**“Cyberdrama and Women” Capstone**

**HOWL DOGS**

**by Meghan Burrows**

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**LEVEL 1: LUPUS**

**i**

The call came at four ‘o clock in the morning, from Slyger.

Joan had already been on her way to the office.[[1]](#footnote-1) The weekend had been an utter bust—Friday night she spent alone, Saturday her date stood her up, and Sunday she spent restocking her pantry with nothing but ramen and canned soup. Not that there was anything she felt like she really *needed* to get, either: she was just anxious. It was her first real weekend off in almost six months, and in spite of that, she *still* got up at three in the morning on Monday to go back to work. As much as she adored Slyger for going out of his way to get her into the FBI’s BAU unit, and even though it was her first “real” day at her “new” job, the call was just another reminder of what she was going back to: long hours, mindless killing, and the cruel reality that even in the year 2134, humanity was still just as violent—just as brutal—as it had been when she first graduated from the police academy thirteen years earlier.

The only part about her job she still loved, without conflict, was the ride.

There was a light drizzle when auto-drive finally pulled her beat-up, 2120 Chevrolet Impala LG into the parking compound for the FBI Detroit headquarters. It was five-fourteen in the morning. The sun was just starting to peak over the city line, highlighting the lakes in the distance from the top of the open garage.[[2]](#footnote-2) The car parked itself and chimed it was safe to get out, and as she locked the sedan and made her way toward the elevator, she noticed a smallish man already standing outside the door and holding a folder. It wasn’t until she got closer that she realized it was Slyger. He saw her, stood, and hit the elevator button—allowing both of them to file in at the same time.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Renan Slyger was a short Brazilian man with dark curls and oddly pronounced facial features—his snaggletooth only being one of them. He had a pointed nose and sharp green eyes, and a jaguar tattoo on his right arm that she had only seen once before, back when she first met him during her days at the police academy when his sleeves were rolled up. He only wore his sleeves rolled up when he was stressed, and they were rolled up again now. Slyger had been in the FBI longer than Joan had been a police officer, and when he showed up at her department for a profiling lecture—and she showed an interest in becoming an agent herself—they struck up an immediate friendship. Despite knowing him for almost her entire career, Joan only knew about him what she “had” to. She knew he was married to Gary Nona, that he had fourteen some-odd sisters still living in Brasilia, and that his jaguar tattoo had something to do with his relationship to his father. Anything from before his indoctrination into the FBI was a mystery to her. That was just the nature of the FBI. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her with his personal information after so long, but it made things easier. He was one of the bureau’s top agents: information leaked to the wrong people, no matter their affiliation, was a job hazard and a potential disaster waiting to happen. He was the only reason Joan was even promoted to the BAU from her previous unit, too.

His voice brought her out of her daze. “It’s about time. I’ve been waiting out here for an hour. Is your phone dead or something?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“Yes,” Joan lied[[5]](#footnote-5). As soon as the elevator doors slid closed in front of them, he was handing her a folder—a particularly heavy one, at that. The papers almost slipped from her hand as she settled in next to him. The elevator started to head down to the tenth floor. She almost reached out to hit the button for the fourth floor, then stopped herself short: that was where he old unit was, and she was done there. “How’d you know I was coming?”

“It’s Monday and you never texted me about your date. You said you would. You always come in early after a shit weekend, too.” Slyger grimaced, but his voice still managed to keep a semi-playful tone. They had been friends for a long time, and even though they rarely saw each other outside of work, he managed to keep the relationship fresh in a way that made her think they had been long-time neighbors. “You’re in the big leagues now, Joan. You make more revenue a year than any cop would in ten. Get a new phone—*please.*”

“I’m saving for a trip,”[[6]](#footnote-6) Joan said, hoping to drop the subject. She turned the vanilla folder over in her hands, inwardly recoiling at the weight. “What’s this?”

“A present from the military. Sorry it’s so low tech. This just got in and Ross didn’t have time to convert it to the RIG system. You remember how to open your RIG, right? If you’re going to be a profiler, you’ll need to be as familiar with it as possible. All your assignments and contacts are in it.” Slyger sounded oddly exhausted.

“Yeah. I re-read the manual after the BAU orientation last week.” She absently raised her left arm, her wrist-mounted computer beginning to automatically scan the folder as she flipped through it.[[7]](#footnote-7) When she looked up to get a better look at him, she could see now that Slyger was disheveled. Either he’d had a night on the town with Nona, or he never actually left the office that weekend. Either way, *something* had happened. “What’s going on?”

“That’s why I called. I have the senior agent and the board of directions breathing down my neck over this damn thing. Did you not listen to the radio this morning?”

“The radio in my car is busted.”

“Figures—they’ve only mentioned it a few times though. They’re already trying to jam some of the stations to get them to shut up about it. God, how do you even *survive?*”

“Can we just get on to the folder?”

“Right, sorry. This comes in two parts, so bear with me,” Slyger started running a hand through his hair. “First, we’re looking an arsonist in the D.C. area.”

Joan looked back down at the folder now that it was scanned into her RIG.[[8]](#footnote-8) There was a freshly copied, still warm police report on top, along with the fax-sheet. There was also a seal across the docket number, marked specifically with the U.S. military police sigil, meaning that they had taken over the case. Behind it were photographs of the actual crime scene. The images were dark, but Joan could clearly make out what appeared to be a charred, grey concrete building that may have been contracted in the eighties. The front windows were blown out, and smaller fires could still be seen glowing inside the building as the fire-department attempted to get the situation under control.

Slyger’s voice was grim. “Eighteen deaths. That was just five hours ago across the street from Siems University. No survivors, and the exits were locked from the outside. They were doing a late-night showing of a filmfor the college.”

“This police report is date-stamped for around one in the morning. It’s almost four-thirty, now. Why was this the military’s problem only two hours later?”

“Not just the military.” The elevator chimed as they reached their floor. As the door opened, Joan was met with the sight of a wallof bodies. Familiar FBI personnel, military garbed individuals, and a CDC jacket were the first things she saw before Slyger started pushing his way into the crowd. She followed suit, briefly struggling to keep up as the smaller man weaved his way through the unusually busy hallway and shoved into the main office area of the FBI’s headquarters.[[9]](#footnote-9) Someone was shouting over the mayhem, and it took Joan another second to register who it was. Their captain, Samuel Wavens, was standing on the walkway on the second mid-floor, scanning the crowd with an agitated expression. Samuel was never the kind of man to lose his cool, and under the fluorescent lights hanging from the rafters of the tall room, there was a fine layer of sweat on his forehead. He was fair skinned and tall with a well-sculpted jawline and shoulders, and with the addition of his already rigid appearance, it gave him an automatic air of authority. Except now there was something else on top of it. Wavens looked—*was*—panicked. His eyes caught sight of Slyger as he leaned over the balcony. “Slyger! Has the new recruit called you back?”

