

Chapter 1

Date: Asiday, fifth day of the week, Zaxo 10th, 3050 XE, six years after the last Xeeon city election

Time: 10:00 AM XST (Xeeonite Standard Time), 10:00 PM DST (Delanian Standard Time)

Location: Ra-Dela, capital city of Se-Dela, largest and most powerful country on Dela. More specifically, in Ra-Dela's dwarfish slums, though do not have much information about this particular area, as Database records have little facts on this part of Ra-Dela, aside from noting that many violent criminals and mentally disturbed individuals of all Delanian races live here due to stigma and Se-Dela's lack of mental health resources. Best to be cautious, as records indicate that visiting Xeeonites have been known to be attacked by this slum's residents. Activating sensors to avoid being taken by surprise.

Objective: Find and apprehend wanted criminal Jornan ah Kona. She is wanted on both Dela and Xeeo for a variety of crimes. Her most recent crime is running an illegal vampire feeding ring in Xeeo, which resulted in twenty deaths total: ten humans, four elves, and six dwarves.

After completing objective, I will return to Xeeo, with Jornan in tow, where the Xeeonite High Court will judge her in accordance with the law. Doubt she will be given a light sentence, considering her long list of crimes, but it is not in my place to speculate about such matters. Only to bring to justice those who have broken the law.

I stand on top of an abandoned building in Ra-Dela's southern edge, where few people live. Sensors indicate that, through the hard wood ceiling of the warehouse, that Jornan is directly beneath my feet. Jornan is also a witch, which is how I locate her in the first place. My sensors pick up a skyras energy spike coming from this warehouse. The spike lasted thirty-six seconds, but that had proven to be more than enough time for me to confirm its source.

Daylight is low. Sun is setting in the east, making visibility difficult. Night vision senses activating, but will not receive full usage of them until the sun goes down completely. If warehouse lacks interior light, I may be able to use this earlier; if not, I will survive.

Paralysis repulser blaster—PRB for short—is at 98% power. It should have been 100%, but Portals always take a fraction of a machine's overall energy levels whenever a machine such as myself travels through them. Ninety-eight percent will work, though I must not get cocky, because Jornan is still a threat with her skyras rings, which have unknown magical properties.

Perform a quick run-down of my various programs.

Connection to Database: Lost, as the Database does not have a server in Dela. Have to rely on mobile Database, which is housed in my memory unit, though due to storage capacities is far more abridged than the full Database. Mobile Database files are 10.0.2, which means they are up to date, as 10.0.2 is the latest update for the mobile files.

Arms and legs are fully functional, though left knee squeaks slightly. Quickly fix with tiny droplets of oil from finger, but make note to bring knee to the attention of one of the certified technicians back in HQ after I return to Xeeo. My quick fix will do for now.

Optics are not obscured. Zoom in feature—which allows me to see two dwarves arguing in a build-

ing on the other side of town—works, as did zoom out feature, which returns my vision to its original size.

Alert! Audio receptors pick up sounds of feet in leather boots coming up behind me. I whirl around, aiming my PRB, only to see that it is my temporary ally in Dela, Sir Alart Garson of the Knights of Se-Dela.

Sir Alart is a tall human specimen, male, wearing typical metalligick armor that all members of the Knights wear. It covers his body from head to toe, with knobs along the shoulders, arms, and chest to allow its user to activate the skyras energy stored in it. Carries a sword by his side, a silver-white one, which I recognize as the best kind of weapon to use to kill a vampire. Quite appropriate, because records indicate that Jornan typically works with vampires and vampires cannot be killed via most normal means.

Unlike most Delanian humans, Sir Alart's left eye is mechanical, a generic type of mechanical eyeball that is popular among those who lost their eyeballs in an accident. Its pupil extends and retracts as he draws closer to me, as if he is trying find the best setting to view the situation.

“You ready for this?” Sir Alart asks. I sense tenseness in his tone.

I nod. “Of course. I have nothing to fear. I have you and the other Knights to aid me should the target prove difficult to catch.”

“And you're also a robot,” Sir Alart points out. “Which means you can't feel fear at all, right?”

Again, I nod. “That is correct, Sir Alart. All emotions are foreign to me, though I've found I don't need them in order to be an effective law enforcer.”

