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The Case of the Misnamed Virgin

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The Case of the Misnamed Virgin

...se fundó después...el pueblo de Misamis, situándolo en la boca de la ensenada de Pangil, guarida inagotable de piratas, por cuya razón se le hizo cabecera y residencia del corregidor que suele ser un militar.

—Vicente Barrantes, *Guerras piráticas de Filipinas* (1878).

La Junta de guerra resolvió establecer un presidio en Misamis, cuya dirección confió el gobernador al padre Ducos.

—José Montero y Vidal, *Historia de la piratería* (1888).

I

In the evening of 8 December 1954, a huge multitude—estimated at one million—was gathered at the Luneta to attend the closing ceremonies of the National Marian Congress. Earlier that afternoon, the crowds had assembled at various points between Malate and the Pasay border. They had then converged upon Dewey Boulevard and had marched between solid walls of spectators into the Luneta, where other hundreds of thousands were already waiting. As night fell the Luneta was ablaze with a million candles. The crowd that night was as large as the immense throng that had gathered in that same spot seventeen years before, in February 1937, to celebrate the closing of the XXXIII International Eucharistic Congress.

On that earlier occasion (in 1937) the Pope had sent as his *Legatus a latere* an American Cardinal, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, who, earlier in this century, had served as Bishop of Vigan. In 1954, the Pope sent as Legate a Spanish Cardinal, whose archbishopric in Santiago de Compostela had been a center of pilgrimage for centuries. It is possible that neither the American nor the Spanish Cardinal had ever seen a multitude as immense as those which they saw at the Luneta. Pilgrims may have gathered at Compostela by the tens of thousands; but here were a million people, gathered from almost every town and province in the Philippines.

In 1954 the procession held earlier along the boulevard that skirts Manila Bay was as colorful as its spectacular sunsets

Never had there been such an assembly of famous statues of the Virgin Mary, brought together from their various shrines throughout the country. There was Our Lady of Piat from the Cagayan Valley in northern Luzon; Our Lady of Manaoag from Pangasinan; Our Lady of Caysasay from Batangas; Our Lady of Peñafrancia from the Bicol Peninsula. From Antipolo in the hills above the Marikina Valley came the famous image that in past centuries had been carried in the Spanish galleons back and forth across the Pacific. The sailors called her *Nuestra Señora de la Paz y Buen Viaje*: Our Lady of Peace and a Good Voyage.

Some of the statues came from Manila itself: from Malate came the statue with a quaint title: "Our Lady of Remedies"; from Ermita came another: "Nuestra Señora de Guía": Our Lady of Guidance. From the Dominican church came the celebrated statue of Our Lady of the Rosary, which is carried in October of each year in the colorful procession called "La Naval", commemorating an ancient victory of the Spaniards over the Dutch in a battle off the coast of Luzon.

The occasion of this unusual celebration was the Marian Congress, convoked as a fitting climax for the Marian Year. The year 1954 was the hundredth anniversary of a great event: the promulgation of the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* by which Pope Pius IX had put an end to the prolonged controversy over the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This much misunderstood doctrine (often confused with the Virgin Birth or with some other tenet) simply means that the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ, had never been under the stain of original sin. Put in positive terms, this means that her soul had always been in the state of grace, not only from her birth but from the first moment that that soul began to exist in her mother's womb. In other words, she was conceived immaculate. Some able theologians had denied this doctrine; others (led by the Franciscans and the Jesuits) had affirmed it. The controversy had lasted for centuries and at certain periods had become acrimonious. At the height of the controversy, some of the Jesuit students in Rome (among them the Belgian Scholastic, St. John Berchmans) had made a vow, signed in their own blood, to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the controversy had simmered down, and (with the exception of a few theologians) a consensus had been achieved. On 8 December 1845, Pope Pius IX had put a seal to that consensus by declaring that the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception was in fact part of revealed truth and therefore contained in the Deposit of Faith which had been handed down through the ages from the Apostles.

Pius IX's proclamation was as great an event and as great a tribute to Our Lady as was the proclamation by the Council of

Ephesus, many centuries earlier, that Mary, Mother of Jesus, was *Theotokos*: "Mother of God." Hence the centenary celebrations: Pope Pius XII proclaimed the year 1954 as a special Marian Year.

