



The Beauty and His Beast

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Everild, known far and wide as the Beast, is a warrior of unparalleled ferocity, revered by the king and feared by his enemies. His prowess in battle has earned him not only titles but also the king's favor, and with it, the spoils of war. Everild expects lands, riches, and glory as his reward. What he does not expect is the king's latest gift—a young cleric, an apprentice no less, to be his betrothed.

Camdyn has spent his life within the walls of the monastery until he is thrust into an arranged marriage with the most infamous warrior in the kingdom. The stories he's heard of Everild have painted a picture of a monstrous man, a beast without equal, but what he finds upon meeting his betrothed is far different. Everild is not the brutal figure of war he imagined, but a man with an unexpected gentleness, one whose quiet kindness disarms Camdyn more than his battle-scarred reputation ever could.

In a world where loyalty is tested and the price of honor is steep, Everild and Camdyn must navigate their new roles all while the threat of betrayal hangs heavy over them.

The Beauty and His Beast is a gay romantic fantasy featuring an arranged marriage, size difference, and age difference.

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Page 1

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Everild Reed hadn't fought for glory or gold. At the time, he thought he'd stood for God—that the king's cause, which he eagerly made his own, was not only legitimate but justified both on earth and in the eyes of Heaven. More than five years later, carved into adulthood by the sword's blade and burdened with the weight of his own choices, his body a hardened knot of muscle and scarred skin, Everild knows better now. He had gone to war simply because he had been foolish—a young man looking at conflict with a boy's naive view: half solemn duty, half reckless game. He thought it would be something thrilling, an adventure that would leave him with tales to tell and perhaps a touch of glory to savor.

Years spent in the brutality of battle had stripped him of such illusions. He is left with an understanding raw and bitter; the singular task, the only satisfaction to be found in war is simply to survive. Yet, the king had promised wealth, land, and titles to his bravest soldiers, and in his eyes, those favors belonged only to his own cousins.

Everild had known both Wilburg Claytone III, the king, and Dustan Redmane, his cousin, for their entire lives. They were once as close as brothers—attending and dodging lessons together, lost in the fantastic worlds of childhood where they played soldiers brandishing sticks as swords. Once, they fought side by side on the battlefield, united against common foes. But now, over the years, his affection for them had diminished significantly, soured by the bloodshed and betrayal that followed. The war, which left an untold number dead and drained the last remnants of youth from Everild and countless others, had ignited from the king's bruised ego. It was only soothed when his power was reaffirmed through the sacrifice of others, marking half a decade of bloodshed, pain, and disillusionment.

Dustan, who had always been a snarling, selfish child, blossomed into something

unrecognizable—a monster who wore the guise of a man. His greed for power shifted from toys and horses to the spoils of the court: wealth, titles, influence, and the favor of noble ladies. In the chaos of war, he seized power to snatch what he desired from the world, leaving destruction in his wake.

It stung—and simmered under his skin—to listen to Wilburg, still brimming with the carefree flippancy of their youth. It churned his gut to watch Dustan swagger through life with a sycophantic smile, as if the very war that had taken everything from Everild had merely been a pleasant diversion for him. The charms of their past seemed to fade into the shadows when Everild found himself in the king's private chambers tonight, desperate for his cousin to unveil whatever treacherous scheme he had concocted this time.

Wilburg and Dustan had been nibbling on remarkably fine foods for hours, leaving the remains of the lavish dinner—chicken gizzards in rich stock, tender lamb glazed with herbs, mouthwatering cuts of cow tongue wrapped in crispy bacon, and a thick stew seasoned with hints of pepper and ginger—laying cold and untouched on silver plates scattered across the opulent table. The extravagance of it all disgusted Everild; there was a heaviness in his stomach he could not shake, whether from the heavy awareness of what it cost to get them to this point or the overwhelming abundance around him.

Dustan lounged regally on the couch, a bottle of wine in one hand, while Wilburg occupied himself near the bedpost, tossing red grapes up into the air and effortlessly catching them in his mouth, chuckling like a child playing a simple game. Everild pressed himself into a chair he had dragged close to the fireplace, staring into the flames for a moment longer than he should have. Perhaps he could lose himself in their flickering dance, finding solace in the heat, until he was beckoned to join their conversation.

And join, he must, because the king, with a smile that promised mischief, proclaimed,

“I’ve completely solved it. You’ll be set for life, Everild. Acres and acres of land—you won’t be tending it yourself, of course, it’s a ways away, so we’ll leave that to the stewards to handle—but you were never made to farm, were you?” He winked, his joy stemming from some ill-conceived plan that Everild could hardly grasp. “And a fresh, young husband for you as part of the deal. Two birds with one stone, wouldn’t you say?”

The word ‘husband’ lingered in the air like a foul odor, pushing against Everild’s senses. “What?” The exclamation escaped him, his voice low and gravelly, made harsh by the echoes of battles past. Once, his roar had sent foes running for their lives; now, it was heavy with disbelief. It was a voice many had learned to dread, but Wilburg never paid his rumblings any attention.

This unexpected query cleaved the air as if it were to be an expected response, prompting the king to continue with his relentless enthusiasm. “The paperwork’s already been drawn up, so don’t worry your big, empty head about that. You’ll have a substantial annual income and a lovely little virgin to play with whenever you want.”

The laughter that erupted from the couch felt jagged and cruel. Dustan, always the self-serving jester, chimed in, “You can only play with a virgin once.”

Wilburg, with the exuberance of childhood, slapped his knee, laughter bubbling up like champagne. “Ah, true, very true! But imagine the adventures you’ll share with him, Everild. He was destined to be a cleric!”

Everild shook his head, his shock warring with a creeping sense of dread. “A cleric?”

“Indeed! The youngest in the family, pledged to a life of piety and austerity. His share destined for the monastery. It would have been a pity—but lucky for us, his father was eager to secure a place at court, rather than by God’s side. The boy marrying one of the king’s most favored warriors? It practically came with an

additional house! We can summer there together, if you'd like. And they say the boy is quite pretty, besides."

Dustan sneered, taking delight in the notion as if it were a game. "What, prettiest among a crowd of monks? Naturally! His only competition is a bunch of scraggly old men. Virginity won't hold any value if you can't stomach to take it from him. Is his monastery known for their beer brewing, at least?"

Wilburg, ever the kingly caretaker, feigned concern. "Oh, I never asked. Wouldn't that be lucky, Everild?" And when silence lingered, he stood taller, frowning as if challenging Everild's apparent indifference. "Aren't you happy, cousin? I thought you would be elated. I promised I'd take care of everything for you."

Everild remained silent, allowing the crackling of the fire to fill the space between them. This was no mere misunderstanding; it was a painful unveiling of the loyalty that had been twisted into disregard.

He should have known something so absurd would follow from the man he once called a brother. Wilburg was many things: impatient, laid-back, quick to anger, but above all, he was genuine, true to his word. He had vowed to eliminate his kingdom's enemies, and he had done so, albeit at the cost of countless lives. He had sworn that Everild would be rewarded for his valor in the war, for his loyalty and steadfastness in the face of death.

Yet here they sat, amidst a feast so lavish it turned Everild's stomach, and instead of expected gifts ripe for the taking—a mill or a herd of sheep, perhaps—his cousin had plucked a young cleric from his sanctuary and handed him a wedding proposal alongside the glittering promise of land.

A wreck of a man, broken by the weight of his own choices, Everild pictured the boy, fresh from his holy cloister, standing beside him. How could Everild himself ever be

worthy of affection or tenderness? A body littered with scars, a soul stained with memories of violence, and a voice that caused those around him to cower in fear. Would the boy want to touch him? Would he recoil in disgust, recognizing the cruel world Everild was steeped in? No amount of land could mend those wounds.

Everild thought bitterly of how he would have preferred to make a deal with an ancient fae or a shrewd devil. At least those paths had warnings etched in stone—in the tales of old—for the folly that awaited him.

Wilburg's hand then settled softly on his shoulder, the warmth flooding back with memories of innocent times. But the concern on his cousin's face only deepened the chasm within him, familiar and aching. "Everild," he called, voice warm and pleading, "You're the best of men. You deserve this, cousin."

But words stuck in Everild's throat, swallowed whole by the bitterness of truth he neither wanted to share nor acknowledge.

"Leave him be," Dustan chided as he rose from the couch, grinning like a wolf. "Can't you see he's speechless? Struck dumb by his good luck. To Everild, and his little cleric." He drained the wine bottle in one woozy motion, smashing the empty glass to the ground with a cacophony of shards, laughter spilling from his lips like poison.

Everild shrugged off the king's touch and made for the door, feeling the weight of expectations pressing down like an anvil. With every crunch of broken glass beneath his boots, he realized he was trapped in a world where he no longer belonged.

"To a lifetime of wedded bliss!" Dustan shouted behind him, the mirth ringing hollow and oppressive.

Everild gritted his teeth, slamming the door behind him with a resolute finality, as if

to reclaim the last vestiges of his own will. Outside the door, the silence clung to him, a blanket of dread woven with uncertainty about what was to come, as he faced the chilling reality of the life laid out before him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Camdyn was so absorbed in his work that he didn't notice the riders arriving. The act of copying even the simplest manuscript was an intricate, painstaking process, and the one he had been working on for nearly a month was no exception. It had no colored borders, no illuminations or elaborate designs—just a clean, precise transcription of another work, its black ink made from oak galls carefully applied in a steady hand. Yet, despite the simplicity, it was a project that had taken up nearly all his attention, with only a small gathering of parchment to show for all his efforts.

Just the day before, Camdyn had completed one full page, and today, after prayers and chores and even more prayers, he was determined to finish ruling another set of parchment by dinner. Ruling the pages, that most monotonous step of the whole process, was his least favorite task. The parchment was ready, its edges trimmed, and now it needed the carefully spaced lines to guide the ink. Soaking calfskin in lime and water for days, scraping off the remaining hair and flesh, was the part of the process he found strangely satisfying, as was the task of cutting the stretched and dried skin to the proper size. And while his penmanship was often praised, and he took immense pride in how elegant his letters appeared, he had to admit that he greatly preferred moments where he could get creative—when he could delve into the borders or decorate entire pages with vibrant inks depicting saints, angels, flowers, and intricate designs in hues of green, red, blue, and gold.

But ruling? That was pure drudgery. It was slow, tedious work—one that required such careful attention to detail that it was a test of patience. But if he did it right, he wouldn't have to repeat it. That was the only consolation. So he plodded on, resolving to finish it that very evening, no matter the cost.

“Camdyn,” a voice called from outside his cell, breaking his concentration. “The

abbot needs to speak with you outside. It's urgent."

The sudden interruption felt unfair. He was right in the middle of his work, and as far as he could tell, he hadn't done anything wrong that day. With a disgruntled sigh, Camdyn stopped what he was doing, put a stopper in his ink bottle, cleaned his quill, and straightened up his desk before reluctantly heading outside.

As he stepped into the yard, he squinted against the bright sunlight and the sharp, salty breeze from the sea. The first thing he noticed was a cart parked in the middle of the yard, and then the sight of five horses tethered in the stables. It was an unusual sight, one that had never occurred during his time at the monastery. The stable had never been so crowded. His gaze shifted toward the strangers—five men, lightly armored, their faces tired from travel, glancing nervously at the monks moving around them, as if unsure of what to expect, where to look, or what they were even doing here.

The abbot, standing among the strangers, caught sight of Camdyn and waved him over. The group of men turned toward him, and Camdyn noticed three of them, standing by the cart, eyeing him curiously. There was something about their gazes that made him uneasy. One man, around his age, met his eyes and blushed a deep shade of red, quickly looking away. Another man muttered something unintelligible—something about lambs and a wolf's den—that made his companion elbow him sharply in the ribs. The two men closest to the abbot regarded him with expressions Camdyn recognized—a softness in their eyes that reminded him of how Cenric looked at him before pulling him into a hug or ruffling his hair. But these two men were strangers. Still, there was something oddly familiar about them, something in their faces that tugged at his memory.

The older of the two, a man with dark blond hair and a beard, smiled widely as he stepped forward. "That couldn't be—you've grown so much—I almost didn't recognize you."

The other, with curly brown hair, added with a cheeky grin, “Well, certainly bigger, but not that much bigger. I’ve seen children taller than him.”

Camdyn stared at them in confusion, his mind reeling. Something in the abbot’s face, along with the earnest looks from the two men, set Camdyn on edge. He hesitated, looking around at the other monks who were busy with their own tasks—scrubbing the walls, pulling weeds, feeding the chickens. He opened his mouth to protest but then looked at the two men again. As he really looked at them, fragmented memories began to surface—bits and pieces of a childhood long forgotten.

There was the sensation of being tossed into the air and caught again and again, of small hands exploring a young man’s face with curious, clumsy touches. Laughter surrounding him as he tasted food for the first time—slices of lemon that made him cry, spoonfuls of sweet rice pudding that were hurriedly shoved into his mouth.

And then it hit him. He knew these men. Gibson and Kenelm, his older brothers. But it had taken him this long to recognize them because the last time he saw them, he had been three years old, bundled up for the journey to the monastery. His mother, tearfully dressing him, had said her goodbyes. And now, nearly seventeen years later, here they were, standing before him. His heart ached at the sight of them, and yet, a part of him wanted to turn and run.

Gibson, the older of the two, was taller, with a full beard and a wide smile. He stepped forward, clearly eager to embrace Camdyn, but he hesitated and instead pressed a hand to his chest. “It’s me, Gibson. And Kenelm’s here too. It’s so good to see you, Camdyn. I’ve missed you so much—God’s truth.”

But Camdyn, still reeling, could only manage to ask, “What do you want? Why are you here?”

Gibson flinched at the coldness in his voice, and behind him, Kenelm shifted

awkwardly, his gaze dropping to the dirt beneath his feet. The silence stretched, and Camdyn's anxiety grew with each passing moment. The abbot, sensing the tension, placed a gentle hand on Camdyn's back and suggested, "Why don't we take a walk by the beach, the four of us? We can talk."

But Camdyn didn't want to show them the beach. The beach was his. It was the place he went to think, to breathe, to be alone. His sanctuary. When he was younger, Cenric had held his hand when they walked along the shore, pulling him away from the tide and showing him pretty seashells as they collected seaweed to dry and turn into medicine. The beach was his, and no one, especially not these brothers who had been absent for so long, would take that from him.

"No," Camdyn said firmly. "I don't want to walk with you. Not now." His gaze hardened as he turned to the abbot. "Why are they really here? What's going on?"

When the abbot didn't answer immediately, Camdyn's anxiety blossomed into panic. His heart raced, his mouth dried out, and his hands began to tremble. Something was very wrong. He could feel it in his bones.

Gibson seemed to hesitate, clearly struggling to find the right words. Finally, Kenelm spoke up, his voice forced, filled with a hollow cheer. "We're here to take you home. Father arranged for you to be married. You'll—well, you'll be part of the royal family. The king's cousin is to be your husband. He's a war hero."

Camdyn let out a sharp laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. "Don't be ridiculous. I can't marry. I'm—I'm a cleric—"

But Gibson, his voice laced with barely contained anger, cut him off. "You're a novice. You haven't taken your vows yet. The abbot can't—Father still has the final say over your life."

“And this man—this man I’ve never even met? Who is he? Why now?” Camdyn's voice cracked, and he looked helplessly at the abbot, whose eyes were filled with sympathy. “Please, you can’t do this. Everything I have, everything I’ve worked for, is here. I—I can’t leave.”

His voice faltered, and he wasn’t sure who he was pleading with—his brothers, the abbot, or anyone who would listen. The three men behind his brothers looked uncomfortable, and Camdyn could see their faces soften with regret, though they didn’t speak.

The abbot, seeing Camdyn’s distress, pulled him into a warm, protective embrace. Gibson, his face twisted with self-loathing, stood motionless, guilt apparent in his expression. “Camdyn, please,” he said, his voice breaking. “Don’t cry. We’ll look after you. You’ll be fine, I promise—”

But Camdyn, feeling the weight of it all, could only whisper, “Where’s Cenric? Does he know? I need to see Cenric, please.”

The abbot’s voice, softer than Camdyn had ever heard it, responded gently, “He knows. He’s praying in the chapel. Go and speak to him.”

Camdyn, desperate for comfort, rushed toward the chapel without a second thought, his heart pounding in his chest. Gibson and Kenelm started to follow, but the abbot stopped them. “You’ll stay with me. Camdyn needs time to speak with the man who raised him. Do not disturb them.”

With those words, Camdyn fled, his mind a whirlwind of confusion, fear, and sorrow. The life he had built at the monastery was about to shatter, and he wasn’t sure he could hold it all together.

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Camdyn knew every chip in every stone that made up every inch of the monastery. He could trace the intricate patterns of wear in the stonework of the chapel, remembering how each crack had formed over the years, how each weathered patch in the masonry had its own story. The chapel, like the rest of the monastery, was a landscape he knew intimately, a world of corners and crevices where his feet had played and his hands had touched in childhood. When he was a child, it was as much a place to play as any other—sometimes more so. The monks would often find him slipping between the towering columns, his laughter echoing off the stone as he explored the spaces where only the youngest dared to venture. He would run his hands along the walls, delighting in how his fingers found the grooves, the rough patches, the smooth stones that had been worn down by centuries of use. Each mark, each imperfection, became part of his growing understanding of the world, a world he'd come to love as much as the stone itself.

When he was old enough to attend prayers but too young to seriously take part in them, Camdyn had been a whirlwind of energy, zipping between the rows of monks, darting past their robes and nipping at their prayer beads as they bent their heads in devotion. Cenric, ever watchful, would often be the one to catch him—his strong hand wrapping around the cowl of Camdyn's habit, pulling him back into the calmness of the prayer circle, holding him firmly, but with the care that only someone who had raised him could understand. The firm hand on his shoulder, a weight that kept him in place, reminded him of the security he had always felt in the presence of the man who had watched over him like a father. Even as he wriggled in place, trying to squirm out of the hold, he never felt fear, only a sense of warmth and belonging.

Now, as an adult, Camdyn stood in the same chapel, his hands no longer small and eager but strong and steady. Cenric stood at one of the chapel's windows, his eyes closed, his face bathed in the soft, golden light of the sun that filtered through the stained glass. The sun's rays highlighted his weathered wrinkles and the thinning patches of gray in his hair, but to Camdyn, he was still the man who had shaped so much of his life. There was something timeless about Cenric, something that seemed

to transcend age and time itself. Camdyn felt a sense of calm settle over him, even as his cheeks were still streaked with the remnants of tears. The weight of the moment—of everything that was changing—pressed on him, but looking at Cenric, he found himself grounded, a stillness returning to his heart.

As he approached, Cenric opened his eyes, and without a word, he pulled Camdyn to his side, just as he had done when he was a child, holding him close. The gesture felt so familiar, so natural, that for a moment, Camdyn was a boy again, nestled beneath the shelter of Cenric's presence. It was as if time had bent around them, and they had returned to the place where everything had begun.

"I'm praying," Cenric murmured, his voice soft and steady. "I am talking to God. Do you know what I'm telling Them?"

Camdyn shook his head, his voice thick with emotion. "No."

Cenric's hand, though no longer as strong as it once was, squeezed Camdyn's shoulder lightly. "Oh, I'm telling Them what a fine young man you've become," he said, his voice filled with a quiet pride. "And that I'm thankful to Them for bringing you into my life and for all the joy you've given us here."

Camdyn chuckled through his tears, a bitter-sweetness in his heart as he wiped his eyes. He thought of the countless times he'd gotten into trouble in his younger years—of the time he'd forgotten to close the livestock pens, of the many questions that had made the monks raise their eyebrows in confusion, and of the times he had caused a minor panic by running away, hoping for the excitement of being found. "All the irritation, more like," he said, his voice cracking with laughter that was tinged with sadness.

Cenric's smile softened, his eyes gleaming with affection. "It was a gift to have you, even for a little while," he said quietly. His voice held a tenderness that made

Camdyn's heart ache.

Camdyn, feeling the weight of everything that had led him here, nestled deeper into Cenric's side, feeling the familiar roughness of his robes against his cheek. "I thought I had time to wait, still. To take my vows. And now—someone else has chosen my path for me," he said, his voice faltering. "I don't want to leave. I don't want to leave you."

Cenric's arm tightened around him, a warmth that reminded Camdyn of countless moments when they had stood side by side, working, laughing, living. "I certainly wished that you could have stayed by my side for the rest of my days," Cenric said, his voice laced with quiet longing. "But come now, you could still write to us. I know we taught you how to use a quill, at least. Letters from you would be very welcome. Especially if they happened to coincide with the wine deliveries." His voice lightened, a joke to ease the tension, and Camdyn couldn't help but smile, a tear slipping down his cheek.

They shared a brief, quiet laugh, the sound a rare joy in the weight of the moment. Then they fell silent, both gazing out the window at the hills stretching far beyond the monastery walls. Camdyn felt the pull of the world outside, a world he was about to leave behind, and the knowledge that it wouldn't take long to prepare to leave. All he owned were his robes, his knife, and his prayer beads. Everything else—everything he had once called his own—belonged to the monastery: the blankets, the bed, the desk...

The manuscript.

His heart twisted in his chest as he thought of it. All the hours spent working on it, all the careful words he had written, all the passion poured into the pages. It was going to be so beautiful when he finished it. He had dreamed of it. "Who'll finish my manuscript?" Camdyn asked, his voice tight with emotion, the words almost too

difficult to say. He blinked back the tears, but they came anyway, unbidden, stinging his eyes. He felt torn between the two possibilities: that they would simply replace him with another monk to finish the work, or that it would remain incomplete, left unfinished, a silent testament to his absence. In his heart, he selfishly hoped for the latter—that the monastery would feel the loss, that his absence would be noticed in the work left behind.

Cenric considered the question as Camdyn clung to him, holding him tightly, unwilling to let go. After a long silence, Cenric spoke, his voice thoughtful. “I think I’ll suggest to the abbot that we keep it as it is,” he said, his hand stroking Camdyn’s hair gently. “As an example of skillful work for the others, and something they should strive towards in their own efforts.”

And then, as Camdyn wrapped his arms around him and held him tight, sobbing into the rough cloth of his robes, Cenric whispered, “Oh, my boy. I do love you so.”

When they finally left the chapel, the rest of the monks had gathered out in the yard. They were whispering quietly amongst themselves, their voices low as they busied themselves with the task of bringing supplies to the group of men who, when they departed, would have Camdyn amongst their number. The monks took the time to give Camdyn a reassuring pat on the head or a gentle clap on the shoulder as he walked by, offering quiet words of farewell. It was a strange feeling to be the center of so many unspoken goodbyes. Gibson, Kenelm, and their men were further along, organizing the cart for the journey ahead.

“We’re leaving today?” Camdyn asked, his voice breaking the stillness in the air. It startled the men near him, and one of the young servants, a man about Camdyn’s age, dropped a crate in surprise. His face turned an alarming shade of red when he realized that Camdyn had caught him in the act of clumsiness. He quickly scrambled to pick up the crate and stuffed it hastily onto the cart, his hands trembling slightly.

Gibson looked at Camdyn with a note of regret in his voice. “I wish we could stay the night, Camdyn, but we had to leave as soon as we could. I’m so sorry. The wedding—” His voice trailed off, unable to explain fully the weight of what had happened. The urgency was there, though, and Camdyn understood.

“What can I help with?” Camdyn asked eagerly. He gestured to the supplies, the horses, anything he could manage. The group of men exchanged curious looks, unsure of how to respond.

“No, Camdyn, it’s all right,” Kenelm said, his voice soft and reassuring. “Just rest in the cart. We’ve cleared a space for you.” And indeed, they had: a small area large enough for him to sit comfortably, lined with soft furs to make the journey more bearable.

Climbing into the cart, however, proved to be more difficult than Camdyn had anticipated. He lifted his robes a little to move his legs more freely, but even so, the task was awkward and uncomfortable. The young servant nearby let out an exasperated sigh, while another servant made a sound that quickly turned into a loud, hacking cough. Gibson noticed Camdyn’s struggle and immediately stepped forward to help. With a hand on his waist, Gibson gently lifted him, pushing him up into the cart with surprising strength. As he did, he spoke casually, as though the memory was fresh. “I used to carry you all the time. Do you remember that? I’d throw you up in the air and catch you, too. Used to drive Mother crazy, but you loved it. I suppose that was too long ago, though.”

“No,” Camdyn said softly, looking down at his eldest brother. “I remember that. I remember you.” Gibson smiled, a rare, fond smile that spoke of long-gone days.

As the men continued to pack the cart, Camdyn settled onto the furs and watched the flurry of activity around him. Kenelm and Gibson were mostly silent, their focus on directing their servants or speaking quietly to each other. The three men discussed the

weather, squinting up at the sky with suspicion, almost daring the clouds to pour down rain. From the corner of his eye, Camdyn noticed the young servant—the one with the perpetually red face—was frequently stealing glances at him. Every time their eyes met, the young man quickly looked away, only to be nudged along by the other two servants. It made Camdyn feel self-conscious, knowing that he was the subject of their curiosity.

This, in turn, brought up a question that had been gnawing at him ever since the news of the marriage had first been mentioned. He cleared his throat before asking, “Gibson? Kenelm?”

Immediately, both of them stopped what they were doing and approached the cart. “What do you need, Camdyn?” they asked, their expressions softening.

“Who is he? My—my future husband?” Camdyn’s voice was quieter now, a little uncertain.

Gibson set the crate he had been holding down with a sigh. Kenelm spoke, his tone matter-of-fact. “The king has two cousins that he favors above all else, because they’re his finest warriors. Father arranged for you to marry one of them, the Beast.”

“The Beast?” Camdyn repeated, raising an eyebrow. The term was an unpleasant one, and he couldn’t help but feel unsettled by it.

Gibson nodded. He leaned against the cart casually, though there was a hint of concern in his voice. “They call him Everild the Beast. His name is synonymous with devastation, the battlefield a place where he leaves nothing but carnage in his wake. His war cries, loud and fierce, echo through the chaos, a terrifying sound that strikes fear into the hearts of his enemies.”

The way he spoke made it clear that this memory was one that had been seared into

his mind, a memory that he couldn't shake, no matter how hard he tried. There was a weight in his voice, a dark familiarity with the violence he described, as though he could still feel the heat of the battlefield and hear the screams of men in the chaos of war. His words hung in the air, heavy with the grimness of the past.

Camdyn's shock and unease must have been evident on his face, for he felt his heart tighten in his chest at the thought of Everild, his future husband, being a part of that violent world. His stomach churned at the thought of what kind of man he was about to marry, and the image of Everild as a ruthless killer, surrounded by blood and death, wouldn't leave his mind.

Kenelm, ever watchful and protective, noticed the way Camdyn's face paled. Without hesitation, he shot a sharp pinch into Gibson's side, his fingers digging into the man's flesh. The movement was quick and deliberate, a sign of reprimand. At the same time, Kenelm shot a hard glare at Gibson, his eyes narrowing with a mixture of annoyance and concern.

"That was during the war, Gibson," Kenelm said, his voice low but firm, carrying an unmistakable tone of authority. "Men are different in war."

His words were meant to soften the impact of Gibson's account, to remind Camdyn—perhaps even Gibson himself—that the horrors of war were not necessarily a reflection of the man Everild had become. But the way the memory had been recounted, with such rawness and intensity, made it hard for Camdyn to shake the image of his future husband as a bloodthirsty warrior, forever bound by the violence of his past.

"I don't think so," Gibson muttered stubbornly.

Kenelm, however, was not to be deterred. "I don't care what you think, because you're wrong. We've been over this. A man's not going to treat his spouse the same

way he fights an enemy combatant, Gibson. You're being ridiculous."

But Gibson was insistent. "In battle, you see a man's true nature."

"I'm not going to argue with you right now," Kenelm said with a sharp tone, his voice rising as if ready to continue the debate. Camdyn's nerves were already on edge, and the last thing he wanted was for this journey to become even more tense than it already was. Besides, there was something else he needed to know.

He cut in before the argument could escalate further, his voice soft and almost pleading, "I mean to ask, will he like me, do you think? Will he—will he be kind to me?" The question had been on his mind since the marriage had been arranged, and now, it seemed like the only thing that mattered. The only thing he hoped for.

His brothers exchanged glances, the silence between them thickening.

Kenelm finally spoke, his voice softer now, tinged with regret. "I'm sorry, Camdyn. We don't know him personally, just his reputation on the battlefield. But I don't think you have to worry—"

He was interrupted by Gibson, who scoffed and spat on the grass. His voice was low but resolute. "If he isn't, you must tell me. As soon as you can, any way that you can. Because I don't care if he's the king's cousin or not, I'll kill him myself, I swear it."

The weight of Gibson's words hung heavily in the air. No one seemed to know how to respond to this oath, and Camdyn certainly didn't know what to say. He let the conversation fall into silence, his mind turning over his brothers' words. It seemed that the only positive things about his betrothed were the very qualities that had persuaded his father to agree to the marriage in the first place: his status and power through his connection to the king.

Camdyn dearly hoped that Everild would not be cruel to him. They didn't have to be friends, but it would be nice if they could at least tolerate each other. He would do his best to please his husband, but the road to that would be one he would have to learn to walk carefully.

There were things Camdyn could do that might help. He had been taught to sew well enough to mend clothes. He could bake bread and catch and gut fish for dinner. He could tend a garden, should Everild have one. His voice was clear and pleasant to listen to, and if his husband wished, he could read aloud to entertain him. But as Camdyn thought more on it, he realized there would not be much interesting for him to say. After all, he had spent nearly all of his life at an isolated monastery, with little experience in the world beyond. He didn't know dances besides the ones he had made up in the forest, and the only songs he knew were hymns.

He also wasn't sure how attractive a figure he would make, even once out of his monk's robes. Unlike his brothers, who were tall, strong, and a bit dashing in their armor, Camdyn was slight and delicate. He could only hope that his betrothed would not be too disappointed in him.

Kenelm dropped a sack onto the cart with a loud thud, startling Camdyn out of his thoughts. His brother winked at him playfully, rummaging through the sack before pulling out a fistful of almonds and dried cherries. He popped a few into his mouth before dropping the rest into Camdyn's lap.

"Well, this is fine hospitality, isn't it?" Kenelm teased with a grin. "All this food we're being sent off with. Fresh baked bread, dried fish, fruits, rice, and herbs. Do you eat like this every day, Camdyn?"

Gibson joined in the teasing, his tone gentle but with an edge of mischief. "Got to keep it a secret, eh? Otherwise, everyone would be coming out here for the cookery."

Near the chapel's entrance stood the abbot and Cenric, side by side. Despite the height difference, the abbot was holding Cenric up, offering silent support against the heavy weight of grief that hung around the younger man like a dark cloud. The expression on Cenric's face was one of pain and loss, a look Camdyn had seen before but never wanted to witness again.

Camdyn answered Kenelm's question with a sad smile, his voice soft. "No, this is a special occasion."

This, he realized, was his farewell.

Page 3

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In the weeks that followed the king's drunken proclamation, Everild had come to an uneasy realization—one that settled deep in his chest, tightening like a noose with each passing day.

Much of his wedding had already been planned and prepared long before his cousin had even seen fit to inform him.

The arrangements had been set in motion well before he'd been made aware of them, the decisions already carved into stone without his voice ever being considered.

Now, as he watched the flurry of activity unfold around him, the decorations being hung, the wedding feast being planned, the guest lists being scrutinized and finalized, it felt as though his future was being handed to him by unseen hands, as though his life had been bargained away by those who saw him as little more than a tool to be wielded in their pursuit of power.

If the king hadn't drunkenly blurted out the arrangement when he did, Everild feared that he might have woken up one morning with some strange young man beside him in his bed, the man claiming to be his husband without Everild ever having been consulted or granted even the illusion of choice.

The thought made his stomach twist.

He had always known that love was a luxury rarely afforded to people like him, but he had at least expected the courtesy of being informed before he was shackled to another for life.

In the quiet moments between the endless, mind-numbing preparations, Everild found his thoughts circling around this Camdyn person—his future husband, a man who was little more than a name to him.

A former novice, plucked from the sanctuary of his monastery at the king's and his father's command, Camdyn seemed less like a groom and more like a pawn in a game neither of them had chosen to play.

What must it have been like for him? To spend years believing his path was set, only to be wrenched from a life of devotion and thrust into marriage with a stranger?

Everild tried to picture him, but his mind conjured only vague impressions.

He supposed Camdyn would be pious—how could he not be, after so many years of religious instruction? He would be well-educated, surely, his mind steeped in scripture and doctrine, his words careful and measured.

Everild had taken it upon himself to order the castle's chapel scrubbed and polished, the library dusted and meticulously organized, hoping that such small gestures might ease Camdyn's transition into this new and unwanted life.

But beyond that, Everild could only wonder.

What sort of temperament would Camdyn have? Would he be bitter, angry at being torn from the monastery? Or would he be sorrowful, quietly resigned to the fate thrust upon him? Everild wasn't sure which he would prefer.

Anger could be argued with, fought against, countered with his own sharp tongue.

But sadness? Sadness was something Everild had never known how to face.

And then there was the question that nagged at him most persistently: What would Camdyn look like? The descriptions he had heard were frustratingly vague, repeated over and over with a maddening simplicity. Pretty.

Not handsome, not striking, not imposing.

Just pretty.

The word lingered in Everild's mind like an unanswered riddle.

Would Camdyn be delicate and ethereal, beautiful in the way Everild's mother had been? Or would he take after the more austere, formidable side of his family? There were no portraits of him—none that Everild had been allowed to see, at least.

And tradition forbade him from meeting Camdyn before the ceremony.

An odd custom, one that Camdyn's people held to with almost superstitious fervor.

It was said to be bad luck for the betrothed to set eyes on each other before the vows were spoken.

Some whispered that the tradition had once been a means of concealing an undesirable match until it was too late to protest.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they lock the church doors once you're inside," Dustan had muttered darkly upon hearing of the custom.

"No one's allowed to leave until they're bound for life.

Probably just to make sure no one runs away after meeting the monster they've passed off to you, cousin."

Everild had laughed, but the unease in his chest had not dissipated.

Camdyn's family had sent several servants ahead to assist with the wedding preparations, but when Everild inquired about his future husband, he found their knowledge disappointingly limited.

Many had only vague recollections of Camdyn as a child—memories worn thin by the passage of time.

Some had known him from his early years at the monastery, but the boy had been sent there so young that few could recall more than fleeting impressions.

They spoke of him in the vaguest of terms, describing a quiet child, well-behaved, largely unnoticed except by his mother and father.

One maid, a matronly woman who had taken charge of the castle's laundry, had smiled wistfully when Everild asked about Camdyn.

"Oh, he was just the sweetest baby," she had recalled fondly, shaking out a sheet with practiced efficiency.

"Only ever fussed when he was left alone for too long.

The lord and lady worried he'd never learn to walk, you know, because Gibson was always carrying him around."

Everild had tucked that away—a small, inconsequential detail, but one that made Camdyn feel a little more real in his mind.

Another day, while passing through the kitchens, Everild had overheard a cook's assistant humming as he prepared fennel soup.

When Camdyn's name was mentioned, the man's voice took on a thoughtful, almost wistful tone.

"He looked like his lady mother," the assistant mused as he sliced onions, his hands moving with the ease of long practice.

"Had his father's coloring—brown hair, brown eyes—but his face was all hers.

A real lady, that one.

Very kind, very pretty.

It broke her heart when the boy was sent off to the monks, though.

Seems such a waste of all those years of heartache, just to marry him off anyway."

He sighed then, dabbing at his eyes with the back of his sleeve before tossing the onions into the pot.

"Forgive me, my lord," he added hastily.

"I mean no offense."

"No offense taken," Everild had replied, his voice quieter than he intended.

"I agree."

And he did.

It was, in many ways, a tragedy.

Camdyn had spent his entire life preparing for a holy vocation, only to find himself thrust into a marriage for political and familial reasons.

And the more Everild thought about it, the more he realized how unfair it all seemed—Camdyn was being taken from his peaceful, structured life and forced into this union with someone who had done terrible things.

A man who had maimed, butchered, and killed on the battlefield.

Everild had spent years training for war, and now he was being asked to trade that life for one of peace, but peace came with its own burdens.

And yet, despite all the horrors of his past, Everild was determined to make these days as pleasant as possible for Camdyn.

The young man would never care for him—Everild knew that.

He was a broken, scarred man, shaped by years of war, with a hoarse, rough voice and a body marred by battle.

His appearance alone would likely horrify Camdyn, and Everild feared that the young man would never come to see him as anything other than a monster.

But Everild would do his best to make sure Camdyn was comfortable in his new life.

He would protect him, offer him shelter, and ensure he had no need to fear anything or anyone else.

It was one of the reasons Everild had staunchly refused the king's suggestion to wear armor to the ceremony.

The king and his advisor, Gerald, had both been displeased by the decision, citing tradition and perceived disloyalty.

But Everild refused to meet Camdyn as the soldier he once was, as a killer in an executioner's garb.

He had cast aside his armor after the war ended, and he would not return to it, not even for the ceremony.

Aldaay, the steward sent to oversee the preparations for the wedding, had been one of the few who had not pressed him on the matter.

A small, fiery man with a sharp wit and an unwavering sense of duty, Aldaay had become quite fond of Everild over the course of their short time together.

When the king and Gerald had pressed the issue, Aldaay had calmly dismissed their objections, explaining that wearing armor to a wedding was not customary in Camdyn's culture.

It was said to invite conflict, either through physical fights or spiritual discord.

And Everild, it seemed, had made the right choice in rejecting it.

"It's bad luck," Aldaay had said, "and very wise of you, my lord.

Camdyn's people don't like to see armor at weddings—it's a symbol of war, not of union.

A man dressed in armor might as well be declaring war on his groom."

???

Dustan's presence was unbearable, as it always was, but on that day, in the grandiose church draped in tapestries of the finest silks and lit by countless gleaming windows, his vitriol heightened.

It was as if the very air of the occasion made him swell with impatience and disgust, and Everild felt the tension in every word his cousin spat out.

Standing at his left, Dustan's sneers were endless.

"They probably trussed up a sheep, this backwoods lot," Dustan muttered with distaste, his eyes scanning Camdyn's family and friends, who were clearly a different breed from Everild's own people.

They wore clothes of striking fashion—although their fine garments were stained with soot and dust—and their faces were painted in eerie patterns of blue, running along their lips, down their chins, across their brows, and following the line of their noses.

The imagery was not lost on Everild; Aldaay had explained it to him in a low voice as they walked to the church.

The colors and designs were meant to mimic the appearance of corpses, giving their faces the pallor of death, and the ash signified that Camdyn's old life had been burned away.

"A wedding's as much a time to mourn as it is to celebrate," Aldaay had said quietly, his words a reminder of the emotional weight of what was unfolding.

"Camdyn's old life is over, dead.

His new life will be born here today, with his hands in yours."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence.

Everild couldn't help but feel the sting, even though he understood the sentiment behind it.

He had taken this young man from the life he knew, dragged him into a world of obligation and duty that he had no say in.

In truth, Everild had become a monster in the eyes of those who knew Camdyn best.

He could almost feel the cold glares burning into him from across the room as he stood there, helpless in the face of it all.

The idea that Camdyn's life had been "burned away" and that he was now dead to his family—well, it stung more than Everild was willing to admit.

"They never knew him," Everild had muttered to Aldaay when he explained the significance of the ashes.

It was a bitter truth that they could never fully understand what it felt like to be torn from everything they knew.

Aldaay had responded gently.

"He'll be lost to them twice over, then.

Don't worry.

At the feast, they'll be rowdy and celebratory, all of them, celebrating the life that Camdyn is making with you.

It will all change.”

But in that moment, before the ceremony began, Camdyn’s immediate family stood in stark contrast to the vibrant, joyous atmosphere of the church.

They looked as though they belonged in another world entirely.

Their faces were drawn, grim, and hollow, as if mourning a loved one who had already passed.

Everild saw the father, tall and lean with calculating eyes that reminded him far too much of the king, and the siblings, equally tall but more muscular and strong-built, their faces equally unsettling.

Gibson, the eldest of the brothers, stood among them, his eyes narrow with hatred and fury, the intensity of his gaze as if he could rip Everild apart with a single glance.

It was clear Gibson wanted nothing to do with him, wanted to destroy him.

The second brother, Kenelm, looked uncomfortable, confused even, his gaze darting between the painted walls of the church and the guests around him, clearly out of place in that foreign environment.

The two older sisters, Aoife and Cera, wore similar expressions of quiet, resigned despair.

Yet, among all the sadness, there was one figure whose innocence offered a stark contrast.

Young Aoife, Aoife’s baby daughter, was utterly oblivious to the tension swirling around her.

She nursed happily at her mother's breast, her tiny hands clinging to her mother's robes, while the adults around her stared daggers at Everild, at the king, at the priest.

The girl was a bright, innocent light in an otherwise dark moment.

And then, the doors of the church swung open.

It was time.

Camdyn was brought into the church with his attendants, three veiled figures who made their way up the aisle in quiet procession.

Everild knew it was Camdyn in the center, his heart racing as he watched the young man walk toward him.

The white robes he wore were blinding in their brightness, meant to ward off any curses or dark thoughts, but it did nothing to settle the churning knot of discomfort in Everild's chest.

Camdyn's robes, loose and flowing, dragged across the ground with each step, the fabric catching the light as it swayed in perfect harmony with the delicate movements of the man within it.

His sash, made of silk, cinched around his waist, its intricate weave almost too much for Everild's eyes to take in.

White stockings and slippers peeked out from beneath the hem, but it was the veil that commanded the most attention.

It was long, impossibly long, trailing behind Camdyn like a living thing, as if the veil itself was determined to cover him completely, to shield him from the eyes of the

world.

The veil, Everild noticed, was no ordinary cloth.

It was embroidered with flowers, birds, and symbols of protection, all stitched by the hands of Camdyn's family.

The imagery was delicate yet striking—blue and green flowers entwined with hawks and sparrows, all caught in a sweeping pattern of golden wheat.

The most striking feature was the large eye stitched in black, centered on the back of the veil, hovering just above Camdyn's head.

It was the Eye of God, symbolizing all-seeing protection, watching over the young man as he stepped into his new life.

The attendants, dressed in bluish-gray garments, walked on either side of Camdyn.

Their presence was meant to protect him, to shield him from any harm, and to confuse any malevolent spirits that might seek to steal him away.

Everild felt a pang of guilt, knowing that Camdyn's true friends were not there with him.

The people who had shaped his life, who had known him and cared for him, were far away in the monastery.

Those attendants were strangers to him, just as Everild was.

As Camdyn was led up the steps and placed before Everild, he hesitated for a moment.

His hands trembled as they rested at his sides, and Everild's heart ached as he noticed the soft, stifled sounds coming from behind the veil.

The young man was crying.

It was a horrible realization, one that struck Everild like a cold wave.

His throat tightened as he watched Camdyn's shoulders shake, his body hunched in distress.

He wanted to do something, to comfort him, to reach out and tell him everything would be alright, but the overwhelming weight of the ceremony, of the eyes of the church upon them, prevented him from moving.

The priest cleared his throat pointedly, sending Everild a sharp, meaningful glance, silently reminding him that the time had come.

With trembling hands, Everild reached for the veil.

He lifted it slowly, the fabric heavy in his hands, as the weight of the moment pressed down on him.

The shock was palpable, like a wave crashing over the entire congregation, rippling from the front of the church where Everild stood to the very back, where the more distant guests murmured in confusion.

There was a sudden intake of breath, a collective gasp, as the veil was lifted completely, revealing the face of Camdyn.

Dustan was the first to break the stunned silence, his voice harsh and undignified as he let out a squawk of disbelief.

He had spoken so many times of Camdyn's appearance, claiming it with the air of one who knew it all, but now that the moment had arrived, even Dustan could not hide the shock that laced his voice.

They had said Camdyn was pretty, yes—that much had been agreed upon by everyone, spoken of with casual ease.

But the word wasn't enough.

It never was.

The truth of it hit Everild like a blow to the chest: Camdyn wasn't just pretty, he was absolutely, impossibly beautiful.

Camdyn's eyes were huge, bright, and a deep amber color, like dark honey glinting in the sunlight.

But these eyes were not clear and calm—no, they were red-rimmed, tearful, filled with emotion that Everild could see but not fully comprehend.

The long, delicate lashes that framed those eyes were wet, the tears still clinging to them as though they were too afraid to fall away.

His hair was a tangled mop of brown curls that tumbled down past his ears, wild and untamed, as though he had no control over the way it fell.

Camdyn's lips were soft, the kind of pink one only saw on flower petals in the early morning light, almost too beautiful to be real.

Freckles dusted his face like constellations in a dark sky—small, scattered marks that added to the sweetness of his appearance, making him seem like he didn't belong

here, like he was a figment from a dream.

A poet would have written sonnets about the vision of him standing there.

A painter would have abandoned everything to capture the image of Camdyn in a perfect work of art.

But Everild? He was no artist.

The beauty before him was wasted on him, and all he could do was stare, stunned and helpless, as words died on his tongue.

The inspiration that struck him was not poetic—it was instinctive, fierce, protective.

A surge of anger and helplessness rose in him as he watched Camdyn's trembling figure.

The terror in Camdyn's eyes gripped him, twisting inside him, igniting something far deeper than any admiration could.

This man—this beautiful, trembling man—did not deserve this.

Everild couldn't tear his gaze away, terrified that if he did, Camdyn would disappear.

His betrothed—his future—could vanish just as easily as a fleeting dream.

But the longer he looked, the more unsettling it became.

He wanted to help, to fix things, to somehow ease the anguish that was so clearly written across Camdyn's face, but he found himself paralyzed, unable to move by the heavy weight of uncertainty, by the unsettling vulnerability that Camdyn had shown

him.

Then, there was a flutter of movement around him and the sound of low murmurs.

Camdyn's attendants were busy adjusting his veil, folding it into a cloak, pinning the brooches to the front of his robes.

Camdyn flinched at the touch, his body quivering with distress as each pin was pressed into place.

The simple act of arranging the veil into something more manageable should have been a quiet, routine moment—but in the context of this overwhelming, emotionally charged atmosphere, it only intensified Camdyn's trembling.

The sound of the brooches securing his robes seemed impossibly loud to Everild, amplifying the painful silence that hung between them.

The priest, however, didn't seem to notice—or care.

As soon as Everild had lifted the veil and revealed the tear-streaked face of his betrothed, the priest resumed his recitation, his voice ringing out with a practiced, steady cadence.

The words he spoke were hollow to Everild, who was still rooted in place, his heart aching at the sight of Camdyn's distress.

The priest carried on as though Camdyn's sobs weren't echoing through the chapel, as though the visible fear in his eyes was just another part of the ceremony to be ignored.

Camdyn's gaze flickered from Everild's stunned stare to the king's, to Dustan's, who

still wore an expression of wide-eyed astonishment, and then to the guests, their faces mirroring the same shock and disbelief.

But in the sea of astonishment, one group stood apart.

Camdyn's family.

His siblings were filled with barely contained rage.

Gibson, the eldest brother, stood on the edge of control, his hands clenched at his sides, his posture rigid.

If Everild hadn't known better, he would have said Gibson looked like a man on the brink of violence, as if he might break free from the others holding him back and charge forward in an attempt to take Camdyn away from all of this.

Kenelm, the second brother, was no less agitated but less able to mask his confusion.

He looked torn, as though he didn't know where to direct his anger, nor how to react to what was happening in front of him.

But Camdyn's gaze didn't stay on them for long.

His focus shifted to his father, the towering figure of a man whose clenched jaw, reddening face, and narrow, hateful eyes were fixed solely on Camdyn.

His expression wasn't directed at Everild—not at all—but at the son he had failed to understand, the son who, at this moment, couldn't hold back the sobs that wracked his body.

It was a moment too much for Camdyn.

The last shred of control snapped, and he broke into loud, heart-wrenching sobs, unable to keep it in any longer.

And yet, the priest pressed on.

His voice rose, louder, more insistent, as though Camdyn's tears didn't matter, as if this was all a part of the normal flow of things.

Everild felt his chest tighten as he watched the man continue his sermon without a hint of mercy, without a shred of compassion for the trembling soul before him.

This was too much.

The heat in the church was stifling, the crowd oppressive, and the weight of the entire situation was beginning to crush Everild from all sides.

There was too much—too much emotion, too much expectation, too much fear.

