

Chapter 2 – The Floating City

The morning sun in Honolulu Harbor shimmered against the glass towers of downtown and the green ridges beyond. At Pier 2, the *Oceanic Majesty* loomed so large it seemed less a ship than a skyscraper tipped on its side—fifteen decks stacked in terraces, lifeboats tucked like orange commas along the hull, white satellite domes gleaming above.

Andrew gave a low whistle. “That’s not a ship. That’s a floating city. No way it actually moves.”

Katelyn angled Leah’s stroller toward the terminal doors. “It better move. We’ve got an ocean to cross.”

Steve didn’t answer. His gaze tracked the waterline—clean, even—then flicked along intake vents, exhaust stacks, and the foam-scuffed rub rail where tugs had nudged the giant into place. *Trim looks perfect. Systems tuned like a clock.*

Becky nudged him gently. “Retirement, remember? You’re allowed to just say it’s beautiful.”

Emily tipped her chin toward the crown of the ship. “Look up—real water slides. Leah’s going to grow up thinking vacations are always castles on the ocean.”

“Brother Face,” she added with a grin at Andrew, “good luck convincing her a kiddie pool is exciting after this.”

Leah squealed at a cluster of balloon arches inside the terminal. Dan, steady as ever, shifted his grip on a duffel and smiled. “Feels like a whole town decided to set sail.”

Inside, embarkation was a polished machine. Baggage handlers in neon vests swept suitcases onto belts with coded tags. A cool conditioned breeze carried the mixed scents of citrus cleaner and fresh coffee. The Wakefields joined the line that snaked past security and check-in counters.

At the desk, an attendant in a navy blazer slid velvet trays toward them. Nestled inside were sleek wristbands—brushed metal faces on woven straps, the cruise line’s crest etched like a watermark.

“These are your OceanBands,” she said brightly. “Room access, onboard charges, muster check-in, and security ID. They pair to your biometric profile. Just a thumb here—perfect.”

Soft chimes acknowledged each match: Steve, Becky, Andrew, Katelyn, Emily, Dan. For Leah, a smaller band blinked blue; the attendant paired her credentials through Katelyn’s profile “until she’s big enough for her own scan.”

Andrew turned his wrist, watching faint circuitry shimmer beneath the face. “Stylish surveillance,” he muttered.

Emily nudged him. “It’s not Big Brother—it’s a bracelet.”

Steve said nothing, though his brow furrowed as he studied the faint blinking light. *Access control, movement logs, charge history—one system to rule the rest.*

Only once the wristbands glowed blue and passports were checked against the manifest were they waved toward security scanners and funneled toward the gangway.

Leah flapped her hands at the sound of a nearby string quartet tuning up, delighted.

They crossed the gangway in a bright spill of sun, the deck warm enough underfoot to smell faintly of baked paint. An officer in a peaked cap greeted each guest by name; attendants with tablets pinged OceanBands and gestured them into the atrium.

Inside, space opened like a cathedral. Light fell from glass domes three decks high. Elevators tucked in crystal shafts shuttled silently up and down. Marble-patterned floors reflected chandeliers and the shuffle of thousands of shoes. The quartet was real, not recorded—two violins, a viola, a cello—bowing a waltz above the hum.

Becky squeezed Andrew's arm, eyes wide. "This isn't a ship. It's a palace."

Andrew had already started counting. "Two thousand passengers, about a thousand crew... that's three thousand mouths to feed."

"Not today," Becky said gently, smiling. "Today is for 'wow.'"

Emily spun once, the music catching her feet. "I didn't pack a ball gown and now I'm offended."

Dan laughed under his breath. "I'm thrilled I didn't pack a tie."

Katelyn checked the deck plan at a digital kiosk and steered the stroller toward the elevator bank. Steve's attention snagged on a different display—voyage tracker, desalination throughput, waste reclamation, weather mosaic. A tiny icon pulsed south of the islands, labeled TROPICAL DISTURBANCE: MONITORING. He stared a beat too long, then stepped away.

"It's... impressive," he said at last.

The elevator hummed them upward. On their deck, the hallway stretched long and hushed, carpet soft underfoot. Their OceanBands chirped in succession as they tapped into three adjoining balcony cabins, linked by interior doors.

At the center was Steve and Becky's deluxe suite, larger than the others, with a living area spacious enough for all of them to gather during the day.

"Whoa," Emily breathed as she pushed through the connecting door into the suite.

A wall of glass framed Honolulu and the shapely line of Diamond Head beyond. Becky slid back the balcony door, and warm air rushed in, touched with salt and flowers. Down on the pier, tugs dozed against rubber fenders; beyond them, surfers stitched white lines across turquoise water.

Leah squealed at the sudden blast of the ship's horn—a note so deep it seemed to ripple the glass. She laughed, delighted at the echo.

“She thinks it’s applause,” Becky said, bending to kiss her before settling her back in the stroller.

Andrew clicked the brake and did a quick perimeter check—crib space, outlet covers, the latch on the balcony. “This will work,” he said, mostly to himself.

Katelyn opened drawers in the suite: cabin directory, safety card, a folded schedule for the muster drill that afternoon. “We’ll need to be there early,” she said. “No way I’m navigating a crowd with a stroller at the last minute.”

Dan dropped his duffel into one of the corner chairs, stretching with a sigh. “Ten minutes off our feet, then coffee.”

Steve set the golden watch on the suite’s desk, glanced at both it and the cabin’s clock, then out to the south where storm clouds smudged the horizon. The weather mosaic from the atrium screen lingered in his mind like a watermark. *One day out. Maybe two, depending on shear.*

Becky joined him at the glass. “You’re thinking already.”

“I’m... appreciating,” he said, forcing a small smile.

Her hand slipped into his. “Good. Let’s start there.”