



The sky was a vast room furnished with moons, and with mountains, and with the great crescent of Butros, round which their own world circled. A column of smoke behind them had been the prison salt mine, Vo'ash Feyu. Red tried to picture its destruction as they steered their mounts back toward the battle. "Is this wise?" he asked his partner. "You helped them already. They don't need you anymore." Red, who had been a monk, wore smoked goggles and a tunic, his brown legs bare in the heat, a straw hat

against the sun.

The doctor, Root, spoke with thought. "I don't think I can leave them there. They ... hope too much for this." Today he wore a robe of white linen against the glare of Davis' Star on the great dead sea pan, and smoked goggles, with a peaked cap.

"Isn't rebellion kind of a serious crime?" (Which mandated a man's death in a salt mine? Or a lifetime of sewing and weaving for womenfolk, forcible remarriage or far, far worse).

"They are rebels. They were sent here for that. What is worse about rebelling again, in hope of living somewhere better than a salt mine?" They rode manhorses, great primates twice human height, shoulder-saddled today.

"Or dying." Red was, or had been, a monk of the faTheyist religion, and uncomfortable with this for good reason. Even if his partner was some kind of.....he didn't really believe that nonsense!

Did he?

“Dying while you—“ He pointed, standing in chestirrup and holding onto the manhorse's harness. “There!” Battle had spilled onto the trampled and stained salt where hills of rubble threatened to make another onak. Two guards had climbed a hill and were mowing slaves down with crossbows. Doubtless the innkeep had bravely barricaded herself indoors with her stock of sweetcake and palm toddy.

“Up! Get them!” His westh followed Root's as he reflected that the medical man was useless in a fight. The huge manhorses weighed eight times what a human did, and were roughly twice as tall, but much of the height was long arms and legs. Red had never seen a horse, but anyone who'd ridden one would see that the grass-eating runners were faster than wesths, and easier to fodder. But, as they hit the huge rubble heaps, they came on to one advantage to a riding-beast evolved from primate stock.

Manhorses could climb. They came most of the way up the wall of rock and dirt ere the crossbowmen saw them. Root's manhorses were not war-trained, and so a crossbow-bolt took one down before the two travelers could dismount. Red jumped at them, punched the end of his staff at one, forcing him down, faked back at the other, who drew a long fighting knife. Root pulled the two manhorses back before they went into hysterics from the fighting, and Red came at the knife-wielder with a whirling attack. The knife slashed at one of his hands, cut him, came at his eye. He shouted in pain, knocked the knifeman's hand aside, tripped him with a staff-thrust, conked him on the forehead and then caught the other man, rising from the ground, and smashed the staff into him, thrust him down the hill of mine-debris. He was sworn not to kill.

He wasn't sworn to let someone kill him.

Root was beside him, holding a crossbow. They managed to get a few shots off at the guards before the last handful fled.

“They'll regroup. That wasn't all of them.”

“How do you know?”

“They were caught,” Red said, “between shifts, by surprise. There are more off asleep, in barracks, elsewhere. There's a—“and the horn that called for shift changes blew, and blew again, and a third time. Wind sounds, and then three more

blasts. “We need to go, and go fast. Now. We can use this to our gain.” He took a deep breath. “It depends on two things.”

The two men climbed down the hill leading the manhorses, and the slaves crowded round them. Root salved and bandaged the crying manhorse who'd been shot. He'd heal with care.

Red frowned as Root stood to greet the oncoming slave-no-more army-village-whatever. He was a monk. He was sworn to aid others reach Bliss.

Why was he helping a slave revolt?

Monkey had robbed them.

It was a small room; its walls were cool in the dark.

“It's another diagram from the knowstone,” Red Thermatsson of Vokherkhe Monastery said as he unrolled the palm-leaf paper in the dim light from the door. A small pan of charcloth was in their packs; the physician, Root, opened it and struck flint on steel to light an oil lantern with a reflector. This helped things a good deal. Each of them kept a careful eye on the hallway in the underground desert hostel at Vo'ash Fayu.

“What is it?” asked the larger man as he looked closer at the machine diagram drawn in walnut ink.

