

Thank You for the Music

By Robotech_Master, with JonBuck

Uplift
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“Hey, is that a guitar?”

Tim looked up. Quentin was peering thoughtfully at the “cigar box special” Tim had left lying on his bed since getting home from shopping with Kim earlier that day. Quentin had still been in a charge cycle, and had just woken up while Tim had been puttering around checking his email on the desktop comm.

“Uh, yeah. I used to play some, and Kim got me that while we were out shopping today.” He chuckled. “We’re engaged, by the way.”

“Oh, really? Congratulations.” Quentin came over to give his shoulder a friendly nuzzle. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy together.”

“Thanks.” Tim glanced at the wall between his and Kim’s apartments. Kim had been inspired by the way the dressing rooms at the clothing store could be made into one larger room by removing the hardlight wall between them, and now she was looking into seeing if something similar could be done for their apartments. Tim supposed that would make them into a “togetherment.”

“Incidentally...I used to play some, myself,” Quentin said. “Would you mind if we Fused, and...?”

Tim blinked. “You did?”

“Nuevo San has a fairly strong mariachi tradition,” Quentin said. “My partner in the army got a guitar and noodled with it a little, but wasn’t really inspired to go very far. But I asked him if he minded if I learned, and I think the idea amused him. So I practiced a lot in virtual, and he let me play Fused in the real too. There was this other RIDE in our unit who had a lovely voice, and she used to sing a little with me...”

“Huh.” Tim considered that. Of course, there was no reason a RIDE *couldn't* play an instrument, especially a smaller RIDE like Quentin whose hands weren't that much bigger than a human's. It was just surprising to know that any did. *But of course they can*, he reminded himself. *They're people, not equipment*. “Uh...sure, if you want. I'm not sure the guitar will be quite big enough, but I guess you can play it like I used to play my old training guitar.”

“It'll do.” Quentin’s hardlight blinked out, and he Fused up and over Tim. They stepped to the bed and picked up the guitar—which was, as expected, something like a training guitar by comparison to Quentin’s size. But Quentin didn’t seem to mind. He gave it a gentle strum, then carefully tightened a couple of the tuning pegs. Then he experimentally picked out a playful tune, and sang.

What color's the sky?
iAy mi amor, ay mi amor!
You tell me that it's red
iAy mi amor, ay mi amor!

Where should I put my shoes?
iAy mi amor, ay mi amor!
You say, "put them on your head!"
iAy mi amor, ay mi amor!

*You make me un poco loco
Un poquitito loco
The way you keep me guessing
I'm nodding and I'm yesing
I'll count it as a blessing
That I'm only un poco loco*

“Wow...” Tim said. “You’re really *good*.” In fact, he felt more than a little intimidated. His own picking and strumming seemed childish by comparison.

But Quentin apparently picked up on his thoughts. “Hey, hey, none of that beating yourself up because you’re not as good. Music isn’t really *about* being ‘good,’ it’s about expressing yourself. Anyway, I’ve had a lot of time to practice, and I don’t think you have lately. You’ll get better quickly if you work on it, *amigo*.”

“I guess that’s right...” Tim said. “But still...”

“Here, I know. Look. Let me help. I can teach you some of these fingerings I use. See how I have our hands? Feel it?” Quentin positioned his fingers in particular ways on the strings—and since at the moment they felt like Tim’s fingers, too, he couldn’t help feeling it.

“Yeah, I think so...”

“See, I start with this chord here, then I change positions like so, and...” Quentin talked him through the song.

Tim followed along, feeling his fingers move in time. He actually thought he *was* picking it up. It was really a rather remarkable form of instruction, he thought. Rather than an instructor placing his fingers in the right grip and relying on him to move them into position himself, Quentin’s putting his own fingers in position moved him there, too, helping him to build up the muscle memory.

“Now you try it.” Tim felt Quentin’s control recede. He stumbled a bit, but he strummed along as Quentin had shown him. “There!” Quentin said. “You’re getting it. Practice it a little, and you’ll be able to do that when you’re not Fused, too.”

“Wow, thanks,” Tim said. “Can you teach me some more?”

“I’ll be happy to,” Quentin said. “Hey, it’s not like I’ve got anything better to do. And it’s nice to have a partner who’s actually *interested* in music for a change.”

