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Designated Survivor

Chapter 35

by Jeff Somers

35.

Thirty seconds after watching the woman salute Frank Darmity, Begley turned to Renicks and said “What the *hell* was that?”

Renicks finished his third water bottle in the last few minutes. He was feeling almost okay, though every muscle and ligament still ached. There was a thick core of exhaustion deep inside him, spreading outward, but he didn’t feel like he was going to fall over any more. “*La flava regxo*,” he said, hearing the tinny voices patched in from the studio. “A pass phrase. Esperanto. It means *The Yellow King*.”

Begley pursed her lips. “Looks like our Mr. Darmity is more highly placed in this than we thought.”

“Looks like our Mr. Darmity might be *running* this.”

There was a moment of silence. Renicks thought its flavor would accurately be described as *horrified*.

Their odds, he thought, had actually just gotten worse. The plan had been simple. Neither of them were in any shape to take on a fresh group of heavily armed, trained people. If they were here to “clean up”, lure them to a room with Mr. Darmity and let them sort each other out—he’d thought their worst-case scenario

was just one of them dead. Instead of weakening or eliminating one of their enemies, they'd combined them into one more effective unit. And they still had to make it out of the complex alive.

"There were six of them when I saw the first poor bastard get gunned down," Begley said. "Where are the other three?"

Begley leaned forward and pointed at one of the screens. "Lobby."

Renicks followed her pointing finger and studied the screen. In the large, useless lobby, grainy and grayscaled, three men in similar body-armor were visible. One appeared to be walking the perimeter, his futuristic-looking rifle aimed down at the floor in casual competence. The other two were working together on the floor, back towards the unused desk. A large black bag lay next to them.

"Bolting down tripods for heavier guns. They're planning to defend against an assault."

Renicks frowned. Watched the screen intently. His head throbbed like his brain was trying to squeeze out through his eyes and ears. "They're going to try and hold the complex? Jesus."

Begley leaned back, letting out an explosive sigh. Renicks looked at her. She was dirty. Bloodied. Her crisp, tailored suit had been torn and sagged off of her in unfortunate ways. She stood there with her arms crossed under her breasts fiercely, chewing her lip. Her posture, he noticed, was still perfect. For a moment, he wanted to reach out and touch her. Just her shoulder, or upper arm. Just friendly contact.

He didn't move. Looked back at the security screens.

He watched the tiny figures in the lobby for a moment.

Conscious of the silence. He glanced back at the TV studio. Darmity and the other three were gone.

Suddenly it felt like they could be right outside the door. This huge underground space, he thought. Everywhere they went there could be someone with an automatic weapon waiting to kill them.

He leaned forward. "Wait. Look."

Begley leaned in next to him. Their shoulders touched. He was aware of her physical presence suddenly. Warm. Solid. Comforting.

"What?"

He hesitated, trying to make the grainy security signal clearer. Trying to will it into better resolution. At the pace this complex was updated, he figured the Federal Government would get around to installing high-definition video feeds by the next century.

Then one of the three figures moved, and he had a clear view of what they were doing again. He nodded. "The tripods. Look at them."

Begley sucked in breath. "What the *hell*." She turned to look at him. "They're oriented inward."

Renicks nodded, leaning back. "They're not holding the complex against an assault. They're just making sure we don't get *out*."

Begley stepped back, turned, and began the ridiculous process of pacing in the tiny office. Three steps up, three steps back. Three steps, three steps. Then she stopped and grabbed his arm.

"Jesus, Jack, it's the same playbook. The charges. Underneath

the facility.”

Renicks blinked. Head pounding. “What?”

“They *planned* to blow the place. I think if they failed to pull this off, the President was supposed to blow the place and erase all evidence. But he didn’t — he killed himself. That wasn’t part of the plan. I think the idea was that Grant would be able to walk away untouched, maybe even a hero, the strong leader who guided us through a crisis. Win-win — either they launch their attack and manage their Soft Coup or whatever, or they get out of it with his image burnished and no one any wiser about whoever these crazy bastards *are*.”

“But then Grant goes loses his nerve. He takes the easy way out.”

“So, the backup plan. Blow this place. *Destroy every single scrap of evidence.*”

Renicks nodded. “There’s a lot, right? A lot of fingerprints. They re-wired the place. There’s surveillance video, access logs. The cut magnetic locks on the suite. The Brick, too.”

“Us.”

“Fucking hell.”

“This was the plan from the beginning. If they fail, blow the whole complex, make sure no one knows what’s happened here.”

Renicks nodded. “That animal wasn’t killing the other agents to keep them silent. He was killing them so they wouldn’t get in the way.”

He turned and stared at the screens again, searching for movement. The tiny office suddenly felt small. Hot.

“So what do we do?”

“We can’t go up,” Begley said immediately. “Even assuming

we can slip past Darmity and his three little helpers, we hit the lobby and there's a choke point. No other way out except the elevators. We'd be cut to ribbons. I'm willing to bet those three are ordered to fire at *anything* that comes up. Even their own people. No one is supposed to come out of this alive."

"And those three? In the lobby?"

She shrugged. "Suicide. Or suicide by cop, if need be. Won't be hard to get themselves shot once the FBI and the Marines arrive."

Renicks suddenly shook his head. Remember, suddenly, the news feed they'd seen earlier: Bluemont being evacuated. "Doesn't matter. Think about it. This place is rigged to be destroyed. That's a lot of force. Even if we could teleport to the surface right now and start running — "

Begley finished the sentence. "We'd never get clear of the blast radius."

They stood for another few seconds in silence. Renicks swallowed, something hard and choking. All this, he thought. And then he'd thought maybe they were going to get out alive. He thought of Stan. At least *someone* had some idea of what had really happened. He knew Stan well enough; he would investigate. Was probably already getting into trouble over it.

He looked back at Begley. She was staring at the monitors without focus, just staring. Lost in her thoughts too.

"The charges," he said suddenly. "They're not designed to be set off locally, right?"

She turned to him and blinked. once. Twice. Clearing her head. "Right. They're in place for remote detonation by order of the President."

“So there’s no *button* or anything in place here, right? They can’t have a box or something, a remote detonator?”

Begley nodded slowly. “Sure, Jack, they have to ... holy *shit*, Renicks.” She looked back at him with sudden energy. “They have to get *down* there. They have to set the charges *manually*.” She paused. “Jesus. That’s a *hard* suicide mission.”

It took Renicks a second or two to realize she was talking about themselves. When he looked up, she was looking right at him. He held her gaze for a moment and nodded.

“I already died once,” he said, forcing a grin he didn’t feel. His heart thudded erratically in his chest. He felt like puking. But he smiled at Begley. “What do we do?”

She smiled back. He had the impression they were both programming expressions on their faces like feeding a program into a computer: Just mechanical reactions to conscious commands. Both of them acting for the other’s benefit. He wondered if this was how his father’s patients had acted: Forced cheer, everyone in on it. Everyone smiling and saying the right things, everyone terrified and cringing underneath.

“We go down,” she said. Then her smile changed. Became more natural. He blinked and found himself smiling back, mysteriously excited.

“They’re on seven,” he said. They were buried, fourteen levels down, deep inside the mountain. “We’re ahead of them.”

She winked. Renicks thought that wink was the most remarkable thing he’d ever seen anyone do under any circumstances. “I know a shortcut,” she said.