

FLOWERS LIKE NEEDLES

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I

Bek scuttled over the needle field on the Waste of Mosses, far from Roktown and the monastery in Hom Valley. Turbulent winds scattered the neat rows of falling iron carbonyl snows. The steely needles here grew jagged, making the magnetic fields on the waste feel unsettled, haunted. Deep beneath the waste, the iron carbonyl ocean surged, pushing erratic breezes between the spines, whistling ghostly, wordless songs.

Only two swarmer, Dux and Jed, accompanied him, humming a tune about Bek's brave travels. In some ways, they looked like him. Fine iron and nickel needles burst radially from the centers of their bodies to absorb microwaves from the pulsar and catch falling gray snowflakes. Strong magnetic fields moved eight legs of sliding metal rods. Small pincers capped each of their limbs, tough enough to hold tight to the upthrusting fields of spines, delicate enough to read histories recorded in the crimpings in archival needles or to preen Bek's needles. Their eye-stalks swiveled, scanning the Waste of Mosses.

Bek was bigger, with longer needles. More importantly, instead of modest pincers on his forelegs, he bore the massive great claws of a warrior. Bek's nobility warranted a larger association of swarmer to provide tips, throw compliments, and process snow paste for him, but his philosophical journey needed a smaller entourage. Dux and Jed could still announce his exploits when needed.

Master Kak had been ready to award Bek his eighth long needle, the *Needle of*

Night, but Bek had refused. Every warrior-monk who earned the seventh, the *Needle of Evening*, could try to earn the coveted eighth and end his formal training into the mysteries of the Needle. Or they could choose to quest, exploring more extreme philosophical mysteries. Most pursued the *Needle of Night*.

Bek chose to seek Mok, the former master of the Followers of the Needle. Bek had studied every known analect, martial treatise, confusing parable, and counter-intuitive wisdom attributed to Master Mok, but could comprehend no more of those mysteries without learning from Mok himself.

Bek had been approaching Mount Ceg for some time, moving between taller rods, foraging for snow paste and fast-scuttling fantails and whistlers, while wind-crawlers soared out of reach, tracing magnetic fields on charged wings. The rolling fields of up-thrusting spines midwived many rising prominences, rods grown on metallic upwellings on the floor of the ocean basin. Bek had already explored Mount Fen, Mount Dow, and Mount Kod. Different songs named each of them as the final place of meditation of Master Mok.

But Bek had found no old master and it was nearly the end of the year, the closest approach of the world to the pulsar. During the Short Kiss, lightning welded snow to spine, boiled the oceans, and exposed underwater caves that supposedly led to the interior of the mountain where Master Mok contemplated his inscrutable wisdoms. If Mount Ceg were the wrong mountain, Bek wouldn't reach another one before the oceans refilled. His search would be delayed another year.

But as they rounded Mount Ceg to the west, the winking microwaves of the pulsar revealed a low plateau on the mountainside, something so even that careful claws must have gardened it. His swarmers sensed his excitement. The pace of their admiring humming rose.

The plateau was lower on the slope than he'd first guessed, and where it met the mountainside, a cave mouth yawned. Warrior corpses littered the downslope around the plateau, decaying, dusty, with wild spines growing at right angles from the needles of the fallen.

A single swarmer rested near the mountain overhang, watching a tranquil warrior in the middle of the plateau. He stood on a single leg, in the *Stance of Night*, his other seven limbs balanced in the wind, long needles fanned out to catch the pulsar's microwaves.

"I am Bek," Bek said formally, raising his great claws, "Follower of the Needle, ranked to Evening. I seek Mok, an old master of my youth, to learn from him."

The other warrior stepped down from *Stance of Night*, leg by graceful leg, finding the balances of *Stance of Evening*, the two oblique shadows, the *Stance of Noon Shadow*, *Stance of Morning*, and *Stance of Dawn*.

"I am Lod," he said, displaying his great claws, "a Child of the Tree, ranked to Evening. I guard the way to Master Mok."

