

[Vilivian]: Audition

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Vilivian listened intently to the distant sounds of battle. A few dozen men descended into the treacherous depths, and after several hours only a handful heartbeats remained slowly closing in on the penultimate room - where she resided.

Surrounded by stone, with a river flowing in the tunnel on her right side, Vilivian was sitting in the middle of the chamber with her legs crossed, holding on tightly to the large sword sheathed in a dark blue scabbard.

Behind her lied the stone door to the inner sanctum where the end goal for all that ventured into the maze-like complex of caves and caverns was hidden - a holy artefact capable of granting eternal youth.

Vilivian closed her eyes and prepared her psyche for combat. It's been over a century since someone managed to venture all the way down here. Several, since someone forced her out of her human form.

Single mistake can lead to her fall. She can't allow herself to die. Not yet. Not until she keeps her promise.

She clutched on tighter to the sword.

As she descended into tranquil meditation, she suddenly sensed a movement. She opened her eyes but saw no one at the entrance.

Instead, she lowered her gaze and rested at a small fox with white fur and strange markings on both its head and puffy tail. It sat in front of her, staring her down, slightly wagging its tail.

Nixen? No, it's two tails short. She doesn't remember any fox-like creatures belonging to her clan either. Perhaps it belongs to the humans upstairs?

It mattered not, she concluded quickly. She couldn't allow her thoughts to stray like that right before combat . . .

Then again, some sustenance before battle would do well for her right about now.

Vilivian's calm demeanour turned ravenous as she launched her hand forward trying to reach the fox's neck and then snap it in one motion, but not a blink could pass before the animal disappeared from her sight and all she managed to grasp was an envelope of some kind.

Perplexed and calm again, she looked over a beautiful red letter with a golden seal protecting its contents.

A message? For me?

The seal carried a sigil she didn't recognize, but she could sense some manner of magic surrounding it. She unsealed it, and inside she found a plain note that read a few largely written words.

Reach the Crossroads and claim your wish.

Vilivian slowly mouthed every word while following along with her finger. When she finally managed to fully read the passage and comprehend its meaning she found herself more dumbfounded than before.

"Crossroads?" "Wish?" She frowned in disappointment that the first written message she's gotten in her life spoke rubbish.

Suddenly, Vilivian felt a jolt of excitement as the smell of blood filled her nostrils. She cast the letter aside and fixated her attention on the new arrivals in her chamber.

Three in total; the bald one in the middle had his otherwise turquoise tunic shredded at left shoulder and completely soaked with his blood. He carried a longsword in his right, bandaged arm. He was clearly exhausted, but his eyes remained determined. Same was true for his companions.

On his right, the blonde archer had his hairs near his face stuck together with blood. Though his bow fastened on his back remained nothing but a fancy stick with a string at this moment; the quiver at his side was empty and all he wielded was a small hatchet.

The last man, on the bald man's other side, managed to carry only a leftover of his heater shield. His left arm was lost; all that remained was a stump, freshly bandaged and blood-soaked. He was on the verge of falling down and it showed but remained steadfast standing near his companions, stubborn as an oak of a man that he was.

Vilivian stood up with her Friend's sword in hands and fixed it into place.

'Shite.' Said the archer quietly as he saw her force the sheath into the ground through the cold stone floor.

'I say,' the bald man's voice echoed in the chamber, 'You're no ordinary waif, are you?'

'On the whole, I fare far differently from your kind.' Vilivian positioned herself between the sheath and the men. 'I wouldn't take me lightly, if I were you.'

'We won't be threatened away, wench.' Said the disarmed shield man. 'We may have lost many men-at-arms on our way down here, but we still outnumber you three to one.'

'A notion made redundant given your state. And my "threat" was merely a fact for you to consider, should you attempt to challenge me.'

'Do we have a choice in that matter?'

'Few can make it through the half-point of this dungeon. Fewer reach this very chamber. I conscript the strongest and most vicious of the beasts roaming the world above. Retrace your steps, and claim their heads. Return topside with bagged glory at your side and most importantly - your lives.'

Bald man chuckled through pain, perplexing the otherwise stone-faced Vilivian.

He raised his sword and pointed at her.

