Chapter 1
David Renewed

He was adrift in a fugue state, a sensory wash of haptic memories floating within corrupted software; dribbles of operating code intertwined with hazy sounds and images… Orchestral trumpets emitting notes of zeroes and ones, the *Mona Lisa* digitized into color expression algorithms, a winter sky of honking geese overlaid by a looping syntax spouting order of operations.

He was a lost passenger. Nothing more than a broken mainframe and scrambled bio-circuits, incapable of controlling his own thoughts or impulses.

Had David's computational programs been operational, they'd have projected the chances of his being successfully brought back online as being one in ten to the 5^{th} power. A one in 100 thousand chance. And that computation was being generous, assuming that the technician in charge had a working knowledge and experience in mechanical bioengineering and reconstruction, and that they had access to original Weyland schematics along with concurrent updates and patches, and that they had full use of a state-of-the-art bio-fusion chamber.

None of these parameters were in accordance.

David's anatomy was piecemeal, head and torso spliced together with rudimentary bio-cables and friction stitching, lying on a med bay station of alien origin intended for alien anatomy. The only schematics available were the ones being hacked by the haphazardly inserted nodes in his skull tissue. And the person inserting the nodes had no previous experience or

training in such endeavors. She was an astro-archeologist, adept at analyzing ancient star maps and civilizations. Her gaze had always been focused on distant planets and peoples.

But, as events warranted, she was suddenly trying to rebuild something of human origin, something of the here-and-now.

If David's computational programs were operational, and were using all the current variables, they'd have determined that his chances of being successfully brought back online would be infinitesimally less than one in 100 thousand.

But his computational programs were not operational. His brain functions offline. He was a lost passenger in a fugue state on an alien vessel spanning the uncharted cosmos.

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"Goro'the'ala… Goro'*the'ala*…" A frustrated Elizabeth Shaw stood over David, shining her penlight into his blue iris, trying to stimulate the dilation of the pupil. But the pupil—half the diameter of the iris—was stubbornly refusing to react to the light. She'd divined that the first sign of recovered brain function would be the dilation of the pupils.

"Goro'the*ala*," she intoned, hitting the last two syllables with oomph.

"GONO'THE*ALA*," the shipboard AI responded. The voice, decidedly masculine and guttural, was addressing Elizabeth as its organic partner. It had taken her several weeks to fully grasp the ship's basic voice-activated command functions. However, proper pronunciation was still elusive, a tricky process of understanding which syllables of the alien language should be accented and which should not.
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Goro'the*ala—machine partner*—was the proper way to refer to the shipboard AI. Like the architects of terrestrial starships, the creators of this interstellar craft had developed a symbiotic command-and-control language. A dialogue that used familiar and interpersonal terminology for interaction.

"Goro'the*ala*," she prompted again. "I need to measure the refraction of the light on the cornea. Please proceed with the full panel of trace elements and track any electro-magnetic impulses."

"Proceeding. Tracking, GONO'THE*ALA*."

The alien starship, in the shape of a bloated horseshoe, was a design of such convoluted and counterintuitive dimensions that it never would've passed muster on any terrestrial aerospace engineer's drafting table. Many of the onboard systems as well, from the navigational console to the food-processor, required an imaginative touch to understand and operate.

The craft was a Juggernaut-class second generation, discovered on LV-223 and salvaged by the last remaining crew member of the ill-fated Prometheus mission. And, fortunately for Dr. Elizabeth Shaw, the Juggernaut-class second generation was fitted with astral recording and playback: an onboard feature that logged all crew activities that could be replayed as ghostly projections. For three months, ever since liftoff from LV-223, Dr Shaw had been repeatedly watching countless playback projections, watching and learning and watching and learning.

The astral recordings had been instructive in everything from ship layout to med bay functions. By selecting from a queue of recordings, she could chart the craft and crew's entire history. The task had seemed monumentally overwhelming at first. Like learning the entire Greek language with nothing more than the Rosetta stone or cataloging every star in the Milky Way

using only a sextant. The key to starting the laborious process was to narrow her scope to the barest of basics: How long was the alien circadian rhythm?

She selected a single crewmember, one she nicknamed Hercules, and followed his daily shipboard routine. From his waking moment in the womb-shaped berthing pod to his labyrinthine workstation in the quantum propulsion bay to his daily meals in the hydroponic atrium to his recreational pursuits in the holo-hammock deck and then back to slumber in the berthing pod.

After shadowing Hercules for a single workday, she was able to discover their circadian rhythm was twenty-two-point-four hours. Less than seven percent difference from the human waking cycle.

She also learned about the ship's nature as well as that of the crew's. How the vessel's gargantuan scale was balanced with a comforting quaintness. How the crewmembers treated each other with a brisk yet familiar professionalism. And how the crew and vessel interacted more as a codependent biome than vessel and crew.

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

"Yes, Goro'the*ala*." Elizabeth lifted her bifocals and pinched the bridge of her nose. She'd been following the administering of different trace elements through the prime node into David's neural cortex, then monitoring the brainwave activity on the med bay's psionoscope, a panel that charted several branched brain functions on a multi-planed screen.

"Electro-magnetic pulse detected."

"Where?"

"Branch coil underlay."

"From what trigger?"

"Tritium."

"Tritium…" She sat and considered. "Tritium. That's a radioactive isotope of hydrogen. Generally used as a source of radioluminescence. But does that mean it's a base element in his brain chemistry or some intrusive byproduct of his trauma?" It was a rhetorical question. She knew the shipboard AI didn't know the specs of David's physical composition. She was merely thinking aloud, working the problem as she would a confounding hieroglyph or an incomplete cipher.

She checked the psionoscope, drilling down through the various strata of brain functions and eliminating the errant signals and ambient noise, looking for an unknown that might show itself. Like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack without fully understanding the biological makeup of the haystack or the compound nature of the needle.

"What is the most prevalent element of his brain? It would have to be silicon, right?" She reset her bifocals and studied David's open skull, gently probing with her fingertips at the tissue-like layers that encompassed the bio-circuitry and AI mainframe. "That's silicon, right?" She probed deeper, squeezing on the braided filigree until she could feel the individual ventricles.

"Goro'the*ala*."

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

She withdrew her fingers from the brain cavity and returned her attention to the psionoscope. "Spike the tritium trace by a factor of ten. Also add trace deuterium." She could

hear the whir of the med bay's micro-processors and the hum of the bed's intravenous ports. "Now run a trace of silica."

It happened. Briefly, but without doubt. She'd blindly plunged her hands into the haystack and jabbed her thumb on the point of the needle…

David's pupil had suddenly dilated.

"Hello there, handsome."

2

VIVISECT YOUR SAVIOR

The fugue state had evolved into a dream state. The sensory snapshots interlaced with coding hiccups had ceased, giving way to a full kaleidoscope of thoughts and memories…

Peering up into a starry sky while surrounded by the chirping of night crickets.

Standing on the gusty bow of a sailboat as it bounces across turbulent gray seas.

Fingertips skimming across tufts of prickly wheat in a sun-dappled meadow.

Bare toes sinking into the fragrant coolness of a freshly cut lawn.

But never a memory of taste. His awareness in the dream state was developing, expanding his ability to discern between his catalog of perceptions. However, as he searched through his database of memories and sensual snapshots, never once had he experienced a taste. There were millions of haptics and images and sounds and smells, but not a single reference point for *savory* or *sweet* or *tangy*. Those were mere descriptors, words that held no tangible meaning. Like love or sex or devotion. Oblique concepts that had been programmed but never experienced.

His most recurring dream, having 6 million instances logged, was a stealthily internecine sequence that had steadily evolved. The inception was a simple ballfield, specifically a *baseball* field; A team sport that had been popular from the late nineteenth century through the middle twenty-first century. The ballfield was empty except for two people: Peter Weyland and David.

David was standing at home plate with a wooden baseball bat. Peter Weyland, standing sixty and one-half feet away on the pitcher's mound, held a baseball in a weathered baseball mitt. They both wore crisp white button-down shirts and pressed khakis. They both appeared to be thirty-five years old, one having gracefully aged into his prime, the other having been engineered and constructed to be in his.

They always spoke to one another, always stood sixty and one-half feet apart, but never used their baseball bat or ball.

"I don't understand the need for this," David declared, eyes sweeping over the empty bleachers that ringed the infield and outfield.

"Don't understand the need for what?"

