

The Abyssal Void War

Book 1: Stars, Hide Your Fires

By

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Chapter 01: Agent of Change

The day of the attempt on her life, the third in two months, had started well.

She had decided visit one of Yori's many parks and, having wandered it for a while, had settled on a mound giving her and her companion an excellent view over the perfectly landscaped leisure area.

The view from the mound brought them the sights, the sounds and the smells of the park as they watched its many interesting but transient residents. She rolled easily on to her stomach, her boots a metre or so away, and luxuriated in the feel of earth between her toes even in the knowledge of the manufactured hull a mere fifteen metres below. It was on such hulls, originally intended for use as the basis for supersized air liners, that the floating city of Yori had been built. Had it not been for such hulls the wealth of the late Yori Matsuyama and Kiya Utsubo, now shared between their siblings, would never have been gained.

The gaze of the woman's green-eyed companion darted from person to person in the park, watching them with an almost palpable hunger yet she remained almost perfectly still next to the woman, instead licking at the occasional patch of scragged fur or a paw. Even this early there were many others in the park, walking, running, sitting, a riot of personalised colour. They wore the fashionable clothes of the city, absorbed themselves in their personal gadgets and mostly occupied themselves with their own activities. Occasionally some would glance towards the woman and her companion and almost always their expression had the same elements; certain yet nervous, envious yet fearful or confident yet jealous. Their curious looks would shy warily away as if they intuitively realised some hidden danger the pair might represent. Only once or twice had someone, usually male, ever approached, they always left quickly and never approached again.

The woman continued to stare around the park always alert always watching, checking the small lake, the trees that surrounded them on three sides, the kiosk to her right almost invisible through leafy foliage and the PVB, the personal vehicle bay where visitors could park their own vehicles or arrange for a cab just beyond it. She briefly glanced behind her to the gantries supporting the Hirohito Stadium and then forward to the glittering towers of the Matsuyama Plaza and those of the more reserved Commercial Zone in the distance.

She glanced skyward past the blinding glare of the daylight sun to see if she could see its "midnight" brother. Unable to see the distant star she folded her mind inwards to form a picture of the daylight sun, Akatsu, and his planets Hiroshi and Hattori. Ignoring the third near invisible star of the trinary system, she placed the larger midnight sun, Kodomo, with his two planets to complete the mental map. Subtly orienting the map, she turned her head and opened her eyes. There, just over the horizon and appearing from behind low cloud, she could see the super-sun that was Kodomo, a small but powerful star in the early morning sky.

With a sigh she rolled upward her flowing clothes and shawl skilfully concealing the lightweight combat suit she had worn almost constantly since the first assassination attempt. Tall, well-muscled and light-brown skinned the woman threw her long shawl around her shoulders and over her head, began to walk. She started slowly down the mound, her luxuriant black hair falling forward to obscure her faintly scarred oval face, almost catlike in her motion.

"Jira?" She didn't turn to her feline companion and no one else heard her.

Lazily the creature's head swung in her direction, its snout raising as it briefly sniffed the air and stretched luxuriously, then it rose and strolled casually towards its mistress. For one brief moment Jira stared upwards, green-eyes staring into gold-flecked eyes of grey then, stepped in close beside the woman as she wound her way down a small path to the riverside path and the main that led back to the PVB and pickup area.

The city never slept and the young woman preferred working from ten to six. Still she found this time, usually before eight, one of the most peaceful. With day-cyclers not yet arrived for work and the night-cyclers mostly gone it was a prime time to wander, in Jira's company, through Yori's parks. The recently renamed Ishimori Park with its many paths around the small lake, alongside the gurgling River Amemasu and over bridges was her choice for today. It was all entirely artificial she knew but it was also one of the more beautiful. More canal than river, Amemasu's shallow chasm twisted its way between city blocks and open spaces to reach Ishimori, and in the park snaked its way between the trees near her chosen path across the park and despite being artificial it was still stunning.

Circling round the paved area of the PVB she crossed the road, turned right then took a left down a side street to a small street café she liked. Independently wealthy and fairly conservative she would sometimes sip Saké or champagne but today she drank black coffee made from real Hatori beans. She had been to the café several times before; sometimes she would eat traditional Akatsu but today, having slept later than usual, she felt like something more exotic. The café had foods from all over the cluster so she chose to eat UCS style with a breakfast of La Vie Toast, syrup, scrambled eggs and thick bacon. She would pay for that later and made a mental note to extend her evening exercise session to make up for it. She also ordered a small plate of raw beef for Jira - that the café allowed her to bring Jira here and order food for her companion was another reason she kept coming back. Breakfast finished and a second cup of coffee set before her by a smiling waiter, she sat staring towards the park and allowed her mind to drift backwards.

Born on Yori, Hiroshi's first floating city, the first floating city anywhere to her knowledge, she had run away from her feuding parents; it had taken almost thirteen years for her to find her way back.

Long before her parental issues had manifested themselves she had looked away to the stars feeling a deep need to explore, her feuding parents had simply been the straw that broke the camel's back. Soon after her fifteenth birthday, eighteen standard Galactic years and legally adult, she had left Yori and headed for the planet's capital city, Edo. With hindsight it hadn't been the brightest idea she had ever had. Within a month, resources exhausted, she had been forced out of her temporary accommodation and on to the streets. Many youngsters there had taken up the oldest profession of prostitution, finding themselves a pimp to "look out" for them, living in low quality accommodation and turning tricks as required - existing more than they really lived. She had been approached by several, had refused and had earned herself little more than beatings but, building on her athletic prowess from school, she had taught herself to fight, learning valuable lessons from others and competing in street fights for status and insignificant prizes. The next time the pimps had approached her, the fight hadn't been so one-sided. She grimaced slightly as she recalled she had still lost and had crawled away vowing to do better the next time but that had been the last time any pimp had laid a hand on her.

Improving her street-fighting skills week on week she had ended up competing in higher level, corruptly run leagues as well as selling herself as a bodyguard, an enforcer or as whatever she could do that had required her rapidly specialising skills. By the end of the year she had been earning enough to rent a small single bedroom flat in the slums near the Izumi river that wound drunkenly through the city. As her notoriety had increased, her dreams had faded and she had taken to drinking heavily, throwing more and more of her money away and often ending up collapsed in gutters near the cheap bars in town. Her fighting skills had earned her some respect and, drunk or not, few had dared to invade her space for fear of what she might have done then or later.

