MOUNTAIN FIVE

A COLLECTION OF FIVE SHORTER STORIES INVOLVING DIVERSE PEOPLE IN UNUSUAL SITUATIONS. SEE HOW YOU MAY COPE AS THEY DID. THERE MAY BE A BOND IN ONE OF THEM.

THE THIRD OF THE "FIVE" SERIES OF SHORTER STORIES.

DUST NEVER SETTLES A vivid dream leads a man to set in

motion, events that could be facts

or fiction.

GREAT DAY FOR A RESTTwo boys make a grim discovery

and the tangled connections to sort

out, to solve it all.

BIRD OF PREY Nothing is straightforward and the

challenges to find the answers that needs logic to be put aside.

JUST A FEW BONES Nothing is fixed in history forever.

A discovery that rewrites history for

young and old.

QUEEN CHARLOTTE When things change, as they always

do, a worthwhile deed should never

be delayed.

By Jimmy Brook

DUST NEVER SETTLES

By Jimmy Brook

A vivid dream unsettles a man who believes it is a prologue to something he dreads. The mystery deepens as he and the police, try to unravel facts from nothing, and race to solve it before it ends like the dream.

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Chapter One

The local guardian of the law stopped shuffling papers and looked out the front window. A day that was new with the smell of freshness and warmth, and hopefully no dramas. He needed a week to recuperate from the all too common drink charges and petty larceny that seemed to be an endless cycle. The town looked quiet, even though he knew it was early still. Maybe on the properties surrounding town, they got up early but here in the business centre of the district, they kept more conventional hours.

Widdon's Crossing grew out of necessity in bygone days. Sheep and some cattle were being traded and shipped to markets. The junction of two major highways in the state. Today the pubs were fewer than years back and so was the policing. Just three of them. Jack Grogan came here fifteen years ago from Newcastle and just stayed. His kids were now grown and his wife of many years still as supportive of his job as when they married.

Hundreds of kilometres away, a similar story for another officer of the law. His day was going to be better when it was over, or so he thought. Now an inspector, he was due for a holiday and it would start next week. Brendon Casey and his wife Virginia, had booked a tour to the Top End. They had never been to Darwin and the city and surrounding area promised a new experience. The majesty of Kakadu beckoned. Even a brochure was taped to his wall.

Now all that was needed for these two people to be thrust together, was a catalyst. And that catalyst came in the form of a person who awoke that morning, rather early. The cause of his early entry to the day was because of a dream. Not an ordinary dream, but something so pungent, so realistic, that he remembered it when awake in every detail. He dismissed it but it didn't go away. Coffee and his eggs on the veranda still didn't vanish it. The need to get his property up and active for the day just put it on hold, and when the two staff he had were doing what they needed to do, he sat down to look at the withered grasses and bleating sheep, and it came back still just as vivid.

William Benson ran sheep. Lots of sheep and over many years had built up a respect from the community. He knew that and never used it to his advantage. He accepted people for who they are and it worked both ways. Now he knew he must do something and this might put that respect into doubt. No family

now to talk these types of things over, just himself. He picked up the phone and entered the number from the small list on his office desk.

"For you Jack." The young officer held the instrument out towards him, and the sergeant dropped his gaze from the street and taking the telephone in his hand, answered the caller.

"Hang on William. Lets get this straight. A man is dead or he might not be yet dead and you don't even know his name or where he is." There was quietness as he listened and shook his head with a grin. "Alright. I have these dreams too but usually some reason for them. Anyone else and I would tell them to get sobered up, but not you. Really nothing I can do without something more positive." A pause whilst an embarrassed man apologised and the conversation seemed to wilt. "You let me know if you can give me something and I will keep my ears on the bush telegraph and lets hope it was just a dream."

The police officer sat in his chair for a while, thinking about it and how to forget it. But that was hard to do. Benson was a solid person and never known to flights of irrational thought. Still he could do little without some hard evidence. At lunch break, he phoned Division with the weekly sitrep which was very lean on crime and more a social catch up with his superior in Area Command. Why he mentioned it he never really remembered, but it just came out as something to fill in the time.

