



PRINCESS OLIVIA INVESTIGATES

THE WRONG
WEATHER



LUCY HAWKING

ILLUSTRATED BY **ZOE PERSICO**

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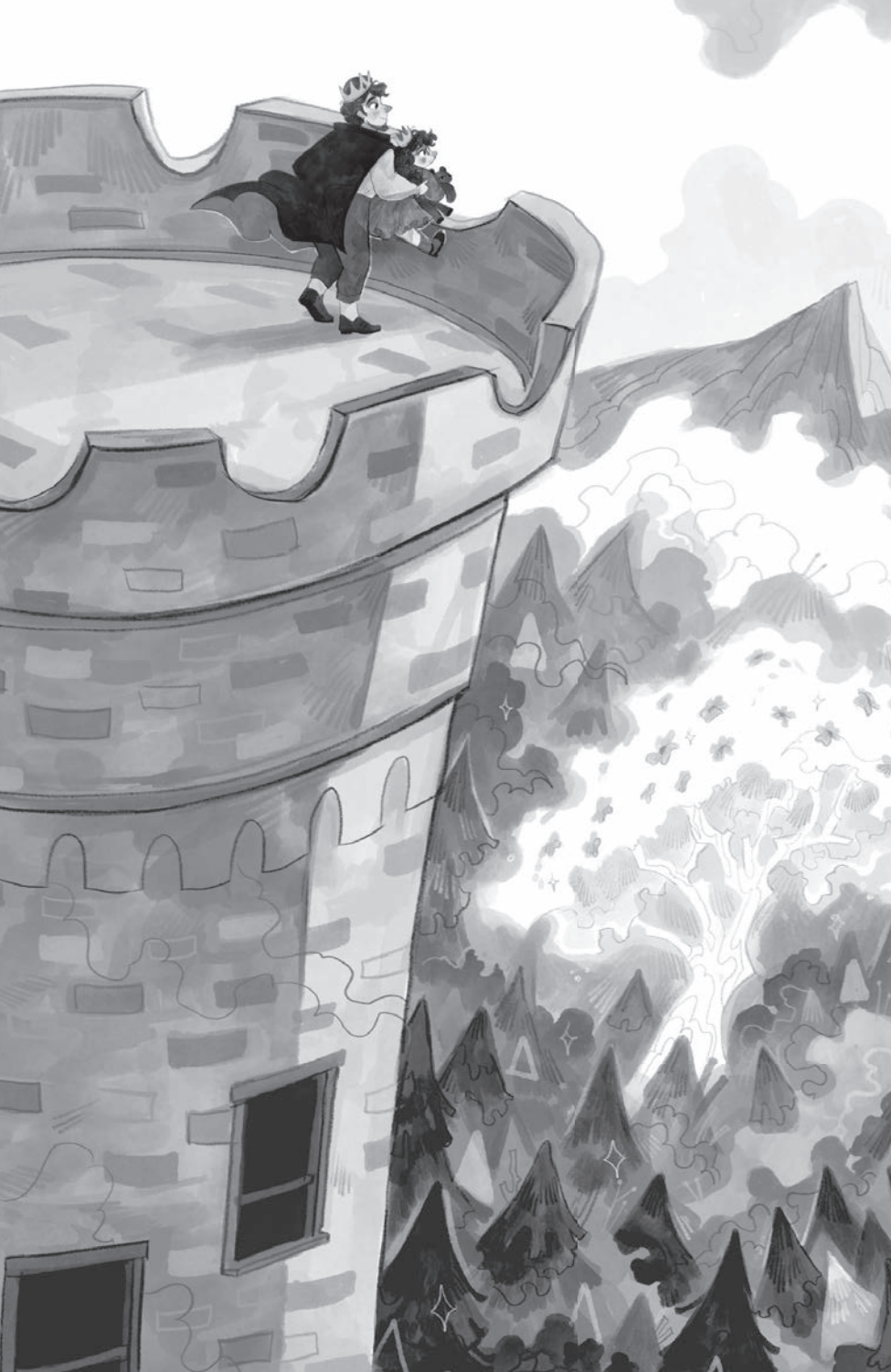


