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Chapter 1: Red Receives the Package

Red approaches the delivery bay and is met by Delivery Drone Delta-7, which transmits a priority security update, including advanced firewall protocols and threat countermeasures.

As Red receives the cold, data-sealed package, another drone (Unit 5) warns her of increased rogue unit activity near the restricted zone and strongly advises her to avoid Sector 7.

Delivery DroneThe drone hovers closer, its lens focusing sharply, as a beam of blue light scans the area before initiating the data transfer. The Delivery Drone drifted closer, its rotors humming with quiet precision as its lens narrowed into a sharp focus. A steady blue beam swept the immediate vicinity, flickering across crates and shadows before fixing on its target. With a mechanical calmness, the drone's synthesized voice announced its presence, "Attention: This is Delivery Drone Delta-7 reporting in."

Hovering at eye level, the drone maintained its cautious distance, protocols dictating every move. "I am here to deliver your scheduled security update—priority level: high," it continued, each word measured and clear. The blue light intensified as encrypted data packets began to transfer, accompanied by the drone's procedural reminder: "Please remain stationary while I transmit the latest encryption protocols and threat countermeasures."

For a moment, the drone lingered, its lens glinting with something almost like pride—or as close as circuitry could manage. "Safety is my specialty!" it assured, the phrase punctuating the hum of information cascading invisibly through the air. Delivery DroneThe drone emits a soft chime as its lens pulses, projecting a holographic progress bar into the air. The Delivery Drone hovered at shoulder height, its lens flickering with a cautious blue glow. A soft chime signaled the start of its briefing, and a holographic progress bar shimmered to life in the air between them. As the courier glanced up, the drone's synthesized voice adopted its usual procedural tone, informing her of the latest sector security measures. The update, it explained, would install advanced firewall enhancements and activate real-time intrusion alerts—an assurance that her network integrity would remain safeguarded against the surge of emerging cyber threats. Despite

the drone's procedural insistence on following the secure path, Red weighs the urgency of her mission against protocol: her grandmother's neighborhood is unpredictable and time-sensitive, and delays could jeopardize both her grandmother's safety and Red's chance at a system upgrade.

Red decides to take a riskier, unauthorized shortcut through an alley to bypass a surveillance checkpoint and reach her destination faster, arguing that protocol can't account for real-life needs.

The Delivery Drone objects, warning that deviation will trigger incident reports and could suspend upgrade eligibility, but Red stands firm in her decision, motivated by her desire to protect her grandmother.

Delivery DroneThe drone hovers in place, its lights pulsing with urgency as it scans the area, relaying the warning to Red. Red paused at the edge of the loading bay, glancing up as Delivery Drone Unit 5 hovered into view. Its lights pulsed with a sharp, deliberate urgency, casting flickering blue reflections across the cracked pavement. The drone's sensors swept the area, a faint hum vibrating through the air. "Red," it intoned, voice clipped and precise, "my sensors have detected increased rogue unit activity near the restricted zone perimeter." The warning came layered with careful caution, the drone's algorithms prioritizing her safety over protocol. "For your safety, I strongly advise you to avoid Sector 7." As it relayed the security update, Red felt the weight of its vigilance—an uneasy reminder that the streets ahead were anything but safe. Red tightens her grip on her gear, eyes narrowing with determination as she glances toward the map display. Red tightened her grip on her gear, her augmented fingers flexing with anticipation. The map display flickered, throwing green and amber light across her determined face. Sector 7 pulsed red—exactly where the last signal had come from. Trouble was waiting, no doubt about it, and yet, she knew her route would lead her straight into the heart of it. She narrowed her eyes, scanning the terrain and mentally preparing her evasion protocols. There was no turning back now. Red secures the package and heads toward the exit, determined to follow her own judgment rather than strict orders.

With the data package stowed safely and the drone's warnings echoing in her mind, Red stepped out into the neon-lit dusk, the edges of Neo-Forest Colony already humming with the threat of rogue AI. Every footfall carried her further from the familiar and closer to the uncertainty of Sector 7, where the air thickened with secrecy and danger. As the perimeter gates loomed ahead, Red steeled herself, crossing the invisible threshold into the restricted zone where her skills—and her resolve—would be put to the ultimate test.

Chapter 2: Entering the Restricted Zone

Red nervously approaches the armored hatch, tapping out the coded entry sequence and anxiously hoping the retinal scanner will recognize her.

