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Fluff the Tragic Dragon
by Laura Resnick
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"Esther, dear, there's a dragon in the basement," said Mrs. Pearl.
I climbed up the rain-splattered steps outside the apartment building on West 93rd Street as I perused the casting announcements in Backstage.
"Hmmm?"

"I said there's a dragon in the basement," Mrs. Pearl repeated.

"That's nice." Backstage proved to be just as depressing as I had feared. Since I couldn't type and I had already failed miserably at telephone sales, I would probably have to go back to waiting tables again.

"I went down to the basement with a load of laundry," Mrs. Pearl said excitedly, "and when I was putting my quarters into the machine, one of them rolled away. Well, dear, you know that I always say if you watch out for the pennies, the dollars will take care of themselves."

I looked up to see her standing in the doorway. Her little tote-cart was full of groceries and took up whatever part of the entrance that her not inconsiderable bulk didn't.

"Yes, you do always say that, Mrs. Pearl," I said mildly. "Can I get by?"

"So when my quarter rolled away, naturally I went after it."

"Oh, good, Mrs. Pearl. I'm glad you got it back. Now, could I just get through here? My feet are killing me, and -- "

"But I didn't get it, Esther. That's the point."

"I'm sure you'll find it tomorrow, then."

"No." She positioned herself in the doorway as if she planned to take root there. "I'm afraid I may never get it back."

"Well, that's too bad, but you know what all the tenants say about the greedy basement troll," I said lightly, trying unsuccessfully to get by. Things were always disappearing from our basement -- coins, coffee cups, articles of clothing. The washing machine had apparently eaten my favorite T-shirt two months earlier.

"It's not a troll that's living down there," she cried, moving with a pro basketball player's agility to block my way again. "It's a dragon!"

"Mrs. Pearl," I said, trying to maintain an even tone, "I've been pounding the pavement since first thing this morning. I've spent the day waiting in humid, stuffy, un-airconditioned rehearsal halls, auditioning before casting directors with faces so stony they could grace Mount Rushmore, and wondering how I'll pay not only this month's rent, but last month's rent, too. Now I'm drenched from this charming summer shower we've just had, and the one thing I want out of life is to go upstairs to my apartment, take off my

shoes, and die in peace on my own couch. And if you will either go in or come out so that I can accomplish that feat, I will give you a quarter to replace the one you lost. What could be fairer than that?"

Mrs. Pearl's doughy face looked disapproving beneath her blue hair. "No wonder you're always having financial trouble. You'll never hang onto your money by giving it away."

"I'm not always having financial trouble," I snapped. The hell with maintaining an even tone. "Just lately." After a six month regional tour and lots of heady anticipation about our New York opening, the show I was in -- a musical based on Clan of the Cave Bear -- had folded after only four weeks on Broadway.

I, like everyone else in the cast, had anticipated that it would be a big success and that I could count on a pleasant interlude of regular income. Unfortunately, Clan had instead proved to be the greatest Broadway debacle since Shogun. Considering that the New York theater community had given the previous year's Tony Award to a show with singing cows, I had thought they would welcome singing Neanderthals with open arms, but such was not the case.

So there I was, still out of work more than three months later and completely broke. Having expected to be steadily employed for a while, I had finally invested in some furniture for my one-bedroom apartment, some clothes for myself, and even a motorcycle for my Significant Other after his had died. He used the new one to pick up another woman. The next time I spend my last fifteen hundred dollars on a man, someone should throw me up against a wall and beat me with a lead pipe.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Pearl," I apologized wanly, trying to forestall a lecture on how to run my life. "I didn't mean to snap at you. It's just that things haven't been going so well lately. Summer is a lousy time to be in the city anyhow, but it's a horrendous time to be looking for acting work. And when I got cast in Clan, I really thought that my table-waiting days were behind me at last."

"Yes, and I'm sure that losing Lloyd to a younger woman hasn't helped," said Mrs. Pearl, whose sympathy is something of a double-edged sword.

I sighed. "Thank you for those comforting words, Mrs. Pearl. Now can I go upstairs?"

"But aren't you concerned about the dragon in the basement?"

"The dragon in the basement?" I repeated. "Do you mean a member of one of those gangs, like the Pell Street Dragons or something?"

