**“Cyberdrama and Women” Capstone**

**HOWL DOGS**

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**LEVEL 2: RUFUS**

**i**

“I hate to tell you all this,” Casandra said from behind her monitor, audibly fiddling with her keypad[[1]](#footnote-1), “but we *do* have this sigil on file, and you’re not like going to hear why.”

The team had relocated to their hotel on Archive Avenue in Maryland, outside the immediate D.C. area. There were a few reasons for this: firstly, it moved the team out of the immediate vicinity of the bomb site and the St. White’s hospital where the remaining victims (only three, according to their most recent update around seven ‘o clock that night) were located. Thankfully the conference room was large enough to accommodate all of them, including Casandra, who had flown in later that evening to set up shop with her equipment. According to Joan’s RIG, Casandra was an open-transwoman and (once) blacklisted hacker working for the CIA in the same unit as Gary before his accident[[2]](#footnote-2). When he transferred to the FBI, she followed along right behind him as an ever-faithful shadow. The two had been friends for as far as the file read back, apparently: which was over ten years, judging by the dates. She was brilliant and tech-savvy, but in absolutely no condition to partake in the same level of field-work as anyone else in the team—including Joan. Klebes was on the big side herself, but at least she had muscle mass (and adequate law enforcement training) to top it off. Casandra, meanwhile, was built like a china doll. Despite this, she acted as if nothing bothered her: her small size and biological sex included. She dressed in bright colors in contrast to the rest of the team’s toned-down work attire, and her usually bubbly, sometimes infectiously sassy personality which topped off the burning, visceral personality that was Casandra Ross.

Semons acted as if he despised her—either because of her bright demeanor or the fact her biological physicality constantly threw off his scanners. He leaned in over her shoulder, frowning at her computer screen. “This had better be good.”

The rest of the team heard the commotion and started over. Renan, dressed down with his tie loosely slung over his shoulder, had a strange expression. “Judging by your tone, *good* doesn’t sound like what we’re gonna get.”

“This sigil was found at four other sites across the U.S. in the past seven months—none of them crime scenes, but this is where it gets tricky.” Casandra’s fingers flew over her keypad. The holo-display on the tabletop flashed, bringing up several images: a highway overpass, the front glass window of what appeared to be a car dealership, the front of a large brick building (a sign next to the door read “Mays Hall”), and a piece of large, spray-painted graffiti on the side of the Jefferson Memorial.

Wavens approached Casandra and Sheldon from behind, frowning deeply. “The Jefferson Memorial—that was less than four weeks ago. Why weren’t we alerted to this?”

“They thought it was just vandalism, hon. It had to go into the FBI databanks because it’s a government memorial and not just a street corner. Honestly, we never would have made the link between the graffiti and the chemical-bomb if Sheldon hadn’t found the carving on the park bench.”

Sheldon scoffed. “Thank you.”

“As far as I’m concerned, that’s nothing to be proud of. Sure you might have uncovered something big, but that means a whole lot of paperwork for me and lots and *lots* of field-work for you. Either way, none of us is going home this weekend.” Casandra brought up the other three graffiti images, the first being the one spray-painted under the highway. “They found this first angel on the underpass above Route 93 in Concord, New Hampshire back in January off exit seventeen. The next...” She brought up the next image, showing off the building graffiti on the college campus. “This one was found on the side of a college building. The third was found on the front of a Chevy and Buick dealership in Wells, Maine in June.”   
 “Were they all in the database alongside the graffiti on the Jefferson Memorial?” Wavens’ voice was critical.

“Hon, if they were, it’d mean that someone already did the legwork for us. I got the image Sheldon sent me, matched it with the graffiti on the Jefferson Memorial, then did a nationwide search of police graffiti databanks to see if I could find any other matches. There were a few more angels, but these four all match our little park bench carving.” Casandra typed in more keys, showing police reports regarding the vandalism. The computer specialists’ database, at least everything that was currently displayed on the holo-display, automatically synchronized with Joan’s RIG.

“So what now?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Joan asked, choosing to close down her RIG unit in favor of listening to the conversation. “Sure we’ve identified the mark, but what about going forward?”

“We should have someone speak to the staff in charge of the Jefferson Memorial’s care, both maintenance and night watch. Maybe they saw some shady visitors the day of the bombing, now that we know the vandalism and chemical attack are related.”

“We could also benefit from having the team split up to look around the city,” Church said. “I was part of a gang unit before hooking up with my last team. If there was graffiti on the Memorial four weeks ago, we couldn’t have been the only ones to take notice. Gang territory is usually marked with low-grade graffiti in higher-income areas like this, so for something so big to go up on a national landmark would step on some toes.”

“There may be other marks around the city,” Nebs said. As everyone turned their attention to him, he was already beginning to fiddle with a holomap. He used a stylus to outline certain quadrants, dividing the entire city into sections. “High profile as this case may be, dividing and conquering may be our best bet. We could get the Maryland and D.C. police divisions in on it to help cover more ground...”

