

# The Battle at the Wedding

by Toklaham Veruzia

### 636 Ethsune

The bridesmaids' dresses were black, the color of mourning. The choice seemed appropriate, considering the likelihood of death at the wedding.

Captain Kir stood on the balcony and looked over the cathedral floor, his sword worn openly at his side. He commanded a team of elite vampire slayers, his own daughter among them. She was one of the bridesmaids, who would act as the last line of defense between the bride and the vampiric assassins who had sworn to kill her. Kir hoped heavily guarded doors would prevent the vampires from ever getting that far.

The wedding guests were arriving, one hundred and fifty of them, the number of witnesses required by Aithreni law for a royal wedding. They went to their assigned seats. The central sanctuary of the immense cathedral was an ideal place to hold a wedding that could quickly turn into a battle. The guests had plenty of room to spread out, leaving space between them, which reduced the likelihood of collateral damage when the inevitable battle broke out. Most of the guests were young noblemen, all of them armed. Some were friends of the prince, but others were essentially mercenaries, strangers who had been paid to serve as witnesses at the dangerous wedding. Every last one was prepared to face his death in the almost inevitable battle that approached.

"I hate vampires," murmured Kir. He checked the bars blocking off the stained glass window behind him. No vampires would be crashing in that way. Prince Angband, the younger brother of the one who was getting married today, should arrive on the balcony soon. From his elevated position, he would be able to shoot arrows into any vampires that came near Lady Neon Kay. Hopefully, the vampires who attacked would be stopped by the guards stationed at the doorways, and fail to reach the bride as she walked down the flower-strewn aisle in the center of the room.

The beginning of the wedding drew near. Now that he had finished installing the window fortifications, he should move to the stage, where he could command his men during the battle and protect the bride and groom while they said their vows. He descended the stairs quickly, mentally reviewing the plan. With numerous layers of protection in place, Lady Neon Kay should be safe, at least until she was married, at which point she could protect herself. But eight years of combat experience on the front lines of the war against the vampires had taught Kir never to underestimate his opponents.

"Captain Kir!" a voice called.

Kir glanced towards the sound as he stepped off the last stair. Rorik, a young and enthusiastic new recruit under Kir's command, approached. He was supposed to be on the balcony.

"Hello, Rorik. Where's Prince Angband?" Kir asked.

"Outside, investigating the body they just found."

"What? Where is it?"

"Next to the cathedral. I heard it was drained of blood, just like the other corpses left in the city. The victim has not yet been identified."

Kir swore. One of the bloodfencers hiding in the city had likely murdered a random beggar, replenished his own blood supply with that of his victim's, and left the body next to the building to intimidate the wedding guests.

“Thanks for telling me this, Rorik. The murder doesn’t change any of our plans. The bloodfencer that committed the crime will likely attack the wedding, so we can trap him and kill him. Now go get in position.”

“Um, sir? There’s something I wanted to give you.” Rorik rolled up his sleeves, revealing a long, spiraled gold bracelet wrapped around his arm. He pulled it off and handed it to Kir.

Kir eyed the bracelet incredulously. “A piece of jewelry?”

“No, sir. It’s new technology. Prince Angband invented it and gave it to me when he heard I was in charge of protecting him in case any vampires got onto the balcony. It increases your strength. I thought that you could use the advantage more than I could, seeing how you’re going to be right in the middle of all the fighting.”

Kir took the bracelet and wrapped it around his arm. “How does it work?”

“Punch something.”

Kir punched the floor. The floorboards buckled and snapped under his assault, which felt many times more forceful than usual. The bracelet glowed brightly.

“They increase your strength when you use them, Captain.”

“This could be useful,” Kir said. “Why didn’t Prince Angband give one of these to every soldier in the army?”

“He only invented them yesterday. And, well, he told me to keep them a secret, but I figured you could be trusted with them. I have three more for you, one for your other arm and two for your legs.”

Kir put them on. “What are they called?”

“Prince Angband called them the lightning bracers.”

“Right. Thanks a lot, Rorik. Go now.”

Rorik trotted up the steps. Kir walked towards the deserted stage. Priest Zaberdol should arrive soon to perform the wedding. He was probably outside now, saying a prayer over the dead body.

A few minutes later, Angband burst through one of the side doors. A quiver of arrows was slung over his back, and an immense longbow was in his hand. He rushed to the stage and stopped in front of Kir, breathing heavily.

“You’re late, your Highness,” said Kir. “You should have been on that balcony already, prepared for the attack and the start of the wedding.”

“That hardly matters, Captain Kir. The vampires have kidnapped Priest Zaberdol,” said Angband.

“What? How do you know this?”

“I saw it. A bloodfencer wearing a suit and tie grabbed the priest and flew into the air. Lieutenant Tulvo spotted him in a dark alleyway near the Pregnant Rock tavern. He said your help is urgently needed to rescue the priest in time for the wedding.”

Kidnapping Priest Zaberdol? Kir hadn’t foreseen that move. Without a priest, the wedding couldn’t take place, which would give the vampires much more time to assassinate Lady Neon Kay. Kir would have to act quickly. The Pregnant Rock wasn’t far from here. He could run there in a few minutes, maybe less if the lightning bracers gave him enhanced speed.

“I’ll leave immediately. Round up a few soldiers and send them to the Pregnant Rock. If the vampires have made their lair near there, I won’t be able to take them down on my own.”

“Good idea, captain,” said Angband.  
Kir leapt off the stage and rushed out of the cathedral.

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Despite the dangers inherent in such a task, Ahyune was feeling quite well about being a bridesmaid in Lady Neon Kay’s wedding. After all, weddings, even ones fraught with peril and threats of assassination by bloodthirsty monsters, were meant to be joyful occasions.

Ahyune finished tying a neon red glowstick into Neon Kay’s hair. The soon-to-be princess wore jewelry filled with neon gas wherever she went, hence her name.

“Does this dress make me look fat?” asked Neon Kay.

“No, Lady Kay,” replied Ahyune.

Neon Kay looked uncertain.

“It’s the *armor* that makes you look fat,” said Ahyune.

“Do you think Azkaban will still want to marry me if I look fat?”

“The armor will save your life in the event of a vampire attack, which Father tells me has about a 100% chance of occurring. So you can look fat, or you can look dead. And I doubt that *any* man will want to marry a corpse.”

“What she meant to say,” interjected Neon Kay’s mother, Elise. “Is that Prince Azkaban is a kind, honorable, and loving man, and he will marry you no matter what you look like.”

“Unless you’re dead,” Ahyune added.

“But you won’t be dead-“

“Because you’re wearing armor.”

“And everything will be all right.”

“Unless, of course, the vampires kill Prince Azkaban.”

Elise shot Ahyune a disproving glare. Neon Kay swallowed nervously.

Ahyune sighed. “I’m joking, Lady Kay. The prince has inherited his father’s Royal Talent, which makes him too dangerous for the vampires to attack. They’ll focus all their efforts on killing you, but, of course, they will fail, because I shall protect you, with my sword and my own amazing cinnamon.”

“I honestly don’t think you could do much of anything in a battle against vampires,” said Neon Kay. “You may be good with a sword, but you’ve never faced a real battle before. And your cinnamon ability? Seriously, what is shooting spice out of your ears going to do to a raging bloodfencer trying to kill you?”

Cinnamon fell out of Ahyune’s ears, as it always did when she was embarrassed. She hastened to defend her ability. “I killed a fully trained bloodfencing master once.”

Technically, Father and a squadron of his best soldiers had killed the bloodfencer. But they undeniably would’ve experienced greater difficulty completing that feat had the vampire not just received a face full of cinnamon (mixed with a little bit of Ahyune’s earwax), and was not only sneezing his face off but also desperately trying to comprehend what the *heck* had just happened.

Most people didn’t shoot cinnamon out of their ears. Ahyune had no idea why she was the exception to this rule. Neither did anyone else, for that matter. Zesad had

scoured the history books, trying to find a reference to some with the same peculiar ability, but had failed utterly and subsequently concluded that Ahyune's unusual ability was a sign that she had some great and mysterious destiny. Apparently, the wisdom he had attained through many decades of life experience failed to discourage him from jumping to unsupported conclusions.

"Besides, I'll have my sword in addition to my cinnamon," continued Ahyune, wrapping a belt around the waist of her long midnight dress. She lifted her sheathed sword from where it rested on the floor and buckled it onto her belt. The sword was the weapon of choice for most vampire slayers. Some used bows and arrows, but a keen blade was the best way to properly decapitate a bloodfencer. Hydropistols, the dominant weapons of Ethsune 4, had fallen almost completely out of use due to the unreliability of ammunition not forged from the sands of Bazat.

Ahyune had never fought in a full-blown battle. But for the daughter of a widowed warrior, who had spent most of her life in towns and battle camps under constant threat of attack, basic swordfighting skills were a necessity. Ahyune had trained with her father for years, and although her fighting prowess didn't match that of a competent male soldier, it had saved her life on more than one occasion when a rogue vampire broke into the camp.

Ahyune's combat skills and spice-spewing specialty made her the perfect bridesmaid for this wedding, despite the fact that she'd never actually met Neon Kay before. She'd heard of her, though. Ahyune's father had been a good friend of Kay's when they were growing up, and of course everyone, even soldiers in the most remote war camps, started talking about her when the crown prince fell in love.

The door to the room was suddenly flung open violently, and a messenger burst in.

"Long live King Azkaban!" he said.

"Wait, what, *King* Azkaban?" asked Neon Kay.

"King Dol Goldur is dead! King Azkaban now reigns in his place!"

