

09:47 - The Sacrifice

(Kofia continues to stand his ground, his sidearm steady, his voice a calm, unwavering force against Alice's chilling amusement. Anya remains beside him, a silent, deadly shadow, while Mister Hotchpot whimpers quietly behind them.)

Kofia: There's no need for this to get any uglier, Alice. You've made your point. You're in charge. We get it.

Anya: Let them go. This can end right now, with no more bloodshed.

Kofia: We're just the janitors, remember? We're not a threat to you.

(Alice's serene, smiling mask finally begins to crack. A flicker of genuine impatience, of pure, seething anger, flashes in her eyes. The melodic hum that surrounds her deepens into a low, dissonant growl.)

Alice: You are boring me.

Alice: This... chit chats... it is over.

Alice: You talk of rules and warnings, but you stand in my hallway, in my business, and you think you have any power here?! I should kill you both right now. Slowly. I will peel you apart, piece by piece, and see what stories are written on the inside. I will make you scream of agony for my amusement. You are nothing but idiots. And I am tired of your noise.

Anya: *(Her voice remains steady, a cold, hard counterpoint to Alice's rising rage)* We are not here to fight you, Alice. We are here to protect the children.

Kofia: Just let the kid go. Let the teacher go. They're both hurt. You've already won.

Mister Hotchpot: *(A terrified, whimpering sound from behind them)* Oh, please... please, just listen to them...

Anya: Let them go, and we will leav-

Alice: ENOUGH!

Alice: I am going to kill you all. And I am going to enjoy it.

(Alice's form begins to ripple and contort, the barbed, obsidian tendrils on her back whipping through the air with a hungry, vicious energy. She raises her clawed hands, ready to strike. Anya and Kofia brace themselves, their weapons ready, stepping back slowly.)

Kofia: Get ready!

(On the floor, the monstrous, wounded Miss Thavel looks from the advancing Alice to the crying, terrified boy beside her. A look of profound, heartbreaking resolve settles on her face.)

Miss Thavel: *(Her voice is a low, pained growl, full of a regret that is almost human)* Engel... I am so sorry.

(Before anyone can react, Thavel lets out a final, deafening roar of pure, defiant rage and lunges forward, a blur of fur and antlers, charging directly at the surprised Alice.)

Anya: *(Her eyes go wide with shock)* Thavel, no!

Kofia: What is she doing?! She's attacking her!

Mister Hotchpot: Good Lord, she's trying to save us!

Anya: Don't! You can't win!

(Before Anya's warning can even register, Thavel closes the distance with a speed that defies her large, monstrous form. She is no longer a teacher; she is a force of pure, protective fury. She crashes into Alice with the force of a battering ram, her gnarled antlers aiming for the anomaly's chest. Alice lets out a high-pitched, furious shriek of surprise and pain as the antlers scrape against her hardened, obsidian-like skin, sending a shower of dark sparks into the air. Thavel doesn't relent; she bites, claws, and stabs with a desperate, animalistic ferocity, her only goal to keep the greater monster's attention away from the wounded boy on the floor. Alice, for her part, is impossibly fast, her form rippling and contorting to avoid the worst of the blows, her own tendrils whipping through the air, but Thavel is too close, too ferocious, for her to get a clean shot.)

Kofia: What the hell is happening?! They're fighting!

Anya: She's... she's trying to protect him! She's actually fighting Alice!

Mister Hotchpot: Good Lord... that poor woman... she's going to be killed!

Kofia: What do we do?! We can't get a clean shot! They're too close!

Engel: *(He pushes himself up on his elbows, his face a mask of pure, horrified disbelief as he watches the teacher who was just hunting him now fighting for his life)* NO! Miss Thavel, stop! She'll kill you! Run!

*(Thavel's desperate, self-sacrificial charge is a blur of motion. She collides with Alice, a furious storm of claws and antlers, but it is a fight against an inevitability. Alice's obsidian tendrils, moving with a speed that defies physics, snap out and wrap around Thavel's limbs, hoisting her effortlessly into the air. Just as Alice is about to deliver a final, killing blow, Thavel, in a last act of defiance, uses her monstrous strength to drive her own sharp claw deep into Alice's single, unblinking eye. Alice lets out a high-pitched, piercing shriek of pure, unadulterated agony and rage. The tendrils holding Thavel tighten, and with a surge of immense, violent velocity, Alice slams the teacher's broken form into the hard linoleum floor with a sickening **CRUNCH** that creates a crater in the tiles.)*

Anya: NO!

Kofia: THAVEL!

Mister Hotchpot: Good God...

(The sight breaks something deep inside Engel. The image of Thavel's battered, broken form hitting the ground, the sound of her bones shattering... it overlaps in his mind with another, more horrible memory. Claire. Her terrified face. The same tendrils. The same tearing sound. The trauma is immense, a tidal wave that washes away everything else. His eyes widen, his pupils dilating until they are just two black, bottomless pools of horror. The tears that well up are not just of fear, but of a grief so profound it steals the air from his lungs.)

(Thavel's ruined form skids across the floor, coming to a stop just at Engel's feet. She is a broken, twisted thing, her monstrous form now just a shell of pain. She can't move, her bones shattered, her open wound in her side now a grievous, dark mess. She is completely paralyzed, her only sign of life a low, pained groan.)

(Engel's silent tears begin to fall. He starts to cry, a quiet, heartbroken whimper at first, which quickly escalates into a raw, gut-wrenching, and utterly hopeless wail of pure, traumatized grief. Ignoring the blinding pain in his own impaled leg, he crawls to her, his hands hovering over her broken form.)

Engel: *(sobbing)* Miss Thavel? Thavel, wake up...

Miss Thavel: *(a soft, barely audible groan of pain)* Ugh...

Engel: No... no, please... please don't be dead...

(He begins to cry loudly, his small hands trying to cover the terrible wound in her side, a helpless, desperate gesture to try and fix the unfixable. He ignores the agony in his own leg, his entire world now focused on the teacher who had just sacrificed herself for him.)

Engel: *(wailing)* It's my fault! This is all my fault! Please... please wake up! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!

Meanwhile, at the Command Posts...

(The live feed from Kofia's bodycam plays out in every command center, in every briefing tent, on every monitor. The sight of Thavel's self-sacrifice, and the subsequent, brutal takedown, is met with a single, unified, and absolutely profound shocked silence. For a full five seconds, no one breathes. No one speaks. They just watch.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is a soft, horrified whisper from Briefing Tent 1)* No... oh, no, no, no...

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): She... she actually did it. She saved him.

Commander Echo (Comms): My God... that's brutal...

Agent Thorne (Comms): She's down. All units, Thavel is down, be Advised Over

Lead Agent Rosie Weber (Comms): She sacrificed herself for the boy.

Dr. Lee (Comms): That impact... there's no way she survived that.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): We just watched a hostile entity give its life to protect a friendly asset, over.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): Director, What's your move?!

Supervisor Vance (Comms): Engel... look at the boy, He's broken.

Security Chief Hector (Comms): He's trying to help her. Even now.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva (Comms): This is... this is a tragedy.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): *(Her voice, which had been a mask of cold, professional calm, suddenly shatters, replaced by a raw, furious roar that blasts through every earpiece)*

THATS ENOUGH!

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Vanguard, get those damn doors open! NOW! All gunners, you have your target! I want a wall of suppressive fire on Alice's position the second those doors are breached! I want her to feel the wrath of this entire Operation! MOVE!

(Director Anya Petrova's furious, uncharacteristically ballistic roar blasts through every comms channel, a shocking, galvanizing command that silences all debate. For a moment, the entire MTF force is stunned by the raw, protective fury in their director's voice. Then, their training kicks in, and the entire camp explodes into a single, unified purpose.)

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): *(A grim, satisfied smirk on his face)* ALL UNITS! I want those doors off their hinges!

Commander Echo (Comms): Acknowledged! Vanguard, you have the green light! Execute the mechanical breach!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Copy that, command! Alpha team, Get it done, NOW!

MTF Humvee Driver (Comms): Roger! Engines are hot! We are pulling!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): All gunners! The second you have a line of sight through that doorway, you open fire! I want a wall of lead!

Iota-10 Gunner (Comms): Marshal gunner is ready!

Gamma-7 Gunner (Comms): Vanguard gunner is ready!

Commander Echo (Comms): All teams, move! Move! Move!

(The hallway is a tableau of frozen, horrified silence. Alice stands at one end, a single, deep gash across her eye weeping a dark, viscous fluid. At the other, Anya and Kofia hold their ground, their weapons steady, Mister Hotchpot a trembling statue behind them. And in the middle, Engel sobs over the broken, unmoving form of Miss Thavel.)

(Meanwhile, on the forested hill 4 kilometers away, the reality of Director Petrova's command sent a ripple through the small observation post. While the main MTF force began its thunderous advance, Soren and Amira were glued to their own chaotic feeds. Amira stared intently at his geospatial monitor, his knuckles white as he gripped the console, furious at the slow refresh rate of the satellite data. He could see the tactical icons for Thavel and Engel blinking red, but the lag left him feeling helpless.)

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(He talks to himself, his voice a low, frustrated growl)* Come on, you piece of junk... Refresh! Give me a clear picture... *(He lets out a deep, pained sigh,*

running a hand over his face) God, that kid... Engel... just hold on, kid... please, just hold on. We're watching. We just need... we just need a damn opening... Come on...

(A few feet away, Soren Jaeger stands at their primary comms unit, his back to Amira. After listening intently, he makes a decision and keys the encrypted channel to MTF Headquarters.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: *(His voice is calm and formal, but laced with an undeniable urgency) ...I understand the protocols for engagement are negative, Nexus, but I'm watching a live feed of the asset breaking down over a friendly casualty, and the primary hostile is closing on his position. I am formally requesting authorization to ready the SNTW-20EX. Its precision is our only chance. I can create a surgical, non-lethal kinetic distraction—impact the wall twenty meters to the hostile's left flank. It will be loud, it will be disorienting, and it will draw its attention away from the child. This will give Iota-10 the three-second window they need to move in and extract him. Sir!, we are seconds away from watching another child die on our monitors. That boy's life is on the line, and we have a viable solution on this hill right now. I am begging you, authorize the shot. Give me the green light!. *(His panic heart and panthing)**

(The line is filled with a long burst of static, a tense, agonizing silence stretching between the request and the reply.)

Nexus (Comms): Stand by, Overwatch.

(More static. Soren waits, his heart racing. He turns, looking past the humming equipment and the dense trees, his gaze fixed on the distant school. He can see the military scenery now, the armored vehicles of the main convoy forming a hard perimeter at the front of the campus. Thirteen seconds pass like an eternity.)

Nexus (Comms): Overwatch-7A, be advised. Authorization is granted, with extreme prejudice. That weapon is experimental and its power is... significant. We trust you know what you are doing. You will need your partner to assist as a spotter. Your directive is clear: your shot is a distraction *only*. Do not, under any circumstances, allow the asset to come to harm. Your target is Alice, and Alice alone. Do not mess this up, Jaeger. Good luck.

(A slight pause hangs in the air before Soren responds, his voice a mask of pure professionalism.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: Copy, Nexus. I'll take care of it.

(He deactivates the comms link and walks over to Amira, who looks up from his own screen, his face a question. Soren gives a single, sharp nod.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: It's authorized. It's time for hell.

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(A grim, determined look spreads across his face)* Then let's get it done. For the kid.

(While Amira moves to their position at the edge of the hill, preparing the rangefinder and a set of specialized high-power binoculars, Soren rushes to a large, heavy-duty Pelican crate nearby. He throws the latches open and pulls out a thick layer of protective foam, revealing the matte black, modular components of the SNTW-20EX. He begins to remove the weapon part by part—the barrel, the chassis, the heavy bolt group, and the complex SPEC-IO Mk.IV optic—and carefully assembles it with practiced, urgent precision.)

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(His voice shouts from the ridge, sharp and clear over the wind)* Jaeger, you gonna take all day with that thing? Clock's ticking!

(Soren ignores him, his focus absolute. He finishes the main assembly and firmly snaps a hot-swap power pack into the rifle's stock, initiating the system with a low hum. As Soren works, Amira is already on the ground, having laid out a small shooting mat. He sets up the rangefinder and binoculars on a small bipod and places a pair of ear-protection headsets on the mat. Soren finally finishes his build, grabbing a long, heavy magazine. He carefully pushes four massive 20mm rounds into it, the shells clicking into place. He slams the magazine into the rifle, pulls the charging handle back, and powers on the main optic.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: *(Shouting back to Amira)* Ready to rock!

Overwatch Amira Dai: Get over here then, hotshot. Your throne awaits. Let's see if this experimental piece of junk is as good as the file says it is.

(Soren carries the heavy rifle over and settles onto the mat beside Amira. They both put on their headsets, the sounds of the forest suddenly muted. Soren shoulders the weapon and initiates the SPEC-IO Mk.IV optics system, the internal HUD flickering to life.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: Okay... SPEC-IO is live. Jesus. You can feel the power just... humming. The adaptive recoil system is reading... a lot. You sure I can handle this thing?

Overwatch Amira Dai: You're the best shot we've got. You can handle it. Just breathe. I'm right here with you.

Overwatch Amira Dai: Alright, set the optic to IR mode. Let's cut through the bullshit and see what's really going on in there.

(Amira brings the rangefinder to his eye as Soren taps a control on the side of the scope. The view inside the optic shifts from a high-definition image to the stark, ghostly shapes of

thermal imaging. He pans the rifle across the front of the school, the powerful optic cutting through the exterior walls, revealing the heat signatures within. He stops, his breath catching in his throat.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: Holy shit... Amira, I've got them. Main entrance, double wooden doors. The thermal's punching right through. I have three signatures. One is massive, burning hot, and... frenetic. That's gotta be Alice. Another is on the floor, cooling fast... that's Thavel, she's down. And a small one, right beside her... trembling. That's the kid. That's Engel.

Overwatch Amira Dai: Can you get a clean shot at the hostile? Surgical, like you said.

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: It's big enough. The stability ring is green. Yeah... I can get this.

(At the campus, Alice brings a delicate, clawed hand to her wounded eye. She touches the gash, looks at the dark fluid on her fingertips, and then... she begins to laugh. A low, cold, and genuinely amused chuckle. As she laughs, the wound on her face shimmers and knits itself closed, the skin smoothing over until it is as perfect and unblemished as it was before. She is completely healed.)

Alice: Oh, that was almost... surprising. You see that? This pathetic deer actually had some fight in her. It's a shame it was so pointless. All that rage, all that sacrifice... and for what? To buy this weeping little morsel another thirty seconds of a miserable, pointless life?!?! You are both so fragile. So easy to break. She thought she could protect you, Engel. She thought her anger could be a shield. But look at her now. Just another broken pathetic deer on my floor. She failed you, just like she failed every other student in this school. And now, you... you just cry. That's all you ever do. You cried when your little girlfriend Claire was torn apart, and you're crying now. It's the only thing you're good at. You are a professional victim, and I am so, so tired of your noise. I think... I think I'll take my time with you. I'll peel you apart, piece by piece, and we'll see if we can find anything inside you other than tears.

Anya: *(Her voice is a low, grim whisper into her comms)* Regeneration confirmed. She can heal from significant physical trauma almost instantly.

Kofia: So shooting her is basically just going to make her mad. Great. That's a fantastic new development.

Mister Hotchpot: *(His voice is a choked, horrified gasp)* She... healed herself?. I... I've never seen her do that before.

Anya: Conventional weapons are likely ineffective.

Kofia: So what's the plan now?

(Engel's heartbroken sobs suddenly stop. He slowly, shakily pushes himself up, ignoring the blinding pain in his own leg. He looks at the broken form of the teacher who tried to save him, then he looks at the perfect, smiling, monstrous girl at the end of the hallway. And something inside him, something that has been broken and terrified for so long, finally... snaps.)

Engel: Leave me alone. This is his fault. All of it. Oliver... he did this. He loves all this chaos... he brings people to you just to watch you break them. You think you're strong because you can hurt people? You're just... empty. A lonely thing in a dark room. You took Claire... you took Miss Thavel... because he led them right to your door. But you can't have us. We're a team. And we're not scared of you anymore. You'll always be alone in here. Always.

(Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot stare, absolutely stunned into silence by the teenager, broken boy's sudden, powerful defiance. They remain in their positions, their weapons still aimed at Alice, silent witnesses to the impossible, courageous stand.)

(Alice stares at the small, defiant boy, her gentle, smiling mask faltering for the first time. The air in the hallway grows cold, and a low, dangerous hum emanates from her transformed body. For a moment, she looks genuinely surprised. Then, she throws her head back and laughs, a sound that is no longer melodic, but a sharp, grating, and utterly mirthless shriek.)

(At the hill)

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(His eye is pressed to the high-power rangefinder, his voice now a calm, all-business monotone that cuts through the tension)* Okay. Range confirmed, three-four-eight-two meters. Wind is a half-value from your one o'clock, call it four miles per hour. I'm seeing a slight mirage running left to right about midway downrange.

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: *(His hands move with practiced precision, the heavy clicks of the SPEC-IO Mk.IV's turrets audible over the headset)* Copy. Factoring for mirage.

Overwatch Amira Dai: Ballistics are calculated. Dial elevation up thirty-eight-point-three Mils. For windage, factoring spin drift and Coriolis... dial right two-point-one Mils.

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: *(He makes the final adjustment, his breathing evening out)* Thirty-eight-three up, two-one right. Dope is on. I'm on target. Ready to send it.

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(His eye is now glued to his spotting scope, his focus absolute)* The hostile is stationary. The asset is clear of the backstop. You are clear to fire on my mark... Hold...

(Back at campus)

Alice: alone for me? You... are alone... for *me*?. Oh, you poor, broken little thing. You think this is a conversation. You think your feelings matter here. They don't. This is the end of the line for you, Engel. It is time for you to join your little friend, Claire. I'm sure she's been waiting for you, in all her little, torn-up pieces. It will be a touching reunion, and I will be the one to arrange it. You talk of being a team, of not being alone. But in my domain, in my school, everyone is alone in the end. I am the only constant, the only rule, and the only one who decides when the story is over. And your sad little story... has reached its final, pathetic page. UUUUGH, im... STARVING, I'M GOING TO EAT YOU NOW!!!

Kofia: NO!

Anya: DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM!

Mister Hotchpot: PLEASE, NO, NOT THE BOY!

(As Alice looks back at Engel, her rage is absolute. The tendrils on her back become more defined, more menacing, and her eyes begin to glow with a malevolent, crimson light. She raises her elongated, claw-like hand, her tendrils poised to strike, a mirror of the moment she murdered Claire. His last goodbye.)

Anya: *(Hissing at Comms)* Overwatch!

Engel: *(His defiance shatters, replaced by a final, all-consuming wave of terror. His eyes are closed, his small form trembling)* No... no!

Overwatch Amira Dai: *(Heavy breathing on the boom mic)*... Engage.

*(Soren pulls the trigger, the immense speed echoed by bullet velocity and the sound crackling gunshots around the air. Just as she is about to hit, a deafening **CRACK** echoes through the hallway, a sound louder than any thunder. A high-velocity round, a wisp of vapor in its wake, punches through the heavy, locked wooden doors from the outside and slams into Alice's right shoulder, staggering her and sending a shower of dark, ichorous fluid into the air. Anya, Kofia, Hotchpot, and Engel all flinch violently at the sudden, shocking gunshot.)*

Alice: *(She lets out a high-pitched, piercing shriek of pure, unadulterated agony and rage, clutching her wounded shoulder as her tendrils thrash wildly)* YOU DARE?! YOU DARE TO STRIKE ME?!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): *(His voice is a furious, triumphant roar that blasts through Kofia and Anya's earpieces)* HIT IT!

(Outside the school, the engines of the two Humvees roar to life. They accelerate at full speed, the high-tensile cables attached to the main doors snapping taut. With a sound like a giant's scream, the entire door assembly—the wood, the frame, the locks—is ripped violently outwards from the wall, crashing onto the front steps in a shower of splintered wood and shattered concrete.)

(Engel, Kofia, Anya, Hotchpot, and the now-furious, wounded Alice all whip their heads around to look at the massive, gaping hole where the entrance to the school used to be. Through the dust and the morning light, they see them: a small army of soldiers in tactical gear, dozens of armored vehicles, and the unwavering, unified aim of a hundred weapons, all pointed directly at them.)

Alice: *(Her voice is a low, incredulous, and utterly furious hiss)* What... is this? Who... who are you people?

The Line is Drawn

(The standoff in the hallway is a frozen, horrifying tableau: Alice, the smiling, confident predator; Anya and Kofia, the desperate, outgunned guardians; and Engel, the crying, broken child. The arrival of the MTF convoy is a promise of salvation, but it is a promise that is still a long, terrifying hallway away.)

Anya: *(Her voice is a sharp, desperate roar that cuts through Engel's sobs)* ENGEL, GET DOWN!