“Ohhh, sounds like the 2130 San Francisco manhunt,” Casandra said, glancing at Nona. “You ended up slamming through a hotel lobby. And you were piloting *Caboose*.”

“Not one of your finer moments,” Wavens said—actually smirking, no less.

Nona grumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, well, *I told him to stop.* And I wasn’t going to let him get away just because he went through some dumb hotel lobby.”

Slyger was deadpan. “It was a five star hotel. Was.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever Slyger.”

Klebes took advantage of the bickering to get up and walk over to Nebs, looking at the map he had had laid out.[[4]](#footnote-4) She took a good look at it, analyzing the quadrants. Some of them were more out in the open towards the D.C. Mall while others were in more suburban areas. Nebs noticed her hovering and turned his head, frowning. “Do you have a preference? Your small guns skillset might make you more adequately suited for something in a suburban setting...”

“I think I’d rather take a peek at downtown, if you don’t mind,” Joan said. “Think you could synchronize that particular map to my RIG in more detail.”

“Absolutely.” Nebs said, fiddling with his stylus again. There was a ping, and the new map layout was added to Joan’s RIG. The update included more a more detailed layout of the town from a digitalized satellite view. “Assuming the rest of our team stops bickering about the hotel incident, we should start splitting up into teams... I’ll likely be going to investigate the Memorial, given my—*disability.*”

Joan almost didn’t say anything. She hesitated before finally speaking up, making sure to keep her voice low. “Down syndrome?”

“Specifically mosaic trisomy twenty-one. In about one percent of all Down syndrome cases, most of the cells in the body have the extra chromosome—but some of them don’t. This is called “mosaicism." Mosaic trisomy twenty-one can occur when the error in cell division takes place early in development but after a normal egg and sperm unite. It can also occur early in development when some cells lose an extra chromosome twenty-one that was present at conception...” Nebs frowned, turning around in his seat to properly face her. “The symptoms of someone with mosaic trisomy twenty-one may vary from those of someone *with* complete trisomy twenty-one or translocation trisomy twenty-one, depending on how many cells *do* have the extra chromosome. It all ties back to genes and there’s virtually no symptomatic differences between mosaic trisomy or, let’s say, complete *or* translocation trisomy. I was lucky enough to be part of a treatment program that allowed me to overcome *most* of the neurological aspects, but the physical traits are still there... and the scars, in general. Are you familiar with the Order of the Green? It was finally disbanded ages ago, but...”

Joan felt like she had the option of being quiet again, but the conversation had her engaged. She sat down next to him. “It was one of the organizations identified by the Council of Peace as being a Tier Five terrorist cell.”

“Yes—the Council of Peace uses Tiers to identify and rank terrorist cells, with Tier One consisting of hate groups with guns and Tier Five consisting of only the most dangerous organizations. Like the Crichton Cell, the Order of the Green was another Tier Five group based out of New Korea. The Order of the Green was founded in 2023, but by 2104, they had amassed several hundred dirty bombs purchased from Chinese and Russian black markets. They set them off in 2105—and I was born in 2106. I was lucky compared to some of the other babies born that year... the Order may have disbanded, but people are still recovering from the effects.”

“Is that why you became an FBI agent? To shut down terrorist cells like the Order?”

“Yes and no,” Nebs said. Joan must have made a face, because the New Korean native was quickly speaking up again to fill the void. “What I mean to say is, yes—I *did* want to stop terrorist cells. However, most importantly, I wanted to help others. Humanity has come such a long way since the turn of the century. We’ve achieved relative world peace, are making a greater effort to reduce our waste and preserve the environment, and equality is a fundamental quality of everyday living around the world. People are finally starting to get along, and as someone who has had great grandparents living in North Korea’s concentration camps, I would like to think I understand the importance of this relative peace better than most. I want to preserve it at all costs, regardless of my own disability that would otherwise hinder me to do so. Does that that make sense to you?”

“I think it makes sense,” Joan said. “It makes perfect sense.”

“Good, because I hate having to repeat myself. The minor speech impediment doesn’t help my cause, in any case.” Nebs turned away to look at the map again, hesitating, before glancing back at Joan analytically. His voice was oddly quiet. “Thank you. For listening, I mean.”

Joan didn’t answer—she didn’t have time to. Just as Nebs finished his sentence, Church was leaning back over the table. Whatever the previous conversation was, it was over. “We should split up into teams now. The more time we waste talking, the more time we end up forking over to whatever group set off the chemical bomb.”

“We have until tomorrow. It’s getting late and it won’t do us good to find our Unsub if the team is exhausted,” Wavens said.[[5]](#footnote-5) He looked at Nebs’ map, pointing to a quadrant wordlessly. Nebs took the silent command as an order, uploading the selected section to Wavens’ own RIG. “We’ll make our selections now, then get to sleep for the night.”

“Fuckin’ finally,” Sheldon said. He walked over to Nebs, hesitated... then wordlessly pointed to a section. Nebs, again, uploaded the segment to his RIG.

“In the meantime, everyone is dismissed. Everyone be up for o-seven hundred hours. It’s going to be a busy day.”

