The Ancient Ones

Chapter 17 – Somewhere Magical

"Maya hadn't realised how useful Juliet could be in the fairly mundane things; like the weather. After a wonderful day for Dava and Jelran to get married, the day of using gateway had arrived full of angry rain and thunder. The full blood Genova had looked at the sky and touched fingers on her right hand, with the thumb of her left hand. Simple as that and yet within a few minutes the day was perfect. Sunshine, but not too hot, a little breeze, but not too windy."

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Nethra felt at home with Den and his group of Hive warriors. She was already twitching her head the way they did during conversations. Give it a week or two and she'd probably be using sounds at the back of her throat to indicate her mood. Den was group leader, but it was obvious he was deferring to her; she was a Chinnura after all a super creature of the multiverse.
"Ginnda spoke to me last night." Said Den. "We're to harass any waggons leaving Tandalla. No attacking them though, unless they attack us."
"Harassment of their waggons." Said Nethra. "Whether we want it or not; I can see steel clashing on steel by the end of the day."
The children of the Hive changed drastically with age; the ones who weren't yet adults looked nothing like Den-Phraxis-Ohm, known to all as Den. They were all smiling at her mention of fighting though, from the smallest bugs to those not much smaller than their mother, the Hive Queen. Nethra put the odds at their being no fighting pretty soon, as just about zero.
"If we have to fight, the children of the Hive are ready." Said Den.
"If the war begins here, we're ready." Said another large adult.
One Feast of Nigon, Aeony had drunk a lot of ale, but she always drank a little too much ale. For various reasons Nethra had been sober that night, when Aeony had detailed how she'd cleared the walls of Tandalla of defending fighters. It had been fast, brutal and best of all; Aeony had survived. One injured Tandallan fighter called Belso Gurd had actually changed sides and fought for most of the war as part of Muzzie's army. Nethra remembered every detail of Aeony's battle on the walls and given the opportunity, she would love to repeat it. Yes, if the war started over the harassment of an enemy waggon handler, she was ready.
"Where can I be of most use today, Den ?" Asked Nethra.
"Wherever you choose." Said Den.
"Just be ready to help if we need you." Someone Said.
They'd given her the freedom to start a war if she wanted to, but Muzzie had been a friend for a staggeringly long period of time. Silsk the dark angel had her roost in the high towers then and Nethra was a pauper in the slums of the City of the Lost God. Nethra's fortune had changed because of Muzzie and she'd obey his orders…….Unless of course, the Tandallans attacked Ginnda's children.
"I'll take six of the older children and lurk near the road north." Said Nethra.
"A good choice, their food waggons return that way from Aarabash." Said Den. "Tandalla needs Aarabash; they'll starve without the fresh fruit and vegetables."

