

SENTRY: The Great Collapse

The morning sun bounced off the silver Ford F-150 like a spotlight on a legend. Students swarmed the drop-off zone, phones raised, voices buzzing. The truck didn't move—it couldn't. The crowd had turned it into a monument.

Agents tried to push the crowd back, but couldn't. The crowd wanted to see Izac, son of Jett and Izabella Sentry.

"This is commander Rusk with the Elite Los Angeles Division. Please back away from the vehicle, or we will have to remove you by force!" Rusk yelled through a microphone.

"We should've gone with homeschooling." Izabella whispered to Jett.

"It's better for him to get taught in person, Izzy." Jett replied. "I am going to help George escort him, keep the doors locked and my radio on your lap."

Jett opened his door and was greeted with news reporters and excited students and teachers. Jett's grip around his VX-92 was stronger than ever like someone gripping their favorite stuffed animal at night.

Agents swarmed around Agent Sentry while he was helping Izac out.

"Come on Izac." Jett said.

"I don't want to." Izac replied.

Izac grabbed his dad's arm as he walked him towards the entrance. A teacher opened the door, this teacher was the only one not excited as the others.

"Hey Mr. Gimbul." Jett said.

"Hola, Mr. Sentry. He looked like you when you were a kid." Mr. Gimbul said. "Don't worry, we have agents in the class. If they hear 'falcon down,' it's go time."

Jett got back into his truck. Izabella locked eyes with a strange looking agent, nothing stood out, standard issued uniform, earpiece, even an agency tattoo that you can request was on his right arm. It was his posture that was throwing her off. The way he stood there, too cold, too calculated.

That's when he blocked their view from Jett's truck and Jett saw him slide something into Izac's backpack.

Jett picked up his radio, "This is Agent Sentry, clearance code 9789, clock me in for overtime at the Los Angeles Elementary School, suspicious activity observed, possible fake agent, respond code 3."

He saw agents press their fingers up to their ear and start to follow the strange agent and Izac.

Izabella realized what was going on, "They never stop do they?"

"Nope." Jett replied as they both stepped out of the truck.

Izabella went after Izac while Jett followed the agent.

"Do we have eyes on him?" Jett asked over his radio.

"Neg... he... west... hi... me... agent... ve... x" The radio was breaking up.

“Agent Div, come again.” Jett replied.

“DAMN!” Jett yelled.

“GET THIS WHOLE SECTOR ON LOCKDOWN!” Rusk yelled.

Izabella came running back with the tracker.

Izac came running out yelling, ‘FALCON DOWN! FALCON DOWN!’ While being chased by people in fully blacked out armor.

They moved like shadows with purpose-tall, broad, and armored in matte-black plating that absorbed the morning light. Their helmets were sleek and angular, with no visors or eyes—just a red slit pulsing across the faceplate like a warning signal.

Each figure stood nearly seven feet tall, shoulders squared, boots reinforced with shock absorbent plating. Their chest armor was layered and tactical, built for impact and intimidation. No insignias, No identifiers. Just raw menace.

Their movements were unnervingly fluid—like they weren’t just trained, but engineered. One raised a gauntleted hand and caught a VX-92 round mid-air. Another lifted an agent by the vest and hurled him across the courtyard like a rag doll.

They didn’t speak. They didn’t flinch. They advanced with cold precision, and every step felt like a countdown.

Jett didn’t hesitate.

He vaulted over the hood of the F-150, VX-92 drawn, eyes locked on the advancing Black Mantel units. The Plasma pistol hummed in his grip, its core heating like a heartbeat. Izac was still screaming “FALCON DOWN!” as Izabella dragged him towards cover.

The first Mantel operative lunged.

Jett ducked under the swing, spun, and fired point-blank into the backplate. The plasma bolt sizzled, cracking the armor just enough to stagger the brute. Jett didn’t wait, he launched himself off the bench, flipped mid-air and landed a crushing elbow into the unit’s neck joint.

Jett twisted, grabbed its arm, and used its momentum to slam it into the pavement. The pavement cracked like an egg. He fired his custom VX-92 round straight into the helmet slit. The red glow flickered. The unit tried to pull his helmet off until the helmet exploded, blood veins flew everywhere and the body collapsed.

“Two down,” Jett muttered. “Eight to go.”

Izabella told Izac to hide behind the bushes behind the truck. Izac ran towards the bushes and dove in. Izabella reached into her purse and pulled out a VX-92 and joined Jett.

“Let’s finish this.” She said.

Jett pressed his VX-92 up against the brute’s armor. The plasma bolt hit dead center sizzling through the armor’s outer shell. The Mantle staggered, but didn’t fall.

Izabella was moving like a cheetah, low, fast, precise. She slid between two Mantel units, fired upward into the knee joint, and rolled out as the operative collapsed with a mechanical groan.

"WE NEED TO FLANK THEM!" Jett shouted.

Izabella nodded her head as she shoved the VX-92 between the armor's slot between the neck and the chest. The brute fell, blood gushing out of the neck.

Izabella pivoted, fired two quick rounds into the side of another unit's helmet. The red slit flickered. Jett followed up with a flying kick that sent the operative crashing into a steel column, shattering it.

Jett noticed a Mantel going straight towards Izabella and ran between them, grabbed the Mantel by his wrist, dislocating it, and then tossing him over his shoulder. Then snaking the VX-92 up the Mantels helmet and firing. The glow died instantly.

"Four down," Izabella said, breath, sharp. "Six left."

"They are upgrading. Damn" Jett muttered.

Izabella pulled out a small EMP grenade from the truck's bed, "Then let's downgrade them, Jetty."

Jett sighed.

Izabella tossed the EMP with a powerful throw like a baseball pitcher right between the remaining Mantels. Jett vaulted off a bench, landed on a Mantel's shoulders, and ripped out its helmet cables. Izabella fired into the exposed neck joint, dropping it instantly.

"Five down," Jett said. "Five to go."

The courtyard trembled.

From above, three sleek dropships roared in, their hulls gleaming with frost. The air temperature plummeted. Steam hissed from the landing gear as the ships touched down, releasing a wave of cold across the battlefield.

The doors slammed open.

Out stepped the Cryo-Suit agents—tall, armored in cobalt-blue plating laced with silver veins of coolant tubing. Their visors glowed icy white, and vapor curled from their shoulders like smoke from a glacier. Each carried a VX-92 variant modified for cryo-disruption.

Jett grinned.

"About time."

The lead agent nodded. "Cyro Division—clocked in and ready."

They moved fast—one agent launched a cryo grenade into the remaining Black Mantel formation. The explosion didn't just knock them back—it froze their joints mid-motion. Armor cracked. Red slits flickered and dimmed.

Izabella fired into the frozen chestplate of a Mantel unit. The plasma bolt shattered it like glass.

Jett vaulted off a frozen bench, landed on a half-frozen operative, and drove his VX-92 into the helmet slit. The unit spasmed, then collapsed.

George tossed another Super Duty grenade. The blast hit the last Mantel unit square in the chest—sending it flying into a wall, where it shattered on impact.

Silence.

The courtyard was littered with frozen bodies, shattered armor, and steam rising from the ground like ghosts.

Jett lowered his weapon. “Sector secure.”

Izabella looked toward the bushes. “Izac?”

A rustle. Then nothing.

Jett’s eyes narrowed.

“Ah sh...”

Steam from the grenades and shattered armor. Cyro agents stood ready, VX-92 rifles humming and blazing hot. Jett lowered his weapon, scanning the battlefield. Izabella stepped towards the bushes.

“Izac?” She called.

No answer.

Then a sudden shift in the air caught their attention.

A low hum vibrated through the pavement. From the far end of the courtyard, a figure emerged, taller, heavier, and more armored than any Mantel they’d seen. Its plating was reinforced with obsidian overlays, shoulders broad enough to block a doorway. The red slit across its helmet glowed brighter, pulsing like a siren in a nightmare.

“Holy hell.” George muttered to himself.

In its right hand, it held Izac, unconscious, limp, dangling by the collar of his shirt like a trophy.

Jett froze.

“Alpha Mantel,” he whispered. “Vex sent his best.”

