

Richie Swanson

Rinehart's Beach



I shot the otter during the evening tide, and he thrashed in kelp, and when the moon finally rose, and he didn't wash up, I figured his mate had carried him like a pup on her breast out to sea, keeping him safe the way they do, so I went up to the cabin to sleep. And at dawn Old Seal Sarah was way down on the beach below, and I took my shotgun down to my hill's drop-off and fired into the air, and Old Sarah slung the otter into her burden basket like she was deaf, and she spun and raced toward Tutuma's Creek, and I aimed beside her feet. The otter might bring eighty dollars. I pulled the trigger. Sand sprayed up. She leapt. She fell, the basket heavy against her back, her legs thin as shadows. A breaker caught her, and she crawled through foam in a panic, scuttling behind beach rocks, and I climbed back to my kettle outside my cabin, beseeching myself. When my brother Charlie and I had built the cabin, Sarah had brought gull eggs to our tent. When the first soldiers, packers and miners had boarded with us, she had left black cod in the hollow-dead cedar where we fermented beer. And after Charlie had left to put up a bakery and saloon in Port Orford, she had traded me a headband of woodpecker crests to hang on my wall for travelers to gossip about.

The wort boiling above the cook-fire smelled scorched, even if it wasn't. Hadn't I learned enough about scattering shot around Indians?

I got my spyglass from the cabin and studied the mouth of Tutuma's Creek, and prints ran beside the shallow slick on the sand, and I figured Sarah had already snuck the otter back to the collapsing lodge where General Sims and Captain Gilman had left Old Blind Tutuma to die in delirium when they had cleared out Selchin's village and the rest of the Seal tribe last October. Old Sarah had hid beneath a logjam until the regulars and volunteers had finished burning things, and she had fed Tutuma flounder broth and mush from old stored acorns through the winter, or so she had claimed, speaking trade talk, making signs. Yet Charlie and I had moved onto our claims in November, and we had never seen Tutuma, though I had ridden partway up his creek this summer and had panned it and had found nothing but charred cedar boards and blackened house pits and mountains of deadfalls, and I had turned around, deciding it better to stay ignorant of him anyway.

I scanned farther along the surf, and two dragoons galloped up the beach, whipping mounts past Tutuma's Creek, showing no signs of seeing Sarah or her prints. They turned abrupt at my creek and rode direct across my cliff, and the taller handed me a letter from General Sims, and I hardly believed the last of the Rogue River Indians had surrendered, the war was over.

"General Sims says he left an old dreamer and other *si'-wash* here last fall," said the taller. "He's ordered to load them on the steamship at Port Orford and see them to the reservation."

"Maybe they're down at Mussel Creek," I said.

"Mussel Creek said up here," said the shorter.

They left for Mount Humbug and Fort Orford, and I fired my oven for bread. I counted my cattle, cleaned my pistol, buried my money box and poke, hid my gold tools in the hollow-dead cedar and tossed shrubs across the trail to it. I swept dust from bunks and counted my liquor and saw the first prisoners about mid-afternoon when the wind started flattening the sea-glitter, and the sun flooded Three Sisters Headland. Chief Jack's band came double file through my spyglass, little brown ants at first, and they wound down the saddle between the first and second Sister, disappearing behind the third, and they came down onto the beach led by Jack himself cocking his chin and strutting into the wind as haughty as he pleased, strings of shell money hanging down his chest, and I could feel his glances cool as a lion's, the battle secrets beneath his headband, all the dead whites on his fingertips.

Braves in war paint followed him, and the women and children trudged and hobbled after them, their feet bare or wrapped in furs or shreds of cloth, the squaws in dresses of torn and filthy grass and dirty printed cotton, their mouths flung open with pangs of grief, baskets overflowing with their last belongings. A string of wagons came next, and finally everyone pulled up at the mouth of my creek — near' two hundred captives, a-hundred bluecoats, a-hundred of Gilman's vol-

unteers, mostly miners skinny as Seal Sarah, their boots tattered and sun-beaten but springy with victory.

General Sims beckoned up to me, his graying hair swept back in a portentous pompadour, his eyes deep-set beneath dire-bushy brows, and I walked down, and he hunched above a squaw sitting up in a wagon-bed, not a Rogue, but a young Seal woman with a chin tattoo and basket cap like Sarah. She had pretty-round cheeks gone sallow and sunken, and she lifted dark-desperate eyes, and as her husband moaned, I near' reeled, smelling the wretched sweetness of his stomach wounds before seeing him writhing in a rope hammock tied to the sides of the wagon.