'I am the Prince of England. The future ruler of the lands this dungeon's adjacent to. My family's been looking for it for several generations and I'm fully aware that it will relocate the moment we exit onto the surface. It will take two ages to find it. It's now or never.'

His retainers remained unflinching; posing battle-readiness and determination.

Centuries ago, she wouldn't have thought twice about facing someone like the Prince. Her duty as a guardian and ignorance of an outside world compelled her to throw hands at the throat of any guest in this dreaded chamber.

She would kill and feel jubilant, but not because she took life but because she was satisfied and proud of fulfilling her duty.

However, oft happened that the challengers would only descend down here to die. Spent by battles above; hoping to find refuge, but finding only their tomb.

Sometimes she'd talk them up, right before they bled out. They'd tell her of the tales and views above. Other times they'd ask her to pass along their last message to their loved ones. Though she had no means to do that herself she employed the courier when she was able to.

She saw the same men standing in front of her. She wondered how many dominions fell apart because heirs apparent were killed by her.

But abstaining from this fight would be insulting. Least she could do was honour their valour.

'Your titles and lands have no value here, Prince. Only strength. Your resolve, however, has been noted.' She brushed back the streak of her fire-red hair. 'Show me what you can do.'

'Will you not reach for the sword behind you?' Prince asked.

'I shan't. It's not for me to wield.' She clenched her hands into fists and leaned into a fighting stance. 'As you were.'

Vilivian stared at the contents of the letter whilst standing among the fallen bodies of the prince and his retainers. She couldn't help herself. Ever since she read that message her thoughts have been partially occupied by the implications and possibilities.

My wish, she clutched the letter, crumbling its edges with her fingers. She doesn't possess such a thing. Only a millennium of duty, isolation and unkept promise.

Crossroads . . . She'd like to at least investigate the matter of this wish, but did it even exist?

She hid the letter in her ragged knickers. She noticed that Prince breathed and managed to muster enough strength to crawl away while she was preoccupied with her thoughts. She cursed her own negligence. *Or was it a blessing?*

Vilivian approached and crouched in front of the prince that desperately tried to scutter away using only his elbows. She broke his legs after all. Or was it ribs? She lost herself in thought halfway through that fight.

'Are you wise?' she asked.

Prince hissed and answered through gritted teeth.

'You mock me.' He stopped and looked at her straight into her emerald eyes. His glare remained defiant. 'I lay a broken man and you lavish in your superiority. At least have some decency to finish me off!'

'I've no contact with the topside world, Prince. I hear very few tales down here. Answer my questions, and I might be able to grant you a new purpose.'

'I will not be pitied!' He shouted angrily.

She waited out the echo.

'Think of it as an opportunity, Prince.' She pressed on relentlessly. 'No heirs apparent should die pointless deaths.'

Prince was clearly agitated by hearing her call his expedition "pointless." Vilivian knew exactly how these humans that came down here felt. They did not appreciate their short lifespans enough. They were too attached to their lives. And that's why she knew he was going to cooperate.

'Fine.' He said at last. 'What do you want to know?'

'Do you know of a place called "Crossroads?"'

Prince scoffed. 'An old wives' tale?'

'So, you know of it?'

"'A place where dreams come true" or so they say, but you need a very exclusive invitation apparently. And no one knows how to get there.'

Invitation. Vilivian was already in possession of one. All that remained was the means of transportation. She left the Prince and approached the blade she stuck in the floor. Without any trouble she pulled it out.

Her right side of torso ached as she clutched it close, but it was one painful memory amidst the sea of soothing ones.

She was not unattracted to the idea of leaving this place. Her mind often considered the possibilities and it was as simple as leaving through the front door.

Yet, it was difficult. She felt guilty over the prospect of abandoning duty she performed her whole life. Defending the artefact was the only thing she knew for most of her time spent here.

She gave a glance to the door to the inner sanctum and with a heavy heart turned her back.

For the sake of her impossible promise, she was willing to abandon her integrity as the vanguard of this place.

With the scabbard in one hand she approached the Prince and grabbed the wounded royal by his collar.

'What are you doing?!' he shouted as he tried to push Vilivian's grip away.

'Thank you, Prince.' She said as she dragged him to the river. 'Allow me to repay your kindness.'

'You said you'd let me go!'

'No. I said I'd give you a new purpose.'

'You *deceived* me!'

