

OUT OF THE LION'S MAW

by

Witold Makowiecki

and Tom Pinch



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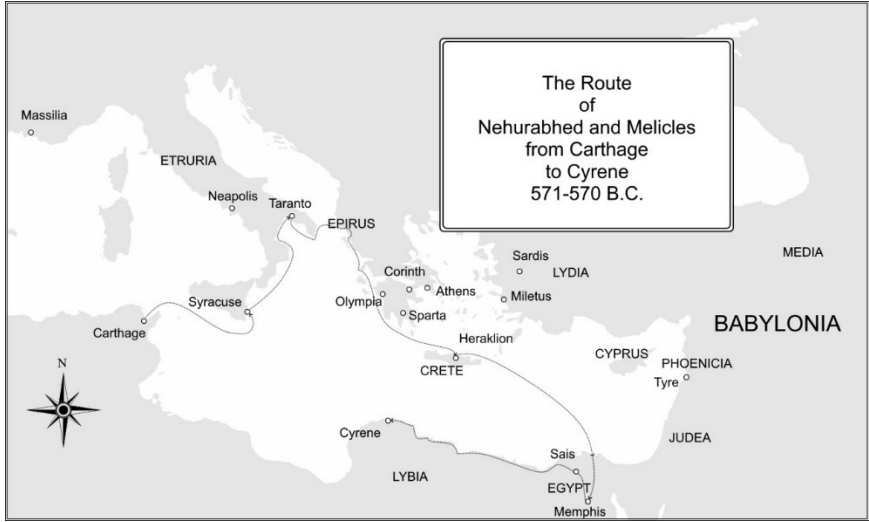
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Behold, I will send Nebuchadnezzar,
the Old Mountain Lion,
the king of Babylon, my servant.
And when he cometh,
he shall smite the land of Egypt,
and deliver such as are for death to death;
and such as are for captivity to captivity;
and such as are for the sword to the sword.

Jeremiah 43:10-11



PART ONE



Chapter One

Fleeing Carthage



Quick, subtropical twilight descended upon the world; on the vast, luminous sea, on the great Phoenician port city of Carthage, and on this quiet, suburban garden of lofty palms, cypresses, cedars, tangled rose, vine, and oleander. The towering trees linked their branches overhead and cast deep shadows on everything below; on the small villa, on the garden paths, on the decorative fountains and statuary, on the enclosing wall. The web of shadows thickened, the shades grew darker, the silhouettes of the trees turned black. Night – humid, stifling, heavy, African night – swallowed the world.

Nehurabhed stood at the open door of the villa. He watched

the darkening garden and sky overhead, still glowing with the last remains of the day. He waited. Faint traces of expiring daylight illuminated his face: long and narrow, wrinkled and swarthy, his dark complexion contrasting sharply with the whiteness of his beard and bushy eyebrows. His face seemed aged at first glance, but his eyes, set deep under the eyebrows, were penetrating and quick, and his posture was alert and supple. His movements seemed infused with hidden and perfectly controlled energy.

He was dressed in the eastern fashion; he wore a black cloak which fell to his ankles, sandals on his feet, and a hood on his head. The hood and robe emphasized his height, lending him an air of lofty dignity.

He stood there for a long time, watching and listening. When the night had grown dark enough, he pulled the hood tighter over his eyes, tucked a small, brocaded bag and a short, fine dagger into the folds of his robe, glanced once more at the sky now darkening fast, and stepped outside.

Making not the slightest noise, he plunged into the tangled, sweet-scented darkness of the garden.

He walked quickly, purposefully, along a path he had memorized during the day. Shortly, he came to a place where a tall plane tree, broken by a recent storm, leaned against a garden wall. With agility and strength surprising in a man his age, he used the branches of the fallen tree to raise himself onto the wall, and he sat there for a while, listening. He looked around carefully, but the darkness was already total. Once he assured himself that no one had followed him, he slid down the other side of the wall into the street below and set out briskly towards the city center.

It was not as dark in the streets of Carthage as it had been in the garden. There was bustle and commotion here, with people coming home from work and slaves driven back to their pens from their work at the port. Small groups of people stopped to eat and drink at outdoor stalls while cries of reveling soldiers could be heard from a distance. Here and there, there was shouting, laughter, and music. Unsteady light of oil lamps spilled from open doors and windows onto the narrow street.

Having reached an intersection, Nehurabhed stopped to look around. Reassured that no one was following him, he turned into a street descending towards the shore. After leaving the residential quarter, he passed by the great workshops, where magnificent Phoenician ships were built: sailing ships, barges, galleys, and the world-famous, terrifying, gigantic war triremes powered by hundreds of oars. Then, walking along the shore, he reached the fishing port. Here, the beach was littered with small sailing boats hung with nets and ropes under which he now and again had to duck.

