

The Last Turn

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To Magdalena, for your love and all your support!

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About the book

I wrote this book in a month during NaNoWriMo of 2013 (nanowrimo.org). I then spent three months trying to avoid making it ready to get published. It contains some spelling errors, and most likely a few sentences that would make my old English teacher cry if she saw them. I don't care! I just had so much fun creating a world and an adventure where anything is possible!

Enjoy!

The First Day of His Last Turn

“Every morning I see you ahead of me.

I have travelled around the world a thousand of times,

But I still haven’t reached you.

Maybe, tomorrow I’ll reach the edge of the world.”

— Captain Tribolios I of the Long Way Up

“Reporting for duty!”, Quentin said with a smile when he walked through the door to the bridge. His father turned around, looking at his son. “Tomorrow, my final trip starts.” he answered with a sigh that seemed to hold both relief and sadness. He looked around the bridge that had been his home for the last thirty years of his life. The steel grey walls on three sides, and the huge window looking out the front of the ship to the clear blue sky and the edge of the Atlantic ocean far below. There were no clouds below them so the land was clearly visible below and the shore cut like a straight line between the green/brown of the Americas and the dark blue Atlantic Ocean. Looking toward the horizon white clouds showed an indistinct edge between sky and ocean.

“Soon I’ll reach the edge of the world”, he said with a wry smile, quoting the old Streamer-poem. “Welcome home my son! I’m glad that you are here again, it has been too long” Finally showing the smile Quentin haven’t seen in person for ten years.

“This moment needs a bit more ceremony.”, Anta said with a dry chuckle. Quentin finally noticed the two other people in the room. The two people seated at the round table in the center of the room

felt like each other's opposites. What made the difference even more distinct was the table. Dark old wood, heavy with age, and showing much use. The old table felt completely out of place with the metal floor and walls, the computer screens filling all walls. It fit perfectly though with the three older men in the room. Or not men, Anta, who was saying something more that Quentin didn't pick up was in her fifties, broad over the shoulders and dressed in dark army fatigues. Her face bore a scar over the left cheek from below her eye and down to her cheek. Her short grey hair and the look in her eyes spoke of having seen the dark side of life. Things she rather would have never seen again yet seemed to accept which gave her the iron will she was so famous for and the rather dark humor that would show itself at the most strange of times. As long as Quentin remembered, Anta had always been the first to chastise him when he slacked off, but also the first to laugh at his boyhood pranks, as long as they didn't interfere with their duties. The other man sitting at the table was a thin man in man in his forties. He still had dark hair with a start of grey at his temples. He wore a strict blue uniform and radiated a strict patience. It was like he was indulging children that had lost focus during school and was waiting for them to tire of it and move back to their homework.. David stood up, straightened himself, let his arms rest at his sides, and with a formal voice he seemed to repeat words that he must've learnt long ago but was still fresh in his heart: "Welcome to the circle of three. We are here to redistribute, defend, and teach. Are you ready to accept your duties?" Quentin feeling the seriousness of the situation mimicked the older man. He stood up straighter, looked him in the eyes and said: "I am ready." The three men who now stood in a line looking at him, answered: "For the greater good."

"For the greater good.", Quentin answered them. He both felt light and heavy at the same time. Lightness for this was the moment he had been working so hard to get to for the last ten years. The heaviness from the pressure of responsibilities he would have for the next thirty years of his life.

“In one Turn you will replace your father as the captain of this ship... If you can pass the tests. You have been away for many years now training at the Academy. You have worked hard, but now the real work begins. This is reality and things are not as simple as in a simulation.

Quentin chuckled, thinking back on some of the impossible simulations he had been forced to redo over and over again at the Academy.

David snapped, “I know you feel well prepared and invincible now, but in a few weeks you will be weeping for the simplicity of the simulations.”

Quentin, his face red with embarrassment, felt that he had failed even before the tests had started. *What is the shortest time anyone has been sent back to the Academy in disgrace?* He thought to himself. *It can't be shorter than five minutes.*

Anta after struggling to keep a straight face for a few seconds started laughing. “I’m looking forward to some young cockiness and foolhardiness. It was a long time since I felt young. I’m looking forward to serving with you the next ten years until I move on as well.” David looked sternly at Anta and looked about to say something when Quentin’s father interrupted

“The responsibility is not yours yet. I will be your Shadow during this Turn, it is Anta’s and David’s job to evaluate and test you, I am here for support and backup. Good luck my son!” Then with a salute he said: “The bridge is yours captain, what is your first command?”