He glanced at Camdyn again, and the sight of him—tears running down his cheeks, shoulders shaking—broke something inside Everild.

The overwhelming pressure of the moment, the stifling, suffocating air, the crowd of strangers, and the crushing reality of his own rage made him snap.

“Shut up.” His voice was rough, harsh, louder than he intended, but it silenced the priest immediately.

The man stumbled to a halt, eyes wide with surprise, his mouth hanging open in shock.

Camdyn's breathing caught in his throat, and he inhaled sharply, then quieted, his

body trembling even more violently than before.

He stared at the floor, his head bowed in a mix of shame and fear.

The weight of the situation pressed down on Everild, and his heart ached in his chest as he watched Camdyn collapse into himself.

But there was no time for hesitation now.

Everild turned toward the priest, his eyes blazing with a fury that he could not contain.

He stepped so close that their noses almost brushed.

“You don’t speak again,” he said, his voice slow and deliberate, each word carrying the weight of an order.

“Until I give you permission.”

The priest’s face paled, and he nodded frantically, his eyes wide with fear.

The authority in Everild’s voice left no room for argument.

The priest did not dare protest.

Everild hesitated for just a moment before moving toward Camdyn again, his steps slow and deliberate.

He saw Camdyn’s shoulders shaking faintly, his breath hitching in soft hiccups that broke through the quiet, the delicate sound of distress.

Every instinct in Everild urged him to reach out and offer some sort of comfort, to make the moment better, to calm the storm of emotions brewing between them.

But he knew that first, he needed to get Camdyn to look at him, to acknowledge him, to find some small thread of connection before he could do anything else.

With careful, trembling hands, Everild reached out, cupping Camdyn's tear-streaked face with his large, rough palm.

The touch was gentle, tentative, as though he might break something if he moved too suddenly.

Slowly, he lifted Camdyn's chin, encouraging him to meet his eyes.

The young man stared at him, his dark, wide eyes as round as saucers, still filled with shock and fear.

He did not pull away, did not shy from the touch, and for that, Everild was grateful.

It was a small sign, but it was enough to give him hope that he might be able to help, to do something to stop this overwhelming terror.

Everild wiped away a tear that streaked down Camdyn's cheek, his thumb grazing the soft skin.

The action was a simple one, but it felt as if the whole world was contained in that small, intimate gesture.

His voice was barely more than a whisper as he spoke, the question slipping from his lips before he could stop it.

“What’s wrong?” It was a vague question, one that did not even begin to scratch the surface of everything wrong with this situation.

There were volumes to be written on the absurdity of the circumstances, the cruelty of it, the way everything had been forced together—this marriage, this ceremony, this life.

Historians, philosophers, and scholars would argue about the injustice of it all for generations.

They would debate what aspect of the arrangement was the most heinous: taking a young novice who had devoted his life to God and forcing him into a marriage with a man like Everild, whose name was stained by blood, or perhaps Everild’s own outburst earlier, the way he had threatened the priest.

It was all wrong.

But in the midst of this overwhelming turmoil, something shifted in Camdyn’s gaze.

It was so subtle, Everild nearly missed it—a small shift, a flicker of understanding, of acknowledgment.

It was as if Camdyn had come to some sort of decision in his mind, something that was both a concession and a plea.

“I’m sorry,” Camdyn whispered, his voice nearly drowned out by the rest of the sounds of the chapel, but Everild heard it.

“I’m so sorry.

I’m scared.”

The admission was quiet, but it cut through Everild like a blade, leaving him raw.

He leaned in, instinctively drawing closer to the young man, his lips near Camdyn's ear.

He whispered in return, his voice soft but firm, stripped of all pretenses.

“So am I.

I'm terrified.”

The words hung in the air between them, an unexpected vulnerability shared.

Everild felt his heart ache as he spoke, his own fear mingling with Camdyn's, making them equals in their uncertainty.

The moment lingered for a heartbeat, and Camdyn's eyes were wide, filled with a mix of confusion and wonder, as if he had not expected to hear those words, much less feel a kindred fear in the man standing before him.

For a moment, Everild feared that Camdyn might collapse, overwhelmed by the weight of it all, by the shared terror in their confessions.

But then, something remarkable happened.

Camdyn's whole demeanor shifted.

The tension in his shoulders evaporated, the color slowly returning to his cheeks as he straightened a little, his posture more relaxed.

The tears still clung to his lashes, but his expression changed—it softened, became

calm, almost curious.

And then, as if something inside him had clicked into place, he reached up to gently touch the hand that still cupped his face.

His fingers grazed Everild's palm, and he leaned into the touch, the motion tentative but trusting.

His lips parted slightly as a soft, tremulous smile curved onto his face, and his eyes—those deep, dark eyes—held something that Everild could not quite name, but it stirred something deep within him.

Hope, maybe.

Trust, too.

In that moment, Camdyn looked at him not with fear, but with the beginnings of acceptance, of something more than the terror that had gripped him for so long.

“Oh,” Camdyn murmured, the realization dawning on him.

The soft sound sent a tremor through Everild, and he felt his chest tighten.

This—this was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

The way Camdyn's expression shifted from fear to something sweeter, more hopeful, and how that trust was directed at him.

How it made him feel like he was not alone in this strange, difficult moment.

Everild swallowed hard, blinking back the rawness in his throat.

He cleared his voice, forcing himself to focus on the present.

“Can we continue?” he asked, his voice thick with the emotion he did not want to let show.

Camdyn looked up at him, his eyes still wide but now softened by the flicker of something more vulnerable.

“Yes, please,” he murmured, and Everild felt a weight lift from his shoulders, replaced by something lighter, something that felt almost like relief.

The priest seemed to recover from the sudden shift in the atmosphere, though it was clear he was not entirely happy about what had just transpired.

He opened his mouth as if to protest, but when he saw Camdyn’s shy, apologetic look, his expression faltered.

Camdyn’s long lashes fluttered up toward the priest, and in that brief glance, he offered a silent apology, a quiet plea for the ceremony to continue.

Everild nodded curtly, a silent command to the priest to move forward.

The priest, still a little stunned, cleared his throat and adjusted his posture, then stammered, “J-just a bit of nerves, was it.

It happens, it happens.

L-let’s continue on, shall we?”

And so, the ceremony continued.

When the moment came for them to exchange vows, Everild reached out and took Camdyn's trembling hands in his, the connection grounding him.

He waited for the priest to bless their union, his grip tightening slightly when the priest took the white cloth embroidered with ivy and tied their wrists together, symbolizing their eternal bond.

The cloth was soft, the ivy's meaning clear: love that was undying, rooted in faith and strength.

Then, the priest sprinkled blessed rosewater over their heads, baptizing them into this new life together.

The rosewater was thick with perfume, and Everild couldn't help but wrinkle his nose at the strong floral scent.

He glanced at Camdyn, expecting to see a similar reaction, and instead found him biting his lip, trying to suppress a laugh.

There was something about that look in Camdyn's eyes—something light, playful—that made Everild smile.

He wondered for a moment if, in some strange way, they had both found some small measure of joy amid the chaos.

Finally, the priest called for them to seal their union with a kiss.

The words felt heavy in the air, charged with expectation, and Everild saw the immediate tension in Camdyn's face.

The young man blanched, his fingers tightening around Everild's hand.

He looked up at him, eyes wide with panic.

“I—I can’t—not in front of—of anyone.

Everyone. Please.”

It was a small issue, one that Everild could easily resolve.

Without thinking, he placed his hands gently on either side of Camdyn’s face, his palms large enough to shield him from the gazes of the entire chapel.

He pulled Camdyn close so that their foreheads touched, their breath mingling, and the world seemed to narrow to just the two of them.

“Just me, now,” Everild said, his voice low but full of reassurance.

Camdyn’s eyes flickered, then softened, and a small smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

As if the world had disappeared, they shared the moment in quiet intimacy.

Camdyn closed his eyes, lashes fluttering against Everild’s cheek as he waited for the kiss.

Everild leaned in, pressing a soft, chaste kiss to the tip of Camdyn’s nose.

The action was a simple one, but it made Camdyn’s brow furrow in confusion.

Then Everild moved lower, pressing their lips together.

The kiss was gentle at first, tentative, as if both of them were navigating this

uncharted territory together.

Camdyn was soft, shy, and Everild could tell by the way he held his head that he was inexperienced.

It was possible this was his first kiss. But even so, Camdyn did not hesitate. His hands found Everild's chest, pressing against him gently, and Everild, in turn, moved his hands to Camdyn's hips, grounding him, offering a stability that Camdyn might need in this moment.

When they finally parted, it was slow and careful.

Camdyn was flushed, eyes heavy-lidded, lips parted and wet.

The sight left Everild speechless, his heart pounding in his chest.

Camdyn exhaled softly, and the sound he made—low, rich, almost like a moan—sent a shiver down Everild's spine.

He couldn't help but squeeze Camdyn's hips, holding him close.

They were broken from their moment by the priest, who coughed awkwardly, clearing his throat as he turned to the audience.

"You have witnessed the creation of this new union," he announced, his voice shaky but loud.

"Now, you shall watch these men take their first steps together in holy matrimony."

Camdyn glanced at Everild once more, searching his face for guidance, and Everild offered a small nod of encouragement.

He took a moment to adjust Camdyn's cloak, ensuring it was properly pinned, then linked their arms together.

Slowly, they began their walk out of the church, stepping into the world together, one uncertain but hopeful step at a time.

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Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

The great hall of Everild's castle was already bustling when they arrived, a whirlwind of activity as servants scurried around with the frenzied energy of ants, their arms laden with plates, bowls, utensils, and towering heaps of food that would soon cover the tables.

The day still had hours left, the sun hanging high in the sky and spilling golden light through the grand windows, filling the hall with a warm, welcoming glow.

Soon, the long tables would be brimming with Everild and Camdyn's wedding guests, their laughter and voices rising in joyful chaos, the wine flowing freely as revelers jostled and crowded each other in rowdy celebration.

Though the noise and bustle would be almost overwhelming, Everild hoped it would be easier to manage here than at the church.

This was his home, a place where he felt grounded, and soon enough, the wine casks would run dry, the food would cool, and the guests would disperse.

Then, perhaps, he and Camdyn would finally have a moment of peace to rest and enjoy each other's company.

Aldaay led them to their table at the head of the hall.

Ordinarily, their families would have sat beside them on such an important occasion, but on the day of the wedding, the newlywed couple was left to share this moment alone, a chance to enjoy their happiness in a more private, intimate way, while still surrounded by the warmth and celebration of the feast.

A single, large golden platter was set before them, where they would share their meal, while their guests sat at the two long tables in the center of the hall, their chattering voices echoing in the air.

Everild gave Camdyn's hand a gentle squeeze beneath the table, and in return, Camdyn offered a shy smile, his cheeks coloring slightly.

They settled into their seats and watched with quiet interest as the attendants moved about, carefully filling the tables with platters of food and the seats around them with excited, eager guests.

"Do you have a garden?" Camdyn asked suddenly, his voice breaking the silence between them.

It took a moment for Everild to process the question and realize that Camdyn was speaking to him.

"No," Everild responded, his answer coming out a little more brusque than he intended, caught off guard by the unexpected inquiry.

Camdyn's expression faltered, and he seemed to shrink into himself, his fingers twisting together nervously.

"Oh.

I see.

Sorry... I just wondered." He quickly smoothed the creases from his robes and lowered his hands to his lap, looking uncertain.

"My lord."

Desperate to alleviate his husband's discomfort, Everild reached over and placed a hand on Camdyn's knee, offering a more reassuring smile.

"Could have one made, if you like," he said gently, before adding, "It's no trouble, for you." Then, with a quieter tone, he added, "Everild.

You can just call me Everild."

The change in Camdyn's demeanor was almost immediate—his expression brightened, and he gave a small, relieved laugh.

"Oh, yes, I could... if it's not too much trouble.

I—I'm quite good at gardening.

I could grow things for the household.

For you, Everild." His words were earnest, filled with the kind of hopeful enthusiasm that made Everild's heart warm.

"If it's something you want," Everild said softly, squeezing Camdyn's knee a little more firmly.

"Then, it's no trouble at all."

Camdyn hummed contentedly, his gaze softening, and Everild could feel the weight of his approval, as though a quiet bond was slowly beginning to form between them, one based on simple kindness and shared intent.

As the tables around them filled with dishes of all kinds, Camdyn watched each new arrival with a curious blend of awe and confusion.

The centerpieces caught his eye most of all.

There was a whole roast pig, its brown, crisp skin glistening, sitting in a rich stew of its own blood and entrails, the tangy scent of vinegar and garlic rising from the concoction.

It looked almost as if the pig were wallowing in mud, a strange yet compelling sight.

Then there were baked ducks, their skin and feathers carefully stitched back on to make them appear alive, arranged around a pie with the ducks seemingly pecking at the crust.

But perhaps the most striking of all was a large, tall gelatin mold, transparent enough to reveal the whole, cooked fish trapped inside, swimming in a circle among sprigs of green herbs that looked like seaweed.

From the shape and design, it seemed like the gelatin was meant to be as much a work of art as it was a dish to eat.

Camdyn stared at it for a moment, clearly perplexed by the unusual sight.

He glanced at Everild, his expression one of polite disbelief.

“Will they... serve that?” he asked, his voice filled with a quiet sense of concern.

Everild watched his husband with a soft chuckle.

“The gelatin’s more for ornamentation than for eating,” he explained.

“But if you want to try it, I’ll have someone cut you a slice.”

Camdyn's face flushed slightly, his hand waving in a quick, dismissive gesture.

"No, no.

Thank you.

It just looked... interesting," he said quickly, though it was clear the oddity of it still lingered in his mind.

The meal began slowly, and the couple opted to sip the strong, spiced wine, which was deep red and potent—certainly nothing a monk would ever have drunk in his monastery.

When Camdyn pulled a face after taking a sip, Everild took it upon himself to order their wine diluted with honey and water, hoping the sweetness would be more to his husband's liking.

"Anything you want to try?" Everild asked, leaning in slightly, his voice low and gentle.

Camdyn took a long drink and looked thoughtful.

"I don't know," he murmured.

"I thought there might be something... more familiar? Something from home—sorry, from the monastery, I mean.

But everything here was either... I don't know what it is, or it looked so nice that I wasn't sure if I should even eat it."

Everild nodded in understanding, his eyes softening as he regarded Camdyn.

“What did you eat at the monastery?”

Camdyn brightened at the question, as though the simple memories of his past provided a comfort.

“Well, oatmeal for breakfast.

Sometimes with salt and dried fish, and sometimes with honey and fruits—fresh or dried, depending on the season.” He paused thoughtfully.

“I liked it with fruit and honey, especially.

Cooked apples were the best, I thought.

And for supper, we had bread we baked ourselves that morning, with cheese.

Dinner was usually stew.

Rice, lentils, vegetables, and herbs from the garden, with a little fresh milk. I took care of the cows, actually. One of the brothers couldn’t handle them, but when I got old enough, I took over. They were sweet cows.”

As he spoke, Everild’s mind drifted to the subtle detail of Camdyn’s smooth, clear skin, and he wondered if the life of a milkmaid had something to do with it, but he quickly dismissed the thought.

Camdyn’s upbringing, filled with simple, hearty meals of grains and vegetables, seemed so different from the rich indulgence of today’s feast, and it was clear that what he really wanted now was something that would help him feel more at ease, something familiar and comforting.

Everild cleared his throat and gave his husband a smile.

“I’ll pick some dishes for you,” he said, “and you can try a little of each, see what you like.”

Camdyn blushed and nodded quickly.

“Oh! Okay.

Yes, please.

Thank you, my lord.

Everild.” He smiled shyly, a small, genuine smile that made Everild’s heart swell.

After a moment’s consideration, Everild decided on a few lighter options for their first course.

He chose a mixture of chopped beet greens, spinach, and leeks, blanched and simmered in butter and breadcrumbs.

There were roasted carrots, both orange and purple, dressed with white wine, vinegar, and herbs.

And a small bowl of rice broth, fragrant with saffron, almond, and chicken stock.

The plate was set before them, vibrant and colorful, and Camdyn looked delighted.

He picked up the bowl of broth with both hands, inhaling the steam as it curled around his face, and took a careful sip.

He hummed in contentment, eyes lighting up.

“It’s good! Would you like to try some, Everild?”

Everild took the bowl from him, their fingers brushing briefly, and enjoyed a sip of the aromatic broth.

It was rich and savory, the almond and saffron balancing the chicken stock’s earthiness.

The rice had absorbed the flavors, adding depth and body to the dish.

“It’s good,” Everild agreed, handing the bowl back, his heart light as he watched Camdyn’s joy.

They continued sharing the meal like this, sipping the broth, smiling shyly at one another as the chatter of the guests around them swelled and fell in waves.

It was a simple, peaceful moment amidst the revelry, one that they both treasured.

As the feast continued, the platters were replaced, and more food was brought out—roasts, pies, tarts, and cakes.

But soon enough, Camdyn began to notice the food disappearing, and his expression shifted into one of concern.

“They’re not just going to throw everything away, are they?”

Everild shook his head.

“No, the leftovers went to the servants first, and what was left after that would be

distributed among the poor.” He watched Camdyn’s face, noting the worry that creased his brow.

“Will there be enough for everyone?” Camdyn asked, his voice full of genuine concern.

It was sweet, a tenderness that only made Everild’s heart grow fonder.

“If you’d like,” Everild said, “we can arrange for another feast’s worth of food to be prepared and given out to the people this week.”

Camdyn’s face brightened, his joy infectious.

“Oh, yes! Yes, that would be wonderful.” His smile was so pure, so full of kindness, that it made Everild feel even more certain that this life, this shared future, was the right one.

For their next course, Everild dared to be a bit bolder.

He ordered cheese tartlets, small enough to fit into Camdyn’s hand, alongside an assortment of grilled mushrooms.

The tartlets were a hit—Camdyn practically devoured an entire tray by himself, offering more to Everild with a wide, delighted grin.

And in between each small, savory treat, Camdyn devoured a dessert, a quiet indulgence that somehow contrasted with the heaviness of their meal.

They shared a whole pear, poached slowly in red wine, its deep color—dark and gleaming—like a large ruby resting on the plate, a perfect jewel of sweetness.

The soft, lush fruit was paired with dollops of cream, rich and smooth, making the flavors sing.

There was a delicate scattering of candied violets, their sugar coating melting away on Camdyn's tongue like a tiny floral kiss, followed by candied citrus peels, which left a sweet, sticky film on his lips, a reminder of their sugary bite.

It was almost childlike, the way Camdyn let the treats melt in his mouth with such unabashed pleasure.

Earlier, Everild had learned of his husband's love for apples in oatmeal, so he had taken it upon himself to surprise Camdyn with a chilled apple pudding, thick and creamy from almond milk, spiced with cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and nutmeg, each spoonful warming and comforting.

He watched with quiet joy as Camdyn's eyes lit up, the first taste bringing a wide smile, a shared moment of satisfaction.

Everild felt a small pride swell in his chest, pleased by the simple happiness his effort had brought.

But the moment shifted when the roast beef arrived, its rich sauce of red wine, garlic, and pepper thickened with a hint of bread.

The scent was inviting, but Camdyn faltered at the sight.

He took a tentative bite, his fork hovering uncertainly.

His face tightened, as though something unsaid lingered between his thoughts.

"Something else?" Everild asked, his tone gentle, though he sensed something was

amiss.

"There's also a stew—browned goose and onion fried in fat drippings, simmered in fresh herbs and wine," Everild suggested, but Camdyn shook his head.

"Or maybe the salmon—grilled and poached, just with salt and vinegar-soaked parsley." Still, Camdyn didn't seem interested.

"No, it's fine," Camdyn said, his voice strained, and for a moment, Everild could see the unease there.

"It's just...

odd.

At the monastery, we only ate beef when we were sick, to regain our strength.

And it was never seasoned as well as this.

Brother Cenric, he—" Camdyn's words trailed off.

His gaze drifted down, lost in thought.

"He was... He still is the herbalist. I just... I'm not there anymore."

The weight of his loss was palpable in the soft way his voice cracked.

Everild watched as Camdyn pulled inward, his thoughts caught somewhere distant and painful.

"You loved him a lot," Everild said quietly, and Camdyn sniffed, nodding slowly.

“Yeah,” Camdyn admitted, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“Everyone at the monastery raised me, but it was always Cenric I was closest to.

When I was small, he'd put me on his shoulders, and we'd go to the beach or walk in the forest.

Any pretty rocks or shells I found, I gave to him.

And as I grew older, he was the one I could talk to about anything.

It didn't matter how silly the question, he'd always take me seriously.

With the other monks, sometimes I could tell they were...

irritated, but Cenric always understood.” Camdyn's voice cracked again, his heart laid bare in the raw honesty of his words.

“He was like—” Everild murmured, finishing the thought for him.

“A parent.”

Camdyn nodded, his face softening at the memory.

The melancholy in the air thickened as Everild processed the grief, understanding that the absence of Cenric weighed heavily on his husband's heart.

Nearby, Camdyn's father was seated among a few nobles, his face flushed with pleasure, a clear contrast to the tension earlier.

He was no longer the source of Everild's anger and disgust, at least not at this

moment.

His own fury had been tempered by the distance from the man who had sent his husband into hysterics only hours before.

The wedding had gone off without a hitch, despite the undercurrent of discomfort.

Everild's eyes flickered back to the king and his companion, Dustan, who had approached their table.

"Here's the happy couple," Wilburg said in a singsong voice, his tone slurring slightly as he swayed on his feet, supported only by Dustan.

"God, but you're a gorgeous thing, Camdyn.

We heard you were, but not like this.

If I'd known, I might have married you myself.

What do you think, Dustan?"

Dustan offered a humorless smile, his gaze lingering over Camdyn's form with cold detachment.

"A very fine husband you found for the Beast," he said, his words deliberate and unsettling.

Camdyn shifted uncomfortably, his hands twitching as he fumbled with his utensils.

"Um.

Thank you, Your Majesty? Lord Redmane?” he murmured, clearly unsure how to respond.

Everild’s stomach twisted in irritation, and he felt his patience wearing thin.

His voice was low, a guttural edge to it as he addressed the king.

“Just here to congratulate us?”

Wilburg grinned widely, a manic gleam in his eyes as he gestured with a wobbly hand.

“Oh, always to business with you, Everild.

Keeping me on track, as always.

That’s why—” He hiccupped, a lopsided chuckle escaping his lips.

“Oof, I think I’m pickling myself as we speak.

But don’t worry, not tonight.

Tomorrow, or the day after.

Soon, we’ll talk.”

Everild’s lips tightened into a thin line, but he nodded stiffly, his voice clipped.

“Soon.” The king tottered back to his seat, waving for more wine, completely ignoring the heavy air at their table.

Meanwhile, Everild watched as the musicians struck up a lively tune, the clapping of guests filling the space as Camdyn withdrew deeper into his own thoughts, lost in memories of a life that no longer existed.

Everild sighed, his hand brushing through his hair in frustration as he motioned for a servant to refill both his and Camdyn's goblets.

They had been drinking this concoction all night—a sweetened mixture that was far more water than wine now, flavored with fruits and honey, with only a dash of fermented grapes left to give it any bite.

It was far from the crisp, rich drink Everild would've preferred, but he had lost interest in that too.

He watched Camdyn hold out his goblet, the young servant struggling to hide his awe as he poured.

He was so absorbed by the sight of Camdyn that he nearly overfilled the cup, spilling a drop of the drink onto the tablecloth.

Camdyn offered a warm, sincere "thank you," making the servant blush as he hurried off, clearly lost in the sight of the man he had just served.

Camdyn watched him leave, a curious look passing over his features, but Everild's focus shifted quickly.

He couldn't afford to be distracted for long.

Dustan, of course, saw his opening immediately.

The man leaned back in his chair, eyes gleaming with that nasty, cruel amusement

that Everild had come to despise, and sneered in their direction.

“I see,” he drawled, voice dripping with mockery, “plying him now so you can plow him later.

A wise strategy.” His laughter rang out, vulgar and cruel, cutting through the room like a blade.

Camdyn shrank into himself, his face turning a deep red, eyes blinking rapidly as if trying to suppress the sting of the words.

“Congratulations, cousin,” Dustan continued, his voice an almost sing-song taunt, “Enjoy your first rut with your little lamb tonight.” Each word landed with a sickening thud in Everild’s chest.

The fury that rose in Everild was immediate, almost primal.

His fists clenched, and he bared his teeth.

He could have said so much, could have crushed Dustan’s spirit, shut that vulgar mouth once and for all, but it was all for nothing.

Dustan merely chuckled to himself, clearly reveling in the discomfort he had caused, and walked off, leaving a path of unease in his wake.

Everild’s jaw tightened, and he reached for Camdyn’s hand, intending to assure him that nothing of the sort would be taking place.

But Camdyn flinched, his body trembling as if the words had struck him harder than any physical blow.

His gaze dropped, and he muttered an apology, his voice laced with uncertainty and shame.

“I’m—sorry, my lord,” Camdyn whispered, barely audible.

His hand trembled as he lifted his goblet to his lips and drained it in one go, the motion stiff and robotic, as if he was trying to numb the awkwardness, the discomfort, the fear.

Everild’s chest tightened at the sight, his heart aching in response.

Why should Camdyn apologize? He had done nothing wrong—nothing.

It was Dustan, the bastard, who was at fault here.

And yet, the thought that Camdyn might now believe all Everild’s kindness, his warmth, was simply a way to lure him into bed gnawed at him like an open wound.

The thought made him feel sick, a wave of nausea sweeping over him as he glanced down at their half-eaten plate of beef, the sauce dark and red, pooling like blood around the tender meat.

The food—everything—felt so distant now.

He could hardly stomach the sight of it.

The noise in the hall pressed in on him, a cacophony of music, laughter, shouting, and the endless clash of drunken conversations.

The air felt thick, the heat from the large fires mixing with the body heat of the crowd, until it was almost unbearable.

The din was suffocating, the conversations spiraling into near arguments, and all Everild could do was sit there, trying to find some air, some peace, but there was none to be found.

People continued to swarm their table, eager to congratulate them, to gawk at Camdyn as if he was some sort of prize to be ogled.

The men and women who approached them were all finely dressed, their laughter polite, their words smooth and practiced.

They made Everild feel like an outsider in his own life.

These people had never bled for anything, never worn armor, never fought for their survival.

He felt out of place, dressed in his doublet, feeling heavier than ever before.

The weight of the fabric, the velvet shirt against his skin, all of it felt like a personal affront, something that made him itch with discomfort.

He wanted to rip it off, throw it to the floor, and leave it all behind.

Why was he even here? He was tired of these games, tired of the false smiles and whispered compliments.

Where were they still feeding the fires in the kitchens? How could it possibly be getting hotter? Sweat dripped into his eyes, his vision blurred.

His head swam, and his stomach clenched in unease.

He wiped a hand across his forehead, but the dizziness only worsened.

He needed air.

Camdyn.

Was Camdyn even well? He was wearing so many layers, his clothes were so heavy, surely he was overheating too...

Just as he was lost in these spiraling thoughts, his attention snapped back when he saw Camdyn handing a small child, Young Aoife, back to her sister.

A smile—genuine, bright, free of the earlier tension—spread across Camdyn’s face, and for a brief moment, Everild could see the joy there.

It was fleeting, but it was enough.

His husband seemed in better spirits than earlier, and Everild tried to hold onto that small victory, but before he could comment, the siblings surrounded them like a shield wall, their voices cutting through the noise.

“You seem in much better spirits than this morning, darling,” Cera remarked, her tone laced with concern.

Camdyn’s smile faltered as he opened his mouth to reply, but the words died in his throat.

“Forgive me,” he began, but trailed off.

“I didn’t mean to cause such a scene.

But... Father...” His voice cracked, and Everild’s heart sank.

He tried to catch sight of his father-in-law through the crowd but couldn't.

The constant bustle around him made it impossible to focus.

Where was he? He couldn't seem to find him, couldn't find any way to push through the rising tension in the room.

Kenelm cleared his throat.

"Well, the two of you seemed to be getting along well enough," he commented, his eyes darting between them.

"Oh, um, yes.

I think we are," Camdyn murmured, but his voice was fragile, uncertain.

Gibson, ever the pragmatist, cut in, his words directed at Camdyn, but his gaze was locked on Everild.

"Just remember what I told you.

As soon as you can—"

"Gibson!" Cera interrupted sharply, but it was already too late.

Everild's patience, already fraying, snapped entirely.

He shook his head, trying to block out the noise, trying to make it all stop, just for a moment.

Their voices were like a beacon in the chaos, sharp and invasive.

Where was the exit? The thought raced through his mind, but he couldn't think clearly.

How had he let them get so close, how had he not noticed how overrun they'd become? He was unarmed, without his armor, vulnerable in ways that made him feel exposed.

He needed out, he needed space, he needed—

“My lord? My lord! Everild!” Camdyn's voice cut through his spiral.

Everild blinked slowly, his focus snapping back to his husband, whose face hovered before him.

Camdyn's small hands were on either side of his head, holding him steady as his eyes filled with worry.

“You're all sweaty and shaking.

Are you okay? Water, someone get—oh, thank you!” Camdyn quickly grabbed a pitcher and filled Everild's goblet with cold, refreshing water.

The cool liquid cleared his head enough to focus, and Everild took a steadying breath. He straightened up, his voice firm but gentle as he spoke.

“We're leaving.”

Camdyn frowned, confusion in his eyes.

“To where?”

“To bed,” Everild replied, cutting off any further protest.

His exhaustion weighed heavy on him, and the stress, the anger, the discomfort—it all rose within him like a wave.

He felt his body tremble, and he just needed to rest.

Let these people take the plates, the wine, the food.

They could empty the cellar, the larders, take everything.

But in their bedroom, they would find peace, silence, and rest.

With one swift movement, he stood—too fast, and the dizziness hit him again.

He grabbed Camdyn’s hand and pushed through the sea of siblings, their angry, concerned expressions fading in the distance as he stormed past them, leaving their chatter behind.

He moved with purpose, feeling the weight of their stares, but he didn’t care.

All that mattered now was getting to that bed.

As they neared the door, the king spotted them, raising his goblet high, sloshing wine all over the floor.

“Ah, well, eager to get to know one another, weren’t they? To wedded bliss!” He laughed loudly, and there was scattered applause, but Everild clenched his jaw and ignored it

He didn’t care.

Not now.

Not tonight.

He was done.

They finally reached their bedchamber, and Everild locked the door behind them, shutting out the world.

The room was quiet, prepared for them—fresh towels, water, wine.

Everything was pristine and untouched.

Everild didn't spare a second glance at the wine bottles.

Instead, he kicked off his boots and stripped off his doublet and shirt, leaving them in a heap on the floor.

The water in the basin was cold, refreshing.

He dipped his hands in, splashing his face, the coolness soothing his racing heart, easing his panic.

He breathed deeply, slow and steady, until the tension in his body finally melted away.

But when he stood up, his thoughts finally cleared, he turned—and there, on the bed, sat Camdyn.

His husband was still in his wedding robes, his hands resting in his lap, his fingers tightly intertwined.

He looked up at Everild with wide, uncertain eyes.

His voice, fragile and uncertain, broke the silence.

“W-what would you have me do?” Camdyn asked.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Throughout Camdyn's years at the monastery, there were a few visitors around his age who, once they were safely in the woods and hidden away from the monks' prying eyes, boldly declared their intentions to him. Sometimes, they offered to spirit him away from what they believed would be a long, dreary life of contemplation and devotion to God. But all wanted to touch him and for him to touch them in return.

He remembered quick, furtive kisses and clumsy hands roaming over his robes, and while it wasn't unpleasant, he was always quite bewildered. Perhaps because he took part more out of honest curiosity than genuine attraction, though some of the young men might have been considered good-looking. At the time, Camdyn met very few other people; he had no one to compare them to but one another.

The merchant's son, blond and self-confident, liked to try and reach underneath Camdyn's robes as they kissed. The woodsman's nephew, tall and lean, was as shy and uncertain as he was. The traveling bard, a few years older than Camdyn at the time, ignored his lips completely to—strangely—suck at his neck. Cenric found them just off the path and, with more strength and fury than Camdyn had ever seen from him before, hauled the man off of him, sending him fleeing down the road. Afterwards, he sternly warned Camdyn about the nefarious intentions of strangers.

Not a single one of those young men looked anything like Everild did now, bare-chested and broad, with rivulets of water running down his collarbones to his stomach. He was just so big, his eyes and hair so dark, and there would be more of him to see once he took off his boots and pants. That all of him was soon going to be in bed with Camdyn had him, for the first time, burning with heat but also trembling with fear.

Camdyn knew, vaguely, about what was expected of him that night. That he and Everild were to consummate the union of their marriage by becoming one. The exact details and logistics of it, however, remained a mystery to him. He wished now that he had done more with the young men who visited the monastery—he would have had a better idea of what was to come and would be more skilled at pleasing his husband besides.

In the week before the wedding, Camdyn tried his hand at research in his family's library. There were only irrelevant medical texts—nothing about sexual intercourse but quite a bit on treating bee stings, which was interesting, and a few entries about breastfeeding, which he passed on to Aoife—and a few erotic tales that were scanty on all details except for a running theme of abduction, ravishment, and initial pain, burning, and tears that turned into pleasure and rapturous cries after enough thrusts.

That wouldn't be—that wouldn't be so bad, he supposed. If it eventually felt good. But the question of how Everild would fit, along with a lingering concern about the pain, still had him shaking. It had to work, plenty of people did it and seemed to enjoy it, and yet—Surely if he just asked his husband to be gentle with him?

Everild finally turned his attention back to Camdyn, chest heaving, staring at him in surprise, his eyes wide. Camdyn shifted nervously on the bed. Maybe he was supposed to have already undressed. But one of the maids told him that husbands preferred to do that themselves. He should have asked her for details. She seemed to know what she was talking about.

What position was he supposed to be in—on his back or on his front? Or maybe something else? Would they be there all night? How many times could a man—enjoy himself? What would Everild's body look like, naked? Would he be pleased with Camdyn's? What if he didn't find Camdyn appealing at all? Would that be better or worse than Everild roughly taking him well into the morning? But, no, the kiss—Everild was so sweet when they kissed and so attentive at the banquet. His

cousin, though, Dustan Redmane—what he said—was that true?

Was his husband just trying to make it easier to—to have relations with him? Everild was so upset at what the man said and yet all but dragged Camdyn up to their bedchambers. If he begged his husband to just let them sleep tonight, would he be angry? Surely he would be disappointed. Camdyn didn't think Everild would force him, but—but people were different behind closed doors.

His gaze flitted to the bedchamber's locked door and then to Everild's naked chest and then to Everild's face. "W-what would you have me do?" he asked.

His husband just stared at him. When Everild finally spoke, his voice sounded like his throat was scraped raw. "Nothing."

Ah, right. That's—Camdyn should just lie back and—and let Everild—he fiddled with the brooches keeping his cloak pinned to his robes. It should have been easy enough to simply unpin them, but his hands trembled. "Of—of course, my lord. Just, please. Please, be gentle, I haven't ever—I know a bit, but I've never actually—" To his horror and embarrassment, he began to tear up again. "I'm—I'm so sorry, I'm nervous."

But as he let the cloak fall from his shoulders and hesitantly tugged at the red sash of silk around his robes, Everild scrambled forward and stopped him. "No, Camdyn," he rasped, "Nothing, we'll do nothing. Sleep in the bed. I'll take the floor."

There was a part of him that sighed in relief at this answer. That nothing would happen that night. But there was another part of him that was stung by this rejection.

He blinked back more tears. "Am I not—to your liking?" Or perhaps it was his inexperience that turned Everild off. That would have made sense. His husband was older than him, cousin to the king, and a great warrior. Surely he had prettier and

more skilled lovers than Camdyn. He wiped his eyes. “I can learn,” he said, sniffing, “I can please you, if you show me how. I promise. I can be a good husband to you.”

Everild kneeled at his feet, almost as if in prayer, so that Camdyn had to gaze down at him. His eyes were so dark and gentle and full of reverence.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, and Camdyn’s heart fluttered, “But nothing will happen between us unless you want it to. Never, if you choose.”

“But—don’t you want to—“

“I want you to be happy here. As happy as I can make you.” He paused, apparently searching for the right words. Then, bluntly, he stated, “We don’t have to have sex. It doesn’t matter to me. I will never force you. I only want what you’re willing to give me.” He reached for Camdyn’s hands and held them in his own. “Nothing else.”

Camdyn could not stop his voice from quavering. “I—I do want you. Really. But I don’t know when I can—But I know that I don’t want to, tonight. Please. I’m tired and I don’t—I don’t think I can—“

“Of course,” Everild said. He rubbed Camdyn’s hands with his rough, calloused ones. There was honest affection in his gaze.

Camdyn bit his lip. “Can I still kiss you?”

“You don’t need to ask to do that.”

“Okay.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to his husband’s forehead. How silly of him to think that Everild would do anything to hurt him. Everild was on his side since he stepped into the church. He was kind and handsome and—and now that the threat of consummation was removed, Camdyn still actually wanted to share some part of

himself with his new husband. “Will you undress me?”

“Camdyn—“

“I want it. I want you to see me, and I want to see you as well. But—but nothing else. I just want to hold you and talk and kiss.” He hesitated. “Is that okay? Can we do that?”

Everild asked, “You’re certain?”

“Yes. I’m certain.”

The cloak was already unpinned; his husband removed it from the sheets, folded it, and set it on the desk. Then he took off his boots. As he did this, Camdyn let his slippers fall to the floor. They were so thin and soft they didn’t make a sound.

Everild gently pulled him up so that they stood face-to-face. For a moment, they merely gazed at one another, hand in hand, and then Everild kissed his nose again, just like at the altar, and reached for the sash cinched around his waist. It pooled onto the carpet, a puddle of red silk. The robes loosened. Everild simply slipped them down his shoulders. Camdyn freed his arms and let the fabric drop to his feet. He was completely bare except for his white stockings that ran to his mid-thigh. The bedroom wasn’t cold, but he shivered at having his skin so suddenly exposed to the air.

He chanced a glance at Everild, looking up at him through his eyelashes. His husband watched him with the same expression he had worn all day whenever he looked at Camdyn: with a bit of wonder and overwhelming gentleness.

“There you are,” he said in his lovely, low, gravelly voice. It made Camdyn smile. He wanted to hold him, to kiss him again, but first—

He placed his hands on Everild's hips. "I want to see you," he said with more confidence. He tugged lightly at the black pants. "Can I?"

Everild looked conflicted, brow furrowed, a frown on his face. But then, finally, he nodded.

"Okay," Camdyn murmured. He untied Everild's laces, slowly, carefully, then tugged the pants down. Everild helped, stepping out of them, revealing his large, muscled thighs, the hair between his legs, and his member.

It was curious—Camdyn had expected to combust from embarrassment or cry with terror once he saw his husband naked for the first time. But here, looking at the whole of him—still tall and broad, every bit of him just so large, and all crisscrossed with scars, a light flush running up his chest and neck to his face as Camdyn stared—he was positively fascinated. It didn't change anything, the lack of clothing. He was still Everild. He was still the same man who had protected him that morning, comforted him, and shielded him from his fears and from the strangers in the church. The man who had brushed his tears away at the altar and kissed him so gently. The man who had sent apple pudding to their table because Camdyn had mentioned that he liked cooked apples in his oatmeal.

The man standing in front of him was his husband. They would get to know each other better, but Camdyn knew Everild now, and he was a good man.

He smiled and embraced him, burying himself in Everild's chest when the man pulled him closer, tighter, running his hand through his hair and along his neck, rubbing his back in slow, soothing circles.

"Here I am," Camdyn said.

They eventually moved into the bed, wrapped up in fur blankets and one another's

arms. His husband's fingers traced idle patterns along Camdyn's hip as he rested his head on Everild's chest. There was still revelry in the great hall. He heard the distant music and dancing below. But here, in their bedchamber, it was just him and Everild and the sound of Everild's heartbeat and the feeling of Everild's lips as he kissed the top of his head and pulled him closer.

Everild asked, "Will you tell me about the monastery?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything. Everything." He paused. "Tell me about Cenric, or your gardens, or just your days there."

Camdyn didn't think he could talk about Cenric yet without crying, and the gardens weren't particularly exciting, even if Everild said he was interested in hearing about them. He hummed a little, thinking, and then began, "It was built near a beach. The monastery. Anytime I could, I liked to walk down it. Sometimes I had to collect seaweed for medicine or a few stews. Other times I offered to fish. But most of the time, it was where I went when I had spare time."

"What did you like about it?"

"The sand under my feet. The smell of the sea. How vast it was. Sometimes I just sat and watched the waves and thought about all the ships and boats on the water and all the creatures underneath it. How they were all there, on that expanse, but I couldn't see them from where I was. I just always thought that was—" He tried to hold back a yawn and failed. "Sorry—that it's amazing."

Everild seemed just as exhausted, though. His words came out slow and a little muddled. "Did anyone ever visit by boat?"

“Oh, I hoped! It would have been so exciting! But no, never. I saw whales sometimes, in the distance. The first time I ever saw them, I called everyone out of the monastery to look at them—all the brothers must’ve seen them for years and years beforehand, but they all indulged me. It was fun...”

They fell asleep like that, holding each other, drifting off to the sound of Camdyn’s memories given voice.

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He woke well before the sun rose. It was a habit ingrained in him at the monastery. Once he was old enough to stand for early morning prayers, Cenric gently shook him awake and led him, yawning and bleary-eyed, to the church where they and the rest of the monks huddled together and sang, their voices entwining into a melodic thrum of devotion to God.

Camdyn slowly opened his eyes and found himself not in his cell, curled up on his straw-stuffed mattress and coarse blanket, but lying on a large, soft bed, wrapped in warm furs with strong, muscular arms circled around him.

Everild.

They were pressed so close that, though the room was still dark, Camdyn saw the outline of his husband’s face, his features. His brows were furrowed; he looked serious even in sleep. Camdyn watched his body rise and fall with each breath he took. When he leaned in and kissed Everild on the cheek, his face lost some of its tension. He snuggled back into Everild’s arms and just listened to him breathe for a little while.

Sometime later, there was a tentative knock on the door. Camdyn glanced at Everild, who was still sleeping soundly, before crawling from the bed.

He pulled on Everild's discarded black velvet shirt and answered the door. It was one of the servants, who clearly expected Everild from his straight, stiff posture and the way he first stared directly above Camdyn's head.

"My Lord, I—" The man stopped in confusion. Then his eyes drifted down to Camdyn, and his face went beet red. He spluttered apologies. Camdyn felt his own face grow warm. What a sorry sight he must be—hair mussed from sleep and clad only in an oversized shirt and white stockings—not very becoming for a great lord's husband.

Self-consciously tugging the shirt down, Camdyn asked, "Yes, sir?"

He remembered a moment too late that he wasn't supposed to refer to the servants as "sir" or "ma'am" or, according to his father, even by their own names. They were to be talked at, not talked to. But, well, Camdyn had referred to everyone who visited the monastery by those titles. If they were really nobles, they found his attempts at social graces charming and gently corrected him. If they weren't aristocratic at all, they always found his attempts at politeness amusing.

But this man instead stared at him, red-faced and wide-eyed. Perhaps here, to the people working in the castle, it was a rude thing after all. He would have to ask Everild after he figured out what the man at the door wanted. "Um, is—do you need my husband? I can get him—"

The servant shook his head frantically. "No, no! Forgive me, my lord, I did not mean to, ah, interrupt. I merely intended to find out if either of you were in need of anything. Breakfast, perhaps? We could have something sent up from the kitchens."

"Oh, we could eat in the bedroom?" Camdyn asked. The man nodded. What a surprise! Camdyn had thought they would have to eat in the great hall again. Was that what the small table in the middle of the room was for? "That would be lovely, thank

you very much. If it's not too much trouble, could I also get, um, some clothes and hot water for a bath? Enough for myself and my husband, please."

At the mention of clothing, the man glanced down at Camdyn's stockings and then immediately stared straight ahead. "Yes, of course."

"Thank you," Camdyn said again.

Once back inside the room, Camdyn opened the curtains just a little to let some sunlight seep into their bedchamber. He carefully crawled back onto the bed so as not to wake Everild and lay down at his side.

His husband woke soon after, blinking away the sleep and squinting at the sunlight. When he saw Camdyn looking at him, he smiled and reached for a kiss, which Camdyn happily provided.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

Everild rubbed his eyes and grunted in affirmation. Then he seemed to really look at Camdyn. "What—is that my shirt?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry, I put it on to answer the door."

His husband opened his mouth to speak, his face taking on the same red color as the servant, but he was interrupted by another knock on the door. Camdyn leaped up. "That must be breakfast! I asked for water for a bath, too. Here, I'll—ah!" He yelped as Everild grabbed him and pulled him back down into the bed, covering him up to the chest with blankets. He looked a little frazzled.

"Enter," Everild barked as the knock on the door became more insistent and Camdyn squirmed in his arms.

The servants laid new sets of clothes on their bed with low bows, studiously avoiding looking at either him or Everild. Another pulled aside the curtain in the corner of the room that led to another small space containing the bathtub. Steady streams of men hauled buckets of boiling water to pour into it. After setting breakfast on the table, the servants filed out with another set of low bows, except for the very last to leave, a younger man who shut the door with a grin and said, “Hope you continue to enjoy yourselves, my lords.”

Camdyn thought that was very kind of him to say, but Everild flushed and grumbled as he finally let Camdyn up, mumbling something that sounded like, “Wise-ass.” As Everild searched for his pants lying crumpled on the floor, Camdyn dived into their breakfast.

There was a loaf of freshly baked white bread with a large slab of butter pressed into the shape of a hen—which delighted Camdyn to no end. There were also scrambled eggs flavored with herbs and slices of melon sprinkled with salt to bring out its sweetness. To drink, there was tea, floral and sweetened with honey, and Camdyn was especially glad for that because he didn’t think he could stomach any more wine after last night.

He slathered the bread with butter and devoured slice after slice. It was so much softer than the brown bread they baked at the monastery. Everild, he noticed, ate with much more enthusiasm than he had at their banquet. In between bites, he reached under the table and affectionately patted Camdyn’s thigh.

His husband insisted that he enjoy the bath by himself while he set about cleaning their bedchamber—clearing the plates and getting rid of the towels and the wine bottles left from their wedding night. A bit disappointing, but there was still tonight, and Camdyn had never had the chance for a bath quite as luxurious as this, so he complied without too much complaint.

The tub took up most of the space in the small adjoining room. Camdyn thought it could probably fit three people. It would most certainly have room for both him and Everild with a little wiggle room. At the monastery, he had only washed with lukewarm buckets of water and a rag and harsh, handmade soap that left his skin pink. The tub, he noticed, was made of stone. Did the material keep the water hot for a longer period of time? The rest of the room was made up of shelves filled with stacks of white soap carved with pretty patterns and various scented oils that didn't seem to have been used much at all. Camdyn sniffed at one and found it warm, like cinnamon and black pepper and sandalwood and something pleasant and heated that he couldn't quite place.

After placing a few drops into the water, Camdyn took off Everild's shirt, peeled off his stockings, and cautiously lowered himself into the tub. It was like nothing he had experienced before. The hot water felt as if it went past his skin and seeped into his bones, releasing every little ache and tension he had held. It might have been unseemly, but he couldn't help but release a loud moan of pleasure.

Outside of the room, he heard a crash that sounded suspiciously like plates clattering to the floor. "Everild? Are you alright?"

"Fine," his husband answered, his voice hoarse.

"Do you need me?" Camdyn asked. Upon hearing Everild vehemently state that no, he was perfectly fine and to stay where he was, he settled back into the bath. He felt a bit like he was steeping himself in tea with the nice, hot water, all scented with spices. The thought made him giggle.

When he was done, he realized he had forgotten both the towels and his clean new clothes. He stepped out of the water, shuddering with the sudden chill, and padded to the curtain, absolutely soaked and dripping. "Everild? Can I have a towel, please?" In an instant, the curtain was brushed aside, and his husband stood there, offering the

towel with the care and pride of someone presenting a long-lost treasure back to its owner.

“Thank you,” Camdyn said. Then he noticed Everild staring at him with an indecisive expression. “What is it?”

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

Camdyn flushed with delight. “You don’t have to ask me to do that, either,” he replied, leaning in for another kiss. Everild’s hands felt especially nice and rough now that Camdyn’s skin was soft from the bath, and he must have made a good choice with the scented oil because his husband seemed to greatly enjoy it. He pressed his face into the crook of Camdyn’s neck and inhaled and sighed.

