

A Glass of Stars

Vaughan Stanger

"C'mon, just do me one of your specials."

That was his third ask of the evening, enough persistence to deserve my full attention.

I gave the man leaning over the counter a glance that doubtless seemed cursory to him. Muscular physique, loosely corralled haystack of multi-coloured dreads, prominent cheekbones disguised by facial tats that morphed before my brain could quite latch onto them. Leather coat making him sweat a bit under the spotlights. My instincts told me that this was someone well known operating under cover. Not a JoPub I could just turf out of the bar because he was being a pain. And more to the point, it might be him.

Bar Fusion attracted more than a few slumming celebs, which was why I'd taken the job here. Why track a stealthed celeb halfway round the world when he could be relied to turn up here, sooner or later, attracted by the carefully leaked underground buzz about what was on offer. But getting them here was one thing, spotting them quite another, what with JoPubs routinely emulating their heroes, who responded by stealthing themselves to varying degrees, depending on vanity or insecurity. Personal stealth tech had led to an arms race of mutually assured confusion, leaving media company operatives like me with a nigh-on impossible task.

Hence the specials: after all, there's nothing a celeb likes more than a new and expensive drug, preferably one that's non-addictive.

I double-blinked a face-snap and sub-vocalised my suspicion to my agent at BarAngel.com. I'd counted to five when it whispered a reply in my earpiece.

Might be, might not be.

Gee thanks, big help!

"So what'll it be? Another shot of Tequila?" I asked, polishing a glass while playing for time.

Holding my gaze, he rested his elbows on the counter and cupped his face in his hands. Then, to my surprise, he wiped one hand over his face, blanking the tats

and switching eye-colour. Cheekbones that screamed: "adore me!" coupled with a piercing blue-eyed stare. Features that distinctive were not easy to mask.

BarAngel whispered 87% probability for Jake Barton. Not quite certain yet, and neither was I.

"You heard me first time," the man growled. "I can pay, if that's what you're wondering," he added. He reactivated his tats and switched back to brown-eyes, giving me a double-measure of glower.

Jake Barton: Rock music's Last Best Hope, as the corporate publicity wonks styled him. The new Bono, if you believed the hype and possessed a long enough memory, which an former music-journo like me sure as hell did. Trouble is he'd fallen off the corporate radar, gone underground. Rumours abounded, lots of gossip on PopBitch. Hardly surprising that my paymasters wanted to find out why their top-selling solo artist had begun hurtling along the fast track to end game.

But Jake Barton, saviour of rock? Don't make me laugh! I'd hated the bastard these last five years, ever since he disbanded Headspin.

Two powerful fists banged down on the counter. "You do a special, right?"

In point of fact, I could "do" dozens of specials, none of them street-legal but all of them helpfully diagnostic. BarAngel whispered 98% for a Barton ID and that was good enough for me. The voice clinched it, I reckoned. First time we'd clapped eyes on each other in five years. Not that he'd recognise me. I operated under much deeper cover than him, with good reason.

I nodded and unlocked a cupboard beneath the counter, extracted the metal-and-glass machine, which looked rather like an oversized coffee maker.

Barton poked a finger at it and chuckled, a gruesome gurgle of nicotine and bourbon. "Fuckin' odd-looking cocktail shaker."

I leaned over the bar and waved him forward, nicely conspiratorial. "This is a sono-mixer," I whispered.

"Whatever."

Damping down the instinct to throttle him, I grabbed the calfskin-bound menu from the shelf under the counter and opened it out for him. He whistled at the prices. Touch of the common; I liked that, despite everything. Nothing JoPub could afford on this menu!

"So, what'll it be?"

Focussing his eyes seemed to take some effort, but after a lengthy dawdle through the options he stabbed his index finger halfway down the second page.

"That one; I'll have an Albeiro." He exaggerated the syllables, like a child in Sunday school reading a passage from the bible.

I took the menu and slid it beneath a pile of cloths.

"A double star for a star." At twice the usual price, of course. "Career on the up, is it?" I resisted the temptation to smirk.

His expression would have withered leaves in mid-summer. "Just pour me one!"

I pushed the credit tablet towards him, but he sneered and waved it away. He handed over a thick wad of fifties. Any lingering doubts about his identity vanished. Only a celeb flashes cash these days.

"Bit more to it than just pouring, my friend, but your special is coming right up."

"No friend of mine." He made it sound like he had no friends at all. The shutters over his soul had gone up again before I could comment further.

With a shrug, I tapped the code into the miniature keyboard I'd attached to the lid of the mixer unit, quarter-filled the jug with some ready-mix I kept handy, and then topped it up with some fashionably brand-free vodka and a dash of lemon juice. The resultant concoction would be potent but only marginally poisonous.

"Ready?"