It had been after one of her infamous benders that she had been found by a middle-aged man in a smart civilian suit who, warned by others not to touch her as she slept, crouched in the night shadows nearby. Waking to see him watching her she had instinctively attacked but, beaten away with ease, she had run, retreating into the maze of alleys between the buildings of the slum district. A few hundred metres later she had slowed to a trot and then to a walk, checked behind and had seen, no more than fifty metres away, the man threading his way relentlessly through the crowd. She had run again, faster this time, checking behind her as she withdrew; always he had been there, rarely more than a hundred metres distant yet he had never seemed to run, never seemed out of breath, never seemed in any way stressed or hurried. Realising he wasn't quitting she had skittered into the corner of an alley and had hidden herself, dragging large and heavy waste bins to form a defensible position of sorts. She had tried to calm herself and evaluate her situation, to think logically and rationally even though she had been convinced, as he approached her hideout, that she was about to die. Clearly her pursuer had been trained in combat and tracking, had been hunting her for some reason and, even though she didn't then know the specifics, had known there were many with good reason to want her dead. The man in the light grey suit and smart leather shoes had walked nearly silently past her hideout and his quiet footsteps had begun to fade. She had breathed a sigh of relief and peered out of her hiding place to see that there had been no sign of him. She had watched for almost a minute, had even begun to move her hand towards the bins to move them and make good her escape and then she saw him as he moved to stand in full view of her hideout. He had found her again.

The man had pulled his trousers at the knee and, as he had before, had crouched about ten metres from her position. He cleared his throat.

"Kiyo?" His voice and expression had carried the question quietly to her.

"What do you want?" She had been tense, readying herself for the dash she knew she must make even while she knew it was pointless.

He had begun to talk, introducing himself but mostly talking about her. He had talked about her life on Yori, her schooling, her academic achievements, her flight to Edo, her fall, her rise within the slum community and her eventual future dead somewhere in an alley from the fight she must one day lose. He had persuaded her that there had to be something different, something better, something more meaningful and that this was not who she was meant to be.

Kiyo hadn't spoken. She hadn't, couldn't have, trusted this man but as he had talked she had started to ask herself the question, "Could she?"

Eventually she had spoken again, "Why me? What are you saying? What do you want of me?"

He had paused for several seconds and then had smiled grimly, "I work for an organisation that, I think, could use someone with skills like yours."

And with that he had stood, nodded in the direction of the administrative sector of Edo, and had started to walk away. Uncertainly at first she had followed, first at a distance but within a few minutes closing to within a few metres.

They had walked for about a kilometre until he had stopped at a door, a black chasm into a forbidding grey edifice, and waited for her. She had stopped several metres short, "Now what?"

"You enter." Again he had smiled grimly.

"And if I do?" She had been wary.

"We," he had emphasised the word, "Will see if you are the kind of person we need, if I am right about you."

"And if you're not?" She had been balanced on a knife's edge, curious but wanting to run.

"Then we will both regret it." He had exchanged a meaningful glance with Kiyō, an unhappy glance that resonated with her as, with sudden realisation, she had understood 'regret' to carry lethal connotation. At that moment she had decided, turned resolutely towards the door, paused to lock eyes with his, then had stepped forward and through into the dark.

Even now she didn't like to think of some of the things they had put her through in order to evaluate her suitability for Bunrui Jigyōbu training but she passed, barely. What she lacked in ability then she more than made up for in hard work along with a willingness to study during the two years of training and graduated top of Class '81. She had joined the ABJ where she had been given special training as a Decommission Unit agent.

No stranger to death having dealt out summary execution on several occasions, she became one of the ABJ's best agents ensuring that no trace was left to identify her or her employers. As a result her progress within the organisation was rapid. At school she had excelled at computing and it helped that she had adapted that expertise to become one of the organisation's most proficient cybernetic experts and hackers.

She recalled with a tinge of sadness GEMODAN, a project designed to genetically modify animals as specialist tools for agency work. Initiated by a predecessor who had paid the ultimate price following the collapse of the project she had been involved during its late stages after reports of the cruelty being practiced there. It was because of that project, four years into her career, that she had met and befriended Jira something she knew she would never be sad about.

When the Decommission Units had been disbanded and she had been transferred, her immediate superior had gone to considerable effort to ensure her new role suited her very specific talents. Furnishing her with a PhD in Cybernetics and securing a role in the parallel Kagaku-sha Chīmu, the Hiroshi branch of the Science Division, initially based at Edo. He had been less impressed that she refused to leave Jira behind, agents were supposed to be detached. Though the qualification was bogus however she was anything but stupid and studied night after night as the DU closed down around her and, by the time her formal transfer orders arrived, had sufficient knowledge on top of her own to bluff even relatively competent workers in the field. She didn't stop and, within a year, even the most competent would have been shocked had she revealed her true background.

Her role at the HKC as a senior cyber infiltration specialist was well paid even if pay no longer mattered to her. The role challenged her even if she had no particular respect for officers higher than her team leader, the same man who had found her in an alley years before. Initially manipulative, she had made few close friends even though she was well respected by her colleagues with her engineering and presentation skills along with her precisionist style a good fit for the team.

When personal crises forced her back to Yori she established herself quickly, even making a friend on the team. Her experience had shaped her, had made her cynical. She tended to be calm to the point of remoteness but easily irritated when presented with poorly justified ideas. Team members who knew her well enough could sometimes tell when she was stressed, a muscle in her right cheek would flicker slightly. Her colleagues sometimes ribbed her about her philosophy, her posture and so on but they paid attention when she had a point to make, it was all about body language and hers could change dramatically.

Back in Yori after so many years she and no longer struggling to survive she kept to herself preferring quiet but, though she tried to stay out of the limelight, that had proven challenging since, to many, she was something of an icon. Even with Jira to ward away "unsolicited distraction" it was difficult to be alone in a city such as Yori. Streets and parks were always lit either by natural or city light and, warmth aside, it was hard to tell the difference - there was almost always someone travelling aside from herself and Jira. She looked up to see a young man staring at her as he walked his pet dog toward Ishimori Park. She stared back levelling her eyes directly with his and a few seconds later, as Jira also looked up to engage him, he dropped his gaze and turned back to continue his journey. A couple strolled by arm-in-arm, stunningly attired and animatedly chattering, moving in the opposite direction and heading away from Ishimori seemingly more interested in their own inane chitter than what the other was saying. Echoing down the street she could hear the sound of children playing in the sandpits and swings of the park whilst their guardians stood at the edges of the play areas alert for possible threats to their charges.

