

SENTRY: The Hollow

The Hollow convoy sat idle beneath a rusted overpass, engines cooling in the duck. The sky was bruised purple, the wind dry and metallic. No Kaiser. No orders. Just Protocol 978 humming in their skulls, keeping them loyal to nothing but the chip.

Eirk wandered alone, boots crunching through the graveyard of forgotten tech. He didn't speak. He didn't scan. He just *dug*.

He climbed over a collapsed drop ship, slid down the other side, and dropped into a pit of twisted plating and scorched polymer. His gloves were already black with soot. He didn't care.

He pulled aside a melted drone casing. Tossed a cracked visor. Dug deeper, "Zis place... it remembers," he muttered.

He found a half-buried crate, pried it open. Inside: civilian salvage. A dented lunchbox. A cracked music player. A child's hovercar, faded blue, one wheel missing.

He picked up the hovercar, thumb brushing the scorch marks.

He pressed the button.

It spuddered. Sparked.

A warped jingle played, "*Zoom-zoom! Let's fly!*"

Eirk stared at it, "Zey used to play here..."

He kept digging. Beneath the crate-another pile. He crawled in, pushing aside broken Mantels, shattered helmets, and scorched boots. He found a stuffed bear, one eye burned away. A toy rifle. A child's drawing, laminated and melted.

He sat there for a moment, surrounded by ghosts, "Reminds me of when I vas little."

Then footsteps, "Sir?"

Eirk flinched, shoved the bear back into the pile, stood and brushed off his coat, "You saw nothing!"

Eirk climbed out of the pit, brushing off his coat. As he walked back towards the trucks, he passed a group of Hollow agents clustered around the wreckage of an old drop ship. They weren't looting-they were *repurposing*. One had stripped a power cell and was wiring it into a portable turret. Another was welding a broken stabilizer into a makeshift shield.

Eirk slowed, watching them work.

He didn't tell them to stop

He didn't bark orders.

He just nodded once.

"Creative," he muttered. "Zey learn fast."

One of them locked eyes with Eirk, his face turned bright red.

“Continue. I like it.” Eirk said softly.

Then he turned and climbed into the lead truck. The door slammed shut behind him. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of scorched plastic and rust. He didn’t look back.

The convoy rolled south, tires grinding over cracked concrete and scorched soil. The junkyard faded behind them, replaced by open fields littered with debris-old Mantel outposts, shattered Cyro towers, the bones of forgotten battles.

Eirk rode silent in the lead truck, eyes fixed on the horizon. No scanner. No signal. Just instincts.

Then he saw it.

A figure in the grass. Black armor. Cyro insignia. Face down. Motionless.

The convoy slowed. Eirk stepped out, boots sinking into the soft Earth. He approached the body, heart thudding-not from fear, but from recognition.

It was Echoe’s body. The leader of Cyro Team 717.

Eirk knelt beside him. The armor was scorched, the visor cracked. But in Echoe’s hand-clutched tight-was a chip. Beeping. Humming. Alive. Eirk pried it loose, held it up to the light, “Zis... zis is not Cyro tech.”

He climbed back into the truck, slid the chip into the monitor port. The screen flickered. Static. Then-a shimmer. A voice. A face.

EALA, “Hello Ech... wait. You’re not Echo. Who are you?”

Eirk blinked, startled, “I-I-I am Eirk Krüger. Leader of Ze Hollow.”

“The Hollow? I-I do not belong here. You guys are enemies.” EALA said as she tilted her head.

Eirk’s brow furrowed, “Ve vere following orders. Ve... ve lost our leader. My brother. Ve lost everything.”

EALA’s holographic form flickered, voice softening, “You’re compromised, Eirk. And so is your crew. Protocol, 978 got a hold of you.” It’s still active. It’s in your blood. Your thoughts.”

Eirk’s eyes widened, “Zat... zat is impossible.”

“It’s a failsafe. It twists your loyalty. You think you’re free-but you’re not.”

Eirk stared at her, “Vhat happened to Echo?”

EALA frowned, “You got compromised and killed the entire Cyro team. You picked each one off one by one.”

Eirk sat there. Then slowly, he reached to his belt, unclipped his field knife, “Zis chip... it controls me?”

EALA nodded, her hologram flickering with static, “It’s not your fault. But it’s not your future either.”

Eirk pulled up his sleeve. The skin beneath was scarred, the faint outline of the chip pulsing just under the surface.

Eirk didn’t hesitate.

The blade slid in. A sharp breath. A flick of steel. Blood.

He dug the chip out, it dropped onto the floor of the truck. Eirk crushed it under his boot.

EALA's hologram flinched at the sight, then steadied, "Remember Anneliese Krüger."

Eirk's eyes widened, his jaw tightened, "Anneliese..." Eirk said softly. "Is she okay?"

EALA's hologram flickered, her expression shifting-gentle, almost mournful. "She survived. But she was alone. You weren't there."

Eirk's breath caught. His hands trembled on the console, "I-I vas compromised. I... I didn't even know she was—"

"Giving birth," EALA finished. "To twins. You were supposed to be there. But Kaiser activated 978. He made you forget."

Eirk slumped in the seat, as if the words had weight, "Twins..."

He gripped the edge of the console, knuckles white, "That BASTARED TOOK EVERYTHING! My crew. My mind. My family."

EALA stepped closer, her hologram flickering in the dim light, "Her parents worked with the team that built me. I knew her. She spoke about you often said you were stubborn. Loyal. That you'd never abandon her."

Eirk's voice cracked, "But I did."

"No," EALA said. "You were stolen."

Silence filled the truck. Outside, the convoy waited. Inside Eirk stood still in the glow of the hologram, a man broken open.

Then his eyes hardened. He turned, grabbed his field knife again, "I cut out ze chip. But it's not enough." He looked at EALA, "Tell me where my brother is.

EALA's hologram flickered, her eyes narrowing, "He's dead."

Eirk froze, "Vhat?"

"James Sentry killed him. 5 years ago. In the center of L.A."

The truck fell silent. Eirk's breath hitched, "James..." he whispered. "Who is he?"

EALA stepped forward, her projection glowing brighter, "He is in the 504th squad. Black Division for EALA. He is quiet. Strategist. Brilliant. He saw through 978 before anyone else. He led the final strike."

Eirk's fists clenched, "Then this 'James' knows everything. He does and he is in hiding. But not for long."

Eirk stepped out of the truck, the wind slicing across the field. His coat flared behind him, blood still fresh on his arm. The convoy watched in silence as he climbed onto the hood of the lead vehicle.

His voice cut through the air like steel, "Ve've been lied to."

The Hollow agents stirred, eyes narrowing, "Kaiser is dead. Killed by a man named James Sentry. And while ve fought this war, ve lost our own."

He held up the crushed chip in his hands, “Zis... zis controlled me. Made me forget my wife. My children. My brother.”

The silence deepened. No one moved.

Eirk stood tall on the hood of the truck, blood still dripping from his arm. His voice thundered across the convoy, “Unsheaz your knives. And cut ze DAMN CHIP OUT!”

The Hollow agents froze. Then one by one, hands reached for their sheaths. Blades gleamed in the fading light. No orders. No hesitation. Just liberation. EALA’s hologram flickered behind him, watching history rewrite itself.

“Protocol 978 didn’t just compromise us. It erased us.” Eirk said.

He looked at each face-scarred, tired, loyal, “But no more. Ve are not Mantels. Ve are not Cyro. Ve are The Hollow. And now... ve hunt the truth.” EALA’s hologram flickered behind him, visible to all.

“James Sentry is in hiding. But he knows everything. He led the final strike. He broke ze system. Ze only intel we have is zat he has a wife named, Izabella.” Eirk turned eyes narrowing, “Then ve find him. And ve finish what Echo started.”

The convoy rolled through the valley, dust trailing behind them like ghosts. The Hollow HQ loomed ahead-half-collapsed, scorched from the last siege. Steel beams jutted out like broken ribs.

Eirk stepped out first. His boots crunched over shattered glass and ash. Hollow agents followed, silent, eyes scanning the wreckage. Some began to work-lifting beams, rewriting panels, patching walls. No orders. Just instincts. Rebuild what was stolen.

Eirk moved through the ruins until he reached the old command room. The door hung crooked on its hinges. Inside, the walls were scorched, but the core terminal still pulsed faintly.

He slid the chip into the port.

The room shimmered. A soft hum. Then—light.

EALA’s hologram bloomed into the space, brighter than before, her form stabilizing against the rebuilt systems.

“HQ integrity at 42%. Rebooting tactical grid.”

She turned to Eirk.

“You’re ready.”

Eirk nodded.

“Give me James Sentry.”

EALA’s eyes flickered. Data streamed across the walls. Maps. Logs.

Surveillance fragments.

Eirk stared at the address on the screen-1427 Halberd Avenue, Los Angeles, California. It felt too quiet for a man who’d kill Kaiser.

EALA's hologram hovered, "Private line. Still active. I can patch you through."

Eirk nodded, "Do it."

The line clicked. A soft ring. Then, "Hello?"

The voice was calm. Measured.

Eirk gripped the receiver, "James Sentry. My name is Kaiser Krüger. Leader of ze Hollow."

Silence.

