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The Starbound Heist

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Introduction

Captain Zane Calder had long ago made peace with the fact that every star had a shadow. Once the pride of the Galactic Union's pilot corps, now he was a name spoken in hushed tones in back-alley cantinas and asteroid outposts at the edge of civilization—a rogue, a smuggler, and, sometimes, a myth. Yet, beneath the ink of his reputation lay the scars of battles fought and alliances shattered. It was the darkness between the stars that taught Zane Calder the invaluable lessons of survival—and the true cost of freedom in a galaxy ruled by order, profit, and fear.

The universe had not always seemed so cold, or so small. There were times, in younger years, when Zane believed he could fly his starfighter clear to the edge of creation and back. But that was before the Union's growing greed strangled out the hope of ordinary citizens, and before a single, life-altering mistake put a price on his head. Now, Zane lived on instinct and impulse, surrounded by a crew as motley as the routes they traveled—a runaway cybernetic engineer, a disgraced Union tactician, a sharpshooter with a haunted gaze, and a broker whose loyalties were as mutable as his face.

The Starbound Heist begins at the edge of desperation, in the dark orbit of a dying red sun, where Zane is presented with an opportunity equal parts promise and peril. The mission: to steal the aurora crystal—the galaxy's most potent energy source—locked away in the impenetrable vaults of the Galactic Union. Success would mean more than credits or infamy; it could tip the balance of power and grant Zane's crew an escape from their pursuers, and perhaps, from their pasts.

As the crew assembles, each member brings not only skill but secrets—a hidden history of betrayals, losses, and debts unpaid. Trust, if it grows at all, grows slowly, striving against suspicion and necessity. Their path through the cosmos winds through bustling trade ports and deserted planet-wrecks, each stop illuminating another facet of these fugitives and their inexorable commitment to one another and the impossible task ahead.

Zane knows better than to hope for a clean getaway; he's survived too many close calls, seen too many plans twist into traps. But for the first time in years, the stakes feel meaningful. This is more than just another job—it is a chance to lay old ghosts to rest, to challenge the machines of power that churn endlessly from one system to the next, and to rewrite at least one corner of the galactic story.

With every chapter, "The Starbound Heist" dives deeper into the ever-shifting twilight between loyalty and greed, unity and survival. Surrounded by hostile stars and

haunted by his own choices, Zane Calder must navigate both the labyrinthine corridors of the Union's stronghold and the even more treacherous terrain of his own crew's hearts. The adventure has begun, and only the bold—or the desperate—will see it through to the end.

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CHAPTER ONE: Outlaw's Edge

The *Stardust* shimmered, a battered sparrow among the predatory eagles of the Galactic Union. Its hull bore the scars of a thousand close calls, each patch and weld a testament to Zane Calder's improbable survival. He stood on the bridge, the holographic star-chart painting a swirling nebula across the room, its tendrils of gas and dust a familiar comfort in the chaotic void. Beyond the reinforced viewport, the dying red sun of Sector 7-Gamma bled across the inky blackness, casting long, crimson shadows that seemed to stretch into eternity.

"Another day, another credit, another miracle we haven't been vaporized," a voice rasped from Zane's left. Jax, the *Stardust's* hulking, perpetually grumpy engineer, ran a diagnostic scan on the main power conduits, his fingers dancing across the console with surprising delicacy for a man built like a repurposed cargo freighter. His cybernetic eye, a gleaming orb of chrome where a human iris once resided, whirred softly as it processed data.

Zane merely grunted, a sound that conveyed a spectrum of emotions from weary agreement to cynical amusement. He ran a hand through his perpetually unkempt dark hair, his gaze fixed on a shimmering anomaly at the edge of the nebula. "Miracles are getting expensive, Jax. We're running on fumes and favors, and both are in short supply."

"Tell me about it," Jax muttered, tapping a recalcitrant circuit with a practiced thud. "Last fuel stop cost us half our remaining credits, and that was after I charmingly persuaded the port authority to 'overlook' our expired docking permits." He paused, a flicker of something akin to pride in his voice. "He was a big fellow, but not immune to the subtle art of a well-placed wrench."