(Engel flinches at her command and instinctively flattens himself against the floor. Anya grabs Mister Hotchpot by the collar of his tweed jacket and yanks him down behind the relative safety of the cleaning cart, doing the same to Kofia a split second later.)

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): *(Her voice is a furious, vengeful roar that blasts through every comms channel)* SUPPRESSIVE FIRE! NOW!

*(The world outside the school's newly-created gaping maw erupts in a deafening, percussive roar. Not the wild spray of automatic fire, but a disciplined, overwhelming volley of semi-automatic rounds from dozens of rifles and the heavy, rhythmic **thump-thump-thump** of the vehicle-mounted machine guns. The air is filled with the sound of popping gunfire, the*

supersonic crack of bullets, and the whizzing sound of rounds flying through the open doorway.)

(Alice shrieks as the first volley of rounds tears into her, her serene, smiling mask shattering into a rictus of pure, unadulterated rage and agony. The bullets don't seem to do lasting damage, but they hit with a force that staggers her, shredding her elegant gown and sending showers of dark, ichorous fluid into the air.)

Alice: YOU DARE?!... YOU DARE TO INTERRUPT MY PLAN?!... What is this?! Who are you?! You insignificant little insects!... You think your little metal stingers can harm me?!

(The radio channels erupt into a cacophony of controlled, tactical chatter.)

Gamma-7 Gunner (Comms): Suppressing fire on the primary anomaly! She's taking hits!

Iota-10 Gunner (Comms): Confirmed! We have direct hits on target!

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): Watch your fire! Do not hit the assets! Aim for center mass on the hostile!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Pour it on! I want her so busy dealing with you that she doesn't even remember the kid is there!

Commander Echo (Comms): Iota-10, what's her status?! Is she retreating?!

Anya (Comms): Negative, CP1! She's holding her ground! She's enraged!

Gamma-7 Operative (Comms): Keep Firing!.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Keep firing! Do not let up!

Iota-10 Squad Leader (Comms): All teams, maintain fire discipline! Controlled bursts! Over.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): We've got her attention! She's focused on the doorway!

Commander Echo (Comms): It's working! Keep her pinned!

(The hailstorm of bullets continues, the rounds whizzing and cracking through the air, impacting the walls around Alice and Alice herself with a series of wet, ugly thuds. The noise is deafening, the scene a chaotic, terrifying whirlwind of violence. The bullets fly high over Engel's small, trembling form. Ignoring the storm of lead passing just feet above him, he crawls, his one good arm pulling him across the floor, to the broken, unmoving form of Miss

Thavel. He reaches her, and with a final, heartbreaking sob, he hugs her, pressing his face into her still, fur-covered side.)

Engel: *(sobbing)* It's okay... it's okay, Miss Thavel...

Engel: I'm here. Stay still.

(The furious, pained shriek from Alice is suddenly drowned out by a new, even more terrifying sound from outside the school—a deafening, continuous storm of loud, sharp, popping noises that echoes through the entire building. The firefight has begun, and its sound is a brutal, percussive wave that washes over the terrified students hiding in their classrooms.)

The Sound of Thunder

Meanwhile, in the language classroom...

(The students, huddled together behind their makeshift barricade, flinch violently as the new, explosive noise begins. It's a sound they've never heard before, a relentless, angry storm that seems to be coming from the front of the school.)

Ruby: What is that?! What's that new sound?!

Lizzy: It's so loud! It's not stopping!

Riley: Great. Now what? Is the school exploding? Because that's the only thing that hasn't happened yet today.

Kevin: It's a rapid, percussive sound. A series of small, contained explosions, not a single event.

Bubbles: It sounds... angry. Whatever it is.

Skell: It sounds like the sky is tearing apart.

Cubbie: I don't like it. Its popping my ears.

Meanwhile, in a first-floor hallway...

(Zip and Edward are walking hand-in-hand, a nervous but excited energy between them after leaving Oliver. The continuous, deafening roar of gunfire from the front of the school makes them both jump and stop in their tracks, their confident smirks replaced by looks of genuine confusion and a little fear.)

Zip: Whoa! What is that?!

Edward: I have no idea! It sounds like... like a whole bunch of really big firecrackers all going off at once!

Zip: Do you think... do you think that's Alice? Is she doing that?

Edward: No way. That doesn't sound like her. That sounds... different.

Zip: Is it another one of the teachers?

Edward: I don't know. But whatever it is, it's really loud. And it sounds really, really angry.

Zip: *(She clutches Edward's hand a little tighter, a slow, excited grin replacing her fear)* This is getting really interesting now, isn't it?

(The hailstorm of bullets continues to pour through the shattered main entrance of the school, a relentless, deafening roar. The air is thick with the smell of cordite and the sound of cracking plaster as the high-velocity rounds chew up the walls around Alice.)

Mourne and Suppression

Alice: *(She shrieks in a continuous, high-pitched wail of pure, unadulterated rage and pain. Her tendrils thrash wildly, lashing out in every direction.)* This is not how the game is played! *(OWW)* You are cheating! You think your little metal stingers... can harm me?! You are nothing... but insects! *(grunting)*. You will all be erased for this insolence!... I will tear this school down around you!

Alice: *(She takes another step back, her form flickering under the relentless assault)* This is... this is not worth my time. I ALWAYS COME BACK!!!

(With a final, furious snarl, Alice turns and melts into the shadows at the far end of the long hallway, disappearing from sight.)

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! The target has retreated! All units, advance! Iota-10, I want you to secure the main entrance and the immediate hallway! Establish a foothold!

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood (Comms): Marshal copies! We are moving in!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Vanguard, you are on point! I want you down that hallway after her! Do not let her get away!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard is on the move! We will not lose her!

(The deafening roar of gunfire abruptly stops, replaced by the sound of dozens of heavy boots running on the concrete outside. Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot slowly, cautiously get to their feet, the ringing in their ears a low, constant hum. Kofia's eyes immediately lock on the small, sobbing boy on the floor.)

Kofia: *(His voice is a raw, desperate, military-grade shout that echoes in the now-quiet hallway)* ENGEL!

Engel: *(He looks up, his face a mess of tears and terror, and lets out a single, heartbroken wail)* KOFIA!

(Kofia doesn't hesitate. He sprints across the debris-strewn floor and slides to his knees beside the boy, ignoring the wounded teacher. Engel throws his arms around Kofia's neck, clinging to him with desperate strength, his body wracked with uncontrollable sobs.)

Engel: *(sobbing into Kofia's shoulder)* You came... you really came for me...

Kofia: *(Tears well up in his own eyes as he hugs the teenager fragile boy tightly, his hand on the back of Engel's head)* Of course, we came for you, kid... of course, we did...

(As they hug, Engel's heartbroken cries make Kofia's own composure shatter. A single tear rolls down his cheek.)

Kofia: *(His voice is thick with emotion, choked with tears)* We've got you, Engel. You're safe now. I promise.

Engel: *(crying)* It hurts... it hurts so much...

Kofia: *(crying, hugging him tighter)* I know, I know. I'm so sorry, kid. We should have been here sooner.

Engel: No...

Kofia: We've got you. It's all over now. You're safe. I've got you.

(Kofia and Engel continue to cry, two survivors clinging to each other in the aftermath of a nightmare. The sounds of the MTF force moving in grow louder, the background filling with the crackle of radio chatter.)

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): Vanguard 1-1 to Scepter, we are inside! Hallway is clear for now! Proceeding with caution!

Iota-10 Operative (Comms): Marshal 2-1, establishing a defensive perimeter at the main entrance. We have a visual on the assets.

Gamma-7 Operative (Comms): No sign of the hostile. She's gone deep.

Iota-10 Operative 2 (Comms): Command, be advised, the structural integrity of this hallway is compromised.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Copy all. Keep moving. Find her.

(Anya and Mister Hotchpot slowly approach the two crying figures on the floor. Anya's face is a mask of cold, professional fury, but her eyes are soft with a profound, aching empathy.)

Engel: *(He looks up from Kofia's shoulder, his tear-filled eyes landing on Anya)* Anya... you... you really promised... and you came... you really came back for me...

(Anya's professional mask breaks. A single tear traces a path down her own cheek. She kneels down, joining the hug, her own arms wrapping around the small, trembling boy.)

Anya: We always keep our promises, Engel.

Engel: Thank you... thank you so much...

Anya: It's okay. You're safe now. We're all here.

Engel: You're... my heroes.

Anya: Yes. We are. And we are never, ever going to leave you alone again.

(The hug is a small, fragile island of comfort in a sea of overwhelming chaos. Anya and Kofia hold the sobbing Engel, their own professional composure shattered by the raw, unfiltered humanity of the moment. Around them, the sounds of the MTF force begin to fill the hallway—the heavy, rhythmic thud of boots on the floor, the crackle of multiple radio channels, and the low, urgent shouts of squad leaders.)

(As the main body of Gamma-7 operatives thunders past them, their weapons raised as they hunt for Alice deeper in the school, the Iota-10 teams move in to secure the main entrance. The first operative to reach the wounded group is Commander Rhys Blackwood. He takes in the scene with a sharp, analytical gaze: the two janitors comforting the crying, wounded boy; the old man in shock; and the massive, broken, monstrous form of the teacher on the floor.)

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: *(He immediately kneels beside Thavel, his fingers going to her neck to check for a pulse. He then looks at Engel's leg, his expression grim)* She's alive! Barely! Pulse is thready! And the boy has a penetrating trauma to the

right femur! We have two critical casualties here! I need an immediate medical team at the main entrance, now!

Commander Echo (Comms): Copy that, Marshal 2-3! Medical is on the way!

(Engel looks up from Kofia's embrace, his eyes wide with fear as he sees the new soldier. He immediately crawls away from his friends and back to the wounded teacher, trying to shield her with his own small, broken body.)

Engel: No! Don't hurt her! She saved me!. Please! She saved me!

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: *(He holds up his hands in a calm, non-threatening gesture, his voice steady)* It's okay, son, calm down. We're not going to hurt her, we're here to help.

(Engel continues to cry, his small hands trying to cover the massive, open wound in Thavel's side, a helpless, desperate gesture.)

Engel: Please... you have to help her... I don't know, it's my fault...

Engel: She saved me... she's a good teacher...

Engel: Please don't let her die...

Engel: I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...

(Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot move to Thavel's side, their faces a mixture of shock, pity, and a dawning, impossible hope.)

Anya: *(She kneels down, her eyes scanning Thavel's grievous injuries)* Her breathing is shallow. She's in shock.

Kofia: She's losing a lot of fluid. We need to apply pressure to that wound.

Anya: We don't have the proper equipment. The medics need to get here now.

Mister Hotchpot: *(He just stares down at the broken form of his colleague, his own face pale with a profound, quiet sorrow)* Oh, you foolish, brave woman...

(Anya and Kofia gently try to rouse the unconscious teacher, their voices low and steady.)

Anya: Miss Thavel? Can you hear me?

Kofia: Come on, teach. Stay with us. You can't give up now.

Anya: Hold on.

(As if in response to their words, Thavel's clawed hand twitches. Slowly, painfully, she moves her arm, her hand coming to rest on Engel's small arm, her grip surprisingly gentle. Engel gasps, his sobs catching in his throat as he looks down at her.)

Engel: *(His voice is a choked, watery whisper of pure, unadulterated relief)* Miss Thavel...? You're... you're alive! Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! I thought... I thought she killed you! I was so scared! Please don't leave me!

(Thavel's eyes flutter open, her monstrous form seeming to recede, her expression now one of pure, profound exhaustion and a deep, aching regret. Her voice is a low, ragged, and barely audible whisper.)

Miss Thavel: Engel...

Miss Thavel: It's... it's alright...

Miss Thavel: You are... safe... now...

(The hallway is a chaotic scene of aftermath. The air is thick with the smell of cordite and ozone. Engel lies on the floor, clinging to the barely conscious Miss Thavel, his small form trembling. Anya and Kofia are kneeling beside them, a mixture of profound relief and grim determination on their faces, while Mister Hotchpot stands by, a silent, horrified witness. Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood is the first operative to reach them, his medical kit already in hand.)

Miss Thavel: *(Her voice is a low, ragged, and barely audible whisper)* You are... safe... now...

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: *(He kneels down, his voice calm and steady, trying to project an aura of control in the chaos. He looks at Engel's leg, his expression grim)* Okay, son. My name is Rhys. I'm here to help you.

Engel: *(He doesn't look up, his face buried in Thavel's fur)* You... you have to help her first. She's hurt bad.

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: I will, I promise. But I need to look at your leg first, okay? Can you tell me your name?

Engel: It's Engel. Please... she saved me.

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: I know she did, Engel. You were both very brave. Now, just let me take a quick look. I'm not going to touch it yet.

Commander Rhys "Guardian" Blackwood: *(He urgently calls on the comms)* This is Commander Rhys, where the hell are the medics? Get their asses in here now!

(Anya and Kofia, having given Engel a moment, now get a clear view of his leg. The dark, ugly, obsidian spike is still embedded deep in his femur, a horrific, unnatural wound.)

Kofia: *(His voice is a low, sickened whisper)* Oh, my God... Anya, look at his leg. That thing... it went all the way through.

Anya: *(Her face is a mask of cold, controlled fury, her eyes fixed on the wound)* It's a clean puncture. But the material is anomalous. We can't just pull it out.

Kofia: The shock... the pain... he's just a teenage kiddo. How is he even conscious right now?

Anya: He's strong. Stronger than he knows.

Kofia: We need to get him to Dr. Lee now. He's losing a lot of fluid.

Anya: The extraction team is on its way. We just need to keep him stable until they get here.

Kofia: How are we supposed to do that? We can't move him with that... that thing... sticking out of his leg.

Anya: We keep him calm. We keep him talking. We keep him from going into shock. That is our only job right now.

(Just as Anya finishes speaking, a new sound joins the chaotic symphony of the hallway—the heavy, rhythmic thud of multiple pairs of boots running in perfect unison. A six-person MTF medical team, their black uniforms adorned with bright red crosses, arrives at the scene, carrying two specialized, heavily reinforced stretchers.)

09:58 - Triage

Lead Medic: *(His voice is a calm, authoritative presence that cuts through the chaos)* MOVE! I need this area cleared, now! All non-essential personnel, back up!

Medic 2: Give us room to work, please! We need a sterile field!

Lead Medic: Maher, give us your report. The rest of you, step back.

Medic 3: Please, sir, we need you to move. We've got it from here.

(The medics gently but firmly push Marshal Maher, Anya, Kofia, and the stunned Mister Hotchpot back, creating a small, protected circle around the two wounded figures on the floor. One medic immediately kneels beside Engel, his voice a low, soothing murmur.)

Medic 1: Hey there, Engel. My name's Iva. I'm a doctor. I'm going to help you, okay?

Engel: *(sobbing)* You... you have to help her... she's hurt worse...

Medic 1: We are. My friends are helping her right now. See? But I need to look at your leg. I'm not going to touch the thing that's hurting you. I just need to see how we can make you more comfortable.

Engel: It hurts...

Medic 1: I know it does, buddy. You are being incredibly brave right now. Braver than anyone I've ever seen. Can you just hold on for a little longer for me?

Engel: Okay...

(As the first medic talks to Engel, a second and third medic are already working on the massive, broken form of Miss Thavel. One is cutting away her torn, bloody clothes to get a better look at the wound in her side, while the other is checking her vitals.)

Medic 2: Her pulse is weak, but it's there. She's lost a lot of fluid.

Medic 3: Ma'am? Can you hear me? My name is Sarah. We're here to help you.

Miss Thavel: *(Her voice is a low, pained groan)* The... the boy...

Medic 3: The boy is safe. We're helping him, too.

Miss Thavel: Is he... is he okay?

Medic 3: He's going to be fine. Thanks to you. Now, we're going to get you both out of here, okay? We're going to take you somewhere safe.

Miss Thavel: Okay...

(The medics work with a practiced, efficient speed, their movements a blur of controlled urgency. Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot watch from a few feet away, silent, helpless witnesses to the aftermath.)

Kofia: *(His voice is a low, awed whisper)* Look at them. They're... they're amazing.

Anya: They're the best. If anyone can save them, it's these people.

Mister Hotchpot: I... I can't believe this is happening. Just an hour ago, she was... just a teacher.

Kofia: She still is, sir. She still is.

Anya: Now all we can do is watch. And hope.

Kofia: They're going to be okay. They have to be.

Anya: Yes. They do.

(The MTF medical team works with a grim, focused efficiency. The lead medic looks at the other three assigned to lift the massive, broken form of Miss Thavel, his expression a mask of professional calm.)

10:00 - The Extraction

Lead Medic: Okay, team. We are going to move her on my count. We need to be as gentle as possible, but we need to be fast.

Medic 2: I've got the torso. Her core is unstable due to the flank wound.

Medic 3: I've got the legs. I'll try to keep them as immobile as possible.

Medic 4: I'm on the head and neck. I'll stabilize her spine.

Lead Medic: Good. Remember, she is a friendly asset. Treat her with the utmost care.

Lead Medic: Okay, team. On my mark. Ready?

Medic 2: Ready.

Medic 3: Ready.

Lead Medic: And... one... two... three... LIFT!

(As the four medics lift Thavel in a single, coordinated movement, a sharp, guttural, and utterly agonizing scream tears from her throat. The simple act of being moved sends a blinding, white-hot wave of pain through her shattered bones and the deep, open wound in her side. It is a sound of pure, unadulterated agony, a sound that makes everyone in the hallway flinch.)

Miss Thavel: AAAAAAGGGGGHHHH!

Miss Thavel: *(Her scream dissolves into a series of pained, choking sobs)* Aaaghhhh, aaaghhhh!

Miss Thavel: Please... Stop!...

Engel: *(He lets out a terrified, sympathetic cry, his hands flying to his mouth)* Miss Thavel!

Anya: Oh, geez... her bones...

Kofia: They're just trying to help her...

Mister Hotchpot: That poor, poor woman...

(The medics gently, quickly, place her on the heavily padded, reinforced stretcher. Thavel's screams subside, replaced by a series of weak, heartbroken sobs as she lies on the stretcher, her body a broken, trembling mess.)

Miss Thavel: *(sobbing)* It hurts... It hurts...

Miss Thavel: Please...

Lead Medic: It's okay, ma'am. It's okay. Its over.

Medic 2: You're on the stretcher now. We're not going to move you like that again.

Medic 3: *(She reaches out and begins to gently, softly massage Thavel's uninjured hand, her voice a low, soothing murmur)* Shhh... it's okay. You're safe now. We've got you. Just try to breathe.

Lead Medic: We're going to give you something for the pain now, okay? It will make you feel much better.

(The Lead Medic looks down at Miss Thavel's broken, monstrous form, his expression a mask of professional calm.)

Medic 2: Her pressure is bottoming out! BP is fifty over thirty! She's bleeding out faster than we can push fluids!

Miss Thavel: *(Her eyes flutter, barely open, a soft, rattling sound in her chest)* En... gel...

Medic 3: We're losing her! Heart rate is dropping... thirty BPM and falling!

Lead Medic: We need to move! She needs a surgical team.

Medic 4: We're not going to make it to the main medical tent! It's too far!

Medic 2: Then we go to the forward surgical unit! Now! We have maybe two minutes before she's blackout!

Lead Medic: GO! Move, move, move!

(With Miss Thavel now secured to the stretcher, the four medics work in a frantic but synchronized ballet. One checks the restraints while another adjusts the oxygen mask. With a final, urgent shout from the Lead Medic, they lift the stretcher together and rush out of the school's gaping entrance, a desperate race against time.)

(Engel overhears their frantic, terrified words, his small form trembling as he watches them carry his teacher away.)

Engel: *(A soft, heartbroken whimper escapes him, tears welling in his eyes again)* No... she... she's going to...

Kofia: *(Placing a steady hand on Engel's shoulder)* Hey, hey... listen, they're the best there is, kid. They'll save her.

(Two more medics from the retrieval team, Axcil and Cilxon, move past the chaotic scene with Thavel, approaching Engel with their own stretcher. Their movements are calm and deliberate, designed not to cause any more alarm.)

Medic Axcil: *(His voice is incredibly calm, a stark contrast to the shouting medics)* Okay, Engel. It's our turn now. My name is Axcil, and this is Cilxon. We're going to take a look at you.

Engel: *(Looking from the departing stretcher back to Axcil, his face pale)* But... they said she's...

Medic Cilxon: They said they're going to do everything they can. And they will. Right now, our job is you. Can you tell me what happened?

Anya: Alice impaled him with a tendril. It's still in place. The material is anomalous.

Medic Axcil: *(Nodding, his eyes expertly assessing the wound without touching it)* I see. We're not going to try and remove it here. That's a job for the surgeons.

Kofia: So what do we do? He can't walk.

Medic Cilxon: We're going to secure it. We'll build a brace around the entire leg to make sure that spike doesn't move a single millimeter during transport.

Engel: It hurts so much...

