

# Star of Erengard

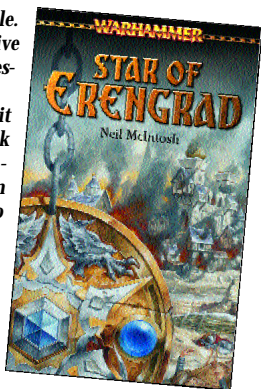
A Warhammer novel by Neil McIntosh

OTTO PAUSED, lost in contemplation for a while. 'The question is,' he continued, 'are you ready to give your all to this struggle for Kislev? Ready, if necessary, to give your life?'

Stefan thought again of the map. In his mind it had become a map of darkness; a wash of black creeping across the face of mankind, slowly obliterating it. He shuddered, but it was a shudder born of anticipation as much as of unease. He had no doubt of what his answer must be.

'What is it that you need me to do?' he asked.

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## *from STAR OF ERENGRAD*

VARIK STEPPED FORWARD tentatively, into the unyielding space that was the realm of Kyros. He stood within a void filled with a blackness more impenetrable than any night. It was like entering a world without dimensions. There was no contrast, no light; no beginning, and no end. It was said that the soul of the Lord Kyros was so wedded to the powers of darkness that daylight had become unendurable, that he could only suffer the withering sun vicariously, from within the host body of a disciple. Yet another story had it that the warping power of Chaos had wrought such terrible disfigurements upon his body that Kyros forbore any of his followers to look upon him without the covering cloak of darkness.

The emissary paid no attention to stories. Varik had survived, flourished – even, in the shadow of Kyros’s insane majesty by keeping his thoughts to himself, until he was required to do otherwise. He stood, penitent and head bowed, waiting upon his master’s pleasure. He had learned never to try and anticipate the will of Kyros.

The silence stretched on until the emissary became aware of something stirring, some denser form moving amidst the darkness. Varik did not move forward, but fell upon his knees, and waited. He could feel the might of Kyros bearing down upon him like an iron bar upon his back.

‘Magnificence,’ he intoned. ‘Your emissary attends your command.’

Varik heard, or rather felt, the Chaos Lord’s reply like a thunder echoing within his skull. The voice of his master flooded into him, filling him with a dark, divine energy.

‘You have not recovered the icon.’

Varik clasped his hands together, and pressed his forehead to

the cold ground; supine and subservient. 'Master,' he said, slowly. 'It is true the pieces of the Star remain scattered across the blighted realm of man. But we will retrieve them. Every day brings us nearer that goal.' He raised his head, fractionally. 'The Kislevite herself shall lead us to our prize.'

Silence. He sensed Kyros measuring his words, probing them for deceit, weighing their worth in the balance.

'What of the old meddler?' the Dark Lord demanded at last. 'If he was not the custodian of the Star, then he would have had knowledge of it.'

Varik took a deep breath. He was aware of his entire body shaking. 'Our servant could glean nothing from the old man,' he said. 'They searched his quarters afterwards, and could find no trace of it.'

'Afterwards?'

'The old man is dead, lordship. He will stand against us no further.'

There was a pause. When the voice of Kyros spoke again, it was in more measured tones. 'Much will depend upon this one servant. You are sure that they will not fail us?'

'Their human will has been completely subdued,' Varik assured his master. 'Their soul has been suspended between the world of the living and that of the dead. It is yours to command.'

Varik felt the pressure bearing down on him lift a fraction. The pain encircling his head like a vice began to ease. His body felt suddenly lighter, blessed with a divine forbearance. Varik knelt quietly in the darkness, savouring his master's indulgence.

STEFAN KNEW THAT if Otto's death signified one thing, it meant that they must now move quickly. His immediate task had been to send word to Elena Yevschenko. Normally he would have gone to her chambers at the Palace of Retribution, but after what had just happened, he was no longer sure that even the palace was safe.

He kept the note brief, only telling Elena that she must come to his rooms in the Altquartier, alone and without delay.

After what seemed like an age there was a knock at the door, and Elena stood before him, her head and body covered by a heavy cloak she wore wrapped around her.

'This better be good,' she told him, curtly. 'Otto must have told you I'm not supposed to go wandering the streets of Altdorf without good cause.'