Each country of course celebrated the Marian Year in its own way. In the Philippines it was celebrated the Filipino way: by bringing to Manila and carrying in procession the celebrated images in which the Filipino people venerated the Mother of God.

The statues carried in procession that evening were named in honor of Mary under one or other of her many titles. But one of the statues was misnamed. It was a wooden image, almost four feet tall, from Misamis in northern Mindanao.

II

The statue was ordinarily kept in the Misamis Cathedral (at that time a temporary edifice) whence it had been escorted by a long motorcade to the airport in Labo, some seven kilometers away. There, with a band playing and a large crowd in attendance, the statue had been taken down from the vehicle and crated and then brought into the plane—a DC-3 that took it on the first leg of the journey to Cagayan de Oro. There, it was transferred to a Convair which took it to Manila. Appointed by the Bishop to escort the statue during its long journey by air to Manila was an old lady (this writer's mother) accompanied by one of her daughters.

In Manila the plane was met by a reception committee composed of residents of the two provinces of Misamis Occidental and Lanao. The lay people were headed by Mrs. Josefa Capistrano, the clergy by Bishop Patrick Cronin whose jurisdiction comprised those two provinces. After appropriate ceremonies at the airport, the statue was brought to the parish church of Singalong where it was placed above one of the altars, awaiting the great day of the Marian procession. The Singalong church (administered by Basque Capuchins) was chosen because it was near the Columban Fathers' residence where Bishop Cronin was staying. After the Congress the statue was brought back to Misamis, where it was received with great honor and restored to her pedestal in the Misamis church.

The statue had been brought to Manila several days ahead of the Marian Congress because the Bishop intended to have it cleaned and repainted. The last time it had been cleaned was in the early 1930's, at which time the robes (gown and mantle), which had originally been in gay shades of rose, were repainted a dull brown. This had been done because some of the more devout women in the parish could not understand why a statue, called "Our Lady of Carmel", should wear such bright rose-colored robes.

Dressed in those bright robes, (represented in the baroque manner as being blown violently by the wind) the statue had conveyed an impression of joy and vitality. The dull brown which had replaced those original colors had changed that impression. It was as if something vital and electric had become inert, and something gay had become sombre.

The Bishop and the parish priests, who had arrived in Misamis in the late 1930's, several years after the statue had been repainted, had never seen the statue in its original colors. But they must have noticed that the sombre colors of the statue's robes did not quite suit the statue's general posture. The smile on Our Lady's beautiful face, the vigorous flapping of her robes in the imaginary wind, the the firmness with which she seemed to step on the serpent and on the crescent moon, and the fact that she was floating on a cloud in which three angels were soaring—all these things seemed to speak of joy and buoyancy and vitality—and even of militancy; they did not go with the sombre shade of brown in which—allegedly as "Our Lady of Carmel"—she was now dressed.

There were therefore some in the parish who felt that the statue's robes should be given a new coat of paint. Being a statue of "Carmel", the robes (they thought) had of course to remain brown: but why not a lighter, more glossy shade of brown?

Accordingly, on the morrow of its arrival in Manila, the statue was brought to the well-known sculpting firm of Maximo Vicente. But those sculptors, long experienced in religious statuary, were puzzled.

"What did you say this statue was?" they asked.

"Our Lady of Carmel," was the reply.

"But it can't be Our Lady of Carmel," they said.

True enough, it had none of the iconographic symbols of Carmel. In any statue of Our Lady of Carmel, the Virgin is usually represented carrying the Child Jesus in one arm and holding out a scapular with her other hand. She also wears a brown scapular herself. But in the Misamis image, the Virgin is alone, without the Child; she does not carry a scapular or a rosary; her hands are joined at her breast; her robes are swirling in the wind; above her head is a crown; under her feet are the moon and the serpent and angels floating in a cloud. The iconographic symbols of the Misamis statue are in fact those of the Immaculate Conception. Which is not surprising, for the Immaculate Conception is the Patron of Misamis, given to that town by the Jesuits when the town was founded in the 1750's.



