

SUDOKU ODYSSEY:

Suki and the Beasts







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Dedicated to our village elders:

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Published by arrangement with Marie Anne's House, Inc.

For more information, address:

Marie Anne's House, Inc.

PO Box 6788

Ocala, Florida 34478

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9749595-7-3

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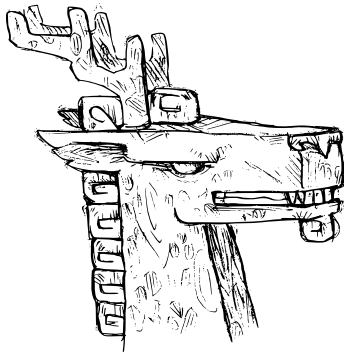
Story

Village Ovens

First Contact



Prologue



"That's my Suki, my little wild thing," Papa smiled over the wooden cradle as Mama rocked it wearily. "You wore your Mama out today!"

Suki, already bright and curious at two Seasons old, reached up and grabbed at the wooden Beast-head the carver had made her as a toy. She shrieked with delight and wiggled her strong little legs. In her infant mind, she was going on some grand adventure....

As Suki grew, Papa added a pole to the Beast-head to turn it into a kind of hobby-horse. Suki raced it through the small village, pretending she really was riding one of the giant Beasts that grazed on wild flowers on the outskirts of the settlement – particularly in the marshy field down beside the Great River.

Papa was helpful to the entire village. When the women who baked at the community ovens complained of the Sun's heat, he put up a tent for them... and decorated it with twin carved Beast-heads in honor of Suki and her playmates.

One day, in her eighteenth Season of life, Suki was helping Mama brew mulghoberry tea as a treat for Papa, expecting that he would soon be home to swoop them both up into his arms and tell them he loved them.

He didn't come home, that evening or any other; Mama cried and worried and cried some more, and Suki, after she had stopped crying, simply puzzled over the problem of where he had gone.



Suki and the Beasts

The first volume of the

SUDOKU ODYSSEY

“Of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks, is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the slavery of Home, man feels once more happy. The blood flows with the circulation of childhood.”

– Sir Richard Francis Burton, Journal

Suki took a deep breath before entering the thatched-roof hut. “Suki, where have you been?! You’ve been gone since sunup! A girl of barely twenty seasons has no business running off and – What? Your coat is torn! Were you playing among those brambles in the field again?!”

“No, Mama,” Suki murmured, afraid that if she told the whole story, she would not be believed. She *had* been playing amid the brambles...

Suki accepted her punishment, going to her cot without supper, and while she lay there she listened to Mama cry. Since Papa had simply vanished two seasons ago, Mama was frightened and lonely, and now she was poor. She had been ill since the last Full Moon, unable to serve her turn at the community ovens and at least earn daily bread for the two of them. Suki heard her cry every night, heartbroken and exhausted, burdened with too much stress, too many questions, and not enough food to go ‘round.

As Suki lay there, she remembered Papa. She smiled in the dark as she recalled his sweet, winsome grin, his kind, generous heart, and his big, strong hands, gentle yet rough, the solid, calloused hands of a woodworker. She missed him terribly and felt like she was going to cry, too.

To push back the pain, she thought about what had happened to her that day in the field. She'd ripped her coat on mulghoberry thorns, gathering the big juicy berries with which to dye her hair purple. A man had showed her seven Suns ago that if a person dyed his hair and sat very still, the giant Beasts – which grazed on flowers – would ignore him and come close enough to watch.

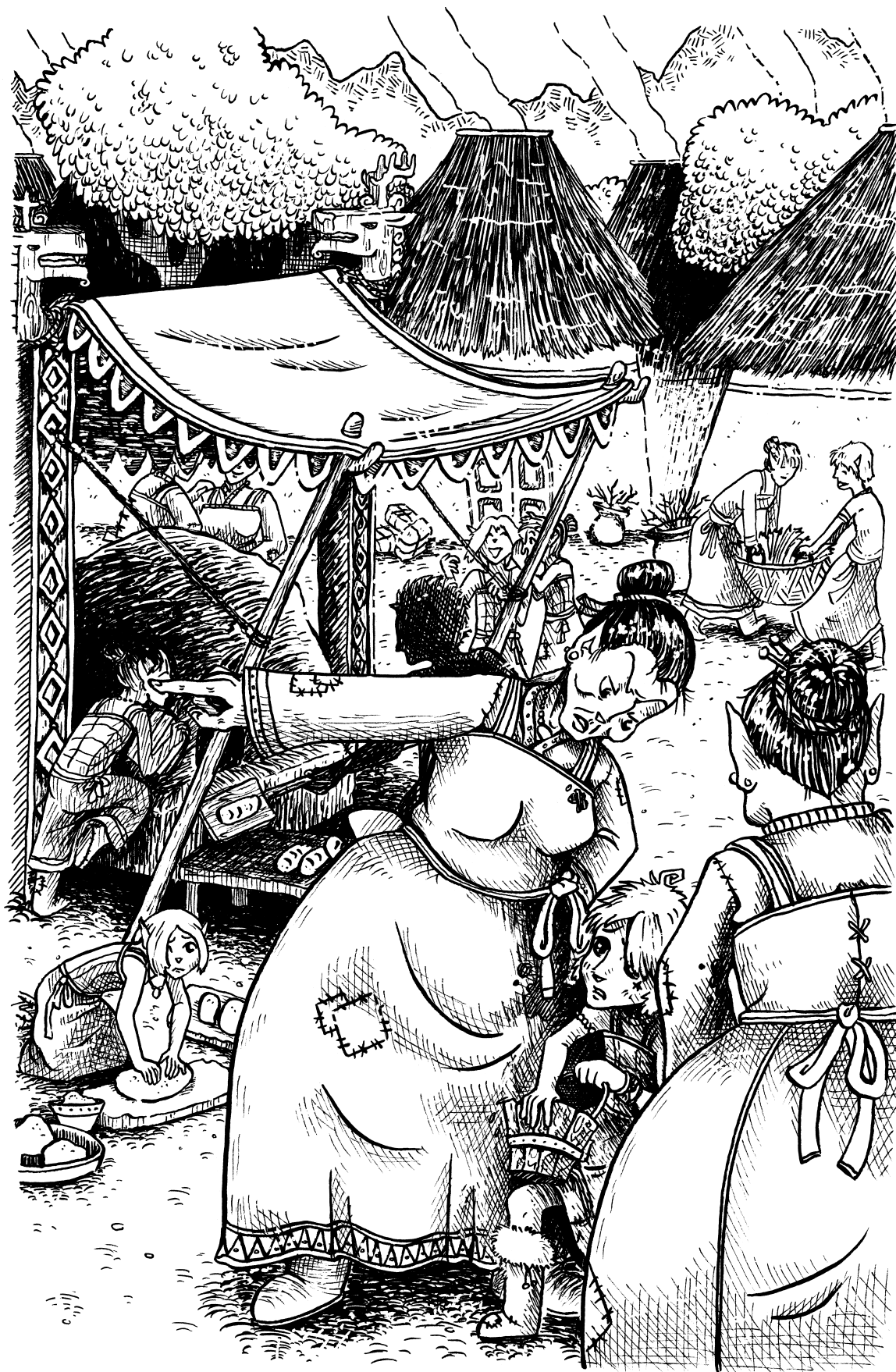
These Beasts were at once terrifying and awesome... but they fascinated Suki. They had small pointed ears, antlers, and big furry bodies with long smooth tails that ended in a fluffy brush. They were most often black in this part of the world, but Suki had seen them tri-colored: white, with orange and black patches like the quilt on her cot. There were some that were reputed to be patterned, and some, very, very rare, that were smoke gray. Suki's older cousin had seen a solid white one – just for a moment, and then it was gone. The Beasts were like that. They were there, grazing, for a minute and then – BAZAM! – they were gone, leaving behind only paw prints in the field grasses and a rush of wind.

Morning sun woke Suki, and after a scant breakfast, Mama sent her to work at the community ovens in her place. "We need bread, my daughter," she sighed tiredly, shaking her head over the girl's purple hair. "You're always exploring, always dreaming. I need your help, Suki. I know you'd rather play in the field, but for now you must do the work I cannot."

Dumi and Dumaki, grumpy elder women who oversaw the baking, scolded and ordered Suki about all day, requiring her to carry wood and water, beat heavy lumps of dough, and open the hot ovens while a baker took out the steaming, fragrant bread. The older girl apprentices looked down on Suki and bullied her, laughing at her ineptitude and her purple hair. "She looks like a freak," they tittered behind their hands. Undaunted, Suki worked just as hard as Mama would have.

One girl apprentice, Wen, who didn't get along with the others, liked Suki and made friends with her. "I wish I was brave like you," she moaned. "I'm forty seasons old, but I'm a coward and I'll always live in dishonor... here, stuck in this hateful kitchen, with Dumi and Dumaki yelling at me."





Suki went to the ovens every day for a complete Moon-Cycle while Mama recovered. Unable to do Mama's job and Papa's too, she could not gather enough wood in the dusk hours to supply the kitchen. Sighing, she brought her prized toy, the carved wooden Beast-head on a pole-the only thing she owned of value to her-along with her small bundle of sticks.

Dumi gasped. "What, child? Your toy Beast? You cannot burn that!"

"B-but I cannot gather enough wood," Suki moaned. "Papa's axe is too heavy for me, and the growing limbs are green and will not break. There is not enough lying on the ground."

"It's all I have," she whimpered.

"Don't cry, Suki," Dumaki said, her stern, gruff manner softened by the pity she felt for the fatherless girl. "Take your toy home. We'll make do with the sticks."

Every day at the ovens, Suki looked up at the twin Beast-heads above the tent and felt connected to her Papa. Sometimes it helped, but other times it just made her sad. Rummaging in Mama's remembrance-chest one day, she found the special toy that had been attached above her cradle. Holding it close to her chest, she thought of Papa, how much she loved him, and how lonely and empty she was now that he was gone.

One day, a man with blue hair and an odd-looking coat staggered wearily through the village. He stopped at the hut where Suki and her mother lived. Mama was dragging a tub of wet clothes to a wash line beside the hut.

"Madam," he croaked. "May I trouble you for a drink of water? I've come a long way, and I am very tired."

