

Hearts in the Crossfire

19:32.

Dinner was at 20:00.

He had thirty minutes to prepare for a potentially lethal emotional engagement—and not just because her dad was ex-military. The silence was thick, broken only by the rhythmic clink of his stress ball tapping the desk.

George had left earlier, tossing out a “good luck surviving feelings” over his shoulder. The smoothie cup still sat in the corner, slowly sweating like it knew something Jett didn’t. A faint vibration pulled Jett’s gaze to his phone.

Izabella ❤

We’re almost ready. My dad’s polishing his medals. My mom’s making something that smells like secrets. Wear something neutral—emotionally and tactically. 😊

Jett stared, unblinking.

Emotionally neutral.

Did that mean no visible trauma or just less sarcastic eye contact?

He stood slowly, crossing the room to the small wardrobe tucked between the weapons cabinet and the espresso machine. Inside, two suits: one black, crisp and lethal... the other, soft gray with a cardigan that screamed “I read poetry under fire.”

He hesitated.

Then pulled out both.

Even his wardrobe couldn’t commit.

19:44.

The clock ticked louder. Outside, a siren wailed in the distance. Somewhere in the city, danger brewed—but tonight, Jett would face it wearing polite shoes and trying not to talk about classified missions over casserole.

Jett limped down the hallway, steps measured, each one echoing against polished marble floors. The building, sleek and sterile, gave no comfort—only reminders of missions past. Tonight's mission was...personal.

At the front desk, the night clerk looked up, eyes twinkling behind wire-frame glasses.

"Have a nice dinner date," he said, not unkindly.

Jett paused mid-step. He turned just slightly, enough to give a nod.

**"Will do," he replied, voice low but resolute.
It almost sounded like optimism. Almost.**

Outside, the air was thick with city buzz. His car waited at the curb—except tonight, George was behind the wheel, looking far too excited for someone assisting in an emotional combat op.

**Jett eased himself into the passenger seat, wincing.
The bullet wound in his leg had stitched up, but the pain still flared like it had something to prove.**

**"You comfy, Romeo?" George asked, adjusting his sunglasses even though it was nighttime.
"More or less," Jett muttered, strapping in.**

George pulled away from the curb like they were chasing a suspect.

“Just sayin’, if the dad pulls out a background check, I’m gonna tell him about your tango skills and your questionable snack habits. That builds character.”

Jett didn’t respond. He was staring out the window, watching lights blur like memories.

He could handle enemy fire. But emotional vulnerability, protective parents, and casserole warfare?

That was a whole new battlefield.

The armored Ford Expedition rolled into the driveway like it had unfinished business with someone’s paranoia. Midnight black, reinforced panels, and the subtle hum of a security-grade engine—it didn’t belong on a quiet suburban street, and that was exactly the point.

Jett Sentry shifted in the passenger seat, jaw clenched. The neighborhood was still, too peaceful—like a lull before something cinematic.

George leaned forward behind the wheel, scanning the house.

“Cozy. Threat level: casserole.”

He parked with military precision.

Jett opened the door, wincing slightly as pain laced through his healing leg. George was already at his side, offering an arm with more flair than tenderness.

“Let’s conquer Mount Domestic,” George said.

Jett raised an eyebrow. “Can we do it without

commentary?"

"No."

As Jett placed a foot on the first step, memory flickered.

Jettback.

Same porch.

Same air.

That night—Izabella waiting behind a door, eyes wild with relief and something softer.

George, pushing him forward.

A stolen moment.

A first kiss.

No training. No backup. Just instinct.

Back to now.

Jett hesitated.

His hand on the railing felt heavier.

George watched him, quiet for once.

"You good?"

Jett nodded slowly. "Just remembering how this all started."

George adjusted his grip, guiding him up another step.

"You mean when I shoved you into emotional danger?"

"Exactly."

The porch light blinked on.

Inside, the house stirred.

Jett drew a steady breath.

He'd fought off assassins, leapt through fire, and navigated HQ drama.

Now he was walking into something less predictable: a

living room filled with affection, suspicion, and homemade dessert.

George helped Jett ease onto the porch bench, his injured leg stiff as concrete. The lights inside flickered gently, casting cozy shadows—not that Jett felt comforted.

*He stared ahead for a long moment before saying, flatly:
“I’m still mad you took that photo of us and blasted it into the Agency group chat. Now half the government knows what happened, George. That was one hell of a stunt you pulled.”*

George didn’t blink.

“Wasn’t my idea. It was her guards and hers.”

Jett turned to him slowly, eyes narrowed.

“Go figure.”

George leaned back against the post, smug.

“Honestly, though? It got you trending on AgencyNet for four hours. Your fan club renamed itself Operation: Heartthrob.”

Jett winced, but it wasn’t the leg this time.

“Great. Now I’m a romantic meme with clearance level six.”

George grinned.

“Honestly? That’s harder to survive than a grenade ambush.”

Jett exhaled and glanced at the door.

“Think her dad saw it?”

George shrugged.

“Depends if he’s been on the secure server lately... or if Izabella handed him a printed copy.”

Jett groaned softly.

“The casserole better be laced with sedatives.”

The porch light buzzed faintly overhead. Jett stood stiffly, trying not to look like a man who’d faced assassins but was now bracing for a casserole interrogation.

Then the door opened.

A tall man filled the frame. Sharp eyes. Broad shoulders. Salt-and-pepper hair combed with military precision. The kind of presence that made Jett instinctively straighten his spine.

Her father.

The man looked at Jett. Then at George.

Then—smirked.

“Well,” he said, voice deep and smooth like it had delivered both bedtime stories and field commands.

“You must be George Lockridge, the one who took the photo of my daughter and Jett kissing, huh?”

George blinked. “Uh—guilty-ish.”

The man chuckled once.

“That’s my daughter for you.”

Jett’s eyes widened. “Dude, you knew about it?”

The man nodded. “Yeah.”

He stepped aside and gestured them in with a casual wave, like it was perfectly normal to reference viral Agency romance intel during introductions.

Jett hesitated. George muttered, “I think he liked it.”

Inside, soft jazz played. The hallway smelled like garlic and something tactical.

*Izabella’s voice floated from the kitchen.
“Dad, be nice!”*

Her father called back, “I’m being charming.”

Then to Jett, quietly:

“Don’t worry. You survived the kiss. Survive dinner, and we’ll talk long-term threat assessments.”

Jett barely crossed the threshold before Izabella stormed through the hallway like a one-woman celebratory parade.

“Jetty!” she shouted, arms wide.

Before he could brace himself, she collided into him with a full-force hug—equal parts gratitude, adrenaline, and slightly reckless enthusiasm. Jett stumbled, catching his balance like he was dodging gunfire. George reached out instinctively, too slow to help but fast enough to witness disaster.

Izabella clung tight, arms wrapped around him like she’d just found him in rubble.

“I still owe you for saving me out there, Jetty,” she said breathlessly.

Jett blinked.

“Jetty? We’ve only been dating a month and you’re already calling me a nickname?” He paused, half-grinning. “Izabell.”

She pulled back slightly, smirking like she had just hacked his emotional firewall.

“Very funny, Jett.”

George raised a brow. “I prefer Jetticus. It sounds gladiator-y.”

Jett sighed. “No.”

Izabella looped an arm through Jett’s and gave her dad a sideways glance.

“See? He’s fine. Very nickname-resistant, but fine.”

Her dad chuckled.

“Jetty, huh? That’s bold. I’ve only called him Agent Tightrope.”

Jett groaned softly. “Can I sit before someone rebrands me again?”

Izabella led him deeper into the house. The living room smelled like cinnamon and parental expectations. And Jett? He was already questioning if Kevlar was emotionally absorbent.

**Her father raised a brow, folding his arms like he was evaluating a special ops briefing disguised as a family story.
“You escaped a gang... in a junkyard?”**

Jett nodded. “The Hollow. Mr. Kaiser was tracking us through the east quarter. We were boxed in—junkyard fences, sniper

posted on a silo, and every getaway route was compromised.”

Izabella leaned in, eyes sparkling. “Jett went full distraction-mode. Ran through scrap piles, drew the sniper’s fire, made it look like he was preparing to launch an attack.”

Her dad blinked. “While you...”

“I hotwired a half-dead EV Chevy behind a stack of hubcaps and hope,” Izabella said proudly. “No backseat. Just metal flooring and a battery that needed emotional support.”

Jett chuckled. “She got it running just in time. I dove in, leg bleeding, car coughing, and we peeled out under crossfire.”

George popped a cookie in his mouth. “Then they camped in a cave. He thought she was asleep while he was taking a leak—started monologuing about how cute she was.”

Izabella smirked. “Best emotional ambush I’ve ever heard.”

Her dad shook his head slowly, amusement simmering. “So let me get this straight. You distracted a sniper with scrap metal confidence, escaped in a glorified toaster, and confessed your feelings into an echo chamber of stalactites?”

Jett nodded solemnly.

“To be fair, it was a very poetic cave.”

Her dad lifted his drink.

“You’re either insane or in love.”

George clinked his glass against Jett's.

"Both. Absolutely both."

Jett shifted in his seat, cheeks faintly flushed with the kind of color that only old memories—and public storytelling—could conjure. Her dad watched him with curiosity, while Izabella leaned in, absolutely grinning.

