Black Sun

By Clifford Beck

“We don't develop courage by being happy every day. We develop it by surviving difficult times and challenging adversity. “

Barbara De Angelis

For My Brother, Randy

Chapter 1

It was a small, unassuming office, near the end of the hallway. Inside, was a staff of one, a scientist, sitting in front of an antiquated computer terminal. Budget cuts precluded the administration from acquiring more modern technology, but for the department's purposes, what they had was all they needed, or so they were told. Now, on an eight-hour shift, a low-paid graduate student sat, dividing his attention between the task of polishing his doctoral thesis and watching the images on the display in front of him. Carefully editing what would be the final draft, his focus was pulled away by an alarm, accompanied by a flashing red square on the display. Spinning around in his chair, he looked at rapidly accumulating data as he was overtaken by a shocked sense of disbelief.

“That's not right,” he said.

Opening another window on the interface, he double-checked the data, and to his horror, his initial impression had been confirmed. Now in a panic, he transferred the information to the computer's print spool and watched as pages of paper slowly slid out into the

printer tray. Scanning the pages, his eyes grew wide with panic.
“Oh my God,” he said. “Oh my God.”
Jumping out of his chair, he ran out and down the hallway. Reaching another office near the elevator lobby, he stopped at the desk of the department secretary.

Her name was Eleanor, a middle-aged woman who was more than familiar with the inner workings of the administration. Looking up from her desk, the first thing she noticed about him was his terrified, pale expression.
“Charles,” she began. “What is it?”
“Where's the boss?” he interrupted. “I need to talk to him, right now!”
His hands began trembling, as his forehead broke out in heavy beads of sweat.
“He's in a meeting with the director,” she replied.
“Where?” Charles asked.
His voice became as panicked as his expression, however, Charles would not divulge the potentially devastating information he had discovered.
“Charles,” Eleanor replied. “Can this wait?”
“Eleanor,” he said.
His voice had become firm as he continued to inquire about his boss's whereabouts.
“This is serious. I need to talk to him right away.”
Eleanor hesitated, knowing that such a disruption could cost her job, but realizing how much the department needed her, she finally cooperated with Charles' request.
“He's upstairs, in the director's conference room.”
Darting out of the office, he ran for the stairwell, racing up, exited the door near the director's office, and foregoing the secretary's office, threw the door of the conference room open.

The table was surrounded by department managers, with the director seated at the end. Everyone turned towards Charles as soon as he appeared in the doorway, while his boss reacted with

obvious irritation.
“Uh, Charles,” he began. “I'm in a meeting with the director. Can this wait?”
Not considering the consequences of interrupting the meeting, Charles walked past his boss, and straight to the director.
“Sir, I'm sorry for interrupting, but we could be facing a crisis.”
Looking down the table at Charles' boss, he asked about the young graduate student.
“Tom, is this one of your people?”
He tried to make excuses, commenting on Charles' exuberance for the job.
“Excuse me,” Charles began. “But, this serious.”
The director managed a bit of patience and inquired about the urgency Charles had been struck with.
“Alright, first, who are you, and what do you do here?”
Charles tried to maintain himself, as he began his response.
“Sir, I'm Charles. I monitor data from the SOHO satellite.”
He clumsily began shuffling the printout and set out in front of the director.
“I just received this,” he said.
The director glanced over the information, and not being able to understand it, inquired again.
“So what's this, a new sunspot?”
Except for his boss' embarrassment, the room broke into muffled giggles.
“I wish that were the case,” Charles replied. “But, this is far more than that.”
Running short on patience, the director asked him to hurry with his findings.
“Okay, Charles, just give the short version.”
Charles took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts.
“Okay, in 1859, there was a solar super storm called the Carrington Event. This storm was so powerful the telegraph line burst into flames. Several operators were electrocuted, and the northern lights could be seen as far south as Cuba. Now, in 2012, there was another storm. It just missed us. If it struck the magnetosphere, it

would have fried every power grid on the planet, effectively throwing civilization back to the eighteenth century. This data indicates that another is on its way, and there's a good chance of a direct impact."
Now, the room had become quiet as everyone's attention focused on Charles. The director, however, was less than convinced.
"Are you sure this isn't some kind of glitch in the software, or maybe you're just overreacting? I mean, these computers aren't exactly right out of the box. Do you have any confirmation of this?"
Sifting through the pages of data, Charles pointed out further information on what he believed could be a catastrophic event.
"Yes, I was able to confirm the incoming data."
Not being a scientist, the director deferred to Tom for further an explanation.
"Well," he began. "We get hit with solar activity all the time, so I'm sure that Charles here might be exaggerating just a bit."

