**“Cyberdrama and Women” Capstone**

**HOWL DOGS**

**by Meghan Burrows**

**meghan.burrows@my.colby-sawyer.edu**

**LEVEL 3: LYACON**

**i**

 When she came to, she knew right away that she wasn’t really awake—not really.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 It was hard to make the distinction at first. Joan woke up with the smell of smoke and antiseptic burning her nostrils, blinking blearily past the blur in her vision until she could see orange light flickering against the ceiling. The power was out except for backup generator floodlights in the hallway, and even then, the light was still *wrong* in the sense that she knew right away she was dreaming.[[2]](#footnote-2) The sound of hauntingly familiar siren blasts echoed outside her window, rattling the glass and vibrating in her bones. As she sat up in her bed and looked outside, she could see the red-green glow of D.C.’s infected sky beyond the glass panes. Smoke billowed from the buildings, the remains of the ruined Washington monument, the Jefferson Memorial rotunda...

 The ground shook.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 The rumble was strong enough to almost knock her off her feet as she tried to stand.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her legs were unusually weak, and even without her RIG, she could tell her stamina was low and she was on the verge of passing out again—and she couldn’t even figure out why. Maybe it was the way that the air seemed to choke up her lungs as if she were breathing in heavy smoke—maybe it was the way her skin seemed to be *crawling* again. Either way, as she headed for the door to her room, something else started to change: the green vapor-like hue from outside was starting to bleed into her peripheral vision, physically burning her eyes and making breathing that much harder. She couldn’t tell if she was hallucinating or not before, but now things were starting to feel too real.

 As she left the room, she navigated down the hallway to the right, ambling along pathetically. She was swaying as additional tremors rocked the ground, occasionally staggering bad bumping shoulders *hard* with the wall. She was tempted to find the nearest phone to call for help, as insane as that sounded: she *knew* she was dreaming, but it never stopped her from trying to break into the other rooms—all of which were locked. Her own room never had a phone, but getting to one stopped being a priority when she found the staircase to the next floor. The layout was identical to the first floor, yes, but the doors, walls, and floor were painted with blood and black sludge. Klebes thought about the victims from St. White’s and regretted it seconds later when she almost slipped on the slick linoleum.[[5]](#footnote-5)

 But the worst part of the dream was when she finally made it outside.

 As she entered the lobby of the hospital and made her way to the double doors, she pushed outward and still managed to find herself on the roof instead. The sludge was knee deep the further out she stepped, and when she tried to turn back, the double doors were locked shut behind her.[[6]](#footnote-6) The siren was blasting at full volume as a never-ending whoosh of sound, and the green, eerie fog clung to the air’s molecules like slick leather on skin. Klebes could feel her own skin burning, *pulling* as the muscle and tissue physically felt as though it were pulling away from her bone. The sludge became deeper as she trudged further and further ahead, but the balcony of the roof kept pulling further away—it wasn’t until she was waste deep in liquefied human remains that she found herself pulling close enough to finally peer over the edge.

 Her reflection—faceless and with dark, peeling flesh—stared right back.

 There was the sound of an engine roaring. “*NO!*”

 She *howled.*

**ii**

 “Anything?”

 “No Marin, nothing yet—honey, you can’t rush art.”

 The Korean man narrowed his eyes, standing back to his full height. Klebes swore she could hear the cogs turning in his head as the genius mathematician tried to make sense of the woman’s words. “Art? This is hardly...”

 Casandra Ross rolled her eyes, turning around in her seat and cocking an eyebrow. If the situation weren’t so grave, Klebes might have actually laughed. “Hon, look, you can’t rush this kind of stuff—that’s what makes it an art. It has to be done a certain way to be appealing to the human eye, but it needs care and love to shape it into something worthwhile. Does that make sense?”

 “It would, if this was a legitimate art form—this is decoding.”

 “It’s *Picasso*,” Casandra said, partly annoyed, partly tired sounding. Klebes took a closer look over her shoulder, careful not to angle herself too severely in case she injured her bad shoulder again. The team had relocated their working space to the FBI headquarters in Bethesda, working jointly with the greater D.C. law enforcement offices and the region’s assigned CSI (which was still casing the abandoned building in Andale). Joan had been out of the hospital for less than three hours, but since the night before, Casandra had been hard at work decoding the e-mail sent to her RIG. While Joan was able to get her RIG back, the keycard had to be replaced and the hard drive completely wiped and recoded. For safety measures, Casandra said.

