

JO GRAHAM



A  
BLACKENED  
MIRROR





## Praise for *A Blackened Mirror*

Graham (*Black Ships*) recalls the legacy of Taylor Caldwell and Mary Renault in this smart series launch, humanizing history from the perspective of deeply imagined, unironically presented characters. //...this slow-building introduction to complex intrigue will please readers looking for vivid historical fare with just a touch of magic.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Ancient Greek and Roman rituals lie like a palimpsest beneath the streets of a Rome resplendent in full Catholic regalia in this tale of ambition, desire, intrigue and enchantment. La Bella Farnese is a compelling heroine, and author Jo Graham casts her Renaissance spell with a deft hand.

— Jacqueline Carey, award-winning author  
of the *Kushiel Universe* series

An addictively rich, vivid and lushly written Renaissance fantasy // Jo Graham's writing style is beautiful, as always, and her storytelling is utterly compulsive from beginning to end.

— Stephanie Burgis, author of  
*Masks and Shadows* and *Snowspelled*

Once again, Graham proves herself a master of historical fantasy—this time, the Italian Renaissance, portrayed in all its glorious complexity. Giulia Farnese is the ideal protagonist, ardent, ambitious, sharp of wit and tongue, willing to risk everything. I devoured the book, and cannot wait for the rest of the series

— Melissa Scott, legendary pioneering SFF author  
and winner of multiple genre awards

Jo Graham returns to magical history with a fresh take on some of Rome's most notorious. Witty and loving, with sharp edges in all the right places.

— E.K. Johnston, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

Jo Graham skillfully brings life in Renaissance Rome and Italy to life... // It is a highly enjoyable read, perfect for those who want to get to grips with the skullduggery of life in Renaissance Rome and the Curia.

— Dr. Katharine Fellows, Oxford University, author of  
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the ecclesiastical career of Rodrigo Borgia”

Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* showcases the breadth of her writing talents... // Graham gives us a fresh and underappreciated perspective on the life and times of late 15th century Rome, with a strong heroine, rich worldbuilding and language; clever, refined and immersibly readable.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

Vivid characters, especially the charming and indomitable young Giulia Farnese herself, bring to life a story of conspiracy, intrigue, and Renaissance magic—Jo Graham's *A Blackened Mirror* is a wonderful adventure.

— K.V. Johansen, author of the  
*Gods of the Caravan Road* epic fantasy series



**Also by Jo Graham (selected works):**

*Black Ships*

*Stealing Fire*

*The Order of the Air* (series, Melissa Scott co-author)

*The Calpurnian Wars:*

*Sounding Dark*

*Warlady*

# A BLACKENED MIRROR

Being the First Part of  
the Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl

Jo Graham



Candlemark & Gleam

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For Janet Frederick Rhodes,  
teacher, mentor and friend,  
because this is the book she always wanted me to write.

Facilis descensus Averno;  
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis;  
sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,  
hoc opus, hic labor est. — Virgil

.



## Chapter One

*Montalto, Italy, 1489*

**S**o you will not believe me blameless in all that befell me, it began with something forbidden. My grandmother had told me where the old tombs were, across the little Fiora River that made its way to the sea less than two miglia away. The tombs, she said, were older than the Romans, remnants of the people who came before. They had been places of old pagan magic. They might even lead to the underworld itself. If a maiden dared to go into them and ask, she might see a vision of her future husband. Or she might never return.

I suspect, now, that these were the sort of cautionary tales that adults tell to daring young girls so that they will not climb around in crumbling ruins; but of course as a child I believed it and went nowhere near the place. If the summer sickness had not come, if my father had not died, if my grandmother had not died, if my baby brother not quite two years old had not died, perhaps I would have forgotten all about it until I was old enough to tell my own children to leave the ruins alone. But those things happened. The summer sickness came and tore us apart.

The marshes near the sea were known for pestilence. Perhaps that is why the Romans built an aqueduct that brought fresh water from inland to us, thinking the water here bad. Even so, from

time to time the sickness came. I washed mountains of stained linens for my brothers, for I had it in the beginning and they later. I laid my youngest brother out for the grave myself, washing his little body and dressing him in a white gown. My mother was too feverish to get out of bed, and my tears fell on him as I fastened the cap over his curls and I prayed that I would not bury her and the child unborn, too. I saw our old steward to his grave. I saw the priest to his grave after. I tried not to think of my father's and my grandmother's bodies there in the dark. I say these things so you will know that the underworld held no terrors for me. I was well acquainted with death.

