

Ghoul

Chapter One of Blood Right

by William T. Dove

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Blood Right: Book One of Strange Haunts

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“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don’t we consider it his duty to escape? The moneylenders, the knownothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we’re partisans of liberty, then it’s our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can.”

Ursula K. Le Guin

Other books by William T Dove

The InVaders Trilogy

Warlock's Wrath

Warlock's War

Warlock's Vengeance

Chapter 1:

Ghoul

Westchester, New York
Saturday, September 22nd, 1945

A light rain was pattering the leaves of the trees lining the hill behind me—the kind of rain that whispered in the dark like it was keeping secrets. Fifty feet below, the Hutchinson River slid by black and greasy, waiting for some sorry mug to take the ticket-puncher express straight down.

I'd parked my '42 Packard Super Eight Convertible on the gravel shoulder, just south of the blind curve. The car had been owned by a collector who'd bought it brand-spanking-new off the lot a month before Packard stopped making automobiles, converting their factories to building war machines, and two weeks before the poor sap dropped dead of a heart attack. Despite the war ending three weeks ago after the Japs surrendered aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, it would be almost another year before luxury Packards were rolling off the assembly lines again. I'd bought mine from the collector's widow for seventy-eight hundred cash with one hundred and thirty-seven miles on the clock. She was Ghost Grey, one of only fifty ever made, and she lurked in the pale moonlight that was leaking through the gathering clouds overhead like the shine of a switchblade in a back alley.

Leaning against the sultry curve of the front fender, the tip of the Lucky Strike I was smoking lighting my kisser in hellish shades of blood red, I wondered again what was keeping Carmichael.

Zee had planted a seed in the crooked copper's head that he'd find something worth his while out here in the lonely nowhere of the Hutchinson River Parkway, right on the bleeding edge between Westchester and the Bronx. I'd been cooling my heels for twenty minutes already, rain soaking through my fedora and running in cold little rivers off the hem of a tailored Chesterfield overcoat that had set me back more kale than a factory stiff would see in six months. It was coming up on two past the witching hour. I was on my third Lucky, and that old familiar itch had started crawling between my shoulder blades—the one that usually meant some twist was about to try planting a slug where my spine lived.

The state bulls had hired me that morning to crack the case of three missing persons, all presumed past tense. All from the farms around this stretch of nowhere. One of them had been an eight-year-old kid snatched out of his bedroom four nights back. The boy's ghost had paid a visit to Miss Evelyn Harrow the same night he vanished, but I'd been out of town chasing another shadow at the time.

Thanks to Eve's special brand of hoodoo, we knew what had done for those people.

What. Not who.

Magic and things that go bump in the night had crawled back into the world nearly a hundred years ago when the island of Avalon appeared sudden-like thirty miles west of Belmullet, Ireland, in 1850, tearing the bottom clean out of a fishing trawler and sending the crew in lifeboats back home with stories that were written off as the ravings of men who'd been at sea for too long—or hitting the sauce too hard.

Eventually, though, some mug with more curiosity than sense had gone to look.

And by ‘Avalon’ I do mean the legendary island; the one where King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table carved their names in the history books before the joint vanished the first time, ages ago, and ‘serious scholars’ of later years decided it was all moonshine and star dust. Archeologists slapped the moniker on the place after it popped out from behind the curtain for an encore, when they dug up the bones of old Roman forts and the ruins of a not-so-Roman castle, along with a rat’s nest of tunnels that crawled criss-cross under the island like veins on a corpse. Some of the history aces who went into those tunnels came back changed.

Some never came back.

Folks gave the place a wide berth for years, the way sharp cookies avoid dark alleys and bent cops. But with enough time, even the smartest mugs can get numb to a thing that couldn’t be. Twelve years later, the first fishing village sprouted up, and soon farmers followed, finding the land generously fertile and the grazing good for sheep. Settlers kept trickling in, even after wild yarns started filtering back to Great Britain—stories of folks developing strange talents, most of them after they’d poked their noses into those tunnels, though sometimes the hoodoo hit at random, like a bolt from the blue. Or a knife in the dark.

