

**THE
REGULATORS**

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For our kid.

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As he walked out of that house, it crushed him. Since he'd found out about Nisha, he'd been on a mission, a one-man enterprise designed solely to fuck the lives of those who had taken away the one thing - the only fucking thing - that ever mattered to Reuben Arrowsmith.

He'd done that now, or at least, he'd done it as best he could. He'd put that bastard Bowen, or whatever he wanted to call himself, into the hands of the police, simultaneously sticking one finger up at the shady organisation that had called itself The Regulators, by making sure they never got their hands on the man they believed was part of some wider group. They were two sides of the same shitty coin. It hadn't mattered which way it landed; Reuben was destined to lose. He had thought when he'd first got involved, that he was going to play the rest of them. In the end, they'd all played each other, to the point where, as far as Reuben could see, not a single one of them had won.

Men and their fucking egos.

It was done now though, so what else was there? He picked himself up off the floor, slowly, his head spinning a little as he reached full height, causing him to sway. He steadied himself, looked around, then walked away.

He was a long way from home. A London boy out in Suffolk. No motor, no cash and at the last count, no one left to phone who would pick him up. Certainly no one he trusted. He'd trusted enough people for one lifetime. That rat Fisher being the one that he would never get over. The two of them had gone through so much, given so much of themselves to each other. They had a bond that couldn't be broken, that's what Reuben had thought. It had all been a lie, exposed by the bullet Fisher had sent through Nisha's head.

Nisha. Fucking hell, man. How was he supposed to go on without her? Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe this was his last day dealing with this fucked up existence. Maybe now he was writing the last chapter of a life that had promised so much, but ultimately come up wanting. Nishad had been his everything. When he woke up in the morning, it was for her. When he went out and got paid, it was for her. When he came home, lay his head down again, it was for her, with her. Now she was gone. Murdered by a man who should have been his best friend. He didn't even really know why, although he guessed Nisha must have stumbled across something that Fisher had decided wasn't worth sharing with the wider world, least of all Reuben.

If only it had been him that had ended Fisher's life. Even that little comfort had been taken away, Fisher being murdered at the hands of a girl that worked for him. A girl trying to save her own life by all accounts. Reuben tried to convince himself that he was glad she had survived, that Fisher hadn't made her another statistic, but there was a part of him, not a small part either, that really wanted Fisher to have walked out of that apartment alive, so that he could have had his satisfaction.

That wasn't going to happen. There was nothing in front of him. Just the slow march of time until he died.

Talking of marching. He would need to get a real march on if he was to get anywhere, any time today. He had a rough idea which way was home. He figured if he started heading that way, sooner or later he would come across something that would help him get home just that little bit quicker.

He had no idea how right he would be.

The road he found himself on looked like it was a main one through this sixties-built estate that he was currently standing in. It meandered slowly south west, pretty much the

direction he needed to be going in, he figured. Sooner or later it would find itself reaching another road, a bigger one he hoped.

Ten minutes later it did that, intersecting a busy road next to a parade of shops. Cars, lorries and buses thundered up and down it. Neither direction seemed to be exactly where he wanted to head, but there was a sign that pointed towards the town of Colchester and Reuben knew that was nearer to London than he was now, so he followed it.

For the first couple of miles, there was a path that he walked on, but that eventually gave way to a simple grass verge once the road moved out of town. All that he had to walk along, was a small strip of dirt, where other walkers had worn away the grass. Had he given a shit, he might have worried about stumbling into the road and falling in front of a truck, but he didn't. Whatever happened to him now, happened. No reason to care.

On his left-hand side, traffic passed by. Car, buses, trucks, bikes, all of them rumbling and trundling past. He'd just about blotted the noise out now, but one car made him look. He heard it slowing rapidly, the tyres biting into the road surface as it came to a quick stop, just managing to avoid a skid. Reuben barely looked up as he kept on walking. A door opened.

"I need you to get in the car." A man was shouting. Reuben knew it was aimed at him, but he didn't care. He didn't want to listen. That man had nothing for him. No point even reacting.

"Reuben!"

Reuben kept walking.

By now, the man's car was blocking the road. Another angry driver behind it gave an impatient blast on the horn.

"You want to get the people who got your girl killed, you get in my car now. One time offer."

Reuben turned and looked. The man looked like an office worker. Blue shirt, no tie, dark trousers. His car was an ordinary dark blue saloon. Boring.

“I ain’t getting in no car with you,” Reuben rasped back.

There was another short sharp hit on the horn, followed up by a “get out of the fucking way,” but Raf wasn’t listening.

“I know you blame us for Nisha’s death.” Raf started to follow after him, prompting cries of despair from the driver trapped behind. “Maybe you’ve got a point.”

“Maybe?” Reuben felt a switch flick in his brain. He turned and beelined straight at Raf. “Maybe I should fucking end you right here right now.”

He lunged and grabbed at Raf, jerking him by the collar. He’d expected a reaction. Fight or flight or something. He didn’t get anything. Raf just peered back, emotionless.

“We’re fighting a war. You chose to be a part of it. You took the risk.” Raf rasped through gritted teeth, leaving Reuben in no doubt that the man absolutely believed it.

“Nisha didn’t.”

“She did, she chose you. She chose to be by your side. Thick and thin. Always and forever. She picked her side. It was yours. The problem is, I don’t think you’ve picked a side yet.”

