

Apprehending the Faculty

Task Force Leader David: Alright. Let's get into the weeds on this. The fire drill gives us our window. It gets the civilian students moving towards our exfiltration teams. But it also means our apprehension teams will be moving through a building full of panicked kids. How do we surgically remove Circle, Bloomie, and Thavel without causing a stampede or getting our own people caught in the crossfire?

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: That's my primary concern, sir. My teams are trained for CQC, but not in a live school environment. A stray non-lethal round, a mis-timed flashbang... it could go sideways fast. We need to isolate the targets.

Director Ash: And we need to do it without them realizing it's a targeted attack. Their behavior is predicated on punishing "failure." If they perceive the evacuation itself as a failure of school order, they might lash out at any student within reach.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Then we don't present it as a failure. We present it as a procedural necessity. But the core issue remains: how do we apprehend three distinct, highly dangerous hostiles in separate locations, all at the same time?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Their psychological profiles are our best weapon. We need to exploit their individual compulsions.

Supervisor Vance: So, a tailored approach for each? I like it. Let's start with the math teacher. Miss Circle. What's her trigger?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Precision. Order. Absolute correctness. Engel's testimony was clear. She reacts violently to "incorrect calculations" and "imbalance."

Task Force Leader David: So we create an imbalance. While the fire drill is happening, a secondary team creates a localized... mess. Something she can't ignore.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: You want my guys to... what? Go in there and start knocking over desks? She'll see that as a direct provocation. She'll engage immediately.

Director Ash: No, not your teams. We use a drone. A small, quiet drone. It enters her classroom during the evacuation and does something simple. It knocks over a single stack of perfectly graded papers. It creates a small, infuriating pocket of chaos in her perfectly ordered world.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: I see. While she's obsessively trying to re-stack the papers, to restore her perfect order...

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My apprehension team moves in from behind. She's distracted, her focus is narrow. It could work. It's a clean, psychological trap.

Task Force Leader David: I approve. It's elegant. What about the science teacher? Bloomie. She's the quiet one. The observer.

Supervisor Vance: Grace's file said she values "purity." A visual distraction might not work if she's focused.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: But she's observant. She notices things. So we give her something to notice that isn't us. An auditory lure.

Director Ash: Like what? A loud noise? That'll just put her on high alert.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: No. A specific noise. Something that suggests... contamination. A dripping sound. A high-frequency, irregular beep from a piece of lab equipment. Something that sounds *wrong*.

Task Force Leader David: So while she's trying to find the source of the "impure" sound, trying to fix her perfect, sterile lab...

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My second team hits her. Another clean entry. I like it. It plays to her personality.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: That leaves Thavel. The language teacher. Engel said she gets "furious." She's the loud one.

Supervisor Vance: Her anger is her weakness. We don't need a subtle distraction for her. We need a direct one.

Director Ash: We send in an agent disguised as a student. Someone who deliberately and repeatedly fails to follow her evacuation instructions.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: You want to put one of my people in a room with her, unarmed, and tell them to be annoying? That's a hell of a risk.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: But it's a controlled risk. She'll focus all her rage on the "failing" student. She won't be looking at the door. She won't be paying attention to anything else.

Task Force Leader David: It's a classic matador's trick. The agent is the cape. She charges the cape...

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: And my third team comes in from the side and plays the bull. Okay. It's risky, but it's a solid tactical plan. It isolates all three targets using their own psychological flaws.

Director Anya Petrova: It's the most surgical approach we have. It minimizes the risk to the evacuating students and maximizes our chances of a successful, simultaneous apprehension.

Supervisor Vance: It requires perfect timing.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: And flawless performances from our operatives.

Director Ash: It's the best plan we've got. Let's start assigning the teams.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: Alright, if we're going with the tailored psy-ops approach, I need to assign the right teams. For the Circle target, the drone op... I'll assign Rhodes' squad. They're good at quiet insertion and have the best tech specialist.

Task Force Leader David: Just make sure the drone is quiet. The last thing we need is for her to notice a buzzing sound and get spooked before the team is in place.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: The drone we've designated is a new-gen stealth model. It has a zero-decibel acoustic signature. She won't hear a thing.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: For Bloomie, the auditory lure... Carter's squad. Bulldog is patient. He knows how to wait for an opening. For Thavel... the matador trick... that's going to be Khan's team. She's the best we have at de-escalation and improvisation. Her agent will need to be convincing.

Director Anya Petrova: They will be. I'll have our top behavioral analyst brief the agent personally. They need to understand Thavel's specific psychological triggers for rage. We want her focused, not homicidal.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Good. That covers the faculty. Now, the two most dangerous variables on the board: Oliver and Alice.

Supervisor Vance: Oliver is the priority. Alice is contained within her domain, for now. Oliver is mobile, and his abilities are... undefined. We have no idea what the upper limit of his power is.

Director Ash: Exactly. He can theoretically create any weapon, any obstacle, any entity he can imagine. He's not just a hostile; he's a potential army of one.

Task Force Leader David: So we hit him first. Hard and fast. During the chaos of the fire drill, before he even realizes what's happening.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My apprehension teams will be on him the second the alarm sounds. We'll use containment foam. It's the fastest, most effective way to immobilize a reality bender without giving them time to think.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: It's a solid plan, but it assumes we can find him. He's a student. He'll be in a classroom, surrounded by other children.

Task Force Leader David: We have his schedule. We know which class he'll be in. We can breach that specific room.

Director Anya Petrova: Through a wall, perhaps? A non-standard entry point? Avoid the door. He'll be expecting that.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: We can do that. A controlled explosive breach on the opposite wall. It'll disorient him. Give us the second we need to deploy the foam.

Supervisor Vance: And Alice? What's the protocol for her? We can't just leave her in there.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: No. But we also can't engage her directly while we're trying to evacuate two hundred children. It's too risky.

Director Ash: We establish a hard perimeter around her domain. Lambda-5 will deploy their portable reality anchors, creating a containment bubble around the entire second-floor hallway.

Task Force Leader David: So we trap her. We put her in a box while we clean up the rest of the school.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Precisely. Once the students are evacuated and the other hostiles are contained, we can focus all our resources on her. A dedicated, surgical, and overwhelming assault.

Director Anya Petrova: It's the only logical sequence of operations. Isolate and contain the minor threats first, then focus on the queen.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: I like it. Clean. Efficient. My teams will be ready.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Alright, the teachers are a manageable, predictable threat if we play our cards right. But that leaves Oliver and Alice. The wildcards. David, what's your initial thought on a simultaneous apprehension?

Task Force Leader David: It's... tricky. I mean, we hit them both at once, we split our forces. We focus on one, the other might react. Alice is tied to her domain, but Oliver... that kid can go anywhere. And he can *make* anything.

Director Ash: The primary threat is his pencil. We have no confirmed limits on his manifestation ability. He could draw a wall, a weapon, another entity... the possibilities are a tactical nightmare.

Supervisor Vance: So, the priority has to be disabling his ability to draw. The containment foam is our best bet for that. Quick, total immobilization.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: I can have my best CQC team on him, but like the Director said, he'll be in a classroom. We go in hard with foam, we risk hitting other students. It's... messy.

Task Force Leader David: What if we don't go in hard? What if we use the fire drill? While everyone's evacuating, we have a two-man Iota-10 team, disguised as... I don't know... school counselors, intercept him in the hallway.

Director Anya Petrova: A soft approach? With a reality bender? David, that's a huge risk. If he senses a threat...

Task Force Leader David: But that's the thing! Two quiet "counselors" asking him to step aside for a "quick chat" isn't a threat. It's just an annoyance. While he's distracted, telling them to get lost, a hidden Gamma-7 team hits him from a cross-corridor. Fast, clean, and out of sight of the other evacuating students.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: It's a decent psychological feint. It uses his own arrogance against him. He wouldn't perceive two unarmed personnel as a genuine threat.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: And while that's happening, we have Lambda-5 creating a hard containment bubble around Alice's domain. We use the fire drill to trap her, while we use it to extract him.

Director Ash: We could use the SRAs to essentially... seal her hallway off from the rest of the school. She might not even notice until it's too late.

Supervisor Vance: It's a solid pincer movement. One team on extraction and apprehension, one team on hard containment. It neutralizes both primary threats at the same time.

(The conversation shifts, the larger plan solidifying as they turn their attention to the secondary targets.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: Okay, that handles the big guns. But what about Oliver's little fan club? Zip and Edward. We can't just leave them in the mix.

Task Force Leader David: Right. Grace's testimony confirmed they're his primary followers. They're a potential complication. A liability.

Director Anya Petrova: They are. But let's be clear, they are also children. Scared kids who are in way over their heads, from the sound of it. A full MTF takedown seems... disproportionate. It would certainly traumatize the other students who witness it.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Intel from Grace confirms they are primarily influenced by Oliver. Without him, their threat level is negligible. The primary risk is simply them getting in the way, or tipping Oliver off before we can make our move.

Supervisor Vance: So we just need to get them off the board before the main event. Isolate them from Oliver quietly.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: How? They stick to him like glue. You can't just ask them to wander off.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: We use the civilian staff.

(A brief, confused silence falls over the command team.)

Director Ash: Explain, Rosie.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: During the chaos of the fire drill, the non-anomalous staff will be focused on herding their students. We have Anya and Kofia on the inside. They can subtly identify a trusted teacher in the confusion and direct them to "deputize" Zip and Edward.

Task Force Leader David: Deputize?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Yes. Have a teacher tell them, "Edward, Zip, I need your help! You two are the fastest runners, I need you to go to the gymnasium and make sure the emergency exit is clear!" Something like that. Give them a task. A responsibility.

Supervisor Vance: You want to give the bullies a job to do?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: It plays to their egos. Makes them feel important. And it neatly separates them from Oliver at the critical moment. While they're running off to be "heroes" on a pointless errand, your teams are free to move on Oliver without any interference.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: It's a brilliant piece of social engineering. It removes the complication without using any force.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: And once they're at the gym?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: A secondary Iota-10 team will be waiting there, disguised as more school staff, to take them quietly into custody. No fuss, no panic. We just tell them they need to come answer a few questions.

Director Anya Petrova: I like it. It's clean. It's quiet. And it treats them like what they are: misguided kids, not hardened hostiles.

Task Force Leader David: It's a hell of a plan. Let's start drafting the specific assignments.

Director Ash: Agreed. The psychological approach is our strongest asset here. A heavy-handed approach with those two could turn them into martyrs in Oliver's eyes, or worse, trigger a panic.

Supervisor Vance: And we need them compliant for the debriefing. I mean, they're our best source of intel on Oliver's day-to-day behavior, his state of mind. We can't get that if they're terrified.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: So the Iota-10 team at the gym... what's their protocol? Just... sit them down and give them a juice box?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Essentially, yes. They'll be met by operatives who will say something like, "Good work, you two. You did great. We need you to come with us now, the Principal wants a report on the exit status." Keep it in their world. Make them feel like they succeeded.

Task Force Leader David: We treat them with a degree of respect for the "job" they just did. It disarms them completely. By the time they realize they're in custody, they'll be in a secure debriefing room at the camp.

Director Anya Petrova: And their testimony will be crucial. We need to understand the full scope of Oliver's influence. Is it just charisma, or something... more?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: We have no indication that Zip or Edward possess anomalous abilities themselves. They appear to be classic followers drawn to a charismatic, powerful figure. Treating them as such is the correct psychological approach. They're scared, and they're looking for a new authority figure to follow. We can be that figure.

Dr. Lee: *(His voice cuts in from the Medical CP.)* And once they are in custody, I want them brought directly to my psychological triage unit. Not the holding cells. We need to assess their mental state immediately. We need to know if they're just followers, or if they've been psychologically compromised by their proximity to Oliver.

Task Force Leader David: Agreed, Doctor. They are witnesses first, accomplices second.

(The conversation naturally shifts to the most delicate asset they have, the small, sad boy who has become the unwilling heart of their intelligence-gathering operation.)

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Which brings us to Engel.

Director Anya Petrova: He's our most important civilian asset. But he's also the most fragile. He's seen too much. His psychological state is a primary concern.

Dr. Lee: I concur, Director. The level of trauma he's already endured... it's significant. A standard, chaotic evacuation could be incredibly damaging for him.

Task Force Leader David: So what's the plan? We can't just leave him in there. But we can't have him caught in the crossfire when we move on the hostiles.

Supervisor Vance: Anya and Kofia. Their connection to him is our single greatest advantage.

Director Ash: Agreed. He trusts them. He sees them as protectors.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: So we send them in to get him? A dedicated two-person extraction team?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Precisely. During the fire drill, while the other teachers are evacuating their classes and our teams are moving into position, Anya and Kofia's sole objective will be to locate Engel's classroom.

Director Anya Petrova: They will enter the classroom, under their janitorial cover, and personally escort him and his friend, Bubbles, out of the building.

Task Force Leader David: A personal escort. I like it. It keeps him calm. It keeps him contained.

Supervisor Vance: It makes him feel safe. Which is paramount. If he panics, he could disrupt the entire evacuation flow.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Their established rapport is the key. He won't question them. He'll just... go. It's a clean, quiet, and psychologically sound extraction method.

Dr. Lee: Make sure they're brought directly to the Medical CP. I want a full psych team ready for him the second he's clear of the building.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: What about the other students in his class?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: The civilian staff member in that room will handle the rest of the class. Anya and Kofia's focus is singular: Engel and Bubbles. They are a package deal.

Director Ash: It's the best way to ensure the asset's stability and safety.

Task Force Leader David: It's the right thing to do. He's helped us. We owe him that much.

Director Anya Petrova: Then it's settled. The fire drill is a go. The psy-ops for the teachers are a go. The feint for Zip and Edward is a go. And the personal extraction for Engel is a go.

Task Force Leader David: So, that's the framework. It's... a lot of moving parts. A lot of things that have to go exactly right.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: High-risk operations always are. Let's refine the most delicate component: the asset extraction. Engel.

Dr. Lee: *(His voice cuts in from the Medical CP.)* I can't stress this enough. His psychological state is our primary concern. The extraction must be as non-traumatic as possible. He's already witnessed more than any child should.

Director Anya Petrova: Which is why Anya and Kofia are the only choice for the primary contact team. He trusts them. He sees them as janitors, as friendly faces.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: So they just walk into his classroom during the fire drill chaos and say, "Come with us"? What about the teacher in that room? What about the other students?

Supervisor Vance: The teacher will be focused on the evacuation procedure. Anya and Kofia's janitorial cover gives them a plausible reason to be in the hallway, even to enter a classroom briefly. "Checking for stragglers," "ensuring the room is clear." It's a perfect excuse.

Director Ash: And the other students will be panicked. Their focus will be on the alarm, on the teacher's instructions. They won't pay attention to two janitors quietly speaking to one of their classmates.

Task Force Leader David: So Anya and Kofia pull him and his friend, Bubbles, aside. Then what? They just walk them out the front door?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: No. That's too public. They'll need a designated, quiet exfiltration route. Baker, what's the layout of that wing?

Logistics Officer Baker: *(He brings up a new schematic on the holographic display.)* Engel's last known classroom is here, in the east wing, first floor. There's a service corridor just behind it that leads directly to a rear exit. Exit C.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My teams can secure that exit point in the first thirty seconds of the alarm. We can have a transport vehicle waiting right there.

Dr. Lee: It must be an unmarked vehicle. Something that looks civilian. No armored trucks. We can't afford to heighten his anxiety. A simple van.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: And the operatives meeting them at the van should not be in full tactical gear. Plainclothes. They should look like school counselors or concerned parents.

Director Anya Petrova: I agree. The transition from the school to our custody must be as seamless and non-threatening as possible. Kofia and Anya will be the bridge.

Task Force Leader David: So the final plan is: Alarm sounds. Anya and Kofia proceed to Engel's classroom. They use their cover to isolate him and Bubbles and escort them down the service corridor to Exit C. A plainclothes team meets them there with an unmarked van.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: And they are brought directly to the Medical Command Post for immediate psychological triage. No stops. No delays.

Supervisor Vance: It's a clean plan. It minimizes his exposure to the main chaos of the evacuation. It leverages the trust our agents have built. It works.

Director Ash: It's the most humane option we have.

Dr. Lee: I approve. Just... tell your agents to be gentle with him.

(The holographic command staff takes a collective, metaphorical breath. The primary plan, a complex ballet of psychological manipulation and surgical extraction, is set. But in their line

of work, Plan A is never enough. The silence is broken by the gruff, pragmatic voice of the MTF Division Director Gamma-7.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: It's a good plan. It's smart. It's clean. But it's also got about a hundred different ways it can go to hell before we even get to the first classroom.

Task Force Leader David: He's right. We're basing this entire operation on a series of psychological assumptions. What's our Plan B? What happens when the fire drill goes sideways?

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: A valid and necessary question. Let's start with the most likely failure point: the anomalous faculty. What if they don't react by herding students? What if they react with immediate, lethal force?

Director Ash: Their behavior during the dismissal suggests a preference for order. But the fire alarm is a different stimulus. It's a sign of *disorder*. It could trigger their 'punishment' protocols on a mass scale.

Supervisor Vance: If that happens, our psy-ops teams are compromised before they even get in the door. Our 'failing student' ploy for Thavel becomes a suicide mission.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: And my teams at the exits are suddenly faced with hostiles mixed in with evacuating children. It's a nightmare scenario. A complete turkey shoot.

Director Anya Petrova: So, if any of the three primary faculty targets initiate hostile action against the student body during the evacuation, what is our immediate response?

Task Force Leader David: We go loud. The moment a hostile makes a move on a civilian, the stealth component is scrubbed. All teams breach.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: All teams? Sir, my guys will be in soft gear, disguised as first responders. They're not equipped for a direct assault against something like Miss Circle.

Task Force Leader David: That's where the real Plan B comes in. We're not talking about your teams, Captain. We're talking about Nu-7.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: "Hammer Down."

Director Ash: So, the contingency is a full-scale, no-holds-barred assault? We abandon all subtlety?

Task Force Leader David: If they start killing kids in the hallways, yes. Absolutely. At that point, our only objective is to neutralize the threat as fast and as hard as possible.

Supervisor Vance: Nu-7 will be deployed at the campus. Their deployment time to the school itself is... what? Four minutes?

Logistics Officer Baker: Four minutes and twenty seconds, sir, assuming clear routes.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: A lot of kids can die in four minutes and twenty seconds.

Director Anya Petrova: Which is why Lambda-5 would also need to be deployed concurrently.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Explain, Director.

Director Anya Petrova: If the teachers go rogue, it's a sign that the entire anomalous ecosystem is destabilizing. We have to assume that will provoke a reaction from Alice. We can't have Nu-7 going in to fight the teachers while Alice decides to emerge from her domain at their back.

Director Ash: So, Plan B is a two-pronged, simultaneous assault. Nu-7 breaches the main school building to engage and apprehend Circle, Bloomie, and Thavel. At the same time, Lambda-5 performs a hard breach on the second floor and establishes a full-power reality anchor right on top of Alice's door.

Supervisor Vance: We put her in a box while we send the hammer after the others.

Task Force Leader David: It's the only way. It's brutal, it's loud, and there will be casualties. But it's a decisive response to a catastrophic failure of the primary plan.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: The risk of exposure would be absolute. The town, the world... they'd see it all.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: At that point, Intelligence Lead, the Veil is a secondary concern. The primary concern is preventing a massacre.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: And what's our role in this? The guys at the doors?

Task Force Leader David: You become the last line of defense. You hold the evacuation points. You protect the children who make it out. You do not engage the primary hostiles unless absolutely necessary. You are the shepherds. Nu-7 and Lambda-5 are the wolves.

Dr. Lee: And my medical teams would need to be prepared for... significant trauma. Both physical and psychological.

Director Anya Petrova: We're all agreed, then. Plan A is the fire drill. Surgical, quiet, psychological. But the second a single child is lethally targeted by a hostile faculty member...

Task Force Leader David: We burn the school to the ground. Metaphorically speaking.

Director Ash: Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

Lead Agent Rosie Weber: Hope is not a strategy. Preparation is. Now, let's start assigning the specific breach points for Nu-7.

The Archives: Dust and Delirium

(Kofia sat on the floor, leaning against a towering metal shelf, a box of old financial ledgers in his lap. Anya was a few aisles over, her quiet, methodical rustling the only sound in the oppressive silence. A huge, silent yawn escaped Kofia, his thin form slumping slightly.)

Kofia: *(His voice is a low, tired mumble.)* Okay. I think I've officially hit a wall. My eyes are starting to cross. Are these numbers, or just... angry little squiggles?

Anya: *(Her voice drifts back, equally weary but still sharp.)* They're numbers, Kofia. Probably. Just try to keep your focus. We still have three more sections to clear.

Kofia: I am trying. I'm trying so hard. But this dust... I swear, I've inhaled so much of it, I think I'm part mummy now. I could probably fall asleep for a thousand years right here on this pile of PTA meeting minutes from 1985.

Anya: Don't. The paper mites in this place look big enough to carry you away. And then I'd have to file the incident report, and that's just too much paperwork.

Kofia: *(A weak chuckle.)* See? You're thinking about paperwork. That's a sure sign of exhaustion. You're just as tired as I am.

Anya: *(A soft sigh rustles through the stacks.)* I'm not tired. I'm... operating at a reduced energy capacity to maximize long-term operational efficiency.

Kofia: Right. 'Reduced energy capacity.' Is that the official Foundation term for 'dead on your feet'? I've been 'operating at a reduced energy capacity' since we found that first binder.

Anya: It's been a long night.

Kofia: It's been the longest night of my entire career. And we haven't even gotten to the part with the monsters yet.

Anya: Technically, we're surrounded by the ghosts of their victims. So, we're already at the monster part.

Kofia: You know, that's... that's not helping, Anya. Not helping at all.

Anya: Just trying to keep you alert.

Kofia: Well, it's working. I'm now alert and terrified. It's a great combination. How much longer you think we'll be in here?

Anya: Until we find something that connects all these... bones. Or until the sun comes up. Whichever happens first.

Kofia: I'm betting on the sun. This place is a black hole for useful information.

Anya: We just have to keep digging.

Kofia: I know, I know. It's just... my brain is starting to feel like that grape jelly on the floor.

(Anya looks up from the files, her expression unreadable in the dim, dusty light. She sees the genuine exhaustion on Kofia's face and lets out a quiet, tired sigh of her own.)

Anya: I know. My brain feels like it's been put through a paper shredder. But we have to keep going.

Kofia: Keep going where? Anya, we've been through every box in this section. We found the binder, the drawings, the creepy diary... but that's it. The rest of this stuff is just... sad, boring history.

Anya: It's a dead end.

Kofia: It's a whole library of dead ends. I think... I think we're done up here. We need to call this in. The Lead needs to know what we found, and what we *didn't* find.

