

ROBERT BISHOP

10000



# ONE THOUSAND

A Short Story By  
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# Don't go looking for snakes

“What does it even matter? You're the best I've ever seen at extracting poison. Surely they can see it as well?”

“I am, but that won't help me at all if I can't make a bomb to save my life!”

The prince smiled. “It's simply a matter of finding the perfect amount.” He made a gesture with his hands. “Too much and you burn yourself, too little and you burn no one.” He grabbed Seld's shoulder, a firm yet loving grip. “You'll really kick them where it hurts next time, I'm sure of it!”

“How can you be so sure? You haven't even seen me there!” Seld sounded angrier than he was. In truth, he was glad Iben hadn't been to the chapterhouse for the last month.

“I saw you once, Seld, and I haven't seen anyone else since.” Iben leaned over and kissed him. “You stole my heart.” He placed his palm on his chest.

“You know, sometimes you're more of a princess than a prince.” Seld grabbed Iben's hand and forced it over his head. “I wouldn't worry about it, though.”

Iben gave him a sly smile. “And why is that?” He squirmed under Seld's grip, but he didn't want to break free. Not at all.

“Because I'm gonna make a man out of you.” He turned Iben over and gently bit his neck, working his way down, kissing the giant eagle resting between Iben's shoulders. Seld absolutely loved that tattoo. He'd seen many a man with similar concepts, but Iben's was special. *So perfectly placed on his soft, muscular back.*

“It's like your wings are one with his.” Seld mused, kissing it. He could lick that tattoo straight off his body.

“Who's the princess now?” Iben laughed into the pillow.

“Shut your gorgeous mouth!”

The sun bathed the two of them as they rolled around between the sheets. Casting its rays down from high up in the sky, scorching the entire valley. It was late afternoon, and most people were indoors or hiding underneath thick awnings. No matter how tan, brown or black the colour of their skin, most of the valley's denizens kept out of the afternoon sun this time of year.

The Valley of a Thousand Snakes was known for two things; being a frying-pan during most of the summer, and – as its namesake hinted at – housing many snakes. The snakes came slithering into the valley every spring, roasting themselves on the hot, red stones.

Contrary to most people, Alyssha, Iben's betrothed, had braved the afternoon heat this very day. Though with an entourage the size of half the valley.

Prince Iben and Alyssha was to be joined underneath the sun no more than four weeks hence, and there was a lot to be done. “How are we to be joined underneath the sun if I can't even face it?” Alyssha would say to her handmaidens. “This magical ceremony won't simply arrange itself.”

It would, though. Alyssha's role was merely that of a consultant. Prince Iben's family, who ruled almost all of Tirmas and The Great Dry, would see to everything. Nothing was left to chance, not even the amount of apple-pieces on each platter, or their exact colour. Alyssha had no power over this.

But she was good at pretending.

She smiled and bobbed back and forth under the tightly weaved parasols, the sun casting eerie shadows across her face.

The princess-to-be was a magnificent creature, eyes like honey and hazel, able to pierce even the sturdiest soul. She was dressed in a light, eggshell gown with a thin veil to keep the

worst of the sun out. A teal shade covered her eyelids and branched out from the corner of her eyes, making her gaze even more intense. Her lips were the same pink as the desert rose, captivating and inviting. On her tan wrists, a dozen bracelets rattled in unison as she stepped across the searing desert sand.

“She looks like a bronze goddess.” Iben’s father had told him.

Iben hadn’t dared told him he preferred gods.

“I love you!” Seld whimpered, placing his lips back on Iben’s neck. The smell was wonderful. He always smelled so wonderful. Seld gently bit him below the ear and allowed his tongue to work its way up to the apex. Judging from the laboured moans and shortness of breath, it was working.

Iben clutched Seld’s thigh, holding on for dear life. His world was spinning, Seld knew. So was his.

A loud knock on the door quickly cut through Iben’s playful moans, sending Seld’s heart up his throat.

“Princess Alyssha is returning, your highness.” A man’s voice announced through the door.

“I count nine hundred and ninety-five!” Seld whispered.

“That’s not funny! She’s a nice girl.” Iben pushed Seld off, the magic gone.

“I know, and you like neither.” Seld threw his robe on; the yellow uniform all acolytes of the Brotherhood wore.

“That doesn’t make her a snake, Seld!” Iben quickly gave the white sheets a shake, making the bed appear less disturbed. He placed his palms on the warm windowsill and stuck his head into the vibrating air.

“Doesn’t it?” Seld equipped his belt, half a dozen satchels and pouches rattling. “Don’t worry;” he patted a small bag of orange powder. “I’m not going to coat her with orange paint, but you have to admit the timing is a little too perfect.”

“My father will pull through. I know he will! He just got better, Seld. And no, you won’t coat her in orange, because there is no poison to extract.” He turned around, his flawless skin wrinkled by a deep frown. “She’s a nice girl. That’s all there is to it!”

“So you’re just going to marry her? Live a lie for the rest of your life, like a coward?”

Iben took a step forward. A man of his stature needed no words, no weapons. Seld knew what that step meant, the threat was clear as day. He pointed at Seld. “Careful, boy!” He said, taking a deep breath. As he lowered his hand again. “I’m living a lie *now*. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is what you’ll feel going to bed every night! For the rest of your *life*. The difference is the pain you place on your own shoulders.” Seld didn’t allow the threat to sidetrack him. He stepped forward and grabbed Iben’s shoulders. “Those perfectly sculpted shoulders.” He gave him a quick peck on the cheek and rushed towards the door. “Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying.” He stepped into the much cooler stairwell, beads of sweat sending shivers down his spine as they crawled down his back. There wasn’t another person in sight, so Seld blew a kiss. *I’m with a prince, after all. In a bedroom in a tower. Might as well play the part.*

“Seld!” Iben threw after him just as the door closed. “I love you, too!”