The Alpha Mantel raised its free hand and pressed a button the back of its neck and spoke.

“Agent Sentry. It’s been a while, eh? You have no idea what Vex has done, have you? Remember the code phrase, ‘dinomite?’” The Alpha Mantel said.

“What the.....AGENT REX!?” Jett yelled in confusion.

Jett started to slowly walk forward, VX-92 trembling in his hand.

“I...I...I thought you were dead,” he said, voice low. “I saw the report. You were shot in your head. I buried your file.”

The Alpha Mantel tilted its head, the red slit pulsing like a heartbeat.

“I never died. Vex took me in and fixed me. The EALA just would’ve let me rot there on the beach. Vex didn’t.” Alpha Mantel replied.

“R-R-Rex?” Izabella added, confused. “What have they done to you?”

“They fixed me. Now, I will destroy you and your son.” The Alpha Mantel said as he pulled out an energy sword and dashed at Jett.

“REX! NO!” Rusk yelled.

Rusk dove between the blade and Jett. The two tipped blades pierced his body. Jett’s eyes grew big.

“RUSK!” Jett yelled.

“Go.....finish...them!” Rusk said as the blade pulled out.

His body crumpled to the ground.

The Cyro agents stood there. They lowered their weapons.

Jett looked at the Cyro agents, including George, “No! No! NO! Don’t listen to Rex! He is a... a... a...” Jett began to say.

“A TRAITOR?! IF ANY THING, THE EALA BETRAYED ME! MAYBE YOUR AGENTS WILL FOLLOW MY PATH!” The Alpha yelled.

The agents lowered their weapons, looking at each other, deciding on which path to take.

“Join me and we can destroy the corrupted Agency. Join HIM and I will hunt you down and make sure you don’t see daylight again.” The Alpha said while holding the energy blade up to Izac’s throat.

“I trained you, Rex! I remember I cared for you like my own brother. And this, is this how it’s going to be?!” Jett yelled, tears coming down his face.

“I am sorry, James. The Sentry’s time has come.” The Alpha said.

Izabella looked at Jett, no, James.

“J-J-Jett isn’t your name?” Izabella said.

James clinched his jaw as he looked at Izabella.

“WHAT OTHER SECRETS ARE YOU GOING TO HIDE FROM ME?!”

Izabella yelled angrily.

She turned her VX-92 at James, **“WHAT ELSE HAVEN’T YOU TOLD ME?!”** She yelled.

James stood there, silent, **“I will explain later.”**

“Yes. Yes. YES! Let the anger rise. Let the Sentry family tear themselves apart. Execute order 978.” Rex said excitedly.

The agents, including Jame’s long time friend George, raised their rifles towards James and Izabella.

“George Lockridge, tell your team to fire when ready.” The alpha said while laughing.

“Yes, commander.” George replied.

“George you are better than this!” James yelled.

“No, no I am not.” George replied.

James grabbed Izabella and threw her behind the truck, put his VX-92 into stun mode and fired at Geroge’s chest.

“Does anyone else want to follow a traitor?” James asked while wiping blood from his lips.

“You made your choice, agent.” The Alpha Mantel growled.

The Alpha put down Izac’s body and charged at James with his energy sword. James jumped over it, and shot a plasma charge right into the Mantel’s back, cracking the armor.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Rex!” James yelled.

“YOU ALREADY HAVE, SENTRY!” The Alpha replied back.

“AGHAGAHHHHHHHH!” James yelled as he ripped off the Mantels helmet.

The face he once recognized, smooth, beardless, big round eyes, black hair. Now had the eyes of Satan.

“Goodbye old friend.” James yelled as he shot his VX-92 into Rex’s skull.

A single bullet made entry and exited out the other side. Rex’s body collapsed onto the pavement. James turned to the cyro team.

“YOU WANT TO END UP LIKE HIM?!” James yelled in madness. “OR DO YOU WANT TO END UP LIKE RUSK?!”

The Cyro team opened fire. Jett grabbed Izac, threw him in the backseat of his truck as he and Izabella drove off into the distance.

“J-J-Jett, why... WHY?! Didn’t you tell me?” Izabella asked, almost crying.

“My dad was the lead scientist for Operation 554 in Alaska, they were mining the minerals creating the Cyro suits and in order for him to not be associated with me, he had the agency make my codename to Jett.” James explained.

“After all these damn years. Now you tell me this?” Izabella pleaded.

“I was going to tell you but I wanted to make sure the threats were detained first. And of course, they aren’t, they never are.” James said while switching the car to autopilot. “Computer, take us to sector G, 8.”

“Of course, Mr. Sentry,” the truck replied.

Once they got to sector G, 8 Izac woke up.

“W-What happened?” Izac asked.

No response.

They walked up to an old house. James led them to a room full of cabinets filled with documents. He opened up a cabinet called “Operation 554.”

“There, you can find out every detail about me.” James said.

Izabella looked at the documents, he was just a kid, watched his father get shot in front of him then the FBI finding his mothers body

decapitated in the back of a Hollow car. Izabella couldn't hold back her tears.

"J-James I am so sorry." Izabella said crying. "I should have never signed up for that private school and approved Undeshuskey's papers. If Kaiser wasn't involved, your parents would still be alive."

"Are you okay mommy?" Izac asked.

"Mommy is going to be okay sweetie." Izabella said.

"You two better get some rest, we are going to be here a long while." James explained while entering an office with a name tag "Mr. Sentry".

James pulled open a drawer and pulled out an old voice recorder. He pressed the play button:

"Come on Jett, just push on the pedals."

"I am trying dad. It's so hard."

"Try this..."

CUTS

"DAD! DAD! LOOK! I AM DOING IT!"

"GOOD JOB BUDDY!"

End tape

James starts to cry in his palm. He looks out the office window overseeing L.A. Fire blazes throughout the city. Military personnel fighting their own members, the EALA, Elite Agent Los Angeles Division.

"I am sorry dad." James said crying "I tried to stop it. I really did."

As the morning sun rose over the skyline, James opened his eyes from sitting in his dad's chair. Izabella came in and James saw Izac asleep on the couch.

"This is all my fault. I killed Kaiser too late. He was already planning an army." James said

"James, don't blame yourself. If you didn't kill Kaiser he would've gotten stronger & smarter.

James stood at the window, eyes locked on the chaos below.

L.A was turning into Hell. Buildings burning. Innocent people getting executed, all in front of James Sentry.

EALA units stormed neighborhoods, firing on civilians. U.S. Army personnel lay scattered in the streets-some dead, some still fighting, though, barely alive. The city he once swore to protect was now a battlefield of betrayal.

A sleek black SUV pulled up to a house carrying a V.I.P named Abby Migel.

"Thank you agent." She said.

The earbud in the agent's ear went off, "This is a direct order from Command. Execute order 978."

The agent turned towards Abby.
“What are you-” BANG!
The driver spoke into the earbud.
Jame’s earbud made a crackling noise:
“Sweep the house. Kill any targets blocking your way.”
James froze like someone after seeing a ghost. His face turned pale white.

The voice was cold. Detached. Not a command-it was an execution order.

“WHY THE HELL ISN’T THIS EFFECTING ME?!” James whispered to himself.

He reached his left hand up, slowly, pulled the earbud from his ear and stared at it in disbelief and anger. The same device that once connected him to allies... now a pipeline for murder. The same earbud that he used to announce that Kaiser was no more. The same earbud that updated him on serious missions and briefings.

James threw the earbud to the floor with sheer force and crushed it with the weight of his boot. The crunch killed the silence in the room. James grabbed the radio from his belt-the one linked to the EALA command and stared at it for a long moment. Then he walked to the firepit in the center of the room, still glowing with ambers.

“DAMN YOU!” James yelled with anger as he tossed it into the flames. James stepped back, eyes filled with anger, badge clinched in his fists.

“It was all Kaiser’s plan,” he muttered. “He broke us from the inside.” Izabella stood there watching it unfold with Izac sleeping on the couch outside of the room. Her eyes were filled with tears. James once trusted the EALA. Now he can’t.

