

Jewel of Muscat

جوهرة
مسقط

On the high seas
in a 9th-century
sailing ship

MEGAN FURMAN



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Foreword

Terry Garcia, Chief Science and Exploration Officer,
National Geographic Society

JEWEL OF MUSCAT represents a remarkable undertaking in world science and exploration, not just for all that it has achieved and continues to achieve, but also because of the values it embodies.

The spirit of the *Jewel* is the same spirit that guided those first Arab navigators who boldly set sail from Oman into unknown waters to open new trade routes to the East.

It is a spirit of adventure, exploration and openness to different cultures and new experiences. The courage and determination displayed by the crew of *Jewel* is typical of the proud maritime heritage of Oman and the best of the human spirit.

Jewel of Muscat is also a shining example of what can be achieved by international cooperation. Experts from around the world came together to build this remarkable ship and sail her from Oman to Singapore. It shows what we can achieve when we work together in tolerance and friendship.

Jewel shows us how the past has valuable lessons for us today and into the future. This story in these pages inspires us to look at the world with new eyes and to learn from it.

Such is the spirit of *Jewel of Muscat*. Long may it thrive.



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Terry Garcia". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.





CHAPTER ONE

Haramel to Qantab

Building the
Jewel of Muscat





HE TOLD HIS MOTHER he was through with the sea. That he would never leave home again.

On meeting him for the first time, people often comment on his eyes. They are bright green and constant. The sea is reflected in them. She is also reflected in the weathered cheeks, in the rhythm of the bushy black beard's inevitable growth and disappearance.

His name is Saleh bin Said al Jabri. He is forty-two years old, a twenty-five year veteran of the Royal Navy of Oman who hails from the village of Haramel.



PAINTED FISHING BOATS line a stretch of sand curving gently with the contour of a lagoon truncated on both ends by daunting dark rocks. Well-worn nets hang over the sides of some, waiting for tomorrow.

In a patch of valuable shade cast by a makeshift roof propped up by four posts, a weathered man makes repairs on a fishing net. Four children play kick-the-can on the south end of the shore near him. They halt in the middle of their game to observe us with curious eyes. Two boats are anchored in the bay. A young boy skips between them, checking the nets.

Saleh's piercing green eyes survey the scene. Fishing has been the staple of Haramel for years, he says. His father is a fisherman, as was his father before him.

The waters of the Sea of Oman are warm, he explains, a breeding ground for tuna and grouper, kingfish and sea bream. For ages, Omanis have been setting out before sunrise to make their catch. Fathers and sons are up before the sun to untangle their nets and set out to sea, hoping for a full catch

before midday, when the sun beating down on the Arabian Peninsula, at the Tropic of Cancer, can be brutal. But the heat won't defeat them. They simply wrap their *mussars* around their faces and sink into the hull, shielding themselves as much as possible from the sun and refraining from moving a muscle. There they wait, listening to the rhythms of the waves and the wind, which whisper of what is to come and where to find the fish.

This is how he grew up, lying in the bottom of his father's fishing boat, the waves lapping gently against its hull. For Omanis, the hull of a fishing boat was where, often without words, the most valuable inheritance was transmitted from father to son. Where boys came of age. A cradle and classroom.

"Maybe it was this," he says, "that instilled my love for the water. Or maybe I was simply born for the sea."



SALEH BIN SAID AL JABRI was born at a remarkable time in the history of Oman, and of the world in general—the end of one era and the beginning of another. The year was 1969: the old era was ending, and in its wake, newly independent states were struggling to rediscover their identities. International dynamics had begun to shift in conjunction with an unprecedented discovery: oil. Previously underdeveloped and disconnected from much of the world, Oman stood on the brink of transformation.

Against this backdrop, a visionary ruler ascended to the throne. Looking towards Oman's historical role as a major trading and seafaring partner, Sultan Qaboos bin Said called all Omanis to join in the restoration of a glorious heritage. In the warming international climate, Oman once again began to open itself to its neighbours and the world.

When Sultan Qaboos came to power, Saleh was two years old. At that time, a single Qur'anic school existed in Haramel.



For lessons in other subjects, including Arabic and English, the village children traveled to a tent school in Sidab, the neighbouring village just a few kilometres away.

"It's an easy commute," says Saleh, "if you go by sea."

The problem was, between Haramel and Sidab stood an outcrop of the jagged rocks that guard the Muscat coastline and insulate its coastal villages. And, in the 1970s, roads hadn't yet made it to Haramel.

Every morning, a boat would wait in the lagoon to take the



Fishing boats at Haramel await the next day's excursion

village children to Sidab. But, if one were late...

Saleh points to a scar by his right eye.

“Missing the boat by one minute meant climbing over the rocks—an incline of three hundred metres—not to mention suffering the embarrassment of arriving an hour late, sweating, stinking, and exhausted.”

Saleh finished school around the age of sixteen. One day, a cousin came by to discuss the prospect of pursuing a career in the Royal Air Force. It was a prestigious opportunity, reserved

only to the most dedicated of students. The admission process was rigorous. But Saleh had taken his studies seriously and had consistently scored good marks. With the blessing of his parents, he took the exam, passed, and was accepted into the Air Force.

It was an incredible honour. But something was wrong.

“I had this terrible feeling. Like I had betrayed the call of the sea.” Within two hours of being accepted into the Air Force, Saleh had run away and enlisted in the Royal Navy.



AS HIS TRUCK circled the roundabout, at the centre of which sat a traditional wooden boat, Saleh detected movement out of the corner of his eye. From the hull of the handmade *banush*, a small head popped up and lowered just as quickly. Exiting the roundabout to the right, near a coffee shop, the truck inched along the winding streets. Saleh tapped the brake, veering to avoid the goats whose multicoloured coats hung down in gnarled locks. Reaching the beach, he parked, and the truck idled a moment. At the south end of the beach, back-dropped by golden rock, sprawled a green canopy beneath which stood two portacabins. Saleh shut off the engine, opened the door, and descended the gravel path leading to the work site. At the sound of approaching footsteps, a man in work trousers turned around.

He lifted his right hand in a wave. “Welcome to Qantab,” he said.

Saleh strode forward and the two men shook hands. “Saleh al Jabri, with the Royal Navy of Oman.”

“Eric Staples. I’m a maritime archaeologist,” the man in work trousers replied.

Saleh peered towards the centre of the tent. There she sat.

“Wow,” he murmured. He hadn’t pictured her like this.

The scent of cut wood mingling with the salt of the sea and baked by the hot April sun wafted from the work site.

“*Afzelia africana*.” Eric leaned down to the sand to pick up a spare piece of the reddish wood, handing it to the sailor. Saleh

lifted it to his nose. Its scent was light and unfamiliar. “From Ghana,” said Eric. “It was a bit of an ordeal, but fortunately, we got it.”

Saleh ran his hand over the interlocking grain.

“Afzelia is dense and incredibly strong. But that also presents a challenge when, from straight timbers, we need to fashion planks with curves.”

From downshore, four young men came running, carrying, at shoulder level, a plank that appeared as pliable as rubber. Alongside of them jogged a plaid-shirted man.

Saleh and Eric ducked out of the way as the group approached the tent, beneath which lay a long wooden keel flanked by frames that rose upwards, outlining the hull-to-be. Atop five curving rows, to a flurry of commands, the new plank slid into place.

“Essentially, a sewn boat is built inside-out,” Eric said. “The crucial first step is to shape the planks so that they fit flush. To do that, Babu and the team must bend them.” He pointed to a long, low, primitive-looking wooden box close to the water.

“It’s a steam box,” said Eric. “Basically, each plank goes for a two-hour sauna bath before being sent to the ‘torture rack,’ where, with clamps, we twist it into shape. There’s a window of only about two minutes before the plank cools, so everything has to be virtually perfect even before the plank is steamed. That means that the carpenters chisel the planks to precision, using one of these—a *qalam*.”

*Timbers are steamed to make them pliable,
then clamped into their curved shape*

Eric lifted a V-shaped instrument.

“With one edge of the *qalam*, they trace along the top of a plank already in place. The other end of the *qalam* is dipped in paint and run along the plank to be fitted, marking a line that allows it to fit flush with the first.”

As Eric spoke, a young man in a baseball cap was working on the portside of the growing hull. He paused to dip the tip of a *qalam* in a can of red paint.

“This is Sajid Valappil, one of our carpenters,” Eric introduced. Sajid turned towards Saleh and nodded.

Plank by plank, strake by strake, a sixty-foot hull was taking shape with elements of a *battil qarib*, a double-ended ship with club-shaped stem heads and stern posts.

“Her design is based upon analysis of the Belitung shipwreck, discovered off the coast of Indonesia in 1998,” said Eric.

“An Arab ship?” asked Saleh.

“Construction analysis,” said Eric, “suggested that the ship had originated in the Western Indian Ocean, probably from the Arabian peninsula. The discovery was an historical breakthrough, providing the most direct evidence of how a ship from this era would have been constructed.” Eric motioned towards a place in the shade where a couple of men sat twisting husks between their fingers.

“As you may have heard, ancient Arab ships were stitched together. Nails didn’t make their way into the Indian Ocean until the sixteenth century, with the arrival of the Portuguese.” Around the rope-workers, golden flax littered the sand. Saleh squatted to pick up a sample, rolling it between his fingers.

“*Coir*,” said Eric, “woven from coconut fibres. Samples taken from the Belitung wreck disintegrated under the microscope, but preliminary observation had suggested that a combination of hibiscus or jute, manila, and *coir* had probably been used.

The formers around which the planks are built will be removed when the ship is complete







We ran tests on all four, submerging them for three months in seawater. The manila disintegrated, and the jute virtually rotted away. Hibiscus held up reasonably well, but *coir* was by far the best.”

“It’s been in widespread use for centuries, hasn’t it?” said Saleh.

Eric nodded. “It has. Plus, it had already proven effective on *Sohar*.”

Saleh looked up at the mention of the familiar wooden ship. Named for the legendary birthplace of Sinbad the Sailor, *Sohar* had successfully sailed from Oman to China in 1980 to 1981. The *Sinbad Voyage* had been a landmark event for Oman, casting its maritime tradition into the spotlight. Now, the ship sat proudly on display at the centre of Al Bustan roundabout. Saleh had just passed it on the drive from Haramel to Qantab.

“Babu, our shipwright, worked on it when he was fourteen years old,” said Eric. He gestured towards the plaid-shirted man who had been directing the plank-fitting.

“Extraordinary,” said Saleh.

“The guys here refer to him as *Ustadh*,” said Eric. The word meant ‘professor’ or ‘master.’ “The hope is that, soon, traditional boatbuilding will again be thriving in Oman.”

“Does that mean that you’re doing everything by hand?”

“That’s been the goal,” said Eric. “We did end up ordering some machine-produced rope, but the guys insisted that it wasn’t spongy enough to plug the holes. So we had a thousand coconuts shipped from Salalah, and they’ve pounded these by hand.”

“How much will she require?” asked Saleh.

*Coir woven from coconut fibres
is used to tie the planks together*



“Thousands of metres, probably close to 130,000,” Eric replied, “for everything from stitching to rigging.”

“What kind of rig is she?”

“Actually,” said Eric, “why don’t we go and take a look? I’d like to check on the sail-makers.” He motioned down the beach. Saleh stood up from his squatting position.

The two men stepped out from under the shade of the construction tent and into the blistering sun. The tide was out, and the gentle waves kicked up just a little surf. Stretched out ahead on the sand was a massive canvas rectangle formed of metre-length strips joined by uniform seams. Twelve or so workers in overalls knelt along the north edge of the canvas. As the visitors approached, a number looked up and the familiar greetings rang out.

Returning them, Saleh eyed the canvas. “Ah,” he said, “a square rig.”

“Right,” said Eric, “What they’re working on here is the mizzen storm sail.”

“So she’s double-masted?” Saleh asked.

Eric nodded. “Yes. There’s a considerable amount of guesswork involved, as less than twenty percent of the original could be excavated. Although the stern was stuck deep in the mud, it seems most likely that the original had two masts.”

The huge keelson has to be carved in place for a perfect fit







A few metres away, a worker in a graffitied cap bent over the canvas and, with some effort, forced a thick needle through the stiff cloth.

“This is Fahad al Shaibi,” said Eric. “He and Noor are our resident stitching experts. Last summer, they spent a couple of months in Pemba observing the locals.” Pemba had long and deep ties to Oman. Like some other East African settlements, the Zanzibari island perched on the edge of the Indian Ocean network had absorbed the region’s diverse influences for thousands of years. Among those it had preserved were traditional boatbuilding and sailmaking techniques such as palm-weaving and sail-stitching.

Saleh shifted. For a moment he stepped back and said nothing, turning again to face inland. The sailor’s eyes came to rest on the six or so strakes squatting under the green canopy. Though only a fraction complete, the frames in place foreshadowed the wide, gentle curves of the growing ship.

“Eric,” said Saleh, “I should get going. I’ve got a sailing course to teach this afternoon.”

“All right,” Eric replied. “I’d better go and check on the model-makers. Next time you can meet the rest of the team. At the moment, they’re out looking for good *sidr*.”

“Zain. Sounds good. *Ma’as-salaama*.”

“*Ma’as-salaama*.”

Climbing the gravel hill, Saleh retraced the path to the car park, opened the door of his truck, and put the key in the ignition. For a moment, the motor idled as the sailor looked far out over the sea. He blinked, shifted into gear, and the truck began the steep ascent winding out of Qantab.



Fitting the coir is delicate work

*The rails which will be
used to launch the Jewel*





Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi, and Secretary General Sayyid Badr confirm the plan to build the Jewel of Muscat

SALEH AL JABRI had half believed that he could forget that first encounter with the *Jewel of Muscat*. But in April, he'd been invited to visit a second time, when he would learn more about her story.

The Belitung shipwreck had rocked the archaeological world, and not only on account of her construction, but also her cargo. When, in 1998, at Black Rock near Belitung Island, two sea cucumber divers stumbled across the sunken ship, they found it laden with treasure. Restoration soon revealed that the ship had been carrying over sixty thousand pieces of ceramics, silver, and gold. A significant portion of the cargo was traced to Tang China, earning it the nickname the Tang Treasure.

The discovery contained the most substantial information ever found in relation to the ancient maritime silk route linking Arabia to the Far East. But who would invest in its restoration? One day, a message appeared in the letterbox of George Yeo, Singapore Foreign Minister, located just a few hundred miles north of the recovery site. "The salvage company was unable to sell the entire cargo," Yeo said, "and they were about to break it up. One day, a representative wrote me a strange letter telling me about the cargo and offering it to Singapore." Yeo nearly discarded the letter, then thought again.

Perhaps, it occurred to him, he ought to see the representative who'd sent it.

"He came to my office," says Yeo, "showed me the pictures, and persuaded me that Singapore was the best place to house the cargo and that it should not be broken up, because if you break it up, it loses its meaning."

Yeo recognised the importance of the treasure. But the cost was beyond Singapore's resources. He thought creatively. Yeo managed to negotiate joint acquisition by the Board of Tourism, the Sentosa Leisure Group, and the Khoo Foundation, all of Singapore.

In 2006, Minister Yeo was on official business in Oman when he was driven past the wooden ship *Sohar*, on prominent display in Al Bustan roundabout. Nearly thirty metres in length, with two *zoolies* suspended on either side of the stern, this ship, he was told, had sailed the ancient silk route from Arabia to the Far East.

"That's the Sinbad ship that we constructed to establish how the ancient mariners traveled from Muscat to China," said his host Yusuf bin Alawi. "They proved it could be done."

Yeo's interest was piqued. "I told him of the Tang cargo, and my suspicion that it came from the Omani coast. Half in jest, I said, 'If we had the money, could you build it for us?'"

Little did he know, the Omanis would take the idea seriously. Within a few months, Minister Yeo received word that Sultan Qaboos had offered not only to build the ship, but also to do so as a gift from Oman to the people of Singapore and, God willing, sail it there as well. It was to be an initiative in education and discovery, as well as preserving and reinvigorating Oman's maritime heritage.



FROM THE HAND of a craftsman perched upon a scaffold, a paintbrush made broad sweeps over a row of strakes, yielding a distinctive reddish brown—and an acrid smell.

“Shark oil,” said a bearded man, approaching Saleh. “Excuse the stench.” Two cats circled nearby.

Saleh extended his hand. “Saleh al Jabri,” he said.

“Welcome,” said the man. “Tom Vosmer.” In 2007, Tom had been excavating an ancient site at Qalhat, eighty miles from Muscat, when he'd received a phone call. There was interest in building a reconstruction based upon the Belitung wreck. Tom has been asked to help the project.

“Good to meet you,” said Saleh. “She's beautiful.”

“Yes,” said Tom. “The oil gives her a remarkable sheen. It's one of the ancient practices still in use today.” Tom gestured towards a ladder leaning against the hull. “Have a look inside, if you like.” Mounting the steps, Saleh peered over the strakes and into the hold of the ship. If the outside was impressive, the interior was breathtaking. Hand-carved ribs mounted upward, flush with the wider curve of the hull. The effect was strikingly both homemade and elegant.

“*Mashallah*,” murmured Saleh. Like a swan, he thought, waiting patiently. There was something regal in her wide and graceful curves. Within the sailor, something stirred.

Each of the ribs has to be hand carved to fit precisely



RRRRING. It was the doorbell. “Baba, it’s Mr. Chris!” called Safa, Saleh’s daughter, as she pulled open the door.

Saleh emerged from another room, surprised by the drop-in visit from one of his dearest friends in the world. Christopher Biggins, a retired captain in Oman’s Royal Navy, had been a mentor to Saleh for over twenty-three years.

“I trust Chris with my life,” says Saleh. “He is my father on the sea.”

It was Biggins who, in 1987, as the first mate aboard the sailing ship *Shabab Oman*, had noticed the budding young officer and brought him aboard as a trainee. The next thing Saleh knew, he was preparing to embark for Australia. Meanwhile, Biggins was promoted to Captain. Saleh’s maiden voyage was also Biggins’ first as skipper.

The tall, lanky man gave a slight bow to the little girl who had greeted him at the door.

“Safa, wonderful to see you. How are things?”

“*Marhaba*, Chris. Welcome!” said Saleh. “Come in and sit down. Would you like a coffee?”

