

Alex Moskwa

Tunnel Trap by Alex Moskwa

The pipe burned her fingers but it was better than being dead. Jin's ankle ached, bearing most of her hanging weight, but it hurt less than being gutted. Or so she imagined. Richardo could tell her just how much that hurt, if the pieces of him remaining had the mouth or will to talk - the pieces not in the monster's belly.

A growl shuddered down the tunnel. It had moved off, searching for more to eat. Richardo had boosted her just before it hit. Machismo or chivalry, she didn't care. He had saved her life. Against the scalding pipes she had blurred into one giant heat blob in the monster's eyes.

It never saw her and she never saw it, in the blackness. But she heard it all - two pops of gunfire, then his screams as it tore into him and kept tearing. It was louder than she would have imagined, the sound of a man dying next to you. And the creature, the sound it made. The licking. The teeth sheering through bone.

Now it had left, through the darkness and away; and she knew the job: she had to catch it. She tried caressing her ankle out from its wedge but it stuck good. She tugged harder, nothing. Her fingers wrapped tighter around the pipe, she winced as the metal seared her. She kept her breath even and low, any noise could bring it barreling back. Pulling hard on the pipes and twisting from her hips she yanked her leg. Her boot clanked against the pipe and her legs swung free.

She hung there in the black. Pain on her fingertips. Breathless. Blind. Hoping it hadn't heard. She waited a few moments but nothing, no growl or shudder, no echo. She allowed herself a breath, nice and deep, then dropped to the ground, soft as a kitty.

Her hands moved along the grimy floor - water and muck - groping in the dark. A few feet and she felt something. Moving her fingers along she gave the object shape in her mind. Strong and sturdy; an arm that had hoisted her to safety. She pulled, and the arm lifted into the air, too light to still be attached. She twitched but held onto it. The creature also tracked by scent and anything to throw it off could come in handy. Her stomach turned in on herself and daggers ran up her spine. Was this all Richardo had been reduced to? Bait.

She kept moving, wading through the chunks. Bit by bit she found what she needed. His .45 pistol, two remote grenades, and his lighter. She felt the etching on the Zippo, the emblazoned logo of their squad. Their mission: First Encounter Assault Recon or F.E.A.R., the feeling their team was supposed to bring to things that went bump in the night. She shivered, stuffed one grenade in each pant pocket, and the

clicker down the front of her jacket. She kept the pistol in hand and palmed the lighter up her sleeve. She held onto Richardo's arm, she didn't want to, but she knew she had to. Any edge it took.

In the lab this monster had killed its maker, then blasted through the wall out into the tunnel. She figured it was 100 yards or so back to the heart of the complex. In the black that could take a long, long time. But she didn't dare turn on her light. That's what had brought it to them in the first place.

A whistle resonated down the corridor. Her head whipped around and she pressed her back into the mush of the tunnel wall. If that thing had echo location she was going to have serious words with this project's director. The whistle changed notes a few times and ended with a chirp.

She let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Then, from back the way she had come another whistle echoed to answer. A few notes and it chirped out. She tightened her fingers around the pistol grip. The rawness of her index finger burned on the trigger. Not good.

The wind pushed into her first. The stench rode with it. She heard the splashing and rumble of its gait, 600PSI of force per stride pounding ground toward. She figured she had fifteen seconds tops before it was on her.

The plan flashed into her mind fully formed. She'd step out to the center of the tunnel, wait for it as it charged. Fire once when it was close enough, the flash of the barrel illuminating it for the moment she needed. She'd throw the remote grenade, the stickies would latch onto its body. Dive out of the way, grab the clicker out of her jacket and boom. Thirty seconds later she'd come up with a different brilliant plan to deal with the other one when it came running. She'd live, right?

The explosion threw her back into the bricks of the tunnel wall. Her knuckles scraped against the rock but she held onto the gun. Her face plunged into sewage water and she tasted slime in the back of her throat. Her eyes tried to focus but pitch black underwater looked no different than pitch black in the open air. She pulled her head back and rolled her aching body over so she could breathe again.

She tried to concentrate. What did the thing look like? She didn't remember seeing it. Had she even stepped out into the tunnel? Did she panic and drop the bomb at her own feet? Why the hell didn't she know?

Pushing against the tunnel floor, she managed to sit herself up. Cordite lingered in the air and some other smell she couldn't quite place. Her ears rang and rang and just behind the ringing she heard something else - a hiss, a slow continual hiss. Prickles brushed across her face, she shook her head and pulled back further into the wall.

She knew there was something else she had to do but she couldn't remember what. A low mournful whimper whistled from the darkness just a few feet from her. Then she heard the lapping: a large thing, drinking deep.

Something brushed against her hand and she grabbed at it. She felt fingers. Someone

else must be down here with her. But then, she remembered Richardo, his arm. She tugged on it but it didn't come to her, then it tugged back.

Jin let go and bit her lip not to scream. She heard the teeth, just like she had heard them before, the splinter of bone. She squinted at the darkness and she swore she could see it glower back.

She reached for her pocket only to find it torn, the other bomb out there somewhere in the black. The clicker was gone anyway. She had his lighter and his trusty .45. Slowly, carefully, she sidled along the wall away from the beast, listening as it continued to eat, drowning its sorrows in a feast of flesh.

With the eating, she could still hear hissing, not from the beast but something else. Mixed in with the cordite, another smell, getting stronger. Then, she placed it - methane. Sweet wonderful, clean burning natural gas filling the corridor with her and the beast. Shrapnel from the remote bomb must have pierced a pipeline. If she flicked the lighter she and the beast would die. Mission accomplished.

Another plan flashed in her head. She'd jump up, hope to god her legs kept her standing, and run. Pray the arm was sweet nectar to the beast - that it wouldn't care as she left - have the .45 ready if it did care. Fifteen paces tops, spark the lighter, toss it back. Boom. She'd live, right?

Reynolds stepped down from the armored van. His boot hit pavement and the pavement shook beneath his feet. He hadn't expected the ground to lurch and move but somehow it did. He waited and listened but the ground didn't move again. The rest of his Delta team piled out. "All right operators, give me a perimeter."

They did their jobs well. Moments later the block was secure and all his men at corners prepared. He popped on command com, "Better, Delta team in position and awaiting rendezvous with your men."

"Roger that. My team's below ground and outside coms," Better responded.

An operative popped on, "Sir, we have movement. A manhole cover."

Reynolds ordered, "Team, move in and secure. Eliminate any hostile."

Light shined down into the black and her hand reached up into clean air. She heard a voice nearby, "Sir, it's agent Sun-Kwon."

Arms grabbed her, a whole team of Delta who hadn't been there. They pulled her the rest of the way out of the black and helped her to a stand.

In free air, Better squawked to life on the com, "Jin, good to see your vitals on the map again. Are you okay?"

"I'm alive." She looked at the .45 pistol in her hand, slick with blood and chunks of whatever it was she never saw. "We took care of it."

"You neutralized both the male and female?"

"Yes."

"Where's Richardo?" Better asked.

Jin swallowed hard. "He's gone. Our pointman's gone."

The com channel buzzed with static for a moment, then "Roger that Jin. I'm glad you're safe."