Reuben let his grip soften. Was it true? Was it really all his fault? He had after all taken the job on knowing there would be risks. It went with the territory. Raf must have seen his hesitation because he fired a few more shots.

“You can pick a side now though. You can get the bastards who gave the orders. We didn’t come for Nisha. We never would. We didn’t even come for you. Not like that. So now you have a choice. Get in the car with me, hear me out, take a final shot at the people really behind all of this. Or you can put your head down, step out in front of the next bus and be done with it. I’ll even give you a push if you think you might bottle it.”

Reuben stammered. Nothing came out of his mouth. This office dweller, this suit, had showed more front to him than anyone in as long as he could remember. He'd been blunt and although Reuben would never admit it out loud, Raf had been honest. It was no good blaming the other side of the coin, when Reuben had been too busy clamouring over his side. The side which had fallen on Nisha.

Her death was as much his fault as anyone else's. More than The Regulators. He knew that. He'd known it from the moment he learned of her death.

What the hell. Maybe this guy could get him nearer to the people responsible for this plot. Without them, none of it would have happened. Nisha would be alive.

"Fine." Reuben released his grip completely. "I'll hear you out."

As they walked to the car, Reuben felt an emotion he'd not felt in sometime. He felt genuine sadness. Not mixed with anger, not blurred by rage, but genuine, remorseful, sadness.

He knew he was going to have to work on that when the time came.

Raf had been the name that the man had given him. Reuben hadn't met a Raf before. They didn't come up a lot in his circles. Didn't even really know that it was a proper name before that point. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was a cover. Who really cared?

He hadn't said anything when he got in the car. He knew his getting in was an agreement with Raf, that he was interested in hearing what he had to say. Not for one moment, did Reuben figure that Raf was interested in anything he had to say.

The drive back had taken longer than the drive out, despite Reuben having walked the first part, due to the gradual build-up of traffic as people's workdays had come to an end. It gave Raf the time he needed to introduce himself as a member of The Regulators, albeit an analyst. "I don't get out in the field much," he had said, almost sounding like he was apologising.

Reuben figured it was more an effort to assure him that he wasn't there to do harm, but he had already worked that out for himself very quickly. You knew who was a threat, you knew who could handle themselves in a fight, and whilst this Raf was in shape and could probably defend himself, there wasn't an aggressor instinct in him. If Reuben had wanted to, he could have very easily got the upper hand with Raf, then he could have done whatever he wanted. On reflection, Reuben had to admit that Raf would have known that too and so he gave him a little bit of respect for putting himself in harm's way. A little, not a lot. He wondered if Raf knew just how Reuben was feeling about his employers? Could he possibly imagine the anger he had towards them? More than a few times he thought about grabbing the wheel, smashing Raf's head on the dash and throwing him out of the car, leaving him lying in the road for someone to either stop and help, or run over. The only thing keeping Raf alive was the

promise of a crack at the people who had first put all of this in motion. He couldn't pass that up. There was no way. He needed revenge. Nisha needed justice.

One thing he didn't want to get into on the drive back, however, was too much about what it was he was offering Reuben. A cryptic nod to a unique opportunity to track down those above Bowen. Reuben had asked for more, but nothing had come.

When they had left London, it was from the East End, somewhere near Stratford, but Raf had taken the car onto the M25 and headed south, bringing them off just before they reached the Dartford crossing, then down into Essex, along the north banks of the Thames, to a lonely looking container yard. Reuben kept himself to his turf, south of the river, but he'd been this way a few times. There was a lot of industry, fewer people outside of business hours. More importantly, plenty of people trying to screw the system, so everyone was looking to keep a low profile in one way or another.

They pulled into the yard, past a couple of security guards, who despite their best efforts to blend in, looked far leaner and meaner than your run of the mill rent-a-cop that would normally be patrolling such a place. There were numerous shipping containers, all a range of colours, dotted around, as well as a brown portacabin, which Reuben assumed they would be heading for. They weren't. Raf drove the car up towards one of the shipping containers, which then opened up to reveal a ramp that led down below the ground.

"That's some fucking James Bond shit," Reuben said admiringly. "How the fuck do you guys get your wedge?"

"The Regulators and Vehm are funded by some of the richest people in the world. They don't get a say, they don't get a thank you, they just get to know that there's someone out there working to fight corruption."

“Can’t put that fucker on your tax return,” Reuben shrugged as the car entered into the container, diving down the ramp.

They came to a halt in a small turning space, in front of a single metal door, about forty feet from where they first entered.

“What’s in there?”

“A safe space where we can talk.”

“Safe space? You a hipster?” Reuben mocked.

“Can’t stand quinoa,” Raf shook his head, getting out of the car. He was growling on Reuben.

They walked through the metal door, Raf leading the way. Reuben had been half expecting some sort of high-tech lair to be revealed, but all he found were brown breeze block walls, a metal table, two metal chairs and a tape recorder.

“I’m not going to use that,” Raf pointed to the tape recorder as he sat down, gesturing to Reuben to do the same. “What I’m offering is off the record and time sensitive, so as much as it sounds like a hard sell, when I say this is a one-time only deal, it really is. Bowen will be dead within days.”

“That’s what your man Quinn said,” Reuben confirmed, sitting down opposite. The metal chair wasn’t comfortable. He figured that he wouldn’t be here long, but for those that were, it was probably just one of many discomforting things that they would experience inside these four walls.