Slyger had to raise his voice to be heard over the chaos. His voice cracked. “Got her right here! We’ll meet you in the conference room pronto, boss!”

“This isn’t just an arson case,” Joan said, albeit feeling a bit stupid afterward. Of course it wasn’t: arson cases were simple. Not necessarily *easy,* but simple. Arsonists were typically white males between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, and their reason for setting fires was usually for simple vandalism. In a case where the vandalism escalated to murder, like this one, it usually meant the arsonist was older—and that vandalism was only part of the equation. It meant he either had a revenge complex, had a rape complex (in which the act of setting a fire and trapping others inside replaced the act of rape), or was an utter sociopath. It was an easy profile, even without necessarily reading the entire file. “Renan, *why* is the military involved?” [[10]](#footnote-10)

“That’s the second part of this whole shit storm. A few minutes after emergency responders arrived at the theatre, a small bomb detonated on a bike trail close to the Jefferson memorial rotunda.” Slyger sounded tense now, passing a large, burly soldier in full marshal garb. “Additional responders were able to arrive shortly afterward to assess the damage, but twenty minutes later, all of them and the additional victims in the park were admitted to the hospital for chemical burns and black lesions. The area has been quarantined, but Wavens is thinking that the fire wasn’t an isolated incident. Whoever our unsub is, they used the fire as a means to gage emergency-responder time.”

Joan felt her heart drop into her stomach. Of all her years in the FBI, nothing could have prepared her for the realization of what was going on.

This was a terrorist attack.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**ii**

In 2134, terrorist attacks weren’t uncommon.[[12]](#footnote-12) In fact, the Council of Peace (which had replaced the United Nations thirty years earlier, after the Nano-Weapon Ethics Scandal of 2102) had identified and ranked over forty-eight different terrorist cells across the globe based on their threat-level. After the eradication of Neo Al-Qaida, the most dangerous of these groups to date was Crichton Cell, which attempted to bomb Antarctica and several free floating glaciers in the Arctic Ocean with fourteen stolen nuclear warheads in 2112. This had been done in an attempt to forcibly spearhead the renewing climate change movement, based on a similar fictional event that had taken place in a novel by Michael Crichton published in 2002. The Crichton Cell was stopped with the combined efforts New Korea, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States, but its legacy as one of the most volatile terror-cells in world history survived.

Since then, however, there were plenty of copycats: some based on eco-terrorism, some not. The Hallowed Treeline Group was an eco-terrorist cell known for domestic acts of extremism across the United States, but their actions were significantly tame up until the introduction of the Android Equality Act in Congress. Another group, REBOOT, was strictly dedicated to the vandalism of new automated technology that threatened human-workers. Despite that, neither of these groups was recognized by the Council of Peace. In fact, only two cells from the U.S. were actually acknowledged by the Council at all. [[13]](#footnote-13)

As far as Joan was concerned, it didn’t matter to her if terrorism was a normal part of twenty-second century living: being placed on her first terrorist case *ever* was a whole new experience entirely.

Sheldon Semons, a dark skinned man with a medium build and permanently angry facial features, was glaring at the case file as if it had turned some offensive shade of pink. Joan didn’t know much about him, either—her RIG’s profile section didn’t give much information.[[14]](#footnote-14) His profile was the shortest: he had an expunged criminal record, no family, and was *not* actually human despite his initial, very convincing appearance. Given the android’s wolf-like persistence in hunting down criminals, the FBI had a legitimate reason to still hire him, though. “I fuckin’ hate terrorists. Bunch of lowlife cowards—you don’t think this could be The Hallowed Treeline, do you, Wavens?”

They were all gathered in the BAU’s private conference room, which was thankfully cut off—and soundproofed—from the chaos still spilling out outside in the main wing. The unit had gathered around the small conference table (minus Casandra Ross, since her research equipment was in the Nest Hub). Other than her, everyone was present. Joan sat between Semons and Slyger, and across from them were Gary Nona, Marin Nebs, and Angela Church.

Wavens was at the front of the room, flipping through photographs of the movie theatre crime scene on the wall’s holographic display. “The Hallowed Tree is an extremist group, but chemical warfare isn’t their style. This is something new.”

“We’ve seen terrorist organizations evolve before,” Semons said, scowling. He leaned back in his chair, rocking haphazardly, clearly annoyed—maybe even a bit worried, too. “Back in 2126, the Humanity Party went from programming viruses into androids’ purchasable dream-codes to bombing android-friendly facilities. There were almost two hundred casualties in the San Francisco area before the ringleaders were captured.”

“The FBI lost almost a dozen android field agents when we tried infiltrating their headquarters,” Wavens said in a grave voice. “You had a personal connection with that case, correct? You knew some of those Brothers and Sisters.”

“Drop it.” Semons sneered as he leaned back forward. Joan could hear the gears—the *actual* gears—in his head turning. “You *know* why I have a personal connection. All the more reason to suspect that The Hallowed Treeline is involved.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Church said. Semons glared at her, but the woman ignored him with professional ease. Angela was a blonde, thin woman with rock star hips and the complexion of a supermodel—which she *had* been at one point, if the profile on the RIG was accurate. Why she had joined the FBI, Joan had no idea, but Church was an expert profiler transferred from the Rhode Island two years earlier. There was a wedding ring on her finger, but Church was her father’s last name and Joan seriously doubted she was really married. Chuch’s voice was light and contemplative, and she always sounded like she was in the middle of a deep thought. “The Hallowed Treeline values the preservation of life, not its destruction. Chemical warfare is completely out of character for them. This profile is something different entirely. The arson distraction testing emergency responders’ timing proves it.”

“Alright, princess—so where does that leave us?”

“Semons, behave.” Wavens’ voice, despite his already usually stoic tone, sounded legitimately forced. He looked at Joan next, momentarily catching her off guard. “Before we begin, I want to remind all of you to be on your best behavior for our newest recruit. Joan Klebes is a twelve year veteran of the Warren police force and recently promoted to our unit after a board review and sponsorship from Slyger. Her skills will be vital for our team to function, according to the Director’s requirements for hiring her on—Klebes, have you entered your qualifications into the skill-set on your RIG, yet?”

Joan sputtered. “No—not yet.” [[15]](#footnote-15)

“Do that now. I imagine you’ve been able to review our own skill-set profiles from your RIG, but none of us have been able to see yours.”

