

A MOTE IN SHADOW

SAMPLE

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“Anchuan Shiyong” [Safe Handling]

A Traditional Martian Benediction

Key coremye te nosu, key portu te prafomu.

Wi gah dachi gadhah.

[From stern to bow, from port to starboard.]

[We fly.]

Fizz yet lul wi hahdah;

Posadkea una gah gahdah; awa wonda bin gbam.

[Taking off, we soar;]

[Landing, we arrive; our journey complete.]

Na ehkeypaza gah togetha tey dey;

Tey-tey anchuan shiyong lul am bin dey.

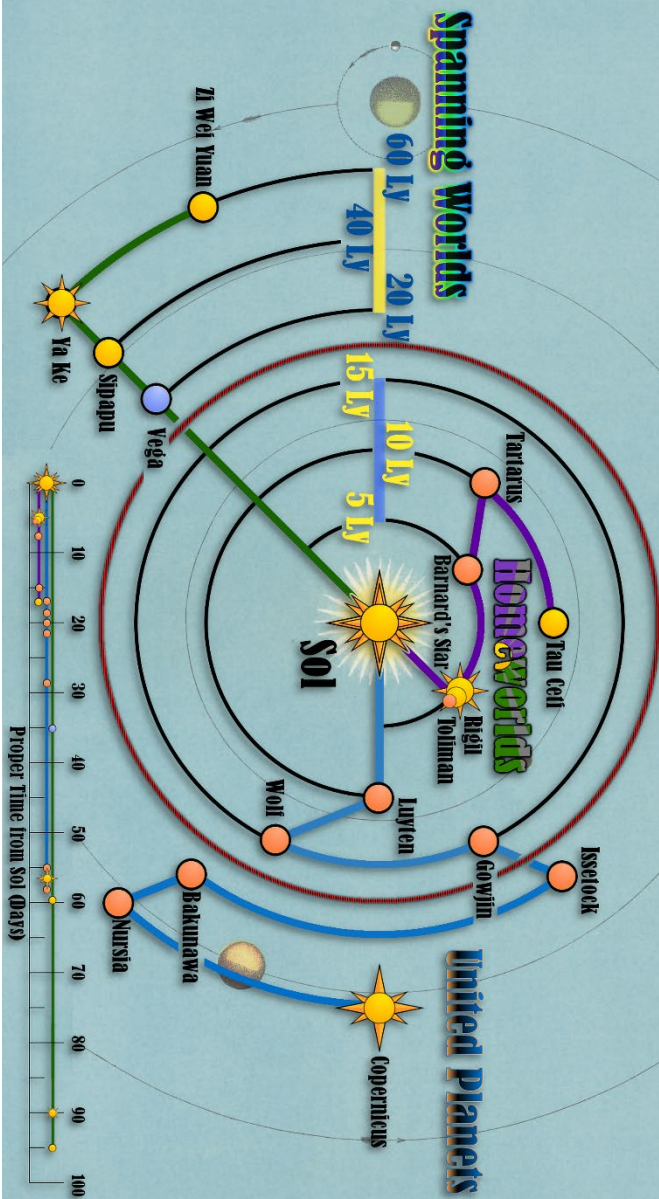
[The crew, together, in past and future meet;]

[Eternally vigilant, we will be safe.]

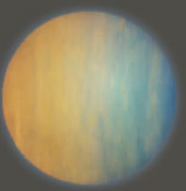
Na all gah til andyanleyu kes fo bin tak.

[Till abyssal currents have their claim.]

INHABITED SPACE



MOONS OF JIN



JIN

Jin
Star: Ya Ke
Type: Gas giant
Exclusion Zone: 1.171 Gm
Population: 24.02 mil.
Moons: 79 (7 primary)



Skarda

Fourth Moon of Jin

Gravity: 0.26 g
Population: 8.52 million
+2.05 million on orbit
Cosmodromes: Arco lazuli, Tay Jinchang, Nova Chuanwu, Portu Grond



Vas

Third Moon of Jin

Gravity: 0.34 g
Population: 7.30 million
+1.75 million on orbit
Cosmodromes: Vas Central Cosmodrome, Infernis Planitia Cosmodrome



Plomo

Fifth Moon of Jin

Gravity: 0.21 g
Population: 1.82 million
+0.39 million on orbit
Cosmodromes: Anchuan Hefushe, Arco Sweet Water, Bul Aqua Archbeam



Susseong, Peng, Kobber, Prata

Jin's population primarily resides on one of the three primary moons (Skarda, Vas, or Plomo) with the remainder either on orbit in stations like Horizon's Edge, or on the remaining primary moons with the exception of Prata which is heavily irradiated by Jin's radiation belts and is entirely uninhabited.

