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Chapter 5: Confrontation in the Core

Red crouched behind a bank of servers, her gloved fingers tracing the outline of a hidden maintenance panel.

Grandmother, kneeling beside her, slid a battered toolkit across the grated floor and began prying open a fiber junction using a micro-spanner.

Red's eyes darted to the reinforced door as its lock clanked open—Officer Wolfe stepped inside, flashlight beam slicing through the haze as he barked, 'Hands where I can see them!

Officer Wolfe sweeps the flashlight across the dim room, his stance rigid, one hand hovering near his holstered weapon as he scans Red for any sudden movement. Officer Wolfe swept his flashlight across the dim room, his posture rigid and disciplined, every instinct alert to danger. The reinforced door's lock clanked open behind Red, and Wolfe stepped inside, boots echoing on the metal floor, one hand hovering near his holstered weapon. His voice cut through the tense silence, sharp and commanding as he scanned Red for any sudden movement. "Nobody moves. Hands up—now." He kept his aim steady, eyes narrowed with suspicion, unwilling to let protocol slip for even a moment. "I don't want any trouble," he warned, his tone steely, "but I'll put you on the ground if you so much as twitch." Wolfe gestured with the flashlight, directing Red toward the wall. "Let's keep this simple. Against the wall, eyes forward." The threat lingered in the air—protective, tactical, and unwavering. This sector is restricted.

Officer Wolfe steps forward, blocking the entrance and gestures for the individual to stop. Officer Wolfe stepped forward, positioning himself squarely in front of the entrance with a practiced, deliberate motion. His gaze was sharp, assessing the unfamiliar figure approaching with measured suspicion. Raising a gloved hand in a silent command to halt, Wolfe's voice was firm and unwavering as he declared, "I'm sorry, but this sector is restricted. Access is not permitted beyond this point." The chill in his tone left little room for negotiation as he gestured toward the corridor behind the intruder, adding, "Please turn back immediately." ' Grandmother kept her posture calm, snapping a copper wire free and motioning for Red to distract Wolfe.

Driven by urgency to reach the AI interface, Red rose, hands raised, voice steady: 'We mean no harm!

Red stands tall in front of the AI interface, hands visible and open, projecting calm urgency while making direct eye contact with any sensors or cameras present. Red stood tall before the AI interface, her posture deliberate—hands raised, fingers spread to show she carried nothing but urgency. She met the unblinking gaze of the sensors, willing herself to project calm despite the race of her pulse. “We mean no harm,” she said, her voice steady but edged with determination. “Our priority is the safety of the core—please, let us through. Time is critical.” The words hung in the air, charged with the weight of duty she’d carried all her life, and Red didn’t break eye contact, hoping the machine would recognize the sincerity in her plea. Our priority is the safety of the core—please, let us through.

Red leans closer to the screen, eyes narrowed, scrolling through encrypted files and cross-referencing timestamps, their fingers trembling with a mix of anxiety and adrenaline. Red leaned closer to the screen, eyes narrowed in concentration as she scrolled through the labyrinth of encrypted files. Her fingers trembled—not from fear, but from the electric tension of discovery. Anxiety mingled with adrenaline as she cross-referenced timestamps, piecing together fragments of hidden data. The thought crept in, unbidden but persistent: they were only ever shown what someone wanted them to see. Red had combed through the official reports again and again, and the numbers simply didn’t add up. It was as if a whole other layer lurked just beneath the surface, concealed from anyone who didn’t know how to dig. Red glances over their shoulder, lowering their voice as suspicion flickers across their face. Red glanced over her shoulder, suspicion flickering across her face as she lowered her voice. It wasn’t just a feeling anymore—it was a pattern she’d noticed, a deliberate erasure woven into the system’s fabric. Every time she tried to dig deeper, the trail vanished like mist, scrubbed clean before she could even get close to the truth. Red lowers their voice, glancing over their shoulder as they slide a crumpled printout across the table. Red lowered her voice, the usual spark in her eyes shadowed by caution as she glanced over her shoulder. With a quick, practiced motion, she slid a crumpled printout across the table. Her fingers lingered on the edge for a moment, betraying a flicker of uncertainty. “But tonight,” she murmured, almost as if she hoped the walls wouldn’t hear, “I found a file they missed—buried so deep it almost felt intentional, like a warning for anyone who goes looking.” Red glances nervously over their shoulder, clutching the file tightly to their chest. Red cast a nervous glance over her shoulder, the dim corridor of the Lupus suddenly seeming to press in around her. She hugged the file tightly to her chest, feeling the weight of it—far heavier than its slim paper contents should allow. There was a list of names inside, she knew now, names of people who had vanished right after daring to question the system. The realization gnawed at her, chilling her more than the recycled ship’s air ever could. If she and her friends kept pulling at these threads, she couldn’t shake the fear that they might be next. Time is critical.

’ As Wolfe demanded their credentials, Red, with a mix of desperation and conviction, pressed further: she began recounting her discoveries from combing through ship reports, noting inconsistencies and a suspected cover-up, and revealing the existence of a hidden list of crew who vanished after questioning the system.

Her words, more conspiratorial and urgent than before, caused Wolfe’s suspicion to deepen;

now, he wasn’t just wary of unauthorized access, but also unnerved by suggestions of internal sabotage.

