

# The Desert and the Sea

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

Unerringly, the Magicians of the Convocation converged on one particular spot where the Red Desert met the sea. The most mundane rode on horses, accompanied by trains of camels and asses for provisions and servants. Others came floating down from the sun-baked mountains on ethereal faerie wings which emerged from beneath the flyers' robes. Yet others travelled at the helms of ships drawn by Water Daemons, whose fish-like tails rippled the waters fore and aft, or in boats whose sails were filled by Daemons of the Air, all but invisible except where they roiled and flowed incessantly around mast and rigging.

All of the Convocation deployed their arts and powers to best advantage: the wands and devices were wielded with the consummate skill of the Master Magician, the Scholars and Readers used their knowledge of the ancient scrolls, and the Prognosticators and Diviners invoked their techniques both various and arcane. All agreed that this was to be the Placement for the new Crossing to the Other World.

This Crossing was to be situated on the coast of the desert where a narrow corridor of sun-bleached sand was bordered by the sea upon one hand, and by a range of jagged and arid mountains upon the other. The mountain wall, weathered by daily variations of searing heat and freezing cold into knife-edge ridges and corries, effectively prevented access or invasion from the central regions of the continent beyond.

The desert coast itself was lined with reefs and shoals, sharp and treacherous, a hazard for shipping; here the corals hugged the beach while there they stretched for leagues out into the sea. It was a wrecking coast, littered by the ribs and timbers of those unfortunate vessels whose daemons had failed, or deserted, at a calamitous moment, and dealing their crews a choice of dismal fates: death by drowning in the sea or from thirst in the desert.

In spite of the reefs and hazardous channels, the sea was an important trade route along the East coast of the Dark Continent. These routes would allow for the future and no doubt profitable

distribution of goods through the newly-opened Crossing, when that momentous event finally came to pass.

The command from the Convocation was for Fair Trade: barter and purchase, not banditry or conquest, was unanimously decreed. The merchants and traders were already planning their stratagems: the sales of the spices and herbs quite unobtainable in this world; the medicinal preparations and elixirs for which the rich and sickly would pay handsomely; the opium and hashish that so many craved, and the fine wines and spirits that would enliven even the most jaded of palates.

Of course it was this promise of future riches that had persuaded the bankers and treasury-masters to open their coffers, the idle rich to speculate some portion of their estate, the emperors and minor kings all across this part of the world to raid their strong-boxes and counting-houses.

At that chosen spot on the desert coast, an array of tents and marquees for the Magicians and Sages was erected, its fabrics all in brilliant colours and festooned with fluttering pennants. At the very centre stood the great Pavilion of Convocation, itself secured by more than mundane ropes: Daemons of the Air worked tirelessly to still the flutter of canvas in the ever-present sea breezes or the occasional lashing gales.

Within the Pavilion, the Magicians of the Convocation met day after day, attended by their servants and Diviners, their Seers and draftsmen, and their guards and Familiars. All the servants, from the most senior of Major-domos to the lowliest of camel-drivers, watched and waited in trepidation while the most intense and complex of magical investigations were undertaken.

The Seers and their masters watched the Other World long and hard, opening many an exploratory portal, and sending devices and Familiars to investigate the territory through these unstable and temporary apertures. Sending human observers was regarded as too risky: none of the Convocation wished to lose a valuable slave or guard should a portal collapse without warning.

The locus of the Seers' attention on the other side was a high scrubland sparsely populated by sheep and goats, and the semi-nomadic tribes who herded them. It was a hot and arid climate, not so very different from the Red Desert, but a dozen or so chains higher above the level of the distant ocean. At first, this disparity in elevation engendered grave concern for the Weather Mages, but after long

deliberation and intensive study, these learned ones finally decided that any disruption in the flux of the air would be entirely masked by the winds that blew endlessly over desert and sea.

So, the Prognosticators and Diviners delivered their edict: the lands of the Other World were sufficiently akin in geography and climate, and thus the Crossing could indeed be opened safely.

This was not to be the first Crossing between the Two Worlds, nor the second, nor even the third. But it was to be the first for the peoples of the hot desert regions, for the navigators of the teeming tropical oceans and for the denizens of the lush equatorial jungles. It would become the pride of kingdoms and empires, and the source of revenue for the rulers and citizens of both.

The construction of the new Crossing would be a long and arduous task, now barely commenced. By the time that regular trade and commerce finally held sway, the men and women of the Convocation would be ten or more years older.

From this world, a Crossing such as to be constructed was formed from a vast dome of pure Magic, a dome a league or more in diameter and as much as sixty chains in height. A traveller entering the dome would find, at the very point of crossing itself, that the dome somehow turned itself inside-out; the whole of the Other World suddenly ceasing to be inside the dome of Magic and becoming instead the setting for an identical dome in that world.