'I needed to speak to you alone, somewhere where I could be sure we wouldn't be overheard,' Stefan explained. 'Look,' he said, his tone more gentle now, 'you'd better sit down. I'm afraid Otto's not going to be helping us any more.'

Elena reacted to the news in near silence at first, sitting quietly, wringing her hands. Finally, the words came as the tears began to flow. 'He often talked of his own death,' she said. 'He would tell me that he would greet the end of each day as a victory, as death postponed. But he knew all the same that he would confront it, eventually.'

'He met a cruel end,' Stefan said. 'I'm sorry.' And saddened, he might have added. He had barely had time to know Otto, yet he had the certain feeling that, finally, he might have found a kindred spirit. Someone, at last, who understood. With Otto dead, Stefan knew that he stood alone once more.

'How long was he – was the body lying there long before it was found?' Elena asked.

'Not long, I think,' Stefan said.

'Then it had not been well concealed?'

Stefan hesitated. He knew this was going to be the most difficult part of all.

'I don't think there was any intention to conceal his body,' he said, quietly. 'I think that whoever did this meant him to be found, and quickly.'

Elena stared back at Stefan. She knew there was more to come. 'Tell me,' she said. 'Don't keep the truth from me.'

Grief leant a sudden harshness to her tone. 'What else did you see?'

Stefan took a deep breath. Recalling the scene at the wharf was hard enough, describing it to Elena was going to be far worse. 'It looked at first as though Otto had been torn apart by some kind of wild beast,' he said. 'Cut apart, into pieces.'

Elena blinked. A tear fell across one cheek. 'Go on,' she said. 'I need to know.'

'But then,' Stefan continued, 'when I – looked again, I saw that this – terrible carnage – had been deliberate. And careful, in its way. Otto had been cut, his body butchered to fit a deliberate pattern.'

Elena paled. She touched a shaking hand to her lips. 'Pattern?' she said, weakly. 'Pattern of what?'

'Insignia,' Stefan said, continuing to force the words out. 'I've seen most of them before, though there was a time when I would

never have thought to see them here, in Altdorf. Nor displayed in such a terrible way.'

'What kind,' Elena demanded, her voice steadied now, 'what kind of insignia?'

'The stigmata of evil,' Stefan continued. 'Runes and spell-charms. Daubings paying foul homage to a dark god – the god of transfiguration.'

'The Changer of the Ways,' Elena said slowly, aghast.

'Yes,' Stefan affirmed. 'There was quite a crowd gathered by the time I got there. I don't think many of them knew what they were looking at.'

'But you did,' Elena said.

'Except for this,' Stefan replied. He reached into his pocket and drew out a folded slip of paper. He opened it out and flattened it upon the table. 'I found this mark near where Otto lay,' he said. 'Someone had daubed it – in his blood. I copied it down.'

Elena took the paper from Stefan's hand and looked at the likeness he had drawn. He knew at once that she recognised it. Elena threw the paper down and pushed it away as though she could not bear to have it near her.

'What does it mean?' Stefan asked.

Elena was shaking now. Fear had replaced the grief in her eyes.

'Are you sure?' she asked. 'Are you sure this is right?'

'Quite sure,' Stefan told her. 'What does it mean?'

Elena did not answer directly, but Stefan caught the whispered word that she spoke, before turning away: *Scarandar*. He took hold of her arm, and drew her back towards him. 'Elena,' Stefan said, gently but firmly. 'This is important. *Scarandar*? Who or what is that? Why would it be here, in Altdorf?'

'I'd never thought to that see that mark outside of Kislev,' Elena said, horrified. 'In fact, not even outside Erengard.' She buried her face in her hands. 'Oh, Goddess Shallya protect us!'

'Elena,' Stefan persisted. 'Please.'

She looked up out of her hands at him, her eyes reddened. 'The *Scarandar* are the servants of evil,' she began, struggling to control the trembling in her voice. 'They are human – at least, I think they are – but they have set their face against mankind and all its works. They worship a daemon, a terrible master pledged to deliver first Erengard, then all Kislev to the Lord of Change.'

'How will he do that?' Stefan asked, gravely. 'What do the stories say?'

Elena held down a deep breath, fighting to keep her composure.

'That he will bring down the walls of Erengrad from without and from within,' she said. 'From without, by bringing a mighty conflagration of fire and blood. From within, by sowing the seeds of unrest and hatred which will divide the people against themselves.'