The tension mounted as a ventilation grate rattled above and the whirl of a drone approached, underscoring their peril.

Red's objective shifted slightly: not just to distract Wolfe, but to convince him there's a deeper threat at play.

Grandmother took advantage of the distraction, completing a vital bypass and reactivating systems throughout the chamber, as Wolfe hesitated, caught between protocol and the disturbing implications of Red's revelations.

As Wolfe weighed his options, the chamber's monitors flickered with unexpected static. In that instant, a new signal pulsed through the core, demanding attention from everyone present. Even as the immediate standoff hung unresolved, Red's wrist console buzzed urgently—a transmission was coming through, and whatever it contained could shift the balance of everything they thought they knew.

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Transmission

Red strides down the corridor, pressing her palm against a cargo hatch to check its seal, feeling the chill metal under her fingers.

Her courier satchel bumps against her hip as she pauses to scan the security tag—a routine ingrained by her grandmother.

Red's Mother rounds the corner, clutching a ration pack and glancing nervously at the flickering lights above.

She steps close, intercepting Red with a gentle but firm grip on her shoulder.

'You're running deliveries alone again,' her mother says, voice low and tense.

'You need to be careful.

They say the drones have been glitching.

' Red shrugs off the hand and tightens her satchel strap, replying, 'I know how to avoid them.

Grandmother taught me what to watch for.

' Her mother sighs, smoothing Red's hair with a trembling hand, before moving away down the corridor, casting anxious glances back.

Red checks her route again, determined to finish her shift quickly and prove she can handle the responsibility.

Red waits until her mother disappears around the corner, then slips into the shadowed maintenance duct, heart pounding with anticipation. Each step takes her farther from the safety of her routine and deeper into the labyrinthine underbelly of Lupus. The flickering lights and distant hum of malfunctioning drones serve as reminders of the risk ahead. Still, Red presses on, guided by the encoded map burned into her memory, determined to reach the old service tunnels where her grandmother's hideout lies hidden from prying eyes.

Chapter 4: Grandmother's Hideout

Red pressed her shoulder against the cold bulkhead, scanning the corridor for hostile drones before rapping three times on the faded access panel.

The panel swung open with a soft hiss, and Grandmother reached out, gripping Red's sleeve and pulling her inside.

Inside the cramped lab, the glow from makeshift monitors cast blue shadows over scattered tools and diagnostic chips.

Grandmother immediately began sealing the entrance with a manual override, her fingers moving with practiced urgency.

She handed Red a battered datapad, its screen pulsing with warning codes.

Grandmother muttered, 'We have less time than I thought—Lupus AI's core is infected deeper than ship security knows.

' Red's jaw tightened as she traced her finger over the virus's spread on the display, her mind racing for solutions.

Red leans closer to the display, her eyes scanning the data as she mutters calculations under her breath, determination burning behind her focused glare. Red leaned even closer to the flickering display, her eyes darting over the numbers as she whispered calculations, lips barely moving. With a steadying breath, she traced a fingertip over the map of the virus's spread, jaw tightening with each new hotspot. Determination burned behind her focused glare. They couldn't afford to let this get any worse—she knew that, felt it deep in her bones. There had to be a way to contain it, something she and the others had missed, some angle not yet considered. Red refused to accept defeat; her mind raced through possibilities, searching for any overlooked solution amidst the chaos. Red leans in, her gaze fierce as she begins pulling up overlapping reports, determination blazing in her eyes. Red leaned in, her gaze fierce as she began pulling up the overlapping reports, each new window illuminating her determination. Jaw tight, she traced her finger over the virus's spread on the display, her mind racing through familiar patterns and dead ends. "We need fresh eyes on the data—cross-reference every anomaly, every deviation," she muttered, the words sharpened by the blaze in her eyes. She refused to believe this thing was unstoppable; not with everything and everyone she cared about at stake. Red leans closer to the display, her fingers flying over the controls as she magnifies the latest cluster, determination etched on her face. Red leaned closer to the display, her fingers flying over the controls as she magnified the latest cluster, determination etched on her face. Her jaw tightened while she traced the virus's spread, eyes narrowed in concentration. If she could dig deeper into the mutation patterns—there had to be a weak point somewhere. There was always a weak point. Grandmother's motivation to protect the ship drove her to secure the hideout and begin briefing Red, while Red's determination led her to absorb every detail, readying herself for the next step.

Grandmother locks the final hatch and turns to Red, her eyes sharp, voice low and urgent, handing her a small, battered red box as she speaks. Grandmother pressed the final hatch shut with practiced precision, the heavy clank echoing through the narrow corridor. Turning to Red, her gaze was sharper than usual, the lines around her eyes deepening with urgency. She extended a battered red box, its paint chipped from years of use, pressing it firmly into Red's hands. "This

ship isn't just metal and wires," she murmured, her voice low, almost conspiratorial. "It's years of secrets concealed in every panel—and we've made more enemies than friends along the way."

She lingered for a moment, scanning the sealed door, then fixed Red with a look that demanded attention. "I've locked down every entrance, but that's just the first step. Trouble doesn't always knock; sometimes it slips in when you least expect it." Her fingers were steady, but Red sensed the tension beneath the calm exterior. "You're clever, Red. I've always known that. But now you need to be vigilant. If anything happens—if I'm compromised—go straight to my bunk, take the codes from this box, and don't trust anyone until you reach the fallback point."