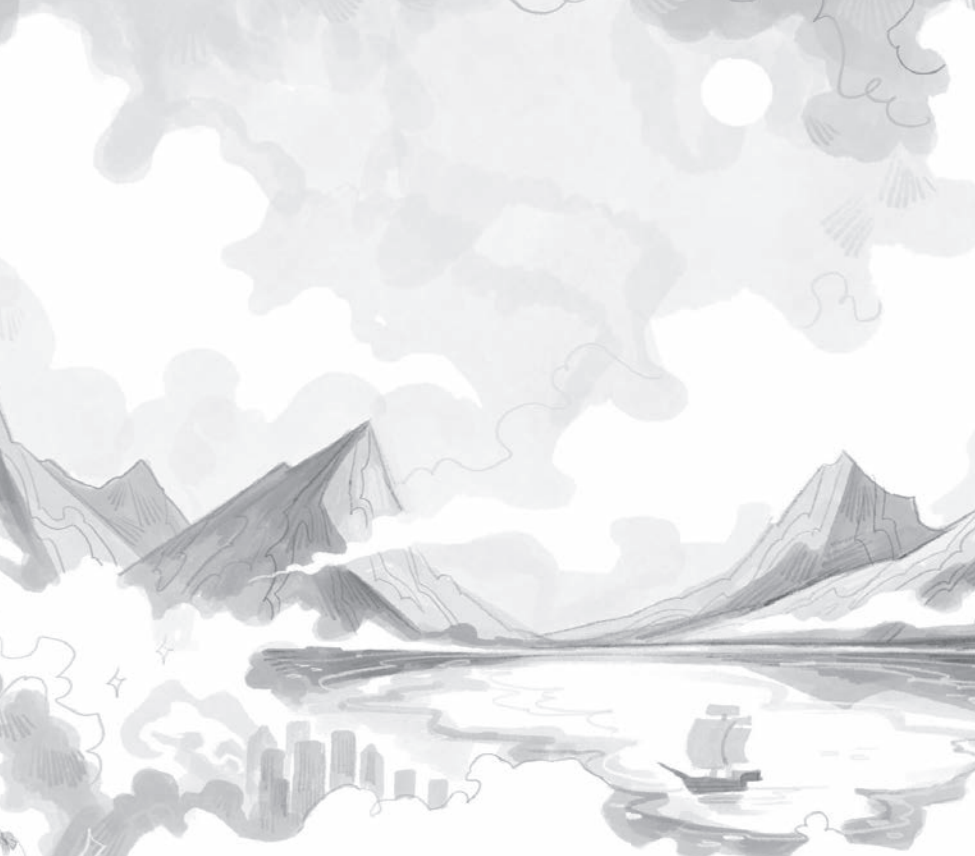
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To all the Princess Olivias in the world









PROLOGUE

From the top of the lookout tower, Princess Olivia could see for miles across the mountainous landscape of the kingdom that would one day be hers. It was just before her third birthday and she was so small that her father, King Tolemy the Thirty-Second, had

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to lift her up to see over the old stone wall of the rampart. Peering over the edge, firmly held by her dad, she could see the wooded darkness of the quiet mountains, broken in places by yellowy green spring leaves and rushing torrents of pale blue water from the distant glacier. Mist hung low across the quiet landscape.

‘**Look,**’ said her father, the king, as he pointed down below the ancient lookout tower to a huge tree. It had spreading branches covered in delicate pale pink flowers whose petals curled upwards to greet the morning sunlight. ‘Do you remember the story of that tree?’

Princess Olivia smiled and shook her head, even though she did. She wanted to hear her father tell her again about the special tree, the emblem of the kingdom of Alez. She sighed happily as he began the tale.

‘A thousand years ago,’ he said, his breath

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softly tickling the back of her ear, ‘our ancestors came across the glacier from the other side. Back then, no one knew what lay beyond those mountains.’ In the distance, Olivia could see the jagged rocky edges of the grey peaks that lay in a semi-circle round the kingdom.

‘It was **a huge adventure**,’ said her father. ‘People came here to escape. A horde of terrifying horseback warriors had swept across the continent on the other side of the mountains, seizing control of everywhere they passed through. Only by climbing over the glacier, where they knew the invaders wouldn’t follow them, did our ancestors get to safety. They followed the honey scent of this land across the ice to find the valley. Do you know who led them?’

He smiled down at his bright-eyed, clever daughter who, even at the age of nearly three,

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he sometimes felt had already sorted her world into better order than he had managed to as an adult.

‘Yes!’ said Olivia. ‘But **tell me again, Papa!**’

‘King Tolemy the First!’ said her dad.

‘The same as you!’ Olivia joined in.

‘Exactly! The great king I’m named after! He founded Alez. When he saw that tree –’ he pointed – ‘which is called . . .?’