My mother lived, and so did I. My brothers Bartolomeo and Angelo lived. My oldest brother, Alessandro, was away at school and did not contract it. My mother's survival was a wonder, for she gave birth to my sister, Girolama, not seven weeks later. We were what was left. The town had been decimated, too, not just those who lived in the rather shabby and small keep in the center of town that passed for a castle.

And yet we went on. I fed Girolama on goat's milk because my mother had none. Alessandro came home from the university and took care of us all. He was meant to be a priest and Bartolomeo the heir, and he saw Bartolomeo confirmed in his rank as Lord of Montalto as soon as my little brother could walk enough to stand before people. Summer ended. Cooler weather came. The sickness had passed through like a flame, leaving scorched ground behind but burning on toward the horizon. We went on, and if our winter nights were full of tears, there was too much to do during the day to let them flow.

How should I do so many things with my own hands? Our name is an old one, but nothing to the great families. Once we were distinguished, but by the time I was born all our holdings had shrunk to the little castle at Montalto, two miglia from the sea on a hill above the river and the marshes, set amid farmland. My father

had been a notable soldier in his youth, condottiero and master of men, but he stood not so far above that he did not see to the care of his own horses, to the state of his own olive groves, or to the health of our own cattle. We worked. When I sat by the fire and sewed at night, it was not fine embroidery but clothing for my brothers.

Alessandro and I leaned on one another, and somehow we managed. We were two of a kind, people said, alike as twins though he was the elder, tall and dark haired and clever and beautiful. He stayed a year, all his studies deferred, and I wondered if he would lose out on them entirely. But when the harvest came in the next year there was enough for him to go back to Pisa and finish school. I envied him. He set off north riding on the box of a merchant's wagon, his trunk in the bed behind him, and I wished I could go with him.

Of course not. For me it was another day. I would mend and direct the scullery maid and chase my brothers around and around and change Girolama's clouts and so on until I fell into bed after Compline to begin it all again at dawn. This would be my life unless I married a man with more money. It was, I thought, a doubtful proposition. My dowry was small. Now I had no father to arrange a good match, and Alessandro knew no one except university students and priests. My mother had no time or energy to see to it, and besides she needed me here with her. It might be that I would stay ten years or more, until Bartolomeo was grown and married, my youth fled, my maidenhood withered on the vine. I might stay a maiden aunt in his household, tending my nieces and nephews, changing their clouts and laying their bodies out for the funeral if they died, never seeing more than five miglia from home.

And yet the road that ran past our walls was the Via Aurelia. North, it went to the university at Pisa, but south it cut straight as the old Romans had built it, a little more than sixty miglia to the walls of Rome. There was the center of the world. There was the center of Christendom. There were palaces and princes and pope,

all the wonders of the world. And here was I, sixty miglia away in what might as well be another country across the great seas. Each day we saw merchants and pilgrims, prelates and nobles, passing our doors. There was good money to be made in tavern keeping, for all must lodge and eat, and only the noblest could beg our hospitality in the castle. Which meant there were always more than we could afford, and while one might charge mendicant priests for lodging, one could not charge great nobles. One had to behave as though serving roast goose and fine wine was but a trifle.

By the time winter was waning, by the eve of Ash Wednesday, I was reckless with despair. That was why I tried the tombs.

I slipped out just after dinner carrying a basket with leftover bread and a pomegranate, from those left in the storage bins in the cellar. The night was fine and cool, the stars bright, a breeze bringing a hint of salt from the sea. I pulled my cloak over my hair and made my way rapidly through town, looking like someone in a hurry to get home. If anyone saw my face they would recognize me, of course, but hopefully no one would. The water whispered around the deep-sunk pillars of the bridge that carried the Via Aurelia over the river.