“Yes sir.” Joan brought up her RIG, entering her credentials. [[16]](#footnote-16)

Across the room, Semons looked down at his own RIG, wincing. “Small guns, hostage negotiation, and stealth. No offense Klebes, but you don’t exactly look light enough to be the stealthy type. Nice weapon qualifications, though.”

Slyger looked mortified. “Sheldon!”

“*Semons*.” Wavens’ voice was a darkened growl, and it was the closest sound to legitimate emotion that Klebes had ever heard out of the unit’s team leader so far. When the Semons said nothing, he moved on. “We want to make Klebes feel as welcome in our unit as possible. Help her out of she needs anything, and we’ll slip back into a functional dynamic soon enough. Given the gravity and importance of this current assignment, it is absolutely *essential* that we work together. Angela, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, sir.” Church reached out, touching the small console at the center of the round meeting table. A hatch opened up in the interface, and she reached into her blazer pocket and plucked out a small thumbnail sized data-patch. She plugged it into the interface and opened the application, showing a series of images on the holographic projector as it flashed to life: one of which was a “blueprint” schematic of the crime scene at the park. Another “image” that materialized directly alongside it was a three-dimensional list of chemicals, many of which Klebes had never heard of before.

Nona’s voice was rugged with skepticism. Gary Nona was a large, heavyset Somalian transfer from CIA four years earlier, honorably discharged due to being shot point blank in the temple in a hostage situation. The incident caused him to lose most of his sight. Making out basic shapes wasn’t an issue, but although he refused retirement, he was still legally blind. What he lacked in sight, however, he made up in excellent hearing: implants in the audio-center of his brain literally allowed him to map out his surroundings with sound alone, and ironically, it made him one of the best shots on the team—as long as he was out in the open where sounds couldn’t echo and confuse him, at least. Despite being Slyger’s husband, they managed to keep to the no-fraternization rule fairly easily: at first glance, they acted like they utterly despised one another. This worked in the unit’s favor, as they were able to bounce ideas off one another at a rapid-fire pace. Nona was built like a brick-house, standing at a solid six foot seven with wide shoulders and biceps thick enough to crush a human skull between them. “What are we looking at? Someone describe it for me.”

Slyger elbowed him. “Listen, you oaf.”

“The CDC did a sweep of the park where the chemical bomb went off,” Church continued, gesturing to the projection. As her fingers skimmed across it, the image zoomed forward, focusing in on the rendering of a small bench. Beneath it was a square shape: the chemical bomb. “The device was found here, made with a lunchbox, light bulbs containing the powder chemicals, and a reprogrammed smartphone converted into an electronic timer. There was significant damage to the park bench, but not the surrounding area. Causing physical damage to the park itself wasn’t the objective.”

“I think most of us figured that out already,” Slyger said, albeit quietly. He reached out and let his fingers dance on the surface of the projection, zooming in on the outline of the bomb. Another window popped up, showing a queer schematic. Slyger frowned. “This doesn’t make sense. The bomb is so... *shitty.* I think one of my nieces majoring in engineering made something more advanced than this—Wavens, stop looking at me like that, *it was for school.*”

“That doesn’t comfort me, Slyger.”

“This kind of bomb is what we could rank as a class four explosive,” Nebs suddenly blurted out, breaking his own silence. The usually quiet, reserved man was examining the schematic with owl-like scrutiny. According to her RIG, Marin Nebs was the technical field analyst, as well as a genius mathematician and scientist. At the age of twenty-nine, he was one of the youngest FBI field analysts in the Detroit BAU unit, and with an IQ of 203, it was no surprise. The New Korean native earned his first PhD at twenty-three, and he was already working his way toward his fifth in psychology—all while having Down Syndrome. His RIG mentioned something about some kind of genetic treatment he had undergone with a corporation named PELM to combat and correctly rewire his actual chromosomes, but many of the details were expunged. He was a smallish man with bleach blonde hair, oddly fair skin, and the iciest eyes Joan had ever seen on another human being. Nebs was also incredibly soft spoken, but whether or not he was just shy or simply thinking too much to ever take command of the conversation was unclear. He plucked up a pen, gesturing to the crude bomb. “A class five would be something like a cherry-bomb or small firecracker. Likewise, class three would be something like a pipe-bomb or a grenade. These kinds of bombs are fairly easy to make—something that’s not typically used in these sorts of crimes. At the most for a standard chemical weapon, I would have expected something like a small-type class two...”

“Don’t worry everyone!” Slyger said suddenly, voice mockingly raised an entire octave. The sarcasm in his voice was syrupy. “These kinds of bombs aren’t *typically* used in these sorts of crimes...”

Nona nudged him, grunting. Slyger glanced at him briefly, then huffed and sat back in his seat with his arms folded.

“We get it—the bomb isn’t sophisticated. So why would someone who planned such a refined crime use such an inferior weapon?” Klebes asked. She readjusted herself in her seat, gesturing to the bomb herself. “Even if this was just some sort of test run, it doesn’t make sense. According to the file, the CDC doesn’t even know what the chemical substance *is* yet. That’s not something you would see from a novice chemical bomber, never mind a potential terrorist organization that hasn’t even claimed responsibility yet.”

“Our unnamed-suspect could be working alone. We shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves,” Wavens said. “The 2120 Concord Anthrax Bomber worked alone from a lab in his garage. We know our current unsub is organized, and since no claim has been made yet, the possibility this is a Lone Wolf attack is doubled.”

“On the contrary, we shouldn’t presume anything,” Nebs interrupted. “This is an incredibly sophisticated crime, like Klebes said. The construction of the main bomb doesn’t match the level of thought that went into the timeline of the crime. If anything, we should be concerned that the events that have taken place so far, from the threatre arson to the bomb in the park, are part of some kind of crude test. We have every right to be wary of another attack.”

“Moving on, there’s also the chemical weapon itself,” Church said. She swiped her hand across the hologram again, zooming in on the light bulbs, the containment system for the chemical weapon, inside the schematic of the bomb. “The CDC crime unit managed to piece together most of the bomb, and the powder chemical found on the inside of the light bulb fragments is—well, they’re not sure *what* it is, like Klebes already pointed out. The CIA Chemical Warfare Unit is looking at it now, but it’s not anything we’re familiar with. The chemical acts like Anthrax, but infection time works twice as fast. Being exposed to this with bare skin is guaranteed to blister in less than five minutes: two hundred times faster than Anthrax. And standard Anthrax treatments do nothing to flush the chemical out once it’s infected someone’s blood.”

“So everyone who’s infected...?” Nona grimaced, shoulders tensing. “There’s nothing they can do for them?”

