

LAIR OF GORGO



T H E I S L A N D O F S L A V E S

Colbby

Lair of Gorgo

Book 4

Island of Slaves Series

By

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Chapter 1

Landfall

On morning of the ninth day the little boat neared land. Jay was thoroughly fed up and longing to be ashore. On any other vessel there would be room to move around but this boat was too small.

A white sandy beach glistened as the morning sun rose. Behind the beach a fringe of trees waved gently in the light breeze. The sea was a clear blue with waves lapping the beach; it looked like paradise after being cooped up for the journey.

The boat ran onto the shore. Jay climbed out and then ran as fast as he could down the beach, giving his cramped muscles a brisk workout for a short stretch before returning to unload the food.

“Feel better now?” Taki enquired.

“Yes thank-you.”

Jay knew Taki was being a little sarcastic but chose to ignore him.

The food was packed into two bags and placed on the sand. They helped push the boat off the beach, as the boatman called out he would be back in a month. Soon the boat was a distant speck on the ocean on its way home to Hoy. Taki turned to Jay.

“What now? Do we walk inland or follow the beach, and if it’s the beach, which way?”

Jay looked left, and then right. As far as he could see the sand stretched in an unending ribbon of white in both directions. The trees behind the beach were dense. Jay picked up a flat stone and wet one side. He flipped it into the air and watched as it landed.

“Wet side inland, dry side the beach.” It landed dry side up. Once again he flipped the stone into the air.

“Wet side Left, dry side Right.” The stone landed dry side up.

“Right that settles it, but first we’ll have something to eat and not fish.”

During their trip the boatmen had supplemented their rations with catching fish, and Jay had eaten enough for the time being.

A fire was soon blazing away as Jay prepared some cereal to be warmed. Taki had gone into the trees a little way to set some traps, hoping to catch something before they set off on their walk but was disappointed and so used their rations. After eating both men stretched out on the warm sand and relaxed.

“Let’s take the rest of the day to get used to being on the land again,” said Taki.

“That’s alright by me,” replied Jay, who had thought of it but hadn’t mentioned it to Taki in case he wanted to start immediately. “I’ll be able to have a nice swim.”

Taki built a little shelter from some fallen twigs and covered it with leaves. After Jay returned from his swim they relaxed, listening to the waves and the occasional bird cry as they flew over the breakers. It was peaceful and warm, just like being on holiday back on Earth thought Jay.

It grew dark and Taki wandered off to check his traps. Two small animals had been caught, but one was almost eaten by another animal, and only a few bones remained.

Taki looked about a little nervously. Whatever had eaten the animal might still be around, and he had only his small dagger as protection. He freed the snare, collected the good animal and made his way back to the fire and safety. That night they ate well but banked up the fire a little higher than they ought, and as a result spent the night sweating from the heat. Morning came without any disturbance. Both men washed in the sea before packing the food into the bags, ready for the march to try to find a village or city.

They ate, and then picked up the bags and set off walking following the coastline hoping to come across a fishing village and civilisation.

The sun was high in the sky when, after four hours walking, it was decided to rest. A shady spot at the edge of the trees gave sufficient cover from the burning rays.

Within a short time the clouds had rolled in and it started to rain. They took shelter but as the rain became heavy, both were soaked to the skin and, as the rain didn't look as if it was going to stop or abate, they might as well continue to walk, as they couldn't get wetter than they were at the moment. After another two hours with the rain still pouring down, a river estuary blocked their way. The river was shallow, with mud banks that looked too soft to cross safely, forcing them to turn and follow the river inland. The trees grew down to the river's bank and it didn't look as though any person had been along that way for a very long time. Taki took the lead and as there wasn't a path to follow, they had to go in single file picking their way through the dripping branches and tangled roots. It was slow progress. Jay was concerned. If there were any village nearby, then surely someone would have walked this way, and therefore a path of some kind should have been left. As there wasn't a path it meant there were no people in the area.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it started. The sun was out again and the ground steamed, giving a soft mist that thickened almost into a fog. Jay thought this area could be the start of the rain forests that usually were situated just above the equator of a planet. If this was the case they could expect a lot more rain.

The river wound its way further inland but didn't appear to have narrowed to any noticeable degree. With forest at one side, and the mud flats on the other, it left no other choice but to keep going ahead. When it grew dark a fire was lit in a small clearing with a few dry twigs they found, as it wasn't safe to travel at night in a strange land at the edge of a forest.

