

Reducer

Blake Thaggard

"REDUCER"

FADE IN:

EXT. CHICAGO ROOFTOP - DAY

The sun begins to set over dense urban sprawl laid out before the shores of Lake Michigan, which is at this point layered in floating shanty towns snaking throughout the polluted waters. The multitude of skyscrapers are sheathed in intensely bright advertisements dancing hundreds of feet up into the air, their audio blasting across street block by street block.

The streets are visibly crammed with people. Multiple monorail systems slither between buildings. Halfway up every skyscraper is tangled up in a web of these bullet-fast vehicles moving along the rails.

The lone figure silhouetted on the edge of one rooftop stares ahead at one advertisement displaying the visage of some inscrutable product caught up in buzzwords and indiscriminate, but eye-catching images. A monotone BEEP manages to make itself heard over the advertisement, and in a flash the figure turns and places a finger to their ear.

She is LEAH, a woman in her 30s with a choppy mess of hair tied back behind her head and in surprisingly innocuous black winter jacket, devoid of iconography. A communication device is in her ear, emitting some encrypted bursts of a computerized voice. She listens to it with intense focus, the background noise fading into silence.

OPERATOR (V.O.)

Apartment complex on the intersection
of 44th and Varnes Boulevard. Bottom
floor only, Reducer. Quota: thirty.

It stops, and she nods, her voice similarly monotone and calculating.

LEAH

Understood.

She holds out her fingers, twitching them as she does some rapid math in her head, mouthing numbers with her eyes closed for a few moments before they snap open again.

LEAH

Fifteen to forty-five targets. Seven
hours, standard traffic diversion away

from the intersection at 04:30.
Reporting back in eight. Leah out.

She presses a finger to her ear again, and turns her back on the skyline, walking away.

MONTAGE

- She pays off a large man sitting behind a desk in a dark, dingy room, a 'BUILDING SUPER' nameplate visible.

- She opens an emergency case, containing a fire extinguisher.

- She stops a whistling maintenance worker as he starts to unlock a door with an immense set of keys.

- She sets up a strange device on an opened power box on the apartment's rooftop, under an antenna. The antenna appears to lilt and power down.

- A couple walks past the emergency case. The extinguisher is gone, but they do not notice.

- At an emergency exit in an alley, Leah meticulously welds the door shut.

- The maintenance worker storms out of the building in a huff, tearing off his uniform's hat and angrily tossing the set of keys into the trash.

- The super walks out of his apartment, laden with suitcases. He locks the door before leaving, looking conflicted.

END MONTAGE

INT. APARTMENT BASEMENT - NIGHT

A room, cloaked in complete darkness, has its silence disturbed by the opening of a door at the top of suddenly-visible stairs. The maintenance's worker's keys hang from the lock as Leah is framed in the contrasting light shining behind her. She steps down the stairs, leaving the keys in the door and leaving it only half-closed as she delves into the basement, defunct, cold boilers and ancient laundry machines filling most of the space. She makes her way to a wall of switches and levers.

INSERT - UTILITIES PANEL

Judging by the labels, these various controls, gauges, and

rusted-out levels are controlling the apartment's utilities. She shuts off several switches near the top of the panel, and as she reaches over and pulls the level beside them, the pipework visible nearby and along the ceiling starts to sputter and SPLASH, the flow of water audibly reduced to droplets..

Leah glances down at her watch as she turns away from the panel, and as she looks up again, there is a man standing directly in front of her.

An older man in his 40s, FRANK looks, much like her, fairly innocuous. A large beard and knit hat compliment his black streetwear, that, on closer inspection, looks identical to that which she wears.

Leah's hand flies to her belt instinctively, but Frank raises his gloved hands just as quickly.

FRANK

Worst kind of work gets done in the dark. What people can't see...

LEAH

(relaxing)

Can't kill them. We do not exist...only reduce. Name?

FRANK

Frank. Fourteen.

LEAH

Leah. Six. I wasn't assigned backup.

FRANK

Changes of plans. Operator couldn't reach you. Signal disruption, big riot going down in Indianapolis. EMPs, disruptors, the works.

LEAH

Heard about that. Makes me wonder what I'm doing up here with numbers this small.

FRANK

(tired)

We're not here to solve society's problems, just to make sure it keeps existing.

Frank walks past Leah to examine the switchboard, nodding at the lever she's pulled.

FRANK

No water, no sprinklers?

LEAH

Basic procedure. Why?

FRANK

Fire station a few blocks away. Have you-

LEAH

(frowning)

Yes.

FRANK

Alright. Saw the exits sealed. Looks like solid work. By-the-books. Fire on the first floor lobby, gets to the stairs. Alarms off, no response...half a dozen smoked out before anyone notices.

LEAH

Right. Just fifteen more and the quota's met.

FRANK

Yeah. Seems pretty small to me, but the quota's the quota.

