

**Excerpt: The Taste of a Planet**

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Also branded into Hibari’s memory was the ever-so-slight difference in gravitational pull. Hibari saw this in the trees, which tended to be taller and thinner than those on Earth, though this could also be the result of less human development. In any case, the atmosphere of Planet Hinode and its main settlement, Mitisu city, was touted on the Worlds Wide Web as an all-natural wrinkle-buster. What’s more, the native vegetables were famed for their nutritional content, with the Japanese Tourism Agency recommending “one Hinode fruit a day” for all Earth-dwellers. The gravity and the food were the main charms of a national campaign that actively encouraged Japanese citizens to relocate. Within the last couple of decades, an influx of middle-aged and elderly Japanese had moved across the galaxy. On the spaceship over alone, Hibari had been one passenger of 229 and over half of these newcomers had been older, all seeking to rejuvenate themselves from the great fountain of youth that was Planet Hinode—Japan’s extraterrestrial star.

Hibari hated being such a cliche but she had to admit, she loved the idea of saving on skincare. It was a passion she’d acquired as a teen, when she’d worked with girls who, like her, knew in the depths of their hearts that they were destined for more than their beginnings. Though Hibari had been a shy and clumsy child, she soon came to realise that there was nothing shameful about pleasure or indulgence. The only way to live one’s life was one’s own way. If that included an appreciation for elegance and refinement, then so be it. Of course, when it was needed, the bank had to be broken, but, until those moments, Hibari would chase the thrill of the bargain.

There was only one thing that Hibari loved more than a good deal: food. As the train continued forward, Hibari caught sight of some rather extraordinary-looking fruit that, to her surprise, had not been mentioned in the infomercial. She nudged her daughter.

‘They look delicious. Why haven’t I ever seen them?’

Hana, stirred out of her own thoughts, took a while to scan the landscape.

‘Those,’ Hibari added, pointing to some white, intertwining stems that protruded from the ground. They started off thick, so thick that a few of them made a trunk about half as wide as the monorail car, then twisted upwards thinner and thinner, before cascading into branchlets that ended in pale green, bean-shaped fruit.

‘Oh yeah. Everyone’s been talking about them recently. The beans popped up around a month ago but nobody knows why,’ Hana turned to Hibari with a glint in her eye, ’For some reason, no-one can pick them. The stems look soft and tender but they’re impossible to cut, and the beans just don’t want to budge. It’s all very mysterious.’

‘Hmmm,’ Hibari narrowed her eyes at the beans, ‘Wait until I get my hands on them.’