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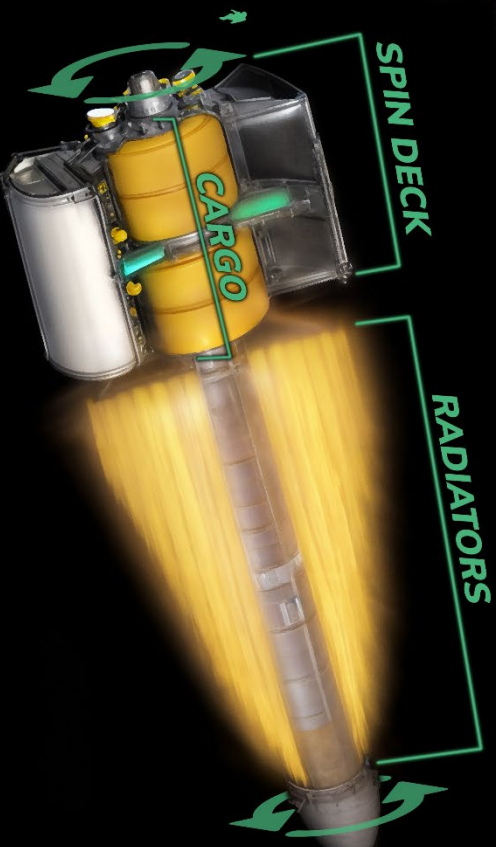
SPIN DECK LAYOUT [01]



SPIN DECK LAYOUT [02]

Iktomi Space & Aeronautic Licensed Spacecraft Schematic

148 dry tonnage | 80 tons cargo | 105 tons bioprop
max accel. 1.91 m/s² | ΔV 44.23 km/s



The CT-185 “El Cajon” is your gateway to the stars,
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Book One:

Ergo Infinitum

Chapter One

[66036] Isabell

Otso Station

Isabell's mind buzzed with a static crackle as her synapses fired—hot and fast like snaps of lightning in the raging storms of Jupiter. Cloaked in a demonic visage, in an alleyway at the edge of Arcas station, high above the surface of Calisto, in the Jovian system, she hid behind something deeper than a shadow. Her obsidian black armor was sharp, angular, violent, and hid her face beneath a monochromatic Oni mask.

Everywhere she looked, she saw green and purple flags, emblazoned with the rising stars motif—the war flag of the Homeworlds. For the hedonistic crowds drawn to this district, the symbol implied the faintest edge of social and political menace. They came here for a perception of peril only, just a little edge of excitement, and that amused Isabell.

Her modified cold gray eyes saw their truth. This was not a place of danger, not really. It was a thoroughly gentrified section of a station in the heart of the Solar system, plastered over with empty signifiers of danger.

The flags around the district were nothing save a mere marketing ploy, designed to draw people to a sad little district tucked between the more stable habitats and the station's superstructure. These crowds were being exploited by the most cynical of Homeworlds refugees displaced during the war, and the crowds deserved it.

Isabell was different. She was here for a righteous mission. And she prepared herself accordingly.

VIPs have arrived.

Isabell subvocalized with a growl across her quantum encrypted communications system as her eyes tracked two Martian scientists entering the district. For these lanky Martians draped in traditional shawls, the danger in the district was very real.

Sitrep.

We're in position, Ninya Blanca.

The hisses of her operators sounded like whispers just behind her ear.

OPFOR shuttle is in our scopes. Ready to follow your lead.

She heard the tension in their voices. She heard their unanswered questions in the pauses between words. Contracted to

protect two scientists—critical research assets for the United Planets Navy—her most elite operators of Grayson Services Group puzzled why they had allowed an abduction attempt to get this far?

Grayson's intelligence officers had discovered an Acheron plot weeks ago. An obvious honeypot trap sprung through an invitation for the scientists to spend a night out in this district. An invitation sent by a known Acheron operative whose team was well prepared to grab the two Martians.

Yet Sato had ordered his cell, Isabell's unit, to allow the plot to unfold, at least partially. Wouldn't we lose face? Wouldn't we lose our contracts? These were the questions that had gone unspoken in the minds of her operators.