Camdyn suddenly recalled the traveling bard. He’d pressed his mouth against his neck and sucked and bit, and at the time, Camdyn had been utterly confused by it, but now he suddenly imagined Everild’s teeth against his throat, and oh, that—that would be—

A clamoring and series of raised voices outside the bedchamber door was all the warning they got before the king burst into their room, bags under his eyes and clothing disarrayed but as utterly cheerful as he always seemed to be. “Good morning, cousin!”

Camdyn cried out in shock and covered himself with the towel. Everild growled, “Fucking hell,” and shoved Camdyn back behind the curtain. He stood guard in front of it, his body blocking the entryway.

Blushing furiously, Camdyn dried himself off. He didn’t think that the king had seen him, but even so...

The cotton towel quickly became damp. It was a bit cold and uncomfortable as he wrapped it around himself. The new clothes were still neatly folded on the bed, and he was trapped in this small room until the king left. He leaned against the tub and stared at the floor, a pattern of mosaic tiles in the shape of a bright sun, with yellow, orange, and red rays. Everild's voice carried past the curtains and reverberated inside the room. He was positively snarling.

"Out," he growled.

The king sounded unfazed. "Right you are, Everild, we need to go out. We've important things to talk about today."

"Get out of this room," Everild clarified, "King or cousin, you don't just barge into my bedchamber unannounced. My husband was still getting dressed."

There was a long pause. The king, to his credit, seemed abashed. "Ah, well. I thought—forgive me, Everild. I didn't mean—but, well, now that I'm here. They've told me you've eaten breakfast and have a bath ready. Good! Because I've got a treat planned for the two of you. A royal hunt! And after we eat our fill of venison and pheasant, you and I will have a nice long talk, Everild, because it's very important that we do." Something desperate crept into his voice. "Please, cousin."

Everild sighed. "We'll get ready. Now, out."

The smile in the king's voice was audible. "Fantastic. Out I go. I may be the king, but it is your castle, after all." He added, cheekily, "Glad to see that the newly wedded couple had a very successful night." The door didn't close but slammed shut.

His husband brushed the curtains back, Camdyn's new set of clothes in hand. "I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

“I’m fine,” Camdyn said.

The shirt was made of dark blue silk and cut to reveal a bit of his shoulders and collarbone. It hung off of him not unlike Everild’s black velvet shirt. The pants he shimmied into still felt odd to wear, after a lifetime of running around in long robes. They were tight, constraining. But he supposed he’d get used to them.

When he made his way back into the bedroom, Everild was sitting on their bed, already dressed and frowning. “That won’t happen again, Camdyn.”

Camdyn bit his lip. “I’m fine, I promise. But, what the king said, about hunting. I don’t know how. Will I embarrass you?”

His husband shook his head. “Never. It’ll probably be very boring for you, in fact.”

He considered this. “You’ll be by my side, though, right?”

“Yes.”

Camdyn felt cheered by that. “Well, then it won’t be boring. I’ll do my best.”

A royal hunt—not how he imagined he’d spend the day after his wedding. He could catch and gut fish as well as snare and skin rabbits, and he wasn’t unfamiliar with caring for livestock, but a hunt was quite beyond him. But if Everild was there, then what could go wrong?

Page 6

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The morning was still early, but the hunt would stretch well into the afternoon. Whatever they managed to catch that day would be the centerpiece of the evening's feast. A stag, surely—not even the king would be foolish enough to allow Camdyn on a hunt for something dangerous, like a boar, or, God forbid, a bear. Everild knew how easily things could go wrong on such a hunt. That's why he'd ensured that Camdyn's first experience in the wild would be one of relative safety.

Everild helped Camdyn pull on a new pair of boots, well-crafted but stiff. Not ideal for the hunt, for they would need to be broken in, and doing so on a long, demanding day would surely leave Camdyn's feet sore long before the hunt ended. Especially if they ended up having to track the beast on foot, which was always a possibility. But there was little to be done about it now; the boots were the only ones available, and they were better than walking through the wilds barefoot.

His husband, as always, looked up at him with those large, dark eyes—eyes that were always full of concern, warmth, and questions. “Everild?” Camdyn's voice broke through his thoughts.

“Mm?” Everild's gaze shifted back down. He was carefully rolling up the legs of his pants, trying to make them a little more practical for the hunt. The pants were too fine for something so rugged, but Everild didn't want Camdyn to feel out of place, and he'd rather his clothing remain neat and clean for as long as possible.

Camdyn chewed on his lip, a habit when he was nervous or unsure. “Can I still pray?”

Everild's hands stilled for a moment, surprised by the question. “What?”

“Before the hunt—do I still have time to pray? That’s what I do—always did—in the mornings.”

Everild blinked, caught off guard, but quickly understood. His husband had spent so many years in a monastery, where devotion and ritual were everything. Of course, Camdyn would still want to honor that part of himself, especially on a day that felt as momentous as today.

With a soft smile, Everild stood and moved closer to Camdyn, leaning in to place a gentle kiss on his forehead. He enjoyed the feeling of Camdyn’s eyes fluttering closed, the soft sigh that escaped his husband’s lips, the warmth of his skin. Everild’s heart fluttered with tenderness. “Of course,” he said. The real hunt wouldn’t begin for a while; everyone would still be at the assembly, gathering and speaking with one another, getting ready for the day ahead. But even if they had to wait for Camdyn, it didn’t matter. The hunt was for them both. “Aldaay will show you to the chapel.”

Camdyn frowned slightly, his brow furrowing in confusion. “You’re not going to come with me?”

Everild froze. That simple question felt like a blow. How could he explain to Camdyn that he had not stepped foot in his chapel since the day he returned from the war? How could he explain that the idea of returning there made his insides twist, made him feel like he might be rejected? He couldn’t bear the thought of walking into that holy place only to feel it reject him as it had before, spitting him out into the hall, leaving him exposed and unworthy. Even when he’d been overcome by guilt and desperate for forgiveness, he couldn’t bring himself to go. The memories of the battlefield—the screams, the blood, the cries of the dying—were always with him, always lurking behind his prayers, mocking him for ever thinking that he fought in God’s name.

But before he could say anything, Camdyn looked at him with a deep understanding

that took Everild by surprise. Camdyn was perceptive and he seemed to sense the weight of Everild's silence. He gently took Everild's hands in his, his expression softening. "Then I will just pray for you, husband," he said with a tenderness that nearly broke Everild's heart. With a peck on the cheek, Camdyn added, "You don't need to be alone in this."

Everild's chest swelled with a mixture of pure bliss and quiet adoration. How could one person bring him such peace? He wanted to hold onto this moment forever, to savor this connection between them. But deep down, a part of him feared it was fleeting. This tenderness, this joy that Camdyn radiated—how long could it last? Everild was so used to pushing people away, to being the one who gave and gave until there was nothing left. He was selfish, but in this moment, he would take what Camdyn offered. All of it. And he would give as much as he could in return.

Before Camdyn could step away, Everild pulled him back, wrapping his arms around him, pressing him into a kiss that was deep and lingering. A kiss that felt like an affirmation of everything that had brought them together—like the wedding vows that had bound them, like the way Camdyn had melted against him on that day. When they finally pulled apart, Everild could see the faint flush on Camdyn's face, spreading from his cheeks down to his collarbones.

"I'd like to meet with our stable master and huntswoman before this all starts," Everild said, his voice low, still heavy with the emotion that lingered from their kiss. He squeezed Camdyn's hips gently, feeling a rush of affection. "If I prepare your horse for you, would you be able to meet me at the field near the forest?"

Camdyn blinked, still looking a little dazed, but nodded. "Oh, yes! Of course, Everild. I know where the stables are. And I can ride a little bit. Don't worry."

They shared one last kiss before Camdyn hurried out the door, his smile wide and genuine.

Everild stood in the doorway for a moment, watching him go with a strange ache in his chest. Was it really this easy to keep Camdyn happy? To see him smile like that, so free and full of life—it was more than Everild could have hoped for. But as much as he wanted to believe it would be this simple, he knew better. After they had indulged his cousin’s whims with the hunt, Everild and Camdyn would finally have time to themselves. Time to grow together, to become the partners they were meant to be.

Everild began to think about the future—about the things he could do for Camdyn to make this place feel more like home. He could prepare the garden, for one. It might be too late in the season to grow anything now, but there would be time to plan for the next year. He could plant vegetables—beans, peas, carrots, turnips, spinach—and flowers—bright, colorful blooms that would make Camdyn’s heart smile. Daffodils, sunflowers, chrysanthemums—flowers that reminded him of warmth and light.

In time, he hoped Camdyn would flourish here, just as he had always dreamed.

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The stables were brimming with the horses of his guests—well-bred, finely groomed beasts, their coats gleaming in the sunlight. Their nickers and neighs echoed through the air, rising in pitch as the animals shifted restlessly. Everild could hear them even from a distance, the sound growing louder as he approached. A hearty voice broke the quiet as he neared the stables.

“There’s the newly wedded lord, come to grace me with his presence. How’s your young husband?” Willow, the stable master, called out from where she stood in front of one of the stalls. She was a tall, hardy woman, her frame built for work, with short blonde hair streaked with gray and eyes that shone with the piercing intensity of a hawk. Her expression softened into a grin, showing an old familiarity that only time and shared history could forge.

Willow had served in Everild's mother's household since she was a girl, caring for the horses, and had followed her mistress to the castle upon her marriage to Everild's father. She had taught Everild how to ride as a child, a skill that had proven invaluable over the years. Even now, as Everild stood there, he knew without a doubt that she would be an excellent teacher for Camdyn as well.

Everild smiled at her, a rare moment of ease, and asked, "How's your wife?"

Willow's grin widened, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Finding you and yours a hart to hunt. A bit of fair warning would've been nice before my love was ripped right from our bed to trek for stags, though, eh?"

Everild's smile faltered slightly as he sympathized. "My own bed's been disrupted for this."

"Hah!" Willow burst into loud, barking laughter. Her voice carried through the air like the crackling of a fire. "The king's generosity knows no bounds. He couldn't rest till he gave every couple in this household a case of longing in his quest for butchered venison." Her laughter rang out again, a hearty sound that filled the stables. But then, as quickly as it had come, her humor faded, and she grew sober. "Ah, Everild, forgive me, I completely forgot. Will you be alright?"

Her tone softened, and the warmth in her eyes turned to something more concerned, as if she could sense the unease that simmered beneath Everild's calm exterior.

He shifted uncomfortably, but his thoughts turned inward, recalling the brutal truth of what the hunt represented. Near the end of a hunt, when a beast was surrounded and utterly exhausted, it would stop, gathering every last ounce of energy to defend itself with desperate, wild abandon, trying to break through the hunters.

It was a scenario Everild knew too well, and one he had witnessed far too often

during the war. He had seen the same wild-eyed, drained look on soldiers as they fought for their lives, shaking and panicking, their movements chaotic and desperate. The comparison had become hauntingly familiar. Eyes rolling in terror, bodies fighting to stay upright, gasping for breath. There was so little difference between the two, in fact, that Everild could no longer see one without picturing the other.

Hunting had lost its appeal for him years ago, and the thought of it still stirred something dark in him. He had no taste for it now. But the king's demands were what they were, and appeasing him would allow Wilburg and his companions—Dustan, Gerald, and the rest—to finally leave his land and return to the indulgent comforts of the king's palace.

It seemed like a small price to pay: a single day of discomfort for the sake of peace, quiet, and his husband's company. Everild shrugged, dismissing his thoughts. "I can manage one hunt. Where's Camdyn's horse?"

His husband's eldest brother had gifted Camdyn a horse as a wedding present. At first glance, the bay-colored mare might have seemed like a slight. She was a little long in the tooth, her coat and mane unremarkable, and she wasn't very tall. But Everild realized quickly, as soon as he laid eyes on the mare, that Gibson had made a shrewd choice. Camdyn wasn't an experienced rider, and the mare's temperament reflected that understanding. She was a placid creature, calm and gentle in a way that spoke of years of careful training.

Everild and Willow carefully examined her hooves and teeth, inspecting her with practiced eyes. She stood patient and still, and as they continued, she sniffed curiously at the hem of Everild's shirt, nibbling at it with a soft huff.

"What's her name?" Everild asked, intrigued by the mare's placidity.

"Seilide, the brother said. Sweet-natured creature," Willow replied with a knowing

smile.

“The horse or the brother?” Everild asked dryly, his tone flat.

Willow raised an eyebrow, her grin widening. “Ah, that man’s not very fond of you, my lord. He interrogated me most fiercely about your character. I told him that if he paid me a gold piece, I’d tell him all he needed to know.”

“And?” Everild prompted, his curiosity piqued.

Willow shrugged casually, pulling a shiny gold coin from her pocket and rolling it down her knuckles. Her eyes locked with his, and her voice dropped low. “I said that ever since the king told you that you were to be wed, you’ve run yourself ragged trying to make this place a peaceful, comfortable home for your husband. Don’t know if he believed me, but he gave me the coin all the same.”

She paused, her gaze intense. “But you remember that, Everild. Even before you laid eyes on Camdyn, all you cared about was his happiness. He’s lucky to have you.”

Everild was about to respond, but he held his tongue. Willow had a way of turning everything around, and in truth, it was really the other way around. But he’d never been able to argue with her—only her wife could. So instead, he cleared his throat and gave her a small nod. “Have Seilide ready for Camdyn when he arrives. I have to go to the assembly.”

Willow petted the mare’s flank gently. “Fine, fine. Go ahead. You’ve got to prepare the gift that the king so generously imposed upon you.”

Everild shrugged once more, as he had done so many times before. It was always the same. His cousin would propose a course of action, and Everild was left to follow through. But this time, this hunt, would be different. It would be the final time, the

last time. His role as a husband had to supersede any duty he had to his cousin, king or not.

Udele, Willow's wife and the castle's huntswoman, was already out in the field with two of her hounds, a small army of servants at her side—servants from Everild's household, Dustan's, and the king's. She waved Everild over as the rest of the group ate from a spread that appeared to be leftovers from the wedding banquet. There was chicken, its skin still crisp, and thick stew with chunks of beef, chopped carrots, and apples, the juices sopped up with loaves of fresh white bread.

"There's my lord now," Udele called with a wide grin, her long brown hair haphazardly braided and pinned to her head. There were bags under her bright blue eyes, evidence of the long hours she had already worked, but she still managed to maintain her usual cheerful demeanor. "Found a hart. Great, big beast. Ten tines. The rest of my hounds are all in position, my lord. Soon as the king and all get here, we'll be ready."

Everild grunted in acknowledgment. "Good." Then, with a half-sigh, he added, "Willow's angry. About the hunt."

"I told her to expect something like this," Udele said with a knowing look. "The king's always been fond of the hunt. Ever since he was a boy. Trying to relive the olden days, I suppose. Remember how the three of you used to play in these woods? Your mother thought you'd be eaten by a bear."

Everild chuckled softly, the memory of those carefree days flashing before his eyes. They had searched the woods for hours, Dustan, Wilburg, and him, convinced that somewhere in the dense forest there was a bear waiting to be hunted. They had used charcoal and parchment to map out their explorations, certain that a bear would appear, but it never did. They had been children, naive and foolhardy, and perhaps it had been a blessing that they hadn't encountered one.

That was a lifetime ago, long before the war.

With a snort, Everild turned to his attendants, who were all gathered near the field, looking at him expectantly. He cleared his throat and spoke with quiet authority. “My husband’s not used to riding. Never been on a hunt, either. I’ll need two of you to stay with him while—”

But he was interrupted by two young men pushing their way to the front of the group. They both looked eager, their faces flushed with youthful enthusiasm. One of them shoved another man aside, causing a hunk of chicken to drop from the man’s hands. It fell to the ground and was immediately snatched up by Udele’s hounds, who were quick and alert.

“I’d be happy to do it, my lord—” one of the young men said eagerly.

“Please, allow me—” the other one chimed in.

Everild frowned, his expression faltering as he observed the ease with which these men volunteered to watch over Camdyn. There was something both comforting and unsettling about it. Comforting in that his husband would have people to look after him, but unsettling because Everild couldn’t shake the feeling that something more lay beneath the surface.

Before he could speak, one of the older hunters laughed at his bemused expression and elbowed Udele in the ribs. “Rough times ahead for our lord, eh? Stressful life, to have such a pretty helpmate.”

Udele smiled, her eyes glinting with amusement. “Ah, I don’t know about that. My life’s been pretty easy ever since I married Willow.” She gave Everild a comforting pat on the shoulder and chuckled to herself, knowing that some things were just too complicated to explain with words.

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It turned out that Everild's life was meant to be stressful after all, because when Camdyn finally arrived, he was not only in the company of both the king and Dustan, but the horse he was riding was not Seilide. Instead, it was a stallion with a coat white like bleached bone and pitch-black eyes, nearly seventeen hands high. Everild had ridden that horse into battle once and then never, ever again.

He cursed, mounted his own horse, and moved to confront the king. Dustan and Camdyn were a little ways behind him, side by side. Camdyn looked nervous. Had Dustan been accosting him? Everild would put an end to it, if so. But right now, the biggest danger was the stallion and Wilburg's stupidity. Everild stopped his horse right in front of his cousin's; the animal reared back in surprise. Wilburg pulled on its reins and shot Everild a quizzical look.

"That's not Camdyn's horse."

The king scoffed and shook his head. "No, of course not. Dustan told me that stable master of yours wanted him to ride a nag. You'd probably get more use turning that thing into stew. You can't honestly tell me you want that young husband of yours on a flea-bitten beast like that. Look how pretty he is—and who gave him the dark blue shirt? My compliments to them. It goes so nicely with his complexion."

"I want him safe," Everild growled. "That nag is slow and gentle. The one you've put him on is for a skilled rider, for battle—he won't be able to control it."

"Come now, Everild. It's not as though we're putting a spear in his hand or anything. He'll be at the back of the party. All he'll do is follow and watch. It'll be fun—way more exciting than anything they ever had at the monastery."

Everild gritted his teeth. "I want this done."

“So eager for the chase? I jest, cousin. I know all you want to do is crawl back into bed and on top of your young man. We’ll catch our quarry and then you and I will have a nice talk, and back to your chambers you’ll go.” He turned to Camdyn and Dustan and called out, “A royal hart for my new royal cousin. A fitting gift, eh, Camdyn?”

Camdyn sat tense and uncertain on the stallion. Softly, he responded, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Dustan smirked. “You’ve married the Beast to a little mouse, not a lamb. How quiet he is! But I bet a skilled man can get you to sing and shout in the bedroom, hm?” His tone was different than the night before—the low croon implied not just Dustan’s usual vulgar harassment but implication, suggestion. Camdyn, trapped on the horse, could do nothing but hold on tightly to the reins and avoid the man’s gaze, embarrassed.

Everild let out a low, guttural warning. Even Wilburg, who had joked about marrying Camdyn himself while drunk and who just teased Everild about their bedroom activities while sober, balked at the discomfort on Camdyn’s face. “Dustan,” he said, “Enough. You’re upsetting Camdyn.”

“Your Majesty. My apologies, Camdyn. I only jest.”

It was a damnable lie. The way Dustan’s eyes fixated on Camdyn’s lips and followed the low cut of his silk shirt made Everild glad that his husband would be at the rear of the hunting party. He would be separated from Everild, yes, but he would also be far, far away from Dustan’s gaze. Everild glared at him as he and the king continued to ride toward the assembly.

Camdyn managed to sidle up next to him. The anxiety on his face hadn’t abated. “Most of the horses in the stable are here—poor Seilide—she’s been left out.”

Everild said, “Don’t worry. She and Willow will keep each other company.”

“I like her. Willow.”

“So do I.”

His husband was still frowning. Everild wished he could kiss him again, but he didn’t want Camdyn to tumble off the horse just for a peck on the cheek. Instead, he asked, “Ready?” and upon receiving a nod, they made their way to the waiting group.

“Everyone’s staring at me,” Camdyn mumbled. “Can they all tell I’ve no idea what I’m doing?”

Everild paused before saying, “It’s because you’re so beautiful.”

That brought a bright blush to his husband’s face. “Oh, please. You flatter me, my lord—“

“I don’t flatter. It’s the truth.” Never had even a thimbleful of charm or fawning words spilled from Everild’s lips. He was solid like a fortress’s walls, strong as a yoked ox, and blunt as a rusted knife—and he always would be. It made the king laugh, made the other nobles sniff or stammer, but Everild had always found himself warmly welcomed among the foot soldiers.

Those men whose hands had been calloused by years of hard work at their trade long before they’d ever held a sword. The sound of their laughter, the campfire’s smoke curling around them as they passed along rationed mugs of beer—it was one of his few good memories from the war.

Camdyn didn’t seem to know exactly how to respond to this, but his blush deepened and he finally gave Everild a small smile. “If you say so,” he said.

If Camdyn wasn't aware of his charms, then how did he explain the attentive treatment from the two young attendants? As they traveled through the forest, waiting for Udele's hounds to scent the hart, he heard Camdyn shyly ask questions and the two men all but fall over themselves to answer.

"What is it we're hunting?"

"A hart, my lord—a full-grown stag."

"Fully warrantable."

"Massive, Udele said, and a full ten tines."

"O-oh?"

"That's the number of points on its antlers, Lord Camdyn. When you hunt red deer, you'll only want a hart of ten or more."

"Why?"

"That's just sportsmanlike, my lord."

"No honor in anything less."

Camdyn said, "Forgive me. This can't be very fun for you, to watch over me like this. Thank you for putting up with me."

"No, my lord! You were at the monastery, they wouldn't have taught you all this."

"We all have to start somewhere! Lucky for you we're here to help. Don't worry."

“Thank you,” Camdyn said again, sounding a bit more cheerful. “I’ll do my best—”

The sharp call of a horn drowned out his words.

The hart had been spotted. The group let out a series of joyous whoops and galloped off. Everild glanced back at Camdyn, who had gone still with confusion, and jerked his head forward. The chase was on.

It was far too familiar, galloping past the others until he was riding alongside the hounds. As soon as Udele had pinpointed the possible path the hart would take, she had set a dog and a handler each along the way to be released when their quarry was found. Now they rushed after the hart, a series of snarling, barking blurs in Everild’s peripheral vision.

They’d corner the beast. However large the forest was, however dark and wooded, there would be no way for the hart to hide or to rest. Not with Udele’s hounds on their scent, and not with a determined unit of men ready and waiting to route its escape. The horn sounded again, signaling the knights to retreat behind the lines and the archers to step forward.

No, wait, that wasn’t right—

His horse crashed through a creek and lumbered up the other side of the bank. Everild allowed a moment’s rest before he spurred her on, flecks of water flying from her coat. Around them, some of Udele’s hounds lunged out of the water, panting and snarling, giving their fur a shake before they, too, continued on. In the distance, there was the flash of movement from more dogs released, the sound of their handlers urging them on with encouraging shouts.

Everild breathed in time with the mare. At the slightest tug of the reins, she immediately turned in another direction. The screams and war horns didn’t bother her

in the slightest; she paid attention to only Everild's touch. This was the way to survive a battle. Atop a well-trained horse, sword in hand.

"My lord," a man shouted, "The hart's headed to the edge of the forest."

Perfect. They'd flush the man out and flank him. He wouldn't be able to escape.

No, that wasn't what this was. What was—he was lightheaded. Everild shook his head vigorously and spurred his horse onward through the thinning forest. He reached the tree line and flew out the other side, accompanied by dogs and the rest of the hunting party.

The hart was nearly at bay. It was still fleeing, but exhausted enough that the hounds could nip at its legs. They didn't actually bite. Udele's dogs were too well-trained for that. They'd merely run the animal ragged until it could do nothing but stamp and scream.

This beast was enormous, nearly seven feet long and probably over 400 pounds. This was where the danger lay, when the hart was desperate and exhausted and angry and ready to pierce its pursuers with its ten-pointed antlers.

They'd driven it to this point; its panicked eyes rolled wildly in its sockets, the harsh grunts and shrieks it emitted, the scratches on its hide seeping blood from having jumped through thorns and brambles in its frenzy to escape.

Some of the haze cleared from Everild's eyes, and finally, he was able to think. The thought that rolled through his head was: thank God the king would kill it .

He didn't think himself capable of it now, not in his confusion. But the highest-ranking man in the hunting party got the honor of making the kill, and there was no one higher than the king himself.

Udele whistled, and the dogs scattered, leaving the king, Dustan, and Everild closest to the hart. The attendants gathered around them, ready to trap it if it fled from the king's spear. As they circled the hart, Everild swore he could see it watching him.

There must be care in how one pierced the hunted animal. Too many stabs ruined the pelt, and a stray stick in the guts could potentially rip the stomach or intestines, ruining the meat. It was a testament to his cousin's skill and strength that he jumped off his horse, took his spear in hand, and lunged forward, breaking through skin and bone and straight to the beating heart.

Some said that a stag could live for hundreds of years, but this one, a full-grown hart, died twitching and panting and groaning, bleeding out on the dirt as men cheered around it.

What did Camdyn think of this display? Had it upset him? Disturbed him? Everild turned to find the stallion and his husband's face among the crowd.

He wasn't there.

Frowning, he searched instead for the two young men who were seeing to him. They were with Udele, speaking in low, anxious voices.

"Where's Camdyn?" he asked, startling the trio. "Where's my husband?"

Udele said, "He got separated during the chase, my lord."

The young men chimed in. "We're so sorry—"

"We thought he was right behind us."

Everild took a deep breath. "Where—where was he last?"

“We’re not sure.”

“Maybe by the creek?”

If he got lost near the creek, would Camdyn stay along the water? Or would he have attempted to find the rest of the party? He might’ve gotten turned around and gone deeper into the forest, but eventually, the trees grew so densely that it was impossible for a horse to pass between them. No, he was smart. He would have stayed near the creek. It was the easiest identifier.

The king’s booming voice broke his line of thought. “Everild, what are you doing over there? Come congratulate me on this kill. You’ll have venison for days.”

“Camdyn’s lost,” Everild rasped.

His cousin frowned. “What?”

“My husband is lost.” The harshness of his voice and the anger in it made the two young attendants flinch and had the rest of the hunting party turn toward them, concerned.

Dustan tilted his head to the side and watched Everild’s growing panic. “Calm yourself. Look, there’s his horse now.”

A hush fell over the group. The warhorse trotted into the field, sniffing at some of the dogs and the carcass on the ground, completely unperturbed and unconcerned that it was missing its rider.

“Oh, God, no,” Everild managed.

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Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Udele had suggested that he find something of Camdyn's for her hounds to scent, but there was nothing. Everild had failed to think to bring anything else—not a token, a favor, or a scrap of clothing. And there was nothing left on the damned horse, not even a scrap of silk—just an empty saddle that broke Everild's heart into pieces. He stared at it for a moment longer, as though he could somehow will it to change, to reveal something he could use, but the reality was inescapable: Camdyn was gone, and he had nothing to search with.

He rode through the forest alone, consumed with a deep, gnawing sense of anger, desperation, and dread. He pushed his horse forward with frantic urgency, each step matching the pounding of his own heart. The trees blurred around him, the shadows whispering threats he couldn't quite grasp. His thoughts were as tangled as the woods, and all he could focus on was the hollow fear churning inside him—the fear of what he might find on the forest's unforgiving ground.

The stallion had not fallen with Camdyn. It could not have. It couldn't have. The thought wouldn't leave him. The horse was unharmed, its coat still shining, unmarked by blood or dirt. Everild had seen men crushed to death by their own steeds—warhorses that reared in panic and threw their riders, sometimes landing back on top of them, crushing them beneath the weight. He had seen soldiers whose mounts had trampled over them, shattering their backs in a brutal dance of chaos. But in the same breath, he had seen men thrown from panicked horses, their bodies like ragdolls, limbs twisted and lifeless, heads cracked open against rocks. And though they had been larger men, trained for battle, Camdyn was so small, so fragile in comparison. The terror twisted Everild's insides, gnawing at him with a constant, growing panic.

If—if Camdyn was dead, then please, God, let it have been quick. The thought of Camdyn, broken and alone on the harsh ground, his small body trembling, soaked in pain, his last breath escaping in frightened sobs—Everild couldn't bear it. The image tore at his mind, the mental picture so vivid, it was as if it was happening before his eyes.

Everild turned his head to the side and vomited violently, the breakfast he'd shared with Camdyn only hours ago rising up in his throat—the bread and butter, the eggs, the sweet, floral tea. He wiped his mouth and eyes with shaking hands, forcing himself to stifle the sob that fought its way out of his chest. It felt like punishment, cruel and unyielding. He had been foolish, thinking that their marriage could ever work, that Camdyn could live long and happily with him. How had he allowed himself to hope, to dream of a future?

When Everild reached the creek, a new thought assailed him. Could Camdyn have fallen into the water, drowned in the current? The creek wasn't deep, but if he had been knocked unconscious... The thought of his husband's body carried away by the water made his stomach lurch again.

Desperation fueled him as he cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting, "Camdyn!" His voice cracked and echoed through the trees, but there was no reply. He would ride up and down the entire creek if he had to, comb through every inch of this cursed forest for his husband. He would—

Then he saw him. A small figure hunched against a tree, still and unmoving. Everild's heart stopped for a moment, the air leaving his lungs in a rush of terror. He approached carefully, each step heavy with fear, unsure of what he would do if he found his husband cold and lifeless, but then—then he saw it. Camdyn's chest rose and fell, steady and alive.

"Camdyn!" Everild's voice was hoarse, full of relief, yet laced with the remnants of

panic.

The young man's eyes shot open in surprise, and upon seeing Everild, his face lit up. "Everild! You found me!" he exclaimed, but then he winced in pain as Everild pulled him into a tight embrace.

"I'm sorry," Everild whispered, holding him carefully, as if afraid Camdyn would shatter at the touch. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—Where are you hurt? What happened?"

Camdyn gingerly held his side with one hand. "I fell," he explained, his voice soft but steady. "When we got to the creek, the horse didn't want to wade through, and he reared back. I fell off—sort of landed on my side. Everyone was so focused on the hunt, I don't think they even noticed. So, I just waited here for you. And you found me!" He smiled, but it quickly faded when he tried to step forward for a kiss, only to be gently pushed back by Everild's firm hand. Everild's breath still reeked of sickness, and Camdyn's brow furrowed in confusion and concern.

His husband's face fell, and he asked softly, "Oh. I'm sorry. Did I—did I ruin the hunt after all?"

"No." Everild shook his head sharply, feeling the tightness in his chest ease a fraction. "No, it's just..." He hesitated, his words stumbling over one another. "When I thought you could be badly hurt, I—I was sick." He gestured to his mouth, embarrassed by the weakness he had shown. Camdyn's eyes widened, his face filled with guilt.

"I'm so sorry, Everild!" His voice cracked, and tears gathered at the edges of his eyes. "I didn't mean to. I tried—I really tried—"

Everild's heart ached at the sight, and without thinking, he pulled Camdyn into

another hug, holding him close, careful not to squeeze him too hard. “Will I always be the cause of your tears?” he asked softly.

Pressed against his chest, Camdyn mumbled into the fabric of his shirt. “You’re not,” he said firmly, though his voice wavered. At Everild’s soft scoff, he added, “No, you’re not. This... this is all so new. Everything is so new, and I—I just don’t want to disappoint you. I don’t know how to be a good husband to you, but I’m trying. I just need to learn.”

“You could never disappoint me,” Everild said, his voice firm with conviction. He placed his hands on Camdyn’s hips, tilting his head so he could look into his eyes. “This is new to me, too. We’re learning together. How to be married. Okay?” When Camdyn nodded, giving him a shaky, yet hopeful smile, Everild pressed a quick kiss to his cheek.

“I’m a little glad I missed it,” Camdyn murmured. “I didn’t want to see the stag get killed.”

Small mercies. Everild kissed the top of Camdyn’s head, his fingers brushing through the soft, curly brown hair. “We’ll go back to the rest and show them you’re alright,” Everild said, his voice quieter now. “I’ll talk to the king. And then we’ll leave, and we’ll have the physician look after you. And I’ll have the cooks prepare dinner for us. Whatever you want.”

“Oh! Um, bread would be nice. Maybe with cheese? And lentil and vegetable stew, please.”

Everild thought briefly of the hart, its lifeless body on the ground, butchered and sliced, its flesh tossed to the dogs. He swallowed the bitter taste that rose in his throat and smiled down at Camdyn.

“Whatever you want, Camdyn,” he said softly, meaning it with all his heart.

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When they returned to the group, a loud cheer erupted from the gathered hunters. Udele, with a satisfied grin, patted their horse’s flank before lifting her fingers to her lips to blow a sharp whistle. The whistle echoed through the trees, releasing three piercing shrieks that sliced through the tension in the air. The call was a signal, unmistakable to all the hunters, that Camdyn had been found.

Everild dismounted with careful deliberation, his boots hitting the soft earth as he reached to steady his husband. He helped Camdyn down from the horse gently, sensing the exhaustion and uncertainty in his every movement. Everild’s men, loyal and silent, immediately gathered around them, forming a tight circle to block them from prying eyes. The two young attendants, faces flushed with embarrassment, hurried forward, babbling their apologies for leaving Camdyn behind in the woods. He merely flushed, his face turning a delicate shade of red as he tried to wave off their words, his voice trembling as he murmured his own apologies, the sting of his earlier fall still present in his quiet shame.

"My husband needs to rest," Everild barked, his voice firm and authoritative, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. "Seat him by the campfire while I speak to the king. Do not allow Lord Redmane to approach him." Some of the men glanced toward Dustan’s group, and Everild saw the dark mutterings shared among them, the suspicion clear in their gazes.

An uncertain expression returned to Camdyn’s face as Everild kissed his forehead softly, trying to reassure him despite the storm inside him. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, his voice low and tender.

“Yes, my lord,” Camdyn murmured, his voice barely audible, his gaze dropping to

the ground.

The disappearance of Everild's husband had, oddly enough, not interrupted the conclusion of the hunt. The hart, once majestic, had been stripped clean, its carcass reduced to little more than bones scattered across the ground. Udele's hounds, having completed their work, gnawed on the bones with a quiet hunger. The head was conspicuously missing, most likely taken to adorn the king's walls as a trophy. Farther away, Everild spotted the king's tent—erected with obvious care, though it looked somewhat smaller than Everild's own bedchamber. His soldiers, always vigilant, recognized the fury on Everild's face and instinctively moved aside to allow him entry into the tent.

Inside, the sight of his cousin lounging on a pile of pillows, casually drinking from a goblet, was enough to set Everild's teeth on edge. The king looked up from his wine, startled by Everild's sudden presence. He stood so quickly that his goblet tipped, spilling a cascade of red wine onto the dirt floor.

“Everild! You've found him, then? Is he all right? I'm sorry, this isn't how I wanted this to turn out at all—” the king began, his voice smooth, rehearsed, but there was something strained in his tone, an underlying anxiety that only served to heighten Everild's frustration.

“You're always sorry,” Everild rasped, his words cutting through the air like a blade. His anger was barely contained, the pressure building inside him with every word. “What did you have to discuss with me? Talk and be done with it. I'm taking my husband back to our castle.”

Wilburg looked as though he wanted to argue, to push back against the demands, but he hesitated, clearly weighing his next move. With a resigned sigh, he set the goblet down on a side table and drew himself upright, a king who had momentarily lost his composure but was quickly regaining it. “Yes. Well. I wanted to talk about the future

of the kingdom,” he said, his voice carrying a weight that immediately put Everild on edge.

Everild stared at him in silence, waiting for the king to elaborate. His cousin took a moment, gathering his thoughts, before speaking again.

“My successor,” Wilburg finally said, his words slow and deliberate, as though measuring their impact.

Everild’s expression remained unchanged, the silence between them heavy.

“I’ve thought quite hard about it,” Wilburg continued, an air of uncertainty creeping into his voice. “I’ve... made a decision. Gerald is probably confirming it with the other advisors as we speak.”

Everild’s mind raced. Was this about an adoption? Or perhaps a pregnancy? The king had certainly had his share of lovers over the years—men and women alike—but none who had ever seemed to hold a special place in his heart or family. Everild could feel the tension building in his chest, his suspicions rising as he tried to read his cousin’s intentions.

Unsure how to respond, Everild simply nodded, his voice cold. “Congratulations. To your dynasty. May it be long and storied.”

His cousin smiled, a look of genuine satisfaction crossing his face as he leaned back into the pillows. “Ah, it will be now, I think. I need someone respected, someone who will hold onto all the gains we’ve made—strengthen them, even. Someone who can truly unite the people,” Wilburg said, his tone turning a bit more earnest. “Camdyn’s father is one of the richest men in this kingdom, and his family’s old and well-loved. Their people are wild—they’ve never willingly bowed to me, but they’ll gladly bow to you with one of their own at your side.”

A cold shiver ran down Everild's spine. His heart lurched in his chest. "What?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "What?"

Wilburg's eyes gleamed with a mixture of calculation and expectation. "You can't be a proper king if you don't have the right consort, cousin," he said, his tone condescending yet certain. "Didn't I say I would take care of everything for you? A pretty, pious husband. The support of his family and their allies, money, soldiers. That summerhouse his father threw in for good measure. And a kingdom. That's as good a present as any, isn't it?"

The words hit Everild like a blow to the chest. "No, I can't. I won't. Why? Why me?" he asked, his voice thick with disbelief.

"Who else would there be?" Wilburg countered, his expression puzzled, as if the answer was so obvious it should be unquestioned. "You're my cousin. You've been my lifelong companion. I've always sought your advice and your thoughts, haven't I? You've never steered me wrong. And you've supported me, fought for me. Who else would I choose?"

The thought of Dustan entered Everild's mind, sharp and unwelcome. "Dustan?" he asked, the very idea repulsing him, though he knew it wasn't an impossible consideration. In terms of bloodlines, he was just as legitimate a choice as Everild, if not more.

Wilburg hesitated for the first time, his smile faltering. "I'll admit, I discussed that with Gerald. But... He's not popular, with many of the other lords and ladies. Or the officers, really."

"Neither am I," Everild snapped back, his patience running thin.

"Ah, but, you see, there's been some—some accusations. Conduct during the war,

some bedroom rivalries, that kind of thing,” Wilburg explained quickly, the words tumbling out. “I’ll tell him my decision, but I wanted to wait to tell you, first.” His eyes darkened slightly as he continued, “And besides, he’s not who I wanted. You’re to be the king, Everild.”

“I won’t accept. I’ll refuse it,” Everild growled, his words laced with venom. The very thought of wearing the crown made him feel sick. He had never sought it. As a youth, all he cared about had been swords, wrestling, and avoiding his lessons. As a soldier, he had only wanted to survive. And now? Now, he just wanted Camdyn. He wanted to see him smile, to hold him.

Wilburg’s face flushed a deep, angry red. “Well, really now, Everild. You’d plunge us into a succession crisis? A civil war? You’d splinter the kingdom, bring bloodshed back to our shores? You’d do that to our people? You’re the best choice for the future of this land, cousin. I thought you’d be happy. I thought you’d thank me.”

The boiling rage inside Everild erupted like a storm. “Should’ve thought of that before making me your heir, then, you fucking moron,” he roared, his voice thick with fury. “As selfish and stupid as you’ve always been. Not once in your life have you thought of anyone but yourself. The future, the people—you just don’t want your reign to end with you as a footnote in history. The king who brought nothing but violence and death, who cared for nothing but meat and wine and a good fuck. You’re a jester in your own court. I know your motives. So does God. When you die and face Them for all the lives you’ve ruined, beg for Their mercy. You’ll get none from me. Any love I had left for you, I dropped onto that beach with my armor. It’s probably at the bottom of the sea now. Go look for it there, if you want it so much.”

When he was done shouting, his chest heaved from exertion, his throat raw. The blood had rushed to his head, and there was a coppery taste in the back of his throat, as if he had tried and failed to bite his own tongue. With a snarl, Everild spat onto the grass, his anger still simmering just beneath the surface.

Wilburg, ever the pragmatist, gave him an odd, almost amused smile. He poured himself another glass of wine, then held it up to Everild. “You see, though? That’s something I’ve always admired about you, Everild. You only ever speak the truth, and you suffer no fools. A very fine king you’ll be.”

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The rest of the hunting party avoided Everild’s gaze as he left the king’s tent. He could feel their eyes on him, even if they didn’t dare meet his. His words, though perhaps not intelligible in the chaos of his rage, had certainly been unmistakable in their intensity. He could still hear the echo of his own voice ringing in his ears, the sharpness of his roar cutting through the air. The party’s tense silence only confirmed what had just transpired.

Everild stole a quick glance at Dustan, who stood apart from the others, watching him with narrowed eyes filled with suspicion. Everild couldn’t help but feel the weight of that gaze, but he had no time to dwell on it. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

As he approached his own men, even they couldn’t hide the wary glances they cast his way. Their unease was palpable, the tension in the air thickening with every step he took toward them. Udele, who had been tending to her dogs, paused in her motions. She was gently soothing the anxious animals, no doubt disturbed by the outbursts that had reverberated through the camp. “Everild?” she asked, her voice laced with concern.

He held up a hand to stop her, shaking his head as he did so. His mind was still reeling from the confrontation with the king. He couldn’t afford to focus on anything else right now.

At that moment, his gaze shifted to where Camdyn sat near the fire, wrapped in a

blanket for warmth. As soon as he saw his husband, the worry on Camdyn's face was unmistakable. The man stood and hurried toward him, his steps quick and urgent. "What's happened, my lord? Are you okay? We heard you yelling." Camdyn's voice trembled slightly with concern, and his wide eyes were filled with questions.

"Later," Everild muttered, his voice sounding rough and strained. He had pushed himself too hard in the tent, his anger getting the better of him. When he cleared his throat, the sharp sting of pain shot through him, and it was almost impossible to form the words he needed. "Back to the castle," he continued, trying to steady his voice. "To the physician. For you. Then we'll talk."

Camdyn nodded quickly, his expression softening. "Yes. Yes, of course, my lord."

Everild didn't waste any more time. He quickly ensured that Camdyn was safely on the back of his horse before he mounted himself, settling carefully behind him. With a light pressure of his heels, Everild urged the horse into motion, guiding it slowly and steadily toward the castle. Their attendants followed, keeping their distance to allow them privacy, but they stayed close enough to assist if needed.

Everild kept his pace slow and deliberate, careful not to agitate Camdyn's injuries, the weight of the day's events still pressing heavily on his shoulders. He couldn't help but think about the strange, unexpected turn his life had taken. Only a month ago, he had been so sure of his path—serving the king, a life of duty and honor, perhaps even rising to the position of a trusted advisor. But now, he found himself in the unimaginable position of not only being married to Camdyn but also having him be bound to him as the future prince consort. It was a role he had never envisioned, a responsibility he had never asked for, yet here it was, inescapable.

Quite a path for one's life to take, Everild thought, his mind wandering as the castle grew closer with every passing mile. From a prospective cleric, uncertain of his future, to this—a prince consort, a husband, a man caught in the web of politics and

destiny.

Camdyn leaned back against him as they rode, the soft weight of his body comforting in its quiet presence. He sighed deeply, and Everild instinctively held him tighter, offering what little protection he could. The road ahead was uncertain, but for now, all he could focus on was the man in his arms and the promise he had made. Whatever happened next, Everild knew he would stand by Camdyn's side, no matter the cost.

Page 8

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Before beginning the search for Camdyn, Everild had sent a rider back to the castle with urgent news. The message was simple but grave: his husband was missing, possibly injured, and the physician should be prepared. The rider had hurried away, racing across the land to spread the word. By the time the rider had alerted the staff and the household, the castle had descended into a flurry of activity. Rumors and wild speculation ran rampant as servants and attendants gathered, whispering, unsure of what to believe or fear. The whole place had been thrown into chaos, each person filled with dread or curiosity as they awaited news of what had truly happened.

When Everild and his group finally arrived back at the stables, they were met by a small crowd of eager and anxious servants. They had clearly been waiting for any sign of their lord's return. Among them was Willow, who, spotting Udele, rushed forward with a smile to embrace her wife, happy to see her again. As the two women exchanged a quiet greeting, one of the stable hands—a young, wide-eyed man who couldn't seem to contain his excitement—took Everild's reins. His hands shook, and he barely managed to hold the reins steady, his eyes bright with anticipation. "My lord, is it true you fought off a bear all on your own to rescue your lord husband?" he asked, his voice filled with awe.

Everild couldn't help but scowl at the young man's enthusiasm, but the stable hand was undeterred. Despite the brief, irritated noise Everild made, the stable hand seemed to believe that something far more heroic had taken place—his mind already painting a much grander picture of the events that had transpired.

"Couldn't have been a bear," Willow commented, her voice light as she idly stroked her wife's cheek with a weathered hand. "Only my Udele could take one alone."

Udele smiled and shrugged, her face softening as she looked at her wife. “Nothing fiercer than you, love,” she replied in a teasing, affectionate tone.

Camdyn, standing a little further away, watched the scene unfold with a quiet ache in his heart. He couldn’t help but feel a stir of jealousy. It wasn’t the intensity of their affection that made him feel this way, but the easy, familiar bond they shared—how they expressed love in front of others without hesitation. The sweet names they called each other, the way they looked at one another—it told the story of years of happy marriage, years of shared experiences and deep connection. He wondered—would Everild like it if Camdyn called him "my love" or "darling" one day? Would Everild ever refer to him in such terms? The idea felt like a distant hope, something he could only dream of. Perhaps one day, he thought wistfully. Perhaps.

"Camdyn?" Everild’s voice broke through his thoughts, and he looked up to see his husband studying him with concern. “The physician.” Everild’s voice sounded strained, almost painful, a rough rasp in place of its usual deep and gravelly tone. Camdyn felt a twinge of worry. Everild had always had a voice like the rumble of distant thunder, but now it was raw and hoarse, as though he had overexerted himself. Camdyn’s concern for his husband flared. He had been the one who had been injured, but he knew he wouldn’t rest until he knew Everild was taken care of as well.

“Back to the castle,” Everild insisted, though his voice still held an edge of discomfort. “To the physician. For you. Then, we’ll talk.” His words were firm, but there was a weariness in them that Camdyn could hear.

Camdyn nodded, his heart full of emotion, though he kept his thoughts to himself. “Yes. Yes, of course, my lord.” He followed Everild as they made their way back toward the castle, both of them moving slowly, carefully, ensuring that Camdyn’s injuries didn’t worsen. They needed to get back to safety, to the comfort of their bedchamber, but it seemed like the whole castle was in an uproar, with servants running back and forth, shouting, and muttering. It was difficult to make progress

through the crowded halls as people clustered around them.

One of the older maids, a woman named Cainech, who had served his parents' household for years, rushed toward him as soon as she spotted them. She was holding a tear-stained handkerchief, and when she reached Camdyn, she pressed it to her face, sobbing with relief. Her voice trembled as she explained how she had heard the rumors of his fall—that he had been thrown from his horse and had fallen to his death from the cliffs. Camdyn blinked in confusion—there were no cliffs near their hunting grounds.

“There are no cliffs in the area,” he said quietly, though he appreciated her concern.

Cainech wiped her eyes, her face full of worry, as she asked, “So, you weren’t thrown from your horse, my lord?”

“Oh, well, yes. I was,” Camdyn answered with a gentle smile, trying to ease her panic. “Just—not down a cliff.” He couldn’t help but feel a little amused by the outlandish rumors, though he knew it was all born from love and concern.

Everild, clearly eager to escape the endless questions and chatter, quickly took Camdyn’s arm and led him away, though Cainech stared after them in horror, her mind still struggling to grasp the reality of the situation.

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The physician’s name was Edwin, one of Everild’s staff sent from his family to serve in the household. Edwin was a slight, dark-haired man who typically appeared quite pleasant, but on this occasion, he was visibly harried. As soon as they entered the room, Edwin had Camdyn sit on the edge of the bed while he opened a case filled with vials, flasks of various sizes and colors, and an assortment of envelopes containing powders and herbs.

Without hesitation, Edwin began to scold Everild. “Well, it really would’ve been better if you hadn’t moved him, my lord,” he said, squeezing Camdyn’s limbs as Everild paced behind him. “Next time there’s a fall like this, have me brought to the patient, not the other way around.”

Everild frowned. “There’ll be no next time,” he grunted.

