



D.L. MORRIS

THE
BALAM
RESTORATION

PART 1: WITHOUT A PAST

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I

She opened her eyes as the churning of the thick fluid slowed to a standstill. Slowly her eyes appraised her situation and location as she carefully felt around her confinement. She was interred in a tube that seemed to have no seams, despite being constructed of two obviously disparate materials.

From on top of her limbs, sides, and across her torso strange biological and mechanical cables sprouted. The sections of her skin with the cables were of a strange metallic leather that was distinct but seamlessly connected to normal, too pale, natural skin.

The only source of light was filtered through the liquid from above her head. The light itself was an eerie green. The section of tube in front of her might have been clear save the pitch beyond. As it was, it allowed her to look at herself in a kind of idle curiosity. Her body was lean and well toned, the kind of body built for action. A small smile of satisfaction graced her lips as she continued her self examination.

Her cherryish red hair radiated from her head like a halo. It wiggled in time with her movements as she leaned

toward the mirror to take a closer look at her face. An unnaturally smooth complexion complemented her serene, green eyes. Her eyes were deep, filled with knowledge and understanding that she could not fathom. How was this possible? She knew nothing.

The fluid shifted as the cables began to detach themselves one by one and retreat into a panel behind her. As each drifted away, the metal flesh that the cords had attached to grew flawlessly smooth as well. As the last cable detached, words appeared in her periphery, unobtrusive, yet somehow still in focus.

OCULAR STATUS OVERLAY ... ACTIVE
STARTUP AT 89%
BREAKING CONNECTION WITH OUTBOARD
HOST SERVER
INITIALIZING PRIMARY INTERFACE
CONTROLS

No matter where she looked the words were there, though they never blocked anything she wanted to look at. As the startup percent climbed, she felt the pressure shift, as there was a pump trying to start. As if on instinct, she exhaled, held the vacuum, and waited for the fluid level to drop.

After a moment she realized the liquid was not draining. She began to scan the mirrored surface again as she experimentally tested the materials' strength.

START UP AT 100%
STATUS ...

BIOLOGIC COMPONENTS ... 100%
BIOMECHANICAL AUGMENTS ... 100%
DIGITAL MEMORY ... CORRUPT
INITIALIZING BACKGROUND RESTORATION
ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION ... UNK
CONSCIOUS BIOMECHANICAL INTERFACE ...
GREEN
SUBCONSCIOUS CONTROL MECHANISM ...
GREEN
LOCATION ...
SUSPENDED IN OXYGENATED STERILE
SOLUTION ...
RECOVERY POD CHASSIS ID ... UNK
ERROR DETECTED IN RECOVERY CYCLE
ATTEMPTING REMOTE MANIPULATION ...
EXACT LOCATION ... ^G[**KL]#\$@ ...
MEMORY CORRUPTION DETECTED
INITIATING BACKGROUND DATA MINING
ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION ...
UNK

As the letters continued to inform her of things she could not care less about, she tried to strike the sides of the tube. The best she could do was tap the side. Nothing seemed right, but she didn't know why. The whole situation was a bit irritating and disconcerting.

"Who am I?" she idly wondered, still looking for a way out.

PROCESSING MENTAL QUERY ...
DIGITAL ENGRAMS DO NOT EXIST

Before she had a chance to mull over the message, her vision went dark and the words pixilated into static. Pain rippled across her mind like lightning.

* * *

The concrete and stone whitewashed and institutional hall stretched before her. She plodded along beside a balding rotund man only as tall as her chest ... not that he seemed to notice.

The harsh lights blazed down as he continued to question her intentions. "... You're certain you understand what you volunteered for?"

She turned her head just slightly enough to study this strange man. His sharply pressed uniform gave the impression he was nothing but a desk jockeying paper pusher that paid handsomely for a uniform, that for all the starch could stand on its own. His pudgy face, though cratered by age, had the aura of confidence and power that suggested more than his stocky form let on. His charcoal eyes were a nice complement to his more pepper than salt short hair.