 “Did your parents ever tell you not to play with something if you don’t know where it’s been? The same applies to whatever *this* is,” Casandra suddenly blurted, half to herself, half to Klebes and Nebs. The large woman’s fingers flew over the keypad, entering string after string of seemingly useless code—which prompted the computer monitor to spew even *more* code at her. She was frowning deeply, so *something* wasn’t going right, obviously. “This e-mail you got isn’t just a gibberish message: its compressed data, and it comes in two parts.”

 “Two?”

 “The first part is a Trojan Horse. Whoever sent this to you, they were hoping we would plug it into our federal databases to extract and plant data. They would take information remotely, then feed us viruses. The second part is actual tangible data: probably a false flag.”

 “Like someone planting false evidence,” Nebs said. He looked at Klebes worriedly. “So someone was hoping to plant something inside Klebes’ RIG for us to find later.”

 “And it would have worked, if she had been killed.” Casandra looked over her shoulder at Klebes, offering a quiet smile. “You did good hanging in there, hon. You really threw a wrench into their plans.”

 “But why me?”

 “Convenience probably,” Nebs said, turning away from Casandra and starting towards the door.[[7]](#footnote-7) “It could have been any of us, but this person targeted you specifically—most likely because our unsub wanted us in that abandoned building to find the Angel sigil.”

 “That makes sense. I just wish we knew more...” Klebes hesitated following Nebs, but did so after he shot her a look. No, as much as she wanted to ask Casandra more questions, it made sense to follow the Korean: the hacker needed her space to work, and there were other things that Klebes could do to make herself useful around the office.

As she started to walk away, Casandra turned back around in her seat. “One more thing—I was able to transcribe *one* critical piece of data. Does the name Angels of Unity mean anything to you?”

“No,” Klebes automatically responded. “Why?”

“I keep seeing it in this codec. I’ll try to hack my way through, they get error messages back with that string of letters in the outgoing code. It’s—worrying me, to be honest. This whole Angels bit is one thing, but Angels of Unity sounds like a name to me. If it’s our organization, it doesn’t exist in any federal database.”

“That’s... good, isn’t it?”

“Ohh honey, I wish it was,” Casandra said, looking grave. In the dark of her office space, the age lines on her face looked so much harsher: she looked much older than she actually was, and from the angle Klebes was staring at, it was a sobering look. “We’ve already seen how organized they are, *and* they’ve started taunting us—both with this e-mail false flag and the sigil in the abandoned building. The point is, even though we’ve never seen them in action before now, they’re already proving to be more dangerous than anything we’ve seen—not since the Crichton Cell. The Council of Peace is going to have their hands full with this one...”

**iii**

The suspect’s name was Ian Matson.

It was amazing, Klebes thought, how much less intimidating he looked striped of all his weapons, his arm slung in a cast and a particularly nasty shiner developing over his swollen left eye. She couldn’t even remember hitting him—at least not there. She almost brought it up, but the room was so quiet, she decided against it: the situation was awkward enough, and she didn’t want to accidently make it worse. Ian had to be identified through fingerprints and DNA samples already in the D.C. police database, and the records went as far back as having paperwork roots in Maine and Quebec—where the Canadian native grew up. According to the records synchronized with her newly cleaned RIG, he was arrested as a minor several times for petty crimes, but his record was clean for almost ten years when his mother moved them to Maine prior to experimental “nanite infusion” breast cancer treatment. Ian was arrested for carjacking in York, Maine, shortly after his mother passed away from complications. There was another lull in the records crime-wise, showing that the boy had inherited a significant amount of money from the hospital that botched his mother’s treatment, as he enrolled at a renowned Maryland college. He dropped out after three semesters after his first burglary charge. Afterwards, the charges kept coming—but none were more serious than that initial burglary.

From the interrogation room’s secondary observation platform, Slyger, Nona, Wavens, and Klebes watched as Semons went at Matson. Nebs and Church had gone off to work on their press conference report for the Council of Peace, since it was clear that some form of intervention would likely be necessary. Klebes sort of wished she went with them, too—Semons was a *brutal* interrogator, and it was just painful watching from behind the three inches of bullet proof glass. Semons was stalking around the room like a predator, letting the poor twenty-something stew nervously while he was handcuffed to the cold table.

