

Part One: Ambush

Ajit Das swam through the shifting mass of revelers that crowded the Venusian pleasure den. The place was packed to the brim with humanity, while what vanishingly small gaps remained were filled in by music, smoke, and shadow. The bodies around him jostled almost randomly, despite the beat of the song, but Das' course barely strayed. He had a singular target, and a simple goal.

Usually, his clients required something mundane of him, like hard labor, monitoring a security camera, negotiating a trade deal, or testing a drug early in development. This time, he'd been hired for an assassination. To a heart as hard as his, this was just another job. The only difference, from Das' perspective, was that when a life was on the line, unforeseen complications were absolutely guaranteed.

He took a small bulb of fluid from his bandolier and pressed it to his neck with a subtle motion, nestling it under his collar opposite its mate. A tiny needle stick, hardly noticeable to him anymore, signaled that a new ensemble of drugs was entering his system. The special injections, from a unique enhancement series called Vasuki, had extensive effects on his body and brain.

A drunk woman was shoved by someone behind her, and she scrabbled at Das' bandolier and jacket as she toppled. He caught her with his left arm as he extricated himself from her grip with his off hand. The balance that kept him upright despite the sudden force, the dexterity that allowed him to stop her clawing fingers from uncovering any of the tools of his trade, even the flatness of his expression in the face of her inebriated enthusiasm, were all carefully maintained by the elixir running through his veins.

Das navigated across the packed central chamber of the den to a corridor in the back leading to private rooms. His eyes had gained an entirely new level of focus, letting him see the subtle signs in the dust and grime on the floor. A scuff here, a streak there, and he knew with certainty which door his mark had entered. Das' footsteps were inhumanly light on his approach.

He hesitated by the entrance to the private room; anyone entering the corridor would be cause to abort this attempt and retry later. He used every bit of the extra sensitivity the Vasuki gave his ears to isolate each sound around him. The dull roar from the main chamber made detecting any other noises difficult, but thankfully the drugs provided him better audio processing as well. Beneath the din, all Das could make out was a faint, faltering melody from behind the door. His intel indicated that his target usually practiced the oud alone.

Perfect.

Das drew his pistol as he slipped a tension tool from a tiny bandolier pocket with his other hand. He slid the tool cautiously into the lock on the door, testing. Alarm made sweat break out across Das' body as he tried to put gentle tension on the lock but felt no resistance. His heart pounded, which helpfully spread the Vasuki more thoroughly through his body. With unnatural speed and grace, he withdrew the tension tool and tucked it away, then raised his pistol as he whipped open the door.

On the other side, he found a room with no solid furniture to speak of, but which was nonetheless extravagant in its comforts. The rug was almost invisible beneath mountains of brocade cushions and other rich fabrics. Multiple silver trays lay at the edges of the room, each piled high with untouched food and drink. An elaborate, over-sized hookah towered in one corner, its smoldering mixture of flavored tobacco and cannabis filling the small space with a heady haze.

A man lounged on one mound of pillows, holding a long-necked string instrument and strumming with halting movements. He was well dressed, Das supposed, but scrawny, with greasy blonde hair that made him look like he'd been dipped head-first into an algae vat. He took a long moment to even react to Das' presence, at which point he squawked and dropped his oud.

Beside him, draped elegantly across another pile of cushions, was the one person Das never wanted to see during a job. Yumiko Ai was stunning, but his mind treated that fact as something axiomatic rather than noteworthy. Everything about her was understated and stylish in a way that screamed refinement, no matter where she appeared in this broken-down city drifting through the skies of Venus. Her glossy black hair cascaded down her body like an inky river. Her dress outshone all the silk and velvet in the gaudy little room, its cut sleek and form-

fitting. Her dark brown eyes were the sharpest Das had ever seen, and they studied him now with brutal acuity. She was, of course, pointing a gun at him. It was as gorgeous as she was, wrapped around her arm like a gleaming serpent. It was sculpted out of carbon and some specialized alloy in a fantastical shape meant to be more of an avant-garde piece of jewelry than just another blocky militaristic weapon. The barrel transitioned smoothly into the stock in the crook of her arm, with a curved magazine reaching out away from her. The glittering emerald weapon looked like a part of her, as did her exquisite dress of the same shade.

“Yumiko,” Das stated, managing to keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Hello, darling,” Yumiko said with a smile. “I guess my hunch paid off. Cozino did go to his old standby for this job.”

