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Designated Survivor

Chapters 41-48

by Jeff Somers

41.

Just before he heard Begley scream, the world seemed to tilt. Renicks felt like he was sliding off the deck of some huge ship. Going down. He was blind, but it was sensory overload instead of a lack of light: The light was everywhere, pushing into his brain. He threw his arm up over his eyes and that helped, but even then some of the intense white light burst through, painful.

In his left ear was just a high-pitched ringing noise and a dull throb. He could still hear — the incessant grinding of the blast door was still there, like any other weak force in the universe — but only in his right ear.

Panic gripped him. Reaching up to his ear, he felt warm, sticky blood. He'd heard of stun grenades, on the news. In video games. He knew what they were. This had been something beyond his experience. He was blind and disoriented, resisting the sick urge to run, to just run until he hit something or got hit by something. Clenching his teeth, he let himself drop, falling prone.

Being on the floor of the cavern helped. He knew where bottom was again. For a second he clung to the floor like a man floating on a piece of driftwood. He pictured the cavern in his

memory, the fuzzy, dark details. He knew how stun grenades were used: Blind and confuse your enemies, then come in, hunt everyone down. Staying in one place was suicide. So he started to crawl.

After two seconds, he heard the snarl of automatic fire. Then he heard Begley scream.

He froze again. His heart staggered and skipped a beat, two, then slammed back into motion. With the screech of the blast door and one ear not functioning, he couldn't tell where she was. But he knew it meant someone was in the cavern. And they would be looking for him next.

42.

Frank Darmity stepped into the cavern. Imagined he could feel the dividing line. As if the bright light of the stun was an oil suspended in the air. He paused just inside and swept his gaze around. He knew they would be blind, but he still felt exposed. Aside from the containment force left topside, he had no more pawns to work with. As it probably should have fucking been from the goddamn get-go, he was running the show. And about fucking time.

He moved carefully. The shades toned the light down to a manageable level, but left everything grayscale and his depth perception was for shit. He hadn't spotted Renicks. He wasn't too concerned; Renicks was a soft touch – smarter than expected, maybe, but he'd been a Desk Man and he remained a Desk Man – and he was probably on the ground in a panic, blind and confused. He could take his time.

He knew where Begley was. He had her position fixed and he was certain he'd nailed her. She might not be dead, and Darmity figured he had time to go check.

And then he would go find Renicks.

43.

Renicks started crawling.

In the noise and blinding light, he focused in on one thought: *Do something. Do anything.* His choices were to curl up and let the noise and light wash over him until Darmity or one of his people found him and put him out of his misery, or move. Just move.

He was blind, but he knew where the blast door was.

He had a vague sense of its position anyway, but it was the engine pumping all the noise into the space. It was easy to start pulling himself with his elbows in the damp, gritty soil of the cavern floor, pulling himself towards the roar.

44.

She was still alive. The Begley Bitch. She resolved in Darmity's vision like a pixilated image on a screen. The M16 lay on the cavern floor next to her. He kicked it away, kept his rifle trained on her. She was curled up on her side, arms pushing against her belly. The blood looked black to him. Thick black rivers of it. Her hands were painted with it. She writhed and gasped.

He stood over her. Enjoying the moment.

And then he had an idea.

45.

When Renicks came across the body he stopped. Breathing was difficult. He was overheated and dehydrated. His head pounded. Every time he breathed in he inhaled a cloud of dust that made him want to cough and choke. When his arm slapped onto something fleshy, he froze for a second, cringing, waiting for the blow. The gunshot.

Nothing.

He reached forward and pulled himself forward using the body. Still breathing. Still warm. He slapped blindly at it, seeking anything that might give him an advantage. Anything.

He found her head. Felt the elastic band looped around, followed the straps. Found the goggles.

46.

Kneeling over her, Darmity made sure she didn't have a weapon hidden. A handgun, a knife. Something clutched in a hidden hand, ready to make him look foolish. There was nothing. She'd been gutshot with high-velocity rounds and was in too much pain to be able to think straight.

Holding his rifle in one hand, aimed away from him, he reached down and pushed his hand roughly into her belly.

Made her scream.

Come on, he thought, bring 'im over here.

47.

Everything ran through her mind all at once. The pain, yes, foremost and immediate. The smell of the motherfucker, stale sweat and something worse. A man you wouldn't sit next to at a bar. Her father, shaking his head in amused exasperation, his usual emotion. The pain again, eating up every bit of her and leaving just lungs and vocal chords and taut, strained muscles. Her sisters, all so alike, looking back at her from eleven, nine, eight, seven years ahead. Jack Renicks, smiling that secret smile when he knew more than you did.

The pain again. Then, for a few blessed seconds, blackness.

48.

Darmity slapped her face with his bloody hand. Fucking hell. Passed out. He stood up, feeling his back twitch as his knees popped. Hefted the rifle.

Without warning, the noise stopped. The blast door finally open. The sudden silence seemed like noise itself, for a moment.

Then, behind him, someone pushed the muzzle of a gun into the back of his head. The soft spot where his neck met his skull. And he thought