“It was from the sunward face,” Red said, “of the knowstone. Look at the -- yes, there, where it curves.” The knowstones, the itachathavthf, were relics of past civilizations in Pendleton's complex prehistory. Given the tendency of civilizations to fall, folk of the past had encoded what they knew. Knowledge was an advantage.

“A removable ... something for a boat?” Red knew that his partner had never sailed, being a son of hilltown weavers. (Sailing would have been nicer for this trip were the central sea of the Nurro not millennia gone).

“Got it on the knuckle.” The monk smiled. “The other guess I had was some kind of wind-force machine. But I couldn't see how to make that work. There isn't anything connecting the—“

“Sails to the wheels. Right.” Root was of middle years, a mustache adorning his brown face. Indoors, in desert heat, he was peeled to his underthings and cooling slowly. The underground mine was cooler, of course, than the surface, in the bake-oven heat of firstday. Outside it was hotter than bird's

blood, the eclipse serving merely to take the edge off. Pendleton's had been an ice moon ere the terraformers had plated a biosphere knitted from remnants of old Earth over its tidal continents, heated it till all but two poles thawed, lived in domes till pantropy allowed humans to breathe outdoors.

That had been lifetimes of civilizations and species ago.

“Yes. I put it together in my mind and imagined the wind, and all at once I saw. It's—“ Red wore his saffron-colored monk's robe wrapped round his waist; he was a small man, his head and face shaved, his body a knotty mass of muscles from his work in the martial arts. He was a scholar and missionary, sworn to the ten vows. Of them, there was one he'd broken, fairly surely.

“A land sailing ship. It runs on those wheels.”

“We need to build one,” said the monk-tinker who fossicked in the past for learning. A wild-minded grin. They had done so before, and the windbox had changed...well, they didn't yet know what. And had led them to run away together toward a land where libraries might help them understand the monument that Red's friends had died for.

They had ridden awesthak, a pair of manhorses, all first-day to this hot, crazy place, and realized that water for the mounts would cost them as much as lodging. (Oddly, there had been a hermitage on a nearby rockpile; this was about as far from a congregation as a cleric could get). Proceeding further in midday heat at the center of the Nurro was impossible, sadly. Beasts were stabled (and watered) here, and they'd hired a room, excavated by prisoners over the centuries from the dead sea pan; salt caravans stopped here and no one else did. Root had argued that coming over the desert center into the Alegan, the monotheistic south province, would attract less notice. Red had argued that they needed more water. They still did.

Vo'ash Feyu consisted of a thousand prisoners, all men, and twenty guards, and a half dozen inn guests who mostly had traveled by night.

“If I stand here any longer, by the Messiah, I will fall asleep without prologue,” said Root. “Want to lie down?” Red reminded himself that the oath contained a great deal of what he didn't know about the monotheists. A future savior -- how were you supposed to know when you ran into one?

“I do,” said the faTheyist monk, “but I don't want to sleep.” They tried the bed, and found that there was a nice way to pass the time, and then they slept.

Red woke, in the dark of the eclipse, and felt someone in the room. He rolled on the mattress stuffed with rice husk, and shot out his arm on a whim (the dorms, dirty practical jokes at night, the endless blind-fighting drills...). He caught a handful of hair and then heard a stifled gulp. Keeping tight hold on the intruder, he eased out of bed and got what felt like a boy's body into a lock. “Who are you? And why are you in my room?”

“Eat durrick's shit.”

Red tightened the restraining hold in a nasty place and said, “Root. Wake.”

“Muh?” The physician, wearing a bad attitude, got up and lit a lamp, though the eclipse would pass soon. “You invite a friend to play?” Their relationship was new and they didn't share their bed.

“Not friends right now.” The light came up, Root closed the room's wood and leather door, and Red saw a skinny boy wearing a breechclout and dirt, one hand filled with a sack of money beads. From his smell and the glory-frost on his cheeks, he might be fifteen. “Drop the good doctor's money, and I'll ease up.”

The boy complied.