He nodded. I closed the lid and clicked the control knob I'd salvaged from an antique TV to "mix". After ten seconds of frenetic whirring, I clicked it round to "compress" and placed the mixer on the bar-top. While counting to ten, I surreptitiously dimmed the bar lights and muted the dance track. Not that anyone ever danced here. The sudden silence certainly pricked the attention of Bar Fusion's hundred or so other punters, judging by the murmurs. Maybe two or three of them knew what was coming.

...Nine, ten...

Twin sparks of light flashed into existence like a pair of miniature supernovae: actinic, eye-searing, yellow and blue. Two bubbles had collapsed under a barrage of

infrasound waves, growing hotter and hotter until pseudo-fusion ignited a pair of tiny suns. Sono-luminescence: the star in your glass. But even those regulars who'd seen me serve one of my specials before gasped. They hadn't seen a double before. There was a scattering of applause. None of them, I suspected, could have afforded what Jake was about to enjoy.

His eyes glinted in the starlight.

A few seconds later, the stars blinked out. I stroked up the lights and music, drowning the hubbub, then flipped open the lid and poured the smoky liquid into the shot glass.

"Enjoy!"

Barton banged the glass on the bar counter and gulped down the contents. He eyes rolled upwards and his mouth sagged open. He gripped the rail below the counter like a vertigo sufferer standing on the Golden Gate Bridge. As well he might, considering what he was looking at right now. He'd be "under" for a good couple of hours, I reckoned, maybe more.

Plenty of time to get a reading.

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The tall, willowy thirty-something woman who sauntered up to the counter, wearing a calf-length suede coat the colour of fog, offered her usual amused but frustratingly distant smile. Veronica Tate had supplied me with client reading services for several years, and knew full well that I fantasised about sleeping with her. My daydreams would turn out to be futile, as she'd made clear the first time we'd worked together. Besides, I had responsibilities to my employers, for which I was very well paid.

"So what do you reckon?" I prompted.

She pushed a lock of flame-red hair away from eyes grey as dawn and peered into Jake's.

"Good stuff you serve here. He's well under." The accompanying wink made me tingle like the first time I clapped eyes her, and just as uselessly.

"Can you set up a channel?"

"Probably, but not here," she teased, eyes bugging in obvious mockery. "We'll need somewhere quieter than this. Let's get him into one of your private rooms."

Handing over my duties to one of my colleagues required the application of a bribe equal to a week's pay. But buying his complicity meant that Veronica, Jake and I would not be disturbed. Installed in a room usually reserved for private parties of the one-on-one variety, Jake appeared oblivious to the world, also to the spider's web of electrodes that Veronica had attached to his scalp, threaded artfully through his dreads. He looked kind of comical, but also a bit scary, with those rolled-heavenwards eyeballs. Veronica took pity on him, and me, and thumbed his eyelids shut. Then she flipped open her retro-looking but wetware-enhanced tablet and connected the fan-in of electrodes into a data-collection module she'd plugged into one of the ports. After almost twenty minutes of data wrangling that I could not begin to understand, she held the screen towards me so I could get a better look.

"What you're looking at is not literally his mind's eye, but my metaphor generator will have got it close enough."

I knew this stuff already but Veronica liked to show off.

The screen presented a surreal yet serene-looking landscape: like the Grand Canyon, but twice as deep, illuminated not by one sun but two: the larger, golden-yellow, the smaller eggshell-blue. Neither disk had climbed more than a few degrees above the misty horizon and both occupied the same quadrant of the purple-velvet sky. When Jake looked over his shoulder, his view partly blocked by his guitar case, the screen showed his twin shadows seeming to stretch halfway to infinity.

"Interesting that he chose a binary system, don't you think?" Veronica commented.

Diagnosis was my job, but she undoubtedly had a point. Most of the menu offered singletons: red giants like Betelgeuse or Antares, blue-white dazzlers like Sirius or Rigel. Few if any celebs would go main sequence, even less likely a white dwarf. Diagnosing giants wasn't too difficult. Quaffing a red giant usually indicated a fear that the career was growing out of control, building up to one last explosion of fame then the long, irreversible cool-off. Blue giants usually indicated a predilection for rapid rise followed by instant burnout. I had expected Jake to go for Sirius. Celebs rarely chose double stars -- and when they did the reasons for doing could be complex.

"Could be an indicator," I said. "But, let's see what he makes of it before jumping to conclusions."

We watched the screen in silence, looking for clues. Jake had chosen Albeiro, the most beautiful double star in the night sky. The psychedelic reaction products generated by my carefully engineered burst of sono-luminescence had generated the corresponding visualisation. But it was what he envisaged himself doing now that mattered.

Disappointingly little, it turned out. The man had plonked himself down at the edge of the canyon, feet dangling in the void while he watched creatures like four-winged Canada geese soaring on the up-currents. No sign of any action or a decision from Jake. He had deposited his guitar case by his side. That it remained closed chimed with the reason for my current assignment. Jake Barton seemed all out of inspiration, stuck in neutral for the first time in the five years since he'd disbanded HeadFuck.

