



BOOK THREE

THE THREEFOLD
CORD



JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



THE THREEFOLD
CORD



THE DARK HARVEST TRILOGY

The Dark Faith
The Scarlet Bishop
The Threefold Cord



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JEREMIAH W. MONTGOMERY



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Elizabeth, Rhiannon, and Sherry

And if one prevail against him,
Two will withstand him;
And a threefold cord is not quickly torn.
(Ecclesiastes 4:12)

CONTENTS

PART I: KINDLED FLAMES

9

PART II: SHIFTING ALLEGIANCE

75

PART III: THE THREEFOLD CORD

161

PART IV: CREATURES OF
FLESH AND BLOOD

243



PART I



KINDLED FLAMES

PROLOGUE

It is a rule worth remembering as long as one lives: syncretism is worse than sorcery, the blending of faiths far deadlier than any witch's brew. The crooked heart will always rail against exclusive claims; the twisted spirit ever strives to unmake the truth of Holy Writ. The enemy incessantly calls man to be his own god, to make his own heaven, to pick his own piety. These whispered urgings are a serpent's promise. For doubt it not: there yet lives a dragon more frightening than most can imagine, and the passage of ages has not sated his ancient craving—to devour both reason and revelation.

It was the morning after the Feast of the Sacred Tree, and sunlight turned scarlet as it streamed through the red glass of the nave's high windows. It permeated the dark interior with ruddy iridescence and soaked the floor of the sanctuary with long, bloody stains. No flames flickered in the tree-shaped candelabras flanking the altar, and no lamps burned in the sconces dangling on chains from the ceiling. No worshipers knelt before the image that overshadowed the apse: a great carving of the Mother tree cradling a baby in two of its lower boughs, while two other boughs made the sign of the cross over the crèche.

The Feast was over.

Yet in the bishop's study above the apse, all was far from finished. Here sunlight fell unadulterated through clear, leaded

windows. On the chamber's far wall, a small fire smiled from its neat hearth at the burgeoning daylight. In the space between these greater and lesser lights, two figures faced each other across a table. Both felt plenty of heat—but neither smiled.

“It is all here, Somnadh.” The woman stabbed a finger at the volume lying open on the table. “Every filthy article of faith, every murderous ritual.” Urien riffled through its leaves. “Every last odious cantillation.” She stopped turning pages and stepped back. “It's all right here.”

Somnadh turned the Bone Codex so that it faced him. For a moment he looked down, running a long finger over the open pages. Then his gaze lifted to Urien. “You got this book from the monk?”

“From Morumus, yes.”

Somnadh flinched at the name. “Where would an Aesusian monk get such a book?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Very little, I confess. But perhaps he did not tell you? I'm not surprised. Ignorance makes manipulation easier.”

Urien bristled. “You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Somnadh? Or should I call you *Simnor*? Or maybe *Archbishop*?” She gestured at his fine Mersian vestments. “Morumus is nothing like you.”

“Then where did he get the book?”

Urien hesitated. Morumus had told her all about how he had first found the Bone Codex in Bishop Anathadus's library, and how Oethur escaped with it on the night the red monks murdered the bishop. He even told her how Anathadus found it in the great library at Tayaturim while Umaddians still ruled Hispona. But none of that was important now.

“Where he got the book is not the issue, brother. What matters is what it says.”

Somnadh's all-black eyes bore into her. “And what do you think it says, sister?”

Here at last they had come to it: the reason for Urien's flight from Urras Monastery, the purpose in her pursuit of Somnadh across leagues of land and sea. Everything that had driven her journey from Marfesbury through Cyrdol, up to the very steps of the altar here in Banr Cluidan, came down to this.

Here they were at last. Urien met her brother's gaze without flinching and took a deep breath. "It says that the faith of our ancestors is evil, Somnadh."

"Evil, Urien?"

"Yes, evil! The Old Faith is nothing but a detailed scheme of lies and depredation—a perverse system of *inhuman* devotion to a *subhuman* idol!" Urien's eyes burned as she unleashed her torrent. "It is nothing but an elaborate justification for the strong to butcher the weak! And for what? For what, Somnadh!? An illusory power that terrifies many but saves none!"