"No, no, not a gangster. A large, fire-breathing lizard with wings. You know." She made a bizarre attempt to demonstrate by imitation. "A dragon."

"In the basement," I said.

"Living down there, on a level below the laundry room, in caverns of primordial darkness and gloom."

"A dragon? Living below the laundry room? What makes you think that?" I asked, as if there could be a good reason.

"He spoke to me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. My quarter rolled under the stairs. When I followed it, I found an old, rusty, dusty door built into the wall. I thought my quarter must have rolled into the crack under the door, so naturally I pried it open."

"Naturally." Prying has always come naturally to Mrs. Pearl.

"There's a series of steep iron stairs behind the door." She lowered her voice, and it took on a dramatic intensity I might have admired in other circumstances. "I started down the steps, and then..."

Hey, I'm an actress, I know a cue when I hear one. "What happened then?"

"I heard a voice coming from far below me, from the bowels of the very earth it seemed."

"Uh-huh." Subway tunnel, no doubt.

"I said, 'Who's there?'"

"And lo, there came a voice."

"Yes!"

"Really?" A homeless person, perhaps? "What did it say?"

"I'm not sure. It was sort of muffled."

"I see."

"So I descended another step."

"Wait a minute! Are you nuts, Mrs. Pearl? You don't want to mess around in old tunnels in this city. You could have been hurt."

"And as I continued downward, step by step, becoming enveloped in darkness -- "

"Good God."

"Suddenly, there was a great heaving sound, and then a burst of fire shot across the ceiling of this cavern -- "

"I'm calling the police," I said firmly, trying to push past her. "We could all be murdered while sorting our colors."

She got a good stranglehold on me and kept talking. "And I saw his shape outlined in the darkness, highlighted by the fire pouring from his nostrils."

"What?"

"He had a great lizard-like head, with square nostrils and tiny, pointed ears, a long, serpentine body, an enormous tail, vestigial wings, claws..." She shuddered and released me. After a moment of profound silence, she added wistfully, "He did have a certain strange, horrific beauty about him though..."

Poor Mrs. Pearl. She was clearly the victim of too many episodes of *Beauty and the Beast*. Taking one of her trembling, clammy hands into my own, I asked, "What did you do then?"

"I went to the grocery store."

"You what?" It seemed rather anti-climactic.

"Well, we were out of a few things," she explained matter-of-factly.

"But... what about this fire breathing dragon you had just seen?"

She placed a hand on her bosom, which heaved alarmingly. I suddenly wished I knew CPR. "Oh, Esther, what are we going to do?"

"I think you'd better tell this whole story to Mr. Pearl. I'm sure he'll know what to do." If he had any sense, he'd have her evaluated immediately.

I stepped past her at last and, finally free to go my own way, I climbed four flights of stairs to my apartment, took off my shoes, and lay down to die. A knock on my door interrupted my nap a couple of hours later. "Who is it?" I called groggily.

It was my neighbor, Arnaud. His real name is Arnold, but when he opened his own hair salon, he felt that Arnaud! in red neon had a certain quality that Arnold! somehow lacked. Arnaud works out every day and is a damn good-looking guy. His lover Scott, who's a model who's always off on location somewhere, is even better looking.

I let Arnaud into my apartment and said, "Are you a weekday widow, again?" When Scott is away, Arnaud practically lives with me. He apparently has some kind of phobia about being alone in closed spaces. A therapist is currently linking the problem to a past life experience.

Arnaud nodded with noticeable agitation before adding rapidly, "Did you know there's a dragon in the basement?"

"You've been talking to Mrs. Pearl, haven't you?"

"No, I haven't told a soul!"

I stared at him. "You mean you've seen it, too?"

He stared back. "You mean you knew it was there and didn't tell me? Esther, I might have been killed!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me there really is a dragon in the basement?" I'd heard there were some pretty weird things wandering around subterranean Manhattan, but really. "Did you lose a quarter, too?"

"Quarter?" He pushed me roughly into a chair. "What are you babbling

about?"

"Me, babbling? Arnaud, who came up here shrieking about a dragon in the basement?"

