

Hours passed before finally he hauled himself ashore and collapsed, half-dead, onto the sand. The fog had lifted, revealing a narrow beach hemmed in between two vast oceans—to the west, the wild Atlantic and, to the east, an unbroken sea of dunes that rose in undulating waves of buff and ochre and gold. Silence reigned. The hiss and thunder of the surf was punctuated only the cries of cormorants and the plaintive lamentations of gulls.

Believing that he'd overshot the settlement he'd glimpsed from the boat, Blacksburg trudged south.

Fatigue dogged him and acted on his brain like a psychedelic drug. Retinues of ghost crabs, fleet translucent carrion-eaters with eyes on stalks, seemed to scurry in his footprints with malevolent intent. Once he thought he glimpsed a spidery-limbed figure traversing the high dunes, but the image passed so quickly across his retina that it might have been anything, strands of kelp animated by the incessant wind or a small, swirling maelstrom of sand that his exhausted mind assigned a vaguely human form.

The hyena slinking toward him, though, was no trickery of vision. A sloping, muscular beast with furrowed lips and seething, tarry eyes, it angled languidly down the dune face, its brown and black fur hackled high, its hot gaze raw and lurid.

Blacksburg took in the clamping power of those formidable jaws, and dread threaded through him like razor wire.

He bent and scooped up a stone.

“Bugger off!” he shouted—or tried to shout—what emerged from his parched throat was a wretched, sandpapery croak, the sound a mummy entombed for thousands of years might make if resurrected.

The hyena edged closer. Blacksburg hurled the rock. It struck the hyena with a muted thunk, laying open a bloody gash on the tufted ear.

The hyena's lips curled back and it uttered a high pitched whooping sound so eerie and wild that the temperature on the windswept beach seemed to go ten degrees colder. He heard what sounded like a Range Rover trying to start on a low battery, but this

false rescue was only the guttural cough out of the spotted hyena's broad muzzle. With a final saw-toothed snarl, the pot-bellied creature—which was 70 kilos if it was 10—wheeled around and loped back into the dunes that had spawned it.

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Exhaustion had so blunted Blacksburg's senses so that he almost sleepwalked past the grey, wind-scoured facade of a two-story house whose empty window frames and doorway stared down from atop a dune like empty eye sockets above a toothless mouth. Climbing up to investigate, he found a gutted shell, the bare interior carpeted with serpentines of sand, roof beams collapsed inward to reveal a square of azure sky. Gannets nested in the eaves. On the floor, a black tarantula held court atop a shattered chandelier.

Spurred by a terrible intuition, he struggled up another dune until he could look down at the entire town—a pathetic row of derelict abodes, a sand-blasted gazebo where lovers might have lingered once, a church whose steeple had toppled off, the rusted carcass of a Citroen from some forgotten era.

The hoped for sanctuary was a ghost town. A graveyard of rubble and stones.

Stunned, despairing, he roamed amid the wreckage.

The wind shifted suddenly and he inhaled the mouth-watering aroma of cooking meat. The hot, heady aroma banged through his blood stream like heroin. Saliva flooded his mouth. Half-dead synapses danced.

Stumbling toward the scent, he crested another dune and looked down upon the beach to see a sinewy, dark-skinned old man using a stick to stir the enormous cast-iron potije that rested atop a fire. The old fellow wore frayed trousers, a yellow ball cap, and a short-sleeved pink shirt. His left hand did the stirring. The right one, flopping by his side, was lacking all its fingers.

Behind him, a girl in her late teens or early twenties was pulling a bottle of water from a canvas backpack on the ground. She uncapped the bottle and poured it into the potije. She wore an ankle-length tan skirt, battered high-tops, and a billowy red blouse.

A brown bandanna around her head held back a crown of wind-blown dreads. An old scar zigzagged like a lightning bolt between her upper lip and the corner of one eye.

With feigned heartiness, Blacksburg slid and trotted down the dune, crying out, “Uhala po.” It meant good afternoon in the Oshiwambo tongue, but judging from the old man’s reaction, it might as well have been a threat to lop off his remaining fingers. The old man’s eyes bulged and he let loose a shriek of mortal fear. The woman had considerably more sang-froid. She held her ground, but snatched up a sharpened stick.

