



Morningstar: Oubliette
Short Story
v.2

by Boman Modine

Stay with us!–

The voice cut through the blessed nothingness of sleep.

Before she had even opened her eyes, her body had snapped into a fighting stance as she hit the floor, left arm shielding her head for a strike that wasn't coming.

Darkness.

Her breathing was coming in and out, sharp and painful. Adrenaline pumping through her. The Stimplex™ gland in her neck throbbed, ready to flood her system.

It's just the dark, you don't need to be afraid of the dark.

Lumin fibers came on, crackling to life above her as the convenience sensor registered her movement. She was in an opti-unit, a standard square of a room, her sleep-pod behind her, the door in front and the amenity columns on her left and right.

All of it painted in consecutive shades of sterile beige.

Your favorite color is blue, you should paint it!

Right. This was *her* opti-unit. It had been assigned to her for this tour.

This was home now.

Helpful memories teased into the forefront of her comprehension. She calmed down. The gland reducing, almost reluctantly, back into the muscles of her neck.

Stay with–

'Shut up!' She let her own voice out from between clenched teeth silencing the others that whispered from within her skull. She cleared her throat, tasting bile and the weakness of her rarely used vocal cords.

You didn't need your voice in her line of work. Her superiors could just read the necessary information off her brainwaves, if they cared.

They never did.

You don't have to do this!

She relaxed and stood. Shook out her limbs. Her mind caught up with her senses in its own sluggish way, absently probing memories, like a toe nudging sludge in the shallows. She hated this, the minutes before her real Self could take over, when the old one was allowed to crawl up from the mire of the past.

She was inflicted with images of herself and the days before this one. Traveling in on a freight-liner. Food she had eaten. The flashes of light and sound of a battle from another tour. All useless nostalgia that didn't matter. If she dwelled on it, if her attention wasn't careful-

They'll make you into a monster!

She was on Kaumah again. A dozen quats ago.

She was beneath the dome. She'd always hated that dome. It would drip with condensation and make everyone sick.

He was there.

His arms outstretched, like he could stop bullets with his hands.

She was in her pocketsteel like the rest of the Tributary squad. Fully enclosed with infrared markings so that they all looked the same but could tell each other apart with their visors.

She was looking at the wall.

Blue. Clean. Twenty insurgents lined up, still wearing their Unionist blue bandanas and arm bands. Pathetic.

She noticed details in the memory that she had missed in the present, like the way the artificial wind pulled on that little girls braids. The old man trying to hold his dislocated jaw together.

He was begging, on his knees, but, thankfully, the pocketsteel kept his voice muted as much as it kept her identity hidden. But now, in the memory. Now, she could hear *his* voice. He looked right at her.

Listen to me, please, if you do this, you won't come back! They'll own you forever! They'll own your soul! Please, daughter!

They already owned everything. It was... *had* been, a stupid thing to say. Part of his religio-subscription that said the Self was in tandem with the fairytale of an immortal soul. She was about to tell him when—

Bang.

The wall turned red. Dirty.

Was she crying?

“Stop it.” She said, quieter now, and the memory withered but it was still there. She needed noise to beat the remembrance down before it paralysed her.

She dropped to the rough formcrete, catching herself on her fingertips, then lowered her face until her nose brushed the surface of the floor. It smelled like bleach. Clean.

She started her routine.

Pushups. Arms wide, then close. Left arm, right arm.

Sit ups. Until it hurt.

Pain was its own freedom.

The memories were replaced by sweat. Her Self was driven into retreat as her body prioritized, unable to fixate on her distant adolescence and the crimes therein. Muscle pain buried the face of her mother.

Disappeared her father's smile. Burned away those hands.

She didn't care about favorite foods, how old she was or the recovery of her last surgery or the intrigue of the last unfulfilled sexual expenditure or, or or ororor-

The routine kept it all at bay. For now.

She took out a chill-pad and rubbed her neck and loosened the square glued there. The electro-prod had been her design she'd made from a basic medkit defibrillator.

She had made the mistake of letting the Armasyn MacroCorp algorithms preprogrammed in her opti-unit run unregulated in her first quat as a Tribute. Gentle music, a mist of vitameths to tease her in and out of seven hours of wonderful sleep. All seemingly innocuous; to make her a better soldier.

Until she had gotten the bill.

It had been a waste of capitol and, more importantly, a theft of *time*. She should have expected it from a MacroCorp. Every moment you slept was another minute added to your time-debt and they knew that. She was sure there were thousands of Tributaries who thought the extra hour of sleep was harmless, like an extra tube of sucrogel. It wasn't, and it added up.

They were fools.

Not you.

Not her.

“Not me.” She whispered.

She was the kind of Tribute that the Directorate’s accountants hated. She kept it basic. No frills, no leisure, unless it was her day off or it was on discount.

They’d warned her that it wasn’t healthy–

They would.

–Warning her that the human brain couldn’t function, not long term at least, on three and a half hours sleep and expect to maintain combat readiness.

