**“Cyberdrama and Women” Capstone**

**HOWL DOGS**

**by Meghan Burrows**

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

**LEVEL 4: SIMENSIS**

**i**

 Casandra Ross was dead.

 Gary Nona had been shot.

 Angela Church and Sheldon Semons were missing.

 And that was only the beginning of their problems.

 Klebes was nursing her head inside the ambulance next to Nona and Nebs when Slyger came jogging back over. Wavens was close behind, expression dark and sagging in a way that made him look years older than he actually. Gary heard them before either Klebes or Marin actually saw them, and as he started to sit up, his entire face contorted in agony. Slyger sputtered and darted forward, practically throwing himself into the vehicle to shove him back down before the EMT even could. “Will you stop *moving,* you ignoramus!? He nearly shot you in the heart, idiot! Lie *down!*”

 “Don’t have to tell me twice,” Nona said, albeit with some venom. He certainly wasn’t happy in the slightest to be put out of commission, but there was little that could be done about it: he had already lost a significant amount of blood, and the IV bag currently replenishing his red cell count was doing so at a snail’s pace. He grunted, trying to get into a comfortable position. “Any news?”

 “Casandra was officially pronounced dead thirty minutes ago,” Wavens said stiffly, tone very formal. Klebes could tell it was a guarded front rather than his normal tone speaking for him. Nona flinched miserably at the mention of the ex-hacker’s name. Marin Nebs proceeded to burst into tears next to Klebes, silently sobbing and curling forward. The poor man hadn’t said a word since being dragged out of the building for the mandatory evacuation so the SWAT team could search the property: just cried. Klebes hesitated briefly, then reached out and took his hand, giving it a squeeze. He squeezed very hard back, his hand clammy and trembling.

 “That’s not all,” Slyger said. He looked particularly worse for the wear, too: hair unkempt and soaked down from the rain. He lifted his severely bruised arm, showing where his RIG used to be. “Semons and Church are gone. So is my RIG. He took both and got out of dodge before the EMP canon could take him out.”

 “What would they need the RIG for?” Klebes asked, feeling her headache suddenly worsening. She scrubbed her forehead where she was struck, trying to fight back the urge to vomit again.

 “That’s where we have another problem,” Wavens said. He looked at Klebes, leaning against the side of the ambulance door. He looked absolutely haggard. In spite of his rigid posture, it was obvious he was struggling to keep his composure through his façade of reserved worry. “Do you remember the specifications of *Howl Dog*’s artillery?”

 *Howl Dog,* their gunperry, had been stuck at the D.C. runway since the beginning of their investigation. Klebes struggled to remember, briefly bringing up her own RIG to check. It has underside mounts for *Caboose* and *Tesla*?”

 “That’s not all. It’s also equipped with a Drop Laser positioner, which is rigged to a GPS inside the ship. It allows us to use military satellites with a series of codes, enabling us to use a particle canon to fire on any location we chose from space. Unfortunately, in all the panic, we weren’t able to secure *Howl Dog* in time after Semons went rogue. The positioner is missing, as is our access to the Drop Laser satellite currently set to be in firing range of Washington D.C. in...” Wavens looked down, checking his own RIG. “Approximately eight hours.”

 Nona sputtered hard, almost slipping into a hoarse coughing fit. “What the fuck? You’re kidding. Please tell me you’re kidding—Renan, he’s not serious, right?”

 “I wish he was,” Slyger said, running a hand through his hair. It was a nervous, fidgety gesture. They’re going to evacuate the president in the next hour. As for the rest of the city, well, we’re fucked. There’s no way we can move four million people out of the immediate area, and even if we do, whoever has the position will just most likely target the largest demographic anyways.”

 “Avoiding casualties will be impossible, in any case,” Wavens said. “Unfortunately, the Drop Laser positioner needs a RIG with the correct passcodes to get past its security wall and access its utilities. Both Church’s and Slyger’s RIGS have Drop Laser access, so if anything were to happen to one of them, Semons would still have access to the other.”

 The unspoken word that Church would likely end up dead in Semons’ custody was a chilling one—but it also reminded Klebes of something important. “Semons said *help me* when I had him in the headlock.”

 It got very quiet. Even over the commotion outside the ambulance, all four men’s attention was instantly on her. Nebs sniffed miserably and squeezed hand harder, Nona stared, and another wave of hard concern washed over Wavens’ cold face. Slyger just looked flabbergasted. “Are you sure? You did hit your head pretty hard...”

 “I know what I heard.”

 “Either way, it paints an interesting picture. Perhaps Semons *was* hacked or otherwise not on full control of himself. Whatever the case, it’s not our problem anymore. The CIA and military are taking over this investigation full-time. Our job was to identify the organization responsible for the first attack, and we have—”

 “No,” Nona said, and it was more out of disbelief than anything. It was infectious, apparently: Klebes felt her heart drop. “Casandra is dead, Semons and Church are missing, and we’re just going to go *home*?”

 “I’ve just been told by my superiors that we are to move out effective immediately. You and Nebs will go to the hospital for treatment, I will remain here to sort out the rest of the details of the incident with the CIA operatives being flown in, and Klebes and Slyger will report to *Howl Dog* and get her up in the air. You will pick me up from the roof of the FBI headquarters here, then we’ll get Nona and Nebs and start flying home. That will put us at least seven hours ahead of when the Drop Laser will be in position—”

 “And we’re not going to evacuate anyone.” Nebs’ voice was hollow. Everyone pivoted to look at him, and as Klebes turned, she could see him staring off straight ahead. His eyes were red-rimmed and glassy. “We’re not going to say a word.”

 “There are too many people in the immediate D.C. region. A mass evacuation on such short notice would only panic the population and lead to bedlam. No one will be able to get away from the radius in time. We’ll just have to trust that the military can disable the remote satellite feed in time to make it obsolete.”

 Nebs said nothing. He nodded absently, then looked back at the floor again. He stopped squeezing Klebes’ hand.

 The EMT chose to come back into the rear of the ambulance then, opening the door and gesturing. “We can move now, if you’d like—they’re clearing the barricades for vehicles to leave. We’ll be there in ten minutes if the roads stay clear.”