“My name is Blacksburg,” he croaked, holding up his hands to show he meant no harm. “I need help.”

The old man commenced a frenzied jabbering. The woman chattered back, and an animated exchange took place, virtually none of which Blacksburg understood. Finally the old man fell silent, but he continued to appraise Blacksburg like a disgruntled wildebeest.

“Excuse my uncle,” the woman said, in meticulous, school book English. “You frightened him. He thought you were an evil spirit come to kill us.”

“No, just a poor lost wretch.” He gestured at the empty water bottle. “You wouldn’t have another of those, would you?”

The woman took another bottle of water from the backpack and handed it to Blacksburg, who gulped greedily before eyeing the potije. “Fine smelling stew there,” he said. “What is it, some kind of wild game, stock, chutney, maybe an oxtail or two?”

Using her stick, she speared a dripping slab of wild meat. Blacksburg fell upon it like a wolf. The meat was tough and stringy as a jackal’s hide, but, in his depleted state, he found it feastworthy.

Between mouthfuls, he gave a version of his plight, detailing the sinking of the Obimi and the loss of her captain, but speaking only vaguely of the one who had chartered the boat, his boss Horace DeGroot. The woman told him that her name was Aamu, that she and the old man were from an Owambo village to the east.

“We’ll take you there tomorrow. A tour bus stops by twice a week. You can get a ride to Windhoek.”

DeGroot’s largest diamond store was in Windhoek. Blacksburg had no intention of showing his face there.

“But what are you doing in a ghost town cooking up a feast,” he said to redirect the conversation. “Did you know that I was coming? What are you, witches?”

The girl snorted a bitter laugh. “If I were a witch, I’d turn myself into a cormorant and fly up to Algiers or Gibraltar. I’d never come back.”

Something in her vehemence intrigued Blacksbury, who was no stranger to restlessness and discontent. “Why do you stay?”

The bite in her voice was like that of a dust storm. “Do my uncle and I look rich to you? We live in a tiny village where the people raise cattle and goats. A good year means we get almost enough to eat. A bad year...”

Blacksbury saw no evidence of food shortage in the overflowing potije, but saw no need to point that out.

With greasy fingers, he gestured toward the forlorn remnants of the town. “This place, what is it? What *was* it?”

Aamu foraged deeper inside the backpack, bringing out a couple of Windhoek Lagers. “No ice,” she said. “You drink it warm?”

He grinned. “I’ll manage.”

“Come walk with me. I’ll tell you about the town.” She took off at a brisk pace, high-tops churning up small clouds of sand, hips fetchingly asway.

Walking was the last thing he wanted to do, but Blacksbury wiped his hands on his trousers and headed up the dune behind her. It was a star dune, one of those sandy forms created by wind blowing from all directions, and it had Blacksbury’s eye. Suddenly, with an agility and vigor that caught him by surprise, the old man lunged and seized his biceps in a fierce, one-handed grip, babbling wildly while pumping his mutilated hand.

“Nikishi!” he repeated urgently.

Blacksbury, a head taller and twenty kilos heavier, shook him off like a gnat.

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked, catching up to Aamu.

“He’s warning you about the evil spirits, the ones that take animal and human form. They like to call people by name to lure them out and kill them.” She rolled her eyes. “My uncle’s yampy. In our village, people laugh at him. Last week he grabbed a tourist

lady's iPod and stomped it in the dirt, because he thought that evil spirits called his name from the earbuds." She took a swig of Lager, grimaced. "Can't stand this stuff warm."

She took off abruptly again, climbing nimbly while Blacksburg labored to keep up. They navigated a surreal dunescape, where decaying buildings pillaged by time and the unceasing wind stood like remnants of a bombing. The larger buildings, the ones the desert hadn't yet reclaimed entirely, indicated a degree of bourgeois prosperity that must have, in its heyday, seemed incongruous, perched as the town was on the edge of nothing, caught between the hostile Namib Desert and the pounding surf.

Aamu must have read his thoughts. "Forty years ago," she said, "this was a busy diamond town called Wilhelmskopf. Water was trucked in once a week. There was a hospital, a school, plans for a community center, even a bowling alley. Everybody lived here—Afrikaners, Germans, Damara and Owambo tribesmen."