Anya: You're right. Let's make the call. The signal is weak this deep in the building. We might need to move closer to the window.

Kofia: Right. Let's not make our report sound like it's coming from the bottom of a well.

(They move to the grimy window at the far end of the archives. Kofia activates his comms, his voice a low, professional whisper.)

Kofia: CP1, this is Iota-10 Kofia. Do you read? Over.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: *(Her voice crackles through, laced with static but clear.)* We read you, Kofia. Your signal is intermittent. Report your status.

Kofia: Sir, we've completed a full sweep of the third-floor archives. It's... a mixed bag.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Explain.

Kofia: We found some significant intel, sir. One binder, specifically. It's... it's a record of former students and staff who didn't just quit or transfer. It's a long history of disappearances, going back decades.

Anya: *(She leans closer to Kofia's comm.)* Anya confirming, sir. The files contain non-standard terminology suggesting a cover-up. We also found evidence of a previous... janitor marked missing... who was stationed here, but has no reason or detailed explanation to it.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: I see. Understood. That is... a critical piece of intelligence. What about the rest of the archives? Did you find the "stories" Demi warned you about?

Kofia: Negative, ma'am. The rest is just junk. It's mundane. Decades of budgets, plumbing schematics, attendance records... nothing. It feels like this one binder was all that was left to find. Everything else has either been scrubbed or was never here to begin with.

Anya: Our assessment is that this is the extent of the relevant physical files in this location.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: *(A thoughtful pause on the other end.)* I understand. You've done good work. That binder is our single most important piece of evidence. Your primary objective is now complete. We need that intel back here for analysis.

Kofia: What are your orders, ma'am?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Your new directive is to secure that binder and any of the other relevant files you've found. Bag them.

Kofia: Uh, bag them, sir? We're... you know, janitors. We're a bit light on forensic kits. I've got a half-eaten protein bar and some lint in my pocket.

Anya: We have a standard-issue evidence pouch in the cart's concealed compartment, sir. We can use that.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Good. Use it. Secure the evidence and exfiltrate the archives. I want you to return to the main command post immediately. We need to analyze those files before the 10:00 AM operation.

Kofia: Return to the command post? ma'am, that means walking back through this whole... murder palace. At night.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: I'm aware of the risk, Kofia. But that intel is too valuable to leave unsecured inside the hot zone. So be careful.

Anya: What about our cover, ma'am?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Your cover is maintained for now. You are two janitors who have finished your deep clean and are heading out for the night. It's plausible.

Kofia: Is it? I feel like the monsters here probably don't care about union-mandated work hours.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: That's the other part of this. You are to proceed with extreme caution. We still have no confirmed data on the nocturnal patterns of Circle, Bloomie, or Thavel. We have no idea whose territory you'll be crossing on your way out, or if they're active.

Anya: So we're moving blind.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: You're moving with every bit of intel we have. But yes, there are unknowns. So you stay quiet. You stick to the shadows. You assume every corner is a threat. We don't know who or what is lurking around those hallways.

Kofia: Right. Assume everything wants to kill us. Got it. That's... pretty much been our default setting since we got here.

Anya: Understood, sir. Secure the package and return to CP1. Caution is advised. We're on our way.

Kofia: Copy that. We'll be as quiet as a couple of... very terrified mice.

(The main holographic display in Command Post 1 glowed with a three-dimensional, color-coded schematic of Maple High. Around it, the assembled command staff stood or sat in a state of coiled, grim-faced readiness. The air was thick with the hum of electronics and the heavier weight of the final, irreversible decisions being made.)

20:46 - The Final Briefing

Lead Agent Weber: *(Her hands clasped behind her back, her gaze fixed on the glowing map)* Alright. The clock is ticking. 21:00 is the hard deck for Gamma-7 and Lambda-5 to begin their final preparation phase. That gives us less than fifteen minutes. Let's lock this down. No more variables.

Task Force Leader David: *(Leaning forward, his knuckles white on the table)* My teams need their final parameters, Rosie. They're ready to move, but they need to know exactly what they're walking into. No more changes.

Director Petrova: *(Her holographic image flickers slightly)* Patience, David. A rushed plan is a failed plan. We have one shot at this. Let's make sure it's a clean one.

Director Ash: Rosie's right. Let's do one final, top-to-bottom review. The fire drill is the primary trigger for all initial movements. Logistics, confirm your status.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(His voice crisp over the comms)* The remote trigger for the school's fire alarm system is slaved to my console, Director. On your command, I can activate it. It will appear as a standard system malfunction.

Supervisor Vance: And the civilian staff—Mister Jack and the cafeteria workers. Anya and Kofia are confirmed as their primary escorts during the evacuation?

Commander Echo: They are. Their new directive is to locate those three and guide them to the designated safe exit the second the alarm sounds. They understand the priority.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My teams will be positioned at all other exits. Our cover is "emergency services." We'll be herding the student body to the pre-designated safe zones.

Lead Agent Weber: Good. Now, the bullies. Zip and Edward. The "special task" assignment is ready to be relayed?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: It is. The undercover Iota-10 agent is in position, disguised as a campus security guard. He will give them the "urgent" message to report to the gymnasium the moment the evacuation begins.

Task Force Leader David: And my secondary Iota-10 team will be waiting at the gym to take them into custody. Quietly. No fuss.

Supervisor Vance: Which leaves Oliver. The primary student threat.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My primary CQC team is on standby for him. We're still going with the containment foam?

Director Ash: It's the most effective, non-lethal option. His reality-bending is tied to his ability to draw. The foam immobilizes him completely. He can't move, he can't draw.

Task Force Leader David: But he'll be in a classroom. Surrounded by other kids.

Director Petrova: The explosive breach on the far wall will be the primary diversion. It will disorient him, draw his attention away from the door. That's your window, Captain.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: It's a tight window, but my men are the best. We'll get it done.

Lead Agent Weber: Which brings us to the faculty. The psy-ops teams are fully briefed on the tailored approaches?

Director Ash: They are. Team one, for Miss Circle, has the drone prepped with the "imperfect" math problem. Team two, for Miss Bloomie, has the auditory lure ready to deploy. And team three, for Miss Thavel, is prepared for a direct, confrontational argument.

Supervisor Vance: And all three apprehension teams are staged to move in the second their targets are engaged and distracted.

Commander Echo: That just leaves the two biggest variables. Alice and Engel.

Director Petrova: The Lambda-5 commander has confirmed their teams will establish the SRA perimeter around her domain the moment the school is clear of civilian life. She will be contained. That is their sole priority.

Lead Agent Weber: And Engel?

Commander Echo: I've spoken to Anya and Kofia. Their personal priority is his extraction, along with the girl, Bubbles. They will get to him during the evacuation.

Task Force Leader David: You're putting a lot of faith in two agents in the middle of that chaos.

Commander Echo: I'm putting my faith in the right agents. They've built a rapport with him. He'll trust them. He won't panic.

Supervisor Vance: It's the soundest psychological approach. He's the key to a calm evacuation.

Director Ash: And the contingency? If any of this goes sideways? If one of the teachers starts attacking the students?

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: The callsign is "Hammer Down." The second it's given, Nu-7 and Lambda-5 breach, and my teams provide support. All subtlety goes out the window.

Lead Agent Weber: So we're agreed. The fire drill is Plan A. "Hammer Down" is the worst-case scenario.

Director Petrova: It's the only viable path. It minimizes civilian casualties and gives us the best chance of a successful containment.

Task Force Leader David: It's a house of cards. But it's the only house we've got.

Commander Echo: Are there any final questions? Any weak points we haven't addressed?

Supervisor Vance: The timing on the fire drill. It has to be precise.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: We're monitoring the school's internal schedule. They have a class change at 09:55. The hallways will be at maximum capacity.

Director Ash: That's our window. 10:00 AM sharp.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: My men will be ready.

Task Force Leader David: It's now or never.

Lead Agent Weber: Let's get it done, then.

Director Petrova: Good luck to all of us.

Commander Echo: Then it's settled. The plan is locked.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: *(Her gaze is fixed on the glowing map, her tone crisp and analytical)* Alright. The clock is ticking. 21:00 is the hard deck for all MTF teams to begin their final preparation phase. That gives us less than fifteen minutes. Let's lock this down. No more variables.

Task Force Leader David: *(Leaning forward, his knuckles white on the table)* My teams need their final parameters. They're ready to move, but they need to know exactly what they're walking into. No more changes.

Director Petrova: *(Her holographic image flickers slightly)* Patience, David. A rushed plan is a failed plan. We have one shot at this. Let's make sure it's a clean one.

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Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: They are. Anya and Kofia's new directive is to locate those three and guide them to the designated safe exit the second the alarm sounds. They understand the priority.

Gamma-7 Leader: *(His voice a low rumble)* And my teams will be positioned at all other exits. Our cover is "emergency services." We'll be herding the student body to the pre-designated safe zones.

Lead Agent Weber: Good. Now, the bullies. Zip and Edward. The "special task" assignment is ready?

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Task Force Leader David: It's now or never.

Lead Agent Weber: Let's get it done, then.

Director Petrova: Good luck to all of us.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Then it's settled. The plan is locked.

Director Ash: *(Her voice is low, almost a whisper, but it cuts through the silence)* Two hundred and forty-three students. Seventeen civilian staff members. That's the number. That's what we're responsible for tomorrow.

Supervisor Vance: It's the most complex ethical and tactical equation I've seen in years. So many lives balanced on the point of a needle. Every move has to be perfect.

Gamma-7 Leader: *(His voice is a low rumble)* My men know the stakes. We're not just doing this for the mission parameters. We're doing this for Ramirez's squad. We're doing this for every operative that thing has taken from us.

Task Force Leader David: *(He slams a fist softly on the table, a muted thud of contained rage)* For all of them. For the first five who were just erased. For Abbie, for Lana, and for Claire. The police wrote them off. We won't. We are their justice.

Director Petrova: *(Her holographic form seems to straighten, her gaze sweeping over everyone)* That's the sentiment we take into this. This isn't just another containment. This is a rescue mission in the truest sense of the word. We are walking into a nightmare to pull those children out of it.

Lead Agent Weber: *(She steps forward, her presence commanding the room)* Look around you. Look at the people on these screens. There is no better team for this job in the entire Foundation. We have the best tactical minds, the best intelligence operatives, and the bravest soldiers. Yes, the risks are astronomical. Yes, the enemy is an unknown. But we are not going in blind. We are going in prepared.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: We have the intel. We have the plan.

Lead Agent Weber: We have more than that. We have a purpose. We hold the line. We hold it for the ones who can't. We do it for the teachers too afraid to speak. We do it for the parents who are living through hell. But most of all, we do this for the children who deserve to go home tomorrow. We will not fail them.

Task Force Leader David: *(A slow, dangerous grin spreads across his face)* Damn right we won't. We're going to kick that nest, and we're going to win.

Gamma-7 Leader: *(He stands straighter, a surge of energy in his posture)* My men are ready to bring the thunder. Just give the word. Let's go!

Director Petrova: Let's give them hell!

Director Ash: Site-77i is ready. The medical teams are on standby.

Supervisor Vance: Area-11 is ready. We'll manage the fallout.

Lead Agent Weber: Let's bring them home!

Task Force Leader David: *(Shouts, his voice echoing in the command post)* Let's go!

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: *(Her voice rings with authority)* You have your orders! Let's get to work! Move!

(The solemn tension shatters, replaced by a surge of raw, focused energy. The holographic displays flicker as personnel begin moving with renewed purpose, their voices a cacophony of commands and confirmations. The command post transforms from a sterile briefing room into the beating heart of a war machine coming to life, ready for the dawn.)

Lost Darkness

(Anya and Kofia moved like shadows through the silent, cavernous hallways of Maple High. They swept the second floor, their movements economical and synchronized, before descending to the first, their soft-soled boots making no sound on the polished linoleum. For five minutes, they were ghosts, peeking through the small windows of classroom doors, their eyes scanning for any sign of their target, their path a slow, methodical spiral towards the front of the school. A minute later, they saw it: the large, heavy double doors of the main entrance, bathed in the pale, cold light of the exterior security lamps. They tiptoed the final few feet, the silence of the school a heavy, pressing weight. Kofia reached the door first and gave the heavy push bar a slow, careful nudge; it didn't budge. He tried again, with more force, and was met with the dull, unyielding clank of metal on metal. It was locked.)

Kofia: *(Whispering, his voice a low hiss)* Well, uh... that's a problem. Door's locked. And I mean, really locked. Looks like a heavy chain and an old padlock on the *inside* handles.

Anya: *(Leans in, peering through the small, reinforced window in the door)* Confirmed. Old, rust-flecked chain... big brass padlock. Looks like it's been here for years. Standard, if... overkill, nightly lock-up procedure.

Kofia: So much for a quiet exit. Guess they really don't want anyone wandering in after hours.

Agent Sarah: *(Her voice suddenly cuts in over their private comms from Command Post 2)* Field Agent Two, are you seeing this? On Kofia's feed. The main entrance.

Field Agent 2: *(A moment of silence, then his voice, now patched into Anya and Kofia's comms)* Yeah, I see it. That's a robust security measure. Iota-10, this is CP2. We have a visual on your position. What's your status on that exit?

Kofia: *(Pressing a hand to his earpiece)* CP2, Kofia here. The, uh, main entrance is a no-go. Repeat, the exfiltration point is compromised. It's chained and padlocked from the *inside*.

Anya: This lock looks ancient. Probably the original hardware. They take their after-hours security seriously.

Agent Sarah: Acknowledged, Iota-10. So it's an internal lock, not an external barricade. That's... different.

Field Agent 2: So it's not a new threat, just an old security measure we didn't account for. Stand by, Iota-10. We're escalating this.

Kofia: Great. So we're just locked in here like regular staff. My night just keeps getting better.

Anya: Stay focused. It's just a locked door. There are other ways out.

Kofia: Are there? This place feels more and more like a fortress every minute.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: *(His calm, authoritative voice overrides the channel)* Iota-10, this is Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva. Acknowledged on the compromised exit. We are analyzing the situation now.

Anya: We're ready for your orders, ma'am.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Your new directive is to find an alternate exfiltration route. Sweep the ground floor for any other potential exits. Service doors, maintenance hatches, cafeteria loading bays... anything.

Kofia: So, uh... we're just supposed to keep wandering around in the dark?

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: You will continue your reconnaissance while we work on a remote solution for the main doors. We need to know if any other exits have been similarly secured.

Anya: Copy that, Lead. Proceeding with a sweep of the ground floor for an alternate exit.

Kofia: Understood. Well... so much for the easy way out.

Anya: *(Turns to Kofia, her voice a low whisper)* Was it ever going to be easy?

Kofia: No. No, I guess not. It was a nice thought, though. For a second.

Anya: Come on. Let's check the gymnasium. The coaches have their own entrance.

Kofia: Right. The gym. Let's hope they're not as enthusiastic about padlocks as whoever does the rounds up here.

Anya: We need to be careful. If they've sealed the main entrance like this, they've probably secured the others.

Kofia: So this isn't just a locked door. It's procedure.

Anya: A very old, very thorough procedure. Now let's go find a loophole.

Intelligence Lead Tori Aliva: Maintain radio silence unless you find another compromised exit or make contact with a hostile. We'll be monitoring your feeds. Good luck.

Anya: Acknowledged. Iota-10 out.

Kofia: Here we go again. More walking.

Anya: It's what we do, Kofia. We walk, and we look, and we find a way.

(Anya takes point, her flashlight beam cutting a sharp, steady path through the oppressive darkness of the main hallway. Kofia follows a step behind, his own light dancing nervously from side to side, the heavy, final click of the locked doors still echoing in his mind.)

(Anya takes point, her flashlight beam cutting a sharp, steady path through the oppressive darkness of the main hallway. Kofia follows a step behind, his own light dancing nervously from side to side, the heavy, final click of the locked doors still echoing in his mind. For the next two minutes, they moved in a practiced, silent rhythm, a dance of pure stealth. As they

approached the long stretch of hallway that ran past the main classrooms, they flattened themselves against the opposite wall, using the rows of lockers for cover. They moved in short, quiet scoots, pausing to peek around the edge of each window frame before proceeding, ensuring no one—and nothing—was watching from inside the darkened rooms.)

Kofia: *(His voice a barely audible whisper, timed with a soft shuffle of his feet)* You know, this reminds me of that job in Marrakech. The one with the, uh... the squeaky tiles and the very alert cat.

Anya: *(Pressing herself flat as she peeks around a corner, her own whisper a dry rustle)* That cat was a genetically engineered listening device, Kofia. And those weren't tiles, they were pressure plates.

Kofia: Semantics. My point is, this floor is, uh... talkative. It's got more creaks than a D-Class on interrogation day. Not a fan.

Anya: It's better than the bioluminescent moss we had to deal with at Site-42. Every step you took lit you up like a Christmas tree.

Kofia: *(A faint, humorless chuckle)* Oh, right. The 'Glow-shroom' incident. I'd almost managed to forget that. My boots were neon green for a week.

Anya: Consider this a luxury, then. Just wood and linoleum. No feline cyborgs, no glowing fungi.

Kofia: Right. Luxury. I'll, uh... try to remember that while I'm trying not to sound like a herd of elephants tiptoeing through a library.

Anya: Just match your steps to the building's hum. It's a natural sound mask.

Kofia: The creepy humming that Demi warned us about? You want me to sync my stealth movements to the, uh... the ambient sound of pure evil?

Anya: It's just acoustics, Kofia. Use the environment. Don't fight it. It's lesson one.

(Following Anya's lead, they moved with a renewed sense of purpose, the quiet banter a thin veil over their coiled tension. They navigated the labyrinthine ground floor, their path taking them towards the large, echoing structure of the school's gymnasium. They reached the polished double doors and paused, listening. There was nothing but the same oppressive silence. Kofia gave Anya a nod, and she moved to one set of doors while he moved to the other. They tried the handles simultaneously and were met with the same unyielding resistance. They were all locked.)

Kofia: *(Lets out a quiet, frustrated sigh)* You've got to be kidding me. Locked. Every single one.

Anya: Same type of lock as the main entrance. Old, heavy brass. It's a systemic lockdown, not just a random one. They're thorough, I'll give them that.

Kofia: Thoroughly annoying. Alright, I'm calling it in. *(He presses his hand to his earpiece)* CP2, this is Kofia. Do you copy?

Field Agent 2: *(His voice is clear in their ears)* We read you, Kofia. What's your status?

Kofia: The, uh... the gymnasium exits are a no-go. All three sets of doors are locked from the inside. Same old, heavy chains and padlocks as the main entrance.

Anya: It's a complete seal on all major exits, CP2. It seems they want to ensure no one leaves after hours.

Agent Sarah: Kofia, this is Sarah. A thought... what about the maintenance room? The one at the rear of the school?

Kofia: The maintenance room? We were just there. The, uh... the door to the outside yard is just a standard push-bar.

Agent Sarah: Right, but the retrieval team used that yard for the extraction earlier. I was just reviewing the after-action report. Sgt. Zara's team confirmed the exterior gate was only secured by a simple padlock. It's a potential weak point in their security.

Anya: Sarah's right. It's a solid lead. It's not a main exit, so it might not have been secured with the same... enthusiasm.

Field Agent 2: Alright, Iota-10. Proceed to the rear maintenance yard exit. That's your new primary exfiltration point. Attempt to secure an exit there.

Agent Sarah: If that route is also compromised, do not continue to search. Your orders are to find a secure, defensible position on the ground floor and hold until we can coordinate a breach. Do you copy?

Anya: Copy that, CP2. We're proceeding to the maintenance room now.

Kofia: Acknowledged. Let's hope, uh... third time's the charm. I'm getting tired of rattling locked doors.

Field Agent 2: Keep us apprised of your progress. CP2 out.

Anya: *(Turns to Kofia, her flashlight beam already pointing down the corridor they came from)* Let's move. We're burning time.

Kofia: Right behind you. Back to the creepy part of the school we go. You know, the part with the, uh... the memories of dismembered children. Great.

Anya: It's also the part with our only potential exit. Focus on that.

Kofia: Focusing. It's just, uh... hard to ignore the other stuff.

Anya: I know. Just keep walking.

Kofia: Walking. Right. My specialty.

Anya: One foot in front of the other, Kofia.

Kofia: Yeah, yeah, I got it.

Anya: This way. The service corridor should be faster.

Kofia: Lead the way. I'll, uh... watch our six. And try not to think about the trash cans.

Anya: Good plan.

Kofia: I'm full of them tonight.

Anya: Just keep the flashlight steady.

Kofia: Always do.

(They turned and began to retrace their steps, their quiet, tense whispers swallowed by the vast, dark silence of the school. Their new objective was clear, but the path led them back toward the place where their mission had taken its darkest turn.)

Kofia: *(His eyes adjust to the darkness of the maintenance closet, his brain catching up)* Wait a minute. Find another way... we're, uh... we're already here. In a maintenance room.

Anya: This was the next objective, yes. The potential exit to the yard.

(Kofia moves past a stack of paint cans to the heavy metal door at the back of the closet, the one leading to the maintenance yard. He grips the push-bar and gives it a firm shove. It clangs loudly but doesn't budge.)

Kofia: Well, damn. This one's locked up tight, too. Chained from the other side, it feels like. You've got to be kidding me.

Anya: Command's intel must have been incomplete. Let's call it in. *(She activates her comms.)* CP2, this is Anya.

Agent Sarah: *(Her voice crackles in their ears)* We read you, Anya. What's your status?

Anya: The, uh... the maintenance yard exit is also compromised. The door is chained and secured from the outside.

Kofia: So that's a negative on all known exits on the ground floor. We're, uh... we're boxed in good and proper.

Field Agent 2: Acknowledged, Iota-10. All ground-floor exits are confirmed compromised. We're showing a complete lockdown.

Agent Sarah: Okay... look, there are no other mapped exits on this level. And with that new... entity... out there, a breach is too risky right now.

Anya: So what are our orders, CP2?

Agent Sarah: There's no other option. It's up to you two now. You need to find a place to hide. You have to lay low until the morning assault.

Field Agent 2: And you must do it without alerting the anomaly you saw earlier. We have no idea what its sensory capabilities are.

Kofia: So, uh... just hide in a closet and wait for the cavalry? Noted. Kofia out. *(He deactivates his comms with a sigh.)*

Anya: *(Turns to Kofia after the channel goes silent)* Well. You heard them. We're staying put. This is our new home for the night.

Kofia: In this closet? For the next... what, eight hours? Fantastic. At least it smells, uh... clean. Ish.

Anya: It's defensible. One door in, one door out. We can barricade this one. *(She gestures to the hallway door.)* And keep watch on the other.

Kofia: Right. Defensible. So, uh... what do we talk about for eight hours? I've already told you about my emotional support pillow.

Anya: We stay quiet. We listen. We observe.