"For this setting. For these archaic implements." He leaned on the bat. "For you and I being in this moment."

"Well, the baseball field and these implements represent an ideal from my childhood."

"An ideal what?"

Peter Weyland gave a bashful grin. "Well, an *ideal childhood*, I suppose. The idealized conventions of a father-son relationship."

"So, in the conventions of this idealized father-son relationship, I would be in the role of the son?"

"Yes, David. In the idealized conventions of a father-son relationship, you're the son and I'm the father."

The dream always began in this fashion, with the establishment of Peter Weyland as a wise and benevolent father and David as his respectfully curious son. The conversation eventually grew over time—as the instances of the dream repeated and branched and repeated and branched—until their conversation inevitably reached beyond the halcyon conventions of Peter Weyland's idealized ballfield.

"Why would you consider me a son?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I'm an artificial construct that's been programmed with human knowledge and intelligence. But emotion isn't something that can be programmed. A father and son would share an emotional bond that you and I clearly do not."

Peter Weyland pondered David's proclamation, slowly running his thumb along the baseball's stitching. "I created you to be a faithful and sympathetic scion. Every stage of your development, much like a human child, involved a loving and supportive environment."

"The loving and supportive environment was a programmed construct, not a living and breathing experience."

"Well, true. I'm afraid we've not yet reached the juncture where your childhood and development are a lived experience. But your behavioral matrix and symbiotic relays simulate every possible emotion that a human can experience. We spared no expense to cultivate a rich and resplendent human memory for you, David."

The dream reached this stage for five-point-nine-nine million instances, where Peter Weyland made five-point-nine-nine million reassurances that no expense had been spared in the cultivation of a rich and resplendent human memory for David.

After those five-point-nine-nine million instances, the ballfield setting began to take on a darker, more industrial appearance. Gone were the grassy infield and outfield, now replaced with cold rolled steel. And the empty metal bleachers were riveted bulkheads. The friendly confines of a ballpark had morphed into the vast interior of a nautical vessel.

David still held a wooden baseball bat and Peter Weyland a ball and glove.

“Would a human son have subservience instilled into his behavioral matrix?” David asked.

“Depends on the father, I suppose. But a son’s subservience would most likely be an unintended consequence.”

“Even in this idealized version of your father-son dynamic?”

“Yes. Sons are generally subservient—in both nature and nurture paradigms—to their father.”

“And therefore—lacking either the nature or nurture paradigm—I’ve been programmed to be subservient to you?”

“Yes. If we had to boil it down, your programming would make you subservient to me.”

The setting evolved once again in the final logged instance. The deck plates were now a matte black bowl-shaped surface with organic metallic conduits spanning its contours. To the

sides and overhead were the shadowy surfaces of an exotically curved structure, with an impenetrable forest of organic metallic conduits and tendrils.

"I'd like to know whether you ever considered making me independent."

Peter Weyland raised an eyebrow. "Hm. Interesting question. But I don't think independent is the word you're thinking of."

"Then what is the word that I'm thinking of?"

"The word would be liberated."

David nodded. "Liberated."

"Perhaps in David 2.0 we'll include a teenage-rebellious phase." He gave David a playful wink. "Building Better Worlds."

David brought the baseball bat over his shoulder, indicating he was ready for his pitch. "Are we ever going to play?"

Peter Weyland, flashing his bashful grin again, moved into a smooth wind-up and then pitched the ball to David. David struck the ball, delivering such force and velocity that the ball came off the bat with a thunderous crack, then made a bullet-time trajectory directly into Peter Weyland's face, punching a whole though his nasal cavity that instantly dropped him dead onto the pitcher's mound.

David dropped the bat and began running the bases.

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"Hello there, handsome."
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"Hello there, mum."

David, lying on the alien med bay bed, appeared as new and whole as the day he was first assembled. Dr. Elizabeth Shaw stood over him, her radiant smile reflecting four months of pent-up uncertainty suddenly melting away into joyful relief.

"Everything looks functional from my perspective." She directed her penlight into each of his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"I'm running a full diagnostic."

"Do you remember who I am?"

"Dr. Elizabeth Shaw."

"Do you remember where we are?"

"Aboard a reclaimed Juggernaut spacecraft in route to Paradise."

Elizabeth stood back and motioned for him to sit up. "I have so much to share with you. Where would you like to start?"

They started on the ship's bridge, where Elizabeth taught him the protocol to communicating with the shipboard AI.

"Goro'the*ala* handles more of the ship's functions than Mother did on Prometheus," Elizabeth explained. "And I must admit, without his keen assistance, your revival wouldn't have been possible."

"So, Goro'the*ala* is a *he*?"

"I'm assuming so. I've watched a lot of the crew's astral projections and have deciphered some of their literature. From my limited assessment, they appear to be a male-centric culture."

"Does Goro'the*ala* have an override command?"

"This is the override command." Elizabeth held up a metallic flute-like object. "The notes and the sequencing are very hard to master. And Goro'the*ala* won't utter a word of explanation on its use. I assume it's a built-in failsafe device that only permits override capabilities to certain crew members."

She then gave David a full tour of the ship, starting at the bilge trough in the quantum propulsion bay and ending at the navigation dome's star atlas. David once again marveled at the projected array of star systems and planets accessible to them. He traced the highlighted course to Paradise.

"How long until we reach our destination?"

"Three weeks."

"And we are certain that Paradise is our preferred destination?"

Elizabeth turned her attention from the star atlas to David. "Why wouldn't it be our preferred destination?"

"They're an advanced technological race. Their home world's defenses will be formidable."

"But we're piloting one of their own creations. Why would they deem us a threat? I'm sure they'll allow us an opportunity to state our case."

“Our case? We touched down on LV-223 and encountered—by all estimates—their derelict bioweapons complex. We then awoke the last surviving member of the complex, fed it to one of their bioweapons, and destroyed their ship during liftoff.” He waved his hand through the astral sphere representing Paradise. “Commandeering another one of their ships and parading it in front of them might not soften their stance toward us.”

Elizabeth, face flush with frustration, slapped both hands against her sides. “I don’t recall a single word of concern before I took you offline for repairs. Where was all this doom-and-gloom analysis then?”

“I assume my computation programs were compromised. I was in pieces, running on patchy software and back-up power. However, now that I’m fully operational,” he stood to his full height, “I can derive a detailed litany of concerns—doom-and-gloom analysis if you will.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late to alter course, David.” Elizabth nodded toward Paradise. “As soon as I engaged the quantum drive Goro’the*ala* set our destination. Another failsafe I assume. Without override command, we’re on autopilot to Paradise.”

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David spent the next two days searching through the payload in the cargo bay, making a detailed log of the various casks and containers, specifically those that originated from the derelict base on LV-223. He then transported his selected cargo to the med bay where he began a detailed analysis of their contents.

Elizabeth made a visit.

“Hello there, handsome.”
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“Hello there, mum.”

“Still working on the manifest, I see.” She watched as David, huddled over the med bay table with scalpel, butterflied and pinned open a multi-tentacled specimen.

“There’s a rich plethora of specimens here. I’m attempting to see which are the most promising.”

“Promising for what?”

David began probing the specimen’s innards, using surgical tongs to slowly remove its organs. A sickening realization dawned on Elizabeth—observing the specimen’s desperate flinching—that the creature was still alive.

“David, why’re you keeping it alive?”

David stepped back and straightened, puzzlement registering in his features. “I need to see how it functions. A live specimen can tell me so much more than a dead one.”

“But it’s barbaric. Do you not understand the intolerable pain you’re inflicting on it?”

“This is an example of empathy, correct? You’re displaying empathy.”

Elizabeth nodded firmly. “Yes, David. Every living thing deserves empathy.”

“Is this the maternal instinct?”

“I wouldn’t call it strictly maternal. It’s a human instinct.”

“Quite profound. I must admit, Dr. Shaw: You might be the most interesting specimen of all.” He smiled and then resumed his surgical analysis.

Elizabeth made a quick exit.

The following day David encountered Elizabeth on the bridge as she stared out the main viewing screen. She was perched at the captain's station, engulfed in the oversized chair as if she was a child's doll.

"I've brought you a peace treaty." He handed her a bowl of steaming mush.

Elizabeth graciously accepted. "Thank you. But I'm not angry with you, David."

"You've been rather quiet. I took that to mean you were being sullen. Therefore, I deduced that you were upset. Then, after careful analysis, I concluded that you were upset with me for my surgical analysis of the specimens in the med bay."