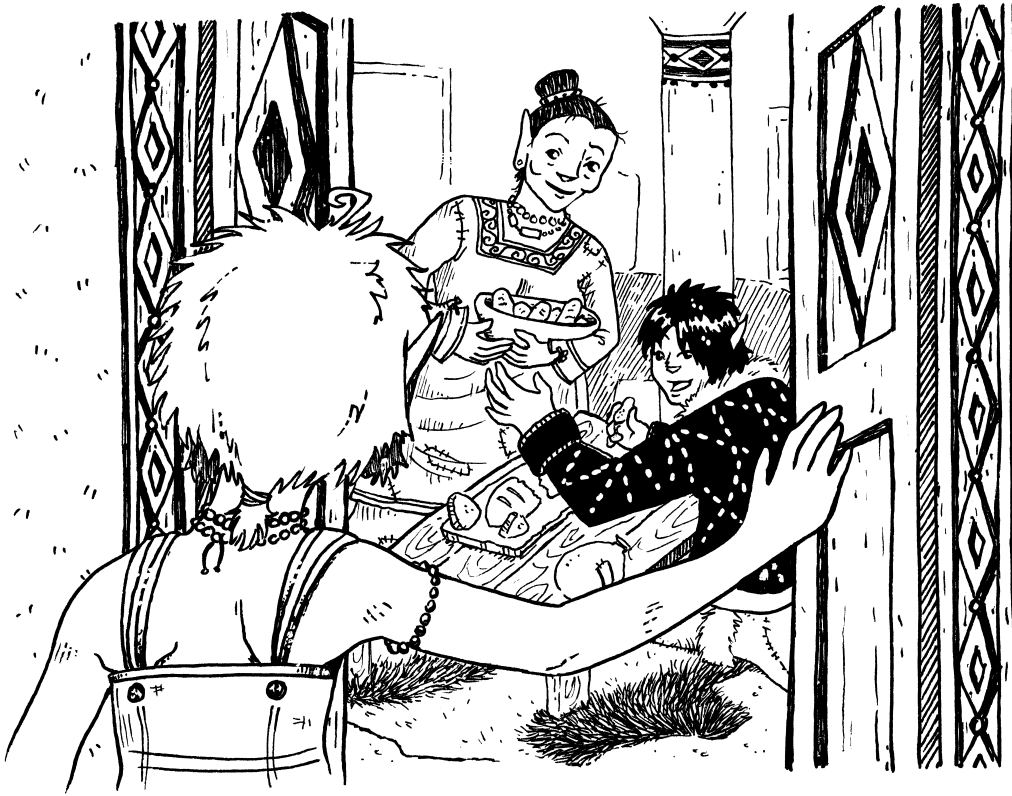
Mama stared at him warily a moment, sizing him up. His hair looked weird, but he was dusty and ragged and seemed too weak and worn to rob her hut or attack her. Still, it was best to be careful. After all, Papa was not here....

"Please, Madam? I am Sanjo Kaku, from the country of Rozu. I am very thirsty. All I desire is to rest awhile, and somehow make it home."

Mama finally allowed him to enter the hut and sit upon a large felt-and-skin rug at the low wooden table. She brought him goat cheese, a crust of bread, a few pieces of dried fruit, and gave him a skin bag of water from which to drink.

By now the sun was setting, and Suki's work at the ovens was over. She entered the hut with the day's bread ration wrapped in a cloth, expecting there would soon be supper. She didn't expect to see a man with blue hair seated at the table, talking with Mama!





"Sir?!" Suki bowed politely, but she couldn't stop staring at the visitor. His clothes were unusual, and he even smelled different than the people in her village. "Where are you from?" she asked boldly.

"Rožu." He smiled at her interest even as Mama slapped her for being rude.

"How did you get here?" Suki rubbed her stinging cheek and braced herself for another slap.

"I rode a Beast," he answered, a bit proudly. "It brought me here – well, through the gorge south of your village – then I fell from the Beast. I've been walking ever since. It's a long way back to Rožu."

"Rode a Beast?" Suki gasped, her eyes wide with awe and delight. *A person could ride the mysterious, furry giants and end up in faraway places?* Her mind was spinning with the possibilities, but Mama was putting their guest out on the street.

"Leave at once, Mr. Kaku," she ordered, pushing him out the door and pointing down the dirt street leading from the village to the Southern Gorge, where the Great River narrowed into churning rapids and a few large rocks broke the surface. "You will only cause trouble for us here."



Mama sent Suki to bed with only the crust of bread to eat. "That stranger was a very dangerous man," she told her as she extinguished the grease lamp.

"Yes, Mama," Suki pretended to agree. She closed her eyes, but she couldn't sleep—her mind was boiling like water. Use those powerful lords of the field and forest to go places?! She never slept a wink that night, but oh, how she dreamed! She thought of fields of flowers, and swift-footed Beasts... and her beloved Papa, who had simply vanished.

On her next free morning, Suki dyed her hair purple again, hoping to blend in with the candleblossoms on the marshy edge of the Great River. The candleblossoms' abundant nectar attracted fuzbees... and a fat golden fuzbee buzzed around her head.

She watched with anticipation as a giant black Beast padded her way, its gigantic paws making quiet *glop, slip, slop* sounds in the shallow water and gushy mud. It was so huge that its magnificent head rose far above the grasses and reeds as it scanned the area for flowers to eat. Oh, how she hoped it was hungry for the tall candleblossoms!

Closing her eyes, she scarcely dared to breathe. Candleblossoms wobbled ever so slightly in the wind on either side of her. The fuzbee droned loudly near her ear.

She felt a warm puff that smelled like cut hay and sweet nectar, and heard a snort. She slowly opened one eye, and there it was – a gigantic



Beast, its leathery nose and wet, agile lips against her head, its tongue emerging to lick her purple hair...

She shuddered. It seemed a bit puzzled at getting a mouthful of hair instead of tasty purple florets, but it kept sniffing around. When its breath fell onto her neck, it bit gently into her jacket and lifted her off the ground.

BAZAM! The world suddenly shot by like a blazing comet in the night sky. Within moments, Suki was dropped hard into chilly, wet grass... far, far away from home.

She lay there a moment, stunned by the swift motion and sudden drop. Had it been an accident? Did the Beast find her unappetizing and dump her? All she knew was that she was lying among tall, dripping grasses that seemed to be an enormous goat pasture.

Suki shook her head to clear it and got to her feet. Her skin mukluks had kept her feet dry, but her yak-wool coat and linen blouse were damp, and her skirt was positively soaked. Good thing she was wearing woolen trousers beneath it...

She parted the grasses and saw that there were no candleblossoms here at all. Instead, there were a lot of spotted, droopy-headed orange lilies she knew as dangle-dits and huge, tall plants with big yellow faces like the Sun. Her dyed hair was the only purple around.

She heard a cry of "Hey, you!" and a sharp whistle. She scrunched down among the grass, but her purple hair couldn't hide amid weeds, and yellow and orange flowers.

"Who are *you*? You have awfully weird hair for a little girl," the older boy wisecracked, biting into a chunk of dried meat he took from a pouch on his hip.

Suki looked at him, heart pounding. She was starved – she had left the hut without breakfast – but she didn't want to beg food, especially from a stranger.

The boy noticed her staring at his snacks. "Want some?" he offered.

"Thank you," she said shyly, taking a chunk.

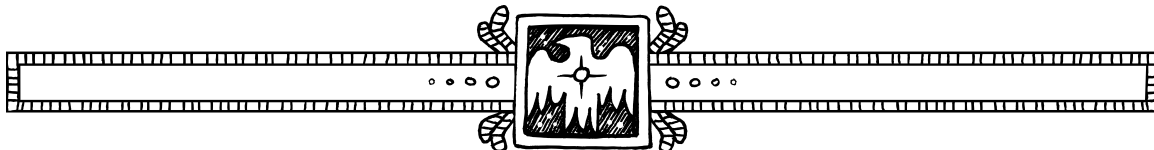
It was good! It tasted sort of like the meat Mama put into stews, when they could afford it, but this was better because it was not as stringy. She accepted four more pieces and ate them ravenously.

"Who are you?" the boy asked again.

"I'm Suki. What's *your* name?"

"Albard."

"Where did you come from, Suki?" Albard asked. "How did you get into our hay field, anyway?"



"A Beast carried me," Suki told him proudly. "I'm from a village called Betuun."

"Where the dickens is *Betuun*!?" Albard frowned. "This is *Tolia*."

"I'm not sure," Suki replied honestly. "I was standing in a field of candleblossoms near the village, and the Beast that was eating them brought me here. Where are we, anyway? Where's the Great River?"

"Oh, you are lost," Albard snorted. "There's no river around here. The closest one's five Suns' journey to the Southwest. We call it Geryon. Hey – did you say a *Beast* brought you here?"

Suki nodded.

Albard whistled sharply. "I've heard of Travelers before; I've just never met one. How do you do it, anyway? The Beasts are awfully fast... and *very big*!"

"You dye your hair and pretend you're a flower, silly!"

Albard folded his arms and frowned. "Good grief! Is this some stupid game that *girls* play?"

"A grown man did it," Suki challenged, tossing her head. "Do you want to try?"

"All right. But if I look stupid and my brothers laugh at me, I'm going to blame *you*," he said, as Suki looked for berries with which to turn her purple hair orange.

"I need to color my hair, but yours is already perfect," she giggled. "And you have spots on your face too... like one of *these*." She cupped a spotted, vivid-orange dangle-dit bloom in her hand.

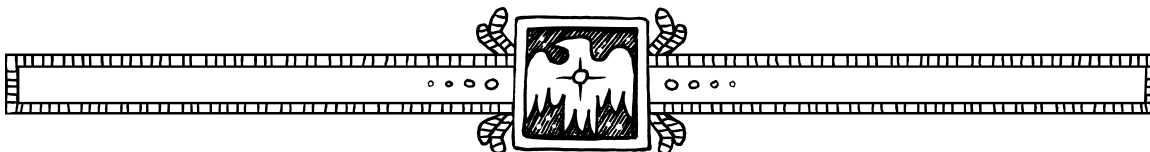
"Hey! Those spots on my face are called 'freckles'," Albard snapped huffily. "Don't tell me they don't have *those* where *you* come from!"

"They look funny!" Suki laughed out loud. "And you look just like a great big dangle-dit flower!"

Suki fell silent. Deep orange, bumpy-skinned melons, growing on a prickly vine amid the grasses, caught her eye. She broke one open and saw that its juicy pulp was just the color she wanted her hair to be. She found it also had a special advantage... when she mashed a melon onto her head, it smelled very sweet, like honey.

"Phew! You *stink*!" complained Albard.

A swarm of fuzbees, attracted by the sweetness, descended upon Suki. The large, velvety golden bees had a nasty sting, and she didn't know where to hide. Albard ducked among the grasses, yelling, "The pond, Suki! Dive into the pond!"





She ran, stumbling blindly through the grasses in the direction he indicated. Suki plunged beneath the murky water.

But she could only hold her breath so long—what could she do? She sloshed around underwater, fighting the need to breathe, till she got the idea to suck air through a pipe-stem; those grew at home, too, in the Great River marsh. Suki stayed under until the gooey sweet fruit pulp had washed out of her hair and she figured the fuzbees would leave her alone.

