

*The mystery of the fate of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's son, Caesarion, is revealed! Red Sea Escape is the swashbuckling tale of Caesarion's flight from Egypt just days before Emperor Octavian conquers Alexandria. A riveting narrative of boys becoming men, Red Sea Escape brims with historical, nautical and natural detail.*

## **Red Sea Escape: Caesarion Lives!**

by Adham Safwat

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# Red Sea Escape

Caesarion Lives!

Adham Safwat

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## About the Author

Born in 1932 in Cairo, Egypt, and raised in the Cairo suburb of Maadi, Adham Safwat rejected the formality of the legal training that his father, an eminent jurist, had hoped he would pursue and instead spent many years exploring the beauty of the Red Sea and its then-rich coral and marine life. His adventures brought him closer to the fishermen and sailors of the Red Sea, and he learned about their ancient craft of navigating the waters of that great body of water. It was during this time that he also discovered his other passions, Roman and Arabic military history and astronomy, which he studied as an amateur later in life.

In the late 1960s, while in his early thirties, Safwat left his beloved Red Sea and his many friends in Cairo and immigrated to the United States, disillusioned with the turn of events in Egypt. Eventually he moved with his family to Northern California after his wife, Amira Safwat, was offered a position on the medical faculty at Stanford University. It would not be long before he discovered Hawaii, especially its Big Island, and his love of the sea and its people turned to Polynesian culture. In the late 1980s, he turned to building several Polynesian outrigger canoes, fashioned as faithfully as possibly on those from Tahiti. He even brought a special carpenter from Bora Bora to carve out the canoes from entire Koa logs in Hawaii.

Safwat loved the sea and its lore and believed that every child should experience its wonders and pleasures and learn of its majesty. He brought his family to the sea often and passed on his experiences to them and numerous friends. Later in life, when he returned to the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea for brief visits, he saw the demise of some of its coral and marine life due to pollution, tourism, and rising temperatures. Eventually, in the early 2000s, he penned this novel to tell the tale of Caesarion's flight from Alexandria, which also takes the reader along the voyage to discover the people and places of the Red Sea and the stars in the night sky that guided its sailors for centuries. Safwat and his wife currently reside in Glen Allen, Virginia.



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## CHAPTER 1: The Harbor Lights of Alexandria

A fast runner delivered a message to me in the shipbuilding yard. Brief and urgent, it was from Galen, the queen's physician: "Wait for me in the yard near the light tower."

The lighthouse stood at the western end of a circular harbor. The land from the base of the light tower to the water was reserved for shipbuilders. Activity here never stopped. I often spent long hours watching the construction of new ships, talking to other captains in the queen's navy and the craftsmen of these ships. From the shipyard, through the sometimes hazy dusk sky, I could see across the harbor to Cleopatra's palace, built on a rocky promontory at the eastern end of the harbor.

A wide avenue paved with slabs of granite connected the light tower to Cleopatra's palace, skirting the edge of the sea. Every day, hundreds of citizens strolled by the sea on this wide avenue to see their friends and to be seen; to enjoy the clean, cool sea breeze; and to watch the sun setting into the sea. When darkness fell, a huge fire was lit on top of the light tower. The orange-red glow would last all night, guiding the ships to Alexandria. Lights from every house along the harbor and every ship in the harbor shimmered on the calm waters. The children, strolling with their parents, carried small lanterns of glass with a candle inside. In the calm summer sea, more than a hundred small fishing boats were busy catching fish just outside the breakwater, even after dusk had fallen. Each boat had a glass box hanging over the side holding two oil lamps. Attracted by the light, the fish rose to the surface. Above it all, as if to not be outshined, a thousand oil lamps glittered in the queen's palace.

I did not know it at the time, but as I watched the changing colors at sunset, Cleopatra and her physician, Galen, stood on her balcony, silently admiring the beautiful city. When the fire was lit on top of the light tower, the queen turned to Galen and said, "My wise friend, we have talked about this before. The time has come. Caesar and Antony



are dead. Humiliation is now my only suitor. Emperor Octavian hopes to drag me to Rome in chains. His legions are three days from our city. I wish to die a quick and painless death. You must help me, Galen. You are my only true friend."