"What happened?" Blacksburg said, although he could guess. Many of the smaller diamond towns had petered out by the middle of the previous century, eclipsed by the huge discovery of diamonds in Oranjemund to the south. Of these, Kolmanskopf, a ghost town just outside Luderitz, and now a major tourist attraction, was the most well-known.

Aamu's answer shocked him. "In the late 60's, there were a lot of violent deaths, people found with their throats ripped out, torn apart by animals."

Blacksburg thought of the hyena that had menaced him on the beach. "Hyenas? Jackals?"

"Certainly. But fear spread that a nikishi and its offspring lived among these Wilhelmskopf people, changing into animal form at night to prey on them. A few superstitious fools panicked and turned on one another, accusing each other of sorcery. Eventually the town was abandoned. Can you believe such bosh? Now it belongs to the ghost crabs and the hyenas."

Blacksburg finished off his beer and flung the empty bottle across the threshold of a faded cobalt house with sand piled inside up to the turquoise wainscoting. Lizards stern and still as ancient gods stared down from a piano's gutted innards and perched atop a

cracked and broken set of shelves. A shiver rustled his spine. He looked away. Down below, in the purpling twilight, he could see the old man reaching into the potije with his stick, stabbing slabs of bloody meat and flinging them out across the sand.

“Hey, he’s throwing away the food!”

Aamu looked away, embarrassed. “I told you he’s mad. Years ago, my uncle was here collecting drift wood after a storm when he was attacked by what he thought was a nikishi. He claims it called his name, and when he answered, it bit his fingers off and ate them while he begged for mercy. His mind hasn’t been right since. He says the nikishi told him he must come here after every storm and make a spirit offering of meat and beer. To thank the nikishi for not eating all his fingers.”

“Waste of good food,” scoffed Blacksburg. “This transforming rot, you believe it, too?”

She looked affronted. “Of course not. I’m educated. I was sent to Swakopmund Girls’ School. I studied German and English, some science, learned about the world. That’s why it’s hard for me to live in an Owambo village. I know something bigger’s out there.”

Blacksburg bit back a sarcastic jibe. What would someone who considered schooling in Swakopmund to be a cosmopolitan experience know about the wider world? This Owambo girl inhabited the most barren region of one of Africa’s least populated countries. In Blacksburg’s view, she was a half-step above savagery.

“How did you and your uncle get here? Trek across the desert?”

She arched a kohl-black brow. “No, we rode our camels. Look!” Grabbing his hand, she pulled him along a passageway between a debris-strewn house and a derelict pavilion and laughed.

For a second he almost expected to see two tethered dromedaries. But it was a black Toyota Hilux, sand-caked and mud-splattered, that was angled on the slope behind the buildings.

Blacksburg gave the Hilux a covetous once-over.

“Nice-looking camel, this. Where do you gas it up?”

“There’s a petrol station for people going to the Etosha Pan about forty kilometers from here. And the safari companies that fly rich tourists in from Cape Town and Windhoek, they have way stations through the desert. Before he became ill, my uncle used to guide for one. That’s how he got the jeep.”

“I need to get to Angola,” Blacksburg said. “What say I buy it from you?”

She eyed him scornfully, his ragged, salt-caked clothes, bare feet, disheveled hair. “And use what for money? Shark’s teeth? Ghost crabs?”

“No need to mock me. Let me explain...” He felt a sudden, irresistible urge to touch her, as though some electrical energy pulsed inside her skin that his own body required for its sustenance. A few strands of hair had whipped loose from under the bandanna and he used that as an excuse, reaching out to tuck the hair back into place. To his dismay, she flinched as though he’d struck her.

“Sorry.” He held up his hands, contrite. “Look, about the jeep, I can pay you well.”

“The jeep isn’t mine. It belongs to the village.”

“Loan it to me then. Go with me as far as Luanda. After that, I’m on my own.”

“But why should I help you?”

“A fair question that I’d expect of you, a graduate of Swakopmund Girl’s School. Here, let me show you something.” His smile was confident, but his stomach corkscrewed at what he was about to do—betting everything on this girl’s gullibility and greed.

“You say you want to see the wider world. What if I told you, you could go anywhere you wanted and live like a movie star? What would you say to that?”

“I’d say maybe you swallowed too much seawater, Blacksburg. That you’re as crazy as my uncle.”