She grabbed his throat and hung him above the water. Underneath the surface a mirage of green colours hinted at a presence of the spirits of the drowned; awaiting their next meal.

Slimy, dark arms reached out of the water, trying to reach the prince by his ankles. Two dozen of them, ravenous for the fresh blood of the living. It's been too long since their last meal.

'I don't do tricks, Prince. It's your kind that's renowned for it. All who challenge me resign their life and only through victory can they claim it back. I gave you a chance. You didn't take it and it's time for you to die. All I can do now is to make sure your blue blood doesn't go to waste. The Ferryman

must be paid his toll; be it blood or gold.'

She dropped him into the waters and the Drowned immediately reached his body. Prince struggled, desperately pleading for her help as the arms reached around him and slowly dragged him down. Vilivian patiently waited for him to be taken, unbothered by his distress.

Finally, he disappeared in the deep river and the water returned to its original colour. The old magic made its leave.

A bell sounded in the darkness of a tunnel to the right of Vilivian. From it emerged a small wooden boat. The golden bell was hanging at the end of the curved post on the rear.

The vehicle was manned by the Ferryman; a humanoid, robed in tatters much like hers. Its face was completely unseen under the hood; not a shadow but a glimpse of darkness impossible to illuminate. Its rowing hands – the only visible part of its body – were bandaged by a white cloth. On its hip, tied to a cincture was a small lamp – its glass walls emanating a blue hue of light.

The boat stopped next to Vilivian. Ferryman pulled out its oar and stared at her with its darkness.

'Can you take me to a place called "Crossroads?"' she asked. "'Where dreams come true?'"

Ferryman brandished an oar affirmatively.

'Let us be off then.'

Vilivian stepped onto the boat and took a seat, clutching her keepsake. She felt her stomach turning. She was abandoning her duty. Shame washed over her like a cold shower.

She rejected her mantle as the Sentinel of Graal, and all that remained was Matriarch Vilivian.

Thick, white fog enveloped the boat and moved alongside the underground river. It was like moving through a white puff.

Suddenly, Vilivian was blinded by a light. She, who spent her whole life in a dark cave barely lit by glowing fungi, was unaccustomed to the overwhelming shine of the sun.

All at once she experienced completely new sensations. Smell of the river mixed with the fragrance of flowers blooming on a nearby meadow. Distant sounds of creatures she never heard before and *people*. She could sense so many of them and not one was near expiring.

Ferryman stopped the boat at the nearest suitable bank and Vilivian got out sword in hand. She was so used to the cold feeling of stone in her chamber that the sensation of grass underneath her naked feet fascinated her.

'Thank you, Ferryman.' She said back to the ghastly figure. The Ferryman tipped its eternal darkness-holding hood and rowed away upstream.

She turned back again and saw a person staring at her. Clad in black and white attire which was antonymous to her wild and abundant hair, not to mention her horns and ears like knives.

Her skin was as if covered in light burns. Unsurprisingly so; Vilivian could sense that woman's blood carried scalding levels of ardour for destruction.

Holding a basket full of mushrooms in her right hand and a lone mushroom in her left, she stared Vilivian down.

Former sentinel scrambled trying to remember good manners her Friend taught her a long time ago.

'Good afternoon,' she said rather awkwardly.

'It's morning,' retorted the woman. She approached Vilivian. 'Where'd you come from?'

Vilivian realized that it's better not to mention the specifics of her former abode.

'A cave.' She answered.

'Don't be a smartass.'

'I do not lie,' Vilivian said sternly. 'I received a letter mentioning this place.' She thought for a second. 'This is the Crossroads, right?'

'Letter?' Her face warmed up. 'And yes, that's the place.'

'The letter mentioned coming here to "claim my wish",' Vilivian pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from her knickers. 'Therefore, I employed the Ferryman's services to have me brought here, to the Crossroads.'

'The Ferryman? You mean the chap that just rowed his boat up the waterfall like it's nobody's business?'

'The very same. I find them to be a very reliable and competent entity.'

'Right, right. Say, wasn't there a fox attached to this letter?'

'Fox?'

'Yes. White and fluffy little fella with strange markings.'

'Well, there was a fox . . .'

""Was?""

'I tried to eat it. I think it might've sensed my intentions and . . . ran away. Very quickly, I might add.'

