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## Chapter 5: Confrontation in the Medical Lab

Red presses her back against a refrigerated storage unit, fingers tight around a sealed data drive.

Axel stands a few meters away, facing the lab's main entrance, his hand hovering near a compact stun baton clipped at his hip.

Suddenly, the heavy door slides open with a pneumatic hiss;

Wolf enters, moving with mechanical precision, synthetic boots scraping against the tile.

Wolf's eyes scan the room, locking onto Red.

'Hand over the drive,' Wolf demands, voice flat and metallic.

Wolf steps forward, gloved hand outstretched, his gaze unblinking and cold. "Hand over the drive. Now. You know what happens if you don't." —Wolf

Axel steps between Red and Wolf, flipping the baton open with a sharp flick, his stance low and defensive.

Red glances at Axel, weighing trust as Wolf advances, knocking aside a rolling tray with a calculated sweep of his arm.

The tray crashes to the floor, scattering surgical shears and glass ampoules.

The hum of a security drone echoes from the corridor, signaling incoming reinforcements.

Wolf lunges at Axel, shoving him sideways into a cabinet door, which rattles against its hinges.

Red darts left, searching for a path to the emergency exit, her breath fogging in the cold air as she clutches the drive.

Axel regains his footing, swinging the baton at Wolf's shoulder, producing a dull clang and a brief flicker of sparks.

Wolf pivots, unaffected, and turns his attention back to Red, advancing with relentless focus.

Red spots a keypad beside the exit and rushes toward it, fingers fumbling over the slick plastic buttons.

The door panel beeps;

Wolf surges forward, arm outstretched.

Axel intercepts, grappling Wolf's wrist, buying Red just enough time to hit the unlock code.

The exit slides open and Red slips through, pulling Axel after her, leaving Wolf momentarily blocked as the door seals with a hydraulic thud.

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Outside the lab, alarms blared through the corridor, echoing the chaos they had left behind. Red and Axel pressed onward, adrenaline masking exhaustion as they navigated the labyrinth of maintenance tunnels. Every footstep was shadowed by the knowledge that security teams would be rerouting to cut off their escape. With the data upload complete but Wolf still in pursuit, their only hope was to reach the spaceport rendezvous before their enemies did—unaware that danger was already waiting for them on the other side.

## Chapter 2: Ambush at the Spaceport

Red crouched behind a crate stamped with the colony's insignia, her gloved hand gripping the sealed data drive inside her jacket.

She scanned the bay, searching for a clear route to the maintenance hatch as Shuttle Pilot 1, a burly man with a scarred cheek, raised a comm to his mouth and muttered, 'Suspicious movement, sector C.

Possible tech runner.

' His partner, Shuttle Pilot 2, shifted his weight and tapped the butt of a stun pistol, eyes sweeping the shadows for signs of a target.

As a security drone hovered closer, blue lights strobing across the crates, Red slipped a small EMP chip from her belt pouch and pressed it against the drone's access panel when it drifted within reach.

The drone's lights sputtered and it dropped, clattering to the deck.

Alarms blared.

From the far end of the bay, a tall figure in a grey utility suit—Wolf in disguise—strode toward the commotion, eyes locked on Red.

Wolf's gait was precise, motion controlled, voice cold as he barked, 'All personnel, stand clear.

' Red darted for the side corridor, boots slapping the metal grating, while the pilots ducked for cover and Wolf advanced, calculating the shortest interception path.

The outcome: Red disabled a security drone and evaded initial detection, but Wolf identified her location, escalating the pursuit.

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Red's desperate flight through the labyrinthine corridors left her breathless and exposed, each echoing footstep drawing Wolf closer. As security teams mobilized in response to the pilots' report, Red slipped through a maintenance hatch, her mind racing for a way out. Hidden in the shadows,

she caught her breath just long enough to notice a flicker on her wrist communicator—a new encrypted transmission pulsing urgently. The danger was far from over, but with the coded message now in hand, Red realized her next move would require even sharper instincts.

## Chapter 1: Red Receives a Coded Mission

Red approached the sealed lab door, boots clinking softly on the grated floor as she paused to scan her wristband at the security panel.

Dr.

Willow emerged from the lab, her lab coat smudged with graphite stains, clutching a slim, opaque data drive.

She glanced up and down the empty corridor, then pressed the drive into Red's palm.

Speaking in a hushed voice, Dr.

Willow emphasized the utmost secrecy of Red's mission, explaining that the drive contains a complete map of the station's core systems—information vital to Grandmother's work and dangerous if intercepted.