Kofia: Right, right. Quiet observation. My favorite. Seriously, though. This is... not ideal.

Anya: It's the safest play, Kofia. We're compromised but we're concealed. As long as nothing comes looking for us.

Kofia: Don't even say that. You'll jinx it. I can already hear the, uh... the creepy antler-scratching at the door.

Anya: There's no scratching. Just the hum of the building. Nothing else.

Kofia: Yeah, the evil hum. At least we have that for company.

Anya: Help me with this shelving unit. We can wedge it against the hallway door.

Kofia: On it. You know, for a librarian, you're pretty good at this whole, uh... tactical interior decorating thing.

Anya: I have a varied skill set. Now lift.

Kofia: Lifting. See? A perfect, uh... perfectly claustrophobic fortress.

Anya: It will do. Now we just have to wait.

(They finish moving the heavy metal shelf, wedging it securely against the door that leads back into the school hallway. The small, dark closet, smelling of bleach and old tools, is now their cramped, makeshift sanctuary until the dawn.)

Anya: *(Her voice a low whisper, she points with her chin towards a dark corner behind a large, dusty shelving unit stacked with paint cans and old rags)* There. We can rest there. It's out of the line of sight from either door.

(Kofia nods in the near-darkness. Together, they move to the designated corner. Anya carefully tucks the evidence bag containing the archive files under the lowest shelf, concealing it behind a stack of tarps. They then settle onto the cold, dusty concrete floor, their backs against the wall, hidden from any potential view. Three minutes pass in absolute, nerve-wracking silence, the only sound the faint, rhythmic thrum of the building's utilities.)

Kofia: *(His voice is a soft, tired murmur, barely disturbing the quiet)* You know what I'm thinking about right now? A real breakfast. Not, uh... not the nutrient paste that tastes like sad cardboard.

Anya: *(She shifts slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position against the concrete wall)* You're thinking about food? At a time like this?

Kofia: Hey, a man can dream. I'm talking pancakes. The big, fluffy kind. With, uh... real maple syrup. And coffee. Bad, greasy-spoon diner coffee.

Anya: I miss books. Real ones. The kind with paper pages that smell of dust and history.

Kofia: See? That's your version of pancakes. A big stack of, uh... of old books.

Anya: *(A faint, tired smile in her voice)* I suppose it is. I'd like to just sit in a quiet room, with a real window, and just... read. For a whole day. No comms, no reports.

Kofia: That actually sounds pretty good. Can I come? I'll, uh... I'll bring the pancakes.

Anya: You'd be bored in five minutes.

Kofia: Probably. But it'd be a great five minutes. What would you read first?

Anya: Something... simple. A history of ancient gardening techniques, maybe. Something with no monsters and no conspiracies.

Kofia: Right. Something where the biggest drama is, like, uh... aphid infestation. I get that.

Anya: What about you? After the pancakes. What's the first real thing you'd do?

Kofia: I'd go see my nephew. He's, uh... he's five. He thinks my job is to fix vending machines.

Anya: That's an effective cover story.

Kofia: Yeah. Last time I saw him, he gave me a drawing of me fighting a, uh... a giant, evil pretzel. He's a good kid.

Anya: He sounds like it.

Kofia: I'd just like to, you know... sit on the floor and build something with LEGOs. Something that isn't, uh... tactically significant.

Anya: A worthy goal. A life less tactical.

Kofia: Exactly. Do you ever think about it? A life after... all this?

Anya: Sometimes. It's a... a difficult concept to visualize.

Kofia: I think about it a lot. Mostly when I'm hiding in a creepy closet in a murder school.

Anya: It's a good time for self-reflection.

Kofia: Yeah. I guess so. Just... feels a long way from here, you know? The pancakes. And the LEGOs.

Anya: We'll get there, Kofia. One closet at a time.

Kofia: *(His voice is a soft, tired murmur)* You know... when this is all over... what happens to them? Engel and, uh... and Bubbles.

Anya: They'll be debriefed. The Foundation's psychological teams will help them. They'll be... taken care of.

Kofia: Yeah, I know. 'Taken care of.' But it's not the same. They've seen too much. I just... I hope they get a chance to just be kids again. For real.

Anya: They deserve that. A real childhood.

Kofia: Yeah. That Bubbles kid... she's tough. Sticking by him like that. She's a good friend.

Anya: She's loyal. It's a rare quality.

Kofia: We should, uh... we should check in on them. Afterwards. Make sure the 'psychological teams' are actually helping.

Anya: *(Her voice is very quiet in the darkness)* You're a good man, Kofia.

Kofia: *(He sounds a little surprised)* Uh... thanks. Just... doing the job.

Anya: No, it's more than that. You always see the person, not just the asset. Even back in recruitment.

Kofia: *(He gets quiet, his voice losing its usual joking edge)* Recruitment... yeah. That was a lifetime ago, wasn't it?

Anya: It feels like it. I remember you. You were the one who kept making jokes during the psychological evaluations.

Kofia: *(A soft, self-deprecating chuckle)* Yeah, well. The proctors didn't find them very funny. You, uh... you were the scary one. The one who aced all the tactical simulations without breaking a sweat.

Anya: I was focused.

Kofia: You were more than focused. You were... brilliant. I, uh... I knew then.

Anya: *(She turns her head slightly, her form a pale outline in the gloom)* Knew what?

Kofia: *(He hesitates, the confession feeling heavy in the small space)* That I wanted you as my partner. And, uh... well. Maybe a little more than that.

Anya: *(A beat of silence passes, the only sound the faint hum of the building)* More?

Kofia: Yeah. Look, this is probably the worst possible time... hiding in a murder closet and all. But, uh... I've had a crush on you for a long time, Anya. Since the day you disarmed that training instructor with his own sidearm.

Anya: *(Another long pause, her stillness absolute)* You hid it well.

Kofia: It's what we're trained to do, right? Hide things. Compartmentalize.

Anya: *(Her voice is still quiet, but there's a new, unreadable softness to it)* Yes. It is.

(The silence in the dark maintenance closet stretches, no longer tense, but filled with a new, fragile intimacy. Kofia lets out a slow breath he didn't realize he was holding.)

Kofia: I, uh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things weird. It's just... we're sitting here, and it feels like if I don't say it now, I never will.

Anya: It's not weird, Kofia. It's... unexpected.

Kofia: *(A hint of his old humor returns)* Yeah, well. 'Unexpected' is kind of my brand.

Anya: *(A faint smile in her voice)* That it is.

Kofia: Seeing those kids... and then, you know, everything else... it just reminds you what's, uh... what's important. What's real. And this... this feels real to me. Has for a long time.

Anya: *(After a long pause, her voice is barely a whisper)* Me too.

Kofia: *(He shifts, turning to face her outline in the dark, his voice full of a sudden, cautious hope)* Wait... you mean...?

Anya: I mean... it's not a one-way street, Kofia. I'm just... not as good with the words.

Kofia: Oh. Wow. Okay. I... I did not expect that.

Anya: You said it yourself. 'Unexpected' is your brand.

Kofia: *(He laughs softly, a sound of pure relief)* I'm glad it's ours.

Anya: Me too.

Kofia: So... what now?

Anya: *(Her voice is an invitation)* Now... you tell me about recruitment. You said you 'knew then'. I want to know what you knew.

Kofia: Heh. Okay. Uh... everyone else there was trying so hard to be tough. You know? All swagger and, uh... and bravado. Trying to prove they were the top dog.

Anya: It was a competitive environment.

Kofia: It was. But you... you weren't trying to prove anything. You just... were. You were quiet, you were focused. You saw things other people missed.

Anya: I was observant.

Kofia: You were more than that. I remember the 'Hostage Simulation'. The one with the, uh... the pressure-sensitive floor.

Anya: The instructors' pet project. It was designed to be unbeatable.

Kofia: And everyone failed it. They all tried to go in loud, go in fast. But you... you just watched. For twenty minutes. You watched the dust motes in the air currents from the vents.

Anya: I saw a solution they didn't want us to see.

Kofia: Yeah. And it wasn't just that you were smart. It was that you were... kind. You helped up that guy who failed right before you, the one who twisted his ankle. You didn't have to do that.

Anya: He was just a kid, like us.

Kofia: I know. And... that's when I knew. I had this, uh... this huge, ridiculous crush on the brilliant, quiet girl who was better than everyone but didn't act like it. It's... it's been there ever since. For a long time.

Anya: *(The silence returns, but it's warm now, comfortable)* You never said anything.

Kofia: And risk the best partnership in the entire Iota-10 program? Never. It was enough just... being here. With you.

(Anya is silent for a long moment. In the deep shadows of the closet, a faint, darker blush colors her thin cheeks, a detail Kofia can feel more than see.)

Anya: *(Her voice is incredibly soft)* Maybe... it doesn't have to be just 'enough'.

Kofia: *(He shifts slightly, leaning closer in the dark, his voice full of a hopeful vulnerability)*
Anya... are you... are you saying...?

Anya: I'm saying... the partnership is important to me too, Kofia. More than you know.
I... I never wanted to risk it either.

Kofia: So you... you felt it too? Back then?

Anya: I felt... that you were the only one who wasn't just looking at the mission specs.
You were looking at the people. I... respected that.

Kofia: *(A soft, almost pained laugh escapes him)* Respect. Yeah, well. For me, it was a little
more than respect. It was... well, the truth is, I think I fell in love with you during
recruitment, Anya. Completely.

Anya: *(She doesn't pull away, just absorbs the weight of the word)* You can't have. We were
just kids.

Kofia: I did. I know it's, uh... it's insane. They were trying to break us down, build us back
up into perfect soldiers. But you... you never broke. You held onto something real.

Anya: I was just trying to survive.

Kofia: No, you were doing more than that. I watched you. You were kind when no one
was looking. You were brilliant when everyone was. You felt... warm. Safe.

Anya: I never felt safe, Kofia.

Kofia: I know. But you felt... like a safe harbor. For me, anyway. It's why I always tried to
get paired with you on assignments.

Anya: I thought that was just because I had the best scores in demolitions.

Kofia: *(He laughs again, a genuine, warm sound in the dark.)* Well, that too. I'm not stupid.
But mostly... it was because working with you was the only time the job didn't feel...
completely lonely.

Anya: It... it was the same for me.

Kofia: *(His voice is barely a whisper)* Really?

Anya: You made it bearable. The terrible jokes... the stories...

Kofia: Hey! Some of those jokes were gold.

Anya: They were objectively awful.

Kofia: Yeah, well. They made you smile. Once. In the mess hall, after the 'Sentient Pudding' briefing. I counted it as a major victory.

Anya: *(A soft, almost inaudible chuckle escapes her.)* I remember that.

Kofia: You do?

Anya: It was... memorable.

Kofia: But you smiled.

Anya: *(She goes quiet for a moment, the admission soft in the darkness.)* Yes. I did.

Kofia: *(His voice is full of a soft wonder)* I knew it. I knew I saw it. It was, uh... it was like seeing a unicorn. Or, you know, a perfectly balanced budget report. Rare and beautiful.

Anya: Don't get sentimental. It was a momentary lapse in professional decorum.

Kofia: It was the best momentary lapse I've ever seen. It, uh... it made my whole week. I think I aced the next simulation because of it.

Anya: So my smile is responsible for your promotion to field agent? I should get a commendation.

Kofia: You should. I, uh... I probably wouldn't have made it through without you, Anya. And that's... that's the truth. *(As he speaks, his voice thick with an earnestness he rarely shows, Anya's hand moves in the darkness. Her fingers gently find his, her touch hesitant at first, before lacing through them.)*

(They both go silent. A profound, palpable stillness fills the small, dark space, heavier than the fear and the exhaustion. In the near-total blackness, they can feel the heat rising in their thin cheeks, a quiet, shared blush. Their hearts, usually steady and controlled even under fire, begin to pound in a new, unfamiliar rhythm, a frantic, hopeful beat that has nothing to do with the mission and everything to do with the person sitting beside them.)

Kofia: *(He stops breathing for a second, his hand tightening almost imperceptibly around hers. His voice is a shaky whisper.)* Anya...

Anya: Just... be quiet for a minute, Kofia.

Kofia: Okay. Yeah. Quiet. I can do that.

Anya: *(After a long moment)* This is... illogical. Sitting in a hostile environment, with multiple hostiles active, holding hands.

Kofia: Feels pretty logical to me.

Anya: It's a tactical vulnerability.

Kofia: Is it? Or is it, uh... a morale boost? Good for team cohesion.

Anya: *(A soft, almost inaudible sigh that might be a laugh)* You're ridiculous.

Kofia: But I'm your ridiculous, right?

Anya: *(She squeezes his hand gently)* Maybe.

Kofia: I'll take it. So, uh... when we get out of here... and we will get out of here...

Anya: We will.

Kofia: The pancakes... and the, uh... the history books. Is that... is that a real thing? Could it be?

Anya: I don't see why not.

Kofia: Wow. Okay. A, uh... a date. With Agent Anya. I'm going to be so nervous I'll probably spill syrup all over the, uh... the priceless historical texts.

Anya: They're just library books, Kofia. And I'll be there. You don't have to be nervous.

Kofia: Right. No pressure. Just, you know, the culmination of a decade-long crush. Easy.

Anya: We see things that can unmake reality. I think we can handle a breakfast date.

Kofia: Yeah. You're right. It's just... I've thought about it a lot. What 'after' would look like. It was always... you know... fuzzy. But it always had you in it.

Anya: *(She turns her head to face him in the dark)* Me too.

(Kofia's hand is warm and steady in hers. The small, dark space of the maintenance closet feels less like a prison and more like a sanctuary.)

Kofia: *(His voice is thick with emotion)* You have... you have no idea how long I've wanted to hear you say that.

Anya: I think I have some idea.

Kofia: So... all this time... all those missions where we almost... you know. You were...

Anya: *(She squeezes his hand)* Yes. I was.

Kofia: Oh. Okay.

Anya: Kofia.

Kofia: Yeah?

Anya: We need to sleep. We have a... a very big mission tomorrow. We need to be rested. Sharp.

Kofia: Right. Yeah. The, uh... the raid. I almost forgot we were hiding in a murder school for a minute there.

Anya: We can take shifts on watch. I'll take the first one.

Kofia: No. Uh... let's rest together. For a little while, at least. *(He squeezes her hand, his grip tightening.)* It's... better.

Anya: *(A soft, almost inaudible agreement)* Yeah. It is.

(In the shared quiet, they can feel the blush returning to their cheeks, a silent, warm confession in the dark. Anya leans her head slightly, her hair brushing against his shoulder.)

Anya: *(Her voice is a soft whisper)* Goodnight, Kofia.

Kofia: *(His voice is full of a quiet warmth)* Goodnight, Anya.

Anya: Hey, Kofia?

Kofia: Yeah?

Anya: Try not to snore.

Kofia: *(A soft chuckle)* No promises.

(Exhaustion finally claimed them, a force more powerful than adrenaline or fear. In the cramped, cold darkness, they leaned against each other, a silent acknowledgment of their new reality. Eventually, their heads drooped, coming to rest gently against one another in the shared, fragile peace of sleep.)

(Meanwhile, out in the oppressive silence of the school hallway, the emergency lights began to flicker and dim in a localized area. A shadow detached itself from the deeper gloom, a hulking figure in torn clothes that barely concealed the dark fur covering its body. From its

head sprouted a pair of sharp, wicked antlers, and its long, matted hair fell around a face contorted in a silent snarl, a low, guttural growl audible only to those unfortunate enough to be near as it began to roam the empty corridors.)

(Deep within the sprawling, sterile complex of MTF Headquarters, the atmosphere was one of disciplined, coiled tension. Monitors displayed troop movements, supply logistics, and the silent, unwavering vital signs of operatives across the globe. Director Anya Petrova stood before a massive holographic display, her expression a mask of cold, professional focus as the clock on the wall struck the hour.)

21:02 - The Wheels of War

Director Anya Petrova: *(Her voice is calm and clear as she activates the priority channel)* David, Captain. Report in.

Task Force Leader David: *(His holographic image appears, sharp and ready. His tone is eager)* David here, Director. We're standing by.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: *(His voice crackles through the speaker, patched in from the forward camp)* Gamma-7 Actual, ready for tasking.

Director Petrova: It's 21:00 hours. The planning phase is concluded. It is time to initiate the pre-assault preparation briefing with your respective teams.

Task Force Leader David: Finally. My men are getting restless. They're ready for the go-word.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: Understood, Director. I'll gather my squad leaders. We're ready to receive the finalized parameters.

Director Petrova: This briefing is critical. Every operative needs to understand their role, their specific target, and the psychological triggers we've identified. There is no room for error on this.

Task Force Leader David: Don't worry, Director. We'll drill it into them until they can do it in their sleep.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: We understand the gravity of the situation, ma'am. We won't let you down.

Director Petrova: Good. Patch your primary command channels through to this one. I will be overseeing the briefing personally. Let's begin.

(As Director Petrova's hologram winked out, Task Force Leader David remained in his spartan briefing room at MTF Headquarters. The energy in the room was palpable, a reflection of his own barely contained impatience. He stabbed a button on his desk console.)

Task Force Leader David: *(His voice sharp, authoritative)* Johnson, get to my office. Now.

Assistant Leader Johnson: *(His voice crackles over the intercom)* On my way, sir.

(A moment later, the door to the office slides open and Assistant Leader Johnson enters, his posture alert and ready. He comes to a stop before David's desk.)

Assistant Leader Johnson: Sir? You called.

Task Force Leader David: We've got the green light. The final briefing from the Director is complete. The time for waiting is over.

Assistant Leader Johnson: *(A flicker of anticipation in his eyes)* Understood, sir. What are your orders?

Task Force Leader David: I want you to go to the main command room. Get on the facility-wide comms system.

Assistant Leader Johnson: The whole facility, sir?

Task Force Leader David: Every last operative assigned to this op. I want you to make the announcement. All teams assigned to Operation: Maple Shade are to report to their designated briefing rooms immediately.

Assistant Leader Johnson: Yes, sir. Full mobilization order.

Task Force Leader David: Tell them to get their gear. Tell them the talking is done. It's time to get to work.

Assistant Leader Johnson: Consider it done, sir. They'll be ready.

Task Force Leader David: I know they will be. They've been waiting for this. We all have.

Assistant Leader Johnson: I'll make the announcement immediately.

Task Force Leader David: Go. Let's get this machine moving.

(Assistant Leader Johnson turned on his heel and moved with a brisk, purposeful stride, breaking into a steady run as he cleared the administrative wing. He navigated the vast, sterile corridors of MTF Headquarters with practiced ease. Three minutes later, he arrived at

the main Command and Control center, a cavernous, circular room humming with the quiet energy of a dozen on-duty personnel monitoring global threats on massive holographic displays.)

Assistant Leader Johnson: *(His voice cuts through the low hum of the room, sharp and clear)* Alright, listen up!

Comms Tech 1: *(Snapping to attention in his chair)* Sir! We weren't expecting you.

Assistant Leader Johnson: That's why they call it a 'go' order, Corporal. It's not on your schedule. I want all stations at full operational readiness. Now.

Comms Tech 2: Yes, sir. Bringing all tactical channels for Maple Shade online.

Assistant Leader Johnson: Patch me into the facility-wide broadcast system. Priority Alpha clearance.

Lead Tech: Right away, sir. What's the nature of the broadcast?

Assistant Leader Johnson: Full mobilization. Operation: Maple Shade is active. I want every MTF operative assigned to this op in their briefing rooms five minutes ago.

Comms Tech 1: Understood, sir. Routing the broadcast patch now.

Assistant Leader Johnson: And get me a direct line to the Gamma-7 forward camp. I want to confirm they're receiving this loud and clear.

Lead Tech: Yes, sir. They're on standby channel three.

Assistant Leader Johnson: Good. The time for standing by is over. Is that broadcast ready?

Comms Tech 2: Channel is open, sir. The mic is hot. On your mark.

Assistant Leader Johnson: Let's wake everyone up.

Lead Tech: You got it, sir.

Assistant Leader Johnson: *(He picks up the heavy broadcast microphone, his knuckles white. He takes a deep, steadying breath.)* Time to earn our pay.

(A sharp tone echoes throughout the entire MTF Headquarters facility, demanding attention. Johnson's voice follows, calm, formal, and radiating an absolute, unyielding authority.)

Assistant Leader Johnson: Attention all MTF personnel. Attention all MTF personnel. This is Assistant Leader Johnson, under the direct authority of Task Force Leader David. By order of MTF Command, I am issuing a facility-wide mobilization order, effective 21:00 hours, for Operation: Maple Shade. Operational condition is now set to RED-ALPHA. I repeat, the condition is RED-ALPHA. All operatives assigned to Task Forces Gamma-7, Lambda-5, Nu-7, and supporting Iota-10 elements are to report to their designated pre-assault briefing rooms for immediate tasking. Acknowledge and confirm readiness via your squad leaders within the next five mikes. Primary logistical elements are to confirm all gear and vehicle requisitions are finalized and ready for deployment. Medical command is to confirm all forward triage units are on hot-standby. The planning phase is concluded. The execution phase is imminent. All non-essential personnel are to remain clear of primary staging areas and hangars. The quiet time is over. Acknowledge. Johnson out.

(The low, ambient hum of the Gamma-7 barracks was the only sound, a stark contrast to the storm of activity brewing at HQ. Most of the operatives were in a state of fitful, shallow sleep, the day's tensions still clinging to them. The quiet was shattered by the barracks door hissing open, followed by a series of deafening, metallic CLANGS as Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez strode in, striking a row of metal lockers with her baton.)

Lieutenant Ramirez: *(Her voice is a sharp, authoritative bark that cuts through the darkness)* On your feet! All of you! Now! The party's over!

Sergeant Diaz: *(Jolting awake, nearly falling off his cot)* Wha-?! Mother of-! What was that? Are we under attack?

Operative Voss: *(Sitting up, rubbing his eyes)* I was dreaming of pizza... For the love of God, what's happening?

Lieutenant Ramirez: You just heard the announcement. Full mobilization. Operation: Maple Shade is a go. The quiet time is over.

Sergeant Major Carter: *(Already on his feet, his movements economical and sure as he pulls on his boots)* You heard the Lieutenant! Move! I want every man geared up and at the ready room in five mikes!

Corporal Chen: *(Sitting on the edge of his cot, calmly putting on his glasses)* Five minutes is an aggressive timeline, Sergeant Major, considering our current REM cycle disruption.

Sergeant Major Carter: *(His voice a low growl)* Did I ask for a sleep study, Corporal? No. I gave an order. Move it!

Operative Knox: *(Already halfway into his tactical vest, his movements silent and fluid)*
What's the situation, Lieutenant?

Lieutenant Ramirez: The planning phase is done. Command just lit the fuse. We're the bomb.

Sergeant Diaz: So we're really doing this. We're going in.

