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Designated Survivor

Chapter 37

by Jeff Somers

37.

One minute and forty-three seconds after Begley missed her shot, Renicks was crawling through the darkness towards the inner blast door.

They'd landed in a slight depression in the floor of a huge cavern. He judged its size by the hollow sound of the air in the gloom. His eyes were adjusting as best they could; he could see but beyond a few feet things became grainy and blurry. The floor felt sandy and shifting, like standing on a deep pour of fine gravel. Begley had led him to the lip of the depression and he'd climbed up a few feet to peer over the edge.

The outer blast door was open. He could see a sliver of it, a pale glow in the distance, reflecting back every bit of light. A soft gray glow poured from beyond it — the old mine shaft, worming up through the mountain to the surface. An experimental shaft, never intended for actual mining.

Beyond the little depression he and Begley had spilled out onto, the cavern floor was relatively flat, an irregular oval shape, the size of a baseball diamond. Thick metal conduits emerged from the rock floor just past the blast door, sprouting up from the ground like the roots of some monstrous gray metal tree.

They spread out immediately, dividing into smaller and smaller pipes, bolted directly into the soft rock, running in straight lines in the direction of the inner blast door, where the conduits dove back down into the earth.

Here and there black boxes with softly glowing LED screens and a single, nonstandard-looking multi-pin jack, wide and thin. Renicks had never seen a cable that would fit the connection.

The two men crouching around one of the boxes obviously had: They had a flat, wide cable plugged into the box. The cable led to a small handheld keyboard. Both men were dressed similarly to the others they'd seen on the security screens: Black body armor, hardshell backpacks, the strange, melted-looking rifles. One was laboriously typing into the keyboard while the other read softly from a small, palm-sized book.

Begley pulled softly at his shirt and he climbed back down behind the lip of the depression to sit next to her, their backs against the rock.

She took the rifle in her hands and looked at him. Renicks nodded and put up his hands: Shooting people in the dark with an automatic weapon was, he thought, pretty clearly Begley's department.

He watched her as she prepared, choosing a spot where she could lean forward against the slope and have her shoulders up over the edge. She steadied the gun against her shoulder and sighted. Turned slightly and sighted again. Then back again. He saw her take a deep breath, lean back slightly.

She fired.

The noise was there and gone, louder than he'd expected. The gun danced a little in her hands, and a yellow-orange flash lit up

the muzzle for a second. He saw the man kneeling over the keyboard spin and drop, transformed into a ragdoll. The other rolled away almost instantly, disappearing into the shadows.

“Fuck!” Begley hissed, sliding down to join him again. “I can disable the hook up if I can get up there, but I need you to draw him off.”

Renicks nodded. His heart pounded in his chest, and dread filled every space between his thoughts. The man in the darkness was a professional. Trained in weapons, in combat. In killing. Renicks was an amateur.

He paused, thinking that he *had* shown a certain dumb talent for killing people. Hated himself immediately.

He nodded and leaned forward again. “Wait for my signal!”

He gave a thumb’s up, hoping he was projecting a confidence he didn’t feel, and got up into a crouch. Ran along the lip of rock as far as he could; fifteen or twenty feet away from the blast door the depression rose up to meet the rest of the floor and he lost his cover. He dropped into a crawl and moved as quickly as he could, trusting in the gloom to cover him.

He’d thrown himself into motion without allowing himself to hesitate. He knew if he stopped to think, he’d freeze up. As he moved he raced through what needed to be done. He had to distract and engage the surviving man. Keep him off of Begley. Kill him if he could.

When he reached the blast door, he pushed himself into the deepest shadow available and gave himself ten seconds to look around. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest like it was trying to break free, adrenaline soaking into everything. He tried to fix the geography in his head. The outer blast door was not

directly across from the inner blast door. The inner door was also set lower; from where he lay panting in the dark, Renicks could only see the top of the other opening. A pale gray rectangle. Begley was in the depression, hidden completely by shadows. As was the surviving man, hiding somewhere else in the gloom.

He let the rifle drop. Pulled his bag around so it sat on his belly. Tore it open and dug into the contents. The Kimber. The survival kit. The bottle of Scotch, forgotten deep down on the bottom. Found Uncle Richie's Zippo.

He went back to the survival kit: A couple of fishhooks, the water purification tablets — turned to powder in their little plastic bag — a small game snare. He put it all back into his bag.

