

Breathe

By D. G. Speirs

Breathe.

I looked through the monocular in night vision mode.

Just breathe. You can do this.

I scanned the balcony across the gap for signs of surveillance - cameras, sensors, guards. It was as I'd remembered - dark, quiet, a blind spot in a place that wouldn't have many. Best to exploit what few advantages I could.

Hopefully, I'd remember the others in time.

Breathe. Don't dwell.

I glanced down from the window I stood behind. Fifteen stories below the ground waited, ready for any mistake I might make, knowing I wouldn't win any arguments on appeal. I leaned back, scanned once more for any sign I was under surveillance. With a deliberate pace, I moved past the darkened cubicles to the fire stairs. As I opened the door, I rechecked my watch.

26:11

Twenty-six minutes to finish this or Sarah would be—

Don't think of that now. Focus on accomplishing the task. Stairs. Five flights of them. Deep breath. Get moving.

I pounded up the stairs, one after another. Sixteen steps, a landing, and a turn. Sixteen more. 17th floor. 18th. Each step a precious second, a grain of sand spent in an hourglass I wasn't getting back.

Haste will kill you, boy. Quickly, not hastily.

Ironic that I heard Henri's voice in my head as I reached the top stair. After all, it was climbing stairs on a job for him we'd first met...

Cinnamon red hair. An artist - she had a sketch pad, sitting in the stairwell of the old building, drawing the railing and the patterns its shadows made on the wall. I saw her for all of seven seconds as I bounded past. But as our eyes met, I'd never seen a pair more striking. Azure blue. I continued upward. I heard her laugh.

The door was locked, but a quick spray of liquid nitrogen and judiciously applied force solved that. Outside into the dark and the rain and over to the southern edge of the roof to look again at my target.

As hiding places go, Stevens Global was pretty useful. Another midtown nondescript office building, with faceless, nameless people wandering in and out.

The best way to hide things is always in plain sight. I'd spent a lot of money and effort to make it that way.

Breathe.

I put down my backpack and methodically laid out my gear. First, the crossbow; the components snapped and locked together, too loud to my ears. Next, the bolt, the wire looped with care and crimped onto the end of it. I scrutinized it as if my life depended on it.

Not just mine, this time.

I laid the crossbow aside and grabbed a small tube the size of a lipstick. Tripod legs extended from the bottom, I powered it and placed it on the edge. Both ends of the tube glowed as a bright green line speared across the gap and painted a target on the far balcony. I glanced behind me. I'd gotten lucky – the opposite end of the laser spotted a point just above the door to the roof. From the bag, I grabbed an anchor plate and quick epoxy patch. I opened the door and climbed atop it.

Careful now, Pipsqueak. Henri again. Not your life you risk with a slip this time.

With the door open I heard voices and footsteps, echoing from below. I'd set off an alarm somewhere, and building security was on its way. I estimated had three minutes. Four, tops.

The anchor plate with its wire guide slid onto the epoxy patch. I slapped that over the laser on the wall and pushed against it, then waited the eternity of sixty seconds for the epoxy to cure, my thoughts straying, her voice in my mind...

"Strange to keep running into you all over." Her eyes crinkled as she smiled. "If I didn't know better I'd say you were following me."

"Or you, me."

"Oh, monsieur, you have discovered the truth. I am a detective, trailing your every movement." She laughed. "You give me a merry chase, no?"

"Oui."

That first kiss tasted of cinnamon and sunlight...

I pulled at the plate then hung from it. It held.

From my belt, I grabbed a device that looked like a tube filled with metal teeth, then swung back up onto the door. I snapped the machine into position in the ring on the plate and fed the other end of the cable into it. Once I felt the teeth bite securely, I pressed a switch on a remote. Small motors inside started to turn the wheels and cable began to feed through.

Quickly, not hastily.

I jumped down and moved to the crossbow. In a single smooth motion, I brought it up to fire. I started to aim, then blinked and lowered it. My eyes stung. I wiped away rain and sweat.

I never used to sweat on a job.

This one matters.

