*Chapter 1 – The Cloud Garden*

Athens was a city twice broken, first by a great earthquake when the old world fell, and then again by the wars fought over what remained. By some great fortune, the iconic Acropolis had survived, but the land surrounding it bore centuries of scars.

It its early years as an independent city-state, Athens had avoided the expansion of the Pan-Mediterranean Union not because of any spirited resistance, but because of that same state of ruin. So spoiled was the land that the Union had little interest in “persuading” the Athenians to swear fealty, and so it was left in the hands of those whose family trees were so deeply rooted that they were loath to leave, and those with nowhere else to stay. Over time, this eclectic mix of locals, migrants, and anybody else willing to trade a bit of comfort for liberty had grown into a cosmopolitan and fiercely independent community set on standing apart from their burgeoning neighbor.

Meanwhile, without much fanfare, a small laboratory near the Port of Piraeus re-opened its doors. It had once been the local branch of a multinational research firm backed by Chinese and American investors, all of whom were lucky enough to die before the old world did. For over fifty years, the laboratory achieved little of note, and when it went quiet following the destruction of the firm’s headquarters, hardly anybody noticed. Five years later, its lights turning back on went equally uncelebrated.

That insignificance didn’t last long.

Freed from the directives imposed by Headquarters, Aleph Null’s Athenian branch had not sat idle during those years of closure. Its director, Alexander Stathopoulos, kept his employees busy with medical research that the new world desperately needed, selling his products on the black market to keep the company afloat. For half a decade, a cohort of scientists, engineers, and support staff worked and lived inside the compound, rarely venturing outside, all to make sure Aleph Null re-entered the world stage with a bang.

As soon as everything was ready, Stathopoulos threw wide the gates and set his plans into motion. Using the leftover funds from his black-market trading, he hired scores of new employees, made deals with local gangs for protection, and purchased a fleet of vehicles to expand the company’s trade network. Aleph Null diversified its research as it grew, building new laboratories dedicated to aerospace engineering and agricultural sciences. A professional security team replaced the gangs, the old compound became a luxury apartment tower, and several farms were subsidized, using the company’s research to boost their yield. That time was a renaissance not just for Aleph Null, but for Athens itself, whose economy thrived with the increase in trade. When Alexander Stathopoulos finally retired, he did so content that his brainchild could take care of itself.

It was close to a century after his plans were first set in motion that the Union shuttle designated Kilo Oscar two niner began its approach to Athens.

Cassandra was the first of its passengers to awaken. The morning sun had not yet started its climb over the horizon, so, after rubbing her eyes – a mistake that left eyeliner smeared around them, much to her chagrin – she checked the time on her phone. It was almost 4am. That was going to properly ruin her sleep schedule, she thought. At least there were a few days before the conference to get herself back on track.

She stood up and stretched, listening to the cracking of her joints, and then lurched her way over to the washroom at the back of the shuttle, where she wiped off her smudged makeup to make herself presentable.

“You goddamned idiot,” she chastised herself, wishing she could smack herself upside the head without making everything worse. In her defense, she had been barely conscious at the time, but tiredness was no excuse for incompetence, even if the matter at hand was trivial.

Satisfied that the area around her eyes no longer looked like she’d lost a fight, she washed her hands in triplicate and left the washroom, careful not to touch any surfaces that she didn’t have to. When she stepped out into the cabin, she saw that her brother had also awakened.

“…Good morning, Cassie,” he mumbled, rubbing his sleepy eyes just like she had. He, at least, was wearing no makeup for such a gesture to ruin.

“Good morning to you too, dear brother,” Cassandra replied.

“Are we almost there, do you think?”

“Hard to say. We’re still above the clouds, so I can’t get a gauge based on the terrain. I guess that means we’re not descending yet, at least.”

“It won’t be long,” came Shufen’s voice from one of the seats ahead.

“Ah, mother. You’re awake!” Elias exclaimed in a jolly tone.

Cassandra, meanwhile, folded her arms. “How long have you been up?” she asked.

“I awoke when you got up to use the washroom. As did your brother, I must assume.”

“That’s right, but don’t worry too much about it,” Elias said. “It’s about time I was waking up, anyway.”