“Semons can be—*aggressive.*” Wavens said suddenly, glancing at Klebes as if to gage her reaction. “Unfortunately, he’s the only trained negotiator we have... other than you, of course. But I wouldn’t want to put you into an uncomfortable position, interrogating the person you had to take down in person. He almost killed you, didn’t he?”

“Not this one,” Klebes echoed quietly. “Two of the others—this one wasn’t so bad.”

“You shouldn’t have wasted your medpack, I say,” Slyger said, scoffing. The smaller man leaned up against the glass, giving it a tap: the signal for Semons to come out. “He’s not gonna tell us anything. Hell, I don’t even think he *does* know anything. This kid is just a punk ass little shitlo—”

Semons emerged from the room, looking haggard and intensely annoyed. “I can’t get anything out of this asshole. I’m pretty sure someone higher up has him too scared to make a fuckin’ peep. Urgh...” The android walked past Nona and Slyger, almost bumping shoulders with Wavens on his way to collapse on the threadbare sofa behind them.

Wavens frowned. “Are you alright, Sheldon?”

“Yeah, I just have a headache—my processor’s been a little... achy.” He shook his head, sneering as he stood up. “I need a break. Is Ross still working on decoding that weird RIG message?”

“The last I heard, yes,” Wavens said. “Do you need something from her?”

“Maybe she can take a look at my head. I feel like fucking *shit.*”

“Maybe ‘cause you’ve been screaming at that kid for more than three hours,” Nona said, frowning as well. The man’s brow furrowed. “You usually don’t get headaches. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Semons grumbled. He stood up to leave, walking out of the room. Klebes debated going after him—just to make sure he really *was* okay. There was a certain way he was carrying himself that was worrying her, and she wasn’t sure why exactly. Still...[[8]](#footnote-8)

“Still,” Slyger said, intrrupteding her thoughts, “we need someone to go at this guy... you want me to take a crack at him, Wavens?”

“I can give it a go,” Klebes said, interrupting all of them.[[9]](#footnote-9) When all three men turned to look at her, she suddenly found herself scrambling. Yes, she did have the experience as an interrogator herself, but not quite on *this* level. That, and this same person had tried to kill her, albeit extremely unsuccessfully.

“Are you sure about this?” Wavens looked her up and down, expression firm. “I just said... I mean—”

“Semons played bad cop. Maybe all this kid needs is good cop?”

“Not too good, I hope,” Slyger said quietly, echoing all their thoughts: Joan’s included. “We still need to get as much out of this asshole as possible.”

**iv**

Ian looked so much smaller in person.

It was funny, actually—Klebes had never been so up close to a person who had tried to kill her just a little over forty-eight hours earlier. Funny, strange, and sobering, actually—maybe even a little unsettling too, if you counted the fact that Klebes was suddenly doubtful of her abilities as an interrogator. The last suspect she had interrogated at her previous job was a woman accused of fraud and trying to hire a contract killer to assassinate her husband: not someone who was potentially involved in a terrorist scam, and certainly not someone who had actually tried to kill her the day before.

Ian must have read her mind, because he straightened up in his seat nervously. “You’re the lady from the mill. You killed Dan and Yumei—and Terrier too, probably.”

There was a flash on her RIG’s display. Slyger had pinged her—apparently he had revealed a new piece of information to them.[[10]](#footnote-10) “We’re they your co-workers?”

“They were friends too, you piece of shit cop—*fuck*. I see where you’re going with this.” Ian leaned back in his seat, scowling at her like an angry dog in its kennel: which wasn’t too far from the actual situation at hand. “I wouldn’t say anything to your big scary friend, so now they’re sending in the fat lady cop to soften me up and be all sympathetic and shit. You pigs are fan-fucking-tastic.”

“I don’t think so at all,” Klebes said, weighing her options. She was half tempted to get up and leave, to maybe let Slyger have a go at him instead, but she held her ground and mentally tallied her options. When she was satisfied with herself, she spoke up again: remembering tidbits of the file she had read and incorporating it into her response. “I don’t think your mother would approve of that language.”

“Leave my ma out of this, lady.” Ian practically jerked in his seat, leaning forward and going to lift his arm, as if to point at her accusingly. The gesture was short lived, obviously: he was still handcuffed to the table. With an indignant sigh and heave of his chest, he slumped back down into his chair. “You don’t know shit.”

“I know enough,” Klebes said. Inwardly, she was scrambling. Then: “I lost my mom when I was pretty young too—and it was a lot more brutal than cancer. She was murdered.”

“What a real fucking tragedy.”

