



The Pagan Stone By Nora Roberts

Excerpt

Prologue

*Mazatlán, Mexico
April 2001*

Sun streaked pearly pink across the sky, splashed onto blue, blue water that rolled against white sand as Gage Turner walked the beach. He carried his shoes—the tattered laces of the ancient Nikes tied to hang on his shoulder. The hems of his jeans were frayed, and the jeans themselves had long since faded to white at the stress points. The tropical breeze tugged at hair that hadn't seen a barber in more than three months.

At the moment, he supposed he looked no more kempt than the scattering of beach bums still snoring away on the sand. He'd bunked on beaches a time or two when his luck was down, and knew someone would come along soon to shoo them off before the paying tourists woke for their room-service coffee.

At the moment, despite the need for a shower and a shave, his luck was up. Nicely up. With his night's winnings hot in his pocket, he considered upgrading his ocean-view room for a suite.

Grab it while you can, he thought, because tomorrow could suck you dry.

Time was already running out: it spilled like that white, sun-kissed sand held in a closed fist. His twenty-fourth birthday was less than three months away, and the dreams crawled back into his head. Blood and death, fire and madness. All of that and Hawkins Hollow seemed a world away from this soft tropical dawn.

But it lived in him.

He unlocked the wide glass door of his room, stepped in, tossed aside his shoes. After flipping on the lights, closing the drapes, he took his winnings from his pocket,

gave the bills a careless flip. With the current rate of exchange, he was up about six thousand USD. Not a bad night, not bad at all. In the bathroom, he popped off the bottom of a can of shaving cream, tucked the bills inside the hollow tube.

He protected what was his. He'd learned to do so from childhood, secreting away small treasures so his father couldn't find and destroy them on a drunken whim. He might've flipped off any notion of a college education, but Gage figured he'd learned quite a bit in his not-quite-twenty-four years.

He'd left Hawkins Hollow the summer he'd graduated from high school. Just packed up what was his, stuck out his thumb and booked.

Escaped, Gage thought as he stripped for a shower. There'd been plenty of work—he'd been young, strong, healthy, and not particular. But he'd learned a vital lesson while digging ditches, hauling lumber, and most especially during the months he'd sweated on an offshore rig. He could make more money at cards than he could with his back.

And a gambler didn't need a home. All he needed was a game.

He stepped into the shower, turned the water hot. It sluiced over tanned skin, lean muscles, through thick black hair in need of a trim. He thought idly about ordering some coffee, some food, then decided he'd catch a few hours' sleep first. Another advantage of his profession, in Gage's mind. He came and went as he pleased, ate when he was hungry, slept when he was tired. He set his own rules, broke them whenever it suited him.

Nobody had any hold over him.

Not true, Gage admitted as he studied the white scar across his wrist. Not altogether true. A man's friends, his true friends, always had a hold over him. There were no truer friends than Caleb Hawkins and Fox O'Dell.

Blood brothers.

They'd been born the same day, the same year, even—as far as anyone could tell—at the same moment. He couldn't remember a time when the three of them hadn't been...a unit, he supposed. The middle-class boy, the hippie kid, and the son of an abusive drunk. Probably shouldn't have had a thing in common, Gage mused as a smile curved his mouth, warmed the green of his eyes. But they'd been family, they'd been brothers long before Cal had cut their wrists with his Boy Scout knife to ritualize the pact.

And that had changed everything. Or had it? Gage wondered. Had it just opened what was always there, waiting?

He could remember it all vividly, every step, every detail. It had started as an adventure—three boys on the eve of their tenth birthday hiking through the woods. Loaded down with skin mags, beer, smokes—his contribution—with junk food and Cokes from Fox, and the picnic basket of sandwiches and lemonade Cal's mother had packed. Not that Frannie Hawkins would've packed a picnic if she'd known her son planned to camp that night at the Pagan Stone in Hawkins Wood.

All that wet heat, Gage remembered, and the music on the boom box, and the complete innocence they'd carried along with the Little Debbies and Nutter Butters they would lose before they hiked out in the morning.