I raised the crossbow again and aimed. Henri's voice came unbidden, a habit from years of training.

Slow down, you! Feel your breathing. Now, Pipsqueak, remember to aim a touch high. Good. Exhale and squeeze.

The bolt leaped across the gap and buried itself in the concrete of the balcony's back wall. I pulled on the trailing cable to ensure the pin was anchored. Satisfied, I pressed the button on the remote a second time. The motors in the cable tensioner tube sped up and pulled the line taut in seconds.

As I packed up, I heard footsteps through the open doorway. They were only three floors away.

Keep moving.

I pulled the zip line trolley from my pack, clipped it to the wire and without hesitation, grabbed the T-handle and leaped out over the gap. The line held although it sagged more than I preferred. Gravity did its job, and I was across to the other building in moments, just barely clearing the balcony edge on the far side. Even as I dropped off the zip line, I pressed the remote for one last time. The cable, the anchors and all hardware glowed red for a moment, then flashed to white. In another second, a cloud of white ash drifted between the buildings and mixed with the rain falling toward the street below.

Movement on the rooftop. I ducked into the shadows and glanced at my watch.

14:37

14:36

14:35...

We lay in the shadows, waiting out the gendarmes.

"You've got her all wrong, Henri. All right, so she's a bit of a troublemaker – you know the type."

"Oh, do I ever, Pipsqueak. Let me guess, a bit of a tomboy, stands her ground, yet to you, she's both a challenge and vulnerable."

"You missed that she's something of a geek girl, too."

"Oh, heaven forbid we leave out that. And what, she's Guinevere to your Lancelot—"

"Not hardly. She can take care of herself. Look, she's just enjoying one last summer on the continent before starting school in the fall – Columbia Law, I think."

“Bah. You’re not thinking with your head. Or at least, not with the big one.” He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine, what’s her name?”

“Trinity. But she likes to be called Trin...”

14:29...

There’s still time. Slow down. Breathe.

I snuck a glance over the edge of the balcony railing – the rooftop was now an anthill of activity, police cars arriving and searching the other building.

Considering what they kept there, not a shock. I glanced down at the window I’d scouted the balcony from and wondered when the guards would figure out I’d just moved the nerve toxin. Put it in the other refrigerator, behind the yogurt.

I stayed low behind the parapet to the balcony door. This part was easy – Henri taught me to bypass alarm circuits when I was twelve. But this tenant was tricky. Always the misdirection – see an apparent big sensor, miss the small, unobtrusive one. The one that’d nail you.

I bypassed the obvious one and the hidden one.

And the second hidden one.

And the third.

Huh. There’d only been two the last time. So much for this being the blind spot. But I was inside the building now, and my watch said I had 13:48 left. I was inside and ready to go to work. I was still ahead of the game.

Until the outer office door opened.

I dove for the closest cover - a desk and crouched, frozen. My heart pounding, panic building, each beat another second off the clock.

No! Stop it! Breathe!

I wanted to, but I held it, fearing even that tiny sound would bring the world crashing down on me.

I heard rustling in the front portion of the office. I slipped out my phone and activated the camera, placing it so the lens could see under the front of the desk. I rotated it slowly to scan the room. Movement, a glimpse of a shadow, then the lights came on in the outer office.

Cleaning lady.

This ruined Plan A. I couldn’t work in this office, not with someone cleaning it. And disposing of this woman was at the bottom of the list of options. But getting caught really wasn’t one, either. Not with a little more than twelve minutes left.

But this might open a Plan B. If she were just starting in this office, I might be able to work unmolested elsewhere on the floor.

Unless they’d changed the cleaning schedule.

Never do a job this big alone. Henri's voice, chiding me inside my head. A fat lot of help right now, old man...

"...never do a job that big alone. Too many ways things can go wrong – get stuck in a shaft, rope breaks, you need a distraction. On and on, Pipsqueak, on and on. Too big a list. That's why you need a partner, a backup, ready to help."

"I know, old man. And I tell you, Trin is the one."

"The girl? Bah. Bad road, that one. Although, if what you say is true, she might have her uses. But an inside man? A partner? Never happen."

