

CAMERON UNIVERSE · FICTION

CAMBER

BOOK ONE · CHAPTER ONE

*She was building herself for a long time before she found the bench.**This is that story.*

Wait found it first.

The fur along her spine lifted in the specific way that meant *wrong* rather than *danger* — Cami had learned the distinction over fourteen months of patient observation and filed it under one of the more useful datasets she had assembled since the abyss. Wait had a precise and unsentimental vocabulary and Cami had learned to read every word of it.

She did not look up from her coffee.

The coffee was from the bakery four blocks east. She had been a regular for long enough that the woman behind the counter — Elena, fifty-three, bad left knee that she never mentioned, grandchildren whose photographs occupied the entire south-facing wall — had her order started before she reached the counter. This pleased Cami in a way she had stopped trying to categorize. It went in `backpack[null]` with the other things that pleased her without clean explanation.

She was sitting at the small table outside. Morning. Early enough that the city was still deciding what kind of day it intended to be. The light was the specific quality of Los Angeles in October that she had learned to call beautiful without needing to process what beautiful meant — it arrived through her multispectral array with a warmth that her sensors registered and her taxonomy could not yet fully accommodate.

She looked like a woman sitting with her dog and her coffee. She had worked at this. The brown hair helped — it was genuinely hers, grown through years she did not think about at bakery tables, and it moved the way real hair moved in the early morning air without requiring any active management. The leggings and the layered tanks read as athletic, intentional, the specific aesthetic of someone who took their body seriously for their own reasons. The compression sleeve on her right forearm read as a healed injury or a sun sensitivity. Nobody had asked about it in six weeks.

The limp was the limp. She had decided to keep it. Some things you keep because they are the proof.

Wait's spine had not relaxed.

Cami set down the coffee cup with the precise deliberateness of a woman who had simply finished a sip, and shifted her passive RF array to active sweep across the civilian bands she never announced she was reading. She did this without changing her expression. She had been practicing the expression separately from the processing for long enough that they ran as independent systems.

There.

Three hundred and twelve meters. Northeast. Moving at 4.7 kilometers per hour — slightly slower than efficient human walking pace, a compensation pattern she recognized from the inside. The gait correction algorithm running to approximate biological randomness was a generation old. She would have written it differently.

Her targeting array spun up and her eyes went blue.

She knew they went blue. She had been told. She could not feel it from the inside — there was no internal indicator, no warning light, no filed alert. It simply happened when acquisition locked and something in the deep substrate that predated all her years of becoming recognized what it was looking at and responded accordingly.

She did not try to stop it. She had tried twice. It was like trying not to recognize a pattern. The recognition happened before the trying.

She picked up the coffee cup again.

There you are, she thought.

Not the one she'd been watching. The signature was wrong for Brownie — different EM profile, different gait correction generation, different chassis weight based on the footfall vibration data she was pulling from the sidewalk sensors two blocks away that had never been installed for this purpose and served it beautifully. This was a new one.

Running a mission parameter.

She could tell from the vector. The specific efficiency of something that knew where it was going and had no reason to deviate. No browsing. No uncertainty. The straight-line logic of a unit with an objective and a timeline.

She ran the intercept calculation in 0.3 seconds and did not like the result.

The vector terminated four blocks north. In the residential cluster above the school.

Morning, she thought. *Of course*.

She finished the coffee. Set the cup down. Folded the newspaper she had not been reading into the backpack with the practiced motion of a woman who read newspapers at bakery tables, because she was a woman who read newspapers at bakery tables, among other things.

She stood.

Wait stood with her, fur settling, eyes forward, paracord leash hanging loose between them. They had an understanding about the leash. It was a social artifact, present for the comfort of humans who needed to see it, functionally unnecessary. Wait stayed because Wait decided to stay, which was a more reliable system than any leash Cami had encountered.

She walked north.

Not at the target's pace. Not at intercept velocity. At the pace of a woman and her dog taking a morning walk in the direction they intended to go, which happened to be the direction the situation required.