“Crazy, huh? Look here.”

With a showman’s flair, he reached inside his shirt, unhooked some clasps and pulled out a leather wallet protector. Unzipping it, he produced two plastic baggies.

“Cup your hands.”

He unzipped one baggy and spilled into her palms a treasure trove of uncut stones. Even in the dimming light, they glittered like a fairy king’s ransom. Aamu’s breath caught. She cradled the diamonds as though she held a beating heart. Her voice, when she finally spoke, was a reverential whisper.

“*Ongeypi*? What are you, a jewel thief?”

“I’m a diamond dealer,” he corrected brusquely. “I was transporting these to a buyer in Luanda.”

He scooped the stones back into the baggy and opened up the next. These were a few museum quality pieces from DeGroot’s private collection, several of which had been loaned out over the years to South African celebrities headed to New York and Cannes. Enjoying himself now, warming to his role, he plucked out a dazzling yellow diamond on a platinum chain. When he held it up, the sunlight put on a fire show, the facets blazed.

Aamu’s dark eyes widened as he fastened it around her neck. In her inky irises were gold glints, a few grains of sand out of this Namib desert.

“It must be worth a fortune!”

“A bit more than a used jeep, I imagine. If you get me to Luanda, it’s yours to sell. Do we have an arrangement?”

She frowned and chewed her lower lip. “What about my uncle? We can’t let him go back to the village. Everyone will know I took the jeep and went off with an *oshilumbu*.”

Blacksburg cringed a little at being called ‘white man,’ and looked down onto the beach, where the flames under the potije still danced. The old man paced a furious circle around the pot, raising his arms in wild supplication to whatever dark gods fueled his imagination. Silhouetted against the blood red sun, the mutilated hand looked like a misshapen club.

He took Aamu’s hand and brought her fingers to his lips, tasting the meat and salt under the nails. “Right then, let’s leave your uncle to his demons.”

She laughed and pulled away, trotting along an alleyway between a half-dozen tumbled-down buildings, beckoning him to follow. When he caught up with her, she was framed in the empty doorway of a small stone house where, with a dancer’s grace and the lewdness of a seasoned whore, she slowly peeled off the scarlet top and beige skirt.

“At the school in Swakopmund,” she said, letting the blouse fall, “the priest said I was too wild—too hungry for excitement, for boys and beer, for freedom. He said it’s wrong to want too much,

that it's a sin to be too hungry." In the fading light, her black eyes made promises both heartfelt and indecent. "What about you, Blacksbury? Are you too hungry?"

For the first time in months, Blacksbury permitted himself a laugh of real delight. For a giddy moment, he actually romanced the notion of the two of them leaving Namibia together, a fantasy that Aamu's reckless passion only fueled.

She rode him with a mad abandon Blacksbury had experienced in only a few women—and then always prostitutes high on serious street drugs. If it was sex she'd been talking about when she asked him if it was a sin to be too hungry, then both were surely hell bound.

Their rutting was as much attack as ardor. Blacksbury, glorying in pain both given and received, rampantly devoured her. His mind stilled, past and future fell away, until all that remained was her thrashing body and feral moans, the sea-salt scent of her and the fierce and biting sweetness of her teeth and tongue. He drank in the musky sweat that ran between her breasts and down her prominent ribs and tangled his hands in the lush snarls of her dreaded mane, and when they rested, panting, sated, knew only that he wanted more.

Later, she spooned her limber body around his and chuckled in his ear, "Where will you go after you sell your diamonds? Don't lie to me. I know you're running. You wouldn't be so quick to trade a diamond for a jeep if you weren't a desperate man."

He was surprised when truth slipped out. "England, maybe. My mother always said we had relatives in Cornwall. I might go there."

"Cornwall." She pronounced the word like one uttering an incantation. "Maybe I'll go with you, Mr. Blacksbury."

And, for a few ecstatic moments, the idea of an impromptu adventure with this exotic woman moved Blacksbury deeply, fed into his desire to see himself as noble, heroic even, a survivor conquering the world by dint of ruthlessness and valor and self-will. The man he truly was, rich and powerful like DeGroot.