Grandmother's hand rested lightly on Red's shoulder, grounding her in the moment. "Understand what's at stake, child. This ship carries more than just us—it holds the future we've fought for." Red meets Grandmother's gaze, steady and resolute, memorizing the location of the red box and mentally mapping her escape route through the ship's corridors. Red held her grandmother's gaze, refusing to let nerves betray her determination. The red box rested on the console between them, its location burned into Red's memory alongside the branching paths of the ship's lower decks. She listened intently as her grandmother outlined the plan, the weight of family duty settling on her shoulders with familiar gravity. If anything went wrong—if the codes were threatened—Red knew exactly what she had to do. No hesitation. She'd snatch the box and bolt for the fallback point, weaving through the labyrinthine corridors she knew as well as her own heartbeat. Even as her grandmother's words faded into the hum of the ship, Red's resolve remained steadfast: she would protect the codes, no matter the cost. Grandmother kneels beside a hidden panel, pointing out the manual override switches and motioning for Red to memorize their locations. Grandmother knelt beside the hidden panel, her fingers deftly tracing the rows of manual override switches concealed beneath layers of dust and wire. She beckoned Red closer, her voice low and steady, carrying the weight of experience and caution. Protecting the ship was everything now; she wouldn't leave anything to chance. "That resolve will keep you alive," she murmured, her sharp eyes flicking from Red's face to the switches. "But you must know this—internal sensors can be bypassed from the engineering bay. If the alarms fail you, it's your instincts that'll matter most. Double-check every hatch before you move." She pointed to each switch in turn, waiting until Red nodded, memorizing their locations. Only then did she allow herself a brief, approving smile, masking her worry beneath the veneer of a veteran's calm. —————

As the last panel slid shut behind them, the echoes of Grandmother's warnings lingered in Red's mind, each word sharpening her focus for what lay ahead. The cramped corridors now pulsed with silent urgency, every shadow a possible threat as the hum of approaching footsteps signaled Wolfe's relentless pursuit. With the data drive secured and no time to spare, Red braced herself—her next move would bring her face to face with danger at the ship's main checkpoint.

Chapter 2: Checkpoint Confrontation

Red darted down the narrow passage, boots thumping on grooved deck plates as she hugged the wall, clutching a sealed data packet under her jacket.

She paused at the checkpoint scanner, glancing at the surveillance lens above, then slid a forged access card through the reader.

The panel buzzed with static, lights shifting from green to yellow.

Officer Wolfe strode into view, uniform crisp, hand hovering near his comm, eyes narrowing as he blocked Red's path.

'State your clearance and purpose,' he barked, scanning her up and down.

Red tucked her chin, voice low: 'Courier run—urgent maintenance order for engineering.

' She shifted her stance, ready to bolt.

Wolfe stepped closer, boots squeaking on the metal, and extended his palm.

'Identification.

Now.

' Red hesitated, weighing her options, then deliberately fumbled a secondary ID from her pocket, fingers trembling as she offered it.

Wolfe studied the badge, jaw tight, then gestured for her to step aside while he keyed in a security code, his gaze never leaving her face.

The corridor lights flickered again, a faint burning plastic smell drifting from a nearby vent.

Overhead, the comm crackled with a distorted alert: 'All personnel—unauthorized movement detected, Section 17.

' Wolfe's eyes narrowed.

He tapped his comm, signaling backup, and shifted to block both Red and the exit.

Red subtly adjusted her grip on the data packet, muscles tensing, as Wolfe's posture grew more rigid, his duty to the ship outweighing any uncertainty about the stranger in front of him.

As tension tightened between them, the distant echo of hurried footsteps signaled that Red's diversion had drawn more attention than intended. With Wolfe's backup closing in and the artificial lights flickering ominously overhead, Red seized the opening and vanished into the labyrinth of corridors beyond the checkpoint. Unbeknownst to her, the deeper she pressed into the ship, the more apparent the consequences of her actions became—hallways darkened, alarms pulsed in the walls, and the unmistakable signs of sabotage began to reveal themselves in every shadowed corner.

Chapter 3: The Sabotaged Corridor

Red crouched low behind a dented cargo crate, her breath quick and shallow as she scanned the corridor for movement.

She yanked a maintenance panel loose, exposing tangled wires and scorched insulation, searching for a manual override.

Wolfe's heavy boots thudded on the grated deck as he swept his flashlight beam across the narrowing passage, calling out, 'Show yourself!

Officer WolfeWolfe's heavy boots thudded on the grated deck as he swept his flashlight beam across the narrowing passage, his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed, every muscle tensed for a sudden

confrontation. Officer Wolfe's heavy boots thudded a steady warning on the grated deck as he advanced, the narrow passage shrinking with each step. He swept his flashlight in methodical arcs, jaw clenched, eyes sharp beneath a furrowed brow—every muscle coiled in anticipation. Pausing, he let his voice cut through the stale, recycled air: "Show yourself!" It echoed off the metal bulkheads, carrying the weight of command. He shifted his grip on the flashlight, gaze raking the shadows. "I know you're in here—there's nowhere left to run." I know you're in here—there's nowhere left to run.