“Now. Do we take you to the innkeep?” The boy tightened in Red's unpleasant grip. “Or to the local magistrate? Which works better?”

“Meatape-fucker. I don't care.”

Red looked at his partner. Root had thrown the bolt on the door, and taken a swig of water. “We could keep him here. Might clean up pretty.”

“Heh. I don't like dirty men.”

“Let me go, blood-poisoning!” The oath was as ugly as it was hard to translate.

“Why should we? You're a thief. You know the punishment.” Which was probably, here, an extension of his sentence to pay off the court costs, since he was doubtless a prison-slave with no money beads to his name. Who could be whipped for digging too little salt. The whole system, Red reflected, was nasty beyond reform. At least they weren't chained

in the mines, as the theft made obvious. Or did they chain the bad ones? He didn't know.

He was a monk, even if his vow of chastity had frayed a bit, and he was sworn to assist others in reaching bliss. This place really, really needed it.

He said softly, "If we tie your hands, and otherwise do you no more harm, will I be able to let you go?" He could hold the struggling boy for only so long, after all.

"Yeah. Let me go." The kid held his arms out, and Root bound him with a piece of cord that had tied their luggage onto the manhorses. Red let him go, stood, stretched, and sat cross-legged on the pallet.

"So. What are we going to do with him?"

Root said, "The innkeep will know what to do with him, who he is." Red watched the kid carefully in the lamplight. "He's done this before." The boy looked at the floor mat.

"Didn't do it before." His voice was flat. To a man trained to take confessions of sin and administer last rites, it was clear that he was lying.

"Or we can take him to the magistrate. What's the punishment for theft here?"

"Not a thief."

"No one is asking," Red said, his voice soft, "whether you are a thief."

"They whip ya." Looking at the floor

Root said, "I thought so." His face showed no approval.

"Whip the bad people, 'cos they deserve it." He was reciting what he had learned, perhaps. What schooling did these prisoners have?

"Innkeep'll charge you." The boy looked at Root, his hands tied, his eyes narrow. "Make you pay."

"Pay? Why do we pay to be robbed?"

"Pay for having a boy. Men do it sometimes. Pay the innkeep."

"Boys or girls?"

"Girls cost plenty. Boys are cheap." Red had seen monks who did the same, though he wasn't one. The kid was no virgin, he guessed, nor did he hope to get help if he cried rape. Yuck.

"We'll take you to the magistrate, then. Have you whipped. Would you like that?"

The boy looked at the floor. "Stuff manshit in your gob."

"Do they give you some of the money, then, when they have you?" Root was curious.

"Give me some if I please'em." He smiled, not at them, and not pleasantly. "I do."

"This is disgusting," said Red. "We're taking you to the law."

"Don't." He pled. "Please. Don't."

"Why not?" Red was truly curious. "What's wrong?"

"Ever see anyone take two hundred with the bamboo cane?" The boy's voice was quiet, sad.

"Dhai's Mercy!" cursed the monk. "That would kill you."

"Killed my uncle. He took water." This was not a great city, and it wasn't a faTheyist monastery, with its fishponds and gardens and sailing boats and....

"All right," said Root. "We won't take you to the law. But if you try this foolery again, we will. Where is your family?"

The boy laughed, voice roughened by dryland wind and salt. "Family?"

"Where do you sleep, then?"

"What are you thinking?" asked the monk. "Turn him over to his own people?"

"They'll punish him, but they value his labor. He's near man-sized; chances are he does a man's work." He turned to the kid. "Do you?"

"Do a man's work. Yah. Don't like the whip."

"So they'll punish him. They don't want trouble for them, so they don't want thieves. But they won't kill or maim him, because they don't want to lose his labor. So they'll cane him, make him work on feastday, but not cut off a hand, not whip him near to death. It's fair by me."

"Let's go before the innkeep charges us double for keeping a boy too long."

"Untie me."

"Huh?"

"Can't take me out tied. They'll see. Take me to the barracks of Mejoj'. I won't run. Take me there, and I won't." He looked solidly into the monk's eyes as he spoke.

He wasn't lying.

