

Chapter 1 - I'm all soundholes

In the beginning, amongst a backdrop of unformed nothingness, beings of unfathomable majesty and pretension willed themselves onto the same physical plain. As uptight as they were all powerful, a quarrel broke out amongst them over how best to proceed in shaping the blank canvas in front of them until finally they each agreed to contribute a morsel of their actuality and with an almighty bang the first ever gourmet restaurant formed around them.

Never again would an eating establishment match the snootiness of this one. Bound to its walls were tapestries made from the finest silk, its floors were lined with carpets plusher than a royal llama's stomach and rows of ornate golden candelabras, which also doubled as waiters, offered the softest of glows and solidified the pompous atmosphere. The restaurant's creators morphed into a form that matched their environment and each took their place around a grand mahogany table. Once they were all sitting comfortably, a candelabra waiter took a position behind them and in unison placed the first course on the table. Served in a set of matching lime green bowls was a thick primordial soup. The Diner's Divine, as they decided they would henceforth be named, wolfed down the tasty broth. Packed with hydrogen and helium, huge waves of energy emitted from their bowls as they were scraped clean.

When all the nuclei were licked from their spoons the table was cleared with similar pageantry and the appetizer was served. This time delivered on silver platters and coupled with a vinaigrette sauce was a bed of fledgling stars. Conversation ground to a halt. To their delight as the diners touched the stars with their forks they quickly bound to others on their platter. Some of these 'galaxies' glowed with the white hot intensity of a freshly prepared cordon bleu while others sparkled a brooding red like the skin of a summer ripened tomato.

On completion of the meal the mood changed. The diners dabbed the corners of their mouths with their napkins and offered each other the stiffest of nods. They very much approved. The empty platters were taken away and they were left to straighten their cravats and adjust their hair pieces excitedly as they speculated about whatever delicacy was coming next.

Finally the kitchen doors flung open and two lines of candelabras marched out each carrying golden plates with their contents hidden under matching cloches. The covers were removed and a cacophony of moans rang from the diners, one even felt the need to stand up, place his hand on his chest and bow in the direction of the kitchen. It was a work of genius.

The galaxies had taken on a more advanced form. Instead of existing as mere lumps of stars, many of them were adorned with smaller celestial bodies tangled in their gravity, spinning around them in a ceaseless orbit.

The diners went at their meal with vim, however as they took their first bite things started to go sour. The taste of what they were eating was too pungent, the texture amiss. They each bent over their plates for a closer inspection of their meal.

"Là-bas!" shouted one of the diners, pointing at one of the rocks in orbit around a star on his plate.

"I see it too," added another, recoiling in such horror his wig fell from his head.

To their disgust on some of these planets where the conditions were just right something a little more sophisticated had emerged... The very first signs of life.

Outraged, half of the diners stormed out of the restaurant while the other half became consumed in bouts of retching. The head chef, who had watched this all unfold, stepped from the kitchen and took a long drag from her vape. Her gamble had not paid off and as she sucked down the peppermint flavored steam she thought about the boots she would have to lick to rescue some small part of her reputation. Without a word she walked around the remaining, retching diners divine and headed out the door.

The universe's first gourmet restaurant never fully recovered from the slew of negative reviews that followed and it was soon shut down although on its unwashed crockery life continued to fester. The uneaten single celled organisms dominated the universe for eons until select offspring rejected the analogue life of their parents and went multicellular. This cycle of rebellion against less complex conservative parents continued until finally, billions of years after their incestuous start, all manner of creatures roamed all manner of worlds with all manner of strange appendages ranging from fins to wings to fingers to back mullets.

Although their appearances differed vastly the societies that emerged shared a number of traits, the most common, an unbridled thirst for more. When their home worlds could no longer scratch this itch they looked upwards, beyond the glow of the stars and planets around them for new worlds to conquer. A new age of exploration began for those civilisations that didn't consume themselves before the requisite scientific discoveries were made and danger awaited them as they crossed the frontier of space although the reward vastly outweighed the risk. Success bred wealth, wealth bred comfort and these burgeoning interplanetary societies thought the good times would never end. The universe was their oyster, or burger, or bucket of fried chicken. Or it was until a warfleet from a civilisation with a similarly expansive agenda descended on them.