“He’s right. People like Bowen know a lot. When they get caught, rather than let them turn, the people who hire them tend to just get rid of them. Bowen knew that, I think you probably did too.”

“I was more up for pissing your lot off if I’m honest.” Reuben looked down at the table, slouching backwards in his chair, letting his legs kick out in front under the table.

“You did that,” Raf laughed. Trying to be a mate. Reuben lost that little bit of warmth he’d had for Raf a moment before.

“You said this was time sensitive, right, so stop trying to get in my pants and serve up the main course, yeah?”

Raf looked at Reuben for a moment and Reuben could see that he was letting the comment slide. It might have been time sensitive, but Raf clearly didn’t want to let Reuben think he was marching to the beat of his drum. Even if he absolutely was.

“Bowen will be behind bars by now. He’ll be held in a station until he’s charged, then he’ll be moved to a more secure location. Woodhill or Belmarsh most likely. Within hours of getting there, he’ll be dead. If not before.”

“Where do I come into that?”

“The killing will be covered up. Natural causes or something like that. We want you inside the prison when it happens.”

“Inside? As in doing a spell?”

“Right. We can falsify the records, you wouldn’t be going in on your own name, that’d be too risky.”

“I might prefer that risk. My name has weight.” Reuben began to object. “Going inside, to a Cat A like those two are, you might well have targets coming at you from outside, but a new face is going to get it inside anyway and it might make it hard for me to get any information on your guy. People talk to people they know inside; they don’t talk to strangers. They got a weird phobia of grasses for some reason.”

“Noted,” Raf said. “But if we use your name, there’s a chance that they’ll find a way to move Bowen elsewhere. You can be Reuben inside, but we’ll have to come up with a story as to why you’re using a false name.”

“Fine.” Reuben shrugged. If all went to plan he probably wouldn’t be there too long anyway.

“Once Bowen gets hit, we need you to find out who did it and get to them. Find out who gave the order. It’ll be someone outside, a contact somewhere.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then we get you out, we follow that trail and find whoever gave the order for the plan that led to all this shit. Nisha’s death, everything.”

Reuben looked at Raf and crossed his arms. “Analyst, right?”

“Right.”

“How do you analyse my chances of pulling this off?”

“Better than most.”

“I reckon the odds are long. I need a guarantee that if I don’t get out, if you guys get there instead, that you do one thing for me.”

“What?”

“You take your time with the cunt.”

Two days later, Reuben Arrowsmith was checked into Woodhill prison under the name Robert Foster. It was the first time Reuben had seen the inside of a category A prison. He'd spent time in a young offenders institute, followed by three months in HMP Maidstone, a category C prison. Woodhill was a different game and for all his bravado, all his front, he couldn't help but feel a little on edge when he walked from the van and into the prison for the first time. He knew that every eye would be on him. Some people would know him. Most would have no idea. A lot of them would want to hurt him, whether they had a reason to or not. That was just the way it was. The first few nights would be the worst. Sadly, that's all he expected to have in there. He wasn't going to have time to make things right and assert himself, like he knew he could. That was, *if* Raf came through like he said he would.

Bowen was meant to be arriving the next day, first thing in the morning. Reuben was probably one of only a handful of people who knew that. Always nice to have a little bit of an inside track. It wouldn't be common knowledge amongst the other inmates, nor the guards. The governor would surely know, perhaps a couple of trusted deputies. Beyond that, it would be top secret. Bowen was a prisoner unlike any other. The reach of the people coming after him was limited only by their knowledge of where he was, Raf had warned. Once they knew, they would find a way to kill Bowen. Reuben just had to sit tight and watch.

Arriving at prison meant a lot of waiting around. After exiting the van, Reuben was searched, then taken to a holding room. There he waited for nearly an hour, before he was collected and then given a more thorough search followed by a spell in what was known as the BOSS chair, short for Body Orifice Security Scanner, designed to look in a

non-intrusive way for mobile phones and other metallic objects that could be secreted inside a person's body. Smuggling objects into a prison was a big business. There were prisoners controlling networks worth tens of thousands of pounds, operating in prisons alone. Drugs, phones, weapons, all sorts of contraband were hidden in people coming in for a range of offences, some of whom would simply do something stupid, just to get arrested so they could get paid for carrying something inside them. BOSS was making a very small dent in a very big business at best.

A series of questions from different people followed. Most were about his welfare and state of mind. Prison staffs primary job after all was to stop prisoners from killing each other and themselves. Reuben kept his answers as vague and closed as possible. Raf had warned him not to get down any potential rabbit holes when talking about his mental state. He'd readily admitted to being worried about the impact that Nisha's death was having on Reuben. Reuben had tried to assure him that he was channelling it, but even he wasn't that sure. He had no idea what was going to happen once he'd reached the end of this journey. What was there for him after he'd killed the people behind this?

"Phone call?" the officer checking him in had asked.

"Sure," Reuben replied miserably. He figured that was probably the best demeanour to take. There weren't many people who came to prison looking like a chipper son of a bitch.

He was taken to a payphone and left to make his call. He made it to Raf.

"How are you?" Raf asked. He almost sounded genuinely concerned.

"Settling, init." Reuben replied.

"I think your visitor might be coming sooner than you think." Raf had clearly received some new information.

“I’ll pop by when I can. That everything?”

“That’s everything.”

“Alright then.” Reuben hung up.

