

The Trench

by Meg Tuite

“Your first time in the trench?”

I looked at Rudy and nodded my head. He handed me one of the TV remotes.

“You're going to need this. Just watch what I do and when you're ready, don't hesitate! Just aim and let her rip!”

We were sitting in a darkened room. Shadows played off of Rudy's gaunt, weathered face and ghostly hands. He was in a hospital bed, metal bars up on either side, so he wouldn't roll out during the night.

“Over on your left,” Rudy lifted his remote, “get ready, there's three of them. Keep your head low and your eyes open. I'm right behind you.”

I lifted my remote and aimed it toward the left corner of the room where Rudy had pointed. I pushed some buttons and added some sound like I'd done as a child when I was shooting off one of my toy guns.

“Excellent,” Rudy said. “You really have a knack for this. You're going to make it, son. You'll be okay.”

I thanked him and put a straw to his parched lips. “It's hot out here, tonight. Take a sip out of my canteen,” I said.

“Thanks, partner,” Rudy said. He was unable to pull liquid from a straw anymore, so I had filled the straw, held my finger to it and let it drain slowly into his mouth.

“This is going to be a long night,” Rudy said. “I can feel it. Let's ease back a little and let it take its course.” His eyes closed and he nodded off.

I readjusted his pillows under his arms and legs and studied this long, emaciated figure through the moonlight that filtered in through the blinds in stripes of golden light. I watched his mouth move as he continued conversations that had been going on for decades. I sat in my chair and waited. I awoke to the sound of muffled artillery coming from the bed.

“Son, I covered for you while you were out, but, this is no game here. You've got to keep with it, no matter how hard it gets.”

“I understand,” I said. “Sorry about that.” I picked up my remote, pointed it around the room and began shooting again.

“That's more like it,” Rudy said. “Don't ever let them think they've got the upper hand. I know. I've seen many a comrade go down because he wasn't alert. We've got to watch each other's back.”

“I promise you, Rudy. I'll always have your back,” I said. A tear slid down my face.

“What's your name again, son?” Rudy asked.

“Mark,” I said. My name was Mary.

“Well, Mark,” Rudy's eyes were luminous in his sunken face. “It's all about trust here. We have to know exactly who we're sitting with before the fireworks start bombarding.”

I agreed as I dripped some more water, drop by drop, down his throat. I slipped a sublingual 5mg morphine tablet under his barren tongue.

“I trust you, Mark. You have what it takes.” Rudy's eyelids started shuddering closed. “I'm just going to get some shut-eye. It's going to be a long, damn night, son. Keep a look-out for me, will you little buddy?”

I nodded my head, but Rudy was already far, far away. I put some lip balm over his cracked lips. His face was cold and hard as marble. Rudy's angular features shuddered and twitched in the darkness. I settled back in my chair and waited for the next ambush.