The Commander sat for a while and tried to collect a thought that eluded him. A man who was dead or maybe not dead, yet unknown. This was recently put into his mind, but not by Jack Grogan. He shrugged and poured a coffee. As he savoured the break from the paperwork that was mounting day by day, he tried to think of what was eluding him. Then he had a glimmer of recognition. Something that happened down in the Riverina a couple of years back. Someone thought they saw a person's body and it appeared dead but quick subsequent investigations showed no body to be found and subsequently no missing person to fit the criteria. That was it. Maybe.

More on impulse, he phoned Jack back. "Brendon here. That missing body who may or not be missing is nagging me. There was an incident some time back. That went no where but just the same, use your nose and have sniff about. Might be something. And I'm off to Kakadu in a week with Ginny, so no calls to disturb our long needed holiday after the 17th."

Jack Grogan sat and looked out at the street. It was half quiet and a bit of a snoop might get his cob webs sorted. He phoned William Benson's place but got no answer, so leaving instructions with his duty officer, he revved up the Land Cruiser, and headed out of town.

Chapter Two

Benson was giving some purchase requirements to his leading hand but couldn't get it sorted in his head. "No, make it ten boxes. Oh I don't know, you decide. I'm going over to David's place." He turned and headed for the ute. The foreman shrugged his shoulders and went to the office. At least he could get a couple of things done without the boss hovering about.

William drove slowly as though with purpose, down the front drive to the town road then turned the opposite way towards his neighbours. At the big poplars that marked the front gate, he stopped on the grid and took stock of his thoughts. 'I'm stupid' he thought, 'let it go'. But he eased off the brake and headed on. No one appeared at the front veranda and William got out and mounted the steps. He yelled David's name out but got no reply. The door was shut so he went around the back of the building and saw the kitchen door was open. He yelled again then went inside. All was quiet. Where was the cook, Alice, or her husband, Hank? The small cottage where they lived was nearby, adjacent to the stables and store room. He headed there but no one answered his call. The carport at the back of the kitchen still had the Discovery parked in it. He looked in the window but it was empty.

Then a voice caught his ear. It seemed to be around the side of the house, and he took some tentative steps in that direction. Suddenly a figure came around almost collecting him. It was Jack Grogan, the local police sergeant. "Whoa," he said then smiled when he saw William. "Thought I would pop out and have a look or whatever. Any sign of Batten?"

It took a few seconds to get his mind in gear, but William nodded his head. "Nothing. No sign of the cook or the offsider, that's Hank."

Together they looked in most places together, the barn; the sheds; stable; the house rooms and even the cottage. All deserted. There were dirty dishes in Batten's sink which didn't sound like Alice. She was pedantic about order, remembered William. The house was neat and nothing seemed to be disturbed. On the front veranda, the policeman made a call on his mobile phone whilst William suddenly went back inside. He had seen something that didn't register at first but came to mind when he saw the few cattle down dear the creek. The last time he came here, about a month ago, he remembered looking at a painting on the sitting room wall as he finished his whiskey. David told him it was a Turner. Cost him a fortune years ago. It was gone. In its place was a small print that was in the hall. William looked in the hall at the blank space of which the hook still remained.

Grogan came in. "Called Command. A detective team will come up this afternoon to have a look around. Mobile phone service is a bit iffy. Kept dropping out but I got there. Anyway what are you looking at?"

William told him. It may be nothing, or it could be something. Bit of a mystery at the moment. They left at the same time. The policeman to get a bulletin out on the three missing people, and the property owner to go and check his, in case something was amiss.

Back home, he quickly found his two hands and explained what had transpired. Buildings were checked and the employees asked to ride the boundary keeping their eyes open. Later, the school bus dropped off young Nancy, daughter of one of the hands, and she was told to keep near the house until her father was going home. Just after five, William saw her coming across the near paddock towards the house. 'So much for staying near' he thought. When she got to the back door, her father came out of the store room and noticed her holding something. He yelled for William and the two men looked at the battered hat Nancy was holding. "Where did you get this?" asked William. His voice trembled for he had seen this green felt hat with a daisy motif before. Alice usually wore it when she was going out anywhere. "I just picked it up down near the creek. Where you have that hole for paddling and mucking about."

