

Bird of prayer

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ABSTRACT

There are spaces built for air-delivered nukes inside grassy tumuli behind 12ft fences, tattoo parlours and US Air Force golf courses. Out on the patio flagstones, sometimes, tiny fragments: a little, insectlike songbird leg, with a foot clenched tight where the sinews have pulled it; or - even more gruesomely - a disarticulated beak, a housesparrow beak top, or bottom, a little conical bead of blushed gunmetal, slightly translucent, with a few faint maxillary feathers adhering to it.

FULL TEXT

Helen Macdonald's fascination with falconry grew from birdwatching expeditions with her father, and when he died suddenly she found her dreams taken over by hawks. In this extract from her new book, she explains the wild and intense relationship she has with Mabel, the goshawk she trained Amidst a whirring clatter of wings and feet and talons and a highpitched twittering, the man pulls an enormous hawk out of the box Helen Macdonald's goshawk, Mabel

Forty-five minutes north-east of Cambridge is a landscape I've come to love very much indeed. It's where wet fen gives way to parched sand. It's a land of twisted pine trees, burnt-out cars, shotgun-peppered road signs and US Air Force bases. There are ghosts here: houses crumble inside numbered blocks of pine forestry. There are spaces built for air-delivered nukes inside grassy tumuli behind 12ft fences, tattoo parlours and US Air Force golf courses. In spring it's a riot of noise: constant plane traffic, gas-guns over pea fields, woodlarks and jet engines. It's called the Brecklands - the broken lands - and it's where I ended up that morning, seven years ago, in early spring, on a trip I hadn't planned at all. At five in the morning I'd been staring, sleepless, at a square of streetlight on the ceiling. Nnngh. Must get out, I thought, throwing back the covers. Out! I pulled on jeans, boots and a jumper, scalded my mouth with burnt coffee, and it was only when my frozen, ancient Volkswagen and I were halfway down the A14 that I worked out where I was going, and why. Out there, beyond the foggy windscreen and white lines, was the forest. The broken forest. That's where I was headed. To see goshawks.

I knew it would be hard. Goshawks are hard. Have you ever seen a hawk catch a bird in your back garden? I've not, but I know it's happened. I've found evidence. Out on the patio flagstones, sometimes, tiny fragments: a little, insectlike songbird leg, with a foot clenched tight where the sinews have pulled it; or - even more gruesomely - a disarticulated beak, a housesparrow beak top, or bottom, a little conical bead of blushed gunmetal, slightly translucent, with a few faint maxillary feathers adhering to it. But maybe you have: maybe you've glanced out of the window and seen there, on the lawn, a bloody great hawk murdering a pigeon, and it looks the hugest, most impressive piece of wildness you've ever seen. It's always a sparrowhawk, never a goshawk: goshawks resemble sparrowhawks the way leopards resemble housecats. Bigger, bulkier, bloodier, deadlier, scarier and much, much harder to see. Birds of deep woodland, not gardens, they're the birdwatchers' dark grail. You might spend a week in a forest full of goshawks and never see one, just traces of their presence. Perhaps you'll find a half-eaten pigeon sprawled in a burst of white feathers on the forest floor. Or you might be lucky: walking at dawn you'll turn your head and catch a split-second glimpse of a bird hurtling past and away, huge taloned feet held loosely clenched, eyes set on a distant target. Looking for goshawks is like looking for grace: it comes, but not often, and you don't

get to say when or how. But you have a slightly better chance on still, clear mornings in early spring, because that's when goshawks eschew their world under the trees to court each other in the open sky. That was what I was hoping to see.

Though goshawks are native to Britain, by the 19th century they'd been rendered extinct by habitat loss and persecution. In the 1960s and 1970s falconers started a quiet, unofficial scheme to bring them back. For the cost of importing a goshawk from the continent for falconry, you could bring in a second bird and release it. Buy one, set one free. It wasn't hard with a bird as self-reliant and predatory as a gos. You just found a forest and opened the box. Some were released on purpose, some were simply lost. They survived, found each other and bred, secretly and successfully. Today their descendants number about 450 pairs. Elusive, spectacular, utterly at home, the fact of these British goshawks makes me happy. Their existence gives the lie to the thought that the wild is always something untouched by human hearts and hands. The wild can be human work.