“Yeah,” Das replied. It was better for him to avoid unnecessary talk with this woman.

“Aw, still hiding behind your little drugs? When will I get to hear in your voice just how happy you are to see me, my dear Ajit?”

Silence was sometimes the only response that wouldn't get twisted.

“If you weren't all numbed up, you'd be blushing. I know you well enough to know that.”

Except when silence was its own kind of answer. Why was this woman so difficult for him to deal with? Das tried to calm himself by focusing on how he would escape. He'd always managed to get away from her before, but he sometimes had to take a hit. It could be necessary, not only as a consequence for executing a risky maneuver, but to convince his employer that Yumiko's presence prevented him from completing the job. He would collect his usual compensation for any wounds, too, which would keep him afloat for a bit while he healed and took easier gigs.

“Ajit, sweetie, I can tell you're planning your exit. How will you do it this time?”

He didn't bother responding. He just kept his pistol trained on her. Das' former target was currently failing to bury himself beneath some pillows. Das let him be. The job was effectively over.

The grizzled merc finally decided on a course of action. Yes, he would have to get shot. Twice, this time.

I could have sworn she was off-planet. I have to keep better track.

“Ah,” Yumiko said. “The chase is about to begin.”

To an untrained eye, nothing would look different about her body now, but Das knew she was coiled to strike. He took a breath and relaxed his muscles, preparing for what was to come. Yumiko smiled hungrily.

Now or never.

Das' body, primed by his Vasuki injections, launched into motion. Yumiko got her first shot off as he pivoted away from the room, her gun's tiny dart slashing across his skin near his floating ribs. A superficial wound, Yumiko's version of a warning shot. He'd heal in no more than half a Venusian rotation, thanks to another Vasuki blend he had access to.

Her weapon's peculiar ammunition ionized the air behind it, allowing for a potentially incapacitating electric charge to follow after the projectile. Das had accounted for this in the way he pivoted, his body twisting out of the way just in time. The beam of blue-white lightning that burned through the air behind him cast a stark shadow of his own body on the wall ahead. The flash was enough to hurt his eyes, even without direct exposure.

Das sprinted away down the curved hall. He didn't re-enter the main den, but instead circled all the way around to the far side of the building, heading for a service door. As he followed the bend of the hallway, he heard Yumiko's voice from behind him.

“Why don't you ever just shoot me first, Ajit? I bet that would make things a lot easier for you, in the long run.”

He reached his exit and ducked through the small passage out into the streets of the *skilad*, the Venusian term for their airborne city-states. It was a short sprint to the edge of this level. Yumiko would exploit that straightaway to catch up. She didn't use anything like his Vasuki serums, but she didn't need it. Even in his prime, he'd never gotten the best of her, physically, or mentally.

“C'mon, stand and fight, just once!” she called as Das focused on running. “It would be so exciting! Well, maybe just for me.”

Das struggled to ignore Yumiko's constant banter as he pushed his body beyond its limits. He loped through the street, dodging around bystanders with the ecstatic fluidity of a full suite of Vasuki enhancements. The rim of this platform was just beyond the next building complex. A sliver of sky came into view.

“It could be... like a present!” Yumiko said gleefully, her voice all too close now. “Isn’t Diwali coming up soon? I can never keep track of Earth’s calendar.”

Das was unable to resist sneaking a glance behind him. Yumiko was there, limbs flowing like liquid while she maintained a dead sprint, what should have been a restrictive dress allowing her full range of motion, the gun that twisted around her left arm moving along with her. People seemed to unconsciously clear a path for her, such that she hardly had to divert her course at all while speeding through a chaotic crowd that had almost stopped Das dead multiple times in a catastrophic collision. Only the Vasuki tuning his cerebellum to an absurd degree allowed him to stay on his feet, but Yumiko made it look effortless.

A pervasive rumor on this *skilad* held that Yumiko had to be blessed by Lady Luck, or one of countless other minor deities. It wasn’t like anyone was counting, or maybe some bookie with a death wish was already keeping track, but things just seemed to go Yumiko’s way, far more more than they didn’t. Everyone noticed it, but for Das, who’d grown familiar with Yumiko over years of back and forth, it went even further. It was as if every move each of them made whenever they met was choreographed in advance. Every interaction a foregone conclusion. Das never relied on luck, preferring the unfair advantage Vasuki gave him, but he could always rely on Yumiko. To defeat him, yes, but also to show up at just the wrong moment for him and the perfect one for her. To mirror him at every turn, to foil his every feint, see through any trick he threw at her. That was why he had to run. Because if he gave her what she wanted, if he turned and fought, he knew the result would be his death. Even so, the temptation was there. To see what a beautiful dance of destruction they could perform together, with all other concerns discarded.

