

## “Sour Notes”

Ele and Nin were making music. More accurately, Ele was teaching Nin to make music. It was to be his first time, and he was as excited as could be. The right to make music was synonymous with adulthood, and indeed Nin had reached an appropriate age for crossing that all-important life threshold. And, upon doing so, he was now to make his own song. Energy and excitement alike were fantastically high for such a monumental life event.

“First, Nin,” Ele brought his full attention to his junior, “I shall let you hear my song.”

Nin knew that learning the song of the elder was part of the tradition, as he had been made aware of the rite countless times before. But now that it was happening to him, he could barely contain his own sense of wonder. He had heard part of Yue's song once, but it was accidental and unintended. He was punished severely then, but this time permissions were granted, and he was where he was supposed to be, attention focused on where it was expected to be focused. This was, without a doubt, his time.

Ele directed Nin's attention slightly downward and a bit to his right. The range was beautiful. For as far as could be viewed were brilliant patterns of stars and systems of many varieties. Some were colorful, and some very dark. Others were forceful and invasive. Then, further out, those that remained were far-reaching but peacefully isolated. Nin projected hard and detected at least a half-dozen dense spaces within the anticipated path, and he was curious as to how they would influence the note as it passed through each one. He steadied his excitement and waited on his mentor.

After a short moment to verify his trajectory, Ele sent forth his note in a flash of blue light. Nin observed intensely as the note wove, spun, and bounced down Ele's path, and the song it made as it went was beyond beauty itself. It began slow and somber, and almost wept as it crossed its first galaxy. Then, it dipped low as it bent up and around the first density, causing the sound itself to darken and instantly change the mood. After the second bend, it rose with a crashing, violent crescendo, and Nin was certain he felt a deep vibration from the force of the following impacts as the note penetrated directly through planets and stars alike. Then, shifting to another movement came a soft, crackly

humming as it slowly tumbled through a space laden with heavy debris. Afterward, another downward bend, causing the note to pick up speed again and lightly but swiftly dance its way around the rim of a beautiful, many-armed spiral far in the distance. After this point, Nin could no longer detect the note, but he could still hear the music. The beautiful, beautiful music. After Ele's song came to its gradual close, there was a long period of silence between the two.

When Nin stirred again, he chose not to project his sense of awe and adoration towards his noble teacher; it was already quite obvious in his passive expression alone. Ele remained silent for several more eternities, still reflecting on the beauty of the composition. Nin respectfully did the same, though his patience was fading fast. He could hardly wait to make a song of his own.

Then came that very moment. Ele redirected his focus to his young pupil.

“Now it is your turn to make your very own song. You have heard my song and seen my beginning. Now, choose your own path and send your note.”

This was it. It was this very moment for which Nin had waited countless aeons, grew, learned, fed, and grew some more. He chaotically scanned his immediate surroundings like a child in an amusement park. Laboriously controlling his urge to send his note prematurely, he surveyed several spots and wondered what sound they would make when they felt his note. Of course, his note was not Ele's; it would certainly be different even if he had chosen the exact same path as his mentor. However, such a gesture would be just as preposterous executed as it was in its mere imagining.

Nin gazed at the event horizon of a nearby black hole and could imagine the note bending viciously as it fought its way through one of the most powerful forces in the universe (But, of course, not as powerful as the music itself). That was where he would begin, but from what angle? An approach from beneath promised a near-perfect collision with the exact midpoint of that large binary which eclipsed him teasingly. However, a twisting, forward approach might ensure something more elaborate and infinitely more varied. Even a slow, direct release was certain to interact with a series of massive, interesting old stars reaching the ends of their lives. Such a difficult decision.

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By Tom Badrick

Ele's patience ran infinitely deep, and Nin finally decided his beginning course. He would boldly cross that foreboding black hole. Almost into its singularity, in fact. The acting gravity would likely launch his note at unbelievable speeds towards a small, yellowish star on the cusp of a greater, larger state of being. Its sound was sure to be fascinating. Then, from that point, who really knew? There were several dense clusters of gas, and then a small but pretty spiral galaxy that it seemed like it might enter, but he was too impatient to be that precise with such calculations. He just knew the galactic contact would sound amazing even if it was just a slight bristle, and that was good enough for him.

Then, without another moment's hesitation, Nin sent his note. Daring the pull of the unrepentant singularity, his song began with a low, warbling bend. It sounded odd at first, but began to smooth into a low, relaxed overture. Then, above the long-sustained bass, came a prettily darting, spritely melody which was harmonized sweetly by a few dense clusters just underneath the note's path. Then, as he had partially predicted, his note skittered off into a nearby spiral galaxy where he lost sight of it. The music grew faster and more energetic as the melody raised in pitch and climbed in tempo. As the excitement of Nin's first song increased, so did the composer's emotions. Lively happiness radiated from him.

Then, after a few more moments of intense ascension, there was a loud pop followed by flickering static. Then, there was no sound at all. Nin's note was lost and his song ended abruptly. In an instant, Nin's feeling's turned sad and strangely frightened. Was this failure? He desperately sought the console of his mentor, as feelings of defeat were rapidly ascending.

“Spare your worries, Nin,” Ele reassured his young student, “No song is ever perfect in a single attempt. But I am old and can see further than you. I shall seek and detect what caused your problem. Then maybe we can resolve it.”

Nin waited as patiently as he could as Ele reached far beyond himself to feel the subtleties of the note's path, all the while reflecting

on his unexpected error. It was moments like this that he was reminded of his handicap: he could never see as far as his peers. In matters of exploration and intervention, he had always felt left behind. But Ele was a great mentor, and could see further than most. Nin was confident that he would help him overcome his perpetual disability, and the creation of his own song was a giant step in that overarching goal.

“Ah!” Ele exclaimed. He extruded revelatory happiness. “There it is! Within that dual-armed galaxy is a small system that holds less than a dozen planets. There are some gas giants and then an asteroid belt, and then within that is four terrestrial planets just before its central star. Your note was soured within, as the current alignment of the bodies inside provided just the right pattern of reflection to cancel and deaden it. All we need to do is remove one of those terrestrial planets and your song would continue should you start it again. Any one of them will do.”

Nin could see it now, but he had to project so hard it almost hurt. It was a young star, all right. As he saw it, warmth and pleasantness were reflected back onto him. She was a nice little star, and would likely live a very agreeable life. He hoped that what he had to do would not upset her in any way.

“Nin?” Ele passed the duty onto his pupil, whom he knew was more than capable of the required task, “Do you know what you need to do now? I’ve looked harder, and I feel the best outcome if you take away the third from the center. But the choice is yours to make.”

A small modification. Such a simple matter. It was incredible to think that something so tiny and insignificant could have such a remarkable effect on music of all the great and wonderful things. His enthusiasm began to climb, much like the crescendos in his mentor's song.

But this was about his own song. *His* song.

“Then I won't wait another moment!” Nin brimmed with excitement as he followed Ele's suggestion to the letter. He couldn't wait to try his note again, to see where his musical journey would now take him. In a passing second, he made the necessary arrangement.

And the pale blue dot known as “Earth” was destroyed in an instant. On the bright side, however, Nin's song became one of legend, and was recognized as such for over a trillion years.