"That's the wine talking, old man..."

The rustle came closer. I pulled the phone back. I heard a light switch flip. Heard it, but no lights came on. I risked poking my head above the edge of the desk. A section of the bookcase had swung out and from beyond it light cast shadows across the room.

Private bathroom. Of course.

I scrambled to my feet and crossed past the open bookcase. I could hear the woman hum as she worked. She has a lovely voice. Quietly I opened the outer door and glanced down the hallway. Empty. I turn left and looked at my watch.

11:04.

Not enough time. Panic rose again as I sprinted down the hall.

The office I ran to had a commanding view of the river. I'd particularly enjoyed that for the past couple of years. I had a feeling it might be some time before I would again. But after all, considering the choices you've made, what's ten years of your life really worth?

Don't dwell. Breathe. Get to work.

"Let's get married."

She watched for my reaction. I propped my head up on one hand. "Love to. Can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Probably a little of both." I leaned over to kiss her. It was how I avoided fights – make love, not war.

She dodged the kiss. Diplomacy would not win the day today.

"I'm serious."

"I gathered. What's really going on?"

She turned and sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, then walked naked to the window. I used to joke with Trin that her American friends would never believe she lived in Paris because we had the only flat whose window

didn't overlook the Eiffel Tower. Even now, backlit by the streetlamps, she was breathtaking.

"I've been offered a job."

"I didn't know you'd been looking."

"It's the sort of job that comes looking for you."

"I see. And what does it involve?"

"Moving back to America."

I didn't say anything, I just watched her.

"Somebody wants me. I was hoping..."

"That maybe somebody else wanted you more?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip. I'd seen Trin in all sorts of ways before, but this was different. A little hopeful, but also frightened.

Fragile was new to me, it gave me pause. I climbed out of bed and walked to her.

"A little sudden, don't you think?"

"It happens that way."

"And if I say yes?"

"Happily ever after."

"Well, for you, yes—"

I did not see the slap coming.

I did not know she could move that fast...

The job had to look like Stevens had been violated by someone sophisticated, yet misdirected – a complete outside hack, aimed at something benign. At the same time, I needed to retrieve the actual target, a client's program security algorithm for creating electronic transfer validation keys. Generated daily, these keys were good only for 24 hours and without the master encryption key, the data was worthless.

The recipient would get the owner's skeleton key, valid for almost a full day. A single day's access to the right information could make someone very wealthy and very, very powerful.

I pulled out a set of lock picks. They'd been Henri's. I was inside my office in 12 seconds.

You're slowing down, Pipsqueak. Henri again, looking over my shoulder. Sorry, old man. A little busy.

10:33

Concentrate, damn it. You have a job to do.

I moved to the desk and sat down as I pulled the flash drives from a pocket.

Now, who to pin this on? Maybe give The Turk credit where it isn't due and see what scatters from under his rock. Some good might come of this yet.

I closed my eyes, path decided. *Breathe*. I went to work...

“Get over it, man. If it’s important enough to her, she’ll be there when we get back. And if not...”

“You do realize you’re not doing a very good job of cheering me up, Henri.”

“20 million euros in uncut stones will do that for you instead. Besides, it’s who we are. Thieves first, gentlemen second. No room in that life for someone like her.”

I sighed and looked up at him. “You’re right—“

“Course I am.” He pulled me to my feet then stopped, staring at me for a moment. “You couldn’t even bring yourself to tell her. Or did you? Ah ha, I thought not. I’m just trying really hard not to say I told you— “

“Fine. Just shut up and let’s get this over with.”

Shooting and anchoring the line went well, and I zipped over in a flash. But Henri...

I never figured precisely what happened. The line fray? The epoxy fail? The line suddenly sagged; he dropped five feet straight down and stopped moving forward just out of my grasp.

I remember reaching out and starting to say, “Grab my hand.” Then him tumbling backward in slow motion as gravity asserted itself. And looking at me...

And me staring, numb, at the red stain spreading on the ground.

No. you never win that argument on appeal.