The sun was about to vanish behind the red cliffs, giving the entire valley room to breathe again. Seld walked towards the outskirts of the city, climbing a small, narrow path up the hillside. The locals were afraid to leave the valley after nightfall. (Some of them during the day, as well). The city contained two districts, separated by The Divide, a deep crevice cutting right through the entire valley. Deep below, a thunderous river roared, carrying an endless

supply of water, branching and stretching all throughout The Great Dry. One side of the divide housed the palace, where Prince Iben and the soon-to-be Princess Alyssa lived, alongside a dozen or so villas and royal quarters. The beautiful structures loomed over the rest of the city, clearly visible from both sides of the divide.

The view from the palace was quite different. From the top floors, one could see above the hillside; endless sand and badlands stretching on for miles. One could also see the entire valley, the Brotherhood Chapterhouse visible in the hills straight across. Arranged in a semi-circle below the chapterhouse were markets, booths and carts in all shapes and sizes, bustling with life all day and night. Further down, towards the divide, the commoners lived, some fancier than others.

There were few poor people living in the valley, it offered few jobs, and mostly attracted rich people who were ready to spend the rest of their lives entrenched in paradise. A handful of poor locals were granted shelter on huge coffee plantations located around the valley, on the warm plateaus above. From this red soil, the best coffee beans in the world grew. Locals who had fallen on hard times, or who had wandered from their homes, could work for shelter here. For many of them, it became a sanctuary, as most of the valleys residents seemed to believe there was no world outside.

For all intents and purposes, Seld was an outsider. A man from the central continents, accepted into the Brotherhood of Akash, Akash being the local word for Alchemy, and all adjacent crafts. This was an honour, to be sure, but it was hard for Seld to see it that way. Being an outsider, he had to work twice as hard as the rest of them.

Seld also saw the plantations as a sanctuary. A place to be on his own, smoke and relax. A place where he didn't have to gaze up at the bloody palace every time he looked out a window.

Then of course, there was Lyonel and Sephala.

"Well, well. If it isn't the acolyte who can't make things go boom!" A familiar voice laughed as he approached the top of the valley. "Here to steal my man, are you?"

Seld gasped for air, too tired to be insulted. "As you're the first thing he sees every morning, I don't think I'll have to. At this point, he'll pretty much come willing--"

Seld stopped dead in his tracks.

"What?" Sephala placed her hands on her hips.

"I'm still in the valley, aren't I?"

She squinted and tilted her head. "For about fifty or so meters, yes."

"Perfect!" Seld dropped down on one knee and grabbed a glass jar from his belt. The jar had a thick hide instead of a lid, and gave away a strong thrum as Seld tapped it. He reached behind some rocks next to the path and found a branch.

"This again? I thought you only needed one hundred or so?"

"Fifty, actually. This is more of a side project." He placed his tongue on his upper lip in concentration, leaning into the shrub on the other side of the path.

Suddenly, a loud hiss came at him, followed by a lunging snake. The Tirmas Cobra, one of the deadliest snakes in the world. A picture of Iben flashed before Seld's eyes as he fell back, closing his eyes, covering his face. He didn't know why. The poison would kill him either way, it would just be more agonizing if he was bitten in the arm.

He felt nothing.

As he opened his eyes again, he could see the snake scurrying down the road, slithering from side to side in the sand. Seld didn't waste a second, bolting after it, pressing the branch down on its neck.

"For heaven's sake, Seld! You're going to get yourself killed!"

Seld grinned as he forced the snake's head down on the skin covering the jar. A thick, honey-like essence pouring into the jar in big, thick globs. He placed the jar back in his belt

and grabbed a pinch of orange powder from a bag, he licked his finger and painted a thick, orange stripe on the cobra's head. "I count nine hundred and ninety-five!" He exclaimed as the snake vanished into the brush.

"You're insane!"

"It's called The Valley of a Thousand Snakes, right? I have to see whether it's true or not!"

"My point stands."

"Didn't argue!"

Lyonel appeared behind Sephala with a tray of lemonade, coffee cups and earthen spirits.

*Lemonade to cool off, coffee to sharpen the senses and spirits to soothe.* The red soil made for excellent alcohol with a thick, dark taste. The couple had made a good business by selling some on the side.

"You know me too well, Lyonel." Seld smiled.

"I heard some noise down here, should I bring the antidote as well?"

"No, you've got all the antidote I need right there on that tray."

Lyonel smiled and kissed Sephala on the cheek. "I thought so." He vanished inside a blue structure balancing on top of the rocky plateau. It looked more like a shed than a house, but it was a warm and inviting home, and Seld always felt at peace there.

"New blend?" Seld asked as he tasted the coffee. It was more bitter than he was used to, but carried with it an explosion of tastes. There were dark tones, of chocolate and nuts, mostly, but a strong acidic taste compromised the rich atmosphere on which it was built.

"Yes, we tried a darker roast than usual this time, but I'm afraid it's a little—"

"Bitter?" Seld finished.

"Yes."

"It is. But I don't know if it's a problem with the ingredients or with the roasting process?"

Lyonel started laughing. "If you learned as much at that chapterhouse as you did here, you would've been a full-fledged Akash a long time ago, braham." Lyonel got up and took the cup from Seld's hands. "You've got to be careful with salts when you're making coffee; a bitter cup is horrible, yes, but a salty cup will kill you." He brought Seld another cup from the kitchen. "Sephala here thinks we're using the wrong grind-size."

Seld looked at Sephala and smiled. "Are you?" He asked?

Lyonel looked at Sephala as well. "No." He answered.

"Then what's the problem?" Seld took a sip from the new cup. "Oh!" He exclaimed. "Noman, sun and the heavens all rolled into one; that's what I call a cup of coffee!"