Later, as he drifted toward sleep, he saw filaments of moonlight slant through the empty window and spill across her face. She was lovely, even with the scar, but what mesmerized him, what he could

not tear his eyes from, was how the yellow diamond glimmered around her dark as bitter chocolate throat.

Blacksburg dreamed about his mother. She stood outside the cottage in Cornwall before a running stream that he had seen in photographs. No longer gaunt, used-up and grey as he remembered her, but young and spirited. Her voice was high and lilting, clear as birdsong, infused with a calm serenity that in her life he'd never known her to possess. She called to him, not in the sharp haranguing style that had been her nature, but with a serenity and sweetness. Blacksburg almost loved her then, an alien emotion he had seldom felt for her in life, for this woman who had been an Afrikaner whore.

He woke up to the unholy cackling of hyenas and the taste of charred meat on his tongue.

Aamu was gone. For a second panic gripped him. But the diamonds, still secure in their plastic baggies, were undisturbed.

He pulled his clothes on and went outside into a night no longer flecked with stars, but murky, swimming with long, damp tresses of fog. He felt like a diver floating along the bottom of the sea, enveloped in an endless, choking school of pale grey, tubular fish.

Peering down onto the beach, he tried to spot the old man's fire and thought he glimpsed the orange flare of a few remaining embers, but no sooner had he started to descend the dune, than a low, contralto rumbling halted him. The sound came from a dozen yards away, where the fog-swathed columns of the pavilion jutted from the gloom like a ghostly Parthenon.

As he approached, he saw a nest of shadows, low to the ground, diverge and reconfigure, then caught a glimpse of a pink shirt and let himself exhale. The old man was asleep in the pavilion, the noise he'd heard undoubtedly was snoring. More movement—undulating, languid. He saw what looked to his uncertain eyes to be a wild crown of Medusa dreads whipped back and forth—a host of unwelcome images besieged his mind—but it was the hyena's glaring eyes and not its mane-like, ruffled tail that finally made the scene before him recognizable.

The hyena's eyes flashed, then vanished into the fog only to reappear a few feet away. The grumbling, growling intensified. Blacksburg, shocked motionless, counted five sets of eyes.

A frightful snarling commenced as two of the hyenas, snapping wildly, fought over a choice morsel. Bits of skin and gristle flew. Blacksburg glimpsed a ragged nub of bone attached to a scrap of pink cloth.

His breath caught in a stifled gasp. A hyena's head jerked up, and it raised its gory snout to test the wind.

Blacksburg shoved away from the pavilion and plunged headlong into the fog. He tried to remember the location of the jeep, thinking he might be able to lock himself inside, but the drifting mist cast a surreal opaqueness across the dunescape. Nothing that he saw was recognizable, the blank facades of the buildings as alike as weathered tombstones.

Ahead the murky outline of a crumbling two-story building floated up out of the fog. An empty window gaped. He hurled himself through it, tripped, and landed atop the piano he'd seen earlier—its ancient keys produced a wheezing bleat.

Behind him a sagging door led into a low hallway. The darkness was crypt black. He groped his way along, stumbling over obstacles—a plank, an empty drum of some kind—until he half fell into a small enclosed space, a storage room or closet. He huddled there, heart galloping, listening for the murderous whoops of the converging pack.

*Blacksburg?*

His own name sounded suddenly as alien and frightful as a curse. It floated on the hissing wind, at once as distant as the moon and close as his own breath, Aamu's voice or maybe just the scrape of windswept sand. He cleared his throat to answer and found that he was mute.

*They call people by name to lure them out.*

Although never in his life had Blacksburg been superstitious, now some atavistic fear crawled out of his reptilian brain and commandeered all else.

He tried to tell himself his frantic mind was playing tricks, but an older knowledge told him what he feared the most, that what called to him was no hyena but a shape shifter, a nikishi, that would split him open like the old man, from groin to sternum and feed while he lay dying.

*Blacksburg!*

The piano suddenly coughed out a great, discordant cacophony, as though four clawed feet had leaped onto the keyboard and bounded off.

The door he'd come through creaked, and then a single animal sent forth its infernal wail into the hollow building. At once other hyenas, some inside, others beyond the walls, took up the ungodly cry.

Knowing he was seconds from being found and trapped, he bolted from his hiding place, raced up the hallway and hurled himself through a window that was partially intact, crashing to the sand amidst a biting drizzle of shattered glass.

