



# BEASTS OF BURDEN

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“Kan... Motahatsu Kan...”

Kan started. The voice rumbled like the pronouncement of God. It was slow and ponderous but definitely the young lord’s name. The shadow of the beast fell over him. He’d seen the tahn-chen up close before, but never outside the workman’s courtyard.

Built like a cross between a bear and a wolf, the blunt-muzzled creature stood upright on thick legs but stooped to address the much smaller man. Its dull-witted eyes gazed down at the young lord from their twenty-foot height. Despite the tahn-chen’s placid reputation, Kan felt a pang of fear. A simple stray movement, an accident by one of those monstrous paws, and he’d be injured or worse. He panicked and stammered a sharp rebuke; it was all he could think to do.

“Stand your ground, beast; I order you—”

It moved closer, out from the alley in which it stood. The creature supported itself against the enclosing walls of the nahn-jin’tae—the paper mill—and the stables. Its lumbering, inarticulate movements cast their shadows into the street as it lumbered forth.

“Kan,” it repeated. Its muzzle worked slowly as if wrestling with poorly understood ideas. It paused, childlike, as if taking the time to form its phrases.

“Get back! *Hosun’ke!* Get back!”

One of the house guard—Masunme, if Kan didn’t miss his guess—had come along the alley from behind the beast. He held his sword in one hand and small, round shield in the other.

The monster turned its head back to look at the guard.

Masunme stood his ground. “Sir!” he shouted, “you must leave here at once! It is not safe!”

The sharpness of the order shook Kan out of his stunned state. He backed several steps away—slowly at first—as the tahn-chen swung its head to gaze first at one man and then the other. Its brow furrowed, an almost human

expression, as if confusion was giving way to frustration or anger.

“Kan...” It rumbled the name once more. Its muzzle worked roughly, inarticulately dropping into a growl.

Shouts reverberated through the late afternoon air. More household guards appeared. Armed with swords, spears, and nets, they swiftly surrounded the beast. Masunme repeated, “Sir: go back to the palace! *Now!*”

Kan swallowed but did not wait to see how the confrontation resolved. Within ten minutes he was past the jade columns, through the towering mahogany doors, down the ancestors’ hall, and passing into the royal reception room. He brought himself up short as he saw his father—Lord Pohl, the niahn’si of Haulu Province—glance up sharply from his maps and papers. The towering man looked out from beneath black, bushy eyebrows with a falcon’s eye. While not in the same league as the beasts who worked on the Komasaru Plains in the royal fields, he stood twice as tall as the tallest man. The mark of royalty, the height and muscle and power, practically radiated from his countenance.

Kan quickly composed himself and slowed his gait to a more gentlemanly stride. His long robes swished around his ankles and sandaled feet. He swept a hand through his short, black hair, straightening it. He approached his lord, stopping ten paces away to lower his eyes. With a graceful bow, he descended to one knee and waited for permission to rise.

“Father,” he said.

“My son,” Pohl replied, “stand and tell me the meaning behind this ... interruption.” The voice was as big as the man and echoed in the lofty room. The niahn’si was formal but not disapproving. Father was always formal.

Kan rose. He straightened the twin folds of his rose-embroidered vest and gracefully nodded. “You do me great honor,” he said with practiced formality.

Niahn’si Pohl half-smiled. “I do no such thing,” he said. “To see my son, so distressed as to forget protocol; clearly, something is amiss.” He approached Kan, slowly, taking long, five-foot strides to cross the space between them. He loomed over his son and placed a large hand on the young man’s shoulder.

Kan took a breath.

Slowly at first, he proceeded to tell his father about the encounter within the walls of the household compound beyond the bounds of the palace. As he spoke, his father’s expression cooled, growing displeased. It was what Kan had overheard the servants call “the face of the on-coming storm”.

“But the strangest thing was, father, that the beast—the tahn-chen, itself—spoke my name! How could a beast, not even the largest amongst them, know my name, let alone speak it?”

His father scowled. “I’m sure you misheard,” he said at last. “The tahn-

chen make many sounds; grunts and snarls. You must have mistaken such a noise for something approximating rational speech.”

Kan shook his head. “No, father. It was slow but clear; it was my name.”

Pohl lowered his gaze to meet Kan’s and Kan immediately silenced his dissent.