"And that's the problem," Lyonel continued. "That's the same blend."

Sephala leaned forward and lowered her voice. "This is the best damn coffee we've ever made up here! It has the potential to make us all rich, braham. But we can't make more!"

Seld barely listened, completely lost in all the flavours dancing around on his tongue. "Why can't you make more?"

"Because *we* didn't make it in the first place."

Seld stopped drinking and put the cup down on the table. "Then who did?"

Lyonel sighed. "There is a worker here, on the plantation. He's a braham, like you."

"What? I didn't think you had any outsiders here on the plantation."

"We didn't. This man just arrived two days ago."

"And he's from the central continent as well? Like me?"

"Yes, he claims to hail from Steadwic. Says his name is Alfred." Sephala leaned even closer. "He scares us, braham. There's something about him."

"Like what?" Suddenly, Seld forgot all about the coffee. He'd never met anyone else from the central continents the two months he'd been in the valley, and he didn't think he ever would.

"Well, for starters he's wearing an Akash robe."

“I’m wearing an Akash robe, that doesn’t-“

“He’s wearing a black one.” Sephala interrupted.

“A black one? But that’s the highest rank! No braham has ever-“

“Which means he probably killed someone for it.” Lyonel said. “We know there’s a lot going on outside in the lands surrounding this valley, and the road from city to city is long and hard out here. Maybe he even picked it off a corpse.” He emptied a long, thin glass of spirits. “But there’s something about the way he looks at you.” Lyonel’s voice turned into a whisper. “It’s like he can see your soul.”

Seld sighed and did the same. “Is it at all possible you’re reading into things? There’s lots of talk and stories in a place like this. Hell, most of the people living here are scared to leave their little hole-in-the-ground!”

“This isn’t a ghost story, braham! I’m not reading into things. I’m just saying something is not right with that man.”

“Don’t get upset now, Lyonel. You’re the one who always told me; ‘don’t go looking for snakes, you might find them.’ Remember?”

“Yes, and you’re the one who always answered; ‘isn’t that the point?’”

Seld raised his hands. “Yes. I was thinking more of actual snakes though.”

Lyonel laughed. “And how fares the snake hunt, if I may ask?”

“Nine hundred and ninety-five.” Sephala said unenthusiastically.

Seld smiled and nodded.

“Only five more to go.” Lyonel shrugged his shoulders. “Huh, maybe this is the Valley of a Thousand Snakes after all.” He grabbed a cane that leaned against his chair. Sitting for too long made his back ache, the cane made it easier to stand up again.

“Well, it sure has a better ring than ‘The Valley of Nine Hundred and Ninety-five Snakes.’” Seld smiled and got up as well.

Seld met Lyonel and Sephala shortly after coming to the valley. Curious about the outskirts of the city, and tired of all the local gossip, he decided to hike up the hillside and see for himself. The first thing that met him was Lyonel and Sephala, tending to their crops. The second thing was the best cup of coffee he’d ever tasted, until today.

The couple were both in their 56<sup>th</sup> year, though the warm sand and unyielding sun had made their skin leathery and coarse. They still looked good though, Seld thought, and made for an adorable couple. Lyonel was tall and slim, and had a face that radiated kindness and wisdom. His grey hair and beard only accentuated this, though the sand-coloured hat he always wore gave him the look of a tired plantation worker.

Sephala had hair as black as the night, and must’ve been one hell of a dame in her time. She still had the curves and the slim waist, but her breasts seemed slightly too big for her body, Seld always thought. Her black eyes could also be a little off-putting at first, but her kind voice and loving character more than weighed up for it.

“Might I have a talk with him, then?” Seld asked, smiling as broad as he dared.

“By all means.” Lyonel said. “Just head north. You’ll spot him a mile away. But don’t you come back here and say I didn’t warn you!”

It was completely dark now; the sun vanished behind the giant bluffs in the distance. Two out of three moons were visible in the sky, one of them red, the other blue, casting an eerie purple light across the plantation.

The coffee beans almost seem to glow blue in the dim haze. *Hot afternoons makes for cold nights*, Seld suddenly remembered, wishing he had some more clothes on underneath. Then his mind wandered to Iben again.

At once, he felt warm.

He kept walking for a few more yards, until sleeping workers started popping up between the beanstalks. Eventually, he wound up next to a red tent, crudely put together by tattered old clothes and fabric. Flickering light poured out, no doubt created by a rusty old lantern. There were huddled voices coming from inside, accompanied by the sound of cards being dealt.

Seld ducked under the opening and presented himself with a brief “excuse me, good sirs.”

There was no answer.

“Excuse me!” He repeated.

There was no answer.

Three skinny old men were sitting around a rickety wicker table, far past its prime. They were mechanically playing some kind of card game. It was impossible to tell which, and who was winning, the cards too worn to have symbols on them.

“I’m looking for Alfred!” Seld barked. “Scary man in a black robe, I’m told.”

One of the men turned towards him, revealing a dead eye on the left side of his face. *Plenty of them to go around, it seems...*

“The braham?” He asked. “He’s further north. Outside the plantation.”

“Thank you.” Seld answered, hurrying away from the tent.

Seld hadn’t really talked much to the plantation workers before, and he suspected he wouldn’t after today, either.

*Outside the plantation? Who the hell sleeps outside the plantation?* Even though most of the stories the bored, rich people told each other were hokum, there were still dangers lurking out on in the badlands. Prairie wolves, coyotes, lions. *And worse.*

It wasn’t until Seld had reached the outskirts he realized he might’ve been fooled. Suddenly, he realized how dark it had become, and how quiet everything was.

He gazed into the darkness for a few seconds, and it dawned on him how little he’d been up here. He’d never bought the stories, never thought the world ended at the top of the cliff. He’d spent night after night naked next to Iben, carefully stroking his back as he laughed at all the ghost stories.