Then, forty years later, in the early evening of August 2nd, 1890, Avalon took another powder, vanishing again as though it had never been there, taking all nine thousand residents with it and without even the common courtesy to leave a forwarding address. By then, the hoodoo had started leaking outwards, like cheap hooch from a cracked barrel, with folks in the British Isles and even Western Europe developing abilities that science couldn’t explain, and with nightmare creatures appearing out of the long-forgotten shadows of myth and legend—monsters who didn’t give a plug nickel for the opinions of ‘serious scholars’.

By the time my brother Brand ran off in 1917 after killing a man in a drunken brawl, the hoodoo had begun showing up in a few places in the eastern U.S. and Canada, Northern Africa, and even Western Russia. It was crawling ever outwards, reaching dark, wet fingers across the skin of the world, claiming more and more territory as its own. Like a cancer, but with poorer manners.

Still, Eve had been an outlier. At the exact same time—to the minute—that Avalon pulled a fade fifty-five years ago, every written scrap about the island wiped clean and its picture fading off maps like chalk in the rain, Evelyn Harrow was born at St. Mary's Hospital in Brooklyn. Eve was stillborn, the cord wrapped around her neck, her tiny face corpse-gray. Five minutes after she was delivered with no heartbeat, the sawbones was filling in her death certificate when the baby coughed and began breathing normally, like she'd been pulling a practical joke.

That same sawbones spent two years on the couches of three different shrinks after claiming that the miracle baby had looked right at him, her ash-gray eyes boring into his soul, and in the voice of a grown woman who had spoken with a French accent had said, calm as a Sunday morning in July, "Tell Marguerite I forgive her."

Miss Evelyn Harrow had been jawing with the dead ever since.

Knowing the nasty habits of the creature that had killed and consumed the three missing people, I knew that by tonight it would be hungry again. And when nightmares get hungry, they don't wait for an invitation before sitting down to dinner.

—

'Icy' Teapenny was as gorgeous a dame as she was prickly. There was only enough room in Isyphenia's world for one person who mattered: a crimson-haired gal who was a gifted forensic mage and whose gifts were always for hire. For the right price. Sometimes her

price could be measured in cold, hard cash, but more often it was information she demanded in return for her unique services.

Fortunately, information is my stock and trade.

Twenty minutes before, after parking my car on the gravel beside the steel railing overlooking the river, I'd taken the Mason jar of blood from the glove compartment, the one our red-haired firebrand had put in my eager mitt earlier that day, and emptied it on a spot thirty feet behind the trunk of my Packard. Miss Teapenny had told me it was human juice, the real McCoy, and after I gave her a questioning look, rolled her pretty green peepers and assured me that no one had clocked out for it. It was also enchanted; bait for the nightmare we were hunting. The crimson pool that spread across the gravel had shimmered in the pale moonlight that was bravely struggling its way through the gathering clouds before vanishing, melting into the hardpack at my feet.

I hadn't thought to ask Icy if rain would dilute the hoodoo, and as the drops grew heavier, splattering loudly off the brim of my fedora and crawling in ice-cold rivers down the back of my neck, I cursed Carmichael again for being late.

Just as I was about to call off the operation and head back to the city for the dry warmth of my 5th Avenue penthouse and a snort of Macallan, headlights appeared dimly through the streams falling from the brim of my hat and reflected off the wet pavement as they charged up the hill toward me. I had to lower my chin to shield my eyes with my lid as Carmichael hit me with his searchlight before rolling to a stop on the gravel shoulder, parking his blocky Ford black-and-white with 'State Police' printed on the doors smack-dab on the spot where the blood Icy had bewitched had pulled its Houdini act.

The stage was set. Now we were just waiting for the star of the show.

Carmichael slammed his door as he got out, cursing after his stomper landed in a rain-filled pothole. His front tire had bumped through it when he'd parked, water splashing in a wave outwards from the rubber before running rapidly back in, like it was hiding from the coming storm. The dumb flatfoot had to have known the puddle was there, but Officer Trent Carmichael had never been the sharpest knife in the drawer. That was another reason we'd picked him to be our patsy.

Yanking his cap down tightly over narrow-set eyes that would do a sewer rat proud, Carmichael stalked toward me, raising his flashlight to aim it straight into my mug while pulling the edge of his jacket free of the .38 on his right hip in a move that might have looked tough on a real cop.

