

Briefing Room 7B: Covert Infiltration

(The air in Briefing Room 7B was thick with the scent of stale coffee and ozone. Holographic displays flickered to life, showing maps of the city, schematics of Maple High, and the stoic, thin faces of Foundation leadership patched in from secure locations. Director Ash and Supervisor Vance were present via a live feed from Site-77i and Area-11, while the formidable holograms of MTF Director Anya Petrova and Task Force Leader David presided from MTF Headquarters. Before them stood the assembled operatives of MTF Gamma-7, MTF Lambda-5, and the command elements of Nu-7, alongside the two agents who would be the tip of the spear: Anya and Kofia of Iota-10. The Lead Agent stood at the podium, her gaze sweeping across the room.)

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): *(Her voice cutting through the low hum of the projectors)* Alright, listen up. You have all read the preliminary intel packet on Operation: Maple Shade. I will be brief.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: We understand the basics, Lead. Eight missing kids, all from the same high school. Local authorities are chasing their tails in the woods.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): That is correct. As of this moment, the local police's incompetence is our primary advantage. It provides us with a wide operational berth, but the situation is volatile. The town is on the verge of rioting, which means our window for a quiet, covert operation is closing rapidly.

Director Anya Petrova (Task Force Director): *(Her holographic image sharp and severe)* Let's be clear on what we don't know, which is almost everything. We have no confirmed number of hostile entities. We have no confirmed capabilities. We have a series of connected, disturbing anecdotes from terrified parents and nothing more.

Supervisor Vance (Area-11 Overseer): What we do have is a pattern. A pattern of extreme fear directed at the faculty, a secretive and obstructive administration, and a consistent local legend about a hidden entity within the school. These are not random events.

Task Force Leader David (MTF Leader): Patterns and legends don't stop bullets. And they don't tell my teams what they'll be facing when they breach those doors. A direct assault at this stage would be a death sentence for the children and my operatives.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Which is why we are not initiating a direct assault. The O5 Council has sanctioned a two-phase operation. Phase One begins tomorrow at 0700 hours.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: What is Phase One, ma'am?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Phase One is Covert Infiltration and Anomaly Identification. We are sending two agents inside to be our eyes and ears. Their mission is to identify the threats, map their locations and routines, and find a safe extraction route for the students, all without being detected.

Director Ash (Site-77i Director): These agents will be our primary source of intelligence. They will be confirming the nature of the threat so that when we do initiate Phase Two, the assault, it will be precise, efficient, and with minimal collateral damage.

Director Anya Petrova (Task Force Director): The success of this entire operation rests on the shoulders of the infiltration team. Their stealth is our greatest weapon.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): For this task, Mobile Task Force Iota-10, 'Damn Feds,' has been assigned. Specifically, Agent Anya and Agent Kofia.

(The Lead Agent's eyes met those of the two individuals in the front row, a silent acknowledgment. Anya, with her sharp, observant eyes, nodded once. Kofia, slightly broader in stature, maintained a casual but alert posture.)

Agent Anya: We're ready, ma'am.

Agent Kofia: What's our cover?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Our intelligence network has intercepted a job posting: Maple High is hiring two new janitors, effective immediately.

(A low murmur went through the assembled operatives. The sheer audacity of the plan was not lost on them.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: Janitors. That's... a bold move, Lead.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): It's the perfect cover. No one ever looks at the janitor. They will become part of the background, invisible. They will have access to every part of the school.

Task Force Leader David (MTF Leader): And the rest of us? What is our role in Phase One?

Director Anya Petrova (Task Force Director): Your role is to wait. All other MTF units—Gamma-7, Lambda-5, Psi-7, and Nu-7—will remain at the forward operating base on high alert.

Supervisor Vance (Area-11 Overseer): You will be our rapid response force. You will not move, you will not engage, you will not even breathe in the direction of that school until you receive the signal from the infiltration team.

Director Ash (Site-77i Director): Once Agents Anya and Kofia have identified the primary threats and a safe extraction path, they will give the "green light." Only then will Phase Two, the full-scale raid, commence.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Until that moment, you are all on standby. Your job is to be ready for the fight of your lives, and to trust that our team inside will give you the intel you need to win it.

Agent Anya: We understand the mission, ma'am.

Agent Kofia: We will not fail.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): I know you won't. The fate of over two hundred innocent children is now in your hands.

Director Anya Petrova (Task Force Director): *(Her holographic image lingering for a moment, her gaze fixed on Anya and Kofia)* Good luck, agents. The entire Foundation is watching.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): *(Her voice now lower, more intimate)* This briefing is concluded. Agents Anya and Kofia, with me. The rest of you, prepare for a long wait. Dismissed.

(The main doors of Briefing Room 7B hissed shut, leaving the three of them in a heavy silence. The Lead Agent gestured for them to follow, leading them away from the grand amphitheater to a smaller, more private antechamber dominated by a single, large holographic console displaying a detailed schematic of Maple High School.)

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Close the door. The big show is for the teams who'll be kicking down doors. This part is for the two of you. This is where we discuss how to make sure they have the right doors to kick down.

Agent Kofia: *(Rolling his broad shoulders, the casual posture a stark contrast to the focused intensity in his eyes)* I figured as much. So, what's the nitty-gritty, Lead? What's the legend behind our janitorial careers?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Your names are Mark and Sarah Jenkins. You're a married couple who just moved to the county for a quieter life. You're reliable,

unremarkable, and keep to yourselves. You do your job, you don't ask questions, and you are utterly forgettable.

Agent Anya: *(Her eyes scanning the school schematic, already memorizing layouts)* And our equipment? Standard issue Iota-10 covert gear?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): The best we have. You'll each have a standard utility belt under your jumpsuits, containing a concealed sidearm, a personal comms unit, and a small, discreet sensor array. Your primary data collection tool, however, will be the cart.

Agent Kofia: *(A slight grin)* My noble steed. What kind of tricks does it have?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): The cart is equipped with a broad-spectrum anomalous energy detector, hidden cameras, thermal imaging, and audio-receptive sensors, all shielded and running on a closed loop. The handle has a biometric scanner linked to you, Kofia. If anyone else tries to use it, it will wipe its data and send a silent distress signal.

Agent Anya: And our primary objective on the first sweep? Where do you want us looking first?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Overwatch-7's long-range investigations, the disappearances seem to be clustered at the front campus. That's where you'll start, under the guise of cleaning up an

Agent Kofia: A classic. No one ever questions a janitor with a mop and a purpose.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Remember the rules of engagement. You are ghosts. Your mission is covert infiltration and anomaly identification only. You are to observe and report. Under no circumstances are you to engage any hostile entity without my direct authorization, unless it is a matter of immediate self-preservation. Is that understood?

Agent Anya: Perfectly. We identify the source, log its parameters, and relay the intel. We are the eyes, not the fists.

Agent Kofia: We're there to confirm the threat, not to become a part of it. Got it.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Good. Your lives, and the lives of every child in that school, depend on your ability to remain invisible. The assault teams are on standby, but they do not move until you give us a clear target and a safe extraction window for the civilians.

Agent Anya: What's the latency on the sensor feed from the cart?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Near zero. We'll be seeing what you're seeing in real-time. We'll be your shadow every step of the way.

Agent Kofia: That's comforting. Now, all we have to do is walk into a school potentially filled with reality-benders and monsters, armed with a mop.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): It's the best cover you could ask for. Get some rest now. We've arranged for your transport to the mobile command post near the school. Your new life begins tomorrow at 0700 hours.

Agent Anya: Understood, ma'am.

Agent Kofia: See you in the morning, Lead.

(The Lead Agent gave them a final, solemn nod and left the room, leaving Anya and Kofia alone with the glowing map of the school. They looked at each other, the weight of their mission settling in. This wasn't a standard operation; it was a descent into an unknown world, a two-person war fought with whispers and secrets, and the fate of hundreds rested on their ability to become nothing more than the janitors no one ever noticed.)

02:22 - The Armory

(The interior of the primary mobile command post hummed with a renewed, focused energy. The initial shock of the warp and the subsequent rapid-fire intelligence gathering had given way to the cold, meticulous process of preparing for war. In a sterile, well-lit section of the truck designated as a temporary armory, Agents Anya and Kofia stood before their Lead Agent and the MTF Iota-10 Intelligence Supervisor, a sharp, no-nonsense operative named Supervisor Manny.)

Supervisor Manny: *(Tapping a holographic display showing their loadouts)* Alright, let's finalize this. Director Petrova wants your team to have every possible advantage. Given the... unique and frankly vague nature of the hostiles, we're deviating from standard infiltration kits.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): We're anticipating close-quarters engagement with at least three physically aggressive individuals, likely faculty, who are described as anomalously enhanced. On top of that, we have a potential reality-bending entity and a student instigator who is a complete unknown. We need versatility and non-lethal options.

Agent Kofia: *(Rolling his broad shoulders, the casual posture a stark contrast to the focused intensity in his eyes)* So, what's on the menu, Kai? Besides our standard-issue sidearms, I'm guessing we're not going in with just harsh language.

Supervisor Manny: We're equipping you both with modified G-7 pistols, loaded with high-density, non-lethal polymer rounds. They won't penetrate, but they'll feel like getting hit with a sledgehammer. It should be enough to stagger the teacher-class hostiles if you're forced into a confrontation.

Agent Anya: And for the primary target? The one the students refer to in their ghost stories? The entity behind the door?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): That's a more complex problem. We can't risk a direct kinetic engagement until we know the full extent of its reality-bending capabilities. For that entity, you'll each be carrying two Class-C amnestiac gas grenades.

Agent Kofia: Short-term memory wipe and disorientation. Good for creating an escape window if it corners us. A classic "get out of jail free" card.

Supervisor Manny: Precisely. Your mission is not to neutralize it. It is to observe, and if necessary, evade. Do not engage it directly unless all other options have been exhausted and your lives are in immediate danger.

Agent Anya: What about the student instigator? The bully the parents mentioned?

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): He's a wild card. We have no data on him beyond his name and a pattern of cruel behavior. Your best defense against him is to not be seen. Avoid him at all costs. If you are forced into a confrontation, your primary objective is to de-escalate and withdraw.

Agent Kofia: De-escalate a school bully. Got it. Sounds almost normal.

Supervisor Manny: Don't get cocky, Kofia. He is a confirmed associate of at least two of the first victims. He may be more involved than he appears. Your sensor arrays are your best defense. They're tuned to detect localized reality fluctuations. If your Hume readings start to spike for any reason, you pull back immediately.

Agent Anya: We understand, Supervisor. Stealth is our primary weapon. We are ghosts.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Good. Now, let's talk about entry.

(The Lead Agent gestured, and the holographic display shifted to a detailed schematic of Maple High's exterior. She pointed to a small, unassuming service entrance at the rear of the building, far from the main gates. She then guided the two agents out of the smaller prep vehicle and towards the massive 16-wheeler semi-truck that served as the main Mobile Command Post.)

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Your transport is ready. We're moving you to the primary MCP for final sync-up with the command staff who will be overseeing your operation from here.

Supervisor Manny: Remember, the main entrance will be under constant, if covert, surveillance by other teams. You will enter here, at the rear maintenance access point, at precisely 0700 hours.

Agent Anya: We've reviewed the file on the principal. She's the one the former school board member described as a "gatekeeper."

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Correct. She is a potential obstacle and a person of high interest. Your first objective upon entering the school is to make contact with her, establish your cover, and then begin your initial sweep of the academic wing.

Agent Kofia: The math and science classrooms. Right into the lion's den.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): Now, let's introduce you to your handler for this operation. He'll be your eyes and ears from the inside of this truck.

(The heavy door of the semi-truck hissed open, revealing a starkly different interior. It was a bustling, high-tech command center, humming with the low thrum of powerful servers and the quiet, focused energy of a dozen Foundation personnel. At the central console, a man with a calm, authoritative presence turned to greet them. It was Commander Echo.)

Commander Echo: *(His voice calm, but with an undercurrent of intensity)* Agents. I'm Commander Echo. I'll be your primary contact for the duration of this mission. Welcome to the show.

Agent Anya: It's an honor, Commander. Agent Anya.

Agent Kofia: Agent Kofia. Ready to get our hands dirty, sir.

Commander Echo: I've reviewed your files. You're the best at what you do. You'll need to be.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(From a nearby console, without looking up)* We're already getting faint energy fluctuations from the school, Commander. The anomaly is waking up with the sunrise.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(A stern-faced figure with precise movements)* Your janitorial cart is prepped and loaded with the designated sensor package. It's in Bay 2.

Agent Sterling: *(Nodding from his station)* We'll be monitoring your every move, Iota-10. You won't be alone in there.

Agent Cross: Just remember to check for temporal residue. This place feels... old.

Agent Bell: And don't forget the emotional component. Fear is a weapon in that school.

Agent Shaw: Stay safe. And try not to actually clean anything.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division): You have your mission. You have your support. The fate of over two hundred children now rests on your shoulders.

Supervisor Manny: Do not fail.

Commander Echo: Let's get you to your insertion point. It's time to go to work.

Inside the Beast

(The heavy door of the 16-wheeler semi-truck hissed open, revealing a starkly different interior. It was not a cargo hold, but a bustling, high-tech command center, humming with the low thrum of powerful servers and the quiet, focused energy of a dozen Foundation personnel. Commander Echo, the operation's handler, gestured for Anya and Kofia to enter, the door sealing behind them, shutting out the mundane world.)

Commander Echo: *(His voice calm, but with an undercurrent of intensity)* Agents Anya, Kofia. Welcome to Command Post One. I'm Commander Echo. I'll be your primary contact for the duration of this mission.

Agent Anya: It's an honor, Commander. Agent Anya.

Agent Kofia: Agent Kofia. Ready to get our hands dirty, sir.

Commander Echo: I've read your files. You're the best at what you do. You'll need to be. Now, let me introduce you to your primary support team.

(Echo gestured to the various personnel working diligently at their consoles.)

Commander Echo: This is Intelligence Analyst Chen. He'll be processing all the data you feed us.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(Nodding from his console, not taking his eyes off a data stream)* A pleasure. We'll be analyzing everything you see and hear.

Commander Echo: Over there is Logistics Officer Baker. He's the one who makes sure you have what you need.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(A stern-faced figure with precise movements)* Your gear is prepped and ready in Bay 2. Don't break it.

Commander Echo: And this is Security Chief Hector. If things go sideways, he's the one coordinating the cavalry.

Security Chief Hector: *(Offering a grim smile)* Just try to give us a little warning before you kick the hornet's nest.

Commander Echo: You are now part of a much larger machine, agents. Your role is critical. What you find in that school will determine the course of this entire operation.

Agent Anya: We understand the weight of the mission, Commander.

Agent Kofia: We're ready to do what's necessary.

Commander Echo: Good. Your insertion is in thirty minutes.

Agent Anya: Yes, sir.

Agent Kofia: Understood.

(The initial introductions complete, a low hum of professional activity resumed in the command post. Commander Echo moved to the main console to begin his final strategic overview, leaving Anya and Kofia in the main bay of the command post with the other personnel. The air was thick with a tense, pre-mission energy.)

Intelligence Analyst Chen: So, janitors, huh? That's a new one, even for Iota-10.

Agent Kofia: *(Grinning as he checks his sidearm)* Hey, a good cover is a good cover. Besides, I look great in blue.

Logistics Officer Baker: Just try not to get lost in the role. We've had agents go deep cover and forget which side they're on.

Agent Anya: I don't think that will be a problem in this school. From the reports, it's not a place you'd want to belong to.

Security Chief Hector: You read the preliminary intel packet? The parent interviews?

Agent Anya: We did. It's a collection of nightmares. Extreme academic pressure, secretive staff, and a whole lot of fear.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: The consistency is what's unsettling. All eight victims, all terrified of the school in their own way.

Logistics Officer Baker: And the local police are still convinced it's a serial killer in the woods. It's almost comical.

Agent Kofia: Leaves a clear field for us, at least. No jurisdictional pissing contest to worry about.

Security Chief Hector: For now. How long do you think that lockdown will last before the public demands they search the school?

Agent Anya: Not long. The town is a powder keg. Our operational window is tight.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: What's your gut feeling on this one, Anya? You've got a knack for these kinds of infiltrations.

Agent Anya: My gut feeling is that the school is a predator. It's not just a location; it's an active participant in these disappearances.

Security Chief Hector: Which means what you see inside might not be what's actually there. Your sensors will be your best friend.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Trust your gear, not your eyes. That's the first rule of anomalous architecture.

Logistics Officer Baker: What about the faculty? The parents mentioned a few specific teachers their kids were scared of.

Agent Anya: The math teacher, the science teacher, the language arts teacher. All described as "intense" and "perfectionists."

Agent Kofia: Sounds like they could be the primary hostile entities. Or at least, the most visible ones.

Security Chief Hector: And the principal? The "gatekeeper"?

Agent Anya: She's the wildcard. Is she a victim? A collaborator? Or the one pulling all the strings?

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Your first interaction with her will set the tone for the entire mission.

Logistics Officer Baker: No pressure, right?

Agent Kofia: None at all. Just another day at the office.

Agent Anya: An office with a history of making its employees disappear.

Security Chief Hector: Just remember, we're right here. Every step of the way.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: We'll be your guardian angels.

Logistics Officer Baker: With very big guns on standby.

Security Chief Hector: So don't screw it up.

Agent Kofia: *(Chuckles)* Wouldn't dream of it.

Rolling Thunder

(Inside the bustling, high-tech interior of Command Post 1, the atmosphere was a controlled storm of incoming data and outgoing commands. The preliminary intelligence reports from the field agents had been received, painting a grim and unsettling picture. Commander Echo stood before the main holographic display, his thin form a picture of calm authority amidst the organized chaos. He watched the tactical map for a long moment, then gave a curt nod, his voice cutting through the low hum of the command post, clear and decisive.)

Commander Echo: Baker, get us rolling.

(The massive 16-wheeler semi-truck, a silent giant amidst the chaos of the MTF camp, began to stir. With a low, powerful hum that was felt more than heard, its complex systems disengaged from their stationary positions, and the vehicle pulled smoothly onto the cordoned-off street, beginning its long, quiet journey to its pre-designated, covert position near Maple High School. Inside, the Foundation personnel settled in for the long, tense wait, the reality of their strange and dangerous mission hanging heavy in the air.)

(Ten minutes later, the command post was rolling smoothly through the darkened, empty streets of South Maple County. The initial, frantic energy of the day's events had given way to

the slow, grinding tension of a protracted siege. Inside the humming, climate-controlled interior of the truck, the command team, their immediate tasks complete, settled into the strange, quiet rhythm of a mission in progress.)

Logistics Officer Baker: *(Leaning back in his chair with a soft groan, the paper of his uniform crinkling)* All systems are green. The route ahead is clear, according to the drone feed. It's going to be a long, quiet drive.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(His eyes scanning a data feed from the town square)* Quiet for us, maybe. The public is still in an uproar. The local police are running in circles trying to manage the panic.

Security Chief Hector: It's a mess out there. But their chaos is our cover. As long as they're all looking at the woods, no one will be looking at us.

Commander Echo: *(His gaze fixed on the main tactical display, which showed a simple, un-detailed schematic of the school)* That's the theory. But don't get complacent. The emotional atmosphere in this town is a volatile element. It could shift at any moment.

Anya: *(Quietly, from a side console where she and Kofia were reviewing the school's blueprint for the tenth time)* The parents' grief is a powerful motivator. They know something is wrong at the school, even if they can't prove it.

Kofia: They were so desperate to be believed. You could feel it. Every one of them had a story, a "yellow flag," that the police just dismissed as nothing.

Logistics Officer Baker: It's a classic case of normalcy bias. The police are faced with an impossible situation, so they're clinging to the only explanation that makes sense in their world, no matter how illogical it seems.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And that gives us the time we need to find the real answers. But the pressure is on. The longer this goes on, the more likely the public is to take matters into their own hands.

Security Chief Hector: A civilian mob trying to storm the school... that would be a catastrophe. It could trigger whatever is inside.

Commander Echo: Which is why your mission is so critical, you two. We need to get a clear picture of the threat before this situation boils over.

Anya: We understand, Commander. The interviews gave us a starting point. A pattern of fear, centered on the faculty and the school's strange, oppressive rules.

Kofia: And the local legends. The ghost stories. In our line of work, a persistent, shared mythos is often a sign of a genuine anomalous presence.

Logistics Officer Baker: So you're really going in as janitors? It still sounds like something out of a bad spy movie.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: It's the perfect cover. No one pays attention to the people who clean up the messes.

Security Chief Hector: And from the sound of it, this school is one big, metaphysical mess.

Commander Echo: We are proceeding on the assumption of multiple hostile entities, a secretive administration, and a potentially compromised student body. You two will be our first and only line of intelligence.

Anya: We're ready. We've studied the schematics. We know the layout... or at least, the layout as it was last documented.

Logistics Officer Baker: We've equipped your cart with a topographical scanner for that very reason. It will map your immediate surroundings in real-time.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And your personal sensor arrays will be constantly feeding us data on any anomalous energy fluctuations.

Security Chief Hector: Just remember, if things go loud, we have MTF teams on preparation, ready to deploy. But you are our best hope for a quiet, surgical solution.

Commander Echo: A solution that gets those children out alive. That is our primary objective. Everything else is secondary.

Anya: We understand, sir. We won't let them down.

Kofia: We'll be the best damn janitors that school has ever seen.

Logistics Officer Baker: Just... try not to actually clean anything. You're not on the payroll.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And keep your comms open. We'll be listening to every word.

Security Chief Hector: Stay safe in there. The unknown is always the most dangerous part of any operation.

Commander Echo: We're approaching our designated holding position. ETA is four hours until your insertion time.

Anya: Four hours. A lot can happen in four hours.

Kofia: Let's hope it's four hours of quiet.

Logistics Officer Baker: Don't jinx it, Kofia.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: He's right. The last thing we need is for the local police to stumble upon us out here.

Security Chief Hector: They won't. They're too busy chasing squirrels in the woods.

Commander Echo: Let's hope it stays that way.

Anya: We'll be ready, Commander.

Kofia: Just point us at the door.

Logistics Officer Baker: I'll make sure you have enough trash bags.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And I'll be watching your every move.

Security Chief Hector: We all will be.

Commander Echo: Good. Now, get some rest. It's going to be a long morning.

(A heavy, determined silence settled over the command post as it continued its slow, deliberate journey through the twilight. The agents, their minds a whirl of tactical possibilities and grim realities, prepared for the long, uncertain hours ahead. The infiltration of Maple High was about to begin.)

02:50 - Whispers in the Treeline

(While the Foundation began the slow, arduous process of containing and understanding the aftermath of the battle at Maple High, a different kind of withdrawal was taking place in the surrounding forest. The massive, county-wide lockdown of the woods was being dismantled. Tired and bewildered police officers, who had spent the better part of the day on a fruitless search, were now rolling up police tape and loading barricades onto flatbed trucks, their movements sluggish with exhaustion and confusion.)

(Sergeant Teff stood by his cruiser, watching two local construction workers, Sal and Frank, expertly strap down the last of the heavy wooden barricades.)

Sal (Construction Worker): *(Wiping sweat from his brow with a grimy hand)* That's the last of 'em, Sergeant. You guys sure you're done out here? Seemed like you were just getting started this morning.

Sergeant Teff: *(Sighs, a cloud of weary frustration)* The order just came down from the Chief. "Stand down, remove the perimeter, and return to the precinct." No explanation, no nothing.

Frank (Construction Worker): No explanation? After all this? The whole town's in a panic, and they're just... calling off the search?

Officer Barnes: *(Walking over, his own face etched with fatigue)* That's what we're saying. We spent all morning gearing up for the biggest manhunt in this county's history, and now they're just telling us to pack it in.

Officer Cole: Did you guys hear that noise earlier? About an hour ago? Sounded like thunder, but... not. It was sharper.

Sal (Construction Worker): Hear it? We felt it! The ground shook all the way over at the depot. We thought it was an earthquake.

