

## FIND US ALIVE EPISODE 36: The Shao Episode

Dr. Carson's office was truly a disaster, if Dr. Shao had ever seen one.

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Reset every cycle to the exact state the man himself left it in, Carson's office looked less like the workspace of a moderately high-level Director, and more like Site-19's second breakroom. Stacks of loose paper on every surface, books and ledgers and binders piled in the corners. It smelled like white vinegar and the curious ozone stench of a decades-old printer. Dr. Klein spent her time sifting through this organizational disaster for months, or the basic equivalent of months. It was Dr. Alves' turn with this, now. Maybe she could put together the remaining pieces of the puzzle.

Dr. Liang Shao, liaison to the Ethics Committee, was sent to Site-107 as one of the final measures regarding its case. They were to examine and ultimately judge Dr. Carson's progress running the nearly-completed site, and evaluate it for future use.

Of course, Dr. Shao knew their job here was a waste of time. The powers that be had already decided the fate of Extradimensional Containment Site-107. Their presence here was a formality before they shut the place down for good.

In the nearly 200 years since its inception, the Foundation had made great strides in the ethics of its contained anomalies. Employees, and other interested parties, often compared the Foundation to a prison. But this wasn't entirely accurate. The earliest form of the SCP Foundation was less like a prison, and more like a late 19th century zoo. Rows upon rows of

concrete boxes, nevermind how closely an anomaly resembled a human being. Prisoners, generally, have cots.

But the Foundation had improved leagues beyond the days of the concrete box. Several incidents involving the steep decline of contained anomalies' mental health had seen to that. They learned the hard way that if you catch a young girl who can start fires with her mind, and you leave her in an empty room with nothing but a toilet and the occasional tray of what sometimes passes as food, then eventually she will seek out new things to burn. Anomalies were easier to keep in custody, they found, when their basic needs are met. Keep things just happy enough, and they're much easier to control.

Nowadays, most sapient humanoid anomalies live in furnished rooms. They receive three meals a day of varying ingredients, access to a library of entertainment sources, and depending on the severity of their affliction, limited levels of socialization with site staff. These measures had a cost, but quickly paid for themselves. Oftentimes the Foundation's best defense against a reality bender's suicidal depression is a portable video game console.

The mental status of the anomalies held by the SCP Foundation was a concern for those in the upper echelons. Poor mental health came at great expense when the subject in question had superhuman abilities. Sick anomalies could hurt the Foundation, both physically and financially.

The same could not be said of the Foundation's own employees.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the SCP Foundation, pinnacle of

mankind's safety from the anomalous, was the safety of mankind *inside* itself. Considering the breadth of resources afforded to the Foundation through its sheer, nigh-omnipotent influence, they *could* afford to treat their people better. But where they once cut expenses from the housing of their anomalies, they now cut it from the wellbeing of their employees. And the people in charge, the dark and shadowy figures who sat around the figurative table at Site-01, would continue to cut these corners so long as the body of the Foundation, the people holding up its many walls and doors, never complained.

None of them were paid an extraordinary amount, or even meaningfully high above average. They, like many of their civilian American counterparts, received very little in the way of respite from their work. Foundation employees did boast an impressive medical package, which was believed to compensate for the injuries that most of them would eventually receive. But in reality, the Foundation's health insurance package was a means to lure in those brilliant minds who might be otherwise snatched up by more conservative institutions. The Foundation itself was not progressive. But it needed bodies too much to justify excluding what could otherwise be useful.

Things could be better. They could. The Foundation could make them better. But as long as their people bowed to the long-standing workplace culture not to complain, to remain an army of silent martyrs for humanity, nothing would get better. Nothing would need to get better, and the Council, the Higher Ups, Those In Charge or whatever you wanted to

title them, would not have to look directly at the problem.

But for the first time since its inception, the highest rung of leadership at the SCP Foundation had encountered a problem it didn't know how to solve.

The Foundation was running out of people.

People were leaving, or dying, at faster rates than what Recruitment could replace. Anomalies continued to bore their way into consensus reality, but the Foundation was rapidly reaching a point where they would lack the manpower to deal with it. They had more than enough human test subjects, recycled from the same bodies for decades in the form of short-lived clones, but that method couldn't replace the research staff. Not sustainably, at least. There were a few projects underway, a few last-resort attempts to stave off the impending shortage. The health insurance was one. A different cloning method was another, but far too early to depend on.

