



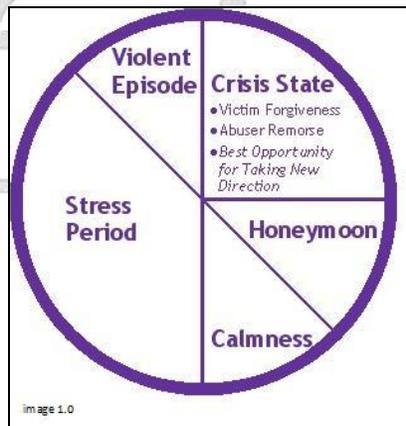
The Dragon's Risk: **The Perils of Getting Into a Violent Relationship**

By Catherine Rene' Heimdale ©
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"The Dragon" represents the abuser well; dragons are powerful, beautiful, charismatic and charming. And they will burn you. While the statistics on dating and domestic violence are frightening, the veracity behind them is a living nightmare for victims of domestic violence. So, what draws someone into a relationship with an abuser? How does the relationship form without the victim realizing what is taking place? What signs or symptoms are there, that the victim is not recognizing? Why is it so hard to get out and stay out? What are the long term effects of being in a violent relationship? As a survivor, the final question, I feel, I must ask myself. "What have I learned?"

There is more than one kind of abuse – emotional, sexual, verbal, and/or physical – it is much more than being pounded on by someone who says that they love you. The abuser may never use physical abuse at all. The fact is that approximately 1/3 of all high school and college age students either have been or will be involved in a violent/abusive relationship. About 2/3 of female victims of violence knew their attacker and *those* victims are 6 times more likely not to report the violence to authorities out of fear of reprisal. Sandi Fultz, a counselor who works with abuse victims of all kinds at Safenet Services in Claremore, Oklahoma, (www.safenetservices.org) stresses, "abusive relationships may not have any physical violence at all but can still be extremely abusive. Also, abusive relationships don't just happen to heterosexual men and women. The LGBTQ community suffers from abusive relationships as well. Children are also victims of abuse both direct and indirect." Abusive relationships cross all cultures, financial levels and genders. It affects absolutely everyone – children, parents, friends, siblings, co-workers and beyond – who is involved with either the abuser or the victim.

The abusive relationship builds like the links in a chain, forming slowly and one link at a time. Each incident in the Cycle of Violence (image 1.0) adds to the links in the chain, slowly wrapping the victim over and over. The longer a violent relationship is allowed to go on, the more difficult it is to actually escape – and escaping is exactly what must take place; it takes an average of 5 – 7 escape attempts to actually get out. And at that, understanding the importance of safety is critical... and escaping is only the first step in the recovery process. Emotional and mental healing must take place as well in order for the victim to become successful at life again.



So, what does draw someone into a relationship with an abuser? Abusers tend to be "the Dragon" mentioned earlier – charming, smart, attentive (aka, controlling) and very good at figuring out how to gain power over the victim by identifying their weakness. It is a very powerful psychological war for control using mixture of love, training and correction.

Angel, of Claremore (not her real name), is a survivor of an abusive relationship who was kind enough to visit with me about her own survival story. I asked her, "What do you think drew you into a relationship with your abuser?" She replies that he was an older man (12 years older) whom she found attractive, was successful in business and gave her attention. "He was very charming and told me everything I wanted to hear."



Sandi Fultz, with Safenet Services reiterates this point, “Abusive people are really good emotional manipulators— brain washers if you will. People who become involved with abusers often have a great deal of empathy for other people’s problems - they want to “help.” Emotional manipulators recognize that trait and exploit it. Combine an emotional manipulator with a nurturing person, a person who wants to help others, wants to love and be loved, wants to belong to someone, wants to have someone in their life who cares for them the same way they care about others - completely and overwhelmingly - well...you have an abusive relationship about to happen.”

In my own case, I suppose I fell into my “Dragon’s” charm the first time I saw him. I was seventeen; I walked into the youth building at my church, where there were quite a few teens; he was standing behind a pool table. I grabbed my sister and said, “Oh, Patti.” He was gorgeous and he was my age. The other teenage boys flocked around him like a movie star’s fan club; he was very popular. I had lived my life to that point never believing that I was attractive or interesting; why would he (or any guy) pay attention to me? When he did, I was amazed and would have done anything to keep him. He was capable of disarming tenderness and terrifying rage and he knew exactly how to take advantage of my naiveté and lack of confidence.