"We'll untie you, but move from between us, and you go

down. Understand?”

“Yes. I won't run, by – by the Dhai.” Red decided against his monk's habit and donned a long white tunic and straw hat, with sun goggles of smoked glass. Root wore loose breeches and a kaftan of linen.

“He won't, then.” Root took his medical kit.

They walked out of the complicated network of roofed-over trenches in a dry lakebed that marked the saltmines at the Nurro astrobleme's center. Under dirt, Red saw, there were scars on the boy's thin back. The growth of muscles had spread and faded them, but they were a mixture of old and new.

A guard stopped them. Red's mind ran the calculation at once. Running was impossible without mounts or water. They'd lose the diagrams, also, even if the wizard had gotten a copy by now. “What is this?” He peered close at the boy. “Monkey. Stealing again, are you?”

“Didn't steal. Lea'me alone.”

“Gentlemen, did this boy give you some trouble?”

“We don't wish to–“

“Red, please.” His partner cut in rudely. Of course it was unclean to interrupt a monk only when he was preaching. “This boy was in our room.”

“Paid the fee?” The guard spoke to the boy.

“They did–“ Another guard came up.

“What is this? The monkey stealing again? Take him over to the guardhouse.” They followed, helpless, as the guards frogmarched the boy to the burrow that housed the guardhouse, and watched as the commander was roused and gave him twenty lashes with a bloodied bamboo shaft. Red cringed at the violation of taboo: blood-mixing carried illness. Or maybe all the blood was the boy's? “Monkey”? Was that his name?

“There. It won't help to tell you this, but don't do it again. Ever see a man take–“

“Two hundred? I did. It was–“ A slap silenced him.

“Get out.” The boy staggered, bleeding. Root silently took one arm and Red draped the other over his own shoulders; the boy was a finger or so shorter than he was. With effort, they managed to get him to the barracks, also made of saltblock and thatched with reed, where the slave-prisoners lived.

The eclipse had ended and Davis' Star lit the landscape

through dust and huge impotent rainclouds: the endless-looking flat of the saltpan, the heaps of alkali and minerals and salt ready for transit, and hazy-distant, the central mountain massif of the crater, the legendary home of mad hermits and wise lone-priests. If stories were true. Closer, a stone-island, an onak, reared double peaks encrusted with saltsponge reefs. The hermit, it must be. He couldn't see, or understand who would want to live there. They passed stills for reclaiming water (water?), made of mica and baked clay, and sun-powered stoves in which he smelled porridge cooking.

Mouse directed them to Mejoj's. Mejoj was in the mines working, but his wife, a transvestite who gave her name as Hara ("Cloud"), was there, and greeted them oddly loudly. Her dress was made from old grain sacks, wrapped to create the illusion of breasts; her headscarf was round her neck. From deeper within the ill-lit barracks Red heard a rustle of activity. A warning, perhaps?

"We're glad you brought Monkey back." Red smiled a little. "What did he do," the manwoman said, "this time?"

"Nothing so much. Could we discuss this quietly?"

"Of course. Talok, bring water, please." A man nodded. She took them into a sleeproom, now vacant. It was more private, if smellier. The walls of salt and stone blocks let in daylight. She served water and waybread; Red guessed her to be perhaps forty-five years old. "There are those who talk. If we come in here, they might think we're just haggling over his price for a night's play." This was clearly a bedchamber at times. There was a decoration on the wall, a note written in charcoal that "this way is east".

"Ah, yes." Root sat on a pallet and Red beside him. The boy squatted on the floor, till Root motioned for him to sit before him, and from a fold of his belt brought out a khepsh, his small medicine box. He washed the boy's back, treated the welts with a strong-smelling herbal ointment and bandaged the worst of the bleeding. It took almost all the ointment in the jar.

"Thank you for the water, miss Hara." Red knew how to be polite. "Now, Monkey came into our room unasked-for. He sought to steal money, and we prevented him."

"Did you?" She glared at the boy. "Open up your mouth." He did so. She pried with a half-clean finger. "Now. Spit." He

spat into the reeds on the floor.