Benson quickly went inside and rang the police, then both men and the girl walked quickly down to the creek and along to the pool. Due to the lack of rain over the last few months, there was not much water and the pool was quite shallow. No sign of the missing cook, but there was a recent campfire remains nearby. They walked back and waited for the law. Jack arrived on his own. He

thought it could be just circumstantial, like she lost it whilst walking. Though why here? The creek was on Benson's land but that meant little amongst neighbours who were on good terms. Or it could have been carried here by someone else, or something else like an animal. That would be up to the detectives. Actually the sergeant had come with one of his PCs whom he had left at Batten's place on the way. His uneasy feeling was now matching that of William Benson.

A search of the creek and pool revealed nothing new, so the policeman went back to town to await the plain clothes men. William told the hands to go home and see what tomorrow brings. He then sat on his front veranda and chewed over his fears for his neighbour. Could a dream do this? He didn't know.

Chapter Three

Two detectives, one an inspector, from Command arrived just on dark and were immediately taken out to the Batten property. As they had brought their own car, Jack took the constable back to town with him, after explaining what he had looked at earlier. "Interesting' he said to his offsider as they drove back. " Brenden Casey came. He was going to the Territory for a holiday. Gets into your blood I suppose."

The inspector and his offsider had a look around but anything outside would have to wait until daylight. They had some items and food in the car and would stay the night. Jack thought this a good idea and would come tomorrow if they wanted more men. The night passed slowly for the visiting officers. A more detailed search of the house yielded nothing and Brendon Casey wished he had gone on his holiday last month. The occasional bellowing of a cow was the only noise to join the crickets.

Next morning, Sergeant Jack Grogan stayed around his office in case the phone rang. There was limited mobile service out at that area so there was incentive

to be available. Things did seem to have an air of mystery, but what? His offsider went out to the post office to collect mail and some items from the supermarket. About 11am he came in, dumped his collections and sought out the boss. "Jack. Funny thing but I was talking to that Mary at the post office and she reckons that she saw Hank outside a house, whilst she was driving to work. Didn't think much about it but it was early for him to be in town. Only mentioned it to me as I said I had been out to the Batten's place yesterday on business."

Grogan didn't waste much time in ringing the post office and talking to Mary. Appears it was in Lester Street, about the end house. He told his junior to keep close to the phone and headed out to the street. The end house was empty but the next one was too easy. When he asked the lady could he speak to Hank, she looked around and then nodded and told him to come in. Hank was in the kitchen but came in at the sound of voices. "I'm Jack Grogan, you Hank?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I'd like you to come down to the station now." He turned and waited on the front veranda, soon to be joined by the supposedly missing man. He wouldn't give him any answers to his questions, just drove back to the station. Inside he asked him to sit down in the small interview room, gave him a cuppa and said "Right, let's sort this out."

"We are not sure anything has happened, but Batten is missing, likewise your wife, and you seem to be staying in town with someone."

Hank looked sheepish and stared at the table before answering. "I didn't know it was a police matter. Has something happened to Mr. Batten?"

"You tell us. Where is your wife? She also seems to be gone."

Hank lifted his hands up in resignation. "She's gone to Sydney to her sisters. She went about three days back. I was staying to help Mr. Batten and do the meals. II asked him would it be OK if I went to town to see a mate after tea. I'd probably have a drink or two, so would be back in the morning. That was two days back. When I got back next morning he was not around. A note on the kitchen bench said he had to go away for a few days and look after the place. I was going back this morning but I got sort of held up."

"Who is this mate you need to stay with?" Grogan guessed what the answer would be or should be.

Hank shuffled his feet. "My girlfriend. Called Rebecca. We have been seeing each other for a few months I guess. Me and Alice don't get along very well these days. Too good an opportunity to miss when she had to go to her sister's place. Has something happened to the boss? There was a note."

"Do you have it?"

Hank said he dropped it in the kitchen tidy. He was told to wait whilst the detectives were informed. Grogan rang the house and no reply but a few minutes later he tried again and Brendon Casey answered. The Inspector quickly went to the bin and found the note. It was not written but printed, which could mean nothing. He told Grogan to get the sister's address and send the foreman out to the farm. They may need his help in what was what.

The daylight search yielded nothing of interest.