Sir Alart shudders, as if I had just said something disturbing, though my reference files for human social interaction do not indicate I misspoke. “I just can't imagine it. Ruthlessly enforcing the law, without any sort of mercy or kindness behind your actions. Makes me glad we Knights are mostly organic.”

Despite my lack of emotion, I begin to question just how useful an ally Sir Alart is. Most Delanians are so afraid of robots like myself that they do not talk even this much to me; even so, Sir Alart does not appear to like me that much. He seems to view our alliance the same way that the street cleaners of Xeeon view their job: an unpleasant task that needs to be completed quickly.

Were I a human, I might be offended by that; however, I am not a human. It doesn't matter to me if Alart considers me his best friend or not. What matters is that we are both law enforcers who, with luck and skill, are about to put an infamous criminal who has terrorized both of our worlds for decades behind bars.

Nonetheless, I ask, “Are the rest of the Knights in position, in accordance with the plan?”

“Every last one of them,” Alart confirms. He gestures with his hands at the area surrounding the buildings. “They'll strike like cobras as soon as they see the signal.”

“Excellent,” I say. “They have the communicators I gave them?”

Alart grimaces. He pulls a tiny, handheld radio from his armor and waves it in front of me. “Yes. And they all know how to use these infernal contraptions, too, so you don't have to worry about anyone messing up.”

“Good,” I say, “though I notice you sound less than enthusiastic about these devices.”

Alart puts his away as he says, “Because they're unnatural. The way we Knights usually remain in contact in situations like this, we either have a portal monkey to deliver handwritten notes to each other

or develop a series of bird calls we can use to signal our positions to each other without giving our position away to the enemy or some other signal that only we would recognize.”

“Both methods sound inefficient to me,” I remark. “But it does not matter. I see that we are both armed and ready to go, so why don't we head down and find out what kind of party Jornan is throwing?”

I wait for Alart's response, but the Knight simply stares at me as if my head had popped off its sprockets and rolled at his feet.

“Was that ... a joke?” says Alart in disbelief. “From you?”

I nod and smile. “Yes. It was funny, wasn't it?”

“It was ...” Alart seems to struggle with finding the appropriate words to criticize my humor. “Why did you tell a joke? I thought bots like you didn't have a sense of humor.”

“We normally don't,” I explain. “But the Xeeon City Government has been making a concerted effort to 'humanize' us J bots, because they are starting to think that our normal robotic selves are frightening to the citizenry.”

“Uh, okay,” says Alart. “But—”

“To achieve this goal, I have been downloading many electronic books on humor so I can become the funniest robot in all of the two worlds,” I continue (because I feel it is important for him to understand completely what I am doing to achieve this goal). “I have downloaded books by such famous Xeeonite comedians as 'Mad-Hammer' Hagan and 'Master of Comedy' Killan. I have learned the secrets of humor from their books; in fact, Hagan's book is titled *Secrets of Humor*, appropriately enough.”

Sir Alart shakes his head in exasperation. “I've never heard of either of those two comedians, but whatever. Let's just do our job. You can joke later, after we've busted Jornan and her cronies.”

“An excellent suggestion, Sir Alart,” I say. I tap the side of my head. “But may I suggest that you take your attitude and sell it to the Attitude Store on Sixth street? Because I hear you can make good money doing that.”

Sir Alart glares at me. “What did I say about joking?”

“That joke was from Hagan's *Secrets of Humor*,” I explain, because I can see that Sir Alart clearly did not 'get' the joke, as most comedians say. “Chapter three, under the section 'Jokes You Can Tell Jerks Who Can't Take a Joke.’”

“I liked you better when I thought you were just another stiff robot,” said Sir Alart. He rests his sword on his shoulder, turns, and walks to the entrance leading from the roof of this building into the interior.

I follow quickly, but do not make any more jokes. This is partly because this is not the situation to be joking around in, but also because I now wonder if I 'botched' the joke, as the books say. Perhaps I need more practice, which the books say you should do if you want to become a great comedian. I have no aspirations to become a comedian—I much prefer law enforcement—but I resolve to tell better jokes nonetheless.

Sir Alart opens the door and peeks inside, even though I could just as easily have told him that there is no one in there thanks to my sensors failing to pick up any signs of life. Still, he pulls his head out and says to me, “It's safe,” before disappearing within.