Denial is common in the face of potential threats, from any source. Even those in high-level positions of government and NASA seemed to be no exception.
"Alright," the director interrupted. "So, how bad could this be?"
Shifting through the data again, Charles presented the numbers.
"Okay, normal activity is usually about minus fifty nanoTeslas. A coronal mass ejection measures at roughly minus 1750 nanoTeslas. This could be, at least, 2500."
The director interrupted him with one last question.
"So, let's cut to the chase. What will this do?"
Having no understanding for the politics of science, Charles could barely believe what he was hearing.
"Sir, this is going to knock out everything – power grids, all of our satellites, the internet, anything that plugs into an outlet. This could cripple the planet for years. Any unshielded power source will be destroyed."
The director took a few moments to absorb the information, and taking the road of caution, asked Tom for confirmation. But,

Charles, once again, pressed the urgency of the issue.
“Sir, excuse me, but we don't have time for that. This will happen in three phases. X-rays and UV rays will reach the planet at near light speed, interfering with radio signals and GPS. After that, there will be a massive electron storm. Then, the plasma storm. This will shake the magnetosphere, so we don't have time for further confirmation.”
Now, the director's mind went into crisis mode, and going around the table, began giving orders.
“Tom, make sure we get a second confirmation.”
“I'll handle it myself,” he replied.
“No,” the director replied. “Charles, you have the most experience at monitoring this activity, I want you on this.”
“Yes, sir,” Charles replied.
“Tom,” the director continued. “Call the Pentagon, and notify them of the situation.”
“But, what if we're wrong?” Tom asked.
The director knew that every decision fell to him, and this would be no exception.
“If we're wrong, I'll take responsibility. But if Charles is right, we could be looking at a level of damage on a global scale. Now, get on the phone. I'll notify the president.”
He continued around the room, ordering contact with the FCC, the joint chiefs of staff, as well as Homeland Security. Everyone in the room suddenly felt the urgency of the crisis that could affect not only national security, but the state of civilization itself, and emptying the conference room, set the wheels of damage control into motion.
“Oh, one more thing, everyone,” the director said. “This information is hereby classified. This conversation does not leave this room. Am I understood?”
Acknowledging the director's order, everyone left the conference room at a rapid pace, with muted expressions of panic. No one could afford to let on even the slightest hint of what now loomed over the entire world, something that promised a cataclysm of unrecorded proportions.

Chapter 2

The call came in that afternoon and was answered by the president's secretary. No information was given, but in the president's absence, it was immediately forwarded to John Berner, Secretary of State. He was in the middle of drafting a proposal to the U.N. for the deliberation of a Syrian ceasefire, but hearing the tension over the phone, he put his work aside and gave the matter his full attention.
“Are you sure?” he asked.
He listened carefully as the voice on the phone continued with more information.
“Alright,” he said. “I'll notify the president. We're going to need one of your people here to give the briefing.”
The Secretary was informed that time was short and that flying someone up to Washington might not be feasible, so a video briefing was recommended.
“Well, if that's what we have to do,” the Secretary replied.
He was then asked if the president was available, but the Secretary, always being aware of the president's whereabouts, was hesitant to answer.
“I'll call you back once the president's here. In the meantime, I'll arrange a meeting of the cabinet, so we can get our information straight.”

Hanging up the phone, the Secretary jumped from his chair and, approaching his receptionist, requested that the entire cabinet be ordered to the west wing. The head of the FCC, the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Homeland Security would be the first to arrive. Some agencies had already been contacted and were on their way to the White House, while other department heads had were being escorted from high-level meetings. No one had been given any information until the cabinet convened, and the meeting was to be held behind locked doors, as two uniformed Marines stood guard. But, a problem was immediately recognized.

