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Designated Survivor

Chapter 24

by Jeff Somers

24.

Five minutes before setting a fire, Renicks was on the fourth floor, moving fast. He knew the main Security Office was on the third floor. He knew Begley was being held there because he'd heard it on the radio, which burst into life every few minutes. They'd discovered the bodies in the TV Studio. They'd blamed Darmity for them, which had surprised him. But he was happy to let that be.

He walked as quickly as his ankle would let him, eyes jumping from door to door, looking for clues. Most were unmarked. He'd noticed on his forced tour with Agent Begley that offices and other utilitarian rooms were unmarked, but storage units and custodial spaces usually had name plates on them using a simple code involving the level they were on and their function. Every time he saw one of those plates, he opened the door and inspected the space. His heart was pounding. He was acutely aware that there were other people crawling through the complex, looking for him. That they might appear at any time. He kept fighting the urge to spin around as he walked, trying to keep every angle in sight.

The first few doors he opened turned out to be, in order, a

lavatory complete with shower, an office supply storage closet filled with toner cartridges and copy paper, an inexplicably empty room, and, finally, a long, narrow room filled with cheap folding cots that had metal rings popping from the concrete. A jail of some sort, he decided. The rings could have handcuffs or chains looped through them.

The Federal Government, he thought, had thought of everything. Except its own Chief Executive going nuts.

The fourth door he tried turned out to be a janitor's supply closet. He stepped in quickly, turned on the light, and shut the door behind him. Set his bag down on the floor and paused, listening. He'd set the walkie-talkie's volume as low as he could, afraid of having it burst into static at just the wrong time. When he was certain he wasn't missing anything, he began searching the room.

There were bare metal shelving units on either side, leaving a narrow corridor between. They stretched up to the ceiling. In the rear, lodged in the chasm between shelves, was a standard custodial mop and bucket with a spring-loaded ringer. The whole room smelled sweet. Renicks walked up and down the shelves until he located a cardboard pallet of toilet paper. Twenty-four rolls. He slid it onto the floor and kicked it up towards the door. Squinted up at the ceiling. Spotted the sprinkler bud and smoke detector combo unit bolted into place and nodded to himself.

He positioned the pallet directly under the smoke detector. Tore the plastic wrap off but left the rolls of paper nestled in the shallow cardboard box. Stepped back to his bag. Extracted a plastic tube about the size of a small flashlight. Unscrewed the top. Poured a heap of strike-anywhere matches into his hand.

Took a moment to marvel that he was actually about to use the contents of his End of the World Bag in its expected way.

He pushed ten of the matches under the cardboard pallet so that just their red and white tips emerged from underneath. Then he set two matches, very close together, on the floor right in front of them, so that the wooden end of the pair touched the tips of the ten. Working towards the door, he created a trail of matches, two at a time, back to front. A fuse. At the door he crouched down and counted: twenty-two matches long. With each match taking about forty seconds to burn from tip to end, he had almost fifteen minutes.

Keeping one match in his hand, he twisted the plastic tube closed and picked up his bag. Opened the door and held it open with his body, taking a moment to re-inspect his fuse. Slung the bag over his shoulder again, knelt down, and struck the match in his hand. Watched it flare up perfectly into a dancing orange flame. He knew the matches were good ones, designed to burn steadily and completely. There was no guarantee he didn't have a bad one that would snuff out before burning down to the next match in line. No guarantee this would work at all. No guarantee of what the reaction to a fire alarm would be.

He touched the flame to the nearest pair of matches. The second they lit, he dropped the match in his hand and stepped out of the closet, slowly closing the door until it latched.

Then he ran.

Counting the seconds in his head, he speed-limped his way back along the corridor to the fire door that led to the service tunnels and ladders. He'd marked the innocuous gray door with some of his own blood as he'd emerged, enabling him to find it

again. He let the door click shut behind him and leaped up onto the service ladder. Pulled himself up, hand over hand. Dragged himself onto the rough concrete landing on the third floor and pushed himself to his feet and into motion.

Four minutes done, eleven to go. If he was lucky. The matches would burn at different rates. He might have nine minutes, or twenty. Two matches might burn out too soon, in which case he would be waiting for an alarm to sound in the Security Office forever.

He opened the access door slowly. Carefully. The third floor was populated, and he had to be cautious. He slipped out of the access tunnel onto the carpet and stopped. He had no idea where the Security Office was. Or where the unknown number of Amesley's agents would be.

He pulled out his stolen walkie-talkie and made sure the volume was set as low as possible but still audible. He'd noticed that whenever someone clicked the red TALK button on their radio, there was a loud burst of static before their voice came through. It was the main reason he'd turned the volume down, because he'd been afraid of having his position or hiding place betrayed by the noise.