Now, they didn’t seem so farfetched.

He could hear the familiar hiss of a cobra a few feet into the darkness, but there was no point. *This isn’t the valley, which means that’s not number nine hundred and ninety-six.*

He didn’t know where anything was past that darkness, not Tirmas, not Aevon, not the rest of the dry. *A few more steps, and I won’t even find my way back here.* A coyote laughed in the distance, sending shivers down his spine. He couldn’t see a damn thing but his breath, misting in the air in front of his face. He didn’t want to be here anymore. He didn’t want to see Alfred, he didn’t want to know how he made the best coffee in the world. He didn’t even want to find the remaining five snakes. He just wanted to go home. To gaze up at the palace from his window like always, wondering what Iben was doing, what he was wearing.

Then a thought struck him. *If those creepy old workers lured me out here for a laugh, they could’ve followed me.*

A twig snapped behind him.

He turned around.

He saw nothing.

“You shouldn’t be out here.” A dark voice said.

“He’s an acolyte at the Brotherhood chapterhouse, I don’t see why you’re making such a big case out of this!” Iben leaned against the window, the night air cold on his naked back. He wondered where Seld was. He wasn’t at home, Iben could see that from the window. There was no light. He had a small spyglass next to an ornate snake figurine by the window. It didn’t allow him to see Seld, it was too far off in the distance. It did, however, allow him to see whether or not there was any light.

“He’s a nobody! A braham from the other side of the divide!” Alyssha removed her teal and silver earrings and threw them on the nightstand. She was completely naked, her raven hair flowing down her shoulders, draping her round, full breasts. Her dark brown nipples were barely visible between the strands of hair. She was perfect, in every sense of the word, and she was standing there, right in front of him, as naked as the day she was born.

“Yes, a nobody! What does it matter then?” He felt nothing, not even a tingle. He studied her caramel skin, trying to imagine what it would taste like.

“A prince doesn’t concern himself with the affairs of nobodies.” She took a few steps towards him. Her nails were the same colour as her eyeshade, on both hands and toes. She had toe-rings on four toes, and on twice as many fingers. He could catch a small glimpse of her sex, just between her legs. A small strip of black hair pointed the way; not at all like a man, with unruly, curly hair all over.

“Maybe this prince does.” He said. “Maybe this prince takes an interest in his people.”

“His people?! That’s exactly it, Iben! He’s not *your* people! He’s not *my* people, he’s not *our* people. He’s a braham!” She looked intense when she was angry. It made her eyes even blacker, her brows more prominent, and her appearance more magical. Her breasts gently bobbed up and down.

Iben sighed. “Don’t worry about it, okay?” He looked down at his member, dull and pointing down.

She was bound to notice eventually.

“Oh, I’m not worried, she answered, taking a swift step towards him.” She grabbed him hard, whispering, “I know there’s somebody else.”

# You might find them

“What do you mean?” Seld felt uneasy. He still couldn’t see the man.

“I mean; you have an odour that smells unmistakably like someone’s rear end. It reeks of you.”

The voice seemed to come from inside the blackness somewhere, impossible to pinpoint. Seld’s hand went down to his belt, fingering a pouch with explosive powder. “What do you want from me?”

“What do I want from you? Nothing! You’re the one who came looking for me.”

*Lyonel was right, there’s something very, very wrong with this man.* Seld could feel it coming in waves, like gusts of wind, chilling to the very bone. “Right.” Seld took a deep breath and tried to forget Alfred’s initial comment. “Well, I was curious about the coffee-“

Alfred laughed a sinister laugh. “Nonsense, this has nothing to do with the coffee.”

Seld could feel the thread holding his satchel closed, he felt reassured, even though he knew they were badly mixed. *Won’t do much damage, but they’ll shut his ugly face up...* Seld looked around again, seeing nothing but blackness. *If I can find him, that is.* “If you know what this is about, why don’t you just tell me?”

“That’s a fair point, I suppose.” Seld could hear footsteps approaching. “First things first,” the man said, his voice no longer coming from all directions. “I’m not schemin’ to hurt you and I’m not fixin’ to play games.”

A man stepped out of the shadows behind Seld. Not young, but not as old as Seld imagined, or as the voice indicated.

“You came stumblin’ over ‘cause you heard about the coffee, and instantly pieced together that yours truly probably know more about Akash than you ever will. I’ll wager you’ve come to some sort of conclusion regarding your, eh-“ He waved his hand in a lazy circle. “Shall we say, sexual alignment?”

Seld removed his hand from the satchels. For some reason, he trusted Alfred’s word. *He won’t hurt me.* He carefully studied him, wondering how to proceed. *He knew of my ‘alignment’ because I smell like ass... Apparently. No point in wasting time on that.* “And what conclusion might that be?” He asked, smiling.

Alfred grinned. His teeth were stained from years of smoking and drinking coffee, and his skin unmistakably told the story of a man wandering the desert for years. There was still something about his looks, though. It was almost like he looked too young, like his appearance lied. “Well, you don’t really have the aesthetic required of a princess, do you?” He chuckled. “That means you’ll have to find some other way to spend your time.”

“Wait. What do you mean I’m not a princess?” Seld knew what he meant, he just wouldn’t believe it. He’d been so careful, hidden his tracks so well.

“Aw, one thousand pardons, my dear. I didn’t realize you wanted to be a princess so bad.”

“Cut the crap!”

“I mean, not only does your-“ He repeated his lazy wave. “Genitalia, reek of rear end; it reeks of royal rear end.” He sighed, like he half expected Seld to start arguing. “I’d wager a guess Lyonel told you one or two things about me that tickled your interests – apart from the coffee, that is – now you know he was right.” He raised his hand, as if stopping Seld from saying something he didn’t intend to say. “Now, there ain’t nothing to gain from wonderin’ about that, or asking questions. It is what it is.”