The native-born Englishman who had been granted the rare honour of Omani citizenship knew better than to decline.

Saleh slipped into the kitchen as Chris settled on the floor of the majlis. Five minutes later, Saleh emerged with a pot of Omani *kahwa* and a tray piled high with fruit.

“What brings you by?” asked Saleh, cutting into an orange. “It’s the *Jewel of Muscat*, you see,” Chris started.

Her again? thought Saleh. He thought he’d dismissed her.

“Look, Saleh,” said Chris. “They need an experienced Omani captain, and we think you’re the one.”

Chris Biggins gave Saleh three days to think it over. Three days passed, and three sleepless nights. Saleh thought of his promise to his mother. He heard the call of Mother Sea.

As far as Saleh was concerned, he’d established his priorities. Already he’d declined certain opportunities, including

the possibility of joining the team of the record-making *Musandam* on its non-stop circumnavigation of the globe.

“I’d spent twenty-odd years on *Shabab Oman*, had worked hard through some tough days, and thanks be to God, I’d come a long way. I was an older man now, with a family to care for, finally enjoying the opportunity to be the father I’d hoped to be for so long. No way was I going to risk killing those small victories, those little successes.”

Until Chris Biggins had knocked at his door.



“DEAR MAMA, how are you? How are things? How’s Dad?” Saleh entered the courtyard of the senior Jabri home. A soft wrinkled face lit up at the sound of his voice.

“Saleh, my son, come.” Bibi al Jabri held out her hand to her son, who took it and kissed it lightly. “Your father is out, still. How are my grandchildren?”

“Everyone’s well,” said Saleh. “But look, Mum, I’ve got something I need to discuss with you.”

“My son, what is it?” The smiling eyes clouded with concern.

“No no, don’t worry, nothing serious,” said Saleh. “Can we go inside? Let’s have a drink.” They slipped off their sandals and entered the cool of the *majlis*.

Passing to the kitchen, Saleh found a bottle of fresh water and two cups. He carried them to the *majlis*. Slowly, he poured. The cool water filled the glasses as his mind churned over the right words.

The sailor looked his mother in the eyes. *The dearest person in the world*, he thought. *What am I about to do to her heart?*

When he told her he had decided to pilot the *Jewel of Muscat*, Saleh’s mother refused to speak to him.

She was disappointed with a son who was breaking his word. That wasn’t how she’d raised him. Saleh understood. Bibi was right: he was her son, and his word was his integrity.

“How could he do this!” exclaimed Bibi to Saleh’s wife, Aseelah. “Twenty-five years of going and coming, coming and going, tormenting my heart. And now, after he has promised—the craziest idea of all?”

Aseelah placed her hand over her mother-in-law’s.

“Am I out of line?” fretted Bibi.

Aseelah sighed. “No, Bibi, you’re not out of line.”

“What doesn’t he understand?” continued Bibi. “A wooden ship, held together with string? This is his family! He has responsibilities to you and to his children. The Navy was one thing—but an ancient ship crossing the Bay of Bengal? What notions have come into your husband’s head?”

Bibi al Jabri was carved from the generation of the Omani Renaissance, which had witnessed indescribable change in the last forty years. Everything—roads, schools, buildings, telephones—had come under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos. Bibi’s deep appreciation for all of this expressed itself in a genuine love for country and family. It had also been handed on to her son. What she didn’t see was that the values she’d instilled were precisely what were compelling him to accept the commission.

It would take time, Saleh thought, but Bibi would come around. He sent two emissaries.

“Mama,” said Saleh’s sister Amina, “this is Saleh’s chance to return the tiniest bit to our country.”

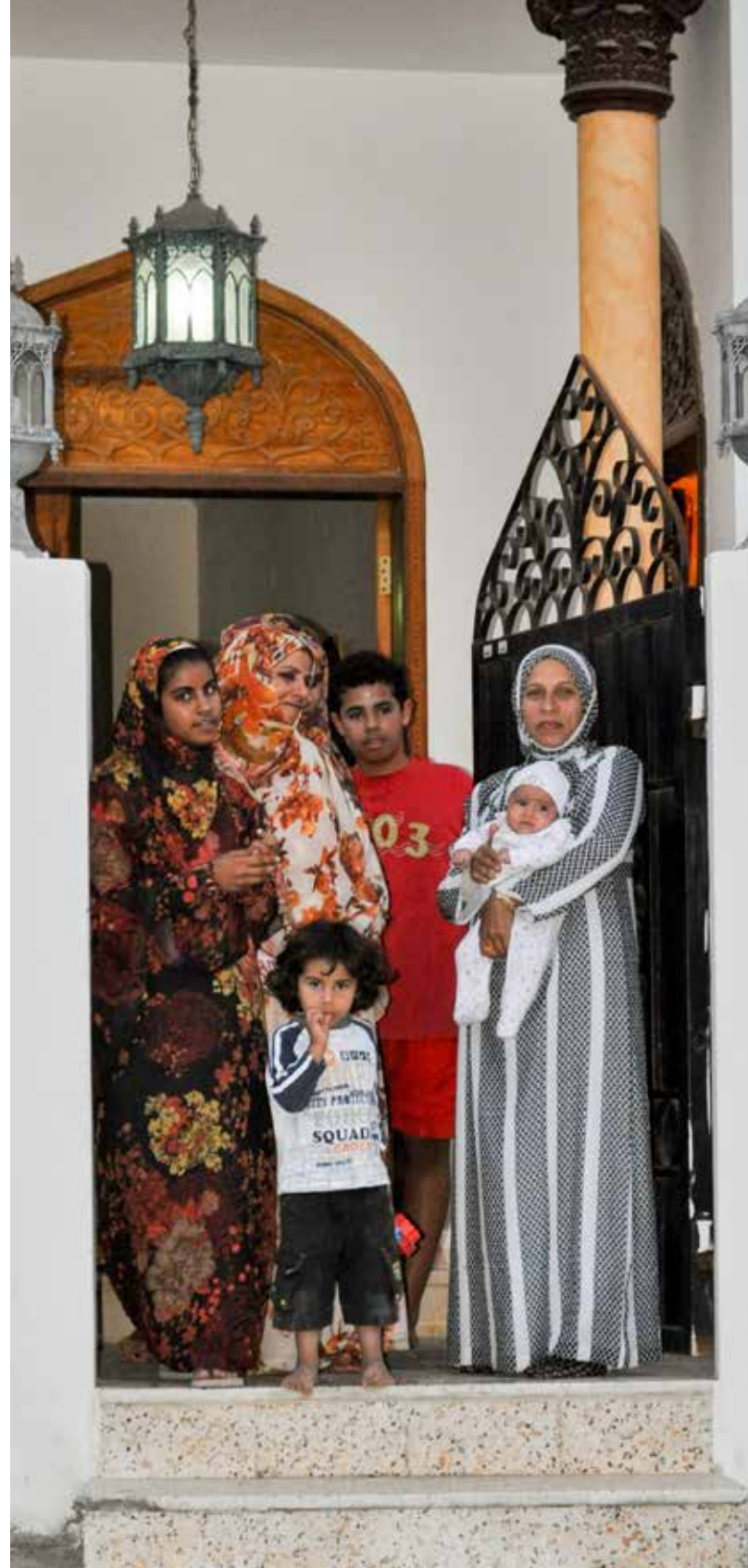
“It is your chance too, Mama,” added Abdullah, his brother.

The interventions were met with silence.

“Mama, it is not only Saleh’s chance to thank His Majesty, but all of ours.”

Bibi didn’t hold out for too long. Her son knew her well. She gave up her silence and granted her blessing.

Saleh’s family prepare for another long absence







CHAPTER TWO

Muscat to Kochi

The Jewel
takes to the water

TICK. TOCK. Saleh glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Three-fourteen. He turned his face back towards the ceiling.

Out in the darkness his *Jewel* was waiting, silently, in the moonless night.

Mid-October was approaching, and the window was tight. The boat would float free only on the spring tide, the highest of the month, which, this month, was due to arrive on the 17th and 18th. If the spring tide passed, the entire project was in jeopardy. The team scrambled to ready the ship for her launch. The plan was to construct a cradle and a track that would gently roll the completed hull from the construction site to the water line below. Workers laid track through the night. A team of divers suited up and, battling against surf and current, attempted to affix the track to the sea floor. At one o'clock in the morning, the final segment of track was wrestled into place. The ship crept down the rails towards the water. By dawn on the 17th, the *Jewel* stood metres from the water's edge. The first of the four spring tides was on its way.

It came. And went.

In the small hours before high tide the ship is rolled down to the shoreline







At dawn, the Jewel begins its journey into the Sea of Oman

Metres from the water, an entire section of track buckled under the weight of the hull. The ship refused to budge.

Under pressure, the project team made a risky wager. Hoping that sheer force could achieve what planning could not, they summoned an earthmover.

Crunch. Shooting forward in its cradle, the hull grated against its steel supports. By now, the morning tide was

swirling around the workers' feet. The day's launch window had come and gone. There was one chance left. The last of the month's spring tides would arrive tomorrow, October 18th, around eight o'clock.

Morning dawned on October 18th. Word had spread. Alongside the familiar faces, several hundred people—possibly the most ever seen on Qantab Beach—had gathered



The Jewel afloat at last

at the work site, along with a corps of traditional drummers, contributing an atmosphere of festivity.

Once more, divers entered the water, preparing to release the boat from its cradle once it reached the sea. Pushing in unison to the rhythm of the drum corps' song, villagers jumped in to help as hands, arms, legs, and shoulders heaved against the hull.

Suddenly, the boat lurched into the sea—straight past the divers. Twelve metres beyond the end of the track, they caught up to her and wrestled her free from the cradle supports.

The Jewel of Muscat was free.



Torn between excitement and sadness, Saleh began counting down the days until departure. Twenty-eight. Twenty-one. Fourteen. Seven. One.

Among media demands and school visits, coordination of logistics and provision of stores, the actual time spent on the sea had withered away as deadlines loomed nearer and nearer. They had taken her out probably two or three times in the course of one month. Only once had they spent the night on the sea, and during that night, they had anchored for lack of wind.

Not exactly what one would call prepared.

So much rode on this voyage. At stake were personal reputation, career, and—though no one wanted to consider it—life. But to many of the crew, even these were minor concerns next to the great honour bestowed on them by His Majesty the Sultan. *If we fail*, thought Saleh, *I'll be to blame*.

All involved were acutely aware of the stakes. As a gift from Sultan Qaboos to the people of Singapore, there was no room for error. The ship was a symbol of Oman's glorious past and—*inshallah*—its successful present. Omani pride was quite publicly on the line.

But Saleh also felt personally responsible for the seventeen lives that would accompany him on board, at least four of which had never before been subjected to the open seas, not least upon anything as primitive as a ninth-century ship. Furthermore, whilst he'd worked with many people, sailing around the world on *Shabab Oman* and as an instructor with Oman Sail, Saleh had never commanded such a multinational crew. Skippering a ship was a challenge enough. Navigating a range of languages, cultures, and customs was another thing entirely.

*The Jewel of Muscat's name
is carved on the prow*



VEL. OF MUSCAT

بوهرة مسقط



*A rare glimpse of the hull
beneath the surface*

There was the question of health, and what to do in the case of sickness. Two on board would have undergone basic medical training. But ultimately, if anyone were to encounter serious illness, there would be little a medic could provide. Beyond this, an even graver concern tugged at the corners of his mind. It was something Saleh would rather not have considered: the looming possibility of death.

“We didn’t want to talk about it,” said Saleh. But the chance of death was real. A man overboard, a broken spar, tropical diseases, malnutrition—realistically, the issue had to be addressed. If an emergency were to occur on one of the first three legs, said Saleh, a rescue vessel wouldn’t reach the *Jewel* for up to four or five days. Strong winds would prevent any rescue by air. A contingency plan was essential.

Someone had had to broach the topic. The uncomfortable duty was left to Chris Biggins, an experienced captain himself well aware of the importance of addressing the dangers with pragmatism.

“We took aboard a plastic body bag,” says Saleh. It’s clear he doesn’t want to elaborate. “I hid it and didn’t mention it to anyone for weeks.” Eventually he felt obliged to tell Robert Jackson, the ship’s medic.

“Many people were worried about the dangers of the voyage,” said Saleh. “They’d ask me about pirates, about cargo ships, about the weather and the fact that we would have no escort ship with us.”

They were no minor concerns. He lay awake at night with worst-case scenarios playing through his mind.

“In the mornings,” Saleh said, “my mind was a blur. But some hot, strong coffee would shake things back into order and as the sun came up, off we went again into another day.”

Saleh’s two phones were ringing with last-minute business from the project team, or with media requests, even in the middle of the night. But the opportunity was so unusual that Saleh remained thrilled. There was an air of excitement

throughout Muscat. Everyone had heard of the *Jewel of Muscat*, the sailing gift being sent from His Majesty to the people of Singapore.

As media requests increased, Saleh saw his family less and less. Every spare minute he had he spent with them, knowing that once the ship set sail, it was likely he wouldn’t see them for four months at least.

“It was all a bit surreal,” he smiled. “In twenty-five years in the Navy, and as a sail instructor for Oman Sail, I’d never been the focus of the camera. Now, *National Geographic* was asking to come to my home and to sit and interview my family.”

Saleh’s father found it all slightly amusing. Here was his son, bombarded by the media, many of whom as visitors to Oman were fascinated by the most mundane characteristics of Omani life—dates and *kahwa*, the Haramel lagoon, the process of closing in on fish with nets. They were aspects of life so common that Omanis would barely think twice about them.

Once upon a time, sixty thousand pieces of Chinese ceramics, gold and silver sank to the bottom of the sea—a lost fortune of elegance, culture, and wealth—but the passage of the *Jewel of Muscat* would be a matter of life and death. Nevertheless, from the depths of his being, something whispered: *trust this ship*. The construction team had been zealously scrupulous. It wasn’t her integrity that plagued him. No no, he was confident that the ship was ready. The question was, were they, the sailors?

No one in the world knew how to sail a ninth-century ship. Not even the team that designed and built her. Their efforts—the ship and its voyage—would stand in tribute to the brave sailors of the ancient world.



SUDDENLY, THE DAY HAD ARRIVED. Saleh turned to his diary.

February 16, 2010: the date is forever engraved in my memory. On this day, the Jewel of Muscat, that beautiful handcrafted ship named by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, set sail from Port Sultan Qaboos in Muscat destined for its first port of call in Kochi, India.

When I woke on Tuesday, that morning, the first thing I thought of was to bid farewell to the dearest one in my life—my mother—to kiss her blessed hands, and to listen to her words before leaving. I went to her home as usual. But when I looked into her eyes, my words choked in my throat.

I took her hands in mine. My mother looked hard at me, unblinking.

Bibi al Jabri was a teacher by nature. Experience was palpable in the wrinkles of her forehead, in the smiles at the corners of her eyes.

“My dear son, Saleh,” said the mother to the son, laying a soft hand upon his own. “Go under the protection of God. You are bearing the message of your country, entrusted to you by the wise and inspired father of all Omanis, who has instilled in the hearts of his sons extraordinary courage, audacity, and will. Do not worry about us. We are safe and secure. Rest assured, we remain under the care of God Almighty and His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, our father and brother.”

Bibi’s eyes welled with tears. Saleh’s did as well. In over twenty years of sailing the seas for the sake of his beloved Oman, never before had he heard words like these come from the lips of his mother.

They would echo in me throughout the entire voyage, pushing me every day to be strong in my leadership, and reminding me to rely upon God to protect and aid us on our journey.

It is priceless to be near loved ones, especially when they have longed for you in your absence, waiting for you to come home. But when the call for duty comes from Oman, we must give her everything and do everything to answer her call. I resolved to do whatever was needed, even to the last drop of my blood, to bring the ship and her crew safely to berth in Singapore.



She speaks in a language audible to those who listen, to those who feel.

There are whispers in the hum of the wind in her rigging, the knock of the waves against her hull. The voices of ancestors murmur in the creak of her planks.

They tell secrets of a time long past and yet somehow, now again, coming alive. Do they know something of a ship that went down—of mysteries long dead and buried?

In the moonless night the *Jewel of Muscat* sat berthed at Port Sultan Qaboos, waiting for the first light of the sun to usher in the day of departure. Her hold was stuffed and stocked and full of sleeping bags, jerry cans, tins of tuna. Handmade water jugs—*gahelas*—hung above her deck full to the brim with fresh water. The *Jewel*, like the night, was expectant. Suspended in time.

A hand-made water jug hangs above the deck





Celebrations as the Jewel prepares for departure

ON FEBRUARY 16TH, 2010, over three hundred spectators lined the pier at Port Sultan Qaboos to bid farewell and fair winds to the *Jewel of Muscat*. Hundreds of others watched from afar, waving from the Muttrah corniche, or from their homes, following the coverage live on Oman TV.

As dates and legumes, ghee, honey, and *halwa* were loaded onto the ship, a national dance troupe drummed and danced. Already on board were stores of dried fish and fruits, rice, flour and dates. To this were added twenty chickens and two goats, which—forced to share space with a seventeen-man crew—would usually be relegated to the *zoolie*. When it came down to it, twenty chickens and two goats wouldn't be all that substantial over the course of four weeks—especially when, on the very first leg, two of the chickens would fly the coop and drift away on the Arabian Sea.

The sun was brilliant in the February sky. As their ropes were loosed, flocks of white doves speckled the cloudless blue. Red, white and green balloons—the colours of the Omani flag—climbed until they were out of sight, carrying the wishes of loved ones, *Godspeed*.

According to tradition, Captain Saleh was handed a copy of the Qur'an, from which he read the following verse: "Verily He Who ordained the Qur'an of thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return."

For the last time, Saleh glanced towards his family who had come to see him off.

Perched atop the shoulders of his brother, Saleh's youngest son, Firas, waved an Omani flag. Nearby on the pier, in the shade of a tasselled canopy, sat a tearful wife, sister, and daughter.



A spectacular ceremony at Sultan Qaboos Port marks Jewel of Muscat's departure on her epic voyage to Singapore

Next to them was a stoic Bibi al Jabri. It was the first time in all of her son's career that Bibi had attended a departure ceremony.

