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Eventually the order came for all control and restraint level two or riot-trained staff on duty to get their riot kit out of the locker room and once dressed meet back in the unit's tea room. I had just completed my riot training a few weeks earlier, so I rather reluctantly followed the thirty-or-so-strong contingent to the room where we kept our stores. As I struggled into my overalls and strapped on my plastic shin and knee protectors, I could hear the excited nervousness among the others as they spoke about "payback" and the chance to "get stuck into the cons". I just wanted to find out what could have happened to cause this problem in the first place, on what should have been an uneventful and routine Saturday.

Once dressed and kitted out with our PR24 nightsticks and full-length riot shields, we filed back into the unit and crammed into the tearoom to await the briefing by the security PO. He entered the room, also kitted out in riot gear, and with a menacing grin on his face stood up on one of the chairs to deliver his game plan.

"Gentlemen, ladies, we have got a situation that most of you are aware began about forty-five minutes ago when three inmates from spur three returned from visits. It appears that they became involved in an argument with an officer on visits regarding one of the visitors wanting to hand over a writing pad and some envelopes."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing: all this was due to the fact that an officer could not be bothered to take responsibility for signing in a notepad and some envelopes from a visitor who had come all the way from Northern Ireland. And it got worse: the officer in question, it was rumoured, had smuggled in a hand-held television set for Gary Nelson the previous week via one of his visitors for a sum of money. Apparently, on hearing the commotion over the notepad, Nelson had approached the officer and made his views known about how petty the matter was. The officer, however, took this as a threat to expose his own little smuggling enterprise and so erupted into his own threats towards the inmates in front of the visitors.

This had obviously not only upset the inmates but also their visitors, and it was probably only the fact that one of the inmates had an elderly visitor that it did not kick off there and then. This was typical of how one officer's guilt and/or laziness in not wanting to put himself out for five minutes could magnify into such a major incident, and one that could have huge knock-on effects for all involved. My thoughts were interrupted as the PO's voice changed tone.

"So that is the situation. The duty governor has handed complete control of the incident to me, so we have a golden opportunity now to hit them hard and fast without some do-gooder looking over our shoulder. We are going in there to take back my spur, and I want to hear screams of pain. Let's show them whose nick this is. I know there are some big names in there, but just you remember this: OUT THERE THEY MAY BE MR BIG, BUT IN HERE OUR GANG IS BIGGER THAN THEIR GANG, SO LET'S DO IT."

It could have been a speech from a Hollywood war movie. I just thought: what have I let myself get involved with here? With our illustrious leader's words still ringing in our ears, we filed out and lined up outside the door to spur three, which had been covered by a medical-green curtained screen brought up from the visits search room. As we waited for the order to go, I could smell burning from the spur. The inmates had obviously set fire to their bedding in an attempt to make some kind of smoke screen. I tightened my grip around the handles of my shield and felt a nervous anticipation wash over me. I had

been in similar situations before in my army days, but this time I did not trust those who were lined up beside me either to watch my back or to act in a totally professional manner.

The volume of noise suddenly increased tenfold and the acrid smell of burning foam filled my nostrils as the door to the spur was opened and we were off. No time for thinking now, just switch into auto-mode, look after number one and focus on what is in front of the scratched plastic I held firm before me. Two by two we squeezed ourselves and our shields through the narrow doorway into the smoke-filled spur. As soon as each pair was through, all we could do was stand our ground while the remainder of the teams joined us. Through the thick smoke I could make out an effective-looking barricade immediately to my front and caught a brief glimpse of one or two inmates with pieces of torn sheet wrapped around their mouths to offer them some sort of protection from the smoke screen they had created. Then the noise broke through the smoke: the shouts and the banging of handmade weapons, which connected with such force on my shield that it took all my strength to stand my ground, and vibrated up my arms as they absorbed the impact.