The President was not yet in attendance, and the room was becoming tense. Getting up from his chair, the Secretary of State approached the Speaker of the House.
“Where's the President?”
He maintained a low tone, so as not to alarm anyone else in the room.
The Speaker responded with great concern.
“He's on vacation.”
Knowing the President's habit of taking time off, the Secretary tried to hide his frustration.
“Again?” he asked. “We need the President here, right now. You call up the Secret Service and tell them to bring him back. And where's the Vice President?”
The Speaker became caught up in deepening concern.
“He's with the President,” he replied.
The Secretary pulled him off into an adjoining room for a stern reprimand.
“You have a direct influence on the President, and you know they're never supposed to be in the same place, at the same time. Now, you get the hell on the phone and get both of them up here.”
In fear of his job, the Speaker attempted to shift responsibility to the President.
“Um, I hate to ask this question, but what if he wants to finish his vacation?”
The Secretary quickly went from frustrated to angry, and overstepping his authority, gave the Speaker a direct order.
“Mr. Speaker,” he began. “I don't care what it takes. You get him up here, and if he refuses, you contact the Secret Service, and you have them take him and the Vice President into custody.”
The Speaker had never heard of such an order being given and wondered about the seriousness of an issue he had not yet been informed of.

Going to the nearest secured phone, the Speaker called the head of the security detail in charge of protecting the President. Acknowledging the order, he passed it along to his team, only to be

met with resistance. Meanwhile, in Washington, the Speaker remained on the phone, anxiously waiting for a response, when the team leader's voice returned.
“Sir,” he began. “The President wants you to handle the situation.”
Enraged, the Speaker gave one last order, fully expecting it to be carried out.
“You listen to me,” he said. “We're looking at the possibility of a global crisis, so I am ordering you to take the President into custody. You put him on a Marine One helicopter and get him up here. Do you understand?”
The team leader made a cautious response, wanting to be sure he was clear on what he was being told.
“Sir, is that policy?”
The Speaker, now screaming into the phone, began making threats of prosecution if his orders were not carried out.
“Fuck policy! This is an emergency! Now, you fuckin' get both of them up here, or I will have you arrested. You will spend the rest of your life in a federal prison! Now do your fucking job!”
The Speaker slammed the phone down, hard enough to crack the receiver. Taking a breath, he regained his composure, and leaving the room, made his way to the cabinet room, where people were already gathering. For the sake of maintaining security, the meeting would be held behind closed doors, and the press, in spite of their protests, would be barred. The last thing the government needed was for information to be leaked to the public, not yet being clear on the magnitude of the impending crisis.

He sat next to Secretary Berner and inquired about the video feed for the briefing. A large flat-screen television hung on the wall, for the purpose of long-distance video conferencing. Its signal was always encrypted.
“We need that video,” the Speaker said.
As if on command, the screen lit up with a fuzzy display, but over the next few seconds, the picture sharpened, and Charles' face appeared, a concerned expression, matching his worried tone. He was also unaccustomed to dealing with the nation's top leaders and

was also noticeably intimidated.
“Hello,” he began. “Can you see me?”
“Yes,” the Speaker replied. “Now, what's your name?”
Charles broke out into a sweat. Between shuffling through the data he'd collected, and facing the most powerful people in the country, he had become aware that he was not nearly ready to make his presentation. But, he believed that the world was in danger, and was committed to offering a convincing case for urgent action.
“Uh, my name's Charles,” he began. “I'm a graduate intern here at NASA...”
“Charles,” the Speaker interrupted. “I don't think there's a need for introductions. We need to know what's going on.”
Becoming slightly short of breath, Charles cleared his thoughts and began his presentation.
“Okay, several hours ago, one of our satellites – the Solar Heliospheric Observatory, captured data of an incoming Carrington Event.”
“Charles,” the Speaker interrupted. “We're not scientists. Can you give this to us in English?”
“Oh, yeah, sorry,” Charles replied. “Well, the short version is that there's a massive solar super storm headed towards us, and it's going to do a lot of damage.”
The Secretary of defense spoke up.
“Don't we get hit with these things all the time?”
“Yes,” Charles answered. “But, not like this. The last time this happened was in 1859. Back then, telegraph line caught fire, operators were electrocuted, and the northern lights were seen as far south as Cuba.”
Prompted by both concern and curiosity, Andrew Marsh, Secretary of the Interior, broke in.
“Excuse me, you mentioned damage. What kind of damage?”
Charles did not have to look for an answer, as fear had forced it into his memory.
“Well,” he began. “This will happen in three phases. First, the planet will be struck by a strong wave of ultraviolet and X-rays. Our atmosphere should protect us from that, but it might affect

