

Chapter 1

Date: Loday, third day of the week, Gogoth 10th, 3050 XE, 3050 DE

Time: 7:32 PM XST (Xeeon Standard Time), 7:32 AM DST (Delanian Standard Time)

Location: Xeeon, one of the seven city states situated between the Dead Lands and the rest of Xeeo, and the most well-known and populous of them. Population: Three million. Current Mayor is Xacron-Ah, who has reigned over the city for six years. Protected by the J Series Law Enforcement Robots, which were designed and built by Annulus Robotics, Inc.

Objective: Kidnap Mayor Xacron-Ah and take him back to the Foundation's current temporary headquarters for further interrogation.

Status: Power level at 90%.

I stand on the top of one of Xeeon's massive skyscrapers. The sky is quite dark at the moment, but the city itself is alive with lights. Massive telescreens play ads for products such as the new Intelligent Arm Buddy, as well as news reports from the major Xeeonite news stations and even news from Dela. The streets are full of hundreds of people, who despite the time of night appear as lively and awake as ever.

I do not stand in the open, however; instead, I stand behind one of the electronic billboards built directly into the skyscraper's roof. I do this because I am trying to avoid the searching optics and sensors of my fellow J bots, who soar through the sky or stand watch on top of other buildings. There aren't many out at the moment—they probably do not expect any trouble tonight—but I must remain hidden nonetheless. I wish to join them, but I am aware that returning to my fellow officers would cause more harm than good at the moment, especially if they knew what I am about to do.

As for why they have not sensed me yet, that is because Konoa, one of the Foundation's agents, disabled my connections to the Database and my fellow J bots when he repaired me two and a half weeks ago. I cannot activate the communication channels between me and my fellow J bots or between me and the Database even if I want to.

But it is not merely my own tech preventing me from communicating with my fellow J bots. Leaning against the back of the electronic billboard, her arms crossed over her chest, is the female elf known as Lanresia. On the index finger of her right hand, she wears a black skyras ring that is cloaking us from the sensors of my fellow J bots. I know it works because when she tested it on herself back on Dela, I tried to scan for her presence but failed to find her, even though she had only been standing a few feet away from me at the time.

In contrast to my passive demeanor, Lanresia appears restless and afraid. She constantly rubs her skyras ring, every now and then peeking out from around the billboard to see if she can spot Konoa, although I doubt she can see much with those thick, dark goggles strapped over her eyes. She does not say anything, probably because her speaking snake is deactivated, curled around her waist like a belt, so she cannot speak to me at all.

Not that I am complaining. Our current mission requires as much silence as we are able to create. Speaking is unnecessary; after all, we already spent the past day going over every last detail of the plan.

I can recite the entire plan by memory, although I suppose that isn't impressive, seeing as we J bots tend to have picture perfect memory in comparison to organics.

The only reason we have not yet moved from behind the large billboard is because we are awaiting the sign from Konoa. Back on Dela, during the planning stages of this kidnapping, we agreed on a signal for Konoa to give us when it is our turn to move. So far, Konoa has not given us the okay, although I am not disturbed, because we have received no sign so far that Konoa has run into any unexpected problems. He should be giving us the signal any minute now.

As I stand here, I go over the plan in my head, despite having gone over it several times with Lanresia, Konoa, and the Head. Still, we have nothing better to do at the moment, so I feel that it is wise to go over the plan in case there are any problems in it that we somehow missed in the planning stages. Then again, if there are any issues, it is almost certainly too late by now to go back and correct them.

Our ultimate goal is to defeat Reunification, that secretive organization which has the goal of 'reuniting' Dela and Xeeo. In order to learn more about how Reunification is progressing in their goal—which we know very little of due to having no spies within the organization to relay their plans to us—we have decided to kidnap the most well-known and high-profile member of Reunification: Mayor Xacron-Ah.

According to the Foundation, Xacron-Ah's primary job, from what they have gathered, is to keep non-members of Reunification from entering the Dead Lands and accidentally discovering Reunification's operations out there. He uses his authority as the Mayor to enforce laws preventing Xeeonite citizens and even foreigners from entering the Dead Lands.

Therefore, we believe that Xacron-Ah will be able to tell us quite a bit about Reunification. He has been seen in contact with the Leader of Reunification, a woman called Kiriah, which is a good sign that he will be able to offer us valuable intelligence if we can get him.

Our plan, then, is to break into the Mayor's Mansion—a building only a block away from our current position—kidnap Xacron-Ah, and then take him to our current base of operations, where we will then interrogate him for the information we need.

As for how we plan to do that, it is simple. Konoa will start a riot in the streets of Xeeon, which will force the majority of the J bots in the vicinity to try to contain it. While they are distracted by the rioting, Lanresia and I will go to the Mayor's Mansion and break through its security forces, kidnap Xacron-Ah himself, and then leave, hopefully before my fellow officers succeed in ending the riot and returning to check on the Mayor.

In fact, the whole reason I am even here is because I have detailed knowledge of the Mayor's Mansion. I have never served on Xacron-Ah's personal security force; however, the mobile Database stored in my memory contains a map of the Mayor's Mansion, as well as knowledge of the other security measures put in place to keep him safe. By using my knowledge, we should have little trouble breaking into the Mansion and kidnapping Xacron-Ah, assuming nothing goes wrong.

Even though I understand that this is all for the greater good, my programming makes me want to rebel against it. Defending Xacron-Ah's life is one of the few specific commands directly coded into our AI. We are not supposed to kidnap or hurt him in any way, because he is the Mayor, and the Mayor is considered an even higher authority than the Database among us J bots.

Furthermore, I find the idea of intentionally starting a riot to be legally questionable. As a J bot, it is

my duty to stop or prevent riots from breaking out, not to be an accomplice to one. Under ordinary circumstances, I should arrest Konoa and Lanresia both and put them in the Xeeon City Prison, where they will await their trial in the courts.

But right now, I must put aside the law in order to protect it. Even I understand that it is more important to stop Reunification than it is to enforce the law. Besides, if I return to my fellow officers, I will likely be scrapped, as I was framed for the murders of several Knights, which makes me a liability for the J bots as a whole.