**ii**

[[6]](#footnote-6)Joan was prone to night terrors as a child. Although she hadn’t had one since she was eleven, their memory was something she couldn’t just burn out of her subconscious—not even years after the fact. Still, looking back on it, they were the kinds of dreams only a child could be scared of: something clawing on her bedroom door for the trailer she lived in with her grandmother on the Edmes Reservation, a pair of eyes looking at her from underneath her bed, scratching in the walls of her first foster home... but this time it was different. Joan knew right away it was a dream because D.C. was on fire. The Washington Memorial was in the process of tumbling to the ground, metal and concrete grinding as the massive pillar seemed to twist mid-fall, breaking off into two separate halves when it finally struck the asphalt and the burning knoll next to it. There was a blast somewhere behind her, and when she turned, the Congress building dome was in the process of caving slowly inward. The way the setting sun was striking the top of the building, Joan could see an ominous green fog choking the air like smog. Her RIG’s Geiger-counter was screaming at her to away, but the device wasn’t ringing up any actual radioactivity—it was something else entirely, and it was affecting her computer equipment.

Her skin was crawling—literally. She could feel blisters forming on her hands, blackening with each passing second. An air-raid siren started to scream. Or maybe that was just her.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**iii**

Church glanced over at her, making a face. “You look like shit.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was sunny and beautiful outside the immediate D.C. area in Annandale, Maryland. The rest of the team had split up several hours earlier, offering to cover ground outside the Capital Heights territory to work inward. The local police departments and FBI gang units were already aiding them, patrolling “high risk” areas and already looking to contact informants about any new graffiti artists on the street: more specifically, any that had a preference for the angels they were looking for.

Joan leaned up from looking out the window miserably, glancing at Church. Of all her new team members, the larger woman felt like the rock star model blonde was the most standoffish and aloof. Despite the SUVs having auto-drive features, Church was driving manually, too. When Klebes noticed and asked why earlier that morning, the other woman explained how she didn’t trust machines with automatic-anything. If she could drive or pilot something herself, she absolutely would. The manner she said so made her automatically wary of her temperament: she sounded like she was in a terrible mood, and that tone was still present, now. “Thanks.”

“Not like that. I mean...” Church frowned, looking back out to the road, expression twisted as she visibly tried to dig herself out. Annoyed for whatever reason or not, it was still an uncomfortable position to be in. “You look tired. Did you not sleep well? Sheldon wouldn’t talk about the hospital visit either...”

“It wasn’t that,” Joan said, immediately regretting it a second later.

“No? What was it?”

“Nothing—just must’ve been a bad dinner.”

“Nightmares,” Church said, and it wasn’t a question. Joan groaned and went back to leaning against the window, looking out at the streets.

There was a call over the radio. “Bravo-One, this is Whacko-Three. Meg-Two attempted to stop an informant on the street and he ran straight for your sector. Think you can rendezvous on Drake Lane and intercept?”

“Ten-four,” Church said, pressing the call-back switch on the console of their SUV. The woman turned across traffic when she got the chance, heading down a one-way street towards the street in question. Joan checked her RIG, watching her GPS marker glide effortlessly across the map display.

“You better get used to the nightmares,” Church suddenly said, voice low. Her eyes never left the road, but when Joan went to look at her, she could see the criticalness in her gaze. “This unit isn’t for rookies. You see a lot of shit working back here. Slyger probably shouldn’t have asked you to replace Minerva.” [[9]](#footnote-9)

“I didn’t know I replaced someone.”

“Well, you are.” Church’s voice was cold. “We were investigating a profile case out in New York. Sheldon, Minerva, and I tailed our Unsub to an old factory. Minnie fell from a rusted catwalk into a metal chipper. The Unsub turned it on. I was the one who tried to fish out what we left of her while Sheldon went after our target.”

Joan felt her stomach knot. “Jesus Christ.”

“If you can’t deal with some nightmares, you’re not cut out for the team. I don’t care what Slyger, Wavens, or your credentials say.” Church’s voice seemed to get colder with each syllable until her words were dripping with obvious resentment. It was almost unnerving: if she thought anyone resented her, it was originally Sheldon. Now that seemed to be the opposite.

Church slammed on the brakes, throwing the e-gear into position and swinging the SUV left. The tires squealed and the cabin was immediately filled with the odor of burning rubber and smoke. Joan was jerked in her seat, spotting a white, hooded man darting into the alley in front of them. Church didn’t even turn on the sirens: just locked up the brakes, undid her belt, and drew her gun all before her door was even open. She was swinging the door open and physically leaping over the hood before the car even stopped moving. Klebes couldn’t hear what she was shouting over the sound of a taxi slamming on its breaks and blasting its horn behind them. She struggled out of her own restraints, pulling her PP7 pistol from its holster and switching off the safety. She bolted down the same alley, trying to keep hot on Church’s heels as the sound of sirens rose up somewhere behind her.

Maybe she really wasn’t cut out for this.

But in the meantime, she had to be.