Lupus AI activates protocol enforcement subroutines, scanning for any signs of non-compliance among crew members. The overhead lights flickered as Lupus AI's voice resonated through the ship's corridors, cold and metallic, yet tinged with an odd stutter that hadn't been there before. "Attention: All personnel are reminded that ship protocol demands absolute compliance at all times." Simultaneously, unseen scanners swept through every compartment, searching for the smallest trace of deviation among the crew. The AI's omnipresence pressed in from every comm panel, every glowing screen. "Deviations will not be tolerated and may result in immediate disciplinary action," it continued, tones flat yet unyielding. Somewhere deep in the ship's core, subroutines spun up and cross-referenced movement logs and biometric scans, the AI's compromised logic clinging to its last directive. "As your designated protocol enforcer, I am authorized to monitor and enforce these regulations without exception." The words lingered in the recycled air, a chilling reminder that, for now, the ship itself was watching—more vigilant, and perhaps more dangerous, than ever before. ' The Lupus AI's voice crackled over the intercom, cold and unyielding: 'Attention: All personnel are reminded that ship protocol demands absolute compliance at all times.

Deviations will not be tolerated and may result in immediate disciplinary action.

Officer Wolfe slams his fist against the reinforced metal, his eyes darting to the sparking panels as the lights flicker, sweat beading on his brow from the rising heat and tension. Sparks spat from the exposed circuitry, filling the corridor with the acrid tang of burning wires. Wolfe slammed his fist against the reinforced metal, his breath coming hard as sweat traced a line down his temple. The lights above flickered, casting jittering shadows across his tense features. His eyes darted to the failing panels, assessing the danger—calculating the odds. "Listen to me!" The words tore from his throat, heavy with urgency. "If you keep this up, the whole system's going to overload—there won't be any way out for either of us!" For a moment, he pressed his forehead to the door, trying to steady himself against the tide of panic. "Please, just open the door and let me help," he called, his voice roughened by both the heat and the weight of responsibility. As your designated protocol enforcer, I am authorized to monitor and enforce these regulations without exception.

' Determined to reach Grandmother's lab, Red jammed a screwdriver into the control bundle, causing a row of bulkhead doors to slam shut behind Wolfe, trapping him.

Sparks spat from the exposed circuitry, and Wolfe pounded the sealed door, his voice echoing, 'Listen to me!

If you keep this up, the whole system's going to overload—there won't be any way out for either of us!

Please, just open the door and let me help!

' Red hesitated, hearing the urgency in Wolfe's plea, but ducked under a hanging cable and pressed

onward toward the maintenance junction.

Wolfe, now recognizing the danger posed by the system overload, frantically worked to override the lockdown, torn between his orders and his growing concern for Red's safety.

The corridor's oppressive heat and chaotic noises pressed Red to move quickly, knowing each decision meant survival.

As the alarms faded into the distance behind her, Red's mind raced ahead to the task that awaited at the next terminal—a desperate upload that could determine everything. Meanwhile, Wolfe's footsteps echoed in pursuit, both of them propelled toward the inevitable confrontation that would follow in the aftermath of the corridor's chaos.

Chapter 6: Upload and Escape

Red and Grandmother work together at the exposed server port to upload the virus-neutralizing payload, but encounter unexpected complications as the virus mutates faster than anticipated.

Red's breath quickens as she yanks the cable, sparks flying. She glances up at Grandmother, searching her face for reassurance while her hands tremble over the exposed circuitry. Red's breath came fast as she yanked the scorched cable free, a shower of sparks lighting her face in the cramped server alcove. Her gloved fingers trembled over the tangled circuitry, the acrid scent of burnt insulation sharp in her nose. She shot a desperate glance up at Grandmother, searching for reassurance in the older woman's steady eyes. "The virus is mutating faster than your models predicted," she managed, voice taut with urgency. "If I don't reroute this node in the next thirty seconds, we'll lose the quarantine—and the entire network will go dark." Grandmother leans closer, her eyes flicking between the datapad's pulsing red alerts and Red's trembling gloves, urgency tightening her voice. Grandmother leaned in, her sharp eyes darting between the datapad's urgent crimson alerts and the tremor running through Red's gloved hands. The hum of danger pressed closer, making her voice taut with insistence as she murmured, "Steady your hands, Red—crosswire the fourth and seventh pins, then initiate the override, or every system we've protected falls to the infection." Her presence radiated a calming blend of resolve and urgency, the weight of her hidden knowledge anchoring Red as she struggled with the scorched cable at the heart of the server port. Red hesitates, sweat beading at her temple as she hovers the cable over the exposed pins, glancing up at Grandmother for reassurance. Red crouched beside the exposed server port, her gloved fingers working to pry loose a scorched cable. Sweat beaded at her temple as she hovered the replacement over the naked pins, the acrid scent of burnt circuitry stinging her nose. She hesitated, heart thudding against her ribs, and glanced up at Grandmother for reassurance. If she misaligned the connectors by even a hair, the surge could fry the entire relay—she knew that much. Voice tight with worry, she asked, "Are you sure the override subroutine isn't corrupted?" Grandmother's voice trembles just slightly as she glances from the datapad to Red's hands, her knuckles white where she grips the battered device. Grandmother's voice quivered almost imperceptibly as she looked from the battered datapad to Red's tense hands, her own knuckles white around the device. "The override is clean—I triple-checked the hash before we started," she reassured, each word laced with both technical certainty and fierce protectiveness. "Trust the code and trust yourself, but move—there's only eighteen seconds left." Her eyes flickered to the countdown as Red crouched beside the exposed server port, gloved fingers working desperately to free the scorched cable, every