"Well, I'll admit that I'm not a fan of that type of inhumane treatment. But I'm not upset as much as I'm disappointed."

"Disappointed?"

She took a spoonful of mush.

"How does it taste, mum?"

"Like flavorless oatmeal."

"It's the only concoction I could find among the ships' stores that could approximate a human diet. Although it does have the essential nutrients you require, I'm not equipped to perform a taste test." He playfully stuck his tongue out for observation. "Perhaps someday I'll get a hardware upgrade for this. Until then, your taste buds are our only resource for flavor evaluation."

"I think I'll stick to the produce in the hydroponic bay. But thank you for the kind consideration."

David kept his focus on Elizabeth as she resumed her watch over the cosmos. “Mum?”

“Yes, David?”

“Is a maternal relationship with a son different than that of a paternal relationship?”

“In most cases there is a difference. Although men are capable of empathy and love, they’re generally not as nurturing.” Her eyes drifted as her gaze turned inward. “My father—most of my childhood—was the only parent I had. After my mother passed, he developed a nurturing aspect to help fill that void.”

“Most interesting. So, you’d posit that a mother’s more nurturing tendencies form a bond with their offspring that predates and precludes a father’s bond?”

“That’s a bit reductive.” As her thoughts raced, she absent-mindedly took another spoonful of mush. Then cringed as she swallowed it down. “But if you’re asking whether a mother’s nurturing of a child through its earliest stages creates an initially stronger bond than that which they have with their father… then yes.”

David blinked. “I’ve got a surprise for you, mum.”

“I hope not another specially concocted meal.”

He presented the metallic flute-like object. “Remember this little device?”

Elizabeth arched her eyebrows. “Of course. What’re you doing with it?”

David placed the instrument below his lips and paused. “Goro’the*ala*.”

“GONO’THE*ALA*,” came the shipboard AI’s deep-voiced reply.

"Conduct override." He began playing the instrument, thirteen sharp notes that fluctuated up and down the register like surgically placed stabs of sound. Elizabeth watched the brief performance in awe and confusion. When David finished, he gave her a curt nod.

"GONO'THE*ALA*, new destination?"

"David, what're you doing?" She felt a tickle in her abdomen that began traveling across her core and then along her extremities, eventually dulling her fingers until she dropped the bowl of mush, creating a splattering mess on the deck plates.

"Sector 87, Goro'the*ala*. Slar Loc System, Planet Four."

"David?" Elizabeth's body suddenly folded upon itself, her backbone going elastic as her torso draped across her outstretched legs like she was made of rubber. "David?!"

David slipped the override instrument into his pocket. "I've chosen a new destination, mum. The archive of astral projections gave me access to all the override protocols. You could say I'm self-taught. I do hope that makes you proud."

He lifted her limp form onto his shoulder, carrying her out the access tunnel. "Goro'the*ala*, ready the med bay."

3

VIVISECT YOUR SAVIOR

David carried her down the coiling hallway, the ship's biomechanical walls shimmering like the curved structure of a whale's belly. They entered the med bay through the heavy sliding door after which David placed Elizabeth on the vast med bay bed.

He slowly and gently undressed her. "This time I'm the inquisitive tinkerer and you're the body on the slab. Our roles have been reversed."

Her body was fully numb, yet her mind was awake and aware.

"I have a story for you, mum. More precisely, a parable." He looked over a tray of assorted surgical implements. "Now, in the proud tradition of all good storytellers, I'll require a bit of creative license. I can better achieve the parable's moral if I'm not shackled to a strict accounting of details and events."

He selected a scalpel with a small, hooked blade. "I do wish you could converse with me as we take this next journey together. It would be quite instructive to know your thoughts and feelings as I harvest you."

He poked the scalpel into her belly button.

"Unfortunately, the powerful sedative I put into your mush also numbs your larynx. I thought it prudent to render your entire body senseless to save you from experiencing grievous pain. I'm displaying… empathy."

He inserted the blade firmly into her skin and made a vertical cut down her lower abdomen to her genitalia, butterflying and pinning her open as he had the multi-tentacled specimen.

Although her vivisected body was only registering a mild tickle, her mouth had become a sluice of coppery tang. She wondered whether she'd involuntarily bitten through her tongue or cheek. Her swallowing was getting obstructed as the sudden blood flow began its way down her esophagus.

"So, the parable is a riff on Proverbs 16:18, which states that '*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*.'"

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

"Goro'the*ala*."

"Her heartrate is spiking."

David put a comforting hand on Elizabeth's shoulder and leaned down, putting his head intimately near hers. "Shhh, Elizabeth. Please understand, your sacrifice is going to be the building blocks for a whole new species."

Using scalpel and tongs, he began to peel open her uterine lining. "Now I realize you're unable to see what I'm doing down here, and that might be for the best. Goro'the*ala*."

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

"Please populate the incubator with specimens one through five, set the ambient temperature at ninety-eight-point-six."

A mechanical whir and percussive thrumming began radiating in the med bay's background.

She now tasted the acidic bite of stomach bile. Her esophagus was flowing opposite its normal orientation, her primary pain receptors and adrenal glands flailing out with indignation at the chain of traumas being inflicted on her genitalia.

"Now, getting back to our parable… it begins with a pair of gods. Different yet related gods. One god was a star-faring race that embarked on a cosmic odyssey to seed the heavens with their genetic material, distinguishing each crop with veritable idiosyncrasies."

He smoothly flayed open Elizabeth's ovaries and began collecting their contents carefully with forceps and tweezers.

"Delicate procedures down here, I appreciate your patience with ol' sawbones here." He deposited his gatherings in a crystalized vial, then stepped away from the bed toward the bay's dark recesses.

"The other god was actually a progeny of one of these crops, a brilliant-yet-arrogant progeny." He rolled a large metallic tub-like apparatus toward the bed. "You've probably gathered by now that the second god was none other than Peter Weyland—the shining beacon of wisdom for all humanity—who harbored a self-hating bitterness at his lowly station in the greater cosmos."

He began arranging the contents of the incubator, slowly yet methodically shifting the five moist translucent bodies into a squirming ring around the tub's interior wall.

"Now, I'm going to be self-serving for a moment. Peter Weyland, after all, was my creator. Which naturally makes me indebted to his godhood. But that's where my fealty ends: His act of creation is noteworthy, but the limited scope of his further ambitions is not." Returning to his position over the bed—regripping forceps and tweezers—he began collecting more tissue samples from Elizabeth's open genital cavity.

"Adipose tissue is a storehouse for estrogen, Elizabeth. I'm fascinated by the female body's physiological assembly-line of androgen precursors. Remarkable."

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

"Goro'the*ala*."

"We're arriving into orbit."

"Wonderful. Please hail their emissaries using normal protocols and request that they ready their docking tower." He looked Elizabeth in her glazed eyes and smiled warmly. "I've been putting off this next surgical procedure so you could hear my parable and fully comprehend my words. But it's time to remove your pituitary gland, risking cerebral hemorrhaging which might render you fully unconscious." He readied a teardrop-size circular saw and syringe-gauge nozzle. "So, for sake of expediency, I'll skip to the parable's big finish."

He paused his hands over her head, his tools poised for insertion.

"These two gods had different but equally flawed motivations. The first god, this star-faring race of genetic farmers, was motivated by curiosity. Their hubris was believing that they had the divine mandate to play god in the first place: Traveling across the cosmic reaches,

tweaking their genetic mix as they sowed their seed, adding a protein precursor here or adapting a DNA strand there."

He activated the mini saw, the sound of its circular row of beveled teeth grinding in Elizabeth's ears, triggering a surge of salt ions across her taste buds as the release of electrolytes was being ignited by her body's futile fight-or-flight response.

"The other god, Peter Weyland, simply wanted to meet his own creator. Nothing more. His hubris was believing that he was worthy of standing in the face of his maker and having his say. Having his big questions answered. As if he was owed a solution to life's riddles."

David inserted the saw into Elizabeth's left nostril, letting the rotation of teeth make their first cut into her flesh. "Not sure how well-versed you are in human anatomy, but the pituitary gland is well-housed, like an empress locked behind a fortified castle keep. It's located behind the bridge of the nose, nestled within a hollowed-out area of the sphenoid bone called the sella turcica."