“Do I need to undress you?” The boy wore a breechclout.

“No.”

“Then I'll do it anyway.” The two visitors looked away, and when the kid shrugged the rag back into place, she held out soiled porcelain money-beads. “These are yours?”

“They ... probably are.” Root reached out a hand, drew it back. “Keep them, good lady, for your honesty with this boy.”

“No one in this barracks wants all the prisoners lined up and whipped. Especially me.” She sighed. “We'll give you what you deserve when Mejoj returns, Monkey.” Red's eyes widened. She was going to beat him again?

“I was just ... you know. To help you.” He was badly upset, and hiding it poorly. Of course, humiliation was part of the life of any prisoner, but Monkey likely wanted to hold on to any dignity he had, or thought he had.

“You don't help us stealing. Nor getting caught.” There was a sad smile on her face. “Now, what do you say to these men, who were kind enough to bring you home?”

“Good sirs,” Monkey said, “I thank you for your kindness. G— I mean, Dhais and Evekhets bless you for your charity.”

“That's better. Now, I must beg you kind sirs to allow us prisoners time to rest and feed ere we are called to labor as we deserve.”

“I understand. I wonder at how well-spoken you are. Do you know Thoket?”

Red didn't know Thoket.

“Elab was my teacher.” He did not know Elab either.

“How amusing. You are of Nantaishar?”

“Bethokashar. Nearby, of course.”

There was no such city.

The slave boy's eyes were wide.

“Him?” The manwoman looked at Red.

“He's with me.”

“You're ... you're really one of us. You've come ... why did you come?”

Red was mystified. He decided to keep silent.

Root said, “I came so that the People of God might be fulfilled in God's Promise.” Now, even Red, who knew little about monotheists, and less that was good, could hear that that

was a wad of hooley. It meant absolutely nothing, whether one believed in the monotheist's silly sun-goddess or no. A faTheyist himself, Red trusted that following the Way led to bliss, but didn't believe in invisible things in the sky that helped people get there. His partner did, the subject of a cease-fire between the two of them, but not between the two faiths. Was Root trying to manipulate these people? Into what? Into getting them all killed?

“Mother, this is him,” said Monkey. “He must be. There's no one else he could be.”

Red was further baffled.

“Let us pray,” said Hara. The monotheists (and Red) arranged themselves into a rough chevron in the small room, the men on one side, Hara on the other, and they recited a great deal of faVashala prayers, facing the “east” graffito. By muttering and keeping to one edge, Red was able to avoid showing his ignorance, but some of the verses were unmistakable.

Someone was talking outside the door. The fact that the beginning of the prayer-jam was called the “Elabethoket” also explained how Root had managed to recognize who these people were. It was probably used as a more-or-less secret code all over the Nurro. When the prayers were finished, the slaves began badgering Root again about the secret plan, but he slowly quieted them, and asked them instead what they had been planning. A good stratagem, in Red's opinion. While they talked, something outside the reed-curtained door caught his eye. He kept the tail of his eye on it until he was sure what he had seen, and then let it bother him.

There were men outside the door, and he had been warned to look by the noise. He was now sure that the tink he had heard was a weapon being set down, since he had seen a man carrying a long knife that was not on the list of approved salt-mining tools. Was this a reason to worry?

His religious education classes had included a lot of ranting about how crazy and awful monotheists were, and regrettably little that was useful. He was certain that a messiah myth was part of it, though. There had been mention of demagogues who'd misused myths to foment revolt. What was going on? He didn't know. He turned his attention back to the conversation. Hara was describing what was pretty likely a

runaway plan. "--and near here, ten hours' walk, is an island where sponge-coral holds water. We can rest there and make it across the salt to Alegan in one night's walk, marching through the night." She paused. "We can, can't we?" The night was seventy hours on Pendleton's and could get windy and cold even here.

Root temporized. "That might be harder than you think. The desert is extremely rough on travelers either mounted or afoot. We came on westhak and we still had to spend much of seconday huddled in what little shade we found. What will you use to carry water?" The noon eclipse gave five hours or so of dark, then the long seconday, thirty hours, till Davis' slow set.