Snapping out of her reverie she readied herself for her homeward journey, a brief thought to her PA summoning transport to the park less than a hundred metres away. She stood and, directing her PA to pay the café with a generous tip, turned back towards Ishimori pulling her

shawl closer around her and ignoring the curious glances of passers-by. A beautiful young woman with a savage black companion padding at her side would have been an extraordinary sight anywhere across The Extent but in Yori, while still of interest, she was known at least by hearsay. Rarely turning from her goal she allowed Jira to "ice-break" a passage through a group of people that gathering to watch an incoming HeliJet, her transport. Those bold enough to approach were gently pushed aside by her companion but most stepped back to let them through and few came close enough to bother her. With Jira at her side she sometimes felt as if they were surrounded by an invisible barrier, others somehow shunted aside. There were, of course, always some perhaps less aware of the city gossip, those who turned back wondering if they had seen someone a little more famous than the average park denizen beneath the shawl.

She arrived at the PVB just as the red and gold Bentley-Royce Silver Cloud HeliJet set down ahead of her with a brief storm of gritty dust and a rapidly reducing whine of its turbo fans. One of the most exclusive forms of personal transport in The Extent, the vehicle reminded her of a large fat bug crossed with a dragonfly, granted a bug with livery that complemented the silver starred, black and gold Matsuyama-Utsubo Incorporated logo displayed on its side. Interest overcoming fear, some people gravitated towards the squat machine sitting on the hard surface of the PVB, its large side fans spinning down and now almost silent. Shawl shielding her face, she brushed past clumps of people and, stepping around the back of the slowly spinning fans, jumped up easily into a plush passenger compartment, Jira's lithe black form leaping after her. She nodded to the pilot staring at her image on a console screen and sat back, auto padding encompassing her body and that of her companion. The pilot, seated securely in the single central seat up front in her bug-like canopy, assured of her passenger's safety turned to her controls. A wave of her hands across the control surface, and increase in the familiar whine of the aircraft's four metre lift-fans and a slight wobble as it heaved itself into the air, once more sending fine grit and dust spraying, forcing the onlookers back.

The buffeting decreased to flashes around the vehicle revealing the presence of hovercams, small, PA controlled, cameras hanging on high-speed fans. Few reacted quick enough and moments later they were rising high above the crowd.

"No paparazzi! Thank the Emperor eh Jira?" she exhaled in relief relaxing now she was out of public view. Jira growled, more of minor irritation it seemed, then tucked her head

between her front legs and dozed her way to sleep in the seat next to her mistress. The woman smiled at her companion, half envious and Jira's left ear flicked as she stroked the black fur behind it.

Half a minute later the HeliJet levelled out in the five hundred metre traffic lane circling Yori, just one more vehicle flying the crowded air space over the city. Leaving Residential Zone Three and Ishimori Park fading behind, they sped high above the low 'scrapers circling the city on their counter-clockwise journey to Matsuyama Plaza just past the central commerce zone.

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Chapter 02: Wave Without A Shore

Yori was the Hiroshi answer to population pressure on a planet where every scrap of available sea, land and air was farmed. The coasts of the larger islands were near solid city and further encroachment into valuable farming territory was heavily restricted. Though slowing, Hiroshi's population had risen by over a billion to a staggering six point six billion in the last decade alone.

In 2748 the floating city of Yori, based on the same technology as Akatsu liners, was built by Matsuyama Engineering. The city was the making of the young, then unknown, scientist/engineer Yori Matsuyama and which had reached out to other systems well beyond Akatsu.

Starting his career working for Hiroshi Liner Outfitters, Matsuyama was tasked with the disposal of an oversized liner hull. Over two kilometres long and one wide, it was the largest liner base ever built, but the company had failed to find a client so it lay unused in shallow water several kilometres off shore. Ignoring his colleagues' ridicule, he proposed the revolutionary idea of using it to create a floating community. He secured backing from the spaceship manufacturer Sakori, whose Chief Executive Officer, Kaiya Utsubo, had an interest in innovation. With Utsubo's backing he negotiated the hull from his employer, agreeing concessions if successful, and resigned. Forming Matsuyama Engineering he had the base towed to a location just off the coast of Kyushu and, with the cooperation of several small to medium size companies, began to prepare the liner base for residential use. Under Matsuyama, Project FS#1, organised the construction of the floating island's first small sixty storey skyscraper and, with Utsubo's guidance, had advertised the fledgling community in the highest echelons of society. The marketing was hugely successful and the city became popular with elite buyers and the service companies which followed. Additional investment persuaded the hull builder Swazake to build two more mega-hulls increasing FS#1 to six square kilometres.

Matsuyama's personal fortune increased massively and, five years into his business relationship with her, he entered a marriage contract with his co-investor Utsubo. As majority shareholders in Matsuyama Engineering they renamed the company Matsuyama

Industries and bought out the liner-hull manufacturing company, Swazaki. Seven years after floating the first liner base the city had towers soaring to over a kilometre and a half, and nearly thirty square kilometres space and specially commissioned units for docking, lagoons and lowered beaches breaking up the city's outline.

Building on its success Matsuyama Industries began the construction of two more floating cities as the city was towed to be anchored in deep water two hundred kilometres off the coast of Hiroshi's largest island, Honshu.

"Yori Matsuyama: The People's Hero" by Aiko Hikari, 2801

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Chapter 03: Brother Assassin

Leaving Residential Zone Eight and heading out over Yori Marina, the young woman stared out from the HeliJet towards the docks able to see perhaps thirty five kilometres of the sea beyond. Beyond the docks she could see the silver-white silhouettes of the nearest islands of floating solar receptors that, in conjunction with the solar collectors integrated into most of the city's buildings, provided the city with power and even fed surplus power into the Hiroshi planetary grid. Most of the city's highest towers were in the commercial zones but that hadn't stopped the build of several impressively attractive buildings further out in the residential and even the leisure zones. However by far the most impressive towers on the island were still farther on based at Matsuyama Towers Plaza and the tallest of those, with its stunningly beautiful spiral supports, was her destination, Matsuyama Tower itself.

Not only the tallest building in Yori, Matsuyama Tower was the tallest on Hiroshi and, until recently, the tallest in the whole of Akatsu and the young woman knew she was privileged to both live and work there. She could hear the low level chatter between the pilot and Yori Air Control as the HeliJet rose from the five hundred to the six hundred metre lane and from that height she could clearly see Matsuyama Tower's five solar receptor coated spires glittering as they spiralled around each other soaring to almost two kilometres.

