

STAR WARS

FATE OF THE JEDI



ASCENSION

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Allies

**STAR
WARS**

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And the 501st

May the Force be with you!

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Ben Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male)
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Gavar Khai; Sith Saber (human male)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (human male)
Haydnat Treen; Senator, member of the triumvirate governing the Galactic Alliance (human female)
Ivaar Workan; Sith High Lord (human male)
Jagged Fel; Head of State, Galactic Empire (human male)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (human male)
Padnel Ovin; Senator from Klatooine (Klaatoinian male)
Saba Sebatyne; Jedi Master and member of the triumvirate (Barabel female)
Tahiri Veila, escaped convict (human female)
Vestara Khai; Sith apprentice (human female)
Wynn Dorvan; member of the triumvirate (human male)

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....



Chapter One

COUNCIL CHAMBERS OF THE CIRCLE,
CAPITAL CITY OF TAHV, KESH

THE SUN BEATING DOWN UPON THE STAINED-GLASS DOME OF THE CIRCLE Chambers painted the forms of all those assembled in a riot of colors. Yet it was not hot in this large room; regulating the temperature was child's play for such masterful users of the Force as the Sith assembled here.

It was an emergency meeting. Even so, formalities were strictly observed; the Sith were nothing if not meticulous. Grand Lord Darish Vol, the leader of the Lost Tribe, had summoned the meeting less than a standard hour earlier. He now sat upon a dais in the very center of the room, elevated above all others, enthroned on his traditional metal-and-glass seat. While there had been sufficient time to don his colorful formal robes, he had not had time to sit and permit his attendants to paint his gaunt, aged face with the vor'shandi swirls and decorations appropriate to the meeting. Vol shifted slightly on his throne, displeased by that knowledge and displeased with the entire situation that had necessitated the meeting in the first place.

His staff of office was stretched over his lap. His claw-like hands closed about it as his aged but still-sharp eyes flitted about the room, noting who was here and who was not, and observing and anticipating the responses of each.

Seated on either side of the Grand Lord were the High Lords. Nine members of the traditional thirteen were here today, a mixture of male and female, Keshiri and human. One High Lord Sarasu Taalon, would never again be among that number. Taalon was dead, and his death was one of the reasons Vol had called the assembly. Seated in a ring around the dais were the Lords, ranked below the High Lords, and standing behind them were the Sabers.

Several of their number were missing, too. Many were dead. Some ... well, their status remained to be seen.

Vol could feel the tension in the room; even a non-Force-sensitive could have read the body language. Anger, worry, anticipation, and apprehension were galloping through the Chambers today, even though most present hid it well. Vol drew upon the Force as naturally as breathing in order to regulate his heart rate and the stress-created chemicals that coursed through his body. *This* was how the mind remained clear, even though the heart was, as ever, open to emotions and passion. If it were closed, or unmoved by such things, it would no longer be the heart of a true Sith.

"I tell you, she is a savior!" Lady Sashal was saying. She was petite, her long white hair perfectly coiffed, her purple skin the most pleasing tone of lavender. Her mellifluous voice

rang through the room. “Ship obeys her, and was not Ship the—” She stumbled on the choice of words for a moment, then recovered. “—the Sith-created construct who liberated us from the chains of our isolation and ignorance of the galaxy? Ship was the tool we used to further our destiny—to conquer the stars. We are well on our way to doing so!”

“Yes, Lady Sashal, we are,” countered High Lord Ivaar Workan. “But it is *we* who shall rule this galaxy, not this stranger.”

Although the attractive, graying human male had been a Lord for many years, he was new to his rank of High Lord. Taalon’s untimely demise had paved the way for Workan’s promotion. Vol had enjoyed watching Workan step into the role as if he had been born to it. While Sith truly trusted no one but themselves and the Force, Vol nonetheless regarded Workan among those who fell on the side of less likely to betray him.

“She is very strong with the dark side,” High Lord Takaris Yur offered. “Stronger than anyone we have ever heard of.” That was quite a statement, coming from the Master of the Sith Temple. Few on Kesh had as extensive a knowledge of the Sith’s past—and now the present as they expanded across the stars—as this deceptively mild, dark-skinned, middle-aged human. Yur had ambition, but, oddly for a Sith, it was largely not personal. His ambitions were for his students. He was content to teach them as best he could, then set them loose on an unsuspecting world, turning his attention to the next generation of Tyros. Yur spoke seldom, but when he did, all listened, if they were wise.