"We have gourd canteens; the men carry them into the mines."

"How will you get the men out of the mines who are in while you run?"

"We'll do it at shift-change. We'll have to."

"Risky. You have great courage."

"We have to." She poured more water from a rough salt-glazed pottery jug. "We have no choice. Now tell us, messenger—" Red was confused, since the word had another meaning in old Farash – "what is the world like out there? What news of the Promise?"

"The world spins, Tingat and Sunmother with it. The old Protectorate shatters and the efetgan puff and spit about their independence. War comes. Sadly." Tingat is what the faNurro call Butros' World.

"Sadly? When freedom from the idol-worshippers is at hand?"

"Sadly, when law, and sanitation, and running water and good roads stand to be lost as petty rulers take over. Watch this and learn." Belatedly Red realized that he was one of the so-called idol-worshippers, along with his monastic family and the laity they served. He was not sworn to persecute.

He was not sworn to holy war.

It happened regardless.

There was not going to be a holy war in this room.

"We'll see nothing here!" said Monkey. "Help us escape! You can do it. You know the outside." In the kid's mouth outside became a place like the Sky Kingdoms of fable. He hated to break it to Monkey, but the rest of the world...

Was better than being a mine-slave.

Anything was except ... well, anything. "We do." They all looked at him. "I can draw you a map of this land now." They hastened to bring charcoal and a smoothed board, there being no palms for paper. He drew the innermost wall of the Nurro astrobleme-crater, with the radial rivers running inwards from the mountains to the low center, with the major cities, the monasteries and so on. Monkey was continually interrupting and pointing to things until Hara told him that if he touched the thing once more she would smack his face in. Abstractly, Red wondered whether a mother spanked more often if she was a man.

It didn't matter. He showed them the Alegan, the south province ruled by monotheists, where his own faith were a minority now, semi-legal and semi-tolerated. The shortest route, which took one right over the central massif of mountains, was possible for a mountain lonepriest or a bird, and no one else.

One could manage a journey across the salt itself with a great quantity of water, and of nerve, and a map. (This map, perhaps.) Or follow the trade-road that Root and Red had been on, and be caught. Oases? They existed, but all the water this far down was a mess of toxic salt and alkali. Mountains ate rain, and pissed rivers, and here the rivers had run out.

It might rain. "Where do you get the water? That you run through the sunstills? Where does it come from?"

Monkey softly explained the geography of the parts of the desert that he'd walked over, skipping sleep and work periods until his back was a mass of scars. "Here." He pointed, and Red drew, and was corrected, and drew. "And here. It ... flows?" Red nodded. "Underneath. I think." They distilled it and got a brackish stuff that did. It had to do. They stretched water rations. There was water cached. Even to Root they would not say where. There had to be, for an escape plan to be anything but fantasy.

(Why was the kid here? What on the Nearside had he done? Eat somebody?) They talked until the hostess believed that they would be missed back at the hostel. Eventually they had a plan.

As Red and Root walked back, unaccompanied, Red felt safe enough to ask, "Okay. Who are those people?" When they left, no

arms had been in sight, but men had watched them carefully. He felt that other men would do so in the hostelry.

“They're Khanashar.”

“Huh?”

“The village of Khanashar. The governor of our beloved province sentenced them en masse after the last revolt.”

“The last ... what? That revolt in the hill lands? That was -“

“Fifteen years ago. The women to the workhouses, the men to the mines, yes.” Root's face was grim. “I care for you, book-bibber, but watch out.” He was sworn to avoid sitting in high seats and resting on soft beds. Seldom a problem traveling.

“Uh ... what?” Red had long ago learned to feign confusion as a means of avoiding conflict, but he wasn't faking now. “What are you talking about? Some kind of prison riot? You're a doctor, for Dhai's sake!”

“Yes, for the Dhai's sake. I am a doctor. Yes. And I travel from patient to patient. True. And I serve when needed. And I'm paid, sometimes passably. But has it never occurred to you that a doctor has a great number of chances to speak to people, privately, when another man does not? Even in purdah?” This whole place was a purdah, Red reflected, without womenfolk, save a few travelers.