The moment passed, and Das faced forward again. He sprinted past a row of potted trees, then dipped around a dilapidated kiosk at the end of the street. The city disappeared behind him, and the world opened up.

Nothing but a flimsy guard rail marked the boundary between the solid ground of the *skilad* and an endless amber sky. Clouds larger than mountains towered over the city, the winds of Venus keeping them in constant flux. The transparent membrane that held in breathable air and kept this hulking insult to gravity afloat was the only thing between Das and the vastness of the upper atmosphere. The sun sat about halfway between zenith and horizon;

the planet's "days" were so long that the star remained almost still from one human cycle to the next. The *skilad* rotated to create artificial shade on a more convenient basis for each vertical section of the city. Without any buildings ahead to protect them, Das' sensitive eyes stung, but he rushed to the edge without hesitation. He vaulted over the railing.

Clouds swept past him as he fell, and a different cityscape, nestled beneath the one he'd just left, raced up to meet him. There was a temple below, with a wide canvas pavilion on its rimward side. That would soften his landing, if he could adjust his trajectory enough. He made his body as limp as possible and oriented himself with his legs downward, then readied himself for two impacts.

First came the round from Yumiko's gun, which pierced his left calf. That would take longer to heal than that scratch from earlier, and he wouldn't be able to work much at all. His client, a boastful little mobster named Cozino, would have to hand over a tower of cash for the wound compensation he now owed Das. It was a stupid little clause Das added to everything he ever signed, and he'd never had cause to regret it. Being in freefall meant he couldn't avoid the real effect of Yumiko's weapon this time. Das seized in the air as his body absorbed a hefty dose of current. The seconds seemed to stretch as his muscles released again and the pain began to dull. The winds outside the *skilad* were fast enough that the clouds changed shape entirely even while the scarred mercenary fell between city levels.

Next, Das hit the sturdy sheet of fabric. He'd intended to let his legs dampen the force of the fall, but with his newest injury, that maneuver became far more painful. He rolled off the canvas sheet to the ground, and as he did he caught a glimpse of Yumiko far above, blowing him a kiss.

"Ridiculous woman would probably even flirt with my corpse," he grumbled to himself as he limped away into the shadows.

Part Two: From the Gutter to the Stars

After an agonizing trip through the winding streets, Das reached his nearest safehouse here on the fifth level of the *skilad*. It was basically a lean-to where he might be able to hole

up for a while and lick his wounds. Das took out his personal terminal, brought up the radio transmission function, and entered the details for Cozino's private channel.

"Herringbone," Das said into the crackling void.

He only had to wait a second or two for a response. A familiar, scratchy voice replied "Tweed," Cozino's half of the security phrase, with palpable eagerness. Das calmly cut to the bad news.

"No go," he said tonelessly. "Yumiko was there."

On the other end of the line, Cozino only growled.

"I took two hits. You agreed to the contingency pay. Healing-proportionate."

"It was an easy job!" Cozino whined. "You shouldn't have needed your friggin 'wound compensation'! Just pop one guy, that's all. Normally it wouldn't even take you the whole afternoon. What, you get tailed? *You*? Maybe old Ajit Das is losing his edge, huh? Maybe I don't call you next time I have someone I need taken care of, whaddya thinka that?"

Das just waited.

"I know, I know, I signed the stupid thing," Cozino said. "I wouldn't go back on a deal. Not with *you*, anyway. So look, meet me on Level Seven, usual spot, full shade."

"That's forever from now! The Crescent District won't be in full shade for almost half a turn! I can barely walk, you little rat. I'm an easy target, and Yumiko won't have given up on finding me yet."

"Fine!" Cozino huffed. "I'll see if I can get to the L7 central water tank by half-shade. Yumiko is your problem."

"It'll have to do."

Das ended the connection, and got up. He had picked up a long piece of metal scrap that made an imperfect crutch. He hobbled away through a mostly empty street. Yumiko would almost certainly track him. He usually had to worry about her pursuit for almost a full city rotation when they clashed. It always ended up like this—Das running away with his tail between his legs. If Yumiko ever decided to make ruining his jobs a personal hobby of hers, Das would just have to retire.