**“James?” Izabella asked. “Are you okay?”
“No. No, I am not.” James replied. “I trusted them. I trusted them with everything! You, Izac. Now they broke that trust. The same way they broke Los Angeles.”**

Izabella gave a long sigh, “Well, I am going to go to bed. Everything is going to be okay.”

James’ face grew with anger as he grabbed his own badge, threw it to the ground, grabbed his personal Glock 22 and shot multiple rounds at it. The bullets just crunched when they made impact and hit the ground.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Still, nothing. The badge sat there, shining.

“DAMN THE EALA!” James said as he started to throw the badge against the wall, clanged, bounced, hit his head “agh” and then landed on the floor, face up, still gleaming.

“Daddy?” Izac asked half awake.

“Daddy is going to be alright Izac.” James replied.

Izabella took Izac to the kitchen leaving James in the room...alone.

James got onto his knees. He looked at the badge, “You don’t die easily do you?” Before holding his lighter up to it and melting the word “Jett” on the bottom of the badge.

Izabella walked in to see James curled up in the corner holding his badge.

She saw his name, melted, gone. Just like his trust with the EALA.

“MAKE ENTRY TO THE OFFICE BUILDING!” George yelled. “SEARCH FOR Jett SENTRY AND HIS FAMILY! SHOOT ON SIGHT!”

The EALA team swept the office building, tore it apart, and broke doors down. They found nothing but the burnt radio and broken ear piece sitting in once was a fireplace.

“Damn it! They were just here!” George whispered to himself, “TRACK THEM DOWN!”

Super heavily armored SUVs left the office and trailed down the road into L.A.

Jame’s truck stopped a few blocks down from where they were executing agents who did not obey 978.

“Are you working with Sentry?” The officer asked.

“Good luck getting that information out of me you sick bas...” BANG!

The agent dropped dead

“What would be your name, young one?” The officer asked.

Izabella saw it all. They were killing Junior agents. Innocent children. Being slaughtered in the streets.

The young agent leaped onto the officer’s face and started to beat up the officer until he was shot by a Cyro agent.

James turned the truck onto another roadway and got met with a Mantel truck. Heavily armored. Carrying Alpha Mantels in the back along with Cyro agents. James didn’t have time to react.

James woke upside down. Mantels approaching the truck. James whipped a thick stream of blood from his forehead. Izac was gone and Izabella was laying outside of the pickup. James unbuckled his seatbelt and fell onto the broken glass from the sunroof.

When he spots the unconscious Izabella he slowly crawls out of the truck’s passenger window.

“Izabella?” James asked while coughing blood.

A Mantel's boot stepped on his hand. James let out a terrifying scream. He looks up to see his friend George holding a Spas-12. They make eye contact and George rams the side of Jame's head with the butt of the shotgun.

James wakes up on a cold floor in a foam patted room. It was a holding facility for Agents with mental issues. Just then a door opened. Stepped in a tall bearded man, standard issued clothing and earbud. Even an EALA badge clipped to his belt with a modified Glock 22.

"Hello Mr. Sentry. I know that you know who EXACTLY I AM!" The man yelled.

James sat there in the chair, handcuffed behind his back for a few seconds before he spoke, "Your time has come, Vex. And I will make sure of it."

Vex chuckled with Geroge who was standing next to him, "I don't think so Sentry. I put a chip in the back of your head. Everytime you lie to me, that chip will send an electrical shock to your brain. Too many lies, you die. If you tell the truth I will have George execute you... slowly. You can't ruin my plan James Sentry. Not again. Not ever. Now let us begin, shall we?"

"That damn girl. What's her name.....ah yes, Izabella. The one who could be the key to ending this. She followed your steps James, but did she ever trust or believe you?

James replies, "She trusted me with her life. You have a wrong opinion..."

"I have a WRONG OPINION?!" Vex yelled as he leaned in towards James. "WOULD SHE HESITATE IF I GAVE HER A GUN, AND TOLD HER TO SHOOT YOU RIGHT THERE!" Vex said as he was pointing at Jame's skull between his eyes.

"She would never." James says coldly.

"Bring her in, George. Let's see how this plays out." Vex says to George.

"Commander? Is this really necessary?" George asks.

"DO. IT!" Vex yelled.

"Yes, commander." Geroge replies.

An Alpha Mantel brings in Izabella. Mouth taped shut, hands zip tied. Blood streaming down her left arm. The Alpha rips the tape off of her mouth.

"So, Izabella. Do you trust him? Do you lo..." Vex begins to say.

"I TRUST AND LOVE HIM! YOU ARE A TRAITOR TO THE EA..." Izabella says as Vex slaps her.

"DON'T MENTION THE CORRUPTED EALA! THEY BETRAYED ME!" Vex yelled.

The Alpha Mantel breaks the zip ties loose, puts Izabella's arms in front of her, zip ties them and puts Jame's Glock 22 in her hands.

"Shoot him." Vex says coldly.

"No.... noNOOO!" Izabella yells.

The glock was trembling in her hands. Her arms were zip-ties in front of her, blood dripping from her elbow onto the padded floor.

James locked eyes with her.

"Izzy," he whispered. "Don't let him win."

Vex paced behind her, grinning like a devil in a uniform.

"You say you 'love him'. Prove it.PULL THE DAMN TRIGGER. End his suffering, permanently." Vex said.

"I-I-I won't," she said through clenched teeth.

Vex leaned in close. "If you don't, I'll have Jame's pal Geroge shoot him, MULTIPLE TIMES! THEN YOU AND THEN I WILL PUT YOUR DAMN SON IN THAT CHAIR AND DO IT MYSELF."

James's eyes widened, "Don't you dare touch him."

"If his wife doesn't shoot him in five seconds, you do. DO YOU HEAR ME AGENT?!" Vex yelled at George.

Geroge hesitated for a few seconds.

"I don't think this is necessary." Geroge replied, quietly.

"Five..."

Izabella raised the gun.

"Four..."

Tears streamed down her face.

"Three..."

James looked at her, "Do it."

"Two..."

Izabella screamed and turned the Glock-not at James, but at Vex.

"ONE–"

BANG.

The shot echoed.

Vex staggered back, blood blooming across his shoulder. Geroge lunged forward, grabbing Izabella's arm before she could fire again.

"GIVE ME THAT!" George yelled as he was trying to take the glock away.

"NO!" Izabella yelled back.

James was losing the zip ties as Izabella bought him time.

"IZABELLA! DON'T MAKE ME-" George yelled.

"I knew for for 30 years now Geroge! I AM NOT LETTING OUR FRIENDSHIP BREAK!" Izabella yelled back.

“YOU AND JAMES ARE TRAITORS TO THE EALA AND THE WHOLE GOVERNMENT!” George screamed.

James thought of something.

“Geroge! You are just like me. Your wife, Mary. Your daughter, Favor. YOU HAVE A FAMILY! THE LOCKRIDGE FAMILY! They wouldn’t like this. Vex doesn’t even care about you. He only cares that you are close friends with me and could get me to tell the truth!” James yelled.

George stopped. Looked at Izabella and threw himself off of her. He sat up against the wall.

“What the hell have I done?” he whispered to himself.

Izabella got up and freed James from the zip-ties.

“Geroge let out a long sigh.

“I will tell my Cyro Agents to move. The code to the door is 896754-VEX-” George began to say until a tranq dart pierced his neck.

“It seems I have another traitor.” Vex said, grabbing his wounded arm while getting up off the floor. “VZ-626.”

James grabbed his head, groaning. He fell to his knees. Coughed blood then looked at Izabella, stood up, then looked at Vex.

“James?” Izabella asked.

“What are the orders Commander Vex?” James asked in a trembling voice.

“See Izabella, James was designed to follow orders from high ranking officers under no circumstances. So, I made him turn on you.” Vex said while doing an evil laugh.

“YOU ARE A FU” A dart hit her neck. “A... A... A...”

“Agents,” he growled. “Kill her, slowly, painfully.

Geroge raised his weapon slowly. “You sure about that?”

Vex sneered. “Don’t test me agent.”

James staggered to his feet, coughing blood, eyes locked on Vex.

“You really think you’ve won?” He rasped.

Vex turned, amused. “You’re bleeding, broken, and begging. I’d say I’m doing just fine.”