"Conditions for Grayson maintaining control of the Martian's project are unfavorable," Sato said. "And there's no reason to expect that to change—unless we force the issue. We must act to align the project with our interests. We cannot afford to sit idly by and merely hope for the right conditions to develop."

There was no reason to doubt his judgement. He remained embedded in the United Planets Navy. He would know how to manipulate them the best. And he was Isabell's mentor, besides.

She tracked the Martian scientists as they entered the large open space at the center of the district. Her targets headed to a bar ten or so meters away from the alley where she lurked, across an open

common space with a gnarled oak tree in the center. A green-haired woman waved the two lanky Martian scientists over to a table at the bar's open patio. With bows exchanged in the Martian fashion, the scientists approached the table.

Danger close, Isabell announced to her team.

Drinks ordered. Words exchanged. The trio's socialization dragged on, and the crowds thinned as the hours passed. Around 01:04, station time, the female Martian scientist, Dr. Silva, said her goodbyes and left the Acheron Operative with the hapless Dr. Jakande.

Escorting Silva, Isabell's operators announced.

Understood.

Her adversaries' digital chatter increased over surveilled channels. Crowds in the public spaces had thinned to the point of non-existence. Tension in Isabell's body increased.

Her fingers in her left hand splayed out. Sharp blades in the gloves of her armor extended as her fingers spread wide like the claws of a cat. She pulled out her coilgun machine pistol's grip, and with a thought, the weapon unfolded and attached its exoskeletal brace to her right forearm.

Beneath the jet-black portholes on her armored demonic faceplate, she watched the green-haired adversary lace Dr. Jakande's drink. Within a minute, he was swaying and violently stumbling up from the table. The green-haired adversary lured him to the water closet in a

side alley next to the bar, where Acheron planned to spring the trap. The hostile operator's accomplice, built like a tank, was ready for the last acts of the abduction just outside the main water closet. In a flash, the green-haired operator was behind the Martian scientist, gun pressed to his ribs.

Go!

She growled the order as she burst through the metamaterial metaflage that had hidden her in her alley. Like a lenticular lens, the metaflage shifted the frequencies of her light and heat in a chaotic dance, hiding her from both human and autonomous snoops. Against her exoskeletal enhanced strength, the metamaterial broke apart like ink display paper.

In three heartbeats she was across the wide-open space, past the gnarled oak tree, and in the alley with Jakande and his would-be abductors. The operator rippling with muscles and mass noticed her and shouted. It was too late.

Snap snap snap. Isabell's hypersonic rounds crackled through the alley like a laser beam. Brilliant red tracers, bright enough to cause remnant phosphors in unprotected eyes, shot out from Isabell's weapon attached to her right arm. The large Acheron operator's upper torso was a mist of blood and bone exploding outward. The green-haired operator turned and took aim with her sidearm.

Pop pop. Valiant effort, but the projectiles exploded against the metal plating where Isabell had been milliseconds earlier. Isabell had already launched herself high into the air. Clawed arm reached back.

Whoosh. She swiped forward with her left hand as she landed on her knees. Pressure emanated from her fingertips in midair. Then something warm and wet spilled across the haptic skin in the palm of her glove.

Shuttle secured Ninya Blanca.

Understood.

Isabell stood and flicked some of the blood off her claw blades, retracting them back into her gloves. With a thought, her demonic faceplate split in half, retracting the top-half as her demon's smile remained in place over her chin. She stared down at the stunned and drugged Martian scientist, tried to smile warmly with her eyes as their artificial steel-gray glow got brighter. A whirlwind of air pressed against her body. There was a roar of wind rushing out of a habitat breach. Warning klaxons and yellow emergency lighting filled the district.

"Don't worry, Dr. Jakande!" Isabell screamed over the cyclone of depressurization. "I am with Grayson Services Group. I am here to protect you."

For now. She thought with a cruel and hungry smile beneath her mask.

Chapter Two

[66255] Chaeyoung

Celosia

Chaeyoung hunched over a glassy copper-green mug half-filled with brown bitter drink, pressed down by the weight of history as she sat at a lonely table in the *Di Polyeznaya*. She was making her best efforts to drown her indecisiveness in the alcoholic soja. After all, it was all the way from Sol.

