

Star Wars

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Rebel Bass

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Standing at one end of a ten-vehicle speeder barn, Ryley Ancum folded both arms around the neck of his bass vye. He listened closely as a slow, dusk-tempo ballad replayed through Hannis D'lund's expertly tweaked touchboard. Ry, Hannis, and their friend Erik Lauderslag had formed the band, Far Cry, three seasons ago.

They weren't just "good for two sixteen-year-olds and a seventeen." If Ry knew anything about dusk music - and this year he'd made dusk music his life - then they were good. Unqualified.

Now if they could just get this offworld gig, without alerting any Imperials to Ry's contacts in the Alliance underground.

Dark eyes, deeper than starlight Warm thoughts caress my soul...

Ry squeezed his eyes shut, pressing the vye against his chest, and tracked the bass line he had just recorded - not only for its musicality, but for the first two notes of each measure.

He no longer double-checked in terms of, How long is the first note? Does it move up or down in pitch, and how long is the second note by comparison? With practice, those thoughts had become second nature, like reading letters off a page. Now, when he closed out the music - which wasn't easy, because Erik had written a gettingly good song - he heard letters and breaks transmitted in bass code. His mind gradually formed words hidden in the playback of "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts"

Ten kilotons [strategic metal] shipping Corellia next month. Rumor new warship project. Feeling as if he were emerging from a trance, Ry opened his eyes. His friend Hannis sat on a stool near the touch board...a misnomer, since it wasn't necessary to touch the instrument at all. Thick-set and muscular, with blond hair that dangled over his eyes, Hannis was the group's eldest member.

"Good bass line," he said as the song ended. "Gettingly ragged."

Ry shrugged.

"Thanks," he said, but inwardly he was delighted. Hannis was an expert at all things electronic, but Ry hadn't told him or Erik about the intelligence he hoped to pass to a local cell of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. If Hannis and Erik thought of the bass line as musical - as gettingly ragged - then his camouflage was perfect.

A gust of wind rattled the barn's main door. Ry flinched, then stroked the neck of his bass to cover it. He really didn't think there was any danger that Imperial enforcers would storm in and arrest them, not even if they sat and listened to a performance. His former bass teacher, Tet Tramys, had invented the bass code. It was only used in the Six Local Systems, and only by one small intelligence cell.

That didn't keep him completely calm. He didn't mind a little adrenaline, but he did know that enemies of the Empire sometimes disappeared.

Erik, Ry's tallest classmate, lounged on a small repulsor "throne" in the midst of his perc's and crashers. He hadn't finished muscling out yet, but he could twirl a stick with the best of them, and every song he turned out got better than the one before.

"Ragged," he agreed, echoing Hannis's praise. "And I like the synth, Hannis."

Erik stretched out one long hand and slid a stick along the rim of a suspended crasher. The brass disk rang sweet and low.

"Think Keth Beamis will buy it?" he asked.

"Oh yeah." Ry unstrapped his vye and set it against one wall of the speeder barn. His guardian had ordered several aides to clear the barn so Far Cry could practice inside, but it still smelled like exhaust. This was the first time Ry had actually found anything important enough to relay through the scheduled Alliance scout. He was eager to prove his worth, both as snoop and as relay. Tet Tramys had recruited Ry shortly after last circuit's talent competition, and Ry felt that watching for "real" information was giving him a better education than he was picking up at tech-ed school.

This also gave him a chance to swing back at the bureaucracy that had lured his parents offworld.

"I'm actually amazed," said Hannis, switching the touchboard over into rest mode by waving his left hand. A force field sprang up over its surface, repelling dust motes that might damage its delicate circuitry.

"We've hardly had two paying gigs all season. How did this Imperial talent scout hear about us?"

Ry shrugged.

"I applied."

And he's had me on his scout list ever since he left Tuttin Iv. It's about time I found something to send!

"They need acts for the SLS officers' club circuit," he added. The Six Local Systems had one Imperial Governor, who happened to be Ry's legal guardian. Ry's parents, low-ranking Imperial servants, had wanted him to finish tech-ed school here.

That still jagged him.

The Governor's wing of the Admin Center had all the amenities, including this speeder barn, but Ry still felt as if Tendis and Jioie Ancum had abandoned him. When career advancement called, they left Tuttin IV. His mother had told Ry he'd understand someday.

But that line of thought only led into an asteroid belt of frustration and pain. He braked it.

"From the top," he said. "We want this perfect."