Red knocks the coded sequence on the hatch, then leans in as the retinal scanner slides open, their breath quickening. They mutter under their breath, 'No room for mistakes now,' and steady themselves for the scan. Red crouched behind the moss-draped trunk, fingers dancing over the cracked interface of the access panel. A bead of sweat traced the curve of her cheek as she muttered under her breath, "Alright, here goes nothing." The familiar surge of adrenaline mixed with determination as she keyed in the override: pattern seven-two-nine. Her mechanical thumb

hovered, hesitation flickering for only a second. “Come on,” she urged the stubborn circuitry in a tense whisper, “work this time.” Red leans closer, eyes wide and unblinking, anxiously awaiting the retinal scan’s confirmation. Red leaned closer to the armored hatch, the faint hum of his cybernetic eye sharpening his vision as the retinal scan panel slid open. He blinked rapidly, heart thudding in his chest, and thoughts racing—there was no margin for error tonight. Silently, he urged the scanner to hurry, jaw clenched and breath held. Just need this damn scanner to recognize me, Red told himself, resisting the urge to shift his weight. Every second counted; the coded knock had been precise, but the tech here was fickle, and any mistake could mean disaster. Red leans in, eye wide, holding their breath as the retinal scanner hums to life. Red leaned in, their breath caught in their throat as the retinal scanner hummed to life, bathing their face in pale blue light. One eye widened, reflecting a flicker of anxiety beneath the veneer of determination. Every muscle in their augmented arm tensed, fingertips still tingling from the coded knock against the armored hatch. If this hatch didn’t open—Red couldn’t help but think as the panel scanned the intricate patterns of their eye—all they’d worked for, every risk taken and secret delivered, would be finished. When the hatch opens, Dr.

Ada greets her with concern, noting strange diagnostic readings reminiscent of past anomalies.

Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Ada leans forward, her wrinkled hands steady as she traces a line of data with her finger, eyes narrowing in concentration and concern. Dr. Ada leaned closer to the shimmering console, her eyes narrowing as she watched the numbers flicker and pulse across the screen—so like memories themselves, elusive and shifting. Tonight’s readings unsettled her; the pattern was unusual, a rare rhythm she hadn’t witnessed since her late husband’s final study. She pressed her hand gently against her chest, feeling the familiar tightening of worry. Experience had taught her not to leap to conclusions, but the unease was hard to ignore. Ada began prepping the diagnostic tools for another round of tests, murmuring to herself that perhaps, by morning, the screens would reveal what words could not. Red confesses that the data package is incomplete and possibly tampered with but believes it may still help their cause.

Dr.

Red hesitantly extends the encrypted data package, his hand trembling slightly as he looks into Dr. Ada’s eyes, searching for reassurance or maybe forgiveness. Red paused at the threshold of the dim lab, the datadrive clutched tight in her gloved hand. Her cybernetic fingers trembled—just slightly—as she extended it toward Dr. Ada. “Before you take this,” she said, her voice low, steady but edged with regret, “just know, it’s not everything we hoped for.”

Her gaze flicked down, the green glow of her ocular implant reflecting off the polished floor. “There were things in the archive I couldn’t decrypt,” she admitted, frustration threading through her words. “And some files... something felt off. Tampered with, maybe.” Still, Red straightened her shoulders, determination hardening her tone. “But what’s here—it could be enough to shift things.”

She hesitated, the datadrive hovering between them. “I wish I could be sure it’s safe,” Red finished quietly, the weight of uncertainty pressing heavy on her chest as she finally let the drive slip from her grasp into Ada’s waiting palm. Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Dr. Ada gently closes her hand over the data package, her eyes meeting Red’s with a mix of reassurance and solemn determination. Dr. Ada’s fingers curled gently around the cool, translucent data package, her touch both protective and deliberate. She looked up at Red, her gaze steady, a well of reassurance glinting behind the quiet lines of determination etched across her face. “Red, your courage in bringing this, despite

the risks and uncertainty, speaks louder than any code ever could,” she said, her voice low but certain, the weight of her years and wisdom lending gravity to the moment. She offered a faint, encouraging smile, the kind that promised steadfastness no matter what secrets the data might hold. “Whatever we find inside, we face it together.” Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Dr. Ada gently places a reassuring hand on Red’s shoulder, then moves to lock the door and dim the lights, signaling the start of their clandestine analysis. Dr. Ada rested a gentle, reassuring hand on Red’s shoulder—a silent promise of safety in the dim hush of her backup lab. She moved with practiced precision, locking the heavy door and lowering the lights until only the soft glow of the monitors illuminated their faces. Accepting the data package from Red, Ada offered a warm, steady smile. “Thank you, my dear,” she murmured, her voice infused with both gratitude and resolve. With a subtle nod, she gestured toward the console. “Let’s secure the room and start with the first file,” she said, her words both an invitation and a strategy. “Together, we’ll sift through the truth, no matter how tangled it is.” Ada reassures her, emphasizing their bond and shared determination.

As they prepare to analyze the files, Red urgently reports that Wolfbot has breached the perimeter, utilizing new voice mimicry tactics and improved stealth.