“Well, I’m glad at least one of us is a morning person. If you can even call this morning.”

“You already knew that. Hah, I still remember you begging mother for your own room when we were young.”

“As if you aren’t all still young. I suggest you take advantage of that youth rather than squandering it by sleeping in,” Shufen said.

“Four in the morning is not ‘sleeping in,’ mother,” Cassandra replied with a half-amused smirk.

“Tsk, I didn’t mean right now.”

“My sister is just playing at obstinance, I’m sure,” the ever-cheerful Elias interjected. “After all, I don’t believe she’s ever missed a staff meeting. She knows the importance of routine.”

Cassandra could think of several times she had eschewed her early-morning obligations, but those had all been during her university days, and Elias didn’t need to know about them. She was better, now, anyway. More punctual. More thorough. Cleaner.

Elias then gestured at Akiko sleeping opposite him. “Speaking of rest, our new friend seems to be quite the heavy sleeper as well. Perhaps she can stay with Cassandra once we get home. There’s room for two in her apartment.”

“I’ll thank you not to accept guests into the Cloud Garden without my approval,” Shufen said. “In this instance, however, I’ll allow it. As long as you two can take care of her, you’re welcome to keep her.”

“You say that like she’s a pet,” Cassandra replied with much distaste

“I say that like she’s *your responsibility*, which she is. I’m not going to support a third child, so she’ll need you to provide her with food, clothes, a place to stay. If that means being Cassandra’s roommate, then so be it, assuming both find that arrangement agreeable.”

“Oh, I’m sure Cassie won’t have any problem sharing,” Elias said, nudging his sister with his elbow. Shufen just rolled her eyes.

“That’s – ugh, nevermind, we’ll talk about this later. If mother doesn’t want to be involved, then let’s not involve her.” Eager to change the subject, Cassandra peeked back out the window. “Look, we’re entering the cloud bank,” she said. “Seems we’ll be landing soon.”

Elias didn’t skip a beat in following her lead. “Wonderful! I trust that party we discussed is still on?” he asked.

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood for a party, but I wouldn’t say no to a celebratory drink, as long as you can provide something non-alcoholic.”

“There’s always water, but I’m sure I can find you something more exciting, and I’ll bring out cider from my room for myself and Akiko.”

“You have cider *in your room*? I’m beginning to doubt this whole ‘moderation’ thing you were preaching.”

Elias just smiled and winked at her.

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Once the shuttle had descended beneath the cloud layer, Cassandra could see Athens International Airport lit up below her. Owing to the odd hour, it wasn’t very busy, but she could still make out a handful of passenger jets being loaded, and several of the flying wing transports that Aleph Null used for most international shipping, all lined up at their private terminal. Even in the dark, they were an impressive sight, looking not unlike a military formation. With some modifications, they could even act as one, though Cassandra had not seen that happen and hoped she never would.

Next to the flying wings were landing pads for helicopters and other VTOL aircraft, and the control tower assigned the shuttle to one of these after a short conversation with Shufen to confirm their identity. Its autopilot made the necessary adjustments in its flight path, and the four of them were safe on the ground before too long.

“Miss Akiko, it’s time to wake up,” Cassandra said, gently nudging Akiko’s shoulder.

The younger woman’s eyes fluttered, and she looked down at the blanket draped over her body, confused as to how it got there.

“Elias and I thought you could use some warmth. I hope you don’t mind,” Cassandra continued.

“…Nah, it’s fine. Appreciate it. But *fuck* does my back hurt. These seats really weren’t made for sleeping in, were they?”

“I wouldn’t know. You’d have to ask the engineer responsible.”

“Yeah, you’re right, dumb question. ‘Course they weren’t, these babies were only made for getting the hell out of dodge in case things go south on the mothership, or for dropping stuff off where we can’t land normally. We’re lucky they’re so fuel-efficient or else we’d be a smoldering wreck somewhere in the French countryside right about now.”

Akiko stretched and stood up, setting the blanket back on her seat. She looked Cassandra in the eyes and smiled warmly. “I really appreciate you taking me along. If you want, I can get out of your hair, now…”

“Absolutely out of the question,” Cassandra interrupted. “As long as you want to stay, you’re welcome in the Cloud Garden – our home. Or, if you don’t, we’ll make sure you have what you need to get back on your feet, reunite with your family, or whatever else. Your choice.