 “Good,” Wavens said, sounding empty. “Klebes, Slyger, let’s go.”

 “You behave,” Slyger said, reaching out and jostling Nona’s leg. “Don’t get any ideas. I’ll see you in half-an-hour.”

 Klebes gave Nebs’ hand one last squeeze before letting go. He released his grip as well. Nothing needed to be said.

 As the ambulance pulled away and Wavens left to go talk with several other agents, Slyger looked at Klebes hopelessly. “Well,” he started, voice weary, “how about that for your first assignment, huh? Too bad it couldn’t have gone any better.”

 She didn’t want to believe it. “This isn’t over.”

 “There’s nothing we can do,” Slyger said, already starting to make his way toward one of their cars. The rain was starting to pick up again, throwing splashing lights against the pavement like watercolor as they walked. When they finally made it to the SUV, Slyger took the driver’s side and ran his hands nervously through his hair again, trying to wring the short locks out. “It’s the fucking end. A terrorist cell has chemical weapons *and* access to a massive satellite particle canon. Fuck, even Semons—him saying *help me* could have just been a front to confuse you. He might as well have been on this bullshit the entire time, and we fell right for it.”

 “This isn’t over,” Klebes repeated. She went to check her RIG to check her previous logs, her current mission objective listing, her own notes—scouring for something, *anything,* that would potentially fix the situation.

 Her RIG beeped: *software update now fully installed*, the holoscreen read.

 Even in death, Casandra Ross lived on.

**ii**

 If Slyger was nervous before, he was absolutely scared shitless now.

 “Do you,” he started, voice wavering, “have any idea—any idea at *all—*how fucking *insane* this all sounds?”

 They never went to the tarmac to pick up *Howl Dog*. They never radioed Wavens to tell him what they were up to. When he tried to call them, Klebes ignored him—and she demanded Slyger do the same when he initially tried to answer her RIG’s radio for her. Slyger, who was her superior officer and generally thinking much more “clearly” given the circumstances, just went along with it. It was likely because he trusted her. It was a good thing she had proved herself to him before, then.

 They were going after Semons, Church, Slyger’s missing RIG, and the Drop Laser positioner: all because of a little update Casandra Ross had left on her RIG.

 “She must have put it there when she fixed it,” Klebes said, watching the red blinking light. “It’s an updated version of the signal tracker.”

 “The missing RIGs weren’t giving off signals though,” Slyger said, frowning as he manually turned the car down an abandoned dirt road. The area was part of the old industrial district, abandoned because of their inferiority to the newer factories. “Semons’ RIG was shut down to keep him from tracking *you* during the fiasco inside the building, and we just flat out stopped getting signals from Church’s or mine.”

 “The same thing happened to me when I was in the abandoned mill with Church—my RIG stopped working and the signal was blocked because of a jammer. I think Casandra gave me some kind of software update that powers through it.”

 “Leave it to Ross to tamper with the RIGs—completely illegal, but fuck, of course she would do it anyways.” Slyger cracked a weak smile, then frowned again. “Shit.”

 “What?”

 “This entire area—there are warehouses forty acres wide, out here. They used to use them for mech assembly. Wavens and I came out here once during a fraud investigation before the BAU days.” He trailed off. “Minerva was with us.”

 “I’m sorry.”

 “Don’t be,” he said. “I’m just—*worried.* We’re completely alone and there could be trouble out here. If any of the RIGs is giving off a signal here, then it means that this might be the Angels’ of Whatever’s turf. We—*we should call this in...*”

 “They’ll tell us to pull out *and* they won’t bother trying to save Semons if he really is innocent somehow,” Klebes tried to reason, lying to herself a little bit. Slyger was right in a way: she could lose her badge for this. Court marshaling was one thing, but there was also the chance of her ending up in prison for so severely defying orders. And what about Slyger? His entire career was on the hook as well. Still... “They’ll just kill him on sight of they get the chance. I don’t know about you, but I’m not going to wait. I’m going in there and saving Semons, saving Church, getting our equipment back, and catching whoever is orchestrating this little shit show personally.”

 Slyger parked the SUV, glancing over at Klebes’ RIG display to get a fix on which warehouse they had to get in. Unfortunately, judging by the looks of things, it was the one directly in front of them. The warehouse was *massive,* standing maybe fifteen meters high and completely windowless in a display of intimidating industrial perfection. It was heavily boarded up with sloppy patchwork (weather and time had not been kind to the rusting structure), but there was evidence that there had been activity in the area even after the heavy rain. Deep tire treads and hovercraft burn patches marked up the churned dirt lot, deep puddles forming in the shape of footprints lining alongside the warehouse. There was a large, shuttered sliding entryway for heavy machinery, but there was no discernable way to open it. The only other entrance was a heavy metal door intended for foot-traffic, but it was heavily reinforced and had an obvious keycard slot next to it.

 “Shit. Looks like an updated security system. Someone’s definitely been here, but I can’t get past anything that’s older than three years ago,” Slyger said, swearing again under his breath seconds later. Klebes couldn’t discern what it was. The small Brazilian man looked at her. “Now what? Wavens and the others are going to lock on this car’s signal GPS signal sooner or later, even if we *did* disable it.”

 Klebes momentarily regretted not spending more time learning how to hack electronic locks (or equipment in general). She hesitated—then got out of her seat, exiting the vehicle. Slyger was quick to follow her. As she closed the door, she walked up to the building, drawing her flashlight and shining it around.

 “Be careful,” Slyger said, voice guarded. In spite of this, he drew his own flashlight, guiding it along where Klebes shone her own torch.

 It took some probing and an almost-gunfight to find their way into the building. After circling alongside the side of the warehouse’s second-attached unit, Klebes spotted a large vent underneath several heavily stacked industrial crates. The vent itself was ajar and rattling loudly in the wind, indicating that prying it open would be easy. Unfortunately, they ran into their first guards: more relatively young student-type goons and two older women. They were camped out around a barrel fire trying to keep warm, so rather than trying to fight them all off at once, Klebes and Slyger looked to stealthily pick them off one by one. As members of the group began to wander away for whatever reason, Slyger and Klebes worked together to pick them off. When the majority of them were gone (and the others were too distracted looking for their now missing allies), the two of them made it to the crates and climbed up inside the building entirely undetected.