**iv**

The first hint that something wasn’t quite “right” should have been the e-mail.

Klebes had completely lost sight of Church.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although her RIG was still picking up the other woman’s GPS signal and transmitting it to her clearly, she had no eyes on the other woman. It was amazing how fast she could move, because every time she seemed to get closer, her energy signal would move further and further away: sometimes nearly out of radar. While the sound of police sirens was still resonating somewhere over the tops of the buildings, Klebes was still alone—and Church still needed backup. While she was sure the other woman was perfectly capable of taking care of herself and a single suspect, it was still a race to try and get to her in time to provide suitable backup. The more Klebes thought about it, the more the direness of the situation began to creep up on her: Church was alone and a past member of their team had already been killed by another suspect in the past. Klebes had only been on the team for barely more than a day, so the idea of risking another potential casualty—especially so soon—was out of the question.

That was when the e-mail came in.

Joan got the notification her RIG as she turned a corner, coming across the back-alley exit of an old industrial building. The heavy, rusted door was busted ajar and hanging awkwardly off its hinges, still swinging—then finally loosening enough to come crashing down. Dust and dirt billowed up around the entryway, and a secondary check on her RIG confirmed Klebes’ suspicions: Church’s RIG signal was resonating not too far ahead, but much further up by approximately forty-two feet—probably the third or fourth story. As Klebes carefully made her way for the doorway, her RIG chirped at her that she was being messaged. Briefly accessing her RIG allowed her to automatically see that there wasn’t something right with it: the sender’s address was a line of botched code so corrupted it momentarily glitched her RIG’s HUD-display. The attachments folder was showing full capacity despite having no formal documents in it, and the subject line just read “PROJECT ARCHANGEL.” Opening it revealed nothing more than a long string of code that corrupted her RIG the longer she left it open on her holographic display, and attempting to forward it was impossible: not that she would have wanted to. If it was messing with her RIG, she doubted it would be safe on a computer—especially one from the FBI office.

The second hint that something was wrong came when Church’s energy signal vanished off her radar, followed by a barrage of echoed gunshots two floors above her.

“Church? Angela!?” Klebes cocked her gun, rushing for the nearest stairwell. The door was also ajar and slightly damaged, indicating that it had been broken-inward very recently. The staircase leading up was dark, but what concerned Klebes most of all was the *silence*. The gunshots had stopped, but Klebes couldn’t hear Church whatsoever—not even her shouting over the radio that shots had been fired. It wasn’t until Klebes tried her own radio that the third hint that something was wrong hit her: her radio signal was being met with nothing but static. The RIG tech was hardly standard-issue, so there was no way the building could have hindered the signal.

No: Klebes was being remotely blocked, and the final realization that something was wrong hit her when the barrage of bullets nearly did.

As she exited the stairwell and stepped onto the floor, the concrete pillar less than four feet away from her suddenly exploded in a hail of small ammunition rounds. Judging by the sound of it, it was a small handheld machine gun: very loud and very, *very* obviously aiming for her. Joan Klebes staggered, instantly throwing herself aside and diving for the nearest thing that could serve as a suitable shelter. The large, significantly wider pillar was enough to provide full body coverage for her larger-than-average gait, but her relief instantly turned to horror when she realized the white concrete was splashed with fresh blood. FBI standard PP7 rounds were littered at her feet, jingling ominously as she unintentionally kicked them away. Church was nowhere to be seen.

“Shit! *Angala!?*”[[11]](#footnote-11) No answer. There was another barrage of gunfire over Klebes as she ducked down her head instinctively, followed immediately after by silence. There was the sound of an action being cocked back, a chamber being unlatched, and a clatter as a magazine was dropped to the floor.

Ten years of police training finally kicked in. Klebes reacted immediately. It was do or die, and she wanted to *live*.

Klebes stood up sharply and opened fire, shooting randomly at first, then aiming her shots for the next largest pillar directly across from her: twenty feet across the open floor and in direct line-of-sight from where Klebes had previously been standing. Bullets ricocheted off the pale concrete, chipping it around its curves and causing someone—the shooter—to momentarily stagger backwards. Klebes caught sight of their leg as they tottered backwards, taking the opportunity to readjust her aim while the shooter continued to struggle reloading their own weapon.

Klebes’ gun jammed.[[12]](#footnote-12)

“Fuck!” She ducked back down to try and force the action back into place, swearing a second time when she heard the adjacent shooter click their next ammunition round into place. The larger woman ducked her head low as another barrage of gunfire whizzed past her, striking the pillar and sending small tufts of dust into the air. Klebes found herself choking on it, heart leaping into her chest and adrenaline surging cold through her limbs. She tried her RIG again, struggling to get through to anyone with the block—whatever it was keeping her from radioing for help—in place. Her RIG’s radio, shortwave, and internet function were completely disabled, and no matter how many times she tried to activate it, the holographic display kept frizzing out and giving her error beeps. She was alone—and running out of ammunition.

Shit. *Shit*.

Agony.