“That’s not to say what happened to your mom isn’t a tragedy either,” Klebes said. “I’m sure she would think of you throwing your life away to be even more of a tragedy, herself.”

“Look lady, the only thing that’s tragic is what the fuck is gonna happen to the government for what they did to my mom,” Ian said, again, reclining in his chair. He looked simultaneously smug, uncomfortable, and frazzled all at the same time. Slyger sent her another ping over her RIG, indicating that she was making progress: Ian’s guard was dropping, based on his body language. Whereas he had locked up and shut down talking to Semons, he was beginning to open up with Klebes. “For what they did to her—they’re getting what’s coming.”

“*What’s* coming?” Klebes leaned forward in her seat. “Is it something the Angels have planned?”

Ian sat straight up, looking at her nervously. “You figured out their name? Is that what they’re calling themselves?”

“You don’t know?”

Ian seemed to realize his mistake—but he was too flustered to backtrack. He sputtered, sitting up in his seat.[[11]](#footnote-11) “Well—they didn’t even tell *us*. We were just hired to move shit and do the painting, you know? They paid us and told us they were going to, like, fix everything by breaking the system—like the government or whatever, I guess.”

Klebes’ RIG was silently lighting up and pinging like *crazy—*Slyger was sending her signal after signal to keep going, keep *pushing...*

She was actually getting somewhere.

“They want to break the system,” she said, echoing his words. “Why? Did the system do something wrong to them?”

“No—well. Yes. I think.” Ian shrugged, although now he looked more upset than anything. “I mean—all this tech... it killed my *mom*, man. It’s killed tons of people, and the government just keeps making more and more, like, *advancements.* It’s killin’ everything—”

“Technology helps us,” Klebes tried.

Ian’s emotions were getting the better of him. He jerked in his seat, *shouting.* “Technology is warheads, fucking androids, and botched cancer treatments. It *destroys*. And these guys, they’re gonna make everything better again: reset the world one step at a time.”

Klebes’ RIG pinged again: this time there was an actual message from Slyger, too. *Come out. We need to talk*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

She was quick to dismiss herself. When she walked back outside into the observation room, Wavens looked grave. Nona was leaning against the one-way glass window, and Slyger was sitting on the sofa in the back of the room. When the door closed, Wavens was the first to speak up, albeit quietly. “We could be dealing with another Crichton Cell, in terms of the severity of the situation. If anything our suspect says has relevance, it means that this group isn’t just out to make a political statement—they’re out to actually make change happen themselves.”

“But this is a biological weapon that they want to launch,” Nona said, standing back up to his full height, turning away from the window. From where she was standing, Klebes could see the distress clear on Ian’s face as he toyed with his cuffs, shaking in his chair. “It won’t do anything to technology. If these are eco-terrorists, this is the exact opposite of productive.”

“It depends on what their endgame is,” Wavens said. “It was similar with the Crichton Cell. They tried to destroy entire parts of Antarctica to bring awareness about climate change, but they also wanted to cause tsunamis. The point is, when you *kill* the people responsible for perpetuating our technology-driven society, it means there will be less people who will actually feed into the perceived problem.”

“Fuck,” Slyger said. “This—this is going to be a massive fucking genocide.”

And then the alarms went off.

**v**

Casandra Ross was dead, and Sheldon Semons had murdered her.

Joan Klebes couldn’t believe it—wouldn’t. She had just spoken to the other woman less than half an hour earlier. When the first panicked shouts from Church came over the RIG’s radio detailing what happened, Klebes felt her entire world freeze up. Casandra had walked out of her office to speak to Nebs and Church in the office-space of the FBI headquarters where they had been working, and before she could wave them down to show them what she had found—something that had been important, she said—Sheldon Semons emerged from behind her, cocking his handgun, and unloaded ten rounds into the back of her head. Casandra was dead before her body even pitched forward, flipped over the railing, and fell ten feet to the ground below.

Klebes had been worried about Church in the abandoned mill, and nothing happened: she never expected anything like this to happen. She wanted to puke.

She wanted to go back and stay with Casandra. Maybe if she had *been* there...

Nona was inconsolable. When the man heard what happened, he slowly ground to a halt, stopping dead in his tracks, *howled*, and threw a punch at the wall—actually breaking down and sobbing.He had been friends with Casandra during his CIA years, and the sudden revelation that she was *gone—really* gone—was too much for him to take. He curled up against the wall and slumped down, staring off into space even as Slyger doubled back to try and usher him back up.