"She's been asking for the medicine man Tutuma since we turned up the beach," said Sims.

"You favor her?" I said, keeping it in English.

"This is the headman Selchin. He did what you have not. He fought for his home."

The general raised Selchin's bandage irritated: bits of skin flaked from a bulge of musket shots, and a foamy froth leaked from his swellings like a stubborn tide-rinse through the cracks of a rock. I near' recoiled. I shook my head no about Tutuma, for I did not like the prospect of trading two free lives for one with gangrene, and I eyed the squaw deep and sorry, risking no words, and then I led Sims' cooks uphill, and we butchered and roasted two steers, and afterward in the cabin I said I would take gold coin or nuggets in pay, not army scrip worth less than two cents on the dollar.

Sims glowered from my lamp and desk.

"Any news from Congress about funding war notes?" I said.

"If you cease, I will finish my letter to President Pierce," he said.

Captain Gilman raised a glass, standing in the doorway, watching the last wine-color fade from the Pacific. "Here's to the day all the savages are dead, and they cost us nothing," he toasted, and I pushed past him, wishing I had charged him more for his whiskey, he spoke so short about costs.

I walked my cliff-edge—checking and surveying things, I told myself, but I headed for the hospital wagons, thinking a few dollars in coin might buy the squaw, and then mules hawed from the beach, spooked by the night-smells of Indians, the moon sudden above the tree-line, the claps of cannon-surf creeping closer, echoing around the sand and rocks where so many people were confined, forbidden from the hill.

A hostler stepped light through a flood of milky beams down there, petting a mule's muzzle gentle like a woman, and the mules quieted as if Justina Patterson had cooed and kissed at them—Justina who two summers ago had glided out of blue-gray shadows of wagon-bonnets and had stroked the snout of an ox bellowing to the desert moon the same moment I had approached from my guard-post. She had whispered the ox quiet as I had watched from sage-shadow, her

hair shiny and fluffy after a wash day beside the Snake, rumped from sleeping, and I sprang and clasped her mouth, catching her waist, and she bit my palm, leaning and wrestling, and her body fell easier and softer than I thought, not near' as leathery or sun-tough as her skin had seemed since the Missouri and Platte. "Sh-sh-shush, you Herman Rinehart!" she said, and I spread my fingers across her dress, and her navel rose and sank beneath linen wind-worn and threadbare, and she punched my head like an ox-brow, knocking me onto desert-grit, and then her teeth shone pert, and she smiled over her shoulder as she swished off.

The next evening I had ridden two miles ahead of the train with her father Rue, looking for a campsite, and I had asked, "When we get to Oregon, and you get your land settled, will you let Justina marry?"

"I see you favor her," said Rue, pulling reins tight, gazing at a meadow large enough for our wagon-circle, peppered with grasses for our stock. He raised his musket, aiming it up a creek at three Bannocks spearing at a fish weir, not seeing us, and I raised my barrel too, and he swung his sight to one side, and I to the other. We fired, and the braves lunged, splashed, dove, and Rue whooped and charged, and I kept pace, whooping too, galloping upon the Indians, and they slipped dripping up rocks into timber, and one fell backward across his spear, and we shot pine dust all around him, and later we laughed how fast and long a Bannock could run.

And as the dawn-glow had whitened ripples the next day, Rue and I had pulled wheels from the creek, feeling rims, and I had grinned yes to him, the wood was swollen and would hold the iron tires, and then muskets popped, smoking from the valley-wall, and we ran toward the camp circle, and Justina lay by a doubletree, and we lifted her into Pattersons' wagon, and I watched in shame as Doc Holmes pulled up her blouse, and blood ran across her stomach and freckles.

"Two weeks antiseptic rest," said Holmes, and Justina gritted her smile, wincing her bluebonnet eyes.

All of us knew Bannocks would swarm, and snows would come, and so we wove her a rope bed, and she bore the Blue Mountains silent, and then the froth had foamed from her wounds, and she had shrieked and hollered, smelling like Selchin as we had climbed toward Mount Hood—sweet and dying, destined to be laid beneath boulders at the foot of the peak rising so white and high in sky.

