



## welcome to zantocorp

### a metroplex zero short story

Sometimes, we wish for more than what we need. We so desperately want excitement and change, that we are willing to go to great lengths to get there. Throughout time, humans have grown and adapted through this constant need for change and desire for things out of the norm. Here at Metroplex Zero, things have always been pretty routine. At least for me it is. Everyday I wake up, get ready in my gear and head on over to work. The good thing about being a Patrol Trooper is the fact that I don't have to spend my days stuck at the Novoline building. I headed into the large complex and scanned myself into the building using the retina scanner. My info displayed on the holo-screen and I heard the ever familiar ding followed by the AI receptionists greeting.

"Good morning Trooper Malahki, your assignment will be uploaded to your AR HUD shortly. Please help yourself to the breakfast nook and partake in our wide selection of goods. And have a wonderful day." The AI's voice, though a bit dull, was a nice start to my day. Though I never saw the need for an AI receptionist, there were plenty of people who could do the job.

I let a huff escape my nose as I headed back out. I usually never had breakfast in the Novoline building. I'd rather eat a Herolutions power bar and get on with my day. It had been a while since I had a decent contract. Mostly patrolling the residential complexes of our benefactors or occasionally going out on an investigation. Nothing too major. It had been a while since I'd seen real action. Back when I first started out, you couldn't turn around without getting hit with a job that was life or limb. That all seemed to die out and was replaced by meager jobs.

However, this job seemed a little out of the ordinary. I was hired on by a worker from ZantoCorp to be a guard for a wing of the building. It was pretty strange, usually they hired several people to help guard the whole complex, but they only hired me. I had heard stories about ZantoCorp and I wasn't sure how I felt about them. I had heard rumors that they were secretly experimenting on people and that's part of the reason why they hired so many humans for jobs that AI could easily take care of. but I didn't pay too much mind to that. There was a lot of mystery held in ZantoCorp and that's part of why I looked forward to doing this job. People look at you differently once you step through the doors of ZantoCorp, and the pay they were offering was the most I had seen in a long while.

I arrived at the complex and was greeted by a man at the door. He smiled warmly at me and gave a slight bow to his head.

"Good day sir, welcome to ZantoCorp, how can we help you today?"

"Hello, my name is Trooper Malahki. I'm here to see Miss Loriya. She's hired my services." I handed him a note screen with the info Loriya had sent me. The doorman entered some information on the holo-screen that stood in front of him.

"Ah yes, apparently she's waiting to meet up with you right now. Here you go sir." He proceeded to hand me a small chip. Not bigger than those you find on small cameras or even the memory chip of a holo-screen.

"Head right on in and insert this into the elevator. It will take you to the floor you need to go to. Have a great day." He smiled and held the door open for me as I walked in. Not exactly what I was expecting, but it was rather nice to experience.

The front lobby was large and typical of what you would see in a large corporate complex. It was filled with employees walking in nearly every direction to whatever it was they were doing. It had a breakfast nook and sitting areas and even some virtual projections of various scenes across Metroplex Zero. Several drones with the ZantoCorp logo glided across the complex, some holding small scale holo-screens and others that seemed to be for surveillance. The most prominent feature by far was the massive elevator that stretched to the ceiling and was covered in the ZantoCorp logo. I walked up to the elevator door and placed the chip into the small opening. The door rang and opened. I stepped in and waited as it made some processing noises and began to move upwards towards where I could only guess was the floor I needed to be on.

After a few moments, I arrived on an empty floor. The hallway was long and contained mostly doors leading to what I assumed were offices. I began to walk forward, and I could hear the sound of my footsteps echo across the hall. I wasn't sure where to go; none of the doors had any markers on them, and the hallway seemed to stretch far. I waited in front of the elevator door for a moment before pressing forward. As I walked along the hall, I couldn't shake this uneasy feeling I had in my gut. Like I was being watched. The silence of the halls did nothing to comfort my nerves, and I kept on my guard. After what seemed like forever, I made it to a turn in the hallway.