Hannis grinned, and in that moment - for the first time-Ry realized he could be putting his friends in danger without their knowledge. He needed to tell them about the messages they were secretly passing. They'd understand. They didn't like the Empire any more than he did.

Not yet, he told himself. Maybe after the audition.

Two days later, performing for real, Ry slid his hand down the bass's narrow neck, finishing the song with a deep slide. He held the bottom note long enough to punch it a few times with his right elbow, over the FX spot, then jerked his head. Erik, watching for that cue, slammed the tenor perc with a final riff. Hannis's hands froze in mid-dance over the touchboard. Tuttin Tech-Ed fed a large student body in the mess hall where Keth Beamis had decided to hold auditions.

With its multicolored dining furniture pushed to one end, this hall mimicked the acoustics of a midsized auditorium.

Keth Beamis laid his data pad on a table.

"Good," he said.

Beamis wore a drooping mustache and sported a blond ponytail, worn low at the nape of his

neck. Ry didn't know much about him, beyond the fact that he gathered intelligence for the Rebel Alliance...and that he had a good ear for all styles of contemporary music: Core drive, minga, flaunt - and dusk, Far Cry's specialty.

"How long you been playing together?"

"Three seasons." Ry spoke up, awed to finally meet this man that Tet had mentioned with such respect. He added, "Tet Tramys help us put together our first cover arrangements."

It couldn't hurt to remind Keth Beamis of their mutual contact.

"Like your sound." Beamis's long nose and high forehead made him look like a Core World aristocrat. "Good balance, and surprisingly mature for your age. D'iund, I hope you stick around for a while after you graduate. Don't go off and leave these two. I think you might qualify to do some full-time performing in the very near future."

Hannis bobbed his head, letting hair flop into his eyes. He cracked his knuckles over his touchboard, a gesture that meant he was thoroughly pleased.

Erik clutched his perc sticks in one hand and held them against his pale green shirt.

"Do we get the job, then?"

Beamis smiled wryly.

"It's too early to tell, since I've still got other systems to visit. But I think you've at least earned a final audition at the home base on Beltrix. That's assuming all your families will let you travel."

"Yes!" Erik slammed a crasher.

Hannis grinned. Beltrix wasn't far, but Erik had never been off Tuttin IV.

"Best clear the, uh, stage."

Beamis made a part-the-waters gesture with both hands, glancing at the tables and seats stacked along the near wall. Behind the piled furniture, Ry could see bits of the mural some previous class had painted, portraying Emperor Palpatine striding from planet to planet, approaching cratered gray planets and leaving a wake of beautifully developed, fertile, wealthy worlds as his New Order spread. Too bad things hadn't actually turned out that way.

"There's another band waiting to set up," Beamis added.

"Whoa." Erik glanced at the wall chrono and grabbed the tenor perc array. "I'm late for smashball practice. Help me pack these up, guys."

Ry dropped his bass in a soft case and started unclipping Erik's crashers. I'll tell them tomorrow, he decided.

After they finished loading everything onto Hannis's landspeeder, Ry meandered back into the school mess room. Beamis still sat at his table near the embarrassing mural, fingering his mustache as an older band played. Ry got a closer look at the musicians and half-smiled. This was a b'ssa nuuvu group, with the traditional fizz, kloos, bandfill, and omni instrumentation. The muscular kloos horn player rocked from side to side, swinging his horn in front of him. Ry wondered if b'ssa nuuvu players, too, slipped out of reality into a space-time state where only their music existed.

And now Ry recognized him. Onjo Fegel had dined at Governor Shran Etison's table, which made sense, since Governor Etison was a b'ssa nuuvu fan. Etison seemed determined to give Rya proper social education... and maybe convert him to his own musical tastes.

Life had been different before his parents left. He'd thought he got along well with them, better than nearly any of his friends and their elders.

The chairs behind Beamis were vacant. Ry slid into one and slumped down, bracing both feet against the seat of another chair.

After Beamis shoed Onjo's group offstage, two black-uniformed Tuttin System Security

Force officers pushed into the mess room.

"Keth Beamis?" called the leader.

Ry slid back to sit straighter. What would TSSF want with a bunch of musicians?...Unless they'd found out about Beamis's Alliance connections.

Beamis stood up, stretched casually, and flexed his fingers, giving his head a toss that sent the ponytail over one shoulder.

"Hello, officers. What can I help you with?"

"You can come with us," answered the TSSF man who'd spoken.

The black uniform made his skin look pasty-pale with a pink undertone. He beckoned again.

"So can you, kid. We have some questions."

Ry's heart started pounding a core-drive beat.