"There is one, I tell you!" He started pacing. "I took a basket of laundry down, and I noticed some peculiar sounds coming from under the stairs. Naturally, I went to investigate -- "

"Naturally?" I snapped. "In a building with no doorman and a front door lock that wouldn't keep out a determined three year old? In a dank basement where no one could hear you if you screamed for help? What's wrong with you people who keep investigating strange noises? You deserve to be eaten by a dragon!"

"My God, you're vindictive," he said critically. "How long have you know it's there?"

"I didn't..." I stopped myself. "Tell me what you saw that makes you think there's dragon down there."

I'll spare you the histrionics. He peeked under the stairs and saw the rusty iron door that Mrs. Pearl had carelessly left open after her little tête-à-tête with St. George's old foe. Unfortunately, his description of the dragon living behind that door matched hers perfectly.

"Of course, everyone knows what dragons look like," I said rationally, "so your mind naturally filled in the details it thought you should perceive."

"Come down and have a look," he challenged.

"Oh... My feet hurt."

"Ah-hah! You're afraid!"

Me, afraid? What was there to be afraid of?

"We could be murdered by some lunatic with a warped sense of humor. We could be eaten by an alligator -- I've heard they're spawning in the sewers. We could be run down by some kind of city-operated subterranean vehicle. We could stumble upon a secret crack laboratory." I was still enumerating all the things I was afraid of when we reached the door to the basement.

Mrs. Pearl and all the other tenants were standing there, peering fearfully down the stairwell.

"Hey, man," said Ricardo, the bongo player who lived on the top floor. "Do you know there's, like, a stinking, fat, hairy, dragon in the basement?"

"I thought he was scaly," I said repressively.

"You've seen him before?" Mr. Rivman demanded. "How long have you known he was in the basement, young lady?"

"Santa Maria," cried Mrs. Castrucci, crossing herself fervently. "The beast, he could have eaten us at any time. And you say nothing about it?"

"I didn't know... Why am I trying to deny there's a dragon in the basement?" I said in defeat. "This is crazy."

"Hey, man," said Ricardo. "This is New York. Anything could be down there."

"So let's call the police," said Fumiko, the sociology student who lived in the studio apartment at street level. She shivered. "It gives me the creeps to think of that thing being down there."

"We should call exterminators," said Mrs. Pearl.

"We should call the stinking, fat, hairy landlord," said Ricardo.

"If we ask him to deal with it, we'll be waiting till the Second Coming," Arnaud said acidly.

"I say we call the police!" said Mr. Rivman.

"We must call a priest!" cried Mrs. Castrucci.

"Hey, man, this ain't no exorcism."

"I say we call the papers," said Arnaud, with an expression that suggested he had thought of a way to turn this into a human interest story for Arnaud!

"I say we take a little dose of reality," I snapped. "We can't call the cops, the rodent man, or the Times and say we have a dragon in the basement, for God's sake."

"No, but the Inquirer would go for it," said Arnaud.

"Maybe even the stinking Post," added Ricardo.

"All right, Miss Reality," said Mrs. Pearl a trifle snidely. "You go down and see what's living in the basement, and then you tell us what to do about it, you're so smart."

Everyone fixed their gazes unwaveringly upon me. Stalling for time, I suggested, "Why don't we wait and bring this up at the next tenants' meeting?"

"Darling, nobody ever goes to tenants' meetings. That's so Midwestern of you," Arnaud chided.

"Look, Arnaud, the landlord may be slow, but this really is his responsibility," I said, sounding mature and wise.

"That's so naive of you," he replied dismissively.

"Beside," said Mrs. Castrucci, fingering her rosary with one hand as she gestured against the Evil Eye with the other, "whadda make you think he gonna believe more than you believe, without you see with you own eyes?" Her English, usually rather good, deteriorates sadly under emotional stress.

"Fine," I said, losing patience with the whole scene. "Fine! I'll go and look at your dragon, and then I will make a rational suggestion. After that, you can do as you please. I'm supposed to be lying on my couch right now, dying in peace and comfort."

Fumiko bowed, and Ricardo made some sort of voodoo gesture. He added, in the kindest tone I'd ever heard him use, "Hey, man, they gonna remember you in this building for years to come. You gonna be like a saint on West 93rd Street."

"Okay, okay," I said, descending the stairs.