“Stronger than I?” said Vol mildly, his face pleasant, as if he were engaged in idle chitchat on a lovely summer’s day.

Yur was unruffled as he turned toward the Grand Lord, bowing as he replied.

“She is an ancient being,” he said. “It seems to me foolish not to learn what we can from her.” Vol smiled a little; Yur had not actually answered the question.

“One may learn much about a rukaro by standing in its path,” Vol continued. “But one might not survive to benefit from that knowledge.”

“True,” Yur agreed. “Nonetheless, she is useful. Let us suck her dry before discarding the husk. Reports indicate that she still has much knowledge and skill in manipulating the Force to teach us and future generations of the Lost Tribe.”

“She is not Sith,” said Workan. The scorn in his melodious voice indicated that that single damning observation should be the end of the debate.

“She is!” Sashal protested.

“Not the way *we* are Sith,” Workan continued. “And our way—our culture, our values, our heritage—must be the *only* way if our destiny is to remain pure and unsullied. We risk dooming ourselves by becoming overly reliant on someone not of the Tribe—no matter how powerful she might be.”

“Sith take what we want,” said Sashal, stepping toward Workan. Vol watched both of them closely, idly wondering if Sashal was issuing a challenge to her superior. It would be foolish. She was nowhere near as powerful as Workan. But sometimes ambition and wisdom did not go hand in hand.

Her full diminutive height was drawn up, and she projected great confidence in the Force. “We will take her, and use her, and discard her when we are done. But for love of the dark side, let us take her first! Listen to High Lord Yur! Think what we can learn! From all that we have heard, she has powers we cannot imagine!”

“From all that we have heard, she is unpredictable and dangerous,” countered Workan. “Only a fool rides the uvak he cannot control. I’ve no desire to continue to sacrifice Sith Sabers and Lords on the altar of aiding Abeloth and furthering her agenda—whatever it might be. Or have you failed to realize that we don’t even truly know what that is?”

Vol detected a slight sense of worry and urgency from the figure currently approaching the Circle Chambers. It was Saber Yasvan, her attractive features drawn in a frown of concern.

“Only a fool throws away a weapon that still has use,” countered Yur. “Something so ancient—we should string her along and unlock her secrets.”

“Our numbers are finite, Lord Yur,” Workan said. “At the rate Sith are dying interacting with her, we won’t be around to learn very much.”

Vol listened as Yasvan whispered in his ear, then nodded and, with a liver-spotted hand, dismissed the Saber.

“Entertaining as this debate has been,” he said, “it is time for it to conclude. I have just learned that Ship has made contact with our planetary defenses. Abeloth and the Sith I have sent to accompany her will not be far behind.”

They had all known to expect her; it was, indeed, the primary reason the meeting had been called. All eyes turned to him expectantly. What would their Grand Lord decide?

He let them stew. He was old, and few things amused him these days, so he permitted himself to enjoy the moment. At last, he said, “I have heard the arguments for continuing to work closely with her, and the arguments to sever ties. While I confess I am not overly fond of the former, and have made little secret of my opinion, neither do I think it is time for the latter. The best way to win is to cover all angles of the situation. And so Kesh and the Circle of Lords will invite Abeloth to our world. We shall give her a grand welcome, with feasting and arts, and displays of our proud and powerful culture. And,” he added, eyeing them attentively, “we will watch, and learn, and listen. And then we will make our decision as to what is best for the Lost Tribe of Kesh.”

Sith Saber Gavar Khai sat in the captain’s chair on the bridge of the *Black Wave*, the ChaseMaster frigate that had once belonged to Sarasu Taalon. Filling the viewscreen was the spherical shape of his homeworld—green and brown and blue and lavender. Khai regarded the lush planet with heavy-lidded eyes. For so many years, Kesh had been isolated from the events of the galaxy, and Khai found he had decidedly mixed feelings about returning.