Yet when I look at the roof of the Mayor's Mansion—which peeks out over one of the nearby buildings—I find it hard to resist my programming, which tells me to defend the building from those who want to kidnap him. It is a strong ... not exactly a feeling, because we J bots do not have 'feelings' of any sort. It is a command, one that I find difficult to ignore, though I manage it nonetheless.

Lanresia, on the other hand, does not seem to be suffering from the internal strife I am. She only appears worried because she is afraid of my former fellow officers finding and arresting us. She has not told me that, but I can tell, because they are currently the only real threat to our plan.

I have no words of comfort for her, seeing as I do not know how to comfort someone. I consider telling another joke from *Secrets of Humor*, but then decide that it is better to keep silent and not accidentally draw the attention of the law enforcers to us with a joke that she will probably not even laugh at. That is the reason, as far as I can tell, why the Foundation agents I have met do not find my humor appealing; it is Xeeonite humor and they are Delanians, which means that their sense of humor is different from mine, although that does not help me find out exactly what they find humorous and what they don't.

Lanresia, peering around the side of the billboard again, suddenly gestures for me to look around with her. As silently as I can, I walk over to her side and peer around the billboard, though at first I do not understand what she wants me to look at.

Then I see Konoa standing on top of a parked hover vehicle. He is wearing a looser, hood-like skull mask to hide his identity, along with a pair of dark goggles over the eye holes, which I consider unnecessary because his face is not in the Database. Then again, I suppose Konoa probably wishes to stay out of the Database as much as he can, so wearing a mask to hide his identity makes sense.

None of the Xeeonians in the streets appear to take notice of him at first, likely because he has not drawn attention to himself yet, although a handful of human teenagers point and snicker at his mask (they probably think it looks ridiculous). Even my fellow J bots do not stop to demand he show his ID, although that may be because he is not behaving in any illegal manner yet.

Then Konoa raises a large, round object in his hand: a blind bomb. I recall Konoa saying that he is going to use a blind bomb to start the confusion, so I am not surprised to see it. I do wonder where he found such a large one, however, considering most blind bombs are only large enough to fit inside the average human fist.

Lanresia's speaking snake uncurls from around her waist and rises up by her head. Its glowing eyes are looking at Konoa as it says, "Ready, J997?"

I nod and whisper, "Affirmative."

"All right," says Lanresia, her voice as low as mine. "I am going to send Konoa a message telling him to throw the blind bomb now. Just be ready to run for the Mansion as soon as it goes off."

“I am always ready,” I say. “And do not worry about getting past Xacron-Ah's security systems; I will handle that when we get there.”

“Good,” says Lanresia. “Now I am sending this message to Konoa. Once he gets it, he will—”

Lanresia is interrupted when Konoa hefts the large blind bomb and tosses it directly into the center of the loud, busy streets of Xeeon. As soon as the blind bomb lands in the streets, it explodes, creating a massive blinding light that is immediately followed by the terrified and confused screams of the people.

I, however, am not blinded by the light, because I activate the darkening filters on my optics to prevent the blind bomb from damaging them. This allows me to see the J bots soaring from all around the nearby skyscrapers, trying to restore peace and order to the now confused mass of citizens running around and screaming in the streets below. I spot Konoa making a break for it, going in the opposite direction of the Mayor's Mansion, causing several officers to fly after him immediately. Smart move. It means my former fellow officers will be less likely to notice Lanresia and I as we make our way to the Mayor's Mansion.

Lanresia grabs onto my shoulders and I fly us both down to the alleyway between the building we stood on and the one next to it. As we touch the streets, I find it hard to ignore the screams and sounds of rioting in the streets behind us, but I focus my attention solely on our mission, which will matter more in the long run than stopping this riot.

Once Lanresia lets go of my shoulders, the two of us run down the alley, which is completely abandoned. There are not even any beggars here, which is good, because the fewer people who see us, the better.

In less than a minute, we arrive at the area behind the Mayor's Mansion. It is a large building—not quite as large as the skyscrapers that tower it, but large enough—that looks antiquated compared to the rest of the city, which makes sense, seeing as the Mayor's Mansion is older than the rest of Xeeon, having been built by the first settlers of this region fifty years ago or so. Removing my darkening filter (which is no longer necessary, thanks to the light from the blind bomb having gone away) allows me to see that the Mansion has a large dome rising from the center, while four turrets rise from every corner.

The Mayor's Mansion is surrounded by an electric fence on all sides. The electric fence is strong enough to knock out anyone who tries to touch it and can shorten out any electrical gadgets used on it. Even we J bots are not entirely immune from its effects, which is why I am careful to keep my distance.

I see none of my fellow J bots around, but Lanresia and I keep to the shadows anyway. The Mayor's Mansion has security cameras affixed to the outside, which means that it is impossible to enter without being seen. Even simply walking by the Mansion's fence unseen is impossible, because the security cameras are always on and constantly filming everyone and everything that comes near the Mansion's vicinity. If the cameras see us as we try to break into the Mansion, they will send an automated alert to Database to send officers to arrest us, and our entire plan will fall apart.

Other security hazards include motion sensors in the garden around the Mansion, as well as an electric grid running underneath the ground to electrocute any trespassers who somehow make it past the fence. It is quite the well-defended area.

But we are not going to climb or even fly over the fence. That will be too obvious and will ruin the plan before it even passes phase one.

Instead, I bend over and remove the manhole cover on the street near us. Lanresia wrinkles her nose

when she looks down it, likely smelling the waste below (which I am unable to, as J bots are not designed with noses or the ability to smell anything). Still, she climbs down the ladder anyway, and I follow suit, pulling the cover over our heads as soon as we are both inside.

We are going down into the sewers because the Mayor's Mansion has a secret escape route connected to them. No one knows about this secret escape route outside of the Mayor himself and us J bots; in fact, even many of us J bots are ignorant of its existence. I only know of it because I was once chosen to protect the Mayor and given this information, but then it was decided that someone else would do a better job as a bodyguard than I would. I was allowed to keep the information in case of an emergency, although I am not quite sure that this is what the Database was thinking of when it told me that.