Back in town, another of those quirks of nature was about to unfold. A million to one thing. The previous night, Bill Henley had taken his wife to play cards at a friend of hers. Since he came to town, he was conscious of the need to help keep his wife interested in staying here as he was. They had baulked at the idea of a stint which could last for years, here, but it was a career move. One day he would be a sergeant. Somewhere. After the game, they decided to drive around and look at the stars from a hill which gave a good view of town in the daylight. There were a couple of cars already there so they decided to go home. It wasn't until the next morning when the boss brought Hank in, that a light went on in his brain.

"Might be nothing boss, but it just came to me when I saw that bloke."

"What just came to you. Where our missing farmer is?"

Bill screwed up his nose. "No. Just that me and Jenny went out to Mison's Hill last night, for a drive," emphasising the last bit with a roll of his eyes. "I am married. Anyway coming back, I now remember seeing a light of some type on at the old Crump place. You know that empty place near Williams Creek. The couple split up and walked out."

Grogan's eyes narrowed. "Squatters perhaps. Or perhaps not. It is very close to the Batten property, when you think of it. How about you and me have a quick lookee and..." The phone rang and that ended the conversation. The other PC took the call and then cupped the handpiece as he spoke to his senior. "Burglary boss. A Mrs. Kemp says someone stole her Wing vase."

"It's Ming actually. Tell her we are on our way." Grogan shook his head. Like an accident waiting to happen, he thought. Iris Kemp was not actually discreet when it came to extolling her importance. Two months ago she announced that a great aunt had bequeathed her a Chinese vase. She did this in a piece to the local paper and then had a supper for CWA friends and others to show it off when she brought it back from the city. It was bound to happen.

The drive out to Crumps was put aside as he and Henley went around to the old colonial house at the end of town. Closing his ears to her loud protestations about not keeping order and protecting poor people's property, he managed to size up the incident as best he could. Rear window was forced and the only thing disturbed or missing was the vase which normally sat in a prominent position on a table for all to see as you entered the living room. Now it was gone. Assuring her they would do all they could, they left. "Put out a bulletin and advise the usual second hand dealers and CID," as they drove back. Then changing his mind, turned off and headed for the Crump place.

The place seemed deserted. The front door was shut and locked but there were recent tyre tracks at the side and rear. The kitchen window was not locked, and with a nod from his boss, Bill Henley prised it open and crawled in, knocking over a glass on the sill, before he got to the door and opened it. The place had been used in the not too distant past and most recent past as the food scraps and dirty dishes together with discarded wrappers, proclaimed. The house seemed empty and sort of derelict, and they were about to dismiss it as vagrants or squatters when Jack noticed a discarded handkerchief on the floor behind the back door. Not so much the hanky but that it was covered in blood. Now they were more cautious and looked at the outside shed. Empty except that a small store room at the back was locked, not with a lock or key but by a nailed piece of timber. The PC checked the back but no apparent window, so Grogan knew he had to be at least thorough especially if his superior was in town. Prising it off with a piece of metal, he pulled the door open.

Chapter Four

Within the next hour, the two detectives and an ambulance, were parked on the parched grass near the back door. The medics were giving treatment to a bruised and injured David Batten. They said he needed hospital treatment but in their opinion, would recover. He had a bad head wound and a broken finger. They did get to talk to him before he was whisked away.

Whist they awaited the arrival of a crime unit from Newcastle, they sat out on the front veranda so as not to contaminate the house and shed area. The story was still sketchy but it appeared that David Batten heard a noise a couple of nights ago, from his back stable, and knowing that both his staff were gone, went out with a torch to investigate. He was thinking a fox or some animal, only to find three men. When challenged, one jumped him and then intense pain and nothing. He woke up, bound, and bleeding, in a farm house kitchen. They had a blindfold of some description over his eyes so he couldn't see them but he could still hear. Something about his Turner painting should fetch a good price and one more job. He resisted a bit when they pulled him up and he remembered the hanky falling off his head when he was manhandled out the back. The last thing he remembered was something like they will never find him in this place.

Jack Grogan mentioned the missing vase to his superior, and they assumed that could be the job that was mentioned. A state wide search would be conducted and whatever avenues they could, but it often end up a dead end. However this did have an ending. Television had given coverage of the story and the missing items a good go, and one motorist remembered a station wagon next to his when he was getting fuel in Maitland. As he walked in to pay, a man in the back of that vehicle briefly recovered a big item in the back, and the observant motorist remembered the top of a big vase. He casually noted the registration then rang the police. They caught the vehicle with a roadside camera, and soon many police vehicles converged on it at the Gosford exit. One Ming vase and one Turner painting were amongst the contents.

