



[REDACTED] [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED] survivor

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Designated Survivor

Chapter 39

by Jeff Somers

39.

Two seconds after settling into position, Renicks began to sweat. In his head, he heard Begley's hoarse whisper: *Jack, we're going to have to kill them.*

It wasn't the temperature of the cavern, which was pretty low. It was reaction. Adrenaline and terror, the sudden burst of activity followed by sitting in a hole and trying to be as still as possible.

The noise of the blast door opening was so loud and caused so much vibration it ceased to be sound and became, instead, simply part of the fabric of the new reality.

Renicks didn't have an accurate idea of when the blast door would finally open far enough to admit whoever was coming in, but his sense was they had about twenty seconds. He scanned the cavern. He couldn't see Begley, but knew she would be across from him, about five feet further from the inner blast door than he was. They'd hastily positioned themselves so they could concentrate fire on the blast door and avoid cross-firing into each other. Assuming he could actually aim the M16. Which he was not certain of.

In the noise, in the gloom, they'd spent the last four minutes

preparing for their visitors. Begley had looked at him like he was crazy when he'd told her to take her jacket off. He didn't know if he was being clever or not. He'd adopted *just do something* as his personal motto. There was no time for ponderous plans or research. He was just throwing together whatever he could, as quickly as he could.

Dressed in his and Begley's jackets, the two dead men had been posed as best as they could over the black box, the keypad with its sinuous cable placed delicately in the slack hands of the one Begley had shot. Both were positioned with their backs to the blast door. Neither looked like anything except two corpses that had been dressed and posed, Renicks thought. But in the gloom, in a split second, he thought they might cause hesitation. Assumption. *Something* they could use.

He'd handled a corpse before.

When your father is a doctor in a small town, he thought, it isn't surprising that you learn a lot about medicine. In a workmanlike, practical kind of way. It isn't surprising that you sometimes act as unlicensed nurse or unlicensed anesthesiologist. Or unlicensed coroner.

The sense of dead weight was as he remembered. The lingering warmth. The body surprisingly loose. Not stiff at all. He'd had a woozy moment of familiarity: the feel of the dead skin, the sagging body. The sense that somehow this was now just a heavy sack of *material*, and not a person, any more.

He'd kept his mind blank while carrying them. The burned-skin smell was overwhelming. He could still smell it, since he was wearing the man's charred body armor, still warm to the touch. Begley had wordlessly refused to wear the other set, and there

was no time to argue with her.

After they'd posed the bodies, he'd felt wired. Amped up. Like any kind of silence, of stillness, would be a mistake. Allow something to occur to him. He needed to keep moving and found himself studying the inner blast door as it ground its way open. He had a minute or so, maybe a minute and a half. He ran over to it, ankle sending friendly spikes of pain up into his leg, and dumped out his bag for what seemed like the fiftieth time. Found the slippery wire of the small game snare and unwound it, threading it between his fingers and getting a sense of its length.

He'd trotted back to the blast door with it. It was a simple piece of work; a thin wire, about ten feet or so long, with a small loop on one end, banded by a brass clip that kept it from slipping. The other end had a bigger loop formed with a noose-like knot, a sliding hitch that allowed the snare to constrict around anything that tugged at it. The idea was, you set the snare up in the forest so that the noose hung over a likely path for a small animal — rabbit, squirrel, or similar. As the critter passed through the space its head would catch the noose, and its own forward momentum would snap the noose tight.

He'd affixed the small end of the snare to a stub of rock where the blast door had been carved out of the wall years ago. Tugged it a few times to be sure of it. Then turned and looked at the floor of the cavern right inside the door. Had tried to decide in five seconds how they would come.

They wouldn't come in straight down the middle. Too obvious. Plus, they would be impatient for the blast door to open. As soon as it opened wide enough, they would come. They would come at an angle, dashing for the shadows. Since the door was

opening, from their perspective, from left to right, he assumed they would angle to his right.

Knelt down with the noose end of the snare and formed a little platform for it, scraping together some dirt and gravel so the noose could lay elevated from the rest of the floor. Not by much. He didn't want it to be an obvious obstruction to avoid by instinct.

Renicks crouched in the darkness and tried to pick the snare out. Couldn't. The dark had swallowed it. He knew the odds of anyone stepping on it were very low. The odds of *him* or Begley stepping on it were somewhat higher. He didn't know what else to do. He held the rifle in his hands, finger off the trigger, and watched the bright line forming as the blast door opened.

Jack, we're going to have to kill them.

If they could somehow gun them down before they reached the shadows, they had the advantage. Once they reached the shadows, it evened up, and he didn't like how square odds ended for him. Trained mercenaries in the dark with automatic weapons ... and him.

He watched the bright line get thicker. After living with the new reality of the opening blast door for so long, the line was widening far too quickly. He watched it swelling, counting off the seconds.

He felt his own sweat on the surface of the rifle, chilled to a slimy film.

Jack, we're going to have to kill them.

He stared at the thick band of light formed by the opening blast door. Cold sweat dripped into his eyes.

Then there was someone running.

Renicks didn't get a good look at them. They were there, framed in the light, and then they were running. Right towards the two corpses. He swung the rifle clumsily, trying to keep up with them. They moved too fast, and the light was so dim — he turned quickly with the heavy gun and overbalanced. Swinging the gun up to shift his balance, his finger jerked and he spat three rounds into the hidden roof of the cavern.

Then gunfire burst from Begley's position. He saw the brief flash. Imagined he heard a shriek over the rumble of the door — a strangled cry, instantly swallowed. As he scrambled to regain his balance, heart pounding and head aching, he couldn't be sure. Which meant the first one through the door could be out there, still. Creeping about.

Keep it together, he told himself. Calm down.

Begley would be displacing. *If I fire, I'll move*, she'd said. He wouldn't know her approximate location any more. He put his eyes on the door again, just in time to see something small and cylindrical sail through the opening, landing softly. Renicks followed it with his eyes, alarm flashing through him.

There was an explosion loud enough to drown out the door, heavy enough for Renicks to be knocked over by its invisible fist. The rifle flew out of his hands and was swallowed by the cavern. And then the whole cavern lit up like the sun in your eyes no matter where you looked, blinding and painful even after he'd shut his eyes tightly. And stayed that way.