
ALFRED KROPP
**The Seal of
Solomon**

by RICK YANCEY



*To my sons, for their inspiration
And to Sandy, for her love*

From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day; and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith, like a falling star.

—*Paradise Lost*

And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is
Legion, for we are many.

—*Mark 5:9*

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You have 1 new message!
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To: ChiCubsFan

From: Aquarius

Subject: New Operational Protocol re. Sub-Sub-Sec. OpUtopia

The Operative Nine has issued an Extraction Order for Special Subject Alfred Kropp.

Circumstances now demand suspension of Utopia until S.S. Kropp is neutralized.

Therefore, you are authorized to use all means necessary to neutralize S.S. A.K. before extraction can be executed.

For the purposes of this Order, "all means necessary" includes *extreme* extraction of referenced subject.

Aquarius

Part One
Extraction

I really thought my life would be different after my death. After all, I had saved the planet from total annihilation, and not a lot of people can say that—well, I can't think of a single living person who can. I'm not saying I thought I deserved a ticker tape parade or a medal from the president or anything like that. I'm just saying I honestly thought my life might be a little different.

I was wrong.

Of course, nobody knew I had saved the world. I wasn't allowed to tell, and who would believe me if I did? There were rumors about what happened when I disappeared from school, mostly based on the news reports that I was involved in a plot to blow up Stonehenge.

One rumor had me as a special operative recruited by the CIA to bust up a terrorist cell. Another said that I was a terrorist the CIA had captured, deprogrammed, and returned to normal life, kind of like mainstreaming someone with a mental condition.

But the most popular rumor was just that I was crazy. "Crazy Kropp," some people called me. Okay, not just some. A lot. Not a terrorist or a mercenary or a spy. Just crazy, off my nut, wacked, loco.

And it wasn't just kids who thought that. Dr. Peddicott, the school psychologist, must have thought it, too, because she referred me to a real shrink, a psychiatrist named Dr. Maury Benderhall, who interviewed me for three hours.

"So, Alfred," he said. "Tell me about school."

"Well, I'm flunking most of my classes. Nobody likes me, and about a month ago somebody invented a new sport called Kropping."

"'Kropping'?"

I nodded. "Kropping. Basically, it's about humiliating me. Or tormenting. Tormenting and humiliation. Only I'm not sure if 'tormention' is a word."

"It isn't."

"Well, it should be. Anyway, Kropping could be anything from tripping me in the hallway to giving me a wedgie. You get more points with something like a wedgie, because it takes a lot of determination and strength to give somebody my size a wedgie."

"I'm sure the school would put a stop to this Kropping if you told someone."

"No, I think it would just get worse."

He flipped a page of his little notebook.

"Let's talk about your fears, Alfred," he said.

"How come?"

"Do you have a problem talking about your fears?"

“It’s not something I normally talk about.”

“And why is that?” Dr. Benderhall asked.

I thought about it. “It’s not something I normally think about.”

He sat there, waiting. I took a deep breath and let it out very slowly.

“Well, clowns for one,” I began. “But almost everybody is afraid of clowns. Heights. Horse. Thunderstorms. Drowning. Being burned alive. Decapitation. Yard gnomes. Cavities. Gingivitis. Insects. Well, not all insects. Ladybugs are okay, and I’d be pretty weird if I was scared of butterflies. Mostly just biting and stinging insects, though I’m not crazy about cockroaches. Not too many people are, I guess, which is why we have so many sprays and exterminators and things like that. Bats. Well, not the fruit eaters. Vampire bats—or any creature with very sharp teeth. That covers everything. sharks and lapdogs and those kinds of things. Those are the big ones, the top fears. Blemishes. Girls. Well, girls might be one of the top ones. Maybe after thunderstorms, but definitely before the yard gnomes. Boredom. See, ever since I came home from England I’ve been bored out of my mind. Except for that time at the mall last week, when I saw the little man.”

He was staring at me. “Little man?”

“Yeah, this little bald baby-faced guy in a dark suit. I first saw him two tables away at the food court. He was staring at me and when I looked right at him, he looked away real quick. Then I was at Blockbuster and saw him two rows over in the comedy aisle.”

“Do you think he was following you?”