The night was filled with strange noises. Jay asked what animals had made the noise. Taki had no idea.

"I wonder if there are snakes or something like them, such as a land version of the sea snakes," Jay said aloud.

"I've never heard or seen anything like those, but you never know what's in this forest. We still don't know all the animals and insects in Mordia without coming to strange lands."

The conversation died as the two wrapped their cloaks around them and settled down for the night.

Morning was fine and bright. Taki made breakfast as Jay packed. After eating they set out again following the river. The rains the previous day had swollen the river almost covering the mud flats. The water was a muddy brown colour and made a soft gurgling sound as it lapped along the edge of the trees. Taki picked his way carefully over the twisted roots.

Once more the day had started out with hot sunshine, but after lunch the clouds opened up and the rain began once more. This time it was ignored, as both were soon soaked. Some low hills arose through the forest. The river narrowed and became swifter as it passed between two of the hills. Having climbed one still following the river, they saw the trees stretching out as far as they could see, with the ribbon of water threading its way between.

It meandered a while then turned in a huge loop circling almost back upon itself before continuing into the distance.

"If we cut through the loop we can save hours of wading." Taki said to Jay.

"I was just going to suggest that myself."

Coming down from the hill they entered the trees going in a straight line, aiming to rejoin the river at the other side of the loop. The forest grew even denser the further they penetrated. Taki picked his way around the tangled growth trying to keep on course.

"Listen," said Jay.

"I can't hear anything," said Taki. They had entered a wooded valley that lay directly in front of them.

"Exactly," said Jay. "No animal sounds or bird calls."

Taki stopped and listened. All around it was quiet. Taki shrugged his shoulders and then pressed on picking his way around the trees. It was too late to turn back.

Jay had an uneasy feeling that he was being watched. He turned and spotted a small lizard like creature upon a rock. Taki pointed at another of the lizards a little further down the trail. It didn't attack but just watched as they passed by. More and more of the creatures were on the valley floor.

Suddenly as Taki passed close to a group of the lizards, one stood on its hind feet and a ruff from its throat stood out in an aggressive manner. It gave a loud hiss and spat out a purple liquid in a long stream. Now its neighbours joined in with the attack and they too spat out the liquid. At such a close range the lizards couldn't miss. Both men's tunics were splashed with the liquid as the creatures from both sides of the track now joined in the attack. The food was protected with their cloaks that were wrapped up and carried on the top of the packs but how long for? It was evident that they must get away as quickly as they could.

"Run shouted Taki."

Jay didn't need telling as a burning sensation that came from his shoulder told him the creatures were dangerous. They cleared the area of the lizards but the pain was getting worse. Both men stripped off the tunics and let them fall. A mist began rising from the material as they bathed the sores on their bodies.

"It's acid. The creatures were spitting pure acid. It's no wonder there wasn't a living thing around, and a few more moments we would have become victims." Jay bathed Taki's back. Angry red marks showed through his grey skin where the acid had hit. Jay too had red marks on his skin. The water helped to ease the pain. Jay picked up his tunic intending to give it a wash when they reached the river. The tunic, still smoking fell into holes. The acid had burned it away. Taki's tunic too had burned. Now they wore just their slave skirts and sandals and had no protection from the rain that was just starting again. Jay un-wrapped his cloak that still steamed from the acid, but had to abandon the idea as it too fell in tatters. They rescued the food and continued splashing through the rain.

The river was a welcome sight as the loop appeared before them. The rain stopped and the sun started to dry all the ground. Once more Taki took the lead following the bank as it headed towards a distant mountain.

For two more days they battled with low tree branches and thickets that lined the riverbank, and then a series of gorges forced them to climb higher. As the pair reached the top of one particularly high hill they could look back and see the entire coastline. The place where they had landed was half way along the beach, between the river mouth and another hill far in the distance. No sign of any civilisation could be seen on the shore or the rainforest. A brown muddy smudge showed where the river emptied into the clear blue sea. In front of them the trees stretched along the river all the way to a valley leading through a gap in the hills. Anyone landing along the shore must have come this way and had been funnelled into this gap by the landscape. This showed them they weren't lost and they took a little comfort for that fact.

The sun was hot without the tree cover but the going was easier. The river flowed quietly but had deepened. Taki stopped at a pool in the bank and bathed in the now clear water. Jay joined him letting the cool water take the last of the pain from his shoulder. The sun soon dried them, and after a meal they set off again but feeling a little better.