radio transmissions and GPS. The second phase will be an electron storm. This..."
He paused a moment in order to avoid becoming emotional.
"Charles," the Speaker said. "It's okay. Just keep going."
"Well," he continued. "The next phase will involve an electron storm. This will knock out any unshielded power sources – things like power grids, and..."
Samuel Taylor, Secretary of the Interior, interrupted with a grave tone.
"What a minute," he began. "Power grids? Which part of the country?"
Charles paused to take a breath. Knowing the gravity of the oncoming crisis, he anticipated their reaction and had become visibly shaken.
"Sir," he continued. "All of them."
Now, as a concerned murmur rose, the defense secretary broke into the conversation.
"Are you saying there's going to be a nation-wide power failure?"
"No, sir," Charles answered. "This will be global."
The murmur within the room grew louder, with concern over transportation, economic, and political issues.

"Excuse me, sirs," Charles interrupted. "I know you're all about politics, but this could get really bad. Every power grid on the planet will be fried, and there's not a lot of time to warn people."
A quiet now fell over the room, as everyone was struck by the same thought.
"You are going to warn people about this, right?" Charles asked.
His question was met with silence. However, the Speaker, exhibiting a cautious calm, again, inquired about Charles' findings.
"Now, Charles, how sure are you about this? I mean, this is a big deal, and we can't go to the public without some facts or some kind of evidence."
The stress of delivering news for what could be a global catastrophe to the most powerful people in the country was beginning to show, as Charles began to break out in a nervous

sweat.
“Sir, this is what I have. I know that to you, it's just a bunch of numbers, but to me, numbers don't lie. And if I could add something, this isn't global warming. This will begin, in all probability, over the next day.”
Politicians always seem to be skeptical of the sciences, especially when it necessitates spending money that could easily go to corporate interests. But, this was not a matter of decades. This was imminent. Yet, politics being what it is, an agreement was made to seek a third-party adviser, prompting an emotional reaction from Charles.
“Excuse me! There's no time for that! We may have twenty hours, tops, before this hits. After that, we'll be living in the nineteenth century. You have to warn people!”
The Speaker had seen enough and came to the understanding that while Charles may have a valid concern, he had also become emotional, casting his Ability for logic into question.
“Charles,” he said. “Can you put your boss on?”
Tom had been nearby, and overhearing the conversation, sat in front of the monitor, pushing Charles out of the way. He was just as nervous, but was far better at hiding it.
“Uh, Mr. Speaker,” he began. “I apologize for my intern's reaction, but having studied the data, I do agree with the possibility that this could be quite severe, and worth the president's consideration.”
The Speaker, now taking the conversation a bit more seriously, asked Tom if he had spoken to his boss about the issue. But, a response was put off when the Speaker's attention was abruptly interrupted by the defense secretary, who leaned towards him with a cell phone against his ear. And although they spoke in a whisper, the exchange commanded everyone's attention.

Turning back to the video screen, the Speaker's voice took on a serious, yet nervous tone.
“Okay,” he began. “I think we have everything we need. We'll contact the president and organize things from here.”
Without so much as a thank you, the video screen was turned off

and turning towards the room, the Speaker updated the cabinet members.
“Alright, everyone,” he began. “That was the director of NASA. It seems that this is the real thing. Now, I need an update on the arrival of the President and Vice President.”
As if on cue, there was a knock at the door, and forcing his way in, an aide, being held back by one of the Marines standing guard in the hallway, urgently requested entry. The Speaker stood and waved off the Marine, allowing the aide to enter the room.
“What is it?” the Speaker asked.
“Sir,” the aide began. “May I see you in the hallway? It's about the President.”
Walking towards the door, the Speaker excused himself, as he left the room. After closing the doors, he walked down the hallway with the aide, out of earshot of the Marines, and spoke in a whisper.
“Where's the President?”
His voice reflected a grave tone of urgency and impatience.
“Sir,” the aide replied. “We just got a report that Marine One went down on its way to the airport. Apparently, they lost power. There were no survivors.”
The Speaker put a hand over his mouth in shock. There was a written protocol for a crisis of this magnitude, but in the absence of both the President and Vice President, the task ahead would be that much more difficult.
“What about the Vice President?” the Speaker asked.
“He was on board as well,” the aide answered.
The Speaker went from impatient and frustrated to terrified and angry, as he quietly reacted to what had become the worst possible scenario.
“Fuck, why were they on the same chopper. Did anyone from the Secret Service think to separate them?”
“I'm sorry, sir,” the aide said. “I don't have any information on that. But, excuse me for saying, but they weren't exactly the brightest bulbs in the box.”
The aide hesitated, as if he wanted to add something.