"Those who are about to die salute you!" Arnaud cried.

"See if you can find my quarter while you're down there!" Mrs. Pearl called.

"I'm going to move when my lease comes up," I muttered.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and turned the corner to the laundry room. It was utter chaos down there. The hastily dropped laundry baskets of half a dozen tenants cluttered up the place. It was while I was wondering who was stupid enough to wash a silk blazer in an industrial machine that I heard the noises.

I froze when I heard the first heavy, echoing sigh. When it was followed by a deep, primordial growl and the scent of smoke, I did everything a good gothic heroine does -- I gasped, I pressed a trembling hand to my heaving breast, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, and a deathly chill raced down my spine. Believe me, it's not a routine a girl wants to go through every day.

"Who's there?" I demanded, my voice squeaking in a manner that would have appalled my singing coach but probably pleased my method acting teacher.

A low, forlorn, hollow moan answered me. It came, of course, from the ancient, heretofore unnoticed doorway beneath the stairs. I approached it with stiff legs and dragging feet, terrified, yet too fascinated to turn away, for surely the moan was followed by a faint glow and another wisp of smoke.

I reached the doorway at last and peered into the stygian darkness beyond. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I thought I perceived an enormous, bulky shape about thirty feet away.

"Who's there?" I repeated, leaning forward as I tried to make out more of that elusive shape.

"Fluff!" came the answer a moment before all hell broke loose. Flames shot forward, smoke clouded my vision, and the bulky figure moved and took on the form of my childhood nightmares, a horrible, ferocious, firebreathing, winged lizard at least fifteen feet high. Never having been the most coordinated Neanderthal in Clan, I tripped clumsily in my terror and pitched headlong into the subterranean cavern.

I nearly lost consciousness for a moment, and I was so winded that even with the adrenaline pumping through me, I lay on the cold, damp floor for a full minute, too stunned to move. I was sure I was going to die.

"Say, are you okay?"

That did it. I hopped to my feet. "Who said that?"

"Me. Fluff." When it spoke, its nostrils glowed.

"You can talk?"

"Of, course. I'm a dragon."

It spoke with a faint Chinese accent and sounded vaguely hurt. "Yes, I see that." I swallowed. "But I... I didn't think you'd talk."

"All dragons can talk." It sighed suddenly, and a soft blue fire poured from its nostrils. "If they have someone to talk to, that is."

"This is incredible." I sat back down rather suddenly and gracelessly.

"Careful. The floor is very damp. I've had rheumatism for thirty years."

"Is that how long you've been down here?" I asked in amazement.

"More or less. Sometimes I go to Chinatown to hang out and have a few meals. They have the best produce, and it reminds me a little of the old days. But... Oh, it's just not like it used to be." He sighed again, looking directly at me this time.

"Hey, watch it!" I ducked before I could be singed.

He raised a dreadful claw. "Sorry, I forgot. It's been so long."

"Since you barbecued anyone?" I asked carefully.

"No!" He sounded hurt again. "Since I had someone to chat with."

"Chat?" I clenched my jaw to stop my teeth rattling.

"I never see anyone," he said despondently. "I just live down here by myself, in the dark, with no one to talk to. I was friendly with the landlord when I first got here. He used to read me the paper, play chess with me, look at my treasures, ask me to grant him wishes." Fluff's fearsome features looked sort of nostalgic. "But then he died, and no one else ever came to visit me again."

"So you've been alone down here all that time?" I started to feel a little sorry for him. When he nodded, I asked, "What do you do with your time?"

He shrugged, making his wings quiver. "Sometimes I crawl through tunnels and see if anything interesting is happening." He sighed again. "But there's seldom anything new to see, and even if there is, who would I tell about it? So, these days, I mostly just keep collecting treasure, since it's sort of a biological imperative, and I sit around here and think about the old days."

Now for the sixty-four thousand dollar question. "What do you eat?"

"Bok choy, onions, apples, snowpeas -- "

"Not people?" I asked hopefully.

"No, of course not!" His glowing, yellow eyes widened in shock. "Oh, that Saint George!" he growled suddenly. "He's got a lot to answer for. He decides to pick on some poor innocent dragon who's minding his own business. And then, just to make himself look like a hero, he goes around telling everyone that we're evil, voracious beasts who devour children and burn down whole villages. And centuries later, we're still suffering because of that bully! It's so unfair."