Seld was completely speechless. *There is, of course, no way this man can smell Iben from my-*

Seld found himself sniffing the air a few times before looking back at Alfred. He still had nothing to say. *Nothing to gain from wondering.* Seld repeated in his head. *Maybe so, but I still do.*

“Good man!” Alfred said, like a proud father congratulating his son.

*Well, at least he can't read my mind, then...*

“Mixing coffee ain't that different from creating a potion or a bomb. You, of course, are quite aware of this.”

“Yes.” Seld still had no response. His heart was racing, and for some reason, he found himself thinking about Iben, about what would happen to *him* if the word got out.

“So... Would you like for me to share my little secret with you?”

Seld wasn't sure how to respond. That was the reason he came here, but so much had changed between then and now. He felt a sudden urge to run, to leave the entire valley, to put everything behind him. “I don't know.”

“Don't worry. I haven't shared with anyone your infidelities, and I suspect I won't either.” He took a deep breath. “Nothing to be gained.” He stepped closer, his grey hair fluttering as he moved, as if it was made of silk. “Just a few words of wisdom, and you can go on about your day.” He turned around and looked into the blackness beyond the valley. The coyotes had stopped laughing, and the world was quiet. “Or rather, night.” He smiled.

*Careful, Seld. Don't let him catch you off guard.* Seld now noticed his black, worn-out Akash robe, draped over his shoulders like linen over a corpse. *It's not his.*

Alfred took a quick step forward, leaning towards Seld. He placed his lips next to his ear and grabbed his neck.

Seld was powerless. There was something soothing and reassuring about the entire thing, as though Alfred was the kindest, most pleasant man in the entire world, carefully making sure nothing would happen to him. He couldn't do anything.

Alfred whispered seven simple words in Seld's ear, and his eyes widened.

*I need to stay here.* Seld knew. *Just for a little while longer, then everything will be okay.* He closed his eyes. “Are you sure?”

There was no answer.

He opened his eyes again, but Alfred was gone. He took a few steps into the darkness. “Old man?” He asked the black night.

A coyote laughed in response, then another.

A bone-chilling gust of wind made the sands cloud beyond the plantation, as if some grand apparition was trying to make itself known in the night.

Seld felt uneasy again, even more so than he did when he arrived. He pulled his robes closer and turned around, not sure whether or not he'd just dreamed the whole thing.

The palace loomed in the distance, mocking and teasing, all at the same time. Iben was there, of course. As was his beautiful betrothed. *Is he fucking her?* Seld found himself wondering. He wouldn't really blame him if he did. Not only was she a gorgeous woman, but they were expected to create many little princes and princesses. *Only one way to do that, as far as I know.* The thought still made Seld miserable though, so he closed the curtains, deciding to focus on something other than the palace. If history was anything to go by, though, he wouldn't be able to.

“He couldn't possibly know...” Seld told his wall. It wasn't a particularly nice wall. As a matter of fact, it was really ugly. Grey, stale clay covered by thin pieces of wood and a ghastly hand-broidered carpet. Red and black, just to be absolutely sure it would be horrible to look at. “Then again, he knew about me. About us...” He turned towards his window again. Even though he couldn't see the palace through the thick, brown curtains, he knew it was there. “What does he want? Why would he-“

Something hissed.

*It can't be. Not here...?*

The Tirmas Cobra, deadliest of all snakes.

Seld stumbled backwards, falling over his table, breaking the entire thing.

The snake lunged at him, aggressive and vile, poison running thick from its fangs. It must've gotten trapped inside, desperate and dangerous.

"Easy!" Seld screamed, as if the snake would somehow understand, and go on about its day. He'd captured and extracted poison from close to a thousand snakes, but he still knew the risks, and they were still every bit as deadly. One bite, and he would be dead.

The snake hissed and squirmed towards him, ready to strike again.

Seld wouldn't be able to roll away quick enough, he knew. There wasn't enough space, and he was trapped by the bits and pieces underneath him.

In desperation, he grabbed one of the feet - once suspending the tabletop in the air, making it just that, a table - now just rolling around doing nothing. He lunged at the snake before it could do the same, making a distinct thud as the edge, with some table still on it, connected with the snake.

The snake flew through the air and slammed into the wall. The entire thing was quite comical really, but Seld wasn't in a laughing mood. The snake scurried into the hall, as if it suddenly realized how it would get out of there.

"Oh no, you don't!" Seld screamed, running after it like a madman. He wasn't wearing his belt, and he wasn't really up to the task of extracting poison right now, so he settled on bludgeoning it to death.

It made a terrible mess, leaving only shredded meat encased in a ruptured snakeskin.

A couple of curious neighbours had gathered, staring in disbelief at the half-naked man with a bloody tenth of a table in his hand. He couldn't really blame them, this was, after all, their hall as well.

"I count nine hundred and ninety-six." He said, breathing heavy. "Go back inside."

As he slammed the door behind him, he noticed the kettle on the stove. He grinned, realizing he wouldn't sleep tonight no matter how hard he tried. He had another tournament at the chapterhouse tomorrow, and he always did terrible.

He stuck his hand in the pocked of his robe, and produced a few handfuls of beans. "Coffee and Akash, same principles." He smiled and ground the beans, then he found some of the jars containing snake-poison and some empty pouches. Each contestant was allowed five home-made concoctions in the tournament, and Seld's were never very good.

This time, things would be different, he decided.

"Don't you worry, Iben. I'll kick them where it hurts."

"Come on, Seld! You can do this!" Iben cheered and clapped, but quickly remembered himself and stopped. He placed his hand on Alyssha's thigh, firmly. She was soft and smooth, like silk.

He still felt nothing.

