

ASTERIA

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[Part 1] “Have you ever counted the stars in the sky?”

Edgar never dreamed that his randomly written job posting would actually attract talent.

His company, Asteria Studio, had been in business for several years, and orders had gone from just a handful in the beginning to the volume he now needed to recruit new staff to take.

Three orders a week - that's the limit Edgar was currently taking orders for, and Asteria Studio's service was quite novel: creating a planet uniquely designed for each customer. Of course, the planets had limitations - they were illusions that only lasted up to five minutes and could only be observed in certain areas. As a former planet artist, Edgar was confident in his ability to design and paint planets, and he was also the only person capable of creating planet illusions. Even when he raised the cost of each order over and over, there were still many wealthy families crowding in to purchase his services. Unfortunately, it took Edgar a really long time to design each planet, so the number of orders he could take was limited. To break out of this dilemma, he decided to recruit a new designer for the studio.



So he took time out of his busy schedule to write a concise job posting and posted it on Asteria Studio's official website. Within a week, he was contacted by dozens of applicants, most of whom said they were senior students from the XX Academy of Fine Arts and were attracted by the lucrative salary. The applicants' qualifications were pretty much the same, and none of them had a portfolio that Edgar was particularly impressed with.

After a few weeks of the recruiting process, just when Edgar felt the right person would never appear, a candidate named "Shiva" showed up.





She was the only applicant who came to visit Edgar in person, because Asteria Studio was located in a really remote place - in a small town with a clear night sky, far from the hustle and bustle of the city. So when Edgar suddenly heard a knock on the door, for a moment he thought he was hallucinating.

The visitor was a young girl with curly blue hair and sparkling ice-blue eyes. Edgar fumbled for a chair, patted the dust on the cushion awkwardly, cleared his throat in a pretentious manner, and finally said, "Please take your seat. " The girl nodded slightly in greeting, and when Edgar had also taken his seat, she began to introduce herself, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Edgar. My name is Shiva, and I am a professional writer. I'm visiting to apply for the position of Planet Designer."

"A writer?" Edgar was a little surprised, "Then can you draw?"

"Only simple illustrations. I never received professional training." Edgar's surprise seemed to be expected by Shiva. She smiled and asked Edgar a strange question in return, "Have you ever counted the stars in the sky?"

"Isn't that something only children do?" Edgar felt confused.

"Yeah, that was my biggest hobby when I was a kid. I was born in this secluded town where there wasn't much entertainment, and my main daily pleasure was counting the stars. But the number of stars is constantly changing, and they are born and disappearing just like humans."

"So what? Does this have any necessary connection to being a planet designer?"



"I know that you were a planet artist before you founded Asteria Studio. You traveled all over the world, observing the stars and drawing the planets based on your observation. I have always been a huge fan of yours and I have investigated all of your works. Those beautiful planets have then become a source of inspiration for my writing. Each planet, I feel, has a story of its own, and I want to write those stories down before the planet fades away, to keep them as permanent souvenirs." Shiva pulled out an elaborate booklet from the canvas bag she carried, "For each of your paintings, I have paired it with a poem or short essay to tell the story of the planet with my own interpretation. Please take a look."

Edgar picked up Shiva's portfolio and thumbed through it. She was truly a great fan of Edgar's, and there were some of his very early works that Shiva had also accompanied with text. Her words were filled with magnificent imagination, and the planets in Edgar's paintings seemed to take on a life of their own and started to glow.

"I believe that even if I can't help you much in painting, my words can give the planet a soul. If we can tell the planet's story while creating the illusion, we will surely create something that will blow the customer's mind." Shiva's tone was firm, as if she already had a good idea of what she was envisioning.

Edgar was lost in thought. Shiva's statements sounded very idealistic, and perhaps would reduce the number of orders he could take. However, in these words he captured the promise of new possibilities, of innovations that could make an artist's blood boil.

"Let's give it a try, then." Edgar nodded.

Shiva smiled with satisfaction. Her beautiful eyes shined brightly, just like the town's starry sky.