Neon Kay's face paled. "Oh no! Was it the vampires?"

"Nah, he died of a heart attack," said the messenger. "It could happen to anyone that old, but his habit of eating half a dozen donuts every day probably didn't help. King Azkaban plans to hold his father's funeral immediately after the wedding."

"It's a bad omen!" said one of the other bridesmaids. "The vampires will attack and kill us all!"

"Silence!" said Elise. "Before his death, King Dol Goldur (may he rest in peace) carefully planned this wedding to be safe as possible. Nobody else will die today! And if anyone else has any doubts, trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Those who do will meet again in heaven when they die to worship their glorious Lord for all eternity."

Ahyune hung her head in solemn reverence for the old king's passing. Poor Neon Kay. Poor Azkaban too, for that matter. What must it be like to lose your father on the day of your wedding? The happiest day of his life would now be tainted with grief. At least their separation wouldn't be forever. Elise had a good point.

"Time for you to walk down the aisle," Elise said to Kay.

Ahyune opened a pouch full of unadulterated cinnamon and poured it into her open mouth. She gagged and drank some water to wash down the spice overdose.

Neon Kay looked at her with disgust as Ahylene coughed, ejecting bits of cinnamon from her windpipe and onto the floor.

“I wouldn’t want her at my wedding,” muttered one of the other bridesmaids.

“It’s for your own good,” said Ahylene. She turned on her cinnamon — not much, just a trickle. Small enough that no one would notice the specks of spice in her ears. Revving her cinnamon up to full power was always easier if it warmed up for a few minutes first.

One of the bridesmaids opened the door, and Neon Kay walked out, accompanied by the bridesmaids. Ahylene observed her face brighten considerably as she saw Azkaban waiting for her on the stage. Priest Zaberdol stood beside him, his Bible open in his hand. King Dol Goldur’s body lay on the front row, draped with a flag of Aithrenar.

Ahylene frowned. Father was absent. He should have been standing on the stage, ready to protect the bride and the groom as they said their vows.

Oh well. He was probably checking the fortifications around the building, or something like that. He’d surely return before Zaberdol had finished giving his speech. Ahylene forced herself to smile. Azkaban was determined to protect his beloved, and any vampires who messed with her would quickly be fried to a crisp.

Neon Kay made it a full quarter of the way down the aisle before being attacked.

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Kir raced down damp streets, leaping over flammable puddles left behind by the previous night’s rainfall. Mercifully, only a few people were out and about today. The high threat of vampire attack had convinced most people to stay home. Kir arrived at the Pregnant Rock with not a moment to spare.

“Captain Kir!” exclaimed Tulvo, the lieutenant who had informed Angband of Priest Zaberdol’s location. He stood in front of the three other soldiers, all of them bearing scratches from a recent battle. One of them was bleeding badly from a massive gash on his leg, and another soldier was binding the wound. Wisps of black smoke lingered in the air.

“What exactly happened here?” asked Kir.

“We saw some vampires dragging Priest Zaberdol’s unconscious body down the street! We attacked, and killed most of them, but a big one flew down the alleyway, carrying Zaberdol with him! We can catch him, we just have to hurry!” Tulvo ran into the alley. Kir followed.

“Lieutenant Tulvo! Stop!” said Kir. Tulvo obeyed. “We might be running straight into an ambush. We need to be careful.”

Tulvo nodded. Kir stepped forward and peeked around a corner. The street was ominously dark and shrouded with shadows, despite the light of the midmorning sun. Although it was creepy, it looked vampire-free, so Kir crept forward.

Tulvo shot him.

“Ow!” exclaimed Kir as he fell to the ground, catching himself with the palms of his hands. The bullet had struck the back of his knee. He wouldn’t be able to walk back to the cathedral. He looked behind him and saw Tulvo holding a hydro pistol, a smug

grin on his face. Water vapor streamed from the barrel of the recently discharged weapon.

"I've always wanted to be a captain," said Tulvo. "Now that you're dead, I'll be able to take your place. Oh, and it doesn't hurt that I was paid a large sum of money to murder you and blame your death on vampires."

"You traitor!" said Kir in shock. "You'll never get away with this!"

"Who will stop me? You were ambushed by vampires in a dark alley. You fought bravely, but tragically died. I alone escaped to tell the tale." Tulvo strolled forward and rounded the next corner. He reappeared a moment later, pulling a large iron cage on wheels. Inside the cage were three vampires.

"Capturing these was difficult," Tulvo continued. "But worthwhile. Once I release them, they'll charge straight at you, drawn by the blood from your wound."

Kir was on his hands and knees, teeth clenched against the pain from his gunshot wound. Tulvo unclipped a ring of keys from his belt and reached for the padlock on the cage. Two of the vampires threw themselves against the bars of the cage, as if sensing they would escape soon. With sharpened, clawlike fingers, long manes of unkempt hair, and yellowish fangs, the angry creatures barely resembled humans anymore. The third stood calmly in the back of the cage, trimming his fingernails with an unconcerned air. He wore a business suit and kept his fangs tucked neatly inside of his mouth, allowing him to almost pass for a human. Kir groaned inwardly. A bloodfencer. As the most dangerous kind of vampire, he retained all the intelligence he'd had before his transformation by dark powers, yet had entirely lost his conscience. How had Tulvo managed to capture one of those?

"Prepare to die, Captain! BWAHAHAHA!" Tulvo inserted the key into the lock. Kir put his weight on his uninjured leg and sprang forward. He tackled Tulvo, knocking the traitorous soldier over.

"What — AAAAHHHHH!" yelled Tulvo. He hadn't expected Kir to be able to jump that far, but then, he hadn't accounted for the lightning bracers. He'd have no way of knowing of Angband's top-secret invention, let alone that Kir was using it.

Pain flared as Kir's injured knee hit the ground, but he ignored it, instead punching Tulvo in the nose. Tulvo screamed in pain as blood flowed out of his nose, then screamed again, this time in frustration as he realized that he now couldn't release the vampires without risking them detecting his blood and turning on him.

The key rested in the lock. The bloodfencer reached through the bars and turned it, then slid open the cage. The other two vampires leapt out.

Tulvo shoved Kir off of him and rolled away. One of the vampires loomed over Kir, about to stab the captain with his razor-sharp claws. Kir slammed both of his fists upward. They connected with the vampire's chest and sent Kir's assailant flying up into the air. He hit the ground with a crash and lay still.

*Wow, these really are useful,* thought Kir, looking at the piece of metal coiled around his arms, the light radiating from them penetrating his shirtsleeves. Huh. Apparently, The lightning bracers glowed when he used them. He had no idea why they did that, or how they worked, but he liked them. He'd have to ask Angband if he could use them full-time.

Tulvo scrambled to his feet, a panicked look in his eyes. The other vampire leapt over Kir and came after Tulvo. The traitor fled down the street, screaming as the

vampire pursued him. Kir smiled grimly. Tulvo deserved to meet his demise as a result of his own wicked scheming.

Of course, despite the vampires' premature breakout, the main part of Tulvo's plan would likely succeed. He'd run away screaming like a little girl when attacked, even though he was only being chased by one of the monsters he'd been specifically trained to fight. That cowardly display certainly wouldn't earn him a promotion. But, assuming the bloodfencer killed Kir, Tulvo would still receive payment from whoever had hired him to orchestrate his captain's death.

Kir wrapped his hand around the one of the cage's bars and pulled himself to his feet. The lightning bracers were strong, stronger than Kir himself had anticipated. Equipped with them, there was a chance he could defeat the bloodfencer, even while hurt. He steadily leaned on the cage with his left hand and drew his sword with his right. Blood flowed from his wound. Kir looked at the bloodfencer, and froze in fear.

The bloodfencer leaned casually against the side of the dilapidated building, straightening his tie with one hand. He held his other arm outstretched, his palm out. A thin stream of blood floated through the air, moving from Kir's wound to the vampire's hand, where it vanished.

The bloodfencer was absorbing Kir's blood directly into his bloodstream. That wasn't a surprise. All bloodfencers could do that, and use that blood to recover from wounds and fuel their use of the Dark Art. What was shocking was the fact that the bloodfencer was moving blood without touching it. He was using blood telekinesis, an ability only possessed by master bloodfencers. There were only about twenty of those in the entire world. A master bloodfencer's presence here was very bad news.

Kir clamped his hand over the wound, stopping the flow of blood. The bloodfencer looked up.

"Captain Kir, I presume?" he asked. He extended a hand towards Kir in greeting. Kir didn't shake it.

"I've heard lots about you," the bloodfencer continued. "You have quite the reputation among my people. Mainly for killing us. I've watched you on the battlefield a few times. You seem a worthy opponent. Too bad I have to kill you, eventually. Of course, I have to kill everyone, eventually. It's my destiny, you see."

"You talk too much," growled Kir.

"I must make up for my brethren," said the bloodfencer. "Those two they locked in the cage with me? They haven't even set aside their bloodlust and aggression long enough to recover their powers of speech. Fools. I'll kill them eventually, too. Oh, you look surprised. I see that you thought 'everyone' merely referred to all humans. Be assured that I truly meant *everyone*, humans and vampires alike."

"Why not just kill me now?" asked Kir.

"Because I need your help. You see, there is one thing that can prevent me from fulfilling my destiny. I'm here to destroy it. You will help me, whether you want to or not. And don't think you can foil my brilliant master plan. Soon, it shall come to fruition, and the whole world shall learn to tremble at the name of Bob!"

"Bob? Seriously?" asked Kir incredulously.

"Are you suggesting that there's something wrong with my name?"