Halfway through following Cassandra out of the vehicle, Akiko paused. “…I’m not sure what I should do right now, to be honest,” she said, looking vexed. “I’m not even sure I *can* go back to my family, since I’m sort of a wanted criminal now. If it’s really okay for me to stay with you guys, then I’ve gotta take you up on that, at least for as long as it takes me to come up with a plan.”

“Of course it’s okay. Come on, we’ll take the monorail back to campus and sort things out there. Just take it easy in the meantime, alright? You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I have.”

Just like she had when they boarded, Cassandra extended her hand to help her companion from the shuttle, evoking the image of a noble lady and her attendant. Akiko couldn’t help but blush as she stepped down.

With nothing more than some vending machine snacks to sate their now-ravenous appetites, the group boarded a mostly-empty monorail and sat down for the journey westward. The lights in the cabin were flickering intermittently, but the floor and seats seemed largely clean save for a small amount of vandalism. Nevertheless, Cassandra declined to sit on the chairs so many others had touched that day, purely for her own peace of mind.

The monorail was so smooth that one could hardly tell it was moving, were it not for the buildings outside flying past. Aleph Null’s investments in local infrastructure had paid dividends in both speed and comfort. Even though the route stretched a long way around the southern end of Mount Hymettus, still regarded as a protected area for ecological and historical reasons, Cassandra knew from experience that the trip would scarcely take twenty minutes, intermediate stops included.

As they sped further and further away from the airport, the buildings around them grew taller. Massive cranes stood alongside the apartment and office complexes, erecting ever more structures to contend with the ongoing population boom.

“We’re past the outskirts, now,” Cassandra explained. “Not at the heart of the city, but getting closer. You’ll be able to tell when we’re there.”

“Looking forward to it,” Akiko replied.

“Used to be this side of town was all ruins. Picture all these towers with the tops blown off or straight-up fallen over, covered in moss and vines. I’ve seen some pictures of it back in the day, and, honestly, there’s a sort of nice aesthetic to it, as long as you don’t think to hard about *why* it looks like that. At least there’s still Hymettus and the Acropolis if you want nice scenery.”

“Maybe we can go there together some time, if you don’t mind showing me around.”

Cassandra smiled. “Now there’s a capital idea! Hold on, look – we’re almost around the bend. You should be able to see the Cloud Garden right about…now.”

She pointed out the window as the monorail turned around the bend, climbing higher up a gentle incline towards the next station. Akiko’s eyes followed, and she beheld for the first time the neon expanse that was Athens proper. There were countless buildings of, all of them illuminated by signage, hazard indicators to ward off low-flying aircraft, and light seeping out from the rooms where night-shift workers still toiled. Even more cranes sat idle here, waiting to resume their work on the skyscrapers that intermittently dotted the landscape.

All of that paled in comparison to what Akiko could only assume was the Cloud Garden.

The name was certainly apt. It was a ziggurat tall enough to have pierced Montreal’s upper layer, eclipsing every other skyscraper in the city. The Aleph Null logo [todo: what does this look like?] shone down upon the city from atop the megastructure, and a well-lit glass enclosure formed its crown – a greenhouse containing the titular gardens. Along the coast were four similar but smaller structures, connected by skybridges to the main building.

“Welcome home,” Cassandra said, while her friend looked on in awe.

“You seriously *live* there?” Akiko gasped.

“We do. The main building has apartments for core staff members, recreational facilities, most of our executive meeting rooms, and all the original laboratories from when Aleph Null was just one man and his cult-like followers experiencing a collective fever dream. It also has access to bomb shelters, anti-aircraft defense systems, and the same model of shield generator that the *Sunset Serenade* uses.”

“Sounds like a lot of eggs in one basket to me.”

“It is and it isn’t. The Cloud Garden is the nerve center of our organization, for sure, but important functions are spread out all over the city. Trade and Commerce is run out of the Piraeus Gateway further north, the Athenian Army Command has its own compound in the middle of nowhere, and, well, you already saw the airport on the other side of the mountain.”

“And you’re in charge of security for all that?”