Part of him was glad to be home. As was the case with every member of the Lost Tribe, he had spent his entire life here until a scant two years ago. Deeply embedded in him were love for its beautiful glass sculptures and purple sands, its music and culture, its casual brutality, and its orderliness. For more than five thousand standard years, the Tribe had dwelled here, and with no other option, had—as was the Sith way—made the best of it. The ancient vessel *Omen* had crash-landed, and the survivors had set about not merely to exist in this world, but to dominate it. And so they had. They had managed to both embrace the Keshiri, the beautiful native beings of Kesh, and subjugate them. Those who were deserving—strong in the Force and able to adapt to the Sith way of thinking and being—could, with enough will, carve out a place for themselves in this society.

Those who were not Force-users had no such opportunities. They were at the mercy of the ones who ruled. And sometimes, as was the case with Gavar Khai and his wife, there was

mercy. Even love.

But most often, there was neither.

Too, those who gambled to increase their standing and power and lost seldom lived long enough to make a second attempt. It was a very controlled society, with precise roles. Everyone knew what was expected of him or her, and knew that in order to change their lot they would need to be bold, clever, and lucky.

Gavar Khai had been all of those things.

His life on Kesh had been good. While, of course, he had his eye on eventually becoming Lord—perhaps even a High Lord, if opportunities presented themselves or could be manipulated—he was not discontent with where he was. His wife, though not a Force-user, supported him utterly. She had been faithful and devoted and raised their tremendous, promising daughter, Vestara, very well.

And Vestara had been the most precious of all the things that had belonged to Gavar Khai.

Discipline was something every Sith child tasted almost upon emerging from the womb. It was the duty of the parents to mold their children well, otherwise they would be unprepared to claim their proper roles in society. Beatings were the norm, but they were seldom motivated by anger. They were part of the way that Sith parents guided and taught their children. Khai had not looked forward to such aspects of discipline, preferring to explore other methods such as meditating, sparring till exhaustion, and withholding approval.

He had found, to his pleasure, that he had never needed to lay a hand on Vestara as a reprimand. She was seemingly born to excel, and had her own drive and ambition such that she did not need his to “encourage” her. Khai, of course, had goals and ambitions for himself.

He had greater ones for his daughter. Or at least, he once had.

His reverie was broken by the sound of the comm beeping, indicating a message from the surface.

“Message from Grand Lord Vol, Saber Khai,” said his second in command, Tola Annax, adding quietly under her breath, “Very prompt, very prompt indeed.”

“I expected as much, once he received my message,” Khai said. “I will speak with him.”

A hologram of the wizened Grand Lord appeared. It had been some time since Khai had seen the leader of the Lost Tribe. Had Vol always seemed so fragile, so ... old? Age was to be respected, for to live to an old age meant a Sith had done something very right indeed. But there was such a thing as *too* old, and those who were too old needed to be put down. Idly keeping his thoughts well shielded, Khai wondered if the renowned Grand Lord was getting to that point. He saw his white-haired Keshiri second in command staring openly at the hologram; doubtless Annax, with her near obsession for determining weakness, was thinking the same thing.

“Saber Gavar Khai,” said Vol, and his voice certainly sounded strong. “I had expected to speak to Abeloth herself.”

“She is on Ship at the moment. Do not worry, you will see her when she arrives on Kesh,” Khai said smoothly. “She is anxious to create a good first impression.”

“I take it that since you are the one speaking to me, she has selected you to replace the late High Lord Taalon in our ... interactions with her.”

“It has not been said specifically, but yes, Abeloth has turned to me since Lord Taalon’s death.”

“Good, good. Please then assure Abeloth that as she is anxious to create a good first impression, after our people have worked so closely and sacrificed so much for her, we are also desirous that our first meeting go well. To that end, we will need time to prepare for such an august visitor. Say, three days. A parade, showcasing the glory that is the Lost Tribe, and then a masquerade.”

Khai knew a trap when he saw one. As did Annax—who quickly busied herself with her controls so as not to look too obvious as she listened in—and the rest of his crew. As trap went, this was blatant. Vol was testing Khai’s loyalties. To force Abeloth to wait three full days before being received was to tell her her place. To keep her waiting, as one might Tyro summoned for interrogation about his studies. Yet Vol would deny such, simply saying that he wanted to make sure everything was just right for their esteemed guest. And with the Sith’s love of ceremony and showcasing, the statement had the dubious merit of perhaps even being true.