He gave his daughter a quizzical look and she giggled, a sound he loved more than anything in the world.

‘**The angel tree!**’ burst out Olivia. ‘The angel tree breathes on the kingdom, and that keeps it safe!’

‘Clever girl! When Tolemy the First saw the angel tree, he stuck his sword into the earth beneath it and said that, from now on, Alez would be a kingdom of peace and beauty where everyone could live safely and **be happy!**’

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‘Everyone be happy,’ echoed Olivia, twisting round to beam up at her dad. ‘With our angel tree!’

‘While the angel tree flowers, no harm can come to Alez or any of the subjects who live here,’ said her dad. ‘And it’s our job, as the royal family, to keep it that way.’



CHAPTER 1

Six years later . . .

Olivia was in the royal library, curled into one of the huge leather armchairs with her blanket and her best teddy, reading an old book about the palace. She was trying to plan an **escape route**. Turning the heavy pages, she sighed – but not happily. She wanted to find

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a map of the palace buildings and grounds to see whether she could find a secret way out that she hadn't come across before.

She'd already tried everything she could think of. Once, she had nearly got out of a small gate in the huge walls that surrounded the palace grounds. The gate had been hidden by such a thick coat of ivy that no one but her had realized it was there. She'd managed to push it open but only walked a few paces outside when she heard footsteps behind her. Nina, her nanny, had caught her and brought her back before she could get even a glimpse of the world outside. The guards had blocked the gate the next day.

After that escape attempt, Nina had felt sorry for lonely Olivia and brought her a set of brightly covered paperback books, which Olivia kept stuffed into her duvet cover to read endlessly at night by the light of a torch. In the

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dim light of the little bulb, she read about the exciting adventures of two girls in a faraway land called England. They went to a **boarding school** and became **detectives**. Olivia really, *really* wished she could go to school and be a detective. Sitting up at night in her four-poster bed with the embroidered curtains and her favourite teddy bear, Prince George, she imagined what school would be like, how many friends she would have and the mysteries she would solve there.

But that was just a dream world to Olivia, who lived in a palace that felt like a prison. It was a beautiful palace. Or at least, people were always *saying* it was. *She* thought it was echoey, cold and smelled of mothballs. To her, it was the **loneliest** place on Earth, despite all the bustle that filled the corridors and the hundreds of rooms. There were no other children and the grown-ups ignored her, though she knew if she

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tried to escape again, they would come running after her straight away.

And there was hardly anything to do, except have her lessons with the tutors who came to teach her pointless things like the lute and table manners – subjects that her parents thought were **important** for **a young princess** but Olivia found very boring. She went on long walks around the gardens, wishing she could leave the palace grounds and find out what life was really like in the world beyond its tall walls and gates.

She hadn't been outside for years now. There had been no more trips to the lookout tower, no picnics in the mountains nor chances to paddle in the streams in the valley. When she asked her parents why they never went anywhere, her mother pretended she hadn't heard and her dad looked sad but said nothing.

That sunny morning, as the butterflies

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fluttered and the hummingbirds drank nectar from the mass of flowering trees outside the library window, Olivia gave up closely examining maps of the palace and decided to go back to her self-made educational system. Her parents never told her anything she wanted to know – they just banged on about royal family history and the great magical yarns of the past. Olivia felt she was **too old** now for **fairy tales** and anyway, she'd heard all the stories of Alez of the past. She wanted to know about Alez of the *present*, but her parents didn't have anything to say on that topic. Olivia was baffled by this – they told her it was her destiny to rule over Alez and yet they didn't seem able to tell her the **simplest facts** about the country they expected her to run one distant day!

To make up for this, she had come up with a plan to read everything in the library – from one side to the other. The books weren't

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always helpful, though. It was the library of her royal ancestors, so it was mostly about learning to joust or how to conduct complicated royal relationships with other countries.

Some, however, *were* interesting. She especially liked the **little book of maps**, where Alez was drawn and photographed in minute detail: every orchard, village and rushing stream was brilliantly coloured and recorded. She would pore for hours over the illustrations of bright blue lakes, clear rivers, green grazing pastures and huge rolling forests. Below the palace a road led to the city's port and harbour, with the sea stretching into the distance. Behind was the jagged rocky border with their next-door country, divided from Alez by the mass of the **huge icy glacier** her ancestors had once crossed. It had all been ruled over by Olivia's family for the past thousand years.

