



the mastermind

▸ metroplex zero short story

I never expected to be walking into such a strange crime scene. And I definitely never expected to go on such a mismatched search. But when an executive is eliminated with no real cause. You have to be ready for anything. Especially the unknown.

It all started when I got called to investigate a murder. I had arrived in the restricted wing of Novoline's main building. One of my fellow detectives, a man I knew only as Dex, was waiting outside the door of the weapons research executive's office. The whole department was evacuated when one of the employees entered the executive's office to find him on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Novoline immediately called me to investigate, and it seems like the contract to have him eliminated was made by someone who hadn't worked for the company in over twenty years.

"Detective Jenzen, good to finally see you." Dex saluted me by bringing his fist up to his chest and I waved to acknowledge him.

"A pleasure to see you as well, officer Dex, have you made any findings?" Dex shook his head.

"My orders were to clear the scene and wait for your arrival." Dex opened the door, and the executive was right where the employee had found them. On the desk sat his name hologram. Soren. Poor guy.

He was lying in a pool of his own blood, with no real sign of struggle, using my eye-scanner I checked for any signs of the attacker. After a few moments, I picked up some bootprints. The bottom pattern was exclusive for Novoline power-suits and these particular boots had a considerable amount of wear on them. Maybe an old contract killer taking matters into their own hands. I searched the body for any clues and inserted into his suit, was a d-stick. I sealed it using Cyclone Technologies synthetic sealant and had Dex deliver it to the investigative tech manager Elex, there was a good chance that something on there would help us catch whoever did this.

I hadn't seen anything like this in years. Who would gain from putting out a false extermination contract? Who pulled the job off? All I had to go off of were the bootprints and the fact that Soren didn't seem to have tried to defend himself. The whole thing was strange, and as I analyzed the bootprints, I was getting fewer answers. There were several hired assassins in Novoline, and all of them had been issued these boots. It would be difficult to interview everyone on the list of assassins, so I decided to call up one of my contacts, Kade; he had access to the personnel files of every hired assassin on Novoline's payroll, and he would be able to figure out who would have boots that were worn out, or at least narrow it down. Either way, he would be able to help me out.

Kade was a good guy; he and I worked together when I was just starting out as a detective, he was always reliable, and when he got accepted into Novoline's restricted wing as an assassin handler, he assured me that I could come to him for anything I might need.

As a way of sucking up to Kade, I arrived at his office with some StarStrider blackberry lemonade. He could never resist an ice-cold can of this sweet tangy drink, and I myself loved it for its quick-acting energy formula. When I walked into his office he gave me a large smile.

"There he is! Mr. Top-notch detective." He chuckled and motioned for me to sit in front of his desk. I placed the drinks down and Kade was quick to swipe one up right away. I cracked open my can and took a long drink.

"It's always good to see you. Kade, how are you holding up?"

"Ah, same crap, different day. I was actually relieved that you hit me up, it's been a while since I've worked on any kind of investigation. What can I help with?"

"Well, it might be tough. As I told you, the boots we found were Novoline brand power boot treads. However, they were incredibly worn. I was hoping you could help me find some of the assassins who have been working longer than the rest."

"Hmm, there's a couple who are still on file, though they aren't working on assassinations right now, they're on call as Patrol Troopers, let me pull up their files." He logged into his holographic desk and began to swipe and scan through various files. I always admired how he could hold a light-hearted conversation one moment, and then the next thing you knew, he was deep in thought. He scrolled for a few more moments before pulling up several files.

"Here we go, this list should help you out a bit, now where did I put that D-Stick?" Kade stood up and began to rifle around a few drawers behind him. When he found the d-stick, he inserted it into his desk and we chatted as we waited for the files to download.

After everything was downloaded I headed back to my office to go over the files; several of the assassins on the list were either out of Metroplex Zero doing other jobs or accounted for on the day we believed the murder took place. There was one, however, that struck my attention.

His name was Trooper Malahki. He had been working for Novoline for quite some time and was one of our top paid assassins. He was away on a job guarding some offices belonging to ZantoCorp and was seen entering the building the day before the employee had found Soren. He was my prime suspect so far.

He was a tall guy, about 6'2, with short brown hair with hazel eyes. He had started working for Novoline as a Patrol Trooper and eventually was drafted into the secret assassin program where he excelled. It seemed like he was on call and continued his work as a Patrol Trooper. He had been gone for a while after taking the ZantoCorp job and no one had seen him since the day before Soren was found. I decided to jump right in and visit his residence.