I actually thought he might start to cry. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

He hid his eyes with a claw. "You just don't know what it's like to be such an outcast. Sometimes I wish I'd never left China. Everyone there knew a dragon's real worth."

"That's where you're from? China?"

He looked up again. "Well, of course. All dragons come from China. Everyone knows that."

"I'm sorry I'm so ignorant." I frowned. "What was that dragon doing in England, then?"

"He was a tourist. Naturally, when we found out what had happened, no dragon ever went there again."

"No, I suppose not. Tell me, why did you leave China? It sounds like you miss it."

He scratched one pointy little ear and shifted his great bulk into a more comfortable position. "It just wasn't the same anymore after 1949. The Cultural Revolution left no room for dragons, not real ones anyhow. So, I decided to come to America. But San Francisco had so many dragons that all the good tunnels were taken. Anyhow, earthquakes make me hysterical. So I just got right back in the water and swam all the way to New York. That Panama Canal of yours is very handy, by the way."

"Aren't there any other dragons in New York for you to talk to?" Other dragons? Oh, Esther, Esther, I thought, it's time to go back to Iowa.

"There's one in Queens and another in Brooklyn. To tell the truth, though, dragons are very people-oriented. We don't like to see each other more than once every century or so."

"So, you've just been hanging out here by yourself until this afternoon, when Mrs. Pearl finally found you," I concluded.

"Is she the fat lady with blue hair? I was so upset. The first person I've had a chance to talk to in over twenty years, and she screams and runs away. Then half a dozen others did the same."

"They didn't mean anything by it," I said hastily, hearing the hurt creep back into his voice. "It's just that nobody expected to find a dragon in the basement, not even in this neighborhood."

"I'm glad you decided to talk to me," he said warmly.

"Well... It's my pleasure."

"You'll come back again and talk to me now and then?"

"Sure. Of course I will." What else would I say? The poor thing was so lonesome, so grateful for a little companionship. And Fluff was really pretty pleasant company, to be honest. More so than Lloyd had ever been. "Of course, I have to admit I'm not much of a chess player -- "

"Oh, that's okay. I have lots of other games," he assured me, trundling over to the other end of his cavern. "Checkers, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuits, Pictionary, Life..." His voice trailed off and he obligingly blew out a stream of fire so I could see his hoard -- an enormous pile of games, old sports equipment, clothing, vases, pottery, books, magazines, handicrafts, and more kinds of jumbled junk than the Eleventh Avenue Thrift Shop had, even right after Christmas.

"My God, what is all this?" I breathed, astonished that this had been down here without our knowledge.

"My treasure," he said proudly. "Dragons are the guardians of splendor."

Although some of the stuff was clearly very old, I noticed a few items he must have collected just recently. "Hey, this is mine!" I grabbed the T-shirt that I thought the washing machine had eaten and waved it in his scaly face. "How did you get this?"

"I can't tell you that. Trade secret." He sounded a little smug.

"And all this other stuff," I murmured. "You really have sticky claws."

"I told you, I collect things. That's my job. Dragons are hoarders. But the treasure's been getting very big, since I've been living all by myself for so long with no one to share it with." He gave me a toothy grin, and I fell back a step despite myself. "But now it's all yours."

"Mine? Why?"

"Because I choose to give it to you. We collect treasures, and then we give them away to mortals who do us a favor or make us happy. Or sometimes even to mortals who need something and just ask politely." He blew out some smoke in a derisive snort. "But no one seems to understand the custom anymore."

Not wanting to offend him, I said carefully, "Thanks, Fluff, but it's such a lot of stuff, and my apartment is so small."

"Oh, I'll keep guarding it for you," he offered eagerly. "That's often part of the bargain."

"Then I'll just keep this T-shirt, and you can guard the rest. Oh, and do you happen to have a quarter, by any chance?" It would be a lot easier to

explain things to Mrs. Pearl if she got her quarter back.

"Of course! I have hundreds of thousands of them!" He scooted a little further into the darkness and dragged an enormous, ancient wooden chest toward me. "I found this chest floating in the East River one night, about twenty-five years ago. Isn't it _amazing_ what people will throw out?"