Cassandra laughed and shook her head. “Heavens, no. My jurisdiction is limited to the Cloud Garden itself, unless our staff have cause to visit another facility, in which case I’ll coordinate with that place to make sure all our Is are dotted and Ts are crossed. Plus, each of the wings has a security team captain who takes care of things there.

“Okay, that sounds a bit less insane. Anyway, this is one hell of a cool city. Bet it looks even better during the day.”

“I think it’s best at dusk or dawn, personally. By the time we get home, the sun should be coming up. We can watch it from the greenhouse.”

“I’d like that,” Akiko said.

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By the time the monorail arrived at the Cloud Garden station, it had started to rain, souring their plans to watch the sunrise. Cassandra, Elias, Akiko, and Shufen all disembarked and made their way inside as quickly as possible, where a night watchman was ready to admit them into the building. He scanned all of their identification cards, only to stop when he got to Akiko.

“I see you have a new guest, Director Hao,” the man said.

“She’s staying at the pleasure of my children, actually,” Shufen corrected. “Issue her a visitor pass, if you would.”

“Length of her stay?”

“Indefinite.”

“Name?”

“Akiko Miura. A-K-I-K-O M-I-U-R-A,” Akiko said, clearly used to having to spell it out.

“Perfect. Just let me print that for you.”

It didn’t take long for the guard to get Akiko’s pass ready, and soon she had a bright red keycard with her name stamped on it hanging from a cheap lanyard around her neck.

“It suits you,” Cassandra joked.

“Red always was my color,” Akiko replied, equally in jest.

“Since you’re with Lady Hao, I’ll assume you know how to behave yourself and spare you the regulation speech,” the guard said. “Enjoy your stay at the Cloud Garden, Ms. Miura.”

“Thanks. You t – ah, never mind.” Akiko’s face turned flush and she hurriedly turned away.

“Oh, one last thing. A letter came for you while you were away, Cassandra. Oddly enough, it wasn’t delivered through the postal service, just left on my desk.” He shrugged and handed Cassandra a red paper envelope with no return address. Her eyes narrowed.

“Thank you kindly. I think I know who this is from,” she said, oblivious to the suspicious stare she was receiving from her mother, and the amused one from her brother.

“Great. I almost threw it away thinking it was spam, but I have to admit the color intrigued me. Best of luck to you all.”

“And to you as well,” Elias replied with a jovial bow.

As they waited for the elevator to their suites on the fortieth floor, Cassandra looked at the envelope quizzically, memories flashing through her mind. The boy – man, by this point – who must have sent it hadn’t bothered to contact her in almost ten years, so why was this message showing up now? And why hadn’t he delivered it through the usual means?

“Are you going to open that?” Shufen asked impatiently.

“Once I’m in private, yes. It’s addressed to me, and me alone.”

“Very well. Just inform me if it contains anything important.”

“Ah, you can at least tell us who it’s from, Cassie,” Elias pleaded.

“…It’s from Xiang. I guarantee it.”

“Xiang? I wasn’t aware you still talked with him.”

“I didn’t. Not since I left for university.”

“Assuming that’s true, and not a cover story, I’ll be relieved to hear it’s not another paramour of yours inviting you for a tryst,” her mother scoffed. “Though I suppose I should consider myself fortunate that your particular brand of recklessness won’t result in unexpected children.”

“You’re one to talk about recklessness. Or do you mean to say you’ve finally found our father after twenty-six years of looking?” Cassandra asked in a half-jokingly venomous tone.

“We all make mistakes. I’m trying to keep you from repeating mine.”

“Mistakes. Right.” Cassandra turned to Akiko. “Well, there you have it. This humble *mistake* welcomes you to our home,” she said with an exaggerated bow. Akiko, meanwhile, just smiled nervously, unsure how to respond.

“She didn’t mean it like that. You know mother treasures us. That’s why she tries to make sure we’re the best we can be,” Elias said.

Shufen did not deny his claims, but neither did she support them, or even reply at all.

Their next stop was the fortieth floor, where the Hao children’s apartments could be found, along with a dozen other families. There was a public lounge in the middle of the hall, which is where Shufen took her leave from the younger three.

