

## Una Mente, Uno Consilio

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The second Natty stepped through the black gates of her new school, she knew something was up. Although she couldn't quite put her finger on it, something about this place just felt wrong. It was different to any first-day feeling she had experienced at any high school she had attended.

It was a deep, pulling feeling in her gut that kept growing and growing. Natty peered around nervously for any threats, and then realised how stupid and kiddy she was being.

"It's just another high school, big deal," she whispered to herself sternly.

She sighed and flicked her black hair nonchalantly, preparing for an exhausting first day branded as 'the new kid'. As she strutted towards her first class, she stopped abruptly. She realised what was wrong with this school; the answer hit her like a fist and knocked the air out of her. Every single teenager around her was moving their feet at the *exact same time* as they walked.

Left.

Right.

Left.

Right.

Natty felt oddly self-conscious of her own out-of-time steps but the other kids didn't seem to care or even notice. They seemed completely oblivious to her existence and to each other's too.

They just marched like teenage slack-jawed zombie military officers along the long white hallways. She felt unease bubble up inside her and she momentarily shut her eyes to gather herself. As she did this, she stumbled and rammed into a red-haired girl who looked about 15. The girl faltered and dropped her emerald pencil case. Coloured pencils scattered across the floor violently.

"Sorry!" Natty blurted out immediately, her cheeks flushing pink.

"It's fine."

She didn't even make eye contact as she replied, she just stared dead-eyed out to Natty's right. She didn't answer with a normal girl's voice either. Instead, the words whispered around the corridors in an eerie monotone. They dripped from the mouths of every single student in the school simultaneously.

Then the sinister voices moaned again, "Also, Different Girl, if you're freaked out by me, don't worry. You'll become part of me too, soon enough. Part of the big, happy family."

Natty's stomach lurched in terror and she broke into the most powerful power-walk she had ever done. She tucked her head down and stared resolutely downwards as she fled to the bathrooms for refuge from the weird zombie-like teenagers.

She sat down, rattled, on a closed toilet in a locked cubicle and racked her brain desperately for a possible solution. Could this be a giant prank to scare the wits out of the new kid? No, she decided. It was more than that.

As she thought, something caught her eye. It was the white school logo, embroidered over her heart, of her black school shirt. Specifically, the motto at the bottom of the logo.

*Una Mente, Uno Consilio.*

Natty had taken Latin classes at a previous school, and as she translated, her face twisted into an expression of utmost horror. The deep, cold meaning gripped her in its icy claws.

*One Mind, One Plan.*

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After she was thoroughly sick of the toilet cubicle, Natty crept out into the hallway.

She had come to the horrifying conclusion that the children must be all connected in some sort of hivemind, controlled by a single consciousness. Natty was completely and utterly certain that she did NOT want to be part of it. She quite liked making her own decisions and thinking her own thoughts so wasn't all too keen to give that up.

She crept quietly across the doorways, careful not to be seen. She saw several classrooms full of glassy-eyed teenagers typing dully, but exactly in time at computers. There was a deafening *CLICK!* every time their fingers hit a letter on their keyboards.

Her heart beat in her chest like a drum and her breathing quickened. The teachers at those classrooms looked like normal adults to Natty though. They still stared at computer screens like the kids did, but they muttered to one another and walked out of time. She decided to try to go to the main staffroom in a desperate attempt to find safety.

With difficulty, after about an hour of sneaking through the white corridors, she finally found the main staffroom. Natty squared her shoulders and prepared herself to knock, but then she heard voices inside. She pressed her ear against the grey door. The conversation streamed through the door so clearly. She could hear every word.

"The Mind isn't getting enough teenage brain power, I'm telling you. It can't crack this next code; our machine isn't working yet," said the first voice.

"We have 900 students connected to it. Surely that's enough brain power to crack one measly bank vault code?" came a second voice, sounding irritated.

Natty stifled a gasp. A bank code? What was 'The Mind'? Was it the collective name for the hivemind that connected all the students? She quickly pressed her ear back up to the cold door to keep eavesdropping.

"Well, we clearly don't. We have no access to the money. We already keep the kids here all day, hooked up to The Mind. It's not like we can use adults to power it because their brains aren't adaptive enough," the first voice sighed exasperatedly.

"I suppose we must simply work them harder then. After all, we aren't bad guys, we're just... underpaid teachers working hard to make a living," the second voice concluded cunningly.

Both voices chuckled together and Natty drew herself up with a jolt. It all made sense. She had to grip the wall beside her to keep herself steady as her knees trembled.

The teachers had obviously made some sort of machine called 'The Mind' to break into banks for money. 'The Mind' needed unwieldy teenage brain power to work and, in order to get the children's brainpower for itself, it had to *be* them. It had to possess them and feed off their minds. She was only spared because she hadn't attended a class yet, so the teachers hadn't had time to 'hook her up'.

Damn, that was creepy. Natty knew that teachers were underpaid, but *that* underpaid? That rattled her.

She knew deep in her gut that this wasn't right. She had to do something to help the innocent kids at this school. They didn't deserve to be possessed and robbed of all their free will. They deserved to be out doing the things they enjoyed, normal teenager things like playing sports, music and talking to friends.

Without really thinking or formulating any plan at all, Natty burst into the room. She was a great tornado of 14-year-old girl swirling into the centre of the room where two tall men were standing frozen in surprise.

Frantically, realising that she had only seconds before the men regained their senses, she ran over to the large, silver box that stood in the corner of the room that she assumed to be 'The Mind'. It had a blue tablet connected to the side. Natty jabbed her finger at its screen randomly until she found a screen that had a large button that said in large black print **STAFF**.

That button looked pretty promising to Natty so she fumbled to press it, conscious of the teachers who were blinking off their surprise and starting to make their way across the room.

The tablet flickered to a new screen that had the words **CALL**, **FREE** and **FREEZE**.

*Oh, yes!* thought Natty as she read the last word. *Perfect.*

She pressed the **FREEZE** button dramatically and whirled around to see the two teachers, who were only metres away from her, freeze like stone. They looked like two vicious dogs, with snarling faces and outstretched arms, trying to seize her.

Natty breathed hard, then grinned triumphantly. She had just used the teachers' own terrible invention against them. How satisfying!

She pulled herself from her victorious thoughts to complete the next task at hand: save the strange possessed teenagers. She fumbled with the screen until she found **STUDENTS** and then **CALL**, **FREE** and **FREEZE**.

Natty went to push the button, but then hesitated. Her finger hovered over **FREE** uncertainly.

*I'm literally in possession of the mightiest mind-controlling machine on Earth.* She thought. *I could do anything.*

She knew that releasing the children would rob 'The Mind' of its power, erasing any possible good acts (or slightly less good acts of personal gain) that she could commit. She could stop climate change. Make world peace.

But at the expense of the lives of 900 innocent children, would it really be worth it? Or would she live in perpetual guilt for the rest of her life?

Natty thrust her trembling finger upon the **FREE** button and instantly felt, deep down, that she had made the right choice.

The school's students might still be unified and determined, but they were no longer *Una Mente* with *Uno Consilio*.