Voices came from all directions. Poor fishermen, not wanting to leave their belongings unattended at night, camped near their boats and nets. They slept in tents improvised from sails or right under their boats turned upside down. Numerous shadowy figures gathered around campfires at which they fried their evening meal of fish and barley cakes and chatted in voices animated by wine.

Nehurabhed moved slowly from one fire to the next, listening to the conversations. He walked for a long time before he heard the sound of Greek. He stopped, watched, and listened.

In front of him, three men sat by a small fire, lost in conversation. The man in the middle, apparently the most important of the three, talked the loudest, gesturing widely, frequently bursting out in thunderous laughter. In a grand gesture of ownership, he leaned his back against the side of a beached boat. He must have been her owner: a sailor or a fisherman. Noticing the stranger, he fell silent.

Nehurabhed walked up to him.

“You’re Greek?” he asked.

The Greek nodded.

“And a sailor?”

“Yes.”

“And the owner of this boat?”

“Yes.”

“I want to talk to you alone.”

He said this in the tone of a man accustomed to issuing commands.

Surprised, the Greek rose to his feet. His beautiful face, framed by a luxurious black beard, did not express concern: it was calm and composed. Nehurabhed inspected that face carefully. They walked some dozen or so steps away from the fire to the very edge of the sea – silent, black, licking the beach with lazy waves. Nehurabhed looked around once more and, seeing no one, explained his purpose.

He meant, he said, to hire a good boat with a good pilot and sail to the Greek colonies in Sicily. Soonest. Tonight. Now, if possible. Two conditions: haste and silence. And then he named his price. A very good price.

The Greek was silent. Haste and mystery – it sounded like an escape. He understood anyone who wanted to get out of Carthage in a hurry but was leery of getting involved.

He hated the Phoenicians, a nation of traders and robbers, cunning, crafty, and vindictive. He hated them, as did all Greeks who competed with them for trade all across the vast shores of the Mediterranean Sea. They fought each other often; they argued even more. They traded with each other rarely; and only the hope of big profits could get him, a Greek, to visit this hateful city. This was not a friendly place for a Greek.

Of course, he had to admit it: one couldn't get a better price anywhere else for his trading goods. Carthaginians were rich and prepared to pay for quality. And because they sailed all over the great mysterious western *Okeanos*¹ and up and down those coasts, they offered goods no one else had.

Trading with Carthaginians was one thing, but helping someone escape from the city was another altogether. Carthage was a powerful state, and her tentacles reached far and wide. No merchant would dare cross her lightly. If Carthage wanted a man, it was best to let her have him.

On the other hand... the Greek had sold all his merchandise and had already loaded his boat for the return journey. And since the weather was fair, he had planned to sail home to Syracuse the next day anyway. And now, a noble-looking stranger turned up and offered to pay him very good money to sail just a few hours ahead of schedule.

¹ *Okeanos*: The Atlantic Ocean

That suited him. He hated the place anyway and was happy to leave it yesterday.

The Greek calculated; this stranger was not a Phoenician, and that was a good thing. But he was not a Greek, either – a bad thing. Even though he spoke the language fluently – a good thing.

He had an honest face and noble features – a good thing. And he was clearly an important person – and therefore not some petty merchant, job supervisor, a thief in trouble, or a crook trying to set him up. All good things.

All these thoughts crossed the Greek's mind as he studied Nehurabhed, trying to guess from his words and his face the secret of this hasty departure. The conversation lasted for a while, but the Greek learned nothing beyond this: the stranger offered to pay well. Really well.

Finally, he made up his mind. His boat was ready, freshly caulked, with sail and rigging all prepared, and the weather was good. There was a light westerly wind, a bit weak but blowing in the right direction. If the wind held up, one could reach the shores of Sicily in one and a half days, two at most. He cast one more glance at the sky – calm, full of stars, foretelling no surprises – and shook Nehurabhed's hand to seal the deal. In his rough sailor's hand, he felt the firm grip of a fine, soft, manicured palm: the gentle hand of a man who hadn't done manual work in many years.

This man is a great lord, he thought.

They agreed on a midnight departure. The Greek's crew had yet to pack their belongings while he himself had to go back to the city to collect money owed to him. He would return as soon as

possible, within an hour most likely, and they would then sail. Nehurabhed promised to wait for him by the boat. He asked the Greek's name. The name was Kalias.

