

THE SLEEPS



THE ISLAND OF SLAVES

Colbby

The Sleeps

Book 3

Island of Slaves Series

By

Colbby



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Chapter 1

Fever

Ast introduce some of his relatives who were visiting his villa. It appeared that it was the custom to visit at least every two or three years and have a short holiday. Ulo said it was time that they too went on a visit to some of her relatives who lived far inland on a farm in the wilderness. Ulo wanted to show off her man and her young son and catch up with all the family gossip and happenings. Ast agreed and said as the work at the shipyard wasn't urgent he should take time off and go.

It was only two years since Jay had crash landed onto the planet after an accident in space. He had been enslaved won his freedom and met his wife Ulo and rescued both Ulo and Ast and returned to Allo his adopted land. He had either been away on a mission or working for Ast in his shipyard and a break was just what he needed.

A week later Jay had bought a little boat and loaded it with food and blankets for the trip to Ulo's relatives. It had a single sail and a tiny cabin large enough for two. They set sail hugging the coast heading for a large river delta where they would travel up the river as the easiest way of going inland.

The delta was about two kilometres across with lots of little rivulets flowing to the sea.

On the furthest most banks were a couple of large wooden sheds and a small quay. Jay moored the boat and enquired of a man where he could obtain fresh water. He was shown a well and started to fill a bucket to take back to the boat.

A small sailing ship was tied up at the quay and its goods were being transferred to a barge to be taken up river. The bargee before starting out made an offering to a river-god, the tutelary divinity of the river, and then cast off heading up stream. Jay finished filling the water container and decided to have a meal before continuing their journey. The quay had a small hostelry that served homemade broth that was both tasty and cheap and gave them a chance to stretch their legs away from the confines of the boat. After eating they set out up the river leaving the mud banks far behind. The river narrowed until it was around a hundred metres wide when the clouds started to gather and the rain made the visibility poor. Ulo retreated to the cabin as Jay pulled a sheet of canvas like material over the tiller and tried steering with just his head sticking out.

A drop of rain falling from a leaf high in the tree landed upon Jay's right ear. He shook the water from his head and listened. All he could hear was the sound of raindrops, and the soft gentle tinkle of running water as the forest emerged from the downpour.

Above Jay in the tree, his wife was holding their son who appeared to be enjoying the adventure not realising the danger they were in. Ulo smiled as the young lad tried to catch another falling raindrop from high in the canopy of leaves. Jay decided to risk climbing down from his perch to the forest floor. At the first sound or movement he was ready to jump to the first branches of their chosen tree.

The backpack of food was leaning where it had been dumped at the bole of the tree trunk. It had been too heavy for them to climb swiftly with its weight.

Jay hit the ground and at once was surrounded by a swarm of biting insects. He slapped the top of his bare leg as one bit, gave a scratch and peered all around looking for any sign of danger. As he watched his hand was feeling inside the pack for the long knife. With his dagger and the knife he could now offer a fight if the animals attacked. A shaft of sunlight pierced the leaves and the insects

flew in and out of its beam. He placed the weapons on the ground and gave a quick clap of his hands; it brought no response either from the insects or the animal pack. He retrieved his weapons and then moved off in a circle to make sure it really was clear before bringing his family down.

The northwest of the country was mainly forest and swamp with no roads but waterways leading inland. After sailing for a day a heavy storm had struck. The rain was very heavy and the river rose. The current was becoming stronger and Jay had to tack to get the boat make any headway at all. Suddenly the river split into two.

“Which Way?” Jay turned to Ulo for an answer.

“I’m not sure,” said Ulo as she looked at the two channels. “They both look the same. Which do you think is the main channel?” Jay wasn’t sure either. The left fork seemed just a fraction wider.

“We’ll take the left and if it’s wrong we can turn around. The most we can do is to lose a few hours and we’ve plenty of food.”

The river current eased as the rain stopped. In a tropical storm it could rise very swiftly and then drop just as fast.

The sun shone and the sailing was pleasant with the wet trees along the bank and birds singing once more. They ate some food and then sat back with the tiller between them making steady progress up the river.

After some hours they passed a boat long ago abandoned on a mud flat. It was larger than their boat and had a large hold with a cabin at the stern. The sun had bleached its planks dry and white and the seams had opened. The craft would never sail again.

As it grew dark Jay felt the craft give a little shudder. A moment later it shuddered again and then ground to a halt.

“We’re on a mud flat.” Jay spoke over his shoulder as he grabbed an oar to push the boat off and into the main stream. Ulo also helped but even together and straining with all their might the craft held.

“We’ll have to stop here for the night and start again when we can see what we’re doing,” said Jay.

It had become quite dark. Ulo agreed and pulled the sheet over the tiny stern area to give a little cover for the night. In the morning she awoke first and looked out. The river was gone! Ulo shook Jay awake.

“I think we chose the wrong fork, the river is dry.” The boat was stranded on a sandbank with no water around. The river had become a small trickle with no hope of the craft being re-floated; there wasn’t enough water for it to float upon. Jay took off his sandals and stepped out onto the sandbank.