“Edwin,” Camdyn interjected, “Please examine my husband’s throat next.”

“After you,” Everild growled.

“Of course, of course,” Edwin soothed. “Now, would you please disrobe, my lord?”

Camdyn blushed, though it seemed ridiculous. He and Everild had already seen each other nude, and they’d shared the same bed in that state. But, for some reason, undressing in front of his husband in this context felt different. Quietly, he asked, “I’m sorry, Everild, but could you...?”

Everild, like a soldier receiving an order, nodded, turned sharply on his heel, and marched out of the room. “Be right outside,” he said before closing the door behind him.

As Camdyn stripped off his clothes, Edwin kindly organized his case of vials and bottles. Camdyn winced as he pulled his shirt over his head, letting out a small hiss as he bent to remove his boots and pants. His left side had turned an angry red.

The physician clucked his tongue. “Ah, my lord, you’ll have some nasty bruising for a few days.” Edwin’s examination was professional, respectful, and surprisingly gentle. He checked Camdyn for any potential breaks, tears, or internal injuries, apologizing each time his prodding caused a wince or whimper. Finally, Edwin smiled, reporting, “Well, my lord, it seems you’ve been thrown off a horse.”

Camdyn laughed. “Oh, goodness, is that your final diagnosis?”

“Indeed,” Edwin replied. “Nothing broken, nothing sprained. You’ll be sore for a little while, but that and the bruises will be the worst of it. However, it must’ve been quite a shock for you, so I recommend some rest. I’ll prepare a mixture for you—valerian extract with chamomile and lavender in warm mulled wine. Drink it after your meal.”

“Thank you, Edwin,” Camdyn said, pulling on a large nightshirt that had been laid out for him. It was as long as Everild’s velvet tunic, very fine, but somehow, it didn’t feel as soft or warm on Camdyn’s skin. It was fresh and clean, but he would’ve preferred the scent of his husband on it. He couldn’t help but ask Edwin, “May I—could you answer a medical question for me?”

The physician turned from his case. “What do you wish to know?”

“It’s about—about sex,” Camdyn stammered.

Edwin didn’t seem surprised. “Yes, my lord?”

“Does it have to hurt? Initially?”

Edwin’s expression grew wary. “What do you mean by that, Camdyn?”

Wiggling on the bed, hands clasped together in his lap, Camdyn said, “I mean, well. Surely there’s a way for it to be more—more pleasant? So that it’s, um, enjoyable for the duration? The—the initial, um, aspect of it. The penetration.”

The physician frowned. “It should not hurt, Camdyn. If you’ve been prepared enough, it should not hurt, I assure you.”

Ah, Camdyn thought. This hadn't been mentioned in any of the stories he'd read in his family's library. "Yes? How does one prepare?"

Edwin didn't even blink. "With oil. Copious amounts of it."

"Oh! You mean—for—"

Edwin proceeded to give Camdyn an impromptu lecture on how to engage in safe, responsible, and pleasant intercourse. It was informative and enlightening, and by the end of it, Camdyn's face was so hot he felt like he might boil water. There was a certain logic to it, and Camdyn didn't doubt Edwin's knowledge, but his mind couldn't help but worry about one thing: even with lubrication and the use of fingers, would Everild truly fit inside him when the time came? He had seen on their wedding night that Everild was quite large, even when not aroused.

A careful question from Edwin stirred Camdyn from his thoughts. "My lord? Camdyn? Is this all new information for you?"

How embarrassing. He was a grown man, yet this was still awkward. There had been young men who visited the monastery, and he had shared kisses and touches with them, but his experience had been light on details. "Well, I'm not ignorant about the process. But, um... I didn't know certain aspects. So—so thank you for telling me how to make it more—more comfortable." Though, truthfully, he wasn't sure how comfortable it would be. He would prefer it to be painless.

Edwin looked appalled. "Camdyn, is there something you want to—"

They both jumped at the loud knock on the door. "Everything alright?" Everild called.

Camdyn shifted on the bed. "Yes, my lord. Please, come in."

Everild entered with a tray laden with bread, cheese, and what appeared to be a bowl of stew. He set it on a clear space next to Edwin's case and addressed the physician. "What of my husband?"

Edwin pursed his lips. "Bruised, and in need of a good night's sleep, but otherwise fine. However, you would do well to remember that your husband lacks your experience. He is quite unused to rough and strenuous activities, my lord."

Camdyn frowned at that remark. It seemed a bit of an overstatement. He had done plenty of hard work at the monastery, from caring for livestock to foraging for herbs for Cenric, and he loved swimming, walking, and climbing trees. The king had merely chosen an activity he had never had reason to learn.

Everild blanched at Edwin's words. He rasped, "Never meant—thought it best to just... get it over with."

Edwin frowned. "Yes, well. You should've known better. Take more care with your husband. A lord should strive to be noble in both bearing and behavior."

Everild appeared thoroughly chastened, and Camdyn felt that this uncalled-for scolding had gone on long enough. He drew himself up in the blankets, outraged. "Edwin, stop this. My husband is a gentleman. He's kind and sweet and caring and—and—ow!" A sudden jolt of pain shot through his left shoulder, and Everild rushed to his side.

"Don't strain yourself," Everild said, running a comforting, calloused hand over Camdyn's shoulder.

Camdyn leaned into the touch. He murmured, "You're one to talk. Let Edwin take a look at your throat, please. I'm worried."

“After you eat,” Everild insisted.

“Well, then let me eat.”

The bread was soft, though it was from this morning, and the cheese was sharp and pungent. Everild tried to spoon-feed him the vegetable and lentil stew but sheepishly placed the tray in Camdyn’s lap when he noticed the glare Camdyn gave him. It was a sweet thought, really, Camdyn mused as he lifted bite after bite of carrots, lentils, onions, and savory broth to his mouth. But he was neither an invalid nor a child. He had made a mistake in the forest, a little scraped up, but it wasn’t worth complaining about. He would do better next time, and then his husband would see him as capable—someone he could rely on, not a delicate, coddled burden.

When Camdyn glanced up from his meal, he found Everild staring off into space, deep in thought. “Are you okay?” Camdyn asked. “Is it—what the king discussed with you?”

Everild shook his head. “Later. You need to rest.” He handed Camdyn the cup of mulled wine mixed with the powdered herbs that Edwin had left.

It was strong wine, and the flavor of the herbs didn’t make it more palatable, but Camdyn swallowed it down. At least it was warm. He handed the empty cup back to Everild, who set it aside on his desk. “Lay down, Camdyn.”

The pillows felt more comfortable than they had the night before. The medicine was taking effect quickly, and Camdyn could barely keep his eyes open. As he settled into the blankets, he asked, voice heavy with sleep, “How long have Willow and Udele been married?”

Everild paused to think, eyes on the ceiling. “Since before I was born. Forty years or more.”

Camdyn smiled at the answer. How wonderful! Forty years of love and care. They had spent more time together than apart and were still so affectionate and tender. He and Everild could have that, too, given enough time. Camdyn reached for his husband's hand, feeling the familiar calluses and scars. He cherished them.

Everild kissed his cheek and gently stroked his hand as sleep overtook Camdyn.

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It was morning when Camdyn stirred, sunlight seeping through the cracks in his clochán. It was too late for first prayers, then, to wake before the sun rose and sing his devotion with the rest of the monks. As a child, he had thought it was they who brought about each new day, coaxing the sun back to the sky with their hymns every morning.

Silly.

He snuggled back into his pillows.

A wren cheerfully trilled outside the window.

There was a tentative knock on the door. Which was extremely strange because the huts of the monastery had no doors, nor windows.

Camdyn sat up, bleary and confused. "Yes?" he called.

A man peered into the room. "My lord, your father is here to see you. Will you receive him?"

How kind of the abbot to visit him when he was feeling unwell! "Please, see him in," he said. Camdyn hoped his absence hadn't upset the daily chores too much. It had

always been his task to forage; he had a keen eye for wild herbs and flowers. And Brother David was so suspicious of the cows—the won't get milked if Camdyn wasn't there—

But it wasn't the abbot's kindly face that greeted him.

It was his father, tall and lean, and displeasure etched onto his harsh features.

Camdyn instinctively shrank into his blankets. The last few days' events came rushing back to him like a wave. He hoped his father had come to check up on him, but the expression on the man's face told him otherwise.

"G-good morning, father," Camdyn said.

His father glared at him. "So, I see you're well. They told me yesterday you might be dead or dying, but it looked like it was a great deal of fuss for nothing. Tell me, did you always make a spectacle of yourself at the monastery, or was this a recent habit formed from newfound freedom? First at the ceremony—"

"I was frightened, father," Camdyn whispered, clutching the blankets to his chest.

"Well, at least the Beast seemed to find it charming."

He shivered underneath the furs, but that comment lit a spark of anger in his heart. He didn't like it when people referred to Everild by that name with such contempt. "My lord," he stated, eyes narrowed.

The incredulous look his father gave him was somewhat satisfying. Camdyn continued, "When you speak of my husband, you will refer to him as 'my lord.' He is your better, father—a great man."

His gratification at his father's shock was short-lived. The man stormed to the side of the bed and yanked the blankets from Camdyn's hands, tossing them to the side. "If you're going to speak to me, you'd better stop hiding. You think me ignorant of social hierarchies, child? Of where I stand? Of where our family stands? Why do you think I married you to the brute in the first place? Out of the monastery for a month, and you think to lecture me." The man let out a mirthless laugh and gritted his teeth. "Tell me, did the king and your lord husband have their discussion before your histrionics ruined yet another event?"

Camdyn stared at his hands. "N-no. After. After I was found. They did talk for a bit, but something angered Everild and we left. He didn't tell me what happened."

His father threw his hands skyward. "Ah! Perfect! I marry my son to one of the most powerful men in the kingdom and what do I get in return? Nothing but a rude, surly little boy whose husband doesn't even bother to keep him abreast of important matters."

The rebuke stung. Camdyn blinked back tears. "But—but he said we'd discuss it, when I'd rested a bit, father," he offered.

The man scoffed. He sauntered around the room, hands behind his back, peering at Everild's desk, the woven carpet, the embroidered tapestries on the walls. "He does seem rather fond of you, I suppose. The bedding went well, I presume?"

A blush roared across Camdyn's face like a forest fire. "No, no, we haven't—that is, we've yet to—"

"You're joking." When he stayed silent, his father stomped back to the side of the bed and yanked his chin up. Camdyn attempted to avoid his gaze, but the man squeezed his jaw and snarled, "Look at me. Didn't I tell you to make yourself agreeable to him?"

“He—he said we could wait, until I’m r-ready.” His husband was so kind; Camdyn was truly lucky that it was Everild’s face that greeted him when his veil was brushed back at the wedding.

His father snorted. “You think he’ll wait around forever? The shy, chaste little novice will only interest him for so long. All he needs is someone with a willing pair of open legs and a sympathetic ear and we’ll have lost our best chance at advancement in court.”

“W-what?”

“Soon enough every noble family throughout the land will be throwing their pretty sons and daughters at him—you think you’ll compare? Get him into bed, Camdyn. Make yourself available to him whenever he desires so that he’ll never have reason to look at another.”

Camdyn sniffled. Everild would never—would he? He had said that it didn’t matter to him whether or not they had sex, but did that mean he would eventually find fulfillment elsewhere? But Camdyn did want him, it was just... “I—please, father, I’m afraid. I’m scared it will hurt, I don’t want—“

The sneer on his father’s face was extraordinarily ugly and cruel. “You’re joking,” he said again. “The future of our family is on the line—your brothers, your sisters, your nieces and nephews—and you’re balking because you’re worried about a little pain. Didn’t they teach you about sacrifice and selflessness at that monastery of yours? How did a group of monks raise a selfish, impudent coward?”

With a quick, sudden movement, he let Camdyn’s head drop and squeezed his left side, nails digging into his skin just under his ribs, still sore and bruised from the fall. Camdyn cried out at the jolt of pain that raced through his body. “Ouch! Father, stop, please, please!” He trembled, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“But I’ve already stopped. Look.” His father spread his arms out wide. “And that wasn’t so bad, was it? You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Stifling sobs, Camdyn wiped his eyes and whispered, “Y-yes,” though he ached where his father had grabbed him.

“See? Pain is finite. It will end. Now all you have to do is lay back on that bed and wait for him to finish. He’ll be done by the time it takes to say a prayer—just think of that.”

But even if it was Everild, the very thought of having to—to be held down on the bed by another’s weight, bound to endure and suffer and pray as someone forced themselves onto him, into him—

He could not stop the distressed cry that spilled from his lips, or the cascade of tears that followed. Camdyn curled up, back against the headboard, knees to his chest, shoulders shaking as he wept. “Please, not that. I didn’t want to—I was scared. I was sorry. I was s-so sorry, father. But I tried—I talked to Edwin, about—please, believe me. Just don’t—p-please don’t hurt me again—“

Camdyn sobbed so loudly that neither he nor his father noticed when Everild entered the room.

“What is this?” His husband’s voice was like a crack of thunder, his face a mask of fury, eyes narrowed, lip curled around his bared teeth. He was shaking, not like Camdyn’s fearful trembling, but actually quivering with rage. His father had snarled at him, but Everild looked like a beast given human form.

Camdyn’s father took a step back, his irritated expression transformed to one of panic. He glanced at the shut door and back to his son-in-law. “My apologies, my lord,” he wheedled, “My son is still feeling unwell. He has been hysterical—“

“He was fine. Sleeping. What have you done?” Behind the rage Camdyn could hear him struggling to speak. Had he ever gone to see Edwin? He would only damage his voice further.

Shivering on the bed, he said, “E-Everild, be careful, please, your throat—“

His husband’s gaze softened but his voice remained a gravelly, raw growl. “Camdyn. What happened?”

But what could he say? That his own father had hurt him? Yelled at him and threatened him for not having yet consummated their marriage? Ashamed and humiliated, Camdyn frantically shook his head and wailed, a fresh wave of tears fell from his eyes.

Everild turned to Camdyn’s father and growled, “Leave.”

“Now, wait just a moment, my lord—“

But Everild hadn't waited. He surged forward in two long strides and grabbed Camdyn’s father by the throat. The man sputtered and choked, scrabbling to lift Everild’s massive hand from his windpipe, but Everild dragged him like a ragdoll into the hall. The door slammed shut, but Camdyn could hear the commotion outside, a cacophony of voices—the guards, Aldaay, his father’s strangled gasps, and Everild, snarling and raging like a wolf.

“Everild—you’ll kill him, let go, let go—“

“Ready his horse. He’d never step foot here again.”

The high-pitched wheeze his father had made had been almost humorous. “Camdyn was my son, I had a right to see my son—“

“You had no rights to my husband,” Camdyn heard Everild bark. Then, again, “Ready his horse.”

Camdyn was still sobbing when his husband returned. He rubbed at his eyes with his sleeve, furious with himself.

He was pathetic. He hadn't been fit for the monastery, no matter how much Cenric and the abbot had tried—always too unfocused, too undisciplined. He would've made a terrible cleric. But now he'd been made into an ill-matched companion for Everild, one who had been untrained in running a household and who couldn't even—couldn't even provide a nightly comfort to his husband. All Camdyn ever did was weep, and all Everild ever did was soothe him.

So when Everild kneeled at the side of the bed and asked, “Could I hold you?” Camdyn turned away from him, sniffing and crying. An anxious tone entered his husband's rough voice. “Tell me what happened, Camdyn. Please.”

He hadn't said anything for a time, merely curled up and buried his face in the blankets, but Everild hadn't left. Instead, he felt a tentative hand on his back and, when he didn't react either way, Everild gently rubbed at the spot between his shoulder blades with his palm.

When there were no more tears left for him to cry and when he felt more exhausted than upset, Camdyn turned and sat up to face his husband. “D-do you have another?” he asked, his voice wobbly.

Everild frowned, brows furrowed in confusion. “Another what?”

“A-another partner. A lover. Was that why it's—was that why you didn't care if I gave myself to you?”

“Camdyn.” Disbelief crept into Everild’s hoarse rasp. “Was that what your father had told you?”

“He said that I needed to make myself agreeable to you. To find your favor, so that—so that our family’s future would be secure.” Camdyn bunched the blankets with his fists. “He was angry that we hadn’t yet consummated our marriage. He said you’d find someone else and that I should just—just pray, and wait until you—until you finished.”

Abject horror lined his husband’s face. He crawled onto the bed and pulled Camdyn into his arms. “Camdyn, no. Never. I would never—I had told you that on our wedding night.”

Camdyn nodded miserably. “I knew, I remembered. It’s just—he upset me, and—and I would have liked to, and I knew you would never intentionally hurt me, but I was frightened. I asked Edwin what could be done to make it hurt less and he told me how to prepare, but I didn’t—I didn’t know, I’d never done that before, either.”

An odd look had passed over Everild’s face. Something like realization. “Ah. So Edwin—never mind. Camdyn, why did you want to have sex?”

“Because I wanted our marriage to work!” Camdyn wailed. “I wanted—I wanted to be a good husband and s-satisfy you—“

Everild’s hands run up and down his sides. “Was that the only reason? You thought it was your duty?”

Shifting so that he could hug him, Camdyn said, “No. I want you, Everild.” He was the only person that Camdyn had ever really wanted, the only one who had made his heart flutter in excitement and anticipation, who made him feel safe and calm wrapped in his embrace.

“You have me.” His husband held him tight. “I’m happy, just like this.”

“But I wanted—“ Camdyn hesitated. He felt so selfish, so embarrassed. “I wanted to feel you, and touch you. And I wanted you to touch me and feel me as well. But—“

Everild interrupted him. “But you were scared of penetration,” he said matter-of-factly.

Camdyn’s face, blotchy from tears, reddened further. “Y-yes. I’m sorry.”

A kiss was pressed against the top of his head. “Don’t be sorry. We can do something else, if you want. Whatever makes you feel good. My hands, or my mouth.”

His words made Camdyn shiver, and yet... “But, what about, um. What about your pleasure, Everild?”

“I’d take pleasure in just watching you.”

That answer seemed a bit of a dodge. Camdyn pulled back and frowned.

A sigh. “My own hand. Or, I’ll show you what I like. Just as you’ll tell me what you like. Right?”

“R-right.”

Camdyn snuggled into the crook of Everild’s neck, arms wrapped around his waist. His husband continued his gentle ministrations, his touch especially feather-light around Camdyn’s bruised left side. They were pressed together so tightly that Camdyn could feel Everild’s heartbeat against his own chest, its steady, strong rhythm a balm to Camdyn’s jittery pulse.

He was very nearly asleep again when his earlier concern had flashed through his mind. “Everild, did you have Edwin examine your throat? I don't want you to hurt your voice.”

A guilty look had crept onto Everild's face. “I am supposed to be having tea with honey.”

“Have you had any of that today?” At his husband's silence, Camdyn firmly pushed him off and admonished him. “Everild! You have to take care of yourself! Were the kitchens still open? We'll have your tea.”

“Only if you eat breakfast,” Everild grunted.

“Fine,” Camdyn said, “Fine. But I wanted to see you drink that tea.”

“Yes, my lord,” Everild murmured.

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The hall looked drastically different without the usual bustle of wedding guests, the lively musicians filling the air with their melodies, and the countless piles of food adorning every surface. It was eerily quiet, nearly empty, a stark contrast to the vibrant celebration just hours earlier. Only a handful of servants remained, quietly cleaning the tables and utensils, their soft movements the only sound that filled the space. Camdyn, feeling utterly out of place in the sudden stillness, attempted to hide his face in Everild's side. His eyes were still swollen and red from the tears that had flowed earlier, and he was certain that he looked absolutely terrible. Indeed, as he glanced around, he noticed a few of the servants casting furtive glances his way, their expressions fraught with worry and concern.

If Everild noticed the stares, he paid them no mind. Instead, he focused all his

attention on Camdyn, determined to offer him some comfort. The two of them sat side by side, just like they had during their wedding banquet, a moment of shared intimacy amidst the surrounding emptiness. As they waited for the table to be set, Everild pulled their chairs even closer together, until their knees brushed and Camdyn was able to rest his head gently against his husband's broad shoulder. The simple act of closeness, of shared space, provided Camdyn with an unexpected sense of solace.

The events of the day—particularly the confrontation with his father and the emotional toll it had taken—had drained Camdyn of much of his energy, leaving him feeling depleted. But as his eyes fell upon the food that Everild had had prepared, a small flicker of cheer sparked within him. It wasn't anything extravagant, but it was warm and comforting in its simplicity, just like the meals he'd had during his time at the monastery. The thought of such humble, nourishing food brought him a sense of calm.

There was plain oatmeal, served with a choice of savory salted fish or sweet, spiced baked apples. The bread, freshly baked and aromatic, was a comforting sight—brown and hearty, studded with grain, and soft, fluffy white loaves that seemed to promise warmth with each bite. And then there was the butter, rich and golden, pressed into delicate flower molds and arranged around the loaves like a small field of wildflowers. The sight of it was so beautiful that Camdyn couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt as he plucked one of the butter flowers to spread on his slice of brown bread. But when he tasted it, all thoughts of guilt vanished. It was utterly delicious.

“Good?” Everild asked, his voice warm with concern.

“It's good!” Camdyn replied with a small smile, watching his husband down yet another mug of tea. “Was it too bitter, Everild? Did you need more honey?” He reached for the honey jar and stirred another spoonful into Everild's tea, frowning slightly as the older man tried—and failed—to hide his distaste.

“Just not fond of tea,” Everild grumbled under his breath.

Camdyn leaned toward him, his expression softening. He placed a gentle kiss on Everild’s cheek, brushing his lips against the roughness of his husband’s stubble. “Keep drinking, please. Your voice sounds better already,” he murmured.

Everild’s lips curved into a teasing smirk. “How about a kiss for each sip, then?”

He was teasing, of course, but Camdyn found it to be good motivation. When he nodded enthusiastically and said, “Yes, of course,” a surprised yet pleased expression crossed Everild’s face. The older man grinned, and the two of them shared a quiet moment as Everild continued to sip his tea. Soon, all that remained on Camdyn’s tongue was the sweet taste of honey and the earthy bitterness of the tea. The steady rumble of Everild’s contented hum vibrated through his chest, a sound that soothed him as they shared this small, intimate ritual. After the last drop had been consumed, Camdyn, feeling a wave of happiness, decided that a small celebration was in order. He leaned forward and peppered Everild’s jaw with soft kisses, giggling at the tickle of his husband’s beard against his skin. The warm, comforting sound of their laughter filled the air before Everild pulled him onto his lap, kissing him deeply, his mouth a soothing balm to Camdyn’s overburdened soul.

A sudden, awkward cough shattered their reverie. One of the servants had been watching them, his eyes wide with nervousness, as though he feared that Everild might sweep the table clear with a single motion and press Camdyn down onto it right then and there. Perhaps that was why the servant hesitantly asked, “May I clear your plates, my lords?”

They pulled apart quickly, both of them flushing with embarrassment. Camdyn looked down at his lap, feeling his face burn as he nodded shyly. He couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious, unsure if their behavior had been entirely appropriate. Everild, sensing his discomfort, placed a gentle hand on his knee, offering silent

reassurance.

As the servant began to collect their plates, Camdyn's mind wandered back to something from the wedding banquet. He chewed on his lip thoughtfully, his gaze drifting toward his husband. "Everild? Do you remember what we discussed during the banquet? You said that we could have a feast for the poor—food to hand out to them. Could we still do that?" he asked, a note of hopefulness in his voice.

Everild looked surprised by the question but then nodded his head, his expression softening. "Of course we can."

Camdyn's eyes lit up. "Then... Could I help bake the bread? If the head baker doesn't mind? I'm good at baking bread. They taught me, at the monastery."

His husband placed a much more chaste kiss on Camdyn's curls, his lips pressing softly against his hair. "They'll be happy for your help. We'll talk to them later. You still need to meet the rest of the staff, after all."

Camdyn nodded, the reality of his new life settling in. He would have to meet all the staff members and learn everyone's names and faces in order to manage the day-to-day activities within the castle. There was much to learn, and much to do. But he couldn't help but feel that this life—this responsibility—might not be all that different from his time at the monastery. There would be tasks like taking inventory, cooking, cleaning, caring for the animals, assisting travelers, and helping to settle disputes. Brother David had often misplaced things and had a tendency to blame whichever creature was nearest, be it the cat or the abbot himself. Camdyn chuckled softly at the memory of those moments, but his thoughts were soon interrupted by Everild.

"Camdyn?" Everild's voice broke through his musings. "I want to show you something. When you've finished eating."

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The castle's walls were bordered by large, grassy fields. Everild walked him a little away from the stone structure, to where the forest was just visible but where the castle's shadow still reached them. They stopped at a small plot where the grass had been cleared and the soil upturned.

Everild rubbed the back of his head with a hand. He looked nervous. "You wanted a garden. I thought this might be a good spot. Is there enough sunlight? Is the soil fertile enough? I don't know what you can grow now. Never grown anything before. But I can help till the soil for you."

Camdyn inspected the plot of land. From where the area sat in relation to the castle's walls, there should have been more than enough sunlight for the crops. And the soil was dark, nearly black—excellent! He smiled. "It's perfect, Everild! If I start planting spinach now, we'll have some by winter. I could plant onions, too, but those wouldn't be ready until summer—carrots and peas by early spring, perhaps—"

Relief bloomed across Everild's face. "You like it, then?"

"I love it. Thank you."

His husband pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Anything you want. Just ask for it. I want this place to be a home to you. For you to find comfort in it."

Camdyn blushed. "Then, could you—I want you to kiss me like you did at our wedding," he said.

Everild nodded. Camdyn closed his eyes and waited.

After what seemed like an eternity, he felt Everild grab either side of his face and

give him a peck on the nose.

His eyes flew open. “Everild!” he scolded.

There was the beginning of a smile on Everild’s face. “That’s how I kissed you,” he said, innocently, his brow furrowed in mock confusion.

“Well, I meant the other kiss.”

“Was there another?”

“Yes!”

“Remind me.”

Camdyn murmured, “You held me like this.” He took Everild’s hands and put them on his hips. Everild gave him a squeeze. “And—and I had my hands like this—“ He pressed closer and placed his palms on his husband’s broad chest, fingers splayed.

His husband’s voice was low. “Now I recall,” he said.

Before, Camdyn had thought that he simply didn’t like to kiss. All the young men who had visited the monastery—ostensibly for prayer or shelter, but always seeking him out as soon as they could get away from prying eyes—neither their hands nor their lips had ever much interested him. The way they had put their mouths on his had been a curiosity, a way to while away the time, and Camdyn had honestly felt little else but bemusement at their activities and mild irritation at the merchant’s son, who always tried to slip his hand up his robes no matter how many times Camdyn slapped it away.

But with Everild, it was—it was odd, difficult to describe, because he never tired of

it, their kissing. Each time it felt as though they were at the altar and all Camdyn could feel and see was Everild, how warm he was, how strong and protective. But that first kiss, and all the ones after—it was as though it had always been Everild he had been waiting for. They slotted together perfectly, their lips against one another's, their fingers laced together, the way Camdyn fit underneath Everild's chin when they embraced.

His husband was, as always, careful with him, his fingers brushing lightly against Camdyn's bruises. But his kiss was hungry. Everild's tongue licked against Camdyn's lips and then into his mouth as if searching for a lingering taste of honey, wet and hot and wanting. It made Camdyn's heart pound and his knees tremble, but—

But he could tease, too. He laughed at Everild's groan when he pulled away. "More of that later," he commanded. "I want to meet the rest of the household today."

As he pulled Everild back to the castle, he heard his husband say, both amused and a little frustrated, "Yes, my lord."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Later that night, after the day's bustling activities had finally settled down, Camdyn excitedly told the cooks about his plans for the charity feast. He eagerly discussed every detail, his eyes shining with excitement as he spoke, but the cooks started to look increasingly harried. Their hands were busy with last-minute preparations, and some of them gave weary glances toward him as they tried to keep up with the mounting workload.

In the midst of this, Aldaay came to find Everild. He asked to speak with him privately, and they retreated to Everild's study for a more discreet conversation.

"You weren't as discrete as you could've been this morning," Aldaay said, his tone calm but carrying an edge of concern.

Despite the memory of Camdyn's delighted reaction to the garden and the lingering taste of his lips on Everild's tongue, the events of the morning were still too raw in his mind. His husband had been so vulnerable, cowering and sobbing in their bed while his father loomed over him, angry and threatening. Everild had felt powerless at that moment, watching the man who was supposed to be a protector instead become a source of fear and pain for his beloved Camdyn.

During dinner, Camdyn told him the entire story, his voice trembling as he spoke. He fidgeted nervously in his seat, his linen napkin crumpled in his lap, and his face flushed with embarrassment as he explained how his father had grabbed him. How he had hurt him—physically and emotionally. Camdyn had clearly struggled with the weight of what had happened, but he told Everild everything.

The memory of those moments still brought a wave of fury over Everild. His fists

clenched under the table, his jaw tightening as he fought back the impulse to lash out. Just the thought of it nearly sent him into another fit of rage. “Think I should’ve been kinder?” he spat, his voice laced with venom. “Let him abuse my husband more before sending him away? That sorry excuse for a man was lucky Camdyn had been too upset at the time to explain exactly what happened, or he wouldn’t have left the castle alive.”

Aldaay, ever calm and pragmatic, had never been one to cower before Everild’s anger. He sighed deeply, sensing the depth of his lord’s fury. “I wasn’t saying you should’ve been tactful,” he said. “You could’ve broken every finger in that bastard’s body for all I care—but it would’ve been better to do it out of sight. An absolute asshole that man is, but a powerful one, and you dragged him out the castle gates by the scruff of his neck like a naughty kitten—right in front of everyone. He’ll view that as a humiliation. There could be reprisals.”

Everild snorted dismissively, his fury still bubbling beneath the surface. “Then let him come,” he growled. “Next time I see his face, there won’t be enough of him to feed to the hogs.”

Aldaay only nodded, his face betraying little emotion but his eyes sharp with understanding. “Just be aware, my lord,” he replied, his voice low but firm. “Not everyone conducts their business face-to-face, as you do.”

The weight of Aldaay’s words lingered in Everild’s mind long after the conversation had ended. His anger subsided somewhat, but the tension in the air remained, like an unspoken threat. While Everild would never back down from protecting Camdyn, Aldaay’s advice reminded him that the political world they now lived in was a far more dangerous game, where subtlety and strategy were as important as strength and rage.

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But the next two weeks passed with neither complaint from Camdyn's father nor any messages from the king save the one sent when Everild's cousins and their myriad of servants returned to the capital.

It read:

To my one true and loyal Everild,

I regret how our last meeting ended, but I understand the day's excitement took a toll on your (very short) temper. I do feel most terribly for your lovely husband's accident. He is very sweet, and I know you adore him most ardently (did I not make a fine choice for you, my friend?).

But you must realize that my decision is final. There is no more fitting heir than you, cousin. Gerald has already informed the rest of the advisors at the capital and we'll make a formal announcement upon my return.

And worry not. I'll deal with Dustan. He won't be pleased, I know, but he'll come around. We all might have grown apart, in our adulthood (isn't that how it goes?) but he is still our cousin and I am certain he will see reason, just as you will the next time we meet. It will be a real discussion, no injured spouses and no spitting blood at me. Unsightly but not unusual with you, Everild.

I know better than anyone it's not the bark one has to fear from you, but the bite.

Until we meet again,

Wilburg

He had yet to tell Camdyn about his newfound status as the king's heir, but his husband had been so busy acclimating to his new home and the day-to-day

responsibilities of maintaining a castle and charming its inhabitants—from the guards to the kitchen staff to the scullery maids—in addition to organizing the charity feast. Everild had refused to burden him with such a revelation at a time when he was already stretched so thin, adjusting to the demanding roles that came with their new life. The castle had many moving parts, and Camdyn's enthusiasm for the feast was admirable, yet Everild could see the weight of it all beginning to settle in his shoulders. Camdyn had a quiet strength about him, but Everild was determined not to add any more stress to his life. Not yet, at least.

To be perfectly honest, though, Camdyn did not seem particularly stressed. In fact, Everild marveled at how his husband carried himself with such grace amidst the chaos. He had quickly grown adept at preparing food, so much so that he was grudgingly allowed into the cook's domain, where he worked alongside the staff with an enthusiasm that often left the head cook grumbling but also begrudgingly impressed. Camdyn woke up well before dawn each day, assisting the cooks, taking inventory, and ensuring that everything was in order. His passion for food was clear, and it seemed to delight him in a way that Everild had not expected. A collection of staples and dry goods began to form—cured meats, containers of grain, beans, and legumes, dried fruits, and woven rush baskets, which would soon be filled with fresh bread. Some of the dishes from their wedding banquet were also in the works, bringing with them memories of the night they had vowed to never let go of each other. It was in these small moments, Everild realized, that their bond was strengthened.

Every day, Camdyn came to him with a shy request for something—cheese, beef, goose, oranges, violets. Everild had granted every single one, and he cherished the delighted smile that Camdyn gave him each time, a smile that brightened even the darkest corners of the castle. There was something about those moments that made everything feel right in the world, like they were creating something beautiful together, bit by bit. Even when the demands of their new life seemed overwhelming, these simple acts of care reminded Everild that they were building something worth

fighting for.

One afternoon, as they sat together in the castle's library, Aldaay remarked dryly, "Some people buy their husbands pretty jewelry, but four whole cows and eight sacks of oranges will do just as well, I suppose." He'd been reviewing the castle's expenses, and the numbers were starting to pile up in a way that would make most advisors anxious.

The comment made Everild pause. He hadn't thought much about the more extravagant gifts he could give his husband, but the idea of jewelry suddenly sparked his imagination. "Do you think Camdyn would like a necklace?" he asked, the thought of his husband adorned with something more than just the simple, finely made clothes he already wore capturing his attention. Aldaay groaned and rolled his eyes in response, but Everild could not shake the image of Camdyn in court robes, gemstones sparkling from around his neck and encircling his wrists. He would look ethereal, like something out of a dream.

Everild filed the idea away for another time. Maybe, when the charity feast was behind them, and after his husband's hard work had been celebrated, he would surprise him with such a gift. It would be a symbol of how much he treasured the man who had come into his life like a bright light, someone who had made even the coldest corners of the castle feel warm.

The only hiccup in their plans came after Everild had officially procured the local church as the venue for the charity feast. Outside, they would have a package of goods for each of the visitors—dried meat, loaves of bread, and fruits—and inside, tables would be laden with food for the guests to pile upon a trencher and enjoy with their own silver tankards filled with wine. "You've made allies of the city's silversmiths, at least," Aldaay had remarked, noticing the elegant tankards and other silverware that were now being prepared. However, a group of irritated nobles sent a worried letter to Everild, explaining their concerns that the masses would not respect

the sanctity of the church. They feared the holy site would be left in shambles after the feast.

Everild had been more than ready to dismiss their complaints. “Let them eat shit,” he’d muttered under his breath, his patience wearing thin. But after Camdyn chided him for his language, he reluctantly agreed to meet with the group of nobles.

A few days later, they gathered in the great hall to discuss the matter. As Everild received respectful, if somewhat fearful, greetings, the group of nobles seemed completely charmed by Camdyn when he arrived with a tray of sweetmeats and wine. One of the men kissed his hand, his eyes shining with admiration, expressing how overjoyed he was to finally meet Camdyn in person. The kiss lingered for a moment too long, before the man kissed Camdyn’s hand again.

And again.

It was only when Everild let out a low, guttural growl that the man hastily returned to his seat, clearly unnerved by the dangerous glint in Everild’s eyes.

The nobles’ arguments mirrored the contents of the letter they had previously sent. They praised Camdyn’s generosity and piety—of course, they couldn’t help but mention his beauty as well, several times—but insisted that he was unaware of the dangers he was about to unleash upon one of God’s houses. They feared an overcrowding of ill-mannered, unwashed masses would desecrate the sacred ground.

Camdyn, however, only stared at them, his expression incredulous. “What is the Church but a sanctuary for those in need?” he asked, his voice steady and clear. “Would you rather have it be an empty, pretty building than one that gives succor to the people? Items can be replaced, and structures can be repaired, my lords, but people’s lives cannot. Is it not your duty as great men to use your resources to ease the lives of others?”

The nobles, gently admonished by this beautiful, devout young man, were left speechless. Slowly, they gave their blessing and, at Camdyn's insistence, left with the tray of sweetmeats as a gesture of goodwill.

Once the last of the nobles had disappeared from sight, Everild allowed himself to grin. "You handled that very well, Camdyn."

Aldaay cackled from his corner, amused by the whole affair. "Hard to argue about God and church with a former novice, eh?"

Camdyn shrugged, a playful glint in his eye. "Ah, well. I learned from the best. No one can argue quite like a group of monks. Especially when it's about food..."

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Once the well-regulated chaos of the post-wedding feast ended, they fell into an easy routine, and the days became a steady rhythm of familiar tasks.

Each morning, Camdyn rose before dawn to attend the early prayers at the chapel. The stillness of the early hours and the quiet of the empty halls gave him time to center his thoughts and connect with the faith that had long been a part of him. By the time the bells rang for breakfast, he was back in their bedchamber, where Everild awaited, already up and preparing for the day. They shared their morning meal together in the warmth of the chamber, the bustle of the castle still distant, as the sun's first light crept over the horizon.

After breakfast, Everild turned his attention to the daily duties of ruling. He carefully reviewed the guard reports from the previous day, making notes and ensuring that everything was in order. There was always something to discuss with Aldaay, who often joined him for updates on the surrounding lands, the state of their holdings, and any potential threats. Once those matters were settled, Everild took his customary

walk around the castle's perimeter. The sound of his boots echoing through the corridors, his sharp eyes inspecting the walls and gates—ever vigilant, ever aware of the weight of his responsibilities.

Meanwhile, Camdyn immersed himself in the tasks that occupied his days. He spent long hours in the library, studying texts on a variety of subjects, from history to botany. His curious mind was insatiable, eager to learn and grow in the new world he found himself a part of. But his interests didn't stop at books. When the weather allowed, he would practice his horsemanship with Willow. Riding through the open fields, he honed his skills, becoming more confident in the saddle each day.

The afternoons were dedicated to receiving petitioners. The great hall became a place of both opportunity and tension, as those who sought Everild's ear came with their requests, their complaints, or their proposals. Camdyn, always by his side, offered silent support, his presence a calming influence on his husband's sometimes short temper. With every gentle smile, every soft touch of encouragement, he steadied Everild as the petitions unfolded—knowing when to speak and when to remain quiet, allowing his husband the space to lead.

After the last petitioner had left, the couple separated for a short time. Camdyn would head to the garden, which they had tilled and planted together, despite the lack of growth. His patience was unwavering, though he did joke that perhaps the earth was a bit stubborn. "We just need to give it time," he would say with a wink, trying to lift Everild's spirits. Meanwhile, Everild would catch up on the mountain of reports that Aldaay continued to compile—details of trade, politics, and local affairs that demanded his attention.

As evening drew near and Camdyn returned from his gardening efforts, a smile on his face despite the hard work, Everild would have a warm bath waiting for him. The simple pleasure of relaxing together after a long day was a cherished part of their routine. Dinner followed, a quiet affair with just the two of them. They would share

their thoughts on the day, talk about their plans for the future, and simply enjoy the comfort of each other's company. When the meal was done, they would undress and fall into bed, tangled together under the covers, whispering of dreams and hopes for tomorrow.

It was bliss. It was more than Everild could have asked for. For the first time in his life, he felt truly at peace. And for Camdyn, the soft, unhurried pace of their life together was everything he had dreamed of since the day they met. There was no greater joy than this—a shared life, built on love and understanding.

Yet, despite this contentment, there was still one issue that lingered in the back of Everild's mind: the lack of letters from the monastery.

For weeks, they had heard nothing. No letters from Camdyn's father, who had only sent one letter—an apology addressed to Everild alone, blaming a misunderstanding for the emotional turmoil he had caused. Everild had burned it without a second thought, unwilling to keep a letter that did not acknowledge the pain it had caused. He could not bring himself to entertain the idea of mending ties with someone who had treated his husband so cruelly.

But Camdyn seemed undeterred by the lack of communication from his father. He found solace in the letters from his sisters, particularly Aoife's frequent updates about Young Aoife's antics, which never failed to make him smile. The letters from his brothers, however, seemed less than inspiring. "Gibson and Kenelm have hired a tailor for me," he remarked one day, casually as he sat at Everild's desk to pen a response. "That's Kenelm's wedding present—another set of clothes. I think I'd rather see a milliner, though. A hat for garden work would be nice."

Everild chuckled at the thought, agreeing that a hat for the garden would indeed be a practical and thoughtful gift. He made a mental note to add it to the growing list of things he intended to buy for Camdyn, a list that seemed to grow longer with every

passing day. The thought of surprising his husband with something new, something special, filled him with warmth.

Still, the lack of news from the monastery gnawed at him.

“I’ve sent Cenric a letter every chance I’ve gotten,” Camdyn confessed one morning over breakfast. His eyes were downcast, the uncertainty of the situation weighing heavily on him. “I thought perhaps I’d have received at least one by now. But then, it is so far away...”

Everild placed a hand over his, his voice steady and reassuring. “It is. But you’ll get them all at once. That’s how it always is. More than likely, they’ve just gotten stuck somewhere along the way. Bad weather, or a blocked path. Soon enough, you’ll be drowning in them.”

Camdyn looked up at him, a small smile playing at his lips. “Really?” His voice held a hint of hope. “I just have to keep waiting, then.”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

But nearly another week after that conversation, there were still no letters for Camdyn, who had grown increasingly homesick and anxious. Each morning, he would look hopefully at the pile of mail, only to be met with disappointment as the letters for him never came. The days began to drag on, and the weight of the silence pressed heavily on him. After the servants who brought them both their breakfast and the mail bowed and exited the room, Camdyn stared despondently at the food on his plate, lip quivering, as if even the simple task of eating had lost its appeal.

“Do you think maybe something’s happened?” he quietly asked Everild, his voice barely above a whisper. His untouched plate of bacon and eggs sat in front of him, but he had no appetite. “Cenric could’ve gotten sick, or—or maybe he’s injured—”

Everild sighed, leaning forward, trying to offer some reassurance. “I’m sure he’s fine, Camdyn,” he said, though he wasn’t sure himself. Still, it was important to ease his husband's troubled heart.

But despite his words, Camdyn’s eyes filled with tears, and his voice broke with the weight of his own worries. “Then—then maybe he’s just forgotten about me,” he whispered, the vulnerability in his words like a dagger to Everild’s chest.

“No one could ever forget about you,” Everild said softly, brushing away a few errant tears that rolled down Camdyn’s cheeks. “Just wait a little longer, Camdyn. You’re going to make yourself sick with worry. I know it feels like it’s been so long, but I’m sure you’ll hear from him soon. The monks are so far away. They must be delayed for some reason.”

“I’m sorry, Everild,” Camdyn said, voice choked. “I’m happy here with you, I

promise, it's just—" He trailed off, not sure how to put into words the ache he felt.

"You don't need to be sorry for missing your parent," Everild said gently, his heart aching for Camdyn. He reached out to take his husband's hands in his, squeezing them lightly. Then, as if trying to lift the weight of Camdyn's sorrow, he offered, "We don't have to wait for a letter. We can arrange to visit the monastery and see him. If that would ease your mind."

Camdyn wiped his eyes with his sleeve, and for a moment, it seemed like a glimmer of hope flickered in his expression. "Oh, Everild, that would be—but it's so far away, though." He looked uncertain, unsure whether it would be worth the journey.

"Nothing's too far or too much for you," Everild said firmly, truthfully. He smiled at Camdyn, trying to give him the strength to face the uncertainty. Then, he added with a soft chuckle, "Have a good cry if you want. It's okay. You've been holding so much inside. Don't bottle it up."

Camdyn chuckled too, though his eyes were still red-rimmed. He buried himself in Everild's chest, finding comfort in the embrace. The warmth of Everild's arms around him felt like the only place where he could truly be himself, free from the weight of the world.

But just as the tension in the room began to ease, a knock on the door interrupted them. The voice of one of the guards called from outside, "Lord Camdyn's brothers are here with the tailor for his fitting."

"Oh, no, I forgot," Camdyn said, furiously wiping at his face, trying to hide the signs of his tears. "I look a mess."

"Do you still want to see the tailor today?" Everild asked, his voice gentle.

“It’s fine. I just need a moment to get myself together.” Camdyn stood up, his hands still trembling slightly as he made his way to the washbasin.

Everild nodded, a soft smile on his lips. “Take your time. I’ll keep them occupied.”

Camdyn quickly hurried to the washbasin with a towel, trying to compose himself while Everild turned his attention to his brother-in-laws. Gibson and Kenelm stood just outside the door, their faces tight with impatience, already seeming irritated by the delay.

“Where’s Camdyn?” Gibson asked, his tone sharper than usual. His impatience was palpable, and it sent a flare of irritation through Everild’s chest.

There was something accusatory in his voice that set Everild’s teeth on edge. “Where’s the tailor?” Everild asked, trying to keep his tone even.

Kenelm glanced nervously from Everild to his brother. “Setting up. Aldaay found us an empty room near the—“

Gibson interrupted him with a huff, impatience thick in his voice. “You’d do well to collect him. The tailor’s waiting. Hourly rates, that man. Very skilled.” He shot Kenelm a glare that Everild couldn’t quite interpret. It was a look that carried more weight than it seemed on the surface. But being commanded to gather his own husband in his own home had Everild’s temper flaring.

He growled under his breath, “Camdyn’s getting ready. If it’s that much of an issue, then let me talk to him. I’ll pay him double for the extra time.”

“No, no, this is a gift, there’s no need for that,” Gibson argued, as if the very notion of extra payment was beneath them.

“Then what are you complaining about?” Everild shot back, his patience thinning.

An awkward silence fell over the passageway. Gibson’s anger mirrored Everild’s own, and the tension between them was thick enough to cut with a knife. Kenelm placed a hand on Gibson’s shoulder and gave him a meaningful look, trying to defuse the situation, though it only seemed to make Gibson more stubborn. One of the two guards posted outside Everild’s bedchamber door cleared his throat, as if to signal the growing discomfort of the moment.

A moment later, Camdyn appeared, lightly dressed in a long, loose dark green tunic that ended just a little past his knees, a pair of brown leggings, and slippers. His hair was tousled, and it was obvious that he had been crying—his eyes were still slightly red and puffy—but despite the evidence of his sadness, he smiled when he saw his brothers.

“Good morning, Gibson. Hello, Kenelm. It’s nice to see you both—“ he greeted them, trying to sound cheerful, though the effort didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Gibson frowned, his sharp eyes narrowing in on Camdyn’s appearance. “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing, just—something silly,” Camdyn said quickly, though his voice faltered slightly.

“You were crying,” Gibson insisted, his voice full of disbelief, almost as if it was impossible for Camdyn to have a moment of weakness.

Camdyn flushed pink with embarrassment, and Everild’s temper flared once more.

“He’s fine,” Everild growled, stepping in to protect his husband from further unnecessary questioning.

Kenelm agreed, though he seemed more concerned with the situation than his brother. “Yes, you look well, Camdyn. But why don’t you change into something more appropriate? Get your boots, at least.”

Camdyn’s face fell, and Everild cursed both men under his breath. Camdyn hesitated, then spoke softly, “I just thought it’d be better to wear something comfortable.”

“Well, still, perhaps some trousers and a shirt? Just to have the tailor see what you already have,” Kenelm suggested, as though it was a simple, harmless request.

Everild snapped, his patience finally breaking. “Thought you were worried about the time. Now you want him to change? The tailor’s making a new wardrobe. It doesn’t matter what Camdyn’s wearing to the appointment.”

An odd smile crept onto Gibson’s lips, as though he found the situation amusing in some way. “He’s right. Kenelm, take Camdyn to the tailor. I want to have a chat with our brother-in-law.”

Camdyn frowned, sensing the tension in the air, but Everild shook his head firmly. “Go, Camdyn,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. His husband bit his lip but nodded, linking arms with Kenelm, who led him down the passageway.

Gibson cleared his throat, his eyes narrowing slightly as he turned to Everild. “Well, Beast. We have much to discuss.”

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Once inside the bedchamber, Gibson’s face transformed with fury. His expression twisted so violently that he looked like a demon. The resemblance to Camdyn’s father was striking, a haunting echo of a man who had long cast a shadow over their lives. Everild stood rigid with tension, irritation bubbling within him. The man before him

had been nothing but rude and abrupt, and now, in this moment, it was Gibson who was angry about something. The resemblance between father and son clearly went beyond mere appearance, it seemed—both had that same aggressive demeanor.