“Gary—Gary, don’t do this. There’s nothing we could have done...” Slyger looked up hopelessly at Wavens and Klebes, but Wavens kept moving: drawing his own gun and taking a turn at the end of the hallway. Over the sounds of the fire alarm and the flashing emergency lights, Klebes was tempted to follow him. Semons—whatever had gotten into him—was still armed. He had already killed Casandra Ross: Marin and Angela were still in danger.

Despite that, she turned around, holstered her own gun, and knelt in front of Nona and Slyger.[[13]](#footnote-13) He drew herself up close, reaching out and gripping the larger man’s shoulder. Gary Nona looked up, and despite the haziness of definite blindness in his eyes, the grief was still definitely there.

“That bastard. I—I bet he did it. To Minnie, too. First her, now *Cas*.” Nona started shaking, and it was unnerving to see the massive, usually quiet man suddenly so destroyed. “She was with me when I lost my sight—she was my eyes before Renan ever was. I—”

“That’s why you need to pull yourself together and get up. We need all the help we can get. You’re not helping Casandra any by breaking down in the middle of a dark hallway, and Marin and Angela still need our help. *Please.*”

For a few long seconds, Nona didn’t say anything. He looked aside and just stared miserably at the wall. Slyger was curled over him with his arm around his shoulder, and it was almost oddly amusing to see how they both contrasted with one another.

“I’m still here,” Slyger said. “You still have me. We’ll get Casandra justice. I promise.”

Nona nodded slowly—then started to haul himself to his feet. He reached down, producing his own assigned weapon, checking the clip. “Sure. Right. Let’s go.”

The headquarters’ office space was in pandemonium. From the upper balcony, Klebes could see that several desks had been flipped and papers were stern all over. A dozen terrified interns and lower-ranked desk-employees were cowering around the entire space, hiding behind anything they could, while Sheldon Semons stood in the middle of the room with about eight hostages. The android’s posture was rigid and he was armed to the teeth, holding his FBI assigned gun in one hand, a semi-automatic in the other, and a Chinese assault rifle slung over his shoulder. Sitting with the group of eight hostages was Marin Nebs and Angela Church. Nebs was curled over himself in a sitting position and rocking back and forth, and Angela was the only one standing: likely trying to talk Semons down.

“...isn’t at all what you’re about. We’re *friends,* Semons. Whatever is going on, we can talk about this like human beings—”

At the word *human,* Semons lifted his semi-automatic into the air and opened fire. The sound of rapid-fire caused all the hostages and other cowering bodies to flinch and duck low. Overhead, a high-hanging fluorescent lamp was shot clean out, sending glass and sparks of electricity everywhere. The light adjacent to it was hit by a stray bullet, causing it to flicker and swing back and forth wildly, hazardously displacing the light in the room. The android didn’t say anything: just stood there shaking in rage. From where Klebes was standing, she could see Casandra Ross lying in a pool of her own blood on the floor, unmoving.

Nona swore quietly, starting to shake as well. “Cass...”

From where they were standing at the bottom of the staircase, another FBI official was waving them down the stairs. Wavens took the lead, moving carefully as he began to slink down the stairs to meet her. Klebes was close on his heels—Nona and Slyger stayed at the top of the stairs. When Wavens and Klebes made it to her, she began speaking in a quiet, hurried voice. She sounded like she had a Boston accent, but the tone was muddled with panic. “Adrian Coffman, sir. Captain of the D.C. Investigations Unit. It’s an honor, but—given the given the circumstances...”

“What the hell happened?” Wavens risked a peek over the concealed banister they were taking refuge behind. “What set him off?”

“Christ, we have no idea. He just walked in behind your tech person and shot her in the back of the head before she could get a word out. She had a datadrive with her too—he took it from her and destroyed it.”

“It had to do with the Angels,” Klebes blurted out quietly. When Wavens and Coffman looked at her, she realized that they had never been updated on Casandra Ross’ findings. She sputtered, trying to remember everything on the spot. “When Casandra was transcribing the data, she said something about the Angels of Unity. They might be our terrorist organization.”

“That explains the symbolic preference for angels,” Wavens said thoughtfully. He chanced another look by leaning back on his heels and angling his view over the top of the railing, but Klebes could tell by the angle he wasn’t looking at Semons or Church—he was looking at Casandra. The normally stoic man’s voice was abruptly choked by emotion, his posture and body language coiled to a spring. “God, *Ross*...”