It was difficult to meet their gaze. But their tears were also tears of pride, and I knew that I would be sailing with their full support and love.

It was my dream to captain an ancient ship like the Jewel. It was the rarest of opportunities, unprecedented in history, not to mention in my lifetime, and I was stunned by the profundity of the honour.

As the Jewel made its way out of the harbour into the open sea, fire tugs shot jets of water into the air. Muttrah shimmered

in the midday light, her white buildings accented by the blue domes of al Lawatiya Mosque and the imposing rocks guarding each side of the harbour.

They ship rounded the corner and reached the open sea.

"All right boys. *Irfa' al-shira'*! Hoist the main sail. *Yalla ya shabab!*"

The crew hoisted her sail for the first time and the Jewel of Muscat set sail like a princess in a field of flowers, protected by the breeze, like the whispered prayers of a lover. She leaned with the wind, soft on the sea, gliding ahead to her first ocean and ready for anything, challenging all weather conditions, confident in the protection of God and the skill of her sailors on board.





Fahad al Shaibi and Ayaz al Zadjali resize a block

THE FIRST FINGERS of grey dawn had wiped two thin patches of sky just above the horizon to the east. First mate Khamis al Hamdani checked the compass. Then he touched the helm, almost imperceptibly pushing it ahead.

“*Sabah al khair.*” A low voice spoke from the darkness. Good morning. A familiar silhouette appeared.

“*Sabah innoor,*” the first mate returned to his captain.

Saleh stepped over a pair of legs and came up alongside Khamis at the stern. Four or five sailors were sprawled on deck, opting for the open air over the stuffiness of the hold. Eight others dotted the deck, manning their watch positions. In the pale light he could just make out the silhouette of Fahad, at the bow, about fifteen metres away.

“Captain, you should be getting some rest,” said Khamis, with a grin. He knew Saleh better than that.

“Couldn’t sleep,” said Saleh. “How are things?”

Khamis moistened his finger with the tip of his tongue, and held it to the air.

“What is she saying?” the captain asked his first mate.

“Smooth sailing,” he replied. “Little wind—slow going—but calm seas.”

Saleh turned towards the streaks of silver sky. Calm waves lapped at the hull and it rocked with the rhythmic sway of a cradle. The ship’s planks, sewn not nailed, creaked as they flexed under the gentle impact.

“Unbelievable, isn’t she?” Saleh looked up at the rigging, which threaded through hand-carved wooden blocks—no winches or pulleys.

Khamis smiled. “*Aywuh.*” Yes. Then the two old naval shipmates, sons of sons of sons of fishermen, and friends, sat silently watching the morning.

At the morning meeting the crew discuss the day's plan

Carpenter Sajid Valappil placed a kettle on the *matbakh* as the sailors gathered around and squatted on the foredeck near the captain. Saleh had propped up a whiteboard and now drew a couple of configurations of arrows across it with a marker. The kettle boiled. Sajid poured the hot water into a coffee pot. The familiar sound of it filling was almost comfort enough. He grabbed four small cups and joined the crew assembled for the daily briefing. As Saleh started explaining the diagram on the whiteboard, Sajid handed around the four cups, filling them with the light-coloured steaming coffee. The smell of cardamom wafted towards Said, the bosun, who gratefully received the first cup in his outstretched right hand.

“Al hamdulillah,” Said murmured. *“Shukran, Sajid,”* he said. *Thank you.*

“This is the current wind system,” said Captain Saleh, pointing to the pattern he had drawn on the right side of the board. “But as you can see it looks like it will be shifting this afternoon as we get closer to leaving the Sea of Oman and entering the open Arabian Sea.”

He gestured towards a second system illustrated on the left of the board. “Watch teams,” he said, “I don’t anticipate any rough weather conditions that will require us completely to lower the mainsail, but we’ll probably do quite a bit of setting and resetting to try to capture the wind.”

“How did you find her yesterday when you were trying to bring her close to the wind?”

“She was impressive,” said Khamis. “Much better than we expected.”

With little evidence of the Belitung’s rig available, the design team had consulted textual and iconographic sources and concluded that the original had probably been double-masted and square-rigged.

This had been something of a surprise, since the triangular lateen sail was generally considered to be characteristically Arab. But research had revealed that square sails had been





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used on Arab ships even into the sixteenth century. It was quite possible that the triangular sail might have emerged only within the past three to five hundred years.

The team had expected a square rig to work well when the ship could run with the wind but anticipated challenges when sailing into the wind. Her designers had been surprised.

“It’s curious,” said Khamis. “We were bringing her to within probably seventy-five, even seventy degrees.”

“Really?” said Saleh, raising his eyebrows.

“The main problem was shadowing,” the first mate added. When sailing before the wind, the mizzen blocked the wind from the mainsail, the primary source of thrust and movement. Said, the bosun, nodded in agreement. He had passed his cup back to Sajid, jiggling it slightly to indicate that he had finished. Sajid refilled it and passed it on to another outstretched hand.

Eric, the maritime archaeologist, spoke up. “We experimented a bit with resetting the mizzen to channel the wind towards the mainsail and had some success by staggering the sails, pushing the lower yard up to eight or nine metres in each direction.”

“We also tried taking her ten to twenty degrees off course,” said Khamis. “But I think we have far to go with that one.”

“What do you mean?” asked the captain.

“Well, a few of yesterday’s inadvertent tacks happened when we were attempting this manoeuvre. We haven’t quite mastered the combination of sails and rudders.”

“Essentially we over-steered,” said Eric. “But we’ve got about four weeks to practise, right?”

If any leg of the passage was ideal for getting to know the intricacies of the ship, it was the first, on the placid Arabian Sea. The north-east monsoon was famously gentle.

“All right,” said Captain Saleh. “Once you’ve finished your coffee, starboard watch, take up your stations. Port watch, you can begin maintenance duties. The shrouds and forestays

need a good coat of baggywrinkle. Yahya and Hussein, will you see to this?”

Able Seamen Yahya and Hussein nodded. “Aye, Captain,” said Yahya.

“There’s still quite a bit of sorting to do in the hold,” continued Saleh. “Ahmed has begun a good system. Ahmed, would you like help with this?”

“Maybe one other wouldn’t hurt,” said Ahmed. Saleh appointed Jeff, the representative from Singapore who’d been selected to join for part of the passage.

“Adam, you’re on the pumps. Check to make sure they’re all in working order and report to me what you find, especially if anything is irreparable. Ayaz, would you check the bilges to gauge how much water we took on overnight?” The young boatbuilding protégée nodded.

“Fahad, sorry to do this to you, but will you look after the chickens?” The twenty chickens aboard had been unloaded in a cage made in Suwaiq by the friends of one of the sailors. “There’s a hole in the cage,” said Saleh. “Will you see what you can do?” Fahad nodded.

“Pushpadas,” Saleh turned to the carpenter, “you know best what needs doing on deck. Would it help to have some assistance?” The carpenter nodded, his well-trimmed moustache bobbing up and down. “Sajid, you’ll work with Pushpadas.”

Contingent upon the regional monsoons, the *Jewel’s* departure had taken place with a few loose ends still lingering, including an unfinished deck. In fact, there had been no evidence of a deck aboard the Belitung. Ancient sailors were likely to have ridden atop the cargo, exposed to all the elements and bailing water out by hand. However, in the end, the *Jewel’s* designers agreed to a deck in the interest of safety.

The crew had begun to disperse. Suddenly Yahya, on lookout near the bow, shouted out.

“Whale!” called Yahya, pointing across the water. A dark



Ahmed al Balushi mans the helm

shape had appeared just above the water line. But strangely, it didn't move. The ship inched nearer. Yahya's whale was a large piece of driftwood.



"I CAN'T ESCAPE IT!" Jeff emerged from the stale environs of the hold where he'd been organising supplies with Ahmed and came face to face with Pushpadas and Sajid sweeping the foredeck with a fresh coat of fish oil. Pushpadas sat back on his heels and wiped his brow. It was a perfect twenty-eight degrees.

Jeff undid his blue and white *shemagh*, wrapped in the

Batinah style, as worn by most of the *Jewel's* sailors. Running a hand through his hair, he wiped a pair of sunglasses and popped them on, surveying the rest of the ship.

"Look at Fahad," he said. Fahad was occupied at the chicken coop. Sitting astride one end of it, he was attempting to repair a section that had frayed, by weaving in new palm fronds. Chickens pecked at the deck around him, spotted as it was with clods of chicken droppings.

Meanwhile Robert, the medic, ducked under the lower yard and stooped to the deck to rifle through piles of rope.

"These animals are relentless," he said, casting a look towards the stern. He was speaking of the two goats brought aboard to provide a meagre but prized supply of fresh meat, and whose mischief had relegated them to the portside *zoolie*.

"They are far more interested in the manila and *coir* than in their fodder," said Robert. He picked up a section of rope, examining it over the top of his spectacles. Two sets of horns poked up just over the rail. "Little do they know they're jeopardising their own welfare," said Robert. The goats had begun gnawing on the ropes suspending the *zoolie*.

"They're jeopardising ours, too," said Jeff, glancing at the stitching that held together the planks. "But then, come to think of it, maybe they're writing their own demise."

"I hope we can hold out at least until next Friday," said Robert. They didn't want to exhaust their meat stores right away. There would be no chance to restock before reaching Kochi.

Just then, from near the stern came a loud squawk and a flapping of wings. Jumping to his feet, Fahad lunged towards the rail near the starboard *zoolie*.

"No!" they heard him cry. Doubled over the rail, only Fahad's waist and legs were visible. He righted himself and turned to face the deck.

"One of the hens laid an egg," he said. "It rolled off the rail into the sea."

“CAPTAIN, this is becoming unacceptable.”
“What’s that?” Saleh was disarmed by the statement from the usually congenial Yahya. Yahya pointed to the aft deck, coated with chicken droppings.

Effective as it was, Fahad’s repair to the chicken coop hadn’t lasted long. There were simply too many of them with incessant curiosity.

Saleh sighed. “Well, only one solution I can think of.”

Yahya grinned. “All right, Captain!” He was off in a flash. “Ahmed!” he cried.

Lunch that day was entirely satisfying. The stubborn coop was cast overboard, and it drifted out to sea. But the *Jewel* was having trouble harnessing the wind. For the rest of the day, a pool of chicken parts bobbed along, somewhat hauntingly, by the side of the ship.

That Sunday, the wind struck up. Throughout the day, it continued to gain in strength. By four a.m. on Monday, the wind had reached nearly eighteen knots.

Khamis lifted a finger to the air. It had cooled.

“What’s she reading?” he asked Adam, at the helm. He was charting wind speed and direction.

“It’s shifting,” said Adam, scrawling something with pencil in the deck log. “It’s coming from the aft quarter.”

“Standby, boys,” said Khamis. “This is tricky wind.”

Ahmed and Fahad, Adam and Hussein stood at their positions. The wind was blowing stiffly. “Prepare to adjust the mainsail,” said the first mate.

Ahmed and Hussein held tight on the mainsheets.

“Port watch, adjust the mainsail two points to starboard,” commanded Khamis. “Well done, boys,” he encouraged. “Now make her fast.” They tied down the lines. The sail was taught. The *Jewel* was clipping along at three knots, then four, then five. Then all of a sudden Adam called out from the helm.

“Hold it *shabab!* We’ve lost the rudder!”

The ship started tacking harshly.



“Wear the ship!” called Khamis, attempting to recover her. “Trim both sails three points to starboard. Ahmed and Adam, see to the rudder.”

Following the command of the first mate, the two set upon the quarter rudder, trying to reposition it in its slot. Saleh emerged from below to find a busy deck and immediately made his way to the rudder, where Adam and Ahmed were manoeuvring it back into place. Saleh took the helm.



The view from high up the mast

Leaning at a severe angle, the ship made a complete circle. “Breakfast,” said Adam. “I need a strong Omani coffee.” Watch duty shifted, and a tired port team dropped to recline on a slanted deck.

“She’s all yours,” said Khamis, handing over the watch to Eric. Eric leaned over the rail in an attempt to gain a better view of the faulty quarter rudder. “Ayaz, take over at the helm, will you?” he said.

“Engage the leeward quarter rudder,” said Eric. With the wind coming over the stern, the ship heeled towards starboard. Ayaz lowered the starboard rudder and felt it grip the water.

Eric squinted up at the masts. A strange sound, like a sporadic vibration, was coming from the top.

“Captain, you might want to take a look at this,” said Eric.

Saleh drew up alongside Eric. He listened. Sure enough, the mast was humming like a plucked guitar string.



WHEN THE BELITUNG shipwreck was first discovered, analysis revealed that, like the cargo it carried, the ship itself was a pastiche of styles and materials. Wood samples identified as *Azelia africana* and teak pointed to sources as geographically distant as West Africa and India. However, the wreck had provided no evidence of the mast construction. Having decided that two masts seemed most probable, the design team decided to seek out poona, one of the strongest, straightest trees in the world, available in the southern region of India.

In June of 2008, foreman Luca Belfioretti had set out for the hot, humid forests of Kerala, India, in search of two tall,

straight trees that could be milled into the *Jewel's* seventeen-metre masts. Trekking through the muggy forests, a local guide suggested tree after tree.

“No good,” said Luca. “Not straight enough.” The guide pointed to another. “Not tall enough.” The guide shook his head. “It’s got to be perfect,” said Luca.

The perfect tree proved elusive. After days of battling mosquitoes and risking dengue fever, Luca had settled for satisfactory. Twenty-seven pieces of poona were loaded into a container labelled for Oman.

Back at Qantab, the project team waited and waited. Seven



weeks later, the container had finally arrived. Unloaded on site, the team found their precious poona coated with dry rot, a lethal fungus that not only destroyed the shipment, but also threatened to contaminate all the other wood on site. The entire container of poona had to be burned.

Resorting to Plan B, the team sourced a shipment of teak that arrived later that autumn. However, none of the teak logs were long enough to fashion into a single mast. Forced to compromise, shipwright Babu Sankaran had spliced together two pieces. *Would the mast hold? Babu had wondered. Would it survive the open seas?*

Said crawls to the tip of the lower yard to fix the new storm sail

Saleh looked at Eric. “Definitely not good,” he said. “Mind if I take over?”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Eric.

“We’ll try to reduce some pressure on the mast by raising the storm sail,” said Saleh. The watch leader gave way.

“Starboard to positions,” called out Saleh. Ahmed took up his station at starboard brace, Ayaz at the sheet, Robert at lazy tack.

“Ready the storm sail to hoist on the mizzen!” Sajid and Said hauled out the storm sail, bound neatly as it had been since it was loaded onto the ship. They carried the heavy cloth and spar to the foot of the mizzen mast, preparing to lash it in place.

“Lower the mizzen!” Saleh struck up a tune, and Ahmed and Said took over. At the halyard, Yahya and Robert started lowering the sail in unison. Down came the mizzen, cupping the wind. The men at the sheets and braces held tight to their lines to stabilise the yards and keep the sail under control. Suddenly the halyard jammed.

“Be smooth, *shabab!*” Saleh encouraged, and called out the rhythmic song once more. The seas were choppy, throwing the sailors off balance.

At last, success: down came the mizzen. Said and Sajid began to lash the new storm sail in place. Said crawled to the tip of the lower yard, which extended out beyond the rail of the ship. With his thighs, he clung to the spar. Without the balance provided by the sail, the ship pitched on the swells. It leaned, and Said leaned with it. His bare heels kicked up surf in the water as he unfastened the lashings.

Eighty-two minutes later, the storm sail was raised for the first time aboard the *Jewel of Muscat*. The crew looked up, holding their breath, to see how the mast would respond. The sail filled taut with air. They listened. No sound but the wind.

IT WAS HOT. It was damp, the air was stale and sticky. The ship was rolling.

Saleh's stomach rumbled. He looked at his watch. Three a.m. He looked over and saw two of his sailors, nestled in their bunks, suspended one atop the other. A film of sweat clung to their faces, beading in the stubble of their beards. Two hours of sweet sleep would be an accomplishment.

As she headed south towards the Lakshadweep Islands, a muggy heat had descended on the *Jewel*, making sleep, a rare commodity to begin with, even more of a challenge. Giving up, Saleh swung his legs over the side of his bunk and ascended the companionway.

"Good morning, Captain." It was Eric.

Saleh returned the greetings. "How are things?"

"Mm, we're making about three-point-five knots, over the course of one hundred and fifty-five to one-sixty degrees. Current position is sixteen-point-two-four degrees north, sixty-seven-point-one-four degrees east."

"Tea, Captain?" Yahya came by with the pot. Saleh nodded and took the small cup he offered in an outstretched hand.

"That's all the breakfast you'll have today, unfortunately," said Yahya.

"What do you mean?"

"When Ahmed took inventory yesterday, he found that almost all the remaining fruit had spoiled. He had to toss them overboard."

"Wasn't he washing them in seawater?"

"Apparently it wasn't very effective."

"We'll have to cut portion sizes."

"That's what Ahmed was saying. With two weeks still to go, breakfast will be dates and coffee."



The crew prepare the midday meal

By now, life on board the *Jewel* had obtained a steady rhythm. On the calm waters of the Arabian Sea, the days came and went on a schedule dotted by regular briefings, watch changes, prayer times, meals, tasks, and drills. Time passed, filled by the typical tasks of sea life: mast repair, rope lubrication, baggywrinkle maintenance. But another concern had arisen, as well. Water had begun more frequently to appear in the bilges.

Captain Saleh began to worry about health, morale, and the onset of mid-passage monotony.



Life at sea is affecting the sailors morally, physically, and mentally. Their fitness is suffering from restrictions on movement, as seventeen men, confined within a sixty-foot hull, have little space to walk around and stretch their legs. Their diets are suffering, too.

Cooking is an especially difficult task on the Jewel, fitted with its traditional charcoal cook-box. And with a diet based primarily on dried and canned food, proper nutrition is impossible.

Personal hygiene depends entirely on what is available. Baths are usually of saltwater, which a man will pour over himself while standing in the zoolie. On calm days, he might get a swim. Sleeping is rare and may not exceed two hours per day—in many cases, one hour only.

But the most grueling aspect of a voyage is the constant tension caused by anticipation of the unknown. It is the waiting that can wear on a sailor, that has the potential to defeat him mentally and morally.



