

The Stranger I : Vic's

by Sam Kurd

The location : Vic's Seedy Space Bar. No, that's not just a description, that's the real name. It was originally called Vic's Slice of Paradise, and it was originally going to be a trendy wine bar, but Vic soon found out that not many trendy winebars flourish in spaceports, especially spaceports like Luna 1. His clientèle were the unwashed masses of scum who drift from planet to planet, moon to moon, searching for that unobtainable goal - happiness and security. Trendy winebar people don't drift, they move swiftly and purposefully AWAY from unsociably unclean places like Luna 1. Vic grew to curse the day he ever bought the dive, and eventually sold it to a travelling eccentric millionaire, who changed the name ever so slightly, in keeping with his rather odd sense of humour. The customers barely even noticed. As long as they had somewhere they could peddle their hallucinogenic drugs, gamble their lives away and drown their sorrows in the kind of rotgut that'd leave their livers with the consistency of damp and mouldy Swiss cheese, they didn't care what the name of the damn place was.

Today was a typical day. Cigar smoke hung heavy in the air, the floor was beer-sticky and muddy, and scruffy rogues played card games using cards with naked aliens instead of Kings and Queens. One tentacled Venusian was sure to lose, as he had a particularly revealing trait — every time he got a good hand he started sweating corrosive acid. In the end he was thrown out by the bartender for dissolving the card table. Nothing unusual for Vic's. In fact, the only odd thing about the day was that no one had been vaporized in a violent bar-brawl yet.

Yes sir, thought Steve the Bartender as he dried a pint glass with an oily rag, looks like it's going to be a relatively quiet day...

Just then, the centuries-old-fashioned saloon doors swung forward,

and harsh sunlight flooded in, silhouetting the figure at the door. Oddly enough the Bar's jukebox chose that moment to finish a song mid-sentence, and silence abruptly reigned. Everyone looked at the door, cursed the brightness and got back to what they were doing, assuming the newcomer to be just another tough guy. As the saloon doors swung back, the jukebox started up again and the new customer became fully visible.

He stalked through the bar, his dirty brown duster flapping at his ankles. Though slim, he still cut an imposing figure. Several customers had to crane their necks back to get a good look at his face, he was that tall. They soon wished they hadn't. Something ... awful had happened to that face at one point. Something that had required reconstructive surgery and bionic implants. The kind that can be bought from any dirty grungy run-down garage. The kind that often malfunction, twisting the face into a contorted mess. Half of the stranger's face was thus deformed, but the rest was oddly handsome - a striking contrast. Sat on top of this monstrous visage was an archaic hat from nearby Earth, a cowboy hat.

The stranger leant over the bar counter, and stared Steve in the face. There was a cold fire in one eye and a look that implied years of torment, hardship and suffering had been inflicted on the owner of said eye — but that the owner had been tempered, made all the stronger by the abuse. The other eye implied nothing — like one of the stranger's ears it was gone, replaced with a cut-price rusty robotic equivalent that sparked erratically. Steve flinched slightly, but the stranger betrayed no emotion at his reaction. It was clear he had experienced it several times before, and doubtless would again.

"Got whiskey?" the stranger asked, in a voice that dragged fingernails down Steve's soul. The bartender gulped and nodded nervously. "Double Scotch, straight. And put an umbrella in it."

Steve poured two measures into a glass, his hands trembling. What

was wrong with him? He'd faced down bigger, meaner arseholes than this guy before. He was from Earth, the galaxy's cesspool! He'd even bottled one Martian who'd been built like a tank and rammed the bottle end into what passed for its - but that was another time, and this was now. This stranger was terrifying somehow, and it wasn't just the face. It was his silent confidence, as if he knew what was going on, was in complete control of it all and simply didn't give a f* * *ck for anything else. This man was a killer. This man Meant Business.

He passed the glass to the stranger, who handed over his ident-card for swiping through the credit deductor. Steve swiped the card and glanced at the monitor, curious to see the man's name. He was disappointed to see that the personal information of the stranger was garbled, the name and address and criminal record details coming through only machine code. He glanced up at the stranger and cleared his throat.