It was an even hotter day than the one before, the air vibrating, violent waves rising towards the merciless, blue sky. Alyssha was wearing a black brazier, adorned with small diamond studs, and a matching sarong. On top, she only wore thin linens, like a ghostly veil, shrouding her in mist. She placed her hand on top of his, smiling a false smile.

He wore white linen pants and a small white vest with matching wristbands. All in all, he looked more than a commoner than a prince, but he felt comfortable.

He looked at Alyssha and smiled back.

His company was another story.

A loud blast caused them both to turn against the arena again.

Black smoke rose from the impact, shrouding every grain of sand within.

Seld coughed, trying to see his opponents through the smoke.

He couldn't.

He grabbed a satchel from his belt and held it high above his head. With the other hand, he clutched the tenth of table from last night. If one of them got to close, he could smack him across the head. And besides, the dead snake spattered on there made it look really intimidating.

Suddenly, one of the others came dashing at him as the smoke lifted. "Not only can't you mix, Seld." The man said, readying a thin vial. "You can't use smoke properly either-" Seld cut the man short by throwing his weapon at his face.

The vial flew from the man's hand, spinning in the air, the red liquid reflecting the sun. Seld threw himself forward, trying to catch it. It was a light-bomb, he guessed, and if it hit the ground, he'd be blind for the next few weeks. He stretched his arm as he bit the sand, his mouth filling up with dust. He let out a sigh of relief as he felt the glass bouncing between his fingers. "Eat shit." He spat as he got back on his feet. He proceeded to jam the vial down the shoe of his opponent, giving him a pat on the back. "I'd remain still if I was you."

The spectators gasped at Seld's raw style. Akash was never meant to be used in duels, but the Brotherhood used to have them once every ten days to force their students to think in new ways, and create new concoctions. Most participants fought only with their own creations, and kept their distance, but Seld was never very good at that.

So he'd decided to fight his own way.

Iben smiled. He'd never seen Seld this cutthroat before. He was no fan of violence, but he enjoyed watching a good duel, and this was bound to be a fine one. He squeezed Alyssha's thigh harder, blood rushing to his own.

A metal-encased bomb flew towards Seld from across the arena, an extremely weak attempt to attack him. *Please have a fuse, please have a fuse*, he thought to himself. He raised his piece of table and promptly smacked the metal ball.

It didn't detonate.

Instead it flew back towards its sender, exploding in mid air, releasing a noxious, white gas. Two opponents were showered by the mustardy contents, coughing and squirming.

Only three remained now. *Three against me*, Seld knew. They'd never liked him to begin with, and after today's display, he was sure they'd do just about anything to get rid of him.

*Time to end this.*

He still had his satchel held high, so he took a deep breath, then another, then another. And released it.

*Too little, you'll burn no one*, he thought as the satchel fell towards the ground.

*Too much, on the other hand...*

Iben and Alyssha covered their eyes as the thunderous blackness crawled across the arena. It was like the world split in half, releasing all the evil inside. Iben could taste the bomb from where he was sitting. A vile and venomous taste, like the air itself had turned into "Poison!"

One of his guards jumped to his feet, his blade ready. "It's an attack! He's trying to kill the--"

Iben firmly placed his hand on the guard's shoulder and forced him back down. "It's not lethal." Iben assured him. "It just feels that way."

Beside him, Alyssha was retching and squirming as if the plague was on her.

"Relax, Alyssha." He said. "Just get down on the ground."

Alyssha looked at herself, then at Iben. "Are you insane?"

“Fine! Stay in the smoke then.” He got down on his stomach, pressing his head against the sand.

Alyssha remained.

It was still impossible to see anything happening inside the arena, but every now and then, sounds of fighting rose against the blackened sky, only to be immediately drowned out by the crowd.

After a few minutes, however, the thick smoke slowly thinned, revealing a cloaked character inside.

The other participants were scattered around the arena, coughing and squirming. Kicking the sand as sweat and tears dripped from their red faces.

For a few seconds, Seld was afraid he'd used too much poison. The effects were immense, and his face felt like it was on fire. Even through the cloth he'd placed over his mouth, the poison stung. It tasted like salt, mustard and sand, combined, only ten times stronger and viler.

Through the ringing in his ears and the screams from the crowd, Seld heard a familiar sound. He tried to listen closer, but it was quickly drowned in the wails and coughs from the scattered contestants. “I bet no one's ever-“

Seld cut himself short by retching. *Done that before*, he finished in his head. *I think I'll keep the cloth for now...*

He stepped over a few people, smiling to himself. The smoke was starting to clear, and he could see more of the arena.

They were ten contestants to begin with, and now there was only him.

*At least they're all still alive.* He thought to himself. *That's good. I think.* He threw a glance up at the arena, his eyes instantly meeting Iben's. Did he look proud? Or was it just Seld's imagination? Seld quickly withdrew his stare as the bitch next to Iben started complaining and waving her arms. *She's not proud, that's for sure. I wonder if she knows anything.*

Then came the familiar sound again. A weak hiss, echoing throughout the grounds. Seld started looking, his brown eyes carefully scanning the field, trying to ignore the stinging. The rest of the world vanished, and all he could hear was the faint whisper.

Seld moved quicker than ever, using what remained of his coffee table. “I count nine hundred and ninety-seven!” He said his throat no longer raw. He marked the snake and got back on his feet.

The world was quiet.

Someone should have said something. Seld should've been announced as the winner by now. At the very least, some of the mentors should've stepped forward. Expelled him, disqualified him or banished him.

Something was obviously wrong.

“It would appear we have a winner!” A voice suddenly boomed amidst the audience.

Seld turned to see Alyssha leaving. “Iben!” He whispered, his heart jumping.

“Isn't that the point of this game?” Iben continued. “To be the last man standing?” He pointed at Seld. “This young man is clearly the last man standing!”