SALEH EXPELLED A SIGH.
 “I don’t like the look of these shipping lanes.”

Taking a pencil from behind his ear, Mylai, the navigator, marked something on the map. The ship had now covered more than three-fourths of the distance to Kochi. The navigator lifted a compass, pinned it to the map, and swivelled it three times.

“There is an alternative,” he said.

Mylai sat with the captain in the hold of the ship. With barely enough room for one person in the navigation quarters below deck, as he began to unfold the map, Mylai was supporting the eastern half of the Arabian Sea with his right arm.

“The traffic is only going to increase as we approach the continental shelf,” he remarked. Mylai Prabhakar knew these seas. He’d been on the water since completing college in Chennai. Nevertheless, when it came to ninth-century ships, Mylai was as much of a novice as the rest.

“If you want to avoid the coast, you could take this route,” he said, retracing the steps of the compass.

“Will it reduce the traffic?” Saleh asked.

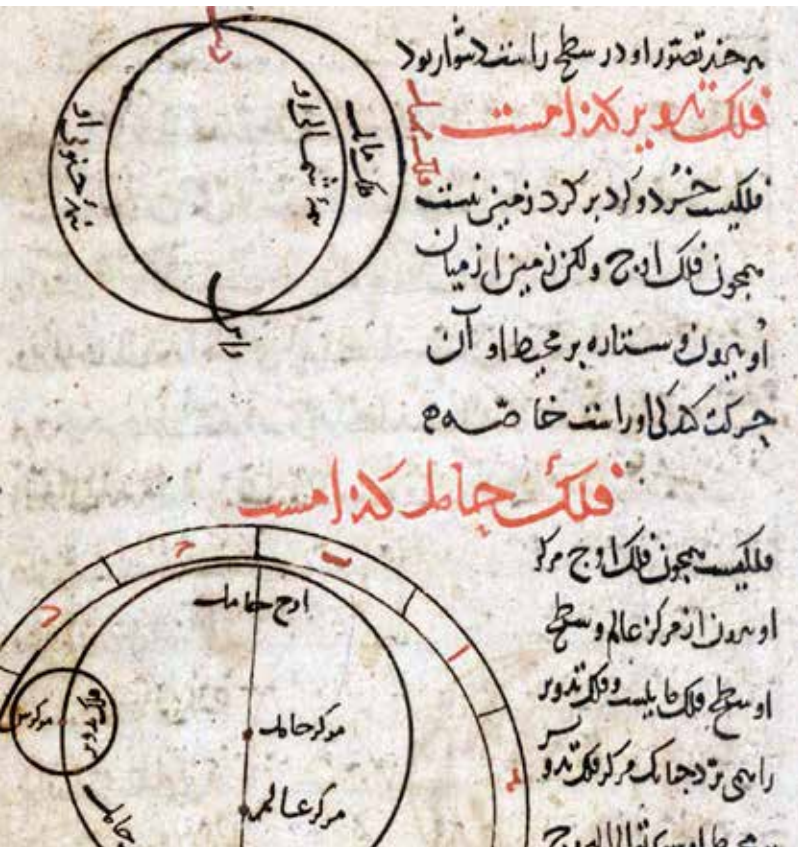
“It should,” said Mylai.

Saleh ruminated.

“Excuse me a minute.”

Saleh went to his bunk and bent down to pull out a box stowed beneath. Removing its lid, he lifted out a binder containing photocopies of *Al-Fawid*, the navigational treatise of fifteenth-century Arab seaman Ahmed ibn Majid.

“Have you looked at this?” said Saleh to Mylai, offering the notebook. “Almost six hundred years ago, this guy had already meticulously detailed everything.” Saleh opened to a page he’d marked, describing the Indian Ocean passage.





Opposite: navigation charts from the 15th century, by Ahmed Ibn Majid

Above: First mate Khamis al Hamdani plots the Jewel's route

“The ancient ships hugged the coast,” said Saleh, with a trace of hesitation.

The navigator looked over Saleh’s shoulder at the book.

“But six hundred years ago was six hundred years ago,” said Mylai. “They weren’t exactly dealing with cargo vessels then.”

Saleh pursed his lips in thought. He looked at the map. He looked at the book.

“Your call, Captain,” the navigator said.

That night, Saleh lay awake in his bunk, a suspended sheet of canvas, listening. The planks creaked like voices of ancestors murmuring something he could not quite grasp. They

whispered in the hum of the wind in the rigging, the knock of the waves against the hull. In the deep, dark blackness, he listened. *What should I do?* he thought. *What are they saying?*

Phantoms, he knew not from where, danced around the corners of his imagination. Unanswerable questions tugged at the edges of his mind. And the voices continued in their incomprehensible chatter, telling secrets of a time long past and buried, and yet somehow, again, coming alive.

Perhaps they knew something of a ship that went down, mysteries that may never be revealed.

The gentle waves lifted her hull up-down, up-down. In his bunk, like a rocking cradle, the captain drifted off to sleep.



A green sea turtle paddles alongside the Jewel

THE NEXT MORNING, a stoic face surveyed the sea. “You all right, Captain?” asked Khamis. For a moment, Saleh didn’t respond.

Then, “Fine, fine,” he said. “Will you round up the boys for the briefing?”

“*Shabab!*” Observing his friend out of the corner of his eye, Khamis curled his tongue and let out a shrill whistle.

Saleh stood at the rail looking out over the water as the crew assembled behind him. A minute passed. The crew were assembled and waiting.

“Captain,” said Khamis. “We’re all here.”

Saleh turned. “I want to begin with our course.” He scratched at his neck, then tipped up the brim of his cap. “We’re going to

sail away from the coast.”

Immediately after the briefing, Eric caught up with Saleh.

“Captain, is this about avoiding the shipping lanes?”

“Yes,” said Saleh. “The traffic is just getting too heavy and Mylai says it increases from here.”

“Is he confident about the monsoon winds?”

Saleh looked at the second mate.

“That’s the gamble, I’m afraid.”

Eric looked eastward over the sea.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stick with the ancients and take the coastal route?”

“I know,” said the captain. “But I’m concerned for our safety. I think we have to play it safe.”

At first, the decision appeared to be wise.

“Look there, portside!” called Khamis. There, paddling north-west, was a green sea turtle, herald of things to come. The next day, a flock of birds dove and fed around the ship. A school of fish jumped in the adjacent waters.

Robert, the medic, looked up from a tattered book.

“You know what this means,” he said. “The *Jewel* is nearing the continental shelf.” Saleh and Mylai leaned over the map, completing some quick calculations. The ship was only about 140 nautical miles away from the Lakshadweep Islands.

Saleh looked up.

“We may see the Islands by tomorrow evening.”

At nine o'clock the following morning, Saleh called for the morning briefing.

“*Shabab*, I have excellent news,” he said. “We’ve made ninety-two miles in twenty-four hours.”

By twelve o'clock, that record had already been broken. The new record now stood at ninety-eight miles. But the *Jewel* wasn't through yet.

By three p.m., the winds had reached nineteen knots, and the *Jewel* had achieved a new top speed, sailing at 6.25 knots. Eric, the starboard watch leader, cast a leery eye up towards the splinted mizzen mast. In the high winds, it had started flapping again. He didn't want to sacrifice speed. But that mast joint simply did not look too certain.

“All men to your sail stations,” Eric called to the starboard watch team. “Stand by a minute.” The ship had started pitching in two-metre swells. The watch leader decided to call for backup.

“All hands on deck!”

As the call rang out, members of the port watch who'd been resting on deck jumped to their feet. A couple straggled out from the hold, where they had been attempting to catch a catnap out of the wind.

In the high winds and rolling swells, the mizzen resisted

the crew's efforts to bring it down. Gusts of wind threatened to rip the lines from the hands of the sailors bracing them. After an hour and a half, the crew finally managed to wrestle down the mizzen and to replace it with the storm sail. Still, the *Jewel's* speed increased.

By eight p.m., the *Jewel* had established new records. At a top speed of 6.6 knots, she'd covered 106 nautical miles in twenty-four hours. She was nearing the point where she would shift course and head directly east for Kochi. But to turn eastward, she had to pass through a channel only forty miles wide. At nine p.m., with Said at the helm, the *Jewel* changed course to one hundred degrees. So far so good.

It appeared that the gamble had paid off. Then, rather unexpectedly, the *Jewel* stopped. Adam stared up at the sails hanging limply from the masts.

“You see that?” he said to Sajid sitting near him on deck. “That is what we call the doldrums.”

Sajid grinned. Ibn Majid's book was open in his lap.

“There's always tomorrow,” he said to Adam.

“Yes. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.”

Adam sighed and, with a towel, dabbed at a forehead beaded with sweat. A sweltering humidity had settled on deck. “Our ancestors are mocking us,” he said.

“Starboard off, port watch on.” Said stood above Adam. “*Yalla* man, my turn in the shade.”

The *Jewel* was eking out one measly knot. Humming at a decent clip, an Indian warship passed by twice, once in each direction.

Patience, thought Saleh. So close and yet so far.

At eleven o'clock the following morning, the wind stopped completely. Nearly two hundred miles from Kochi, the *Jewel* was becalmed in a sapphire sea as smooth as glass.

NOISELESSLY, SALEH CLIMBED the companionway stairs. The first streaks of dawn threaded the sky. It had been a rough night.

"G'morning, Captain. How'd you sleep?" said Eric. The two sailors exchanged a look. Saleh sighed.

"Two hours, maybe. I heard the waves lapping against the hull. It was calm. Too calm." Eric smiled and shrugged.

"Yeah, I'd say we're not going anywhere."

"What are the readings?"

"Well, it appears we have actually been going backwards."

"Seriously?" said Saleh.

"Unfortunately, yes. We're battling a current of about one-point-three knots."

"Absolutely no progress?"

Eric hesitated. "None."

"This doesn't bode well for arrival."

"Not at all."

Just the day before, Saleh had been informed that the arrival in Kochi had been fixed for eight o'clock on Monday, March 15th, a mere two days away.

"An ancient ship subject to modern bureaucracy," said Saleh. "Quite the interesting mix."

"What are they planning?"

"Police escort vessel, immigration officers, diplomatic officials from both India and Oman."

"We can't keep them waiting," said Eric.

"Certainly not," said Saleh. "Certainly not."

"What do you think?" said the second mate to the captain. "I'm going to have to make the call."



AYAZ SAT AT HIS POST on the foredeck when he spotted it. It was six-thirty.

"Warship off port bow!"

"To your stations!" called Eric. Saleh stepped forward with radio in hand.

"This is the *Jewel of Muscat*, do you read me?" He spoke into the handset.

"I repeat, this is the *Jewel of Muscat*. Do you read me?"

There was a crackle over the radio. Then: "This is the *Sharda* to the *Jewel of Muscat*. We copy, sir. Welcome to India."

The soft wind tickled the loose fringe on Saleh's blue-and-white *shemagh*. After twenty-six days, his beard was black and full. He looked round at his crew.

Thin ankles stuck out from Eric's tan cargo shorts. Robert's face and neck were red and freckled. The others were dark and heavily bearded. Everyone could use a good shower and a shave, thought Saleh.

Sharda was nearing. About three hundred metres away, the radio crackled once more.

"*Sharda* to the *Jewel*: we'll be deploying a visiting vessel. Could you hold your position?"

Saleh held the radio near his mouth.



The Jewel makes a triumphant entry into Kochi

“Holding,” he replied and released the button. Yes, he thought. That we can do with no problem.

From the side of the warship, a small rigid inflatable boat set off, skimming over the glasslike water. Standing on the sheer beam with one arm wrapped around the mast, Yahya waved to the approaching watercraft. Khamis and Ahmed went to the rail and tossed over the rope ladder. The hum of the inflatable boat peeled through the morning, sputtered, and died as it tied up adjacent to the *Jewel*. Khamis and Ahmed leaned over the rail, extending arms to the two visitors scrambling up the ladder. Saleh stepped forward.

“*As-salamu alaikum*,” he greeted them. *Peace be upon you.* “Welcome aboard the *Jewel of Muscat*.”

“Thank you, Captain,” replied the taller of the two officers. “We must confess, if we didn’t know better, we’d have thought you were a pirate ship.”

The next night, an Indian Coast Guard plane made several low passes over the *Jewel*. Pressed by the deadline, the captain had made the decision to call for support. An escort vessel would accompany the *Jewel* for the remaining distance to Kochi.

Exhausted but content, the crew dreamt of setting foot on land. Fahad anticipated a football match, Robert a good stretch of the legs. After twenty-seven days at sea, the coast of India appeared.

“Land, ho!” cried Yahya.





CHAPTER THREE

Kochi to Galle

Battling fierce storms



“CONGRATULATIONS, CAPTAIN.” The words came from Luca, the construction site foreman. Saleh spun round and, with one hand holding a massive coconut given to him upon arrival, with the other, he shook Luca’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you, Luca. Thanks to your handiwork, she held up beautifully. She performed really well.”

Along with Tom and Babu, Luca had flown from Oman to meet the *Jewel of Muscat* in her first port-of-call. Having been four weeks at sea, the ship would be dry-docked for nearly four more in order to carry out structural inspections.

“I’m anxious about the mizzen mast,” said Luca. “I think we should replace it.” The captain took a sip from the straw protruding from the coconut.

“Let’s celebrate,” he replied.



“I don’t like it.”

With his hands on his hips, Luca stood sizing up the scarf-jointed mizzen mast. Tom stood alongside him.

“Well, what are our options?”

“I wish I’d found that poona,” said Luca, shaking his head.

“But there’s too much to do already, especially with this time pressure. Plus, I think I exhausted that forest. I don’t know where I would begin.”

The captain was approaching. He had overheard. “We also have to keep with the monsoon,” he said.

“We do need to get to Galle before the south-west monsoon sets in,” added Tom.

The gentle winds of the north-east monsoon typically blew from November until March or April. With the onset of the south-west monsoon, the passage from Kochi to Galle would be highly dangerous.

Tom thought aloud. “It’s already April. To get caught in the transition could be fatal.”

Already, they had spent more than two weeks in port, unloading three tons of ballast, cleaning and resealing the hull, adding new rigging, and trying to repair the worrisome mizzen mast.

Saleh spoke up. “Ibn Majid cautioned: *He who leaves India on the 100th day is a sound man, he who leaves on the 110th day will be all right. However, he who leaves on the 120th is stretching the bounds of possibility, and he who leaves on the 130th is inexperienced and an ignorant gambler.*”

“So now you wish to defer to the ancients?” said Luca.



I AM TOO OLD FOR THIS.

Bibi al Jabri turned her leathered face towards the sun, which wavered on its way down for the day. It had put in a full day of work, as it usually did. The wind had shifted and was coming off the sea, bringing a welcome coolness. She turned her nose to the wind. Could it be? Was the breeze carrying the scent of her son?

The last of the fishing boats were coming in. The crescendoing hum of their motors was audible even before they rounded the jagged rocks of the lagoon. As their motors were cut, the vessels nosed forward, ploughing the turquoise water.

Bibi wandered down the sand, looking over the line of boats that sat precisely where they did every day. *Like old friends*, she thought. She ran a finger over the lettering painted on a hull—*The San Francisco*. Bibi chuckled. It wasn't so long ago that San Francisco had seemed like another planet. It was unfathomable how much the country had changed since she'd been a girl.

On the other end of the beach, a group of men were heaving an incoming boat up onto the sand. Bibi thought back to the days when her own mother-in-law had been living. Sometimes, Bibi had found her pacing the shore for twelve, even fifteen hours, waiting for her son and Bibi's husband, Said. When evening fell, Bibi would walk outside, begging her to come in for supper.

Wringing her hands, her mother-in-law would stall. "I feel something," she'd say. "The waves are quicker. The air is thick. There's a storm out there, I feel it." Usually, she'd been right.

Haramel, where Bibi al Jabri awaits news of her son

Bibi's thoughts turned to her own son, Saleh. He was so good, her dear one, her Saleh. He always had been, from the earliest days. Mischievous, at times, that was sure—just like his own son, Firas. She smiled, thinking back on the days when she'd wake him for prayers before sending him off to school in Sidab. One afternoon in particular came vividly to mind.

Bibi had stood peeling onions in the kitchen when her daughter Amina burst in, clutching her school satchel.

"Mama!" Amina cried. "Saleh nearly bled to death!"

Onion and knife fell to the ground.

Bibi ran down to the shore where the boat had delivered the lot of schoolchildren. With a couple of other village boys, seven-year-old Saleh was loitering by the row of fishing boats, kicking a can as, together, they arranged a football match.

"Saleh!" called Bibi. As the child turned, a brown stain appeared on his *dishdasha*. She sighed with relief. A bit of blood but nothing near death. But his face. Oh his face!

"*Habibi*, what happened?"

Just above the cheekbone, a deep gash had clotted, leaving a foreboding wound and bruised, swollen skin.

Saleh went silent. Then, "Mama, I missed the boat. I fell on the mountain."

With big eyes, the two village boys looked on. Bibi dropped to her knees and placed a hand lightly on his chin. She tilted his cheek towards the light, eyeing the wound.

"Come, my son. Come home," Bibi said. "Let's get you cleaned up."

The hum of a motor jolted Bibi from her thoughts. Instinctively, her eyes darted towards the sound. Four silhouettes stood upright in a small fibreglass boat, leaning



*Saleh al Jabri,
aged 15*

ever so slightly forward as it cut through the water. The upward curve of the hull gave the impression that the bow rode high on the waves.

A light touch alighted on Bibi's shoulder. Turning towards it, Bibi came to face her daughter-in-law, Saleh's wife, Aseelah. Near the neck, Aseelah gripped a head scarf, holding it steady against the breeze coming off the sea.

"Bibi," said Aseelah, "come home." Wrapping her arm around her mother-in-law's waist, she steered her towards the village. She did not look at the sea. "He's not there, Bibi. He's not coming tonight."

The call of the *muezzin* reverberated off the cliffs of Haramel. Men in spotless white *dishdashas* began to trickle out of their homes, heading for the mosque.

"*Masah al khair*," they nodded. *Good evening.*

"*Masah innoor*," Bibi replied.

One face in particular was missing from among them.