"Dad," she said sweetly, "remember how you asked about our cave escape?"

Jett winced. "Can we not—?"

"Because you have to hear this part," she continued. "So we'd just fled from The Hollow. Mr. Kaiser had a sniper posted near the junkyard, and Jett drew fire while I got that old EV Chevy running. Thing didn't even have a backseat. Just metal flooring and fried wires."

Her dad nodded. "Yeah, she's a mechanic under pressure."

Izabella beamed. "We drove into the canyon and ducked into a cave. Thought we were safe, finally."

Then she giggled. "Jett went behind the Chevy to take a leak."

Jett covered his face. "Oh no."

Izabella powered forward. "And while he's back there, talking to himself, I sneak up and hear him say—'God, why does she smell like lavender and adrenaline?'"

Her dad choked on his drink.

“I stepped up behind him and said, ‘I smell like lavender and adrenaline, huh?’”

Jett jumped mid-zip, fumbled, pinched himself, and yelled.

“I thought Kaiser had found us,” he muttered. “I legit reached for my sidearm mid-pee.”

George snorted into his cinnamon cookie. “He panicked like it was a live grenade—only it was his dignity.”

Izabella chuckled, resting her hand on Jett’s knee. “It was adorable. Weird. But adorable.”

Her dad leaned back, smirking. “Son, I’ve been interrogated by warlords who handled surprise better than you.”

Jett nodded solemnly. “I’d take sniper fire over emotional drive-bys any day.”

Her mom entered with more dessert and whispered, “So... are you calling her lavender now? Or adrenaline?”

Jett grinned through the embarrassment. “Depends on the mood. Lavender’s when she’s gentle. Adrenaline’s when she hotwires a car under gunfire.”

Izabella kissed his cheek. “And I like it when you ramble.”

They reached the top landing, Jett grumbling playfully with each step, Izabella practically glued to his side.

Just as he turned down the hallway toward the bathroom, she leaned in close—close enough for her voice to land directly in his ear.

“For the record,” she whispered, lips curved, “you smell like burnt cinnamon and gunpowder.”

Jett froze mid-step.

“Burnt cinnamon?” he echoed. “That’s oddly specific.”

Izabella smirked. “It’s the scent of reckless decision-making and emotional depth.”

He blinked. “You’re profiling me by aroma now?”

She gave his arm a squeeze. “And I’ve decided I like it.”

Jett muttered something under his breath about “aromatic betrayal,” then continued limping toward the bathroom, cheeks warm, heart doing tactical gymnastics.

Jett stood at the upstairs sink, fingers running under warm water. He stared into the mirror, jaw tense, the flicker of the hallway light casting fractured shadows across his face.

He dried his hands slowly, but the unease crawled faster than gravity.

Every nerve felt louder.

Every memory sharper.

He stepped into the hallway, limped quietly down the stairs—halfway down, he stopped.

Sat.

Gripped the railing like it might keep the world steady. Then pressed his palms to his temples.

“I just had one hell of a bad feeling,” he muttered.

Izabella, halfway through passing cookies to her mom, froze and turned.

“What kind of bad?” she asked, instantly alert.

Jett didn’t answer right away. He looked past her—beyond the candles and warm lighting and casserole charm—and into some memory that hadn’t caught up yet. Something didn’t sit right.

Something was coming.

George stood up slowly.

“You’re getting the same gut signal as Prague?”

Jett nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

Izabella crossed the room, kneeling in front of him, eyes locked with his.

“What do you need?”

Jett blinked. “To know we’re not about to get blindsided.”

George reached for his communicator.

And just then—outside—a car door slammed.

The tension was razor-sharp.

The guards, flanking every exit, clenched their sidearms, knuckles pale against matte black steel. Eyes darted, scanning for a threat no one could name yet—but all had learned to dread.

A heavy thud echoed in the hall.

Suddenly, Mike burst through the door, nearly knocking the servant aside. His tie flapped behind him, face flushed and wild with urgency. “Mr. Sentry! Mr. Sentry!”

Jett clenched his jaw, the pain in his leg intensifying with every heartbeat. Sweat beaded at his brow, but his hand never left the grip of his sidearm. The room had fallen silent—only the distant hum of the city, and the sound of Mike’s labored breathing.

“Everything okay?” Jett steadied himself, though the tremor in his voice betrayed the storm inside.

“It’s Kaiser, sir. We can’t find his body.”

Jett’s heart dropped. “How?” His voice barely escaped his throat. “I shot that monster. Twice.”

Izabella’s father tightened his grip on the shotgun, eyes narrowing toward the darkened corners of the room.

Jett swallowed hard. “Maybe his guards dragged him off. Maybe they’re... repairing the damage.”

Outside, the wind stirred with eerie resolve, as if carrying secrets it refused to share. And in that moment, every shadow felt heavier.

Jett pushed himself off the couch, gritting his teeth as pain lanced through his wounded leg. His hand brushed Izabella’s shoulder briefly—a silent reassurance, though his own nerves were fraying.

He limped toward the kitchen, each step echoing louder than it should. The guards didn't move, but their eyes tracked him like hawks. The air felt tighter now, more watchful.

Jett reached the sink and poured a glass of water. His trembling fingers rattled against the rim. He stared at the faucet for a beat too long, lost in thoughts swirling darker than the night sky.

Izabella's father shifted his weight, still gripping the shotgun, watching Jett's every motion.

As Jett raised the glass to his lips, his eyes met Izabella's—his look haunted, hollowed by doubt.

"He's still out there," he muttered. "I can feel it."

Jett raised the glass, but his fingers trembled too much. The cool water sloshed over the rim and hit the counter.

Then—his body gave out.

He collapsed forward, catching himself with a harsh smack against the edge of the marble. His breath came in jagged bursts.

Izabella rushed over, heart thundering. "I don't think you should be walking," she said, grabbing his arm and easing him down onto the stool beside the counter.

Jett managed a weak smirk. "It's been a month since that bullet entered."

Izabella raised an eyebrow. “Still... if you can’t even stand up straight, I’m going to have to give you a cane. Like an old man.”

He groaned. “Please don’t. Not only will half the department have a photo of our first kiss, they’ll see me with a cane. Top elite agent here, Izzy.”

She chuckled, brushing back his sweat-damp hair. “See? Now that’s a better comeback.”

Mike stepped closer, trying not to intrude too harshly on the moment, though urgency was carved into his voice.

“Jett, also... HQ wants to see you. It’s about Kaiser.”

Jett’s eyes hardened for a beat. He nodded slowly, then turned toward Izabella’s father.

“George, I appreciate the hospitality. Be seeing you.”

George gave a firm nod, then slung the shotgun over his shoulder. “Watch your back.”

Jett limped toward the front door, Izabella matching his pace.

“Sorry the date got cut short,” he said, cracking a dry smile. “But it’s HQ, and they don’t exactly love it when I’m fashionably late.”

Izabella frowned but tried to keep it light. “Okay... Just don’t die on me.”

He paused at the door, looked into her eyes, and gave the smallest smile. “Promise.”

She watched him go, her hand resting on the doorframe, heart caught between fear and faith.

The sun hung low on the horizon as the Patterson family van cruised down Route 9, windows cracked to let in the desert air. Inside, kids argued over music, and the scent of peanut butter sandwiches lingered from lunch.

“Look at that thing,” said the dad, eyes narrowing as he passed a massive armored van parked off the shoulder. It was matte black, with reinforced panels and no insignia. Military-grade.

The mom shifted uneasily. “Is that... part of some convoy?”

Just then, a deep, guttural scream echoed from inside the van. It wasn’t human. It was rage, raw and animalistic—followed by metallic clinks and strained voices yelling commands.

“What was that?” the teenage daughter asked, now glued to the window. Her little brother whimpered in the seat beside her.

Inside the armored van, shadowy agents struggled to keep Kaiser strapped down. His body jolted against restraints as surgical tools clattered nearby. A medic barked orders, extracting twisted metal fragments from the wound—each one seeming to trigger a fresh, monstrous howl.

Jett’s bullets had done damage, but something about Kaiser refused to break.

As the Patterson van sped away, the dad muttered, “I don’t want to know what kind of monster they’ve got locked up back there.”

The sound faded—but the unease lingered, curling through the family van like smoke.

Inside the armored van, chaos simmered beneath an eerie hum of surgical equipment and muffled grunts.

Kaiser lay strapped to a steel table, his body twisted in agony. Every movement he made caused the reinforced restraints to groan against his bulk. Sweat poured off him like rain, his jaw clenched so hard it looked ready to crack.

“He’s tearing through the cuffs again!” one guard shouted, wrapping another layer of duct tape across Kaiser’s chest. “Left forearm’s loose!”

“You want to get bit? Tape it tighter,” barked the medic, his gloved hands soaked as he dug into Kaiser’s shoulder.

The bullet fragments weren’t easy to retrieve—they had embedded deep, tangled with muscle and fury. Every time the tweezers bit into flesh, Kaiser growled like a wounded animal, primal and guttural.

Another guard pressed his knee into the corner of the table to brace it. “He shouldn’t even be conscious.”