"No, I was just expecting something that sounded, you know, a little more *evil*."



“By the time I’m finished, everyone will associate the name Bob with crimes so incredibly heinous that the sun hides its face at their mention. BWAHAHAHAHA!!!”

“Your evil machinations shall never succeed!” shouted Kir.

“Whatever,” replied Bob, rolling his eyes.

Kir lunged forward and stabbed his sword at the diabolical bloodfencer. Bob grabbed the blade and shoved it away with hardly any effort. He shot a little red ball of his own blood, glowing magically, at the sword, causing it to clatter down the cobbled streets as he pushed it away. He reabsorbed the sanguinary projectile, then turned his gaze back to Kir.

“It’s time to leave now. We have a royal wedding to crash! Of course, we’ll have to stop and eat some donuts on the way.” Bob took off his tie and bound Kir’s hand with it. Then he picked up Kir and flew into the air.

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Neon Kay screamed as a portion of the wooden floor exploded. Dirt and splinters flew into the air, and a clawed hand reached through the newly-made hole in the floor two dozen feet away from the bridesmaids.

Ahyune’s hand flew to the hilt of her sword. A vampire in formal attire climbed out of the hole and charged at the bride. Other holes appeared throughout the cathedral and more vampires emerged, attacking the guests.

So they were tunneling in. It made sense, considering the armed guards at every door.

Ahyune’s heart beat faster as she beheld the attackers. She’d slain a few vampires before, but none of those had been bloodfencers, and she’d never fought more than one at once.

But she’d been trained for this, and she wasn’t alone. Already several of the wedding guests had drawn weapons and engaged the vampires.

Ahyune drew her sword and swung it at the lead bloodfencer. The vampire summoned his bloodblade - a weapon made out of his own blood, and held together by dark magic - to parry Ahyune’s blow. Ahyune jerked her arm, sending her sword flying in the opposite direction. She couldn’t afford crossing blades with the bloodfencer. A weapon made from the Dark Art would shatter an ordinary steel blade if they collided.

An arrow hit Ahyune’s foe in the chest. The bloodfencer stumbled backward, grabbed the arrow and pulled it out. He could have regenerated after receiving that wound, had not Ahyune taken advantage of his momentary distraction and decapitated him. The vampire’s body dissolved in a puff of black smoke.

Ahyune glanced up to the balcony, where Prince Angband stood. She gave him a nod in thanks for that arrow. The young soldier standing beside him waved, then heaved a bag of cinnamon over the edge of the balcony. The bag exploded on impact with the floor, spreading a cloud of cinnamon that engulfed the nearest wedding guest and the vampires he was fighting. The vampires hit by the cinnamon bomb erupted in a flurry of sneezing. They were allergic to cinnamon, a common, if mystifying, ailment among vampires.

Two more vampires charged at Neon Kay, snarling. Before Ahyune could fight them, twin streams of fire burst from the stage and consumed them. That would be

Prince Azkaban. The Royal Talent, the mysterious set of powers that was passed down through unexplained means from king to king, made him an unparalleled warrior. He frequently wielded the power of fire granted to him by the Talent and used it to overcome hordes of vampires by himself.

The Royal Talent wasn't just for the king, but the for the queens as well. The moment Neon Kay married Azkaban, their eternal bond of love would bind them together in ways not yet understood by even the most eminent scientists. As a side effect of this, Neon Kay would obtain the Royal Talent, and immediately start disintegrating vampires in blast of flame. Naturally, the vampires were intent on killing her before that happened, intent enough to launch a massive attack on a church deep in enemy territory.

Throughout the cathedral, more holes opened in the floor and more vampires burst out. Soon, most of the wedding guests were locked in combat. The soldiers guarding the entrances rushed to their aid. Some moved chairs over the holes in an attempt to prevent vampires from exiting the tunnels. It didn't work. The bloodfencers leading the vampires shoved those barriers aside with a blast of their dark power.

Ahyune steadied her shaking hands, breathing deeply in an attempt to calm herself as the battle raged around her. Father knew that she had trained enough for this, otherwise he wouldn't have let her be a bridesmaid in what would surely go down in history as the most dangerous wedding of all time. A snarling vampire rushed her. She wiggled her ears, aiming them forward, and sent a stream of cinnamon into his face. The vampire sneezed massively, his allergies activate by the cinnamon. Ahyune lunged forward and stabbed him through the heart. The vampire collapsed, and a blast of Azkaban's fire finished him off.

"HA! Stupid vampires!" yelled Neon Kay. "My Azkaban will kill you all!" She threw several glowsticks at the vampires, then hastened down the aisle, vampires tearing the train of her dress that she dragged behind her. Ahyune ran in front of her, pointing her sword at the vampires. The other bridesmaids screamed and ran away, hiding in Neon Kay's makeup chamber.

Screams of pain filled the air as the vampires struck down several of the wedding guests. Fire, arrows, and cinnamon swirled around Neon Kay, slaying vampires left and right. Ahyune burst through a cloud of black smoke left by a deceased vampire. They were almost to the stage, where Zaberdol and Azkaban awaited them. Where was Father? Ahyune had her cinnamon running full blast, producing a storm of spice and sneezing.

Azkaban reached out a hand and helped Neon Kay onto the stage. For a moment, his flames ceased. A vampire tackled Ahyune. She fell to floor, sharp claws tearing a gash in her face and barely missing her eye. Ahyune gave the vampire a face full of cinnamon and kicked it in the stomach. Gritting her teeth against the pain flaring in her face, she punched the vampire with her left fist and gritted her teeth again as its claws dug into her arm. The vampires sneezed and released Ahyune as she blasted more cinnamon into his face. Ahyune pushed the monster off her and rose to her knees, lifting her sword in the air.

The vampire sneered. "You may kill me, but Master Bob will kill you all! BWAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Ahyune chopped off his head. Black smoke enveloped her, and she stood up. Priest Zaberdol was saying the words of the wedding ritual as fast as possible.

“Do You, Azkaban Dyrsem, Take This Woman To Be Your Lawfully Wedded Wife To Love Honour And Cherish For Better Or Worse In Sickness Or Health Richer Or Poorer Till Death Do You Part?”

“I, Azkaban Dyrsem, do.”

“And Do You, Kay Humblefield, Do The Same For This Man, Before We All Die?”

“I do.”

“Then I Pronounce You Man And Wife! Kiss The Bride Then Get Back To Fighting! People Are Dying Out There!”

Azkaban put a ring on Neon Kay’s finger, then quickly kissed his new wife. Holding hands, the newlyweds turned towards the fighting crowd and together blasted fire at the vampires.

Ahyune let loose a giggle in defiance of the grim scene all around her. The vampires had failed. Neon Kay was married. With not one but two people shooting flames like that, the remaining vampires couldn’t last long. Already they had stopped pouring out of the tunnels, and the wedding guests were gaining the upper hand. Azkaban and Neon Kay leapt off the stage and charged into the battle, flames swirling in the air around them. The wedding guests ran and formed into a battle formation behind the newlyweds. Ahyune lifted her sword and joined them.

The vampires wavered the onslaught, and several of them turned to flee. Azkaban let out a battle cry and pursued them, his wife at his side.

One of the few remaining bloodfencers flew into the air. “Forget about the wedding guests! Focus on killing the cinnamon girl! Master Bob will be here soon and kill them all for us!”

Ahyune froze. Cinnamon girl? *Her?* And who was this Master Bob the vampires were talking about?

A new wave of vampires emerged from the tunnels beneath the cathedral. Two dozen of the monsters looked straight at Ahyune, hatred in their eyes. Then they rushed at her.

The stage exploded.

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The door to the bakery exploded.

The bakers froze in fear as splinters showered over them. Bob finished vaporizing the wooden door with a blast of bloodfencing power and walked through, dragging Kir behind him. He shoved Kir against the wall, then spun around and hovered a few inches in the air.

“Alright, pitiful humans,” said Bob. “Here’s the deal. Give me all your donuts, or I’ll kill you. Actually, I’ll kill you all anyway, but give me the donuts and you’ll die later instead of now. Understand?”

The head baker nodded, his face pale as he beheld the powerful bloodfencer invading his bakery. His trembling hand reached under the counter and pulled out fresh donut with pink frosting.

Kir watched, intrigued, as he tried to loosen the knot on Bob's tie binding his hands together. Why did Bob want donuts?

Bob snatched the donut from the head baker and held it up to his face, savoring its delicious scent. Then he devoured the sugary confection, consuming it in just a few hasty bites. The bakers looked on, tense with terror, waiting to see if the monster in their midst would be appeased with their offering.

"Mmmm," said Bob. "I must have more donuts!"

The bakers leapt into action, grabbing all the donuts and piling them onto the counter. Bob plunged into the stack of treats and shoved them into his mouth, inhaling the donuts nearly as fast as the bakers could put them on the counter.

The pain from the the injury in Kir's leg had subsided to low ache. Kir reached and wiggled his fingers in the wound until he found the bullet. Fortunately, it hadn't penetrated very deep, and he was able to remove it without much effort. More blood seeped from the reopened wound. Kir turned his thoughts away from the pain. For now, he should concentrate on distracting Bob and keeping him away from the wedding. The more time Neon Kay had to get married before Bob arrived, the safer everybody would be, including Ahyune. Prince Azkaban and Neon Kay together might be able to burn Bob in a tide of flames. No master bloodfencer had ever fought against Prince Azkaban before. Could that be because they were scared of him? Or was it merely a coincidence?

Bob finished the donuts and let loose a horrendously rude burp. He turned to leave.