So might the City of the Lost God, they too needed the food grown in Aarabash. It seemed everyone needed the food of the farming town. Not that Nethra felt a need to mention that to Ginnda's kids.
"We'll fly slow but high over the city." Said Nethra. "That should make the Tandallans nervous."
They loved her, she could tell. Nethra had become a kindred spirit to the children of the Hive. Nethra had to fly high and slow though, until she could build up enough rage to fly fast and low. She picked the six of Ginnda's kids she wanted to go north with her.
"Let's have a good look at Tandalla." Yelled Nethra.
"Yay." Shouted the kids of the hive.
Nethra thought about Merrick and the tricks he'd played on her, but it was no good. She was in far too good a mood for any kind of rage to build. The crossing of Tandalla would definitely be high and out of arrow reach, while slow enough for some reconnaissance. She went first, climbing to a height that left it hard to recognise the people below; even the ones she knew well. The children of the Hive followed, hovering around her like protective siblings. Hard to even yell anything audible at that height, but Nethra knew Ginnda's kids had superb hearing. And of course, there was always pointing. Nethra pointed at the food markets stalls a long way below them.
"They seem agitated." Yelled Nethra. "We'll go a bit lower and take a look, but not too low."
The rifts killed technology, all but the most simple devices. Tandalla had erected giant bows at key places, which could fire massive arrows at high speed. Held in place by massive wooden pegs rammed into the ground, those bows were just about the limit to technology; if you wanted it to survive and actually work. Everyone had heard the talk from Den, on the best ways to avoid the huge arrows. Number one was to keep high and out of the way of the damned things.
"Watch out for their giant bows." Shouted Den.
As Nethra went in low, a huge arrow would have skewered her if her reflexes weren't so good. She dodged it and had a good look at the food market stalls. It was chaos down there, with traders trying to get their stalls and stock under cover. The last war fought by Tandalla had been several centuries ago and they were panicking; in the way only those not used to fighting panic.
"See them run……..They don't like us." Shouted Den.
Nethra had been introduced to Ram-Phraxis-Ahm, a sibling from the same egg sack as Den. He was known to everyone as Ram. He was also known as being a ferocious fighter to the point of insanity. As Nethra dropped a little to observe the panic in the market place, Ram dropped with her. He dropped lower than her and he was flying faster than Nethra.
"No, Ram……..You're going far too low." Shouted Nethra.
It was no use; he'd have taken slowing down as a sign of weakness. The bows around the marketplace fired and one massive metal arrow; tore into Ram's carapace. His innards began to squirt out of his body, as Ram began to spin out of control. He was probably dead already, but the fall from quite some height, definitely removed him from the land of the living.
"We should recover his body." Said Den. "We can't leave him behind."
Nethra realised she was being asked to start a war. There was still hope that if they killed a couple of Tandallan fighters in payback for Ram; that would be an end to the matter. They'd killed one of Ginnda's children and they'd killed two of them. Probably no war that year and the whole matter of Ram's death would be forgotten quite quickly. It all came down to Nethra; did she want to be the one who started the war everyone seemed to assume was inevitable.
"We'll need some bottle bombs to do this safely." Said Nethra.
"You heard Nethra." Said Den. "Everyone needs to load up on bottle bombs."

It wasn't what she'd said, nothing like it. Not that anyone would remember her part in starting the war, once the huge armies on either side were hacking at each other.
"Lot of bottle bombs." Someone yelled.
"Yes, lots of bottle bombs." Said Nethra.
They flew back to where Ginnda's kids were camped and loaded up on bottle bombs. Inside each bomb was a volatile and highly flammable liquid. The liquid had also been given a few magical extras by the sorcerers travelling with the army. Dropped from a height, the bottle bombs could destroy the huge bows of the Tandallans and kill the fighters who fired them. Nethra gave Den a good hard stare; until she was certain she had his full attention.
"If we do this, it will start here, today." Said Nethra. "Or we could take a little revenge for Ram and see what happens. My guess is that everyone will decide there'll be no war for a year or two. Do we do what we both want to do ?"
Den seemed to think it through, but not for very long. Ram was a sibling of his, a child born of the same egg sack.
"We will do this." Said Den. "We do it to honour Ram-Phraxis-Ahm."
"Honour Ram-Phraxis-Ahm." Shouted most of the children of the hive.
Nethra had quite a few bottle bombs in a sack, so many that she hadn't bothered counting them. A rage was building in her, which gave her the ability to fly fast and carry the weight of the bombs. There was a strange atmosphere around Ginnda's older children, as if they were seeking some sort of holy vengeance; maybe they were.
"We destroy the bows and those who fire them." Yelled Nethra. "Then we go down to the ground and recover Ram."
"Vengeance for Ram." Someone yelled.
Nethra's wings were buzzing as she flew over the Tandallan city walls. She'd wanted to copy Aeony and clear the top of the walls of enemy fighters. This was better though, much better.
"For Muzzie and the empire." Shouted Nethra.
"For Muzzie……..For the empire." Yelled Den and soon all the others joined in.
Nethra was good at judging drop, the distance the bottle bombs would fall from where she dropped them. It was all about height and speed, all judged on the fly. Her bombs hit the first line of bows, but others hit market buildings and even a chapel used by the market traders. The market was beginning to be nothing but a sea of flames. The children of the hive who dropped their bombs late, managed to blow out a large section of the city wall. Not a huge blow against Tandalla on its own, but they also destroyed much of the building where the Tandallan army garrison was housed. Nethra didn't want to guess at the number of deaths, but one thing was certain. Tandalla and the City of the Lost God were now at war, there was no way to avoid it.
"Recover Ram……..Now we recover our brother." Shouted Den.
The area of the city between the barracks of the army garrison and the Merchants Guild was either burning, or already nothing but ash and charred bodies. Nethra wasn't prone to looking back at her actions; but even she felt shocked at the obviously huge loss of life. Tandalla had paid a high price for killing Ram. Luckily Ram's remains were there and fairly untouched by the hell contained in their bottle bombs. A little charring, but there was more than enough of his body to send home for burial.
"Now the city garrison comes out to attack us." Said Den.
Chinnura or not, Nethra thought her life might be about to end. The children of the hive were tough, but they were hugely outnumbered. Each of them would need to kill fifty enemy fighters and the Tandallan army might not be the best on the rifts, but they weren't that useless. The garrison