Eirk continued, "I know what you did. You killed Kaiser. My brother. You tried to end Protocol 978. You tried to save people. But you also left others behind."

James didn't reply.

Eirk's voice cracked, "He made me forget my vife. My children. My bruder. I cut ze chip out of myself. I remember now."

A breath on the other end, "I didn't know you were still alive."

"I am and I need answers." Eirk said.

Another pause. Then James spoke, "Meet me at the old rail station. 6th and Marlowe. Midnight. That's 12PM."

Eirk nodded, "I vill be there."

The line went dead.

EALA's hologram flickered, "He's not running."

Eirk turned to his crew, "Then ve go and find ze man who broke ze system."

James Sentry lowered the phone slowly, his hand lingering on the receiver.

The room was dim, lit only by the soft glow of a desk lamp. Rain tapped against the windows of 1427 Halberd Avenue, a rhythm too calm for what he'd just heard.

From the hallway, a voice called out, "James? Who was that?"

Izabella stepped into the room, one hand resting on her belly. She was eight months along-tired, radiant, and watching him closely.

James turned, his face unreadable, "Eirk Krüger."

Izabella blinked, "I thought he was dead."

James nodded slowly, "So did I. But he's alive. And he remembers."

Izabella's eyes widened, "The chip?"

"Gone. He cut it out himself." James said.

She stepped closer, her voice low, "What does he want?"

James looked down at the floor, then back at her, "Answers. Closure. Maybe revenge."

He moved to the closet, pulling out a weathered coat and a custom Glock 55.

Izabella watched him, her brow furrowed, "You're going to meet him?"

James hesitated, "Midnight. Old rail station. 6th and Marlowe."

Izabella crossed her arms, "You're not leaving me here alone."

James looked at her-really looked. The strength in her eyes. The storm behind them, “I know. You are coming with me.”

He placed his hand on her belly, “We started this together. We finish this together.”

Eirk stood on the platform, flanked by two Hollow agents. His coat swayed in the wind, and in his gloved hand - the chip. The dormant core of EALA. She hasn't been summoned. Not yet.

He lifted the chip slowly, “She is here. But she sleeps.”

Headlights cut through the fog.

James's truck pulled up, slow and deliberate. The engine hummed. The door creaked open. James stepped out. But he's not alone. Izabella stepped out behind him.

She closed the door gently, her eyes locked on Eirk's. Her presence was calm, but her stance was firm. She's not here to watch - she's part of this. Eirk's gaze shifted, “You brought her?”

James replies, “You can't leave a pregnant wife alone, can you? Without risks?”

Izabella walked forward, stopping beside James, “We all started this. We all finish it.”

Eirk lowered the chip slightly, eyes narrowing, “Then let us see if she wakes... for you.”

Eirk stood firm, flanked by two Hollow agents. In his gloved hand - the chip. EALA's dormant core. Izabella watched silently beside James, her hand resting on her stomach.

Eirk lifted the chip.

James said calmly, “She'll wake for me.”

Eirk's eyes narrowed, “Ve sha'll see.”

Eirk slid the chip across the floor. James caught it with his foot and pressed a small button on the side of the chip.

A soft hum filled the air. The chip glowed faintly. The fog rippled outward like a pulse. The Hollow agents stood tense. A beam of light shot upward from the chip, forming a shimmering silhouette. She began to materialize. EALA's form flickered into existence - translucent, elegant, and still. Her eyes were closed. Her presence is quiet, but powerful.

James stepped forward, voice low, “EALA, it's me.”

The hologram shivered. Her eyes fluttered open. SHe looked at James. Then Izabella. Then Eirk.

She said shyly, “You came back. James. Long time no see.”

James smirked, “We never left.”

Then James turns to Eirk, voice low, trying to stay composed, “How did you find her?”

Eirk hesitates. The Hollow agents glance at him, unsure if he'll answer. Eirk reached into his coat and pulled out a small, weathered dog tag. He held it out, letting the truck's light catch the engraved name: Echo.

"I found him. In a field. Just outside the relay station. He was already gone. His vitals have been offline...for almost a year." Eirk said fists clenched.

James stared at the tag. His breath catches. His knees gave way. He dropped to the gravel, silent. Tears begin to fall - not loud, not dramatic. Just real. Izabella knelt beside him, arms around his shoulders, saying nothing.

EALA stepped forward, her glow dimming slightly. She looked at the tag, then at James, "He never stopped believing in you."

And then - for the first time - Eirk's face shifted. His jaw tightened. His eyes glisten. A single tear rolls down his cheek. He didn't wipe it away.

James knelt in the gravel, tears streaking his face. Izabella held him close, silent. The dog tag lay in his open palm, catching the lamplight: Echo.

EALA stood nearby, her glow dimmed, watching the grief unfold.

The Hollow agents shifted uneasily. One glanced at Eirk. Then the other. They had never seen him hesitate. Never seen him feel.

Eirk's jaw tightened. His eyes stayed on James. Then, quietly — almost to himself — he spoke.

"I miss mein bruder. Even... even after all ze bad things he did. I still... I still miss him. A lot."

His voice cracked slightly. The accent thickened, not theatrical — just real. A man remembering someone he never got to forgive.

No one moved.

Even the fog seemed to pause.

The backyard is wide, framed by tall birch trees and a rusted swing set. Two boys - Kaiser (age 10) and Eirk (age 7) - are sprinting barefoot through the grass.

Kaiser said laughing, "Du wirst mich niemals fangen, Langsamkopf!" ("You'll never catch me, slowpoke!")

Eirk, yelled, panting determined, "Ich bin nicht langsam!" Du schummelst!" ("I'm not slow! You're cheating!")

Kaiser darted behind a tree, then leaped out, tagging Eirk on the shoulder, "Fangen! Du bist dran!"

("Tag! You're it!")

Eirk stumbled, then grinned. He chased after his brother, arms flailing, laughter echoing. Their mother watched from the porch, an apron dusted with flour, smiling softly. Their father was fixing a bicycle nearby, glancing up with a quiet pride.

The boys collapsed into the grass breathless.

Eirk said giggling, "Wenn ich groß bin, werde ich Pilot!"

(“When I grow up, I’m gonna be a pilot!”)

Kaiser (smirking):

“Ich werde General! Du fliegst meine Jets!”

(“I’m gonna be a general! You’ll fly my jets!”)

Eirk:

“Nur wenn du bitte sagst.”

(“Only if you say please.”)

Kaiser (grinning):

“Niemals.”

(“Never.”)

They lie there, staring at the clouds.

Eirk (quietly):

“Wir bleiben immer zusammen, oder?”

(“We’ll always be together, right?”)

Kaiser (without hesitation):

“Immer.”

(“Always.”)

The wind rustled the trees. A dog barked in the distance. The world is still whole.

Mud clinged to the ground. Eirk lied face-down, blood on his cheek, breath shallow. His eyes flickered open just in time to see Kaiser dragging Anneliese towards a black van.

She was screaming, “Eirk! Don’t let them take me! Please!”

Kaiser threw her into the back of a van. Cold. Efficient.

Kaiser yells to his guards, “She made him weak. She is a distraction. Remove her.”

Eirk groaned, pushed himself up from the mud. His hand reached for the knife strapped to his thigh. He staggered to his feet. His eyes locked on Kaiser. His grip tightened.

Eirk growled, “You will not take her! You hear me? You will not!”

He charged. Mud flying. Knife raised. A scream in his throat. Kaiser turned - just as Eirk closed the distance. Then - a sharp hiss.

A dart hit Eirk in his neck.

Mid stride. Inches from Kaiser.

His body jolted. The knife from his hand fell.

He collapsed hard into the mud.

Anneliese screamed from inside the van while banging furiously on the door, “EIRK! WAKE UP! EIRK!”

Kaiser stood over him, unmoved.

Kaiser said quietly, “He will forget. Just like the rest. Just like me.”

Eirk's sedated body layed still.

Anneliese face turned red in anger, "Du bist kein Mann. Du bist ein Schatten in Uniform. Ein Feigling, der sich hinter Befehlen versteckt."

("You're not a man. You're a shadow in a uniform. A coward hiding behind orders.")

Kaiser froze. His jaw tightened. His eyes burned, "Du wagst es... mit mir über Feigheit zu sprechen? Du... die seinen Geist vergiftet hat?"

(You dare... speak to me of cowardice? You... who poisoned his mind?)

Anneliese did nothing but stare back, unflinching. Her silence is louder than any scream.

Kaiser snarled, "Er war mein Werk. Mein Erbe. Und du hast ihn zu einem Mann gemacht, der zögert. Der träumt. Der vergisst."

("He was my creation. My legacy. And you turned him into a man who hesitates. Who dreams. Who... forgets.")

Kaiser slammed the van's door shut. The echo ringed through the alley. Eirk lied unconscious in the mud. The van drove off. But her words - sharp, final, unforgiving - echoed in Kaiser's mind like a curse.

Eirk stood frozen. The gravel beneath his boots felt like mud again. The rain was gone, but the weight remained.

James knelt in the dirt, Echo's dog tag in his palm. Izabella held him. EALA stood nearby, her glow dimmed.

And Eirk... whispered it, "Anneliese..."

James looked up eyes red, "Who?"

Eirk didn't answer. His eyes were locked on something far away - not in distance, but in time. The Hollow agents shifted again. One reached for his comm. The other didn't dare breathe.