A lump rose in her throat. This was her history: shadow, slaughter, and terror. But she was not finished. "It says that both of us—you and I, Somnadh!—have devoted our lives to darkness. What we have practiced is not the 'Old Faith,' but the Dark Faith."

A heaving sob interrupted the flow of her words, and Somnadh raised a hand to cut her off. But, seeing his gesture, Urien growled with such ferocity that he took a step back.

"But worst of all, brother," she forced the words out, stabbing her finger like a pike thrust at his chest, "worst of all, it says that you knew. Father did not know, and I did what I was told. But you were different, Somnadh! You weren't led into the lies. You embraced the darkness with open eyes—every vile, murderous bit!"

For a long moment after she finished, Somnadh said nothing. Then he stepped back to the table, put a trembling hand to the Bone Codex, and slammed it shut. His fingers lingered on the leather cover until they steadied.

“This is not a book for any but the Mordruui,” he said at last.

Urien was surprised at the calm tone, but when he looked up she saw fire behind the void of his eyes.

“Not even for the Mother’s Heart.” He scooped up the book, carried it to the hearth, and tossed it into the flames.

Urien made no move to stop him. What need was there? “I’m the Mother’s Heart no longer, Somnadh. And you can burn the book. But you cannot deny what it says.”

“I do not deny the *facts*, sister. What I dispute is your *interpretation*.” His eyes showed something almost like pity. “I am convinced now of what I suspected before: that this monk has poisoned your mind. Your words reek with the most narrow-minded Aesusian invective: *Lies! Depredations! Subhuman idol!* You have always been too dramatic for your own good, Urien, but this is beyond you. *Dark Faith!* Really? Do you hear yourself? This isn’t you, dear one—not the real you. You have been infected with Aesusian lies. That is why you burned the Mother’s seedling. And that is why the Mother will receive you back.”

Urien gaped. She had not thought it possible that anything could make her angrier than the contents of the Bone Codex. After unleashing her accusation, she felt certain that her anger had been spent. But as she stood here now, drinking in the full measure of her brother’s condescension, she felt the flames within leap back to full strength—and beyond.

“Don’t you ‘dear one’ me, Somnadh!” She forced the words through clenched teeth, her voice rising. “Don’t you *dare* call me that!” Urien was seeing red now. “Do you want to know who forced me to burn the Mother’s seedling? Nobody! *I* caught Morumus and his friend prowling around the Mutha-dannach, and *I* led them to the Mother! *I* threw my lamp at the Mother’s roots! *They* did not lift a finger! *I* did it! *Me*, Somnadh! And do you know what? I’m *glad* I did it! I renounced the Mother then, and I renounce her again! She is no powerful goddess, just an *impersonal, impotent, unthinking* tree!”

Urien was screaming now, but she did not care. “And as for *Aesusian lies*, you are wrong again! I am *no* Aesusian, Somnadh—though I wish I could be! It is a far better faith!”

What Somnadh did next surprised Urien even more than his horrible words . . .

He struck her.

It was a hard blow, and she hit the floor almost before she knew what had happened. Pain blossomed on the side of her face, and dark spots replaced the red in her vision. But worse than the physical impact was the emotional shock.

He hurt me—my own brother!

Looking up, she saw Somnadh standing over her, his chest heaving. “How dare you speak thus?” he snarled. “How dare you?”

“You *hit* me,” she sobbed, the words sounding incredible to her ears. “You *hurt* me, Somnadh!”

But if there was any remorse or pity left in those black pits from which her brother looked out on the world, Urien did not see it.

“And what about the hurt you would cause our Father, Urien?” he raged. “In his old age, as he lies moldering in his bed, what would Father say if he heard your words? To this day, I have concealed from him your treachery to the Mother. Must I tell him now that his beloved daughter has renounced the faith of our ancestors?”

Somnadh’s thin attempt to justify his actions only provoked Urien further. She pushed herself up and glowered at him. “I will tell him myself!”

“You will do no such thing!”

“Oh, I will, brother. And I will tell him that his son is a coward—a coward who struck his own sister, and then tried to blame her for it!”

Somnadh’s face took on the ugliest expression Urien had ever seen, but whatever he was going to say—or do—next was interrupted by a sudden knock at the door.

“Your Grace?” The muffled, Vilguran call came through the heavy door.