“Great! I guess I should head back to the mall and get a bigger guitar for you.”

“No rush on that. This will do for now.”

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Over the next couple of days, Tom started to practice, shaking the rust off and picking up some new old tunes from the Steader archives. He remembered a few of the requests he’d gotten earlier at the mall and looked them up, as they seemed like a good place to start.

Quentin taught him some new fingering techniques and chords, which were also useful. He wasn’t sure that Quentin’s musical style necessarily meshed with his—Quentin was more into rockabilly and *tejano*-style music, while he favored classic pop and rock—but that just meant they wouldn’t step on each others’ toes and could give the audience more variety together.

The next weekend, Kim finally finished making the arrangements to have their separating wall between their apartments removed. They both took down the few decorations they'd put up and made sure the area around the wall was clear. Then they and their RIDEs stood well back as the wall slowly slid aside, revealing each other standing in each other's rooms.

Tim grinned. "Howdy, neighbor."

Kim grinned back. "Howdy, *close* neighbor." She nodded to the guitar sitting on his sofa. "How about a tune?"

"Okay, sure," Tim said. "Been working on this one." He sat down, settled the guitar on his lap, and began to pick out a complicated melody.

*And the men who hold high places
Must be the ones who start
To mold a new reality
Closer to the heart
Closer to the heart*

Kim listened as Tim sang the old Rush tune, nodding in time. When he brought the song to a close, she applauded. "You've gotten even better than I remember."

Tim blushed. *Sheesh, I'm a guy now, but still I blush. And that's on top of the deal with Mr. Happy. Ugh, worst of both worlds.* "Well, thanks. We've been working on it. Seemed like a good way to honor the gift."

"You know what? I think you're ready for some serious busking." Kim grinned. "We should go downtown and do it, to celebrate our new bigger digs. I think I know just the spot."

"Well, all right," Tim said. "But you have to sing, too."

"Wait, what?" Kim said. "Where did this come from?"

"It seems like a fair division of labor, doesn't it?"

"But what if I can't carry a tune?"

"I've heard you singing in the shower. I think you'll do okay."

Now it was Kim's turn to blush. "Well, I dunno..."

"C'mon, as much *other* stuff as we do together, we oughtta do *this*. It'll be fun!" Tim grinned. "Besides, something tells me having an attractive woman will get more tips."

"Aha, an ulterior motive!" But Kim grinned back. "All right, then, let me get into that black dress you picked for me. If I'm going to vamp for tips, might as well go all the way."

The downtown spot Kim had in mind was a streetcorner across from a bar with a big "Cheers" sign—clearly based on the old twencen television series that had used the same logo. Tim hadn't really been able to get into the show, as sitcoms just weren't his thing, but the episode or two he'd chanced to watch while browsing Steader stuff had seemed decently made for what it was.

They'd researched the regs on busking on public property in Uplift, and they were pretty lax. You just had to be sure not to impede traffic, and you couldn't be lewd. That didn't seem like a problem. This corner was in front of an entrance to a mall, so there was a lot of room for people to stand without blocking the way. Tim unfolded a folding

camp stool, sat down, and tuned up the guitar. Kim stood by, and Quentin and Madeira sat off to one side to listen.

“Okay, you know this one?” Tim began to strum the guitar.

“I think so,” Kim said. She began to sing.

*Come to my window
Crawl inside, wait by the light of the moon
Come to my window
I'll be home soon*

Just as Tim had expected, Kim had a pretty good voice. She wasn't exactly a trained singer, but she was decent at carrying a tune. *Not exactly hard on the eyes, either*, Tim thought. But he was *especially* fond of the diamond on her finger.

Passers-by began to take notice, and many of them started to stop and listen. Tim heard the chimes of transactions hitting their wallets, and grinned. “Hey, do you know ‘Let it Go?’” one of their audience members asked.

“The classic Disney tune? Sure.” Tim strummed the notes of the piano introduction, and Kim launched into that song.

“The snow glows white on the mountain tonight, not a footprint to be seen...”

By now, a small crowd had gathered, some holding drinks they'd gotten in the Cheers bar across the street. “Why don't you do one, Tim?” Kim asked.

“How about we duet? ‘Dressed for Success.’”

“*Our* song? Okay...”