With structural supports constructed of ultra-strong, non-corroding ceramoplastics, the tower appeared as stunning as it the day as it had been built, thirty years ago in 2763. Her gaze slid up the side of the building, another design of the visionary Yori Matsuyama, completed only two months before she was born. Passing back over Residential Zone Five, she could hear Air Control directing her pilot to descend again and to head inwards towards Matsuyama Towers Plaza and, from two kilometres out, she could see the lower roadways, each wide enough for larger delivery vehicles, that linked most of the buildings to others below the tenth storey and narrower glittering walkways higher up above the fiftieth. At the sixtieth storey, nestled between and around the spires, was the public HeliJet platform that allowed the delivery of people and goods to the tower. As the HeliJet approached Matsuyama Tower its engine whine increased as the pilot diverted the craft up at a steep angle, then her ears popped as the engine's increased to full power, its turbofans forcing the craft up near vertical. The little vehicle was buffeted by rising winds as it climbed to over a kilometre then, as it

approached the upper platform, stabilised as the tower guidance sensors started communicating with its onboard systems to facilitate an easier landing. A few moments later, with a light bump and a loud snap of the platform's AESRA locks engaging, the vehicle's ochre uniformed pilot brought the bug-like machine in for a precise landing at the little used platform. As the HeliJet's turbo fans cycled down, the pilot unbuckled her straps and her disembodied voice carried through the internal speakers, "It's safe to disembark now Ma'am. Please be careful of the step down from the vehicle."

Jira watched, green eyes glinting, as her young mistress stepped from the HeliJet onto the breezy platform then unwound herself, stretched once more and followed her across the semi-transparent floor. Despite the height the breeze was tolerable with most of the wind diverted around the platform by a series of steerable vanes controlled by the towers environmental protection and power generation systems. The young woman stared briefly at the Matsuyama-Utsubo company logo, identical to the one on the HeliJet in all respects except size and a position overlooking the wide platform. Two more HeliJets sat around the edges of the platform all bearing the same corporate logo. She glanced upwards at the five supporting struts as they spiralled closer to each other and disappeared into the residential floors above. She knew that they continued on past several penthouses, some luxurious apartments and finally to the building's full height beyond which there was only the building's communications mast.

The lowest and largest of the penthouse suites being her goal, she turned heading for a recessed area in the opposite wall and, as she approached, a door slid back revealing a plush sofa-lined elevator. She entered and relaxed into the padded seating to one side whilst Jira leapt up beside her, curling up with her head tucked between her paws. The young woman stared at her companion almost with envy as she instructed the elevator to take them to her penthouse.

"Voice identity authorisation accepted." Her automated security advisor's disembodied voice confirmed.

"Security report," Until the first assassination attempt she had been relaxing her personal security but now, even more since the second, she was being far more cautious. The lift doors closed with no noise.

"No incidents."

"Incidentals report." She wasn't worried about security incidents. A common thief attempting would be detected but it didn't take much training to hack the security advisors database to ensure no record was left.

"No incidents."

She was surprised, "Confirm last."

"Confirmed."

"Interesting," she murmured to herself as the lift slowed to a stop at her penthouse suite, "There's always something incidental, unless..."

She dropped, rolling to the floor as the elevator doors hissed open as two shuriken buried themselves with a double *thunk* in the padded wall where her head had been moments before. Jira moved, a flash of black against the dull red lit suite, as the woman heard a sound up high to the right and another over the far side.

She shrugged out of her street clothes to reveal a black fighting suit beneath. Within seconds the suit faded to match the colour of suite's lighting and furniture surrounding her.

'Two marks, top of the stairs . . . another towards the diner.'

"Stairs Jira!" She whispered to her companion. Jira's green eyes locked briefly with those of her mistress then turned to slink away to her right, to hunt. The woman watched her leave, her eyes full of concern but thought to herself that she didn't envy the hunter now become prey. She turned her attention to her other unwanted guest perhaps a hundred and fifty degrees anti-clockwise. She crept clockwise envisaging bright light in the apartment. Her PA instructed the lighting to come on but little happened and the apartment remained bathed in dull red, emergency mode. A simple instruction flicked her mil-grade lenses to low light mode and improved her vision as she kicked at a wall switch. She was unsurprised that the garage door failed to open - had she been planning the attack she might have organised something a little less pleasant but these attackers had not had her training.

'The game is on.' She smiled grimly as she straightened and launched herself over some furniture to the sound of a third shuriken embedding itself in its high quality leather.

'Damn! I liked that sofa!' she thought, 'They're gonna pay for that.'

Landing and rolling to a stop near her HoloView just behind another sofa, just a few metres from the door to the kitchen-diner. She reached out and, pressing simultaneously on two slight depressions in the HVs wooden frame, opened a hidden compartment.

"Knew it would come in handy one day," She whispered withdrawing a collapsed fighting pike and a flechette pistol.

Flipping herself from her position of cover, firing a burst of flechettes in the direction of the kitchen-diner, she threw herself over the couch to slam up against the kitchen-diner's outer wall. She quickly stole a glance around the corner but ducked back as splinters flew from the door frame near her head to the accompaniment of a low crunching "pfft". Replaying the scene in detail through her PA she could see that the slugs fired had been plasticised presumably fired from some kind of military handgun or machine pistol. More importantly, in the last few milliseconds of video, she could see blurred vanes on one of the projectiles.

"Assassins," She confirmed under her breath then grinned humourlessly as an agonised scream sounded from behind her. Outside of criminals few ordinary citizens carried guns. The police, military and licensed bodyguards carried guns of course but unless she had been marked a fugitive in the past few hours the only others to carry guns, especially with using steerable projectiles were criminals and that meant assassins. And assassins were trained to kill with the least detectable weaponry that would be loaded with biodegradable ammunition that was hard to detect after the deed was done. She had few doubts they'd have some solid gear, fairly sophisticated equipment, but that Jira had made her kill so quickly betrayed a lack of experience. Perhaps, she mused, they hadn't faced off against an experienced decontamination unit agent yet. She activated her own implants, information feeding directly to her brain which she perceived as a kind of virtual room inside her head. A brief instruction to her PA and her vision was overlaid with temperature varied patterns from the apartment. There, faint in the corner and farthest from the window, a slightly cooler area, roughly humanoid in shape betraying the assassin in heat insulated clothing.