It seemed as if I was standing there for hours, but in reality it was probably only minutes, before the order to push forward reached me. By now the smoke from the burning mattresses had almost filled the spur. I could feel it burning the back of my throat, and my vision was seriously impaired due to constant watering of my eyes caused by the acrid smoke, which stung each time I blinked hard in an attempt to improve my field of view. Blindly we shuffled forward, our lead leg firmly against the base of our shields as we tried to force our way through the makeshift but nevertheless effective barricade to our front. Each step sapped more and more energy from my already tired and aching body, and sweat now poured down my back and forehead to add to the irritation the smoke was causing to my stinging eyes.

Inch by precious inch we edged forward through the smoke and din of the constant barrage of objects that were being hurled at our shield line. Finally a breakthrough: we managed to break away enough of the barricade to advance through it and re-establish our shield line on the other side. My chest was heaving and my lungs were burning, through a combination of sheer exhaustion and the smoke that I breathed in with every desperate gasp for air. I could feel the tension rising within the ranks and knew that, as soon as we could get amongst the prisoners, anger and bitterness would take over from professionalism and many of the officers behind our shields would unleash this anger on the inmates before them. With this in mind, I remember thinking how Dingus had helped me get off the spur and thought I now owed it to him to try to offer him some protection from the imminent wrath of the staff. As the time for the order to break into our separate teams and target individual inmates neared, I squinted into the smog before me, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of Dingus.

Most of the inmates had gathered together in the rear-left of the spur and I spotted Dingus in amongst them just seconds before the order to break ranks was shouted down the line. With a last surge of my remaining energy reserves, I ran forward at half pace. I could feel the two officers who made up my team tugging at the sleeves of my overalls as they tried to remain tight in behind the protection of my shield. I was physically exhausted, but knew I could not give up now. The shield and the two officers I was effectively dragging behind me only served to sap my strength further, but I had to keep going that last few feet. I had to reach Dingus before another team.

Two inmates appeared before me and threw what I assumed was a mop bucket of boiling water from the boiler directly at my shield. For a moment the sheer impact stopped my advance in its tracks and stunned me as my aching forearms once again absorbed the blow. I recovered and smashed my shield through the gap between the two men, knocking them to either side of me. There was no time to worry about what they would do; I just had to hope that another team would deal with them before they could launch a counterattack on the exposed rear of my team. I now had Dingus right in front of my shield and needed just one final effort to pin him against the back wall of the spur and remove him from the game, or more importantly from the reach of other teams.

As I prepared myself for the final lunge forward, I felt a shattering blow to the side of my helmet, which in my exhausted state caused me to lose my balance and I felt myself falling to the floor. I landed heavily onto the handles of my own shield, which made contact painfully with my ribcage, knocking what wind I had left out of my lungs and leaving me desperately panting for air. The two members of my team became caught in my downward motion and followed me to the floor, landing on top of me and pinning me to the ground. In these last desperate minutes of this confrontation our situation was very serious. We were dangerously exposed, not only to the inmates, who would have loved a chance to stick a last boot into a downed officer, but also to the forward momentum of our own remaining teams, who were themselves advancing for the final assault.

With a determined energy that you can only muster in such desperate situations, I kicked and thrashed my body like a man possessed until I managed to scramble back to my feet. Disoriented in the smoke and dazed through exhaustion and the blow to my head, I felt around blindly for my shield. After those few minutes of chaos in which I had been temporarily immobilized, and by the time I had retrieved the shield and regained my bearings enough to re-engage in the job at hand, I could see through the misted visor that I was too late. The inmates had all been restrained and screams of pain and shouts of protest now replaced the din of battle. I had been too late to restrain Dingus, as I saw with some sadness that he was lying face down under a group of four or five black overalls.

I staggered over to the small window at the back of the spur, stepping over groups of officers and inmates along the way. When I got there, I pushed open the two small barred windows as fully as they would reach and stuck my face out of one. With nausea washing over me due to smoke inhalation and sheer exhaustion, I sucked desperately at the clean air outside the window. More staff streamed onto the spur as word spread that the situation was under control, and someone was going round with a fire extinguisher to douse the smouldering mattresses, but all they succeeded in doing was to create more thick smoke to fill the air.