Keth Beamis arched his eyebrows.

"I'd be happy to talk with you here," he offered, his voice so calm that Ry suddenly doubted he was an Alliance spy at all.

"Well, we'll see how far we get."

The pinky-pale TSSF officer rested one foot on a vacant turquoise chair while his backup stepped toward the hall's main double door. Ry wondered if they expected Beamis to bolt. Ry's pulse kept driving. He hoped he didn't do anything stupid, like taking a run for it himself.

"You came to the Tuttin system from Thabit." Pinky eyed a datapad.

"That's correct."

"You made inquiries there about a woman named Maiferri Tag?"

Again the eyebrows arched.

"I wasn't able to find her," said Beamis. "She scheduled an audition several months in advance, but she didn't show. I hope nothing happened to her."

The backup officer strolled closer, keeping one hand too casually near his blaster.

"What happened," he said, "was that she got herself arrested on an espionage charge. Beamis, we'd better talk, and not here."

His lip curled.

"Privately."

There'd been a time, pre-Empire, when Ry thought TSSF officers were tough, strong, and virtuous. Recently, the TSSF had attracted people who just wanted to bully other folks.

Beamis smiled pleasantly.

"One good thing about having nothing to hide is that you have nothing to fear. Go on home, Ry. I'll talk with these gentlemen."

"The boy comes too," said Pinky.

"Uh, sure."

Ry shrugged, trying to mimic Beamis's appearance of utter unconcern. He dangled both hands at his sides as he followed the lead officer to a waiting patrol speeder, a recent blue-and-white model that seemed to have sprouted multiple cooling fins all over the engine compartment. Ry slid into a rear seat with Pinky on his right and Beamis sitting beyond him. If the TSSF really was worried, they would've put binders on him. Wouldn't

they?

Maybe not. Maybe they'd blast first and ask questions later.

It was a short ride back to the white marble Admin Center. Nestled at the foot of gray cliffs that had attracted mining concerns in a previous century, the Center's west wing held Governor Etison's mansion. Pinky's backup steered them to the east wing and official offices, where they rode a lift down several levels.

Ry marched obediently down a gray corridor that terminated in a broad waiting area. Along one wall was a line of energy-fenced detention cells.

"Thabit Security won't get here for a couple more hours," said Pinky. "Meanwhile, we just don't want you taking unauthorized vacations." He gestured toward one detention cell.

Beamis took a step forward.

"Sir, you can't detain law-abiding citizens of the Empire without adequate cause. I'll give you a pledge of good conduct"

"I think this time the cause is adequate. Inside, Beamis. You too, kid. Three cells down. For all I know, you're an accessory."

"Accessory?" Ry echoed, panic finally getting him by the throat. "I'm.

.. he's... listen, call Governor Etison. He'll vouch for us both. I was just auditioning for a performing job. He's a music scout - "

"And I'm the Emperor's aged grandmother." Pinky's backup grasped Ry's shoulder and gave him a push. Ry stumbled into the nearest cell. He turned around quickly. By then, the energy barrier was buzzing and sparking. The officers led Beamis to a cell farther down the line.

"There's been a mistake," Beamis insisted, stepping into the cell. "Ry, don't worry. We'll talk to the people from Thabit, and then you'll get home for a late dinner."

An administrative aide, sitting at a data terminal several meters away, glanced up as the officers left, then turned back to his terminal.

Ry blinked, too stunned to do much else. What had just happened, and why was Keth Beamis acting so cool about it? Ry looked back up the line of cells. Keth Beamis was sitting down, facing the opposite direction. It looked like a warning not to try to communicate. Ry faced the other direction and stared at the aide, who worked silently. The underground hush made Ry feel as if he were smothering under a heavy blanket, wearing earplugs and a blindfold. He hummed a few bars of "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts" and wondered where his parents were. Tendis Ancum's promotion had put him in charge of a factory. Ry's mother had always pitched in as an assistant, but she was also a classical musician, a sweet-voiced soprano who could move the stoniest audience to tears.

Ry clenched a fist, determined not to cry now. He still couldn't believe his parents hadn't taken him with them. Their messages always included apologies for not corresponding often, but that was small comfort. Other than Hannis and Erik, he felt alone in his own city.

He stopped humming. Dusk was the wrong kind of music when you were already smothering in your own hurt and fear.

He hadn't sat long when the administrative aide stood up and strolled in his direction. The man punched a code sequence into the touch panel outside Ry's door, and abruptly the sparking and snapping stopped.