Vol was waiting for Khai’s reaction. He was trying to figure out where the Saber’s loyalties lay.

And Khai himself suddenly realized, with a sick jolt, that he himself didn’t know.

Abeloth had doubtless sensed the conversation and was monitoring Khai’s presence in the Force. For all he knew about Ship, she also had the ability to monitor the conversation itself. He addressed himself calmly to the man who ostensibly ruled the Lost Tribe of the Sith.

“Abeloth will be disappointed to hear that preparations will take so long,” he said, keeping his voice modulated. “She might even see it as an insult.” Out of Vol’s line of sight, Annax was nodding.

“Well, we wouldn’t want that, would we?” said Vol. “As a fine example of a Sith Saber, you will simply have to assure her that this is done out of respect. I trust you will be able to do so.”

Slowly, Khai nodded. “I will.”

“Excellent. You have always done well by me and the Circle, Khai. I knew you would not fail me now. Give my best to Abeloth. I look forward very much to our meeting. I have heard certain rumors, and am anxious to hear from you how Vestara is performing on our behalf.”

The hologram disappeared. Khai leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin and thinking. He heard the soft chime that indicated an incoming message and was instantly alert.

“Saber Khai,” said Annax, “Abeloth wishes to speak with you privately.” Her bright eyes were on him, her quick mind doubtless racing two steps ahead, wondering about the outcome of this particular conversation.

Khai nodded. He had expected this, too. “I will receive her in my quarters, then.”

A few moments later, he was in the austere captain’s quarters of the *Black Wave*. He took a moment and steadied himself for the interview. Settling down at a small desk, he said aloud, “Transmit.”

“Patching her through, sir,” Annax replied promptly. Idly, he wondered if the Keshiri was eavesdropping. He had expected a holographic appearance, but Abeloth chose to communicate through audio only.

“Saber Khai,” she said. Her voice sounded better than it had when they’d made the agreement to work together; stronger, more in command. Less ... wounded. Khai slammed down that line of thinking at once.

“Abeloth,” he said. “I have heard from Lord Vol.”

“I know,” she said, confirming what he had suspected—that she had sensed the conversation already. “It did not go as well as you had expected.”

“Say rather it did not go as well as one could have hoped,” Khai corrected.

“I do hope that he is not denying me the chance to visit your world after all,” said Abeloth.

“Quite the contrary. He has insisted that Kesh, and primarily Tahv, be granted three days to prepare for your arrival, that the Sith may welcome you as the honored guest you are.”

“You suspect he is lying?”

It was a very dangerous game Gavar Khai was playing. Above all else, he wanted to ensure his own personal success—nay, simple survival, if it came to that. He had always been fiercely loyal to his people, but his experiences with Abeloth had also opened his eyes to the vast power she could wield. Ideally, he could bring the two together, but he had to always be aware that conflict could again erupt between Abeloth and the Lost Tribe.

And if that did happen, he needed to make sure he was on the side of the victor.

While lies were useful, sometimes the truth could be even more so. So he told the truth. “I do not think he is lying. It is a cultural tradition to have great celebrations for momentous occasions. There are always parades and parties and so on. And certainly, Lord Vol is very well aware that choosing to ally with you is an extremely important moment for the Sith.”

“But three days seems like a long time to ask so apparently honored a guest to wait.” There was irritation in her voice, and he could feel it, cold and affronted, in the Force.

“Such preparations do take time,” he said. “I do not know what he plans.”

And that much, at least, was as true as the sun rising, although Tola Annax probably could give him a list of possible ideas.

“Very well. We shall give Lord Vol his three days. I must admit, I think I will enjoy seeing so elaborate a celebration. It is good to be honored and respected.”

“Indeed. It will be a joyous occasion. I have been told that there will be a parade and afterward a masquerade.”

A moment, then a chuckle. “A masquerade. How fitting. Yes, I will definitely enjoy this.”

“I can safely say it will be unlike anything you have seen before.”