Once Reuben was checked in, he was taken to what the prison called its first night centre, but actually would be the place that most people stayed for the first couple of weeks. There he was met by another prisoner, an older gruff looking white bloke, who told Reuben his name was Azza. Azza was Reuben’s “insider,” a trusted prisoner, chosen by the guards to integrate new inmates. He seemed sound enough, but Reuben wasn’t planning on being around long enough, so he didn’t press on what his real name was. Enough friends for one lifetime. Azza showed him the wing he’d be joining, pointing out the different facilities and spots and offering as much information as he could think of. Reuben kept it polite, but minimal. Azza didn’t seem to care. He was probably used to people being less than talkative when they got inside.

With the tour over, Azza said his goodbyes and Reuben was finally taken to his cell. For the first couple of weeks, he’d be in a single cell he was told. That was fine. He was given his prison issue clothes and crockery, then the door was shut, locked and that was it. Reuben was an inmate.

After arranging his bedclothes, he lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He had planned on doing all he could to get a good night’s sleep on this first night, but if Bowen was coming in later, he wanted to be awake for that moment. That meant sleep now. He closed his eyes and tried to do everything he could to block everything out.

It was dark when he opened them again. There had been no dreams. No nightmarish visions of Nisha. None of that cliché bullshit. Just a dreamless sleep that had left him feeling barely refreshed. He had no idea how long he had been out. He flicked his TV on,

using the remote that sat next to his bed. Nearly eleven. A little under five hours sleep. Had he missed Bowen's arrival?

He stood up and went to the cell door, peering out of the thin slit of a window that crept up the door, like the murder holes you saw on castle turrets, from which archers shot their arrows. The prison floor was dark and still. No one about. Reuben scanned the limited field of vision he had as best he could. Nothing. He sat back down. He waited. Eyes on the ceiling. Any time he felt himself drifting off, he forced himself to think of Nisha. To think of the terror she felt in the moment before death. To let that emotion turn to guilt, because after all, it was him who had put her in that situation. He'd let her be in everything. If he'd just kept her away, put up a wall between them, she'd be alive.

But then, would that have been Reuben and Nisha?

Would it fuck.

It was nearly three in the morning when he heard the sound of the door to the prison wing being opened, the sound reverberating around the empty wing. He stood and softly made his way to the door, peering out once more to see three figures walking slowly to a cell. In the dark he couldn't make out any faces, but he could pick out how they were dressed, just about. Two were guards, one was a prisoner. They approached a cell, opened the door and the prisoner walked in. The door was shut, the two guards left. Reuben watched them all the way out, then looked at the cell door.

He stood there, watching it until eight in the morning, when finally, the doors were released and he could get back out onto the wing.

Once the doors were unlocked, Reuben bee lined for the cell he'd seen them take Bowen into. Given the nature of his predicament, Reuben figure that Bowen wasn't likely to be coming out of the cell doors straight away, but all the same, he wanted to be safe and get to him in time. You never know when a man might want to get out and about. He marched in through the door and saw Bowen, lying on his bed, looking dejected. He looked up at Reuben as he stood just inside the doorway.

“They sent you to do it?” he asked nonchalantly. “Well, I guess that wasn't much of a hard sell.”

Reuben walked to the end of the bed where Bowen had his head, pulling the small wooden desk chair that was in the room with him, placing it next to Bowen and sitting down on it.

“You want to talk?” Bowen eased himself up off the bed and onto his shoulders. “I am surprised.”

“Oh Bowen, you smug little fuck,” Reuben shook his head. “I want to do much, much more than talk, but you and I know I ain't ever going to get the satisfaction I'm looking for in here.”

“Best get on with it then, before someone asks what we're up to.”

Bowen didn't even sound resigned. No doubt he'd been thinking about this moment since he had been arrested. Everyone had seemed to believe it was a foregone conclusion and there was nothing that made Reuben think that was unaware of the threats to his own life. The man was switched on. Not a complete fool. When a man has time to contemplate

his own death, sooner or later, he stops worrying and just wants to get on with it. Maybe it was even a relief. How much further would he have had to have walked yesterday to get to that point himself, Reuben wondered.

“Thing is Mr. Bowen. I want my satisfaction. I want it very badly.” He leant forward on the chair so that his head hovered in front of Bowen’s. “I’m not going to be happy until I get it in fact. Probably won’t be that happy after, but at least I’ll know I’ve made a little bit right. But, you know, since they asked me to do you, I’ve been thinking, what if you’re not the end of the line?”

Bowen pulled a face that showed that he had no idea what Reuben was talking about, but just in case it needed any reinforcing, he said it out loud. “What the hell are you on about?”

“Your boss, or bosses. They’re the ones I want really. I mean, why get the monkey when you can go for the organ grinder.”

Bowen laughed. “Oh Reuben, you know why we picked you right?”

“Indulge me.”

“Because you’ve got these delusions of grandeur. You think you’re a big I am, when in reality you’re barely a smudge of shit on someone’s boot. Do you really think you can get to the people I work for?”

“Yeah.” Reuben did all he could to keep his poker face on. He knew he was lying. Hadn’t got the first clue where to start looking for these people, let alone how he’d ever actually get to them. But he didn’t need to convince Bowen of his plan, just believe that there might be one.

“You can’t. These people are on a different level, even to me. They’re not run of the mill, they’re the upper crust, the top brass.”

“Of the army?” Reuben seized on that. Instantly Bowen seemed to shrink away a little, taking a moment to compose himself, before coming back. The right thread to pull on.

