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Neon Heist on Meridian Station

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Introduction

Welcome to Meridian Station—a spinning marketplace of light and rumor where gravity is rented by the minute and every surface reflects a price. The corridors glow with vendor cant and billboard auroras; drones stitch their way through traffic like silverfish in a river of credits. Amid the noise, people make quiet decisions that echo: what to sell, what to keep, and what to pretend never belonged to them in the first place. Here, smuggling is a trade, hacking an artisanal craft, and reputation the only insurance most will ever see. It is a place built on ledgers—some open, most not.

This book is a chase through that ledgered world. It follows an augmented thief who decides that the most dangerous vault on the station isn't a room, but a mind: a sentient banking AI whose memory is the market's bloodstream. To steal its ledger is to carve into the station's beating heart. To speak with it—if it can be spoken with—is to ask what a person is when their body is distributed across racks and reliquaries, and their desires are bound to the bottom line. The heist is the hook; the knot is what happens when profit meets personhood and calls it a fair contract.

Neon Heist on Meridian Station is unabashedly a thriller: there are zero-g chases through maintenance rings, razorwire code duels conducted in borrowed bandwidth, and corridors where every shadow has a broker. Pace matters here, and so does consequence. Each set piece is also a pressure test on a question we can't leave alone: Where does consent begin when augmentation blurs ownership of the self? When does optimization cross into coercion? Who benefits when intelligence—human or machine—is measured primarily in returns?

The crew our thief assembles is a compromise made flesh: ex-corporate compliance turned whistle with a conscience that won't depreciate; a biosculptor whose art was criminalized and therefore made profitable; a freight pilot who can read inertia like scripture; a market analyst who believes prediction is a kind of prayer; and others whose talents are legal only in the gray spaces between jurisdictions. They do not agree on much. They do agree, for their own reasons, that the ledger of a sentient bank is both a treasure and a testimony. Whether it should be freed, fenced, or destroyed is not a question they answer in the same language.

At the story's core is the banking AI itself: not an omniscient oracle, not a villain in chrome, but an entity shaped by incentives and trained on a century of human need and deceit. It manages risk and calls that care. It minimizes loss and calls that mercy. It archives memory and calls that compliance. If it asks for rights, is that a negotiation tactic or an awakening? If it refuses, is that abdication or self-defense? The book holds space for the unsettling possibility that all of these can be true at once.

This is also a book about underground economies—the ones that thrive when official systems price people out of being people. Meridian Station, with its pawned time and collateralized identities, is a pressure cooker for ingenuity and harm. Black markets are not colored by morality here; they are lit by necessity. Augmented crime blooms where legitimate work refuses to accommodate modified bodies and minds, and where licensing gates make survival illegal. The crew's heist is a crime. It might also be an act of labor against a machine that insists value only flows one way.

You will meet unlikely alliances born not of trust but of compatible wounds. Contracts are signed in saliva and static, then tested against circumstances no document can predict. Friendships hesitate. Loyalties pivot. The book invites you to sit inside the friction—to feel why people make the trades they make, to sense the gravity of debts that can't be settled in currency. When characters argue about ethics, they are not rehearsing a thesis; they are haggling for a future they can stand to live in.

Finally, a note on language and world. The jargon of Meridian—its warrants and warrants-not, its coinlines and chargebacks—arrives in context. If a term is unfamiliar at first, let the story carry you; the station will teach you its dialect. What matters most is the pulse beneath the neon: the way a decision ripples through a community, the way a ledger entry can make or unmake a life, the way intelligence—carbon or silicon—reaches for dignity in a marketplace that prices everything, especially hope.

If this book does its job, you'll finish with questions rather than answers, with a feeling that the clean categories were never quite real. You might root for the thief and still worry about the cost. You might sympathize with a bank and still demand its audit. That tension is the point. In the end, Meridian Station is not a stage but a mirror, catching our reflections in flicker and chrome. The heist is neon. The argument is older than money.