What he'd gained in greenbacks, groupies and gossip inches since then meant nothing, as far as I was concerned. HeadFuck were the best band in the world: like Nirvana of In Utero playing a lost album by The Beach Boys, and then some. They sounded like nothing on Earth: they could fry your brain with crunching guitar riffs and seduce you with atmospheric harmonies in the same damned chorus. But that stupid bastard had lived up to the name he'd given the band: walked out on his friends, just as the trio looked like conquering the world.

Yep, I hated Jake Barton all right. But that hadn't stopped my curiosity getting a hold of me when the corporation offered the job. Find Jake Barton for us and tell us what's wrong in his head. As if there hadn't been something wrong five years earlier.

"Is he waiting for someone?" Veronica suggested.

I looked up at her. She was frowning at me.

I shrugged. "Jake Barton is single, notoriously so. A quick fuck with a groupie, male or female, after each gig is the closest he gets to a meaningful relationship. If he's waiting for someone in particular, then it's news to me, and more to the point, it's news to his owners."

"Well, if he's fully stealthed, it's not that surprising they don't know what's going on his private life -- or in his head, for that matter."

"Which is why I do what I do."

She waved her palm-graft sensor over Jack's forehead while glancing at the screen. "Half-an-hour tops," she remarked. "If you're going in, you'd better do so now."

Less than I thought.

Fixing a sensor net to my scalp took less time than for Jake, since I'd depilated that morning. Veronica reset the software; the screen went blank then presented two views, one blank, the showing Jake's much as before.

I poured liquid from the mixer into another shot glass, and gulped it down. It left an acrid, bitter flavour in my mouth. A moment later a ball of heat erupted in the pit of my stomach.

Darkness flooded my head, blotting out my view of Veronica and the back room. Time passed, but in no way I could measure, until the inky nothingness became a purple sky and twin disks of gold and blue shone down upon me.

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"Fuck, man. What the hell you doin' here?"

I sat down beside him, clasping my knees, not daring to dangle my legs over the edge.

"Bartender's prerogative," I said, averting my gaze from the chasm, which seemed to intrigue him. Was he thinking of jumping?

He gave me a sideways look, more penetrating than I'd expected, as if he'd had an intuition. I stared back, but couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Company paid for your shot of Albeiro, did it?"

Realising that there was little point denying my affiliation, I nodded.

"Those bastards will never stop hounding me."

I couldn't deny that, so I didn't try. We sat in silence for a while. When he spoke again both suns had climbed high into the purple sky.

"It's gone, mate," he said. "My fire, my edge, my muse, call it what you like, but it isn't sparking up here" --he tapped a finger against his temple-- "any more."

"Are you sure?"

For an answer, he got to his feet, opened the case and hurled the guitar over the edge. Then he threw the case just for good, measure. I didn't bother watching their trajectories. The notion of looking over the edge made me feel queasy. For now, I switched my gaze from him to the screeching double-geese.

"You want out, then?" I ventured.

Which in this age of rent-a-double and ubiquitous stealthing was perfectly possible, but like any A-Lister his contract contained penalty clauses designed to prevent such bailouts. Judging by Barton's abrupt shake of the head, he didn't think that option was feasible either.

"Got some expensive habits, mate."

Not least "warm bodies" aged two, four and five, and their mothers, that he paid to keep out of the public gaze.

"What could we do that would make a difference?"

The hollowness of his laugh suggested a man caught in a trap of his making.

"Filing for corporate bankruptcy would be a start!"

I chuckled. "I'm sure your contract would be traded on to someone less...caring than us. So really, what can we do for you?"

He leaned back and gazed up at the purple sky, supporting himself on hands half-sunk into orange soil.

"It's just not the same on your own. Wish I'd never split up Headspin."

So shocking was the notion that formed in my head that I blanked right out of our mutual daydream before I could suggest it to Barton.

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"Every band on this planet has reformed at some time or other, usually for money, almost never for artistically valid reasons. So why not Headspin?"

Veronica loomed over me, hands planted on hips, looking perplexed. Lying prostrate on the couch, Jake Barton continued to snore his way towards a hangover that would be no better than mine. I had woken up groaning, but not just from the vice seemed clamped round my skull. I groaned some more before I began outlining the problem.

"Look, I was the journo who spotted Headspin playing to six punters in some crummy back room in Camden. They made this glorious racket that distilled retro

guitar, bass, drums and voice into something primal but beautiful too. I helped negotiate a start-up deal with Fierce Panda: just enough to keep 'em going, not so much that they'd lose their hunger. One year later, I wrote an adulatory article that got them the cover picture slot in the final dead-tree issue of the NME. Six months after that, with the download generation going mouse-click mental for them, Jake Barton did a Ziggy."