Frank (Construction Worker): My brother-in-law called, said he saw military helicopters flying towards the school. Is any of that true?

Sergeant Teff: *(His expression carefully neutral)* We've had reports of... training exercises in the area. That's the official word.

Officer Dunn: *(Scoffs quietly)* "Training exercises." Yeah, right. They've been feeding us that line all day, even while we're getting flooded with calls from terrified residents.

Sal (Construction Worker): So, you're telling me you don't know what's going on either? You're the police!

Officer Barnes: Right now, we're just the guys they tell to stand here and look official. The real decisions are being made by people we've never even seen.

Officer Cole: The Feds, or whoever those people were who showed up earlier. They just waltzed in and started taking over.

Frank (Construction Worker): So, what about the kids? The three new ones? Are they still just... gone?

Sergeant Teff: The search is... ongoing. It's just being handled by a different agency now. That's all we've been told.

Officer Dunn: They told us to stop looking. That's what they told us. It feels like we're just abandoning them.

Sal (Construction Worker): This is a mess. A total mess. I've never seen this town so scared.

Frank (Construction Worker): It's that school. Everyone knows it. It's the one thing everyone is talking about.

Officer Barnes: And it's the one place we've been ordered to stay away from.

Officer Cole: We're supposed to be protecting this town, and we're stuck out here chasing shadows in the woods while the real problem just sits there, watching us.

Sergeant Teff: Our orders are to stand down. So we stand down. Let's get this last truck loaded up.

Sal (Construction Worker): You got it, Sarge.

Frank (Construction Worker): I just hope someone knows what they're doing.

Officer Dunn: You and me both, pal. You and me both.

Officer Barnes: This whole day... it just feels wrong.

Officer Cole: Every day in this town has felt wrong for the last three months.

Sergeant Teff: Let's just get back to the precinct. Maybe someone there will have some real answers.

Sal (Construction Worker): I wouldn't count on it.

Frank (Construction Worker): Yeah. It feels like the people with the real answers aren't talking.

(The construction workers finished securing the last barricade, their movements heavy with a shared sense of unease. The police officers, their authority now just a hollow uniform, began their slow retreat from the woods, leaving the forest to its silence, the mystery of Maple High still completely, and frustratingly, unsolved for them.)

03:20 - The Midnight Express

(The hour was late, a deep and unsettling quiet having fallen over the residential streets of Maple Forest Ville. This suburban neighborhood, distinct from the sprawling, wild Maple Forest itself, was usually a picture of peaceful slumber at this time. Tonight, however, sleep

offered no escape from the day's anxieties. It was in this heavy silence that the low, powerful hum of a large engine began to cut through the night.)

(Three figures stood on a darkened porch, their faces illuminated by the single, dim bulb above their door. They were neighbors, drawn together by a shared, sleepless dread. There was Elias, an old man who had lived in the town his whole life; Cora, a middle-aged woman who worried about everything; and Jax, a young man who had seen too much to be anything but cynical.)

Elias: *(His voice a low rumble, pointing with a shaky hand down the street)* There it is again. That's the third time it's passed this block in the last hour.

Cora: *(Hugging her robe tighter around herself)* That's not a normal truck, Elias. It has no markings. No company name, no license plate on the front... it's like a ghost.

Jax: It's not a ghost. It's government. Or something that wishes it was. Look at the way it moves. It's not making deliveries. It's patrolling.

Elias: Patrolling for what? The police pulled out of the woods hours ago. Said the search was over for the night.

Cora: I heard them talking before they left. They were angry. Said some... "Feds" had taken over the investigation. Do you think that's them?

Jax: Feds don't usually drive unmarked 18-wheelers through residential neighborhoods at three in the morning. This is something else. Something... quieter.

Elias: After the noises we heard this afternoon... the booms, the sirens... I'm not surprised something strange is going on. It felt like the world was ending for a minute there.

Cora: I just wish they'd tell us something. Anything. Are we safe? Are the rest of the children safe?

Jax: They won't tell us anything. People like that, the ones who drive trucks with no names... they don't talk. They just... act.

Elias: It's heading back towards the school. See? It just made the turn.

Cora: Why would it be going there? The school's been empty for hours.

Jax: Maybe it's not as empty as we think.

Elias: This town... it used to be so quiet. Now... now I don't even recognize it.

Cora: I'm scared, Elias. For the first time in my life, I'm genuinely scared to live here.

Jax: You should be. Whatever is happening, we're just the audience. And I don't think we're going to like the final act.

Elias: I'm going back inside. There's a chill in the air tonight that has nothing to do with the weather.

Cora: I'll be right behind you. I don't want to watch that truck anymore.

Jax: I'll stay out for a bit. I want to see if it comes back around.

Cora: Be careful, Jax.

Jax: Don't worry. I'm not the one they're interested in.

(Elias and Cora retreated into the safety of their home, leaving Jax alone on the porch, a silent sentinel watching as the mysterious semi-truck disappeared into the darkness, its low, powerful hum the only evidence of the secret war now being waged in the heart of their quiet, terrified town.)

03:30 - The Long Road to Morning

(The interior of Command Post 1 was an island of low, humming light in the vast, rolling darkness of the highway. The team had settled into the quiet, focused rhythm of a long-haul operation. Their destination was still two hours away, a fixed point on a digital map. Outside, the world was a blur of dark trees and the occasional, lonely streetlight. Inside, they were a self-contained universe of tired professionals, their conversation a low murmur that did little to disturb the heavy silence.)

Logistics Officer Baker: *(Stretching his arms over his head, a soft rustle of paper)* I swear, I can feel my joints starting to fuse together. I haven't sat this still since my last 18-hour stint monitoring that anomalous, time-dilated chess game in '98. This is a whole new level of "hurry up and wait."

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(Without looking up from his console)* At least the chess pieces didn't try to bite you. I'm still analyzing the ambient audio from the town square. The background noise... it's not right. There's a sub-harmonic frequency that shouldn't be there, even with all the panic. It's almost... organic.

Security Chief Hector: *(Cleaning a sidearm with practiced, meticulous movements)* Let me guess. It's the sound of pure, unadulterated evil? Or just bad civic engineering? I've seen both cause this level of chaos.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Something like that. It's... hungry. That's the only word I can think of to describe the feeling it gives off. It's a low, predatory hum that was present in the background of every single news report.

Commander Echo: *(His gaze fixed on the main tactical display)* Stay focused on the data, Chen. We need facts, not feelings. Though I admit... the preliminary reports from the field team are profoundly unsettling.

Anya: *(Quietly, from a side console where she and Kofia were reviewing the school's blueprint for the tenth time)* It's the quiet that's the worst part. The way the parents talked about their children... they were scared, but they didn't know what they were scared of. They were fighting an enemy they couldn't even see or name.

Kofia: And the ones who could see it, the other students who told those stories, were too terrified to talk. It's a perfect system of fear. It isolates and silences its victims before it even strikes, leaving the parents with nothing but these vague, terrifying "yellow flags."

Logistics Officer Baker: So, what's the plan for tomorrow morning? We just... walk in and pretend to be janitors? After everything we know now? It feels like walking into a bear trap with a bottle of honey.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: It's the only way. A direct assault would be a massacre. We have no idea what these "teachers" are capable of, or the full extent of the school's anomalous properties. We go in loud, and we risk turning two hundred students into collateral damage.

Security Chief Hector: And we still have over two hundred civilians in the line of fire. We can't just go in with guns blazing. We'd be killing the very people we're trying to save.

Commander Echo: Our primary objective is intelligence gathering. We need to get inside, confirm the identities and locations of any hostile entities, and find a safe extraction route for the students. This is a hostage situation, first and foremost.

Anya: And we need to do it without tipping them off. We have to be invisible. Utterly forgettable. Just part of the background noise.

Kofia: Just a couple of humble custodians, here to clean up a mess that's a lot bigger than spilled juice. I'm still working on my "weary but diligent" walk.

Logistics Officer Baker: I still can't believe they're hiring janitors. After eight kids have gone missing. It's... arrogant. It's like they're daring someone to look closer.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Or it's a trap. They could be expecting us. Or someone like us. They might not know who we are, but they might know that someone is finally starting to connect the dots.

Security Chief Hector: Then we'll be ready for them. Iota-10 is the best at this kind of deep-cover infiltration. No one is better at becoming a ghost.

Commander Echo: They'll have our full support. We'll be their eyes and ears every step of the way. Every sensor feed, every audio pickup, will be analyzed in real-time.

Anya: It's the waiting that's the hardest part. Knowing that those kids are in there, scared and alone, just trying to survive another day in a place they should feel safe.

Kofia: We'll get them out. That's a promise. We owe it to the parents, if no one else. They deserve to know the truth, no matter how ugly it is.

Logistics Officer Baker: I hope so. I really do. This one feels... personal. More so than usual.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: They all feel personal, Baker. This one just has smaller victims. And the perpetrators are hiding behind lesson plans.

Security Chief Hector: For now, we just have to trust the plan. Trust the agents. Trust the intel, as fragmented as it is.

Commander Echo: We are approaching our designated holding position. ETA is four hours until your insertion time.

Anya: Four hours. A lot can happen in four hours.

Kofia: Let's hope it's four hours of quiet.

Logistics Officer Baker: Don't jinx it, Kofia. I've already triple-checked the comms encryption and the power supply for your sensor cart. Everything is green.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: He's right. The last thing we need is for the local police to stumble upon us out here. Or for some secondary anomaly to wander out of those woods.

Security Chief Hector: They won't. I've got a perimeter scan running on a continuous loop. We'll know if a squirrel sneezes within a five-click radius.

Commander Echo: Let's hope it stays that way. The quiet is our ally tonight.

Anya: We'll be ready, Commander. We've gone over the schematics until I can see them in my sleep.

Kofia: Just point us at the door. We'll handle the rest. I've even got my "confused but helpful" face practiced.

Logistics Officer Baker: I'll make sure you have enough trash bags in the cart. And some extra cleaning solution. It helps sell the part.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And I'll be watching your every move. Remember to look for patterns in the student's behavior. Fear has a tell.

Security Chief Hector: We all will be. My teams are on standby. The second you give the signal, we're coming in hot.

Commander Echo: Good. Now, we've done all we can for tonight. The next phase is up to you two.

Anya: We're ready, Commander. We'll get the intel you need.

Kofia: And hopefully, we won't have to actually mop anything. I hear the floors are already suspiciously clean.

Logistics Officer Baker: Just remember your cover story. You're a married couple. Try to look like you at least tolerate each other.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And don't get too close to any anomalous artifacts. We need you with your faculties intact.

Security Chief Hector: Listen to Chen. Don't be a hero. Be a ghost.

Commander Echo: That's enough. You have your orders. You have your gear.

Anya: Time to get our heads in the game. A few hours of meditation should do it.

Kofia: I'm going to try and get at least an hour of actual sleep. A well-rested ghost is an effective ghost.

Logistics Officer Baker: Good idea. I'll get the nutrient packs ready for your pre-mission meal.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'll keep monitoring the data feeds. Let me know if you need anything.

Security Chief Hector: I'll be here. Watching the perimeter.

Commander Echo: Good. Now, get some rest. It's going to be a long morning.

(A heavy, determined silence settled over the command post as it continued its slow, deliberate journey through the pre-dawn darkness. The agents, their minds a whirl of tactical possibilities and grim realities, began their final preparations for the long, uncertain hours ahead. The infiltration of Maple High was about to begin.)

04:50 - The Final Approach

(The interior of the command post was a world of deep shadows and soft, glowing screens. Most of the team had managed to get some form of rest, their paper forms slumped in their seats or leaning against the humming consoles. Anya sat in a meditative state, her eyes closed but her posture perfectly still. Kofia was in a light, fitful sleep, his head resting against a bulkhead. The van rolled on, a silent ghost in the pre-dawn darkness. A soft, gentle chime echoed through the cabin, a ten-minute warning to arrival. One by one, the agents began to stir, the quiet hum of the truck slowly being replaced by the sounds of a team coming back online.)

Commander Echo: *(His voice, though quiet, cut through the sleepy atmosphere with practiced authority)* Ten minutes to holding position. Everyone, time to come back to the land of the living. Baker, give me a final systems check on all internal and external hardware.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(Stifling a yawn, his fingers already dancing across a console)* Systems are green across the board, Commander. All sensor packages are online and stable, power core is at one hundred percent. The external chameleon cloaking is primed and ready for activation on your mark. We're ready for a long-haul, stationary operation.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(Stretching, his paper form crinkling softly)* I've been monitoring local police and emergency chatter while you were all sleeping. It's gone completely quiet since the Chief recalled his units from the forest perimeter. It seems the official strategy is now to just... wait.

Security Chief Hector: *(Already on his feet, checking the locks on the equipment cases)* That's good for us. A quiet perimeter means a clean infiltration. The less variables we have to deal with, the better. I don't want any stray patrol cars stumbling upon our hideout.

Anya: *(Opening her eyes, her gaze clear and focused)* Have there been any new energy readings from Overwatch-7's position? Any fluctuations at all from the school?

Commander Echo: Negative, Agent. The school has been completely dormant since the initial disappearances. No spikes, no fluctuations. It's just... sitting there, waiting for the sun to rise.

Kofia: *(Shaking himself awake, rubbing the back of his neck)* That's almost creepier than if it was throwing off sparks. It's like a predator sleeping off a big meal, just waiting to get hungry again. I hate the quiet ones.

Anya: It gives us a stable baseline, at least. Any deviation from that baseline once we're inside will be an immediate indicator of a threat. We'll be able to pinpoint the source of any anomalous activity the second it happens.

Security Chief Hector: Let's hope your sensors pick it up before it picks you up. From the parents' stories, these teachers don't give a lot of warning. They just... act.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'll be monitoring your biometric and audio feeds constantly. The second your heart rates spike or your voices show signs of duress, we'll know you've made contact with something.

Logistics Officer Baker: Your janitorial cart is prepped and ready in Bay 2. I even added a squeaky wheel, for authenticity. And it's fully stocked with cleaning supplies that have been... enhanced.

Kofia: *(A small, tired grin)* You're a true artist, Baker. Thank you. It's the little details that sell the performance. What kind of enhancements are we talking about?

Anya: We'll need every advantage we can get. That principal... the "gatekeeper" the board member mentioned... she's going to be our first and possibly most difficult obstacle to get past.

Commander Echo: Your cover is solid. Your story is plausible. You are just two people looking for a steady job in a town that's been hit hard. She has no reason to suspect you beyond normal background checks, which we've already taken care of.

Kofia: Let's hope she's too busy dealing with the fallout from three new missing kids to look too closely at the new janitors.

Anya: We'll be unremarkable. We'll be invisible. We just need to get our foot in the door and start the initial sweep.

Security Chief Hector: And we'll be right here, ready to kick it down if things go south. My teams are on a hair trigger.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Five minutes to arrival, Commander. We're approaching the final turn.

Commander Echo: Acknowledged. Anya, Kofia. Final gear check. The rest of you, prepare for stationary lockdown and silent running.

Anya: We're ready, sir. All systems green on our end.

Kofia: Let's do this. Time to punch the clock on the weirdest job we've ever had.

05:00 - The Holding Position

(The massive semi-truck turned off the main road, its movements slow and deliberate, and rolled into a small, heavily wooded clearing a little over a kilometer from the school. The location had been scouted by drones hours earlier; it was a perfect blind spot, invisible from the road and offering a clear, if distant, view of the Maple High campus. With a final, soft hiss of its air brakes, the Command Post came to a complete stop. The long journey was over. The long wait was about to begin.)

Commander Echo: *(His voice a low, steady command)* We are at the designated holding position. Baker, engage full stealth protocols. Power down the engine, activate the external chameleon cloaking, and go to silent running.

Logistics Officer Baker: Copy that, Commander. Engaging stealth protocols now. Engine cycling down. Cloaking field is active and adapting to the surrounding foliage. As far as the world is concerned, we are now a very large, very boring rock.

Security Chief Hector: Perimeter sensors are active and linked to my console. I've deployed three micro-drones for a wider security net. Nothing gets within 500 meters of this truck without us knowing about it. The perimeter is secure.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'm patching into Overwatch-7's live feed now. I have a clear visual on the school's main entrance. No activity to report. The sun is just starting to rise, casting long shadows.

Anya: Two hours until insertion. It's going to be the longest two hours of my life. The anticipation is always the worst part.

Kofia: Just gives us more time to go over the plan. And to drink more of Hector's industrial-strength coffee. I'm going to need it.

Commander Echo: Your primary objective upon entry is to make contact with the principal and secure your janitorial positions. From there, you will proceed directly to the academic wing.

Anya: The math and science classrooms. The areas of highest reported fear from the victims. We'll start at the heart of the problem.

Kofia: And the most likely place to get a reading on our anomalous energy detector. If there's something to find, it'll be there.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'll be monitoring that feed with extreme prejudice. The moment you get a spike, I'll begin a deep-level analysis to try and identify the nature of the signature.

Security Chief Hector: And my teams will be on high alert. A confirmed anomalous reading is a green light for us to move to a heightened state of readiness. We'll be ready to breach at a moment's notice.

Logistics Officer Baker: Your cart is in Bay 2, fully charged. The topographical scanner is slaved to your HUDs. It will map the interior in real-time as you move, so you'll know if the blueprints are lying.

Anya: Good. We're assuming the school's internal layout is... unreliable. That's a variable we need to control.

Kofia: We'll keep the comms open, but chatter will be minimal once we're inside. We'll let the sensors do the talking.

Logistics Officer Baker: Good luck in there. And try not to make too much of a mess. I just finished restocking your cleaning supplies.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Stay sharp. And trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, it probably is.

Security Chief Hector: And come back in one piece. We've got your backs, no matter what happens in there.

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Intelligence Analyst Chen: Stay sharp. And trust your instincts.

Security Chief Hector: And come back in one piece. We've got your backs.

Commander Echo: Now, we wait for the sun. Final preparations. We go over the plan one more time.

05:00 - 05:30 - The Final Brief

(The interior of the command post was now a crucible of focused, low-voiced planning. The holographic table in the center of the room glowed, displaying a 3D schematic of the school, annotated with the agents' "yellow flag" intelligence. Every member of the command team was present, their full attention on the two agents who were about to walk into the unknown.)

Commander Echo: Alright, let's walk through it one more time, from the top. Insertion is at 0700 hours, rear maintenance entrance. Anya, Kofia, what is your primary objective upon entry?

Anya: Establish contact with the principal, secure our cover as the new janitorial staff, and then immediately begin a slow, methodical sweep of the main academic wing.

Kofia: Our initial focus will be the math and science classrooms. We'll use the "unexpected spill" cover to justify our presence and linger in the area to get our first baseline energy readings.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Remember, the parents' reports indicate that the teachers in those specific classrooms are the primary sources of fear. Approach with extreme caution. We have no idea what they look like, or what they're capable of.

Security Chief Hector: Your non-lethal loadout is a last resort. Your first and best weapon is your cover. You are janitors. You are invisible. Do not do anything to compromise that.

Logistics Officer Baker: The cleaning cart is your Trojan horse. Every sensor, every scanner, is integrated into its frame. Keep it with you at all times. It is your lifeline to us.

Anya: Understood. What are the parameters for identifying a hostile entity?

Commander Echo: A confirmed anomalous energy reading above 3.5 Humes, any visual confirmation of a physically impossible or reality-bending act, or any direct, unprovoked act of aggression towards you or a student.

Kofia: And if we get a positive ID? What's the protocol?

Security Chief Hector: You do not engage. I repeat, you do not engage. You confirm the target's identity and location, and you withdraw to a safe distance.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: Your confirmation will be the green light for my team to begin a deep-level analysis of the entity's signature. We need to know what we're fighting before we send in the MTFs.

Anya: What about the students? If we witness an act of aggression towards a student, are we authorized to intervene?

Commander Echo: That is a command-level decision, and it will be made on a case-by-case basis. Your primary mission is intelligence gathering. Intervening could compromise the entire operation and endanger all two hundred students.

Kofia: So we just... watch?

Commander Echo: You watch. You record. And you report. We need to understand the rules of this place before we can break them.

Anya: And the bully? The student who was named in the reports?

Intelligence Analyst Chen: He is a high-priority person of interest. If you can get a visual, get a name, that would be a significant breakthrough. But do not approach him directly.

Security Chief Hector: He is a known instigator. He could be a collaborator, or just a wild card. Either way, he's a risk.

Logistics Officer Baker: Just remember, you're the quiet, unassuming janitors. No one expects you to be heroes.

Kofia: We'll do our best to live down to their expectations.

Anya: We understand the parameters, Commander. Stealth, observation, and data collection.

Commander Echo: Good. You have one hour until you move out. Get your final gear check done. And get your heads in the game.

Kofia: We're already there, sir.

Anya: We're ready.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: We'll be watching.

Security Chief Hector: And waiting.

Logistics Officer Baker: Don't be late for your first day.

Commander Echo: You are the first and only line. Make it count.

06:00 - The Morning Bell

(The interior of the command post was a world of deep shadows and soft, glowing screens. The team had settled into the quiet, focused rhythm of a long-haul operation, their minds a whirl of tactical possibilities and grim realities. The infiltration of Maple High was just an hour away. Suddenly, a sound, faint but unmistakable, cut through the van's insulated silence. It was a distant, thin chime—a school bell.)

Logistics Officer Baker: *(Sitting up, his coffee cup making a soft clink against his console)* There's the bell. A bit early, isn't it?

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(His fingers already flying across his keyboard, pulling up audio logs)* I heard it. Confirmed. 65 decibels, frequency consistent with a standard institutional bell. It originated from the target location.

Security Chief Hector: Six in the morning. An early start for the student body.

Commander Echo: *(His voice cutting through, sharp and focused)* Overwatch-7B, do you copy, give me a visual. Patch your telephoto camera feed to the main screen, now.

Overwatch Amira Dai (Comms): Copy that, Commander. Overwatch-7A is patching telephoto feed now... Visual confirmed.

(The main holographic display, which had been showing a static schematic of the school, flickered to life with a high-definition, long-range view of the Maple High School main entrance. The sight that greeted them was mundane, orderly, and deeply unsettling. Students, their thin forms fluttering in the gentle morning breeze, were streaming through the gates.)

Anya: There they are. Right on schedule, it seems.

Kofia: Six in the morning. I guess the rumors about this school's intense curriculum weren't exaggerated.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'm cross-referencing with local school schedules. Maple High's official start time is 07:00. This is a two-hour early call time.

Logistics Officer Baker: Look at them. They're not being herded. They're not in a panic. They're just... walking in. Laughing, talking on their phones.

Security Chief Hector: It's just a normal school day for them. Another part of the routine.

Commander Echo: Overwatch-7B, are you detecting any signs of coercion? Any external influence forcing them to go to school?

Overwatch Amira Dai (Comms): Negative, Commander. They all appear to be acting under their own volition. I'm seeing students walking from the houses in the nearby Maple Forest Ville neighborhood. They're just... going to school.

Anya: This is part of the anomaly, then. The normalization of the unusual. The entire routine is a component of the containment failure.

Kofia: Or maybe the school just... decided to start early today. And everyone just went along with it. The level of compliance in this town is already off the charts.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: This complicates our infiltration plan significantly. We were expecting to go into an empty school. Now, we'll be walking in with the entire student body.

Security Chief Hector: It's a higher risk, but it could also be a better cover. More people, more chaos. It's easier to be invisible in a crowd than in an empty hallway.

Commander Echo: He's right. This doesn't abort the mission. It just changes the parameters. Anya, Kofia, you're still going in.

Anya: Understood, Commander. It might even give us a chance to observe the students' interactions with the faculty in a live environment.

Kofia: And to see how many of them look as terrified as the victims' parents said their kids were.

Logistics Officer Baker: It's incredible. They're just... going to class. Like eight of their friends didn't just vanish into thin air.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: That's the most disturbing part. The complete and utter normalization of the impossible. It suggests a powerful, long-term anomalous influence.