Somnadh’s face changed even as his hands smoothed his vestments, and he turned away from Urien toward the door. “Come!”

The door swung inward to admit a catechumen. He wore the scarlet robe of the Red Order, but his cowl was down and his head shaved. He touched his forehead to Somnadh, then bowed.

“What is it, my son?”

“Your Grace, Duke Stonoric sends his compliments and requests an audience at your earliest convenience . . .” He noticed Urien, then averted his eyes as he realized she was not a monk. Looking back to Somnadh, he hesitated. “Shall I tell him you are . . . *indisposed*, Your Grace?”

“By no means,” said Somnadh in a firm tone. “Tell the Duke that Archbishop Simnor sends his compliments, and will be pleased to come to him presently.”

When the servant had gone, Somnadh turned back to Urien. “You will come to see your error, sister. The Mother has guaranteed it.”

“It is you who are in error, brother. The Mother is just a tree. Trees do not speak.”

Somnadh raised his hand again, but then shook his head. “No. No, you will see for yourself. Llanubys promised that you would.”

“Llanubys?” Urien had never heard the name before, but it sent an inexplicable shiver down her spine. “Who is Llanubys?”

“Llanubys, sister, is the Heart of Genna and Keeper of the Last Secret. For years untold she had tended the Mother. Unlike you, she has never found her service too burdensome.” Somnadh sighed. “But only the Mother lives forever, and very soon even Llanubys must return to her.”

“So she’s dying?” Urien shook her head. Her suspicion turned to pity. Only too well could she imagine a whole lifetime of serving the Mother. “I am sorry for her.”

For the first time that morning, Somnadh smiled.

It made Urien’s skin crawl.

“No, dear one. One Llanubys may pass, but another will take her place. *You* will take her place, Urien. Llanubys is the past and the present—and she is *your* future.”



In all his life, Oethur had never felt such joy as he did this evening.

Just a few hours earlier, he had stood alone at the front of Dunross Great Kirk, his shoulders heavy with the weight of his future. He had survived the destruction and pillage of Lorudin Abbey. He had escaped torture and execution at the hands of the Red Order. Finally, he had denounced his brother as a heathen, a murderer, and a usurper. With the backing of the kingdom of Lothair, he had claimed the crown of Nornindaal for his own.

But steel was thicker than parchment. Oethur knew that swords would ring and blood would flow before the future of Nornindaal was secure. And there was no guarantee that it would be secured for him. His brother Aeldred was a cunning foe, and he had allies, armies, and a castle of his own.

Oethur had realized then just how tenuous the situation truly was.

But then the doors at the back of the Great Kirk had swung open, and he saw . . . *her*.

Princess Rbianwyn.

Resplendent as a ray of celestial light, the princess had caught his eye down the long distance of the nave. And then she had smiled.

Rhianwyn knew the precarious position of their cause. She was the only daughter of King Heclaid of Lothair. Though she was delicate, she was not frail. She understood as well as any that by cancelling her engagement to Aeldred and marrying Oethur, she had signed her own death warrant if their cause should fail. Yet as her father escorted her down the aisle, neither eye nor smile wavered from Oethur.

Rhianwyn.

He had loved her for a long time. But all the while she was engaged to his elder brothers—first Alfered and then Aeldred—and so Oethur had never dared allow himself to see her as more than a sister.

All that had changed now.

The remainder of the wedding ceremony had passed like a dream. It *was* a dream in which he was conscious of participating, but like a dream it seemed to pass with preternatural speed. Before he knew it, he was awake again.

Happily, though, Rhianwyn was no dream. She had not vanished when Bishop Ciolbail concluded the service. Instead her smile had only grown wider, and the warmth of her hands in his filled him with new life and resolve.

Against every hope of a long-guarded heart, Rhianwyn was now his wife.

His brother might have powerful allies and a strong position. But Oethur had more.

Queen Rhianwyn.

He had a bride to protect. He had a cause to vindicate. He had a kingdom to win.

Aesus help me, I will do it!

That was his determination as he escorted Rhianwyn from the Great Kirk. That was his pledge as they stepped out of the church to meet the waiting cheers of Dunross.