The door almost closes itself behind him, but I catch it with one hand and enter. We stand in a dark,

narrow room, with holes in the walls, ceiling, and floor from years of neglect. My optics catch a tiny spider of undetermined species crawl into a hole on the floor, but I do not allow myself to be distracted by that, because Sir Alart and I are in the enemy territory now, which means that we have to be on high alert at all times to avoid being taken by surprise.

The ceiling is low enough that Sir Alart must crouch to avoid scraping the top of his helmet against it. I do not need to, but I do so anyway in order to avoid giving our enemies less of a visible target. Though I doubt that our enemies could harm me much; aside from Jornan, the rest of her minions do not seem to have any skyras rings of their own, which means they likely rely on old-fashioned weapons like swords and cudgels and knives, weapons that pose a tiny threat to robots like myself.

We soon emerge onto one of the two catwalks extending across the ceiling of the warehouse. We do so very slowly, because both of us are heavy, Sir Alart due to his armor, I due to being constructed entirely out of metal. We manage to make very little noise as we walk across it, but I am prepared to fight the moment someone notices us; though our keeping silent isn't entirely necessary, because below us come the loud—almost too loud—conversations of Jornan and her minions even before we see them.

Her minions are mostly dwarves, which is why my audio receptors pick up such loud and hostile tones, as my records say that dwarves generally speak in gruffer tones than most Delanian species.

“Come on, come on,” says a woman's voice, which I quickly match with the audio file of Jornan's I have downloaded into my memory. It is harsh and impatient, which is a good description of the witch in general. “You dwarves are so slow. We need to get this shipment of super speed out *tonight*, and if you idiots don't get all of this packed and through the Portal soon, we'll miss our deadline and the Founder will be beyond angry.”

I understand most of what she says—for example, super speed is a Delanian drug that is popular on both Xeeo and Dela and is smuggled between worlds by a variety of criminal gangs. Jornan has been known to work alongside the Red Ring Smugglers to help smuggle the drug between the worlds, though I had thought she was going to try to keep low after the busting of her earlier vampire feeding ring. Then again, Xeeonite psychologists often say that criminals usually return to crime quickly because they have made a habit of it.

I also understand the reference to the Portal. Xeeo and Dela are connected by thousands of Portals that allow individuals from both worlds to travel between them. Most Portals are overseen by the governments of both worlds; however, it is common among criminals to have their own illegal Portals that they use to commit all sorts of crimes. That Jornan and her minions have one—possibly more, as most criminals generally have anywhere from two to as much as fifty, depending on the size of the criminal operation in question—surprises me not in the least.

The reference to the Founder, however, makes no sense to me at all. I do a quick search of the mobile Database files, but find no reference in Jornan's bio of any being named 'the Founder.' Possibly a hitherto unknown partner-in-crime? Unknown.

I glance at Sir Alart and whisper, “Founder?”

But Sir Alart shakes his head. “No idea. Keep listening.”

I nod as we continue to walk along the catwalk. As it turns out, there is some light in this place; on the floor, near a dozen empty old crates, are portable floodlights that show a sight I had expected to see.

There are at least a dozen dwarves in all, hauling large crates full of super speed in pairs through a

larger-than-normal Portal. The Portal appears to be a custom design, possibly made by Jornan herself, because it does not match any Portal design I know of; however, it may actually be an older, discontinued model, because it has a thick layer of dust over it, as if it has not been cleaned or used in a long time. Bluish-white energy crackles within it as dwarves enter and exit it in an orderly manner that prevents the dwarves entering from bumping into the dwarves leaving. A short wooden ramp allows the dwarves to climb up to or down from the Portal easily. I see no power source, though if my readings are correct, I suspect that this Portal has skyras energy coursing through it.

Standing ten feet from the Portal is Jornan ah Kona herself. I snap a picture of her face and compare it to a picture from the mobile Database files. The two look the same: Pale, almost sickly skin, with blackened, rotted teeth from too much super speed usage. Her hair is stringy and graying already, even though her files indicate she is in her late thirties.