The files state that this secret escape route is only to be used if Xeeon is under attack and it is unsafe for the Mayor to escape above ground. If the Mansion's teleporters are broken, the secret escape route leads to a teleporter that will take the Mayor out of Xeeon and to wherever he needs to go in order to be safe.

Lanresia reaches the bottom first. A couple of seconds later, I am standing by her and using my built-in night vision to look at our surroundings.

I have only been down in the sewers of Xeeon a handful of times, so I am not as familiar with their layout as I should have been. They are dark, with dirty water and waste flowing down the center from wherever they come from. I see turned-off lights on the walls, but I have no way to activate them. Lanresia and I stand on the raised edges of the sewers, which appear to go down quite a ways, although the exact length is irrelevant to the plan, so I don't think about it.

Lanresia looks quite sick, because her face is turning green and she has her hands over her stomach. Still, she is not complaining, although I wonder if her sickness might harm us. I hope not, but it is too late to send her back now and I do not have any medicine to help calm her stomach.

According to the mobile Database, we need to walk straight ahead. I lead this time, because I am the only one of us who has an idea of what to expect ahead. Lanresia follows me, but she is so light on her feet that even my advanced audio receptors do not always pick up the sounds of her footsteps.

I walk forward without any reservation, despite the darkness of the sewers. I do this because I know that the secret escape route has no security in it at all—no cameras, no J bots, nothing; this is due to its secrecy. Because no one knows about it, the Mayor thought it is unnecessary to add extra security measures. That is why it will be easy for Lanresia and me to use this route. Assuming all goes well, we should have the Mayor out of here with little trouble.

“J997?” says Lanresia behind me, her voice a whisper. “Did you hear that?”

I stop and look over my shoulder at Lanresia. Her pointed elvish ears are twitching, a sign that she is trying to hone in on a particular sound that she hears. Her facial expression is still quite sick, although she looks like she is trying to concentrate hard on whatever it is she is listening for.

“Hear what, Lanresia?” I ask. “My audio receptors do not pick up anything down here.”

Lanresia frowns. “It sounded like claws scraping against brick. And ... something swimming in the waste water.”

I increase the volume of my audio receptors to see if I can hear that same sound. My audio receptors pick up nothing at first, but then I hear something swimming in the dirty water flowing through the

center of the sewers. I peer at the water, but it is so thick with waste that I cannot see through it at all.

“What is it?” Lanresia asks, her voice more than a little worried.

“I cannot see it,” I say. “It may simply be a sewer dweller, which is a type of lizard that exists in the sewers of Xeeon and other cities. They are usually harmless, content to swim in the dirty water and waste that flows down here, and do not care to attack anything that does not pose an immediate threat to them.”

Lanresia sighs. “Oh, that's good. I thought it might be something worse.”

“We have nothing to fear down here,” I say, shaking my head and turning away from the waste water. “Nothing at all. The sewers are abandoned even by the city's homeless. No one ever comes down here, aside from sewage workers and maintenance crews, so I believe we will be just fine. We must continue going forward until we find the secret entrance to the Mayor's Mansion.”

Lanresia nods, but then she looks at the wall to our right and jumps. “What is that?”

I look at what she has seen. The wall at first looks as slimy and greenish as the rest of the tunnel does, but upon further inspection, I see a dried coating of blood on the wall. Sensors indicate that it is human blood, although when I run a sample through the mobile Database, it does not match any known Xeeonian citizen's blood. This is probably due to the blood's age, as well as the bacteria of the sewer that has no doubt mixed with it.

But it is not just a little blood; it is a lot of blood. It is almost like a second coat of paint. That is indeed strange, but when I look around, I do not see any bodies that the blood could have come from, which makes me wonder where it came from.

“Why is there blood on the wall?” asks Lanresia. She looks like she wants to run, but to her credit, she does not. “What is going on down here?”

“I do not know for certain,” I say. “There should not be any blood down here at all. To my knowledge, the only organic beings to have ever been down here were the original workers who built this sewer, but the Database does not record any of them dying.”

“I don't like this,” says Lanresia. “Let's just hurry on and find the—”

Lanresia is interrupted by the sound of water splashing behind us. I whirl around in time to see a large, humanoid-like lizard creature bursting from the waste water, its open maw revealing row upon row of deadly teeth, its sharp claws extended out before it.

Before I can react, the lizard humanoid grabs me and pulls me back into the waste water with it. I hear Lanresia scream behind me as that happens, but I am unable to respond and her scream is cut off the moment my head goes beneath the surface of the water.

In the waste water, I am unable to see anything due to the thick sewage and waste in my optics. Sensors indicate, however, that the lizard humanoid—which must be one of the same creatures that attacked the Foundation's Delanian and Xeeonite branches two and a half weeks ago—is holding me tight and biting at every part of my body it can reach.

I try to fight back by punching and kicking at the creature, but my body is not designed to fight underwater; therefore, my attacks are weak and ineffective. The lizard humanoid, however, must have been designed to fight here, because it has no trouble at all attacking me through the thick sludge and waste all around us.

Its attacks do not hurt, but I doubt it will be long before it tears through my armor and succeeds in

damaging my internals. Therefore, I must end this fight quickly and reunite with Lanresia; although my resolve to end this fight quickly does not make the lizard humanoid fight any less viciously.

But then I remember my electrical barrier, which, if I choose to activate it, will electrocute the lizard humanoid and probably kill it. But I hesitate to do so underwater, because it might end up short-circuiting me as well.

Instead, I activate my laser vision, firing twin beams at the lizard humanoid biting at me. My lasers strike it in the neck, causing the lizard humanoid to let go of me in response. I then kick at it as hard as I can, making contact with its chest, and then activate my boosters to allow me to rocket out of the water quickly.

Bursting through the surface of the waste water, I almost fly into the low ceiling of the escape tunnel before I succeed in stopping myself. Then I hear Lanresia's cry and look to my right to see what is happening to her.

