



Sub-sti-tute

Standing side-of-stage at the Apock-Ellipse rock concert, percussionist Clay Potter was in delirium. He'd slipped away from his group unnoticed and was now actually *here*, unmolested by the security guards. As soon as the announcement was made about The Artizens' support act, he was *in*. He'd be as close to the stage as he could muster for their every single show.

All of the street-press and youth radio stations were in accord. Apock-Ellipse, were destined to be the next Big Thing. Stuart Doom, the lead singer, or 'Doom-Sayer', was belting out their first hit to bring their short 45-minute set to a close. Clay, like all those present in the small but animated crowd, knew all the words, and was mouthing along.

Rosie, the chick drummer in the band, was pounding out a punching rhythm that Clay felt deep within his chest and gut, and he nodded to her in a way that he hoped conveyed professional recognition, though she never once looked in his direction.

She'd locked in with the bass guitarist in perfect rhythmic unison. Long curly orange ringlets flew in time, droplets of her perspiration illuminated in a rainbow as they arced through the humid, close air.

As the bridge gave way to the guitar break in their biggest hit so far, Stuart gave Clay a sly sideways glance, causing him to break out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the searing concert lighting, throwing swirling multi-coloured shadows across the stage.

Already covered in goosebumps, Clay now felt that every hair follicle on his entire body was engorged with delight at being physically present while one of his favourite bands was performing a blistering version of their best song. Distracted, he saw Stuart nodding in his direction.

Insistently.

Clay's knees went weak as he realised that the Doom-Sayer was inviting him to be up-front for once, and Clay instinctively pointed at his chest, in the classic 'who, me?' gesture. A chest, incidentally, which was clad in a sweat-soaked "Apock-Ellipse" t-shirt.

The decision took a millisecond to make, and the hired security thugs made no attempt to ruin Clay's evening.

Pumping a fist in the air in time with the music and guitar solo, Clay floated across the sticky, beer-soaked stage floorboards to stand in the spotlight, front and centre. He'd never seen a crowd so hyped-up from such close proximity and he forgot himself, whooping, hollering and high-fiving the outstretched hands of the front-row until Stuart put an arm around him and pointed the radio microphone into his face.

Now he knew why his own band never gave him a chance at doing backup vocals.

Tapping a foot, Clay kept time and the harmony in his foldback speaker was pitch-perfect, as he realised he was singing the melody and the Doom-Sayer had effortlessly taken over the harmonising as they shared the microphone.



Clay could happily die, right there, on the spot.

The song and set came to a thunderous close and the band came to the front of the stage to receive their applause.

"Thank you Sydney! We also just wanna thank The Artizens for letting us open up for them tonight. And especially for you guys for all coming out a little early to support Apock-Ellipse! It means a lot to us." He took a breath before adding the spiel.

"Buy our albums and t-shirts. Visit our website, double-you double-you double-you dot Apock hyphen Ellipse dot com. See ya next time, Sydney! So sayeth the voice... of doom!" Anyone who'd been in the crowd before knew his sign-off and joined in, particularly the guttural growl of the last two syllables.

Stuart Doom beamed, threw a goat, downed the rest of his beer in one, clapped Clay on the shoulder and they strode off stage together like old war comrades. Rapturous cheers and wolf-whistles, like tinnitus, *just* like tinnitus, still ringing loudly in their ears.

Clay was walking across the surface of the dry-ice clouds that still lingered on the stage.

Back-stage was abuzz as a small crew of roadies rushed on and off the darkened stage, toting quad boxes, guitars and rolling up leads. Apock-Ellipses' drummer, with the very un-rock'n'roll name of Rosie (Acca-Dacca notwithstanding) – having jubilantly hurled her sticks into the crowd after the final number, felt her way back to the drum kit in the dim between-set lighting; an anonymous shape in the darkness.

Fans, screaming just moments before, had drifted back to previous conversations held in raised voices over the deafening 'mood music'. Some hit the bars, bathrooms and merch tables. Either way, Rosie was ignored by all as she efficiently packed up her equipment, without so much as a peep from the large cymbals.

She'd catch the band up later. The band – whose persona she'd willingly adopted – had increasingly become a boy's club that she'd always struggled to feel a part of – especially as she had no desire whatsoever to sleep with any of them.

Back-stage, Clay felt acceptance like he'd not experienced in a long time and when the Doom-Sayer offered him an in to party the night away with Apock-Ellipse, Clay spent even less time pondering this decision than he had to join the band on-stage during their set.

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The stage was set for the concert of the year, and the now ten-thousand strong audience were growing increasingly impatient, looking at flashing images projected upon the oversized video walls. "Ar-ti-zens". They chanted, tunelessly, reading the stage backdrop.

"Ar-ti-zens." Emphasis on each syllable. "Ar-ti-zens."



Fists began punching the air in time as the calls grew in volume and intensity. Impatience that nothing was actually preventing the band from coming on stage. Yet it was tempered with anticipation, that this band could *really* put on a show, and by making the crowd wait, the inevitable frenzy it would create upon their appearance would carry them through the first three songs of their hit-laden set.

This was the exact moment where Walter Culler, lead singer of The Artizens, usually wanted to start the show, but they were still a bandmate down. Skull was here, Cha-Cha-Char, just not... Walter was pacing back-stage, listening to the rabble outside, expectantly calling his name.

"Ar-ti-zens."

Cursing their manager for floozing instead of keeping tabs on these four souls, who scattered to the winds at a moments' notice. Never mind that any of them had the capacity – and the propensity – to make headlines single-handedly – for all the wrong reasons. The manager had simply chosen the wrong band-member to shadow tonight.

"Anyone seen him? Where the hell could he've got to?" Walter was livid.

Skull Churr, guitarist with the Artizens, flexed his impressive biceps, which seemed to make his tattooed-on skulls animate. This was generally part of the show, but it had grown from a nervous tic attained when everyone, not just his mother, still called him 'Warren'.

"Stuff him, Walt, let's just..." Skull trailed off as a young bedraggled redhead with ruby-red lips appeared, unchallenged, in the doorway of the band-room. "Listen, sweetheart, no auto..."

Again, failing to complete a sentence as he saw her AAA credential pass hanging around her neck on a lanyard. Not too pretty, but not too plain. No-nonsense, by the look of her. She looked after herself, good arms, and a reasonable body on her too. Fit.

"Hi Skull, nice to finally meet you. My name is Rosie Ellipse". She said by way of introduction, holding out an underawed hand with a smile and suddenly she was peeling off her sweat-sodden Apock-Ellipse T-shirt.

"Hey, hey. After the show, babe..." Walter began, holding his hands up, but was silenced.

"Not even *our* band tee..." Said Cha-Cha-Char Cole, under his breath.

"Walter, Cha-Cha." Rosie looked from one Artizen member to another. "Seems as though you need a drummer and I... Well, not to mince words."

Standing there, very comfortable in a sports bra which secured but did not hide her assets. "Looks like I'm working a double-shift tonight. I'll grab a spare fresh T-shirt of Clay's. The crowd are calling us. Come on, let's not disappoint them."