Quentin’s mind was in an instant empty of all thought. The sudden realization that he was now completely responsible for the lives of the hundreds of people living on the ship and for all the people that he would help by transporting the goods to keep them supplied and the soldiers to defend them. It left him feeling dumbfounded, inadequate and scared shitless at the same time. After what felt like an eternity, but was probably only a few, seconds he stammered:

“What do you suggest?”

David showing a bit of a smile said, “That is probably the wisest thing anyone has ever said on this bridge.” Anta’s booming laugh echoed across the bridge as she and David went to the door to welcome the crew back into the bridge. “It is time you met your crew, but before that. For gods sake Brian, give your son a hug!”

The hug from his father left Quentin with tears in his eyes, and this moment started to feel real to him. As the people on watch came back into the room Quentin took the time to look around the bridge to. *This is it*, he thought. He took a deep breath, put on a smile to hide his nervousness, and walked with what he hoped showed confidence around the bridge to meet some of the people under his command.

Quentin’s mind felt filled with a numbing fog, after what felt like an eternity of constant talking, trying to learn names of the new people in the crew, catching up with the people he knew and projecting a positive attitude through it all. He was extremely happy but at the same time felt overwhelmed with everything. He walked out from the bridge took a left heading towards his family’s old rooms, when he realized he had no idea where he was staying or where his luggage had been taken. He had just left it with one of the ship’s Runners and then went straight to the bridge. *That is a problem for later, I want to meet my mother.*

Coming up to the bulkhead door of his family’s rooms a sense of homesickness came over him. Knocking on the door, he heard his mother call from inside: “Come on in, it is open.” He opened the bulkhead door and walked into the apartment. He longed for seeing the paintings his mother was so found of making, the smell of incense and paint all mixed into one. Except when he walked in, the apartment was completely empty. Nothing was there except for his two bags lying on the table in the middle of the common room. “What has happened with all your things, mother?”, he almost yelled. The lithe woman walking out from his old room had a huge

smile on her lips. Her hair now completely grey yet still fell long and full down her shoulders. She was dressed in the white loose clothing she was so fond of wearing.

“It is not all gone, we left your room just like it was when you left for the Academy.”

“But where are your things?”, he said again, having no idea what was happening.

“Quentin, these are the Captain’s quarters. These are your rooms now, we moved to one of the cabin’s a few doors down the hall.”

She walked up to him and gave him a long warm hug, whispering in his ear

“Welcome home my son! We have missed you so much.”

Quentin leaned into the familiar embrace and started to feel himself relax and felt tears running down his cheeks. *I am home!* A long moment later his mother gave him a kiss on the cheek. “We have brought some food from the mess, come by for dinner when you have unpacked your things.”

His mother left Quentin in his rooms. The common room in the middle was four by four meters with a dinner table with four chairs in the middle of the room, a couch against one wall, empty shelves along the walls spoke of the large library his mother and father had kept here. It was not completely empty though, on the bottom shelf, there was one book that they seemed to have forgotten. He picked up the leather-bound book. It was quite small and was called the History of the World. There was a bookmark put into the middle of the book. He opened the book and saw that the bookmark was actually a piece of canvas torn from what must have been one of his mother’s paintings. The chapter, he had opened the book to, was called ‘Why violence was and never will be the answer’. Quentin closed the book leaving the bookmark where it was and put it back into the shelves. The many impressions, thoughts and feelings made him forget the book the second he put it on the shelf. He walked into

his parent's old room. A new bed had been put into the room for him, and he realized that this was where he was supposed to sleep from now on. And when he really became captain on this ship he was supposed to bring his chosen, Sarah, here to stay with him. The thought didn't give him that much comfort, as it should have.

Walking into his old room the sight and smells filled him with childhood memories. The posters on the wall were 10 years old but he still remember how much he used to love the band *No one can hear you Stream!*, his desk held the model he had been working on when he left, it was a replica of a Spitfire, an airplane used during the Second World War. A war over 200 years old, but still used as a warning example in schools all over UNN on what would happen if we don't stand united, that we must fight for the greater good. Going out into the common room again, his bags did not look adequate to fill these rooms. To keep his mind off all the things happening, he needed to do something with his hands so he started to unpack his things into his parent's old bedroom. *My bedroom.*

An hour later, walking into his parent's new rooms felt like a huge relief. The smell of incense and paint was there. His father and mother sat the table talking in angry voices. "You can not start this now and leave Quentin with the mess..." his mother said, stopping in mid sentence when Quentin walked in. His father stood up and gave him a strong hug when he walked up to the table. Quentin wanted to ask what they talked about, when his mother interrupted his thoughts by uncovering the plates of food.