[Part 2] “Never forget your initial intention.”



The day after Shiva joined the studio, she received a new commission.

Asteria Studio took orders in two ways, either by customers filling out the order form on the official website, or by phone commission. Edgar would take the order based on the customer's needs, filtering out the orders that were most likely to be designed for the planet.

This time the commission came from a dessert chef. His pastry shop was about to celebrate its first anniversary, and he wanted to ask Edgar to design a planet for his little shop to mark the occasion. The commission was not too difficult, and Edgar thought he could use it to give Shiva some practice.

After checking the information about the order on the official website, Edgar wanted to start preparing the sketch of the planet. He intended to design a candy-shaped planet with some dessert-like meteorites on the periphery for decoration. To his surprise, after reading the order, Shiva said, "Can I have a phone call with this gentleman to talk about his demand in detail?"

"He only ordered a minute of illusion. It's easy to tell that he is not wealthy. We are already very generous by taking his order. What else do you want to throw into the mix..." Edgar rolled his eyes, "Forget it, you can waste your time if you want."

Shiva then dialed the client's number. Edgar was not the least bit interested in what they were chatting about, and continued to do his work. Shiva made a long phone call, taking notes throughout the process, and Edgar was halfway through his sketch when she finally put the phone down.

"What did you talk about? It's taking so long." Edgar couldn't help complaining.

"I asked him about his entrepreneurial experience." Shiva gazed at her notebook and fell into thought, "In short, he originally worked as a dessert chef in a five-star hotel and was very good at his craft. However, he was often reprimanded by his leaders because of his passion for shaping desserts into various elaborate forms that were both time-consuming and labor-intensive, which could not meet the hotel's supply needs. He was unwilling to give up what he loved, so he resigned. Later, he used his savings to start a pastry shop, but the shop was often in deficit because the products were not commercial enough. That's why he hoped to attract more customers to the precarious little shop through the planet we designed."

"Facing all the fierce competition in pastry shops these days, it's not wise for him to open his own shop. Besides, technology is so advanced nowadays. Considering all the good-looking molds and assembly line work in other shops, he's sure to be too inefficient to make money if he insists on making desserts by hand." Edgar sighed.

"That's not fair so say so. I can actually understand him. I used to work in a big city for a while and tried a lot of desserts. The desserts nowadays are all too stenciled, and they're actually pretty much the same from appearance to taste. It's very rare for him to stick to handmade and have his original creations." Shiva's tone dripped with approval, "So I was wondering if we could design a planet that would reflect what makes his pastry shop stand out?"

Edgar pondered for a long time and called the dessert chef, "Could you email me pictures of some of the most satisfying desserts you've made? Preferably with some text descriptions, such as your inspiration for the creation, etc. Thanks!" While he was on the phone, Shiva wasn't idle. She was looking for information related to the client's pastry shop online. As soon as Edgar put the phone down, she couldn't wait to start sharing her findings, "I found the official website of his shop. The client likes to put his own imagination into his desserts. Look at this piece, "Dancers of the Eiffel Tower". When he made the cake into the shape of the Eiffel Tower, he also put a chocolate figurine of a ballet dancer on top, with one of the figurine's toes standing right on top of the tower, looking very elegant and harmonious."





After carefully reading the email from his client, Shiva began to discuss with Edgar about the plans for the next step. The sketch of the planet had been largely drawn up, and its candy-like appearance looked very pleasing. On the wrapper, the face of the planet, was the name of the pastry shop - "La Trouvaille". "Now it's all about bringing out the killing features of this shop. Do you have any ideas?" Edgar looked aside at Shiva, who was absorbed in the planet's sketches. Suddenly, she snapped her hand and said excitedly, "We can use perspective!" "Perspective?" Edgar furrowed his brow. "I was thinking of it like this. We can do an animation of peeling back the candy wrapper. The inside of the candy will be transparent, so we can simulate the process of our client transforming a real-life scene into a dessert. We can create an exhibition-like environment in which we place artworks, buildings, etc. that the client has referred to, and then depict how these physical objects are turned into desserts. For example, take a look at this work, "The Red Dress of Venus de Milo." The client uses rose petals to make a red dress for Venus' sugar figurine, just enough to cover her mutilated arm and half-naked body. We can do an animation of falling rose petals dotting Venus' body for this piece in our design of the planet."