This wooden statue of "Nuestra Señora del Triunfo" was once in the fort, now in the Misamis Cathedral. The robes, originally painted in gay colors, have been repainted brown.



Wooden statue of "Nuestra Señora del Triunfo". Despite the popular appellation ("Our Lady of Carmel") the iconographic symbols are those of the Immaculate Conception.

III

The statue which had thus been brought to Manila was the wooden (and larger) replica of an image set on the outside wall of the stone fort in Misamis, above the South Gate (now walled-up) facing the harbor. As can be seen from the photographs reproduced in these pages, both the image above the South Gate and the wooden statue are identical in their iconographic symbols. In both, the Virgin is represented as standing, her tunic and mantle swirling in the strong breeze, her hands joined together at her breast in an attitude of prayer. In both, she is standing on a cloud in which three cherubs with outstretched wings are flying. A crescent moon is under her feet. And she is stepping on a serpent.

There are of course artistic differences between the two statues. One humorous touch is the position of the serpent's head. In the wall-image the serpent's head is inconspicuously peering from behind the outstretched wing of one of the angels. In the wooden statue, the serpent is more obtrusive: his body is coiled about the cloud, and his large head appears above that of one of the angels.

Naturally, in a wall-image many things can be put within the frame which can not be done in a wooden statue. In the wall-image, for instance, a pair of cherubim are flying on either side of Our Lady, on a level with her head. And above her is the Holy Spirit, brooding over her in the form of a Dove. The beholder is at once reminded of many lines. For instance, from St. Luke: "The Holy Ghost shall overshadow thee." Or (for the modern visitor) the lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods
with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

From an examination of both photographs, it is obvious that both the wall-image and the wooden statue represent the identical idea: their iconographic symbols are those of the Immaculate Conception. Both, however, were known (until a few decades ago) by a unique title: *Nuestra Señora del Triunfo*: a title which may be rendered, "Our Lady of the Triumph".

Actually, the wall-image over the South Gate of the fort that appears in our photograph is a recent (and not very artistic) copy of the original. That original image had remained on the wall, an object of pilgrimage and veneration, for two centuries. Then, in the late 1950's, some crazed fanatic had gone up the ladder and with a bolo had hacked the image to pieces. The parish priest had managed to collect the pieces and they are now kept in the parish house of the Misamis Cathedral. In its stead, a plaster imitation has been set up by some unknown devotee, whose piety and devotion must make up for any artistic inadequacies.

The wooden statue, on the other hand, is certainly two centuries old. It is made of hard wood. The figure of Our Lady is 35 inches from head to toe. The cloud under her feet and the crown on her head give her an additional 12 inches, so that the entire statue is one inch short of four feet.

Where had this statue come from? Had it been imported from Spain or Mexico? Had it been made in Manila by Filipino or Chinese sculptors? Had it been made in Cebu or in Manila? Perhaps some day some historian might dig up the answers to these questions. All that can be affirmed at the moment is that the statue—like the image on the wall of the fort—must have been brought to Misamis sometime in the thirteen-year period between the building of the fort in 1755 and the departure of the Jesuits in 1768.

IV

How both statues came to be called by the name "Triunfo", and how they both came to be misnamed "Our Lady of Carmel" is a story that must go back to the Muslim wars of 1754. In that year (as we have mentioned in greater detail elsewhere)¹ Governor Obando sent two fleets to Mindanao to try to stem the tide of Muslim piracy. One fleet was sent to Zamboanga to cope with the pirates from the South. The other was sent to Iligan, to deal with the pirates of northern Mindanao. This northern fleet had left Manila in January, was refitted and reenforced in Cebu, and had arrived at Iligan in April: but it did not get into action until June, when its commander finally arrived in Iligan. This fatal delay of several months cost him his command, which was given instead to the Jesuit missionary in Iligan, Father Jose Ducos. Governor Arandia, Obando's successor, had confirmed this appointment, conferring upon the Jesuit the title of Captain General of the Armada of Iligan.