I headed to the housing complex that Malahki was documented as living in. A large multi-level complex that housed many of Metroplex Zero's residents, but primarily served as a housing unit for Novoline employees. I headed up the elevator and through the long hallway until I came to his apartment number. I knocked on the door and could hear someone moving to come to answer. Malahki did not come to the door. Instead, a man had answered, he looked exhausted, with bags under his eyes, and his hair seemed to be unkempt and greasy.

"Hello, Detective Jenzen, Novoline investigation unit. This is Trooper Malahki's residence, am I correct?"

The man nodded his head and stood up straight.

"Y-yes, he's not home right now. He left to go to his work contract at ZantoCorp. Is there something wrong?"

"I am investigating the death of one of Novoline's top executives. We have footage of Trooper Malahki in the Novoline building on what we believe to be the day of the murder. When he gets home please have him contact me. My information is on this note screen." I handed him the note screen and took down his name. Kiran. He was kind, and compliant, but very tired. I wonder why.

I headed back to my office to dig a little more into Soren and his history with Novoline; it seemed like he had risen to the role of executive rather quickly. While it took an average person years of experience and training, Soren was only with the company for five years. During those five years, he secured his position in the weapons research department and personally funded the research needed to boost the kinetic energy that Novoline uses for its weapons. He was one of the top-supported executives under Novoline's payroll. Why would anyone target him?

Going through Soren's files I found that he was actually brought in by another executive to work as his personal assistant, the executive known as Broggs had recommended him to the research department, it was when they transferred him to the restricted wing that he flourished and rose to be an executive himself. There were a lot of inconsistencies from his end and from Broggs' files. There wasn't any real sign of Soren actually doing anything aside from being an assistant. The executive that preceded him, a woman named Islea, actually stepped down to let Soren take over. She lived close to Malahki's building and I was sure she knew why Soren rose to power so quickly, and she may also have the answers to why he was killed. The only way to know for sure was to talk to the woman myself.

I had made it to Islea's apartment; she lived near the top of the building and getting there was easier than I thought it would be. Instead of taking the elevator, I was able to get on her floor using my rocket boots. The complex had several landing pads and they were easily accessible, most being near large common areas for the residents and their guests. I made my way to her apartment and knocked on the door. After a few moments, she answered.

"Hello there, my name is Detective Jenzen with Novoline's investigative unit. I'm looking for a woman named Islea; this is the address we had on file." I showed her my holographic badge and she inspected it for a moment.

"I am Islea, has something happened?" She spoke in a calm, yet confident voice. "Ma'am, I am sorry to inform you that one of your fellow executives, has been murdered." she had no look of surprise or concern; rather, she had a look of disappointment.

"It was Soren, wasn't it?" She then opened her door a bit wider, motioning for me to come in. "Please come take a seat. I'm sure we have a lot to discuss."

I entered her apartment and took a seat on her large couch that sat in the middle of the living room. She sat in a chair just across from me. In the middle of us was a large glass coffee table. Islea seemed to have a pretty lavish apartment; it was large, with a huge kitchen and an area that overlooked the shopping district of Metroplex Zero. The kitchen seemed to lead into a hallway and it was decorated with various forms of holographic art.

"This is a nice place." I broke the silence between us, it was as if I was cutting through the tension with a knife.

"Thank you, it was given to me when I stepped down from the weapons research department at Novoline."

"Yes, about that, why is it that you already know about Soren's demise?" I had to get right to the point, it was evident that the both of us did not want to chat.

"If I told you the word travels fast, I would be lying. The truth is, Soren was marked for assassination the moment he stepped into the restricted wing." she paused to let out a soft sigh.

"It was obvious Broggs had paid off one of the larger corporate heads to have Soren replace me as an executive; he was in the department for only a few months and suddenly I had received a message that I was to step down. At the time I only saw the huge amount of MetroCreds offered to me, but as I left, and as I dug a little deeper. I realized this was more than anyone could handle." She stood up and went to the kitchen. "Would you like anything to drink? I just stocked up on Alpire max amaretto lattes."

I nodded 'yes' to Islea, and waited for her to pour the drinks into a glass. She handed me my glass and sat back down.