Shiva's idea enlightened Edgar. There were ready-made pictures of the actual scenes and the desserts, so it wouldn't take much time to design them. All he needed to do was to design a background similar to an art exhibition, and the remaining process would not be a problem when it came to creating the illusion, as long as his imagination was strong enough.

Yes, Edgar had not told Shiva that the planet's visions were constructed entirely by his imagination, and thus there were many marvelous designs that were able to be shown with his ability. Shiva's offer opened up his eyes, and he was instantly impressed by the young girl.



The planet design was a great success. The gorgeous illusion attracted a lot of fans for the commissioner's little shop. To thank Edgar and Shiva for their efforts, the commissioner even made a planet-shaped cupcake and sent it to the studio. Edgar didn't have a sweet tooth, so Shiva had the cake all to herself.

"This is really good eh, are you sure you don't want to try it?" Shiva ate with pleasure. Suddenly, the phone in the studio rang. Edgar ignored her and went straight to the phone. "What? For free? Sorry, this studio is not a charity. Please go find another one." Edgar didn't talk for long before hanging up in a huff. Sensing some impatience in the teacher's tone, Shiva set aside the unfinished cake and asked with concern, "What's the matter?" "A kid named Lily, called to say that her grandma was seriously ill and hadn't been out of the house for a long time. Her biggest wish was to see the stars in the sky, but their city is so polluted that it's hard to see the stars at night, so the kid asked if our studio could create an illusion for her grandma for free." "That sounds so poor..." Shiva lowered her head. "Heh, there are so many poor people in the world. How are we supposed to survive if we try to rescue everyone?" Edgar rolled his eyes, "And who knows if what she said is true or not. There are so many cheaters these days. I've seen more than my fair share of scams coming out at a young age." He shook his head and prepared to go take care of his next order.

"So what was your original reason for creating Asteria Studio in the first place?" Edgar turned his head and found Shiva looking straight at him, "Never forget your initial intention."

Both of them fell into silence. Shiva started writing in her notebook and did not eat the rest of the cake.





[Part 3] “When you look up at the stars, I will be there, staring at you.”

Edgar's ability to create illusions was not innate.

When he was a planet artist, he loved to travel around the world in search of the best places to stargaze.

One night, just as he was setting up camp inside a forest in a nature preserve, the lake beside him suddenly glowed with blue luminescence. Edgar looked up and noticed that the stars in the night sky seemed to start moving rapidly. He rubbed his eyes, thinking it was his illusion, but the stars' displaced trajectory became more and more apparent, gradually forming a bridge in the sky.

A thick, inky darkness flooded the forest, with only the lake in front of Edgar's eyes and the stars shining in the sky. A silence fell around him, and the insects that had been clearly audible not long ago seemed to be swallowed up by the beast of the night. The bridge of stars gradually stretched downward to the lake, with a small golden bird hovering around, shaking off bits of starlight with each flap of its wings.

From the end of the star bridge slowly came down a young lady. Her sapphire eyes were deeper than the universe, her ultramarine hair flowed in the evening breeze, and her long blue and white dress perfectly reflected her gentle and virtuous temperament. Little golden birds fluttered around her merrily, singing the praises of her nobleness:

**"Asteria, Asteria,
The Angel of Holiness,
The Goddess of the Stars.
You flee in starlight,
Comet lights your way forward.
You chant the nocturne,
Polar night is silenced for you,
Light and dust are frozen for you."**



The maiden, whose name was Asteria, held out a hand, and the little bird landed obediently at her fingertips. She gracefully walked down the bridge of stars, and countless tiny stardust fell onto the lake, paving a golden shimmering path for her.