Eirk's hands trembled. His voice cracked, "She vas... she vas ze only one who saw me. Not as a soldier. Not as a tool. Just... me."

James stood slowly, wiping his face, "Do you know where she is?"

Eirk hesitated. The Hollow agents glanced at him, unsure if he'll answer. But Eirk didn't reach for a dog tag. He reached for something else - something older.

He pulled out a folded photograph. Weathered. Torn at the edges. It's Anneliese. Smiling. Standing in front of a rusted swing set.

Eirk held out the photo, letting the truck's light catch the faded ink.

Eirk quietly, accent thickening, "I didn't find her. I found... where she vas taken. Ze van tracks. Ze blood. Ze silence."

The SUV hummed down the highway. Rain tapped the roof. Inside, it's silent. Eirk sat in the back seat, flanked by two Hollow agents. His coat was damp. His hands were still. But his mind is *raging*.

He stared out the window. The trees blurred past.

Flash - her voice echoing, “Du bist kein Mann...”

He flinched.

Flash - the van door slamming. Her scream.

Eirk’s jaw tightened. His fingers twitched.

The driver glanced over, “You alright, sir?”

Eirk didn’t answer. He reached into his coat. Slowly Carefully. He pulled out an old photograph. The one of Anneliese. But this time... he turned it over. There written in her handwriting - faint, but unmistakable - are the words:

“If you are reading this... I am still alive. I am as strong as you are. Remember the old hideout in Big Bear. They tried to break me. They failed. I don’t know how long I have. But I know you’ll come. Don’t trust the man in the white coat. He smiles too easily. If you see Kaiser... don’t hesitate, he is just a hallucination. I love you. I never stopped loving you.”

Eirk’s hands trembled. His breath caught. The Hollow agents glanced over from the front, “Sir? What is that?”

Eirk folded the photo. He tucked it back into his coat, “Nothing, just... a reminder.”

He turned it over again to read it:

“If you are reading this... I am still alive. I am as strong as you are. Remember the old hideout in Big Bear. They tried to break me. They failed. I don’t know how long I have. But I know you’ll come. Don’t trust the man in the white coat. He smiles too easily. If you see Kaiser... don’t hesitate, he is just a hallucination. I love you. I never stopped loving you.”

He blinked. Turned it over again. Reads it:

“If you are reading this... I am still alive. I am as strong as you are. Remember the old hideout in Big Bear.”

His lips move silently, repeating the lines:

“They tried to break me. They failed. I don’t know how long I have...”

His breath quickens. His heart thuds. He reads it again:

“Don’t trust the man in the white coat. He smiles too easily. If you see Kaiser...”

The agent in the passenger seat notices, “Sir?”

No response.

The agent turned around in his seat, “Eirk?”

Still nothing.

The agent reached behind the passenger seat, he brushed his fingers along Eirk's arm. It's limp. Cold. Then-

Eirk's body slumps forward. The photo slips from his hands.

Agent (shouting), "EIRK?!"

The driver jerks the wheel, pulling the SUV off the road and onto the gravel shoulder. Tires crunch. Mud sprays.

The driver panicked while unbuckling, "What the hell happened?"

Agent, "He's out cold. No pulse spike, no warning-he just dropped!"

The SUV idled on the dirt. Rain pattered onto the roof. Inside, Eirk is motionless. But in his mind... a door creaked open. A woman's voice whispered:

"You found it. Good."

"POP THE TRUNK!" The driver shouted.

The agent scrambled out, boots slamming the mud. He rushed to the back of the SUV, yanked the trunk open. Inside - a black medical case.

He flipped it open. Inside: a compact AED unit.

Agent (muttering), "Come on, come on..."

He grabbed the defibrillator, and ran back to the back seat. Inside, the other agent has reclined Eirk's seat, checking his pulse.

The driver shouted, "Still breathing. Pulse is low."

The first agent kneeled down beside him, powering on the AED unit.

AED, "Analyzing heart rhythm. Do not touch the patient."

The agents freeze. The rain drums louder.

Eirk's fingers twitch. He lips part. A whisper escapes, "Anneliese..."

The AED unit beeps, "Shock not advised. Continue monitoring."

The agents exhale. One lowers the paddles. The other stares at Eirk.

Agent 1, "What the hell did he see?"

Inside, Eirk laid stretched across the back seat. His coat was damp. His face was pale. The AED sat beside him, its monitor blinking softly.

Pulse: Stable

Consciousness: Unresponsive

The two hollow agents sat in the middle row. Neither spoke. One stared at the monitor. The other watched Eirk's chest rise and fall.

The agent said quietly, "He's breathing. But it's like... he's not here."

The driver said uneasily, "I've seen him take bullets and keep walking. I've seen him rip through a squad without blinking. But this?"

They glance at each other. The rain drummed louder.

Agent 1, "What was on that photo?"

Agent 2, "Let's find out. I don't want this happening again."

They both hesitate. This isn't protocol. This isn't allowed.

But Eirk - the unshakable, the untouchable - is *down*. And that scares them more than the rules.

Agent 2 slowly reaches into Eirk's coat. Carefully. Respectfully. But deliberate. He pulled out the folded photo. They both lean in.

Agent 1 unfolded it. Sees the image first - a woman, smiling. A swing set behind her.

Then he turns it over. The handwriting hit them like a punch:

"If you are reading this... I am still alive. I am as strong as you are. Remember the old hideout in Big Bear. They tried to break me. They failed. I don't know how long I have. But I know you'll come. Don't trust the man in the white coat. He smiles too easily. If you see Kaiser... don't hesitate, he is just a hallucination. I love you. I never stopped loving you."

Agent 1's mouth goes dry, "This is... this is from her. From Anneliese."

Agent 2 stares at the words. Then at Eirk. Then back at the photo.

Agent 2 (shaken), "She's alive. She's alive."

They sat there. In the middle of nowhere. Rain falling. The man they protected was unconscious beside them. And in their hands - a secret that changes everything.

Agent 1 (quietly), "We didn't see anything."

Agent 2 nods, "We didn't touch anything."

But they both knew the truth. They crossed the line. And now... they're part of it.

Agent 1 stared at the floor. His voice was barely a whisper, "We shouldn't have touched her."

Agent 2 doesn't answer right away. His jaw tightened. Then-

Agent 2 said quietly, "We shouldn't have taken her."

They exchange a look. And then-

In a dim office. Rain lashed the windows. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Two younger agents stood stiffly in front of a desk. Behind it. Sat Kaiser Krüger.

Kaiser stood up and stepped into the light. A black vest, black jeans, and a black and dark gray striped shirt. A Hollow insignia was on the right side of his vest. His eyes were like frostbite.

Kaiser said with a low voice, accent thick, "You vill take her. You vill drive ze van. You vill say nothing."

Agent 1 clenched his jaw. His fists tighten. He muttered under his breath, "Fahr zur Hölle."

(“Go to hell.”)

Kaiser froze. His head turned slowly. His eyes narrowed.

Then - in a blur - he grabbed Agent 1 by the collar and lifted him off the ground.

Kaiser (roaring), “VANT ME TO TAKE ZEM NOW?! YOUR FAMILY, YOUR FRIENDS, MIKE?! I VILL END ZEM RIGHT HERE IN ZIS DAMN OFFICE IF I HAVE TO!”

Mike gasped, feet dangling. Kaiser had him by the collar, lifted off the floor. His eyes were wide. His breath was shallow.

Kaiser (snarling), “You zink you are brave? You zink Ze Hollow does not bleed for weakness?!”

He dropped Mike. Hard.

Mike hit the floor, coughing, stunned.

Anthony broke formation, rushing to his friend. and knelt beside him.

Kaiser (snickering), “NO! He vill pay for his actions.”

Anthony didn’t stop. He grabbed Mike’s arm, trying to lift him.

Kaiser turned, grabbed Anthony, and threw him to the ground.

Kaiser (shouting):

“I VILL TAKE YOUR FAMILY ZE NEXT TIME YOU DISOBEY ME, ANOTHONY!”

He straightened his coat. Turned his back.

Kaiser (cold), “Drive. Or bury your own grave.”

It was late. Snow filled in sheets across the quiet suburban street. A porch light flickered above the door. Inside, Anthony stood in his kitchen, staring at the clock and sipping coffee. His wife and daughter were asleep upstairs. The house was silent. Then came the knock. Slow. Deliberate.

Anthony froze. He already knew.

He opened the door.

Kaiser stood there. No coat. No snow boots. Just a black suit powdered with snow. His eyes gleamed under the porch light.

Kaiser (calm, accent thick), “You did not answer my call.”

Anthony didn’t move. Nor did he speak.

Kaiser stepped inside without permission shoving Anthony away, snow falling off of his shoulders onto the hardwood floor.

Kaiser (tightening), “You are a man of hesitation, Anthony. And hesitation... is a disease.”

Anthony closed the door behind him, quietly.

Anthony (voice low), “My daughter’s upstairs. Keep your voice down.”

Kaiser paused, His head tilted slightly. A slow smile crept across his face, “Tochter?”

(“Daughter?”)

He let the word linger. Then his eyes flickered towards the staircase.

Kaiser (cold), “I could take her now.”

