



the heist

a metroplex zero short story

by Anna Mocikat

"Hey, watch out!"

The skinny man jumped to the side and barely made it. I swooshed by at high-speed without paying much attention. I was late and didn't have time for the likes of him.

The sun stood high, and its summer rays reflected in the endless maze of glass towers surrounding me. I didn't need to consult my internal chronograph to know it was past noon. The others were waiting, and they wouldn't be amused if I was late.

The surfspeeder trembled as I accelerated. Despite its name, it wasn't designed to go faster than 50 km/h, although I had modified mine to go up to 70 km/h. Speeding might have gotten me in trouble in other parts of the city, but this part of Metroplex Zero was Tritoonico area, and those batshit crazy asshats didn't care about anything around them when they were listening to their sermons – which was basically all the time. Good for us.

The downside was that the sidewalks crawled with those idiots wearing their long, white robes and blissful smiles on their faces while they listened to the messages received through their ear implants. It was said they couldn't mute them which sounded like a nightmare to me. The last thing I needed was someone babbling nonsense in my ear 24/7. No thank you. I had my friend Giuseppe for that.

I flexed my knees as I swiftly navigated between more of the white-clad lunatics. The Surfspeeder Model MUC3000 was a flat device, its shape and length reminiscent of a surfboard, with the difference being that instead of swimming on water, it hovered a meter above the ground. This was the fastest way to go around the city – for the ones who dared at least. There was no safety measure if you fell off; you broke your bones or worse. But like all 20-years-olds in the history of mankind, I felt pretty much invincible.

Five minutes later, I left the busy main street and entered a narrow side alley by performing an impressive mid-air slide. A gust hit my face, which was more than welcome on this hot summer day. The alleys between the kilometer-high skyscrapers were like wind canals, ventilating the city, whose omnipresent glass and aluminum turned the streets into baking ovens during summer. Like most of them, the alley I entered was also so narrow that the lighting was dim. The flanking towers were so high that hardly any light reached down here. It was why pedestrians almost never used the alleys as shortcuts. People didn't like the gloomy atmosphere, where dangers could be lurking in the shadows. Only cleaning robots and waste disposal machines entered the "spooky" wind canals. And delivery drones, of course. Although those buzzed through the air at a hundred-and-fifty meters above the ground and higher.

This was our turf.

"There you are, Lily!" a familiar voice called as I swiftly approached three figures, two sitting on a corroded container someone had left here and one standing next to them.

With another impressive air-slide, I brought the board to a halt and jumped off it.

"Hey, guys," I said. "Sorry, I'm late."

"When are you ever not late?" Wilhelm said, glaring at me.

He sat on the container, one leg propped up, and leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. As always, he was dressed all in black. Tight pants, a sleeveless shirt that revealed his many motion-tattoos, a gleaming studded belt, and leather collar around his neck. His asymmetrically cut hair was raven-black and shimmered slightly, and he wore plenty of eyeliner. Even a blind man would have noticed that Wilhelm was a neo-goth – literally. He had a skin augment that made his sweat smell like patchouli.

I smiled innocently and shrugged.

Wilhelm rolled his eyes. "No one buys the innocent girl act. Not from you."

I chuckled. "Well, it was worth a try."

"Ugh," Wilhelm said and facepalmed.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" I asked, wiping sweat from my brow. Today was particularly hot. The omnipresent wind flowing through the artificial valley between the skyscrapers felt like air blasting from a gigantic hairdryer.

Giuseppe, the second guy, jumped from the container and grinned. He was the complete opposite of Wilhelm: short, skinny, with brown curly hair, and dressed in shorts and an oversized t-shirt in screaming colors.

"Since when do we need a plan?" he asked.

Despite being the oldest of our group at twenty-six, he had something boyish about him. His dark-brown eyes always gleamed with mischief.

"Oh, lord," Wilhelm said.

"Okay, of course, we have a plan," Giuseppe snickered. "We have the route of two high-value Astropoly cargo drones. They should pass right above us in exactly..."

His eyes took a blank expression for a brief moment as he focused on his internal chronometer.