Gage stepped out of the shower, rubbed his dripping hair with a towel. His back had ached from the beating his father had given him the night before. As they'd sat around the campfire in the clearing those welts had throbbed. He remembered that, as he

remembered how the light had flickered and floated over the gray table of the Pagan Stone.

He remembered the words they'd written down, the words they'd spoken as Cal made them blood brothers. He remembered the quick pain of the knife across his flesh, the feel of Cal's wrist, of Fox's as they'd mixed their blood.

And the explosion, the heat and cold, the force and fear when that mixed blood hit the scarred ground of the clearing.

He remembered what came out of the ground, the black mass of it, and the blinding light that followed. The pure evil of the black, the stunning brilliance of the white.

When it was over, there'd been no welts on his back, no pain, and in his hand lay one-third of a bloodstone. He carried it still, as he knew Cal and Fox carried theirs. Three pieces of one whole. He supposed they were the same.

Madness came to the Hollow that week, and raged through it like a plague, infecting, driving good and ordinary people to do the horrible. And for seven days every seven years, it came back.

So did he, Gage though. What choice did he have?

Naked, still damp from the shower, he stretched out on the bed. There was time yet, still some time for a few more games, for hot beaches and swaying palms. The green woods and blue mountains of Hawkins Hollow were thousands of miles away, until July.

He closed his eyes, and as he'd trained himself, dropped almost instantly into sleep.

In sleep came the screams, and the weeping, and the fire that ate so joyfully at wood and cloth and flesh. Blood ran warm over his hands as he dragged the wounded to safety. For how long? he wondered. Where was safe? And who could say when and if the victim would turn and become attacker?

Madness ruled the streets of the Hollow.

In the dream he stood with his friends on the south end of Main Street, across from the Qwik Mart and its four gas pumps. Coach Moser, who'd guided the Hawkins Hollow Bucks to a championship football season Gage's senior year, gibbered with laughter as he soaked himself, the ground, the buildings with the flood of gas from the pumps.

They ran toward him, the three of them, even as Moser held up his lighter like a trophy, as he splashed in the pools of gas like a boy in rain puddles. They ran even as he flicked the lighter.

It was flash and boom, searing the eyes, bursting in the ears. The force of heat and air flung him back so he landed in a bone-shattering heap. Fire, blinding clouds of it, spewed skyward as hunks of wood and concrete, shards of glass, burning twists of metal flew.

Gage felt his broken arm try to knit, his shattered knee struggle to heal with pain worse than the wound itself. Gritting his teeth, he rolled, and what he saw stopped his heart in his chest.

Cal lay in the street, burning like a torch.

No, no, no, no! He crawled, shouting, gasping for oxygen in the tainted air. There was Fox, facedown in a widening pool of blood.

It came, a black smear on that burning air that formed into a man. The demon smiled. “You don’t heal from death, do you, boy?”

Gage woke, sheathed in sweat and shaking. He woke with the stench of burning gas scoring his throat.

Time’s up, he thought.

He got up, got dressed. Dressed, he began to pack for the trip back to Hawkins Hollow.

One

Hawkins Hollow, Maryland
May 2008

The dream woke him at dawn, and that was a pisser. From experience, Gage knew it would be useless to try to find sleep again with images of burning blood in his brain. The closer it got to July, the closer it go to the Seven, the more vivid and vicious the dreams. He’d rather be awake and doing than struggling with nightmares.

Or visions.

He’d come out of the woods that long-ago July with a body that healed itself, and with the gift of sight. Gage didn’t consider the precognition wholly reliable. Different choices, different actions, different outcomes.

Seven years before, come July, he’d turned off the pumps at the Qwik Mart, and had taken the added precaution of locking Coach Moser in a cell. He’d never known, not for certain, if he’d saved his friends’ lives by those actions, or if the dream had been just a dream.

But he’d played the odds.

He continued to play the odds, Gage supposed as he grabbed a pair of boxers in case he wasn’t alone in the house. He was back, as he was every seventh year. And this time he’d thrown his lot in with the three women who’d turned his, Fox’s, and Cal’s trio into a team of six.