*Eating is difficult when the ship
tilts at an alarming angle*

Twenty-six days after arrival in Kochi we were back on the sea. I could not bear waiting. I was anxious to be on board again with the wind filling the sails, gliding across the sea to the friendly country of Sri Lanka, previously known by Arabs as Sarandeeb, or Ceylon.

A majestic display of red scattered across the mirror-like water. The *Jewel of Muscat* inched along slowly, but steadily, with barely a touch needed on the rudder. A flock of gulls honked overhead. Saleh looked up from a book. They passed, and the tranquility returned. No sound but the whisper of wind and lapping of waves.

We performed Maghreb prayer aboard the Jewel. As we did so, we remembered our beloved Oman and going to the mosques in the evening. Sixty days have already passed since leaving Oman. I feel, now, sixty years old. I miss you very much, dear Oman.

The sun sank low, giving way to a darkening sky. One by one, stars popped through, glittering like gems on the hem of a king's robe. They strengthened in brilliance as the last hint of daylight waned into a sky of velvet black.

Darkness fell. A transmission crackled over the radio. There was a tanker nearby, only a couple thousand metres off the stern beam. Its captain spoke to Saleh. "I'd like to pass," he said. "Would you alter course?"

The men onboard the tanker could see the *Jewel's* navigation lights, but darkness had prevented them from seeing the ship itself. Saleh tried to explain the situation. "Unfortunately, we can't alter our course quickly enough," Saleh replied. "We're a ninth-century sailing ship with no engine."

The radio went silent for a minute. Then it crackled again. The voice of the tanker's captain repeated the request that the *Jewel* change course, and soon. Now only a few hundred metres away, the tanker appeared to be headed straight for the *Jewel*.

His heart beating quickly, Saleh spoke clearly into the radio. Invoking the law of the seas, again he explained the situation and requested the tanker urgently to alter course. The gap between the two vessels was quickly narrowing.

Again, a voice crackled over the radio. This time, it confirmed that the tanker would make a turn. Yet to all appearances the tanker was keeping straight on course. "You are bearing steady, sir," called an anxious Saleh. Finally, no more than two hundred metres from the *Jewel*, the tanker passed.



Hussein al Raisi attaches more baggywrinkle to the stays

THE LEG FROM KOCHI TO GALLE was reasonably short, so Saleh had opted to focus on what was most essential. The crew hoped to see land within a week's time, so as long as fundamentals were covered, other repairs could be carried out in port. Pushpadas and Sajid fashioned new blocks for the lines suspending the lifeboat, while Adam and Fahad applied a new coat of animal fat to the halyards.

It was a hot, soggy day of tropical heat. Just three days out of Kochi, a foul odour had already begun to emanate from the hold, as high temperatures baked the stores of shark liver oil, animal fat, dried fish, and fruit, held in the ship's underbelly.

Saleh sent a team to clean the hold, only to learn that a number of the fruits and vegetables brought from India had already rotted. A good chunk of their stores had to be tossed overboard.

Perhaps the free dinner sent ripples throughout the marine kingdom, for by the end of the day, the *Jewel* had been visited by an unidentifiable bird, a gigantic squid, and a cresting whale.

The embers of the *matbakh* glowed in the descending darkness, cocooning the deck in a hearth-like glow that bled at the edges into the surrounding abyss of night. Fahad had pulled out his drum and tapped away at a rhythm, alternating palms and fingertips on the hide.

The familiar Arabic strain floated off into the abyss.

Ahmed gave the charcoals a stir and then squatted before them, staring into their glow. Sajid, the carpenter, sat nearby whittling away at a small log.

The dusk gave way to a sky peppered with diamonds. The water was calm and the deck, outside Fahad's drumming, was

The crew must snatch a sleep in the shade where and when they can

quiet. Sitting among the ropes, Saleh turned to his journal. He hadn't written in a while. But something about the vastness of the sea had loosened the spigot.

In the black of the night came nostalgia.

We remember our dear Oman, our relatives and our beloved ones. We miss them so much. But from them we derive the will to continue the voyage, to push on despite monotony and frustration.

The same black night was an invigorating comfort.

Though these oceans are so far from the Gulf, we feel safe, protected, and strangely at home.

Under this sprawling sky, in a place of such calmness, the moon shines over us and illuminates the night enough that I am writing by the light of the moon.

Effortlessly he had slipped into the realm of Ibn Majid and the poet geographers.

Saleh closed his eyes. The familiar landscape of home was vivid in his mind: the dry, baked earth, in stark contrast with a shockingly blue sea, the whitewashed Haramel mosque, the curve of the lagoon.

The ship rocked gently on the waves. Saleh opened his eyes to a soft, ripe moon and a velvet canvas of glittering stars. There was Scorpius, its arachnid outline covering a third of the heavens, with Antares, the brightest star in the cluster, shining brightly at its heart.







*Saleh al Jabri tries to
navigate using the kamal*

ERIC EMERGED FROM BELOW DECK with something in hand. Stepping over two reclining sailors, he found a clear space towards the foredeck. He surveyed the sky. There it was, Polaris. With an eye on the North Star, he raised a small wooden card towards the heavens, tucking a string protruding from its centre between his teeth.

Eric's right eye was closed. He was looking along the length of string stretched out the reach of his left arm. Lowering the wood card, he flipped through the pages in a notebook, stopping to examine something, and then looked back up at the sky.

Closing the diary that lay open on his lap, Saleh stood up slowly, scanning the heavens.

"Imagine," said the captain, approaching the second mate, "we're reading only by the light of the moon and stars. How's it going?"

"Well, *Shihab al Dein's* a tricky one," said Eric. The two mariners heard a shuffle on the deck.

"*Masa al khair,*" said Sajid. *Good evening.*

"*Masa inoor,*" replied the two sailors simultaneously.

"Sajid, you should give this a try," said Saleh. He handed Sajid what looked like a mere scrap of wood, a rectangle about four finger-widths in height, with a string laced through the centre and tied off behind the card.

"Polaris is one of the simplest stars to begin with," explained Saleh. "It stays almost motionless in the sky, while all the stars of the northern sky appear to rotate around it, so it makes a good reference point for northern hemisphere measurements."

"At the North Pole," the captain continued, "which is ninety degrees latitude, Polaris is fixed directly overhead, so it has an altitude of ninety degrees. At the equator, which is nought



*A variety of kamals
at different sizes*

degrees latitude, Polaris is on the horizon with nought degrees altitude. Understand?" Sajid nodded.

"Between the equator and the North Pole, the angle of Polaris above the horizon is a direct measurement of latitude. The ancients realised this and developed the use of the *kamal*."

Sajid caught on quickly.

"So basically," said Sajid, "I want to align the top of the *kamal* with Polaris and the bottom with the horizon. The length of string tells me my latitude."

"Yes," said Saleh.

Eric nodded. "You've got it."

Sajid placed the end of the string between his teeth. He looked towards the blackened sky and, lifting his arm, aligned the *kamal's* top edge with the Pole Star. Then he extended his arm until the bottom edge aligned with the horizon. He pulled the string taut and tied a knot where the string met his teeth.

"Pretty clever, isn't it?" asked Eric.

Sajid nodded. "A sailor would tie knots at certain landmarks, right? So that once he reaches his destination, he can retrace his steps by following the knots in reverse order?"

"Yes," said Eric. "Now there is a more complicated method, as well, which corresponds to the data recorded by Ibn Majid in *Al-Fawid*. It involves 'fingers' or *isba* above the horizon. While the method you were just using depends on your own arm length and such, this other one can allow a sailor to follow the route charted by another. And it employs a variety of stars."

"Do you know of Ahmed Ibn Majid, the fifteenth-century Arab seaman?" Saleh asked Sajid.

Sajid nodded. "I've heard of him. Isn't he the one who took Vasco da Gama to India?"

Saleh and Eric looked at each other.

“Well,” laughed Eric, “that’s a matter of live debate. It’s now generally agreed that Ibn Majid was not da Gama’s pilot—but yes, that’s the story.”

Saleh handed Sajid the copy of *Al-Fawid*.

“Regardless of whether or not they met in person,” Eric continued, “Ibn Majid’s work introduced entirely new concepts to the Europeans who, up to this point, navigated by the sun. The Arab system, which relied upon the stars, was more sophisticated and precise.”

“*Al-Fawid*,” added Saleh, “is often called the greatest Arab navigational treatise written. There are about seventy stars or combinations in here, all of which can help us determine latitude with the simplest of instruments—this homemade *kamal*—and nothing more than our eyes, our arms, and the sky.”

Sajid leafed through the pages, examining passages written in complex Arabic, detailing principles of sailing, Indian Ocean coastlines, reefs, and currents. The work was packed with catalogues of monsoon winds and weather patterns, star positions and movements.

Saleh nodded towards the text. “He seems to enjoy using incredibly difficult classical Arabic. Sometimes he writes in poetry.”

“Compared to his Arab predecessors,” added Eric, “Ibn Majid was distinguished by his practical application of theory. He inherited a lot of navigational theory but was the first to link it concretely to, for example, the Indian Ocean passage. That’s why it’s helpful for us,” he continued, “although we have to keep in mind that the stars have moved a bit in the past few hundred years. One of the things I’m trying to determine is

how this movement will have affected his measurements.”

Sajid examined the celestial map, comparing it to the night sky.

“So basically he’s spelled it all out for us—the monsoon winds, the weather, the route. Are we following in the path of Ibn Majid?”

“That’s the idea,” said Saleh. “It’s pretty well tried and tested.”

At that moment, Ahmed appeared.

“Ah, let the professional give it a shot!” he said. Sajid handed over the *kamal*. Ahmed lifted it to the sky, closing one eye.

“Yes, yes, exactly. There you are!” he said. Before anyone could say anything he had tied a knot halfway up the string, at least ten centimetres from the nearest knot.

“All right, Ahmed,” said Saleh. “Now you be the captain. From here, how should we alter course?”

“Well, Captain,” replied Ahmed with a shrug. “Oh wait, I am Captain; well, *shabab*, you see, I prefer GPS.”







Ayaz al Zadjali slides across a tilting deck during the swell

IT WAS APRIL 14TH, a Wednesday. Two squalls had come the night before, and the winds had kicked up in the upper teens. The *Jewel* had attained a new record speed of 7.8 knots.

The captain gave instruction to the starboard watch and, leaving Eric in charge, retreated below deck to map the *Jewel*'s course and coordinates. For an hour or so he sat checking the maps and navigation accounts. His head jolted upward. Something wasn't right.

He remembers some of his first days on the sea. He remembers lying in the bottom of his father's fishing boat, attempting to hide under his *shemagh* from the blistering midday sun. He remembers dozing off to the rhythm of the waves lapping gently against the hull.

He remembers waking instinctively when something was off, when the rhythm had changed. In his bones he could detect a shift in the wind or the weather. Even then, the sea had a way of speaking to him, of whispering her secrets. Perhaps this is how she gained his implicit trust.

In the movement of the ship he had sensed a quiver, like a tremor through the hull. He listened. An unusual sound was coming from the rudder, as if the steering shaft was grating in its slot. *The rudder is heavy in the water*, thought Saleh. *It must be fighting strong waves or currents.*

In the next moment, commotion burst out above. Saleh ran up the stairs to find the port crew struggling to lower the mizzen sail. Wind and waves lashed against the boat. The alarm bell rang out: all hands on deck.

The storm had struck from the south-east. The entire sky had blackened, and though it was early afternoon, it appeared as dusk. The watch leader had ordered the lowering of the mizzen. As the crew wrestled it down, Saleh took command.



“Wind is topping twenty-five knots,” shouted Yahya at the helm. The mainsail started whipping. Saleh thought quickly.

“*Shabab*, bring down the mainsail!” It was a rare and risky procedure. Without either sail, the ship would be at the mercy of the waves. But given the state of the mast, it seemed to be the safest option.

“Come on boys, easy does it!” He cupped his hand to his mouth. He could tell by the sporadic heaves of the men at the halyard that Khamis was singing out the familiar song, attempting to keep them in rhythm, but to little avail.

Fahad stood at the bow, watching helplessly as the others struggled to wrest down the sail. Torrents pounded against his back and he clung to the hood of his slicker, simply trying to keep his head covered. But nothing, not a square centimetre of his body, was dry.

A rope came loose and started whipping violently. Fahad scrambled forward to tame it.

“Fahad, watch yourself!” Yahya called anxiously as the sheer beam swung round on the mainsail. Raising his right hand in acknowledgement, Fahad stayed low to the deck. He lunged forward to grab the stray line. As he did so his hood was pushed back. Cold, sharp needles dug into his skin. The wind gusts were like quick jabs, knocking his head this way and that.

Allah karim, he thought. The reality dawned on him. We might not make it through this.

The waves crashed. Fahad let go of the rope. Instantly it was snatched from his hand.

“Yahya!” he cried. Yahya ducked just in time as it snapped back and whipped violently in the wind. Within less than a minute, the wind had become even stronger and was whipping at the mast. Torrential rains ensued.

“Thirty-five knots,” yelled Yahya, struggling to raise his voice above the howling wind. Water was coming from every angle. “Forty knots,” called Yahya. “Forty!”



Opposite: Ahmed braces against the wind as a storm batters the Jewel

Sea met sky with crashes of thunder. Nature was battling itself like two tigers locked in a wrestling match, without a care for the ship tangled up in the middle. The sky spat at the sea, and the sea fought back with thrusts of bilious foam.

The faces of the crew were set like stone against the spray that pelted them like pins from all sides. It was impossible to tell who was who. The ship pitched and tossed on waves that no longer seemed to be distinguished from the ship itself. From where he stood near the stern, Saleh couldn't see the *Jewel's* bow. But he urged the sail down, "That's it, *shweya shweya*. Come on, boys!"

From underneath the hood of one raincoat a set of clenched teeth appeared as one of the crew—maybe Ayaz—fought to

The ship rocks perilously in the high seas

prevent the halyard from chafing. Adam leaned at a forty-five degree angle, struggling with his entire body weight to stabilise the sail. The wind was now gusting at forty-three knots, winding the sail around the mast like a leaf. Suddenly Ayaz lost his footing and went sliding across the tilting deck.

Waves up to seven metres crashed over the rails, starboard and port. The sail was stuck. The ship was tilting, the mast whipping dangerously. If it split, it meant disaster.

Saleh admits, in the wake of it all, that he had no idea what was going to happen, that, out of view, he put his hand to his heart. A horrifying thought crossed his mind: *I am going to lose her*. But with a determined exhale the captain shouted out instructions.





“Cut the lines,” Saleh commanded. “Anything to take down the sail.” Side by side, clutching for balance onto any fixed part of the boat, the crew began slashing at the ropes preventing the mainsail from coming down.

Suddenly, a loud crack reverberated through the air. The sail shot out behind the mast and the ship lurched backward. In an instant, the wind had reversed direction, jolting everyone and everything aboard. Hands grabbed for the nearest fixed part of the ship, to prevent being tossed into the sea.

Still the brutal wind howled, and the sail tangled around the mast. Saleh shouted to Yahya at the helm to align the *Jewel* with the wind, hoping the manoeuvre would help untangle the sail. They were getting close. But without a sail to stabilise her, the *Jewel* was tilting dangerously to starboard. Her yards and sail began to slip into the sea.

Hooking the end of his safety harness around the lower yard, Ahmed began to inch his way out to the yardarm. He perched precariously over the ocean, the foaming broth yapping at his ankles and now and then deluging his head. As massive waves pummelled the ship, Ahmed gripped the spar with his legs and hauled in the sail.

After sunset, finally, the rain ceased. The *Jewel* was tired. She tilted, limping through the swells that carried on long after the end of the storm. Her crew shivered on deck in the gusting wind that had replaced the placid heat of the morning. The *Jewel* had suffered no damage at all to the hull or to the deck. But her upper upright steering beam had become unseated. The crew lashed it back in place. Further inspection, however, revealed a more serious problem. Through the main mast ran a transverse crack, half a metre above deck. It would no longer be possible to hoist a sail on the main mast. In the middle of the sea, still over two hundred miles from Galle, the crew would have to find a way to repair the main mast.

Ahmed inches out over the yardarm to haul in the sail



The Kechimalai Mosque, one of the oldest in Sri Lanka

Opposite: the splint strapped to the mast makes a temporary repair

A SCHOOL OF DOLPHINS, dancing and playing, welcomed a limping *Jewel of Muscat* into the territorial waters of Sri Lanka. On April 17th, around four p.m., a pair of dots appeared on the horizon. A transmission crackled across the radio. Two Sri Lankan patrol boats radioed their greetings.

Saleh reported the news. “Tonight,” he said, “A naval vessel will be meeting us to help us to port.” The crew sent up a cheer.

“But first,” continued the captain, “one more drill.” Taking first mate Khamis with him, he descended into the hold and emerged with something no one expected. Oars. Several of them. He distributed them among the crew.

“Punishment?” said Ahmed. “Why, Captain, why?”

The goal, said Saleh, was to figure out how to handle the ship in an absence of wind. It was something he’d been thinking about since the day the mast had cracked and the sails had come down. God forbid that the *Jewel* should become crippled again, clearly, a contingency plan was essential. So the crew posted up, four to a side, with two men operating each oar, and row they did. At first, the *Jewel* didn’t seem to respond.

Two of the sailors, sharing an oar, managed to catch only air. However, within half an hour, the crew had developed a system that seemed to work, albeit minimally.

That evening, the Sri Lankan naval escort vessel arrived. It was dark, and the rain was once again falling. The *Jewel* hitched up. She lowered her sails as if sighing after an arduous five hundred miles, and nine days, on a cantankerous sea.

As we approached the second port-of-call, the call for prayer rang out from the oldest mosque in Sri Lanka. The hair raised on my arms. This was the exact spot where our ancestors had landed and settled one thousand years ago.

A remarkable sight greeted them: the dazzling white facade of Kechimalai Mosque, its minarets punctuating the horizon from the rocky promontory of Beruwala Harbour, the port town on the road to Galle, where it is said that the first Arabs in Sri Lanka settled in 1024. As the ship drew closer, the call of the *muezzin* rang out, reverberating across the water.