His feet barely left a mark showing him that the bank spent most of the time out of the water and would only be covered in a flash flood. Now he knew what had happened to the other boat. It too had taken the wrong turning at the fork and had become beached as the river dropped.

After climbing back aboard he gathered all the food into his pack, and as Ulo picked up their son, stepped out onto the sand.

“Let’s try to cut over to the other river and see if we can get a lift on any passing boats.” said Jay as he pulled the backpack of food onto his shoulder. He knew it was a long shot but better than nothing and their boat was of no use until a heavy rain when it might be washed back down the river. They forded the rest of the water now less than a foot deep. Jay put his sandals back on his feet before stepping out into the forest. By heading into the sun he knew they would arrive at the river sooner or later. The trees were very like the trees back on Earth with trunks supporting branches and not as the Black trees that grew straight and then hardened into wood. Above their heads was a canopy of leaves that gave cover to various kinds of birds and insects.

The forest was hot and steamy as the rain dried. Soon the sweat was trickling down their backs as it was like walking in a sauna bath. At midday a small fire was lit with a few dry twigs to give a hot meal, and then it was back on the march again.

Towards evening a snarling sound could be heard coming from behind them. Jay had thoughts of being attacked by an animal with sharp claws and teeth and not much in the way of weapons to defend his family. He took his son from Ulo and both ran. They crossed a clearing and glanced back. A pack of animals burst from the trees. They were like wild boars with huge tusks and jaws equipped with many rows of teeth, and they were heading straight for them. Jay knew they would soon catch them and shouted to Ulo to climb a tree. Ulo climbed into the low branches helped by Jay. He passed up their son and followed as the pack of animals neared.

“Let’s hope they can’t climb,” said Jay as he threw off his pack and joined Ulo. The leader of the pack reached the tree and with a snarl jumped up to snap at Jay. It fell back and tried again with its jaws open showing two rows of large teeth. The pack joined in but Jay could see that they had hooves and not claws on the feet, and wouldn’t be able to climb. He felt safe for the time being until it was time to descend.

After two hours the animal pack left but then it started to rain again, and the noise drowned out any sound of the animals. Jay decided to remain up the tree for a little while longer even though they were getting soaked.

The rain finally ceased and he descended very cautiously. His one-piece tunic was wet and uncomfortable but to take it off would be an open invitation to the flying insects. Again he clapped his hands to see if the pack responded. When it didn’t he helped Ulo down, picked up his backpack and left still heading for the river.

Two hours later they reached it and set up camp on the bank to wait for a boat. When it grew dark they retreated up a tree where Jay had built a small platform. At least it would help in defence just in case of any further attack and although they heard sounds of animals nothing disturbed them.

In the morning Jay climbed down and a fire was lit using flints. After cooking a meal, green leaves were added to the fire to make signal smoke and then they waited.

The next morning they were still waiting until a barge came up the river and gave them passage. One hour later it passed through the middle of the swamp that drained a huge part of the country. The holds were full of cargo and all the crew and Jay’s family had to remain on the deck fending off the insects that flew in swarms from the muddy waters. On the far side of the swamp the barge entered the river once more. Now the banks were green fields and little log cabins began to appear. At noon they docked at a wharf and set off to find Ulo’s relations.

One week later the visit was over and they were back on the barge heading for home. Jay’s son complained of being hot and tired as they arrived at their villa by the little port. Ulo put it down to the long journey and the heat. The next day when the boy wasn’t any better Ulo sent for the surgeon. The surgeon thought the lad had picked up something from the swamp but he didn’t know what. After leaving some medicine he left.

Jay entered the room and laid his young son on the bed. Ulo his wife waited anxiously for the Regal’s surgeons to come and examine him. It had been nearly two weeks ago that the strange sickness had put their son into a deep sleep, and nothing they did seemed to help, nor had any of the Allo doctors from Jay’s adopted country any idea of what the illness was or how to cure it.

Jay had been down at the boatyard with Ast his friend and partner working on a new design of craft for Prince Baad, one of the four Princes who were formerly raiding for slaves but had now turned to trade. Their vessels were fast raiders and were not suitable for carrying cargo and Jay and Ast had won a commission to build a new type of ship, helped with the knowledge of Jay’s Earth experience.

A servant had brought the message of the boy lapsing into a coma and Jay and Ast had rushed back to the villa to await the doctor. When the doctor arrived they were shocked to hear of his opinion.

“There’s no cure and in a year or so the lad will die.”

“We’ll have to take him to Mordia,” said Ast.

“The Regal’s surgeons are far in advance from ours and if anyone knows what’s wrong with him they will have the answer.” It was Ast who made the suggestion. Since Jay’s arrival from Earth he had come to look upon Jay as a brother and therefore the lad was like his nephew.

“I’ll go and make the arrangements.” He departed from the villa without waiting for a reply. Ulo was stroking her son’s brow and Jay looked on knowing there was nothing to be done and feeling very helpless. Ast called at his villa and told his wife Santi the bad news. She began to make preparations for the journey as Ast called to his men to ready the fishing boat for sea.

