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# Designated Survivor

## Chapter 36

by Jeff Somers

36.

One minute after their decision, Renicks trotted unsteadily behind Begley, wondering how in the world she managed to *almost* run with a broken leg while carrying a heavy automatic rifle. He wanted to draw some blood when they were finally done with this and win a Nobel Prize analyzing her genetic code. They were retracing their steps back to the service tunnel. They passed a series of unmarked doors along the damp, finished hallway that Renicks remembered. He knew the door that led to the tunnels was rusted. There was water flowing nearby, deep underground. He could smell damp in the air and wondered how often they had to tear out the carpet and moldy drywall, replace everything dry. Every few years, he thought.

When the rusted door came into view, Begley attacked it. Tore it open with a grunt. Her own momentum carried her back into Renicks. He steadied her and pushed her gently back into forward motion.

He felt the energy. The necessity. They had, for the first time, an advantage. They were some minutes ahead of Darmity, and for the first time knew exactly where all the other players were: Above them. Everyone was above them, heading down. Heading

down *fast*, and coming armed. But simply *knowing something concrete* was energizing. He hadn't realized how long they'd been running blind, scampering from one faulty hiding place to the next, always worried about turning a corner and finding an enemy.

Running felt perfectly natural.

Three steps into the service tunnel. There was the butt end of the ladder leading up to the thirteenth level; Renicks stared at it and skidded to a halt. Stood for a second, an image of Begley sliding down the last few feet of a ladder flashing through his thoughts.

Begley skidded to a halt on the gritty, irregular floor and twisted around. "Jack!"

"Go!" he shouted back. "I'll catch up in a second!"

She hesitated, then spun and hobbled off. He watched her for a second, knowing how much pain she had to be in. Then he tore open his bag and started riffling through its contents. Pulled the little mini-survival kit out and dug into it, extracting the fishing line. Dropping the rest of the kit back into the bag, he freed the fishing line from the plastic clip that kept it looped up and let it dangle free: About four feet of thin, shining wire.

He looked back at the ladder. Saw Begley sliding down. Wondered, for just a second, if that was a common trick. Decided it probably was.

When the ladder emerged from the channel a few feet above him, metal pieces had been welded into place, jutting back to the walls where they were attached with big, rusted bolts. To stabilize the last section of ladder. He stepped up close to the ladder. Put his face where it would be if he was sliding down,

terminal velocity from above. Lined up the bolts on the sides above him. Concluded that any wire strung between those bolts would slice up through the chin.

Thought about that for a second.

Thought about Frank Darmity. Saw his flat, squinty stare. Remembered his voice on the PA, making Begley scream. Thought about the guns. These people, he reminded himself, had tried to murder millions, and had come to make sure he and Begley were dead. Would kill thousands as collateral damage if the complex was destroyed before a complete evacuation had been effected.

Keeping his weight on his good ankle, he climbed up a few feet. The silence was almost perfect again, and for a second he imagined he could feel the ladder vibrating under his hands. Someone up above in the darkness, riding down. Then he hooked one arm through the rungs and hung on, looping the fishing line around the bolt on the left. Three, four times, twisted. Looped it again. Twisted. Made a knot. Pulled it over to the other side and looped it around the other bolt. Pulled it taut, as tight as he could manage. Looped and twisted until it was secure. He plucked it with one finger and climbed down to the floor.

It was invisible. Anyone sliding down the ladder would have no warning. He thought it would probably clear their body and catch the face.

Hesitated for one more second. Then turned and moved as quickly as he could after Begley.

He pushed all thoughts out of his head. Blocked out any chance of imagining someone slicing through that wire. Told

himself this was war. Told himself that anyone coming down that ladder was coming to set off the charges and kill Begley and himself. Told himself a lot of things, quickly and loudly, shouting to distract himself.

He caught up with Begley quickly. The hallway seemed to be devolving. The floor had become uneven and the walls were rougher. The regular hanging lights had given way to bare bulbs sprouting from a single electrical conduit. He had the impression of coming to the edges of the complex. Everything blurry. Unfinished. It was palpably colder and damper.