The trees started again as the valley fell behind them. Soon the sweat ran from their bodies as the humidity rose. Their bare flesh attracted the insects in the trees, and soon walking was accompanied by slaps as the insect's bit. Mid afternoon a clearing gave them the chance to rest and eat. No trail had been seen and they wondered if this was the right way to go, or had they strayed in the forest?

One hour later a noise startled them, and a dart made a phut sound as it buried itself deep into a tree just by Jay's head. Taki turned as another dart landed by his side. Jay knew that back on Earth, Indian Tribes from South America used darts to hunt their prey and was very accurate. If these were similar, then the darts were warnings and not meant to kill. He stood still and Taki took the hint and he too froze. Nothing happened for a few moments but the darts stopped. A rustling came from their right. A man stepped out from the trees. He was shorter than either Jay or Taki. Like them he was nearly naked, dressed in a loincloth made from tree bark. His skin was grey like Taki's but a little darker. On his head he wore a headband holding his long jet-black hair, and had skin shoes upon his feet. He carried a blowpipe that he held at the ready. A quiver of darts was slung over his shoulder. Two stripes of paint or dye circled his arm as though a badge of office such as a stripe or chevron. Two more warriors joined him and each man held a blowpipe pointing at Jay and Taki's chest. One moved to the rear of the pair and Jay felt his arms being pulled around his back and tightly lashed. Taki too was bound and then their captors pushed both into a walk.

The walk lasted about two hours. It ended at a lake, and beyond lay a village made of huts with mud walls with thatched roofs. The huts were round with no windows and only one doorway but no door. At the beginning of the village was an effigy of a warrior armed with a spear, standing guard.

It was around ten feet tall made of grass and twigs with leather armour and a shield. At the top a skull gave its ghastly grin as it looked through vacant eye sockets at any intruders, as if to ward them off. The armour was identical to the armour of the Army of Hoy.

Well thought Jay, we now know what happened to at least one of the Rulers men.

The prisoners were pushed into one of the huts of the village, and left with their hands still tied. The hut was empty except for a pile of rushes on the floor. Taki sat down on the pile.

"We seem to have done it again."

"It would appear so," answered Jay. "See if you can untie this rope."

Taki turned his back to Jay and started working on his bonds. Soon both men were loose and Jay approached the doorway to look outside. A warrior standing guard pushed him back with a spear. Taki was examining the walls of the hut. The mud, over time had set like concrete, and was very thick. It would take them both ages to break through and they didn't know how much time they had left before the guard came for them.

At night a flickering glow from a fire cast shadows inside their hut. A woman brought some food in a bowl. Jay took it and began eating it immediately. Taki was a little more cautious and tasted it first. It tasted like broth and he too tucked in. The woman stayed and watched them eat not taking her eyes from Jay. It appeared his light coloured skin fascinated her so much she eventually reached out her hand and stroked him as if to see if the colour came off. Jay finished his broth and put down his bowl. The woman picked up the bowls and left, still giving Jay a lingering look as she went out of the door opening.

Warriors came for them soon afterwards, and paraded them in front of a crowd. Once more their arms were lashed and a rope placed around their necks as they were led around with Jay being the centre of attraction. His skin was fondled and stroked. It was obvious they hadn't seen anyone of the Allo race in this country.

Two lines of effigies at the bottom of a flight of stone steps lined the way. They were like the one at the entrance to the village. That accounted for another eight of the men of Hoy. Their captors prodded them up the steps of what was a pyramid with a stone slab at the top. Jay seemed to recognise it. It was straight from a book he'd read on the ancient Incas. This was a sacrificial altar where victims had their heart cut out as an offering to whatever god they believed in.

As the warriors prodded them to the top Jay could see that the stone was dark red where the blood of the men sacrificed had been spilled, especially that of the warrior's enemies. Now Jay and Taki were going to be the latest victims.

At the top of the steps, a row of what Jay presumed to be priests waited for them. One was decked out in an elaborate costume of leather and feathered plumes. Around his neck were various necklaces of beads, and one was made from finger bones from his victims.

Jay was prodded along the line to stand in front of the chief priest. He examined Jay at the same time as holding a dialogue with his second in command. They talked in a tongue Jay hadn't heard before and couldn't understand. After a few moments the talking became heated and then developed into a full-blown argument between the two. The chief finally had his own way, and ordered the guards to take Jay and Taki back down the steps, not to the hut, but to a pit sunk at the edge of the village.