Kan was tall. For all his eighteen years he stood a foot taller than most of the palace staff and guards. Only his father, a few of the niahn’si’s personal guard, and the other blood relations of their royal family were taller. The transformation, the growth into the leader who would one day tower over the people of Haulu Province, had yet to instill itself, fully, within Kan’s body.

“It did not speak your name and that is final,” his father declared. “You have been to the temple; you have studied the writings of the imperial priests. You know what all men know: the tahn-chen are beasts given to mortal men by God to serve. To suggest one could speak, could possess a soul, is heresy and unbecoming a young lord.”

He knew his father’s tone sufficiently to know when a word was final. Still, his father seemed to want to drive the point home.

“Follow me,” he said.

His father led Kan back through the towering doors and into the ancestors’ hall. Rather than go back to the main entrance, he turned down a side corridor and led his son to a broad, spiral staircase. It wound its way upwards to the west tower. Following it, they emerged at the top; Niahn’si Pohl strode to the balcony and rested his hands upon its rail. Kan, as he always did when trying to keep up with his father, concealed his panting breaths.

Below the palace wall and beyond the buildings of the household, past the royal dwelling wall and the wall of the city itself, were the plains. The cliffs began as the ground fell away past the edge of Inishan City to rolling fields dotted with patches of yellow. All across this expanse toiled the tahn-chen.

The massive beasts loped slowly through the fields. Most of them were thirty to forty feet tall with some reaching an impressive sixty feet in height. Despite their size and power, the creatures were occupied in careful patrols, each stopping, bending low, and inspecting the small, yellow flowers that grew in patches between the broad, winding paths. Each of the creatures had been outfitted with simple clothes for modesty’s sake but, otherwise, bore no resemblance to civilized men. They went about their work inspecting the tiny flowers and, periodically, carefully harvesting them in their giant, clawed hands.

“The beasts,” his father said, “do the work that God has decreed they do. Why else would beasts so mighty—so powerful and strong—labor to care for things so delicate and tiny?”

Kan bowed his head to hide his scowl. He and his friend, Bailar, had come to this tower many times over the years to watch the tahn-chen in the fields below. Bailar had been fascinated by the creatures as all young boys were but carried that fascination well into his teen years. He would speculate on what the mindless brutes thought about when tending the vast fields; what they experienced when armored and sent into battle. Kan had humored him partly because of their friendship but also partly because he, too, was curious about the towering beasts. To have his father bring him to this place, the last place he and Bailar had enjoyed their freedom before his friend was sent off to school in Paillar Province, rankled him.

“I ... do not know, father.”

“It is the will of God that the tahn-chen serve those of royalty and honor. Whether a land-owning molokai or one of the kohmanasi in the imperial court, all those of station are given an herd of tahn-chen in direct proportion to their greatness.” He paused and looked down at his son, face stern. “Those with authority and honor task the tahn-chen to such menial tasks to remind themselves of humility. Do you think that all the great people, the land-owners and high-born families, would restrain themselves if not for the example of the tahn-chen?”

To Kan it seemed only natural that one would show restraint. Like all royals, he was bigger and stronger than common folk. He could easily best any of them in a fight. But more than that, at a word he could have them cast into slavery or expelled from the city. He had seen his father do exactly that to the “chattle” whose indolence and dishonor offended him. To a high-born, it was dangerous to not embrace restraint.

“But, father, the flowers; the perfume that the ladies of the court wear comes from them ... why pick those? Why not task the tahn-chen to other humble tasks?”

“It is tradition,” the giant man rumbled. “My father oversaw the tahn-chen in their work as did his father and his father before him. Back forty generations to the first emperor, it has been this way. To question such traditions is to question the very foundation of society.”

The finality of his father’s tone would brook no objection. Kan bowed graciously, indicating acquiescence.

“Put this matter out of your mind, my son. The beast you encountered will be returned to the fields. You should focus on your studies. Only if you are worthy, after all, will God grant you the body and stature of a true leader. If you do not, you’ll be no better than the mindless, commoner chattel of this world. Is that what you want?”

Kan shook his head and, humbly, took his leave.

In the days that followed, Kan could not put the incident out of his mind. He found himself returning to the western tower to look down across the plains at the laboring tahn-chen. He watched them as they made their way down the rows they'd worn into the hard earth with their heavy feet. A few times he thought he saw the small one who'd surprised him. In the end, though, he could never be sure. Coloration between beasts was far too similar and he'd not paid enough attention the creature's markings when it had presented itself to him.