How does the control of the abusive relationship form without the victim realizing what is taking place? Many have heard the old adage about the frog in boiling water. If you drop the frog into cold water and slowly heat it up, that frog will stay there until it kills him. If you drop him in boiling water, he’ll jump right out. Although this may not be scientifically accurate, it is an excellent parable for this discussion. Abusers gain control by essentially brainwashing their partner. The best way to get the assistance needed to maintain control is through quiet, manipulative re-directing of the thoughts and emotions of the victim, who then becomes a prisoner of the relationship in every sense of the phrase as a result.

Abusers isolate their victims. They work to create divisions between the victim and their support group (family and friends) and, at the same time, they work to make the victim feel like this isolationism is a good thing. After all, says the abuser, those people are not on your side... “I would never do that to you,” “They don’t love you like I do,” and other insidious observations; the mental realignment is very hard to resist. Everything the abuser does focuses on *eliminating* anything and/or anyone – persons, information, support, independence, thought - that is not consistent with acquiescence. The abuser will do so by *any* means necessary. This deprives the victim of the help needed to resist the abuser and, in fact, makes the victim entirely dependent on the abuser.

The mere threat of violence in one form or another creates a culture of anxiety and fear. That, coupled with offers of positive reinforcement for compliance – which includes the “honeymoon period” in the Cycle of Violence (image 1.0) create the reward the victim is hoping for. As a victim of a violent relationship, these “rewards” and the “honeymoon period” were exactly what kept me hooked. I look at it as the “*If only*” syndrome. *If only* he/she could be that way all the time. He/she is so wonderful when... *If only*. During those peaceful, good times, you keep thinking how great it is and that, if only you can avoid making him/her angry, then everything would be just fine.

As a part of maintaining power and control, the abuser reinforces his/her supremacy and command at every opportunity, including enforcing small, seemingly unimportant demands. This coupled with constant degradation in one form or another, of course, impresses to the victim that it is useless to struggle.

“At the beginning of a relationship, abusers will often appear to meet the victims’ emotional and sometimes physical need. The nurturing person appreciates the attention and often begins to feel the abuser is the answer to happiness and belonging. Establishing power and control is gradual and can be both overt and covert but is based on emotional manipulation and sometimes but not always physical intimidation. The victims begin to feel (thanks to the manipulation) that they can’t live without the abusive person and work very hard to minimize conflict by changing their behavior. This works to lower the victims’ sense of esteem and confidence. Victims have to constantly second guess what might cause conflict” notes Sandi Fultz of Safenet Services.

What signs or symptoms are there, that the victim is not recognizing?

I asked Angel (a survivor), “What signs or symptoms do you see now, but did not recognize when the relationship with your abuser was forming?” She said, “Oh, there were lots of red flags!” She admits that, while they seem apparent now, when she looks back, she did not put them together or understand the significance early in the relationship. Some of the issues Angel dealt with were:

- Serious anger problem
- Name calling



- Bad drinking and drug habits
- Controlling everything – money, the phone, use of the car
- She had to report every move she made and check in constantly if she were out
- The abuser's circle of friends was a big indicator
- Being left alone for hours locked in the house while he went out
- Being isolated
- The abuser's work allowed him to associate with violent/criminal types of people
- Threatening to have those violent/criminal people hurt or kill her if he did not do it himself

"There are often red flags in the abuser's behavior but sometimes they're not noticeable" notes Sandi Fultz, Safenet Services. "If a person meets someone and begins thinking, 'I've met my soul-mate,' 'We just met and we talked all night,' 'I've never met anyone who listened to me like that,' 'We just have so much in common,' 'It's love at first sight,' 'I knew we were meant to be together,' 'It was fate,' then a big stop sign needs to appear in their brain" she warns.