After a couple more songs, they noticed a pair of Integrates had stepped out of the Cheers bar across the street and were coming their way—a deer, and a clouded leopard.

“Uh-oh, d'ya suppose we made them mad?” Kim wondered.

“Not sure what they could do if we did. This is a public street, we aren't breaking any laws.”

“Hey, you two,” the deer said, hands on her hips. “What're you doing luring all my patrons away?” She smiled sardonically.

“Just trying to earn a few *mu*, ma'am,” Tim said cheerfully.

“Hmph. Well, if you're any good, why don't you come on over to Cheers? I've got a stage, and a fair going rate for live entertainment.” She glanced at the crowd. “That way this lot could come *buy drinks* while they listen.”

Tim and Kim looked at each other. “What do you think?” Tim asked.

Kim shrugged. “Sure, why not. If someone's willing to offer us a stage and pay us money, I won't say no.”

Tim shouldered the guitar, folded the stool, and he and Kim followed the Integrates over into the bar, with Quentin and Madeira padding along behind. It was nicely furnished in wood, in a style familiar from the old TV show. The bar itself was a rectangular enclosure in the center of the room, with racks of glasses and liquor bottles overhead. Tim looked around. “Some nice attention to detail here.”

“Thanks. We're pretty proud of it. By the way, I'm Diane, and this is Serena.”

“Nice to meet you. Tim Clifton, and my fiancée, Kim Lane. And our partners are Quentin and Madeira.”

Serena nodded. “The stage is right over there. Why don't you go get set up, and

I'll turn the mics on."

"Okay, sure." Tim and Kim headed over to the stage, where there were a couple of chairs and microphones. Tim took a chair, and Kim moved to stand behind the mic. "Any requests?"

"And we hope you aren't expecting *both* kinds of music—country *and* western," Kim added. "There isn't any protective chicken wire here."

"No deceptively 'free' drinks, either," Diane smirked. "I'll charge you right up front for 'em. Though I'll at least give you the employee discount."

"Good to know," Tim said, strumming the first few bars of the theme to *Rawhide*. "Rollin', rollin', rollin', though the streams are swollen, keep them dogies rollin', rawhide..."

As he drew the song to a close, a commotion broke out at the entrance. Without missing a note, Tim looked up to see that the huge Shell-mode wolf at the entrance seemed to be manhandling...well, it looked like a hornless bull Integrate who was trying to force his way in. *Buh?* Tim thought. *Someone's trying to stop that dogie from rolling?*

"Lemme in!" the bull yelped. "I gotta talk to Diane!"

"You're on the 'barred' list," the wolf growled. "Along with the check bouncers and other rowdies. Out!"

There was a rather dramatic sound of a shotgun being pumped. The huge weapon Diane leveled at the bull had **TORGUE** in giant letters on the side, and the doe was suddenly dressed in a cel-shaded yellow costume and had short blue hair. "Get out of my bar, Brodrick."

"I gotta talk to you! Please! Just talk!" the bull protested, squirming. The wolf had both his arms twisted behind his back in a wrestling hold. "You won't answer my emails!"

"Why *the fuck* would I? If you have something to say, you can say it from outside."

"Fine! If you'll come outside so I can say it *to* you!"

Diane sniffed, then slung the shotgun over her shoulder and walked outside with a swagger. The wolf shoved Brodrick outside after her. Curious, Tim and Kim hopped down from the stage and followed.

Outside, Diane crossed her arms and faced the bull. "All right, fine. Say what you gotta say."

"I gotta say...I'm *sorry*." Brodrick sighed and looked down. "I'm a *baaaaad* bull. I see that now. I been in therapy. And as part a' my parole...I gotta apologize an' try to make resti...resti...I gotta try to pay back all the people I done wrong to." He looked hopefully up at her. "I don't got any money, but...I'm real good at sweeping floors. Or lifting heavy stuff. Or...whatever."

Diane sighed and rested her free hand atop her muzzle. "I'll think about it. Now get out of here before I phase-lock you."

"Yes'm," Brodrick mumbled. The wolf released him, and he turned to go.

As he walked away, Diane frowned. "Brodrick...when you busted up my place, you were wearing giant hardlight horns. Why aren't you wearing them anymore?"