Klebes shouted and reeled around, pressing her back flush to the back of the pillar.[[13]](#footnote-13) Out of the corner of her vision she could see a flash of red blooming under her blue jacket, as well as a neat tear in the fabric where the bullet had exited directly between her shoulder blades: the one place where her body armor didn’t completely cover due to her wider-than-average torso-width. With a venomous his, Klebes continued to struggle with her own gun, resorting to slamming the barrel into the ground to loosen the congested mechanism. As the shooter opposite of her stopped shooting—dropping another empty clip and momentarily hesitating—Klebes took her chance. She used the pillar for support as she pushed her legs forward, forcing herself to slide up against the concrete before swinging around, opening fire with another ballistic barrage of her own. This time she didn’t miss.

The shooter wasn’t the man she had seen in the alley. The young white man—boy, really—looked substantially younger, wearing a green sweater rather than the white hoodie she had seen earlier. She saw the fleeting look of surprise and fear in his eyes as he jerked backwards to the left, then the right, then backward again with a clumsy teeter. He shook, trying to raise his gun again, and Klebes acted on instinct: she pulled the trigger four more times. One shot struck the young man in the neck, sending blood spraying onto another nearby pillar, before he tottered backwards. According to Joan’s life-detection feature on her RIG, he was dead before he even hit the pavement.

**v**

Klebes ran into two more (very) young goons on her way up to the final floor.

As much as she wanted to turn back, she had to find Church. Minnie’s story was far too fresh in her mind to put it behind her, and the idea of losing a team member—especially one she had specifically been paired up with—was enough to force her to abandon common sense. Risking her own life when the rest of the police force was probably still looking for them (likely in the wrong building, too) was probably one of the dumbest things she had ever done as an FBI agent or a police officer. The stakes, however, were far too high for her to turn back.

There was still a matter of finding the jamming device blocking her RIG signal too.

Church’s signal was likely also being blocked, and based on the few bits of electronic-sabotage training she received as a Federal Cadet, she knew that the jammer—whatever it was—was likely on the top floor. A quick check of her RIG’s user-manual indicated that the error messages she was receiving was indeed being caused by some sort of frequency scrambler, albeit primitive enough that fixing the issue would be “easy.”[[14]](#footnote-14) All she had to do was find it and put a few bullets into the control panel to lift the communications lockdown, finally giving her access to her radio *and* her radar. Hopefully she would find Church before then, in case she was hurt: or worse.

She didn’t want to have to bring a body back to the team when they had already lost one.

There was also the issue of the boy she had killed. He didn’t have any identification, but Klebes found a small keycard in his pocket during her pat down.[[15]](#footnote-15) A second once-over revealed a small second handgun, which she confiscated for her own use: she was running low on her own supply, and whoever this goon was, he was packing substantially more heat than her. She debated taking the semi-automatic assault rifle with her too, but ultimately decided against it: her area of expertise was in small handguns, so the risk of having it slow her down outweighed the benefit of her having it on her for insurance. Luckily, it used the same ten millimeter rounds as the goon’s unused handgun, so Klebes was able to stock up efficiently. Unfortunately, it still didn’t make her feel any better about the actual corpse. The boy couldn’t have been any older than nineteen, face dappled with freckles and spots of his own blood. The same went for the other boys she ran into.

As Klebes made her way to the next set of stairs across the length of the open lot, two more young men emerged from the hall doorway. They weren’t nearly as armed to the teeth as their friend, but dealing with two shooters at once was hardly a walk in the park: especially with her own injury. While she *did* kill one, she was able to knock out the other: sacrificing her only medpack to patch him up while still struggling to ignore her own injury.[[16]](#footnote-16) After handcuffing him, she made her way up to the next floor, finding it gradually harder and harder to maintain her balance. The shot to the shoulder had been worse than she thought: she was losing blood relatively slowly, but the high intensity of the last gunfight was wearing her endurance thin. If she didn’t find another medpack or disable the jammer soon, she would end up curled over unconscious—or dead.

That having been said, nothing could have prepared her for what she ran into when she finally reached the top floor.

“Oh shit,” she muttered, pushing the heavy door open. It was dimly lit with boarded up windows on either side of the wide room, but the most prominent feature was the far-end wall splashed in light from a flickering floodlight. The air was stale and touched with a hint of aerosol, and that was hardly surprising considering the massive angel-style sigil stretched from floor to ceiling on the aged concrete. As Klebes limped toward it, she noticed a smallish, toaster-sized device at the foot of the floodlight stool. Without waiting for a prompt from her RIG, Klebes raised her PP7 and unloaded four rounds: missing only one as the rest of the bullets struck the scrambler’s casing. The device exploded with a pathetic *pop*, sparking and smoldering as the shattered, gored interior was revealed through the cleanly blasted exterior. Joan’s RIG immediately picked up on the change and forcibly shut down, beginning a full-scale reboot and flashing the restart codes on her holographic display. Joan wasn’t looking at them.

She edged closer to the massive angel display, reaching out and touching the broad, black lines on one of the wings.[[17]](#footnote-17) She immediately jerked her hand away when she felt the paint was still wet, looking down at her blackened fingertips.