“It doesn’t matter. You won’t get to them. Certainly not from in here. You think they’re going to let you out once you kill me? You think you’re not next on their little list?”

“I’m pretty certain I am, especially since I took this little number on,” Reuben lied effortlessly. Holding one over the man who had helped tear his world apart felt good. Really good. “But I’ve got me a plan. It’s not a great plan, but it might just work, for both of us.”

“You’ve got a plan?” Bowen snorted.

“Don’t discount me Bowen, you know what I pulled on you. Had you bang to rights boy, mercing that cop. Putting the bullet in his face. Nice little video of that. I played you, son. I can play anyone. Don’t ever forget that.”

“What’s to say you’re not playing me now?”

“I’ll tell you my plan.” Reuben replied dismissively, as if it was no big deal. “In here, we’re trapped. We ain’t going nowhere. Two dead men walking. It’s only a matter of time. But if we weren’t in here...” he paused to see if the idea would plant in Bowen’s head.

“We’d have to escape, and that’s not likely in the timeframe.” It didn’t.

“Oh, you reckon?” Reuben smirked. “What about this then? I hate you, you probably ain’t my biggest fan either, especially after I rolled you up, turned you over to the feds and put you in here. Now, if a man done that to me, I’m going to want to batter the ever living fuck out of that cunt. True?”

“True,” Bowen nodded.

“And as for me, well, I mean I don’t surely need to be spelling out my motivation here to put you through a wall, do I?”

“We hate each other and want to kill each other, I get it. How does that help?”

“Let’s refrain from a fight to the death for just one minute. How about we just beat the shit out of each other? Put each other on a hospital wing for a little while?”

“You’ve watched far too many movies kid, if you think it’s truly easier to escape from a hospital wing.”

“Might not be if you didn’t already have a plan in place on how you would do that with some outside help. You forget, I’m connected. I got people all over London who are going to jump when I tell them too. I got a couple of connections with some leveraged people working as porter’s here on the hospital wing. They’re going to get us out tonight if we’re in that hospital.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

“And in return?”

“I want one thing, but I want it now. Right now.”

“What?”

“The name of the person above you.”

“Why now?”

“I need to verify it. I can make a call,” he looked down between his legs, suggesting to Bowen where the phone might be, if in fact, it actually existed. He looked back up at Bowen, seeing quite clearly that the man was buying into this. It was amazing what a man might cling to when you were offering him one last chance to save himself.

“How can you verify it?”

“You tell me.”

Bowen looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Fine,” he replied. He sat up straighter and looked around, as if someone might have crept into the cell whilst he wasn’t looking. “You might want to give me a little space.”

Bowen rose from the bed and Reuben got up off the chair and walked towards the door of the cell. Bowen looked over Reuben’s shoulder, and then satisfied that no one was looking, lifted his grey prison issue jumper to reveal a small wound on his chest that had been stitched up.

Placing both hands on the desk in front of him, he positioned the wound against the corner of the desk, pushing his body into the wood, the corner of the desk biting into the already damaged skin.

“Jesus,” Reuben exclaimed.

The wound opened up, just a little, enough to let a small trickle of blood run down Bowen’s stomach. Standing from the desk, he reached his hands to the wound, using the fingers from his left hand to hold the skin as tight as it could do, whilst simultaneously with the right, letting his fingers delve into his cut, searching for something. Clearly, they found it, because within seconds they were pulling a thin, cigarette sized plastic container from out of Bowen’s body.

“This, had I needed it, was my insurance policy.”

“What is it?”

“A photo, of me and the big boss, if you want to give him a title.”

Bowen unscrewed the cap of the small plastic container and tipped it up, letting a rolled-up photo slide out. He passed it to Reuben. Who looked at it, not having the

slightest clue who the grey-haired man with the rugged face was in the picture? Bowen must have known, because he offered a name.

“That’s Julian Wentworth, Major General Wentworth. He’s the Director of Personnel for the army.”

“He’s the man, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. I’m gonna take this, get someone to check him out, then I’ll be back. If it looks good, we fight.”

Bowen sat back down, his jumper covering his wound once more. “Fine. Just don’t leave it too long.”

“I’ll do my best,” Reuben lied once more. He wasn’t coming back. In the hours that came, Bowen was going to know that his chance of escape had gone. That once more he was counting down to his death. That yet again, he’d underestimated Reuben Arrowsmith. In those final moments, he would know defeat. All the same, Reuben knew he ought to thank him. The man’s desperation had given Reuben the one thing he needed with The Regulators. Leverage.

“You have a name?” Raf didn’t sound like he particularly believed what Reuben was telling him, but Reuben didn’t care. This was his deck of cards now. His game.

“I got you a name. I don’t need to sit and wait and work out who’s killing Bowen. You follow that lead if you need to, do some regulating, but I’ve got the a golden path to the top. You come get me out of here and away we go.”

There was a moment’s pause as Raf’s brain tried to catch up to the new information. Once more, people were underestimating Reuben Arrowsmith.

“I don’t know how quickly we can do that,” he said cautiously.

“Just as quickly as you always planned to surely, once you knew I’d seen who killed Bowen. Unless of course you weren’t planning on ever coming to get me?” Reuben called Raf’s bluff. Did he really think he’d been that naïve?

“Okay,” Raf replied wearily. Caught in the lie. “I’ll get something sorted. Go and wait in your cell.”