She emerged with a gasp. She didn't know why Albard was laughing until she saw her reflection in the dark water... her hair was now as orange as his.

"Let's go!" Suki cried.

They looked around to see if a Beast was near. There was a ginger-colored one feeding in a good thick stand of dangle-dits, its head down in the grass as if it didn't notice them at all. Suki and Albard crept up very slowly and carefully. Albard took his hat off his head.

Albard's orange hair and spotty cheeks looked good to the Beast. It picked him up by his shaggy hair and carried him away... with Suki in his arms. BAZAM!

Yuck! The Beast, having tasted Albard's hair instead of a succulent dangle-dit flower, dropped him – nay, spit him out – onto a dry, rocky rise where there were no flowers at all.

The Beast disappeared, and, as the countryside was nothing but rocks and short, wind-burned brown grasses on dry, cracked soil – not even any insects save a few hairy hill-bugs – Suki and Albard got bored. Seeing a water-crane fly overhead, they walked till they saw a stream.



"Last one across is a red-eyed slog!" yelled Suki, plunging ahead into the swift, clear, knee-deep waters that were very, very cold. Her mukluks were wet inside and her clothes soaked through from her pond dive and she really didn't care that she got wet again. Albard fell in face-first and got soaked, too, when he followed her across.

After a short hike uphill and down again, they found themselves in a field of golden-petaled sun-faces and rough grass as high as Albard's waist. The flowers dwarfed the young adventurers; the tallest plants were fully twelve heads high, and their nodding flowers and giant, scratchy leaves were nearly as wide as Suki was tall. The girl felt like a hill-bug, parting the thick stems and ducking in and out among them; Albard pretended to be lost in the Great Forest to the west of Tolia.

Their games and explorations occupied them until the sun went down. They ate the last of Albard's dried meat, and when the moon rose, turning the sun-faces into weird shadow-sentinels above the cold, windy prairie, they curled up in a nest of grass – both for dryness and for for warmth – and fell asleep.



Suki woke up in a bad mood. Her belly was growling, she was far away from home, and she missed Mama! She fussed and fretted despite Albard's best attempts to comfort her; she began to cry.

"I want Mama! I'm hungry!" she wailed.

Right away Albard realized he had a duty to provide for her. She was young and helpless; he was much older, a farmer's son used to herding goats and living in the fields. "Don't cry, Suki—I'll get us some breakfast," he told her. They were walking upstream, towards yet another marsh... the spring-head of the creek they'd crossed yesterday.

The grassy ground gave way beneath their feet to cold bogginess. "Watch your step, Suki!" Albard warned, lest she sink in the watery ground and disappear. He waded further, into a pool with a sound bottom, and cast in a string he'd pulled from his rucksack... baited with a dead hairy hill-bug he'd had in his pocket.

It wasn't long before he had caught two fat butterbass, their strong, slippery bodies coated with natural grease to keep them warm in the extremely cold spring-waters. He secured them well afterwards, piercing



their jaws with a sharp stick and tying them together with his string. Albard was a very good fisherman.

While he cleaned his catch, Suki tried to catch chirping, warbling birdieflies, which hovered and fluttered over the water and reeds. Their transparent wings of brilliant blue, gold, and purple sparkled in the bright, clear morning Sun. Albard interrupted her and asked her to find some dry wood, or grass, or anything to burn as fuel.

"Even marsh-candles will do," he suggested.

Suki couldn't find any dry sticks in the vicinity. Instead, she plucked marsh-candles – the fat, oily spikes of a common wetland plant – so he could cook their breakfast. When she had an armload, she piled them into a ring of stones he had made, sat beside them, and waited for him to start the fire.

"Stay back," he warned.

He pulled a reddish crystal from his pocket and aligned it with the rising Sun. A beam shot from it, and the greasy marsh-candles exploded into flame.



"This is how we start fires in my country," he said proudly, poking the new little blaze with a reed as Suki marveled.



He put the fish upon the fire to fry in their own grease. Soon, they were eating those butterbass – enjoying the crispy golden filets, oil dripping down their chins.

After their delicious repast, Suki was in a better mood and Albard was feeling generous. He gave the girl a piece of fire crystal from his sack and listened patiently as she taught him the names of the flowers growing in the marsh grass.

“Impressive... for a little blond pixie!” he teased gently.

Suki squatted down in the soggy marsh and looked at her reflection in a pool. Her hair was no longer orange; the fruit acids had dried it out and turned it golden. It was sticking out in all directions like a surface.

“Wheeee!!!! I’m a little surface!” she cried, running through the grasses up a slope to higher ground. BAZAM! – she was gone.

A moment later, Suki was on her back in a field of candleblossoms.

She heard munching; when the world stopped spinning, she saw the Beast who had brought her there eating the flower spikes directly above her head, grazing as harmlessly as a goat. She squinted at the creature’s soft, creamy-yellow underbelly fur with soft reddish shadings and decided it was a ginger tabby. She lay still, watching it eat; then the Beast moved its massive, antlered head and grazed off to her left side, still chomping noisily.

She rose as carefully as she dared, hoping desperately the magnificent creature wouldn’t bolt away. When she got to her feet, she saw stiff, evenly-spaced rows of candleblossoms. Looking between the stalks, she saw a central, flooded field of some type of grain she didn’t recognize.

She shook her head to clear her mind. Was she just *imagining* this orderly design? When she shook and blinked and shook again, it was inarguable that people had planted these fields. There were no other flowers at all, nor grasses, nothing but grain, shallow muddy water, and candleblossoms in a giant square that stretched nearly to the horizon.

She jerked her head around in response to motion beside her. That same Beast was dropping his nose into a fresh row of candleblossoms, walking along, placidly eating his fill like a woolly-yak or a goat.

If I can avoid scaring him, maybe I can ride on him! Suki thought.

She waited till his face was turned away, then slipped up beside him. She took hold of one of his velvety antlers, quickly hoisted herself onto his head behind his shaggy forelock, then – BAZAM! – she went for a ride!



In the mere blink of an eye, she found herself sitting on her bottom in a soggy border of bright-red three-petaled flowers she had never seen, marveling at the planning required to create this giant quilt-field. The rows of flowers stopped abruptly at a long wall made of flat gray stones. The Beast was grazing contentedly on the other side, munching dangle-dits. Dangle-dits had a distinctive fragrance when crushed or bruised.

This display was a garden, like the fruit orchard at home!

Suki walked along the stone wall, wondering what manner of people would plant flowers and feed the Beasts as if they were common livestock. She walked until she found a gravel road, wide and level... very different from the irregular, rutted dirt tracks her own village called roads. She kept going until she came to a village.

It was a prosperous village—well-dressed, well-fed adults hurried about their business and happy-looking children played games in the roads. Suki was too enchanted to feel self-conscious, even though, in her muddy yak-wool clothes and beat-up mukluks, she undoubtedly looked like a ragged beggar to them.

Suddenly, Suki heard a distant rattling and saw clouds of fine gray dust. A strange contraption was headed her way, the likes of which she had never seen: a kind of huge basket fixed between a pair of grinding-wheels, pulled along by two men with long poles. Both men were dressed in fine red garments, but they were hooked together at the shoulders with a heavy wooden beam, like prisoners, and wore harnesses of skin ropes. A big old woman, who reminded her of Dumi, was riding in it! Imagine! A woman riding in a basket pulled by men!

"The Honorable Lady Qin-Li!" they cried.

The Honorable Qin-Li gave Suki such a withering look she felt like a criminal. Little foreign Suki hadn't known she was expected to bow!

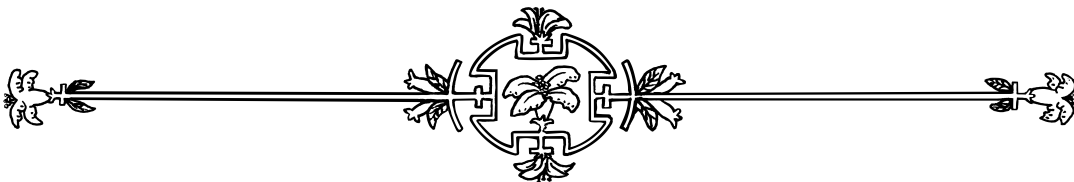
"Stop the rickshaw! Bring her before me!" Lady Qin-Li demanded.

Suki trembled. Faced with this angry elder, unaware that she'd even done wrong, she was terrified.

Two village men took Suki prisoner and held her, shaking in her mukluks, in front of the Honorable Lady... the city's noblest elder matriarch, second only to the King. In his absence, her word was law.

"You dare to gaze upon me and not make obeisance?" she thundered. Her eyes were black as the midnight sky, but blazed like fiery coals. Frown lines were etched upon her face, and her mouth turned down exactly the way Dumi's did when things didn't go her way. "Who are you, child?"

"M-madam, I am Suki, from the country of Betuun—" Suki began.



"Never heard of it! Away, to the fields! Let her plant our food, and flowers for the Beasts!"

Suki was dragged away and put into servitude.

As Suki was being led away to her new life in a strange place, she saw a man crossing the street when the cry came: "The Honorable Lady Qin-Li!"

Now this man already had a black eye (he'd been in a fight with a fellow bricklayer). He wasn't about to move aside, wait, or anything else! He was done for the day, on his way home to his wife and children. He ignored the cry and crossed in front of the rickshaw... sadly, with serious consequences. Ped was knocked down beneath the whirling wheels and injured far worse than he had been in the fight.

Lady Qin-Li shouted "Stop the rickshaw this instant!"

The yoked men dragged the wheeled contraption to a halt. Lady Qin-Li peered over the side of the basket and frowned blackly at the groaning man lying in the street.

"How dare you not stop for my carriage?!" she demanded imperiously. "Stand to your feet and answer me!"

He could not rise to obey. His leg was badly injured.

Qin-Li could see this. "If you have broken your leg, fool, it is your own doing!" she scolded vehemently. "All citizens of Honkai are to stop for my carriage, and bow before me! You, apparently, think you're too good to do so!"

He shook an angry fist back at her. "I don't care who you are! I'll go before the King!" he threatened. "You won't get away with running over Ped Xing!"

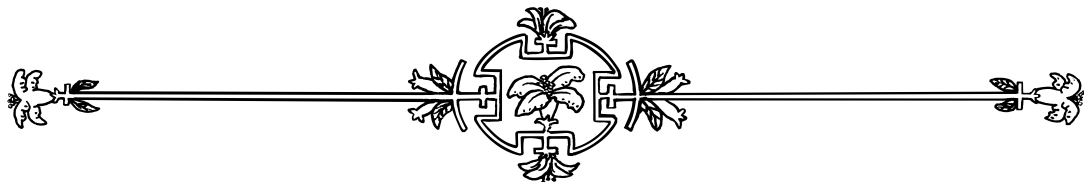
Her minions threw him in prison for his insolence. Suki shuddered at the fearsome, bad-tempered Lady and her great power.