Security Chief Hector: It's like the whole town is in a trance.

Commander Echo: Then it's our job to wake them up. Anya, Kofia. This is your new insertion window. The morning rush.

Anya: It's the perfect cover. No one will notice two new janitors on the first day of what everyone else thinks is a normal school week.

Kofia: We'll be just another part of the morning routine.

Logistics Officer Baker: I've already got your janitorial uniforms laid out. And the cart is fully charged.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: I'll be monitoring your every move. The second you step on that campus, you're live.

Security Chief Hector: And my teams are on high alert. You go in quiet, but we'll be ready to go in loud if necessary.

Commander Echo: You have one hour until your new insertion time. 0700 hours. Right in the middle of their morning rush.

Anya: Understood, Commander. We'll be ready.

Kofia: Time to get into character.

Logistics Officer Baker: Don't forget your squeaky wheel.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And your hidden cameras.

Security Chief Hector: And your sidearms.

Commander Echo: Let's get to it. The school day is starting. And so are we.

(The command post shifted from a state of quiet anticipation to one of focused, pre-mission urgency. The sight of the students, so blissfully unaware of the danger they were walking into, had solidified the team's resolve. Anya and Kofia moved to the rear of the van, to the small, private alcove that served as their changing room and final briefing area. The weight of their mission was now a tangible, heavy presence in the air.)

Anya: *(As she pulls on the generic, faded blue janitor's jumpsuit, her movements are precise, economical)* It's a strange feeling, isn't it? Knowing what we know, and then seeing them... just being kids.

Kofia: *(Stretching his broad shoulders as he zips up his own jumpsuit)* It's the reason we do this job, Anya. To keep them that way. To let them worry about homework and pop quizzes, instead of... whatever is waiting for them in that building.

Anya: Still. It makes you feel... separate. Like we're from a different world entirely.

Kofia: We are. And right now, that's a good thing. We have to stay detached. Objective. We can't let their fear become our fear.

Anya: I know. But it's hard not to feel for them. Especially after talking to those parents.

Kofia: We'll use it as fuel. Every scared kid we see, every whispered rumor we hear... it's just another reason to keep pushing, to find the truth.

Anya: The truth. I have a feeling the truth in this place is going to be uglier than anything we've ever seen before.

Kofia: Probably. But we've seen a lot of ugly. And we're still here.

Anya: *(Checks her concealed sidearm, the click of the magazine seating a sharp, definitive sound in the quiet van)* True enough.

Kofia: You ready for this?

Anya: *(A small, humorless smile)* I was born for this role.

Kofia: I know. Just... try not to overdo it. We're supposed to be invisible, remember?

Anya: I know, I know. Blend in. Become part of the scenery. Just another couple of faces in the crowd.

Kofia: A crowd that's walking into a slaughterhouse.

Anya: And we're the only ones who can see the butchers.

Kofia: Let's go meet them, then.

Anya: Let's.

Kofia: Comms check.

Anya: Green.

Kofia: Sensor array?

Anya: Online and synced to my HUD.

Kofia: Then let's go to school.

Anya: I hate school.

Kofia: Me too.

Anya: Let's make this quick.

Kofia: That's the plan.

Anya: After you.

Kofia: Just getting into character.

Anya: Right.

Kofia: Let's do this.

Anya: For the kids.

Kofia: For the kids.

(With a final, shared look of grim determination, Agents Anya and Kofia turned and headed for the rear exit of the command post. Their real mission was about to begin. The school bell was ringing, and it was time for them to clock in.)

06:20 - A Deceptive Calm

(The world was bathed in the soft, gray light of pre-dawn. A gentle mist clung to the perfectly manicured lawns of Maple Forest Ville, and the air was cool and crisp with the scent of damp earth and blooming flowers. Anya and Kofia walked at a steady, unhurried pace down the silent suburban street, their janitorial cart rolling quietly beside them. The scene was idyllic, a perfect picture of small-town peace that was so fundamentally at odds with the grim reality of their mission.)

Kofia: *(Taking a deep, appreciative breath, his voice a low, relaxed murmur)* You know, for a town with a monster problem, this place is actually beautiful. Look at these houses. Perfect lawns, picket fences... it's like something out of an old TV show.

Anya: *(Her eyes scanning the "perfect" houses, looking for the cracks in the facade)* It's a very well-maintained illusion, I'll give it that. Orderly. Clean. Almost... sterile.

Kofia: Come on, Anya, a little optimism. Look at that apple tree. It's perfect. The kind you see in a postcard. Makes you want to settle down and forget the rest of the world exists.

Anya: The most beautiful flowers are often the most poisonous, Kofia. A perfect apple can still have a worm inside.

Kofia: You're a ray of sunshine this morning, you know that? I'm just saying, it's a nice walk. We should appreciate the quiet moments before we have to deal with... whatever is waiting for us in that school.

Anya: I am appreciating it. I'm appreciating the sheer, audacious level of normalcy this place is projecting. It's a testament to the power of denial. Or the power of the anomaly.

Kofia: You think the school is affecting the whole town? Making it look this... perfect?

Anya: I think it's a possibility, but can't confirm yet.

Kofia: So, the perfect apple tree might not even be an apple tree. It might just be what the anomaly *wants* us to see.

Anya: Exactly. So, by all means, enjoy the scenery. But don't trust it. Don't trust any of it.

Kofia: Right. Stay sharp. Even when admiring the local flora. Got it.

Anya: We're getting close now. I can see the school's roofline over the next row of houses.

Kofia: And I can see the students. Looks like the morning rush is in full swing.

Anya: Time to put on our game faces. We're just two humble janitors, excited for our first day.

Kofia: I was born for this role. Just try to keep up.

Anya: Just try not to trip over your own feet.

Kofia: Hey, I'm a professional.

Anya: We'll see about that.

Kofia: Let's go meet our new boss.

(The two agents fell into a comfortable silence, their brief, lighthearted banter a necessary release of the crushing tension. They continued their walk, two unassuming figures moving towards a perfect-looking school in a perfect-looking town, their minds a razor's edge of focus and suspicion, ready for the beautiful illusion to shatter at any moment.)

First Mission Overwatch: First Impressions and Preparation

(Anya and Kofia wheeled their clanking janitor's cart through the main entrance of Maple High, stepping from the crisp morning air into the warm, bustling interior. They paused for a moment, letting the sounds of lockers slamming, distant chatter, and the faint rhythm of passing students wash over them. From their vantage point, the school appeared perfectly mundane, a vibrant tableau of ordinary teenage life. Anya's gaze swept across the polished floors and rows of lockers, while Kofia subtly adjusted his posture, taking in the details of the student artwork taped to the walls.)

(They began to roam, pushing their cart down the main hallway, past classrooms where lessons were already underway, and a cafeteria that hummed with the promise of lunch. Each turn was an opportunity to observe, to soak in the atmosphere. Students, all like in appearance, moved with an almost unsettling normalcy, their movements fluid and their expressions animated. Nothing seemed overtly out of place, yet the memory of the blurred images from the briefing lingered in Anya's mind, a subtle unease gnawing at her.)

Kofia: *(He subtly tapped the comms unit near his ear, his voice a low murmur).* Command, this is Agent Kofia. We're inside. Initial assessment: school appears perfectly normal. No immediate energy fluctuations beyond baseline, no visible anomalies. Feels like... just a normal high school.

Anya: *(Leaning in slightly, her voice barely audible over the school's general hum).* Too normal, Kofia. That's usually when things get interesting.

(She subtly gestured towards a vibrant, almost childlike drawing of a smiling paper figure, seemingly innocuous yet unsettling in its simplicity).

(They continued their circuit, familiarizing themselves with the layout, noting emergency exits, and mentally mapping the school's various wings. After a few minutes of quiet observation, they made their way towards the rear of the school, following signs for 'Maintenance' and 'Custodial Supplies'.)

(They continued their circuit, familiarizing themselves with the layout, noting emergency exits, and mentally mapping the school's various wings. After a few minutes of quiet observation, they made their way towards the rear of the school, following signs for 'Maintenance' and 'Custodial Supplies'. The bustling energy of the main hallways began to fade, replaced by a quiet, utilitarian stillness.)

The Custodial Closet

(The heavy, fire-rated door creaked open to reveal a cramped storage room, crammed with cleaning chemicals, stacks of spare floor tiles, and various tools. The air was thick with the scent of disinfectant and dust. This was their new domain, their temporary base of operations.)

(Anya and Kofia began their routine, moving with a practiced efficiency that belied their true purpose. They pulled out mops, filled industrial-sized buckets with water and cleaning solution, and organized their supplies. This was mundane work, designed to keep their hands busy and their minds clear, allowing them to remain inconspicuous while listening, watching, and waiting.)

Kofia: *(As he filled a bucket, he spoke quietly into his comms, his voice a low, steady murmur).* Command, this is Agent Kofia. We've secured access to the primary custodial storage. The room is clear. We're preparing our gear now.

Commander Echo (Comms): Copy that, Kofia. Any initial readings from inside the closet?

Kofia: Negative, Commander. Hume levels are at a flat 1.0. The room itself is clean, anomalously speaking. It's a good place to establish a temporary foothold.

Anya: *(Her voice equally low, as she checked the charge on a discreet sensor array she'd subtly clipped to the underside of their cart)* We will begin our initial sweep of the academic wing as briefed, focusing on the areas of interest flagged by Overwatch-7s. Our cover is solid, and we have a plausible reason to be in any part of the building now.

Commander Echo (Comms): Acknowledged. Proceed with caution. Maintain your cover at all costs. You are our only eyes and ears in there.

Kofia: Understood. We'll be ghosts. Kofia out.

Anya: *(To Kofia, once the channel was closed)* This is it. The real work begins. You ready for this?

Kofia: As I'll ever be. It's strange, isn't it? After all the training, all the high-tech simulations... it all comes down to a mop and a bucket.

Anya: It's the perfect cover. No one ever questions the presence of a janitor. We're part of the background noise. It gives us unparalleled access.

Kofia: True. Let's just hope the background noise doesn't decide to bite back. I've got a bad feeling about this place, Anya.

Anya: So do I. But that's what we're here for. To find out why. Let's get moving. The sooner we start the sweep, the sooner we can get a clear picture of what we're up against.

Kofia: Right behind you. Let's go clean up this mess.

(The ordinary sights and sounds of a busy school day continued outside the closet, providing a disarming cover, lulling any potential observer into a false sense of security. But for Anya and Kofia, the real work was just beginning.)

(Anya and Kofia began their routine, moving with a practiced efficiency that belied their true purpose. They pulled out mops, filled industrial-sized buckets with water and cleaning solution, and organized their supplies. This was mundane work, designed to keep their hands busy and their minds clear, allowing them to remain inconspicuous while listening, watching, and waiting.)

The Janitor's Rounds

(Anya and Kofia began their first "official" task: mopping the main hallway. The rhythmic squeak of the mop head against the linoleum was the only sound besides the distant hum of classes. Anya pushed the bucket, her movements precise and economical, while Kofia handled the mop, his broad shoulders swaying with each deliberate stroke. They moved like a well-oiled machine.)

Kofia: *(He leaned against the mop handle for a moment, his voice a low, casual murmur)* So, Anya, you ever thought about making a career out of this? Seems pretty chill, all things considered. No reality-benders trying to turn your skeleton into a pretzel.

Anya: *(She glanced at him, her expression flat, but a flicker of amusement in her eyes)* The benefits are lacking, Kofia. And I prefer a job with a bit more... intellectual stimulation.

Kofia: *(Chuckles softly, resuming his mopping)* Can't argue with that. Still, it's a nice change of pace. No gunfire, no explosions, just... squeaky clean floors.

Anya: Keep your senses open, Kofia. Overwatch indicated strongest activity near the academic wing and that auditorium. We'll work our way there, nice and slow. And keep the chatter light. We're just two janitors, remember? Happy to have a steady paycheck.

Kofia: *(Gives a subtle nod, his eyes locking onto a discarded piece of paper near a locker. He moves towards it, mop in hand, a picture of diligent work)* Got it. Just two regular folks, making the world a cleaner place, one existential nightmare of a high school at a time.

Anya: Something like that. Just try to look a little less like a highly trained operative and a little more like you're bored out of your mind.

Kofia: I can do bored. I've sat through enough of the Director's financial briefings to master the art of the thousand-yard stare.

Anya: I'm sure you have. Now, less talking, more mopping. We have a lot of ground to cover.

Kofia: Yes, ma'am.

Anya: And don't call me "ma'am." I'm a janitor, remember?

Kofia: Right. Sorry, boss.

Anya: That's better.

(They continued their slow, methodical work, their quiet, professional banter a stark contrast to the grim purpose that had brought them to the silent, unnerving halls of Maple High.)

(Anya pushed the heavy cleaning cart, its wheels squeaking faintly against the polished linoleum. Kofia, a steady rhythm to his mopping, worked beside her. The mundane task was a perfect cover, allowing their voices to blend with the distant hum of the school.)

Janitorial Confessions

Kofia: *(He sighed, a soft, almost nostalgic sound)* You know, sometimes I miss the simple days. My biggest problem in school was figuring out if I'd make it to the cafeteria before all the good stuff was gone. That, and trying to remember my locker combination.

Anya: *(A faint smile touched her lips, a rare sight for her)* Mine was trying to perfect the art of getting through class without being called on. The quiet kid, always in the back. I suppose that's probably why I'm so good at this job now. Blending in has always been my specialty.

Kofia: *(He chuckled, a low rumble)* I was the opposite. Always in the thick of it. I got sent to the principal's office more times than I can count. My parents just shook their heads and said I was a "handful." Thought I'd end up as a professional troublemaker. Look at me now, still stirring up trouble, just... on a global, occasionally interdimensional, scale.

Anya: *(She shook her head, a dry amusement in her tone)* And I was supposed to be a librarian. Quiet. Organized. A life of Dewey Decimal Systems and late fees. No anomalous entities trying to turn people into paper.

Kofia: *(He paused his mopping for a beat, leaning on the handle)* Imagine explaining this job to our old high school counselors. "So, Kofia, what are you doing these days?" "Oh, just mopping up existential threats and occasionally preventing reality from unspooling like a cheap sweater. Standard Tuesday."

Anya: I'm not sure "janitor" would be the first thing on my resume, but it has its moments. At least the work is tangible. You see a mess, you clean it up.

Kofia: I suppose so. Though our current "mess" is a bit more complicated than spilled soda. Speaking of which, have you noticed how... clean this place is? For a school full of kids, there's barely any dust.

Anya: I have. It's unsettling. It's either the most diligent custodial staff in history, or the school itself has a way of... tidying up.

Kofia: Let's hope it's the former. I'd rather not get into a turf war with a sentient, self-cleaning hallway.

Anya: Just keep your eyes open. This place is all about the little details. The things that are just a little too perfect.

Kofia: Roger that. Back to our regularly scheduled, non-anomalous mopping.

(Their conversation flowed, a quiet, almost domestic rhythm to their work. But beneath the surface, their senses remained sharp, their eyes constantly scanning, their minds processing every detail of their surroundings. This familiar, human chatter was their shield, making them invisible, just two ordinary janitors reminiscing about their past.)

(Anya pushed the heavy cleaning cart, its wheels squeaking faintly against the polished linoleum. Kofia, a steady rhythm to his mopping, worked beside her. The mundane task was a perfect cover, allowing their voices to blend with the distant hum of the school.)

Math Class and a Curious Teacher

(Anya and Kofia continued their mopping, their quiet chatter about their past lives a steady backdrop to the rhythmic swish of the mop. They rounded a corner, the hallway opening up to a section lined with classrooms, and as they passed one particular door, they both instinctively glanced through the window. It was the math classroom.)

Kofia: *(He nudged Anya subtly with his elbow, his voice a low murmur).* Think this is where all the fun happens? Quadratic equations and existential dread? The energy signature is definitely stronger here, just like Overwatch said.

Anya: *(She barely acknowledged the nudge, her eyes already fixed on the scene inside. Her voice was equally quiet).* Not for us, Kofia. We're on cleaning duty. Keep your head down, but your eyes open. *(Her gaze swept across the normal-looking students, their like forms animated and seemingly engaged, hunched over desks, some laughing softly, others raising their hands to ask questions. The atmosphere was light, even joyful, a stark contrast to the grim reality Anya and Kofia knew could be lurking beneath the surface.)*

(As their eyes swept across the room, Anya's gaze snagged on the teacher at the front. She was tall, with strikingly long, dark hair that cascaded down her back. Her movements were graceful as she wrote equations on the board, but it wasn't her height or her hair that caught Anya's attention. It was the large, ornate compass pinned to her left arm, glinting subtly under the classroom lights. It looked less like a decorative pin and more like a permanent fixture, an unusual detail in an otherwise perfectly ordinary setting.)

Anya: *(Her voice dropped to a whisper, barely audible).* Kofia. Look. The teacher. On her left arm.

Kofia: *(He followed her gaze, his mopping slowing almost imperceptibly. His eyes narrowed as he spotted the unusual detail on her arm).* You mean the human protractor? What is that thing? It's not in any of the personnel files we were briefed on.

Anya: *(She shook her head slightly, her gaze still fixed on the compass).* No idea. But it's... out of place. It's not what you expect to see on a math teacher. Keep it casual. Don't stare. We need to log this.

Kofia: Already on it. I'm taking a high-resolution scan through the cart's optical sensors. Command is going to have a field day with this.

Anya: Good. Let's keep moving. We don't want to draw attention. But remember her face. She's our first potential target.

Kofia: Don't worry. I won't forget a thing.

Anya: I know. That's why you're here.

Kofia: And here I thought you just liked my witty banter.

Anya: That too. Now, mop.

Kofia: Yes, ma'am.

Anya: I told you not to call me that.

Kofia: Sorry, boss.

Anya: Better.

(They continued their slow, methodical work, the discovery of the strange, compass-wielding teacher a new, sharp point of focus in their minds. The seemingly normal facade of Maple High was beginning to crack, revealing the strange, unsettling reality beneath.)

(Kofia "accidentally" stumbled, sending the mop bucket tipping over with a loud clatter. A wave of grey, sudsy water spread across the polished linoleum floor, stopping just short of the math classroom's door. The sudden noise was sharp and jarring in the otherwise quiet hallway. Anya immediately moved to the cart, grabbing a "Wet Floor" sign with a practiced, weary sigh, every bit the part of a janitor dealing with a clumsy partner.)

Setting Up Surveillance

Anya: *(Her voice just loud enough to be a plausible reprimand, but low enough not to carry into the classroom)* Kofia, honestly. That's the third time this week. Watch your feet.

Kofia: *(Rubbing the back of his neck, a perfect picture of sheepish embarrassment)* Sorry, Anya. Slipped on a... well, on a non-wet spot, I guess. My mistake. I'll get this cleaned up right away.

Anya: You'd better. We don't want any of the students slipping.

(As Anya placed the "Wet Floor" sign with deliberate slowness, she angled her body to get a better view into the classroom, her eyes subtly scanning. Kofia, meanwhile, retrieved a second mop and began the slow, methodical process of cleaning up the spill, his movements bringing him closer to the classroom window. He activated his discreet comms unit.)

Kofia: *(His voice was a low murmur, barely audible over the gentle slosh of the mop bucket, intended only for Command)* Command, this is Agent Kofia. We have an observation. We have created a plausible reason to remain in the vicinity of the math classroom. We are attempting to get a better reading on the teacher.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(The crisp voice responded instantly in his ear)* Go ahead, Kofia. We're monitoring your cart's sensor feed.

Kofia: The teacher... she didn't even flinch when the bucket fell. Didn't even look up from her lesson. The students did, but she's completely focused. It's... unnatural.

Anya: *(Adding to the report, her voice a low murmur as she "inspected" the spill)* Visual confirmation on that, Command. Her focus is absolute. It's almost... predatory. I'm getting a faint, intermittent Hume reading from her location. It's low, but it's definitely not baseline.

Commander Echo (Comms): Understood. The "compass" on her arm. Can you get a clearer scan of it?

Kofia: That's the plan, Commander. The spill is giving me the perfect excuse to get closer. I'm going to mop right up to the window.

Anya: Be careful, Kofia. Don't let her see you looking.

Kofia: Don't worry. I'm just a humble janitor, remember? Completely invisible.

Anya: Just make sure you stay that way.

Kofia: Copy that.

(Kofia continued his mopping, his movements slow and deliberate, a perfect picture of a man doing a tedious job. But with every swipe of the mop, he was gathering data, his hidden sensors scanning, his trained eyes observing, as he and Anya began to peel back the first layer of Maple High's terrifying secrets.)

(Kofia "accidentally" stumbled, sending the mop bucket tipping over with a loud clatter and a splash of water that spread across the polished linoleum floor. The sudden noise was sharp and jarring in the otherwise quiet hallway. Anya immediately moved to the cart, grabbing a "Wet Floor" sign with a practiced, weary sigh, every bit the part of a janitor dealing with a clumsy partner.)

A Principal's Interruption

Anya: *(Her voice just loud enough to be a plausible reprimand, but low enough not to carry into the classroom)* Kofia, honestly. That's the third time this week. Watch your feet.

Kofia: *(Rubbing the back of his neck, a perfect picture of sheepish embarrassment)* Sorry, Anya. Slipped on a... well, on a non-wet spot, I guess. My mistake. I'll get this cleaned up right away.

Anya: You'd better. We don't want any of the students slipping.

(As Anya placed the "Wet Floor" sign with deliberate slowness, she angled her body to get a better view into the classroom, her eyes subtly scanning. Kofia, meanwhile, retrieved a second mop and began the slow, methodical process of cleaning up the spill, his movements bringing him closer to the classroom window. Suddenly, a new presence entered their periphery. It was Principal Grace, a woman with a stern but not unkind face, approaching them with a small, precise smile.)

Miss Grace: Good morning! You two must be our new custodial staff, yes? *(Her voice was clear, a touch formal but welcoming)*. I'm Principal Grace. Welcome to Maple High.

Anya: *(She offered a small, polite smile, adjusting her grip on the mop bucket. Kofia, still mopping a few feet away, subtly angled his body to listen in)*. Yes, ma'am. Anya, and this is Kofia. We just started. Good to be here.

Kofia: *(Without missing a beat in his mopping, he chimed in, his voice a friendly rumble)*. Heard great things about Maple High, Principal. Cleanest school in the district, they said. We aim to keep it that way.

Miss Grace: *(She chuckled softly, a genuine sound)*. Well, we certainly appreciate the enthusiasm. I just wanted to introduce myself. We're a busy school, as you can see, but we pride ourselves on a welcoming environment. You'll find everyone very friendly.

Anya: *(She nodded, maintaining eye contact)*. We've noticed. Students seem very bright. And the teachers, too. Just saw the math teacher, actually. Quite the unique accessory.

Miss Grace: *(She blinked, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes, before her smile returned, if a touch strained)*. Ah, yes. Miss Circle. She certainly has her quirks. Very dedicated to her subject, though.

Kofia: *(He paused his mopping, leaning on the handle, a casual gesture)*. Speaking of dedication, we were just heading to check out the old auditorium and those locker rooms nearby. Heard there might be a bit of a... dust problem.

Miss Grace: *(She raised an eyebrow slightly, a hint of curiosity)*. Oh? I hadn't heard of any specific issues there recently, but certainly, if you notice anything, please let us know. We encourage proactive maintenance. The auditorium can get quite dusty, I suppose. Just be mindful, classes do use it throughout the day.

Anya: *(She gave another small nod, a professional demeanor firmly in place)*. Absolutely, Principal. We'll be as discreet as possible. Just doing our rounds. Ensuring everything's in tip-top shape.

Miss Grace: *(She beamed, seemingly satisfied).* Excellent. Well, I won't keep you from your duties then. Welcome aboard...

(She gave a polite wave and continued down the hallway, her footsteps receding. Anya and Kofia exchanged a brief, almost imperceptible glance, a silent acknowledgment of the successful interaction.)