IN THE WAKE of the treacherous storm, the *Jewel of Muscat* carpenters had put in overtime, fashioning a spar 250 kilograms in weight to reinforce the broken mast. However, the next leg would require the *Jewel* to compete with one of the world's most treacherous stretches of water, a crossing that no one in his right mind would dare to attempt while relying upon a band-aid. The five-day stopover planned at the outset of the passage would have to be revised.

Construction foreman Luca Belfioretti had flown from Oman to service the ship and join the passage. He examined the broken mast. That evening, he strode up to join the members of the project team, who sat sipping juice cocktails under a plush canopy of Sri Lankan palms.

They looked at him anxiously.

"The news is not good," began Luca. "You cannot risk crossing the Bay of Bengal like this." Tom drew the last of his iced lemon-mint through the straw. Its gurgle echoed in the silence.

"What do you suggest?" asked Chris Biggins, who'd come over, as well, and was helping Saleh monitor the weather.

"You have to replace it. It will take, oh, maybe a couple extra weeks. We're not going anywhere soon."

"We couldn't just reinforce it, perhaps with something stronger?" asked Saleh. Two weeks sounded like a long time.

"I will be sailing on this leg. And I am telling you it would be naive to get on that ship unless she has a new mast."

Tom shifted in his seat. Saleh looked at the ground. Chris surveyed the various countenances in the group before speaking.

"May I ask where we plan to find this new mast?"

Several pairs of eyes fixed on Luca.

Luca shrugged. "I don't think there is an option. I will do what is needed," he said. "I am going to see her to the end. I built her. She is my ship."





Out of the corner of his eye Chris saw the Captain's back straighten. Tom shifted uneasily in his seat.

So off to the forests of Sri Lanka went two project team members, Luca and Alessandro, to search for sea-worthy trees. For Luca, it was something of a *déjà vu*. It had been only about a year since he'd done likewise in south India.

For several days, Luca and Alessandro braved mosquitoes and mugginess—and a close encounter with a cobra—in search of trees tall enough to fashion two new masts from single pieces of timber. Memories of frustration in India left Luca anxious. But north of Colombo, in Pannala, two massive teaks appeared. This time, the search would not be in vain.

Carpenters Babu, Tuanie, Pushpadas, and Sajid were waiting at Wayamba Sawmill. Within a single day, the logs were shaved down first by machine and then by hand. Sitting astride the logs, the craftsmen chiseled and sanded the wood into smooth, tapered masts, seventeen metres in height. Then they loaded the masts onto a truck and shipped them over 150 miles to Galle, where the rest of the crew was waiting to install them.

Ever so carefully, the old masts were removed. It was quite a sight to see once more the *Jewel* free of masts and rigging—a flashback to January, with a little more wear and tear. By crane, the new masts were carefully inserted.

There she stood, with two new beautiful masts from single pieces of timber. She was almost ready to go, but one last touch remained: from Zanzibar, where Fahad and Noor had perfected the craft of sailmaking, two tubes had arrived containing forty-foot, handcrafted, palm mat sails. The *Jewel* looked stunning.

The splinted mast has enabled Jewel to make it into port

After the correct teak tree is located, the mast is prepared and lowered into place







CHAPTER FOUR

The Bay of Bengal

From storm to
becalmed sea





The ship rocks back and forth in the rolling waves

THE *JEWEL OF MUSCAT* was initiated into the Bay of Bengal—quickly—by ripe clouds and voluptuous skies. The crew glanced upwards with some concern. Perhaps the twenty-four days in Galle had weakened the knees of some. Or maybe it was the instantly choppy seas, and the thirty-five-knot winds that welcomed the *Jewel* to the Bay of Bengal. Either way, vertigo struck with a vengeance.

Alessandro staggered backwards into the sheer beam. Was it the sea or his equilibrium? His stomach clenched. From under heavy eyelids he spotted the starboard rail. *Must get there*, he thought. Three wobbly steps, and a wave tossed the ship, throwing him directly into the rail. He caught it weakly with his two hands as his knees buckled and he sank to the deck, keeping his head over the rail just enough to vomit into the sea.

Alessandro hung on the rail looking into the churning sea, lapping up at his face. Then suddenly a sharp blow struck his upper right arm.

“Sorry,” said Luca. He was yellow. Despite his misery, Alessandro could not help but laugh.

“You look terrible,” said Alessandro. Luca rolled two sagging eyes towards him.

“Is it like this the whole way?” Luca smiled weakly in return. He turned and retched over the side of the ship.

The rain streamed down and the waves were relentless, pushing the *Jewel* towards land. The newly installed palm sails were proving tricky, or downright ineffective. Clearly, this wasn’t the ideal situation to experiment with the new sails. So down they came, and up went the canvas storm sail on the main mast, improving the ship’s speed and handling. The crew tried hard to keep the *Jewel* on course, away from

the mountains towards which she was drifting. She reached two knots as winds continued to gain strength and rains continued, making issuing commands and hearing them challenging. Late in the afternoon, nature's chaos converged in a waterspout. *Mamma mia*, thought Luca. *What have I signed up for?*

Baffling winds and large swells continued to plague the ship throughout the afternoon and evening. All hands were employed—when they weren't clutching retching stomachs—raising, lowering, and trimming the sails. The crew stumbled and slid over the slick, rolling deck, barely able to see more than a couple metres in front of them. Suppertime came, along with bleak news: due to rough seas, a hot meal wouldn't be possible. *Welcome back, boys*, said the Bay of Bengal.



HIS HEAD WAS FUZZY. His legs were rubber. If he let himself go, Robert wondered, would he drift away into nothingness? Through sheets of water, he saw black and yellow jackets grasping onto anything stable.

A pair of brown feet appeared. How long had he been in that position like that, staring down at the deck?

"You okay, mate?" Eyes encircled with dark *kohl* appeared in front of him. Khamis.

"Yes," Robert mumbled out feebly. *Must get down to send the report*. His mind was working on autopilot. It latched onto the familiar duty like a comfort blanket.

Robert slunk to the hatch in the deck. Moving his limbs was like lifting lead. Lifting the hatch was like moving an elephant. He swung his legs into the hole and the hatch banged down

over him, nearly crushing his skull. Robert slid down the companionway stairs into the hold below, collapsing into a few inches of filthy water. The stench of fish oil, hydrogen sulphide, and spilled diesel was overbearing. He breathed in sharply to keep himself from losing his breakfast.

Welcome to the Nausoleum, thought Robert. It was the portion of the hold where the ship's communications systems were housed. Here, alongside a fuzzy white beard growing in the ship's dark and dank nether-regions, Robert submitted the daily web reports. On good days, a satellite connection allowed for the transmission of one or two photos.

Struggling to stay upright, with one arm, Robert clung to the wood column. With the other, he pawed at the keyboard. His fingers were stiff with cold and the sentences came out gibberish. He backspaced. *Strong winds*, he keyed. Robert squinted at the laptop screen. Were the words even coherent?

On constant swells, the ship pitched and rolled, making it impossible to maintain a satellite connection. *Send*. Robert waited. *Error: transmission failed*. He tried again. And again. And again.

Finally, *transmission successful. Save a copy?*

Yes, clicked Robert, looking over the text. *Four sentences*. Robert counted them. *That tells them nothing*, he thought dejectedly. *But maybe it's better, anyway, that they don't worry*.

*It takes all hands to secure
the sail on the rolling deck*





A sodden crew wrestle down the palm mat sails

BACK AT QANTAB, Tom did worry. Scratching at his beard, Tom pushed back his chair and stared at the screen of his laptop. On his favorite weather-tracking site, he had pulled up the Bay of Bengal. A tiny cursor marked the approximate location of the *Jewel of Muscat*. Not far from the cursor was a large, illuminated mass of green.

Tom clicked the link to the dynamic forecast, and the green mass began hurtling across the screen towards the south-east coast of India. Directly in its path lay the cursor representing the little wooden boat, the *Jewel of Muscat*.

His face white, Tom left the room and returned clutching a telephone. It was evening. The sun was sinking in the sky. Tom removed his glasses and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

“If only we’d waited longer in Sri Lanka.”

As the new masts had been installed, the team had been monitoring the winds for the arrival of the south-west monsoon. While transitional periods brought dangerous weather, all signs had seemed to indicate that the south-west monsoon had arrived early. *She’s ready*, some had said. *We’re clear of danger*.

Tom had been hesitant: “A couple more days wouldn’t hurt.” They had plenty of time to make it to Malaysia. But the crew had already spent twenty-three days more than originally expected in Sri Lanka, and sea legs were itching to go.

A foreboding signal had appeared when little fishing boats were seen making beelines for the shore. Not long after that, thick clouds had lined the sky. Lightning and thunder flashed and boomed over the *Jewel*. Wind speed was increasing, and under the storm sail alone, the *Jewel* was making an impressive seven knots.

In the two days since leaving Galle, the *Jewel of Muscat*

had covered ninety-five miles. But she’d also endured quite a battering. Waves of four and five metres were sending any loose item flying about the ship, even, in some cases, overboard into the sea. In these conditions, breakfast had consisted of sliced bread and spreadable cheese.

Around midday, the wind kicked up again. Twenty-two knots. Twenty-five. Thirty. A constant swell and five-metre waves kept all hands on deck, fixing down lines and lashings.

Changing a sail in such powerful wind was a battle of brute manpower. Saleh called out the start of a song and Khamis, Ahmed, and Adam took over. Over half a dozen men dressed in dark rain slickers gave it all they had, muscles pumping. Meanwhile, wind speed increased. “Forty-two knots!” Yahya called. He was on the rudder, next to Ayaz at the pump, who was desperately trying to keep up with the buckets of water spilling into the *Jewel*. And the ship kept accelerating, to seven knots, seven-and-a-half, then eight.

The six hours between ten a.m. and four p.m. are blank in the *Jewel of Muscat* deck log. At four o’clock, the entry reads simply, “Skies clearing slightly.” The events of the day had included a new top speed—8.4 knots—but no one had had a chance to record anything.

All night long the swell plugged away as if daring the crew to attempt shut-eye. But after the third cold meal of the day—bread and beans—exhausted sailors collapsed into their bunks, pulling sheets of plastic snugly around their shrivelled appendages. *Not so fast*, the Bay taunted. *Eight-point-four knots, is that all you’ve got? We’ll see what you’re made of tomorrow*.

The proverbial saying speaks of a calm before the storm. That wasn’t the case for the *Jewel*. All through the night, the

*The deck soaked after
the tempestuous rain*

winds hummed in the rigging. Dawn was nearly indiscernible. Plump, grey canopies had planted themselves in front of the sun. By six o'clock, winds were again registering twenty-five knots. A single website photo exists from that day showing a secured *Jewel* deck tilting forty-five degrees to port. The daily weblog consists of six short sentences.

The ship was pummelled by at least three squalls that day, interspersed with sweltering bouts of heat and humidity. In these moments of respite, the heaviest rains and winds would let up, giving the sailors a few minutes to regroup. Then another wall of lightning-streaked clouds would appear on the horizon, and they'd batten down the hatches, bracing for the wind.

"We saw them all coming," says Saleh of the squalls. "But there was little we could do about any of them. We had to ride them out and keep on going." Tightening their hoods, they turned to meet the Bay in all her glory.

"To the mizzen stations! Slack the port lazy tack!" shouted the watch leader, Eric.

It was the third squall of the day. The mizzen sail was down and tied, the lower decks secured. The storm sail was raised on the main. Once more, the wind was steadily increasing. "Thirty-three knots," shouted Said near the helm. Starboard stood on standby, ready at their posts. But to attempt a change in winds like this could be potentially lethal. So having secured the decks according to standard procedure, there was little the crew could do but hang on for dear life, and wait.

"All of a sudden," said Saleh, "everything on the *Jewel* deck jolted. The wind changed direction, and the storm sail changed direction, as well." The ship veered off course. In attempt to realign her, the helmsman heaved the right quarter







With winds at fifty-two knots, the crew must work hard to control the Jewel

rudder into the water. Unabated, wind speed still increased: thirty knots, then forty. Suddenly, the ship was flying.

“Nine knots!” cried Said. But there was little chance that anyone could hear him. Thunder crashed. The wind buzzed in the rigging. Torrents of rain pounded down on their heads, beating on the plastic hoods covering the sailors.

At his post on the foredeck, Ayaz sensed the pressure of the wind in the sail. The *Jewel* sped through the water unlike ever before. A surge of anxiety gripped his stomach. This was the ship he’d helped to build. She was flying. But how much could she handle?

Faster and faster the *Jewel* went. Nine and a half knots. An image of her scarf-jointed keel appeared in Ayaz’s mind. Ten knots. Eleven. Held together entirely with string, her planks were moaning under the strain. The wind topped fifty-two knots, and the *Jewel* was racing at eleven and a half. *She wasn’t designed for this*, thought Ayaz.

**Indo-Asian News Service
Hyderabad, May 20, 2010**

Cyclonic storm Laila caused havoc in coastal Andhra Pradesh late Thursday, killing fourteen people, inundating scores of villages and inflicting massive damage to infrastructure, before heading towards the neighboring Orissa.

Accompanied by heavy rains, high storm surges and winds with speed of 125 km an hour, the storm hit southern part of Andhra Pradesh snapping mobile links, forcing cancellation of trains and damaging electricity and communication systems.

BBC News

It is the worst storm to hit Andhra Pradesh in fourteen years.

Within the twenty-four hours of May 18th, the *Jewel of Muscat* covered a record 151 nautical miles. At the time, no one on board had known that they’d just caught the edge of a cyclone.

But in its wake, the cyclone had wreaked chaos, exhaustion, and seasickness. The ship’s generator was defunct, its water pumps out of commission. A leak had been discovered in the stores of fish oil. The rudder had again slipped out of place.

Things began to quiet down, but no one was about to let down his guard.

You never knew what would happen next. The Jewel was safe, but still, it was not stable over the Bay of Bengal, the most dangerous in terms of storms and squalls.

Rainy weather hovered, and massive swells continued, making even sleep difficult for the worn out sailors.

I find difficulty in writing because of the high waves and heavy rainfall. I am very tired, but I hope that it does not show.

As Saleh looked around him, he realised that, on board this ship, something had transformed. Whereas, before, there had been a group of people, some of whom were neophytes at sea, now, there stood a brotherhood of men.

When I saw the Sultanate’s flag fluttering on the Jewel, for a moment I could hardly breathe, and then my morale soared and soared to the sky. It gave me the strength to go on – for our country, for our people, for our heritage.



AT DAWN ON MAY 24th, the lookout caught sight of the Great Nicobar Island, marking the close of a chapter. The *Jewel* had officially made it across one of the most precarious stretches of water in the world. As the ship exited the Bay of Bengal and entered the Andaman Sea, a new adversary reared its head: traffic.

The Andaman Sea formed the mouth of the channel called the Straits of Malacca, the busiest shipping lane in the world. Through the straits passed massive tankers and cargo vessels making their way to or from Asia, alongside inconspicuous fishing boats that darted to and fro across the waterscape. Within the day, the *Jewel* had reached the Indonesian island Sumatra, when again, rather suddenly, the wind ceased. The *Jewel* had officially entered the doldrums.

For millennia an affliction to sailors, the doldrums span

a belt of low pressure that encircles the earth around five degrees to either side of the equator. If, in these “equatorial calms,” an engineless vessel were to lose the wind, there was no telling how long it could be stranded.

With barely a stir of wind in the sails, Adam sighed and cast a pleading glance at the slackened cloth. But there was little anyone could do but wait, and hope. Countless games of dominoes were played, and plenty of coffee consumed. Minutes stretched into hours, and hours into days.

Becalmed at sea, as many others had been before them. The fact didn’t offer much consolation. It did instigate a bit of mischief, which began with a pair of grumbling stomachs.

Port watch was on duty. Meals had grown meagre and morale was flagging. In case of ‘emergency’ a supply of ‘ancient’ Snickers bars had been brought aboard. But, perhaps



A vast amount of traffic makes the Straits of Malacca the busiest shipping lane in the world

wisely, it had been stowed beneath the captain's bunk.

On this third-watch shift, Adam and Ahmed heard their comrades' stomachs pining. What to do? they thought. Concerned for well-being, a plan was formulating.

The operation began with reconnaissance. An innocent Fahad was commissioned to scope out the situation.

"Captain's asleep," Fahad reported, emerging from the *Jewel's* hold. Adam and Ahmed exchanged a look. *Go time.* Adam descended below deck. Spying the coveted bulk, he picked his way gingerly towards the captain.

Saleh sensed movement. He opened one eye. Just a shaft of moonshine came down through the hold. But it was enough to illuminate a skulking silhouette. Without a sound, Saleh slid the Leatherman knife from its sheath. The shadow bent down, rooted around, and then unfolded once more to its full

height. Moonshine glinted off the blade of the knife as Saleh found himself face to face with Adam.

"Something wrong?" asked the captain.

"No, sir! Nothing wrong," came the reply. A glint of intrigue danced in Adam's eye. Saleh drew forth the knife, squinting into Adam's pupils. He rested the blunt of the knife against Adam's thigh.

"Can I help you with something?" the captain asked. Adam had tensed as the Leatherman had come forward.

"No, Captain, don't worry," said Adam. "Everything is fine." Saleh turned the knife and pressed lightly with its point.

"Ah!" yelled Adam. His hands went up in the air and a shower of Snickers bars tumbled to the ground.

"Take them," laughed Saleh. "But remember, the captain always sleeps with one eye open."



After the storm, life on board returns to normal

THE BELL RANG OUT. “All hands on deck, with safety equipment! All men to their sailing stations!” called Saleh. The clouds had closed in more quickly than expected. Lightning flashed in the distance.

“Standby, *shabab*,” Saleh said. The men took their positions. Monitoring for ships at the starboard brace stood Pushpadas Elamassery, the carpenter. For four days they had been stuck in the doldrums. The crewmembers had demolished the remaining stores of fresh fruit and veg and were mainly surviving on dried fish and rice. The wind had shifted north-west, and as it gained strength, a deck full of sailors peered hopefully at the clouds gathering astern.

The winds whipped up to speeds unseen for nearly a week. Saleh thought quickly. Should he leave the mainsail raised and attempt to run before the wind? Or should he lower it, and risk being tossed by the sea? Or, still yet, should he replace it with the storm sail? With supplies running low, Penang within one hundred miles, and on the back of four frustrating days becalmed at sea, riding with the storm was a tantalising option.

