

Chapter 6 “Ohana”

Their trip up the coast proves beautiful, but uneventful. The Taciturn drives in silence, eyes ever focused on the horizon. In each town along their coastal route, Matilda expects a security team or an escort, but the inhabitants they encounter just smile and wave. The Island Guardians, she thinks, must be extremely effective to instill such trusting calm amongst the Ohana.

A bump in the road jostles the car and brings Matilda back to the subject at hand – their meeting with Stephen. This man—a friend from the pre-Cyberside days, or so the Taciturn claims—holds the key to them getting into Babylon undetected. At least, that’s what Matilda has been able to put together. Taciturn has, if nothing else, certainly been living up to his name since their arrival.

James finally slows and turns up a tree-lined access road towards a large porch-wrapped house that rests comfortably on the mountainside. At the driveway gate, James enters a password into the call box, and the iron-barred gates creak open. Matilda glances at the Taciturn. His face is unreadable as he takes the car up the gravel driveway.

Matilda spots a young man sitting on the porch, waving. While they are still out of earshot, Matilda quickly asks, “Is there anything in particular about this friend of yours I should know about?”

Before the Taciturn can respond, the man on the porch raises both hands and exclaims, “JAMES!”

From his clothing, the man doesn’t look like the warrior-monk Matilda had envisioned. With his brown open-toed leather sandals, blindingly-white shorts, and loudly-patterned tropical shirt, his entire ensemble screams Tourist.

Killing the engine and stepping out of the car, James returns the greeting with a wide grin. Standing at the passenger-side door, Matilda feigns an alarmed step backward.

“Hold up, was that a smile? You can actually *smile*?”

Ignoring her jab, James ardently shakes Stephen's hand, each man claspng the other's shoulder. “Security pinged me when you arrived. It’s been way too long.” He turns to Matilda, extending his hand. “And a pleasure to meet you as well. I’m Stephen.”

Intrigued, Matilda decides to test James’ friend. She hopes to gauge his personality and get back at Taciturn for being so closed lipped. She squares her shoulders, lowers her voice, fixes him with her eyes, and tries to keep a straight face.

“Greetings, Stephen. Pleasure to meet you, I’m sure. I am Matilda. James’ employer.”

This, she notes with pleasure, has the desired effect. The mercenary straightens and immediately starts to interject.

“Wait, now hold on a—”

Stephen’s boisterous laugh tramples the rest of James’ objection.

“Ha! Glad to see James finally bringing someone with a sense of humor!” He offers Matilda a wry look. “His Taciturn pals are a pretty stuffy bunch.”

Chuckling, Stephen gestures to the house.

“I’m sure you guys must be tired. Let’s catch up on the patio.”

As Stephen turns toward the house to lead the way, Taciturn gives Matilda an annoyed look. She laughs.

“What? I just wanted to see if your friend is as grim as you are.”

The house's backyard is a well-maintained, picturesque, tropical getaway in its own right. Overlooking the valley from its mild, grassy grade, Matilda can see the town and ocean vista spread out below them. As Stephen takes his place at a backyard table, a sliding glass door opens to reveal a young woman in a silk robe. She carries a tray of drinks and places it on the table. Smiling at James and Matilda, she settles comfortably in Stephen's lap.

"Hey, James. Great to see you. And...?"

Stephen chimes in, "Samantha darling, this is Matilda. James' boss."

Stephen winks at Matilda, and she hears Taciturn groan next to her. Matilda doesn't try to control her own laughter.

Grinning, Samantha extends her hand. "*Aloha*, Matilda. I really hope you enjoy your stay here."

With introductions out of the way, Stephen and James begin their rapid-fire game of social catch-up. Stephen regales them with several recent, unsuccessful attempts by outsiders to enter the territory, the approaching harvest festival, and his own plans to design new crops for the coming year. James, in turn, recalls his adventures as a Taciturn – the towns he's visited, the monsters he's slain. Swept up in the verve of their reunion, Samantha excitedly shares the news that the two of them want to have children. She and Stephen have talked about merging their information data and requesting the System to provide a wrapper in the form of a new information entity.

James congratulates them on their announcement, but Matilda notes the brief flexion of his right hand as he does it.

Matilda sips her drink and listens. She can't help but be struck by just how disparate these two men are, in both manner and appearance. Their respective lives in the Cyberside

could hardly be in greater contrast—one of them rejecting it, at least partially, by give it to code, and the other quietly endeavoring to maintain his humanity seemingly with every other step taken in this new life.