“No can do, Bowen is going to want to come and see me. I ain’t going back there, you gotta make that call now.”

“I can’t just call and get you out.”

“No, but you can get me moved to another wing. A holding cell. I want to be sat with my feet up now, not looking over my shoulder. Make the call, Raf. I can forget what I’ve seen.”

There was a pause. “The call’s being made,” Raf finally said.

“Good lad. Knew we were still mates,” Reuben smiled, putting the phone down. He looked to the guard. “We ain’t going to be going back. Someone gonna call for me.”

“We’ll see about that. Come on,” the guard replied brusquely, ushering Reuben back towards the cell.

They got halfway there, then the radio call came in requesting Reuben be taken to another part of the prison. Reuben smiled at the guard and said nothing.

Raf hadn’t seemed happy to see him. Telling, Reuben thought. Didn’t matter, he’d got the information they wanted, now it was just a case of making sure he was the one who pulled the trigger. As they sat in the car heading back to London, Reuben decided to make his case.

“I need this,” he said to Raf, almost pleading. He decided honesty, and forgiveness were the best tact. “Let me be the man. I know you were going to fuck me and leave me to rot. Let’s not play pretend otherwise. I should be mad. I should be fucking raging about that one bruv, but you know what, you’ve timed it at the end of a week where in all comparison, sticking me in a hell hole high security prison for the rest of my days, let’s be blunt, it wasn’t even close to being the shittiest thing that happened to me.”

Raf flicked a quick glance at Reuben weighing up his options. *Not whether or not he should tell me*, Reuben thought. *But whether or not I’ll kill him if he does.*

“Fine,” Raf finally settled on honesty as well. “It was an option. One I probably would have gone with. Your performance would have dictated the outcome and when you went in, I felt you were better off staying in there.”

“But?” Reuben wanted him to admit it.

“I was wrong. I underestimated you.”

“People keep doing that shit.”

“You won me over Reuben,” Raf said, though he didn’t sound happy or convincing. “So, what do you want now? To kill one of the heads of the British Army?”

“Is that what this geezer is?”

“That’s what this geezer is.”

“Then yeah. That’s what I want.”

“You need a plan.”

“Don’t analysts make plans? They analyse the outcomes, work out what’s going to work out best, put it all together, then have a cuppa while the grunts get their bollocks blown off?”

“That’d be my best-case scenario, but in every analysis, I’ve come up with, there’s only one outcome.”

“What’s that then Raf?”

“You’re going to do whatever the fuck you like, no matter what I tell you.”

Reuben smiled. Then he laughed. “Oh Raf,” he said. “I might actually grow to like you.”

He looked up at Raf. The look on the analyst’s face suggested that he wasn’t sure it was going to be a mutual thing.

This time they skirted right around London, heading south towards East Sussex. Raf was getting real time intelligence updates on the location of Major General Wentworth. He was currently on a shooting expedition a little to the north of the small town of Uckfield. Exposed and in the open, albeit armed. It was deemed as soft a target as they were likely to get in the near future and The Regulators were apparently keen to act so that they could launch coordinated raids on who they believed were his associates and his properties to try and recover any data that might otherwise end up destroyed.

None of that really mattered to Reuben. He was only interested in one thing. Killing the guy. He had been the puppet master for this whole thing. Wentworth was the reason

Nisha was dead, why Reuben's empire was in ruins and his future had been crushed. He had reduced him to nothing, so in return, Reuben would destroy him.

They arrived at a muster point just south of Gatwick airport, in a small lay-by on a winding country road. There was a small van waiting for them. Stood by it was a man, tall, black, athletic looking. He leant against the van casually, even though he didn't look truly dressed to be behind its wheel in his smart tailored suit. Raf pulled the car up behind the van and the two of them got out. The man beelined for Reuben, smiling as he walked, extending his hand in greeting.

"Reuben Arrowsmith, pleasure. I'm David Warner."

Reuben took his hand, a little thrown by the reaction. "Alright," was all he could think to say.

"Great work with Bowen. You might be glad to know that he was killed about an hour ago. No word on what happened yet of course, but I'm sure it'll be of some relief to you."

"I don't know about relief," Reuben shrugged. "I beat the guy twice; I had his pride. I'd rather he was still breathing and thinking about that to be fair."

"Death isn't the only punishment," David raised an eyebrow. "It's an important facet of what we do. Let the punishment fit the crime."

"Yeah, well, this next fucker, I don't think I got enough life left in me to do what needs to be done to him."

"I'm sure, come on, let's get you kitted up."

David led Reuben to the back of the van and opened the doors, revealing a shelving unit with five sliding racks. Each one held an array of weapons. "Take your pick," David offered.

Reuben didn't know where to begin. His knowledge of guns wasn't limited, he knew enough about the sort of things you'd find on the streets, but these were top end, high spec

military weapons. He skimmed through each shelf for a moment, picking a couple up, feeling the weight, how they felt in his hands.

“How many?” he looked up at David.

“Whatever you need to get the job done.”

Reuben smiled. He took two handguns, a pump action shotgun and some kind of assault rifle that was finished all in black. “Better to have it, than miss it later,” he quipped.

David gave him a quick rundown of the latest tactical data they had. A drone was currently tracking Wentworth and his friends as they shot grouse. There were three of them in total, plus two beaters and a number of dogs.

“They’re all going to be gunning for you if you go in mob handed. Subtlety might be your friend here,” David warned.