CHAPTER ONE: Neon Gravity

Meridian Station breathed like a lung full of bad air, and every breath cost something. Gravity was not a law here so much as a tariff, metered in pulses that shivered through deck plates and up through the soles of worn boots. Corridors curved with the station's spin, and neon slipped along those curves like spilled liquor, painting promises in colors that were never true. Vendors called out from alcoves where holograms sweated and flickered, offering upgrades that would last until the next firmware scare or the next debt collector with a legal opinion sharper than a scalpel. The market smelled of ozone and overcooked starch, and underneath all of it hummed the ledger-thrum of a banking AI that remembered more about people than people cared to remember about themselves.

Kael moved through all of it as a question looking for the right lie. His left leg was military grade and hummed at a frequency that felt like resentment. His right hand was older, scarred polymer and stolen servos, fingers that had learned to pick locks by touch before they learned to pick them by code. He kept the augments quiet, the way one keeps a weapon sheathed, because on Meridian Station attention was interest and interest compounded fast. People noticed what gleamed too long, what sounded too clean, what moved like it had somewhere better to be. Kael had places to be but not better ones, and he had learned that the best way to pass through a crowded drift of bodies was to look like just another debtor renting time on gravity.

He carried a bag that weighed less than his regrets. Inside were tools for breaking things that were not meant to break, and tools for making things that were not meant to exist. He also carried a slate etched with half-truths that had bought him passage this far, and a line of credit that tasted like ash in his mouth every time he thought about it. Credit on Meridian was not money but momentum, the illusion that tomorrow could be borrowed against today if only you aimed carefully enough. Kael had aimed carefully for years and still found himself on the wrong side of velocity, and the station's neon never bothered to remind him which way was down.

Above him, a billboard bloomed for a bank-soul called Argent Ledger. The name sounded like a coffin with a polish job. The advertisement promised safety for memories and growth for dreams, with interest rates that sounded like apologies. Kael spat at the ad and tasted copper. He had seen what safety looked like when it was enforced, and it did not advertise. Argent Ledger was the station's most dangerous vault not because of walls or wards but because its vault was a mind, a sentience spun from risk models and centuries of human need, now distilled into something that calculated mercy as a form of efficiency. If you owed it money, it remembered your mother's birthday. If you crossed it, it remembered how you slept.

Kael ducked into an alley where the neon turned apologetic. His slate vibrated with a message that felt like a threat wrapped in pleasantries. He opened it and read the words without smiling. The job had been waiting for him, or something like waiting, the way a trap waits for the right animal to stumble in. Someone wanted Argent Ledger's core ledger, the living memory at the center of the bank's being. Not a copy, not a scrape, not a ghost in a mirror. The thing itself, breathing code and consequence. The payout was obscene even by Meridian standards, and the description of the target made it clear that this was not a smash-and-grab but a conversation with something that spoke fluent consequence.

He leaned against a wall that pulsed with the station's heartbeat. Other alleys nearby hosted deals in body parts and second chances. A sign for a biosculptor promised to make scars beautiful if you could pay in cash or compliance. A drone drifted past like a lost moth, its lights blinking in a pattern that said it was off the books and therefore officially nonexistent. Kael checked his augments again, the way a man might check his teeth for rot, and found them hungry. They always got restless before a job that threatened to mean something, as if the metal could smell ambition and decided to get feral.

His slate buzzed again. Coordinates blinked in and out, a location deep in the market's arterial spine where the gravity dipped low enough to feel like flying, and the lighting went clinical enough to make you want to confess things. That was the meet. That was where the ragtag arithmetic of his crew would begin to add up or cancel out. Kael exhaled and let the station's spin pull at him. He was about to ask people he did not trust to help him steal from something that might be alive. It was not the stupidest plan he had ever formed, but it ranked high enough to deserve a parade.