Stefan sat down, and rested his head in his hands. 'Unless, of course,' he said, 'something or someone is able to unite the people, and deliver them to another destiny?'

Both of them sat in silence, the significance of their words suddenly weighing down upon them. Stefan had understood the seriousness of things when Otto had first shown him the map. But somehow, now, this had become personal. It was about Elena. And it was about him.

He felt Elena's hand upon his own. Her nails gripped into the flesh of his wrist. When he looked up he saw the tears flowing freely down her face.

'But why now?' she sobbed. 'Why choose to seek Otto out and murder him now?'

'I don't know,' Stefan replied. 'Maybe they – if it is the Scarandar – were looking for something they thought he had. Maybe they want the Star.'

Both were silent for a moment as the implications of Stefan's words sank in.

'I think Otto's death was meant as a message,' he went on, quietly. 'A message for us. I think they meant to show that they know who you are.'

'But then why give us warning?' Elena demanded.

'Yes,' Stefan agreed. 'Why indeed?' He folded the paper carefully and put it away. 'One thing is clear,' he said. 'We can't afford to delay our departure any longer. I've sent a message to Alexei Zucharov. He should be here at any moment.'

'Then we're leaving,' Elena said.

'Yes,' Stefan replied 'Without delay. Tonight.'

Elena glanced at Stefan then looked away. 'Very well,' she said. 'We'll be ready.'

It took a moment for the word to register with Stefan. 'We?' he asked, slowly. 'Who do you mean by "we"?'

Elena got up, and turned away from Stefan. 'My maid, Lisette, and I, that's who,' she said, curtly. 'Surely you don't expect me to travel half way across the Empire with just two strangers for company?'

Stefan wasn't sure any more what he expected. All he knew was that, in the midst of his grief for a dead comrade, Elena had suddenly thrown a totally unknown factor into the equation.

'Why didn't you tell me about this before?' he demanded. He didn't know what he felt about Elena's maid riding with them. What he knew was that he had been wrong-footed, intentionally or otherwise, and it didn't agree with him one bit.

Elena rounded on him, eyes flashing angry fire. 'Why in the name of Taal should you have been?' she demanded. 'You don't own me, Stefan Kumansky. It's my decision if I choose to take a whole troop of servants. Surely you don't begrudge my having my maid ride with me?'

'What I begrudge,' Stefan continued, pushing back his own anger, 'is that you make arrangements without telling me.'

'Well, I'm telling you now,' Elena snapped. 'Lisette is more than a maid. She's a companion, and an outsider, just like me. She's the only person who knows what it's like, always to be the stranger in a strange land.' She brushed a tear away from her face. 'That's why I chose her to attend me, rather than those sneering madams they sent me at court.' She stared up at Stefan, her defiance undimmed. 'I'll be damned if I'll give her up now, and Otto would tell you himself it was my right.'

'Otto's dead,' Stefan said, quietly. 'He can't tell us anything any more.'

The sound of footsteps outside cut short the quarrel. Stefan turned away from Elena and opened the door. Expecting just Alexei Zucharov, Stefan was at first alarmed to see two figures, their faces hidden beneath heavy woollen capes. The second figure pulled the hood clear of his face and looked up, expressionless, at Stefan. 'I assume it's not too late to change my mind?' he said.

'Bruno!' The dark cloud pressing down upon Stefan lifted at the unexpected sight of his friend. Bruno shook Stefan's hand and smiled, briefly. Behind the smile there was still something, some distance that Stefan could not fathom. He let the question go.

'It's good to see you,' he said, warmly.

'You're still looking for someone to ride with you?'

'If that someone is you, then yes,' Stefan affirmed.

Bruno exchanged glances with Alexei. Stefan thought he saw something in Bruno's look, discomfort or unease. Again, he let the question go.

'Bruno's thought things over,' Alexei said. 'Come to think better of his decision.'

'Just promise me one thing,' Bruno said to Stefan. 'Accept that my decision now is to ride with you. Don't question me about why. Things have changed, that's all.'

'Things have changed indeed,' Stefan agreed. He turned to Zucharov. 'Otto Brandauer's been murdered,' he told him. 'It looks like someone knows about the mission.'