An old slave named Mari Yin-Ong trained Suki in field work. She dressed the girl in a heavy apron with pockets full of seeds and led her to a flooded grain field with bare, muddy edges.

"You must plant your seeds in perfect rows around the edges of the grain paddy," she instructed her young charge.

Suki knew she was going to get slapped, but this just didn't make sense. "Why?" she asked, bracing herself for punishment.



Mari Yin-Ong was patient and didn't punish her for asking. "Flowers and *gabik*— that's what our grain is called — both grow in wet ground," she explained. "If we keep them separated, we can enjoy the flowers and the Beasts can eat their fill — yet the creatures will not trample our *gabik*."

"What will this kind be when they grow?" curious Suki asked, plucking out a long, awn-shaped seed with a bluish tip.

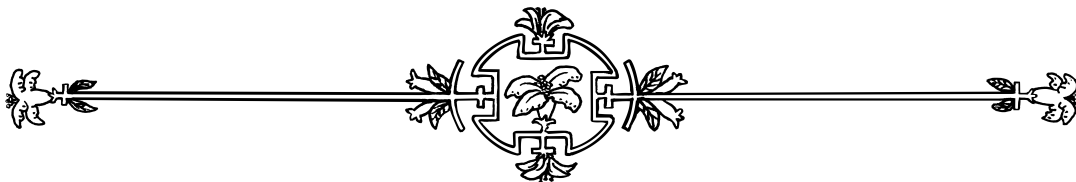
"Sky-cups," Mari told her. "They're sweet with nectar and brilliant blue... bluer than your little eyes."

Suki's feet grew soggy as her mukluks filled with muddy water and her back ached constantly from the bending and stooping. Fortunately, she slept in Mari's "hut" in an unexpectedly comfortable cot—actually, this slave's home was better than her own!

The really bad thing about this place was the food. It was sticky and gooky, full of the starchy *gabik*. It seemed that *gabik* formed the basis of the people's entire diet. It was fussy, too—when she cultivated the flower-rows, or weeded the fields, she had to be very careful not to disturb the grain.



Suki's field work taught her much. Planting and cultivating around the *gabik* paddies, she discovered the Beasts ate the flowers in a specific order, and always in the same order: first candleblossoms, then dangle-dits, then the red flowers (which happened to be called heart-stains), then the glorious blue sky-cups, which grew up quickly, bloomed, and set seeds in less than one season. The sky-cup borders were planted in rotation—there were always some just sprouting, some in bloom, and plants from which seed was being harvested to sow again.



Sky-cups were a treat to the local children, Suki discovered. One day, while she was weeding the rows of grain, she saw two little girls pluck a few of the large blue cups and drink their sweet nectar... ending the snack by eating them.

Their carefree play made Suki sad. It reminded her of her former life... of her little hut, of the field, of purple mulghoberries, of Mama and Papa, and of Wen, and even grouchy old Dummi and Dumaki. She wondered if she'd ever see any of them again. She even wondered what had happened to Albard.

"He was so nice to me," she sighed, fingering the piece of fire crystal he had given her.

She needn't have worried about Albard; when the Beast had mistaken her for a sunface and carried her to the candleblossom fields of Honkai, he had simply walked home. It was merely a five-Suns' journey east to his farm from the edge of the great Sunface Plains.

One day, Suki was tending a sky-cup border in bloom when Lady Qin-Li herself arrived in her rickshaw. Remembering her first experience with the Honorable Lady, Suki immediately fell to her knees and bowed low.

Now, Qin-Li was visiting the fields merely to see that they had been properly maintained, but when she saw little Suki's respect and reverence, she commanded that the child be brought before her.

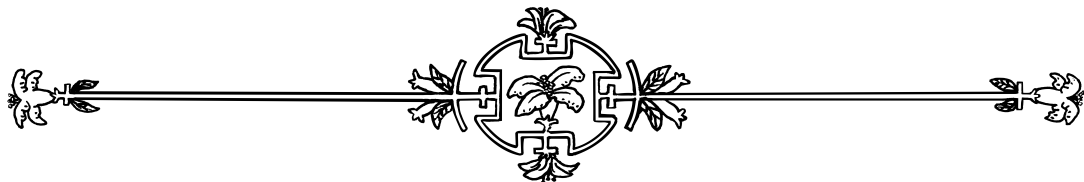
Suki groaned inside. *Again? What did I do this time?* she thought.

She was very surprised to be commended instead of punished. "You have learned respect, child," The Honorable Qin-Li smiled, her old, sour face crinkling as her lips curved upward. "Your work here is finished; you have served us well. Go in peace. You are released from bondage."

Released from bondage! Forgetting she was still wearing her work apron full of seeds, she tucked several of the big, blue, velvety sky-cups in her hair, which had faded back to its natural brown.

She ran to a fresh, undisturbed sky-cup border, where no one was working and no Beast had yet fed. Looking around, hoping to see one of the creatures approaching, she sat among the waist-high flowers and waited.

She remained there alone. A soft wind blew across the field, waving the gabik and caressing the scent from the bright-blue flowers, as if to remind her that not everything in Honkai had been painful. Just as she was feeling a slight fondness for the place, a smoke-gray Beast appeared, sniffed her head, and...



BAZAM! She was gone.

Good-bye, Honkai!



Suki fell among thorn-bushes on a dry prairie full of grasses and brush. The fall had been quite painful – those thorns hurt! – but it felt very good to walk on rocks and hard, solid soil for a change. A sweet smell in the air reminded her that she was hungry, and the position of the Sun told her it was well past supper time. She saw the Beast that had brought her feeding on the five-petaled, star-shaped pink flowers of those cruel thorn-bushes. Dodging vicious thorns, Suki plucked a few of the delicate blossoms and sniffed at them. They smelled like ripe mulghoberries, looked as soft as Honkai silk, and were encrusted with sugar crystals. They obviously weren't poisonous, for this Beast was eating them greedily.

No wonder the Beasts eat flowers, she thought. These are delicious!

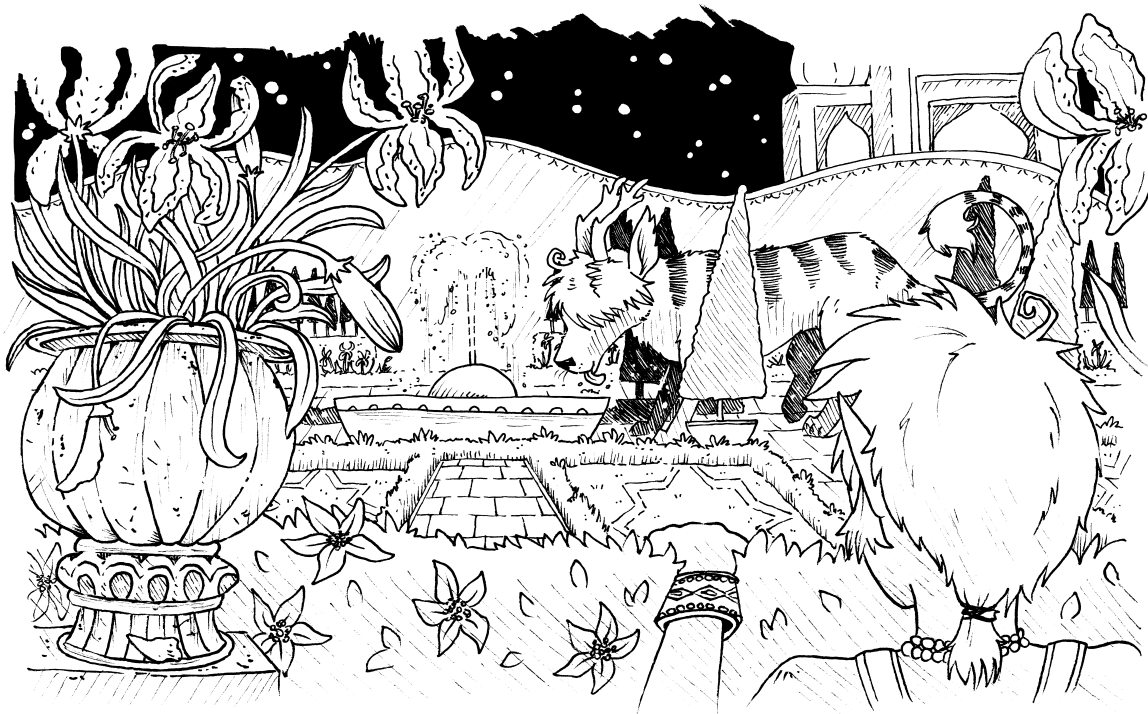
After Suki had eaten her fill, she looked for a place to sleep. The ground was hard, and there were no trees or even tall sunface flowers under which to take shelter anywhere close by. She had to find something, as it was getting dark. As she had already learned, prairies were cold at night.

She walked in circles, the thorns tearing frustratingly at her clothes. She saw no settlements in any direction except what looked like a city in the twilight on the south horizon, but even young Suki could tell that was at least a full Sun's journey away. It looked impossible to attain in a single evening. Sighing, she lay down among the thorn bushes.

They're better than nothing, and it really isn't cold now, she told herself.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, Suki was aware of a now-familiar motion, like that of a comet streaking through the sky. BAZAM! She felt the drop, and the *thud*, and woke in a garden. It *had* to be a garden, because she was sprawled in a perfectly square bed of dangle-dits and heart-stains, with candleblossoms at the rear and a low, tightly-clipped hedge of those pink-flowered thorn-bushes from the prairie around its border.





She sat up and shook her sleepy head to clear it. She could see that she was in the pleasure-gardens attached to a huge palace made of smoothly-polished white stone; even though it was quite dark now, she could identify the flowers she knew by scent, shape, and shadow. Across a paved walk of the same smooth, white stone, a beast was standing in a flowerbed eating something she had never seen before—it was a plant that was mostly stem and long, pointed leaves that looked like the ceremonial *ch'ani* swords used in Honkai. There was only one oddly-shaped flower at the tip of each stem, with three petals curving downwards and three pointing up, and the beast was biting these off, one by one... *chomp, chomp, chomp*. When Suki looked closer, she noted that each down-curving petal had a bright-yellow stripe on it and a strip of fuzzy golden hairs in the center of that... like a fuzbee crossed with a measuring worm.

When Suki explored the garden, she noticed *ch'ani*-plants everywhere. While climbing on benches, crawling through holes in the thorny hedge, and splashing in an oval pool that sprayed water into the air, she saw they were being grown in raised stone boxes, set out in formal beds around metal rings that measured the Sun, and planted in rows along the palace walls. Their big blooms had only a very slight fragrance, but even in darkness where their bright colors could not be seen, they were without doubt the most prominent plants in the garden.