“He didn’t look like the kind of guy who would rent comedies, but you can’t always judge by appearances.”

He leaned forward in his chair and said, “Okay, let’s talk about what’s really on your mind.”

I thought about it. “There’s nothing really on my mind.”

“Alfred,” he said. “Anything you say in this room stays in this room. I’m not allowed to tell anyone.”

“What if I told you something about a crime?”

“You’ve committed a crime?”

“Well, I guess technically I did.”

“All right.”

“So say I tell you about that—wouldn’t you have to turn me in?”

“Our doctor-patient relationship is sacrosanct, Alfred.”

“What’s that—like holy?”

“Something like that.” He was smiling. Dr. Benderhall had large yellow teeth, like somebody who smoked or drank too much coffee. “So—what was this technical crime?”

“I beheaded somebody.”

“Really?”

“And shot somebody.”

“Shot *and* beheaded them?”

“Not the same person. Oh, and I guess I stole a car. Maybe two cars. A cop car and a Jaguar. And the Lamborghini. So I guess that would be three. No, there was the Bentley too. So four cars. You sure you can’t repeat any of this?”

He nodded.

“I haven’t told anybody since I came home,” I said.

He promised me anything I told him would be held in strictest confidence, so strictly confidential I told him everything.

Then he promptly sent me into the waiting room and I listened as he picked up the phone and called the social worker assigned to my case. He had left his door open, so I could hear almost every word.

“Clinically depressed,” I heard him say. “Borderline psychotic with delusions of grandeur and paranoid fantasies . . . the death of his mother when he was twelve . . . the murder of his only surviving relative six months ago . . . issues with his father abandoning his mother before he was born . . . Alfred believes he is descended from the knight Sir Lancelot. . . . Yes, *that* Lancelot, and that he was involved with an international spy organization in an operation to rescue Excalibur from what he calls ‘Agency of Darkness.’ He also reports encounters with angels, particularly Michael the archangel, whom he believes took the Sword to heaven following Alfred’s own death and resurrection as ‘the Master of the Sword.’ He also believes the Sword wounded him, endowing his blood with magical healing powers . . .”

Then he said, “Intensive therapy to work out his issues of abandonment, guilt, and betrayal. . . . I’m recommending a CAT scan and an MRI to rule out any physiological abnormality. . . . Yes, such as lesions or tumors. I’d also like to start him on Thorazine, which has been proven effective with paranoid schizophrenia.”

I couldn’t believe it. He was telling the social worker *everything*, not five minutes after he promised he wouldn’t, and he was a doctor. If I couldn’t trust somebody like him, who could I trust? I felt lonelier than ever.

When Betty Tuttle, my foster mom, showed up to drive me home, Dr. Benderhall took her into his office, closed the door, and when she came out thirty minutes later, it looked like he had hit her upside the head with a baseball bat.

“I’m not crazy,” I told her in the car on the drive to the pharmacy to fill the prescription for the crazy drug.

“Oh, no, no,” she said, bobbing her head up and down. “Just a bump in the road, Alfred. Just a bump in the road.”

I overheard the Tuttles arguing late that night. Horace wanted to get rid of me.

“He’ll lose it completely one day, Betty,” he said. “Murder us in our beds!”

“The doctor said—”

“I don’t care what the doctor said!”

“Maybe it’s something simple,” Betty said. “Like a brain tumor.”

“Listen to you: ‘Something simple like a brain tumor’! I say we send him back to Human Services. I didn’t sign up to be a foster parent to a lunatic!”

Every day I palmed the pill and slipped it into my pocket. Then, after dinner, I flushed it down the toilet. I thought about that a lot—if I was crazy. If everyone around you thinks you’re crazy, does that make you crazy, even though you might not be?

I thought about proving to Dr. Benderhall I wasn’t making it up by putting him on the phone with Abigail Smith, the field operative with OIPEP, who had given me her number and told me to call anytime.

And I *did* call her about six months ago, after I got home from England. She asked how school was

going and I told her not very good, and she said working for OIPEP was more like a calling than a job. I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by that.

"Normally we won't consider anyone under twenty," she told me, which made me wonder why she gave me her card in the first place. "And, of course, the training is quite rigorous."

I guessed she meant I was too young and too out of shape.

