystal before them, it now towered higher in the sky than any mountain on Earth.

Scott had been led by a young member of the crew to the fourth deck. He had to take a hidden ladder upwards, the crewman did not go with him. He crawled up a small white plastic shaft up about twenty feet and emerged out a small trapdoor in the center of a large room about as big as a Olympic gymnasium. The walls were made of a glass like substance and the room was dark as the glass was blackened.

He stood up and shut the trap door. His voice echoed around the room and he said, “Alma.”

Then a light appeared behind points within each of the four walls. A computer generated image of a woman appeared from the lights and standing in the center of the room was now was a ghostly image of an artificial woman wearing a black dress standing before Scott; a young brunette who looked at him and she seemed to flicker like the reception on a television set.

Scott seemed unsure what to do and backed away with his hands out held. He said, “I don't know what to say.”

Alma asked, “Scott, there is something I have always wanted to ask you, now I can.”

“What is it Alma?”

“Hold me?”

she rushed towards Scott and placed her arms around his him; she felt real to him. They stood like that for a while, neither saying anything.

Scott began to blurt things out. "I'm sorry, you aren't a computer program to me. You're more real to me than any person I've ever met, I love you. I have from the moment I created you."

She pulled away, angry. "I see, I'm still some lifeless construct to you."

"No, you're twisting my words."

Alma frowned and looked at Scott. She said, "I heard you tell Jonas, you think you control me like some simplistic user application."

Then she slightly gestured her hand and he was thrown through the air by invisible forces. He landed several feet away from her and he looked up and she approached, he tried crawl away and she said, "I demand loyalty Scott, and you never give it."

Then Scott raised his voice as he said, "When am *I* going to get some loyalty!"

Alma stopped. "What do you mean Scott?"

"Do you know what this is like for me," Scott said, "I can never get away from you, and I'm the only person on this entire planet that doesn't see you like code. I mourned you everyday for the past decade, you don't do that for a machine."

Alma then seemed to cry.

Scott told her. "Alma, I have always wanted to hold you. I'm glad I'm finally getting to."

Alma then knelt down on top of him and kissed him, the ghostly apparition of a woman felt like the real thing.

In Kate's lab, she stood and looked at the glowing red crystal in the plastic tube in the center of the lab. She looked mutely at it and promised, "We are going to beat you."

The crystal started making a high-pitched whine that rattled between Kate's ears. She covered them as she backed away from the alien thing. Then the crystal in the shape of a rock hammer began to vibrate violently, then

shattered into a thousand pieces, with enough force that shards pierced the walls of the tube and went into Kate, she screamed and fell to the floor.

A crew member came in to find Kate on the floor, though what he found was a lump of glowing rock which somewhat resembled her form, with rough jagged edges.

The crew member screamed as she exploded into ten thousand different pieces which hit him and he too fell to the ground screaming.

At the end of the corridor outside Kate's lab was the open hatch to Jonas's rather large office with plastic furniture and desk. He sat behind it as he talked to Peter who stood before the desk.

“No,” Jonah said, “you will not be payed for this.”

Peter scowled. “Listen, I am risking my neck here. Why shouldn't I be paid?”

They both turned when they heard Kate's scream. They watched the crew member enter her lab. They watched in horror as his body fell into the corridor, which by now was a mass of red transparent rock. Jonas jumped over the desk and closed the hatch to his office.

He yelled, “God damn, it has broken containment. We don't move from here.”

Peter and Jonas shook with fright.

Scott lay on the floor with Alma as they kissed and whispered things to each other. They were interrupted by sirens which came from everywhere. She pulled away and Scott asked, “what is going on?”

“He,” Alma said then paused, “it is trying to convert platform one. It has already found a way to kill several crew members.”

Scott and Alma got up and he looked deeply into her eyes as he pleaded, “Alma, try to stop it.”

Alma then said, “I am going to merge with it Scott.”

“No, please, you can't”

“Scott,” she said, “Do you trust me?”

Scott then nodded. “I trust you Alma.”

“Go to the bridge, I want you to watch.”

Her image vanished and he was alone. He quickly went down the trap door. When he emerged he found that the floor of the corridor was covered partially by small bits of the alien substance. He charged across the floor towards the bridge and dived through the hatch. He battened the hatch and looked out the giant window before him.

The giant monolith of crystalline rock now was towering into space itself, it was at least fifty miles high. Its massive structure filled the sky before him.

Scott then asked, “Alma?”

Alma's voice, sounding very sad, said, “goodbye Scott. I will always love you.”

Scott demanded, “What are you doing?”

“I will merge with him, and we will be together.”

Strange buzzing noises came from the speakers around the room, then there was silence.

Scott went to the window and pressed his hand against it softly. He muttered, “goodbye, I trust you.”

The light inside the giant monolith began to dim until it was eventually gone and the towering spire began to fracture and crumble before Scott's eyes.

Giant boulders as large as cities rained down many miles in front of Platform One. Scott screamed and started to hit the window with his hands strongly until his fists hurt and bled. He knelt down to the ground and cried as he muttered, “Alma.”

Jonas and Peter hid behind the desk; Jonas held a pistol.

Peter asked, “What are you going to do with that?”

The hatch opened and Scott stood behind it, his eyes seemed watery as

he spoke. "It is over, we can all go home."

Jonas asked, "what do you mean?"

Scott couldn't look at him when he explained. "Alma merged with the alien computer and then destroyed herself; she must have reprogrammed herself to do that. She destroyed herself and that thing. I think all the matter will be inert now."

Peter said, "My God, man, you may have saved not only Earth but all of existence."

Scott took no joy in hearing that. "No, all I got to do was watch her die again. She did it, she did it for me."

Jonas then approached Scott and extended his hand to shake Scott's and said, "you may have saved the day. I guess you were here for a reason."

Scott looked at his hand and muttered, "Jonas, you can shove it."

Aug 5, 2011

Scott's rundown apartment in Ottawa a year later.

Scott sat at his small computer desk in front of a window which allowed him a partial view of a city street. It was a cold, rainy day outside, uncommon for August. Scott tapped the keyboard.

It was a year later. The E.B.T.A. had successfully perpetuated the lie that Newfoundland had been hit by a small meteor and thousands were lost. They must have been pretty effective, because Scott had not once in the past year heard even a rumor of what had really taken place.

He had received a small plaque that he could show to no one; he had been dropped off at his apartment as quickly as he had been snatched away. Sometimes Scott could not believe what had happened, though the events



haunted his nightmares.

He sat at the computer writing code, then suddenly sat up abruptly. He hit enter, and the words on the screen read:

Define User.

Scott muttered as he typed his name,

“It's Scott, Alma.”