



Everafter Acres

A Short Story by Carolyn Kephart
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Sir Peregrin was always good-humored, and even dour mornings with grudging dawns made him cheery. It was very trying.

As always, much too shortly after daybreak he strode to the window, flung aside the draperies, threw wide the casement and leaned out beaming as he drew a deep breath, thoroughly satisfied. “Zounds, verily ‘tis caliginous this day. Right lowering. What think you, my heart’s divinity?”

Lady Calantha stifled a groan as she sat up in the great four-poster bed, blearily regarded the gray world outside the diamond-patterned panes, and replied curtly in the vernacular.

“For heaven’s sake, Grin, do close that.”

Her lord lapsed into the vernacular as well, but left the window open as he reveled in the view, blithely oblivious to his lady’s tone. “Dirtiest weather we’ve had for a while. Think I’ll take a gallop around the north woods to check for griffins—they love this sort of murk. Wear that purple velvet thing of yours, won’t you, m’dear?”

Calantha tried not to whimper as she huddled in the covers. “I’d really rather not ride all the way to the north woods on a day like this. And besides, my purple gown doesn’t fit just now.” It hadn’t fit for ages, but she wasn’t about to let her lord know.

Peregrin laughed in his tryingly hearty way. “Blame the sweet wine and suckling pig at everyone’s feasts, m’dear. A good stirring rescue will give you some exercise.”

Calantha shuddered as much at the notion of yet another rescue as she did at the misty chill invading the chamber, and somehow managed not to give the Reply Querulous, which would have reminded her lord that his armor had very recently been altered with roomy gussets to accommodate his expanding paunch. Instead, she regarded the back of Peregrin’s head, remembering the golden mane that had fallen just past his broad shoulders in days gone by. Now the shoulders stooped, and what little hair he had left was becoming as gray as...well, as her own. “Suckling pig’s such a fad lately. And feasting’s getting as tiresome as...” She almost said ‘tournaments,’ but managed to stop herself in time.

Peregrin didn’t notice. “Speaking of feasts, that reminds me—it’s our turn to give the next one.”

“Wonderful.” Resignedly Calantha wrapped a shawl over her shift and joined her lord at the window, shutting the casement with a jerk that rattled the glass. With no enthusiasm she surveyed the view of bumpy little hills each with its own little castle, each castle neatly framed

by the window's diamond panes. Her listless gaze narrowed on one in the near distance, that was very showy in a sinister way, with attenuated towers pointed sharp as arrows, and black swans in its moat. "Sir Bors' accursed mastiff bayed me awake all night."

"Probably smelled a troll lurking around the walls. They're pungent." Peregrin seemed to muse, an unusual thing for him. "He's a good fellow, is Bors. Bit of a standoffish loner, but he'll never let you down in a fight."

Calantha noted the pennons on the black castle's towers—black pennons, each emblazoned with a red heart stuck full of arrows, all of them now hanging limply in the drizzle, to her admittedly snide satisfaction. "And he's sworn champion to the fairest maiden in the land... who certainly puts him through his paces."

Peregrin chuckled. "Can't say I envy Bors his lot. I've heard Blanchefleur needs to be rescued at least three times a day or there's no putting up with her. Speaking of which, we should get ready, don't you think?"

Calantha sighed. "Grin, this is hardly the ideal weather for a lady of my years to be tied to a tree and fought over. Besides, you'll only rust your armor and catch a cold."

Her lord sighed too, but very briefly. "You never want to be rescued these days." He suddenly looked perplexed, and contrite. "Am I doing anything wrong, my love? Would you like more excitement when it's going on? More activity?"

"No, no." Calantha felt a twinge of guilt. "Your rescues are always perfect. I mean that."

He actually believed her. "Good!" His still-brawny arm half-wrapped Calantha's waist, giving rather too firm a squeeze. "Perhaps more girth there than in days of yore, but what of it? You'll always be my queen. If you don't feel like being rescued, maybe you should write one of those ballad things, or get out your harp. You never play your harp anymore."

Calantha disliked her lord's fingers assessing her superfluity, and moved away. "I'm not in the mood, Grin. That accursed dog's barking again. Perhaps I'll take up archery."

"Ah well, I'll ask Ubald and Knute to join me for a bit of hunting. Three knights against a griffin is decent odds." Peregrin brightened, and beamed. "I'll bring you back its head. What do you say to that?"