Dr. Ruby Hood (Dr. Willow) Willow leans in closer, her eyes scanning the dim corridor to make sure they're alone, her tone low and urgent. Willow leaned in, her presence tense in the dimly lit corridor. Her eyes flicked over Red's shoulder, scanning the shadows to ensure their privacy before she pressed the small, sealed drive into Red's palm. Her voice dropped to an urgent whisper, every word heavy with caution. Red felt the weight of Willow's gaze as she insisted that the task must be handled quietly—no one else could know. The drive, Willow stressed, held everything Grandmother needed to complete her work. It was imperative that Red go straight to Grandmother on the surface and never let the drive out of sight. The severity in Willow's tone left no room for doubt; she needed Red to understand just how critical this delivery was. Red clutches the drive tightly, glancing nervously toward the hatch that leads to the planet's surface. Red's fingers curled tightly around the cold edge of the data drive, her pulse thumping in her wrist as she glanced toward the hatch—the only thing separating her from the forbidden world below. Willow's whispered instructions still echoed in her ears, urgent and secretive. Red drew a shaky breath, steadying herself despite the uncertainty twisting in her chest. "I'll get this to Grandmother," she promised, voice low but resolute, determined that nothing would stand in her way. Still, her gaze flickered back to Willow, searching for answers as she hesitated. "But... what's on this drive that makes it so dangerous?" she asked, unable to mask the worry that crept into her words. Dr. Ruby Hood (Dr. Willow) Willow leans in closer, her eyes scanning the corridor for any sign of eavesdroppers. Dr. Willow leaned in, her breath barely a whisper as she pressed the cool metal of the data drive into Red's palm. Her gaze darted down the empty corridor, sharp and searching, as if shadows themselves might conceal traitors. "This contains a complete map of the station's core systems," she murmured, her voice taut with urgency. "If it falls into the wrong hands, everything we've built here—every bit of it—could be lost." The weight of her words settled heavily in the air, and for a moment, Willow's guarded eyes met Red's, silently pleading for absolute trust. Red clutches the drive tighter, eyes searching Willow's face for any hint of doubt or hesitation. Red's fingers curled protectively around the data drive, her knuckles pale against the dim cabin light. She searched Willow's face, scanning for any flicker of uncertainty that might betray the gravity

of what she'd just been asked to do. "No one's getting near this," she promised, voice low but steady. Still, a knot of doubt tightened in her chest. "But... how will I even recognize Grandmother on the surface?" Red's gaze flicked down, then back up, trying to read Willow's expression. "Is there something I'm supposed to call her, or will she already be expecting me?" Dr. Ruby Hood (Dr. Willow) Willow places the drive into Red's hand, her gaze stern but trusting. Willow pressed the cool, sealed drive into Red's palm, her fingers lingering a moment longer than necessary—a silent plea for caution and trust. Leaning in close, her voice barely more than a whisper, she fixed Red with a steady, resolute gaze. "She'll be waiting by the old willow tree near the landing site," Willow murmured, scanning the dim corridor for any signs of eavesdroppers. "Look for the silver cloak. When you see her, just say, 'the roots remember.' That's how she'll know it's you." The weight of the data drive seemed heavier with Willow's words, and Red could feel the urgency thrumming beneath the scientist's calm exterior. Red, determined but seeking clarity, asked about the drive's contents and how to safely meet Grandmother.

Dr. Ruby Hood (Dr. Willow) Dr. Ruby Hood swiftly taps out a coded sequence on Red's wristband, her eyes flicking to the dark shapes lurking above as she leans in, voice barely above a whisper. Dr. Ruby Hood's fingers danced across Red's wristband, inputting a coded sequence with practiced speed. Her eyes never stopped scanning the shadows above, wary of the silent drones gliding through the darkness. She leaned in, her words barely audible, breath warm against Red's ear. The coordinates were sent—she didn't need to say it aloud; the warning was clear in her tight, urgent whisper. Any mention could draw the drones' notice, and she knew better than to risk it. "Keep your head down," she murmured, her gaze flickering once more to the ceiling where the machines prowled. "Trust your wristband. One wrong move and they'll be on us in seconds." Red Dr. Hood glances upward, scanning for drone silhouettes, then subtly tilts her head toward a narrow alleyway, signaling Red to get moving. Dr. Hood's eyes flicked upward, scanning the sky for the telltale glint of patrol drones. Her hand never paused as she keyed a coded destination into Red's wristband, the green glow of the screen reflected in both their faces. With a barely perceptible tilt of her head, she indicated the narrow alleyway ahead—a silent command for Red to move. In a low, urgent murmur, almost lost beneath the thrum of distant engines, she reminded her daughter to stick to the shadows and move only when the lights shifted. Their comms would be her guide through the labyrinth below, but now, Dr. Hood cautioned, silence was their only shield. Red's heart thudded in her chest as she swallowed her nerves and stepped toward the alley's darkness, trusting her mother's instructions to keep her unseen. Dr.