Reuben looked sceptical. Mob handed was always a preferred method of confrontation, but then, he had to accept this wasn’t his normal realm.

“Any of them in on this?” Reuben asked.

“Too soon to tell,” David answered. “Take it that they’re not.”

“Innocent until proven guilty.”

“Exactly.”

“So how do I get him separated?”

Raf stepped back up. “We’ve been able to isolate a signal coming from his phone which we believe is how he’s been communicating with his team. It’s got a unique signature that although it’s been routed through a number of servers, we’ve been able to pinpoint a number of other people using it.”

“I ain’t got a clue what that all means,” Reuben admitted.

“It means we know who the enemy are. It also means we can get into their secure communications. We can make a call to him and force him away from his friends. If they’re not involved, he won’t want them to hear his side of the conversation. If they are, well he’ll stay put and you can go in all guns blazing.”

Reuben looked at the assault rifle that was now lying on the back seat of the car. “Man, I hope they are.”

“Once we’ve got him away, or not, as the case may be, we’ll give you the greenlight to engage.”

“Then what?” Reuben knew they didn’t just want a bullet putting in the man. He was an asset; they weren’t giving him up that lightly.

“We need to know what this was all about. Get as much out of him as you can, but remember, he’ll be missed.”

“Fuck knows why,” Reuben thought out loud.

“This is a dangerous job. I want to thank you for taking it on.” David said, putting his arm on Reuben’s shoulder, steering him towards the car.

“Thank me?” Reuben asked.

“Yes. You don’t have to do this.”

“I do bruv. I really do.” Reuben looked at David earnestly.

“That may be. But regardless, when it’s done,” David put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a card. “If you need work, call me.”

“Work? Are you fucking kidding?”

David smiled. “Happy hunting Mr. Arrowsmith.”

Reuben took the card and nodded.

Raf dropped him off at the edge of the estate where Wentworth was shooting. Reuben had the assault rifle and shotgun zipped up in a gun bag in an effort to make him fit with the surroundings as best as a mixed-race man in combat fatigues could fit in a country estate, whilst the pistols were holstered inside his jacket, out of sight.

Wentworth was a three quarter of a mile walk away, so Reuben set off, picking his route so best to avoid detection. There was another drone in the air now, giving him an eye in the sky, whilst Raf relayed any relevant tactical information to him through a small earpiece that he had given him just as he left the vehicle.

As he approached the area, Raf came through the communications set. “Okay, find a place to grab some cover and we’ll make the call.”

Reuben secreted himself at the edge of a small wood. He could hear the sound of shotguns firing their pellets at the grouse that were spooked into the air by the dogs and beaters on the ground. A dull crack every now and again, which echoed off the rolling hills that made up this part of the world. He waited. He couldn’t hear the conversation. He had no idea what was happening.

“Okay, he’s moving off.” Raf chirped up. “I guess he’s the only one.”

“Where do you need me?”

“I want you to head north east, move through the trees when you get to a small stream, you should be on top of him.

“Got it.” There was silence in his ear once more and Reuben set off quickly.

It was a little over a minute before he heard the sound of a voice shouting. A gruff voice, but one that had clearly been educated well. Each word was delivered with

precision, perfect Queen's English. Not the sort of thing Reuben could ever imagine himself speaking.

"Who on earth could he have given proof to? I don't care if you have to kill every last bloody prisoner in there, make sure it's snuffed out!" The ruse they were using seemed to be pretty close to the truth, Reuben thought.

He could see Wentworth now. A sturdy looking man with broad shoulders and no sign of a gut, a little under six foot, with short curly white hair, neatly cut. The sort of thing you'd expect from a soldier Reuben supposed. His back was to him. Perfect.

Reuben broke from the treeline, pistol drawn, treading as lightly as he could. Twenty feet away, ten feet... he pointed the pistol at Wentworth and thought about just pulling the trigger there and then.

"Drop the fucking phone and put your hands up."

But he didn't.

Wentworth turned, a look of surprise on his face. He didn't drop the phone.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"I'm the boy who's gonna fuck your shit up. Drop the fucking phone."

"I'll call you back," Wentworth muttered into the phone nonchalantly, as if completely unaware of the trap he'd fallen into. He still looked smug, complacent. *If only you knew*, Reuben thought.

"What do you want boy?" Wentworth snapped abruptly, confirming Reuben's thoughts about his smugness, as he sneered at Reuben, looking for all the world as if he was dealing with an impertinent servant.

"You're a right fucking coloniser aren't you?" Reuben couldn't resist. He was wielding the power. Wentworth had no idea.

“I beg your pardon?” Wentworth looked taken aback, but Reuben wasn’t about to start apologising.

“Walk towards me, hands on head.”

Wentworth did as he was told, hands on head, slowly towards Reuben, eyes firmly on him.

“Good lad,” Reuben taunted. This was turning out to be easier than he thought.

Wentworth was five yards from him now. Reuben started to pace around him, wanting to get behind him to manoeuvre him into the woods where he could ask as many questions as the clock would allow. He was side on with Wentworth when he heard a noise from the treeline. He turned too late.

From the trees a dog lurched out, snarling as it went. Reuben didn’t know the sort, just that it was a big dog and an angry one. Wentworth shouted something in triumph, then called on the dog. “Get him!” he yelled at the dog.