"Uh, there seems to be a uh, a problem with the machine. Your name ... your details, they're, uh ... they're missing."

Silence from the stranger.

"It's just that, uh, I need them. Can't really, uh, can't really sell you anything without them, y'see. It's, uh ... it's the law ... " He trailed off as the silence grew heavy and menacing. The stranger didn't even flicker his remaining eyelid. Steve nodded decisively. "Well, uh, never mind then. Here you go, enjoy sir!"

He handed the glass over to the stranger, who held a hand to his hat and tugged it down ever slow slightly in salute. He moved silently to a small table in the corner by the jukebox and sat, staring into his whiskey glass. Steve whistled in relief under his breath, glad that it was all over. As he resumed drying the pint glass he noticed with

mild annoyance that Weasely Jim, a Vics regular, was sidling up to the bar.

Ever bar in every spaceport had a Weasely Jim. By which I don't mean that there was an army of clones of a dirty, scruffy man bent on the annihilation of all stocks of cheap sherry and cigarettes. No, it's just that in all establishments of a lightly less savoury nature, there's always an older man who hovers around the corners of the room getting paid by bar patrons to cross the room and bug someone else for a bit. The smell of stale alcohol and cigarettes follows them like a lost puppy. It has been speculated that after a while this smell gains a sentience of sorts, and that certain Weaselies have trained it to seek out and assault richer bar-patrons, but is rubbish. The smell is far too stubborn to be trained.

One thing that the Weaselies were good for, however, is the flow of information. When you're a sub-class citizen, people say things in front of you that they'd never say I polite company. Usually it's something along the lines of 'Quick, Fred, stash the body here, no one'll suspect a thing'. Weaselies knew the value of information, and as such they usually guaranteed a free drink or two from suspicious people with reason to believe a Weasley might know something important that he doesn't. Weaselies tend to take this rather seriously. A Weaseley who takes free drinks and dispenses device like "Don't run with scissors" is a soon to be dead Weasely.

Steve eyed the Weasely and nodded cautiously. Strangely, there was no smell. Somewhere across the room someone started coughing violently, but that was probably just a coincidence. Weasely Jim grinned one-toothedly at Steve and nodded amiably at the newly arrived stranger, who appeared to be dipping his finger into his whiskey.

"Now thur's a vetrin if'n I ever saw one, eh?" Jim chuckled, his breath an almost visible cloud of halitosis and onions. Steve raised

an eyebrow.

"Didn't think they allowed implants in the military, Jim," he offered cautiously. Jim chuckled and shook his head.

"Naw, they don't. Not in OUR military, leastways. Course, he might of served and then got 'em, but I don't think so. Somethin I his face is forrin. I don't mean alien," he spat, eyed the non-humans around him distrustfully. "Naw, he's human alright. But he ain't one of us. I reckon ..." he trailed off here and snuck an appraising glance at Steve. Seeming to come to a decision, he coughed twice, pitifully. Steve rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Jim, I'm sure it's not exactly life or death information," he objected. Jim sighed deeply, as if from the depths of his soul.

"I don't know," he said mournfully. "My throat's bin awful parched lately." Just behind him, another customer broke out in a coughing fit, tears streaming from their eyes. Steve gritted his teeth.

"Fine," he hissed. "One drink. Just ONE, though. It comes out of my wages, you know."

"Bless you, m'lad!" Jim cried, arms flung wide. "Yer a true philanthropist, and don't let none of em tell you no different!" He grinned happily as Steve's hand reached below the counter, but his face fell dramatically when it returned clutching nothing harder than a cheap watery beer. He shrugged. Alcohol was alcohol, after all. He waited until the bottle was opened for him before nodding his head.

"Thank ee," he said solemnly. Manners make the space bum. "Now, our impressive looking friend in the corner. I reckon ..." He looked around in mock caution, as if his next words might be controversial somehow. "I reckon ... he' been on The Fringe!" He leaned back

with a triumphant grin.

Steve blinked. The Fringe? For this he'd just spent ten credits? It was obvious to any fool that man had just come back from The Fringe! It was the only area of Earth's fledgling space empire that wasn't at peace. There was no war out there with aliens, though. No, this was old-fashioned war, good old-fashioned man against man. The enemy didn't have scales, tentacles, antenna or prehensile slime-bodies. It was a war between Mother Earth and her children, the colonists of Neptune and Pluto. And Mother Earth was winning.