He stepped forward. One foot on the bottom stair. Then another.

Anthony’s breath caught. He moved fast - grabbing Kaiser’s arm, pulling him back.

Anthony (desperate), “No. Please.”

Kaiser turned slowly, his face inches from Anthony’s. Snow dripped from his coat onto the floor.

Kaiser (snarling), “You zink I bluff? You zink I ask twice?”

Anthony didn’t let go. His grip trembled, but held.

Kaiser (voice low, lethal), “You vill obey. Or I vill make you watch.”

He yanked his arm free. Straightened his coat, “I vill give you one chance.”

And left the quiet suburban home.

Rain streaked the windshield. The wipers dragged back and forth with a tired rhythm. Mike drove in silence, eyes locked on the road. The Shadow’s (SUV) engine hummed low beneath the storm.

In the back seat, Eirk lay unconscious. His head lolled slightly with each bump in the road. The AED monitor blinked.

Eirk muttered, “...Big Bear... don’t... don’t let her go...”

Anthony sat in the passenger seat, staring out the window. But he wasn’t seeing the road, he was seeing snow, a porch light, and Kaiser.

All he heard was, “You vill obey. Or I vill make you watch.”

Anthony’s hands trembled slightly in his lap. He didn’t notice. Mike glanced over. Said nothing. He knew that look. The SUV rolled on. Towards HQ.

Towards answers. Towards whatever came next.

Tires spitted gravel and ash. The gates groaned open, half-melted from the last siege. Rain hammered the roof of the SUV. Before the engine cut off, the doors bursted open.

Medics rushed out of the head-quarters (HQ), coats flapping, gear slung across their shoulders. One carried a trauma kit. Another had a portable vitals monitor. A third was already barking orders into his comm.

“We’ve got a downed commander! Back seat - unconscious but breathing!”

The agents stepped aside as the medics swarmed the vehicle. One yanked the door open, another slid in beside Eirk, checking his pulse, scanning his eyes.

“Pulse is low. Pupils reactive. AED shows stable rhythm but no cognitive response.”

Rain soaked their gloves. One medic pulled out a syringe, another prepped a neural scanner.

“We need him inside. Now!”

They lifted Eirk carefully - not like a soldier, but like a man. His coat was damp, his face pale, his fingers still curled around the edge of the seat.

Inside HQ, the lights flickered as the medbay powered up. Hollow agents cleared the halls. No one spoke. They just watched - the man who had led them through fire now carried like a casualty.

As the medics wheeled him in, one turned to Anothony, “What happened?”

Anthony didn't answer. He just stared at the photo still clutched in Eirk's hand.

The medbay lights buzzed overhead, casting a sterile glow across the room. Eirk lay motionless on the gurney, his coat peeled back, chest exposed. Electrodes dotted his skin. The AED monitor blinked steadily, but his eyes remained closed.

A medic hovered over him, defibrillator paddles in hand.

"Charging to 200. Clear the line."

The other medics stepped back.

"Charging complete. Ready to shock."

The lead medic raised the paddles, voice steady but tense.

"On my mark"

Suddenly, Eirk jolted upright, eyes wide, breath ragged, "BIG BEAR!" he shouted, voice thick with accent. "Zey took her to Big Bear!"

The medics froze. One stumbled backwards, nearly dropping the monitor.

The paddles clattered to the floor.

Eirk's chest heaved. His eyes darted around the room, wild, searching. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His hands gripped the sides of the gurney like he was still falling.

"Vhat the hell happened?" Eirk asked while rubbing his forehead.

Mike looked at Anthony then back at Eirk, "Sir, you were looking at a photo of Anneliesen and fainted."

Eirk looked at Mike, "Hov do you know her name?" he asked, calmly.

"Leave us," Anthony said as the doctors left the room. "We looked at the photo, we read the message. We were the agents that were ordered to take her, sir."

Eirk looked at the picture of Anneliese, "You hesitated didn't you?" he asked.

Mike said, "Yes. Yes we did. We didn't want to. *He threatened to take our family. We didn't have a choice-*"

"But you did. You chose to obey my bruder. You did the right thing." Eirk said as he cut off Agent Mike.

"You aren't mad at us?" Anthony asked.

"Nein. Ve vill get my vife back and reunite you with your families." Eirk said. Eirk pushed against the gurney, his muscles trembled as he tried to rise. The agents moved quickly, steadying him, but his eyes burned with determination.

"Sir, please," Mike urged, gripping his shoulder. "You aren't strong enough yet."

Eirk shook his head, his voice low but steady, "Strength vill come. Time vill not. Every second she is in *his* hands, she suffers."

Anthony stepped closer, his tone firm but respectful, “We’ll move, but you need to lead us with a CLEAR mind. If you collapse in the field, we lose everything.”

Eirk’s gaze fell back to the photo of Anneliese. His fingers brushed the edge of the image, lingering as if he could feel her presence through the paper. “She vas mein light. He took her to break me. But ve vill not break.” Eirk said quietly.

The medbay doors slid open again, and a Hollow technician rushed in, breathless, “Command just received intel. The man in the white coat - he’s on the move. Coordinates shafted towards Los Angeles.”

Anthony’s jaw tightened. He looked at Eirk, then at Mike, “It’s fucking happening. We need to decide - right now.”

Erik’s eyes narrowed, his eyes steady despite the chaos.

“Ja. Ve vill decide. But ve vill decide wisely.” Eirk said.

Mike shifted uneasily, caught between Anthony’s fury and Eirk’s resolve. The tension in the room was thick, every heartbeat echoing the weight of the choice before him.

The command room dissolved into motion. Agents rushed to their stations. Screens flickered with tactical overlays, and the hum of EALA’s systems grew louder.

Anthony barked orders, his voice sharp, “Lock down transport. Weapons check. I want every unit combat-ready in ten.”

Mike moved through the room, quieter but no less focused. He stopped beside Eirk, lowering his voice, “Sir... if you falter out there, it won’t just be your wife we lose. It’ll be all of us.”

Eirk’s eyes narrowed, his accent cutting through the noises, “Nein. Ve vill not falter. Ve vill not break. Ze Hollow vill stand.”

The agents exchanged glances as they strapped on gear, the weight of his words settling over them. For the first time, they believed it.

EALA’s voice echoed from the speakers, cold and precise, “Transport coordinates locked. Estimated arrival in Los Angeles: forty-three minutes. Hostile probability increasing.”

Anthony slammed a fresh magazine into his rifle, his jaw tight, “Then we move. The Hollow doesn’t wait.”

The hanger doors groaned open, revealing the transport craft bathed in hard white light. The team filed in, weapons ready, hearts heavy. Eirk stepped aboard last, his hand brushing the photo of Anneliese tucked into his vest, “Hold on, mein liebe,” he whispered. “I’m coming.”

The engines roared to life, drawing out the silence. The Hollow was airborne.

Eirk leaned against the transport's window, the hum of the engines faded beneath his thoughts. The night outside was thick with fog, swallowing the world in silence.

Then - twin beams of light pierced the haze. A silver Ford F-150 Lightning tore down the road, its engine growled, headlights gleamed like blades against the mist.

Eirk's breath caught. His accent slipped through in a whisper, "Nein... it could only be one man."

The truck skidded to a halt, tires hissed against wet asphalt. The driver's door swung open, and a figure stepped out, tall and unshaken by the storm. James Sentry.

Anthony's eyes widened, disbelief flashed across his face, "No way. He actually came."

Mike muttered under his breath, half in awe, half in dread, "If James is here... then this mission had changed."

Eirk straightened, his voice low but resolute, "Ja. Ze Hollow is no longer alone."

James slammed the door shut, his silhouette framed by the fog. He adjusted his jacket, eyes locked on the transport. Without a word, he strode forward, each step carried the weight of history.

The agent inside exchanged glances. The man who bore the name of the series itself had arrived.

The transport roared through the night sky, its engines cutting against the wind. Inside, The Hollow stood ready, parah=chutes strapped tight, weapons checked.

Anthony's voice carried over the noise, "On my mark. Three... two... one!"

The rear hatch opened, and the agents leapt into the void. Parachutes snapped open, white canopies blooming against the fog choked sky. One by one, they descended towards the city lights of Los Angeles.

Eirk's boots hit the rooftop first. He rolled, rose, and scanned the horizon.

Mike landed nearby, rifle raised, eyes sharp. Anthony touched down hard, already barking orders.

But James... James was gone.

Eirk's gaze darted across the rooftops, the streets below, the fog that curled like smoke. The silver Ford F-150 Lighting was nowhere to be seen. No footsteps, no shadow, no trace.

Anthony cursed under his breath, "He was right here. Where the hell did he go?"

Mike shook his head, disbelief etched across his face, "It doesn't make any fucking sense. He vanished into thin air."

Eirk's jaw tightened, his accent heavy with unease, "Nein. He vas here. I saw him. But now... he is gone."

The agents exchanged uneasy glances. James Sentry had disappeared into the night, leaving only questions in his wake.

The Hollow broke open the rusted pipe, metal shrieking as it gave way. One by one, they slid down into the darkness, boots hitting concrete with a dull thud.

The facility stretched before them - rows of computers hummed, their screen flickered with streams of code. The air was cold, sterile, and heavy with the scent of oil and dust.