Where diplomacy failed, war between worlds erupted. Workout plans were distributed and men and women were handed blasters and stuffed into cockpits to fight the invaders. Almost a silver lining, conflicts between countries on invaded worlds disappeared over night. How could one man resent the inhabitants of his own planet over something so arbitrary as differing skin tone when it was the invaders with back mullets that were the true enemy.

Eventually beefs between multiple planets spilled over and chaos consumed the known universe. Alliances were formed and broken as rapidly as a toddler bouncing between his new Christmas toys. Complex life teetered on the brink of collapse until a message directed at every receiver that could take it made those fighting stop and pause. Its source, Vexus Prime, a backwater planet that had stayed out of the intergalactic conflict. Its sender was the daughter of a rebel leader whose uprising was days from being snuffed out by the cruel ascendancy which had oppressed her world for hundreds of years. Desperate for support she pleaded for the equipment to save her father and her people.

The woman's plea struck a chord amongst the warring worlds. Her cause was righteous whereas most of the soldiers at war weren't really sure why they were still fighting and by offloading some of the old weapons that they all had lying around they could help liberate her people. An armistice of one week was declared so aid could be delivered to Vexus Prime and after the first weekend in living memory without bloodshed, peace talks were proposed. This marked the beginning of what would eventually become the Galactic League of Worlds or G.L.O.W, a collective of hundreds of planets living in relative harmony and bound together in a union of commerce, culture and free love. Paxum was selected as its capital. Its lush fields and

rolling mountains were bulldozed to make room for the administrative buildings that were needed to manage the growing empire until eventually all its cities merged into one super metropolis across the entire planet.

Five hundred years passed and excluding one minor droid rebellion, the borders of the new empire continued to expand in relative peace. Systems that agreed to join were welcomed with open arms while those that refused received no outward animosity although were spied upon intensely.

The latest addition was a string of colonies built on an asteroid belt. Its largest settlement, Asteroid 10, was already a microcosm of the new order embodied by G.L.O.W. Every day thousands of people from a multitude of species came to work and interact with each other in peace.

It was here in its bustling downtown in a small family run insurance business with a reach that hardly stretched beyond the nearest star, was a man that had once championed this golden age of galactic order like no one else. A warrior, a lover and a reasonable chef, this young man's star had blazed across G.L.O.W until one errant torpedo saw it all go up in a puff of smoke.

Kent's Insurance and Pet Cemetery had a large window at its front which allowed passersby to glance in. Those walking past on this fairly nondescript afternoon wouldn't have seen anything particularly unusual. Inside, it was illuminated by a row of uncomfortably bright lights and a number of customers sat in booths across from highly trained insurance agents. The one customer that may have merited a second glance was Glorp DiGlurby-Durp, a pink blob of translucent jelly who had come in for a quote for some life insurance. With three protruding tentacles and the sandwich he had stuffed down during a rushed lunch suspended in his center, he sat across the desk from one of the store's sales agents and had just become extremely taken aback by the sales agent's line of questioning.

"Glorp looking at this I can only come to one conclusion - you hate your wife and you hate your children," said Nick Vice leaning back in his chair.

Even though it was approaching the end of the day Nick still looked the part. His short sleeved white shirt remained crisp, his thick black hair was neatly styled and his clip on tie was adjoined at the perfect point of symmetry under his collar. Where a day in the office took its toll on his colleagues, a trouser leg would become stuck in a sock, stray hairs would slip from a ponytail, such imperfections never appeared on Nick. He knew that looking the part and projecting a persona was half the battle. Less than 10 months after moving into sales following years of being the store's janitor, he had become the most prolific closer the branch had ever seen, even giving the store's owner a run for his money.

"I'm sorry what?" said Glorp. "I want to speak to your manager."

"Well he's going to take one look at this form you've just filled out and come to the exact same conclusion as me," said Nick.

"That I hate my wife and children? Please, enlighten me. I'm all soundholes."

"Like me, the first thing he'll notice is you've got two young kids, one of them still a larva and the other just out of pupation. Then he'll see you've only gone for the most basic coverage and you haven't even bothered taking out a policy against income protection. If you lose your job or, heaven forbid, die, your wife's going to have a hell of a time trying to raise two young kids on a single payout of five thousand bytes. Therefore my boss will conclude, like me, that you hate

your wife and kids because when you die, it won't be two years until they're absorbing their meals straight from dumpsters."