Edgar was so stunned by the scene in front of him that it was not until the young girl came to his eyes that he sobered up and stammered, "You... Hello... Your Majesty..." Asteria responded with a chuckle, "How do you do? You must be Edgar, the famous planet artist. I love the planets you paint." Her voice was pleasant and reminded Edgar of a babbling stream.

"I can't stay here for too long, so I'll keep it short. The pollution on this planet is getting worse and worse, and in many places people can no longer see the stars in the sky. Therefore, I hope you can create a starry sky for them." Asteria said as she placed a necklace in Edgar's hand, "I will grant you the ability to create illusions. Hold the star embellishment of this necklace in your hand and read my name silently for three times, and then you will be able to create an illusion of up to five minutes in any small patch of the sky on this planet. The shape of the illusion will depend on what you imagine in your mind. Remember, this ability can only be activated once a day, so please cherish it." Just as the words left her mouth, her figure began to fade and Edgar suddenly felt a dizzying sensation. "Will I ever see you again?" Edgar asked aloud before he fell into a faint. "Maybe yes. Maybe not. When you look up at the stars, I'll be there, staring at you." Asteria's voice became disembodied, as if it had melted into the endless night.

When Edgar woke up, everything had returned to the way it used to be. The lake no longer shone with a strange light, and the bridge of stars became nonexistent as well. However, the cold touch of the necklace in his hand seemed to remind him that the encounter was not a dream.

【Part 4】“Thank you so much. I feel very happy right now.”

After the pastry chef's commission, Shiva and Edgar had collaborated on a number of new orders. Shiva's boundless imagination had breathed a whole new life into Asteria Studio's work and had garnered rave reviews from clients. Edgar admired the young student. In his free time, he taught Shiva some painting techniques. She was a smart learner and mastered them quickly. However, Edgar did not completely let go of his wariness of Shiva. He locked himself in a small private room each time he created an illusion and not leaving the room until the illusion was over. As a result, Shiva was never sure how the visions were created.

One day, Edgar received a commission from a young man named "Matthew". He wanted to make a proposal to his fiancée under the fantastic sight of a meteor shower crossing the sky. After consulting with Shiva, Edgar decided to mold the meteoroids into the form of perfumed lilies. At first, the meteoroids were closed buds, but as the shower approached the ground, the meteoroids would burst into bloom and become lilies blossoming in the sky. Edgar was confident that this romantic sight would definitely impress Matthew's fiancée with its magnificence, no matter how demanding she could be.

However, something unexpected happened - half an hour before Matthew's proposal, he abruptly called and asked if he could cancel the order.

"Cancellation of orders is possible, but refunds are not supported. It's all clearly written on the official website." Edgar said coldly. He disliked such customers who changed their plans on the spur of the moment, because it was a waste of his work. Shiva heard their conversation and suddenly came over and asked, "May I talk to this gentleman? Perhaps I can help him."

Edgar reluctantly handed her the phone. He didn't really think the sympathetic student could be of much help, and would probably get a flurry of accusations from the client.

"Mr. Matthew, could you tell me why you're canceling the order?" Shiva turned on the speaker so that Edgar could hear the call as well. "My fiancée suddenly told me that her grandmother is terminally ill and won't live long, and she has to be by her grandmother's side, so she can't stay with me..." Matthew's tone was depressed. "Does your fiancée have a sister?" Shiva seemed to remember something. "Yes, she has a sister ten years younger than her. I remember her name is Lily."

Hearing the name, Edgar became speechless. Lilly... It was the kid who had called earlier begging for free help from the studio. It turned out that her grandmother was the same person as Matthew's fiancée's grandmother. He looked to Shiva, who nodded to him and said, "If you don't mind, we can pass this order on to your fiancée's grandmother in your name." "Fine fine, the money won't come back anyway." After saying this, Matthew hung up the phone.