At first, in my own case, the violence was never directed at me; it was directed at the wall, the car window... and other people. *Surely* he would never do that to me. But he *did*. And it was always my fault – why was I so thoughtless when it came to him? That's the way it was presented to me afterwards and he made it all so logical. At the naive age of nineteen, I married this man – a Dragon, so to speak. He was muscular, attractive, devious, powerful, forceful, charismatic, popular and deceitfully charming. I was so certain that my love was enough to fix what was wrong. Besides, he could be so wonderful, "*If only*" (because I could only envision his possibilities and all of the good that I saw in him). At first, of course, the violence was never directed at me and when it was, I did not understand the ramifications or the effect that it would have on me for the rest of my life. It took me six years and five escape attempts to finally break free of that abusive relationship.

These are important questions to ask:

- Are you afraid of the person you're going out with?
- Do they call you names, make you feel stupid, or tell you that you can't do anything right?
- Do they say that no one else would ever go out with you?
- Does the person you're involved with tell you where you can and can't go or who you can and can't talk to?
- Do you feel cut off from your friends and family?
- Do you feel if you say no to sexual activities that you will get in trouble? Do you feel pushed or forced into being sexual?
- Does the person say it's your fault when they hurt you?
- Does this person shove, grab, hit, pinch, hold you down or kick you?
- Is the person you're seeing really nice sometimes and really mean at other time (almost like they have two personalities)?
- Do they promise "never to do it again" after an outburst of abuse or a "fight?"
- Does this person make frequent promises to change?
- Do they pretend that they never hurt you? Or do they tell you that you are "making too big a deal" out of it?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," it is very possible that your partner is being abusive towards you. You may want to look at your relationship more closely and talk to someone you trust or contact your local domestic violence organization or even law enforcement. Sandi Fultz, with Safenet Services imparts "In our culture, we often mistake jealousy and possessiveness as a sign of love but they're just the opposite. They're controlling behaviors as are checking your cell phone, accusing you of cheating, and working to isolate you from your friends and family." That isolation the abuser creates is critical.

Why is it so hard to get out and stay out? Abusers draw their victims in by making life with them appear to be more, be better, like being drawn into the splendor of a Dragon's lair. The sparkle and "riches" (some perceived advantage) of their powerful charisma and/or charm radiates. Something in the victim so wants to be a part of that, so they voluntarily go into the relationship. "A psychological condition called the Stockholm Syndrome can be in operation in abusive relationships. The victims often lose themselves in the relationship. Victims begin to feel



like they can't live without the abusers and will do everything they can to make the relationship work, sometimes even going against their own value systems" reports Sandi Fultz, Safenet Services. "Often a state of learned helplessness is created, where the victims begin to believe they are unable to survive on their own. Abusive relationships frequently damage a person's sense of self-worth. There may also be physical threats against the victims, their children or their families if the abusers think the victims might leave. The possibility of losing custody of your children in a divorce, of losing your home, of losing your marriage, of losing your life, of losing your only income are very real fears created (often by abusers' threats) in the victims of abusive relationships" she adds. Suddenly one day, the victim is so deep into the "Dragon's lair" that they don't know how to get out. They are trapped in the labyrinth of an abusive relationship.

Even if they find an exit, victims are often turned back to the abuser's control by those around them. Cultural and religious bias against divorce and/or in favor of one person's dominance in a marriage, family and friends that, quite simply, don't believe it is possible for the abuser to be so severe, are all factors that contribute to the difficulties of escape. Additionally, victims often have no idea how important it is to learn how to be safe. They leave; the abuser finds them and uses their considerable control and influence to convince the victim of the hope (*exactly what they want to hear*) offered in returning. Like a drug entices the addict who tries to quit, it is very difficult to resist. Understanding the importance of safety when leaving an abuser is absolutely critical because it is a fact that the most dangerous time for any abuse victim is when they leave or try to leave. Seek out information from your local domestic violence organization, go to www.ocadvsa.org (Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at 800-522-7233) for information and local resources, or contact law enforcement.

When I asked Angel (a survivor) about getting out, she admitted that it was very difficult. She left a total of three times. The first two times, when she left, she returned, wanting the relationship to work, wanting to be with him because of how good he "could be" when he wasn't being abusive. The last time she returned, however, "it was bad" she reflects, with more beatings and heavier drug use on the part of her abuser. At this point in the relationship she felt so threatened with her life that she was scared to leave. But, she reports, she also felt that if she stayed, she "would die." The sexual relationship also became notably more violent.