William Benson had just returned from the small hospital in town, after visiting his neighbour. He sat on his kitchen chair with a coffee and reflected on his vision that started this chain of events. All finished now, he hoped, although there was the one little thing that niggled him. Maybe two things. What about the hat that was down by his creek? The other was the vase. That was a bit of a surreal issue. Especially as he was planning to do something about it! He disliked that woman but business was business. At the CWA supper, he had gone and he felt the need to have it. Not to take but to buy or trade. He had a Tang vase, similar in size, although not the same. He flirted in a verbal sense with her about selling, and she laughed it off saying he needed a lot of cash or something appropriate, to do business with her. That meant there was hope and whilst he didn't have cash of the sort she would be bound to want, he did have something else.

Iris Kemp liked things she could show off, and at the supper he noticed a small sculpture on a table. Pseudo Greek in design of a nymph playing a flute. He knew and she would know that it was less than 100 years old, not 2,000, but her friends were never told that. William used to be in antiques in his early days and he saw many good and many bad items. Somehow he had kept a few and one in particular was also given to him by a business man for helping acquire bits and pieces over those early years. It was a small alabaster relief of a Roman goddess and it was old. Not from the Roman times but probably Georgian. He had it in a box. It was not his thing and he saw a possible trade. A matching piece to his vase would be nice.

The night it was stolen was the night he had planned to ring her and ask to discuss such a transaction. He put off calling that night and then the next day he heard, the whole town heard, of what had befallen her Ming vase. When she finally got it back in the weeks ahead, he perhaps would ask her. Not now. It was all too raw.

The hat was another issue. He didn't know how it got where it was found, but he knew it was Alice's, because she was wearing it when they met at the creek last week and when they parted. He took a billy can and mugs, and with a small fire, made a cuppa for them both. If her husband found out that William had been seeing his wife, it could have been ugly. There was nothing that wasn't above board. They just used to talk. She needed someone to talk to and he just happened to be that person. It waws a platonic friendship, never even kissed her, just a friendly hug on parting. He would try and ask her one day about the hat.

Jack told Hank that the reason for him coming to town was not a police concern and wouldn't be mentioned to his wife. She came back from her sister's place and apart from the distress for her employer, never indicated anything else amiss. Jack had his feelings about the matter though, and was sure she knew there was something going on. Maybe Rebecca was one of a line of many somethings going on. Their problem.

Six months later, Jack's wife casually mentioned to him that she got out early from a boring tea party put on by Iris. Pride of place, she saw, was a small alabaster statuette of some Roman goddess or other. When Jack asked her about the Chinese vase, he was told it was nowhere to be seen. Last week something else caught his eye. It was a new painting in the Town Council art gallery, a Turner, that looked very familiar. A wise move on David Batten's part.

The town had its limitations and it had its interesting points. Always something happening. Yes, he thought, dust never settles.

Jimmy Brook

BIRD OF PREY By Jimmy Brook The need to have is a compelling human emotion. Rejection will be even more compelling to correct, by whatever method is at hand. The human

more compelling to correct, by whatever method is at hand. The human mind is infinite in its creativity although sadly much is designed to reduce man to a level that should have long been left behind.

There is nothing like a straight forward crime to one who is charged to pursue it. When it is not, it either challenges the mind or frustrates it.

Sometimes logic has to be put aside.

BIRD OF PREY

CHAPTER ONE

Gary parked his bicycle on the bridge and threw stones into the still water below. It was getting hot and he hoped Michael would be along soon. They had talked about riding along the river track that skirted the mangroves passing an old fishing shack. Local gossip at school was that some cranky bloke lived there and yelled at anyone who ventured too close. Gary didn't care. His dad yelled all the time at him. He was used to it.

Dust rose as another bike skidded to a halt next to him. The usual greetings were exchanged that young teenagers used and without discussing where to go they just did. The heat would be unpleasant for riding in a couple of hours and Gary wondered about a swim. Where the tidal river was blocked by some rocks, water flowed down from above and they had waded here before. They reached the old shack and kept going. No one challenged them as they rode past and soon they were in a leafy section of forest as the track meandered about. They stopped when a wallaby jumped out and just as quickly disappeared, then decided to go through a thicket onto the creek.