Finally, wet from the fountain and absolutely exhausted, Suki curled up on a stone bench behind a hedge and fell asleep in the moonlight.

In the morning, Suki woke to the sound of chattering female voices. She rubbed her eyes and peeked through a gap in the tall hedge behind her – seven young girls, the oldest of marriage-age and the youngest not much older than herself, were walking down the path on the other side. They all had long, black plaits hanging down their backs and wore colorful, elaborately embroidered long coats over matching trousers that were tight at the ankles; their funny little slippers turned up at the toes and appeared, also, to be made of cloth. Each girl's garments were a different color of the rainbow: the youngest wore red, the next oldest, orange, on up to the oldest, the girl of marriage-age, who was clothed in royal purple. This young woman carried herself like the Honorable Qin-Li; she wore gold jewelry, including a head-band with sparkling purple gems. Suki surmised that these were the King's daughters.

The embroidered patterns on their clothing were apparently intended to resemble the flowers of those ch'ani-plants. A slave woman in white trousers and a short, plain white coat drew out a small knife, cut a white bloom, and handed it to the oldest princess by its long, stiff stem. Now, holding the flower like a staff of authority, she truly looked like the queen she would one day be.

Suki decided to call those flowers "queen's flowers."

In daylight, Suki got a more complete picture of the garden. The outer walls were made of the same stone as the palace. "Sugar-stars" from the prairie had been clipped hard and low, edging formal beds of all the other blooming things: dangle-dits, heart-stains, candleblossoms and many plantings of the beautiful, colorful queen's flowers. A few sugar-star bushes with large, bright-pink, especially sweet and tasty blooms grew in odd shapes on top of straight, bare stems; Suki hadn't noticed what she'd done last night, but in her eagerness to taste their flowers and play in the fountain, she'd trampled the heart-stains growing around them absolutely flat.

Uh-oh! I'm in trouble again, she thought.

It didn't take long for the gardener to see the ruined plants. At first he blamed the youngest princess: "Nalita's been roughhousing out here again, chasing birdieflies!" he groaned. "When will she ever learn to act like a lady?"



Suki remembered the Honorable Qin-Li and thought about how she might have even banished a disobedient, playful daughter, and she didn't want Nalita to get punished for something she hadn't done. Five seasons as a slave in Honkai had taught her a thing or two about taking responsibility.

Gulping nervously, she approached the old man, who was on his knees pulling out the heart-stains she had crushed and tossing them over his shoulder onto the ground. A Beast snorted roughly on the other side of the wall, surprised to see a meal come flying at him. He sniffed the pile; seeing that the plants were still edible, if no longer attractive to look at, he began munching contentedly.

"S-sir?" Suki began in a quivery voice.

"What?!" he barked gruffly. Servants' children were always bothering him.

"I-I'm the one who squashed your plants," Suki admitted. "I'm very sorry. I won't do it again."

He looked up and pushed back his straw sun-hat. His dark face was lined and roughened from exposure to the elements; he certainly looked stern. "Whose child are you?!" he barked. "I'll have you beaten! This garden belongs to King Pundoor!"

Suki was terrified. He probably wouldn't believe her, but she told the truth anyway. "My name is Suki. I don't belong to anyone here-my country is far away. I slept in His Royal Majesty's garden last night."

He squinted at her for a better look, hearing the foreign-sounding name. "You must've come from the Northern Circle," he commented, noting that Suki was much paler in complexion than the people of Chenkor and had slanted eyes. "Do all your people wear a beauty mark?"

Suki looked at him strangely, and he pointed to the star-shaped bluish stain on her left cheekbone. "That. That mark on your face."

"Oh, no sir. That's my birthmark. My Papa has the same kind. I left home looking for him, but I ended up here."

The gardener's temper had cooled off now, and he was intrigued with this brave young stranger. "Do you have a trade, little Suki?" he asked her. "A way to earn a living in this world till you find your Papa? Certainly you're too bright to beg."

"I can plant flowers," she replied, showing him the bag of sky-cup seed she'd taken with her from Honkai. "I planted fields in Honkai for, umm... five seasons, though the seasons are a bit different there than back home."

He finally smiled. "Well, little Suki, my name is Abo. I'm head gardener to King Pundoor, and my word carries a lot of weight around here. I can house you in my quarters until you're ready to continue your search, if



you'll work in the gardens with me. It is the very height of Bud-and-Bloom, and I need all the help I can get."

Suki agreed to help Abo through Bud-and-Bloom into Seed-Time in exchange for room and board. She was so glad to be treated as a hired hand instead of a slave that she went to work immediately, pulling weeds in the hot sun. Abo offered to provide her a hat.



"With your pale-golden skin, you'll blister out here," he said.

Suki worked hard-as hard as any of Abo's veteran gardeners – and her quick intelligence and desire to learn impressed him.

He taught her how to fertilize the land, how to water the ground in a hot, dry country, and how to grow flowers from parts other than seeds.

He pulled a blooming queen's-flower from the dry garden soil. Suki had never seen a bulb before, and had no experience with growing things that did not thrive in marsh conditions. She was amazed.

"Bulbs are self-contained, portable packages," he explained, showing her the egg-shaped underground bud with the plant growing from the top and roots coming from the bottom. "The bulb itself contains the flower in miniature, waiting to burst forth the following season in response to rain."

When Suki wanted to understand more, he explained stem, leaf and root cuttings. "Bulbs are natural," he told her, "but sometimes nature needs help. Seeds do not always form, do not always grow, and sometimes, do not result in a desirable garden plant. That is when we generate plants from other parts: a leaf, a branch, even a cut or broken piece of the root."



He took a knife and demonstrated this by cutting a branch of a sugar-star plant. "This shrub has exceptionally fragrant blooms, and that is what we want to foster," he said, inserting the cut end into the ground. "Now, with care and with rain, this will be a bush exactly like that one."

Suki watched him intently. "I'd like to try cutting a new plant," she breathed, eyes on the sharp knife in his calloused hand.

"Be careful, young Suki," he warned sternly. "A knife is not a toy, but a tool. You could slice off your finger instead of a branch if you do not cut properly."



Suki ceremoniously took the knife from Abo, cut a branch, and peeled back the green outer skin just as he had done. Likewise, she had selected partially-mature wood, firm enough to stand on its own but still green and growing... not brown, woody, and tough.



The old man smiled. "You did well for your first time. Your cutting is good, and you still have all your fingers. I believe I can trust you."

"Trust me?" Suki puzzled.

"You are proving to be a wise and diligent worker, Suki," he went on. "Keep that knife. It will become your best friend, if you respect it."

Suki vowed not to let Abo down.

When she was tired or overwhelmed, or when the servants' children tempted her to shirk and play with them, she remembered her agreement with Abo. In return for his knowledge, she shared hers: she gave him sky-cup seeds to plant and taught him about how the Beasts ate flowers in a specific order.

"They'll go to a far country to eat the 'next' flower instead of eating any other flower nearby. That's how I ended up here," she told Abo... explaining how she had put sky-cup flowers in her hair so that the Beast, thinking she was a meal, would pick her up and give her a ride.

"They won't harm you, but you have to be quiet and fool them to attract them," she said, going on to further explain her rather painful landing among thorny sugar-stars on the vast prairie at dusk.

Abo was intrigued by Suki's tale, fantastic as it sounded. He too had heard of Travelers who used these great furry creatures to go from place to place. It was uncommon for city dwellers, he said, but there were those in the outer provinces of Chenkor who had discovered the principle of the "flower numbers" and had used it to travel through many lands. Some of them had been honored by King Pundoor for their bravery and wisdom, and valuable trade goods they had given in tribute.

"Do you think your Papa may have been carried away accidentally by a Beast?" Abo asked her over a bowl of gabik and spiced vegetables when they took a break during Sun-high.



"I thought that might be what had happened to him, but I dared not say anything back home in Betuun, she told the gardener frankly. Those people are afraid of everything. I dyed my hair purple, so I could get close enough to watch the Beasts, and most everyone made fun of me."

"You are indeed brave, young Suki," Abo commended her. "Fearful, old-fashioned people often confuse an adventurous spirit with foolishness and mock what they do not understand."

After work, supper was still more gabik and vegetables, but Suki didn't complain. She had eaten so much gabik in Honkai she thought she'd die of disgust, but the way the people in Chenkor prepared it – mixed with chunks of a starchy, filling root called *batata*, with seasonal vegetables and very strong spices – it was actually tasty. Besides, she was working very hard here, and she was growing. She had already gained another head's worth of height, and her clothes and boots had had to be replaced. She was looking forward to the time when she would be free to resume her search for Papa.

But life wasn't all worry and work and planning for the future. Suki had learned a game from the servants—the first real game she had ever been privileged to play. Called Trick-Squares, it was based on the Principle of Five – that is, five irregularly-shaped pieces made of exactly five square blocks each had to be assembled into a perfect square, with no gaps, overlaps, or missing spaces. All the people of Chenkor played the game, from the great to the lowly, and it was particularly fashionable among older youths. In fact, children were required to learn the game in formal classes. To play skilfully was considered a necessary accomplishment, like cooking for a girl or a trade for a young man. Suki, with her quick mind, was already beating people who'd been playing Trick-Squares from the cradle.

One evening, when the Sun was coursing lower in the sky and Bud-and-Bloom had slid inexorably into Seed-Time, Suki was lying on her pallet in old Abo's hut. She was tired; she and the other workers had harvested twenty-five bags of fruits, bulbs and seeds, and bundles of cuttings from the palace gardens, which the slaves and hired hands would plant for another season of flowers and fruits, appropriately called "Second Bloom." Suki had agreed to work halfway into Seed-Time... and Abo had promised she could leave in seven more Suns. That would give her time to pack her belongings, find a place where the Beasts were still feeding, and launch into the next leg of her journey.



By the time Suki left, however, the Beasts had moved on because of the paucity of blooming things. Suki decided to follow the Tapuk River out of Chenkor. Even with no Beasts to ride or flowers to feed them, there were butterbass to catch and wild nuts to eat. Suki set out West-by-North, going upstream.

She walked for days in the protected bottoms of the river, staying in the shade of pambu trees and eating the copious nuts that were dropping daily. Of course, she had to compete with chatteruks and many kinds of birds, but if she worked smart instead of just working hard, she always had enough.



The peace of the river both energized Suki and calmed her anxious mind. Waking with the Sun each morning, she gathered pambu nuts and, using their oily meat as bait, caught the occasional tasty butterbass and fried it using Albard's fire crystal. Without the demands of servitude or even other people to talk to, she enjoyed the burble and gush of river water and the sounds of wild creatures.