Holding his breath, he clicked the TALK button.

Dimly, he heard a burst of static somewhere. Far off, muted by distance and walls.

He checked his count. If he was lucky, ten minutes left.

It was difficult to tell which direction the static burst had come from. He turned right; his best guess. The sense of being watched settled on him and pushed. He *knew* there were people on this floor. They could be around any corner, behind any door.

Every step forward was an effort. When he found the first junction of corridors, he hit the TALK button again.

To his left, muffled but distinct, came a squawk of static.

Slowly, he stepped towards the noise. He reached into his bag and pulled out the Kimber; it felt warm and heavy in his hand. He pictured the dead agent lying somewhere below and left the safety on.

When he reached another junction, he toggled the button again. The burst of static was closer, to his right again. He slowly edged around the corner. The hall was empty. Instead of the usual blank-faced fire doors, however, there was a bank of windows with two glass swinging doors set in the center. He retreated and put his back against the wall. Eight minutes.

He closed his eyes and imagined the security camera screen he'd seen with Begley in the smaller office below. He counted the people he'd seen. Amesley and Darmity, and six or seven others. He knew from the radio chatter that Darmity was imprisoned somewhere. Amesley might have sent some of his people out to search for him. Unless some number of *other* others he didn't even know about had returned to their headquarters; just because he'd so far only seen six or seven people didn't mean that was all there was.

He hit the TALK button. Heard the squawk of the radio. Definitely inside the Security Office. No one in the hall nearby.

He waited. Seven minutes to go.

He heard the squeak of the glass door's hinge. He froze. Heard the squeak again as the door swung shut. Waited, holding his breath. Five minutes and counting.

No one stepped around the corner to surprise him. He let his

breath out slowly. Waited.

He thought about *ELIRO*. Felt again that he knew the word, had seen it before. It would be something personal to Grant, he thought, if the President was using it as a personal code term. He thought of the coded message the file contained: *Dum tre longa tempo nun*. His sense of familiarity increased. He fell back on a technique he'd used in his linguistics work, letting his mind jump from connection to connection, running through different languages he'd worked with, studied. Throwing the unknown word into sentences, see if it fit, or maybe just made him think of something.

C'était le meilleur des périodes, il était le plus mauvais des eliro.

Era un día frío brillante en abril, y los eliro pegaban trece.

He froze. Four minutes left. He knew exactly what *ELIRO* was. It was Esperanto. An invented language, spoken by a handful of linguists and hobbyists around the world. It was originally developed as a simple universal language, a language everyone could learn easily, to bridge borders and cultures. It had never taken off, and for century had been a curiosity. Researched by people like him, sometimes played with by intellectuals and people like President Grant. It wasn't much of a code, but it served well enough to stop casual spying. He concentrated, trying to pull together his rough memory of the language.

He thought back to a project he'd worked on in school, translating the Bible into different languages and then having the translations themselves translated back into English, to study how nuances changed, meanings shifted. The idea being to

quantify how ideas got altered throughout history as old texts were translated and re-translated. One of the test languages had been Esperanto. *Eliro* meant *Exodus*.

He paused for a second, looking around and listening. Then opened his bag and pulled out the e-reader. Tapping it into life, he scrolled through the thousands of books stored on it and pulled up an Esperanto primer, a text he hadn't accessed in twenty years. Emily had always made fun of his insistence on keeping every book he'd ever read. he made a mental note to tell her about this when he saw her again.

If he saw her again.

After a few seconds of tapping, he knew that *dum tre longa tempo nun* meant, roughly, *for a very long time now*.

He couldn't remember the rest. It hadn't been very long. A last minute instruction to a fellow conspirator? Or maybe something important, something that would help derail the plot. Maybe something, he thought hopefully, that would help get him out of this alive. Or maybe it was coincidence. But that first line: *History will forgive me*. It had to mean *something*.

He needed The Brick back. He needed to see the file again.

Flushed with a momentary success, panic swept back through him as he realized he'd lost count of the time. Two minutes? One? He glanced down at the gun in his hand, suddenly remembered. Told himself that if he had it out, he had to be prepared to fire it. To possibly kill someone. Otherwise there was no point in having it in his hand.

He tightened his grip on it. Moved his thumb. Flicked off the safety.

There was a dim alarm from within the Security Office.

Pushing through the layers of drywall and insulation, it was just a dull buzzing noise.

He heard the glass doors squeal open. Squeal shut. He heard a voice, moving away from him, towards the elevators. One man. He took a deep breath, checked the Kimber one last time, and turned the corner.