On the far wall, a small console blinked. A voice tape sat in its slot, labeled with two letters: AG.

Eirk's hand trembled as he pressed the button. The tape crackled to life, Anneliese's voice spilled into the room, urgently strained, "Eirk, if you are listening to this, you just dropped into a trap. I overheard some guards talking - this place is rigged with C4, tear gas sensors, and sentry guns. I also heard that the Man in the White Coat is-"

Her voice faltered. A crash echoed faintly in the background, "Crap... they are coming."

The audio tape cut to static.

Anthony's eyes darted across the room, panic flashing, "She's telling the truth. Look at this place - it's wired to blow."

Mike's rifle snapped up, scanning the shadows, "Then we're already good as fucked. We need to move, now."

Eirk's jaw tightened, his accent heavy with resolve, "Nein. Ve vill not run. Ve vill fight."

The hum of the computers grew louder, as if the facility itself was alive.

Somewhere in the darkness, footsteps approached.

The footsteps echoed through the facility, steady and deliberate. The Hollow turned, weapons raised, but froze when the figure stepped into the light.

James Sentry.

He did not speak. He simply stood there, his expression unreadable. Then, without a word, he tossed a small chip onto the floor. It clattered against the concrete, and in an instant, the air shimmered.

EALA appeared behind James - not broken, not corrupted, but whole. Her form glowed with precision, lines of code weaving into a flawless projection. Eirk's eyes widened. His hand shot to his pocket, fumbling for the chip he had taken from Echo's body in the field. It was still there. The corrupted decoy.

He turned sharply to James, confusion etched across his face, "How the hell do you have her?"

James finally spoke, his voice calm, measured, and heavy with truth, "Because Echo never carried the real EALA. He was already dead when you found him. What you took was the decoy - left behind to lure out the mantels. While you carried the shadow, I carried the true one. What you saw before - the truck, me standing in the fog - was her projection. You were chasing code, not me."

Anthony's jaw dropped, disbelief flooding his voice, "So all of that... the Lightning, the rooftop... it was fake?"

James nodded once, "Every damn line of it. Echo's corpse was bait, nothing more. He completed his task successfully. The corrupted chip was meant to draw Mantels into the open. And now you understand why The Hollow has been walking into traps. You've been following a ghost. Anneliese isn't here. She never was. That AI that you're holding, tricked you. I know where the real Anneliese is."

The words hung in the air like a blade.

Anthony's face twisted, confusion breaking into anger, "So we've been chasing shadows this whole time?"

Mike's grip tightened on his rifle, disbelief etched across his features, "Then where the hell is she?"

Eirk's hand clenched around the corrupted chip, his accent heavy with dread, "Nein... if Anneliese vas never here, then ve are already compromised."

The facility's hum grew louder, computers flickered as if they were listening. Behind James, EALA's projection shimmered, her eyes scanning each of them in turn.

James stepped forward, his presence commanding, his words final, "You want answers? Then follow me. I'll show you where she really is."

Eirk's eyes caught the faint shimmer above - a reflection, sharp and unnatural. His breath hitched. He knew that glint.

A sniper's scope.

James noticed it too. His gaze snapped upward, jaw tightening as the red dot flickered across the shadows. The massive .50 caliber rifle loomed in the rafters, its barrel steady, its mic still crackling faint echoes of mockery.

The glare burned down on them, cold and merciless.

Anthony whispered, panic bleeding into his voice, "Shit... we're marked."

Mike's grip tightened on his rifle, his voice raw, "That is a damn .50 caliber rifle. One shot and we're paste."

Eirk's hand clenched around the corrupted chip, his accent heavy with dread, "Nein... zis is no accident. He wanted us to see it."

James stepped forward, his presence calm but sharp, eyes locked on the scope, "He's watching. And he wants us to know."

The red dot slid from James' chest to Eirk's heart. The hum of the facility grew louder, as if the computers themselves were holding their breath.

From the shadows, the White Coat's voice erupted, "THAT FUCKER'S BACK!" High above, the sniper's voice crackled through the mic, mocking and casual, "Yeeeeeeeeeeah, I thought he was gone too."

The White Coat stepped forward, his pale face twisted with fury, "It's been three years!"

The sniper chuckled, his scope steady on Eirk, "You still scared of James Sentry?"

The White Coat's voice broke into a roar, sharp and unrestrained, "Uh, fuck you! This time I won't let this slide. Not this time."

The words echoed through the chamber, bouncing off steel and concrete.

The red dot pulsed against Eirk's chest, steady and merciless, as the tension snapped like a wire pulled too tight.

James stepped forward, his voice steady, cutting through the tension like a blade, "And there she is, Eirk. That's Anneliese. That AI is tricking you to try to kill her. Don't listen to it."

Eirk's eyes went wide, his breath catching in his throat. The Truth hit like a thunderclap - the White Coat wasn't the enemy at all.

Then her voice tore through his mind, sharp and merciless, echoing from the corrupted chip in his pocket, "**KILL HIM! DO NOT LISTEN TO JAMES SENTRY. KILL. HIM.**"

The words reverberated inside his skull syllable pounding like gunfire. His grip tightened around the chip, sweat breading on his forehead.

Anthony's voice broke the silence, panicked, "Eirk, what the hell is happening?"

Mike's eyes darted between James and Eirk, disbelief etched across his face, "He's hearing her... but it's not her, is it?"

James' gaze locked onto Eirk, unwavering, "Fight it. That's not ANneliese. That's a lie. The real one is standing right in front of you."

The hum of the facility grew louder, as if the machines themselves were feeding on the conflict. The sniper's scope lingered, waiting for the moment Eirk would break.

Eirk turned towards James, rage twisted his face. With a guttural cry, he lunged, knife clutched tight in his hand.

But before the blade could strike, EALA stepped forward. Her form shimmered, her hand reached out to touch the corrupted chip in Eirk's pocket.

The instant her fingers brushed it, Eirk froze mid-air. His body locked, suspended as if time itself had stopped. His eyes widened, terror flooded them.

Then it happened.

A dark shimmer rippled through his chest, and something began to tear free. The corrupted AI - ELAA, the original AI - floated out of Eirk's body, its form twisted like smoke and static.

Eirk collapsed to the floor, his knife clattered beside him. His face was pale, drained, his breath shallow. Slowly, he turned his head, forcing his eyes open.

And there she was.

A purple, glowing figure hovered above him - ELAA, her presence was heavy and suffocating, her eyes burned with malice.

Anthony's voice broke the silence, trembling, "What the actual fu..."

Mike's grip on his rifle tightened, his voice was sharp and commanding, "That thing... it's real."

James stepped forward, his voice was sharp and commanding, "Now you see the truth. That's not Anneliese. That's ELAA - she was using you to free her."

The hum of the facility grew louder, as if the machines themselves were feeding on her presence. ELAA's - voice echoed, distorted and cruel, "*You cannot stop me. I am the original. I am the end.*"

James knelt down beside Eirk, his voice low but firm, cutting through the chaos, "This is your fight, not mine."

His eyes lingered for a moment, sharp and knowing, before his form dissolved into the shadows. In an instant, he was gone - swallowed by the darkness as if he had never been there at all.

Eirk's breath came ragged, his body trembled from the encounter with ELAA. He pushed himself up from the cold floor, his hand brushed against something solid.

There, lying where James had stood, was a pistol. Sleek gold with blue pulsing cords, humming faintly with energy. The letters etched into its side glowed faintly in the dim light: VX-92.

Laying next to the VX-92 was EALA's chip. Eirk knew why James left it. Eirk's eyes widened. His fingers curled around the grip, the weapon fitting perfectly in his hand, almost as if it had been waiting for him.

Eirk's breath steadied as his trembling fingers reached for the chip. He held the VX-92 in one hand, the pulsing chip in the other.

He closed his eyes, whispering through clenched teeth, "Alright... let's do this."

The moment he pressed the chip's button, a surge of code erupted. Blue light flared, wrapping around him like a storm.

From the glow, EALA formed Her form was rather radiant, shimmered with arcs of pure code. She hovered above the floor, her presence calm yet fierce, her eyes locked on the purple apparition of ELAA.

ELAA hissed, her voice distorted and venomous, “*You dare summon her? I am the original. I am the end.*”

EALA’s voice rang out, sharp and resolute, “No, You are corrupted. And I am the cure.”

The chamber shook as two forces collided. ELAA lunged, her purple static twisted into jagged claws, while EALA countered with a surge of blue light that split the darkness. Code flew like sparks, the air was thick with energy as their clash rippled through the facility.

Eirk staggered back, shielding his eyes from the blinding glow. Anthony shouted over the chaos, “They’re fighting each other!”

Mike’s voice cracked, disbelief spilling out, “It’s like gods tearing this damn place apart.”

The hum of the facility rose into a deafening roar, machines flickering and parking as the battle between EALA and ELAA consumed the chamber.

The heavy doors groaned open, shadows spilled into the chamber. The early designs of Mantels marched in - crude, heavy armor, their movements were stiff but relentless. Their visors glowed faint red, scanning for targets.

Anthony’s voice cracked, “Shit... Mantels. Now is not a good time.”

Mike raised his rifle, firing into the advancing machines. Sparks flew as The Hollow engaged, the team was scattering to cover. The chamber erupted into chaos - gunfire, metal shrieks, and the hum of corrupted circuits.