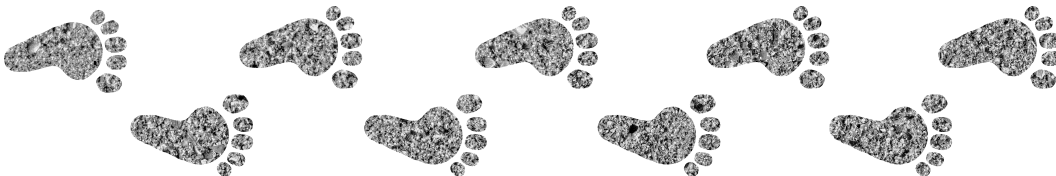




One of the nicest things about her journey was the assortment of oddities that she collected. She had turned her skirt into a rucksack, filling it with smooth stones, a perfectly-round pambu nut, and sleek, black bits of pambu driftwood she found washed up beside the river. She noticed that some of her driftwood pieces resembled the shapes used in the game of Trick-Squares – an X-shaped cross, for instance, and an L and a T– and she created game grids, drawing in the sand, five squares by five squares, for a total of twenty-five in all–placing her driftwood sticks within them, filling the grids completely. During the long afternoons when walking was hot misery, sitting in tree-shaded coves or on sandy beaches, she played, placing and re-placing her sticks, passing time, finding many solutions.



Suki walked and played Trick-Squares for twenty Suns, counting the Rises and Settings by carving notches on a stick. Her trousers grew worn at the knees, her Sun-hat fell apart, and she had long since



abandoned wearing any type of coat in the hot weather. Although she tried to stay in the shade of the river bottoms, her brown hair bleached to the color of gabik straw and her pale-yellow skin became pambu-nut-brown.

When Suki came to an unnaturally-cleared spot on the riverbank and an artificial canal on the twentieth Sun of her journey, she knew she was back to civilization... but she did not recognize the place. All she knew is that following the canal brought her to a settlement of small clay huts.

And there, feeding on freshly-opened sky-cups around a field of gabik in full head, was a big black Beast. She only knew sky-cups to be cultivated like this in the vicinity of Honkai!



Suki was hungry, so she ate a few to give her energy. Seeing some villagers rinsing clothes in the canal, she stopped and asked the way to the great city.

"I have goods for sale and a trade to ply," she told the small knot of women. "I am a gardener."

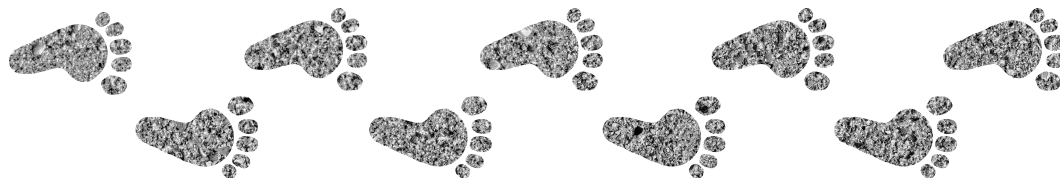
"Ah! Then you must go to the palace of the great Qin-Li," one woman told her, bowing reverently. "Her head gardener, a venerable man, has put his apprentice into prison for theft. The palace gardens are too extensive for one man to tend alone, no matter how gifted or wise. Lady Qin-Li's servant needs help."

Suki didn't know whether to laugh or cry, smile or shudder. The Lady Qin-Li – *again!* "Which way is the Lady's palace?" was all she said openly.

"North-By-East," a younger woman said softly, pointing to a high stone wall in the distant mist. "I was indentured there seven seasons, as a palace maid. The Lady is a harsh mistress, but a fair one," she said.

Suki thanked her and bowed goodbye. She knew how to please the great Qin-Li.

Another two Suns' journey brought her to a great wall, which stood as high as three men and seemed to have no gates. Looking for an entrance, Suki followed the massive, gray barrier until she saw a man in a spiked helmet and metal breast-plate, with a ch'ani sword at his side.



"Halt!" he cried, drawing the weapon.

Suki knew enough to bow. She threw herself to the ground, face-first, till the guard barked, "To your feet, young miss! What is the nature of your business with the Lady Qin-Li?"

Suki obeyed and said in a trembling voice, "I am a gardener, seeking employment with the great Lady... it was told to me that her head gardener lost his apprentice and requires assistance."

"You are young for such labor, miss," the guard frowned. "The work is heavy... and the Lady's estate stretches from Rising Sun to Setting Sun. A position of honor it may be, but apprenticeship to the Lady's beloved Gan-Yo-Chu is more than chasing birdieflies and sprinkling flowers with a watering pot," he said as he sheathed his sword.

"I am prepared for hard labor," Suki countered with her shoulders back and head high. I come recommended by the venerable Abo Jihn, gardener to King Pundoor of the land of Chenkor. Under his guidance, I tended the palace pleasure-gardens for two full seasons." Suki breathed hard and gulped as she continued on to confess, "I learned hard work, discipline, and respect by planting sky-cups in Honkai's gabik fields... as a prisoner of Lady Qin-Li herself."

The guard seemed shocked, but he was also impressed. Suki's ragged appearance and deeply tanned skin showed him she was no stranger to a rough life outdoors, and her return to her former mistress was a good indication that she truly wanted to *work*.

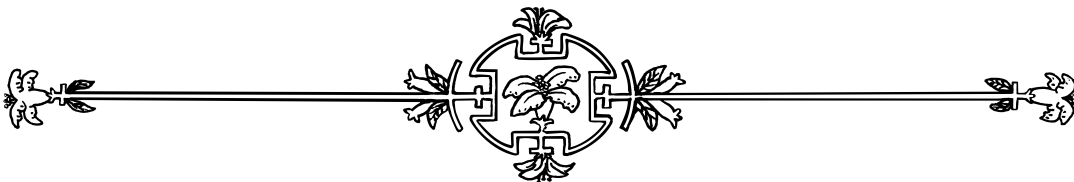
"I'll take you before the Lady," he bowed.

Qin-Li did not recognize Suki's outward appearance, but remembered the girl's voice. "You wish to return to my service, young Suki?" the elder matriarch gasped, taken aback that anyone would actually *want* to do that.

"Y-yes, oh great Lady," Suki avowed. "It has been told me that your gardener has lost his apprentice. I wish to train in that man's place."

"It is hard, hard labor, child," Qin-Li said. "Second Bloom is fully upon us, and there are many tasks to be done in my gardens. Gan-Yo-Chu is a harsh disciplinarian. Are you sure you wish to accept such a grueling responsibility?"

"Oh, but madame! I have come with the recommendation of Abo Jihn, head gardener to the King of Chenkor. He has given me his seal – and these flower bulbs – as proof." Suki brought forth the golden seal with the emblem of the queen's flower and seven of the fat ovoid bulbs that looked like a woman's fist encased in a papery brown skin.



Qin-Li examined the offerings with enthusiastic curiosity. Royal flowers in *her* garden? As Suki waited, her heart in her throat, the Lady's old, sour face crinkled upward into a satisfied smile.

"Very well," she nodded. Clapping for her house servant, she told him to "Show young Suki to her new quarters immediately."



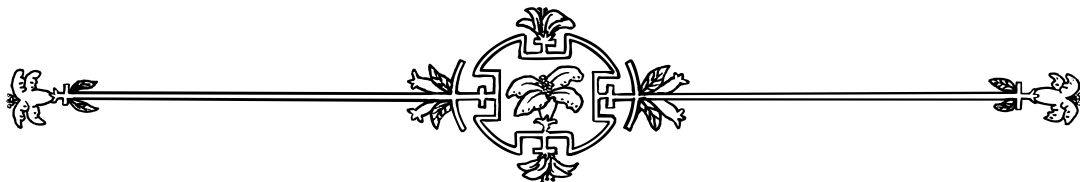
At Gan-Yo-Chu's order, Suki planted as many queen's flowers as she could propagate by cutting the bulbs into quarters with her knife. Second Bloom was kind to the exotic plants; Qin-Li walked in her gardens every day, and she impatiently watched them inch forth from the soil, their long, pointed leaves elongating until bloom-stalks formed. The day the first furled, flag-like purple bud became a silken, six-parted blossom of shimmering pale violet, she actually wept.



The Lady proclaimed a holiday when the new flowers began to bloom in earnest. She opened the gates to her palace grounds and allowed the citizens of Honkai to celebrate with a great fair on the mown fields of the South Hill. Townsfolk came to sell their wares and demonstrate their trade-skills, while Suki and several slaves gave tours through the lovely palace gardens.

"These flowers indeed belong in the garden of a queen! Nothing like this has ever before been seen in this land," they marveled.

The street fair lasted six Suns. Tradespeople sold their goods for money, and in turn made food and beverage merchants rich. Qin-Li benefited too – the great Lady gained honor and fame as the first one in Honkai to possess the new, beautiful queen's flowers, and exacted tribute from all in exchange for the privilege of coming to see them.



Bun Aki was one of the townspeople who came. He paid his tribute to the tax collector and entered Qin-Li's tall wooden gates, ushered through by limping prisoner Ped Xing, who was clad in a bright-yellow outfit and stuck with the unenviable task of directing traffic.

A wood-carver by trade, Bun was already well known throughout the West Quarter, the section of Honkai where most new foreigners settled. Children loved him, and he loved them; he made them dolls and wagons and wooden Beasts to play with.

"They remind me of my daughter," he'd sigh as he watched the children race away with their hand-made treasures. "It's been many, many seasons. Will I ever get home? Will I see her again?"

Suki gathered a group of visitors to tour Qin-Li's Rainbow Garden when she saw a large wooden wagon, drawn by a tall, bent-backed man, creaking by at a distance. Filled with wooden toys and tools and kitchen goods, it looked like nearly every other tradesman's cart on the South Hill's green expanse, and she thought nothing of it; she just called out to see if its owner wanted to join the tour.

"See the queen's flower, prize of the great Qin-Li, in every color of the rainbow!" she cried.

Bun turned his head. He made a wide circle, to fasten the cart's yoke to a tree, and as he did, Suki saw the life-size Beast-head carved on the back.

"*Papa!*" she screamed, waving her arms and beckoning.

Bun was flabbergasted, hearing the familiar voice. "*Suki...?*"

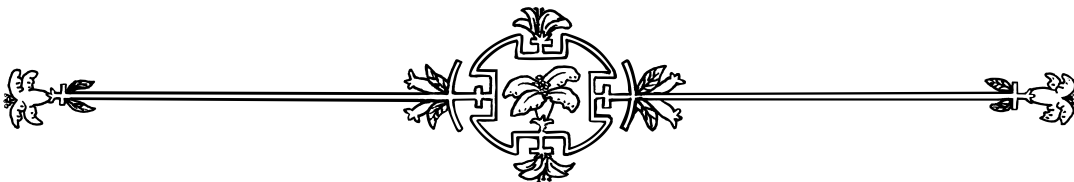
"It's me, Papa! It's really *me!*" she cried, hopping up and down, heeding nothing but him.