“Yes. I see that.” He motioned for his partner to continue.

“I hear messages and repeat them. I write when I can't avoid it, since the questioners can read.” Red nodded; who didn't fear the Questioners and their power to arrest, torment and slay? “I keep our people.” He sighed. “God's People. Together.”

“I ... look. Nothing that I believe asks me to bother these poor people any more than they already are troubled. If I could do anything to—“

“You can. You did. They have a map. Now.”

“They're all going to die, either from the guards killing them or from the salt. This desert kills, Root. That's why lone-priests come here, and that's why the prison is here.”

“Lone-priests, yes. Fine machine-makers, aren't they?” This was part of the reputation of lone-priests, who, after all, had to provide for themselves in weird places. They tended to invent or reinvent the strangest things.

“They are.”

“Are you thinking—“

“We'll visit him after we eat. There's time, ere seconday ends.” There turned out to be, barely. The innkeep was happy to clean their room and serve food, telling them to watch for ratsnakes in the desert, and the hermit was a nice old holy man, and sometimes he prayed for her, she said. Their manhorses, shod in leather boots with nailed soles and wearing straw hats, trod the salt to the onak, and followed a barely visible path. They had brought food and medicine,

and Charthat stopped at the “beach” of sponge-coral debris, stripped, and donned his monk's habit. “It'll help. It has to.” They watered the manhorses and found a lick of shade for them below a huge many-branched cactus, bearing fruit. Root carried medicines and food in a huge basket, including a jug of beer. Red bore a pack of tools, the scroll copy, and a saint's relic (fake, bought in the Favashar market, and good for impressing people, and belief was what mattered, wasn't it?) The domed stone hut stood in a small garden fenced with ancient cactus ribs.

The aged hermit, Hogarak, was tinkering with a pipe when they arrived, his robes worn with work and prayer. Their gifts were accepted and they drank a little beer and chanted sutras. (Root simply bowed his head; faThey accepted that not everyone knew the holy words.) Then Red, in the hermit's corbeled hut-workshop, spread out the machine diagram he'd copied from the tachathavthf, the knowstone.

Hogarak the hermit was puzzled, then thrilled, and delved in his mess of a storeroom among crocks of pickles, sacks of mesquite-meal, and stone jugs of homemade wine, and finally found the remains of two wagons, long ago wrecked with their dead crews, whom he had burned in a pyre of cactus rib, he said. With a little fiddling, he said—

It turned out to be a lot, and took all the long Pendleton's night to do. By dawn a sailing cart rolled onto the optical flatness of the salt. Urmston, the great ice moon, rose, and Root learned



to sail the salt sea. It was great fun and the hermit whooped as they raced the dawn wind, raising a huge roostertail of dust and salt, tacking back to the onak and steering by the moons and the morning sun: Ngobi was full and low on the western horizon and Butros' night side sparked with lightning. The goal, Red thought, handling sail as Hogarak steered and Root held on tight, was Bliss. But this world wasn't so bad. Until—
CRACK! Worn cactus-rib, bleached to driftwood in the harsh light of Davis' Star, snapped under the strain of the wind, left them dismasted two klicks from the onak. The hermit and Red hauled back the wreck, to meet Root leading a manhorse. It pulled the craft the rest of the way back to the workshop, and then was rewarded with cactus-fruit.

They worked harder on strengthening the thing, until Root thought to use iron-reed for as much of the frame as they could. Fitting small-end-into-large built tents and scaffolding Nurro-wide, and like as not in the Great South, although Red had never been there. Lashing of raw meatape-hide and they were ready to go again. A wind blew under the light of Butros' immense face, crossed by Ngobi, the firemoon. Absently Red calculated the Signs for the night and then felt like slapping himself. Astrology was nonsense, after all. So what of a messiah?