A heavy swell on a hot sultry day didn’t make the trip any more pleasant as the boat sailed on its way to Mordia.

It would take a week to get to the Princes Island and then another week to reach the capital a City called Taal. A bed was constructed in the hold for the boy and Ulo but Jay and the crew would have to sleep on the open deck.

Throughout the journey Ulo fed her son with a feeding tube but that was all she could do as the only medicine the doctor had given her were salves to rub into the skin to prevent bedsores.

They reached the island and docked in the harbour and took the road to the palace to see the Commander of the Guard a man called Taki. He was of the Mordian race. The Mordians with their grey skin and yellow eyes looked to Jay like grey wolves. Prince Baad made them feel welcome but spoilt it by enquiring how his boat was progressing as he waddled over. He was running out of slaves for sale. Although he no longer raided an arrangement had been made with the ruling council of the Allo to allow men who had been convicted and sentenced to death to choose to be sold to the Mordians. The Prince could therefore trade in goods or be the sole agent for Allo slaves, an arrangement that suited him well.

Taki, short for Takulazanti, said he too would accompany the party to the capital as he and his wife were going to the mainland to visit her parents.

Taki was Jay’s driver in the Regal cup races when Jay was enslaved after his escape from a crashing space shuttle and landing upon a strange new world.

Through their adventures together they had become firm friends and Jay had won his freedom.

The Prince had furnished supplies now he knew the design for his new boat would not be slowed in any way, and the enlarged party sailed with a following wind that cooled the hot steaming hold a little. On the sixth day a Blackship pulled up alongside the fishing boat. It would seem Prince Baad had sailed earlier than planned and would beat them into port by an hour or two. The boat turned into the river leading to the capital with the Blackship now ahead and pulling further away. When they docked at the little port the Blackship was unloading. This was as far as they could go because of rapids further up the river and it would be a trip of two days to reach Taal the capital of Mordia.

Jay watched as the slaves were led down the gangplank of the Blackship. He had little sympathy for them, as they were all convicted killers and bandits preying on innocent travellers. Some would find life as a slave very comfortable if a good master bought them, and it was more than they deserved. All the slaves wore neck chains. Prince Baad wasn’t taking any chances, as they were all fit and lean having just spent six months working in the Prince’s quarry. They were slowly building a causeway to the mainland.

Next off the ship were the menhorses. These were the worse criminals of all and the only option they had was to be surgically made to look like horses. They were given a fur coat by using a plant that grew under the skin and sent up hairs to form the coat, but would ultimately be the cause of their death in around twenty years’ time.

Prince Baad himself waddled down the gangplank and onto the quay. He climbed aboard a carriage that had just arrived, his large girth making the carriage sway as he placed his weight upon the step.

Taki had in the meantime managed to organise two carts of his own, and had made a bed for Jay's son. They set off following the menhorses to the capital.

The day was sunny and warm as they travelled the now familiar route between small white houses and a few larger villas. There were forests of the black wooded trees that were used for ships and the leaves for medicine. A few waved at Jay having recognised him as the Regal Cup Champion and the only one to have won three times in the history of the race. On any other occasion Jay would have enjoyed the trip but his mind was on his son lying in the bottom of the cart and on what the doctors may say.

A coaching inn served as a half way house. This time Jay could use a room in the building instead of being chained outside as a slave. The Prince had taken the top floor for his party but two rooms were found and good wholesome meals prepared. It was the first time the inn had entertained anyone from the Allo race, at least on the inside of the inn. Taki as the Prince's Commander would have a room upstairs although he'd rather had been with his friends.

The night passed slowly. Jay couldn't sleep. He went down into the courtyard to find some cooler air. The slaves still held in their neck chains were stretched out on the ground with just a blanket. Some were still awake and began to have a conversation with Jay as he wandered by. They probably thought he was one of the Princes' slaves as he still wore his slave collar and ear bars. The bars were riveted into Jay's ears and had little rings at the end; these were used to attach reins when he raced. The slaves were a little fearful of what may happen to them at the auction house. Jay had been auctioned himself and told them what took place as his attitude towards them had now softened a little. At least when you're a slave the only thing to worry about was getting your food and a bed at night and not being beaten. If only that was all he'd have to care about then life would be simple. The walk helped him a little and when he returned to bed he managed to sleep until morning. After breakfast the convoy set off once again. The pace was slowed to avoid shaking up the boy on his bed. Prince Baad went on ahead, still picking a piece of meat from a bone, and drinking wine in spite of the movement of his transport. Early afternoon they entered the outskirts of Taal and the slave party took a separate road to the auction house. Now the entire road was paved and progress was much faster. They reached the citadel of the Ruler of Mordia; a man called the Lord Regal.