Bek gestured at the corpses beyond the plateau. "You kill pilgrims?"

"I fought fairly in each case, warrior to warrior, under tourney rules. Those who yielded returned to their homes, or maybe went elsewhere to avoid telling of their loss. Those who wouldn't died with honor. Their swarmers returned to tell their stories. Do you challenge me?"

"To enter the mountain and see Master Mok, I must."

"You will not see Master Mok. The cave contains a greater guardian than I."

Bek had heard stories of a monster under the mountain.

"I challenge you," Bek said. "Do you wish to begin the reciting of boasts?"

Lod's swarmer scurried close, humming a background tune as the warrior opened his great claws menacingly. Lod boasted that he came from Sekt, far to the archipelago's south, where he'd trained in the monastic order of the Children of the Tree,

completing many pilgrimages, defeating opponents Bek had never heard of, before finally coming here. Lod's great claws closed.

"You didn't finish your boasting," Bek protested. "Are you a disciple of Master Mok? Why do you prevent pilgrims from approaching him?"

Lod turned his claws to reflect the pulsar shine impressively. His lone swarmer threw compliments at Lod's reluctance.

"Years ago, my master chose me to learn from Master Mok," Lod said, "to bring new wisdoms back to the Monastery of Trees. After searching from island to island, I found the path to Master Mok's burrow. But the monster under the mountain bested me. I yielded, but he obliged me to swear to guard the mouth of the caves while contemplating my defeat."

"Have you learned how to defeat the monster in your contemplation?"

"If I had, I wouldn't be here."

"The monster beneath the mountain holds Master Mok captive?"

"This is no longer boasting. Recite your boast, begin your challenge, or retreat," Lod said.

Bek pivoted slowly, assuming the *Stance of Fierce Contemplation*, one great claw extended, one held cocked high. His two swarmers tittered appreciation of his form. Lod assumed a stance Bek didn't recognize. He knew little of the martial traditions of the distant Children of the Tree. Lod seemed to balance his weight oddly. Lod's swarmer scuttled close to offer a quick gratuity, which Lod accepted with a hind leg.

They moved.

Lod feinted, great claw swiveling, changing direction unexpectedly at mid-stroke to sweep his other great claw low. Bek darted low and then leapt into *Pik's Flight*, sailing above the second claw. Lod lunged at Bek's alighting stance with a thrust similar to *Equinox Star*. Bek turned the momentum of his leap into the *Funnel of Snow*, spinning, sweeping his great claws to bat aside Lod's, and land *Short Spine*, a small strike with a minor claw.

Lod grunted in discomfort, retreating. Many schools knew the strikes and stances of the Followers of the Needle, but *Short Spine* was rare. Bek didn't even know if he was performing it correctly; he'd pieced it together from the Analects of Mok.

Lod launched a sophisticated web of thrusts and parries, some of which landed, even though that wasn't their purpose. Lod observed Bek as much as Bek observed him. The pace of the swarmers' magnetic humming became louder and louder, a speeding refrain to the dangerous dance.

Lod's attacks and probes were challenging, elegant, innovative even. Bek struggled to find room for his own creativity. The three swarmers sang together, complimenting their respective masters, building resonances, composing the song to sing after the battle. And as the magnetic ballad gained depth, Bek sensed a change in the rhythms of Lod's movements, a sign he'd finishing measuring Bek. A new part of the dangerous dance began.

Bek recognized *Blinding Branches*, a flurry of shifting side blows, from both great and minor claws along a warrior's flank, difficult to execute and disorienting to block, since the tempo of large and small blows differed. Bek met the small strikes and even the denting blows of great claw with his minor pincers, pivoting suddenly, seizing both Lod's hind legs in his great claws. Lod struggled, but Bek's tightening grip promised only the loss of both of Lod's hind legs.

"Yield!" Bek said.

"No."

"I don't want to kill you."

The swarmers sang the warriors' words back like an echo, building an epic narrative to attach to the combatants' names.