Das had dropped from the fourth level to the fifth, which meant there were two levels between him and the place he had to meet his client. The gangster's influence stretched

greedily upward from the lower levels he actually inhabited. Das' failed job from earlier had been one step in a convoluted plot to increase Cozino's sphere of influence on Level Four. He was far from being a major competitor much higher than L6, but Cozino's style often involved grossly overextending himself. It made him feel more important than he actually was, but it also meant that his enemies sometimes had a lot more clout than he did. Hence, Yumiko showing up to save some rich schmuck's life.

Das cursed Cozino under his breath as he slowly approached the *skilad's* central hub. The giant column unified the entire structure, carrying power, water, people, and everything else between sections of the city. The lifts here were the preferred method of traveling between levels, and much safer than just using gravity. He would have to be on his guard while using a lift, though, as that would be the most logical place for Yumiko to intercept him.

Das had never gotten to see the *skilad* from a distance, but the way the roughly cylindrical core supported and connected the different tiers of the city made him think it might look almost like an enormous tree bearing multiple tiered canopies. Tubes, wires, and shafts wound organically around the hub like vines, enhancing the resemblance. The massive trunk shone and sang from all sorts of signs and signals that sprouted from it, each clamoring to convey their sensory messages. Some simply directed traffic, while other more garish ones advertised businesses on other levels, and the most obvious and straightforward relayed important safety information. Das limped toward the entrance to a particular lift shaft, guided by a peculiar pulsation whose color and pulsing rhythm told him it was carrying passengers down, directly to L7.

He couldn't stop scanning his surroundings for signs of an ambush, but nothing stood out, even in the wide ring of open space around the central column. He approached the lift shaft and signaled with a button press that he wanted to board. After a moment, the doors opened onto a chamber that was nearly overflowing with people. They were mostly laborers or wanderers, with a scattered few in more casual clothing that implied a small but crucial difference in wealth. Das couldn't see all the way to the back rows, but he had to keep moving, no matter what. He stepped into the crowded lift and casually dropped his makeshift crutch outside as the doors slid closed. He couldn't afford to stand out.

As the lift began to descend, a series of small sounds from the back of the compartment caught Das' attention. Any one of them alone would be innocuous, but together, they immediately put him on edge. There was a sharp inhalation, followed by a stretch and snap of elastic, then a faint metallic flick. If Das had been in ideal condition, his reflexes would have put him into a defensive crouch, ready to react to any threat. Instead, his injuries hampered him enough to send him stumbling to the floor, where he was nearly trampled by the ensuing panic from the crowd. He didn't quite manage to draw his pistol as he fell.

The escalating agitation of the passengers was accompanied by a steady hiss, as an opaque white gas began to fill the space, much faster than the passive circulation could compensate for. Das hurriedly dug in a pouch on his bandolier for a Vasuki bulb that contained a broad spectrum of useful antidotes. He pressed it to the side of his throat, regretting that it had to replace the pod that provided him his painkillers. Function was crucial right now.

Even through the emotional numbness that Das usually maintained with his Vasuki doses, genuine disquiet began to stir in the back of his mind. This was very much not Yumiko's style. So was this unrelated to their sparring? This was a lift full of regular workers. None of them had looked to Das like a high value target. Then again, he'd missed whoever was now releasing the poison. If this was for Das, they didn't know about his Vasuki use.

Doesn't add up.

He drew his pistol from its shoulder holster but kept it beneath his jacket for now. As the people around him began to collapse, he went limp as well, feigning unconsciousness while scanning the room through slitted eyes. Back in one corner, a person in a bulky parka stood with a vapor-spewing canister in their hand and a gas mask on their head. At their feet—

Yumiko!

She wore a dark coat and hat, which had hidden her hair and colorful dress, as well as her weapon. He might have overlooked her when he boarded, but he would bet she had been keeping an eye on him, waiting for her moment to pounce.

Typical Yumiko. She had to have him all to herself. Or rather, she never pulled the trigger unless she had a clear shot. If there were people in the way, she would simply bide her time.

