

NOW YOU'RE GONE

Stars. From the depths of space, free of light pollution from humanity, there suddenly became too many stars to count. And while on Earth or some colony you had your own weight pressing down on your feet and grounding your mind, the lack of gravity had a sort of numbing effect.

Chiemi looked at the stars, listened to the music, and tried to forget herself.

The stars were so bright, and they seemed to be getting thicker and moving towards her. They were moving towards her, and moving erratically—swirling, now falling.

Falling.

Chiemi felt her forehead pressed against something cold. The passenger window of her family's landspeeder. She was in Nebraska—she must've fallen asleep while watching the blizzard slide across the flat, snow-blanketed fields.

“Are we there yet?” she heard herself say, like it was some kind of road trip film.

Her mother was driving. “Close...ish.”

Chiemi looked at her mother. Her hair was dark and curly, pulled up in a messy bun that was perpetually coming undone and getting messier. Her little round glasses were sliding down her little round nose. They were both dressed in thick parkas. Expensive, but they'd been early Christmas gifts to each other, as they put it.

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Chiemi felt very, very sad, like she suddenly longed for something but forgot what. Not that she necessarily had to feel happy, but she knew for certain she was feeling the wrong emotion right now. Nobody should feel like this on Christmas.

She knew she should have commented on the blizzard, on the potential danger of their flying through the dead of night instead of staying at a motel, and about how grandma would be angry if they turned up in all of this snow.

She asked instead, “Mom, why did you stop painting?”

Her mother reeled back in her seat like she’d tasted something sour. She opened her mouth to speak.

“—And I know,” Chiemi cut in, “you had to make sacrifices to raise us. But we’re okay now, right? Money-wise and all?”

Her mother exhaled.

“Sometimes we have to prioritize things. You were just more important than some silly paintings, and that’s no sacrifice. Not to me, at least.”

Chiemi knew her mother would say that. Exactly that, even if the whole conversation felt off-script somehow.

“But if you could, you know, if you didn’t have to worry about anything else, maybe now...”

“Maybe.”

The speeder lurched in the wind and dipped along the top of a snow bank below. It pulled back up, but not without making a nasty scraping noise that amplified in the cabin. Chiemi’s heart raced momentarily.

Her mother sighed relief.

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“I mean,” Chiemi continued, “if the single does well; if my music career really takes off, I could help out, you know.”

Her mother laughed.

“No, please. Listen, I changed your diapers for long enough. I won’t stand to see you change mine.”

There was a long silence, cut only by the wind whipping the side of the speeder.

“Mom,” Chiemi said. “Do you enjoy painting?”

A beat. Then...

“I enjoy it as soon as the piece is finished, yes. Everything felt like my best work. That was one of my favourite things, but it never really lasted all that long. There was no destination, just... checkpoints. And the journey was so tough, so draining, and it keeps going. I always thought it’d get easier, like I could just sit down and release it all through colours, but it felt like I was just bleeding on the canvas, you know?”

Something’s not right here, Chiemi thought, and her throat grew hard. The tears started coming against her will.

The speeder was caught in a harsh gust of wind.

And the snow stopped swirling, and started coming down—or was it up?—like a tsunami.

“Stop the demo. Now, please.” a man’s voice said.

The music ended.

The stars above Chiemi were blurred by the tears floating weightlessly across her eyes. She wiped away the droplets into little spinning orbs that carried themselves off, and she tried to turn over in her sense deprivation pod.

“Easy now,” the voice said.

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Chiemi was back in her clothes, back in the two-faced comfort of pseudo-gravity. She was sitting in a waiting room furnished with dubious wood furniture reminiscent of First America. She’d been given a paper cup of water bearing the Piero Records logo.

“Chi-chan!” A thin man approached to shake her hand. “Big fan. I’m Duncan Prosst, chief sound engineer on the station.”

“Nice to meet you. Where’s Mr. Sigmund?”

Prosst seemed unfazed by her lack of charisma.