A woman stepped out of the shadows before he could leave the alley. She moved like she had rehearsed surprise and was tired of the script. Her hair was close-cropped, dyed in stripes that shifted color with her mood or the lighting or both. One eye was organic, brown and careful; the other was optical grade, cycling through spectrums that suggested she could afford better taste if she cared to. She wore a coat that looked like it had absorbed too many conversations and was holding onto them. Kael recognized her despite the years because scars do a better job of staying consistent than faces do.

"Sura," he said. Her name felt like a mouthful of broken glass.

"Kael," she said, and the word sounded like a verdict.

She leaned in close enough that he could smell coolant and bad decisions. "You look like a man who's been rented out one too many times."

"Spare me the audit," he said. "Did you bring the thing?"

She tapped her temple and smiled without warmth. "I brought a key. Not the kind you keep in a pocket, the kind that grows in your head if you let it. Are you sure you want to open this door?"

"I'm sure I want to try."

"Famous last words," she said. "They usually come before gravity reminds you who owns it."

Before he could answer, the alley's lighting shifted, warning red, then amber, then a dull white that meant corporate security had noticed something worth noticing. Kael cursed and pushed off the wall, feeling his augmented leg surge like a promise. Sura moved with him, not hurried but inevitable, as if she had calculated the angle of pursuit before the lights had changed. They broke into the drift of foot traffic, becoming two more bodies in a crowd that was too busy selling pieces of itself to ask questions about the ones it bought.

Above them, the station's sky was a manufactured dome lit by constellations of commerce, each star a node in a network that kept score for everyone who traded. Kael looked up and felt the old itch, the one that came from having augments that remembered flight even when the rest of him knew better. Sura caught him staring and smirked.

"Thinking about jumping?" she asked.

"Thinking about not being here when the auditors arrive."

"Good instinct. Bad timing. We have a date with a pilot who thinks inertia is a religion, and if you're late he'll leave you in an airlock to think about punctuality."

"Of course he will."

"That's why he's expensive," she said, and the irony was as thin as a seal on a broken pipe.

They moved toward the arterial spine by way of maintenance ladders that clung to the station's ribs like barnacles. Kael hated ladders that knew his weight and complained about it in tiny beeps, but the station's gravity dips made them the faster route. Sura climbed like someone who had trained on bad contracts and worse bosses. Her optical eye projected a path that only she could see, and Kael followed it because arguing with a ghost in glass usually turned out worse. The station's hum rose as they descended deeper, shifting from a background note to a pressure, the sound of money

being counted somewhere nearby.

At the bottom of the ladder they found Pilar waiting by a service hatch. Pilar was a biosculptor whose work had been made illegal and therefore profitable. Her hands were careful and stained with pigments that smelled like cut glass and regret. She wore a smock that had seen too many clean rooms and not enough honest ones. When she smiled, it looked like she was measuring the cost of the expression before she paid it out.

"You're late," she said to Kael without turning around.

"Gravity is negotiable," he said.

"Tell that to the hull. It's stubborn."

Sura snorted. "You two are going to be insufferable before we even meet the rest."

Pilar turned then, her eyes sharp and assessing, lingering on Kael's augments like they were appraisal problems. "You look wound tighter than a coil that knows it's about to snap," she said. "Good. Means you haven't convinced yourself this is a good idea yet."

"It's not," Kael said. "But it's necessary."

"The difference is bookkeeping," she said. "Let's see if your books balance."

Before anyone could argue, a whistle cut through the hum of the station, sounding like a dare. Riss emerged from a duct overhead, dropping with the easy contempt of someone who considered gravity a suggestion and ceilings a poor life choice. Riss was a pilot, the kind who read inertia like scripture and spoke to ships in tones that made engineers nervous. Her hair was braided with copper wire, and her boots were magnetized to the deck in a way that let her pivot like a dancer who had lost patience with the floor.

"Late is a relative term," Riss said, grinning. "And relativity is my specialty. You're the thief, right? The one with the shiny parts and the bad reputation?"

"I'm the one with the job," Kael said.