Two hundred years of sustained human effort and now there were thousands of bars like *Di Polyeznaya*, sixty-four light years from Earth, where people got drunk instead of boldly exploring the unknown. Hot, dusty, and crowded but quiet. Her thoughts were the loudest thing in the room, and she was utterly alone with them.

In Tiantang, the largest city and capital of Celosia, there were many bars she could have gone to that would yield a more complete distraction from herself, but *Di Polyeznaya* was unique. *Stellah steh*—a Martian description of people born in the Solar system but not on Earth or Mars—came to bars like *Di Polyeznaya* to ease their homesickness.

Chaeyoung's was here seeking to recapture that feeling she had as an optimistic student studying in Sol—her first time out of the

Spanning Worlds—but the intervening years had changed her too much. Wallowing in nostalgia made it inescapably obvious just how frustrated she had become with her career.

Now she was not only wallowing over impending decisions, but she was also mulling over what could have been. Not simply for herself, but even for those dreams that had brought her ancestors out to the Spanning Worlds. Faced with all that history, her own contribution to the sustained human project seemed inadequate.

Pinned in a corner at the edge of a bar top, sitting on a high stool, surrounded by strangers, she rested her elbows against the cool ceramic table. Her nose tickled by the astringent medicinal aroma of her alcoholic drink. The other patrons tightly packed around her like passengers in a high-acceleration metal bucket rocket, or a propulsion can. As the name suggested, there was little room to move in a propcan.

She lifted her cup to drink, letting the brown soja burn at her throat and nose before she halved its remaining content, and set the cup down as gently as if it might crumple from its own weight against the bar top.

A long day of conference talks on astrobiology had worn her down, caused her thoughts to run, trend toward the moody. Her fellow exobiologists all believed in the standard line of a universe filled with

self-sterilized oxygen-rich planets like Celosia. Victims of their own abiotic oxygen production.

Oxygen denied complex life any chance to take hold. Across the Local Bubble, this process had decidedly left worlds ideally suited for humanity. But, in Chaeyoung's opinion, exobiology had stalled out similarly—killed by the field's own oxygen hypothesis. All other ideas denied any chance to thrive.

Exobiologists had spent the last century focused on searches for unusual microbes within settled systems, studying the fossil traces in Ahtash's lithium deserts, and protecting the pre-biotic Europa chemistry. These were interesting fields of study, but they never held Chaeyoung's attention for long.

She had always worked on these projects as a placeholder so, someday, she would go out into the vast unexplored space and see what was out there. Each step she had taken, from completing her degree, working as a postdoctoral researcher on Ahtash then Europa, and securing a more permanent position back home in the Spanning Worlds, was justified on the hope that she would finally have enough cachet and seniority in the field to look for life in new places. Unexplored places.

Four years after her graduation from Huygens University, the only people who had shown even vague interest in listening to her dreams were representatives of a private defense contractor, Acheron

Private Capital Group. Acheron had a reputation as freedom fighting heroes, or cynical warmongers and profiteers depending on who you asked, but they heard her talk at the conference and wanted to hear more. Everyone else in her audience had been friends, showed up to smirk at her presentation, or just needed a place to catch up on their own work while dodging social obligations, but Acheron's nameless representatives had shown genuine interest, and wanted her to give a private presentation tomorrow.

Chaeyoung's friend Sania said there was an implied funding opportunity. She had mixed feelings over that possibility. Her postdoctoral fellowship was ending soon, and she could renew her contract but only if she joined a team that had openly mocked her most recent talk, leave the field, or take Acheron seriously and take money from a weapons manufacturer.

Instead of making any kind of decision, she was getting drunk. Procrastinating until her friend Sania would inevitably demand a yes or no about tomorrow's meeting. By then, hopefully, she would have found some distraction and made the final decision on a whim, consequences be damned.

She took another sip of her drink and looked around for someone to help her crawl out of her own mind. Next to Chaeyoung was a beautiful stranger with skin like warm Martian clay on a dusty day, dark hair in a high bun, wearing a brilliant light sleeveless red dress with

a plunging back revealing extensive *stellah steh* tattoos. Splashes of geometric shapes, abstract lines reminiscent of mathematical scripts or some unknowable language, with crisp spacing, all in a beautiful ruddy violet colored ink spiraled over spine, shoulders, and curled along the contours of toned arms.