seemed to pour out of scorched buildings and dark holes in the ground. Each of them looked to be well armed wearing good quality armour.
“Come on then……Let’s get this done.” Nethra shouted at the Tandallan warriors.
No sword was swung, no arrow fired; the Tandallan fighters went down on one knee; out of obvious respect for a dead enemy fighter. The Tandallan right at the front of the garrison was probably their leader. He nodded at Nethra, but not a word was said.
“Get Ram out of this place.” Said Den.
They’d brought strong ropes, which they wrapped around the body of Ram-Phraxis-Ahm. Nethra helped to get them really tight, while creating loops to carry him by. It took a while and all the time the Tandallan warriors remained quiet and down on one knee. Eventually Ram was ready to lift into the air and carry back to where Ginnda’s children were camped at Nara-Unadaris. From there the portals would be used to take him home to the City of the Lost God. The Hive Mother would probably weep for days for the loss of one of her children who was almost an adult.
“Thank you.” Yelled Den. “We shall not forget the honourable actions of the Tandallan city garrison this day.”
Ram was heavy and Nethra was still holding a full rage within her. She helped them lift and carry Ram across the city and over the Tandallan city walls. Not one single arrow was fired at them. Eventually the remains of poor Ram were lowered to the ground in the centre of their camp.
“I never knew Tandallans could be such honourable people.” Said Den. “Are we still likely to be at war with them ?”
“Yes……..And they will attack soon.” Said Nethra. “I’ll find the base commander and let him know.”

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Maya hadn’t realised how useful Juliette could be in the fairly mundane things; like the weather. After a wonderful day for Dava and Jelran to get married, the day of using gateway had arrived full of angry rain and thunder. The full blood Genova had looked at the sky and touched fingers on her right hand, with the thumb of her left hand. Simple as that and yet within a few minutes the day was perfect. Sunshine, but not too hot, a little breeze, but not too windy.
“Thank you Juliette, the weather is perfect.” Said Maya.
“It’s a big day for everyone.” Said Juliette. “Though talking personally, I’d have preferred it to be hotter and drier.”
“Me too……..The Ancient Ones are better suited to dry weather.” Said Uula Podda.
Tareq was with them, as was Nim; child of the hive mother. It was their honour to go first through the gateway, though Maya would have preferred someone else having that dubious privilege.
“Shall I begin charging up this truly ancient piece of technology ?” Asked Juliette.
She meant the great stone upright circle of course, which was generally known as the gateway. Only a full blood Genova could charge it up and only an ancient one could get it to actually work. Uula had been nervous about that for days.
“Speaking for myself.” Said Seren. “I’d rather we set the gateway for the City of the Lost God. Aim it at Muzzie’s bar and we can have a good time.”
“Take no notice of her, she doesn’t mean it.” Said Pinthrad.
“Oh, I think she does.” Said Lilleth. “A little strange places fatigue is quite understandable.”
“I might only mean it a little bit.” Said Seren. “Begin Juliette, charge up this gate to who knows where.”