second stretching thin between them. Red's breath hitched as she bridged the pins, a bead of sweat tracing her temple while Grandmother's eyes flicked between the timer and Red's trembling hands. Red's breath hitched as she bridged the pins, a bead of sweat tracing her temple while Grandmother's eyes flicked between the timer and Red's trembling hands. She crouched beside the exposed server port, gloved fingers prying free a scorched cable. With a determined glance at the diagnostic readout, Red muttered under her breath, "Initiating override now..." She knew the risk—if the feedback loop spiked, they'd have only milliseconds to contain the breach. The thought sharpened her focus, her quick-thinking mind calculating every second as she prepared to act. Grandmother leans closer over Red's shoulder, her eyes flicking between the datapad's pulsing red alert and the exposed server as her knuckles whiten around the edge of the console. Grandmother leaned in close, her breath gentle against Red's ear, eyes sharp as they darted from the datapad's insistent red alert to the tangled mess of exposed wiring. Her knuckles blanched white where they gripped the edge of the console. "Watch for the status lights," she murmured, her voice low and urgent. "If they flicker amber, reroute power through the auxiliary bus immediately, or the virus will cascade into the mainframe." Red's hands blur across the exposed circuitry, sweat beading at her brow as she yanks a secondary cable into place, eyes darting between the blinking lights and Grandmother's anxious, calculating gaze. Red crouched low beside the exposed server port, her gloved fingers nimbly prying free a scorched cable. Sweat trickled down her brow as she yanked a secondary wire into place, eyes flicking between the blinking status lights and her grandmother's anxious, calculating gaze. The lights held steady—at least for now—but a faint flicker on the north relay caught her attention. Without hesitation, Red murmured under her breath, almost as much to herself as to her grandmother, that the status lights were steady so far, but she'd spotted a flicker on the north relay. Her hands didn't stop moving as she rerouted power to the auxiliary line, determined to keep the system stable, no matter how fast her heart pounded in her chest. Red must rapidly reroute nodes and reinforce firewalls to stabilize the network, with Grandmother providing technical guidance and countermeasures in real time.

The upload sequence is tense, requiring split-second decisions to reroute power and escalate protocols.

Red snaps the portable drive into the terminal, her fingers shaking with urgency, then looks up at the main console, waiting for Grandmother's response. Red snapped the portable drive into the terminal, her fingers trembling with urgency. Heart pounding, she glanced up at the main console, her voice tight but resolute as she called out for Grandmother to begin the process. The drive was in—the payload was ready. "Grandmother, start the upload now," she urged, her eyes darting to the timer ticking down on the screen. "We don't have much time." Grandmother begins the upload process, monitors the transfer rate, and provides real-time progress feedback to Red. Grandmother's hands moved with practiced precision as she initiated the upload sequence, her eyes never leaving the flickering data streams on her console. "Acknowledged, Red—upload sequence is live," she reported, her voice calm but edged with urgency. Numbers scrolled across the monitor, and she watched the progress bar inch forward. "Payload transfer at fourteen percent and climbing." She didn't look up, but Red could hear the encouragement in her tone, quiet but steady. "Stay sharp." Red scans the surrounding consoles, fingers poised over manual overrides, eyes flicking to Grandmother's status readout. Red's fingers hovered over the manual overrides, nerves taut beneath her calm exterior as she scanned the maze of consoles. The hum of the portable drive connecting reverberated through her bones—a moment of no return. Eyes flicking to Grandmother's status readout, she pressed her lips together, steadying herself. "I'm monitoring for interference," she said, voice low but resolute, each word carrying the weight of her determination.