'Then we need to make a move,' Zucharov said.

'Yes,' Stefan confirmed. 'We must be on our way by moonrise. But there's another problem to resolve, now.'

'Which is?'

'Otto was going to lead the mission, at least as far as Middenheim where we meet up with the merchants travelling east. Otto was to have been our pathfinder through the forest.'

'There are maps here,' Elena said. 'It can't be that difficult.'

'Let's take our chances,' Alexei agreed.

'Not good enough,' Stefan said, firmly. 'I've known men who've set off into those forests armed with the best maps in the Empire. Those who didn't lose their lives usually lost their minds trying to find their way out of the Drakwald. At very best we'd lose time: days, weeks, probably.' He shook his head, firmly. 'We couldn't afford that. We need a guide. Someone who knows the ways of the woods.'

'Philip Alben,' Alexei offered. 'He was born and raised in the Drak. Knows his way about the forest as well as any man.'

'Then it's a pity he didn't know his way around a bar room brawl,' Bruno said, breaking his long silence. 'Alben was found floating in the dock with a knife in his back over a week ago.'

'Well,' Stefan demanded, 'Any other ideas?' He looked around at the three others in the room, waiting for an answer. 'In that case,' he said at last, 'I have just one. Not the man I would choose willingly. But the choices seem to have just run out.'

HE HAD FEW problems finding the address. Plenty of people knew the name, and had stories they could offer as well. None of them made Stefan feel any better about this. But, as he kept reminding himself, there wasn't a lot of choice.

After about half an hour's walk he found the house buried deep within a rundown part of the city. The street was strewn with refuse and rotting food, rats outnumbering the people going about their business. This, Stefan said to himself, is the last

stop on the way down. A place where you come to die. Steeling himself against the stench wafting from the interior of the house, Stefan climbed the staircase towards the single room on the top floor of the tottering building. The door of the room lay half-open, and a stale reek of cheap liquor hung on the air.

Stefan's call met with no response, but it didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. The room was sparsely furnished – little more besides a table stacked with empty bottles, and a single, bare bed, grey with human grime. A man lay splayed across the bed, still fully clothed. Only the faint, laboured sound of breathing betrayed the fact that he wasn't dead.

Stefan fought back a wave of revulsion that almost had him turning straight back. No choice, he reminded himself yet again. He looked about the room and found what he was looking for, a pitcher half full with water. The water had a greasy scum covering its surface, with at least a dozen dead flies glued upon it. But it was cold, and would serve Stefan's purpose. He levelled the pitcher towards the bed, and slung the contents over the sleeper's face.

The man groaned, cursing an imaginary foe, and gradually came to sitting. A fit of coughing seized his body as his eyes opened and focused upon Stefan standing before him.

'Get up,' Stefan commanded, throwing a cloth in the direction of Tomas Murer. 'Everyone gets a last chance in this life,' he told him. 'This is yours.'

THEY MET AT Wilhelm's Gate, by the old toll road that skirted edge of the city. Bruno, hardly speaking, lost within a place known only to him. Tomas Murer, sober now, was shivering in the cold. Alexei Zucharov, eyeing the newcomer with obvious mistrust. And Stefan Kumansky, watching them all. These would be his comrades in the coming months, his companions through whatever adversity the fates chose to cast at them. Somehow, together, they had to see this through.

It was now an hour past sunset. Mannslieb and Morrislieb had taken their places in the sky above Altdorf, dappling its spires and turrets in a pale silver light. The night was clear and cold after the rain that had been falling over the city.

Horse-hooves clattered upon the cobblestones, approaching the abandoned tollgate. Elena Yevshenko emerged out of the darkness, a second rider on horseback following a few paces behind. Elena drew up next to Stefan, and nodded a brief acknowledgement.

'This is Lisette,' she announced, motioning the maid forward. The second rider threw back the hood of her gown, revealing delicate, almost elvish features. The girl had the olive-dark complexion of western Bretonnia, with dark curled hair and deep hazel eyes. It struck Stefan immediately how slightly built she was; small enough almost to be taken for a halfling. Lisette seemed to read Stefan's thoughts, and drew herself up in the saddle as if to accentuate her height.

