

I watched the speech until it was finished, surreptitiously glancing back at the hallway that led to the stairwell, as well as back over to the nearby elevators. Pretty soon, Hans and his men would step out of that elevator, and I had no way of knowing when. I was aware of every second that went by, knowing that any one of them might be the moment that all hell would break loose.

Finally, the speech ended, and the audience cheered before shifting into a party crowd, with people gathering in groups to chat. I even spotted two people sneaking off, giggling and groping each other, walking down the same hallway I had come from. If I remembered the movie correctly, that meant the room John McClane was in was in that direction as well, since he gets a full view of them being pulled out of their room when Hans shows up. I watched them leave for a moment before focusing on my target.

Mr. Takagi was still talking to McClane's wife, despite the best efforts of that asshole guy whose name was slipping my mind. He was clearly looking for more attention, the attention he obviously felt he deserved. Eventually, Mr. Takagi broke away from the pair, stepping towards a table laden with food. Seeing the first chance I had had since I started watching, I quickly stepped forward. He was already turning back to the pair when I stepped in front of him.

"Mr Takagi!" I said with a smile. "I'm glad I caught you for a moment. Do you think I could borrow your ear for a minute or two? I have-"

"Who are you?" He asked in a very no-nonsense tone. "You are not one of my employees. Why are you here?"

"Well, if I'm honest, Sir. I wanted to speak with you," I said, trying to sound genuine. "I have a business prop-"

"And you came to me? During what is supposed to be a celebration?" He asked, sounding annoyed and baffled. "This is unacceptable. I-"

"Okay, this is going nowhere. You see this?" I asked, shifting my posture and gesturing down at the pistol just barely visible under my jacket. "That right there means you are coming with me. If you raise your voice, about five of my teammates are going to kick down the doors and start wiping people out. Unless you'd like your Christmas party to turn into a bloodbath, I suggest you shut up and head to the stairs."

The man's face fell for a moment when he realized I was threatening him, then morphed into something much colder when I threatened his staff. If looks could kill, my head would have exploded. After a moment of silence, he narrowed his eyes. Then he spotted something behind me, his eyes going wide. I turned and spotted Hans and his boys stepping out of the elevator, armed with MP5s. I quickly turned back to the older Asian man, putting my hand on his shoulder.

"See, there they are now. As long as you don't do anything stupid, they won't kill anybody. Now move!"

I gave him a little shove, and he started to walk away. We had only made it a few steps around the far side of the crowd when one of the goons fired into the air, causing the socializing to stop and the screaming to start. I grabbed Takagi's shoulder roughly and kept pushing him through, managing to get past most of the crowd and back into the hallway that led to the stairs. Takagi resisted my shoving, so I wrapped my arm around his waist and lifted him, ignoring his shout.

I carried the surprisingly light man, even as he swatted and elbowed me, down the hall. As I ran past the corner office, I noticed that the door was still shut, but I could see movement inside, shadows shifting as John ran to get his gun, and then I was around the corner. Mr. Takagi continued to try to stop me, but I finally reached the stairwell door, all but kicking it open and dragging the reluctant man through.

"Stop! Where are you taking me!" He shouted, his voice now carrying through the stairwell. "What is going on!"

"Mr. Takagi, I know this is hard to believe, but we are trying to save you," I explained, starting to drag the man down the stairs. "Those people aren't mine; they are terrorists and thieves. We need to get you out of the building before they can get their hands on you."

"My people! I need to return to my employees!" He responded as I managed to get him down a full flight of stairs, where Alissa and George were waiting.

"Mr. Takagi, I need you to calm down!" Alissa said, her voice professional and clear. When he refused to calm down at all, she sighed and brandished an already-prepared syringe. "Are you allergic to any medications?"

"I... what? No! Release me at once! If you are trying to help me, help me return to my people. I will not abandon them!"

Alissa gave me a look, and after I nodded, she stuck her needle into Mr. Takagi's arm, which I had restrained against himself. He cursed and tried to break away again, but it was too late. Between his small size and age, I could feel him getting weaker by the moment. After just a few seconds, he was completely limp. The second he went limp in my arms, all three of us started climbing downstairs, descending two floors before I reached the rest of the team. They were waiting for us on an empty floor, holding the door open for us to step through. I laid Mr. Takagi down on the ground, Alissa kneeling down beside him with a wince.

"Alright... I think that went well," I said softly, recovering slowly from the rush. "Let's wait to make sure he isn't having a bad reaction, and then-"

The sound of a door being opened higher up the stairs, coming in through the still-open doors. Everyone went silent, and I tiptoed back into the stairwell. I slowly looked around the stairs, up through the gap in the middle, spotting just a hint of someone climbing upwards. I saw a hand on the railing, a shadow shifting as they passed the lights and the sound of bare feet on the metal stairs. After thirty seconds or so, they left the stairwell several floors up from us.

"Okay, pretty sure that was John," I said quietly as I stepped back out of the stairwell. "That means everything is going alright. Now, we need to slowly make our way down to the first floor, find a window to bust open, and then we can escape. Preferable before the cops arrive."

"So, should we head out now?" Jessica asked, fidgeting with her shotgun.

"Alissa? How is the patient doing?" I asked.

For a moment, she was quiet, putting her finger up against his neck, feeling his pulse, her lips moving as she counted to herself. She nodded, seemingly satisfied, before pulling at his shirt for a moment, opening a place to slide the listening end of a stethoscope against his chest. After a few seconds of listening, she nodded.

"As far as I can tell, he is fine," She responded, putting the stethoscope back into her bag. "Heart rate is normal for a man of his age, and his breathing sounds good. I'd like to-

"What the fuck-"

The sound of someone talking from the stairwell caused us all to whirl around, weapons raised. It was John McClane, standing in the doorway, his gun up and pointed at my head.