Calantha suppressed a wince. "I never know what to do with griffin heads. They just sit around until I have to throw them out." Realizing what she'd said, she felt a stab of regret. "I'm sorry, Grin. I don't know what's wrong with me lately."

Peregrin had indeed looked disappointed, but as usual only momentarily. "You just need a visit to the wise woman, m'love. She'll give you a potion, or a philtre, or something that'll set you right."

It took all of Calantha's self-control to keep her expression sweet, and she only partially succeeded. "Elspeth is annoying lately, and won't mind her manners. And I never like riding about in the woods. There's always a monstrosity lurking."

"Well, but one of the lads will show up to save you. That you can count on."

"Oh, yes. That I can."

Oblivious to his lady's tired tone, Peregrin kissed her with his usual blend of gallantry and relish, and hastened off to set about his day. That most of his days were exactly the same never seemed to bother him.

Sir Bors' dog howled anew, making Calantha yearningly remember the lake-moated keep she had called home for so many contented years before it became too big to look after, and too isolated, and too damp. The attractions of Everafter Acres were, at the outset, obvious: new construction with modern conveniences, less dust-gathering square footage, no annoying apparitions, and safe walls that made private armies unnecessary. All of their friends had moved there. It was only later, as more years passed, that Calantha realized that castles were never meant to be built so close together, and these weren't very well made compared to the

strongholds of yore. Moreover, far too many of them were garishly designed, with overdone crockets and crenellations and innumerable ornamental gargoyles.

But the real problem was that Everafter didn't include much Happily.

Later in the morning Calantha gifted her purple velvet to her maid, donned a new and blessedly roomy green replacement, pinned on a wimple, and gave order to have her palfrey brought round. Tying a bag to the saddle-horn, she set off to visit the wise woman.

As she rode through the woods that led to Dame Elspeth's cottage, Calantha kept a sharp eye on the the world around her. Stepping outside Everafter's walls always meant adventure in all its life-threatening variety. A flash of golden light amid the mists accompanied by a slightly bawdy bit of song only put Calantha more on her guard.

In another moment Lady Blanchefleur rounded a bend, caroling the latest love-ditty as she cantered up on her smart little palfrey of dappled grey with trailing pastel ribbons in its mane. Calantha's apprehension vanished, but her gloom darkened. Only an extreme effort produced the requisite appearance of glad welcome.

The two ladies reined in and greeted one another courteously in approved Everafter fashion, bending from the saddle to almost-kiss one another's cheek, then inquiring as to the state of each other's health with the requisite thees, thous, and forsooths, then lauding the beauty of the not especially praiseworthy day as a matter of form. Those prerequisites done, Blanchefleur dropped into the vernacular with evident relief.

"There's a troll lurking about," she said, indicating the thickest part of the woods with a delicate diamonded forefinger. "Just thought I'd warn you."

"Thanks awfully," Calantha replied. "I'll keep an eye out."

"You're on your way to Elspeth, I daresay. I just left her. That hag's prices are absolutely criminal, but still..." Blanchefleur held up a little vial. "It'll keep the milk and roses in my hue or my money back. Care to try a drop? That shade of green is such a trying color, even for youthful years. Not to mention that wimples look so nunnish."

Elsbeth's potions, Calantha had learned from long experience, were at their best insipid, and at their worst pernicious—rather like Blanchefleur. Declining with thanks a little strained, Calantha would have changed the subject, but Blanche beat her to it.

"You're giving the next feast, aren't you? I hope you'll have suckling pig. I adore it."

As Blanche launched into a rapturous litany of favorite dishes, Calantha inwardly bristled. It was bad enough that Blanche considered herself invited as a matter of course, but even worse that since she was single, with little more than a tower for a dwelling, she never had to endure the bother of providing food, drink, and minstrelsy for several score lords and ladies exceedingly fond of good cheer. As if that weren't enough, Blanche gloried in the type of figure that always stayed a damsel's no matter how much she ate, and hair that made gold seem detritus. Her blinding tresses fell in silken profusion to a waist almost impossibly slender, set off by a gown of watchet samite so perfectly fitting and obviously costly that it took one's breath away. Although she was of fully the same years as Calantha, she was as beautiful as an angel in a missal.