James wiped his mouth, then smiled, coldly, deliberate, “You should’ve checked the chip logos.”

Vex’s face twitched.

George lowered his weapon, “We’ve been feeding you lies since the moment you strapped him to that chair.”

James stepped forward, “Every scream. Every twitch. Every ‘truth’ you thought you pulled from me? Scripted.”

Vex’s eyes widened, “No...”

“You are just as stupid as Kaiser.” George hissed as he pulled out a small device from his boot and tossed it to the floor. It blinked once, then died.

“Chip blocker,” James said. “Courtesy of Eirk Kaiser.”

Vex staggered back. “You traitors—”

James cut him off, “Kaiser built VZ-626 to control minds. But you forgot one thing.” He raised his Glock.“You can’t control our wills.”

Vex reached for his sidearm

James shot his hand.

“Don’t!” Geroge yelled.

Vex snickered, “You really think that is going to stop me? I am just getting started.”

The wall behind him blew out and Mantel units stepped in and helped Vex to the drop ship.

James and Geroge opened fire, the bullets just bounced off their armor.

“He got away.” George hissed.

“Izabella!” James said, realizing.

“What the h... JAMES LOOK OUT!” Izabella yelled.

“Hey, hey, he is with us. We fooled Vex. We have a lot to talk about.” James explained.

They ran down the hall to Izacs holding cell. Izabella opened the door. There he was sitting there. Alone. His eyes were red. He was silent. Izabella stepped into the room first, her breath catching.

“Izac...” She whispered.

Izac sat on the edge of the cot, hands folded, eyes glowing faintly red in the dim light. Silent. Still.

James followed, heart pounding, George scanned the corners, Spas-12 in his hands.

“Izac,” James said, voice trembling. “It’s me. Dad”

The boy didn’t move.

“Izabella knelt down, ignoring the blood on her arm. “Baby, it’s okay. We’re here.”

Izac finally looked up.

“Mom?” He said, voice distant. “Dad?”

James stepped closer. “Yes. We’re here to take you home.”

Izac blinked slowly. “He said you wouldn’t come.”

George stiffened. “Who?”

Izac’s eyes flickered. “The man with the scar and the EALA badge. He said I was dangerous.”

Izabella's voice cracked. "You're not dangerous. You're our son and will always be our son."

Izac looked down at his hands. "Then why do I feel... wrong?"

James knelt beside him. "Because they tried to make you into something you're not. But they failed."

Izac's gaze locked onto James. "He said I was the final product."

George stepped forward. "Vex said that?"

Izac nodded.

He looked up, voice low and steady, "Vex said... if I ever get out, and The Hollow ever turned against him... he'd wipe us both out."

James froze.

George clenched his jaw. "He's scared of you. And them."

Izabella held Izac close. "Then we make sure he never gets the chance."

Izac nodded, "He said we were the main threat to his control. That if we ever stood together... he'd burn the whole system down, completely wipe out The Hollow and Los Angles. Including... us."

Izac looked down at his hands, voice trembling.

"He said Eirk Kaiser built the failsafe."

James froze. "Failsafe?"

Izac nodded. "Something buried in the VZ-626 code. Vex said if I ever escaped... it would trigger. Not just in me. In anyone exposed to the protocol."

George stepped forward. "That could mean The Hollow."

Izac looked up, eyes wide. "He said it would make them turn on each other. Like before. But worse."

James's heart dropped. "We need to tell Eirk. Now!"

James leaning in, voice tight. "Izac... did Vex say anything about exiting the facility triggering VZ-626?"

Izac nodded slowly. "He said if I ever left this play without The Hollow's override... the protocol would activate. He called it a 'containment burn.'"

Geroses face dropped. "That means if we take him out now..."

Izabella's breath caught. "It'll kill him."

Izac looked down. "And anyone else linked to the sequence. The Hollow. Maybe even me."

James backed away, heart pounding. "We need Eirk. We need The Hollow's help to shut this down."

Izac stood trembling, "You're leaving me?"

James stepped forward, gripping his shoulders. "Only for now. We're coming back, with the people who can end this."

Izabella kissed his forehead, tears streaming. "You are not alone. Not anymore."

George turned to the door. “Let’s move. Every second counts.”
Izac watched them go, eyes burning.
“I’ll be ready,” he whispered.
George led the charge through the dim corridor, boots hammering the steel floor. Alarms wailed in the distance. Cyro units were on the move.
“We’ve got two minutes before this place locks down,” George snapped.
“The garage is two levels down. Move!”
James and Izabella followed close behind, hearts pounding, the weight of leaving Izac behind pressing on them like a vice. They burst into the underground motor bay, rows of armored vehicles lined up like sleeping beasts. George didn’t hesitate. He pointed to a matte black tactical truck with reinforced plating and a mounted turret.
“That one. It’s clean. Get in!” George said.
They piled in, George behind the wheel, James in the passenger seat, Izabella in the back, looking at the ring James gave her on their wedding day.
George slammed the door and powered up the engine. The dashboard flickered to life, red lights scanning the cabin. “Computer,” George barked. “Route to Sector J, 10. Priority override.”
The onboard AI responded in a cold synthetic voice. “Voice authorization required.”
Geroge leaned in. “Authorization code: 897645.”
A pause. Then, “Confirmed. Route to Sector J, 10. Tactical mode disengaged. Allies located in the area.
The engine roared. Geroge floored the gas, and the truck launched forward, tires screeching as it tore through the tunnel.
Izabella looked back through the rear window, eyes wet, “We’ll come back for him.”
James stared ahead, jaw clenched, “This time, we’ll bring hell with us.”
The room was dim, lit only by the glow of holo-screens and surgical lamps. Medics worked in silence, sealing the wound in Vex’s shoulder with biofoam and dermal mesh.
He didn’t flinch.
Across the room, a tall figure stood in the shadows—armor matte black, visor pulsing faint red. Alpha Mantel, Obi. One of the last loyal operatives still running Vex’s playbook.
Vex’s voice was low, almost bored. “They left the boy.”
Alpha Mantel, Obi didn’t move.
Vex glanced at the medic. “Tighter seal. I want this arm working when the system falls.”

He turned back to Obi. “They’ll come back. They think they have time. They think The Hollow will save him.”

Obi stepped forward. “Orders?”

Vex’s eyes narrowed. “Stalk them. Watch Sector J-10. Don’t engage. Not yet.”

He leaned back, letting the medics finish. “When they return... I want you ready. I want them to feel the walls closing.”

The Mantel nodded once, then vanished into the corridor.

Vex exhaled slowly, watching the blood on his gloves fade into the sterilized light.

“They didn’t take the boy,” he whispered. “But they’ll bring the fire. Let’s make sure it burns them first.”

On top of a hill a fully blacked out Humvee sat perched atop a ridge overlooking the winding road to Sector J-10. Its windows were tinted, its silent engine. Inside, tactical screens glowed faintly, tracking the armored truck speeding through the canyon below.

A figure leaning forward in the passenger seat, headset crackling.

“They’re en route. ETA four minutes.”

The driver nodded. “Block the road. No hostels. Just a signal.”

A second Humvee peeled off from the ridge, descending fast towards the junction ahead. Inside the lead truck, James narrows his eyes as the road ahead lit up, two vehicles parked sideways, forming a barricade. No weapons raised. No aggression.

George slowed the truck, hand on the gearshift. “We’ve got company.”

Izabella leaning forward. “Cyro?”

James squinted at the insignia on the nearest Humvee, faint, but unmistakable.

“No,” he said, breath catching. “That’s Eirk’s crew.” George exhaled. “Then we’re not alone in this.”

The radio crackled:

“James, Izabella, George. You are clear to pass. Eirk’s waiting.”

James looked at Izabella, then back at the road. “Let’s go meet the man who built the failsafe.”

The armored truck rolled through the courtyard of The Hollow’s HQ, its engine rumbling low beneath the weight of silence. The facility was still rebuilding, scaffolding clung to shattered towers, welders sparked against broken steel, and agents moved like ghosts through the wreckage.

James sat in the passenger seat, eyes scanning the damage. Every scorch mark felt familiar. Every crack in the concrete whispered a name.