Bun didn't believe it. Thinking his lonely eyes and ears were playing tricks on him, he looked for the blue, star-shaped birthmark on Suki's left cheekbone... an unmistakable giveaway that exactly matched one on his right wrist.

It was there!

"My little daughter," he finally choked, tears clouding his eyes as he left his wagon and hugged her tight.

Suki gave her group an extra-special tour for the benefit of her father.





"Queen's flowers have been grown by the royalty of Chenkor for tens of thousands of seasons," she explained proudly. "They come from an underground bud with a brown paper skin and soft white flesh. Inside, an embryo flower waits for the seasonal rains to bring it into bloom."

"How can a child less than forty seasons old know so much about flowers?" a townswoman in the group marveled.

Suki explained – also for Papa's benefit – that she'd begun with planting sky-cups as a slave in Honkai and had cared for the royal gardens of Chenkor after she was freed.

"Chenkor?! How could one small girl travel the great distance from Honkai to Chenkor, even if she had been strengthened by hard labor in the fields?" someone else asked.

Suki gulped. If she told the complete truth, she wouldn't be believed and might even be punished. "I rode a Beast," she finally said lightly, though her heart was pounding as she remembered how Mama had treated the visitor from Rozu.

The group burst into laughter. "Rode a Beast!" one man snorted. "How ludicrous!"

"Do slogs fly, too?" snickered another.

Suki's face reddened, but she did not defend herself or argue back. *Well, I know it's true, she thought. They can take it however they like. All I want is for Papa to believe me.*

He did. "A Beast *can* pick someone up and carry him off by accident," the wood-carver told Suki and her tour-group gently. "Maybe that's what happened to Suki. It's possible... it's how I got here."

Murmurs rippled through the group. Bun the wood-carver was a nice man and a talented craftsman, but he was still a foreigner. What kind of tale was this? Was he trying to subvert the city? Was he out of his mind?

"Call the Palace Guards!" one angry man yelled, shaking his fist.

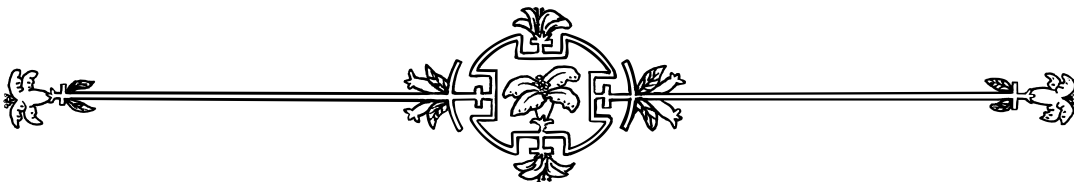
"What for?!" Suki cried hotly, stepping forward. "My father has done nothing wrong! If a Beast carried him here, how is that a criminal act?"

"You're both trouble!" a woman scolded, grabbing Suki by the hair at the scruff of her neck. A man made as if to carry her off to be punished.

"Give her to me!" Papa ordered in a voice that Suki had never heard him use. "If she deserves punishment, I will punish her myself!" He raised his hand as if to strike her.

The gesture fooled the crowd. They threw the girl from their midst and let her father have her.

A palace guard, who had been listening to the ruckus since it began,



wisely trying to determine who was really at fault, stepped in and dragged the whole lot of them to the justice hall of the great Qin-Li.

I just find Papa, and I destroy his life! Suki thought, weeping for her tragic mistake, envisioning the dark prison pit where the gardener's apprentice lay.

Qin-Li was shocked and saddened that this whole riot was over Suki. The girl was a golden apprentice; she was ten times as bright as the man who was in prison, and her work was nothing short of exemplary. Truth be told... she *liked* her!

The great Lady listened to both sides of the story – both the infuriated crowd and the hapless Bun Aki and Suki – without moving a muscle or revealing a hint of emotion. Finally, after a long deliberation, she spoke.

"We will see if a Beast can take a person away 'just like that'. Suki and her father will prove it is possible... or they will both be publicly punished for lying. Each of you will remain in my palace tonight, under guard... and tomorrow, we will go to the gabik-fields at sunrise, where the Beasts feed on flowers. We can not and will not have inflammatory statements spread in peaceful Honkai."

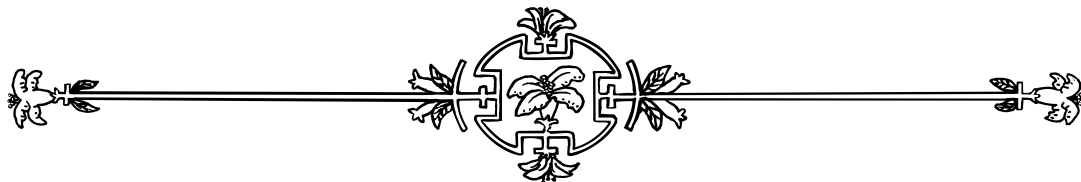
In the morning, Bun Aki, Suki, and the small crowd that had toured the gardens were taken by rickshaws to a quilt-like patchwork of gabik fields surrounded by wide borders of red heart-stains and blue sky-cups. The large shadow-shapes of Beasts feeding within the ribbon-like borders were evident even in half-light. It would have been a beautiful, almost mystical experience if it hadn't been for that huge, frightening, silent palace guard seated in the rear of each rickshaw!

As it was, it was more like a very bad dream.

Qin-Li arrived last – just as the Sun was peeking above the East horizon. Suki was breathing hard in her father's arms. She hoped the Beasts would be extra-hungry today. She didn't care where they ended up, just so long as she and Papa were together and proven truthful.

After ascertaining that everyone was present who ought to be, Qin-Li made a short speech. Suki had claimed the Beasts ate the flowers in a certain order-and it seemed to be true, since two of the creatures that were feeding in the heart-stain area went directly from there to the border of sky-cups. Qin-Li had understood immediately.

"Make a cap of sky-cups for each of them," the wise old woman decreed. "If they are telling the truth, a hungry Beast will surely take them away – out of here where they will not cause any more trouble."





Suki squirmed round in Papa's arms to watch his face during the test. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be thinking of old times far away. Was he thinking of Mama, and their little hut, and the tiny village of Betuun? Was he tired of being a vagabond, and sorry he had ever seen the world go by in a flash like a shooting star?

"My little Suki," Bun Aki murmured, squeezing her tighter, trying to block out the

laughter and taunts of the crowd, humiliated at wearing an overturned basket stuck full of flowers and hoping against hope that a Beast would cooperate.

Poor Papa! I've made him look like a fool, Suki fretted to herself as the crowd grew louder and Qin-Li announced that the test was...

BAZAM!

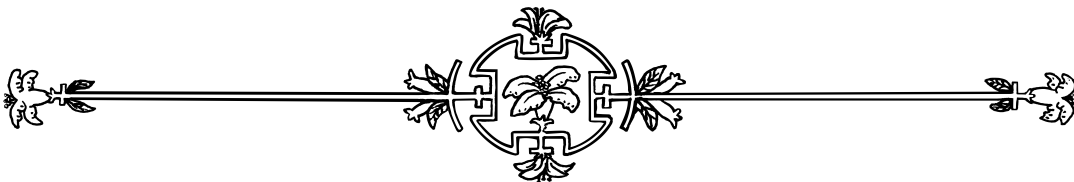


All around the wide prairie there was nothing but brilliant sun, grass, ground-warblers, and sugar-star bushes. A particularly lush thicket overhung a babbling stream... where the Beast that had carried Suki and her father out of Honkai dumped them most unceremoniously. It didn't know or care that they would be chilled and wet. All the creature wanted was a mouthful of sugar-stars.

"Unh! Papa!?" Suki mumbled, thinking the whole episode with her father might have been a particularly vivid dream. She raised her head from the water to look around for him.

"Yes, Suki, I'm here," he reassured, sitting up in the cool spring water, the silly basket-hat falling off his head and floating away. "But I have absolutely no idea where we are."

"I think we're in the land of Chenkor again," she told him, squinting in the bright morning, hand to her brow to block the Sun as she looked across the prairie. "The last time I came here, it was almost night."



"Y-you've been here before?"

"Yes, Papa. I've been to many places looking for you."

Papa was suddenly angry. "You ran away?!" he thundered. "You left Mama?! What is she going to do without you?!"

Suki dropped her head in shame. "I only wanted to bring you home so we could be together again," she said in a small, sad voice. "I didn't mean to make it harder on everyone."

"Well, now that we're homeless, we must make every effort to find our way back to Betuun," Papa declared. "If a Beast can take us far from home, it can surely take us back there."

"But Papa! Remember? The Beasts eat flowers in a certain order. After they eat sugar-stars, which have five parts, they must eat the queen's flowers, which have six."

"Queen's flowers?!" Papa sputtered. How will we find a royal palace out here, in the middle of *nowhere*?!"

"Remember, Papa; I haven't merely cultivated the queen's flowers; I've learned their nature and how they grow. In their natural state, they are found in rich, chalky soil amid grasses, on prairie land such as this. The ones you saw in Qin-Li's garden have been captive-bred, like our goats and woolly-yaks at home.

"We may actually find some out on this wide grassland," Suki assured authoritatively. "Look for large flashes of bright violet-purple away from the water. Purple is their natural color."

"Brrrr! My sandals and clothes are soaked through with this chilly water! You must be cold, Suki."

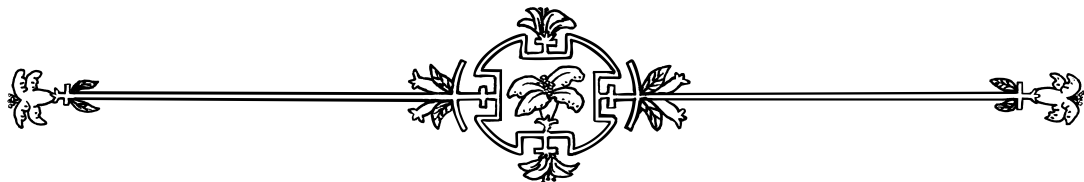
"Cold water is good, Papa—it is where the butterbass live."

"Butterbass?!"

"They are oily fishes with fat bodies and slippery scales. They can be cooked and eaten... good food for a long journey."

Papa knit his brows. "How did you learn of such a thing?"

Suki began to unravel a thread from the hem of her ragged trousers. Baiting it with a hairy hill-bug snatched from the stream bank, she told Papa how she'd left home by attracting that first black Beast in the candleblossom patch, of her chance meeting with Albard in his hay-field, and how the boy had helped her along her journey. "I wonder whatever happened to him," she sighed wistfully. "I want to thank him for the fire crystal, and for teaching me how to fish..." A sudden tug on the string meant a butterbass had taken the bait. Suki drew the fish, flopping and fighting, from the crystal water and used her knife to clean and filet it as expertly as Albard himself had done.