"Chandler," he barked, "I shoulda known I'd find you mixed up in this. Funny how you're always around just before somebody takes the fall. It's enough to make a cop wonder how you always seem to know more than any man's got a right to."

I flicked my half-smoked Strike over my shoulder, where it sailed over the hood of my car and plunged to its death beyond the guardrail, then glared pointedly at Carmichael. After a moment, he took the hint and lowered the flashlight, taking the beam out of my eyes.

"I'm good at what I do, Officer Carmichael," I answered pleasantly, glancing up at the rain, "And what brings you out on a fine night like this?"

Lightning flashed in the distance to my right, followed seconds later by a low rumble. In the stark brilliance that had painted the side of the crooked cop's mug, I saw why he'd been late. Carmichael'd been taking a runout powder with John Barleycorn. He was soused, tanked, sailing three sheets to the wind, probably from the cheap hooch his unofficial employers brewed up in some back-woods still. The short, pudgy copper's breath could peel paint, and his eyes had

the glassy look of a bourbon drunk fixing to take a close-up gander at the floor. That might make tonight's little Off-Broadway production easier—if Carmichael could manage not to fall off the stage.

“I ask the questions, Shamus,” he answered, “What the hell are you doing out here? Three people in the area been murdered in the last two weeks. I find it suspicious, you bein’ out here for no reason.”

He glared a challenge at me, and I saw my opening.

I smiled like I didn't mean it and replied, “You seem tense, Carmichael. What's wrong? Your boss's whores start charging you for their services?”

I saw the swing coming. He brought the flashlight around like a club, aiming for my kisser. I moved with it, rolling my head so it didn't sting as much as Carmichael'd planned. I'd spent my Dublin youth in boxing clubs and back alleys, learning how to use my fists as hammers and my noodle for something besides a punching bag. I spun as he followed through, leaning hard over the hood of the Packard and faking a moan while I held my jaw with my left mitt. My right hand dangled loose at my side, an open invitation.

Officer Carmichael took the offering, and I felt the cold steel of a cuff snap around my wrist before he yanked my left arm around behind me and made a matched set. Then he grabbed the back of my overcoat and pulled me upright with surprising coordination, considering his current state of questionable consciousness and the fact that he stood five inches shy of my own 6'1”.

“Alright, wise guy,” he said, “You're under arrest on suspicion of abduction and murder.”

He steered me toward his prowlie, and through the downpour I heard the sound I'd been waiting for, right on cue. Just across the blacktop, damn near swallowed by the storm that had cranked up another notch when Carmichael slugged me, there was an eerie, metallic scrape on the pavement, like the voice of the grim reaper

come calling. I'd bet my last nickel nobody else caught it, not even Zee, who was parked a couple yards off my left shoulder, cloaked from Carmichael by one of the kid's pocketful of nifty tricks.

When we hit the black-and-white, Carmichael kept pushing me past the back door, toward the rear of his prowlie, the engine ticking a deathly countdown as it cooled in the pouring rain. He kept a firm grip on the cuffs, twisting the chain so the sharp steel edges were cutting into my wrists and leaving me facing the road as he circled around to pop the trunk. That wasn't good. I saw a flicker of pale motion in the corner of my eye, twenty feet away, where the gravel ended on our side of the road.

Time was running short.

"The trunk, Carmichael?" I asked, "What did I do to deserve the royal treatment?"

"Shut up, wise guy," he snarled, "We ain't goin' to the station. The Boss wants to talk to you. Keep your smart mouth shut for a change, and you might live to see the sunrise."

I heard the trunk pop, and as it creaked upwards on rusty hinges, I twisted to my left, ignoring the bite of the cuffs as I tore them from Carmichael's grasp. A pale nightmare rose out of the dark and sliced the crooked bull open from his right hip to his left collarbone, blood and guts spewing into the night. I threw myself to the ground, tucking my shoulder and putting out a small effort of one of my own unique talents, the cuffs springing free of my wrists as I rolled clear.