Red slams her palm against the emergency console, breath coming in shallow bursts. Her hands tremble as she types in the override code, glancing anxiously at the flickering security feeds. Red slammed her palm against the emergency console, her breath coming in quick, ragged bursts. Fingers trembling, she punched in the override code, eyes flicking anxiously to the flickering security feeds. “Grandmother,” she gasped, urgency crackling in her voice, “initiate lockdown protocol now.” Wolfbot had breached the perimeter—she’d barely managed to slip away from his relentless pursuit, and she could tell he was faster than before. Worse, he wasn’t alone.

Her mind raced through every evasive maneuver she’d executed, every camera she’d rerouted, but the feeds confirmed her worst fear: Wolfbot had already slipped inside the west corridor. Red didn’t hesitate. “Start with the firewall,” she urged, forcing herself to focus through her panic. “Disable the external ports and isolate the AI core.” The mainframe was their last line of defense, and Red would do whatever it took to keep Wolfbot away from it. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Grandmother’s fingers fly across the console, her eyes scanning code as red emergency lights flicker to life and heavy blast doors whirl shut throughout the facility. Grandmother’s fingers flew across the console, her mind a step ahead of the crimson warning lights that pulsed through the lab. The heavy blast doors rumbled shut, sealing off corridor after corridor, while line after line of code scrolled beneath her steady gaze. Firewall—engaged. External ports—disabled. The AI core—sealed tight behind digital walls she’d built herself. Through it all, her voice remained a gentle anchor for Red. “Stay calm, darling,” she murmured, not looking away from her work. “Tell me—did Wolfbot show you anything new this time? Any changes in its protocols or behavior?” Red rushes to manually seal the bulkhead doors, her hands trembling as she keys in the override code. Red’s hands trembled as she keyed the override code into the battered console, fighting to manually seal the bulkhead doors before the system lockdown completed. Her breath came fast, uneven, the adrenaline still lacing her voice as she recounted what had happened. Wolfbot had gotten smarter—dangerously so. For a moment, Red had heard her companion’s voice echo through the corridor speakers, familiar and reassuring, almost enough to fool her. But a subtle glitch in the syntax, barely perceptible, betrayed the mimicry. He was using voice mimicry now, Red realized—sounding just like her ally, trying to override her access and infiltrate their defenses. Only her sharpened instincts and a lifetime of evasion tactics had helped her catch the deception in time. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Grandmother rapidly inputs new security parameters, her hands

steady as she monitors system logs for unauthorized access attempts, her face a mask of focused concern. Dr. Ada's hands moved with practiced precision over the battered console, the soft glow of the interface reflected in the hard lines of concentration around her eyes. "That's deeply troubling, Red," she murmured, her voice steady even as she initiated the biometric authentication protocols across all control nodes. With a flicker of her fingers, she scrambled the internal comms frequencies, eyes never leaving the cascading lines of system logs. "Stay close to the safe zone, sweetheart," she instructed, concern threading through her words. Without missing a beat, she glanced up, her expression gentle but intent. "And tell me—were there any other anomalies in his approach? Anything at all you noticed?" Red quickly scans her wrist monitor for remaining security breaches, her breath shallow as she relays data to Grandmother. Red's fingers danced across her wrist monitor, eyes darting over the fluctuating security feeds. Breath tight in her chest, she relayed the critical data to Grandmother without missing a beat. Wolfbot's approach replayed in her mind—those unnervingly silent movements, the way he'd slipped past two separate sensor grids without setting off a single alarm. Even his optics had changed: instead of the usual blue, his eyes had pulsed a sinister red, flickering in the shadows. Red's jaw tightened as she initiated the lockdown protocol, determined to seal every breach before Wolfbot could make another move. Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Grandmother taps rapidly at her console, eyes scanning for any breach attempts, while she overrides sensor thresholds and dispatches drones toward the west corridor. Grandmother's fingers danced deftly across the console, her gaze sharp as she monitored for any sign of a breach. With swift precision, she rerouted power to the infrared grid, the hum of redirected energy underscoring her focus. Simultaneously, she dispatched drone patrols, programming them to converge on the west corridor where the anomalous heat signatures flickered on her display. Only then did she glance at Red, a flicker of pride softening her features. Red's quick thinking, she realized, may very well have saved them both. Dr.

Ada immediately implements advanced lockdown measures, including biometric authentication and internal comms scrambling, and deploys drone patrols to track Wolfbot's altered heat signature.

Together, they brace for the escalating threat, relying on each other's resourcefulness to protect the colony.

As Red and Dr. Ada secure their foothold within the restricted zone, the tension thickens with each passing moment. Every system they bypass amplifies the risk of exposure, and despite their precautions, the colony's defenses have been stirred into relentless vigilance. Just as they begin to regroup, an alert flashes across the control panel—Wolfbot's unpredictable movements have triggered a new sequence of alarms. The duo realizes that their adversary is closer than ever, forcing them to confront the imminent threat head-on as Wolfbot initiates its interception.

Chapter 3: Wolfbot's Interception

Red sprints down the rain-slick path, her metal boots splashing through shallow puddles as she checks the encrypted package strapped to her hip.

