

Designated Survivor

Chapter 34

by Jeff Somers

34.

Thirty-three seconds before he heard Marianne Begley's voice, Frank Darmity was strapping his body armor back on, wincing a little as the blowback pushed into the wound in his abdomen, as the straps dug into his bloody shoulder. He was sweating and felt a little lightheaded. Shock, he thought. And exhaustion. He'd lost blood, suffered injury, and hadn't eaten or drunk anything in hours. This was not professional behavior, he chastised himself. A professional keeps himself in top condition at all times. He repeated the mantra his commanders had almost literally beaten into him: There is always time to eat. There is always time to hydrate. A hungry, thirsty operative is sloppy and weak.

Except, there literally had *not* been time.

He adjusted the vest so the indentation where the Begley Bitch had shot him didn't slip right into the hot, painful wound like a peg into a hole. It felt uncomfortable, out of sync, but he felt better with it on.

He hefted his rifle and checked it over, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

Amesley's Assholes had dropped his equipment one office

over from where they'd try to imprison him. It hadn't been hard to find.

What had been hard to find was Doctor Jack Renicks' dead body.

Renicks was another one. Sitting behind a desk. A button-pusher. He'd been looking forward to teaching the Secretary a lesson about the difference between them. But then the motherfucker had gotten all slippery and he'd wasted a lot of time chasing him, and then he'd killed himself. A coward. A bitch. He'd bitched out. And that had been an unsatisfying way for it all to go down. But Darmity was a soldier. He knew mission creep when he saw it. Once everything had gone to hell, his mission had shifted. So he'd let it go. He had to find the Begley and smother that fire.

Start with Renicks. She'd been with him, maybe planning to follow suit. He didn't think he'd find her weeping over the corpse, but it was a starting place. So he'd gone back to the office. And found it empty. A syringe on the floor. He'd picked it up and stared at it. Then at the empty spot on the floor.

Thought he should have told Amesley to fuck off and gone for Renicks with both barrels, right away. Fuck the subtle shit. That's where it had all gone wrong.

Just as he was slinging the rifle over his shoulder and trying to decide where to look for Begley, her voice suddenly crackled from the complex PA system.

"... — ever we do, Jack, we have to be smart. We can ride this out."

He blinked, staring up at the ceiling. The tiny speaker, like thousands of others throughout the complex, made her voice tinny and thin. But clear.

“We should keep moving. Hiding out someplace is just waiting to be killed.”

Renicks’ voice. Darmity straightened up and cursed. An involuntary vocalization.

“We keep moving, we actually increase our chances of just running into them, Jack. This studio is our best —”

Darmity was out the door. Their voices were in the air. The second he stopped concentrating on them, they stopped forming into coherent words in his head. They were bird songs. Just tinny noises fluttering in the air. All they meant was that Renicks — miraculously alive — and the Begley Bitch were in the TV Studio on Level Seven, accidentally hitting the PA.

He could see how it happened. He’d been in the studio, and the PA patch-in button was right on the console in the office portion. Someone had leaned on it. Or sat on it. Or put something on top of it, and the microphone was patched through to the PA. And the studio was insulated and soundproofed and wired so that the PA didn’t cut in there, just in case the President was making an address to the nation from the Secure Facility. You didn’t want security announcements stepping on the Commander-in-Chief.

So they didn’t know they were transmitting. Announcing their location.

The studio. He trotted down the hallway with the rifle in his hands, safety off, pointed down and to the side. It made sense. The Fax line had been yanked out of the wall, but if there was a place aside from the Security Office you might be able to communicate with the outside world, that would be it. And he liked the psychology of it: They might assume he wouldn’t come

back there because there had already been a close call for them there. It was the sort of half-smart thing a Softy like Renicks would think of.

As he approached the elevators, He smiled. Half smart. The studio would have been his next stop. There was an unconscious agent there that needed to be tended to.

He keyed in the call code. The indicator light blurred red for a moment, then went out. He frowned. Keyed it in again, more slowly. Sweat dripped off his nose. He felt shivery. He wondered if his wound was souring.

The indicator blurred red again. Then went off.