The Other World could be entered from any point on the circumference of the crossing. This important factor had taxed the sharp minds of the Master Mages and Seers, directed as they were to selecting a location which could be effectively guarded. After all, the revenues and taxes imposed at the borders must not be evaded by bootleggers and smugglers. The near-impassable desert and the mountain ranges formed a much more effective deterrent than the most diligent of human or magical sentinels; although the region was even now patrolled by the Scouts and Explorers, the advance party of the Guardians whose role as from time immemorial was to protect all Crossings between the worlds.

Near the point where the Magicians had converged was a sheltered cove that allowed for a safe anchorage with deep water close to the shore. The Convocation ordered the construction of a harbour, and secure warehouses and markets and counting houses, and all the other buildings which would be necessary for trade and commerce to

flourish. So vast blocks of granite were quarried from the far mountains, transported with mighty effort on rollers towed by Earth Daemons, and placed in foundations hacked laboriously from the living corals themselves.

Meanwhile, preparations for the opening of the Crossing continued unabated. The precise location and parameters for the great dome of magic, its curves and arches, its dimensions and placement, were debated long and hard in many parts of the Great Pavilion. Finally, all were in accord, save for one dissenter.

The sole rebel was a Sea Mage, a master of the Water Daemons that were used to propel larger vessels of trade along the coast. He was a prudent and learned man, although as yet only a junior member of the Convocation, by name, Noah.

This Mage argued against the Placement, saying that it was too dangerous, too close to the sea, that the consequences of an error in the position of the dome would allow the waters of the seas in this world to inundate the high deserts of the other.

The voice of the Sea Mage was heard, long and loud and with increasing shrillness, in the conferences of the Convocation and the councils of the Master Magicians. Oh, there were a few of the Convocation who might have listened more diligently to the arguments and studied more closely the scrolls and dissertations. But all knew that the pride of the peoples of the region, and the pleasure of their rulers, was pinned on the opening of the Crossing.

Finally, Noah sought a private audience with the Inner Board of Magicians, the Crossing Masters, the leaders of the Convocation itself. By all accounts, Noah and his Masters put forth their arguments fully and at length, at first calmly and rationally, and then with voices and tempers raised. Afterwards, the Inner Board, now challenged in their authority and wisdom, resolved to silence this troublemaker once and for all.

The Sea Mage was arrested as soon as he left the Pavilion, and immediately sentenced to banishment. Passively accepting his fate and already understanding the implication of his punishment, Noah was taken without delay to an exploratory portal and hurled through, abandoned in the high desert of the Other World. The Master Magicians then calmly put the misguided Mage out of their minds and returned to their tasks and labours.

Now, Noah was a wise man and one well versed in the myriad ways of the world. He had spent more time in desert and steppe than most of those who had plied their trade upon the sea; indeed it was only his knowledge and consummate skill in the handling of Water Daemons that had led him to the nautical life some years before.

In his new circumstances, he was not entirely without resources or knowledge. The geography of the high desert was intimately familiar to him through long hours of study within the Pavilion of Convocation. More importantly, because of the deceptive passiveness and apparent weakness Noah had displayed in accepting his banishment, his gaolers had failed to identify and confiscate all of the magic he had drawn about himself.

He had carried with him one of the magic of Tongues, whose use allowed him to comprehend instantly a single one of the languages of this world. With magic and more mundane skills, Noah proceeded to re-form his robes to more closely resemble the garments habitually worn by the goat-herders and nomads who populated this scrubland.

Another of his meagre stock of magic was expended in tracking down a handful of wild goats and stray sheep, driving them to sweet pastures and safe waters hidden deep in a valley perhaps even the local nomads knew not. This oasis also grew dates and other fruits, and the flowers which attracted the wild bees whose honey could be gathered at the cost of a few stings that even his magic could not entirely deflect.

During his peregrinations, he happened upon a waif, a boy outcast and runaway, the youth crippled from birth by a club foot and dying from thirst in the desert heat. With time and care and more of his magic, Noah nursed the boy to health and repaired the defective foot. In his gratitude, the youth would become Noah's faithful servant and constant companion in the years ahead.

With milk and honey and fruit, and the meat of an occasional wild partridge or coney, Noah and his servant were able to survive well enough, and even enlarge the little flock as spring brought newborn animals which fattened quickly on the bountiful forage of the hidden oasis.

As time went on, Noah and his manservant would visit one or another of the more permanent settlements that served as markets and meeting places. Here, they would trade some of his livestock for the silver pieces used as coin hereabouts, which in turn allowed the

purchase of cloth for tenting and clothes, and chickens for eggs and meat, and flour for flatbreads to augment their diet.

Although already into his middle years, Noah was still a fine figure of a man, tall and strong, and he still carried the noble bearing that befitted a Mage and Sea-master. The stranger soon came to the attention of the ladies of the townships, and first this mother and then that goodwife would tentatively suggest his betrothal to their maiden daughters.