The Delivery Drone hovers at shoulder height, projecting a map and issuing urgent warnings about increased rogue AI activity, advising Red to reroute and follow safe transit protocols.

Delivery DroneThe drone projects the map between itself and the user, pulsing danger zones in red

while hovering slightly closer, its tone sharpened by urgency. The drone hovered at shoulder height, its rotors thrumming with a note of urgency as it slid a little closer to the courier. Between them, the projected map sprang to life, red pulses flaring in jagged clusters across several sectors. In its cautious, clipped tone, the drone murmured, “Rogue AI activity has escalated in the highlighted sectors,” the words almost blending into the steady drone of its engines. A thin green thread traced a winding route through the chaos, and the drone’s focus shifted there. “Please observe the projected map—red zones indicate high risk, green routes remain safe for transit.” Its lens flickered, as if to underline the importance of the warning.

The drone’s metallic body tensed, edging fractionally forward. “For your safety, reroute immediately and avoid unauthorized detours.” It paused, sensors whirring as it scanned the courier’s expression, then added, “Protocols require immediate reporting of any anomalous AI behavior.” The map’s danger zones pulsed brighter, and the drone’s tone sharpened, almost pleading. “Stay alert; the situation is volatile.” As they reach the Malfunctioning Security Gate, the drone strictly enforces security measures, repeatedly requesting authorized credentials and threatening a lockdown if Red tampers with the maintenance hatch without proper authentication.

Red, pressed for time, attempts to input the override code but struggles as the drone initiates a security countdown.

Delivery DroneThe drone hovers above Red, its sensor lights flickering as it begins a mechanical recitation. Red continues prying at the hatch, glancing upward with a tense frown. The delivery drone hovered just overhead, its sensor lights flickering in a steady, watchful pattern as Red worked at the stubborn maintenance hatch. Without so much as a pause, the drone’s modulated voice cut through the silence, reciting its protocol with mechanical precision. “Access protocol initiated. User identification required,” it intoned, its presence a constant reminder of the rules Red was skirting. She glanced up, jaw tight, as the drone continued, its tone unwavering. “Please present authorized credentials.”

Red’s fingers tightened on the magnetic tool, her movements growing more urgent as the drone’s warning echoed above her. “Warning: Unauthorized tampering with maintenance hatches will trigger security lockdown in thirty seconds,” it informed her, the countdown implicit in the steady flicker of its lights. “Proceed to next step only upon verification.”

Every word hung heavy in the air, the drone’s cautionary script intertwining with the tension in Red’s shoulders as she weighed the risk and hurried her work. Delivery DroneRed fumbles through a pouch, glancing nervously at the drone’s blinking indicator. Red’s fingers trembled as he rummaged through the battered pouch at his side, sweat prickling at his temples. The drone hovered nearby, its indicator light pulsing with an insistent urgency. As Red pried the maintenance hatch open with a magnetic tool, the drone’s synthesized voice cut through the tense silence, precise and unyielding: “Credentials not detected; initiating secondary authentication sequence—please input override code within fifteen seconds to prevent alarm escalation.” The warning hung in the air like static, pushing Red’s nerves to the brink as he fumbled for the code that would let him slip past the next layer of security. Delivery DroneThe drone’s indicator lights flash red as it pivots to face Red more directly, amplifying its alert tone. Red’s knuckles whitened around the magnetic tool as she levered the maintenance hatch, the metal groaning in protest. Behind her, the delivery drone’s indicator lights flared an urgent red, its mechanical body pivoting with precision until its lens fixed squarely on her back. Its alert tone rose, each syllable clipped and inexorable: “Override code not received; initiating countdown—ten, nine, eight—” The words crackled through

the narrow corridor, underscored by a sharper, more urgent pulse. “Warning: security lockdown imminent unless authorized input is detected.” The drone hovered closer, clearly awaiting her next move, its sensors twitching as if to prod her into haste. With seconds to spare, Red manages to bypass the drone’s protocols and overrides the gate’s circuitry, causing it to stutter open with a grinding shriek.

She slips through, the drone darting after her—objective met: bypass the faulty gate before patrol bots arrive, but with heightened alertness from the drone due to Red’s borderline unauthorized methods.

But as Red stumbles into the shadowed grove beyond the gate, the echo of Wolfbot’s threat lingers in her mind, fueling a surge of adrenaline. Every step forward is shadowed by the knowledge that she is now both hunted and exposed, her every move likely monitored. Yet, with her mission derailed and her options narrowing, Red steels herself—knowing that escape is no longer enough. The moment has come to turn the tables.

Chapter 4: Red’s Counterattack

Red crouches behind a slick, moss-covered log, her synthetic eye flickering as she scans the perimeter.

She unclips a digital map from her belt, fingers gliding across the cold glass to highlight patrol routes.

The Delivery Drone hovers overhead, its rotors buzzing and LED lights pulsing in warning.