Nehurabhed asked him to hurry and reminded him again to keep quiet about their deal.

After the Greek's departure, Nehurabhed stood lost in thought for a while, staring at the dark sea. Then, he began to walk slowly along the shore. Lazy waves rolled at his feet, whispering softly in the dark. Nehurabhed also seemed to whisper as if in prayer.

Noticing that the Greek had moved off some distance already and was about to disappear behind some campfires, Nehurabhed suddenly changed direction and set off after him. He followed some distance behind so as to see and yet not be seen. He now had to quicken his pace because Kalias was marching briskly. At times, the old man lost sight of the Greek completely, but then he saw him again – a silhouette at the next fire or in the light of a lantern carried by a passer-by.

In this way, they walked around the fishing encampments, passed the dockyards, and started climbing into the city again. The streets were winding and narrow and climbed steeply upwards. In the side alleys, surrounded by high windowless walls, darkness was complete. Occasionally, a hulking passer-by hurried past him, glancing at him cautiously; it was easy to get a knife in one's back in this darkness. Nehurabhed was on alert, too, gripping the hilt of his dagger firmly under his cloak.

He reached an intersection and stopped, unsure which way the Greek had gone. Kalias's silhouette had vanished somewhere

in the shadows. It seemed to him that the Greek had disappeared through a nearby gate, but he wasn't sure. He reflected for a while on what to do. At length, he decided to wait there. Surely, the Greek should return the same way he went.

Nehurabhed now stood in the shadows, almost invisible, calm, as still as a statue. Only his eyes watched every passer-by closely. He stood in this way for a long time. The lights around him began to dim, the murmurs of conversations quieting down with ever fewer passers-by. The big city was slowly settling down for the night.

Then, from behind a nearby wall, he suddenly heard a commotion: raised voices, then a short, desperate scream of pain and terror, and then the loud noise of a quarrel. People started gathering at a nearby gate leading into a courtyard. Their silhouettes cast long shadows into the street. Nehurabhed walked over to them.

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

This time, he spoke Phoenician as fluently as he'd spoken Greek before. Several voices answered him at once – hoarse, drunk, stuttering through laughter and hiccups.

“What is this? Why, the usual! They're flogging a slave to death!”

“For running away.”

“Second time already. The pipsqueak! This time they will not spare him.”

“To death! Look, look, they're starting!”

Nehurabhed shuddered and looked glumly into the depths of the little courtyard where torture was about to begin. At a well,

dimly lit by the flickering light of torches, lay a young prisoner, tied with ropes like a piece of smoked ham. He was completely naked. Skinny, huddled, he gave the impression of being immature, practically a child.

A gigantic slave stood over him with a flogging rod in his hand. The condemned man lay motionless. The executioner stood motionless. Their eyes were fixed on a group of speakers – several men standing nearby. Nehurabhed also shifted his gaze in that direction.

One of the men was a bald, fat Phoenician, with cold, cruel eyes, contemptuous and resentful. He was the lord of this house, this courtyard, and this slave about to be flogged to death. The second man, lively and restless, was explaining something to the first in a raised voice, arguing fiercely in broken Phoenician, swearing at the same time in Greek, Phoenician, Egyptian, and Etruscan, invoking all the gods of the world.

“Fifty drachmas², fifty drachmas for a slave!” he shouted.

Nehurabhed shuddered. He recognized the voice and came closer. Yes, this man who now single-handedly filled the entire courtyard with the shouting of a dozen was none other than his new acquaintance – the Greek Kalias.

“O, good people!” Kalias cried as if to call to witness the crowd around him. “What happened to the renowned wisdom of the shrewdest merchant this great city has ever had? Look here! I’m giving him fifty drachmas, you hear? – fifty drachmas! – for a slave he wants to kill – and he refuses to accept! He does not want

² *Drachma*: a silver coin

to accept fifty drachmas! Have you ever heard such a thing? O, holy Isis³, Astarte⁴, Athena⁵, Great Mother of all gods! Give this man his reason back so that he may amaze us once again with his cunning!

“O, great and wise man!” he went on. “What profit do you get from a dead slave? Even your dog won’t feed on him! He is too scrawny! And here I am, giving you fifty drachmas! Think about it! Think – o, you greatest of all merchants – what you can buy with fifty drachmas!”

The Phoenician shrugged and pushed the Greek away.

“Why all this talk?” he said coldly. “Give me a hundred drachmas, or let’s forget the whole thing now.”

Kalias gasped in indignation and raised his hands heavenward.