“He’s not ‘should’ anything,” the medic muttered. “He’s not normal.”

Kaiser’s eyes flew open for a second—glassy, bloodshot, unfocused—and locked onto the overhead light. And despite

the pain surging through his veins like fire, he whispered something no one could quite hear.

Then he convulsed again, forcing the guards to brace hard as the van rocked gently in response.

The medic pulled out the final fragment and dropped it into a steel tray with a clink. “He’ll survive,” he said grimly. “But God help whoever faces him next.”

The sleek, towering structure of HQ loomed ahead—cold steel and mirrored glass rising like a monolith against the evening sky.

Mike swung the car into the entrance lane, glancing over at Jett as he grimaced, bracing against the door. “You sure you’re good to walk?”

“No,” Jett muttered. “But I’m too stubborn to roll.”

The vehicle halted. Before Jett could fully limp out, the heavy front doors swung open—and out stepped the head officer himself, Commander Rusk. Weathered face, stern brow, and a voice like gravel laced with caffeine.

“Agent Sentry,” he said, descending the steps. “You look like hell.”

Jett groaned softly as Rusk looped an arm beneath his shoulder and helped him up the stone steps, one strained foot at a time.

“You know, Jett,” Rusk continued, “that was one hell of a stunt you pulled with Kaiser.”

*Jett coughed out a dry chuckle between clenched teeth.
“Just doing my—groans in pain—job, sir.”*

Rusk paused at the top landing, looking out across HQ’s courtyard. “Your job doesn’t usually come with this kind of aftermath.”

“No, sir,” Jett replied. “This one’s different. He didn’t die. He’s... evolving.”

Rusk’s face tightened. “We’re about to find out just how different.”

Inside the vaulted, ultra-secure briefing chamber deep beneath HQ, tension bristled in the air like static.

Holograms glowed along the far wall, displaying satellite images, intelligence profiles, and schematics of The Hollow’s palace—a fortress of crime nestled in an abandoned oil refinery. Around the massive round table sat over a hundred high-ranking officials: intelligence directors, military generals, cyber warfare specialists, even the President herself.

Commander Rusk stood to the side, arms folded. “We’ve already lost too many agents trying to breach that place,” he said. “Sentry, walk us through your plan.”

Jett rose slowly from his chair, posture rigid but determined. His voice carried across the chamber. “We go in quiet—through the underground spill tunnels. Their sensors won’t pick up our heat signatures if we wear cryo-suits. Team Alpha hits the lab wing, Bravo moves toward the

central control dome, and I take point on intercepting Kaiser.”

Heads turned. The President leaned forward, intrigued. “And you’re certain this route avoids the kill zones?”

Jett gripped the edge of the table. “It bypasses the outer perimeter completely. But we’ll need—”

Suddenly, his words faltered. The world spun.

His knees buckled.

With a dull thud and stunned gasps, Jett collapsed to the floor, unconscious—right there in the heart of national command.

Rusk lunged forward. “Medic!” he barked.

Mike rushed from the corner, already yanking his jacket off to cradle Jett’s head. The hum of machinery and elite chatter dissolved into stunned silence.

The President stood slowly. “This infiltration... just became even more complicated.”

Sterile light buzzed softly overhead. The scent of antiseptic filled the air. Jett stirred, groaning as he blinked against the blinding white of the HQ medical bay.

Commander Rusk stood at his bedside, arms folded and face carved in a frown. “You’ve looked better.”

Jett smirked weakly. “Still handsome enough for covert ops.”

Rusk stepped closer. “Jett... that gunshot wound was worse than expected.”

Jett turned his head. “Did the bullet punch through a kidney or something?”

“Worse,” Rusk said. “The other doctor missed it—bullet carried venom. A neurotoxin. It’s causing your blood to die out in your leg. Slow and ugly.”

Jett exhaled. “That monster doesn’t just shoot to kill, huh?”

“We have a cure,” Rusk continued, “but it takes a full day to process. Bio-synth regeneration. No shortcuts.”

Jett winced, then nodded. “A day’s not that long.”

Rusk gave him a rare look of approval. “I’ve rescheduled the briefing for tomorrow. You’re still the only one who’s been face-to-face with Kaiser and lived. We need you sharp.”

Jett sank deeper into the mattress, staring at the ceiling.
“Then I’ll be ready.”

The door to the medical bay slid open with a soft hiss.

Izabella stepped in, badge clipped to her jacket, hair pulled back in a tidy bun that couldn’t quite mask her mischievous smile.

Jett squinted. “You have high clearance?”

She crossed her arms. “Jetty, now look... I warned you to not to be walking without that cane.”

Jett covered his face, groaning as Izabella's teasing echoed through the med bay.

"You had to call me that in front of Rusk?" he said, muffled.

Izabella shrugged playfully. "Why not? He's seen the photo."

Commander Rusk raised a brow. "Yup. That library kiss. Bold move, Agent."

Izabella leaned against the side of Jett's bed, grinning.

"Cornered you between the espionage aisle and the rare manuscripts section. No escape, just lip-lock."

Jett peeked through his fingers. "George said he was there to 'read up on encrypted signals'—then sent that photo to everyone from tech to tactical."

Rusk chuckled. "Honestly? More firepower in that kiss than in half our arsenal."

Izabella squeezed Jett's hand gently. "So behave. And maybe I won't ambush you again in public... maybe."

Jett's face turned a shade of crimson as Izabella leaned in with that signature grin.

"You had to call me 'Jetty' in front of Rusk?" he groaned.

Commander Rusk, standing with his arms folded by the med bay door, smirked. "Actually... I've seen the collection."

Jett blinked. "I'm sorry—collection?"

“Oh yeah,” Rusk said, nodding with a chuckle. “We’ve got a wall in Tactical Archives: about half a dozen candid agent ‘first kisses’ snapped by overly enthusiastic bodyguards. Yours? Library. Section 8-B. Between encrypted documents and romance novels. Yours took up two slots—George submitted it with timestamps and lighting notes.”

Izabella laughed. “That explains the dramatic angles.”

“Technically, it was a violation of Protocol 39,” Rusk continued, grinning. “Emotional entanglements during active missions were flagged. But you two made it into the exception list. We amended the rule—still restrictions, but Agent Sentry and his corner-kissing partner? You passed.”

Jett groaned, dragging the blanket over his face. “This is worse than the bullet wound.”

“Not quite,” Rusk said. “At least the venom can be cured.”

Jett lay staring at the ceiling, still feeling the warmth from Izabella’s goodnight kiss as the room fell quiet.

Rusk had left. The lights dimmed. The silence was heavier now.

His thoughts wandered—not to missions or intel, but to the assignment. The one that changed everything.

She wasn’t just a partner. She was his protectee.

Elite Guard Protocol Level 7. His job was clear: keep her alive, no matter the cost. The day he met her, she was defiant, brilliant, never content to be sheltered in safety. And

Jett? He preferred clean orders, straight lines, silence. But escorting Izabella... shattered that.

He remembered the tension of that first day. How she strutted into the transport bay with a file thicker than his patience. “I don’t need a babysitter,” she said.

And he had replied, “I’m not a sitter. I’m a shield.”

She challenged him for weeks. Pushed boundaries. Broke silence. And somehow, she carved herself into the one space he’d never meant to open: trust.

He turned slightly, wincing at the pain in his leg.

**“She was never the assignment,” he whispered to himself.
“She became the reason.”**

Outside, quiet footsteps faded into the corridor. And Jett closed his eyes, knowing tomorrow he’d be guarding her again—whether she needed him or not.

The steel double doors of HQ’s main briefing auditorium creaked open as Jett stepped in, the unmistakable clack of a cane echoing with each uneven footfall.

Heads turned.

Hundreds of high-ranking officers, tactical commanders, and advisors sat in poised silence—well, almost silence. A few lips twitched. Even the President, seated front and center, struggled to hide a grin behind her folded hands.

Jett limped to the podium and paused, scowling at the polished floor like it personally offended him.

“That damn doctor gave me a cane,” he said flatly. “Now I look like a 60-year-old retired librarian.”

A wave of suppressed laughter rippled through the room. One general coughed dramatically into his fist. The cyber-intel director bit her lip, eyes squinting with effort. The President’s shoulders bounced ever so slightly with stifled amusement.

Commander Rusk, standing near the digital display, didn’t even try to hide his grin. “Good thing you’re still the most dangerous one here. Cane or no cane.”

Jett rolled his eyes. “Tell that to my leg—it thinks I’m overdue for a senior discount.”

Despite the chuckles, the room settled quickly, leaning into gravity once more as Rusk dimmed the lights and brought up the schematics of The Hollow’s palace.

“Alright, team,” he said. “Cane or not—Agent Sentry leads infiltration.”

Jett gripped the podium, steel in his gaze, ready to command. The cane? Just part of the legend now.

Jett adjusted his stance at the podium, balancing his weight on the cane like it was an extension of his command. The room, still recovering from his sarcastic entrance, leaned in as the holograms flickered to life behind

him—schematics of The Hollow’s palace now glowing across the wall.

“Alright,” Jett said, voice steady, slicing through the silence like a blade. “Here’s how we get into the devil’s den without handing him a welcome mat.”

The main layout zoomed in.

