

Nova Outlaw: The Shattered Star

Chapter 1 – Smoke and Starlight

The ship rattled like an old gambler's dice cup, every shudder threatening to come up snake eyes. Jax Orion had been in tight spots before, but this one was personal. If the Vagrant Star came apart in the asteroid belt, nobody was going to care enough to scrape his remains off the rocks.

Jax hunched over the controls, his leather jacket creaking as he yanked the throttle forward. His dark hair, tied back in a lazy knot, clung to his forehead with sweat. He grinned anyway. Adrenaline always made him smile.

"Come on, girl," he muttered, patting the cracked dashboard. "Just one more trick."

The ship groaned in protest, hull plating squealing as another asteroid grazed too close. Warning lights flickered across the console like a festival gone wrong.

"Warning," the ship's AI said flatly, "probability of catastrophic hull breach at current velocity is—"

"Don't tell me the odds, Sable," Jax interrupted. "You know I hate math."

The AI paused, then sighed in a voice carefully engineered to sound disappointed. "You confuse math with survival, Captain."

"Semantics," Jax quipped, slamming a glowing switch. The Vagrant Star lurched like it had been kicked in the gut, skimming the edge of a tumbling asteroid the size of a cathedral. Metal screamed, sparks rained from the ceiling, and Jax whooped like a madman.

And then, silence. The endless black swallowed them as they cleared the belt.

Jax leaned back in his chair, arms wide, a victorious smirk spreading across his face. "And that, my dear Sable, is how you dodge a debt collector."

"Correction," Sable replied. "That is how you temporarily dodge a debt collector while also adding a list of new repairs that exceed your available credits by—"

"Shhh," Jax said, pressing a finger to his lips as though the AI could see him. "Don't ruin my moment."

The ship shuddered again, a softer, more troubling sound. Jax's smile faded. That wasn't the cheerful groan of a freighter still kicking. That was... something else.

He frowned, rising from the pilot's seat. The cargo hold.

The sound had come from the cargo hold.

With a reluctant glance at the console—where the fuel gauge hovered dangerously close to empty—Jax pushed open the bulkhead door. The dim corridor smelled of ozone and old coffee, wires dangling like jungle vines overhead. He grabbed a crowbar from the wall and walked toward the hold.

The sound came again. A hollow clang, like something shifting in a crate.

Jax's jaw tightened. He'd smuggled plenty of things before—spice, tech, once even an entire flock of miniature glow-birds—but this job was supposed to be simple. Just haul a sealed crate from one end of the sector to the other. No questions asked. Easy credits.

He stepped into the cargo bay. The lights flickered, revealing rows of dented containers strapped to the floor. Everything was still—except the largest crate at the center. Its metal frame pulsed faintly, as though glowing from within.

Jax's grin returned, though thinner this time. "Well, that's... not ominous at all."

He tapped the crowbar against the side of the crate. The glow inside pulsed faster, like a heartbeat.

Sable's voice drifted through the speakers. "Captain... my sensors indicate a significant energy source inside that container. Might I suggest you do not poke it with a stick?"

Jax smirked, resting the crowbar on his shoulder. "Relax. I've been poking things I shouldn't since I was twelve."

The crate gave a sudden, sharp hiss. Steam vented from the seams. And then, with a grinding screech, the lid began to open.

Jax took a cautious step back, crowbar ready. "Well," he muttered to himself, "looks like payday just got complicated."