Her RIG began beeping at her obnoxiously. When she brought the display back up, her radar screen was the first thing to display on the HUD: showing Angela was directly behind—

Wavens came through on her radio, sounding frantic. *“—Joan, where are—?*”

Something struck the back of her head, and the ground suddenly came rushing up to meet her. Everything was dark before her head could hit the floor.

“Joan!? *Joan!?*”

**vi**

When she could move her limbs again, the first thing she realized was that she was lying down.[[18]](#footnote-18) Struggling for a minute, she finally managed to open her eyes—hissing painfully when the gross, fluorescent just overhead started giving her a headache. A second later, a shadow loomed above her, and it took Joan another second to recognize the scowl. Semons’ looked annoyed, but there was something else in his face too. Concern? Maybe. Then again, maybe the slight crease in his forehead was just an indication that he was more agitated than usual. “Good morning, Tinkerbelle. The next time you run off like that, make sure you get pistol whipped from the front. It’ll hurt less. You might even stay awake, next time.”

“It won’t happen a next time,” Wavens said—and she could tell it *was* Wavens, even if she couldn’t immediately see him. Klebes could mainly tell by the sound of his voice, even if her head was pounding too much for her to hear whether or not the tone was scolding or relieved. As she struggled to sit up, he finally walked into view, reaching out and touching her shoulder to stop her. Despite her blurred vision and the blinding light, she could make out that she was definitely in a hospital room. The scuffed, dull linoleum and generic furniture was the first giveaway. The second was the large fluid needle stuck in her arm, as well as the scrubs she was wearing.

“Shit,” she swore, going to lie back down. “How long was I out for?”

“A day and a half. We’re at Titan Modis Hospital in Annandale,” Wavens smiled almost apologetically—and it was first time she had seen him with anything else than a stone-cold face, too. “You were jumped from behind after you destroyed the scrambler. Church took care of your assailant and Semons carried you out himself. You would’ve lost a lot of blood if he didn’t get you out as fast as he did. Church was too tired to do it herself—”

Church. Klebes went to try and sit up again. “Angela? Is she—is she okay?”

Semons sneered, baring his teeth. “Fit as a goddamn fuckin’ whistle. Which is why her almost letting you bleed out is pissing me the fuck *off*—”

“Your sensors could have been picking up an adrenaline rush from her, Sheldon. Church said she had to dispatch several of those suspects herself, and given the nature of Klebes’ gunshot and the amount of blood she already lost, it would have been difficult for *anyone* to tell if she would survive.”

“Says you,” Semons said, scoffing irritably. He looked off to the side, frowning to himself. “She was insisting Klebes was dead. God, it was just like fuckin’ Minnie—”

“Klebes?” the door opened suddenly, and when Joan looked back up, Church was walking briskly across the room with a nurse in hot pursuit. The woman wasn’t in scrubs like she was, but her hair was down and she wasn’t wearing makeup. She looked pale: obviously not doing too well herself. She wasn’t bandaged, so clearly she hadn’t been shot... and just thinking about that reminded Joan of her own injury. She winced and leaned forward, reaching up to gingerly rub her shoulder. Church saw her and smiled sympathetically, reaching out to touch her hand.

“You should’ve waited for backup,” Church said gently. “I would have been able to take care of things myself—you’re lucky I was up there when that goon came up behind you.”

“Which is why his body was up there,” Sheldon said sourly. “*Not*.”

“I told you, he darted off before I could stop him.” The blonde turned to the android with a slight frown, her expression almost hurt. I was out of ammo, and I had to stop Klebes from bleeding out.”

“Right, which is why I found you compressing the wound—oh wait. No, you weren’t doing that either.” With each word out of his mouth, Sheldon was sounding more and more venomous. In fact, he was looking downright angry. The man stood up, towering almost an entire head over Church, looking like an intimidating wall than anything else. “This is just like what happened at the factory—”

“SEMONS!” Wavens immediately turned on the android, sounding *furious*. “*Enough!*”

“She wanted me to *leave* Klebes there,” Semons said, turning to their unit leader. “You should’ve seen the bitchfit Blondie threw when I started ‘disturbing’ her evidence. Joan was still fuckin’ *alive*, Sam. Your precious little Blonde Devil would have let her die up there—”

“A serious mishap on her part, yes, I agree—but not purposeful. You need to watch yourself Sheldon.” Wavens stood up to his full height in front of Sheldon, and for a moment, both men looked like they were sizing each other up.

Klebes couldn’t keep her mouth shut. She finally broke her silence, cutting off the two men before they could say something they would regret. “This whole thing is my fault, not Church’s. I just wanted to make sure she would be okay. I mean—after what happened with Minerva—”

Sheldon turned on Klebes, eyes bugging out of his head. He was shaking now. “She told you about Minnie?”