There was a moment of silence while the mushroom-picking woman grinned ear-to-ear, baring her fangs.

'Oh, *this* I have to hear.'

'Sorry?' Vilivian was confused.

'Don't worry, you've come to the right place.' She took a glance at Vilivian's back and frowned.

'Anyhow, my name is Saki. I am the owner and bartender at the Fox Den. A local tavern.'

'I am Vilivian, Sentinel of—' she bit her lip and started again. 'I am Vilivian of Lilith. I'm a Matriarch. It's good to meet you, Bartender.'

They shook hands. Vilivian was impressed how much control Saki had over her strength despite her destructive ambitions.

'You can call me Saki.'

'I won't. But thank you.'

'... Sure. Let's get to Fox Den. We're going to get you some clean clothes and a meal first.'

Vilivian was, again, dumbfounded by that proposal.

'Why, what is wrong with my current outfit?'

Vilivian looked down. True, her tunic was barely holding on and had myriad holes in it, but the lower garments were in good enough condition. They can certainly last at least another half a century.

'You need to look decent if you're going to take part in the tournament. There'll be children watching, you know?'

'Tournament?'

'Not to mention, it's rather breezy in these, innit?'

'Quite windy, true. Very well, lead on.'

Several patrons occupied some of the Fox Den's tables at this time of the day. They were regulars apparently. Humbly tending to their drinks while Saki helped Vilivian get clean and dressed up.

Vilivian was bewildered by the showering apparatus. Hot water flowing at command without any use of magic. And people use it every day. Every day! Vilivian had confidence in her fiendish endurance, but wouldn't bathing that often be detrimental to ordinary human's skin?

Afterwards she was given a set of new clothes along with the fitting undergarments. Vilivian was attired in a red blouse along with black trousers and leather boots. Saki even tied Vilivian's long hair into a braid, finished off with a colourful ribbon, much to latter's dismay.

Keeper of the Fox Den observed as Vilivian clumsily used a knife and fork to cut the meat.

'So, you didn't even notice the letter?'

'No.' Vilivian tried to pin down the elusive pea with her fork. 'It wasn't after I failed to grab the fox that I realized there was one.'

Vilivian managed to nail the pea and triumphantly ate it. The silverware lightly stung the insides of her mouth.

'I see. And why exactly did you want to eat that fox? Did it tempt you somehow? Appeal to you?'

Vilivian made a really confused expression.

'I was hungry.'

Saki nodded. 'Seconds?' she asked.

Vilivian pushed away her plate.

'I'd like you to tell me about the wish instead.'

'Right. See—'

Door to the tavern opened with a slam.

'SAKI!' shouted the arrival. 'A terrible atrocity had occurred!'

'... Perfect timing.'

Saki sighed and reached for a pint mug. Rest of patrons turned back to their drinks once they realized who the newcomer was.

She approached the counter. Jingling of bells accompanied her every step. She was just slightly taller than Vilivian, thanks to her heels.

Woman carried herself with elegance matching the dark dress despite the sudden outburst. She sat down at the counter next to Vilivian and crossed her legs. Saki had already put a pint of ale in front of her.

Woman drank it all and put it down in one motion after which she let out a satisfied giggle. Vilivian watched in fascination.

'She drank it all in one go . . .'

'It's Chifu. She does that.'

Chifu turned to Vilivian. She just noticed that she had two irises.

'Why, hello there, cutie,' Chifu giggled as Saki poured another filling of ale.

'Good morning.'

'It's afternoon. My name's Chifu. I'm your friendly neighbourhood kitsune. How do you do?'

'I am Matriarch Vilivian of Lilith. It's good to meet you, Kitsune.'

""Matriarch?" Now that's some strong title. Oh, and please, call me Chifu. Everyone else does.'

'Thank you, but I won't.'

'Why not?'

'My kind uses names only for our friends or family.'

Chifu laughed.

'Well, why didn't you say so from the start?! Let's become friends! The best of friends!'

Vilivian watched in disgust as the kitsune wrapped her left arm around her and took the pint into her other hand.

'Don't touch me.' Said Vilivian coldly. *'Please.'*

'Nuh-uh. How else are we going to become friends, Viliv? Saki! Best ale for my best gal!'

