

Epilogue

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The journey we have shared, dear reader, had no port of departure or destination, merely sporadic beacons sprinkled on our minds' maps. Why should we find this surprising when we agreed from the start to embark on a ship full of bodies running in all directions? So let us steal a last moment together, and venture to this small Mediterranean harbour, in recent past. Can you see her nodding from behind the counter as the shipmaster storms through the door towards his familiar stool?¹ From his favourite crow's nest, he can guess his ship, wrapped in the fog at the very end of the mooring.

Upon each return, he has told her of heroic deeds, tales of uncharted voyages. How unlike Ulysses, he had refused to be tied to the mast as they approached the farthest reaches, west and east, north and south, at the ends of worlds. How his crew was able to drag him back undeterred. Of a ship of fools turned ship of steel. Of tempests unending. And she, in turn, had showed him the ship in her mind's eye, a ship so cunning it would let her see a hundred sunsets in a single night, a ship made entirely of shipwreck beads and bobs, where dreams hang from hammocks and nettings, unscorched by the sun's gaze. Perhaps she didn't say all – how she deciphered far at sea ship logs late into the nights simply to know them safe. His too.

Now she can read the news in his eyes and hide behind thoughts of

¹ Editor's note: we have not been able to ascertain the girl's exact identity. Is she Al Aswany's Bu-thayna, St Exupery's little prince, or Calvino's great Kublai Khan? Or maybe the shipmaster's demon in one of Pullman's parallel universes?

subterfuges: Another glass for the anchor's windlass? A tablemat for his maps? Would he stay?

But he is far already, speaking to her, effervescent. So proud to have pulled it off. Now, no one could tell! Was this truly the same ship of yesterday, restored to his ancient glory? She knows of his labour – how, over the years, he has changed every bit of the ship, every last peg and every rope, every last nail and every cable. It is a brand new beast, and yet, he whispers with a smile, still the very same ship. The one my ancestors built. Or is it? With nothing left of the original it can fulfil its destiny. This time, they had careened and pampered the ship, breamed and burned off the seaweeds, readied it whole: hull scrubbed from under and deck scraped from above, spinnaker and cargo fastened, sternpole and flagpost polished, planks fixed and pranks fraught. They had agonised over old anchors and antagonised young anchor-men covering the deed. And now it was done. He sits and stares at his oeuvre with eyes shining.

She follows his gaze and sighs: it is beautiful.

But he knows better. That she doubts whether it is new or the same, or whether it matters. He is adamant. For everything to remain the same, everything must change. My crew wants new food, my officers new quarters and I...

She likes change, she likes the shine, she does, really. She does not want to rock his boat, especially today... Encouraged, he goes on to praise his crew, marvels at their constancy. As for the passengers, well, they still want to look in every direction. But they don't run around so much anymore. Instead, they help hail sails and set anchors; there is so much to be done. She nods, 'part of the ship, part of the crew' as they say.

There is more she wants to say. How there used to be much idle gossip on that ship of yours, great captain – don't you miss it too... Why has the navigation bridge grown so high? And... can you pick and choose among your pasts and paint over so many ghosts? Your officers long ago cast them overboard and conspired to forget them. But open your palms, great captain; their blood is still on your banisters and will always run in your veins. She casts away the thought – another time.

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So have you decided on your destination, great captain? South! *She frowns.* The gale that swept the southern shores has torn other vessels apart... East! *She laughs.* You say east to make me believe west when I know perfect-

ly well that you are going east. Do I dare say, great captain, your compass has many needles!

Ah but he knows better – an old sea wolf like him stitches his compass in his heart where no one else can reach. He would like to indulge her. Perhaps. But does it matter? All ships' roads lead to some shore and all shores grant me hospitality, my dear. Wherever we stop my sailors run ashore to meet some relative or other. The shipmaster smiles again. This world is our oyster.

Ah, perhaps, but for how long? When you let your crow fly from the top of the mast it will always point towards the closest land. But who says that's where you ought to go? And what if one day the bird smashes down on the deck below, hit by some friendless salvo? Radars are only as good as messages sent, and messages sent are not always messages received. Watch out for dangerous ports, great captain, as you stand at the bow pondering your next stop over. Who will you trust?

The shipmaster protests. He will trust the seagulls that can read the winds before they rise...

... You may have acquired the best, great captain, the sturdiest sails and treenails, pegs, chocks, deadeyes and cordage, but they will not secure your mighty ship if you take on contrary winds.

Look settled girl, I can go where the breeze takes me. Quartering is my game; this ship was born to sail near the wind! And if the tack is too tight, the waves too choppy, I shall chart a new course – that's all.

Ah, master of the jibe, you can always find another lighthouse as you turn. But it takes much skill to swing your sail from side to side without injuring anyone on board! And what if a bump leads to revolt and revolt leads to mutiny, stalling that great ship of yours?

Who says! *His protests have grown more vehement* – they are happy down in the furnace, my boys; food rations have tripled, and on Fridays they get to play badminton on deck with the passengers, better still, to play with the chains and gun port. And they take pride in my... their... ship. That's the problem with you, old friend: you are romantic and gullible, a lethal combination! Besides, crews are two penny a dozen...