It leapt at Reuben’s outstretched arm, its teeth sinking in just below his elbow joint. Reuben shouted in pain, dropping the gun, tumbling to the floor with the dog. They both rolled together, one on top of the other and then switching, the dog’s jaws clamped on his arm, snarling as it went. Reuben could feel the blood pouring out. He needed to get this thing off him. With his left hand he scrambled inside his jacket for the other pistol as the dog shook his arm. He couldn’t get his fingers around the hilt.

Wentworth fell on the two of them now, his heavy body knocking the air from Reuben, his forearm clubbing down on the side of Reuben’s head. He would have had him pinned there underneath him, had he not dislodged the dog which in the chaos snapped forward once more, its teeth sinking into the first thing it found, which this time, was Wentworth’s hip.

The soldier shouted out in pain, pulling away and allowing Reuben the chance to roll the other direction, crashing into the dog. The dog yelped, then jumped up on Wentworth, its face coming towards his, teeth bared. Wentworth wrestled with the dog grabbing it under its jaw, before twisting. Something snapped. The dog whimpered and then gave way on top of him.

Wentworth had got to his feet again. He must have been preparing to hurl himself at Reuben once more, but he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw that Reuben had got his second pistol out and was pointing it square in his chest.

“Fucking don’t even move,” panted Reuben.

He took a moment on the floor to compose himself. His arm was agony, he could feel the blood running down inside his coat. He had to go on.

“Let’s move,” he urged breathlessly.

Wentworth didn’t try anything as he hobbled in front of Reuben. The dog’s bite had clearly hurt him too. “You know people are going to come looking for me any second now,” he warned.

Reuben did know that.

“No one around,” came the reassurance from Raf in Reuben’s ear.

“Why didn’t you warn me about the fucking dog?”

“What?” Wentworth sounded confused.

“I didn’t see him in the trees, sorry. I’ve got thermals on now, should give me a better look.” Raf apologised

“Fine. Gonna need some stitches.”

“Back up,” Wentworth worked out what was happening. “Who are you? A bloody Regulator?”

“Nah,” Reuben replied. “I’m just freelancing.”

“Didn’t know they had much truck with that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, well I was the bad guy a couple of days ago according to them, so I guess things change.”

That must have made a connection somewhere in Wentworth’s head, because he stopped and turned to Reuben, who himself stopped, keeping a comfortable distance between the two of them.

“Oh, you’re the one that Bowen hired. I’m sorry about what happened, that was never the plan.”

“I bet the plan had me dying,” Reuben remarked.

“There has to be some collateral damage,” Wentworth didn’t pretend otherwise.

“Why?”

“Why what? Why collateral damage?”

“Nah, why all of it? Why kill so many fucking people man? I mean, a nuke. Ain’t you meant to be on our side?”

“Like I said, collateral damage.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Look at the world we live in now. Look at the rise of the far right. Nazis everywhere. We fought a bloody world war against them, and rightly so. No one can argue with that. Yet now I’ve got people who are just the same posing with my soldiers, influencing my politicians, setting the political discourse, and nothing they do, no matter how appalling it is, seems to stop them from gaining more and more publicity. So, I made a decision, a calculation. How many lives would I give up to stop fascists taking over my country? We gave up millions in World War 2, I was happy to give up just a few thousand here.”

“You wanted to set off a nuke, so you could blame it on some failed football hooligans, to stop your soldiers being racist cunts?”

“It’s a bit deeper than that.”

“Seems a bit over the top mate, I got to be honest. There must have been another way?”

Wentworth shook his head. “Do you not think I tried? Do you think this is the first thing I went to?”

Reuben sighed. “Fuck me, why does it have to be you? Why couldn’t you just sit there and say, ‘You know what, I ain’t got an answer, but I bet some smarter cunt in a suit will have?’ I mean, surely that would be better than nuking London.”

Wentworth nodded. “Perhaps it would have been, but I was sick of waiting. I was scared of waiting. I had to do something. I’m a soldier. I had to fight back.”

Reuben looked at the gun in his hand. He looked at Wentworth. “Fighting back,” he said. “Where the fuck does it get us? Just more and more bodies innit.”

“I’m sorry.” Wentworth truly sounded it. Reuben’s head was feeling light. He was bleeding badly. He needed to get out of here.

“If I let you live, you know they’re going to come for you and they’re going to put you away. You know you deserve that.”

“Maybe,” Wentworth nodded. Reuben wasn’t quite sure what he was saying ‘maybe’ in relation to, but he knew that he had to get out of there. If he shot the man, the noise would alert his companions and he really wasn’t sure how far he was going to get before he went down. And all this killing, all of it, what had it achieved? There was a trail of bodies across London, for a cause that had failed. One of them was Nisha, his Nisha. One more body wasn’t going to bring her back. Nothing was.

“Fucking go,” Reuben said.

Wentworth nodded. There was no surprise. Had he played Reuben? Was it all a ploy to save himself? Silently Reuben cursed himself for being naïve, but he wasn’t about to go back on his word right now. This was his call. His kill, if he’d wanted it and right now, he didn’t.

Wentworth stepped cautiously past Reuben, who gave him more than enough space to ensure there was no sudden lunge in his direction. He kept walking until he came to the body of the dog.

“Shame.” Wentworth stopped and looked back to Reuben. “She was probably the most innocent out of everyone. Rest of them might have deserved it, but not her.”

The words vibrated through Reuben like a shot. He felt his eyebrows raise, his nostrils flare, felt his fingers stiffen around the gun.

“What the fuck did you just say?” he asked.

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