"I've never been healthier. I had my ooze tested last week and I'm only five years away from retirement."

"And your pension automatically transfers across to your spouse."

"That's right."

"And you live in the Falanx region, a parsec from Omeda 12."

"Yeah, so?"

"So you're well versed in the increase in solar pulses from Omeda 12 and the impact it has on tentacle detachment amongst male Florpdorpians your age. I'm correct in thinking DiGlurby-Durp is a Florpdorpians surname?"

Glorp suddenly got very nervous. His pink skin shimmered as Nick spun his screen around, switched off the invisible forcefield that separated them and leant across the desk.

"How are you going to drive your truck or hold down any kind of job if you don't have tentacles?"

"I can't... I wouldn't be able to," said Glorp, still shaking.

"For me, a big old huge chunk of my salary comes from commission," said Nick. "It's not the volume of sales I make money on, it's the value. That information I've just shared with you about the solar flares isn't currently factored into the price on screen for a Florpdorpians living within that proximity to Omeda 12. Really I should get my manager, just like you asked me to, and tell him to update our system and watch that price shoot up. Although before I go, I owe you an apology. The way your skin's shaking like the top of a subwoofer I can tell you do in fact care about your wife and kids. What were the names again?"

"Blurpy Ann and Susan."

"Cute. Well give me a second and I'll grab Mr Kent."

Nick went to stand up although a tentacle wrapped around his arm.

"Please Mr Vice, isn't there anything you can do?"

Nick looked at the clock on the wall.

"I skipped lunch and by law I've got to leave this desk for at least ten minutes every four hours. You could probably get those extra bundles added to your package by the time I grab a coffee and I push through a system update."

The tentacle shot from Nick's arm to the pen on the desk and Glorp began to scribble furiously on the form in front of him.

"You're making a good choice," said Nick, getting to his feet. "Just remember who you're doing this for."

"Thank you Mr Vice," said Glorp.

Nick left the Florpdorpians to fill in the form and walked towards the break room. As he passed his colleagues in neighbouring booths he caught snippets of the conversations they were having.

"It's company policy, we only cover dimensions one through three as standard although we can put you in touch with someone about fourth dimensional travel."

"In your situation I wouldn't bother with accidental planet damage. Satellite cover should be sufficient."

“This policy will cover you for parasitic organisms birthing from your chest although eyes and nose are going to cost extra.”

The break room was empty when Nick entered. With its standard chairs, standard mugs and below standard coffee machine the room was a monument to monotony. Glamour was for the showrooms on the other side of Asteroid 10, selling summer homes or intergalactic cruisers, not Kent's Insurance and Pet Cemetery. He'd been approached although hadn't entertained any of their offers. Right now Nick made enough to keep his fridge filled with ready made meals and his cupboards lined with booze. Besides, new jobs required references and background checks. His past wasn't something he wanted anyone looking into.

Nick placed a mug under the coffee machine and reached for the hip flask he kept hidden behind it when an almighty 'Yeaaaaa ha' rang from the other side of the break room door. A few seconds passed before it burst open. Standing in the doorway was the store's owner, Dover Kent. Just visible under his chunky white mustache a smile lined his face. He dropped into one of the breakroom chairs and tossed his stetson onto the table.

“You should be popping champagne, not sipping that garbage. What was it? Eight locked down today on premium packages?”

“I've got number nine filling in his form now.”

“Nicky, you're the goose that laid the golden egg and the fox that gets to eat it. You've got that quarterly sales award locked up with two months to spare!”

“Still a bit to go until I get your record.”

“Don't you worry - I've got my commiseration speech ready. You're coming over to mine tonight, no excuses. Susie doesn't stop talking about how handsome you are and smart to boot after you pulled us out of that Paul situation a few years back. Lord, if you were twenty years older I'd be worried.”

Even as a janitor, Dover had been good to Nick. Not that he cared but some of his other employees thought them above talking to the man that emptied their trash. Dover however was drawn to the silent custodian. He'd clocked Nick for a service man days into working for him although was tactful enough not to press him on it. The store's owner had seen combat as well and knew any soldier that didn't want to talk about his past probably had good reason.