"I've got to say, Jim, you're not wowing me here. I've seen Fringe veterans before. None of them looked quite like that, but they're certainly battle-scarred and tough. Mean too, usually."

Jim grinned slyly and regarded the stranger again. He was now staring intently at his palm. Steve suddenly realised what the finger-dipping had been about — he had a scanner implanted into his hand! The finger was the measurement device, and his palm obviously had an inbuilt computer display. He was probably checking the alcohol level of the drink. Steve figured he'd be satisfied with it — Vics never watered down their dinks. Well, not usually.

Jim leaned in close to Steve. Steve winced. Jim's face was solemn and serious now.

"That man," he said seriously, "is a colonist."

Steve couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"A colonist? Here? This is Earth's moon, Jim! There's no way a colonist could get this far into our territory."

Jim shrugged. "Mebbe so," he conceded. "And mebbe not. But I can tall you one thing fer certain : that man ain't one of us, and him bein here is trouble. I've heard tell of a colonist, mean sonuvabitch, powerful ugly, makin his way from the outer Fringe to Earth to settle some old debts. And I'll tell you this for free — every time I hear of him agin, he gits closer and closer. You mark my words, Mr. Bartender. That's him. And I reckon hell's about to break loose, cos if'n he's here, he's here for a reason."

Weasely Jim raised his bottle in mock salute and faded into the shadows in the recesses of the bar. Trouble or no, he wasn't about to up and leave when there might be the chance of a show. Besides, there might be a drink or two in it later.

As the stranger finally lifted the glass to his lips, there came a hostile croak from a dark corner of the bar.

"You. I thought I told you never to come in here."

The man stood and turned, his bionic eye sparking as it automatically scanned the room for the speaker. He stopped, facing the corner the voice had come from. Out of the shadows stepped a giant lizard-like alien, eyes glowing with rage. Several other lizard people stood up, sliding their chairs back, hands reaching for belts. Their race was renowned for its skill at manufacturing bladed weapons, and they were all carrying. Steve cursed and slid his hands under the counter. 'Why didn't I get a quiet job, like accounting?' he thought.

The stranger murmured something under his breath, and slowly raised his arms peaceably. He gazed steadily at the lizard people and their giant leader, and shook his head slowly.

"I don't want trouble," he said, quietly yet clearly. "I don't want to kill anyone today."

There was scattered nervous laughter at this, but the stranger's face remained serious. The Lizard people hissed, and closed their ranks to form a diamond of fighters. As one, they drew swords, knives and pulveriser sticks. The lizard leader pointed at the stranger.

"We have unfinished business, scum!" he howled, and he pulled a blaster from his belt. The stranger, in a blur of movement, swung both hands to his hips and reached into his duster.

"No blasters!" Steve bellowed, and ducked behind the counter as the lizard man opened fire at him. Glass shattered and sprinkled his head and shoulders as he yanked the bar's automatic blast-rifle from its clasps. 'Well, he's barred, for a start,' he thought wryly, hearing the blaster discharge twice more. He was startled to hear two rather loud explosions in reply to this. Bracing himself for the worst, he jumped upright again and pointed the rifle at the fighters.

Chaos greeted him. One of the lizards was down, dead, with a neat little hole in his forehead. Steve couldn't see it, but the back of the creature's skull was missing, pulverised. Another lizard was writhing on the floor, howling with pain, tail thrashing around, surrounded by bits of table. It appeared to have a very painful gut wound. The wall behind the stranger was scorched and blackened; evidently the alien leader gang leader was a lousy shot and had missed each time. The leader was fiddling with its blaster and swearing loudly it had jammed. There were bits of broken chair lying around on the ground by the stranger's feet, but he didn't appear to be fazed. He was standing his ground, feet planted apart, arms raised. Sparks flew as old mechanical joints groaned at the speed with which the stranger, though still, fought. A contradiction in terms, perhaps but it was the only way Steve could comprehend it. The man was moving so fast he was standing still.