“Mr. Sigmund handles more the... business side of Piero. I may be better suited to address your concerns.” An eyebrow joined the last word raised, like a question, or an alien word. “And besides, Sigmund doesn’t normally operate from this station. For all intents and purposes, I’m captain of this ship.” Prosst meant to speak ironically, but his pride eked through, very real.

Chiemi didn’t know what to say to this man for whom she already had distaste.

He said, “Now that you’ve had a full-blown taste...what do you think?”

“It’s scary, to say the least.”

“Keep in mind you had the ‘Oolong Package.’ We’re still working on experiences for other emotions.”

“So it’s a kind of mind control?”

“The control is still the listener’s. The music is just an empathic nudge to draw out what is already there. Like spicy food before bed. The sense deprivation was to focus

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on that elicited emotion. At a marketable dose, the emotional experience would be much less potent.”

“Potent.” Chiemi repeated.

“Just so. But when combined with music like yours, under the Chiemi brand...” A winning smile seemingly privy to many rewards crept across his face.

“Show me the creature. I want to see how it’s made.”

Prosst led her through the station with military sharpness in his stride, truly embodying the role of ‘captain.’ Despite being an R&D vessel, the station was outfitted like a luxury cruiser, with lounge-like chairs and stretches of portside windows looking out at a neighboring nebular. On wood panel walls hung framed records of Piero’s greatest hits, tracing back to the roots of the major supergenres of music. Over a century of experimentation and envelope-pushing had taken music to the very outer limits of what audio was capable of. Simple listening could ride the back of technology only so far before human interest reached its limit. Chiemi had heard her fair share of art records, as encapsulating as they were unlistenable. But the marketable side of music needed to find that balance of new and familiar.

After her first hit, the fear of remaining in obscurity was replaced by the black hole of the one-hit wonder. Chiemi’s breakout single, “Now You’re Gone,” grew to towering heights, until it cast a shadow so deep, her life couldn’t seem to escape it for three years or so. Many times she’d wished she’d never written that song. She put out explorations into a helping of new genre fusions, had even found a handful of success. If anything, she’d earned a general reputation as an indie darling, her stylistic trajectory as unpredictable as her career’s. But to the world, she was still the “Now You’re Gone” girl.

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“You’ll have to wear these.” Prosst handed her a heavy set of headphones which matched those draped around his neck. “If things get to be too much, these are noise-cancelling. Protection.”

They were at a thick metal door, devoid of the warmth so meticulously evoked from the rest of the station. A dimmed sign read ‘RECORDING.’

“You make it sound like you’re holding a monster.”

“Powerful, yes. Monstrous, no.” Prosst smiled. “You’ve undoubtedly seen the pictures.”

She had. Every human probably had.

The door opened.

The room was doughnut-shaped, or like a circular amphitheater. The audience, an inconspicuous mix of producers, biologists, and every other curious mind with enough money to station themselves at everything from mixing tables to a myriad of complicated-looking lab machinery. Centre-stage was the star of the show, the alien creature who lacked any conclusive scientific name.

“Meet Elvis, the future of entertainment.”

“God...” Chiemi breathed, “did you really name it Elvis?”

The yellowed, bulging flesh of the creature hid any discernible features. It was frontless, like a jellyfish, but moved around the spherical chamber in graceful, powerful dips, like a sea whale.

“How is it flying?”

“It’s floating, actually, in the vacuum of space.”

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The sphere was like a cage, exposed to the stars through shafts far too small for the creature to squeeze through, if escape was something it was even capable of wanting.

“You can come closer.” Prosst walked right up to the thick glass and looked up admiringly at the creature. It moved a little more irrationally, swaying in and out of its roundabout path.

It looked to Chiemi like a scrambled egg, cooking and rumbling in a hot pan, popping with oily bubbles of flesh.

Pop pop popping, it splashes on her skin and burns at her arm—it hurts, but then she realizes it’s cold. The creature is a scoop of ice cream, melting on the park blacktop. Her older brother slapped her cone out of her hand and in her young, ignorant rage, she’d screamed she wished he was dead, and maybe she really meant it at the time.