"So, great Miss Shiva, how are you going to change the romantic spectacle of a proposal into a memorial for a sick old woman in half an hour?" Edgar's tone was full of mockery. Shiva looked over at him, her deep blue pupils seeming to run his mind through. "Sir, I've taken on the task myself, and I have the means to solve it. But this time, please, let me create the illusion."

Edgar was really curious about how Shiva was planning to clean up this mess, so he unwillingly taught her how to use the necklace. "But I'll be watching aside, so you'd better not screw it up." He admonished. Shiva thanked him and immediately went off to conceive the upcoming illusion.





Victoria helped her grandmother outside the house. Her fiancé, Matthew, had called a short time ago to say that there was a meteor shower to watch tonight. His affirmative tone struck Victoria's grandmother, and she insisted on dragging her frail body to witness the once-in-a-lifetime spectacle.

The town's sky was gray and cloudy, and not a single star could be seen. Lily took her grandmother's hand and asked her sister sadly, "Is the meteor shower really going to come?" "It will, for sure." Victoria tried to comfort her, but she also felt quite uncertain.

Just as the crowd was about to give up hope, the gray sky abruptly lit up. At first, there were only some gently wavering halos of light in the sky, and as the halos spread out like ripples, a meteor shower descended, making the sky resplendent and magnificent. The meteoroids appeared in the form of blooming flowers, each shimmering with a mixture of gold and silver. As they fell, the flowers gradually closed, turning into buds and then into tiny seeds. Each seed bounced off in all directions, growing into delicate flowers that shifted between blooming and fading. Prosperity and wilting intertwined, symbolizing a human's life.

It was a magnificent sight that could only be seen once in a lifetime. It was the tiny and tenacious life that sank in eternal time after giving its last glimmer.

Tears dropped down from Victoria's eyes. No one could fail to be touched by such a sight.

"Thank you so much. I feel very happy right now." She heard her grandmother say in a choked voice.


(Part 5) “Our meeting is for departure; our departure is for reunion.”



Edgar and Shiva were invited to the funeral of Victoria's grandmother. Throughout the funeral, Edgar remained silent. After the funeral, Shiva noticed that Edgar was nowhere to be found. She looked around anxiously for her teacher, but carelessly ran into Matthew.

"You must be Miss Shiva, aren't you? Mr. Edgar asked me to give this to you." Matthew handed a letter to Shiva, "By the way, thank you sincerely for your willingness to help Victoria's grandmother achieve her dream."


After a few brief pleasantries, Shiva went to an unoccupied corner and quietly opened the envelope. Inside the envelope, in addition to the writing paper, was Edgar's much cherished necklace. The letter read as follows:



Dear Miss Shiva,

I beg your pardon for my leaving without saying goodbye. I thought that if you had been informed in advance you would have retained me, and I feared that my will might be shaken by it.

You are a very talented artist and a student that I admire greatly. Your unbounded imagination and pure, unadulterated heart have touched me deeply. After Matthew's commission, I believe you have the ability to run Asteria Studio on your own.