The armada of 1754 had a complement of some 700 men: 200 of them Spaniards and 500 Filipinos. The latter were mostly from Bohol, but there were also several boats manned by residents of Iligan and Initao. This naval squadron had the support of land forces, including several hundred Bukidnon warriors under their respective chieftains. The armada had originally included three major ships (galeras) and many smaller ones. But as its former commander upon leaving the fleet had sailed away in one of the major vessels, only two galeras were left behind to Father Ducos. One was the flagship "San Felipe", commanded by Don Lazaro de Elizavera, senior officer of the fleet. The other was the "Triunfo" under the command of Don Nicolas Afriano.

¹ "Father Ducos and the Moro Wars: 1752-1759", by M. A. Bernad, to be published in a forthcoming issue of this Quarterly.

In an effort to seal up the ordinary exits of the Moro pirates, the fleet was deployed in three places: four Boholano boats were assigned to guard the mouth of the Liangan River; the galera "San Phelipe", with the smaller boats from Iligan, guarded the mouth of the Linamon River near Iligan; the galera "Triunfo", with several smaller vessels, was stationed at Misamis to patrol the Bay of Pangil.

Although all these three divisions of the armada saw much action, it was the flotilla stationed at Misamis and headed by the "Triunfo" that had been engaged in the greatest number of combats which were fought with the fiercest intensity.

The report of their successes reached Manila on 27 January 1755. The following day a Solemn *Te Deum* was sung in the Manila Cathedral before the Blessed Sacrament exposed. The ceremony was attended by civil, military, and religious dignitaries, headed by the Governor General and the Archbishop of Manila.

After such signal success and such signal recognition, Father Ducos found little difficulty in getting the civil and military authorities to listen to his suggestions for the defence of northern Mindanao. And one of the principal points in his program was the construction of a stone fort at Misamis, to guard the entrance to Pangil Bay.

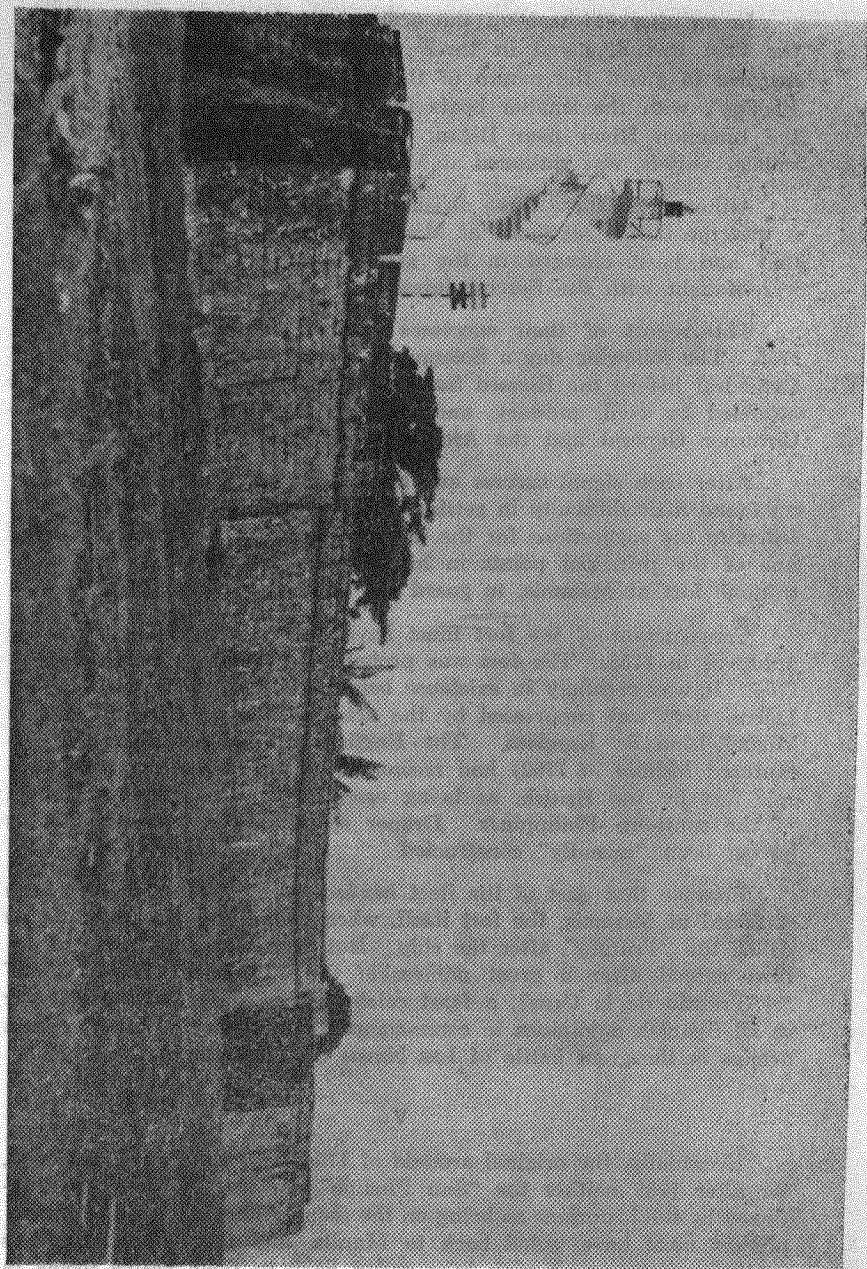
Construction of the fort must have begun immediately upon its approval in 1755. The fort was probably substantially completed by 1756. It was certainly in existence before 1759, at which time Father Ducos' fleet was suppressed by the acting Governor General, Bishop Miguel Lino de Espeleta. The Englishman William Draper (who captured Manila in 1762) had recommended the seizure of the Misamis fort by the British, as being essential to their gaining control of the southern Philippines. Draper spoke of the Misamis fort as having been "recently" constructed.