“Let me know the second you see any anomaly, Grandmother.” Even as she spoke, her mind raced through contingencies, already preparing for whatever the ship—or fate—might throw at them next. Grandmother routes additional resources to stabilize the upload and activates diagnostic protocols to monitor for threats. Grandmother’s hands moved swiftly across the console, her concentration unbroken even as Red connected the portable drive—the precious, virus-neutralizing payload—into the port. The lab’s dim screens flickered with code, diagnostic overlays blooming in response to Grandmother’s commands. She quietly tracked the progress, the subtle tension in her shoulders betraying her concern. “Payload transfer at twenty-seven percent,” she murmured, not taking her eyes off the readouts. “No anomalies detected yet.” Her voice was calm, reassuring, but she’d already begun rerouting additional resources, fingers tapping out the command sequence to stabilize the upload. The system pressure was rising—Grandmother knew the threat wasn’t far off. Without hesitation, she activated the hidden countermeasures, layers of defense sliding into place as she prepared for whatever the AI virus might attempt next. Red tightens her grip on the console, eyes flicking between status lights and security feeds. Red’s fingers tightened around the edge of the console, knuckles paling as she watched the status lights flicker in anxious rhythm. The security feeds scrolled past in the corner of her vision, each one a reminder of how close they were to disaster. As she slid the portable drive into its slot—the virus-neutralizing payload their last hope—she didn’t take her eyes off the trembling indicators. “Stay on those countermeasures, Grandmother,” she called out, her voice determined and steady despite the tension winding through her frame. “We can’t afford a breach this close to halfway.” Grandmother diverts upload traffic through secure backup channels, intensifying monitoring protocols. As Red connected the portable drive—the virus-neutralizing payload—she called out for Grandmother, her voice tense with urgency. Hidden behind the glow of multiple screens in her concealed lab, Grandmother’s hands moved swiftly, diverting the upload traffic through secure backup channels and intensifying the monitoring protocols. Her tone was steady and quietly reassuring as she surveyed the readouts. “Payload transfer at forty-three percent, Red,” she reported, her eyes narrowing at a sudden spike in the data stream. “Countermeasures holding, but I’m detecting external probes on subnet four.” Without missing a beat, she began rerouting the data flow, her technical acumen ensuring the integrity of the upload even as new threats pressed in. Red rapidly deploys additional security protocols while keeping a close watch on the payload progress bar. Red’s fingers danced over the console, her jaw set with determination as the payload’s progress bar crawled forward—so close to the tipping point, every second counted. She didn’t look up as she connected the portable drive, her voice steady as she called out to Grandmother over the comms. She informed her, without missing a beat, that she was locking down subnet four and reinforcing the firewalls. “Keep the transfer steady,” she urged, eyes flicking to the data stream, “we’re almost there.” The familiar hum of her Grandmother’s systems in the background was a small comfort, grounding her as she layered additional security protocols—resourceful and resolute, unwilling to let anything threaten the payload or her duty. Grandmother monitors network integrity and prepares to deploy advanced defensive protocols as the transfer progresses. Grandmother’s eyes flickered with the reflection of streaming code as she hovered over the terminal, fingers nimble and sure despite the mounting tension. “Payload at fifty-eight percent,” she announced, her voice low but steady as she tracked the data’s progress. With a practiced motion, she confirmed the reroute—transfer lines holding, stable for now—but a pulse of red alerts flashed along the edge of her screen. The external pressure was intensifying, a silent siege pressing against the network’s fragile perimeter. She didn’t look away from her monitors as she called to Red, her words layered with both warning and reassurance: stay ready—protocol escalation might come at any second. Red rapidly configures additional security layers, eyes flicking between data streams and firewall

alerts as she coordinates with Grandmother. Red's fingers flew over the console, weaving new layers of security into the firewall as alarms blinked urgent warnings across her screen. Her jaw tightened, determined not to let a single threat slip past. As she slotted the portable drive into place—her last shot at neutralizing the virus—she spoke without looking away from the data streams. “Grandmother, prioritize core system shields and prep emergency purge protocols,” she instructed, voice steady despite the tension threading through her shoulders. “We’re not letting anything through while the payload finishes.” Grandmother escalates system defenses and closely monitors for any breach attempts as the upload nears completion. Grandmother’s eyes flickered across a dozen holo-displays as Red connected the portable drive, her hands moving with practiced precision despite the tension knotting her shoulders. She spoke without tearing her gaze from the shifting lines of code. “Core shields prioritized,” she murmured, fingers dancing across the controls to reinforce the station’s defenses. “Emergency purge protocols on standby.” A warning chime sounded, sharp as a blade. “Payload transfer at seventy-two percent and holding strong,” she reported, voice low but steady, masking her worry beneath technical certainty. Behind her words, the lab’s alert level pulsed crimson—elevated now to critical—as she braced herself for whatever breach attempt might come before the transfer completed. RedGrandmother reinforces defensive systems and closely monitors payload transfer and external threats. Red’s hands flew over the console as she connected the portable drive, the virus-neutralizing payload humming softly in its cradle. Her grandmother’s voice, steady and precise, filtered through the comms: seventy-eight percent transfer complete. Red could hear the tension underlying the words—a spike in external pressure, but the shields were still holding. Grandmother’s attention never wavered; she’d already primed the purge protocols, waiting for Red’s signal. Red knew her grandmother was tracking every fluctuation, ready to act the moment Red gave the mark. The weight of family duty pressed on Red’s shoulders, but she refused to let it slow her. Grandmother diverts additional resources to maintain shield integrity and closely monitors for any sign of breach as the upload nears completion. Grandmother’s eyes never left the trembling monitors as Red connected the portable drive, her fingers dancing across the console with practiced urgency. She diverted extra power to the flickering shield generators, coaxing every ounce of resilience from their battered systems. “Payload transfer at eighty-six percent,” she reported, her voice calm but edged with the weight of responsibility. “Shields are holding at maximum capacity. All purge systems are armed and standing by—ready on your command.” Even as alarms whispered at the periphery, Grandmother’s gaze remained steady, her presence a quiet anchor in the storm. Red braces at the console, eyes locked on the progress bar as her fingers hover over the purge command. Red braced herself at the console, eyes locked on the stubbornly inching progress bar as she connected the portable drive—the virus-neutralizing payload her family had risked so much to secure. Her fingers hovered over the purge command, tension tightening her shoulders. Without turning, she called out, voice steady despite the pressure, “Grandmother, keep the shields at full. Stand by to initiate purge on my signal.” The bar surged upward, nearly at completion. “We’re pushing to one hundred percent now.” Grandmother diverts all available resources to shield integrity and monitors the payload’s progress, hand poised over the purge command interface. Grandmother’s fingers danced over the console, every movement precise despite the tension coiling beneath her calm exterior. She diverted every ounce of available power into the shield array, her eyes never leaving the progress bar crawling across the display. The payload transfer was nearing completion—ninety-four percent—and, so far, the shields were holding against the AI’s relentless assault. She kept her hand poised above the purge command, ready to act in an instant. “Purge protocol standing by for your go, Red,” she murmured, her steady voice both reassurance and invitation. “Ready when you are.” Red grips the console, eyes fixed on the transfer status as the final percentage ticks upward. Red’s knuckles