Looked around again. He took a breath and nodded to himself. He didn't have time for a plan. He needed to just do whatever came to mind. He reached down and took hold of his own shirt. Tore a big swatch of the fabric free with both hands. About five inches of the material. He dug the bottle of whiskey out of his bag again, took the cork between his teeth and yanked it free, spitting it out into the darkness. Took a swig. Regretted the swig immediately as his heart lurched and his head swam. He poured some of the liquor onto the torn piece of his shirt, then a bit more right onto the gritty floor of the cavern. Stuffed the fabric into the neck of the bottle until it filled it like a plug, a plume of white spilling out of the glass.

Carefully set the bottle down on the floor. Slipped the Zippo into his pocket. Getting back into a crouch, he took the Kimber from the bag and placed it in a shadowed nook right next to the blast door.

He crept back to where he'd left the bottle and rifle and

picked both up. Slowly straightened up. Heart pounding, he counted to ten, wondering, far too late, if Darmity's people had brought night vision with them.

Then he figured if they had, he would have been shot two minutes ago.

He held the rifle exactly the way you weren't supposed to: One handed, arm outstretched. He pointed it off to the side. Tried to brace himself.

Well, so much for my marksmanship merit badge, he thought.

Squeezed the trigger.

The rifle roared for a split second, the muzzle flashing in the gloom. The rifle bucked and jumped out of his hand, straining his wrist. Biting back a cry, he stumbled a little but forced himself to watch the darkness. Just as he steadied himself, he saw it: A similar flash, then the noise of return rifle fire, aimed a few feet to his right.

He started running.

Fixing the location of the flash in his mind, he ran as fast as he could push himself, holding the improvised bomb in one hand while he dug the Zippo out of his pocket with the other. He approached at an angle, coming around in a loop so he would pass in front of the spot from the left side, from the shadows across from the open blast door.

Lungs burning, he forced himself to wait until he started the approach, looping inwards. Then he snapped the lighter open and flicked it into life, the tiny yellow flame dancing immediately. He touched it to the piece of white cloth and it flared into bright life. Without pausing to think, he threw it as he ran.

The tiny flame traced an arc across the distant, black ceiling of the cavern and smashed into dancing flames. For a moment they swirled on the floor, liquid, rising up in tongues. A second later they seemed to reach out like an arm reaching into the darkness and grabbing onto a man's form, revealed next to the pyre as if he'd formed out of the new light itself. Then there was a man outlined in flames, running. Running. Falling to his knees. A burst of gunfire from the darkness of the downslope, and he fell backwards as if kicked.

Triumph surged through Renicks. He resisted the urge to throw his arms up in the air as he made out the dim form of Begley scrambling onto the maze of conduits. Continued to run out of sheer exhilaration. As the triumph faded into a vague, rotten horror, he passed close to where the first man had fallen, shot by Begley. He slowed to a walk, all the energy draining from him. He'd killed two people directly. Murdered them. Self-defense, maybe, but they were still dead. He'd aided in other deaths, too.

He stopped and stood for a moment. Pictured the woman up in the TV studio again. His kids were going to ask him to tell them how this all happened. He was going to have to tell them the story.

"Jack!"

He blinked in the darkness and snapped his head up. *Pray for forgiveness on your own time, Jack*, he told himself, and pushed himself back into motion, back towards Begley. She was crouched over the tiny handheld LED screen and keyboard, attached via the thin, broad cable to the black box on the cavern floor.

“This will take me about ten minutes,” she said without looking up.

Renicks shook off the last clinging horror and self-disgust, clearing his head. “Maybe we should go find an ax. Just cut the lines.”

She shook her head without pausing or looking up. “Can’t. Interrupt the signal improperly, the charges blow. It’s designed to prevent people from taking possession of this facility when it’s online as the new Commander-in-Chief’s headquarters.” She tapped something into the keyboard and studied the stream of data that spilled out after it. Shook her head. Finally looked up at him.

She was exhausted, and Renicks felt immediately guilty. She was in worse shape than he was. She was still focused and working to save lives — to save their lives. “I need ten minutes.”

He nodded. “What about the mine shaft?” he said. “Just making a run for it?”

She looked back down at the screen. “Aside from the potential deaths of civilians? We’re not alone in this facility yet, Jack. We walk away, Darmity gets in here five minutes later and sets the charges, we’re half a mile up that shaft when a fireball comes through, burning us alive, and then the whole damn thing just collapses. We don’t even know how many people they’ve sent. We’ve seen nine, including our friend Mr. Darmity. There could be dozens more we just haven’t seen.”

Renicks nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m not thinking. I’m — ”

Somewhere behind them, a red flashing light sparked into life. A klaxon split the silence. And a deep rumbling noise he could feel in the stone under him lurched into life. The Blast

door, being opened.

In his head, Renicks heard Begley again. *We're not alone in this facility yet.*