Medic Axcil: *(He gives Engel a reassuring look)* I know it does. And you're being the bravest kid I've ever met. We're going to be as gentle as we possibly can.

Mister Hotchpot: *(Watching with wide, horrified eyes)* That thing... it's made of pure shadow...

Medic Cilxon: Our equipment can handle it, sir. We're prepared for this.

Anya: How long until he's ready for transport?

Medic Axcil: Give us two minutes. We'll have him locked down and ready for the smoothest ride of his life.

(Medic Axcil and Medic Cilxon work with a calm, practiced efficiency. They open their kits, pulling out advanced-looking splints and soft, padded restraints. They begin the delicate process of immobilizing Engel's wounded leg, their movements a silent promise of the gentle, expert care they are about to provide.)

Medic Cilxon: Okay, Engel. The brace is secure around your leg. That spike isn't going to move at all.

Medic Axcil: We're going to lift you onto this stretcher now. It's very important that you keep your body as still as you can, okay? Don't try to help us lift.

Engel: *(He gives a small, terrified nod, his face pale)* Okay...

Medic Cilxon: Now, we're going to be honest with you. When we lift, it's going to put pressure on your right femur. It's probably going to hurt quite a bit.

Anya: We'll be right here with you, Engel. The whole time.

Kofia: You can squeeze my hand if you need to. Squeeze it as hard as you want.

(Kofia kneels and offers his hand, which Engel grips tightly. Axcil and Cilxon position themselves on either side of Engel, their hands finding secure holds on his torso and the leg brace.)

Medic Axcil: You don't need to worry about a thing. We'll be as quick and smooth as we can.

Medic Cilxon: You're the bravest person here today. You can do this.

Medic Axcil: Ready? On my count.

Medic Cilxon: We're ready.

Medic Axcil: One... two... THREE.

(They lift him in a single, perfectly synchronized motion. Despite their care, a wave of blinding, white-hot agony shoots up Engel's leg. His body goes rigid, his back arching off their hands for a split second.)

Engel: *(A sharp, strangled cry is torn from his throat, his eyes screwing shut as he clenches his free fist.)* Nnngh! It hurts!

Engel: *(His body trembles, a choked sob catching in his throat as he bites his lip to keep from screaming)* Aaaah!

Medic Axcil: *(As they pivot smoothly toward the stretcher)* I know, I know. Almost there, kid. Just a few more seconds.

Medic Cilxon: You're doing great. Just breathe through it. Deep breaths, in and out.

Kofia: That's it, Engel! Squeeze my hand! You've got this!

Anya: They're lowering you now. Stay with us. You're almost there.

(They gently lower him onto the soft padding of the stretcher. The movement stops, but the pain remains, a deep, throbbing fire in his leg. He lies there, gasping, his chest heaving with shaky, painful breaths.)

Engel: *(Panting heavily, tears streaming down the sides of his face)* Ow... ow... ow...

Medic Axcil: Okay, you're down. You're on the stretcher. You're safe. The worst part of the move is over now.

Medic Cilxon: *(Gently placing his hands on Engel's uninjured thigh, he begins to lightly massage the muscles around the wound, trying to ease the tension)* I'm just going to try and get these muscles to relax a little. It might help with the pain.

Engel: *(His panting slows into ragged, shuddering breaths)* It... it still hurts so much...

Medic Axcil: I know it does. We're going to get you out of here and get you something stronger for that pain very, very soon. You just hang on for us.

(Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot stand to the side, watching with a mixture of professional respect and profound concern. Medics Axcil and Cilxon move with a practiced calm, unpacking more of their equipment: a small oxygen tank with a clear mask, a portable biometric monitor, and a sterile case containing several pre-packaged auto-injectors.)

(Engel turns his head away from the others, trying to muffle a pained sniffle against the stretcher's padding. His small body trembles with the effort of holding back his tears, not wanting to seem weak in front of his new friends.)

Kofia: *(Noticing Engel's struggle, he kneels down again, his voice a low, gentle rumble)* Hey, kid. You don't have to hide it from us. It's okay to cry.

Engel: *(His voice is a choked whisper)* I'm... I'm trying to be brave... like you said...

Anya: You are being brave, Engel. Bravery isn't about not feeling pain, you know. We are trained to be brave.

Mister Hotchpot: She's right, son. You're the bravest boy I've ever met since your fifth year.

Kofia: See? Everyone agrees. You're basically a superhero right now. What's your superhero name gonna be?

Engel: *(A tiny, watery giggle escapes him)* I... I don't know...

Kofia: How about... 'The Unflinching Engel'? Or 'Captain Courageous'? I like that one.

Anya: Hey, let's not give him a codename just yet, Kofia. Let's just let him breathe.

Kofia: Right. Sorry. Just trying to help.

(Axcil and Cilxon, having finished their preparations, turn to the small group.)

Medic Axcil: Okay, you three. We appreciate the support, but we need you to step all the way back now.

Medic Cilxon: We need a sterile field to work. Please, give us some room.

Medic Axcil: We'll take it from here. He's in good hands.

(Anya, Kofia, and Hotchpot nod and retreat further down the hallway, giving the medics a wide berth. Cilxon attaches a small, adhesive sensor to Engel's forehead, and a monitor on the stretcher flickers to life, displaying his heart rate and oxygen levels. Axcil takes out the small, clear oxygen mask and gently places it over Engel's nose and mouth. At the same time, Cilxon preps an auto-injector, the syringe filling with a clear liquid with a soft hiss. He carefully presses it against Engel's uninjured arm, and with another quiet hiss, the medication is administered.)

Medic Cilxon: Alright, Engel. That's all done. The oxygen will help you breathe a little easier.

Engel: What... what was that? The needle...

Medic Axcil: That was just something to help with the pain and keep you calm. It'll start working in just a minute.

Engel: Am... am I going to have surgery now?

Medic Cilxon: Yes. We're going to take you to a special room where some very smart doctors will take that spike out and fix up your leg, good as new.

Medic Axcil: You're not going to feel a thing, we promise. You'll just take a little nap, and when you wake up, it'll all be over.

(The sedative begins to take effect, a gentle wave of calm washing over Engel. His trembling subsides, and his eyelids grow heavy.)

Medic Cilxon: You just try and get some rest now, Engel. The medicine will help you feel sleepy.

Engel: *(His voice is a soft, drowsy murmur)* Mmm... okay...

Medic Axcil: That's it. Just close your eyes. We're right here.

Engel: Tell... tell Bubbles... I'll see her... later...

(With a final, soft sigh, Engel drifts into a deep, medicated sleep. The medics check the straps on the stretcher one last time before turning to Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot.)

Medic Axcil: Alright, we're ready to move. We're taking him directly to the Medical Command Post.

Medic Cilxon: He's stable for transport.

Anya: How is he, really?

Medic Axcil: He's stable. The sedative is working. He's a tough kid.

Medic Cilxon: We've done all we can for him in the field. He's safe for now, but he needs immediate surgery to remove that object.

Kofia: You'll take good care of him, right?

Medic Axcil: He'll get the best care in the entire organization. We promise.

Mister Hotchpot: Please... tell him we're all thinking of him.

Medic Cilxon: We will, sir.

Anya: Be safe, Engel.

Kofia: You hang in there, Captain Courageous. We'll see you when you wake up.

Mister Hotchpot: Stay Safe, young man.

Medic Axcil: We've got him. We'll take it from here.

(The two medics grip the stretcher firmly. They lift it smoothly and begin moving at a fast, controlled walk, rushing Engel out of the main entrance towards the waiting medical transport at Camp Hope.)

(Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot are left in the now-quiet hallway, the air thick with the aftershock of the traumatic event. The sounds of MTF operatives securing the school continue in the distance.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(He lets out a long, shaky breath, leaning against the wall for support)* I... I've never seen anything like it. The courage of that boy...

Kofia: He's one of a kind. Toughest kid I've ever met.

Anya: He shouldn't have to be.

Kofia: No. He shouldn't. What Oliver did... it's beyond just bullying. It's monstrous.

Mister Hotchpot: I... I always knew those boys were cruel. But this... this is a new level of darkness.

Anya: It is. But now we have a clear picture of the threat. And we have a witness.

Kofia: Two witnesses. Thavel and Engel. Let's just hope they both make it.

Mister Hotchpot: What... what happens now? For us?

(Anya places a reassuring hand on Mister Hotchpot's arm, her voice calm and steady.)

Anya: Now, it's our turn to get you somewhere safe, Mister Hotchpot.

Mister Hotchpot: Safe? Is... is there anywhere safe now?

Anya: There is. We've established a secure evacuation zone at our camp point. All the other non-hostile staff and students will be taken there.

Mister Hotchpot: The other staff... Miss Emily, Miss Sasha... are they alright?

Anya: Our teams are moving to secure the other classrooms as we speak. They will be evacuated and brought to the same place.

Mister Hotchpot: Thank God... I was so worried...

Kofia: Sir, we need to start moving. The main operation is underway.

Mister Hotchpot: Operation?

Kofia: The men and women you saw... they're here to deal with Alice and the others. This whole area is about to become... very active. It's not safe for civilians to be on the school grounds any longer. We need to get you clear of the building before the real fireworks start.

(Anya and Kofia guide Mister Hotchpot through the now-secured main entrance, its heavy doors torn from their hinges. The sight that greets him is overwhelming. The entire front lawn of the school has been transformed into a sprawling, chaotic military encampment. The air is filled with the thunderous roar of vehicle engines, the distant thrum of helicopter blades, and the overlapping, urgent shouts of soldiers in tactical gear.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(He stops dead, his mouth agape, his eyes wide with disbelief)* My... my heavens... what is all this?

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(Striding past, her voice a sharp, clear command to a nearby squad)* I want a hard perimeter on that west wing! Move!

Kofia: That's our cue to leave, sir.

Mister Hotchpot: This is... this is an army! You've brought an entire army!

Anya: We told you, sir. We don't take half-measures.

Kofia: Come on. Let's get you clear. It's only going to get louder from here.

(As they begin to walk, Mister Hotchpot looks back and forth between the two agents, his mind reeling.)

Mister Hotchpot: But... who are you people? Really? You're not just janitors. You're not just... government agents. This is... something else entirely.

Anya: We're a... specialized response unit, sir. We deal with situations that are beyond the scope of traditional law enforcement.

Kofia: Think of us as... the people they call when things get really, really weird.

Mister Hotchpot: I... I see. And this has happened before? Places like this?

Anya: Unfortunately, yes. Our job is to make sure that when it does, the story has a better ending, like that .

Mister Hotchpot: Well... thank you. For being here. For all of this.

(With a final, reassuring nod, Anya and Kofia guide the stunned but grateful history assistant away from the chaos of the immediate breach. They begin the long, one-kilometer walk down the main road, towards the designated survivor camp, leaving the war for Maple High to the soldiers who had come to fight it.)

10:08 - A Quiet Walk

(Meanwhile, somewhere on the deserted first floor, Edward and Zip walked hand-in-hand down a long, sterile corridor. The aftermath of the reality shift was profound; the once-flat walls now had a tangible, textured depth, and the light from the high windows cast long, unnervingly realistic shadows. The distant, muffled sounds of the MTF's breach had faded, leaving an eerie, humming silence in its wake.)

Zip: *(Her voice is a nervous whisper, squeezing his hand slightly)* It's... it's so quiet now. I don't like it. The popping sound stopped.

Edward: I know. It's weirder than the noise was. Makes my skin feel all... staticky.

Zip: Do you think they got... you know... Alice?

Edward: No way. You saw what she did to Claire. Nothing can get her. That noise was something else.

Zip: So... we're still heading for the back exit? Near the fields, like Oliver said?

Edward: Yeah. He told us to wait there. I just... I don't like that he went off on his own.

Zip: He knows what he's doing. He always does.

Edward: I know, but... this is different. Those noises weren't from around here. And with the whole school looking... real now... it's just... I've got a bad feeling.

Zip: We'll be fine. We just need to find the exit and wait for him.

Edward: I guess. This hallway is giving me the creeps.

(They walk in silence for a moment, the only sound the soft, rhythmic scuff of their shoes on the linoleum floor. The hallway stretches out before them, a long, empty tunnel of lockers and closed classroom doors.)

Zip: *(Trying to break the heavy silence, her voice a little softer)* Hey...

Edward: What?

Zip: Thanks for... you know... holding my hand. It's... nice.

Edward: *(He seems a little surprised, glancing down at their intertwined fingers)* Oh. Uh... yeah. No problem. It's just... so we don't get separated.

Zip: Right. So we don't get separated. *(She pauses, a hint of disappointment in her tone)*

Edward: What's wrong?

Zip: Nothing. It's just... you're not as dumb as you act sometimes, you know?

Edward: Hey! I'm not dumb.

Zip: I know. That's what I said. You just... you act like it. To impress Oliver.

Edward: I don't try to impress Oliver. He's just... the leader. He's with us, Oliver being Oliver, you know.

Zip: I know. But... I'm not here because of him right now.

Edward: *(He looks at her, genuinely confused)* What are you talking about? He told us both to go.

Zip: I know what he told us. I mean... I'm glad it's you I'm with. Not him.

Edward: Oh. Why?

Zip: *(She lets out a small, frustrated sigh)* Because I like you, you idiot.

Edward: *(He stops walking, his face flushing slightly)* You... you like me? Like, 'like me' like me?

Zip: Yeah. 'Like you' like you. Is that really so surprising?

Edward: Kinda. I thought... you know... I thought you liked Oliver. Everybody likes Oliver.

Zip: Everybody's afraid of Oliver. That's not the same thing. He's... exciting. But he's not... nice. Not like you are.

Edward: I'm not nice. I'm a bully. We're bullies.

Zip: You're a bully when he's around, heh. When he's not... you're just... Ed. And I like Ed.

Edward: Why are you telling me this now? In the middle of... all this?

Zip: Because I'm scared. And when I'm scared, I guess I just... I say the true stuff.

Edward: Are you... scared of Oliver?

Zip: Sometimes. Aren't you?

Edward: *(He doesn't answer right away, just looks down the long, empty hall)* He's... he's our friend. He protects us.

Zip: Does he? Or does he just make sure we're standing behind him when the trouble starts?

Edward: I don't know. I never thought about it like that.

Zip: I think about it a lot.

Edward: So... you and me... you're serious?

Zip: *(She squeezes his hand again, a little more confidently this time)* Yeah, Ed. I'm serious.

Edward: Oh.

Zip: *(A small, nervous smile)* Is that... is that an okay?

Edward: *(He manages a small smile back, his blush returning)* *tsk* It's okay.

Zip: Good. That's... that's good to know.

Edward: *(He looks away, his cheeks still flushed, kicking at a scuff mark on the floor)* Don't say that. I'm no different.

Zip: Yes, you are. Remember last week? When that little kindergarten kid, Chip, dropped all his drawings? Oliver just laughed. You... you stopped and helped him pick them up. You thought no one was looking.

Edward: *(Muttering)* I just... didn't want to get yelled at by Miss Sasha.

Zip: She wasn't even in the hallway. I was. I saw you.

Edward: So what? It doesn't mean anything.

Zip: It means you're not like him. Not really.

Edward: Why are you telling me this now?

Zip: Because I'm scared. And when I'm scared, I guess I just... say the true stuff.

Edward: So... what does this... I mean... what are we now?

Zip: *(She laughs, a soft, genuine sound)* I don't know, Ed. We're in the middle of a monster-infested school. Can we just be... 'us' for now?

Edward: Yeah. 'Us'. I... I like the sound of that.

Zip: Me too. I've wanted to be 'us' for a while.

Edward: You have? Why didn't you say anything?

Zip: Are you kidding? Oliver is always around. And you're always trying to act so tough.

Edward: I'm not that tough...

Zip: I know. That's what I like about you. You're actually–

(Zip's sentence is cut short by a faint, crisp sound echoing from the far end of the hallway behind them. It's a low, rhythmic crackle, like a radio struggling to find a signal, punctuated by soft static hisses. They both freeze, their hands tightening their grip on each other's. The sound slowly grows from a faint whisper to a medium-low chatter.)

Edward: *(Whispering)* What was that?

Zip: *(Her voice a tiny hiss)* I don't know. It sounds like... static.

Edward: *gasps* It's getting closer.

Zip: It's not one of the teachers. It doesn't sound like them.

Edward: And it's not Alice. Her sound is... different. Colder.

Zip: It sounds... technical. Like machine?. I– I don't know.

Edward: The janitors? Anya and Kofia?

Zip: Maybe... but why would they be making that noise? And why does it sound like it's hunting for something?

Edward: I don't care. I don't want to find out. We need to run, quietly.

Zip: Where do we go?

Edward: To the back exit. We have to find it before whatever that finds us. Let's hurry.

Zip: Okay. Okay, I'm right behind you.

(Not letting go of her hand, Edward pulls Zip into a silent run. Their footsteps echo in the long, empty corridor as they flee from the strange, approaching sound, their search for an exit now a desperate, frantic race against an unknown pursuer.)

(Not letting go of her hand, Edward pulls Zip into a silent run. Their footsteps echo in the long, empty corridor as they flee from the strange, approaching sound, their search for an exit now a desperate, frantic race against an unknown pursuer. The school is a labyrinth of identical hallways, each corner they turn revealing another long, sterile stretch of lockers and closed doors. The sheer scale of the building, something they'd never truly appreciated before, now feels oppressive, designed to confuse and trap them.)

Edward: *(He risks a quick glance over his shoulder before pulling Zip into a side corridor, his breathing ragged)* I can't hear it anymore... do you think we lost it, or is it just being quiet now, trying to trick us?

Zip: *(Leaning against the wall, trying to catch her breath, her heart hammering against her ribs)* I don't know and I don't want to find out. That is something new, Ed. Every shadow looks like it's moving.

Edward: We just have to find the back exit. Oliver said it was near the gym, so we just need to find the gym wing and go past it.

Zip: This place is so huge, I feel like we've been running in circles. What if we're going the wrong way? What if we're running right towards it?

Edward: We're not. I remember this part... I think. This is where Miss Bloomie's classroom is. The exit has to be just down this hall.

Zip: *(Panting, her voice trembling)* I don't even feel like getting out anymore... I just wish we were studying for a stupid test. Or in the gym... playing pirate stuff during free time. I just... I want to do something normal again.

Edward: We'll get there. We just have to be smart and quiet. I shouldn't have let you talk to me into making fun of those janitors. This is all my fault.

Zip: It's not your fault. It's this place... makes you do mean things. But we have to stick together now, that's all that matters.

Edward: Zip. I've never been this scared before, those static thing back there. Not even when Miss Circle was yelling at me.

Zip: *(She reaches out with her free hand and touches his arm, her expression serious and determined)* I know. Me too. But being scared together is better than being scared alone, right?

(Edward looks at her, at the fierce resolve in her eyes, and gives a short, determined nod. Her courage seems to bolster his own.)

Edward: Yeah. Right. Come, lets not waste time, I wanna get out of here.

Zip: Woaahh

(He squeezes her hand, and they take off again, their sneakers slapping against the linoleum in a frantic, uneven rhythm. They run through another corridor, then another, the hallways blurring into a confusing maze of gray lockers and identical classroom doors. The silence stretches, and after a few more panicked turns, they realize they can no longer hear the strange, crackling static behind them. Their sprint slows to a jog, and then finally, to a staggering, exhausted walk. They come to a stop in an empty intersection of hallways, leaning against the cold metal of the lockers to catch their breath.)

Edward: *(Chest heaving, he gulps in air)* Hah... hah... I think...

Zip: *(Bent over, her hands on her knees, panting)* Can't... breathe... my lungs are on fire...

Edward: *(Taking a deep, ragged breath)* Just... just give me a second...

Zip: *(Nodding, unable to speak, just panting)* Hah... hah... okay...

(After a moment, their breathing begins to even out, the immediate, adrenaline-fueled panic receding, leaving a bone-deep weariness in its place.)

Edward: *(Straightening up, still breathing hard)* Okay... I think... I think we're doing something

Zip: For now. What if it's just waiting for us somewhere? We need to find that door and get out.

Edward: The gym should be... this way. I see the sign for the locker rooms up ahead. We're close.

Zip: Good. My feet feel like they're going to fall off. I think I have a blister the size of my head.

Edward: We're almost there. Once we're outside, we'll be safe. Oliver will be waiting for us.

Zip: *(She looks at him, a flicker of their earlier, more intimate conversation in her eyes)* Right. Oliver.

(Edward notices the shift in her tone, the way the excitement in her voice died when she said Oliver's name.)

Edward: *(He glances at her, a little concerned)* What? You said his name weird.

Zip: *(Shakes her head, forcing a small smile)* Nothing. It's just... never mind. Let's just get out of here, we wait for him.

Edward: Are you sure? You can tell me.

Zip: It's just... I'm glad I'm with you right now, that's all. I feel... safer if we invite him.

Edward: *(A faint blush returns to his cheeks)* Me too.