Willow instructed Red to find Grandmother waiting by the old willow tree near the landing site, wearing a silver cloak, and to use the phrase 'the roots remember' as identification.

She warned Red about surveillance, sending silent coordinates to Red's wristband and advising her to move stealthily and avoid detection.

Red, slipping the drive into her inner jacket pocket, adjusted her hood and prepared to begin her mission, trusting Willow's guidance and determined to fulfill her task.

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As Red vanished into the cargo hold, the colony's corridors hummed with tension and anticipation, but far above the surface, another figure was quietly making his move. While Red descended toward danger, unseen eyes and cunning minds began to weave their own plans within the orbital station's labyrinth. The balance of secrecy was about to shift, for the colony itself was not as secure as it seemed—someone else was already inside, and his presence would soon change everything.

## Chapter 4: Wolf Infiltrates the Colony

Red and Axel crouch behind a crate, monitoring the corridor and security drone patterns.

Red notes the precise timing of camera loops and proposes taking the east corridor, moving in the shadows.

As they advance, Red spots a motion sensor activation and quickly adjusts their route, instructing Axel to stay low and alert for changes.

When a security drone flags their trail earlier than expected, Red realizes their planned route is compromised.

Axel suggests abandoning the east corridor and rerouting through maintenance, warning they have under three minutes before lockdown.

Red decides they must split up to maximize their chances: she will jam the maintenance sensors, while Axel clears the hatch for their escape.

Their objective remains to reach the shuttle bay, but now with a riskier, time-critical plan that involves dividing their efforts.

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With every second counting down, Red and Axel exchange a final, urgent glance before slipping in opposite directions—each carrying the weight of their mission. As alarms echo through the labyrinthine corridors and the echoes of the Wolfbot’s alert reverberate above, their only hope now rests on a desperate gamble. The path to the shuttle bay is no longer a route to safety, but a race against inevitable pursuit—and the danger waiting for them aboard has only just begun.

## Chapter 3: Sabotage on the Shuttle

Red approaches the cargo bay with urgency, directly appealing to Shuttle Pilot 1 for immediate boarding, citing imminent danger to the station.

The pilots, motivated by the bounty but wary of increased security scrutiny, debate whether to help her or turn her in, ultimately agreeing to assist if they can minimize risk and avoid detection.

Shuttle Pilot 1 Glances over shoulder at Shuttle Pilot 2, fingers drumming nervously on the ramp control panel. Shuttle Pilot 1’s gaze flicked warily over his shoulder at his companion, fingers tapping an anxious rhythm against the ramp control panel. “You seen the update?” he murmured, voice low and edged with urgency. The latest bounty had just doubled, and that meant someone out there wanted the mark desperately. His eyes scanned the bustling spaceport, calculating risk and reward. “If we’re smart, we’re out before the crowd catches wind,” he added, pragmatism overriding any thrill for danger. He didn’t fancy dodging more than blaster fire, and the thought of getting caught in the crossfire set his nerves jangling. Shuttle Pilot 2 glances sharply toward the docking bay, tightening their grip on the comm and nodding once to signal readiness. Shuttle Pilot 2 shot a sharp glance toward the docking bay, his knuckles whitening around the comm as he nodded once—ready. He edged closer to his partner, voice low and urgent, but every word honed with self-interest. “We move now,” he insisted, eyes darting for signs of trouble. “Split the cut, and keep our names off the chatter—unless you’re keen on painting targets on both our

backs.” Even as he spoke, his gaze flicked to the shadows, always alert for anyone who might overhear or get in their way. Shuttle Pilot 1 glances over their shoulder, scanning the landing bay for newcomers. Shuttle Pilot 1 cast a wary glance over his shoulder, eyes narrowing as he scanned the landing bay for any unfamiliar faces. He kept his voice low, barely more than a whisper as he paced near the entry ramp. “Split works,” he muttered, pragmatism edging his words. “But we stick to shadows—last thing I need is the Guild sniffing around.” His gaze lingered on a group of newcomers, suspicion sharpening his movements, always calculating the risk against the promise of a fresh bounty. Red produces a detailed manifest and claims to have override codes that could prevent a station-wide lockdown, further convincing the pilots of the seriousness of her mission.