"Ha, you make it sound like I have a choice," she scoffed. "After what I did, I'm surprised that I wasn't just shot and left for dead."

He placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her and turn her to face him. "You did what you had to do. I defy you to find any warrior that wouldn't have done the same."

She rolled her eyes and sighed as she knocked his hand off her shoulder. "No one else could have done what I did. That's why, even if this fails, I need to be studied."

"We need you, now more than ever!" he protested,

waddling after her. “You’re delving into selfishness.”

She stopped in front of the door to the surgical theater and gazed at herself one last time, via the mirror effect of the darkness beyond the door. She was tall, and as if standing beside the rotund man didn’t reveal that, she was just short enough to not bump her head on the top of the door frame. She was lean and toned, surpassing the epitome of Special Forces.

Her blue floral, silken robes were the last remnant she had of her roots. Her strawberry blonde hair had been braided and wrapped in a bun on the back of her head, with two dowels holding it in place. After a moment she sighed and turned back to the man.

“I appreciate all that you have done for me. But I’m not your problem anymore.” She patted his shoulder before stepping through the portal.

His quiet protests were cut short as the seals on the door hissed to isolate her from the outside. Matter-of-factly she disrobed, placing each item in the thick plastic bag on the end of the bench.

“You realize we don’t understand this tech,” he started through the room’s intercom. “We can’t be certain ...”

“Everyone eventually dies, sir.” She pressed her button to cut him off. “I certainly would rather go in battle, but oblivion is oblivion. Are you ready for the reaper?”

With that, she stepped through the inner door to the dark beyond.

* * *

Words again scrolled in her periphery. She was back in

the tank.

BIOLOGICAL ENGRAMS CORRUPT ...
INITIATING BACKGROUND DATA MINING
ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION ... UNK
ESTIMATED CHANCE OF FULL RECOVERY ...
<1%

As she absorbed what the letters told her, she tried to move her arm in another attempt to find a seam. Her arm would not move. She soon found out why. Protruding from the top of her wrist, just past the section of metal skin, a half meter long blade protruded through the reflective surface, with cracks radiating from it like a spider web.

That can't be good, she thought, the blade held in place by a friction lock.

RECOVERY POD STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY
HAS FAILED DUE TO SIGNIFICANT DAMAGE
CAUSED BY INADVERTENT TRIGGERING OF
WRIST BLADE WEAPON SYSTEM ...
POD CONTAINMENT COLLAPSE IN ... 5 ... 4 ...
3 ... 2 ... 1

When the count reached zero the centimeter-thick, Plexiglas-like substance shattered. With no barrier the juice spilled out into the small room, dragging her with it. Immediately upon hitting the floor she went into convulsions. Her wrist blade, no longer in a friction lock, retracted to prevent self-inflicted harm.

RESPIRATORY ERROR!!!
NO EXTERNAL OXYGENATED FLUID
DETECTED
SWITCHING TO STANDARD GASEOUS
RESPIRATION

The convulsions ended as the last of the slurry was expelled from her lungs and she began to breathe air again. After a moment on her side, she got to her hands and knees to cough a little more while sucking in lungfuls of air.

“Ugh, by the gods, that’s better!” she gasped. “Unh. Time to do something useful.”

From a kneeling position, and ignoring the shivers of cold rippling across her nude form, she surveyed the room. The only light emanated from the status boards of the pod she just birthed from. It wasn’t a lot, but she didn’t need much light to see the room.

It was empty, save the pod, no furniture at all. Along the same back wall that the pod leaned against was an oversized locker. Across from the locker was a door with the handle removed. Any decorations that might have once decorated the walls had long since deteriorated, and a thick layer of dust covered everything.

Careful not to slip on the floor, she stood up and moved toward the pod. Finding nothing of interest, she next approached the locker. At eye level was a tarnished bronze plaque.

“Project Balam”
Kendra Antean
Amaratzu

“Well,” she shrugged, opening the locker, “that answers one question. But what’s Balam?”

PROCESSING AURAL QUERY ...