The squall approached so quickly, he barely had time to act. The wind struck with fury.

“Slack the halyards!” Saleh commanded as Adam and Ahmed paid out a metre of rope, softening the face of the mainsail in an effort to channel the wind to its sides. But perhaps the the mainsheets had been slackened too much. In an instant, caught by a gust of wind, the mainsail shot forward. Along with it went the lower yard. The 250-kilogram spar catapulted ahead. With a reverberating crack, it collided with the starboard oar support at the place where Pushpadas stood keeping lookout. The yard split. Pushpadas went down.

“Man down!” someone cried. Immediately, Robert ran to his aid.

“Pushpadas has been hit!” Robert shouted. On a rolling deck, he attempted to lift the carpenter over his shoulder and to carry him down into the hold, or at least out of the rain.



“CAREFUL, BOYS,” called Saleh. “But bring her in quick!”

As if by second-nature, Ahmed and Adam leapt on the bucking sail. The strength of the wind threatened to toss them off, but they were determined. With men at the ropes, they wrestled the sail and a jagged spar to the deck. The others jumped on top of it, pinning it down with the weight of their bodies.

Meanwhile, down below, Robert tended to Pushpadas. From his station at Pushpa’s side, he could’ve sworn a Third World War had broken out above. Thunder intermingled with pounding footfalls as the men scrambled around the deck and water poured down through the middle companionway. It sounded as if the universe had exploded.

Back on deck, Saleh ordered that the mizzen sail be lowered and the storm sail raised on the main mast, and then he reconsidered. The winds were weakening, so instead he decided only to change out the broken yard. Minus Robert, the resident medic, the starboard watch installed the spare yard and once more hoisted the mainsail.

The winds abated. Following a watch shift, the port team raised the mizzen sail, only to notice a significant fissure. So down came the mizzen, and the seamsters set to work. The night had set on dark and cold. The men worked by the light

of their headlamps alone, strapped as they were around the hoods of their battered ponchos. Finally, the *Jewel* was once again under full sail. Saleh descended into the hold to check on Pushpadas.

Stretched out on a canvas bunk, the carpenter lay calmly as Robert fanned his forehead, monitoring his eyes, speech, and temperature. Chances were good that Pushpadas had suffered a concussion.

To keep him from falling asleep and slipping into a coma, Robert continued talking with him. His condition seemed to be improving. As fate would have it, Pushpadas had sat down just seconds before the yard had snapped. If he hadn’t, the blow could have been far more serious—likely fatal. Pushpadas had been lucky.

Saleh did not sleep that night. The events of the day replayed in his mind like a film reel.

Under a moonlit sky, the *Jewel* inched forward towards Malaysia. But in the end, the squall had yielded virtually no progress. What little thrust the ship had mustered had been more or less cancelled by an adverse current. Once again, the *Jewel* was becalmed.



BACK IN HARAMEL, Said al Jabri tightened the *wizzar* around his waist, gave his net one stiff tug, and frowned. It should have been much heavier, he thought. Served him right. After nearly seventy years on the sea, he'd been outwitted overnight. Yesterday, he'd dropped his nets and had slightly drawn in the edges, surrounding scores of tuna. Confident, he'd left the nets there overnight, underestimating the mid-summer currents. By sunrise the next morning, only a couple of hundred remained.

It was the season for small tuna. They knew it by the weather, wind, and water temperature. On land, the thermometer was registering forty-five degrees, but, mercifully, the Gulf brought cold currents to shore. In a single day, catches could reach four or five hundred. But the north-north-easterly wind that attracted the fish to shallower waters and to the surface was accompanied by currents that just as easily plucked them from the nets.

"Good morning, Abu Saleh." A few metres away on the beach, another village fisherman sorted through his catch.

Said grunted in reply. *Better not talk to a fisherman when his wizzar is wet.*

The village fisherman approached. He was just a boy, the youngest son of a family Said knew well.

"*Assalammu-alaikaum,*" said the boy.

"*Alaikum-salaam,*" returned Said. He stood up from sorting his catch.

"How are things? What's the news?" The boy rolled off the standard greetings. Then the subject changed. "How's Captain Saleh?"

Said paused. He looked in the young man's eye. It twinkled with admiration.

"*Al hamdulillah,*" said Said. *He's well, thank God.*

"In Singapore yet?" asked the fisherman. Said resumed his work, laying the tuna out on the beach.

"Not yet. Soon, *inshallah.*"

The young fisherman leaned against Said's boat, arms crossed.

"One day," he said, "I'll be a sea captain like Captain Saleh."

Said paused, bent at the waist, and looked up at the boy.

He smiled. "*Inshallah.*"



ALREADY, THE *JEWEL* had covered over twelve hundred nautical miles from Galle, over thirty-three hundred from Muscat, and the handmade ship had weathered it all impressively. There had been challenges, of course, but structurally, she seemed flawless. She had pushed through penetrating waves and stayed stable on course. Indisputably, there was something extraordinary about this ship. She was distinctive, special, and—Saleh suspected—not only in comparison with her modern counterparts, but even with her ancient forebears.

At six degrees north of the equator, once more, clouds began to gather. Lightning sliced the sky, and thunder rumbled from every direction.

Battling an unrelenting current, the ship finally moved—backwards. For the first time in weeks, the crew shivered with cold, huddling on deck as wisps of steam rose from their teacups. The tropical moisture never lifted. With the return of the sun the next morning, a sweltering humidity settled on deck, making off-duty sleep impossible. A few of the sailors had broken out in rashes. “I saw my sailors drowning in sweat,” lamented Saleh.

More greatly troubling was the fact that an inventory had revealed that nearly all the ship’s supplies had been exhausted. For their daily intake of vitamins, the crewmembers were relying primarily on dates.

The frustration was nearly tangible. Within range of phone towers, there seemed but one natural thing to do. Saleh picked up the handset and rang—who else?—his mother. Astonished to hear her son’s voice, Bibi wept.

On June 1st, with the arrival of a new month came the blessed winds. Rains streamed down from the heavens. Inside



The captain stands ready as the Jewel approaches the dock

the ship, the off-duty watch crawled under plastic sheets to shield themselves from the influx of water. But not a complaint was uttered. The *Jewel* was on the move.

Soon, the mountains of Penang appeared in the distance. By dinner time, the *Jewel* had come within twenty miles of the Malaysian coast. By midnight, the *Jewel* had reached the point at which she would be met by an escort vessel.



Around three-thirty p.m. on June 2nd, the *Jewel* entered Tanjung Marina in the historical port town of Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia. Hundreds peered eagerly at the incoming ship, their curiosity piqued by the tales they'd heard.

Among them stood a very relieved Tom Vosmer. Tom threw his arms around Saleh, grasped the hand of Yahya, kissed the cheek of Ayaz.

Despite squalls and storms and doldrums, the *Jewel* had triumphantly made one of the most dangerous crossings in all the world.



*Saleh al Jabri raises
the flag of Singapore
alongside that of
Malaysia*

*Back in port, the crew
await a hearty meal*



JUST A FEW HOURS after the *Jewel* had successfully berthed in Georgetown, the land crew sat sipping cold drinks in the lobby of the City Bayview Hotel. Those who'd just arrived by sea had made beelines for the showers. One by one, then in twos and threes, the crew trickled into the lobby.

Said appeared, relaxed and grinning from ear to ear. Adam followed and was greeted with a firm handshake and a celebratory smile. Said dropped into a chair to watch the World Cup match. The younger Omanis appeared: Ayaz and Fahad, in jeans and fashion caps. Sajid followed, dapper in a T-shirt. All three stood a bit taller. One of the last to emerge from upstairs was Luca, who had just completed his first leg of the passage. Wrapped in a coloured *wizzar*, Luca looked relieved. Playfully, the others greeted him. *Mabrook*, Luca. *Congratulations*. How did it go?

"I feel strange," came the reply. "Not really here."

"When you hit the cyclone, what in the world was going through your mind?"

Luca hesitated. Now, safe on land, he was processing it all for the first time.

"It was terrifying," he said.

ON JUNE 3rd, 2010, one day after the *Jewel of Muscat* had tied up in Georgetown, word arrived that the east coast of Oman was about to be battered by a cyclone of its own. In Penang, Omani mobile phones lit up with automated SMS alerts.

In Oman, the most vulnerable coastal areas were evacuated, including Masirah Island, Ras al Hadd, and Qalhat, the latter of which was home to Fahad al Shaibi.

The *Jewel* crew and project team waited anxiously as Fahad tried to reach his family. Vivid in their minds was the 2007, unexpectedly destructive Cyclone Gonu, strongest on record in the Arabian Sea. After an evening of phone calls, Fahad finally reached his uncle. His family had indeed left Qalhat; they were safe and sound. The following day, June 4th, Cyclone Phet struck land.





CHAPTER FIVE

Penang to Singapore

The final leg



“**S**HWEYA, SHWEYA.” Gently, gently, take it slowly, easy does it.

“I can’t watch,” said Tom Vosmer, shielding his eyes. The propeller of the escort tug came precariously close to the *Jewel*’s stitched hull. “To come through storms and cyclones only to risk damage in port!” The tug revved its engine.

It was June 18th, 2010. Facing a contrary current, the *Jewel of Muscat* was attempting to depart Tanjung Marina, bound for her final stopover at Port Klang, Malaysia, a journey expected to take only three to five days. However, in order to get anywhere, she’d first have to figure out how to work her way out of the harbour.

After nearly two hours, finally, the *Jewel* was back on the move, ready to take on one of the busiest shipping routes in the world: the Straits of Malacca. Linking the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, this stretch of water measures just forty miles at its narrowest and 155 at its widest. On any given day, around three hundred ships ply its waters, which run 500 miles in length. That means that, each year, the Straits play host to sixty to seventy thousand ships transporting a third of the world’s trade and half of its oil supply. No wonder these waters bore

a history of piracy. From its massive tankers to its yachts and fishing boats, the Straits of Malacca were a virtual obstacle course. The *Jewel of Muscat* was about to run the gauntlet.

As night fell, the bothersome current continued to plague the *Jewel*, and traffic increased.

Fishing boats flocked to the sea as if convening for some celebration. I found it difficult to sleep because we were forced to tack quite a bit in order to avoid other vessels.

At 4 a.m., the watch team thought they’d spotted something floating on the surface. I took up the helm and discovered that a nearby boat had dropped its anchor, and another was only fifty to sixty metres away.

The tentative plan had been to anchor at night, but it was now clear that this didn’t seem to be the best idea. Night watches would require greater alertness than ever.





A crowd awaits the entry of the Jewel into Port Klang

“DO YOU THINK HIS MAJESTY is following the ship?”

Red and green navigation lights blinked around the ship as the starboard team kept night watch on deck. Fahad’s drumming faltered. Said halted in his song. Reading with the help of a penlight, Robert peered over the tops of his spectacles.

Writing in his journal, the captain sat at a bit of a distance from the others. He cleared his throat.

In the darkness, the voice came again, very low. “If His Majesty commissioned this project, one would think that at some point, he’d have come to see the ship, no?”

Robert rested his book on his lap.

“I think the Sultan has several pairs of eyes,” he said.

On the middle deck, in the glow cast by the lights, Ahmed, Said, and Hussein sat tying baggywrinkle. Hussein’s back was tall against the thick main mast, and his feet stretched out before him. His fingers moved quickly, teasing apart the loose ends of the one-ply rope. A long strand of baggywrinkle was emerging, coiling itself like a scarf on the deck beside him. Opposite Hussein sat the tall and lanky Said, cross-legged, forcing a stout needle through a thick piece of leather.

Ahmed began to speculate.

“I think His Majesty knows all about us,” he said. “And when we reach Singapore, *inshallah*, he will bequeath us with honours!”

At that moment, the two carpenters emerged from the hold.

“Eh, Pushpa!” called out Ahmed. “What will you do once we reach Singapore, *inshallah*?”

Pushpadas wiped a drop of sweat from his brow.

“Pushpa’s wife is due almost any day, right Pushpa?” The question had come from Luca.

“Any day.” Pushpadas smiled.

“How about you, Sajid?” the persistent Ahmed plied. “When we reach Singapore, what will you do?”

Luca spoke again. “He could get married, right, Sajid?” The young carpenter grinned.

BY DAWN ON JUNE 21st, just three days out of Georgetown, the *Jewel* had reached the next rendezvous point about ten nautical miles from the canal leading to Port Klang.

The approach was bittersweet, for suddenly, the end was near.

The end of Jewel’s voyage is approaching. I told myself, why I should think of this now? Let’s enjoy sailing on this unique and historic voyage. But I have a strange feeling about her. How will we be able to leave such a special ship? It will be difficult. Sailors have asked me, “why we don’t go to Australia first, then to Singapore?” They do not want to end this happy voyage so quickly.



The discovery of the Belitung Treasure, lost for centuries beneath the waves

“IMAGINE FOR a moment,” said Robert Jackson, the teacher and resident medic, “that at this very moment, a wooden ship is setting out from China, loaded with over sixty thousand pieces of precious Chinese ceramics, gold and silver.” Thirty faces peered back at him: Chinese and British, Malaysian and Greek, Serbian, Slovakian, Tunisian.

On the deck of the Royal Selangor Yacht Club in Port Klang, Malaysia, three or four couples stood surveying the harbour, sipping on fresh juices and cocktails. A striking newcomer had arrived.

“Thank goodness you have come,” said a patron in a sun bonnet. “The whole port has cleaned up for your arrival. We’ve never seen it looking so sharp!”

An archaeological society from Kuala Lumpur had driven twenty miles to see this mysterious artefact first-hand. Loitering on deck, its members ogled over the *matbakh* and traced the inscription carved in the steering upright.

“*In the name of Allah, the Almighty and All-merciful,*” Robert translated. “From the Qur’an. Written in Eastern Kufic, a script developed in Iraq between the eighth and tenth centuries.”

“Who knows what was going on in Europe in the ninth century?” Robert posed to the crowd. A British man spoke up.

“We were in the Dark Ages, sir.”

“That’s right,” said Robert. “Twelve hundred years ago in Europe, following the collapse of the Roman Empire, urban life, education, and culture were crumbling. It was not until the thirteenth century that a handful of Italians struck out across Mongol territories, laying the groundwork for the Age of Discovery. Who can name the Venetian famous for travelling to China and back?”

“Marco Polo,” said an Italian woman in dark sunglasses.

Robert nodded. “Most people know that Marco Polo went by land along the Silk Road to China. But few know that



Three items of rare pottery salvaged from the Belitung wreck

he returned by sea. To the overland route there existed a corresponding silk route at sea.”

“Twelve hundred years ago,” he spoke slowly, “the peoples of Arabia and Persia, East Africa, India, South-east Asia and the Far East were enmeshed in a far-flung network of regional trade. But until recently,” Robert added “scholars have had to rely on textual and iconographic sources. Who was doing the sailing? What types of vessels were they using? Evidence has been peripheral.”

“However, in 1998,” continued Robert, “discovery of the Belitung rattled the archaeological world.”

“Its cargo, nicknamed the Tang Treasure, featured an astounding range of motifs and designs of Chinese, Sumatran, Arabian and Persian origins. A number of the vessels bore Islamic inscriptions in Arabic calligraphy. Two types of pottery aboard had only previously been found at a few Near Eastern sites.”

“Dated to as early as the year 826 CE, the wreck provided the first direct evidence of a regular trade between Arabia and the Far East at least as early as the mid-ninth century.”

“It’s mind-boggling, really,” concluded Robert. “By the ninth century, the Chinese were producing for export on a massive scale, and for an incredible range of markets. This far-flung trade was well-established and quite regular. Globalisation is not a twentieth-century phenomenon.”

The deck was quiet. A gentle breeze blew, not strongly enough to dispel the subtropical humidity. Gradually, chatter struck up again among the visitors on board. The Italian woman approached Robert.

“Excuse me,” she said. “May I ask a question? How did the original sink?”

“Ah,” said Robert. “To return to the beginning. Good question. The simple answer is, we don’t know. That’s one of the reasons we’re here.”

*With Singapore in sight, the crew
prepare for the end of their voyage*

THE FINAL STOPPING POINT for the *Jewel of Muscat*, Port Klang had been inserted into the programme to ensure an on-time arrival in Singapore, where significant figures would be waiting—dignitaries, diplomats, celebrities, the President. The *Jewel* must arrive on time.

On this final leg, a special guest would be aboard: Tom Vosmer, *Abu Safina*, father of the ship. Luca, the foreman, had resigned his place to make space for Tom.

“He deserves it,” said Luca. “He’s seen this through from the beginning.”

As Yahya helped him wrap his blue and white *shemagh*, Tom beamed. He’d invested more than two full years in this ship, and now he’d have the chance, first-hand, to see how she truly performed.

Next up: Singapore. The next time the ship were to call in port, *inshallah*, she would have safely arrived at her final destination. Nevertheless, the captain urged caution.

“This final leg,” he told his sailors, “could be most difficult.” After all, the number of container ships plying the Straits was not to be dismissed. Plus, there was that baffling current.

When you feel that you have completed your job, you relax at the risk of losing concentration. The key was to balance confidence with caution.

As the *Jewel* pushed off from Port Klang, immediately, her challenge loomed large before her. Giant cargo vessels crammed the narrow strait. Traffic was so heavy that, as evening fell, darkness barely descended. The lights cast by the number of ships made midnight nearly as bright as midday.

Added to the traffic was a disconcerting sound generated by whirlpools swirling in the waters below. Mis-directed

wind and the continually adverse current pushed the *Jewel* backwards, compounding the crew’s woes. In the wee hours of the morning, as Yahya manned the helm, the ship began uncomfortably to drift towards an island. Closer and closer the island came, yet the crew could not manage to free the *Jewel* from the command of the stubborn current. The ship headed directly for an anchored vessel. Saleh thought quickly.

“Deploy the rubber rescue,” he commanded.

With two at the helm using all three rudders at once in an attempt to offset the force of the current, the inflatable boat was cast into the water. The goal was to create some drag that might also turn the bow. Worst case, the raft might also buffer the ship from collision.

“Drop anchor,” called the captain. Down the anchor went. Just metres from the anchored ship, the *Jewel* slowed to a stop.