Axel, now posing as a supervisor rather than a covert accomplice, scrutinizes Red’s paperwork, expressing suspicion about discrepancies, but Red provides plausible explanations and offers to show supporting correspondence.

Axel asks Red to stay put while he verifies the information, maintaining a cautious but not overtly adversarial stance.

Red halts just short of the hatch, breath quick and eyes darting past Shuttle Pilot 1, searching for any chance to slip by. Red skidded to a halt just shy of the hatch, her breath coming in shallow bursts. Shuttle Pilot 1 loomed in front of her, eyes narrowing in suspicion as he barred her way. Red’s gaze darted past him, cataloging every potential opening, every sliver of hope for escape. Desperation edged her voice as she blurted out, “Please, I need to get inside—there’s no time to explain!” The words tumbled out, urgent and insistent, her resolve barely masking the tremor of uncertainty beneath. Shuttle Pilot 1 plants a firm hand on the hatch control, eyes narrowing as they block Red’s way. Shuttle Pilot 1 planted a firm hand on the hatch control, eyes narrowing as Red darted toward the shuttle’s service hatch. He stepped sideways, blocking her path with practiced ease, gaze sweeping over her like he was measuring the risk against the potential bounty. “Not so fast—nobody boards without clearance,” he said, voice low but edged with suspicion. “Especially not after what happened on Deck 3.” Red squares her shoulders, voice low and urgent, eyes locked on the pilot as she inches closer to the hatch. Red squared her shoulders, refusing to let the tremor in her voice betray the uncertainty fluttering in her chest. The pilot stepped into her path, broad-shouldered and wary, eyes scanning her up and down as if searching for a weakness. Red’s gaze didn’t waver. She edged closer to the hatch, clutching the data drive in her palm like a lifeline. “If you don’t let me through right now,” she said, her voice low but urgent, “everyone on this station could be in danger.” The words pressed between them—unmistakable, desperate, and true. Shuttle Pilot 1 squares their shoulders and tightens their grip on the hatch handle, blocking Red’s way. Squaring their shoulders, Shuttle Pilot 1 planted themselves firmly in front of the hatch, their grip tightening on the handle as Red darted closer. Eyes narrowed, the pilot gave her a slow, calculating once-over, every muscle tense with suspicion. “Danger from what, exactly?” they demanded, voice low and wary. “Unless you tell me what’s going on, I’m not moving.” The words came out clipped and unyielding—a clear message that no one passed without answers or incentive. Red glances nervously over her shoulder, voice low but urgent, hands clenched tight at her sides. Red’s breath came quick as she darted toward the shuttle’s service hatch, only to find Shuttle Pilot 1 blocking her way, his eyes narrowing in suspicion as he scanned her up and down. She glanced over her shoulder, heart pounding, uncertain who might be following, and when she spoke, her voice was low but urgent, clenched hands betraying her anxiety. She hesitated for a fraction of a second—she knew that revealing too much could spell disaster—but forced herself to meet his gaze. If she said too much, she risked making things worse, but if he refused her entry,

there might not be a station left for them to argue about. Shuttle Pilot 1 narrows their eyes, body tense, one hand hovering near the comm panel to call for backup. Shuttle Pilot 1 narrowed their eyes, muscles taut beneath the worn fabric of their flight suit as Red darted toward the shuttle's service hatch. They blocked her path, gaze sweeping over her with practiced suspicion, one hand hovering near the comm panel—ready to call for backup at the slightest provocation. “You’re asking me to trust you with everyone’s lives—give me one good reason I should,” they demanded, voice low and steady, every word edged with pragmatic caution. Red holds up a small device, hand trembling but eyes locked on the pilot, daring him to call her bluff. Red’s hand shook as she brandished the small device, the cool metal pressing into her palm. But her gaze never wavered from the pilot blocking the service hatch. She forced her voice to stay steady, daring him to second-guess her. “I have the override codes,” she said, each word clipped with determination. “And if you stall me any longer, the lockdown protocol will trigger. We’ll both be trapped out here.” Shuttle Pilot 1 narrows their eyes, but steps aside just enough for Red to reach the hatch, hand hovering over the comm panel as a warning. Shuttle Pilot 1 narrowed their eyes, suspicion sharp in the space between them, but nevertheless shifted just enough to let Red edge closer to the hatch. Their hand hovered, unmistakably poised above the comm panel—a silent warning Red couldn’t miss. “Codes or not,” the pilot muttered, voice low and pragmatic, “if you try anything reckless, I’ll sound the emergency alarm—and then we both answer to Command.” The threat hung heavy in the recycled air, a reminder that opportunity here came with consequences, and Pilot 1 wasn’t about to be caught off guard. Red Shuttle Pilot 1 steps aside just enough for Red to squeeze past, eyes narrowed and hand hovering near the console. Shuttle Pilot 1 shifted just enough to let Red slip through, but his eyes remained sharp and untrusting, his hand hovering close to the console as he laid down the rules in a clipped tone. “Fine—but you stay in my line of sight and one wrong move, I pull the alarm.” The warning hung in the air, taut as a tripwire, and Red could feel the weight of his suspicion pressing on her as she edged past, heart hammering against her ribs. The pilots plan to keep their transponder dark and avoid patrols, ready to abort the operation if anything seems amiss.