He found himself growing concerned for her. Despite riddling him with holes over the course of his career, despite constantly teasing him about every little thing, despite always beating him and making it look easy, Yumiko had become a constant in his life, in her own way. She'd been reliable, a known quantity. At least, as far as two agents of violence on Venus could ever be known to each other from across the battlefield. There had always been unspoken rules to how they engaged. He didn't like the interruption of their routine by this interloper, but more importantly, his rival wasn't equipped to handle the gas. So, this hadn't been for him, after all.

He had maybe ten more seconds until the lift passed the next level, and anywhere from twelve to fifteen before the passengers were too far gone—if they were lucky. Whoever wanted Yumiko out of the picture had accounted for the travel speed and the fluid dynamics of the system. That meant that Das needed to stop the lift at Level Six if everyone, including Yumiko, was to survive. As slowly as Das could manage under the time pressure, he began adjusting the angle of his pistol until he was aiming at the masked attacker.

The assailant was struggling with the fading Yumiko over her gun. Maybe they wanted the artistic weapon as a trophy. Das took advantage of their distraction to fire. There was no time to make the shot perfect, but grazing their shoulder and disabling their dominant hand was enough. They dropped Yumiko to clutch their wound, the stream of profanity they spewed garbled by their mask. Das heaved himself up, depending entirely on his uninjured leg this time. He slammed into Yumiko's would-be killer, dropping his pistol in favor of grappling them. As the gun clattered to the floor, Das' hands found his opponent's. His Vasuki-enhanced muscles strained, and he overpowered them in a sudden rush of motion. He broke one of their wrists, then twisted their other arm behind their back. Their muffled scream of pain cut off abruptly as he slammed them to floor of the lift hard enough to knock them out. He hurriedly tore away the gas mask to give it to Yumiko. With only heartbeats to spare, Das lunged for the emergency stop button, barely managing to smack it before he landed on his injured leg and collapsed in pain. The lift box's speaker announced the change of itinerary in a cheery, artificial customer service voice.

“Emergency stop requested. Please brace yourself, as the lift must decelerate much faster than usual. The next stop is: Level Six.”

It was easy to forget, under normal circumstances, how fast these little metal canisters went while shuttling people up and down the *skilad*. Once the emergency brakes kicked in, however, laws of motion became impossible to ignore. Everything grew unbearably heavy. As Das struggled to sit up against the wall, he scolded himself for not realizing sooner that they weren't out of the woods yet. Any attempt on the life of a professional like Yumiko would have to be thorough. There would be a clean-up crew waiting for them, both on the seventh level where they were supposed to be going, and on the sixth as a contingency. Whoever had ordered this hit clearly had no qualms about the deaths of a whole lift full of bystanders, so anyone else coming for Yumiko would be doing so openly. For Das, surviving this was going to be a challenge. Keeping Yumiko alive as well? That might not be within the realm of possibility. Das shoved that thought out of his mind. He had moments to prepare. Things started to get lighter again, but instead of being a relief, it was a potent warning that they were approaching their stop.

Das gathered the dregs of his stamina and crawled back to Yumiko. She was coughing and holding the mask to her face, showing she was conscious, at least. Das didn't let himself feel relief just yet. He rose to his knees as best he could and pulled her right arm across his shoulder. In the few seconds they had left, he dragged her into cover behind the console next to the doors. It was more like dragging both of them, at this point. He allowed himself a moment of irritation at the woman next to him, for almost crippling him beyond his ability to save her own life. He didn't think about how strange it felt to touch his mortal enemy like this—how it didn't make him itch with the sensation of imminent danger. The lift's computer spoke again.

“Now arriving at: Level Six.”

In the last split second before the doors opened, Das snatched his pistol from where it had fallen. He made eye contact with Yumiko as all sensation of downward movement ceased. She was having too much trouble breathing to speak, but that quick glance might as well have been a heart-to-heart over drinks that lasted all night. Something shifted deep within Ajit Das in that moment, but before he could identify it, the doors slid open.

The thick white fog that had flooded the compartment began to pour out, no longer obscuring the details of the bodies littering the floor. No new passengers tried to enter. In

fact, there was almost no sound at all from outside. Das listened intently for any sign of movement, but to his horror, Yumiko's coughing fit returned. She struggled to keep it under control, but finally let out one short cough much louder than the others.