"So what should I do?" I asked.

"Alfred, I know it's difficult for you now, trying to return to a normal life after what you've experienced. I told you we were interested in your development and we are. Very much so." Then she told me to stay in school, work on my grades, and maybe they'd be in touch after I graduated.

I never called back after that and she didn't contact me. I guessed my jet-setting, world-saving days were over, and in a way I was glad and not glad at the same time.

I was wrong about that too.

On the way home from school, I saw the bald baby-faced man from the video store again, this time through the back window of the school bus. I always sat in the last row, because if I sat anywhere else I inevitably got popped in the back of the head with a paper wad or spitball. One time somebody even threw their dirty gym shorts at me. I bet that Kropp earned them at least four points.

Mr. Baby-Face was driving a silver Lexus ES, so clean and polished, you could see the sky and clouds and trees reflected in the hood.

After I got off the bus, I waited to see what Mr. Baby-Face would do. He just kept driving; he didn't even glance in my direction.

You're losing it, Kropp, I told myself. Maybe Dr. Benderhall was right. Maybe I was delusional.

I walked two blocks up Broadway to the Tuttles' house. Neither of them had a job: they were professional foster parents. At any given time there were six or seven kids stuffed into their little house.

My current roomie was a skinny kid named Kenny, with a face that looked like it had been shoved into a vise and squeezed. His eyes were very close together and sort of crossed, so he always looked angry or confused or both. I didn't know his background but, like most of the Tuttles' foster kids, couldn't have been very pleasant.

Kenny was a mutterer. He made little noises under his breath and repeated the same words over and over. When I was around, the word was "Kropp," and he muttered it as he followed me from room to room: "Kropp, Kropp, Kropp, Alfred Kropp, Kropp, Kropp, Kropp."

It got worse at night. "Kropp, Kropp, Alfred Kropp, it's dark, it's very dark, oh, and I'm thirsty, I'm so thirsty, Kropp, Alfred Kropp, Kropp, Kropp, Kropp." Most nights he was positive someone even lurked right outside the window, and he badgered me until I got out of bed to check the latch.

But his jabbering never bothered me much. It was soft and steady, like raindrops against a windowpane, and sometimes it helped me go to sleep.

It bothered some of the other kids in the house, though, and they were pretty rough on Kenny until he took them aside and told them if they didn't stop teasing him, I was going to chop off their heads and stuff their headless corpses into the crawlspace. I wasn't exactly a knight, but I was descended from one, and defending the weak is pretty high on the list of knightly virtues.

I hesitated before going inside. I could hear the TV blaring at full volume through the thin wall, probably one of the soap operas Betty Tuttle was hooked on. Horace was usually sprawled in his La-Z-Boy, shouting over the TV at his wife, "Why do you waste your time with these silly soap operas? A Bunch of kooks and nuts getting kidnapped or killed or falling in love with their own brother!" While he watched the whole episode, Betty scrambled around making after-school snacks and folding laundry and picking up toys.

But Horace wasn't in the La-Z-Boy when I came in. He was prancing around the living room wearing an apron and wielding a feather duster, his round face shining with sweat, while Betty worked the corners with a broom. She saw me at the door, gave a little cry, and turned off the TV.

"Dear," she whispered to Horace, who had stopped prancing and was standing very still, staring at me. "Alfred is home."

"I know he's home," he hissed back. "These two things over my nose, they're called 'eyes,' Betty."

Then Horace Tuttle came toward me, his short arms flung wide, and I stood there in the entryway, stunned, as he threw those little arms around me. Dust flew from the feathers and I sneezed.

"How ya doin', Al?" he said into my chest. "Good Lord of mercy, you're getting bigger and stronger every day!"

He pulled back, grinning. The smile on his face would give new meaning to the word "creepy."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Oh, Alfred, the most extraordinary thing—" Betty began, but Horace cut her off.

"Nothing!" he shouted. He gave an embarrassed little laugh and clapped my shoulder hard. He lowered his voice.

"Just a little spring-cleaning, Ally my boy. Is it all right if I call you 'Ally'?"

"No," I said. "And this is October."

"No time like the present!" Horace bellowed.