Because that part of the fleet headed by the "Triunfo" had been stationed at Misamis, the fort itself, when completed, also came to be called the "Triunfo", after the ship. But both ship and fort were in turn named after a great namesake: the "Triumph of the Cross" (el Triunfo de la Cruz), a feast celebrated on July 16 of each year in all Spanish dominions to commemorate the victory of the Christian armies in the great battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in the year 1212.

V

Eventually, the original armada of 1754 must have been dispersed, for after 1755 neither the "San Phelipe" nor the "Triunfo" is mentioned by the historians as being on the scene. They and their Spanish officers must have sailed back to Manila, and the Boholano sailors in their smaller craft may have sailed back to their native towns in

The stone fort ("cota") of Misamis built in 1755 and named after the ship "Triunfo". Shown in picture are the east wall and the north-east and south-east bastions.





Plaster replica of "Nuestra Señora del Triunfo" on outer south wall of the fort. The iconographic symbols are those of the Immaculate Conception.

Bohol. Or they may have settled down in the towns of northern Mindanao: which may help to explain how, even before the more recent migrations, some of the towns were largely Boholano in population.

But Father Ducos was not left long without an armada. A new one was organized and placed under his command. It consisted of two galeras (the "Santa Rosa" and the "San Ignacio") and twelve vintas. These were manned by citizens from Iligan and Dapitan, commanded by their respective maestres de campo: the men from Iligan under Pedro Tamparong, those from Dapitan under Tomas Cabiling. A set of regulations was drawn up for the conduct of the fleet. And the ships were stationed at Misamis as their headquarters.

Thus, under the shadow of the fort (the "Triunfo") and of the fleet, the town of Misamis grew and soon became the capital. The former Province or District of Iligan (comprising what are now the provinces of Lanao, Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Norte, with part also of Misamis Oriental) now became the Military District (Corregimiento) of Misamis, governed by a military governor (Corregidor) stationed there.

Both the town and the fort of Misamis needed a patron saint. Father Ducos gave them a Patroness to whom (like all Jesuits of his day) he himself must have been ardently devoted. In his day, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had not yet been proclaimed a dogma of the Faith. *Ineffabilis Deus* was still a hundred years away and there was still an air of battle within Catholic ranks. An air of battle was precisely what Father Ducos and his brave Christian warriors thrived in. Was it perhaps with a thrill of daring and defiance that they placed both town and fort under the patronage of Mary, invoked under her most controversial title of the Immaculate Conception?