In left hand, he clutched a small weapon, much like a blaster

though, like the rest of the stranger's equipment and attire, strangely low-tech. The gun had a smaller barrel, for a start, and was a lot slimmer than any blaster Steve had ever seen. When it discharged, it did so with a frankly terrifying bang, and there appeared to be a recoil. No gun had done that for decades. By all rights, fighting with a gun like this, the stranger should be dead. The gun had a leather thong attached to the butt, and looped round the stranger's fist, which allowed him to 'drop' the gun and clutch his enemy with his free hand. This done, he could bring his second weapon into play — Steve's eyes widened as he clocked it. Not quite a knife, not quite a sword. It was a machete, and it was easily as long as Steve's arm.

Before Steve's very eyes, the stranger gripped an enemy by the arm, swung it around and swiftly hacked its head off in two immensely powerful strokes. Dropping the decapitated alien, he jerked his left wrist up suddenly, swinging the pistol back into his grip and swivelling on one foot just in time to plant a bullet into the chest of an enemy who had silently flanked him. Steve flinched involuntarily as the explosion sounded his finger convulsing on the trigger of his own weapon in reaction. A lizardman fell. The bar's insurance would cover it.

"Behind you!" Steve called to the stranger, not quite sure why he'd done it. The stranger leant into a lunge from the lizard in front of him, grabbed its arm and swung around, dragging the helpless alien before him. Not a minute to soon, as three shots from lead alien's blaster slammed into the hostage, killing it instantly. The stranger threw the lizard's corpse at his remaining enemy, a move the alien was not expecting. It tumbled to the ground, its blaster slipping from its grip.

In an instant the stranger's foot was pressing down heavily on the alien's chest. The lizard clutched the stranger's leg feebly, wheezing as the breath was slowly driven out of its body. It stared fearfully

into the barrel of the stranger's gun, and at the cold, merciless face that had remained expressionless throughout the small massacre. The stranger spoke, slowly, quietly, deliberately.

"When you get to Hell," he said, "you can wait for McCoy and Jensen to join you."

The lizardman's eyes widened fit to pop out of its head.

"You're taking on McCoy?" it whispered harshly with its remaining breath. "You're —"

Steve never found out what the alien reckoned the stranger was, because the stranger emptied his gun into its head. At that range, the head was pulverised. The floor underneath it took a beating, too. Whatever bullets were in that gun, they weren't the conventional bullets to go with that weapon.

The stranger looked around slowly, appraising the room. No one said a word. No one breathed. If there had been tumbleweed on the moon, it would have rolled across the room. And what a state that corner of the room was! Debris from broken furniture, damaged walls and floor, dead bodies lying around — and one very alive one, still squealing like a stuck pig. Or a stuck lizard, rather. The stranger strode over to it and picked it up with one hand. It howled in protest.

"You can live," he said simply. "Tell him I'm coming."

And then he threw the wretch through the bar's main window, shattering the glass that had only been replaced yesterday. The lizard lay unconscious on the pavement outside, and that was the end of that.

Steve set the blaster-rifle down on a stool beside him and appraised

the damage. It could have gone much worse. The stranger drained his whiskey glass, walked over to the counter and regarded Steve unapologetically.

"This will cover the expense," he said simply, dropping a small Hessian pouch on the counter. He made as if to leave, but stopped. He stared into Steve's eyes, and Steve felt a shudder run down his spine. The stranger nodded slightly to himself.

"Reckon you saved my life back there," he said softly. "I'm not much of a one for thanks. But I figure I owe you something." He leaned forward slightly. Steve leaned back.

"Leave," the stranger commanded. "All manner of hell is coming. Reckon maybe you don't deserve to bear the brunt of it."

And without another word, the stranger turned and left the bar. Steve stared silently at the doors as they gently swung shut. Every patron of that bar was gazing at Steve, and he knew that they had all, himself included, come to the same conclusion.

He didn't know who McCoy was, or Jensen. He didn't know how the stranger defined Hell, or why it should be following in his wake. But he did know he didn't want to be around here when it arrived that was for certain.

He wondered if the weather on Venus was nice this time of year.