THEY LOADED SELCHIN IN A BLANKET BEHIND A SADDLE, and the squaw sobbed hard like Justina's mother, leaning into the wagon, and then she slumped and beat hands against sand, wailing like something I'd never known, and I fled from the cliff-edge and went way up to the stock trail past the cabin, and moon shadows from the forest-edge wrapped me dark as the ocean floor, and I sat high above the surf-rumble, brooding on a whole world of quicksilver shimmering across the Pacific, my spirit too low and foul to wait on thirsty officers, my soul

feeling the final cold ways of the Reaper and the raw-wet rains of last winter, months of no association with any white female.

Boots shuffled and stopped. Branch-tips scraped. A crane of a man was out in clear moonlight, feeling his way out from behind the shrubs I had tossed across the trail to the dead cedar, his boots sneaking around like coons' paws. Gilman. He carried a sack heavy against his chest and came my way, and I waited quiet as if hunting, not wanting to startle him, and he sat just inside the forest-shadow and dropped the sack in the moon glow, and nuggets knocked, sounding like they could be three, four, five pounds apiece—probably plundered from Jack or some other chief who had taken them from some miner—and now hidden from the general, stashed in haste when Gilman had arrived this afternoon.

Gilman heard my thought in the dark. He swung his head, drawing his pistol, and I spoke my name in an even tone and stood and walked invisible to him, and I sat out in the pulsing light, eyeing his rocks plain, the moonlight pouring down their veins and flecks like smooth white water. "Sims—"

"Sims!" Gilman hissed, pawing whiskers, shaking his head defiant, Indian scalps dancing from his hatband. "He knew Jack had us against a mountain with nothing to eat or drink or shoot, and he let his companies rest three days at Crescent City. Your precious Sims wasn't there when men took arrows for this." He put away his nuggets deliberate and tied the sack tight. "You got no wife yet, do you?"

"No."

"But you got two claims laid out, and the other ain't improved, and no one's on it."

"It's fenced proper. It's got potatoes on it."

"I seen this place just 'fore Jack started his spree, slept in the cedar you're hiding. I was 'bout to file here, but the governor made a call, and I answered."

"The other claim's my brother's. He's up at the fort—"

"Selling beer too, I hear, charging us high as rafters after he 'nored the governor's call just like you." He looked at me disgusted, holding his pistol on top of his sack. "Both of you says you don't want no pay but gold, but I seen you walk down to that squaw, and I say you're not twenty-one yet, not old 'nough to file legal, and you never had any woman at all yet, I see it in your every step!"

I flew on him instant, had him up by his coat collars, flung him downhill, and he sprawled drunk, knelt, pawed for his pistol, and I grabbed his pants-seat and pitched him into manzanita, and I tripped on branches, charging him, and he started uphill, and I tackled him, and we rolled and grappled, his teeth at my face and ears, his nails in my eyes, and I bucked him off, and then he was nowhere, and I caught myself at the cliff-edge, seeing him lying across a strange yellow glow down on the sand—a fire and circle of Indian corpses in blankets.

I lay hidden in wild parsnip, catching my breath, the beach so close

here I had thought of building a ladder to it: Gilman scrambled up, limping frantic over scattered-burning logs, and a corpse rose, grabbing a driftwood club, and another and another followed, then Chief Jack—all of them alive as ever. White guards ran up, waving guns, and Gilman shouted my way, and then little balls of flames flared from his hair, and he slapped them, hopping in smoldering trousers, and Chief Jack brushed aside a regular's rifle, demanding a look, and Gilman's whiskers smoked as thick as damp-burning alder. They went *woof* like tinder from a gust, and Gilman threw himself down, yelping, and the regulars fell to him, beating out flames, tossing away coals, slinging sand on him, buckets of water, and they helped him up, and he wobbled and groaned, clapping his face, and Jack threw back his head with four or five other braves, and they yipped like coyotes over a dying elk.

Troops slung arms around Gilman, walking him toward the hospital tent, and the Indians cawed after him harsh as tide crows. "*Lam'-mi-he smoke! Co'-sho smoke! Piu'-piu smoke!*" He smelled like an old woman burning, a hog burning, a skunk, they jaunted in trade jargon.