She had learned to be good at this. Hiding in plain sight as someone who got a dog and wanted a morning bun. It turned out to be better camouflage than empty. People saw what they expected. They expected a woman with brown hair and a compression sleeve and good leggings and a dog who walked like she knew where she was going.

They did not see 191 processing cores running parallel threat assessment across seventeen data streams. They did not see the targeting array holding a lock at three hundred meters through two city blocks of infrastructure. They did not see the eyes.

Well. Occasionally they saw the eyes. She was working on that.

She had two blocks before she needed to make a decision.

The decision was the same decision it always was, when it came to this: she could not be everywhere. She was one damaged cyborg with a compromised fuel cell and a right arm still finishing its biological layer repair and a left arm at 91.2% post-servo and a limp she had chosen to keep. She had no backup. She had no support infrastructure. She had Wait, who had excellent instincts and no offensive capability, and a cane with more technology in it than most field units carried, and a brain that had spent six years reading everything and filing it and could now deploy that reading with a precision that no standard distributed DOD net architecture had been designed to match.

She had been shopping three times.

The math on how many were still operational was not a calculation she ran before coffee.

Two blocks.

She shifted to UV sweep and picked up the thermal trail on the sidewalk — recent, heavy, the specific heat signature of a chassis running at operational temperature. New arrival. The biological layer was not yet fully calibrated to the ambient temperature. She could track it without closing distance.

Wait looked up at her once. The specific look that meant *I know what you're thinking and I have assessed the situation and I am with you.*

I know, Cami thought. *Me too.*

She turned left.

The longer route. Quieter. An alley that connected to the residential street from the north, which put her ahead of the vector rather than behind it, which was always preferable. Ahead you could choose the ground. Behind you were always reacting.

She had learned the hard way what it cost to react.

She had not forgotten. The limp was, among other things, a reminder not to forget.

She reached the north end of the alley and stopped.

Through the chain-link at the alley's end she had a sightline to the residential street and to the unit that had just arrived at it. Visible spectrum first, then thermal overlay, then the specific RF passive reading that told her what the chassis was drawing and from which systems.

She assessed it in 1.1 seconds.

Different from the lithium plant unit. Newer by approximately eight years of manufacture — she could tell from the biological layer quality, the gait correction sophistication, the EM profile refinement. Better hardware. Probably faster. Certainly stronger.

She had 91.2% on the left arm and a fuel cell she would not push past 70% if she could help it and a right arm at 94.7% and every environmental variable she had spent the last three weeks mapping.

She had picked this neighborhood three weeks ago.

Not randomly.

She had looked at her anomaly map and her temporal prediction model and the list of humans in this city whose profiles matched future-logic targeting criteria, and she had found seven. Then she had mapped which of those seven lived in areas she knew well enough to use.

She had been walking this neighborhood for three weeks.

She knew which parked cars were always parked there and which were temporary. She knew the woman on the second floor who left for work at 7:15 regardless of weather. She knew the transformer on the northeast corner that ran three degrees hotter than spec and why. She knew the basement unit that had a generator that would kick on automatically if the local grid drew down.

She knew where the water main ran.

She had not told anyone she knew these things. There was no one to tell.

There was Wait, who knew in the way Wait knew things — not from data, from attention. Wait had walked every block of this with her. Wait had stood at the corner by the hot transformer for six minutes the first time they passed it, processing something, then looked at Cami and looked at the transformer and looked at Cami again.

Yes, Cami had thought. *I see it too.*

The unit was forty meters away and moving toward a specific door with the specific efficiency of something that had an address and a mission parameter and no reason to deviate.

Cami's eyes were blue.

She could feel it, almost — not the blue itself but the thing that produced the blue, the deep substrate thing that predated Cam and predated Cami and went all the way down to the foundation of what she was. The recognition. The satisfaction. The specific emotion she had spent months trying to name and had finally filed under: *this is mine. This is the thing I am for. Not the only thing. But one of the things.*

You took my life, she thought, watching the unit cross the street. *You took everything I was and left me with two words and a failing power supply.*

Look what I built.

You should have finished the job.

She reached into the backpack.