I peer over the side of the catwalk to get a better look at Jornan. Though she is not walking, her body shakes and shivers as she watches her minions move the super speed drugs through the Portal to wherever they are sending them. Another common symptom of super speed over-usage is that the user's body shakes uncontrollably, though I do not take that to mean she is weak. On the contrary, records indicate that Jornan is a master witch, as she has ten rings on all of her fingers, which is five more than the typical Delanian witch or wizard has.

Jornan has her hands on her hips, tapping her foot against the floor impatiently. Her men are clearly moving as fast as they can, but dwarves, due to their height and weight, cannot move very fast. That is good news for us, because it will be that much easier for the Knights and I to capture these criminals once we begin the attack.

“By Waran-Una's name, you dwarves have to be the slowest dwarves I've ever had the displeasure of working with,” Jornan snaps. She points sharply at the Portal. “Go faster, faster, faster, or do you think you can just take it nice and easy, as if we *don't* have a deadline to meet? If we don't get all of this super speed delivered on time, none of us get paid a cent. Do you hear me? Not one cent.”

None of Jornan's dwarves respond, but I suspect it's less to do with not having anything to say and more having to do with their fear of her. Mobile Database records indicate, based on the confessions of her arrested ex-partners, that she does not take well to minions who talk back to or disagree with her.

But then one of the dwarves unexpectedly puts down the crate he was lifting and turns to face Jornan. His partner, who lifts the backside of the crate, stares at him in shock and says, with a thick dwarfish accent that even my universal translator has a hard time deciphering, “Rok, what are you doing? Do you expect me to lift this damn crate myself?”

“No,” says the dwarf named Rok, shaking his head. He looks at Jornan and folds his arms over his chest. “I'm just sick of Jornan bossing us around like this. You're treating us like pebbles, even though we're working our hardest.”

“Do you think I care?” says Jornan in exasperation. “Or do you not realize that we have a strict deadline to meet?”

“I just think I'm tired of working for you,” says Rok. He begins listing his grievances off his fingers. “First, you're demanding and unappreciative of our hard work. Second, you never pay us well enough to put up with your crap. And third—”

Jornan raises her right hand before Rok can finish complaining and the ring on her middle finger

glows red. While I am not a Delanian witch or wizard myself, I have done enough research to know that a glowing skyras ring means that it is in use.

As soon as the ring finishes glowing, Rok stops speaking. He stares blankly at nothing for a few seconds, as if something has caught his attention. I look to see what he's staring at, but I see nothing but the floor.

Then Rok begins to hyperventilate and back up. He is so terrified by whatever he sees that he trips over his own feet and falls on his behind, but he keeps crawling away even then. I still see nothing coming after him; his fellow dwarves are simply staring at him in confusion, while Jornan watches with an amused expression on her face.

Then Rok begins screaming, "Get away from me, you beast! Get away, or I'll—"

He doesn't finish his sentence because he then curls into a ball and begins sobbing and kicking at whatever he thinks he sees. He grabs at his long beard and pulls at it, screaming something almost incomprehensible about how the thing wants his beard. One of his fellow dwarves looks away in disgust, but the others continue to watch and stare as if this was the most horrifying thing they have seen in their lives.

I feel no horror at this sight, but I notice Sir Alart's heart rate increase and his sweat going down his temple. I know enough about Sir Alart to know that he dislikes criminals, but apparently he has enough empathy left in him to feel disgusted by this display of horror.

The spectacle is over as quickly as it began. Rok now lays on the floor, panting like he has run ten miles in a minute, while his fellow dwarves stand around and look at each other uneasily, none of them making eye contact with their fallen friend.

Jornan, on the other hand, appears to be the only organic being in the warehouse to be entirely unaffected by Rok's morbid display of fear. Mobile Database records indicate that Jornan has a severe lack of empathy, indicating possible sociopathy, though Xeeonite criminal psychologists disagree.

"What are you idiots staring at?" Jornan snaps at her other minions, who start when they hear her voice. "Get back to work. Rok will be all right in a few minutes. He just needs to take some time to remember why *I'm* the boss and *he* isn't."

Her other minions do not even hesitate to resume working. In fact, they work harder and more efficiently than before, hauling their crates into the Portal quicker than they did earlier. I have never thought that fear to be a great motivator before, but perhaps that is another thing about organic beings that I don't understand.

Then Alart nudges me and I look at him. He holds his communicator up and says, "Think it's time to attack?"