“Speak,” Everild commanded, his voice taut with barely contained frustration.

Gibson’s gaze flickered briefly to their unmade bed and Camdyn’s untouched breakfast before he spoke. “I’ve heard some things. About my brother’s marriage. I needed to see if the rumors were true.”

“What rumors?” Everild demanded, his temper flaring.

Gibson’s eyes narrowed as he fixated on the uneaten meal. “Did you force him to lay with you? Or did he refuse you? Is that why you beat him? Why was he crying before we arrived?”

The words hit Everild like a physical blow. His heart pounded with fury. “You’ve got a lot of nerve to say that to me,” he growled, his voice laced with venom. “You think I’d hurt Camdyn? You think I’d hurt my husband?”

Gibson scoffed, his voice dripping with disdain. “Cainech said the doctor told her his side was purple.”

Cainech? That maid? What could she possibly know about his marriage? Everild seethed. “He fell from his horse. That monster you call a father should’ve told you that.”

“Our father knows nothing of what’s going on in his own son’s marriage,” Gibson spat, “since you banned him from the premises and refuse to answer his letters!”

This was too much. Everild’s anger boiled over. “You charge me with abuse,” he

roared, his voice thick with outrage, “when that man humiliated my husband, hurt him. If you take his side, then you’re as unwelcome as he is.”

Gibson retaliated, his voice rising in fury. “You’d isolate Camdyn from his family?”

Everild barked out a bitter, joyless laugh. “What family he had is back at the monastery. You’re just the people who sold him for your own gain.”

There was a sudden clamor outside the door, but neither man seemed to care. Gibson’s jaw clenched in frustration. “You don’t know what you speak of. You think we wanted him married off? That I wanted my baby brother bound to you for the rest of his days? To the Beast? Nothing but a killer, a savage. It makes me sick to think my brother left a life of God to be the plaything of an animal.”

The venom in his words hit Everild like a punch to the gut. He stared at him, shocked, not just because of the words Gibson had spoken, but because his brother-in-law had so casually verbalized a fear that haunted Everild in his darkest moments. The thought of himself as a monster, as something less than human, was one that never strayed too far from his mind. But never—never had he heard it voiced so openly.

“I’ve never hurt him,” Everild rasped, his eyes filling with unshed tears. “I would never. I’d die first.”

Before Gibson could respond, the door burst open, slamming against the wall with a loud bang, rattling the hinges. Aldaay rushed in, hand in hand with Camdyn, barefoot and disheveled, followed closely by a frazzled Kenelm whose face bore scratches and whose hair was in disarray, and two bewildered guards who looked as though they had no idea what they were walking into.

Aldaay spoke first, his voice a mixture of confusion and urgency. “Everild, I didn’t know they were here—I had no idea at all—”

Kenelm looked at Gibson with an apologetic expression. “I told Camdyn to get ready, Gibson, but he just clawed at me and ran.”

Their words were like oil thrown over a fire. Everild’s tears rolled down his face, and a surge of pure, unadulterated rage exploded from deep within him as the realization hit him with the force of a thunderclap. “This was all a ruse,” he snarled, his vision blurring with red. “You were planning to kidnap my husband.”

Gibson sneered, his voice low and venomous. “Be easier to take care of all this now, rather than when you’re king.”

The words hit like a punch to the chest. “What?” Camdyn’s voice was filled with confusion. “King—Everild, what’s he talking about—Everild!” He screamed as Gibson, knife in hand, advanced on Everild.

One of the guards reacted swiftly, grabbing both Aldaay and Camdyn and pulling them out of harm’s way, while the other lunged for Gibson.

Despite the rage and desperation in Gibson’s movements, he was no match for Everild. Gibson’s swing was too wide, too slow, and Everild easily dodged it, grabbing his wrist in a vice-like grip. With a sharp yank, he heard a satisfying snap as Gibson’s wrist broke. The knife clattered to the floor, but Everild wasn’t done. He shoved his brother-in-law to the ground, handed the knife to the guard, and wrapped his arms around his trembling husband.

Camdyn clung to him, fingers tightening on the fabric of Everild’s tunic, positioning himself as a shield between Everild and both his brothers—one groaning in pain on the floor and the other held immobile by the guards.

Camdyn’s voice quivered with a mix of fear and disbelief. “You tried to—I can’t believe the two of you would—how dare you. How dare both of you. Everild’s never

hurt me, never. That's more than I can say for father." Camdyn turned his gaze, full of fury, on Gibson. "And you don't know anything about me, about my marriage. You need to stop treating me like a child you need to mind. It's been seventeen years. You're my blood, but—you're not my family anymore. None of you have been for a long, long time. But Everild is."

The words struck Gibson like a physical blow, leaving him visibly stricken. Camdyn continued, his voice a firm declaration. "I'm not the baby you used to hold, or throw into the air and catch. I'm a grown man. If I was ever in trouble and in need, I'd ask you myself. You can't just make decisions for me, try to control my life. That's what father did. What he's still trying to do. Everild's the only one who's ever asked what I wanted, and I want him. If—if you'd hurt my husband, I would've never forgiven you."

Kenelm mumbled weakly, "Camdyn, we only thought—"

"I know what you thought, but you were wrong. And—and I'd like you to leave," Camdyn interjected firmly.

"I'm sorry, Camdyn," Gibson said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Camdyn's tone was sharp and unwavering. "Don't apologize to me. It's Everild you threatened. It's his character you insulted." When both men dropped their gazes to the floor, Camdyn turned to the guards, his voice still strong. "Have Edwin attend to my brother's wrist and then see both of them out, please."

Aldaay spoke, his voice soft but filled with resolve. "I'll accompany them as well. I need to know how they got so far into the castle without my knowing."

Once the door was shut behind them, the sound of the lock clicking into place shattered Everild's resolve. He collapsed to his knees, overwhelmed by the weight of

everything that had just transpired, wracked with sobs.

Camdyn rushed to his side, alarm and concern written across his face. “Are you hurt? Everild, what’s wrong?”

Everild pulled him into a tight embrace, his face pressed against the softness of Camdyn’s green tunic as his body shook with emotion. “They thought I mistreated you. They thought I beat you—that I raped you.”

Camdyn’s hands ran gently up and down Everild’s back, soothing him. “I know, Everild. I’m so sorry. They were so wrong, and they should’ve never said such things to you.”

“I would never hurt you,” Everild choked out.

“Oh, Everild, I know. You protect me. You’ve only ever protected me.”

Everild’s voice was thick with emotion as he whispered against Camdyn’s neck. “I don’t deserve you. The things I’ve done... they stole you from the monastery to give you to me, of all people. You would’ve been a saint if not for me.”

Camdyn chuckled softly and pulled back to gently wipe Everild’s face. “You think too much of me. I would not have been a saint. I’d have been barely a tolerable cleric. And—I realize that the life you’ve had has affected you, in ways. But please, just know that—that when my brothers came to the monastery and told me I was to be married, all I hoped for was that my husband would be kind to me. And you have been, you’ve been so kind. You’ve been more than I ever could have asked for. I’m so glad it was you who met me at the altar. Thank you for being my husband.”

Everild’s breath shuddered, and tears spilled anew as Camdyn’s gentle hands soothed him. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you, Camdyn.”

He cried until exhaustion claimed him. Camdyn guided him to their bed and curled up next to him. “I’m alright,” Everild murmured, his voice fragile. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Camdyn replied softly.

They lay together, the warmth of Camdyn’s presence comforting Everild as his tears dried and his breathing returned to normal. Camdyn nestled into his side, their usual position in bed, with Everild’s arm wrapped protectively around him.

“Everild?” Camdyn’s voice was soft, hesitant.

“Yes?”

“What Gibson said, about you being king—what did he mean by that?”

Everild sighed softly, his voice hoarse from talk and tears. “At the hunting party. The king told me that he’s made me his heir. And that he married me to you because your family is powerful, and would be my allies.”

Camdyn thought for a moment before asking, “You’ll be king one day, Everild? But why didn’t you tell me?”

Everild hesitated, his voice thick. “Because I don’t want to be king. And because I didn’t want to upset you. So much has changed for you recently, going from a novice to a lord’s husband. I thought that—the prospect of being married to a king, to being a prince consort—that it might scare you off.”

Camdyn kissed the corner of Everild’s mouth, his voice steady and reassuring. “You’ll be a good king. You take care of me and everyone else in this castle. There’ll be many more people to be responsible for, but I’ll be there to help you as best as I can. Don’t worry. I won’t go anywhere without you.”

Everild couldn't find the words. He was struck dumb by the kindness Camdyn had shown him and the deep affection he held for him. Taking Camdyn's hand, he kissed the inside of his wrist, his heart swelling with love and admiration. Imagining a future with Camdyn by his side, finely dressed and radiant, he whispered, "I can only try. But I know that with you with me, I'll be at my best."

Camdyn smiled, his eyes warm, and they held each other close.

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When he woke early the next morning, Everild immediately noticed the absence of Camdyn, the side of the bed where his husband had been softly snoring just hours ago now empty, though still warm. It felt wrong, the warmth of the sheets where his love should have been. His heart sank slightly, but he quickly pushed the concern aside, washing his face and dressing as usual. He told himself Camdyn must simply have gotten up early, as he often did, to tend to some task or another. Breakfast would wait, he thought. They would share it together as they always did.

But as the minutes stretched into an hour, and then two, the feeling of unease deepened. There was no sound of Camdyn's light footfalls in the hallway, no cheerful call of his name to join him for breakfast. Everild's thoughts raced, and with them came the creeping tendrils of panic. The chapel. Camdyn had often gone there in the early mornings, for solitude or prayer, or perhaps simply to center himself. Surely, he thought, Camdyn could not have disappeared from there, not with the chapel being so secure, the only possible way out through the hall, where staff were always present. There had been no mention of any disturbance. And yet—could he have changed his mind? Could he have slipped away while the house was still asleep, hiding his departure behind a guise of early morning prayers? The thought made Everild's chest tighten.

Without another moment's hesitation, Everild bolted from the bedchamber, his heart racing in his chest. He hurried down the long, familiar corridors of the castle, as if the walls themselves might hold some clue to his husband's whereabouts. The sound of staff moving in the great hall met his ears—scraping chairs, the soft rustle of cloth, and the faint scent of herbs and polish drifting through the air. He rushed toward them, desperation in his eyes, seeking reassurance, even if he wasn't sure what he hoped to find.

In the hall, some of the staff were cleaning the stained glass windows, their movements graceful and practiced as they dusted the panes with care. They moved with an air of serenity, a calmness that contrasted with Everild's frantic pulse. As they noticed him, their polite smiles barely faltered, though their eyes held the knowing look of those who had seen the fluctuations of a newlywed's emotions. These past weeks, Everild had swung between uncontrollable joy and anxious fear—something the staff had come to understand, even if they chose not to comment.

“Where's my husband?” Everild croaked, his voice thin with uncertainty.

One of the women, a middle-aged servant who had often attended to Camdyn's garden, gave him a long, appraising look. “Why, my lord Everild, lord Camdyn's only gone out to tend his garden.”

The garden? Everild's brow furrowed in confusion. “But he does that in the afternoon,” he muttered, the words feeling hollow even as they left his lips.

The woman shrugged, unconcerned by Everild's obvious alarm. “Well, I'm just telling you what I know, my lord. Your husband's out in the garden. You'll have to ask him what he's up to.”

With that, Everild's mind raced again, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. He simply nodded, trying to mask the relief that began to wash over him. “Of course,” he said, distracted. “My thanks to you.”

The garden. The garden. His feet moved faster than his mind could catch up, his steps light with sudden hope as he made his way through the back corridors and out into the lush, green expanse that surrounded the castle. The air was fresh with the scent of earth and leaves, and the soft hum of morning birds greeted him as he stepped into the garden.

And there, kneeling among the rows of tenderly cared-for plants, was Camdyn. His husband was covered in dirt, his fingers stained from the soil as he worked carefully at the bed of garlic and onions. Everild stopped in his tracks, a smile breaking across his face. "Camdyn!" he called, his voice breaking the stillness of the morning.

At the sound of his name, Camdyn looked up, his face lighting up with an expression of pure joy. "Everild, look! They've sprouted!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with childlike wonder as he pointed at the soil, where tiny green buds had broken through the earth's surface.

The sight filled Everild with warmth—relief, yes, but also something deeper. This was their future. Together, in this small garden, with hands in the dirt, growing something together. He moved to Camdyn's side, kneeling beside him and reaching out to touch the budding shoots. "It looks beautiful," Everild murmured, his heart swelling.

Camdyn chattered excitedly as Everild inspected the garden. "Oh, I could make you onion soup. With cheese and fresh bread, of course," Camdyn continued, his tone light. "What do you think we should grow next year? Maybe some wild strawberries and raspberries? Those would go so well with oatmeal. And custard. Or perhaps pears, Everild. What about pears?"

The garden was only the beginning of their life together. A life filled with shared moments, with simple joys—Camdyn's laughter, his cooking, his presence. The thought of it overwhelmed Everild, filling him with an emotion he could not name but recognized as love in its truest, deepest form.

Everild turned to his husband, his voice low but filled with devotion. "Yes. Whatever you want. Just ask. All you have to do is ask, and I'll make it happen. Whatever it takes to make you happy."

Camdyn smiled, a soft, contented smile. “I know,” he said. “I am. Everything you do makes me happy, Everild.”

Everild’s heart hammered in his chest as he looked at his husband, desire and adoration filling him. “What do I do? Tell me, please. I want to know.”

Camdyn nuzzled against him, his eyes filled with affection. “How you protect me. How you listen to me. How you look at me... Like that!” He laughed, his fingers brushing over Everild’s lips, as if he could not bear to stay still in the face of such warmth. “And how you kiss me—“

“You like how I kiss?” Everild asked, his voice thick with emotion. He brushed his beard against Camdyn’s neck, pressing close. “That makes you happy? I can do that all the time.” He kissed the soft skin of his husband’s shoulder, his neck, and then his jaw, his lips savoring the touch of his husband’s skin.

The two of them tumbled together into the grass, their laughter ringing through the garden as they kissed and tangled in the earth. Everild kissed Camdyn’s forehead, his nose, his cheeks, each touch igniting more laughter from his husband. It was a moment of pure joy—a moment that could have lasted forever.

But then, as Everild shifted to better accommodate his aching leg—a reminder of the war, an old injury that never quite healed—Camdyn’s knee brushed accidentally against his groin. It was light, just a fleeting touch, but it sent a surge of heat through Everild’s body. He instinctively moved toward the sensation, his body reacting before his mind could fully catch up. Camdyn’s laughter faltered, his gaze shifting between Everild’s face and his lower body, surprise widening his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Everild rasped, his voice shaky. “I didn’t mean—“

But his husband, ever gentle, slowly moved his leg along Everild’s inner thighs,

urging him to continue. “Kiss me again?” Camdyn asked, his voice soft, almost pleading. “Please?”

A low, broken moan escaped Everild’s throat. He leaned down, his hands on either side of Camdyn’s face as their lips met, deep and urgent. The kiss was raw and real, their shared breath the only sound that filled the air as they sank into each other. Everild tasted Camdyn—just Camdyn, the man he loved—letting the kiss consume them both, savoring every moment of it.

When they pulled away, Camdyn’s face was flushed, his lips swollen and red, his eyes dark with desire. “Back to bed?” he asked, his voice a soft whisper. Everild nodded, his heart racing.

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Camdyn didn't stop giggling on their way to their bedchamber. They rushed past servants, who saw them careening towards them and politely stepped out of the way and bowed, but they were addressing empty space by the time they managed to say, “Good morning, my lords.”

They took the steps of the stairs two at a time. His husband was panting and laughing when they got to the top, so Everild scooped him into his arms and carried him to their bedchamber.

The expressions of the guards posted outside their door did not change; they were too well-disciplined for that. The only indication that the men knew what was about to happen inside the room was their slowly reddening faces.

“We’re not to be disturbed,” Everild commanded as a now-blushing Camdyn buried his face in the crook of his neck. “Feel free to stretch your legs, but let one of the maids know to prepare hot water for a bath.”

“Do you have any idea when, ah, when you’ll be needing it, my lord?” one of the men asked.

Everild admitted, “It could be some time.” Camdyn let out a little gasp that had the guards’ eyes darting to his bare shoulder before resolutely moving back to Everild. “Just have them keep it hot.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The click of the door shutting and locking was like a song in itself. Everild kissed Camdyn’s forehead once more and gently set him down. “Let’s undress?” he asked.

His husband nodded and shyly turned away to unlace his boots and disrobe.

Everild did the same with much less decorum. He pulled off his tunic and threw it over his desk chair. He shucked off his own boots, shoving them underneath the desk. Then he unlaced his trousers and stepped out of them. He had already been half-hard in the garden. Now, the thought that in a few moments he would have his husband naked and spread out on the blankets, panting and moaning against him, had his cock swollen and aching with need.

Camdyn sat on the bed, completely nude and absolutely lovely and extremely nervous. He took one look at Everild’s erection and paled, asking, “Everild, how am I supposed to fit all of you inside me?”

God preserve him. Everild bit back a moan as the scenario played out in his mind—Camdyn, rocking back on his well-oiled fingers, stretched and ready and begging for him. He gave the base of his cock a squeeze before replying, “Don’t worry about that now. Today is about your pleasure.”

“Okay,” his husband whispered. He fiddled with his hands. Everild guided him onto

his back. Another kiss to Camdyn's curls seemed to calm him somewhat, but he had to be certain his husband was ready—that he wanted this.

“Are you comfortable, Camdyn? We can stop at any time. Just tell me. Do you want to stop now?”

“No, no, please—I'm just nervous. I don't—I've—I've touched myself before, but never...” He swallowed. “I'm not sure if I know how to be good for you.”

“Don't worry about that,” Everild said again. “I want to see you. I want to feel you. I want to watch your reactions to everything I do so that I know what you like. So I know how best to pleasure you.”

“Oh.” Camdyn bit his lip. “How do you want me?”

“Just like this.” Everild ran a calloused hand up Camdyn's hips to the side of his ribs, marveling at his pretty, smooth skin. “I'm going to keep kissing and touching you, okay?”

Camdyn nodded and settled against the blankets and pillows, his arms on either side of his head, eyes closed, lips parted in anticipation. He moaned as Everild ran his tongue along his lower lip, and when Everild moved on, he sighed.

One day, he would cover Camdyn's entire body with his own, worship every bit of his lovely form with his own rough, scarred one. But for now, Everild gladly roved over his husband's figure, exploring him with his mouth, his kisses increasingly desperate. First his jaw. Then the freckles on his neck. When Everild brought Camdyn's nipples to his mouth, his husband shivered beneath him, but he barely had time to gasp before Everild moved down to lick at his stomach. The younger man must have anticipated what would be the next focus of Everild's adoration because he slowly parted his legs so that Everild could crawl between them.

His cock was hard and pink, and Everild wanted nothing more than to taste this part of his husband, but as he shifted, Camdyn began to tremble once more. “Everild?” he asked. He reached for Everild, and so with one hand, Everild gently rubbed his hip and with the other, he clasped Camdyn’s hand.

“I’ve got you,” Everild murmured, sucking on the inside of Camdyn’s thighs, his beard brushing against his skin. It made Camdyn tremble in a different way; the remaining tension left his body as he broke into a fit of giggles.

Everild grinned. “Laughing at me?” he asked. “I thought you liked it when I did this.” He shook Camdyn’s thigh and pressed another kiss to it.

“Ha! Oh, I do, but you’re tickling me.”

“How? When I do this?” He rubbed his beard along his leg and was rewarded with another round of giggles.

“Yes! Your beard—“

Then Everild tightened his grip on Camdyn’s hand and hip and asked, “What about when I do this?” and pulled his husband’s pretty cock into his mouth.

Camdyn threw his head back against the pillows and screamed. He writhed on the blankets as Everild held him tight and sucked the precum from the head of his shaft. The drops on his tongue and the sweat on his husband’s skin were hot and slightly salty, his soft whimpers and gasps were sweet, and it was all absolutely delicious, completely divine.

Everild moaned around Camdyn’s cock, and Camdyn shivered and cried, “Oh, God, oh, God, oh my God—“ and he thought, dazed with lust and passion, This is the first time I’ve heard him pray.

With some reluctance, he released his hold on Camdyn's hand, but it was fleeting. The grip on his husband's hard, leaking shaft was even better as he immediately and seemingly unconsciously thrust into his fist, moaning. With his breath puffing against Camdyn's cock, Everild asked, "Does that feel good, Camdyn?"

"Yes, God, please, Everild, please—don't stop—" He keened as Everild tongued at the slit on the head of his cock, wailed when Everild took the entire length of him in his mouth. "Everild!"

The entire castle must have heard them. The thought was intoxicating. Everyone would know now. He had been the Beast and had maimed and broken men's bodies, including his own, but here in this bedroom, he was Everild, Camdyn's husband, a man who could bring ecstasy to his lover, who could evoke his high, rapturous cries.

Suddenly, Camdyn scrabbled at his hair. "Everild—Everild, I'm going to—" It was a warning that he paid no heed to, opting instead to bob his head along Camdyn's cock, determined to wring every single drop of cum from him.

Camdyn arched his back and spilled down Everild's throat. He swallowed it greedily, stroking Camdyn's thighs as he shuddered through his orgasm. Only when he was sure that his husband was completely spent, softening and over-sensitive in his mouth, did he gently pull away. The younger man was flushed and panting and so completely gorgeous—Everild could not resist trying for another kiss. Camdyn smiled and softly sighed, turning eagerly to him. Everild tasted Camdyn's cum and Camdyn's spit and felt his husband shift to embrace him, and it was bliss—and he ached.

Camdyn noticed, too. "You, Everild?" His fingers tentatively stroked the side of Everild's cock.

Groaning, Everild said, "Not going to last. Can I—" He stopped, uncertain and not a

little embarrassed.

“What is it?”

“Let me—“ He swallowed. He didn’t have the words for this. “Let me—finish against you?” He brushed his hand up Camdyn’s thigh and stomach.

“Oh, yes, please. I want to feel you, too.”

He crawled over Camdyn, kissing him again, and pressed their hips together. His husband's soft skin was delightful friction against his long-neglected cock. Their foreheads touched; Camdyn’s eyes were dark, his expression one of hazy satisfaction. The thought that he had done that—that he had given his husband such pleasure—spurred the heat in Everild’s cock. He rolled his hips frantically against Camdyn’s, dripping precum, panting and grunting.

“Can I?” Camdyn asked, and Everild had no idea what it was he wanted—but always, always, always, he would give it, he would allow it, anything for Camdyn, and so he nodded and then moaned as Camdyn reached between them and took him in his hand and stroked.

One—two—three—four pumps of his fist, and Everild’s cum coated Camdyn’s fingers, his stomach. He collapsed on top of the younger man, exhausted.

They held each other on the bed, hot and sticky and spent and completely content.

“I’ll get a rag,” Everild said eventually. “I need to clean you off.”

Camdyn shook his head. “Later.”

“They’ll have a bath ready—“

“Later,” his husband repeated. “Just stay here with me.”

Everild didn’t argue with that. He said, “Okay,” and had Camdyn nestle against his side as usual, an arm thrown around his waist. “How do you feel? Was that all right?”

He wasn’t quite sure, but Everild thought Camdyn was blushing redder now than he had when Everild was sucking his cock. “I liked it,” his husband murmured.

“It wasn’t too much?”

“No, I want—I’d like to do it again. If you’d like to.”

Chuckling, Everild said, “Later. I’d very much like to, but we’ll have to wait till later.” He gave Camdyn’s shoulder a shake. “Your lord husband’s old.”

“You’re not!” Camdyn cried, outraged.

“I’m an old husband, and I’ll be an even older king.”

“You’ll be a handsome king. They’ll call you Everild the Fair.”

“With my beautiful consort, Camdyn the Blind.”

Camdyn shrieked with laughter and buried himself in the crook of Everild’s neck, and Everild could not contain the burst of joy in his heart either. They held onto each other, laughing loudly.

He hoped the castle could hear that, too—their happiness with one another.

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In the days following his and Everild's newfound intimacy, Camdyn still rose for prayers at the break of dawn as usual. He spent half an hour kneeling in the chapel, hands clasped together, thanking God for the path that They had set him upon. For all his fond memories of the monastery and his love of Cenric, Camdyn was acutely aware that he would have made a terrible cleric—his impatience, his fidgeting, his constant chatter and questions, and his tendency to run off with the younger male visitors, even if it had been out of more honest curiosity than lust. And though he still missed the monastery terribly and waited for word from Cenric, now, as a young husband to a great lord, he could be more involved in the community, in the people's lives and their needs. With all resources now available to him, he could help them. It was a wonderful thing—praise God for Their wisdom.

And thanks be to Them for the love and care They had shown him in giving him Everild. His husband was so kind, so sweet, so handsome, and Camdyn adored him more and more every day.

Their first time together in bed had prompted a very welcome change in their morning routine. Now, after his prayers were over, Camdyn rushed back to their bedchamber, where his husband would be awake but not dressed, and they spent the early morning hours kissing and rubbing against one another. He would never get enough of Everild's hands roving over his body, so deliciously rough and yet so gentle with him, so careful, nor would he ever have grown tired of his husband's lips upon his or his mouth around his member.

And—a blush crept onto his face—these were such salacious thoughts, here in the sanctity of the chapel—and he liked it when Everild came. So far, he thought he liked it best when his husband straddled him and took himself in his hand. He could watch

the desperate pleasure on Everild's face as he stroked himself, red-faced and panting, until he spilled, hot and sticky, all over Camdyn's chest and stomach and thighs.

Only after Everild cleaned the both of them up with a warm towel and they dressed—or, in Camdyn's case, redressed—did they call for breakfast. A slice of herb and cheese quiche or oatmeal with cinnamon and cooked apples, a small bowl of fruit—ripe blackberries and raspberries, or a shiny pile of dark red pomegranate seeds—and always fresh baked bread accompanied by a pat of rich, creamy, yellow butter. Mint tea with honey was their choice of drink in the morning hours; its flavor was light and refreshing, with the added bonus of being both good for Everild's throat and more acceptable to his palate than black tea.

And before they left the bedchamber for their routine tasks, there was always a kiss—deep and slow and languid—so that their day began with the lingering taste of each other on their lips.

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There had been no letters from his father, and for that, Camdyn had been incredibly relieved. In his prayers, he had always thanked both of his parents for bringing him into the world, though the gratitude was tempered with the ever-present bitterness toward his father. He thanked his father, of course, for his tireless machinations that had led to his marriage to Everild—a union Camdyn had come to cherish. Yet, alongside that, he thanked God that he hadn't laid eyes on the man since Everild had forcefully thrown him out of the castle. The idea of his father entering his life again filled him with dread, and Camdyn hoped, with all his heart, that he would live a long, contented life far away from that looming shadow.

As for his sisters, he received regular communication from them, and their letters brought him comfort and warmth. Cera, his younger sister, always took great care in the presentation of her letters, ensuring that each one was perfumed with a delicate

floral fragrance that made it feel like a personal touch. Camdyn, with his fine, neat handwriting, had found himself taking over the task of responding to Everild's correspondence. His husband would dictate his thoughts, and Camdyn, with the utmost care, transcribed them onto the parchment, carefully shaping each word. His sister-in-law, in turn, did the same with Cera's replies—her own form of communication, which, while sometimes a touch blunt and bordering on tactless, Camdyn had learned to navigate. Everild often grew frustrated with the pretensions of the nobility, but his exasperation rarely translated into more than heavy sighs and the occasional grumble, which Camdyn handled without complaint.

In contrast, his eldest sister, Aoife, was a tempest of emotion. She was quick to see insult in nearly every word, whether it was intended or not. Her replies were always sharp, her responses measured, and her words, more often than not, carried an undertone of reprimand. Camdyn never envied his sister-in-law's task of tempering Aoife's aggression. It was a delicate balancing act to ensure that Aoife's words didn't spark conflict or worse—a blood feud. Yet, despite the tension, Aoife's letters were a marvel of refinement. She poured great care into her scented parchment, her elegant penmanship, and the meticulous editing of her wife's often caustic words. Camdyn admired her ability to maintain composure while still fiercely defending her own, something he had never quite mastered.

The most recent cause for Cera's fury was the actions of their two brothers, Gibson and Kenelm. Their half-baked scheme to take Camdyn away from Everild had enraged Cera to such an extent that even her beloved wife struggled to paraphrase her wrath. Camdyn had written to her, detailing their brothers' plans, and the response had come almost immediately. The letter smelled of lavender, a scent so thick it nearly suffocated the words within. The letter was ornate and polished, as always, but filled with Cera's ire. Her fury was evident in the sharply written words, and as she cursed—almost blasphemously—she assured Camdyn that their brothers would be severely reprimanded for their “monstrous stupidity and grave insult to both your marriage and your husband.” Camdyn had felt a warm glow of comfort as he read,

knowing that his sister would stand by him, no matter the cost.

Aoife, too, had shown her support. Her letter had been equally heartfelt, offering comfort and reassurance. She invited him and Everild to visit her and her family anytime, a gesture that meant more than words could convey. Aoife's gentle invitation was tinged with a hint of humor, as she explained that her husband was prone to becoming flustered when guests arrived without prior notice. Aoife signed the letter "your favorite sister, Aoife," her official seal accompanying the flourish. Below, at the bottom of the parchment, was a small handprint in ink from Young Aoife, with a simple but heartfelt addendum: "And with love from your favorite niece, as well." Camdyn had smiled as he read it, a sense of family and connection enveloping him, and the thought of visiting them filled him with longing.

The matter had been thoroughly discussed with Everild. They both knew that, once things settled a bit, they could leave the castle in Aldaay's capable hands and make their way to Aoife and her family for a visit, before journeying onward to the monastery. It was a trip Camdyn had been eagerly anticipating. In the months since he had left, there had been no word from Cenric, and the silence weighed heavily on him. He could only hope that something—anything—would come of his efforts to reach out to his former friend. Every day, he wrote to him, keeping up the correspondence in hopes of receiving some form of reply.

When Camdyn had still been at his family's castle, anxiously awaiting his wedding day, his letters had been full of trepidation, laden with fearful thoughts and frequently splotched with tears. But now, his letters were pleasantly mundane—simple variations of his daily routine, his thoughts no longer weighed down by anxiety but rather filled with a certain peace. Each day, he dutifully recounted his breakfast, the books he read in the library, his progress with horse riding (which was improving, though not dramatically), and the meals he had put together in the kitchen under the stern but kind supervision of the cook. He also made detailed notes of the many gifts Everild had given him, though these often seemed far more extravagant than Camdyn

ever would have chosen for himself.

The gifts were a generous and steady flow, each thoughtful in its own way. Camdyn had received a proper riding outfit, fine and durable, which would serve him well for years to come. He had been presented with a new hat to keep the sun from his eyes as he worked in the garden, a gift that Everild had clearly thought about, as it was perfectly suited for his outdoor tasks. There had been half a bushel of fresh, shiny apples—red and crisp—ready to be eaten or used in the kitchen, depending on his mood. And, of course, the bouquets—so many bouquets, changing with the seasons, bringing life to their bedchamber. When the flowers wilted, they didn't go to waste but were either dried into potpourri or used as compost for their garden.

But then there were the jewels. Everild's gifts were always elegant, yet Camdyn couldn't shake the feeling that if he gave in, Everild would shower him in jewels beyond reason. The very idea made Camdyn uneasy, for he had no fondness for the ostentatious display of wealth that jewelry often represented. He had no desire to wear diamonds, rubies, or sapphires to flaunt his position. He had, after all, turned down Everild's repeated offers to adorn him in such lavish items.

"It'd be too much, Everild," he had said one evening, noticing how his husband's expression had fallen at the thought. "There's no need for them, and I'd look silly besides."

Everild had kissed his hand, his gaze softening with affection. "You'd look beautiful. You always do. But if you really don't want anything... I can get you whatever you'd like." His sigh had been heavy, filled with a quiet disappointment, and Camdyn had felt a pang of guilt at the sight. Everild had looked so vulnerable in that moment, as if he had been denied something he truly wanted to give.

Eventually, Camdyn had relented, agreeing to accept just a few small pieces—nothing ostentatious, nothing too grand, but something to wear for special

occasions. A week or so later, Everild had presented him with a velvet-lined jewelry box, which Camdyn had eagerly opened. Inside, he found a crown wrought with delicate gold vines and leaves, a choker and a few bracelets made from pearls, and a gold ring set with a shimmering opal. Camdyn had been taken aback by how lovely they were. The pieces were understated, elegant, and exactly what he would have chosen for himself.

“Oh, Everild,” he had murmured. “These are so lovely.”

Everild’s face had lit up with a smile, his chest swelling with pride. “You like them, then?”

Camdyn had smiled back. “Yes. They’re exactly what I asked for. You know me so well.”

His husband had preened, delighted by the praise. “Put them on?” Everild had asked eagerly. “Let’s see what they look like on you.”

And so, Camdyn had modeled the jewelry for him, smiling, twirling, enjoying the simple joy of seeing Everild so pleased. The moment had been perfect, and when Everild had suggested that Camdyn wear nothing but the jewelry, Camdyn had playfully obliged, crawling into his husband’s lap, ready to thank him in the most intimate of ways.

That, of course, had not gone into his letter to Cenric. The monastery didn’t need to know every detail of his marriage—only that Everild cared for him deeply and made him happy, more so than he could have ever imagined.

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Camdyn was sitting at the large wooden desk in the quiet of the library, his fingers

idly flipping through the pages of a book on beekeeping. He had always been fascinated by the process of making honey, and the monastery's small apiary had sparked a deep desire within him to one day create his own. His eyes scanned over the intricate instructions on how to build a beehive from straw, mentally noting the steps as he imagined the sweet rewards of his own source of honey. The calming scent of old parchment and beeswax filled the air, blending with the natural, earthy smell of the library. He was completely absorbed in the task when suddenly, the stillness was broken.

Aldaay appeared, a sharp figure in his dark robes, and dropped a heavy stack of letters along with a bulky parcel onto the desk with a loud thud. The sudden noise startled Camdyn, and he looked up from his book, blinking in surprise.

"Solved the communication issue, Camdyn," Aldaay said, a smug expression on his face. "Your letters were being delivered. The monastery's letters were being stopped at the border."

Camdyn's eyes flickered to the pile of letters now resting in front of him. He reached out, his fingers brushing over the edges of the neatly stacked parchment. There was a sense of relief at finally seeing these letters, which he'd been waiting for with impatience. He could feel the weight of them in his hands, and it struck him that Cenric must have been writing to him just as often as he had been writing back. "Everild was right," Camdyn said softly, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I just had to be more patient." His mind lingered on the weeks that had passed since his wedding, the emotional toll it had taken, and how he had longed for the letters that never arrived. "What was the problem at the border? Some sort of tariff?"

Aldaay cleared his throat, a nervous edge creeping into his voice. "Well... It appeared that, uh, your father was holding them back."

Camdyn's brow furrowed in confusion, and he stared at the advisor in disbelief.

“What?” he asked, his voice tinged with shock. “W-why? What reason would he have to do that?”

Aldaay shifted uneasily, his gaze lowering slightly as though unsure how to explain. “Your father... spent a lot of time and resources arranging your marriage. It needed to be a success. It was his thinking that if you received any letters from the monastery, then you’d be—well, homesick, I suppose.”

Camdyn couldn’t help but feel a pang of frustration at this revelation. The scent of the letters—slightly fragrant with the herbs and spices of Cenric’s apothecary and the beeswax candles from the monastery—made his heart ache a little. His fingers lingered on the edges of the bundle as he absorbed Aldaay’s words. “I was already homesick,” Camdyn said quietly, his voice soft and full of emotion. “It would have been nice to have had these in the weeks before the wedding, when I was scared and lonely.” The memories of those days, when everything had felt overwhelming and uncertain, flooded his mind. He had longed for a piece of home, a connection to the familiar faces and places of the monastery. But instead, he had felt abandoned.

Aldaay’s face softened with a look of genuine regret. “I’m sorry for it, Camdyn,” he said, his voice gentle. “I think the concern was that you might either be so distraught as to refuse the marriage and demand to be returned to the monastery, or that you and Cenric might have concocted some sort of plan for you to run away and escape back to the monks.”

Camdyn let out a quiet hum of acknowledgement as he reflected on Aldaay’s words. His mind raced, piecing together the puzzle of his father’s actions. Instead of simply letting him experience the natural grief of homesickness, his father had, in a misguided attempt to protect him, made him feel even more isolated. It wasn’t just homesickness Camdyn had endured; it was a deeper sense of abandonment and loneliness. He had been left to navigate the unknown, without the comfort of letters or guidance. He couldn’t help but think that had he been allowed the chance to

communicate with Cenric, things might have been different. Perhaps the fear and confusion that had plagued him during the wedding could have been alleviated, saving both himself and Everild a great deal of time and tears.

But there was no changing the past. With a sigh and a small shrug, Camdyn asked, “I suppose they got lost in the shuffle after the wedding?”

Aldaay’s expression became more uncomfortable as he cleared his throat once again, visibly uneasy. “It appeared that after the incident the morning after the hunt, he chose to... forget to rescind the order to waylay the letters.”

Camdyn let out a small, exasperated sound, rolling his eyes as he processed the explanation. “Ah,” he said, his tone dry. “That certainly sounds like my father.”

Aldaay, looking like he might burst with something unsaid, hesitated before speaking again. “If I may be so bold, my lord?”

Camdyn raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Yes?”

“Your father is a fucking prick.”

Camdyn let out a laugh, a genuine sound of amusement that filled the room. “Oh, well, goodness. God forgive me, but I won’t disagree.” The tension in the room seemed to dissipate, replaced by the shared recognition of the absurdity of the situation.

Aldaay grinned, clearly relieved by the lighter atmosphere. “I don’t think even They could begrudge you that,” he said, a playful glint in his eyes. “I’ll leave you to it, my lord. You’ve quite a bit of reading to do.”

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The first letter was written only a few days after Camdyn's departure from the monastery.

My dear boy,

You took part of my heart when you left. I saw it clinging to you as you disappeared over the horizon in your brothers' cart. Make sure to feed yourself well, and to get enough rest, and enjoy yourself when you can. By caring for yourself you will also care for me.

The monastery keenly feels your absence. It is far too quiet and everyone dislikes it greatly. Brother David had to wrangle the cows himself for the first time in nearly a decade. And I now have no stalwart companion to keep me company and assist me in the garden or the apothecary.

Do you remember how you used to run around during our prayers? You would tug on our rosaries and robes until I made you come stand with me. Always moving, always curious.

I know you are greatly upset with this sudden change in your life. I do not mean to add to your distress with my nostalgia and loneliness. But just know that you are my boy. I sewed and hemmed your robes, I bandaged your cuts, I watched over you when you were ill, and now, like children are wont to do, you have grown up and are getting married and will have a life separate from mine. I will do as all parents must one day do, and simply write to you with all the love I have in me.

It pained me greatly to see you leave and it still pains me now as I write you this letter, but I also feel heartened because soon you will read it and think of me. I pray that your journey is safe, I pray that your family welcomes you back with open arms, I pray that your husband is kind and loving, and I pray that you are happy.

God bless you, Camdyn.

Brother Cenric

Camdyn smiled and wiped his eyes, then kissed Cenric's signature, scrawled in long-dried, black ink, and pressed the letter to his heart. He carefully folded it and set it aside before moving on to the next one, and the next. It pleased him that the contents of Cenric's letters were much like his own, filled with the day-to-day life of the monastery. They mentioned every monk's health, chronicled Brother David's renewed struggles with the livestock, and described how the garden was growing, as well as when the day was particularly hot or rainy.

Cenric had realized early on that their communication was one-way.

You don't address the subjects in any of my letters, yet nearly every week I receive more messages from you. Perhaps the couriers in this area are worse than I thought. I will continue writing, of course—you shall certainly get them one day, and what else is there for me to do? I will tell you a secret: no one here is as wonderful a conversation partner as you, Camdyn. If I do not put my thoughts of the day's events to ink, then I will burst with all the observations I have not shared.

It always pleases me greatly to hear about your little niece. She sounds much like you did as a child—curious and sweet natured.

There was a shift in tone that occurred in the letters written after the wedding; a palpable relief as Camdyn wrote to Cenric, ecstatic, that Everild was gentle and handsome and had protected him during the ceremony and doted upon him at the banquet, and that he had been kind to him on their wedding night and all they had done was talk and sleep.

Praise be to God for Their love and mercy. I had so worried about your wedding day.

I cannot overstate how grateful and relieved I am that you've a husband who is considerate of your fears and desires. It is of greatest comfort to me to know that you are well and happy. I love you so.

Eventually, Camdyn read through the entire pile of letters, and the only thing left to do was open the parcel. Cenric had mentioned it a few times—a wedding gift from the monastery. The shape of it and the sound it had made when Aldaay dropped it onto the desk indicated what it was. Camdyn carefully unwrapped it and found his assumption accurate.

A prayer book.

The cover was a fine example of leatherwork. It was a carved scene of the view of the sea from the beach near the monastery, where Camdyn had spent much of his free time. He ran his fingers over the grooves, admiring the craftsmanship. Then he opened the book, smiling as he was greeted with page after page of illuminations and carefully copied prayers, hymns, and stories. Every new page brought another set of handwriting and a slightly different style of art.

This was no doubt a collaboration between every brother in the monastery.

Camdyn's suspicions were proven correct when he neared the end of the book. It was slightly lengthier than other prayer books he had seen. The extra pages had him curious.

After the last page of hymns, there was a message written in Cenric's hand:

This book of hours is dedicated to a young novice whose life path diverged from ours. We have humbly put together this collection of prayers for him and have also had the temerity to include in this additional section the memories we have of his time with us.

Camdyn, may this be a fitting present for your marriage. You might not have become a brother at the monastery, but you will always be a child in our hearts. Let this book be both a devotion to God and a record of our love for you.

Brother Cenric

Blinking back tears, Camdyn turned the page and found a recollection from every monk who had helped raise him. Brother Trian had written of the first day they took him to the beach and dipped his chubby legs into the water, and how he had shrieked with glee. Brother David extolled his virtues for having the patience and hardiness to deal with the cows. The abbot admired his gentle nature and his curiosity, as well as his ability to sneak sweets from the kitchen.

He read through each page, smiling so hard his cheeks hurt, until he reached the end of the book.

Cenric's entry was the very last.

I could fill another book with my memories of your childhood and our time together. Each day with you was a gift from God. But I fondly remember a time when you could only fall asleep in my arms.

All of my love, always.

Camdyn shut the book with a snap, the sound sharp in the quiet room, before his tears could splatter the pages. He let out a shaky breath, feeling the sting in his eyes as he wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. It was a silly thing, really, he thought, sniffing. There was nothing to cry over. Cenric was fine. Hearty and healthy, and they would now get each other's letters in a timely, uninterrupted manner. It wasn't as though the pain of separation would vanish instantly, but at least there would be communication now, real communication—something he hadn't realized he needed

so desperately.

And the brothers at the monastery had given him such a lovely, wonderful, beautiful gift. His heart swelled with gratitude. That they had put this together for him, with so much care and attention—it filled him with joy. But at the same time, it made him ache, a deep, aching longing in his chest for the life he had left behind, the life he missed so fiercely.

He wanted to—he heaved a sob and buried his head in his arms, crying in earnest on the polished mahogany desk, his fingers curling around the edges of the letters. It was silly and stupid, because he and Everild had even planned a trip to the monastery, but that could be ages away, and right now, all he wanted was to stand in the chapel where he had grown up, the one that echoed with the voices of the monks, where he’d learned to pray and where Cenric had first taught him to sing hymns. He wanted to kneel in front of the altar and feel the cool stone beneath his knees, to listen to the faint hum of bees just outside the window. Or perhaps he wanted to forage for oak galls again to make the night-black ink for their manuscripts, something he hadn’t done in far too long. Or he just wanted to sit beside Cenric, to share a quiet moment with the man who had been his only parent, and say, “I’ve gotten your letters, finally, and I love you, too, of course, I love you so much, you’re the only parent I’ve ever had and I miss you all the time.”

It wasn’t a rational thought, but it was one that he couldn’t push away, not now, not after reading Cenric’s words, after feeling his love and care from miles away, across pages worn with time.

He had to write him back, that was clear. He’d thank Cenric for his advice, for his stories, for his patience, and love. He needed to tell him how much his letters had meant, how deeply they had comforted him. He could start right now—well, as soon as he could stop crying and let the blur of tears fade enough so he could see clearly. But it wasn’t just a letter that needed to be sent. Camdyn’s thoughts wandered to the

monks, to the way they had worked together on this beautiful prayer book. He should send them something too, something special. Not just to Cenric, but to all of them, a gift they could all enjoy. He thought about it for a moment—maybe candied citrus peels, from the kitchen’s stock of limes, lemons, and oranges. Pretty, colorful, and sweet, and Camdyn was fairly certain they would keep on a long trek, provided the parcel didn’t get damp. He sniffled again and wiped at his eyes, already imagining the scent of the candied fruit filling the air, the bright flavors bringing a little piece of home to the monks at the monastery.

A nice wooden box to hold the candy, wrapped in a sturdy cloth that could be reused for a sewing project, or—

“Camdyn?” He looked up to find Everild standing in the doorway, concern etched across his face. “Aldaay told me he gave you your letters. Have you—received bad news?”

Ah, he had worried his husband again. Camdyn shook his head, trying to stop his lip from quivering. “No, I just.” His voice faltered as he struggled to keep his emotions in check. “I just really miss Cenric, and it was so nice to read his letters, and then—my wedding present—“

He pushed the prayer book toward Everild, the weight of it heavier than he had realized. Everild took it from him, admiring the cover briefly before paging through the book with care. He made an approving noise at the quality of the copied hymns and prayers, the attention to detail that had clearly gone into it. But when Everild reached the final section of the book, his expression softened in a way that Camdyn hadn’t expected.

Everild’s smile was gentle, his eyes filled with a tenderness that made Camdyn’s heart ache all over again as Everild read Cenric’s entry. “You were a very sweet child, Camdyn.”

Camdyn let out a soft laugh, shaking his head. “I think it’s my absence that has sweetened their memories. I was a terror, to be sure.” The memory of his younger self, running wild with boundless energy, made him chuckle in spite of the tears still threatening to spill.

His husband snorted, his voice full of warmth and affection. “Impossible.”

Camdyn stood, crossing the room quickly to embrace Everild, his arms wrapping tightly around him. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I didn’t mean to have you come find me.”

A thought occurred to him, a shift of panic as the time seemed to rush back into focus. “Wait, why did you—what time is it? Oh, no! I’m so sorry, Everild, I completely missed the petitioners—“

“It’s fine,” Everild assured him, his tone soothing as he gently stroked Camdyn’s back. “You were reading your letters. And you don’t need to keep me company in the great hall every day.”

Camdyn pulled back slightly, looking up at Everild with a soft frown. “I like to, though. I want to help you when I can.”

Everild kissed his forehead, the pressure of his lips warm and reassuring. “You help me plenty. It’s all right to take some time to yourself.”

Everild’s arms were always so warm, so comforting. Camdyn snuggled against him, resting his head on his chest. “I think—I’ll tend the garden a bit, and then—and then I’ll write Cenric back. I’d like to give him and the other monks a gift. Do we still have citrus fruits in the kitchen?”

Immediately, Everild answered, “If we don’t, then I’ll get them for you. However

much you need.”

Camdyn thought for a moment, running his tongue over his bottom lip in concentration. “Well, maybe a bag of each—oranges, lemons, and limes.” He paused, nibbling at his lip. “And we’ll need quite a bit of sugar—mmph!”

Everild pressed their lips together in a firm, lingering kiss, a promise in the softness of it. “See to the onion sprouts. Then write your letter. I’ll have Aldaay add your ingredients to this month’s expenses. We’ve a meeting tonight, anyway.”

There was a grumble in his voice at this last statement, a clear sign that he didn’t look forward to more time spent poring over accounts with Aldaay. But Camdyn only giggled, running his hands over Everild’s chest, enjoying the feel of his closeness. “I’ll wait up for you. Since I missed our time together in the great hall today.” Feeling a little bold, he added with a teasing smile, “I’ll take a hot bath, and then I could—I could wear my pearls for you. Just, um—just the pearls?”