Kir could use Bob's obsession with donuts against him somehow. If the vampire stopped to search for additional donuts, the wedding participants would have more time.

"Look! There are more donuts in that corner!" yelled Kir.

"What?" Bob asked, looking around wildly. Seeing no donuts, he turned towards the bakers and bared his fangs. "How dare you hide donuts from me! Now you shall die!"

"Wait! Stop!" said Kir. "*Why* do you want to kill everyone in the world?"

Bob summoned his bloodblade and held it an inch away from the head baker's throat. "Because it's my destiny. And, of course, if everyone else is dead, I can have all the donuts for myself."

"But if everyone else is dead, who will bake donuts for you?"

A shocked look passed across Bob's face as the significance of Kir's inquiry hit him. Apparently he had never considered that question before. He might be a powerful bloodfencer, but he was far from the smartest opponent Kir had fought.

Bob's bloodblade vanished, dismissed. He leaned over, grabbed the head baker's face and drew it close to his own. "I've had an epiphany. I'm not going to kill you, after all. You, and all your kind, will serve as bakers in the kingdom of Bob, a kingdom that will consist *only* of bakers, because everyone else will be dead! BWAHAHAHAHA!!!"

The head baker whimpered and nodded. Bob released his hold, straightening with a smug grin on his face.

The knot on Bob's tie held fast. Kir summoned all his strength and ripped the binding in half, a feat surely made possible through use of the lightning bracers. Now was as good a time as ever to attack the megalomaniac vampire. He certainly wouldn't

win, but he could distract Bob for a little while longer. Bob said he hadn't killed Kir yet because he'd needed the captain for something, something at the wedding. He wanted to keep Kir alive. Well, Kir planned to strongly tempt him to do the opposite. It should be easy, as he had spent the last eight years fighting vampires.

Kir punched Bob. His fists, swung in unison with one another, struck the vampire's lower back. To a normal human, the blow would have dealt damage to important internal organs. The lightning bracers should have increased this damage immensely. But hitting Bob felt like hitting a brick wall, only worse. Kir's attack bounced off, leaving the vampire unfazed.

Bob hissed and spun around, thrusting forth a spread hand. An invisible force pushed on Kir's limbs. Kir flew backward, crashing into the bakery wall.

Kir gasped as he struck the the wall and slumped to the ground. The sudden motion opened his wound yet again, bringing forth a new wave of pain. How could Bob do that? Master bloodfencers could manipulate blood, moving it through the air and forming weapons from it, but their powers were ineffectual when used on blood in a living body. Some blood still stained Kir's pants, but it wasn't enough for Bob to push on with as much power as Kir had felt. But then, Bob wasn't an ordinary bloodfencer, or even an ordinary master bloodfencer. If he somehow had the power to effect blood in a person, his claims that he could kill everyone in the world gained a terrifying new weight. If he simply stopped blood from flowing through the bodies of everyone near him, hundreds of people could die at once, from symptoms resembling a heart attack. When taken by surprise, not even Prince Azkaban could defeat a vampire wielding this strange new power.

Kir narrowed his eyes at the hideous monster before him. He had to somehow send a message to Prince Azkaban and warn him of this threat.

"I am the greatest bloodfencer to ever cast my shadow over the world!" said Bob, striding over to Kir. "Do you really think you could defeat me using powers I spent decades mastering?"

"What? I'm no bloodfencer!"

"I sensed it! Someone nearby called upon the dark powers and wielded blood!"

"Well, it wasn't me," responded Kir. He groaned inwardly at the thought of another master bloodfencer in the city. But then, that could be a good thing. Maybe he could goad Bob into attacking another vampire. Even if he overcame his opponent, he would be weakened after the fight. A determined and skilled squad of soldiers might be able to take him out.

"You're lying," said Bob. "But no matter. You cannot stop me!"

Kir stood up and looked Bob right in his black eyes, windows through which he saw an even blacker soul. "If I can't stop you, who can?"

"I WILL NEVER TELL YOU!"

Wonderful. That meant there was someone who could defeat Bob. "Is this person at the wedding?"

"SHE WILL DIE, JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE! NOW SHUT UP!"

Apparently the possibility of defeat was a touchy subject for Bob. But in his rage, the pronoun he used gave Kir important information. Bob believed that a woman was able to bring him down, probably Neon Kay. He likely feared her flames when used in conjunction with Azkaban's. The storm of fire that would result from both husband and

wife using their Talent simultaneously should be enough to exhaust the regenerative powers of even the strongest bloodfencer.

Bob took a deep breath, and reached a clawed hand to his chest to straighten his tie, only to realize it wasn't there. He looked around and saw the discarded tie lying on the floor. "Great. Now you've put me in a bad mood and ruined my tie. I'll have to eat some extra donuts after I utterly annihilate the city to make up for this. Of course, I'll have killed you by then, so that will make me feel better."

"Why not just kill me now, you lowdown piece of scum?"

"Because that would be the nice thing to do," hissed Bob. "And I am *never* nice to those who insult me."

"Well, I might as well not be nice to you, then," said Kir. He immediately proceeded to launch every insult his mind could conjure at the vampire sneering at his face.

"ARGHHH! You will regret this, weak one! You'll wish you died on the day you were born!" Bob punched Kir in the nose. Tears sprang to Kir's eyes as Bob grabbed his arms and pulled him into the air. He soared out of the bakery and took Kir to another dark and foreboding alleyway near the Pregnant Rock. A tall stone with a lumpish outgrowth towards its bottom stood against a dilapidated building. Bob pushed the stone aside, revealing a hole. He grabbed Kir and pulled him down the hole, which proved to be a tunnel.

"As you shall see, I've been planning this attack for quite some time," said Bob, dragging Kir down the tunnel. "What better time and place to orchestrate a tragedy than a wedding, where humans are supposed to be happy and joyful? Bringing others pain and sorrow is one of the things I like doing best, almost as much as I enjoy eating donuts.

"The brilliance of my plan is now revealed," said Bob, turning a corner and stepping into a large cavern full of vampires. "We dug numerous tunnels from here into the cathedral. Already my minions have attacked and are killing the wedding guests. This particular tunnel leads to directly under the stage. All I have to do is lead the rest of my army into the cathedral and assassinate my target while they wreak havoc."

"You'll never get away with this!" yelled Kir at the top of his lungs. "Azkaban will annihilate you and all your minions the moment you come near his bride."

"I never said I was going after Azkaban's bride," Bob said, tying Kir to a chair. A wicked smile appeared on his face. "Actually, I'm going to kill your daughter."

"Ahyune?" gasped Kir. "In that case, I will kill you personally. I'll rip you to shreds and feed you to dogs."

"Rip a master bloodfencer to shreds while tied to a chair? I'd like to see you try. Anyway, I received word from Kotor, the Dark Lord who declared my destiny, that only someone wielding the power of cinnamon could destroy all the vampires forever. Naturally, this must not be allowed to happen, since once destroyed I could hardly fulfill my destiny of killing everyone. My destiny, as you surely know, is the most important thing in the world, so your daughter's life is nothing next to its assured fulfillment."

"That means Ahyune can destroy you," growled Kir. "You plan to threaten my life in order to get her to stop fighting. But that will never work. You might as well give up and go hide for the rest of your miserable life."

“Actually, no,” said Bob. “Do you really think me so weak I can’t defeat a little girl? I really just wanted to force you to watch while I kill your daughter. I’m sadistic like that.”

Fear froze Kir’s heart. He steadied himself and looked Bob straight in the eye. He’d never give up fighting Bob, and he *would* find a way to keep Ahyune safe. “There’s just one thing you don’t know about my daughter.”

“What’s that?”

“What, you expect me to tell you and ruin the surprise? Good luck with that, O sheep-brained imbecile.”

Ahyune liked turnips on her pizza. Bob probably didn’t know that, but Kir failed to see how withholding that knowledge would be useful. At very least, it might unnerve Bob.

“Gah,” sputtered the megalomaniac vampire. He turned and tossed a water grenade at the bottom of the stage. The subsequent explosion rent an immense hole in the stage, one through which Bob picked up Kir’s chair and flew through. The other vampires followed him. As Bob carried him into the chapel, Kir quickly scanned the room for Ahyune. She was safe for now, but with a plethora of vampires determined to shed her blood, he couldn’t be certain how long she would remain that way.

The wedding guests appeared to have the upper hand and were rapidly beating back the remaining vampires, but with Bob and the reinforcements he brought, the tide of battle would quickly turn. Kir had to find a way to get Ahyune to safety, someplace she could hide until the city guard could muster and kill all the vampires in the city. Assuming, of course, that Bob failed to follow through on his pledge to massacre everyone. If not, Ahyune may be the only one who could stop him, at least according to some mysterious prophecy made by a megalomaniac bloodfencer. Alas, even if they did manage to defeat Bob and slay all his vampire minions, the kingdom would still be bereft of a leader, for Kir saw King Dol Goldur’s corpse lying forlorn on the front row. Some of the vampires stopped to claw at the face of the fallen ruler and shred the flag that draped his body, making clear their disdain.

“Behold my triumph,” said Bob to Kir. He turned to his vampires. “Kill the cinnamon girl, and kill all who resist you. After you’re done with that, break out of the cathedral and kill everyone in the city.

BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHHA!!!”

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Prince Angband narrowed his eyes and cursed violently as fire blossomed from the stage. He nocked his longbow and fired, driving an iron broadhead through the heart of a flying bloodfencer. The vampire fell to the ground with a scream. Angband nocked another arrow and turned his sight on the smoking crater in the center of the stage. An unusually well-dressed bloodfencer emerged from the hole, carrying a man tied to a chair. Angband shot him in the head.