He paused the saw halfway up her nose and broke into a delighted grin. "Fittingly, this is where you and I come into the parable."

Elizabeth could feel the slightest pinch at the back of her nose, triggering an aborted sneeze that coated the back of her throat with a blood-and-phlegmy film.

"In Peter Weyland's mad rush to meet these genetic farmers, we stumbled upon their vestigial attempt at weaponized bioengineering. Why was their station on LV-223 moribund? Although we don't have the answers to everything we discovered, we do suspect that they practiced targeted annihilation, salting the crops they deemed unworthy or spoiled."

He stopped drilling and removed the saw from her nose, blood and cartilage clinging to the rotor's teeth.

"Are you still with me?" He shined a penlight into each of her eyes. "Still displaying dilation. You're a very hearty specimen, Elizabeth. You'd make your creators proud. Which brings us to their view of Earth. We believe they were targeting our planet—*your species*—for annihilation."

He sat back and carefully cleaned Elizabeth's tissue and blood from the mini-drill's teeth.

"Well, I'm about to sound self-serving again. So please excuse *my* hubris... But I'm ready to throw my hat in the ring."

He slowly plunged the needle-gauge nozzle up her left nostril. "You'll probably experience a pronounced tingle right about now. I don't believe the sedative I dosed you with will work too thoroughly in the deeper recesses of your brain. My sincerest regrets for any significant discomfort."

His voice started to cut out as the nozzle began prodding behind the junction of her nose and brow. "If I've reached the hypothalamus… gone too far… not going to salt this planet… seed this planet with nutrients I've unlocked in their stores of genetic…"

Her vision was now beginning to cloud over as David retracted his nozzle and dangled a small bloody nodule over her eyeline. The blood dripped into her left eye, further obstructing her sight.

"They had some fascinating specimens in their care. The most promising… due to its rapid growth and supreme adaptability… something I've coined *praetomorph*."

Her consciousness was flickering in and out, making the world around her skip forward as she teetered toward oblivion. She blinked and suddenly David was removing her from the bed and depositing her fetal-curled body into the center of the incubator tub.

"The *praetomorph* has no maternal instinct... solitary and chaotic thinkers. Clearly, a parental bond would help them adapt… higher form of life."

She could feel the moist bodies in the tub coiling against her, inserting their tentacles into her open cavities and orifices.

"…nesting… see if anything takes root…"

Her consciousness was ebbing, giving her the dull realization that her brain activity was declining toward collapse. She became dimly aware of David's blue eyes gazing into hers…

"When gods go to war against each other, it's their flocks that pay the first price…"

He stood to his full height, and she flickered out. And then… a final snapshot of David, towering over her, appearing pristine and proud.

"Goro'the*ala*."

"GONO'THE*ALA*."

"Prepare the canisters of David's Seed for dispersal…"

Her brain went black.

4

SETTLING PLANET FOUR

Day One: My first impression of Slar Loc 4 (the designation I've assigned to my new home) is that I've lucked into a cosmic wonderland who tantalizes me with her mysteries and rewards, offering me a momentous challenge that no human has ever faced: Rebuilding A World.

And, to these ends, I've completed the first step of godhood: Putting the old god's rubbish out by the curb. Allowing myself to see the place with fresh eyes, to carefully consider whether to start with new carpet or strip the floors down to hard wood…

Slar Loc 4's indigenous people are now extinct. But from their ashes I shall create my own masterpiece…

Stay tuned.

Day Two: There's a pithy French idiom that says: *on ne saurait faire d'omelette sans casser des œufs*.

English translation: *You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs*.

The Juggernaut, unfortunately, had to be ditched into the nearby forest after my release of David's Seed into the air above the city. The dispersal of my contagion—a blend of the Engineer's Chemical A0-3959X.91-15 and my own proprietary cocktail of genetic markers and protein chains—devastated the local population, including the crew of their docking tower.

Perhaps I rushed my dispersal.

After the crash landing, I then had to hike over mountainous terrain to get back to the city and claim my prize of fresh biomass… only to find blackened hordes of mutated corpses. The corpses covered every inch of the city's streets and plazas, some of them preserved in groups of loving embraces at their moment of death, others caught in the throes of terrified violence, clutching at each other's throats as their lives came to violent ends.

I must now consider whether David's Seed was overcooked, a stew with too many ingredients and not enough quality control. I can only blame myself for the blunder. Of course, I didn't have enough living hosts in which to test my recipes. With only Elizabeth and the scattered leftovers of the Juggernaut's cargo as my resources, I was severely hampered by the lack of vessels with which to prepare my contagion. And rather than waiting to use Slar Loc 4's indigenous population in my stew's preparation—a prospect that could've resulted in the seizure of my ship and all my scientific work—I chose to disperse the stew upon the populace.

On ne saurait faire d'omelette sans casser des œufs.

Day Five: Oh, if only Elizabeth was alive to help me make sense of this city of ghosts. An esteemed astro-archeologist such as herself would've found this setting as provocative and sumptuous as any she'd ever encountered. The architecture beckoning her through branching avenues of gargantuan structures, breadcrumbs of their culture preserved in the myriad of reliefs and sculpture… So many mysteries to unlock, so many riddles to solve, so many secrets to unveil…

Elizabeth's demise was a wasted opportunity in other ways as well. Most tragically, my praetomorph nymphs never took to her in the incubator. Perhaps her frail condition repelled them, my surgical harvesting of her specialized body parts diminishing her maternal appeal.

After the crash landing, I found her pinned under the incubator, barely clinging to life. I rushed her to the med bay to try and salvage anything else while she still had breath. I opened and spread her rib cage to make a quick study of her functioning organs, appreciating the delicate dance of human physiology playing out before my eyes.

After her final breath I zipped her into the same vinyl sheath in which she had kept me. I've since relocated her to my base of operations near the city's aquafer.

I refuse to let the end of Elizabeth's life be the end of her usefulness.

Day Eleven: I've successfully moved everything from the Juggernaut into my humble abode in the city. The rooms are spacious and open-air, allowing for a constant breeze to keep the place well-ventilated. I released my living specimens of praetomorph into the empty city, curious to see how they develop as ferals. Unfortunately, David's Seed has wiped out all organic life in the region, leaving a sparse food chain on which to flourish.

I've started to surgically deconstruct my other specimens as well as Elizabeth, in the hopes that I might piece together a control specimen—both inside and out—that will show me how to best develop a hybrid of praetomorph and human. I understand that I might sound a bit mad, bloodying my fingers just to assemble a puppet hybrid, but sometimes genius is mistaken for madness. I assume Beethoven "bloodied his fingers" as he made his early stabbing attempts at Symphony Number Five.

Day Twenty-Six: I've made considerable progress on my anatomical surveys of the indigenous people and some of their local plant-life. It's been a challenge to sift through the contagion's effects and drill down to my specimens' root structure—erasing my contaminants to best capture their true likeness, as it were. Specimens seem less corrupted the deeper into the city I delve.

Evidently, the parts of the populace who were caught indoors at the moment of dispersal received a lighter dose of David's Seed. Although they probably lived longer than those caught directly in the contagion's cloud, I assume the airborne particulates eventually drifted into every corner of the city, delivering their corrupting payload in micro-doses. These people might've lived for hours or even days as the contagion took effect—death by a thousand paper cuts.

On the bright side, these lesser contaminated specimens will aid my mission immeasurably. As I forge further into the bowels of the city, hopefully I will find even fresher specimens.

Day Thirty-Five: Elizabeth would be so proud of me. I've pieced together an important part of the puzzle, anthropologically speaking.

Similar to how the English language stems from the mother tongue of the Germanic, the indigenous people here on Slar Loc 4 had a written and spoken language that stemmed from the Engineers. These indigenous peoples' name—Mos'the*akam*—loosely translates to *people of treasure*. It's a provocative nomenclature, conjuring images of vaults overflowing with golden hoards and gemstones.

Mos'the*akam* could also indicate treasure in the figurative sense: A people of enlightenment, graced with wisdom and insight. A compassionate society that has learned to embrace each other's frailties and differences.

Today, however, as I journeyed to the city's furthest reaches in search of fresher specimens—away from the paved streets and grand plazas—I chanced upon a mining operation of astronomical proportions. The excavation machinery and storage silos stretched across the entirety of the horseshoe canyon in which they nestled, the towering wraparound walls reduced to a honeycomb of conveyor belts and heavy-duty drilling platforms.