Brodrick turned back. "The shrinks said they were a 'symptom of my overdeveloped aggression' and that I'd be better off without 'em. Shouldn't pretend to be something I'm not, but try to like myself for the me I am. Mebbe they were right. I

don't get mad as much anymore now."

"Huh. Well, that's good for you, then. I'll be in touch. It's not just Serena I need to discuss this with, it's the entire bar. Now shoo."

"Yes'm," Brodrick said again, and slunk off down the street, head low.

Tim blinked. "What was *that* all about?"

"Well, about a year and a half ago, that bully boy was one of Fritz's goon squad that brought down the Domes. He marched into the bar and said, and I quote; 'Mistah Fritz says this place has gotta go'. Now, we took some offense to that. He shattered about ten thousand *mu* worth of liquor. I was about to plug him with this little shotgun, but someone else took care of him instead."

Kim shook her head. "We just got here from Earth, and I'm still having a hard time crediting half the stuff I hear about this 'Fritz' guy and his underlings. How could someone like that go for so long without getting taken down?"

"Well, the fact that he was a psycho with a giant pulse gun and a molecular flensing knife he used to skin Integrates who displeased him alive had a lot to do with it," Serena said.

"Brr," Tim said. "I guess I'm glad we missed that part."

"Anyway, times are better now," Diane said. "Without him on our case, we Integrates are free to rejoin society openly, and society's taking some giant steps forward. There's just these odd little reminders of the old days that pop up every now and again." She shrugged. "So, go on, get back on the stage. But...given what happened after your last song, I'd just as soon you don't play 'Wrecking Ball,' okay?"

Madeira giggled.

"We'll keep that one off the set list," Kim promised.

After a couple of hours, several drinks each, and a fee that was still decent even after the cost of the drinks was taken out of it, Tim, Kim, Quentin, and Madeira headed for home. Tim had traded off guitar duties with Quentin, but Madeira had chosen to remain in Walker mode for the night. "A BBV RIDE in a place like this is usually assumed to be 'working,'" Madeira said. "Just as well to avoid awkward propositions." Diane and Serena had nice things to say about their performances, and invited them back again whenever they had the free time.

"That was fun," Kim said. "We'll have to go back there sometime."

"We should tell Clara and Tom about it, too," Tim said. "Did you notice, all those wolves Diane's got working for her seem to be from Sturmhaven. Maybe Lubyanka might like to meet them."

"Wonder what a deer is doing bossing wolves around," Kim mused. "I'll bet there's a story there."

They walked into their shared apartment. "Well, here we are. Home sweet home." Kim grinned. "It seems so much roomier now."

"Well, that's because it's twice as roomy as one apartment alone."

"There is that."

Tim flopped on his sofa, putting the guitar on his lap again. "Ahhh, that was fun. I think I've gotten better with this thing than I ever was before. All the practice."

"I think so, too." Kim chuckled. "Funny, I hadn't expected singing would also be that much fun."

"You're pretty good at it," Tim said. "Between that, and you buying me guitars,

feels like I should be thanking you a *lot*. In fact..." He strummed the guitar again, and sang.

*So I say
Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty
What would life be?
Without a song or a dance what are we?
So I say thank you for the music
For giving it to me*

Kim chuckled. "Well, what can I say but 'you're welcome'?" She yawned. "But I think it's just about time for bed by now. These long Zharus days..."

"I guess since we're sharing the same apartment now, we should probably share the same bedroom, huh?" Tim said.

"Well, my bed is big enough for two..." Kim winked. "But first, a shower, I think. Wanna scrub my back?"

Tim grinned. "Just try and stop me." He leaned the guitar up on the end of the couch, and followed her out of the living room.

Quentin and Madeira watched them go. "That was a pleasant evening for them," Madeira said. "I do enjoy seeing them enjoy themselves."

Quentin nodded. "We should try to nurture their talents."

Madeira chuckled. "I'm not sure I'd know how to nurture a talent that wasn't for...well, you know."

"Then perhaps this will be a learning experience for you, too."

"Perhaps." Madeira yawned. "So...want to go hunt a nutria or two in Nature Range?"

Quentin nodded. "Let's go to our chargers, and I'll meet you there."

The two RIDEs padded off in opposite directions, and a moment later the room was empty.

THE END