In time, the image of the Immaculate Virgin was set up on the outside wall of the fort over the postern gate. The other image of the same Immaculate Virgin was set up above the main altar of the chapel within the fort, which for a time must have served as the parish church. There are many instances of such an arrangement. Even today in Cuyo and elsewhere in the Visayas the parish church is still situated within the walls of the fort. Because Our Lady of Misamis was the Immaculate Conception, her feast was kept on December 8th. And when a separate parish church was built outside the fort (about half a kilometer away), the patronal feast of the town continued to be celebrated on December 8th.

But because the fort itself was called the "Triunfo", and Our Lady within the fort was the Lady of the "Triunfo" a second feast

was celebrated in her honor: on July 16th, feast of the *Triunfo de la Santa Cruz*.

Thus, although parish and fort honored the identical Patroness, they honored her in two separate festivals: the parish on December 8th, the fort on July 16th.

This led to confusion a century later: for July 16 is also the day when the Church commemorates Our Lady of Carmel. As the decades passed, priests and people forgot about the Muslim Wars and the "Triunfo": and they began to think that what the people of Misamis were celebrating on July 16 was the feast of Carmel.

VI

What particularly aided this process of oblivion was the fact that the Jesuits had to leave Misamis: for in 1768 they were expelled from the Philippine Islands, as they had been expelled from all other territories subject to the Bourbon dynasty. When the Jesuits left, the Recoletos took over the mission of Mindanao, including that of Misamis, and they remained in charge of Misamis until 1919. A devotion to Our Lady of Carmel would be more familiar to them than to "Our Lady of the Triunfo". In any case, after the middle of the nineteenth century, the Virgin of the fort (or at least her wooden replica) was referred to in the parish records as "Nuestra Senora del Carmen".

Sometime between 1875 and 1884, when fray Jorge Carcabilla was parish priest, the wooden statue of the Virgin of the Triunfo (alias Carmel) was removed from the chapel in the fort to the parish Church. Two statues of the Virgin (both really depicting the Immaculate Conception) were now venerated within the parish church itself: over the main altar the Immaculate Conception; over a side altar, "Our Lady of Carmel". This latter was the one brought to Manila for the great procession of 8 December 1954. She was referred to as "Our Lady of Carmel". Our Lady of the Triunfo had (so to speak) changed her identity.

VII

But calling her "Our Lady of Carmel" did not make her so. There was still the obvious fact that she had none of the iconographic symbols associated with Carmel. The Patroness honored by the people of Misamis on December 8th and on July 16th was in fact one and the same Lady under one and the same title: the Immaculate Conception.

Two men made distinct efforts to call this fact to the attention of the educated, and to restore the title of "Our Lady of the Triunfo".

One was a Spanish Jesuit missionary. The other was a layman, head of the Catholic community at Misamis and at one time Governor of the Province.

The Jesuit was Father Gabriel Font. The Jesuits, exiled in 1768, had returned to the Islands in 1859 and to Misamis in 1919 after an absence of 160 years. But their return to Misamis was very tenuous at first. Suffering acutely from a shortage of men and being charged with the care of the entire island of Mindanao, they could not afford to provide a resident priest at Misamis. Instead they stationed an itinerant missionary at Iligan, who had to travel up and down the coast of Lanao and Misamis Occidental to take care of the numerous towns and barrios. The most indefatigable and the best loved of these itinerant missionaries (who served the entire coast single-handed for the best part of a decade) was Father Font. In his sermons at Misamis on July 16 (whenever Misamis was fortunate enough to have a priest on that day) he always referred to the feast as that of Our Lady of the Triunfo.

In this he was seconded by his friend and host (whenever Father Font was in Misamis), a lawyer who was well informed in local history. This was Anselmo Bernad, the present writer's father.

But such valiant attempts to restore an old tradition would succeed only with the educated few. It did not in fact succeed with the people in the hills and villages who came by the thousands on every 16th of July, to pray in the church and to pray at the old stone fort. They prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. What did it really matter by what title they called her—whether Carmel or Triunfo or the Immaculate Conception?

In the 1930's the American Jesuits took over the parishes of Misamis Occidental, and in the 1940's they were replaced by the Irish and American Columbans. Unaware of the change of names, they accepted the common designation of "Our Lady of Carmel".

In the history of religious iconography, this case is perhaps unique: a case of a misnamed Virgin.

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