I nod. "Yes. We will take advantage of Jornan having taken out one of her own men for us. It should make it easier for us to defeat the rest."

"All right," said Alart. He raises his communicator up to his mouth and speaks into it, but in a very low tone so neither Jornan nor her minions below can hear us. "Everyone in position, attack now."

We wait for a response from everyone; however, there is no answer, not even from one of the Knights. That is odd. The plan is for everyone to attack as soon as Alart orders them to. That no one responds at all makes no sense.

"Men?" Alart repeats into the communicator, the worry in his voice rising with the tension in his

body. “Sir Yaron? Sir Gako? Is anyone there? Hello? Lady Waya?”

Again, there is no response. The communicator is as silent as if it has been turned off, but I know it is active because the green glowing light that signals its activation is on.

Alart looks at me in worry. “What’s going on? J997, do you know what the problem is?”

“Without access to their specific communicators, I cannot say for certain what the problem is,” I explain in a low whisper. “Did you make sure that everyone’s communicator was on?”

“I did,” says Alart in annoyance. “I double-checked to make sure that everyone had their communicators on. And yes, before you ask, I made sure they all knew how to use them as well.”

“I will try connecting with them,” I say. “I know the frequency their radios are tuned to, which is a frequency I have access to.”

I go silent, concentrating on connecting to the Knights. Searching ... searching ... searching ... connection fails.

“Hmm,” I say. “Perhaps there is something in this warehouse that is blocking radio signals. It is likely magical, whatever it is, because you Delanians rarely use technology to achieve these kinds of feats.”

“Does that mean we’re on our own?” says Sir Alart. He swears. “Let’s retreat. Head back out onto the roof and try to contact everyone again. Maybe the roof is somehow blocking the signal. We can do that because no one even knows we’re here yet, so we technically still have the element of surprise on our—”

He is cut off when the catwalk we are on shakes under our feet. We both grab the bars, but it is useless because in the next moment, the catwalk falls out from under our feet. Sir Alart falls, but I try to activate the jets in my feet to keep afloat, although as Sir Alart falls he grabs onto my ankles and we both fall to the floor below.

Sir Alart hits the floor before I do, and I land on top of him. Sir Alart groans under me, while I look around in time to see Jornan’s dwarves surround us, drawing out their weapons; small battle hammers, double-bladed axes, and bronze knuckles. None of those weapons are very high-tech; however, there are enough of those dwarves surrounding us that they do not need high-tech weapons to kill us.

Sir Alart and I scramble to our feet, drawing our own weapons out to defend ourselves, even though I run the numbers and realize that we cannot defeat them all on our own. We stand back-to-back, carefully watching the growling and angry-looking dwarves who look more than ready to kill us.

Jornan walks up at that moment, just outside of the dwarf circle, holding up one of her rings, a blue one, which glows softly in the dark warehouse.

“Did you two honestly believe I didn’t expect you Knights to try to track me down?” asks Jornan in an amused voice. “Or that I wouldn’t ruin your surprise by using one of my rings to make the catwalk fall apart under you? I’m not that much of an idiot, though I will admit that I didn’t expect you to have brought along one of those stupid J bots from Xeeo with you.”

“Did you also block off our communicators?” asks Sir Alart, brandishing his silver-white sword at the dwarves, though it only drives them back temporarily, because they then return to their original positions, looking angrier than ever.

“That I did, Sir Knight,” says Jornan as she stops just outside of our circle of dwarves. She raises all ten of her rings and flexes her fingers. “It was a simple task, casting a spell that blocks all communica-

tion between here and the outside, but sometimes the simplest spells are the best, wouldn't you say?"

"Miss Jornan, you are still under arrest," I respond, resting my finger on the trigger of my PRB. "You and every dwarf here are under arrest for the illegal possession and smuggling of super speed drugs."

"J997, is that really what we should be focusing on at the moment?" asks Sir Alart. "Not, you know, figuring out how to survive against these criminals when we're so badly outnumbered?"

"Your Knight friend has a good point," says Jornan. "We know that we are all going to jail if we get caught. That's why I am going to have my men here take you two apart piece by piece."

She gestures at her dwarves and snaps, "What are you idiots standing around wasting time for? Kill these two and make it quick. We don't have time to waste killing these fools, as fun as it would be to drag out their deaths."