"I can't yield. I swore to the monster beneath the mountain."

Bek's eye-stalks widened in surprise. Two of the three swarmers made a bridge of surprise into their song and then waited, humming just the tune.

"You've fought for years under a death sentence?" Bek said. "You cannot leave if you win and you cannot yield if you lose?"

Lod struggled. "My sentence is meditative, seeking a higher state of understanding."

Bek had him. The simplest, straightest route to honor was through fair, honest victory. And Bek had outmaneuvered Lod. And yet, nothing he'd heard in any of the *Analects* or stories of Mok pointed to any simple answers.

"I yield to you, then," Bek said, releasing Lod's hind legs.

The three swarmers faltered, their humming stumbling into indecisive discordance. The Child of Trees spun angrily. For a moment, it seemed as if he would channel his anger into a strike, as he'd been trained to do, as they'd all been trained to do. But Lod couldn't strike. Bek had yielded. Their battle was done.

"You shame me," Lod said.

"You were trapped. I freed you."

"I'm not free."

"You were ordered to stand guard here forever, only permitted to win or die," Bek said. "You could only be freed by someone who accepted a loss to give you a kindness."

Lod blustered, eye-stalks waving uncertainly. "In yielding when you were unbeaten, you dishonor both of us!"

"Because you're not worthy of being yielded to?" Bek said, indicating again the corpses beyond the edges of the neatly tended plateau of upthrusting needles. "Yielding to you is no dishonor."

Lod spun away, scuttling off on six legs, great claws held high. Bek's swarmers didn't know what to sing about. Lod's swarmer conferred with them, courteously exchanging snow paste.

"Lod, Child of the Tree, ranked to Evening," Bek said formally, "will you offer hospitality and make pleasant conversation with me?"

Lod stared at Bek with widened eye-stalks before finally approaching resentfully. He settled into the five-legged *Stance of the First Oblique Shadow* and scraped snow paste from his own lower needles. Lod offered it on his great claws. Politely, Bek accepted and offered snow paste of his own. And as if suddenly finding their way again, the swarmers began fussing, offering tips, and babbling compliments, making note of particularly exquisite martial positions the combatants had demonstrated.

"Master Mok is within the mountain?" Bek said.

"So I believe."

"I've never heard of conditions of yielding like those the monster within the mountain placed upon you," Bek said. "I wonder if Master Mok constructed these circumstances. I don't understand all of Master Mok's teachings, but his thinking is often deeper than we can understand, like his ideas on friendship with swarmers."

"I too studied Mok's *Analects*," Lod said. "I saw nothing in them relating to the conditions of my oath of yielding."

"Master Mok once transformed himself into a swarmer, to assassinate an enemy master. From then on, he was concerned with the quandaries of our ethical systems. Nobles and swarmers. Honor and clan wars. Peace and tourneys."

Lod's resentment seemed to be cooling. They fanned their needles, absorbing the hard microwaves from the pulsar. Swarmers straightened bent needles, preened misplaced snow paste.

"His ethical riddles infuriate me," Bek admitted. "I'm never sure if I'm learning the right thing. Your punishment feels like one of Mok's riddles. The famous attack he invented, *Rag's Sacrifice*, can only be completed with the cooperation of a willing

swarmer.”

The three swarmers made protestations of loyalty, but this was for form’s sake. They well understood that *willing* meant something deep in the case of Rag. That swarmer had risked himself as an act of generosity, detached from the swarmer creed.

“You too were bound in a trap that could only be broken by a sacrifice. I played Rag and you played Mok. Together, we broke the trap.”

Lod shifted from the *Stance of First Oblique Shadow*, to the *Stance of Noon Shadow*, and back. Finally, he scuttled away. Bek did not interrupt his thoughts. The Child of the Tree had been trapped for a long time in an oath. Under many philosophies, that was unfair.

“Do you know all this to be true?” Lod said when he returned.