"I'm thinking of bringing hennins back in style," she was saying.

Calantha, who had been too rapt with her own thoughts to pay much attention to whatever Blanche was saying, started at the mention of that hideous headgear, and reflected that Blanchefleur would look divinely fair even with her glorious locks scraped under a cone. The thought was infuriating. "It's quite a chilly day," she all but snapped. "I fear you'll catch cold in that gown, my dear, although it is a shame to veil so faultless a bosom."

Blanchefleur glanced down with complacent admiration at her snowy decollete, which was extreme almost to indecency. "Oh, I never feel the weather; no worries." Contemplation of her temptingly rippable bodice seemed to inspire a change of thought. "By the way, there's a

new romance going the rounds. I'm next in line to read it, and you can have it after me if you like."

There was always a love-manuscript written by some bard or other being passed about among the Everafter ladies. The stories could be relied upon to provide lubricious and horrific thrills right up to the inevitable happy ending, and were decorated with illuminations that spared the imagination any undue effort. By the time the book reached the last lady's hands, it could be counted upon to be dog-eared, underlined, margin-scrawled and creatively stained, with most of the illustrations missing. Blanche was suspected to be a frequent offender in that regard.

Before Calantha could refuse her friend's offer with the observation that romances were tedious and predictable and she hoped to never read another again in her life, Blanche's cerulean orbs gazed past her and became animated for the first time since the mention of food. "Why, there's Bors!" And dealing Calantha a perfunctory wave of farewell, she dug an exquisitely spurred heel into her palfrey's side, sending the horse prancing away into the deep woods, exactly in the opposite direction of the dark-armored knight just coming into sight down the path.

Calantha distinctly heard the knight grumble an oath and heave a resigned sigh, waiting a minute or so to give Blanche a good start before urging his war-horse into a gallop. As he thundered past Calantha he bowed from the saddle, and his eyes met hers an instant before giving a significant upward roll.

Having no time to react to Sir Bors' atypical show of emotion, Calantha watched him crash through the woods until he was lost to sight. It was well known, or at least generally supposed, that Bors and Blanche were paramours. Both were unmarried, which was far from usual in Everafter Acres, and although Blanche often alluded to her maiden status, people noticed that she always made herself scarce during unicorn sightings.

Moodily Calantha continued her ride, and soon reached the crazy little cottage that was Elspeth's abode. As always, smoke spiraled from the crooked chimney of the thatched roof, and ruffled chickens scratched about the open door, from which issued a mildly revolting blend of odors and the high faint whine of senile crooning.

Lifting her skirts to clear it from the bare bird-fouled dirt of the cottage's yard, Calantha lowered her head to enter the cramped little doorway, and greeted Elspeth with the civility due a seeress, making sure to keep her skirts elevated since the cottage floor was no cleaner than the trampled earth outside.

The blear-eyed crone barely looked up from the mess she was stirring at the hob of the hearth. "Bring me anything?"

The bag around the palfrey's saddle-horn held not only a flask of wine, but rich delicacies. Elspeth had a sweet tooth—it was one of the few in her head—and she at once began munching marzipan between sips of malmsey. By now used to such wordless intervals interrupted only by stifled gulps and belches, Calantha examined the arcane oddments and pickled horrors on the room's tables and shelves.

Elspeth wiped her mouth on the back of her veiny mottled hand and took a breather. "That Blanche's baggage was just here, craving a new potion for that pretty phiz of hers. Will ye be wanting the same, m'lady? I'll have to brew it stronger and charge more, I warn ye."

Calantha flinched. "No, thanks."

"A dye then, to get the gray out of your hair? You'd not need to hide it under a rag, then."

Calantha pretended to ignore this allusion both to her faded tresses and her spotless, intricately-pleated headdress of finest lawn. "I'm past those sorts of things, Elspeth." She set down the gnarled bit of dried mushroom, or perhaps mummy, that she'd been idly scrutinizing. "I just want something to..." She hesitated. To what? Give her the zest of her

young days? Alleviate the tedium? Allow her to just...vanish? Tears began to gather in her eyes, and her sinuses became troublesome.

Elspeth regarded her with a piercing squint. "So. In the doleful dumps again, are we?"

Calantha sniffled agreement.