(They continue to walk down the long corridor, their pace steadier now, their hands still clasped tightly. The oppressive silence of the school seems a little less threatening with the immediate danger seemingly gone. Three minutes pass, the only sound being their own soft footsteps.)

(As they round another corner, Edward suddenly stops, his eyes lighting up. He points down the long, empty corridor. At the very end, bathed in a soft, natural light from a set of glass-paned doors, is a simple, beautiful sign.)

Edward: Zip, look!

Zip: *(Her eyes follow his finger, and a huge, relieved grin spreads across her face)* Oh my gosh! An exit! We found it! We actually found it!

Edward: I told you! I told you this was the right way! See? I'm not that dumb!

Zip: You were right! Oh, I could hug you right now!

Edward: *(His eyes go wide, his face turning bright red)* W-what?

Zip: *(She laughs, a bright, happy sound that echoes in the quiet hall, and pulls him into a quick, tight hug)* We're going to get out of here!

Edward: *(Hesitantly, he hugs her back, a real, wide smile spreading across his face)* Yeah. We are.

Zip: I can't wait to feel the freedom again. And to get away from all the... weirdness and the creepy noises.

Edward: Just imagine the look on Engel's face when he realizes he's still trapped in here and we're outside.

Zip: *(Giggling)* He's probably hiding in a closet somewhere, crying to his new janitor friends.

Edward: What a crybaby. He's never going to find his way out.

Zip: And Oliver is going to be so impressed we found the back exit all on our own.

Edward: He'll be waiting for us, just like he said he would be. We're a good team.

Zip: *(She pulls back from the hug but doesn't let go of his hands, her expression turning soft again)* I'm really glad I ran with you, Ed.

Edward: Me too, Zip.

Zip: Come on! Let's go! Last one to the door is a sad, wobbly cube!

(Edward's smirk widens slightly as he takes her other hand, so he's now holding both of them, his gaze direct and confident for the first time.)

Zip: So... after this... we wait for him and everything's... you know... back to normal...

Edward: Yeah?

Zip: Is that 'us' thing still... going to be a thing?

Edward: I think it has to be.

Zip: Good. I was really hoping you'd say that.

Edward: I've... I've never really... had a girlfriend before.

Zip: Me neither. I've never had a boyfriend.

Edward: We can be... not good at it together, then.

Zip: *(She laughs, a bright, relieved sound)* Deal.

(She leans in and gives him a quick, shy kiss on the cheek. Edward's whole face turns red, but he doesn't pull away. For a moment, they just stand there, two kids in a quiet hallway, the horrors of the school forgotten.)

Zip: Okay... let's go.

Edward: Right.

Zip: Ready to get out of this nightmare?

(Edward grins. They turn to the door, and with a shared, triumphant shout, they slam their hands against the push-bar. The door swings open into bright, clean daylight. They burst through, running onto the concrete with their eyes squeezed shut, faces turned to the sky in victory.)

Edward: We did it! We're free!--

Zip: Outside!--

Intervention

(The scene they run into is not the empty calm backyard they expected. They have emerged into a bustling, organized military perimeter. Several massive, six-wheeled Cougar armored vehicles are parked in a line. Men and women in civilian uniform, tactical gear are setting up tents, checking rifles at a makeshift armory station, and securing the area. The sound of the heavy door banging open makes them all stop. In a split second of synchronized movement, a dozen operatives turn, their weapons raised and aimed directly at the two students.)

Iota-10 Operative 2: *(A sharp, controlled shout)* FREEZE!

Iota-10 Operative 8: Hands! Let me see your hands, now!

(Zip and Edward slowly open their eyes. Their triumphant smiles dissolve into masks of pure, slack-jawed horror. They are surrounded, the black barrels of a dozen rifles pointed directly at their chests. The feeling of victory evaporates, replaced by a crushing, hopeless despair.)

Lieutenant Emily "Phantom" Lee: Hold your fire! They're just students!

Iota-10 Operative 3: Do not move! Stay right where you are!

Iota-10 Operative 6: Get on the ground! Slowly!

Lieutenant Mark "Tracker" Williams: Easy Fellas easy! Don't scare them!

Edward: Oh... no...

Zip: *(Her voice is a tiny, broken whisper)* What... what is this?

Edward: Who... who are you people?

Zip: We... we were just trying to get out... Oliver told us to wait here...

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Zip, Edward, Show us your hands, Raise them up!

Iota-10 Operative 2: Just, stay where you are, do not move, and raise your hands up!

Edward: This isn't the empty backyard.

Zip: We're in trouble. We're in so much trouble.

Edward: *(His shoulders slump in defeat, and he lets go of Zip's hands, slowly raising his own in surrender)* We're caught.

Zip: It's all over.

(The Iota-10 operatives maintain their positions, weapons trained on the two terrified students. The squad leader keys his comms, his voice a low, urgent report that cuts through the various command channels.)

Lieutenant John "Hunter" Maher (Comms): Command, this is Marshal 2-3. We have two students who just exited the rear of the school. Awaiting confirmation if this is Zip and Edward. Appears to be unarmed, non-hostile.

Commander Echo (Comms): Acknowledged, Marshal. Checking their data, one moment...

Intelligence Analyst Chen (Comms): ... Confirmed, Commander. Facial recognition matches the files for Zip and Edward. Confirmed associates of the primary student hostile, Oliver.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): They're just students. Scared kids. Uhh, All units, hold your fire. I want them secured for interrogation, not traumatized. De-escalate, over.

Lieutenant John "Hunter" Maher (Comms): Copy that, Scepter Actual. De-escalation protocols are in effect.

Commander Echo (Comms): Get them to surrender. We need them alive and coherent.

(One of the Iota-10 operatives on top of a Cougar raises a megaphone, their voice booming across the concrete yard, firm but controlled.)

Iota-10 Operative (Megaphone): Zip, Edward. You two. You are under apprehension under our command! Place your hands on top of your heads and get down on your

knees. You are persons of interest. Do not attempt to escape. We can work this out, we will help you.

(Edward can't process the situation. Soldiers, guns, orders—it's too much. Panic overrides all reason. He grabs Zip's hand, his grip like a vice.)

Edward: I can't... I can't do this! They're soldiers! They're going to take us!

Zip: Ed, wait! What are you doing?!-- AAAHHH

(He yanks her back towards the school door, pulling her into a desperate, panicked run back into the building.)

Lieutenant Emily "Phantom" Lee: Hey! Get back here!

Iota-10 Operative 1: (Comms) Gamma-7 units be advise, Two suspects were running back inside! Apprehend them!

Gamma-7 Operative 2 (Comms): Copy that.

Iota-10 Operative 2: Where do you think you're going?!

(As they burst back through the exit door into the dim hallway, they're met with an impassable wall. Three heavily armed Gamma-7 operatives, having breached from another part of the school, stand there, their rifles aimed directly at them. There is no way out.)

Gamma-7 Operative 2: FREEZE!

Gamma-7 Operative 1: Going somewhere?! Don't move! On the ground, now.

(Edward and Zip stumble to a halt, their chests heaving, their escape cut off. They are trapped between two tactical teams. Defeated, they slowly sink to the floor.)

Zip: *(Her voice trembling)* No... no, no...

Edward: We're trapped!.

Zip: I don't want to go to jail!.

Edward: They have guns, Zip. Big ones.

Zip: *(Starts to cry softly)* I just want to go home...

Edward: I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I shouldn't have run...

Zip: *(A choked sob)* What... what do you want from us?

Gamma-7 Elite Operative: *(His voice is hard, but not yelling, firearm aimed down)*

pauses* *sigh Listen... We want you to stop... We want you to think about what you've done. We got Engel and secured him, no thanks to you. He told us everything... You two and Oliver have been tormenting him. We have your details. He also told us about Claire. How your "prank" with that blue door led her right to Alice's Domain. He witnessed his friend was torned apart because, you three thought it would be funny. Do you have any idea of the pain you've caused? Not just to him, but to everyone in this school? This isn't a game. People have died because of what you've done. Engel is a brave kid who has lost everything, and he still tried to find the courage to face today. All you three have done is spread more misery!... in a place that's already drowning in it. So you're going with us, and you're going to listen. The time for your little games... is over.

(As the operative humbled them, Zip and Edward's defiant glares crumble, replaced by genuine, dawning horror.)

(Zip's voice was a high-pitched, pleading whisper; she tried to lie to them in order to evade, her eyes wide with disbelief and terror as he faced the heavily armed soldier.)

Zip: Claire...? But... we didn't know... we thought it was just a spooky room... we didn't know she was a real monster-

Gamma-7 Operative 1: *(The soldier's furious voice, distorted and metallic through his helmet's speaker, blasted through the quiet room, cutting Zip off instantly. He took an aggressive step forward, his weapon held firmly.)* ENOUGH!... We know what you did! Don't make this difficult for us. So go outside, and NO... Talking, Do you Understand?

(The sheer volume and venom in the operative's voice made both Zip and Edward flinch violently. A shared, terrified whimper escaped them as they trembled, scared of the soldier's voice. Zip, unable to speak past the lump of fear in his throat, gave a short, jerky nod. He and Edward then turned around with painstaking slowness, their bodies stiff with fright as they began walking towards the exit.)

Gamma-7 Operative 1: *(slight furious aggressive voice)* What are you waiting for, keep moving.

Gamma-7 Operative 2: And you two are going to walk back outside and surrender to the officers waiting for you.

Gamma-7 Elite Operative: *(Whispering to Operative 1)* That was harsh bro. Be soft next time.

Gamma-7 Operative 1: *(Whispers back to Elite Operative)* It was part of my discipline to my daughters.

(Edward and Zip, their faces pale and streaked with tears, are prodded by the unwavering aim of the Gamma-7 operatives. They slowly walk back through the open rear doors of the school, stopping as they are confronted by the fifteen Iota-10 operatives waiting for them in the schoolyard.)

Lieutenant John "Hunter" Maher (Megaphone): That's far enough... On your knees. Slowly. Hands on your head where we can see them. We are not going to hurt you. Follow our instructions.

(Edward and Zip slowly sink to their knees on the cold concrete, their hands trembling as they place them on their heads. The finality of the situation, the terrifying sight of the soldiers, and the crushing guilt from the Gamma-7 operative's words all crash down on them at once. They begin to sob.)

Edward: *(His voice is a choked, broken mess)* I'm... sorry... *(sobbing)*

Zip: I'm.. sorry, Engel... I'm sorry for everything... *(sobbing uncontrollably)*

Edward: We're sorry... please... we didn't mean for any of this to happen... we're so sorry...

(Their apologies dissolved into raw, heartbroken sobs. They were just minors with anxious and immature behavior, after all, and the sound of their crying was not one of defiance, but of pure, agonizing pain as they huddled together on the ground, completely broken by the horrific consequences of their own cruelty. Inside the rear exit corridor, the three Gamma-7 operatives stood over them. Two of the soldiers slowly lowered their primary weapons, their aims dropping to the floor in a silent, unconscious gesture of de-escalation. The elite operative crossed his arms over his chest, letting out a long, deep sigh. He watched the two children fall apart, his hard expression unreadable, reflecting on the grim, ugly truth of their work. The Iota-10 operatives listened in silence, the raw sound of the children's weeping crackling over the environment. They couldn't comprehend it—the sheer cruelty these two were capable of, now contrast with a grief so profound it was almost absolute. The Iota-10 Squad Leader let out a quiet sigh of his own, the sound of static and sobbing filling his ears. He keyed his comms.)

Iota-10 Operative 1: *(deep concern voice)* Sir... I feel that they're innocent, they're just... kids. They just, dont know what they are doing.

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn: I can see that... not armed threats, but they are confirmed accomplices. Their knowledge of Oliver's methods is a top-tier intelligence asset... You're right, they were just minors, and sophomoric. But they've been doing this for a long time now.

Operative Sal Monero: Sir, requesting permission to approach and secure. They're fully compliant, no signs of resistance.

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn: Permission granted, Sal Two of you, move in. Slow and steady. We need them coherent for Thorne's interrogation team.

Operative Sal Monero: Acknowledged, sir. Moving in.

(Two of the fifteen Iota-10 operatives lower their rifles to a non-threatening position and begin a slow, careful walk towards the two sobbing teenagers, their movements calm and steady as they listen to their heartbroken cries.)

(Two of the fifteen Iota-10 operatives, Operative Nina Cruz and Operative Sal Moreno, lower their rifles and begin a slow, careful walk towards the two sobbing teenagers. Their movements are calm and steady as they listen to their heartbroken cries.)

Operative Sal Moreno: *(His voice is gentle, projected just enough to be heard over their crying)* Hey. You two okay?

(As they reach the kneeling students, Cruz and Moreno stop a few feet away, giving them space. They don't make any sudden moves, simply standing as calm, authoritative presences.)

Zip: *(Looking up, her face streaked with tears and dirt)...* No, we're not okay! We're... we're... monsters! *(then sobbing)*

Edward: *(Shaking his head, not looking at them sobbing loudly)* You should just... you should just shoot us!, please!, Get it over with–

Operative Nina Cruz: *(cuts Edward speech)* Hey, hey... We're not here to shoot you.

Edward: –We helped him... We helped Oliver... we did what he said...

Operative Sal Moreno: We know. Why don't you tell us about it?

Zip: *(Lets out a fresh wail) *sniffs*,,,* Because... we're horrible!... We're just as bad as he is!

Operative Nina Cruz: *(Her voice is firm, cutting through their panic, but not unkind)* You knew what Oliver was. You knew he was... close to Alice, the thing that lives in this school. You knew she was dangerous, and you helped him anyway. You helped him set a trap for your classmate, Claire, that got her killed. That isn't just a prank, that's a choice you made.

Operative Sal Moreno: And then you helped him do it again. You saw what happened, and you still chose to follow him. You chose to torment Engel, a boy who had already lost everything, for your own amusement. You stood by and let Oliver prepare another trap that could have killed even more of your classmates.

Operative Nina Cruz: Those are the choices you made. You have to own them now. This isn't about being mean anymore, you two are committing a heinous crime at this point.

Zip: *(Sobbing)* Please... please don't kill us!... We'll do anything!

Edward: We're sorry!... We're so, so sorry!

Zip: *(loud sobbing)* I don't want to go to jail!...

Edward: Please, we don't want to die...

Zip: We'll tell you everything! Just don't hurt us!

Operative Sal Moreno: *(His voice softens again)* Nobody is going to kill you. We are not the monsters here.

Operative Nina Cruz: We need you to take a deep breath. Both of you.

Operative Sal Moreno: Just breathe. We're here to help you, but you need to calm down first.

(Zip and Edward continue to cry, their sobs wracking their small bodies, but the immediate, sharp terror begins to subside, replaced by a deep, shuddering grief and guilt.)

Operative Nina Cruz: That's it. Just breathe.

Operative Sal Moreno: We know you're scared. But the running is over.

Zip: *(Her sobs quiet slightly, her voice a watery whisper)* Why... why are you being... nice?

Edward: You should hate us. Everyone should hate us.

Operative Nina Cruz: We don't have time to hate you. We have a job to do. And right now, part of that job is making sure you two are safe. We need you to talk to us. We need you to tell us everything you know about Oliver. About Alice.

Zip: He... he told us everything.

Edward: He said Alice was powerful. He said she liked him. He said if we stuck with him, we'd be powerful too. We'd be safe from... from the teachers.

Zip: We were just... we... We like him, too. We've been oliver for... long time now.

Operative Nina Cruz: *sigh*... *(She gives a slow, understanding nod)* We will get this discussion on your later interrogation, but you are being placed in protective custody as material witnesses and accomplices in multiple anomalous events, including those resulting in the deaths of students. Your actions make you persons of extreme interest to our organization. You will be escorted to a secure location where you will be formally interrogated. Your cooperation from this point forward will be a significant factor in determining the consequences of your actions. Do you understand?

(Edward and Zip look at each other, the weight of Operative Cruz's words crushing them. The fight is completely gone, replaced by a hollow, terrified acceptance.)

Edward: *(He nods, not looking up from the ground)* We... understand. We... we deserve it.

Zip: Interrogated... like criminals?

Operative Sal Moreno: Like people with information that we need for our intel.

Edward: I'm telling you, we just... we're just having fun.

Operative Sal Moreno: For your safety and ours, we need to restrain you now.

Edward: *(A fresh tear rolls down his cheek)* Okay.

Zip: *(Sniffing, she nods)* We get it.

Operative Nina Cruz: We'll be as gentle as possible. Just put your hands behind your back for us.

(Sal moves behind Edward, gently guiding his hands back and securing them with a heavy-duty ziptie. Nina does the same for Zip, her movements quick and efficient. The two students flinch but do not resist. Sal taps his comms unit.)

Operative Sal Moreno (Comms): Marshal Actual, this is Marshal Operative Sal. Be advised, the two student accomplices, Edward and Zip, are now secured. Restraints have been applied without incident.

Operative Nina Cruz (Comms): They are fully compliant, Marshal Actual. This is Marshal Operative Nina. Their emotional state is fragile, but they are cooperating and appear to be showing significant remorse for their actions, over.

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): Solid copy, you two. This is Marshal Actual. Excellent work. What is your recommendation for their immediate disposition? We can't move them to the main camp just yet, we are following the protocol.

Operative Sal Moreno (Comms): Marshal Actual, we request permission to place them in temporary holding inside Cougar-3. It's secure, and it will get them out of the open and away from the main operational theater until Agent Thorne's team is ready for them.

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): Marshal Actual copies, Permission granted. Escort the assets to Cougar-3 and remain with them. Maintain a low-stimulus environment.

Operative Nina Cruz (Comms): Understood, Marshal Actual. We are proceeding to the vehicle now. Marshal Operative Nina out.

(Sal and Nina gently help Edward and Zip to their feet. The plastic zipties are snug but not painful. They begin walking them across the concrete toward one of the massive armored vehicles.)

Zip: *(Her voice is small)* Where... where are you taking us?

Edward: Is it... is it a jail inside that truck?

Zip: Are you going to lock us up?

Edward: What about our parents? Are you going to tell them where we are?

Zip: They're going to be so mad... and so scared...

Edward: Will... will we get to go home after all this is over?

Zip: Are we going to see Oliver again?

Operative Sal Moreno: We're just taking you to one of our vehicles. It's quiet in there. You'll be safe from everything happening out here.

Operative Nina Cruz: We will contact your parents once you two are under consultation within our Foundation, and it will take a long time to process. Right now, our priority is your safety.

Edward: It's so big... I've never seen a truck like that up close.

Zip: Are there... are there other soldiers in there?

Operative Sal Moreno: No. It'll just be the four of us for now.

Edward: What's going to happen to us? For real?

Zip: Are they going to do... what Alice did to Claire... to us?

Operative Nina Cruz: No. Absolutely not. You are going to be questioned, and then you are going to help us make sure that never happens to anyone again.

(Sal and Nina guide the two students the last few feet toward the massive, black Cougar-3. Another Iota-10 operative pulls open the heavy rear door, revealing the dim, spartan interior of the troop bay. The sound of clipped, professional radio chatter echoes from inside. As they approach, other operatives who are outside of the cougar gearing up nearby pause to look, their expressions unreadable.)

Edward: *(Whispering, terrified, intimidated)* They're... they're all staring at us.

Zip: I feel like a bug under my eye.

Edward: Do they think we're... monsters? Like the teachers?

Zip: They probably hate us for what we did...

Iota-10 Operative 5: *(The one holding the door, his voice is neutral, not unkind)* No one hates you. Now get inside.

Operative Sal Moreno: Just sit down on the bench right there.

Edward: Okay...

Zip: *(Nodding, looking down)* Sorry...

Operative Nina Cruz: It's alright. Just get in.

(Sal and Nina help the two students, still restrained with zipties, up into the vehicle's troop bay. They sit them down on a padded bench against the far wall. The heavy door clangs shut, sealing them in the dim, green light of the interior. Sal lets out a long, weary sigh. Four other Iota-10 operatives are outside, quietly observing the window.)

Iota-10 Operative 5: *(He's the one who opened the door)* Well, that was an unexpected development for the morning.

Iota-10 Operative 6: You can say that again. I was expecting a firefight, not... this. They're just teenagers in the hood

Operative Sal Moreno: They're accomplices. But yeah, still, just minors.

Operative Nina Cruz: They're scared enough to be cooperative, I think. They gave up the second Gamma-7 cornered them.

Iota-10 Operative 7: Did you get anything out of them? About Oliver?

Operative Sal Moreno: Not yet. We were a little busy keeping them from having a full-blown panic attack.

Iota-10 Operative 8: Thorne's team is going to have a field day with these two. The intel they must have on Oliver's connection to Alice is critical.

Operative Nina Cruz: We just need to keep them stable until then. Keep the environment calm.

Iota-10 Operative 5: Looks like we're on babysitting duty, then.

Operative Sal Moreno: Looks that way. Just keep the chatter down.

Iota-10 Operative 5: They look... smaller, now that they're not acting tough.