Wavens interjected stiffly, stone-faced and grim. “Other than give them morphine—no. There’s nothing yet. The CDC is trying to deconstruct the compound to try and find a blood-treatment, but the powder samples they took are already starting to break down... which is why we need to find our unsub as fast as possible.” He looked at Church. “Is this enough for a preliminary profile?”

“It’s going to have to be,” Church said. “We don’t have anything else. Not until the CDC declares the park safe and we can begin our own investigation. *Howl Dog’s* is on the launch pad with her engine running and ready to take off when we are. We can be at D.C. in three hours if we leave in the next thirty minutes.”

“Slyger and I can check out the arson site once we get there, too,” Nona said. “There might be more clues there that will give us some insight about the unsub’s behavior—like if he has a delusion or not.”

“What do you mean—*if?*”

“No, Nona is right.” Wavens gestured loosely to the dark, heavyset man. “You and Slyger will go to the site of the fire and look for anything *physically* linking the two locations together. Given how the fire-site was locked from the outside, it shows that our unsub likely had some previous experience with the property, maybe a former employee or a local. If there *are* any security tapes across the street aimed at the property, I want Ross to have access to them immediately. The sooner she can analyze them, the further ahead of the game we’ll be.”

“You got it, boss,” Slyger said, standing up.

Church frowned. “And let me guess...”

“I hate to ask you again—I know you want to get into the field for yourself, but I need a fresh face for the press conference. Nebs?”

“I can give the preliminary profile to the military, CIA, and CDC units.” Nebs stood up, already making to walk out of the room. “I’ll start writing up a report to send to the local police forces, too. Given my experience in biology, I feel qualified to look at the chemical compound as well. Do you want me to forward additional information to Ross so we can both analyze it?”

“Yes—the sooner we can get both of you to look more closely at the compound provided by the CDC, the sooner we can get her to back trace where it could have come from.” Wavens looked at Joan. “Klebes, I want you and Semons to interview one of the park survivors. It’s already been a few hours, so the sooner we can get a statement, the better.”

“Sure,” Semons said sourly. He went mostly ignored.

“I’ll go with Church to the press conference. We’ll rendezvous over our holo-projectors at thirteen thirty—that should give enough time for Ross to do more digging. We’re boarding *Howl Dog* in twenty. Dismissed.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

**iii**

The team’s gunperry was a small, mobile fortress modeled after the retired military Osprey X1-80: complete with anti-gravity thrusters, suspension propellers on each wing, and water-particle conversion turbines on the hull to increase fuel efficiency.[[18]](#footnote-18) Given the sophistication of their job (and ever since the Crichton Cell crisis), all FBI teams above third level clearance were indoctrinated into U.S. military operations under their own separate branches, giving them access to otherwise restricted equipment in an attempt to quell the constantly rising threat of terrorist-plots. While there *were* civilian styled gunperries in production, theirs, *Howl Dog*, had some “special” equipment. Two mounted rail-guns concealed on the bottom hull allowed her to be utilized in emergency situations, such as during S.W.A.T. raids and the one hostage situation that had taken place three months earlier in New Boston. She was also equipped with a laser targeting system, which routed to a GPS and then to FBI satellites, which could target “drop points” and allow the satellites to fire down a brutal hail of laser fire from space. And then there were the two robots: the mobile-armors *Tesla* and *Caboose.* Neither mech was “sentient” in the sense androids were, but their A.I. units allowed them to synchronize their movements with their pilots’ mental commands via a cerebral sensor-interface. Nona and Semons were the only ones trained to pilot them, but the mechs stood roughly twelve feet tall and could be used for emergencies—like dealing with terrorists.

“Not that they ever will,” Semons said, sitting down in his seat.[[19]](#footnote-19) He tapped on the holo-monitor, causing Ross’ image to flinch back. “*Tesla* isn’t mobile. He hasn’t had maintenance done on him since March last year. I keep telling Wavens we need to upgrade his nuclear-reactor, but *apparently* we don’t have the funds for it. And *Caboose* is insane. His sub-sentient A.I. is still fuckin’ warped to hell after that EMP that went off in New Boston.”

“The robots were deemed non-vital at the time. We’ll see about getting them fixed after the next budget review.” That was Wavens, up front with their pilot, reading a datapad detailing more information on their case. The threatening undertone of his voice caused Semons to immediately shut up. Semons was always mouthy, but he was well aware when he was stepping too hard on their leader’s toes.

Casandra Ross rolled her eyes. The FBI data-analyst was a perky older woman with a low pitched, nasally voice. Before working for Wavens, she had been stationed with the CIA as a military-grade hacker. For what department, she wouldn’t say—but she was very, *very* good at her job. Joan couldn’t access her data on her RIG yet, but when she rendezvoused with them in D.C., the information would become available. “As I was saying, I did some digging and I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?”

“Preferably the good news,”[[20]](#footnote-20) Klebes said. She glanced over her shoulder. Slyger and Nona were passed out in their seats (with Nona heavily slumped against the smaller man, looking as if he might crush him), and Nebs and Church were going over notes—likely for their respective press conference and profile delivery. “Do you have anything for us?”

“Nothing concrete hon, but those chemicals found in the weapon? It *does* appear to be Anthrax, although a highly modified version of it. Anthrax toxin is composed of a cell-binding protein, known as protective antigen and two separate enzyme components, called edema factor and lethal factor. Nebs had to explain this part to me: three proteins act together to translocate into the cytoplasm of a target cell. Once inside, the enzymatic components of the toxin disrupt various immune cell functions, namely cellular signaling and cell migration. Anthrax toxin ultimately allows the bacteria to evade the immune system, multiply, and ultimately kill the host animal, but here’s where it gets tricky...”

Semons raised his eyebrow. “This is the bad news, right?”

“Looking at the analysis sent to me, it looks like there are three more additional enzymes. It’s destroying entire cells rather than just allowing bacteria to bypass the immune system, and the two other proteins are causing necrosis and what looks like premature rigor-mortis where the muscles lock up and blood pools in the body—it’s seriously messed up.”

“Doesn’t rigor-mortis happen when you’re dead?” Semons made a face. “And here I thought humans couldn’t be any more—disgusting.”

“Aren’t *you* a delightful little ball of sunshine today,” Ross said, only half sarcastically. “By the time we solve this thing, they’re going to have to come up with a brand-new classification of living-rigor, or something. Another fun fact: the infection is *not* contagious once it’s inside people. It’s only contractible in its powder form, and even then, it breaks down rapidly if it doesn’t find a human host.”

“Not like you would have to worry about it, Semons,”[[21]](#footnote-21) Klebes said. “You might be the only one immune, if we need to send someone into a potentially dangerous area.”