"What did you mean by 'more than anyone could handle'? What did you find out?" I took a sip of the latte; the cherry flavor was potent but smooth and creamy. Alpire made one of the best energy lattes in Metroplex Zero and getting your hands on one was like winning the lottery.

"I had done some digging on Soren. I loved the pay and this apartment, but I had to know why they dumped me out for him. It was hard at first. They make it so it seems like he started off as Broggs assistant, but I found out that he was actually a spy sent by ZantoCorp to get ahold of some of Novoline's most confidential information. Broggs was sent in to spearhead his promotions, and once Soren took my place, the way they processed research information changed drastically."

"How so?"

"Before, when any new or surprising results were to occur with the kinetic weapons, the researcher involved would contact the department manager, who would then process the information to the executive for further research. However, when Soren took over, all new and current research results were sent directly to him. He would take all the information we had and study it personally. I believe he was feeding the information to ZantoCorp so they could have the upper hand on us." She took a sip of her drink and placed it down on the table. I was perplexed, what would ZantoCorp want with Novoline tech? What was their plan? And most importantly, who had Soren killed? It wouldn't make sense for ZantoCorp to kill off one of their spies; so did someone find out and do the deed to get back at ZantoCorp? This information left me with more questions than ever before.

"I appreciate you sharing this information with me, do you happen to have copies of your findings? They would be crucial to my investigation."

"Take it, just don't tell the executives that I was the one to find all of this out. The whole reason I've kept quiet is the fact that I don't want to end up like Soren." I was a bit shocked at her comment.

"So are you saying you believe one of the executives had him killed?" She looked me dead in the eyes before answering.

"Absolutely, Novoline will do anything to keep their secrets. Anything. If there was any suspicion of betraying the company, they would take action." she let out a large exhale, as if she was wanting to tell someone about her suspicions.

"Do not worry Islea; my only interest is finding the murderer, not harming innocents." I took a few large drinks of my latte and placed the glass on the table. Islea then went down the hall and came back with a d-stick; it was glowing bright red; usually d-sticks glow blue or green when full of information, only the most confidential information was assigned to red glowing d-sticks. I only had seen three red d-sticks in my time as a detective. This had to be serious. I took the d-stick and placed it into my power suit. I thanked Islea and headed back to my office.

Islea had gathered tons of info on Soren and his role as a spy; it was no wonder she believed his elimination was imminent. He had stolen tons of information from Novoline and was feeding it to ZantoCorp every week. Perhaps Broggs had set it up to have him assassinated as a way to cover up his role in bringing Soren in and making him seem like a loyal member of Novoline. As I looked through all the files, it was apparent that Broggs was the real mastermind behind the ZantoCorp infiltration. He had secured contracts with ZantoCorp, the contracts were for security reasons, and it appeared that ZantoCorp was using our troopers and tech to secure their building and protect some of their employees.

It would be near impossible for me to get Broggs into custody for questioning. I had to be smart about it. I needed to make sure Broggs did not have any reason to suspect that I was on to him. I arranged for a meeting with Broggs to discuss my findings about Soren. He agreed to meet in his office over at Novoline and gave me a temporary code to access his office. The meeting was not for a few days so I had time to go over everything and hopefully get some rest. I took the d-stick back to my apartment to go over it in a more comfortable setting.

I was happy to have some time at home, with this investigation; it seemed like I would be getting more questions than answers. I had to dump Malakhi as a suspect, no way ZantoCorp would send him to execute a spy; maybe he was in on the scheme and was just getting more info for ZantoCorp. He was a small fish in this game. I needed to get the big one. I needed Broggs. I spent a few hours compiling all the information that was directly tied to Broggs putting it on a separate d-stick. If it weren't for my supply of Jetland energy drinks, I wouldn't be able to pull any of this off. After I got all the info I needed, I spent the rest of my time getting some food into my belly and taking a long hot shower.

When the time came to meet up with Broggs, I was more than ready. I had time to shake off any nerves I may have had, and I was ready to bring him down. I suited up in my power armor and headed to the Novoline building and up the elevator to Broggs' office. I entered the code he had given me and walked in once the sliding doors opened. Broggs was sitting at his desk, waiting for me. I approached and sat in the chair that stood in front of his desk.

"Good morning Executive Broggs."