He gasped as Everild gave his bottom a playful squeeze and pulled him in for another kiss, his lips warm and insistent.

Then, as quickly as the kiss had started, Everild abruptly turned and began marching out of the library, his movements purposeful. Camdyn blinked, dazed and still a little breathless. “Where are you going?”

“To Aldaay,” his husband growled, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Sooner I finish with these accounts, the sooner I can see to you.”

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The garden grew well. Camdyn had high hopes for their crop of onions. He planned to make soup or a savory tart. He thought he could surprise Everild with a special dinner one night.

When he returned to their bedchamber, he requested hot water for a bath. The tub was filled as he penned his response to Cenric, letting him know that he had finally received all his letters and explaining his father's actions.

God have mercy on him , Camdyn wrote, His ambitions have made him cruel, and he's driven his children away. He is clawing his way to the upper rungs of society for the future of a family that wants nothing to do with him.

He gives his sincere thanks for the wedding present. It is beautifully made. I adore it. Reading all of your kind words had me weeping in the library. Poor Everild! He was so worried when he found me. But I have decided on a good gift for you all, I think, and he has agreed to help me procure all the necessary ingredients. That is your only hint! You may guess but I will not tell you what it is!

After detailing the garden's progress and closing the letter with an eager request for Cenric to write back as soon as he could, Camdyn made his way to the bath.

This seemed like a night to use the scented oil—the one that smelled warm and sensuous with its hints of cinnamon, black pepper, sandalwood, and what Camdyn now knew was bergamot. He had experimented with a number of the little vials on the shelf, but it was this one that made Everild's pupils dilate, and had him kissing and sucking at Camdyn's neck as he breathed in the scent.

He hummed as he rubbed the washcloth over his skin, fantasizing about his husband returning to find him warm and flushed on the bed, wearing only the pearl choker. Would it be too much to add the matching bracelets? But maybe Everild would find the sensation of them on Camdyn's wrists as he ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair enjoyable—

An urgent knock on the door startled him out of his thoughts. "My lord? Are you, uh, are you decent? It's important." The guard sounded flustered. Camdyn had noticed that many of the servants and staff were nervous around him, and he suspected it was either because he was still a new member of the household or that they were uncertain how to treat someone who grew up at a monastery. Or perhaps it was a combination of both. But there was an undercurrent of anxiety in the guard's tone that had Camdyn climbing out of the tub. The water sloshed to the floor, spilling over the mosaic tiles.

"Just one moment, please." Camdyn dried himself off as quickly as he could and threw on his bathrobe, tying a bow loosely at the front. "What's happened?" he asked the guards when he opened the door.

The two men stammered and talked over one another.

"Lord Everild and Aldaay are in the study—"

"Riders, from the Capital—"

Camdyn held up a hand. "Please, just one of you speak."

After a pause, one of the guards took a deep breath and said, "Officials from the Capital have arrived. They've been traveling nonstop for days. Lord Everild and Aldaay are speaking to them in the study. Your presence has been requested."

“Oh, goodness,” Camdyn murmured. “Do you have any idea what’s happened?”

He shook his head. “No, my lord. We were just told to inform you that you’re needed.”

Camdyn nodded. It didn’t matter what the issue was—in these types of situations, his duty was to support Everild in any way he could. “I’ll be out in a moment. I just need to get dressed.”

He shut the door as a beet-red color crawled up the men’s faces.

Something simple that he could get into by himself, but still neat and elegant. Camdyn chose a light blue tunic that hung off his shoulders with long, flowing sleeves. He tied a white sash around his waist and searched for his white slippers. Camdyn hadn’t worn the pair since his wedding, but they would go with his outfit nicely. He stepped into them; they were still soft and light.

At the very least, Camdyn mused, he could wear his pearls for Everild while they sat through whatever pressing matter had arrived from the Capital. He pulled the choker and bracelet from his jewelry box and put them on.

He dressed very quickly, but as he looked in the mirror, Camdyn was pleased with his appearance. There was a sort of wide-eyed, youthful look about his face that had stayed with him well into adulthood. The cut of his robes and the pearls around his neck and wrist gave him a more mature, dignified air. Like a more fitting companion for Everild, whose stern and stoic expression commanded respect.

Camdyn opened the bedchamber doors. “I’m ready. Please, take me to my husband.”

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It was late, Camdyn thought as they rushed through the corridors toward Everild's study. The dim glow of candlelight flickered along the walls, casting long shadows in the passageways, the warmth of the flames failing to reach the chill that settled in Camdyn's chest. Night had settled fully outside, and the stillness of the hour seemed to amplify the urgency that had pulled them from their bedchamber. What could be so pressing at such an hour?

Surely, it wasn't another war? The mere thought of it made Camdyn's heart stumble in his chest. The familiar fear of conflict, the chaotic rush of battle, sent a cold shiver down his spine. But what else could prompt such a sudden arrival of men from the Capital? The King would surely want Everild at his side once more, but—Camdyn hesitated, thoughts swirling in a storm. Everild hadn't taken up a sword in years, not since the war had ended. In fact, the last time he had held a blade had been at the final battle, and that had been the end of it. Everild had never been fond of conflict, not the kind where men's lives were at stake, where the air smelled of blood and iron. He had grown quieter, less inclined to command. The loud, crowded rooms full of power and demands made him tense, made him uneasy. Camdyn had seen it, how his husband would retreat into himself, strain his voice if forced to command, the pressure of it all weighing heavily on him. And when that happened, Camdyn would be there—always there—to make sure Everild drank his tea, to make sure he didn't push himself too far.

But now... What if Everild had to leave again? What if duty called him to fight once more? The thought was unbearable. Camdyn bit down hard on his lip, desperate to keep the tremble from escaping. He couldn't cry now, couldn't let the flood of emotion overtake him. He cried too easily—sometimes in joy, but more often in sorrow. It wasn't the time for tears, not when there was so much unknown. Whatever the matter was, whatever decision his husband had to make, Camdyn knew one thing for certain: he would be Everild's support. Just as Everild had been his, through every trial and every challenge, so too would Camdyn stand by him now.

He straightened his posture, pushing aside the doubts that clung to him like the night shadows. The cacophony of voices grew louder as they neared the study—a mixture of shouts and raised voices, the unmistakable hum of chaos within. Camdyn swallowed hard, trying to steady his breathing. His fingers itched to hold Everild, to anchor him amidst the storm.

The guards opened the doors. Camdyn walked in, every step deliberate, every inch of him steeled. His head was high, his shoulders pulled back with resolve. The study, which had once felt like a place of calm, of contemplation, was now filled with strangers, their presence heavy and tense. They were an unsettling sight—exhausted, their clothes torn and stained with the evidence of days spent in travel, their faces marked with the strain of worry and fatigue. Some were red-faced with rage, others pale and gaunt from fear. Aldaay stood at the center of it all, his usually calm demeanor shattered, his eyes frantic and agitated.

And there, by the desk, stood Everild—still and quiet, a figure of silence amidst the chaos. His face was ashen, drained of all color, and his eyes were hollow, glazed with the weight of whatever news had been delivered. He looked so small in the center of the room, so vulnerable amidst these strangers whose voices filled the space with demands and urgency.

As Camdyn strode forward, the men in the room bowed deeply, one by one, dropping to one knee as he passed. The formal gesture was not something Camdyn was accustomed to. Should he address them? What was the proper protocol in this moment of heightened tension? He cursed himself for not studying etiquette more thoroughly, for not knowing what was expected of him. But at that moment, as he stood before Everild, none of the other matters seemed important. All he could focus on was the look of distress in his husband's eyes.

“What’s happened, my lord?” Camdyn asked, his voice soft but firm, his concern pushing through the uncertainty. “Why are you in such distress?”

Everild's hand found his, cold and trembling, and with the gentlest of squeezes, Everild spoke, his voice low and strained. "The king is dead."

A gasp escaped Camdyn's lips before he could stop it. The words seemed impossible, the very notion of them shattering the quiet of their life. The king had been young, vibrant, full of energy. The thought of his sudden death was unfathomable. "Oh, Everild—how?" Camdyn asked, the question lingering in the air, unspoken fears taking root in his heart. The king had been in his prime, lively and youthful, no older than Everild. It didn't make sense. A hunting accident, perhaps? Too much drink? Anything other than this.

Aldaay spoke up, his voice grim. "Murdered. By Dustan Redmane. There was a disagreement over the king's heir." His words were punctuated by a hollow smile that seemed to lack any true joy.

"The treacherous bastard," one of the men growled from the corner. "His own cousin. To kill both king and kin and throw this nation into turmoil."

Another man joined in, his voice thick with contempt. "Only reprobates would side with him—his ilk from the war, those bandits and criminals. They'll meet the executioner's axe."

"God's will will prevail," another man stated firmly. "Blessed be the day our former regent chose the Beast as heir. No one is more suited to bring this usurper to justice."

"His Majesty will see justice done," came a triumphant voice. "And peace will return to this land!"

"Long live the king!" one of the group shouted, his voice rising with fervor.

The words echoed through the room like a chant, a chorus of defiance and rage.

“Long live the king!” they shouted, over and over again, the sound growing louder with each repetition.

Aldaay’s voice, however, remained quiet and grim. “Long live the king,” he repeated softly, the weight of the words heavy on him.

Camdyn looked at Everild, his heart aching as he saw the toll the news had taken on him. This was too much—he knew it. The weight of the king’s death, the demands of these strangers, the pressure for Everild to take action—it was all too much. Everild’s face had drained of all color, his shoulders slumped with the burden. He was shaking, his breathing shallow, and his eyes began to lose focus, the overwhelming nature of the situation beginning to unravel him.

Without thinking, Camdyn stepped forward, his hands trembling as he cupped Everild’s face gently in his palms. He pressed their foreheads together, blocking his husband’s view of the others, just as Everild had done for him on their wedding day when Camdyn had been afraid.

“I am here,” Camdyn whispered, his voice steady despite the storm swirling inside him. “I am with you, husband. Whatever comes next, whatever course you choose to take, I will be at your side.”

Tears spilled from Everild’s eyes, the dam breaking under the weight of everything. Camdyn brushed a tear from his cheek, his thumb gentle against his husband’s skin. He kissed Everild’s forehead, then his nose, and finally, his trembling lips, grounding him in this moment, in the present.

And then, standing firm, Camdyn spoke once more, his voice clear and unwavering, “Long live the king.”

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Camdyn's hand didn't leave his. Their fingers stayed entwined as he stood at Everild's side, clearly aggrieved by the news he had received but still calm, collected, and so, so beautiful—the very image of a king's consort. It was a role that fit him well, though it had always seemed distant, and yet here they were, standing side by side in this storm of grief and change.

Everild knew he needed to ensure that he was the very image of a king. The weight of the crown, though unseen, pressed on him in a way he had never truly anticipated. When Camdyn wiped the tears from his eyes, it wasn't just a comforting gesture—it was a moment of clarity. Camdyn had also cleared the fog from Everild's mind, allowing him to see the gravity of the situation for what it truly was. The former king was dead, murdered by his and Everild's own cousin. The kingdom was now in disarray, and the fate of it rested squarely on Everild's shoulders. These men—these advisors, who were only vaguely familiar to him—had arrived to inform him of his new status and to look to him for guidance. They needed him to decide the next step, to be decisive, to rise to the occasion. And Aldaay was there, with sage advice no doubt ready to burst from his lips, as was Camdyn, his beloved husband, who gave Everild all the courage he needed with a squeeze of his hand and a small, soft smile.

Everild let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Once, he had commanded soldiers into battle, but it had been a long, long time since he had led anything. He had spent so many years in the shadow of others, away from the battlefield. Now, he wasn't in charge of a battalion; he was in charge of the fate of an entire kingdom that had just experienced a regicide. This would be difficult. Stressful. But someone had to deal with the problem, and it ought to be him. He cleared his throat and barked out questions with the authority of a man who had stood at the edge of the battlefield once more, standing in the king's tent, poring over battlefield notes and maps of

enemy forces, interrogating his scouts for information. There was no room for hesitation. His people needed him now.

“Where has Redmane gone?” he asked, his voice sharp and commanding. The sharpness in his tone and the volume of his voice made the group jump, like a sudden crack of thunder.

One of the advisors answered, "We're not entirely certain, Your Majesty. But we do know that he's friendly with a few of the men he fought with during the war, and some have declared their allegiance to him. More than likely, he's with one of them."

Everild nodded, the pieces falling into place. “Get me a list of these men and map out their lands. Look for his closest ally. You said it was a three-day ride to get here from the Capital at breakneck pace. Assume Redmane was riding just as fast. Whose land would he flee to?” A younger advisor nodded and scurried off with a guard for parchment and paper. Everild continued, not letting the urgency of the situation slip from his mind. “Should I be worried about his claim to the throne?”

This sent the group into another round of excited muttering, their voices overlapping and rising with anxious uncertainty. Aldaay answered with his usual bluntness, cutting through the noise like a sharp blade. “Considering he's also a cousin, he might've had a leg to stand on. He could've challenged the line of succession, and we'd all be having a very dull conversation while staring at your family tree, trying to find the relations who've been removed and once-removed and tracing marriages, and so on. But he's gone and killed the king in cold blood and ran. Forget the regicide for a moment—he's still a murderer on the lam. Anyone who assists him is aiding and abetting a dangerous criminal. Once news of that reaches the countryside, I don't think he'll be able to garner much more support, my lord. Er, Your Majesty.”

Aldaay's words rang true, as usual. Everild knew the kingdom's people well enough to understand the weight that a murder of this magnitude would carry. If Dustan had

bided his time, scrutinized their family lines, and wooed allies—he might’ve successfully challenged Everild’s claim to the throne. But the murder of the king and his subsequent flight from the Capital indicated that none of this had been planned. The events had unfolded in a chaotic, ill-conceived rush. More than likely, their fool of a king had gotten drunk once more and let slip the news that he had chosen the heir to the throne—just as he had done months ago when he had happily told Everild that he had arranged a marriage for him by stealing a novice from a monastery—and Dustan, in a fit of rage, had killed him right there in his quarters.

Everild wasn’t about to allow any support to gather for Dustan. “He might have a few allies. Let’s not give him any more. Put a bounty on his head. Give him no place to rest. No one to turn to. Let nowhere be safe.”

An older advisor, gray and bearded, chuckled without humor. “I see, Your Majesty. May he bear the wolf’s head.” Everild nodded.

The label meant more than just being an outlaw—it meant to bear the wolf’s head was to become an outcast, a pariah, a danger to others who was to be hunted and killed by anyone who dared get close.

“He’s more of a rabid dog than anything else,” Everild growled. There was a particular danger in men like Dustan, men who acted only to satisfy their own desires and lashed out when something was denied to them. But Everild had killed both man and beast in his life, and if he now had to slay a monster, then so be it. Dustan should’ve been put down long ago.

His mind began to wander again, and Camdyn, ever the steady presence at his side, gave his hand another gentle squeeze. Everild was pulled from his thoughts by the simple warmth of his husband’s touch. Without thinking, he brought Camdyn’s fingers to his lips and kissed them softly. “Announce it, then. The king’s murder. That Dustan Redmane bears a wolf’s head. That I won’t have my coronation until

he's dead. And that—" He paused and looked into Camdyn's dark, honey-colored eyes. "And that I'll be leaving tomorrow to hunt him down myself."

For one brief moment, Camdyn's expression faltered, his face crumpling with concern, but he quickly schooled his features back into impassivity. His grip on Everild's hand tightened, as if he was afraid that his husband would suddenly disappear from the study. When he spoke, his voice was steady and quiet. "Would you have me prepare supplies for your journey, Your Majesty?" Camdyn asked, his voice betraying a quiet vulnerability. Everild realized that, in that moment, it wasn't just his words he was speaking to, but the men in the room. He was making it clear that he supported his husband's decision, that he was ready to assist him in any way he could.

"No, Camdyn," Everild replied, his voice firm yet tender. "It's late. You must rest."

Aldaay, ever the practical advisor, spoke up. "We all ought to sleep. There's nothing more we can do tonight but speculate about the morning, and you've had a trying last few days, my lords. I'll let the kitchen staff and the stable master know that you'll be departing tomorrow, Your Majesty."

Camdyn released Everild's hand reluctantly. "Let me at least have your rooms prepared, my lords."

"Your Royal Highness, there is no need—"

"Oh, please, let me help in some way." He turned to Everild, his big brown eyes wide and pleading. It was so late, and they'd have to get up early in the morning, and Camdyn needed to sleep, but he had never denied his husband any request, and he would not start now.

Everild pressed a kiss to his husband's lips. "As you will."

“I’ll wait for you, husband,” Camdyn murmured. His voice was soft but unwavering. Then he turned, inclined his head to the crowd of advisors, and strode out of the room.

One of the men, after a moment of silence, said very carefully, “Your Majesty must be very pleased with this union.”

Everild couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face. He could never help but smile when he thought about Camdyn. His husband thought God had brought them together. He had said it many times. As they lay pressed together in bed, skin still hot and flushed from their exertions. Working in the garden, pulling at weeds, dirt under his nails, and the sun in his face. Relaxing in the bath, head tucked under Everild’s chin, eyes closed and humming. Everild wasn’t sure God had anything to do with it, but he erred on the side of caution. He quietly thanked God for Their divine intervention when he held Camdyn in his arms at night, lulled to sleep by his soft snores.

Everild was extremely pleased with his marriage. He was happier than he had any right to be. He had never been a man for flowery turns of phrase, had always shirked from speeches and discussions at court. But when it came to Camdyn, words came easily. He loved his husband beyond what words could express.

And tomorrow, for the first time since their wedding day, he would have to leave him.

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When he finally returned to their room, Camdyn wasn’t dozing in bed as Everild had expected. Instead, his husband gazed out the window, dressed in Everild’s velvet tunic, which had long since been repurposed into Camdyn’s favorite night robe. It looked beautiful on him; he always seemed so warm and comfortable wearing it. The

color suited his pale skin, and it left his long legs on display.

The pearls rested on Everild's desk, a small pile of precious gems next to sheets of parchment.

Everild placed his hands on Camdyn's shoulders and kissed his cheek. "What are you looking at?"

"Just the stars," Camdyn replied softly. "I wasn't sure if you still wanted me to wear the pearls. I can, if you want. Do you—are you in the mood?"

If it had been any other time, any other day, Everild would've gladly accepted the offer to enjoy one another's touch. But the king had been murdered, a crowd of strangers filled the castle, both of them were exhausted, and by tomorrow evening, they would already have said their goodbyes.

How long would it take to root out Dustan and his allies? First, he had to find his treacherous cousin and kill him, and then those who declared their support for his cause had to be dealt with. A siege needed to be avoided. Camdyn's little garden was still growing, but most of the crops had been harvested. Any responsible lord would have a castle well stocked for winter. God, what a mess. This could take months if they made a mistake.

It was agony to imagine being away for that long. There would be no morning love-making, no breakfast and talk afterward, no kisses goodbye, no happy updates about the garden or the latest research in the library as they prepared for a bath, no small, soft, warm body clinging to him throughout the night.

Everild pulled Camdyn into a tight embrace. "Do you remember our wedding night?" he asked. "All you wanted was to kiss and talk."

“I do,” Camdyn replied.

“That’s all I want now. I just want to kiss you, hold you, and fall asleep to your voice. Can we do that?”

Camdyn smiled. “Oh, yes, of course, Everild.”

It was almost shocking, the difference in their behavior. On their wedding night, Everild had been stressed beyond belief, worried about frightening his new husband, scared that he might make him uncomfortable. Camdyn had been shy, confused, and uncertain about Everild's wants as well as his own. But the two of them had been so hopeful that they could make their marriage work.

Now, Camdyn undressed him with practiced ease, waiting until Everild had taken off his boots before unbuttoning his vest and freeing him from his shirt. He carefully wrapped and set his belt on the chair as Everild stepped out of his pants.

“Now you,” Everild said. It was an easy task. Camdyn didn’t even have his leggings on; he was naked underneath the velvet tunic. But as Everild helped him shrug off the clothing, he was struck, as always, by his husband’s beauty. His skin smooth and pale, his brown curls, his large, dark eyes, his long legs. But he had changed a bit. Camdyn stood taller now, more confidently, and he was a little fuller than when they first met—the result of a healthy appetite no longer stymied by monastic asceticism. More for Everild to hold and adore. And now all the tremulousness was gone from his expression; the trust in his eyes was accompanied by desire and affection.

The sight of his husband naked and relaxed, unashamed and eager for his touch, was one that Everild would never tire of.

He placed his hands on Camdyn’s bare hips. “There you are,” Everild said with a grin.

Camdyn smiled and spread his arms wide. “Here I am!”

His husband cried out in delight when Everild picked him up—he was still so light—and twirled him around. Camdyn’s laughter was one of the sweetest sounds in the world, Everild thought, as he placed him onto the bed. He kissed every inch of his husband, ran his hands over him, trying to soak up all the little happy noises Camdyn made and the feeling of his body against his, all warmth and goodness like sunlight against his skin.

His husband merely clung to him and allowed him to indulge in the scent and feeling of his body, giggling occasionally when Everild’s beard brushed against a particularly ticklish spot. Yes, this was what he wanted, Everild mused with a sigh against Camdyn’s stomach. His lovely husband, comfortable and laughing, basking in Everild’s love. Tomorrow, they would sleep without one another, and only God knew how long it would take for them to be together again. But at least they had this gentle night of kisses, touches, and laughter to make the days following less lonely.

“Everild, kiss me, please?” Camdyn asked.

Everild’s mouth had not left his skin since they’d gotten into bed, but he knew that Camdyn meant that he wanted a kiss pressed to his lips. Ever obedient, Everild shifted so that he could leave a trail of kisses up Camdyn’s chest to his neck, to each corner of his mouth, and then to his pretty, pink lips.

It was a different kind of desire—a need to just simply hold Camdyn, to pour his affection into every kiss and caress.

Eventually, he simply rested against Camdyn, their foreheads pressed together, their breathing in sync, his husband gently stroking his back.

“You said you wanted to talk,” Camdyn murmured. “What did you want to talk

about?”

Everild rolled off of him and settled against the pillows, pulling Camdyn into his side to cuddle as they always did. What to discuss? Something happy and sweet. Something to think about in their time apart—to look forward to.

He asked, “What will you show me first when we get to the monastery?”

Camdyn’s face lit up. God, how beautiful he was. “Oh! We’ll have to meet the Abbot first and foremost. And then Cenric, of course, you must meet Cenric. He’ll like you, don’t worry. And then the rest of the monks—Brother David, Brother Trian, all of them... After we pray in the chapel, maybe I could show you my old clochán? There won’t be much there, but—it’d be nice for you to see where I lived all those years. And—and then down to the beach? That was my favorite place. I’d like to watch the waves with you, Everild. Depending on when we go, there might be seaweed on the shore. I could show you how we collect and dry it. We could make soup. I think you’d like it. With the vegetables and legumes, it’s very filling, and with Cenric’s spices, it’s so flavorful—“

It was a wonderful image. Camdyn’s childhood home, the people who raised him and loved him, the places he walked, ran, swam, and spent his time, where he grew into the man that Everild adored with every fiber of his being.

He pulled Camdyn close so that his lips brushed his husband’s ear. “Camdyn?”

Camdyn looked up at him through long, dark lashes and with a contented smile. “Hm?”

“I love you.”

His husband stilled in his arms. His eyes grew wide, his smile wider. “You—you

do?”

Of course, Everild did. How could he not? It was impossible not to love Camdyn. But he repeated, as softly as he could, “I love you.”

Camdyn’s expression transformed into something remarkably gentle and tender. “Oh. Oh, Everild. I love you, too. You know that, right? I love you so much.”

With a shaking hand, he cupped Camdyn’s cheek. He ran his thumb along Camdyn’s lower lip, plump and moist from their kissing. “I know. And I’m happy. I’m so happy you love me.”

His husband said, quite seriously, “How could I not love you, Everild?”

Pure joy welled up inside Everild’s heart. It bubbled out of his throat in a peal of laughter. His lips found Camdyn’s once more, and he kissed him again, and again, and again.

Tomorrow would come, but tonight was theirs.

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In the early morning light, Camdyn resolutely went to the chapel for his prayers, as he did every day before any important event. It was his quiet moment to focus, and to seek guidance for Everild’s journey. Standing in front of the altar, he whispered a prayer, his voice soft but firm in the sacred space. “I’ll pray to God for your health, and your safety, and that you complete your task in a timely manner, and that you will come back to me shortly.” The words were sincere, filled with a deep, unshakable love and hope. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in the serenity of the chapel, before standing to leave, his heart heavy with the knowledge that Everild was leaving soon.

After his prayer, they gathered for breakfast in the great hall, which was already teeming with activity by the time they arrived. The kitchen staff worked furiously, preparing supplies for Everild's departure, while also making sure the group of misplaced advisors were fed and ready to continue their duties. The clatter of plates, the bustle of feet, and the low murmur of voices filled the room, but through it all, Camdyn could only focus on his husband. Everild was leaving, and he couldn't stop worrying.

Camdyn fretted over the smallest details. His hands moved quickly, packing Everild's things as though they could somehow ensure his safety. "I'm packing tea leaves," Camdyn said, his voice thoughtful, as he carefully spooned piles of earthy, aromatic black tea leaves into a small container. "I know you don't care for the taste, Everild, but Edwin said it was good for you. Goodness, I can wrap up a few lemons as well, but how am I going to get the honey in there—would a small jar be too cumbersome? I don't want it to break and leave you with a mess to clean." His voice trailed off, lost in his thoughts, hands still moving, as he worked to pack everything that could be needed.

Aldaay, always one for practical matters, raised an eyebrow at him. "You're aware that His Majesty isn't going on a picnic, yes, Your Royal Highness?" Camdyn glanced at him with a small, worried frown, but Everild shushed Aldaay with a quiet, affectionate smile. He knew that Camdyn's worry was an expression of love, a love he cherished deeply. The small things, the little extras that Camdyn packed—each carefully chosen item was another small symbol of his devotion. Everild's heart swelled with love for his husband, knowing that Camdyn wanted nothing more than to ensure he would be safe and comfortable while he was away.

The light streaming through the great hall's windows caught Camdyn just so, making his curls seem almost auburn in the morning sun. His big, brown doe eyes sparkled, and his lips, slightly parted, shone as though inviting Everild to do nothing but kiss him. Camdyn was truly beautiful in that moment, caught in the soft, golden light, a

picture of grace and love that Everild could never tire of looking at.

Everild moved, taking the small jar of honey that Camdyn had carefully wrapped in linen for safekeeping, and placed it into his satchel. With one hand, he cupped Camdyn's face and pulled him in for a long, deep kiss. Camdyn sighed, his breath warm against Everild's lips, and melted into his arms. The kiss was a moment of perfect tenderness, a connection that was both simple and profound. They had no words to express the depth of their love, but in that kiss, it was all said.

Aldaay made a disgruntled noise in the background, but the rest of the household had grown used to their lords' displays of affection. They simply went about their business, packing sun-dried fruits, meats, hazelnuts, and wheels of hard, aged cheese for the journey ahead. The smell of the food, the rustle of leather and linen as supplies were carefully stored—everything else was a blur to Camdyn as he reluctantly pulled away from Everild.

The advisors, however, had no such experience with displays of affection, and when the two men parted, they stared at them from their table, faces shocked, flustered, and scandalized by the intimate moment they had just witnessed. One advisor, the younger one who had gone off to map out Dustan's potential escape routes, tentatively approached them. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. Your Royal Highness. I don't mean to—interrupt—" He stumbled over his words, clearly unsure of how to proceed after witnessing such a personal moment. "I believe I've charted the outlaw Redmane's most likely location. There's a lord to the west, near the mountains, who fought alongside him during the war. I'm certain he's there."

Everild's voice, gruff as always, cut through the awkward silence. "What makes you sure he wouldn't try to flee across the border? Or to another ally?" His questions were direct, but the advisor seemed to understand that they were not dismissive—Everild was simply seeking the most complete answer to formulate the best plan.

The young advisor replied confidently, “He wouldn’t try and flee, Your Majesty, because then whatever tenuous claim to the throne he has now would be lost. And there are a few others who are friendly with him, but they reside in more populated areas. I doubt Redmane would take the risk of riding through those cities alone. Not when he’s gone and murdered a king. He’d be torn apart by a mob. The lord’s land in the mountains—it’s a bit farther away, and the road is more difficult to travel, but he’s a skilled rider. He’ll be there, I’m sure of it. That’s where you need to be.” He cleared his throat before adding, “That is, if you think that’s the best course of action, Your Majesty.”

Everild gave a curt nod, impressed by the advisor’s detailed and confident response. He considered the options carefully before making his decision. “Send a battalion of soldiers to each of the lords that have made public their support for Redmane. Have them march through the cities and towns on their land, but they’re not to loot or pillage a single shop or home. Have them tell the elders that they are merely searching for the murderer and would-be thief Redmane and that their lord is suspected of hiding him. Then have them surround the lord’s manor and wait.” His throat had grown raw and rough from the discussion, and he cleared it, reaching for his cup. Camdyn returned with a fresh cup of black tea sweetened with honey, and Everild thanked him, even though he grimaced at the taste. The warmth of the tea soothed his throat, but it did little to ease the heavy burden on his mind.

The advisor waited patiently for Everild to finish his tea. When Everild handed the cup back to Camdyn, he added, “I’ll go to the mountains with my huntswoman. If Redmane is there, then Udele and her hounds will track him down. If not, we’ll keep looking—manor by manor, lord by lord.”

The younger advisor nodded, but then asked, “What will be done with those lords that supported Redmane, Your Majesty?”

Everild’s expression darkened, the weight of the question pressing down on him.

There was really only one answer in a situation like this. Dustan had forced his hand, and now his reign would be stained with blood. His voice was a low growl as he spoke, the words heavy with finality. “Their bodies will hang in the Capital square alongside their murderous friend.”

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Guilt roiled in Everild's stomach as he watched Udele and Willow say their goodbyes. He and Camdyn had been married for only a few months, and Everild knew their separation would be unbearable. Willow and Udele had been together for as long as Everild could remember and had never gone more than a week without seeing each other. This would be agony for both women, their bond made all the more palpable by their unwillingness to part.

"It must be done, Your Majesty," Willow said, her fingers adjusting the hood on Udele's cloak with careful precision. "I hate to have you leave, dearheart, but this'll all be over more quickly with your help."

Udele's smile was soft but filled with resignation. "Ah, you've quite a lot of faith in an old woman."

"Experienced, you are," Willow teased, her voice fond.

"In many ways," Udele replied with a wink, and Willow responded with a playful slap to her shoulder. The air was filled with the quiet but familiar affection between the two women.

"Just be careful," the stable master said, his voice firm but tinged with concern.

Aldaay, though indispensable in council, would remain behind due to his less-than-impressive horsemanship. Everild knew that Camdyn would need his assistance in keeping the castle running smoothly during his absence, so Aldaay would be staying put for the time being.

“So long as this isn’t a plot to keep Gerald as your advisor, Your Majesty,” Aldaay teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Everild snorted at the comment. The entire situation had become so convoluted, and Gerald’s involvement was a central part of it. Dustan had assassinated the king in his bedchamber, and with Gerald’s help—whether through coercion or his own volition—he had fled the palace. Gerald claimed it had been under threat and duress, but the other advisors had quickly placed him in chains. Everild found himself conflicted about the matter. On one hand, no one should have died for the king—after all, he had been just a man, and not a particularly good one at that. But on the other hand, Gerald had been the one to encourage the king’s violent tendencies, his insatiable lust for war, urging soldiers to march to their deaths for the sake of God and the crown. And now, Gerald could not even face the consequences of his own counsel? Hypocrite. Charlatan. Everild was angry that it was his own cowardice—his reluctance to take a life—that had forced him to leave Camdyn, his beloved, for an uncertain period of time.

Camdyn stood quietly by Everild’s horse, stroking the stallion’s thick, muscular neck. The animal was broad, dark, and sturdy—like a true companion in both battle and peace. “Not unlike someone else I know,” Camdyn had once remarked with an impish smile as he gently petted the horse. The beast snorted, then curiously sniffed at the curls framing Camdyn’s face, eliciting a brief but warm smile from him. Everild’s heart ached as he watched this small, intimate moment between his husband and the animal.

Everild knew he was almost ready to depart, but an anxious weight pressed down on him. It was the same feeling he always had before battle—the gnawing uncertainty, the tangle of emotions, the tightening of his chest. Once the battle had begun, there had been no time for thought beyond survival. But it was the waiting, the standing in formation, listening for the sounds that would signal the charge—that had always been the most uncomfortable part. Now, his body felt that same anticipation, but in a different way. This time, the battle was internal, his heart and mind warring between love for Camdyn and the responsibility he felt toward his kingdom.

He had deliberately chosen not to carry a sword, instead strapping an axe to his back. This had caused a great deal of consternation among his advisors—most of whom had never seen live combat, let alone taken a life. They argued that Everild would be unprepared to defend himself should he face Dustan, or that it was unbecoming of a king to forgo the traditional weapon of a commander. How could he explain to a group of men who spent their days discussing matters of state—the treasury, trade routes, alliances—that a sword, to him, was not just a tool but a reminder of all the violence he had left behind? The mere thought of grasping the hilt would dredge up horrific memories, transforming him into a killer, a soldier first and foremost, at the expense of the man he had become. He could never return to that life.

But Camdyn had come to his defense, offering a few words that had satisfied the advisors. “A sword is for an equal, my lords. A fellow soldier, a fellow warrior. Dustan Redmane bears the wolf’s head, but he is naught but a beast, and he will be dealt with as such,” he had said, squeezing Everild’s hand for reassurance.

“Forgive us our impertinence,” one of the men had quickly responded. “Your Royal Highness is of course correct. Your Majesty’s skill and conduct in battle are renowned. The outlaw Redmane is no peer.”

Now, however, Camdyn remained silent, brushing the mane of the horse with absent concentration. Everild gently tugged him away from the animal, tilting his husband’s chin up so that their gazes met. The look in Camdyn’s eyes held a mixture of sadness and love that tugged painfully at Everild’s heart. Without a word, they kissed—a kiss that felt far too deep and lingering for the moment, but it was their last for a while. A final taste of each other’s lips, a desperate attempt to hold on.

“I won’t be gone long,” Everild assured him, his voice soft but firm. “I’ll be back before you know it. You’ll enjoy the time away from me.”

Camdyn pouted, his voice quiet but full of emotion. “I won’t. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I just want you to come back to me. Even if something happens, and you get hurt—just come home, and I’ll take care of you.”

Everild kissed his forehead, his heart swelling at the devotion in Camdyn’s voice. “If something does happen, Camdyn—go to your siblings. Cera, or Gibson.” His sister-in-law was a force to be reckoned with, strong and capable. And though his brother-in-law’s actions still hurt, Gibson was as loyal and protective as they came. He would ensure Camdyn’s safety above all else.

“But nothing will happen.” Camdyn’s voice held a tinge of uncertainty, his words more a question than a statement. He sought reassurance that Everild could not fully give, not this time.

“We must plan for every possibility, Camdyn. That’s how you win a battle,” Everild replied, his voice steady even though his heart was not.

Camdyn blinked back tears, his emotions breaking through. “I love you,” he whispered, his voice small but heavy with meaning.

Everild hugged him tightly, feeling the steady beat of Camdyn’s heart against his chest. “Do you think,” he asked softly, “that there’s anything in this world that will stop me from returning to you?”

Camdyn narrowed his eyes, his lips curling into a faint smile. “No. Anyone that tries will have to deal with me. I can be very scary.” Then he laughed, the sound a bittersweet relief in the tense atmosphere. Everild couldn’t help but laugh as well, pressing a kiss to his husband’s lips even as the thought of being apart from him, of leaving him behind, tightened his chest painfully.

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Udele was keenly aware of Everild's concerns, her expression calm and assured, yet laced with the understanding of his anxiety.

"Nothing will happen to you, Everild," she said in her usual steadfast tone, her voice a reassuring constant. "Not when I am around. There are few creatures alive that can best me, and those that can won't get the better of my hounds. You stay with me, Everild, just like when you were a boy. We'll draw that man out, take him down, and then we'll come home and kiss our pretty helpmates, and that'll be that."

"And that'll be that," Everild replied, though the weight of what lay ahead hung heavily on him.

They rode west, pushing forward through the unfamiliar stretches of land, past the Capital, past the palace, and through crowds of people who seemed to stir with conflicting emotions. They clamored for justice for the dead king, an unyielding demand to see the new one—Everild—take his place. But Everild couldn't help but wonder: had they truly mourned his cousin as a king, or had they been drawn into the spectacle of his violent end? Had the public, whose emotions seemed so raw, really felt a deep connection to the late monarch, or was it only the crime itself—the brutal murder—that stirred their hearts and ignited their anger?

The faces of the crowds were a blur, their cries and chants hanging in the air, but as they moved through the different districts, something else caught Everild's eye. Everywhere they went, they saw his coat of arms—the royal insignia—flying high on rooftops, pinned proudly to the doors of houses, shops, and churches. It was draped from window to window like a line of laundry, fluttering in the breeze on silk, linen, or even humble pillowcases. To Everild, this was the most meaningful sight: the undeniable mark of the people's recognition of him as king, even as they protested.

More heartening to him, however, was the wolf pelts nailed to city gates and town walls. A message of defiance, loud and clear: the inhabitants were not only unafraid but resolute. They hunted the beasts and would not yield to them. There would be no support, no safety for Dustan Redmane from the people of these towns. It was a powerful statement of unity, a reminder that while the throne might have been taken by force, the land—and its people—stood resolutely in his favor.

After passing the cities and towns, the horses galloped faster, their hooves pounding against the earth as they approached the outskirts of a small village at the edge of a dark and foreboding forest. The air thickened with the smell of pine and earth, the landscape shifting as the tall trees loomed over them. When they stopped to speak with the headman, Udele's hounds—still tracking Dustan's scent—snarled and growled, pacing restlessly at the lead, eager to resume the hunt. They were relentless, almost as if they too were aware of the severity of the task at hand.

Everild understood their agitation, his own impatience growing as the weight of the mission pressed on him. The sooner they ended this, the sooner he could return to Camdyn, to the life he had momentarily left behind.

“The outlaw Dustan Redmane has been here,” one of Everild's men remarked, his gaze shifting toward the hounds still baying for their quarry. “Your lord—he has allied with him?”

The headman shrugged indifferently. “Oh, that man did, but he isn't our lord anymore.” He gestured vaguely toward the manor in the distance, the smoke rising from its still-burning remains. “You don't shelter a wild animal. They live in the wilds. Murdering a king—and his own kin, no less—there is no love or loyalty there. If a man wants an animal as an ally, then he'll be treated like one. It's the way of things.”

His blunt speech made Everild think of Aldaay. A brief chuckle escaped his lips.

“You remind me of a friend of mine,” he said, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

“Handsome man, eh?” The headman grinned, a flash of wit behind his weathered face.

Everild smiled in return, though it was bittersweet. “And very wise. Your people know these forests better than us. Would you help us find Redmane with their help?”

The old man stroked his beard thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing as he considered the request. “Ah, well, we were just going to let him starve to death—less risk to get the bounty that way. But if you’ll be with us, Your Majesty, then I’ll gather up a few of my people. We’ll put him down ourselves.”

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Everild walked alongside Udele, her hounds straining at their leashes as they led the way, their noses low to the earth, locked onto Dustan’s scent. The dogs’ instincts were sharp, guided by years of training, and they were relentless in their pursuit. Behind them, Everild’s retinue stretched for what seemed like miles, a formation of soldiers and advisors, the village’s fit young men and women, all moving with purpose and precision. The air in the forest felt dense, as if it absorbed the weight of the world. The trees grew tall and ancient, their thick canopies blocking the sunlight, casting everything beneath them into a heavy twilight. The ground was uneven, thick with roots, rocks, and fallen branches, making each step a calculated effort. It was difficult to navigate, yet it was impossible to hide. The forest held secrets, but it also knew no mercy. Dustan could not outrun them, not with the dogs and the hunting party trailing him.

They moved like a well-oiled machine, their formation unwavering, intent on flushing out the fugitive who dared to defy their king’s authority. They scoured the

underbrush with methodical efficiency, eyes sharp, searching for the smallest signs: the flash of Dustan's red cloak, the gleam of metal from his chain mail, or the faintest glint of his icy blue eyes that stood out even in the darkest woods. Every sound—every rustling leaf, every snapped twig—was amplified in the silence of the hunt, and with each step, Everild's resolve solidified.

The walk was eerily familiar, like a forgotten memory surfacing from the depths of his mind. Once, he and his cousins had scoured these very woods in search of adventure. It had been a simpler time, filled with the excitement of discovery and the thrill of chasing after elusive creatures. The forest had been a playground, a place to lose themselves among the trees, to climb the highest branches, to pick wild blackberries and play in the cool shade. The air had smelled different back then—fresher, more innocent. The animals had been prey for their imaginations: deer darting through the underbrush, foxes peering curiously from the shadows, birds flitting between branches with a chatter of feathers. They had even hoped to see the great brown bear, a creature of legend, a symbol of untamed power that only the bravest of hearts would dare to track.

But now, those carefree days felt like another life entirely. Now, Everild walked the same paths, but not for sport. Now, he hunted his own flesh and blood, a man who had killed his brother—a man who, like the predators of these woods, was a danger to all who crossed his path. Dustan had become something else, something far darker and more dangerous than the wild animals they once chased. The forest no longer whispered with the voices of innocent creatures. Instead, it echoed with the weight of vengeance.

Everild's thoughts drifted to his husband, Camdyn. A soft smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, a fleeting thought of warmth in the midst of the cold, relentless pursuit. Camdyn was everything Dustan was not—gentle, kind, the embodiment of compassion. Everild could feel the stark contrast between the two men, one driven by greed, power, and bloodshed, the other by love, patience, and the desire for peace. It

made the task at hand even more unbearable. He did not want this. He did not want to walk this path of violence. But duty called. The land demanded justice.

So, let this reign begin in blood. Let Dustan's blood water the soil, nourishing the kingdom with its sacrifice. Everild would make sure of it. The kingdom needed a ruler who would protect it, who would care for it like Camdyn cared for his garden, tending to it with patience and love. That would be Everild's legacy. The kingdom would grow, and he would stand beside Camdyn, defending both the man he loved and the people who needed him.

"Your Majesty, might Redmane have taken off into the mountains?" one of the soldiers asked, breaking Everild from his thoughts.

Everild shook his head, a low growl escaping him. "He wouldn't have expected the villagers' opposition to his arrival. He's somewhere in this forest. Scrounging for food and water. Hiding in the brush. Unable to even make a fire lest we see him. He's trapped. Soon enough, we'll walk right into him."

As if on cue, the hounds began to snarl, their deep growls echoing through the trees. Spittle dripped from their jowls as they circled, their powerful muscles tensing. Udele, ever calm and in control, called the hounds back to her, but they were restless, their instincts alive with the hunt. One by one, she untied their collars, and they sprang forward, the forest floor shaking under the pounding of their paws, a chorus of howling and barking filling the air.

The pack, trained for the chase of deer and boar, was no stranger to blood, but it had never hunted a man before. Their growls grew louder, fiercer, their sharp teeth flashing as they surrounded their prey. They would trap Dustan, keeping him at the center of their circle, but they would not kill him. Not yet.

It was not long before they found him—cornered, exhausted, and irate. His fine

clothes were tattered, his armor dented and dirty from days of running, his face shadowed by the stubble of a hastily grown beard. He was the picture of a man on the verge of collapse, yet his eyes burned with defiance. He gritted his teeth as the hunting party closed in, his gaze locking onto Everild's. The two men shared a long, tense moment, the space between them charged with animosity.

“What took you so long? Had to put together a force strong enough for one man, eh?” Dustan sneered, his voice dripping with contempt. He spat on the ground. “You used to be more than enough for an army just on your own. A true soldier. Gone to seed, have you? Gone soft? I know your stomach roils at the sight of blood now, Your Majesty.” His words were a calculated insult, meant to provoke, to tear at Everild's pride.

Everild stared at him, his expression unreadable. He had heard Dustan's taunts before, back when they were children, and even then, he had learned to ignore them. But now, those words held no weight. He was no longer the same man who had once cared about such things. His life had changed, and Camdyn was waiting for him, miles away, far from this blood-soaked forest. Everild could not—would not—risk everything for a battle that had no meaning.

Dustan was no longer a man. Not in the eyes of society, at least. He was an outlaw, a murderer, a danger to everything Everild sought to protect. “The only quarry fit for a king is a hart of ten,” Everild said, his voice cold, his gaze unwavering. “There's no antlers on your head. But I hear your barking. I see your fangs, and the blood on your hands. You're that wolf that's gone and killed a man.” He motioned for the villagers to step forward. “And we've found you.”

The archers, a silent line of tension, notched their arrows, each of them aiming at a single target.

Dustan's face twisted in frustration, a strange mixture of a growl and a whimper

escaping him. "You think you're going to make a good king? You were slow of speech when we were children, and now you can barely say a few sentences without spitting blood. Think people will cheer for the fucking Beast?"

"A ruler is for their people," Everild replied, his voice steady, unwavering. "My duty is always to protect them, whether they like me or not." The former king had done nothing but sate his own hunger for power. Dustan was no different, but he was worse, crueler. Everild had learned that much long ago.

He thought of Camdyn again, his words from days past echoing in his mind: "My husband says that I'm a good man, so I'll be a good king. He might have too much faith in me. But I'll do my best to be better than the last one. And I already know that I'm a better man than you."

With that, he gave the signal. Udele whistled, and the dogs returned to her side, their task complete. "Don't hit his face," Everild ordered. "His body will hang in the Capital's square along with anyone who helped him."

Dustan's expression shifted, a flicker of disbelief flashing in his eyes. He was silent now, his anger muting into something more dangerous: resignation. He glared at Everild, his jaw clenched, the sound of his breath a low, guttural growl.

The archers fired in unison.

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The villagers slaughtered a pig for Udele's hounds to feast on and another for Everild's retinue. It was a generous gesture, one that surprised Everild. He was taken aback by their hospitality, especially given the harshness of the winter. "You needn't have done that," he exclaimed, his voice tinged with surprise. "I don't want to take away from your winter stores." The weight of his words lingered in the cold air, but

the headman merely flashed him a toothy grin, his eyes gleaming with a quiet satisfaction.

"Well, we'll be able to buy up plenty of supplies with the bounty from the wolf's head, won't we?" The old man's words were said with a kind of cheer, as if the community's needs and the victory were one in the same.

Everild nodded, still processing the gesture. "Of course. I won't forget your help." His voice held a sincerity, but there was a shadow of uncertainty behind his words, as though he didn't quite know what to make of their generosity. He paused, before continuing with a more pressing question. "You wouldn't happen to know where your former lord fled, do you?"

The headman's smile faded slightly as he looked towards the bloody sack that contained Dustan's lifeless body. "Hoping to add to the display?" he chuckled, his voice rough with age and experience. He waved off Everild's query with a wry expression. "Apologies, Your Majesty. If we'd known your plans, we wouldn't have burned him in the manor."

Everild, his mind still racing from the recent events, wasn't sure how to respond to that. The idea that Dustan's body was now little more than a charred relic, destroyed before it could be properly dealt with, weighed heavily on him. It was almost as if the world had been stripped of any pretense of order. Instead of voicing his discomfort, Everild shifted his focus. "Should I appoint a new lord for you all?" he asked, his voice carrying the weight of his new role.

"Go right ahead, go right ahead," the headman responded, with a casual wave of his hand. "If we don't like them, we'll take care of them ourselves, eh?" There was a gleam of mischief in his eyes, a deep-seated pride in his community's self-reliance.

Yes, Everild thought to himself, Aldaay would get along well with these people. They

were resourceful, unbowed by the weight of authority. He almost felt a flicker of hope, wondering if perhaps there was a path forward for his fractured kingdom.

As evening fell and the sounds of the village quieted, Udele found Everild sitting alone next to Dustan's body. He was lost in thought, staring down at the remains of the man who had once been his cousin, his family. Udele lowered herself onto the ground beside him, her movements slow and deliberate, as though she, too, understood the gravity of the moment.