"Seven minutes and twenty-five seconds. Chromie will hack them and force them to land, then we loot them and scram before the SecuBots show up. Piece of cake, right Chromie?"

He turned his head toward the third man. Well, technically he wasn't a man although his body had a male shape. He was over two meters high and coated in silver-gray chrome. White glowing eyes shone from his metal face that was designed to display perfect features. Chromie was a Secubotics service model CP-500. Like all others of his product line, he had been designed to perform simple service duties, such as hotel concierge or clerk. However, after several malfunctions, he had been discarded and would have been dismantled if not for Giuseppe, who had saved and reprogrammed him. Officially, Chromie was Giuseppe's property, but in truth, he had his own mind and will and was an equal part of the team. And even more than that, his ability to communicate with every Secubotics machine and therefore hack them in real-time made Chromie invaluable—and he knew that.

"Right, piece of cake," the robot said dryly in his slightly tinny voice.

"Great," I said, "I have nothing against doing the job quickly and –"

"Of course you are," Wilhelm said, lifting a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "But it's not gonna happen today, Lily. Monarch wants to see us when we're done."

"Oh? Why?"

All three of them shrugged with Chromie imitating Giuseppe's body language perfectly.

We got ready. The two guys and I put on the glasses. Although nothing special at first glance, they were high-tech gear stolen from ZantoCorp and our life insurance. The glasses produced a holographic image over our faces and made them unrecognizable for cameras and face recognition software. Basically, they were a modern version of a bandana that bank robbers used to cover their faces within earlier centuries.

"Here they come," Giu said, pointing at the sky.

He shared the data, and the AR implant in my left eye highlighted two drones approaching instantly. From a distance, they appeared like any other Astropoly cargo drone. The retail giant used them to deliver their wares. No one knew exactly how many there were in the skies in and above Metroplex Zero, but it was estimated to be several million.

Which was only logical if one wanted to keep consumerism flowing in a city of Metro's size. It covered half of what used to be called Western Europe in earlier times and had a population of a hundred-and-fifty million. Astropoly was like a gigantic Kraken supplying everyone with everything.

"Get ready, everyone!" Giuseppe said. "Chromie?"

"All systems ready," the robot replied. "Establishing connection with target now."

Less than two seconds later, the two drones in question staggered and changed course, swiftly descending to our location.

Almost noiselessly, they landed in front of us and opened their hatches.

"Excellent work, Chromie!" Giuseppe clapped the robot's metal shoulder as if he was human.

It always touched me to see how he treated Chromie, like a real person and a friend he cared for. No one else did that with robots.

We approached the drones and grabbed everything inside, several small boxes with the Medigenix logo printed on them.

I furrowed my brow. "That's it?"

"Whatever," Wilhelm said. "Monarch will have reasons why he wants this shipment of all others. Let's grab the shit and get out of here."

"That's a splendid idea," Chromie said. "My sensors show multiple Secubotics Seeker Drones approaching."

"Oh crap, already?" Giu said.

That was not good at all. They must have been patrolling somewhere close by.

"Move it!"

I stuffed as much as I could into my messenger bag, then jumped on my board. The other two guys did the same, and we accelerated. Chromie was the only one who didn't have a speederboard, but he didn't need one. He could easily run 50 km/h, and he never got tired.

Engines whined, and three heavy SecuBots flew around the corner.

"Frak!" I called out. "Hurry guys!"

We flew down the alley at high speed. It was a death trap with only one escape, and that was forward. Once we reached the main street, we could disappear among the pedestrians and traffic. And if we managed to reach the monorail, we would get them off our tail for sure.

But our pursuers were fast, very fast. They were almost on us.

"Split!" Wilhelm shouted as we reached the end of the alley.

We were pros; it wasn't the first time that SecuBot Seekers were on our asses. Everyone knew what to do.

Giu and Chromie turned left, while Wilhelm went right. He almost crashed into two white-clad figures, who jumped out of the way, shrieking, as he navigated his board into a crowd of people.

That left only one way for me: straight.

The main street was busy and cars swooshed by in both directions, some flying, some zipping over the pavement. I focused and accelerated to maximum speed.