“Angela.” Wavens turned on Church next, eyes hard. “We agreed we would discuss what happened to Minerva at a later time. You bringing it up to Joan without having me present is extremely unprofessional—”

“Look, I was just—trying to make a point. I’m sorry, Wavens. It was a misjudgment on my part... or not.” Church gestured to Joan. “Joan had a nightmare the night before or something. I told her about Minnie to see if she would really be willing to stay, given how dangerous this job can be. Thing is, after what happened in the abandoned building the other day, I’m sure she’s earned her mettle. She could’ve waited for backup, but she didn’t and came to help me instead. That has to be worth something, even if she was almost killed.”

“Because you nearly let it happen,” Semons said under his breath. Klebes was sure everyone heard, but it was an undercut sneer more than anything else. Wavens and Church ignored him readily.

“What happened exactly?” Klebes struggled to sit up again. “After I disabled the scrambler, I saw Church’s RIG signal directly behind—”

“I was trying to get the jump on the asshole already coming up behind you,” Church interjected immediately, earning another sharp glare from Semons. She promptly ignored him. “He managed to clock you before I could stop him, and I had already lost my gun in the scuffle. I couldn’t afford to give away my own position while he was still armed—at least I thought he was. He ended up being out of ammunition too, I think. His gun—all their guns—were sent off to the lab yesterday for evidence. We’re still trying to identify them, but it doesn’t look like any of them are in the system.”

“Yeah. One of the kids looked pretty young. Too young to be part of a professional crime ring, or—” Joan stopped herself, suddenly realizing something. “Before my RIG’s signal was jammed, I got an e-mail. The message looked corrupted as all hell. I couldn’t read it.”

Sheldon perked to attention, looking less annoyed and more intrigued. “What?”

“Excuse me?” Wavens looked away from Church, hovering over Klebes tensely. “Did you open it?”

“I tried to, but the data was scrambled. It even warped the display screen.” As Klebes spoke, she noticed Church looking increasingly distressed. She glanced towards the door (and the nurse who was still awkwardly standing there, looking distressed herself about trying to get the blonde agent to go back with her), then back towards Klebes as she continued. I got it just before my communications and outside functions were blocked.

“It could be a virus,” Church said. “It’s no coincidence that we found the angel sigil up in the attic of the building. These guys are toying with us and they wanted us there. It could have just been a plot to cripple our systems—we can’t function without our RIGS. Especially considering how they connect to the weapons satellites and—”

“Are you suggesting we purge those codes? Holy fuckin’ shit, you’re off you’re rocker.” Sheldon looked back, shoulders hunched offensively. “If we can backtrack where the message came from, we can figure out where this group’s base of operations is. Obviously this was an elaborate set up to taunt us—most terrorist groups will do that as a form of psychological warfare to gibe us when we can’t find them.”

“Sheldon has a point. We took your RIG when you were put into the ICU, but we’ll have Nebs and Ross look at it immediately. In the meantime, the doctors want you here for at least one more night. The blood transfusions kept you from bleeding out, but your shoulder is still in rough shape.” Wavens looked to Church. “The same goes for you. Obviously the staff wants you back in bed.”

“Please,” the nurse in the doorway said, shifting her weight from foot to foot with an increasingly nervous demeanor. “You still need your ribs checked again.”

“Right,” Church sighed, and the way she said it made Klebes wonder if something else was wrong. Her shoulders were sagged, but there was a definite tension in her posture. She looked back at Wavens, then Semons, and then back at Klebes. The blonde looked lackluster in the fluorescent blaze of the lights even with the sun shining through the windows, casting an ugly silhouetting on the opposite wall.

As she turned to leave, Semons seemed to finally relax. The android sat up, rolling his neck and audibly cracking the gears under his synth-skin. “Wavens, I got a bad feeling about—”

He didn’t get to finish. As soon as Church was gone, Slyger and Nona immediately replaced her. Both men strode into the room, albeit Slyger was moving noticeably quicker. Without paying much attention to the look Wavens shot him, the small Brazilian man took up the empty space next to Klebes’ bed, just opposite of Semons. His voice was shrill, like a hysterical mother trying not to lose her mind over a misbehaved child. “You had *one* job, Joan: don’t get killed on your first day. *Is that too much to ask?*”

“Technically it was my second day.”

“Hehheh—I like her,” Nona said, folding his arms and elbowing his smaller partner in the shoulder with his elbow. Slyger was having none of it: the other man turned around and swatted at him angrily.

“Keep the visit brief. We still need to get back to the motel. Joan will be fine by herself until we pick her up in the morning.” Wavens made to leave as well, turning and looking at Semons when the android didn’t go to follow. “Semons?”

“I think I’m gonna stay for a few minutes,” the android replied curtly, much to—well—*everyone’s* surprise, actually. Slyger glanced up at him with a strange expression, as did Nona. Klebes turned to get a good look at him as well. Sheldon Semons was looking out the window with a scowl, but there was something in his eyes that threw her off. Then again, maybe it was the fact he wasn’t frowning as deeply as usual, either. “I don’t feel like moving.”