Red extends the manifest toward Axel, maintaining eye contact and a calm demeanor, though one hand tightens imperceptibly on the folder’s edge. Red extended the manifest toward Axel, meeting his gaze with a steadiness she hoped would mask her nerves. Her grip tightened, almost imperceptibly, on the folder’s edge—a small anchor against the tension thrumming beneath her skin. “Here’s the manifest you requested, Axel,” she said, her voice even, betraying none of the uncertainty fluttering in her chest. “All items are accounted for, with weights and serials cross-checked.” She kept her tone practical, rehearsed, as Axel edged closer, the air between them taut with unspoken suspicion. “If you need any further details,” she added, holding his eyes, “I can walk you through the shipment line by line.” Axel narrows his eyes, folding his arms as he steps even closer, his gaze fixed on Red for any sign of a slip. Axel narrowed his eyes and folded his arms, stepping closer until the sterile light caught the edge of his jaw. His gaze locked onto Red, searching for the faintest flicker of uncertainty. “I appreciate the thoroughness, Red,” he said quietly, his tone measured, almost too polite. “But I can’t help noticing these serial numbers don’t match the inventory tags from our last checkpoint.” The words hung in the air, edged with suspicion. He angled his head just so, waiting—expectant, unblinking—for Red to explain. Red maintains a calm demeanor, but a slight tightening of their grip on the manifest betrays a flicker of anxiety, while Axel folds his arms and narrows his eyes, leaning in as if daring Red to slip up. Red kept her voice steady, producing the falsified cargo manifest with practiced ease. She felt the smooth surface of the paper beneath her fingertips, gripping it just a fraction tighter than usual—a

subtle tell she hoped Axel wouldn't notice. He folded his arms, eyes narrowing as he leaned in, his posture radiating suspicion and readiness to pounce at the slightest misstep.

She met his gaze without flinching, her words measured and controlled. There'd been a last-minute substitution from the supplier, she explained, so she had updated the manifest accordingly. If Axel wanted to see proof, she added, she could pull up the correspondence right then. Each word was calculated, Red's mind racing ahead to anticipate his next question, even as her heart thudded against her ribs in silent warning. Axel narrows his eyes, subtly shifting his stance to block Red's path, his hand hovering near his comm—just in case. Axel's gaze sharpened as he edged closer, his presence suddenly commanding the narrow corridor. Without a word, he shifted, subtly angling his body to block Red's path, his hand hovering near his comm as if expecting trouble. "That won't be necessary just yet, Red," he said quietly, his tone firm but not unkind. "But I'm going to need you to stay right here while I verify a few things myself." The words were calm, almost casual, yet there was no mistaking the underlying caution—the careful reserve of someone who had learned to trust his instincts more than promises. Red keeps their gaze steady on Axel, hands folded calmly atop the manifest, while a faint muscle twitches at their jaw. Red kept her gaze steady on Axel, even as he inched closer, the tension in the small cargo bay thickening with every step he took. Her hands remained calmly folded atop the forged manifest, betraying nothing but a faint, involuntary twitch at her jaw. "Take all the time you need, Axel; I'm not going anywhere," she said, voice unwavering, willing herself to sound more composed than she felt. Each word was carefully measured, offering no hint of the uncertainty bubbling beneath her resourceful exterior. The alliance between Red, Axel, and the pilots forms out of mutual necessity and distrust, rather than a coordinated ruse, and their cooperation hinges on the perceived threat rather than bounty greed alone.

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As the shuttle's hatch sealed behind them and the engines rumbled to life, Red, Axel, and the pilots faced the uncertain dark beyond the station—united not by trust, but by the fragile hope that escape might offer a second chance.