'That won't help you,' she thought.

"Only one of you now my friend. How 'bout giving a girl a break? Let you off easy!" Again she grinned coldly without humour in response to the answering silence.

Crouching and reaching down, she twisted the low heels from her outwardly expensive boots, pocketed one, flicked a switch on the other and, twisting, flung it through the door to its left, towards where she knew the remaining assailant to be.

A muffled thump and acrid smoke gently billowed from the door. She sprang forward, to the tune of bullets impacting behind her, and rolled across the floor to end up crouched in the corner under the window overlooking her small balcony garden. Now inside the kitchen, her infrared implants painted a more detailed picture. The assassin was no longer visible, no longer betrayed by his artificially cooled heat signature, so she waited patiently breathing through nasal filters she hoped the assassin didn't have.

A low wheezy cough from the other side of the room, perhaps five metres away, gave her attacker's position away. She fired a second burst of flechettes to keep their head down and reached up to the kitchen knives she knew were above her, grabbing two. Increasing the sensitivity of her lenses she edged forward seeking cover and saw a small patch of heat moving ahead of her. One of the razor-sharp flechettes must have damaged his suit. She adjusted her vision, moving up and down the infrared and ultraviolet spectra. There, about three metres ahead of her, a human outline spread-eagled on the floor behind an object, an overturned table from the look of it. Moving silently, she gained a position behind and to her assailant's left.

The smoke had started to thin and she was close enough now to see more detail, musculature revealing the intruder as male. Judging from his stance and patchy heat signature it appeared that at least two flechettes had hit him but more importantly - moreover his stance betrayed him, the man still thought she was over in the corner near the window.

Unconvinced she could close on him without detection she flung one knife at his head, the other lower towards his body. Alerted by the sound of her moving to throw the attacker ducked but, the sound of Jira growling from the connecting diner, distracted him and made him flinch. The first knife glanced from his head with a visible spray of blood and he hissed in pain as the second embedded in his shoulder. Knowing better than to enter a combat area

Jira remained outside satisfying herself with threatening growls as she watched her mistress in combat.

Pleased with Jira's discipline the woman followed the knives in and, as the man struggled to raise his gun in defence, her partially extended fighting pike smashed down club-like on his already injured arm breaking the bones in his forearm, the gun clattering across the floor. Still unwilling to concede defeat he rolled upwards spinning as he reached for his knife with his remaining good hand and almost succeeding until a roundhouse kick to his head snapped him backwards, smashing his head against one of the kitchen units. Rebounding from the surface he stumbled and fell forward, sinking to the floor and unconsciousness only dimly aware of his intended victim as she leapt to a ready position above him should he stir again.

The woman stared down at her would-be-assassin a curious expression on her face.

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Chapter 04: Question and Answer

It hadn't been the attacker's day and, as he woke, he realised it was going to get worse. He could move easily but, as he looked around, he discovered he was on a balcony tied to a chair with some kind of tape, not particularly strong stuff but wrapped around each limb enough times that he knew he wouldn't be breaking free anytime soon. The chair was positioned precariously close to the apartment balcony's edge next to a gap in the safety barrier that should have separated him from the one hundred and ninety storey drop below. Still dizzy from the pain of his earlier fight he thought back to his mission briefing earlier that day - he didn't recall any such doors from the apartment's plans.

The woman stared coldly at her former attacker, now prisoner. He stared back, defiant while trying to avoid the vicious gaze of the woman's feline companion lying alert behind the bloody remains of his partner and occasional lover.

His captor was once more dressed in stylish city clothes, a change of outfit that didn't surprise the imprisoned man or indeed that she appeared so clean, calm and composed. With most resources on Hiroshi dedicated to farming, the permanent personal possession of non-essential including clothing was heavily discouraged. With the possible exception of the poorer classes in cities such as Edo, most purchased patterns, printing and recycling clothing they "owned" as desired. He guessed her original clothing had already been recycled back by her apartment's automated servants.

The woman gazed at the assassin who couldn't have been more than sixteen, just over twenty galactic she guessed.

"They start you young these days don't they?" She mused, as she gently pushed her fingers into a leather and metal studded object band that he quickly realised was some kind of torture implement.

"Roman Caestus," She smiled coldly, "I'm told that being hit with one can be quite distressing. Now," she paused as if for dramatic effect, "Tell me who sent you?"

She frowned when he didn't reply then hit him hard, studs crashing against flesh covered bone, blood spraying as his head snapped to one side. She heard his forearm bones grinding as he instinctively grasped the chair to prevent a fall the securing tape would have prevented anyway. Probably he thought.

"Who sent you?" The question was more insistent and, again, he failed to reply. Blood and fragments of teeth flew, splatters decorating her clothes and her frown deepened.

"Who sent you?" The assassin spat more blood at her. She leant hard on the chair, bringing it forward and pulling his head down hard to meet her rapidly rising knee, the gel of the fighting suit beneath hardening momentarily as it smashed into his face to send yet more blood and teeth fragments spraying.

"You can make this easy or you can make it hard. It's your choice. Who sent you?" Her voice grated.

Again he spat splintered tooth fragments and, raising his head, laughed bitterly at her.

"You don't have the balls and this?" He rasped through broken teeth, his head jerking slightly to indicate his face, "This can be repaired. So fuck you bitch!"

"Yes, it's true," She shrugged, "I have no balls but I'm a woman, dickhead! Jira? Arm. Gentle." The feline's eyes flicked to her momentarily then, turning her attention to the assassin, closed her still bloodied jaws on the injured arm protruding out beyond the end of the chair's armrest; she didn't put much pressure on the limb and her eyes flicked back again to the woman. The young woman dispassionately noted the flicker of fear that passed across the assassin's face.

She waited a few more moments then let out a long, frustrated sigh, "I am going to ask you one more time and I strongly suggest you answer this time. Who sent you?"

The would be assassin glared at her, "Why don't you ..."

"Jira!" The woman overrode the insult and the big cat, having played this game several times before, closed her jaws on his arm. Bones crunched, grated against each other, a brief screech of tortured pain. Beads of perspiration dotted the assassin's bloody, olive-skinned, features.

She looked at Jira then sighed.

"I will only go so far before I allow my companion here ..." She paused reflectively, "Before we move on to something else, something more serious, more painful. Who sent you?"

His continued lack of response irritated the young woman and her expression hardened. She began to lose patience and pulled the bloody kitchen knife from the assassin's shoulder, twisting it as she did. His painfully angry growl turned to an agonised scream as the knife descended and severed his undamaged left-hand's smallest finger.