Besides that, his father's rebuke and lesson in honor sat suspiciously in the back of his mind. Why take such offense at a tale of a talking tahn-chen? It was when he saw one of them approach the city walls that he decided to resume his inquiry.

The beast carried a massive armful of pariah blooms. The tiny, yellow flowers had a strong smell that seemed at odds with the delicate perfume worn by high-born ladies of the court. He ran down the stairs. He left the palace and crossed the workman's courtyard to the city wall. There, a small group of guards guided the huge beast with spear tip and sword. Kan slowed and watched from afar as it laid its bundle down and turned to be led back to the fields by the household guards. Even its shadow looked heavy and imposing as the fifty-foot giant lumbered by.

From a low door set into the base of the nearest building, a willowy, towering woman emerged. It was Izakaya: the alchemist.

Taller than even his father, she was the only one of such stature within the household neither of Kan's blood nor his father's personal guard. She walked gracefully across the smooth cobblestones to where the flowers had been laid on a vast expanse of netting. Carefully, she folded the corners towards the center and began to drag the delivery back towards her apartments. A few stray blooms fell aside. Kan came forward to retrieve them.

A fierce, "Do not touch the flowers!" interrupted him.

Brought up short, he looked up and up and up to the cool, disapproving gaze of the alchemist.

"But ... you dropped them."

"And I shall retrieve them." Izakaya stood nearly sixteen feet tall; an older woman, she still held on to the beauty of her youth. Her loveliness had been transformed by age into a grace that seemed to trail her like a gown. Gloved hands clad in the finest silk, she stooped for the scattering of petals at Kan's feet. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

“I came—” He paused. An idea occurred to him and he formed his words carefully. “I came to ask you about the tahn-chen.”

She drew herself up to her full, magnificent height. Archly, Izakaya stared down at him. Suspicion crossed her perfect features as she asked, “Does the niahn’si know you are here?”

“My father knows all,” Kan lied. “You would expect him not to?”

The alchemist pondered for a moment before nodding and motioning for him to follow. She gathered up her bundle and led him to a nearby building, through its door, and down a flight of stairs. In the close quarters the smell of the pariah blooms was overwhelming. Kan gagged to be in such proximity. Their cloying, acrid smell brought tears to his eyes.

“How do you make such—awful—aromas into perfume?” he gasped.

“It takes ... practice,” she replied. Her words were measured, as if feeling him out. They entered a circular, stone room at the base of the stairs out of which led two doors. She crossed to a large, metal panel in the wall, pulled it open, and unceremoniously dumped the flowers down a chute. She let it clang shut after she was done and turned to face the young lord. “So, you have been sent to me to ask about the tahn-chen?”

He nodded, graciously, and allowed her assumptions to lead the conversation. The duplicity was exciting and his heart beat faster. There was a secret regarding the beasts; he could feel it.

“One of them spoke my name,” he said, “Not more than a week ago. Some tell me that it could not possibly be the case; that tahn-chen have no souls nor minds with which to shape thoughts into words.”

“You have been to the temple; you have learned all about them.”

“The priests of the temple answer to mortal authorities as well as God’s. I have learned only what they told me. After asking my father, he sent me here to learn the truth.” He put subtle emphasis on the last word. He was nearly three years until his twenty-first birthday when he would be considered an adult, but he fancied himself skilled in the arts of mature, courtly conversation. Kan’s teachers in rhetoric and debate would be proud at his manipulations.

Izakaya frowned with annoyance but nodded. “Very well. If your father wishes to break with tradition, who am I to question?” She crossed to a low table—low to her, at any rate; to Kan it was enormous—and sat. She beckoned for him to come closer. “What do you know about the tahn-chen?”

Kan looked calm and collected. He met her gaze with confidence. “Again, only what the temple teaches.”

“But you have had other thoughts before this moment, yes? Else your father would not have sent you to me.”



He thought about this for a moment before nodding. “My closest friend, Bailas, often said there was more thought beneath their eyes than we have been told.” Kan remembered Bailas fierce will and intellect; his propensity for asking difficult and uncouth questions. “He would often watch them and say, ‘Look at those beasts; so magnificent ... so powerful! Why do we force them to work in the fields, where none of us are permitted to go, when we could do the job just as well?’”

“Your friend; he pitied them?”