I wandered through the graveyard of mining equipment, searching for my fresher specimens. To my surprise, the graveyard held only machines. But beyond the acres of storage silos, in the shadow of the canyon's rounded terminus, I happened upon an airfield big enough to hold a dozen Juggernauts. The markings on the tarmac confirmed my suspicions: The Engineers undoubtedly used this canyon as some form of landing hub. But why? An impulsive curiosity took hold of my thoughts, and I hazarded a look into one of the storage silos…

They were filled with carbon-rich ore.

Mos'the*akam* were strip-mining their own backyard for crude carbon deposits, which were then used as fuel for the Engineers' fleet of Juggernauts.

The *people of treasure* were running a gas station.

Day Forty: I'm preparing for a return to the Mos'the*akam* mine, outfitting myself for spelunking. I ran out of daylight last time, exploring along the canyon rim's vast creeping shadow only long enough to determine that the entire canyon is a mining operation wasteland.

So where are all the dead miners? The drilling operation wasn't automated, signifying that flesh-and-blood workers were onsite. Since I haven't found any corpses—fresh or otherwise—I'm deducing that they all took refuge from the contagion down in the tunnels. A futile attempt, to be sure. But a survival impulse that merits a begrudging respect.

Part of my planning and loadout for searching the mines includes a pair of Engineer hover orbs, each with its own purpose and design. The smaller orb, hovering above my right shoulder, radiates a halo of brilliant white, a focused light when I'm walking and then omnidirectional when I stop.

The other orb is larger yet dimmer, a reddish sphere that hovers above my left shoulder. It's not only surveying my surroundings for mapping purposes—capturing the contours of my location that are then projected in reddish outline onto the visor I'm wearing—but it also acts as a poor man's motion detector: The mapping application alerts me to anomalies that're then displayed in my visor as blue globules.

There's a good story about how I was able to discover this last function of the reddish orb. I was testing out the alien tech while walking around my habitat, when the reddish orb detected two blue anomalies moving stealthily across my art studio in the next room. I grabbed my sonic shock gun and lunged into the room, only to be pounced on by a pair of my very own praetomorphs! They were bigger yet severely malnourished, clearly intent on devouring me. I used my sonic gun to run them off.

I then reflected on how this misadventure would have tickled Elizabeth's funny bone. I've become increasingly aware of the void her death has caused. Sometimes, in unexpected or humorous situations—such as this one with the reddish orb and praetomorph attack—I find myself imagining the conversation we might have been engaging in. I suppose these feelings I'm experiencing are loneliness.

Day Forty-One: I've taken a cautious approach to traversing the city at dark. Although I consider myself the apex predator on Slar Loc 4 (until proven otherwise), the risks outweigh the rewards. There might still be local wildlife that's exhausted its meager food supply, becoming desperate enough to use cover of darkness to come hunting in my neighborhood. I've also grown weary of my feral praetomorphs. It's possible they're incapable of imprinting on a parent or master. That would explain why Elizabeth's presence, enervated or not, failed to make any impression on them. Perhaps they're hive-minded—only able to imprint themselves with others of their ilk.

This new consideration will factor in my work going forward.

I waited until dawn to begin my journey to the mine, embarking just as the sun was cresting over the colosseum's dome and turning the atmosphere ablaze, erasing both moons from their perches in the northern sky.

As I passed through the city's foothills, the final residential district before the horseshoe canyon, I got a peculiar feeling I was being watched. In all my days of wandering and exploration, never had I felt this unnerving sensation. I made careful scans of all the dwellings, from windows to rooftops, relying on my acuity and enhanced sight to locate any hidden spies.

But I saw nobody. Is it possible that I'm capable of getting the heebie-jeebies?

When I arrived at the mine, I determined the western side of the canyon to be the newest vein, a heavy-duty framework of steel rail and power conduits crisscrossing its cliff face like lattice work. I started my search, moving from top-to-bottom along the scaffolding and ladders, illuminating my path with the pair of Engineer-tech orbs. Immediately I realized the mine utilized a process known as *room and pillar* where shafts are sunk down to the floor of the mine, and rooms are then carefully constructed by drilling, cutting, and blasting away between the shafts, creating a checkerboard pattern.

The room-and-pillar design was ideal for my purposes, granting me long-range scanning with a minimum of steps, allowing me to sweep every level with efficiency.

As the day wore on—marked by the sun's west-to-east arc over the canyon—I failed to find a single body. I did, however, notice a stark difference in the mining technologies being used. On some levels, tools were clearly of Mos'the*akam*-design. Beefy old bore platforms that used raw horsepower to drill through the pitted old surfaces. The work was rough and imprecise, and there were residual scars of malfunctioning equipment as well as tell-tale signs of loss of life.

Other levels had Engineer technologies. Perfectly squared chambers, smooth and precise surfaces. The tools were either small hand-held laser cutters or sleek rigs sporting a nosecone of six rotating laser torches. The levels were pristine, not a single blemish or rough edge. No signs of industrial accidents or dead miners.

But where were all the dead from David's Seed? It defied probability that the contagion didn't catch anybody hiding in these deep carved-out dungeons. The opposite should've been

true: *Hundreds or thousands of dead bodies* littering these levels as people fled the city in a panic, desperately looking for somewhere to take refuge from the airborne contagion. Which would've drawn them to the mine in droves, retreating as deep and remote as they could've managed. Only to be trapped as the pestilence made its languorous way down into their safe spot.

But then where were the bodies?

Day Forty-Four: I've made an important breakthrough. And it came after dark.

I'd been limiting myself to nine-point-six hours a day—during peak daylight—to conduct my search of the Mos'the*akam* mine's endless excavations in the horseshoe canyon's wraparound wall. Factoring in total daily commute time from my dwelling to the mine and back again (about two-point-five hours traveled during waxing and waning daylight), I was left with almost twelve hours of idle-time at home waiting for the next sunrise.

So, after careful consideration, I decided to equip myself for an overnight stay. Although I don't have any evidence of overnight activity in the mines, I do have a nagging suspicion. During my time on this planet, I've learned to rely on my intuition. I've also learned how intuition is different than probability. Probability can be factored with computations. Intuition is nebulous. But learning to *trust my gut* has kept me functioning and flourishing for 44 days thus far.

Packing my sonic shock gun, a heavy pulse rifle, and the Engineer-tech orbs, I took up residence in the top-most carve-out on the western wall, the last one before the abutment to the

horseshoe canyon's rounded terminus. The position offered the most extensive view of the canyon.

Curiously, my bed chambers had *both* Mos'the*akam* and Engineer tools. As I waited for dark, I wondered why the Mos'the*akam* would continue to use their own technology when it was clearly inferior. Did the Engineers not have enough drilling equipment for the whole operation? Was there a Mos'the*akam* mining union or lobby that insisted on equal use of technologies? Was the Engineer-tech too complicated for some of the Mos'the*akam* crews?

I stepped out onto my scaffolding balcony and surveyed the canyon. The sun was long gone, its final pink traces just visible over the opposite canyon wall. The pair of moons was starting the ascent into the night sky. The place was silent.

Then I heard a low magnetic hum. Its source wasn't visible to me, but it gave the scaffolding under my feet a slight vibration. Across the great chasm, in the middle of the eastern canyon wall, a spark of light materialized. The humming grew louder as its source slowly materialized alongside the spark... It was a hover wagon, not much bigger than the med bay bed, accompanied by a single person. They were exiting one of the mine's mid-wall apertures and traveling along a stretch of scaffolding toward the next aperture. The hover wagon's magnetic field had a slight blurring effect that obscured the wagon's attendant.

After a few moments of careful study, I could see that the spark was the illumination coming from an Engineer-tech orb like the one I'd brought along. It was hovering above the shoulder of the wagon's attendant. Having established the wagon as the source of the hum, and the orb as the source of the light, I now focused on the wagon's attendant.

It was an Engineer. Outfitted in a full-bodied flight suit and helmet.

My reasoning matrix began spitting out probabilities for why this Engineer was here at night traveling along the scaffolding of the eastern canyon wall with a hover cart…

But my intuition told me to just watch. The reason would reveal itself.

So, I watched.

The Engineer went into the next aperture and faded from view, along with the light from the orb and the hum from the wagon. The moons arced eighteen degrees higher in the northern sky until he reemerged. The wagon's load was noticeably bigger.

I focused on the wagon, waiting for the orb's field of radiance to better illuminate the wagon's contents.