LEAH

Suppose it is.

Frank turns away from the pipes, and is almost immediately met with a collapsible baton smashing into the side of his head with a metallic THWANG. Leah, the wielder, presses the attack, sweeping one leg under one of Frank's to put him off-balance, and pulling her arm back for another strike. But he's just as quick; grabbing one of the pipes above him, he lifts himself up just over her leg-sweep and lands a kick directly in her chest, sending Leah sprawling backward to the ground. She rolls to her feet to see him dart up the staircase, and without hesitation, pursues.

As Frank moves through the door, his attempt to pull it shut behind him is thwarted by Leah's baton shoved between it and the doorframe. Abandoning the effort, he sprints down the dingy halls of the apartment, shoving aside a bystander in

the process. Leah rips open the door, tosses aside her now-bent and useless baton, wasting no time in following.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

The filthy glass facade of the apartment complex shatters as a chair is thrown through it, breaking the moment it bounces off the street. Frank leaps through the empty frame at a remarkable distance, and takes off down the sidewalk. Leah whips through it moments later, forgoing the leap and running straight through the frame.

He is twenty feet or so ahead of her, throwing aside any (largely homeless) passerby that bars his path, as the streets are rather populated even at this hour. Some bystanders are shocked, others shoot video with phones, and Leah ignores all of them in her pursuit as they fly through the sidewalk, past run-down and closed shops. Those attempting to shoot video shake their phones in confusion, as though they have just died or malfunctioned as soon as they attempt to record.

The gap between the pair closes as Frank's sprint becomes desperate, he visibly struggling to keep going, while Leah, face set with relentless determination, sprints ever closer. He spares a second to glance behind him, realizes how close she's getting, and makes an obvious detour, darting into an alley. Leah rounds the corner, and finds him clambering over an old, useless security barrier. As she too vaults over it, he's already reached the other side of the alley, onto the street, one that, as she arrives, she finds is problematic.

EXT. MARKET - CONTINUOUS

Like a bloated flea market, the downtrodden of the city have congregated into a makeshift bazaar of tents and homemade stalls. Scavenged, cracked, flickering neon signs can be found lighting up the otherwise muted market in purples and blues.

Leah whips her head around, honing in on individual faces one by one, looking for Frank. Her face hardens as she rotates, coming up empty on the faces, so she turns her gaze to the ground, to people's feet. Most are robed or blanketed, many barefoot, and all shuffling about, cold and uncomfortable. She catches sight of a woman crouched, gathering odds and ends from what looks like a stall that's just been knocked over. It's enough for Leah, who sprints in that direction.

As she makes her way through the crowds and under a vast canvas tent, she gets a few looks of disdain; even her incredibly basic streetwear sticks out in this sea of

patchwork robes and blankets. The area is tense and claustrophobic, and Leah quickly notices that many of these robes are folded or hanging, with several people running their hands over the fabric and comparing them, despite how utterly crude each one is. One or two people even walk up to her offering such robes, but Leah blocks out their pleas.

A few moments pass as she scans the makeshift clothing bazaar, but many of the robes are hooded, and it's impossible to see everyone's faces. Leah looks sideways again at those making her offers; and an idea seems to strike as she digs her hand into her coat, pulling out a handful of what appear to be a sort of currency, coins shaped like squares with inscrutable etchings on them.

With not a moment's hesitation, she holds up the paltry handful of change, instantly drawing the eye and gasps of nearly the entire room as they hear the credits jangle. For only a second does Leah hold them aloft before lobbing them off to the side, over the heads of the crowd. In a mad scramble, every single person in the room lunges and dives for the loose change...save two. Leah...and a robed, hooded figure that is only now turning around to react to the sound: Frank.

He grits his teeth in a rage at the ploy, but as he turns to try and run again, he proves too slow. Leah is already on him, grabbing the hood of his speedy disguise and hanging it - along with him - backwards onto the ground, where she turns and crouches, planting a knee right against the front of his neck under his chin.

LEAH

Appearance is only half of a disguise,
Frank. The rest is manners.

Frank stares at her for a few moments...and smiles bitterly, teeth red with blood from her baton strike. His words are choked as Leah squeezes both air and blood flow to his head with the pressure on his neck.

FRANK

I see why the Reducers got to you.
You're good. How'd you spot me?

LEAH

We automated fire station response
delay a year ago. And my quota's
thirty. Now get up. We're not doing
this here.

FRANK

You got something to do, you can do it here. I'm done hiding.

LEAH

Forget already? We don't exist, Frank. There's no being done with that.

With that, she lands a particularly fierce punch across his face, and, already dizzy from the lack of blood flow, his head lolls, and Frank falls unconscious.