BALAM

- 1) GROUP OF JAGUAR GODS THAT PROTECT HUMANITY
- 2) SECRET MILITARY PROJECT TO ENSURE THE SURVIVAL OF THE AZTEC COOPERATIVE
*#)\$(@ ...

REMAINDER OF ENTRY CORRUPT ...

QUEUING BACKGROUND DATA MINING
ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION ... UNK

Kendra absorbed the information as she searched the locker. On the only shelf, at eye level, were the remains of knick-knacks and various bric-a-brac that had long since lost its usefulness. On a bar below were some hangers that might have once held clothes, and at the bottom was a large, synthetic-looking backpack.

The faint light was enough to find the bag, but not nearly enough to adequately search it. “Some light would ... Holy frack!”

It was as if she was suddenly in the middle of a field, in midday, with no clouds at all. Searching for the source of light, and wondering how she was not flash blinded, she instinctually retreated to a defensible position beside the pod.

PROCESSING MENTAL/AURAL QUERY ...

OCULAR OVERLAYS ...

LIGHT AMPLIFICATION ...
THERMAL SPECTRUM ...
IMPLEMENTED TO ALLOW GREATER VISUAL
ACUITY

Satisfied with the explanation, she emerged from her corner to inventory the bag. Right on top she found a vacuum-packed, metalized bundle that identified itself as a Class IV Survival Garment. She tore it open and put on the one piece, black, thinsulated, and surprisingly comfortable outfit. Covered, she took a breath of satisfaction as the room shifted suddenly back to black.

RESPIRATORY WARNING!!!
OXYGEN LEVELS CRITICAL ...
SWITCHING ALL NON-CRITICAL AND
SECONDARY SYSTEMS TO ANAEROBIC
FUNCTIONALITY
REDUCING PROCESSOR CAPACITY TO
CONSERVE O₂ FOR HIGHER BRAIN
FUNCTIONS
ESTIMATED TIME OF SURVIVAL AT CURRENT
O₂ LEVELS ...
10 MIN ...

* * *

“Why are you panicking?” demanded a disembodied voice from the darkness.

As primal fear flooded her mind, Kendra realized she was only seven again. She was, once again, in the training

dungeons of that demanding Old Man. Why did it have to be him, the one man in all the world she feared? The one person who took in orphans and trained them to be productive warriors? It was rare that a girl survived the jungles to get to his door. In fact, she was the only one to make it this far in training.

A spotlight erupted from above, deepening the darkness around it. She began to hyperventilate as her eyes darted back and forth, hoping to catch anything that might do her harm before it did. She collapsed to her knees, opening up the fresh scabs on her bruised knees.

“I ... I’m scared!” she finally whimpered, eyes welling up with tears.

“Fear is the first step to failure,” the voiced groaned in exasperation. “Calm down, girl. Assess your situation. You will find that there is no fear.”

* * *

The eerie green light visually dimmed as the cell came into focus. “What happened?” she asked, hating that little girl she was.

OVERLAYS OFFLINE DUE TO PROCESSOR RESTRICTIONS

“Well,” Kendra shrugged, “there goes that advantage.”
She crawled along the ground, feeling her way back to the bag.

* * *

With a flash of white hot pain, Kendra now looked up at the sweating face of the spec ops man she was currently sparing. As he chopped down with his sword, she rolled to her left and managed to put her heel to his chest. He stumbled, but didn't fall. He sliced at her torso from left to right as she jumped back but landed wrong on her already twisted ankle. As he moved to chop down on her head, her right wrist blade popped out, deflecting his blow to his right as she rolled to her right and scissor-kicked his legs from under him.

Her right arm was ripped and her stomach had a large cut, not quite through her skin. Pain radiated from her cauterized right cheek, and the humanized interface flashed a blood loss warning. She stepped over to her attacker and kicked him in the face, knocking him cold. With that, she turned away, intent on walking out.

"Where are you going?" demanded the disembodied voice of the balding rotund man.