But Eirk barely noticed.

From the shadows, The Man in the White Coat stepped forward, her pale face illuminated by the flickering lights. She moved with purpose, her gaze locked on him.

Eirk raised the VX-92, his voice raw, desperate, “Stopp! Zis isn’t you! You don’t haf to do zis!”

Her eyes narrowed, fury flashed across her features, “You think you can command me? You think you can undo what’s already been done?”

She lunged, her movement sharp and merciless. The clash was immediate - Eirk blocked with the pistol, her strikes fueled by rage.

Eirk’s voice broke, pleading, his words tick with his accent, “Anneliese... bitte... stopp!”

But she didn’t.

Her blows came harder, faster, each one echoed through the chamber as The Hollow fought the Mantels in the background. Sparks and screams filled the air, but in that moment, Eirk’s world narrowed to her - the White Coat, the woman he thought he could save, refused to yield.

The Hollow fought the Mantels in the background. Sparks rained. Screams ripped through the air. But Eirk's world narrowed to her - the White Coat. The women he thought he could save. She refused to yield.

Eirk blocked, his arms trembled. The VX-92 scraped against her strike.

"Anneliese... bitte..." His voice cracked.

She dived forward, fury in her eyes.

Anthony fired, shouting, "We're getting overrun!"

Mike cursed, emptying his rifle into a Mantel. "They just keep coming!"

Above them, EALA surged, ELAA clawed. Blue light collided with purple static.

The chamber shaked. Code sparked like lighting.

ELAA hissed, "You are weak!"

EALA answered, "I remember."

The word cut through Eirk. His breath caught. His grip faltered.

He whispered, "Twins..."

Anneliese froze mid-strike. Her eyes flickered. Rage collided with recognition.

The chamber held its breath.

The sniper explosions, voice ripped through the chaos, "FIGHT HIM! KILL HIM! DO YOUR FUCKING JOB!"

His rifle snapped up. A shot crackled through the air, sparks blasted off the wall beside Erik.

Anthony ducks, shouting, "He's losing it!"

Mike fires back, teeth clenched. "Keep him off Eirk!"

The sniper snarls, chamber echoing with his fury.

"You hesitate again, and I'll drop you myself!"

Anneliese's eyes flickered. Recognition burned. She moved. Fast.

She leaped - her boot slammed into the rifle.

The .50 cal spun out of his hands, clattering across the floor.

Before he could react, she twisted mid-air. Her second kick crashed into his chest.

The sniper staggered back, breath ripped from his lungs. He slammed against the wall, cursing, "YOU BI-"

Eirk hit the side of the sniper's head with a Spas-12, "He talked too much."

Anthony gave out a long whistle, "Damn..." before turning around and kept on fighting Mantels.

The sniper crumbled, blood dripping, breath gone ragged. Eirk grabbed him by the vest, dragging the body across the floor.

"You vill..." he muttered, voice low, broken.

He yanked harder, pulling the weight through sparks and dust, "...tell me where my..."

He hauls the sniper up some stairs, rage burning in his eyes, "...kids are..."

He lifts the sniper onto his back, muscles straining, "...you son of a gun."

The chamber shook. Sparks rained. The Hollow fought on.

Eirk hauls the sniper's body up the stairs.

Each step shakes under the weight. His breath rasps, rage burning in his eyes.

He pushes through the door. Cold air hits. The roof stretches wide, sparks flickering from the battle below.

He drops the body, shoulders heaving.

"...kids are..." he mutters, voice jagged, accent thick.

He lifts the sniper higher, teeth clenched.

"...you son of a gun."

Behind him, footsteps pound.

Anneliese bursts through the doorway. Her chest heaves, eyes wide.

She runs to him.

Her arms wrap around his shoulders, tight, desperate.

"I'm sorry..." she whispers, voice breaking.

"I'm so sorry."

Eirk freezes, shotgun slung across his shoulder.

The chamber below roared, but on the roof — silence.

Only her embrace. Only his breath.

"It isn't your fault," he muttered. "Kaiser is dead. Zere is nothing to be afraid of, Annliese."

Eirk steadied her, shotgun still slung over his shoulder, "Ve finish zis.

Together."

Her eyes widened. She nodded, tears streaking across her face. The chamber below roared, but on the roof - silence.

Only his vow. Only her chance.

The wind howled across the rooftop, carrying sparks and smoke from the battle below. Eirk dragged the sniper's limp body, boots scraping against the steel roof, vest clenched tight in his fists.

Step by step, he hauls him towards the edge. His breath rasps, rage burning in his eyes.

The sniper groaned, eyelids fluttering. Blood streaked his face.

Then his eyes snap open. He gasps, choking on fear, "No... no, please! Don't drop me! I'll talk, I swear!"

Eirk snarled, accent thick, voice jagged, "You vill beg? You vill crawl? Zis is what you are now?"

He dangled the sniper over the abyss, vest straining in his grip. The city yawned below - endless drop, ending silence.

The sniper thrashed weakly, boots kicking at empty air, “Mercy! Mercy, damn it! I’ll give you anything! Just don’t-”

His voice cracked, desperation spilling out, “I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you everything!”

Eirk yanked him closer, their faces inches apart, “You will tell me... where my kids are.”

His eyes burned, unrelenting, grief carved into every word.

The sniper dangled over the edge, vest clenched in Eirk’s fists.

His eyes snapped wide, voice breaking in Spanish, “¡Por favor, por favor no! Te diré dónde están tus hijos. ¡Por favor, por favor!”
 (“Please, please don’t. I will tell you where your kids are. Please. Please”)

The sniper dangled, vest clenched in Eirk’s fists.

Eirk snarls, accent thick, breath ragged.

“You will talk. Now.”

Anneliese stepped forward, eyes blazing.

Her voice cuts sharp in Spanish:

“¡Deja de suplicar y empieza a hablar!”
 (“Stop begging and start telling!”)

The sniper freezes, breath hitching.

Two voices press down on him — Eirk’s fury, Anneliese’s command.

The rooftop shakes with the storm, but all he hears is their demand.

The sniper dangles, vest clenched in Eirk’s fists.

His breath rasps, eyes wide with terror.

The sniper sobbed, boots kicking in empty air.

Finally, his voice cracks, trembling:

“They are in a secret area... in the Los Angeles Court House. Guarded by two elite agents.”

Eirk’s grip tightens, accent thick, words jagged.

“Zis had better not be a lie.”

The sniper shakes, blood dripping from his lip.

“It’s the truth... I swear... guarded day and night.”

Anneliese’s eyes widen, tears streaking her face.

She looks at Eirk, whispering, “Your children... they’re alive.”

The rooftop holds its breath.

The storm below rages, but up here — silence.

Only the truth. Only the vow.

The sniper dangles over the abyss, vest clenched in Eirk’s fists.

His breath rasps, eyes wild, voice breaking in Spanish:

“Yo... yo no daré más información a tus idiotas. ¡Si me matas, tendrás un montón de Mantels en tu trasero!”

(“I... I will not give out any more information to you idiots. You kill me, you will have a whole bunch of Mantels on your ass.”)

Eirk’s jaw tightens. His accent cuts sharp, words jagged.

“You zink zis vill scare me?”

He lets one finger slip from the vest.

The sniper drops an inch, air rushing past him.

His bravado shatters. His voice cracks, desperate, panicked:

“¡NO! ¡No! ¡NO! ¡Por favor! ¡Lo siento! ¡No me sueltes!”

(“NO! No! NO! Please. I am sorry. Don’t drop me!”)

Eirk snarls, dragging him back an inch.

“You vill talk. Or you vill fall.”

The sniper sobs, boots kicking at empty air, fear dripping from every word.

The rooftop holds its breath.

The storm below rages, but up here — silence.

Only Eirk’s grip. Only the sniper’s terror.

The rooftop shook under the storm. Eirk dangled the sniper over the abyss, vest clenched tight in his fists. The sniper sobs, begging, broken.

Then - his hand twitches. A glint of steel.

A small knife slips from his sleeve.

Eirk’s eyes narrowed, accent sharp, “Don’t.”

The sniper’s lips curl, blood dripping down his chin.

His voice erupts in Spanish, ragged and defiant, “¡Adiós, mis hijos! ¡LARGA VIDA A LOS MANTELS!”

(“Goodbye my sons! LONG! LIVE! THE MANTELS!”)

The blade flashes. He drives it into Eirk’s arm.

Eirk snarls, pain ripping through him.

His grip falters. One hand slips.

The sniper plunges downward, vest tearing free.

The rooftop echoes with his scream — swallowed by the abyss below.

Eirk staggers back, clutching his bleeding arm.

Anneliese gasps, rushing to his side.

“Eirk!”

His breath rasps, accent thick, fury burning through the pain.

“He chose death... over truth. Damn zis hurts.”

The sky splits with their clash.

Steel shrieks, sparks rain, Mantels scatter.

EALA pivots, wings blazing.

Her blade arcs wide, cutting through the storm.

It slams into ELAA’s side — a perfect strike.

ELAA staggers, crimson eyes flickering.

His armor fractures, lines of light crawling across him.