Lieutenant Ramirez: We are. And we're going in hard and fast. So I suggest you stop asking questions and start checking your gear.

Operative Voss: My rifle is clean. I checked it twice.

Sergeant Major Carter: Check it again. And then check your backup. And your backup's backup.

Corporal Chen: My systems are already running a final diagnostic. All green.

Lieutenant Ramirez: Good. I want status reports from all of you in the ready room in four minutes.

Sergeant Diaz: Four minutes? I haven't even had coffee!

Sergeant Major Carter: You'll get your coffee when the mission is done, Diaz. Now get your ass in gear!

Lieutenant Ramirez: This is it, people. This is what we've been waiting for.

Operative Knox: We're ready, ma'am.

Operative Voss: Ready as we'll ever be.

Corporal Chen: All tactical data is synched to my HUD. I'm prepared to provide real-time analysis.

Sergeant Diaz: Right. Just... try not to narrate the battle while we're in it, Chen. It's a little distracting.

Lieutenant Ramirez: Enough chatter! You're wasting time!

Sergeant Major Carter: First one to the ready room gets the least terrible nutrient paste for breakfast!

Sergeant Diaz: Now you're talking my language!

Lieutenant Ramirez: Move it! Move it! Move it!

Operative Voss: Yes, ma'am!

Corporal Chen: Acknowledged.

Sergeant Diaz: On my way!

(The barracks erupts into a flurry of controlled, chaotic activity. Lockers clang open, gear is strapped on, and the weary, half-asleep soldiers transform back into the focused, deadly operatives of MTF Gamma-7, their minds now fixed on the grim task that awaited them in the morning.)

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(This was a familiar ritual, a violent symphony of readiness that Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez conducted in every Gamma-7 barracks across the forward operating base. Her methods were brutally effective, designed to shock the operatives from the lingering fog of sleep and into the cold, sharp reality of the mission. It was a necessary cruelty, a primer for the chaos that awaited them at dawn.)

Meanwhile, at the Iota-10 Barracks

(The atmosphere in the Iota-10 wardrobe room was a world away. There was no shouting, no clanging lockers. Here, the operatives moved with a quiet, deliberate purpose, checking the seams on civilian jackets for concealed armor and calibrating the whisper-thin comms units hidden in their collars. They had heard Assistant Leader Johnson's announcement, and their preparation was a silent, focused ballet.)

Operative Nina Cruz: *(Smooths down the lapel of a nondescript gray blazer)* So, it's a go. Finally. I was getting tired of running threat assessments on the local diner's menu.

Operative Sal Moreno: *(Checking the action on a concealed sidearm)* You and me both. The waiting is always the worst part. Did you hear the latest from Agent Anya and Agent Kofia's feed?

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: *(Observing from a corner, her arms crossed)* I've been monitoring it. Their work has been flawless. Getting that kid, Engel, to open up... textbook social engineering.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: *(Shakes his head as he adjusts his own plainclothes gear)* Textbook or not, they're trapped in there for the night. I'd rather be out here getting ready to breach than in there playing hide-and-seek with monsters.

Operative Nina Cruz: Still, to build that much rapport, especially with a traumatized asset... it's impressive. Agent Anya has always been good at that, the 'quiet understanding' approach.

Operative Sal Moreno: And Agent Kofia with the bumbling janitor act? Genius. No one ever suspects the guy with the mop.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: They balance each other perfectly. That's why they were chosen for the deep infiltration.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: It's a hell of a risk. One wrong word, one slip-up, and they're just more names in the archives.

Operative Nina Cruz: What about that new hostile they spotted? The shadow with the antlers?

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: Intel's still analyzing the footage. No database matches. It's a complete unknown.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Which is exactly why Command is moving now. The situation is too volatile. They can't risk another variable emerging while our primary assets are isolated.

Operative Sal Moreno: So we're the cleanup crew for the bullies? Zip and Edward?

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: We are the 'misdirection team.' We get them off the board so Gamma-7 can focus on the primary target.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: It's a babysitting job. But a necessary one. Oliver can't have his backup.

Operative Nina Cruz: I still can't get over what they found in that maintenance room. Three of them... just... discarded.

Operative Sal Moreno: That's what we're here to stop.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Agent Anya and Agent Kofia gave us the targets. Our job is to make sure they're in place for the takedown.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: So we get to play 'concerned school officials'? I hate playing dress-up.

Operative Nina Cruz: You're a natural at it, Rogue. Your 'disappointed but fair' face is very convincing.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: Ha, ha. Just make sure your own cover is solid.

Operative Nina Cruz: Always is.

Operative Sal Moreno: We'll be ready, Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: I know you will be. The work Agent Anya and Agent Kofia are doing in there is critical. We will not let them down by failing on our end.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: Let's just hope they make it through the night.

Operative Nina Cruz: They will. They're the best we've got.

Operative Sal Moreno: They always come back.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Let's focus on our own roles. We have a part to play. Let's make sure we know our lines.

(The relative quiet of the MTF Forward Operating Base shattered. Alarms began to blare in a steady, urgent rhythm, and the entire compound flooded with the harsh, sweeping beams of floodlights. The low hum of a base at rest was replaced by a symphony of controlled chaos: the thunder of heavy boots on asphalt, the roar of transport truck engines firing to life, and the unmistakable, percussive thrum of Blackhawk helicopter rotors beginning to spin up.)

MTF SERGEANT: *(His voice booming across the motor pool)* Get those transport trucks rolling! I want engines hot in sixty seconds! Go! Go! Go!

GROUND CREW CHIEF: Ammo check on Squad B! I want a full count before you load out!

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: Attention all personnel. Condition RED-ALPHA is in effect. All Gamma-7 personnel, report to Briefing Room Alpha. All Lambda-5 personnel, Briefing Room Bravo. This is not a drill.

MTF OPERATIVE 1: Get the SRA units loaded onto truck three! Handle with care! That's our only ace in the hole!

MTF OPERATIVE 2: Move it, Corporal! That gear won't load itself!

Sergeant Diaz: (*Jogging in formation, hoisting his rifle*) Okay, okay, I'm moving! Never a dull moment around here!

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: (*His voice a low growl that cuts through the noise*) Less talking, more running, Diaz! This isn't a social club!

Corporal Chen: (*Keeping pace effortlessly, his eyes scanning everything*) Adrenaline levels are spiking facility-wide. Projected combat readiness will be at one hundred percent in T-minus ten minutes.

Sergeant Diaz: See? Even Chen's excited. You can tell because his, uh... his vocabulary gets bigger.

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: (*Running alongside them*) Eyes forward, both of you! We're not there until we're there!

MTF PILOT (over comms): Blackhawk One is hot and ready. Awaiting flight plan and manifest.

AIR CONTROL OFFICER (over comms): Stand by, Blackhawk One. Flight plan is being finalized.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: Voss! Knox! Double-time it! You're falling behind!

Operative Voss (from a distance): On your six, Bulldog!

Operative Knox (from a distance): Moving!

MTF SERGEANT: I want a perimeter check! Now! I want to know who is on this base!

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: Repeat: All Nu-7 support elements, report to Hangar Bay Two for heavy armor deployment.

Sergeant Diaz: Heavy armor? They're really pulling out all the stops for this one.

Corporal Chen: The threat profile warrants a significant tactical response. It is a logical allocation of resources.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: It means Command isn't taking any chances. Neither are we. Pick up the pace!

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: Briefing room is fifty meters ahead! Let's move like we've got a purpose, people!

MTF OPERATIVE 1: Come on, let's go!

MTF OPERATIVE 2: Move it! Move it!

Sergeant Diaz: I'm going! I'm going!

Corporal Chen: Maintaining optimal velocity, Lieutenant.

Operative Voss: Almost there!

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: Faster!

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: Don't make me leave you behind!

(The flood of operatives continued to pour across the tarmac, a disciplined, determined river of black tactical gear and grim faces. The FOB was fully awake now, a hornet's nest that had just been kicked, its swarm preparing to descend on the quiet, unsuspecting horror of Maple High.)

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SQUAD LEADER (in the distance): On me! To the south perimeter! Let's go, let's go!

DRILL SERGEANT (in the distance): LEFT! LEFT!

Sergeant Diaz: *(Panting as he runs)* My ears are bleeding! Is the whole base shouting at once?

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: All non-essential power to be diverted to hangar bays. Stand by for facility-wide brownout in designated sectors.

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: You hear that? Move! They're about to kill the lights on the barracks!

GROUND CREW CHIEF: Watch your backs! Heavy transport coming through! Move!

(The deep, deafening blare of a truck's air horn echoes across the tarmac, forcing a squad to break formation for a moment.)

Corporal Chen: Decibel levels are exceeding standard operational parameters. Recommend auditory protection.

Sergeant Diaz: What?! I can't hear you over the sound of... of EVERYTHING!

MTF OPERATIVE (shouting): Where's the requisition for the SRA units?!

LOGISTICS OFFICER (shouting back): Hangar two! I already told you!

DRILL SERGEANT (in the distance): LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT!

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: *(Points ahead)* There! Briefing Room Alpha! Get inside! Now!

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter: You heard her! Form up at the door!

Operative Voss: I can't wait to sit down!

Operative Knox: We're not there to sit.

Sergeant Diaz: A man can dream, Knox!

Lieutenant Maya "Ghost" Ramirez: Less dreaming, more moving!

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: Blackhawk One, you are cleared for liftoff. Repeat, Blackhawk One is cleared for liftoff.

(The roar of the helicopter's turbines intensifies, drowning out all other sounds for a moment as it lifts off into the dark sky.)

(The roar of the helicopter's turbines intensified, drowning out all other sounds for a moment as it lifted off into the dark sky, its navigation lights blinking once before vanishing into the night.)

(Down on the chaotic, windswept tarmac of the MTF FOB airfield, the mobilization continued at a feverish pace. Logistics teams swarmed around massive transport trucks while air crews performed final checks on a pair of waiting V-22 Ospreys. In the midst of the organized chaos stood MTF Lambda-5 Task Force Sergeant Cammer Vancek, his sharp eyes missing nothing as he surveyed the scene.)

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: *(His voice cuts through the engine noise, directed at a crew chief near one of the massive Ospreys)* "Chief! Status on the V-22s for Nu-7! Are they prepped for a hot deployment?"

Air Crew Chief: *(Shouting back over the rotor wash)* "Still running final diagnostics, Sergeant! Avionics are green, but we're still loading the primary ordnance! It's ongoing!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: "Get it done! They need to be ready to lift in thirty mikes! I want them spooling on the pad!"

Air Crew Chief: *(Gives a sharp, affirmative nod)* "Working on it, Sarge!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: *(Turns, spotting another team near a row of armored vehicles)* "You! Team lead on the Bearcats! Give me a sit-rep on those vehicles!"

MTF Driver: "Three out of five are fully loaded and fueled, Sergeant Vancek! Still waiting on the comms integration for the other two!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: "Unacceptable! What's the delay?"

Comms Tech: *(Leaning out of the hatch of one of the Bearcats)* "Sir, we're trying to slave their systems to the main command post! The new encryption is... tricky!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: "Make it less tricky! I want all five of those Bearcats rolling out with the main convoy!"

Comms Tech: "Yes, sir! We're on it!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: *(Activates his squad comms)* "Alright, listen up! I want all Lambda-5 logistics and special equipment packed and loaded onto transport seven, now!"

Lambda-5 Operative (Comms): "Copy that, Sergeant. What about the portable SRAs?"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: "They are top priority! Handle them like they're made of glass, but get them on that truck! Double-time it!"

Lambda-5 Operative (Comms): "Understood! Moving now!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: *(To a nearby logistics officer)* "I want a final manifest on my datapad in ten minutes! Every weapon, every piece of gear!"

Logistics Officer: "Yes, Sergeant! Right away!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: *(Surveys the scene, a grim look on his face)* "Hurry it up, people! The clock is ticking! We're burning daylight and we don't have any to spare!"

Ground Crew Chief: "Come on! Move with a purpose!"

MTF Driver: "Let's go, let's go!"

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: "Faster! I want this airfield cleared in twenty!"

(The briefing was a multi-location, simultaneous event, seamlessly connected by the Foundation's secure holographic network. At MTF Headquarters, Director Anya Petrova stood at a central podium, her presence commanding, with Task Force Leader David Scepter beside her, his posture radiating a barely contained, kinetic energy; in briefing rooms throughout the HQ, other stationed divisions watched the feed on their own projectors. Miles away, at the Forward Operating Base, the scene was replicated in the barracks of each task force; the projectors in their briefing rooms presented the live feed from HQ. Before these screens, the squad and team leaders from Nu-7 (Hammer Down), Lambda-5 (White Rabbits), Psi-7 (Home Improvements), Sigma-9 (Valkyries), Iota-10 (Damn Feds), and Gamma-7 (Spectral Vanguard) sat with their teams, all listening with disciplined silence.)

The Eve of Battle: Final Briefing

Director Anya Petrova: *(Her voice is calm, formal, and resonates with absolute authority)*

The following information is highly restricted, access is limited to those with a Level 3 clearance and a verified. This is the first critical Operation we need to know about this briefing, and I expect everyone to listen. At 10:00 hours, we will be initiating a full-scale containment operation designated "Operation: Maple Shade." Our target is a location in South Maple County: Maple High School. The Foundation's initial interest was triggered by a statistical anomaly: five students reported missing from this single location over a three-month period. Local law enforcement records proved inconclusive, and made up story, suggesting evidence had been either disbelieved in the situation, or they have different tactics in their sleeves. Our initial field agents, operating under a Northwood Relief Foundation cover, conducted interviews with parents and local residents, but the intel gathered was contradictory and heavily affected by what we now believe to be a low-level cognitohazard suppressing local awareness. The situation was escalated to Priority Alpha following the recent, rapid disappearances of two more students, Abbie Malum and Lana Pocketknife, and the public, brutal murder of a third, a student named Claire Charmont. This final event, coupled with intel from our deep-cover Iota-10 assets and the successful extraction of a high-value intelligence source, the school's principal, Eleanor Grace confirmed the school as a multi-threat, active anomalous zone. The situation is critical. Intel gathered by Agents Anya and Kofia, and corroborated by Principal Grace's testimony, has confirmed the school is an ecosystem of at least five hostile entities. We have three anomalous faculty members. Hostile-1A, designated Miss Circle, a math teacher who utilizes a compass-like appendage as a weapon. Hostile-2A, Miss Bloomie, a science teacher who uses a razor-like implement. and Hostile-3A, Miss Thavel, the language teacher, whose anomalous properties are linked to a rage-based morphological transformation. Their primary trigger for aggression appears to be what they define as "academic failure." We also have a confirmed hostile element within the student body. The ringleader, a student named Oliver, designated Entity-2Δ, is a

collaborator with the primary entity and possesses low-level reality-bending capabilities manifesting through drawing. He is supported by two followers, Zip, codename Asset-1A, and Edward, Asset-2A. The nexus of this entire anomaly, however, is a Class-4 reality-bending entity, Entity-1D Alice. She is contained within a spatial anomaly, designation Entity-1B, referred to as her domain and is directly responsible for the death of Claire. She is to be considered the highest priority target for containment.

Task Force Leader David Scepter: Your objectives are twofold. Primary, the safe and total evacuation of all non-combatant students and staff. Secondary, the containment of all hostile entities within the school. We will initiate this operation under the guise of a school-wide fire drill at 10:00 hours. Iota-10 will lead the extraction of key civilian assets we have identified, including the student Engel, marked as Asset-1B. Gamma-7 will provide close-quarters tactical support and will lead the apprehension of the faculty and student hostiles. Lambda-5 will deploy Scranton Reality Anchors to establish a stable reality perimeter around Alice's known domain. Nu-7 will provide heavy ordinance and support under the "Hammer Down" contingency protocol, should our primary plan fail. Sigma-9 will provide all air support and ISR. MTF Gamma-5 will establish an information cordon around the entire operational area. Their mission is to prevent any and all public exposure, manage civilian witnesses, and deploy countermeasures to ensure this event remains completely off the public record. The tactical approaches have been tailored to the psychological profiles provided by our sources. We will be conducting three simultaneous, coordinated psy-ops maneuvers to isolate and capture the faculty hostiles during the evacuation. For Hostile-1A, Gamma-7's Alpha squad will deploy a micro-stealth drone to project a flawed geometric proof onto her whiteboard. For Hostile-2A, Bravo squad will utilize a pre-planted auditory lure inside her lab's ventilation system. For Hostile-3A, an Iota-10 agent will pose as a defiant student to trigger her rage response. The student hostiles will be handled concurrently. A secondary Iota-10 team will lure Asset 1 and 2A to the gymnasium for quiet containment. The primary student target, Entity-2Δ, will be apprehended by a dedicated Gamma-7 CQC team, using a controlled explosive diversion and high-pressure containment foam. Additional Note, there is to be no direct engagement with Alice during this phase. I repeat, no teams are to engage Entity-1Δ. Once the evacuation is complete and the other hostiles are secure, Lambda-5 will take point. Their sole objective is to deploy their ANVILs and establish a hard containment perimeter around her domain, locking her down until a specialized re-containment plan can be formulated. The command structure is absolute. Lead Agent Rosie Weber is Chief Supervisor with O5 oversight. I am your direct operational commander. On-site, Commander Echo has tactical command of the evacuation. The Gamma-7 Division Director has field command of all apprehension teams. Agent Thorne has authority over all detainee processing. Dr. Lee at the Medical Command Post has absolute authority

over all medical operations. Communication protocols will be strict report critical updates only. The initiation signal for the fire drill will be 'Playtime is over.' The code word for the 'Hammer Down' contingency is, simply, 'Hammer Down.' The plan is set. The command structure is clear. Trust your training. Trust your team leaders. And trust the operative next to you. Any Questions?

(The MTF Forward Operating Base was a maelstrom of light, sound, and movement. A repeated, synthesized voice blared from loudspeakers mounted on every building, the message a constant, driving pulse that urged the last of the operatives into motion. It was the final call, a digital shepherd herding its flock of wolves to the gates.)

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: All personnel, this is a final mobilization alert. Report to your designated convoy assignments immediately. All teams are to be boarded and ready for departure in five mikes. Repeat, all teams, report to your designated convoys immediately!

(Outside the bustling barracks, the sheer scale of the operation was laid bare under the harsh glare of the floodlights. Sixteen heavily armored Humvees were arranged in a defensive posture, their engines rumbling. Iota-10's eight robust 6x6 Cougar heavy armored vehicles with police sirens stood ready, their thick armor plating promising protection against any conventional threat. For Gamma-7, six heavy Stryker APCs waited, their weapon systems already cycling through diagnostic checks. The logistical train was a formidable presence on its own, with ten large transport trucks forming its backbone: the first two carrying five Scranton Reality Anchors each, another filled with recontainment tools, a fourth with engineering equipment, four more packed with massive amounts of general supplies, and the final two configured as a survivor evacuation unit and a mobile field communications hub. On the nearby helipad, the massive rotors of two heavy Cargo Chinook transport helicopters spun lazily, kicking up dust as the last of the MTF Psi-7 operatives boarded, their forms silhouetted against the bright interior lights.)

Gamma-7 Squad Leader: *(Banging his fist on the side of a Stryker)* Let's go, let's go! Get inside and get settled! This isn't a scenic tour!

Iota-10 Operative (over comms): Cougar-2 to Command, all systems are green. We are ready for rollout.

Sigma-9 Pilot (over comms): Cargo Chinook-1 to Command, all Psi-7 elements are aboard. We are ready for takeoff on your mark.

Logistic Officer: *(Shouting into his radio)* Final manifest check on the SRA carriers! I want confirmation that all anchors are secure for transport!

Psi-7 Senior Field Operative: Is the heavy ordinance loaded yet?

Loadmaster: Just finishing up! Keep your distance!

Sigma-9 Operative: Air convoy is ready for escort duty. Just waiting on the ground-pounders.

Task Force Leader David Specter (over comms): All squad leaders, report readiness status now!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (over comms): Gamma-7, Vanguard is green!

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (over comms): Lambda-5, Spectre is green!

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: T-minus three minutes to convoy departure. All personnel must be aboard their designated vehicles immediately.

MTF Driver: Seal the hatches!

Iota-10 Operative: Sealing now!

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: Let's move it! I want this convoy rolling in two!

Ground Crew Chief: All ground crews, clear the tarmac! Repeat, all ground crews, clear the tarmac!

Sigma-9 Pilot (over comms): Command, we are ready to provide eyes in the sky.

Task Force Leader David Specter (over comms): Understood, Cargo Chinook-1. Hold your position until the ground convoy is clear.

Gamma-7 Squad Leader: Everyone in? Sound off!

Stryker Crew: Ready on the spot!

Sergeant Cammer Vancek: Let's get this show on the road.

(The blare of the base-wide alarm continued its steady, rhythmic pulse. On the main runway, the five futuristic 8-wheel Bearcat armored vehicles designated for Lambda-5 stood waiting, their engines emitting a low, powerful hum that was a promise of the force they could bring to bear. Their sharp, angular silhouettes were stark against the sweeping floodlights of the airfield.)

The Tip of the Spear

(Marching from the direction of the armory, Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell led a squad of his operatives towards their vehicles, his voice a sharp, motivating bark that cut through the surrounding chaos.)

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: *(His voice carries over the rumble of engines)* Come on, move it, move it! Pick up the pace! We have a schedule to keep and a school to save will ya!

(Back at the open-air armory just off the runway, the remaining fifteen Lambda-5 personnel, including their other commanders, conducted their final checks. The air was filled with the metallic clicks of magazines being seated and the electronic hum of specialized equipment being calibrated. Their conversation was a low, professional murmur, a stark contrast to the shouting outside.)

Lambda-5 Operative 11: *(Calibrating a device on their wrist)* You read the full intel packet on 'Alice'? The primary target?

Lambda-5 Operative 4: *(Slotting a specialized, non-Euclidean trajectory magazine into his rifle)* The extradimensional reality bender with telepathic capabilities and a penchant for silencing people? Yeah. Read it twice. Sounds like a typical Tuesday for us.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: It's the telepathy that gets me. The idea that she can just... kidnapped you by teleporting and snuff you out for thinking the wrong thought.

Lambda-5 Operative 11: That's why we have the Scranton Reality Anchors. They should create a null-space. Our thoughts will be our own inside the perimeter.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: The keyword is 'should,' my friend. These things are always tricky. Remember SCP-██████? The one that fed on abstract concepts?

Lambda-5 Operative 4: Don't remind me. I couldn't think about the color blue for a month without getting a migraine.

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: *(Her voice is calm but firm as she oversees the gear check)* Focus up. We're dealing with a Class-4 entity that has a confirmed body count.

Lambda-5 Operative 4: Yes, ma'am. Just... processing.