“What it is?” the Speaker asked.
“Well, sir,” the aide began. “I don't know if this information is correct, but it was reported by police that the President may have urinated himself as the chopper went down.”
The Speaker put his hands over his face, as he wondered how much worse things could get. He knew that if the information was leaked, it could not only incite chaos but lead to a public relations disaster, causing people to lose faith at a time of crisis. Finally, collecting his thoughts, he ordered the aide never to repeat the information he had given him, stressing the need to maintain the dignity of the Presidency.
“Get a scrub team out there,” the Speaker continued. “Get everything cleaned up, and have the bodies recovered. We can't let this get to the press.”

Walking back into the cabinet room, everyone noticed the troubled look on the Speaker's face. Standing in front of them, he announced that both the President and Vice President were dead. The room broke into chaos, and naturally, there were questions.
“Everyone,” the Speaker began. “According to the report, Marine One went down somewhere outside Miami. We're getting a recovery team together, and I've ordered a media blackout. Given the fact that both the President and Vice President are dead, I am hereby assuming the presidency.”
The head of the Democratic Party was quick to speak up.
“Excuse me, Mr. Speaker, but I believe that Congress should choose the next President.”
Quickly becoming irritated, he looked at the senator with a dumbfounded expression.
“Senator,” he replied. “Have you ever read the constitution? I believe that, under the circumstances, I am the successor to the presidency. Do I make myself clear?”
“Yes, Mr. President,” the senator answered.
The senator became struck with the embarrassment of suddenly being seen as an idiot, but attempting to save face, he got on his phone and called the Chief Justice. Without revealing the nature of

their meeting, he asked him to come to the cabinet room immediately, and within five minutes of his arrival, the Speaker was sworn in as the new President. The Chief Justice, assuming the worst, knew better than to inquire into any details regarding the cabinet's emergency meeting.

He then directed his attention to the Secretary of Energy.
“Frank, I need you to contact everyone in charge of the country's reactors. We need everything taken off-line. We can't keep this from happening, but we can try to get ahead of the damage.”
Taking out his phone, Frank asked about what he would tell them.
“What about a cover story?”
The Speaker took a moment to organize his thoughts. There had been many situations that required such fiction, all in the name of secrecy, of course.
“Tell them its part of a new policy. We've decided to take everything off-line once a year for federally mandated maintenance. And we need this done quickly.”
Already on his phone, the Secretary conveyed the order to his staff, asking for confirmation within the hour.

Now, the conversation shifted to public response, and an agreement was quickly reached that martial law should be immediately implemented. This raised concerns about the suspension of civil liberties, and the time it would take for Congress to act.
“I understand your concerns,” the Speaker said. “An executive will be written, ordering the states to establish martial law. They can do that overnight, as opposed to the time it'll take for us to handle it.”
Everyone agreed without hesitation, but there was one issue left.
“Excuse me, sir.”
It was the Secretary of State.
“What about our borders? If we wait until this storm happens, we'll have no way to direct the public.”
Everyone knew that without an act of war, the closure of the country's borders would difficult to explain, so another cover story

would be needed.
“Alright,” the Speaker replied. “Any ideas?”
The Secretary of Defense offered a suggestion, to put the country on high alert, anticipating a terrorist attack, and in order to avoid a panic, its location would not be disclosed.

