

## Chapter 2: One Night Back Teaser Sample

Starlina was as shocked as anyone to find herself back at the jollyboats the next morning.

She was back in Warvonía, free from the voyage and the ship that she had once described as a “floating prison.” Therefore, many options were before her. She could return to Friendly Oaf’s Taproom to face her employer—or, quite likely, former employer—and explain her absence over the past month. She could roam the market square downtown. She could tend to her apartment. She could walk the city’s winding streets and stop at her favorite eatery. She could jog on the beach or hike the westward hills.

But even her favorite pastimes felt dampened. A thin haze veiled any enjoyment to be gained.

No matter what she did, Jensen would be away.

*This is what you’ve chosen*, she told herself. *You’ve accepted that he’s a sailor, and that means he will be gone on voyages...even long voyages.*

There had been some compromise. Her father had agreed that Jensen could hang back during some voyages to stay with her, branded loosely as a matter of “security” for the captain’s daughter. She held tight to that promise, hoping it enough to soothe the anxious pit in her stomach. She had spent so many years hoping that Jensen would switch occupations, and now here they were. Starlina had ultimately been the one to relent. Being a sailor was part of who Jensen was, something her time with him at sea had finally helped her to understand, and she realized that she loved him enough to accept that.

Last night, she stood outside her apartment door and watched until Jensen disappeared around a street corner. They would only be apart for one night, but even that felt wrong.

The next wrong feeling came upon entering her empty apartment. When last in Warvonía, she still shared this place with Amira.

Amira had left weeks ago. She had gone off to the vocational university while Starlina had been on the ship.

Upon her small, round kitchen table, Amira had left a letter. Starlina’s heart pounded as she picked it up, and her fingers trembled as she unfolded it. Its sentiments were a blend of worry, anger, sadness, and hope for Starlina’s safety. Amira, along with other friends and coworkers, had searched all over town after days of her absence. She finally noted in the letter that Jensen and Murdoch’s crew had also disappeared in haste. Starlina was glad Amira had made that connection.

True to Amira’s usual starry-eyed romanticism, she mused that, perhaps, Jensen had finally managed to sweep Starlina away “to explore true passion and intimacy.” It brought a smile to Starlina’s face and a rush of warmth through her body. In the letter’s closing, wherever Starlina had gone, Amira hoped she was safe and left her love. It brought some closure to one of the things that had most concerned Starlina while away.

Now, she stood again upon the beach, her hand clasped in Jensen’s, about to *voluntarily* go back out to the sea. She wondered if she had finally lost her sanity.

Her father’s expression was rather queer upon seeing her. “Keep hanging around, and I might have to add you to the roster,” he said.

“That would be a dream turned reality!” replied Jensen.

“Just relax, the both of you,” said Starlina. “It’s only a short ride, and then right back to Warvonia.”

They set off in their jollyboats, Evette again taking up the lead, and soon they were back at the ship. Starlina felt much more at ease than ever before to go aboard such a vessel. It fascinated her how the crew secured and hoisted their jollyboats back up to the main deck. She sat comfortably in the boat, allowing herself to enjoy it, almost like a sort of carnival ride.

Dippy immediately made for the bell. “Make ready to weigh anchor!” The crew sprang into action like clockwork, carrying out the well-honed skills of their craft.

“Beep! Jensen!” shouted her father. “Set course for Cragport.”

“Aye, Captain!” Kasper answered.

Starlina nudged Jensen. “Can I borrow your spyglass?”

He breathed a laugh. “Of course.” He handed it to her.

She walked off to the larboard railing, currently facing southward. Once they caught wind and turned the ship, that was to be their heading. The Rocknee coastline would remain visible off starboard the whole way.

She extended the spyglass and pointed it toward the water.

All was calm and beautiful. The view from within open waters really was awe-inspiring. She watched small waves dappling the ocean’s surface. She spotted a dolphin as it popped its head above the water and retreated, only to reappear somewhere else. Smiling, she made a game of following it.

“You’re a little rascal, aren’t you?” she spoke softly. She saw two more dolphins nearby. It seemed they were playing, or perhaps hunting as a pod.

She lifted the spyglass to follow them as they swam farther away, squinting through a faint haze.

Something else was out there, she soon noticed. It was large, dark, reaching far above the water.

“Father!” she called.

Captain Murdoch joined her. “What is it, Starlina?”

“What is that out there? Is that another ship?”

He took the spyglass. “Gheol’s foul breath,” he grumbled.

“Do you know who it is?” Even as she asked it, she feared she already knew the answer.

He nodded. “The *Iron Mermaid*. Seadread is heading this way.”