Now, as he stood at the center of the high table, Oethur silently repeated the prayer before speaking aloud. “My lords and ladies,” he began in a voice calculated to rise above the festive din filling the great hall. “Friends and guests, may I have your attention!”

The effect was more or less immediate, if not quite complete. Though the evening was young, already eager servants had ensured that the guests were well supplied with food and well plied with wine. Even at the high table, several of the attendants seemed to waver on the border between a gladdened heart and outright dissipation. In particular, the Lady Isowene—one of his wife’s attendants—seemed quite beyond it. Her expression was glazed, her laughs careless, and she seemed quite oblivious to his call for attention.

As he stood from his chair, she continued chatting in Rhianwyn’s ear.

Oethur gave Rhianwyn an imploring look, and his bride turned to hush her friend.

“My lords and ladies,” he began anew, turning back to his guests. “It is time for the First Toast. If you will fill your glasses, please—the royal goblets will be brought!”

There was a flurry of livery and silver as servants scurried to fill every glass in the hall. A moment later, a servant girl carried a gold tray toward the high table. On the tray were two large, ornate goblets.

The royal goblets were as traditional as the First Toast itself. Cast in gold and carved with the symbol of the Three-fold Cord, the ancient vessels had been used at royal weddings in Dunross since the days of Lothair the Wise. According to tradition, Oethur and Rhianwyn would each take a goblet. Oethur would praise his bride to the assembled guests, and then offer her the first drink from his goblet. She would then return the courtesy.

As the tray approached, all the guests stood—including those at the high table. The servant girl’s eyes glittered as she proffered the goblets to the beaming bride and groom. Oethur reached for his goblet—

—but it was snatched away!

More than one guest gasped as Isowene grabbed the king’s goblet and held it aloft before the assembled guests.

“To the new king and queen!” she declaimed in a loud, slurring voice. She gave both Oethur and Rhianwyn a disheveled smile and lifted the goblet to her lips.

“No!” hissed the servant girl.

But it was too late.

Isowene drained the glass in a single gulp.

The entire hall fell silent. Festivity notwithstanding, the breach of protocol was appalling. Rhianwyn gaped. Oethur just stared.

But almost immediately, he saw that something was wrong.

For several long moments, Isowene seemed frozen in place—unnaturally transfixed, with her head tossed back and the goblet tipped to her mouth. Then her face twitched, a shudder convulsed her body, and the goblet fell.

Its clattering echo vanished in the wake of her scream.

Isowene’s shriek pierced the silence of the hall, sending panic into most of the ladies and not a few of the men. The cords of her neck stood out with taut rigidity, and she clawed at her throat with a desperate ferocity—leaving rivulets of scarlet streaming down her pale skin. She bent over double, then jerked back upright as her back arched and stuck. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, her face turned blue, and she frothed at the mouth. Then, with terrible suddenness, it was over.

Her screaming stopped, and Isowene collapsed into Rhianwyn’s arms.

Oethur kneeled beside his wife and put a hand to her friend's neck.

Dead.

Though he was as stunned as anybody in the hall, Oethur's mind had never stopped working. Even before Isowene collapsed, he knew what had killed her.

Poison.

As all other eyes remained on the fallen lady, Oethur's went to the servant girl who had carried the tray. His glance confirmed his instinct.

There was emotion in the girl's face, but it was not shock or surprise.

It was anger.

"You there, girl!" He rose to his feet. "Stay where you are!"

The girl's eyes turned toward him, and there was such malevolence in her expression that Oethur paused in mid-step.

"Who are you?"

"*Muthadis!*" she hissed. She flung the heavy tray at him edge-on, then turned and fled.



Morumus and King Heclaid had been conversing on the balcony outside the hall when the sudden scream shattered the evening air.

"What was that?" Morumus stared at the king. But both he and Heclaid knew full well what they heard.

Without another word, both turned and raced back into the hall . . .

. . . just in time to see a lady collapse near the center of the high table!

“Rhianwyn!” shouted Heclaid, terror rising in his tone. He shoved into the panicking guests like a crazed bear fighting toward its cub.

At the same moment, Morumus heard Oethur shouting. He saw a golden tray flying at his friend, and watched as a servant girl fled toward the entrance of the hall. Without a second thought, he veered away from the churning mass of guests at the center of the hall to the empty space behind its flanking colonnades. He could see the servant girl holding up her long skirts as she sprinted toward the far doors.