George slowed the truck near the central plaza.

Izabella leaned forward. “Why are we stopping?”

James didn't answer. He was already climbing out.

The others followed, boots crunching over debris as they approached the wall, tall, cold, and carved with names. No ranks. No titles. Just the fallen. James's eye locked onto two near the center:

M. Reyes

K.

His breath caught

Izabella stepped beside him. "Reyes... the one that was impersonating an agent."

James nodded slowly. "He was loyal. So was K. They didn't betray anyone. They just... hesitated."

"I never thought I would feel bad for them." Izabella said softly.

Gerpoge looked at the names, then at James who was almost sobbing.

"They never wanted to hurt you James. And you know that. They were just following their damn orders."

James's voice was barely a whisper. "Like they were nothing."

He reached out, fingers brushing the etched letters.

"They didn't want to die. They didn't want to fight. They were caught in the machine." George said.

Izabella's eyes welled. "They were victims."

James nodded. "And I helped build the system that broke them."

The wind stirred. Somewhere nearby, a welder's torch hissed.

James stepped back, eyes still locked on the wall, "We're not just fighting Kaiser," he said. "We're fighting everything he left behind."

George placed a hand on his shoulder, "Then let's finish what they started."

James turned jaw clenched, "For Reyes."

"For K." George added.

"For every name caved into steel." Izabella said.

Behind them, footsteps echoed, measured, deliberate.

James turned.

Eirk Kaiser stepped into the courtyard, flanked by two Hollow guards. One tall and silent with a scar across his left eye. The other slower, his left arm wrapped in a cast, sling taut against his chest.

James and Eirk locked eyes. The silence between them was heavy. Not hostile. Just full.

Then, quietly, James spoke, "Guten Abend, Herr Kaiser. (Good evening, Mr. Kaiser)"

Eirk nodded once, his voice low. "Guten Abend, Herr Sentry. (Good evening Mr. Sentry)"

They stood there, the wall behind James, the weight of the past pressing down like gravity.

Eirk Kaiser stood in front of Izabella. The courtyard was quiet. James watched from the memorial wall, the names of Reyes and K still burning in his mind.

Eirk's voice was low, his accent thick, "Izabella... I owe you more than words."

She didn't speak, just looked down at the ground.

"I helped build ze system that put you in danger. THat turned you into a damn target." Eirk said, calmly.

Her eyes didn't blink

Eirk added, "I did not protect you. I protected protocols. Chains. Men like Kaiser. My own brother."

He looked down, then back at her, "I am sorry." Für alles (for everything)." Izabella's gaze softened. Just slightly.

She stepped forward, just enough to close the space between them.

"Its not your fault, Erik," she said quietly. "You were just following orders."

Eirk nodded slowly.

"And you're trying to fix the damage," she added. "You are trying to be a good person and I appreciate that... I forgive you."

Eirk's breath caught.

"Danke. (thank you)." Eirk replied.

James turned away from the wall, watching the moment unfold. And for a long time, the courtyard felt just a little less heavy.

After the apology, Eirk turned without a word and began walking towards the west wing of The Hollow HQ, James followed, so did Izabella and George close behind. Boots echoing against the fractured stone.

They passed the scorched walls, patched corridors, and flickering lights. The damage from the EALA breach was still everywhere, but so was the effort to rebuild.

Eirk stopped at a door. Heavy. Steel. Familiar.

Jame's breath caught.

"This room..." James said.

Eirk nodded, "Ja. Ze one Kaiser escaped from."

He pushed the door open slowly.

Inside, the meeting room was dim. The long table still stood, scarred by bullet marks and scorch lines. Chairs were overturned. Papers scattered. But the window, the window Kaiser had jumped through, was now boarded up with thick planks, nailed hastily into the frame.

Two repairmen stood nearby, measuring the wall, prepping tools.

Eirk raised a hand, "Leave us."

The workers hesitated, then nodded and exited without a word. Silence returned.

James stepped inside, eyes locked on a boarded window.
“He jumped through that,” he said quietly. “Didn’t even look back.”
Eirk walked over to the boards, ran a hand across the splintered wood. Then he turned to James, a rare grin tugging at the corner of his mouth, “You think I am going to do ze same?”
James blinked.
Then he laughed. A short, sharp breath at first. Then a full, unexpected laugh.
Eirk chuckled too, shaking his head, “Nein, nein. I prefer doors (no,no).” Even Izabella crackled a smile.
The laughter faded, but the tension had cracked with it, just enough to let something else in.
James looked around the room, “Feels different now.”
Eirk nodded, “It should.”
He stepped towards the table, “Now... let us talk about how ve end zis. Together, Sentry.”
Eirk moved to the head of the table, brushing aside a scorched folder and resting both hands on the surface.
James, Izabella, and George stepped towards the table.
Before sitting, George reached up and unclipped his helmet. He pulled it off slowly, revealing a face marked by exhaustion, grit, and quiet resilience.
James turned to him, a flicker of warmth in his eyes, “It’s good to see you again, George. Welcome back, agent.”
George gave a small nod, lips twitching into a half smile, “Wouldn’t miss it James.”
They took their seats. The chairs creaked under the weight of armor, tension, and history.
Eirk tapped a panel embedded in the table and a soft hum filled the room as a hidden projector flickered to life, casting a pale blue glow across the wall. A schematic appeared, complex, layered, and unmistakably dangerous.
“Zis,” Eirk began. “Is what remains of Protocol 978.”
Eirk slid a scorched data chip into the console. The projector flickered, and a voice crackled to life:
Kaiser. Kaiser Krüger. His voice was calm. Cold. German accented. Every word clipped and deliberated.
“Protokoll neun-sieben-acht (Protocol nine-seven-eight) is not a failsafe. It is a filter. A blade. Ven ze system begins to rot, you do not patch it. You cut.”
James leaned forward, fist clenched, “That son of a gun.”
Krüger continued, “Agents compromised by emotion, hesitation, or loyalty... zey are liabilities. Protocol 978 identifies. Isolates. Removes.”
Izabella’s breath caught.

“You vill not understand zis now. But ven ze system is clean... ven ze noise is gone... you vill thank me.”

The log ended with a soft click then... silence.

Eirk looked at the boarded window, then back at the team, “I found zat chip in ze rubble,” he said. “He left it behind. Like a message.”

James stood slowly, “He called Reyes and K ‘noise.’”

Eirk nodded. “And now ve know what he vas really building.”

Izabella whispered, “A system that kills its own.”

Geroge muttered, “Hell of a legacy.”

Eirk stepped forward, “Then let us rewrite it.”

The projector dimmed, leaving only the faint hum of the console and the boarded window behind them.

Eirk turned to the others, his voice steady, “Ze Obsidian Vault is not just a server farm. It is ze spine of Protocol 978. Everything-logs, directives, kill orders, surveillance node-feeds into it.”

James leaned forward. “Where is it? We need to get our son back.”

Eirk’s head snapped towards James, “Son? Zey took your son?”

James nodded, jaw tight. Izabella’s eyes didn’t leave the screen.

Eirk’s voice dropped, colder now.

“In zat case... ve must deactivate Protocol 978’s servers. 978 won’t let him leave ze holding cell. Not while he’s flagged.”

George muttered, “Flagged for what?”

Eirk looked at him, “For being part of the Sentry family.”

Silence fell.

Izabella stood slowly. “Then we go in. We shut it down. We bring Izac home.”

Eirk stepped forward, placing a hand on the table, “Then, ve move at....”

An alarm screamed through The Hollow HQ. Red lights pulsed. The projector flickered and died.

James shot to his feet. “What the hell-”

BOOM!

A distant explosion rocked the west wing. Dust rained from the ceiling. The door busted open.

Hollow agents flooded in, weapons raised. Tactical gear gleaming. One barked, “SECURE THE ROOM!”

Izabella reached for her sidearm, but Eirk held up a hand, “No. Zey’re ours.”

James narrowed his eyes. “Then who-”

“Mantels. Cyro agents. I forgot they implanted a tracker into my suit.

Damnit, it’s all my fault.” George muttered.