“Team Alpha approaches through Sector 4—the dried-out spill tunnels under the refinery. No heat, no motion sensors. You’ll be wearing cryo-suits to avoid biometric detection. Once inside, head straight for the lab wing. That’s where intel says they store volatile compounds—and Kaiser’s synthetic enhancers.”

Jett turned, cane tapping with rhythm on the steel floor.

“Bravo Team will punch north through a service shaft embedded in the oil pumps. Takes you to the central surveillance dome. Neutralize their signal array, take control of Hollow’s network. You get eyes and ears on the whole compound from there.”

A quiet murmur of approval passed through the crowd.

Jett zoomed into a final sector—isolated, shadowed, and pulsing red on the map.

“And me?” He nodded grimly. “I take Point Delta. Kaiser’s sanctum. No tunnels, no shafts. I go through the east wall—two charges, silent entry. I confront him while Alpha and Bravo are secured. No more hide-and-heal. We finish this.”

The President leaned forward, brows furrowed with interest. “Risky.”

“Calculated,” Jett corrected. “I know his habits. I know his guards. I’ve seen the venom in his eyes. This time, I don’t miss.”

Rusk crossed his arms, nodding. “You may limp, but that brain’s still lethal.”

Jett tapped the cane once, turning from the map.

“Tomorrow night,” he said. “We take back control. The Hollow falls.”

The briefing room erupted—not in applause, but in unified determination. And for one fleeting second, Jett didn’t feel broken or bruised.

He felt ready.

Jett limped through the front door of his apartment, cane tapping rhythmically like the ticking of some cosmic joke.

He was met immediately by the glow of a holo-screen projected above his living room table, laughter filling the space like it had been waiting for him.

George sat back in Jett’s recliner, legs stretched out like a man who hadn’t guarded a VIP for twenty years. Izabella lounged cross-legged beside him, both fixated on the rotating gallery of images that Jetted across the screen.

Jett froze. “Tell me that’s not the First Kiss Collection again.”

Izabella beamed. “It totally is. New update just dropped.”

George zoomed in on a fresh image with a flick of his wrist. “Agent Marquez,” he read aloud, barely containing his grin, “caught getting kissed by her VIP package—inside a submarine. During a family vacation. No protocols. No backup. Just one stunned guard mid-swoon in international waters.”

Jett dropped his keys onto the counter, sighing dramatically. “So now we’re documenting romantic espionage in submersibles?”

“They were sixty feet below sea level,” Izabella added proudly. “Really pushing the depth limits of protocol violations.”

George winked. “Hey, if you’re gonna get swept off your feet by your escort, might as well do it in a pressurized tin can.”

Jett collapsed onto the couch beside them. “Please tell me ours hasn’t gone viral again.”

Izabella tapped to their photo—Library Kiss, Section 8-B, still front and center. “Trending fourth. Sorry, Jetty.”

Jett buried his face in a cushion. “Fantastic. My romantic reputation is now permanently archived next to aquatic scandal and aisle seven.”

George leaned back, smug. “And still the most dramatic one of the bunch.”

Jett squinted at the holo-screen, watching the images rotate with what could only be described as dramatic, kiss-filled chaos.

“What’s number one trending?” he asked, cautiously, as if bracing for emotional impact.

George and Izabella exchanged a look. Izabella smirked, tapped the screen, and a new image flickered into view.

“Agent Takeda,” George announced, barely keeping a straight face. “Caught mid-kiss by her VIP—on a zipline. Above a jungle ravine. Thirty meters in the air, both harnessed, hanging like tangled spaghetti.”

Jett blinked. “You’re kidding.”

“ Nope,” Izabella replied, grinning wide. “Agent tried to say it was ‘a stability maneuver.’ Protocol team ruled it as ‘gravity-assisted romance.’”

Jett leaned back into the couch. “So I’m trending below airborne affection and submarine swooning?”

George nodded solemnly. “You’re solid number four. But you’ve got literary flair. No one else can say their kiss happened between encrypted documents and Jane Austen.”

Izabella nudged him playfully. “Still time to reclaim the top spot, Jetty. We just need a more cinematic location next time.”

He muttered, “I’m bringing smoke grenades to our next date.”

Izabella suddenly stood up from the couch, pointing at Jett as he shuffled in with dramatic flair and the unmistakable rhythm of a cane.

“Whoa!” she blurted, eyes wide.

Jett sighed. “Yeah... that doctor gave me a cane for the day.”

George’s head whipped around, brows shooting up. “Wait—a cane?”

Then came the eruption.

George and Izabella doubled over in laughter, clutching their sides like the photo gallery wasn’t already enough comedy gold. George’s protein bar flew to the floor as he gasped for air. Izabella nearly fell off the couch.

Jett raised both hands like a weary prophet. “Ha ha ha. Very funny. A wounded Jett here! Show some dignity for once!”

Izabella wiped a tear from her cheek. “And you said you’d never use a cane. Swore up and down you’d rather crawl.”

Jett groaned, leaning the cane against the wall with theatrical defeat. “I was hoping to be taken seriously at tomorrow’s op... not look like someone’s retired uncle with a security badge.”

George grinned. “Uncle Jett. Has a nice ring to it.”

Izabella giggled. “You’re still elite. Just... elite with accessories.”

Jett muttered, “This is emotional sabotage.”

The morning light slid across the apartment like quiet reassurance. Steam curled from the coffee pot as Izabella stood by the counter, hair pulled into a lazy bun, humming softly under her breath. The scent of roasted beans mixed with the calm before the storm.

Jett stepped into the kitchen, noticeably steadier. His leg, though still wrapped, no longer screamed with every motion. He moved like himself again—cane leaning quietly against the wall, ignored.

He walked up behind Izabella, wrapping a loose arm around her waist and kissing her gently on the cheek.

She smiled without turning. “Mmm. That’s either gratitude or nervous energy.”

“Both,” Jett murmured. “Coffee smells like peace before chaos.”

She slid a mug toward him. “Then drink fast. Because your briefing starts in an hour.”

Jett took it and raised his brow. “No teasing about my cane today?”

Izabella gave a sideways grin. “Nah. You kissed me first. That earns one day of immunity.”

Jett clinked his mug against hers. “Deal.”

The armory hissed open with a hydraulic thud, cold air rushing out like a vault of restrained fury. Inside, racks of weaponry lined the walls like disciplined soldiers, gleaming under the blue LED glow. At the center, Jett stepped in—his

gait strong, steadier than the day before. No cane now. Just purpose.

George was already there, standing beside the reinforced suit rack, hands hovering over the control panel.

*“Guardian-class gear, freshly calibrated,” George said.
“Good to see you upright.”*

Jett exhaled, pulling off his jacket and stepping up to the suit module. “Only because Izabella finally let me out.”

George raised an eyebrow. “She didn’t want you to go?”

Jett grinned. “Wouldn’t even let me leave the room. Kept pulling me back for one last kiss... five times. Said each one was a good luck seal.”

George snorted, lifting the armor plates off the rack. “She’s got style. Subtle emotional sabotage.”

“Trust me,” Jett muttered, slipping on the exo-gloves, “I nearly called off the mission after kiss number four.”

George helped lock the chest plating in place and tapped the wrist display to sync biometrics. The suit whirred softly, molding to Jett’s frame.

“You ready for this?” George asked, quietly.

Jett tightened the last strap and nodded. “I’m not just ready. I’m overdue.”

Jett moved to the weapons rack near the rear wall, where the lighting dimmed just slightly—like even the armory understood this was personal.

His hand hovered briefly before landing on his sidearm. Sleek matte black, custom grip worn smooth by years of service. A modified VX-92 revolver, capable of silent rounds and high-caliber impact. This weapon wasn't just gear—it was history.

He checked the chamber, gave it one spin, and holstered it across his leg with care.

George, still tightening the last strap on Jett's suit, watched him closely.

Jett exhaled, gaze lingering at the locker near the exit.

"If I don't make it out," he said quietly, "tell her there's a surprise for her in the closet."

George paused. "What is it?"

Jett gave a crooked half-smile. "A locked case. Left side. Her name's engraved on it. I was going to give it to her if I came back with a limp and a ring."

George's eyes softened. "You put a proposal kit in a tactical case?"

"Of course," Jett said. "She's not ordinary. Neither was the plan."

The suit whirred gently around him as Jett turned toward the exit, resolve radiating from every step.

Tomorrow, he'd face The Hollow.

But tonight, a secret rested behind the closet door... waiting for a promise to be kept.

Jett tightened the grip on his sidearm, the weight of it grounding him—but it wasn’t the mission that had him pausing. It was what would’ve happened after.

He glanced toward the exit, then back at George, his voice dropping to something quiet and loaded.

“I was going to propose at the agent ceremony,” Jett said. “After we got back from the mission. She’d be in dress uniform, hair done up, probably cracking jokes at my expense—and I’d pull out the case. Not exactly conventional, but that night felt right.”

George crossed his arms, nodding slowly. “I had a feeling. She might’ve too.”

Jett gave a crooked smile. “Well... if everyone already knows, why wait? If this goes wrong—if something happens—I don’t want her left wondering.”

He turned to the console behind them, grabbed a small encrypted communicator from his gear bin, and typed out a message. No dramatic speeches. Just four words:

Check the closet. Tonight.