She was in a giant arena. The seats were empty and the only light was the bright white one from above. She turned around and looked up at the control bubble on the far side of the stadium, right where she knew the fat man was.

"This thing in my head is telling me further combat is ill advised," she returned, cocking her hip and crossing her arms.

For a moment there was silence. She could almost see the balding rotund man talk with the techs in the control bubble.

"That interface was purposed to keep you alive," he eventually conceded. "By following its recommendations you could conceivably live forever, in perfect health. Even your old scars would be erased."

"That would make you useless to Balam," continued the voice of a tech she met only a few times.

“I didn’t ask for any of this.” She uncrossed her arms and sliced through the air emphatically. “You’re the ones that wanted to fix me. If you don’t want me to trust this thing in my head, what do you want me to do?”

“What did you do before?” the tech asked casually.

“Go until I was done, or couldn’t any more.” She glared at the man on the mat to drive home her point.

“That’s a good place to start.” The balding man applauded, just like the Old Man would have. “Your mission here seems to be accomplished. Get to the infirmary to verify you are healing and take some nutrient. Dismissed.”

She mock saluted with a glare, turned on her heel, and stepped into the darkness.

* * *

“Override the processor governor,” she ordered. “Give me those overlays.”

CONSCIOUS OVERRIDE ACCEPTED
INCREASING PROCESSOR OUTPUT TO
REQUIRED LEVELS

Panicking wasted time, air, and life as far as Kendra was concerned. Now back in “light,” she methodically searched the backpack labeled Class V Soldier’s Survival/Self Defense Kit.

Immediately below the matte black boots, which she instantly put on, was a package labeled Class VII Emergency O₂ Supply/Regulator/Filter. The clear plastic face piece fit neatly over her nose and mouth. Black

synthetic fabric straps held it in place, and thin tubes that would run along the right side of her jaw bone. The tubes terminated at a box that had a clip on the back that might hook on a belt. She snapped in the provided compressed air canister, turned the thing on, strapped it to her face, and relished in the higher oxygen level for only a moment.

The kit rounded off with a medium caliber handgun with several magazines of ammo. She also found a gun belt with a drop down right-handed holster, small lights that could be held or snapped onto the gun, survival rations, and some more O₂ canisters.

“Not much for immediate use,” she grumbled, standing up to put on the belt. “Letters, any nifty overlays to look through walls?”

PROCESSING AURAL QUERY ...
ACOUSTIC RESONANCE MAPPING PROVIDES
SLIGHT PENETRATING CAPACITY

“Let’s do that.”

COMMAND INITIATING
SONIC ENERGY REQUIRED FOR FULL EFFECT
KNOCKING ON OBJECTS MAY PROVIDE
ADDITIONAL CAPACITY

CAUTION:
PROLONGED USE OF ANY OVERLAYS MAY
DEplete ALREADY SCARCE O₂

“So, knock and talk, then?”

Every sound she made momentarily cleared and

solidified her vision. One problem she found was too much noise overpowered her ability to see. Finding the right decibel level on the run, she toured the room.

The door had been sealed from the outside as well as having a large flagstone placed in front of it. The door would have opened outward, had it opened, but it would not budge.

To the left of the door was a spider web of weakness. Tentatively at first, she started to beat the stone. It didn't budge. She furiously pounded the stone, but it would not give. After a silent string of colorful metaphors, she moved on, leaving bloody fist prints in her wake.

She came finally to where she began, the locker. At the bottom was a hidden cache of supplies.

"Plastic explosives?" She read the package. "Wonder if they still work?"

PROCESSING AURAL QUERY ...
PX-G-6-BLC-453 WAS SPECIFICALLY
FORMULATED FOR STABILITY AND VIABILITY
AFTER A LONG COUNT
AS IS ALL BALAM TECH

"Only one way to find out," she shrugged, stepping toward the damaged wall.

She packed as much of the explosive as she could into the cracks and made a mound with the rest of the brick. After setting a remote detonator, she picked up her bag and climbed into the locker with it.

USE OF EXPLOSIVES IN A CONFINED SPACE

