

The Starfighter Bar and Grill

When you've owned this place as long as I have, there's no such thing as something new. Everything just reminds you of something else you've seen. And trust me, cousin, I've seen it all.

They come from everywhere, from planets I don't even bother trying to pronounce anymore. We're located in a thirsty spot off the first exit to the Milky Way, nestled between bouncing clouds of asteroids and floating wreckage from hundreds of lost ships. Getting here has killed some of the finest space explorers ever known. Hell, that's part of what makes it so exclusive.

Runaway comets and stampeding asteroids? We call that Tuesday morning 'round here. If you can make it to the front door, the first drink is on the house. That was a rule my father laid down when he lost his first customer.

My old man went to school for world building. He dropped out when he realized he'd rather party for a living. Using money he'd saved up delivering food to the outer planets, plus a hyperdrive ship with a thousand light years on the engine, he found this spot and built it with his own four hands. That schooling wasn't for nothing, though, he used his genetic blending abilities to brew the first batch of Galactic Grog that sits in every cooler in the universe now. Mom drifted in with a bachelorette party not long after and fell in love. I was born on the bar counter to the sounds of clinking glasses and toasts all around. Been here ever since. It ain't much, but it's home.

Oliver Black

They're long gone, mom and dad, drove head first into a Neutron Star a few hundred years back. People say it was the drink that killed them--don't ever drink and fly--but I tell myself it was love that did them in. They could never keep their hands off each other.

My dad called it the Starfighter because "damn it, it just sounds cool." And I totally agree. When I tell you we've had some fantastic customers, I ain't lyin'. Elvis Presley found his way here in a stolen Sun Schooner and introduced the guitar to the universe. Best damn concert we've ever held, that's for sure. The whole house was rockin' to Hound Dog and we get a lot of lousy impersonators coming through on Wednesday nights.

Now, when I say bartending is a form of universal politics, it's the truth. We've been invaded and annexed three times in my life. Some armada is always stompin' around layin' claim to this and that. I just toss a couple grilled Xarquon steaks at 'em and a case of G.G. and fly the banner they give me outside. Doesn't really matter who is in charge, everybody loves this place. Peace was negotiated at this very bar at the end of the Millennium Wars over strawberry daiquiris and pickled Mars Mushrooms. Vandi and Vulapxios ended their civil war over one very intense, overly dramatic game of beer pong. There's a couple missile holes and plasma burns on the walls, but I leave them there for character.

Like I said, man, I've seen it all. But after everything, there's still only one woman that ever swung through those double doors and stopped my breath.

She came gliding in on a freshly solar washed Star Corvette. Black. Man that thing was hot. She came through the door like she'd been here a million times, though trust me, if she was a regular I would have remembered that face. Deep purple eyes the color of a newborn nebula, green braided tentacles that hung to the middle of her back. Wide set hips that could shake all

Oliver Black

night long. I don't believe in love at first sight, but if she told me to, I would have happily been a convert.

She came up to the bar and I forgot all about my line of other customers. "What's your poison, doll?"

"Jack'n'Coke. On the rocks." She said, and her voice was the chorus of a thousand Venus angels singing in perfect harmony.

Now, had she ordered anything else, like blended Valhalla Moonwater or even a bottle of Andromeda Light, I would have brushed her off as another uppity rich princess out looking for an adventure she didn't really want. But she had to order Old No.7--a woman after my own heart--and I'm telling you, it was love.

I pulled down my prized bottle of Sinatra Select (thank you, NASA) and blew the dust off. I let the coke fizzle and tossed in some crushed Comet Ice and slid it down the bar her way. She caught it, took a sip, and smiled.

"Fan of Earth, are you?" I said.

"I'm headed that way," she said.

"I've never been, personally."

"I hear the sunsets are to die for."

"Out on vacation? Or, let me guess," I rubbed my chin. "You're royalty out looking for a suitable place to colonize. Don't bother denyin' it, hon, we get those all the time."

"Got a knack for reading folks, do you?" She said.

"It's a gift."

"Well you're wrong," she said. "Earth's a dying planet. I'm on a...sensitive business trip. I heard this was the right place."

I should have mentioned before--we don't just serve food and drink here. I deal in weapons of every kind, from angelfire swords to magnet cannons. It's a business venture I added to our menu, my parents had no idea. It isn't for the money but for the customers. I've got plenty of cash and not enough excitement.