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: Process on the transport. Right now, I want a final check on all anchor deployment systems. I want them green across the board. No exceptions.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: *(He moves down the line, checking each operative's gear)* Complacency is what gets you killed. Or worse, *poof* gone.

Lambda-5 Operative 2: Yes, sir. All my systems are green. Ready for deployment.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: *(His voice booms as his squad reaches the armory entrance)* Armory team! Time's up! Let's move!

Commander Orocia "Cipher" White: Grab your gear. We're rolling out.

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: It's showtime, people.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: Finally.

(The Lambda-5 operatives moved with a sudden, focused intensity, the time for quiet preparation over. They began grabbing the heavy, reinforced cases containing the Scranton Reality Anchors and other specialized equipment from the armory racks.)

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: *(His voice booming, cutting through the last of the chatter)* "Alright, that's enough talk! Grab the primary anchor cases and the support kits! I want all personnel in their designated Bearcats in the next three minutes! We're moving!"

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: "Alright! Two ops per SRA case! These things are delicate, so don't drop them unless you want to spend the next week recalibrating reality by hand!"

Lambda-5 Operative 12: *(Grunting as he and a partner lift a heavy, metallic case)* "Got my side! This thing's heavy!"

Lambda-5 Operative 7: "Just pretend it's full of pizza, like that Gamma-7 guy was talking about."

Lambda-5 Operative 3: "I wish. This feels more like it's full of... solidified dread. And lead."

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: "Stow the chatter and lift! Get this equipment to the vehicles on the double! We're burning daylight!"

Lambda-5 Operative 1: "Yes, sir!"

Commander Orocia "Cipher" White: *(Directing the flow of operatives out of the armory)* "Spectre's squad in Bearcat-1. Echo's squad, you're in Bearcat-2. Rodriguez, your team takes three."

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: "My team will take the last two vehicles. Let's get these cases secured inside. Check the magnetic clamps twice!"

Lambda-5 Operative 2: "Securing now. The clamps are active, sir."

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: "Good. Don't just toss them in there, guide them! We need them fully functional when we hit the ground!"

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: *(Standing by the ramp of the lead Bearcat, watching his teams mobilize)* "Hurry it up! The main convoy is about to get the signal! We are the tip of the spear, let's start acting like it!"

Lambda-5 Operative 3: "Almost there, Commander!"

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: "All anchor cases are loaded and secured in my vehicle!"

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: "We're all loaded and clamped in here!"

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell: "Good! Everyone get in! Mount up! We roll in two!"

Lambda-5 Operative 1: "Yes, sir!"

Lambda-5 Operative 2: "Mounting up now!"

Commander Skye "Echo" Martinez: "Let's go, people! It's showtime!"

(The air at the MTF Forward Operating Base was thick with the smell of diesel fumes and ozone, a tangible cloud of anticipation. The massive convoy was assembled, a long, steel spine of armored vehicles and transport trucks stretching across the tarmac, their engines rumbling in a low, hungry chorus. Searchlights swept across the scene, illuminating the disciplined hurry of the last few ground crew members clearing the path. Every soldier was boarded, every piece of gear was stowed. They were a coiled spring, waiting for the final, irrevocable order to be released.)

21:38 - The Engine of War

Director Anya Petrova: *(Her voice cuts across all channels from MTF HQ, calm and clear)* "All task force commanders, this is Director Petrova. Sound off. Final readiness check, effective now."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: *(His voice follows immediately after, hard and impatient)* "Okay. I want a go-no-go from every unit. Sigma-9 Archangels, you're providing eyes and transport. Talk to me. What's your status?"

Sigma-9 Lead Operative (Comms): "Sigma-9 Lead, command. Air wing is fully prepped. All eight of our transport and support craft are spooled and ready for immediate deployment. We are a go."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "Copy that, Sigma-9. Keep those rotors warm. Psi-7 Skyhook, report."

Captain Chloe "Skyhook" Peterson (Comms): "This is Psi-7 Lead. We have ten operatives fully kitted and boarded on the primary Cargo Chinook. We are ready to deploy reality anchors and provide structural stabilization on your mark. We are a go."

Director Anya Petrova: "Acknowledged, Skyhook. Iota-10 Marshal, what's your status on the ground?"

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): "Iota-10 Command here. All twenty-five of my undercover and extraction operatives are in position within their Cougars. We are ready to move on the convoy's greenlight."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "Solid copy, Marshal. Gamma-7 Vanguards, you're on deck."

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "Gamma-7 Actual. All thirty of my apprehension and CQC specialists are locked and loaded in the Strykers. We are green across the board and eager to get to work."

Director Anya Petrova: "Understood, Director. Nu-7 Valkyries, give me your status on heavy armor."

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): "This is Nu-7 Command. All twenty-five juggernauts and support personnel are in V-22s. We are ready to bring the hammer down on your order, over."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "We read you, Valkyrie. Lambda-5 Spectres, status."

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): "Lambda-5 Lead. All fifteen of my reality specialists are secure in the Bearcats. The Scranton Reality Anchors are stable and slaved to our deployment systems. We are ready to go."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "Copy that Spectre. Lastly, Gamma-5 Genesis, status report."

Chief Adrian "Genesis" Lima: This is Genesis Actual, Genesis teams are ready to silence people, we are going dark, over.

Director Anya Petrova: "All units confirmed ready. Command is showing green across the board."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "That's what I like to hear. All teams are ready and not a single no-go."

Assistant Leader Johnson (Comms): "Sir, all convoy drivers are reporting engines hot and ready. The path is clear."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "Copy, Johnson. Tell them to stay frosty."

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "We're just waiting on you, command."

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): "Lambda-5 is ready to roll on your signal."

Sigma-9 Lead Operative (Comms): "Air wing is standing by for ground convoy's departure."

Captain Chloe "Skyhook" Peterson (Comms): "Skyhook team is ready."

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): "Marshal team is ready."

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): "Valkyrie Team is ready."

Director Anya Petrova: "Excellent. All callsigns, listen closely..."

Director Anya Petrova: *(Her voice remains steady, a point of absolute calm in the storm of readiness)* "The intelligence you have all received is the most complete picture we can provide. It is also likely incomplete. Expect the unexpected. Trust the intel gathered by Iota-10, but more importantly, trust your training and your instincts. Inside that school are over dozens of children and more than a dozen civilian staff who are trapped by the true nature of the threat. They are our absolute priority. The primary goal of this operation is their safe and total evacuation. Every tactical decision you make must be weighed against that objective. You are not just fighting a handful of anomalous entities; you are dismantling an ecosystem of terror that has been allowed to fester for years. Your discipline, professionalism, and your restraint are as critical to this mission's success as your firepower... The convoy will depart at precisely 21:40 hours. You have two minutes. Check your gear one last time. Clear your heads. Task Force Leader David, you have the final command."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: *(His voice is a low, controlled growl, filled with grim satisfaction)*. All units, you have your orders. You know the stakes. We do this for the fallen, and we do this for the living. On my mark?!

Assistant Leader Johnson (Comms): "Convoy is awaiting your command, sir."

Task Force Leader David Scepter: "Let's go remind those things what happens when they poke the Foundation."

(Task Force Leader David Scepter's final, grim declaration hangs in the air for a tense second, a promise of the violence to come. Then, the comms channel, which had been disciplined and silent, erupts in a chorus of readiness, a wave of voices from every corner of the assembled force.)

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "You heard him! Let's get it done!"

Sergeant Major Ben "Bulldog" Carter (Comms): "Time to go to work!"

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): "Nu-7 is ready to bring the hammer!"

Nu-7 Juggernaut (Comms): "Let's make some noise!"

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): "Lambda-5 is ready to stabilize the field. Let's get those anchors deployed."

Captain Chloe "Skyhook" Peterson (Comms): "Psi-7 is ready to manage the fallout. We'll take care of the kids."

Sigma-9 Lead Operative (Comms): "Sigma-9 has your back. Air support is standing by."

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): "Iota-10 teams are ready for extraction and misdirection."

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim (Comms): "We'll be their shadows."

Sergeant Diaz (Comms): "Finally! Let's get this party started!"

Corporal Chen (Comms): "All systems are green. We are operating at peak efficiency."

Operative Voss (Comms): "Let's do this."

Lambda-5 Operative 1 (Comms): "Anchors are hot!"

Lambda-5 Operative 2 (Comms): "Let's fold 'em up!"

Nu-7 Operative (Comms): "Time to crack some eggs!"

Iota-10 Operative (Comms): "We're ghosts."

Psi-7 Operative (Comms): "We're ready for the evacuees."

Sigma-9 Pilot (Comms): "The sky is ours."

Gamma-7 Squad Leader (Comms): "Let 'em hear us coming!"

Assistant Leader Johnson (Comms): "All drivers, stand by for the greenlight!"

Logistics Officer Baker (Comms): "The supply train is ready to roll."

Security Chief Hector (Comms): "Perimeter is secure. Go give 'em hell."

Director Ash (Comms): "Get it done. And bring our people home."

Supervisor Vance (Comms): "Execute the plan. Flawlessly."

Dr. Lee (Comms): "Medical is standing by. We're ready for them."

Agent Thorne (Comms): "And we're ready for our conversation with the principal."

Commander Echo (Comms): "Iota-10's recon is our guiding light. Don't let them down."

Lead Agent Rosie Weber (Comms): "This is for every child they took. Bring them all home."

Director Anya Petrova (Comms): "Hold the line. Make us proud."

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): "Let's ride!"

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): "On your mark, David."

(The order hung in the air, a spark thrown into a room full of gasoline. For one long, final minute, the entire convoy stood in a tense standoff with the coming dawn, a massive beast holding its breath before the charge. Inside the humming, metallic bellies of the armored vehicles, operatives stared into the middle distance, their hearts pounding a steady, grim rhythm. They were preparing to face Alice, the three monstrous teachers, the innocent children they had to save, and the bullies they despised. Many operatives had their heads bowed, not in prayer, but in focus, their eyes locked on their wrist-mounted or vehicle-integrated ATAK devices, the small screens glowing in the dim interiors. They swiped through the briefing files one last time, memorizing procedures, studying the blurred, unsettling descriptions of the hostile faculty, and burning the face of the high-priority student asset, Engel, into their minds.)

(At the front of the convoy, the massive, reinforced gate of the Forward Operating Base began to slide open with a low, hydraulic groan, revealing the dark, empty road that led towards Maple High. The greenlight was on.)

(At the front of the convoy, the massive, reinforced gate of the Forward Operating Base was now fully open, a dark maw leading out into the quiet suburban night. A final, definitive klaxon sounded across the base. A large status light near the gate switched from a pulsing red to a solid, brilliant green.)

LOUDSPEAKER VOICE: "Attention all units. Attention all units. Operation: Maple Shade convoy is now at condition green. I repeat, condition is green. All callsigns, you are cleared for immediate departure. Execute, Effective, Immediately!!!"

(A wave of sound washes over the tarmac as the low rumble of dozens of idling engines escalates into a deafening roar, the ground vibrating with raw power. The lead Humvee lurches forward, clearing the gate, followed by the rest of the Gamma-7, Iota-10, and the massive logistical trucks, a steel serpent uncoiling into the night as the air fills with the crackle of tactical radio chatter.)

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "All elements, this is Scepter Actual. We are wheels up. Maintain convoy discipline and spacing. I want a clean exit from the FOB."

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "Vanguard-1 copies. Gamma-7 is right behind you."

Sigma-9 Pilot (Comms): "Overwatch-1 is airborne, Scepter. We have eyes on the entire convoy. The route is cold."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Solid copy, Overwatch. Keep us appraised of any movement."

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): "Marshal-1 to Scepter. Iota-10 is rolling."

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): "Valkyrie-1. Nu-7 heavy contingent is bringing up the rear."

Assistant Leader Johnson (Comms): "Scepter, this is Johnson. All callsigns are accounted for. The serpent has left the den."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Copy that. Comms, go to encrypted short-range. Let's keep this channel clean unless absolutely necessary."

Comms Tech (Comms): "Roger, switching to short-range encrypted now."

Sergeant Diaz (Comms): "Vanguard-2 to Vanguard-1. We're rolling smooth. Tell Chen to stop narrating the tire pressure."

Corporal Chen (Comms): "Optimal tire pressure is critical for mission success, Sergeant."

Captain Chloe "Skyhook" Peterson (Comms): "Skyhook-1, we're holding in the air until you clear the main roads."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Acknowledged, Skyhook."

Gamma-7 Operative (Comms): "Vanguard-4, all weapon systems are hot and ready."

Logistics Officer Baker (Comms): "Logistics train is maintaining pace. No issues to report."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Good. First checkpoint is in twenty mikes. Stay sharp, people."

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): "Copy."

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "Roger that."

(The roar of the engines was deafening, a symphony of raw power channeled into a single, unstoppable purpose. The long convoy, a steel serpent of armored vehicles and logistical trucks, plunged into the subterranean tunnels connecting the Forward Operating Base to the main roadways. Headlights cut brilliant, stark tunnels of their own through the oppressive darkness, glinting off the damp concrete walls as the Strykers, Cougars, Humvees, and massive transport trucks thundered past. They emerged minutes later onto an open road, the sudden quiet of the wilderness a stark contrast to the tunnels. The convoy snaked its way through high, rolling hills dusted with a light, unseasonable snow, a dark, formidable line moving through a silent, sleeping world.)

(Meanwhile, back at MTF Headquarters, the five futuristic 8-wheel Bearcat armored vehicles of Lambda-5 roared to life in a cavernous, subterranean hangar. For five minutes, the only sound was the deep, resonant hum of their advanced engines echoing off the polished concrete. Then, with a series of low, grinding groans, a massive section of the surface above began to slide away, revealing the night sky as massive blast doors opened. One by one, the Bearcats ascended the long ramp to the surface, their powerful headlights cutting through the light, swirling snow as they rolled out onto the empty roads, a separate, silent blade destined for the same heart.)

(With the ground convoy now a distant rumble, all attention at the MTF Forward Operating Base turned to the helipad. The two heavy Cargo Chinook helicopters sat like massive, sleeping beasts, their twin rotors spinning in a lazy, hypnotic rhythm, kicking up a vortex of loose snow and grit. Between them, a single ground crew marshaller stood firm against the rotor wash, his glowing wands held at the ready.)

21:46 - Angels Are Go

Marshaller: *(His voice is a calm, clear signal over the ground crew's comms channel)*

"Overwatch-1, Overwatch-2, this is Ground Control. Your pad is clear. The ground convoy has cleared the primary departure vector."

Sigma-9 Pilot 1 (Comms): "Copy that, Ground. Overwatch-1 systems are green. We are ready for liftoff. All Psi-7 personnel are secure."

Sigma-9 Pilot 2 (Comms): "Overwatch-2 confirms. All systems are go. Awaiting your signal to ascend."

Marshaller: *(He gives a thumbs-up to his own ground crew, who are retreating to a safe distance)* "Alright, clear the pad! I want all ground personnel at a safe distance!"

Marshaller (Comms): "Overwatch-1, Overwatch-2, you have a green light for vertical departure. I repeat, you are green for liftoff. Wind is light, visibility is clear. Godspeed."

Sigma-9 Pilot 1 (Comms): "Acknowledged, Ground. Overwatch-1 is lifting. Taking us up."

Sigma-9 Pilot 2 (Comms): "Overwatch-2 is right behind you. Have a good night, Ground."

Marshaller (Comms): "You too, Overwatch. Give 'em hell."

(The Marshaller raises his glowing wands, his movements a precise, practiced ballet as he guides the first massive helicopter into the air. The roar of the turbines intensifies, a deafening wave of sound that vibrates deep in your chest.)

(With a final, powerful surge, the two heavy Cargo Chinook transport helicopters lifted off the ground, their massive rotors beating the air into submission. They hovered for a moment at their designated takeoff altitude, two dark, formidable insects against the cold night sky. Then, with a deafening roar that echoed off the surrounding hills, they banked hard and accelerated, streaking away into the light snow and towards the distant, ominous glow of the moon, carrying a payload of soldiers on their way to save a school from the monsters hiding within it.)

22:01 - The Long Ride

(The inside of the 6x6 Cougar was a cramped, humming world of its own. The low thrum of the engine and the whir of tactical comms displays were a constant presence. Outside the small, armored viewports, the snowy hills rolled by in an endless river of darkness, illuminated only by the powerful headlights of the vehicle ahead of them.)

Operative Nina Cruz: *(Her eyes are fixed on a datapad displaying Principal Grace's psychological profile)* I've been re-reading the intel from Grace's interrogation. Twenty years... she's been living in that nightmare for twenty years.

Operative Sal Moreno: Can you imagine? Watching kids disappear, knowing the truth, and having to act like the stern, unbreakable principal every single day. That's a special kind of hell.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: It's what broke her. But it also gave us a goldmine. Her testimony on the faculty's triggers... that's what makes the psy-ops plan even viable.

Operative Nina Cruz: I'm still worried about Agent Anya and Agent Kofia. They're still in there. Alone. For the whole night.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: Sal... They're the best we have at deep cover. If anyone can survive a night in that place, it's them.

Operative Nina Cruz: I know. It's just... the thought of being trapped in there. With the comms on low-traffic. The silence must be deafening.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: *(Speaking for the first time, her voice calm and steady from the lead seat)* Their sacrifice is what's giving us this chance to prepare. Their intel is the only reason this isn't a blind assault.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Which brings me to my next point. We've got a long ride ahead of us.

Operative Sal Moreno: What's the ETA, Lieutenant?

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Command's last projection puts our arrival at the final staging area between 06:00 and 08:00 tomorrow morning. That's a lot of road to cover.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: So we're just supposed to... what? Twiddle our thumbs for the next eight hours?

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: No. You're supposed to get some rest. All of you. In shifts.

Operative Nina Cruz: Rest? Now? Ma'am, the adrenaline is still pumping.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: I know. But you're no good to me tomorrow if you're running on fumes. We're the misdirection and extraction teams for the bullies. We need to be sharp, rested, and thinking three steps ahead.

Operative Sal Moreno: Yeah, she's right. We're going to need our wits about us for this one.

Lieutenant Light "Rogue" Foster: Fine. But I'm taking first watch with you, Sarah.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: I expected nothing less. Cruz, Moreno, you two take the first sleep shift. Four hours. Then you relieve us. Get some sleep.

Operative Nina Cruz: Yes, ma'am.

Operative Sal Moreno: Understood, Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Sarah "Shadow" Kim: Try to get some actual rest. We're going to need every bit of it.

22:19 - The Soben Room

(The small, quiet house was a tomb of memories. Mister Malum moved through it mechanically, turning off lights, checking the lock on the front door for the third time. After two long minutes of finding tasks to delay the inevitable, he walked slowly up the stairs to the second floor, his feet heavy on each step. He pushed the bedroom door open slowly, a practiced silence to his movements. The lamp on the bedside table was on, casting a soft, sad glow. His wife was not sleeping; she was sitting on the edge of the bed, curled into a tight, closed-off ball, her shoulders shaking with the rhythm of quiet, heartbreaking sobs. He stopped in the doorway, the sight a physical blow, his own composure cracking as he watched her private grief. He took a shaky breath and approached, the mattress dipping as he sat down beside her.)

Mister Malum: *(His voice is a soft, broken whisper)* Hey...

Miss Malum: *(She doesn't look up, her own voice muffled)* I... I can't sleep. I tried.

Mister Malum: I know. Me neither. The house is... too quiet.

Miss Malum: *(She looks up then, her face tear-streaked and pale)* I keep... I keep expecting him to just... walk through that door. You know? *(a soft, hitching sob)* Complaining about homework... or asking what's for dinner...

Mister Malum: *(His own voice cracks)* Yeah. I... I keep listening for his video games. That... that stupid little song from the one he always played.

Miss Malum: His room... it's so quiet. I went in there earlier and... *(another sob escapes)* ...and his laundry was still on the floor. I almost... I almost yelled at him to pick it up.

Mister Malum: *(He puts a tentative arm around her)* Don't do that to yourself, honey. Please.

Miss Malum: How can I not? I'm his mother! I should have known something was really wrong. He was so scared that morning, John. So scared.

Mister Malum: We both saw it. We... we just told him it was a test.

Miss Malum: *(Her voice rises with anguish, thick with tears)* A test! It wasn't just a test! It was... those people... those *things*... they took our son! They took him from us because of a stupid test!

Mister Malum: Shhh, shhh, I know. I know, honey.

Miss Malum: And those other people... the soldiers. They tell us to wait. To be patient. How are we supposed to be patient? Our son... our little boy is... is... *(She can't finish the thought, breaking down into a fresh wave of sobs.)*

Mister Malum: *(He pulls her close, holding her tightly as she cries)* They promised, honey. Remember? They promised they would find him. They believed us. They're not like the police.

Miss Malum: *(Her voice muffled against his shoulder)* But what if they can't? What if he's... what if he's really gone?

Mister Malum: Don't say that. Don't... don't you dare say that. We can't think like that.

Miss Malum: I can't help it! Every time I close my eyes, I see his face when he left for school...

Mister Malum: I know. Me too.

Miss Malum: What are we going to do, John? How do we... how do we even get through the night?

Mister Malum: I don't know. We just... we just do. Together.

(Mister Malum holds his wife, his own grief a silent, crushing weight. The soft light from the bedside lamp seems to accentuate the emptiness of the room, the space their son used to fill now a palpable void.)

Miss Malum: *(She pulls back slightly, her voice hollow and distant)* Together? How, John? How can we be 'together' when there's a... a piece of us missing? *(her breath hitches)* It's like... like our whole world has a giant, gaping hole in the middle of it.

Mister Malum: I know, honey. I know. It feels... wrong.

Miss Malum: It's more than wrong! It's impossible! He's supposed to be here! *(Her voice gets a little louder, laced with a desperate anger)* He's supposed to be in his room, leaving his socks on the floor and... and forgetting to take out the trash!

Mister Malum: Sweetheart, please...

Miss Malum: No! Don't you 'sweetheart, please' me! Don't you feel it? It's like I can't breathe in this house anymore. Every corner I turn, I... I expect to see him.

Mister Malum: I do. I feel it every single second.

Miss Malum: I can still smell his shampoo in the bathroom. The... the mint one he liked. *(a soft, choked sob escapes her)* I can't... I can't even go in there.

Mister Malum: We'll... we'll get rid of it. Tomorrow.

Miss Malum: *(She shakes her head violently, pulling away)* No! Don't you dare! Don't you touch his things! It's all... it's all we have left of him now!

Mister Malum: Okay. Okay, we won't. I'm sorry. I just... I can't stand seeing you in so much pain.

Miss Malum: I just want my baby back! Is that too much to ask? *(She pounds a fist softly on the mattress)* I just want him to be safe! I want to hold him!

Mister Malum: Me too, honey. More than anything in this world.

Miss Malum: And I hate them. I hate that school. I hate those teachers. I... I hope those soldiers do what they said they would.