I raced toward a car that stood at the side of the street. Flexing my knees, I jumped the board off the roof of the vehicle and high into the air. A flying car rushed by, and my fingers grabbed its back bumper.

I was yanked hard, but my augmented arms held their grip while my feet stayed firmly on the board. Turning my head, I saw one of the bots whipping onto the main street in pursuit of me. Suddenly, a huge multi-passenger vehicle crashed into it. It was tossed aside then crashed to the ground, sending fumes and sparks flying.

I grinned and looked ahead, focusing on the car that was rocketing me through traffic. Crouching on my board at its rear and holding onto its bumper, I was invisible to the passengers inside.

I enjoyed the ride for half a kilometer, then let go and hovered to the ground. I jumped off the board and let my AR eye scan my surroundings. No one was after me. I had made it-as always.

Hopefully, my friends had made it too, but I was certain they had. We did such stunts almost on a daily basis. Not because we were adrenaline junkies, but because it was our only way to survive.

Scrap kids the ones like us were called. Orphans whose parents either died or abandoned them because they couldn't afford to take care of them any longer. That happened mostly when people did something that made them lose their affiliation. I had been unaffiliated since I was sixteen. But I didn't mind it. My life was a constant adventure, my turf the gigantic city jungle that was called Metroplex Zero, and no rules and restrictions applied to me.

Less than an hour later, I left the monorail station closest to Monarch's HQ. It was an old Astropoly warehouse that the corporation had abandoned almost a decade ago after it had partially burned down. It was said that this had been no coincidence but a deliberate attack to drive them out, but no one knew for sure.

The whole area was rather run-down, with lower, industrial-style buildings. Many unaffiliated lived here, some homeless, others occupying space in the old buildings. The more fortunate even lived in apartments in one of the gray tenements, which were scattered around the blocks.

Occasionally, armed Novoline forces were dispatched into the neighborhood to set an example and Secubotics drones patrolled from time to time, but mostly, the quarter was left alone by the big corpos. They had realized that there wasn't much to gain from here and as long as the unaffiliated kept quiet and didn't cause trouble, they didn't see a reason for a purge.

For a while, the white-clad fanatics from Tritoonico had shown up to catch some homeless and sacrifice them in their gruesome rituals, but then Monarch's men had driven them out. Ever since anyone clearly recognizable as a Tritoonico affiliate was shot on the spot whenever they dared to enter the area.

Yes, Monarch was the king of the unaffiliated, at least in this district. I was one of the many kids working for him. It didn't happen often that I got summoned, and it made me more nervous than facing SecuBots or Novoline ops on the streets.

The closer I got, the more groups of armed men and women patrolled the streets, some of them augmented. Monarch took pride in that, contrary to the corporations who used automated workforces wherever possible, he only employed humans. From time to time, some service robots could be seen on the streets, but those were only used for tasks too dirty or hazardous for humans. Chromie was a huge exemption here. Sometimes he and Giu got hostile looks from passersby with anti-robot sentiments, but no one dared to openly bother them.

When anyone working for Monarch entered the area, they activated a holographic pin on their collar that showed a black butterfly, his sigil. And no one in their right mind would ever dare to cause trouble with Monarch's people. If one thought about it, it was ironic. All Metro citizens wore insignia of the corporations they were beneficiaries of. We were unaffiliated and yet we wore Monarch's butterfly – and proudly so.

I met the guys at the warehouse entrance. Gui and Chromie leaned against the wall in an almost identical pose while Wilhelm had his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed. He could be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I knew it was just a mask he was wearing. In truth, he was a good guy. Both of my friends were.

"Well, that was fun!" I said and grinned as Wilhelm rolled his eyes.

"Let's go inside," Giu said. "We don't want to let him wait."

The massive, industrial-style iron gates were guarded by a group of men that seemed to consist only of muscle mass. They knew us, and therefore ignored us as we passed.

Once inside, we first went to the kiosk. It was run by two elderly women and a robot helping them to move around heavier things. Another group of scrap kids stood at the counter, and we had to wait a couple of minutes until it was our turn.