“Elias. Cassandra. I assume you’re capable of making arrangements for Akiko from here on out?”

“You can count on us,” Elias said.

“I’m not the one counting on you. Worry about the girl. I don’t want to come back to find her dead or dying somewhere.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine.” Akiko replied, awkwardly flashing a peace sign.

“Very well. I’m going to make some calls and set up a meeting with the board. I’ll let you both know when that’s scheduled. In the meantime, get whatever rest you can without shirking your duties, because you’ll absolutely need it.”

“Understood,” the twins said in unison.

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

With a curt nod, Shufen dismissed her children and their friend. She stepped into the elevator, hit the button for the forty-sixth floor, and was gone.

“I’m sure that meeting will be a fun time,” Elias said. “But first, a drink for everyone to celebrate our safe return. You two wait right here – I’ll be back shortly.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Eli,” Cassandra replied.

As Elias wandered off to his suite to fetch the cider he had promised, Cassandra looked back at the letter in her hand and sighed. She carefully ran her finger underneath the seal flap to break apart the adhesive and removed the note within.

“You sure you wanna open that here?” Akiko asked. “I thought you said you’re waiting to do that in private.”

“I didn’t want to open it in front of my mother, because Heaven only knows what’s inside, and I don’t need to give her any more reason to judge me.”

“I mean, I’m an outsider, here, so stop me if I’m prying too much, but is it really that bad? Nothing she said seemed too out of line from where I’m standing.”

Cassandra sighed. “I know,” she said. “I know she’s right. When I was younger, I *was* reckless, and I definitely hurt some folks. I just wish she would give me a chance to prove I’m not that person anymore. That even if I’m not as chaste as she would like, I’m not putting myself or anyone else in danger.”

“She must trust you, at least a little, if she gave you this job. Like, you don’t put someone in charge of security if you think they’re a total flake.”

“That’s what I don’t understand! She knows I can handle myself. I’ve proven it every time we travel abroad without incident. So why act like I’m still some party-addled schoolgirl trying to smoke or screw everything she sees?”

Cassandra stopped to take a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to get worked up, she knew, especially in front of guests.

“…Apologies,” she continued, straightening out her back. “I let my emotions get the better of me. You don’t need to be involved in any of this.”

“Heh, I think that’s twice today someone’s told me that,” Akiko smirked. It seemed to Cassandra like she was attempting to lighten the mood, so she smiled back, even if she didn’t find the circumstances around it particularly amusing.

“Well, let’s see what’s in this letter, then, shall we? This is definitely my friend Xiang’s handwriting,” she said, tapping the letter.

“How’d you know it was him from the get-go?” Akiko asked.

“When we were little, we used to write secret messages to each other and slip them into the red envelopes for New Years’, birthdays, and so on, in additional to the usual money. There hasn’t been any occasion for someone to send me one of these envelopes recently, so it had to be a clue to let me know it’s from him without posting a return address.”

“Wonder why he couldn’t just do that?”

“We’ll find out soon enough, I suppose.”

Cassandra’s eyes scrolled down the paper, taking in Xiang’s words, which were penned in Mandarin Chinese.

*Dearest Zhenyan,*

*I could fill a whole letter telling you how sorry I am for how things ended up, but I have neither the time nor the ink, so all I can do is ask that you hear me out. A friend of mine, someone you don’t know, was captured and held against his will by the Skywatch in Firenze. I was able to arrange his escape, but for reasons I can’t disclose, I am unable to escort him to safety, so I have instructed him to head to where you and I first met. As I understand you hold a high position within the company, I beg you to advocate for him when he arrives. You and your family are the only people I’m confident will be able to protect him.*

*I wish I could tell you more, but the risk that this letter will be intercepted is too great. Hopefully you understand.*

*Best wishes,*

*Xiang*

Cassandra stared at the letter for a moment, unsure what to do with it. She was tempted to throw it away then and there, but she knew it would be foolish to dismiss this news out of hand. After all, it sounded like this “friend” of his was coming no matter what, and, for all she knew, that one was innocent of any crime. Akiko certainly had been. At the very least, she could leave this letter with the Board of Directors and think about it no further.

No. That would be irresponsible. Xiang had written to her, and she needed to deal with the situation he had presented.