"Etison says he'll vouch for you," he said. "Get home. You're wanted for dinner. Just don't leave town."

"Not a problem."

Ry gestured up the line of cells.

"How about him?" he asked softly. His voice broke on the last word. "Can't he join me?"

"No," said the aide.

Ry clenched both hands to keep them from trembling. This was no adrenaline rush. This was fear for a friend, and he didn't like it.

Ry's dinner sat like a rock at the pit of his stomach. He'd called Erik and Hannis as soon as he finished eating, and now they perched on his bed. After agonizing over how much to tell them, he decided to spill everything. His friends wouldn't tell on him, and they would be careful.

"I could get a ferret into Governor Etison's database," he finished. "I'm sure I could get Beamis's cell unlocked long enough to get in and get him out."

Erik's head was still shaking. Ever since Ry swore him to secrecy and explained the bass codes, he'd stared down at the bedcover.

"I don't know," he said.

"This sounds awfully dangerous. My folks could get canned from the school if I got in this kind of trouble. And what about Teki?"

Erik's little sister was only four local years old.

"This is just too big, Ry."

Hannis snorted.

"Too big? For us? I think it's gettingly good."

Hannis's grandparents had been Core World aristocrats under the Republic. His parents had fled to the Inner Rim as the Empire tightened its grip, and he'd always considered life something of a game. His expertise with electronics - especially music and communications - gave him plenty of toys.

"No." Erik rarely talked about his past. Now his eyebrows arched as he pleaded, "Guys, you could get killed. Think what that would do to your parents."

To his parents? Ry snorted.

"My parents don't give a Ranat's whisker - "

The comlink buzzed on his wall.

"What?" he demanded.

"Ryley."

The voice belonged to Governor Etison's aide, Captain Hall.

"You're wanted in Governor E's office."

"I'll be right there, ma'am," he told the comlink. Then he lowered his voice. "You see? Something's mixing. Go on back home, and I'll do what I can. By myself"

"Call me," Hannis insisted.

"I'm there for you, too," Erik added. "But be careful."

Three minutes later, Ry stood at his sponsor's desk. Shran Etison wore Imperial khaki with an uncomfortable air - no surprise, since he'd been born on a backwater mining world. He had a reputation as a competent administrator, and now and then Ry saw hints that Governor Etison had faint doubts about Emperor Palpatine and his New Order.

No doubt or hesitation showed tonight. The Governor sat in front of his black-suited aide, resting both hands on his desktop. His broad shoulders, wide jaw, and faintly scarred temple hinted at his early career as a smashball hero. His fingers twitched rhythmically.

"I hope the audition went well?"

Ry sat down in his extra chair. He longed to ask what happened to Keth Beamis.

"Pretty well. The talent scout thought we might have a chance at landing a real touring job."

Governor Etison's hands stopped twitching. He glanced up at Captain Hall, a stout woman with gray braids wrapped around the back of her head.

"Ry, I'm afraid Keth Beamis may have just complicated that possibility."

Ry raised one eyebrow with what he hoped was an air of mild curiosity.

"What happened? It sure seemed odd that he was arrested."

Governor Etison looked up at the aide. Ry thought his sponsor's face looked grayer, his worry lines deeper than usual.

"Tell him, Captain Hall." Hall brandished her datapad.

"The Thabit people had a number of questions for him. Evidently he'd tried to contact a woman who recently was revealed as a Rebel spy. He tried to talk about your band, instead."

"Us?" Ry's lip twitched. Was he back in trouble?

"Under certain persuasions, Rebel agents start talking and keep talking. Standard procedure," she added.

A chill raced down Ry's spine. If they'd used truth drugs on Beamis, he was cooked. Not even Governor Shran Etison could save him if Beamis had implicated him...but come to think of it, wouldn't he already be under arrest if that happened?

"We think," Hall continued, "that he wanted to talk about your band to keep his mind on safe subjects."

"What do you mean?"

Calm. Be calm.

Governor Etison leaned forward. When he clasped his hands on the desktop, he flexed his shoulders.

"It's looking as if your friend Keth Beamis was involved in a Rebel spy ring, Ry."

Ry gaped, exaggerating the expression. That reaction would make him look like a kid, but he'd better appear as innocent as possible.

"So when he tried to talk about your band instead of Maiferri Tag," continued the aide, "they let him run on for a while. It's best to let the.

.. subject warm up and get used to talking. He was just insisting you were ready for the circuit, and that he would've loved to offer you a contract."

That was no way to finish an explanation.

"And then?"