On the other side I turned off the road to the right, climbing up the little hills that overlooked the river. My father had always said it was an ideal place for a fortification. Perhaps that's what it had been long ago. Perhaps once that had been the old town and our Montalto the new town, but whatever conquerors or scourges had swept through in two thousand years, the old town was long deserted. Its houses were gone but its tombs cut deep into the hills.

The footing was treacherous. The sun was down now, only lingering twilight, and I made my way cautiously among the tumbled stones, careful of my lantern, the candlelight glowing through the pierced metal. There was the entrance, a dark hole a little more than my height, an open mouth that went into the hill.

I took a deep breath, pushing the hood of my cloak back. This

was the moment of decision. Even small magics, like trying to see your future husband's face, were forbidden. I should have to confess it and do the penance, but that was less worrying than what might be inside. Was it truly the entrance to the underworld?

*Aren't all tombs*, I thought, as though something had whispered it behind me. *All graves are death's doorway.*

And so I plunged into the dark. My lamp made a little pool of light around me. It cannot have been far. The hill was not large, and yet it seemed to me that I walked a long time. There were pillars with flaking paint, carved figures limned in colors still bright, men with shields and swords battling lions. There were stone sarcophagi but any bodies which had lain in them were long gone. If this tomb had held treasure, it had been stolen long ago. The treasure which remained was on the walls.

Down, and down again. One gallery after another opened ahead, until I came to the heart of it and stopped in awe. Life-size, a couple stared back at me. They shared a couch, he leaning on one elbow, she sitting beside him facing forward with his arm around her. She wore a bridal garland on her head, a bunch of lilies in her hand, her saffron gown falling in graceful folds. Some water had gotten in, making a pool in front of them no deeper than my hand. The light reflected off its surface, as did they. In his hand he held a pomegranate.

I knew them. I knew the story. I had shared Alessandro's tutor until he went away to school, and of course he had the classics. "Proserpina," I said, "Queen of the Underworld, I am sorry to disturb your rest."

The echoes ran round galleries and columns. "...rest...rest... rest."

I laid the bread and the pomegranate carefully on the ground before them, against the wall where they would not be in the water. "My name is Giulia Farnese," I said. "I am a maiden of the town above. I have come to ask you to show me my husband. I need..."

I stopped, my voice breaking. "...I need a good husband if I am ever to leave here."

Her painted eyes watched me. He did not look at me. His eyes were only for her, forever admiring his bride. And yet it seemed that her eyes held compassion. It was a trick of the light, surely, the candle flame flickering through the piercings of the lamp. So many months, and no person to share it with since Alessandro left. I could not burden my mother further. She had so much to do and was sunk in grief, losing husband and mother-in-law and child at the same time. How could I ask her for anything?

"Proserpina, Persephone, Lady of the Dead," I said. "I need your help." I poured it out to her, every sorrow and pain that tore my heart, and then every hope and dream. A handsome husband who would take me to Rome or some other great city. Learning, art, beauty, pleasure, books and plays and a man who adored me. Beautiful children to grow up healthy and clever, clients and servants to depend on me as they had my father at Montalto, rulership and glamor and power and love. Most of all, love. I ached for love. I yearned for love like a young bird for the sky. Most of all I feared the cage, the cloister, the prison of remaining a maiden aunt. And I would die for love, to be wanted and precious, treasured and listened to, courted like a great lady and kissed like my lips held absolution.

At last I stopped. Tears were running down my face. "Please, Proserpina. Please show me my husband's face so that I can find him." I looked into the pool, or rather at the reflections on the surface of the water.

All I saw was the candlelight. I stared at it, willing it to change. It shifted, wavered. *Streaming torches, torches in the darkness. A procession through a great city. A swirl of scarlet, a bull lying bleeding on the pavement, a sword of fine Toledo steel. A garden in the sun, a fly crawling on the skin of a purpling fig....*

"No," I said. "My husband's face. The face of my husband



who will love me!" I bent my will to it. "Show me!"

*A silver tissue mask in the shape of the moon, a cradle surmounted by white lace curtains, a fireplace and beaded slippers, gold and white....*

"My husband's face!" Images swam, but there was no man's face. *A hand with a ring with a great ruby, a sword, a pack of playing cards dashed from a table....*

"Am I to have no husband then?" I demanded, my voice thick with tears. "Then grant me anything but the cloister! Anything!"