But how would it look to the world, to other parties with anomalous interests, if the SCP Foundation admitted its methods were wrong?

Buried in a secondary account was a chain of emails from Dr. Carson to a Dr. Hays. Dr. Shao didn't know if Klein had found them. They were easy to overlook, considering most of them didn't have a response, being simply sent off through the airwaves like Dr. Harley's ghost communications. But they detailed the last days of Site-107 before the disaster, and the frustratingly obvious warning signs of what would soon occur.

Site-107 was to be decommissioned as a containment site. The

original plan, to expand into the remainder of the mineshaft and use the space as a hub for the study of extradimensional anomalies, was scrapped after the powers that be decided they didn't have the personnel to justify it. Dr. Carson fought the decision tooth and nail, arguing that the Foundation's extradimensional safety protocols desperately needed updates. He wasn't wrong. The last few decades had seen dozens of incidents, some deadly, some worse. The current protocol was set in place during the Foundation's 1980's golden age and had barely changed since. Not even Dr. Robert Scranton's horrific incident, left to dissolve in an empty pocket dimension for years, could spur the Council to action.

Dr. Shao was visiting the site on this matter. To go over the final details with Dr. Carson in the last weeks before Site-107 was shrunk to a skeleton crew. No more passages would be built into the twisting caverns of the mine, no more containment cells dug to hold future dimensional anomalies. It would become another locational containment area attached to an anomaly that could not be moved, like so many others. And sites like that didn't need 200 people. They barely needed 50. Dr. Carson spent the better half of ten years staffing 107 with people he figured would be useful to the research. His work was about to be fully undone.

As much as Dr. Shao had to remain objective in the situation, they sympathized with the man. They, on behalf of the Ethics Committee, agreed with him. Safety measures did need updating, but that would have to come at a time when the Foundation could better shoulder the cost. That is what they believed at the time. Carson argued that better safety would

beget better survival rates. Every mass tragedy, every monumental loss of life was one more brick taken from the bottom of the pile.

It seemed history was proving Dr. Carson right. Quite a shame he couldn't be here for his vindication.

Shao how Site-107's Shift had affected the rest of the Foundation. Whether it had any impact, or if those with something to lose from the accident had put more effort into covering it up than they had put into preventing it. None of that mattered to Dr. Shao. At least, it didn't matter yet. What mattered now was what else, if anything, Dr. Carson had squirreled away before the dismantling of his site began. Anything useful to their escape.

Dr. Shao waited at the ancient printer for the expected copies of Dr. Carson's last email correspondence. Maybe, they thought, it would look different on paper. Something new might jump out at them. The printer chugged to life, gratingly forcing the papers out of itself as though in pain. Shao swept them out of the tray, still warm, and made a quick exit from that hurricane of an office.

Their ragtag entourage of unassigned agents had long since scattered into other duties on site. Not that Shao felt they needed them anyway. The Rogue Faction, as they had come to be known within Site-107, were more of a humiliation to Shao than a comfort. Frankly, if the time came that they needed protection from an imminent and deliberate threat, Shao would rather be shot than have one of these young, overzealous misfits diving in front of them. Contrary to the social and professional rituals of

their position, Shao's life was not worth more than anyone else's. They made it to their early 60's in this hellscape of a company, if someone waited until now to assassinate them, they would only succeed in freeing up a slot for a younger, fresher replacement.

Through Site-107's strange metamorphosis, Dr. Shao began to see the Foundation in a new light. For most of the staff, it took a much shorter time than they expected to start carving protocol out of their routines. At certain times, this place had the best morale Shao had ever seen in a Foundation site, and it came almost always as a result of something they would never be allowed to do on the outside. Without the influence of a Council of shadowy figures watching their every move, the 107 had reverted from parts of the Foundation's grand machine, to 91 ordinary human beings in a matter of weeks.

And that humanity was everywhere. It was in the wobbling shapes of code tattoos on the arms of a tight-lipped Records archivist. It was on the lower shelf of the media cart that served as 107's portable movie theater, which sat unused in a corner of AB for the duration of the cycle so far. It was finger-painted in schlocky emotional messages on the walls in dark gray paint, before being painted over at the behest of the new Acting Site Director.

The Foundation was still here. But this time, try as the rule book might, it couldn't keep the green from breaking up through the concrete.