Kofia: *(He lowered his voice slightly, as Miss Grace disappeared around a corner).* "Human protractor" has a name, Anya. Miss Circle. And our "dust problem" got us direct clearance to the areas of interest. Not bad for five minutes.

Anya: *(Her expression tightened marginally, the professional facade still in place).* Too easy, Kofia. That's what worries me. And the "quirks" comment. Keep that in mind.

(As Principal Grace's footsteps faded into the distant hum of the school, Anya and Kofia resumed their mop-and-bucket routine, their movements seemingly unhurried. Kofia nudged Anya with his elbow, a silent prompt. Anya, with subtle movements, activated her comms unit.)

Reporting In and Moving On

Anya: *(Her voice was a low, steady murmur, blending with the squeak of the mop as she pushed the bucket).* Command, this is Agent Anya. Update on current infiltration.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(The crisp voice of the handler responded instantly).* Go ahead, Agent Anya. We've been monitoring your interaction.

Anya: We just had a brief, successful interaction with Principal Grace. She identified the math teacher with the unusual compass-like object as 'Miss Circle'. *(Anya paused for a beat, ensuring the name was clear).* We have no further identifying information on this 'Miss Circle' at this time, beyond her physical description and the unique item. The interaction was successfully navigated, and our cover as janitorial staff remains intact.

Kofia: *(His voice, equally low, chimed in).* We also managed to secure plausible justification for moving towards the flagged areas of interest. Specifically, the auditorium and adjacent locker rooms. We cited a "dust problem" and she gave us the green light to proceed.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(There was a brief, almost imperceptible pause on the other end, processing the new information).* Understood, Agents. Log 'Miss Circle' for cross-referencing with our existing intel. Your social engineering was flawless. Proceed to the auditorium and locker rooms as planned. Maintain vigilance.

Intelligence Analyst Chen (Comms): Be advised, agents, the energy signature from the math classroom has remained stable throughout your interaction. No spikes, no deviations. She didn't react to your presence at all.

Anya: Copy that, Command. Her lack of reaction is, in itself, a point of interest. It suggests a high level of control or a complete disregard for external stimuli.

Kofia: Or she's just really, really into teaching math. Either way, we're moving on. We'll continue our sweep towards the auditorium.

Security Chief Hector (Comms): Good. The further you get from the main hallways, the fewer variables you'll have to deal with. Keep your comms open, and report any new observations or anomalous readings immediately.

Anya: Copy that, Command. Proceeding to objective.

(Anya ended the transmission, her gaze meeting Kofia's for a fleeting moment. Without another word, they subtly altered their course. Their cleaning route now led them directly towards the rear of the school, their industrial-grade mop and bucket serving as perfect camouflage as they made their way towards the suspected anomalous hotspot-the auditorium.)

(Anya and Kofia wheeled their cart towards the older, less frequented section of Maple High, the hum of the main hallways slowly fading behind them. The air grew noticeably stiller, dust motes dancing in the shafts of light filtering through grimy windows. They arrived at the hallway leading to the auditorium and adjacent locker rooms. The lockers here were older, their paint chipped, and a thin layer of dust coated everything. Several of them stood ajar, revealing nothing but empty, echoing interiors. On the floor, scattered haphazardly, were several unused, worn books, their covers faded, suggesting they hadn't been touched in a long time.)

The Dusty Auditorium Hallway

Anya: *(Her voice was quiet, almost reverent in the stillness)* Well, Kofia, looks like our "dust problem" just got a lot more... literary. *(She knelt, running a gloved finger over the top of one of the books, leaving a clear streak in the dust. Her eyes scanned the floor, taking in the sheer volume of forgotten items).* And these lockers look like they haven't been cleared out in years. This place is a time capsule. Perfect.

Kofia: *(He surveyed the scene, then nodded. His hand went to his comms unit, but he held back, opting for direct communication first).* Looks like a job for the big bin. This little cart won't cut it. I'll head back to the storage room and grab it. You start on these lockers. We need to be thorough.

Anya: *(She already had a stack of the unused books in her arms).* Copy that. Clear the clutter, clean the dust. See what secrets these old things are hiding. And Kofia? Be quick, but be quiet. This area feels... different.

Kofia: Always am. Don't worry. I'll be back before you know it.

(Kofia turned, heading back the way they came with a purposeful stride. Anya, meanwhile, began her meticulous work. She placed the books carefully into a pile, then pulled a rag from her cart, methodically wiping down the dusty tops of the lockers. As she cleaned, she reached into each open locker, carefully removing any stray items - crumpled papers, a single lost pencil, a forgotten, dust-covered gym sock - and adding them to the growing pile of refuse that Kofia would soon collect. Every item was briefly inspected, a quick scan for anything unusual, before being deemed inert. The mundane act of cleaning masked a deeper purpose, each swipe of the rag a silent search for the anomaly.)

Anya: *(Muttering to herself, her voice a low hum)* This is pointless. Just... old junk. Nothing here. But we have to be sure. Every piece of data matters.

(She reached into another locker, her fingers brushing against something cold and metallic. She pulled it out. It was an old, tarnished silver locket. She opened it. Inside, on one side, was a faded, like photo of a young girl she didn't recognize. On the other, a small, intricate carving of a bird. It was... beautiful. But it wasn't a clue. Just a sad, forgotten memory. She placed it carefully in a separate pocket. She would log it later. For now, it was just another ghost in a school full of them.)

(The silence of the hallway was heavy, broken only by the soft swish of her rag and the distant, muffled sounds of the school. The air was still, heavy with the scent of dust and time. Anya continued her work, her movements a slow, deliberate dance of cleaning and searching, a lone, quiet figure in the forgotten corners of a very strange, very dangerous place.)

(Anya leaned back, stretching her arms above her head, a soft groan escaping her lips. The air in the auditorium hallway, once thick with dust, now smelled faintly of lemon-scented cleaner. The rows of lockers gleamed, their surfaces free of grime, every scattered book and forgotten item now safely consolidated in the large trash bin Kofia had retrieved. The methodical work had been surprisingly cathartic, a brief respite from the constant vigilance.)

A Gleaming Auditorium

Anya: *(She wiped her brow with the back of her gloved hand, a small, satisfied sigh escaping her)* Well, that's done. Miss Grace will be surprised by this. I don't think this hallway has been this clean since the school was built.

Kofia: *(He gave the overflowing bin a final pat, his own back cracking faintly as he straightened up)* Bet she will. Probably hasn't seen this place this clean since... well, ever. My kind of proactive maintenance. We're the best janitors this school has ever had.

Anya: Don't get too attached to the role, Kofia. We're not here to win "Employee of the Month." We're here to find a monster.

Kofia: I know, I know. But a little professional pride never hurt anyone. Besides, it's good for our cover. It shows we're committed.

Anya: True. The more we look like we're actually doing our jobs, the less likely anyone is to look twice at us.

Kofia: Exactly. So, what's next on the agenda? We've cleaned the hallway, we've cataloged a whole lot of nothing... are we heading back to the main wing?

Anya: Not yet. We still haven't checked the auditorium itself. And we need to get rid of this trash. Our cover requires us to follow through on our tasks.

Kofia: Right. The maintenance yard is just around the next corner, if the blueprints are to be believed.

Anya: Let's hope they are. This part of the school feels... older. Less stable. The air is heavy.

Kofia: I'm not getting any anomalous readings, but I know what you mean. It feels like the whole thing is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

Anya: Then let's not give it a reason to exhale. Let's get this done, and get back to the main part of the school where the real threats are.

Kofia: Agreed. I'll take the lead on the cart. You keep an eye on our six.

Anya: Always do.

Kofia: I know. That's why you're the best partner a guy could ask for.

Anya: *(A very faint, almost imperceptible smile)* Just push the cart, Kofia.

Kofia: On it.

(They surveyed their handiwork, a rare moment of tangible accomplishment in their often abstract and dangerous line of work. The hallway, once a dusty relic, now looked like it belonged in an active, well-maintained school. With their task complete, they began pushing

the heavily laden trash bin and their cleaning cart out of the now-pristine auditorium wing, ready to continue their infiltration deeper into Maple High.)

(Anya and Kofia pushed the heavy trash bin and their cleaning cart, the wheels rumbling softly on the tiled floor as they navigated the less-trafficked corridors towards the back of the campus. Their destination: the maintenance storage area and its outdoor garbage containers. The fresh scent of cleaner from the auditorium faded, replaced by the faint, earthy smell of old building materials. They walked in comfortable silence for a while, their internal sensors and instincts constantly scanning the environment. Finding the first-floor maintenance area a dead end, they consulted their schematics and ascended a grand, ornate staircase that felt both familiar and entirely new, pushing their janitor's cart onto the second floor.)

Kofia: *(His voice a low, thoughtful murmur as they reached the second-floor landing)* Alright, new floor, new opportunities for discovery. I'm still getting nothing on the anomalous energy detector, but the air up here feels... different. Colder.

Anya: I feel it too. It's a subtle shift, but it's there. It's like the ambient temperature dropped a few degrees. Let's do a slow, methodical sweep of this entire floor. We're looking for anything out of place. Anything at all.

Kofia: You got it. Just two janitors, making our rounds. Nothing to see here but the thrilling world of institutional sanitation.

Anya: Keep the chatter down. And keep your eyes open. This is where the school starts to feel... less like a school.

Kofia: Roger that.

(They continued their slow, deliberate patrol, their movements practiced and inconspicuous. The second floor was even quieter than the first, the distant hum of the school almost completely gone, replaced by a strange, expectant silence. They passed by rows of identical, closed classroom doors, their windows dark and empty. The artwork on the walls here was older, more faded, the cheerful paper figures of the main floor replaced by strange, abstract shapes and patterns.)

Anya: These drawings... they're different from the ones downstairs. More... complex. And less cheerful.

Kofia: They're almost... geometric. Like someone was trying to work out a very complicated math problem.

Anya: Or a very complicated spell. This feels less like a school and more like... a gallery of warnings.

Kofia: Let's hope it's the former. I'm not in the mood for any curses today. Let's just finish this sweep and get back to the main wing.

(They rounded a corner, the hallway opening up into a long, straight corridor. And there, at the very end of it, they both stopped. Their eyes landed on a door unlike any other they had seen in the school.)

The Forbidden Blue Door

Kofia: *(His voice dropped to a low, cautious tone, almost a whisper).* Well, that's subtle. "Do Not Enter." And glowing. Like a magnet to every troublemaker I ever knew in high school. And those scratches... they're deep.

Anya: *(Her gaze was fixed on the blue door and the surrounding drawings, her expression unreadable. She didn't move towards it, but her body language was coiled, alert).* More like a flashing neon sign for us, Kofia. Overwatch didn't flag this door. Or this color. Or this... aura.

Kofia: *(He nudged the trash bin slightly with his hip, feigning a need to reposition it, while his eyes darted to the comms unit at his ear. He debated contacting Command immediately).* A bright blue door with a warning sign. Unlocked. Glowing. Seems... inviting. In a very, very wrong way. What do you think's behind it? Janitor's paradise? Or, you know, anomalous entity no. 7?

Anya: *(She shook her head slowly, her eyes still scrutinizing the vibrant paint, the stark red lettering, the ominous glow, and the disturbing artwork. Her hand instinctively went to the utility belt beneath her jumpsuit, brushing against the concealed sensor array).* Too prominent to be forgotten. Too conveniently open. And the warning sign is... almost childlike. It's not standard school signage. It's an intentional deterrent. Or a trap.

Kofia: And these drawings... "We love Alice." Who the hell is Alice?

Anya: The "ghost girl" from the parents' stories, maybe? The one who supposedly haunts the halls?

Kofia: Well, it looks like we found her room. And it looks like she's not a ghost. She's something else. Something... angry.

Anya: The scratches indicate something significant. And the name... it's a direct confirmation of the intel.

Kofia: So, do we... peek? Or do we call this in and wait for the cavalry?

Anya: *(She didn't answer immediately, her mind rapidly cycling through protocols and probabilities. The compass teacher, the missing students, the suddenly very clean auditorium. And now this. The pieces felt like they were starting to click into place, but the image was still blurred).* No. Not yet. We have a trash run to finish. But we will be back. This isn't just a janitor's closet. This is a containment zone.

Reporting the Anomaly

(Anya's eyes remained fixed on the glowing blue door, the scratch marks, and the unnerving drawings of "Alice." Her gut clenched, a familiar sensation when facing a potent anomaly. Kofia, seeing the change in her demeanor, knew exactly what she was thinking. He had already subtly shifted his body, positioning himself between Anya and the ominous door, his hand hovering near his own concealed comms unit.)

Anya: *(Her voice was barely above a whisper, direct into her comms unit, cutting through the school's background noise).* Command, this is Agent Anya. Immediate update. We've found something. We have a confirmed anomalous locus.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(The handler's voice was sharp, recognizing the urgency).* Go ahead, Anya. Status report. We're reading a minor, localized Hume fluctuation at your position.

Anya: We're in the rear service corridor of the second floor, en route to the external disposal unit. We've located a door. It's painted a vivid blue, with significant, deep scratch marks on its surface. There's a visible black and red glow emanating from beneath the door.

Kofia: *(He added, his voice low but firm).* The doorknob is unsecured, and there's a handwritten sign above it that reads: 'DO NOT ENTER'. The walls around it are covered in drawings, childlike in style, depicting a single female individual. Each drawing has the phrase 'WE LOVE ALICE' written beneath it.

Anya: Based on the visual characteristics, the energy signature, and the explicit warning, we believe this is the primary anomalous locus we've been seeking. This aligns with the "ghost story" and "secret door" mentioned in the intel from the first five disappearances.

Kofia: The name "Alice" is a direct confirmation. This has to be the central entity.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(A brief, tense silence hung on the line, then the handler's voice returned, sharper, more focused).* Understood, Agents. This is significant. Do not approach the door. Do not engage. Confirm your location and await further instructions.

Intelligence Analyst Chen (Comms): We are initiating Level 4 Anomaly Confirmation Protocol based on your report. All standby MTFs are being alerted to a potential escalation.

Kofia: *(He nodded, his gaze unwavering from the blue door).* Location confirmed. Rear service corridor, second floor, adjacent to the campus's back right maintenance exit. Awaiting instructions.

Anya: The energy signature is low, but it's constant. It feels... dormant. Like it's sleeping.

Commander Echo (Comms): Let's not do anything to wake it up. Maintain your position, but create some distance. And keep your eyes on that door. I want to know the second anything changes.

Kofia: Copy that, Command. We're holding our position.

Anya: This is it, Kofia. This is the heart of the matter.

Kofia: I know. And it feels even worse up close than it did in the reports.

Anya: Just stay sharp. We're in the endgame now.

Kofia: Roger that.

(Anya and Kofia stood rooted, their janitorial cover momentarily forgotten. Their eyes were locked on the glowing, scratched blue door. The mundane sounds of the school suddenly felt distant, replaced by the silent hum of the potential danger before them, and the crackle of their comms as the SCP Foundation began to mobilize around their discovery.)

Request for Tracker Deployment

(Anya's gaze remained locked on the pulsating black and red glow beneath the blue door, her mind already anticipating the next steps. The anomaly was clearly defined, highly localized, and critical to pinpoint. She tapped her comms unit, her voice urgent but controlled.)

Anya: Command, this is Agent Anya. We have a confirmed anomalous locus. I am requesting permission to deploy a discreet tracking beacon on the anomaly's immediate vicinity.

Commander Echo (Comms): Explain your reasoning, Agent. We have a visual. What will the tracker accomplish?

Anya: A visual is not enough, Commander. The school's layout is unstable. This door could be somewhere else in five minutes. A live, constant tracking signal would allow standby MTFs to pinpoint its exact location and secure the perimeter with precision upon arrival, minimizing risk and response time.

Kofia: She's right, Command. If this thing moves, we can't afford to waste time searching for it all over again. We need to tag it now, while it's dormant.

Commander Echo (Comms): The logic is sound, Commander. A live tracker on the primary target is a significant tactical advantage.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(After a brief pause, a rapid internal consultation likely taking place. The handler's voice returned, firm and decisive).* Permission granted, Agent Anya. Use a low-signature beacon. Ensure it is placed inconspicuously.

Anya: Copy that, Command.

Commander Echo (Comms): Do not make direct contact with the anomaly or its immediate influence. Get out of the area as soon as the beacon is deployed.

Anya: Understood. Proceeding with deployment.

(Anya nodded to Kofia. Kofia, ever vigilant, positioned himself to provide cover, his eyes sweeping the empty corridor. Anya reached into a hidden pocket within her janitor's jumpsuit, extracting a small, flat, almost imperceptible disc. It was a standard Foundation tracking beacon, designed to adhere to most surfaces and transmit a precise location signal.)

(With precise, practiced movements, Anya quickly knelt, feigning to tie her shoe. Her hand moved swiftly, adhering the beacon to the wall beside the blue door, just above the crude "DO NOT ENTER" sign, ensuring it was almost entirely concealed by a slight protrusion in the wall. The beacon emitted a faint, almost inaudible click as it activated, a tiny green light flickering once before fading, its signal now broadcasting directly to Foundation assets.)

Anya: *(Standing up, her voice calm).* Beacon deployed, Command. Signal confirmed and stable.

Commander Echo (Comms): Received, Agent Anya. Good work. Now, disengage from the immediate vicinity. Return to your routine duties and await further instructions. Do not draw any attention to yourselves. The MTFs are being alerted and will begin mobilizing.

Kofia: *(His voice was low, as he began subtly pushing the trash bin forward again).* Copy that, Command. We're moving out. Let's go finish our trash run, Anya.

Anya: Agreed. We've seen enough here for now. Let's not linger.

Kofia: So, what's the plan now? Just... keep mopping?

Anya: For now, yes. We need to maintain our cover. We'll continue our sweep of the second floor, then head back down to the first. We can't afford to look like we've seen a ghost.

Kofia: Right. Just another day at the office. An office with a glowing, scratched-up door to another dimension.

Anya: Exactly. Now, let's move. The sooner we're out of this hallway, the better.

Kofia: You don't have to tell me twice.

(Anya and Kofia resumed pushing their cart, their pace unhurried, their faces neutral. They left the glowing blue door, its strange drawings and ominous warning fading behind them, now a silent target for the formidable forces of the SCP Foundation. They continued their sweep of the second floor for another ten minutes, their movements slow and methodical, a perfect picture of janitorial diligence. They found nothing else of note, just more empty classrooms and silent, dusty hallways. Finally, their sweep complete, they made their way back to the main staircase and descended to the first floor, the oppressive silence of the upper levels slowly giving way to the distant, familiar hum of a school in session.)

A Disturbed Student

(Anya and Kofia wheeled their cart towards the older, less frequented section of Maple High, the hum of the main hallways slowly fading behind them. The air grew noticeably stiller, dust motes dancing in the shafts of light filtering through grimy windows. They had just completed their sweep of the second floor, their only major discovery being the ominous blue door. Having descended back to the first floor, they continued their janitorial patrol, their senses on high alert.)

Kofia: *(His voice was low, thoughtful, as they navigated a quieter hallway on the first floor).* Well, the second floor was a bust, aside from our glowing blue friend back there. The energy signature is focused, but the rest of the wing is a ghost town. No students, no teachers, not even a dust bunny out of place.

Anya: *(She kept her eyes ahead, scanning the empty corridor).* It's not a bust, Kofia. It's a data point. The lack of activity is just as significant as the presence of it. It tells us the primary anomaly is localized and contained, for now.

Kofia: True. But it doesn't get us any closer to understanding the "how" or the "why." We've got the "what" and the "where," but the rest is still a mystery. We still haven't seen a single teacher up close, besides the math teacher.

Anya: We will. We have to be patient. For now, we maintain our cover. We're just two janitors, doing our rounds, cleaning up spills that haven't happened yet.

Kofia: Right. Appearances. *(He chuckled softly).* So, if you were a librarian, what would be your favorite section? Dewey Decimal, no anomalies allowed.

Anya: *(A faint smile touched her lips).* Probably the history section. There's always something to learn, something to connect. Unlike some of our current cases, where nothing ever truly makes sense.

(They were halfway to the maintenance area when a sound broke the mundane rhythm of their walk. The door to the arts room creaked open. Both agents instinctively stopped, their heads turning. A tall, like boy emerged. He had distinct white hair, a short, fluffy tail, and two prominent feathers standing in his hair, one red and one blue. He seemed utterly dejected, his shoulders slumped as he walked directly towards the nearby boys' bathroom.)

Kofia: *(His voice dropped, a genuine note of concern in it).* Hey, Anya... look at that kid. He looks pretty down. And his... appearance is definitely unusual, even for this place.

Anya: *(Her eyes narrowed, observing the boy's unique features. This was the first student they had seen up close who wasn't in a classroom setting).* No. He's clearly distressed. Let's see what's going on. Discreetly. This could be our first chance to get some real, human intelligence from inside the school.

Kofia: Agreed. Let's follow him. But keep it casual. We're just mopping our way to the bathroom. Just another Tuesday.

Anya: Of course. Let's go.

(They altered their course, pushing their cart more slowly, giving the appearance of simply continuing their janitorial duties while subtly following the boy. As they neared the bathroom, the faint, unmistakable sound of sobbing reached their ears. He was crying, alone in the school bathroom.)

Kofia: Poor kid. Whatever's going on in this school, it's hitting these kids hard. This is the first real crack in the "normal" facade we've seen since we got here.

Anya: This is our chance, Kofia. We need to talk to him. But we have to be careful. He's fragile, and we still don't know the rules of this place.

Kofia: I know. Let me take the lead on this one. I've always been good with kids. My "bumbling but friendly" janitor persona should be disarming enough.

Anya: Alright. But I'll be right behind you. And remember, we're janitors. Not therapists. Our goal is intel.

Kofia: Got it. Just two friendly faces, offering a shoulder to cry on. And maybe getting a name or two in the process.

Anya: Let's see what he has to say.

Kofia: Right behind you.

(They reached the bathroom door, the sounds of the boy's quiet, heartbreaking sobs now clear and undeniable. They exchanged a final, determined look. Their mission had just taken an unexpected, and potentially very fruitful, turn.)

Comfort in the Restroom

(The sound of quiet, heartbreaking sobs echoed from the boys' bathroom. Anya and Kofia stood just outside the entrance, the harsh fluorescent lights of the hallway doing little to soften the raw emotion emanating from within. The raw grief was palpable, cutting through their professional detachment and grounding their abstract mission in a painful, human reality.)

Kofia: *(His voice uncharacteristically soft, a rare crack in his usual stoicism)* Poor kid. Whatever's going on in this school, it's hitting these kids hard. That sounds like more than just a bad day.

Anya: *(Her gaze was fixed on the bathroom door. She remembered the reports from the parents, the whispers of fear, the stories of missing children. This boy's distress, so visible and raw, was a stark reminder of the human cost of their mission. A deep sigh escaped her, a rare show of emotion for the usually composed agent).* We can't just leave him. This is our chance. He's a direct source, not a second-hand story.

(Without another word, Anya pushed the cleaning cart aside, signaling Kofia to stay put for a moment. She walked slowly towards the bathroom entrance, her movements deliberate,

non-threatening. She pushed the door open just enough to peer inside. The boy, Engel, was huddled on the floor beside a stall, his fluffy tail twitching with his sobs, his white hair disheveled. His like form seemed to absorb the dim light, making him appear even more fragile.)

Anya: *(Her voice was gentle, soft, completely unlike her usual command tone. It was the voice of someone offering genuine comfort, not an agent on a mission).* Hey there. Are you okay? I heard you crying from the hallway.

(Engel flinched violently, startled, looking up with wide, tear-filled eyes that held a terror far older than his apparent age. He sniffled, trying to compose himself, but his shoulders still shook with suppressed sobs. He quickly scooted back, pressing himself against the cool tile of the wall.)

Engel: *(His voice was small, choked with grief).* I-I'm fine. Just... I just have something in my eye, that's all. Please, just leave me alone.