"Mourning your cousins?" she asked, her voice gentle, yet filled with a quiet knowing. Everild let out a snort, half-amused, half-sad. "You all loved each other once," she added, her words carrying the weight of nostalgia. "It used to be the three of you running down those castle halls."

"When we were very small," Everild conceded with a sigh, his voice soft and distant. "When we were happy, and curious, and all we ever wanted to do was play." The memories came rushing back—before the war, before the betrayal, before Dustan had murdered the king, before everything had shattered. "Perhaps I'm mourning the children they once were." He looked down at the ground, lost in thought.

The image of them—two bright-eyed children—still clung to his memory. Dustan with his dark hair, and Wilburg with his blond locks, both of them always by his side, both of them carefree and innocent, dressed in tunics stained with the juices of wild berries they'd pick near the castle. They would tumble on the grass, laughing and shrieking, their voices rising in the air. How had they gone from that to what they had become?

Dustan had grown cruel, intentionally callous, aggressive in his brutality, and Wilburg, despite his jovial nature, had only ever cared for his own pleasures, his laughter echoing even as others suffered for his amusement. The war had done something to all of them, something that they could never undo.

And then came the war—ruthless and unforgiving. It had stripped the flesh from Everild's body and the ease from his mind, leaving him scarred, mentally and physically. It had taken away any remnants of the love he had once felt for his cousins. They had thrived in battle, found joy in it, while Everild had longed for peace, for an end to the endless violence that seemed to follow him wherever he went. He hadn't wanted the throne. He had never wanted this life. All he had wanted was a quiet place to rest, away from the screams, the bloodshed, the constant fear.

"We killed each other," Everild murmured, his voice tinged with bitterness. "Dustan murdered the king, and then I had Dustan slaughtered." He let out a bitter laugh, one that lacked humor. "Did you ever imagine this would happen when you watched the three of us explore the woods together? That we'd die at one another's hands? That one day I'd be the last?" He shook his head, as though the weight of his words was too much to bear.

Udele was silent for a long moment, her face unreadable. Then she spoke softly, her voice steady. "Only God knows what's in store for anyone, Everild. I can't say I ever expected this would be one of our hunts, but—" She paused, furrowing her brow, as though searching for the right words. "You've always been a good lad. You've only ever tried to do what's right. They thought you a warrior for your strength and size, and I daresay you were more than decent at it, but—you know the reason you get along with that pretty husband of yours? You're both gentle creatures. Made for nurturing and caring and defending others. So, no, I can't rightly say that this is where I thought I'd be sitting one day, but it is so, and I'll gladly follow you wherever you continue to lead me, Your Majesty."

Everild chuckled weakly, trying to mask the sorrow in his heart. "Have you been talking to Camdyn?" His voice cracked slightly, strained from the emotions churning inside him. He hiccupped, wiping at his eyes, and managed a small, pained smile. "He's always telling me ridiculous things like that." Udele's hand, worn and weathered, gently rested on his shoulder as he hung his head, unable to stop the tears

that flowed freely.

A storm of emotions raged within him. Udele's words were too kind, her trust in him too much, far more than he felt he deserved. He was the king now, but he never wanted to be. His family was gone, and somehow, he wasn't sure if he was supposed to feel more sorrow than he did. Throughout the kingdom, Dustan's allies—those who had fought alongside him, who had reveled in the brutality of the war—were being hunted down, dragged from their manors and castles, and executed. And yet, as each one fell, Everild felt a sickening satisfaction that he didn't know how to reconcile with his conscience.

He missed his husband. The ache in his chest was a constant, gnawing reminder of the life he had left behind. All he wanted was to return to Camdyn, to see his garden, to sit with him in peace, to talk about everything and nothing at all, to hold him and feel his warmth, to sleep beside him, to kiss him, to feel like something in this broken world could still be right.

It was thoughts of Camdyn that finally stopped the tears. The pain in his heart didn't fade, but his mind cleared, a sense of clarity settling over him. There was still much to do, and he couldn't do it alone. He needed Camdyn at his side. Above all else, he was Camdyn's husband, Camdyn's lover, Camdyn's friend. No crown, no title, no throne could replace that bond.

"Udele," he rasped, his voice thick with emotion. "Go back home. Kiss your wife. Then have them send Camdyn to the Capital. I need to prepare for the coronation, and I won't be crowned king without my husband at my side."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

There was very little time to mope. The demands of the castle left Camdyn with little room to dwell on his loneliness. As Everild's absence stretched on, Camdyn found himself carrying more and more of the responsibilities, both his own and his husband's. The burden was not easy, but he was determined not to disappoint Everild. He had learned quickly that being in charge of the castle meant more than just managing the staff. He had to make sure that everything ran smoothly—from overseeing the duties of the servants and staff to ensuring that meals were planned and the inventory of supplies was kept up-to-date. These were the tasks he was accustomed to. But now, with Everild away, there were even more duties to handle. With Aldaay's assistance, he received the previous night's reports from the captain of the guard, listening closely to any issues or concerns. Then, after reviewing the security of the castle, he would walk the perimeter to inspect the walls, checking for any potential weak points that could be exploited. It was a daunting task, but it gave him a sense of purpose.

In the afternoons, Camdyn sat in Everild's chair to receive petitioners. The chair was large and heavy, carved from dark wood, and though functional, it was hardly comfortable. Its armrests, designed in the shape of roaring lion's heads, had been worn smooth over the years. Camdyn felt small in it. Even after Aldaay had placed a velvet cushion on the seat to make it more bearable, it still felt as though the chair was swallowing him whole. Yet, despite its discomfort, there was something strangely comforting about it. Being there, in that chair, surrounded by the echoes of Everild's presence, was a reminder of the man he loved. It was as though he could still feel Everild's energy in the very wood of the seat.

After each session with the petitioners, there were always more things to discuss with Aldaay. It seemed that no matter how much Camdyn accomplished in a single day,

there was always more waiting for him the next. The tasks never seemed to end. The castle, much like a monastery, was full of endless work. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Camdyn had come to realize that when he was busy, when he had his hands full with responsibilities, it kept his mind from wandering to darker thoughts. It kept him from worrying about Everild, though that worry was never truly gone.

The bedchamber, however, was a different story. It had become unbearable without his husband. Everild had left with his horse and his axe, and in doing so, he had taken the warmth and liveliness from the room. It felt hollow now, a space where only memories lingered. Camdyn found himself missing the smallest of things—the scratch of Everild's quill as he wrote at his desk, the gentle clink of his spoon stirring tea, the sound of his voice during their quiet morning conversations. He missed the warmth of their shared moments—over breakfast, in the bathtub, as they dressed and undressed, lying in bed with Everild's strong arms wrapped around him. Without him, the bed was cold, the silence oppressive.

Waking up to an empty bed and going to sleep in one just as empty was a crushing loneliness. It was hard to ignore the void, to push aside the ache that settled deep in his chest. No matter how much he tried to distract himself with tasks, there was always a part of him yearning for Everild's presence.

But the castle's inhabitants seemed to understand his sorrow, and they made every effort to cheer him up. The kitchen staff, in particular, took it upon themselves to lift his spirits through their food. Camdyn's meals, which were typically simple but always comforting, were plated with more care than usual. The butter, usually a modest accompaniment to bread, had appeared on his plates in a variety of whimsical shapes—molded into little hens, flowers, reclining lambs, and even stamped with intricate patterns like wheat, bees, and birds perched on branches. They didn't stop there. Camdyn had been presented with small loaves of bread shaped like frogs, each one with currants for eyes, sitting on a bed of cabbage in their own “pond” of soup. For dessert, there were delicate wafers—thin, crisp, and sweet—shaped to resemble

lace.

Though these gestures were meant to cheer him, Camdyn couldn't help but smile. The household was doing its best to make him feel better, and their efforts didn't go unnoticed. The cooks, with their creative presentations; the maids, who paused in their work to tell him that they prayed for both him and Everild every night; and the guards, who humored his questions as he stood on the ramparts, watching for any sign of riders—each of them had offered kindness in their own way. They tried to make him feel at ease, to make him forget the gnawing emptiness inside him.

But despite all of their kindness, the castle never truly felt like home without Everild by his side. The empty chambers, the echo of footsteps where there should have been two, the silence where laughter should have lived—none of it felt right. Even with all the attempts to cheer him, the castle was just a place, not a home, without the man he loved.

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The sun had not yet risen when Camdyn woke, but the faint light of dawn had already begun to paint the world outside his window with a soft, golden hue. He blinked sleepily, disoriented for a moment, before his senses caught up with him. The air was still cool, and he was cocooned in warmth under his blanket, the familiar scent of linen and Everild's scent still lingering in the room. As his eyes adjusted to the half-light, he felt a tug of concern at the sight of the glow outside. It wasn't the morning sun that illuminated the grounds but the flickering light of lanterns and torches. Camdyn rubbed the sleep from his eyes and slipped the blanket off his shoulders. The light was coming from the stables. A peculiar stirring of urgency gripped him as he made his way over to the window.

He could see figures moving below—shadows of men, women, and horses moving quickly toward the castle. Camdyn squinted, trying to make out more details. There

was a distant clamor of voices, the sound of boots hitting the ground and the clink of metal. His pulse quickened as the shape of a rider became clearer. He stepped closer to the window, heart thumping as he realized there was a group of riders gathering. They were too far for him to recognize anyone, but it didn't matter—Everild wasn't among them.

Camdyn knew that if his husband had returned, he would have been easy to spot. Whether on foot or mounted, Everild always stood out. Camdyn could not miss the way his husband towered over everyone, his commanding presence impossible to ignore. That was why, despite the fact that the group seemed to be bringing news of some sort, Camdyn could not suppress the disappointment that filled him. The riders must have some urgent message, perhaps word of Redmane's capture—or worse, news of an impending threat. He swallowed hard at the thought. Or, he hoped, maybe just a message from Everild himself to reassure him that he was well.

Without wasting any more time, he hurried to prepare himself. He grabbed a robe of modest length and slipped it over his nightshirt. Everild's velvet tunic, though soft and luxurious, was too large for him and fell too short to cover his knees properly. It was a warm and familiar garment, but today it would have to serve as his makeshift robe. He stepped into a pair of slippers, careful not to trip on the hem of the robe as he moved. His mind raced, wondering why they hadn't arrived sooner.

As Camdyn was carefully tying the robe shut, there came a soft knock on the door. The voice of his trusted advisor, Aldaay, came through the thick wood. "Camdyn? Are you awake?"

"Barely," Camdyn replied, his voice tinged with impatience. He quickly opened the door, finding Aldaay standing there, still half asleep, flanked by the night guards and... Willow? No—next to her stood a figure that sent a jolt of surprise and relief through him.

“Oh, Udele!” Camdyn exclaimed, his voice breaking into a smile at the sight of his old friend and the huntswoman he had come to trust. “You’ve come back! How was your journey? Have you eaten? Are you very tired? I saw the riders out near the stables—how long have you been traveling?”

Udele raised a hand to calm him, her lips curling into a warm smile. “Peace, Your Royal Highness. I’m as hearty as ever. I made good time and came as quickly as I could on your husband’s orders.” Her tone shifted slightly, growing more serious. “The outlaw Redmane is dead, and now the king will have his coronation. His Majesty is waiting for you. He’s asked for you to join him—he won’t hold the ceremony without you there.”

Camdyn blinked, stunned by the words. Redmane—dead? He had known that it was only a matter of time before the outlaw met his end. After all, he had murdered the king, and he had threatened Camdyn in ways that left a lingering unease in his chest. But to hear the words out loud—it struck him. He couldn’t bring himself to feel joy at the news, not after everything that had happened between Redmane and his family. Still, there was no denying the weight of the victory.

"God’s will be done," Camdyn murmured softly, his hands tightening together. "Was Everild—how is he? After everything, is he well?" He couldn't help but ask, his heart aching with concern for his husband.

Udele’s expression softened, and she nodded reassuringly. “His Majesty is unharmed. Your husband is in one piece—don’t worry about that.” She paused, her eyes filled with understanding. “But I won’t lie to you, Your Highness. He’s deeply troubled by what transpired. The outcome weighed heavily on him. But he’s asked for you. He would very much like to see you.”

Camdyn’s heart clenched with compassion. Poor Everild! He must have been struggling, dealing with the ghosts of his past and the recent events that must have

torn at him. There would be no one left at court who could truly understand him—Udele, Willow, Aldaay, and Camdyn were all here, but without Everild by his side, the castle seemed hollow. Camdyn clasped his hands together tightly. “I’ll get ready right away,” he said, his voice firm with determination. He quickly turned toward his chest of drawers, digging through his clothes to find something suitable for travel. “Three days, isn’t that right, Aldaay? We can get to the Capital in three days?”

Aldaay stepped into the room, his face as calm and composed as ever. “True enough,” he said, his tone steady and reassuring. “For a very fast horse and a very skilled rider, it’s possible. But it will take a few more days for all of us to make the journey.”

“Oh...” Camdyn frowned, disappointment flooding him. His lessons with Willow had made him a better rider, but he wasn’t quite as skilled as he’d like to be. He sighed. “I see. But could we—could we go faster? I want to see Everild as soon as possible.”

Aldaay gave a dry chuckle. “Yes, I’m sure he’s eager to see you too, but let’s not risk you being thrown from another horse.”

A blush crept onto Camdyn’s cheeks. “It won’t happen again! I’m much better now, and Seilide is a sweet mare. She’d never throw me.”

Aldaay raised an eyebrow, his voice teasing but wise. “She’s also getting on in years, Your Highness. Let’s have a nice, safe journey to the Capital, shall we? Your husband will be much happier to see you in one piece.”

Camdyn had no choice but to agree. Aldaay’s reasoning was sound, and after all, his husband would want him safe, not hasty. He nodded, his smile returning. “You’re right, of course. A safe journey it is.”

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He had been ready to leave come morning, but the hours before dawn seemed to drag on endlessly. Camdyn could hardly get another moment of sleep, his mind buzzing with anticipation. He was so eager for the sun to rise and for the journey to begin. But he knew the importance of being well-rested, calm, and collected. As the king's consort and husband, his every action reflected on Everild, and he refused to cause him any shame.

Yet despite his resolve, the excitement that bubbled inside him was almost impossible to contain. Soon, he would be reunited with Everild after a long, lonely month. It had been far too long without him. The thought of seeing his husband again, holding him, speaking to him—Camdyn could hardly wait. But there was more. He would also be traveling to the Capital, experiencing the bustle of the city once more, meeting all the people, seeing the familiar yet ever-changing faces of the court. He had grown accustomed to this life, though it had been overwhelming at first. His wedding had been the first time he had ever seen such a crowd, and at the time, he had been overwhelmed with fear and self-doubt. But now, after spending so many days with Everild, after the charity banquet where he had worked alongside so many strangers, he had learned to navigate those crowds, to embrace the connections with others, and to carry himself with dignity.

The journey, then, would be a welcome adventure. As they traveled, Camdyn would tell Everild everything—every detail, every feeling, every thought that had filled the long days without him. It would be their time together, their chance to share and to reconnect.

Willow and Udele would be in charge of the castle while Camdyn and Aldaay were gone. There could be no two better people for the task, Camdyn thought. These were women who had helped raise Everild, who knew him as well as anyone could. They understood what it meant to serve the throne, to stand by those they loved. If anyone

could manage the day-to-day matters of the castle, it was them. But there was one thing that lingered on his mind, something that made him hesitate as he prepared to leave.

After Udele and Willow had each taken his hands in theirs and wished him a safe journey, Camdyn said, “Please, take care of the garden? I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.” His thoughts turned to the garden, where the garlic and onions had been growing so well. If he and Everild had to live at the palace for an extended time, he might miss the harvest, and he could never bear the thought of the garden falling into neglect.

But perhaps he could have a small garden at the palace. It wouldn’t be the same as their home, with its familiar rows of vegetables and flowers, but it might be enough to keep a piece of their life with him.

Udele smiled gently at him, her voice soft. “Don’t worry about the crops, Camdyn. I’d have made a fine gardener if I weren’t so handy on the hunt. Is that not so, my love?”

“True enough—when I’m at your side,” Willow replied, her teasing tone light, yet filled with warmth.

Her words made Camdyn smile, and he could see how much they cared for each other. Their relationship was a source of tenderness for him, a reminder of the love that could exist between two people. But now, as he thought of Everild, he felt a pang of longing. He yearned for his husband, for the quiet moments they shared, for his laughter, his touch, his presence. The thought of being apart for even longer was almost unbearable.

Aldaay’s sharp voice broke him from his thoughts, snapping him back to reality. “Your Royal Highness, we can’t start without you! Come now, that horse of yours is

slow enough!”

“Seilide is patient and careful,” Camdyn huffed, unable to help the defensive tone in his voice. He glanced back at Willow and Udele, his heart heavy with the thought of leaving them behind. “I don’t know when we’ll be back, but—thank you, truly, for all you’ve done for me.”

“Safe travels, Your Royal Highness,” Willow said with a smile, her warm, weathered hand giving his cheek a pat. “We’ll all be waiting here for you and your man, whenever you two deign to grace us with your presence once more.”

Camdyn smiled, feeling a sense of comfort in her words. It was reassuring to know that, no matter how far he and Everild traveled, there were those who cared for them, who would be waiting for their return. But even as that thought settled in his mind, another one followed swiftly—when would they return? There was so much he didn’t know, so much uncertainty that still lay ahead. But no matter the journey, he was determined to face it with courage and hope—because he knew the moment he saw Everild again, it would all be worth it.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Something truly remarkable happened as they traveled along the well-worn roads. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a soft glow over the scene. On either side of the gravel path, throngs of people seemed to appear out of nowhere, gathering to watch the procession—four guards at the front, closely followed by Camdyn and Aldaay, with the rest of the advisors and some of the riders who had come with Udele from the Capital. Behind them trailed a handful of servants and another set of guards, ensuring everything remained orderly.

It wasn't just a few curious onlookers. Entire families—no, entire towns—had come out to witness the spectacle. Camdyn could see men, women, and children dressed in their finest clothes, all craning their necks to get a better view of the horses and riders as they passed. The scene reminded him of a field of flowers, each person blooming in their brightest colors—orange, light blue, yellow, red—creating a patchwork of joy and anticipation. The people's excitement was palpable, and yet Camdyn couldn't help but feel slightly out of place. Was their enthusiasm really for him? A procession like this one was an unusual sight, yes, but Camdyn wondered if it truly warranted all the finery and wide-eyed expressions. After all, the king wasn't even with them today. Everild wasn't by his side as they traveled.

He worried his bottom lip, feeling a strange tightness in his chest. "Do they know that Everild's still in the Capital? I hope they won't be disappointed."

Aldaay, ever perceptive, leaned closer and spoke in his calm, measured tone. "No, Camdyn. They're here to see the prince consort."

Camdyn's face immediately heated, his skin flushing with a mixture of surprise and confusion. "What? Why would they want to see me?"

The advisor scoffed lightly, his voice tinged with amusement. “The lovely, pious young man who’s captured and softened the heart of King Everild the Beast, and who held a grand banquet for the poor and needy during his honeymoon? I can’t imagine why the people would ever want to see you.”

Camdyn’s cheeks burned even brighter, but he couldn’t help a small, bashful smile. “Oh, well.” He fidgeted with the reins in his hands. “That’s just what you do. You give what you can to help others, and now I have more to give.”

Aldaay raised an eyebrow, but there was a knowing smile on his face. “It’s quite the change, isn’t it? The last king spent his time with drunken louts and sycophants, never thinking about the common folk. But now you have a king who’s both a war hero and, apparently, a man with a heart for his people. They see that. They’ve seen the difference.”

Camdyn’s heart swelled, but his smile faltered. “Not Everild,” he protested quickly, coming to his husband’s defense. “He might be strict, but he’s not like that.”

Aldaay waved a dismissive hand. “Everild was there, occasionally, but he is not a drunken lout or a sycophant, my apologies. I just meant to say that your husband is well-loved by the soldiers, admired for his strength and his fairness, regardless of what he thinks about his own service. He’s strict, yes, but he’s fair—and that’s a rare thing in a ruler.”

Camdyn opened his mouth to protest further but was cut off by Aldaay’s quick remark. “And you, my dear Camdyn, are the gentle, beautiful, charitable, and devout prince consort. Together, you make a perfect pair. The people are happier now than they have been in a long time. Perhaps that’s the silver lining to the regicide, at least.”

Camdyn gasped, his eyes wide with shock. “Aldaay!” he exclaimed, his voice a mixture of disbelief and mild horror. But Aldaay was unperturbed by his reaction,

merely shrugging and smirking in his usual, irreverent manner.

The advisor's words stung a little, but Camdyn couldn't deny the truth in them. He glanced over at the excited crowd, who cheered and waved as they continued on their journey. Despite his discomfort, he realized that, for better or worse, the people were looking to him now. Not just as Camdyn, Everild's consort, but as someone who represented hope for the future—a future where things might finally be better than they had been under the previous king.

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They had made camp only at night, as they had grown accustomed to the rhythm of the journey. The captain of the guard had lightly suggested that perhaps it would be better for Camdyn's constitution to camp twice a day, to give everyone more time to rest. Camdyn had simply reminded him that his trip from the monastery with his brothers had been far more dangerous. There had been no roads in many areas, for one, and the swift pace at which they had traveled had left him jostled and uncomfortable in the wooden cart. He had told the captain that camping in the evening for a proper meal and sleep had been just fine, so long as they made sure to give both man and beast ample rest throughout the day.

The food they had eaten had been typical for travelers: brown bread, hard cheese, slices of sweet red apples, handfuls of hazelnuts and almonds, strips of spiced, dried meat, and hot pottage made from lentils and vegetables thickened with crumbled bread crusts. Though there had been plenty to eat, most of the party hadn't found the meals particularly enticing. They had come from the capital, where fine food had been readily available, and they had no love for such plain fare. Camdyn, however, had been cheered by the simplicity of it. The food had reminded him of the meals he had eaten at the monastery—nothing fancy, but hearty, filling, and surprisingly satisfying. To him, it had tasted like home, and that had made it all the more comforting.

As they continued on their journey, sometimes people from nearby villages and towns had met them on the road, offering gifts of fresh water, baskets of strawberries, salted fish, and other kinds of food. Each offering had been a warm gesture, and Camdyn had smiled and thanked them profusely, grateful for their kindness. One woman had brought a tray of freshly baked cheese tarts. Camdyn had told her truthfully that they had tasted as delicious as the ones he had eaten at his wedding, and the woman had beamed with joy and kissed his hand in gratitude. One evening, a family of three—husband, wife, and their baby, just beginning to walk—had shyly approached as they made camp. Camdyn had offered to share a bowl of pottage and apples with them, inviting them to join in the warmth of their fire. The family had stayed, bewildered but pleased, while Camdyn gently bounced the baby in his lap, making them laugh.

Though it had still been a long way to Everild, it had been incredibly encouraging to not only meet such kind-hearted people along the way, but also to see his husband's coat of arms displayed everywhere. Flags flew atop forts and guard towers, and banners hung from windows of shops and homes. During their wedding procession, when the king had led them to Everild's own home, the people had lined the streets, bowing, but their faces had been neutral—perhaps even distant. Everild hadn't been with them then, but now, as they traveled without him, the crowds seemed to respond differently. As Camdyn and his retinue passed, the people had bowed, cheered, and clapped. When Camdyn had smiled and waved, they had only grown louder and more enthusiastic.

His cheeks had hurt from grinning so broadly, but he hadn't been able to stop. It delighted him beyond words to see how much the people had already come to love Everild. His husband had always been spoken of with great respect, and sometimes with fear, but Camdyn had known better than anyone that Everild was a man who deserved love and admiration. The fact that his people proudly displayed their king's colors from their homes and cheered for the king's husband and his advisor had given Camdyn hope—hope that, one day, Everild would realize that he was worthy of

admiration and affection, not just from Camdyn, but from everyone.

However, as they neared the Capital, Camdyn's excitement shifted to nervousness. He had known of the executions—Redmane and his supporters had been killed and hanged in the square as proof that Everild had brought justice to the kingdom and dealt with the would-be usurper and his allies. This was the law of the land, Camdyn knew, but still—the thought of those bodies hanging, bloated and dark, their remains picked over by scavenging birds—he had felt sick just imagining it.

“Aldaay?” Camdyn called out, his voice hesitant. “Will—will Redmane and the others—will they still be in the square?”

Aldaay turned to him, raising a brow at his question. His normally hard features softened in response. “No, Camdyn. The square will be clear and cleaned by the time we get there, I assure you.”

Camdyn breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Aldaay.”

And just as Aldaay had promised, the Capital's square was teeming with people, but the stones had been scrupulously clean. They practically gleamed in the sunlight, polished and free of any traces of decay. Fresh rushes and flower petals were strewn about the area to cover any lingering scent of death, and though many of the people stood in the square where bodies had once hung, none seemed to mind. Perhaps this was just the way things were in the Capital—crime, punishment, and justice had been part of life. The most worrisome thing that had ever happened at the monastery had been monks occasionally slacking off in their chores, or the constant disappearance of candied chestnuts from the kitchen pantry (which Camdyn had never known anything about, of course).

But this—this was very different from the monastery. Now, Camdyn stood in the heart of the kingdom's capital city. It was vast—absolutely enormous—its skyline

dotted with towering buildings carved from wood and stone, some rising three stories high. It was teeming with people, and Camdyn thought of an ant colony, bustling in a maze of streets, all filled with a kind of energy and purpose. And they were all there for one reason: to see his husband. To see the newly crowned king, Everild, and to see Camdyn standing by his side.

It was a new era for the kingdom, yes, but it also felt like a chance for a do-over for their wedding ceremony. Camdyn and Everild would be together once more, and now, everyone would see the greatness of the man Camdyn loved so deeply. He thought he could burst with joy at the idea of sharing his husband with the world.

It was overwhelming. It was amazing.

Just a short time ago, Camdyn had been a novice—no more than a simple monk, living a life of quiet reflection and service. How had he ended up here, in the midst of a kingdom, surrounded by thousands of people, and about to witness such a monumental moment in the history of their reign?

Aldaay gently shook his shoulder. “What’s wrong, Camdyn? Are you ill?”

Camdyn hadn’t even realized that he was crying. He hastily wiped his eyes, embarrassed. “I’m fine. I’m just—tired from the journey. I want to see my husband as soon as possible, please.”

The advisor nodded with understanding. “Don’t worry. It won’t be long now.”

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Everild’s castle was old; he had told Camdyn once that it had been in his father’s family for generations. It was a remarkable structure. It was home. But next to the palace—Camdyn thought three of their castles could fit inside it. This was where the

previous kings and queens had lived. His husband's forebears.

The palace was surrounded by tall, stone walls on an island in the middle of a lake. There was a strip of land that bridged the palace to the mainland, the entryway gated and guarded. It was a brilliant color—all of it was built from red sandstone, from the battlements to the keep to the chapel, and even though it was such an enormous building, it was still bustling with people. Camdyn could see the guards patrolling the walls, hear the conversations of the stable hands, and smell the smoke from the kitchen's fires. But even with its lovely exterior and all its activity, the palace still seemed—

It still seemed lonely.

This was where all the former rulers—Everild's ancestors—had lived, and this was where they had died, in the heart of their nation, cut off from the people by a lake and a heavily guarded drawbridge. This was where one of Everild's cousins had murdered the other. Inside the walls was the place where the former king had died.

This was where Camdyn and Everild would live, now.

He hoped there was a garden.

They had barely stepped foot inside the castle before Camdyn had been ushered off to the baths by a team of officious-looking men and women intent on making him presentable at court. Up the stairs, through the halls, and to a room that was nearly as large as his and Everild's entire bedchamber. The marble tub was so large it could fit a handful of people. In fact, that seemed to be the intention. While a hot, perfumed bath had sounded extremely appealing, Camdyn had balked when one of the attendants had idly mentioned that they would bathe him. "No, that will not be necessary, I assure you," he had cried.

The group had paused in collecting various bath oils and soft towels to stare at him. “You’ll—bathe yourself, Your Royal Highness?” one of the women had asked. She had sounded as if Camdyn had just suggested he had no need for a horse because he knew how to fly.

“I did learn a few things at the monastery,” Camdyn had tried to joke, but the attendants had merely exchanged glances and nodded, as if his very strange insistence on not being seen naked in front of a group of strangers was explained. They had been satisfied, however, when he had requested that they bring him a set of clean clothes.

One of the men had said, “Oh, worry not, Your Royal Highness. We’ll bring you an entire wardrobe to choose from.”

That had seemed like a bit much, Camdyn had thought, floating in the middle of the bath. He had spread-eagled. His limbs hadn’t even come close to the rim of the tub. The scented oil had been nice as well—fresh and floral, coloring the water a lovely lavender. It just seemed a bit much. The room had been too large—the tub, the shelves filled with perfume and oil and colorful soaps, the white fur rug at the foot of the bath. He had missed the coziness of his and Everild’s bath, where the two of them could soak in the steaming water and cuddle against the warm candlelight, kissing and touching one another.

He had stepped onto the fur rug and dried himself off with one towel, covering himself with another, waiting for the attendants to return with his clothing.

They had seemed equally perplexed that he wanted them to set the outfits aside and leave so he could dress himself. But the prince consort’s orders were not to be questioned.

They had exited with deep, low bows.

To Camdyn's dismay, none of the tunics had been ones he would have picked out for himself. They had been gaudy, bright, patterned things. He had preferred his clothes to be a single color in a simple shape, perhaps embroidered along the neckline or the hem. These had been all trim and lace and frills, as colorful and bright as his opal jewels. He would have looked ridiculous in them—no way to greet his husband after more than a month apart.

But then he had spied a decent one and sighed in relief. It had been a deep, dark red. Camdyn had felt his complexion was better suited to blues and greens, but he had liked the solid color. The tunic had still been rather suggestive, in his opinion—the neckline had been lower than he'd liked, and while the sleeves had been loose and the length appropriate, the waist had been quite cinched. Compared to the others, though... He had shuddered as he had pulled the tunic on over his head. The material had been lighter than he had expected, but it had been pleasant against his skin.

He had stepped into his new black slippers and rushed out the door to the waiting attendants. They had been arguing with Aldaay, who had spotted him and immediately sagged with relief. "There you are, Camdyn."

"His Royal Highness," one of the attendants had scolded.

Aldaay had ignored him. "Travel an entire week together and it's when we get to the palace that I lose track of you. Come on, let's go see your husband."

A scandalized murmur had risen among the group of men and women. "His Majesty is holding court. We have to wait to announce His Royal Highness's presence."

"I'm sure His Majesty's been in a thunderous mood ever since he arrived, am I right?" Aldaay had asked. At their tentative nods, he had said, "Easy fix. A man needs his husband. Let's go, Your Royal Highness."

The attendants had made a series of squawks like a gander of geese. They had fluttered around Camdyn, rapidly informing him of court protocol.

“You must wait to be addressed, Your Royal Highness.”

“Yes, and then you bow, and you walk three steps, and you bow again, and walk another three steps—“

“All the way to the king. Stay bowed when you reach his feet.”

“You must not stand until he allows it.”

Right—Camdyn was at court now. He had to moderate his behavior. He needed to be a fitting partner and consort for Everild, but not forget that he was still one of his subjects. Camdyn’s time and desires were not more important than everyone else’s. But it was difficult to see his husband and not be able to simply rush to embrace him.

Things were so different there.

He was a bundle of nerves by the time Aldaay led him through the maze of corridors to the court entrance. The door was massive and ornate and shining. Surely, it had to be gilded?

What would have been the point in making a door solid gold? Two guards stood on either side of it. At first, they held up a hand as Aldaay stomped toward them, but then they startled when they noticed Camdyn, his face flushed from their near run.

“Open those doors, if you would,” said Aldaay, “So that we may inform the king that the prince consort has finally arrived.”

The guards took in Aldaay’s stern, glowering face and Camdyn’s anxious, hopeful

one.

Then they nodded and opened the door.

It was nothing like the great hall at home, which served as both a communal dining area and a place to hold discussions and air grievances. In the castle, visitors could sit at the tables while they waited to see Everild, comfortable from the warmth of the kitchen fires and the delicious, wafting scent of spices and baking bread and roasted vegetables as the cooks prepared the evening meals just another room over.

Here, the audience stood in their finery, draped in jewels and dressed in velvets and furs, looking either impatient or bored or nervous as they muttered to one another. Camdyn recognized a few of the advisors who had informed Everild of his kingship near the front of the room, arguing amongst themselves. And the throne—it was a large thing, made of marble, carved with a pattern of oak leaves. Camdyn thought it looked quite pretty but also cold and rather lonely, just like the rest of the palace, especially because it was currently empty.

Instead of sitting on the throne, the king stood beside it, standing straight and tall, hands behind his back, like a military commander. His husband was resplendent and handsome in a rich black tunic embroidered with gold thread in intricate floral patterns. His dark pants were new—Camdyn could tell, because all the ones at home were scuffed from use—but his boots were the same worn, weathered pair that he wore when he helped Camdyn in the garden.

He hadn't noticed Camdyn's entrance yet, so focused had he been on the arguing group of advisors in front of him.

A soft, shuddering gasp escaped Camdyn's lips. He trembled. He couldn't help it. He was supposed to wait for someone to announce him, wait for the king to address him, and then he was supposed to bow and walk and bow and walk until he reached the

king's feet, and only stand when he was told to stand. He was supposed to be a vision of dignity and regality and order.

But Camdyn's heart soared at the sight of his husband, and he found himself walking toward him completely unbidden. The audience on either side of the room turned to watch him, confusion and surprise written on their faces as he made his way to the throne. There might have been murmurs—he didn't know. He could focus on nothing but the expression on Everild's face, uncomfortable around this crowd, irritated at the argument, somewhat sad and tired.

Courtly conduct wasn't nearly as important as seeing to his husband. Camdyn stopped just before the still-arguing advisors and eagerly called out, "Everild!"

Everild immediately turned. When he saw Camdyn standing there, his eyes widened. He went slack-jawed. It was an expression of extreme, utter surprise. Even though he still trembled.

Camdyn couldn't help but laugh at his poor husband's look of shock.

His laughter echoed through the now hushed court. The sound jarred Everild out of his reverie. His voice was that same low rasp, as welcome and pleasant to Camdyn's ears as the way his callused hands felt against his skin. He said, voice full of wonder and joy, "Camdyn."

Camdyn took a few steps forward before Everild crossed the distance between them in two quick strides and pulled him into a strong, warm embrace. Camdyn practically melted against his husband with a sigh. This was what he missed—Everild's arms around him, the feeling of his heartbeat, the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed—just Everild, there, with him.

"You're here," Everild murmured.

Camdyn smiled. “Of course I am,” he said, “I came as soon as I could. I missed you so much. I love you.”

Everild’s face broke into a broad grin. His husband was always so handsome, but his wide smile especially made Camdyn’s heart flutter. He gave Camdyn a peck on the nose. “I love you.” Then, to those in the court, he said, “My husband’s arrived. We must discuss the coronation. You all may enjoy the rest of your day.”

And with that, he ushered Camdyn out of the room.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

Their journey to the bedchamber was interrupted as Everild seemingly lost his patience. He pulled Camdyn into a quiet corridor and ran his hands along his waist, peppering his face with kisses. “I love you,” he rasped. “I love you so much. You’ll never leave my side again.”

“Never, Everild,” Camdyn breathlessly replied. “I was so worried. I prayed for you every day. I’m so glad you’re—but, Udele told me you were troubled.”

Everild kissed his neck just how Camdyn liked, brushing his lips against his throat, running his tongue along the skin, and gently, gently nipping at his pulse with his teeth. “I missed my husband. I needed you near me to be happy—couldn’t bear to wake up without you next to me—“ His words were so sweet, but his tongue ran hot and wet on Camdyn’s skin.

It was odd how Everild affected him. When he spoke, Camdyn’s heart fluttered, and when he touched him, Camdyn grew hot between his legs even as he shivered in Everild’s arms.

He shifted the material of his robes, blushing, in order to hide his arousal. “I want you,” he whispered. “I missed you so much, Everild. I was so lonely without you. I thought of you at night—touched myself. But it wasn’t the same at all.”

His husband stared between his legs. He swallowed. “You want me? You’ll have me. We won’t leave the bed until you’re satisfied.”

The palace took on a new perspective as Camdyn was lifted from the floor and carried to the bedchamber in Everild’s arms.

Camdyn didn't bother glancing around the room. Everything in the palace was new and overwhelming, and this wasn't their castle and this wasn't their bed, but he was with Everild—finally, finally, finally—and home was in his lips, his hands, his eyes, his voice.

When Everild threw him on the bed, Camdyn pushed himself up on his elbows and pitched his voice low and sensual. "My king. What would you have me do?" He fluttered his eyelashes as he looked up at Everild—that always seemed to send his husband into a frenzy of lovemaking.

He wasn't wrong. Everild's pupils were blown black as he stared down at Camdyn. "Your king wants to suck his husband's cum straight from his pretty cock."

Camdyn felt his entire body grow hot as he flushed pink all over. His confident, sensual act quickly disappeared. "O-oh! Everild!" There was no low purr to it now, just a scandalized cry. Everild huffed a laugh as he undressed, tossing his boots and his pants and his tunic to the side.

It wasn't the first time that Camdyn had seen his husband naked and hard for him, but it had been more than a month without him, and Camdyn was as giddy and eager as he had been when they first started using their bed for more than sleeping. His husband's broad, muscled chest and shoulders, crisscrossed with scars that were still so sensitive to the touch and made Everild shiver under Camdyn's lips. His strong arms that could lift Camdyn up in the air like he weighed absolutely nothing. His dark, kind, warm eyes, his beard that rubbed pleasantly rough against Camdyn's face and chest and thighs as he kissed him.

When he spotted Camdyn reaching to take off his slippers, he stopped him. "I'd like you to keep them on. And the tunic." Everild bunched the material in his hands and pushed it up to Camdyn's chest.

Then Everild kissed his cock from the base to the head—sloppy and wet, imbued with a month’s worth of desperation and longing. “Missed this—missed your taste.” He laved at Camdyn’s cock with his broad, rough tongue, lapping at the dripping precum before swallowing him down, his throat tight and hot.

Camdyn’s toes curled into the blankets while his hands flew to Everild’s hair. “Everild—“

His husband pulled his lips off of him and rasped, “Missed your voice saying my name like that.” He stroked Camdyn’s shaft in his fist. “I love your voice. I love you.”

Even beating as fast as it was, Camdyn’s heart still found time to flutter at Everild’s words. “I love you too, Ev—ah! Ah! Everild!” Oh, God, the entire court would hear him—but he couldn’t help it, not when Everild licked and sucked him like all he wanted to do was make Camdyn scream and tremble. “I’m not going to last—“

His warning didn’t faze Everild one bit. His husband merely hummed, sending pleasurable vibrations through Camdyn’s cock, and continued to lave and lick and suck in earnest. He pressed Camdyn’s hips into the bed, and it was that—the sensation of his fingers digging into his skin—that had Camdyn throwing his head back with a cry and coming down his husband’s throat. It was so intense—he hadn’t come like this in all the time they had been apart—and for a moment, as he shuddered and gasped, writhing on the bed, he worried that it might be too much for Everild to swallow. But the older man simply continued to suck at his cock, wringing the cum out of him with his lips and tongue.

When he began to feel oversensitive, he whimpered and reached for Everild’s hand. His husband immediately pulled his mouth away, lips shining with spit. “Are you okay? Was that good for you?”

Camdyn gave him a dazed nod. “Oh, Everild,” he murmured. “Please, I want...”

“What do you want, Camdyn? Tell me what you want.” Everild brought Camdyn’s fingers into his mouth and laved them with his tongue, suckling them in lieu of his cock.

Camdyn shivered. “I—I want. I want you to—when you stroked yourself and spilled on me. I liked that. I missed that. I missed how hot and sticky it was on my skin. I—Everild?”

His husband stared at him, flushed red from head to toe with arousal, chest heaving, cock thick and erect and leaking. “That’s how you want me?”

“Yes, please, Everild.”

Everild crawled on top of him, legs brushing against the bunched-up silk of Camdyn’s tunic. His lips found Camdyn’s, soft and gentle. “Let me take this off of you?” he asked, his voice low and raspy.

Camdyn nodded again. “Oh, yes, please—I want—ah!” He cried out in shock as Everild grabbed the neckline of his tunic and yanked it down his body. The sound of the material tearing, the seams ripping apart, filled the room. He shivered at the sudden chill, the cool air on his bare chest, trembling in delight at the strength of Everild’s desire for him.

He was stripped nearly naked—Everild pulled the ruined clothing off him and then slid his palms along the inside of Camdyn’s thighs. His husband’s eyes roved over his body. He pressed his knees into the mattress on either side of Camdyn’s waist. His hand grasped his cock, and he thrust, groaning with each pump of his fist.

Camdyn’s spent cock twitched. It was so—he loved this, the almost primal look on

Everild's face, the noises he made—and it was always so intimate. His husband watched him with eyes half-closed from pleasure, mouth open and gasping as he stroked himself. Camdyn only looked away to stare between Everild's legs, to watch how his hips moved when he fucked his fist, to look at how wet his fingers were gripped firmly around his leaking cock.

Then Camdyn recognized it—when Everild's thrusts became shorter and quicker, when he started panting like a dog—he was close. Camdyn sat up on his elbows, eager and flushed and waiting.

Everild groaned. His eyes closed, his body shook—he was lost in ecstasy. Ropes of thick, hot cum burst from the tip of his cock and hit Camdyn's chest and stomach. This was what he did to Everild, he thought, pleased. His husband wanted him that badly—got such pleasure from Camdyn that when he finished, his seed covered Camdyn's body.

When Everild's orgasm tapered off and his breathing returned to normal, he asked, “Did you like that, Camdyn?”

“I loved it. I love feeling your pleasure on me.” He squirmed on the bed, suddenly feeling shy. “Will you kiss me, Everild?”

“You think there's a chance I wouldn't?” His husband pulled Camdyn into his lap and pressed a border of kisses along Camdyn's jaw. “We've been apart for longer than I thought. You've forgotten that I always want to kiss you.”

“Everild, I could never forget that,” Camdyn murmured.

“Good. But I'll have to keep reminding you. Just in case.” His hand fell to Camdyn's chest, his fingers running through streaks of his drying spend, and pinched a nipple between thumb and forefinger.

Camdyn yelped. “Everild!” Brushing the offending hand away, he said, “I love you very much. But surely we have to prepare for the coronation?”

His husband grumbled, “I am the king. It’s my coronation. We can postpone it if I want to enjoy my prince consort.”

It was so shocking to hear the petulance in that deep, rough voice that Camdyn burst out laughing. “No, you’ll do no such thing! We’ll have your coronation, and then you can enjoy me as much as you’d like.”

“Yes, my lord,” Everild teased.

They sat there for a time, comfortable in their embrace. Then Camdyn shifted in Everild’s arms and noticed the sorry state of his tunic, ripped down the middle and sodden with sweat and cum. There would be no mending it—it would be nothing more than a very large, expensive rag.

He said, with a little bit of wonder and a great deal of arousal, “You tore it right off me, Everild.”

His husband looked embarrassed. “Forgive me, Camdyn. I was too eager. I shouldn’t have been so rough with you.”

“I didn’t mind that,” Camdyn quickly replied. “I really liked it. But my clothes—“

Everild kissed him. “I’ll have another one made for you to replace it. Something better.”

“That’s fine, but I don’t have anything to wear now.”

“I’ll have someone bring you another outfit,” Everild said. Something mischievous

flickered in his expression. “We’ll have to wait a bit for them to get it ready, though, won’t we?”

Camdyn couldn’t help but giggle.

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By evening, both he and his husband were thoroughly sated, and Camdyn was modestly dressed in another tunic and breeches. The officials and advisors were aflutter with activity and nerves. They carefully explained the morning’s schedule to Camdyn as he sipped at a bit of warm, mulled wine, watered down at Everild’s order with fresh water and honey.

It wasn’t as ostentatious or complicated an event as he had thought it would be, especially since Everild had insisted that the ceremony be over and done with as soon as possible. For one, Everild hated being the center of attention. And more importantly, there was little to celebrate in his opinion. Not with him coming to power at the expense of his cousin’s murder.

Camdyn would accompany Everild the entire way. His husband had insisted that they would walk together side-by-side from the palace to the Capital’s church. Camdyn simply needed to hold his husband’s arm on their way to the church. It was when they got to the altar that Camdyn worried.

“His Majesty will bow before the priest and humble himself before God. Your Royal Highness will wait by His Majesty’s side and receive his tunic. Then the priest will anoint His Majesty with oil, bless him and his reign—may it be long and bountiful—and then you will redress His Majesty, the priest will place the crown upon his head, and he will rise. Have you any questions, Your Royal Highness?”

Camdyn set his cup down and carefully asked, “When Everild names me his prince

consort—will I be—um—humbled before God as well?” He didn’t mind God seeing him stripped to the waist and bare-chested, but a room full of other people, on the other hand...

The advisors suddenly grew flustered; they coughed and turned red and cleared their throats. Some avoided his gaze while others suddenly stared at him as if considering the image.

Everild cupped his cheek and shook his head. “No, Camdyn. I’ll remove your cloak and the priest will anoint your head, and neck, and shoulders. That’s all.”

One of the advisors murmured, “A lucky man,” and Everild growled in warning, his dark eyes flashing.

Camdyn sighed in relief. “Thank goodness.” He didn’t want anyone but Everild ever seeing him in such a state. The threatening, protective expression on his husband’s face softened. He brushed Camdyn’s bottom lip with his thumb.

“I worried it would be very boring for you,” Everild admitted. “It’s a long ceremony. We’ll be walking for some time, and then we’ll have to stand in the church—if you get tired, tell me, please. I’ll have someone bring a chair for you.”

“Of course,” Camdyn lied. As if he would ever dare to interrupt his husband’s coronation. Everild was sweet but so silly sometimes. Though he hadn’t thought of how long they’d be standing—Everild’s leg, the one he had injured during the war, sometimes ached. If standing proved to be too much for him tomorrow, then Camdyn would hold his husband’s hand and have Everild lean on him a little, to ease the pressure on his leg, and no one would know.

He sat through the rest of the meeting quite pleased with himself: he was Everild’s support in a myriad of ways. His consort, his husband, his lover, his friend,

occasionally someone who offered counsel but always one to lend a sympathetic ear.

When they returned to bed for the night, Everild reached for him again. Camdyn caught his hand, kissed his fingers, and asked, “Won’t you tell me what’s troubling you?”

Everild sighed. “Let’s do something more fun. I can count the freckles on your thighs.”

“The freckles will be there later,” Camdyn said sternly, “But Udele told me that you’ve been upset, and I saw your face when you were holding court. You looked so unhappy, Everild. I can’t stand to see you unhappy. I want you to tell me. Please?”

His husband always gave him what he wanted. Everild pulled the blankets over the both of them and held him close. “I didn’t want this. The kingship. But I took it. I know I can protect people. I’ve always been good at that.”

That was an encouraging statement. His husband so rarely admitted his strengths and virtues. Camdyn kissed his bearded cheek. “Oh, you are, my love. You take such good care of me and keep me safe, and you’ll do the same for everyone in the kingdom.”

Callused fingers gently massaged his shoulder. “But I. I don’t know that I. This court life, Camdyn. It was never for me. I’m not a man for all this pomp and circumstance. This palace. All gilded and lively. My cousin fit in it. I don’t.”

Camdyn said fiercely, “No, you’re not a man for courtly ceremonies and parties and favorites. And that’s not important. Not at all. You’re brave and loyal, and everyone knows that you’ll care for them. Defend them. I was on the roads, I know—They might have bowed to your cousin because he was the king, but they cheer you because you are a good man.”

Everild kissed him, a few errant tears rolling down his cheeks. They got lost in his beard. For a time, neither of them said anything. As Everild sniffled quietly and wiped his eyes, Camdyn added, “To be honest, Everild, I don’t really feel like I fit this place either. I’m all out of sorts. But—but I’m with you again. We’ll do our best together. Won’t we?”

“Of course,” his husband rasped.

They indulged in a few more kisses before sleep overtook them.

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In the morning, the attendants brought Camdyn sleeveless silver robes, their soft fabric shimmering in the sunlight that streamed through the palace windows. The bodice of the robes was low against his chest, cut to accentuate his form in a way that felt both regal and delicate. Skillfully embroidered patterns of flowers and leaves wove through the fabric, catching the light as though the designs themselves were alive. At first, Camdyn thought there were colorful glass beads sewn into the bodice, glinting like little stars, but upon closer inspection, he realized that the leaves and vines were actually small emeralds, their deep green color rich and striking. The flower petals, too, were no mere decoration, but finely cut sapphires and amethysts, each petal catching the light in an almost ethereal way, making the bodice look as though it were adorned with precious gems plucked from a magical garden.