Galen went to the nomads who lived to the west of Alexandria. They were desert people who knew how to capture the horned viper of Egypt. They also grew the sweetest figs. Cleopatra's physician bought three baskets filled with ripe figs, and in each basket there was one horned viper. Galen returned to the queen's palace. He found her waiting for him on a large balcony overlooking the sea. Galen approached the queen and said, "I have done what you have ordered me to do."

Cleopatra called one of her slave girls, the one she liked least, and ordered her to eat a fig from the basket. The girl reached for a fig, and the viper struck her on the arm. She screamed once and then sank to the ground. The look of terror on her face gave way to the pallor of death. In a few moments, she lay dead on the marble floor.

Cleopatra nodded her approval. "She did not suffer greatly."

Galen said, "My queen, the desert trackers tell me that if this viper strikes a man, even though the sun may be low on the horizon, he will not see the sun set."

She answered him, "Sunsets . . . they are so beautiful here on the sea. I would like to see just one more. I shall eat the figs after sunset today. My burial place must be a secret. You know where Alexander was buried. Have some slaves bury me there." The queen spoke with sadness in her voice. "Alexandria, most beautiful of all cities, will fall into the dirty hands of Octavian. Caesarion, my beloved son, will no longer be safe here. Octavian will never allow Julius Caesar's son to live, and surely he has already tasked his forces to assassinate him as soon as they conquer our city."

After a pause to ensure that no one could hear our conversation, the queen charged Galen with her final wish: "Please, Galen, help my son flee from Alexandria. Go see Hiro Nearchus, captain of my navy, and tell him that I have asked you to take Caesarion to the island of

Serendib<sup>1</sup> at the southern tip of India. The governor of the harbor there is a good friend. He will allow Caesarion to grow up in safety. You must be at the harbor of Myos Hormos before the news of my death reaches the people of Upper Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Take all the gold and silver coins you need and a few good men to guard you. May all the gods be kind to you, my friend."

And so it was that the queen's physician came to me in the shipyard near the lighthouse after dark three days before the Emperor Octavian entered Alexandria.

I watched Galen walking toward me with the natural grace his body possessed. The gods had given him a noble head with black curly hair, now speckled with grey, which covered his ears and neck. His lofty brow and sincere brown eyes commanded respect. His face had strong features, yet his smile showed extreme kindness. He was a man who found it difficult to hide his emotions. Now he was fifty years of age and a famous physician. He always dressed in the finest cloaks made of the best linen. He was extremely clean in body and clothes. I never saw him wear any jewelry. He admired the Roman virtue of *gravitas* and believed that the higher the civilization, the less jewelry men wore. Aristocrats and the poor alike sought his advice. He radiated massive authority, and people turned to him in times of trouble.

My dear friend sat next to me, his face grave and his voice filled with emotion. "Hiro, before her suicide, the queen entrusted her son to me. I promised her that I would take Caesarion beyond the Red Sea to safety. I cannot do this without your help. My wife and children will stay with her family. I hope I can return to Alexandria in less than a year. Will you go?"

I thought about this dangerous voyage for a long time, Galen looking at me with his piercing eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Serendib* is the Arabic name for the island of Sri Lanka (formerly called Ceylon). Horace Walpole coined the word *serendipity*, which means "unexpected good fortune," from the fairy tale "Three Princes of Serendib."

<sup>2</sup> *Upper Egypt* is the name given to southern Egypt. The Nile River originates in the south and flows north to Alexandria and the Mediterranean. Thus, it is necessary to travel "up" the Nile to reach southern Egypt.

"Hiro, there is no time to waste. Egypt is no longer a friend and ally of Rome. Egypt will soon be a province, and the Romans will send a governor. Our people will be slaves of her empire. The young men you see laughing around you now will be forced by the lash to work harder and harder. Rome will want more grain. No woman will be safe, and no man will live in dignity."

I found it hard to believe, but I replied in a soft voice, "We could go to the fort at Myos Hormos. The officers know me there. But we will need gold. There will be many men to pay."

Galen said, "And to bribe. Hiro, I have more gold coins than you can count. Word of Cleopatra's death has not reached the people outside Alexandria. The country is still safe for us as long as we travel faster than the news. Tell your sons to get their weapons and meet me at the queen's palace at moonrise."

At my house my two sons, sixteen and eighteen years of age, met me with their usual smiles just as if the whole city were not in danger and there was no invading army marching toward us. I told my sons of Cleopatra's death. "We are leaving the city. We must carry many bags of gold and silver coins, but our safety depends on keeping that a secret. Bring your short swords, sharp knives, and an extra cloak. We are going to the coast of the Red Sea, to the port of Myos Hormos."