There were more doors along yet another long hallway. I sighed and looked around. There wasn't anyone in sight. Not a soul. It was strange and I decided to stay put and deploy my critter crawler camera. It popped out of my power suit and began to crawl along the floor. I turned on its live camera and brought it up on my eye scanner and watched as it scouted the halls, there was no one. Just more hallway. As I began to call it back, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Startled, I turned around and got into a defensive position. There in front of me, stood a woman. I pulled out my titanium nanoblade katana and kept my stance.

"Identify yourself! Now!" I spoke sternly. How could this woman appear behind me without making any noise? She stood there for a moment. Not really reacting to my defensive behavior.

"Trooper Malahki I presume?" She spoke in a calm, soft voice

"Who are you?" I kept my stance. I had to keep my guard up. There was no sign of anyone other than myself and now this strange woman.

"I am Loriya, I believe we were scheduled for a meeting today. Why don't you put that away and follow me."

I wasn't sure what this woman was playing at, but if she was who she said she was. I was obligated to follow her. After all, a job is a job. I put my katana away and waited for my critter crawler camera to jump back into my suit and followed Loriya to one of the doors that was in the previous hallway. It looked like a large conference room, with a big table surrounded by chairs. Loriya sat at the head of the table and motioned for me to sit beside her. I sat down. Keeping my guard up.

"I'm glad you could make it today. I'm excited for what we have in store." She looked me in the eye and did not move her gaze. I usually wasn't one to let my nerves get the better of me. But something about this woman made my skin crawl.

"We looked through loads of trooper profiles and yours seemed to be exactly what we needed. You have led a pretty successful career as a trooper have you not?" She proceeded to pull up my digital file on the large wall screen behind her.

"What's the meaning of all this? Why did you bring me here? I was under the assumption that I was hired as a guard."

"Oh but you're capable of so much more than that, Trooper Malahki. And we here at ZantoCorp hate to see so much potential go to waste. After all, you were quite the assassin in your day were you not?" Loriya then pulled up several photos of me from when I was first hired to Novoline as an undercover assassin.

No one was supposed to know about that division. It was one of Novoline's most well-kept secrets, even though I didn't understand the full grasp of the work I was doing. I worked with a team of assassins under some of Novoline's most senior executives. We would receive contracts that would instruct us to eliminate threats to Metroplex Zero, or so we were told. After a while, it became evident that we were taking out threats to

Novoline's reputation or to the company as a whole. I myself had to eliminate several Novoline employees and benefactors they deemed a threat. The pay was astonishing. I had enough Metrocreds to make a comfortable living for myself. The only reason I wasn't working as an assassin now was the fact that I hadn't been called to work in quite some time. How Loriya had these photos was a mystery to me. What was even more concerning, was the fact that all the photos she had were in places I never expected a camera to be.

"I'm not sure how you got hold of these photos, but I'm not at liberty to discuss Novoline's business to a non-executive." I looked back at the screen; the photos were clear as day and at the most unusual angles. How did they capture these photos? Why did they bring me here? I had to keep on my toes, there was a reason I was lured here. And I wasn't sure I was ready to find out why.

"We have our ways Trooper, you see, we here at ZantoCorp, believe that with a little push, humans can and will do great things. The problem is, the other MegaCorps seem to think of humans as an expendable resource. Like with your employer, Novoline."

Loriya then pulled up the Novoline logo and a blueprint for the main building. She zoomed in on a blacked-out section of the blueprint. It was where secret projects and dealings took place. I myself only ever visited that wing when I would receive the elimination contracts. The more information she brought up, the more unsettled I would become.

"You see, we've been surveying you and Novoline for quite some time. We know that this classified wing is where your company conducts its most secret and most dangerous work. We want to find out more. Actually, we fully intend to find out more. With your help."

"I guess you didn't hear me. I'm not at liberty to discuss anything with you. I think I'd better be on my way." I went to stand up, but before I could rise from my seat, I was quickly strapped into the chair by large metal clamps that held me tightly. Loriya stood up and put her face close to mine.

"Oh Trooper Malahki, you're not in a position to leave anymore. You see, we chose you because you were the best, you know how to get the job done in a quick and discrete way; we need you in our ranks, and you will join them."