Just then Kenny walked into the room, muttering, "Oh, Al. Al Kropp. Alfred Kropp."

Horace whirled on him and shouted, "Zip your pie-hole, you pea-brained little halfwit!" and Betty murmured, "Horace, you'll give him a complex." Horace yelled back, "Little late for that!"

"Lay off Kenny," I said, and that shut Horace up.

"Dear," Betty said to Horace. "Maybe we should tell Alfred." She turned to me. "We're having a visitor today."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"No one you know," Horace said. "Here, Al, let me take that backpack for you . . . Dear God, it's heavy—you're as strong as Paul Bunyan's ox! How about that? You learn about Paul Bunyan in school? Kenny, put this away for Al."

Horace slung the backpack in Kenny's direction. It slammed into his stomach, and Kenny went down on his butt.

"That's okay," I said. "I'll take it."

I grabbed the backpack with one hand, Kenny's arm with the other, and pulled him to his feet.

"Thank you," he gasped.

The doorbell rang. All the color drained from Horace's face and he whirled on Betty, one of his stubby fingers jabbing at her nose.

"Great, he's here and I haven't dusted the mantel yet!"

"Who's here?" I asked.

"The visitor," Horace said. He was struggling with the knot in the apron strings.

"What visitor?"

"Didn't we cover this? Betty, go get me a pair of scissors so I can cut off this damn apron . . ."

"I told you to tie it in a bow." She bit her lip and worked at the knot behind Horace's back. The

doorbell rang again. Nobody moved. Horace waved the feather duster around in a figure eight. ~~He reminded me of a fat, round majorette, though you don't see many majorettes with his body type.~~ Little dust motes danced and darted in the air. Horace snapped at Betty to never mind and put the broom away. The doorbell rang a third time.

“You want me to get that?” I asked.

“No!” said Horace and Betty at the same time.

Then Horace said, “Al, you take the sofa, but don't sit in the middle. Betty, put the coffee on and do something with your hair. You look like Ozzy Osbourne. Far end of the sofa, Al, you smell sweaty. Kenny, why are you standing there gasping like a guppy? Get outta here.”

Horace pulled the backpack from my hand and shoved it back into Kenny's arms. Kenny looked at me and I nodded to him that it was all right, though I really wasn't sure that it was. Kenny leaned over, staggering under the weight. Betty disappeared into the kitchen while Horace tore the apron off.

“Sit, Al,” Horace hissed. “Act natural! Stick this under the sofa.” He handed me the wadded-up apron and I shoved it under the sofa before I sat down.

Horace flung open the door to reveal Mr. Baby-Face, a thin black briefcase in his hand and a puzzled expression on his chubby face.

“Is this the Tuttle residence?” he asked.

“You bet your sweet aunt Matilda it is!” Horace said. “Come on in. Take a load off.”

He had remembered the feather duster at the last second, hiding it behind his back as he waved the bald guy toward the family room.

“I'm Horace,” he said. “My wife, Betty, is in the kitchen, brewing.”

“Brewing?”

“Coffee. Decaf. Want some?”

“No, thank you, but perhaps a glass of water. It's very warm for October, don't you think?”

“Hot as Africa,” Horace said.

The bald guy had come into the family room. Horace trotted after him.

“And here he is,” Horace said. “Here is Alfred Kropp.”

“I know who Alfred Kropp is,” the bald guy said, smiling at me. He had very small teeth with sharp incisors, like a ferret, though I've never really studied a ferret's mouth. He offered his hand and I took it without getting up. His hand was moist and soft.

“My name is Alphonso Needlemer, Alfred,” he said.

“What a pleasure it is to finally meet you.”

Behind him, Horace turned and shouted toward the kitchen, “Betty! Nix the coffee and bring me some ice water!”

“No ice,” Alphonso Needlemer said.

“Nix the ice!”

“But chilled, of course.”

“Chill it!” Horace yelled over his shoulder. “Take a load off, Mr. Needleman.”

“Mier,” the bald guy said.

“Mier?”

“Needlemer.”

Mr. Needlemier sat on the opposite end of the sofa and placed his briefcase on his lap. Horace sat into the lounge and tossed the feather duster behind the chair.

“You’ve been following me,” I said to Mr. Needlemier.

“I have.”