I had struggled in the last few years to fill the void in my sons' lives after the death of their mother. I could not help but wonder whether taking them from Alexandria would be good for them, but I told myself that they would do well to travel and to have a change of scenery. And perhaps this was true and not just my own way of justifying turning our lives upside down in service to the queen and Caesarion.

At moonrise we moved quickly to Cleopatra's palace. The sounds of crying women and wailing slave girls had not stopped. Just inside the main gate we found Galen with three of his trusted servants, gigantic Nubians with honest faces and dark brown skin. Without saying a word, he rode on a mule while his servants walked behind, armed with swords and knives like ourselves. Each also had a long whip made of hippopotamus hide. With their whips they could keep

the crowds away from us. My sons walked on either side of the gold-laden mule, and I took the bridle and led them out of the city.

I was wearing my red cape and Greek helmet with red feathers. People in the streets recognized these as signs of high rank in the queen's army and navy, and they stepped silently out of our path. There was no panic in the city, just silent fear.

One of Galen's faithful young Nubian servants was Adoo, who walked by his side. He was talking to Galen in a respectful and melodious voice. He had the charming habit of sprinkling his conversation with proverbs he learned in his childhood. His full name was Adoo Bahar, which means "slave of the river god." His parents thought this name might protect him from evil crocodiles. I looked at Adoo with his oval, humorous, strong-jawed face. He was the most typical Nubian man I had ever seen with his serene brown eyes, shining dark brown skin, and shaved head, as with all of his people protected by a fine white turban. Adoo was a tall man, about twenty-five years old. Unlike many tall people who have shoulders too narrow for their bodies, he had broad, muscular shoulders and long limbs. Looking at him, I could guess the stamina and strength in his magnificent body. Three scars on each side of his face radiated from the corners of his eyes to the hairline, and on his right thigh a dark blue tattoo of geometrical pattern encircled his leg. He walked with the loping gait of a man born and raised in the open spaces of his country, Nubia, a desert land to the south between Egypt and Sudan.

And so it came to pass that four citizens and three Nubians arrived at the pier where riverboats were tied.

Egypt is blessed with steady northwesterly winds that allow riverboats to sail up the Nile against the current. Floating down from Upper Egypt is sometimes aided by a few days of south wind or calm. One branch of the Nile feeds Alexandria, and we found many boats of all sizes tied at the pier, waiting for cargo to go to Upper Egypt.

The riverboat captains observed our group and recognized an opportunity, so they gathered around. Galen asked which of them had a completely empty boat. One of the captains stepped forward, a wiry man, barefoot and tanned by the sun, with green eyes and a pleasant

grin on his face. "Great ones, I have no cargo and will take you where you want to go."

"What is your price for taking us to Upper Egypt? We want to leave now." The short, wiry man laughed and said that he would be willing to sail now and would be content with whatever pay he received, for he knew by the looks of this distinguished party that he would get more than he expected.

We stepped into the empty boat. Galen ordered his servants to bring the mule into the boat without unloading the bags of gold coin. I was sure he did not want people to notice what we were carrying. He looked at the boat owner and said, "I need this mule. My old legs cannot walk far. You may raise sail now."

The great white lateen sail was raised by two crewmen with our help, and the wind filled it and pushed the boat to the center of the river. The banks were visible in the light of the half moon. If we ran onto a sandbar in the river, it would be easy to push this boat free—it had no cargo and no ballast. It was drawing little water, and because of its wide beam, it was quite stable.

Now the people on the docks could no longer see or hear us. The Nubians took the bags of gold coins off the mule, stowed them in the covered area under the foredeck, and sat down, fully relaxed, on the giant wooden beams holding the mast. From that point, only one at a time would sleep while the other two kept their eyes on the treasure. At night they would take turns, six hours each, and in the afternoon heat, they would sleep in turn, two hours each.

Galen motioned me to follow him, and he stepped up to the foredeck. We sat down under the great sail. With the wind following us, nobody else could hear a word of what he said.

"Hiro, I could not speak freely when we were on land. Please keep this secret between just you and me. If one of us dies, the other must complete this journey. Cleopatra asked me to take Caesarion to the island of Serendib. There is a strong Greek garrison in the harbor there, and the governor was a good friend of Caesar. Hopefully, the boy will be safe there."

