One Night At A Local Bar

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Hanging half a meter out from the top of the glossy black facade, glittering StardustTM spelled out The Original Old-Time Joe's Bar & Grill. Below, five fuzzy-edged spots of depolarized transparency chased one another across the obsidian-like surface, giving passersby tantalizing glimpses of the dim, red-lit interior. Xahh paused and peered longingly; the ruddy warm glow was painfully reminiscent of his far-off home.

Varkles, he thought, why not? He wasn’t due back aboard ship for five hours yet, and the door stood invitingly ajar just a meter away. He’d never been in a joint like this before, and had heard discouraging tales of their hazards, but that friendly glow made him dismiss such stories as xenophobic fabrications.

The door swung open as he approached, admitting him freely.

The place was bigger inside than he had expected; one wall was covered with game machines, half the opposite wall with dispensers, and the remainder by a huge old-fashioned solid wood bar, with ornate brass and crystal trim. The rear wall was totally invisible, lost in the smoke and darkness. Close at hand there reared up a large brass serpent, polished to a ruddy gold in the crimson gloom; where its snout should have ended in a pair of slit nostrils, there were instead three upward-curving horns, each capped by a solid-brass ball, and its mouth gaped open impossibly. A sniff in its direction told Xahh’s sensitive nose that it was dispensing pure oxygen, for those who chose to start the evening’s intoxication with an oxygen jag.

Psychbeat music filled the room, blending subtly with the hum of conversation from the two dozen occupied tables; Xahh relaxed as its soothing effects reached him, and crossed to the bar. Clambering awkwardly onto an empty stool, he glanced around at the other patrons while waiting for the bartender to notice him.

To one side were three unoccupied seats and the end of the bar; to the other side, a single stool separated him from an immense green lizard-creature, looking almost black in the red light, which sat contemplating a half-empty glass of some viscous purple fluid. Beyond it—or probably him, but Xahh was uncertain—were arrayed three identical young pure-human women, presumably free clones, sniffing cocaine; they struck Xahh as being slightly misshapen, with far more chest than seemed reasonable. There was a gap after them, and then, at the far end of the bar, there sat a withered old man with chocolate-brown skin, wearing a tattered and archaic pressure suit but no helmet; the bartender was talking to him, though Xahh couldn’t hear a thing at that distance.

Behind him, at the tables, he saw a representative sampling of the port’s groundling population: naked loading androids, human administrators in uniform, gleaming metal mobile AIs, inhumanly graceful cyborgs, and all the other specialized or purebred people that one found in Terra’s greatest starport.

“What’ll it be?”

The bartender’s voice startled him, distracted as he was by his study of the bar’s patrons. He turned back around and said, “Ah, whiskey and water, please.” It was the only local drink he was familiar with; he had been too timid to do much adventuring in his brief stay on Terra, but one of the old hands among his crewmates had introduced him to this concoction that was both cool and fiery at once. It didn’t have that same intoxicating effect on him that it did on humans, but a few of them would give him a slight feeling of euphoria.

He had only seen the bartender reach below the counter, without mixing anything, but here his drink was. Obviously an automatic drink dispenser was at work. Some “old-time authenticity“! He barely restrained a snort as he handed the bartender his credit card. Well, at least they had a human bartender; most bars had gone completely modern.

Assuming, that is, that the bartender was human. Xahh peered at him suspiciously, but couldn’t decide. There were no visible signs that the bartender was anything but pure, but they made convincing cybers and androids of even his own small people these days; a thing the size of that bartender, a portly two meters tall, could hold any intelligence around with room to spare.

The man, if he was a man, returned the card, and Xahh restrained another snort as he saw his new balance registered on the display. At these prices they could sure afford a human! Tucking the card away, he sipped his drink, and was pleasantly surprised; it was good, almost worth what it cost. Whatever else they might stint, the bar’s owners didn’t scrimp on their booze. No wonder it was a popular local hangout.

He sipped again, and glanced up at the mirror behind the bar. His eyes met the reflected gaze of the lizard-thing, who seemed to be blearily studying Xahh’s image. Xahh turned away, looking instead at a cobwebbed bottle below the mirror, as the stories of beatings and robberies at these dives came back to him.

“Hey, Shorty.”

The unsteady voice came from the lizard-creature, who was now studying Xahh himself rather than his reflection.

“Yeah?” He hoped his voice didn’t give away his nervousness.

“You new ’round here?”

“Passing through.”

“Oh.” The green creature turned back to his purple goo long enough to suck up some through a hollow tongue, then went on, “Wha’s yer name?”

“Xahh.”

“Kha?”

“Close enough; Xahh.”

“Khah, right. Please t’meet yer. I’m called Argonath; Argo for short.”

Xahh nodded politely.

“Gonna be ’round long?”

“No, my ship leaves tonight.”

“Ship? Oh. Never ridden one, myself.”

That caught Xahh by surprise; his crest twitched as he took another sip of his drink. He looked up at the creature. “You’re from around here?”

“Yeah. From the plant down the road.” Holding its drink in one three-clawed hand, it motioned vaguely with the other, then hiccupped; Xahh saw sparks scattering from the thing’s mouth.

He would have liked to dismiss it as an illusion, but he couldn’t imagine why he might be hallucinating. Had he gotten the wrong drink? Maybe whiskey had effects he hadn’t noticed before.

He said, “Oh,” and took another gulp of whisky and water.

“Yeah, I’m a, I’m...” The creature tittered drunkenly, then abruptly stopped and whined, “I’m a factory reject, tha’s what I am. S’posed to be a dragon, for some entertainmen’ or somethin’, but I didn’ come out like they wanted.”

“Too bad.” Xahh was honestly touched by the creature’s pitiful expression, but he was also increasingly nervous of his own safety.

“Where you from?”

Xahh shrugged. “Nowhere special.”

“Ah, c’mon; you sure aren’t a pure-bred, you must be from somewhere.”

“I’m second pilot on a starship.”

“Oh, so tha’s why yer so small! Save weight!”

Xahh nodded.

“Where y’ from originally?” Xahh could smell the creature’s acrid breath; it was leaning toward him, and he knew he couldn’t avoid answering much longer. He considered lying, but he knew he wouldn’t. It would be worse to be caught in a lie than to admit the truth, and he didn’t know enough terrestrial geography to lie convincingly.

“Arcturus III.”

“Arc...?” The dragon-thing sat up straight. “You’re an alien?”

“Yeah.” He might brazen it out yet, he thought.

“An alien?! In Joe’s Bar?”

He wasn’t going to get away with it, he knew. With a gulp, he finished his drink, as conversation died and the occupants of the bar all began to stare in his direction. One of the big-chested clones pulled a needlegun from somewhere, and leaned past the dragon toward him, weapon raised and pointing at the mirrored ceiling. The dragon itself was still too astonished to do much but gape. She said nothing, merely glared, letting the weapon speak for itself.

“Hey, buddy, this is a nice joint.” It was a naked, sexless android that spoke.

“Yeah, we don’t need you here,” said a glittering, golden cyborg.

“This is a Terran bar, freak.” The monotone voice came from the wheeled box of a cryogenic artificial.

“An alien!” The dragon still gaped.

Xahh knew when he wasn’t wanted; he slipped from his stool and walked, with all the dignified calm he could manage, out the door. Behind him he heard a clone saying, “Damn foreigners! C’mon, Argo, I’ll buy you a drink.”