“Yeah, right, fuck you, lady.” Semons stood up, walking to the front of the cabin.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Ross flinched. The holo-monitor wasn’t particularly clear because of the bad reception going through the clouds, but the anguish on her face was noticeable all the same. “Ow. He’s usually not this moody... please don’t take that to heart. He’ll warm up to you eventually.”

“I think some of the initial comments this morning at debriefing got to him,” Klebes said. “Is he sensitive about being an android?”

“So you’ve been reading the profiles on your RIG.” Ross’ voice was almost sad sounding. “Poor guy. He was programmed to be a guard-droid. When the sentience kicked in, he ran around on the streets for a while getting into all sorts of trouble. A lot of his friends were killed during the initial equality riots, and when he joined the FBI, a lot of other androids were killed in a terrorist-cell raid. Him being an android might be a saving grace for this case, though. I know I said it wasn’t contagious, but it might be highly contractible to humans in later stages. The hospital where all the victims of the chemical bomb were sent to updated a report on their database mentioning something about victims developing sores containing mutated spores...” Ross paused. “I did some digging for potential terrorist organizations too. None of the organizations in the federal database match the bomb-design. It’s like—this is something new entirely. I hope we’re cut out to handle it.”

“Me too, Casandra.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

**iv**

It was nine in the morning when *Howl Dog* landed. The white SUVs were waiting for them on the tarmac, and the team promptly split up. Klebes loaded up with Semons, and both agents promptly headed for the hospital. The drive was fairly non-eventful: the streets of D.C. were bustling with their usual activity and the radio only fleetingly mentioned the quarantined bike trail by the (now temporarily-closed) Jefferson memorial.[[24]](#footnote-24) By the time they made it to St. White’s Hospital, the fire at the movie theatre had only been mentioned twice. The scandal surrounding the pop singer Adelaide Power and her android fiancé Curve-3, however, had dominated the airwaves.

As soon as the car was parked, Semons switched off the radio. “Thank fuckin’ god. We’re investigating a possible terror-plot and no one will shut up about Curve’s goddamn ugly mug. What a cheap bastard.”

“Jealous?”[[25]](#footnote-25) Joan felt awkward, but she felt like she had to say something.

“If I *ever* suggest I’m jealous of one of my Brothers marrying a human, just do me a favor and pull my plug.”

Both profilers filed out of the car, walking for the front doors. The hospital seemed oddly abandoned, and the reason became apparent as soon as they were in the lobby. Two large, intimidating armed guards were standing by the receptionist desk, towering over the small woman typing away at the keyboard of a holographic display. When both FBI agents reached the desk, they flashed their holobadges wordlessly. The woman looked up—and instantly an expression of relief bloomed on her face.

“This is a nightmare,” she said as she stood up, offering her hand. Joan shook it. When the woman offered it to Semons, he declined. Miffed but ultimately undeterred, the woman pulled back and continued. “All of our ambulances are being rerouted to Mercy Regional on the other side of the district. We’ve sent some of our staff too, but they’re overcrowded enough as it is—and I can’t even tell them *why* we’re on lockdown. It’s awful.”

“Lockdown?” Semons raised an eyebrow. “Why weren’t informed of the lockdown? Did something happen?”

“So much has happened in the last nine hours, I don’t even know where to start.” The woman said, walking around the receptionist desk. She began making her way towards a staff elevator and the FBI agents followed the unspoken prompt to follow. The armed guards remained behind, motionless. “We had to clear an entire floor just to house the victims of the chemical bomb. At first we just quarantined half the emergency floor, but then there was the *screaming...* we *had* to move the other patients. Good thing we did too.”

Joan shuddered. She felt her stomach knot. “Screaming?”

“Of our original thirty patients, only twenty-four are left. The chemical, bioweapon, whatever the CDC wants to call it, causes mock-rigor to set in after five or six hours. Their bodies are locking up and rotting out from the inside. Morphine doesn’t help. We’ve given them all we can without killing them. We’re not *allowed* to kill them, but...”

“But you wish you could.” Semons’ voice was oddly calm as they stepped into the elevator, doors closing behind them.

The woman looked mortified. “I took the Hippocratic oath to do no harm. This—keeping these people alive once their flesh starts falling off and the body-wide necrosis sets in—is *worse* than harm.”

The elevator jerked to a stop. A holographic display prompt appeared in front of the door, showing a keypad. The woman entered a codec and was then prompted to place her hand on the display for a print-check. She did as it asked. *“Samantha Burroughs, director of operations. You have been cleared.”*

“We need the extra security,” the woman said. She reached into her pocket, producing several balls of what appeared to be wax. It took Joan an extra second to realize they were low-tech earplugs. “This thing isn’t initially contagious once it infects a host, but the patients who have already died developed sores that released some kind of spore. One of our own staff inhaled some of it and threw herself from the window—we’re ten stories up. God, I *knew* her. I hired her onto my staff last fall. She just paid off her college debts.”

“Delightful,” Semons muttered.

That was when Joan heard it—the *screaming—*coming through the vent above them as the elevator rose to the top floor of St. White’s.

**v**

It was so much worse than Dr. Burroughs made it sound. Joan briefly wished that Nebs had been chosen to go to the hospital rather than give the initial profile at the press conference. He was a scientist before a profiler—he might have been able to find *some* merit out of this trip, horrifying as it was.

The earplugs were hardly any help. Before the doors even opened, the agonized death throes—and they *were* death throes—were unbearable. It was with another stroke of horror, Joan realized, that she could hear at least two children screaming as well. As the doors slid open, the whereabouts of the remaining staff were clear. The open-floor plan of St. White’s top floor was bustling with people in full protective gear, filing around white tents set up along the walls and up the middle of the room, creating corridors. The outside of the tents were pristine, but the insides of the translucent, tarp-like material were frequently marked up with streaks of black and filth. One tent was shaking, and several staff members were rushing in holding gurney restraints. The silhouette of a person could be seen writhing and bucking on a bed inside, additional silhouettes holding them down.

Next to her, Semons’ entire body was tense and coiled to a taught spring. She couldn’t blame him.

They continued walking up the right-hand isle until they reached the back of the room. There was a steel-plated door with another keycode, and when they entered it, Joan realized it was complete and utterly silent. When she saw Semons curiously reach up to disengage his earplugs, she did the same. The room was soundproofed.

“We moved our only coherent patient to the back,” Burroughs said. She gestured to another door ahead of them. “She’s been showing delayed symptoms. I don’t know how much longer she’ll be like this, though. Her mock-rigor is already progressing and she’s been complaining more and more about her pain. Whatever you need to ask, do it now—she won’t be available later. *No one* will be available later.”