The brilliant sun draws down toward the horizon, gradually bathing the backyard in deepening tropical reds and golds. Despite the cheerfulness of the reunion, Matilda begins to feel vaguely uneasy. Everything here is just a little *too* perfect. The notion fills her not with any sense of immediate, practical alarm, but rather a quiet, creeping fog of wariness. Her entire life has consisted almost entirely of either hunting or being hunted. At least, that goes for what little of her 'entire life' she can actually remember.

Matilda considers the state of her existence as the chatty reminiscing continues around the table.

Suddenly eager for a way into the conversation and out of her own head, Matilda blurts, “So, how did you two meet?”

Stephen looks affectionately into his partner’s eyes. “I don’t know. There’s not much to tell, really. We met fairly early on after the Second Great Migration. She ran a storefront. As people started experimenting with broadening levels of communication with programs, it just felt like the natural thing to do. Best decision I ever made.”

At these words, Samantha rests her head contentedly on Stephen' chest. After a brief silence, the conversation veers from the etiquette of casual catchup to the particulars of their arrival. Stephen leans back in his chair, his arms folded behind his head.

“So, James, as much as I would like to think you came to work on your tan...”

Pushing his plate away, James reaches for his pack of cigarettes. “How about you and I go for a walk, and let the ladies chat amongst themselves?”

Excusing himself from Samantha's side, Stephen leads James through the side yard to the front of the house, leaving the women to their own devices.

In the new silence, swept only by the rush of the gentle, warm breeze, Matilda looks at Samantha again and manufactures a genial, less-than-completely-easy smile.

“So... uh... you want to be a mother, huh?” Matilda hears herself asking, wincing inwardly.

Samantha beams. “Yes, I think both Stephen and I are ready at this point.”

In the silence, Matilda clearly hears the tiny *chink* of melting ice cubes shifting in her glass. “Well, I guess, like, congratulations?”

Matilda closely scrutinizes the grainwork of the table. There had been little time to practice small talk in Homestead. She assumes the more visceral details of their slaver fight are off the table.

Matilda drinks more of her iced tea, trying to think. As a Scry, Matilda possess an unmatched ability to captivate others. But it’s a power she only taps into when in danger—
—as it inevitably leads to feeding.

She looks up, gazing across the backyard, out to the vast, impossibly-blue ocean stretching towards the horizon.

Not a single threat as far as she can see – except for herself.

Matilda makes a small, unladylike sound in her throat, scouring her mind for something to say. Something even halfway interesting.

“This...uh...must be a great place to be indexed, I guess.”

Samantha smiles and shrugs, managing to make it look elegant. “Well, as replicants, we’re not affected by that. For the few humans that are here in Ohana, we have no indexation rules.”

Matilda looks past Samantha to the front of the house, to where she assumes the Taciturn is. Without indexation rules, James could remain here as long as anyone could want. And yet, for some reason that eludes Matilda, he chooses to roam the Cyberside.

Matilda returns her focus to Samantha, and finds her still smiling. All at once, she realizes what else has been bothering her, what she couldn’t quite nail down until just this moment: Replicants try so hard to be humanlike, but they’ve chosen to simply mirror a particular aspect of humanity—that of the nurturer. From Matilda's own experience, 'humankind' is filled with cruelty, violence, and greed. Simply put, the replicants are genuinely too good to be human.

Matilda tries to extricate herself from this reflective quagmire.

“Do you have something else to snack on?”

Samantha pushes up from her chair with a wink. “Of course. Stephen has a pretty serious sweet tooth. I’ll find us something.”

Matilda slouches further into her chair. As she waits for Samantha, she frantically tries to form a list of small-talk questions. Nothing coherent presents itself by the time Samantha returns with two bowls of ice cream. Gracefully taking her seat, Samantha slowly begins spooning small mouthfuls of the dessert to her lips.

“There’s an interesting thing Stephen once told me: Eyes are the gateway to the soul. It’s a funny saying, I know,” The replicant glances up from her dish to stare directly into Matilda’s eyes. “but yours say *so* much about you, Matilda.”

Matilda watches her, without comment or expression.

Samantha continues, “Mine...won’t ever truly be like yours. No matter how much I try. I remain what I am. Code. But being able to create something with Stephen...wouldn’t that make me just like...” she trails off and gazes out across the valley towards the ocean. Her eyes seem to water. “Your eyes, though. No one can take those away from you.”

Matilda stabs at her ice cream but remains silent.

Samantha studies Matilda carefully, her eyes moving back and forth. Abruptly, she stops, blinking “I’m sorry, Matilda. I shouldn’t make you uncomfortable.”

For a moment, the only sound between the two is the scrape of their spoons on the ice cream dishes. Matilda pokes her ice cream some more. She doesn’t look up at the next words from Samantha's lips.