For a second, Darmity stood there glowering at the keypad. Renicks and Begley's voices were still sizzling in the air around him. Had he misremembered the code? After a second, he keyed in the previous code, for when the complex had been online. It didn't work either.

"Mother-fucker!" he spat, leaning back and kicking at the keypad. Nothing happened.

He turned away and started trotting unsteadily back the way he came. Renicks and Begley weren't the only people who knew how to use the Access Corridors.

The voices were still in the air. "*... increase our chances ...*"

By the time he crashed through the unmarked door leading to the service corridors, he was sweating freely and had given up holding his rifle carefully; he held it loosely by the barrel as he ran. Mouth open. Lungs burning.

In the service corridors there were no speakers. He could still hear their voices on the PA for a few seconds, and then they were swallowed by the walls. Then he was in the tube, sliding down

the access ladder with his hands loose on the railing. He hit the landing and almost fell, staggering backwards and catching himself.

He raced down the next three ladders the same way, ran for the access door on Level Seven and burst into the hallway.

“ ... can ride this ... ”

Their voices, still in the air. He didn't listen. All that mattered was that they had not yet realized their danger. They were unaware. He was creeping up behind them, and he was going to enjoy putting his foot up their ass.

He looped the rifle's strap around his forearm and held it carefully, pointed down at an angle. The door to the studio had a big red light mounted right above it to indicate when it was in use. The bulb glowed brightly. He knew they would be in the office section; if they had moved into the set their voices would be muffled and distant.

He kept his eyes on the door as he approached. He felt tensed and ready. Limber. Oiled. Sweat dripped into his eyes and he blinked them feverishly. But didn't stop. Didn't hesitate.

He took the last two steps quickly and kicked the door open. The lock shattered. It was just a privacy lock, had never been intended to resist a determined Frank Darmity.

The tiny control room was the mess he remembered it from earlier.

Renicks and Begley were nowhere to be seen.

Standing amidst the chaos, arms up in the air over his head, was the agent he'd left in the studio after capturing Begley. He was filthy. He didn't even turn to look in Darmity's direction.

Renicks and Begley were still talking.

“... just waiting to be killed.”

“We keep moving, we actually increase our chances of just running into them, Jack.”

A recording. Darmity stared at the agent — Simmons, he remembered — and considered. The studio control panel could digitally record sound and play it back; they had recorded a short conversation, patched through to the PA, and started a looped playback. Renicks and Begley were on set. Out of his line of sight. He saw their train of thought: He hears them, comes in guns blazing, they cut him down from an oblique angle before he even knows what’s happening.

A second before the man behind him spoke, Darmity heard the shift of fabric behind him.

“Drop the rifle,” a male voice said. Just a few feet behind him. Far enough to be out of reach. Close enough to not have to aim anything. “Just relax your hands and drop it. Do anything else, and I will shoot you dead. Don’t say a word. Don’t move anything but your hands.”

Darmity sighed and released the rifle. There were protocols.

“Good. Step into the room.”

Darmity stepped into the room. Simmons stared at him. Darmity didn’t acknowledge him in any way. He turned, and found two more people: A woman with short, red hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, her angular features terse and composed, and a burly man with a shaved head, scars on his scalp like Martian canals. They both held the same model of assault rifle. They both looked, to him, like people who would not hesitate to kill him the moment he gave a wrong answer.

This was proven a moment later. The woman turned to

Simmons, studied him for a moment, and then said “*Kiu estas la flava regxo?*”

Darmity nodded to himself. He didn't know what the words meant, but he'd heard them before.

In the corner of his eye, Darmity saw Simmons look at him. Then back at the woman. “I don't kn — ”

She squeezed the trigger. Four, five shots, one second. Simmons jiggled and exploded, fell to the floor like a sack of corn.

She swung the rifle towards Darmity. He looked back at her. “*Kiu estas la flava regxo?*” she said softly.

He nodded. Didn't waste any time. “*Trovi li en la strato de la kvar tordi.*”

He didn't know what those words meant either. He'd been taught them, and he remembered.

The woman nodded and put up her gun. The other man did as well. Darmity imagined the man behind him did the same.

The woman snapped a salute. “Sir!”

Darmity smiled and saluted back.