“They’re all going to die,” Semons said. He was stone-faced.

“There’s nothing we can do for them,” Burroughs said. She went to put her earplugs back in. “I’ll be back down in the lobby. I... I can’t be up here. I trust you can let yourself out when you’re done.”

“We understand. Thank you.”

The second door leading into the closed-off room opened, and Joan and Semons stepped in—leaving Burroughs in the tiny soundproofed entryway to prepare her own exit.

Joan wasn’t prepared.

She had seen some fairly heavy things during her career. On her first assignment with the FBI, back when she first left the Warren police department, they had been tasked to profile an unsub responsible for murdering several college students and posing their bodies in front of college dorms on another campus. The bodies had been heavily mutilated, and while the team was in the area, another body turned up. The girl had only just turned nineteen. She was a small athlete with strong legs and bright red hair, but the rest of her—there wasn’t much of anything. Her face had been stripped off, possibly with an axe, and her ribcage had been opened. Joan had to immediately go home after arriving at the scene. The only reason she stayed with FBI was because of Slyger’s persuasion that things could have been worse. The wounds had been done post-mortem, meaning she hadn’t been alive to feel it. That ultimately offered Joan the comfort she needed to continue with the case, and four days of investigative work later, the local police finally caught the culprit.

This wasn’t like that.

The woman on the cot looked like a wet, slicked down corpse. The entire room smelled like copper and antiseptic, but the stench of rotting *meat* overpowered everything else. The only part of her body that looked remotely normal were her fingers, but even then, the flesh was discolored black at the tips as the infection decimated her. Chemical burns and blackened patches of puss infected wounds peppered her purple skin, and her eyes were milky. If it wasn’t for the fact the girl’s chest was rising and falling, Joan wouldn’t have believed she was still alive. She couldn’t even tell what *race* she used to be.

“Are you the police?” The woman’s voice was hoarse and gravely, like sandpaper on chalkboard. There was a hole starting to develop in her right cheek, exposing the stretching muscle as she struggled to speak. Semons actually winced at the sight of her. She continued. “Where is my son? He’s only seven—I was supposed to bring him his lunch today. Did someone call my husband to pick him up?”

“Someone is taking care of him,” Semons said immediately, expression still frozen. He glanced at the datapad at the foot of the bed. “Sarah?”

“Yes.” As she spoke, black slop pooled in her mouth. She spat it up, causing it to drip precariously on her already soiled hospital gown. Some of what remained of her lips split open, causing a small chunk of flesh to peel away—revealing her white gums underneath. “You’re police officers?”

“We’re FBI, ma’am.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Joan moved around the other side of the bed. “You were on a midnight jog when this happened?”

“After they installed the sniper sentries in the park... they automatically detect if someone is being attacked, so I thought it would be safe to go for a run. I thought it would be *alright*. I thought...” She coughed, spitting up more black fluid. Her sores oozed, and it took all of Joan’s willpower not to stagger back or jump. She wasn’t contagious, she had to remind herself. Not yet. “I heard a pop and saw other people looking at a smoking bench. Then I felt dizzy—someone called the police, I think.”

“Did you see who left the bomb by the bench, Sarah?” Semons asked, quieter.

“No,” she mouthed. No sound came up—just more puss. Off handedly, Joan wondered about her son. Sarah would never get to see him again. Even if she did, he likely wouldn’t recognize her—at this point, she was already dead to him. She had been in emotionally disturbing situations like this before, but *this* was something new in itself entirely.

Sarah’s son was never going to learn the true gravity of what really happened to his mother. Joan, however, was going to take the image of Sarah rotting away like a corpse to her grave.

“I saw an angel.”

Joan felt herself get drawn back to reality. She snapped back to attention and looked down at Sarah, noticing how the woman was actually trying to smile. What little remained of her lips stretched and slid off her face, catching on her chin and exposing her blackened, bloodied teeth. Semons shook, and if he had been human, Joan was sure he would have broken out into gooseflesh. He looked up at her, and Joan felt the words leaving her mouth before she could stop herself. “An angel?” [[27]](#footnote-27)

“He wasn’t very pretty. He had cold hands. Very cold...” She twitched her head to the left, starting to laugh. “Momma told me they were pretty.”

“Stay with me, Sarah,” Semons said. “Focus. Where did you see the angel?”

“Semons?” Joan glanced at him. This line of questioning wasn’t going to get them anywhere, and if she was becoming incoherent...

“Angels. *Angels...*”She reached up with her free hand, going to scratch her arm—pulling away a large piece of flesh, exposing muscle and bone underneath.

Joan felt her breakfast rudely begin to disagree with her. She pivoted and made for the door, struggling not vomit. She closed her eyes, grounding herself and trying to burn the image out of her head. Whatever this was—whatever the *fuck* this was—they had to stop it. Another bomb, bioweapon, could *not* be allowed to go off.

“Thank you so much for talking with us, Sarah. You’ve been a great help. Get some rest.” When Joan turned around to look at Semons, he was standing rigid, not looking away from the poor woman on the cot. His shoulders were squared and tense, jaw locked. He turned to look at Joan next, a strange expression on his face. “We better call this in to Wavens. We’re done here.”

“I’ll call him once we’re back in the car,” Joan said, trying not to look at Sarah. She felt horrible—she wanted to say *something,* but her gut was screaming at her to just leave*.* When she joined law enforcement, she did so to do something good for others—to assure others that no matter what, they were always going to somehow be safe*.* But the way Sarah looked, the way she was falling *apart*, Joan felt herself freezing up.

They had to stop this. Not just for national security—for the people they couldn’t save. Like Sarah.

As Joan turned to leave, she noticed something else, too. For as much as Semons acted like he despised humans, there was no mistaking the general mishap of his hand as it brushed up against one of the machines supporting Sarah. His finger darted across something, causing a number on a small display screen, fourteen, to suddenly shoot up to sixty-seven. When one of the IV bags above Sarah started to drip faster, Joan realized it was the morphine delivery mechanism. Sarah sighed, staring up at the ceiling blankly, settling into her soiled cot comfortably. Euthanasia by accidental morphine overdose seemed a far better fate than the one that awaited the poor woman outside the soundproofed room.[[28]](#footnote-28)

“We’re done here,” Semons said, briskly walking past Joan. He didn’t put his earplugs back in, and Joan, without another word, followed him back into the loud hell of the outside world. There were no angels there.

**vi**

Wavens told them they needed to go to the bike trail next. Apparently, it had been cleared by the CDC. Slyger and Nona were already there when Joan pulled the SUV up to the barricades. The Jefferson Memorial was in the background, barely visible above the tree line of the small park.