“A hundred drachmas? For what? O, gods, for what?! For a dead slave? He is not worth anything to you anymore! He is as good as dead!”

The Phoenician scoffed angrily.

“Why do I want a hundred drachmas?” he growled. “Why? Because you are trying to deprive me of my revenge. This dog dared to run away from me. Twice. On Moloch⁶, killing him is worth a hundred drachmas to me. Besides, he is a Greek, and you are Greek, so you will pay. Pay me one hundred or shove off.”

³ *Isis*: an Egyptian goddess

⁴ *Astarte*: a Phoenician goddess

⁵ *Athena*: Greek goddess of war and wisdom

⁶ *Moloch*: a god of ancient Palestine

And with an impatient hand, he pushed Kalias away and motioned to the executioner to begin.

Kalias wiped sweat from his brow and tugged at his beard in helpless rage. He was panting. The unhappy slave, a young boy, a child almost, looked at him with despair. Kalias cursed.

“Sixty drachmas!” he stammered out. “I give you sixty drachmas!”

But the Phoenician was not listening. The sharp whistle of the rod cut through the air and was answered by a cry from the condemned boy.

Nehurabhed approached Kalias.

“I’ll give you the forty drachmas,” he said softly. “Redeem the boy.”

Kalias looked at him, astonished as if he had just seen a ghost, but he didn’t waste any time on reflection. He grabbed the merchant’s arm.

“I’ll give you your hundred drachmas, blast you!” he exclaimed through a choked throat. “I’m giving you your hundred drachmas, hear? Untie the slave.”



Melicles, for that was his name, walked with his saviors bewildered and half-dreaming. Blood dripped from his back from the terrible blows of the rod, but he felt no pain.

He was alive! He was breathing! He inhaled the cool breeze from the sea, heard the eternal crash of the waves, and joyful sobs squeezed his chest. He couldn’t understand what had happened

and why; he was not only alive, but he was free! How did it happen? How *could* it have happened?! Who were his saviors? He had never seen either man before. He was dumbfounded! He was confusion itself!

After a year of terrible captivity, after two hopeless attempts to escape, after so many futile endeavors, pleas, and curses, after torture and misery and now the terror of inevitable death – now, suddenly, this.

Salvation.

Where did salvation come from?

So, gods existed after all? Zeus⁷ existed? And answered prayers? So, there was goodness? There was hope? There was grace?

The boy was trembling. He wanted to fall on his knees before his saviors, to kiss their feet, but he did not dare do it. They walked swiftly, in silence – only Kalias gasped with anger and agitation, then he glanced suddenly at the old man walking next to him.

“How did you get here, my lord?” he asked.

Nehurabhed didn’t answer right away.

“I wanted to find out where you were going,” he said at last. “Were you really going to collect your money? Or were you perhaps going to report me?”

“You didn’t trust me, my lord?” Kalias felt offended and pounded his oversized fist against his powerful chest. “All Syracuse knows to trust my every word as if it were the word of

⁷ Zeus: Greek god of thunder, king of all gods

the sacred Pythia⁸ herself!”

The old man nodded.

“From now on, I, too, will trust your word,” he said simply.

Then, pointing to Melicles, he asked:

“Is that your relative?”

Kalias jumped as if burned by a branding iron.

“My relative?! Such a lame shrimp? Such a loser? Such a weak, headless, heedless fool who allows himself to be caught into slavery? And not once but three times in a row? O, ye gods! If I had such a relative, I would cry for shame. And to think that I paid sixty drachmas for a loser like this when he’s not worth a broken *obolos*⁹!

“By Hermes¹⁰! I swear I never made a worse deal. Never. And all of this just because my heart is too soft. And my luck is rotten. Like I really needed to get there just as they started on his back. And why? Why? Why? If only I had not turned up, everybody would now be better off! The world would now contain one fool less, and I would be sixty drachmas richer!”

He gasped angrily.

“Am I your slave, my lord?” Melicles asked softly.

“A slave? No! A Greek will never be the slave of a Greek! At least not in my house! No! You’re free, and you can run wherever the demons take you. But if you do, you will be the most ungrateful thief in the world, and Zeus the thunderous will burn

⁸ *Pythia*: a prophetess of god Apollo

⁹ *Obolos*: the smallest copper coin

¹⁰ *Hermes*: Greek god of merchants and thieves

you with living fire. Do you understand?”

“I understand, my lord.” The boy choked with joy. “I understand, and I will serve you as long as you want. And I will be grateful to you for the rest of my life.”

“If it weren’t for me, you shrimp, they’d be burying you there in the garden by now. Or feeding you to the dogs.”

They walked on in silence again.