"We asked the kitchen to make your favorite food from when you were young. Everyone is having hamburgers and fries tonight. You are now officially the hero of everyone under 14 years of age on the ship."

With a dramatic sigh, "Thank you for your help in giving me a professional image towards the crew, mom."

"It's good to show that you are a person, and not a machine." his father said seriously. "And this is actually really good.", he finished

the sentence with a laugh.

They started eating and talking about the last ten years. It felt strange to talk to them in person after ten years with only monthly communications allowed during the Academy. After talking for a long time it seemed like the conversation was moving in circles around the thing they were most curious about. The paragraphs and sentences started weaving in closer and closer until it felt like there was no question left but the one his father asked.

“Tell us about your chosen. We have been dying to hear more of her.” His father’s voice held a bit of sadness in it, like he was trying to put on a happy face yet at the same time was biting off the words one at a time. Quentin was torn. He was supposed to love Sarah with all his heart; the Chooser said that they are a perfect match. But he just didn’t feel it. *Could the Chooser have made a mistake?* All these thoughts were flying around in his mind. The conversation had come to a stand still, Quentin looked down at his plate. His mother said softly,

“When me and your dad were chosen I held extreme doubt in my heart. Who was this Chooser, this machine to tell me what I wanted, what I needed? But I had now choice, and neither did your father. When I first met him, I was really disappointed.” His father rolled his eyes. “But when I got to know him I realized that we fit extremely well together and I came to love him. But it takes time and hard work. You just have to remember that the Chooser is there to make sure that no unnecessary conflicts happen onboard the ships. The ships and their Captains are too important to allow them to just randomly choose their partners.”

“I know,” Quentin answered. “It just felt really strange meeting her. She was jubilant when she saw me, threw herself around my neck. It felt fake somehow. It was a nice to spend that last day with her but I’m not sure.”

His father guffawed “A ‘nice’ evening, huh?”

“Not like that.” Quentin responded, “And I seriously don’t want to hear crude jokes from my father, especially when my mother is sitting next to me.”

Left Behind

*“My home can’t be found on any longitude or latitude.
I am a Streamer, my home is 10000 meters above the
earth.”*

— Captain Abraham II of The Greater Good
(the first Jet Stream Ship built by the UNN)

Sarah walked away after saying goodbye to Quentin not knowing what to think of him or how she felt about the fact that they would spend the rest of their lives together. Or to be exact, in 4 months she would travel up to the Ship and they would spend the rest of their lives together. The Chooser had decided that they would be the perfect couple. It was based on their psychology profiles, their behavior during the Academy, their genetics, political implications, family ties, how well they would fulfill the greater good and hundreds of years of experience. *I wonder if everyone feels this way when they first meet their chosen?* She had read his psych-profile before the day and had planned how she would act and respond to him in a way that would give them a good and deep enough connection. But he had seemed distant the entire day like he rather wanted to be somewhere else, almost like he was afraid of her. But that would be preposterous, he soon to be Captain could not have been afraid of her. *Or was that what I had missed when developing my strategy?*

Walking back toward the building that had been her home for the last 10 years, the Tower. Standing outside the small building, barely 5 stories high she smiled a bit about it. There were 6 of these towers spread around New York. Three of them were above ground, visible from miles away, The Academy where Quentin and

the other Captains and pilots were trained. The Barracks where the Marines were trained and The Question where the Inquisitors were trained were the other two. The three other Towers were hidden away, in plain sight. They were the mirrors to the towers rising high above ground, these other three towers stretched into the ground. Hidden from view like their opposites were made to be visible. They were the yin to their yang. The Circle that was visible on the ship was the Captain, the Commander of the Marines and the Inquisitor. The other circle was the invisible one, consisting of the spouses to those three people. The other three towers held no names and were just called the Towers, even though they were more like underground caves than towers. She only knew of the location of one of them, her own.