Anya: *(She stepped fully into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar. She didn't approach too closely, giving him space, but her posture conveyed a deep, unwavering empathy).* It sounds like you're not fine. And that's okay. It's okay to not be okay. Sometimes, things happen that are just too big to handle alone, and it's alright to be sad about them.

(Engel looked away, fresh tears welling in his eyes. He wiped at them furiously with the back of his hand. Just then, Kofia entered, closing the door softly behind him, creating a private, momentary sanctuary. He leaned against the wall near the entrance, his large frame a silent, supportive presence.)

Engel: It's not just "stuff." It's... everything. My friends... Abbie... Lana... they're gone. And Claire... *(His voice broke on her name, a raw, ragged sound of pure agony).* I saw it. I saw what happened to her. And no one cares. No one understands. They just keep telling us to go to class like nothing happened.

Anya: *(She knelt down slowly, keeping a respectful distance. Her gaze was steady, compassionate).* I understand that losing friends is incredibly hard. And it's even harder when you've witnessed something terrible. It's okay to be sad, and it's okay to be angry, when people you care about are taken from you.

Kofia: *(He spoke, his voice a low, reassuring rumble, carefully chosen to be unthreatening).* She's right, kid. Sometimes you just need to let it out. There's no shame in that. We're just the humble janitors. We're not here to judge. We're just here to clean up messes, and sometimes, that includes listening to people who are having a tough day.

Anya: Can you tell us what happened? Even a little bit? Sometimes, talking about it can help make the weight a little lighter. We're not like the teachers. We're just here to listen.

(Engel hesitated, looking from Anya's kind face to Kofia's friendly, open posture. The offer of genuine solace, from two people who weren't teachers or other students, seemed to disarm him, even just a little.)

Engel: *(His voice still trembling)*. The teachers... they were chasing her. They were so angry. And then... the door. Mr. Demi told me the- the fake exit. And... and *her*... Alice... She... she killed Claire... And now... now Claire's gone forever.

Kofia: It sounds like you miss her a lot. It's hard when people you care about are suddenly not there anymore, especially when it happens in such a terrible way.

Anya: And it's even harder when you feel like you're the only one who is still sad about it. But you're not alone in feeling that way. We believe that you saw something terrible.

Engel: *(Looks up, a flicker of surprise in his teary eyes)*. You... you believe me?

Anya: We believe that you're hurting. And that's what matters. We believe that something is very, very wrong at this school.

Kofia: We're new here, but we can already tell this school is... a little different. And it seems like a lot of the kids here are carrying some heavy burdens, and are too scared to talk about them.

Engel: It's... it's a scary place sometimes. And the teachers... they always like that, they're not all what they seem.

Anya: We believe that too. And we're going to do something about it.

Engel: You... you are?

Kofia: That's why we're here, kid. Now, take a deep breath. You're not alone in this anymore.

(The simple act of validation, of being believed without question, seemed to create a small crack in the wall of Engel's grief. He took a shaky breath, the intensity of his sobs beginning to subside, replaced by a quiet, fragile trust in the two strange, kind janitors.)

A Moment of Solace

(Anya's gentle demeanor and Kofia's steady presence seemed to slowly chip away at Engel's defenses. The bathroom, once a refuge for tears, was becoming a temporary sanctuary of trust. Engel, still fragile but visibly calmer, looked up at the two janitors, his eyes wide as he finally felt safe enough to share the name of his terror.)

Anya: *(Her voice remained soothing, her gaze steady)* It sounds like you're going through something incredibly difficult, Engel. And it's very brave of you to still come to school, to face the day, even when you're feeling this way. Sometimes, just having someone listen, truly listen, can make a difference.

Engel: *(He looked up, his tear-streaked face showing a flicker of surprise, then a tiny spark of something akin to relief. He took a shaky breath, trying to compose himself. Anya waited patiently, her compassion a quiet anchor in the sterile bathroom.)*

Kofia: *(He spoke, his voice a low, reassuring rumble, carefully chosen to be unthreatening).* She's right, kid. Sometimes you just need to let it out. There's absolutely no shame in that. And sometimes, you just need a friendly face, even if it's just us humble janitors. We're good listeners. It's part of the job, you know? You hear a lot of things when you're cleaning the halls.

Engel: *(He managed a small, wobbly smile, a single tear still tracing a path down his like cheek. The shared, human moment seemed to pierce through his isolation. He still looked sad, but the raw, uncontrolled sobs had subsided.)* Thank you. No one... no one else has really asked if I was okay. They just...

Anya: *(She offered another gentle smile)* It's no problem at all. We're here to help where we can. It's our job to make sure this is a safe place for everyone.

Kofia: *(Stepping a little closer, his expression warm)* Feeling a little better now, kid? You know, talking about it can sometimes make the scary things seem a little smaller.

Engel: *(He looked between their faces, a sense of cautious trust beginning to form. He took a deep, steadying breath.)* It's... it's just... I miss them so much. Abbie and Lana... they were my best friends. And Claire... she was... she was my everything. I saw the teachers chasing her, I protect her, and when I ran to the main entrance... She was dead *(*sobbing*)*

Anya: We believe you, Engel. We believe that you saw something terrible, and we are going to find out what happened. You are not alone in this.

Kofia: That's a promise, kid. Now, what was the name of the monster you saw? Did you hear anyone say a name?

Engel: *(His eyes widened in fear, and he nodded slowly).* Yes. Her name is Alice.

(The name dropped into the quiet bathroom like a stone. Anya and Kofia's expressions didn't change, but internally, a thousand alarms went off. "Alice." The name from the ghost stories. It wasn't just a legend. It was real. And it had a name.)

Anya: *(Her voice remained perfectly calm, betraying none of the sudden, intense focus in her mind).* Alice. That's... a pretty name. Did... did she say anything to you?

Engel: *(Shaking his head, a fresh wave of tears welling in his eyes).* No. She just... she just laughed. It was a terrible sound. And then... and then Claire was gone.

Kofia: *(*low voice*)* It's okay, Engel. You don't have to talk about it anymore. You've been incredibly brave just telling us that much.

Anya: You've helped us more than you know. Knowing her name... that's a very important piece of the puzzle.

Engel: It is? But... I'm the only one who seems to care. Everyone else just acts like nothing happened. Like they didn't even try to do anything... because Alice is threatening them.

Kofia: I see kid? Is everyone really acting like it's normal?

Engel: Well... not everyone. Some of the other teachers, the nice ones like Miss Emily and Mr. Demi... they look sad sometimes. They look scared when they think no one is watching them. But they don't *do* anything.

Anya: *(Leaning in slightly, her interest piqued)* They're scared? Why do you think they don't do anything?

Engel: I don't know. Maybe because they're used to it? Or maybe they're just too scared of the other teachers. And some of the other kids... they see things too. They whisper about it. But... we're just kids. What are we supposed to do?

Kofia: *(Exchanging a significant look with Anya)* So there are others who know something is wrong, they're just too afraid to speak up. That's a very important detail, Engel.

Anya: It tells us that not everyone here is blind to what's happening. Some of them are just... trapped. Just like you.

Kofia: And it tells us that maybe... we're not the only ones who want to see things change around here.

(The conversation continued, light and easy, as they helped Engel to his feet. Kofia shared exaggerated tales of his own school mischief, while Anya offered surprisingly witty retorts, drawing more giggles from Engel. For a few minutes, the school bathroom transformed from a place of grief into a space of shared, if temporary, levity. The sounds of ordinary school life outside the door seemed to dim, overshadowed by the unexpected bond forming between the grieving paper boy and the undercover agents, who now had not only the name of their primary target, but the first hint of potential, terrified allies within the school's walls.)

New Janitorial Friends

Anya: *(Her voice remained soft and gentle, picking up the thread of conversation and shifting it to something more personal to solidify their new alliance)* It's very brave of you to share that with us, Engel. It takes a lot of strength to talk about these things. We haven't even properly introduced ourselves. It's nice to meet you, Engel. I'm Anya. And this big fella here is Kofia.

Kofia: *(He gave a small, friendly nod, a genuine warmth in his eyes).* That's me. Just your friendly neighborhood clean-up crew. Don't mind the mops. We're just here to make sure the place sparkles. And sometimes, you know, lend an ear when someone needs it.

Engel: *(He managed a small, almost genuine smile, the raw edges of his grief beginning to soften under their unexpected kindness.)* You... you really listened. No one else does. They just say it'll be fine, or tell me to go to class and forget about it.

Anya: *(She knelt a little closer, maintaining a comforting distance).* Sometimes, it's not fine. And it's okay to feel that way. We've all had tough days, even us. Forgetting isn't always the answer. Sometimes, remembering is how you start to heal.

Kofia: *(He leaned against the wall, a relaxed posture that belied his sharp focus).* Absolutely. I remember one time, back when I was a kid, I lost my favorite toy. Thought the world was ending. Cried for hours. My parents just told me to toughen up. Wish I had someone like us to tell me it was okay to be sad.

Anya: *(She glanced at Kofia, a shared, understanding look passing between them. Then she turned back to Engel).* We're just here to do our job, which includes making sure everyone feels okay in the school. Even if that means a quiet chat in the bathroom. Your well-being is just as important as a clean floor.

Engel: *(He looked from Anya to Kofia, a new, brighter light in his tear-rimmed eyes)* You're... you're not like the other adults here. You're different.

Kofia: We try to be. That's a cool feather you have on your hair, by the way. Are those real feathers?

Engel: *(Touching the red and blue feathers in his hair, a small flicker of pride in his expression).* Yeah. I found them in the woods a long time ago. They remind me of... of being free.

Anya: That's a wonderful way to think about it. It's important to hold on to things that remind you of freedom, especially when you feel trapped.

Engel: Do you guys have anything like that? Something that makes you feel better?

Kofia: I've got a lucky coin I've had since I was a kid. It's probably not really lucky, but it feels like it is. Sometimes, that's all that matters.

Anya: And I have a favorite book. No matter how bad things get, I can always open it and escape for a little while.

Engel: Wow. That's... that's really nice.

Kofia: See? Everyone's got their own little secret weapon against the bad days.

Anya: He's right. And now, you know you've got two more friends in your corner.

Engel: I... I'd like that.

Kofia: Then it's a deal. Now, how about we get you cleaned up? You've got a whole free period ahead of you, right? No point in spending it in here.

Anya: A fresh start to the rest of your day. And remember, Engel... you know where to find us. If you ever need to talk again, or if you see something else that doesn't feel right... you come find us.

Engel: I will. I promise.

(The conversation continued, light and easy, as they helped Engel to his feet. Kofia shared exaggerated tales of his own school mischief, while Anya offered surprisingly witty retorts, drawing more giggles from Engel. For a few minutes, the school bathroom transformed from a place of grief into a space of shared, if temporary, levity. The sounds of ordinary school life outside the door seemed to dim, overshadowed by the unexpected bond forming between the grieving paper boy and the undercover agents.)

Free Period

(The mundane conversation had indeed provided a strange comfort. Engel, no longer sobbing, even managed a few small laughs as Kofia recounted a particularly messy "custodial emergency" involving a spilled vat of glitter from a previous, fabricated, job. Anya,

though quieter, offered her own dry observations, finding herself genuinely engaged in the brief, unexpected reprieve from their mission.)

Anya: *(She glanced at her wrist, subtly checking the time on her standard, unassuming watch).* So, Engel, shouldn't you be heading back to a class soon? Or is the bell just a suggestion around here? We wouldn't want you to get in trouble on our account.

Engel: *(He shook his head, a small, like sigh escaping him, but his smile lingered).* Nah. It's free time right now. We get a few hours every day where we're not in a specific lesson. We can pretty much do whatever we want, as long as we're quiet.

Kofia: *(He whistled softly, leaning his mop against the wall).* A few hours of free time every day? My school just gave us detention if we looked at the clock too long. You guys are lucky. That sounds like a pretty good deal.

Anya: *(A faint, genuine smile touched her lips as she processed this new piece of intel about the school's routine).* That does sound remarkably relaxing. It must be a nice break from all the lessons. Much better than trigonometry, I imagine.

Engel: *(He brightened even more at the thought, a hint of his former, happier self shining through).* Oh, it's way better! It's the best part of the day. Claire and Abbie and Lana and I... we used to hang out in the library or the art room. Sometimes we'd just draw, or play games.

Kofia: So, what's on the agenda for today's free time? Any big plans to take your mind off things for a little while?

Engel: I was just... going to find a quiet corner somewhere and draw. It usually helps me think. And... it helps me remember them. The good times.

Anya: That sounds like a wonderful idea, Engel. A little bit of peace and quiet, and a chance to focus on something creative, can be a powerful thing, especially on a day like this.

Kofia: Absolutely. You're a good kid, Engel. You deserve a break, and a chance to do something that makes you feel a little better.

Engel: Thanks. You guys are... you're really nice. The old janitors... they weren't like you. They just left.

Anya: *(Her expression remains soft, but her focus sharpens instantly)* They just left? Did they say why they were leaving?

Engel: No. They just... stopped showing up one day. A few months ago. One of them looked really scared the last day I saw him. He dropped his keys and ran out of the building.

Kofia: *(Exchanging a quick, significant glance with Anya)* Ran out? That's a strange way to quit a job. He didn't even pack up his things?

Engel: Nope. His cart and everything are still in the big closet in the basement. It's like he just... vanished.

Anya: That is strange. Well, their loss is our gain. We're happy to be here to help out. It's a much nicer school when it's clean, don't you think?

Kofia: Absolutely. And it's a much nicer school when the students feel safe, too. That's the most important part of our job, really.

Engel: You... you really mean that?

Anya: Of course. A school should be a safe place. That's non-negotiable.

Kofia: That's right. So, you mentioned you were going to draw. What do you like to draw the most?

Engel: I like drawing... my friends. And birds. I really like birds.

Anya: Birds are wonderful. They can fly anywhere they want. A perfect symbol of freedom.

Kofia: And friends are the most important thing in the world. It's good to keep their memory alive in your drawings.

Engel: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

(The conversation, light and easy, had served its purpose. Engel, though still carrying the weight of his grief, seemed lighter, his shoulders less slumped. The unexpected bond formed between the grieving paper boy and the undercover agents had not only provided comfort, but had also solidified a crucial human connection in the heart of the anomaly.)

School Day Tales

(The laughter and comfortable banter continued, creating an unlikely bubble of normalcy in the school bathroom. Engel, completely at ease now, began to recount his typical school day, his initial sadness momentarily forgotten in the warmth of their attention.)

Engel: So, we usually start with lessons in the main hall. Miss Circle always starts with numbers, and sometimes she uses big, spinning things. *(He made a swirling motion with his hand, a slight shiver running through his paper form that he quickly dismissed).* Then after that, usually it's art with Miss Bloomie. She loves bright colors. And then, sometimes, we have... special lessons. Those are really hard.

Kofia: *(He nodded, feigning casual interest, while subtly filing away the names 'Miss Circle' and 'Miss Bloomie').* "Special lessons," huh? Like advanced calculus? Or how to build a super-fast paper airplane?

Engel: *(He giggled).* No, not like that! More like... *(He paused, searching for the right words, a flicker of something unreadable passing through his eyes).* Like, understanding shapes. Really, really deep shapes. And listening. Very carefully.

Anya: *(Her gaze sharpened, though her voice remained even and pleasant).* That sounds... intriguing. Are the special lessons your favorite?

Engel: *(He shrugged, a small frown creasing his brow).* Not really. They can be... scary sometimes. But we have to do them. Then it's usually free time. And then, more lessons after lunch. What about you two? What was school like for you?

Kofia: *(He leaned back against the wall, a faraway look in his eyes).* Oh, man. My school days were mostly about trying to sneak extra cookies from the lunch lady and figuring out how to pass history without actually reading the textbook. My favorite part was probably gym class. Or recess. Anything where I didn't have to sit still.

Anya: *(She offered a small, almost wistful smile).* My school was... structured. Very academic. Lots of books, lots of quiet study. My favorite part was probably the library. I could just... get lost in stories. No one bothered you there. *(She glanced at Engel, a subtle invitation in her gaze).* It sounds like your free time is a bit like that. A chance to just be yourself.

Engel: It is. It's the best part of the day. It's when we get to be kids.

Kofia: That's important. It's good to have that time.

Anya: Absolutely. It's what school should be about, really. Learning, and then having time to just... be.

Engel: Yeah. I wish it was always like that.

Kofia: Me too, kid. Me too.

(The conversation flowed, a blend of childhood memories and present-day observations. Engel, eager to share, felt comfortable enough to recount small anecdotes, completely unaware that his seemingly innocent descriptions were being meticulously analyzed by the two "janitors" beside him.)

Shared Laughter

(The small bathroom, once a refuge for tears, now hummed with an unexpected warmth. Engel, still fragile but clearly uplifted, found himself laughing freely, a bright, thin sound that filled the space. Anya and Kofia, maintaining their cover as best they could, found a genuine satisfaction in the boy's improved spirits.)

Kofia: *(He leaned his mop against the wall, chuckling)* You know, Engel, my old history teacher used to say that if you didn't learn from the past, you were doomed to repeat it. I think he was talking about my grades, but still. The man had a point.

Engel: *(He giggled, covering his mouth with a hand).* Miss Circle says numbers are everything. And if you get the wrong answer... *(His smile faltered for a moment, a shadow passing over his face before he quickly pushed it away).* Well, it's just not good. She gets really quiet, and that's when you know you're in trouble.

Anya: *(She caught the subtle shift in his expression, her own smile tightening almost imperceptibly).* Numbers are important, Engel, but so is knowing when to ask for help. Or when to just... take a break. It sounds like you've been carrying a lot on your shoulders.

Kofia: *(He clapped his hands together lightly).* Definitely a good break! Best part of being a janitor, honestly. You meet all sorts of interesting people. And you get to hear all the best stories, the ones that happen between classes.

Engel: *(His eyes lit up, the dark memory seemingly forgotten for a moment).* Oh! Like the time Kevin tried to stick his whole head in the water fountain? Miss Demi had to pull him out by his feet! It was so funny!

(Anya and Kofia exchanged a brief, meaningful glance. The name "Kevin" was new, but the name "Miss Demi" was one Engel had mentioned as being one of the "normal" teachers. The casual, innocent way Engel recounted the story was a stark reminder of the bizarre, yet mundane, reality of life in Maple High.)

Anya: No! Was he okay? That sounds like a recipe for a very wet paper disaster.

Engel: *(He nodded vigorously, clearly delighted by the memory).* Yeah! Just really wet. And kinda dizzy. He said the whole world looked like it was underwater. We all laughed so hard.

Kofia: See? Even in a place like this, kids are still kids. Finding ways to get into trouble and make each other laugh.

Anya: It's a good reminder. That underneath all the... strangeness, there's still a school full of children who deserve to be safe.

Engel: Yeah. I miss laughing like that. With... with everyone.

Kofia: You'll laugh like that again, kid. We're going to make sure of it.

Anya: We are. Now, tell us more about this Miss Demi. She sounds like a fun teacher.

(The conversation flowed, a tapestry of shared school-day anecdotes. Engel, in his innocent joy, began to paint a more vivid picture of the school and its inhabitants than any intel briefing ever could. For a brief, precious window, the grim reality of their mission faded, replaced by the unexpected camaraderie in the quiet school bathroom.)

An Unwelcome Interruption

(During the school's designated "free time," a quiet lull had settled over most of the hallways. In a less-trafficked corridor, Oliver and Edward were walking with a bored, restless energy, their paper forms moving with a familiar, arrogant swagger. The distant, muffled sounds of other students in the library or the gym were the only things breaking the silence.)

Edward: *(Kicking idly at a locker, the sound echoing in the empty hall)* Ugh, I am so bored. Free time is supposed to be for fun, not for wandering around like a couple of lost ghosts.

Oliver: *(Smirking, hands stuffed in his pockets)* We could always go find Zip. She's probably trying to draw a comic book in the art room again. We could "help" her with the speech bubbles.

Edward: Nah. That's boring. I'm in the mood for some real fun. We need to find someone to mess with. Someone who won't fight back.

Oliver: *(His smirk widens)* I think I know just the person. Little Engel is probably hiding in a corner somewhere, crying about his missing friends. It's pathetic.

Edward: Perfect. Let's go find him. I feel like making him jump today. Maybe we can convince him his other shoe has run away.

Oliver: *(Chuckles, a dry, thin sound)* You're a real genius, Edward. A true artist of annoyance.

(Just as they were about to turn down another hallway, a sound, faint but clear, reached their ears. It was the sound of laughter coming from the nearby boys' bathroom. It was a bright, happy sound, one that was startlingly out of place in the usually tense atmosphere of Maple High.)

Edward: *(Stopping in his tracks, his head tilting)* Wait. Did you hear that?

Oliver: *(Listening intently, his smirk fading into a look of genuine confusion)* Yeah. It sounds like... someone's laughing. A lot.

Edward: Who would be laughing in the bathroom? That's just weird.

Oliver: And it sounds familiar. Too familiar.

Edward: You don't think...

Oliver: It's Engel. It has to be. But... why is he laughing? He's supposed to be sad.

Edward: And who is he laughing with? It sounds like there are other people in there.

Oliver: I don't know, but I'm going to find out. No one gets to be that happy in this school. Not on my watch.

Edward: Uhh, let's check. This just got interesting.

Oliver: Let's go see what's so funny.

Edward: Maybe we can join the party.

Oliver: Or maybe we can crash it.

Edward: I like that idea better.

Bathroom Confrontation

(The shared laughter and comfortable banter continued, creating an unlikely bubble of normalcy in the school bathroom. Engel, completely at ease now, was mid-sentence about a silly classroom mishap when the bathroom door suddenly swung open. Anya and Kofia instinctively stiffened, their expressions subtly shifting from warm empathy back to professional alert. Standing in the doorway were two like boys: Oliver and Edward.)

(Edward, with his typically sharp, angular features, looked particularly agitated. His expression was one of angry defensiveness, his gaze immediately snapping to Engel, then to

Anya and Kofia, assessing the scene. Oliver, slightly more nonchalant, had a smirk playing on his lips, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.)

Edward: *(His voice was harsh, accusatory, cutting through the pleasant atmosphere).* Well, well, well. Look what we have here. I thought I heard a dying hyena in here. What are you doing, Engel?! And who are they?

Engel: *(He flinched, but he surprisingly stood his ground, a flicker of the newfound confidence Anya and Kofia had instilled in him).* I'm just talking. They're... they're the new janitors. They're my friends.

Oliver: *(He sauntered in, a mocking laugh escaping him).* Friends? Janitors? Haha! Look at you, Engel, hanging out with the mop brigade! What's the matter, too much of a crybaby for real friends? Had to find some adults to hold your hand?

Edward: *(He stepped closer to Engel, his angry expression intensifying).* Yeah, still crying over... everyone? Grow up, Engel! No one cares about that stuff anymore! You're just a sad sack, hanging out with... janitors! It's pathetic!

Engel: *(His face crumpled, the remnants of his earlier grief returning, but he clenched his big claw fists, holding his ground).* They're nicer than you are!

Oliver: *(Scoffs)* That's a low bar, kid. Even for you.

(Anya and Kofia exchanged a swift, imperceptible glance. The shift from casual conversation to direct confrontation was immediate, and their cover now demanded a more active role.)

Kofia: *(His voice, no longer soft and friendly, deepened, carrying a quiet authority that cut through the bullies' taunts. He stepped forward, subtly positioning himself between Engel and the two boys).* Alright, boys. That's enough. This isn't how we treat people in this school. I believe you were just on your way out.

Anya: *(Her gaze was sharp, unwavering as she locked onto Oliver and Edward. Her posture became subtly firmer, her presence radiating a quiet seriousness).* There's no place for that kind of talk here. And definitely no place for bullying. We're here to keep this school safe and clean, and that includes making sure everyone feels safe from harassment.

The Bullies' Retreat

(Oliver and Edward, caught off guard by the sudden, unwavering authority in the janitors' voices, hesitated. Edward's angry expression faltered, replaced by a flicker of surprise, while Oliver's smirk slowly vanished, replaced by a wary frown. They clearly hadn't expected the 'janitors' to intervene, let alone with such quiet intensity.)