Servants attended to their needs when they arrived. The Prince must have warned of their imminent arrival. They were led to a suite of rooms as Somi, Taki's wife was the Regal's niece and therefore of great importance. Taki told the servant to take a message to the chief surgeon to ask if he would attend him. A few minutes later a young man appeared wearing the white tunic with a red stripe of the House of Surgeons. He greeted the party as though he knew them although Taki didn't know him. Then Taki suddenly realised that this man was the former chief surgeon he knew as an old man, and he too like the Lord Regal had had a brain transplant. He was an old man in a young man's body. Taki couldn't help staring. The youth appeared to be around eighteen or nineteen and of perfect build with keen bright eyes, in fact a picture of youth and health. The boy smiled and addressed the party.

"You like my new appearance, then?"

"The last time I saw you were at the party on winning the Regal's Cup. You must have been about 70 years old." Taki remarked.

"I was 72 at that time, I'm now eighteen."

Jay now realised who Taki was talking to.

He had once been examined as a possible donor for the Regal's brain transplant, and this was one of the men who examined him. He wondered where they had obtained the young bodies to have their brains transplanted.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“It’s Jay’s son,” replied Taki.

“Ah, the Allo.” The surgeon’s young eyes cast a glance over Jay’s young body with its powerful physique. Jay felt a little uneasy at the stare.

“Let’s have a look at the boy.” He summoned a servant and ordered him to take Jay’s son to the surgeon’s room for tests. As the boy was taken out the Regal himself entered the room to greet his niece and Taki, and enquired what was wrong. When told he took the party to the banqueting hall for a meal and rest saying the lad was in the best medical hands there was in the land and he should know. Jay looked at the young Adonis that had been an old man only a year before, and had to agree the doctors were very advanced in some ways, as even on the space ship The ARK they couldn’t transplant the brain.

They were led to the great hall and given an excellent meal but neither he nor Ulo had any appetite and, as soon as good manners would allow, they excused themselves and returned to their room to await the result of the surgeon’s tests. The next morning after eating they were taken to a remote part of the citadel to a room resembling a hospital ward where they found the Regal along with the Chief Surgeon were standing alongside a row of beds. In each of the beds lay a young child ranging in age from a baby up to a teenager. The chief surgeon addressed Jay.

“We know what is wrong with your son. He has an illness we know as The Sleeps. It is an infection that reduces the brain function to the absolute minimum to sustain life, at least for a while, and then gradually even that fades and the patient dies. All in this ward have been infected. Some have been in here for nearly two years. The most we can do for the moment is prolong their life until we get back the cure.”

“Get back the cure?” asked Jay. “Then there is a cure?”

“There was.” The Regal interrupted. “Let me explain. Three years ago a man was picked up half dead. He said he’d some important medicine for the surgeons and that it would cure The Sleeps. He had with him a small vial filled with a yellow liquid that came from a country over the great mountains, a country we know nothing about. Before he could tell us any more he died. The vial was brought and the liquid was tested. It worked. We tried it out on all our patients and all made a full recovery. Unfortunately when we tried to analyse the liquid we found an unknown ingredient and we couldn’t reproduce it. Now the liquid is finished and we no longer can cure The Sleeps.”

“Why can’t you get any more from the country from where it came from?” asked Jay.

“We have tried. An expedition was sent but it never returned. Soldiers were despatched and they too disappeared. Another expedition set out to look for the first two and *they* have not been heard of since. It would seem as though the people in that far country are very hostile to any strangers.”

Jay fell silent. Ulo was in tears. She looked at the row of beds and the pathetic bodies of the children and thought of her only son ending his days in the same way. She took hold of Jay’s hand, looked up through her tears and said;

“We must get the medicine whatever it takes.”

Jay squeezed her hand.

“I’ll go.”

“You’ll be killed. They kill everyone,” said the Regal.

“Maybe they will only kill if they see me as a threat,” replied Jay. “Remember how Taki and I went to the rescue of Somi your niece. We went as two slaves and all the soldiers were killed but, as we were of no importance we were spared.” Jay was referring to a rescue mission into the hostile tribal territory of the Zoti where during a raid on a Mordia village Somi was taken captive.

“You think if you went as a run-a-way slave again you might get through?” The Regal appeared to be thinking about it but Jay knew he would go whether the Regal liked it or not as it was his son’s only chance. Somi took Jays hand.

“Taki will go with you.”

Taki was hoping he could go but dared not risk asking Somi because he knew it would be a long separation and very dangerous, but the thought of being out with Jay and going into danger made his pulse race. He seemed to come alive with Jay instead of the usual boring round of setting the guard back at the Princes Island.

“It may be worth a try, how would you do it?” The Regal had now come round to thinking the plan could just work.

“We’d travel south and cross into Zoti territory to meet Tillute the Zotian, the one who has Markel the magician. He owes us a favour and we will ask him for a guide for as far as he can go into the unknown land. After that I just don’t know. We would need a letter for the General to get fresh supplies and any information he has of where the man had been when he brought the vial of medicine. Also if we could take a few paralysis vials with us they may come in useful as a last resort. These vials when broken under a person’s nose rendered him paralysed for up to thirty minutes.