Governor Etison sighed.

"He pulled a standard Rebel trick. He suicided before he could reveal any real information. We found an affide crystal under his tongue. Very fast poison. Security tells me those can be hidden under a waterproof barrier inside a drilled tooth. He must've been working it out with his tongue while he rattled on about your band. I'm sorry, Ry. He was using you."

Beamis was dead? Ry shut his mouth. Obviously, Beamis suicided rather than betray Ry and his friends, or any other onsite agents. Rather than tell the Imperials that Ry couldn't

be sent offworld because a Rebel cell needed him here, gathering information-especially on the "new warship" Ry had just told him about - he'd taken the Final Jump.

For a moment, Ry hated himself for getting involved. Then his need to blame someone slid around and rested on his parents. They'd followed the Empire blindly, and they'd abandoned him. If they'd still been here, this wouldn't have happened.

Hall leaned heavily on the Governor's desk, hyperextending both elbows.

"So we have a chance for you to serve the Empire, Ry."

Governor Etison waved a hand in the air.

"Yes, and still indulge your number-one passion. I have fond memories of my own performing days," he added softly.

Twenty planetary cycles ago, Etison had a little b'ssa nuuvu band of his own. It was one reason he'd indulged Ry and his friends.

Ry made an effort to lean back in his chair and cross one ankle over the other knee. Serve the Empire? Not after it broke up his family, however willingly his parents had gone. But he wanted to keep performing. Wanted it worse than anything else in his life.

"Look, Ry." Etison picked up a writing stylus and twirled it down the fingers of his left hand. "With this development back on Thabit, there's suspicion that Beamis's talent agency on Beltrix is a Rebel intelligence center. But it's only a suspicion. We want you and your friends to set a trap. I'll send ahead word that you could be bringing in illegal information, and we'll see who meets you... and what they do about it. Don't worry," he added quickly. "I'll include orders that you aren't to be harmed, under the strictest penalties."

"Thanks." Ry hated it when his voice shook this way. "No one would suspect you boys of working for me. Do you see that?"

"Sure."

"Good. And if you'll help, I'll arrange for Far Cry to take the next year completely off from tech-ed school. You can perform that circuit, with or without the talent agency's contract. Even if they get put out of business, I still have contacts in the officers' clubs. This is your big break."

Ry swallowed nothing, connecting a dry mouth with a parched throat.

"You are so right," he managed. "Thank you!"

One day later, Far Cry boarded a transport for Beltrix. Standing inside an echoing hangar, Hannis glared as Onjo Fegel hoisted his kloo horn case onto the boarding conveyor. Until this morning, Ry hadn't known that Onjo Fegel graduated from the Imperial Service Academy...in Intelligence. For the duration of this trip, Far Cry had been burdened with the services of a musically gifted - but completely out of place - kloo horn player.

They were a dusk band, not b'ssa nuuvu! If Governor Etison was still trying to win Ry to his own musical taste, he'd just lost several parsecs of whatever ground he'd gained. They had rehearsed once before riding out to the spaceport. They sounded sick.

When Ry thought about Keth Beamis, he felt even sicker. And what about his old friend Tet Tramys?

He had to warn them to dump all suspicious files and send away anyone who might be recognized. But all day, Onjo had stuck to him like a mynock on a power cable, keeping him from talking to Hannis or Erik about sending a coded message ahead. And they would have only one day on board to figure out how to make Far-Cry-with-a-Kloo-Horn sound less like a herd of giddies in heat.

He strapped down on a frayed, padded seat in the transport's passenger compartment.

There were no viewports. Only a series of clangs, then a garbled voice over the cabin

speakers, confirmed takeoff was imminent. Shortly, the transport started shaking. It rattled for several minutes, followed by a series of lurches that made Ry glad he'd skipped lunch.

A flashing light signaled the end of strap-down. Onjo got up, stretched left and right, then straightened his flight suit. Ry had never noticed how subtly comical his slightly rounded cheeks and small nose made his face look. His stubby hands stuck out at the ends of too-short sleeves.

"We must have a Chadra-fan pilot," he said dryly.

"You kids hungry?"

Ry wasn't, not at all, but he followed Onjo downship to a mess cabin. Like the passenger compartment, it had no viewports, no external screens - nothing to give him a glimpse of the light years they were crossing. One more dirty trick from the universe.

Long tables were filling rapidly, and the transport's crew was handing out a one-menu-suits-all tray lunch. Onjo steered them from the pickup line to a spot near one bulkhead. He touched the heat control on his lunch tray, then raised the lid with a dramatic gesture.