The kiosk was the place where all scrappers had to turn in their loot. We opened our bags and handed over the small packages we had retrieved from the Astropoly drones. The women counted everything, checked if the wares were intact, made notes, and took pictures. Then they paid us out, partially in credits and partially with AstroTokens and MediBits.

Finally, we were done and ready to move upstairs and see the big man himself. After climbing a metal staircase, we were checked for weapons by some more security guards, who also scanned our retinas. Whoever wanted to work for Monarch was only allowed to have one eye replaced with a cybernetic one. The other needed to stay biological for identification. Chromie wasn't allowed to go any further and remained downstairs. Monarch didn't trust robots and didn't want them anywhere near him.

Once the guards were done checking us and confirmed that we were who we said we were, they let us pass, and we were allowed to enter the inner sanctum.

Monarch resided in a spacious office made of glass. He was a slender man with an ageless face. Although he claimed that he was 100% bio, there were rumors he was a former Medigeneix employee and therefore genetically augmented. Other rumors claimed he was a former doctor, and some were convinced he used to be a high-ranking ZantoCorp exec before he became an underworld boss.

I didn't care much who he was or where he had come from, all I knew was the man was intimidating as frak.

A winning smile flashed over his handsome face as we entered. As was typical for him, he didn't waste any time on formalities but cut straight to the point.

"Your team did very well today," he said. "That could have easily gone sideways, but you managed the situation perfectly."

"Thank you, sir," Giuseppe said, speaking for our group as usual.

I wondered for a moment how Monarch knew about what had happened earlier, but I didn't have time to contemplate any further because he continued talking.

"I've been monitoring your progress and think that you kids are the most promising scrappers I have."

Giu smiled broadly and even Wilhelm's usually stern face lit up. It didn't happen very often that we got acknowledged and certainly not by the man himself.

"I have a special assignment which requires extraordinary talent," Monarch continued. "And I would like to assign the job to you. If you manage to complete it properly, you'll receive 1k credits each, plus AstroTokens worth another 500. How does that sound?"

We exchanged surprised looks. That was a lot of money! More than any of us made in three months!

We didn't need a verbal exchange as we all thought the same: Hell yeah! Whatever it is, we do it!

"That sounds fantastic!" Giu said, the excitement in his voice unmistakable.

Monarch smiled. "Excellent. I knew you were promising kids. Here's what you have to do."

It was dark when we arrived at our target area. The summerly temperature had subsided, but the surrounding pavement and concrete buildings still radiated a lot of heat.

The mission Monarch had sent us on led to an industrial zone about ten kilometers south of the unaffiliated area. This was Astropoly territory, and we stood in front of a fully automated production facility. The few streetlamps shone in a reddish light, and humming and buzzing came from inside the dark concrete walls.

Now that we were here, I suddenly felt a strange nudging sensation in my stomach. This seemed like a very easy job. Why did the boss offer us so much money to do it?

"Okay," Giuseppe said, "let's stick to the plan, and we'll be on our way back in no time."

If he had a bad feeling about this too, he didn't show it.

"Chromie will hack the SecuBots, then Wilhelm will lockpick the back door. We sneak in, go upstairs to the supervisor's office, open the safe, take the papers Monarch wants, leave the package he gave us instead, and go home. Easy enough."

"Yeah, too easy, don't you think?" I said.

Giu looked at me, furrowing his brow. "What do you mean?"

"If it's so easy, why is he paying us so much?"

"Because we're breaking into a corporation facility."

I shrugged. "It's not that we haven't done it before."

Wilhelm sighed. "And I thought I was the pessimist here."

"Don't worry guys, it'll all go well," Giuseppe said cheerfully. "Chromie?"

"Commencing," the robot replied.

We waited while he did his "magic". After a moment, he said: "I've intruded the system and disabled all cameras. Eight SecuBots are going into sleep mode now."

"Well done, buddy!" Giuseppe said. "Let's move!"

I swallowed my bad feeling, put on my glasses, and followed the two guys and the robot to the back of the building. Maybe I was being paranoid, and it all would go well after all.