“See to it,” the Regal told one of his aides. “Oh, and you better not take that with you.”

He pointed to the Regal’s medallion that was hanging from the slave collar that Jay wore. It was a sign that Jay was under the Regal’s personnel protection while in Mordia but would be soon noticed by anyone in a strange land that Jay was not an ordinary slave. Jay took it off and handed it to the Regal.

“I have one last favour to ask of you. Can you look after my boy while I’m away? He’ll be better taken care of here under the Chief Surgeon until I return.”

“Of course, Ulo can be my guest at the Palace and remain as long as she wants. There’s a supply train starting south tomorrow, I’ll see to it that you can travel with that.” He turned and was gone leaving the group alone in the ward.

Early the next day Jay and Taki said their goodbyes and joined the supply train. Prince Baad was there. Taki thought it odd the Prince was up this early but then saw the robe he was wearing. It appeared that the Prince had been out all night at a party and had only just arrived back just in time to see them off.

The Captain in charge of the train approached. He looked at Jay, an Allo and ordered him to be chained to the rear of the cart as was usual with slaves. Taki told him Jay was a freeman and was on a mission for the Regal. The Captain wasn’t going to get on the wrong side of the Regal and offered Jay a seat on the lead wagon away from any dust.

Jay smiled but declined. For the moment he would walk. Taki threw his bundle with his cloak and the letter onto the cart and walked with Jay as the train set off, making its way out of the capital and onto the road leading to the south. The vials had been sewn into the hem of the black slave skirt. This was a very short skirt to be worn as a loincloth, and was all slaves wore if they were good looking, as their owners like to show them off. As a slave would not be searched if captured it was a good place to hide the vials.

Now as they marched Jay stripped off the rough tunic leaving just the short skirt. Taki wished he could do likewise but this near the capital and in the company of the soldiers it was not wise. He walked beside Jay and sweated with all the other men in their heavy tunics and carrying weapons. His slave tunic and skirt had been packed away with the letter. His skirt also had vials stitched into the hem but he’d wait a couple of days before wearing it.

Ast and Ulo set off back to the little port and their fishing boat. Prince Baad had offered to re-supply them back at the island for the return journey home. Ulo would close the villa and leave just a couple of servants as caretakers, then take the fishing boat down the coast to her mothers and stay there until Jay returned.

The Prince overtook them on the way back and was waiting as they docked. Another of the Blackships had also just docked and was discharging the latest slaves from Allo. The slaves didn’t have chains but instead a helmet had been placed over their head. These helmets lacked eyeholes and

locked on making the wearer completely blind and helpless. They would be led to the quarry and there be given a slave collar that would explode in a yellow powder if they tried to escape. This powder would instantly kill them.

The Prince led Ast and Ulo into the palace to rest. What he really wanted was a quick sketch of his new vessel. Ast had made a drawing with the approximate sizes and dimensions for the Prince. He knew the Prince would want to see it. The new vessel would be three times the size of any other ship and would sail as fast as the Blackships if not faster. It had three separate decks and the masts doubled as derricks for loading the huge holds. The Prince beamed. He would have the largest ship, at least him and the other Princes on the island.

“We’ve called her the Titanic, it means very big. Jay thought of the name but you can change it if you prefer something else.”

The Prince wanted to call it The Prince Baad but the other Princes disagreed.

“No, I like the name, the Titanic it will be.”

Jay had told Ast of the fate of the real ship back on earth and they both had a good laugh at the prince’s expense.

“Let’s hope this one doesn’t sink”

Later all the Princes gathered together to view the drawing and approve the name. They all agreed it was a good name and were impressed by the proposed size of the vessel.

“It will have to be large to carry all the trade goods between our two countries. The first of Allo wines had been unloaded and the Princes were sampling the wine and admiring the first of the new ceramics.

“When the rest of Mordia see these you’ll need a fleet of ship to cope with the demand,” said Ast.

“At such an expense for one ship it had better earn its keep or we’ll be bankrupt.”

“You saw for yourself our new warship the Argo and how well that sails.” Prince Baad had seen the Argo and knew it was a formidable ship, one that they could not match. The Titanic had to succeed, as there was no alternative. Later Ast would build more ships for himself and Jay, but for now he’d have to be content with building for the Princes.

Four Surgeons entered the room dressed in their white tunics with the red stripe. These were the first of the exchange Surgeons going to Allo to teach and pass on their skills to the Allo doctors. Ast was asked if he could take them in the fishing boat, as the next sailing of the Blackship wouldn’t be for two weeks. Ast agreed and orders were given to take their trunks down to the quay. In the morning Ast supervised the loading and quarters were found by partitioning the hold.

When they were ready the boat sailed, as they were not dependent on the tide. Ast hoped the surgeons were good sailors as it was the first time they had been to sea.

One week later Ulo was back at home closing up the villa. Ast provisioned the fishing boat and loaned the crew. Ulo set off to her mother’s farmhouse to give her the bad news and stay until Jay’s return hopefully in about a year.