"Where is Caesarion?" I asked Galen.

He said, "He is disguised as a boy of the desert traveling on camelback with some loyal Bedouins. These people will keep their oath when they are well paid. If anybody hears that the boy is traveling in the western desert of Egypt with Bedouins, they will think he is going to North Africa, and the search for him will be diverted there. But after a couple of days, the Bedouins will turn to the south and travel three more days to meet us near the Great Pyramid. We shall take the boy across the river and across the Eastern Desert, and we will go to the port of Myos Hormos on the Red Sea coast. There, you, my friend, will select the best boats and the best crew, and we shall sail down the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean and on to Serendib."

I said, "It will be a great adventure for my sons, and they will learn much about the world. You have the gold; I have the authority. Yes, we shall take the best ships, and we will go."

But Galen added, "Always say, 'May the gods help us.' You never know what fortune or misfortune awaits us."

We spent the rest of the night talking. Memories stirred in the depths of our souls. I was proud to call Galen my friend. As young boys growing up together in Alexandria, we had spent many happy times playing in the sea. When the weather was calm, fishing was our main goal in life, and when the weather was rough, we played endlessly in the surf. Love of the sea was a great bond between us, strengthened by many shared adventures.

Galen's family was rich. They had sent him to the school of the Stoics, and he found pleasure in learning from the great teachers. The best minds of the Roman world were drawn to Alexandria by the generosity of the Ptolemies, and Galen would spend nearly all his evenings listening to their discourses. During the days he would spend time with me in the shipyard watching the boatbuilders. After I became a captain in the navy commanding many ships, he would often join me on voyages throughout the Mediterranean. He visited Rome, Athens, and all of the cities where he could meet philosophers, astronomers, and mathematicians. Wherever we stopped, he would gather medicinal plants to try to cure our sick sailors. Galen was a born leader of men. He could have been a great general, even a lawgiver and a statesman, but he chose to be a physician.

The first rays of daylight showed over the horizon, and from the warm darkness of the river came the sounds of the water against the hull and hundreds of waterfowl that would not sleep.

## CHAPTER 17: The Storm

After we had sailed a few days in a southeasterly direction with a fair wind, the wind stopped about midnight, and I knew the next day would bring intense heat. Before sunrise we lowered two canoes into the sea and towed *Sword of the Sea* close to the *Sorceress*. We tied both ships together to keep them from drifting apart in the currents. The crew used all our sails to make a shade covering the entire ship, and the huge rudder was lashed so it would stop its creaking noises. We sat in this shade, watching the sun rising out of the oily sea, not a ripple between us and the horizon. We had a good supply of melons; they last more than two weeks when stored in the shade because of their thick rind.

Everyone was eating sliced melons for breakfast, and some of the younger boys jumped into the ocean for a morning swim. The rest of our crew aimed and threw melon rinds at the swimmers' heads with great force but not much accuracy. In a short while the sea around us was covered with floating melon rinds. Adoo was the best, and with every throw he hit a swimmer.

Suddenly he shouted at the crew, "*Girsh dahyadahya*, big shark, big shark!" The boys scrambled out of the sea, and we saw a gigantic shark swimming slowly just under the surface. He came close to our ship, and I estimated his length at twenty feet or more. The huge fish went about eating the melon rinds one by one. Adoo threw a whole melon at the shark just in front of it. The shark swallowed it, showing us the inside of its mouth filled with very small teeth.

Taleb said in a loud voice that everyone could hear, "This is a harmless shark. See the long slits of his gills covered with loose, flapping skin?"

I asked Taleb, "Do you know this kind of shark?"



He answered, "Yes, I saw them in the open ocean many times swimming near the surface, feeding on huge jellyfish [*Hamathamat*] and other creatures drifting in the water."<sup>61</sup>

Adoo, laughing, shouted at the crew, "That shark is harmless unless you are a melon! Taleb says it is safe for you to go back into the sea."

The first to jump in was Che, followed by Marcus, his faithful friend, who would do anything Che did without a second thought. The shark stayed near the ships awhile, gobbling the melon rinds that the crewmen were happily throwing at it.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the heat became intolerable, and the crew begged Atiya for some music. He played his *simsimiyya* and sang many songs; then he stopped, exhausted. In the afternoon, the entire crew stretched out to try to sleep, but sleep would not come in the heat of the day. In the total silence, their breathing seemed like a loud, irritating sound. At night we did not remove the sails shading our ships because with the heat and humidity, there would be heavy morning dew.