"Life seems a bit tiresome, eh?"

"More than a bit." Calantha looked down at her waistline with renewed dismay. "I used to be as lissom as Blanche fleur."

"Lissomer. I remember."

"I thought I'd be young forever. How'd this happen, Elspeth?"

"People forgot about you."

That stung. "Clearly they didn't forget about Blanche."

"That's because she stayed single. It kept her interestin'. Well, there's always drink to keep your wits addled and happy. If not, I've got this herb..."

"No." Calantha wiped her eyes with her flowing sleeve. "Maybe I'll just wander into the woods and let a griffin eat me."

Elspeth snorted at her client's sullen tone, and helped herself to more of the rare malmsey with irritating liberality. "Go see how far it gets you."

At those words, Calantha felt a strange jolt that took her away from herself a moment. "What?"

"You heard me. I said try it."

"You want me to be eaten by a griffin?"

"Can't say as I care, but it won't happen no matter how hard you try." As Calantha stood astounded, Elspeth shook the marzipan-crumbs from her apron, which were instantly intercepted by some of the chickens. "And don't stare so gormless. Do you honestly think being a wise woman is any fun around here?"

Calantha ignored the question. "Are you saying the monsters aren't...real?"

Elspeth shrugged. "Oh, they're real enough. But they won't harm you. They can't. They're stocked like carp in a pond, and have about as much bite to 'em."

Calantha remembered the loud and violent but consistently harmless griffins of the north woods, and contrasted them with those of her long-past days as a damsel. The latter had been absolutely, universally lethal. In comparison, the former were little more deadly than Elspeth's chickens. Her heart sank. "You always knew this?"

"Yep."

"Who...stocks them?"

"The management, I s'pose. Does it matter?"

"But what made you tell me?" Calantha put a sharp emphasis on the last word.

"Because no one ever complains, 'cept for you. Reckon I got tired of it."

"You're lying about the monsters, you...you hag."

Elspeth only cackled. "Go back out to the woods and try to get yourself killed. Try your hardest. If you live, you owe me."

"For what?"

"You'll see." Stretching in a gaping yawn, Elspeth dropped back in her frowsy cushioned chair, raising a faint cloud of dust. "Malmsey always makes me nappish." In another moment she was snoring.

There was no point in waking her. Calantha stared down at the cryptic hag's ravined wrinkles, sickle nose, and lipless mouth. Had Elspeth ever been young? Ever been lovely? No amount of imagination could envision her as other than she was. She had always been a part of Everafter, always the way she looked now, except at the present moment she was even uglier than usual.

“Liar,” Calantha whispered. Resisting the urge to drop a nearby black beetle into the crone’s now wide-open snaggy jowls fully as revolting as an orc’s, she left the house, scattering chickens with the skirts of her gown as she made for her horse.

Riding homeward, Calantha thought with small joy of her maid now probably glorying in her mistress’ purple velvet; of how Blanchefleur’s eyes had gleamed avidly at the sight of Sir Bors; of her own lord Peregrin, and how handsome he had once been, and how delightful life had once been, full of love and peril. What was left, now that youth and beauty had fled? If the knights had nothing to conquer, and the ladies had no need to be rescued...what then? What would fill up the endless hours between now and forever, if nothing meant anything?

Dismally pensive, she let her mare find its way back to the castle, which it soon failed to do. After a time Calantha halted, looking around her. She was in the depths of a forest primeval, where rags of mist wraithed among the huge trunks and caught in the massive low-hanging boughs like cobwebs. No birds sang, but winds sighed through the boughs like resentful ghosts. It was the kind of place where something dreadful could occur at any instant.

Reliably, it did. A horrific creature slithered out of a narrow cave with a sinister rattling of scales, coiled itself on the path, reared its ghastly head, and showed all its teeth, of which it had several rows, in a ravenous grin.

Calantha’s horse promptly threw her, and galloped away. The monster seemed thrilled, and swayed its serpentine neck as its slit shimmering eyes stared its prey up and down.

Palfreys weren’t much larger than ponies, and the fall had been soft, onto a bank of moss. As Calantha picked herself up, her first instinct was to scream, but she remembered Elspeth’s revelation. Now would be the time to test it. Accordingly she stood her ground, trying not to tremble.