Chapter 2

Koda's Fortress

A gentle cooling breeze blew into the camp. Taki could at last take off his heavy tunic. The Captain had set the guard and everything was quiet. Jay had walked most of the anger out and now was more like his old self. They drank wine supplied by the Captain and talked by the fire after a good meal.

“Have you any idea what we've got ourselves into?” asked Taki.

“No, but I know I don't have any other choice. Anyway if it can be done then I have the best companion with me to do it. You don't have to come; I can't guarantee that we will get back.”

“What! I'd have given my right arm to come.”

“You may have to before we get back,” replied Jay. They suddenly saw the funny side and laughed aloud. The Captain listened to the laughter and wondered what it was about.

A low mist hung over the campsite as the day dawned. It promised to be another hot sticky day for any travellers. Jay once more stripped off his tunic and threw it onto the cart. Taki wished he could follow but would have to wait awhile. The train started out one hour later, and reached the first of the little forts in the afternoon. One of the wagons would be left here along with two soldiers as replacements.

This was the pattern of the supply train. They were dropping off supplies and a few men at each of the small garrisons, until they would come to the main garrison in the far south and meet once more with the General.

The second fort was one where Taki and Jay had raced and they were recognised. They begged for a display with the racing cart, a cross between a rickshaw and a buggy. It hadn't any springs or a hood but just two wheels and seat and light shafts for the man pulling. The 'horse' wore a helmet similar to the slave helmets. With the visor locked he was blind and had to rely upon the driver for both speed and direction by means of a light whip and the reins attached to the earbars. As there wasn't a cart with the supply train and the fort only had one it was impossible to have a race, but Taki and Jay gave a demonstration although it was some months since they had last raced. The next morning they were back on the trail again but this time Taki too stripped off his tunic and along with Jay wore the slave skirt. He explained to the men they would be going as two run-a-way slaves and he had to get use to dressing as one. There was no point in keeping their mission a secret, as no one would be having any contact with the country over the mountains. Taki had worn the skirt before and soon felt comfortable being unclothed as he watched the soldiers sweating under their armour, then it rained. Now the soldiers boots kept their feet nice and dry whilst Taki and Jay had only slave sandals made of a resin sole tied on with rope, and now they were at a disadvantage having cold wet feet. Taki thought about his boots in the wagon but could lose face by using them, so he sloshed through the rain just as a real slave having no choice of what he could wear.

The rain made the track very muddy and the carts bogged down too easily. When that happened it was a case of everyone had to help pull them out no matter what rank they held, and soon everyone was covered in mud and wet through.

They camped early that day having exhausted themselves with the carts. There wasn't any dry ground to camp upon and soon all their sheets and blankets were wet. It was a case making the best you can to try to sleep until the sun came out again.

After a miserable night of cold and damp the morning brought a clear day with bright sunshine. The Captain delayed departure of the train to allow the drying out of clothing and blankets. The hot

sun would also dry the trail making progress much faster and making up the lost time would be easy. Taki and Jay gave a hand spreading blankets and reloading the carts just as slaves would. Taki started to enjoy the freedom of not having the responsibility for the well being of the men, and could relax feeling the warm sun upon his back. Jay too was now his old self and although not forgetting about his son's illness, he could put it to the back of his mind.

An early meal at lunch time and they were on the move again. The train had been moving for about an hour when a scout returned to report a bridge over a stream had washed away. The Army were responsible for the tracks throughout Mordia therefore the captain ordered a section of men to go ahead and make a start on repairs. Jay and Taki went along with them armed with axes and saws.

It would give them something to do and was better than just helping if the heavy carts became bogged down.

They arrived at the stream. It was only narrow but deep. Two logs with rough-hewn planks laid across formed the bridge and one of the logs had fallen and splintered. Taki selected a suitable tree and started to chop it down. When it was felled the men would saw it in half and lay it over the gap. The section leader planted a new seed to replace the tree as it was an offence not to. The tree would be fully-grown in just one year. Jay helped with the planks and soon the bridge was finished just in time for the train to cross over. Soon afterwards they arrived at the third of the little forts on their route to drop off supplies.

Day after day the column followed the same routine until the countryside began to change. From forests of tall black trees the land became more scrub like with occasional forests. Small villages clung to the banks of the rivers and the vast interior was mostly deserted. One reason was the scourge weed, which grew so fast. This was the plant whose purple flowers shot out the tiny hairs that grew into a coat. It would also grow on a man as well as an animal so people stayed well clear.

Soon both Jay and Taki recognised the area. They were near the largest garrison in the south where the General had his headquarters and the local Magistrate's court was held. This was the place Markel's men had attacked. (See Island of Slaves The Mind Thief) Taki changed back into his commander's uniform to enter the garrison but Jay didn't bother with his tunic. Some of the soldiers remembered him as soon as they entered and as at the first fort, hoped he had come to give a display with the racing cart as he had the last time he was here.