Vilivian cringed. She had no intention of getting pulled into the fox's drinking games, but she felt as if she was losing control of the situation.

'I don't like ale.' She mumbled out.

'Make it wine, then!' Chifu shouted with unrelenting fervour.

'I don't—'

But there already was a glass of wine standing in front of her. Vilivian looked at Saki pleadingly, but the bartender only shook her head.

'Just let it happen, lass. She won't let up.'

Resigned, Vilivian picked up the glass. She sensed the fruity fragrance as she put it up to her lips. The combined sensation of multiple flavours lingered when she swallowed the sip.

Wine was good and she hated herself for enjoying it.

She put down the glass and Chifu squealed quietly.

'Yay~' she drank her ale. She put down her ale.

Then her gaze wandered lower.

'Oh, wow, what's this?'

She reached for an item resting on Vilivian's lap - her keepsake sword sheathed.

All Vilivian's monstrous instincts lit up the moment she noticed Chifu's hand. She instantly grabbed her wrist and didn't let go.

'*Handsssss. Offff.*' Vilivian growled. She was barely keeping herself from transforming.

But Chifu didn't seem to be bothered by the hostility showcased by the Matriarch.

'Goodness me!' Chifu said surprised and turned to the bartender. 'Saki, I think her grip rivals yours!'

'Cease your elaborate trickery, *Vixen.*'

Chifu grinned.

'*Trickery!* That's good! That's fitting! You may call me *Trickster*, then! Until you inevitably become my best friend, of course.'

Saki decided to finally interject.

'Wasn't there some terrible atrocity occurring, Chifu?'

Chifu looked at her horned friend, and thought for a while. Her expression changed to that of indifference. 'Oh, right. That.' She said in a bored tone and turned back to Vilivian with her mischievous smile back on her face.

'Mind letting me go, love? It's hard to drink when you're grasping my hand as if I was your first love. Unless . . .?' she tilted her head, exposing her neck.

Vilivian released her hold. She turned forward to her glass of wine and sipped it.

'Your culture confounds me.'

'I think that's just Chifu,' Saki smiled and turned to kitsune. 'So, what happened?'

Chifu downed the rest of her ale in one go again and put the mug down. Saki was already on the refilling duty.

'Oh, Saki, my dearest friend!' she cried out. 'The most horrifying occurrence had occurred! I was up, in my humble abode, meditating . . .'

'Napping.' Saki decided to storm through Chifu's rant by cleaning the glassware.

'*Meditating,*' Chifu insisted. 'While all of a sudden one of my familiars – you know them, you love them – appeared before me! Strung out and exhausted, terrified and shaking! Oh, I could only wonder what kind of monster would terrify one of my cute little foxes like that!'

To Vilivian, Chifu's voice started grating on her. It was increasingly more vexing to listen to her, so the matriarch decided to mute herself out of conversation completely and focus on the drink. She decided to wait for the kitsune to leave the tavern before she asks Saki about the wish.

'Argh, the things I would do to the scoundrel that endangered my kin! The things I'd do to make them regret it! Argh, I will find them and make them pay and . . . and . . .'

Chifu yawned and leaned on the counter. 'Eh, this is boring. I wanted to make you feel all bad so that you'd try and make it up for me and I'd have you become my friend, but no. Boring You're boring, Viliv.'

Vilivian looked at her in shock.

'You knew?'

'Duh. What do you think I came here for?'

Saki and Vilivian answered simultaneously.

'To drink.'

'To drink.'

Chifu pouted. 'I *could've* come for something different! Like tax collection!'

'You don't do that.' Said Saki.

'Well, maybe I should start!' she exclaimed and went back to her melted and comfortable self. She sipped her ale. 'Who gets an invite is often a lottery. You're not the first food stamper who tried getting her claws on one of my familiars. But most often they manage to escape intact along with the letter. You've some quick hands if you managed to get that scrap of paper before my familiar jolted away.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Foxes can transport their recipients here after they agree to come. Letters also wield that power though I suppose you weren't resolved enough to join us, were you?'

'I was resolved enough to abandon my duty – have been for a few centuries. This invitation of yours was the kind of push I needed to make my final decision. And the circumstances allowed me to use

Ferryman's services, too. As for the wish . . .' she grasped the sheath. Memory of received injury coursed through her body. 'I'm old enough to know that nothing comes without a cost.'