Begley turned her head as he fell into step behind her.

“The charges are throughout the complex,” she said breathlessly, turning back. “Every level. Deep inside the concrete. Designed to pancake the whole goddamn place. Which will destabilize the whole mountain. Rockslides, mudslides in addition to the fireball and gas venting. You can’t get to the charges. You’d have to drill into the pour on every level, each one would take a fucking hour to get to, and they’re pressure-locked, so the minute the air hit them from a bore-hole they’d trip individually. They’re linked to the outside via dedicated satellite hookup. Designed to be separate from the Security Office, because the whole idea is to blow it out from under someone seizing the complex illegally.”

She took a few steps in silence, catching her breath.

“They ran the satellite hookup through the old mine shafts. If you want to disarm the system, you have to disconnect the hookup from the complex. If you want to set the charges off manually, you have to simulate a signal *from* the hookup!”

They came to a right-angle in the corridor. Renicks watched

Begley limp around the corner. Lungs burning, he raced after her. His ankle shooting shards of glass up into his calf with every step.

He turned the corner and slowed just a fraction of a step. The corridor widened out into a small room. On his right was a huge steel blast door. A single sheet of steel set into the rock. A small keypad — for a moment Renicks was stupidly amused at the tiny scale of the keypad compared to the door itself, which was about ten feet high and twelve or fifteen feet wide. It was unmarked. The metal reflected the weak light back and appeared to glow a soft orange-yellow.

He turned and saw Begley continuing down the corridor, which narrowed down again, disappearing into near blackness. The electrical conduit on the ceiling ended at a junction box a few feet past the corner.

“Isn’t *that* the access door?” he shouted, lumbering after her.

The blue light of her tiny flashlight sprang into being ahead of him. “Yes — two sets of blast doors, one leading to the old mine shaft itself and one into here. They take time to open. Five minutes or so before a single person can squeeze through, ten minutes to full aperture. It’s a production.”

He could barely make out her outline as he closed in again. He could feel the walls narrowing down. Reached up and found he could touch the ceiling. Their sounds were muffled back at them. The corridor was shrinking.

“This,” Begley said, breathing hard as she came to a stop, “is the shortcut.”

Renicks squeezed in next to her. With his shoulder jammed into what felt like rough, raw rock, he was pressed against her

tightly. He could feel her struggling for breath. Could feel her body heat. She was exhausted. *He* was exhausted, he realized. Heart pounding, head pounding, legs shaking. They were both close to their physical limits.

He squinted, following the weak pale light of her flashlight. The space tapered off sharply from where they were — the ceiling crashing down, the walls sucking in, until there was just a black shadow, perhaps two feet high, a foot and a half wide. If that.

“What is it?”

Begley turned to face him, giving him a sudden sense of release as he was no longer being pressed into the wall. “Just a void. I had hours to myself in this goddamn tomb, so I wandered. I read specs and old manuals. I explored. I don’t think this was here when they built the place. I think something gave way and this opened up. No one ever noticed. It’s a hole, basically. It’s wet. Water erosion, I guess, caused it.”

Renicks strained his eyes at it. It was just darkness. Shadow. “A hole.”

“It’s tight. For me. For you, it’ll be *really* tight. It drops you into the cavern beyond, what the old mineshaft opens into. Where the hookup is.”

“You climbed into that,” he said. He tried to imagine the frame of mind that would lead Begley to shrug and *climb into it*. The level of boredom required. He didn’t think he had a suitable experience with which to compare it. The idea of pushing himself into that hole, with the weight of rock around him was horrifying. He knew immediately that the only thing that would ever convince him to do so was something like Frank Darmity

with an automatic weapon creeping up behind him.

He felt rather than saw her preparing. Pulling off her jacket. Leaning the rifle against the wall.

“No way to carry the guns in. But we can use the straps to pull them in after us,” she said. “Give me yours.”

He slung it off his shoulder and held it out blindly until he felt her grab it. “How come you didn’t report this? It’s a pretty major breach of security.”