She is surrounded on both sides by a couple of lizard humanoids, although the creatures are keeping their distance from her because she is firing her laser gun at them. She does not hit them, probably because her fear is affecting her aim, but so far she does not appear wounded by them, which is good.

I aim my eye lasers at them, but before I can fire, there is a splash below and the lizard humanoid I fought in the waste water bursts out and grabs onto my ankles. The sudden change in weight throws off my balance and almost causes me to be dragged down back into the water.

But then I put more power into my boosters, sending out large flames that burn the lizard humanoid's hands. It roars in pain and lets go, falling back into the water with a splash, while I regain my balance and look at Lanresia's situation again.

She fires her laser gun at the lizard humanoids, but her aim is poor, likely due to her fear and the darkness overriding her rational senses. The lizard humanoids have no trouble dodging her blasts and are about to attack her, prompting me to fly down toward her as fast as I can.

I land on the concrete floor and then lash out with a kick aimed at one of the lizard humanoids. My foot connects with its jaw, sending it staggering backward from the impact, and then I follow it up with a laser blast from my eyes, striking it in the heart. My lasers cut a black, bloody hole in its chest, causing the lizard humanoid to collapse onto the floor instantly.

Then I turn my attention to the second one, which is standing back as if to analyze me. Lanresia, who is behind me, points her laser gun at it, but before she can pull the trigger and shoot, the lizard humanoid opens its mouth and unleashes a stream of fire at us.

I knock Lanresia down and then step forward to take the brunt of the blast. The flames bathe over me, but I do not feel the heat. However, my internal thermometer says that my temperature is rapidly rising, even with my external cooling shields activating to prevent my exterior from being melted. Even so, the flames are hot enough that I know I must end this quickly before they break through my cooling shields and cause serious damage to my exterior.

The flames obscure my optics, but I can easily guess where the lizard humanoid is. I fire twin lasers at it, hear the lasers sizzle against its skin, and then the flames abruptly cut off. At the same time, my exterior temperature rapidly returns to normal, while the lizard humanoid that had been trying to kill me falls dead on the floor. My lasers appear to have gone through its open mouth, which likely means that they hit its brain.

In any case, these two lizard humanoids are dead, but I still sense the third one in the waste water below. I hesitate to go after it, however, because I know how deadly that creature can fight in the water.

Just as I think that, the lizard humanoid splashes out from the water again, roaring like a Great Lizard as it lunges toward me. Without hesitation, I raise my hand and fire a single finger lightning bolt at the creature.

The finger lightning bolt strikes it in the chest, causing it to roar in pain as it is electrocuted. It falls back into the water, splashing up more waste as it does so, but this time, my sensors pick up no signs of life below. That final lightning bolt likely did the trick.

I turn to Lanresia. She is panting hard and looking sicker and more frightened than ever, even though all signs indicate that we are currently safe from any other unexpected threats.

“Those monsters are down here?” says Lanresia, still holding her gun as if the battle is not over. “You said that there weren't any guards down here. Why—”

“I admit to being wrong about that, but the explanation is quite logical,” I say. “The lizard humanoids work for Reunification. Most likely, Xacron-Ah placed them down here in order to more effectively protect himself from possible intruders. I doubt he thought anyone would actually come this way, but he obviously wanted to be safer than sorry.”

Lanresia's eyes flick to the blood-stained wall. “What about the blood, then?”

“I do not know,” I say. “Perhaps someone else came down here—likely a sewer worker, seeing as this is still part of the sewers and no one else knows about this place—and the lizard humanoids attacked and killed him under the mistaken belief that he was a threat to Xacron-Ah's life.”

As I say that, a hat floats by us on the waste water. It appears to me to be the cap usually worn by Xeeon sewer workers, although it is so covered in grime and waste that I cannot tell for sure.

Lanresia shivers. “Those things are so horrible. Just awful.”

I nod. “They are indeed quite terrifying, but there is no reason for us to be afraid. They are all dead, and it is unlikely that there are any more down here, because I doubt Xacron-Ah thought he needed more than that.”

Lanresia holds her gun close to her chest, however. “Maybe, but I'm going to keep my gun out anyway.”

Because I do not expect us to get into any more fights, I find her desire to keep her gun un-holstered rather odd.

I am about to comment on it before I remember that Lanresia has already had terrible experiences with these creatures. She is one of the few survivors of Reunification's assault on the Foundation's Xeeonite branch and is also a survivor of Reunification's attack on the Foundation's Delanian branch. She may even be suffering from some kind of stress disorder, although I again say nothing about it, because aside from this odd (yet understandable) action of hers, she seems to be functioning as normally as ever. Still, I resolve to keep a closer eye on her in case the stress of the situation causes her to break down, however unlikely that may seem at the moment.

With the lizard humanoids out of the way, it only takes us a few more minutes of walking to find the secret ladder leading up to the Mayor's Mansion. The ladder is hidden behind a portion of the concrete wall that resembles every other part of the wall; however, my keen optics spy a cracked part of the wall which resembles a panel. I press my hand against it and the wall slides away, revealing a rather

simple metal ladder leading up into the shadows above.

This time, I go first, because I am better able to handle whatever may await us above than Lanresia is. I doubt we will run into any real problems, however, because this ladder should take us directly to Xacron-Ah's bedroom. Knowing the Mayor's schedule, he should be either asleep or about to go to sleep at this very moment. Xacron-Ah always sleeps alone in his room, so we probably will not run into any guards. Of course, he usually has his bodyguards stationed outside his room, so Lanresia and I will need to be as silent as the Dead Lands once we get there.

It takes us only a couple of minutes of climbing to reach the hatch leading into Xacron-Ah's room. The hatch is normally locked, but I know the secret combination to undo it.

Unfortunately, the hatch is locked from the outside. It is designed to allow someone to *leave* Xacron-Ah's room, not enter it via the sewers. That is why it cannot be unlocked from the inside.

Even this problem is not as insurmountable as it first appears, however. A quick but careful application of my laser vision destroys the lock and allows me to lift it.