*Go now. I heard it like a whisper. Go now. Even now your time comes.*

I turned and ran from that place, half-blind with tears. The lantern shook, the light flashing over pillars and painted walls, until at last I emerged with the candle guttering onto the dark hillside. I stopped, breathing hard.

There were torches on the road. A great party of riders were approaching the bridge at a walk, outriders carrying torches before them. There must be twenty armed men with no wagons behind. The flickering light illuminated their colors, red and white.

I stood stunned for a moment. A great lord and his party. At this time of night they would surely stop in Montalto. We would need to give them hospitality. Mother would be looking for me, needing me to get rooms ready for the illustrious among them.

I blew out the candle and ran. I could not get to Montalto ahead of them, but I must not be too far behind. Mother would be frantic if I could not be found. Along the broken hillside and across the bridge I pelted. They were in the town ahead of me, but I caught up with them in the square before our gates, men and horses milling around while my mother made a speech of welcome from the steps, a yellow gown thrown on over her cotta and laced quickly in the front. I caught the end of it as I slipped up, trying to look as though I had just come outside as well. "...we bid you welcome to Montalto," she said. "My Lord, we will prepare a meal if you would enjoy it."

The leader was a big man on a white horse, with dark red velvet beneath his steel breastplate. "There's no need for such fuss, Madonna. A plain repast will do. We have been on the road all day and have far to go tomorrow. If we may eat and seek our beds, that is best for soldiers such as we."

"Of course," my mother said, trying not to sound relieved that a banquet would not be expected. Her eyes fell on me. "My daughter, Giulia, will show you to the best guest chamber so that you may refresh yourself. Pray, consider it our honor to welcome you as though this were your home."

That was laying it on rather thick, I thought. He must be someone extremely important. Red and white, the Orsini colors. He glanced at me, then gestured to his squire. "Take my things where the lady says. I will be up in a few minutes."

"This way," I said courteously, hoping that the maidservants had at least gone ahead to light a fire. The squire burdened himself with his lord's luggage, and I led him in and up by the broader stair. The castle had not been built all of a piece to a design, but had rather had bits put on over the years wherever it suited someone, and nothing made any architectural sense whatsoever. Finding two matching windows was a feat. We went around a corner and I opened the door. The room was chilly, but at least the fire had already been lit. "I hope this will suit your lord," I said.

"Very nicely," the squire said. He was younger than I, with a broad, homely face.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "But I arrived late outside. Who is your lord?"

He looked at me like I was inordinately stupid. "Virginio Orsini, Lord of Bracciano," he said. "Gonfaloniere of the Papal Armies."

"Yes. Of course." I felt myself blushing. The general in command of all the Pope's forces, a lord and great landowner, head of the powerful Orsini family—and I had asked who he was!

My next thought was to wonder if he had any sons. Of course he had sons. But certainly he would not consider me for any of them with so poor a dowry and no connections. Perhaps the squire was not promised? Surely the gonfaloniere's squire was well born. I favored the squire with what I hoped was a stunning smile. "If there is anything you need?"

"Not that I know of, thank you," he said. He did look gratifyingly stunned. "I'll go down and get the rest of My Lord's gear."

"Of course," I said, with what I hoped was a modest and curious glance. Or maybe I just looked nearsighted. I heard him clomping down the stair. I looked around the room to see what else was missing. The bed was made neatly. Was there water for washing in the pitcher? He would want to wash his face and hands after the road. I went over to the basin on its brass stand.

A mirror hung above it on the wall, a small one but nicely framed, so that one could see one's face while washing. There was no water in the pitcher. I would have to have it sent up warmed from the kitchen. I looked up. My reflection caught my eye. No, not my reflection. She looked back at me as she had on the wall, hair like ruddy gold and a saffron dress, but not painted and static. She smiled, holding out something in her hand.

"What is it?" I said. Was she trying to tell me that the opportunity I had wished for was here? The squire? One of the other men? Her smile broadened. She opened her hand. "I don't understand," I whispered.

"Don't understand what?" A rough hand closed on my shoulder.

I started, looking up into the face of Virginio Orsini, lord of Bracciano. "My Lord!" I managed.