"What the hell is going on here?" He said aggressively, still keeping his voice down. "What did you do to Mr. Takagi?"

"... He is unconscious," I responded, taking a second to force myself to look past the gun pointed at me, meeting John's eyes. "I know it looks bad, but we are here to get him out of the building and out of the terrorist's hands."

As I talked, I gestured to the rest of the group, and John looked at them, double-taking when he noticed Barry and Jessica.

"How old are you two?" He asked, eyebrow raised as he noticed their age. "What the hell is going on? I'm going to need some answers here, real ones, *Now*."

"There isn't really an explanation I can tell you, John, I-"

"How the fuck do you know my name?" He asked, his gun focused on me. "I-"

"Because this situation is beyond your paygrade, Mr. McClane," I said, standing up slowly, now ignoring the pistol pointed at my chest. "We are here to take Mr. Takagi somewhere safe, and there is nothing you can do to stop us. And I can prove it. Alissa, is he stable?"

"Yes," She confirmed, her voice full of tension as she stared at the action hero come to life. "If he was having a bad reaction I would have heard it in his breathing by now."

"Alright, thank you, Alissa. Whenever you're ready, I think it's time you went home..."

I trailed off as Alissa started to flicker. She looked down at her hands and then back up at me, her eyes wide as the flickering got worse and worse.

"What the hell, this feels so-"

Her words cut out as suddenly she flickered out... and didn't flicker back, just vanishing before our eyes. It was shocking, so much so that my brain kind of struggled to accept it for a moment, despite knowing exactly what had happened to her.

"Holy hell... Is that what I've been doing to people?" I asked, my eyes wide, momentarily forgetting the situation. "Note to self, try harder not to vanish in front of people anymore. That's strange."

"Make a note not to watch other people disappear, too," Barry added, shaking his head. "I feel like I just witnessed the unknowable."

"Like we saw bad CGI in real life, and my brain hated it," Jessica added commiseratingly.

"I think I know what being schizo feels like," John added, suddenly bringing everyone back to the moment. "I think my brain is itchy."

I shifted and looked back at John, whose gun was noticeably lower, like he had forgotten who he was aiming at.

"John, you need to get back to work," I said, shaking my head. "As much as we would like to help you, we cannot interfere beyond saving Mr. Takagi. The people upstairs, including your wife, need your help."

For a long moment, he stared me down, his gun held steady despite what I was telling him. Eventually, he lowered his pistol, looking back into the stairwell.

"I'm not gonna pretend to understand whatever the fuck is going on here," He said. "But it's definitely above my pay grade. I'm going to go upstairs and see if the phones work like I had planned to. I want you guys out of this building. If you're not going to help, you're only going to get in my way."

"We'll get out of your hair," I said with a nod. "Good luck, Mr. McClane. And try not to think too much about us. It's not worth the headache."

After another long look, he nodded, shaking his head and walking back into the stairwell. He gave us one last look before starting to climb, quickly leaving our view. We waited a moment before collectively letting out a long breath. We stood there in silence for a long, drawn-out moment before I shook my head and recovered.

"Right, we need to move," I said, resisting the urge to clap my hands. "I'll grab Takagi. George, Barry, you take the lead. Jessica, you cover our rears. At some point, the guy at the security post at the entrance might spot us, so we need to do this fast. Everyone ready?"

I got a round of nods, so I bent down and folded Mr. Takagi's legs with his knees up, stepped on his toes, and pulled him up into a fireman's carry, up and over my shoulders. I bounced him a bit to make sure he was as stable as he could be before nodding to Barry and George.

We entered back into the stairwell, slowly but surely making our way downward. We had thirty floors to cover, and while the movie had shown Hans and his people using the only functional elevator, there was a lot of running around that happened on and off screen.

We could have company at any moment.

Eventually, we got down to the fifteenth floor. Suddenly, the door access to the floor below us slammed open. George had his rifle up and ready in record time, his instincts as a cop shining through. The rest of the team froze for just a split moment before raising their weapons. Not bad for a bunch of civilians. Then again, we could hardly be considered civilians at this point.

We all listened closely as the voices, all speaking German, chatted and talked. It took a moment for us to realize they were heading down, voices slowly getting more and more faint until finally, they disappeared after the sound of a new door being opened and shut.

Collectively, the team unclenched, letting out a long breath... Until gunfire echoed down from above us, ringing loudly through the stairwell. I had the urge to peek at who and where exactly it was coming from, but before I could do anything, George climbed the stairs beside me, pulling me back.

"We need to get off the stairwell," He hissed quietly, and I nodded, trusting his instincts.

Quickly, we piled into the sixteenth floor with George leading the way. Once we were all in, Barry shut the door as gently as he could, while I carefully put Takagi down on the ground. I noticed Barry peeking through the reinforced window built into the door, but George grabbed

and pulled him down. As the younger man stumbled back, the retired police officer put his ear against the door, kneeling down so he was below the sightline of anyone running past. When he turned, he gestured all of us to get out of sight, prompting everyone to push up against walls and furniture.

Sure enough, after a few seconds of silence, the sound of people running past, going upward, reverberated through the door, casting shadows into the room we had taken cover in as people ran past. Three people in total ran by, rushing up to where the gunfire had come from. After a few moments, we were left in silence again.

"Nice save, George," I said, patting his back. "What are the chances they come back down anytime soon?"

"No idea, but we need to move," He pointed out. "The longer we sit around, the more likely we are to get picked up on a camera or the security feed at the desk."

I nodded, gesturing for the rest of the team to get ready. Quickly, I got Takagi back on my shoulders, and we made our way back to the stairs to continue our descent.