'You're not the only one who's interested in that wish. There're many people . . . with many desires they'd like to fulfil. That's why we're organizing a tournament. Three rounds. The champion gets a wish. Simple, isn't it?'

'Too simple. What do you get from all of this?'

'Fun.'

Vilivian frowned, taken aback.

'You might've enjoyed a millennium staring at the stone wall, Viliv, but I bore very easily. I can't handle an afternoon without *something* happening, much less three hundred sixty-five thousand. So yes; the invites and the tournament? All for my personal indulgence.'

She finished the remaining ale.

Vilivian shook her head.

'It *can't* be that simple.'

'It is. As simple as saying "Very well. I will participate in this tournament, Chifu."'

Vilivian hesitated.

'I've come this far . . .'

Chifu yet again burst out in almost hysterical laughter.

'*Far?* Darling, you're barely done with the formalities. Those rounds will not be your typical knight-errands, warlords or princes wishing to prove themselves a little more than bland stereotypes. No. They're all as determined as they are unique. Variety being the spice of life and all that. Well then,' Chifu raised her refilled mug. 'What say you, *Matriarch?*'

Vilivian knew that she wasn't going to just be handed over the wish. But perhaps it is for the better. She had finally done what her Friend been telling her to do for so many years. She left that accursed place. She was now in the same spot as her sisters. A vagabond.

She felt as if she had committed a grave sin. It was hard to let go of her sense of duty after so many years, stubbornly clutching to it. Ideally, she'd envision herself going back to that chamber after fulfilling her promise, but it didn't matter.

Vilivian could sense that Chifu was not just some beastfolk with a talent for the arcane. There was certainly a great power within her and if the spatial magic she uses is any indicator of her other talents then she just might be able to grant Vilivian her wish.

At this point, Vilivian is willing to take any chance to keep her promise.

'Very well,' Vilivian looked at Chifu. Vixen raised her eyebrow curiously. 'I will participate in this tournament,' she paused for a second. Chifu smiled. '*Trickster.*'

Chifu cliqued her tongue. 'Oh, you teasing minx!' she laughed. 'I promise you, by the end of this tournament, I will have you call me by my name.'

'Your tail also appeared,' said Saki.

'My tail?!' Vilivian panicked and turned around. There was indeed a tail – but it wasn't her own, but was instead a piece of giant fluff sticking out from above her buttocks. 'Huh?'

'Cute, isn't it? Consider it a sign of status as a participant. It shouldn't hinder any of your abilities, so you needn't to worry about it affecting you.'

'Its size is distracting.'

'Just ignore it.' Said Saki.

Vilivian did as told and turned back to her refilled glass of wine.

'It's on the house,' said the bartender. 'Good luck.'

Saki tended to rest of the patrons. Vilivian was left to her own drink. Chifu seemed to have lost any interest in talking as well. She sipped her ale and giggled to herself occasionally.

Vilivian never expected that her first contact with a civilized world would be in Crossroads of all places. She could've gone anywhere, but she hired the Ferryman to take her here. It was refreshing; meeting people without any killing intent.

Yet, she couldn't help but have this gnawing feeling in the back of her head. She knew she didn't really belong here. She didn't really belong anywhere but that place.

'... What will happen if I lose?'

She directed the question to herself rather than to anyone in particular, but Chifu answered nonetheless.

'Well, you're free to spectate until the end of the tournament, of course. After that, you can do whatever. I'm not going to just throw you out like some rubbish. If you'd really wanted I could bring you back to your world. Even that cave of yours if you really want.'

Vilivian glanced at the Trickster. Chifu was playing with her white, gold-embellished pipe; balancing it and spinning atop of her finger.

'Frankly, I don't know why you'd ever bother protecting that little cup.' Chifu said mockingly. 'I say, let the people find out on their own that their age is the least of their problems.'

'Short lifespans lead them to desperate measures,' Vilivian recalled the Prince. 'They fear they won't meet their ambitions in their lives.'

'They'll reach them all in a century or two. Then there will be nothing for them to do.'

She inhaled from her pipe and exhaled to the side. Even on the other side, Vilivian could smell the tobacco.

'Eternal life is boring,' said Chifu.

Vilivian nodded.

'Isn't it?'

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