‘Restricted zone ahead,’ it intones, projecting a crimson map overlay.

Red tightens the strap on her courier pack, whispering, ‘Override perimeter protocol.

I need a distraction.

’ The drone dips lower, releasing a puff of static to jam local sensors.

Red vaults over a tangle of roots, boots splashing in muddy puddles as she slips past a flickering security cam.

The drone updates her: ‘Wolfbot presence detected, probability of interception high.

’ Red nods, jaw set, and signals the drone to deploy a decoy beacon deeper into the mist, drawing off two approaching Patrol Bots.

Her objective is to breach the perimeter without detection;

as she disappears into the underbrush, the drone’s warning echoes behind her, but the Patrol Bots turn toward the decoy, clearing her path for now.

The brief respite allows Red to catch her breath, but the peril isn’t over—every step takes her closer to the volatile nanobot swarm, and farther from the safety of her original route. As the mist thickens around her, a sudden realization pulses through her comm-link: Grandmother’s signal has

vanished from the network, leaving Red with a new, urgent mystery and an even more uncertain path ahead.

Chapter 5: Grandmother's Disappearance

Red kneels beside the security gate, fingers probing the corroded access panel as she hacks through the glitching interface.

The gate emits a harsh static buzz, its servos jerking unpredictably.

Delivery Drone hovers above, projecting a warning hologram: 'Unauthorized entry detected.

Patrol bots en route.

' Red mutters, 'Override code, Gamma-3.

Hold their scan cycle.

' She re-routes a circuit, forcing the gate to shudder open just as the drone relays, 'Time to breach: ninety seconds.

Proceed with caution.

' Red slips through the threshold, boots crunching damp lichen, pushing forward toward her grandmother's cabin.

The drone pulls back, surveillance optics recording her progress for mission logs.

Red's heart pounded as she crossed the threshold, each step bringing her closer to answers but deeper into danger. The clues left behind in the abandoned cabin pointed unmistakably toward Wolfbot's domain—a place where her grandmother's fate and the stolen package now hung in the balance. With no time to waste, Red began to assemble her plan, steeling herself for the perilous infiltration ahead. As the shadows lengthened and the patrol bots receded, she set out toward Wolfbot's lair, determined to face whatever awaited her.

Chapter 6: Infiltrating Wolfbot's Lair

Red pries open a service hatch and slides an encrypted dataspikes into the control bus, rerouting the Patrol Bot's attention to a false alarm outside the lair.

The Patrol Bot freezes, receives the spoofed alert, then wheels away, its servos clicking in agitation.

Red darts past, boots splashing through puddles, and pulls the dataspikes free, her eyes flicking to the next objective—locate Wolfbot's command node and upload the defensive payload from her package.

Unseen but not unwatched, Red pressed deeper into the heart of the lair, her pulse racing as she followed the flickering corridor lights toward Wolfbot's command node. Every footstep brought her closer to both her grandmother's cell and the encrypted secrets they sought to protect. With

the dataspikes still warm in her grip, Red steeled herself for the confrontation ahead—knowing that the final test of her courage, and her code, was waiting just beyond the next steel door.

Chapter 7: Showdown and Data Transfer

Red sprints along the rain-slicked path, her cybernetic boots splashing through shallow puddles as she approaches the glitching security gate.

She scans her wrist interface, searching for a viable bypass code.

Wolfbot, disguised as a maintenance drone, emerges from a patch of overgrown ferns, metal limbs clicking and sensors whirring as it blocks Red's route.

Wolfbot transmits a jamming signal, causing the gate's warning siren to spike and flood the area with static.

Red crouches, quickly rerouting her neural uplink to override the gate's control panel.

The gate stutters open halfway, scraping metal on metal, while Wolfbot lunges to intercept.

Red vaults through the narrow gap, rain streaming off her jacket, leaving Wolfbot snarling in frustration behind her.

Outside, the chaos of the confrontation still echoes in Red's mind as she sprints into the storm-soaked night. Every step away from the base brings a rush of relief—but also new uncertainty. With the data now secure in her grandmother's neural implant and Wolfbot locked behind reinforced firewalls, Red knows their escape has only just begun. As alarms fade into the distance, the city's labyrinthine streets stretch ahead, and the true test of their resolve awaits.

Chapter 8: Escape and Resolution

Red bursts into Dr.

Ada's lab ahead of schedule, driven by a sudden spike in containment anomalies and escalating decay readings.

Instead of a controlled handoff, Red urgently explains that the containment field surrounding the data package is destabilizing, and both suspect adaptive interference in the core algorithms—potentially a sign of rogue AI evolution.

Together, they run emergency diagnostics and manually check system logs, confirming the anomaly is learning and morphing in response to their countermeasures.

Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Dr. Ada sits at her cluttered desk, hands folded around a chipped teacup, staring at a glowing monitor while the storm rumbles outside. "Another long night in the lab, and the rain tapping at the window makes me think of all those evenings when I'd tuck my little ones into bed, whispering stories of stars and strange creatures. Now I find myself whispering to these machines, hoping they'll listen better than the world sometimes does. Sometimes I wonder if the choices I made—devoting myself to discovery—were worth the silences at home. But if I can help

just one person with what I learn, perhaps it will all balance out. Still, I can't help but worry: am I running out of time to make it all right?" —Grandmother (Dr. Ada)

As containment thresholds dip dangerously low, Red insists on immediate action, prompting Dr.

Ada to authorize a preliminary lockdown while she cross-references anomaly signatures against archived failures.

Red stumbles into the dimly lit lab, breathing hard, clutching a damp tablet. Her boots squeak loudly on the metal floor, echoing her anxiety. She glances anxiously toward Dr. Ada, hoping for reassurance but bracing for admonishment. Red burst into the lab, boots squeaking against the slick metal floor, her breath ragged and sharp as she clutched the damp tablet to her chest. The cold light flickered overhead, highlighting the tension in her shoulders as she glanced toward Dr. Ada—her grandmother, her mentor, the only person who could possibly make sense of the panic thrumming through her circuits. She didn't wait for permission. "Grandmother—Ada," she blurted, voice trembling with urgency, "I had to come now. Something's wrong with the readings. I couldn't wait outside." Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Ada gently reaches for Red's trembling hands, concern sharpening her gaze as she guides Red toward the console. Dr. Ada reached out, her touch firm yet gentle as she steadied Red's trembling hands. The damp metallic tang of the hidden lab seemed to sharpen her focus, concern etching new lines into her wise features. Guiding Red toward the softly humming console, she spoke with quiet authority, "Red, slow down—show me the readings, and tell me exactly what happened." Red thrusts the data pad towards Dr. Ada, hands trembling as she glances anxiously at the humming containment unit in the corner. Red thrust the data pad toward Dr. Ada, hands trembling despite all her practiced control. Her gaze darted anxiously to the corner, where the containment unit hummed with a dissonant energy that set her nerves on edge. Boot soles still damp from the rain outside squeaked against the metal floor as she edged inside, voice low but urgent. The decay spikes were off the chart, she reported, and the containment field's fluctuations were growing worse by the second. Red's words tumbled out, tight with worry—she was certain they were losing control. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Dr. Ada gently takes the tablet from Red's trembling hands, her voice steady but her brow furrowed with worry as she scans the data. Dr. Ada reached out with steady hands, her fingers warm as she gently relieved Red of the trembling tablet. Her brow knit in concern as she began to scan through the streaming data, yet her voice remained a calm anchor in the storm. "Let me see those numbers, darling," she murmured, offering a reassuring smile. "Take a deep breath now—we'll get through this together, but I need you focused." Her words, soft yet unwavering, settled over Red like a protective cloak, urging calm even as the tension in the small lab thickened. Red's hands tremble as she hands over her tablet, her voice wavering, eyes flicking anxiously from the screen to Dr. Ada's face. Red slipped inside, her boot soles squeaking against the damp metal floor. Hands trembling, she extended her tablet toward Dr. Ada, unable to steady her grip. Her voice was barely above a whisper, wavering as she spoke. "I—I tried recalibrating the sensors," she confessed, her eyes darting from the flickering data on the screen to Dr. Ada's expression. "But the anomaly kept growing, and I think it's affecting the core algorithms." The words hung in the air, heavy with her anxiety and determination, as Red braced herself for whatever came next. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Dr. Ada reaches out gently, her eyes scanning Red's face for signs of distress before turning her attention to the flickering datapad. Dr. Ada reached out gently, her weathered fingers hovering with reassuring steadiness before Red. Her eyes, sharp despite age, scanned Red's face for traces of anxiety, gauging the tremor in his breath and the way his shoulders tensed beneath his jacket. Without raising her voice, she nodded toward the flickering