His hand held me tight. "What were you doing?"

"Seeing if there was water in the pitcher, My Lord."

His eyes were piercing. "You were speaking to the mirror."

“You mistake me, My Lord,” I said. His hand closed tighter. Surely he was bruising me. He had heard. I could not pretend. “I thought I saw something there,” I said quietly.

His chin lifted. “You see things in mirrors.”

“No. Yes,” I stammered. “Sometimes. Nothing important.”

“And what do you do to make this possible?” Bracciano demanded.

“Nothing,” I said. “I do nothing, My Lord. Sometimes I see something of no importance. Just a glance. It is nothing.”

“What did you see now?” He did not release me.

“A lady in yellow,” I said. “That is all. She did not speak.” He was beginning to frighten me. “Please, My Lord.”

“A lady in yellow.” His expression was appraising. “And what else do you see?”

I cast about for harmless things I had seen. “That my mother will call me just before she does. That we will have visitors and need fodder for their horses. Nothing grave or great, My Lord Bracciano.”

“Nothing grave or great indeed,” he said. He let go of my arm, smoothing my ruffled sleeve. “And you are the young lord’s sister?”

“Giulia Farnese, My Lord,” I said with a curtsy. “Bartolomeo is my brother.” I took a step back. “Shall I send warm water up so you may refresh yourself?”

“Yes, thank you.” He turned away, taking his gauntlets off and dismissing me as thoroughly as a servant. I backed out and closed the door, then took flight to the kitchen. There was something about him I did not like. I would send a maid up with the water and keep clear of him, easy enough in the bustle.



It proved to be simple indeed. Bracciano took his meal in the guest room and retired. He and his men rode shortly after dawn,

south toward Rome. I did not speak to him and only saw him when he was mounted to leave. *Well enough*, I thought. Whatever opportunity the squire might have offered paled compared to the unpleasantness of the master. We were well rid of them. By the time the sun rose above the battlements, they were gone. I went on with my work and thought nothing more of it.

For three weeks. I had been chasing my brother Angelo out of the henhouse when a maid came running to tell me that my mother wanted me. Dusting my hands off on my apron, I went in to find her in the room she had shared with my father, their big, curtained bed taking up half the room, a table and chairs by the fire. The table was now covered in papers. She preferred to do the business of the family in here rather than in my father's study. Now she had a letter in hand and looked at me incredulously. "Giulia, what do you know of this?"

"Of what?" I asked.

"This," she said and held the letter out to me.

It took me three times through for it to register. "This is an offer of marriage," I said. "For me to marry a gentleman named Orsino Orsini, cousin of the gonfaloniere. It says that he is a year my senior, of the highest blood and impeccable character. An Orsini."

"Do you know this man? Was he here with Bracciano?" my mother demanded.

"Not that I know of?" I was utterly astonished. "I spoke only a few words with Bracciano, and none concerned marriage or this kinsman or anything!" I looked at the letter again. "Do they know the size of my dowry?"

"Certainly they must," my mother said. "It is no secret that we are not wealthy. Giulia, I hardly know what to say!"

"We must write to Alessandro and ask him to come," I said. "He will know what to do." And yet I thrilled at the thought. A great marriage, a great house, an unknown man who might have seen me and fallen in love though I was unwitting, or else I had

impressed his kinsman so much that I seemed a match for this Orsino. My life was beginning.



Alessandro arrived a week later. He perused the letter at length, then sighed and looked at our mother. “It seems a legitimate offer,” he said. “Properly written and sealed, signed in Bracciano’s own hand.”

“And the bridegroom?” I asked.

“He has no need to sign if the head of his family does it for him,” Alessandro said. “Besides, he is only a year older than you, apparently.” He leaned back in the chair which had been our father’s. “I asked at the university when I got your letter. He hasn’t been at school in Pisa, but I do have a friend from Rome who confirmed that he is a young man of the Orsini, though not of the main branch of the family. His family has a fine palazzo near the Vatican. His father died recently and Orsino is the heir.”

“The heir?” Mother said disbelievingly. “The heir of what?”

“The palazzo, certainly.” Alessandro shook his head. “Giulia, your beauty must have impressed Bracciano.”