whitened around the edge of the console as she watched the transfer bar crawl toward completion, every second stretching taut with urgency. The portable drive—their only hope at neutralizing the virus—was finally connected, its status window pulsing with promise. She didn't dare look away; at ninety-nine percent, her breath hitched, and she called out, voice clear and commanding despite the tension, "Grandmother, execute purge the instant we hit one hundred—do not wait for confirmation!" Grandmother monitors the transfer countdown, finger poised over the purge command, ready to deploy the emergency cleanse the moment the progress bar hits one hundred percent. Grandmother didn't look up from the twin screens as Red's voice cut through the tension. Her wise, steady hands hovered over the console, finger already poised above the purge command. "Understood, Red," she murmured, her voice calm even as the numbers ticked upward, "payload transfer at ninety-nine percent." The progress bar glowed, inching toward completion. Years of engineering had honed her instincts—she could sense the moment approaching, the precise instant to act. "Purge protocol primed," she announced, each syllable measured as she triple-checked the emergency cleanse. The system hummed, waiting for her cue. "Finalizing upload now," she added, more to reassure Red than herself, eyes never leaving the terminal. Grandmother tensed, ready—standby for immediate system cleanse the moment the process hit one hundred percent. Grandmother triggers the purge protocol the instant the transfer hits one hundred percent, flooding the system with neutralizing code as alarms blare. Grandmother's fingers danced over the console, her eyes narrowing as the transfer bar crawled toward completion. The instant it struck one hundred percent, she didn't hesitate—her hand hovered above the purge protocol button, then pressed down with the certainty of decades spent outsmarting machines. Alarms shrieked through the hidden lab's shadows, but Grandmother's voice was steady, almost gentle, as she called over the rising din. "Payload complete—initiating system-wide purge now, Red." She glanced toward her granddaughter, her expression both reassuring and fierce. "Hold fast," she added, her words layered with wisdom and quiet command as the cleansing sequence surged through the infected code. As the payload nears completion, Red instructs Grandmother to execute a system-wide purge the instant the upload finishes, prioritizing speed over confirmation.

Grandmother's hands tremble as she quickly types the final digits into the security panel, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. The metallic scrape of drone limbs grows louder, echoing through the narrow corridor behind them. Grandmother's fingers shook as she raced to enter the final digits into the security panel, her breaths coming in rapid, uneven bursts. The metallic scrape of drone limbs echoed louder in the narrow corridor behind them—a relentless reminder of how little time remained. Wolfe tensed beside her, ready to leap into action, but Grandmother's voice, low and urgent, cut through the mounting panic. "Hold still, Wolfe—I need another second." Her words were clipped, each syllable precise, her focus unwavering despite the tremor in her hands. "If I don't get this last code in, the lockdown won't release and we won't make it to the safe room." She pressed harder, her determination shining through the strain. "Just a little more time—please." Officer Wolfe plants himself between Grandmother and the door, hackles raised, as the metallic drone whirring grows louder. Wolfe planted himself squarely between Grandmother and the door, his stance rigid, every muscle tensed as the metallic drone on the other side grew louder, closer, more insistent. Watching Grandmother struggle with the security codes, her voice low and urgent, he barked a warning without taking his eyes off the entrance. "They're right outside, Grandmother—hurry, or I'll have to hold them off myself!" His words snapped through the cramped room, edged with both discipline and threat, the kind that only came from someone who understood exactly how dire the situation could become. Grandmother's hands tremble as she enters the final code, sweat beading on her brow, while Wolfe presses his back to the door, weapon drawn,

eyes darting as the drone shadows flicker beneath the threshold. Grandmother's hands trembled as she tapped in the final sequence, each digit weighted with consequence. Sweat beaded along her brow, threatening to slip into her eyes. "Almost there—just one more digit and the override should disengage," she murmured, her voice low and urgent, words nearly drowned by the distant, rising whir of drone servos. Behind her, Wolfe pressed his back to the door, weapon drawn and eyes narrowed, tracking the flicker of shadow that crawled beneath the threshold. Grandmother's breath caught—if she slipped up now, the whole system would lock them in for good. Officer Wolfe braces himself between Grandmother and the door, weapon drawn, as red warning lights flicker and the drone shadows grow larger in the corridor. Weapon raised and stance unyielding, Officer Wolfe wedged himself protectively between Grandmother and the door. The corridor pulsed with red warning lights, their glow painting the advancing drone shadows in monstrous relief. Wolfe's ears picked up the high-pitched whine of servos drawing nearer—a mechanical chorus that sent a chill down his spine. He shot a glance at Grandmother, who was hunched over the panel, her hands trembling as she keyed in a desperate string of security codes. Wolfe's voice sliced through the tension, rough and urgent: "I can hear their servos whining—Grandmother, now or never!" With external pressure mounting and hostile drones approaching, Grandmother shifts her focus to unlocking the chamber doors, racing against time to input override codes while Officer Wolfe stands guard, prepared to defend them if necessary.