Edward: *(He scoffed, but there was less conviction in his voice)* What's it to you, old man? You're just here to scrub the floors and clean up our messes. This doesn't concern you.

Oliver: *(He shot a quick, nervous glance at Edward, then back at Anya and Kofia, sensing the shift in the air).* Yeah, mind your own business. We're just having some fun with our little friend here. No harm done.

Kofia: *(His eyes, usually warm, were now cold and steady. He took another deliberate step forward, subtly asserting his imposing presence).* Our business is ensuring a safe environment for everyone in this school. And that includes putting a stop to 'fun' that involves making other students cry.

Anya: *(Her voice, while calm, had an edge of steel that made Edward take an involuntary step back).* You have two choices. You can apologize to Engel and go about your day, or you can find yourselves spending your 'free time' with Principal Grace explaining why two new members of the custodial staff had to report a bullying incident.

Oliver: You wouldn't dare. You're just janitors. She wouldn't listen to you over us.

Kofia: Are you willing to bet your afternoon on that? Because from what I've seen, Principal Grace takes the rules of this school very, very seriously. And bullying is a serious offense that disrupts the order she likes to maintain.

Anya: We have a direct line to her office. We can make the call right now, if you'd like. It's our responsibility to report any and all infractions we witness. It's part of the job description.

Edward: *(Growing more agitated)* This is ridiculous! We didn't even do anything! He's just a crybaby!

Oliver: *(A flicker of genuine fear in his eyes at the mention of Grace).* Alright, alright. Calm down. We were just leaving anyway. Weren't we, Edward? This place stinks like bleach.

Kofia: I think an apology is in order first. Don't you? It's the right thing to do.

Anya: And it's what Principal Grace would expect. She seems to value respect between students.

Oliver: *(He hesitated, then let out a frustrated sigh, his pride clearly wounded).* Fine. Sorry, Engel. For... whatever.

Edward: *(Muttering under his breath).* Yeah. Sorry.

Kofia: That's better. Now, get out of here. And don't let us see you bothering him, or any other student, again.

Anya: We'll be watching. Remember that. We see everything.

Edward: You don't scare us.

Kofia: I don't have to. The principal's disappointment is a much scarier prospect, isn't it?

Oliver: *(His face flushing with anger and embarrassment).* Let's just go. This is lame.

Edward: Yeah, whatever.

(Oliver and Edward exchanged a quick, furtive glance. The mention of Principal Grace, combined with the unexpected firmness of the janitors, clearly gave them pause. They were used to unchallenged taunts, not to professional, unyielding adults who held actual power in the school's hierarchy. Without another word, Edward turned abruptly and stalked out of the bathroom. Oliver, after one last lingering, resentful glare at Anya and Kofia, followed, the bathroom door swinging shut behind them with a soft click. The sudden silence left behind was profound, broken only by Engel's shaky breathing.)

Engel: *(He looked up at Anya and Kofia, his eyes wide with a mixture of surprise and gratitude. The fear in his face had receded, replaced by a tentative sense of relief.)* You... you made them leave. Thank you. They never listen to anyone.

Kofia: *(He knelt down, placing a reassuring hand on Engel's shoulder).* No one deserves to be treated like that, Engel. Not on our watch.

Anya: *(She offered a gentle, tired smile).* Exactly. Now, are you feeling a little better?

(Engel nodded, wiping his remaining tears. The bathroom, which had briefly been a battleground, settled back into its role as a sanctuary. Anya and Kofia had successfully diffused the situation, but the encounter with Oliver, a known associate of the mysterious Alice, had added another layer of intrigue to their mission.)

Interrogation Under Cover

(Engel, still slightly shaky but visibly relieved, looked at Anya and Kofia with a newfound trust. The lingering fear from the bullies had receded, replaced by a quiet gratitude. Anya glanced at Kofia, a silent acknowledgment passing between them. They both knew their comms had been active the entire time, broadcasting every word of the confrontation and their comforting interaction with Engel.)

Kofia: *(He knelt beside Engel, his voice still gentle).* Feeling better now, kid? Good. Nobody messes with you on our watch. That's a janitor's promise.

Anya: *(Her voice, while maintaining its compassionate tone, subtly shifted, becoming more purposeful. Her gaze was soft, but her mind was calculating).* Engel, you mentioned a few teachers earlier, the ones who were... less friendly. Can you tell us a bit more about them? We're still learning the ropes here, and it helps to know who's who.

(Engel hesitated for a moment, then, encouraged by their kind faces and the recent defense, began to speak more freely.)

Engel: Oh! Miss Circle is our math teacher. She's really strict about her class, no failures, like, *really* strict. If you get it wrong... *(He shivered, remembering the earlier shadow that crossed his face).* Well, it's just bad. She has super long hair and that... that thing on her arm. She also really likes Oreos, everytime she sheets one, she immediately goes to it. *(nervous laugh)*

Kofia: *(He nodded, a thoughtful hum escaping him).* Oreos, huh? Good to know. A woman of taste. And what about the science teacher you mentioned?

Engel: Miss Bloomie is our science teacher! She's... she's kind of quiet, but she knows a lot. She has a razor blade to her left arm. It's always there.

(Anya and Kofia exchanged a swift, imperceptible glance. The names, direct from Engel, were a massive confirmation. "Miss Circle," the math teacher. "Miss Bloomie," the science teacher. The yellow flags from the parents' interviews were now concrete targets.)

Anya: A razor blade? That's... unusual for a teacher. Does she ever... use it in class?

Engel: *(He hesitated again, a flicker of unease in his eyes).* Not really. She just... Intimidating, forcing us not to fail her class.

Kofia: *(He feigned casual interest, while subtly processing the information).* Hmm, what was she teaching about huh? Like advanced calculus? Or dissecting paper frogs?

Engel: *(He giggled weakly).* No, not like that! More like... *(He paused, searching for the right words, a flicker of something unreadable passing through his eyes).* Like, understanding shapes. Really, really deep shapes. And listening. Very carefully. It makes your head feel all fuzzy and weird afterwards.

Anya: *(Her gaze sharpened, though her voice remained even and pleasant).* That sounds... intriguing. Are the special lessons your favorite?

Engel: *(He shrugged, a small frown creasing his brow).* Not really. They can be... scary sometimes. But we have to do them. Then it's usually free time. And then, more lessons after lunch.

Kofia: And the other teachers? You mentioned some of them were nice. It's not all scary lessons, is it?

Engel: Oh no! The other teachers are the best! Miss Emily, our history teacher, she's really serious but she's super chill. And Miss Sasha, the art teacher, is the kindest person ever! She also teaches the little kindergarten kids.

Anya: That's good to hear. It's important to have teachers you can trust and feel safe with.

Engel: And Mr. Demi! He's our music teacher! He's so funny and energetic, everyone loves his class. Miss Sasha has a big crush on him.

Kofia: *(A small, genuine smile).* A little bit of schoolyard gossip, huh? That's more like it.

Anya: So it's just Miss Circle and Miss Bloomie who are... a little different?

Engel: And the language teacher. She's really tall and her voice is... loud. She gets mad if you fail her quizzes. Really mad.

Kofia: *(Nodding slowly, the third "yellow flag" teacher clicking into place).* Right. The language teacher. We'll be sure to keep an eye out for her.

Engel: You're not scared of them?

Anya: It's our job not to be scared, Engel. It's our job to make sure you don't have to be.

Kofia: That's right. We handle the messes so you kids can focus on being kids.

(Engel's innocent perspective provided invaluable, albeit disturbing, intel. The agents now had confirmed names for two of their primary targets, and a clearer picture of the strange, unsettling nature of their "lessons," as well as the names of the seemingly benevolent staff.)

The Rest of the Staff

(Engel, now completely comfortable, seemed eager to share everything he knew about his school. Anya and Kofia listened intently, their internal filters working overtime to separate innocent observation from potential actionable intelligence. The stark contrast between the seemingly normal teachers and the unsettling descriptions of the others was growing clearer.)

Kofia: *(He kept his voice light, nudging Engel gently).* So, you mentioned Miss Emily and Miss Sasha earlier, and Principal Grace. It's good to know there are some normal, friendly faces around here. It sounds like not everyone is super strict.

Engel: *(He giggled, shaking his head).* Oh no! They're not just friendly, they're the best! Like, really normal teachers, not like the others! They make you feel safe, you know?

Anya: *(Her voice was calm, reassuring, encouraging him to continue).* It's important to have teachers you can trust. Tell us more about them. We're trying to learn who's who, and it helps to know who the good guys are.

Engel: Miss Sasha is amazing! She's our art teacher and also the kindergarten teacher. She's super caring and soft, and everyone loves her. She's really gentle with the little ones, like Chip and Oz. And she really, really loves Mr. Demi, and He even Loves her.

(Anya and Kofia exchanged a quick, knowing glance. "Mr. Demi" was a new name, but the crush detail was a typical, mundane school tidbit, a piece of normalcy in a sea of strangeness. It was a perfect, disarming detail.)

Kofia: A little schoolyard romance, huh? That's nice to hear. And what about Miss Emily? What's her class like?

Engel: Oh, Miss Emily, she's our history teacher. She gets really serious sometimes, especially if someone fails her class. She'll crash out! *(He made a dramatic flailing motion with his hands).* But she's also really understandable and chill. She just wants us to learn, not... not like the others. She doesn't get that cold look in her eyes.

Anya: And Principal Grace? She seems pretty serious about the rules. We saw her in the hallway earlier.

Engel: *(He nodded vigorously).* Oh, Principal Grace is super serious about the rules! Like, if you break them, she'll know. It's like she has eyes everywhere. But she's really calm about it. She never yells or anything, just... makes sure you follow the rules. And she always knows everything that's going on.

Kofia: *(He nodded, filing away the details: a caring art/kindergarten teacher, a serious but chill history teacher, a strict but calm, omniscient principal. And a new name, the "twinkle boy").* What about this Mr. Demi, Engel? What does he teach that makes him so popular?

Engel: *(His face lit up, a genuine, unadulterated joy that was a stark contrast to his earlier grief).* Mr. Demi. He's our music teacher. He's a nervous person. He's always stuttering, but he's caring. He's like a twinkle boy, everyone loves his music class. Well, he's weak and can't defend himself, that's why Miss Sasha is always with him.

Anya: I see. That's a rare thing in this school, it seems. What about the other staff? Like in the cafeteria or the gym? It's a big school, there must be a lot of people working here.

Engel: Oh, yeah, Chef Anna and Tom are super nice. They always sneak us extra cookies if we're having a bad day, especially if they see someone crying. They're the best.

Kofia: Good to know where to go for a secret cookie, then. We might need one after cleaning up some of these messes. What about the gym teachers? I bet they're pretty tough.

Engel: Coach Roberts and Ms. Davis are really loud, and they make you run a lot, but they're fair. They just want us to be strong and healthy. They're not... mean. Not like the others. They don't have that look in their eyes.

Anya: So it really is just a few specific teachers who are... the problem?

Engel: *(Nodding, his expression growing serious again).* Yes. It's Miss Circle, and Miss Bloomie, and the language teacher. They're the ones you have to be careful around. The others... they're just teachers. They're nice.

Kofia: Anything else?

Engel: There's Mister Jack! He's okay. A little grumpy, especially if you get fingerprints on the monitors, but he's really smart. He helps you if you get stuck. He just doesn't like it when you play games during his lesson.

Anya: And the history assistant? I think we saw him earlier. An older gentleman?

Engel: Mister Hotchpot. He's super old and tells the best stories about the past, even if they're a little scary sometimes. He helps Miss Emily out a lot.

Kofia: It sounds like you've got a lot of good people looking out for you here, Engel.

Engel: I guess so. It just... doesn't always feel that way. Not since... not since my friends disappeared.

Anya: We understand. And we're going to do everything we can to make this place feel safe again. For you, and for all the other students.

Kofia: That's our job, after all. We're the cleanup crew. And this school has a big mess that needs cleaning up.

Engel: You... you really think you can?

Anya: We're very good at our jobs, Engel.

Kofia: The best. Now, what about the music assistant? You mentioned a Miss Harmony?

Engel: Oh, yeah. Miss Harmony helps Mr. Demi in music class. She's really nice too, and she plays the piano so beautifully. She's always smiling.

Anya: It sounds like the music room is a good place to be.

Engel: It's the best place. It always feels... safe in there.

Kofia: That's important. To have a safe place.

Anya: You've been incredibly helpful, Engel. You have no idea how much this clarifies things for us. It helps us know who to watch out for, and who we might be able to trust.

Kofia: You're a good kid, Engel. A very brave one for talking to us. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Engel: *(A small, shy smile).* Thanks. I... I feel a little better now.

Anya: We're glad. Now, how about that free time? You've earned it.

Kofia: Go on, get out of here. And try to have some fun, okay? We'll take care of the messes.

Engel: I will. And... and you guys be careful, okay? Especially around them.

Anya: We will be, Engel. Always.

Kofia: *(His voice remained gentle, almost an afterthought, as if not to break the fragile calm they had built).* Oh and, Hey, Engel, those two boys from earlier... the ones who came in here and were giving you a hard time. What were their names again? We're new here, so we don't know everyone yet, especially the troublemakers.

Engel: *(He hesitated for a moment, a faint frown creasing his brow as the memory of the bullying returned. His cheerfulness dimmed slightly, a shadow passing over his paper eyes).* Oh. That was Oliver and Edward. They're... they're usually mean. Always trying to get into trouble or make other kids feel bad.

Anya: *(Her voice was calm, reassuring, not pressing too hard).* They seemed a bit... angry. Are they always like that? It's not right for them to treat you, or anyone, that way.

Engel: *(He shrugged, his like shoulders slumping a little).* Pretty much. Especially **Edward**. He's always looking for a fight. Oliver's sometimes okay, but usually he just follows whatever Edward does. And they're not the only ones. There's a girl, Zip, she hangs out with them too. She's got these little dragon wings, and she thinks she's so tough.

(The agents' minds raced, their internal databases cross-referencing the new names. Oliver. Edward. Zip. The bully trio from the initial reports. This was a direct, firsthand confirmation of their identities.)

Kofia: So there are three of them, then? Oliver, Edward, and Zip?

Engel: Yeah. They're the main ones. They're always messing with people, especially the younger kids.

Anya: And you said they mess with Miss Circle sometimes? That seems... unwise.

Engel: They do it when they think she's not looking. They're not scared of anyone. Or, they act like they're not. But Oliver... he's the real leader. Even though he acts like he's just following Edward, he's the one who comes up with all the really bad ideas.

Kofia: What do you mean, "bad ideas"?

Engel: He's the one who told Jenna and Liam about the "secret door." He's the one who's always talking about... *her*.

Anya: *(Her gaze sharpening, her voice remaining perfectly calm).* Her? Who's "her," Engel?

Engel: *(His voice dropping to a whisper, a flicker of genuine terror in his eyes).* I'm not supposed to say her name. It's bad luck. It's... Alice.

(The name dropped into the quiet bathroom like a stone. Anya and Kofia's expressions didn't change, but internally, a thousand alarms went off. "Alice." The name from the ghost stories. The name Jenna's mother had mentioned. The name from the drawings on the second floor. It wasn't just a legend. It was real. And Engel knew her name.)

Kofia: *(Keeping his voice perfectly even)* That's... a pretty name. You said Oliver is obsessed with her?

Engel: Yes. He... He and Alice have been together for a long time... They were still together... Even they were separated.

(Another bombshell. Anya and Kofia exchanged a microscopic, almost imperceptible glance. This was a critical piece of intel, a direct link between a student and the primary anomalous entity.)

Anya: His girlfriend? That's... an interesting thing to say about a ghost story. Does anyone else see her?

Engel: Sometimes. It's rare, but sometimes... she walks the halls. Not like the other teachers. She just... appears. And everyone gets really quiet.

Kofia: What do the other students and teachers do when she's around?

Engel: Most of the students get really scared and try to hide. The nice teachers, like Miss Emily and Mr. Demi, they just look really sad and concerned, and try to get us into our classrooms. But some of the other students... they're not scared at all. They just watch her, like they're waiting for something. It's really weird.

Anya: And you've seen Oliver with her? Walking together?

Engel: Once or twice. They don't talk. He just walks a little behind her. It's... it's scary when she's out. It feels like she's the real boss of the school, you know? Like not even the principal can tell her what to do.

Kofia: It sounds like she's a very powerful and intimidating person.

Engel: She is. And... you can't tell anyone about her. Not anyone outside the school.

Anya: *(Leaning in slightly, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper)* Why not, Engel? What happens if you do?

Engel: *(He starts trembling, looking around the empty bathroom as if the walls were listening, whispering them)* I... I heard some older kids talking. About fifteen days ago, before... before Claire. They were talking about one of the first students who disappeared, Sofia. They said she knew too much, and she was going to tell someone.

Kofia: And what happened?

Engel: They said... they said Alice *heard* her thinking about it. And that if you even *think* about telling the outside world what she is, she can... teleport to you... and make you stop. For good. Especially the staff. That's why the nice teachers are so scared. They know, but they can't say anything

Anya: That... sounds terrifying, Engel. It makes sense why everyone is so afraid to talk. Thank you for being brave enough to tell us.

Kofia: You did a very brave thing. And now that we know, we can be extra careful. We won't tell anyone that you told us. It will be our secret.

Engel: Promise?

Anya: We promise. *(Her voice, though still kind, held a note of gentle finality).* Well, Engel, it looks like our break is almost over. Time for us to get back to our cleaning rounds.

Kofia: *(He nodded, a friendly smile on his face).* And you, kiddo, probably have some more awesome lessons waiting for you. Or maybe more free time. Don't want you to be late.

Engel: *(His face fell slightly, the return to routine a stark contrast to their comfortable chat).* Oh. Already? But... it was nice talking to you guys. Really nice.

Anya: *(She offered a warm, reassuring smile).* It was nice talking to you too, Engel. You're a good kid. And don't worry, we're the new janitors, so you'll definitely see us around. Probably after classes, or sometime soon, I guess.

Kofia: *(He reached into a hidden pocket of his jumpsuit, pulling out a small, unassuming necklace on a simple chain. The pendant was distinctive: a black circle and a white circle, perfectly separate but linked by the chain. He gently placed it in Engel's hand).* Here, kid. Something to remember us by. It's... a little something.

(Engel's eyes widened as he looked at the necklace. He traced the smooth, cool surfaces of the two separate circles with his finger.)

Engel: *(His voice was full of wonder).* Wow! It's... it's really cool! Thank you!

Kofia: *(He chuckled, his voice soft).* It's special. We call it a 'Myth-Weaver'. It's been handed down, from... well, from folks like us who believe in keeping things balanced. See how it's got the black circle and the white circle? They're separate, but they're always connected. It means even when things are dark, there's always light, and vice versa. It helps remind you that you're never truly alone.

(Unbeknownst to Engel, the 'Myth-Weaver' was a minor anomalous object, a piece of Foundation tech designed for deep-cover operatives. Its primary function was one of remembrance; if the wearer of one half were to perish, their soul, their very essence, would be captured and stored within the pendant, a perfect, incorruptible memory. This captured soul could then be combined with the soul of the partner holding the other half, a final, tragic union that ensured the fallen would never truly be forgotten.)

Anya: *(She chimed in, her voice gentle).* And the cool part? It glows a little at night. Not super bright, just a soft shimmer. Like a little nightlight.

Kofia: That's right. And it's got two parts. You can keep this one. The other part... well, your partner has it. Or you can keep both, if you like. It's yours now. It's supposed to bring a bit of... well, balance. And comfort, when things feel a bit much.

Engel: You mean... like Claire?

Kofia: *(His expression softening)* Yeah, kid. Like Claire. You keep her half, and you hold onto this one. It'll keep you connected.

Anya: It's a way of keeping her with you. Always.

Engel: *(His eyes, still tear-rimmed from earlier, widened with awe. He clutched the necklace tightly in his hand.)* It's... it's beautiful. And it glows? Thank you, Kofia. Thank you, Anya. This is the best gift anyone has ever given me.

(Without another word, Engel reached out and gave Kofia a spontaneous, tight hug. Kofia, momentarily surprised, returned the embrace, a soft chuckle escaping him. Anya watched, a rare warmth spreading through her chest. The teenager, like boy, so recently engulfed in grief, now held a tangible token of their unexpected kindness and a piece of Foundation lore, unknowingly entrusted to him.)

Kofia: *(Pulling back, a gentle pat on Engel's shoulder).* You keep that safe, alright? And you know where to find us if you ever need to talk. We'll be around.

Anya: *(Her smile softened further).* We'll see you around, Engel.

(Engel, clutching the necklace, gave a final, grateful nod before turning and heading out of the bathroom, leaving Anya and Kofia alone once more. The door swung shut behind him, and the sounds of the school hallway returned.)

(Engel, clutching the necklace, gave a final, grateful nod before turning and heading out of the bathroom, leaving Anya and Kofia alone once more. The door swung shut behind him, and the mundane sounds of the school hallway returned, a stark contrast to the heavy silence that now filled the small, tiled room. The agents stood for a moment, the emotional weight of the encounter settling upon them. They had not only confirmed the name of their primary target but had also established a crucial, if unwitting, asset within the school's walls.)

A Wave and a New Path

(The bathroom door clicked shut behind Engel, leaving Anya and Kofia in the sudden quiet. The lighthearted atmosphere, briefly cultivated to comfort the grieving boy, dissipated, replaced by the ever-present hum of their mission. Anya exchanged a look with Kofia, a silent acknowledgment of the wealth of new, disturbing information they'd just acquired from their small, like informant.)

(They pushed their cleaning cart out of the bathroom, the squeak of its wheels seeming loud in the now-empty corridor. Just as they emerged, they saw Engel a little way down the hallway, turning towards a classroom. He glanced back, his paper face still holding a hint of his earlier smile. He offered a small, grateful wave, a silent thank you that was both heartwarming and heartbreaking. Anya and Kofia, maintaining their cover, subtly raised their hands in a reciprocal wave, their expressions professional and unassuming.)

(Once Engel was out of sight, their expressions hardened. The innocent boy, the alarming teachers, the blue door, and now the Myth-Weaver necklace. The picture of Maple High was becoming chillingly clear, and with every new piece, the puzzle grew more dangerous. The time for passive observation was rapidly coming to an end.)

The bathroom door clicked shut behind Engel, leaving Anya and Kofia in the sudden quiet. The lighthearted atmosphere, briefly cultivated, dissipated, replaced by the ever-present hum of their mission. Anya exchanged a look with Kofia, a silent acknowledgment of the wealth of new, disturbing information they'd just acquired from their small, like informant. They pushed their cleaning cart out of the bathroom and resumed their rounds, the weight of their discovery settling heavily upon them.

Engel's Secret

(Engel slipped into his classroom, the familiar hum of lessons resuming around him. He moved to his desk, sliding into his chair, but his mind wasn't on numbers or lessons. His hand instinctively went to his pocket, fingers closing around the cool, smooth pendant Kofia had given him. He pulled out the necklace, letting the black and white circles rest in his palm. They felt solid, comforting.)

(He looked down at the twin circles, the black separate from the white, yet linked by the delicate chain. Kofia's words echoed in his mind: "...even when things are dark, there's always light, and vice versa. It helps remind you that you're never truly alone." He remembered Anya's gentle voice, "...it glows a little at night. Like a little nightlight.")

(A quiet warmth spread through Engel's chest. No one had ever been that kind to him before, not like this. Not really listened, or cared when he was sad, or stood up for him against Oliver and Edward. The other teachers were nice, yes, like Miss Sasha and Miss Emily, and Principal Grace was fair. He knew they cared, he could see it in the sad, worried looks they gave him when they thought he wasn't looking. They tried their best to stop the bad things with kind words or by quickly moving the students away from trouble, but they never truly confronted the source. It was like they were just as scared and powerless as the students, trapped in the same terrifying routine.)