It was 8.30 exactly. I was looking down at a little sprig of mahonia growing out of the turf, its oxblood leaves like buffed pigskin. I glanced up. And then I saw my goshawks. There they were. A pair, soaring above the canopy in the rapidly warming air. There was a flat, hot hand of sun on the back of my neck, but I smelt ice in my nose, seeing those goshawks soaring. I smelt ice and bracken stems and pine resin. Goshawk cocktail. They were on the soar. Goshawks in the air are a complicated grey colour. Not slate grey, nor pigeon grey. But a kind of raincloud grey, and despite their distance, I could see the big powder-puff of white undertail feathers, fanned out, with the thick, blunt tail behind it, and that superb bend and curve of the secondaries of a soaring goshawk that makes them utterly unlike sparrowhawks. These goshawks weren't fully displaying: there was none of the skydiving I'd read about in books. But they were loving the space between each other, and carving it into all sorts of beautiful concentric chords and distances. A couple of flaps, and the male, the tiercel, would be above the female, and then he'd drift north of her, and then slip down, fast, like a knife-cut, a smooth calligraphic scrawl underneath her, and she'd dip a wing, and then they'd soar up again. They were above a stand of pines, right there. And then they were gone. One minute my pair of goshawks was describing lines from physics textbooks in the sky, and then nothing at all. I don't remember looking down, or away. Perhaps I blinked. Perhaps it was as simple as that. And in that tiny black gap which the brain disguises they'd dived into the wood.

I sat down, tired and content. The goshawks were gone, the sky blank. Time passed. The wavelength of the light around me shortened. The day built itself. A sparrowhawk, light as a toy of balsa-wood and doped tissue paper, zipped past at knee-level, kiting up over a bank of brambles and away into the trees. I watched it go, lost in recollection. This memory was candescent, irresistible. The air reeked of pine resin and the pitchy vinegar of wood ants. I felt my small-girl fingers hooked through plastic chain-link and the weight of a pair of East German binoculars around my neck. I was bored. I was nine. Dad was standing next to me. We were looking for sparrowhawks. They nested nearby, and that July afternoon we were hoping for the kind of sighting they'd sometimes give us: a submarine ripple through the tops of the pines as one swept in and away; a glimpse of a yellow eye; a barred chest against moving needles, or a quick silhouette stamped black against the Surrey sky. For a while it had been exciting to stare into the darkness between the trees and the blood-orange and black where the sun slapped crazy-paving shadows across pines. But when you are nine, waiting is hard. I kicked at the base of the fence with my welling-toned feet. Squirmed and fidgeted. Let out a sigh. Hung of the fence with my fingers. And then my dad looked at me, half exasperated, half amused, and explained something. He explained patience. 'When I'm at work, taking photographs for the paper,' he said, 'sometimes I've got to sit in the car for hours to get the picture I want. I can't get up to get a cup of tea or even go to the loo. I just have to be patient. If you want to see hawks you have to be patient too.' He was grave and serious, not annoyed; what he was doing was communicating a grown-up Truth, but I nodded sulkily and stared at the ground. It sounded like a lecture, not advice, and I didn't understand the point of what he was trying to say.

You learn. Today, I thought, not nine years old and not bored, I was patient and the hawks came. I got up slowly, legs a little numb from so long motionless, and found I was holding a small clump of reindeer moss in one hand, a little piece of that branching, pale green-grey lichen that can survive just about anything the world throws at it. It is

patience made manifest. Keep reindeer moss in the dark, freeze it, dry it to a crisp, it won't die. It goes dormant and waits for things to improve. Impressive stuff. I weighed the little twiggy sphere in my hand. Hardly there at all. And on a sudden impulse, I stowed this little stolen memento of the time I saw the hawks in my inside jacket pocket and went home. I put it on a shelf near the phone. Three weeks later, it was the reindeer moss I was looking at when my mother called and told me my father was dead.