EXT. CHICAGO ROOFTOP - DAWN

The sun is just barely started to peek over the horizon, over the very same rooftop as before. Frank slowly regains consciousness and he finds himself zip-tied to a pipe, slumped over uselessly. Leah is standing on the edge of the rooftop, facing away from him. Distant SIRENS are audible, and as he regains composure, he looks over his shoulder, at and past Leah, to see a plume of smoke rising in the distance. Bitterly, he shuts his eyes.

FRANK

Damn it, Leah.

LEAH

I'm going to stop you there.

FRANK

Why the hell did you do it?

LEAH

Should I even dignify that with a response?

Leah whips around, striding up to Frank and crouching to be eye-level with him.

LEAH

You're one of us. At least, you were one of us. A Reducer. You know why we do it.

FRANK

I was. I was one of you, and then I realized, I have no damn clue WHY we do it!

LEAH

(narrowing eyes)

You know exactly why. In some dark room in D.C. that nobody knows about, someone's running numbers. Not money. Not political demographics. Just. People. Making a list. Checking it twice.

FRANK

Is that funny to you? Is what we do a joke?

LEAH

Do something long enough and you learn to enjoy it. Now, I'm confused, Frank. You said yourself earlier our job was to keep society existing. Was that you trying to gain my trust? Sure doesn't look like you believe that anymore.

FRANK

That IS our job. Reducers are necessary to keep things the way they are.

LEAH

Then why are you here? Why did you lie to me? From where I'm sitting, it looks like you were trying to figure out exactly what I did to fill my quota, so that you could undo it all. Is that it? You wanted to save those people? Be a hero?

FRANK

(biting)

Fuck you, Leah. You know none of us are saints. You know why they pick us? You know why they take us off death's row for this? Because this is misery. This is fucking torment, this is a hell they can get something out of! They won't even let us goddamn die, they need us!

LEAH

Why didn't you say no?

FRANK

I thought I was a monster. I thought I

deserved death. You know what? I fucking did. Nobody deserves this. Nobody deserves to do what we do. I saw redemption when they made me an offer to do something important. Now I'm just...worse.

LEAH

Worst kind of people for the worst kind of work. I've seen Reducers with regret before, Frank. We all have it. Hell, I have it. But you...it's all you've got left. That's not enough to get the job done.

She stands, waving an arm out at the plume of smoke in the far-off distance, at the relentless glow surrounding it, at the urban chaos.

LEAH

World's full, Frank. They can't sustain it. They can't keep it from growing. But they can...reduce it.

FRANK

Culling people. Slaughtering them. We're monsters, Leah. All of us.

LEAH

It's a monstrous world that's out of options.

FRANK

Let it fall apart. Let it burn and rebuild itself.

LEAH

You think a total collapse of society isn't going to kill more people than we ever could reduce? Or you're more comfortable with that idea because that blood wouldn't be on your hands?

FRANK

We're not the first Reducers. We won't be the last ones. I can't...stomach that.

LEAH

I can. The others can. Whoever's calling the shots can.

FRANK

(desperately)

Nobody's calling the shots, Leah. Did you know that?

LEAH

What are you talking about? The government set it all up.

FRANK

They set up the first Reducers, yeah...decades ago. But everyone that knew? They're all dead. And you know what?

Frank laughs, almost mad, his head lolling against the pipe he's tied to.

FRANK

I envy them! They took us, the worst secret they could've conceived, to their graves! Nobody outside of us knows we fucking exist! THAT is what I'm doing, Leah, I'm telling you that this 'why' doesn't exist anymore! Nobody's making us do this! We recruit for ourselves, we run the numbers ourselves, we're the only ones that can end this cycle of...misery. Do you get it now?

He looks up desperately at Leah, but she's already standing, looking down at him with surprise...but visibly, the emotion evolves, from shock, to pity, to grim acceptance.

LEAH

I get it.

FRANK

Then let me go. We can stop the others. We can keep this from happening anymore. Think of how many people we can save...not just the quotas, but future Reducers.

LEAH

Think of how many people die if we don't bite the bullet ourselves and keep doing this.

FRANK

I have. I have thought about it. But I just...I can't be holding the gun, Leah. I can't be holding the gun anymore.

LEAH

You don't have to, Frank. I'll hold it for all of us.

She turns her back to him and walks towards the fire escape, as he rattles his ziptie uselessly, pulling with feverish determination.

FRANK

I'll tell everyone. I'm a dead man either way, I'll spill everything, to everyone, and they can put a stop to this.

LEAH

(pausing near the fire escape,
turning slowly)

Tell them what? You're part of a disavowed government measure? That you work with more ex-death row convicts you don't know the names or even the number of? That you reduce carefully-calculated masses of people to curb overpopulation? That you don't have any physical evidence, witnesses, suspects, or any tangible proof of, other than your word?

She turns back to the fire escape, clambering down the first few rungs.

LEAH

What people can't see, can't kill them. We do not exist...only reduce.

FADE OUT.

THE END