That shit was for the bootheels or the treadheads.

Not you.

'Not fucking me!'

Sweat dripped from her body.

Anything could be done with the right mix of stimms. She’d served in the same theater as a Barakan Unit and one of the Tributes that worked for them had given her some pointers on how to blend the stimms the right way.

She finished and walked to the amenity column and selected: *personal*. The cylinder turned with a groan.

Kitchenette.

Fresher tank.

Then her footlocker. She opened the door revealing her wardrobe and fatigues then pulled out a small box from the bottom. It had a name on it.

Hannia Tselo Myrtus.

Hannia was your grandmother’s name. We used to work in the farms, before the Hegemon shipped in serviles and forced us to move under the dome. Your grandmother died missing the soil. That’s why we fight!

Come! Fight!

A stupid name. A lie that hung around in strange places like paperwork and timesheets. Not really her.

Maybe it was better then?

Hannia turned, the empty room staring back.

His voice, out loud no less. Not in her mind.

Hallucinations were a given but were they getting worse? You had to be careful with stimms.

“Nothing was better then. You should know.” Hannia said back to no one. Armasyn had assigned her unit when Dome 3 had tried to lock the doors to the Auditors. They’d held out for six days when Hannia and a few squads had flattened everything and everyone. Kaumanians sent to fix a Kauma problem.

Stand with us! - their screams echoed up from the shadows.

Hannia snorted, withdrawing the box and putting it in her hab-chamber’s only chair. The mind did funny things, funny pointless, stupid, fucking–

“STUPID,” things... It made you see things, hear things, wear familiar faces and shout at you in voices of dead people.

Nevermind. She had a solution.

She fumbled in the box, withdrawing a rubber hose, a vacuum injector and several vials of viscous, clear, liquid with different names inked on the sides. She tied the hose around her arm and began dosing in careful, measured, sequences.

Lastly, she took out a beaten up tin, clicking it open, she pulled out one of the cellulose stamps and placed it on her tongue.

It burned; adding it's own special kick to the morning's sensations. She swallowed the blend of mynthin, fencycline and menthol only after it had dissolved fully.

'That's it.' She muttered as the colliding chemical wonderfulness made her whole, grateful for the stimm's invisible hand yanking her attention from random thoughts and drowning the ghost of that old, terrible, man.

She finally felt like the *preferred* version of her.

Calm, collected, committed. A rush of bodily reactions obliterated the emotional crippled within her in a roar of pharmaceuticals.

A doctor that serviced the Tributary slurbs had threatened to write her up if she didn't get the prescribed sleep amounts. She'd ignored him. There's been some protests, some kind of a Directorate fine that Armasyn had paid and she was back on the frontlines less than a day later.

She was an AMU Rider and as long as she could get in her rig; no one was going to care what some mandated doctor thought was right or wrong. Results were more important and her employers knew that.

She got dressed, peeling off her nightclothes and throwing them into the sink on the other side of the room. She'd wash them tonight if she survived. Taking sanitizing wipes to herself she saved her water allotment for necessity and trade.

She dialed up the kitchenette from the column. When it cycled she took a flimsyplas wrapped meat roll out of the frigerator then tossed it into the hot-box, twisting the timer for two minutes.

Tick tick tick

She pulled on her bodysuit, a single form fitting piece that regulated her temperature and would wisk the moisture off her body when the bullets started to fly. It was better than the standard issue, which cut off at the elbows and knees. This one had a hood and paper thin coverings for her fingers so it was like she wore nothing when her hands were on the controls.

Tick tick tick tick

Light carapace armor came on next, clipping together perfectly, which would protect her if shrapnel made it through the AMU's armor plating. A few strength multipliers were at the joints which could be turned off and on. She couldn't punch through a wall but she could turn some bastard's face to pulp with ease if she wanted to.

And she had, of course.

She made sure the input ports were clear of grime and the granulated smog that got everywhere in the slurb.

Tick tick tick tick tick

Her sidearm, a stubby double-barrelled scattergun, primed and loaded. She fixed it to an anchor on a thigh plate. It was often enough intimidation to make plucky consumers or a cocky bootheel think twice. Certain universal truths persisted in spite of strict gender-equality clauses in contracts. Besides, a spray of shot had a permanent effect where a violation fine did not.

Ding!

She grabbed the roll and unwrapped it while it was hot and headed for the door and out into the hallway. The beige of the opti-unit gave way to cheap thermal-tile.

She ate.

The roll's explosion of designed flavors were distantly regarded. She didn't care about the taste while the stimms were hitting, it was important to remember to chew. If she wasn't hungry she could ride the high longer and keep the inevitable headaches at bay as her metabolism went into overdrive.

She reached a bare formcrete staircase that led down toward streetlevel. No one was up this early, something else she liked about her routine. Bumping and jostling as the muster calls screamed out from Base started a day of work off bad.