There was a small grassy area and two large lizards were feeding on something in the grass. They turned their heads when the bikes appeared then scurried off to ascend a tree. The boys headed for the water but Gary looked over at what the lizards had been eating and thought it was a large kangaroo. "Look Michael. Some dead 'roo over there." They took some steps towards it and then stopped. Kangaroos did not have arms and legs or wear clothes. For a few

seconds they just stared then whilst Michael heaved his insides up, Gary used a word or two his mum would not approve of. Then they high tailed it out of there.

Peter Bradshaw followed the constable as they alighted from the 4x4 and walked down to the creek. It was hot and he wished he was in his swimming pool. But he wasn't and he would have to do some work instead. Three other police and a man in white overalls were already there. He put on some overshoes and gloves that were offered and sauntered towards the body he could see. It looked a mess. There was blood and strips of dried flesh every where. Obviously the local animals had been feeding.

"Hello Frederick," he said to the man in white overalls. "Definitely dead?" It could have been a statement but either way it was the same result.

"Peter, your perception is amazing. Yes, he is dead. A day or so by the looks." Can't find the cause by looking so it may be just natural causes but more should be revealed back at the mortuary." Peter nodded and decided that to keep his lunch he should look around. There were no nice pieces of evidence apparent, even though the others had fossicked about and it would probably be some poor person who just came for a walk and had a heart attack or something. A question to no one in particular confirmed that there was no wallet and no car or house keys. This was unusual and it was looking suspiciously like robbery. The deceased was turned and slid into a bag before being lifted. Bradshaw looked at the ground and something caught his eye next to where the body lad lain. It wasn't obvious at first but had been exposed by the boot of one of the constables as they lifted. He picked it up and would have chucked it away. Just a very small plastic ring that had split in two. There was a marking that looked like a star and the letters 'AND' but that was all. Whatever else there may have been to this was missing and although he looked about, nothing was recovered. He pocketed it and with the thumbs up sign, they departed after some tape was put around the site. Always a precaution until they confirmed the cause of death. Peter Bradshaw hoped he would not have to come back. Holidays were due and he had booked a trip to the Sunshine Coast. Five glorious days just with sand and sun and cold beers and hopefully some nice female bodies to admire as he soaked it all up.

Back along the fire trail and almost unnoticeable for it was off in some bushes, he saw the back of a station wagon and he motioned the constable driving to

pull up. Bradshaw walked to the vehicle and had a look. It was in tact and was locked. The others had followed him.

"Think it's his?" The young officer had put his hands on the window to gaze in. The inspector groaned inwardly. "Hands constable," came out rather loudly. The junior realised his transgression and jumped back. "Sorry sir."

"Someone check the rego and lets just look about." He thought it may not be related but then you never knew.

"Sir." It was the clumsy constable, now with a gleam, probably hoping to redeem some credit points. "Keys. On the ground behind the front wheel." This time he was definitely not touching them. They were bagged just as the radio gave them the registered owner's details.

"Gerald Fullbright. Local address." Peter made a note of it then asked for someone to wait by the car until he heard otherwise. If Gerald came to retrieve his vehicle, he couldn't. Then they left. It was getting on but the inspector thought he could at least check out the local address. Fingerprints would be taken but it was only a slim chance they would be on file. He had sent a constable to check the old shack but it was empty and seemed disused.

The house was at the end of a quiet lane with lots of bushes and fifty metres or so past any other residence. He heard kids playing back there but nothing from this address. He knocked twice then walked around the place. Windows locked and all serene. There was a big bird aviary at the rear but it was empty. Unlocked and no seed or water. Peter decided to try the kids up the road.

He knocked on a door and a middle aged woman answered. "Yes?" Yelling from children echoed from the rear. He introduced himself and enquired about her neighbour. "Mr. Fullbright? Lives alone I think. Writes and likes birds. Trevor said he had a hawk once in the cage but now I don't know. There's a lady who comes every couple of days or whatever. Middle aged." "Friend? Relative?"

"Don't know but she had a vacuum cleaner one day. Might be a cleaner. "She turned to the inside and yelled. "Trevor." A ten year old appeared with mud on his face. "Trevor, you saw that woman once who comes next door. Where was it?"

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