I was about to leave the house when the phone rang. I picked it up. Hop-skip-pity, doorkeys in my hand. 'Hello?' A pause. My mother. She only had to say one sentence. It was this, 'I had a phone call from St Thomas' Hospital.' Then I knew. I knew that my father had died. I knew he was dead because that was the sentence she said after the pause and she used a voice I'd never heard before to say it. Dead. I was on the floor. My legs broke, buckled, and I was sitting on the carpet, phone pressed against my right ear, listening to my mother and staring at that little ball of reindeer moss on the bookshelf, impossibly light, a buoyant tangle of hard grey stems with sharp, dusty tips and quiet spaces that were air in between them, and Mum was saying there was nothing they could do at the hospital, it was his heart, I think, nothing could be done, you don't have to come back tonight, don't come back, it's a long way, and it's late, and it's such a long drive and you don't need to come back - and of course this was nonsense; neither of us knew what the hell could or should be done or what this was except both of us and my brother, too, all of us were clinging to a world already gone.

Bereavement. Or, bereaved. Bereft. It's from the Old English bereafian, meaning 'to deprive of, take away, seize, rob'. Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try. I can't, even now, arrange it in the right order. The memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places but they don't make a story. One day we were walking from Waterloo to the hospital under clouds. Breathing seemed an act of discipline. Mum turned to me, her face tight, and said, 'There'll be a time when all this seems like a bad dream.' His glasses, carefully folded. His coat. An envelope. His watch. His shoes. And when we left, clutching a plastic bag with all his belongings, the clouds were still there, a frieze of motionless cumulus over the Thames flat as a matte painting on glass.

After the funeral I went back to Cambridge. I didn't sleep. I drove around a lot. I stared at the sun going down and the sun coming up, and the sun in between. I watched the pigeons spreading their tails and courting each other in stately pavaes on the lawn outside my house. Planes still landed, cars still drove, people still shopped and talked and worked. None of these things made any sense at all. For weeks I felt I was made of dully burning metal. That's what it was like; so much so that I was convinced, despite all evidence to the contrary, that if you'd put me on a bed or a chair I would have burned right through.

Weeks passed. The season changed. The leaves came, the mornings filled with light, the swifts returned, screaming past my Cambridge house through the skies of early summer. As the rain fell and the waters rose something new began. I'd wake up frowning. I'd dreamt of hawks, again. I started dreaming of hawks all the time. The hawks were goshawks, and one in particular. A few years earlier, I'd worked at a bird-of-prey centre right at the edge of England before it tips into Wales; a land of red earth, coal-workings, wet forest and wild goshawks. This one had hit a fence while hunting and knocked herself out. Someone had picked her up, unconscious, put her in a cardboard box and brought her to us. Was anything broken? Was she damaged?

We congregated in a darkened room with the box on the table and the boss reached her gloved left hand inside. A short scufe, and then out into the gloom, her grey crest raised and her barred chest feathers puffed up into a meringue of aggression and fear, came a huge old female goshawk. Old because her feet were gnarled and dusty, her eyes a deep, fiery orange, and she was beautiful. Beautiful like a granite cliff or a thundercloud. She completely filled the room. She had a massive back of sunbleached grey feathers, was as muscled as a pit bull, and intimidating as hell, even to staff who spent their days tending eagles. So wild and spooky and reptilian. Carefully, we fanned her great, broad wings as she snaked her neck round to stare at us, unblinking. We ran our fingers along the narrow bones of her wings and shoulders to check nothing was broken, along bones light as pipes, hollow, each with cantilevered internal struts of bone like the inside of an aeroplane wing. We checked her collarbone, her thick, scaled legs and toes and inch-long black talons. Her vision seemed fine too: we held a finger in front of each

hot eye in turn. Snap, snap, her beak went. Then she turned her head to stare right at me. Locked her eyes on mine down her curved black beak, black pupils fixed. Then, right then, it occurred to me that this goshawk was bigger than me and more important. And much, much older: a dinosaur pulled from the Forest of Dean. There was a distinct, prehistoric scent to her feathers; it caught in my nose, peppery, rusty as storm-rain.