“Oethur!” he shouted as he gave chase, “I’ll catch the girl! See to the queen!”

But the servant—whoever she was—had no intention of being caught. She reached the doors several seconds before he did, and by the time he crossed their threshold she was almost to the stairs at the far end of the corridor. Several servants stood in that corridor, looking alarmed and confused.

“There’s been an attack on the queen!” Morumus shouted at them as he ran past, not daring to pause in his pursuit. “Call for guards, and send them after me!”

A moment later he hit the stairs at full tilt and clutched the hem of his robe to avoid tripping as he ran up the winding flight. He could hear the girl’s steps above him, and he growled.

She’s outpacing me!

Praying for strength, he forced his feet to move faster. He could not sustain such a pace for long, but he dared not let the servant escape.

As he ran, his mind turned over the sudden events. He did not know exactly what had happened in the hall, but even the limited sounds and sights told him all he needed to know at present. This servant had attacked the queen. Whether Rhianwyn survived or not he could not tell . . .

Lord Aesus, let her live!

Morumus could not bear to think what Rhianwyn's death would do to his friend. Oethur was strong as oak, but some storms might fell even the sternest timber.

Morumus's mind churned almost as fast as his burning legs as he pounded up the steps.

The servant must have acted at the behest of a patron.

Mersian? Nornish? Does it make a difference?

He shook his head.

No. What's important is whether she has associates here in Dunross.

There was only one way to find out.

Oh God, help me catch this girl!

Morumus tumbled out of the stairs into a corridor running the length of the upper level of Dunross Castle. The servant girl had made it halfway to the far end when she paused. At first, Morumus could not tell why she had stopped. Then he saw what she had already heard.

A tall figure crested the stairs at the corridor's far end. In his hand he bore a heavy saber. He had fair hair and wore a festal garment, but even from this distance Morumus could see wrath in his expression.

Oethur!

The Norn saw him at the same instant, but directed his words at the girl.

"You are trapped, girl! Surrender to us now, and you will receive a merciful death. Resist, and you will drink the same cup you gave the Lady Isowene!"

Lady Isowene.

The name did not register with Morumus except by negation.

Lady Isowene—not Queen Rhianwyn. God be praised.

It seemed a strange thing to praise the Almighty for sparing one in place of another. Was such a prayer even appropriate? But Morumus did not have long to dwell upon the question, for in the next instant, the servant girl wheeled toward him.

In her hand appeared a knife. It had a long, wide blade that curved back at the tip. Morumus became suddenly conscious of the fact that he bore no weapon.

“Morumus!”

“I see it!”

“Let her pass! There are guards on the lower level.”

“We cannot take the chance.” But what would he do to stop her?

With Oethur approaching from behind, the girl took half a dozen steps toward Morumus. The blade of her knife reflected torchlight like a dull, cruel fang.

Torchlight! The torches!

“Do not risk yourself,” Oethur insisted. “She will not escape!”

“Let’s make certain.” Morumus took a torch from the wall sconce next to him and brandished it before him. How much defense would it provide?

Seeing the torch, the servant hissed, pulled back her knife as if she were about to lunge . . .

. . . then turned sideways, yanked open a small door, and vanished!

Morumus reached the door before Oethur and saw that it opened onto a much narrower servant’s corridor. A dozen paces ahead of him, their quarry was shoving at side doors, trying to force entry. But none of them would budge.

Seeing Morumus, she gave up on the attempt and resumed her heedless flight. The servant’s passage ended at another door, through which the three of them spilled in quick succession. The chase continued down a second passage, up another flight of steps, and then down a third corridor. This last hallway had only one exit.

Always several steps ahead, the girl reached the doors at its end well before her pursuers. As she flung them open, Morumus caught the smell of fresh air and feared she would escape. But he need not have worried.

The doors opened onto a high, open balcony.

Morumus and Oethur stepped through the doors side by side. The cornered assassin, seeing her only hope of escape blocked, backed away from them until she stood against the stone rail.

“It’s over, girl.” Oethur leveled his saber at her chest. Morumus had never heard such authority—or doom—in his voice.

“My name is Muthadis,” she spat, her eyes defiant as she raised her knife. “Come and kill me, if you can.”