“Great lords do not marry their kinsmen to girls with no lands and little dowry because they are pretty,” my mother said tartly. “There’s something here.”

“Montalto,” I said.

“You are not the heir and you have three brothers ahead of you,” Mother said.

“But he is the gonfaloniere,” I said. “And Montalto overlooks the Via Aurelia and the northern trade route.”

Alessandro nodded. “Useful. It’s a strong point worth securing. Your marriage would tie us to the Orsini.”

“Securing against whom?” I asked.

“The Colonna. Or maybe the Sforza.” Alessandro frowned.

“The great families of Rome are always at war with one another. They war over lands and over the papacy itself. All of them have family members in the College of Cardinals, but the Orsini have the gonfaloniere as well, at least at the moment. Virginio Orsini holds his commission from the pope himself, but he serves at the pope’s pleasure. Another pope might not keep him. And right now the Orsini have all but exiled the Colonna. Having a grip on the Via Aurelia could be useful to them, especially if they had to pressure the pope into keeping Bracciano on if he didn’t want to.”

I nodded slowly. “And Bartolomeo would never hold Montalto against my husband or his kin.”

“That makes sense,” my mother said. “Marry a young kinsman to you, and Bracciano has something he wants with no trouble.”

“If that’s the reason,” I said, “then I think we should take this offer.”

Mother looked at me like I was insane. “Of course we have to take it,” she said. “Do you think we can go around rejecting the Orsini? But it is good to know why.”

“Yes,” I said. Being married for my brother’s lands was not romantic, but perhaps my husband would be. He was young and rich. Surely this marriage was not of his choosing either. If I could win him over, be a good wife to him, we might have a very happy life. *Proserpina*, I thought, *I will thank you all my days*. And yet, remembering her smile, I was more uneasy than I might have been.

Coming soon:  
the second book of the *Memoirs of the Borgia Sibyl*

## THE BORGIA DOVE

Jo Graham

### **Renaissance Woman**

1492: Giulia Farnese is the mistress of the powerful Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia. Educated, brave and ambitious, Giulia revels in the art and ideas of the Renaissance and in her newfound influence as the consort of one of the leaders of the humanist movement within the Vatican. The gifts of prophecy and magic that made her a weapon against Rodrigo but allowed her to save his life are gone with her virginity—or so she thinks.

Now the pope is dying, plunging Rome into lawless chaos until a new pope can be elected. The most likely candidates want to purge Rome of heresy, endangering both Giulia's friends and the fragile Renaissance itself. A dark horse candidate who most people underestimate to their peril, Rodrigo is ruthless and clever; but to seize the ultimate prize of the papacy, he'll need all the help he can get. He relies on Giulia to be his eyes and ears in the world of



powerful women and to negotiate on his behalf when the voting cardinals are locked in seclusion.

Drawn into a high-stakes game of bribery and bargains, Giulia discovers all too soon that losing means paying a deadly price. Her only hope of protecting those she cares about from Rodrigo's enemies lies in mastering the magical gifts she once thought lost. For Giulia to claim the divine power of a pagan priestess may be the ultimate heresy—or a way to win her lover the papal crown.



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Most especially, I would like to thank Janet Frederick Rhodes, who died years before I wrote this, but who always knew I could when she generously and kindly edited hundreds of pages of a 15th century epic written by a sixteen-year-old who loved Virgil, Machiavelli, Richard III, and Neoplatonists. Rhodesie, I wish you could see what came of it!



## About the Author

Jo Graham is the author of twenty-seven books and three online games. Best known for her historical fantasy novels *Black Ships* and *Stealing Fire*, and her tie-in novels for MGM's popular *Stargate: Atlantis* and *Stargate: SG-1* series, she has been a Locus Award finalist, an Amazon Top Choice, a Spectrum Award finalist, a Manly Wade Wellman Award finalist, a Romantic Times Top Pick in historical fiction and a Lambda Literary Award and Rainbow Award nominee for bisexual fiction. With Melissa Scott, she is the author of five books in the *Order of the Air* series, a historical fantasy series set in the 1920s and 30s. She is also the author of three pagan spirituality books. She lives in North Carolina with her partner and is the mother of two daughters.



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