I hid Gilman's hat and went up and put his pistol and sack on my desk in front of Sims still writing by my lamp. "I took out what Gilman's company owes," I said. "The army is due the rest."

GILMAN'S COLONEL AND LIEUTENANT SAID NOTHING ABOUT GILMAN IN THE HOSPITAL TENT DURING BREAKFAST, for fear Sims would ask about more plunder, I guessed, and when the whole lot left, the captain rode in a floppy-brimmed hat in a wagon-seat, a clean white bandage wrapped from chin to nose, looking like a masked highway robber turned into a theater mummy, or the other way around.

I followed the train with my spyglass, and I found Selchin's widow neither in any wagon nor walking with squaws. But bands from south of the Rogue straggled past for days—Chetcos with more pretty-round faces—an inland tribe with blue-eyed squaws with French-looking chins—a Pistol River band with a mink-eyed widow with a boy who might split rails or tend stock—all kinds of Indians hacking with fever coughs, speaking any number of tongues—all with thirsty and hungry escorts starved for stories of black-sand strikes on beaches, ways of clearing and planting Land Donation Claims, the cost and compliance of Chinese wives.

One day a dragoon told me the army had finished with stragglers, and the steamer had returned to Port Orford for another load of Indians. And the next morning Old Seal Sarah skittered through the fog along the mouth of Tutuma's Creek, the first she had showed herself since the otter. Another squaw followed, and I rode down, and Sarah was pulling at the flipper of a fresh-dead seal, and Selchin's widow was cutting it with an army-issue knife, her hair in new-delicate braids against her cheeks, her skin come back from sallow but not so dark really, her chin-tattoo not so deep it wouldn't fade, her eyes the rich-brown sheen of otter fur, fixed stubborn as a church woman's on her

task. Sarah cackled about the shotgun, and I asked if she had traded my otter to soldiers, and she hardened the webs of cracks on her face, kneeling beside the seal with Selchin's widow to butcher it. I tossed down a rope, and the squaws tied it around the seal, and my pinto mare dragged it out of sight into spruce beside the creek, and then Sarah signed how Tutuma would sing both seal-flippers from Selchin's grave, and Selchin would eat them in the other world across the sea.

Selchin's widow — Euchinasahata — Selchina — caught my eye, maybe half-believing, maybe just nervous about soldiers, needing protection, and a glance was all she gave, but it run sure beneath my skin, seeping real as the creek water down into sand, and I offered Sarah a longer-sharper knife and five dollars in gold coin, and Sarah looked up the creek, and I nodded I understood, I would go ask Tutuma, and Sarah answered in jargon. "He'll give his granddaughter — maybe. I snuck her to him. He knows you're good for her, she'll live at home. He won't come out. He won't let you find him. Your cabin is where we used to burn for berries. Your beach is where we played shinny and dug clams. You fed men who killed us. You make a poison he has no medicine for."

Selchina lowered her lashes, guarding against any more glances, and a bear growled in my loins, a big-bull sea lion, and I spurred my mare so she squealed on our way out of the spruce, and I reared with her in the sun on the sand, and I galloped her up and down the marks from the seal and squaws.

I checked harnesses, made a list for Port Orford, added French blue beads, mirror beads, ribbons red as a woodpecker's crests, a winter-wool dress, chocolate for a cake, a book of poems. I boiled bottles to fill and trade in town, put them on my sorrel mare and led her through the woods toward the casks, and she smelled Indians as adept as any government mule, balking as we skirted an old game pit dug by squaws, deep enough to catch elk or even cattle when the top was covered by branches.

Sarah's voice echoed faint from the cedar — the tree a towering chamber heady with beer fumes inside, wide as a burned-out redwood, its doorway a blackened fire-scar just five-feet high.

"Hal-lo!" I hollered.

Selchina and Sarah ducked out, the old squaw holding an old otter cape she had planned to leave, shiny with a fresh pelt sewed to it. "This is for your wedding," she said. "If you beat your wife, your brother pays the fine, and she leaves."

"A'ha," I said. "*Kwa'h-ne-sum.*" Yes, forever.

"You give the woodpecker crest back to Tutuma," she said. "He keeps all the seal, whales and fish on the beach."