The second day of dead calm brought more heat, and swimming was not refreshing anymore. There was a layer of hot water on the surface about two feet deep, and with each stroke my hand reached down to cold water. To refresh myself, I dove down about five feet and swam underwater for as long as I could hold my breath. The crew was watching, and soon everyone was in the sea diving down to the cooler water. When the boys came up to breathe, they stayed very close to the ship to keep their heads in the shade.

The second night of dead calm was worse than the first. Atiya was too hot and tired to play his music, and we sat or stretched on deck, bored and tired. Our minds stopped thinking, and there was a hushed silence without conversation or songs.

Galen asked Taleb Ali, "When did you first notice that you were losing your eyesight?"

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<sup>61</sup> This harmless shark is called the "basking shark" (*Cetorhinus maximus*) because it is always basking in the sunlight near the surface of the sea. It grows to thirty feet.

Taleb told him, "It happened so slowly. I cannot even remember the year when I first noticed my eyes getting weak. On my last voyage, I crashed a ship into a deep reef. There was a substantial quantity of silver on the ship to pay for goods from India. Most of it belonged to merchants in Mokalla, and the rest was my own wealth. We were sailing on the windward side of a reef. When you are on the moving deck of your ship, it is difficult to determine whether your zenith star is exactly overhead or not. I made a small mistake in judging the ship's course, a small mistake that grew larger with every mile. Had my eyes been good, I could have seen the white breakers on the reef even at night. When I finally saw them, it was too late. I lost the ship and her silver. The second ship saved my crew. After this, no merchant would trust me."

Taleb stopped his story, drank some water, looked at Galen, and said, "I could still see but not clearly, and back in Mokalla I was not my true self. I was walking and acting like a blind man, looking this way and that way, straining to see. And as my eyes got weaker, I tried to hear better, moving my head from side to side. Everyone knew that I was almost blind. I often thought of ending my life the old navigator's way."

Galen interrupted him. "The old navigator's way?"

Taleb continued in a soft voice, but every man could hear him in the total silence of the night. "All navigators teach their sons that death in the sea is a sweet death, and the old blind navigator will formally visit all his friends. Then he would take a small boat and sail out to sea and never return."

Galen asked, "Do old navigators still do this to end their lives?"

Taleb nodded. "Many do. I remained on land and alive, not because of fear but for the love of my grandchildren. I could not see them, but I could hug them, listen to them, and tell them stories. I did not want pity from other people, so I held my head high and walked like a whole man with my hand on my grandson's shoulder. Now I can see the moonrise and the sunset, and every night I look at the sky to drink in the majesty of the stars, as if it is the end of my last day. I am grateful, truly grateful."

The third day of heat was upon us—not a breath of wind, not a ripple in the sea. Each of us bore a changed expression on his our face. Fatigue and lack of sleep changed our features, and no one had any appetite for food. The crew poured buckets of water on the awnings and deck to no avail. We dove down into the sea to reach the cold water under the hot surface, but we got tired of this after a while. That same night after midnight, there was a show of lightning on the horizon, too far for us to hear any thunder.

Mobareek told the boys, "Come, pray for wind!" The lightning increased and became a sheet of light like a curtain between the clouds and the sea, continuously moving, but always there on the western horizon. We watched fascinated for a long time, and now the moon was setting, slowly, very slowly, going down into the ocean behind this curtain of light.

At sunrise, dark clouds covered the western horizon, and the wind arose, blowing from the west. Mobareek said, "A storm is coming our way. A big one. We have time to prepare."

I asked Taleb, "What do you make of these dark clouds?"

He said, "Mobareek is right. Six hours at the most and these clouds will be on top of us."

Mobareek stepped onto the deck of his *Sorceress*, saying, "If we get separated, give me a smoke signal after the storm." He untied with his own hands the two lines holding the *Sorceress* close to *Sword of the Sea* and calmly gave orders to the crew to prepare for rough weather.

As the wind picked up speed, energy was restored to our bodies and wakefulness to our minds. We could see high clouds all over the sky, white like long strands of hair, blown by a high and powerful wind. The low black clouds were moving toward us, but we still had time to finish our preparations without rushing. There was no fear among the crew, but they were tense and excited. They knew that in the open sea, where there are no rocks or coral reefs to smash your ship or break your keel, all you have to do is to run before the storm. If your ship is well built, she will not sink. You will suffer fatigue and exhaustion, aches and pains. You will be bruised and cut. But the ship will survive.