But I do not throw the hatch open; instead, I carefully raise it inch by inch. While I doubt Xacron-Ah will notice, seeing as this hatch is carefully hidden in his room, I cannot risk him noticing us before he needs to.

As I lift the hatch, I gradually gain a better view of the room it is in. It is a dark room, not very large, without any lights or any furniture in it. There is a door directly in front of us, however, which should lead us into his closet, which will then lead us into his actual room.

Seeing no one here, I lift the hatch all the way open and climb out. Lanresia follows me and looks happy that we are no longer down there. She still does not holster her gun, however, and when she looks at me, she wrinkles her nose again.

"You smell awful," says Lanresia in a whisper. "Must be the sewage water."

"I do not think it matters," I say. "I can still kidnap Xacron-Ah whether I smell good or bad."

"What if he smells you before we sneak up on him?" says Lanresia. She pinches her nose. "Because when I say you smell awful, I mean *awful*."

"I have no way of cleaning myself off," I say. "But I wonder if your concealment ring can also hide scents."

Lanresia glances at the skyras ring on her finger and says, "I think so, but that requires more skyras usage than normal. I may not be able to maintain it for long."

"You do not need to," I say. "All you need to do is maintain it for a few minutes. That is all the time we will need to kidnap Xacron-Ah."

"If you say so," says Lanresia. "You seem pretty confident about our ability to kidnap him."

"I know neither confidence nor doubt," I say. "As a robot, I know only that I must do what I must do."

"Right," says Lanresia, who has a hint of doubt in her voice. "Well, let's just get going. There's no telling how much time we have before the J bots get that crowd under control and return to their original positions, which will make it harder for us to escape with Xacron-Ah once we catch him."

I nod and walk over to the door in front of us. It is unlocked, allowing me to wave my hand and cause the door to slide open. I find that odd, because I expected it to be locked. Then again, if Xacron-Ah ever needs to make a quick escape, it is probably more practical for him to keep this door unlocked

than locked.

When Lanresia and I step through the doorway, we find ourselves hidden behind rows of large suits, equally-large shirts, and other clothing. The mobile Database says that Xacron-Ah's secret escape route is hidden within his closet, which explains the presence of so many suits hanging in front of us.

Based on the darkness of the closet, the door must be closed; however, when I push aside some of the suits (thus getting some of the waste water on them, although that is unimportant at the moment), I see that the closet door is in fact cracked open just slightly. It appears that Xacron-Ah has failed to close the door for some reason. Then again, I recall that Xacron-Ah is well-known for his sloppiness in minor matters such as this, so this is not surprising.

Still, Lanresia and I push aside his suits as quietly as we can. I do not know if Xacron-Ah is in fact in his room yet or if he is even awake. All I know is that we must be careful nonetheless; this entire plan hinges on our kidnapping Xacron-Ah. If we fail now, it is highly unlikely we will get an opportunity to try this again.

As it turns out, however, Xacron-Ah's closet has more than merely clothes in it. We step over old, forgotten pairs of shoes, cardboard boxes containing objects we cannot see, and other articles of clothing, such as ties and socks. Once we even find a tiny metal ball that hums when you touch it, but thankfully we learn how to turn it off and do so before it can alert Xacron-Ah's attention to his closet.

As we walk closer to the door, I see blue lights flashing through the crack, as well as voices that sound like they are deep in conversation. One of them is Xacron-Ah's deep, rumbling voice; the other is unfamiliar, although if Xacron-Ah's tone is a clue, he is clearly someone with authority over the Mayor.

Enhancing my audio receptors, I listen hard to Xacron-Ah's conversation, gesturing at Lanresia to stop so I can hear him more clearly.

"... yes, Founder, of course," says Xacron-Ah. He sounds worn out, but he is clearly making an effort to hide it. "No, we have had no luck in locating that rogue J bot on Dela. I've been working with Kalcan to find him, but Kalcan says that he can't find him anywhere. On the plus side, we've moved more shipments of super speed from Dela to Xeeo in the past couple of days than we did in all of last month."

I look at Lanresia, who is now staring at me in surprise. It is obvious to us both that Xacron-Ah is talking about me, unless there happens to be another 'rogue' J bot somewhere on Dela who is also working against Reunification.

Even more interesting, however, is his reference to someone with the title 'Founder.' That title can only belong to the mysterious and enigmatic head of Reunification, which means that Xacron-Ah is speaking with him right now; if so, then I may be able to get my first glimpse of the Founder if I am careful.

Gesturing for Lanresia to stay still, I make my way to the cracked door, still listening to the conversation all the while.

"You better find him quick," says the unfamiliar voice, which I believe belongs to the Founder. "I do not like having someone outside of our organization knowing about us and our plans, even if we have discredited his witness by framing him for the murder of those Knights. And I do not care about the drugs, despite the role they will play in the completion of the Mission."

"Yes, Founder, I understand," says Xacron-Ah. "But don't worry. If that J bot ever steps back on

Xeeo and tries to reconnect with the Database, I will be the first to know, and he will be reprogrammed and his memory wiped entirely, if not scrapped outright.”

That does not alarm me, mostly because my lack of emotion makes it hard for me to feel alarmed at anything. Nonetheless, I hear the sincerity in Xacron-Ah's voice, which tells me he fully intends on carrying out that promise should he ever get his hands on me.

Reaching the door, I peer through the crack as carefully as I can, adjusting my optics to see better in the darkness of Xacron-Ah's room.

Due to the thinness of the crack, I cannot see much; however, I can see Xacron-Ah's massive back to me. He appears to be wearing his navy blue suit; unusual, seeing as he is by himself. Then again, it is highly likely that Xacron-Ah is wearing his suit because he just returned from an important political meeting of some sort. Seeing as I do not have access to his personal calendar, I cannot tell for sure.

Due to Xacron-Ah's bulk, it is hard for me to see the Founder, who appears to be a glowing blue hologram projecting in front of Xacron-Ah. I catch a glimpse of a head that appears half-organic, half-mechanical, which is unusual; however, I see nothing else besides that.