I chuckled at her hubris, but she was dead serious; she intended to use me as a mole for ZantoCorp.

"Oh will I? What if I refuse?"

She smirked and pulled up a live feed of someone sitting in a dark room, a sack covering their face. She entered something into the holo-screen and a man came into the room, ripping the sack off of the person's head. The man pulled the prisoners hair to show their face. I was horrified. They had trapped my old partner, Kiran, and were torturing him. Kiran and I worked together for a few years when I first took the Patrol Trooper position at Novoline. We were incredibly close and when he split to become a freelance officer, I supported his decision. I had assumed the reason I hadn't heard from him in so long was because he was working. I was wrong. I was so horribly wrong.

"It's a shame you have no living relatives left. Relatives make our workers more. Compliant. But our records show that you two were as close as brothers. Your brother here has been a huge help in our research department." She took down the live feed and sat back in her chair.

"What have you done to him?! Explain yourself!" I was furious, shaking from anger. The chair's metal binds tightened as I attempted to escape. It began to push my power armor further into my skin. I tried to hide the pain from my face, but it was of no use.

"All will be made clear in time Malahki, for now, let's focus on what you will be doing for us. You see, we recently found out that Novoline is working on new kinetic weapons; we want every bit of information you can find on them. When you secure the documents, you are to assassinate the department head, Soren, and plant this d-stick on him." She inserted the d-stick into my power armor and released me from the chair. I took a deep sigh, and stood up.

"And if I just walk out of here?" I kept my gaze fixed on Loriya; she just sat there smiling.

"You could leave, but then again, Kiran could have had an unfortunate accident." She did not budge at all when making her threat. I knew she meant business. I also knew that I couldn't let Kiran die because of me. I had no choice but to accept it.

Loriya made it clear that if I failed in any way, Kiran would pay the price. Making sure that I would not try and reveal my mission to anyone. She gave me a day to prepare what I needed and to put in the files needed for me to gain access to the weapons research wing located in the restricted part of the Novoline building. I had access codes to the restricted zone, so it wouldn't be too strange for me to show up. The files Loriya had made it seem like I was going to pick up another elimination contract. In a way, I was. It had been a while since I worked a job like this.

When the day had come for me to infiltrate Novoline's restricted zone. I felt numb. Not only was I betraying my company, my friend's life hung in the balance. If I fail, I lose everything. I walked into the building, past the AI secretary, and made my way to the elevator. Using the retina scanner, I scanned in and entered the code for the restricted zone. The elevator rang and zipped up to the floor I needed to be on. I walked down the long hall and entered the weapons research wing. Once inside, I headed to the back where the offices were located. After some searching, I found Soren's office. I entered the code provided by Loriya and headed inside. Shutting the door.

His office was large, almost as large as a small apartment. Being the department head had its perks, I suppose. Soren was nowhere to be found, but his desk screen remained on and logged in. I took the d-stick from my power suit and inserted it into the desk; it made a strange whirring noise and the screen went black for a second. It then began the downloading process. I had hoped that Soren wouldn't show up while the extraction was taking place. It would have made things a tad more difficult, but nothing I couldn't handle. Ultimately, I wanted this to go as fast as possible so I could get Kiran and get out of ZantoCorp.

I watched as file after file uploaded into the d-stick, as more information flooded in, the d-stick would begin to glow brighter and brighter as they usually do with larger ports of info. I felt my stomach sink deeper the brighter it became. I had to remember that Kiran was now counting on me to save him, whether he knew it or not. After what seemed like hours, all the files were uploaded to the d-stick. I took it out and placed it into my power suit. All that was left to do was wait for Soren. I took no measures to hide, in fact. I helped myself to some of his Delugation brand energy drinks; he had a wide variety of flavors and he wouldn't have much use of them pretty soon. Before I could take a sip, I heard the door open.

"Excuse me? What are you doing here?" a voice called out from behind me. I popped open one of the drinks and took a sip.

"Executive Soren I presume?" I took another sip of the energy drink. And Soren looked confused, which of course he was.

"What is the meaning of this? How did you get into my office?" He attempted to contact one of the Novoline guards. But his security systems were taken out while the file extraction was taking place. As far as anyone knew. Soren entered the office and went offline.