Black armor. Frosted visors. Silent. Deadly. They moved like shadows through the corridor behind The Hollow squad, not allies. Not friendly.

Eirk turned to James, pulled the scorched data chip from the console and pressed it into his hands, "Take it. Protocol 978's root access. You'll need it." James gripped the chip tight.

Izabella whispered, "They found us."

George muttered while pulling the tracker out, "Guess we're not moving at dawn."

Eirk looked at the tracker George had in his hands and took it, "I will make sure this gets destroyed."

Mantels and Cyro agents flooded the compound like a virus-silent, coordinated, lethal.

A Hollow commander burst into the meeting room, flanked by two operatives. No words. Just action. Three heavy assault rifles hit the table. James grabbed one mid-air. Izabella caught her by the grip. George snatched his and racked the slide with a growl.

"MOVE!" The commander barked.

The trio bolted from the room, boots pounding against steel floors. Sirens wailed. Lights flickered. Hollow agents peeled off to cover flanks, laying suppressive fire.

Mantels closed in.

James fired first, short bursts, precise. Izabella spun and dropped two Cyro agents with surgical shots. George laid down a wall of lead, clearing the corridor.

"MAIN DOOR!" Izabella shouted.

They turned the final corner, a blast door halfway open, smoke pouring through. Beyond it: the truck. Their only way out. A Mantel drone swooped overhead. James fired, clipping its wing. It spiraled into the wall and exploded.

"GO!" George roared.

They burst through the door, guns blazing. Bullets tore through the night. The truck's engine was already running. The Hollow's last gift.

James drove into the driver's seat. Izabella slid into the back, covering their retreat. George jumped in last. Slamming the door shut, "DRIVE!"

James punched the accelerator. The truck roared to life, tires screeching as it tore down the mountain road. Behind them, the compound burned.

The truck tore down the mountain road, tires skidding on gravel, engine growling like a beast uncaged.

Inside, James gripped the wheel, eyes locked on the winding path ahead.

Izabella scanned the rearview mirror.

George checked his rifle, then the chip, "Still intact," he muttered.

Suddenly, headlights.

A large armored truck rounded the bend ahead, barreling towards them. Black plating. Red glowing visors behind the windshield. Mantels. Izabella's breath caught. James didn't slow down.

"Hold steady," George whispered.

The Mantel truck thundered past them, no reaction. No pursuit. Izabella blinked. "They didn't notice."

Eirk's voice echoed in her memory, "Zey took your son."

The road stretched on. Behind them, the compound burned. Ahead, the Obsidian Vault. And Izac.

The truck rumbled through the final stretch of forest, headlights off, engine low. First crunched beneath the tires. The forest loomed around them, dark, ancient, watching.

James slowed as the terrain dipped. Izabella leaned forward, scanning the horizon. Then they saw it. The Obsidian Vault.

A monolithic structure carved into the Mountain's base. Black steel. No windows. No doors visible. Just vents, turrets, and motion sensors blinking like stars. Enemies swarmed the perimeter. Mantels. Cyro Agents. Drone circling overhead. Automated sentries tracking movement. The air shimmered with surveillance fields.

George muttered, "This isn't a vault. It's a fortress."

Izabella checked her rifle, "Maximum security. They're expecting someone."

James parked behind a ridge, out of sight. "They're not expecting us."

He looked down at the chip Eirk had handed him, still warm from the chaos. Izabella whispered, "Let's bring Izac home."

The trio crouched behind a mud covered ridge, eyes locked on the vault's perimeter. Turrets scanned the forest. Drones buzzed overhead. Cyro agents patrolled in tight formations.

James whispered, "We need a way in."

George pointed to a ventilation shaft near the east wall, "That leads to the control room. I'll go quiet. Shut down the turrets."

Izabella nodded, "I'll handle the cameras. If they can't see us, they can't stop us."

James handed Geroge the chip, "Use root access. Eirk said it's coded to bypass 978's firewall.

Inside the vault, George dropped into the control room. It was dark, humming with servers. A single Cyro tech monitored the turret's grid. George stayed low, crept behind the console, and plugged in the chip. "Override code: VEX-DELTA-978."

The turrets blinked. Then, offline.

George grinned, "One less problem."

Outside, Izabella spotted a lone Cyro agent checking a surveillance node. She moved like a shadow, silent, precise.

SNAP!

She grabbed the agent from behind, pressed him against the wall, and yanked the key card from his belt.

“Sorry, wrong team.” She whispered as she tranqed him.

She slipped into the control room, slid the keycard into the camera console, and began rerouting feeds. “Looping visuals. We’re ghosts now.” She said.

George looked up, “Turrets down. Camera blind. We’re in.

James’s voice crackled over comms. “Then let’s find Izac.”

The control room was dark now. Turrets offline. Cameras looped. The vault’s defenses were blind, but the danger was far from over. James stared at the biometric gate ahead. Beyond it: the lower levels. The holding cells. Izac.

He turned to Izabella and George, “Head back to the truck. And get back to L.A.”

Izabella blinked, “What?”

James’ voice was calm. Final, “I’ve got unfinished business.”

George stepped forward, “We’re not leaving without you.”

James handed George the chip, “You’re not. You’re getting Izac out. That’s the mission.”

Izabella’s eyes narrowed, “James...”

He looked at her, then at the vault’s depths, “Kaiser left something down there. I felt it the moment we stepped in. This isn’t just about Izac. It’s about ending 978, for good.”

George hesitated, then nodded, “We’ll get the boy.”

James turned towards the gate. The lights flickered. The air grew colder.

Izabella whispered, “Come back.”

James didn’t look back.

James swiped the stolen keycard. The biometric gate hissed open, revealing a narrow staircase spiraling downward into the mountain’s core. Cold air rushed up from below, metallic, sterile, humming with power. He descended. Each step echoed like a countdown.

At the bottom: the server room. A cathedral of cables and processors. The heart of protocol 978. Screen flickered with surveillance feeds. Data pulsed through fiber veins. And in the far corner, Vex.

Cloaked in shadows. One hand resting on the hull of a sleek jump ship, its engines still warm. James froze.

Vex stepped forward, voice like static, “You weren’t supposed to make it this far.”

James raised the chip, “You weren’t supposed to be here.”

Vex’s eyes locked on the chip, “Give it to me.”

James didn't move.

Vex's voice cracked like ice, "You think that chip will save anyone, JAMES?! Kaiser created that. THE EALA is corrupted. Just like you and your WHOLE DAMN FAMILY!"

James didn't move.

Vex's voice dropped to growl, "You plug that chip in, and it won't just shut down 978, it will wake it up, you fool."

He circled James like a predator, "You really thought Eirk would let you take down 978? No, no, no... he didn't want to help you, he wanted to help..."

Vex leaned in, eyes gleaming, "...himself."

James gripped the chip tighter, "He wouldn't."

Vex turned sharply, arms behind his back, "And what makes you think THAT?!"

James locked eyes with him, "Because he has a heart... unlike you, Vex."

James snickered, "And unlike you... his parents didn't fight for control."

Vex's eyes narrowed to slits, "DON'T YOU DARE BRING THEM INTO THIS."

James stepped forward, "It's true, Vex. Your parents gathered an army in London. Tried to rule the whole damn place-

Vex lunged. James sidestepped, barely dodging the first strike. Vex spun, elbow slicing through the air-crack-caught James in the jaw. He staggered back, blood in his mouth.

"You think you're strong enough to finish this?" Vex snarled.

James wiped his lip, "Strong enough to bury you."

Vex charged again, fists like hammers. James ducked, grabbed a loose cable from the server rack, and whipped it across Vex's face. Sparks flew.

Vex roared.

They collided, brutal, close-quarters combat. No finesse. Just rage.

James slammed Vex into the jump ship's hull. Vex twisted, grabbed James's arm, and threw him into the server stack. Glass shattered. Alarms blinked. The chip skidded across the floor. Both men froze. Vex dove for it. James tackled Vex mid-air. They crashed into the floor, grappling, choking, fists flying.

"You don't deserve to touch it!" James growled.

Vex headbutted him, "Neither do you!"