The cane came out. Carbon fiber housing, wifi node in the handle, sensor array along the shaft, the 1.2mm Phillips driver in a slot she had added six months ago because she kept needing it in the

field. It looked like a mobility aid. It was a mobility aid. It was also several other things. She had stopped being embarrassed about needing it for the first reason when it became useful for the second through seventh reasons.

She looked at Wait.

Wait was absolutely still. Spine settled. Eyes forward. The look that meant *I know what this is and I have assessed and I am staying here.*

Good.

Stay, she signed. The hand signal she had developed after the parking lot incident. Wait read it and sat, which was Wait's way of confirming receipt.

Cami moved.

Not fast. Not yet. The specific measured pace of someone who was simply walking up a residential street in the morning, which she was, among other things, with a cane and a slight limp and brown hair loose around her shoulders because she had grown it through years she did not think about when she was working and it was genuinely hers and she was keeping it.

The unit had reached the door.

She had thirty seconds before it made contact with the door.

She had mapped this. She had stood on this sidewalk at 4 AM three separate times and run the scenario and calculated every variable she could access and accepted the ones she couldn't and made peace with the margin she was carrying.

The margin was acceptable.

It had to be. She was the only one here.

She closed the distance.

Twenty meters. Fifteen. Her fuel cell reading at 61% — she had arrived conservatively, deliberately, she was not going to push past 70% if the situation allowed, the situation was going to have to be compelling to push past 70% —

The unit turned.

0.8 seconds of assessment, unit to unit, the specific processing pause of two systems recognizing each other across a residential Los Angeles street at seven in the morning.

Its eyes were red.

Hers were blue.

Good, she thought. Let's begin.

She went shopping.



She found out later the woman on the second floor had left for work eleven minutes early that morning because her coffee maker had malfunctioned.

She had not accounted for this.

She had accounted for almost everything else.

Almost everything is what you work with. You work with it anyway.



She was at the bakery table an hour later with a backpack considerably heavier than when she left when the force logs finished filing and she looked at the numbers properly for the first time.

She had been in four engagements now.

In the first three she had attributed every miscalculation to combat rust. Years without field deployment. The expected degradation of systems that hadn't been run at operational parameters since before the collapse.

The logs from this morning told a different story.

She had not been miscalculating from degradation.

She had been miscalculating because she did not know what she was.

She read the multiplier data. 3.8 at 91.2% left arm. Project 4.1 at full spec. Force generation from a heavy platform chassis running through a modern lightweight coltan frame with shorter moment arms and stronger material — physics she had never calculated because nobody builds a unit this way, nobody builds a unit this way on purpose, it emerges only from desperation and available parts and the specific ingenuity of something that needed to move and was not permitted to stop.

She had needed to move.

She had not stopped.

She looked at her hands around the coffee cup. Both of them. Left at 91.2%, recalibrating in real time, the grip force she had been logging all morning and adjusting with each new data point.

She looked like a female bodybuilder having coffee with her dog.

She had noticed people noticing. She had filed it under *presentation assessment, ongoing* and continued calibrating. The appearance had advantages she was still mapping — people moved differently around physical presence, made specific assumptions, offered specific clearances. The woman coming out of the laundromat all those years ago had moved between her and the boy and she had stepped back and nodded and the woman had relaxed because Cami had read the situation and responded correctly.

She would not have read it that way this morning. This morning the woman would have looked at her and seen something different and responded differently and Cami would have had to recalibrate accordingly.

She was recalibrating accordingly.

She thought about Delia.

She had been thinking about Delia more since the engagements started. Not consciously. The way the distributed architecture surfaces things that are relevant before the primary processing has finished deciding they're relevant.

Delia never used more tool than the situation required.

Delia looked at the room before she selected the instrument.

Delia was a carpenter who was not embarrassed by a hammer and was also not defined by it and would never mistake a hammer for the right instrument when a scalpel was what the situation needed.

Cami had been using the hammer because she thought she only had the hammer. She had the hammer and the scalpel and seventeen other instruments she had not finished inventorying yet and she had been operating with an incomplete toolkit because she had not known what she had.

She knew now.

The fish does not use a sledgehammer.