Chaeyoung wanted to be noticed and approached by this beautiful stranger, but she was a *well steh*. She was born on a planet with a terrestrial atmosphere and was, in many ways, a local. This justified her hesitation. Politics with Uppers—people from the United Planets—could complicate matters. Complicated was the last thing she wanted right now, though this may be a different kind of complication. The allure of the stranger was distinct from everything she was actively avoiding.

“Fuck it,” she muttered to herself.

With one last gulp she finished her *soja*, turned to face the stranger, and showed off a little with a *Di Lingua* greeting—the shared language of the *stellah and Grond steh*.

“*Hao fa!*”¹ she happily greeted the stranger in *Di Lingua*.

The stranger spun on the chair to face Chaeyoung. They had a slim heart-shaped face, deep-set eyes with a single sweep of dark black makeup on their upper eyelid, soft arch eyebrows, bow-shaped lips, and

¹ [*Di Lingua*]: Hello!

eyes that were like dark brown pools of void with glints of orange from the overhead light in the bar.

The stranger was tall, even while sitting, and had to hunch over to make eye contact. “*Yu gah mi ill tok?*”² the stranger asked with a flat affect.

“*Ye. If yu gah jaw lul may wahala dey, A gah maiself kes tok.*”³

Chaeyoung set her mug down, then waved her open palm exaggeratedly to signal her sincerity—she would not talk to someone who was uninterested.

“No, that’s fine,” the stranger gave her a sly smile. “Not a lot of *dichu pipol*—locals—come into this bar. You speak *Di Lingua* like you’ve lived there. *Yu gah wey bin steh?*”⁴

Chaeyoung looked at her hands for a moment as she blushed, mostly from inebriation, then held the eyes of the *Grond steh*, responding and coyly brushing a strand of hair away from her face. “*A gah Sol bin eight haif nyan, but Ya Ke ill bin ste. A gah mot wel tok lul tink.*”⁵

“What brought you to Sol?”

² [*Di Lingua*]: Are you talking to me?

³ [*Di Lingua*]: Yes. If that bothers you, I can talk to myself.

⁴ [*Di Lingua*]: Where are you from?

⁵ [*Di Lingua*]: I lived in Sol for eight and a half years, but I am from Ya Ke. I don’t think I speak it that well.

"I was a student at *Dayhagyo gah Huygens*.⁶ Studied AXB—Astrobiology, Xenobiology, and Biochemistry."

The stranger raised an eyebrow. "Huygens University is a nice place. Did you live on Titan the whole time you were in Sol?"

"Not the whole time," Chaeyoung shook her head. "I lived at the research base near Europa for some of it."

"*Nawa oh!*"⁷ the stranger looked genuinely impressed and sounded wistful. "I can't imagine what it's like to visit a place like that. Almost entirely untouched by us. It must be wonderful."

"It was," the corners of Chaeyoung's mouth curled into a smile. "*Yu gah wetin lul name get dey?*"⁸

"My name's Vis. *Na yeoja*,"⁹ Vis said with her hand out, taking care to place her palm up it so her *stellah steh* gesture was clear.

"*Na yeoja gah Chaeyoung lul name get dey*,"¹⁰ Chaeyoung said with a gender-specifying particle and a smile.

Vis bowed her head politely, lifted her mug, frowned, and set it back down.

"*Am hey empty dey?*"¹¹ Chaeyoung asked.

⁶ [*Di Lingua*]: Huygens University.

⁷ [*Di Lingua*]: Woah!

⁸ [*Di Lingua*]: What's your name?

⁹ [*Di Lingua*]: This woman.

¹⁰ [*Di Lingua*]: This woman's name is Chaeyoung.

¹¹ [*Di Lingua*]: Is that empty?

Vis tilted the mug and Chaeyoung saw it was indeed empty. She raised her hand to get the attention of the tender by bringing her fingers toward her palm in a *stellah steh* motion that looked a bit like one hand clapping. The blocky autonomous bar manager stumbled over as large expressive plates on its blue-tinged faceplate bent and flapped in some poor imitation of a polite smile.

"Yes, how may I help you, *ohlowyeh*?" the tender asked with a dual gender fluctuating voice most autonomous systems from Sol used.

"Two more of what she was having," Chaeyoung pointed at Vis's empty drink.

"Yes, *ohlowyeh*. Here is your order. It will be ten *bah-kay* or eleven point two nine *swawn*. Shall I add it to your tab?"

"Ye, *oke*."