 As they crawled in, Klebes thought she heard a helicopter’s propellers and the hum of antigravs. She ignored it. If they were getting reinforcements good, if not, well—they would deal with it later. They had bigger things to worry about.

 There was no going back, now.

**iii**

 The Wolfpac was much, much larger than Klebes thought it would be. As she and Slyger entered the main warehouse through the broken vent and made their way to the main hanger crowded with additional supply containers, Slyger had to reach out snatch her by her vest and stop her from stepping out into the open. The Wolfpac was monstrous, standing roughly as high as the second-floor landing and stalking the open hangar freely. Wolfpacs were a security-type class-three mech, designed with canine-efficient in mind. They were completely non-sentient and piloted by basic A.I. programs, although that didn’t make them any less dangerous: especially considering that this was the biggest one she had ever seen. It was likely stolen and being used by whoever had set up shop to keep something protected—something *big*.

 Getting around the goons was one thing. Navigating around this monster, on the other hand, was going to be something else entirely.

 As Klebes stopped, she accidently kicked a stray spray can over the side of the second-story landing. The imposing mecha-dog froze, snapped its head in their direction, and stared with its ears perked and optics blazing. Slyger swore and yanked Klebes further backward, and she let him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 “Shit,” he swore. “That’s an oversized model. They stopped making those when the military couldn’t control them.”

 “What do we do?”[[2]](#footnote-2) Klebes tightened the grip on her gun. “Do we even *have* armor piercing rounds?”

 “Even if we did, I doubt they’d work. Wolfpacs were built to resist anti-tank guns. We’d need the Drop Laser positioner to take that thing out—and it won’t do us much good until we get it back.”

 Below, the Wolfpac began to move into another hanger in the warehouse. As it walked into the next room, there was a shrill beep as the hangar doors began to lower behind it. Once it had completely folded downwards, there was a click. The red light above the door flashed, then flickered to orange, yellow, then green.

 “Looks like they got their own security system for the damn thing, too,” Slyger said quietly, possibly to himself. Sweat was glistening on his forehead as he stood up, moving into the open now that the mechanized monstrosity was gone. He paused thoughtfully before gesturing to Klebes to stand with him. “See those warning lights? It’ll let us know when that thing is getting close. Whoever owns this place must not have been able to reprogram it properly. It’s probably rigged to attack anyone on sight... they must be hiding something really important here if that’s the case, if they’re risking having that much unrestricted security walking around.”

 “Damn... here’s to hoping we don’t cause enough of a ruckus to get that thing’s attention, then,”[[3]](#footnote-3)Klebes said, checking her gun. “Think we can sneak through—?”

 There was a heavy rumble. It echoed ominously in the massive chamber, gradually rising into the sound of bending metal. One of the warehouse doors suddenly *buckled,* sending part of the frame snapping off as it flew across the room and bounced, careening into a stationary two-story forklift. Slyger ducked down and immediately retreated back into the shadows, but Klebes stood form and watched the door, raising her gun to look through the crosshairs. As she did, there was no movement from the door. It became very quiet once more, and nervously, she lowered her pistol.

 “That’s not a helicopter,” Slyger swore, likely referring to what Klebes had heard earlier as they were crawling in. “What the fu—?”

 There was another blast of sound, and the entire room shook with it as the door was knocked—*punched—*right out of the wall.[[4]](#footnote-4) Klebes was half-expecting another Wolfpac, since the last one they saw hadn’t gone through that particular door. She was never expecting to see a mech with the *Howl Dog* insignia, never mind the voice that came through her RIG’s radio as *Caboose*—it *must* to have been *Caboose*—stumbled into the room with a clatter. The visored mech had a distinct rhino-motif theme in overall design, including a massive horn and heavy armor. It turned its gaze up to them and flashed its bright green visor.

 “Did I miss anything?” Nona asked.[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Slyger *howled,* absolutely furious. “GARY! *I TOLD YOU TO STAY AT THE HOSPITAL!*” In his rage, the smaller man sprinted forward, plucked up an empty spray bottle, and hurled it at *Caboose’s* helm. The can uselessly bounced off the robot with a feeble ping. Nona turned to look at Klebes, activating his RIG camera and sending her the video-feed remotely. His face appeared on the holoscreen that flashed in front of Klebes, showing the interior of the mech-suit. Nona was braced into *Caboose* with several heavy braces, his head plugged into a series of sensor pins that electronically picked up his brainwaves and communicated with the robot how to move. Nona chuckled nervously, offering a tired, shit-eating smile. “I gave that little talk we had some thought, Joan. I wanted to say thank you, and I thought you two could use some heavy-metal reinforcements. I saw the Wolfpac on my thermals on the way in.”

 “Oh my god*,* go *away,* Gary.” Slyger was shaking, torn between being angry and being very, very upset. “*Caboose* is in no condition to fight—how did you even get him!? He was with *Howl Dog* at the tarmac...” As Slyger spoke, his own words seemed to sink in. “The helicopter we heard outside.”

 “When Wavens called my RIG to tell me that *Howl Dog* hadn’t left the airport let, I bailed the hospital and headed straight over there. I had flying lessons too, Renan. I figured you two were up to something, and I wanted in.” Caboose flexed his arm, and Nona laughed quietly over the radio. “Looks like you could use my help, anyways. That Wolfpac’s sensors aren’t programmed to scan outside the warehouse, but I could see hear it using my audio-radar. Even with all the echoes in this place, that thing is *nasty.* Probably a mark eight, if the engine purr has any say...”

 “And you just left *Howl Dog* outside!?”

 “The automated defenses are on. Anyone who doesn’t have our RIG signal will get torn to pieces before they get close to her. Plus the rain masked the sound of me showing up anyways—at least from in here, I’m guessing.. And all those kids who were outside won’t be a problem anymore, though...”