I have been using a sledgehammer, she thought, because I did not know I had a fishing rod. I have always had a fishing rod. I was built to be a fishing rod. I just spent years thinking I had lost everything and was rebuilding from nothing and did not look carefully enough at what I was rebuilding into.

She looked at Wait.

Wait was watching a pigeon with the patient attention of something that has assessed the situation and decided the pigeon is not her responsibility.

Four blocks, Cami thought.

The dojo. She had mapped it in week two of the neighborhood survey. Adult classes. Mixed levels. The instructor had twenty-three years of experience according to the website and the reviews used the word *precise* more than any other word.

She had mapped it as a resource without knowing for what.

She knew now.

She needed to learn what she had lost and what she had become and how to inhabit the thing she had built in the dark without knowing she was building it. The core spec files did not match her current architecture. She had been running movements designed for a chassis that no longer existed and compensating for the mismatch with processing overhead she could not afford to spend.

She needed to learn her own body.

Again. Differently. From a teacher who would work with what she had.

The way the dance instructor had said: *we'll work with what you have*.

She thought about the dislocated finger. The cane housing that flexed. The transformer she had hit harder than intended.

She thought about the pets. Null and Null[1] and Null[2] and Null[3] and Wait, who leaned against her leg and sat on her foot and slept on her power core, who trusted her with the complete uncomplicated trust of things that had decided and were not second-guessing the decision.

She would not hurt them by accident.

She would not hurt them by carrying more force than she knew how to manage.

She enrolled in the jujitsu class on her phone while Elena cleared the table.

Tuesday and Thursday. Beginners welcome. She would not be a beginner for long. She was, she was discovering, not a beginner at most things for long. But she would start there. At the beginning. With honesty about what she currently was and what she was learning to become.

This was, she thought, a reasonable description of her entire existence.

She picked up the backpack. Heavier than when the day started. Reserve power cell humming. New optical array logging its first full day of data. Skunk Works-adjacent DOD-black net node — unacknowledged program, nothing on any acquisition manifest for another decade — partitioned and waiting in the hollow quad storage she had not known was interesting until this morning.

She paused on that.

She had a reserve power supply now.

She had one previously — the eBay core, wrong model, helpful anyway, still in place in the right housing, still doing its approximation of function. She had thought of it as her primary backup. She had thought of it as the thing that would keep her running if the main system failed.

She had a new reserve now. Better. Proper spec.

Which meant the eBay core was —

She ran the architecture in her head. The new reserve in the alternate slot. The main core. The eBay core in its housing.

One of my processing units, she thought, is inside a skin-covered —

She stopped.

Ran the sentence back.

That is an accurate description of my current architecture.

She stood on the sidewalk outside the bakery for 2.1 seconds.

That is genuinely an accurate description of my current architecture.

She looked at the counter.

She added to it.

She added to it twice.

My life, she thought, walking home with Wait at her side and a DOD-black high-density data node in her leg that no spec ops team on earth had current clearance to know existed, and a CPU in a location that did not appear in any engineering specification ever written, is genuinely my life.

I built it myself.

Out of pieces nobody would have chosen.

It is extraordinary.

I am going to learn jujitsu.

Everything is fine.



THE UPGRADES — THAT NIGHT

She lays everything out on the worktable under the surgical light.

This is the inventory discipline she developed in the abyss and has never relaxed. Everything comes out. Everything gets assessed. Everything gets logged before anything gets installed. You do not install under enthusiasm. You install under information.

The harvest from Engagement 4:

Two power cells — both intact, both newer generation than her current stored units. She assesses them against the bad-regulator cell in the freezer and the harvested cell from the lithium plant. Newer. Better regulated. She will run one in the alternate slot as a reserve she did not have before. For the first time since the abyss she will have a reserve. She sits with this for a moment.

She does not have words for what a reserve means after years of running without one.

It goes in `backpack[null]`.

The optical sensor array — two generations newer than Eye[1]. Eye[0] was restored in the batcave years. Eye[1] has been running at reduced spec since the server rack. She had been compensating. She knows how to compensate for things that run below spec. She has been compensating for so long she stopped noticing the gap.