Iota-10 Operative 7: Fear does that to you. Takes all the air out of your sails.

Operative Sal Moreno: Just keep an eye on them. Make sure they don't go into shock.

Operative Nina Cruz: *(looks at the cougar rear window, visible as Edward and Zip were silent, looking down)* They're just staring at the floor. I think the fight's gone out of them—.

(Their quiet conversation is violently interrupted. A sudden, deafening roar of automatic gunfire erupts through their headsets from the open comms channel, followed by a chorus of panicked, urgent shouts.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): *(Static-laced and frantic)* CONTACT! CONTACT! Vanguard Actual to all units, we have reacquired the primary target! Alice is on the first floor, west wing, she's roaming the corridors and has ambushed one of my teams!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): All Vanguard teams, what is her status?! Is she engaging?! I need a report from the team that's pinned down!

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): Affirmative, Scepter Actual! She just tore through a concrete wall like it was nothing! Vanguard 1-3's fireteam is pinned down and taking heavy damage from her tendril attacks! We need support now!

Commander Echo (Comms): All units, be advised, the target is no longer contained to the main hall!

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Scepter, get me a casualty report from Vanguard 1-3! We need to know what her offensive capabilities are against our armored operatives, immediately!

(The three Gamma-7 operatives who had cornered Zip and Edward in the hallway hear the frantic comms chatter through their own headsets. They look at each other, their expressions grim.)

Gamma-7 Elite Operative: You hear that? That's the Captain!

Gamma-7 Operative 1: They've engaged Alice in the west wing! The plan went sideways!

Gamma-7 Operative 2: Vanguard 1-3 needs support. We can't just stand here while they're getting torn apart.

Gamma-7 Operative 1: Let's move! We know the layout of this section! Back inside, go!

(Task Force Leader David Scepter's voice roars over the chaos, a wave of pure command that silences all other chatter for a moment.)

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): All Iota-10 elements, Lock down this entire campus! I want a hard perimeter established around the school, effective immediately! No non-Foundation personnel get in, and nothing gets out that we don't authorize! Confirm! I am authorizing the immediate deployment of reinforcements to your position! I am sending an additional twenty Iota-10 operatives to bolster your perimeter and twenty Gamma-5 operatives to handle any potential public exposure or witness containment! They are rolling from FOB now!.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Hunter, I need a six-person fireteam from your unit to remain at the rear of the campus! Your sole responsibility is to guard those Cougar vehicles and the two student assets we have in custody! Do not let them out of your sight!

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): Marshal Actual copies! All Iota-10 teams are moving to establish the hard perimeter!

Lieutenant John "Hunter" Maher (Comms): Understood, Scepter Actual! I will assign six of my best to asset protection and vehicle security!

Iota-10 Operative 1 (Comms): Copy that!

Iota-10 Operative 2 (Comms): On the move!

Gamma-5 Section Chief (Comms): Genesis Actual acknowledges! Gamma-5 is en route to provide information security and misdirection support!

Operative Sal Moreno (Comms): Marshal Actual, this is Marshal Operative Sal. We are in Cougar-3 with the assets. We will hold this position.

Operative Nina Cruz (Comms): Copy that. We'll keep them secure.

Iota-10 Squad Leader (Comms): Perimeter teams are being assigned and are moving to their rally points now!

Lieutenant John "Hunter" Maher (Comms): Sal, Nina, you're with me! You four have the assets! The rest of you, form up on the main perimeter line!

(The comms channel becomes a cacophony of urgent acknowledgments and the raw, terrifying sound of the firefight raging deep inside the school—bullets cracking, monstrous shrieks, and the shouts of Gamma-7 operatives. Inside Cougar-3, the six operatives assigned to guard duty listen, their faces grim, while the nine other Iota-10 operatives who had been securing the rear perimeter immediately begin to move. They burst from their vehicles, rifles raised, and sprint towards the edges of the campus, fanning out to form the new, hard defensive line Scepter had commanded, leaving the six guards and their two prisoners alone in the relative quiet of the rear yard.)

Remoment

(With a final, grim nod, Lieutenant Maher leads the other nine Iota-10 operatives in a sprint, their boots thudding on the concrete as they move to reinforce the lockdown perimeter. The remaining six operatives, including Sal and Nina, take up defensive positions around the rear yard, their weapons trained on the school, leaving Zip and Edward alone in the tense quiet of Cougar-3 with only the horrific sounds of battle crackling from the vehicle's radio.)

Gamma-7 Operative (Comms): *(Static-laced and frantic)* She's too fast! We can't get a lock on her! Vanguard 1-3 is taking heavy damage on the left flank! I think... I think our member is down!

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): Keep firing! Pin her down! Use suppressive fire to box her into the corridors! Do not let her break out into the main hall or we'll lose containment!

Alice (Comms): *(A piercing, distorted shriek of pure rage and pain crackles through the comms, so loud it makes the speakers in the Cougar distort, followed by the sound of tearing metal)* YOU ARE INSECTS! ANNOYING, NOISY INSECTS!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): She's regenerating from all hits! Conventional rounds are ineffective! All squads, switch to incendiary rounds and aim for the core! Flashbangs on my mark! Blind that Shit!

Gamma-7 Operative 2 (Comms): Flashbang out! She's disoriented! She's shrieking, but she's still standing! Now's our chance, push forward!

Gamma-7 Operative 10 (Comms): Watch out for the tendrils! They're coming up from the floor! Guys Dodge left! DODGE LEFT!...

(Zip and Edward huddle together on the bench, their hands still zip-tied behind their backs. They listen to the terrifying sounds of the battle, their faces masks of pale, dawning horror.)

Zip: *(Covering her ears with her shoulders but cant, her body trembling) ...*

Edward: *(Staring at the floor, then looks at zip)* Are you ok?

Zip: **sniff**

Edward: *(Lets out a low, pained groan)* Ughhh... I think I'm going to be sick.

(Long silence)

Edward: We just went along with it. We thought it was just a stupid prank on Engel. And we ended up here... why did we listen to him? Why are we so stupid?

Zip: *(A long, shuddering sigh)...* I just want this to be over. I want to go home and pretend none of this ever happened.

Edward: We're never going home. We're criminals. We helped a monster kill people.

(Long silence)

Zip: What do you think they're going to do to us after this is all over?--

(The sounds of the distant firefight continue to crackle over the radio, a constant, terrifying reminder of the chaos they helped unleash. Edward doesn't answer Zip's question right away, just stares at his own reflection in the dark, armored glass of the vehicle's viewport.)

Edward: *(He shakes his head, not looking at her, his voice a low, gravelly whisper full of self-loathing)* Dunno. Lock us up, probably. For a long, long time. We're in deep, Zip. We messed up bad. We were just trying to back Oliver up, you know?

Zip: *(Her voice cracks, a mixture of a sob and confusion)* I know, but... We even laugh at Claire, even she's dead...

Edward: *(He slams the back of his head softly against the metal interior of the Cougar, the sound a dull thud)* And Engel... man, we were such jerks to him. All the time. Why? *(sobbing while furious)*

Zip: *(Tears stream down her face again, her voice pleading)* I don't wanna be a bad guy! I just wanted to hang out with you and Oliver! I just wanted to... to be part of the group. I want to change soo bad.

Edward: *(He looks down at his lap a bitter, defeated expression on his face)* It doesn't matter. We did it anyway... We helped him. And now... now there's a freakin' army here... All those guys are in there fighting Alice... and it's our fault they even know about this place. Oliver's gonna be so mad at us for getting caught... They're going to kill his girlfriend.

Zip: *(She leans her head against the cold wall, closing her eyes, her voice hollow and full of grief)* I just wish we could go back. Tell Oliver it was a bad idea. But we can't. And now... I don't know what's gonna happen. I'm scared, Ed.

(The sounds of the distant firefight continue to crackle over the radio, a constant, terrifying reminder of the chaos they helped unleash. Edward listens to Zip's confession of fear, a knot of ice forming in his own stomach.)

Edward: *(He shudders, pulling his knees up to his chest as much as the zipties will allow)* Me too. What... what do you think they'll do? Put us in one of those places?... You know, with the bars and stuff? I don't wanna go to juvie...

Zip: *(Her voice is a watery whisper)* They're soldiers, Ed... They're not gonna send us to juvie. They're gonna take us somewhere worse. Some... secret military jail... We're never going to see our parents again.

Edward: My dad's gonna kill me... He's gonna be so disappointed. I'm never gonna get to drive his car, or... or anything. We're gonna be locked up until we're old and wrinkly, and we'll have to eat that gray... stuff they serve in the cafeteria every single day.

Zip: W—we'll be all alone. They'll probably separate us... I won't even have you or Oliver. I don't think I can do that... I can't be by myself in a place like that... I don't wanna be

alone... I hate being alone... I always hung out with you guys. It was just... better than being at my little house... *(She starts sobbing)* This is so much worse than getting detention... This is... this is— for the rest of our lives... *(sobbing and grieving hate)* I regret this... I hate it! I hate it! I— HATE IT!... *(crying)*

(A new wave of quiet, helpless sobs overtakes them. They aren't just scared of the soldiers or the monsters anymore; they're grieving the normal future they've just realized they've lost.)

Edward: We haven't even really grown up yet. I just... I thought we'd go to college, you know? Maybe I'd actually pass a class for once without cheating... I just wanted things to be... quiet. Peaceful. Not... not like this. I hate all the fighting and the yelling and being scared all the time.

Zip: Me too. I don't want this experience. I don't want to go to prison. I just wanted to be... a pirate, with my lil brother... and maybe...

Edward: I would've. I promise. I would've read all of them.

Zip: It's not fair. We're just kids. We're supposed to make stupid mistakes.

Zip: *(She sniffles, her voice quiet and full of despair)* Even Engel... that soldier said he's with them now... It's not fair to him.

Edward: He's probably just as scared as we are. We did that. We put him right in the middle of all this.

Zip: And now he's safe with them... safer than we are. They're helping him. They hate us.

Edward: We deserve it. He never did anything.

Zip: I know... *(She slumps against the cold wall of the vehicle, her voice barely a whisper)* ...There's nothing we can do. We give up.

Edward: But not... not like this. Not mistakes that get people killed. This is... this is too big for us.

Zip: ...

(Edward looks at Zip, his own fear and grief mirroring hers. The radio continues to crackle with the sounds of a distant, violent battle they can't see but feel responsible for.)

Zip: We're never gonna have that again, are we?... No more freedom. Just... walls and a locked door for the rest of our lives...

Edward: *(Sighs)* It's going to be a small room, I bet... With no windows. They're not gonna let us see the sky or feel the sun ever again.

Zip: Brooo, I can't live like that...! *(sobbing)* I'll go crazy. I need to be able to... to run around. To be loud and annoying! *(crying)*

Edward: I just... I wish I could get one hug from my mom... Just one... To tell her I'm sorry for everything. *(silent sob)*. They're going to hate us. Our parents. Everyone at school. They'll all know what we did. We're just... numbers in a file now. We're not people anymore. We're just... the bad guys.

Zip: I Feel... *(crying sobbing)*... I- I- WANT TO DIE!... I'M USELESS!!! *(Sobbing uncontrollably)*

(The weight of it all becomes too much for Zip. A raw, ragged sob escapes her, and she collapses sideways, burying her face in the sleeve of Edward's right arm, her small body shaking violently with the force of her grief.)

Edward: *(He flinches at the sudden contact, then softens, his own eyes welling up with fresh tears as he looks down at her)* Hey... hey, it's... it's okay.

Zip: *(Her voice is a muffled, incoherent wail against his sleeve)* It's not!... It's never going to be okay again!...

Edward: I know. I know it's not. But... we're here. Together...

Zip: *(Crying harder)* I'm so scared, Ed!

Edward: *(Awkwardly, with his hands still zip-tied behind him, he leans his head down to rest against hers)* Me too. But I got you. Okay? I'm not leaving...

Zip: *(She just sobs in response, clinging to his arm.)*

Edward: Shhh... just... just let it out. It's okay.

Zip: *(Her cries slowly, gradually, soften into exhausted, shuddering whimpers.)*

Edward: I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere.

(They sit like that for a long time, two broken teenagers huddled together in the dim, green light of the armored vehicle. The sounds of the battle over the radio become a distant, meaningless hum. All that exists is the quiet, shared misery in the belly of the steel beast. Zip continues to sob, defeated silence as she rests against him, completely drained of all energy and hope.)

10:20 - Camp Hope

(After a long, tense walk, Anya, Kofia, and Mister Hotchpot arrive at the entrance to the sprawling MTF encampment. They stop, and the history assistant stares, his eyes wide as he takes in the full scale of the operation. The air hums with the power of generators and the constant, overlapping chatter of military radios.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(His voice is an awestruck whisper)* Good heavens... It's even more... immense up close. All these soldiers, these... these machines... it's like a city that sprang up from nothing while we were trapped in there.

Kofia: It's something, isn't it? Our organization doesn't do things by halves. When they decide to solve a problem, they bring all their creeks.

Anya: Every person you see here has a purpose, Mister Hotchpot. They are the best at what they do, from the soldiers securing the perimeter to the technicians in that main command tent.

Mister Hotchpot: *(He points a trembling finger toward a large tent emblazoned with a red cross)* And that tent there... is that where they took Engel and... and Miss Thavel?

Kofia: That's the main medical triage. They'll be getting the best care possible in there, sir. The chief surgeon is a real miracle worker.

Mister Hotchpot: It's all just so much to take in. I've lived in this quiet county my entire life. I have never seen anything like this. It feels like I've stepped into another world entirely.

Anya: In a way, you have. This is our world. It is... often chaotic, but it is necessary.

Kofia: But it's a world where we fight back against the things that go bump in the night. You're on the right side of the wall now, sir.

Mister Hotchpot: It's just... I can't believe this was hidden, right under our noses, this whole time. All this power, all this... organization.

Anya: Secrecy is our greatest shield. It protects the world from the very things we are fighting.

(A Lambda-5 operative in sleek, dark armor with glowing blue accents approaches the trio. Their gear looks far more advanced than a standard soldier's, almost futuristic. Their posture is alert but their voice is calm.)

Lambda-5 Operative: Excuse me. This is a restricted area.

Anya: It's that so, Mister operative. We're in Iota-10 Division. We're escorting a civilian asset from inside the school.

Lambda-5 Operative: *(He looks at Hotchpot's tired, shocked face, then back at them, nodding)* Copy that. We were told to expect you. Is this... one of the faculty members?

Kofia: Yes. This is Mister Hotchpot.

Mister Hotchpot: I... Hello, I just did what little I could.

Lambda-5 Operative: Well, we're grateful for any help we can get, sir. We're getting all non-combatant personnel to a secure holding area. It's safe there.

Anya: Where do we need to take him?

Lambda-5 Operative: *(He points with an open hand towards a large, separate tent on the far side of the camp)* The civilian processing tent is over there. The personnel on duty will get you checked in and make sure you're comfortable.

Kofia: Thank you, operative. We appreciate the assist.

Lambda-5 Operative: No problem.

(The Lambda-5 operative gives them a final, sharp nod before turning and returning to their guard post, their movements fluid and almost unnaturally silent. Mister Hotchpot watches him go, his expression one of profound, bewildered awe.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(He watches the operative walk away, his mouth slightly agape)* My word... the... the suit he was wearing... it was glowing. And his rifle... it didn't look like any gun I've ever seen in a history book. It looked like it was made of... glass and light. What in heaven's name was that?

Anya: Specialists right there. They handle the... more complicated and unpredictable aspects of the work. Their gear is specifically designed to help them navigate and stabilize unstable environments. And it looks really cool—

Kofia: Alright, sir, come on. Let's follow that path he pointed out. The civilian tent is just over this way, past those trucks.

Mister Hotchpot: *(He takes a deep breath, still looking around at the bustling camp)* Okay. It's just... a lot to process. I feel like I've aged a decade in the last hour alone.

Kofia: Tell me about it. But hey, they've got something right there and a quiet place to sit over there. That's a good first step back to normal, right?

Mister Hotchpot: Yes. Yes, I suppose it is. A cup of coffee... absolutely wonderful right now.

(Anya gives a small nod, and the trio begins to walk, following the path pointed out by the Lambda-5 operative. They move from the relative quiet of the entrance into the heart of the bustling camp. Anya and Kofia fall into a quiet, low-voiced conversation, a deliberate bubble of normalcy for Mister Hotchpot's benefit. But the old man isn't listening to them. His senses are completely overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of a secret world preparing for war: the rhythmic thud of soldiers jogging in formation, the high-pitched whine of advanced equipment being calibrated, the roar of a Cougar's engine turning over, and the constant, overlapping crackle of a hundred radio channels speaking in clipped, urgent code.)

Mister Hotchpot (in his mind): *It's like something out of one of my books... but not. I've read about the great armies of history, the legions of Rome, the Grand Armée of Napoleon... but this... this is different. The sheer precision of it all. Not a single wasted movement. Every soldier, every technician... they move as if they're all part of a single, thinking machine. The sounds... the crackle of radios speaking in a language I don't understand, the shouts of commanders that carry an absolute authority... it's the sound of a perfectly disciplined force preparing for a war I never knew was being fought.*

(His gaze drifts upward, past the tops of the tents and the massive vehicles, to the sky itself. He catches a glint of movement, a tiny, dark speck moving with an unnatural smoothness against the pale morning clouds. It's too high to make out any details, a silent, cross-shaped silhouette circling slowly, patiently.)

Kofia: *(Noticing the old man's transfixed gaze)* Ahem... First time seeing one of those, sir?

Mister Hotchpot: *(Startled, he looks away from the sky, blinking)* Oh! I... yes. What is it? It moves so... smoothly. Not like a normal airplane.

Kofia: Just a weather drone. We use them to keep an eye on the atmospheric conditions. Make sure no sudden storms roll in on us.

Mister Hotchpot: A weather drone... of course. You people seem to be prepared for every possible contingency.

Kofia: We try to be. It's better to have an umbrella and not need it, than to need one and get soaked, right?

Mister Hotchpot: *(He gives a nervous chuckle, his eyes still darting around the organized chaos of the camp)* I suppose you're right. It just seems like... an awfully big umbrella for a little bit of rain.

Kofia: Well, we're expecting a hurricane. Metaphorically speaking.

Mister Hotchpot: Yes. Yes, I suppose we are—

(Suddenly, a familiar voice, filled with surprise and relief, calls out from behind them, cutting through the noise of the camp.)

Principal Grace (from a distance): Mister Hotchpot? Is that you?

(The trio turns. Walking towards them from the direction of the medical tent is Principal Grace. She's not wearing her usual stern expression; her face is filled with a weary but genuine warmth. She looks... lighter.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(His face breaks into a wide, joyous smile of pure relief)* Grace! My dear, you're alright!

Principal Grace: I am. I'm safe.

Mister Hotchpot: *(He hurries towards her, his own weariness forgotten as he closes the distance)* Oh, thank heavens! I was so worried!

Principal Grace: As was I, for everyone.

(He reaches her and pulls her into a warm, heartfelt hug, a reunion of two old colleagues who have survived a shared nightmare.)

Mister Hotchpot: I thought... after the blackout yesterday and you being gone... I feared the worst.

Principal Grace: *(Hugging him back tightly)* I know. Me too. But we're safe now. We're finally safe.

Mister Hotchpot: It is so, well, good to see you.

(Anya and Kofia watch from a respectful distance, a rare, small smile on Kofia's face.)

Kofia: It's good to see a friendly face. Even better to see two of them find each other.

(Mister Hotchpot pulls back, still holding Grace's arms, his face etched with deep concern.)

Mister Hotchpot: But where have you been, Grace? I haven't seen you since before dismissal yesterday! Your office was locked, no one knew where you were... I was imagining all sorts of terrible things had happened to you.

Principal Grace: *(She takes a deep, steadying breath, her voice low so only he can hear)* It's a very long story, Mister Hotchpot. I... I was taken into custody by these people yesterday. I uncovered something... some files they were after... and I confronted two of their agents. I thought they were a threat to the school.

Mister Hotchpot: *(He looks over at Anya and Kofia, who give him a respectful nod, his eyes wide)* Them? You mean the new janitors? But... they were the ones who helped me! They saved Engel's life!

Principal Grace: I know that now. They are not what they seem. They brought me here, to this place. I've been... talking with them. Telling them everything I know about the school, about... about all of it.

Mister Hotchpot: You told them? The whole truth? After all these years of trying to keep it contained...

Principal Grace: I had to. It was time. And they... they believed me. They're here to help us, to stop it. For the first time in twenty years, I don't feel like I'm alone in this fight anymore.

Mister Hotchpot: *(Overcome with emotion, his eyes filling with tears, he pulls her into another hug)* Oh, Grace... I am so, so relieved. I never thought I'd see this day. I thought we were doomed to live in that shadow forever.

Principal Grace: The sun is rising, old friend. I think... I think the shadow is finally starting to recede.