The pit was round and about ten feet deep. It had two pieces of wood stretching to the centre. Above the wood a rope hung from a tree. Jay was forced to walk the plank to the very end of the wood. Once there his hands were untied, then refastened on to the rope, which was pulled up until he was nearly hanging by his arms. A warrior then stepped onto the other plank carrying a large basket shaped like a man but in two halves. He placed one half around Jay's back and the other onto his front tying them together. When he was satisfied he produced some large splinters of wood with sharp points, and inserted them through the basket until they were just touching Jay. He positioned the splinters all round the latticework of the basket tying each one until Jay couldn't move without one of the points piercing his flesh. Two of the points were at each side of his head but by moving his eyes alone he saw Taki was being put into a similar basket.

A man entered the pit through a trench dug into the side. He attached a tube of cloth to the bottom of Jay's basket leading into the neck of a smaller basket on the ground, and then he left leaving Jay wondering what it was all about.

After an hour of waiting Jay saw a flickering in the firelight. A large moth was flying by. The wings had a faint green glow as it fluttered around as though chasing a scent. Soon lots more joined the moth fluttering over his head. One of the moths came in to land. It slipped easily through the lattice of the basket and landed on Jay's shoulder. He felt a sharp stab of pain and then, another one landed on his forehead and crawled down to his nose. One more alighted on the basket holding on with tiny claws. Now he knew what the pain was, it was the claws digging into his flesh. The one on his nose bit deep giving him another sharp stab of pain. Others followed as more of the moths alighted and crawled over his body. The splinters of wood prevented him from moving to shake them off. The one on his nose appeared to be growing larger by the minute. Jay then realised that the moths were blood sucking insects and he and Taki had been left helpless for them to feed upon.

Taki was covered in moths just as Jay. Now all over his flesh he felt their claws and then their bites, as they gorged on his blood. The one on his nose was now twice as fat as when it had first landed, and then having had its fill, it fell off down into the bottom of the basket. The cloth had funnelled it into the bottom of the collecting basket where it lay too full to move.

Morning came. Jay was exhausted. He felt tired and a little light-headed. The moths had gone but he was still in his basket. A man entered the trench of the pit and collected the fallen moths in the collecting basket. Another man removed the splinters and released the prisoners. Both men staggered as they were led back to the hut. Jay reckoned he must have lost two or three pints of blood that would account for his weakness.

The first man took his arm and helped him to the pile of rushes where he gratefully sat down. The man took one of the bloated moths, and with his knife nipped off its claws and head and swallowed it. He offered one to Jay putting it to his lips and squeezing gently. The pale red liquid that came out tasted like pure cane sugar, energy-giving sugar. Jay clutched at his hand holding the moth and greedily sucked at the liquid. Taki watched until the man offered one to him and at Jays prompting took one and tenderly sucked. A look of amazement came over his face and he too greedily ate the moth.

They were left to recover from their ordeal, lying on the rushes in the hut too tired to even think of escape. The woman brought them breakfast and then left them to sleep. Jay awoke suddenly as the man started to lash his wrists. It was already dark and he had slept all through the day. He was dragged to his feet and taken outside in the direction of the pit. Surely they weren't going to put them back over the pit again so soon. He was already weak from loss of blood and hadn't had time to make up the loss. The man prodded him to walk. Taki was already hanging in his basket waiting for the moths when Jay arrived. They had taken him and Jay hadn't even known. Once more the basket was fastened around his body and the splinters inserted leaving him hanging and helpless. He dreaded to think what state they would be in when morning came.

Both Taki and Jay had passed out when they were released the morning after. Their bodies were covered with tiny wounds from the claws and the bites of the moths. The men dumped them in their hut and left them. Jay awoke later in the day. A bowl of food had been left in the hut along with some water. He ate hungrily and shook Taki awake to make him eat. He was so weak from loss of blood that he could hardly stay awake, but Jay forced him to take the food, as it was the only chance of survival for them both. Another night in the basket and it would be too late to save either of them. They both slept until it was dark, when being dragged across the ground wakened Jay. He was so weak he couldn't resist, and the warriors hadn't bothered to tie his hands. A glance told him they were heading for the pit. Surely they weren't going to be put in the basket again as they must know it would kill them.