Nothing was wrong with her at all. We took her outside and let her go. She opened her wings and in a second was gone. She disappeared over a hedge slant-wise into nothing. She found a rent in the damp Gloucestershire air and slipped through it. That was the moment I kept replaying, over and over. From then on, the hawk was inevitable. The goshawk I was about to collect had been bred in an aviary near Belfast. A man walked slowly towards me across a Scottish quayside, carrying two enormous cardboard boxes like a couple of oversized suitcases. Strangely alien suitcases that didn't seem to obey the laws of physics, because as he walked they moved unpredictably, in concert neither with his steps nor with gravity. Whatever is in them is moving, I thought with a little thump of my heart. He set the boxes down, ran his hand through his hair. 'I'm meeting another falconer here in a bit. He's having the younger bird. Yours is the older. Bigger too,' he said. 'So.' He ran his hand through his hair again, exposing a long talon scratch across his wrist, angry at its edges and scurfed with dried blood. 'We'll check the ring numbers against the Article 10s,' he explained, pulling a sheaf of yellow paper from the rucksack and unfolding two of the official forms that accompany captive-bred rare birds throughout their lives. 'Don't want you going home with the wrong bird.'

We noted the numbers. We stared down at the boxes, at their parcel-tape handles, their doors of thin plywood and hinges of carefully tied string. Then he knelt on the concrete, untied a hinge on the smaller box and squinted into its dark interior. A sudden thump of feathered shoulders and the box shook as if someone had punched it, hard, from within. 'She's got her hood of,' he said, and frowned. That light, leather hood was to keep the hawk from fearful sights. Like us.

Another hinge untied. Concentration. Infinite caution. Daylight irrigating the box. Scratching talons, another thump. And another. Thump. The air turned syrupy, slow, flecked with dust. The last few seconds before a battle. And with the last bow pulled free, he reached inside, and amidst a whirring, chaotic clatter of wings and feet and talons and a high-pitched twittering and it's all happening at once, the man pulls an enormous hawk out of the box and in a strange coincidence of world and deed a great flood of sunlight drenches us and everything is brilliance and fury. The hawk's wings, barred and beating, the sharp fingers of her dark-tipped primaries cutting the air, her feathers raised like the scattered quills of a fretful porpoentine. Two enormous eyes. My heart jumps sideways. She is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A grifon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water. A broken marionette of wings, legs and light-splashed feathers. She is wearing jesses, and the man holds them. For one awful, long moment she is hanging headdownward, wings open, like a turkey in a butcher's shop, only her head is turned right-way-up and she is seeing more than she has ever seen before in her whole short life. Her world was an aviary no larger than a living room. Then it was a box. But now it is this, and she can see everything: the point-source glitter on the waves, a diving cormorant a hundred yards out; pigment flakes under wax on the lines of parked cars; far hills and the heather on them and miles and miles of sky where the sun spreads on dust and water and illegible things moving in it that are white scraps of gulls. Everything startling and new-stamped on her entirely astonished brain.

The man was perfectly calm. He gathered up the hawk in one practised movement, folding her wings, anchoring her broad feathered back against his chest, gripping her scaled yellow legs in one hand. 'Let's get that hood back on,' he said tautly. There was concern in his face. It was born of care. This hawk had been hatched in an incubator, and for the first few days of her life this man had fed her with scraps of meat held in a pair of tweezers, waiting patiently for the lumpen, fluffy chick to notice the food and eat. I grabbed the hood from the box and turned to the hawk. Her beak was open, her hackles raised; her wild eyes were the colour of sun on white paper, and they stared because the whole world had fallen into them at once. One, two, three. I tucked the hood over her head. There was a brief intimation of a thin, angular skull under her feathers, of an alien brain fizzing and fusing with terror, then I drew the braces closed. We checked the ring numbers against the form.