Everything below deck was tied down in its place. The deck hatches were closed tight. No one stayed below; even the strongest would have been thrown about like salt in a shaker.

Four thick ropes were coiled near the steersman. When the seas got too big and boisterous, he would order the crew to pay out the ropes. They would trail behind the ship and help her to run steadily before the great waves. The men passed strong lines through holes in the heavy rudder. These ropes would hold it amidships when steering became too difficult. The mast, thick, heavy, and very strong, normally had only one moving stay. This rope was secured to the bows. Attached to it we had a small, tough, triangular storm sail, stretched tight and flat amidships. When running before the wind, if she turned to the right or left, wind would fill this small, tough sail and push her bows back on course, straight before the wind, always keeping her running before the waves and the wind. The mast was also secured with four extra stays (ropes).

Every man on board had a piece of sheepskin tied around his waist and wore a safety line like a belt. Without the sheepskin, this line would have cut into his flesh. While the safety lines would inhibit the crew's movements, still the men would not be washed overboard. We enjoyed a big, hot meal, knowing that for two or three days, there would be no hot food, only sigan and dried dates.

The wind was picking up speed. Taleb ordered a small square sail to be raised. The crew jumped to obey him. His tremendous self-confidence encouraged them. The young men were aware of the impending danger. There was nervous anticipation in their voices, but they were still eager to watch this grand spectacle of nature.<sup>62</sup>

The storm clouds were now close to us. We could hear their thunder and see lightning bolts. Dark clouds were racing toward our small ship. Taleb shouted, "Tie your safety lines! Here comes the wind that you love, bringing terror from high above!" Taleb looked at Galen, then reached over to check the knot in the physician's safety

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<sup>62</sup> "To face the elements is, to be sure, no light matter, but when the sea is in its grandest mood, you must then know the sea, and know that you know it, and not forget, that it was made to be sailed over." —Joshua Slocum, the first navigator to sail alone around the world

line. Laughing, Taleb said, "Now the gods will play with us like young boys with hooked fish."

I watched the storm clouds coming toward us, low and menacing. They were in two separate layers. The top clouds, more grey than black, flew before the west wind. The lower clouds, more black than grey, swirling and rising, were driven by gusts of unseen wind from different directions. The sound of thunder was like the chariots of the gods racing in the sky. The lightning bolts cracked like whips over their horses.

The swirling wind hit us with unexpected violence. The square sail was torn away. The crewmen barely had time to secure the rudder amidships. But our tough storm sail on the forestay held. From the low black clouds, thunderbolts came down to the sea, and flashes of lightning went up to the grey clouds.

Turbulent winds were hitting us from every direction, the salty spray stinging our eyes. We tasted salt on our lips until the rain came flying straight into our faces, warm and welcome. We were enveloped in low black clouds, and I could not see the *Sorceress* anymore. Naturally, I worried about Mobareek and his young crew, Ari, Justin, Marcus, and Che. This was an irrational, unfounded fear. Mobareek was a great captain, and his *Sorceress* was a perfect ship, built with great care. But would the lightning spare her? Would it miss our ship?

After about six hours of this rough treatment, the gods relaxed their grip. There was a strange, menacing calm, with clouds forming a high wall around us. The crew took advantage of this and made a hot stew of dried fish, dried vegetables, and olive oil. They rested their aching bodies on deck, and most of them fell into deep sleep. The air was warm and loaded with moisture. I was resting on the stern deck with Galen, Taleb, and Adoo nearby. Adoo grabbed me by the shoulder and shouted, "Our mast!"

A ball of fire, real fire, grew on top of the mast. Sparks were darting up and down the whole length of it. The stays holding our mast were sparkling with dancing lights. Adoo's powerful voice woke up the crewmen. They were hushed and quiet, but on many faces you could see fear.

The ball of fire came down, slowly swirling around the mast, and when it touched the deck, it rolled slowly toward the stem, getting bigger and bigger. We could not escape it, and the ball of fire rolled over our feet. There was no heat, no burning, and no pain. I looked at my friends. Galen had a halo of light above his head, and Adoo had both arms outstretched, his hands glowing with light. Suddenly, this ball of magical fire faded away, but the stays and the mast kept sparkling, and there was a hissing sound heard all over the ship coming from this fire of the gods.

