



[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
designated [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED] survivor

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Designated Survivor

Chapter 12

by Jeff Somers

12.

Seven minutes before the elevator doors opened, Renicks watched Begley cautiously open a fire door a half-inch, leaning in to press her eyes against the sliver of light. He was still out of breath but tried to hide it, breathing in shallow little gasps. He was honest enough to admit it was vanity. Begley was young, and attractive, and capable. And she'd scampered up the access ladder like she did it every morning for exercise. Which, he thought, was entirely possible. The way she'd led him through the service corridors spoke of a familiarity bordering on contempt.

After a few seconds, she turned back towards him. Nodded, pulling her gun from its holster. He noted it was the first time she had drawn the gun since he'd arrived. It looked like a toy. Like it would weigh nothing. Like it was made of black plastic with some gray bits here and there, a red dot visible on one side. He didn't know much about guns. Uncle Richie would have said he knew just enough to get into trouble.

She pushed the door open and stepped into the hall, turning in a smooth movement to scan the visible area. She held the gun down by her thigh, finger along the barrel. She stood still for a

few seconds, then holstered the gun again and waved him through without looking back.

“This place is huge,” she said. “Chances of running into them on the non-essential floors is pretty low. I saw seven people. Plus the short guy, your driver.”

“Darmity,” he said, a small piece sliding into place in his mind. “Not an agent, huh?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of. It’s possible he’s from another office. But what I saw of him makes me doubt he’s in the Service at all.”

Renicks filed that away. “So what level is this?”

“Eleven,” she said, turning and walking. “Storage, mostly. A few administrative offices. If you’re in the mood to pick up a few RTE meals, now would be the time.”

“From what I hear, RTEs are made from old boots and tears,” he said. “No thanks.”

She snorted. “We can make for the elevators. If they’re still online, I can lock out changes once we’re in. They won’t be able to stop us from riding all the way up, and they won’t be able to beat us to the top. It might only be a minute or so, but we’d have a lead.”

“Would the elevators be running if the government’s planning to blow us to kingdom come?”

She shrugged. “Sure. If the perimeter upstairs is breached, keeping the elevators locked down won’t do much good; an invader can rain grenades down the shafts and then rappel down in a few seconds. So you might as well leave them online, for convenience.”

He nodded. “And if they think we’re still in the suite, even less

reason to shut them down.”

The hallway was an improvement over the service corridors. It was carpeted; a thick brown industrial carpet that had plenty of dark grease stains and tread marks from countless hand trucks. The walls were finished. Everything painted a vanilla color that showed each scrape, divot, and stain the walls had ever endured. The ceiling had been dropped, all the infrastructure hidden behind sagging foam squares running along aluminum tracks.

The silence was almost total. Renicks imagined he could hear a muted sizzling, the impossible sound of silence.

There were no signs on the walls or floor, and the doors had cryptic signs which offered no description of what lay behind them, but Begley moved confidently. Renicks himself was lost after the second junction. Every hall looked the same. All the doors looked the same, and he was willing to bet there were exactly the same number of them along each leg of corridor.

After the fourth turn, the elevator bank came into view. Two sets of doors, a pair of the ubiquitous keypads alongside each. The doors were a dull, scratched-up stainless steel.

Begley held up one hand, and Renicks stopped.

“Let me take a look,” she said, moving forward with one hand on her gun. “If they’re offline we can make for the freight elevator, but that’s less secure because I can’t lock out changes in it.”

Renicks watched her approach the elevators carefully, moving diagonally to hug one wall while she watched the opposite side, giving her a view of one end of the perpendicular corridor while hiding her from the other. She moved quickly. Trained. He found

it comforting that she knew what to do. It was all in her posture and her movements: Straight and immediate. Back in the suite there had been moments of hesitation, of confusion.

Understandable. But now that they had made decisions and started moving, her body language was tight and controlled. A woman who knew exactly what she was doing. Which made him feel a lot better about the first hundred minutes or so of his administration.

She ducked her head around the other corner, and relaxed. “Okay, let’s see if we’re in business.”

As she walked over to the nearest of the keypads, Renicks thought back to the file he’d discovered on the Brick. *ELIRO*. The first line was still clear in his mind: *dum tre longa tempo nun*. It had a rhythm to it, a bounce. He chanted it in his head a few times, convinced he’d seen the words before, or somehow recognized them. Like a song he’d heard once, long ago, the tune still familiar.

Dum tre longa tempo nun. He recited the words. Nothing came of it.

He let it go. He knew the only way to dredge up a memory was to relax. Forget about it. Let the brain do its work. He tested his weight on his ankle. Got a sharp pain in response. Manageable, he thought. If he had to he could even run. His whole foot throbbed. His shoe was tight around the swelling appendage.

He glanced up at Begley. She was tapping a complex series of buttons on the keypad.

He didn’t have any references to work with to analyze the phrase, and it was only six distinct forms anyway. More in the

file; it was a brief document but long enough to work with. But he couldn't remember more than the title and the first six words. Still, plenty you could do with simple thought experiments while waiting for your sole ally to work the elevators. Was it a cipher? If it was a simple substitution for English, the first word could be *the*. Would the President of the United States use something as old and insecure as the Caesar Cipher or ROT13 to obscure something? A man who had the best cryptographers on the planet at his fingertips. Not likely.

Still, he thought: People did strange things. Out of laziness. Out of ignorance. Or because the document itself simply wasn't anything more than a curiosity. He might spend hours working on it, only to find he'd decoded a grocery list.

He ruled out a ROT cipher immediately. A Rotation cipher just rotated the alphabet by a certain number of letters. In ROT13, the letter A became N and so on, so the word "the" became "gur". Even if you altered the number you rotated the alphabet by, he could tell immediately the phrase didn't work in a simple rotation cipher.

Instant possibilities flashed through his mind. A book cipher. A one-time pad sort of code. He got lost in his own thoughts, his mind crawling through the slim amount of information he had at his disposal. The hallway faded away. The sound of the keypad buttons clicking under Begley's fingers disappeared. He was in a gray, silent bubble of thought.

The elevator *dinged* softly. He looked up.

"Oh, *fuck*," Begley whispered, stepping back suddenly, her hand going to her gun.

Renicks jerked back to full awareness. Half-crouched in

sudden alarm, ready to move. Watching Begley. Following her lead.

The elevator doors split open.

The elevator was empty.

The interior was dull metal plates screwed in place. The floor was tile that looked thick and durable and was a shade of green that made almost every human who looked down at it think of something they had vomited at some point in their life. It was lit by a weak incandescent bulb behind a frosted plastic bubble on the ceiling of the cab.

For a second Begley and Renicks just stood, staring into the empty elevator. Slowly, he straightened up. Started to say something to her. Then he heard a noise behind him. It was a dry, quiet noise. The sound of a shoe dragging slightly on carpet. Before he could react, there was something pushing into the small of his back, and then a familiar voice almost in his ear.

“Hello, asshole.”