The wyrm—it was a wyrm—threw back its head, opened its maw to the maximum, and shrieked. The noise was truly blood-curdling, and normally Calantha would have screamed in her turn, running away as fast as her flowing skirts would allow. But she remembered what Elspeth had told her. Drawing a deep breath, she turned her back on the horror, closed her eyes and stood perfectly still, speaking between clenched teeth.

“Go ahead. I dare you.”

She waited, her heart battering, for foul hot breath, then fleshy slime-tongued damp enveloping her head, and a neck-severing crunch. An interval of a dozen or so seconds elapsed, every one of them a drop of boiling oil, until Calantha heard the wyrm make a noise that sounded exactly like a confused and petulant whine before giving her a hard headbutt in the back. Furious, Calantha spun around and smacked its face, or rather the one spot that wasn’t either teeth, eye, or snout.

The wyrm’s glittering eyes blinked in what could only be amazement, and its spiny crest wilted as it turned about and slithered back to its den in a manner clearly nonplussed, without a backward glance.

Calantha looked on absolutely astounded, and then uttered an oath that no lady would use under any circumstances.

“My sentiments more or less precisely.”

Turning toward that dry vernacular uttered not a stone’s throw away, Calantha stared at the last person she expected to see. “Sir Bors, what are you doing here?”

The dark knight shrugged with a slight creaking of half-armor. “Thought you might need rescuing. Quite apparently you don’t.”

As always, Bors looked magnificent with an arresting touch of the sinister. His broad shoulders showed no signs of even beginning to bow, just as his waist had stayed as slim as a squire’s. His hair was long, still abundant, and raven, framing his swarthy hard features in an

arresting way. He was so perfect that Calantha just stared at him for some moments, and of course he let her; and she couldn't help but think, even in her jangled mental state, that dark knights seemed to have all the luck.

"How long have you been watching?" she finally asked.

"Just arrived," Bors said. "Thought I heard a lady shrieking, but it turned out to be the wyrm."

"Shouldn't you be rescuing Blanchefleur?"

"Did that half an hour ago, from a troll."

"And was it terribly exciting?"

Bors' mouth quirked. "Not too."

"I believe you. It looks as if it didn't put up much of a fight."

"You knew it wouldn't." He hesitated. "How'd you find out?"

"Elspeth." Calantha hesitated, too. "How'd you find out?"

"I just felt it. Had for a long time."

A long deep silence fell, and it was a relief when Bors looked away and spoke again. "Shall we be off? Nag's getting restive."

Bors' horse was nearby, pawing the ground and snorting. As they approached the animal, Calantha noted a charming wreath of autumn leaves around its saddlebow.

"How lovely. A gift from Blanchefleur?"

Bors shook his head in his moody way. "I made it for her to wear, but she didn't want it. Said something about bugs and scratchiness and it not being her colors."

Calantha took the wreath in her hands. Around a circlet of ivy, thickly-clustered leaves of red and orange and gold seemed to glow with inner fire in the dim light of the deep woods. The wreath was very skilfully wrought, and Calantha tried to imagine Bors creating it, selecting just the right mixture of colors and shapes set off so well by the vine's deep green, his tough fingers bending the ivy with just enough force, careful not to break it. "Blanchefleur indeed seems best suited to roses and lilies," she said, as graciously as possible; but she suddenly disliked that lady more than ever. "Here." And she handed the circlet back.

"I don't want the thing. Keep it if you like."

"Oh, but I couldn't..."

"Bah." Bors plucked the wreath from her hands, and in another moment Calantha was wearing it over her wimple.

"Hold still," Bors said, settling the circlet with care upon the fine white linen, then critically adjusting the leaves before moving back to inspect his work. "Hm. Very fine. You look like a prophetess."

Calantha had never before received so much of Bors' attention, and hardly knew what to do with it. "Too bad I don't have a mirror."

"Here's one," Bors said, tapping his gleaming steel breastplate.

Calantha contemplated her reflection only a little distorted by the metal's curve. "Bors, I can't tell Peregrin about...what happened. It would kill him."

"Actually, it wouldn't, which is worse."

That thought made Calantha flinch within. "He really is perfect."

Bors nodded. "A bit over-jovial perhaps, but no harm done."