(He thought of his friends, like Bubbles. She tried to help. She was always trying to cheer him up, to make him laugh. But she was scared too. They all were. They were just kids. What could they do? The janitors, Anya and Kofia, they were different. They weren't scared. They had stood up to Oliver and Edward without even flinching. They had listened to him, really listened, and they had believed him.)

(He looked at the necklace again, seeing not just the circles, but the kindness and the strength they represented. He had a secret now, a special gift from his new, strange, and incredibly brave friends, a reminder that even in the confusing, sometimes scary world of Maple High, he wasn't completely alone anymore.)

(Engel carefully tucked the necklace back into his pocket, a small, genuine smile playing on his lips. He'd keep it safe. His own special balance charm, just for him.)

(After Engel departed, a heavy silence settled between the two agents in the quiet of the school bathroom. The weight of the boy's innocent testimony was immense, a cascade of horrifying confirmations and new, terrifying variables. Kofia slowly picked up his mop, his movements mechanical, his mind racing. Anya stood perfectly still, her gaze distant, processing the raw data with cold, efficient precision. Finally, after a long moment, they pushed their cart back out into the hallway, their janitorial facade a thin, fragile shield over the sudden, intense urgency of their mission.)

Analyzing the Intel

(Anya and Kofia continued pushing their cleaning cart and the overflowing trash bin through the quiet hallways. They were still about halfway to the maintenance storage at the back of campus. The rumble of the wheels and the distant murmur of classes were the only sounds, but their minds were buzzing with the fresh intel from Engel. The encounter with the bullies and Engel's innocent descriptions had painted a far more intricate and disturbing picture of Maple High.)

Anya: *(Her voice was low, contemplative, as she ran through the new data, her words meant only for Kofia).* So, Miss Circle, the math teacher, has the compass. And she's "really strict about numbers," with consequences if you get them wrong. Engel seemed genuinely scared of that. And she likes Oreos, a trivial but grounding detail.

Kofia: *(He nodded, his brow furrowed in thought as he recalled the blue door).* Then there's **Miss Bloomie**, the science teacher, with a razor blade on her arm. Quiet, but "knows how things work." And the language teacher, Miss Thavel, who gets "furious" if you fail. Three confirmed hostile faculty members, their names and primary anomalous traits now confirmed by a direct witness.

Anya: And the "special lessons." "Understanding shapes. Really, really deep shapes. And listening. Very carefully." That sounds like some form of anomalous induction or cognitive conditioning. It fits the pattern of reality alteration we suspected from the last disappearances.

Kofia: The faculty is clearly split, too. Miss Sasha, Miss Emily, Mr. Demi, Mister Hotchpot, Mister Jack, Miss Harmony, and the cafeteria and gym staff... they're all perceived as normal, caring, well-liked. Then you have Circle, Bloomie, and Thavel, with their dangerous accessories and unsettling teaching methods. It's almost like two distinct factions operating in the same space.

Anya: Or two distinct states of being. Remember the blurred images from the briefing? The way they looked like? What if the "normal" teachers are... unaffected? And the others, like Circle and Bloomie, are part of the anomaly's direct influence or are anomalies themselves? It would explain why Engel perceives them so innocently, yet their actions are clearly hostile.

Kofia: *(He whistled softly).* That's a chilling thought. And then there's Oliver and Edward and Zip. Bullying Engel, but also "messing with Miss Circle." Are they just foolish kids, or are they somehow involved with, or even attempting to interact with, the anomaly? Especially Oliver.

Anya: Engel confirmed he's the one who told the first victims about the "secret door." And now we have a name for the entity behind it. Alice.

Kofia: And according to Engel, Oliver claims Alice is his *girlfriend*. That's... a level of complication I was not expecting. It moves him from a simple instigator to a primary person of interest, possibly a collaborator or a cultist.

Anya: It's the final piece of intel that's the most alarming, though. The part about her telepathic abilities.

Kofia: *(His expression hardened, the memory of Engel's trembling form vivid in his mind).* Yeah. If you witness what she is and even *think* about telling the outside world, she can "teleport then kidnapped victims and make you stop." For good.

Anya: That explains everything. The staff's fear, their silence. They're not just complicit; they're prisoners. They know what's happening, but they can't report it without risking their own lives. It's a perfect, self-enforcing containment breach.

Kofia: And it means we're in even more danger than we thought. Our very thoughts could be a liability here. We need to report this to Command. Now.

Anya: Agreed. This is a critical threat update. The entire operational plan needs to be reassessed with this new information in mind.

Kofia: Let's find a secure location. The next janitor's closet we come across. We need a direct, encrypted line.

Anya: We're not just dealing with physical threats anymore, Kofia. We're dealing with a psychic one.

Kofia: I know. And I've got a very bad feeling that she's already listening.

(They found a slightly secluded alcove along the hallway, shielded from casual view by a janitor's supply cabinet. Anya discreetly activated her comms unit, keeping her voice low while Kofia maintained a casual stance beside the cart, seemingly deep in thought about his mopping technique. The weight of their new knowledge was a palpable, chilling presence between them.)

(The encounter with the bullies and Engel's innocent descriptions had painted a far more intricate and disturbing picture of Maple High. The agents now had a clearer understanding of the school's social dynamics and the true nature of the threats within its walls. They found a slightly secluded alcove along the hallway, shielded from casual view by a janitor's supply cabinet. Anya discreetly activated her comms unit, keeping her voice low while Kofia maintained a casual stance beside the cart, seemingly deep in thought about his mopping technique. The weight of their new knowledge was a palpable, chilling presence between them.)

Report to Command

Anya: Command, this is Agent Anya. We have a full intelligence update. It's critical.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(The handler's voice was immediate, crisp).* Go ahead, Agent Anya. We've been monitoring your comms and have the raw audio. Give us your synthesis.

Anya: We have confirmed initial assessments. The blue door is the primary anomalous locus. It displays severe claw marks, a black and red glow, and crude warning signage. Drawings of a figure labeled 'Alice' surround it. We've deployed a tracker as authorized.

Kofia: During our sweep, we also identified two faculty members displaying anomalous characteristics, confirmed by a student witness. Miss Circle, the math teacher, has a compass-like object permanently affixed to her arm. The student described her as strict, with unsettling consequences for errors, and mentioned 'special lessons' involving 'deep shapes' and 'careful listening.' This aligns with suspected anomalous induction.

Anya: The second is Miss Bloomie, the science teacher. The student described her as having a razor blade attached to her arm. He also alluded to her 'chasing' a student, which aligns with the previous incident's pattern.

Kofia: Other faculty, including Miss Sasha (art/kindergarten), Miss Emily (history), Mr. Demi (music), and Principal Grace, appear to be non-anomalous, or at least perceived as normal by students.

Anya: We also had a direct interaction with a student, Engel, who was being bullied by Oliver and Edward. Engel confirmed their names. He noted their disruptive behavior and mentioned them "messing with Miss Circle." This relationship warrants further investigation for potential complicity or exposure.

Kofia: We've provided comfort to Engel and established rapport, which led to this intelligence. We also deployed a non-Foundation tracking necklace on him as a goodwill gesture and potential future tracking point, without compromising cover.

Anya: Requesting immediate analysis of this new data, Command. We believe the anomaly, Alice, is likely contained behind the blue door, and is operating through, or has affected, specific faculty members like Miss Circle and Miss Bloomie to facilitate the disappearances via these "special lessons."

Commander Echo (Comms): *(A brief, almost imperceptible pause on the line, then the handler's voice, now with a new urgency).* Understood, Agents. This is significant and highly disturbing. Your intel is invaluable. Analysis is underway. Maintain your current cover.

Intelligence Analyst Chen (Comms): We're cross-referencing the names with our databases now. The connection between the bully, Oliver, and the entity, Alice, is a major breakthrough.

Security Chief Hector (Comms): Be advised, the risk assessment for this operation has just been elevated. All standby teams are now on high alert.

Commander Echo (Comms): Do not approach the blue door again until instructed. We are accelerating MTF deployment based on this.

Anya: Copy that, Command. We'll continue our sweep of the first floor and await further orders.

Kofia: Just one more thing, Command. The student, Engel... he's a good kid. And he's in the middle of all of this. We need to consider him a high-priority asset for extraction.

Commander Echo (Comms): Noted, Kofia. His safety is a primary concern. Now, continue your sweep. And stay sharp.

(Anya and Kofia remained in the secluded alcove, the large trash bin a silent sentinel beside them. The comms channel went silent, the weight of their report hanging in the air. They had given Command a treasure trove of horrifying intel: confirmed names for the anomalous teachers, a name for the primary entity, and a direct link between her and the student bully. The order from Command was clear: maintain cover and continue the sweep. The MTF raid was on hold, but the clock was ticking.)

Anya: *(Her voice a low, steady murmur)* Okay. They have the intel. The raid is on standby. Now we just have to keep up the act until we can find a weakness. We need to look like we're just doing our job.

Kofia: *(Nodding, his expression grim)* Right. And our job right now involves taking out the trash. Let's get moving. The longer we stay in one place, the more suspicious we look. And frankly, I want to put as much distance as possible between us and that blue door.

Anya: Agreed. We need to finish our rounds and continue the sweep. Let's not give anyone a reason to question our presence.

(With a shared, determined nod, Anya and Kofia pushed their cleaning cart and the now overflowing trash bin out of the alcove, resuming their slow, methodical journey towards the rear of the school. The weight of their discoveries was a palpable, chilling presence between them.)

To the Maintenance Room

Kofia: *(He grunted softly, the wheels of the heavy bin groaning in protest).* This thing weighs a ton. All this mundane work gives you a lot of time to think, though. Too much time, maybe. My mind keeps replaying that conversation with Engel.

Anya: *(Her gaze was fixed ahead, calculating their approach to the maintenance room).* Keep your thoughts focused, Kofia. Engel's intel was a game-changer. The telepathic kill-switch... that's a nightmare scenario for any breach team. It changes the entire risk assessment.

Kofia: I know, I know. It's just... it's one thing to read about these threats in a file. It's another to hear it from a terrified kid who just lost all his friends. It makes it... real. And the way he talked about the teachers...

Anya: It was always real. We just have a better understanding of the rules now. And the players. Miss Circle, Miss Bloomie, and the language teacher we still haven't seen... and Oliver.

Kofia: That kid... Engel said he claims Alice is his girlfriend. What kind of a person does that? Makes a monster his girlfriend? It's a level of psychosis I can't even begin to wrap my head around. Is he a victim too? Or is he a willing collaborator?

Anya: A very lonely one, maybe? Or a very broken one. Or maybe he's just as much of a predator as she is. We don't have enough data to make that call yet. His file in Grace's office didn't give us much on his psychology.

Kofia: And the other teachers? The "nice" ones? Engel said they know something is wrong, but they're too scared to act because of Alice's... enforcement. It's a perfect prison. She's created a system where the inmates are also the guards, and the only rule is silence.

Anya: It explains why this has gone on for so long without a single leak to the outside world. Anyone who even thinks about talking becomes another victim.

Kofia: Makes you wonder what would happen if we just... walked out of here and told the world. Would she be able to reach us? How far does her influence extend?

Anya: Let's not test that theory. Our comms are encrypted, but a direct telepathic link is a whole other level of security breach. We have to assume she can hear everything that isn't locked down tight.

Kofia: Right. So we just keep mopping. And taking out the trash. Speaking of which, this bin smells like a D-Class containment cell after Taco Tuesday. I think one of the bags is leaking.

Anya: *(A very faint, almost imperceptible smile)* Just try to breathe through your mouth. It's a useful skill in our line of work. You should have mastered it by now.

Kofia: I'll add it to my resume. "Expert in anomalous waste disposal and tactical mouth-breathing." I'm sure the Director will be impressed.

Anya: I'm sure she will be. Now, let's get this done. The maintenance room should be just up ahead. The sooner we dispose of this, the sooner we can get back to our actual mission.

(They finally reached the door labeled "Maintenance," a simple, metal door at the end of a long, quiet corridor. It was unlocked. Kofia pushed it open, revealing a large, cluttered room.)

The air was thick with the smell of oil, dust, and old machinery. A large, roll-up garage door, currently closed, dominated the far wall. In the corner, a smaller, reinforced door led to a fenced-off yard outside, where several large, green dumpsters were visible through a grimy window.)

Kofia: *(He stopped the cart by the main dumpster inside the room).* Alright, Anya, I'll handle this part. You keep an eye on things. Standard procedure. Watch the doors, make sure no one is observing us.

Anya: *(She nodded, her eyes already scanning the area, her posture relaxed but alert).* Copy that. I'll keep watch. Don't take too long. This room gives me the creeps.

(Kofia began the cumbersome task of hauling the heavy bags from their bin into the larger dumpster, the rustle and thud of refuse filling the air. Anya, meanwhile, didn't just 'guard.' Her gaze drifted to a set of four identical, smaller trash containers lined up against the back wall of the room, tucked away from the main trash area. They were standard industrial bins, but something about their isolation, their neat alignment, piqued her curiosity. A prickle of unease ran down her spine.)

Anya: *(Her voice low, on their private comms)* Kofia, I've got something weird over here. Four smaller bins, separated from the main trash. They're lined up too perfectly.

Kofia: *(Still heaving a bag, his voice slightly strained)* Weird how? Are they giving off a signal? My cart's sensors aren't picking up anything from over here.

Anya: Negative on the energy readings. It's just... their placement. It's too deliberate. Too organized for a school's back room. It feels less like trash collection and more like... storage. I'm going to check it out.

Kofia: Be careful. This whole place feels like a trap waiting to be sprung.

(With a growing sense of dread, Anya approached the first of the four containers. She hesitated for only a second, then, taking a deep breath, she unlatched the lid and pushed it open. Her eyes darted inside, and her breath hitched. Her heart dropped.)

(Inside, lay the dismembered, mangled remains of a like body. It wasn't crumpled; the limbs were cleanly severed, the torso split open, revealing a horrifying, yet intricate, mess of like organs and viscera dripping with blood everywhere, saliva-like substance. The distinct nature of the form was unmistakable. This was not normal refuse. This was one of the missing.)

(Her hand trembled slightly, but she forced herself to move to the next container. She lifted the lid of the second bin. Another like body lay within, equally disfigured, its form torn and

violated. The same horrifying, flat appearance. She moved to the third. Another. Her stomach churned, the scent of oil and dust in the room replaced by the metallic tang of horror.)

(She walked to the fourth and final container, her fingers cold as they gripped the lid. She forced it open. It was empty. A void, a silence that felt just as chilling as the bodies themselves.)

(Anya slowly closed the lid on the fourth, empty bin, her mind reeling. The three missing students. Three bodies. Accounted for, in the most gruesome way imaginable. This wasn't just a simple disappearance; it was a methodical, brutal butchering. Her comms remained silent. Kofia was still busy with the trash, his back to her, oblivious to the horror she had just uncovered. She had to tell him. She had to tell Command. The grim reality of their mission had just become infinitely more tangible, and infinitely more horrifying.)

A Grisly Discovery

(Anya stared at the closed bins, her breath catching in her throat, her mind replaying the horrific, visceral images. The like forms weren't just folded or misshapen; they were violently dismembered, their flat limbs torn and separated from their torsos, which were split open to reveal a horrifying, yet intricate, mess of organs and blood and guts, saliva and blood stained everything. These were the missing children.)

Anya: *(Her voice cut through the air, low but insistent, sharp enough to cut through the noise of Kofia's work).* Kofia! Stop! Now!

Kofia: *(Mid-heave with a trash bag, he froze instantly at the command in her tone. He turned, seeing the pale shock on Anya's face, the grim intensity in her eyes as she stood over the smaller bins.)* Anya? What is it? Did you find something? You look like you've seen a ghost.

Anya: *(She waved him over, her gaze still fixed on the bins, her voice a tight whisper).* Get over here. And lock the main door to the hallway. Now. We have a major, critical problem.

(Kofia quickly moved to the maintenance room door, sliding the heavy bolt lock into place, his eyes darting towards Anya with growing concern. Once the door was secured, he strode over, his body tensing as he saw the contents of the bins.)

Kofia: *(He peered inside, his own jaw clenching. The realization hit him like a physical blow. His voice was a low, pained growl).* Oh, God. The missing kids. They're... they're here. They've been... butchered.

Anya: *(Her voice was a tight whisper, thick with a controlled fury).* Yes. And they're not just 'missing.' They've been... *(She struggled for the word)*...processed. Dismembered. Their organs are exposed. This wasn't an accident. This was a deliberate, violent act.

Kofia: Three of them... The news said three students went missing just ten days ago. Do you think... could this be them?

Anya: The timeline fits. It's too much of a coincidence for it not to be. Three missing students, three bodies. This is where they ended up.

Kofia: *(His gaze darkens as a more horrifying thought occurs to him).* And what about the other five? The ones from three months ago? Is this what happened to them, too? Have they been doing this all along, just... disposing of the evidence in the trash like common garbage?

Anya: It's possible. This could be their standard operating procedure. A horrifyingly mundane way to get rid of their victims. We need to secure these remains. We need to get them to a lab for analysis.

(Working in grim silence, their initial shock replaced by a professional, steely resolve, Anya and Kofia carefully and respectfully began to transfer the dismembered like remains from the small bins into fresh, clean bags they quickly retrieved from their cart. Each movement was precise, gentle, despite the horrific nature of the task. They were two highly trained agents, but the sight of the children, so brutally violated, was a stark reminder of the true evil they faced.)

Kofia: *(His voice was rough with suppressed emotion as he gently lifted a severed limb).* Command, this is Agent Kofia. We have a critical, grim update. You're not going to like this.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(The handler's voice was immediate, a sharp intake of breath on the other end).* Go ahead, Kofia. We detected a spike in your biometric readings. Report.

Anya: *(Her voice was tight, conveying the raw horror of the discovery).* Command, we've located three bodies. The remains were found in discrete trash containers in the maintenance room. They have been violently dismembered, their torsos split open, their internal like organs exposed. This confirms lethal intent and a horrifying method of disposal.

(A tense silence filled the comms channel. In Command Post 1, the personnel exchanged looks of shock and dawning horror.)

Intelligence Analyst Chen (Comms): Three bodies... Commander, that matches the number of students reported missing ten days ago. It has to be them.

Commander Echo (Comms): It's a strong possibility. We have the names from the public reports: Abbie, Lana, and Claire. But without a direct visual comparison or DNA, we can't confirm who is who. Kofia, Anya, do the remains have any identifiable features?

Kofia: Negative, Command. The... the damage is too extensive. They're just... pieces. We can't tell who is who.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): Then what about the other five? The original victims from three months ago? If this is their disposal method, there should be more remains. Where are they?

Anya: We've searched the immediate area, Lead. There are only four bins inside this room. Three with remains, one empty. There is no sign of the other five victims in here.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): So we have three confirmed KIA, and five still completely unaccounted for. This is... a new level of grim.

Commander Echo (Comms): Understood, Agents. Intel gathering is now paramount. We are sending an extraction team to the secondary mobile recovery medical post near the parking lot at the entrance of the school. They will await your signal for the remains so we can conduct immediate autopsies.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): Do not, under any circumstances, allow the bodies to be discovered by school staff or civilians. Proceed with extreme caution. We will keep the MTFs on standby for tomorrow's raid. The search for the other five victims is now a secondary objective.

Anya: Copy that, Command. We will secure the remains and continue our investigation. We will find the names of these children.

Kofia: You can count on us, Command. We won't let them be forgotten.

(With the grim task completed, and the bodies carefully secured in the clean bags, Anya and Kofia looked at each other. The playful banter with Engel felt like a distant dream. The school, once a curious anomaly, was now a horrifying crime scene, and they were the only ones who knew the full extent of its terrors.)

Anya: *(Taking a deep, steadying breath, her voice low)*. Okay. The retrieval team is on its way. But we can't just stand here and wait.

Kofia: What are you thinking?

Anya: The other five. If this is where they dispose of the bodies, there have to be more dumpsters.

Kofia: *(His eyes flickered to the small, reinforced door that led to the fenced-off yard outside).* The ones in the maintenance yard.

Anya: Exactly. We have to check them. Before the retrieval team gets here. We need to know if we're looking at three bodies, or eight.

Kofia: It's a risk. We'd be exposed, even for a few minutes.

Anya: It's a bigger risk not to know the full scale of the body count. Let's move. We'll be quick.

(Kofia gave a grim, determined nod. Together, they moved towards the door to the maintenance yard, ready to confront the possibility of an even greater horror waiting for them just outside.)

(With the grim task of bagging the remains completed, Anya and Kofia stood in the silent, dust-filled maintenance room. The three body bags lay on the floor, a stark and horrifying testament to the school's true nature. The air was thick with the smell of old machinery and death. Kofia stared at the small, reinforced door leading to the fenced-off yard outside, his jaw tight with a grim resolve.)

The Fruitless Search

Kofia: *(His voice a low, hard rumble)* Anya. The yard. There are more dumpsters out there.

Anya: *(Nodding, her gaze fixed on the body bags)* I know. If this is their disposal method... then the other five might be out there. We have to check. We have to know the full extent of this.

Kofia: It's a risk. We'd be exposed, even for a few minutes. Anyone looking out a back window...

Anya: It's a bigger risk not to know the full scale of the body count. We can't go into this operation half-blind. We need to know if we're looking at three bodies, or eight.

Kofia: You're right. Let's make it fast. Ten minutes, in and out. Then we call in the retrieval team for... for these three.

Anya: Agreed. I'll take the bins on the left, you take the right. Be quick. Be quiet.

(Kofia unbolted the heavy door, and they slipped out into the small, fenced-in maintenance yard. The late afternoon sun cast long, distorted shadows, and the air, though fresh, felt heavy with dread. They moved with a silent, synchronized purpose to the large, green dumpsters that lined the far fence, their movements a grim ballet of investigation.)

Kofia: *(Lifting the heavy lid of the first dumpster, the metal groaning in protest. He peered inside, his flashlight beam cutting through the gloom. A long, heavy sigh escaped him.)* Nothing. Just... old textbooks and what looks like a mountain of failed art projects. It's just normal trash.

Anya: *(Her own voice echoing from the next dumpster over)* Same here. Discarded gym equipment, broken chairs... nothing of a biological nature. It's all mundane.

Kofia: It doesn't make sense. If they disposed of these three here, why wouldn't they dispose of the others in the same way? Why the inconsistency? It's sloppy for a creature that's been this careful.

Anya: Unless... unless something was different about the first five. Something that required a different... method of disposal.

(For ten minutes, they continued their grim, fruitless search, opening every container, shifting through the mundane refuse of a school, their hope of finding answers slowly turning to a cold, creeping dread. Finally, they met back in the center of the yard, the setting sun casting their paper forms in a deep, orange light.)

Kofia: Nothing. Not a trace. The other five aren't here. There are no other bins, no disturbed ground. They're just... gone.

Anya: I know. Let's get back inside. We need to think about this.

(They slipped back into the maintenance room, the heavy door clicking shut behind them, sealing them once again in the quiet, dusty tomb. Kofia leaned against a workbench, running a hand over his face, while Anya began to pace, her mind a whirlwind of possibilities.)

Kofia: So, what are we thinking? Three bodies here, but the other five just... vanished into thin air? It doesn't track. Anomalies, especially predatory ones, usually have a consistent M.O.

Anya: *(She stopped pacing, her eyes widening as a new, horrifying theory began to form, connecting Engel's terrified words to the empty bins outside).* Kofia... what did Engel tell us? The final, most important piece of intel he gave us in the bathroom. About Sofia.

Kofia: *(His brow furrowed in thought, then his own eyes widened in dawning horror).* Alice. Her... her ability. He said he heard a rumor that if you knew too much, if you were going to tell someone... she would *catch* you.

Anya: Exactly. He said the older kids were talking about Sofia, one of the first five victims. They said she "knew too much" and was going to tell someone. What did her case file say? The one that The Damn Feds Agents stole?

Kofia: She disappeared from the library. Surrounded by people, but no one saw a thing. No witnesses, no struggle, no body. The report said she just... "evaporated."