As the smoke gradually dispersed, I saw twelve mounds of bodies. Black overalls were now laced with white shirts as some fresh staff took over from the original riot teams. From the bottom of each of these mounds, shouts of pain and protest could be heard, as the restraining officers applied far greater force than was necessary to the wrist and leg locks of the immobilized inmates beneath them. The parts of the floor that were not occupied by mounds of bodies were littered with the debris of broken furniture and electrical appliances, together with water from the broken toilets. The walls were charred black from the smouldering mattresses. The place was a mess: so much damage over a notepad and a few envelopes.

For a few minutes nothing moved. Everyone took the opportunity to try to catch their breath before the next phase of the operation, which would involve moving the inmates off the spur and down the stairs and relocating them in the segregation unit.

Then the security PO took position in the middle of the spur and, with a sadistic grin on his face, shouted, "I can't hear much pain being inflicted."

No sooner had the words left his lips than the spur erupted with ear-piercing screams of pain, as the officers heeded his words and tightened their hold on their prisoners' wrists and legs.

"That's better. Now we have got your attention we will be moving you to the segregation unit one at a time. I hope this has been a lesson to you not to fuck about in my jail."

What a fucking hero, I thought to myself.

Each of the twelve inmates was then in turn dragged up from the floor and, still bent over double with an officer on each arm and one pushing his head down almost between his knees, he began the painful, slow walk to the segregation unit. The PO accompanied each move personally and kept the tension going with shouts to encourage the escorting staff to tweak the wrist locks a bit if the inmate fell quiet for a moment. One particular inmate, who tried to protest to the PO that he thought his wrist was fractured, was twice led headlong into one of the doors leading off the spur with such force that the perspex in the door shook with the vibration.

Once in the strip cells of the seg unit, the inmates were subjected to a brutal disrobing of their clothes, which were literally torn from them, and then they were left, many of them bleeding and complaining of injury, lying naked on the bare concrete floor of the cell. To relocate all twelve inmates took approximately forty-five minutes in total, and I watched in disbelief as they were manhandled down the stairs and at the ferocity and venomous way in which the staff took pleasure in causing as much pain as possible in order to look good in front of this bearded wanker of a security PO.

Once all the inmates had been relocated, the staff involved all started slapping each other on the back, with mutual congratulations on a job well done. The stories then started about who did what to what slag, etc., and it was suggested that we all go over to the mess for a celebratory drink. However, I kept a low profile, as I didn't want to be part of such an egotistical group of idiots. As far as I could tell, a corrupt officer had started this whole incident and it was made worse by a sadistic PO. I could not understand the mentality of people that seemed to enjoy inflicting pain on someone who had been immobilized. All I saw was an abuse of power, but then again I had seen a lot of that during my time in the Prison Service.

Once the triumphant troops had left for the mess and the shouts of protest had faded from the segregation unit, I sat alone and wondered what gave me such a different outlook to the vast majority of the other staff in terms of how to deal with such situations. Unlike them, I felt no bitterness or hatred towards the inmates over the eruption - to me it was just part of the job I had signed up for. I did not blame the lads for what had just happened as, in my opinion, the whole situation had arisen as a result of poor management by staff. The three inmates initially involved in the visits incident had been quite understandably upset by the attitude of the staff, but had resisted the urge to do anything in front of their visitors. Once they returned to the spur and realized they would not get a reasonable explanation, they felt, as is quite often the case especially on a weekend when staffing levels are at a minimum, that they had to take action. The rest of the inmates may not have all agreed with them, but felt they had to support them. This is the nature of our prisons and it is no different to members of staff supporting colleagues by providing false statements.

I had only been in the job about a year and a half by this time, but I already feared that I had made a big mistake and was beginning to realize that I would never be able to act in the sort of unprofessional manner in which many officers conducted their duties on a daily basis. Each day I struggled with my conscience and inside questioned whether I was doing the right thing or not.