Prosst pulled Chiemi’s headphones over her ears, snapping her out of the daze. Her face felt hot.

Prosst put his own headphones on and opened a comm to her.

“The effect is stronger for newcomers. I should’ve anticipated that.”

“That was that thing?” Chiemi spoke loudly. “I couldn’t even hear it!”

“Mmhmm. White noise mostly, but it can pierce even through the hull of a ship, without the right materials. You feel it before you can even hear it.”

This anger was different from the sadness from before, in the sense deprivation pod. It was stronger, like it wasn’t entirely her own. Though the creature had no front, the way its flesh drooped and swayed in zero-gravity looked like a skirt twirling about.

“Anger like that we’re in talks to record with a certain punk outfit who are very big on Mars right now, but I can’t say more than that. We call that the Chai effect. Spicy.

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With Chiemi, we're thinking something a little more thoughtful, somber, in a way. Not quite an Oolong, but a nice Matcha."

"Can you make it happy?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Happy."

"Well... Elvis doesn't seem to feed on anything, or desire to do so, so we can't really treat it so easily. Some people can only sing the blues."

"What about the sadness? Why not just do the opposite?" Chiemi never looked at Prosst, never noticed the odd scientist or sound engineering fanboying and snapping her picture. She just watched the swaying of the alien.

"Frankly, it's tough to cure loneliness," Prosst chuckled, "if only it were easy for humans, right?"

Prosst and some other egghead types talked the day away with her. Contract drafts. Projected timelines. Then she met some studio artists with impressive credentials who were staying onboard Piero Records station long-term. She negotiated with Prosst until almost midnight by the station's clock, and then she was taken to the queen suite. It was elegantly, expensively furnished and surprisingly spacious. Supposedly soundproofed. It had one of the nicest sound systems Chiemi had ever seen, and a record had been placed courteously under the needle. It was the 7-inch single of "Now You're Gone," original pressing.

Chiemi looked at her portrait on the album sleeve. She was about six years younger with a longer hairstyle. Her face had a sad expression, but like movie sadness, not a real sadness. She remembered the photographer parroting her own lyrics at her,

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egging her on without realizing the horrible things he was conjuring. The background, between the curve of her jawline and her slender neck, was a deep indigo. It was only a crack compared to her own close-up shot, but she want nothing more than to dive right into that indigo blue.

The melody started up again in her head.

“Excuse me, Miss!” a man shouted.

Chiemi was bathed in a beam of light, like an escaping convict. Her palm was pressed against the glass sphere, just inches from the alien creature. From Elvis. How had she gotten there?

“Chi-chan! I’m a big fan, but we don’t let people in here alone with the creature. Err—Elvis.” The man wasn’t security, but he didn’t look like a scientist either. “Did you leave your headphones in your room?”

You shouldn’t be here alone, the man kept saying. He had on headphones, so he wasn’t aware how loud he spoke.

“That thing,” he said loudly, without coming closer. “It does things with your head, with your emotions. Things that aren’t there. We have to be careful here.”

The alien was just a big scrambled egg, a melting scoop of ice cream, a rolling hill of windswept snow, harmlessly locked away.

The man handed her a pair of headphones from a nearby console, but she didn’t put them on. He kept his distance from the creature who was soundlessly gliding side to side.

“Who are you?” Chiemi asked.

“A guitarist. One of the studio musicians.”

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“Huh. Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure, but you should put your headphones on.”

“Do you enjoy playing the guitar? Like, all the time?”

“Of course,” he replied instantly. “Even when I was learning, getting the callouses on my fingers and all that. ‘Course some parts feel better than others.”

“You’re lucky.” She didn’t mean anything unkind.

“Well, I’m still more than a guitar player. Now will you please put on your headphones, please?”

Listening to the voice of the guitarist, Chiemi wanted nothing more than to pass through the glass of the sphere and be with the lonely alien, but she was very conscious of the fact that doing such a thing would be impossible.

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