The warriors reached the pit and tied Jay onto the rope pulling him upright on the plank. He felt the basket as it was fastened around him, and then the sharpened wood inserted until it once again touched his flesh. Taki appeared to be still unconscious in his basket. At least thought Jay it would save him the pain of the moths. The men left and entered the trench to adjust the cloth. All went quiet and Jay waited for the first green glow that would announce the moth's arrival.

A blast from a trumpet roused him from his tired half slumber. He turned to see where it had come from, and received a stab in the temple for his trouble. For a moment Jay had forgotten where he was and a stake's point had reminded him. The trumpet sounded again but this time louder and just behind him. Men were marching and it wasn't the warriors, because they didn't march. He listened intently to the marchers who stopped in the centre of the village. Words were being spoken, angry words by the sound of the voices, although Jay didn't understand what was being said. He heard the sound of bare feet running towards him, and two of the natives started to remove the basket. They were just in time as Jay had seen the first glimmer of green flitting through the darkness. The moths were on their way looking for food. Jay was dumped at the feet of a soldier. He was too weak to stand but looked up from where he had been left on the ground. Taki was brought and left alongside but was still unconscious. The soldier asked Jay who they were and what were they doing here. Jay tried to respond but then all went dark and he too lapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 2

The Emperor

It was the next day before he regained his senses. The sun was high in the sky and he judged it was mid morning. The soldier entered the hut and asked once more who they were. Jay told him about the medicine and also of the search for the missing men.

“I don’t know about any medicine, but the missing men are here on the poles, and you too would be on a pole if we hadn’t arrived in time. Jay thought of the skulls guarding the steps. He had been destined to be one. Then he realised the soldier was speaking his adopted language and not the native tongue.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” Jay asked.

“Rest,” said the soldier as he left the hut. “Tomorrow we march.”

Taki awoke and saw he was back in the hut.

“What happened?”

“Soldiers,” said Jay.

“Oh,” said Taki and promptly fell asleep again.

When he awoke for the second time it was late afternoon. The woman brought two bowls of hot food with some kind of meat and a type of beer. It tasted good and even Taki enjoyed it.

Feeling better, Jay ventured outside but a warrior blocked his way. It appeared he was still a prisoner although his treatment had improved. As darkness fell more food was brought along with fruit and wine. Jay would have enjoyed the food more if he could have left the confines of his hut. Taki was improving too. He was becoming more like his old self as his strength returned. Both relaxed on the rushes eating and drinking as the woman returned with blankets. Now they could sleep well with a full stomach, ready for the morning.

A trumpet sounded. The men were assembling ready to move out. The guard beckoned to Jay and Taki to leave the hut. Outside the soldiers had been drawn up in two ranks. About fifty men paraded in front of their leader. The soldier’s wore the same uniform consisting of a short skirt with waistband and leather straps over the shoulders. Boots completed the uniform. It was very skimpy but in the heat of the rainforest it didn’t matter. Most of the men carried swords and spears but some had a type of crossbolt weapon slung over their shoulders, with leather quivers of bolts attached to the straps. The leader had a helmet with a coloured plume as his badge of rank otherwise he was dressed as his men. He approached Jay and enquired if they were capable of travel. Having rested for two days Jay told him they were.

The chief priest and three of his men were taken from one of the huts. His robes of office had gone, and all four were naked except for a loincloth. Each man had ropes leading from their necks tying them together with their wrists tied behind their backs. It seemed they too were being taken on the march.

The leader spoke in the native tongue to a new chief bedecked in the robes of office. It was the second priest that had been arguing with the chief on the temple. The leader turned away and gave the order to begin the march. Jay and Taki followed with the prisoners although they were not tied.

The soldiers strode confidently through the forest and, although Jay couldn’t see any pathway or obvious route for them to follow, they appeared to know where they were going.

It started to rain again but the march continued. The cool water was welcome at first on the bare flesh but soon it felt too cold and Jay shivered.

At dusk a small camp appeared in a clearing in the jungle. It consisted of two long huts on stilts placed opposite each other fifty feet apart. Jay and Taki were allocated beds at one end of the first hut and a meal was also provided. The other prisoners were left outside but chains had replaced the ropes. They had to sleep under the hut and their ration was just a bowl of soup. The rain had stopped two hours ago and now the mist grew dense, making the coming night seem darker than before. Night sounds came from the jungle but Jay and Taki had long since fallen asleep and didn't hear a noise. The soldiers relaxed on low beds and laughed and talked quietly amongst themselves until only the guard was awake.