“I hope so,” says the Founder. “It would not be good for us if this robot allied with the remnants of the Foundation. I am not afraid of a simple machine; however, I do worry about the Foundation, who have proven themselves time and again to be a thorn in our side.”

“You don't need to worry about anything, Founder,” says Xacron-Ah. “The Foundation is gone. Its twin bases on Xeeo and Dela are destroyed, most of its members are dead, and those few who survived both assaults are scattered and on the run, unable to do anything except try to survive. I even succeeded in having my J bots arrest a few of them, including Kojama himself not more than a few hours ago.”

A tiny, slightly metallic gasp behind me makes me look over my shoulder at Lanresia's speaking snake. Lanresia is standing near me, having somehow moved close to me without me noticing. She looks shocked and terrified, which puzzles me, as I do not know who this 'Kojama' fellow is. She does, apparently, but I decide to ask her more about him later.

“Kojama?” says the Founder. “Interesting. When will you execute him?”

“His execution is scheduled for the morning,” says Xacron-Ah, who sounds proud of himself. “Remember the Jaws massacre that happened a few weeks back?”

“I recollect you telling me about that sometime ago,” says the Founder. “Was not that the regretful day when a mad man entered the area of Xeeon known as 'the Jaws' and killed ten Rathonian immigrants, including three children?”

“Yes,” says Xacron-Ah, nodding his large head, making his dreads fly about. “The J bots did not arrive in time to stop him. The killer is still on the loose; however, I am blaming Kojama for the murders that shocked the city. Since no one knows what the killer's face actually looks like, no one is questioning whether he is indeed the killer or not. We have fabricated evidence to fool the media into believing that he is the culprit, which they've eaten up like cake. About the only thing we've done is make sure that the media doesn't have any picture of him or his name.”

“Why?” says the Founder.

“Our excuse is that we don't want to make a killer famous and thus inspire other killers like him to perform a repeat of the Jaws massacres in order to get that same level of fame,” says Xacron-Ah, who sounds quite proud of himself. “But I'm sure you know the real reasons why I'm doing it.”

“Of course,” says the Founder. “A wise move all around. You not only will kill one of the Foundation's most important members, but you will also do it without alerting the public to either organization's existence. Well done, Xacron-Ah, well done.”

“All for the Mission, Founder,” says Xacron-Ah. “I believe as you do, that anyone who stands in our way must die.”

“That is the truest statement you have made in a long time,” says the Founder. “Now I must let you know that we are closer than ever to completing the Mission. Indeed, I speculate it will only take us a few more days to do so, due to our rapid progress.”

“Wonderful to hear, Found—” says Xacron-Ah, before the Founder interrupts him.

“Which is why I am speaking with you so early in the morning,” says the Founder. His tone becomes harsher. “With the Mission so close to completion at this point, we cannot afford even the smallest of mistakes from any of our agents, including you. Do you hear me?”

Xacron-Ah steps back, even though the Founder is merely a hologram that cannot hurt him. “Why, er, yes, Founder, I understand completely. I have done my best in everything that I do. I would never make a mistake that could cost us the entire Mission.”

“I know how eagerly you believe that,” says the Founder. “But I must repeat it: *Do not make any mistakes*. If you slip up even once, when we are so close to healing the worlds, I will know about it, and you will not live long enough to repeat it, much less regret it.”

Xacron-Ah runs his hand through his locks. “Yes, sir, I understa—”

“You are not important,” the Founder interrupts again. “Remember that your life is insignificant in the long run. You are not so important that I will hesitate to snuff out your insignificant life if you make a mistake. Every step you take, you take on the narrow road, with death awaiting to embrace you on either side of the deep, dark pit you walk over.”

“Yes, sir, of cou—”

“Good,” says the Founder. “Now I believe we have covered everything. I must now go and return to my chambers. As for you, make no mistakes, do not attract any unnecessary attention to yourself, and use whatever force necessary to subdue our enemies.”

Xacron-Ah bows deeply, allowing me a glimpse of the holographic Founder. He wears golden wizard robes and has a half-organic, half-mechanical face. Not entirely unusual, seeing as many Xeeonites have 'two-faces,' as the slang for those types of faces goes, but the Founder's face does not look like a typical two-face.

Then Xacron-Ah rises to his full height again and the Founder is gone from my view once more. “Yes, Founder, sir. I understand. Glory be to the Mission!”

“Indeed,” says the Founder. “If anything comes up, contact Kiriah immediately. At this point, I cannot be distracted by anything less than the most urgent of emergencies. Understood?”

“Yes, Founder sir,” says Xacron-Ah. “I will make certain of it.”

“Very well,” says the Founder. “Assuming all goes well within the next day or so, the next time we see each other, it will be on the healed world, where all is one.”

Then the Founder's hologram vanishes. As soon as it does, Xacron-Ah gasps and staggers back. He puts a hand on his forehead, but with his back to us, I cannot see his face. However, my sensors indicate that his blood pressure is rising fast.

“Oh god,” says Xacron-Ah, panting as though he has run a mile. “Oh god, oh god, how did I get into this? Why, why, why.”

His sudden fear cause me to look at Lanresia. She, however, appears to be thinking too deeply about this 'Kojama' person, whoever he is, to notice Xacron-Ah's odd behavior.

I turn my attention to the crack in the door, watching as Xacron-Ah begins pacing back and forth across his room, disappearing and reappearing in my view every now and then.

“This is deeper than I've ever thought I'd be in,” says Xacron-Ah. He appears to be talking to himself. “I was promised riches and fame and I got that, but god does that man scare me. I'm not even sure he's a man. Just what the hell is he, anyway? Some kind of immortal monster, that's what he is.”

He appears to be talking about the Founder, which puzzles me. He must not be as loyal to the Founder or to Reunification as he appears.

Xacron-Ah stops and begins pulling at his locks, which I recognize as one of his nervous habits, according to the mobile Database's files on him. “Thinks he can boss me around and threaten me. *Me*, Xacron-Ah, Mayor of Xeeon, best former super speed dealer in the world. And then he just blows off the good news about how our shipments are coming along, even though he *told* me to increase productivity. What the hell. Who does he think he is?”