“So the movie theatre was a bust,” Slyger said as Joan and Semons crossed the crime-scene tape. He was fiddling nervously with a set of latex gloves. “Typical arson site. Most of the people suffocated in the hallway trying to escape through the emergency exit, but the chains on the door outside...”

“This whole thing smells like a setup for something big,” Nona finished, eyeballing Semons. “You okay?”

“Mind your own business.”

“I take it that the hospital visit wasn’t great, either,” Slyger said quietly to Joan, making the extra effort to learn towards her so their own conversation could be more private. “Was your witness...?”

“She’s gone,” Joan said. “They’re all gone.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph...” Slyger made a face. “In less than ten hours. Unbelievable. I don’t know what’s worse: us scratching our asses because we can’t figure out any leads, or the fact that these assholes could have crippled us from the start if they set this weapon off on a larger scale...”

“Well, we better be fuckin’ glad they didn’t,” Semons said, moving past them towards the park. “CDC cleared us?”

“Whatever it is, it can’t survive outside the human body or a vacuum for long,” Nona said as he came up behind Slyger. “That’s what the CDC girl said to me...”

“What my idiot companion is trying to say,” Slyger started, elbowing the larger man, “is that this *thing* can’t survive in an environment that isn’t completely sterilized or a human host. When the chemical was inside those light bulbs, there was a vacuum. Outside the vacuum, the chemical pretty much decimated in the air—or found a human host to infect before it could be destroyed. They can’t find a trace of it in the park *anywhere* anymore. You could eat off the ground and not get sick—well, at least not from whatever *we’re* investigating. It has something to do with the way it was engineered.”

“Whoever made this didn’t want us to be able to trace it back to them,” Semons said. He kept walking further and further ahead of them, and Joan found herself having to jog slightly to keep up. Slyger followed suit—Nona just widened his already massive strides. “So *that’s* why looking at this thing is such a bitch? It just kills itself when it’s not in a sterile environment or mutating human cells?”

“That would seem to be the case. Nebs would *love* to get his grubby little mitts on this shit, I bet,” Slyger said, albeit somewhat meanly.

The park bench was just a little further ahead. There were still some people in full hazmat suits milling around, but other than that, the site was abandoned. The bench was warped from the small explosion, and indents in the wood showed where the tin lunchbox shrapnel had impacted it. There was a smallish crater behind the most warped leg, causing the entire seat to shift slightly on its left. Aside from a fine layer of black powder caked onto its surface from the initial explosion, the bench appeared mostly intact.

“I can’t believe this killed more people than the threatre,” Nona said quietly.

“I can’t believe you have the capacity to string whole sentences together, you dumbass,” Semons said, walking around the back of the bench. The android was scowling, his head—*literally—*whirling as he thought. “Angels.”

“What?” Slyger frowned. “What about them?”

“The witness at the hospital mentioned she saw one after the explosion,” Joan explained quietly. She walked up next to Semons. “She was delusional, Sheldon.”

“I don’t think so,” he said quietly. When his eyes changed color—from brown to red—Joan realized he was scanning the bench. He started to circle it like a predator, his frown deepening. “Sarah was adamant about it. Something set her off, andshe talked about someone having cold hands.”

Joan debated even speaking up. “You think she came in contact with someone?”[[29]](#footnote-29)

“Possibly our unsub? Yeah.” Semons squinted. He was eyeing the bench with an almost vicious air of prejudice. “And *angels* has something to do with it.”

“If she saw the unsub that would mean that he was still at the park when the weapon went off. He would have been with the initial victims—” Nona stopped himself, swearing something in Somali. “He’s at the hospital with the rest of our victims, then.”

“*Dead* victims,” Slyger corrected tersely, voice equally tense. “So much for getting our guy alive, then. This is too sophisticated to be a Lone Wolf attack, and if this was some kind of freak suicide bombing, it means that this is bigger than just one person. This is definitely another terrorist cell—but what does an angel have to do with anything?”

“This.” Semons’ eyes returned to their normal shade. He knelt down, bracing his knee in the small crater in behind the bench and gesturing for Joan. “Give me your pocket knife. Or razor. Whatever you have on you—now.”

Joan reached into her back pocket and handed her laser switchblade to him. “What are you doing? Do you see something?”

Semons said nothing. He flipped open the switchblade, going to gently scrape at the back of the blackened bench. “Not sure. Come on and help me with this.”

Joan frowned, kneeling down next to him. Carefully, she began wiping away the access grit away from the path of Semons’ scraping. Part of her wanted to ask the android about Sarah again, mention the incident as they were leaving, *something*... but she stopped herself short. She had rarely seen the other agent show legitimate sympathy for a victim, and she didn’t want to ruin the chance to see it again by probing him. Semons must have felt her decision to keep quiet too, because he suddenly relaxed. For the first time since knowing him, the android seemed completely calm next to her.[[30]](#footnote-30)

“Wait—wait, stop.” Slyger was standing over them now, leering. “What *is* that?”

“I fuckin’ knew it.” Semons dropped the knife, wiping the access soot away with his fingers. There was an image stenciled underneath, freshly carved into the bench. It had been covered up by the soot during the explosion, but the fact it wasn’t weathered down meant it was new. Judging by the still somewhat jagged carve lines, it couldn’t have been more than a few days old. The image was a stick figure, sporting oriental wings that were far too artistically advanced for the scribble it was attached to. Each of the feathers were stenciled out, the wings curving upward along with the stick figure’s raised hands.

“I can’t see,” Nona whined. “What is it?”

“You don’t need to see it,” Semons said, his eyes changing blue—he was photographing it. “I’m sending this to Ross. We need to identify it.”

“But what *is* it?” Joan furrowed her brow. She knew what it was, obviously—an angel, just like the poor woman had said in the hospital. It took another few seconds for the next realization to hit her. “This is a drop point. Someone marked this for the bomb to be placed.”

“That poor woman must have seen it *and* come into contact with our unsub, somehow. We need to identify every single person at the hospital to try and figure out which our male “victims” came in contact with Sarah. *And* we need to call Wavens and get Church to change the profile. Even if our first Unsub is in the hospital morgue, we still have more.”