"Tell me, is there any reason why someone would want you eliminated?" I finished the rest of the energy drink and placed the can into the instant disposal bin. I could tell by the look on his face that he knew what I was here for.

"No, I-I.." He began to stutter and I could see sweat dripping down his face.

"Please! There has to be some way out of this. Which executive hired you? I'll triple the creds they paid you! I'll give you anything you want!" He was speaking frantically, trying with all his might to contact assistance. There was no use.

Not wanting to play this out any more, I pulled out my titanium nanoblade katana, and did what I needed to do. Afterwards, I placed the d-stick that Loriya had given me and placed it on his body. I didn't know what was on it, and I didn't want to know. It was likely that they were going to make it look like he was betraying the company. That way no one would ask questions about his elimination. I sighed deeply and made my way back to ZantoCorp. I usually felt a little off after an elimination. But this was different. There was something else going on that I couldn't put my finger on.

I headed back to the strange span of hallways and doors; the sight of it all gave me the creeps, and of course Loriya was nowhere to be found. I leaned against a wall and waited for her to show up. Which, of course, she eventually did, I heard what sounded like sliding doors, open and closed, followed by footsteps. I turned my head and coming around a corner was Loriya herself. She had that same smile on her face. I couldn't stand it. How could someone be smiling and yet their eyes look so dead?

At least I wouldn't have to deal with her for much longer. I hoped so anyway. I'm not sure what I would do if this was long term. Especially if I had to work with whatever Loriya was.

"You work fast, Malahki; we value that in our workers." I couldn't tell if she was being sincere or being sarcastic. Her expression outshined any tone she gave off. It was like she was staring into nothing when she looked at you. Like you were nothing. I tried to hide my discomfort as best as I could.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to get this over with. Here's your d-stick, now, where is Kiran?"

I wanted to get straight to the point. My plan was to get Kiran and get out of there as fast as I could. Loriya chuckled and took the d-stick from me; she then motioned to follow her and we walked along the long hallway to one of the endless unmarked doors.

Inside, there was yet another conference room, but sitting in one of the chairs was Kiran; he looked bruised and beaten up. He kept his head low and did not look up until I called him. I ran to his side and placed my hand gently on his back. He flinched slightly at my touch.

"Kiran! What have they done to you? How did you get here?" I started to ramble a bit and had to stop myself from overwhelming him. He took a shaky breath and started to speak.

"Mal, it really is you" His voice was raspy and tired, who knows what they subjected him to.

"Yeah Kiran it's me. I came to get you out of here." I glanced over at Loriya, who was going over the info on the d-stick; there was definitely something off about her. Like she wasn't really human, could she be an AI-powered automation? A robot programed to take on these tasks? Something just didn't sit right.

"Mal, h-how did you get here? They said no one knew I was trapped here, they said—" Kiran stopped talking and began to cough; he leaned against me and I could feel his tiredness. How long had he been kept here?

"They said no one was coming to find me." he let out another shaky breath. I held him for a moment letting him break down. Loriya sat there, watching, as if she was observing my reaction.

"We are leaving, now." I said firmly, looking at Loriya, dead in her eyes. I was furious, how could ZantoCorp allow this to happen? Is this what they've been doing all this time? If this is even a fraction of what their company does, I wanted no part in it.

Loriya chuckled "You seem to forget your place Trooper, remember, we have enough information to have Novoline take you down. Kiran is free to go and live his life as he pleases. You, however, have a lot more work to do before we even consider letting you out of your contract. You are free to go to your apartment and rest, but we will be in contact with you again, and if you don't want to end up like your friend here, then I suggest you do as you're told." She then pressed a button and a security officer escorted us out of the building. What did she mean by more work? They wanted me to do more? What was their plan? There was no time to speculate.