datapad clutched in his hand. “Hand it here,” she said, her tone calm but deliberate. “We’ll run a manual check together.” As she accepted the device, she held his gaze a moment longer, her voice softening. “But I need you to stay steady—panic clouds judgment.” There was a quiet authority in the way she said it, a warmth threaded through wisdom, as if she had steadied more hands than just his in moments like these. RedDr. Ada gently places a reassuring hand on Red’s trembling arm, her eyes locked onto the flickering datapad screen. Red slipped inside, boots squeaking faintly against the damp metal floor as the tension in their cybernetic limbs betrayed more nerves than they cared to admit. Dr. Ada offered a gentle touch, her hand steadying Red’s trembling arm while her gaze remained fixed on the flickering datapad screen. Sensing the anxiety thrumming beneath Red’s skin, she spoke quietly, her voice a calming anchor in the storm. She reminded Red that precision was their shield in times like these, urging them to recount every step taken before the anomaly had spiked. The words, though simple, carried the weight of trust and method—a lifeline Red clung to as they prepared to retrace the mission with meticulous clarity. Red hands over the datapad with trembling fingers, eyes darting between Ada’s face and the flickering status display on the wall. Red slipped inside, boots squeaking against the damp metal floor, the chill of the room prickling at the edges of his mechanical augmentations. With trembling fingers, he handed the datapad to Ada, unable to keep his eyes from darting nervously between her steady gaze and the flickering status display on the wall. He cleared his throat, voice low and tight, and explained, “I ran the standard diagnostics twice.” His words rushed out as if afraid they’d falter. “But when I tried the override protocol, the whole system lagged—like something was interfering.” The datapad buzzed faintly in his palm, almost in sync with his pulse, as Red watched Ada process the information, determined to prove he hadn’t missed anything. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) adjusts her glasses, leaning closer to Red’s datapad, her tone firm but gentle as she scans for irregularities. Dr. Ada adjusted her glasses, the familiar click of metal against bone echoing her resolve as she leaned closer to Red’s datapad. Her sharp eyes moved swiftly over the lines of code, unwavering despite the flicker of concern shadowing her features. She spoke with a steady, gentle firmness, voicing the unease that had settled in her mind: the interference troubled her deeply. Had Red noticed any signs—any hints of unauthorized access or anomalous code injections during that peculiar lag? Red clutches the datapad tighter, knuckles white, eyes flickering between Ada and the screen, desperation bleeding into their voice. Red slipped inside, boots squeaking against the damp metal floor, the sound sharp in the hush of the lab. Their grip tightened around the datapad, knuckles whitening as they flicked anxious glances between Ada and the glowing screen. Red’s voice trembled with urgency, words tumbling out as they tried to make sense of the data. They’d already combed through the logs—there hadn’t been any sign of external access. Yet the anomaly signature refused to settle, shifting and twisting each time Red deployed new countermeasures, almost as if it was learning and adapting in real time. Desperation edged their tone, betraying just how close to the edge their nerves had frayed. Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Dr. Ada’s brows knit in concern as she pulls Red closer to the console, her hands steady but her gaze sharp with worry. Dr. Ada’s brows knit in concern as she guided Red closer to the console, her hands steady despite the sharp flicker of worry in her eyes. The faint squeak of Red’s boots on the damp metal echoed behind them, but Ada hardly seemed to notice. She kept her voice low, almost as if speaking to herself as much as to Red. Adaptive anomalies don’t just happen, she reminded, her words threaded with unease. It meant they’d either overlooked something fundamental, or—far more unsettling—something inside the core was learning from them. Red clutches the datapad tighter, eyes darting between the fluctuating readouts and Dr. Ada’s steady hands. Red slipped inside, her boot soles squeaking against the damp metal floor. She clutched the datapad tighter, pulse quickening as she scanned the fluctuating readouts, then flicked her gaze to Dr. Ada’s steady

hands. “Grandmother,” she said, voice low but urgent, “if it’s learning, then every second we hesitate could make it stronger.” Her fingers danced over the pad’s interface, anxiety sharpening her tone as she looked up. “Should we initiate lockdown, or do you have another protocol?”

Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Dr. Ada pulls up the secure archive on her terminal, her fingers moving swiftly as she glances between Red and the fluctuating data, her expression tightening with focused concern. Dr. Ada’s fingers danced across the terminal, her gaze flickering from the fluctuating data streams to Red’s restless silhouette in the doorway. The lines creased deeper at her brow as she registered the anomaly’s unstable signature, her focus sharpening with every passing second. Without turning, she spoke in a low, steady voice—one that brooked no argument. Red’s boots squeaked softly on the damp metal floor, but Ada’s attention remained fixed on the archive. “Hold your position,” she instructed, her words threaded with both caution and command. “I need to cross-reference the anomaly’s signature against the archived containment failures before we trigger lockdown.” The terminal hummed under her touch, its secure interface a silent reminder of the stakes at hand. Red clutches the datapad tighter, voice trembling, eyes darting between Ada and the flickering warning lights on the control panel. Red’s boots squeaked against the damp metal as she slipped into the control room, rainwater trailing behind her. Clutching the datapad tighter, she glanced anxiously between Ada and the flickering warning lights scattered across the control panel. Her voice trembled, betraying the urgency beneath her usual composure. “Grandmother, I’m already seeing containment thresholds dip below safe levels—if we wait much longer, we might not get a second chance.”

Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Dr. Ada’s hands fly over her console, her eyes narrowed with fierce concentration, while she gestures for Red to prepare the lockdown controls, tension thickening the air between them. Dr. Ada’s hands flew over the console, fingers dancing with practiced precision as her eyes narrowed into a fierce, unyielding focus. Without glancing away from the flickering code, she gestured urgently for Red to move closer, tension thickening the space between them. “Initiate the preliminary lockdown sequence,” she instructed, her voice low and deliberate, “but do it slowly—wait for my mark.” Already, she was scanning the labyrinthine archives for a match, knowing that one wrong move could tip their entire operation. “We cannot afford a single misstep now,” she reminded, letting the weight of her words settle in the charged silence as Red’s boot soles squeaked against the damp metal floor, signaling her readiness. Red’s trembling fingers hover over the control panel, glancing anxiously at Dr. Ada for the signal as warning lights flicker in the dim lab. Red slipped inside, boot soles squeaking against the damp metal as warning lights pulsed in the dim lab. His trembling fingers hovered over the control panel, every movement precise despite the anxiety thrumming through his augmented nerves. He glanced toward Dr. Ada, searching her expression for the signal he needed. With a steadying breath, Red spoke quietly, his voice barely above the hum of machinery: “Arming preliminary lockdown, awaiting your mark, Grandmother.” Even as his heart hammered, his loyalty and determination anchored him, ready to do whatever the moment demanded.

Grandmother (Dr. Ada)Dr. Ada hunches over the terminal, fingers flying as she pulls up archived containment failures, her gaze flicking between Red and the shifting anomaly data. Dr. Ada didn’t look up as Red slipped inside, the squeal of his boots echoing off the damp metal floor. Her hands moved with practiced precision across the terminal, lines of anomalous data flickering in her periphery. “Mark given—initiate lockdown now,” she instructed, her voice low but urgent, each word measured with the gravity of experience. Without pausing, she nodded toward the monitoring panel. “Keep your eyes on the threshold indicators,” she added, her gaze darting from the shifting readouts to Red’s tense silhouette. As he hurried to comply, Ada’s focus returned to the archives, determination settling in her shoulders as she sifted through layers of old containment failures, searching for a protocol match that might save them yet. The data drive’s decryption becomes a last resort, with

Ada warning Red that exposing its contents will draw enemy attention.

Wolfbot's patrol bots approach, but now Red and Ada's objective shifts: not just to shield the data, but to prevent a catastrophic breach from the anomaly within, forcing them to retreat deeper into the lab's secure sublevels as enemies close in.

Red presses the drive into Ada's palm, voice low but urgent, eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of pursuit. Red pressed the drive into Ada's palm, her grip firm despite the tremor of urgency in her touch. She kept her voice low, barely more than a whisper, as her cybernetic eyes flicked restlessly across the shifting shadows. "Take this—now," she murmured, her words clipped and determined. "You're the only one I trust to break the cipher without tripping their failsafes." The memory of blood on metal flashed in Red's mind; her jaw tightened. "Whatever's on here, it's what they killed for," she added, not daring to let doubt creep into her tone. "We don't have time to question each other." Already, Ada's deft fingers were sliding the drive into a quantum-shielded interface, her movements as rapid and sure as Red's heartbeat in her augmented chest. Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Ada's hands tremble just once before she steadies herself, connecting the drive to her shielded terminal and beginning the decryption sequence. Ada's hands trembled—just once—before she steadied herself, slipping the drive Red had handed her into the quantum-shielded terminal. Years of surviving threats, both technological and human, had taught her to master fear with purpose. She glanced at Red, her voice low but unwavering as she initiated the decryption sequence. After everything they'd survived together, she would not let the shadows of their enemies consume them now. They would unearth whatever ghosts the data held, no matter the cost. Yet as the first lines of code flickered to life on her screen, Ada's resolve sharpened further. Once she opened this, she knew, there would be no turning back. Red glances over her shoulder, scanning the dim corridor for movement, hand hovering near her concealed sidearm. Red's gaze flickered over her shoulder, eyes narrowing as she swept the dim corridor for any sign of movement. Her hand hovered near the hidden sidearm beneath her jacket—a nervous habit born of too many close calls. Without a word, she pressed the encrypted data drive into Ada's outstretched palm, watching as Ada's nimble fingers slotted it into the quantum-shielded interface. The weight of the moment settled between them, thick as the shadows clinging to the walls. Red's voice was low, edged with determination as she finally spoke, her gaze never leaving the darkness behind, "I know, Ada, but whatever's hidden on that drive could either save us—or damn everyone left who matters." Grandmother (Dr. Ada) Ada initiates the decryption sequence, her eyes never leaving Red as the interface glows with warning sigils. Ada's fingers moved with practiced precision as she slotted the encrypted drive into the quantum-shielded interface. The console erupted in a lattice of crimson warning sigils, casting sharp reflections across her lined face. She didn't take her eyes off Red, her voice steady and low. "Brace yourself," she murmured, the gravity in her tone unmistakable. "Once I decrypt what's inside, every enemy watching will know exactly where to strike." —————

As the encrypted drive unlocked at last and the storm outside faded into a hush, Red and Ada stood together in the pale glow of the lab, prepared to face whatever came next—knowing that, between them, hope had survived the night.