Over Olivia's head, as she sat in her arm-

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chair, hung a scowling portrait of her great-grandmother, the terrifying grande marquessa. She was **so frightening** even the artist hadn't dared paint her with a smile. From the picture, Olivia could see she had the same snub nose as her great-grandmother but she often thought how lucky the grande marquessa was not to wear glasses like she did, as the marquessa really didn't have the right kind of nose to keep them



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in place. She had the same wide-spaced, shiny eyes, the same sweep of hair that fell forward and the same heart-shaped face ending in a determined chin; in the portrait this was raised in exactly the way Olivia raised her own when she wanted to ask a question.

Olivia could even see that, like her, the grande marquessa was not a large person. The biggest difference was that where Olivia's face always wanted to break into a **smile**, her great-grandmother's mouth was turned down into a **scowl**.

What the painter couldn't capture was the grande marquessa's legendary voice, said to be so commanding that even the birds stopped singing when she spoke. Olivia liked to try out scary voices to see if she could come up with one good enough for the grande marquessa. But just as Olivia was scary-voicing her way through a long and confusing paragraph about

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how to politely declare war on a badly behaved nearby country, something happened.

Suddenly she heard a **commotion** coming from the Great Throne Room next door! She jumped out of her big armchair and ran to the connecting door to peek through.

From her side view, she could see her mum and dad, lolling in their thrones as usual with their crowns on. But instead of a whole host of servants around them, fussing and whispering and jostling to get closer to the royal couple, a very different group of people – ones Olivia had never seen before – had barged noisily in.

This was all **extremely odd**. Ordinary people were not supposed to speak until they were spoken to, and they certainly weren't meant to charge around the royal rooms, examining priceless objects, toppling huge flower arrangements and helping themselves to sandwiches.

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The crowd was dressed in unfamiliar clothes. Usually, everyone in Alez – by law – wore the national dress, which for non-royal people was a knee-length embroidered wraparound garment with socks and sandals. But this group were wearing strange, two-piece costumes made of black cloth with leg coverings that went right down to their shoes and a square jacket that buttoned at the front. Both men and women were dressed the same; under the black jackets, they wore white shirts with an odd-looking narrow red piece of fabric tied round their necks, which hung in a straight line down their fronts.

Olivia could see her parents were **not coping well** without her. She pushed her way through the black-clad crowd, not even bothering to say ‘please’ or ‘excuse me’. For a second, she thought she needed Prince George, her loyal and supportive teddy bear, but there was no



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time to go and get him, so she ducked and dived over to the two thrones and was just about to give her dad a hug when a man and a woman walked forward, and the crowd went quiet.

‘Paragona and Tolemy,’ the large, heavysset man said, not even bothering to bow. Those were the names of Olivia’s parents, but no one ever said them because they were supposed to address them only as ‘Your Royal Majesties’.

Olivia’s dad, King Tolemy the Thirty-Second, looked around wildly for his courtiers to tell him what on earth was going on. But **everyone had vanished.**

‘Minister Jeremy Pont!’ said Tolemy in confusion. ‘What in the name of the angel tree of Alez do you mean by this! Deputy Minister Gretchen Sparks! You too? I thought we worked together and trusted each other!’

Jeremy smiled. ‘We’re here to help,’ he said, tipping his head in what almost looked

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like a bow but wasn't. The group behind him, silent now and standing in a long row, nodded solemnly.

'Help?' said Tolemy, sounding even more perplexed. Paragona's mouth was wide open in an expression of horror. Olivia knew this meant things were really bad, as usually her mother forbade such facial expressions as 'common' or 'ageing'.

'Yes,' said Gretchen, the deputy minister soothingly. 'We realize that you have borne the **terrible burden** of the crown for so long.'

The group behind them put sorrowful expressions on their faces.

'And it's too much for you now. We, the people of Alez, can no longer expect that you suffer the pain and stress of running this country – especially not with its present challenges, which you are so ill-equipped to meet,' she continued as Jeremy turned away

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briefly to answer his mobile phone. Olivia clocked this. She knew about mobile phones because she'd once found her nanny, Nina, using one in secret to call home, but Nina had refused to let her play with it as mobile phones were banned inside the palace.

'It's **not your fault**,' Jeremy added in a syrupy voice, tucking his phone into his pocket. 'You tried. You went along with the decisions we told you to take. But nothing has prepared you for the complex nature of the modern world.'

Olivia was looking from Jeremy to her parents and trying to work out what was happening. Disloyal though it felt, she knew this intruder was right. After all, her parents didn't even have their own mobile phones so they couldn't call for back-up now they needed it! What else was missing from the life of the palace? How far behind were they really?