Gateway had been disassembled, stone by stone. Mainly because Uula would never fit into the part if the temple where it had been left standing for several millennia. Once outside the gateway had been assembled again, though no one was totally sure if it would ever work again.
“I think it will work……I can feel it charging.” Said Galla Sinsa-Ennari.
“Dangerous……Too dangerous.” Squawked Bird.
“Ignore him; he’s having one of those days.” Said Galla.
Maya agreed with Bird, though she wasn’t going to say it. Being zapped inconceivable distances to places called simply somewhere magical. All using what looked like a circular arch of incredibly old stones. Even the builders who’d moved it were far from convinced that using it after so many years was safe. Maya and Uula were there to use the gateway though, in the hope of finding what had become of the ancient ones. It was all very much their show.
“I can feel it charging too.” Said Maya.
“We’re really going to do this……We’re all quite mad.” Said Adamaz.
“Yes, but it’s a wonderful kind of madness.” Said Dava.
The newlyweds had been fairly quiet since their big day, but Juliette kept saying that they were essential to the success of using gateway. Juliette was still being very annoying by not revealing why two young Algarians were essential to using old magic from the days when full blood angels ruled the rifts. As for Tejan the assassin and her hybrid lover; no one had a clue what part they had yet to play, but there were hints from Lilleth that it was huge and important.
“I can feel the stones tingling.” Said Ash.
“Dangerous…….Dangerous.” Said Bird.
“Quiet Bird, or you’ll never get another live Nesh Bug.” Said Galla.
Juliette touched the gateway stones, which resembles the stones used in cobbled streets. The ground beneath Maya’s feet was vibrating slightly and she had no idea if that was normal.
“Gateway is fully charged.” Said Juliette. “Time for Uula to think of where she wishes to go. Once she has stepped into the portal her colleagues should follow. I will follow them. We’ve been through this many times; you all know who you should be following through Gateway.”
“If we never meet again in this world, may we meet somewhere in the next.” Said Itzel.
No one replied, but Seren looked even more morose than had been her normal look lately. Maya hadn’t seriously thought that the Gateway would shred any of them, or send them to somewhere so extreme that they’d die of it. It was a possibility though, a definite possibility.
“Stand aside; I’ll need every bit of space to enter Gateway.” Said Uula.
Uula Podda stood in front of Gateway with her wings folded tightly back against her body. She was concentrating, Maya recognised the look. When Uula nodded and smiled, Maya knew the gateway had been successfully set to the right destination. Whether they’d all get there in one piece was another thing entirely.
“Step slowly and carefully.” Said Uula. “The gateway will stay open for quite some time.”
There was no spinning portal, just the slight look of a light mist within the stones of the ancient gate to somewhere magical. Uula vanished and then Nim followed her. Tareq was looking at her and Maya remembered that they’d never agreed on who followed Nim.
“You next, I’ll go last.” Said Maya.
It was as if Tareq had been sucked into the portal, rather than walking into it. Maya refused to let her mind wander onto scary thoughts about where the portal might have sent her lover. Maya walked into the portal and the world seemed to melt away.

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“Can we run through who goes when again ?” Asked Ash.
“No, you all know…….Concentrate and remember the list.” Said Juliette.
With that Juliette stepped into the portal, leaving them with a fully charged portal and a little confusion about who used it next.
“I’m next and then Itzel follows me.” Said Seren. “After us it will be the happy couple; Dava and Jelran.”
“I go then and Ash follows me.” Said Pinthrad.
“Thank you, now I remember.” Said Ash.
Galla listened and watched, with Bird sat on her shoulder. He’d travel with her and if anything dreadful happened to either of them, it would happen to them both. Seren actual gave herself the dark angel’s blessing, before stepping into the portal. Itzel stepped through a few seconds after Seren. As for the happy couple, they were grinning at each other as Dava entered the portal, closely followed by Jelran. Pinthrad was about to enter the portal alone, but Ash had other ideas.
“Can I go with you Pinthrad ?” Asked Ash. “I’m quite small……We’ll easily fit.”
“I’m not sure, Juliette did agree the order we went in.” Said Pinthrad.
“Please, the thought of going alone is making me anxious.” Said Ash.
“Silly Ash.” Said Bird.
“He has a point; the gateway won’t stay open forever.” Said Galla.
“Fine, fine……..Walk beside me, Ash.” Said Pinthrad.
Something happened as Pinthrad and Ash went through, something strange and unexpected. The portal flashed red for a few seconds and Galla felt a drop of rain on the exposed skin of her neck. Only it wasn’t rain water when she touched it; water was never that red.
“Oh……..We really need to keep to the agreed order.” Said Galla.
She showed them the blob of red on her finger and didn’t need to tell them it was blood. Whose blood was unknown for now, but Pinthrad or Ash were likely to have been hurt on their way to somewhere magical.
“I go next.” Said Lilleth. “Pray to the Nine Divines that I arrive in one piece.”
Lilleth entered the portal and there was no flash of red, no red drops of rain that weren’t really rain; but blood. Galla felt far less worried about those remaining using Gateway.
“I’m next to use this damned thing.” Said Adamaz.
He almost ran into the portal and vanished with no apparent mishap. Galla was last, so she’d have to watch all the other sent to somewhere magical; whether she wanted to watch or not. The Dredgers and their boss weren’t going; they were staying in Gezenter-Aparen for a while. If no one returned through gateway; the Genova had promised to make sure they returned home in one piece. Chenad Gurd was stood in front of the Dredgers hired to pull waggons they no longer possessed. But the Dredgers had proven themselves to be good fighters when needed.
“May the Old Gods smile on you, Galla.” Shouted Chenad.
Tejan entered the portal next and then Sokkelf. It either of them felt any fear, they definitely weren’t showing it. Galla sighed and realised that her old joints were aching. There were a hundred and one things she might have been doing at her age; but using a portal of the angels had never even occurred to her.
“Where do I fly, Galla ?” Asked Bird.
“Stay on my shoulder, you’ll be fine.” Said Galla.