Tomorrow I will meet them. The people I will work with for the next couple of years, working for the greater good. Always there, but out of sight. The thought made her smile as she walked into the nondescript building where she had lived and trained for the last ten years. This was her final night here, tomorrow she would move to the Wardens mansion where she would meet and get to know Quentin's grandparents, his mother and the other two people of her Circle. This thought removed the smile from her face and she started to feel nervous again. The instructors had told her that the tests she would face during the next four months would be the hardest of her life. She would now finally prove that she was ready to serve on one of the Ships. *How could the test be any worse than the ones I have already been through?*

Walking into the lobby walked up to the security officer sitting at the front desk and showed her ID. He looked carefully at it and let her past. There were both homes and offices in the building, it was the best way to explain the flow of people that flowed in and out of the building at all hours. He was really not the security for where she was going, that came later. She walked into the elevator, held her security card over the sensor, the elevator doors closed and started to descend down. The elevator descended quickly and

stopped smoothly. The doors opened and she was greeted with another lobby. This lobby held the real security checkpoint. Hidden and not so hidden cameras and armaments tracked her every move as she walked into the room and up to the security booth. The room was colored in a light green color that was supposed to make people calm. The lights were turned up at a high level, so that high quality pictures could be taken of anyone who entered. Her identification would be verified both by a human and by a computer interface. Both could be fooled in different ways, but it was more than twice as hard to fool them both than to fool just one of them. The security guard relaxed when he recognized her, and did not look that closely at her ID. *I will have to report that.* Sloppiness was never tolerated here. She remembered the amount of times she had not finished her tasks to perfection. The punishments, never physical ones, but having to do the same meaningless task over and over again so that they were up to the standard of the instructor had ingrained that simple message into her brain. Sloppiness was never tolerated! After passing the computer's security check, she walked through the now open security doors and entered the large lobby on the other side. It held 8 elevator doors and while walking into a random one she took out her small datapad and sent her report about the guard's sloppy behavior. He would be reprimanded, but not fired unless it had happened before.

She stepped out into the floor where the trainees lived. Where she had lived for the last ten years. This was her last night. She walked to the canteen to get a late dinner before going to bed. When she entered the canteen she was startled by the roar that flew out of the mouths of what must be over a hundred people inside.

“CONGRATULATIONS, SARAH!!!!!!!!!!!!”

She had not noticed anything being prepared, they had managed to fool her completely, and she had in her heart given up on getting a going-away party. But they had done it. All her friends were here. The people she had grown up with. She could not stop herself, tears

came to her eyes and she threw out her arms to hug the people rushing towards her. Her plan to go to bed early so that she would feel fresh and have a lot of energy when she met the Circle the next day failed completely.

Over the Ocean

“The Point of no Return is used to describe when a transport has enough hydrogen to land and rendezvous with the next ship passing the area. The transport ships refuel on the Jet Stream Ship and not on the ground where they are stationed. They need energy to both land and to be able to fly up again.”

— An answer from Quentin’s final exam

Quentin woke the next morning feeling stressed and sad. He got out of bed and started the moving meditation he had begun every morning with during the last ten years. Moving through the slow routine strained his muscles and his focus to the max. It brought back the feeling of camaraderie from the Academy. He could almost see how he and the other eleven were slowly moving from position to position in their barracks every morning before breakfast. After a shower he felt focused and refreshed. His old instructor’s voice suddenly came to him with the words that had been repeated to him at least a million times, *“The first thing you do every morning is to check the ship’s status.”*

Feeling he had something semi-constructive to do, he headed for the bridge with the list he made the night before in his pocket.

“We just left New York behind and we are above the Atlantic Ocean, captain.”, the first mate said the moment he went onto the bridge. His father was already on the bridge and it was apparently him the first mate was addressing.

“Thank you! The real Captain is on deck now, I’m only the Shadow” his father said without turning around.

Quentin trying to take control of the conversation asked. “What is the status of the last transport for the capital?”

“The transport is loaded with everything except the passengers. It has also been refilled with hydrogen and is ready for takeoff. One hour until point of no return.”

“Thank you first mate,” Quentin responded, “We will see the passengers off, let me know if anything changes.” After checking that the crew had everything in hand, secretly checking his list a few times, they went down to the loading docks to say farewell to his mother and his father’s chosen.

Seeing his mother standing at the transport almost brought Quentin to tears. To meet her for one night and then waving goodbye the next day felt unfair. His father put his hand on his shoulder. “There is a reason that we always repeat the UNN-Motto, almost like a prayer, it is to remember that what we do is for everyone not just for us.”

“For the greater good.” Quentin said to himself and walked towards his mother. They talked for a while. The transport pilot was getting more and more irritated with them; keeping him from returning home. Finally they felt they had to say their goodbyes.

Diane hugged her son and whispered in his ear. “Did you find the book I left for you in the book shelf? Read it when you get the chance.”

His father interrupted them before he could answer. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Just telling our son how much I love him.”, His mother quickly replied.