I took Kiran to my apartment and got him some fresh clothes. He went to the bathroom to shower and I heated up some Canics Instant Noodles. I only had the meatloaf flavor, but after everything Kiran went through, I'm sure he didn't mind. I also got us some nice

hot cups of Alpha Brews lattes. Kiran always enjoyed a nice hot meal after a job. It would be like old times, at least for a while. I sat at the table and took a huge deep breath. This whole ordeal was a lot to take in. Do I work for ZantoCorp now? What were they up to? Why did they take Kiran? So many questions and so little time to unravel it all. Kiran had walked in and sat down at the table. He took a sip of his latte and let out a relieved sigh. I could tell he was glad to be out of that place.

We spent some time sitting and eating in silence; it was shockingly nice. Almost peaceful. The noodles were pretty good and there's never a bad time for a latte. It was almost like the last time we saw each other. We sat at an electro patio and just talked the night away. That was back when we worked jobs regularly together, and right before I became an assassin. It was before all of this. Before we knew one of the many things that lie behind ZantoCorps walls. I broke the silence between us, eager to get it out of my head.

"Kiran, I'm so sorry I wasn't able to find you sooner. Had I known." He raised his hand and cut me off.

"I don't blame you, Malahki. I blame myself. I was desperate for money and I let them experiment on me." He hung his head down slightly before continuing.

"There was a flier over at the freelancers bar, it was from ZantoCorp looking for new recruits for some fake project they were luring people in for. I was really low on MetroCreds and it seemed easy enough. We had to stay in these medical style rooms and they made us wear those gowns. For weeks they injected us with different types of sedatives and who knows what else. They monitored our reactions and held us hostage. They somehow knew about the not-so-legal things we'd done and held it against us if we tried to escape. Then they started the electroshock experiments. I was too weak to run and they told me no one even knew I was missing. I'm just glad you found me when you did, please Mal, whatever you do. Just do as they tell you to do. It's the only way out."

He took a deep breath and sat back in his seat. It took me a while to fully grasp what he was telling me. It was yet another new look at what ZantoCorp does. I knew then that this was more serious than I thought. If they were capable of blackmailing nearly anyone, they wanted, to do what they saw fit to anyone they wished to torture or make someone do their dirty work. It was sickening. After letting the tension settle in, we spent the rest of the night talking. Really talking, we talked about the various jobs we worked while separated. I told him everything about my time as an assassin for Novoline. He told me about some smuggling jobs he worked on as a freelancer. He smuggled everything from knockoff prototypes of weapons right down to smuggling illegal android parts under the table. We both had seen and done things we would rather forget about. And I think that's what bonded us closer together.

It was about a week before ZantoCorp called me back in. Loriya had wanted more information on Novoline; it soon became clear that I would be the one to get any information they wanted. And they wanted it all. From weapon schematics and armor upgrades, right down to the kinetic energy blueprints and files. Sometimes I would have to eliminate another executive to make space for the ZantoCorp replacements; other times I would be tasked with destroying equipment and files. I had invited Kiran to stay with me. That way I could always know where he was and know he was safe.

After a few months I began to question the capability of Novoline. They were supposed to be at the top of the line when it came to security. But they were so far unaware of the ZantoCorp replacements, and from what I could gather, they weren't suspicious of me and my part in what was essentially a silent takeover of their most top secret department. If ZantoCorp could easily infiltrate a facility like the one Novoline had made. What else were they capable of? No one really was sure what ZantoCorp actually did. And from what I could see. The more you try to find out, the more mystery you seem to find yourself in.

The time came for me to make the biggest decision of my life. To become an official ZantoCorp assassin, if I were to take the offer. I would have to move to an apartment closer to ZantoCorp and embrace their brand completely. I would be paid instead of blackmailed though they always kept my past over my head. The deal seemed nice. But I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling I had whenever I would meet up with Loriya. Maybe that's what they wanted. To keep you on edge. Keep you pliable. I had been talking about it with Kiran for quite some time. I was surprised at what he thought I should do.

"I'd say you'd have a better chance of staying alive if you make the switch. I mean think about it. Your life is already threatened by Novoline now. At least ZantoCorp thinks you're useful enough to keep alive."