The tender raised an arm, pinched as if it had just grabbed something unseen in the air, and then pressed whatever invisible thing it was toward Chaeyoung before it released its grasp. A semi-transparent window emerged before her with an external and urgent authorization request to add the charge to her biometrically sealed bar tab. Implants near her optical nerve connected to the ambient information network and then rendered an interactive display that only existed in her occipital lobe. It was a user interface produced by her Extraocular Augmented Reality, or EAR, implant.

As her focus shifted across the face of the virtual window, there was a tingle in her fingertips. Haptic feedback. She idly consented to the bar order. Then she pinched the semi-opaque window in her hand and gently passed it back to the tender.

As that EAR window disappeared, Chaeyoung caught a flash of motion. There, in the corner of her EAR, was the dancing icon of unread messages. She waved her hand in front of her face and the entire EAR interface closed out so she could ignore whatever message Sania had no doubt sent.

"Very good *ohlowyeh*," the tender nodded its faceplate as it carefully picked up Vis's mug, filled two more empty mugs with a milky white tonic—taking care to support each hand at the elbow in a *stellah steh* politeness gesture, and then passed the mugs to Vis and Chaeyoung. "Enjoy your drinks. *Gbam!*" the tender raised up a thumb.

In tandem, Vis and Chaeyoung picked up their full glasses in their right hands, lifted them with a slight tip of the brim to the tender with their free arm over their abdomen in a signal of politeness.

"*Gbam!*"¹² the pair said in unison, tapped lips of mugs gently, and took a sip.

Chaeyoung coughed.

¹² [*Di Lingua*]: Cheers!

Vis laughed. "This is strong Pluto distillate. You should be a little careful."

Vis reached out, touched Chaeyoung's forearm, letting her hand linger. Chaeyoung's face flushed. She looked down at Vis's hand as it pulled away, saw the tattoo ink on Vis's arm was over slightly raised bumps of scarification.

"I've had nothing like this. What is it?" Chaeyoung asked.

Vis lowered the cup and responded delicately. "In Upblanda it's called Plutonian white wine, but in *Di Lingua* it's *nokcha soja*. It's a *soja* distilled from *nyams*, but it has a sprinkle of ginsenosides in it."

Chaeyoung recognized ginsenosides as in ginseng, an Earth plant that has had some mild cultivation success on Mars and the outer Solar System.

Chaeyoung raised an eyebrow. "Ah, that explains the flavor. Must make it fairly special."

"Ye, it's a rare specialty from Pluto."

Chaeyoung raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you...*Grond steh*?"

She nodded her chin toward Vis's tattoos. These were not *stellah steh* tattoos as she had first assumed, these were signs that Vis had extensive musculoskeletal supports and implants to strengthen her body. These were telltale signs that someone had grown up in one-third Earth standard gravity, especially with tattoos which called attention to the medical implantation's presence.

Martians—*Grond steh*—had developed the practice of beautifying themselves while proudly displaying how Mars had changed them. When *Grond steh* built the ring habs and stations that were plentiful in the rest of the Solar system, they had created habitats for millions to live in near-standard gravity—they had created the *stellah steh*. That obviated the need of the implants for many from a technological or medical perspective, but the *Grond steh* traditions of extensive tattooing were a cultural expression. And so, even without implants, *stellah steh* continued the tattooing practice. But the *Grond steh* still had the scars and the implants, beneath the ink.

Vis glanced at her left arm, that was covered in her intricate tattoos and nodded. “Ye, I am *Grond steh*, but I spent a little bit of time on Callisto and in the Kuiper belt.”

Chaeyoung’s eyes widened in excitement. “*Nawa oh*, what’s that like? The Kuiper belt?”

Vis shrugged, turned back to her mug, and looked down at the milky substance sadly.

“*Binu*, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s fine,” Vis turned to Chaeyoung with a bright smile. “I just don’t want to talk about that.”

Vis’s body tensed, and Chaeyoung reacted empathetically. She hunched over her drink and there was a weight on her chest. She felt on the verge of abandonment, being left alone to wallow in her own

thoughts again. She sipped at the *nokcha soja* and saw the window of recovery from her misstep dwindling.

“You know you can actually consume too much ginsenosides,” she blurted out.

“Oh? Huh,” Vis raised an eyebrow and took another sip of her drink.