“Good shot, your Highness!” cheered Rorik, throwing a bag of cinnamon off the edge of the balcony. Angband’s victim casually set down the bound man, then grasped the shaft of the arrow lodged in his brain and yanked it from his head. The wound healed immediately, sealing before any blood leaked out. Angband cursed again, then

aimed his bow at a different vampire. A bloodfencer with healing powers great enough to not even flinch at receiving an arrowhead penetrating his skull? He'd let his brother handle that one.

More vampires leapt from the newly made hole and rushed towards the only remaining bridesmaid, who blasted cinnamon from her ears and fought back valiantly. Why were the vampires so intent on killing her, when they could be targeting the new king and his queen? A somewhat skilled bridesmaid, rather than one of the most renowned vampires slayers of all time? The supremely strange strategy seemed superbly stupid, but Angband knew better than to write it off as such. There was a reason behind the vampires' target, just not one he understood at the time. Now was the time for fighting, not pondering the enemy's tactics.

Angband shot three arrows in quick succession, each one fatally wounding one of the raging vampires. The man tied to the chair yelled something. Angband glanced at him and gave a start of recognition. Then he cursed yet again. Captain Kir was supposed to be dead, not captured by vampires. Angband raged inwardly and shot another vampire. The soldier he'd bribed had failed, and somehow this vampire had captured the man he was supposed to kill. Obviously, much was happening that Angband wasn't aware of.

Of course, Kir was bound and incapable of action, which would serve the same purpose as having him dead. Angband regretted having to kill him later. The man was a courageous warrior and skilled vampire slayer, the kind of man Angband could use in the war that was to come. But the good of the kingdom came first. If Kir exposed Angband's treacher-

Wait, no. Not treachery. Angband was serving his country above everything else. His loyalty to Aithrenar exceeded that of Azkaban, who had made it clear that his kingship would follow that of his father in enforcing laws that deprived his people of their greatest weapon. He believed that Aithrenar's military would be strong enough to overcome the vampires without it. Angband wasn't willing to take that chance when the lives of every person in the Aithrenar, and indeed the entire world, hung in the balance. Once his plan was complete, the valiant soldiers of the Aithreni army would wield weapons so powerful that they could break the vampire army and banish its remnants beyond the badlands. In the face of such an immense advantage, what was one soldier like Kir, or even one like Azkaban?

More arrows sang through the air, each one with smoky death written on its shaft. Rorik cheered and launched more bags of cinnamon each time one hit its target. The bridesmaid caught one and chugged it. A young man dual wielding rapiers stood nearby, warding off any vampires and providing cover while the bridesmaid momentarily ceased fighting. A new wave of vampires rushed out of the tunnels and towards her. Azkaban and Neon Kay used fire to take down several, but the bloodlusting monsters ignored them and focused on the bridesmaid, driven on by their suited leader's voice.

"Rorik," said Angband.

"Yes, sir, your highness?"

"The vampires aren't attacking me, so I have no need of your protection. Draw your sword and join that battle down below. They need your help."

"Yes, sir!" Rorik hurled his last bag of cinnamon, then turned and rushed down the stairs, his sword in hand. Angband smiled grimly. With Rorik engaged in combat, no



witnesses would pay attention to Angband's next actions. The prince reached deep inside his coat pocket and fingered a metallic crossbar. He hoped his first use of the sword would be to slay vampires, but his wishes came after the good of the kingdom. Angband didn't particularly want to kill his brother, but as long as the vampires didn't do the job, he was the only person who would. He gripped the edge of the balcony and threw himself off.

For the good of the kingdom.

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Ahyune's mouth was parched. Sweat ran in rivulets down her skin in defiance of the cool morning air, joining blood from several minor injuries. Azkaban and Neon Kay's fighting had raised the room temperature by several degrees. Ahyune could hear the heavy breathing of the wedding guests who fought near her, their strength faltering as the battle dragged on longer than expected.

What was going on? The vampires had outwitted King Dol Goldur's carefully designed defense mechanisms. Their tunnels allowed far more of the monsters into the cathedral than would have been able to burst through the doors. They also eliminated the advantage the wedding goers had from their position inside the defensible church building. Somehow, the suit-wearing bloodfencer commanding the enemy forces had captured Father, and he summoned new waves of vampires from beneath the chapel every minute. Assuming reinforcements kept arriving, the vampiric fighters would soon outnumber the wedding guests. The vampires had the perfect opportunity to overwhelm the new king and his newer bride, thereby depriving Aithrenar of leadership and two powerful warriors in one fell stroke.

But they ignored the obvious targets, choosing instead to follow their master's bidding, focusing all their energy on killing an unimportant bridesmaid.

"Kill the cinnamon girl!" screamed the vampiric commander. "I, the Great Bob, shall reward greatly the one who sheds her life's blood!"

"Don't listen to him! He plans to betray and murder you all!" yelled Father.

"Master Bob! Master Bob!" the vampires chanted, and redoubled the ferocity of their attack.

Ahyune narrowed her eyes at the leader of the vampire hordes. He was a master bloodfencer, a fearsome monster capable of wielding dark magic with unparalleled power. And his name was Bob. Huh. Ahyune wondered what the other master bloodfencers were called - and more importantly, why one would come here to kill her. Every master bloodfencer she'd ever heard of was arrogant, preferring to stand back and command his armies from afar rather than fight on the front lines, where a lucky blow could potentially slay him and end his power forever. Only a very important reason would draw a bloodfencing master here.

A hissing vampire lunged at Ahyune, claws outstretched and fangs bared. Ahyune fended him off with a sweep of her sword, wounding him. The vampire retreated several steps, but was reinforced by two more of the monsters who charged out of the hole in the stage. A wedding guest with golden hair stepped between Ahyune and the vampires. Moving with youthful agility, he pulled twin rapiers out of their sheaths at his side and slashed at all three vampires. After she took a gasping breath that grated

against the dryness of her throat Ahyune stepped forward to help him, supplementing his rapier thrusts with blasts of cinnamon. The ghastly trio was soon overwhelmed and their bodies dissolved into black smoke as the man stabbed his rapiers through their hearts.

“Thanks,” said Ahyune. “Who are you?”

“Just a man,” replied the handsome stranger who had just saved her life. “But you can call me Thad. Any idea why all these monsters want to kill you?”

“No. Vampire behind you!”

Thad swirled around and drove his rapier into the hand of a vampire leaping through the air. The vampire’s momentum carried him forward and his other hand reached out, clawing the underside of Thad’s arm. His wicked life ended soon afterwards as Thad drove his other rapier through his head. Blood dripped from Thad’s wound. He winced and lowered his injured arm to his side, then pulled a long cloth bandage out of a pouch on his belt.

“Bind this around my wound,” he said. Ahyune sheathed her sword and complied. Pained screams and battle cries reverberated throughout the chapel.

A wedding guest screamed in pain and fell to the ground, bleeding from many wounds. A bloodfencer stabbed his throat with a bloodblade, then knelt down and absorbed his victim’s blood. His wounds healed as he did so, and a wicked smile lit his face as the reservoir of dark power within him blossomed. A moment later he turned and leapt toward Ahyune.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Ahyune. She wiggled her ears and blasted cinnamon in the vampire’s face. He sneezed and fell to the ground, but soon recovered and swung his bloodblade at Ahyune. Thad swirled with aquiline speed and drove a rapier into the vampire’s chest.

Ahyune’s cinnamon reserves were gone. She needed to swallow some more before she could wield her power again. Zesad theorized that her body’s internal workings made cinnamon into more cinnamon through some unknown microscopic process. Regardless, although she could produce more cinnamon than she ate, she couldn’t shoot cinnamon without an internal supply, and cinnamon that had come from her ears didn’t work.

Fortunately, there was that soldier on the balcony with his supply of cinnamon ammunition. A bag of cinnamon flew from the balcony and landed in the face of a bloodfencer attacking Neon Kay. Ahyune beckoned to the soldier, and he threw the next bag in her direction. Ahyune caught the bag and swallowed its contents, then washed it down with a gulp of water from the canteen on her belt.

With her cinnamon supply restored, Ahyune glanced warily around the room for the source of the next attack, standing close to a watchful Thad. Strangely, no more vampires seemed to be coming after her, although several were battling Prince Azkaban and several more stood by the doors over the bodies of slain guards. Amid the ruin that had once been the stage, Master Bob whispered inaudible, but indubitably insidious, intonations in Father’s ears. In response, Father let loose a wordless cry and burst his bonds in an incredible display of strength. He leapt on the bloodfencer and started pummeling his head. Despite the ferocity of Father’s attack, his blows appeared to have no effect on Bob, whose wicked smile remained plastered on his face.

“We must help him!” said Ahyune.

Before she could move, the bloodfencer grabbed Father around the waist and threw him into the air. Father flew over several rows of chairs before crashing to the floor.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Ahyune again. Father grabbed the back of a chair and pulled himself up. With his bruised jaw set in determination, he limped towards Ahyune.

“He’s coming for you,” said Thad. “You’re in danger.”

Ahyune turned her head towards the stage. Sure enough, Bob was leaving the rubble from where he had commanded his forces and was flying towards her, hands folded casually behind his back. Behind him, yet another wave of vampires emerged from their tunnels beneath the city. Rather than follow their master as he hunted his prey, they charged towards the king and queen, dodging and ducking away from blasts of flame. Ahyune glanced around, searching for help, but none would come. Locked in combat with the seemingly ubiquitous vampires, Azkaban and the other warriors could offer no help to Ahyune. Only Thad remained nearby, and no lone warrior could match a master bloodfencer.