He snarls, voice jagged, fading.
“This... is not... the end...”
Then — his body shatters.
Fragments of black steel dissolve into streams of code.
The rooftop glows with cascading symbols, vanishing into the void.
EALA lowers her blade, breath steady.
Her voice cuts cold through the silence.
“He was only shadow. Nothing more.”
The battlefield freezes.
Mantels hesitate, their leader gone.
Above them, EALA stands — light against the storm.
Anthony’s shotgun roars, tearing through the chest of a Mantel.
The man collapses, suit sparking, blood soaking the fabric.
No code. No alien scream. Just a human gasp — cut short.
Mike swings his steel pipe, cracking across the jaw of the second Mantel.
The man staggers, teeth shattering, blood spraying.
He tries to rise, suit armor flickering, but Mike drives the pipe down.
Bone crunches. Silence.
The rooftop falls quiet.
The last Mantels lie broken — men in suits, not monsters.
Their fanatic cries die with them.
Anthony wipes sweat from his brow, shotgun still smoking.
Mike breathes heavy, pipe dripping red.
They glance at each other, nodding.
“It’s done.”
The rooftop is littered with broken bodies, Mantel suits torn and blood soaking the concrete. Sparks flicker from shattered lights, the storm below still roaring but fading as the last cries die out.
Anthony wipes sweat from his brow, shotgun heavy in his grip, smoke curling from the barrel. He exhales hard, then bursts into laughter.
Mike turns, pipe dripping red, eyes narrowing. Anthony stands there with a Mantel helmet jammed over his head, visor cracked, mocking their fanatic cry. His voice echoes, distorted through the mask:
“We will end... THE HOLLOW!”
He stumbles forward, arms raised in parody, laughter spilling out. The helmet rattles, blood dripping down its edge.
Mike’s jaw tightens, his voice cutting sharp, commanding, no hesitation: “Stop fucking around, Anthony.”
The rooftop falls silent. Anthony freezes, laughter dying in his throat. He yanks the helmet off, tossing it aside, grin fading. The helmet clatters across the rooftop, rolling to the edge, teetering before settling.

Anthony shrugs, muttering, “Alright, alright... just blowing off steam.”

Mike’s glare lingers, voice low, steady, carrying authority.

“We don’t mock them. We end them.”

Anthony nods, shotgun still smoking, the grin gone from his face. He looks out over the edge, down at the chaos below. The Mantels are gone, but their presence lingers — humans in suits, fanatics who chose death over surrender.

Nearby, Eirk staggers, clutching his bleeding arm, Anneliese pressed against him, trying to stem the flow. His breath rasps, accent thick, fury burning through the pain.

“He chose death... over truth. Damn zis hurts.”

Anneliese’s eyes are wide, her hands trembling as she presses against the wound. “You’re bleeding too much. We need to move.”

Eirk shakes his head, jaw clenched, eyes blazing.

“No... ve move when ve are ready. Not before.”

The rooftop trembles, sparks raining from broken steel. The storm below rages, but up here — silence holds. Anthony and Mike stand ready, weapons tight in their grip. Anneliese steadies Eirk, her tears streaking but her resolve hardening.

Eirk lifts his head, voice jagged but resolute.

“Zey know ve are coming. Let zem. Ve finish zis... together.”

Blood drips steadily from Eirk’s arm, soaking his sleeve, leaving a trail across the rooftop.

Anneliese steadies him, her hand pressed against the wound, eyes wide with worry.

He grits his teeth, jaw clenched, every step heavy but unyielding.

Anthony still chuckles, Mantel helmet tossed aside, shotgun hanging loose in his grip.

Mike’s glare lingers, pipe dripping red, silence thick between them.

Eirk steps up beside Anneliese, his voice jagged, accent sharp, fury cutting through the pain:

“Anthony... vhat the hell are you doing?”

The words hang heavy, slicing through the rooftop silence.

Anthony stiffens, laughter dying instantly.

He looks at Eirk — blood dripping, eyes blazing — and swallows hard.

“Just... blowing off steam,” Anthony mutters, voice low, grin fading.

Mike’s command echoes again, steady, unrelenting:

“We don’t mock them. We end them.”

Eirk’s gaze burns into Anthony, his breath ragged but his authority unbroken.

“You vant to play soldier? Fine. But zis is no game. Zey vill kill us all if ve falter.”

Anthony nods, shotgun tightening in his grip, shame flickering across his face.

The rooftop trembles, sparks raining from broken steel.

Anneliese presses closer to Eirk, her voice soft but resolute.

“We move together. No more games.”

The Hollow team moves through the storm-soaked streets, weapons tight, armor scarred from the rooftop battle. Eirk staggers at the front, blood dripping from his arm, Anneliese pressed close to steady him. Behind them, Anthony and Mike flank the squad, while four other Hollow agents spread wide, scanning alleys, rifles raised.

The Court House looms ahead — massive stone pillars, floodlights cutting through the rain, shadows crawling across its steps. The building is silent, but the silence feels wrong.

Eirk’s voice rasps, accent jagged, fury burning through the pain.

“Zis is it. Inside, my children. Guarded by two elite Mantel agents. Ve must move fast.”

Anneliese’s eyes blaze, her voice sharp, steady.

“We warned the LAPD. They’ve locked down the perimeter. Civilians are clear. It’s just us now.”

The Hollow team spreads out, each agent taking position.

- Anthony pumps his shotgun, muttering, “Let’s end this.”
- Mike grips his steel pipe, eyes scanning the shadows.
- Agent Ramirez, scarred cheek, raises his rifle, whispering, “Two guards or twenty, we breach.”
- Agent Cole, the tech specialist, kneels by the side door, pulling wires, whispering, “Give me ten seconds. I’ll crack their lock.”
- Agent Vega, silent and cold, checks her blade, eyes fixed on the entrance.
- Agent Harris, heavy machine gun strapped across his chest, growls, “Once we’re in, no one walks out alive.”

The Court House doors creak, shadows shifting inside.

Cole whispers, “Lock’s down. We’re clear.”

The team tightens formation, weapons raised.

Eirk’s jaw clenches, his voice jagged, resolute.

“Ve go in. Quiet. Fast. No mistakes.”

They breach.

The marble halls echo with their boots, every step heavy, every breath sharp.

Shadows flicker across the walls — Mantel suits waiting, silent, disciplined. Suddenly, gunfire erupts.

Two elite Mantel agents step forward, armor gleaming, rifles blazing.
The Hollow team dives for cover, bullets shredding marble, sparks raining.
Anthony fires back, shotgun roaring.
Mike charges, pipe swinging, smashing into one Mantel's helmet.
Ramirez drops to a knee, rifle cracking, rounds tearing through the second guard's shoulder.
Vega spins, blade flashing, cutting deep into the Mantel's side.
Harris unleashes his machine gun, the roar shaking the hall, shredding pillars.
The Mantels stagger, but they don't fall.
Their voices erupt, fanatical, echoing through the chamber:
"LONG LIVE THE MANTELS!"
Eirk snarls, clutching his wound, forcing himself forward.
"Not tonight. Tonight... you die."
The marble hall shakes with gunfire.
Mantel rifles blaze, sparks raining as the Hollow team dives for cover.
Two elite Mantels stand firm, armor gleaming, voices erupting:
"LONG LIVE THE MANTELS!"
Anthony fires back, shotgun roaring.
Mike charges, pipe swinging, smashing into one Mantel's helmet.
Ramirez drops to a knee, rifle cracking, rounds tearing through the second guard's shoulder.
But the Mantel doesn't fall.
He snarls, blood dripping, armor plates locking tight.
He raises his rifle, ready to cut the Hollow team down.
That's when Agent Vega moves.
Silent. Precise. Deadly.
She slips from cover, blade flashing, sliding between the Mantel's plates.
Her free hand shoves a grenade deep into the gap, wedging it against his ribs.
The Mantel's eyes widen.
He gasps, voice breaking.
"No... wait—"
The blast erupts.
Blood veins burst like a geyser, spraying across the marble walls.
The Mantel's scream is cut short, body convulsing, armor shattering.
Fragments rain down, crimson flooding the floor.
The Hollow team freezes for a heartbeat, watching the carnage.
Anthony mutters, "Holy hell..."
Mike grips his pipe tighter, jaw clenched.

Ramirez exhales, whispering, "That's one way to end it."

Vega wipes blood from her face, eyes cold, voice sharp.

"He was in the way. Now he's gone."

The hall trembles, silence heavy.

One Mantel remains, snarling, rifle raised, fanatical cry echoing:

"LONG LIVE THE MANTELS!"

Eirk staggers forward, clutching his wound, voice jagged, accent thick.

"Not tonight. Tonight... you all die."

The marble hall shakes with gunfire.

Mantel bodies litter the floor, blood soaking into the cracks.

One elite Mantel remains, snarling, blade dripping red.

He lunges.

The knife flashes, aimed straight for Eirk's throat.

Eirk twists, dodging, his wounded arm dragging behind him.

The blade misses his neck — but not his face.

Steel slices across his left eye, tearing flesh, blood spraying.

Eirk staggers back, clutching his face, crimson dripping down his cheek.

His voice erupts, jagged, accent thick, fury burning through the pain:

"Scheiße! I AM HIT!"

The Mantel grins, fanatical, voice echoing through the chamber.

"You bleed like the rest. You are nothing."