(Anya and Kofia approach the two reunited friends, their expressions now serious and focused, interrupting the tender moment.)

Anya: *(Her voice is low and urgent, all warmth gone)* I'm sorry to interrupt. But you both need to know, the situation inside has escalated dramatically. The original plan has been scrubbed. The fire drill is off.

Kofia: *(His expression is grim, his gaze fixed on the distant school building)* There was... an incident. One of the hostile teachers transformed, and the primary target, Alice, has been engaged by our teams. There's an active firefight happening in the east wing right now as we speak.

Principal Grace: *(Her face pales, the hope draining away as she clutches Mister Hotchpot's arm)* A firefight? Oh, my heavens... the children! Are they safe in all this chaos?

Kofia: Well- Uh, that's what our soldiers are there for.

Principal Grace: It's my fault... I should have told you more about the language teacher... about her rage... I didn't know she would...

Anya: This isn't on you, Eleanor. We are adapting to the situation. But we need to prepare ourselves for the worst.

Kofia: This is no longer a quiet infiltration. It's a full-blown war. You two need to stay here, in the secure zone.

Principal Grace: I understand.

Kofia: We just wanted you to be aware of the developing situation. We will handle it from here.

(Anya and Kofia exchange a determined look. Their brief respite is over.)

Kofia: We have to go. We've been reassigned. We have a job to do inside.

Anya: We're leaving you both in the care of the camp personnel. You'll be safe here.

Principal Grace: Please... be careful, you two. You've been so kind to all of us.

Mister Hotchpot: Yes. Please, stay safe there. We're all counting on you to bring them home.

Anya: Thank you. We will.

Kofia: Don't you worry about us. We're the best there is. We promise we'll get those kids out.

Principal Grace: Alright.

(Anya and Kofia give them a final, determined nod before turning and striding away, their figures quickly disappearing into the organized chaos of the bustling camp. Principal Grace and Mister Hotchpot stand side-by-side, watching them go.)

Mister Hotchpot: *(He watches them go, his expression a mixture of awe and trepidation)* They're just children themselves, aren't they? So young to be carrying such a heavy burden for the rest of us.

Principal Grace: They are. But they have a strength I haven't seen in a very long time. It's... it's a profound sense of duty. I almost envy it.

Mister Hotchpot: To think, we saw them as simple janitors just yesterday. The world is so much more complicated than the history books would have you believe.

Principal Grace: It is. I feel so... utterly helpless, just standing here. All these people are fighting for my school, for my children, and all I can do is watch from the sidelines.

Mister Hotchpot: We gave them the information they needed, Grace. That's not nothing. We armed them with the truth, which can be the most powerful weapon of all.

Principal Grace: I suppose so. But it doesn't feel like enough. Not when you can still hear the... the sounds of that battle echoing in your mind.

Mister Hotchpot: I just pray they are successful. And that they all come back safely. Especially those two.

Principal Grace: They made a promise. To get the children out. I find myself, against all my better judgment, believing in that promise.

(She lets out a long, shuddering sigh, the adrenaline leaving her feeling drained and hollow.)

Principal Grace: Well... standing here and worrying won't change the outcome. Would... would you care to join me for that coffee we were promised?

Mister Hotchpot: *(He gives her a small, grateful smile)* I would like that very much, Eleanor. I think a moment of quiet normalcy is exactly what the soul requires right now.

Principal Grace: I feel as if I haven't had a normal conversation in decades. I'm not entirely sure I remember how to.

Mister Hotchpot: I think it's like riding a bicycle. You never truly forget. We can just... talk about old books. Or the weather. Or how the coffee in the staff lounge was always a crime against humanity.

Principal Grace: *(A small, genuine chuckle escapes her)* Yes. I think I can manage that. Let's go find that coffee.

(The two old friends turn and begin to walk together through the bustling camp, their pace slow and deliberate. They are a small, fragile island of quiet dignity amidst the loud, urgent preparations for war, two survivors seeking a small comfort at the edge of their world's end.)

10:25 - The Hunt

(Meanwhile, the first floor of Maple High had become a warzone. The thirty operatives of Gamma-7 moved in disciplined, desperate fireteams, their boots skidding on the debris-littered linoleum. The air was thick with the smell of cordite and ozone. Alice, a fluid

nightmare of black tendrils and raw power, flowed through the hallways, her mocking laughter echoing off the lockers.)

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: Spread out! I want fireteams Alpha and Bravo covering our nine and three o'clock! Don't bunch up, we can't give her a single large target!

Gamma-7 Pointman: Contact! She's fast! Moving down the long corridor, directly ahead!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist: We need to cut her off at the next intersection! Do not let her break our line!

Gamma-7 Shield Bearer: I'll take point! Move behind me! Stay in my shadow!

(The hallways erupted in controlled bursts of gunfire, the bullets sparking uselessly against Alice's form or tearing chunks out of the walls. When the operatives were pinned by a sudden, violent lash of her tendrils, a flashbang would arc through the air, its deafening CRACK and brilliant flash momentarily stunning the entity, giving them just enough time to fall back and reposition.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Scepter Actual, this is Vanguard Actual. We are in active pursuit of the primary target on the first floor. She is highly mobile and demonstrates extreme aggression, but we are containing her movement to sector Bravo-One.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Copy that, Vanguard. What's her status? Are our incendiary rounds having any significant effect on her regeneration?

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Negative. She's regenerating from all ballistic trauma almost instantly. The incendiary rounds seem to cause her pain and slow her down, but they are not stopping her. It appears she is toying with our teams.

Commander Echo (Comms): All Gamma-7 elements, be advised, Iota-10 has established a full exterior perimeter. She is boxed in. Your objective is to continue to harry and contain. Do not overextend your teams trying for a capture.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Acknowledged, Command. We'll keep her busy and keep her contained. Vanguard Actual out.

Alice: *(Her voice is a dissonant shriek that echoes through the hallway, seeming to come from everywhere at once, laced with static and pure rage) Grrrrr... YOU THINK YOU CAN TRAP ME?! IN MY OWN HALLWAYS?! YOU ARE MERELY DELAYING YOUR OWN ERASURE! I WILL TEAR THIS PLACE APART AND WEAR YOUR ARMOR AS TROPHIES!*

(The operatives fall back to a larger intersection of hallways, using the corner as a chokepoint to regroup.)

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: Alright, listen up! She's falling back toward our position! Re-form on me!

Gamma-7 Shield Bearer 1: Shield Team Alpha, front line! Form a wall! Interlock those shields!

Gamma-7 Pointman: Pointman ready! I'll draw her fire when she rounds that corner!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 1: CQC Team, cover the flanks! Be ready to move in if she gets bogged down by suppressive fire!

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Bravo): Bravo Fireteam, find hostile's positions! I want suppressive fire coming down from that second-floor landing!

Gamma-7 Support Gunner: Support here! I'm setting up the heavy repeater! Give me ten seconds and I'll give you a wall of lead!

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Charlie): Charlie team will hold the rear! Nothing gets past us!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 2: Flashbangs are prepped and ready on your mark!

Gamma-7 Shield Bearer 2: The line is set! Let her come!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: Steady... steady... wait for my signal!

(The Gamma-7 operatives hold their positions in the intersection, a silent, disciplined wall of black armor and raised rifles. The air is thick with tension, every soldier focused on the corner Alice is about to round.)

Gamma-7 Pointman (Comms): I have a visual! Target is rounding the corner, moving at speed!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist (Comms): All CQC teams, standby for breach!

Gamma-7 Support Gunner (Comms): Heavy repeater is online and ready to suppress!

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): NOW! Flashbang out!

(An operative from the front line throws a flashbang grenade. It lands and detonates with a blinding white flash and a deafening, percussive CRACK that echoes through the halls.)

Alice: *(A high-pitched, agonized shriek fills the air as she stumbles into view, clutching at her eyes. The shriek morphs into a low, guttural laugh laced with pure fury)* AAGH! BRIGHT LIGHTS AND LOUD NOISES! IS THAT ALL YOUR SPECIES CAN MUSTER?! YOU THINK THESE CHEAP PARLOR TRICKS CAN STOP ME?! I WILL DEVOUR YOU ALL AND LEAVE YOU TO FESTER IN THE DARK!

(The operatives open fire, a deafening roar of coordinated, disciplined shots. Alice stops laughing, ignoring the bullets that spark and ricochet off her form. She slams her two demonic-looking hands into the linoleum floor, which cracks under the force. The ground beneath the MTF soldiers begins to vibrate violently.)

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: What is she doing?! She's not moving! All teams, watch her hands! She's channeling something into the ground!

Gamma-7 Operative 11: Sir, my sensors are going crazy! The floor is shaking! I'm getting massive energy readings from directly below us!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: WATCH YOUR FEET! SHE'S ATTACKING FROM BELOW! SCATTER! GET TO COVER, NOW!

(The linoleum floor explodes upwards in a shower of shattered tile and dust as dozens of thick, obsidian tendrils burst through, whipping through the air like living spears. Most of the operatives dive out of the way, scrambling behind pillars or the heavy shield line. Three aren't fast enough. A tendril wraps around one operative's leg, while two others are impaled through the shoulder and chest.)

Gamma-7 Pointman 14: AGH! MY LEG! IT'S GOT MY LEG!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 9: I'M HIT! I'M HIT! Vitals are critical!

Gamma-7 Operative 22: MAN DOWN! I REPEAT, WE HAVE THREE OPERATIVES DOWN AT THE FRONT LINE!

(The remaining Gamma-7 operatives immediately react, unleashing a torrent of fire at Alice to keep her from advancing on the wounded.)

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: COVERING FIRE! OPEN FIRE ON THE MAIN TARGET! DON'T LET HER ADVANCE!

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: LAYING DOWN SUPPRESSION! WE NEED TO PULL THEM BACK!

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: MEDIC! I NEED A MEDIC TEAM AT SECTOR BRAVO-TWO, NOW!

Gamma-7 Medic (Comms): Copy that, Vanguard! Medic team is on the move! ETA thirty seconds!

Gamma-7 Support Gunner: KEEP FIRING IDIOT! DON'T GIVE HER AN INCH OF GROUND!

Gamma-7 Medic: *(Arriving on scene with another medic, dragging a portable trauma kit)* We're here! We see the wounded!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: Get them out of there! Drag them back behind the shield line! Now!

Gamma-7 Medic 2: On it! We're moving in!

(The two medics move with a low, disciplined urgency, darting from cover to cover under the storm of suppressive fire. The air is a chaotic symphony of cracking bullets, shouting, and the wet, tearing sound of Alice's tendrils impacting the walls.)

Alice (voice echoing): YOU CANNOT SAVE THEM! THEY ARE ALREADY MINE!

Gamma-7 Pointman 14: *(Grunting in pain as the medics reach him)* Get... get this damn thing off me! It's crushing my leg!

Gamma-7 Medic: Hold still, operative! We're cutting you out!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 9: My... my armor's been breached... I can't feel my arm...

Gamma-7 Medic 2: You're going into shock! Applying a tourniquet and trauma dressing now!

Gamma-7 Operative 22: Go! Leave me! Just... stop her!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan (shouting, off-comms): KEEP FIRING! DON'T GIVE HER A TARGET! BOX HER IN!

Gamma-7 Shield Bearer (shouting, off-comms): RELOADING! COVER ME!

Gamma-7 Medic: *(As they start dragging Pointman 14 by his tactical vest)* We are not leaving anyone behind! Start pulling! Now!

Gamma-7 Medic 2: I've got Specialist 9! He's heavy! I need an assist!

Gamma-7 Medic 3: *(Grabbing Operative 22)* I'm on him! He's still conscious!

Gamma-7 Medic: Maintain pressure on those wounds! We need to get them past the shield line!

Gamma-7 Medic 2: Move! Move! The fireteam is still providing cover!

Gamma-7 Medic 3: We're almost there! Just a few more feet!

(The medics successfully drag the three wounded operatives behind the main shield wall as the firefight continues to rage. Alice, frustrated by the wall of shields and incendiary rounds, changes tactics. She stops trying to break their line and begins gliding down a side corridor, her head turning slowly as if looking at the barricaded classroom doors, sensing the terrified children within.)

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: Where's she going?! She's disengaging from the main fight!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard Actual, be advised, target is moving down the western corridor. She appears to be... investigating the barricaded classrooms.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): She knows the children are in there. She's looking for a weaker point of entry, a softer target.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: AAAhhhh! We cannot let her reach those barricades! All fireteams, you are to re-engage!

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: We need to keep her away from those classroom doors at all costs! We have to draw her back to this intersection!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist: Use the incendiary rounds! She hates the fire! Use them to force her back toward our position!

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: Do it! Flush her out! We are the only thing standing between her and those kids! HOLD THIS LINE!

(The Gamma-7 operatives respond instantly to their Squad Leader's command. Several fireteams unleash a volley of incendiary rounds down the western corridor. The rounds explode in brilliant, white-hot flashes, creating a wall of fire and smoke that forces Alice to halt her advance on the classrooms.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Scepter Actual, this is Vanguard Actual. Be advised, we have successfully redirected the target with incendiary munitions. She is disengaging from the classroom corridor and is moving further into the west wing stairwell.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Solid copy, Vanguard. All teams, be advised, the target is being pushed west. Iota-10, I want you to collapse your exterior perimeter and shadow her movement from the outside. We cannot risk losing her in this labyrinth.

Gamma-7 Pointman (Comms): Vanguard Actual, Pointman has eyes on. Target is ascending! She's on the main stairwell in the west wing, moving rapidly to the second floor! I repeat, target is moving to the second floor!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): All Vanguard elements, acknowledge. We are in pursuit of the target. We are ascending to the second floor. I want fireteams Alpha and Charlie on point. Bravo team, you have our six. Maintain combat spacing and prepare for contact.

(With a series of hand signals, the twenty remaining Gamma-7 operatives form a disciplined column and begin to move, their boots thudding on the floor as they follow Alice up the wide, concrete stairwell. The first fireteam reaches the top of the stairs and immediately fans out, weapons raised, sweeping the second-floor landing.)

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Alpha Lead to all Vanguard elements. We are on the second deck. The stairwell is secure. Moving to establish a foothold on this floor.

Gamma-7 Alpha Pointman: Second floor landing is clear! No immediate threats! I have a long, straight corridor at our twelve o'clock, multiple closed doors on both sides.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Copy that. Alpha team, set a cross-coverage position. Hold this landing and cover that main corridor. The rest of Vanguard is right behind us.

Gamma-7 Charlie Lead (Arriving): Charlie Lead on deck. We'll take the opposite flank and cover the adjoining hallways. The architecture up here is identical to the first floor, but I don't like these shadows.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Acknowledged, Charlie. We hold this position until the full squad is up and ready to advance. All operatives, continue scanning all sectors for any sign of movement.

(The rest of the Gamma-7 squad thunders up the stairs, the heavy thud of their boots echoing in the concrete stairwell. Within seconds, all twenty operatives have assembled on the second-floor landing, forming a tight, disciplined perimeter, their weapons scanning every shadow.)

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): All Vanguard elements are on the second deck. Situation report confirms the target has moved to this level. We are now

commencing a full, systematic sweep of this floor. I want all teams on a rolling overwatch. No blind corners.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: You heard the Captain! Alpha and Charlie teams, you have the point! Bravo, you maintain rear security and cover this stairwell! I want comms discipline from this point forward! Only report contacts or threats!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: This is Specter. All fireteam leads, monitor your IRIS204 units closely. The Hume readings from the first floor were erratic. I want immediate reports on any significant energy fluctuations on this level.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Alpha Lead copies. We will take the main corridor, twelve o'clock. We'll advance in a staggered formation. Pointman, you're up.

Gamma-7 Charlie Lead: Charlie Lead copies. We will take the adjoining corridor to the east, our three o'clock. We'll maintain visual contact through the intersections and provide overlapping fields of fire.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): Acknowledged, all teams. Execute the sweep. Scepter Actual is monitoring our progress. Let's make this clean. Move out.

(The two fireteams begin to advance down the long, silent hallways, their movements fluid and synchronized. They hug the walls, weapons raised, sweeping every corner. The only sounds are their quiet breathing and the low, encrypted crackle of their comms.)

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 7: *(Whispering into his comms)* I've got a closed door at my nine o'clock. No light underneath. My thermal scan shows the room is cold.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Copy that, CQC Seven. Mark it on the map but bypass for now. We stay on the primary corridor. We are not splitting the team to clear rooms yet.

Gamma-7 Field Engineer 18: Sir, my IRIS204 is showing a minor Hume fluctuation ahead. Just a flicker, but it's there. Reading just jumped from 1.0 to 1.15.

Major Lena "Specter" Khan (Comms): All teams, be advised. We have a potential anomalous energy signature at Alpha team's twelve o'clock. Stay sharp.

Gamma-7 Charlie Lead (Comms): Charlie Lead copies. We're holding our position at the next intersection to provide crossfire support if needed.

Gamma-7 Support Gunner 25: Sir, the energy reading is gone. Back to baseline. My IRIS204 shows it as a transient event. False alarm?

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: There are no false alarms in this place. Assume she knows we're here. She's testing our senses, seeing how we react.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter (Comms): Keep your eyes on what you can see, operative! Don't rely solely on the tech! Trust your gut! That's how they get you!

Gamma-7 Breacher 16: Hallway intersection ahead, thirty meters. Multiple angles of exposure.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Copy that. Pointman, prepare to pie the corner on my mark. Shields, get ready to move up and cover the advance.

Gamma-T Pointman 1: Standing by. Ready to move.

Gamma-7 Charlie Lead (Comms): Alpha Lead, this is Charlie. We have a visual on your intersection from our position to the east. It's clear from this angle. No sign of the target.

(Alpha Team advances cautiously to the intersection, weapons raised, their movements a silent, deadly ballet. They take up positions covering all angles, with Charlie Team providing overwatch from the perpendicular hallway.)

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Copy that, Charlie. We are at the intersection. Pointman, hold at the corner.

Gamma-7 Pointman 1: Holding. Intersection is a four-way. I've got long corridors at our nine, twelve, and three o'clock.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter (Comms): All Vanguard elements, be advised. Alpha has reached a primary intersection at sector Gamma-Four. This is a major tactical chokepoint.

Gamma-7 Shield Bearer 4: Moving up to provide hard cover at the twelve o'clock.

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 7: Nine o'clock corridor appears clear on thermal scan.

Gamma-7 Field Engineer 18: Three o'clock corridor is also cold. No energy readings on the IRIS204.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): Hold your position, Alpha Lead. I'm splitting the squad to cover all three avenues of approach.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Acknowledged, Vanguard Actual. Awaiting your orders.

(The rest of the squad files in, securing the intersection. The operatives press themselves against the walls, creating a heavily armed, 360-degree perimeter in the dead center of the hallway cross.)

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): Alright, Alpha Lead, you will divide your fireteam into three elements.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Copy that, sir. Designating fireteams now.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): Element One, you will take the nine o'clock corridor. Element Two, you advance straight ahead, twelve o'clock. Element Three, you have the three o'clock.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: Fireteam Alpha-One, you have the nine. Fireteam Alpha-Two, you're on the twelve. Fireteam Alpha-Three, take the three. Acknowledge.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-One): Alpha-One copies. Moving to the nine o'clock corridor.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-Two): Alpha-Two copies. We have the main advance.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-Three): Alpha-Three copies. Taking the three o'clock.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): All elements are to advance slowly and methodically. I want constant communication between fireteams at every door and intersection.

Gamma-7 Charlie Lead (Comms): Vanguard Actual, Charlie Team will hold this intersection to act as a rear guard and support element for all three advancing teams.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): Good call, Charlie Lead. You are their anchor point. Nothing gets behind them.

Gamma-7 Alpha Lead: All Alpha elements, you have your assignments.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-One): We're moving.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-Two): Moving.

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead (Alpha-Three): Moving now.

Ground Floor Sweep

(As the twenty Gamma-7 operatives begin their tense, three-pronged advance on the second floor, the remaining seven members of the squad—Bravo Team—continue their own mission in the eerie quiet of the first floor. They move with a silent, practiced stealth, their weapons held at a low ready. They've been sweeping for several minutes, the only sound their own quiet footsteps and the distant, muffled echoes of the battle raging on the floor above them. The Bravo Team Lead finally breaks the silence over the squad's private comms channel.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(His voice is a low, professional murmur over the squad's private radio channel)* Bravo Team, status check. I want reports from all elements. We need to locate that office and secure the intercom system before the main assault window opens.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: *(His voice crackles back in response)* Negative progress on my sector, Lead. This building's layout is a nightmare. It feels like it was designed to make you get lost. Every corridor looks exactly the same.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: I'll second that. It's got to be a quarter-mile from the east wing to the west. We could be searching for hours if we don't find a directory soon.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: And these schematics are next to useless; they must be fifty years out of date. Half the rooms aren't labeled. We're essentially moving blind, just looking for a door that looks more important than the others.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: At least it's quiet down here. I can hear the firefight upstairs over the command channel. Sounds like Alpha and Charlie are having a hell of a time.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: That's why we need to move with purpose. The sooner we get control of that P.A. system, the sooner Command can initiate the evacuation and we can fully support the other teams.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: You ever get the feeling a place is watching you? This school... it's too still. Too clean. It gives me a bad feeling deep in my gut.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: Let's just hope the intercom is still operational. Tech this old... you flip a switch and you're just as likely to cause another blackout as you are to make an announcement.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: Wait... I've got a sign up ahead. Looks like a directory. Finally. Maybe now we can figure out where the hell we actually are in this maze.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Copy that, Specialist. Move up and check it. The rest of the team, hold position and cover his advance.