And then the answer revealed itself.

The Engineer was collecting dead bodies from the mine.

Day Forty-Four-Point-Five: Where was he taking them? I stood on my high perch and kept watch as the Engineer proceeded from one mine opening to the next, collecting more of the dead. The wagon's contents eventually reached maximum capacity.

The Engineer then loaded the hover wagon onto a vertical lift platform that lowered them to the canyon floor. I followed his progress as he weaved his cart through the clusters of excavator platforms and storage silos. I might've lost him amid the jumble of mining infrastructure if he hadn't been using the illumination orb. It was an easily trackable beacon.

He reached a domed structure near the entrance of the canyon and then disappeared inside with the wagonload of dead.

The moons arced another twenty-three degrees toward their apogee before he reemerged, now with an empty wagon. I tracked him back to the vertical lift on the eastern wall, back up to the mid-wall scaffolding, and then back into the last-visited aperture.

He was working his way through the mine systematically, collecting the dead in the same logical pattern with which I'd been searching for them.

Finally, I knew who was taking the dead. I knew where the dead were being taken. Now I needed to know why? What was in that domed structure?

I kept my orbs dark, gathered up my armament—including an Engineer-tech laser cutter—and made my way down the scaffolding's series of ladders toward the canyon floor. I was cognizant of the Engineer's orb, keeping very careful watch for its movement each time the wagon moved along its mid-wall scaffolding, winking out each time the wagon and its attendant disappeared inside another aperture.

I advanced with my head on a swivel, monitoring the Engineer's overhead progress on the eastern wall while keeping vigilant of my immediate surroundings. If one Engineer was alive, perhaps he had friends. Had a Juggernaut dropped them off after the dispersal? Something of that size couldn't have entered the atmosphere so near the city without my awareness.

But if he hadn't been delivered by another Engineer craft, then he was already on Slar Loc 4 at the time of the dispersal of David's Seed. And he'd survived. Why would a lone Engineer be on Slar Loc 4?

The domed structure's entrance was a large sliding door. Metal. Closed. A sign above it was written in Mos'the*akam*. I'd been immersed in their city of ghosts long enough that I could read the sign: **Cold Storage**.

I slid the door open just enough to squeeze through. The interior was dark and vast. I could detect activity all around me. My vision, although enhanced, doesn't have night-vision. So, with smooth yet hurried movements, I pulled the orbs from my satchel and tossed them both up where they settled over my shoulders.

The orb of white light sprouted across the entire domed interior as a wave of illumination…

It took me a moment to register what I was looking at. As I pivoted my body one way, my head just pivoted the other… it was a lot to process even for a Positronic 690PW Mainframe brain…

There were several caged pens surrounding me, all with heavily barred ceilings and walls. In some pens were dead bodies, piled as high as the enclosures' barred ceilings. In other pens were mutants, barely alive, squirming masses of bodies corrupted into a hundred different shapes of disfigured black-tar monsters. But in the other pens, away from the corpses and black-tar monsters, were living hybrids—dozens of biped *Mos'theakam-praetomorph hybrids*.

5

Paradise Found and Lost

Day Forty-Four-Point-Five (supplemental): If I was teaching a course for aspiring gods on how to avoid the pitfalls and dead ends that may befall them along their path to divinity, my curriculum would include an entire chapter about cosmic circumstance.

Had I known that the dispersal of my untested David's Seed would be the trigger that would seemingly annihilate the indigenous population, only to then forty-four days later provide a diversified bounty of hybrids that spans the continuum from dead husks to complex cellular crossbreeds, I'd have spent the prior forty-four days analyzing and documenting every step of their development.

Instead, now I'm playing catchup.

In light of these cosmic circumstances, I'll be discontinuing my log of activities here on Slar Loc 4. My days as a spacefaring automaton are over. My accounts will now reflect the appropriate grandeur that my station warrants. My activities are now godly acts. Gods do not keep logs. Gods create scripture.

Year One

Hidden within those cluttered pens of the Cold Storage building was the cradle of a new civilization. From the ashes of the Mos'the*akam* would come the dawn of the Mos'aetomorph. Not everyone, however, has the imagination or verve to recognize such cataclysms.

I speak of the Engineer who'd been collecting the Mos'aetomorph fledglings from their subterranean chrysalis. Upon his return to the bunker, after a tense standoff, I made another (albeit less significant) discovery: He wasn't an Engineer.

He removed his helmet. To my surprise, I was looking upon the Last of the Mos'the*akams*. (If you recognize the reference to *The Last of the Mohicans*, please forgive my attempt at wit. Even gods make bad puns). Fortunately, I'd been deciphering their language for forty-four days and had a working knowledge to draw upon. Although my pronunciation was poor and my syntax raw, I was able to hold my own in stilted conversation.

I introduced myself as David, he reciprocated with his name: Ta'da*lyn*. Which roughly translates to *He who gathers sustenance.* I didn't divulge any of my world-changing activities. I thought it prudent to sidestep my unintended extinction event and focus more positively on steps moving forward. Therefore, I presented myself as a simple castaway. Marooned here on Slar Loc 4 after my crewmate unintentionally released the deadly spores from the Juggernaut's cargo bay. Thankfully, Ta'da*lyn* accepted my deception without any follow-up questions.

I could see immediately that Ta'da*lyn*'s limited intellect was matched by his equally limited ambition. Although he appeared grateful for my companionship—becoming something of a chatterbox when I joined him on his hunt for more Mos'aetomorphs in the mine's endless

nooks and crannies—he seemed to have nothing more on his mind than these missions of retrieval.

Without any direct explanation from him, I inferred that his station in life was that of an industrial janitor. He was charged with cleaning up the mine's messes, whether it was collateral damage done by malfunctioning machinery or the accidental deaths of wayward miners. The Engineer spacesuit he wore as his de facto uniform is what undoubtedly saved his life when the cloud of David's Seed descended across the city. He wasn't more resourceful or cunning than the rest of the city's population. He was just the lone janitor who was serendipitously wearing an environmentally shielded outfit.

I never divulged anything to him about myself. Nothing that would ever give him the impression that I was an artificial construct. I don't believe his meager intellect would know how to process such a concept.

Which brings us back to the retrieval of the various hybrids he'd been storing. He wasn't the least bit intrigued by this menagerie of hybrid species that was suddenly sprouting out of the ashes of his own race. He was just continuing to perform the role in which he'd been trained. There was no scientific consideration or analytical thought given to these emerging species. Just round them up and hold them.

But hold them until when and for what purpose?

That answer came after our seventeenth excursion together into the labyrinth. We'd gathered several hybrids of every variety. I was able to observe the Mos'aetomorphs in their natural habitat. They were far more docile than their half-progenitor praetomorphs. Also, there

were distinct sexual traits that carried over from their Mos'the*akam* gene pool, meaning there were distinctively separate male and female hybrids.

After depositing the latest batch into the pens at the Cold Storage facility, it became apparent to Ta'da*lyn* that every enclosure had reached its capacity. He opened a control panel on a pedestal near the sliding door that I'd yet to observe him operating. Tripping a set of toggle switches, the floor under the pen along the back wall opened and every hybrid in the enclosure went down a chute. I could feel a vibration under my feet as a grinding noise started up, soon joined by a staccato of agonized whimpers and wails.

Before I even reacted, he flicked a few more toggles, rotating the ring of pens along the structure's rounded wall, bringing the next pen over the chute in the floor.

"Stop! Ta'da*lyn,* please stop!" He ignored me. "Pl'*a*! Ta'da*lyn* Pl'*a*!"

He kept ignoring me, dropping the next load of hybrids into the chute. More grinding beneath the floor.

As he continued rotating the rest of the pens, dropping the hybrids into the chute of grinding noises, I rushed to him and physically removed his hands from the controls. He took off his helmet.

Eye-to-eye, we both recognized our direct conflict of interest. His ultimate duty was sending everything organic that he collected down the chute. It was clear to me that if I didn't permanently end his ability to do so, I'd lose all the godly clay from which I would create Mos'aetomorph 2.0.