Finally, Angel says, she decided she had to get out and it took her two weeks to get to the point where she thought she could. She simply told her abuser that she was leaving and, she says that telling him was "a big mistake" because he did, indeed, try to kill her. She was very badly beaten and bruised, but law enforcement was able to intervene in time. Her abuser was arrested, prosecuted, sentenced and lost his career as a result. She admits, in looking back, that she is very fortunate to be alive today and she adds, "and but by the grace of God, I'd be dead."

The first four times I left my own abuser, I went where he could find me – that was my first mistake. Without time to build my resolve and escape him long enough to really feel the idea of my right to live a pleasant life, he could always easily talk me into coming back, much to my family's dismay. He would promise never to hurt me again, tell me that he could not live without me, genuinely crying and begging. All too often, too, the people around me – especially his family and friends – would say things like, "It couldn't be that bad." I heard it so often, I actually believed it. *Right*. It couldn't have been that bad. I wanted so badly to believe that, but "*If only*" is a pipe dream and the key to escape is always right there in front of you. It is your own future and the right to freedom from fear.

Never tell someone, "It couldn't be that bad."

Because it is that bad.

My mother gave me my first glimpse of the key I held in my own hand. She constantly told me, "*Life was not meant to be miserable, it was meant to be pleasant. Somewhere out there is a prince who will treat you like a queen.*" If you know someone in a violent relationship, you should say something every time you see them! "I am afraid for you." "It's never going to get better." Be consistent with your message and, most important of all, go to your local domestic abuse organization or Oklahoma's state-wide resource, the Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at www.ocadvsa.org or call them at 800-522-7233 and get information!

I grasped a firm hold of the key one day when the gravity and danger of my abuser's behavior was made abundantly clear to me. My abuser stood over me in fisted rage as I crouched in fear on the floor, readying myself for the beating that was coming, and then I saw the look on my son's two and a half year old face.

I saw desperation, fear and anguish – my son wanted to help *me*. "Mommy, help you!" With this surprising interruption, my abuser stormed into the bedroom and closed the door. I knew at that very instant what I had to do. I had to leave to protect my son. I picked up my purse and my son and walked out the door, vowing never to



return. Just walking out the door and getting into the vehicle was an experience in terror. If he came out, I knew I would be in trouble. Fortunately, he did not come out. I had no job, no money... nothing but my son and myself.

This time, I went to a Baptist Women's Shelter. The reality behind this decision was that I had left him so many times before (*four times!*) that I had ruined my relationship with my family. My mother told me not to contact her again until I had the divorce papers in my hand. My sister's husband absolutely forbade me to come running to her again, and could I blame him? No.

The Women's Shelter gave my son and me some clothing and four weeks to hide and find somewhere else to go. Like myself, many escaping victims are forced to leave with nothing. Four weeks was all they could offer in their crowded facility.

The truly frightening realization, one that did not really occur to me for many years, was that I was there at the shelter, hidden, for two weeks before I let *anyone* know where I was. *No one* knew I was missing! My abuser had so isolated me that no one knew that they needed to be worried about me. I could have been dead in a ditch.

Imagine, if *you* were that isolated and you suddenly disappeared for two weeks... *and no one noticed.*

When I left him this time, my abuser took everything I owned and put it out for the trash collectors. The neighbors were too afraid of him to try and retrieve any of my things. I lost absolutely everything I owned. My best friend, to whom I will always be in debt, offered me a place to live. "Debbie," I said, "I have no job, no nothing." She did not care, I could come. Even there, my abuser stalked me, followed me. To this day I consider the fact that he did not attack me purely as a miracle, because I did not know how to be safe.