It felt as though a hand was in the centre of her chest, pushing her back. Something didn't want her to enter the portal. It was too late though, she was committed to using gateway to wherever it was sending her friends. Galla spoke a quick dispel cantrip and the pressure on her chest was gone.
"Here we go, Bird." She said.
The ancient city of Gezenter-Aparen vanished and Galla found herself walking across a sandy beach, on a warm bright day. Bird was still on her shoulder and she could feel him moving around.
"Are you alright, Bird ?" She asked.
"Bird is fine."
The first worrying thing was no sign of any buildings. No temples overlooking what appeared to be a large ocean. No fishing village ideally situated for visitors from Gezenter-Aparen. There was nothing and that meant another worrying thing, there was no obvious way back through gateway. The others were there, Seren was nodding at her. Something had happened; Lilleth was prodding at what looked to be a pile of rags, while Pinthrad paced round near her.
"I had no idea……We were never told this could happen." Said Pinthrad.
Juliette was there, glaring at Ezzel Pinthrad, but not arguing with him. They did know the order they used the portal was important; Juliette had told them about that, several times. Galla looked at the pile of rags, which wasn't rags, it was the torn apart clothes Ash had been wearing.
"Poor Ash, his body ripped apart by ancient forces we'll never understand." Said Lilleth.
Galla was no stranger to messy and horrendous death, but Ash was the worst she'd seen for quite some times. It was as though he'd been hacked at by a dozen expert warriors, all using enchanted blue steel blades. Even his bones had been cracked and broken apart. His face was unrecognisable, but everyone knew the clothes he'd put on that morning.
"We just weren't warned." Said Pinthrad.
"Yes we were old friend." Said Galla. "We simply weren't careful enough."
"Poor Ash, we need to bury him." Said Dava.
"He worshipped Nigon; I know the words to use." Said Galla.
Seren and Itzel buried him close to where Gateway had brought them, but well past high tide and just into a small area of woodland. Galla said the words worshippers of Nigon liked spoken over their grave and everyone came and muttered their own thoughts over Ash's grave. Only when everyone had said their goodbyes, were other matters discussed.
"Where by the Nine have we ended up ?" Asked Adamaz.
"I recognise nothing here; even the plants are strange to me." Said Galla.
"There, I need to go there……" Said Uula, while pointing. "Maya and I will go and find out why I feel a need to go there. We shouldn't be gone for very long."
"Nim and I will go with you." Said Tareq.
"No, not this time." Said Uula. "My people are not fond of the Ginnda, or the children of the hive. This time Maya and I will go alone."
"Very well, we'll set up camp here and wait for you to return." Said Seren.

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Galla hadn't expected Uula's idea of not being gone for long, to be what most people considered a short period of time. Uula Podda was an ancient one after all, born from an egg and likely to still be alive when most of the Nine Divines were dead and boiled away into the abyss. Galla didn't agitate to setup camp in a fairly permanent way, until light was fading where they were and Uula hadn't brought herself and Maya back to them.