I finished the job, somehow. Called Trin and got her voice mail. Got to the flat and found all her things gone.

I gathered the stones and walked away, alone for the first time since I was nine and Henri had caught me trying to pick his pocket. After hours wandering the streets of Paris carrying a fortune in diamonds, I decided to take fate into my own hands. As dawn colored the skies, I climbed up the steps of the Direction Centrale de la Police Judiciaire building and directly into the Interpol office. Behind the desk was an attractive blond in a no-nonsense business suit working on a report. The sign on her desk said, “Inspector Dulac.”

I stared at it for a moment. She looked up at me. “Can I help you?”

I poured the stones onto her desk. “I’d like to report a robbery.”

Two laptops sat on the desk, company and personal. One showed the Stevens Global logo as a background; the other, a picture of a woman with cinnamon hair and sunglasses and smiles on the Left Bank. Another lifetime, long lost.

The company machine accessed the mainframe by its backdoor but flubbed the entry deliberately a half-dozen times - common errors, each one slightly different. As soon as the link was in a second remote was set into the Istanbul branch to order the machines there to mine data files about some more substantial gambling interests among the clientele.

On the personal laptop the real target data was grabbed and copied, then I employed a nifty little piece of code that erased all transactions from the system data log. Theoretically impossible, but just merely improbable was the reality.

Once downloaded, all files were run through a custom crypto-breaker we'd had built for the firm - after all, you never knew when a client was going to forget their house keys. Once free of any protection, I started to transfer them to a USB flash drive. A grey progress bar sprung to life.

6:48

Data moved silently as I stared at the screen...

"Her name is Sarah. And you will get me what I asked for."

I stared at the screen, transfixed by the video on the tablet. The young girl had been on a swing set. Two men – no, two thugs; no other word for men that brutal to a child. They ran in, stuffed a rag in her mouth and carried her off to a white van. A Good Samaritan had run in and tried to help. It was over in three punches.

As I said, brutal.

I rewound the video. The girl swung back and forth. I froze the image, zoomed in for a better look. To be sure.

My breath caught.

Cinnamon hair. Azure blue eyes. That smile. And that nose.

That damned Roman nose.

Lord knows I'd seen it the mirror enough times to recognize it.

"Right. Give me a day—"

The laugh was sharp, like a cough. "A man of your talent and resources? Hardly. No, you're on a much shorter leash. May I?" He held out his hand, and I gave him back the tablet. He made a couple of swipes to the surface and touched it once, then turned it around. A countdown timer displayed.

It read 75:00.

He touched it, and the clock started. "Call me when you have the item. Do so before the timer runs out, and the child lives." He stood and walked away.

I started to follow. My phone rang. The number was strange, foreign.

"Hello?"

My guest, already out the door. "Don't bother. You won't find the girl that way. Besides, she already suffered one tragic loss today." A second image appeared on the screen.

Cinnamon hair and face down on the ground, three bullet holes in the back.

*My mind put meaning behind his words. Trin. "You bastard—"
"Surely you don't want to compound the tragedy. You know the terms. Get what I want before the clock expires, the girl lives. Play nice, and I'll consider not making her an orphan afterward." He was silent for a moment as if he expected a response. I was biting my tongue.*

"You now have less than 73 minutes. I suggest you make the most of them."

He hung up. I stared at the phone, my mind a jumble. Then I heard Henri's voice.

Breathe.

The grey progress bar continued to crawl. I looked at my watch.

5:00

Make the most of them.

I remembered something. I grabbed a notepad and scribbled off a quick note to Reed Johnson, one of my subordinates, to ask if the cookie dough I'd ordered from his daughter's soccer team was in. If it was, would he mind holding onto it for me? I figured I wouldn't be back to get it until next Monday.

I finished and folded the note quickly, origami-style, into a crane. The grey bar finished. I pulled out the drive, closed and put the laptops away, then grabbed what looked like a stick of gum from my backpack as I did. Satisfied, I dropped the origami on the desktop and walked out of the office, glancing at my watch.