"Amazing." When he opened it though, I lost my casual manner and dropped my expression of polite interest. The contents of the chest gleamed beneath Fluff's fiery breath. Nickels, quarters, dimes, pennies, gold rings, sparkling earrings, and strands of pearls filled it to the brim. "I don't believe it," I whispered.

"I have lots more stowed away back there," he said, his scaly chest expanding with pride.

"This is fantastic." I looked at him questioningly. "People drop dollar bills, too."

He snorted again, causing me to jump back a little. "Dollars aren't pretty at all," he said contemptuously.

Although some of the jewelry was certainly fake, a few pieces looked pretty real to me. I'd have to have them evaluated. "Uh, this is all mine, too, Fluff?" I asked hesitantly.

"Of course," he said.

Believe it or not, I hugged him. "I'll pay my rent, I'll put a little in the bank for emergencies, I'll get my mother a birthday present..." I looked around. "You know, Fluff, this isn't a bad place you've got down here, but it really needs a few things. Things that don't fall through cracks in the sidewalk or end up floating in the East River."

"Like what?" he asked excitedly.

"A color television, for one thing. Ricardo knows all about hooking up to cable without paying for it. And we'll get you nice blankets and some fresh flowers, and we'll have some good produce delivered so you can stop going all the way downtown for it. And you definitely need a few lights so you don't have to breathe fire every time you want someone to see something." I patted him on the wing. "Everything's going to be fine from now on."

"But the others," he said hesitantly, "do you think they'll like me?"

"Of course they will," I assured him. "But let's keep this part of the treasure out of sight, agreed? And there's no need to mention it to them, is there?"

"Not if you don't want to, um...?"

"Esther," I supplied.

We played a few rounds of checkers, and then he beat me at Monopoly. Dragons are hoarders, after all, and I spent my paper money as recklessly as I spend the real stuff. It was very late by the time I heard Arnaud's voice on the stairs. "Esther? Esther, are you there?"

"Oh, Christ!" I jumped to my feet. "They've been waiting for me all this time. They probably think I'm dead or something." I called through the open door, "I'll be there in a minute, Arnaud."

I heard him shout, "She's alive!" A faint cheer seemed to echo down from the first floor.

"I've got to go, Fluff. I'll talk to Ricardo about setting up a television right away," I promised.

"And you'll come back soon?" he asked, making a brave little effort not to sound pathetic.

"I'll be back before you've noticed I'm gone."

"Esther." His voice stopped me when I had nearly reached the top of the stairs.

"Yes?"

"Before you go, isn't there some wish I could grant you?"

"That's right, I'd forgotten you said you could grant wishes."

"Well?"

I shrugged. "I've got an audition tomorrow. Think you can get me the part?" The silence went on for so long, I prodded, "Fluff? Is something

wrong?"

"It's just... Well, couldn't you ask me for something hard?"

Visions of playing Scarlet in the sequel danced in my head, but my mother had taught me not to be too greedy. Not right away, anyhow. "Oh, let's start out small. We have plenty of time to get really ambitious."

"If you say so. Goodnight, Esther."

"Goodnight, Fluff."

"Esther?" he called again, just before I was out of earshot.

I returned to the doorway under the stairs. "Yes?"

"It's so nice having someone to talk to again."

I felt my throat get tight. Poor Fluff, all that solitude must have been just awful for such a sociable creature. "It's really nice knowing a dragon like you, Fluff," I said at last.

"Thank you, Esther." He sounded pleased to the point of embarrassment.

I turned away and climbed the stairs back to the first floor.

"Well?" said Arnaud, as he and the others encircled me.

"There's a dragon in the basement," I said. "Everybody be nice to him, he's been very lonely. Ricardo, I'll get a T.V. for him tomorrow. Can you please hook him up to cable for me?"

"Do you have my quarter?" Mrs. Pearl demanded.

"Are you insane?" Arnaud demanded.

"I'm definitely renewing my lease," I said. "Goodnight, everybody. I've got a big day ahead of me tomorrow."

As I climbed the stairs to the second floor, Ricardo said, "Hey, man. New York. You gotta love it."

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