“Darlin’,” I said, “this ain't a place for sensitive things. Nor is it a place for secret code talk. If you need a weapon, say so, and I'm your man.”

She downed half her drink. I let my eyes wander down her body. She caught me and I blushed a deep blue. She set the glass down and leaned in.

“I need a belt fed, coin operated plasma blaster with an Ultra Violet scope.”

“That's illegal in this galaxy,” I said, “and about twenty thousand others.”

“You said you were my man.”

“And I am, so long as you aren't an agent of some kind.”

She dropped her eyelids and smiled. “Would an agent do this?” She leaned in and kissed me. My mouth came alive with electricity and if I was a lesser man, I would have melted into a puddle right there. No really, I would have melted into ooze. I've seen her kind do it to people before.

We broke away and I licked my lips. “You definitely are somethin’ else. Why’s a gorgeous thing like you lookin’ for such firepower?”

“I specialize in finding things that don't want to be found.” She lit up a smoke and blew a circle at me. “And what about you, Slick? What's a handsome guy like you doing stuck out on the frontier?”

I spread my arms open. “This is my place. My home. I wouldn't rather be anywhere else.”

“Never cared to venture to the outer reaches?”

“Nothin’ ever gave me a reason to.”

“How sad,” she said.

“Well I don't think so,” I said, “got everything I need right here.”

“Except all the things you want.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Like drag racing across the Mercury Solar line,” she said, “or sitting under a waterfall on Venus. Ballroom dancing on Earth. Jetpack tours of Mars.”

“I hear they're all overrated.”

“You *hear* that, but you haven't seen it for yourself.”

I felt very small, then. It wasn't something I was used to. “Who *are* you?”

“Nobody special,” she stubbed her smoke out, “just a girl looking for some serious weaponry. The drink was good too, though.”

“Thanks doll,” I said. “I'll show you the hardware if you'll show me what you can do on that dance floor.”

She whipped a stray tentacle out of her eye. “Nice try, Slick. But I deal in cash only.” She slapped ten platinum Gorleons on the bar.

“Was worth a shot,” I said, then slid the coins back to her. “But your money is no good here. Follow me ‘round back.”

She sauntered behind the bar and I grasped her hand. I led her through the winding tunnels stocked with bottles of liquor. The further back we went, the more expensive they got. We ducked under an old bulkhead and set foot in my office. To the left was a row of video screens playing camera footage of the packed bar. To the right were a desk and a beat up anti-gravity couch. I pressed a button on my desk and a wall flipped over to reveal stacks of

Oliver Black

glimmering, savage-looking weapons. I selected the big gun and held it up for inspection. It's a terrible form of destruction and has been deemed too terrible for even unconventional warfare and rebellions. It could lay waste to a pack of Kandolon Trampelants in ten seconds, but it was designed horribly, as it depended upon spare change to unlock the trigger mechanism. And last I heard, spare change wasn't something any soldier in the universe had a stockpile of.

"Hear you are, dame," I said, "you get the family discount, but don't tell anybody."

She held the weapon up and checked the chamber. She raised it to her shoulder and looked down the scope. "Ever been used?"

"I shot a couple wayward asteroids with it, but it's never taken a life, so far as I know."

She nodded approval and slung it over her shoulder. She cocked her head and looked at me. "Thanks for the drink, and for the hardware."

"You're really going to Earth, huh?"

"Yes."

"You headed back this way when you're done?"

"That depends. I'll be there for quite some time."

"Will I ever see you again?"

She reached out and patted my shoulder.

"You're sweet. Too sweet," she said, "but I don't ever come back to the same place twice. The universe is too big to see the same things again, there's too much that needs done."

I was heartbroken as she headed for the door. She paused and turned to look at me.

"If you ever have the courage to leave this place, go to Earth. Watch one sunset with me, maybe you'll feel differently about standing still."

"You think so?"

Oliver Black

She shook her head. “No,” she said. “actually, I don’t.”

She looked at me like I was some dead thing she'd found caught in a trap.

“See ya around, Slick.” And then she was gone.

I never saw her Corvette again. And trust me, I've been keeping an eye out. Every time I hear those doors swing open, I jerk my head up to look with all my hopes. I think about her often, sitting on a beach somewhere over whiskey and coke, a smoking barrel by her side. I wonder if she found what she was looking for, if maybe she's just there waiting for me, watching the stars.

Then I polish another glass, and I pour another drink.