Oethur looked ready to oblige, but Morumus put a hand on his arm.

“Wait. We need to know who sent her.”

Morumus took a step toward the girl. “Your name—Muthadis—it means ‘Mother’s Maiden’ in Dyfanni. But your accent is northern. For whom are you working?”

Muthadis glared at him. “I serve the Mother.”

Morumus looked at Muthadis. He could see that she was young.

Has she had seen even a score of years?

And yet here she was, about to sacrifice her life . . . for what?

“The Mother does not order assassinations. She is just a tree.” He took another step toward her. “Don’t die in the service of an idol. Put down the knife. Cooperate with us, and we will give you a chance to repent. There is more at stake here than your life in this world.”

The words seemed to have some effect. The tension in Muthadis slackened. For a moment she lowered both her eyes and the knife.

“You will promise?”

“We will.” Morumus turned toward Oethur. “Won’t we, sire—”

“Morumus, watch out!” Oethur raised his sword and lunged forward.

Morumus turned just in time to see Muthadis’s face jerk up.

“I do not want your promises!” Her eyes were wide and her face twisted with hatred. “Nor do I wish to repent!” With the suddenness of an uncoiling serpent, she sprang at him.

Morumus saw the knife flash in the sunset and knew he was too close. There was no way he could avoid its keen edge . . .

But just when he was sure the blade must slice open his throat, Oethur’s saber blade struck downward.

The curved knife fell to the balcony stones—still clutched in a pale hand.

Muthadis howled, blood spurting from the severed stump of her wrist.

But the failed assassin was not finished yet. With the fluid nimbleness of a cat, she pounced at her severed hand, retrieved the knife with her remaining hand, and sliced at Oethur’s outstretched arm.

Oethur tried to pull back, but he was not fast enough. His blade had stuck in the balcony stones, and the instant required to pull it free was all Muthadis required. Her knife sliced into the meat of his forearm.

A look of feral glee sprouted on the girl’s face. “You will never be king now!”

Oethur gasped, but now he had his saber free again. This time he swung it straight at her middle.

Muthadis saw his stroke and jumped back—too far.

Morumus saw her legs hit the balcony rail, saw her momentum carry her balance over the edge. For a moment, the girl seemed suspended in midair as she flailed her arms.

“No!” Morumus dove toward her.

He reached the rail just in time to watch her fall.

And to see her smile up at him.

“Aeldred has triumphed!” she shrieked, mere moments before she slammed into the courtyard below. “The knife was poisoned!”

The Dark Faith is rising again. ... Will it bury the light?

The machinations of the Dark Faith ignite war throughout the lands of Aeld Gowan. Desperate to marshal allies against the rising foe, Morumus embarks on a secret mission to the distant barbarian peoples of the North. Sinister events force Oethur to risk everything for his queen and his crown. Will he find justice? Meanwhile, agony haunts Urien in the dungeons of the Scarlet Bishop as she faces the loss of everything—even her brother. Will the Ring of Stars be broken . . . or will the Red Order drag all of Aeld Gowan into the bosom of the Mother?

An epic battle between good and evil concludes in *The Threefold Cord*, the final book in the masterful Dark Harvest trilogy. It is a battle that will push a band of friends to the very limits of their strength—and their faith—as they fight to unearth the truth of an ancient evil, a tree rooted in bloodshed, and a fabled book that holds the secrets they seek.

“No one does fantasy like Jeremiah Montgomery! He draws the reader into an engrossing, believable world peopled by characters we love—and love to hate. His stories and characters stay with me long after I’ve finished the book. If you’re looking for a fantasy that’s powerful, moving, and full of truth, look no further. This is the writer for you!”

—**Karen Ball**, Bestselling Author, *The Breaking Point* and *Shattered Justice*

“Finally a trilogy that deals with clashing worldviews, true faith, and vigilante monks all at the same time! Montgomery is to be commended for carefully exposing the evils of syncretism and clearly drawing the line between good and evil. A fast-paced, multifaceted fantasy novel, *The Threefold Cord* delivers a fitting end to the Dark Harvest trilogy.”

—**Patrick Daly**, Manager of Sales, Marketing, and Operations, Banner of Truth Trust

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