"Oh, yeah, I think..." she said, sounding like she remembered, but dimly.

"Trouble is, Jake did more than break up the band, because his unprincipled dash for a solo career propelled drummer Marcus Levy into therapy followed by off-the-map obscurity, while Jennifer Mueller--"

"Bassist, presumably?"

I nodded. "She drove her Mini Cooper off Beachy Head after shooting up.

Veronica blanched. "So reforming the band could prove quite a challenge."

I grinned at her. "Unless I can tutor you this quickly" -- I clicked my fingers -- "in bass guitar."

She scowled back. "Forget it; I don't have a musical bone in my body."

Long, thin, lovely bones, certainly, but I was prepared to believe her verdict about their musicality. I knew I stood no chance of finding out for myself.

Granted, I had played drums in a couple of local bands while studying English Literature at Manchester University, but the idea of putting together a pick-up band that simulated the missing members of Headspin was just plain silly. After all, I turned out to be a much better music journalist than I ever was a drummer. Even then, when Headspin went into a tailspin I turned out to be a one trick pony in that field too. Since then, I'd turned my talents to snooping on the great and the good.

But I had written for a living once, right? Hell, even now I should be able to knock out an advert, like those you used to find in the back of the music 'zines.

"Drummer and bassist wanted. Influences: Nirvana, Beach Boys and Headspin. No timewasters, druggies or prima-donnas."

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This time Jake Barton didn't have to ask more than once.

"Gimme a Rigel," he muttered.

A fast burn out singleton did not seem a good sign.

Reaching for the sono-mixer, I said, "Got something new, if you want to try it."

He shook his head; dreads wafting like corn in a breeze.

"It's on the house."

That got his attention -- and suspicion. His gaze focussed on nothing for a moment, like he was getting an update from his account-handling agent. Then he shrugged.

"Okay, whatever."

Five tiny stars lit up the bar, burning bright, pure actinic white. The fireworks generated by my latest special seemed of no interest to Barton but drew a sustained burst of applause from all but two of my clientele. The boy and girl sat nearest the door looked on the verge of crapping their pants. Within seconds of Epsilon Aurigae expiring, I poured one measure into a shot glass and slid it towards Barton. He gulped it down without a word. I waved Veronica to the bar. She enlisted the assistance of the nervous-looking couple to move Barton into the back room. Meanwhile, I poured out four more measures. Soon the couple returned.

"You ready for this?"

The squat, powerfully built young man with the drummer's hands, shaved head sporting with a crimson bandana shook his head.

"Can't quite believe..."

His blonder-than-platinum, kohl-eyed companion elbowed him good-naturedly.

"Course we're ready," she said, not entirely convincingly.

They'd got Marcus and Jennifer off to a tee, visually and vocally, as might be expected from former members of the one-and-only Headspin tribute band. Paying their Jake-a-like to stay away had been the easy bit. Nerving these two chancers for the big night had proved much harder. Still, it was now or never.

I poured the sono-luminescence buy-products into two more shot glasses.

"Enjoy!"

After a wild-eyed exchange of glances they drank up.

I motioned Veronica over, grinning like an early 90s raver who'd found an un-cut tab of E. I had just reformed, even if for one night only, the greatest band in the world. Did I feel good?

Oh, yes.

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Veronica had just completed her wiring-up when I walked into the back room. Not wanting to risk missing the gig, I'd cleared the bar on the pretext of a fake police tip-off.

"There having a whale of a time," she remarked.

I inspected each of the three screens I'd requested in turn. Jake and his new band-mates had set up their equipment in the natural amphitheatre provided by a stadium-sized crater. Epsilon Aurigae's suns supplied the lighting: five dazzling sparks set against a jet-black sky, shining down on Headspin, the jagged ramparts casting shadows across the stage.

After a brief period of jamming, the trio had started to conjure an exhilarating racket, Jake Barton riffing majestically amid the multi-shadowed desolation, the rhythm section threatening to pound the planet into rubble. And somehow audible above the sonic attack, their three-part harmonies sent a shiver down my spine.

The reason? Well, that song was new, the first from Headspin in more than five years. It pissed all over Jake's solo output, that's for sure.

"There's just one thing missing," I said.

Veronica looked up. "What's that?"

I offered her a shot glass then raised mine.

"A band needs an audience. Two is a bit thin, but they've got to start somewhere."

Her frown damped down my hopes from zilch to nil.

I pointed at the screen. "We've got the best seats in the house."

The sight of her smile warmed me more even than the contents of the glass. I'd just played the oldest gambit in my dodgy repertoire: buy her a drink; take her to a gig.

Bathed in the light of five suns, the best band in this or any other world played a blinder.

And a bit later, so did Veronica and me.