The General greeted them warmly. Taki told of their quest into the unknown land and asked for the General's help, giving him the Regal's letter.

"I'll make the arrangements, when are you going?"

"In the morning," then he told of Jay's son lying ill in the capital.

"First I need a slave collar to look like a run-a-way, and then some more of this excellent wine as it will probably be the last we get for some time."

"Done," said the General and called his aide.

"Take the Commander and put a collar on him. He's going to pretend he's a run-a way." The aide now realised the reason for the collar and asked Taki to follow him across to the blacksmith.

"Please take off your tunic." Taki took it off and knelt down over the anvil placing his neck in a half circle of metal. A second half was placed over the first and then the two halves were sealed together with hot metal.

Word soon spread that they were going south to look for the lost expedition and some asked them to look for their friends who had gone before and never returned. Taki said he would but he knew it would be a very long shot to find them alive. The men were a little disappointed Jay wasn't giving a display but Taki said they needed to rest for the long journey ahead.

That night the General gave a dinner for them in his quarters before they retired for the night. In the morning they made two parcels of the supplies the General had provided, and left the fort on the way to the land of the Zoti to see Koda at his fortress on the volcanic mount of Mt Orr, and Tillute on his farm.

This far south it was peaceful, as only in the north were there border disputes. Just the same Taki wondered if he'd done the right thing leaving his sword behind, as there were still bandits around. He reasoned no one would attack slaves as they'd nothing worth stealing and would only be worth any money if there were a reward for them, so he left it behind. He put on the slave tunic of rough grey cloth, picked up his bundle, and after saying his goodbyes strode out of the gates.

They decided to avoid the small hamlet and the inn to avoid any questions by by-passing the inn taking the road leading to Mt Orr, an active volcano. Soon all sign of civilisation had been left behind as the road gave out to a track between the trees. Camp was made at night in a small clearing amongst the trees.

In the morning after breakfast they set out again. After two hours a small stream blocked their path.

This was the border of the Mordia. They crossed the stream and were soon deep into Zotian territory. In the distance a plume of lazily curling smoke could be seen. This was their second destination, the volcano of Mt Orr. Only one road led to the mount and this was rarely used but they had been here before when chasing Markel the magician. It was the road used by Markel to escape. They travelled on and reached the grave of Fela.

Taki had beheaded her after Markel had infected her with burrow beetles. These were beetles that could live for months without eating. They were placed in a collar with compartments separated by a membrane from the wearer's neck. The membrane had to be changed every day or else the beetles could get through and sting the wearer injecting its eggs that turned into tiny maggots and burrowed deep into the victims neck eating and growing larger until they killed. The collar had a combination lock that only the person who put the collar on knew; therefore the victim had to obey or else.

The track turned to scree and loose rock. A fast running stream blocked the way. Taki knew there was a wooden bridge further up, but at the moment they turned away and took the road down the track seeking Tillute's farm, reaching it a day later. Tillute was overjoyed at seeing his friends and had a huge meal prepared making their rations in the backpacks unnecessary. They talked late into the night as Tillute demanded to know all the latest news and also of their mission. After listening to Taki he said he didn't know of the land to the south as the furthest he had been was to Koda's fortress. He could offer to supply men but his offer was declined. The next day the journey resumed, but first they visited the wheel by the stream.

When the wheel turned it lowered buckets into the stream by the means of simple gearing. These irrigated Tillute's farm. Markel in his flight had chosen Prince Baad's island to escape to, but had been captured trying to flee disguised as a slave. Instead of putting him to death they had sent him to the surgeons and altered him to be a horse, and then they gave him a fur coat from scourge weed and gave him to Tillute to take him back to his Lord whose castle the Naked Men had attacked. Now Tillute had taken his revenge. His faithful horse had been freed from its duty at the wheel and now Markel would spend the rest of his days drawing water, going round and round in circles at the wheel.

Taki and Jay walked over to him just before they left. He looked like a little Shetland pony thought Jay. If Markel recognised them he gave no sign. It was a fitting end to one who had caused so many deaths.

They said farewell to Tillute and continued to Koda's fortress. A day later and the little bridge were reached once more. They crossed and now could see the fortress in the distance. The way led between old lava runs forming a natural track right up to the fortress, showing that in the distant past the volcano had erupted quite violently. The road then led through fields with grazing cattle, huge beasts with tusks instead of horns, and ending at a flight of steps with a very steep gorge at either side making a perfect defence.

Jay led the way up the steps to the great iron door guarded by a sentry. The sentry was one not known by Jay. All he saw was a slave asking for the master of the fortress, very unusual, so unusual he called for the Sergeant who told Jay to wait.

The Sergeant reported to Koda that an Allo slave was outside asking to see him. Lea, Koda's young daughter dashed to the doorway to look down to the steps, gave a whoop and dashed down jumping upon Jay with her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him giving him great big kisses.

"Steady on!" Jay managed to say when he could get his breath. Just then Koda along with his three sons rescued him and along with Taki, escorted them into the great hall firing questions at them all the way. The story had to be repeated once again telling how they had to get the medicine for Jay's son.