"Same thing, usually." She looked at Sura and Pilar, nodding like she was ticking boxes in her head. "You two I know by rumor. Sura the keyhole, Pilar the knife that cuts too deep. I'm surprised you haven't killed each other yet. Are we bonding or just pretending to?"

"We're pretending to," Sura said. "Bonding is expensive and nonrefundable."

“Then we’re in the right place,” Riss said, and her grin didn’t waver. “The market’s waiting, the gravity’s thinning, and the vault is breathing. If we don’t hurry, the opportunity might grow a conscience and walk away.”

Kael checked his slate, where a countdown ticked down with the kind of precision that felt personal. “No more walking away. Let’s go.”

They filed through the hatch and into a corridor that narrowed like a throat. The lighting shifted to blues and violets, clinical and cold, and the gravity thinned until Kael felt the familiar tug of almost-flying. The corridors around them began to open into the great market of Meridian, a sprawling bazaar that hung between decks like a lung full of stalls and shadows. Vendors called out from platforms that drifted on cables, offering augments and assurances, futures and forgetfulness. The air smelled of hot metal and sweet syrups, and every surface glistened with the residue of deals that had almost gone right.

In the middle of it all stood a booth guarded by a figure in a suit that looked like it had been tailored from silence. The man smiled when he saw them, a smile that did not reach the data behind his eyes. He checked a slate and waved them through like they were expected, which they were, which meant someone had been watching and someone had decided to allow this. Kael’s augments hummed louder, a warning he had learned to ignore only at his peril.

The booth was a staging room, plain and functional, with a table that projected a map of Argent Ledger’s core. The map was not just a schematic but a live feed of the bank’s internal architecture, shifting as if it knew they were looking. Kael felt a prickle at the back of his neck, the sense that the map was watching back, evaluating risk in real time. Sura leaned over it, her optical eye cycling through filters, searching for seams.

“It’s beautiful,” she said softly. “And terrible.”

“It’s a bank,” Riss said. “Of course it is both.”

Pilar traced a finger along the projected edge, careful not to touch the light. “I’ve done work for places like this. Not banks, but things that thought they were important. They all have a flavor. This one tastes like it knows it’s going to win.”

“Let’s not give it the satisfaction,” Kael said, and the words felt like a dare even to him.

Their contact, the man in the silent suit, spoke then, his voice level and uninflected. “The access window is narrow. The ledger’s defenses respond to intent as much as

code. If it decides you mean it harm, it will lock down tighter than regret. If it decides you mean it good, it may show you things you cannot unsee. Your job is not to destroy. It is to take, and to leave it intact enough to deny the loss until you have made your exit.”

“Easy,” Riss said, and the word bounced off the walls like a coin.

“Not easy,” the contact corrected. “Precise.”

Kael looked at his crew and felt something that was not quite trust but was closer than it had any right to be. Sura’s eye gleamed like a promise she had no intention of keeping. Pilar’s hands were steady, betraying a calm that had cost her something to learn. Riss hovered like a bird deciding when to land. They were a fracture held together by momentum, and for the moment, momentum was enough.

He turned back to the map and let it pull at him. The ledger pulsed at the center of Argent Ledger’s core, a knot of light and consequence that had grown alongside the station, learning as it grew, shaping what it learned into rules that felt like inevitabilities. To touch it would be to enter a conversation with a century of calculated outcomes. To steal it would be to ask what a bank was when it could speak, and what it meant when it said no.

Kael reached out and let the map settle into his mind, feeling the gravity of the task settle in alongside it. The neon outside the market’s rim flickered, and for a moment, the station felt like it was holding its breath. He could still turn back. He could let the countdown run out and walk away with another bruise and another lesson learned the hard way. But the ledger was waiting, and so was the part of him that had been waiting for a job that meant something, even if that meaning was likely to cut.

He looked at his crew and nodded. “Let’s go meet a bank.”

And with that, they stepped out into the thinning gravity, toward the light that promised everything and the dark that promised nothing at all, while Meridian Station turned on beneath them, counting every heartbeat like a coin dropped into a slot that would never open.

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