He looked up. “If I don’t make it back, she gets that message. No ceremony. Just... the truth.”

George laid a hand on his shoulder, firm and steady. “She’ll get it. Either from the closet—or straight from you.”

Jett stared down the corridor beyond the armory, the one that led toward the staging bay and whatever waited inside The Hollow.

“I’m making sure it’s the second option.”

The wind howled across the rooftop helipad as floodlights bathed the giant cargo helicopter in white. Its blades spun slowly, rhythm building with purpose. Jett led the charge—agents flanking him in full gear, visors glinting, boots thudding in unison on the steel deck.

He stopped short of the ramp and turned to his team, voice commanding but electric with anticipation.

**“All right, men!” he shouted over the roar of the engines.
“TODAY WE STRIKE!”**

Cheers erupted behind him, fists raised, hearts pounding. Jett climbed aboard, muscles taut beneath the Guardian-class armor, his custom VX-92 sidearm snug against his leg. This was it.

George scrambled in after, immediately dropping into the jump seat and clutching the armrest like it was a lifeline.

“I get air sick,” he groaned, face already a shade paler than protocol white.

Jett smirked, grabbing the overhead rail. “Try not to throw up on my boots. Would ruin the dramatic tone.”

George looked up with wide eyes. “If I do, it’ll be tactical. Targeted splash. Only on your boots.”

The pilot gave the all-clear.

The helicopter rose like a beast unleashed, cutting into the sky with precision and fury.

As HQ shrank beneath them, Jett glanced at the city lights below—then forward toward The Hollow. The time for talk was over.

This was war.

From the open side hatch of the cargo helicopter, Jett peered down beneath the thundering rotors. Wind lashed at his face as the urban skyline melted into barren roads stretching like veins toward distant hills.

Then he saw it—headlights flaring across the desert floor in synchronized motion.

A full army.

Armored SUVs, matte-black sedans, reinforced tactical vans—all storming forward in phalanx formation. Dust kicked up behind them like rising smoke, and their speed matched their silence: relentless. Vehicles bore HQ insignias and infiltration tags. Each one packed with strike teams, heavy weapons, mobile medic units, and surveillance payloads.

“Holy hell,” George muttered, leaning over Jett’s shoulder. “This looks like a coordinated invasion.”

Jett narrowed his eyes, gripping the hatch frame as the convoy veered toward the jagged silhouette of The Hollow’s compound.

“They’ll hit the perimeter just before we drop,” he said. “Rattle the walls. Pull eyes away from the tunnels.”

George looked skeptical. “And you think Kaiser’ll just stand there and watch us roll in?”

Jett’s jaw tensed. “No. I think he’s already watching.”

Below, the storm of engines surged onward—HQ’s thunder rolling in.

The sky grew darker as the helicopter banked west.

Tonight wasn’t just infiltration. It was an army with a purpose.

And Jett was leading the charge.

The thudding rotors echoed like war drums overhead. The cargo helicopter hovered low above the outer perimeter of The Hollow’s compound—massive, rust-streaked walls looming below with mounted turrets and reinforced steel barriers. Dust swirled violently in the air.

Inside, agents gripped their harnesses. Breath tight. Visors locked. Jett stood by the open hatch, fingers curled around the edge, his armor humming with tension.

Then—the signal.

The pilot, clad in a matte flight suit, straightened his gloved fingers and swept his hand forward and back like a silent conductor leading chaos. No words needed. Just gesture.

Go.

Agents lunged from the hatch one by one, dropping into the night like lightning bolts. Parachutes snapped open

mid-descent as they twisted toward their designated breach zones.

Below, the convoy struck hard.

Armored SUVs skidded into position, their reinforced bumpers slamming against the compound's massive gate. A half-dozen sedans opened fire with sonic disruptors, while tactical vans deployed mobile shield rigs and laser cutters to slice through the gate's outer locks.

The Hollow's defenses sprang to life—alarms blaring, floodlights slashing through the dark—but it was too late.

The assault was already inside the walls.

And at its heart?

Jett.

The interior of The Hollow erupted in controlled chaos. Jett led the first breach unit—VX-92 blazing, footfalls pounding through concrete corridors lined with rusting pipes and flickering lights. Hollow members swarmed like hornets, shouting orders in scrambled codes, weapons raised.

Jett didn't blink.

Rounds fired in rapid succession. Bravo Team flanked from the west, clearing the catwalks above with precision shots and stun grenades. Alpha moved with surgical efficiency through the compound's underbelly, torching toxin labs and disarming tripwires with cryo-tech blades.

Outside the central dome, chaos boiled.

George fired from behind a reinforced shield, shouting over the comms. “Kaiser’s elite—they’re guarding the inner vault!”

“Keep pushing!” Jett shouted, blasting through a wall panel to reveal a security passage.

They moved like a machine—agents synced to his rhythm, coordinated and lethal.

By the time they reached the final corridor, over two hundred Hollow combatants had fallen. The last twenty retreated toward the command wing, unleashing suppressive fire—but Jett stormed forward through the hail, shield blazing, eyes locked on the prize.

Then—silence.

Jett kicked open the towering door to Kaiser’s office. It swung inward like a temple gate.

Inside, velvet shadows draped the walls. Monitors flickered with scrambled data. And at the far end—

Kaiser waited.

Seated. Calm.

“Agent Sentry,” he said smoothly, rising. “You came to finish what you started.”

Jett stepped forward, sidearm raised, voice like steel.

“Dead men don’t get second chances.”

Commander Rusk stormed into Kaiser’s office behind Jett, tactical rifle in hand and a dozen elite agents flanking

him. The flickering monitors and deep crimson lighting gave the place the eerie glow of a throne room built on blood and stolen data.

Kaiser stood calm. Regal, almost. A subtle shimmer pulsed across his dark suit—barely noticeable to the eye but unmistakable to sensors.

“Target confirmed!” Rusk shouted. “Weapons hot—open fire!”

The room erupted in gunfire.

Dozens of rounds tore through the air, lighting up Kaiser like a storm made of vengeance. Jett ducked to the side, shield raised, heart thundering.

And then...

Ping. Ping. Clink. Thud.

Bullets struck Kaiser—and bounced off.

Not deflected. Not absorbed.

Bounced.

Like pebbles hitting tempered steel.

“What the—?!” Rusk yelled, stunned. “That was armor-piercing!”

Jett narrowed his eyes, watching the shimmer around Kaiser intensify. “He’s not wearing armor,” he muttered. “That’s a kinetic barrier... body-wide. Custom tech. Synthetic shielding woven into his bloodstream.”

Kaiser smiled, unfazed, and stepped forward through the haze of smoke. “Did you really think you’d walk into my kingdom and shatter it with lead?”

Rusk’s grip tightened on his rifle. “Change of plans—aim for the emitter!”

Kaiser raised one hand—and the lights began to flicker.

Something else was coming.

Just as Rusk called for a second volley, Kaiser moved.

And he wasn’t fast—he was instantaneous. Like gravity forgot it had a grip on him.

His body blurred forward, and the nearest agent didn’t get a chance to react before he was flung across the room like a ragdoll, smashing into the far wall with a crunch of metal and bone. Another was swept off her feet with a spin kick that cracked her visor open, sparks flying.

“Kinetic shielding AND augmentations!” George shouted, diving behind a console.

Kaiser rampaged through the room. A third agent tried to grapple him, but Kaiser caught the man mid-air and hurled him through the glass conference table like he weighed nothing more than a pillow. Crash. Groan. Silence.

Jett fired—twice, clean shots. They ricocheted.

Then Kaiser spun to the window. He shattered it with a forward vault, glass exploding outward like a bomb of diamonds. Below, a sleek black interceptor roared awake as

if summoned by command. The door lifted, lights inside flickering red.

He landed like a god on concrete, slid across the polished tarmac, and dove into the driver's seat. Tires screeched, engines bellowed, and the car peeled out in seconds—blasting through the compound's outer gate like it wasn't even there.

Jett ran to the window, eyes narrowed.

"He's not retreating," he muttered. "He's repositioning."

Rusk limped to his side. "Then we intercept. Call satellite support. Nobody outruns us."

Engines roared to life as command agents swarmed from the shattered remains of The Hollow's compound. Tactical SUVs skidded into formation, dust trailing like smoke behind their tires. Jett jumped into the lead vehicle, George clutching the side rail with one hand and his lunch with the other.

The desert stretched endlessly ahead—wide, open, blistering.

On the horizon, Kaiser's sleek black interceptor tore across the sand like a shadow with fire beneath it. Solar-fusion engine blazing. The armored plates shimmered like oil-slick steel.

Rusk shouted over the comms, "Target in sight—engage with suppressive fire!"

Rounds exploded from multiple vehicles. Sniper turrets on the back of jeeps, auto-cannons mounted on sedans, Jett-flares from hand-held rifles.

Ping... ping... TING!

The bullets danced uselessly across Kaiser's car, ricochetting off the surface like sparks off a forge. One snapped clean off the hood and embedded itself in a cactus.

"What in tech hell is that plating?" George yelled, ducking as shrapnel grazed their windshield.

"Some kind of reactive armor," Jett growled, swerving around a boulder. "Every round hitting him is turned into fireworks."