Mister Malum: They will. I believe them.

Miss Malum: I want them to tear that place down, brick by brick. For what they did to our Abbie. For what they did to Lana and... and Claire.

Mister Malum: They'll get justice for them. For all of them.

Miss Malum: Justice doesn't bring him home, John. *(Her voice breaks completely, dissolving into a whisper)* Justice doesn't give me back my son.

Mister Malum: No. No, it doesn't.

Miss Malum: *(She collapses against him again, her fight gone, replaced by a profound, bone-deep exhaustion)* I'm so tired. I'm so, so tired of hurting.

Mister Malum: I know. Just... just lean on me. I've got you.

(Miss Malum collapses against her husband, the last of her anger washed away by a tidal wave of pure, crushing grief. Mister Malum holds her tight, rocking her gently, his own tears falling silently into her hair. He was supposed to be the strong one, but in the face of this, strength was a meaningless concept. All he could do was be present, a fellow survivor on a desolate shore.)

Mister Malum: *(His voice is a low, steady murmur, trying to pour his own strength into her)* That's it. Just... just let it out. There's no... there's no right or wrong way to feel right now, honey. Whatever you're feeling... it's okay to feel it.

Miss Malum: *(Her words are muffled, broken by sobs)* But it hurts so much, John. It's a... a physical pain, right here. *(She touches her chest)* It feels like... like my heart is just gone. Like they scooped it out and left a... a cold, empty hole.

Mister Malum: I know that feeling. I feel it too. Every time I walk past his room, every time I see his... his baseball glove just sitting on the entry table. It's like the whole world just stops for a second, and the quiet is so loud.

Miss Malum: How are we supposed to do this? How are we supposed to wake up tomorrow and... and just pretend? Pretend to be normal people who... who haven't had their entire world shattered into a million tiny pieces?

Mister Malum: We don't have to pretend. Not with each other. We can just... be broken for a while. It's okay. We can be broken together.

Miss Malum: I feel so guilty. I keep thinking of all the... all the little times I got annoyed with him. At the school... he's so shy and weak, the reason why Lana is with him... *(sniff)* He always has bad grades, it's my fault... *(sobbing)* I didn't teach him well... I failed him... He's the only child we have... *(sobbing uncontrollably)*

Mister Malum: Hey, hey. Don't do that to yourself. You were a good mom, you *are* a good mom. You loved him with everything you had. He knew that. He never, ever doubted that for a single second.

Miss Malum: Did he? I really hope he did. I just... I wish I'd told him more. I wish I'd hugged him longer that morning before he left for school.

Mister Malum: We can't get lost in the 'what ifs,' honey. It'll... it'll just eat us alive. We have to try and hold on to what we know for sure.

Miss Malum: What do we know, John? We don't know anything for sure. We just know he's gone.

Mister Malum: No, we know more than that. We know he was a good, sweet boy. We know he loved to draw, and he... he had your kind heart. We know he was brave, even when he was scared. And we know we love him more than anything. That's real.

Miss Malum: *(She looks up, her tear-filled eyes focusing on a memory)* He did have a kind heart. Do you remember that time he found that baby bird that had fallen out of its nest in the backyard? He sat with it for hours. Made a little bed for it out of an old shoebox and some tissues.

Mister Malum: *(A watery smile touches his lips at the memory)* Yeah. Yeah, I remember. He was so worried about it. He even tried to feed it a worm he'd painstakingly dug up from your flowerbed.

Miss Malum: That's our boy. So gentle. How could... how could something so terrible happen to someone so good?

Mister Malum: I don't have an answer for that. I don't think there is one. There's no... no logic to this kind of evil. It just... it just is.

Miss Malum: Those other people... the soldiers. Do you really think they can do anything? Do you really think they can stop it?

Mister Malum: I have to believe they can. I have to hold on to that. They looked me in the eye and they believed *us*. That's... that's more than anyone else has done.

Miss Malum: I want to believe it too. I just... I'm so scared of hoping.

Mister Malum: I know. Me too. But we have each other. We can be scared together. That's something.

Miss Malum: *(She leans her head on his shoulder, her sobs finally subsiding into exhausted, shaky breaths)* Okay. Okay, John. Together.

Mister Malum: We'll just... we'll just get through tonight. That's all we have to focus on right now. Just getting to the morning.

Miss Malum: One minute at a time?

Mister Malum: If we have to. One breath at a time. I'm right here.

Miss Malum: I don't want to be in this room. It feels... too empty without him just down the hall.

Mister Malum: Okay. We can go downstairs. I'll make you some tea. We can just... we can just sit on the couch.

Miss Malum: I don't think I can move from this spot.

Mister Malum: Then we'll just sit here. For as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere.

Miss Malum: Promise?

Mister Malum: I promise.

(Mister Malum holds his wife, his own grief a silent, crushing weight. He gently rubs her back, trying to offer a comfort that words could never provide. The room is quiet, save for her soft, ragged breaths as the initial storm of sobs begins to subside into a deep, weary sorrow.)

Miss Malum: *(Her sobs soften into quiet, hiccuping breaths. She pulls a pillow into her lap, hugging it as if for dear life.)* Remember when he was in... in first grade? Mrs. Gable's class. He was so, so shy. He wouldn't... *(her voice hitches)*...he wouldn't even raise his hand to ask to go to the bathroom.

Mister Malum: *(A faint, sad smile touches his lips)* Yeah. He'd just sit there and cross his legs, hoping the teacher would somehow read his mind. We had to have a... a whole meeting with her about his 'quietness.'

Miss Malum: She was so kind about it, though. She said he wasn't just quiet, he was... 'observant.' She said he was just taking everything in. He... he always saw the little things other people missed, didn't he?

Mister Malum: He did. He'd notice the... the way a spider spun its web outside the kitchen window, or the... the exact shade of purple in the sky right before a storm. He had an artist's eye, even back then.

Miss Malum: But he hated school so much. The... the tests. The grades. It was always such a struggle for him. (*a choked sob*) He'd get so anxious. He would study for hours and hours and then... and then the paper would just be blank in front of him and his mind would go empty.

Mister Malum: It wasn't that he wasn't smart. He was brilliant, in his own way. He just... he didn't think in straight lines and multiple-choice answers. His brain was all... swirls and colors and ideas that didn't fit in the little boxes.

Miss Malum: I know. But they don't... they don't give grades for having a beautiful mind, do they? (*a fresh tear rolls down her cheek*) They just give red marks. And he took every single one of them right to heart. It felt like... like a personal failure to him, every time.

Mister Malum: I tried to tell him it didn't matter. That the grades weren't who he was. That we were proud of him no matter what, just for being him.

Miss Malum: I did too. But when you're a kid... the school is your whole world. And his world was just... constantly telling him that he wasn't good enough.

Mister Malum: Except for his friends. Lana... she was so good for him. She was the one who... who just bulldozed right through his shyness.

Miss Malum: She was. She'd just grab his hand and drag him into whatever game they were playing. She didn't... she didn't give him a choice to be shy. She just... accepted him. They all did.

Mister Malum: That little group they had... it was his safe place. The only part of school he ever really seemed to love.

Miss Malum: And now they're all... they're all gone. It's not fair. He was finally... he was finally starting to find his voice. To be a little less afraid of the world.

Mister Malum: He was. I saw it in him too. He was starting to stand up a little straighter.

Miss Malum: That's why we sent him to Maple High. We thought... we thought the focus on the arts would be good for him. That he would... that he would finally be in a place where his 'swirls and colors' mattered more than test scores.

Mister Malum: We thought we were doing the right thing. The best thing we could possibly do for our boy.

Miss Malum: *(She looks at her husband, her eyes filled with a fresh wave of despair and guilt)* And we sent him into a monster's den. We... we fed him to them, John.

Mister Malum: No. No, don't you dare say that. We didn't know. We couldn't have possibly known what was in that place.

Miss Malum: But we should have! The rumors... the other kids that went missing... We just... we wanted to believe it was a good place so badly.

Mister Malum: We are not going to do this. We are not going to blame ourselves. The only ones to blame are the things in that school.

Miss Malum: But it doesn't stop the feeling, does it? The... the guilt. It's so heavy, I can barely breathe.

Mister Malum: No. It doesn't. But we can't let it crush us. We have to... we have to remember him. The real him. The boy with the shoebox for the bird.

Miss Malum: *(clutching the pillow, a memory surfacing through the pain)* The bird flew away the next morning, you know. He was so happy. He ran inside and told me he'd 'fixed it'.

Mister Malum: He always wanted to fix things. To make things better. That's just who he was.

Miss Malum: I just wish... I just wish we could fix this.

(Mister Malum pulls her a little closer, his own heart aching with the same impossible wish. He rests his cheek on the top of her head, trying to be the anchor she needs in the storm of their shared grief.)

Mister Malum: *(His voice is a low, steady murmur, trying to pour his own strength into her)* I know you do. If I could trade my life for his, right now, I would do it in a heartbeat. You know that, right? There is nothing in this world I wouldn't do to bring him back to us.

Miss Malum: *(She nods, her face buried in his shoulder, her words muffled by tears)* I know. I would too. I'd give anything. Everything.

Mister Malum: But we can't fix it. It's... it's the one thing in the world we have no power over. And that's the hardest part, feeling so utterly helpless.

Miss Malum: That's exactly it. I feel so helpless. Just sitting here, in this quiet house, waiting. It's... it's a kind of torture I didn't even know existed.

Mister Malum: Then let's not just wait. Let's... let's remember him. Let's talk about him. The good stuff. We can't let those... those things in that school take that from us too.

Miss Malum: The good stuff... it just makes me miss him more. It makes the hole feel bigger.

Mister Malum: I know. But it also... it reminds me that he was *here*. He was real. He wasn't just... a sad story that ends in that horrible place. He was our son. He was happy, sometimes.

Miss Malum: *(She pulls back a little, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand)* He was. He loved going to the beach. He absolutely loved digging for those little sand crabs, remember?

Mister Malum: *(A small, genuine, but watery smile)* He was terrified of the waves, though. He'd stand right at the edge of the water, where the foam was, and he would dare them to get his feet wet.

Miss Malum: *(A watery chuckle escapes her, a tiny flicker of light in the darkness)* And then he'd shriek like a banshee and run away when a tiny little wave actually did. Every single time.

Mister Malum: Every single time. That was our Abbie. So brave and so scared, all at the same time.

Miss Malum: That's what I don't understand. He was always so careful. He wouldn't have just... gone off with a stranger. He wouldn't have broken the rules if he thought it was dangerous.

Mister Malum: No. He wouldn't have. Whatever happened in that school, it... it wasn't his fault. You have to believe that in your heart, honey.

Miss Malum: I'm trying. It's just so hard not to... to picture his little face and wonder what he was thinking. If he was scared... if he was calling for us...

Mister Malum: Don't. Please don't go there. Let's... let's think about the sand crabs instead. Let's think about him shrieking at the waves.

Miss Malum: *(She takes a deep, shaky breath, trying to anchor herself to the memory)* Okay. The sand crabs. And the time he tried to build a sandcastle big enough for all of us to live in, with a moat for the crabs.

Mister Malum: And the tide came in and washed it all away. He was so devastated, he sat there and just watched it go.

Miss Malum: And you told him... you told him it was okay, because we'd just build a better one tomorrow.

Mister Malum: *(He looks at her, his eyes full of a deep, unwavering love and shared pain)* And we will. We'll... we'll build a better tomorrow. Somehow. We have to. For him.

Miss Malum: I just don't know how.

Mister Malum: Neither do I. But we'll figure it out. The way we always do.

Miss Malum: *(She leans her head back on his shoulder, the violent storm of her sobs finally passed, leaving only a vast, quiet ocean of grief)* I'm so tired, John. I am just so, so tired.

Mister Malum: I know. Me too. Let's just... let's just sit here for a while. You don't have to be strong right now.

Miss Malum: Okay.

(Mister Malum gently kisses the top of her head, pulling the blanket from the foot of the bed up and around her shoulders. He holds her close, his voice a low, soothing murmur, meant more as a comforting sound than as a conversation.)

Mister Malum: That's it. Just breathe. Just like that. We don't have to solve anything tonight. We just have to be here.

Miss Malum: *(Her voice is a tired whisper against his chest)* My head is so... loud. It won't stop replaying everything.

Mister Malum: I know. So let's try and make it quiet. Just for a little bit. Let's not think about... about them. Or that awful place.

Miss Malum: What are we supposed to think about instead? There's nothing else.

Mister Malum: Let's think about... our first apartment. The tiny one over the bakery with the leaky faucet and the... the terrible yellow wallpaper that peeled in the corner.

Miss Malum: *(A ghost of a memory surfaces through her grief)* I hated that wallpaper. It gave me headaches just looking at it.

Mister Malum: Me too. But we were happy there, weren't we? We had absolutely nothing but a lumpy couch and... and each other. And we were so happy.

Miss Malum: We were.

Mister Malum: And then Abbie came. And that tiny little apartment... it suddenly felt like a palace. Remember how we spent a whole weekend painting his room? The little glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling?

Miss Malum: You got more blue paint on yourself than you did on the actual ceiling.

Mister Malum: *(He chuckles softly, the sound a gentle vibration)* I did. I think my hair was blue for a week. But he loved those stars. He'd just lie there in his crib and... and stare up at them for hours.

Miss Malum: He always loved the sky.

Mister Malum: See? That's what we hold on to. That's what's real. The blueberry paint, and the... the sand crabs, and the shoebox for the little bird. That's our life. That's him.

Miss Malum: It just... it doesn't feel real right now. This... this nightmare feels real.

Mister Malum: Because this is the storm. But the storm will pass, honey. It has to. And we'll still be here. You and me.

Miss Malum: *(She closes her eyes, leaning her full weight against him, a small pocket of warmth against the cold)* I love you, John.

Mister Malum: I love you too, honey. More than any words can say.

(Mister Malum holds her, the shared memories a fragile shield against the overwhelming pain. He can feel the tension slowly seeping out of her, replaced by a bone-deep weariness that he feels in his own soul.)

Miss Malum: *(Her voice is a soft murmur against his chest)* I'm sorry. For... for yelling before. And for falling apart like this.

Mister Malum: Don't you ever be sorry for that. Ever. You have every right in the world to fall apart. I'm just... I'm glad you let me be here to help pick up the pieces.

Miss Malum: You always do. You're... you're my rock, John. You've always been so steady.

Mister Malum: And you're mine. We're a team. Always have been, always will be.

Miss Malum: Remember what Abbie used to call us? When he was little and wanted to watch a movie?

Mister Malum: *(He chuckles softly, the memory a warm, sad ache)* Team Malum. He'd say it so seriously, like he was a little general. 'Team Malum, assemble!' and we'd all have to pile onto the couch.

Miss Malum: *(A watery giggle escapes her, the first sound of real amusement in hours)* He did. And we'd all pile on, even when he got too big to really fit between us anymore.

Mister Malum: He was never too big. There was always room for him, right in the middle.

Miss Malum: I miss him. I miss our team so much.

Mister Malum: Me too. But we're still a team. You and me. That part doesn't change.

Miss Malum: It just feels... so much smaller now.

Mister Malum: It is. Which just means we have to hold on to each other that much tighter. We have to be strong enough for him now.

Miss Malum: I don't feel strong. I feel like... like a piece of wet paper. Like I could just fall apart at any moment.

Mister Malum: You are strong. You're the strongest person I know. You got through tonight. That's a victory.

Miss Malum: It doesn't feel like a victory.

Mister Malum: It is. We're still here. We're still together. And we're still fighting for him.

Miss Malum: Okay. Together.

Mister Malum: *(He shifts slightly, his own eyelids feeling heavy as lead)* My eyes are getting heavy.

Miss Malum: Mine too. I... I didn't think I'd ever be able to feel sleepy again.

Mister Malum: Maybe... maybe our bodies are just forcing us to take a break. Just for a little while.

Miss Malum: Can we just... stay like this? I don't want to let go.

Mister Malum: We don't have to move. We can stay right here.

Miss Malum: Will you still be here when I wake up?

Mister Malum: Always. I'm not going anywhere, I promise.

Miss Malum: Good. That's... that's good to know.

Mister Malum: Try to sleep now, honey. Just rest.

Miss Malum: *(Her voice is already thick with sleep, her breathing evening out)* You too...

(The conversation faded into the soft, rhythmic sound of their shared breathing, a quiet harmony in the silent house. The pain hadn't gone away, but for a few precious hours, it was held at bay by a shared, profound exhaustion. Clinging to each other on the edge of the bed, a silent testament to their unbreakable bond, Mister and Miss Malum finally drifted into a fragile, dreamless sleep.)

(The new day was born in the dead of night, marked only by the quiet flip of a digital clock in the lead vehicle. The massive MTF convoy thundered down a deserted, four-lane highway, a river of steel and shadow under the cold, distant moon. A light, persistent snow dusted the landscape, swirling in the turbulent wake of the heavy trucks and armored vehicles. Inside most of the transports, the rank-and-file operatives rested in a fitful, gear-laden sleep, their mission still hours away. But in the lead Humvee, the four-man crew was wide awake, their eyes scanning the darkness, the only sound the low rumble of the engine and the hiss of the heater.)

The next Day: The Midnight Run

MTF Driver: *(His knuckles are white on the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on the road)* Man, I hate snow missions. Can't feel my fingers on the wheel, and every shadow looks like it's about to jump out at you.

MTF Shotgun: Better than jungle ops. Last time we were in the Amazon, I had a spider the size of my hand build a web in my helmet overnight. A spider, man.

MTF Gunner: *(His voice crackles from the turret's internal comms)* Could be worse. Could be giant sand worms. At least the snow is quiet.

MTF Comms: *(Hunched over his console in the back)* Quiet? All I hear is your stomach growling from up there. You'd think for a Priority-Alpha op they'd give us better MREs.

MTF Shotgun: Don't get him started on the MREs. We'll be here all night listening to him complain about the chili mac.

MTF Gunner: Hey, the chili mac is a classic. It's the cheese spread that's a war crime. Tastes like melted plastic and regret.

MTF Driver: Speaking of war crimes, remember that retrieval in Chicago? The one with the... the statue that cried pigeons?

MTF Comms: Don't. Just don't. I still have nightmares about the noise. And the feathers. Never seen so many angry birds in one place.

MTF Shotgun: I'll take a million angry pigeons over one of those reality-benders Lambda-5 is prepped for. The stuff they were talking about in the briefing... 'ontological threats'?

MTF Gunner: Sounds like something out of a bad sci-fi movie. The kind where the janitors are the secret agents who end up saving the day.

MTF Driver: *(He chuckles softly)* Yeah, that's the one. Let's hope those two Iota-10 spooks, Anya and Kofia, know what they're doing in there.

MTF Comms: They're the best at the deep-cover stuff. Still... I'd rather be us than them right now.

MTF Gunner: Amen to that. I'll take my big gun and this freezing cold Humvee any day over being trapped inside a murder school.

MTF Driver: Just keep your eyes peeled. This is the quiet part. It's never quiet for long.

MTF Shotgun: Roger that. Eyes are open.

MTF Comms: Anyone got any gum?

MTF Gunner: Nope. Just MRE crackers and a profound sense of existential dread.

MTF Shotgun: I'll pass.

(The Humvee rumbled on through the darkness, the only sound the crunch of snow under the heavy tires and the low hiss of the heater. The brief moment of humor faded, replaced by the heavy silence of the long road ahead.)

MTF Driver: *(After a minute of quiet, his eyes never leaving the road)* Alright, knock it off. Let's focus up. Comms, what's our ETA to the first rally point?

MTF Comms: Uh, checking... Stand by... ETA is approximately twelve mikes. The route is still cold.

MTF Shotgun: So, this fire drill plan... are we really buying it? That these... things... are just going to herd kids out the door because a bell rings?

MTF Gunner: It's what the psych-profile from the principal said. They're obsessed with order and procedure. A fire drill is, like, the ultimate procedure for them. It's a system override.

MTF Driver: It's still a hell of a gamble. One of them decides to have a bad day, and we've got a hallway full of casualties before we can even breach.

MTF Comms: That's what 'Hammer Down' is for. We're just the first wave. If it goes sideways, Nu-7 will turn that school into a parking lot.

MTF Shotgun: With two hundred kids inside? I don't think so. Plan A has to work. There is no Plan B, not really.

MTF Gunner: He's got a point. This one's gotta be clean. Surgical. No room for error.

MTF Driver: What about the kid? The one with the pencil. Oliver.

MTF Comms: Briefing said Gamma-7 is on him. Controlled breach and containment foam. Sounds easy when you read it off a datapad.

MTF Shotgun: Nothing's ever easy on paper when the paper can apparently draw a monster that wants to eat you.

MTF Gunner: Just hope that foam works as advertised. I saw a training video once. That stuff is nasty.

MTF Driver: Just keep the convoy moving. We do our job, they do theirs. That's all we can do for now.

MTF Shotgun: Yeah. Just drive.

MTF Comms: Rally point is ten mikes out. All quiet on the long-range sensors.

MTF Driver: Copy that. Let's keep it that way.

00:59 - The Quiet Before

(The world had gone quiet and cold. Along a long, dark stretch of highway on Sora Road in Northernwood, Canada, the only beacon of light for miles was a lone gas station, its fluorescent glow spilling out onto the wet asphalt. A small restaurant was attached, where four patrons ate in near silence, their meals served by three weary-looking staff while a single cashier stared at the clock. Outside, the air was crisp and dusted with a light, unseasonable snow. Three gas station workers moved about in the cold, their breath pluming in the air. A

man in a leather jacket stood by his motorcycle, whistling a tuneless, cheerful melody as the gas pump clicked and whirred.)

(The motorcyclist finished, paid, and rumbled off into the night, his single headlight vanishing down the highway. At the station, the work was slow. One of the gas station workers finished cleaning the pumps, another stood watch, staring out at the empty road, and the third sat on a worn wooden bench near the station's entrance. Three minutes passed in the profound silence of the late night. The worker who had been cleaning finally tossed his rag into a bucket and walked over to the sitting man, slumping down beside him with a heavy sigh.)

Worker 1: *(Wiping his hands on his jeans)* Man, I'm beat. That's the last of the pump cleaning. Now what?

Worker 2: *(Doesn't look away from the dark highway)* Now you can join me in the exciting spectator sport of watching the road. It's a real thriller.

Worker 1: It's dead tonight, huh? Even for a weekday.

Worker 2: It's the snow. Freaks people out. Shouldn't be snowing like this. It ain't right.

Worker 1: Yeah, it is pretty weird. Think the roads are gonna get bad?

Worker 2: Nah. It's not stickin'. Just... makin' everything look weird and quiet. Quieter than usual.

Worker 1: Did you hear about all that commotion over in South Maple County? My sister called, said the news was going crazy about it.