Slowly, people started getting up, clapping and cheering.

“This young man is going to fuck you senseless, you magnificent, gorgeous man!” Seld mumbled under his breath. “Which is more than I can say for that bitch of yours.”

Seld raised his hands in the air and got down on one knee. *Best play the part.* “Thank you, my prince.” He said. “It's a great honour to be pronounced by the royal highness himself.”

Seld threw his robe where the table used to be. It landed on the floor, amidst all the broken pieces. He knew it would end like this. Suspended from the Brotherhood, for violating just about every rule there ever was.

“Endangering the life of every member of the audience, including Prince Iben himself.” Seld said mockingly. “Lucky you weren’t hanged for attempted murder and treason.” He continued.

Even after the prince himself pronounced him the winner, the brotherhood had decided to fuck him over. He didn’t know where to go now, what to do.

He knew nothing.

The room was quiet and dark, a heavy orange hue forcing itself through the thick curtains. If not for the mess on the floor, no one appeared to be living there. Next to the smashed furniture was a small pile of ash, and on the other side of the room, all of the various powders, poison and cloth Seld had used to make his bombs.

*I never used ash, and I never burned anything.* He suddenly realized. *Someone’s been here.* Two more questions immediately sprang to mind. *Are they still here? What do they want?*

His thoughts were abruptly cut short as something crashed into the wall next to the window. It sounded like something hit it with great force, but didn’t fall down.

Instinctively, Seld threw himself to the ground. By now, he was used to loud things being bombs. He could hear his heart beating against the floor, feel the blood rushing to his temples. The room was oddly quiet, still bathed in an eerie, dull orange glow.

Satchels dipped in sticky oil or glue was nothing new; dip something made of hemp in glue before you threw it, and it would stick to anything and stay there forever.

*Or, at least until it explodes and the thing dies.* Seld looked towards the window, waiting. Nothing happened.

Seld listened, but could only hear his own heart and his own laboured breath. He slowly got back on his feet, stepping towards the window, one casual step after the other. There was no way a bomb took this long to detonate, no way. *Make a fuse that long, and it’s sure to be snuffed out long before it finds the powder inside.*

He poked his head out of the window, still half expecting to lose it.

Then he saw the arrow.

It was a perfectly crafted, sharp-as-a-razor arrow, no doubt hailing from the palace. Seld looked at the spire, looming in the distance. Iben was probably in there now, with Alyssa. *Shouldn’t he be firing his arrows inside her?* Seld wondered, hoping the arrow was indeed from him.

A brief examination revealed a little container near the feather. Inside was a note, signed “your eternal love.”

Seld remained by the window, reading, frowning, weeping. “My dear, sweet Iben.” He mumbled to himself. “Did that crazy old man actually have a point?”

Seld read the letter again, then again. He was so moved by its contents, he almost missed the hissing sound coming from the entrance.

Almost.

There were two of them this time, hissing and squirming. Two more snakes... *This isn’t a coincidence, not a chance.* The attempt was quite pathetic, though. *Nine hundred and ninety-seven snakes I’ve drained of poison, why would these two be any different?*

Seld took a decisive step towards them, grabbing another piece of the table. *Snakes are reluctant to attack humans. Using them as tools for assassinations isn’t the brightest idea.* Seld took comfort in knowing his assailants were less than clever, at least. He lazily kicked one of the snakes away, pinning down the other. He knelt down to it, mumbling “I count nine hundred and ninety-eight, and nine hundred and ninety-nine,” as he grabbed hold of it. The snake rattled and hissed as Seld raised it.

But it wasn't a rattle-snake.

"What the--"

Seld noticed a vial crudely attached to the snake's tail. It only took a quick glance to notice the colour and the mixture of the contents. Seld threw the snake towards the window and ran towards the door as fast as he could.

*It's a fire bomb!*

He dove through the door, sliding face down on the floor on the other side.

Nothing happened.

Typical, Seld thought, too stressed to be embarrassed.

He scrambled to his feet and started running through the labyrinthine complex, light wooden walls and clay separating sparsely decorated living quarters.

He didn't make it far before a loud hiss sounded somewhere behind him. It wasn't a snake this time, and it quickly grew much louder. Like fabric tearing, or like a cascading waterfall. Seconds later, the floor shook and the house trembled. A pillar of blue fire rose through the roof where the snake had once been, quickly expanding, engulfing the other rooms. The small wooden walls collapsed one after the other behind Seld, leaving nothing behind but piles of rubble.

*Someone really, really wants me dead.* Seld reflected as he stumbled away from the expanding blast. He could feel the heat, smell the smoke.

And then it stopped.

The flames receded, pulling back towards the centre of the explosion in a rather spectacular fashion. Trails of blue flame remained like glowing tentacles, stretching from the impact site. They burned cooler than an ordinary flame, saving most of the building from catching fire.

*The bomb was mixed to destroy, not burn.* Seld turned around, looking at the destruction. The building went on for a few more feet, and then it just stopped, transforming into nothing. There was a huge void ahead, bits and pieces of building still falling in, tumbling into the blue abyss.

*Still. Sacrificing this many lives, only to get to me.*

With the walls, floor and roof missing, the palace seemed to loom even closer, clearly visible through all the smoke and debris.

"She knows," Seld mumbled.

*Iben!*

Iben's eyes were wide with horror. The pillar of blue seemed to touch the very sky, obliterating the poor clay and wooden house it came bursting through.

The same wooden house where Seld used to live.

"Blue flame!" Iben exclaimed. "The work of an Akash brother." He turned towards Alyssha, resting naked on the bed behind him. "Revenge for the arena today..." He said.

Alyssha didn't respond.