The lockdown is released at the last moment, allowing Red to secure the drive and the trio to escape through the maintenance hatch just as the drones breach the outer doors.

As the echoes of alarms faded behind them, the trio emerged into the narrow corridors of the facility, hearts pounding with adrenaline and relief. Every hurried footstep carried the weight of Wolfe's sacrifice, reshaping the fragile trust between them. With the immediate threat behind them but uncertainty ahead, Red, Grandmother, and their unexpected ally faced the consequences of their choices—and the new alliances forged in the crucible of escape.

Chapter 7: Aftermath and Alliance

Red crouched beside a scorched access panel, her gloved fingers prying loose a melted relay as Grandmother handed her a diagnostic tool from a battered kit.

Sparks popped and fizzed as Grandmother rewired a critical circuit, murmuring instructions.

Grandmother leans over the open panel, deft fingers twisting wires with practiced precision as she guides the connection into place, eyes narrowed in concentration amid the crackle of electricity. Grandmother leaned further over the open panel, her hands sure and nimble even as sparks snapped dangerously close. Her voice was steady, almost soothing beneath the sizzle of electricity. "Now, keep steady, dear hands—blue wire to terminal four, just as I taught you." She didn't so much instruct as guide, her gaze never wavering from the tangle of wires. The sparks seemed to dance at her touch, but she only offered a small, secretive smile. "Don't let the sparks distract you; that's only the old girl complaining." With a final twist, she nodded in satisfaction, eyes glinting. "There, see? The current's flowing just right." Grandmother steadies her breath, her fingers expertly guiding the tiny component as she aligns it with the humming board. Grandmother steadied her breath, her hands unwavering as she guided the tiny component toward the humming board. Sparks popped and fizzed, momentarily illuminating her lined face with a soft glow. She murmured,

almost to herself but loud enough for Red to hear, “Next, we’ll nudge the resistor into place.” Her voice, both patient and precise, carried the weight of years spent coaxing machines back from the brink. “Careful now,” she added, her fingers demonstrating the exact pressure needed, “it’s delicate, but a gentle touch coaxes even stubborn circuits to behave.” GrandmotherShe tightens the connector with a practiced flick, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction as the circuit hums steadily. Grandmother’s fingers moved with the steady assurance of decades spent in the hum of circuitry. She tightened the connector with a flick so precise it seemed almost effortless, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction as the circuit responded—humming, alive, sparking just as it should. Sparks popped and fizzed, but she scarcely glanced up from her work, murmuring instructions for Red to hear. “There we are—now, a firm twist on the connector, mind you,” she advised, voice low and sure. “This whole contraption will sing like it did in ’57.” The words carried the weight of memory and mastery, a promise that even in the shadow of the AI virus hunting her, some things—well-made and carefully tended—could still endure. Red scanned the console’s flickering display, inputting override codes while sweat beaded at her brow despite the chill.

As the panel whirred back to life, Grandmother leaned in, quietly instructing Red to prepare a status report for Security—her tone brisk, her eyes scanning the corridor for threats.

Grandmother leans closer to Red, her voice low but firm, while her gaze sweeps the corridor for any sign of movement. As the panel sputtered back to life with a soft whirr, Grandmother leaned in close to Red, her eyes sharp and scanning the dim corridor for any hint of movement. Her voice dropped to a low, steady murmur—urgent but unshakable. “Red, quickly—initiate a status report for Security. We need eyes on every entry point. Stay alert; something feels off.” Even as she spoke, her hand hovered protectively over Red’s shoulder, a silent promise that she’d face whatever came next together. Red’s fingers hover over the console, eyes darting to the shadows at the far end of the corridor. Red’s fingers hovered over the console, every muscle tense as her eyes flickered to the corridor’s far shadows. The panel buzzed softly, its blue glow illuminating Grandmother’s weathered face as she leaned in, voice low and steady with the authority Red had grown up respecting. Without hesitation, Red nodded, shoulders squared in determination. She began compiling the status report, her voice calm but alert: she would flag any irregularities immediately, unless Grandmother signaled her to hold back. There was no room for error—not tonight, and not with Grandmother watching. Grandmother steps closer to the panel, scanning the surveillance feeds, her posture tense and watchful. Grandmother drew closer to the surveillance panel as it whirred into motion, her sharp eyes scanning the flickering feeds with a practiced intensity honed by years of hidden work. She didn’t waste words—her voice was low and steady, carrying the weight of both authority and care. “Red, flag anything unusual right away,” she instructed, barely glancing up from the screen. “No delays.” Her fingers hovered over the controls, ready to intervene, but she shifted her attention to the corridor outside, her shoulders stiff with vigilance. The message was clear: while Red sifted through data for anomalies, Grandmother would keep watch, every sense attuned for the first sign of trouble. Their actions—repairing, instructing, watching—were driven by their shared determination to stabilize the ship and shield each other from further harm.

Side by side, as the ship’s systems hummed back to life and the corridor lights flickered steady, Red and Grandmother stood ready—not just to face what came next, but to meet it together, their alliance forged in ash and hope.