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Stolen Stardust

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Introduction

In the cradle of a galaxy drenched in neon and shadows, on planets carved up by ambition and ancient grudges, survival is a dance—fluid, dangerous, and unforgiving. Here, the rich soar above in gleaming spires while the ground-level denizens huddle in the underbelly, breathing air thick with secrets and desperation. This is the world Astra Kael calls home. She is a whisper in the static, a shadow flitting from one crime lord's den to another, a master thief with a code, a purpose, and a reputation etched across the underworld's infonet.

Each city Astra passes through is a microcosm of the conquered stars: floating market domes ablaze in color, midnight bazaars humming with illicit trade, corporations squeezing every last resource from their domains as if they could bottle gravity itself. Between these bastions of power, the gutter-born and outcasted thrive—or perish—in the gray spaces where law dissolves into opportunity. For Astra, it's all she's ever known: the thrill of bypassing a locked core, the adrenaline of slipping past retinal scans, and the satisfaction of vanishing with prize in hand, unseen and untraceable.

Politics between planets is a game of chess played with warships and espionage, but the real action pulses in the shadows—where information, technology, and trust are coin. Astra has always preferred the clear simplicity of a good heist and the unspoken camaraderie of a crew that knows when to watch your back and when to cover their own. Her motivations are simple, or so she tells herself: stick to the code, stay one step ahead, and never get caught. But in a universe where friends can become enemies in the blink of an eye, even the best rules sometimes need to be broken.

It is during one such job—a high-stakes gig targeting a vault rumored to house a relic from the forgotten wars—that Astra's world unravels. The plan is flawless, the entry smooth. But in the moments between sliding through a laser grid and cracking an iris-locked safe, everything goes sideways. There is a flash—brighter than plasma fire—then darkness. When Astra comes to, she's sprawled on a cold alloy floor, a strange, celestial tattoo pulsing blue across her wrist, and her memories, sharp as diamond before, are now scattered like stardust.

Somewhere in those missing pieces lies the answer: what she stole, who wants her dead, why the tattoo burns brighter with each passing hour. Now, Astra must navigate a maze of shifting loyalties, hunted by mercenaries, tracked by a relentless AI, and haunted by a past she can no longer reconstruct. The stakes stretch far beyond the next heist: power, identity, and perhaps the pivotal balance of the galaxy itself.

In this high-octane chronicle, Astra will risk everything—her freedom, her life, and the

fragile trust she forms with a disgraced detective and a quantum-savvy alien—to recover what was lost and outrun the bloodsoaked tide closing fast behind her. The hunt for the truth begins here, in the electric twilight between fractured memories and the blazing possibilities of a universe forever changed by stolen stardust.

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CHAPTER ONE: Broken Halo

Astra woke to a symphony of aches. Her head throbbed like a dying star, each pulse radiating outward to every nerve ending. The alloy floor beneath her was a brutal embrace, cold and unforgiving, a stark contrast to the luxurious synth-silk sheets she usually preferred. The air, thick with the metallic tang of ozone and something sickly sweet, did nothing to soothe the metallic taste in her mouth. She tried to push herself up, but her limbs felt like lead, protesting every inch of movement.

Through slitted eyes, the world swam into a blurry, distorted mosaic. A flickering emergency light cast long, dancing shadows that stretched and shrank, making the vast chamber feel even more cavernous and disorienting. She was alone, utterly alone, in what looked like the wreckage of a high-tech facility. Sparks spat from severed conduits, and the faint hum of failing machinery echoed from somewhere beyond the immediate vicinity.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to prickle at the edges of her muddled consciousness. Where was her comm unit? Her stealth-weave suit? Her arsenal of specialized tools, each one a beloved extension of her will? Nothing. Her fingers, when she finally managed to bring them into her field of vision, felt alien, clumsy. And then she saw it.

On her inner left wrist, just beneath the palm, a tattoo glowed with an ethereal, cerulean light. It wasn't a simple design; it looked like a miniature galaxy, swirling with nebulae and tiny, crystalline stars. It pulsed with a gentle rhythm, mirroring the dull ache in her skull. Astra stared at it, a flicker of recognition nagging at the periphery of her mind, but it was just out of reach, like a word on the tip of her tongue. This wasn't her usual discreet neural ink; this was something else entirely.

A sudden, sharp memory, fleeting as a dream, sliced through the fog: a flash of brilliant light, a high-pitched whine, and then darkness. Nothing before that, nothing after, just the stark, terrifying blankness. She tried to grasp at other memories—her last job, her crew, her name—but they slipped through her fingers like sand. Astra. The name felt right, tasted familiar on her tongue, but the context, the meaning, was gone.