Carmichael dropped like a sack of hammers into his own widening pool of rain-soaked guts, the light in his eyes already snuffed out when his kisser hit the dirt. My assistant and protégé, Zachary Bernstein, appeared behind the fresh stiff just off the rear bumper of the cruiser, my rifled Parker Brothers double-barreled AHE shotgun already snugged to the kid's shoulder and aimed dead-center on the ghoul's chest. The night roared as Zee gave the ghost-pale ravaging nightmare both barrels, and the slugs I'd loaded it with tore off the

creature's left arm and made an art deco pattern from half of its ribcage on the gravel and pavement behind it.

I'd scooped Zee two years before, a skinny fifteen-year-old orphan grifting on the streets of Queens. The young Mr. Bernstein had been cleaning up, running the 'blind newsboy' scam. He was hawking papers, wearing dark glasses, and carrying a white cane, looking pathetic as a wet cat. When a mark would buy a rag, Zee would make skin contact while handing back the change. Then, in a voice too deep for his young and tender years, he would recite the exact contents of the mark's wallet, along with the name of the skirt he kept on the side, or the illegal contents of his office safe. The twist would tip the 'newsboy' a tenner to buy his silence—a week's wages for a lot of honest, working joes.

Zee was street-smart but didn't know his own value. I yanked him just as Boss Vito's button men were closing in to clip him. Miss Harrow took him in at her brownstone, and the skinny Jewish psychic had been riding with us ever since. A year ago, I bumped him to assistant and put him on the books. The kid's bag of tricks didn't stop at mind-peeking and planting suggestions—he could pull a vanishing act too. He'd been parked six feet to my left the whole time I'd been waltzing with Carmichael, visible to Yours Truly, but not the crooked bull or the flesh-eating ghoul. Mind mojo doesn't take with me. Unless I want it to.

The slugs that near tore the ghoul in half wouldn't keep it down long. The damned things were nigh-impossible to kill, and as I brushed dirt from my sodden overcoat, I saw its flesh already crawling back along the ragged edges of the gaping wound like the film was running backward. The monster was still staring sightlessly at the sky, rain drumming off its undead eyes, but that kopacetic state wouldn't hold for more than a few heartbeats.

I moved fast, pulling a metal syringe—Miss Teapenney's second contribution to the evening—from the inside pocket of my suit jacket

and jabbed it into the thing's neck, squeezing the plunger hard. A few drops of brilliant green fluid crawled out from around the seal, and the night air filled with the smell of roses and fresh-plowed dirt. The ghoul had started twitching as I'd leaned over it, and my blood turned to ice when its lamps locked on mine for one fear-fuelled second before sliding closed as whatever witch's brew Icy had cooked up slammed on the brakes. Even Miss Teapenny's concoction wouldn't keep it down for the count, but it would buy us time while we set up for the next act of the show.

As Zee hot-footed it for the trunk of my Packard, my second set of keys rattling in his mitt, shouting to be heard over the pounding deluge, he yelled that Father Brandon O'Neil was inbound.

I dragged the monster across the wet gravel to the guardrail on the other side of Carmichael's prowlie in case some poor sap was out driving in the sheets of rain that were coming down now like spillage over a dam. The last thing we needed was a rubberneck asking awkward questions while a half-dead ghoul was knitting its wing back on and setting itself to lodge a complaint with the management. Despite the occasional newspaper article *not* in the outhouse tissue section of the newstands, most folks still kept their eyes willingly closed to the evidence that the strange and macabre had returned to the world.

Life was simpler for them that way.

The monster was heavier than a coffin full of lead. The ghoul stood no taller than I did, and it was emaciated, ribs standing out like fence pickets on skin that gleamed moon-white in the now-deafening rain. Thunder barked again, and the stage was briefly lit by the flashbulb of a lightning strike that was much closer than the last one. I heard a tree split not far away with a crack that was sharp as a .45 in a phone booth.

Zee met me at the guardrail with an armful of heavy tow chains and three Yale No. 6 high-security pin-tumbler padlocks; the kind

with the optional hardened boron-steel shackle and mushroom-pin drivers. They had enough heft to dent a man's skull, and I hoped they'd do to keep our guest of honor from causing any more trouble while we waited for the good Father to make his entrance.