When we reached the back door, Wilhelm pulled out a small, black box. He held it against the control panel at the door and activated it. Three tiny red lights appeared on the device, then one after another they turned green. The door mechanism clicked as it opened.

"Tadaa," Wilhelm said dryly and made a gesture with his hand like a magician who had just performed an exceptional trick.

I pulled my gun and opened the door.

As usual in such situations, I went in first. Giu was our genius, Wilhelm the con man, and I protected them. With my augmented arms and the spec ops software in my eye, it was only logical.

Inside the production facility, it was dark. The building had no windows, and the robots working here didn't need light to operate. I saw endless rows of rudimentary robotic bodies, working monotonously, building whatever shit Astropoly produced here. They were still active; it was only necessary to disable the security machines because the production robots were no threat to us. The humming and buzzing were much louder here than it had been outside.

I took cover behind a conveyor belt and scanned the room. The AR built into my eye let me see in the dark, with everything appearing greenish. The moving machines surrounding me had something eerie. I shook the uncanny feeling off.

"Clear," I whispered even though there was no one here who could have heard us.

Giu and Wilhelm came in while Chromie stayed outside to keep an eye on our surroundings.

Quickly, we moved through the dark production hall and up the stairs to the second floor. It was a much smaller area than the rest of the factory and overlooked the production line. A room with glass walls dominated most of the space here. It was the workspace of the two or three employees necessary to run the factory. Most likely only one was human and the others robots, which helped the corporation keep a perfect balance.

Lights sprang on as we entered the room and made me flinch. A second later, I could have slapped myself for being so jumpy. The lights were automated and reacted to motion, as was typical in such buildings. If no one was in the office, there was no need for lights.

"There!" Giuseppe said, pointing at a wall safe. "That must be it!"

Wilhelm frowned after he approached the safe and studied it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh nothing," he said with a grin. "I was wondering for a second why they would have such an old model here. A six-year-old could crack this one."

"Even better," Giu said. "Let's make this quick."

"Yes, yes," Wilhelm said, like an artist who didn't appreciate if someone rushed him.

He used a slightly different device than the one he had at the entrance. Less than 20 seconds later, the safe door opened.

Wilhelm stepped aside and let Giuseppe handle the rest. Giu reached into the safe and pulled out a huge envelope.

"This must be it!" he said.

I still couldn't believe how smoothly everything went. This must be the easiest job we have ever done!

Giu reached into his bag and produced a metallic box. He placed it into the safe and closed the door.

"Done!"

"Great," I said. "Now let's get out of here!"

"You better," we all heard Chromie's voice over our earpieces.

"What's happening?" Giuseppe said, alarmed.

"Novoline armed forces approaching. ETA 86 seconds."

"What?!" all three of us called out in unison.

"Where did they come from?" Wilhelm asked with disbelief in his voice.

"It doesn't matter!" I said. "We need to move or they'll riddle our asses like Swiss cheese!"

Novoline were famous for their attitude to shoot first and interrogate later.

We rushed down the stairs as fast as we could and then through the dark production hall where the robots stoically continued their endless labor. The factory appeared to be much bigger now than it had been only minutes ago and running down the endless isles almost felt like running in a nightmare.

I knew it! I thought. I had known something was wrong here the moment we had arrived.

I smashed open the door, and we rushed outside. Chromie waited for us, his silver coating gleaming in the nightly illumination.

"How long?" I asked.

"Less than fifteen seconds."

"We're so done..." Wilhelm said.

"No, we're not! This way!" I hollered.

We couldn't go back to the main street as they were coming from there. Our only chance was to escape through the maze of factory and production buildings.

We sprinted around the corner and between two warehouses. Turning my head, I saw them approaching: Novoline combat androids. These were nothing like the ordinary Secutronix bots; they were military-style war machines.

Whoever had sent them after us wanted to make sure we didn't get out alive.

"Hurry!" I urged the others without telling them who was after us.

I heard a familiar noise in the sky, and my heart almost stopped. If they came with a drop-ship, we would never make it. But to my surprise, it wasn't a Novoline dropship that hovered above the low industrial buildings. Instead, it was an NNZ helicopter.

What the hell?