“We’ve already called for reinforcements, per Agent Church’s direct orders. The SWAT team is coming with a chopper and EMP cannon,” Coffman said. “It will be strong enough to take out an android EPU and souldrive, but the RIGs and our secure hard-drives should be unaffected due to their anti-magnetic proofers. They’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“That’s—*fuck.*” It was the first time Klebes ever heard Wavens swore. He ducked back down, visibly starting to shake. “Semons—this isn’t *him.* This couldn’t be. Something else has to be wrong, I won’t believe this. Someone must have hacked him, planted a virus—*something.*”

“Androids can’t be hacked... can they?” Coffman didn’t sound so sure of herself. “He’s too dangerous like this. No one is going to be able to get close to him to talk him down from anything. Your other team member is already struggling with him, as is.

“We need to do something, either way,” Klebes said. She felt her heart clench inwardly at the thought of Semons being killed. He was foul-mouthed and cold, but certainly not *cruel—*and certainly not a murderer, either. Whatever had come over him, she felt in her heart that they had to try and subdue him: not kill him.

“Agreed. If we can get to him and take him into custody without anyone else getting hurt, we should absolutely try.” Wavens nodded, looking at Coffman. “Can we count on you and your men to give support if something goes wrong?”

“All of you are crazy,” Coffman said. “He murdered your friend.”

“Semons is our friend as well. If he truly didn’t mean to kill Ross—if this is all a gross misunderstanding—that will be dealt with. If he *did* mean to kill her, that will be dealt with accordingly, as well. Destroying him without giving justice to Ross would be an unrefined prejudice. We’ll never know *why* he did it either. I can’t live with that. I won’t.”

“Let me try to get to him,” Klebes said quietly. “I’m formally trained in stealth operations. I can get around those tables without him seeing me.”

“Joan.” Wavens slowly turned his head to look at her—and it dawned on her that it was the first time he used her first name (without using her surname, either). His expression was soft, but his mouth was twisted into a sharp frown. It wasn’t a disapproving look: it was worried. Worried and maybe even a little—definitely—horrified. “Are you sure. Sheldon is—Sheldon is vicious. He’s the most heavily trained out of all the members of this team. Are you sure you’re willing to put yourself in harm’s way? I’m just as qualified *and* the leader of this team. I—”

“You’re needed here,” Klebes said. “You need to keep everyone else together. Let me do this—please. You already lost Minerva, and now Casandra is gone, too. No one else has to die. Especially Church or Marin—or Sheldon—if we can help it. *Please.*”

Samuel Wavens didn’t say anything right away. Finally he gestured back up the stairs behind Klebes. As she turned her head, she saw twin terrified looks Slyger and Nona were giving her. Finally, albeit with some hesitation, Slyger drew his weapon and positioned the muzzle over the side of the railing. He stayed tense at attention, obviously taking Semons into his crosshairs. In Nona’s case, he kept his own gun ready: ready to listen to whatever conflict would take place. If there was a condition, Klebes didn’t doubt he would take action and pinpoint Sheldon’s location based on the sounds he made.

“Be careful, Joan. Get to him, try to subdue him by any means necessary when you jump him, and we’ll be along to help immediately afterwards,” Wavens whispered hoarsely. “I just have one order for that you *must* follow.”

“Sir?”

“Under no circumstances are you allowed to die.”

**vi**

It was the most terrifying thing she had ever done: the last time she had gone on a stealth mission, it had been while she was on her last mission with her old team. Slyger had been with their unit too, actually: he had been working the case with her old squad leader. The operation was to assist the SWAT unit with rescuing several hostages from an elementary school in High Desert, Colorado. A gunman wanted in a string of murders had taken the fourth grade class hostage, and Klebes had been assigned to the SWAT extraction unit assigned to the outside of the building. The plan was simple: the team inside the building would create a diversion, and the extraction team would help the children escape through the outside window while also providing potential cover fire. The plan went off without a hitch and no one was killed—not even the armed forty-something year old. He had been too drunk to stop the SWAT unit when they finally swarmed him, never once getting off a single shot. The last Klebes heard, he had gotten a lethal injection.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This was different, though. Significantly, so.

For one, Semons was her teammate—possibly even a friend. He had stayed by her side when she was in the hospital. He tolerated her presence in a way that was “friendly” for his usual character. Despite being new to the team, despite replacing *Minerva*, he treated her without animosity. Any annoyance he had with her was purely situational and had nothing to do with her character.