"Then there were nine!"

The young woman showed no sign of malice or triumph and, despite his obvious pain, the assassin recovered enough to glare in silently at her. She sighed.

"You know," Her voice took on an almost conspiratorial mien, "I was once an assassin just like you. Well, not just like you, I suppose." She laughed lightly, "I wouldn't have let myself be caught this easily. I keep myself as fit as the next girl and, let's be honest, I haven't been in the business of late but I did serve with the Decomm Units." At the mention of DU she again caught a flicker of expression.

"You had what should have been the perfect plan," She stressed the word 'should' as she turned to Jira and grinned, "Perfect? Purr-fect? Get it Jira?"

Jira, assassin's arm still clamped between her teeth, flicked her gaze to the woman, eyes seeming to roll in a human-like expression. The woman's gaze flicked from the would-be assassin to Jira and back again.

"Oh come on! Where's your sense of humour?" Her eyes rolled in a mockery of unappreciation then she sighed, "Where was I? Your perfect plan. The one that should've

worked but didn't. Yes, I was an assassin, worked for the DU," Again the flicker, "But I would never have let myself be caught like this! You had the perfect setup yet, with the help of a cat, I beat two of you."

He spat at her again, this time missing his goal, as he rasped through broken teeth, "Cat? That's not a fucking cat. It's a fucking freak!"

"Ouch!" The woman feigned injury then threw a feral grin at the large black animal, "That's not nice now is it Jira?"

The genetically modified panther, let go of the assassin's arm and, muscles rippling under glossy black fur, raised herself on all fours, hackles raised and green-eyes glaring.

"Ohr!" Jira growled as shock registered briefly on the man's face before he regained control.

"Oh? You didn't realise she's not exactly a normal cat?" The woman smirked at him, "First generation product of 'Project Gemodan'. Genetically modified. Smarter than some humans. And, it seems, some assassins!" She paused again seeming to play to a hidden audience, "Oh yes! And did I mention that she can, after a fashion, talk?"

Flickers of fear passed across the assassin's face as the woman continued her practised speech.

"I grant you her vocal physiology doesn't exactly pre-dispose her to talking but her vocabulary is really quite extensive and, although it can take some considerable effort to understand her, she's rather clever. And, would you believe it, opinionated? She's the first and only surviving 'product' of 'Gemodan', that's short for 'Genetically Modified Animal' by the way. I was involved in the project only as an administrator, quite senior you understand, not the real big shot but a series of poor management decisions and other events led to the two of us meeting." She smiled sideways at Jira, "And Jira? She decided to stay with me and has been with me ever since. You should have seen the looks a month later when I returned to the office. Of course they tried to take her away but Jira?" She smiled again at the large creature, "Jira put her foot down. Actually she put all four down and when a panther puts her feet down, with claws like those you'd better be very, very fast or really good at running and

locking doors behind you. Four security guards can testify to that. One of them was in recovery for nearly a week and refused to work in the same office afterwards, poor man. They let her stay with me." The woman reached gently out to stroke the cat behind one of its ears, "She's not only quite lethal, she's one hundred percent loyal! To me! And I to her! That's what attracted me to her, what brought us together as a team."

She smiled wistfully, a look of affection that, to the would-be assassin, bordered on insanity especially when the cat imitated her. The woman's expression hardened.

"Let's get real shall we? You're dead as far as I'm concerned; there is no scenario that ends with you being alive at the end of our little 'chat'." She stared coldly at the man in front of her, "Now death isn't, in and of itself, such a big deal; wasn't it old Earth chemist cum computing pioneer and philosopher Isaac Asimov who said, 'Life is exciting, death is peaceful, it's the transition between the two that is problematic' just before his death in the early 21st century? What we're discussing, implicitly at least, is the manner of your transition, nothing more. It could be easy or it could be hard but," She grinned coldly, "Just trust me on this, when I say hard I'm not talking about a slightly out-of-breath jog in the park. DU taught me interrogation and did so rather well. I freely admit I never held the record but, in my own unit, I was rather admired for having kept someone alive under the most exquisite torture for nearly five days. He was babbling like a baby at the end though by then, as I recall, he had lost his fingers, his toes, most of the musculature on one of his arms, a kidney, a lung, an eye, lots of skin and some of his, shall we say, softer parts."

Her cold grin became colder still.

"There are many, many things I could do to you, none of them pleasant but for me it's just a question of motivation. I simply want to get you to tell me the things I need to know. You think, or rather you thought, you're hard but compared to me you're a babe in arms. The decommission units didn't train weaklings, couldn't use them, and it happens that they trained me. Oh the things I could tell you, the fun I've had chatting to this person and that, many have tried to ignore me, to stay silent, to date none have succeeded.

"I could" She mused, "Slice off your ears, burn out your eyes, even cut out your tongue though, given that I need information, that might be a little counter-productive. Acid has

always been one of my favourites though I do tend to use it in combination with various chemical salts that not only bring out the full flavour of the burn," She emphasised 'flavour', "It also makes subsequent acid treatments far more effective."

"I could pass fairly high, though non-lethal, electric current through your genitals or perhaps your remaining teeth." Her grin faded, "And talking of teeth do you recall that back in the very early twentieth that had a nice line of dental instruments? Did you know that they actually used to drill holes in patients' teeth and fill them with metal amalgams? Imagine that! How quaint! Oh they used anaesthetics of course but I wonder how you'd feel if I drilled into your teeth, through the dentine and directly into the softer nerve bearing tissue beneath? I have some drills in my kit and I imagine that might be very painful, no anaesthetic of course, so yes very painful indeed."

The assassin's face was deathly pale, his body quaking with fear. Yes, he had had some interrogation resistance training but, even though she hadn't really started on him yet, he wasn't prepared for anything like this! At heart he was still the poor kid from the back streets of Edo that had been trained and moulded to be an assassin in a little over a year. Though he had several years assassination work under his belt they had trained him to kill with little emphasis on what could happen if he were caught. Still he knew the code of The Assassins Guild. Assassins kill, assassins might get killed but assassins don't talk.

He was terrified and she knew it but he stayed silent. The young woman had not, however, finished.

"Now you see this?" She flaunted her flechette gun, "Yes I know you know what it is, a flechette gun, but I'm betting you didn't know that I've modified it, that it now has more than one use?"