At dawn the march began again. It lasted until noon when a river blocked their way.

The leader turned by a small stream feeding the river and there, jutting out from the bank, a landing stage of tree trunks had been built. A barge was waiting, and they boarded and cast off heading down the river. The sail was used, as the current was very slow. The warm sun dried off any remaining mist as the barge gently glided along its way allowing everyone time to rest.

The river flowed through long stretches of trees flanking both banks. At night the barge tied up, as it was too dark to continue because of clouds. Green glowing forms flitted through the trees and approached the barge. A soldier picked up a pair of bellows and puffed a fine liquid into the air. A strange perfume filled Jay's nostrils but the moths kept well away from the barge. Next day after an hour's sail, the barge was left as the men headed inland. Soon another native village very similar to the first one was entered. The natives showed respect to the leader as he strode to the centre and began to speak in their tongue to the headman. He took another captive handed to him by the chief, and then they headed back to the barge. The leader was acting as the law for the whole district, collecting prisoners to take back to wherever he came from. Jay didn't know what the new man had done but he was added to the line of chained men. He wondered why the leader didn't leave the prisoners at the first huts instead of having them march to every native village, unless it was simply to show his power.

More visits to villages added more men to the chain until Jay counted twenty. The barge was full of people as it pulled in to another landing stage. This one had a shed and looked as if it was the barge's base. He was right, the men headed inland once more but this time low hills appeared. After climbing a while the column cleared the trees and continued upwards towards a gap in the peaks of two mountains. It grew cooler the higher they climbed but soon the summit of one of the hills was reached. Jay saw the gap between the peaks and also the rest of the forest from where they had just emerged. Unbroken trees stretched to the horizon as far as the eye could see. They crossed through the gap and looked down on a city by a lake and in the distance was the sea.

The city reminded Jay of a Chinese temple. It was set out in squares one inside the other. The first square had walls ten miles long. Inside that was the second square with a wall eight miles long leaving a gap in between of a mile. This carried on down to the centre where a huge temple complex had been built. Each of the walls contained a large gate guarded by soldiers preventing passage to the next compound. The gate and wall was forty feet high with watchtowers set at intervals.

Jay's party headed down to the city crossing fields of crops and herds of animals all the way to the first gate. The guards let them through and the soldiers peeled off leaving just the leader and two men controlling the prisoners. These along with Jay and Taki made for the second gate. After going through this gate the prisoners were taken to a walled prison in-between the walls. If anyone escaped they still had to get through two walls and the guards to reach the outside. Jay and Taki were taken to a third gate and a complex of small buildings used as guesthouses. It wasn't clear whether they were guests or prisoners, but Taki said they were guests who couldn't leave. The leader left to make his report.

Jay settled down in the small but comfortable suite of rooms to await a summons from whoever was in charge. It didn't come. Days passed and it seemed as though they had been forgotten. A guard at the door prevented them from going out but in their rooms they were free to move around. Jay was

bored with nothing to do but lounge around all day. The only good thing about his enforced rest was that his strength had now returned to normal.

Jay was taking a bath in a tiled sunken bath when the guard came for them. His slave skirt had been washed and was drying in the hot sunshine. The guard told him to change from the borrowed robe and dress in his skirt. Whoever wanted to see them, would see them as they were picked up in the village. It was a little damp but he did as he was told, and then followed the guard through the third gate and handed them over to another man dressed in rich robes. This man took them through three more gates into the inner compound.

Ranks of soldiers waited in front of a throne set on a dais in the open air. At the front the native prisoners were lined up still wearing their chains. It was like being at a Chinese Emperor's court. The Emperor approached and sat on the throne. Various officials were paraded before him and talked to him but Jay was too far away to hear. Finally it was the prisoners' turn and they and Jay and Taki were escorted to the throne. The leader told of capturing the pair at the village and what was happening to them. The Emperor addressed the natives in their own language, and then listened as they pleaded their case.

The Emperor silenced them with a wave. He gave instructions to his guards and the first three were told to kneel. Then a huge guard with a very large sword took off the first two men's heads with one blow each. The third man was escorted out. Jay later learned he would be returned to tell what he had seen as a warning to the rest of the tribe. The rest of the prisoners were dealt with. Some were executed and some let go.

Jay and Taki stood before the Emperor. This man had their lives in his hand. One word and it was the executioner for them.