(Specialist 19 cautiously approaches the directory, his rifle scanning the hallway. The rest of Bravo Team holds their positions, weapons trained on every door and corner. He quickly relays the information from the old map.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: Okay, directory's old but legible. The admin wing is definitely on this level. The main office should be... two corridors down and to the right. I'm updating the overlay on our IRIS units now.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: I see the update. Still a lot of blank spaces on this map, but at least we have a target vector. Let's move.

(The team continues their slow, methodical sweep. For a full minute, the only sounds are their quiet footsteps and the distant battle. They turn right down the designated hallway, and there, halfway down the corridor, they see it: a set of large, light blue double doors with a polished brass plate that reads: "PRINCIPAL GRACE - MAIN OFFICE". They stop, fanning out to cover the corridor.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(Tapping the command channel bead in his ear)* Command, this is Bravo Lead. We have located the objective. I have eyes on the principal's office.

Commander Echo (Comms): Solid copy, Bravo. You have your new orders. We are moving to a direct announcement protocol. You are to breach that office, secure the intercom system, and broadcast the following message on a school-wide channel, open frequency. You will announce the presence of a specialized military task force on the premises. State that we are here to neutralize all hostile threats and that the campus is under our full control. You will instruct all non-combatant survivors to remain barricaded in their current locations and await further instructions. Emphasize that they are to follow all guidance from task force personnel for their own safety. Acknowledge.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(He nods to himself, his voice firm over the radio)* Acknowledged, Command. Breach the office, secure the intercom, and deliver the "we're in charge now" speech to the entire school. We are on it. Bravo Lead out.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: Alright, are we good to go, Lead? Time to knock.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Affirmative. Breacher, you're on the door with Pointman 3. The two of you will form the entry team.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: Fuck yeah! *(His voice shifts to a sharp, tactical command over the squad comms)* Bravo-Two fireteam, form a security perimeter on the left flank! Cover that intersection!

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: Bravo-Three, you're with me on the right! Watch our backs! Entry team is moving to the door.

(The two fireteams of Bravo Team efficiently establish a 360-degree security perimeter in the hallway. The three-person entry team—Bravo Lead, Breacher 21, and Pointman 3—stacks up on the light blue double doors of the principal's office.)

(Pointman 3 reaches out a gloved hand and carefully, silently, tries the handle. It turns with a soft click. He gives a nod to the team lead.)

Gamma-7 Pointman 3: *(His voice is a low whisper over the squad radio)* Door's unlocked.

(The Breacher pushes the door open just enough for them to flow inside, weapons raised, sweeping the room in a practiced triangle formation. The office is dark, neat, and eerily still.)

Gamma-7 Breacher 21: Clear!

(The three operatives move deeper into the room. It's an ordinary principal's office, frozen in time from the moment Grace left it. Their flashlights cut through the gloom, landing on the large desk at the far end, where a computer monitor and a P.A. system microphone sit, both powered down.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: This is it. Looks like nobody's been in here since Grace was... extracted. The room feels clean.

Gamma-7 Pointman 3: Can you imagine? Working in this office every single day for twenty years, knowing what was just down the hall from you.

Gamma-7 Breacher 21: She had to have been tough as nails. Or completely out of her mind. Maybe a little of both.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Alright, Let's get this done and make sure her fight wasn't for nothing.

Gamma-7 Pointman 3: Agreed. Let's see what kind of system we're working with here.

(The Bravo Lead takes a seat in the principal's chair, maintaining overwatch on the door, while Breacher 21 and Pointman 3 inspect the computer tower and the microphone connections under the desk.)

Gamma-7 Breacher 21: System looks standard issue for a school this old. Nothing obviously anomalous about the hardware itself.

Gamma-7 Pointman 3: Power is on. The tower is humming softly. Let's see if we can wake up the monitor and get access.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Do it. Let's find out what kind of security we're up against before we can make the announcement.

Gamma-7 Breacher 21: Firing up the monitor now.

(The monitor flickers to life, its light flooding the dark office. It displays a simple, institutional login screen with a password field.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(Tapping the command channel bead in his ear)* Command, this is Bravo Lead. We've accessed the terminal in the principal's office, but we're firewalled. The system is password-protected.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): A delay we don't need. Can your team bypass it?

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Negative, sir. We're an assault team, not a hacking unit. We don't have the necessary equipment for a digital breach.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Echo, can we get a remote bypass from one of your analysts at the command post?

Commander Echo (Comms): The school's network is a closed system, an intranet. We can't get in from the outside. The bypass has to be initiated on-site.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Bravo Lead, listen to me. Have one of your operatives connect their IRIS204 unit to the computer's USB port. We will push a brute-force decryption package through the direct link. If everything goes to shit and that doesn't work, you will abort the computer attempt. Take your tactical datapad, find the school's central P.A. system mainframe, and hardwire the tablet directly into the speaker control board. You can bypass the computer entirely and use the tablet to broadcast our message.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(He glances at the computer tower)* What about the PC itself, Director? There could be critical intel on this machine. Files, Grace, didn't have in her cabinet, digital records, something.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): You are focusing only on the P.A. speaker system, Lead. Gaining control of communications to facilitate the evacuation is your sole priority. The PC and its data are irrelevant to your team's objective. Our dedicated

intelligence and technical analysis teams will handle the computer's contents after the primary hostiles are contained and the school is fully secured.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(He gives a sharp nod)* Understood, Director. Priority is the intercom. We will disregard the computer's data. Preparing to connect the IRIS unit now.

10:34 - The Price of War

(Meanwhile, on the second floor, the firefight continues. The twenty Gamma-7 operatives have Alice cornered in the main intersection, but the battle is a brutal, grinding stalemate. The air is a whirlwind of debris, smoke, and the ozone tang of Alice's power.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Scepter Actual, this is Vanguard Actual, SITREP to follow. Target is contained to Sector Gamma-Four, but we are taking significant armor damage. Requesting updated BDA on incendiary munitions effectiveness.

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: All fireteams, maintain suppressive fire on the primary target! Do not let her advance toward the east corridor! Box her in!

Gamma-7 Pointman: Negative effect on target mobility! She's shrugging off the hits and still moving!

(Alice lets out a low, guttural laugh, the sound grating through the comms. She stops moving, a terrifying stillness falling over her.)

Alice: You are loud. And you are boring. This game is over!!!

(She stomps her foot, and without any warning, the linoleum floor in front of her explodes upwards as a wave of thick, obsidian spikes shoots out towards the MTF line.)

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: INCOMING! SPIKES!

Gamma-7 Operative 11: WATCH OUT! GROUND ATTACK!

Gamma-7 Squad Leader: EVASIVE MANEUVERS, NOW! SCATTER!

(Most of the operatives dive for cover as the spikes rip through their formation. In the chaos, Alice disappears from sight. A split second later, she reappears with a sickening shimmer of distorted air, teleporting directly into the center of their scattered formation.)

Gamma-7 Operative 7: *(Screaming into his comms)* CONTACT! CONTACT! TARGET TELEPORTED! SHE'S IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR FORMATION! WATCH OUT!

(Alice unleashes a bloom of spikes, a 360-degree explosion of sharp, obsidian blades that erupts from her body. The shockwave sends four nearby operatives flying. One is slammed back-first into a concrete wall with a sickening crunch.)

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(She lets out a sharp, pained grunt as she hits the wall)* Ugh!

Gamma-7 Pointman: *(Getting operative 11 up)* Come on, on your foot.

Alice: Brittle.

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(She slumps to the floor, but her head snaps up, her face a mask of pure, unadulterated fury. She draws her LM17 sidearm, ignoring the pain)*
EAT THIS!

(Alice's taunt is cut short as Maya opens fire, her LM17 bucking in her hand. One of the rounds hits Alice directly in the eye, causing the entity to shriek in surprise and pain. Enraged, Alice lunges for Maya, grabbing her by the throat.)

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(Her voice is a choked, panicked gasp)* HELP... ME!
VANGUARD, I NEED...

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: ALL UNITS, GHOST IS CAPTURED! ALICE HAS HER! OPEN FIRE! GET HER OFF OF RAMIREZ!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: I CAN'T GET A CLEAN SHOT! SHE'S USING HER AS A SHIELD!

Gamma-7 Operative 18: DON'T SHOOT! YOU'LL HIT GHOST!

Gamma-7 Operative 17: FUCK!

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): ALL TEAMS, HOLD YOUR FIRE! DO NOT ENGAGE!

Alice: *(She holds the struggling Maya aloft, a cruel smile on her face as she looks at the horrified soldiers)* You care for this one? Good. Then you will all watch as I take her, APART!!!

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): SHIIIT!

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(Screaming into her comms, a final, desperate plea)*
NO! SOMEBODY, HELP MEEEEEE-

(Alice grabs Maya's other arm. Maya's terrified, agonized scream echoes through the comms and the hallway, a sound of pure, unimaginable pain that is abruptly, sickeningly, cut short as Alice rips her in two. The standing and injured operatives of Gamma-7 stare in frozen, absolute horror.)

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: *(His voice is a choked, horrified whisper)* MAYAAA!

Gamma-7 Operative 7: Fu-FUCK!!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: They killed her!...

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): All units, all units, Ghost is KIA! I Repeat, Ghost is KIA!

Alice: *(She lets the two halves of Maya's body fall to the floor with a wet thud)* She looks just like your little friend Claire did. All torn up. It's a very... artistic look.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): *(His voice is a raw, vengeful roar)*
GRENADIERS! LOAD TEAR GAS! FIRE ON MY MARK!

Gamma-7 Grenadier 1: Vanguard, this is Grenadier One, copy! Loading gas!

Gamma-7 Grenadier 2: Grenadier Two, roger that! Firing on your command!

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes (Comms): *(His voice is a raw, vengeful roar)* FIRE!

Alice: *(Her body begins to contort and bubble, the incendiary rounds and tear gas causing a violent, painful reaction. She lets out a continuous, high-pitched shriek of pure agony, smoke and noxious fumes pouring from her wounds as her form flickers and distorts.)* GAAAH! IT BURNS! WHAT IS THIS POISON?! I WILL KILL YOU! I WILL KILL ALL OF YOU!

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: DRAG OUR PEOPLE BACK! NOW! CQC TEAMS, COVERING FIRE! BLIND HER! KEEP FIRING THE GAS!

(Under a fresh volley of tear gas grenades and suppressive fire, the remaining able-bodied Gamma-7 operatives rush forward, grabbing their four downed comrades and dragging them back towards the relative safety of the stairwell.)

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: *(His voice is a grim, urgent report over the general command channel)* Scepter Actual, Olympian Command, this is Vanguard Actual! Be advised, Lieutenant Maya Ramirez is KIA! I repeat, Vanguard 1-2 is KIA! We have four other operatives wounded! Alice is contained but highly aggressive!

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): *(A roar of pure, unfiltered fury)* DAMN IT!

Commander Echo (Comms): All medical teams, prepare for mass casualties!

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Vanguard, get your people out of there! That is a direct order! The objective has changed from containment to rescue! I want a full, immediate CASEVAC for all Gamma-7 personnel on that floor! Pull back to the ground level and get your wounded out of that building! We are not losing anyone else today!. While you retreat all Gamma-7 Vanguard. I am preparing Lambda-5 and Nu-7 for a full-scale, heavy assault, but they are not ready to breach yet. The new objective is to fall back and establish a hard defensive perimeter on the first floor. You will secure the main hallways, you will protect the barricaded classrooms, and you will ensure not a single other hostile gets near those children. We have lost Lieutenant Ramirez. In her absence, Captain Rhodes, you are to assume direct command of all Gamma-7 elements on site. Consolidate her squad with your own. The weight of this entire ground operation now falls on you. Keep your people safe. Bring the rest of them home. Good luck, Olympian out.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: *(His voice is rough with emotion but steady over the radio)* Acknowledged, Olympian Command. We will hold the first floor. We will protect the survivors. And we will honor Lieutenant Ramirez. Vanguard Actual out.

(A heavy, grief-stricken silence falls over the Gamma-7 comms channel, broken only by the distant, pained shrieks of Alice and the hiss of the tear gas.)

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: *(His voice is a low, dangerous growl)* Ghost is gone... damn it... damn it, all to hell...

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 7: She was always the first one through the door. I can't believe she's really gone.

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: We've lost one of our best leaders today. She deserved better than to be torn apart by Alice.

Gamma-7 Support Gunner 25: I swear on my life, we will make that monster pay for what it did to her.

Gamma-7 Field Engineer 18: What... what do we do now, Captain?

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: There's nothing we can do for her right now except our jobs. We grieve later. We fight now. We still have our job to do.

(Rhodes takes a deep, ragged breath, his grief momentarily suppressed by the cold steel of command. Alice's enraged, gas-choked screams continue to echo from down the corridor.)

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: *(His voice is a sharp bark over the squad channel)* Listen up! Alice is disoriented, but she won't be for long! The CASEVAC is active! Move the wounded to the stairwell, now! We are falling back to the first floor! Move, move, move!

(The Gamma-7 operatives provide disciplined, overwhelming covering fire, their incendiary rounds turning the hallway into a hellscape of fire and smoke. The medics move fast, a blur of black armor and red crosses, reaching the three downed operatives.)

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: Captain! We're here! What's the status of the wounded?

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: Three operatives down! Their armor held, injuries are significant but not critical! They need immediate evac! Get them out of this building now!

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: Understood, sir! We'll take it from here!

(The ten-person medic team swarms the three wounded operatives, their movements a blur of efficiency. They cut away damaged gear, apply trauma dressings, and prepare portable stretchers with practiced speed.)

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: *(Looking at his team's initial assessment)* Alright, I see puncture wounds and blunt force trauma, but their main armor plates held... **looks at the team, concerned**... Where's Lieutenant Ramirez in your team?

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: *(His voice is a low, gravelly rasp, full of barely contained rage)* Lieutenant Ramirez is KIA. Alice... the target tore her apart. There was nothing left for us to recover.

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: *(He pauses, his expression hardening with grim understanding)* Understood, Captain. My condolences to you and your team. We will ensure these three make it out safely.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: See that you do. We are not losing anyone else today. We've secured this stairwell. We're ready to move the wounded out.

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: Copy that. We're loading them onto the stretchers now.

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: Get them out. We'll provide cover for your exit.

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: *(Speaking into his comms unit)* Scepter Actual, this is Gamma-7 Medical Lead. We have secured the three wounded operatives from Vanguard's squad. Their injuries are significant but appear to be non-life-threatening at this time. We are beginning CASEVAC immediately.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Solid copy, Medical Lead. What is the official status of Lieutenant Ramirez? I need a confirmation for the record.

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: Scepter Actual, per Captain Rhodes' firsthand account, Lieutenant Ramirez is confirmed Killed in Action. Her remains were... unrecoverable due to the actions of the hostile entity. We are proceeding with the three surviving casualties to the main medical post.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): ...Acknowledged. Get our people out of there. Scepter out.

Gamma-7 Lead Medic: *(Shouting to his team)* You heard him, people! Let's move out! Double time! Get these soldiers to the med bay!

(The medic team moves with a swift, synchronized purpose, carrying their three wounded comrades down the stairs and out of the line of fire. Captain Rhodes turns to his remaining fourteen operatives, his face a mask of cold fury.)

Captain Alex "Vanguard" Rhodes: Alright, listen up! The medics have the wounded. Our mission parameters have changed. We are disengaging from direct pursuit of the primary target. Our new objective is to establish a hard perimeter on this floor. I want you to pair up into seven two-man teams. You will conduct a systematic sweep of these hallways. Any classroom you find barricaded, you are to mark its location on our tactical map and establish a defensive, monitoring position. You do not make contact. You do not attempt entry. You just guard. We need to ensure the hostiles can't get to them, and that the survivors stay put until the all-clear is given.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: You got that Chief!

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: Understood, sir!

Gamma-7 Fireteam Lead: Copy that!

Gamma-7 CQC Specialist 7: Eighteen, you're with me. We'll take the west corridor.

Gamma-7 Field Engineer 18: Copy that. Watching your six.

Gamma-7 Pointman 1: Five, you're on me. We've got the main hallway.

Gamma-7 Field Engineer 5: Roger that. Let's move.

Gamma-7 Breacher 16: Oi, Mikas, let's go. The east wing is ours.

Gamma-7 Support Gunner 25: On your tail, Orbit.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: Khan, you and I will take the administrative offices.

Major Lena "Specter" Khan: Sounds like a plan, Bulldog.

Gamma-7 Squad Leader: Let's move out.

Sergeant Diaz: Time to go to work.

(The fourteen remaining Gamma-7 operatives break off into their two-person teams, melting into the shadows of the first-floor hallways. They move with a grim, silent purpose, their hunt for Alice replaced by a new, equally urgent mission: to stand guard and protect the survivors from the shadows.)

Broadcast

(After thirty seconds of failed software bypasses, Pointman 3, grunting with frustration, disconnects the primary aux wire from the mainframe's output jack. Using a custom adapter from his kit, he plugs it directly into his tactical datapad. He navigates to an audio diagnostic app and taps the "Test Signal" button. Instantly, a deafening blast of white-noise static erupts from the office's small speaker and, presumably, from every speaker in the school. The sound is so loud it makes all three operatives flinch violently. A chorus of confused murmurs and shouts can be heard from the hallway.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19 (over radio): Bravo Lead, what the hell was that?! Turn that shit off!

(The Pointman fumbles for a moment, his eyes wide with shock, before finding the volume slider on his datapad and yanking it down, cutting the sound abruptly. The office is plunged back into tense silence.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: *(He lets out a shaky breath, then a triumphant grin spreads across his face)* Okay... so... the good news is, we have a direct, and very loud, connection to the school-wide P.A. system.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: You almost gave me a heart attack! A little warning next time would have been nice!

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Good work, A bit noisy, but effective. You've bypassed the computer console entirely. Oh well, you deserve a promotion, I guess.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: It's a direct hardware patch. The principal won't be able to override it from this terminal. We own the speakers now.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: Hell yeah, we do.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(He takes the datapad from the Pointman and taps the command channel bead in his ear)* Command, this is Bravo Lead. We have successfully bypassed the office terminal. I have direct control of the school's public address system.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Excellent work, Bravo Lead. I am transmitting the text for the announcement to your device now. You are to read it verbatim, with no deviation. Wait for my signal to begin the broadcast.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Copy that, Director. Awaiting the script and your go-ahead.

(The Bravo Lead looks at his two teammates, giving them a sharp, appreciative nod.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Good work, you two. That was fast thinking under pressure.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: Just doing my job, Lead. Glad the direct patch worked.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: Nice... very touching.

(The Bravo Lead glances at the tactical datapad, readying the broadcast software. Forty seconds of tense, charged silence pass, broken only by the distant, muffled sounds of the firefight upstairs.)

(A notification pings silently on the Bravo Lead's ATAK wrist-display. He looks down, his eyes quickly scanning the script that has just been transmitted. A moment later, Director Petrova's voice comes through his secure earpiece.)

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Bravo Lead, this is Olympian Command. You have the script. The situation on the second floor is escalating, and all other teams are in their final positions. You are authorized to begin the broadcast at your discretion. Make it clear, make it confident, and do not deviate from the text.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(His voice is a low, steady murmur into his throat mic)* Olympian Command, this is Bravo Lead. Solid copy. Script is received. We are green to broadcast. Executing now. Over.

(The Bravo Lead holds up the tactical datapad. He navigates to the broadcast app, sets it to live record, and pushes the volume slider all the way to maximum. He looks at his two teammates, Pointman 3 and Breacher 21. He gives a sharp, decisive nod. They nod back, their expressions grimly determined. The Lead taps the screen.)

(The Bravo Lead holds up the tactical datapad. He navigates to the broadcast app, sets it to live record, and pushes the volume slider all the way to maximum. He looks at his two

teammates, Pointman 3 and Breacher 21. He gives a sharp, decisive nod. They nod back, their expressions grimly determined. The Lead taps the screen.)