**LEVEL 1: COMPLETE**

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***Howl Dogs* page!**

1. The game’s first scene opens inside the car with *The Logical Song* playing on the radio. Although Joan cannot control where the vehicle is going (this particular car drives on its own automatically), she can listen to the radio, drink her coffee, and read a series of e-mails on her cell phone. One is from her cousin, another is from her date that stood her up, and another is from Renan Slyger. She can also go further back into her e-mails to read an email from Samuel Wavens, her new captain, welcoming her to the BAU team now that she is successfully transferred and getting ready to start her first day on Monday—which is the same date showing on the car’s console. Several prompts show the player how to select things using certain buttons. The car ride is, in fact, a basic tutorial for using certain buttons to access and deselect certain intractable objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At this point, the car rolls to a stop and prompts Joan to get out, allowing the player to physically maneuver Joan’s body for the first time. They receive several more discreet prompts from the bottom of the screen, showing the player how to walk and run. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Joan enters into the elevator, the game exits out of “combat-mode” and enters “casual-mode.” This is to prevent enemies from spawning inside the elevator in the event of a game glitch. Switching between modes also keeps the game from lagging substantially, because keeping a game “locked” in a combat situation takes up a *lot* of computer processing data in most modern games. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the first bit of “official” dialogue in the game. Hearing impaired players can go into their settings menu and switch on subtitles if they need to. It is accessible from both the in-game menu and the title-screen menu. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The player character is given the option to choose between several dialogue options. A prompt at the bottom of the screen informs the player that these options may or may not elicit certain responses. For example, being polite will usually make a character like you more. Alternatively, using a rude answer may make them like you significantly less. Whenever you choose a dialogue choice, a small script will appear in the top right-hand corner of the screen detailing what the character you are talking to thinks about that response. However, you only have a set amount of time to choose dialogue: if you wait too long, the game will choose for you. In Joan’s case here, she chooses to lie. The dialogue bar in the top right-hand corner of the screen reads *“Slyger doesn’t believe you,”* and you lose a karma point with him. All the relationships you have in-game follow a karma-counter. High counts will result in good relationships and bonuses with that character. Low counts will result in bad relationships and setbacks to working with that character in the future. It can also unlock more unique dialogue choices as the game goes on. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is another chance to choose dialogue choices. In the corner of the screen, it reads “Slyger will remember this information.” This means that he will likely refer to it at some point later in the game. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. You are allowed to access your RIG for the first time using the select button on your game controller (or the command key if you are playing on a PC). The RIG is essentially your in-game “command center,” allowing the player to access health-restoring kits, switch between weapons, access mission/quest information, read in-game files (such as the one Joan is currently “scanning,” access maps, character bios (and their karma stats in terms to their relationships with Joan, and set hot-keys for easy weapon access in the over-world without having to access the menu (useful for combat situations, since opening the RIG does not “pause” the game when it is being accessed).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Joan can flip through the pages at will, and the player can read what information they want to. This feeling of control will help establish the feeling of “immersion” (where the player can feel like they are “actually” part of the scene as it is unfolding in real-time). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The player character will actually struggle to push through the crowd, showcasing how the player will be bogged down and have limited movement in tight spaces. This means that potential suspect chases can be disastrous if they are in crowded spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Another chance to choose your own dialogue is given here, but no perks/drawbacks come about from what you ask. Some chances to choose dialogue are there purely for aesthetic reasons and to increase the feeling of immersion in the player. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. At this point, the game cuts out to black and the title *HOWL DOGS*appears on the screen. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The player receives this next bit of information through a narrated overview, which happens following the game’s title sequence. It carries in for a few minutes, showing art stills relating to certain things being narrated, before it finishes and cuts back to the main game. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is the end of the title sequence. The game switches back to the over-world, showing Joan already in the meeting room with the rest of the team. She is sitting down and she has the option to get up, but she has the option to get up and move around if she wants (giving players a sense of freedom and a further sense of immersion). It is recommended Joan sits down though: it’s easier to see everything going on when she is. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In this situation, Joan is flipping through her RIG’s profile section in order to read more about her team. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is another chance the player has to choose dialogue. Sometimes when Joan is caught off-guard, the player will have significantly less time to pick an answer. In this case, Joan had less than two seconds to respond and barely stuttered out an answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Here, the player is able to enter in their “credentials,” choosing what three things the character is best at. As the player levels up, they can add points to certain categories, increasing Joan’s skill level. However, choosing three primary “skills” right away will grant +20 skill points for that particular skillset. In this case, this playable version of Joan specializes in small guns, hostage negotiation, and stealth. The player can also choose a perk, which will grant them other bonuses. As the player levels up, they can choose more perks. For this playthrough, we will presume Joan has chosen the Lady Killer perk, which makes her 15% more effective in combat against other women. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The scene cuts out again, removing Joan from the conference room before the scene “reopens” into another narration sequence. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This particular narration scene talks about *Howl Dog.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The narration sequence ends and abruptly reopens onto Sheldon sitting in his seat inside of *Howl Dog*, putting the player back into an intractable environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is another chance to choose dialogue. Again, this one is here mostly for aesthetics. Choosing between good or bad news first does not chance much, other than making the player feel like they are in control and immersed in the game-world. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is another opportunity for the player to choose their own dialogue. In this case, the player has unwittingly chosen the “worst” dialogue option for Sheldon. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In the corner of the screen, it reads *“Sheldon is furious with Klebes and will remember this conversation.”* The player may face repercussions for this dialogue choice later on, now that the player has lost karma points with Sheldon. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The scene cuts out as it comes to a close. For this particular scene, Joan chose to stay and talk with Sheldon and Ross the entire time, rather than taking the opportunity to explore the cabin of *Howl Dog* and interact with other characters. However, as a result, Joan has earned extra karma points with Ross, which may prove much more useful later on. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The scene opens up directly in the car, rather than showing Howl Dog land in the main video game world. The player knows they are in D.C. because they can see the Capital building out of the car window. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Another chance to choose unique options. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Another opportunity to choose dialogue. However, because this character is only able to be interacted with this one time, dialogue choices said to her will only affect the next closest character in the room: in this case, Sheldon. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Another instance where the dialogue option has a very short response time, due to Joan’s surprise. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This is a rare instance where the player has the opportunity to interact directly with another non-player character. Joan can either stop Sheldon or let him kill Sarah to put her out of her misery. In this case, she allows him to kill her. This results in a fairly significant karma increase, making Sheldon’s relationship with Joan much stronger than it would be with strict dialogue alone. This is because of the idea that “actions speak louder than words.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Sometimes, Joan can choose not to speak at all when given dialogue options. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This is another instance where the player can choose not to select any dialogue options. By doing so, this is sometimes the best option. In this case, by not saying anything, it makes Sheldon feel more at ease, further increasing his karma levels with Joan. This is a great example of how quickly relationships between characters can change: at the moment, Joan’s karma levels with Sheldon are the highest, and out of all the other characters in the game, Sheldon trusts her the most. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)