"Clear a ring of ground, Papa, and heap up twigs and tinder," Suki told her father with the pride of new learning. "I will make a fire with the crystal Albard gave me."

Papa prepared the pile of sticks and Suki pulled out her fire crystal. Aligning this with the climbing Sun, she produced first smoke, then flame with a beam of concentrated red light. Papa gaped in awe.

Suki fried the butterbass and they ate gladly... she, rejoicing because now she could provide for her father, and he, struck by her clever, grown-up resourcefulness.

Now it was Sun-high, and Suki and her father relaxed in the scant shadow of a sugar-star thicket. A Beast was coming closer, unaware of them, munching on the thorny twigs laden with a second flush of sweet, crystal-caked pink flowers and some acid red fruits left over from the first.

Suki felt its presence first. The sweet breath that smelled of greenstuff and nectar touched her neck, and she sat very still. Papa, realizing they had to travel together, slipped his arms around her.

BAZAM!

They lay on their backs in a shallow hollow, surrounded on all sides by the tall, pointed foliage of queen's-flowers. The Beast was biting off the blooms immediately above them – *chomp, chomp, chomp*.

Suki's father sat up first, gazing around at the great wild fields of the regal purple flowers, which stretched nearly to the horizon in every direction. He marveled that such a thing could be. Even in Honkai, where the King and Qin-Li owned vast tracts of land and grew beautiful gardens, this was unheard of.

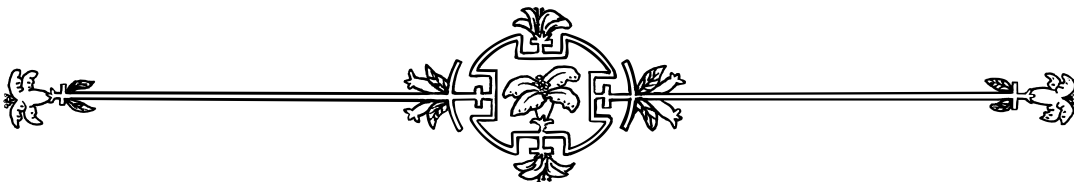
Suki sat up on her knees amid the bloom-stalks, which stiffly rustled in the wind. Silken purple petals fluttered at the level of her head like dainty little flags. The land was purple... purple, purple everywhere.

The Beast feeding beside her ear reminded her of the first one she had ever attracted... of the time she had dyed her hair purple and caused such havoc at home. She suddenly wished again for purple hair – or a purple head!

Thinking quickly, she used her gardening knife to cut a bloom stalk and hold the flower in front of her face.

"Quick, Papa! Hold me around the waist like you did before!" she whispered.

Papa looked at her quizzically – then he understood what she was doing. He put his arms around his brave, wise daughter's midsection and...



BAZAM!

The familiar, honey-scent of candleblossoms took Suki back in her mind to the marshy field where she'd played so very long ago. She lay on the ground in Papa's arms, wet, chilled, and dazed from her third jarring fall in less than two full Suns. She really didn't want to get up.

Papa raised his head and looked around. The air was *cold!* They were nowhere near Honkai, and far from the hot prairie of Chenkor; he too shivered in the dampness. But when he heard the Great River burbling over rocks and roaring through the gorge a short distance away, his discomfort was overcome by sheer delight.

He hugged Suki hard, shaking her out of her half-conscious state. "Suki! Suki! You did it!" he cried excitedly, over and over. "We've made it back to Betuun!"

Suki's blue eyes flew open and she looked around as if to make sure he wasn't just joking. "Wha – huh? Wh – *we are!! Oh, Papa, we really are!!*" She wriggled free and leaped to her feet, bounding through the field like a young goat let out of its pen... as she had on the day she'd picked mulghoberries for tea and stained her hair purple so many, many seasons ago.

She was ten seasons older, a full head taller, and a whole world wiser than the little girl she used to be.

"Let's go home," she urged Papa, before he even had a chance to suggest it. "Mama will be waiting up for us."

Hand in hand, they walked to the place where the grassy field gave way to the rutted, clay road that led to the central compound of huts. Mama's friend Wenki recognized Papa and Suki and shouted, "They're *here!* Ani – Ani, they're *back!*"

Suki's mother rose from the yak-skin mat outside her hut where she often sat. After so many empty seasons of watching and waiting, she almost didn't believe her eyes when Suki and Papa came running towards her in their wet, ragged clothes, arms outstretched for exhilaration and



joy, looking for all the world like a pair of starving beggars who had just stumbled through the gates of Paradise.

Ani Aki gasped, then ran down the street to meet them, her full skirts slapping her legs and mukluks. "Suki! My Suki! Bun, my dearest! You're really here!" she cried, embracing them both there, stumbling to her knees in the middle of the street. Tears spilled down her dusty, lined and sallow cheeks.

"Mama! Mama, a Beast carried us home!" Suki clamored, unafraid now to admit her connection with the awesome creatures.

"It looks like it dropped you in the marsh," Mama ventured to chide. "You're both soaking wet, and muddy too! Come home and get yourselves bathed, and dried before the fire!"

"It really *is* true, Ani – a Beast picked me up and carried me away by accident – then it dropped me in a foreign land," Papa explained earnestly. "I couldn't get home-but not a single Sun rose and set that I didn't think of you and Suki. Suki didn't run away from home—she traveled through many lands to find me, and learned many difficult lessons along the way."

"There'll be time for telling the stories later," Mama smiled as the three of them entered the small, cozy little hut. "The only thing that matters right now is, you're home."

Suki and Papa had never enjoyed a meal of bread crusts and warm mulghoberry tea more. The wind bit through the thatching on their tiny hut and threatened to blow out the single lamp and the low-burning fire, but they'd never felt so warm. It didn't matter that their clothes were torn and their feet were chilled and wet. They were *home*!





Glossary

terms used in
Suki and the Beasts

Batata

A starchy, filling root usually cooked and eaten along with gabik in Chenkor.

Birdieflies

Tiny, multicolored, birdlike creatures with butterfly wings and webbed feet that populate marshlands, drink nectar like hummingbirds – and are often caught by children as play.

Butterbass

“They are oily fishes with fat bodies and slippery scales. They can be cooked and eaten... good food for a long journey.”

Ch’ani

A flat sword used by palace guards of Honkai, appearing to be only for ceremony due to the jade and ruby ornamented scabbard, however they are kept very sharp and have a pointed tip.

Chatteruk

Squirrel-like creatures that live in the Pambu trees along the Tapuk River; they eat the nuts.

Fire crystal

A red corundum-like stone that concentrates sunlight like a magnifying glass and has great potential to start fire.

Fuzbees

Furry golden bees with a large, round bodies and vicious stings, they pollinate the flowers, make honey, and attack in swarms—the sting is not deadly but really hurts.

Gabik

A starchy, sticky, oval-shaped beige grain grown in the south-temperate climates; it looks somewhat like short-grain Oriental rice.

Hairy hill-bug

An ant/beetle cross, reddish, with long, coarse hairs all over its body. Hairy hill-bugs live in low, mound-shaped mud nests like tropical termites and are found in rocky prairies.

Marsh-candles

An oily type of cattail used as fuel where there is no wood or the wood is wet. Because its oil is bitter, marsh-candles are not edible.

Mulghoberries

Purple berries similar to purple raspberries, but preserve better; dried and eaten by the people of Betuun—they are juicy and tasty when eaten fresh by children playing in the fields. Often brewed as tea.

Pambu

A species of tree with sleek, shiny brown nuts that sustain Suki as she travels from Chenkor back to Honkai – grow on the flood-plains of the Tapuk River.

Red-eyed slog

A “sloth-hog” creature that is regarded as the lowest sort of animal. If applied to a person, it is an insult. Slogs move slowly, live in forested areas, sleep in muddy places, and hunt from trees. Their red eyes can be seen in the trees at sunset.

Trick-Squares

A pentomino puzzle game played in Chenkor; it consists of fitting any five of twelve unique pieces into a 5×5 square, with no gaps or overlaps. Suki masters it and makes puzzle boards in the sand to amuse herself while traveling.

Geography

LANDS

Betuun

Cold-temperate, on a steppe-like plain between mountains to the north and mountains to the south, bounded on the east by a river that the villagers simply call the "Great River." Betuun can best be described as being like a tribal Tibetan settlement with a vaguely Japanese feel. The few villages on the steppe/plain where Suki's people live are organized under an elder leader; *village* and *country* mean the same thing to them.

Chenkor

Subtropical, located on a great prairie far east of the River, quite a distance south of the city of Honkai. It is a great nation, like India crossed with medieval Persia, with highly advanced art, literature, mathematics, and fine gardens. Some citizens of the outer provinces have learned to travel extensively by Beast and have been honored by the King. Here, Suki learns about queen's-flowers, sugar-stars, ornamental horticulture, and the logic-game of Trick-Squares.

Honkai

Temperate, located east of the Great River, and north of Chenkor. It is a powerful, China-like city-state ruled by a king and the elder Qin-Li; Suki ends up enslaved there for several seasons, and observes that Beasts always eat flowers in a specific order. She learns how to plant the flowers in special, attractive grids that will keep them from trampling the people's grain fields. Suki didn't know it while she was there, but her father had come to stay in its West Quarter.

Honkai, West Quarter

A poorer section of Honkai more distant from the palace, where foreign settlers live to avoid enslavement.

Roza

Temperate, directly south of Betuun, roughly the same latitude as Honkai but mountainous instead of flat (the Great River curves westward in a gorge and divides the steppes of Betuun from the mountains of Roza). It is a pretty village, bigger, more developed than tiny Betuun; Suki learns that Beast travel is possible through a lost traveler from Roza.

FEATURES

Geryon

Albard's people's name for the Great River.

Tapuk River

A natural, beautiful river that flows between Honkai and Chenkor. Suki follows the river to leave Chenkor and continue on her quest for her father.

SEASONS

Bud-and-Bloom

The first warm season, corresponding to Spring; long in the cold-temperate Betuun, Tolia and Rozu, shorter in Honkai and Chenkor, but very productive everywhere.

Seed-Time

A Summer harvest and resting season; short and quick in Betuun, Tolia and Rozu, hot and very productive in Honkai and Chenkor

Second Bloom

A second flush of growth in Autumn (like Indian Summer) not as wildly profuse as Bud-and-Bloom, but still distinct, with its own fullness and beauty. It is short in Tolia, gentle in Betuun and Rozu; prolonged and warm in Honkai and especially Chenkor.

Cold-Time

Winter; deep and snowy in many lands, dry and cold in Betuun, snowy in Rozu, very damp and snowy in Tolia, short and moderately cold in Honkai, mild in Chenkor and Southward.