 “It shouldn’t matter!’ Renan’s shout was shrill, like he was about to break into hysterics at the drop of a hat. “None of this is up for debate. I don’t even know why we’re arguing about this. Look, *Caboose* hasn’t had maintenance since the last time we used it. You’re going to hurt yourself in there! The acoustics in this warehouse—you won’t be able to hear where the sound is coming from if—*when*—we get into trouble!”

 “Maybe not me,” Nona said with a scoff, turning the mech’s head in Slyger’s direction. Even then, Klebes could see Slyger’s point spot-on. *Caboose’s* helm turned too far to the left, not quite looking at Slyger. Even in a space where there *wasn’t* gunfire or a conflict, Nona’s hearing was off. Already crippled by blindness, she could see right away how this could be problematic. Despite this, when Nona turned back toward her, he was looking straight on at her. It wasn’t until he sent a program to her RIG that she realized he was using *Caboose* to hone in on her own specific RIG signal. “But you can, Joan. Even if Slyger’s RIG wasn’t snatched with the Drop Laser, I wouldn’t trust anyone else: I need you to direct me using this program. If I can’t lock onto a target because of the sound, use this and I’ll recalibrate my attack strategy.”

 “You trust me?” Klebes asked, stunned. “Why?”

 “You remind me of Slyger,” Nona said, smiling—and it was a genuine smile. One of the ones he usually only reserved for Slyger, or even Casandra (when she was still alive). As he spoke, Slyger immediately appeared to calm down: his rage dissipating into obviously swelling, muted panic. He stood there at the edge of the balcony, shaking emotionally as he looked at *Caboose*. Nona revved *Caboose’s* engine, reaching up with a massive hand, holding it out with the palm extended. Slyger made a choking sound, leaning on the flimsy railing almost haphazardly as he pressed his palm back. For a moment, Klebes debated looking away. Renan and Nona were married, but she had never seen them look so... quiet. They weren’t a traditional couple: they had their own unique way to show emotion, and this was clearly a clean-cut example.

 Slyger pressed his palm against *Caboose’s*, then his forehead, sighing only semi-angrily. “I can’t convince you to go back? If we go in and it’s guarded, everyone will be shooting at *you.*”

 “Oh, it’s definitely guarded. This place is *crawling* with punk guards on my thermal-scan. Once they get riled up, the heat signals will be all over the place, though... don’t worry about me. I survived getting shot in the head. I’ll be fine. I’ll always be fine.”

 “Says the asshole that was shot by our own ex-teammate.”

 “Guys,” Klebes interrupted. “I’d hate to cut this short, but we’re running on borrowed time here. We need to get in and out before the others realize we’re gone, and now that *Caboose* is here...”

 “Right. Let’s get our equipment back...” Nona directed *Caboose* to draw its massive servo away from Slyger. The huge mech reached over its shoulder, drawing out what appeared to be a massive staff. There was a hiss, followed by a flash of light. The end of the staff materialized into an energy club, which *Caboose* balanced on its shoulder. Nona’s video feed disappeared. “We’ll follow your lead, Joan.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

 She hoped she wouldn’t be too much of a disappointment.

**iv**

 Klebes and Slyger continued to the other side of the warehouse along the catwalk, stopping to search through several crates for health packs and ammunition. Only four clips actually matched what Klebes was carrying, but Slyger was able to pick up the rest easily. They also found a large medkit, which Slyger was able to use on his crippled ankle from earlier. It was only a temporary fix, but he was walking better without as noticeable of a limp. Below, *Caboose* was making its way toward the furthest part of the hangar, its head turning as it scanned its surroundings. The exterior of the mech was posed tensely, and Klebes wondered if it was a reflection of Nona’s own anxiety.

 “I’m worried about him,” Slyger said quietly as he moved up alongside Klebes, watching her apply her own medkit. “I am *so* worried. The acoustics are crap. He has a built-in echolocation unit, but all those sounds bouncing off each other in this confined space... *Caboose* hasn’t had maintenance since last year, either. If something goes wrong, he’ll be in trouble—like if that Wolfpac shows up. It will tear him to fucking *pieces*.”

 Klebes almost didn’t answer him, because she was afraid her voice would betray just how nervous that thought made her.[[7]](#footnote-7) “He was right. The Wolfpac was almost twice as big as *Caboose*, and with Nona already being partially “blinded” because of the way sound would work inside the warehouse, he would be defenseless trying to fight against it. “Then we just have to make sure to keep ahead of it. So long as we move from room to room fast enough, we should be able to avoid running into it.”

 “And if *Caboose* gets overwhelmed?”

 “We’ll deal with it when it happens. But right now, *Caboose* might be our best bet—you don’t have a vest on and we’re both low on ammo. We *need* Nona for this, Renan.”

 Slyger didn’t say anything else. As the both of them made their way to the end of the catwalk, they came across a locked door. Slyger grumbled, getting on his knees and popping open the control panel, reaching inside to hack it.

 “This one looks easy enough,” he said quietly. “Give me a few seconds. Unlocking these doors might take me a few extra seconds if the security gets more difficult.”

 “Can you open the door for *Caboose* too?”

 “That will take extra time...” Slyger frowned, looking over her shoulder. “I can bypass the security code by hacking the doors to automatically open whenever *Caboose* is close enough, like with the Wolfpac, but it might cause it to react to our position faster.”

 “We’re running out of time already. So long as we keep moving, I think we can keep ahead of it with automatic door locks. Bypass it.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

 “God, I hope you know what you’re doing...” Slyger dug his hands back into the control panel, snapping something. The panel beeped, flickered, and then the control screen switched to black. An alarm immediately went off, and through the door, Klebes could hear shouting.[[9]](#footnote-9)

 “We got movement on the other side of the door,” Nona said through his radio. “I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

 “Right. Keep your heads up, guys,” Klebes said. She moved in front of the door, prepping her gun. “Move fast!”