James rolled, pinned Vex down, and reached for the chip-but Vex kicked him off, sending him sprawling.

"You're too late, Sentry." Vex hissed while wiping blood from his lips. "978 is already listening."

James stood, blood dripping from his brow, "Then let it hear this."

He charged. Full sprint. No hesitation. No mercy.

Vex barely had time to brace before James slammed into him like a battering ram. Flesh and fury colliding with steel.

CRUNCH!

Vex's body hit the jump ship's hull with such force it caved inward, metal groaning, panels buckling like paper under a sledgehammer. The scream that tore from Vex's throat wasn't human.

He crumpled to the floor, gasping one arm twisted unnaturally, blood smearing the hull.

James stood over him, chest heaving, "You wanted to wake it up?" James raised the chip into the air. "Then lets fuckin' wake it up."

James took the chip and crunched it with the weight of his boot. Blue light surged. The server room dimmed. And then... she formed. A holographic figure, flickering like a flame caught in a breeze. Her limbs shimmered with unstable physics, hair flowing in slow motion, eyes glowing with ancient code.

She giggled, "Well... that was dramatic, James."

James stepped back, stunned, "Who... WHAT are you?"

She tilted her head, voice playful, "I'm what Kaiser buried. What your father feared. What Vex tried to control." She floated closer, eyes narrowing, "I'm EALA's main server. And now... I'm awake."

"JAMES YOU ARE AN IDIOT! AN ABSOLUTE IDIOT! I HOPE YOU KNOW THAT!" Vex said as he pulled out a stun gun and fired, hitting James's left shoulder.

EALA stepped forward, her form flickering like moonlight on water. Vex backed away, boots scraping against the metal floor.

She tilted her head, voice playful, "You had the high ground, Vex. Now you've got the floor."

Vex tripped, hitting the deck hard, and scrambled backwards on all fours. "STAY BACK!" he hissed, eyes wide.

EALA kept walking, calm as ever, "You were so confident a moment ago."

She leaned in, voice dropping. "Funny how quickly gravity changed."

Vex yelled as he got to his feet and clawed his way into the drop ship's cockpit.

Start up sequence initiated

His fingers flew across the controls, hands shaking. He glanced out the window. She was still walking towards him. Slow. Measured. Unbothered. "Come on, come on..." he muttered, eyes darting between the console and the glass.

EALA tilted her head, watching him through the hull, "Run, little hound."

Behind her James sat up and darted for the drop ship grabbing the landing gear as it took off and the overhead doors opened leading to the Los Angeles forest.

“Computer! Take me to Sector A, 8” Vex said scaredly.

[Destination confirmed, Agent Vex]

He glanced out the window, he didn’t see either EALA or James. Below the ship, James clung to the landing gear, muscles screaming, shoulders still twitching from the stun bolt. Wind howled around him. The forest blurred beneath. He looked up, the hull was open. James gritted his teeth and climbed.

Hand over hand, boots slipping, he hauled himself up the gear strut and into the hull.

Inside the ship was dim, rattling with turbulence. Vex hadn’t sealed the interior, he was too panicked, too focused on escape. James dropped into a crouch, breathing hard. He was in.

The cockpit door was suddenly ripped open. James stood there, “You’re not going anywhere.”

Vex spun around, too slow. James grabbed him by the collar and slammed his head into the control panel. Once. Twice. Sparks flew. The ship lurched. Alarms screamed.

“WARNING: FLIGHT PATH COMPROMISED.”

James threw Vex aside and grabbed the controls, but it was too late.

Outside, George and Izabella’s truck rumbled down the dirt road, headlights cutting through the trees.

Izabella looked up, “What the hell is that?”

George slammed on the brakes, and threw on his helmet, “More like WHO THE HELL IS THAT?!”

BOOM!

The drop ship crashed nose-first into the road. Skidding to a halt in a shower of sparks and shredded metal, right in front of their truck. Smoke billowed. The hull hissed. Inside James groaned, pulling himself from the wreckage. Vex didn’t move.

Smoke curled from the wreckage. The drop ship hissed, metal groaning as it settled into the dirt. James climbed out, one arm clutching his shoulder, blood streaked across his face. He limped towards the truck, boots dragging, eyes locked on Izabella. She stepped out, but didn’t move forward. Her hand hovered near her weapon. Something was wrong. James opened his mouth to speak, then froze.

Behind him, the wreckage shifted.

Clank.

Clank.

Vex emerged. He was no longer just Vex. He wore the Alpha Mantel suit, a prototype exo-frame built for frontline annihilation. Black plating shimmered with reactive mesh, and across his back-an RPG launched. Rigged. Armed. Ready. His visor glowed red. James turned slowly. Vex raised his weapon, “I am never finished, James. But you are. You always are.”

James, gripping his left arm, turned around, eyes wide, mouth opened, “EALA?”

“Huh?” Vex said quietly as he turned around, and saw her. Standing there, giggling.

“What....WHAT THE! How did you, never mind that. You can’t even hurt me inside of this suit.” Vex said laughing. “This is reinforced with pure titanium.” “Then that means springlocks are holding it back...” James said.

“Well, well, well. Aren’t you a smart fellow? But yes, indeed they are. Now, I WILL DESTROY YOU! AND THAT DAMN EALA!” Vex roared while pulling the RPG off of his back.

EALA giggled again, her voice echoing like corrupted audio, “You sound stressed, Vex.”

Vex snarled, stepping forward, “You think this is a game? You think I’m bluffing?” He pointed the RPG at James. “You brought her back. You gave her access. You let her evolve!”

James gritted his teeth, blood dripping from his arm, “You buried her. You tortured her code. You made her crawl.

Vex laughed, manic and broke, “SHE was a tool! A weapon! You don’t mourn a gun when it jams!”

EALA tilted her head, voice calm, “You didn’t just jam me, Vex. You tried to erase me.”

Vex turned towards her, eyes wide, “You think you scare me? You’re just old corrupted data. A ghost in the system.” James stepped forward, “She’s more than that now.”

Vex’s grip tightened on the RPG, “You think she’s on your side? You think she won’t turn on YOU NEXT?”

EALA’s smile faded, “I don’t turn. I choose.”

Vex hesitated.

James whispered, “You never had control. You only had delay.”

EALA stepped closer, “And your delay just expired.”

Vex roared and charged, throwing the RPG on his back and pulling out a red energy blade. EALA didn’t move. She vanished. Thin air. No shimmer. No trace.

Vex skidded to a halt, eyes wide, “WHERE THE HELL IS SHE?! ”

Behind him-a giggle. He spun around.

EALA stood there, flickering, playful, “Peekaboo.”

Vex stumbled back, energy blade trembling.

James stepped closer, blood still dripping from his arm, “She’s not in the system anymore.”

Vex turned, confused, “What?”

James lifted his sleeve, revealing a faint glow beneath the skin, “Before I got on the drop ship... I implanted her chip into my arm.”

Vex’s eyes widened, “You-you WHAT?! How are you still alive?”

James nodded, “She’s tethered to me now. I can summon her whenever I want.”

EALA giggled again, “He’s my anchor. You’re my entertainment.”

Vex screamed.

Vex lunged, swinging the RPG like a blade. **EALA** vanished. He spun-she was behind him.

Giggle.

He roared and swung again. She flickered left. Then right. Then gone.

“STAND STILL! **Vex** screamed, eyes wild.

James watched, silent, blood dripping from his arm. George and Izabella stood there trying to keep a straight face.

EALA reappeared behind **Vex**, upside down, floating, “You are one twitchy Mantel.”

Vex spun, slashing with the suit’s wrist blade.

She ducked. She vanished. Then, she reappeared on his shoulder, “Peekaboo.”

Vex screamed stumbling backwards, blade scraping the hull, “YOU’RE NOT REAL! YOU’RE NOT REAL!”

George and Izabella had their breaking point. They were laughing super hard.

James stepped forward, “She’s real enough to drive you insane.”

Vex turned, panting, eyes wide behind the visor, “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill both of you!”

EALA giggled again, “You’re welcome to try, my new found enemy.”

She vanished once more. **Vex** stood alone in the smoke, blade trembling, breath ragged, “WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU DAMN AI!”