“Cassandra? Are you okay? You’re…crying,” Akiko said.

A single tear fell from Cassandra’s eye and stained the paper. With her free hand, she reached up and wiped away the rest. “Just some old regrets, is all,” she said. “Damn, I’m being a poor host, aren’t I? And I’m not even the one who’s been ripped away from her friends and family. I don’t know how you’re holding up so well.”

“I’m sure the pain will come back, but, for now, I’m just kinda living in the moment. Then again, that’s easy for me to say when I don’t have ex…friends? Partners? Er, whatever this guy was to you sending letters to unbury all the old shit in my life.”

“Just friends,” Cassandra insisted. “I can tell you the full story some other time.”

“Yeah, no worries. I can hardly expect you to go pouring your heart out to some chick you met less than a day ago.

“Nonsense!” Elias declared, returning triumphantly with an armful of glass bottles. “We’ve all survived a crisis together. I’m sure my sister would trust you with her life. So, what was that letter about? Or is it too steamy to share?”

Cassandra shook her head. “It’s about business. I’ll share it with the Board at the meeting later on.”

“Business? Xiang never struck me as the business type. People do change, though. No doubt he’s matured just as much as you have.”

“We’ll see about that soon enough.”

“That sounds good to me. Anyway, I got you some plain cranberry juice, and sparkling cider for myself and our lovely guest.”

“Thanks again, Eli,” Cassandra said, smiling and accepting the bottle of juice from her brother. She cracked it open and took a long sip while the others poured themselves glasses of cider.

“Have you two decided where she’ll sleep tonight?” Elias asked after gulping down half of his drink in a single gulp.

Cassandra knew the polite thing to do would be to offer to share her own room, especially since the idea had already been broached. Akiko didn’t seem like she’d be a difficult roommate. If her appearance was anything to go by, there was nothing strictly unclean about her, and the two of them had gotten along well since their first meeting. However, despite all that, the very idea of sharing *her* space with another person on a long-term basis simply felt wrong.

“If there’s no space for me, I can sleep on the couches out here,” Akiko offered. Cassandra could tell that she had sensed her discomfort, and that only embarrassed her further.

“No, you can stay at my place until we find a suite for you” Cassandra blurted out before her instincts, which were crying out for her to stop, could get in the way.

“Are you sure?”

*No.*

“Yes.”

“Well, then I won’t refuse.” Akiko at least seemed pleased with this arrangement.

“Hmm, she’ll also need some clothes. Can’t have her wearing that stuffy stewardess uniform every day. I hate to impose, Cassie, but do you think you could loan her an outfit for the day? It might be a tiny bit big on her, but it’ll do until we get her some clothes of her own.”

“Um. Y-yeah, I guess,” Cassandra said. “I can spare her some pants and a shirt. She can just have them, honestly; I won’t need them back. Not sure she’d be okay taking my underwear, though, even if it’s clean. That seems…weird.”

“That, and I’m sure your bras are too big for me,” Akiko remarked, looking from Cassandra’s chest to her own. “I mean, I really don’t mind wearing the same clothes for one more day. It’s not like I soiled these or anything.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to put a shopping trip fist thing on the agenda. We’ll be spending a lot of time together, I’m sure, so let’s make sure to set things up right,” Elias said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Cassandra replied, relieved that her wardrobe would remain her own.

The three of them clinked their beverages together and drank before saying their goodbyes and retiring to their own homes.

“So, uh, why the Hebrew letters, if you don’t mind me asking? Like, you’d think a company here would use Greek lettering.”

“I’m told it’s about mathematics. Aleph Null refers to the size of the smallest infinite set of numbers, because apparently some infinities are bigger than others. Don’t ask me why; there’s a reason I didn’t go into the tech side of things. Point is, our founder believed that there are infinite possible futures, but our work would prevent the worst of them, until only good futures remained. Still infinite in number, just…smaller. As small as it can be, now that the bad branches have been trimmed away.” Cassandra made a cutting gesture with her fingers to emphasize the point.

“Okay, sure, but what kind of ‘good futures’ was he looking for?”

“Unfortunately, he neglected to elaborate on that topic, meaning it falls to us to figure it out. Can’t say I’m too fond of the guy.