Worker 2: Heard something. More kids missing from that weird school, right? Place is cursed, I tell ya. Always has been.

Worker 1: Cursed is one word for it. My cousin goes to Northwood, says they're not even allowed to drive on the roads near there.

Worker 2: Smart kid, your cousin. Nothin' good ever comes out of that town. Just bad news and weird weather.

(The bell above the gas station door jingled softly, a sound that went largely unnoticed. Inside Mono's Restaurant, the world was a small, warm bubble of light against the snowy darkness. Of the four customers, two were lone truckers eating in silence, while the other two, a young couple, were sharing a slice of pie. The lone cashier was indeed bored, idly scrolling through

her phone under the counter, while a cook and two servers moved with the slow, practiced rhythm of a late-night shift. A quiet, chill jazz tune drifted from a pair of dusty speakers in the corner.)

Mono's Restaurant

Woman: *(Takes a slow sip of her coffee)* I have to admit, this is better coffee than I was expecting for one in the morning. I thought it would taste like hot, brown water.

Man: *(Smiles, poking at his slice of apple pie)* Hey, don't knock roadside diners. They're the backbone of this country. And this pie... this is surprisingly decent.

Woman: Decent? You've eaten half of it in the time it took me to add cream to my coffee.

Man: I was hungry. It's been a long drive. My eyes are starting to see blurry lines on the road.

Woman: Maybe we should have just gotten a motel room back in that last town. I'm so tired.

Man: And miss out on this fine dining experience? Never. Besides, we'll be there in another three hours. We can push through it.

Woman: If you say so. Just... don't fall asleep at the wheel. I'm too tired to even try and drive right now.

Man: I won't. This coffee and this pie are my co-pilots. We're a team.

Woman: *(Looks around the quiet restaurant)* It's so quiet in here. A little creepy, actually.

Man: It's late. What do you expect? A marching band?

Woman: No, just... it feels like the whole world is holding its breath tonight. Must be this weird snow.

(The man gives a small, tired smile, taking another bite of his pie. The woman just shakes her head slightly, looking out the large window at the swirling snow, the quiet jazz music a soft, melancholic soundtrack to the late, lonely night. Behind the counter, the cashier, a young woman named Tares, was lost in a world of her own.)

Cashier (Tares): *(Leans her chin on her hand, endlessly scrolling through a social media feed on her phone, her thumb moving in a lazy, repetitive motion)* Ugh... another picture of

Ashley's 'amazing' trip to the city. Big deal. It's just a bunch of tall buildings and expensive coffee.

Cashier (Tares): *(Sighs, her breath fogging the cold air around her)* I'd kill for a tall building right now. Or, you know, just one more customer who isn't a trucker ordering black coffee and complaining about the roads.

Cashier (Tares): Let's see... 'Ten Signs Your Crush Likes You Back.' *(scoffs softly to herself)* Sign number one: they don't work the graveyard shift at a gas station restaurant in the middle of Northernwood.

Cashier (Tares): *(She glances up at the clock on the wall, then back at her phone)* Only... four more hours. I can do this. Four more hours of sad saxophone music and the smell of old coffee. Living the dream, Tares.

Cashier (Tares): Maybe something interesting will happen. Like, uh... a bus full of cute rock stars breaks down outside. *(She laughs a little at her own thought)* Yeah, right. The most exciting thing that's happened all night was that weirdo on the motorcycle. At least he was whistling.

(Outside, under the hum of the fluorescent lights, the snow continued to drift down, melting the moment it hit the dark, wet asphalt. A new customer, a woman in durable riding gear, finished refueling her large touring motorcycle. She clicked the gas cap shut and was pulling on her gloves when one of the gas station workers, Ward, approached her, his hands stuffed in his pockets for warmth.)

Worker (Ward): All set there, miss?

Motorcyclist: *(Nods, her voice slightly tired)* Yeah, all done. Just needed to top off before the last stretch of the ride.

Worker (Ward): It's a long ride you got there?

Motorcyclist: You have no idea. Coming all the way from the city. Just trying to get to the coast before sunrise.

Worker (Ward): Wow, that's a haul. The roads should be pretty clear for you, at least. Just... watch out for this snow. It's a weird one.

Motorcyclist: *(Looks up at the swirling flakes in the light)* Tell me about it. Snow in August. I've never seen anything like it. Makes the night feel... strange.

Worker (Ward): The whole world feels strange tonight. You just be careful out there, alright?

Motorcyclist: Always am. You guys staying open all night?

Worker (Ward): Yep. Someone's gotta keep the coffee hot for travelers like you. You need anything from inside? The pie's not half bad, I hear.

Motorcyclist: Nah, I'm good to go. Just need the road. Thanks for the heads up.

Motorcyclist: *(Nods, but lingers for a moment, zipping up her jacket)* Yeah, you too. Seriously, this snow is something else. Is this normal for Northernwood this time of year?

Worker (Ward): Normal? Ha. Nothing's been normal around here for a few months. But snow in August? That's a first, even for this place.

Motorcyclist: Just makes the drive more... memorable, I guess. Adds to the atmosphere.

Worker (Ward): That's one word for it. My buddy Walt, he just calls it 'plain weird'.

Motorcyclist: Well, 'plain weird' seems to be the theme of the night. It's a good thing I like weird.

Worker (Ward): *(He gestures back towards the lit-up store with his thumb)* Anyway, uh... you still gotta pay up for the gas. You can pay inside with Tares at the counter, or I can run your card out here if you want.

Motorcyclist: Oh, right. Of course. Uh, here is fine, thanks. *(She starts to pull a card out of her wallet.)*

Worker (Ward): No problem. Just trying to save you a trip in the cold. It's starting to bite a little.

Motorcyclist: *(She hands him the card)* Appreciate it.

Worker (Ward): *(Takes the card)* Be right back. The machine out here is busted, so I gotta run it inside.

(Ward gives her a small nod and jogs back towards the main gas station building, disappearing inside to process her card. The motorcyclist waits by her bike, her gaze turning from the empty road up to the strange, snow-filled sky, a lone, quiet figure in the vast, dark night.)

01:05 - The Approaching Storm

(One kilometer down the dark highway, the quiet of the night was not absolute. At first, it was just a low, distant hum, a vibration felt more in the bones than heard with the ears, but it was growing steadily louder, deeper. Then, the sound began to resolve itself, the deep, guttural roar of dozens of powerful engines swallowing the silence of the road. A single pair of powerful headlights cut through the swirling snow, followed by another, and another, until a procession of lights burned through the darkness. The ground began to tremble as the source of the noise rolled into view: a long, impossibly formidable convoy of black, armored vehicles, moving with a disciplined, terrifying purpose. They were a river of steel and shadow, devouring the empty road, their roaring engines a declaration of war against the quiet of the snowy Canadian night.)

(Ward walks back out from the main building, the cold air hitting him again. He hands the motorcyclist her card and a thin, flimsy receipt.)

Worker (Ward): Alright, you're all set. The payment went through.

Motorcyclist: *(Tucks the card safely into her wallet)* Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it.

Worker (Ward): No problem. It's... kinda nice to have someone to talk to. It helps break up the long night.

Motorcyclist: I get that. The open road gets pretty lonely too after a few hours.

Worker (Ward): Yeah, I bet. You have a good rest of your ride, okay?

Motorcyclist: Will do.

Worker (Ward): And, uh... seriously. You stay safe out there. The vibe tonight is just... off.

Motorcyclist: *(She offers a small, confident smile)* I've handled a lot worse than weird snow. But thanks for the concern. You stay safe too.

Worker (Ward): Always do.

(The woman gives a final nod, swings a leg over her motorcycle, and kicks the engine to life with a satisfying roar. But as her bike's engine settles into a steady idle, a new, deeper sound begins to join it, a low, ground-shaking hum that seems to come from the very bones of the earth, growing steadily louder from the distance.)

Motorcyclist: *(She pauses, her hand on the throttle, a frown on her face)* Hey... you hear that?

Worker (Ward): *(Listening, his head tilted towards the dark highway)* What is that sound? It's... it's deep. Like thunder, but it's not stopping.

Motorcyclist: But there's no storm. It sounds like... a lot of engines. A lot of *big* engines.

Worker (Ward): I have no idea. Maybe it's, uh... military? From the base up north? We don't usually see them using this road, though.

Motorcyclist: Whatever it is, it's big. And it's coming this way, fast.

(Inside Mono's Restaurant, the deep, ground-shaking rumble becomes impossible to ignore. The chill jazz music is completely drowned out by the approaching roar. The four customers slowly stand up from their tables, turning their heads towards the large windows that face the highway. The cashier, Tares, her boredom completely forgotten, rushes to the window, her eyes wide with disbelief.)

Cashier (Tares): Whoa... Chef! Chef, you have to come see this!

Chef 1: *(Pokes his head out of the kitchen, looking annoyed)* See what, Tares? I'm in the middle of a rush here.

Cashier (Tares): We don't have a rush! There are four people in here! Just get out here! You won't believe this!

Woman: *(Standing up fully from her booth, her hand covering her mouth)* Oh my God... look at them all...

Man: What in the world is that?

Chef 2: *(Wiping his hands on his apron as he joins the cashier at the window)* Sweet mother... Is that the army? What's going on?

Man: That's not the army. Not our army, anyway. Look at the design of those vehicles.

Chef 1: *(Now standing beside them, his own face a mask of shock)* They just... they just keep coming. There must be dozens of them.

Woman: Who are they? And where are they going in such a hurry?

Cashier (Tares): *(Her mouth is hanging slightly open)* I said I wanted something interesting to happen tonight... but I didn't mean... this.

(The ground began to vibrate, a deep, resonant tremor that rattled the coffee cups on the tables inside Mono's. The roar of engines grew from a distant hum into a deafening, overwhelming wave of sound. The first of the black, armored vehicles thundered past the gas station, its powerful headlights momentarily blinding everyone. It was followed by another, and another, and another—a seemingly endless procession of formidable, unmarked military hardware that dwarfed the quiet roadside stop. The people who saw it were frozen in a state of pure, unadulterated shock. Outside, the two other gas station workers, their faces pale, ran from the pumps to where Ward and the motorcyclist stood, their mouths agape.)

Worker 3 (Walt): Ward! What in the hell is that?!

Worker 1 (Jesse): I've never seen anything like this! Not in my whole life!

Motorcyclist: They're not... they're not standard military. There are no markings on any of them.

Worker (Ward): Look at the size of those trucks! What are they hauling?

Worker 3 (Walt): And those Humvees... they're kitted out with some serious-looking gear. This isn't a training exercise.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Is this... is this a military response? To what? What's happening?

Motorcyclist: I don't know, but they're moving with a purpose. A real purpose.

Worker (Ward): Where could they possibly be going out here? There's nothing down this road for another hundred miles.

Worker 3 (Walt): This feels big. This feels like... something you're not supposed to see.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Should we... should we go inside?

Worker (Ward): And miss this? No way.

Motorcyclist: I'm not going anywhere. I need to see where they're headed.

Worker 3 (Walt): They just keep coming... how many of them are there?

Worker 1 (Jesse): Too many. That's how many.

(Inside the restaurant, the decision was made for them. Drawn by the incredible noise and the flashing lights, the remaining three customers and the three staff members all moved as

one, pushing open the glass door and stepping out into the cold, snowy night, their own small dramas completely forgotten. They stood in a stunned cluster on the sidewalk, watching the impossibly long convoy roll past.)

Chef 1: I've never seen a convoy that big. Not even on the news.

Woman: They're not stopping. They're just... going.

Man: Look at the armor on those things. They're expecting a real fight.

Chef 2: A fight with who? Out here? The biggest threat we have is a moose crossing the highway.

Cashier (Tares): This is... this is way more interesting than a bus full of rock stars.

Woman: I think I'd prefer the rock stars. This is terrifying.

Man: It's a show of force, that's for sure. But for who?

Server 1: I'm getting back inside. This doesn't feel right.

Chef 1: It's like... it's like we're not supposed to be seeing this.

Cashier (Tares): But we are. We're seeing it.

Woman: I think... I think I want to get back in the car. Now.

Man: We're not going anywhere until this passes. I'm not getting on the road with... with whatever that is.

(For ten more seconds, the world was nothing but the roar and rumble of the convoy. The ground shook, and the air thrummed with the power of the engines as the seemingly endless line of black vehicles thundered past the small, brightly-lit gas station. The onlookers, both inside and out, were frozen, mesmerized by the sheer, intimidating scale of the procession.)

Worker 1 (Jesse): It's still going... It's like a parade, but, you know... terrifying.

Motorcyclist: Look at the wheels on that last truck. They're taller than I am. What kind of gear are they even carrying?

Worker 3 (Walt): The kind you don't ask questions about. The kind that solves problems you don't even know you have.

Worker (Ward): You think... you think it has to do with what's going on in South Maple?

Worker 1 (Jesse): It has to! What else could it be? This is a massive response.

Motorcyclist: They're not just responding. They look like they're going to war.

Worker 3 (Walt): Just keep your heads down. We're just a gas station. We ain't seen nothin'.

Worker (Ward): But we are seeing it, Walt! We're seeing all of it!

Worker 1 (Jesse): Do you think they'll stop?

Worker 3 (Walt): They ain't stopping for cheap coffee and a Slim Jim, kid. Just let 'em pass on by.

Motorcyclist: There's the end of it... I think. No, wait... there are more.

Worker (Ward): It just doesn't end.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Holy cow...

(Just as the last of the ground vehicles finally thunders past, a new sound cuts through the night—a deep, percussive WUMP-WUMP-WUMP that grows rapidly louder, beating down from above. Everyone's heads snap upwards in unison.)

Cashier (Tares): What now?! Are you kidding me?

Woman: Look! In the sky!

Man: Are those... Cargo Chinooks? Two of them! Flying low!

Chef 1: Okay, that's it. This is a full-blown invasion. I knew it.

Chef 2: They're following the convoy! What in God's name is happening tonight?

Trucker 1: *(Speaking for the first time, his voice a low grumble)* That's special ops hardware. The kind they don't talk about on the news.

Woman: I want to go home. John, I really, really want to go home right now.

Man: We will, honey. As soon as they're gone. As soon as all of... this... is gone.

Cashier (Tares): I am never, ever wishing for an interesting night again. Ever.

Chef 1: Yeah. I think we've hit our quota for the decade.

(The sound of the heavy helicopters faded into the distance, leaving a ringing silence in its wake. For ten long, breathless seconds, the civilians stood frozen, the impossible spectacle they had just witnessed slowly sinking in. The quiet felt fragile, temporary, and they were

right. A new sound began, a deeper, heavier rumble that vibrated up from the asphalt, promising that the night's strange parade was not yet over.)

Woman: Okay... okay, I think that's the last of them. The helicopters are gone.

Man: What is that new sound? It's... it's lower than before.

Cashier (Tares): *(Points a trembling finger back down the highway)* Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Look.

Chef 1: Are those... are those tanks?

Trucker 1: *(His voice is a low grumble)* Not tanks. Closer to APCs. But bigger. Way bigger. That's... that's not standard issue hardware.

Chef 2: There's a whole other convoy behind the first one! This is completely insane!

Woman: John, I'm getting in the car. I don't care if we have to drive into a ditch, I am not staying here.

Man: Just wait, honey. Just let them pass. We don't want to get their attention for any reason.

Cashier (Tares): Attention? They look like they could drive right through this building and not even notice it.

Chef 1: Something terrible is happening tonight. Something really, really terrible.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Alright, I think that's finally it. That was... that was nuts.

Motorcyclist: No. Listen. There's more coming.

Worker (Ward): You can feel it in the ground again. It's heavier this time. Way heavier.

Worker 3 (Walt): *(Stares down the road, his face pale under the fluorescent lights)* My God... Those aren't trucks. Those are rolling fortresses.

Motorcyclist: Whatever they are, they're built for a warzone. What kind of warzone is out here in the middle of nowhere?

Worker 1 (Jesse): This is way above the pay grade of the local cops. This is... something else entirely.

Worker (Ward): I'm not even going to ask. I don't want to know. As of right now, I saw a couple of weird trucks pass by. That's it.

Worker 3 (Walt): Good plan, kid. We saw nothing.

Motorcyclist: I don't think they care if we see them. They're not exactly trying to be subtle about this.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Maybe that's the point. Maybe they *want* people to be scared.

(The ground-shaking rumble of the heavy APCs began to lessen, replaced by the slightly higher-pitched, but still aggressive, roar of the final part of the convoy. For another ten seconds, the onlookers watched as the last six heavily armored Humvees thundered past, their dark, angular forms a final, definitive statement of force. Then, as the last Humvee's red tail lights disappeared down the snowy highway, a profound, ringing silence began to descend, the night feeling emptier and colder than it had before. The sound of the convoy lowered and lowered, until it was just a distant hum, and then, finally, it was gone.)

Woman: Is that... is that the last of them? I think that's it.

Man: Looks like it. Just those last few jeeps. Thank God.

Cashier (Tares): They're not jeeps. They're Humvees. Military-grade.

Chef 1: Whatever they are, I'm just glad they're leaving.

Chef 2: The sound... my ears are still ringing from it all.

Trucker 1: Never seen anything like that. Not in thirty years on the road. Not even close.

Woman: So that's it? It's finally over?

Man: I think so, honey. The road is empty behind them.

Cashier (Tares): I need to... I think I need to sit down. My legs feel like jelly.

Chef 1: I think we all need to sit down for a minute.

Chef 2: What do we do now? Just... go back inside and finish making burgers?

Man: I don't think I'm hungry anymore.

Woman: Me neither.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Okay... I think that's really, really it this time. That was... something else.

Motorcyclist: Six Humvees bringing up the rear. A rear guard.

Worker (Ward): The sound is already getting lower. It's almost gone.

Worker 3 (Walt): *(He shakes his head slowly, a look of profound awe on his face)* Whatever that was... it wasn't for us. We were just ants on the sidewalk watching giants walk by.

Worker 1 (Jesse): I feel like I need a drink. A very strong one.

Motorcyclist: I feel like I need to ride in the complete opposite direction. For about a week.

Worker (Ward): You still heading to the coast after all that?

Motorcyclist: I don't even know anymore. What if I run into them again down the road?

Worker 3 (Walt): You won't. That convoy... they weren't just driving. They were on a mission. They'll be long gone by the time you get back on the road.

Worker 1 (Jesse): But where did they go? What in the world is out there?

Worker (Ward): We don't ask, remember? We saw nothing.

Motorcyclist: *(She looks down the dark, now-empty highway)* It's kind of hard to unsee something like that.

Worker 3 (Walt): You'll learn. Now, someone should probably go tell those folks inside it's safe to breathe again.

Worker 1 (Jesse): You do it. I think I'm just gonna stand here for another minute.

Worker (Ward): Yeah. Me too.

Motorcyclist: Wow. Just... wow.

(The final tail lights of the Humvees vanished into the snowy darkness, and the roar of their engines faded, leaving a profound, ringing silence in its place. The night felt colder now, emptier. The civilians at the gas station and restaurant stood frozen for a moment longer, as if waking from a strange, terrifying dream. Then, slowly, shakily, the spell broke, and the mundane world tried to reassert itself.)

Chef 1: *(Clears his throat, his voice a little unsteady)* Well... uh... that pie's not gonna eat itself, folks.

Man: Right. Yeah. The pie. *(He sits back down at his booth but doesn't pick up his fork.)*

Woman: John, I... I don't think I can eat. My stomach is in knots.

Cashier (Tares): *(Walks slowly back behind the counter, looking dazed)* I should... I should probably wipe the counter down. Or something.

Chef 2: I'm just going to go stand in the kitchen for a minute. And, uh... pretend that didn't just happen.

Trucker 1: *(To the other trucker)* You ever see anything like that, Dave? In all your years?

Trucker 2: Nope. And I don't want to again. Let's finish up and get out of this town. I don't like this road anymore.

Woman: Can we just... can we just get the check, please?

Cashier (Tares): Oh, yeah. The check. Of course.

Man: We're not going back on the road tonight, honey. We'll find a motel somewhere close. That's it. I'm not driving after... whatever that was.

Woman: Okay. A motel sounds good. I just want to lock a door.

Chef 1: *(Pokes his head out of the kitchen)* Anyone want more coffee? On the house.

Man: Yeah. I think I'm gonna need it. A lot of it.

Worker 3 (Walt): *(Claps his hands together once, the sound sharp and final in the quiet)* Alright, show's over. Back to work. Jesse, finish wiping down those pumps.

Worker 1 (Jesse): Work? After that? It feels... kind of stupid.

Worker 3 (Walt): The world keeps turning, kid. Whether you're watching it or not. Now move.

Motorcyclist: *(Shoves her wallet back into her jacket, her movements a bit stiff)* Well... that was definitely something.

Worker (Ward): You still gonna ride tonight? After seeing that?

Motorcyclist: I have to. Got a schedule to keep. Just... maybe I'll take it a little slower. Let whatever that was get a real good head start.

Worker (Ward): Probably a good idea.

Worker 1 (Jesse): What if they come back this way?

Worker 3 (Walt): They're not coming back. They were going somewhere specific. That wasn't a joyride.

Motorcyclist: *(Gets on her bike, her expression grim as she looks down the dark road)* Yeah. They looked like they were on their way to end someone's world.

Worker (Ward): Just... be glad it ain't ours.

Motorcyclist: For tonight, anyway. Thanks again for the gas.

Worker (Ward): Yeah... no problem.

Worker 1 (Jesse): *(Watching the motorcyclist get ready to leave)* It's weird, huh? One minute everything's normal and boring, the next...

Worker 3 (Walt): That's the world, kid. It's always weird. You're just not always looking close enough to see it.

Worker (Ward): I think I've looked close enough for one night, thanks.

02:00 - A Sky of Glass

(The world below was a dark, sleeping tapestry of forests, fields, and the occasional lonely farmhouse, all blanketed in a thin, ethereal layer of impossible snow. High above, the two heavy Cargo Chinook transport helicopters of MTF Sigma-9 sliced through the cold, clear air, their forms like predatory dragonflies against the brilliant, full moon. The blades beat a rhythm that was a mere whisper to the sleeping suburbs below, a deliberate choice to maintain the illusion of a peaceful night. Inside the vibrating cargo bay of the lead chopper, the Psi-7 operatives sat in disciplined silence, the red glow of the interior lights casting their faces in shadow. They weren't checking rifles or magazines; they were reviewing psychological profiles and preparing for the wave of human trauma they were about to confront. Their battlefield was not the school's hallways, but the shattered minds of its survivors. In the cockpit, the only light was the cool, green glow of the instrument panels, the only sound the low hum of the avionics and the quiet, professional crackle of the comms.)

Sigma-9 Pilot 1 (Comms): Sky Eye, this is Overwatch-1. We are holding at three-thousand feet, maintaining stealth profile over the Northernwood rural sector. All systems are green. The ride is smooth up here.