“Of course. I am sure so isolated a world must have developed unique traditions.” The way she said *isolated* made it sound like *backward*. Khai forced down any hint of resentment at her condescension.

“This is your world, Saber Khai,” she continued. “I know you have other family besides your daughter. You will be visiting before the celebration?”

“I am the leader of this flotilla,” Khai said. “I had not planned to, no.”

“Do,” said Abeloth. It was couched as a suggestion. Khai knew it was not. “And any other you think would appreciate the chance to visit should do so, as well. I do not think that I will be tarrying over-long.”

“As you wish,” said Gavar Khai, wondering, for the hundred thousandth time, just what she meant.



Chapter Two

KHAI ESTATE, KESH

THE NIGHT WAS BEAUTIFUL. THE MOON WAS HUGE AND FULL, CASTING a silvery blue glow on the land surrounding the Khai estate. Gavar Khai leaned on the balcony of the master suite, naked save for a pair of light, billowy trousers. His black hair was undone from its usual topknot and flowed loosely about his shoulders.

He looked down at his cybernetic arm, lifting it slowly, clenching and unclenching the fist. The technology was excellent. It looked in all respects like a real arm. It had complicated sensors, so that all tactile sensations were replicated. And in many ways, it was superior to a flesh-and-blood arm. Now that he was mastering the use of it, he realized that he would soon become stronger and faster with it than with his real hand. If such were the case, then the “disfigurement” so frowned upon by the Lost Tribe would be recast in the light of a great advantage.

But ... it was still a false hand. And when he had caressed his wife’s body with it an hour earlier, her skin had not felt the same.

It was not a flaw—no senseless accident had caused its loss, but rather a fight with one of the most powerful Jedi who had ever lived. And yet, he could not shake the feeling that such should not have happened.

Khai sighed quietly, looking out again over the landscape of rocky hills and stubborn trees that grew, albeit twisted, in the arid environment. Directly below him he heard the pleasant flow of water from a large glass-and-ceramic fountain.

Typically, he found the sound soothing. Now, when he thought of the word *fountain*, all he could recall was the Fountain of the Hutt Ancients on Klatooine. It had been the epitome of arrogance and foolishness for Taalon to want to harvest a piece of the thing. It had led to the unnecessary loss of several members of the Lost Tribe. Normally, such a thing would not concern him. But he could not help but wonder if perhaps, had they had another ship full of Sith, they might have been able to triumph over and properly subdue Abeloth after all, rather than being in the unpleasant position of trying to strike an alliance with her.

Yet ... this could be a good thing. If she were, indeed, more powerful than the Lost Tribe—

He sensed his wife’s wakefulness and concern, heard the soft pad of bare feet as she came up behind him and slipped her arms around his trim waist. Absently he covered one of her hands with his cybernetic one. Her cheek pressed against his back.

“Why does my husband not rest soundly in his own bed?” Lahka asked quietly. “Surely he

is not worrying about the event to come.”

Gavar did not answer immediately. He sighed, then turned to face his wife and gather her in his arms.

“I am, yes,” he confessed. “There is much riding on how things go tomorrow night.” He glanced up at the moon and amended his words. “Tonight.”

She smiled up at him. Lahka had not a speck of Force sensitivity in her. Normally, that would have made her automatically undeserving of his affections. But Lahka had other, extremely worthy qualities. She was intelligent, patient, and knew how to keep secrets. And she was beautiful, as beautiful as any Keshiri woman, though she was human. Even now, well past her youth, her soft smile moved him. She had proven a good mate and mother, and he had missed her.

Her eyes searched his. “You are worried about our daughter,” she said.

Gavar tapped her nose lightly. “And you tell people you aren’t Force-sensitive.”

“I am Gavar-sensitive,” she said, humor warm in her voice, “which is perhaps even better.”

They had not spoken of Vestara until now, and Gavar found that he yearned to unburden himself of the worry. No one in the galaxy knew Vestara as well as he and Lahka did. Perhaps she could shed some insight.