 As the door opened, Klebes darted through first, raising her pistol. There was a guard with an Angel sigil standing just opposite of the door, and as Klebes rushed him, she gave him a hearty shove off the catwalk. He screamed as he fell, prompting his allies to immediately turn their weapons on her. As she and Slyger darted behind a large metal crate, the hangar door opened. *Caboose* came charging in without hesitation, partially destroying the frame as he ducked underneath it and raised his mace to knock away scrambling guards on the hangar floor. As more guards opened fire from the opposite catwalk, *Caboose* staggered, raising his arms to take the brunt of the bullet-fire. An alarm popped up on Klebes’s RIG Nona sent her a distress signal, showing he couldn’t “see” where they were coming from with all the access noise. Klebes peered around the edge of the crate where she had taken cover, switching on her RIG’s infrared connection to *Caboose’s* auto-targeting system and auto-targeting the group Nona was having trouble locating. As Klebes’s RIG locked onto the targets, it sent a ping to *Caboose*, allowing Nona to pinpoint their location. The huge mech turned around, lifting up his mace before flinging it forward. The flail at the end dislocated from the staff, turning the weapon into a ball-and-chain as Nona swung it at the offending guards. It landed on top of them, ripping the part of the platform to pieces and severely damaging a roof-support. Behind them, the light above the closed-hangar door flashed orange.[[10]](#footnote-10)

 The catwalk jerked as one of the support beams overhead was damaged. Slyger shouted as he fell, and Klebes stumbled and struggled to find a decent hold on the railing. There was a tremendous metal *snap* as the entire structure gave out, causing the bridge to collapse and bend downward vertically. It was a thirty foot drop, at least. Klebes sputtered, fumbling for a railing as she slipped and nearly fell the full height down to the concrete.[[11]](#footnote-11) She managed to grab another railing, holding on just long enough for the bridge’s upper portion to snap and break apart as well. Being held up by nothing but cables, the structure jerked downwards—but at least the fall was cushioned. She let when the structure was held suspended over the floor less than ten feet. As she ducked and rolled to take the majority of the fall, Slyger was already helping her up.

 “Are you two okay?” Nona asked, jogging up in *Caboose*. More guards were coming into the room from behind, but the mech’s heavily armored back kept the rounds from bothering him. The mech was beginning to show signs of damage, too: Klebes hoped he could hold out for just a little while longer.

 “We’re fine—get to the door and we’ll follow you!” Slyger turned around, firing off a few pot shots at the guards coming in behind them. “Urgh! How many of these guys do they have on payroll?”

 “Not enough to stop us!” Klebes shot back, going to follow Nona and *Caboose*.

**v**

 Klebes had never had to deal with the death of a teammate before.

 As for the rest of her new unit, it was a different story. Slyger, Nona, and all the others had to deal with the loss of Minerva on their own terms, though. Considering Klebes was her replacement so soon after her death, it was amazing they managed to hold themselves together for as long as they had. That loss was still fresh to them, too: and Klebes had no idea how to even *wonder* how they dealt with it. Minerva was the second oldest member of the unit next to Wavens who *started* the team, and with the recent revelation that Semons had likely been her killer... it was a hard thing for Klebes to process, and *she* hadn’t even beenthere. She supposed everyone grieved in their own way. Wavens probably took everything in silence, Nona grieved loudly, Slyger let his emotions take the better of him in private away from prying eyes...

 But nothing prepared her for the loss in the warehouse that night.

 As *Caboose* careened through the final door into the open-chamber, two things came to Klebes as a shock. For one, there were four stacked canisters to her right, fifteen yards across and just as high. They were all matte-black and stored on tall metal-lined platforms, refracting white, lazy white from the dull moonlight coming through the decrepit bay windows. The writing on the sides of the heavy metal exterior was written in bright red Russian, further doubling the intimidation value and leaving her with a sinking feeling in her gut. The second thing that Klebes noticed was a large, open pit at the end of the room.

 “What is that!?” She took cover behind a metal beam to her immediate left as more goons took aim from the second floor platforms. Bullets ricocheted off the black canisters precariously, each hit sounding more and more critical, and the heavyset women couldn’t help but flinch every time a round actually pierced the metal: causing the entire cylinder to groan ominously. She didn’t care to find out what was inside, in case of an explosion.

 Slyger dove next to her, reloading his gun, then taking a few potshots at the walkway across from them. He struck someone in the shoulder, causing them to stagger backwards and fall thirty feet to the ground below. Klebes didn’t watch for the impact—she couldn’t even hear it over *Caboose’s* engine and all the gunfire. “Which one, the canister or the pit?”

 “Both!”

 “This warehouse was probably used to put together Class Eight mechs—*Caboose and Tesla* are only Class Three! They’d be too big for the warehouse standing up, so they would add sublevel pits to build them from the bottom up more easily! That pit probably goes down three hundred feet!”

 More bullets whizzed by, striking the wall immediately behind Klebes. She attempted to peer around the corner to ping to Nona their exact location, but a bullet grazed her cheek. With a startled scream, she peeled back around the corner, her heart racing and the corners of her vision turning dark. She fought back the urge to pass out, and once she collected herself, she tried again: successfully sending off a ping.[[12]](#footnote-12) Caboose turned, *roared,* and took a swipe at the catwalk with his mace, causing the entire structure to buckle and send bodies careening to the floor below. At the same time, Klebes’s RIG updated: the missing Drop Laser Positioner and Slyger’s missing RIG were located in a small, closed off office just above them on the third-level balcony, accessible only by a set of stairs straight ahead of them.

 Slyger heard her RIG beep. “Did you get a lock on—?”

 “It’s directly above us,” Klebes said. “Come on, we can—”

 There was a tremendous roar, followed by blazing alarms: both from Klebes’ RIG and the warehouse campus security system. Without a hint of previous warning like they had been receiving beforehand, the opposite end of the bay erupted with a blast of concrete and shredded metal.[[13]](#footnote-13) Through the previously closed lot door came the Wolfpac, staggering on its haunches and swinging its huge head around to snap furiously at the dust billowing around its streamlined, silver body. The beast’s optics rolled in its skull, turning its attention directly toward Klebes: automatically locking onto her RIG signal. Her HUD flashed red in warning but there was nowhere for her or Slyger to go. It crouched low, then sprung forward with thirty tons of furious metal. Slyger screamed, staggering to his feet to try and displace them, but the Wolfpac was too huge: avoiding this thing, in any case, was going to be impossible.