With Zee pitching in, I wrapped the creature in three lengths of heavy chain, two loops running between its legs for insurance, and snugged the chains tight to the guardrail while the kid snapped the padlocks shut. Then I juiced the 12-gauge with two more slugs, and we planted ourselves against the side of Carmichael's prowlie just as the ghoul started twitching again, pale meat crawling up toward the shoulder Zee had blown clean off. In minutes that arm would be back like it'd never left, the monster at full steam, and nursing a grudge big enough to chew nails and spit bullets.

I shot a look at my protégé, and he nodded. Brand would be here before then.

My brother and I had grown up in the Liberties, a warren of run-down Dublin tenements bordered by the Coombe and the intersection of Thomas and Francis streets. Ma had been a mouse of a woman who thought the saints had blessed her when she married our father, but Da had lost his job at the mine four years after and took up permanent residence in the bottom of a bottle. His temper got quick, and his fists quicker, but in Catholic Ireland, divorce wasn't done.

Brandon and I responded to Da's temper in different ways. Brand fought whenever and whoever he could, hardening himself for the day he could rid us of a hundred and fifty pounds of near-daily abuse. I sharpened my wits and learned to see the writing on the wall while there was still time to find somewhere else to be when the hammer fell.

In '16, when I was fourteen, and my brother seventeen, Brand and I watched the Easter Rising from our bedroom window. A Brit machine-gun post had been set up at the end of the street, and we

found out later that a stray slug had gone through a tenement wall and killed a three-month-old babe in its crib. The following year, Brand killed a young Tommy in a drunken bar fight. He lit out that same night for the continent. Months later, a letter postmarked in Nairobi arrived. He'd joined the French Foreign Legion.

I stuck in Dublin, doing my best to take care of Ma after Da died in '21, the victim of tuberculosis and too much drink. Not much of note happened until '37, when Brand came home, retired with a pension after twenty years of service. By then, Ma had gone to an early grave too, worn down by work and broken promises.

To my endless surprise, Brandon came home a changed man. In the last months of his hitch, he'd been fighting in the Rif Mountains of Morocco when a French 81mm mortar shell fell short and landed in the trench smack beside him. It spun in the mud, and a puff of smoke drifted from the casing as the fuse announced its early retirement.

My brother left a killer and came home a saint.

As the ghoul began snarling, yanking at the chains hard enough that the steel of the guardrail was slowly bending like cheap tin, the giant bolts that anchored it straining against the eight-by-eight oak posts driven six feet into the ground, I heard the rattle of Brand's ancient Ford flatbed as it groaned its way up the hill toward us.

He parked behind Carmichael's black-and-white and glared at me when he saw the cop's body on the ground, spilled guts steaming in the cold night air. He knew Officer Trent Carmichael was bent as well as I did, but I guess Brand figured there ought to have been some way to pull off this caper without anyone getting dead.

I'd seen it as an opportunity to kill two crooked birds with one well-aimed stone.

I nodded toward the creature, where the guardrail was now twisted a foot out of line, as though impossibly sideswiped by a speeding truck from the cliff side, and tapped the face of my watch.

Tick tock. Brand dropped the judgmental attitude and got down to business.

He strode in a steady circle around the creature, even climbing over the railing and risking the neck-breaker to the river below as he moved behind it, sprinkling holy water on the ground until he came back around to his starting point. He closed the loop just as one of the heavy padlocks snapped like a gunshot, and the ghoul began throwing its weight against the chains with the extra movement provided by the resulting slack, the other two locks groaning their displeasure at having been abandoned by their fellow.

Father Brandon O’Neil flipped open a Latin bible as he stood just on the far side of the invisible circle from the creature that, four days before, had silently abducted and eaten an eight-year-old boy. Zee popped open an umbrella, shielding the pages from the now-driving rain, and Brand began intoning in Latin from the passages known as the *Rituale Romanum*, “*De Exorcizandis Obsessis a Daemonio*”, the ‘smoke and wax’ psalm, and the traditional rites for destroying undead.

Brand’s voice thundered at the best of times, but when he started working his holy hoodoo, his basso Irish brogue heavily seasoned with judgment and wrath, the ground under my pins shook like it was hearing the final trumpet blast of the archangels.