The plan was seamless, and as opposed to other decisions made at the federal level, it took barely an hour to put together. Now, with the meeting adjourned, the new President, having made his way into the hallway, just outside the cabinet room, walked to a nearby window. Putting his hands on the glass, he tried to absorb the gravity of what would soon test the country's resolve. But only moments later, he quickly pulled himself back, with a gasp, and stepped away. He had been struck by a sudden burning over his palms and fingers. Examining them, he found his skin had been badly reddened, leaving him barely able to move them. Remembering what Charles had said, he ran to the office of Homeland Security, and with his hands beginning to blister, approached the Secretary, who was busy drafting emergency measures.
“Jack,” he began. “It's starting.”
The Secretary looked up from his desk, and seeing the President's hands, reacted in horror.
“Jesus Christ, Mr. President, what happened?”
The pain caused his hands to begin trembling. But discounting Jack's concerns, he gave him the order to evacuate the White House, sending the cabinet members, as well as Congress and their families, to their assigned bunker in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It had originally been built as an emergency shelter, in the event of a nuclear war, and possessed every necessity and comfort for the continuity of government. It also housed a three-month supply of food, but it was not expected to be used for more than a month. Over this period of time, reorganization, and recovery would be planned, while all other issues would be tabled. It was now understood that science was anything but fiction, and as a group, they tried not to think about how global warming had been

handled. Instead, they focused on the crisis that would soon blanket the world.

Chapter 3

Ryan had lived in Troy all his life, and shortly after his divorce, settled on an apartment in the city's war zone, an area plagued by crime, drugs, and violence. He worked as an architect in Albany, but after court costs and lawyer's fees, his income had taken a substantial decline. Renting a drafty room in the back, it didn't take long for the effects of despondency to take their toll. Although his former marriage had been filled with misery, with his, now, ex-wife having turned his children against him, he had come to miss her company. There had some good times in the beginning. And even though he would cling to them in his best attempt to bring himself solace, he chose to remain isolated, distracting himself from the pain of being away from his children with alcohol. But one day, the pain of a solitary life overwhelmed him, and he found himself on the roof of the three-story building. Sitting near its edge, he wondered if there could have been anything he might have done differently, something that would have saved his marriage, sparing himself the repeated thoughts of ending his life. Now, after hours of soul-searching, he came to the conclusion that without, at least, being able to visit his children, life was no longer worth living, and standing up, he stepped to the edge of the roof. The building was only three stories high, but Ryan hoped it would be tall enough that he could successfully bring an end to what he believed would be a lifetime of personal loss and depression.

As he stood at the edge, Ryan closed his eyes and prepared himself, imagining how he would let his body fall, allowing the top of the head to strike the sidewalk below, ensuring a quick, merciful death. Opening his eyes, he made one final act of preparation, and taking off his watch, threw it back near his feet. He took a deep breath and held his arms out away from his sides. But, as he

began to lean forward, his journey into oblivion was interrupted by a popping sound nearby and looking back towards his feet, Ryan saw that his watch had exploded. It was also at that moment that he heard people screaming in the streets below. Curiosity quickly overtook his plan for suicide, and driven by continued screaming, ran down the stairs to the street. There, he found people writhing on the ground, their ears bleeding, some with holes blown out from the sides of their heads. Glancing around them, he found their phones had exploded, with sharp edges and charred cases. Upon closer examination, he also discovered that many were also missing several fingers. He tried to reassure them, using a calming voice, but something else grabbed his attention, and looking up, saw a series of colorful, bright curtains of light hanging in the sky. Having spent some time in Alaska, he was more than familiar with the northern lights, yet, knew they rarely reached that far south.

Running into a nearby convenience store, he asked the clerk for the use of their phone, but in having seen several customers drop in front of her, was already trying to call for an ambulance.
“The phone's out,” she said. “What do we do?”
Ryan took the phone from her, suspecting that as the result of panic, she may have misdialed, but looking at its digital display, discovered that the line was, in fact, dead.
“Do you have a first aid kit?” he asked.
His tone was quickly approaching panic. However, the clerk was close to collapse as her breathing quickened, and as her eyes widened with shock the mind seemed to drift off into catatonia. Now, seeing that she would not be able to provide any degree of help, Ryan ran around to the back of the counter, but searching frantically, found nothing. Running back to the clerk, he asked if there were any towels that could be used, but still, her eyes remained fixed on the space in front of her. Now, unable to reach her, Ryan turned his attention to the wounded, scattered across the floor. First approaching an elderly woman, his attention was immediately drawn to the left side of her chest. There, he saw a deep gaping wound with what remained of an electronic device,

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