Anya: What if that's what happened to all of them? The first five? What if they weren't killed by the teachers for failing their classes? What if they learned too much? What if they saw Alice, or understood what she was, and she knew they were a threat to her secrecy?

Kofia: And she... teleports to them, kills them, and makes the body vanish. A different kind of disposal. Not physical, but... metaphysical. She didn't leave a body to be found because there was no body left. Poof. Gone.

Anya: It would explain everything. The lack of remains for the first five. The different M.O. The reason the police found nothing. It also explains why these three *were* disposed of physically. They were killed by the teachers, for failing. A different crime, a different perpetrator, a different method.

Kofia: So we're not just dealing with a school full of killers. We're dealing with a school full of killers, and a single, silent, psychic executioner who cleans up her own loose ends by completely erasing them.

Anya: It's a new, terrifying variable. And we have to report it to Command. Now. They're preparing for a raid based on incomplete intelligence.

Kofia: Agreed. They need to know what we're really up against. This changes the entire risk assessment for the MTF teams.

Anya: *(Activating her comms unit, her voice low but steady).* Command, this is Agent Anya. We have a critical update to our previous report. And a new, unconfirmed, but highly plausible theory regarding the first five victims.

Commander Echo (Comms): Go ahead, Anya. We're listening.

Anya: Command, we have searched the entire maintenance area, both interior and exterior. We have found no remains of the original five missing students. However,

based on the testimony of our student asset, Engel, regarding the primary entity's rumored abilities...

Kofia: We believe it is highly probable that the first five victims were not physically killed and disposed of in the same manner as the three we have recovered. We believe they were... erased. Terminated and dematerialized by Alice's anomalous abilities as a form of information containment.

(The comms channel went silent, but the weight of Anya and Kofia's new theory hung in the air, a chilling, invisible presence that connected every command post. In Command Post 1, the faces of the personnel were grim, their minds grappling with the horrifying new possibility. Commander Echo stood before the main holographic display, his thin form rigid, his gaze fixed on the schematic of the school as if he could will it to give up its secrets.)

A Paradigm Shift

Commander Echo (Comms): *(A long, heavy silence on the other end of the line, then the handler's voice, now laced with a new, profound gravity).* Understood, Agents. Stand by. We are re-evaluating all mission parameters based on this new, horrifying possibility.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(His voice barely a whisper, his eyes wide as he stared at his console).* Erased... Commander, if that's true, if she can just... teleport, kill, and make the evidence vanish... what does that mean for our containment protocols? How do you contain something that can bypass any physical barrier?

Security Chief Hector: *(His hand instinctively tightening around the grip of his sidearm).* It means our standard non-lethal options might be useless against her. How do you cuff a ghost? How do you tase a memory? You can't. You have to stop it at the source, and we don't even know what the source looks like.

Logistics Officer Baker: It also explains the lack of evidence from the first five disappearances. The police weren't just incompetent; they were looking for something that literally wasn't there. No bodies, no clothes, no DNA... nothing. Because she left nothing behind to be found. It's the perfect crime.

Director Ash (Comms): *(Her voice cutting through the comms, sharp and analytical).* This is Director Ash. This aligns with a Class-5 Mobile, Predatory, and Reality-Altering entity. The ability to selectively dematerialize biological matter after termination is a significant and dangerous trait.

Task Force Leader David (Comms): David, MTF Command. My teams are equipped for physical confrontation, not for fighting a teleporting assassin who can unmake matter.

We need Lambda-5 in the lead on this. Their reality-bending suppression technology is our only chance to pin her down, if she can even be pinned down.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Petrova. I agree. Lambda-5 will take point on the initial breach to establish a stable reality zone. Nu-7 will provide heavy fire support, but their primary role is now to create a perimeter and deal with the physical threats—the teachers.

Commander Echo: So we're splitting our forces. Lambda-5 for Alice, Nu-7 for the faculty. It's a sound plan, but it thins our resources on the ground. We need to be surgical and precise.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And what about the students? If Alice can teleport anywhere in the school to eliminate a threat, what's stopping her from doing the same to the entire student body the second we breach the doors? She could perceive the entire school population as witnesses.

Security Chief Hector: That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? We'd be walking into a hostage situation where the hostage-taker can make the hostages literally vanish with a thought.

Logistics Officer Baker: This is a nightmare. A complete and utter tactical nightmare. How do you negotiate with something like that?

Anya (Comms): *(Her voice cutting through the rising tension, calm and focused).*
Commander, Agent Anya. We have a potential theory. It's a long shot, but it's based on Engel's testimony.

Commander Echo: Go ahead, Anya. We're listening.

Anya: The rumor he overheard... it was specific. Alice targets those who know too much and are *going to tell*. It sounds like a reactive, defensive measure. Not random aggression.

Kofia (Comms): What if it's not a blanket ability? What if it has a trigger? The rumor was about Sofia, one of the first five, who was supposedly going to talk. What if that's the key? What if she has to perceive a direct threat to her secrecy before she acts?

Director Ash (Comms): A fascinating theory. So she's not a god-like entity, but a highly specialized hunter with a specific trigger. This is a crucial distinction. It gives us a potential avenue for approach.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): It's a long shot, but it's the only one we've got. If we can conduct the operation without any of the students knowing our true purpose, if they believe it's just a drill or a gas leak... we might be able to extract them before she perceives them as a threat.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): I agree. This has to be a stealth operation. The "fire drill" evacuation plan is our best bet. We move the students under a pretense of normalcy, and they never know the true danger they were in. They never become a threat for Alice to neutralize.

Task Force Leader David (Comms): It's a massive risk. One leak, one scared kid who understands what's really happening, and Alice could be triggered to... sterilize the entire school.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): It's a risk we have to take. It's the only way to get the children out alive with this new intel. We proceed with the utmost care.

Commander Echo: You heard them, Agents. The plan is back on. Stealth is our only option. Now, get back to your sweep. We need more intel. And we need to find that language teacher. Your work is not done.

Kofia: We're on it. Let's start with the first-floor faculty offices. The language teacher has to have a desk somewhere.

Anya: Agreed. Let's move. We have a lot of ground to... *(She suddenly stopped, her paper form going rigid. Her eyes widened, a look of dawning horror on her face. She had been so focused on the new telepathic threat, on Alice, that a critical, gruesome detail had been completely pushed from her mind.)* Oh, God. Kofia.

Kofia: *(Turning to her, his brow furrowed with concern)* Anya? What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost.

Anya: *(Her voice was a horrified whisper)* The bodies.

Kofia: *(His own eyes widened in a mirror image of her shock as the realization hit him like a physical blow)* The maintenance room. The three students. In the bins. We... we just left them there.

Anya: We were so focused on reporting the blue door, then Engel, then the bullies... In the chaos, we never called it in. They're still just... lying there. On the floor, in those bags.

Kofia: *(Running a hand over his face, a wave of self-recrimination washing over him)* How could we forget? We're trained for this. We're better than this. Three dead kids, and we just... forgot. It's unacceptable.

Anya: We have to report this. Now. This is a massive oversight. We need to correct it immediately.

(Anya immediately activated her comms, her voice now tight with a mixture of urgency and professional shame.)

Anya: Command, this is Agent Anya. We have a... a critical oversight to report. I apologize for the delay. This is a failure on our part.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(His voice was sharp, immediately sensing the gravity of her tone).* Report, Agent. What did you miss?

Anya: The three bodies, Commander. The ones we found in the maintenance room. In the chaos of the subsequent encounters and the new intel, we... we failed to report their recovery.

Kofia: They are still in the maintenance room, secured in evidence bags on the floor. We never initiated an extraction protocol for them.

(A profound, stunned silence fell over the entire comms network. The news landed like a lead weight in every command post. The personnel, who had just been processing the complex, esoteric nature of a telepathic anomaly, were suddenly reminded of the three, very real, very dead children they had left behind.)

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): *(Her voice was cold, laced with a barely concealed fury)* You're telling me you located three confirmed casualties, and you failed to report it? For over an hour?

Anya: There's no excuse, Lead. We were... distracted by the escalating threats. It was a severe error in judgment.

Director Ash (Comms): *(Her voice was sharp, cutting through the recriminations)* What's done is done. The immediate question is, what is their condition? The file mentioned... dismemberment. Are the remains viable for BRS protocol?

Kofia: *(His voice grim)* The damage is extensive, Director. But they're... intact, in a sense. All the pieces are there. We believe Bio-Revival is a possibility, yes.

Task Force Leader David (Comms): Then that is our new, immediate priority. We are not leaving three children in a series of body bags in a closet. Dr. Lee, what's the status of the Medical Command Post?

Dr. Lee (Medical Command Post) (Comms): Dr. Lee here. The Medical CP is currently stationed at Site-77i, approximately 25 kilometers from your location. We can be prepped and ready for BRS initiation upon receipt of the subjects.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): That's too far. We can't transport unsecured anomalous remains that distance. We need a forward retrieval team. Baker, what are our assets in the area?

Logistics Officer Baker (Comms): We have a specialized, unmarked retrieval van stationed 20 kilometers out. It's equipped with three portable Bio-Revival Stasis bags. They can stabilize the remains for transport.

Commander Echo (Comms): Then that's the plan. Dispatch the retrieval team to the parking lot 500 meters from the school's rear entrance. Dr. Lee, you will prep the Medical Command Post for their arrival.

Dr. Lee (Medical Command Post) (Comms): Understood, Commander. We'll be ready.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): Anya, Kofia. Your new mission is to secure the maintenance room and prepare for a covert extraction. You need to get those three body bags from inside the school to the retrieval van without being detected by any students or staff.

Anya: The school is still in session, Lead. The hallways are active. Extracting three body bags without being seen will be... extremely difficult.

Kofia: And the maintenance room has that roll-up garage door. It leads directly outside, but it's old and probably loud. Opening it will draw a lot of attention.

Commander Echo (Comms): Then you will find a way to do it quietly. The retrieval team will be on site in approximately 30 minutes. Use that time to formulate an extraction plan. We need a solution, agents. Not problems.

Lead Agent (Intelligence Division) (Comms): A diversion is too risky. It could trigger a panic, or alert our hostiles. No, this needs to be done with surgical precision. Anya, Kofia, you are our hands on the ground. Find a way.

Anya: Understood. We'll assess the situation and formulate a plan.

Kofia: We'll get it done. We won't fail them again.

(The comms channel fell silent, leaving Anya and Kofia alone with their new, incredibly difficult task. They had to smuggle the bodies of three dead children out of a school full of witnesses, under the noses of multiple, highly dangerous anomalous entities. The weight of their earlier mistake, and the gravity of their new mission, settled upon them with a crushing finality.)

(Days had passed since the initial, frantic investigation in South Maple County. For the original four Iota-10 field agents, it had been a period of forced, agonizing standby. After escorting Scarlet and Dorothy to their bookshop sanctuary, they had been recalled to Site-77i, debriefed on their preliminary findings, and then ordered to wait. They were cut off from the live operational feed, a standard procedure to prevent emotional compromise, leaving them to pace and wonder about the fate of their two undercover colleagues. The weight of the unknown was a heavy burden.)

Meanwhile, at Site-77i

(In a designated recreational area within the sprawling, subterranean complex of Site-77i, Agents Sterling, Cross, Bell, and Shaw were engaged in a listless game of pool. The air was sterile, the lighting a constant, flat white. The only sounds were the quiet hum of the site's life support and the sharp, clean crack of the cue ball striking its target. Each of them held a bottle of standard-issue, low-alcohol beer, a small, sanctioned comfort in a world of constant tension.)

Agent Cross: *(Leaning on her pool cue, watching Shaw line up a difficult shot)* You know, for a secret underground city dedicated to containing reality-bending horrors, you'd think they'd have a better brand of beer. This tastes like... static. And regret. It's the kind of beverage that makes you question your life choices, and I already do that enough on a daily basis.

Agent Shaw: *(Without looking up from the table, his focus absolute)* It's designed to be forgettable, Cross. Just like us. If you can't remember what you were drinking, you can't accidentally mention it to a civilian during an amnestics debrief. It's just good operational security. Think of it as a tool, not a refreshment.

Agent Bell: *(Taking a slow sip from her own bottle)* He's got a point. I once had a D-Class try to describe the flavor of a brand of soda from a parallel universe. The memetic hazard alone put three researchers in quarantine for a week. I'll take bland and safe any day over a soda that makes you believe you're a 17th-century French poet.

Agent Sterling: *(Sinking a solid, his movements precise and economical)* It's not the beer that's bothering me. It's the silence. We've been on ice for days. No updates, no new orders, nothing. We dropped Claire's siblings off, filed our report, and then... radio

silence. I don't like it. It feels like we're waiting for a storm to hit, and we're not even allowed to look at the weather report.

Agent Cross: Me neither. Anya and Kofia went into that school completely blind, based on our preliminary intel. We should be their tactical support, not... playing pool and debating the philosophical implications of bad beer.

Agent Shaw: That's not our call, Cross. The Lead Agent wanted a clean separation. She didn't want our personal involvement with the families, especially the anomalous ones, to cloud our judgment, or theirs.

Agent Bell: Still, it feels wrong. We were the ones who talked to the parents. We were the ones who saw the fear in their eyes. We have a stake in this. To be benched like this... it feels like a punishment for getting too close.

Agent Sterling: It's not a punishment, but that doesn't make the waiting any easier. Every time I close my eyes, I just see those missing posters. Eight kids, just... gone. And we're down here, shooting pool.

Agent Cross: *(Her shot goes wide, the cue ball rattling uselessly in the pocket)* Damn it. See? I can't even focus. My mind is still running a thousand different threat assessments. What if their comms fail? What if they've already been compromised, and we're just sitting here, waiting for a rescue mission that's already failed?

Agent Shaw: They're the best we have at this kind of deep-cover work, Cross. If anyone can handle it, it's them. We have to trust in their training. And in the Lead Agent's judgment.

Agent Bell: He's right. We have to trust the process. It's the only thing that keeps us sane in this line of work.

Agent Sterling: I do. It's the anomaly I don't trust. A school that eats children... it's a new level of nightmare, even for us. And we still have no idea what's really going on in there, beyond a collection of ghost stories and parental fears.

Agent Cross: We just have to wait for the call. Whenever it comes. I just hope it's not a call telling us we're too late.

Agent Bell: And try not to go crazy in the meantime. We're no good to them if we're all wound up.

Agent Shaw: Another game? Or are we going to stare at the walls for a few more hours and contemplate the futility of our existence?

Agent Sterling: Rack 'em. It's better than staring at the walls.

(Just as Sterling was about to break, a soft chime echoed through the room, and the speakers on the wall crackled to life. The calm, severe, and unmistakably familiar voice of their Lead Agent filled the space, a sudden, sharp intrusion of their mission into their forced downtime.)

Lead Agent (Comms): *(Her voice was quiet, but it carried the weight of the last few days).* I thought I might find you here. I trust you're all well-rested.

Agent Sterling: *(Placing his cue stick on the table, his body immediately snapping to a more attentive posture)* Lead. It's good to hear your voice. We were just...

Lead Agent (Comms): I know what you were doing. You were waiting. And you were worrying. I don't blame you. But your wait is over.

Agent Cross: Ma'am, what's the situation? Are Anya and Kofia... are they okay? We've been in the dark for days.

Lead Agent (Comms): They're okay. But they're still inside. And the situation has escalated beyond our worst-case projections. It's a complete paradigm shift.

Agent Bell: We're ready to move, Lead. Just give us the word. We've been on standby for too long. We're packed and ready to go.

Lead Agent (Comms): I know you are. That's why I'm calling. It's time for you to be read back in. We need your perspective on this. The situation has become... complicated.

Agent Shaw: What happened? What did they find in there?

Lead Agent (Comms): It's... a lot. They made contact with a student, a boy named Engel. He gave them names. Miss Circle, the math teacher. Miss Bloomie, the science teacher. He confirmed they were the source of the students' fear.

Agent Sterling: So our initial assessment was correct. The teachers are the hostiles. We knew it.

Lead Agent (Comms): It's more complicated than that. Engel also gave them a name for the entity in the ghost stories. Alice. And he told them that another student, the bully Oliver, claims to be her boyfriend.

Agent Cross: A student collaborator. That's a dangerous complication. It means the anomaly has allies among the student body. This is bad. This is very bad.

Lead Agent (Comms): It gets worse. Engel claims that if you know what Alice is, and you try to tell the outside world, she will come for you. She will teleport to your location, kill you, and make your body vanish. That's how she keeps her secret.

Agent Bell: So she's mobile. And a teleporter who can dematerialize evidence. My God. That explains the perfect information containment. It's not just fear; it's a direct, lethal threat.

Lead Agent (Comms): And that's not all. Anya and Kofia found the bodies of the three missing students from ten days ago. They were... dismembered. And disposed of in the school's maintenance room.

Agent Shaw: So they're not just disappearing. They're being butchered. This is a whole new level of brutality. We're dealing with a slaughterhouse.

Agent Sterling: *(His voice dropping, the weight of the new information settling on him)* So... Claire... she's...

Lead Agent (Comms): Confirmed KIA. All three of them.

Agent Cross: *(A sharp, pained intake of breath)* Oh, God. Her siblings... Scarlet and Dorothy. We left them in that bookshop. We promised them we'd find their sister. We looked them in the eye and promised.

Agent Bell: How are we going to tell them? What do we even say? "Sorry, your little sister was murdered and thrown in a dumpster"? They trusted us. They came to us for help.

Agent Shaw: And we can't just use amnestics. Command has been rationing Class-A's for months at this site. We don't have enough for a situation this... personal.

Agent Sterling: And we don't even know if amnestics would work on them. They're not baseline human. It could have no effect, or worse, a paradoxical one that makes the trauma worse. We have a duty of care to them, as anomalous assets if nothing else. We can't just wipe their minds and walk away.

Agent Bell: So what about the first five, then? The ones from three months ago? Their bodies weren't in the maintenance room.

Lead Agent (Comms): That's the running theory now. We believe Alice's teleportation and dematerialization ability is how she disposed of them. They knew too much. They were a threat to her secrecy. She didn't just kill them; she erased them.

Agent Cross: So... we're looking for ghosts. For five people who don't even exist anymore. That's... a new kind of cold case.

Lead Agent (Comms): That is why your mission has been... adjusted. The primary assault will be handled by a specialized MTF unit equipped for reality-benders. You four will be going in *after* the initial breach and containment.

Agent Shaw: So... we're the cleanup crew?

Lead Agent (Comms): You're the forensics team. The ones who will piece together what really happened in that school after the dust settles. You know the players. You know the emotional landscape. You're the best shot we have at understanding the "why." You will investigate the school, find any trace evidence of the first five, and build a complete psychological and anomalous profile of the entire event.

Agent Sterling: It's more than that. It's about ensuring this never happens again.

Lead Agent (Comms): I know you will. Now, get some real rest. Because when the call comes... it's going to be a long, long day.

(The comms channel went silent, leaving the four agents in a stunned, heavy silence. The simple game of pool was forgotten. The weight of the new, horrifying reality of Maple High, and their new, critical role in its aftermath, had just come crashing down upon them.)

(The comms channel went silent, leaving the four agents in a stunned, heavy silence. The simple game of pool was forgotten, the half-empty beer bottles sitting on the edge of the table, completely ignored. The weight of the new, horrifying reality of Maple High had just come crashing down upon them, and they knew that the next time they left this room, it would be to go to war.)

Agent Cross: *(She let out a long, slow breath, her knuckles white where she gripped her pool cue)* So... that's it, then. A teleporter who erases her victims, a kid who can draw things into existence, and at least two confirmed anomalous killers, all in a school full of kids. And our new job is to go in after the main event and... what? Tidy up?

Agent Sterling: *(He slowly, deliberately, began to rack the pool balls, the soft clicks a stark contrast to the grim silence)* It's not tidying up, Cross. It's a post-conflict investigation. It's about understanding the "why." The breach teams will handle the "what." Our job is to make sure this never, ever happens again, anywhere.

Agent Bell: The Lead Agent's right. We have a unique perspective. We've spoken to the families. We've seen the raw grief. We understand the human cost in a way the breach teams, focused on tactical engagement, won't.

Agent Shaw: *(His gaze was distant, his mind already running a thousand tactical simulations)* It's a different kind of pressure. We're not just going in to fight a monster. We're going in to understand it. To dissect its motivations, its origins, its weaknesses. That's a different kind of battlefield entirely.

Agent Cross: So we're... the cleanup crew. The ones who have to sift through the wreckage and write the report that no one will ever read.

Agent Sterling: It's more than that. It's about ensuring this never happens again. We need to find out what happened to the first five missing students. Their bodies weren't in the maintenance room. If Alice really can... erase people... then we need to find proof. We need to understand that process.

Agent Bell: And we have to think about Scarlet and Dorothy. We left them in that bookshop, with a promise. A promise that we would find their sister. And now we know she's... she's been confirmed KIA.

Agent Shaw: How do we even begin to approach that conversation? "Sorry, your little sister was murdered and dismembered, and we have the body parts in a freezer back at base"?

Agent Cross: And we can't just use amnestics. Command has been rationing Class-A's for months at this site. We don't have enough for a situation this... personal.

Agent Bell: And we don't even know if amnestics would work on them. They're not baseline human. It could have no effect, or worse, a paradoxical one that makes the trauma worse.

Agent Sterling: We have a duty of care to them, as anomalous assets if nothing else. We can't just wipe their minds and walk away. That's not who we are.

Agent Shaw: So we have to tell them the truth. The brutal, horrifying truth.

Agent Cross: That's going to be a fun conversation. I'll volunteer to be the one to break the news. I owe them that much.

Agent Bell: We all do. We'll be there with you.

Agent Sterling: We'll do it together. After the mission. For now, we need to prepare. We need to go over every piece of intel we have. We need to memorize every name, every detail. We need to build a psychological profile of every single player in this twisted game.

Agent Cross: And we need to get some real rest. Because something tells me we're not going to be getting much sleep for a very, very long time.

Agent Bell: Agreed. Let's head to the archives. I want to read every file we have on reality-benders and ontological threats.

Agent Shaw: I'll start running simulations based on the new intel. See if I can predict their behavior patterns.

Agent Sterling: Good. Let's get to work.

(The four agents, their brief, listless downtime now a distant memory, moved with a renewed, grim purpose. The game of pool was abandoned, the half-empty beers forgotten. They were no longer just waiting; they were preparing, sharpening their minds for the dark, complex, and horrifying task that lay ahead. The battle for Maple High was coming, and they would be ready for the aftermath.)

(Anya slowly closed the lid on the fourth, empty bin, her mind reeling. The three missing students. Three bodies. Accounted for, in the most gruesome way imaginable. This wasn't just reality alteration; it was a methodical, brutal butchering. Her comms remained silent. Kofia was still busy with the trash, his back to her, oblivious to the horror she had just uncovered. She had to tell him. She had to tell Command. The grim reality of their mission had just become infinitely more tangible, and infinitely more horrifying.)

The Weight of the Fallen

(The interior of the maintenance room was a tomb of dusty silence, broken only by the distant, muffled hum of the school's air conditioning and the frantic beating of their own hearts. Kofia stood guard by the main door, his back to the room, listening intently for any sound from the hallway. Anya, meanwhile, had knelt beside the three body bags. With the cold precision of a field medic, she was performing a preliminary forensic analysis, her gloved fingers gently sorting through the dismembered parts, trying to piece together the last, terrifying moments of the children's lives. She picked up a severed arm, examining the clean, sharp cut, then carefully placed an eye back into its socket on a detached face, her expression a mask of grim concentration.)

Kofia: *(His voice was a low, rough murmur, not turning from his post at the door)* Are you getting anything from that? Anything that makes sense of... this? It's a goddamn slaughterhouse in here, Anya. Just tell me you're getting something useful, anything to make this feel less... pointless.

Anya: *(Her eyes were fixed on her work, her voice a flat, clinical monotone that did little to hide the tremor of emotion beneath it)* The viscera... the internal organs are exposed.