They rolled onto the flat saltpan. The hermit sat by one rear wheel with the tiller and Red let out sail bit by bit, as he had on the monastery fishpond long ago. (A messiah would work miracles.) The iron-reed mast held, bending nicely, and the craft (unnamed?) picked up more speed. (A messiah speaks truth). They ran at the speed of a charging manhorse, then fast as a sprinting tiger-cat, then like nothing but bird or storm. (A messiah restores the world). The lonepriest played with the tiller, steering round debris, the (very) occasional rock, then swerving-

Red flew into the air and landed, rolling, on salt, priest's robe tangled round him (there was a reason to disrobe for exercise). For a moment he just breathed and took stock of his limbs (the usual number) and bones (the same as last time). Felt himself over, untangled from the robes, and found the hermit lying still on the cool salt. He felt a stab of fear.

He touched the old man's neck, touched his mouth.

Hogarak breathed. (And so did Red.) He lived, and with a few minutes' recovery, he woke. "Breath knocked outta me! That's one Bliss of a ride you give me- thought I'd end up in my next mama's belly!"

They sat on the pan's floor for a couple of hours, as the hermit eventually decided that he'd just had the wind knocked from him when the tiller snapped the wheel off. On the way back, aided again by Root and his manhorses, they redesigned the craft and ended up with two wheels in front, a broad prow, a keel (of old wagon-timber from oaks of the Batharkh mountains), and one rear wheel with its tiller of oak also. This version of the ship sailed briefly through maneuvers that had wrecked the first two, then more. Root named the ship Gwuf Baram, or Saint Lightning. (He hastened to assure them that, yes, there was a real saint named that, and was cut off mid-hagiography by the old lonepriest.)

They left the hermit with instructions for where to meet them (a stone pillar, a seastack in the salt) on the landsailer. Their manhorses trod back to the inn, and they slept, played rats-and-dragons, and had sex with enthusiasm. The landlady brought a kettle of bath water and then a meal of porridge and saltfish. As second day faded, Red told the innkeep that they'd be checking out, having visited the holy man. She said that she left gifts for him out on the salt, and returned, sometimes, to find them gone. Her manservant had gone to tend him once when the jointsick had taken him. She thought that they were good lads to have brought him some provisions, and after a great deal more chatter they paid their bill and left into the hot late-afternoon light.

They emerged, collected manhorses, and left to cache themselves in nearby shade, which was a couple of hours' walk onward. They carried great water-skins and some dried meat (seasoning, he reflected, would not be a problem.)

They looked back after a rest stop.

"Are you ready to loan these beasts out for a while?"

"Why?" Root was salving and washing the wound of a mine-slave while the man bit his lip to keep from screaming.

"Too heavy. We can't sail any distance with them, and they can't run as fast as this thing can sail. They can carry water, the wounded, or food. Lend them to your fellow god-worshippers, and

recover them in Alegan.”

“I can...do that. I guess.”

“Second. Are you ready to run this thing as fast as eye has ever seen? Because if we can do that, we can raise a lot of dust, and give the slaves cover to bolt. I can't think of another way to cover them, and without cover -“ He shrugged and his hand swept over the burning flat whiteness.

“Yeah. Not a thoruth's chance. I'll go along with you, and why are you doing this again?”

“Because we must!” Red told him. “We have the salt-sailor working for us, we have the work of the gods ahead of us, and it is what you wanted to do.” He glanced at the sky. “The day is coming to an end. This part of our work is done. Let us rest with satisfaction of a job well-done!”

There was room, in shade, to lie a while on hard crunching salt; there was room to rest and shut eyes. They drank water and napped; when Root got up to piss, he roused his partner as well.

“That noise and smoke mean one thing. Battle.”

“Battle they planned. I wish'em luck.”

“We have to go back there, you know.”

“We have to what?”

“We need to go back and help them,” the doctor-moonslighting-as-a-savior said, slowly. Red frowned. Was this messiah thing going to his head? Root could die of an arrow or spear, readily, and redly as man ever did. The Sun Goddess wouldn't save him.

The Sun was just a great fire round which spun Butros, and the world also. The Sun wasn't a magic being who would save them.

He could not argue with these people. Even if he trusted himself to convert them (and he didn't) there wasn't time.

There wasn't room.

“Then we do,” he replied. “Onward.”

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