Chaeyoung nodded. “Ye, but I think...if this stuff is so rare,” she brought her mug up to her eye and inspected it suspiciously. “You might need to consume the entire crop on Pluto before it did anything noticeable.”

Vis laughed, almost spitting out the *nokcha soja*.

“*Jeje, eheen, anchuan shiyong*,”¹³ Chaeyoung said with a wink over the rim of her mug.

Vis swiveled back and forth on her stool as she looked into Chaeyoung’s eyes. As their eyes locked, there was a new tension between them.

Vis’s eyes, black as void, ignited into stars—brilliant cerulean blue orbs—as her EAR implants produced light beneath the surface of her irises. It was a purely aesthetic modification to basic EAR functionally, but it was stunning. For a moment, all Chaeyoung saw of the world were Vis’s enlarged pupils swallowed by blue accretion disks.

¹³ [*Di Lingua*]: Careful, sweetie, safe handling.

Chaeyoung had to look away, eventually. “So,” she said as she looked at her *nokcha soja*. “How has Celosia been treating you?”

“I threw myself into work since I arrived,” Vis curled both hands around her mug with a demure smile sent Chaeyoung’s way. “But with the end of the term, things are looking more exciting.”

“Term as in school term?”

“Ye. I am a *gyosa*. A teacher.”

“What do you teach?”

“Physics—I used to work on ERR—AL physics. Mostly theory—computational—and some applied.”

Despite being impressed, Chaeyoung kept it cool. “Do you like teaching?”

Vis shrugged with her hands. “Ye, it’s more like fine-tuning autos than interacting much with students. They do most of their group work as I supervise and troubleshoot. So, I feel more like myself when I’m not teaching.”

Chaeyoung wondered out loud. “So...what are you, when you’re being yourself?” then she gave Vis a mischievous smile and said flirtatiously. “*Oda than A gah baire gyosa ill see?*”¹⁴

Vis rolled her eyes but giggled with a flare of blue in her eyes. “*Shey, oke. Eheen, slo slo gahdah.*”¹⁵

¹⁴ [*Di Lingua*]: Other than this white-hot teacher I am looking at?

¹⁵ [*Di Lingua*]: Yeah, okay. You’re moving fast, sweetie.

Chaeyoung blushed and turned away to watch the cloud-like formations in her mug as she swirled the *nokcha soja*.

"*Na am hey baze baze mot bin dey*,"¹⁶ Vis reached out and squeezed Chaeyoung's hand. "I'm still trying to find myself out here...ever since I switched careers and left Sol behind...but I enjoy dancing, and I always loved plants. I enjoy tending to my little garden in my hab," Vis laughed. "It gets a bit neglected when I get busy during the term, but it's all made with hardy plants and I was agronomy certified in another lifetime."

"I heard dancing? There's a nice *jip olodo* in this district if...if you're interested," Chaeyoung suggested nervously.

Vis's eyes got a little bluer, and she stared out into the distance like she was focusing on something in her EAR windows. "What's it called?"

"Axis Mundi."

"Ah ye, I think I've heard of it. Is it on the waterline?"

"Ye, that's the one."

Chaeyoung pointed at Vis's drink.

Vis shook her head. "I'd like to keep my head, for now, *ehéen*. Maybe we could go dancing later?" she sounded hopeful.

¹⁶ [*Di Lingua*]: It wasn't not hitting the mark.

"*Na gah pinleyu wetin dey?*"¹⁷ Chaeyoung brought her EAR back up and made little circles in the air with her hand sending a request to exchange EAR frequencies—or more accurately coordinates to send messages across any network—and then flicked the request to Vis.

"You're going to keep this information safe, right?" Vis asked as she swiveled on the stool.

Chaeyoung put a grave look on her face, put a hand over her heart, and bowed as if she was accepting some great honor. "Ye, of course. *Anchuan shiyong*.¹⁸ I will guard your EAR with my life. I swear."

Vis laughed and accepted the exchange. "Good, good! I was going to meet some friends tonight, but after they show up, head out to Axis Mundi?"

Chaeyoung nodded and lifted her glass to finish the *nokcha soja*. "*Gbam!*"¹⁹

Vis reciprocated. "*Gbam!*"²⁰

Chaeyoung and Vis chatted as they waited for Vis's friends. It turned out to be quite a crowd when four showed up, introduced themselves to Chaeyoung, and then they all left *Di Polyzenya* to go dancing at the Axis Mundi.