**“Exsúrgat Deus, et dissipéntur inimíci ejus;
et fúgiant qui odérunt eum a fácie ejus.
Sicut déficit fumus, deficiant;
sicut fluit cera a fácie ignis,
sic péreant peccatóres a fácie Dei.”**

*Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered;
let them that hate Him flee from before His face.
As smoke vanisheth, so let them vanish away;*

*as wax melteth before the fire,
so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.*

Brand reached the next to last line just as lightning shattered a tree not thirty feet from us, sending its charred remains toppling over the edge of the ravine to sizzle and steam in the river below. Masked in the deafening clap of thunder from a strike that left me blinking spots from my vision, the ghoul had snapped the chains, broken links bouncing across the gravel like loose teeth, reflecting sallow glints from Carmichael's dropped flashlight as they scattered over the hard rain-soaked ground.

The monster, its missing mitt back where it had abandoned ship from, launched itself toward Brand and Zee just as my brother completed the first passage, his booming voice reciting the Latin verses that resounded as the judgment of God, overcoming even the banshee fury of the growing storm. As the final syllable sounded, Brand's voice trumpeting '*facie Dei*'—a blast of defiance that challenged the receding thunder in volume—the circle of holy water, diluted not at all by the driving rain, flashed a counterpoint to the lightning strike of moments before, and the ghoul ricocheted off a solid wall of force mere feet from my brother, its pale, dead skin charring to ash where it made contact.

Father O'Neil didn't even flinch.

The ghoul threw itself at Brand again, snarling in rage, viscous strings of drool flying from yellowed fangs stained dark with human blood, and again it rebounded as the wrath of Brandon's god seared its skin black as charcoal.

My brother flipped to another page, a frayed silk bookmark holding its place, and began once more to intone in Latin while the monster howled in frustration, pacing the circle, hunting in vain for an opening it would never find.

**“Ecce dedi vobis potestátem calcáandi
supra serpéntes et scorpiónes,
et super omnem virtútem inimíci,
et nihil vobis nocébit.”**

*Behold, I have given you power to tread
upon serpents and scorpions,
and upon all the power of the enemy,
and nothing shall hurt you.*

At the final syllables, the creature cowered like a cornered rat, slinking back toward the guardrail, and Brand took one confident stride toward the invisible boundary, leaving Zee holding the umbrella behind him. As he reached the barrier, Brand snapped the bible shut with a coffin-lid crack and pulled from his ratty overcoat a golden crucifix, which he raised in the air where it flashed in the reflected strike of another bolt of lightning, before commanding, this time in English,

“Burn, spawn of hell!”

The ghoul screeched in agony as white fire burst from its body, tearing ragged holes in its death-pale flesh, consuming it in ravening waves that ate the monster from the inside out. Lightning flashed again, this time on the far side of the river, just as a final blinding sunburst of holy judgment rendered the nightmare creature into a drifting cloud of ash. Thunder rumbled into the distance while the night fell suddenly silent, the rain stopping as though some cheap mug had shut the tap off.

Despite all that I had seen in the past four years since Brandon and I crawled out of those tunnels in France, I still wasn't certain that

I believed in God, but I was *damned sure* that God believed in my brother.

—

We planted enough dope in Carmichael's prowlie to pin the vanishings on him square, even where the bones would turn up. We salted the pot with paper tying him to Boss Vito's outfit too. Nobody was gonna kick up dust over a crooked badge going off his nut and icing three citizens. The chew marks on the bones would get chalked up to critters noshing the stiff's after they'd been dumped.

Carmichael's carcass we pitched over the ravine edge, letting the Hutchinson River current take it for a ride. Clam diggers hauled it in two weeks later on the east shore of the Thomas Pell Sanctuary, four miles downstream. By then, the body was so ripe even the sawbones couldn't swear how the guts got spilled—rocks or snags after the fact did the trick just as easy. Suicide was the call: jumped from the cliff where his heap was parked, finally eaten up with guilt over his dirty work.

And nobody was going to lose sleep wondering how a short, fat flatfoot snatched an eight-year-old kid from a second-story bedroom without ladder scratches on the dirt below or so much as the creak of a floorboard. Like I said, with the weird and spooky slinking back into the world, most folks these days kept their traps shut on questions they didn't want answered.

**Books One and Two of Strange Haunts, Blood
Right, and Knight Shade, will be published late
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