Romantic and gullible, great captain? Perhaps. But am I the one who believes that men can be bought with games in our XXIst century? Or that my dogwatch on deck can track port and starboard all at once? That I can always swiftly take off before any gale? Am I the one who will let the wind slap

my loosened sails against the mast until it snaps, or the one who believes my washboard will keep out seawater forever? How many jurymasts can you carry to replace the ones you've lost?! Am I the one who can't see that in this sea of ours mooring in one port does sometimes bar you from the next? Or who believes that my ship can –with impunity– share mooring, the fresh water and all, with my friends' enemies? Am I the one who doesn't dare ask what happens when the propeller catches stuff, when the ship hits the sand, when... Am I, great captain? *As dusk takes its toll and her tears linger, he feels an urge to put his arms around her shoulders and say those things meant to keep the world at bay.* Don't worry, child, we tend to follow even mightier ships, ocean liners, you know. Their shadow is our silver lining...

She does not want to let him down. She wants to believe. If she had been unkind, she would have interrupted, told him this and more, that whether you deploy your skyscraper or moonraker, whether you crack the whip or oil your oars, your ship will not keep pace with the big mammoth at sea. And you know it.

Instead, she conjures back her playful tone. Ah, so it is all about power for you, great captain! You like to walk a tight rope? Will you try a little game of chicken-at-sea then? Test some other ship on a collision course to see who will budge first – you know what needs to be done do you? Hell, visibly tear out your steering wheel from its wheelhouse and throw it at sea. Who could hope for your ship to change course without a helm?!

He is not sure that even he would risk such an obituary: sunk in a voluntary collision on the high seas.

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They remain silent for a while, watching night fall. She yearns to ask him about the figurehead before he goes. What cheap bazaar pigment has he used to make her so, what high tech shape-shifter? The girl has stood mesmerized on the quay, watching her take on the harbour's every colours, their hidden intonations and insinuations. He guesses her silent question and feels confident again. Whatever truth there may be in her fears, whatever his ship's imperfections, on, inside or under, whatever the other ships, there is the prow, undeniable. When my ship enters a harbour gliding steadily on its even keel, no onlookers, no dockworkers or loaders can turn their gaze away. Why should they know better? What a dramatic sight she makes! Even the other ships bow as we approach: by god, they cannot compete!

He takes her back to these southern shores. Ah yes, his ship too was almost torn apart! But by friendly hands it was. They each wanted a bit of it.

She has drifted to a lighter mood. How will you withstand the onslaught, great captain?! All these well-wishers, sycophants and true admirers trying to board the ship with its sails down... You will need pretty steady anchors, to say the least!

He refuses to take the bait. Anchors are no joking matter. They are demanding and fickle, always complaining about one thing or another: your mooring of choice is too shallow or too deep, neighbouring ships too close or at bad angles, their chains prone to entanglement. And, in the end, anchors can fail you abysmally, forgetting to let you know if your fluke has fastened in the depth of the sea. He has caught himself dreaming more than once of a world free of their tyranny. Sure, the girl has no taboos. Still. Anchors are overrated, *he retorts with full seriousness*, especially when you don't stop for long. All you need are secure bowers and bollards to hook to – as long as the harbourers want you there...

Will they for long, great captain? What if under the new glossy paint they recognise the same old ship that used to sail from the City to levy tax on their elders? What if they come to resent your tight fishnets and their indiscriminate catch? And your sailors, great captain, who can speak among themselves for hours before noticing another?

Our great captain, not prone to prolonged self-doubt, loses patience: And so, if you were right, does it matter! They all want to buy my wares and wikis, and will as long as the waves carry me to their shores. The rest is mere fantasy of a dreamy barmaid.

She understands it is time to change tack, save him from his contrived hubris. Well, maybe sometimes it is better not to go there at all. Send a postcard. How would you like me to draw your ship, great captain, *she asks.* I could show its wonders virtually to my travellers. Shall I focus their gaze on sails capable of withstanding the most powerful winds? Or shall I let them peak in the galleys and the eyes of your moody crew? Shall I dare disturb your universe? Shall I dare?

He brushes her off. I can go further and faster than any dare of yours. I can visit every port and every shore of this sea before my next stop here in less time than it will take you to draw my vessel. Promise.

She frowns. You will be windbound sooner or later, great captain – and then, how will you keep your promise?

The night has fallen; he must go back, ready the jackstaff to hoist the flag, and call everyone on quarterdeck for the ceremonial. His mind is already on board: All hands on deck!

As he hurries to the door, she smiles to herself. You can't be everybody's type, great captain. But you'll always be mine...

2023, SAME PLACE

He sees it immediately as he pushes the door with bursting impatience. Her absence. Later, the barman recounts the day she swam towards the horizon. He sighs. He has allowed his loyalty to the misty harbour to be dissolved in the frenzy of seafaring. He had come back for an anniversary of sorts, a horizon they had oftentimes scrutinized together.

To hell with her, her childish integrity and my foolish promises. She dared dream that horizons could be reached. She did not have the right to tolerate my whims. To pretend. He suddenly notices her drawing on the wall: helm thrown to one side, bodies falling on the other, cracks on the hull, fire from the furnace but sails all out, still. As he unpins it carefully he knows his ship will never look the same.

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