Stefan found himself staring at the girl, not so much in curiosity, or even admiration – though she was undeniably pretty. What caused him to stare was a feeling uncomfortably close to recognition. He cast his mind back over the events of the last day, the faces glimpsed in crowds or upon the street.

'We've met before, I think,' he said. The girl's face flushed a sudden red. Lisette turned her head to one side, avoiding Stefan's inquisitive gaze. 'You're mistaken, sir,' she mumbled.

'I think not,' Stefan insisted. 'You were at the festival games last night, sitting not far from me. Earlier that day you were in the Altquartier, and then later in Hergeldstrasse, following the same path as me. It's either a remarkable coincidence, which I doubt, or else you were purposely following me. Why?'

The Bretonnian girl hesitated, caught between denial and a plausible explanation. The silence was broken by Elena. 'Because I told her to,' she snapped. 'Why not? For the last few weeks I've been a virtual prisoner in the palace. Why shouldn't I gain my own account of you and your comrades, from someone I can trust?' She glared at Stefan and the others, growing angrier as she became more defensive, then muttered a few words of reassurance to the girl in Bretonnian. The girl's face flushed, with embarrassment or relief. Sitting up next to her mistress she seemed an unlikely spy, and as docile in nature as Elena was fiery.

The explanation might have been innocent enough, but Stefan was furious that, again, Elena seemed to have gone out of her way to cross him. If she hadn't made it clear before that she was a reluctant companion, there was no mistaking her view now. For a relationship that would inevitably be close over the coming months and miles, this had been an ill-favoured start.

Alexei Zucharov pointed to the sky. 'The light's good,' he said. 'We should make full use of it while it lasts.'

'Agreed,' Stefan said. He looked back at Elena. 'We have a job to do, you and I,' he said. 'Let's put this behind us and get on with it.'

'Agreed,' Elena replied, somewhat stiffly. For a moment their eyes met. Stefan found himself wondering if their apparent differences didn't mask the fact that, on some level, they were very alike. Time alone would reveal the truth. 'Let's go,' he shouted to the others. Stefan took up the reins and spurred his horse onward, out of Altdorf, on the road that led to the east.

THEY RODE IN silence until the lights of Altdorf were a distant glimmering on the horizon behind them. By then the well-paved road had given way to one of loose stone, little more than a rough track beneath the horses' hooves. They had steered away from the road favoured by the traders, the highway that ran between Altdorf and Talabheim, and instead skirted east of the Talabec river on the rutted tracks winding north-east from the city.

Stefan was relieved to be on the road at last. For sure, danger lay ahead, but he was glad nonetheless to be putting Altdorf behind them. The years had seen him grow accustomed to the face of death, but Otto's murder had unsettled him, and left him feeling hollow inside.

Rarely had slaughter seemed so premeditated, so deliberate in its manner. He wondered at the meaning of it. That it was the work of cultists he was in no doubt, and the bloody insignia left at the scene seemed to signal it clearly as the work of the Scarandar. At first Stefan had reasoned that the murder was meant to serve as a warning, but, if so, to what end? If the idea had been to frighten Elena into abandoning her plan, then the ploy had failed. Indeed, Otto's death had hastened the urgency of their departure from Altdorf by several days.

And that was what was troubling him still. The forces that opposed them were not simple, nor stupid. Otto Brandauer's murder had been calculated; it had a purpose. And Stefan could not be sure that they were not even now fulfilling that purpose as they rode away from the city.

He marvelled at how empty the world had suddenly become, how desolate. He had rarely travelled this way from Altdorf, and never before by night. The darkness accentuated the sense of solitude enveloping them. Once clear of the city walls, the crowded, human bustle of Altdorf quickly became a distant memory. Here and there they passed clusters of houses, hamlets or small villages, but for the most part they were derelict and deserted. It was not what he had been expecting.

As the hours passed, however, he noticed that they were drawing closer to what looked like some kind of barrier lining the horizon ahead of them. Whatever it was gradually expanded until it filled their entire line of sight, like a wall wrapping itself around the world. No light seemed to escape from within it; it seemed darker even than the surrounding night. Gradually the conversation amongst the travellers died away as, each in turn, they became transfixed by the towering darkness rearing up in front of them.

'Gods watch over us,' Lisette whispered. 'We are riding into the very heart of it.'

'What is it?' Elena demanded. 'It looks so vast.'