"A'ha," I said again. "*Kwa'h-ne-sum.*"

THE OLD SQUAW SAT ME AGAINST MY CABIN'S DOOR AND MADE A BRIDAL PATH, laying down two rows of shell-money strings, and she drummed on a

hand-log, humming, and Selchina walked the path, her lashes still low, her chin stiff, her hair oiled, and she sat beside me, and Sarah slipped the otter cape over our heads, saying in her Seal way we should stay under one roof, be true like otter pairs. She tossed broken bits of shell money on the fur, and she hummed herself inside, getting the woodpecker band, and I slid my hand to Selchina's waist, turning, and the cape fell off clumsy, and Sarah was already walking off, arching her head against her basket's head strap.

Selchina and I went into the cabin, and I pecked her mouth, and she smelled of the blubber she had cut a few hours ago, tasted like the seal-paunch she had blown into an Indian flask. I felt her braids greasy, and she looked away, but the bear growled strong, and I kissed her neck, rubbing her hips eager, and she pulled my hands away. "Wake," she said. No. She put my fingers the places she wanted. "A-ha," she murmured, yes, and I unbuttoned my trousers, and she slid on me like a great slow breaker, roiling, breathing an ocean wind, and I near' screamed, so grateful was I, but we went to my creek afterward, and she rubbed hemlock needles on my skin, and they did me no good, for we lay beneath my bearskin that night, and she rolled and wiggled like a snake shedding scales—a goby or eel leaving fish-scum—full of sin—for her tide smelled sweet, and our sweat ran like foaming froth, and I had not swum oxen and wagons and cattle across rivers all the way from Iowa, had not watched Justina and others die, so I could make seed with someone with roots so simple as seal flippers and under-worlds across the sea, someone wrong with my country's god, someone already broken and soiled by a savage headman, and unequal to make the land here grow its bounty for all who gave so much to settle her.

Yet I slept supine, and I woke woozy and wondrous, eyeing the brand on Selchina's chin, charcoal lines fluttering in candlelight, her lips and cheeks dusky but beautiful, moving so quiet in sleep she cut me deep.

"Herman! Herman Rinehart!" A voice boomed outside, a horse tramped around the cabin, I clutched Selchina. "This is Corporal Dillon Jasper, Company D, Ninth Division, U.S. Army!" He pounded the door. "The *Columbia* embarks tomorrow! I am ordered to take any *si'-wash* however old or young or crippled!" He banged the window-board, and Selchina leapt up, snatching my musket, and she pumped the ramrod expert.

Jasper hammered a notice on the door, and she stood ready, aiming at the rattling-iron bar, and I leaned up, and she aimed at me. I signed for silence, and finally the hooves went downhill. She opened the window-board expert too, and we peered out. "I'll get a wedding paper, and they'll be damned," I said.

She pressed brown-skinned breasts against my back, rubbing nipples against my skin, stirring me, her voice near' breathless in my ear.

"Get a paper for Tutuma, a paper for Old Sarah. Get one for Selchin's brother, Selchin's brother's son, all the Seal who lived here. Say it's all right for everyone to come back and live with you, *everyone*."

"Can't!" I said, flinging my arm backward, and she went flying against my desk, the lamp crashing, and I shoved her as she rose, and she careened against the stovepipe, spinning away, and I swatted the back of her head, the pipe clanging, wood ash puffing, and she scuttled as if to hide beneath a bunk, and I pitched her onto my bed, and she hit the wall and stiffened, pulling the bearskin up across her body, her glare wet with terror, and I shook my musket at her, my pistol. "No, you, never!" I yelled. "Don't shoot a white! They'll hang you!"

She gawked bleeding from the chin, and I threw myself across her lap. "*Sick tum'-tum*," I said. Sick in heart. Sorry.

She yanked my hair until I shrieked, and she bit my shoulder, sank teeth to bone, and blood trickled warm down my back, and I bore it until she stopped and spat between my eyes.

"Know Chetco Jenny?" she said. An Indian agent had whipped Chetco Jenny naked through Port Orford in broad daylight, and braves had caught him later, and she had eaten his heart. "If you can't say Euchinasahata, don't say Selchina. Call me Seal Jenny, so you don't forget," said Seal Jenny.