So standing on the balcony, his arms around his wife, Gavar Khai spoke quietly of the challenges he had set their daughter. Of her success, or possible failure. Of killing High Lord Taalon. Lahka didn’t protest, or seem upset in any way. Both her daughter and her mate were powerful dark side users. He was the one best suited to guide Vestara, not she. But Gavar knew she loved them both, and he welcomed the chance to speak freely.

“She loves this Jedi boy?” Lahka asked.

“While he is yet a boy, he is already a Jedi Knight. Their equivalent of a Saber. And yes, I believe she does.”

“Do you think she could sway him? He could be a powerful asset to the Tribe, and it sounds like he will treat our daughter properly—with respect and care.” Lahka had the correct priorities—first the Tribe, and then their child.

“I fear he might sway *her*. Sometimes I think she is truly my daughter, a fierce and proud Sith, as I have trained her to be. And sometimes I think she is on the verge of betraying all of us.”

She gave him another one of her smiles, almost radiant with love. “Not our Vestara. She knows her duty. To the dark side, to the Sith, to the Lost Tribe, to us. Even if she falters, I have faith she will not truly fall from the path.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, sighing softly. “I hope you are right,” he said. He did not have to elaborate. If Vestara betrayed them, his duty would be to slay her. And Lahka knew it.

Wordlessly, Lahka lifted her mouth to his and kissed him. Her fingers curled around his cybernetic arm, and she led him back into the bedroom.

Gavar left her again once she had fallen asleep, quickly donning his robes and slipping out. He walked the halls of his own home as if he were a stranger, seeing everything with new eyes. Was this truly his glorious home, filled with art and high ceilings and music instruments? He paused in front of Vestara’s room.

He thought of the day that he had knocked on this door, knowing what Vestara did not—that soon she would begin her training at the Temple. He remembered bringing out Muura, telling the puzzled young Keshiri female that her services would no longer be needed.

Muura had known better than to ask for a reference. She had left quietly, after Vestara had departed. He had not been ungenerous; Muura had clothing, and food for several days. And he had alerted one or two of his friends who had daughters that she would be departing. If they were interested in employing her, they would find her. Regardless, Muura's time as a servant in the Khai household had come to its logical and inevitable end, and they both knew it.

Unable to resist, Gavar opened the door and looked into his daughter's room. Lahka had kept it as if the girl had only just left and might one day return, though Khai knew that would never happen save for brief visits.

The windows were closed against the cool night air, but the drapes were open. By the soft light of the moon, Khai could see everything. His gaze wandered to the beautiful glass vase once filled with flowers; to the overstuffed bed that had not been slept in for a long time; to the dresser and mirror where Muura used to prepare Vestara. It was calm and orderly without being severe.

Here he had embraced his only child as she departed for her destiny; here, he would always see her, her strong body and lovely face adorned with vor'shandi markings, wearing an exquisite dress, standing straight and tall although he knew she was nervous.

It had been so promising a beginning for her ...

Khai took a long, last look, then quietly closed the door. He trailed his fingers against the smoothly polished stone of the walls as he left the main house. Massive doors opened with a twitch of a finger, and a moment later Gavar Khai was standing outside in the cool night air. He took a deep breath and looked out over his lands. Then, knowing where he needed to go now, he turned to make his way down a winding stone road.

The Khai family was nowhere near the wealthiest on Kesh, but they had done well enough. Vestara would have inherited everything upon her parents' death, and would have become a wealthy and powerful woman. The estate would have made her wealthy; her innate abilities and shrewdness would have taken her very far in Sith society.

Would have.

Still could?

Gavar Khai did not know, and this not knowing ate at him, fueled the restlessness that would not let him sleep, even in his own bed next to a devoted wife.

It was a good thing, to be clever enough so that others did not guess one's motives. He had been proud that Vestara had misled the Skywalkers—even the vaunted Luke Skywalker—sufficiently well that she was still in their company. He had been excited at the thought of bringing so talented a Force-user as Ben Skywalker over to the dark side—firmly at the side of a Sith woman.

A Sith woman who had killed a High Lord ... a High Lord who was becoming something ... *else*. Had that been treachery, or loyalty?

Was Vestara still playing the game they had arranged?

Was Sith Saber Gavar Khai the father being duped, not Luke Skywalker?

For the life of him, Khai could not tell. He growled softly, following the road down to the

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