It was the wrong bird. This was the younger one. This was not my hawk. So we put her back and opened the other box, which was meant to hold the larger, older bird. And dear God, it did. Everything about this second hawk was different. She came out like a Victorian melodrama: a sort of madwoman in the attack. She was smokier and darker and much, much bigger, and instead of twittering, she wailed; great, awful gouts of sound like a thing in pain, and the sound was unbearable. This is my hawk, I was telling myself and it was all I could do to breathe. She too was bareheaded, and I grabbed the hood from the box as before. But as I brought it up to her face I looked into her eyes and saw something blank and crazy in her stare. Some madness from a distant country. I didn't recognise her. This isn't my hawk. The hood was on, the ring numbers checked, the bird back in the box, the yellow form folded, the money exchanged, and all I could think was, 'But this isn't my hawk.' Slow panic. I knew what I had to say, and it was a monstrous breach of etiquette. 'This is really awkward,' I began. 'But I really liked the first one. Do you think there's any chance I could take that one instead?' I tailed off. His eyebrows were raised. I started again, saying stupider things, 'I'm sure the other falconer would like the larger bird? She's more beautiful than the first one, isn't she? I know this is out of order, but I... Could I? Would it be all right, do you think?' And on and on, a desperate, crazy barrage of incoherent appeals.

I'm sure nothing I said persuaded him more than the look on my face as I said it. A tall, white-faced woman with wind-wrecked hair and exhausted eyes was pleading with him on a quayside, hands held out as if she were in a seaside production of Medea. Looking at me he must have sensed that my stuttered request wasn't a simple one. There was a moment of total silence.

'All right,' he said. And then, because he didn't see me believe him, 'Yes. Yes, I'm sure that'll be OK.'

In the half-light through the drawn curtains she sits on her perch, relaxed, hooded, extraordinary. Formidable talons, wicked, curved black beak, sleek, cafe-au-lait front streaked thickly with cocoa-coloured teardrops, looking for all the world like some cappuccino samurai. 'Hello hawk,' I whisper, and at the sound she draws her feathers tight in alarm. I put on my falconer's glove and take her up on to my fist, untying the falconer's knot that secures her leash to the perch. She bates - a headlong dive. I lift her back on to my fist with gentleness and patience. Her feet grip the glove convulsively. I feel for her breastbone with the bare fingers of my other hand. She is plump, her skin hot under her feathers, and I feel the beating of her nervous heart. I shiver. Draw my hand back. Superstition. I can't bear to feel that flickering sign of life, can't help but suspect that my attention might somehow make it stop. In the front room I sit, tuck a piece of raw steak into the glove under her scaly feet, and wait. One minute, two. Three. I take the hood from her head.

Two wide, wild eyes stare at me for a fraction of a second, and then they are gone. Before the hawk can work out what the hell is happening she is trying to fly away as fast as possible. I lift her back on to the glove. Under her feathers is sinew, and bone, and that fast-beating heart. She bates again. And again. I hate this. In these first few minutes there's nothing you can do but accept that you are terrifying the hawk when it is the very opposite of everything you desire. After three more bates my heart is beating like a fitting beast, but she's back on the glove, beak open, eyes blazing. And then there is a long moment of extraordinary intensity.

The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the gloom. Her beak is open. She breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burnt stone. Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready for flight. I don't look at her. I mustn't. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of not being there.

Hawks aren't social animals like dogs or horses; they understand neither coercion nor punishment. The only way to tame them is through positive reinforcement with gifts of food. You want the hawk to eat the food you hold - it's the first step in reclaiming her that will end with you being hunting partners. But the space between the fear and the food is a vast, vast gulf, and you have to cross it together. I thought, once, that you did it by being infinitely patient. But no: it is that you must become invisible. You're trying to get her to look at the steak, not at you, because you know - though you haven't looked - that her eyes are fixed in horror at your profile. All you can hear is

the wet click, click, click of her blinking.

To cross this space between fear and food you need - very urgently - not to be there. You empty your mind and become very still. You think of exactly nothing at all. The hawk becomes a strange, hollow concept, as flat as a snapshot or a schematic drawing, but at the same time, as pertinent to your future as an angry high court judge. Your gloved fist squeezes the meat a fraction, and you feel the tiny imbalance of weight and you see out of the very corner of your vision that she's looked down at it. And so, remaining invisible, you make the food the only thing in the room apart from the hawk; you're not there at all. And what you hope is that she'll start eating, and you can very, very slowly make yourself visible. Even if you don't move a muscle, and just relax into a more normal frame of mind, the hawk knows. It's extraordinary. It takes a long time to be yourself in the presence of a new hawk.