The fact is that the most dangerous time for an abuse victim is when he/she leaves or tries to leave. When a victim decides to get out, there are some very important steps to take in order to be safe. Check out www.ocadvsa.org (Oklahoma's state-wide domestic violence resource) for information on domestic violence organizations in the area or contact local law enforcement and learn how to be safe. There are important areas to consider in order to improve safety and success when escaping. *While this is not a complete list, these are some important steps.*

When a victim is getting ready to leave:

- Try to find out about resources that are available before a crisis, so options are known.
- Tell someone you trust what is happening!
- If injured, go to a doctor or emergency room. Tell them what happened and ask them to document everything.
- If there are children, plan a safe place for them – a place where they can go for help. Make sure that they understand that their job is to be safe, not to attempt rescue.
- Perhaps most important, keep a journal of abusive events and threats, including dates, to corroborate your situation.
- Try to store some items like an extra set of clothing, emergency money, lists of medicine, bank/credit card information, with a trusted friend or family member

When a victim is actually leaving

- Request a police escort. If needed, don't hesitate to do so.
- If sneaking away is necessary, have a plan for how to do it and where to go, and *plan to do it swiftly.*
- Avoid going to next-door neighbors, close family or friends when leaving. Plan to go where the abuser cannot find you. This is critical for your safety.
- Be sure you have important phone numbers

What are the long term effects of being in a violent relationship? "Even saying his name is hard" Angel (a survivor) reveals. Just saying or hearing his name brings fear to the forefront. The flashbacks are very hard to deal with – which are violent, terrifying images suddenly thrust into the forefront of the mind, unbidden and unwelcome. She is also very guarded in her relationships with others, especially men. "My walls go up" she remarks, when she perceives someone as aggressive or intimidating in terms of body language, voice, mannerisms, eyes, etc. If she feels the least bit threatened by this person, "my walls go up" she repeated. Too, she has a serious concern about whether or not she'll ever be able to get married or have a serious relationship again. "How do I meet people when my walls close me off?" she asks, when her emotional walls go up protectively. She worries



about getting to the point in any relationship where she has to talk about her very difficult past. How will they take it? Will they understand or will they not?

Each incident, each step in the Cycle of Violence (image 1.0), adds another link in the emotional, psychological and physical chains that form around the victim. The longer a violent relationship is allowed to go on, the longer and more difficult the recovery and healing process takes, because the victim must discover how to live life without the abuser's constant, overwhelming control. The key to those chains is always right there, in the victim's hand. It is life; it is the future; it is the right to freedom from fear.

"The lack of emotional safety (and physical safety if there is physical violence) creates long-term effects. Fear, anxiety, depression, health problems, nightmares, inability to make a decisions, forgetfulness, lack of confidence, confusion, lack of self-esteem and efficacy, poor communication skills, and boundary issues are just a few," Sandi Fultz, Safenet Services asserts. "The financial and emotional effects are overwhelming and can be long-lasting. There are also secondary effects on children raised in abusive relationships even if the children 'never see any violence.' These can include developmental delays and behavioral problems" she adds.

As a survivor, I came to understand that simply getting out did not grant me the freedom I needed. It was only the first step in a long recovery process. As many recovering abuse victims (survivors) of trauma, I suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – a result of having experienced a terrifying series of events in my abuser's episodes of outright rage. *And my own walls were up!*

According to Michelle Rosenthal (www.healmyptsd.com), speaker, author and host of "Your Life After Trauma," symptoms include nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks, rage, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, hyperarousal, depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, panic attacks and avoidance. Fear becomes the overwhelmingly dominate emotion, whether the victim is conscious of the fear or not – and it is important to note that the victim is not always aware of the fear. It becomes the new normal; victims have extreme difficulty dealing with feelings of helplessness and a lack of options, which are particularly debilitating.

In victims who develop PTSD, the physically, psychologically and emotionally violent events of an abusive relationship create life threatening situations with no hope of rescue – helplessness. Rosenthal points out that the victim feels powerless – they would like to do something to stop it, but they cannot. That was certainly the case in my own life. I escaped my abuser, but that was when PTSD and the extreme emotional turmoil took over. In fact, it was years before I even knew that I suffered from PTSD, which is the case all too often.

Feeling trapped, PTSD and fear become a lifestyle as the victim works out coping mechanisms to "feel safe." Desperately seeking out a safe space, the action of curling up in a fetal position and crying for hours (as in my own case, in the early years after escape) feels safer somehow. Panic attacks set off by some unknown trigger quite simply shut everything down as a "fight or flight" emotional battle takes place. Those who suffer from PTSD learn to use their coping mechanisms and live in the moment, doing what makes sense in the never-ending quest to feel safe.