"Wonderful," he exclaimed. "Mystery meat number twelve."

Hannis smiled wanly. Ry didn't find Onjo particularly funny either. He picked at the meal.

After eating silently for ten or twelve minutes, Onjo sliced off a bite of meat and waved it at Erik.

"What you need," he pronounced, "is a brighter riff on those crashers. You're putting people to sleep back there."

"It's dusk, not b'ssa nuuvu." Erik, normally one of the most patient people Ry knew, rolled his eyes. "Look, Onjo, we understand this isn't a real gig, not any more. But don't try to make Far Cry sound like something it isn't."

"For this market, b'ssa nuuvu is a better groove any day." Onjo waved the bite one final time and then chomped down on it.

"Officers. Old people, or getting old fast. Even older than me." He grinned as if he'd made another joke.

Hannis muttered something into his plate.

"What was that?" Onjo asked around his mouthful.

Hannis raised his chin.

"Keth Beamis didn't give this audition to your b'ssa nuuvu band." Onjo leaned over the table.

"There's a lot more to auditioning than standing still with your eyes shut. You aren't ready for the real thing."

"We are prepared," Ry insisted.

Onjo raised an eyebrow.

"Prepared? This from the boy who assumes that the Holstrum Talent Agency on Beltrix has an amp to loan him for his bass? Think again, why don't you? They can't let every outsystem beginner borrow their equipment."

Amp? But -

In that moment, a solution flashed across Ry's mind. He silenced Erik's impending retort with one fast shin-kick. The tall perc player blinked, raised his eyebrows, then leaned back again.

Ry's thoughts whirled. His bass vye was a recent invention, self-amplified...kind of a

return to acoustics, but with the conveniences of artistic distortion. Onjo had confused this instrument with the bass mando, a b'ssa nuuvu axe that was barely audible above a solid set of percs unless you amp-linked it.

"Kessel! You're right," he exclaimed.

He was getting a lot of practice pretending ignorance these days.

"Do you think I made a mistake, counting on them? I didn't really think they wanted me bringing a bass amp on board. We used up our weight allowance on Hannis and Erik's gear."

It sounded marginally logical, and apparently Onjo bought it. Ry submitted to ten minutes of stories about musicians who showed up unprepared for gigs, and the dire consequences. Finally, Onjo went for a cleanup droid.

Ry caught Erik's attention with a drum-roll offingers on the tabletop.

"Distract him for a few minutes," he whispered.

As Onjo returned, Erik scrambled to his feet.

"You know," he said, "I've always wondered what sets the b'ssa nuuvu beat apart from minga. You wouldn't have any recordings along?"

Onjo squared his shoulders, stretched his neck, and managed to look down his nose at Erik, who was half a head taller.

"Of course I do," he said.

"You serious?"

"You've gotta always be learning. Or you're dead on the peres."

Onjo half smiled.

"That's the best sense I've heard out of any of you boys. Erik, you've got potential."

He laid an arm on Erik's shoulder.

"We'll see you two in a few," he told Ry and Hannis.

To Erik's credit, he didn't cringe away from the arm or even wrinkle his nose at Onjo's fresh attempt at humor.

Ry sat still until Erik and Onjo disappeared out the mess hall's main hatch. Then he bent toward Hannis, speaking softly. He wouldn't have put it past Onjo or Etison to plant other ears among the passengers.

"I've thought of a way to warn our people there's a spy on board. But I need to know the ship's comm frequency. Do you have any idea what they send on?"

"Sure." Hannis shrugged, smiling. "Spotted it pre-boarding."

"I figured." Ry whacked his friend's shoulder. "Then let's get to the baggage compartment. Fast."

Ry flashed Governor Etison's permission slip at the primitive security droid who guarded the baggage compartment, and they were admitted. He and Hannis swept inside, puffing.

"He's got me pegged for a bass mando," Ry explained as he dug into his vye case. "Give me that frequency. And how fast could you switch a comlink's cover plate with one for a power point?"

"No time at...oh!" Hannis nodded vigorously. "You're going to plug into the comlink and make that pompous shroob think you're using a power source to amplify! I should've thought of that."

"You would've. This time I thought of it first."

Ry hesitated only a moment before going to work on his beloved instrument. As Hannis popped cover plates off the bulkhead, Ry pulled a multitool out of his pocket and carefully slit into the instrument's black plastene wave box, near the spot where its neck joined the body. Nestled inside was a small, metal-wound internal amplifier. He studied it carefully. He was a player, not a circuit-slicer...