She was always naked that one, it seemed. Sure, her body was close to perfection, but Iben was getting a little tired of seeing her breasts gently bobbing up and down every time she accused him of something. He'd fucked her twice, but she still saw through his charade. Something with his eyes, he knew. He didn't stare wide-eyed at her breasts as they tossed back and forth. He didn't gasp in pleasure as her flesh turned moist around him. He didn't grab her curves and squeeze them passionately. He just, was.

Could Alyssha really be behind this attack? Had she pegged Seld as the one he was fucking?

"You said you knew there was someone else..." He forced himself to smile. It wasn't as hard as he thought. The grief hadn't found him yet. There was also something deep inside,

convinced that Seld hadn't been obliterated. He was smart. He had to see something like this coming.

Alyssa raised her eyebrows and rolled over on her back, her head hanging from the edge of the mattress, hazel eyes staring at Iben.

"There she goes, flaunting her tits again." He thought. "You didn't think it was Seld, did you?" He asked, doing his best to keep smiling.

"Well, it most certainly wasn't another woman." She answered.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Iben dropped all forms of pretence, there was no point.

"Please, Iben. Don't take me for a fool!" She rolled out of bed and walked towards him, her fingers playfully sliding up her thigh. She slipped one of them inside herself, moaning quietly. Her other hand found one of her breasts, squeezing it decisively, two fingers closing around her nipple. "You don't feel a damn thing watching this." She slid another finger inside, moaning again, louder this time. "Even if you *were* madly in love with some other harpy, your eyes wouldn't be so dull and vacant watching me."

She grabbed his head and forced him down on his knees, pressing her wet womanhood against his nose and mouth. He could barely breathe, but didn't struggle.

"See?" She moaned. "If you preferred the company of women, you wouldn't be able to help yourself. You would've fucked me with your tongue. Enjoyed every ounce of wet coming out of me." She threw her head back, pressing herself against his face even harder.

She was right, of course. He could taste her, smell her, feel her. What man didn't want this?

He pulled away.

"So you tried to murder him?!" He wiped her juices from his face, looking at her. Her nipples were puffy, her lips swollen. Both pairs.

"Tried?" She smiled a dark, selfish smile, licking her lips.

Iben stepped back. "What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

"You're mine!" She hissed. "I'm not about to let some man-whore steal you away!" She walked towards him, her bracelets rattling.

She really was a snake, Iben saw it now. "Don't you mean all your fame and fortune?" Iben kept walking backwards, his back touching the windowsill. "That's what you're really after, isn't it?" He stopped moving, placing his hands on the ledge.

"You think I care about that?" She seemed genuinely baffled. "It's you that I want, Iben! It's you that I've always wanted!" She kept moving towards him, her thighs glistening.

She wasn't lying.

She was insane, but she wasn't lying.

Iben turned around, looking towards the shattered building in the distance. The fires had stopped, most of the smoke flown away to greet the sun. "So what's your plan here?" He closed his eyes, hoping his love would come and save him. "If you can't have me, no one can?"

Alyssa placed her hand on his shoulder. "Something like that."

"Shit!" Seld could see Iben up in the window, struggling with something. "I'm not letting that bitch kill you!" He ran towards the tower entrance, guarded by a dozen men.

*The best men this place has to offer.*

Before they could react at all, though, Seld threw another poison bomb, this one even stronger than the one at the arena. He'd tied a thick scarf around his mouth this time, protecting him from the worst of it.

The bomb landed between three of the soldiers standing in front of the wooden doors. They barely had a chance to look down before the thing went off. At the same time, a horrible truth dawned on Seld; *I'll be a killer before this is over.*

Another bomb took care of the bolted doors, and Seld wasted no time getting into the tower. "Iben!" He screamed as he begun ascending the stairs, grabbing a torch from a sconce near the second flight.

"Seld!" A vague voice called in the distance. "Help!"

For the life of him, Seld couldn't understand why Iben would be overpowered by a woman. He was bigger, stronger and probably even faster than her. *Maybe she has the guards with her? Or maybe she has some tricks up her sleeve. Women are scary like that...* "I'm coming!" He screamed, almost flying up the stairs.

"I'm going to fall!" Iben said.

"No!" Seld rushed towards a window without hesitation. He pushed his head through, just in time to see something white fluttering in the wind. "Iben!" He quickly grabbed the white, a dreadful tear following.

"Seld!" Iben cried, his clothes disintegrating around him.

Seld kept clawing at linen, eventually finding an arm. "I've got you!" He yelled, the white fabric almost hissing. He pulled with all of his might, placing his foot on the windowsill. "Don't you fucking fall down!"

The disintegrated building in the distance provided a sinister backdrop to their struggle.

"Seld..." Iben mumbled, his body limp in Seld's hands. "There's--"

"Shut up!" Seld gave Iben one last decisive tug, dragging his body through the window. "I've got you, my love! I've got you!" He collapsed against the wall, with Iben's head on his lap. He quickly removed his Akash belt, allowing Iben to rest properly. His face blue, almost purple. "I love you!"

"I love you too, Seld." Iben whimpered. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? I--"

"I wasn't able to notice it in time..." Iben motioned towards his arm.

"No!" Seld cried. "No, no, no, no, no, no!" Tears started falling onto Iben's face and neck, trickling down his chest and arms, rolling off of the pale, white snake coiled around his bicep, its teeth lodged deep within Iben's skin. "I love you!" He repeated. "Do you hear me, Iben! I love you!"

*One of the deadliest snakes in the world... He's already dead.*

Seld quickly grabbed a dagger from his belt, the sheath clattering against the stone floor. He carefully cut the snake's head off, his tears a steady stream down his face.

Footsteps soon came from above, the pitter-patter of bare feet. No doubt belonging to her.

Seld looked up, Iben dead in his lap. His eyes met hers; hazel eyes, almost red, filled with anger, greed, lust, passion.

"I count one thousand..." He mumbled, his voice barely a whisper.