Lanresia moves a little bit closer to the door. She seems to be listening to Xacron-Ah's rambling as well.

Then Xacron-Ah falls to his knees and hides his face in his hands. “Oh god, what if he heard me say that? Of course, he probably didn't. My communicator is off and the room isn't bugged. I made sure of that. No, he can't hear me. Bastard can't hear me at all. Unless he's got some weird magic, but—”

Abruptly, Xacron-Ah is up and pacing again. “About the only good thing that idiot's done for me is help me win this office. Even then, being Mayor isn't all that great. Endless meetings, political scheming among the members of Parliament, stupid people demanding I support this or that law, having to pretend that I give a damn about the people who live in this awful city ... sometimes, I think this is a horrible nightmare that will end if I would only just wake the *hell* up.”

It appears to me that Xacron-Ah must have some kind of mental condition. Possibly the stress of the job is getting to him, although I do not recall ever hearing from the others about this side of the Mayor. His mobile Database files do not mention him being diagnosed with any sort of mental illness, though perhaps he has never seen a psychiatrist about it.

Then Xacron-Ah stops and stomps his foot without warning. “Just brushing off my good report about the drugs ... doesn't he realize that this wouldn't be possible if I wasn't in charge of the city? He's the one who harped on and on and on and *on* to me about the importance of these drugs in distracting the J bots and the general population from the Mission, but now he's acting like it's as trivial as a child's toy? What an idiot.”

Now that is a particular piece of information I had not known. It is true that smuggling and usage of super speed drugs among the population of Xeeon and its surrounding countryside and cities has increased tenfold ever since Xacron-Ah's election to the position of Mayor of Xeeon; however, I did not know that it is because of Xacron-Ah's aid. That certainly explains why Reunification hired a former drug dealer to lead the city.

“I can't handle this,” says Xacron-Ah. He licks his lips and looks at something over his shoulder,

out of sight. “I need my hit. I need it. Gotta calm down. Can't sleep if I'm worried about everything. Nope. Can't.”

He walks out of my line of sight. Then I hear a drawer open, followed by it closing again. Next, I hear Xacron-Ah sitting down on what sounds like a chair and then a low moan of pleasure that I have little trouble recognizing as the moan of an individual who is injecting super speed into his body.

I look at Lanresia. Her hands cover her mouth; her organic mouth, that is. Her speaking snake's mouth is unobstructed.

“Think we should get him now?” says Lanresia, her voice a low whisper, although thanks to my enhanced audio receptors, I still hear her well.

“Wait,” I whisper in return, holding up one hand. “Just wait. Let us wait until Xacron-Ah is too drugged to fight back.”

Lanresia frowns, but nods. “Okay.”

Of course, I do not know how long it will take for Xacron-Ah to do so. Depending on how used his body is to the drug, he might take anywhere from five minutes to several hours before he is knocked out by the drugs. His fatigue should help, however, because it is a well-known fact about super speed that the amount a person uses directly correlates with how tired they feel now.

We stand in his closet, listening closely to Xacron-Ah's moans of pleasure. He seems to have a high tolerance for the drug, because he still sounds like he is aware. This does not surprise me, however, because due to his past as a dealer of the drug, Xacron-Ah's body likely has developed a tolerance for the drug, despite its destructive effects on the human body. Again, the mobile Database does not mention Xacron-Ah having a history of drug usage, but at this point, I expected that, as the mobile Database does not seem to have any useful information on anything anymore.

Then—without warning—a loud *thump* breaks the monotony. Lanresia and I continue to stand here, however, and listen for a couple of more minutes for Xacron-Ah to continue moaning; instead, we hear him snoring loudly.

With a nod at Lanresia, I quickly but carefully push open the closet door. It opens softly against the carpeted floor, making virtually no noise. Once it is open completely, Lanresia and I step into Xacron-Ah's room.

This is the first time I have stepped foot in this place, because we J bots—even Xacron-Ah's bodyguards—are not allowed in here. Therefore, I look around at the room in order to commit it to my memory.

It is a large, wide-open room, almost taking up the entire floor that it is on. The floor has soft elfish carpeting, while the walls have fine oak wood paneling. An entertainment center, with a large black sofa and a hologram projector, takes up the center of the room, while the door to the bathroom is opened slightly on the other side of the room.

Xacron-Ah's bed is about a dozen feet away from us. It is a large bed, appropriate for a man of his size, with red drapes surrounding it. It looks more Delanian than Xeeonite, which makes sense, seeing as Xacron-Ah is a native of Dela and not Xeeo.

But Xacron-Ah is not sleeping on his bed. The Mayor is instead lying on the floor next to his bed, snoring loudly, his arms splayed out. In his right hand is a needle full of the green liquid known as super speed, although 'full' is not the most correct word. It is half-full at best, although that is still far too

much super speed for one human to inject into himself.

In front of Xacron-Ah is a chest of drawers. The top drawer is open, which is no doubt where he kept the needle. I consider digging around inside it to find out what else Xacron-Ah is hiding from us, but then I remember that we have very little time as is and that we need to spend most of that time dragging Xacron-Ah out of here.

Lanresia and I walk up to the unconscious Xacron-Ah, who, aside from his snoring, is not moving at all. I remove the super speed needle from his hand and toss it into the nearest trash can. Then Lanresia and I grab his arms and begin dragging him toward his closet.

Xacron-Ah is a large, heavy man; however, we J bots can lift up to two tons of metal, so dragging him along is not much of a challenge for me. Lanresia, on the other hand, appears to be putting her all into helping. I consider telling her that she does not need to and that I can drag and even carry Xacron-Ah all on my own, but as we are trying to be as quiet as possible, I decide not to mention it.

We have little trouble carrying Xacron-Ah through the open doorway of his closet; however, just to be safe, I close it when we get inside. I doubt anyone will be checking on Xacron-Ah until the morning, by which time we will be long gone; however, I do not want to take any chances.