I asked my companions, "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Taleb said, "Yes, I have, and this fire that does not burn signals very rough weather ahead."

I looked at Galen, and he said, "I never saw this phenomenon before, but I read about it in the story of Moses. He approached a dry bush burning with a fire that did not consume it, and he heard a hissing noise that sounded like his name. Who can blame him for being frightened while his God circled above the mountain, hurling thunderbolts to the earth?"<sup>63</sup>

The calm center of the storm moved away from us, and the wind hit us from the west with sudden unexpected violence. The wind by itself had no sound, but when it hit the mast and rigging it made a sound, and when it blew against our ears it made a sound. Now the wind was flaying the crests of the waves, turning them into whitecaps and picking up the spray. The noise was loud and not unpleasant.

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<sup>63</sup> KJV Bible, Exodus 3:2, 4: "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire, out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. . . . And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, 'Moses, Moses.' And he said, 'Here am I.'"

The electrical display described in this passage of Exodus is probably the natural phenomenon known as Saint Elmo's fire.

*"Last night I saw St. Elmo's Stars,  
With their glittering lanterns all at play,  
On the tops of the masts, and the tips of the spars,  
And I knew we should have foul weather today."*—from *The Golden Legend*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Taleb Ali had four coils of thick rope near at hand. He paid out the ropes behind our ship to steady her before the seas. We were driven before this storm for a full day and a night, when finally the wind slackened and it was possible to steer. Taleb released the rudder, which was bound amidships, by cutting the ropes with his sharp knife. We took turns steering *Sword of the Sea* over the crests of the waves. Fatigue and lack of sleep prevented us from admiring the grand spectacle all around us—the ocean showing its might and Taleb expertly guiding the ship from the high crests of the waves down into the troughs. This was a display of endurance and expertise that few mariners possess.

Now that the worst was over, the crewmen slept on deck, their bodies exposed to the elements with only their heads and shoulders covered with sheepskins. They huddled together, steadying themselves against the motion of the ship, their hands on their safety lines, even in this fitful sleep.

It was my turn to steer. Everyone was trying to get some rest. The wind was gradually getting weaker, and our deck was almost dry. The waves were still huge, and even after the wind calmed down, they would remain as big swells in the ocean for a few days. When two or three of these waves joined and merged into one big wave, it looked as if the whole surface of the sea was rising up and coming at you. And this is what happened to us. A huge green sea rose up and came at the ship from the side like a never-ending wall of water. From where I stood at the stem, I could see nothing but the mast. The deck and every man on it were underwater for a brief moment that seemed too long.

When there is sudden danger, the mind works faster and time seems to slow down. After a long moment of fear, the ship came out from under the great wave and shook herself free. It was then that I saw Galen entangled in his safety rope, his body twisted in a very unnatural position. I felt a knot in my stomach and shouted at the top of my lungs, "Adoo! Adoo!" I could not leave the steering tiller, but Adoo was at Galen's side in a flash. He cut the rope with his knife and freed Galen from the tangles and compression of the safety line.

Adoo lifted Galen and dragged him to the high stem. I could see pain clearly on Galen's face, but he never uttered a groan as Adoo tried to make him comfortable. "Are you injured?" I asked.

"I think I broke a few ribs." He winced. "Or cracked them at least. When the wave came over the side, I didn't hit the deck fast enough."

Taleb Ali asked, "Is there anything we can do?"

Galen said, "I will be all right. My ribs will heal. It will take time, but they will heal."

From this moment on, Adoo was never far from Galen until we entered the harbor of Serendib.

After one more day of our extreme fatigue, the wind lost much of its force. Our deck was dry, and I wrapped myself in a blanket and fell into a deep sleep. A vivid, powerful dream came to me. I saw a man standing near the tiller, smiling at me. I asked him, "Who are you?"

He said, "Don't you know me, Hiro? We have the same name! I am Nearchus, the pilot of Alexander the Great. Go back to sleep. I will take care of your ship."

The dream was so real, I stood up on my feet and walked toward the stem. The phantom pilot was still there, smiling at me. I said, "Thanks for your help. I never thought I would meet you." I wanted to hug him and to shake his hand, but he vanished before I could touch him. I went back to sleep, and the next morning I told Galen, Adoo, and Taleb about this marvelous dream.