“Sixty drachmas!” Kalias muttered to himself. “Sixty drachmas!”

“Perhaps, my lord, my mother will be able to pay you back this sum.”

“What? Who? Your mother?” asked the Greek in a much softer tone. “Do you have a mother? Where is your home?”

“In Miletus. All the way in Ionia. In Asia.”

“And Phoenicians snatched you from there?” Kalias asked in disbelief.

“No, my lord. After my father died, my uncle took me from Miletus to Parthenope. That’s the Milesian colony on the Campanian¹¹ shore, you know.”

“Of course, I know!” muttered Kalias. “I wasn’t born yesterday. Parthenope. And sometimes they say Neapolis. I’ve been there. There is a large volcano there, and they claim, liars, that it is the site of the forge of the great god Hephaestus¹². Even though, of course, everyone knows that Hephaestus’s forge lies in Sicily, under Mount Etna. Is that where the Phoenicians got you?”

¹¹ *Campania*: region of Italy surrounding Naples

¹² *Hephaestus*: Greek god of metalworking

“Yes, my lord. Not Phoenicians – pirates. They attacked us while we were on our way back to Parthenope from Massalia.”

“From Massalia? From Neapolis by sea to Massalia? Don’t lie, you little brat, tell the gods’ honest truth and do not confuse matters. It’s a thousand miles from Neapolis to Massalia”.

“I am telling the truth, my lord.”

“Well, that you are from Miletus... this could be because you sing and draw out your words like an Ionian. I have a good ear for accents and will recognize an Ionian clear across the square on a market day.” And then he burst out again: “My gods! So, fates drove you all the way from Miletus here, to my misfortune!”

He fell silent, but not for long; it was evidently not Kalias’s custom to remain silent.

“How long ago was that?” he asked again.

“What, my lord?”

“Your getting kidnapped, of course!”

“A year ago.”

“And you people couldn’t defend yourselves?”

“We defended ourselves, my lord – to the death. Six of us were left out of the crew of fifteen. But the pirates had two ships. Over sixty men. We fought hard, my lord. I myself killed two. I think. But I passed out from my wounds. Then they took me.”

“And they sold you in Carthage?”

“Yes, sir.”

Kalias stopped panting. His anger was slowly leaving him.

“How old are you?” he asked at last when he calmed down.

“I’m past sixteen.”

“And you killed two pirates?”

“I am strong, my lord.”

Kalias looked at the boy’s small stature and shook his head doubtfully.

“Never mind,” he muttered to himself. “In your place, I would have said three.”

They arrived at the shore. The boat was ready to go – it just needed a push onto the water. Final preparations were made in silence. Everything around was asleep. There was only one light all along the shore now – the great fire in the watchtower. That light was lit each evening and kept up all night as a guide for ships far at sea.

The night was calm and moonless. Nehurabhed couldn’t have chosen a better time for his mysterious departure from the city. He happily settled at the bottom of the boat, now being pushed with strong hands, slowly sliding off the sandy shore and into the sea. He heard with intense relief the splash of the water parted by the prow and the flapping of the sail.

It seemed unlikely that the harbor guards might notice someone leaving the city in this darkness or that anyone might spot a single, gray sail melting away into the night. Kalias was a skilled sailor and knew the harbor well enough to clear the entrance to the port even in pitch-dark. Half an hour passed. No one said a word; only their hearts beat anxiously.

Finally, Kalias took a deep breath as if dropping a huge weight off his chest. He looked back. The light on the watchtower faded into the distance. All around them was now only night, silence, and the deep, dark sea.

“Let’s thank Poseidon¹³, comrades,” he said in a firm voice.
“Carthage won’t catch us here anymore.”

Then he turned to Nehurabhed.

“Lord,” he said, “I understand everything, yet there is one thing I cannot comprehend. I paid sixty drachmas to save this worthless shrimp because he is a Greek, and me, well, I am a Greek, also. But you, my lord, why did you do it?”

The old man looked up at him thoughtfully.

“Because he is a man, and I am a man also,” he said at last.

¹³ Poseidon: Greek god of the sea

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Witold Makowiecki (1903-1946) was a Polish agricultural engineer. Under German occupation during World War II, he took up writing to entertain his family and friends. He is the author of popular adventure novels set in the ancient Mediterranean. Each book is a stand-alone volume, but the appearance of several characters connects them all. His books were published only after his death, but due to their writing style, fast action, and humor, they proved a great popular success and have remained in print in several European languages since their original publication in 1946.

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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Tom Pinch is the penname of a translator and a publisher based in Luxembourg.

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