He asked them who they were and what were they doing in his land? Taki told him about his Regal and the quest for the medicine. The Emperor seemed more interested in Jay and his light skin. He descended from his throne to take a close look. After examining Jay he waved his hand and the guards came and took them back to their suite of rooms to wait once more at the Emperor's pleasure.

Day's later they were standing before the Emperor once more. He again came down the steps to speak with them face to face. He addressed them in their own language.

Taking hold of Taki's slave collar he asked why he wore it if he was representing the Regal of Mordia. Taki replied it was for protection, as most people didn't see slaves as a threat. The Emperor seemed satisfied with the answer.

"I do have the medicine you seek but not enough to let you take it. To the west is a land that was under my control but isn't any more. An army has invaded and has built a fortress inside the mountain making it very difficult for my army to engage them in battle. The caves are being expanded as we speak and I've lost many a man trying to explore them. If I had a map I could mount an attack, but not knowing which is the right tunnel splits my force into fragments and they're overcome. It's in this land that your medicine is to be found. If you wish to go there I'll permit it, but it is at your own risk. A man called Gorgo controls the Army. He has plundered three kingdoms of treasure and enslaved their peoples' to dig for him."

Taki listened, and when the Emperor had finished speaking he told of their promise to the Ruler of Hoy to obtain more of the medicine because he had saved Jay's son. The Emperor said he understood, and would assist to the edge of his territory.

A soldier led them back to their rooms. A day later the same soldier took them to a storehouse where they stocked up with food for the journey. He gave them the uniform of the Emperor to wear but Taki declined the offer preferring to remain as he was.

After a good night sleeping in the comfortable room, it was time to set out again into the jungle. Two soldiers escorted them out of the complex of walls and out through the fields. This time instead of going over the gap in the mountains they turned west and entered the trees following a trail. The going was easy with a wide well used path through the forest by a small stream. This path followed

the stream all the way offering fresh water and places to camp. After two days the soldiers led them to a village of natives.

The headman took them to a hut and gave them food and let them rest. The soldiers left saying the chief would provide a guide.

The trail now turned into the deep forest. One of the natives armed with a blowpipe led the way although no path could be seen. Taki thought it would be the perfect place to leave them, as they couldn't possibly find a way out again. That night at camp Taki tried to stay awake to watch the man but tiredness got the better of him and he fell asleep. At dawn the man was still there, and he was offering them something to eat. Jay as usual bit into the snack wrapped in a leaf, but Taki was sure something inside the leaf moved, and he ate from his own rations. The rainforest grew thick and progress was very slow.

The native cut and hacked a way through ahead of Taki with Jay bringing up the rear. On the few occasions where the trees thinned a mountain peak could be glimpsed in the distance. Jay took note, as it was the only sign he had for finding a way back.

The forest gave way to bushes with low-lying swampy water. The native pointed at the swamp and a narrow path leading through. He spoke something that neither Jay nor Taki could understand, waved a farewell and left them to return back to the forest.

"I think we're on our own," said Taki. Just then the thunder sounded like a crack of doom.

The rain continued all through the night and into the next day. The water of the swamp was getting higher and soon it was level with the path. They stopped for breakfast and waited to see if the rain would cease but it didn't. The water continued to rise. The path turned slightly and then disappeared underneath the water.

"Now what do we do," asked Taki. "It'll be just as bad if we turn back."

Jay took his stick and prodded the ground just ahead to check if it was firm enough for them to continue. By doing this they managed to keep to the now flooded path. The rain beat down and the water rose up to their knees. Soon Jay's stick would be too short. The forest had begun again, and Taki suggested they head for it before being drowned. Jay tried to but each time he found some soft mud that wouldn't bear their weight and had to try again elsewhere.

It was midday before they reached the trees but even there the water was over their feet. The mountain couldn't be seen for the forest and they were lost, wet, cold and hungry.

Two crossing branches of a tree gave them the chance to climb from the swamp to dry off a little. The packs were opened and they ate, still trying to shelter beneath the branches. It finally stopped raining and the sun shone. Soon the mist from drying swamp water filled the air making it feel damp again. With the sun they managed to get their bearings and could set off once more in the general direction of the mountain although they couldn't see it. The direction they had to take was all trees with water underfoot and nowhere to rest.

The swamp gave off a musky odour as it warmed from all the rotting vegetation and every pace produced a stench from the black mud that nearly turned their stomachs. It was nearly dark before the ground raised a little and the water was left behind.