Rosenthal also points out that PTSD's feelings of powerlessness become the anchor that drives the victim down, ever deeper. Victims lose their identity – their "whole self" if you will – because their place in the abusive relationship defined them. When a victim actually escapes their abuser, the "whole self" has been eradicated by the abuser's sculpting control. This becomes an enormous identity crisis as PTSD becomes who the victim is, developing a post-trauma identity; PTSD defines the person who suffers from it. Picture yourself with PTSD – and PTSD is your life preserver – keeping you afloat in an ocean of fear. You will not give up that life preserver when someone asks you to because, from your perspective, your life *depends* on it. But, picture someone offering you a surf board in exchange for that PTSD life preserver. That surf board is counseling and time. As a part of the path to recovery, that surf board allows you to float across the top of the ocean of fear and head for shore.

The triggers behind PTSD are deeply ingrained in the victim's subconscious mind. Rosenthal explains that the conscious brain only uses 12% of your memory – for short term memory and analytical thinking. The other 88% of your mind is in the subconscious realm – for long term memory, beliefs, perceptions and emotions. In PTSD the trauma that has created the problems is in the subconscious. The kind of life threatening trauma that sets the stage for PTSD affects changes in the brain's chemical and biological makeup, and can affect the victim's health as well. Long lasting issues develop from the victim's emotional internal conflict because they hold themselves accountable for allowing the trauma to happen, thus the trauma is harbored – buried deep inside the subconscious mind. Victims of PTSD often have little real regard for themselves as a result, overwhelmed by an identity crisis and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.



In order to overcome PTSD, a victim must seek counseling from a professional who is experienced with PTSD. Rosenthal is quick to point out that the trauma lies deep in the subconscious and the root cause and, even more important, the trigger that everything in the victim's life centers around must be addressed. More information about PTSD is available at Michelle Rosenthal's website - www.healmyptsd.com.

What have I learned in my own healing process? I have done public speaking on dating and domestic violence for over 10 years now. I call it my "soap box" because I will take any opportunity that I can to speak out. I stand in front of audience of all kinds, ranging from teens to business professionals, from 10's to 100's of people and tell my own story of escape and survival. I talk about things that I used to be afraid to tell anyone, when PTSD and fear ruled my life completely. I do it because I want people to understand, to offer hope to victims and offer a unique perspective to anyone on the outside looking in. I have written a book, "Escape the Dragon's Path," about a victim who is driven insane by her abuser. The book actually starts when she gets away. It moves back and forth between her hallucinatory world and the reality around her, literally putting the reader in of a woman who has been under an abuser's control. It is about recovery and victory – what she has to do to recover and rediscover herself and what law enforcement has to do to capture the "Dragon" that ravaged her. Extensive research on the psychology of the victim and the abuser, as well as the legal/law enforcement issues was done for this endeavor and I learned. In learning, in writing and with counseling, I gained the mental and emotional freedom that I began searching for so long ago. I grew to understand the psychology of abusive relationships and the road to recovery.

I found that I could not bury my fears. No matter how deeply I pushed them down, they would never leave me alone. I had to learn to face my fears and understand them, in order to overcome them. I also discovered that I had the fortitude to succeed. I have discovered freedom from fear. Today I am successful in life. I have a wonderful marriage to the prince my mother promised me, and I have two wonderful sons who were able to grow up in a home without the violence and fear of an abusive relationship.

Life is simply amazing.

About the Author:

Catherine Heimdale has a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration. She has spoken to groups and organizations on dating/domestic violence, personal motivation and overcoming obstacles since 2002. She now brings her powerful story to audiences of all kinds - talking about the 'Dragons' in her life that once terrified her beyond reason.

Hear the truth about the formation of a violently abusive relationship and why it lasted for 6 years - including 4 years of marriage. Learn the power of the defining moment that finally got her out, why it took so long and the destructive fears and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome that she grappled with as a result. Escaping any "Dragon's Path" takes counseling, perseverance, determination and the rebuilding of a tortured mind.

Discover Catherine's path to recovery; read her book, "Escape the Dragon's Path." Find out what her book, represents, the people in her life that made a difference and the power of the key she is certain each person holds - because the joy of life with freedom from fear is worth fighting for.

Note:

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