"I know the way to the great mountains," said Koda, "but I've never heard of anyone finding a path over them, or why anyone should want to go over them. Are you sure that the man really did cross them?"

"He said the medicine had come from the land to the south of the great mountains so there must be a way over or he couldn't have returned."

"What about ships?"

"The only ships sailing anywhere near would be the Regal's ships and he hadn't sent any and that only left a land route."

"The mountains end at the sea in sheer cliffs so he couldn't have gone that way, and the land is barren with only scourge weed and rock all the way to the foothills. Still if you want to try, one of my sons will guide you, but please stay for a couple of days before you go as we get so few visitors." Jay and Taki agreed to stay, as they needed a guide. Another great feast was prepared.

"And to think, the General said it would be the last good meal we'd get when we left him. If this goes on I'll be as fat as a pig." Jay said wiping the grease from his lips.

"What's a pig?" asked Taki

Jay had forgotten for a moment where he was.

They were given rooms in which to rest. Jay had Fela's old room with its hot bath. All the rooms in the fortress were heated by means of vents directing the hot air from the volcano. A small stream coming from near the summit gave ample hot water for all. It was the ideal place as long as the mount remained dormant. Jay climbed into the bath very tenderly as he remembered how hot the water was. He gingerly lowered himself and then luxuriated in the warmth letting it soak into his body.

Then he dried himself and wrapped in a robe climbed into the soft warm bed falling fast asleep.

He awoke early the next morning and after bathing went out to find little Lea, Koda's young daughter waiting to take him down to breakfast.

They spent the time resting and discussing with Koda and his sons the best route to take. Two separate tracks ran in the direction they wanted to go but both were only animal tracks and Koda knew neither led to a way across the mountains.

"We'll take the most direct and then go alongside the range until we find an opening." Taki had made up his mind.

"In that case you'll need more clothing as it will be cold in the mountains, far too cold for just a tunic. Once you get over you can discard the extra until you need it to get back across, Ill find you something suitable." Koda gave an order to his sons who brought several items for both Taki and Jay to choose from.

Soon it was time to set off. It was still early in the morning as they started out taking the track to the bridge but instead of crossing they turned right and followed the stream as it flowed down the gorge. After an hour the party took a small track leading off into the scrub and gradually the volcano faded into the distance. When they stopped for a meal from Koda's fresh supplies the only thing they could see was a faint plume of smoke from Mt Orr.

Koda's son set a fast pace as he led the way. He followed animal tracks for most of the time where they ran in the direction leading to the mountains. The scrubland gave way to the desert with just a few clumps of bush and scourge weed trying to grow in the hot dry climate. The tracks had ended but Koda's son strode onward. The mountains ahead in the distance formed a 'W' with three peaks. Their guide told them to head straight for them and on the return journey look for the plume of smoke from the volcano. This was as far as he would take them. He wished them luck, turned and left. Jay and Taki picked up their packs and set out towards the three peaks. The ground became sandier and desert like in character. The guide hadn't mentioned anything about water or the lack of it; therefore they presumed there would be streams or water holes along the way. They were dressed in their short tunics but all the heavy clothing tied in bundles; lay heavy upon their backs in the hot sunshine as they strode over the uneven ground. Around them the land became pure desert with no trees to shade them or allow them to take a rest away from the burning rays of the sun.

Late afternoon the sound of running water could be heard. A small stream offered the chance of a cooling drink, they decided to make camp for the day as only an hour or two of daylight remained.

After a meal the heavy clothing was unwrapped as being in the desert Jay expected the temperature to drop and become cold. Taki gave a little shiver and he too reached for his bundle. The blankets were spread to make beds and the small fire they had made was banked up as they turned in.

During the night something in the darkness screamed waking the sleepers. Jay spotted a rabbit like creature but this one was a carnivore and had large fangs. He wondered what else was in the darkness hunting. The fire was again banked up using dried animal droppings that would burn for a long time, but he slept uneasily for the rest of the night. In the morning blood was found close to the camp but no sign of any carcass. Whatever had killed had taken away its kill.

The desert gave way to foothills with more greenery. Now they had to climb as the mountains loomed above them. These were not ordinary mountains but one continuous range of towering cliffs capped with snow, and looking far too high for two ill equipped men to climb. The track petered out. In both directions there were no openings or valleys.

"Which way do you think?" asked Taki.

Jay picked up a small flat pebble and spit on one side tossing it into the air.

"Wet side left, dry side right." It landed dry side up. They turned to the right following the base of the range and probing anything that looked as though it might lead to a passage to the other side, but to no avail. As darkness fell they had to admit defeat and they camped worn out from walking up and down the hills all day.

At midday the next day a valley opened. It was definitely a way through. After a quick meal and a rest the trail seemed easier and they strode out with a more purposeful stride. It led between two very large peaks of craggy cliffs and had small streams trickling into it. At night the valley still stretched before them in spite of eight hours walking. They decided to rest and make an early start tomorrow.

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