But I didn't have to learn how to do this. I was already an expert. It was a trick I'd learnt early in my life; a small, slightly fearful girl, obsessed with birds, who loved to disappear. When I was a child I'd climb the hill behind my house and crawl into my favourite den under a rhododendron bush, wriggling down on my tummy under overhanging leaves like a tiny sniper. And in this secret foxhole, nose an inch from the ground, breathing crushed bracken and acid soil, I'd look down on the world below, basking in the fierce calm that comes from being invisible but seeing everything. Watching, not doing. Seeking safety in not being seen. It's a habit you can fall into, willing yourself into invisibility. And it doesn't serve you well in life. Believe me it doesn't. Not with people and loves and hearts and homes and work. But for the first few days with a new hawk, making yourself disappear is the greatest skill in the world.

I know how to do this, I thought. I am good, at least, at this. I know all the steps to this dance. First the hawk will feed on my gloved fist. Then as the days pass she'll grow tamer, partly because I am keeping her indoors and constantly in my presence, just as 15th-century falconers had done. Soon she will step to my fist for food, and later jump to it. We'll go for long walks to accustom her to cars and dogs and people. And then she'll fly to me when I call her, first on a line, and then free. And then.

And then. I'd told my friends to leave me alone. I'd filled the freezer with hawk food and unplugged the phone. Now I was a hermit with a hawk in a darkened room with books on three walls, a faded Afghan rug, and a sofa of stained yellow velvet. There was an old television, a mint-green vinyl cloth on the floor with the hawk's perch on it, and a pair of deep green curtains printed with flowers that shut out the world. The goal was to be motionless, the mind empty, the heart full of hope. But as the minutes stretched I had to move, just slightly: angle my foot to stop it sleeping; wrinkle my nose if it itched, and each time I did so I felt the hawk flinch in fear. But I also saw from the corner of my eye that she was pulling herself up incrementally from that sprung-to-fly crouch. Her stance was more upright. There was a little less fear in the room.

The old falconers called the manning of a hawk like this watching. It was a reassuringly familiar state of mind, meditative and careful and grave. For the first time in months my life had a purpose. I was waiting for the moment from which all else follows: the hawk lowering her head and beginning to feed. That was all I wanted. That was all there was. Waiting. Watching. Sitting with the hawk felt as if I were holding my breath for hours with no effort. No rise, no fall, just my heart beating and I could feel it, in my fingertips, that little clipping throb of blood that - because it was the only thing I could sense moving - didn't feel part of myself at all. As if it was another person's heart, or something else living inside me. Something with a flat, reptilian head, two heavy, down-dropped wings. Shadowed, thrush-streaked sides. Outside life went on, hot and distant. Shadows passed behind the curtains that were shoppers and students and bicycles and dogs. Vague, person-shaped shades making sounds like tin-can telephones, burred and incomprehensible. The slap, slap of walking feet. The hissing buzz of another bicycle. Long minutes passed. A piece of down dislodged from the hawk's covert-feathers drifted slowly to the carpet at my feet. A tiny star, barely any quill to it, just a muss of soft white plumes. I looked at it for a long time. I'd not looked at an object like this, with such searching attention with my mind elsewhere, since that reindeer moss, on the day the phone call came.

H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald (Jonathan Cape) is available from Telegraph Books for Pounds 13.49 plus

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For the first time in months my life had a purpose. I was waiting for the hawk to lower her head and feed. That was all I wanted

Credit: Helen Macdonald

Illustration

Caption: Right Mabel and Macdonald flight training; HELEN MACDONALD BARBARA MACDONALD. PETER CAIRNS/ NORTHSHOTS. HELEN MACDONALD. CHRISTINA MCLEISH; Below left Helen Macdonald with her father, Alisdair, 1975.; Alisdair, 1975. Right Mabel and Macdonald flight training; Left Macdonald introduces Mabel to her new surroundings on the first morning after her arrival in August 2007.; Helen Macdonald's goshawk, Mabel; HELEN MACDONALD; Far left A European goshawk in flight at Cairngorms National Park.

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