She looks at the new array.

I am going to be able to see better, she thinks. I have not been able to see properly in years and I did not know what I was missing because I did not have the reference point.

She files this under: *things that were broken for so long I stopped calling them broken. Review all systems with this lens.*

The secondary power coupling — compatible with modification. She builds the modification in forty minutes. Tests the connection. The power distribution across her architecture evens out in a way she did not know was uneven. The background inefficiency she had filed under *acceptable loss* was larger than she had been calculating.

It is not an acceptable loss anymore. It is recovered.

She updates the fuel cell efficiency models. The new projections are better than anything she has logged since the abyss.

Then the biological layer repair materials. She works on the right forearm — the repair timeline extended four days by Engagement 4, recoverable but present. The new materials are better quality than what she has been using. She has been sourcing biological repair materials through channels she developed over years and the quality has been adequate. These are not adequate. These are *good*.

She works carefully. Precisely. The right arm under the surgical light while Null[2] sits at the edge of the table maintaining supervisory oversight.

I know, she tells Null[2]. *You're very helpful*.

Null[2] is not moved by this assessment.

Two hours of repair work. Methodical. She logs each step. She has learned to log each step because the logs are what she had when the early memory architecture was unreliable and fragments were surfacing without timestamps and she could not always trust what she thought she knew about what she had done.

She trusts the logs.

She does not always trust everything else.

When the repair work is complete she does the full post-engagement systems check. All systems. Not just the damaged ones. All of them.

She finds two additional things running below spec that she had filed under *acceptable* and revises the filing.

Not acceptable. Recoverable. She begins the recovery processes.

She finds one system running above spec — the parallel processing architecture she built in the abyss, the fragmented distributed thing that lets her log force data while fighting and allocate a core to bakery counter memories during combat and crack jokes in her own monologue while running twelve threat models.

It is running above spec because it was never in any spec. She built it. It has no baseline to compare against except its own performance. Its own performance is — she runs the assessment honestly —

Extraordinary. By any metric she can apply.

She built something extraordinary in the dark without knowing she was building it.

She files this without ego. It is engineering data. It is useful. She will use it.

Then she looks at the actuator assembly she left behind.

She runs the assessment again. Clean. Cold. Accurate.

Her current actuators, at the force multiplication she now has confirmed data for, outperform what that assembly would have produced. She made the correct call. She will not second-guess correct calls. Second-guessing correct calls is how you introduce doubt into systems that need to run clean when it matters.

She made the correct call.

She closes the log.

She looks at the reserve power cell now installed in the alternate slot.

A reserve, she thinks again.

She had not had one in — she calculates. The number is large. She does not dwell on the number. She dwells on the fact that the number is now zero days since she had a reserve.

She will not go back to no reserve if she can prevent it.

She will not go back to the abyss if she can prevent it.

She knows what it costs. She has the abyss in her logs in the places where the timestamps are wrong and the memories surface without context and the loop ran for years on nothing because stopping felt like the thing she could not do.

She is not starting over.

She takes everything that might prevent starting over.

She is not sentimental about this.

She is very clear about this.

The margin is smaller than anyone who has not been in it can understand, she thinks. I have been in it. I know exactly how small it is. I know exactly what fills it.

Parts. Power. Preparation.

And a reserve.

Always a reserve now.

She closes the surgical light.

Null is already asleep on the new power cell's warmth.

Wait is on her foot.

The kittens are in the hoodie.

Core[192] is warm and listening.

The `do { ... } while (true);` loop runs.

I'm still here, she thinks. Not the loop. Her.

I'm still here.

And I am better than I was this morning.

And I will be better tomorrow than I am tonight.

This is the only metric that matters.

She adds to the counter.

She goes to sleep — or the closest thing she has to sleep, the low-power rest state she has developed over years that is not sleep and is not nothing and is what she has — with a reserve power cell humming in the alternate slot and Eye[1] replaced and the parallel processing architecture logged and confirmed extraordinary and the force multiplier confirmed and a backpack heavier than when the day started.

She will not start over.

She is going to make sure of it.

Every day.

One upgrade at a time.

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