

Opening extract from

The Scribes from Alexandria

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The Scribes from Alexandria

In the black, storm-tossed waters of the Libyan Sea, a dark-skinned girl was treading water and fighting for breath.

For three days the sailors had struggled to keep the Roman merchant ship *Tyche* afloat. On the first day they had passed ropes under the ship to hold it together. On the second day they had thrown all the cargo overboard: the priceless elephant tooth, terebinth resin and exotic spices. On the third day the crew had jettisoned the ship's tackle and anything else not nailed down.

At dusk on the third day, a point of light appeared briefly on the southern horizon. It was too low to be a star, so they made for it. Presently it was veiled by a squall. Some time during the night the *Tyche* came to a violent, juddering standstill, and gave a resounding groan. There were a few moments of confusion, punctuated by shouts and screams on deck, where the girl had been huddling with her friends. Torches moved in the darkness but were extinguished as the ship began to break apart and sink.

The girl was tumbled along the deck into the cold black water. The sea heaved and plunged around her. For a moment the clouds parted, and moonlight showed the head of a person in the dark trough of a wave. When she tried to call out, bitter salt water filled her mouth. She clutched a floating spar as it passed, but it was not buoyant enough to support her.

The girl choked as saltwater filled her mouth and nose again. She looked around desperately for something to hold on to. After a few moments she saw a large wooden box sliding down a glassy slope of water. From within she heard the roar of a lion, so she let it pass by. She watched it rise up, then plunge out of sight over the crest of a wave. A moment later the

fast-moving clouds blotted out the moon and she could barely see in the cold, stinging wetness.

The girl was a strong swimmer, but weakened by three days of seasickness and cold, she knew she could not keep afloat much longer.

‘Neptune!’ she cried out. ‘Help me, Neptune! If you save me...’ she paused to cough out seawater. ‘If you save me, I will give you my most precious possession.’

But even as Nubia uttered the words, she knew it was hopeless.