Air Control Officer (Comms): Copy that, Overwatch-1. Your flight path is clear. Maintain this altitude until you reach the primary staging area. We don't want you waking up the locals.

Psi-7 Operative (in cargo bay, to another): You ever get used to this part? The quiet before the storm?

Psi-7 Squad Leader: You don't get used to it. You just learn to use it. Check your gear again.

Sigma-9 Pilot 2 (Comms): Sky Eye, this is Overwatch-2. We are holding at three-thousand feet, maintaining stealth profile over the Northernwood rural sector. All systems are green. The ride is smooth up here.

Air Control Officer (Comms): Copy that, Overwatch-2. Your flight path is clear. Maintain this altitude until you reach the primary staging area. We don't want you waking up the locals.

(The pilot gave a silent, affirmative nod to his co-pilot, the massive aircraft a ghost in the sky, its true purpose hidden by the clouds and the quiet of the late hour. They were the promise of an exit, the final, desperate hope for the children who didn't even know they needed saving.)

(Down below, the main ground convoy was a serpent of black steel and roaring engines, a stark, violent scar across the serene, snowy landscape. Its passage was a rolling wave of sound and power, a force of nature unto itself. Inside the cramped, vibrating hulls of the Strykers, the men of Gamma-7 sat in a state of coiled, kinetic readiness, their hands resting on their weapons, their eyes hard and focused in the dim, green light of the interiors. In the more advanced Bearcats of Lambda-5, the atmosphere was different; it was a quiet, cerebral tension, with operatives monitoring the complex energy readings of the Scranton Reality Anchors, preparing to wage a war against the very fabric of physics. The headlights of more than thirty vehicles cut through the darkness, illuminating the swirling snow and the endless stretch of empty highway as the tactical radio remained disciplined, each word carrying the weight of the coming battle.)

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Scepter Actual to all callsigns. Checkpoint Delta in ten mikes. Report status.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard-1 copies. All Gamma-7 elements are green. No issues to report.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): Spectre-1 copies. Lambda-5 is green. Anchor vitals are stable.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Good. Keep your drivers sharp. This is the longest leg of the journey. We don't need any fatigue-related incidents.

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): Understood, Scepter. Nu-7 is rotating drivers at Checkpoint Delta.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Acknowledged. Keep the pace steady. We arrive at dawn.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Oracle Actual to all callsigns. Checkpoint Delta in ten mikes. Report status.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard-1 copies. All Gamma-7 elements are green. No issues to report.

Commander Vivian "Oracle" Stone (Comms): Oracle-1 copies. Lambda-5 is green.

(The convoy thundered on, a testament to the Foundation's immense power, a promise of the violence they were prepared to unleash. Each operative was a single, focused thought in a vast, collective mind, all pointed towards a single, unsuspecting school on the edge of a quiet, terrified town.)

(The world outside the armored vehicles remained a hypnotic, monochrome blur of snow and darkness. The long drive had settled into a steady, rumbling rhythm, a shared state of tense patience. In the lead Humvee, the driver's eyes were fixed on the road, cutting a path through the night, when his headlights swept across a large, snow-dusted wooden sign on the side of the highway.)

02:54 - Crossing the Threshold

MTF Driver: Command, this is Scepter-1's lead element. We have eyes on the county line sign. Welcome to Forest Ville, Maple County.

MTF Comms: *(Activating the convoy-wide channel)* Scepter Actual, all callsigns, be advised. We are crossing into the Maple County operational area. I repeat, we are now entering the AO.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Copy that, lead element. All units, go to Condition Yellow. Weapons on standby. Eyes open. We are in their backyard now.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard-1 copies. All Gamma-7 elements are at Condition Yellow.

Commander Liam "Spectre" O'Connell (Comms): Spectre-1 copies. Lambda-5 is yellow.

Lieutenant Commander Eva "Valkyrie" Rostova (Comms): Valkyrie-1 copies. Nu-7 is yellow.

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): Marshal-1 copies. Iota-10 is yellow.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Overwatch, what's your status?

Sigma-9 Pilot 1 (Comms): Overwatch-1 copies, Scepter. We see the county line. Air wing is moving to a higher, tighter surveillance pattern. The area ahead is cold. No ground or air contacts.

Air Control Officer (Comms): Sky Eye to all air assets, acknowledge entry into the AO. Maintain stealth profiles.

Sigma-9 Pilot 2 (Comms): Overwatch-2 acknowledges.

Captain Chloe "Skyhook" Peterson (Comms): Skyhook-1 acknowledges. Psi-7 is ready for deployment on your command.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Good. Everyone is sharp. Maintain radio silence from this point unless it's critical. Let's move in quiet.

MTF Driver: Roger that, command. Moving in quiet.

(The massive convoy rolled past the welcome sign, a silent promise of the violence to come. They entered Forest Ville, but this was not a place of homes and streetlights. The highway narrowed, plunging them into a landscape of deep, ancient woods, the trees pressing in on either side of the road, their snow-dusted branches like skeletal fingers reaching for the vehicles. Great, moss-covered rocks and steep, rolling hills defined the terrain, a wild and untamed wilderness that felt a world away from the manicured lawns of the suburbs they had left behind. The only light was the cold, sterile glow of the moon on the snow and the powerful, cutting beams of their own headlights as the convoy moved deeper into the dark, silent heart of the county.)

03:00 - The Hunter's Respite

(Far from the unseen convoy and the sleeping terror of the school, the world was a different kind of quiet. High in the rolling, snow-dusted hills of Maple County, miles from the main road of Forest Ville, a lone wooden cabin stood as a silent sentinel against the night. It was a small, rustic structure, the only sign of human life for miles, a thin curl of smoke beginning to rise from its stone chimney into the cold, clear air.)

(Inside, by the nascent warmth of a newly kindled fire, sat a tall, pale woman known only as Aiden. Her long, messy black hair spilled out from under a large, dark blue ushanka hat, the front of which was emblazoned with a stark, white delta symbol enclosed in a triangle. She wore a heavy, dark blue trench coat over a simple light gray shirt and dark pants, her expression weary and unfocused as she meticulously performed her late-night ritual. Spread out on a canvas cloth before her were the tools of her trade: a large hunting knife, several coiled snares, and a small hand axe. With a practiced, steady hand, she drew a damp rag along the length of the knife's blade, carefully wiping away the last crimson traces of the day's hunt—a pair of skinned rabbits that now lay prepped for the morning's meal. Once the tools were cleaned and gleaming in the firelight, she set them aside and turned her attention to the small campfire she had just started in the hearth, feeding it small pieces of kindling. The light snow outside was an unseasonable nuisance, and the fire was a welcome defense against the biting cold that had settled over the hills.)

(The fire in the hearth crackled, a stark, lively sound in the otherwise dead quiet of the lone wooden cabin. Aiden worked with a detached, methodical rhythm, humming a low, tuneless, and empty melody. The sharp, clean sound of her hunting knife echoed softly as it struck the wooden chopping block, dismembering the rabbit carcasses with an unnerving precision. She showed no emotion, no satisfaction or disgust; it was simply a task to be completed, a necessary step in the process of survival.)

A Disturbance in the Quiet

Aiden: *(Her voice is a low, flat monotone, devoid of any inflection as she separates a joint)*
Messy. But necessary.

(After a few more minutes, she finished her work. She wiped the blade of her knife clean on a rag, then gathered the bloodied tools from the canvas. She pushed open the heavy cabin door and stepped out into the biting, snowy cold to clean her gear in a rain barrel filled with icy water. As she finished rinsing the last of the blood from her small axe and was about to go back inside, a new sound reached her, cutting through the silence of the hills. It was a faint, rhythmic, and deeply unnatural beating sound from the distance. She looked up at the

sky, her face a blank, emotionless mask, and saw two sets of blinking navigation lights moving steadily across the star-dusted, moonlit sky.)

Δiden: *(Her head tilts slightly, her gaze tracking the lights as they move in formation)*
Flying... things.

Δiden: *(A flicker of something unreadable in her eyes, a detached analytical thought)* Loud.
Big. Not birds.

Δiden: *(She continues to watch until they are just faint, blinking stars moving steadily south)*
Going somewhere. In a hurry. Interesting.

(Aiden turns, her brief interest in the flying objects already fading, ready to return to the warmth and solitude of her cabin. But before her hand touches the rough-hewn wood of the door, a new sound reaches her. It is not the rhythmic beating from the sky, but a deep, mechanical rumble from the ground, a low, powerful growl coming from her left, from the direction of the distant highway. Her head snaps towards the sound, her expression a mask of cold, analytical curiosity.)

03:05 - The Steel River

(Without a sound, she melts into the shadows of the trees surrounding her cabin. She moves down the steep, snowy hill with a fluid, predatory grace, her steps silent on the cold earth. She uses the ancient rocks and thick, snow-dusted pines as cover, moving slowly, deliberately, a ghost in her own territory. Reaching a rocky outcropping that gives her a clear, high-ground view of the road below, she flattens herself against the cold stone and peers through a gap in the trees. What she sees makes her pause, a rare flicker of analytical interest in her otherwise dead eyes. A long, unbroken line of dark, armored vehicles is thundering down the highway, their headlights cutting sharp, white tunnels through the night.)

Δiden: *(Her voice is a flat, analytical whisper to herself, steam pluming from her lips)* More of them. On the ground this time.

(The procession is immense, a river of steel and roaring engines flowing through the silent wilderness. She watches the different types of vehicles pass, her mind cataloging their shapes, their sizes, their apparent purpose. Then, a column of smaller, more aggressive-looking vehicles comes into view.)

Δiden: *(She focuses on a Humvee as it passes directly below her vantage point. Her eyes track the focused face of the driver, the passenger scanning the woods, and then the figure in*

the open turret, hands resting on the grips of a heavy, mounted .50 caliber machine gun. Her expression remains unchanged, a perfect mask of cold observation.) Who are these guys?

(Her question hangs in the cold, snowy air, an answerless query directed at the night itself. She continues to watch as more Humvees roll past, a procession of disciplined, armed figures, their faces grim and focused under their helmets.)

Δiden: *(Her gaze follows the Humvee as it disappears, another one taking its place. Her focus is intense, analytical.)* They move together. Like a pack.

Δiden: They all wear the same skin. Different shapes, same colors. A tribe.

Δiden: *(She notes the weapons on each vehicle, the uniformity of their gear.)* They have sharp, metal claws. And they all carry them the same way.

Δiden: They are not hunters. Not like me. Too loud. Too many of them.

Δiden: A migrating herd. A herd of predators. Going south.

(Her gaze remains fixed on the road below, a silent, unblinking sentinel. For six seconds, she watches the large, lumbering transport trucks roll past, their massive forms dwarfing the trees on the roadside. Another six seconds pass, and the transports are replaced by the faster, more agile 6x6 Cougar vehicles, their six wheels churning through the light snow with an aggressive purpose. Ten seconds later, the last of the Cougars rumble by, and a new shape appears, one that makes even the stoic hunter pause. The Stryker APCs are sleek, modern, and formidable, their angled armor and advanced weapon systems looking utterly alien in the rustic, snowy wilderness; they are like futuristic, armored beetles, tanky and menacing, words and concepts Δiden does not have but understands in a primal, tactical sense.)

Δiden: *(Her eyes narrow almost imperceptibly)* Bigger ones. Slower. They carry things. Not fighters.

Δiden: Six legs. Faster. More claws.

Δiden: *(She watches the first Stryker pass, her focus absolute)* Hard shells. Like a beetle.

Δiden: Moving caves made of metal. The most dangerous ones... they ride inside those.

Δiden: What are they hunting?

(She remains perfectly still, a statue carved from shadow and curiosity, watching the last of the heavy APCs rumble past. Ten seconds later, the rear guard comes into view, the familiar, aggressive shapes of the Humvees returning. A few more seconds pass, and the final Humvee

rolls by, its red tail lights a pair of angry eyes staring back at her before it follows the others to the right, down the long, dark highway. The deafening roar of the convoy begins to recede, the sound lowering and lowering, a beast returning to a whisper, until all that is left is the silent pulse of their distant lights against the snow.)

Δiden: The small ones again. The tail of the pack.

Δiden: So many. All going to the same place.

Δiden: South. Towards the quiet town.

Δiden: The town with the bad feeling.

Δiden: My hunt is not their hunt.

Δiden: Whatever they are hunting... it must be big.

Δiden: Well. That's done now.

Δiden: The night is quiet again.

Δiden: Time to go back. It's cold out here.

(Δiden watches for a moment longer as the last of the convoy's lights disappear over a distant hill, finally leaving her alone once more in the profound silence of the snowy wilderness. With a final, emotionless glance at the empty road, she turns and melts back into the trees, her silent, fluid movements carrying her back up the hill towards the solitary light of her cabin window.)

03:21 - The Tip of the Spear

(The night was a vast, silent expanse of white and black on a snowy night. On a different road, miles away from the main convoy, five futuristic Bearcat armored vehicles moved like ghosts through the cold. They traveled down East Rose Street, a lonely stretch of asphalt that skirted the frozen edge of Baker Lake in Maple County. Their advanced engines emitted a low, almost imperceptible hum, a stark contrast to the thunderous roar of the main force. This was MTF Lambda-5, the surgeons of the operation, their purpose not brute force, but the precise and delicate business of rewriting reality itself. Inside their climate-controlled vehicles, the operatives were surrounded by the soft glow of complex energy readings and arcane symbols, their focus absolute as they transported the five Scranton Reality Anchors that were the Foundation's only real defense against a monster like Alice.)

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma (Comms): Scepter Actual, Vanguard-1, this is Spectre-3. We're making good time on the eastern route. Do you have a projected time for our rendezvous with the main convoy?

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Copy that, Spectre-3. Scepter Actual here. I was just about to ping you. All callsigns in both convoys, listen up.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): Intel projects a primary intersection with East Rose Street in approximately thirty to forty mikes. Lambda-5 convoy, your expected merge with the main column will be between 03:55 and 04:15.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): Vanguard-1 copies. So we'll be seeing your ugly mugs soon, Spectre.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma (Comms): Acknowledged, Scepter. Looking forward to it, Vanguard. What's our position in the formation once we merge?

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): You will fall in between the primary logistics train and Vanguard's Stryker element. We want your reality anchors protected in the center of the column.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma (Comms): Understood. We'll be the filling in a very angry metal sandwich.

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): That's the idea. Keep your speed steady and stay sharp. Scepter out.

Lambda-5 Operative 1: *(In the back of the Bearcat)* Center of the column. It's a smart play. Keeps us protected until we're needed to deploy.

Lambda-5 Operative 2: Yeah, I'd much rather have a few tons of Nu-7's heavy armor between us and whatever's waiting for us in that school.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: *(To his crew)* You heard him. Thirty mikes to rendezvous. Let's make sure our systems are primed and ready for the merge. I want a final diagnostic on all five anchor deployment mechanisms.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: Already on it, Commander. All five anchors are reading stable. Their energy signatures are clean.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: Good. We're walking into a reality-bender's playground. There is no room for error with our gear.

Lambda-5 Operative 1: We're ready, sir. Just give us a target to stabilize.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: You'll get one soon enough.

Lambda-5 Operative 2: I've been reading Iota-10's report on 'Alice'. Telepathic enforcement of secrecy... that's a new one.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: Just means we have to be better. Quieter.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: It means our anchors have to work. Perfectly.

(The night deepened, the moon a cold, silver disk in the star-dusted sky. The light, unseasonable snow continued to fall, a silent, steady curtain that seemed to absorb all sound, muffling the world in a blanket of white. High above, the two Sigma-9 Cargo Chinooks moved like ghosts, their massive forms gliding through the frigid air with an unnatural quiet. They had long since passed over the last vestiges of sleeping suburbia and were now crossing the vast, unbroken wilderness of the Maple County national forest. Inside the dimly lit cargo bays, the Psi-7 operatives were no longer resting; they were in a state of deep, focused readiness, their final preparations silent and personal. They were the ones who would have to face the aftermath, to walk into the ruins of children's minds and try to piece them back together. Their war would be fought not with bullets, but with quiet words and a steady, unwavering compassion against a tide of unimaginable trauma.)

03:50 - The Convergence

(Down below, the two steel serpents of the ground convoy continued their relentless push through the darkness. The main force, a long, formidable column of Strykers, Cougars, and logistical trucks, thundered down the main highway, a brute-force declaration of the Foundation's power. Miles to the east, the smaller, more specialized convoy of Lambda-5's five Bearcats moved with a quieter, more surgical grace down a winding secondary road. They were two arms of a massive pincer, and they were now closing in on their rendezvous point. The air crackled with the encrypted, low-traffic chatter of final approach vectors and status checks. The rumble of their combined engines was a promise to the sleeping county—a promise that the quiet, festering horror at its heart was about to be met with a storm of fire and steel.)

03:57 - The Junction

(Inside the lead Lambda-5 Bearcat, the ride was remarkably smooth, the advanced suspension absorbing the bumps of the uneven, snowy road. A commander sat bolted into a command chair, a ruggedized laptop open on his knee. The screen glowed with a detailed topographical map, two glowing icons—one large, one small—slowly converging on a single intersection.)

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: *(His eyes are glued to the glowing map)* Alright, We are three mikes out from the rendezvous intersection. Prepare for convoy merge.

Lambda-5 Operative 1: Copy that, Commander. All vehicle systems are green.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: I want final checks on all external sensors. The main convoy is a loud, angry beast. I don't want any surprises when we link up.

Lambda-5 Operative 2: Running a wide-band scan now, sir. The only contacts are the friendlies in the main column, still about five clicks out from the junction.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: Good. Once we hit that intersection, we slow to a crawl and wait for their logistics train to pass. We fall in behind the last supply truck, just as ordered.

Lambda-5 Operative 3: Understood, sir. We'll be ready to slot into the formation.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: This is the last easy part of the night, people. From the moment we join that convoy, we are officially in the hot zone.

Lambda-5 Operative 1: We're ready for it, sir.

Lambda-5 Operative 2: Let's go link up with the cavalry.

Commander Michael "Phantom" Lalma: Stay sharp. Two mikes to the junction.

04:13 - The Rendezvous

(The five Bearcats of Lambda-5 glided through the snowy darkness, their advanced engines a near-silent hum against the whisper of the wind. Inside the lead vehicle, Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith watched the glowing tactical map on his console, a single red icon marking their position as it closed in on a designated intersection.)

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: *(His eyes are fixed on the map)* "Alright, listen up. We are three mikes out from the intersection. Prepare for convoy merge."

(As they approached the junction, a vast, dark crossroads in the middle of the desolate forest, Commander Smith gave the order. The five Bearcats expertly pulled off onto the wide, snow-dusted shoulder of the road, forming a tight, defensive echelon, their engines dropping to an idle. He checked the map again; the large, multi-icon cluster of the main convoy was still several kilometers behind them.)

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: *(Taps his comms unit)* "Scepter Actual, this is Wraith-1. We are at the rendezvous, Junction-7. No visual on your column, over."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Copy that, Wraith-1. We read you. Your ETA was faster than projected. Hold your position and park on the eastern shoulder, over."

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: "Acknowledged. We are in position and holding. Awaiting your arrival, over."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): *(His voice now broadcasting to the main convoy)* "All Vanguard and Marshal elements, this is Scepter Actual. Wraith is at the junction. We are behind schedule. I want you to pick up the pace. Double time, now. Let's close this gap, over."

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "Vanguard-1 copies all. Increasing speed. It's about to get bumpy, over."

MTF Driver (Gamma-7 Stryker): "You heard him! Let's move! Step on it!"

MTF Gunner (Gamma-7 Stryker): "Whoa, okay! Hold on to your helmets back there!"

Commander Marcus "Marshal" Horn (Comms): "Marshal-1 acknowledges. Iota-10 is increasing speed. We'll be on your six, Scepter, over."

MTF Operative (Iota-10 Cougar): "Driver, get on it. Let's not keep Lambda-5 waiting in the cold."

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: *(To his internal crew)* "Alright, we wait. Use the time. Final checks on all anchor deployment systems."

Lambda-5 Operative 1: "Copy that, Commander. Running a final diagnostic now."

MTF Driver (Gamma-7 Stryker): "This is more like it! We're making good time now!"

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): "Scepter, this is Vanguard-1. We are now two clicks from the junction and closing fast, over."

Task Force Leader David Scepter (Comms): "Solid copy, Vanguard. Maintain speed. Wraith, prepare to fall in behind the logistics train as they pass. You'll be the shield between them and the heavy armor, over."

Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith: "Wraith-1 copies. We will be ready to merge on your mark, over."

Lambda-5 Operative 2: *(To his crew)* "You hear that? We're the shield. Sounds important."

Lambda-5 Operative 3: "It means we're the first line of defense if something hits the convoy from the rear. So yeah, it's important."

(The five Bearcats of Lambda-5 waited in the silent, swirling snow, their low-profile lights a cluster of quiet intensity. They were a razor's edge, waiting patiently for the hammer to arrive.)

04:15 - The Stillness

(The five Bearcats of Lambda-5 sat in absolute, disciplined silence, their futuristic forms looking utterly alien against the ancient, snow-dusted pines that lined the road. Their engines had dropped to a near-silent, low-power hum, the only sign of life the faint, internal glow of their tactical displays visible through the thick, armored viewports. The stillness was broken not by the expected thunder of the main convoy, but by a sound far more mundane: the quiet whisper of tires on wet asphalt. A lone sedan, its engine a soft purr, rolled past them, the driver inside likely just registering a strange set of parked military vehicles before continuing on his lonely journey into the night. Another car followed a minute later, a family station wagon, its headlights sweeping across the lead Bearcat's angled armor and illuminating the swirling, falling snow particles in a brief, hypnotic dance. The occupants were oblivious, just ghosts passing in the blooming night, unaware of the silent predators waiting in the dark.)

04:17 - The Stillness

(The Lambda-5 operatives waited, their world contained within the humming, metallic shells of their vehicles. They watched the civilian cars pass, small islands of normalcy in a sea of tension, each one a reminder of the world they were fighting to protect. The snow fell, catching the low-profile lights of the Bearcats, each flake a tiny, perfect crystal in the vast, cold darkness. The forest was a wall of black on either side, the air still and heavy with the promise of the coming dawn and the violence it would bring. But then, a new vibration began, a low-frequency tremor that had nothing to do with the passing civilian traffic. It was a feeling that started in the ground, a deep, resonant promise that the rest of their tribe, the main body of the steel serpent, was near. The quiet before was over; the storm was about to arrive.)

(Commander Noah "Wraith" Smith gives a silent hand signal to his driver. With a low, powerful hum, the lead Bearcat lurches forward from the snowy shoulder, its tires gripping the cold asphalt as it pulls out onto the main highway.)

04:23 - The Column is Forged