By this point, it was obvious that the crew members had their work cut out for them. The confounding current strengthened, pushing northwards; then it would reverse. Saleh had seen nothing like this in the navigation manuals or ancient treatises. Any forward movement seemed to be voided by necessary tacking and the adverse current. Out of eighty nautical miles, progress totalled five. Back and forth the *Jewel* tacked, contending with anchored ships, floating oil platforms, sand barges, and fishing boats.

The captain turned to the father of the ship.

“Tom,” said Saleh, “would you like to try your hand at this?”

The experienced sailor stepped in. “Trim the mainsail one point to port,” he suggested. Then, “Let’s extend the lower yards.” As the sailors pushed them out, the *Jewel* gained a fraction of a knot. Thick clouds rolled in and a breeze kicked up. By that evening, the *Jewel* was back on course.





*The Jewel safely moored in Singapore,
to a rapturous welcome*

LIGHTS. MUSIC. COLOUR. CROWDS. On Saturday, July 3rd, Keppel Bay Marina in Singapore was decked out in her finest. Students lined the pier waving national flags. Expectant eyes peered around the bend, straining for a glimpse of the storied ship that was supposedly on its way. Was it true? Could there be such a ship? This was Singapore, for goodness' sake, the cutting edge of modernity, where even average highways could transform into airplane runways.

Then, suddenly: drums. The crowd that, to this point, lingered casually, pinched forward. Was it there? *Look! See?* There it was, coming round the bend—its prow just visible—now the bow—then the mast, sail lowered, and the sailors. In matching polo shirts and those trademark checked *shemaghs*, they danced and waved. Now, the second mast was visible. *Click* went the cameras. *Flash* went the bulbs. *Pound, pound, pound-pound* went the drums. A Chinese dragon wound its way along the pier. Then came the music. Triumphant music. The music of heroes.

The ship was in full sight. *Wait—that thing had made it all the way from Oman?* She was an extraordinary sight! A deep brown-red, with subtle variation in shades—a true mark of her handcrafted birth. Near the stern hung a semi cylindrical



The infamous zoolie toilet

box—that must be the infamous *zoolie*, the toilet. From mast to mast and bow to stern hung nautical flags of every colour and symbol. At intervals on deck, the crew raised their cameras, returning the volley of flashes from the pier.

Then, there: high on the aft deck stood two men who beamed from ear to ear. Their arms were raised, triumphant, and they were dancing. Over the shoulders of one, an Omani flag was draped—red, white, and green. Raising it high over his head, he gave three pumps in the air, still dancing. That must be the captain.

Then, a new sound: a victorious chant. Emerging from the crowd, a dance troupe sang and swayed its way down the gangway to the pier.

To the beat of drums pounded by men in white *dishdashas* and blue *wizzars*, Omani women in their colourful *thawbs* shuffled and clapped. A bagpiper jubilantly wound through the crowd in a dark green kilt. By the time the troupe reached the ship, the entire crowd was swaying.

One by one, then in twos, threes, and fours, the men on the ship trickled overboard to the dock below. Beaming, clasping hands, and clapping one another in embraces, they formed a line. In unison they knelt, planting kisses on the ground.





President S R Nathan of Singapore greets Captain Saleh. His Highness Sayyid Harib and George Yeo look on

Escorted by the dance troupe, the crew made their way up the gangway to the place where three dignified men stood waiting to greet them. One, clad in batik—the President of Singapore. Another, tall and lean, bespectacled and grinning—the Singaporean Foreign Minister. The third, like a king, enrobed in a gold-embroidered gown—a member of Oman’s Royal Family representing Sultan Qaboos. A faint smile on his lips suggested that, perhaps, this scene was reawakening fantastical schemes and swashbuckling playtimes from long ago. The captain stepped forward and, with each one, clasped hands.

Then, in a voice shaking with emotion, Captain Saleh al

Jabri stepped onto the podium, expressing his gratitude to the government and people of Singapore for their role in this unprecedented initiative.

And then, suddenly, commotion to stage left. The crowd parted, and one face was nudged forward. The captain blinked. Was he seeing things? Running towards him came a caramel-coloured *dishdasha*. Saleh’s heart leapt. He threw open his arms as his eldest son, Hamza, buried himself in his father’s embrace.

Sayyid Badr had surprised the captain, flying Hamza to Singapore from Muscat. Father and son stood there, locked, as tears welled in the corners of Saleh’s tightly shut eyes.

It is wonderful to be in Singapore at last.

It is a great honour to have captained this ship, tracing the path of our ancestors twelve hundred years ago. The crew have loved and cared for this ship, learning to listen to her, to read her better day by day. They know the sound of the wind in her sails, the creak of her rudder, the rhythm of the waves against her hull.

For nearly five months, this ship has been our kitchen and our cradle, our office and our classroom. Our lives have depended upon her, in the most adverse weather conditions, on tossing seas and in driving winds. She has not failed us. She has surprised and perplexed us on many occasions. But she has proven loyal and true, exceeding our expectations, and above all protecting our lives.

On her deck, we have gained a whole new respect for our forefathers, learning to navigate by the stars, as they did centuries ago. From her bow, we have seen astounding sunsets.

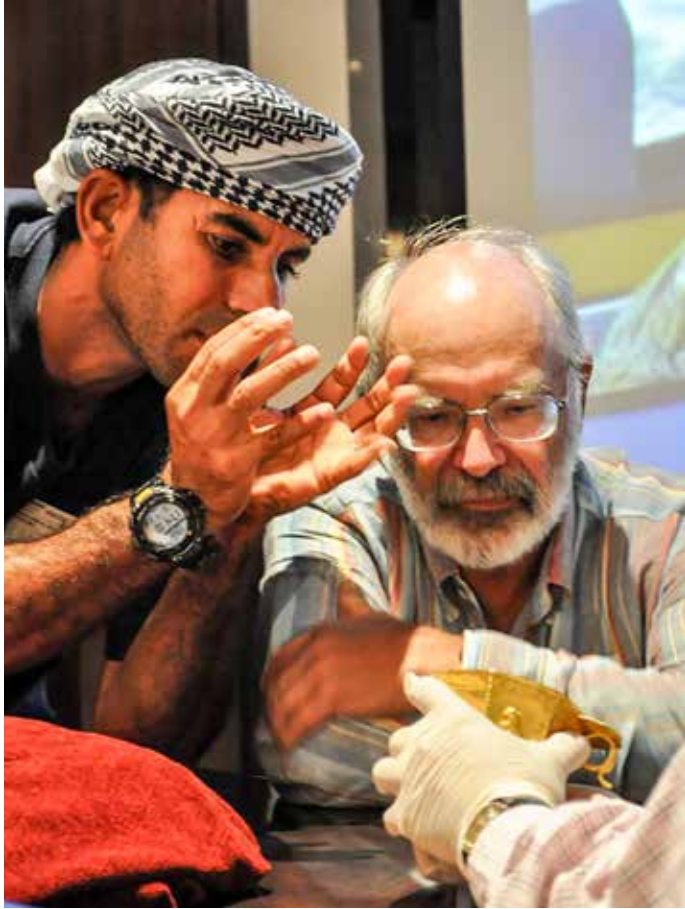
But her greatest gift, I think, is that in her beauty and her mystery, in the challenges and the hardships of the voyage, she has created an entirely new family. This voyage has forged unforeseen relationships to our past. We have gained a real connection to, and a deep respect for, our ancestors who went before us, charting the course, mapping the stars. But perhaps more importantly, it has produced unbreakable relationships among us here in the present.

We knew when we began that this was an international project. We had Omanis and Italians, Indians, Australians, Americans, Sri Lankans, Singaporeans, Malaysians, and British, among others. This ship has shown us that when it comes to people, there are no borders. This crew has become a group of brothers, of true and loyal friends. But it has united a family even wider than this.



At each port, we have been welcomed by smiling faces. These smiles speak a universal language. They have transported us home, to those we love, when we are miles away from our homes and families. This voyage has united groups of complete strangers into a Jewel of Muscat family.

I will miss this ship dearly. The past few months have been challenging and profound. This voyage and this ship, have brought about much growth in all the boys here, and in myself. I thank my crew and all of our supporters, around the world. And we all thank this Jewel of Muscat for the lasting gift she has given to us—the incredible family she has brought together from all across the globe.



Saleh al Jabri and Tom Vosmer are treated to an exclusive viewing of the magnificent Tang Treasure

A SILENCE OF AWE passed among them. Extending before them were the reaches of a dimly lit room, its graduated floor lined with clay pots arranged by girth and height. As in a theatre, the room disappeared into darkness, giving the effect that the horizon did not exist, that the pots continued on into eternity. The Tang Treasure.

Sixty thousand pieces of Chinese ceramics, gold, silver, and bronze are housed at three locations in Singapore. Owned jointly by Sentosa Leisure Group and the Khoo Foundation,

the pots—many still unrestored—are mainly kept at the Hua Song Museum. A single glance is enough to take one’s breath.

“Turning around,” says the curator, “you’ll find thousands more of our original pieces.” Following his gesture, you turn, to your surprise, to see a wall lined with rollaway shelves. The curator rolls back the first. Bowls, goblets, teapots, in soft greens, blues and whites appear. Lotus flowers and dragons dance among Chinese calligraphy and Arabic script, Buddhist swastikas and geometric patterns of Islamic style.



The Jewel takes pride of place, permanently installed in the Maritime Experiential Museum in Singapore

Drifting down the aisle between two of the cases, your eye settles on something familiar: the famous blue-and-white plate, predecessor of Ming ware, which you have seen in photographs. You raise your camera—*click*—and examine the result. You frown. *Click* again. There's no way to do it justice.

Following the crew, you are lead to a site where the second portion of the Tang Treasure is held. It is rarely seen by anyone. A curator is waiting. With a *snap!* he straps on latex gloves. The door opens, and a guard enters with a box. Carrying it before

him as if it were precious treasure—*wait, it is!*—gingerly, he places it on the table.

With gloved hands, the curator lifts the lid to reveal an inside lined with red velvet. And there, cushioned in its folds, is the gold goblet.

Lavishly robed central Asian figurines dance on each of its eight panels. The goblet glows with an inner luminescence only the most precious of metals can emit. Captain Saleh leans in to examine it closely. Its brilliance is reflected in his eyes.





CHAPTER SIX

Coming home

The return
to Muscat



Saleh al Jabri cradles his youngest son, Firas, as other crew members delight in reuniting with their families once more

AT NINE-THIRTY on July 10th, the Boeing 737 touched down on the runway at Seeb International Airport. The flight from Singapore required ten hours of air travel, plus layover time in Colombo and Dubai. But it seemed like the bat of an eyelid. The journey in the opposite direction had taken 276 times as long.

The hatch opened. A blinking captain strode forth into the familiar Omani sun. There, at the foot of the stairs, stood a small crowd of beaming faces of officials and the media. One by one, the crew disembarked onto a sizzling tarmac. Saleh al Jabri lifted a scarf of Omani colours high over his head. Said al

Tarshi raised his arms in triumph. At last, Oman's most recent heroes were home sweet home.

Crossing the tarmac, the jubilant crew was escorted to a welcome lounge where they were greeted with garlands of pungent flowers. Cameras flashed. The crowd squeezed forward. There, waiting for their heroes, were their families.

Saleh's brother ran to him. They embraced. *Welcome home.* Saleh's brother turned around and lifted up Firas, the youngest of Saleh's sons, whose curled brown ringlets tumbled from a patterned white *mussar*. Firas beamed. He clambered to his father. Saleh squeezed as if he'd never let him go again.



Said's nine children ran to him, bubbling with excitement. The smile seemed permanently fixed on Said's face—even when he found that his youngest son was rejecting him.

"He's not happy with me right now," said Said. "I've been gone so long. He wouldn't talk to me when I called from Singapore. But he'll come around, it will just take time." Said shrugged. "I figured it would happen. But he will trust me again soon."

Yahya joked with Said's children. With his son perched in his arms, Khamis spoke to the media. Ahmed laughed and joked with his family, who'd come from further up the coast.

In a tender moment, Fahad embraced his father who—not too long ago—had been displaced from Qalhat by the recent cyclone.

As a national dance troupe, *Firqa sha'abiya*, began its rhythmic sway, two familiar faces appeared in the crowd: Babu Sankaran and Abdul Salaam, two who'd helped construct the ship from the earliest stages. They were swept up in the celebration. So was Luca. Before he could resist, the crew had gathered round him and tossed him high into the air.



Saleh proudly displays the Omani Medal of Honour

ON SATURDAY, JULY 10th, nearly five months from the day the *Jewel of Muscat* left Oman, the Jabri truck wound up the familiar road to Haramel. In the passenger seat sat a tired but happy captain. As his brother drove, Saleh surveyed the landscape that, mingled with the sea, had become a part of him. There were the jagged rocks he'd climbed over as a child. There were the new football pitches—and the site of the old one, which had since given way to development.

Beside his brother and his son, Saleh's family hadn't made it to the airport, and it had been so long since he'd seen his wife, his parents, his children. Saleh was expectant. But he never foresaw what awaited. As the truck rounded the final bend and the rocky drive gave way to a little fishing village,

Saleh binked. There, before him, was little Haramel, but not as he'd known it. Pictures and banners decked the buildings. Villagers sang and danced in the streets.

Saleh's brother grinned and shifted the truck into park. Astonished, Saleh jumped from the passenger seat. All of Haramel had turned out to greet him. There stood his father, sisters, brothers, wife and children, and hundreds of friends. And there stood his mother. With her blessing, he had done it. He ran to her, took her hands and kissed them. Her son was home.



Epilogue

“I BOUGHT A COW,” he says.

“A what?”

“A cow.”

A cow? *Baqarah?*

Aywuh. Yes.

“For what?”

“To give a party, for all the guys.”

Ah, of course. Naturally.

Remembering back to his initial involvement in the project. One of the first things he did shortly after being named captain was to organise a barbecue for the villagers of Qantab.

“Between you and me,” he adds, “I have this feeling. I keep waking at night thinking about the *Jewel*. It’s strange, but it’s like it’s not over.”



“WOULD YOU LIKE to see it?” he grins. It’s just the second time the crew has been reunited since they returned to Oman.

The case alone is impressive: a green leather box hinged on the sides and opening in the middle like shutters. Inside, the side panels are lined with pearl-white fabric, the middle with green velvet. Atop the velvet lies a collection of medals bearing Oman’s national insignia. At the centre is the largest, strung on a ribbon of burgundy, green, and white. The Omani Medal of Honour.

“So where do you wear that?”

He smiles. “Actually, I was just asking the same.”

A rare honour bestowed by the Sultan, the medal is to be worn over the *dishdasha* on formal occasions.

“May I have a look?” asks Tom Vosmer. “You should go and show your mother.”

“I did, straight away,” says the captain, who is still the son, the brother, the husband, the father.





Many people contributed to the *Jewel of Muscat* photographic archive. Very special thanks are due to Robert Jackson, James Oprey and Alessandro Ghidoni, who took most of the photos of *Jewel's* voyage and construction and whose work features largely in this book.

Other photographs by:
Mohammed Al Rashdi, Megan Furman, Simon Gallimore, Mark Lloyd, Norbert Weismann, Mateo Willis, Miguel Willis, Tom Vosmer.

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Chris Biggins *Voyage Liaison*
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Jewel of Muscat crew

Saleh bin Said Al Jabri
Captain (5 legs)
Khamis bin Hamdan Al Hamdani
First Mate (5 legs)
Ahmed bin Muhammad Al Adawi (5 legs)
Adam bin Muhammad Al Balushi (5 legs)
Ahmed bin Abdullah Al Balushi (5 legs)
Yahya bin Juma Al Faraji (5 legs)
Hussein Al Ra'isi (5 legs)
Zakariya Al Saadi (1 leg)
Fahad Khalfan Al Shaibi (5 legs)
Said bin Muhammad Al Tarshi (4 legs)
Ayaz Khalid Al Zadjali (5 legs)
Luca Belfioretti (2 legs)
Geoffrey Dobbs (1 leg)
Alessandro Ghidoni (5 legs)
Mohammed Ismail (3 legs)
Robert Jackson (5 legs)
Jeff Khoo (1 leg)
Pushpaddas Elamassery Krishnan (5 legs)
Mike Lithgow (3 legs)
Mylai Prabhakar (1 leg)
Ananda Kumar Raghavan (1 leg)
Eric Staples (5 legs)
Sajid Madathile Valappil (5 legs)
Tom Vosmer (1 leg)
Vincent Wee (2 legs)
Mateo Willis (1 leg)

Carpenters

Ayaz Khalid Al Zadjali
Supervisor, Omani Carpenters
Younis Masoud Al Shareiqi
Head Modelmaker
Ashraf Khaled Al Hamdani
Mahmoud Ishaq Al Balushi
Noor Bakhsh Al Balushi
Nasir Jum'a Khamis Al Falahi
As'ad Hamed Said Al Habsi
Muhammad Al Habsi
As'ad Al Hadidi
Anees Mansur Al Harthi
Badr bin Zaher Al Jabri
Muhammad Sulaiman Al Ma'amari
Fahad Khalfan Al Shaibi
Muhammad Al Subhi
Shanmughan Nannanar Kandy
Sivan Nannanar Kandy
Biju Kuzhi Pazhan Karan
Pushpaddas Elamassery Krishnan
Bhaskaran Kunhikandiyil
Balakrishnan Edathum Padikkal
Babu Mavila Veetil Sanathana
Lucy Peter Vadassery
Raju Pandar Valapp

Ropeworkers

Mohammed Ashraf Tharammal Kamban
Foreman, Ropeworkers
John Ajikumar
Abdul Jabbar Chadayam
Rajeesh Kotiyil
Rathnan Kotiyil
Abdul Vahab Kuttuvantavida
Stellus Muthappan
Abdul Salam Kadavath Purayil
Yesudhasan Thomas
Navas Kaltha Valappil
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The *Jewel of Muscat* team wishes to pay tribute to Chris Biggins, a very remarkable and gallant sailor who sadly passed away on February 15th 2011. We will always remember him.



Muscat

Sea of Oman

Arabian Sea

Kochi, India

Galle, Sri Lanka

Indian Ocean



Bay of Bengal

Georgetown, Malaysia

Port Klang, Malaysia

Singapore