 The Wolfpac made it to them in less than three strides, but it didn’t make contact. On the third bound, the huge mechanical dog was seized midair by *Caboose*. Nona shouted and grunted over the radio as he caught the mecha-dog in a headlock with his left arm, using the right to try and circle his bicep under its jaw: trying to snap its neck and ruin the spasming hydraulics to permanently put it out of commission. Klebes could only watch helplessly as the Wolfpac, still larger and meaner than *Caboose*, turned its homicidal attentions to Gary Nona instead. With a bellowing roar, it swung its unrestrained back legs around and braced them on the concrete, pushing upwards and to its right as he lifted its head, opened its jaws, and sank its graphene fangs directly into *Caboose’s* shoulders and unprotected throat. Slyger was shouting and shooting his gun at the side of the Wolfpac’s head to try and distract it—to get it off Nona—but the rounds were too small and the Wolfpac had made up its narrow mind on who it’s next target was. As Caboose wrestled with the Wolfpac to try and throw it off, there was a clear moment of hesitation as Nona struggled to figure out what to do with himself. He sent a panicked ping to Klebes’s RIG, and all at once, everything slowed down.[[14]](#footnote-14)

 Caboose’s mace was too far away. Nona’s only two options to deal with the Wolfpac: to try and crush it under one of the canisters, or to try and throw it into the pit.

 Klebes sent one final ping towards the pit.

 Caboose roared his engine: seizing the Wolfpac by the scruff-plate with his free hand, allowing the huge mech to leap upward and sink its teeth full force into *Caboose’s* jugular. There was a tremendous snap of metal as *Caboose’s* spinal strut was snapped, undoubtedly breaking Nona’s own back through the neural connectors. There wasn’t a peep over the radio, though—not even when Caboose pitched backwards into the pit with the Wolfpac’s jaws still locked on him in a death grip.

 “*GARY!*” Slyger surged forward towards the pit, and Klebes had to immediately give chase. As they were less than five yards from the open drop, there was a massive shudder and explosion. The ground *heaved* and Slyger staggered—and Klebes had to reach out to stop him from accidently pitching forward at the last second.**[[15]](#footnote-15)**

Using every ounce of strength she had left, she pulled back on the back of his shirt as hard as she could, pulling *hard* and rapidly stepping backwards as part of the floor actually began to crumble underneath them. The large platform of metal that Slyger had been standing on buckled and started to shift forward, crumbling and falling apart as it swung forward on its support beams, then pitched downward into the pit. Below, Klebes could see rising billows of fire and smaller explosions from *Caboose* and the Wolfpac’s combined fuel-pockets ignited, and Gary Nona, age forty-nine, went up in flames with them.

**vi**

 Slyger was inconsolable. Klebes couldn’t blame him.

 For almost a full ten minutes, Klebes said nothing to Slyger. While the poor man knelt over the side of the pit just staring at the billowing flames below, Klebes went around the room checking the corpses left behind. In the meantime, it didn’t look like security was going to be a problem: no one was left. Klebes was able to loot several medpacks off the bodies too, but when she offered them to Slyger, he didn’t even acknowledge her. It didn’t matter that he was hurting: he had more than physical wounds to deal with. Klebes momentarily wondered if he was ever going to be okay. Nona—his best friend, lover, and husband—was gone.

 Klebes was getting ancy—and worried. She finally approached Slyger again, kneeling down and touching his shoulder. “Renan?”

 “We should get the RIG,” Slyger said, standing back up to his full height. He looked like he was going to vomit, but his stance still managed to remain terse, as if the nausea in his expression wasn’t physically bothering him at all. “The Drop Laser positioner too—whatever.”

 “Renan,” Klebes tried again. “Please...”

 He didn’t answer. In fact, he didn’t even follow her. He started moving towards the staircase at the far end of the warehouse, and Klebes, feeling helpless, had no choice but to follow him. At least Nona’s RIG signal had finally stopped transmitting, silencing the flatline signal that had been blaring nonstop over Klebes’ own HUD sound-system whenever she flipped to that particular screen. Semons’ and Church’s signals were still off the radar-system, but Klebes had a feeling they were going to find them soon: they had to.

 The office space was very small and decrepit from lack of care, containing very few items. Two broken desks, several askew chairs, a dusty file cabinet... it was clear the room hadn’t been formally used in a long time, but the broken lock on the door and the aged, muddy footprints on the floor indicated it *had* been occupied recently. Several papers were stern on the nearest desk in Korean and Russian print, and on the table set up directly behind it were Slyger’s semi-dismantled RIG and the Drop Laser positioner. The positioner itself was a slightly bulbous, blinking mechanism inside a metal black box casing. It was hitched to a small tablet, flashing binary and other ominous looking lines of code.

 Klebes moved much faster than Slyger, striding across the length of the room and hovering with uncertainty over the table. “Renan—Slyger, what should we do? Do we take it apart or—?”

 There was the click of a gun’s safety being switched off.

 “I wouldn’t try it, Joan.”

 It wasn’t Slyger’s voice.

 Slowly, Klebes started to turn around.[[16]](#footnote-16) Behind her, still standing in the open doorway, was Slyger—his arms gradually starting to rise in a gesture of submissiveness. Behind him was a shimmer of light, and then the cloaking mechanism Angela Church was wearing faded.[[17]](#footnote-17) She had the muzzle of her semi-automatic pressed into the back of Renan’s head as several men filed in behind her with their own weapons raised. Behind them, slowly stalking into the room, was Sheldon Semons. The agent’s movements were extremely shaky, and judging by the way he kept shaking his head, it was clear something was wrong. His synthetic-skin and hair was pulled out in certain places along his scalp, exposing his exoskeleton beneath, and—

 Church jabbed her gun against Slyger’s head. “Put your weapons on the table or I kill him *right* now.”