I WROTE TO CHARLIE TO PAY A PREACHER OR CLERK. And after the steamer left again, near' emptying the fort, Jenny and I took a four-horse team, and they trotted hesitant at first, blinded by fog-pockets and shy of surf-booms and all the slippery heaps and long-tangled loops of washed-up bull kelp. But the sun came out, the tide-flat opened up, mud-clods splattered against buckboards, and the horses caught the spank and rhythm, lathering, and when a little flash glinted on a hill, we kept on, for I had told Sarah to stay hidden at Tutuma's Creek, and we would make it through the tide-tunnel in Francis Drake Rock, save five miles over cliffs and shortcut to the backside of Mount Humbug, load supplies from Charlie's wagon, make testimony and return with our marriage-paper by dark.

And then the tide-flat slanted steep with cobbles. The horses labored, veering. A rock popped loud in back-slosh, the pinto mare slid into the dappled-gray. More pops cracked, Jenny flew over the bench. My shoulder slammed backward, burning, and the wagon jerked, dragging, and Jenny slid smearing blood across the tilting bed, and my shoulder bled too.

I sat up for reins sure we weren't truly shot—cobbles popped, not muskets—but Gilman stood atop a beach rock, reloading, drawing his musket's sight to his face long, swollen, yellow, purple, and I fished for my pistol, and my arm wouldn't, and a ball banged the seat-bench, and Jenny crawled beside a wheel, and I dropped scurrying behind horses screaming, trying to roll up from flanks, my musket back beside

the seat. Gilman fired, and Jenny slapped down onto a mound of kelp, losing her feet, arms flailing, and I plunged into the seaweed, muscling through water and stems one-handed, and I sank in a deep pool of urchins and came up gasping behind barnacle rocks, and balls sprayed water, ping-pong and scattering shell-crust.



Gilman pried a board beneath the wagon-seat, finding some of his nuggets, my coin box too, and he strutted around the urchin-pool, pointing my musket at me, smirking, and I slumped weak, bracing myself, reaching left-handed for drenched pistol, and he cocked the hammer, and a wet-brown whip snapped his hand. The musket dropped, and he stooped for it, turning to Jenny, and a second rope of bull kelp ripped the air. The float-bulb thudded against his temple, and he turned to Sarah's cackle, and Jenny raced behind him, legs wheeling nimble, blade flashing, and Gilman and Jenny fell, and I pushed myself up. But I slumped again, and then Old Sarah hovered above me, the spyglass hanging from a horsehair strap, borrowed no doubt when I had kissed at Jenny beneath the otter cape.

I shivered in the cold water, feeling light-headed, pain against skin, insides throbbing salty, and then I saw only murk, and it seemed I was lifted past Gilman propped against a rock, his chest sliced open, and the squaws seemed somewhere ahead, fretting over horses, and I rode hollering and bouncing against buckboards, my shoulder foaming tide-water sweet, and then I lay supine again, pulsing hot, dreaming thirsty and flighty on and on.

Nothing but surf drummed inside my head.
Seabirds...coyotes...panthers chanted.
Brittle-little crab-claws raced across me.

Cannon-waves clapped.

Fish lips fluttered at me.

The gummy smell of spruce pitch woke me, steaming oily with elk, and Jenny rubbed the salve on my skin, plastering trillium and vine leaves across my musket wounds, and I wasn't in fever, wasn't swollen or hurting.

Old Sarah brought a bucket of water beside my feather bed, and black worms lay like tiny gobies across the bottom. "Tutuma sang—pulled—sucked these poisons out of you," she said.

"The captain missed me." Jenny showed me scars. "Beer bottles broke. I slid through foam and got cut. I slipped on kelp, and barnacles cut me."

She took me outside, and Tutuma rose from a dome of brush-trunks behind the cabin, nodding straight into the sun, his eyes rolling behind narrow slits, pale and oozy like clam flesh. His face glistened wet on sharp-edged bones, for he had been sweating, weeping, wearing only loincloth, and I sat on his log, and he rubbed my knees with fingers long like octopus tentacles, flaky like withered bark, and I said nothing to his silence but *mah-sie*, thank you.

"Euchinasahata," he said, toothy and impossible, repeating the sounds for me slow, and then Charlie stepped from the forest-edge, wearing a new derby from Germany, new leather vest, new green-flannel shirt, and he held a shovel-handle beside mutton-chops, carrying the new spade he had used to dig a fresh animal pit farther back in the woods, big enough for three people to hide inside when the law returned.

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