A small, amused smile touched Zane's lips. Jax's persuasion techniques rarely involved subtlety. More often, they involved the threat of rapid decompression or, as was the case with the unfortunate port authority, a demonstration of his surprising strength. "Remind me to thank him next time we're in Sector 5, Jax. Perhaps with a complimentary orbital bombardment."

"Ha. Funny, Captain," Jax replied, but there was no malice in his tone. Their banter was an old, comfortable coat, worn smooth by years of shared peril. It was a language unique to the *Stardust's* crew, a shorthand for trust and unspoken camaraderie forged in the crucible of impossible odds.

The anomaly on the star-chart began to solidify, resolving into a faint energy

signature. Zane leaned closer, his expression sharpening. "Something's out there. Not a Union patrol, not a pirate raid. Too... clean."

"Clean usually means trouble, Captain," Jax observed, glancing up from his console. "Especially when we're out here in the black, where 'clean' is an urban legend."

Suddenly, the ship's comm system crackled to life, a high-pitched whine that grated on the nerves. "*Stardust*? This is... a friendly hail. Or at least, I hope it is. Unless you're the bounty hunter I owe a rather significant sum to, in which case, disregard."

Zane exchanged a look with Jax, a silent acknowledgment of the unexpected. He activated the comm. "This is the *Stardust*. Identify yourself."

A slightly breathless, undeniably feminine voice replied. "Name's Kaelen. And before you ask, no, I'm not lost. Just... on a rather urgent rendezvous. With you, specifically."

Zane's brow furrowed. He didn't do 'rendezvous' unless he initiated them, and certainly not with people who announced their intentions like they were ordering a drink at a cantina. "I don't know any Kaelen. And I'm not in the market for anything you're likely selling."

"Oh, I think you are, Captain Calder," Kaelen's voice purred, a hint of steel beneath the velvet. "I'm selling freedom. And a way out of that permanent 'most wanted' list you've been topping for the last five years."

That got Zane's attention. He rarely reacted to threats or boasts, but the mention of his bounty, particularly with such casual confidence, was unsettling. "How do you know my name?"

"Let's just say I have excellent sources," Kaelen replied. "And those sources tell me you're a man who understands desperation. And opportunity. And the subtle art of making things... disappear."

Jax, who had been listening intently, finally spoke up. "Opportunity around here usually comes with a laser sight aimed at our backs, Captain."

"True enough, Jax," Zane conceded, but his gaze remained fixed on the energy signature. It was closing fast. Too fast for a casual approach. "Alright, Kaelen. You have five minutes to convince me not to blow you out of the sky. State your business."

A soft, almost imperceptible laugh echoed through the comm. "Direct. I like that. Alright, Captain. I have a job for you. A big one. The kind of job that could set you and your crew up for life. Or get you all killed in spectacular fashion."

"We're familiar with the second option," Zane said dryly. "Less so with the first."

"Good. Because this isn't just about credits, Captain. This is about power. The kind of power that could shift the balance of the entire galaxy. I'm talking about the aurora crystal."

A stunned silence descended on the *Stardust's* bridge. Jax's head snapped up, his cybernetic eye widening. The aurora crystal. The most valuable energy source in the galaxy, rumored to be housed in the deepest, most secure vaults of the Galactic Union. It was a legend, a myth, a bedtime story for aspiring criminals. No one had ever seen it, let alone thought of stealing it.

"You're insane," Zane finally said, the words heavy with disbelief. "No one can get near that. It's a fairy tale."

"Oh, it's very real, Captain," Kaelen's voice held a new gravity now, a stark seriousness that cut through her earlier flirtatious tone. "And I have a plan. An intricate, daring, absolutely insane plan. But it's a plan that needs you, Zane Calder. And your unique... talents."

The energy signature was now clearly visible on the main screen: a sleek, black ship, designed for speed and stealth, not combat. It shimmered briefly, almost vanishing, before reappearing closer still. Kaelen was confident, perhaps even arrogant. But she had also just offered him the impossible.

"Tell me more," Zane said, his voice low, a predatory glint entering his eyes. The shadows of the dying red sun seemed to deepen around him, an echo of the darkness that had defined his life. For the first time in years, the possibility of something beyond mere survival flickered. A dangerous, exhilarating flicker of hope. And with hope, came the inevitable, crushing weight of risk. This Kaelen, whatever her motives, had just lit a fuse.

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