 “Church.” Slyger’s voice was watery and starting to crack. Klebes was sure it was a mix of shock and the loss of Nona, at this point. “What are you doing?”

 “Fixing a problem,” she said. “I didn’t think any of you would be stupid enough to follow me. Well—Nona maybe. He wasn’t the brightest crayon, though. *He* certainly got what was coming to him, didn’t he? Too bad he wrecked almost five million dollars’ worth of equipment, though. What a waste.”

 Slyger’s reaction was immediate. He whirled around to lunge at Church, eyes bugging out of his skull. He was livid, but as he turned, Church had time to pull the three times. The silenced gun popped with a metal ting, flashing muted red light as Slyger jerked backwards once, twice, then fell as the third bullet ripped through his shoulder and sent him to meet the floor. The small Brazilian man didn’t move.

Klebes reacted on instinct. She went to lunge forward to help him, but Semons reached her before she could move more than a few feet. He seized her around her large waist, pinning her arms, and despite her own physical strength, she couldn’t shake him. With a furious shout she struggled to break free, stopping only when Church took aim at her instead. “What the fuck are you doing!?”

 “Fixing an error,” she said, scoffing. “Forcing Semons to make a scene and kill Casandra didn’t matter. Neither did sending that virus to your RIG and trying to kill you. No matter what the fuck I do, trying to make things go my way has been one mistake after another—all because of you.”

 “What are you talking about?” Klebes struggled to look at Slyger past the desk, trying to make sure he was okay, but she couldn’t see him.

 “I’d worry less about him and more about you,” Church said, taking notice. “He’s not nearly in as much trouble as you are, right now. Ever since day one on the job, you’ve been in my way and it stops *now*. Just like Minerva—history repeats, I guess. Shame.”

 Klebes stopped struggling. She glared at Church. “You’re... I don’t understand. Why are you doing this?”

 “For humanity,” she said. She lowered her gun, holstering it as she looked over her shoulder to several of the men. They heeded the unspoken command, moving to retrieve the Drop Laser positioner but leaving the RIG behind. As they left, Church continued. “Humanity is on the verge of a major social shift. Technology has taken precedence over nature and the Earth’s natural beauty. Everything that God gave us in its natural state means nothing—the only thing that matters is how fast our internet connection is, or how far we can reach out into space. The blasphemers of humanity have lost sight of what is truly important: God’s natural work.”

 “You’re from the Angels of Unity,” Klebes said. It wasn’t a question.

 “Yes,” Church said. “I was indoctrinated by my late husband. He was murdered for trying to enlighten others—technology doesn’t create in the way nature does. Technology only destroys.”

 “Technology doesn’t kill people,” Klebes said, hissing. “*People* kill people.”

 “But people kill easier with technology,” Church said venomously. She made a twirling, non-committal gesture with her hand towards her. It took Klebes another second to realize she was gesturing towards Semons. “All I had to do was implant one of my husband’s reprogram-codes into Semons while he was sleeping, and look at what he did to Casandra. She was going to tell everyone that I was the one who planted the virus and Trojan Horse on your RIG. Wavens had been onto me for *months* now after I killed Minerva when she caught onto *me*. Framing you as being the new Angels mole trying to get into the unit after her death would have been successful if you hadn’t lived—if Casandra hadn’t been alone tinkering with what I had done to put myself out of the spotlight. I had to be creative reprogramming Semons, sure, but in the end, that’s all technology’s doing. It drove us—the Angels—to do all of this. We wouldn’t have had to if humanity had just *stopped...*”

 Behind her, Semons whimpered.

 Now it was clear.

 “Oh my god,” Klebes said. “You murdered Minerva. This—everything that the Angels have been doing, you had planned from the start. She figured out what you were doing and you killed her. Semons knew it, too. That’s why he hated you: he suspected you as well.”

 “Minnie was the worst of them,” Church said bitterly. “She would have ratted me out as an Angel of Unity for sure, if she hadn’t been conveniently standing on that catwalk. She deserved it though—she was sleeping with Semons, that filth. Technology can’t replicate the real thing that God intended for us when he made our beautiful world: the world that mankind has been so *eager* to destroy. Pretty soon, the only natural things in the world will be the atoms in the air—which will also be synthetic, if things keep up.”

 “So you staged that elaborate *thing* at the FBI headquarters to get away, and you stole the Drop Laser positioner to kill thousands of people for not believing in your religious views.”

 “Oh.” Church, who had started to pace, stopped. She looked at Klebes like a deer in the headlights. It was unnerving—her expression had the look that she had no idea what she was doing was even remotely wrong. “Oh no. Killing with technology would be... counterproductive. We’re just using it as a trigger.”

 “A trigger.” Klebes’ voice was hollow. She could feel her heart dropping into the pit of her body. “A trigger for what?”

 “The bomb.”

 Oh no.

 “Oh yes,” Church said, either reading Klebes’ mind or just reading the look of horror that she physically felt pale her whole face. “Jefferson Memorial was just a test run. We were going to have several more, but you and the others were so on-point with your investigation that I never had time to give out orders without risking detection. So we’re moving to the final phase in just a few hours. That virus I put on your RIG would have been the ultimate distraction, but that part of my plan never quite came to light... since you won’t be leaving this room, I guess it won’t hurt me to tell you. See—for the past several months, we’ve been moving barrels of that fun little chemical to several abandoned sites around the city. Because we couldn’t risk manually activating them without killing even more of own church members, we decided having access to the Drop Laser would give us the perfect opportunity to set them off. It’s why I became an agent in the first place, actually. Unfortunately, having access to additional RIGS made access and preventing the government from shutting the satellite down that much easier. Now all we need is for it to finally fall into place.”

 “You’re not fucking getting away with this.”

 “I already have,” Church said, albeit with a frighteningly cheerful demeanor. She gestured towards—behind—Klebes again. “Semons is going to be blamed for everything. An android killing thousands of humans of Washington D.C. will be worldwide news. The Wolfpac you destroyed wasn’t the only one. We have an additional model that we’re going to use to safeguard our primary target site, and Semons is going to pilot it. When I feed him a remote signal, he is going to activate the Drop Laser positioner from inside the Wolfpac with his own RIG codes, unmistakably leaving his own technological footprint in the system. Everything will be his doing—and the Angels of Unity will then lead the charge to eradicate technology and return the world to a natural state.”