The landscape changed from swamp to hill, with deep gorges and wooded slopes.

"I can see why the Emperor had difficulty getting an army to the mountain and then having to fight. I'll bet they were exhausted before they reached the caves."

Taki took the lead looking for a place to camp. He found a flat piece of ground on a small mound just level with the treetops. From here they could see any animal coming before it could reach them. Jay lit a fire. It was the first hot meal for two days and tasted good although the fresh water was running low. That night they slept well, being above the insects, and with the fire keeping any animals away. In the morning the sun shone and the sky was clear with no clouds in sight.

Travelling was very slow through the forest as each step of the way could be concealing a drop where the unwary may fall. Taki picked his way skirting around the thickest part of tangled plants and

foliage. The swamp had been left behind and it was dry underfoot. They entered a valley that was particularly thick with trees. The easiest way was to climb the sides to get where the trees thinned out a little. After a hard climb the ground changed to rock and scree, and the vegetation was sparse. Suddenly a low cloud passed but this time they were above it looking down as the cloud deposited its rain on the forest below. It was cooler being above the trees and they decided to remain high throughout the rest of the day. That evening it became too cold and they descended once more into the trees, but had made good time and resolved to climb high again in the morning.

Jay shook Taki early the next day. After a drink from a clear stream and with nothing to pack they set off. Taki took two paces and stopped. His head dropped to his chest and he collapsed into a heap on the ground. Jay picked him up and laid him against a tree.

He started sweating and began to shake and shiver.

Jay had seen these symptoms before when he had been stricken with swamp fever. Taki had now got the fever and Jay knew it would be at least a week before Taki would recover and be able to travel again. Jay must have picked up some immunity from the time he had caught the illness, and had managed to stay well. With just their blankets to keep Taki warm the best Jay could do was to make a bed of leaves and a shelter to keep the rain off, and then watch as his friend suffered with the shakes. In the morning of the third day Jay picked Taki up and put him over his shoulder. He had to continue with his journey as the food had run out, and there was no prospect of anything to eat where he was in the middle of the jungle.

The way started to drop down in a gentle slope making the going easy even with the extra weight over his back. Jay emerged from a clump of trees, and landed back on the path. What had taken days over difficult ground could have been done in two if they hadn't been forced into the forest by the rising water.

The mountain peak grew nearer. Jay made good time striding out with no undergrowth to stop him. He walked until noon and placed Taki down on a grass bank to take a rest.

He lay back and closed his eyes to the hot sun. When he opened them he thought he saw a movement, then a native stepped out of the trees and stood looking at him. Jay made a motion with his hand bringing it up to his mouth telling the native he needed food.

The man stepped back to the trees and was gone. Jay once more picked Taki up and began to walk.

Mid afternoon, as he approached some low bushes, more of the natives surrounded him. He put Taki down and stood still as the natives had levelled their blowpipes at him. These were different natives from the ones who had helped him before, and Jay wasn't taking any chances of any movement he may make being interpreted as hostile. One of the men lashed his wrists behind his back just as before. A litter was made from branches and Taki laid on it to be carried to wherever they were going.

After two hours of steady marching a native village not unlike the first one appeared. Jay was put into a hut but his wrists were untied. Food was given to him and he was left alone. For five days nothing happened. Taki came round from his illness but was still very weak and would be for another week. The pair was allowed to move around the huts but always under the guard of one of the natives with a blowpipe. Hunting parties came and went, and a plentiful supply of small animals was brought. Jay would have liked to have gone on one of the trips if circumstances had been different as he was getting bored with nothing to do all day. With plenty of food and gentle exercise Taki grew stronger and more like his old self although he couldn't remember being ill.

Soldiers arrived, but not friendly ones. These men were surly looking. They were big men with grey skins as Taki, but had large bushy beards. These were the first beards Jay had seen since coming to the planet and he'd forgotten what they looked like. The uniform was similar to the Emperors men consisting of a short skirt with leather straps. Their weapons too were similar. Jay and Taki were paraded in front of the leader who singled Jay out to be inspected because of his light skin. Jay was familiar with being inspected and stood still until the leader had finished. Their slave collars caught

the soldier's attention, as did Jay's ear bars that were riveted into his ears. The bars had been used to hold reins when he and Taki used to race for the Regal's cup back in Mordia. The pair was questioned about the collars and the bars, and what they were doing here and how did they get passed the Emperor's men. Jay told the truth.

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