“Why?”

“Mostly to satisfy my own curiosity.”

“That killed the cat,” Horace said. “But who likes cats?” He yelled, “Betty! Water!” He smiled apologetically at Mr. Needlemier.

“The resemblance is not striking, but evident,” Mr. Needlemier said.

“The resemblance to what?” I asked.

“To Mr. Samson, of course.”

Just then Betty came into the room carrying a tray with three glasses of water. She had pulled her hair back into a bun, but some strands had come loose and hung down on either side of her face. Mr. Needlemier took a glass of water and thanked her. Horace glared.

“Coffee,” he said.

“You said nix the coffee.”

“Nix his coffee, not mine.”

Betty scurried back to the kitchen. Mr. Needlemier sipped his water and then set the glass on the coffee table.

“Alfred,” he said, “I am Bernard Samson’s personal attorney and executor of his estate.”

Alphonso Needlemier pulled a long white envelope from his coat pocket and held it toward me. It read: For Alfred Kropp in the event of my demise [signed] Bernard Samson.”

Below the signature were the words, in bold type, Personal and Confidential.

The flap was sealed in the old-fashioned way, with a glob of red wax imprinted with the image of a knight on a horse carrying a banner.

“I would have delivered this sooner, Alfred,” Mr. Needlemier said. “But I found it only two weeks ago while going through Mr. Samson’s papers. He was a very private man and I promise you I didn’t know of this letter’s existence.”

“Well, what are you waiting for, Al?” Horace said. His voice was shaking. “Open it!”

I slid my finger under the flap and tore the envelope open. Inside were two typewritten sheets of paper. Horace was leaning forward in the lounge. Mr. Needlemier studied me with a sad expression.

“Well?” Horace asked.

It read:

My dear Alfred,

If this letter finds you, then my time on earth has passed. Words cannot express my deep sorrow for not sharing the truth with you while I still drew breath. In time I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me (and your mother) for keeping your true identity a secret. I would have told you of your ancestry, but my journey has been cut short—such is the fate of one born into the line of the noblest of knights.

I pray on this, the eve of my final rendezvous with M. Mogart, that you have found a suitable home. If I have learned anything in my strange and secretive life,

it is that Fortune often smiles in the darkest circumstance and it is when we reach that place between desperation and despair that we find hope. I know all too well how you must miss your mother and your uncle . . . I pray only that you understand that I have done everything within my power to see that you are kept safe, far from this dangerous business.

My dear son, I would have taken you in had I not believed doing so would have endangered you and your mother. Forgive me! You are my son, and though I have gone, I remain always your father.

Bernard Samson

I read the letter twice, then I folded it carefully, returned it to the envelope, and set the envelope on the little end table by the sofa.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Mr. Needle mier was looking kindly at me. Horace was glaring.

“Well—what’s it say?” he demanded in a loud voice.

“It is a privileged communication, Mr. Tuttle,” Mr. Needle mier said.

“And I’m his guardian. Practically family. Nearly a father!”

“Not even close,” I told him.

Betty came back into the room carrying a cup of coffee.

“Oh, Alfred!” she said. “I completely forgot about you! What would you like, dear?”

“Maybe just a glass of water.”

She left again and Horace gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “You married?” he asked Mr. Needle mier. Mr. Needle mier didn’t say anything. He was still looking at me. “Good thing!” Horace said, which covered either possibility.

Mr. Needle mier flipped the gold clasps on his briefcase. Horace gave a little jump at the sharp snapping sound.

“There is one other matter we should discuss, Alfred,” Mr.

Needle mier said. “As I mentioned, I am executor to Mr. Samson’s estate.” He pulled a legal-size folder from the briefcase. He tapped it with his pudgy index finger. “Alfred, his will names you as sole beneficiary.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“That means you are due to inherit control over Samson Industries and his entire personal fortune valued at . . .” Mr. Needle mier glanced at the papers in the folder. “Yes, four hundred million dollars—give or take a million.”

A glass shattered and everybody jumped. Betty had come into the room with my water, and when Mr. Needlemer said “four hundred million dollars,” the glass slipped from her hand and smashed on the floor. She ran into the kitchen for a towel to clean up the water and broken glass.