The bottom half of the robes was made of fine, thin silver silk that seemed to flow like liquid moonlight as he moved. The fabric draped over him so lightly that it almost felt like a second skin, catching every shift in the air. When he walked, the fabric rippled gently around him, shimmering as though the very moonlight had been woven into it, its delicate movement mesmerizing.

There was a slit in the side of the robes that revealed his pale leg, and the sandals he

wore were a work of art in themselves. Made from dark blue ribbons of silk, they were wrapped around his feet and calves with perfect precision, the soft fabric gliding over his skin, and adding an elegance to every step he took. The cloak that draped over his shoulders was pinned together across his chest so gently that it almost felt like it was a part of him. It was sheer enough that he could still see his collarbone through it, a subtle and elegant feature that made him feel exposed, yet beautiful. As he turned toward the mirror, Camdyn felt a blush rise on his cheeks at the sight of himself—he had never seen himself like this, not with such finery, not with such grace.

For the second time in as many days, Camdyn thought back to a time when he had been nothing more than a novice. He had been so different then—unsure of himself, of his place in the world. And now, in these robes, adorned with the trappings of royalty, he felt as though he were stepping into a new version of himself, one he had never imagined. It was a strange and humbling thought.

He slid on his shimmering opal ring, feeling its cool weight settle on his finger. The attendants, noticing this final touch, were absolutely delighted. They showered him with praise, admiring his curls, his fair skin, and how the robes complemented his features perfectly. They cooed over him, their voices full of admiration as they complimented his appearance, but there was only one man whose opinion truly mattered to him.

Camdyn thanked them for their help, his voice warm and polite but with an edge of impatience. He wanted to see Everild, to receive his judgment. The attendants bowed, leaving him with a final, lingering glance, before they escorted him to the king's quarters. They were separate from their shared bedchamber, which felt confusing in its own way. But then, everything about this royal life seemed to be full of contradictions.

When they reached the door, Aldaay was busy adjusting Everild's cloak, his hands

deftly making the final touches. Camdyn cleared his throat, catching the attention of his husband. Everild looked up from his task, his gaze locking on Camdyn's figure. His eyes widened slightly as he took in the sight of Camdyn in the robes, and for a moment, he simply stopped and stared, as though struck by something unexpected.

It was the same warm, affectionate expression that had been on Everild's face the night they had wed, full of gentle wonder and deep affection. At that moment, Camdyn felt his heart swell.

"Do I look presentable, Your Majesty?" he asked, his voice laced with a teasing note, but there was vulnerability there, too.

Everild's response was immediate and filled with warmth. He laughed softly, the sound like music to Camdyn's ears. "You're a vision," he said, his voice full of admiration.

Camdyn flushed with pleasure, a heat rising in his cheeks. Everild's approval meant everything to him.

Aldaay, now finishing with the brooch on Everild's cloak, turned his gaze to Camdyn with a smile. He seemed satisfied with his work, nodding approvingly. "He cleans up fairly well, don't you think?" he asked, his tone light and friendly.

Everild blushed slightly, standing straighter under Camdyn's scrutiny. But he need not have worried, for Camdyn's heart only swelled with affection as he took in the sight of his husband. Everild was resplendent.

His tunic and pants were simple, unadorned but expertly crafted, dyed in a deep, inky black that made him look even more striking. Black was a color that always seemed to make Everild stand out, his presence commanding and magnetic. But it was his cloak that truly held attention. It was a lush, dark green, embroidered with an oak tree

in gold thread— an intricate symbol of a strong and flourishing reign. With his strong jaw and nose, his neatly trimmed beard, his height, and his powerful physique, Everild had always possessed impressive, noble features, but today they seemed especially accentuated, as though the very fabric of his cloak were highlighting the strength and majesty within him.

Without thinking, Camdyn rushed to him, unable to keep his admiration to himself. “My handsome husband,” he murmured softly, his lips brushing against Everild’s cheek. “My king.”

Everild’s hands found their way to Camdyn’s hips, his touch grounding and intimate. “I only want to be worthy of you,” he said, his voice a soft rasp, filled with sincerity.

“You always have been,” Camdyn replied without hesitation, his voice filled with conviction.

Everild’s gaze softened, and he leaned closer, his lips brushing against Camdyn’s forehead. “You’ll stay by my side?”

“Always, Everild,” Camdyn said, his voice steady and full of love.

His husband’s lips pressed gently to his forehead once more, his hands settling around him with warmth. “Then let’s begin,” Everild murmured.

That day, under the eyes of God and their loved ones, Everild would officially be crowned king, and Camdyn, his prince consort.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:55 am

It was a massive procession, even larger than their wedding. It seemed like the entire palace followed behind them as they linked arms and walked through the city to the church. As soon as they crossed the bridge to the Capital proper, the streets became absolutely packed with people, cheering, clapping, and yelling. They lined either side of the street like walls.

Camdyn could feel Everild tense beside him. The sheer mass of observers and the cacophony of noise—it was overwhelming for him, and he could only imagine how it must have been for Everild, who often grew anxious in a room full of strangers and loud sounds, let alone an entire city of them.

But Camdyn tried to reassure himself. If they could make it to the church, there would only be officials, advisors, priests, and some nobles there. It would be quiet and solemn, and Everild would feel more comfortable.

He gently tugged on Everild's tunic to grab his attention and said, "Everild, when Aldaay and I were traveling, the roads were like this."

At first, Everild didn't respond, and Camdyn worried that he hadn't heard him above the noise of the crowd. But then, Everild finally replied, "Were you okay, Camdyn?"

"It was a little scary," Camdyn admitted. "There were just so many people everywhere we turned. But they were all so kind. Everyone was so kind to me."

His husband relaxed bit by bit, his shoulders losing their tension, and his jaw unclenching. "I'm glad. I was worried about you."

Camdyn smiled and continued, “A woman gave us cheese tarts that she’d baked, and they were so good. Do you remember, at our wedding feast—“

“You ate nearly a whole tray,” Everild murmured, smiling. “I remember that. I remember everything about our wedding.”

Camdyn chuckled. He would chatter all the way to the church if it kept Everild relaxed and happy. “There were some complaints about the food when we were on the road. It was lighter fare than many were used to, I think. But I didn’t mind it. It was sort of like being at the monastery again.”

He paused for a moment, then added, “And did you know that Aldaay is very good at cards? I think he won quite a bit of money from the guard captain.”

“Gambling on the job,” Everild joked. “Remind me to have a talk with him later.”

“Not the guard captain, too?” Camdyn asked, surprised.

“He’s learned his lesson,” Everild replied with a grin. “He won’t play cards with Aldaay again. Not after losing that badly.”

Camdyn laughed, bright and loud, and Everild pressed a quick kiss to his curls. “Thank you, Camdyn,” he said, his voice soft but sincere.

“Whatever for?” Camdyn asked innocently, though his smile revealed that he knew.

Everild just smiled wider, and they continued walking, side by side, through the cheering crowd, feeling the warmth of their connection despite the noise and chaos around them.

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It was silly to be so nervous. There was nothing either of them had to do, really, but stand together as the priest blessed Everild, kneel to be anointed, and then return to the palace. But Camdyn still trembled when they reached the church. His knees shook, and his teeth chattered. It was a massive structure—just like everything else in the Capital—all white stone, spires, and arches. Bright but imposing, it shone in the sunlight as it cast its shadow over the people nearby.

Everild was concerned. “What’s wrong? You’re shaking.”

“Oh, Everild,” Camdyn whispered, “I just don’t want to embarrass you.”

It was his husband’s turn to comfort him. Everild gently disentangled from him, lacing their fingers together. He gave Camdyn’s hand a squeeze. “You could never. I love you. I’m so glad you’re by my side today.”

“I love you, too.”

Camdyn entered the church alongside his husband, not arm-in-arm but hand-in-hand.

The inside was already packed with spectators—officials, advisors, nobles. Camdyn recognized one of the men who had initially objected to his charity banquet, the one who had kissed his hand thrice when they met. There were familiar faces from his wedding as well, though he couldn’t place a name to any of them.

Up on the balcony, he spotted Gibson and Kenelm. His eldest brother leaned against a column. His gaze drifted from Camdyn’s to Everild’s, and he gave Camdyn a small nod.

Everild nodded back.

Was that an apology from his sibling? Camdyn wondered, bewildered. And did his

husband accept it? The two men were more alike than they thought—sometimes they were both quite odd.

On the other side of the balcony stood his father, looking pleased beyond belief. All his great planning had come to fruition: his youngest son, married to the king, bringing their family into the royal fold. Camdyn would let him have this moment because his father would never be in his presence again. It would be his first declaration as prince consort.

He squeezed Everild's hand again—those big, rough, callused fingers—and was heartened when his husband squeezed back.

They stepped in front of the priest. Camdyn turned and watched the rest of the procession file into the church and find places to stand.

A hush fell over the crowd as the priest cleared his throat. He was an old man, white-haired and slightly stooped, but he had a kindly face that reminded Camdyn of Cenric. He indicated that Camdyn should step to one side. When Camdyn let go of Everild's hand and moved, the priest smiled and opened his arms wide.

“Who is this man who stands before me?” he asked.

Everild took a deep breath and spoke, his voice deep and slightly rough, but loud and clear. “My name is Everild. The people call me the Beast.”

“Is this your only title?”

“No,” Everild said. “They call me king.”

The priest addressed the spectators. “Is this so? Is this your king?”

A raucous cheer rose from the crowd. It shook the church. Shouts and cries of “Long live the king!” echoed throughout the building, a never-ending chant of support.

Camdyn pressed his hands to his heart. “Long live the king,” he whispered.

The strength of the crowd’s support seemed to have surprised his husband. Everild stared at the priest, wide-eyed, as he waited for the next prompt.

The priest gently patted his shoulder. “And why are you here, oh great and noble king?”

“All my life is a gift from God,” Everild answered. “I was born by Their love. I am here today by Their grace. We are all Their subjects, and I am a man like any other. I will rule only with Their blessing.”

“Then kneel, Everild the Beast, and humble yourself before God.”

Everild knelt. Camdyn unclasped his cloak. His husband’s tunic was loose for this purpose—the priest gently pulled it off him and handed it to Camdyn, who took it in his hands and draped it over his arm.

His husband’s broad back, thick with muscle and covered in scars, was revealed to both God and the spectators.

The priest anointed him with oil, brushing a hand across Everild’s forehead, shoulders, neck, and chest. It smelled like roses. “May your reign be long and bountiful,” the old man said.

He held his hand out for Everild’s tunic. Camdyn hastily passed it back to him. He wrapped the cloak around Everild’s shoulders after he was carefully redressed. Then the priest took the golden crown, heavy with jewels and the lives of past kings and

queens, and placed it on Everild's head.

"Rise! Greet your subjects, King Everild." Everild stood, turned, and bowed deeply.

"Long live the king!" The shout started up again. "Long live the king!"

Now it was Camdyn's turn.

They waited for the cries to die down before the priest turned to Camdyn. "Who is this young man who stands before me?"

It was Everild who spoke first. "He is called Camdyn. He was a novice, but now he is my love. My husband."

The old man asked Camdyn, "Is this true?"

"Yes," Camdyn replied. "I am his love. I am his husband. And he is mine."

"But you married a man, not a king."

"He is the same. A king is merely a man, and this man is my husband."

"And why are you here, Camdyn?"

"To stand by his side—to be his support and comfort for as long as God wills it."

The priest said, "Then kneel, prince consort, and receive God's blessing."

Camdyn knelt. The stone floor was cool against his skin. Everild gently removed his sheer, delicate cloak. Everild had been stripped to the waist. Camdyn just had his shoulders and arms bare, but even so, it made him blush with embarrassment. His

face was warm when the priest drew a line of the sweet, rose-scented oil across his forehead, along each shoulder and collarbone. “May you have many, many joyous years together.”

And then it was finished—Everild replaced his cloak, and a smaller, silver crown was placed on top of Camdyn’s curls.

“Rise, prince consort, and greet your king.”

Before Camdyn could even fully stand, Everild had him in his arms. His hands pressed against Everild’s chest as his husband grabbed his hips, and his lips found Camdyn’s. “My love,” his husband murmured against his mouth. “Camdyn.”

There was, perhaps, another cheer. More celebration, more cries and chants of support. Camdyn didn’t notice them, if there were any. All he could hear was the sound of his heart, beating frantically in his chest, and Everild’s voice, low and rough, whispering sweet words in his ear.

The people’s king, yes.

But Camdyn's husband.

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They eschewed dinner to whet an appetite of a different kind in the bedchamber.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” Everild moaned against his neck. When Camdyn made a shy, noncommittal noise, he growled, “You are. You’re the most beautiful person in the world. And you let me kiss you and touch you like this.” His husband slipped a hand between his legs and rubbed his cock.

Camdyn ground against Everild's palm. Blushing, he responded, "I love you, Everild—I want you to touch me."

"I love you, too."

And he did. It was so obvious—Everild looked at him not just as though Camdyn was actually the most beautiful person in the world—an overstatement by a besotted husband, surely—but as if there was no one but Camdyn. As if Camdyn was the most important person to him. When they were like this—there was only ever warmth and comfort in his expression, only ever love.

Camdyn wanted to show him the same thing, if he could. He said softly, "Everild, I want—I want all of you tonight."

His husband's eyes widened. "Camdyn—are you certain? This isn't—just because I'm king now doesn't mean you have to—I love what we have now—"

"I know," Camdyn replied. "But, Everild—I wanted this. When we were apart, I couldn't stand it. I missed you all the time—your lips and your hands—and now we're together again, and I want us to become one. I need to know how you feel inside me."

Everild swallowed and nodded. His face flushed red. "If that's what you want. But we'll go slowly. And if you're uncomfortable or in pain, you must tell me, and I'll stop. It should never hurt, Camdyn."

"It won't. I know it won't, Everild, because you'd never hurt me."

Something extraordinarily tender flickered across Everild's face. "I love you," he said again.

The bed was plush, the blankets warm and soft. As he undressed and waited for Everild to return with the oil, Camdyn rubbed against them and sighed, enjoying the way they felt on his bare skin.

“Are you ready?”

At Everild’s voice, he sat up, blushing. “Yes, Everild.”

“Okay.” His husband was naked and half-hard already, but he looked nervous. He held a small jar in his hand. It trembled slightly. “Lie back for me?”

Of course, Everild had to prepare him. Edwin had explained the entire process to him once. It had been quite detailed. Back then, it had shocked him, but here, now, with Everild’s fingers covered in oil—it was exciting. Exhilarating. He began to say, giddy, “Oh, Everild—Edwin told me that sometimes you have to—”

Disbelief laced Everild’s voice. “Camdyn, please—don’t mention another man when we’re in bed together.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Everild, I didn’t mean to…” His voice trailed off.

Everild stroked his hip. “No, I know you didn’t mean anything by it. But I get jealous. I only want you to think of me like this—to only be with me.”

Camdyn said truthfully, “You’re the only person I’ve ever wanted, Everild. No one else.” He giggled as Everild kissed the inside of his thigh.

“Good,” his husband growled. “Now, lay back for me.”

Everild’s slick fingers brushed against his hole, and Camdyn shivered. The soothing hand returned, gentle and warm on his skin.

“I’m okay, Everild.”

“If you want me to stop at any time, just tell me.”

“I will.”

Seemingly satisfied with that promise, Everild slowly eased his finger inside him.

It was—odd. Not uncomfortable exactly but strange, and Camdyn was very aware of the intrusion. He took a deep, shuddering breath, clenched at the blankets, and murmured, “I’m okay.”

Everild watched him carefully. “You’re sure?”

“Mm-hm.” Camdyn nodded.

He was sensitive. When Everild drew his finger back, he whimpered just a little, and when he pressed back in, he gasped. Slowly, he grew used to the motion, settling back into the blankets more comfortably. The entire process repeated when Everild added a second finger; he tensed at the stretch, breathed through the slight burn, sighed at his husband’s comforting ministrations. The way Everild pumped his fingers in and out of him had him sweating and shaking on the bed, and the oil—it was such a large amount they had used, and they weren’t even ready yet. Edwin had said it would take a lot, and some of the books he had read mentioned preparation in passing, but—

“What are you thinking about?” Everild asked. He scissored his fingers, and Camdyn gasped before replying.

“The books that I looked at—the, um, the romantic ones. They never really discussed how much oil would be used. Usually, it wasn’t important, I don’t think.”

Everild snorted. “Ah, those kinds of books. Those are worthless things, Camdyn.”

“Then why are there so many in your library?” He laughed as Everild reddened and sputtered something about inheritance and collections. “I like some of them. The ones with the brave, kind, handsome hero. They remind me of my husband.”

Camdyn marveled at the color of Everild’s deepening blush. It was like a sunrise.

He wiggled his hips to encourage Everild to go further. After a few more quick kisses along his thighs, the third finger slid in, and Camdyn scrabbled at the blankets. “Oh, Everild, wait, wait, please—” He saw his husband’s burgeoning panic and quickly added, “Stay still for a moment? I just need to—I’m okay.” Once he took a deep breath and nodded, Everild started his slow, steady rhythm, his fingers large and callused as they stretched him so wonderfully, but he was still oh-so-gentle. Everild had always been so gentle with him—

Eventually, each thrust elicited only a desire for more. Camdyn rocked his hips in time with Everild’s fingers so that they brushed inside him just right and made him pant with need.

“I think I’m ready.” There couldn’t be that much more to it. Everild had stretched him and prepared him and—it should be fine. But then, his cock was so much larger and thicker than his fingers. The thought made Camdyn’s heart pound with both nervousness and excitement.

The fingers were removed—he felt empty now—as Everild took the time to lather his cock with oil. It was red and hard and slick between his legs, and soon enough, it would be inside Camdyn—Everild would be inside Camdyn—

He bit his lip, uncertain. “Will—will it be better on my back or on my knees?”

“Here, Camdyn—” Everild pulled him into his lap, maneuvering Camdyn’s legs so they wrapped around his waist. “Like this. So we can hold each other.”

It was just like an embrace, only—Camdyn bit his lip—only they would be joined together.

He sat up, grasping Everild’s shoulders, buoyed by his gentle expression and the rough, warm hand rubbing his hip, and slowly lowered himself onto his husband’s cock.

“A-ah—” A whimper escaped his lips. Everild’s fingers had been—a lot—but he had thought—Everild was just so big—

His husband’s voice grew concerned, his grip on Camdyn’s hips tightening to stop him from going further. “Camdyn—not if it hurts, I said.”

“No, Everild, it doesn’t hurt, I promise,” Camdyn gasped. The head of Everild’s cock was in him, teasing him as Everild held him up. “It’s just—it’s just different. Please?”

Everild stared up at him, brows furrowed, but then he nodded and relaxed.

He eased himself down, inch by inch, until Everild was fully inside him and Camdyn was clenching around his husband’s cock.

Camdyn buried his face in the crook of his neck, gasping and shivering in his husband’s arms. Everild let out a hiss. His hands circled around Camdyn’s waist, fingers digging into his hips. “Oh, fuck, Camdyn—Are you alright?”

“I—” Camdyn swallowed. He felt a bit dizzy. Everild was fully sheathed inside him, stretching him out, filling him up, and holding him so sweetly and tightly. He smelled of sweat and lust and passion, and it was— Camdyn lifted his head. He pressed his

lips to Everild's before pulling back and panting, "You feel so good in me. I didn't know you would feel that good. Just—just wait a moment, please? I just—"

Everild's rasp was full of gentle affection. "Of course."

They stayed like that, nestled against one another, as Camdyn's breathing calmed. His husband stroked his back in long, soothing movements, his calloused hands rubbing pleasantly against Camdyn's skin. Camdyn sighed and then slowly, tentatively rolled his hips.

His husband's long, thick cock pulsed inside him, rubbing against his inner walls. It felt so good. The noise that Camdyn made was half a gasp and half a sob.

Everild choked out, still worried, "Slowly. Go slow—fuck—" He broke off into a groan as Camdyn tried another experimental roll of his hips. And then another. And another.

"Yes, Everild," Camdyn moaned, "Oh, yes—yes, I—oh, Everild—"

His moans grew louder each time he rocked against Everild's body. When he pressed his hands to Everild's shoulders and lifted himself up—just a little bit—to fall back down on Everild's cock, their skin slapped together, and Camdyn began to cry out. He covered his hand with his mouth, blushing furiously—but his husband grabbed his wrist and then sharply thrust up into him, forcing a strangled scream of pleasure from Camdyn's throat.

"Don't hide your sounds," Everild rasped into his ear. "Let me hear them. I need to know you're enjoying this. That I'm making you feel good."

His next thrust sent Camdyn shaking. He kissed his husband's neck and panted, "E-Everild—you are the only one who ever—you are so good, no one has ever made me

feel like you do—Oh! I love you, I love you, I love you—”

Everild growled another curse. “Fuck.” It made Camdyn’s cock twitch. It was trapped between their stomachs; each time Camdyn ground against Everild, it rubbed against his stomach, smearing his abs with precum.

His husband thrust inside Camdyn with a slow, steady rhythm—as if he were savoring the feeling.

Camdyn’s toes curled. His nails dug into Everild’s back. He closed his eyes and tossed his head back, gasping for breath. Everild’s hands moved from his back to his hips, and suddenly Camdyn was no longer the one moving—it was Everild, lifting him up and pulling him back down onto him.

“Camdyn...” He gasped his name like a prayer, his voice full of love and longing, hands gripping him tight, cock impossibly thick inside him—

Camdyn came with a cry, spilling onto Everild’s chest as he embraced him. He shivered in his husband’s arms, feeling himself clenching around Everild’s cock as each wave of his orgasm rolled through him.

Everild flipped him onto his back. Camdyn’s legs spread wide and high in the air as Everild crawled on top of him. Never once did he stop moving his hips; his thrusts became even more frantic as he fucked Camdyn through his trembling bursts of pleasure. It was all too much and yet not enough—Camdyn nestled into the crook of Everild’s neck as his husband moaned. It was a good feeling—to hear his lover’s noises of pleasure, to know that he was the one drawing those sounds from Everild. That all he could do was hold tight and be taken, such was the intensity of Everild’s desire for him. He wanted more.

“Everild,” he murmured, “Everild—inside me, please, I want to feel you come inside

me—”

His husband had always given him everything he ever asked for.

Almost as soon as the words left Camdyn’s lips, Everild gave one final deep thrust, tensed, and groaned. Then Camdyn felt himself being filled with his cum. Everild collapsed on top of him, panting, his hips still rocking against Camdyn’s.

It was always hot and sticky when it hit his skin, but inside him—another shiver of pleasure flowed through his body. This was Everild in the best of ways: his husband touching him, covering him, wrapped around him, inside him, filling him. Camdyn was absolutely and utterly surrounded by his love.

Did he make Everild feel just as adored? Just as happy? To be certain, he nuzzled against his neck, pressed kisses to Everild’s cooling skin beaded with sweat, and said, “I love you. That was wonderful, and I love you so much.”

The much-abused bed creaked as Everild sat up to look at him. He was smiling, but there was worry in his eyes. “It wasn’t too much? I didn’t hurt you?”

“No, Everild, you felt—amazing.”

“Wanted this to be perfect for you,” Everild mumbled, blushing. “But I kind of... lost control there at the end.”

“I liked that. I like feeling you like that. I like that you want me.”

Everild stroked his cheek. “I always want you. Was it really all right? Did you enjoy yourself?”

Camdyn teased, “Your Majesty, now I think you’re fishing for compliments.” But he

enjoyed giving them, especially to Everild, who hadn't received nearly enough of them in his life. And so he continued, "When you were in me—you felt so good, I didn't want it to end. But—but when you came inside me—I liked that. I want you to do that more."

A kind of strangled laugh left Everild's lips. "It won't be a hardship for me, Camdyn."

Their touches turned light, their kisses delicate, and then the two of them were cuddled together once more. Camdyn listened to Everild's heartbeat, strong and steady and comforting to his ears. His husband traced patterns along his hip with a finger, slow circles and swirls and lines.

The next day, he had to learn the layout of the castle—it was such an opulent place, the halls filled with rugs and tapestries and paintings, the many, many rooms packed with so much furniture that it was a chore to avoid bumping into things. Then he had to meet the staff—all the servants and guards—not to mention the rest of the advisors and court officials. And the nobles—they would be around quite a bit, wouldn't they? Camdyn had to learn all their coats of arms. And everything was more of a show at court—he and Everild wouldn't get their private breakfasts together. Camdyn probably wouldn't be able to read in the library by himself. And the chapel would always be bustling with other people.

As long as there was a garden, he thought. But then, it was a shame that they wouldn't get to see their own grow...

"Camdyn?" Everild asked.

He pressed a kiss to his husband's broad, scarred chest. "Mm?"

"Tomorrow I was going to tell the court that we would be returning to our home. We

were going to go see your sister's family, and then we would go to your monastery, and then back to the castle. Permanently."

There was a moment's pause as the words settled in Camdyn's mind. Then he pushed himself up so that he and Everild were looking eye-to-eye. "I—really, Everild? We could do that? The trip? And we could stay in the castle? Forever?"

"Do you want that?"

"Of course I do, but—but you're the king, this is your palace—"

"There's no law that said I had to live here," Everild said dryly. "Believe me. I checked. I thought about this a lot. While waiting for you."

Camdyn said quietly, "But your family lived here."

"Those paintings on the wall? Or the bones in the crypt? You're my family. Anywhere with you is home. But we both said that we didn't care for this place. So tell me, truthfully, where do you wish to live? Be selfish."

It was rather anathema to how he had been raised. Camdyn bit his lip. He thought the same—anywhere with Everild was home. But if given the choice, if they really could—

"With you," he finally admitted. "In our castle, with our household, with Willow and Udele and Aldaay, and our kitchen and our library and our bed and our garden. That's—that's what I want, Everild."

His husband kissed him, slow and languid. "Then you'll have it. Didn't I tell you I'd give you anything you wanted?"

Camdyn laughed with joy.

In the morning, they would be packed to go to Aoife's manor, meet her husband, and greet Young Aoife, who had learned to walk and was running rampant. After that, they would take the long journey back to the monastery, back to where Camdyn had been raised, and Everild would meet the men who had cared for him his entire life, all the souls that Camdyn loved and cherished. They would shake the Abbot's hand and bow, they would hug Cenric, and he and Everild would walk along the beach, hand in hand, talking and laughing.

And then, they would make their way back to their own castle, where Udele and Willow and the rest of their household were waiting, with the cozy library packed from ceiling to floor with shelves of books, with the kitchen that Camdyn loved to cook in, with the garden that was completely theirs—his and Everild's—and which grew larger and more vibrant every day, just like their love.

He smiled at Everild. His husband gazed at him with adoring eyes and brushed their lips together so softly and so gently.

"I love you," Everild murmured.

Camdyn smiled. "I love you."

And after that—whatever they encountered, wherever life took them, they faced it together, not as king and consort but as husband and husband, utterly in love.

They fell asleep like that: peaceful and happy in one another's arms.

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It was a beautiful land, one that seemed to hum with life in every corner. Everild admired the rolling lakes that shimmered in the early morning light, their calm waters reflecting the soft pastel colors of the sky. The mountains loomed majestically in the distance, their peaks kissed by clouds, as if reaching up to touch the heavens. The forests stretched for miles, tall and ancient trees intertwined, creating a canopy of green that whispered secrets to the wind. It was a land that breathed tranquility, a land untouched by chaos, where every step felt like a return to something sacred.

The quiet was unlike any Everild had ever known. There were no bustling streets, no distant sounds of industry, no clamor of crowded towns. Just the gentle rustling of leaves, the distant cry of birds, and the soft calls of animals hidden in the underbrush. Serene. Peaceful. Not wild, as others had described it, but rather free—free in the sense that everything here seemed to grow and live naturally, as if it had always been this way and always would be. It was a place where life flourished without force, where nature reigned, unrestrained.

As Everild marveled at the land, his thoughts turned to Camdyn. That Camdyn had been born in such a country, and then raised in the quiet and peace of a monastery, explained so much about his gentle soul. It was no wonder his husband was so calm, so lovely, and so full of grace. The serenity of the land had become part of Camdyn's very essence, shaping him into the person Everild had come to love so deeply.

When Everild shared this thought with Camdyn, the young man blushed deeply, his freckled face glowing in the soft warmth of the campfire's light. "Oh, Everild," he murmured with a shy smile, his voice a soft whisper, "That's just the romantic in you."

Everild's heart softened at the words, for he had never before been described as a romantic. It was something he had never expected anyone to say about him. No one had ever looked at him—his thick muscles, his jagged scars, the roughness in his voice and the growls that escaped his throat—and called him sweet. In his past, he had been known for his strength, his fierceness, his resolve. But Camdyn saw something else in him. Camdyn saw gentleness and softness, things that Everild never thought anyone could see, especially not in a man like him.

Years ago, Everild wouldn't have believed such qualities could exist in himself. He had been hardened by battle, shaped by survival. But Camdyn, with his earnestness and sincerity, had shown him that there was more to him than just the soldier, the warrior, the king. When Camdyn told him he was handsome, Everild believed it, not because of the way others looked at him, but because Camdyn saw him with such warmth. When Camdyn said he was gentle, Everild believed it, because in Camdyn's eyes, there was no judgment, only acceptance. When Camdyn reminded him that he was good, Everild felt a truth deep in his chest that he had never known to be true before.

And when they were in bed together, wrapped in each other's arms, and Camdyn looked up at him through those long, dark lashes, speaking the words that had become Everild's greatest treasure—"I love you"—Everild believed it, too. He believed it with all his heart, for there was no greater truth than the love they shared.

The night was drawing to a close, and it was almost time to rest. They still had a long journey ahead of them in the morning, and the cold night air reminded them that they would need their strength for the road. The horses were resting peacefully in their stalls, their gentle breathing a quiet lullaby. Most of the attendants were already in their tents, having finished their duties for the day, and only the guards remained outside, keeping watch over the camp.

But for now, there was no hurry. For now, they sat together beneath the vast, star-filled sky. The night felt endless, and in the silence, Everild could hear the steady

rhythm of Camdyn's breath beside him. The weight of the world seemed to melt away in the peaceful stillness of the moment. It was just the two of them, alone in the quiet, surrounded by the beauty of the land they traveled, with nothing but the sound of their hearts beating in unison.

In this place, with Camdyn by his side, Everild felt more at peace than he had ever known. The road ahead was uncertain, but for tonight, they had all they needed. And as the stars twinkled overhead, Everild couldn't help but feel a deep sense of gratitude for the love they had found, in this beautiful land, under the vast, eternal sky.

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They weren't that far from the monastery when they spotted a man in the distance, standing amidst a herd of cows. At first glance, it seemed as though he was simply shouting at them, but as Everild observed more closely, it became apparent that he wasn't just cursing at the stubborn creatures. No, he was arguing with them, as if expecting some kind of intelligent response. He would shout at them, pause, and then wait as though he was expecting them to speak back—when they didn't, he would grow angrier than before and shout again.

"How dare you!" the man's voice rang out, frustration lacing his words. "This is impertinence of the worst sort! I was there when you were calved—"

Everild held up his hand, signaling the retinue to halt. Camdyn, who had been riding beside him, quickly brought Seilide to a stop, patting the horse's neck as he looked at his husband. "What is it?" he asked, his voice soft but attentive.

"That man," Everild said, pointing toward the scene ahead, where the monk was trying in vain to deal with the unbothered cows. "He's concerning me." His tone was firm. Everild didn't like the idea of anyone causing such a scene, especially not near Camdyn.

But before he could say more, Camdyn's eyes lit up with recognition. He quickly dismounted, moving with a speed that surprised Everild, who was still processing the situation. "That's Brother David!" Camdyn exclaimed, his face lighting up with a mixture of surprise and affection.

"Brother David?" Everild asked, eyebrows raised in disbelief. He had already heard more than enough blasphemous phrases from the man to be concerned. "Camdyn, wait, don't—"

But Camdyn was already striding toward the monk. The energy in his movements was infectious, and before Everild could fully process his own thoughts, he was following suit. His stride was longer, sure, but Camdyn's eagerness quickly outpaced him. They dashed through the soft grass, their footsteps light as they made their way toward the monk. The cows, seemingly intrigued by their arrival, paused for a moment, their eyes following the newcomers. If Everild didn't know better, he might have thought the cattle were watching them with a mischievous glint in their eyes.

"Brother!" Camdyn called out, his voice warm and familiar as he reached the monk. "Brother David!"

The monk, caught in his frantic attempts to corral the cows, paused and turned briefly. "Ah, there you are, lad. Where have you been? Now, help me with these blasted creatures—you know they've got it out for me."

Everild watched in bewilderment as the cattle mooed in response, their calls sounding oddly like laughter. It was a strange and somewhat surreal moment, the kind Everild wasn't sure how to interpret.

Camdyn, unfazed, walked over to the monk, his voice gentle but firm as he approached the unruly herd. "Brother," he scolded playfully, "I've told you many a time that you've got to ask them nicely."

The monk groaned. “Oh, nicely, he says. They’ve never treated me nicely. Not in all my years.”

Camdyn was unbothered, his tone still light. “Start now, then.”

Everild could hardly believe what he was seeing, and the captain of the guard, who had been riding along with them, must have felt the same. He stopped his horse beside Everild, casting a glance at the odd exchange. “Is everything alright here, Your Majesty?” the captain asked, his expression uncertain.

Before Everild could offer a response, the monk’s voice rang out again, louder and more agitated. “No, of course not—does everything look alright to you? These damned cows again! They won’t listen to a word I say!” The monk then paused, looking around. His eyes locked on Everild and the captain, and then he shifted his gaze to the rest of the retinue, still watching from a distance. “Who’s this man, Camdyn?” he asked, squinting in confusion.

“This is my husband, Brother,” Camdyn said with a smile, as though introducing a dear friend. “Everild. Remember? I left to get married.”

The monk raised an eyebrow, giving a snort of disbelief. “Ah, a ruler. Always one of them around. One dies, and another takes their place. Never ends.” He turned to Everild with a mischievous grin. “I’d rather have someone lend me a hand. What do you know about cows?”

Everild shrugged, trying to keep his composure. “Not much,” he admitted. “Except to follow Camdyn’s lead with them.”

“Well, how unusual!” David exclaimed, slapping Everild’s shoulder in a friendly manner. “This kingdom’s had four rulers in my lifetime, and here’s the first wise one!”

Camdyn blushed, the sudden attention from the monk making him a little uncomfortable. “Brother David, please! Be respectful to my husband!”

Everild couldn’t help it—he laughed, the absurdity of the situation finally sinking in. The monk simply shrugged, unfazed. “I think I do remember Brother Cenric mentioning something about you being prince consort now, lad. That’s a fine thing! Very useful! You’ve all these people to help us with the cattle now.”

The retinue, still watching with wide-eyed astonishment, seemed even more baffled as Camdyn continued to gently scold the elderly monk. He then turned to the cows, speaking softly to them. He called them by name, one by one, and asked them to make their way home. To the astonishment of everyone watching, the cows sniffed Camdyn with interest, nuzzling him in what appeared to be a greeting, before slowly turning and making their way back toward the monastery. Everild could have sworn the cows seemed almost pleased by the attention.

The monk, seemingly overjoyed by the turn of events, let out a jubilant laugh. “Hah!” he exclaimed, and wandered after the cows, all smiles.

Everild watched the old monk walk away and then moved to help Camdyn back onto Seilide. But Camdyn, shaking his head with a smile, placed a gentle hand on Everild’s arm. “I’d like to walk back to the monastery, Everild,” he said softly. “Could I do that? Just as the pilgrims do?”

“Of course,” Everild replied without hesitation. “Let’s walk together. It’s a fine day.”

With that, Camdyn kissed his cheek affectionately and took his hand. The retinue followed behind, riding slowly on horseback, while the king and his prince consort walked together under the bright, shining sun, their laughter mingling with the peaceful sounds of the surrounding countryside. The day was clear, the sky a vibrant blue—everything felt right in the world.

The monastery itself, nestled below the hills near the shore, was unlike anything Everild had seen before. It was so different from the grand churches of the Capital, towering and gleaming with white stone and decorated with intricate stained-glass windows. It was also unlike the chapel in their castle, where Camdyn would kneel each morning, surrounded by candles and flowers.

Here, the buildings were simple, constructed from plain gray stone. The stones seemed roughly cut, some left in their natural state while others were roughly broken to fit the shapes of the buildings. The architecture was humble, with domed roofs that created an austere, ascetic atmosphere. It was a far cry from the luxury of the Capital, but there was a quiet peace here—a place for the monks to sleep, to cook and eat, and, most importantly, to pray. A life of simplicity and structure.

The monastery's yard was equally simple but well-kept. The grass was lush and green, chickens, goats, and sheep wandered about a section of fenced-in land, while many of the monks tended to a sizable garden. Some were harvesting parsnips and spinach, while others covered the crops with soil and straw to protect them from the winter chill.

“What’s that for, Camdyn?” Everild asked, his curiosity piqued as he helped his husband navigate down the small hill toward the yard.

“Oh, thank you, Everild,” Camdyn replied, his voice soft with appreciation. “It’s to protect the crops that’ll still be growing through the winter. It helps keep the worst of the weather off them.”

“I see.” Everild nodded, still absorbing the simplicity and beauty of the place. There was so much he had to learn about this kind of life. He looked forward to spring, when they would be able to plant more. Perhaps flowers this time—bright, colorful blooms like bluebells, primroses, and marigolds. He smiled at the thought, imagining Camdyn laughing among the vibrant colors, chatting with the monks as they worked.

As the cattle made their way back to the pen, David cupped his hands around his mouth and called out in a voice full of mirth, “Look! Look who’s come to visit us! Camdyn’s back!” He paused before adding, “Oh, and here’s the king as well!”

Everild’s laughter bubbled up once again at the monk’s enthusiasm.

The monks paused their work, and one of them—a man taller and slightly younger than the others, with a salt-and-pepper beard but not yet elderly—threw aside his spade and dashed toward them.

Camdyn’s entire body shook as he saw the man approaching. “Cenric,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Everild, that’s Cenric.” He was almost dazed. “Oh, I missed him so much.”

Everild, touched by his husband’s obvious love for the monk, brushed a stray curl from his face and smiled. “Go on, then. Go see your father.”

Camdyn’s face lit up with a wide, joyful grin. He seized Everild’s wrist, kissed his palm, and then without another word, he took off toward the monk who had raised him.

The reunion was nothing short of overwhelming. Camdyn practically tackled Cenric with his hug, and the two of them tumbled to the ground, laughing and crying in sheer joy. Cenric held Camdyn’s face in his hands, and Everild heard the monk murmuring softly, “Oh, my boy, my little boy...”

Tears spilled from Camdyn’s eyes as he smiled through his laughter. “I thought maybe I’d never see you again,” he said, voice thick with emotion. “When I left—and then, when I didn’t get any word from you in so long, I thought maybe you’d forgotten me—but then I did get your letters, and we wrote to each other, but I still missed you, and Everild said we should come and see you, and I wanted it to be a surprise—Did we surprise you, Cenric?”

Cenric chuckled, his voice thick with emotion. “Yes, oh, my goodness, yes, you have. What a wonderful surprise. The best surprise I’ve ever had.”

“I love you,” Camdyn whispered into Cenric’s robes.

Cenric squeezed him tighter, his eyes red-rimmed with emotion. “I love you so much. Always remember that.” He looked up at Everild, gratitude shining in his gaze. “Thank you, Your Majesty. For bringing Camdyn back to visit.”

It was an incredibly intimate moment, one that made Everild feel like an intruder. He wanted to give them space, to let them have this reunion without his presence. But Cenric’s words pulled him back. He cleared his throat, speaking softly. “It wasn’t entirely altruistic.”

Cenric furrowed his brow in confusion. “No?”

“No,” Everild replied, his voice steady but filled with affection. “My husband is the best of people. There’s never been anyone in my life as kind, as gentle. And he loves you. Admires you. I wanted to see you with my own eyes. To meet my father-in-law.”

Cenric, unable to respond through his emotions, simply nodded and closed his eyes, pulling Camdyn ever closer. But Camdyn, with a soft smile, looked at Everild and said, “Everild, I told you you’re a romantic.”

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The rest of the monks greeted Camdyn enthusiastically, rushing from their chores to wrap him in tight embraces or ruffle his hair in affectionate delight. There was laughter and chatter as they made their way toward him, voices raised in a kind of joyful commotion, and Everild found himself smiling at the scene. The Abbot, a kind-hearted elderly man, embraced Camdyn warmly, the look of joy on his face evident

as he welcomed each and every member of their party with open arms, his welcome hearty and sincere. His tone was filled with affection, and there was no mistaking the deep respect he held for Camdyn.

The monastery, small and humble, wasn't quite what Everild had expected, but its charm and simplicity felt like a balm after the long journey. Everild had always known that the monks didn't have much in terms of material wealth, and he was concerned that their retinue might be too much for them to manage. He feared the monks would have to dig into their winter supplies just to appear as good hosts for royalty, stretching their resources thinner than necessary.

“We’ve our own provisions,” Everild told the Abbot, his voice low and sincere. “Don’t concern yourself about sharing your resources with us. Please, we don’t wish to impose.”

The elderly man, however, shook his head vigorously, his face kind but resolute. “Nonsense, Your Majesty. It is harvest time, and God has blessed us with Their bounty. The mast in the forests, the eggs from the hens, the milk and cheese from the cows, goats, and sheep. The crops from the garden, the fruit from the orchard, the fish from the sea. There is always plenty, always. And how could we scrimp on hospitality when you’ve all gone to the trouble of bringing Camdyn to us once more? Don’t worry. We are very glad to have you here. All of you.”

Despite the Abbot’s assurances, Everild had them camp away from the monastery, unwilling to disturb the monks’ daily routine. They set up tents near the outskirts of the grounds, where the peace of the countryside seemed to settle around them like a soft blanket. Everild watched as Camdyn, with his familiar, easy grace, fell back into old habits with ease. He started sweeping the stone path clean, his movements light and rhythmic, as if he had never left. He tended to the garden with the same care he had once shown, kneeling to pull weeds with an unhurried attentiveness that made Everild’s heart swell. Camdyn didn’t rush; he simply enjoyed the process, the simplicity of it, the connection to the earth beneath his hands.

And then, without missing a beat, Camdyn joined the monks in their prayers, his voice blending seamlessly with theirs in the sacred rhythm of their hymns. Everild stood a little ways off, his eyes closed as he listened, and he could pick out Camdyn's voice from among the rest. It was always there, a steady presence that gave him comfort in a way no words ever could.

When had Camdyn last taken a nap? Everild wondered. Likely not since he was a toddler, when a nursemaid had seen to his needs. But the quiet afternoon, the shade of the tree he was resting against, the sound of Camdyn's sweet, low voice as he sang—these things brought Everild a peace he hadn't known in years. The warmth of the sun, the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves, and the contentment of being near Camdyn... it filled him with a sense of calm that he hadn't realized he needed.

Camdyn was the source of that peace.

In his dreams, Everild felt the soft touch of Camdyn's hand, and heard the sound of their laughter mingling together in the quiet of their bed as they talked into the night. He dreamed of the warmth of their shared space, of quiet, tender moments where the world outside seemed to vanish. Comfort. Love. Home.

Everild dozed off just long enough for the prayer to finish, and he awoke with a start as he heard Camdyn's voice, not directed to God but to him. "Everild? Everild, I didn't know you were tired!"

When he blinked the sleep from his eyes, there was Camdyn, kneeling beside him in the grass, the sunlight framing his face, the corners of his honey-brown eyes crinkled as he smiled. His presence was like a beacon, warm and inviting.

Everild gave him a sleepy smile and replied, "I didn't realize, either. But it was a long journey. And your singing..." He trailed off, knowing that it wasn't just the singing that had put him at ease. It was Camdyn's very presence, the way he made everything

feel right, safe.

Camdyn, ever the tease, grinned mischievously. “Ah, good thing prayers are so long. I bored you into a nice rest,” he said with a wink, pressing a quick kiss to Everild’s cheek. Everild shook his head, his smile soft and affectionate. He wasn’t bored—not in the slightest. He just... felt calm. He felt safe.

“You make me feel safe,” Everild said, his voice firm with sincerity. “I can relax with you.”

Camdyn’s eyes softened, and he kissed him again, this time with more tenderness. “I’m so glad, my love. Are you still tired?”

“No.” Everild shook his head, already beginning to sit up. “Did you have something in mind?”

Camdyn’s eyes lit up, his excitement palpable. “I want to show you the beach,” he said. “My favorite place. We have time, though. We can wait until tomorrow, if you’d like.”

But Everild was already moving. He could deny Camdyn nothing, and the thought of seeing Camdyn so happy brought him more joy than anything else. “I’d love to. Let’s go.”

They walked down the well-worn path to the shore, side by side, the sound of their footsteps muted by the grass beneath their feet.

Everild had seen the sea before, of course. The first time had been years ago, a memory that now seemed like a lifetime away. Back then, he had arrived at the harbor to find it teeming with young men and women eager to prove themselves as brave and loyal soldiers, ready to defend God and king. Everild had been one of them, eager and full of youthful determination.

What struck him most at that time had been the sheer number of ships, the vast armada floating in the harbor, surrounded by countless soldiers ready for war. The sight of the sea, an endless expanse stretching out beyond the horizon, only fully sank in when the shoreline disappeared from view. It was then that he had felt the overwhelming vastness of it—the water stretching out in all directions, vast and powerful, a reminder of how small and fragile they all were in the face of such a force of nature.

The journey back had been brutal, almost unbearable. He had been too exhausted, too filled with despair to get out of bed, but sleep never came. Instead, he was haunted by the memories of battle, the bloodshed, and the haunting sound of the waves crashing against the ship's hull.

He had vowed to leave it all behind when he waded ashore. Stripping off his armor, Everild had walked away from his life as a soldier, his sword abandoned to rust and his heart heavy with guilt and remorse. Back at his family's castle, he had been angry, miserable, and alone—until Camdyn entered his life.

Now, on this beach, with Camdyn by his side, Everild felt a sense of peace he hadn't thought possible. His husband sighed deeply as they reached the shore, his voice thick with emotion as he murmured, "Oh, Everild, it's just as I remembered. I thought it might be different now, but—but it's still just as beautiful."

Camdyn was staring at the glittering blue-green sea, but Everild's gaze was on him. He watched as Camdyn spoke about the first time Cenric had taken him fishing, the memories flowing easily as he described their shared experience. They had caught a basketful of wriggling fish for the monks' dinner, and Camdyn warned him about walking on the algae-covered stones because they were so slippery. He described how to harvest razor clams from the sand, laughing as he recounted his many frustrated attempts. Every word was a precious memory, a treasure.

Beautiful, Everild thought, yes, absolutely and utterly beautiful.

The air was fresh and crisp with the briny scent of the sea. The sky was a perfect blue, not a cloud in sight, and the sound of the gulls above was drowned by the steady roll of the waves. It was the kind of beauty that took your breath away, the kind that made you feel as though everything in the world was in its right place.

And there was Camdyn, as beautiful as ever. His eyes sparkled with joy, his curls tousled by the sea breeze, and his cheeks flushed from the cool wind. He looked as though he belonged here, as if this beach was a part of him, a piece of his soul laid bare for Everild to see.

The last time Everild had arrived at a beach, he had discarded his armor and left behind his sword, letting them rust in the sand.

Camdyn turned to him, his smile warm and knowing. “You’re thinking very hard about something,” he said, smoothing Everild’s brow with his gentle hands. “Tell me what you’re thinking about.”

Everild smiled, his heart full. “Just how much I love you,” he said, his voice soft and sincere.

Camdyn’s face lit up, and his voice dropped into a tender murmur as he replied, “I love you, too.”

Then Camdyn smiled wide, his eyes full of light, and said, “Everild, let’s walk together.”

With a happy heart, Everild laced their fingers together and pressed a kiss to Camdyn’s lips. “Let’s,” he said, his voice a quiet promise.

And together, hand-in-hand, they walked along the shoreline, their feet sinking into the damp sand, the tide lapping gently at their toes.