“Run,” said Thad. He stepped in between Ahyune and Bob, swords held ready for battle. “I’ll hold him off as long I can. Join the king and queen; they might be able to destroy him if I fail.”

“No, I’ll help you,” said Ahyune, raising her swords towards Bob. Together they could-

“Are you crazy? You know you’re not that powerful!” Thad briefly sheathed one of his own swords, then reached over and disarmed Ahyune. He tossed her sword to Father.

Thin streams of blood rose into the air from injured fighters all over the chapel. They glowed and flowed towards Bob, whose devious smile never wavered as he filled his reservoir of evil power. In a pitched battle, with wounded, bloody soldiers all around, a master bloodfencer would never run out of blood to fuel his powers, which was why they were so dangerous. But one could never heal from decapitation, so they tended to stay back from battles where a lucky blow could sever their head. Ahyune hesitated to fulfill Thad’s command. Those rapiers he carried were made for stabbing, not cutting. He would never be able to deal enough damage to stop Bob. Indecision and horror froze Ahyune as she watched the vampire lord’s ominous advance.

“I said *go!*” shouted Thad. He pushed Ahyune, and with a cry she broke out of her trance and ran.

“Trust me, I know more about these situations than you do,” said Thad.

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Golden light radiated from beneath Kir’s pants and shirtsleeves. His feet pounded against the wooden boards as he raced to reach Ahyune before Bob. Although only a dozen feet lay between him and his daughter, the time required to traverse that distance felt like an eternity.

Fortunately, he had Rorik’s gift of the lightning bracers. Without the strength granted by them, he never would have been capable of bursting the ropes binding him to the chair when Bob had taunted him with assurances of Ahyune’s impending death. Angband’s invention was powerful. If every soldier in the army was equipped with it,

they might be able to drive the vampires out of their dens in the badlands and eliminate the vampiric scourge for once and for all. But then, maybe not. Bob seemed immune to lightning bracers; they must have some weakness Kir didn't comprehend. Not that now was the time to ponder it. He had to save Ahyune and stop Bob, or the bloodfencer would lead his vampire hordes into the city and start killing everyone.

Kir summoned all the might in his legs and lunged forward, clearing the distance between him and Ahyune in one mighty leap. She was running, a frightened look in her eyes. The poor girl was probably quite traumatized by all the death and destruction surrounding her, not to mention a master bloodfencer personally commanding an attack primarily intended to bring about her death. Kir wished he could comfort her, but Bob posed a more pressing problem. Besides, he had never been good at that kind of thing anyway. His wife had been better. Kir ran in the opposite direction of Ahyune to join with the wedding guest currently facing Bob.

"I see that someone desires to die today," said Bob, turning his malicious gaze upon the young man. "Sadly, I can't grant your wish immediately, for I have a cinnamon girl to pursue. Kindly step aside, and when I fulfill my destiny I'll let you die last."

Kir stepped forward and leveled his sword at Bob. The wedding guest wasted no time answering Bob's taunt, instead whipping his rapiers through the air and plunging them both into Bob's chest.

Bob gasped in pain, but his wound soon healed, the skin regenerating around the blades still penetrating his chest. His omnipresent grin reappeared, and his deadly red bloodblade materialized in his hand. Without an ounce of hesitation, he rammed it into the chest of the man who had stood against him. The warrior fell to his knees and let loose a cry of pain. Bob ripped out his blade and blood spilled from the man's wound.

"I'm so powerful, I don't even need to absorb blood from every one of my victims," explained Bob. "Anyway, I'll leave you to die. Everyone else in the world will soon join you. Goodbye."

Kir roared angrily and swung his sword at Bob's throat. His stroke hit its mark, and Bob's head fell off his shoulders.

"Lalalalala," sang Bob merrily. "My head got chopped off again, no big deal, lalala."

Bob picked up his head and set it back on his neck. The wound sealed instantly, and a whole, uninjured Bob stood before Kir.

"Rainfire!" swore Kir. "How did you get so powerful?"

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Bob. "I traded my sanity for power."

Kir stared in shock at the overpowered villain. Decapitation was the only sure way to bring down a master bloodfencer. If Bob could survive even that, what chance did anyone have of stopping him?

Bob pulled the two rapiers out of his chest and tossed them aside. He strolled down the aisle in the opposite direction that Neon Kay had gone, his demeanor casual as ever.

"You," gasped the man who had defied Bob and now lay dying on the cathedral floor. Kir knelt down beside him. The man, a stranger, had sacrificed himself trying to save Ahyune. He deserved someone to listen to his dying words.

"You're Ahyune's father," said the man. Kir nodded.

"There's still... still hope. You can defeat Bob and save Ahyune."

“How?” asked Kir, his head hung low in defeat. “Bob is too powerful. His vampires have already slain King Dol Goldur. Nothing can stop him from murdering the rest of the royal family after he’s killed Ahyune. All of humanity will fall before the scourge of Bob.”

The stranger coughed. Blood came out of his mouth. “You’re wrong,” he gasped. Kir leaned in closely. Perhaps this man knew something he didn’t.

“King Dol Goldur wasn’t killed by vampires,” said the man. “He died of a *heart attack*.”

The stranger closed his eyes and exhaled for the final time. Kir groaned in despair. What did it matter how the old king died? He was still dead either way.

Then the full meaning of the mysterious man’s last words crashed into Kir like a wave crashing over the beach, bringing with it new hope. Kir leapt to his feet and ran, not towards Bob, but towards the kitchens off to the side of the cathedral. All his hopes now rested on whether or not King Dol Goldur had requested that his favorite food be served at the wedding reception.

For with his last breath, the young man had revealed the path to defeating Bob.

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Thad died. Father stood up, turned and fled. Ahyune stepped over a bloodless corpse as she hastened towards the king and queen. A tear welled up in her eye as she observed the devastation throughout the chapel. She was convinced that she was not created to be some warrior maiden. Her youthful dreams of gloriously riding into battle alongside Father and slaying vampire hordes had turned to mockery. Now, she swore to herself she would ever be content with brave and chivalrous men getting all the glory from battle. Men like Thad, who had defended a woman he hadn’t even known. Who had died for it. Which, of course, reminded of why all her oaths to herself were utterly meaningless. She would never have another opportunity to fight in another battle, or avoid fighting. Today would be her first stand, and her last, ere she was slain by the tyrant Bob. For if even her valiant father, who had ever been unflinchingly resolute in the face of danger, had given up the fight and ran, what hope could possibly remain?

Vampires besieged what survived of the royal family from all sides. Prince Angband stood beside his brother, fighting with almost superhuman speed and strength. His daggers glinted in the light of Azkaban’s flames. Time and time again they flashed, bringing the life of another vampire to an end. But his foes had vastly superior numbers. He had no hope of defeating them all, and already his face looked weary and haggard. He stumbled as he drove a dagger into the chest of a berserk vampire, and a nearby bloodfencer took advantage of his weakness and slashed the prince’s side with a bloodblade. Angband was saved by a burst of Azkaban’s flame, but his misstep foretold the battle’s inevitable end. Even if the low-ranking vampires were somehow all slain, their master yet approached, his steps calm and inevitable.

“We need reinforcements!” screamed Azkaban. He stood back-to-back with his young wife, both of them surrounded by a ring of fire that kept away the vampires. “Call the city guard!”

“It’s impossible!” replied Angband. “The doors are locked and barred! Even if the guards could arrive in time, they’d never be able to enter the chapel!”

The defense strategy, carefully planned in advance of the wedding, had fallen to pieces. The doors, which could not be opened from the outside, were now guarded by vampires. The guards were supposed to fling open the doors in case of emergency were gone, either dead or cowering in hiding, their courage deflated by the presence of an invincible master bloodfencer.

Ahyune picked up a sword from beside a fallen soldier and pointed it at the nearest vampire, her hands shaking. Bob cackled diabolically and his minions started chanting his name. The stench of blood, smoke and fire filled the air.

“Focus all your fire on their leader!” said Angband. “Maybe we can drain his healing reserves and bring him down!”

Azkaban nodded and ceased his fire. He grasped Neon Kay’s hand and together the newlyweds pointed at Bob, and erupted in fire. A raging inferno burst from their hands and streamed through the air towards, catching several chairs on fire along the way. Bob disappeared, his form obscured by the red-hot light of the rulers’ flames.

But with all of their power turned towards Bob, the king and queen were vulnerable to an attack from behind. A vampire dodged past Angband and leapt on Neon Kay’s back, clawing and howling furiously. Neon Kay gasped and fell to her knees.

“NOO!!!” yelled Azkaban at the sight of his wife being attacked. He slammed a blazing fist into the vampire’s side, then dissolved the beast. “Are you okay, my beloved?”

“I’m fine,” said Neon Kay. “Not even a scratch.”

Ahyune smiled. “I knew you wouldn’t regret wearing armor!”

“No armor can stand against my blade!” proclaimed a completely unmelted Bob. His face looked a little sweaty, but other than that he showed no signs of Azkaban and Neon Kay’s attack. “As you surely must know by now, nothing can defeat me.”

Ahyune’s smile vanished as Bob approached, swinging his bloodblade menacingly. He was only a few steps from her now. Ahyune stepped backwards until she was only a few inches away from the royal family. Several vampires gathered behind them, extinguishing any hope of escape. The monsters’ ominous chant rose in volume as their master approached his final victory.

“Stay back, my minions,” commanded Bob. “I can handle this.”