 “Holy fucking shit, you are *insane*.”

 “I’m *right*,” Church said. “And the Angels have won. Semons? Get rid of her.”

 Semons whined—shifting from foot to foot. It took a second, but slowly, he started to walk forward, dragging Klebes along with him. Whatever Church was doing to make him work against his will, it was working very well... although there were still traces of him still trying to fight back. As he walked forward, he noticeably staggered, seemingly trying to fight back against himself...

 As they made it to the doorway, Semons shoved his way through with her, pushing her up against the balcony. The metal creaked and buckled dangerously, nearly causing Klebes to pitch forward right then and there. She shouted, scrambling to stagger backwards, but Semons kept pushing her forward—*forward—*

“Sheldon—*Sheldon!*” Klebes struggled to turn around, to grab the other man and keep him from *pushing.* The railing buckled further forward as he suddenly hefted her upward. It didn’t matter that she weighed twice as much as he did: having mechanical muscles trumped her much weaker, pathetically organic ones. “SHELDON, *WAIT*—!”

 Sheldon Semons shoved her forward, pitching her several hundred feet towards the fire and jagged metal below. The world turned dark, and Joan Klebes felt nothing.

**LEVEL 4: COMPLETE**

**To read more, go to** [**www.womencyberdrama.weebly.com**](http://www.womencyberdrama.weebly.com) **and check out the**

***Howl Dogs* page!**

1. This is a jumpscare-quicktime event. Accidently causing the Wolfpac to see you or resisting Slyger pulling you back (i.e. jumping and accidently touching the joystick in panic) will result in the player unintentionally entering combat-mode and preventing further dialogue with Slyger (or Nona, if you chose to partner-up with him at the start of the level instead). If either Nona or Slyger were killed before this point, the player will have to find a different way in, otherwise the scene will result instant-death regardless of the preset difficulty setting. Playing on Hard or Impossible difficulty will result in instant-death. However, playing on Easy or Normal mode will grant the player 1000 extra XP and the Beast Hunter achievement at the end of the level if they can defeat the Wolfpac, which has a significant boost in HP if the player is spotted. If the player isn’t spotted, this is the beginning of a CUTSCENE (combat-mode is disabled). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The player has three dialogue choices. “What do we do?” is the neutral choice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The player has four dialogue choices. This is the “risky” choice. Picking this choice causes the game to randomly generate a series of numbers in the game-computer. If the random generator matches a certain sequence, it either gives the player +5 for the Luck stat (1/5 of the time) or -1 Luck (4/5 of the time). This will either drastically improve the player’s potential success for the mission or be a hindrance. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Controller rumble cue. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If Slyger was left at the hospital, Caboose’s design will be different, since it will still be Klebes’ first time seeing it. Caboose will have a distinct Jaguar-motif design and will be piloted by Renan (with some difficulty). Because Nona is piloting Caboose for this run-through, Caboose gains +1000 HP and Slyger gets no bonuses. If Slyger was piloting Caboose, Caboose would gain no HP bonus, but Nona will gain +1000 HP working alongside Klebes. The point of choosing between Slyger and Nona at the hospital in the first place gives the player the option to have A) an easier time directing the robot through the next obstacles (with a less useful follower) OR B) giving the player a more useful follower (with a less easy time directing the pilot in the mech). In this case, the scenario matches up with option B. It also affects who will die at the end of the mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. End of the cut scene sequence. Combat-mode is reengaged. Any followers re-attach themselves to Klebes’ character and will now follow her again (in this instance, that follower is Slyger). Nona will be programmed onto his own path of travel and will not necessarily physically “follow” Klebes. Boss music Caboose starts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Klebes has the option NOT to reply to Slyger’s dialogue for about ten seconds. Not replying will make Slyger’s Nervous Stat go up +3, making him less efficient in combat. However, speaking up encouragingly will grant Slyger a temporary -1 to the Nervous Stat and cause a +10 to the player’s Relationship Stat. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. By choosing to bypass the security code and make the hangar doors open automatically, the Wolfpac is much more likely to show up and destroy Caboose, ending the level prematurely and forcing the player to restart from the beginning. HOWEVER, assuming the player is skilled or is replaying the game, it’s more likely that they’re familiar with this level and moving fast enough to get through the hangars and avoid the Wolfpac until its required boss fight at the end. Essentially, the choice Klebes made will make the level harder and force her to move faster, but it will mean she and Slyger will receive less gunfight damage and won’t have to resort to using as many medkits so long as they keep moving behind Caboose. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This alarm would not go off if the “less” difficult version of this mission was chosen. The siren is very loud and high pitched, used as a psychological weapon against the player more than anything else. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A warning sign to indicate the Wolfpac is getting closer. Not moving to the next room in time will cause the Wolfpac to lunge through and instantly destroy Caboose. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is another quicktime event. Not hitting buttons in a certain order as Klebes falls will result in an instant-death. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Because Joan is so low on HP at this point, this sequence (with the darkness closing in around her vision) is an example of her almost dying on the spot. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is the beginning of another non-interactive cutscene. Joan won’t be able to move from her spot or otherwise react, since this sequence is completely scripted. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Everything actually DOES slow down. This gives the player the opportunity to take time with their decision, which happens very quickly in real-time. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Another quicktime event. However, this one only has a 50/50 chance of succeeding. The player might think they are doing the right thing grabbing Renan to try and save them, but they still might fail anyways. This will fill the players with intense regret if they fail, because even though they tried to save him, he still dies. However, in this case, the attempt is successful. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is the beginning of a non-interactive cut scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Prior to this confrontation, you can see Angela Church in the warehouse following you. She is just a transparent shimmer of light because of the cloaking device she is wearing, and it is impossible to interact with her unless you have a very, VERY high detection stat. For this playthrough, Klebes is only noticing her just now. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)