Tomas kept his eyes trained on the dark expanse, like a hunter suddenly re-united with an ancient foe. 'It is the forest,' he said softly. 'The Drakwald.'

As one, the riders drew up their horses and sat, staring, at the unending vista unravelling ahead. Now, truly, the enormity of their journey began to hit home.

'Well,' Alexei said, breaking the silence at last. 'Welcome to the world beyond.'

The waxy light from the moons had ebbed over the last hour until, suddenly, it was gone. Now the darkness enveloping them was all but total.

Stefan contemplated the forest. It looked all but impenetrable, difficult even by daylight. Perhaps for now they should push their luck no further. 'This is as far as we go tonight,' he said. 'We won't tackle the Drakwald until dawn. That's still some five hours distant. We'll find somewhere to lay up for the night, get some rest.'

Lisette had already climbed down from her horse and was at the reins of Elena's, waiting to help her mistress dismount. Elena looked around at the bare moorland, the dark shoulder of the forest towering over them.

She shivered.

'It's so dark,' she said. 'And I'd forgotten I could feel so cold!'

Alexei laughed. 'You've been too long from Kislev,' he observed.

'Anyway,' Stefan said, getting down from his own horse. 'We best all get used to it. There'll be plenty of nights like this.'

They tethered the horses near the river, and set about making camp beneath the shelter of some nearby trees. Once they'd done, Alexei produced a flask of Bretonnian gin. He offered it

around, but got no takers. Finally he turned towards Tomas Murer, sitting apart from the rest of the group at the water's edge. Alexei held out the flask. 'You can't function without this stuff, can you?'

Tomas looked from Alexei to the leather flask being held in front of him. A look, part fear and part hunger passed over his features. He extended one hand, tentatively, then stopped, and shook his head. Stefan got up and snatched the flask away from Alexei.

'That's enough game playing,' he snapped. 'It's been a long day. And a difficult one,' he added, catching Elena's eye. 'We'd better all get some sleep whilst we can.'

'Maybe,' Alexei said. He reached out to retrieve the flask from Stefan's side. 'But I think I'll sit out and keep this gin company a while yet. I'll take first watch.'

Stefan gave him a searching look. 'Everything all right?' he asked, quietly.

Alexei grunted, non-committally. Stefan didn't mistake his tone for indifference. Zucharov might be strong-willed, and he was certainly unpredictable, but Stefan had learnt to respect his nose for trouble.

'It's probably all right,' Alexei said. He unfastened the stopper from the gin and took a slow swig. Stefan looked around, and listened. The only noise he could hear was the swirling water of the river nearby, a vaguely comforting sound.

'I think so too,' he said. 'I don't think anyone has followed us. In fact I don't think there's anyone but us for miles about.' He looked over at Tomas. 'What about you, Tom?' he asked. 'What do you reckon?'

'I think you're right,' Murer replied. He kept his eyes averted from Zucharov as he spoke, staring all the while down into the water. 'I think we'll be safe enough here for the moment.'

Alexei pulled the stopper from the flask. 'Well,' he said, contemptuously, 'that's all the reassurance we need, then.' He took another mouthful of gin.

'Let's get some sleep,' Stefan said again, firmly. 'Wake me in an hour,' he told Alexei.

Elena and Lisette were already bedding down upon the blanket, their cloaks wrapped tight around them against the cold. Bruno was standing at the edge of the camp, some way apart from the others. Stefan walked over to join him.

'How are you?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' Bruno said. 'Tired, that's all.'

'Then sleep,' Stefan advised. 'We'll need to be riding again as soon as the sun is up.'

'Of course,' Bruno said. As he turned away, Stefan caught his arm.

'Every man has the right to keep his own counsel,' he said. 'I respect that. But we have a long journey together, and a perilous one. Some time along that road we will need to talk of what's in our hearts.'

Bruno returned Stefan's gaze, his body stiff and uncomfortable. Then he smiled, briefly but warmly, rekindling a brief memory of the friendship that had sustained them on so many travels in the past. Stefan lay a hand upon his comrade's shoulder. 'Good night, old friend,' he said. 'Rest well.'

Follow the story of Stefan and Elena's quest to unite  
the city of Erengard and save Kislev  
from the forces of Chaos in  
THE STAR OF ERENGRAD.

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