Kicking aside shoes and other assorted items on the floor of Xacron-Ah's closet, we make our way to the back, where the door to the secret escape route is still open. I find it interesting how close we are to escaping without anyone noticing, but I keep my mouth shut. While I am not superstitious at all, even I have noticed at times how easy it is to 'jinx' oneself, as the Delanians tend to put it.

Considering how important this mission is, I cannot afford to 'jinx' either of us.

When we arrive at the hatch, this is where we meet our first real obstacle. While Xacron-Ah is still sleeping and snoring as soundly as ever, we do not seem to have any easy way to transport Xacron-Ah down it. His bulk should fit through, seeing as the hatch is wide; however, I do not know if I can carry him down myself.

Turning to Lanresia, I ask, "Do you have any idea how we can transport Xacron-Ah down the hatch?"

Lanresia strokes her chin. "We need some sort of platform we could use to lower him down on."

I look around the dark, furniture-less room. "I do not see any platform on hand or even any rope or cables we could use to lower him down with."

Lanresia shrugs. "Then I don't know how we can move him out of here. Unless you think you can hold him over your shoulder while climbing down at the same time?"

I shake my head. "Negative. While I do have the strength necessary to lift up Xacron-Ah, trying to climb down the ladder while supporting him on my shoulder at the same time is impossible."

"I knew it," says Lanresia. She looks at Xacron-Ah in worry. "Then how do we get him out of here? It's not like we can just take the elevator."

I consider the problem logically for a few seconds before a possible solution occurs to me when I glance at the unconscious Xacron-Ah. "I have an idea."

"What is it?" says Lanresia.

"I will show it to you," I say. "Stand back and watch."

Lanresia does as I ask, giving me some room to move. I bend over Xacron-Ah, who is still snoring without end, and shake him gently as I say, in a low voice, "Mayor Xacron-Ah, please wake up. Can

you hear me, Mayor Xacron-Ah?"

Lanresia immediately grabs my shoulder. I look over my shoulder at her and see an alarmed look on both of her faces.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" says Lanresia, her voice still little more than a whisper. "If you wake him up, he'll call in his guards, and the whole plan will be ruined."

"I understand your concerns, Lanresia, but please do not worry," I say, shrugging off her hand. "I know what I am doing. We will not be caught and Xacron-Ah will certainly not call in his bodyguards. Of that, I can assure you."

Lanresia's faces look at me skeptically, but then she steps back and folds her arms across her shoulder. She does not look away, however; instead, she focuses on me with a look that is quite clearly disapproving of my plan, even though she does not yet know what it is.

Turning back to face Xacron-Ah, I gently shake him again, saying, "Mister Mayor, are you awake?"

Then Xacron-Ah's snoring ceases and his eyes flicker open. He looks at me, but I can already tell that the super speed has destroyed his comprehension. His pupils are smaller and his eyes are bloodshot already, while his breath is unsteady.

"Huh?" says Xacron-Ah, staring at me with blank eyes I recognize from many arrests of super speed dealers. "What are you? Where am I?"

"Mister Mayor, you are on your way to a very important meeting with the Xeeon Parliament," I say. "I am waking you up to get you ready to go. It's starting in ten minutes."

Xacron-Ah makes a dismissive grunt and says, "Bah. Those Parliament idiots can jump into the volcanic pits for all I care. Wake me for something important."

Xacron-Ah tries to close his eyes, but I shake him again, causing him to snap, "What is it now?"

"Sir, you have an important date with Kiriah," I say. "It is in ten minutes and I—"

Xacron-Ah sits up so quickly that he almost knocks his head into mine. He looks around wildly and says, "I have a date with her? Where? What time is it? Am I dressed and ready to go?"

I look at Lanresia, who is staring at me in sheer disbelief.

Then I look at Xacron-Ah and gesture at the hatch behind him. "Sir, we can reach the date quickly if we climb down this hatch into the sewers. It is a short cut to the place you agreed to meet her at."

Xacron-Ah staggers to his feet and almost falls into the hatch headfirst before regaining his balance. He then brushes his locks back and says, "How do I look? Do I look good?"

"Perfect, sir," I say. "Now we must leave soon, because Kiriah is waiting."

"Yes, yes, I agree," says Xacron-Ah, nodding. He pats the lip of the hatch. "Down this hatch, right?"

"Right," I say. I gesture at the ladder. "Just watch your step, because it is a long way down and if you fall on your head, that would force you to push back the date again."

"Again?" says Xacron-Ah, staring at me in alarm. "You mean I've missed my date with her before?"

"Yes," I say with as much sincerity as I can. "Several times, in fact. That is why we must hurry; in fact, that is why you told me to wake you up in time for your date today."

"Of course, of course," says Xacron-Ah. "Thank you so much. I should give you a raise and a promotion for all your hard work."

“It is nothing,” I say, ignoring Lanresia's disbelieving stare. “I am only doing what any good servant would do in my situation.”

“Very well,” says Xacron-Ah. “I'll just climb down this ladder, then.”

“I will come with you,” I say. “You might not remember the date's location, so I will lead you there.”

“Thanks,” says Xacron-Ah. “You're a lifesaver. I don't know how I can repay you.”

“Again, it is nothing,” I say. “Now we must hurry, before Kiriah decides you are not going to show up and leaves.”

Xacron-Ah nods and climbs down the ladder far more quickly than a man of his bulk should have been able to. I am about to follow when Lanresia says, “How did you do that?”

I look at Lanresia, who still has her arms folded across her chest. She is looking at me with extreme skepticism, as if I just performed some kind of magic trick that she cannot figure out on her own.

So I say, “One of the effects of super speed over usage is heightened susceptibility. I can effectively make Xacron-Ah do whatever I want simply by suggesting it to him.”

Lanresia shakes her head in amazement. “Why didn't I think of that?”

“I've dealt with super speed dealers and users dozens of times before,” I say. “It's how I learned about it. Now come on. If we let Xacron-Ah get too far ahead of us, we will lose him.”