“I suspect we’re not even on part of the rifts anymore.” Said Galla. “Similar to the rifts, but this place has a strange feel to it.”
“It is somewhere magical.” Said Lilleth. “I’d be amazed if it was like the rifts.”
“We need to plan for sleeping here tonight.” Said Adamaz.
There was already a fire, burning dead wood that Galla didn’t recognise. It burned well though and lasted for many hours. The problem was that Seren seemed to think her job was done and Uula would arrive back very soon.
“We need a proper camp, Seren.” Said Galla.
“I can see that now.” Said Seren. “It’s too late to build a fence around our camp out of branches, but we’ll do that tomorrow. For now we need a fire all night and a two person watch. I’ll take first watch with Itzel.”
Galla ended up with third watch of the night with Adamaz, which would have been her own personal choice. Juliette offered to take a watch on her own, but Seren insisted that she was paired up with Dava. It took a while and a few arguments, but by the time darkness arrived wherever they were, there’d be always be two of them awake; and hopefully alert.
“Wow, I never expected that.” Called Lilleth from her bedroll. “Stars…….Bright twinkling stars.”
“We always have stars in the sky of Algaria.” Said Dava. “A moon too and a sun in the daytime.”
“Careful…….You’d have once been burned alive for such heresy.” Said Adamaz.
“Don’t scare the girl.” Said Seren. “Thanks to Muzzie we now live in more enlightened times. Even I like to see the sky full of stars.”
“Seren the heretic……..That’s something I never thought I’d see.” Said Galla.
Pinthrad had to speak his wisdom of course and Galla was glad he was now well enough to speak it. There had been a time when it looked like Ezzel would end his days in a very bad way……But Galla refused to dwell on might-have-beens.
“Stars, even if a dozen moons were looking down on us.” Said Pinthrad. “I still believe we’re on something that is linked to the rifts. A kind of rift annexe if you like.”
“I have never seen stars before.” Said Sokkelf. “This place truly is somewhere magical.”
If pushed, Galla would have said the night was slightly shorter where they were. There was the usual ultra violet wash of the rifts and despite the stars, there was no sun. The sky just began to get brighter. Galla just had the impression that she’d had less sleep than she liked to have. Despite her old aching joints and bones, she resisted moaning about them. She even began cutting thin branches from the trees and using them to build sections of fence. If they were there a second night, their camp would be protected by a fence. Maybe not the strongest fence in the world, but it would slow down a night time predator a little.
“Galla building fences…….Can your joints cope with that ?” Asked Adamaz.
“My joints are fine.” Said Galla. “Though none of us are getting any younger.”
“True.”
Lilleth had gone off on a very iffy task. She was using Bird’s avian senses to tell if lots of berries on many unknown bushed; were likely to be poisonous. Not a frivolous task, there might come a point where the food brought with them ran out. Adamaz was all for becoming totally carnivore, but even the meat of local creatures might be toxic to them. As there was no obvious exit back to Gezenter-Aparen, future food supplies really mattered. Pinthrad had already tried to contact the Sorcerers Guild, with no success. Bird came swooping in and sat on her shoulder. A few moments later he vomited over her favourite gown, which had also been her only remaining clean gown.
“Not the yellow berries.” Said Bird.

“Oh, what has Lilleth done to you ?” Asked Galla.
“Yellow berries on plant with spikey leaves.” Said Bird. “Very nasty…….Silly Lilleth.”
Of course berries toxic to her pet might be fine for them to eat, but Bird was the only poison tester they had. Not that Galla had ever considered Bird to be expendable. With luck he’d puke up the yellow berries and be fine. He’d poisoned himself by accident a few times in the past and had recovered quite quickly. Lilleth came running after Bird, with a definite guilty look on her face.
“Lilleth ! What have you done to my pet ?” Said Galla.
They were interrupted by something coming up and out of the nearby ocean. It was huge and its many massive legs left no doubt what it was. As it came up the beach towards them, its head really did seem to touch the sky.
“I never thought I’d see one apart from as drawings in very old books.” Said Pinthrad.
“A genuine ancient one…….I hope it’s friendly.” Said Adamaz.
“Just don’t let Bird vomit over it.” Said Lilleth.

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