The lines of falling iron and nickel carbonyl snow had slowed, as if time itself hesitated at the end of the year. Bek plucked a single gray flake out of its regimented little line of flakes.

“Does my reasoning seem correct?”

“I don’t know. I came all this way for understanding.” Lod swung his great claws wide, a stretching sweep prior to battle, or a diffusing of frustration or nervousness. “And yet, I now live with this dishonor of unearned victory!”

Lod appeared ready to fight again. His swarmer began humming a ternary theme to accompany battle, although Bek’s swarmers waited quietly, eye-stalks swiveling from one warrior to the other. Great swelling ocean waves rushed beneath them, running between the millions of rods and needles holding up the Waste of Mosses.

“Do you think Master Mok means the same thing we do when he uses the word honor?” Bek asked.

Lod came closer. After some moments of impressive posturing, he settled before Bek. His swarmer quieted.

“Changing a definition is impossible.”

“Yet he tried,” Bek said. “Maybe if we had understood him, he might have continued teaching the Followers of the Needle. He came to the Waste of Mosses, setting up the approach to his hiding place as a series of tests.”

“I failed my test. I didn’t defeat the monster beneath the mountain.”

“Maybe,” Bek said, “or maybe you were also transformed into a test, for yourself and others.”

“I was tainted with dishonor and now you pretend to teach with if after if after if!”

“I’m no master, but Mok learned from the shabbiest of swarmers. Rag taught Mok that even the great need help. He’s been trying to teach us to accept it.”

Lod tucked his legs more tightly beneath him and retracted his eye-stalks. For a time, he meditated.

“You might be correct,” Lod finally said. “Accepting help when it is owed, as from swarmers, is one thing. Accepting help when some struggle is beyond you is a lumpy paste to spread smooth.”

The pulsar had brightened. The snow of iron carbonyl had stopped. Every gray flake in the sky hovered now, pregnant with the coming end of the year. They watched this magical timeless moment. Within minutes, the lines of hovering snowflakes began to slowly retreat upward, into the sky. The year was about to finish.

At the closest approach, the conjoined magnetic fields of planet and star, twisted by a year of orbit, would snap, uncoiling a year’s pent up charge, filling the whole sky with a great arc of lightning. The Short Kiss would boil the oceans of iron carbonyl, exposing all the steel rods beneath. As snow refilled the oceans they would enjoy months of good feeding.

“The Short Kiss comes,” Bek said. “It’s said the way to Master Mok is only open in the first days of the year. I’m going into the mountain to find him. Come with me.

You deserve it."

"Because I reached a new state of being? Because I found new truths?"

"Haven't you?"

"It wasn't me finding," Lod said.

"That might have been the point of Master Mok's lesson."

"I am tired of your ifs, but I will go with you, at least as far as the monster."

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II

They passed beneath the overhang. The ceiling of the wide cave was thin enough for some of the pulsar's microwaves to seep through. But the light was strange. Not like night or shadow. More like twilight when colors bleed into one another, becoming one. The slow hunger of night began to creep over Bek. The three swarmer began falling behind, with their shorter needles and thinner reserves of snow paste.

"Go back," Bek said to Dux and Jed. "Enjoy the Short Kiss and new year snow. I hope to come back."

The two swarmer offered large tips, singing the second part of a ballad about one of Bek's fights with a noble officer. Lod told his swarmer to join them. The swarmer scuttled to keep up with the other two.

The cave soon ended in a tangle of spines that had collapsed under their weight. The high ceiling had a hole in its center.

"That was the way," Lod said, indicating the hole. "The floor of the cave used to be higher. I jumped before. It's too far now."

"It's not too far if I boost you up," Bek said.

Lod eyed him askance. That was swarmer work, demeaning.

"Your last help still galls me," Lod said. "I will help you this time."

"It's not a tally to be balanced," Bek said, stepping two minor claws, then another two, onto Lod's great claws, "but I accept your kindness."