He liked her as a teammate and a colleague—possibly even a potential friend.

She liked him the same way.

Casandra was already gone. If she could somehow help Semons, regardless of whatever had happened, she was absolutely going to.

Klebes had carefully moved away from the stairwell and into the open, moving from desk to desk to keep her cover.[[15]](#footnote-15) She had several close calls, though: if she stepped on a piece of paper, Semons would suddenly lurch around to look for the source, and if she didn’t stay perfectly still, he would absolutely pick her out. It was even worse when she dodged behind desks with hiding office workers: she couldn’t stay long when they were there. They would whimper and make noise, begging her to get them to safety, and the longer she stayed with them, the more frantic they would become. As their volume rose, Semons would perk to attention and look in her direction. Her RIG (set to be silent and masked to Semons’ own RIG signal, which had since been remotely disabled), would flicker frantically as his battle computer would start to remotely lock onto her. Once he raised his gun to actually shoot, but Wavens was quick to shout to get Semons’ attention. As his focus was diverted, Klebes was able to move to another location to reestablish her cover.

By the time she finally made it close enough to Semons and the hostages, the timer on her RIG was reading thirty seconds out—the SWAT team would be within position to fire off the EMP canon soon, and unless she did something, Semons would be killed. She could already hear the steady roar of the helicopter in the distance even through the office’s interior, and it was adding to the urgency of the situation. If she was going to move, it had to be *now.*

In spite of that, Church was having an interesting (albeit one-sided) conversation with Semons. As Klebes moved into position, she hesitated—listening carefully.

“...Did you do this with Minerva too? What you did to Casandra?” The rockstar blonde’s voice was critical—almost malicious. “You’re the one who shoved her into the mulcher, didn’t you? You pushed her off the railing into that machine and turned it on remotely. You killed her just like you killed *Ross*. Are you even really who you say you are?”

Semons said nothing—just kept his gun trained on Church. As if he was *waiting* for something.

Klebes didn’t wait.

Without waiting another second, she lunged forward—dropping her gun and reaching out with both her arms, wrapping her biceps around his shoulders and throat from behind.[[16]](#footnote-16) The headlock was sloppy at best, but despite her overweight and un-athletic appearance, she was *very* strong. She pulled back with her full strength, causing Semons to gasp in surprise as he dropped both his guns, reaching up with his hands to try and displace her powerful forearms and biceps. She staggered as he tried to kick at her, but she ultimately held firm. At the same time, she saw the hostages get up and scramble to safety—officers starting to move in. Marin Nebs stayed curled up on the floor, she saw Wavens, Coffman, and other officers begin to usher the unarmed workers away, Slyger and Nona were hopping the railing on their way down the stairs to rush to assist her—

“*Help me*,” Semons suddenly choked out, agonized sounding.

Klebes froze—*what.*

“NO!” Church sprung forward—grabbing for *Klebes.[[17]](#footnote-17)* The larger woman sputtered in surprise, finding herself struggling with not one, but *two* separate bodies. First there was Semons, still struggling to get free, and *Church,* actually trying to pry Klebes off and *away* from Semons. At the same time, she was screaming almost incoherently. “Fire the EMP cannon—*fire the EMP cannon NOW!*”

“CHURCH, *STOP!*” Slyger suddenly came into view, ramming into Semons from the other side, trying to dislodge Church *and* help Klebes. It was a free-for-all: Klebes trying to bring Semons down, Church trying to shove Klebes away, and Slyger trying to stop Church *and* help Klebes. Had Nona gotten there in time, he would have been able to dislodge Church completely: allowing Slyger and Klebes to take down Semons on their own—but he didn’t.

Without warning, Semons jerked his head back—hitting her square in the center of her forehead.[[18]](#footnote-18) The world spun and immediately submerged her in darkness. When she came down, there was a distinct ringing in her ears and the sensation of rough carpeting pressing into her cheeks. Through her spinning vision, she saw Semons struggling with Slyger, snatching him by his arm and pulling *hard*. Slyger—limp in unconsciousness—fell to the floor with his RIG missing off his arm. Klebes blinked, struggling to roll onto her back. The android had Church by the waist, Slyger’s RIG in the same hand, while he produced another gun from his belt—firing four times. Klebes heard Nona shout in pain. Over the now steady roar of a chopper, Semons staggered, let out an ear splitting howl, and abruptly pivoted on his heels. He sprinted off to the left, there was the sound of shattering glass, Church’s scream—

There was the sound of an explosion without the actual blast. All the lights flickered, then like Klebes’ already fading vision, everything went black.