Outside, the Celosian air was frosty, as it often was in the

¹⁷ [*Di Lingua*]: What's the frequency?

¹⁸ [*Di Lingua*]: Safe handling.

¹⁹ [*Di Lingua*]: Cheers!

²⁰ [*Di Lingua*]: Cheers!

sprawling mega-capital city of Tiantang. Vis wrapped her shoulders with a traditional Martian shawl and a black long padding coat. Chaeyoung wore her usual long padding coat with the blue synth-fur lining.

*"Kacha bul!"*²¹ Vis said with wink. "Nice coat."

"Thanks," Chaeyoung smiled then offered Vis her arm.

Through cramped alleyways, the group of six wobbled along, Vis and Chaeyoung arm-in-arm. They walked along the top of the storm wall, almost four stories above the ground, looking out over the lattice network of aquaculture that stretched out for tens of kilometers across Tiantang bay. Chaeyoung's eyes watered from the bitter icy winds and the brilliant light reflecting from the glittering buildings of the Vermilion cape, or the occasional flash and *toom* of a distant rocket launch from the cosmodrome.

They had strayed far from the parts of Tiantang where it was common to see *stellah steh*, and the group drew side-long glances from some locals. Celosia had been Chaeyoung's home since she was a teenager, but between her earliest years spent Ahtash in the Vega System, and the nearly nine years in Sol, she felt self-conscious and alienated underneath the glares. Feelings exacerbated since she was a head, or more, shorter than Vis and her friends, though the group seemed unbothered, or in the least, their good mood seemed

²¹ [*Di Lingua*]: Ultimate fire.

impervious to the occasional hostile glance.

At Axis Mundi, Vis and Chaeyoung alternated between dancing, engaging in conversations, and drinking *soja*. They bounced between tender, to dance floor, to speaking areas where sound cones blocked out the loud thrum of the latest autonomously generated and human remixed music. They lost themselves in the flow of each other's company, barely noticing that Vis's friends had left them behind to go to another club hours ago.

"I'll be right back," Vis waved toward the public water closet.

"I'll come with you."

Chaeyoung lagged a few paces behind Vis as they stumbled to the water closet hallway through the thinning crowds. She absent-mindedly waved open her EAR, saw a flood of messages, and slouched against the wall of the hallway as Vis went inside.

Chaeyoung's childhood friend and colleague, Sania, had sent a flurry of messages about the Acheron Private Capital Group offer. This was what she had been dreading all night. She had to decide. Take the meeting or not. She glanced at the time on her EAR, groaned as she realized she could easily make the meeting and get some sleep if she left soon—she almost hoped she had missed her chance.

A pit formed in her stomach and her face flushed from embarrassment, but there was a warming confidence in her heart that

had been absent earlier in the evening. Chaeyoung waved up a reply on her EAR.

Tell them: "Look forward to meeting you."

Sealed and delivered.

She was momentarily dizzy as she stumbled into the water closet. Vis was alone, hunched over the sinks in front of the vanity mirrors. Her skin was wet with sweat and glittered in the fluctuating lights of the club. She was beautiful, but the reflection of her face seemed wracked with sorrow. Chaeyoung's chest tightened, and her eyes teared up sympathetically. The music was a soft throb subsumed by the pound in Chaeyoung's head.

As Chaeyoung approached, she lightly placed her hand on Vis's back, her palm feeling the raised bumps beneath ink. Vis tensed, saw Chaeyoung in the mirror, and relaxed. Chaeyoung then stood on the tips of her toes to bring her face closer and curled herself around Vis's back in a bear hug. Vis seemed to melt into Chaeyoung's arms. Vis slid around to face Chaeyoung and leaned into the embrace. Then hot breath was upon her neck, a tickle in her ear.

Vis whispered as she wrapped an arm around Chaeyoung.

*"Remember, eheen, anchuan shiyong."*²²

²² [Di Lingua]: Safe handling, sweetie.

Vis intimately traced the subtle scar ridge along Chaeyoung's left cheek with her hand as Chaeyoung traced the lines of scars along Vis's forearms. As Vis tracked Chaeyoung's thin cheek scar, she reached the deep ridge that split the left edge of Chaeyoung's mouth and caressed it tenderly. Vis's EAR mods pulsed with blue light, almost like a heartbeat, drawing Chaeyoung in. She put her hand over Vis's. They intertwined their fingers, and she leaned in to give Vis a warm and eager kiss.

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