"I'm not just offering a kindness," Lod grunted with the effort. Warriors were not light. Lod strained as Bek trembled on the shaking great claws, in a modified *Stance of Noon Shadow*, reaching for the ceiling. "You again tricked me into accepting something greater."

Bek caught a low-hanging steel spine, but it bent under his weight.

"What's that?"

Lod strained, lifting Bek higher. "Trust."

"What?"

"As you are now, I could snip off three or four of your minor claws before you could protect yourself."

"Dishonorable," Bek said, catching a sturdier rod. As he pulled, taking on more of his own weight, Lod lifted him higher. "You've already shown me you're honorable."

"I could, though."

Bek gripped a thicket of rods in each of his great claws now, hanging solidly. "I have to trust you more. Climb my body quickly, or you won't have a way up."

Lod lifted himself on all eight of his claws, distributing his weight, trying to avoid ripping out a tuft of Bek's needles. Lod's weight tore at Bek's joints. Fiery pain. Creaking. But finally Lod got his claws onto the ceiling, and he supported his own weight. They scabbled into the next tunnel.

The upper channel followed the cave ceiling until it dipped steeply downward, toward the sound of crashing waves that could dissolve their joints, leaving just disconnected needles. Everyone lived on stories, told stories of themselves, told stories

of one another. But in no story was descending beneath the world wise. Noble and swarmer alike were blind, starving, and dangerously near the ocean in the underworld. And every legend placed monsters in the dark.

“You must have been brave to have gone down here,” Bek said.

“I was then. Now that I know what’s down there, I’m just foolish.”

The colors of the world became fainter until no microwaves made it through the gaps between the millions of upthrusting spines. The sky no longer existed. Just cold, darkness, and a growing hunger. But not just Bek’s hunger. The closer they came to the Short Kiss, the higher the ocean rose in the gaps between the spines. It was the greatest monster, with an endless hunger that tried to swallow the whole world, honorable and dishonorable alike.

“How can the monster survive down here?” Bek said.

“I never asked him,” Lod said.

The channel opened onto a high-ceilinged space. The microwaves lit faint pools on the uneven floor of the grotto. The cave channel seemed to continue onward after this space, heading downward to the deadly ocean. Wavelets beneath them, not so far now, made endless splashing sounds among all the spines. Some microwaves penetrated to this depth, through the gaps where spines had been selectively torn away. What strength could have wrenched free steel rods?

Then the floor moved.

Bek and Lod scrambled back as a hulking figure rose, nearly to the ceiling. Its needles fanned wide. Two eyes on long stalks waved, looking at them from different angles as it showed two huge great claws.

“Is that Lod?” the monster said. “Did Lod come back?”

Bek scuttled right as Lod scuttled left. The gloom hid much of the monster, but Bek recognized its martial stance, a variant of *Crawler’s Claw*.

“You’re a warrior?” Bek said in astonishment.

“What are you doing here, Lod?” the monster said. “I let you yield.”

“I yielded to him,” Bek said. “I freed him from your oath trap.”

The monster, the warrior, made a grumbling sound. He was larger than anyone Bek had ever met or heard of.

“What is your school?” Bek said.

“Are you challenging me first or will Lod do it?” the monster said. Neither of them could beat him.

“I have a right to ask for boasting before deciding to challenge,” Bek said.

“So you do,” the creature said. “So you do. I am TokTok, a Follower of the Way of the Tide.”

“That school doesn’t exist anymore,” Bek said. “It went extinct decades ago.”

“It thrives beyond the archipelago, in Goz and Gan.”

It was hard to credit this statement. The islands of Goz and Gan were mythically distant.

“You must have quite a story of your travels here,” Bek said finally.

“I crossed the ocean basin after a Short Kiss. It took months of fast moving as snows and rains refilled the basin. I reached the farthest edges of your archipelago with the rising ocean licking at my hind claws. I summered on that first island, regaining my strength. Year after year, I tracked the stories of a Follower of the Needle who had assassinated a Master of the Tide.”