NNZ was the biggest news agency in all Metroplex Zero. What were they doing here?

I didn't have time to think about it as bullets hit the wall only centimeters from where my head had been seconds ago.

At the very last second, we managed to take cover behind a cargo container.

"Shit, we're screwed," Giu said, trying to catch his breath. He wasn't what you would call an athlete and wouldn't last much longer.

I drew my gun and took a deep breath. When I peeked around the corner, I had to agree with my friend. We were screwed indeed...

At this moment, something happened none of us would ever have expected. Suddenly, the factory we had been inside less than a minute ago was shaken by a massive explosion. A huge fireball tinted the nightly sky blood red. Just in time, I turned away from the corner and crouched next to my friends, then the shockwave and deafening thunder hit us.

Everything turned blurry, and for a moment, I thought we would die. I found myself on the ground on all fours with a horrible ringing in my ears. Slowly, I got up and peeked around the corner again. What I saw was an apocalyptic scene of devastation. An infernal fire was ablaze where the factory building had been, and burning debris rained everywhere. There was no sign of the helicopter, and I couldn't tell if it had crashed or if it was behind the gigantic black cloud, forming over the exploded building.

The androids chasing us were scattered around, fuming and sparking. Apparently, they had been hit with the full force of the shockwave. I turned toward my friends and was relieved to see that they were unharmed.

"Are you ok?" I asked, hardly hearing my own voice through the ringing in my ears.

"Yes," Giuseppe said shakily. "What happened?"

"I have no frakking clue," I replied. "But we need to get out of here."

Chromie helped Giu up who had been the most shaken of us, then we ran off as quickly as we could, using the smoke and chaos to cover our tracks.

At first, we were completely confused about what had just happened. But we soon found out. We managed to leave the area on foot and found an autonomous vehicle that Chromie hacked for us.

In the car, we watched the NNZ news feed on integrated screens.

Apparently, a group of terrorists had planted a bomb in an Astropoly facility and was now on the run. The footage from the helicopter showed us.

Thankfully, we all had been wearing our glasses, which had made our faces unrecognizable, but half of Novoline were now after us. According to NNZ, we were part of a dangerous group that had been rioting and creating mayhem lately, and Novoline would retaliate with full force.

All of this was a lie, of course.

After the first shock, we discussed what to do and finally decided that there was only one place for us to go and one person who hopefully would have answers for us: Monarch.

When we arrived at the warehouse, we were surprised to be told he was expecting us.

Tired, confused, and pretty pissed off, we went up to his office.

Monarch sat behind his desk and grinned when we entered. Then he slowly clapped his hands.

"Bravo, my young friends!"

Wilhelm, Giuseppe, and I exchanged puzzled looks. Giu opened his mouth to say something, but I was quicker.

"What in the frakking hell is going on here?"

"You did an excellent job," the underworld boss replied. "You survived. Frankly, I'm surprised and impressed."

"It was all a setup," I hissed. "The bomb was in the package you gave us."

"Yes," he admitted with a shrug. "Novoline paid us to plant a bomb at Astropoly, so they have a reason to go after a group they wanted to wipe out for while."

"Novoline?" I said. "I thought we're unaffiliated."

Monarch chuckled. "Clearly, you kids still have a lot to learn. We're unaffiliated, which means we work for everyone who pays us. And they pay us a lot of money to do their dirty work. I see a bright future for the three of you in my organization. Well done. Now off with you to the kiosk. The ladies there are waiting to pay you out."

"What about Novoline?" I asked. "They're after us!"

Monarch winked. "Not anymore."

At the door, Giuseppe turned around one more time and pulled the envelope we had stolen from the safe out of his bag. "What about this?"

The underworld boss laughed. "Keep it."

Completely stunned, we went to the kiosk and were paid double what we had been promised.

"A little bonus from Mr. Monarch," one of the women answered our unspoken question.

We left the building and I inhaled the warm night air, happy to be alive.

Only now, Giu opened the envelope. It was empty.

story by Anna Mocikat



Anna Mocikat is the award-winning author of Behind Blue Eyes, Shadow City and Cyber Squad.

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