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‘What . . . what’s going to happen now?’ said her father meekly.

‘We’re going to take over from you, let you have a really nice, good rest,’ said Jeremy firmly. ‘We’re going to get everything sorted out, those tiresome problems that you found so difficult to manage. The big mistakes you’ve made. Once we have the whole situation under control, we can give you a call or maybe pop in to let you know how everything’s going?’

‘Pop in?’ said the king. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t I say?’ said Jeremy, in what Olivia just knew was fake surprise. ‘We’re going to need the palace as the new seat of government. It’s just perfect, so it’s time for you to **go somewhere else.**’

‘But where?’ said the king in bewilderment. ‘Wh-wh-wh-?’ he stuttered. But he didn’t get an answer as he was already being helped out of his throne by members of the crowd.

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Queen Paragona still looked too stunned to speak as Gretchen took her gently by the hand and led her towards the great doors.

Only Olivia seemed able to say anything.

‘You’re throwing us out of our house?’ she piped up. She tried for the grande marquessa scary voice, but it came out much more squeakily. **‘You can’t do that!’**

Jeremy Pont turned his gaze on her. He had eyes the colour of the cloudy azure blue of the icy streams that ran down from the Alez glacier, way up in the mountains behind the palace.

Olivia shivered; she suddenly felt afraid.

‘Little girl,’ said Jeremy. ‘Your people have lived off the fat of this land for over a thousand years – and look what a mess it’s become. Don’t you think it’s time to let someone who knows what they are doing rule the country?’

‘A mess?’ said Olivia, perplexed. ‘Why is it a mess? I don’t understand.’

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‘You will,’ said Jeremy. ‘Guards, escort them out of the palace grounds. Take them to the bus stop. From there, they can arrange their own transport to the city to start their **new lives.**’

As Olivia and her parents stumbled out of the palace, no one would meet their gaze. Even the gardeners, once so friendly, turned away as they passed. But just as they got to the big gates, they heard running footsteps behind them. Out of breath, Nina, Olivia’s nanny – well, ex-nanny now, it seemed – ran up to them and pressed a pillowcase full of clanking objects into Paragona’s hands.

‘It was all I could grab,’ she said, panting and looking back to see if anyone was watching her. ‘I must go! Prince George is in the bag! And your book of Alez!’ She kissed Olivia on the forehead and disappeared into the trees by the gate.

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Now clutching the oddly shaped pillowcase – which turned out to have a selection of Paragona’s jewels and crowns in it as well as Olivia’s precious bear and her treasured book of pictures – the royal family stood silently at the bus stop at the end of the long palace drive while several buses roared past.

They didn’t know they had to put a hand out to make one stop.

Eventually **a saggy old bus** wheezed to a halt in front of them, and so the three ex-royals clambered on and took their seats in the front row. The bus cranked into life and set off down the winding roads towards the great port city of Alez. Olivia had never been there before and certainly never expected to visit the city in an ancient bus, puffing out great clouds of black smoke behind it, while she sat squeezed between her parents on ripped seats looking out of dirty windows.

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Olivia's parents were startled beyond belief by this unexpected turn of events. Paragona was even too taken aback to examine her **jewellery collection**, something that at other times would have been her first priority. Tolemy was clearly lost in a nightmare. But Olivia was peering out for her first proper glimpse of the world beyond the palace gates. Finally she was escaping! But not in the way she had ever expected. And what she saw was a surprise too.



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The books of old photos and pictures in the library had shown the road down to Alez City as lined with happy villages, flowering angel trees and smiling children. But instead, Olivia could now see that the roads were littered with little shacks made of plastic, branches and corrugated iron. The trees had thin drooping branches with only yellow leaves that drifted downwards to the scrubby earth. Skinny children stood around in groups, poking at



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mangy-looking cats. Dirty water pooled in puddles that glowed with an eerie shimmer. As the bus turned a bend and the city below laid itself out like a living map, Olivia could see the harbour definitely did not hold tall ships with fluttering sails and brilliant flags – as she'd seen in her book – but the rusted hulks of abandoned vessels.

The weather, which had been bright and sunny as they had stood at the bus stop, suddenly closed in and the old bus was buffeted by high winds and squalls of fierce rain so dense that Olivia could see nothing but **fat raindrops** running down the windows. Was this the start of the adventure she had longed for? Torn between excitement and surprise, she hugged her bear closer and wondered what the outside world was going to reveal to her, now she was about to be part of it.



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