Quentin frowned, but nodded towards his mother hoping that she understood that he had found it and that he would read it. *Why is she keeping secrets from him?*

She was the last passenger to board the transport. Quentin and Brian

looked in silence at the closing door until one of the Loaders yelled at them: "There is never summer in the stream." Quentin and Brian ran out of the dock through the inner bulkheads just as they closed. After they were closed they could hear the bangs from the ship releasing the bolts holding the transport to the ship and then only silence. They looked out the window as the transport was released from the ship and dropped down.

Quentin had always loved watching the transport planes taking off. The huge plane was an engineering marvel. The wings were stretched out and it started to drop at a slight incline. Its' turbine engines started spinning from the air passing through them from dropping, which caused the huge reaction wheel to start to spin inside of the plane. On the roof of the plane he could see the circular housing for the reaction wheel. Every time he saw this kind of drop he could almost feel the humming when the wheel started to spin faster and faster, though the wheel never made any sound, if any sound would start leaking out then you knew you were only seconds from the plane exploding. An unbalanced wheel at the speeds it span at would be extremely destructive. The reaction wheel would store momentum from the turbines and when it had reached its maximum the turbines would start and the transport plane would get most of its energy to fly back from New York from just dropping from the Jet Stream Ship. It would drop to gain energy and then use the energy to fly part of the way and then repeat until it was to close to the ground it had to use up some of the precious hydrogen in its tanks. It takes a lot of energy to lift goods up to the 10000 meters that the ship traveled on and most of the hydrogen was used when the transport planes transported goods up to the ships, and the reaction wheels was one way to minimize the energy usage. If it was one thing the UNN was good at it was redistributing and recycling. *Like my mother.* After a minute his father looked away, brought a smile to his face "Where should I shadow you now?"

"Lets go to the mess hall for an early lunch. I think the bridge can manage an hour more without me." Quentin replied.

Walking in to the mess hall felt eerily familiar but at the same time like he didn't fit in anymore. Coming from the back of the ship the left side of the mess hall was a glass wall stretching almost 3m from floor to ceiling and the entire 30m of the mess hall length. The right side held the entrance to the kitchen, they could hear the bustle coming from in there as the kitchen staff was finishing the preparations for lunch or starting the preparation for dinner. At the long counter the lunch was displayed and ready for the taking. The last time he was here he was a young man on his way to the Academy. He remembered the party to celebrate the ship's son who was on his way to become a man. Right here in this hall. But then he was just the captain's son. It also brought back the memory from the day after the party. When he left for the Academy, the tears in his eyes when he finally realized that he wouldn't meet his parents again for 10 years. Now he was the Captain-to-be. He saw David sitting by himself in a corner of the room. He is the ship's inquisitor. His task was to judge in any dispute on the ship or in any area they passed on their turn around the world. *I wonder what the test is about?* His thoughts on the tests were derailed when he saw his two old friends Roy and Sebastian sitting at one of the tables.

"I need to take my mind of everything happening. Can we talk later?"

Brian saw where Quentin was looking. "I will have lunch with David, we have some things to talk about."

What is all the secrecy about?

Quentin got some lunch from the kitchen and walked over to his old friends' table. Feeling lighter and happier with every step he walked towards them. He had needed to see some friendly faces.

"Long time no see! I didn't know you still served on this ship," He said happily.

Sebastian and Roy looked up, happiness and a bit of envy seemed to clash in their eyes.

“Not all of us have the possibility to take ten year vacation’s.” Roy sounded a bit short when he said it.

Sebastian though looked happy to see him. “It is so great to see you again, it has been a very long time. We just got back from our tours. We actually haven’t seen one another for a couple of years now as well.” Nodding at Roy. “I just got back from serving on the Tech team at the Greater Good and I just got assigned as team leader of your Tech team.”

“Congratulations, Sebastian. It is going to be great working with you! Roy, what have you been up to these last few years?”

“I have been here the last few years, I am a Marine now, working as a sergeant under Anta.”

“That is great, you managed to get into the Marine academy. Just like you wanted.”

“It is a really tough job.”

“He has gotten quite a bit more cynical since I met him last though.” Sebastian said teasingly.

Roy sounded really sad “When you get so see the real side of people, life loses its fun.”

Quentin got worried and wanted to ask him what he meant when David suddenly stood next to the table looking down at Quentin. “Your first test starts now, follow me.” He turned around and walked out of the mess hall. Quentin stood up looking nervously towards his two friends. Roy just nodded. Sebastian mouthed, “Good luck!” Quentin turned towards the exit and followed David out.