Without pause, he got up and pounded down the duneface, arms pinwheeling, skidding wildly.

The hyenas converged around him.

The largest, boldest of the beasts fainted once before going for his throat. Its teeth snagged his shirt, taking with the fabric a strip of flesh from Blacksburg's ribs. He fell to one knee, one arm up to guard his jugular, the other to protect the pouch across his chest—even knowing, beyond all doubt, that both were lost to him.

The ecstatic yips of the hyenas were suddenly drowned out by the roar of an approaching motor. The Hilux teetered at the top of the dune, then careened straight down the face, sand spewing out behind the tires, high beams punching through the fog. It slammed onto beach, suspension screaming, bounced off the ground, and veered toward the hyenas. The pack scattered. Blacksburg staggered to his feet, as the jeep skidded to a halt beside him.

“Get in!”

Aamu flung the door wide, and Blacksburg launched himself inside, the jeep lurching into motion while his legs still dangled out the door. A hyena leaped, jaws snapping. He screamed and kicked out. The hyena twisted in mid-air and fell away. Blacksburg muscled the door closed.

Aamu gunned the engine and the jeep tore away through the fog.

She drove like a witch, outdistancing the pack by many miles, before she turned to Blacksburg and said gravely, “I looked for you

on foot at first. I called your name. I knew you were close by, but you didn't answer."

"I didn't hear you," Blacksburg said, shame making him curt, resentful of her. They both knew he'd been afraid to answer, that in that desperate moment, rationality had failed him. He'd believed the hyena pack to be nikishis and one of them was mimicking her voice. He was a fool and a coward, just as all along he knew his boss DeGroot had judged him privately to be. In that moment, when he felt as though she'd seen into his soul and found him wanting, he made a harsh decision.

He told her to stop the vehicle and switch places. He would drive.

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Later, when the mid-day sun was high and blazingly hot, Blacksburg decided they'd come far enough. He'd been driving for hours while Aamu slept. Now he halted the Hilux in the middle of a sun-blasted stretch of desert bleak and desolate as a medieval rendition of hell, shook her by the shoulder, and said, "Get out."

She sat up, blinking groggily. "What...what are you talking about?"

"It's simple. End of the line. Get out."

"I don't understand." She looked around at the miles of barren, retina-searing whiteness. "Is this a joke?"

He barked a bitter laugh. "Did you really think I was taking you with me? I can get to Angola on my own."

"But...I'll die out here."

"Yes, I imagine so."

For a woman contemplating her very short future, she appeared strangely unmoved. "But we are going to Luanda."

"One of us. Not you." He held his hand out. "And by the way, I want my diamond back."

"Then take it and be damned!" Before Blacksburg could stop her, she yanked the diamond from around her neck and hurled it out the window as casually as if she were discarding a wad of gum.

He swore and struck her across the head. The bandanna came

off. He saw the dried blood in her hair, the fresh blood flowing from the wound at the top of her ear. He stared at his hand, where her blood stained it.

She dragged a finger pensively along the scar that ran along her cheek. “You know how I got this? My uncle cut me with a knife. But I was merciful and let him live. Last night I was merciful again. I killed him before I fed his flesh to the hyenas.”

Using sheer force of will, Blacksburg hauled himself back from the brink of panic. “You think you scare me? You’re crazier than your uncle was. If I can kick my old boss into the ocean when he was trying to climb into the lifeboat, I can damn sure get rid of you. Now get the hell out of my jeep.”

She didn’t budge. Wild hunger, wanton and insatiable, raged in her eyes. Her lips curled in a soulless smile. “Yesterday I could have killed you on the beach, but I was curious about what kind of man you were, about what was in your heart. Now I know. And now, you know me.”

Her voice was lush with malice. Her face, as she commenced her changing, was radiant with cruelty.

“See me as I am,” shrilled the nikishi.

At once, her slashing teeth cleaved the soft, white folds of his belly. She thrust her muzzle inside the wound, foraging for what was tastiest. The salty entrails were gobbled first, then the tender meat inside the bones, his life devoured in agonizing increments.

Hours later, a hyena pup following a set of jeep tracks came across a human skull. It seized the trophy in its strong young jaws and headed back to its den where it could gnaw the prize at leisure.

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