"There." Hannis sprang away from the bulkhead. "Looks like you're using a simple amp circuit. Perfect for fooling a simple kloo horn player. Having trouble there?"

"I want to recalibrate this to transmit on your frequency, but - "

"Easy." Hannis grabbed the instrument and the multitool. "It'll take me two seconds...done."

He handed it back just as the hatch slid open. Erik and Onjo joined them.

"All right," Ry declared, casually snapping his bass back together and holding it to his chest. "We've got less than an hour to try to make this group sound like a band again."

Ry helped Erik assemble his peres and crashers around the repulsor-mounted "throne." Hannis dug his touchboard out of a pile of luggage. Onjo assembled the kloo horn.

Then Ry counted off a slow groove for their audition number.

There wasn't time to work out a genuinely musical bass line in code. Ry's new line was full of sour notes, but he couldn't help that now. Letter by letter, he coded in a new message, sending it out over the comlink as he played: Beamis dead. Spy aboard. Raid planned. Destroy records.

When they'd finished, Hannis thrust both hands through his longish hair.

"That was awful."

"Sorry," answered Ry. "Not used to hearing a kloo horn in there."

He tossed a shrug at Onjo.

"Try again."

This time, knowing in advance what he needed to say, he did a little better job of picking initial notes that would settle into a sustain that fit the song's chord structure. There was still one note so sour that even Onjo grimaced. Ry answered with a pained expression of his own, but as they finished the number, having sent off the warning twice, he started to feel better.

Now if only someone had been listening. And hopefully, no one in the cockpit cared if music came off the ship's transmitter. Judging by the condition of its interior, the crew didn't care much about much at all. This was a low-priority supply run.

"Onjo," Hannis sighed, "couldn't you at least try to make your line fit our style? Come on. I bet you could play dusk in your sleep."

Onjo's round little eyes narrowed.

"As a matter of fact, I could."

This time through, Ry played his original bass line, the one with the message about the metal going offworld. Why not? If anyone on Beltrix was listening, they might as well get the whole story.

"Huh," said Onjo as he laid down his horn. "I have to admit, that was a better blend."

Hannis cracked his knuckles over the touch board.

"I thought so, too."

He glanced sidelong at Ry, and Ry gave them all a thumbs-up salute.

A horn blared from the comlink panel, and for a mercy, Onjo didn't seem to notice that the

comlink had a power-point cover.

"Time to strap down," he announced. They secured their instruments, then hustled back into the seating area. Ry harnessed in, then settled back to wonder what really waited on Beltrix III... whether the "talent agency" was destroying records, or if a squad of Imperials was headed for the loading dock.

The transport lurched and shook. Overheads rattled. Ry clutched the arms of his seat and wished he were somewhere else.

"Hannis," he muttered, "you'd better switch those panels back on the ride home."

"Right," mumbled Hannis.

After the shaking stopped, the strap-down light kept flashing. The passenger compartment grew quiet, then slowly filled with suspicious murmurs. Ry heard, "...lost baggage?..." and "...wrong terminal?"

Erik craned his neck, then murmured, "Onjo isn't here."

Ry gritted his teeth.

"Then we'd better hope they heard the music."

Onjo Fegel quickstepped down the boarding ramp toward three spaceport enforcers. He didn't care that the kids knew he was only along to keep them from spoiling Etison's trap. But en route, he'd changed his mind. Instead of going through with a painful, humiliating performance, he could hit the so-called talent agency now.

"The kids are strapped down," he announced as they boarded a speeder. "They can't warn anybody, even if they are involved."

"We'll soon know, sir," said the enforcer sharing his seat.

It was a fast cross-town hop to the talent agency. A young man sat at the reception desk, his dark blond hair just longer than Onjo could approve.

"Welcome," he said, sweeping out both hands. "Gentlemen, what can the Holstrum Agency do for you? Combo? Duo? Perhaps a pair of battle droids to liven a convention?"

Onjo flashed his ID and walked around the counter toward the data terminal.

"Step back," he ordered.

"Of course. "

The man swept out his hands and got up.

"Perhaps you'd like to check our talent listings yourself."

Onjo waved one of the local enforcers forward. The man keyed rapidly, inserting a ferret into the system that would sniff out arcane activities. Onjo glanced around the reception room. Blue walls displayed a constantly changing array of billing posters. Acoustic panels floated beneath a sloped ceiling.

And it was all just a front. He could almost taste his next promotion.