A groaning sound nearby made her flinch, adrenaline finally kicking her sluggish body into a semblance of alertness. It sounded like something heavy shifting, dragging across the floor. Not a person. A machine? She scrambled backward, pushing herself against a half-melted console, her eyes darting through the gloom. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat urging her to move, to hide, to do anything but stay still.

Her instincts, though disconnected from their source, were clearly screaming danger. She needed to get out. But where was "out"? And where had she been? The fragmented recall of a high-stakes heist, a vault, a relic—it was all vague, like trying to remember a dream moments after waking. The tattoo pulsed harder, a tiny beacon in the darkness, as if trying to tell her something.

A sudden, jarring clang echoed from the far end of the chamber, followed by a faint whirring sound. Whatever was out there was moving closer. Astra forced herself to stand, wobbling precariously. Her legs felt weak, her muscles screaming in protest. She scanned her immediate surroundings for anything, a weapon, a cover, a way to orient herself. The room was a twisted mess of ruptured data conduits, overturned plinths, and scorched machinery.

Her eyes landed on a shattered display panel, shards of iridescent glass scattered across the floor. Beneath it, a dull gleam caught her attention. A small, sleek vibro-knife. Her fingers closed around it, the familiar weight a tiny anchor in the storm of her confusion. It was a cheap model, not her usual customized blade, but it was something. A flicker of satisfaction, primal and instinctive, pulsed through her.

She moved with a cautious grace she didn't realize she possessed, her bare feet silent on the debris-strewn floor. Each step was a gamble, each shadow a potential threat. The air grew colder, and a new scent joined the ozone: the faint, acrid smell of burnt circuitry. The humming grew louder, more insistent. It sounded like a drone, a heavy-duty security model.

Suddenly, a beam of bright light swept across the wreckage, freezing Astra in her tracks. She ducked behind a pile of twisted metal, pressing herself flat against the cold surface. The light moved slowly, methodically, painting the devastated room in stark white. Her breath hitched. She could hear the distinct whir of rotors now, the low thrum of propulsion. It was close. Too close.

Through a gap in the metal, she caught a glimpse: a heavy-set security drone, its optical sensor glowing red, systematically scanning the area. It wasn't just patrolling; it was searching. For her. The drone was a standard corporate-grade Enforcer model, usually armed with sonic disruptors and stun coils. This one, however, looked more heavily armored, its chassis scarred, as if it had been through a rough encounter.

Astra's mind, despite its shattered state, began to piece together fragments of tactical knowledge. The drone's optical sensor would detect her body heat. Her best bet was to find a blind spot, a shadow deep enough to mask her thermal signature. The vibro-knife felt pitifully inadequate against a machine like that, but it was all she had.

She calculated her movements, timing her dashes between the sweeps of the drone's

light. The hum of its rotors filled the air, a relentless, mechanical heartbeat. She needed to reach a service tunnel she'd spotted earlier, a dark maw in the wall that looked like a viable escape route. It was a risky move, directly in the drone's patrol path, but it was her only shot.

Taking a deep breath, Astra sprang from her hiding spot, sprinting low to the ground. The drone's optical sensor swung around, locking onto her. A shrill alarm blared, echoing off the high ceilings. "Unauthorized personnel detected. Terminating with extreme prejudice." The mechanical voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

A high-pitched whine preceded a burst of crimson energy lashing out from the drone's arm. Astra dove, the energy bolt scorching the floor where she'd been a heartbeat before. Her body reacted on pure instinct, a dancer's agility born from countless escapes. She rolled, came up on one knee, and launched herself towards the service tunnel.

Another bolt sizzled past her ear, narrowly missing. The air crackled with energy. She heard the whine of the drone's servomotors as it adjusted its aim, its heavy form lumbering forward. There was no time to think, only to act. She hit the ground again, sliding under a low-hanging piece of debris, and scrambled into the dark maw of the service tunnel.

The drone's alarm continued to shriek, but its bulk prevented it from following her into the narrow conduit. Astra pressed herself against the cold, grimy metal wall, listening to the frustrated whirring outside. The tattoo on her wrist pulsed erratically, mirroring the frantic beat of her heart. She was safe, for now, but the amnesia and the glowing mark were still a terrifying enigma. Her escape was only the beginning of a hunt for answers in a galaxy that clearly wanted her dead.

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