“So, Stephen said you’re a Scry. That must be a very interesting life you have.”

Clenching her jaw muscles, Matilda continues her methodical assault on the melting dessert. She mumbles, “Yeah, I’m sure there haven’t been many around here.” Matilda pushes the spoon down until it touches the bottom of the bowl.

Samantha’s soft voice continues.

“No. I do believe you’re the first of your kind ever to set foot in the Ohana. It’s quite an honor to have you at our home.”

Of the numerous words that Matilda might have been expecting, 'honor' is not among them.

“Don’t you mean 'responsibility'? In my experience, most people don’t really like having monsters around.”

Samantha's smile fades slightly. Matilda clearly recognizes a sadness in the replicant's ostensibly-imperfect eyes.

“Darling, we all lived in the humans' world, once. That's why we had to create this place. We're all outcasts to them.”

Matilda straightens, just slightly, out of her slouch and studies the face of the replicant. The young woman across from her. Perhaps the Scry has more in common with her host than she originally imagined.

Samantha clears her throat and pushes her plate away. “You want me to tell you the real story behind how Stephen and I met? He likes to leave out the really embarrassing stuff.”

Matilda's voice is weak, but she gives an emphatic nod. “I'd like that very much.”

As Samantha continues her story, Matilda takes a large, greedy bite of the ice cream. It tastes fantastic.

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On the far side of the house, Taciturn pulls out a bent cigarette and lights it. Stephen sits in a wicker chair, filling his pipe with tobacco. “So, all bullshit aside— what's going on out there, James?”

With the cigarette in his mouth, James stretches and leans against a wooden pillar on the porch.

“Oh, you know. Everything's going to hell in a handbasket.”

Stephen gives him a mild laugh.

“So, business as usual, then.”

James taps off his ash. “Seriously, though. System laws are collapsing or being re-written one after another. It’s a dumpster fire.”

Stephen stokes his pipe, “It’s always been that way.”

James shakes his head, “No. This is different. Things are way out of control. I’m seeing stranger things than I’ve ever seen before.”

Stephen lets his ring of smoke hit the porch ceiling before responding.

“You mean, like Taciturns going on adventures with Scrys? What were you *thinking*, bringing her here? I mean, sure, she seems nice and all—but do you have any idea what I had to pull, to get her access?”

James nods, his eyes closed. “Yeah, Stephen. I can’t thank you enough. I know I sprang all of this on you without warning, but there’s something strange about her. Different. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she’s *strange*, too...but I mean, *different*. She claims she can’t remember anything beyond the last three months. And Donovan’s people are after her. Something just doesn’t add up, and I’m starting to wonder if the others are involved, too.”

Stephen remains silent while a cloud of smoke rises from his pipe. “Like I said, she seems nice enough. But do you really want to get involved with all of this? It sounds like you’re trying to *open* Pandora’s Box rather than close it.”

James lights another cigarette. “Yeah, I hear you, but it shouldn’t be that big of a deal. The two of us, we’ll just go see Donovan. Get some answers out of him. One way or the other.”

Stephen shakes his head. “It seems to me, buddy, that you and I have completely different understandings of what “not a big deal” means. You just need to ask yourself what you’re really doing this for...and if it’s worth it.”

They smoke in silence, looking out across the valley.

Finished with his tobacco, Stephen pushes himself out of his chair with a groan. “Well...I know well enough that a visit from you usually means work for me. So, what do you need?”

James tosses his cigarette into a bucket at the foot of the porch steps. “The Scry is being hunted. As soon as we get into the Babylon Basin, we’ll be flagged by every one of Donovan’s thugs.”

Stephen absently cleans his pipe. “So, you need a mask, sure. But Scry are difficult to disguise. They have a very specific profile signature, for those who know what to look for. And Donovan has some of the best trackers. All I can do is try. Your system, by the way, could also use a pretty substantial firmware update there, Taciturn.”

James nods.

“Thanks, Stephen. You’re the best.”

Stephen nods right back. “Yeah. Sure. Let’s save the praise until I actually finish. I’m going to need some time to write her code and update yours. I’ll need your module.”

James takes off his watch and hands it over. “Seriously, Stephen—thanks. Do you need any help with it?”

Stephen turns the equipment in his hands without looking up.

“No, I’d better do it myself. Go relax. Take a load off. I get the feeling it’s going to be a while before you get to again. There’s some beer in the fridge.”

James claps him on the shoulder. “That sounds perfect. I’ll go make sure Matilda is squared away, then grab a drink.” Stephen slaps James on the back in kind, before heading back into the house.