She pressed a button on the gun and twisted the grip which came away in her revealing an additional ammunition loading compartment. She reached into her small bag and withdrew a cartridge the same size and shape as the compartment and inserted it into the gun's chamber with a loud click.

"A little concoction of my own. It's a strong truth drug that I've combined with a sensation amplifier." She glanced down at his hand, "Your little finger is gone, correct? The pain is mostly gone now, yes? More of an itch perhaps? Maybe a slight burning sensation?"

The woman's hand snapped out grasping his hand, the remaining part of the finger she had recently severed, and squeezed hard. He bucked, his back arching but he didn't scream just grunted in pain as heavy drops of sweat appeared in beads across his brow.

"Now imagine this," She continued in that kind voice doctor's use to talk to their patients, "If someone were to inject you with a mil of this, and I assure you that I plan to do so, those sensations, the pain, the itch, will increase around tenfold. Another mill will increase those sensations a further tenfold.

The woman knew that drugs didn't work that way but the assassin, terrified and sweating, wasn't well educated and didn't know her game. This was far beyond any real education he possessed and, indeed, his guild training. She increased her pressure on his hand as his terrified gaze followed the gun's applicator nozzle descending down, watched as she pressed it into his skin and pulled the trigger forcing microscopic droplets through his skin. He held his breath for several seconds and had even begun to relax as he wondered if the drugs were actually going to have any effect on him, then his back arched and his body struggled to rise out of the chair in a near impossible contortion, his eyes seeming to bulge out of his head. He screamed, hoarse, loud and much, much longer than he had before. It was almost a minute before he stopped screaming and started babbling incoherently. It took another minute for her wannabe assassin to start making sense.

"Brother! It was your brother, your brother, was your brother." He babbled, "It was him. I only work for him!"

Unknown to her would-be assassin the young woman had an ability, a kind of empathy. The Decommission Unit had considered her to be outstanding at her job in part because of her ability to gauge subjects under interrogation and determine if they were telling the truth. Hiroshi society being what it was she had kept that side of herself very private, there was still some social stigma associated with such things.

Once, when she was young and at school, she had tried to explain to a friend that she had the ability, to explain that although she couldn't actually read minds, she could assess feelings and emotions with confidence way beyond what anyone else seemed able to do a surety well beyond the norm. That friendship has ceased to be soon after and her ex-friend's friends had started to point and taunt, calling her a freak and other names. Few teachers believed her or showed her any sympathy and her mother had withdrawn her from the school soon after. Nowhere near as strongly empathic her mother had some of the same ability and could touch her daughter's mind in a way that no other of her family was ever able to. Even though she had loved her father and her young brother it had felt as if there were some kind of psychic or mental veil between them. Over time her ability increased, massively as she hit puberty, when she became a strong empath with a talent bordering on something she imagined telepathy might be like. She had learned that her ability was something one didn't discuss with others so she hid it and that, it turned out, was something quite easy to do under the covert umbrella of the Decommission Units.

Whilst unable to literally tell true from false she found herself easily to tell if someone believed their statements to be true or false and sometimes the degree of confidence they had in it. She could sense emotions, particularly strong ones such as love, anger and hate and sometimes found it difficult to concentrate when exposed to larger groups of people. Many of her ex-colleagues in the Decommission Units had viewed her as a kind of human lie detector.

She reached out with her mind to the man in black, the would-be-assassin, the hoodlum tasked with ensuring her death. He was babbling now but, she sensed, he was also telling the truth. There were no absolutes in this kind of game but she knew how powerful those drugs could be and assumed he was now being truthful.

"And," She spoke slowly and deliberately, "Where might my brother be now?"

"I do not know," The knife caressed his hand where his little finger had once resided and again, his body arched, again he screamed, again it seemed his hoarse voice was unable to maintain the power of the vocal chords behind it. "I can guess, guess, can guess. I can guess!"

"Go on." The woman's voice was cold.

"Kuril! I heard he had a palace on the island of Kuril."

"A palace?" Her voice held wry amusement, "Really? And how do you know he is there?"

It took nearly an hour, but gradually, grudgingly the assassin revealed his secrets along with many of his employer and finally her suspicions were confirmed; there was only one person on the planet, or off, that would have attacked her in such a remote and cowardly fashion.

Leaving the man tied to the chair she wandered thoughtfully into her kitchen and started cleaning her knives, once they were clean and all traces of blood washed away she put them in the steriliser. The radiation used would not only heat the knives sufficiently to destroy all bacteria on them it would also denature any DNA.

She drew a deep sigh knowing what she had to do next and walked outside to see the assassin straining against his bonds while Jira watched quietly from nearby. As he saw her he stopped, the determination on his face faded to be replaced by a loathsome pleading mien as he ingratiatingly pleaded for his life, offering to work for her.

She stepped closed to him surveying his bloodied countenance and unclamped his arms and legs.

"I admit I could use someone like you." She mused superficially thoughtful as he stood shakily and began rubbing his thigh muscles all the while turning his body subtly towards her, his muscles tensing, "But the one thing I can't stand is a traitor!"

Feinting slightly she punched open-handed with her right striking the assassin full force in his upper chest knocking him off balance then powered into a spin to deliver a roundhouse kick to his head. He stumbled backwards too fast to maintain his balance tripping perfectly through the open gate in the balcony barrier to drop screaming into the abyss below.

"The third attack in a year," she mused then sighed, "I suppose, my brother, the time has come for me to deal with you once and for all!"

The balcony cleared and the gate seamlessly closed, she ignored the police vehicles buzzing around the tower and set several auto-clean and repair bots to clear up signs of the recent conflict in her apartment. She manhandled the bloody body of the female assassin into her personal atmo-shuttle and programmed it for a reconnaissance flight over and around Kuril Island. She started to instruct it to dispose of the body at sea en route then paused. With a

savage grin she altered several parameters, waved her hands over a control panel then stepped back to watch the garage doors open and the shuttle launch away on its seven and a half hour trip.

Changed again into clean clothing the woman and her feline companion traipsed down several flights of stairs to the helipad. Passing under the Matsuyama-Utsubo corporate logo once again they stepped through a set of double doors on the opposite side of the helipad marked, "Bunrui Jigyōbu". Continuing down a gently curving set of stairs the couple entered the ABJ offices and walked around the orbital corridor to the small secure office at its rear. Pressing her palm against a slightly raised area of the transparent wall, a door slid silently aside.

"Good morning, Tokachi," She smiled at the young man sitting behind the desk.