All the color had drained from Horace’s face. He reminded me of a middle-aged Casper the Friendly Ghost.

“Naturally, as is usually the case in these matters, you are not due to gain control of the money until you reach the age of eighteen,” Mr. Needlemer said. “Until then a trustee will manage your inheritance.”

“A trustee?” I asked.

“Trustee,” Horace whispered.

“Someone to look over your financial concerns. A guardian of your interests, as it were.”

“Who’s the trustee?” I asked.

“Who? Yeah, who’s the who?” Horace whispered.

“Unfortunately, the will does not designate a trustee. That choice falls to me, as executor.”

“So who’s it gonna be?” Horace asked.

Just then Betty came back with a towel and a whisk broom, saying, “Oh, don’t you hate breaking glass? You never can get all the little pieces and when they get in your foot—”

“So let’s stop the pussyfooting around, Mr. Needlemer,” Horace said. “Who’s the trustee?”

Mr. Needlemer stared at Horace for a second. “I haven’t decided.”

“You haven’t decided?”

Mr. Needlemer shook his head. “That is one of the reasons I’m here.” He turned back to me. “I want to know Alfred’s wishes.”

“Alfred’s wishes?” Horace asked. “*Alfred’s wishes!* You’re telling me you’re gonna let a kid—and forgive me here, Al, but a kid with not much wattage in the brains department—decide who manages four hundred million dollars?”

“Actually,” Mr. Needlemer said, “the figure is closer to a billion dollars, if you include the assets of Samson Industries.”

Horace’s mouth came open but no sound came out, as if the word “billion” had sucked all the air out of him.

“I’ll have to think about it,” I said.

“Of course,” Mr. Needlemer said. “It’s a great deal to think about.”

Horace got some of his breath back and whispered hoarsely, “I’ll help him. Alfred. Think about it.”

Al'll need my help with that. The thinking."

"Alfred means the world to us!" Betty called from the kitchen doorway.

"I was saving the news for a big surprise," Horace told Mr. Needlemer. "But I guess this is a real letter day for big surprises. See, Betty's right; the kid means the world to us and funny thing is, Mr. Needlemer, we've talked to our lawyer to get the ball rolling."

"What ball?" I asked.

"We're adopting you, Alfred, you adorable big-headed lug."

Mr. Needlemier gave me his card and said he'd be in touch in a couple of weeks. He told me he was sorry for my loss. I didn't know if he knew about my father being the head of a secret order of knights charged with protecting Excalibur, the Sword of King Arthur, so I decided not to mention it to him. I didn't have the chance, though, even if I wanted to, because Horace was hovering right next to him from the time he stood up till the good-byes at the front door.

After Mr. Needlemier left, Horace barked at Betty to stop sweeping and vacuuming and running a wet cloth over the floor where the glass broke, and get started on dinner.

"We're making your favorite, Al," he told me. "Steak and potatoes!"

"That's not my favorite," I said.

"What do you mean that's not your favorite?" he snapped, then caught himself and said, "Then you name it, Al, whatever you want!"

"I'm not hungry," I said, and I went to my room and closed the door.

Kenny was lying on the top bunk in semidarkness; the blinds were drawn. He muttered softly above me as I stretched out on the bottom bunk, trying to wrap my Kropp brain around the fact that I was now a billionaire.

Kenny whispered, "What are you doing, Kropp?"

"Trying to figure out how I'm going to avoid becoming Horace Tuttle's son. What are you doing, Kenny?"

"Nothing, Alfred Kropp."

I rolled onto my stomach and glanced under the bed. I flopped back over and said, "All right, Kenny, give it back."

"Give what back?"

"You know what."

After a second I could see the faint light gleaming off the black metal of the blade as he lowered the sword from the top bunk. I knew it was very sharp, so I took it from Kenny carefully. "I told you not to touch it," I said as I held it against my chest.

"I'm sorry, Alfred Kropp. Please don't be mad at me."

I was running my fingertips along the flat smooth part of the black sword. "Don't bother me anymore, okay?" I said.

"Okay, Alfred Kropp."

I slid the sword beneath the bed. When I first got back from London, I took Bennacio's sword from its hiding place under my bed every day. But as the months went by I took it out less and less. Looking

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