Immediately, gunfire filled the air, all different calibers and rates of fire, a chaotic storm of projectiles that pinned them down mercilessly. As the barrage continued, texturing the back wall of the lift and gradually blanketing the dead and dying on the floor with shrapnel and deformed slugs, Das checked his own pistol. He field stripped his weapon and reassembled it, confirming along the way that the magazine was full, before some of the goons outside even had a chance to reload. There was no gap in the onslaught of course—there were at least a dozen of them out there, some with belt-fed guns.

As Das' hands went through those familiar, meditative motions, his mind failed to come up with a way forward. He looked to Yumiko, who gave him a grim smile. She was gradually getting her breathing under control again.

"I guess this is it," she said, voice raspy and barely loud enough for him to hear over the din. "It's weird to go out with you."

"What??"

"No, no, I mean I always figured you'd end up killing me someday, when you got the nerve, or you didn't see another option."

"Yeah," Das lied.

"How are your wounds?" she asked.

"Fine," Das lied again.

"Stoic to the end, huh?"

He let the edge of his mouth twitch up, just a hair, but he knew she caught it.

"So," she said. "You always found a way out before. Any ideas?"

Das sighed and looked around as if he might have missed something that would save them. There was no way past these guns, either by leaving through the main doors or the emergency exit in the ceiling. It wasn't feasible to wait until they ran out of ammunition, either. Many dangerous things were cheap and plentiful on Venus, and ammo was one of them. At this rate, they might even gouge through the walls enough to hit Das and Yumiko, or a critical piece of the structure itself, and then either way, that would be it.

Yumiko was recovering a little, but she'd need medicine soon if she was going to avoid more permanent damage. Das would run out of Vasuki eventually, too, and then he would be truly crippled. That reminded him to switch out the pod holding the antidote for another painkiller blend. This one included an ingredient that had a slightly narcotic effect. It wouldn't impair him much more than he already was, and it was all he had left that could dull the pain.

So they couldn't leave the lift. There would undoubtedly be more gunmen stationed on the seventh level, and maybe even the eighth, at the very bottom of the *skilad*. Nowhere would be safe... except for the upper tiers. Level One, in fact—the absolute top of the superstructure, surmounted only by the spaceport—would be the only place where they were completely guaranteed at least some small respite. Going there would have severe consequences, of course.

The decision between that fate and immediate death wasn't trivial to Das. To show himself at the pinnacle, weakened and supporting a half-dead woman, was to utterly sacrifice their freedom for merely a chance at survival. Both of them were wanted, badly, by powerful players in the more aristocratic circles of the upper levels of this *skilad*. He would be putting them both at the mercy of those fiends. Most likely, they would either end up rotting in some lordling's private prison, or they would be put to work for their crimes. Those "crimes," of course, would in reality consist of any past jobs they'd done in opposition to their new masters. The "sentence" would be to do the same work they'd done before, but on behalf of only one client, in perpetuity.

It was the only way to avoid death right here and now. Escaping from the more insidious and less tangible danger that waited above would be a problem for their future selves. In a way, it was a lot like taking a wound from Yumiko to have any chance of surviving an encounter with her. He had to give something up in order to escape, and deal with the fallout later. The top floor was the only place where whatever spiteful son of a bitch had ordered this hit wouldn't have even the slightest influence, and that meant it was their only option.

"We're going up," he said.

"What?" Yumiko said. "That's insane."

“It’s a low-percentage move, sure, but it’ll buy us a little time to recover and plan. Maybe we’ll find a way out of the fire after leaving this bloody frying pan, who knows. It beats being shredded down here.”

“Alright.” She hardly hesitated. “I trust you.”

Das was already busy hacking the lift’s terminal to get them to the top floor without any interruptions. Momentarily, the voice of the lift announced their destination, and the doors began to close. The gunfire outside sputtered out and was replaced by running boots, too late. Finally, once they were on their way up, Das’ brain finished processing Yumiko’s answer.

“What did you just say?” He asked.

“I was agreeing with you, it’s the only real plan—” Yumiko said.

“No,” Das cut in. “You know what I meant.”

Yumiko made a sound that might have been a dry chuckle under better circumstances, but she didn’t repeat herself.

“Why in hell would you trust me?” Das asked.

“We’re in a tight spot,” Yumiko said. “Strange bedfellows, and all that.”

Das grunted in frustration. The dose that kept him cool and collected all the time was definitely starting to wear off. He holstered his gun with far more force than was necessary.

“Don’t try to turn this into a flirt,” he said.

Yumiko shrugged, as if to say “you got me.”