Rusk's voice crackled through comms, "Then we stop aiming at the car. Aim for tires. For terrain. Force him into a trap."

Jett's eyes narrowed. "I've got one. But it'll mean driving through hell."

George groaned. "You always say that before doing it."

Jett slammed the accelerator. The convoy followed.

Kaiser veered toward a canyon ridge—escape fading fast. And the agents?

They weren't letting go until this ended.

Kaiser's interceptor screeched as it veered hard into the canyon's edge, sand flying like shrapnel behind him. With expert timing, he whipped the wheel in a tight J-turn, tires

carving a brutal crescent into the gravel, aiming to shake the agents off his tail.

But Jett wasn't just trained—he was built for this.

His tactical SUV surged into the curve, matching the angle with near-perfect symmetry. Dust blinded the view, but Jett's grip never faltered. He shifted gears, leaned in, and cut the canyon bend like a ghost chasing fate.

George clung to the dash, jaw clenched. “He’s trying to lose us!”

Jett didn’t blink. “He’ll have to do better.”

As Kaiser emerged from the canyon onto cracked pavement, the landscape transformed—a city in ruin. Hollow operatives flooded the streets, chaos erupting like fire. Cars were flipped, storefronts ablaze, civilians fleeing in all directions. It wasn’t just panic—it was orchestration. Kaiser’s retreat was a smokescreen for full-blown urban sabotage.

Across the skyline, red-and-blue lights danced like stars.

The entire city’s police force had mobilized—armored vans, riot units, tactical drones. Sirens howled in layers, all converging toward the heart of the madness. Hollow members fired indiscriminately, blocking intersections, setting traps, unleashing mayhem.

Jett’s vehicle swerved past an overturned ambulance, tires screeching as he dodged falling debris.

“They’re collapsing the city,” George muttered. “This isn’t retreat—it’s cover for something bigger.”

Jett's eyes locked onto Kaiser's car, which was cutting through barricades like a blade through silk.

"Then we shut it down," Jett said. "Before the whole place falls."

The dust-choked convoy skidded to a stop outside a familiar gated estate—Izabella's home.

Kaiser's interceptor idled inside the open gate, matte black and gleaming like a final chess piece placed with twisted precision. Jett jumped from the lead SUV, sidearm drawn, heart thundering like war drums.

And there they were.

Izabella, her father Luke, and her mother Rose—bound tightly to the columns of the front veranda. Ziptied. Mouths sealed with tactical tape. Their eyes locked on Jett, wide with fear.

Kaiser stood calmly in the courtyard, arms folded like he had all the time in the world.

"Mr. Sentry," he called out with unsettling composure, "Let's settle this fair and square, ja?"

Jett didn't answer. He took one step forward.

That's when one of Kaiser's elite guards approached, gear spotless, face half-shadowed under a helmet.

**"Wir haben die Familie. Was sind unsere Befehle?"
(We have the family. What are our orders?)**

Kaiser kept his eyes on Jett as he replied:

“Warte auf meinen Befehl. Sobald Jett Sentry nicht mehr da ist, eliminiere sie.”

(Wait for my command. Once Jett Sentry is no more, eliminate them.)

Jett clenched his fists, rage sharpening the edge of every breath. He glanced at Luke, at Rose, then at Izabella.

This wasn’t just a trap.

This was the moment he’d make Kaiser regret everything.

Suddenly—crack! A sharp, silenced gunshot echoed from somewhere beyond the rooftops. One of Kaiser’s elite guards collapsed instantly, a neat hole between the eyes as he crumpled like a broken puppet.

Kaiser turned his head slowly toward the direction of the shot. The corner of his mouth curled into something resembling amusement.

“Well done,” he said to the distant, unseen marksman. Then his expression turned razor-sharp. “Kill them.”

“NOOOOO!” Jett roared.

Before any of the remaining guards could react, Jett was already moving—faster than rage, faster than grief. His VX-92 barked as rounds erupted from the barrel, clean, furious, precise.

One guard fell beside the fountain.

Another spun mid-air before crashing through the veranda railing.

A third tried to shield Kaiser, but Jett's bullet ripped through the forearm and shoulder joint, dropping him like a brick.

The courtyard was a warzone, echoes ringing against stone and blood-stained marble.

Kaiser backed up, shield shimmering, watching with something eerily like admiration.

**“You are a frecher kleiner Dachs,” he said coldly.
(sassy little badger.)**

Jett leveled his weapon again, not even flinching.

“You’re about to learn what happens when a badger bites through armor.”

Kaiser reached into the inner lining of his sleek combat vest and pulled free a slender, obsidian device—twisting with coils of light and humming with energy. Its surface pulsed like venom alive.

Jett barely had time to register the name etched across its core: Viper Key.

“You’ll love this,” Kaiser whispered.

He raised the weapon and pointed it toward the agents flanking the courtyard. With a high-pitched frequency—silent to the untrained ear—the device emitted a wave of neurological disruption. Invisible, but devastating.

In an instant, agents dropped their weapons. Arms spasmed. Knees buckled.

Screams erupted from hardened soldiers as their bodies betrayed them, twitching uncontrollably. Some collapsed outright. Others clawed at their suits, voices torn in agony.

George hit the ground, clutching his chest. Rusk's eyes rolled back mid-command. Even tactical drones fizzled out above the rooftops.

Jett tried to move—but Kaiser was already there.

He lifted Jett by the collar with inhuman strength, feet dangling inches above the tiles. Jett struggled, choking, arms pinned.

“I was once like you,” Kaiser said coldly. “Weak. Tiny. Forgettable.”

He tightened his grip. Muscles bulging beneath synth-braided skin.

“But now—I am something a whole lot... more.”

A whimper split the tension.

Izabella, still bound but wild-eyed, screamed through her tape. Then—she broke free. Shattered zip-ties. Ripped the tape from her mouth.

“STOP!” she cried, voice cracking, soul on edge.

Kaiser looked at her.

And for a moment—just a flicker—he hesitated.

Then dropped Jett to the ground, like releasing old baggage.

Kaiser paced slowly toward Izabella, his weapon raised, cold calculation etched into every step. Her hands trembled at her sides, but her eyes—her eyes didn't flinch. They locked onto his, unwavering, full of fire.

He leveled the gun, finger curling—

WHAACK!

A splintering crack rang out as Jett came roaring in from behind, wielding a jagged piece of the broken fence post like a war hammer. The wood shattered across the back of Kaiser's head with brutal force, shards scattering like glass.

Kaiser staggered forward, gripping the right side of his face. He fell to his knees, screaming, a sound less human and more metallic—high-pitched, corrupted.

Then... he pulled his hand away.

Half his face was gone.

Revealed beneath the ruined synthetic skin: titanium alloy plating, exposed wires, flickering lights where veins should've pulsed. An eye glowed pale blue behind a mesh of steel.

“LOOK AT THE MONSTER YOU TURNED ME INTO!” Kaiser roared, voice echoing with distortion.

Jett stepped forward, eyes burning. “You were already one.”

And he swung again.

The fence post collided with the side of Kaiser's face—this time with full intent. The remaining skin shredded clean off,

peeling in one horrifying motion like paper ripped from steel.

Kaiser slumped sideways, choking on rage, a half-man, half-machine nightmare gasping on marble tile.

But Jett didn't move again. He stood tall, breathing hard, staring at the thing Kaiser had become—not just broken, but exposed.

"Put a monster in a suit and give it power," he said. "All you do... is magnify what it already is."

Voices blurred together—muffled sobs, static buzz, the distant hum of rotors fading. Jett blinked hard, chest aching, ears ringing like a thousand alarms.

He was lying on scorched stone, half-buried in rubble. The air was smoky, thick with panic.

Then—a hand.

Izabella, trembling but alive, was gripping his arm with both hands, her eyes flooded with tears. She leaned over him, whispering his name like a lifeline.

"Jett," she whispered. "You're okay... You're okay..."

Jett groaned, eyes slowly focusing. She was safe. Luke and Rose were nearby, dazed but untouched.

He tried to sit up, his voice cracked, barely audible.

"Kaiser...?"

Izabella nodded, voice shaking. “He ran. But we’re not done.”

Jett squeezed her hand—dirt-covered, bloodied, but filled with determination.

“No,” he said. “We finish this.”

But the second his weight shifted, a sharp agony tore through his leg—his old injury, now reopened, bleeding through the torn combat suit. He collapsed again, coughing violently as dust filled his lungs.

Izabella dropped to her knees beside him, eyes wide and frantic. “Jett—please,” she said, gripping his armored chest. “You have to get up. Please!”

Jett’s vision blurred, the courtyard spinning in shades of red and ash. His chest heaved, lips flecked with blood and dirt. He turned his head slowly, desperation clawing at his ribs.

Everyone was alive.

Except one.

Jett’s bloodshot eyes locked onto a collapsed section of the compound, jagged steel and burnt concrete stacked high. Buried in the wreckage—

“HUME!” he cried, voice shredded with panic.

There—half-submerged in ash and debris, an arm twisted under a collapsed pillar, gear scorched, visor cracked—

Agent Hume wasn’t moving.