At the ground landing there was a punch-clock next to a door seal. She unclipped her ident card from the slot in her chest armor and slid it into the reader. There was the chatter of gears, like teeth breaking, as the logicor noted her start-time. She wouldn't gain anything by being early, but it would look good when her review came up with Armasyn's Human Resources as they cross referenced with counterparts in the Directorate. The latter didn't matter since Armasyn was paying, if the rumors were correct, almost a hundred percent of the Army's presence here on the worldring.

'The Hegemony thanks you for your service!' The androgynous, eternally chipper voice of the logicor's rudimentary intelligence chortled out of a speaker grill above the door. 'Trust the system, be the system!'

Become the system. She finished the slogan in her mind.

“Remember, Armasyn Hardware and Technology cares!”

Time for work.

The door seal broke and the door slid up revealing the warzone outside. The street was cracked and split, blocks of hab towers pockmarked with craters, here and there a dead airship. Plastek wrapped corpses from the nightshift ready for processing.

That was all past the wire fence, of course.

The slurbs of the Base complex were new, made from freshly poured formcrete two weeks before the Tributaries even got on site. MacroCorp contract builders were... notoriously quick at picking where they'd lay down new foundations and didn't care what they paved over.

Here and there were the remains of what must have been an aesthetically modeled neighborhood, probably where the middle class consumers or mercantile types had lived before they'd paid Armasyn for security to stop the... whoever it was she had been paid to fight and kill for the past month.

Hannia would have wondered if the *middi-cons* had felt betrayed or wronged by suddenly being turned into homeless refugees watching their 'protectors' from behind pre-fab huts hugging the military bases for safety. Proud rulers reduced to glaring and spitting curses from the wrong side of a wall.

She did not care.

She crossed a bridge made from intestine looking sewage pipes and heavy fiber cabling that connected to another section of the slurb. Only here, where an artillery strike had knocked down several buildings, could she make out the horizon as it curved upward into a false sky.

She didn't care about the war that had split this orbital colony into two factions. She didn't care about any of it. The only thing that trickled past the chemical focusers that were flooding her bloodstream was the distance left between her physical body and her *real* body as it sat in a hangar two blocks ahead in the Base.

She would have run, pell mell, if she could but there were rules about running on base if you didn't have to and she wouldn't risk a fine. She got there in due course.

Tributaries finishing their shift watched as she marched past through the outer security rings. Grid readers mounted on bipedal ergoid heads flash scanned her, turning their underslung automatic guns away and outward.

She didn't wave or nod and ignored the younger soldiers who looked at her in awe through their weariness.

She ignored her other Riders and they her. There was no love between them despite some of them operating over a cycle together.

They all wanted the same thing for their own reasons and that didn't include camaraderie. The final security vault door opened on a sigh of gears revealing the hangar, the most secure place on the Base besides the observation and control theater.

The AMU's stood in a towering line, twenty abreast. The Riders instantly ran up to them, stepping into the cradles that would enmesh them. The part of her still holding onto Hannia saw that eagerness for what it was; shared addiction. There was nothing different between her squadron and narco fiends.

Who cares.

She locked her boots into the twin elevating platforms which inserted her into the AMU's chest piece. Each mobility unit was a construct of bundled muscle fibers encased within heavy slabs of nusteel that swallowed her in crepitating panels and segments.

She was giddy, nevermind the stim, as her arms became weapons that would have been more appropriately fixed onto a battle-crawler or a gunship.

She tested thrusters in quick bursts that would gift her the power of flight on wings of fire.

All green.

Only then did the helmet slowly descend and self-aligning anchor pins slam into place along her carapace. This is what she wanted most. She was salivating, her eyes welling up with tears in anticipation.

The cogit hood.

She all but laughed as prehensile cabling snaked around her and into input ports along her skull. The neuro-vein interlink that would drive the lie that was human consciousness away. It would obliterate the noise of the Self that her stimms could only cage for a few hours.

She would be made into that *other* person. No, not a person, a thing, a *weapon* that would obliterate the ame on her paperwork and on her register tags and what her fucking father had called *Hannia Myrtus*

disappear and turn her into what she really was...

An Armored Mobility Unit, not just it's Rider. She would become a giant of metal and unflinching violence. A titan that would smash and shoot and burn and explode whatever it was the Hegemon needed pacified. Her muscles slackened as the restraints tightened all over her body, keeping her in place as she ragdolled. Her Self was disappearing, like water down a drain.

Until that day her time-debt was clear and she would be allowed to convert her hours into capital gains, when they'd give her a credit rating that would get her a ticket on one of those unlicensed far-burn ships headed beyond the Hegemon. When that finance would buy, not lease, a plot, or even a spread, somewhere on an empty world.

She'd sanitize her memory, rebuild it and get to pick exactly who'd she'd be for the rest of her life in retirement. She'd invent a father that loved her, a mother that believed in her who were both still alive and happy for her emigration.

Then she'd plant something green and live a simple life without the hauntings of a hated past. Of the things she'd done.

And the things done to her.

But, until she could just be Hannia.

The AMU would be the rest.

End