“You came for revenge against the best fighter in the world,” Lod said.

“I had nothing to fear from Mok. I, TokTok, second of that name, am a Master of the Tide.”

“Why aren’t you boasting of meeting Master Mok?” Bek said. “Even if you lost, it’s worth a song, a lay, a poem. Speak it.” Bek didn’t know the customs of Goz and Gan at

the furthest edge of the world, but boasting was boasting. History telling was universal.

"Mok did not boast," TokTok said. "The famous Master Mok, who had defeated Master Cis of the Tide, didn't boast. He didn't even name himself. I called him a coward, seeking to goad him. I called him selfish, for not responding to my challenge. I thought he was trying a trick."

The ocean waves crashed, perhaps only a few body lengths beneath them, pulled higher and higher as the world neared the pulsar. Bek felt light, like the world itself was lifting him by every one of his spines. They neared the end of the year, when the world had to explode.

"Mok moved his great claws," TokTok said, "so I struck a killing blow. He turned in time to make the blow glancing, but I injured him badly. To my horror, I found in his great claw a flower. I'd demanded boasting and fighting, and the killer of Master Cis of the Tide had brought out a flower. I'd struck an opponent who had not accepted my challenge, who hadn't engaged in feats of boasting, who hadn't been ready."

Bek heard the pain in TokTok's voice, the self-loathing. The frustration. Every school lived by an ethos of fairness. They differed in form, but not in essence. In a challenge, honor superseded life or death. Warriors carried nothing but their honor in life and left only stories of it after death. TokTok's story had become one of striking down someone who had not accepted a challenge. TokTok could not refuse to tell his story, but the story would never leave here. Whether Lod or Bek fought him first didn't matter. Both would lose to TokTok. And when he defeated them, he didn't need to let them yield.

"What did Master Mok tell you?" Bek asked.

"Nothing. I tried to tend him, but he wouldn't let me close. He crawled into Mount Ceg. I followed him. On this spot, he said to me: 'Your fate is your own to decide.' I chose to stay here, meditating on my crime. He went on. He is beyond this cave, in a hollow blocked by the ocean."

"And you've stopped every pilgrim," Bek said.

"I have restitution to do for what I've done," TokTok said. "I will protect him from challenges until I feel the stain on my honor is expunged."

The throbbing of the ocean was only a few claw lengths beneath them now. The Short Kiss was only minutes away.

"Until you can defeat him honorably."

"I hope so."

"Why did he show the flower?" Bek said. "Was he afraid?"

"He was not afraid," TokTok said with finality.

"What have you meditated on?" Bek said.

"All the philosophies. The Followers of the Wave. The Children of the Tree. The Followers of the Needle. My own knowledge of the Way of the Tide."

"Have you found new truths?"

"I don't know."

"Could Master Mok have defeated you?" Bek asked.

"No one can defeat me."

"If you'd defeated him, killed him, what would you have done?" Bek said.

The wind howled between the thicket of needles around them. TokTok's eye-stalks came close, like in dreaming. "I would have gone home, island by island, telling my story."

"You would have become not only the greatest Follower of the Tide, but perhaps the greatest warrior in the whole world."

"Maybe," TokTok said.

"You would have shaped other students to follow the ethos of the Tide."

"Yes."

"But Master Mok is himself a teacher. Do you know his teachings?"

“No. I came to avenge Master Cis.”

“TokTok, this dishonor wasn’t your fault. Anyone would have done the same facing Master Mok.” Bek scuttled in front of the immense warrior. “Forgive yourself. We don’t blame you.”

TokTok loomed higher. “You don’t blame me? Who are you to blame or forgive?”

“I’m among the highest of the Followers of the Needle, a student of the students of Master Mok. I seek him out to learn the meaning of his Analects. The hardest thing to understand of Mok’s teachings is honor. It doesn’t mean the same thing to him as to us, nor does dishonor. I don’t believe he thinks you dishonored him or you. What if he asked you to choose your fate because he wanted you to choose?”