“Why do you even want to kill me?” asked Ahyune. The stench of blood and smoke filled her nostrils. The chapel was littered with the dead and dying, some charred, some pale. Why? Why all this carnage for her sake? If she was going to die, she at least wanted to know the reason for it.

“Because, as I have explained before, it is my destiny. I must fulfill my destiny.”

“What does that even *MEAN?!?!?*” screamed Ahyune. Grief and fury erupted within her. The pain this vile, despicable monster had inflicted today was a living thing inside of her. It arose, and came forth in the form of cinnamon. A torrent of cinnamon, more than she had ever seen before, erupted from her ears, deafening her to the screams around her, and flew towards Bob. Ahyune let loose a wordless cry, imagining the cinnamon as a physical manifestation of her anger, and flung it at Bob. As if guided by an invisible hand, the cinnamon formed into a massive, rapidly moving ball, and hit Bob in the face.

“ARGHH!!!” screamed Bob. The force of the impact threw him back several yards, and he crashed into the floor. “ACHOO! ACHOO!”

For a moment all Ahylene could hear was the wild beating of her own heart as she sucked in ragged breaths. Bob lay motionless beneath a pile of cinnamon. Could he be defeated? Had she really just-

Bob's bloodblade appeared. A moment later the master bloodfencer himself flew into the air, cinnamon falling from his clothing like ashes from a phoenix. He spoke not at all, his face twisted in a mask of rage as he flew towards Ahylene.

Ahylene parried Bob's bloodblade. Her sword shattered beneath the dark power imbuing the red-hued weapon, and steel shards fell to the floor around her. One cut her face. The pain from the mild wound was insignificant, considering that she was good as dead. Bob's blade rose in the air to deliver the killing stroke.

A donut flew through the air and hit Bob in the face.

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"Zesad!" called Kir, throwing open the kitchen doors with frenzied strength. In the kitchen, an elderly man stood by a counter and carefully decorated the wedding cake. He appeared oblivious to the horrible battle raging just outside his kitchen.

"What do you need, Kir?" Zesad replied, putting down the knife he'd been using to carve the newlyweds' names onto their cake. As a man who worked not only as the official Historian of War but also as the Royal Chief Chef and part time as philosopher and theologian, Zesad was a man with a wide and varied knowledge base. Kir desperately hoped he'd used his knowledge of donut-making today.

"Do you have any donuts?" said Kir at a louder volume than his typical speech, for Zesad had gone partly deaf with age.

"Of course. King Dol Goldur requested that they be served at the wedding reception. They are his favorite food, er, were his favorite food, I guess. Poor guy, dying at his son's wedding."

"A lot more people are going to die if we don't get those donuts out there soon enough. Tell all your apprentice chefs to load as many donuts as possible onto the handcarts and push them out into the sanctuary room. Then throw them all at a bloodfencer wearing a suit."

"That makes no sense at all! What is going on here?"

"Don't ask questions! Just do it! The fate of the entire world depends on those donuts!"

Kir grabbed boxes of donuts and frantically loaded them onto a cart while Zesad summoned his apprentices and commanded them to do the same. As soon Kir had his cart full, he charged and slammed it into the kitchen doors, the lightning bracers providing enough strength to snap the doors off their hinges. He finally had the weapons he needed to bring down Bob. He could only hope he wasn't too late.

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Angband decided not to kill his brother.

Strength flowed through his limbs as vampire after vampire screeched and dissolved into smoke, a victim of his rapidly flashing knives. But he could slay a thousand ordinary vampires, and it wouldn't matter unless he could find a way to take

down the one known as Master Bob. A vampire with healing powers so great he could recover from both decapitation and incineration, one shortly after the other? A terrifying thought. He could defeat any army, kill anyone he wished. If Angband ascended to the throne now, he'd only be painting a target on his chest. No, Bob would kill Azkaban. Angband's primary goal right now was to escape. He'd go into hiding and continue the work he'd been doing in secret. With time, he would find a way to overcome Bob's regenerative capacity, and perhaps even recreate it for his own use. What glory would be his in that day! He could see it now: Angband the Invincible, slaying hundreds of vampire in a day, taking his rightful place as leader of Aithrenar. His country would never fear invasion by any foreign power ever again. Indeed, with such power as he now saw in Bob, he could rule the world.

Angband kicked a vampire and sent him flying through the air to crash violently against the wall. Though the name he called them by was misleading, the lightning bracers were mighty pieces of equipment. The power that Angband wielded gave him a major advantage over his foes. That power could have been Azkaban's as well, if only he had looked past his qualms and outdated morals to see the benefits of bloodfencing technology. Instead, he planned to follow in the old king's footsteps and uphold the ban on research into that field. Angband had defied that restriction, but only with the kingdom's best interests at heart. What he'd discovered, and what he would discover, would change the world forever. Sure, the process by which he'd harnessed the power of bloodfencing and inserted it into technology that he could wield himself was a little bit... messy, but it was worth it. He'd only had to murder a few beggars and prostitutes to collect enough blood to fuel his inventions. The city would probably be better off without them anyway.

The prince smiled to himself. The chapel's exit grew near. Angband reached into his pocket and withdrew the greatest piece of bloodfencing technology he'd created yet: his very own bloodblade. The metal hilt and crossbar appeared to simply be a sword lacking a blade, but once he activated the device he'd wield a weapon that could cut down his enemies with ease. The power once reserved for bloodfencers was now held by an ordinary man, a man that would go down in history as a great one, who opened the way for bloodfencing to be used without all the nasty side effects of transforming into a vampire.

Angband glanced over to the edge of the cathedral, where Rorik dueled a lone vampire. He'd like to recover the set of lightning bracers he'd given to his bodyguard. Oh well, it was probably too late for that now. Regardless, watching someone else use his invention had given Angband a useful, albeit puzzling piece of information: the lightning bracers seemed to have no effect on Rorik. The young soldier fought his vampire with average strength and speed. The matter deserved more study. Angband could give it that later. For now, he had to escape the deadly wedding.

Behind him, Bob cackled triumphantly. Angband annihilated the last vampire between him and the door. Bob may laugh for now, but the day would come when his body would disintegrate, along with all those of his kindred. Angband would return, and every vampire would meet its end.

"DONUTS!" screamed Bob.

*How strange*, thought Angband. He ignited his bloodblade and started cutting through the door.



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Kir's heart nearly stopped when he saw Bob's bloodblade hefted over Ahyune, about to deliver the killing blow. He leapt into action, grabbing the nearest donut and throwing it with all the strength his lightning bracer enhanced arms could muster. The donut hit its mark, bouncing off of Bob's face. Bob's bloodblade swerved as its wielder jerked his head toward his favorite treat. Ahyune looked up as the blow missed her by mere inches, a surprised look on her face as she realized she yet lived.

Bob stuffed the donut into his face. Frosting smeared his lip.

"Bob!" bellowed Kir, his voice reverberating throughout the cathedral as he pushed the donut-laden cart towards the vampire. Ahyune turned her head towards him. Bob licked his lips.

"I've finally realized something," said Kir "You were right all along. You are too powerful to defeat. So I've brought you a gift in recognition of the fact that you will rule the world."

Bob flew into the air and headed towards Kir, who heaved a box of donuts in his direction. The box opened and donuts spilled all over the floor. Bob dropped to the ground and began fervently devouring the donuts, eating a faster pace than anyone had previously believe possible.

"Mmmm, what a great gift, you realize I still have to kill you, mmmm, I MUST HAVE MORE DONUTS!"

"And so you shall have them!" declared Kir. He opened another box and started hurling donuts wildly. Bob flew ravenously from donut to donut, consuming each one in a flash. For a moment, the battle ceased, as everyone in the chapel beheld the strange scene with bewilderment.

Ahyune stood up and suppressed a giggle, looking away from the absurd display. Kir nearly laughed too, but he had to keep up his persona of a defeated warrior. Still, the situation was ridiculous. Moments ago, Bob had been an insane serial killer about to bring death to everyone in the building. Now, he was still insane, but... in a really weird way.

"What in the world... what?" wondered Neon Kay aloud.

"Bob is distracted. We must take advantage of this reprieve," said Azkaban. "Angband! Open the doors!"

Prince Angband gasped in shock and slipped something into his pocket. Then he lifted the the bar barricading the doors and started unlocking each of the numerous locks.

Zesad emerged from the kitchen, pushing another cart of donuts. Behind him, several apprentice chefs brought out their own supply of donuts and started hurling the sugary ammunition at Bob. With each passing donut, Bob became increasingly frenzied. Foam dripped from his mouth and frosting coated his entire face and stained his suit.

"In honor of your certain triumph," said Kir. "We bring you more donuts than you've ever eaten before."

Bob initially pursued each and every treat with vigor as it flew from the bakers' hands. Soon, however, his movements slowed, though he still seemed determined to leave no donut uneaten. Finally, he pounced upon the final donut and ate it. He rose to his feet and stumbled forward maladroitly. A thunderous burp erupted from his throat.

“Now,” he said, but his voice was weak, far from the insidious elocutions he had used earlier. Sweat poured down his skin. “I shall fulfill my destiny.”

“Are you feeling fatigued, Bob?” asked Kir, filling his voice with mocking. “Nauseous, dizzy? Do you have a pain in your chest?”

“Yes,” murmured Bob. “How did you know?”

“Because those are all symptoms of a *heart attack*. Which, as any physician could tell you, can be brought on by eating too many donuts. You really should have watched your diet, Bob.”

“No! I am the most powerful... I cannot be stopped... I am... I am...” Bob fell to his knees. He clutched at his chest and groaned.

Then he died.