“How can I say no?” said Nick.

“Hot dog - say there's another one just landed,” said Dover. “The boring parts done, how about I wrap up pink and slimy and you have a swing at your tenth?”

“I'm on it,” said Nick, setting his cup on the counter and stepping back onto the store floor. He dropped into booth five, hit the button on the counter and his next customer was signaled to come forward. He brought up their details while two figures slipped into the seats opposite him.

“So how can I help you...”

Nick froze.

In bold on top of the screen... her name. The woman that had been the center of a life he'd given up everything to escape. Emotions he'd spent years suppressing burst through him like a zombie bride emerging from her grave at the beckoning of a voodoo priest. A few seconds passed before Nick recaptured his composure.

“Nice to meet you Machina, how can I help you today?” he said, turning around to face her. Machina's long dark hair was tied back and she was dressed in the navy uniform that Nick had risen to fame in, the red eagle emblazoned on her chest. Anger, relief, joy, pity all swirled in her

brown eyes. The woman was one part deadly and two parts beautiful served in a chilled glass of class.

"It's good to see you again Nick."

"This one was previously the Commander Elite?" asked the large humanion next to her. Where Machina embodied elegance the pale blue monster sitting next to her looked like the result of a breeding programme between an alpha gorilla and an irritated poison dart frog. A Vormer, not renowned for their deep thinking but their freakish strength. Those massive arms could flatten a man like a tin can under a tire.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" asked Nick.

"Indeed this is our first encounter Nick Vice," said the Vormer. "I am Joran. But Machina Yapar you should know. She is your great love."

"Are you really doing this?" said Machina.

"Doing what?"

"Maybe he has forgotten who he is?" said Joran.

"So Mrs Yapar, are you and your husband interested in one of our life insurance packages?" said Nick.

"We're not together and it's not 'Mrs'," said Machina.

"According to this form it's 'Mrs'," said Nick, spinning the screen around. "Would you like me to change it to something else?"

"I'd like you to stop being an idiot. I'm sorry we had to approach you here but I couldn't risk you disappearing. I wouldn't have come if it wasn't important."

"I'm afraid I don't understand Mrs Yapar. I know there's a Nick Dice that run's a falafel stand two streets over. Is that who you're looking for?"

Machina's eyes shone in the unpleasant LED light and Nick felt his resolve weaken.

"Maybe if I shake him," said Joran, breaking the silence. He reached across the counter but his hand was repelled by the forcefield and knocked it back with an electric shock. The Vormer growled and his fist clenched as he eyed his invisible enemy.

The head of a salesman appeared from the neighboring cubicle.

"Everything ok Nicky?"

"All good Roy. I'm just updating some of the information on this form."

"No need," said Machina, standing up. "I've made a mistake, sorry for wasting your time. Two streets over did you say?"

"You can't miss it. I'd recommend the salad wrap."

Without a glance back Machina strode out of the insurance store. Joran cast a final vengeful look at the cubicle as he lumbered after her. Roy's head disappeared and Nick sighed. He turned to the computer screen and stared at Machina's name for a few seconds before he hit delete.

"Time wasters," said Dover, wandering across from the breakroom. "Hell of a woman though. Did you recognise that uniform? I think they were Alphaflight."

"I wouldn't know," said Nick. "I'm going to have to raincheck on dinner tonight. I forgot I had plans."

"You sure? It's that peppery chicken you went crazy for the last time you were over."

"I'm sorry. This I can't miss."

“All right, all right. Well you can make it up to me by taking me to that wing place next week. You still get that discount?”

“We’re on.”

“You have a prosperous evening son.”

Nick grabbed his coat and slipped out the backdoor. Parked a few meters from the exit was his jetpack. It revved into life as he approached and lifted from the ground. He strapped in, reached into his pocket and slapped a round, metal disc onto his arm. A transparent cover spilled from his military grade spaceprotector. It slowly crawled over his body until a green light flashed on the disc to show he was fully covered. Ready for takeoff the jetpack rocketed upwards, out of the protective zone around Asteroid 10 and into the cold vacuum of space.