Izabella turned sharply, horror blooming across her face. George stumbled to the edge of the rubble, calling for medics. Rusk limped to assist, shouting coordinates. But Jett tried to rise again, hand clutching his leg, teeth grit through pain.

He wouldn't leave Hume behind.

Not like this.

Izabella pressed a hand to his face, grounding him. "We'll get him. Just breathe. I need you conscious, not broken."

Jett nodded weakly, staring at the wreckage.

The battle wasn't over.

But it had already cost them more than they thought.

Smoke curled above the rubble like a silent mourner, ash floating in the wind as George and two agents clawed through scorched debris. Metal groaned. Stone shifted.

And then—they found him.

Agent Hume, barely visible beneath twisted beams and shattered concrete, eyes cracked open with fading clarity. Blood pooled near his ribs. His breath came in sharp, broken gasps, and each cough left crimson flecks on his chest plate.

"Tell my—" cough "my wife... I'll always... love her..." he whispered, voice fracturing.

He strained, trembling hand lifting slightly. "Under the bed... silver box... coughing violently ...it's got the ring..."

George dropped to his knees beside him, eyes wide and shaking. “No, no, no—Hume, you can’t leave right now. Your son, Izac... his birthday’s tomorrow. He’s turning 8.”

Hume blinked slowly, pain etched into every movement.

George’s voice cracked. “You and all of us agents—we were gonna help you put together that swing set you bought him. Remember? You said it had too many screws and not enough instructions...”

Hume’s lips twitched, almost into a smile.

But he didn’t respond.

George pressed two fingers to Hume’s neck, breath caught in his throat. The seconds stretched.

Then—he shook his head.

Tears welled instantly. George closed Hume’s eyes with shaking hands. “He’s gone...”

Silence fell like thunder.

All the agents nearby lowered their weapons. Shoulders sagged. Even Commander Rusk, hardened by years of loss, turned away and wept quietly into his palm.

Izabella collapsed beside Jett, who watched through blurred vision, gripping her back protectively. She buried her face into his shoulder, sobs muffled by his torn armor.

This wasn’t just another mission.

This was a family losing one of its own.

Jett, battered and bloodied, leaned slowly toward Hume's unmoving form. His hand trembled as he reached into a compartment tucked deep inside his armor—a photo. A slightly wrinkled group shot taken just before the mission began. Smiling faces. Hume at the center with his toddler on his shoulders, agents crowding around him like brothers.

He stared at it for a beat too long... then gently folded it, pressing it into Hume's chest pocket with reverence.

"Rest well, my friend." Jett whispered.

Izabella watched from beside Luke and Rose, eyes swollen, jaw tight.

George wiped his face, rose to his feet and scanned the smoky skyline. Rusk turned away, barking commands at a comms unit. The sting of grief hardened into purpose.

Jett exhaled, stood slowly, pain pulsing through every bone—but this time, he refused to fall.

"We need to move." His voice wasn't just heavy—it was sharpened.

"If we want to kill this monster... we need to find him."

And somewhere out there, in the debris and fire, Kaiser was running—but not for long.

The agents tore across the ruined streets in their remaining vehicles—armored SUVs scraped and dented, engines growling with vengeance. Jett led the charge, legs braced in the backseat, pain rippling through reopened

wounds. George rode up front, scanning the skies with a heavy tactical launcher cradled in his arms.

Then—

Over the city skyline, Kaiser's helicopter emerged. Sleek. Silent. A silhouette of defiance against the orange dusk.

George didn't hesitate.

FWOOSH!

The missile screamed from its launcher, trailing fire across the sky. It struck the chopper's hull with pinpoint precision.

The explosion lit up the horizon. The helicopter spiraled, smoke trailing like a comet, before crashing down into an open field on the edge of the city.

The convoy swerved and skidded to a halt. Jett jumped out, limping through the smoke, weapon low but ready.

And then—through the smoke—

Kaiser emerged.

Untouched. Unscathed. His face—repaired. Clean, flawless skin stretched over synth plating, eyes brighter, colder than before. Like the explosion had gifted him rebirth.

Jett stepped forward, fury barely restrained. “You monster...”

Kaiser smiled, voice echoing with artificial resonance. “I am unstoppable. You and your Kameraden can sit there and do nothing about it!”

His arms spread wide—welcoming the war to come.

Kaiser laughed, low and menacing, arms spread wide like he owned the air. His repaired face gleamed under the sun, synthetic skin stretched across machine tendons, arrogance oozing from every word.

Then Jett reached behind his armor plate and pulled out a pistol unlike any other.

Gold handle. Red tip. Sleek. Silent.

It wasn't Jetty—it was familiar. A gift from Hume years ago. Modified for a single purpose.

Kaiser scoffed. "What is that? A child's toy?"

He kept laughing right up to the moment Jett pulled the trigger.

CRACK!

The shot rang out with a hiss of plasma and a burst of crimson light. The bullet wasn't metal—it was pulse-infused. An ion-coated round designed to slice through artificial nerves and destabilize synthetic cells.

It hit Kaiser dead-center.

His body jerked. Sparks flared along his ribcage. A crack spread across his armor plating. His face twisted in shock and pain.

**"Unmöglich!" Kaiser snarled, stumbling back.
(Impossible!)**

Jett stepped forward, eyes burning with fury and defiance.
“That was for Hume. And for every agent you thought you could turn into ash.”

Kaiser staggered, hand clutching the fractured plating. His aura of invincibility—shattered.

Izabella stared wide-eyed from the sidelines. George grinned in disbelief. Rusk stepped up, weapon raised.

This fight had just found its equalizer

Kaiser didn’t wait for another shot.

With a terrifying burst of speed, he lunged forward, leaping through the scorched field like a predator unleashed. Jett barely had time to raise his pistol before Kaiser crashed into him, slamming him hard to the ground.

George spun, raising his weapon—too late.

Kaiser snatched him mid-motion, lifted him off the ground like he weighed nothing, and hurled him into the side of a tactical SUV with a sickening crunch. The vehicle’s door caved inward, glass shattering as George groaned and dropped, motionless.

Jett tried to roll away, but Kaiser pinned him down with unrelenting force. The cyborg’s hand snaked under Jett’s armor and twisted violently—

CRACK!

Jett screamed as his arm dislocated, pain shooting down his side like fire and electricity tangled together. He writhed, breath ragged, muscles failing him.

Kaiser leaned down, face inches from Jett's contorted expression, voice ice-cold and metallic.

"Your pain? I forged it."

Jett bit back another scream, vision swimming. But even through agony... his grip on resolve never slipped.

Izabella shouted from behind, crawling toward them. "Jett!"

Pinned beneath Kaiser's crushing weight, pain lancing through his body, Jett mustered every ounce of fury left in him. His dislocated arm trembled, but his resolve burned brighter than the field fire around them.

Kaiser leaned in, head tilting ever so slightly.

Jett coughed blood, then smirked through bruised lips.

"Now who has the last laugh?" he rasped.

Kaiser raised an eyebrow, amused. "You barely breathe, and still you speak?"

That's when Jett's hand twitched.

The gold-handled pistol with the red tip—still clutched in his fist—rose slowly. Not pointed outward... but upward.

Jett pressed the barrel against the side of Kaiser's head, just beneath the synthetic cheekbone.

“I have more than one.”

BANG.

The round wasn’t ordinary.

It erupted with a Jett of red light and a magnetic pulse so intense that Kaiser’s mechanical head shattered, spiraling apart mid-air in a bloom of sparks and shattered plating. Wires flew loose. The blue eye dimmed instantly.

His body collapsed sideways onto the dirt with a lifeless thud, arms twitching once, then still.

Jett rolled onto his back, exhausted, staring at the sky.

Izabella ran to him, kneeling beside his battered body, cradling his face with tear-streaked hands.

“You did it,” she whispered.

Jett looked at Kaiser’s broken shell, eyes flickering with fading adrenaline.

“Not yet,” he replied. “There’s still cleanup... but the monster’s down.”

Around them, agents rose slowly, bloodied but alive. And for the first time in days—the field fell silent.

Jett groaned as he leaned against the smoldering SUV, sweat pouring down his face, dirt streaked across his armor. With a loud grunt and a grimace that could crack steel, he grabbed his dislocated arm—

POP.

A sickening snap echoed through the field.

He screamed beneath his breath, but the pain was already dulling. Bone realigned. Nerves still blazed.

George was sprawled beside the wrecked car, chest barely rising. Jett limped over, extended his good arm, and gently pulled him up.

“You’ve taken worse,” Jett murmured with a half-smile.

George chuckled weakly, then winced. “Yeah... but ribs don’t bounce back like pride.”

Clean lights replaced firelight.

Machines hummed quietly. Cool air swept through sterile halls.

George lay on a padded bed, ribs wrapped tight, a dull bruise painted across his side like abstract war art. A nurse scanned him and muttered about two cracked ribs and a puncture scar, but he waved her off with the charm of a man stitched together by caffeine and adrenaline.

Across from him, Jett sat shirtless, bandaged, a series of shallow cuts stitched with precision. But beneath those patches, the real concern was brewing—venom residue from the Viper Key’s blast. His veins pulsed faintly with a greenish hue, symptoms whispering just below the skin.

A medic approached with a slim vial—the cure.