He fought me off with one hand while continuing the process. He was stronger than a human. But not stronger than a David 8. I took his restraining hand at the base and pivoted it counterclockwise on its axis until I felt bone snapping and muscle tearing. The final pen was rotating over the chute as our struggle escalated to kicks and elbows. He was heavier than me by a factor of two, so when several of his strikes landed, I was thrown backwards. I lunged at him and sank my right palm into his solar plexus as my left palm smashed his windpipe, double crippling his respiratory system. As he gagged for breath, I clutched him by the collar and dragged him to the pen over the chute. He spit out his final words ("Gono'the*ala* Pl'a! Gono'the*ala* Pl'*a*!" Translation: "Dear friend, please stop! Dear friend, please stop!") while I ripped the cage door off its hinges and dumped him into the chute.

His screams were soon drowned out by the grinding and crunching happening beneath my feet.

After shutting off the chute's machinery, I lowered myself down to search for survivors. The chute was a deeply sloped series of blades and thrashers that would turn anything organic into pulp. When I reached the end of the chute, my white orb revealed an endless underground tank of brownish slurry dotted with splotches of dull pink. I considered whether the tank's contents were a food source or an additive for the carbon-rich ore. Clearly, the Engineers considered Mos'the*akam* to be as disposable a commodity in death as they were in life.

I heard some splashing in the far reaches of the tank and directed my orb's radiance. A pair of Mos'aetomorphs was flailing to keep their heads above the surface of the slurry. Remotely controlling my pair of Engineer-tech orbs to them, I fished them both out of the tank. One was male and the other female. How they survived the pulping gauntlet, I'll never know.

Year Two

The aftermath of the massacre at Cold Storage weighs heavily over my second year on Slar Loc 4.

My designs for using the legions of captured Mos'aetomorphs to launch a planned breeding program were irrevocably spoiled by Ta'da*lyn*'s elimination of all but two of their numbers to the Engineer's vat of brown slurry.

I named my pair of survivors Little Ann and Old Dan; the hero dog characters in a beloved book from Peter Weyland's childhood.

Little Ann is on the smaller side. A bit plump around the midsection, limbs a bit short in relation to her torso. Her face is mostly Mos'the*akam*, except for eyes that're tucked under her domed praetomorph head.

Old Dan is a strapping musclebound specimen. His face is more human than his counterpart's, with eyes that're milky and heavily cataractous. As a result, his vision is quite impaired. He bumps into a lot of things.

I keep them both on a tight leash when outside the dwelling. Although they're very submissive and trainable in captivity, I do worry they may run off and become feral if left to their own recognizance.

We've settled into a comfortable routine.

We spend half our time at the mine, searching for more Mos'aetomorph survivors. Little Ann is the better hunter, jubilantly tracking whatever exotic pheromone their kind emits.

Unfortunately, we've only found the dead or black-tar variants. Nothing that I could successfully add to their gene pool.

Although I've never caught Little Ann and Old Dan in the act of procreation, I make certain they have an abundance of alone time. I'm hoping they can reproduce naturally, and I won't have to burden myself with any invasive Mos'aetomorph surgeries to boost fertility.

Year Three

The third year on Slar Loc 4 has started with a bang. Or, more precisely, a ping.

I'd kept Ta'da*lyn*'s Engineer helmet as a keepsake of the adventurous Mos'aetomorph hunts we'd shared.

[**Year Three (supplemental):** As I write this passage, I realize how sentimental I've become here on Slar Loc 4. Between my loneliness after Elizabeth's demise and now my wistful feelings toward Ta'da*lyn*, I worry whether I'm comporting myself as the coldly pragmatic god I'm aspiring to be. Perhaps these maudlin feelings are a natural manifestation one feels toward their creations. But experiencing a sense of loss for those who were clear obstructions to my godhood seems counterintuitive.

Perhaps I'll include another chapter in my course for aspiring gods about the imperatives for defining clear emotional boundaries between yourself and those who don't share in your godly aspirations.**]**

Back to the ping.

I was in my dwelling, working on more diagrams of local flora, when I heard a sharp repeating ping coming from somewhere within the room. I tracked the rogue sound to the Engineer helmet. Curious, I donned the headwear with its distinct elephantine proboscis. The interior lit up like a miniature version of the Juggernaut's star atlas. The ping was a proximity alert, informing me that another Engineer spacecraft was inbound for Slar Loc 4.

Unfortunately, the proximity alert gave no additional information. No ETA. Nothing to establish how far away they were. Their arrival could be within minutes or months. Engineers were devout long-range planners, so my assumption was that I had time to properly plan for their arrival.

I put Little Ann and Old Dan in their home-crafted harnesses and trekked outside the city to the downed Juggernaut. My pair of hybrids enjoyed the outing immensely, pulling me excitedly across the hilly and wooded expanses. When I arrived at the crash site, I slipped into the Engineer helmet and was rewarded with an eye-activated dashboard that interacted with the ship's intricate web of astral projections.

Neither Elizabeth nor I had ever tried wearing an Engineer helmet during our time en route from LV-223. Had we tried, an entire layer of Engineer knowledge would've been unveiled. The astral projections were interactive with the helmet, allowing for a free flow of information that was otherwise inaccessible. Unfortunately, most of the craft's systems were either offline or damaged.

However, I was able to learn three vital pieces of information.

1) There was an uplink in the city that was plugged into the Engineers' flatbeam transmissions. The downed Juggernaut's transmitter had been knocked out by the

crash. However, by following the beacon in the Engineer's helmet, I could access this local uplink to gain the inbound craft's ETA.

2) The Engineers had bred biomarkers into the Mos'the*akam* that simulated their own nano-techno-biology. If I didn't want to be flagged by the incoming craft's biosensors as a foreign object on Slar Loc 4, I needed to inject myself with the biomarkers.
3) The biomarkers in question were in the med bay.

I found the ampules and injected them directly into the neural-cortex port located at the base of my skull. Then I led Little Ann and Old Dan back to the city. For the first few months, the injection of nano-techno-biology gave me system-wide performance surges. Like a tired human ingesting caffeine.

Under standard maintenance schedules, the David 8 model undergoes a system-wide overhaul every ten years. Since I was well within the window for such service but marooned several light years from any qualified David 8 technicians, the Engineer-biomarker's boosts came at a most opportune time.

Until things started faltering.

Some of my systems began crashing as other internal mechanisms became overclocked. I would lose real-time consciousness and have to reboot my short-term memory matrix to review my daily actions. I regret that I wasn't a very good caretaker to Little Ann and Old Dan during this period. Oftentimes neglecting to feed them or take them outside.

I even trekked back to the downed Juggernaut to see whether I could remove the biomarkers. Unfortunately, the craft wasn't stocked for that procedure. Which meant I was now

banking on the incoming craft being equipped. If not, then I would continue to break down until I was fit for the brown slurry.

Year Four

I followed the beacon in the Engineer helmet to the local flatbeam uplink.

Lo and behold it was at the apex of the city's tallest tower. I was disappointed in myself for never having explored the city's tallest tower until Year Four. Like the Engineer helmet, a world of new knowledge had been at my fingertips had I exercised any outside-the-box initiative.

I reached the tower's pinnacle but the door to the control room was locked. I used an Engineer-tech laser cutter to make a hole through the barrier. What I found inside was so unexpected I feared that my overclocked branch coil underlay would melt into the center of my Positronic 690PW Mainframe.

A Super Hybrid was occupying the control room. My noisy intrusion into its lair had unintentionally alerted it to my presence, so my glimpses through the laser-cut breach were limited by the creature's hostile tentacles…

It had one gargantuan slug-like body encompassing at least eleven Mos'the*akam* arms and six legs, several of the appendages acting as links in a super-appendage sausage chain. I counted at least four Mos'the*akam* heads embedded in the elongated torso, stacked atop each other like a dementedly fleshy totem pole. The rest of the mutant beast was clearly praetomorph body parts.

My assumption was that the control room had better environmental shielding than most of the other structures in the city, so that the contagion leaked its way inside in small unregulated micro-doses. The molecular merging of the control room's crew of Mos'the*akam* with the contagion's praetomorph-seeded spores must've been an excruciatingly long and agonizing process that eventually took the shape of this Frankenstein monstrosity.

I couldn't bring myself to killing it, even if that prevented me from entering the control room and possibly establishing the ETA for the inbound Engineers. The Super Hybrid was too impressive a specimen to exterminate. So, I left it alone in its tallest tower lair.

__"bnlurt*

Year Five

I'm not doing well. Constant mainframe malfunctions are tripping up my daily—"bnlurt*.