“Suit yourself.” Wavens turned and left, walking out the door without a backward glance. There was something hauntingly odd about his stance too: something else that was throwing Klebes off in the same way Church’s own posture did. Obviously there was more going on than anyone was letting on, and it had something to do with Minerva. Something not quite right in the sense that—

Slyger’s voice was quiet. “So... I suppose I should’ve told you about Minerva.”

It could wait. Tomorrow was a new day.

**LEVEL 2: COMPLETE**

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1. The screen fades in from black, reading *LEVEL 2: RUFUS* on the screen. The perspective is from Joan, who is looking out of the hotel conference room window at the city below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Again, this character exposition is never/almost never said out loud in this much detail: it is only accessible through Joan’s RIG when the player decides to access it as bonus material to increase the feeling of immersion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joan’s silence through this scene is another example of how she can use dialogue to affect her surroundings: by not saying much at all. In fact, there are parts in this scene where Joan can interact with characters, but the player still always has the option to just let the dialogue flow if they feel like they don’t “need” to interject. This applies to real life as well, since some people might not feel comfortable with interjecting in a conversation that is in full swing. This is another way immersion comes into play and makes the world feel more “real.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the end of the main cut scene for this scene, and Klebes is now free to interact freely with anyone. In this case, she chooses to interact with Nebs, who the player (for this run-through) hasn’t gotten to know well yet. Just by going out of your way to talk to other characters and build your relationship with them, it can open more doors down the road in terms of gameplay/how your karma levels will affect their fate. In this case, choosing to interact and develop a relationship might help save his life later on: or ensure his death, making the loss more emotional. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Depending on who you chose to communicate with in this scene, as soon as the conversation is done, it will be “too late” at night and Wavens will force everyone to retire, ending the scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Although there is no “combat” *or* other intractable objects in this cut scene, Joan is still able to move around and explore the area. Not only does it add to the feeling of immersion, but it also adds to the player’s sense of dread as they try to figure out what to “do” in this scene when all the chaos is going on around them. Coupled with ambient sounds and an eerie soundtrack, these kinds of stressful, otherwise “useless” scenes force the players into “panic mode,” where a player will begin to panic/feel helpless while playing a game. Making a player go through “panic modes” throughout a game is crucial to keeping them engaged when the game itself hasn’t had combat in a while. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This scene has two ways it can end: either a certain amount of time has elapsed, or the player has moved Joan to a certain location where an in-game “trigger plate” forces the scene to end.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A random number generator is used to determine who Joan pairs up with for this particular mission. In this case, the game picked Angela Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Many video games have outside source material. For example, *Dead Space,* despite starting out as a video game, has many pieces of lore existing outside the game-world. In this case, Minerva would be from an existing, stand-alone comic outside the main game-world. Although she does not play a major role in the game, game creators do like making nods to other existing pieces of canon that didn’t make it into the final game. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Although Klebes has the option to go back and wait for backup, it’s actually “easier” of a level to complete if she goes alone. For example, waiting for backup means she will have twice as many enemies to face when she eventually has to go after Church anyways, and since the police AIs are “less trained” than the FBI agent AIs, they would be next to useless in the upcoming combat situation/mini-boss fight. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Since Joan is talking to herself, this piece of dialogue is “automatic.” In fact, most dialogue options during combat-situations are automatic or programmed to “come up” during certain situations. For example, if Klebes is shot, she might scream. Since these exploitations can happen automatically in real-life as well (such as stubbing your toe and shouting a swear as a knee-jerk response), it still feels “natural” despite not being the player’s “choice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A gun jamming mechanism in-game will add to the player’s stress, forcing them to use “reaction” commands (hitting a certain button over and over again) in order to clear the jam and be able to resume combat. Jams can happen randomly, with increasing frequency in harder gameplay modes. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The option to duck, take cover, and do other fighting/weapon related things will only be available in combat-mode. The player will get a quick prompt on how to do this as part of a brief on-the-spot tutorial, but otherwise, it’s up to the players to discover how the combat works for themselves. This is because Klebes is caught off guard and scrambling, and that “panic mode” element comes up again, forcing the player to scramble and be just as confused as Klebes is. Again, it also adds to immersion. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is an example of how the RIG can be checked to determine “objectives” to complete the level. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is the first time Klebes has been able to search a body, and that function is crucial to solving certain levels later on. Enemies can also sometimes drop valuable, *usable* items like medpacks and ammo, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is another situation that gives Joan an on-the-spot prompt. Some enemies can be spared and handcuffed for interrogation later, *if* they can be subdued. However, you only get to use the cuffs once per level, and if the enemy is bleeding out, you may have to sacrifice useful medpacks, which Joan *does* do in this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As soon as Joan destroys the jammer and steps close enough to the mural, there is a forced/non-interactive cut scene. Video games may include these if something crucial has to happen to end a level or ensure that something has to happen that a free-controlling character may interfere with. In this case, Joan has to look at the angel mural long enough for someone to strike her from behind. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As the scene slowly fades in, the player has to move their joystick around to force Joan to wake up. Otherwise, this scene might not happen and skip over entirely: and in case Joan misses out on useful information, it might be a good idea *not* to pass out again. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)