“Last dose,” she said. “Works fast. Stings first.”

Jett nodded, grabbed the vial, and took the injection straight into his neck. He winced... then exhaled. The green faded.

Izabella stood at the doorway, watching them both.

**“I’d say you need rest,” she whispered, voice soft as silk.
“But monsters don’t take sick days.”**

Jett turned to her, eyes tired yet burning. “Then neither do heroes.”

Outside HQ, the night sparkled with golden spotlights and camera Jettes as fancy cars and limousines rolled through the gates. Engines purred softly while agents stepped out in tailored suits, elegant dresses, and radiant smiles. Their mission was over—but tonight wasn’t about war.

It was about life.

Inside, the atrium had transformed into a stunning venue—streamers curled around steel beams, soft jazz melted into dance rhythms, and long banquet tables overflowed with gourmet dishes. Glasses clinked with laughter. Children darted through the crowd, some swinging toy rifles like their agent parents. A few loyal pets padded between legs, tails wagging proudly.

For the first time in forever, agents showed who they really were—husbands, wives, girlfriends, boyfriends, mothers, fathers, friends. Survivors.

As the energy built, the singer on the stage raised a hand. The crowd quieted.

“Tonight,” she said, voice echoing across the hall, “we raise our voices for two legends who gave Los Angeles its chance to breathe again. An honorable mention—Jett Sentry and George Lockridge, heroes of Los Angeles!”

The room erupted in cheers.

Jett entered—bandaged arm in a sling, eyes tired but shimmering. He scanned the crowd and spotted her.

Izabella. In a midnight blue dress. Hair curled. Smile radiant.

He leaned to George, muttering under his breath, “She is super cute in that dress...”

Then he turned—and blinked.

George, cleaned up and somehow charming despite the bruises, stood beside a woman in a crimson cocktail dress, her arm looped through his.

“YOU’RE DATING?!” Jett shouted, half laughing.

George grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, we met three nights ago at my friend’s party. Her name’s Marissa. Turns out surviving near-death missions makes you pretty dateable.”

Jett shook his head, chuckling. “Unreal.”

George smirked. “Told you the swing set could wait.”

As the party swirled with music, laughter, and the glow of healing hearts, Jett stood near the edge of the ballroom, sipping gingerly from a glass and watching agents reunite with family. Then—a quiet tap on his arm.

He turned to see her.

A young woman, eyes filled with strength and pain, approached with a small boy clutching her dress. She gave a soft smile.

“Are you... Jett Sentry?”

He nodded, setting down his drink. “You must be Hume’s wife, Maria. I’m terribly sorry.”

She swallowed, voice trembling just enough to break him. “Me too. But I wanted to thank you... for delivering that message. Little Izac here says he wants to be just like you.”

Jett knelt down to Izac’s level, managing a grin through the bandages. “Hey, Izac—there’s some fruit punch over there with your name on it. You’ve earned it.”

Izac bolted toward the buffet, giggling as he nearly collided with a stack of cupcakes.

Jett stood again, eyes gently meeting Maria’s. “When are we doing that swing set?”

Maria wiped the corner of her eye, smiling. “Any time tonight... so he wakes up with it built.”

Jett nodded firmly. “Will do.”

Maria walked away, her silhouette blending into the warmth of the celebration.

And then—

“Jetty!”

Jett turned, cheeks tinting red as he saw Izabella, radiant in that midnight-blue dress, arms crossed with a teasing smirk.

“You still owe me that dance,” she said.

Jett bowed his head, extended his hand.

“I sure do.”

The music softened as a slow, sultry rhythm rolled through the room. Warm lights cast golden halos around dancing couples—agents turned romantics for just one night.

Izabella stepped into the glow like a dream, her midnight-blue dress catching the light with every move.

Jett extended his hand with a smile still stitched with war and wonder. She took it without hesitation.

He led her to the center of the floor. Eyes met. Bodies aligned. And with a graceful pull, Jett spun Izabella in toward him, her laughter catching like a spark in the air.

They twirled gently as the crowd faded away. Rhythm in their feet. Spark in their hearts.

Then—

With perfect timing and quiet drama, Jett placed his hand just above her waist, his other supporting her back, and tilted her downward.

Izabella leaned back, hair cascading like ink in slow motion. Jett held her firmly, steady as ever.

Their eyes locked, hearts beating to the same rhythm.

He bent forward. Their lips met in a kiss that stopped time.

Under the soft lighting of the grand hall, with elegant arches above and twinkling fairy lights along the walls, everyone gathered stepped back in unison, creating a wide open space like the calm before a storm. As the first chords of their favorite song began to echo through the air, Izabella instinctively turned, sensing something electric in the atmosphere. Eyes met hers—friends, family, all beaming and expectant. Confused, she murmured, “Jett wha...” and spun around—there he was, down on one knee, ring in hand, cheeks flushed crimson though he tried to play it cool. “Izabella, will you marry me?” he asked, voice trembling with emotion. Time froze. Then suddenly, joy surged through her as she gasped, “YES!” and leapt forward, wrapping him in a tearful embrace that drew cheers and laughter from every corner of the room.

The crowd around them cheered and whooped, lifting glasses and clapping as the music swelled.

*And just before lifting her back up, Jett whispered:
“You still think I owed you that dance?”*

She smiled as he pulled her close, their faces inches apart.

“Every second of it.”

The night buzzed with laughter and the gentle hum of celebration—but the agents were still agents.

Just as the final song faded and the last toast was raised, Commander Rusk stepped onto a chair and shouted over the crowd, his voice full of adrenaline and nostalgia:

“Before anyone goes home—one last stop! You know where!”

The room erupted into cheers.

Jett raised a brow. “What’s he cooking now?”

George grinned, slipping on his jacket. “Old tradition. You’ll see.”

Agents began hustling toward the exit, swapping suits for gear bags. Armored vehicles rolled out once more, this time not for battle—but for memory. Limos gave way to tactical trucks filled with snacks, laughter, and families joining in the strange finale.

Children tugged on their parents’ sleeves. Wives and husbands, clutching hands, blinked at the transformation happening before their eyes.

One mom leaned close to her husband, an agent still tying his boots. “Is... this what you do?” she asked softly.

He chuckled, buckling his vest. “Tonight? You’re about to see.”

Izabella climbed into the backseat with Jett, resting her head against his shoulder. “So where is this final stop?”

Jett smirked, tapping the window as engines roared.

“The place we turn battle scars into swing sets.”

Under a soft moonlit sky, the agents—once warriors in armor—became architects of joy. Jett, George, Rusk, and a dozen others stood around the half-assembled swing set in Maria’s backyard, covered in sawdust and instructions they all ignored. Izac had been tucked in hours earlier, dreaming unknowingly of the surprise waiting for him.

Screwdrivers passed like torches. Beams were lifted, bolts tightened, paint brushed with precision that only years of tactical focus could produce. One agent used his scope to make sure everything was level. Another rigged safety brackets like it was mission-critical.

George wiped sweat from his brow. “Never thought I’d get emotional over a monkey bar.”

Jett chuckled. “Kid’s gonna fly higher than all of us combined.”

Just before sunrise, they stepped back. Finished. Swing set gleaming in early gold light. A piece of peace built by those who knew war best.

Jett and Izabella arrived back home with her parents, Luke and Rose. The atmosphere quiet, hearts lighter, the warmth of victory settling in their bones. Izabella collapsed on the couch in her pajamas; Luke poured cocoa for the group, humming an old jazz tune.

Jett flopped onto a beanbag and exhaled.

DING

His phone lit up—a message from the agency group chat.

A picture.

Izac, wide-eyed and grinning, legs swinging high in the air on the brand-new set. Maria stood beside him, hand shielding her smile from the morning sun.

Maria: “Thank you guys for all the help.”

A flood of replies followed from the agents.

Rusk: “You’re welcome.”

George: “Any time, ma’am.”

Skyler: “Let us know when he wants monkey bars upgraded to obstacle course 😎”

Dixon: “Can’t wait to see him out-rank all of us someday.”

Izabella leaned over, smiling as Jett stared at the screen.

“Looks like Izac’s already got a fan club.”

Jett nodded, phone resting on his chest. “He’s got a village behind him now.”

Jett stepped into his room, the door clicking softly behind him. The walls were quiet now—no sirens, no commands, no battles waiting in the next breath. Just stillness. Just safety.

He walked over to his desk, fingers brushing the grip of his sidearm. Took out the same magazine he used to kill Kaiser and put it in the drawer. Carefully, he set it down, the

weapon that had saved lives and taken them, resting now like a silent badge.

Before he could even exhale—

The door creaked open behind him.

Izabella entered without a word, her eyes soft but fierce, dress flowing like shadow and moonlight. She stood there for a beat, just watching him, breathing in the weight they'd both carried.

Then she stepped forward—close. Real.

And with one quiet move, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and leaned in.

Jett didn't flinch. He didn't hesitate.

Their lips met in a long, deep kiss—one that melted armor and burned away grief. The kind of kiss that carried everything: victory, loss, love, and promise. Her fingers curled into his jacket, his hand sliding up to her back, pulling her closer.

It wasn't reckless. It wasn't rushed.

It was earned.

Their war was over... and this?

This was the beginning of something else.