Kan considered. “Perhaps. But I think, more, he felt it dishonorable to waste the natural power of such giants on a menial task that any fit person with good eyes could accomplish. He was born malokai—a land-owner—and felt that the only thing separating himself from the common folk was the same hair’s breadth that separated them from the tahn-chen.” He blushed and shook his head sadly. “He had honor but questioned the very foundations of society. It was ... it was a conflict that got him in great trouble.”

The alchemist arched an eyebrow. “Did it?”

Kan found it hard to reply with an even tone. “Two months,” he said, “barely eight weeks ago, his father sent word that Bailas’ questioning ways had ‘dishonored the family’. He was sent away to the university at Callis to learn proper respect for imperial history and tradition.” He scowled. His dearest friend had been taken from him because of an open mind and fascination—a *preoccupation*—with the tahn-chen.

Izakaya nodded, slowly. “And you have come to feel that, perhaps, he was right?”

Kan just raised his gaze to meet hers, noncommittally.

“The tahn-chen pick the flowers because it is what they do,” she said at last. “Were this household not here, were these hills bare of settlements, the tahn-chen would still be here, chewing mindlessly on the flowers; striding as giants beneath the sun.”

“But they’re intelligent, aren’t they? They understand commands, they comprehend the threat of the sword, the one who spoke—” Sudden fear bloomed in his heart. If his father, if his people, knew that the creatures were smart and could speak... No civilized society condoned slavery, but what if that’s what this was?

“No,” she answered. “No, they are not.”

He blinked, taken aback. “But the small one; the one who said my name?”

“The tahn-chen are not intelligent; not anymore.”

His heart quickened at her choice of words. Before he could speak, though, she raised one, long-fingered hand. It was a gesture that would have gotten anyone else rebuked for attempting to silence a young lord. He ignored the slight and listened.

“You are a tall man,” she said, simply. “You are powerful and tall as are all of your family going back for generations.”

“We are blessed by God,” he said, slowly. “The wisest and most deserving of power are given the gift of stature and prominence. As a family of the niahn’si is to the molokai so are the molokai to the commoners.”

“And above the niahn’si are the members of the emperor’s court: the kohman’si. And above them all towers the emperor, a giant some twenty-four feet tall with a reach great enough to command all the provinces.” She paused and narrowed her gaze. “But it is *not* a gift from God.”

The abrupt heresy made Kan feel uncomfortable yet excited. This was the sort of conversation he used to have with Bailas. “Then where—?”

“The pariah blooms,” Izakaya said simply. “In that humble and simple flower rests the power to make mortal souls grow in power and stature. It is not a judgment of God that makes your family leaders of men. It is a flower; a simple, yellow flower.”

Kan coughed out a laugh and raised his brows incredulously. “Indeed? And I suppose my father eats the flowers morning, noon, and night? Are you mad? Do you think to make a joke with me?” He half expected her to smile but, instead, she kept her expression even.

“No,” she said. “To eat the flowers, to be exposed to their petals in a raw state...” She paused, considering. “Well, you have already seen what happens to those who travel *that* particular road.”

His laughter dried up in his heart. It took a minute of silence before he realized what she was implying. Then, he understood what she was saying; his mind hesitated to believe it. It seemed impossible; it *must* be impossible.

“The tahn-chen?”

She nodded, slowly.

“The tahn-chen; they used to be ... people?”

Again, Izakaya nodded.

Kan could think of nothing to say. It was horrible; astonishing. He’d never conceived of such a thing. A worse realization began to dawn on him. He licked his lips nervously. “And my father; the family—”

“Your father knows; of course,” she said. “But few others do. The secret is passed down from niahn’si to niahn’si. The royal families all know it, of course, because it is through work by alchemists such as myself that the flower is

processed, diluted, and made useful. Even as, in its pure state, the flower makes the body grow into that of a huge beast with a mind less than that of a child, the extract that the high-born use—”

“Stop! This is ... this is *heresy*! It is vile!” He turned away from the alchemist and began to pace. “You are saying that these flowers—the flowers and the tahn-chen—give the high-born their positions; not the judgment of God?”

“Not unless the Emperor himself is God,” she said. A slight, sarcastic smile crept across her face. “Although I have heard a few in the court have started to call him that, just to curry favor.”