“What do you know of his intent?”

“He told you to choose your fate. You decided to protect the target of your revenge indefinitely, until the end of the world. You punish yourself for a crime only you think you committed. I’ve heard your story. I forgive you.”

The world exploded with blinding lightning and deafening radio static, outlining the hulking enormity of TokTok and the poised watchfulness of Lod. Hurricane winds of the iron carbonyl ocean boiling to vapor tore at them. They held their claws tight to the cave. Lightning heated the steel of Bek’s body, welding the fine, smoothed snow paste to needles, lengthening and thickening them. Vital euphoria filled him. The year was ending. The world celebrated with long minutes of a violent storm.

Weight seemed to return. And throbbing darkness. The three warriors still clutched the cave floor, flexing experimentally with their slightly grown spines, with claws sticky from tiny incidental welds to the floor. Everything on them felt alive, renewed, born again.

“I don’t understand everything Master Mok taught,” Bek said into the weird quiet. “I haven’t seen him since before I had great claws, but even then, he was trying to teach something different from all other masters.”

Lod sat beside Bek, as if Bek were a teacher. TokTok flexed his great claws in disheartened grace.

“It seems in Mok’s teachings,” Bek said, “that honor is like a great claw. It must be sharp and strong, but it is not a tool for every occasion, and sometimes can be utterly unimportant. Mok put his own needles into his dying friend, a shabby swarmer, sacrificing the cleanliness of his own needles, risking his own life.”

Bek reached out, touching the sliding, overlapping needles of TokTok’s great claw. There was no static discharge. Only in the newest hours of the year did every tree and bush and warrior and bird have the same charge. TokTok did not strike him down for his presumption.

“You earned and named each of your needles,” Bek said. “Each was grown over time, or taken from a defeated opponent, or given by an approving master. We recite the history of every needle in a song of boasts, and yet the greatest warrior in the world put his needles into a shabby swarmer’s body. When he told you to choose your fate, what do you think he meant? Do you think he meant for you to live out your days in the dark?”

TokTok was quiet. Bek settled into a meditative stance, the one with seven claws holding onto seven different spines in the floor of the cave. *Stance of Dawn*. It was not a defensive posture, but a restful, contemplative one. The air of the world was thick now, heavy, with the weight of all the ocean hanging in the unseen sky, waiting to snow down nourishment on them, to refill all the basins with promise.

“You did not get your chance to boast of your best battles,” TokTok said quietly.

“They don’t seem important right now,” Bek said.

Lod scuttled beside Bek.

“I don’t understand what Master Mok was trying to teach you,” Lod said, “but I

would like to ask him.”

TokTok's needles fanned. If TokTok chose to bar the way, they could do nothing but withdraw or die.

“Let us seek him out,” TokTok said finally. “If we're all wrong, I can still kill you both after.”

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III

The three of them descended. The cave must have been beneath the ocean only an hour earlier. The spines making up the foundations of the mountain were misshapen in the way only subsurface needles grew. The chaos of it was weirdly disturbing.

The cave bottomed out before climbing gently. The wind made a haunting moan at this depth where normally ocean would have dissolved them, leaving only needles. They'd only been given permission to transit this deathly warren. In weeks, perhaps days, the snows collecting in the ocean basins would melt and fill the world again, closing this pathway through the underworld.

They finally emerged into a wide space half-lit with microwaves. The ceiling was nearly solid with needles, but here and there, as if by judicious pruning, narrow channels welcomed in faint pulsar shine. The cave was not the barren hole Bek had expected. It was a garden, bursting with shiny metal flowers, steely petals in all stages of curling growth.

Flowers were hard to grow. Their tending had much to do with sculpting and they only bloomed in regions where the magnetic field bent in unpredictable ways. Flowers were fractal maps of the strange unexpectedness of the world. And this garden was immense.