"He'd probably think me very odd-looking just now." Calantha watched the image in the breastplate give a wry reminiscent smile. "Wreaths are meant to be worn over tresses flowing loose, by slim young damsels. Not by—"

"Oh, nonsense." Bors frowned, then. "Blanche really should put her hair up."

"Now that you mention it, she's thinking of bringing hennins back into style."

Bors growled an underbreath imprecation against that conical mode, and reached for his horse's halter. "How would you like to ride? Withers, crupper, or led?"

Calantha did a swift mental rejection of all three. "I'd rather we both walk."

"Hm. That's different. Do you have the shoes for it?"

"Flat and comfy. And you?"

"The same. Well, let's be off."

It turned out to be a very enjoyable stroll, despite the dank gloom of the woods. Calantha had feared she and Bors would have little in common, but such wasn't the case at all. Unlike any other knight Calantha had ever known, Bors wasn't his own favorite subject of conversation, and the talk didn't once stray to the good old days, which were usually just about the only topic in Everafter. No monstrosity whatsoever appeared to make itself troublesome, although now and then Calantha noticed an ogre stealing sheepishly behind a rock, or a chimera scuttling away abashed, or a spectre discreetly dissipating once sighted. Clearly word had gotten around.

The horse soon wandered off, taking its way back to Everafter. Relaxed in the quiet, Calantha and Bors stopped often to examine the mushrooms growing on fallen trunks and in shaded earth, and together they admired the symmetry of the delicate gills, and tried to give names to the indeterminate colors. They halted at a bend of a stream and watched a bullfrog swelling its croak, and further on gazed up at a great owl nearby on a branch staring back at them with its huge yellow eyes, and they both made hooting noises to get it to hoot back, which it did. At one point in their progress Bors tapped Calantha's arm, alerting her to a little troop of deer crossing the path. And the more they walked together, and the more they saw and enjoyed, the more the sun came out, until all the leaves on the trees gleamed bright against the deep blue sky.

"This is the first time I've ever really enjoyed the woods," Calantha said as they passed through an especially radiant grove. "I was always too busy worrying about being attacked, or carried off, or both."

"I never really minded for a long time," Bors replied. "It kept me busy. But now..."

Rounding an outcropping of rock, they found themselves looking out over the little castled hills of the community, and they sighed at the same time. At that very instant Bors' mastiff began baying.

"What a barker that beast is," the dark knight said. "I never noticed before."

Calantha stared. "Surely you jest. He's the terror of the neighborhood."

"I'll feed him to the manticore. How does that sound?"

"You know the manticore won't touch him."

"I suppose not. Well, I'll find a muzzle." Bors finally broke a longish silence. "Odd, life with no monsters."

"Good riddance." Calantha gazed from one predictable set of towers to another. "It's my turn to give the next feast. Everyone will expect suckling pig. Such a bother."

"I'll show up uninvited, and we can dance."

"You're always invited everywhere, but you never show up. And I didn't know you danced."

"I do, and not sedately. Expect to be whirled."

"No easy task, I warn you."

"Bah. They don't call me redoubtable for nothing."

"People will be shocked."

"Good." Bors' thoughts seemed to stray elsewhere. "I like mushrooms."

"With suckling pig?"

"No, no. Those ones in the woods. I think I'll try to draw them."

"I didn't know you could draw."

“I can, rather tolerably. But monsters were never very inspiring.”

Calantha felt the warmth of the bright leaves wreathing her brow. “I might ask you to illustrate the epic I’m planning to write. The notion just occurred to me as we were walking.”

Bors’ eyes widened a fraction. “Will it be about mushrooms?”

“Well, they’ll figure in the plot.”

“As heroes, or villains?”

Calantha laughed, and realized it’d been quite a long time since she’d really and truly done so. As they started on the little path through the field to Everafter’s gate, she couldn’t help a question of her own.

“Speaking of drawing...why your sword?”

Bors swung his weapon’s gleaming blade in a martial salute. “For the look of the thing, as we make our entrance. Everyone will think I rescued you.”

“They’ll be right. Which reminds me—I owe Elspeth a keg of malmsey.”

Bors smiled, something he seldom did; it was always a bit startling. “I can’t imagine mushrooms ever getting dull, can you?”

Calantha took his offered arm. “Even if they do, there’s always owls.”

“Excellent.”

And they lived...well, you know.



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