Adoo said, "That was the ghost of Nearchus. He came to help us." I never suspected that Adoo had this streak of superstition in him.

Galen laughed. "It was just a vivid dream, induced by your extreme exhaustion. Let your living crew sail the ship, not a noble ghost. Go back to sleep and have a good rest."

The next day, the wind was calm. A smoke signal would go straight up in the sky and not be blown away. Once again we got a big fire going and added some oil-soaked cloth to the flames. A black plume of smoke rose high above our ship, and we kept the fire going all morning. Some of the younger boys danced around the fire, shouting, "Mobareek, Mobareek, where are you?" They were in high spirits. The storm was over, and they needed to release the tension. Mobareek and his crew would certainly see this smoke signal, even if



they were as far away as the horizon. Sure enough, in the afternoon, the *Sorceress* was sailing toward us. I admit that I had been worried about her because my sons, Ari and Justin, were on board.

The sight of the *Sorceress* flying toward us sent a great wave of joy all over the ship. Many among our crew fell to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the deck, gratefully thanking the gods of the sea for the safety of their brothers and friends.

I thought the *Sorceress* more beautiful than ever, her sail bleached as white as could be and her graceful curves outlined against the dark blue sea. She came alongside. We raised our sail and moved close to her, and both ships sailed together, their crews exchanging smiles and small talk. Ari shouted that he wanted to come aboard *Sword of the Sea*. A long rope was thrown to us and kept slack, almost touching the water. Ari came over on this line, pulling himself hand over hand with a strong, sure grip, his head and shoulders in the air and his body in the sea. When Ari stood on deck, I hugged him. Galen and Adoo did the same.

The crew gathered around us, wanting to hear from Ari about what had happened to the *Sorceress*. Ari said, "The first hour was an exciting show! Did you notice the two large clouds? The grey cloud floated higher up, and the black cloud swirled nearer to the sea. They exchanged angry lightning bolts up and down at each other."

Several voices answered him. "Yes, yes!" "We saw those dark clouds!" "We also saw the fire of the gods!"

Ari continued, "This huge, black cloud passed right over us. Lightning bolts hit the ship, and one hit the mast. One side of our mast is blackened and charred. The heavy rain and the ocean spray kept the ship wet, and there was no fire. As long as this cloud was overhead, there was fear in our hearts. But everyone remained calm because of the example of Mobareek. He was on his feet steering for a full day and night. When the wind slackened, he finally let me and Che steer the ship." I detected a note of pride in his voice.

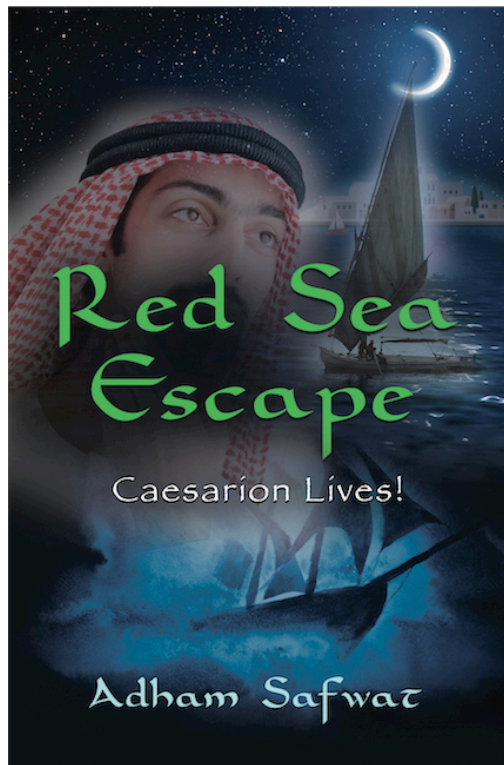
Galen asked, "Is anyone injured or sick on the *Sorceress*?"

Ari answered, "No. They are all covered with cuts and bruises, but they are happy to be alive."

Che was steering the *Sorceress*, Justin standing beside him. They were waving their arms and smiling at us. Mobareek was resting on deck, his legs braced against the bulwark.<sup>64</sup> Our ships were so close to each other that we could hear his voice clearly. "Hiro, you can be proud of these boys. They did well." Mobareek was a man of few words, but these came from his heart.

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<sup>64</sup> A ship's bulwark is a solid railing that prevents objects from rolling into the sea.



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