**LEVEL 3: COMPLETE**

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1. The beginning of another dream sequence starts here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Like in any cinematic experience, lighting is key. By making something as simple as the lighting “wrong,” we can instill a sense of paranoia and uneasiness in the viewer: or in this case, the player. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The controller rumbles. Having something as simple as a vibrating controller whenever something heavy moves or (something happens in general), it increases the sense of immersion. In situations like this, it also increases the sense of uneasiness, doubling the player’s involvement with the scene. Not only are they engaged in terms of the story, they are emotionally engaged as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Joan actually physically staggers, forcing the player to try and fight to keep from collapsing. Again, this increases immersion and makes the situation feel less automated, since the player wasn’t expecting to lose control or be knocked off their feet. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The player will have to avoid these patches to keep from slipping and falling. While nothing “bad” will happen to the player if they do, it does make navigating the hallway that much harder. This forces the player to pay attention to their surroundings if they want to get through the hallway relatively quickly, forcing them to pay attention to their footing and engage with their environment even if “nothing” is happening. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Trippy scenes like this force the player to become even more uneasy, but it makes them want to engage with the environment out of curiosity. Plus, it’s SUPER cool to see from a cinematic perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The player has the option to follow either Nebs or stay with Casandra. Depending on the relationship Klebes has already developed with these characters, it will affect their fate in the next upcoming scenes. For this particular game, Klebes chooses to go with Nebs, leaving Casandra alone to work: something that the player might regret later... [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It should be mentioned that Klebes has had several options to speak up during this scene. However, she is not harping on many (if any) of them. For this particular playthrough, this is to showcase how the player really does have the option to do whatever they want: whether it’s become extremely involved in every conversation or simply observe. While it can be detrimental not to speak up at certain points, sometimes it can help just to sit back and listen, too... [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is where having certain skillsets comes in handy. At the beginning of the game, the player had to decide what their skills were. For this playthrough, one of those skills that got a bonus stat-boost was interrogation tactics. This will make interrogating suspects easier. Without that perk, this part of the game would be significantly harder. However, because the player chose *this* perk and not another one, there will be another part of the game later on that *will* be harder. In other words, for every positive choice in a game, there is a negative one. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These “pings,” identifiable by how the HUD of the RIG lights up, will show Klebes how well she is interrogating her suspects. Alternatively, if she wants to get up and leave at any time, there is the option on the RIG’s menu to “stop the session” and do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The more flustered and emotional a suspect gets, the better: it will make it easier for the player to get information out of them. In this case, Ian is extremely emotional because of some of Klebes’ dialogue choices, making him much more forthcoming in what information he gives out. This is also partly due to the fact that Klebes has such a high interrogation stat, meaning that she’s more likely to choose the “correct” dialogue options to get the information she is looking for. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. When you’ve gotten all you can out of a suspect (either because you have successfully or unsuccessfully), you will be called out of the room for debriefing. Further interrogation with the suspect (unless you get permission to do so for whatever reason) will be impossible. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. When given the option to either follow Wavens or aid Nona and Slyger, Klebes chose the latter. This is another opportunity for Klebes to develop relationships with her allies, which is especially important in stressful situations like this. This is both for the gameplay element (Klebes’ karma will increase with both Slyger *and* Nona) as well as the player’s own comfort, since they just found out a character they might have had a good relationship with has now died. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This information is available through in-game records accessible through the RIG, as well as through Klebes’ own in-game notes on the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This level is very hard on higher difficulties: even more so if Klebes’ is not trained in stealth. Alternatively, if she had a bad relationship with Semons, she could choose to just get into a gunfight with him, risking the lives of the hostages for bad karma. However, because Klebes *does* have a good relationship with Semons in this playthrough (on top of already being a character with stealth as a skillset), the stealth option is still the best fit. Being spotted by Semons will result in Klebes needing to kill him, though: risking the lives of the hostages for neutral/no karma-loss since she at least tried. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This scene is based strictly on reaction commands, where the player has to press a series of buttons in rapid succession in order to be successful with this particular maneuver. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On top of wrestling with Semons, you now have to wrestle with Church, too: this makes the reaction commands that much harder to follow, significantly upping the stakes... [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is the end of the interactive portion of the scene. From this everything is a non-interactive cut scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)