After some years past, Noah became more visibly wealthy; his livestock flourished and multiplied, and his fattened lambs were said to please even the most finicky of diners in the finest houses. He finally accepted the offers and blandishments from the mother of a daughter both strong and pretty, and accepted too from the girl's father a dowry rather larger than he had in all honesty anticipated. The wedding was the subject of gossip for a seven-day: this handsome but mysterious stranger who had appeared in their midst so suddenly and his marriage to the younger daughter of one of the town's most respected citizens.

The dowry allowed Noah to purchase camels and asses, and to engage servants and labourers, before the enlarged party departed for the hidden valley. The years that followed were long, yet prosperous. Noah and his new wife established a house and farmstead, paying off the labourers in coin and goods, and the new servants tended the flocks and farmed the bounty of the oasis.

The founding boy, now fully-grown and Major-domo of the new household, attracted the eye of the younger of the two maid-servants that had accompanied Noah's new wife from her father's home. The young man and the maiden made an accommodation, after the fashion of servants, and for ever after were regarded as man and wife.

Noah himself, ever prudent and cautious, hoarded the last of the silver coin presented by his father-in-law, and was oft-times able to add to it after a market visit. But there was money enough to provide luxuries for his wife: fine silks from China and sweet teas for evening refreshments.

In the natural course of events, Noah's wife presented him with first one, then a second and finally a third healthy son, all of whom grew fast and ran wild after the chickens. The boys were at first set with learning from their father and mother; later, a tutor was engaged for a period to instil the rudiments of civilisation in the children.

But Noah had not forgotten about his previous life, and the dangerous plans to open a Crossing to join the Two Worlds in trade. Often he would walk alone in the mountains, always watching for the telltale signs of the Seers' devices at work; or he would engage in conversation with sheep-herders and itinerants, always asking for tales of bizarre appearances or bright lights or mysterious strangers in the hills and high valleys. He found that there were many, many such stories, with ghostly visitations and shining objects appearing with worrying regularity.

Finally, Noah felt that he must speak out, to express to his neighbours and adopted countrymen the real risk that a wall of water, an entire sea, might fall out of the sky if the Crossing was opened.

However, his dire predictions were not well-received by the Council of Elders in the townships, nor by the populace at large. Too many people remembered his sudden appearance in their midst a decade before, and were jealous of his rapid rise in wealth and social standing. No matter that Noah's ascendancy was the result of much hard work, some luck and prudence, and just a little magic; he was still far too much a stranger for them to accept such an impossible prophesy.

Once again, Noah found his protestations disbelieved by all. His oratory in the market squares was met with silence, or laughter, or ill-concealed scorn; some street urchins even threw stones at him.

Disillusioned, Noah returned to his house to think, to plan, to consider his future. He could take his family and flee, but he would have to leave in the next season or so, he judged, if he was to get far enough away to be safe from the waters. But, he reasoned, suppose he was wrong, that the Crossing would be opened without incident. In that case, he would have abandoned his home for no purpose; worse still, he would miss out on the myriad opportunities available to a moderately wealthy and cultured man, one who was familiar with the language and customs in the Other World.

Finally, he hit upon a solution. He would construct a boat, a watercraft covered and stoutly built, one which could ride out the tidal wave. His mundane skills in handling sea craft would serve again, even without Water Daemons or other magical assistance.

A problem remained, however. In this region, timber was both expensive and hard to obtain. In what little time remained, it would be possible to acquire only enough materials for a boat large enough to

accommodate his family and their closest servants, with barely room for provisions or livestock.

At once, Noah engaged agents to purchase seasoned timbers, and labourers with pack animals to transport the wood and to perform some of the heaviest of the construction work, releasing them once the basic shape of the boat was complete. These labourers and most of his other servants he paid off with silver coin, adding his sincere advice to leave the region as soon as possible.

Noah also took stock of his herds, separating the sheep from the goats, keeping only the strongest and healthiest of animals, and slaughtering or selling the remainder at market.

As he returned from the market place, Noah discovered that the coarse labouring men he had engaged had evidently gossiped in the tea shops and bars. The silver he had paid them had bought much wine for the men, and their tongues had wagged wildly. Noah found himself the subject of much uncouth ridicule and the butt of many jokes, with only a few more curious and thoughtful souls wondering at his uncharacteristic willingness to sell his sheep and goats at low prices.

Fuming at the intransigence and obstinacy of his neighbours, Noah returned to his family and waited, expending the last remnants of his magic to sense the moment of the opening of the Crossing. After three days of anticipation, the expected sensation surged across his awareness; the world-twisting wrench would have been hard to miss with even everyday magical senses. Quickly, Noah directed his family and the remaining servants, and a few pairs of sheep and goats and chickens, to the cramped darkness of the little boat.

With quiet trepidation, Noah and his Ark awaited the Flood.

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