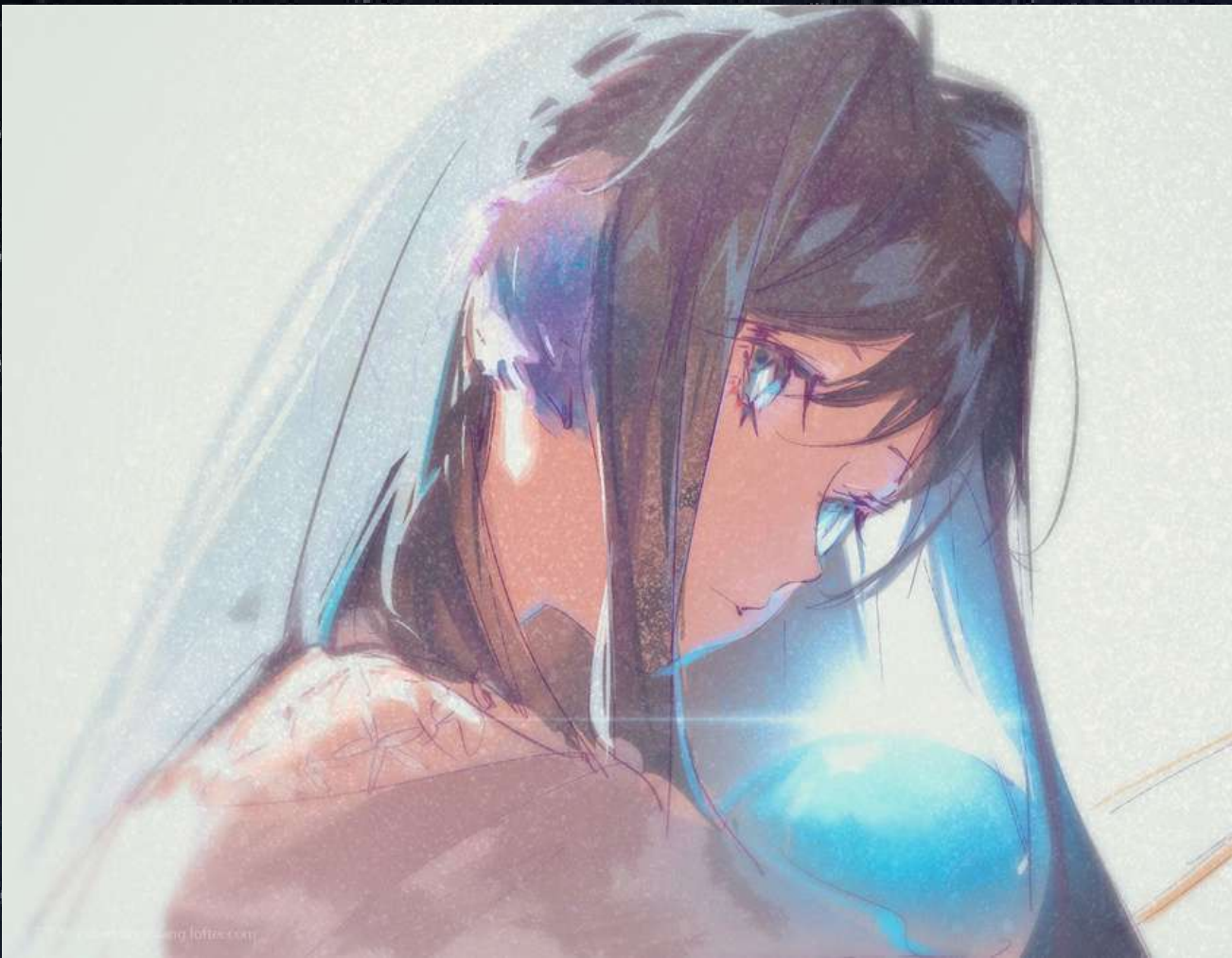
The owner of this necklace is named Asteria, someone I can never forget in my whole life. I followed her will to bring the wonderful sight of the stars to the people on this planet. But as time passed, I gradually forgot my original intention - I became a merchant and my creations became profit-oriented, losing their originality. It was you who reminded me of what I started Asteria Studio for in the first place, and who brought a new life to our work, so I think you would be the perfect successor to the studio.

After I leave the studio, I want to return to my old job as a planet artist. Maybe one day I'll have the pleasure of meeting Asteria again, and I'll be sure to tell her about you and how similar you are to her - the light of wisdom is always shining in your blue eyes.

Finally, please remember the saying, "Our meeting is for departure; our departure is for reunion." I'll be back to the studio sometime in the future to check it out, and maybe by then I'll want to try some of the cake I didn't get to eat before.

Your teacher, Edgar
August 6th, 2400





[The End]

Edgar returned to the forest where he first met Asteria. He had traveled to many, many places, and it was still in this area that the night sky was the most beautiful.

He looked up at the starry sky. Those stars were like little birds, parachuting over his heart.

He knew Asteria must be watching him from the depths of the stars, and he happened to have a lot to say, about Shiva, and about himself. He hoped she could hear his words.