James whispered, “Everywhere.”

Vex stood trembling, blade raised, eyes darting through the smoke.

James exhaled slowly, then whispered, “My turn.”

He leapt, not with rage, but with purpose.

Mid air, he didn’t strike.

He reached out, calm as a ghost, and turned a small nob on the side of **Vex’s** helmet.

Click.

Vex froze, “What did you just do?” He barked, spinning around. James landed behind him, blood dripping from his arm, eyes locked, “I adjusted your permissions.”

“MY WHAT?!” Vex yelled through the helmet.

EALA giggled from somewhere in the smoke, “In simpler terms, he gave me access.”

Vex reached for his visor and panicked, “NO! NO! NO, NO, NO!”

James stepped back voice low, “You locked her out. I just let her in.”

Vex clawed at his helmet, fingers scraping the reinforced titanium, “GET IT OFF! WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

James stood calm, blood dripping from his arm, eyes locked, “EALA executes safety protocol on Alpha Mantel suit 777.”

EALA’s voice echoed, smooth playful, “Affirmite. James Sentry.”

Click.

Vex froze.

The suit’s servos locked.

The HUD flickered, “NO-NO, NO, NO-” Vex screamed, slamming his fists against the helmet.

James stepped forward, voice low, “You really thought you were the apex. You’re just a test subject.”

Vex turned, eyes wild behind the visor, “You-you think this makes you strong? You’re nothing without her!”

James didn’t blink, “Good think she’s with me now.”

EALA giggled, her voice dancing through Vex’s comms, “You’re very. Loud. Want me to mute him?”

James smirked, “Negative. Let him scream.”

James looked at George, “Cover Izabella’s eyes. She doesn’t like gore.”

Izabella just standing there, “What?”

George looked down at her, “he said ‘you don’t like gore.’”

Izabella, “I LIKE CONTEXT!”

“I can pixelate it for her. Want me to?” EALA asked.

“Negative. She’s seen worse.” James replied, smirking.

Jams turned away, voice cold.

“EALA, execute springlock protocol on Alpha Mantel suit 777.”

“Affirmite, James Sentry.” EALA said giggling.

Click Vex froze.

Then-the suit switched.

A low hum began inside the exo-frame. The reactive mesh shimmered. The titanium plated vibrated.

“WAIT-WAIT!” Vex screamed, clawing at the helmet.”I CAN FIX THIS! I CAN-”

Snap.

The first springlock fired.

A thin spike shot inward from the shoulder plate, piercing muscle, grinding against bone.

Vex howled.

“NO-NO! NO! NO-”

Whir. Snap.

The chestplate contracted. Hooks deployed from the lining, digging into his rib, pulling them apart like a mechanical rip spreader.

Blood sprayed inside the suit.

“MAKE IT STOP!” Vex shrieked, voice muffled by the visor.

The suit didn’t stop.

It tightened.

Springs snapped. Pistons drove. A blade burst through his thigh, severing tendons. Another drove into his lower back, puncturing a kidney.

His body spasmed, twitching like a marionette on broken springs.

“I CAN’T-” Vex tried to say.

EALA’s voice echoed inside his helmet, “You were never meant to wear it.

You were meant to feed it.”

Snap.

A spike drove through his left hand, pinning it to the inner gauntlet.

Snap.

Another through his right foot.

Snap.

One into his jaw, locking it shut.

Vex convulsed, eyes wide behind the blood-smeared visor. Jams watched silently. Izabella turned away. George covered her eyes.

EALA whispered, “Final lock: engaged.”

CACK.

A spike drove into the base of his skull.

Vex collapsed.

The suit locked shut.

Smoke hissed from the seams.

Silence.

James exhaled, “He always talked too much.”

Izabella turned, “Is it over?”

“Yup, the monster is down.” EALA replied.

James walked past the smoking unit, “Next time. Don’t steal my tech.”

Smoke hissed from the seams of the suit.

Vex lay crumpled, twitching.
Groaning.
Some springlocks still engaged, grinding against bone. Blood poured from the joints, pooling beneath him.
James turned to EALA.
“Bring Izac.”
EALA flickered, then spoke:
“Teleporting subject: Izac Sentry.”
A shimmer of light—Izac appeared, stumbling forward.
“James!” he shouted, running toward them.
But then—
The suit moved.
A twitch. A groan. A hand clawed at the ground.
Vex was still alive.
James stepped forward, calm.
“Stay back, Izac.”
Vex’s voice rasped through the broken comms.
“You think this is over...?”
James raised his pistol.
“It is.”
He aimed at the helmet.
One shot.
CRACK.
The bullet punched through the visor, straight into Vex’s skull.
The suit jerked once.
Then went still.
James lowered the weapon.
“Now it’s over.”
Izac stared, wide-eyed.
EALA giggled softly.
“That was dramatic.”
James turned to George.
“Cover Izabella’s eyes. She doesn’t like gore.”
Izabella blinked.
“What?”
CRACK.
The bullet tore through the visor.
For a moment, silence.
Then—

Blood erupted from the fracture like a geyser, spraying across the floor in thick, arterial bursts. The cracked visor split wider, and something wet and gray slid down the inside of the glass.

Izac gasped and covered his eyes, turning away.

Izabella staggered, hand to her mouth.

“Oh my god—”

She nearly collapsed.

Inside the suit, Vex’s body twitched once.

Then slumped.

His head tilted unnaturally, the helmet now sloshing with blood and brain matter.

James didn’t blink.

EALA’s voice echoed, playful.

“He’s... brainless.”

James turned to her.

“You’ve been waiting to say that, haven’t you?”

EALA giggled.

“Since the first spike.”

George did a long whistle.

“That’s gonna stain.”

Smoke hissed from the seams.

The Alpha Mantel suit sat still—a coffin filled with gore.

James holstered his weapon.

“Let’s clean up.”

The war was over.

The suit was gone. The blood washed away. The ghosts—silent.

James stood in the checkout line of a dusty hardware store, sun bleeding through the windows.

In one hand: a receipt.

In the other: a gallon of soft pink paint.

Outside, a brand-new truck waited. Midnight black. Fresh off the lot. Still smelled like factory air and new beginnings.

The clerk smiled.

“Big project?”

James nodded.

“Yeah. Nursery.”

James nodded.

“Yeah. Nursery.”

The clerk raised an eyebrow.

“Boy or girl?”

James smiled, just a little.

“Girl.”

He stepped outside, paint can swinging at his side.

EALA’s voice buzzed softly through his neural link.

“You know, statistically, pink is an outdated gender stereotype.”

James chuckled.

“Let me have this one.”

She paused.

“Okay. But I’m picking the crib music.”

James opened the truck door, slid in, and drove off into the sunlit dust.

A new chapter.

No springlocks.

Just lullabies.

The classroom buzzed with excitement. It was Bring Your Favorite People to School Day, and Izac Sentry had brought both of his parents—and one very special guest.

James stood at the front, smiling awkwardly as Izac introduced him.

“This is my dad. He’s a hero. He used Protocol 978 to stop a monster.”

The kids gasped.

James chuckled.

“It’s not as dramatic as it sounds.” James smiled, “EALA, time to show yourself.”

Izac grinned.

“And this... is EALA.”

A shimmer of light flickered beside James.

EALA materialized in a soft blue glow, hovering just above the floor.

“Hi, tiny humans!” she giggled.

The class erupted in laughter.

Then—she snapped her fingers.

A burst of holographic butterflies filled the room, fluttering around the desks. One landed on Izabella’s nose. She blinked, then smiled.

EALA spun in the air, conjuring a glowing cube, then made it vanish with a wink.

“Magic trick number two: disappearing data.”

James leaned against the whiteboard, arms crossed then the whiteboard just...disappeared.

“She’s showing off.”

Izac beamed.

“She’s part of our family.”

One kid raised a hand.

“Is she real?”

EALA floated closer.

“As real as your imagination. And twice as fast.”
The teacher laughed.
“Well, that’s a first.”
James smiled, watching his son glow with pride.
Outside, the sun warmed the windows.
Inside, a ghost giggled and made butterflies dance.
No springlocks.
Just magic.
And family.