Kan shook his head. He looked up at the alchemist and no longer saw a haughty and knowledgeable face. Rather, she looked tired and strangely relieved; as if talking about these things to someone who didn’t previously know had taken a weight from her shoulders. “So, the Emperor...?”

“The Emperor sets limits on how much of the refined elixir each family gets,” she admitted. “I am only allowed to process a certain amount of flowers each season. The resulting elixir is given to the niahn’si for distribution. Many who enjoy its benefits don’t even know where it comes from. Most probably just think it a vial of blessed water from the temple.”

“But ... but the perfume; all the ladies in the court—”

“A harmless, sweet-smelling side-effect,” she said. “Only the ladies directly related to your father are given the true elixir and, even then, only in the doses prescribed by the imperial court. The Emperor is allowed the highest safe dosage; no others may approach his stature.”

Kan paused in his whirling thoughts. A single word stood out in what she’d said. Curious, he asked, “Safe dosage?”

Izakaya inclined her head to him, once. “It has been the goal of court alchemists for generations to refine purer and purer extracts of the pariah bloom and make it safe for human consumption. But, in the end, no matter how pure we make it—no matter the process—too much of the elixir will still turn the subject into a mindless beast. The process is even faster when the dosage is not a pure flower but in its concentrated form. The subject grows, becomes dull-witted, and turns into a beast. This is why even the Emperor can only consume so much and reach a maximum height. After a while all he can do is take a continual, weak dose to retain his size.”

“And the tahn-chen, no matter who they were as people, are then put to work in the fields, tending the flowers.”

“As you say,” she said. “Although some receive better care than others.”

He understood, now, why no one was allowed out in the fields. Surely

some commoner folk must occasionally go out there, seeking food in lean times but the influx must be low. “So, when a tahn-chen dies...” He trailed off and Izakaya did not complete his thought. He knew the answer. They were chattel. They were unimportant. They were replaceable pieces of a large machine. They were power that was controllable. They were commoners. The tahn-chen were replaced with people who would not be missed. They then worked in the fields until their end.

Izakaya cleared her throat. “For what it is worth,” she said, “they live peaceful lives. They look like carnivorous beasts but all they eat are the flowers. It makes them bigger but even they reach a maximum. After that the flowers sustain their size long past the point where their over-sized bodies would perish. They are well-tended, docile—”

“It’s monstrous,” he said. “And how ‘peaceful’ is it when one niahn’si goes to war against another and sends the tahn-chen into battle? You—*all* the court—are monsters for being able to turn so blind an eye to such a travesty.”

“I pay my price,” she said.

The coldness he’d seen before descended upon her face once again. She rose from her chair and crossed the room. Her robes swept the floor as she moved.

“I am an alchemist. I deal with the flowers all the time. No matter my care, I am constantly being ... exposed.” She turned to look at him. “I face the same end as all my profession. Sooner or later it will be me in those fields. At least I know that tradition states I will be well cared-for.”

“But you... How *could* you?”

She looked at him, suddenly pained and tired. “I am no niahn’si. I am not even molokai. I am in that nebulous position between commoner and tradesperson. How can I refuse the commands of your father and the Emperor? Were I to do so, were any of us to defy such orders, we would be deemed trouble-makers and put out to pasture ahead of our time. I doubt if our treatment would be as caring as it would be had our end come as the result of a lifetime of hard work.”

The truth in her words hit him like a punch to the stomach. She was talking about not becoming a “troublemaker”. She was talking about not being like Bailas.

Bailas.

A sick feeling settled into the pit of his stomach, stronger than what he’d felt up until that point.

“I ... I should go,” he said. His words were terse and short. Izakaya did nothing to stop him.

He climbed the stairs, still smelling the echo of the sweet flowers in his clothes. When he emerged into the sunlight of the courtyard, he felt as if he'd climbed up out of Hell. All around him there were the sounds of his world. A few birds nested nearby, chirping and singing. From beyond the inner compound walls, he could hear carts in the neighboring city streets; people talked and bartered and argued and laughed. All the sounds of life were there, yet now seemed so hollow. How many of those people had lost brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, daughters, or sons just because someone in the royal household thought them "chattel" and put them to pasture? How many had lost someone like Bailas?

He had to act.

He turned back to the door that led to Izakaya's quarters and workspace. He descended the stairs.

Dinner was late making Niahn'si Pohl's mood unpleasant. It was not like Kan to be tardy, certainly not when taking the evening meal with his father. But the boy had arrived an hour after the food was supposed to be served, scowling and sullen. The niahn'si glowered at him from his titanic chair at the table's head.