.. hopefully to a Core world, where b'ssa nuuvu was appreciated.

The enforcer looked up from the data terminal, compressing his lips in a straight line. He eyed Onjo.

"Sorry, sir. It looks like you made this trip for nothing, unless you wanted to hire a juggler."

"What do you mean?"

"They're clean, sir."

Onjo pushed the enforcer aside.

"I think not."

Five minutes later, he slumped over the terminal. He'd failed. The Rebels had to be elsewhere, but his only potential informer... Beamis... was dead. It was back to square one. Once more from the top. First measure, and what key were they playing in this time?

For this, he'd spent two days with three kids who didn't know b'ssa nuuvu from minga?

A pair of brilliant overhead lights separated Far Cry from the rest of the galaxy. Facing three murky silhouettes seated behind a long table, Ry counted off the intro to "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts."

To everyone's relief, Onjo had announced he would skip the actual audition, and he was nowhere in this dark, cramped room. Ry suspected he was somewhere else in the building, checking out b'ssa nuuvu groups, and so Hannis hadn't even bothered to set up a fake amp for Ry's "bass mando."

One uniformed enforcer did sit staring over the talent scouts' shoulders, but Ry could ignore him. If anyone had intended to arrest him and Erik and Hannis, they would've already done it. So for the next five minutes, there would be only music.

And after two interminable rehearsals with Onjo Fegel, this was music. Hannis's touchboard glisses fell slowly to settle each cadence, eking every shred of emotion from each line. Erik drummed a slow, steady beat on the tenor array, riding one crasher for the choruses. Beneath them all, Ry's bass line sang out a solid bottom...the original bass line, naturally.

To Ry, "Dark Eyes" would always be about metals going offworld.

Hannis held the final chord infinitesimally longer than usual, and Ry let the bass ring out before elbowing the FX spot. They'd turned up nothing for Governor Etison; their chance for fame had evaporated, but for this moment, they stood as professionals among professionals. Nothing ever felt so good.

Two of the scouts stood up and walked around the table toward the band.

"Good job," pronounced the man in front.

His gait and build reminded Ry of his old friend, Tet Tramys, but Tet hadn't worn a goatee -

Then he caught the grin behind those new whiskers. It was Tet! Ry clutched the neck of his vye and grinned back. Even with an enforcer watching, he had every right to bask in these compliments. Erik lounged over his tenor set, beaming.

The second scout, a long-haired woman, stood just out of the circle of light, behind Tet. Oddly, she was humming something in a sweet soprano voice. Her riff sounded more like b'ssa nuuvu than anything else.

"Doo-dit, doo, doo..."

Ry straightened, careful not to stare at the woman's silhouette. Was that bass code? Finally, she stepped into the light. Ry got a good look at her face and nearly fainted. She'd changed her hair color and style, and he'd never seen her wearing anything remotely like this beaded shift-smock before -

But that woman was his mother.

Did she honestly work at Holstrum Talent Agency, or was she covering for an Alliance agent who'd just skipped town... or was she an Alliance agent? Maybe she and his father left him on Tuttin IV to keep him out of danger when the Alliance recruited them. Maybe now she could see that he, too, was ready to be trusted on the front lines.

"Di-di-dit, dumm."

Shutting her eyes, she tossed the long hair. Tet turned aside. He said something to Hannis. He might as well have been speaking droid dialect for all the attention Ry paid him.

Good job, good job. Ry finally caught the rhythm of the hummed code. He smiled, though he kept looking at Hannis and Tet. He felt like his brain was swimming in blue milk, blowing funny little bubbles. His mother hadn't acknowledged him, but he could see from the lines around her eyes and crossing her forehead that she was barely keeping herself from taking a run at him, arms flung out, just like she used to do.

Need you home, for now, he heard. Good job, Ry. So proud.

Tet turned away from Hannis and Erik.

"Gettingly good," he announced, "and I'm sorry, but we've got three dusk bands on the circuit already. Try again next year."

Ry groaned, just as the enforcer would expect.

"Thanks anyway," he said. "Thanks for listening."

"Our pleasure."

His mother put so much pride into those two words that Ry's last doubts flitted away for good. He ached to sit down and talk with her...and with Tet...but with that enforcer still sitting behind the table, he couldn't. He cased his bass and helped Erik load peres. As they exited the gaudy reception room, he glanced back over his shoulder.

His mother had followed them out. She barely lifted one hand.

He nodded vigorously, eyeing the animated displays on the advertising wall. Hannis would figure out a way to send code between systems.

He had a lot of catching up to do.