Swarmers climbed the walls, shaping with pincers, smoothing, cleaning. They sang no boastful songs, but chanted placid nature hymns. Some of their needles were swarmer-short, but a few of them carried outsized warrior spines too. A shiny old warrior stood in the middle of the subterranean garden in a one-legged stance Bek did not recognize. His seven other limbs were raised in perfect balance. He looked funny; many of his spines were swarmer-short.

The three of them approached the greatest warrior in the world with respectful grace. They each assumed learning stances appropriate to their schools. After a time, Master Mok's eye-stalks rose toward them.

“Master Mok,” Bek said, “we are students, come to learn from you.”

“You are Bek,” the master said.

Bek's eye-stalks widened in surprise. He had expected a meeting, not a reunion.

“You remember me? I was only a budling on my father's body when you were a master. I carried only trainee claws when you were grandmaster. Was I special that you remember me?”

“No,” Mok said.

Disappointment smothered Bek's brief elation. The idea that the famous teacher had remembered him had given him a strange pride.

“I won't teach you, Follower of the Needle.”

“Not just me. All of us. We're from different schools.”

“Only if you defeat me.”

The swarmers along the walls continued their hymn to growing things. Bek looked at the old warrior-monk strangely. He couldn't defeat the greatest fighter in the whole world, even aged as he was. TokTok had not. Then Bek realized that Mok was referring to all three of them.

“All three of us?” Bek said. “We cannot. There is no honor in three against one.”

"There is no teaching unless you defeat me."

"I expected some joy in finding again my old teacher."

"It depends what you wish to learn," Mok said.

"I do not appreciate riddles," TokTok said.

"To have come this far, you three must have been solving riddles," Mok said.

"This is a feint," Bek guessed. "A trick of battle to distract the opponent. Like the flower you revealed suddenly to make TokTok think you were attacking?"

Master Mok observed them. What was he observing, though? Bek had passed two dangerous guardians and penetrated a mysterious fastness open only once each year. Even if he fought Master Mok and failed, Bek had come so far that his own legend was assured.

His own legend was assured. And he wasn't listening.

"I'm not special," Bek said, looking at the flowers climbing the walls, at the swarmers who possessed some needles like nobles, at the master who carried some swarmer needles. Here, the differences between people were tricks of the light. TokTok and Lod seemed to be waiting for Bek to make his next guess. Master Mok had them baffled. He had Bek baffled.

"I'm not special," Bek said. "I'm great among my school, but how many warriors walk the world? How can I be special among thousands of nobles, thousands of warriors and followers of all the ways?"

Master Mok watched him with an effortless patience, standing on his single claw, untouched by the world as the swarmers sang of things other than Mok. He was perhaps the most famous warrior in the world. Yet he meditated here, in a steely garden, hidden from the world.

"We all want to be noticed and appreciated," Bek said to Lod and TokTok. "Shinier needles. More boastful songs. We say we're strong, and yet really we ache for someone to honor us. Imagining we're special feeds the myths we tell ourselves to ease that ache."

"Lod, you have a swarmer outside, and more at your home, singing songs about you," Bek continued. "They tell tales of the great warrior TokTok in Goz and Gan. But songs are brief in the life of the world. What song is heard above the Short Kiss? We remember Pik in song, but do we know him? Was he even real, or just a story? Because we're trapped in prisons of our own making, we spend our lives seeking appreciation now and some legacy in a future we can't experience."

"Nothing we had before means anything?" Lod asked.

"We've been walking pathways already laid out by others," Bek said. "Master Mok tried to show us we could cut new ways through the thicket. The paths we traveled before were just to learn to walk, but now we can choose. We can live to someone else's standard of honor, or we can live differently, explore new philosophical worlds, finding some that make us happy."

Still Master Mok was silent. Waiting without appearing to wait. Listening without appearing to listen.

"Stories don't matter," Bek said. "We matter, learning from each other."

Lod and TokTok had been facing Master Mok. After some moments, they shifted slightly, so the four of them were facing each other equally. Four learners. And they began to talk.