"Where have you been?" he rumbled. "I have had to order the cooks to prepare our meal twice, now!"

Kan cast his eyes downward. "I apologize, father; I have just come from the kitchens and told them I have arrived. I am sorry for my delay."

"What kept you so late?" The niahn'si drained his goblet and hammered its base against the table to attract a server to re-fill it. "Was there another incident with one of the tahn-chen?"

"No, father; nothing of the sort."

"You will address me as niahn'si," he said in a low voice. Clearly, he was still annoyed at having the evening meal delayed. "No son of mine shows such disrespect!"

The servers brought out the food while one filled the niahn'si's cup. Kan stared at his plate.

Niahn'si Pohl narrowed his eyes. "You have been notably disrespectful of late," he said. "You realize that should you fail to earn my approval, the temple clerics will withhold the right of ascension from you?"

"And, thus, contradict the word of God?" he whispered.

"What was that?"

Kan looked up. "Nothing, niahn'si; I was merely giving assent."

His father's monstrous stature was almost as threatening as his scowl of disapproval. If not all Kan's words had been detected, his father had heard enough. The man brought his fist down on the table. "I have had enough of your disrespect!" He stood and several servants ran to his side. "Remove my son's food. He shall dine on nothing but rice and water until he learns respect once more!" With that, he picked up a fresh goblet the size of a human head and downed it, eyes never leaving Kan's.

Kan met the gaze, unflinching.

The servants gathered up the young lord's plates and platters and removed them to the kitchens. Eventually his father sat down again and resumed the evening meal. The two were alone again.

Long minutes passed, stretching out between them. "What's become of you, lately?" the niahn'si rumbled. "What's gotten into you?"

"Tell me," Kan asked, ignoring the question, "was Bailas really dangerous?"

His father stopped eating and stared at him. "What did you say?"

Kan just looked his father in the eye.

The giant rose up like thunder. "You dare—!" But he stopped, choking on his words with sudden discomfort.

The niahn'si shuddered and stepped back as a tremor shook his body. For the only time in his life that Kan could remember, his face took on an expression of confusion and uncertainty. Then his body clenched as if knotting into a fist. Bone and flesh began to groan and creak; his muscles bulged and his clothing tightened across his torso. His speckled black hair began to grow shaggy, brown, and long. His face pushed forward into a muzzle as he tried to cry out in pain. His throat, though, was locked tight in spasms. He pitched forward into the table, scattering the food and place settings.

Kan left his place at the table and walked up to his father as the powerful dosage he had arranged to be placed in his food, took hold. He strode forward as his father, crumpled against the ground and splitting his fine clothing, looked up at him with increasingly dull-witted eyes.

"This ends now, niahn'si," he said. "It will end for all the provinces if it is the last thing I do."

When he called the guards, the shaggy giant—unsteady and confused—didn't put up any resistance. The daily dosage his father took made him a small giant; the overdose he'd arranged had increased the speed and potency of the metamorphosis. How a tahn-chen could have gotten in to the household, let alone the palace, was a conundrum for the guards but taken as a pretext to dismiss them for having failed his family and his now-missing father. While it

was unknown for a tahn-chen to attack someone, there was just enough fear in the popular mind-set that it was a semi-believable story. New guards were acquired within days.

Coups happened. Sons of story and fable would occasionally unseat a dishonorable father. Thus even without proof, everyone in the court assumed that Kan was responsible. But there was no proof. The young lord would sit in regency until his twenty-first year and then assume the throne.

In the days that followed he paid his respects to the household staff and treated them as members of the family. The cooks and servers from the kitchens never spoke of the argument the former niahn'si had had with his son.

A week later, Kan ordered the guards to bring the tahn-chen in from the fields and up to the walls of the city. He went down and walked among them, peering up into their eyes trying to see if he could identify any characteristics of someone he knew. It was a fruitless task. The beasts bore no resemblance to the people they had once been. They looked at him, blankly; like over-sized pets. He sighed and turned to go.

Gingerly, a giant hand reached out and—very gently—pressed down upon his shoulder. The guards bristled but Kan held them back as he turned around. The shaggy giant cocked its head and made a low, grumbling sound in its throat. Then, with delicate finesse, he presented Kan with a single, yellow flower.

The End