She removed the strap from his rifle and hers. “I don’t know. You can’t get into the cavern from the outside except through another blast door, and getting *up* into the void from in there is not nearly as easy as dropping *down* into the cavern from here.” She tied the straps together into one, then set the safeties and looped it around the rear sights, binding them together. “It was a serious breach of protocol, I admit it, Jack. When we’re topside you can file a complaint.”

He managed a ghost of a smile. “I will. I already have to file one against Darmity, so it will be no trouble.”

“I go first. When the rifles drop in, come in after me. I’ll talk you through if you get disoriented.”

Renicks swallowed. “Jesus,” he said.

Begley paused. After a second he felt her hand on his. “You gonna be able to do this, Jack?”

He swallowed again. Felt his heart lurching in his chest, a crazy non-rhythm. He thought if his heart were doing that under any other circumstances he’d be in the car already, headed for the Emergency Room. He nodded. “I’ll be okay.”

She squeezed his hand. Then let go. Went back to work.

“We’ll be inside in thirty seconds,” she said. “It’ll take them,



minimum, five minutes once they get here. That's our window. If we can trash the hookup in five minutes, they can't blow the place."

He shook himself. "But can still shoot us."

He heard her small, cute laugh. "Well, *sure*." She paused. "Here, take the light. I know what I'm doing here. You'll need it more."

He took the flashlight from her. Watched her sit on the floor, push her legs into the shadow. He wondered if her splint was going to cause her trouble, but she made smooth progress, and he figured it was a sloping fall, a straight shot. She pushed herself forward with her hands, the straps of the guns looped around one fist, dragging them behind her. Her feet disappeared, then her legs, then her midsection, and finally her head. The rifles rattled on the stone right behind her, then were sucked into the darkness behind her. It was as if the darkness was eating her.

He waited. Realized he was waiting to hear her say she was okay, or that he should come through now. Felt stupid.

Far off, he heard a sudden shriek. There and gone.

He dropped onto the floor and pushed his feet forward until they were swallowed by the darkness. Felt no resistance. Took two quick, deep breaths. Began pushing himself into the void. He watched his legs disappear, eaten by darkness. Felt a change in temperature; it was colder once you crossed the threshold. He felt the top of the void and leaned back, getting onto his elbows. When his shoulders were slipping under, he could just see the rough line of the top of the hole. Just enough room for him to slide into. His feet were suddenly dangling over an edge, and he

could see that he'd be able to just barely push himself along until gravity took over and sucked him down.

He pushed with his arms until he couldn't go any further that way, then used his legs. His calves were bent over the unseen edge; he pulled with his hamstrings, letting his head and shoulders lie on the floor as he pulled himself further in. The dim glow of the flashlight showed him rough gray stone, droplets of milky water hanging half an inch from his eyes.

Then he stopped.

He kicked his legs but was unable to get any more purchase; they were extended out too far. He stopped breathing. He could twist his arms but they were wedged between his body and the rock and for a moment he couldn't get them free. A black, swallowing terror welled up inside him. He thrashed for a second, kicking his legs uselessly and twisting his torso violently. One arm squeezed free, and he quickly found the inner edge of the slot with his free hand. With just his fingers he managed to slide himself another inch or so, and that was enough. His other arm squeezed free and then he was able to pull himself the rest of the way through. Just before his head cleared, gravity finally noticed him and yanked him down. He scraped his forehead on the rough stone and tumbled a few feet down a sharp, rocky incline, biting his tongue and knocking his head a few times.

He lay for a moment on a wet, sharp surface. It was painful, but he didn't want to move again. Perhaps ever.

"*Jack,*" Begley whispered, almost in his ear. "You okay?"

He nodded. Felt foolish. "I'll live," he whispered back. He wondered why they were whispering. He didn't see the flashlight; there was a thin film of weak, gray light that nudged

the edges of things and left them indistinct. He could barely see Begley, a foot away. She looked spectral and immaterial, like a ghost come to haunt him. She held out one of the M16s.

“Good,” she said. “Because we’re not alone in here. Someone beat us to it.”