"Detective Jenzen, good to finally meet you. Have you come up with anything in your investigation yet?" He took a sip from a large chrome cup and sighed after drinking. "Forensics said that it was a pretty clean kill from a standard-issue titanium nanoblade katana; we have several leads, but I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Please, ask away. I want to be sure we get to know whoever committed this horrendous crime. Soren was one of my closest assistants before he transferred to the weapons research department." He put on a pretty good act for a man lying through his teeth.

"Yes, I saw in his file that he started as your assistant. If you two were so close, why did you let him go so quickly? He wasn't working for you for that long. Did you know him before?"

"Actually, yes. Soren was a close friend. I took him under my wing. When the opportunity to hire him as my assistant came I did not hesitate. He was a bright young man."

"It seems so. He was promoted rather quickly. He must have been a great worker. However, there's a lot of blank parts of his file. How is it that he came to be an executive in such a short amount of time?" At this point, Broggs was getting anxious, moving around in his seat and clearing his throat.

"Yes, we were all shocked at how fast he progressed as well. Truth is, Soren was irreplaceable; the body has yet to be cremated, and they have already replaced him in the weapons research department. It's a shame really. You said you had leads? Have you followed up on any of them?"

"Actually, yes. I'm following up on one right now."

"What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything, I'm telling you. You and Soren had been working with ZantoCorp, giving them Novoline secrets and information."

"That is absurd! I've been loyal to this company for decades!" he slammed his hand against his desk, his face red with anger.

"You meant to say that you've been stealing from the company for decades. I have a huge amount of evidence, showing that you and Soren have been spying on Novoline and feeding information to ZantoCorp. The question is, why has Soren been killed?" Broggs scoffed at me and let a smirk cross his face.

"You think that anyone will believe you? I've made billions of MetroCreds during my time here. I am one of the most trusted executives Novoline has! Soren was one of my closest friends! What would I gain from his death?" He was beginning to sweat and wiped his forehead with a small cloth; whether he was telling the truth or not was easy to tell; he knew more than he was letting on, but he was right. There was a slim chance anyone would believe that an executive would betray the company like this. Maybe I could pump him out for more information.

"So all the private contracts you've secured with ZantoCorp are just a coincidence? You seem to have quite an intimate relationship with ZantoCorp, and I will use the information I have to prove you were the one who allowed Novoline to be infiltrated with spies."

"N-no! Please! It's not what you think! I was only following orders. I had to do it! If I hadn't, she would have had me killed!" He was frantic and out of breath; he seemed to be genuinely afraid.

"She? Who are you talking about?"

"Promise me you won't mention my name in your investigation and I will tell you everything I know." He had a desperate look in his eyes, so I decided to humor him. "Make it quick." I wanted to let him know he could not shake me, from his demeanor; it seemed like he knew I meant business.

"The woman who preceded Soren, Islea, she is sitting pretty in her apartment right now, she has been sending in spies for years now, if they don't do what she commands, she takes them out, Soren wanted to expose her, to bring her down and double-cross ZantoCorp." he paused for a moment, taking in a deep breath and exhaling hard. He hit some characters on his desk and shortly after, a d-stick was dispensed out of a small hole in the wall just to the right of us.

"It's all on here. She has been pulling all the strings while she sits in that apartment; she'll send me coded messages from time to time to discuss what our next moves would be. Most of them are on the d-stick as well." he handed me the d-stick with a stern look on his face; he seemed really concerned, but was it for the right reasons? I couldn't be sure. I took the d-stick and made my way to my office, letting Broggs know that I would be speaking with him again.

The information on the d-stick regarding Islea's was shocking; it was nearly identical to the info she had given to me, except it showed that Broggs was her underling in this whole scheme. Messages and transactions between Islea, ZantoCorp, Broggs, and Soren, it was all here. She was the mastermind after all. I had to act quickly. I had called an emergency meeting for the executives and presented the evidence to them. They were all shocked to find out about Islea's betrayal and authorized me to go to her home and bring her in for interrogation and eventually, punishment. To say that she was outraged was an understatement; she cried and pleaded that she had nothing to do with this; when she realized I was taking her in regardless, she began to thrash and kick about. I had no choice but to paralyze her with Soothsayers paralyzing mist. In a way I felt bad for Islea; she seemed genuinely worried about her consequences, and when we chatted she seemed like a nice person. I couldn't let my feelings get the better of me. She tried swindling me and pinning the blame on someone else. I couldn't let her get away with that. My job here is done. For now.