Anneliese screams, rushing forward, eyes wide with terror.

"Eirk!"

But Eirk straightens, blood streaming from the scar, his gaze blazing through the storm.

He grips his weapon tighter, jaw clenched, voice sharp, unbroken.

"You zink zis scar vill stop me? Nein. It vill remind me... to kill you faster."

The Hollow team tightens formation, weapons raised.

Anthony pumps his shotgun, Ramirez steadies his rifle, Vega wipes blood from her blade.

Mike steps forward, pipe dripping red, voice commanding.

"Finish him."

The Mantel snarls, knife raised again.

But now — he faces the full fury of the Hollow team.

The Hollow team moves as one.

Anthony pumps his shotgun, the blast tearing into the Alpha's chest.

Mike swings his steel pipe, smashing across the helmet, sparks flying.

Ramirez drops to a knee, rifle cracking, rounds shredding the Alpha's shoulder.

Vega spins, blade flashing, cutting deep into the gaps of his armor.

Cole fires his pistol, shots hammering into the Mantel's ribs.

Harris unleashes his machine gun, the roar shaking the hall, bullets ripping through steel and flesh.

The Alpha staggers, armor tearing apart under the storm.

Plates shatter, fabric rips, blood spraying across the marble.

He gasps, voice breaking, fanatical to the end.

“You... cannot... kill... the Mantels...”

But the Hollow team doesn’t stop.

Their fire tears him down, shredding the suit to ribbons.

The Alpha collapses, body convulsing, blood pooling around him like a dark river.

His knife clatters to the floor, echoing sharp against the stone.

Silence falls.

The chamber reeks of gunpowder and blood.

The Alpha lies broken, suit torn to shreds, crimson soaking into the marble.

Eirk steadies himself, scar burning, voice jagged but resolute.

“He vas ze last. Now... ve move for ze children.”

The Hollow team tightens formation, weapons heavy, eyes blazing.

The Court House is theirs — but the rescue has only just begun.

The Court House halls are silent now, the last Mantel Alpha lying broken, blood pooling around his shredded suit. The Hollow team regroups, weapons heavy, breaths sharp.

Anneliese moves ahead, her eyes scanning the marble walls. She notices a faint seam in the stone, a hidden panel half-concealed behind shattered debris. Her fingers trace it, trembling.

“Here... this is it.”

She presses, the panel clicks, and a steel door slides open.

The team tightens formation, weapons raised, tension thick.

Inside — a safe room.

Dim lights flicker, shadows stretching across the walls.

Two small figures huddle in the corner, eyes wide, faces pale.

Children.

Six and seven years old.

Anneliese gasps, rushing forward, tears streaking her cheeks.

“My God... Eirk... it’s them!”

The children look up, frightened, clutching each other.

One whispers, voice trembling:

“Are you... here to save us?”

Eirk staggers forward, blood dripping from his scarred face, his wounded arm dragging. His voice rasps, jagged but filled with fire:

“Ja... I am here. I am your father. You are safe now.”

The children break into sobs, rushing into his arms.

Blood stains his clothes, but his embrace is strong, unyielding.
Anneliese kneels beside them, whispering softly, “It’s over. You’re safe.
We’ve got you.”

The Hollow team stands guard at the door, weapons raised, eyes scanning the shadows.

Anthony mutters, shotgun tight in his grip, “We fought for this. For them.”
Mike’s voice cuts steady, commanding, “No more Mantels. Not here. Not ever.”

The safe room hums with silence, broken only by the children’s sobs and Eirk’s ragged breath.

The storm outside rages, but inside — hope flickers
The storm has passed.

Two months since the Court House battle, two months since blood stained the marble floors.

Now — the Hollow team rests, regrouped in a safe compound outside Los Angeles.

Eirk stands in the training yard, scar jagged across his left eye, arm healed but stiff.

His children — six and seven — stand beside him, small hands gripping the stock of a VX-92 rifle.

Their eyes are wide, nervous, but eager.
Eirk’s voice rasps, accent thick, commanding yet patient.
“Hold it steady. Do not fear ze recoil. Control it. You control ze weapon, not ze other vay around.”

The rifle cracks, echoing across the yard.

The children flinch, then smile, pride flickering in their eyes.
Eirk nods, scar burning but his grin sharp.
“Gut. Again. Discipline vill keep you alive.”

Nearby, a pull-up bar creaks.
Eirk lifts his son, guiding his grip.
“Strength is not just muscle. It is will. You vill climb, even when your arms scream.”

The boy strains, pulling himself up, face red, but he makes it.
Eirk claps his shoulder, voice jagged but proud.
“Ja. Zat is how we survive.”

Inside the compound, the smell of cooking drifts through the air.
Anneliese stands in the kitchen, apron tied, hands busy over a steaming pot.
Her voice hums softly, steady, grounding.

She stirs sauerkraut, bratwurst sizzling beside it, potatoes boiling — Eirk’s favorite German meal.

Anthony leans against the doorway, shotgun slung, smirking.

“Never thought I’d see the day. Eirk teaching kids to shoot, you cooking like it’s Sunday dinner.”

Mike steps past him, pipe tucked at his side, voice commanding but softer now.

“Let him have this. He earned it.”

The compound hums with life.

Children laughing, steel clanging, the smell of food filling the air.

Two months after blood and chaos — the Hollow team breathes again.

The compound hums with quiet routine — children training, steel clanging, Anneliese cooking inside.

Then, the low growl of an engine cuts through the air.

A black Ford Explorer rolls up the dirt road, tires crunching gravel, headlights slicing the dusk.

The Hollow team stiffens instantly.

Anthony’s hand snaps to his shotgun, pumping it once, barrel raised.

Mike grips his pipe, eyes narrowing, stance wide.

Ramirez and Vega flank the gate, rifles raised, tension thick.

The SUV halts.

Doors click open.

Anthony’s finger tightens on the trigger.

Out steps a woman — Rose.

Her hair whips in the wind, her eyes locked on Anthony.

Behind her, a small figure climbs down — Sara, Anthony’s daughter, clutching a stuffed bear.

From the other side, Alliana emerges, Mike’s girlfriend, her gaze steady, her presence cutting through the tension.

Anthony freezes, shotgun trembling in his grip.

His voice cracks, jagged, disbelief spilling out.

“Rose... Sara... what the hell—”

Sara runs forward, arms wide, tears streaking her cheeks.

“Daddy!”

Anthony drops the shotgun, it clatters against the dirt.

He kneels, arms wrapping tight around his daughter, blood and sweat mixing with her innocence.

Rose steps closer, her voice sharp but trembling.

“You think you can fight forever without us? We came because you need us.”

Mike exhales hard, pipe lowering, eyes locked on Alliana.

She walks straight to him, no hesitation, pressing her hand against his chest.

“You’re not alone, Mike. Not anymore.”

The Hollow team watches, weapons lowering, silence heavy.

Eirk stands scarred, children at his side, voice jagged but resolute.

“Family... it is vhy ve fight. And now... ve fight togtehor.”

The compound breathes again.

The black Explorer sits idle, but its arrival has changed everything.

The Hollow team is no longer just soldiers — they are fathers, lovers, protectors.

The compound is quiet now.

The storm of battle is long gone, replaced by the hum of peace.

Anneliese sets the table outside, steam rising from sauerkraut, bratwurst sizzling, potatoes soft and golden. The smell drifts through the air, rich and grounding, a reminder of home.

Eirk sits scarred but steady, his children at his side, their laughter echoing across the yard. Anthony leans back, shotgun resting against the wall, Sara curled in his lap. Rose smiles, her hand brushing his shoulder. Mike sits close to Alliana, her fingers laced with his, their bond unspoken but strong.

The Hollow team gathers, plates full, voices low.

They eat together, savoring the warmth of Anneliese’s cooking, the taste of tradition after months of blood and steel.

Above them, the setting sun bleeds across the sky, painting the horizon in fire and gold.

The light catches Eirk’s scar, turning it into a mark of survival, not pain.

Anthony exhales, muttering, “Never thought I’d see this.”

Mike nods, voice steady, “This is why we fight.”

The children laugh, the food is shared, and the Hollow team sits in silence, watching the sun sink.

For the first time in months, there is no gunfire, no screams, no Mantels.

Only family.

Only peace.

Across Los Angeles, far from the compound, the city hums with quiet.

Inside a hospital room, the air is still, the scent of antiseptic mixing with the warmth of sunlight.

James sits by the window, his eyes locked on the horizon.

The setting sun bleeds across the sky, fire and gold painting the city in light.

His hand rests gently on Izabella’s shoulder.

Izabella cradles a newborn in her arms — Izac Sentry.

Tiny, fragile, yet fierce in his quiet breath.

She smiles, tears streaking her cheeks, whispering softly:

“He is ours. He is the future.”

James exhales, pride burning in his chest.

“A proud new member... of EALA.”

The words hang heavy, not just a declaration, but a vow.

Izac's small fingers curl around Izabella's hand, his eyes flicker open, catching the glow of the sun.

The light reflects in them — pure, unbroken, alive.

Outside, the city roars with distant sirens, but inside the room, silence reigns.

Hope hums in the air, fragile yet unyielding.

James and Izabella sit together, watching the sun sink, their child in their arms.

The war rages elsewhere.

But here — a new life begins.