Jetpack travel had never really caught on as a means of transport. Most people preferred the comfort of a spaceship for their commute to work or trip to the shops, however it’s popularity had seen a slight uptick following the ninth and final film in Zelden Zentbacker’s ‘Fast to the Blast’ series where the lead character spent a large section of the movie in one. A cowboy abducted by aliens, Zentbacker starred as Wyatt Wyoming who used smarts developed over twenty years of working as a ranch hand to break free from his captivity before swiftly rising to the rank of captain on a rival ship. As a boy Nick was enamored by Wyoming. Witty, strong and a hit with the ladies he was the exact man Nick wanted to be. Even as the plots got more outlandish and Zentbacker became visibly less committed to the character Nick still found plenty to cling onto.

Trundling along at a pokey 500mph Nick ran through his final days at Alphaflight. He’d been so careful, what had he overlooked? The dummy ship, the faked explosion and his escape had all gone off without a hitch and the only things he’d taken with him, TheSickChild and Vaart, were untraceable and had been in camouflage mode from the moment they’d set up camp on Asteroid 9. In his first year in hiding he’d obsessively poured over the response to his death. He’d read obituaries, monitored charitable foundations set up in his honor and combed through articles and their comments to make sure his tracks were thoroughly covered. Eventually the universe moved on and the fear of his door bursting open in the middle of the night dwindled as well.

Ten minutes after take off Asteroid 9 began to loom in front of him. A commuter asteroid set up to accommodate the workers of its more prosperous neighbor, there wasn’t much to the huge rock Nick had called home for the last seven years. One of its larger, flatter sides was covered by a constant housing estate littered with kids’ parks with broken swings and corner stores that seemed to only stock adult magazines and milk. Its humdrum nature had made it the perfect place to hide, until now. Had Machina worked out his home address as well? He skimmed along the top of his neighbor’s houses before touching down at his front door.

“Home early Mr Vice?” shouted Phil Kumar from next door as Nick pulled his keys from his pocket and fumbled with the lock. Nick’s neighbor had emerged from his house in his heavily aged dressing gown to water his geranium bushes.

“Don’t forget to switch that jetpack off,” he added.

“I’m not hanging around,” said Nick as he stepped inside, careful as always to open the door just wide enough so that he could squeeze through. From the house’s exterior it was a perfect extension of the hundreds of others that lined Asteroid 9, its inside however would raise a few eyebrows. The decor consisted mainly of metal rails, connecting rods and pistons due to it being

Nick's ship broken down and stacked in parts to minimise any wear and tear. His very meager kitchen along with a bed, a television and a crafting area were the only things that might have looked in place in a normal house. On a threadbare basket next to his bed was the house's only other sentient being, Vaart.

"Ba-ark, Ba-ark" said Vaart.

"We've been found," said Nick as he pulled off his clip on tie and threw it on the bed. "And I don't want to hear it."

"Ba-ark, Ba-ark."

"I told you I don't want to hear it," said Nick. He quickly changed clothes, fished a taser he had stored in a cupboard and shoved it down the back of his trousers. "Get the house ready for immediate departure. I've got to go collect."

"Ba-ark."

Nick charged out of the house and ignored Mr Kumar's comment about his missing post. He strapped himself back into the jetpack and shot into space.

It was a short flight to the Kettle, a bar with such low standards as hard as anyone tried they couldn't get barred from it. Hardened battle droids served the drinks and cages had to be set up around the stage to protect performers from projectiles, it was Nick's favorite boozier. The rich scent of engine oil, sweat and stale beer had become somewhat soothing to him and since its discovery he tried to spend as much time there as possible.

A little too early for its regulars the Kettle was still warming up. Two burly men in leather jackets hung over the jukebox while a handful of other familiar faces were dug into booths against the wall. He nodded at a few as he passed although didn't stop to talk, it's typical clientele didn't come for conversation. He took his usual seat at the bar and waved at the droid on the other side. It spotted him and began reaching for bottles and rapidly mixing something, its arms almost moving too quickly for Nick to keep up.

"Those bytes you owe me," said Nick. "I need as many of them as you can give me."

"Might be a problem," said the droid, dropping a piece of lemon into a short tumbler and placing it in front of Nick.

"I didn't order anything."

"From the lady in the back."

Nick looked around, shook his head and grabbed the drink. He crossed the Kettle's sticky floor and dropped into a booth.

"Ready to talk now?" said Machina.

"I'm all soundholes," said Nick.