"Please look into this camera Ma'am," He nodded but otherwise betrayed no emotion.

The guard was grasping a sensor, a dead man's switch, and she knew that if released it every alarm on the floor would sound and guards would come running. Tempting though it might be to upset the powers that be, she smiled and leant forward lining her left eye up with the camera. She felt a subtle vibration as she was scanned then the lift doors to the left of the guard slid silently open. Nodding politely to Tokachi she walked into the lift.

As the doors closed quietly behind them a rich toned voice spoke in welcoming tones. "Good morning Dr. Matsuyama."

Chapter 05: Childhood's End

Towards the end of childhood Matsuyama's relationship with her father had been strained. She had always loved him but, as Shiro her baby brother entered senior school, their relationship had changed.

The family had been followers of Kami-no-michi, The Way of the Gods. Like all religions Kami-no-michi carried philosophical baggage, how much depending on how devout you were. Following her move to a second senior school Matsuyama had become a follower in name only, observing few of the real rituals but more-or-less honouring the traditions and important festivals. Kiya Utsubo, her mother, had been brought up Buddhist but had converted on her first marriage contract because her soon-to-be husband's religion demanded she follow the same beliefs.

Though not explicit in scripture Kami-no-michi was paternalistic, favouring men over women, supporting male dominance and inheritance. More forward thinking her father had joined with her mother on an equal footing with his daughter's birth changing only his joy in having a child. Her brother's birth had not affected things but her mother had told her that as Shiro approached his fifth birthday, the age the young began their religious training, her relationship with both her son and her husband had shifted subtly. Matsuyama's father, now an elder at the temple, had spent more time there, had showed greater interest in her brother, had neglected her and had become more domineering at home. Over time he became detached from general family activities and had spent disproportionately more time grooming his son for eventual corporate leadership.

When Matsuyama turned fifteen, her mother had snapped and for weeks her parents screamed and shouted at each other over the fate of their children and their corporate empire. It had been upsetting at the time but she knew better now; her father, influenced by other temple elders and ignoring her academic prowess, had decided he wanted his son rather than his daughter to inherit the company. There were five years between her and Shiro and her younger brother's academic achievements were notable only inasmuch as they were poor, far poorer than many of his contemporaries. Shiro wasn't stupid by any means, far from it, but her mother was unable to accept her father's wishes and wanted the company passed to the

best candidate which, of course, Matsuyama was more than. The arguments faded over time but resentment simmered and that her father considered winning the only honourable result became the main focus of her mother's slow burning anger and resentment.

The disagreements continued, arguments sometimes flaring, with occasional full blown screaming matches and it became apparent that it was too painful for her mother. She took her daughter aside one evening when her husband had taken her son to the temple and told her that she had decided not to renew her marriage contract later that year.

After their split in '79 with lawyers arguing over company assets, her mother had quietly reclaimed her Buddhist roots but, like her father, her brother appeared to be a strong follower of Kami-no-michi and few knew better. Matsuyama did and, unwilling to deal with the fallout, dropped out of society and ran away to Edo. The rest, as they say, was history as she ended up an agent of Akatsu's Bunrui Jigyōbu.

Her father died when she was with the Edo Science Team and, despite public ignorance, Matsuyama's resources revealed several possibly significant peculiarities about his death. His will left everything to his son Shiro and she found it interesting that her brother took up the mantle of de facto CEO within hours of the announcement. Contentiously his will assumed ownership of assets still under negotiation following the earlier separation of her parents and her mother had immediately launched a full legal challenge. Her brother's legal teams mounted a vigorous defence whilst his public relations team launched an even more vigorous campaign for the hearts and minds of Hiroshi people but ultimately the challenge was resolved in her mother's favour winning her the corporate giant's jewel, Matsuyama Plaza Towers. Her brother's leadership skills began to show as Matsuyama-Swazaki Incorporated began to decline in share value whilst Matsuyama-Utsubo Incorporated, her mother's new business, rose like a phoenix. Shiro had been furious with his mother and had left the family home but, though she felt the time was not quite right to re-join polite society, Matsuyama had reached out secretly to her mother to let her know that she was still alive.

Her mother died five years later and, noting circumstances reminiscent of her father's death Matsuyama used her old agency contacts to gain more evidence. Though the evidence was sketchy she was certain of two things, that the two deaths were somehow linked and that neither had been natural.

Her mother's will left everything to her but she reckoned on a year at least before her brother could declare her legally dead and she was as yet unwilling to return to the family home on Utsubo Island. Instead she continued her investigations and paid more attention to the media circus surrounding her mother's death as well as the increasing number of tenuous links being drawn between it and the earlier death of her father.

Within a month of her mother's death her brother had launched a legal challenge to have her declared missing presumed dead - she knew it would take most of a year to work its way through the courts. She was barely able to contain the fury she felt as she saw newscasts of her brother with fake tears proclaiming his wish to re-join what had been torn apart as soon as his sister's disappearance and presumed death was declared legal. She continued to play the waiting game until the day the court was to rule on her death and showed up on that day to announce that she was still alive. In a small measure of revenge, acting with mock sadness of her own, she petitioned the court that her mother's will remained legal and that her brother should not be able to take possession of Matsuyama-Utsubo Incorporated. Once checks had confirmed her identity the courts had to agree.

Hiding his fury her brother embraced her as if in affection but whispered in her ear, "I fear a storm is brewing, my sister."

She leant back and appeared to smile kindly at him, "Then I shall make sure my interests are protected shall I not, my brother?"

"Ensure you do, my sister," Under the surface smile, his expression hardened.

Acknowledgements

When I first wrote this book I had specific names for the Chapters, the first for example was called "Yori" after the floating city where the story happens. Late in my writing of the first draft I came up with a few ideas one of which was to name each chapter the same as a science fiction book, in the main books that I have read and liked. To be clear it is the words of the titles I have used, Arthur C. Clarke's superb story, "A Fall Of Moondust" in no way relates to my chapter of the same name except in the fact that one part of it is set on a moon where there may or may not be dust.

In truth there are many authors I have liked and I would call my inspiration but it isn't possible to acknowledge them all so this goes a little way towards doing that.

ACT 1: Akatsu

Chapter 01: "Agent of Change" by Sharon Lee

Chapter 02: "With Friends Like These" by Ben Bova

Chapter 03: "Brother Assassin" by Fred Saberhagen

Chapter 04: "Question and Answer" by Poul Anderson

Chapter 05: "Childhood's End" by Arthur C Clarke