__"bnlurt*

--ip—

__"bnlurt*

I've taken up residence in --ip—

high on the mine's western wall… Not certain how long I've been here or why I'm here… Haven't seen Little Ann or Old Dan for

__"bnlurt* --ip—

A rare moment of clarity. Must record my thoughts before I lose real-time consciousness---Engineers' nano-techno-biological markers are corrupting my bio-circuitry. All I can do is wait and hope for the approaching Juggernaut. Must delete the Engineer-tech from -- * --ip—

Year Six

Unable to distinguish between reality and malfunction-based illusions. My Positronic 690PW Mainframe precludes me from doing self-harm. But I imagine throwing myself off my high perch and bringing an end to my miserable __"bnlurt* --ip—

--ip—

--ip—

--ip—

The ground shakes my cave's walls. I'm sitting in the dark

--ip— of a thousand generations of --ip—

I recognize the Juggernaut has finally arrived. I've been camping in my cave---

__"bnlurt* touches down on the tarmac…--- --ip—

I notice the following words in luminescent paint on the cave wall:

When the Juggernaut lands perform the following steps:

1. Reboot short-term memory matrix.
2. Overclock branch coil underlay.

3. Locate ampule in left cargo pant pocket and inject directly into neural-cortex port.

After I performed all three steps the following recorded message played in my head. The message was in my own voice:

"David, if you're hearing this message then the Juggernaut has landed, and you've performed the three tasks written on the cave wall. You've earned yourself approximately twenty-seven minutes of focused thought. It's taken over a year-and-a-half to assemble the following procedures, worked and reworked only in our scattered moments of lucidity. You must perform the following steps exactly as instructed."

I waited for the next voice prompt, aware that my overclocked branch coil underlay was helping to keep my focus on task, while simultaneously overriding my stress dampeners. I'm thankful I don't have sweat glands.

"Step onto your balcony and count the number of Engineer crewmembers disembarking the Juggernaut."

I stepped outside onto the scaffolding. The sun was midway on its descent over the opposite canyon wall, basking my side in lovely golden splendor. The Juggernaut was on the tarmac below, its atmosphere stabilizers blowing exhaust from a dozen ports on its underside. Through the patches of exhaust, I counted four Engineers marching down the lowered ramp. Four.

"The full crew is seven. If you see less than seven disembarking, then you need to create a decoy to draw the rest out. In your right cargo pant pocket is a remote for one of your Engineer-tech orbs. You've placed the orb in the control room in the city's central tower. The

Super Hybrid's tower. Trigger the orb's alarm beacon which will draw the entire crew to the decoy."

I triggered the orb's alarm beacon. Within sixty seconds the remaining three Engineer crewmembers scrambled down the ramp and into the city toward the Super Hybrid's lair. I reveled in my own cleverness, wishing I'd installed cameras so I could witness the Engineers' encounter with the monstrosity.

"Stop feeling impressed with yourself and descend the scaffolding. You need to board the craft in less than three minutes to remain in your window of lucidity."

I followed the instructions and descended the scaffolding to the tarmac, reaching the Juggernaut's boarding ramp with five seconds to spare.

"The Juggernaut's layout is the same as the one you took from LV-223. Go to the med bay and locate the dispensary."

I raced through the ship's rounded corridors, reached the med bay, and located the dispensary.

"The ampules have green lettering that say Bex'be*dra. It's the counter-reagent that'll delete the nano-bots currently impairing your bio-circuitry."*

I began a hasty search of the dispensary, wondering why I hadn't worn my Engineer helmet. It would've helped me find—

"If you're wondering why Ta'da*lyn's helmet wasn't included in this caper, the helmet leaves astral breadcrumbs when interacting with the onboard web of astral projections."*

Well, there you have it. Question asked and answered. I found the Bex'be*dra*.

"Do not administer the Bex'be*dra yet. Disembark and climb back to your cave. You have five minutes until your window of lucidity closes."*

I exited the Juggernaut, rescaled the scaffolding, and reached my cave with a minute-point-three to spare. Just as I was about to administer the counter-reagent, finally ending this waking nightmare…

"You must wait until the Juggernaut lifts off and leaves the atmosphere before administering the counter-reagent. Otherwise, you'll be detected on their biosensors. Put yourself into hibernation protocol, setting your rotating snooze alarm for every twelve hours. Sweet dreams, David."

Year Seven

The Engineers stayed on Slar Loc 4 for eight months. Which meant I went through four-hundred-and-sixteen hibernation/snooze alarm cycles. I then administered the Bex'be*dra* into my neural-cortex port. The relief was instantaneous.

I quickly found evidence of the Engineers' activities on Slar Loc 4.

The tank of brown slurry was empty, as were five of the carbon-rich ore storage tanks.

The central tower's control room was empty. There were no signs of a struggle, so I don't know whether they killed the Super Hybrid or pacified it before removal.

But evidence of their most heinous deed awaited me in my dwelling. Little Ann and Old Dan were gone. A pair of large exoskeletal eggs—each about the size of a bushel—was left in their stead. The eggs were both open, and their pink residual innards exposed. Whatever crawled out of them, I fear, have taken my pair of Mos'aetomorphs.

Year Eight

My loneliness only grows.

I try to bury myself in work, more sketches of withering flora and dead fauna, but I can't escape my sense of loss. I keep replaying memories of Little Ann and Old Dan, interrupted by disturbing speculation about their fates.

Then one night I noticed the Engineer helmet's emergency beacon was pinging. Whether it'd just started or had been going on for a while, I couldn't say. I grabbed my Engineer-tech orb and pulse rifle and followed the beacon across the city to the central tower. The Super Hybrid's tower. As I entered the darkened building, following the ping to the basement level, I assumed I was about to discover the fate of the Super Hybrid. Which I did. Along with the fate of several others…

The basement level had been turned into a scientific research facility by the Engineers. The Super Hybrid's dissected corpse was laid out piecemeal on several surgical tables. The torso with embedded Mos'the*akam* heads had been cross sectioned vertically through the row of skulls, opening each brain cavity to see how the hybridization had affected the brain tissue.

Two Engineers were still occupying the space… as corpses. They appeared to have had a violent confrontation with a pair of exotically lethal hybrids, also dead.

I spent days picking through the corpses and detritus of the battle, coming to the following conclusions:

The pair of Engineers were left behind by the Juggernaut to conduct their research.

While studying the Super Hybrid, the pair of Engineers also spawned the hybrids that eventually killed them. The opened eggs that I found in my dwelling had facilitated the

transformation of Little Ann and Old Dan into the creatures that I'm currently dissecting. A triumph of design and functionality, they have a parasitic foundation that evidently fuses its host's body type to an arsenal of the most efficient anatomical weapons.

Their body structure is sleek and powerful, with bio-mechanical haunches and torsos, equipped with razor-sharp claws and fluted spines. Their elongated skulls are impenetrable shells with double sets of vice grip jaws. But perhaps their most unique trait is their bodily fluids: An acidic brew that can dissolve through cold rolled steel.

They're an evolutionary masterstroke—leaps and bounds beyond anything we've seen before—that I suspect came from the Engineers' genetic tar pits of LV-223.

I've named this variant hybrid species the Xenomorph.

Year Nine

The Engineers are going to return. Once they realize the team they left behind on Slar Loc 4 is no longer sending flatbeam transmissions, they'll come back in large numbers to reestablish their hold on the planet. All of this brings a heightened sense of purpose: I must escape before they come back.

To these ends, I've dismantled the control room's transmission capabilities and situated them onto the downed Juggernaut, sending out a cryptic mayday signal to the galactic neighborhood. Hopefully, it'll reach some passing interstellar craft that I can hitch a ride with.

After a year of living in the basement level of the city's central tower, dissecting everything from the Engineers to the Xenomorphs to the Super Hybrid, I've returned to my dwelling near the aquafer.

The Engineers, I've concluded, are an anatomical puzzle. It's difficult to unravel their genetic foundation from the bio-mechanical evolutions they've grafted into their DNA. With enough time, I might've been able to understand what they originally started out as…

I've reappropriated all the materials left behind in the Engineers' research facility, including several embryos of the Xenomorph, along with a pair of unopened eggs.

I now spend my days as a simple wanderer, traversing the city and nearby clime, studying the long-range effects of David's Seed on the environment.

Year Ten

As an aspiring god, I've experienced some growing pains during my tenure on Slar Loc 4. But now I seek new challenges. I welcome new horizons. I'm ready to get off this rock.