He made a great point. Either way, I was in more danger at Novoline than I was at ZantoCorp, and the MetroCreds helped to sweeten the deal a bit. I guess the only thing that really bothered me was the uneasiness I always felt when I was in the building. I knew deep down it was my nerves getting the better of me. After some time and a lot of thinking, I came to the conclusion that in order to keep Kiran safe and keep my life, I had to make the switch. I resigned my position at Novoline and forfeited my contract with them. I gave them no reason aside from sending my regards to the company and thanking them for giving me a colorful career.

Moving to the ZantoCorp residents wasn't too bad. Kiran and I packed what we needed into our storage cubes and the new apartment was in a great place. It was equipped with all-new tech and was twice as big as my last place. There was plenty of room for Kiran and I to live comfortably and to our surprise. The kitchen was fully stocked. I knew in my heart that this was just to keep us happy for the moment. I wasn't sure how or when. But I knew ZantoCorp was only starting when it came to pushing me past my limit. They wanted to see how far I was willing to go to keep myself and those I care about safe. I was prepared to show them just how far I could go.

What they would never know was that I was constantly calculating how I could take Loriya down, how I could get revenge for Kiran. He had told me many times that it wasn't worth it. But it wasn't just for him that I spent countless hours trying to figure out each and every detail of the ZantoCorp building. Not only would I take Loriya down, I would bring the whole human experimentation wing of the building down. I couldn't just sit and comply with their demands. I had to earn their trust. I had to play the part so I couldn't eventually get access to more and more information. I'm sure they were suspicious of my dedication for a while. Though with Loriya you couldn't tell much about what she was feeling. If she felt anything at all. All I know is the more I show my loyalty. The more I get rewarded.

For ZantoCorp, it seemed to all be about results. And I gave them the results they needed. In return they gave me creds, food, a place to sleep, and the ability to keep my life. I had to play the waiting game. Keep my eyes on the task ahead and do as I was told. Be it taking out more of their enemies or those they deemed 'un-useful' or sneaking into a rival company as a worker and obtaining various amounts of information. I did anything, and everything they asked of me. All the while, I collected my own data on what they were doing. The possible connections to certain corporations and taking note of who exactly they tasked me to eliminate. I knew that in time, I would have enough info to take them down. I just had to be patient.

The more jobs I took, the more it weighed on my heart just how ruthless, and cruel ZantoCorp could be. It pained me more to know I couldn't reveal anything to anyone, the only one I seemed to have left this world; the only one I could confide in. Was Kiran.

Kiran stayed with me. I made sure of that. For a few months, he never left the apartment. Slowly but surely he would come out, at times just to go for a walk. I could tell that what ZantoCorp had done to him took its toll. Most nights I could hear him screaming in his room and at times I would catch him just staring off into space. I took it slow with him. Never prodded him for information and just existed with him. I think he appreciated it. At least, he never told me that he didn't. We always had an

understanding with each other, and after everything I knew that he would need more time to recover. I gave him that time willingly and never judged him. If I hadn't taken the ZantoCorp job and just left him there, who knows how long he would've lasted. I was grateful to have him in my life. And he told me time and time again how thankful he was for me saving his life. Our bond was stronger than ever.

As for Loriya, the more I tried to dig into her past or personal life, the more confused I would get. She had no records that I could access about where she lived or even if she was a human or not. There was no information on her position in the company. It was all off, her demeanor, the silent way she seemed to travel throughout the building, the way she spoke. Everything about it was off. I wanted to know as much as I could about her, but it seemed like she wasn't going to give that information up freely. No matter what or who she was. I was determined to stop her. I just had to figure out how. It seemed like she was everywhere and nowhere all at once. Like she chose when you could see her. But that was just crazy. Right?

In the end. This all was for the best. Novoline was holding me back, and though ZantoCorp was shrouded in mysterious happenings and the things I'd seen and done were not the best. It was surely the most powerful MegaCorp in Metroplex Zero. I had to learn the hard way just how far their influence could reach. But I would be sure that they knew I couldn't be stopped. And in some way they did. Every mission I took was completed in record time and there was little to no trace of my work anywhere. Well mostly. ZantoCorp always had a way to find you no matter where you hide or where you think you're safe. I was careful as I could be, but I knew I was never completely safe. I had to keep on my toes constantly. Because ZantoCorp is always watching.