Dr. Shao stepped over and around the last piles of rubble scattered on the cracked floor of BC-2. Some of it was bloody. It was always a little bloody. Many of those

trapped in the collapse every cycle were creeping their way toward permanent muscle and nerve damage with every fresh incidence of being crushed by debris. Several of them would likely never walk the same again. Security personnel rely heavily on their physical ability to do their jobs. In the outside world, they would be reassigned to desk work if they were lucky or fired altogether if not. But this was not the outside world, this was Site-107, and there was something for everyone to do, regardless of how your body moved.

They would have it cleaned up soon. Until then, it would smell like dust and drywall in Dr. Shao's temporary office, located just beyond the collapse. Formerly belonging to one Dr. Guerra, another casualty of the Shift, the room belonged to Shao for the moment. They felt they had gotten to know Dr. Guerra quite well during the process. Her perfectly square handwriting, her immaculately organized array of sticky notes stuck onto a designated glass board. The spiritual opposite of Dr. Carson. Every new cycle, Shao awoke her computer to her array of still-open tabs, and an email half-written, something about getting the copy machine fixed. Dr. Guerra heard and felt the first collapse, and ran into the hall just in time to be caught in the second. Shao wondered if she was trying to escape, or trying to rescue her coworkers.

Either way, into the incinerator her body went.

The vigil for Kasey Lowe was a complete change of pace from the death of Guerra. What they found at that silent ceremony was more humanity than they'd seen from the Ethics Committee in years. They



couldn't even remember the last time they saw a Committee member make physical contact with another person. Those in charge of the humane treatment of individuals in the Foundation, fully divorced from the meaning of the word.

No one was walking on the sidewalk now. Not enough shoes grinding down the green shoots that poked toward the sun. Kasey's death, and the unexplained collapse and subsequent hospitalization of Agent Love, had cracked the panel right through the center.

Beatrice Klein had spent months tossing seeds to the earth. It would take Gloria Alves a lot of elbow grease and a lot of fresh material to pave them back into the ground again, if she could do it before the concrete dried up.

Today, Shao took to Dr. Guerra's computer to re-type their observations of the site's behavior, punching each item further into their muscle memory. There were new behaviors to add to the growing list. Gravett strained to keep a field agent alive, encouraged by a rotating small group of people who hovered nonstop around the door. None of them were acting in a way that violated protocol, and Alves couldn't force them to leave. Dr. Shao weighed the pros and cons of siding with Alves or siding against. As far as the book was concerned, Alves was doing everything right. But from the knowledge left over from Shao's extensive education, Klein's ethics in the treatment of the staff were better. Simply better. Tangible results almost immediately.

It didn't really matter who they sided with, in the end. In spite of their position as the highest-ranking individual in the

site, Dr. Shao had learned by now that their actions had little to no effect on Site-107's momentum. It was a little like shouting into a monsoon. But that was fine. They preferred the observation anyway.

Soon, Research would begin more invasive testing on a certain alleged Dash Three instance. The whitecoated researchers adhered strictly to their mandated language, denying the psychologist personhood and autonomy in their speech when Shao was around. It was painfully obvious that they almost never acted this way among themselves, reserving the cold, scientific vocabulary for Shao's presence and dropping it the moment they were out of earshot. Dr. Shao didn't care. They knew everyone onsite still considered Dr. Lancaster to be one of their own. Motivating them to conduct tests that might hurt him was clearly a challenge for Dr. Klein. But measures needed to be taken to protect the rest of the site. And the psychologist himself, after being told what the tests might detail, didn't put up a fight at all.

Shao closed tabs, cleared documents they knew to be useless, and opened a fresh page on a word processor. Like in all their borrowed spaces, and at every Department Head meeting, Liang Shao would observe. Absorb the information, step in when liberties were being infringed upon, although none would be. They were making notes of their own, as they quietly contributed to the collective escape plan. Notes about the miraculous survival of Site-107, perhaps the most comprehensive study of Foundation personnel and the environment they build for themselves when nothing gets in the way.

So they would continue to stay out of the way. Employee wellbeing fell under the jurisdiction of the Ethics Committee just as much as anomaly wellbeing did. It *had* been an awful long time since someone formally proposed a restructuring to the employee handbook concerning how personnel could and could not act on site. Every day, Liang Shao was being presented with brilliant new ideas, all for free. All they had to do was watch for where the leaves breached the sidewalk.