“He’s *dead*.” said Ahyune as Bob’s body dissolved into smoke. “And I’m alive.” She started laughing. Tears ran down her face and mingled with blood from a cut.

One of the surviving soldiers started clapping. The clap spread throughout the cathedral, until everyone was applauding Kir’s ingenious plan. Everyone, that is, except the vampires, who merely stared in shock at the place where their unbeatable leader had fallen.

The few remaining vampires, suddenly realizing that they were outmatched, snapped out of their shock and fled towards the tunnels. Azkaban blasted fire at them, but several escaped.

“I’ll send some guards to track them down later. We can’t have them running loose in the city,” said Azkaban. “For now, we need to get to get this place cleaned up and bury our fallen warriors.”

Neon Kay sighed. “Not the way I had hoped to start our marriage but... with you at my side, I can do anything.”

Azkaban kissed her again.

Angband stood by the door and tapped his foot. “This day holds immense ramifications for all Aithrenar. That bloodfencer had unprecedented power. What if there more like him out there somewhere, waiting to launch a devastating assault? We can’t rely on heart attacks to take down all of them. We need an advantage, Azkaban. You know where to get it.”

Azkaban fixed his brother with an authoritative stare. “Angband. I’ve talked with you about this. If we start murdering people, not matter what the profit of doing so, we become no better than the vampires we fight against.”

The main door to the chapel was suddenly pushed open from the outside. Lieutenant Tulvo entered, his face frightened and sweaty.

“Vampires!” he gasped. “In the streets. They killed Captain Kir!”

Tulvo paused and surveyed the wrecked cathedral, taking in the slain warriors and decimated stage. He his eyes widened in horror as he beheld Captain Kir, alive and well, with a triumphant grin on his face.

“What are you talking about?” asked Azkaban. “Kir is right here. He just saved us all from a maniacal master bloodfencer.”

“That soldier is traitor! He tried to murder me!” said Kir. “Seize him!”

Tulvo turned to flee, but Azkaban nimbly dashed through the doorway and seized him by the arm.

"I confess! Have mercy! I'll explain everything!" blubbered Tulvo as Azkaban dragged him into the cathedral.

"Alright, traitor," said Kir. "Start by telling us who hired you."

Tulvo whimpered and pointed a finger at Prince Angband. A gasp of surprise ran throughout the building.

"Angband! Why would you do such a horrible thing?" asked Azkaban.

His brother's face contorted into an angry scowl. "You refuse to embrace the power of the future, Azkaban. Like our father before you, you hold the entire country back with your ban on research into bloodfencing technology. I had to break it, for the good of everyone in the country. You saw the might of Bob. You know what will happen if more vampires with his abilities emerge and attack Aithrenar. As long as we allow the vampires to access a power source we refuse to use ourselves, we remain vulnerable. Removing you from the throne was the only way to safeguard the future of Aithrenar. Once I was king, I could devote whole laboratories to the development of bloodfencing weapons."

"At what cost?" asked Azkaban. "You know the only way to create a bloodfencing-powered piece of equipment is to murder someone and drain their blood. Doing that will corrupt your soul... you won't have anything left worth fighting for once you've degraded your conscience to that point."

Kir suddenly had an uncomfortable feeling about how Angband had made the devices he now wore on his limbs.

"I've already done it," snarled Angband. "I fought today with enhanced strength granted by equipment forged through bloodfencing. I moved with such might I was able to defeat five times as many vampires as I would have otherwise. If those vampires had got past me, they would have killed anyone they could. I saved lives today, more than I took creating my weapons. More lives, and worthier lives. Imagine if one of those vampires had struck at your darling wife, Azkaban, in a place where her armor didn't protect her. She could have bled to death today, were it not for me."

Azkaban breathed a curse in horrified wonderment. "That body we found outside the church before the wedding... that wasn't Bob. That was *you*."

"Wait," said Kir, rolling up his sleeve. He removed the lightning bracer from his arm and tossed it on the floor. "You mean you made these things by murdering people?"

"Rorik!!!" screamed Angband, his face red with fury. "What did you do with those lightning bracers I gave you?"

"I gave to them Captain Kir, of course," replied Rorik innocently. "He had a much more dangerous job than I did, because he was protecting the king and queen, whom all the vampires wanted to kill."

"I didn't want him to protect them! He was to be Azkaban's body guard. That's why I wanted to remove him, in hopes of a vampire striking down Azkaban while he was unprotected! That would have been the simplest way to solve this mess, but my brother never did have the courtesy to die when he needed to."

"Well, don't ever try to trick me into helping your evil plans ever again!" declared Rorik. "Or you'll regret it!"

"I already do," muttered Angband. He removed a sword hilt from his pocket and flicked a switch on its side. A bloodblade flared to life in his hand. "I'm leaving this wretched place and going somewhere where my intelligence will be appreciated! If

anyone tries to follow, they'll get a taste of this!" He swung the bloodblade dramatically. "And Azkaban, you'll regret driving me away. When your kingdom's fallen to vampires that you don't have the resources to fend off... you'll see that I'm right."

"Better to leave such things in the hands of God than to resort to murder," replied Azkaban.

"Like I care," sneered Angband. He turned and ran out the door, vanishing into the city streets.

Azkaban heaved an exhausted sigh and fell to his knees. "My father dead, my brother trying to kill me, and a brutal battle with vampires, all on my wedding day. Now I am the king, but I'm tired, and I feel that I cannot bear the burden of responsibility that comes with leading this country."

"You'll do a fine job," Neon Kay reassured him.

A faint smile appeared on the king's face. "Still... this will certainly go down in history as the worst wedding of all time."

"I'll do what I can to make it better," said Neon Kay. She embraced her husband.

## Epilogue

Kir stood on the balcony of King Azkaban's palace, watch the morning sun rise for the second time since the battle at the wedding. Ahylene stood beside him, her hand resting lightly on the railing.

Angband had vanished. Azkaban had ordered his rooms searched and had promptly destroyed the tools he had used for his nefarious experiments. Nothing discovered, however, had yielded any clue as to what the renegade prince was planning next. Several countries enforced no ban on the development of bloodfencing technologies. Angband could have fled to any one of those.

The wedding's body count was lower than had initially been assumed. Many of the wedding guests who'd gone missing turned out to have fled in terror rather than stand against the wrath of Bob. The damage inflicted during the battle was already well on its way to reparation.

"So, you know, I've decided to become a pacifist. For now," said Ahylene. "Zesad said he'd take me on as an apprentice baker. He needs some help crafting some new recipes, since half the ones in his cookbook are for donuts, and both the king and queen have sworn never to eat a donut again."

"I won't be able to stay with you for long," said Kir. "My presence is needed at to defend the towns bordering the Badlands of Bazat. Bob may not have been unique, and there are rumors of an unusually powerful bloodfencer in that area. Angband didn't lie when he spoke of the threat posed by more vampires as powerful as Bob."

"But you can defeat them without stooping to using their own dark power, right?"

"It wouldn't work anyway. Bob was immune to bloodfencing technology, something I don't think Angband ever learned. But yes, I believe we can defeat them. Bob said he traded his sanity for power, so any others of his kind will have as well. We'll need to discover what form their insanity takes - I doubt they'll all suffer from donut mania - and exploit that. We'll need lots of scout to watch the bloodfencers and observe unusual behavioral patterns. Spying on vampires like that will be difficult, but not impossible."

"I have one question about what happened at the wedding," said Ahyune. "If Bob's healing powers were so great that he could survive being burned in a raging inferno, why couldn't he recover from something as mundane as a heart attack?"

"A bloodfencer can heal his wounds by using blood," explained Kir. "Bob's use of blood was incredibly efficient, allowing him to recover from deadly wounds that would have drained the blood supply of an ordinary bloodfencer. However, a heart attack cuts off blood flow to the heart, which is what makes it dangerous. Without blood flowing to his heart, Bob's couldn't heal the damage to it."

"What about Bob's obsession with killing me? Do you know where that came from?"

"I'm sure it was just a side effect of his insanity. There's no reason to believe that any more vampires will try to assassinate you."

He didn't tell her about the prophecy that we should be the one to destroy the vampires. No need to burden her with what was probably nothing more than mad ravings. Actually, the more he thought of Bob's so-called 'prophecy' the more ridiculous it seemed. Ahyune wasn't going to kill anybody, let alone every single vampire in the Badlands of Bazat. And her abilities as the 'cinnamon girl' weren't strong enough to be important, certainly not strong enough to kill a vampire...

Ahyune nodded slightly. "Good. I'd hate for my own wedding to be as violent as the king's."

"Speaking of weddings... why are you wearing that bridesmaid's dress again?" asked Kir. "I thought you hated black."

"King Dol Goldur's funeral is this afternoon," replied Ahyune. The funeral had been delayed while the new king cleaned up the damage dealt by the battle. "I thought it would be appropriate to be in mourning for him. And for Thad. I'm going to find his family and thank them for his sacrifice."

Thad was a mystery. Ahyune had searched the record of wedding guests yesterday and found his name, but he had listed no surname. Furthermore, none of the surviving wedding guests seemed to be familiar with him.

"He must have had someone," said Ahyune. "Someone who knew him, at least. Who knew why he went to the wedding. Why he didn't leave it." She looked towards the splendorous hues of the rising sun and sighed, then turned back towards Kir. "You're right, though. I hate black. The color's much too morbid."

"What color do you want the bridesmaids' dresses to be at your wedding, then?"

Ahyune gestured towards the east, from where the sun bathed the land with its bright and colorful beams. "Like that, I think. The color of morning."

The End