3:29

Too close. Don't stop. Don't panic. Just breathe. And move!

I used the private elevator and walked through the lobby as if I belonged there. Which, really, I did. After all, I owned the company and the building. But right now, that didn't matter.

Outside, a half-dozen police cars clustered on the corner, joined by two fire trucks. They were about to cordon off the building I'd leaped from. *Well, it was a medical research lab. Serves them right for not keeping their products better locked up.*

I turned and walked away from it toward the next intersection. As I did, I pulled out my cell phone and hit redial. He picked up after two rings. "I have it."

"And with all of twenty-two seconds to spare, I see. I always told Henri it would be foolish to let someone with your talents go to waste. Now bring it to—"

"No."

You have this, Pipsqueak. Don't hold your breath. Let it out. Breathe.

"No? Surely you understand that—"

“I know the consequences. But I also know if I agree, you’ll figure the next time you need me, all you have to do is threaten her.”

He chuckled. “You must admit, your response was positively Pavlovian.”

“True, but you also caught me by surprise. Among civilized men, a threat to an innocent isn’t needed. I propose a different arrangement.”

I could hear his leather chair creak as he shifted his weight. He slowly exhaled. “Go on.”

I turned the corner and stopped at a mailbox. As I leaned against it, I looked to see if any of the police had followed me. I was alone. “Leave the girl out from here forward. Completely. Instead, I come and work with you directly. We’ll keep it discreet. You become my sole client – under my usual terms, of course.”

“You’re trading your life for hers.”

“Well, when you put it that way—”

“Is there any other way, really?”

“I suppose not.”

Another pause. Another long exhalation. “Fair enough. And as a gesture of good faith, I’ll even arrange for you to work out of London.”

“London?” I looked around, surprised.

“Yes, London. The girl lives there. You’ll even be able to look in on her now and again. After all, don’t you agree that you’ve been absent from her life long enough?”

I pondered that. “No, I don’t. Even not knowing me is still dangerous. It got her kidnapped. If you were willing to use her as a pawn, who’s to say others won’t?”

“You.”

I sighed and bent down to tie my shoe. “Henri was right. I am much too sentimental.”

“I never thought so, Tomas.”

The voice was soft and feminine and right in my ear.

Damn it. I’d let my guard down, and someone was right atop me. Instinctively I pulled the revolver from my ankle holster and whirled in the crouch, bringing the gun up—

*Azure blue eyes. Cinnamon hair. A black beret. A knowing smirk.
A 9-millimeter silenced Beretta pistol held by an expert aimed at my head.*

I froze.

Breathe. Tough to when looking at those eyes, but force yourself.

“Trin.”

“Hello, Tomas.”

“You’re—”

“Not dead. Sarah’s mother. Working with them. Take your pick.”

“All of the above, I guess.”

“Look, Tomas, I’m here to bring you in. Let’s just put down the guns together, okay?”

“You first.”

“You know that’s not how this works. Together.”

I nodded, then slowly lowered my gun as I stood. Trin did the same.

Breathe.

I let out my breath slowly. Trin did the same. I shrugged. “So what now?”

A second figure – one of the thugs from the video – stepped up behind me. Trin smiled. “Now we figure out how to best use one of the world’s greatest thieves – pardon me, security consultants. Personally, I’m looking forward to the challenge. Give me your gun and phone and walk this way.”

I handed her them to her, then followed, my other escort behind us. I patted the flash drive in my pocket and permitted myself a small smile. Its identical twin with the correct files, now secure under that mailbox, slipped further and further away from me, unlikely to be found in time without my assistance. I thought of the clock ticking away on all that data, and what Trin and her bosses would trade for it.

I thought about the two goals Reed’s son had scored in the soccer match last week and knew how my company’s head of security would react when he found that note in eight hours and determined what I had done.

I thought about how one of the world’s most exceptional security consultants – *no, thief, definitely thief* - would best use an organization like Trin’s.

Especially right after stealing it from under her very attractive nose.

And not for the first time, I thought I’d instead just let her walk *that way*. She did it so very, very well.

Positively breathtaking.

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