“Obviously you’re desperate,” Das continued. “And of course it’s in your best interest for us to work together *right now*. But you—you didn’t say it like that!”

“Oh?” Yumiko said. “How exactly did I say it, then?”

Das spluttered.

“You said it like... like you meant it. Like you weren’t just talking about right now. And that’s—it’s just so stupid. You have no reason to trust me, and every reason not to. I’m your literal enemy. You’ve tried to kill me more times than I can remember.”

“Well,” Yumiko said after a pregnant pause. “About that...”

Das’ mind raced but his mouth might as well have been paralyzed.

“You’re gonna think I’ve lost it,” she muttered.

“We’re on Venus,” Das blurted out.

They shared a rueful chuckle at their home planet's less-than-sane reputation. After another beat, Yumiko started talking. Slowly, at first, then faster, though her damaged lungs limited her severely.

"When we first met, back on the Ibrahim job, I thought you were... intriguing. I mean, it's not like people in our line of work often get to just meet people, you know, much less have friends—to say nothing of romance."

Das couldn't help but grimace. Yumiko chuckled, which turned into a scratchy cough.

"I understand how you feel about the subject by now, believe me. But back then, you piqued my interest, in a *number* of ways. I guess, well, it just would have been a shame to kill you. We seemed to already have a fun dynamic developing between us, even as we played cat and mouse across the space port. Why cut that short, you know? Then, over time, as we each made names for ourselves and picked up more work, I guess I ended up looking forward to seeing you. We kept getting hired for opposing jobs, over and over. Almost like it was on purpose. You became a constant in my life..."

Das shivered, remembering when he used that same phrase to describe her, not that long ago. He could only stare in response. Yumiko returned his gaze, her amber eyes locked on his.

"Don't claim you didn't feel it, too," she said. "When we faced off against each other, it was like... a dance, Ajit. Every time I saw you, it was as if I already knew every move you were going to make before you made it. It was like a game, and then at some point it became more than that, I think. To me, anyway. I may have acted as if we had some sort of bond, treated you with much more... familiarity than made sense."

Das raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, so I flirted with you relentlessly. That's fair. But I would never have taken it too far. I hope you get that, now. I was never going to hurt you, not beyond your ability to heal, with words or weapons. I would have missed you too much, otherwise."

It was the most Das had ever heard Yumiko say all at once without teasing him. It would have been too much to accept, if it didn't ring so true. If he hadn't been feeling the compliment to each of her emotions, that entire time.

“I know what you mean,” he managed to say. Her eyes shone. He decided to let go, just a little, just for a moment, of the tight hold he kept on his emotions. If his inhibitions were lower because he was high, he had to live with that. “I... felt it too. The “dance.” I never would have killed you, either. Heh... If I even could beat you in a real fight.”

She tried to playfully smack his chest with the back of her hand. There was no strength behind the motion. She might have been worse off than she was letting on. Das kept going. He had to, now.

“It was probably really stupid of me, to never even *try* to eliminate the biggest threat to me and my success, but, well... I think I trust you, too.”

They lapsed into silence, having said what was necessary. The rest could wait until they were free, if they successfully evaded their doom on Level One. They had almost a minute until they reached the top. Das took some time to check on the other passengers. A few were dead, most were unconscious, and he found a couple that were awake but faking one of the former out of fear. He did what he could to calm them, but he wasn't a very comforting person, with his almost monotone voice, countless scars, and grim aspect.

They neared the pinnacle. Das had never visited Level One, despite living on this hunk of junk his whole life. The higher you climbed on the *skilads* of Venus, the more affluent the inhabitants grew, and the more like Earth or Sirius A-b this place became. There were even cops, of a sort. So he'd heard. Anyone was welcome anywhere on the *skilad*, but people naturally stratified themselves. That was what the people enforcing the stratification always said, anyway.

“Now arriving at: Level One,” said the saccharine voice of the lift system.

Das climbed up the console until he was leaning against it, then helped pull Yumiko up as well. He would have had Yumiko lean on him, but they both needed support at this point. She put her arm around his shoulders again, and he put one around her waist. There it was again, that conspicuous lack of discomfort when they touched.

Is this what it's like to have... a comrade?

The compartment slowed, and then stopped. The doors parted, revealing a blinding wall of light beyond. There was no shade up here, at the top of the world. Das and Yumiko

gathered the last of their strength and stepped into the radiant void, ready to meet their next challenge. Together.