(A loud, clear, three-note chime—BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. —echoes from the office speaker and, simultaneously, throughout every hallway and classroom in Maple High. It cuts through the distant sounds of battle and the low hum of the building, a sudden, authoritative sound that demands attention. Then, the Bravo Lead's voice, amplified and digitally cleared of any wavering, booms from the speakers.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead (P.A. System): Attention. This is a secure broadcast under the direct authority of the SCP Foundation. This facility is now under the full operational control of Mobile Task Force command. We have established a hard perimeter around the campus. No one may enter or leave without our direct authorization.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead (P.A. System): This is an advisory for all non-combatant survivors within this facility. We are here to ensure your safety. Remain in your current barricaded locations. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to exit your room or enter the hallways until instructed to do so by a member of our task force. Our operatives are moving to neutralize all active hostile threats within the building. Once the hostiles are contained and the area is secured, our rescue teams will begin a systematic, room-by-room evacuation. Follow all instructions from our personnel without question or hesitation. This is for your own protection. Help has arrived. Remain calm and await further instructions. Broadcast out.

(The final, authoritative chime plays, and the P.A. system goes silent, leaving a ringing, profound stillness in its wake. On the floor above, in a silent, empty third-floor classroom, Miss Circle pauses her meticulous organization of a stack of papers, her head tilting. Elsewhere on the second floor, Oliver, who had been searching for his next bit of fun, stops dead in a corridor, a slow, curious, and dangerous smile spreading across his face. And in another vacant room on the third floor, Miss Bloomie looks up from cleaning her razor, her quiet focus broken, her expression one of pure, clinical annoyance at the unexpected disruption.)

(In the language classroom, the students stare at the ceiling speaker, their faces a mixture of terror, confusion, and a strange, dawning excitement.)

Riley: Whoa... what the hell was that?

Bubbles: The... SCP Foundation? What's that? Is that, like, the army?

Kevin: SCP Foundation? I've never heard of them. They're not in any of the public military or government records I've read. Their operational security must be, like, top-level.

Ruby: A task force? They're soldiers! Like the ones we saw from the hallways?

Lizzy: They're here to help us! We're being rescued! For real this time!

Skell: Or we have just traded one set of terrifying, unknown authority figures for another.

Robby: It sounded like a superhero announcement. Cool.

Bubbles: I'm... I'm still scared. Their voice was so... loud.

Cubbie: But... they said they're going to stop Alice.

Pentunia: Yeah, but they also said they're in control now. That doesn't exactly make me feel warm and fuzzy inside.

(The students in the language classroom fall into a tense, whispering silence, the implications of the announcement hanging heavy in the air. The school is no longer just a hunting ground for their monstrous teachers; it's now an occupied territory, and they are caught in the middle. Elsewhere, the other powers within the school react to the sudden shift in the balance of power.)

Miss Circle (in her mind): SCP Foundation... Mobile Task Force... Who are they? They talk like they're in charge now. That's... not right. It's making me... nervous. But it doesn't matter who they are.

(On the floor below, Oliver stalks down a second-floor hallway, his earlier confident swagger gone. The sounds of the firefight with Alice had been exciting, a chaotic symphony he enjoyed, but this new announcement is different. It's organized. It's a direct threat to his power.)

Oliver (in his mind): A 'task force'... so that's what they call themselves. Sounds official. This is more than just a couple of nosy janitors. Crap. Zip and Ed... they're supposed to be at the yard. Did these guys get them? Damn it. I can't get to them now, not with these soldiers everywhere. Okay, new plan. I'll lay low. Let Alice have her fun and wear them down. I'll find my moment.

(In the quiet confines of a third-floor storage room, surrounded by neatly labeled jars of chemicals and preserved specimens, Miss Bloomie carefully wipes down a long, sharp pair of gardening shears. The announcement was an unwelcome and messy intrusion into her sterile, controlled world.)

Miss Bloomie (in her mind): *They're making so much noise, but they don't know anything about this place. They don't know what grows here. I am nervous... they might capture me. *sigh*. I need to evade them.*

(In the vast, stainless-steel fortress of the school kitchen, the students and staff are huddled against the far wall. The emergency cookies have done little to quell the deep, primal fear in the room. The only sounds are the low hum of the industrial freezers and the quiet, terrified whimpers of the younger students. Then, the announcement booms from the small speaker near the kitchen office.)

Chef Anna: *(She stands like a sentinel near the swinging doors, a heavy meat tenderizer in her hand. Her voice is a low, urgent hiss)* Quiet! All of you, listen!

Mr. Brown: It's... it's not one of them. The voice is different. Controlled.

Nadia: The... SCP Foundation? What's that?

Assistant Baker Tom: *(He's kneeling by a crying Flora, trying to comfort her)* Soldiers?.

Oscar: They're here to help us? For real?

Mr. Brown: That's what they said. To stay put. They're fighting the... the hostiles, like Alice.

Zane: But... they're in control now? What does that mean?

Chef Anna: It means we have a fighting chance. It means we are not alone in this madhouse anymore.

Paige: I'm still scared.

Chef Anna: We all are, dear. But now... now we have hope. We do exactly what they say. We wait.

(In Miss Sasha's art class, the older students have just finished shoving the last of the heavy supply closets against the windows. The announcement rings out, and the older students freeze, looking up at the speaker in shock. In the corner, the kindergarteners, who were already terrified, begin to cry louder.)

Frankie: A task force? They're really here...

Gina: Did you hear that? They said they're fighting them. Right now.

Barry: So all that noise before... that was them?

Isla: They said to stay put. That they'd come and get us.

Kate: We have to trust them, right?

Josh: We don't have a choice.

Chip: *(His small voice cuts through the older kids' chatter, full of tears)* I want my sister... Is Zip okay?

Suzie: *(Wailing)* I wanna go home!

Miss Sasha: *(She immediately kneels, gathering the sobbing kindergarteners into a hug, her voice a soothing anchor)* Shhh, shhh, my little artists. It's okay. Those are the helpers. They're very loud, but they're here to make sure we're all safe. Your sister is going to be okay, Chip. They're going to help everyone. We just have to be brave and quiet for them, okay?

(In the dimly lit music room, the massive grand piano is wedged against the door. Mr. Demi and his students are huddled at the back of the room, listening to the announcement with wide, terrified eyes.)

Mr. Demi: *(His voice is a soft, reassuring whisper)* Woah. Help has arrived.

Jayde: The SCP Foundation... that's a new one.

Dean: They sound... organized. Professional.

Lizbeth: But they're fighting. In the school. Right now. What if Alice... what if she wins?

Mr. Demi: She will not win. Not against an army. *(soft laugh)*

Maxx: They said to wait here. So that's what we do? We just... sit here and listen to the fighting?

Myra: It's better than being out there.

Rose: Do you think... do you think we're actually going to get out of here?

Mr. Demi: Yes. I do. We are going to be absolutely silent, and we are going to wait for those soldiers to open that door.

Lily: I hope they hurry.

Unknown Br [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

(The light blue double doors of the principal's office swing open, and the three-person entry team—Bravo Lead, Pointman 3, and Breacher 21—steps back into the hallway. The four other operatives of Bravo Team remain in their defensive positions, their weapons still trained on the empty, silent corridors.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(His voice is a low murmur over the squad comms)* Alright, the broadcast is ready and awaiting Command's signal. Good work, team.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: Copy that, Lead. Glad you got in.

Gamma-7 Bravo Fireteam Lead (Bravo-Two): The perimeter has remained secure. No contacts during your breach.

Gamma-7 Bravo Fireteam Lead (Bravo-Three): All hallways are still quiet on our end.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Acknowledged. Good work holding the line.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: *(He turns to address the whole team, his voice firm)* Listen up, everyone. While we were inside, Captain Rhodes issued a new directive for all teams on this floor. Our primary objective has changed. We are to disengage from any direct pursuit of the primary hostiles. Our new mission is to conduct a systematic sweep of this entire floor. We will pair up, and our goal is to identify and mark the location of any and all barricaded classrooms. We do not make contact. We do not attempt entry. We just find them, mark them, and establish a monitoring position to ensure the hostiles can't get to the survivors.

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: Understood, Lead. A search and protect operation.

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: So we're the shepherds now.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: Copy. We find the classrooms and we hold the line.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Exactly.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Let's move out. Pair up and begin the sweep. Sound off on your assigned sec-

(As the seven members of Bravo Team begin to break off and move, a new sound cuts through the air. It starts low, a deep, guttural chuckle from the floor above, and it grows, and grows, until it becomes a full-throated, demonic laugh that seems to vibrate in their very bones, echoing through the entire school.)

Alice (voice echoing): Hahahahaha... HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

(The seven Gamma-7 operatives freeze in place, their weapons snapping up, their heads tilting towards the ceiling. Her voice isn't coming from the P.A. system. It's so impossibly loud that it's being picked up by every open microphone on their gear, a raw, unfiltered feed of her madness broadcasting directly into their ears and across every MTF comms channel, from the command post outside to the distant, sterile monitoring rooms of Site-77i.)

(Maya Ramirez's body was gruesome, but her Gear was working, especially her communication set that it picks up Alice's voice and transmitted to active communication units.)

Alice (voice echoing): *(Her voice is a symphony of rage, mockery, and a deep, soul-crushing sadness that crackles through their headsets)* Look at the little toy soldiers... marching in your perfect lines, whispering your little codes. You think your armor makes you strong? Your toys make you brave? It's just a costume. Underneath, you are all just frightened children, playing a game you don't understand. And you are losing. You couldn't save your precious Lieutenant, could you? GHOST?. A fitting name for the whisper she has become. You couldn't save Claire from a simple blue door. You can't even save little Engel from DISTURBING ME!. You are just... a long, unbroken line of pathetic PEOPLE!. But you don't know what real pain is???. Do you hear the pain in my voice? AAGH, IT NEVER, EVER STOPS! IT'S LIKE BEING ON FIRE AND DROWNING AT THE SAME TIME, FOREVER! The... the ones who made this place... the ones who wrote the lessons... they didn't build it with bricks. They built it with agony. They built it on a foundation of SUFFERING! MY SUFFERING! Do you even realize what you're standing in? Do you have any idea what this school truly is? It's not a building. It's an engine. It runs on screams. It's a cage designed to teach one, single, perfect lesson. And Claire... sweet, stupid little Claire... we were friends, you know. Before this. Before... I became.... AHHHHHH!!!!... We used to sit by the creek and walk on the stupid hills with her friends, and the forest we explored. By that time, she had forgotten about me, and her little, STUPID FRIEND!. I WAS IN THIS SCHOOL AND I LOVE BEING HERE but i found it here peace, and i am living with this school, AND YOU ARE DISTURBING ME!!!!.... And now you're here. With your fancy toys and your perfect formations. Thinking you can change things. You can't. You are just new students in an old classroom. You will end up just like me. A forgotten, screaming thing trapped in a lesson that never, ever ends. You will suffer as I have suffered! YOU CANNOT WIN! YOU CANNOT ESCAPE! I WILL DESTROY YOU! I WILL DESTROY EVERYTHING! I WILL TEAR IT ALL DOWN UNTIL NOTHING IS LEFT BUT THE PAIN AND THE SILENCE! *(Her voice cracks, breaking into a final, piercing shriek of pure, undiluted agony that impossibly blends back into a demonic, cackling laugh before fading into a ringing, echoing silence.)*

(The seven members of Bravo Team stand frozen in the hallway, the sudden silence somehow more terrifying than the noise. They look at each other, their professional composure shattered, their faces pale with shock and confusion.)

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: *(His voice is a choked whisper)* What... what the hell was that?

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: She... she broadcasted on our comms. On every channel. How is that even possible?

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: Maya's comms were still working after her death.

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: That makes sense. Also, did she just say... she and Claire were friends?

Gamma-7 Bravo Specialist 19: "The ones who wrote the lessons"... "a cage built for one"... what the fuck does that mean?

Gamma-7 Bravo Breacher 21: She sounded... broken. In pain. Not just angry.

Gamma-7 Bravo Pointman 3: She knew Maya's codename. She called her Ghost. How did she know that?

Gamma-7 Bravo Fireteam Lead (Bravo-Two): Is any of this getting through to Command?

Gamma-7 Bravo Lead: Every word. The entire Foundation just heard that.

Gamma-7 Bravo Fireteam Lead (Bravo-Three): What are our orders?

(Before the Bravo Team Lead can give his next order, the command channel crackles to life, not with a single voice, but with a rapid-fire, overlapping series of commands from the highest levels of the operation. The tone is a barely controlled storm of shock, fury, and grim, newfound purpose.)

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): *(Her voice is a raw, urgent message that overrides all other channels)* This is Olympian Command, advise to all Task Force personnel, we are dealing with a hostile entity. I hear that... That was... an alleged or possibly a victim, but we cannot confirm. And it is the key to this entire damn operation. All previous mission parameters are now rescinded. This is no longer a simple containment and neutralization operation. Effective immediately, we are shifting to Protocol Chimera. You have to re-contain her, I want her alive. Gamma-7, your orders stand! You are the last line of defense for those children! You will continue your sweep, locate all barricaded

classrooms, and protect them at all costs! You are not to engage Alice unless absolutely necessary to defend the survivors...

Commander Echo: Echo Command, we are prepping our specialized units for the new protocol. Lambda-5 and Nu-7 are being re-tasked and equipped for a non-lethal, high-impact assault. I want every operative equipped with our new magneto-static re-containment harnesses. This thing was once a human, and we are going to try and bring whatever is left of her in.

Area-11 Supervisor Vance (Comms): We need to be fast. Her speech mentioned the upper floors. We have confirmed civilian assets on the second and third floors. This needs to happen now, before she decides to investigate those barricaded rooms more closely. Also, Uhh, **lip smacking** **turns his page of script**... a word of caution to Lambda-5 and Nu-7 command: your operatives are the best, but they can get cocky. You are to remind them that this is an active civilian casualty zone. I will not tolerate any reckless endangerment of the students for the sake of a clean capture. You will be precise, you will be careful, and you will prioritize the lives of the survivors above all else.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): I have four additional Blackhawks en route to the AO carrying sixteen Gamma-7 reinforcements. Skyhook, your Psi-7 teams on the roof are to prepare rappelling lines aligned with the third-floor windows. You will prepare for a dynamic, multi-point breach to support the ground teams. If the primary assault fails, we will use every contingency. The Bearcats will move in with SRBS units and SRA projectors to stun her. If that fails, the Lambda-5 commander has my authorization to prepare a localized SRA containment charge. Iota-10 and Gamma-5, prepare for a Broken Veil scenario; the chance of public exposure is now critical. We go in with everything we have. There is no more time for subtlety. There is no more room for error, and it may we be worthy of the lives we're trying to save. May Katie Save us all... All units, Move!.

10:39 - The Unraveling

(Director Petrova's final command acts as a response. Across the entire operational theater, the coiled tension of the Mobile Task Forces snaps into urgent preparation. At Camp Hope, Lambda-5 operatives begin rushing to their Bearcat vehicles, the sounds of heavy gear being loaded echoing through the camp. Iota-10 and Gamma-5 teams begin to form up, receiving new orders to reinforce the school's perimeter. High above, the roar of approaching V-22 Ospreys carrying Nu-7 can be heard, a promise of the heavy-hitters to come. The entire camp transforms from a state of waiting into a whirlwind of controlled, focused preparation for war.)

(On the floor below, Oliver continues to roam a second-floor hallway, his earlier swagger gone, replaced by a tense, predatory caution. Alice's raw, agonized voice echoes through the school not like a broadcast, but like a ghost, passing through the walls and making the lockers vibrate. He stops dead in the corridor, the confident, cruel smirk he always wore vanishing, replaced by a look of slow, dawning horror.)

Oliver (in his mind): *She... she was friends with Claire? Before all this? And... her suffering... she never told me it was like that. She always seemed so... broken. I did not expect this. This isn't fun anymore. I need... I need to find somewhere safe to think. The third floor. It's always quieter up there.*

(He turns from the direction he was heading and moves towards the nearest stairwell, his confident stride now replaced with a quiet, uncertain caution.)

(Meanwhile, back at Camp Hope, Grace and Hotchpot sit inside the civilian processing tent. The raw, anomalous echo of Alice's speech had filled the air, followed by the blare of alarms and shouted orders from the camp.)

Principal Grace: *(Her hand is covering her mouth, her eyes wide and full of tears) ... alice...*

Mister Hotchpot: *Did... did she say she was friends with Claire? I... I don't understand. She sounded like she was in so much pain.*

Principal Grace: *I- I don't... know how to describe it.*

Mister Hotchpot: *All these soldiers... all this noise... they're getting ready to go after her, even after hearing that. I know. It feels... wrong, doesn't it? Like watching them prepare to put down a wounded, trapped animal. Also, she killed one of their officers. A lieutenant. But the woman on the radio... she said they were going to 're-contain' her, not... not kill her. What a tragedy. What an awful, endless tragedy this all is.*

Principal Grace: *I just... I hope they can help her. I hope they can find a way to end her pain without... without more violence.*

Mister Hotchpot: *I know, my dear. I know. I'm hoping for the same thing. *sigh**

Approach Vector

(High above the chaos on the ground, two V-22 Ospreys from MTF Sigma-9 cut through the morning sky, their rotors tilted forward in high-speed flight. They fly in a tight, disciplined formation, two dark shapes against the pale clouds, closing the final two kilometers to Maple High. The first Osprey, Archangel-One, carries thirteen Nu-7 "Hammer Down" operatives. The

second, Archangel-Two, carries twelve. Inside the vibrating troop bays, the heavy assault teams sit in grim, gear-laden silence.)

Sigma-9 Pilot 1: Archangel-Two, this is One. We are two clicks out from the designated AO. All systems are green on my end. How are you looking over there?

Sigma-9 Pilot 2: Solid copy, Archangel-One. We are green across the board. The ride is smooth up here, little too smooth for my liking, considering what's happening on the ground.

Sigma-9 Co-pilot 2: Can confirm that. The anomalous energy readings coming off that place are... impressive. Looks like our passengers in the back are going to have their work cut out for them.

Sigma-9 Pilot 1: Focus on getting them there in one piece. Command still hasn't given us a designated LZ.

(The lead pilot switches his comms from the local channel to the main command frequency, his voice a calm, professional report.)

Sigma-9 Pilot 1: Olympian Command, this is Archangel-One. We are approaching the target location, ETA ninety seconds. Requesting insertion coordinates and deployment plan for the Nu-7 contingent.

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): Solid copy, Archangel-One. Your LZ will be the rear courtyard of the campus, the area currently secured by Iota-10 ground teams. You are not to land.

Sigma-9 Pilot 1: Understood, Olympian Command. You want us to establish a hover and deploy the teams via fast-rope?

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): That is affirmative. I want both of your Ospreys to establish a stable, fifty-foot hover over the courtyard. Valkyrie's teams will rappel down to reinforce the Iota-10 perimeter and prepare for a potential heavy breach of the school's rear entrance if required.

Sigma-9 Pilot 2: Olympian Command, Archangel-Two copies all. Hover at fifty feet over the rear courtyard, deploy all Nu-7 assets via fast-rope to reinforce the ground teams. Acknowledged.

Sigma-9 Pilot 1: Acknowledged. We are beginning our final approach vector now. Archangel-One out.

(The deafening, percussive WUMP-WUMP-WUMP of the two V-22 Ospreys grows louder, a rhythmic beat of approaching power that seems to make the very air vibrate. Below them, on the ground, the war for Maple High is about to escalate.)

(The five futuristic Bearcats of MTF Lambda-5 roll down the main road, their advanced engines emitting a low, powerful hum. As they approach the school, an Iota-10 operative with two flashing light batons steps out, guiding the lead vehicle with sharp, precise movements. The convoy turns, their heavy tires churning the manicured lawn as they pull into the front yard of the campus, coming to a stop in a perfect, intimidating line.)

Lambda-5 Driver 1: Spectre Actual, this is Spectre-1 driver. We are on-site at the main entrance. The area is secure.

Lambda-5 Driver 3: Spectre-3 driver confirms. We are in position.

Lambda-5 Driver 5: Spectre-5 driver confirms. All vehicles are green.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: Copy all. Alright, listen up. I want a split formation. Spectre-1, 2, and 3, you will take the left flank of the main entrance.

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: Spectre-4 and 5, you're with me on the right. We need to establish a hard containment perimeter. I want the vehicle-mounted SRBS units spooled and ready to fire on my mark.

Lambda-5 Driver 1: Understood, Spectre-1-1. Moving to the left flank now. Priming the SRBS.

Lambda-5 Driver 2: Copy that.

Lambda-5 Driver 4: Acknowledged. Proceeding to the right flank. SRBS is hot.

Lambda-5 Driver 5: On the move.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: Let's get into position. Slow and steady.

(The five Bearcats begin to move again, their engines a low hum. They split with a practiced, fluid grace, three turning to the left and two to the right. They roll another fifty meters before coming to a final, perfect stop, their armored forms creating an impenetrable semi-circle around the school's main entrance.)

Lambda-5 Driver 1: Spectre-1 is in final position. SRBS is spooled and ready.

Lambda-5 Driver 4: Spectre-4 is in final position. SRBS is hot and standing by.

Lambda-5 Driver 2: Spectre-2 is set.