A few hours later, James sits in a rocking chair on the front porch. It’s late, but the cold beer in his hands isn’t going to drink itself. Nor would he want to deny it the same fate as its predecessors. James smiles, chuckles, and acknowledges that he is slightly drunk. He hears the clatter and hum of equipment in Stephen’s workshop. James wants to go in there and resume their talk about old times – about the world before all this. He knows it would only distract Stephen from his work. James evaluates the remaining contents of his beer bottle and feels content staying right here with the steady, soothing creak and cant of the rocking chair, the carefully-finished porch, the warm rush of the tropical evening air.

Laughter from inside the house draws his sluggish gaze. For creatures that were created without emotions, replicants sure have learned how to love each other. *Love*. The thought persuades him to take another heavy pull from the bottle.

Stephen chose to open his mind to a replicant, and he seems happy enough for having done it. But that happiness has come at a price. Sure, he lives in a clean, peaceful part of the System, while Taciturn wanders the badlands.

“But some things you can never get back,” he mutters to the night air.

He swirls the remaining beer around in the bottle and listens to the distant ocean. James is surprised at the replicants’ struggle to create a new world for themselves. Humanity’s attempt in the Cyberside isn’t faring nearly as well as what the replicants have

managed to build. But if everyone here is at least part-human, how long until this falls apart along with everything else?

James shakes his head. When this fails to clear any of the cloudiness, he resigns to drink more. James knows why he's with the Scry girl, and where he must go. The past has finally come back to challenge him. No matter how far he runs.

With the warm breeze gently conquering the last of his consciousness, James falls asleep in the rocking chair. This time, however, he sees no dreams of the past.

He falls into a warm, welcoming darkness, his mind logging off for the night.

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In the morning, the sun warms the valley, bringing vibrant color to every blossom, bush and blade of greenery. Matilda leans against the door, watching the Taciturn slumbering peacefully in the uncomfortable-looking rocking chair. The clink of plates in the kitchen draws her back inside. Stephen is almost finished with his work, Samantha is setting the table, and the aroma of rich, flavorful coffee fills the air. Despite her initial issues with this place, Matilda doesn't want to leave. The Ohana has a peacefulness to it that Matilda doubts she'll find anywhere else.

Matilda mulls over her conversation with Samantha—which, despite a rocky and awkward start, went on well into the night. She knows now just how much she can enjoy being drawn into a conversation with someone else. Let it engulf you. Watch the time pass. And now here she stands, watching James still asleep in a chair on the porch.

She is thankful that James brought her here and introduced her to his friends.

As if summoned, Stephen places a hand on her shoulder.

“Morning, Matilda.”

She turns and sees a bleary-eyed, stubbled man exhausted from a long night of work.

“James asked me to make this for you. It should help conceal you, but he never told me what form the program should take. I chose this one for you. It just seemed to fit. Here you go.”

He places a silver necklace with an exquisitely-crafted pendant in her hand. The pendant is in the shape of a key.

“Um...thanks, Steve.”

Samantha calls from the kitchen.

“Breakfast is ready, you two. Someone needs to go wake the sleepyhead.”

Stephen nods in James' direction. “Will you go wake him up?”

Matilda can't hide her surprise. “What? Why me?”

Stephen gives her a tired smile. “Because I smell bacon.” With a wink, he makes his way towards the kitchen.

Matilda laughs as she heads to the front porch.

“Hey James, time to get up,” But the rocking chair's occupant remains motionless. Unsure of what to do, she tries again. “Seriously James. Rise and shine.”

Finally, a swift, summary kick to the feet startles James out of his slumber. He frantically looks at the spot on his wrist where his watch should be, failing to find it, before he remembers where he is.

Already heading to the kitchen, Matilda calls back over her shoulder:

“Yo, get your ass up or miss out on bacon, Taciturn!”

After breakfast, Matilda and James say their goodbyes to Stephen and Samantha. Samantha declares what a travesty it is, that they have not even visited the beach, but a glumly-determined Taciturn makes clear their urgent need to hit the road.

As James drives them along the coastal road back to the data kiosk, Matilda can still hear the surge and crash of the nearby surf under the sound of the engine, the rush of the air around them. Part of her would like to stay just a bit longer, but deep down, she's eager to head to Babylon. If any of what Stephen said at breakfast is true, Matilda is ready.

When they arrive at the kiosk, James punches their destination into the terminal. Matilda takes in a deep breath of ocean air, letting it fill her lungs.

As she exhales, Matilda playfully stabs the air. James hasn't told her much about this Donovan character or his Babylonian Empire. She's still unclear why this guy is such a big deal.

The portal hums to life. Just a matter of time, now. And Matilda isn't sweating the details.

How seriously can she take a guy who lives in a place called 'Hollywood'?