With Cal engaged to Quinn Black—blond bombshell and paranormal writer—she often spent the night at Cal’s. Hence the inadvisability of the wandering downstairs naked to make coffee. But Cal’s attractive house in the woods felt empty to Gage, of people, of

ghosts, of Cal's big, lazy dog, Lump. And that was all too good, as Gage preferred solitude, at least until after coffee.

He assumed Cal had spent the night at the house the three women rented in town. As Fox had done the headfirst into love with the sexy brunette Layla Darnell, they might've bunked at the house, or Fox's apartment over his law offices. Either way, they'd stay close, and with Fox's talent for pushing into thoughts, they had ways of communicating that didn't require phones.

Gage put coffee on, then went out to stand on the deck while it brewed.

Leave it to Cal, he thought, to build his home on the edge of the woods where their lives had turned inside out. But that was Cal for you—he was the type who took a stand, kept right on standing. And the fact was, if country charm rang your bell, this was the spot for it. The green woods with the last of the spring's wild dogwoods and mountain laurel gleaming in slants of sunlight offered a picture of tranquility—if you didn't know any better. The terraced slope in front of the house exploded with color from shrubs and ornamental trees, while at the base the winding creek bubbled along.

It fit Cal to the ground, just as his lady did. For himself, Gage figured the country quiet would drive him crazy within a month.

He went back for the coffee, drank it strong and black. He took a second mug up with him. By the time he'd showered and dressed, restlessness nipped at him. He tried to quell it with a few hands of solitaire, but the house was too...settled. Grabbing his keys, he headed out. He'd hunt up his friends, and if nothing was going on, maybe he'd zip up to Atlantic City for the day and find some action.

It was a quiet drive, but then the Hollow was a quiet place, a splat on the map in the rolling western Maryland countryside that got itself juiced up for the annual Memorial Day parade, the Fourth of July fireworks in the park, the occasional Civil War reenactment. And, of course, the madness that flowed into it every seven years.

Overhead, the trees arched over the road; beside it, the creek wound. Then the view opened to rolling, rock-pocked hills, distant mountains, and a sky of delicate spring blue. It wasn't his place, not the rural countryside nor the town tucked into it. Odds were he'd die here, but even that wouldn't make it his. And still, he'd play the long shot that he, his friends, and the women with them would not only survive, but beat down the thing that plagued the Hollow. That they would end it this time.

He passed the Qwik Mart where foresight or luck had won the day, then the first of the tidy houses and shops along Main. He spotted Fox's truck outside the townhouse that held Fox's home and law office. The coffee shop and Ma's Pantry were both open for business, serving the breakfast crowd. A hugely pregnant woman towing a toddler stepped out of the bakery with a large white bag. The kid talked a mile a minute while Mom waddled down Main.

There was the empty gift shop Fox's Layla had rented with plans to open a fashion boutique. The idea made Gage shake his head as he turned at the Square. Hope sprang, he supposed, and love gave it a hell of a boost.

He gave a quick glance at the Bowl-a-Rama, town institution and Cal's legacy. And looked away again. Once upon a time he'd lived above the bowling center with his father, lived with the stench of stale beer and cigarettes, with the constant threat of fists or belt.

Bill Turner still lived there, still worked at the center, reputedly five years sober. Gage didn't give a flying fuck, as long as the old man kept his distance. Because the thought burned in his gut, he shut it down, tossed it aside.

At the curb, he pulled up behind a Karmann Ghia—property of one Cybil Kinski, the sixth member of the team. The sultry gypsy shared his precog trait—just as Quinn shared Cal's ability to look back, and Layla shared Fox's reading of what was hidden in the now. He supposed that made them partners of sorts, and the supposing made him wary.

She was a number, all right, he thought as he started up the walk to the house. Smart, savvy, and sizzling. Another time, another place, it might've been entertaining to deal a few hands with her, see who walked away the winner. But the idea that some outside force, ancient powers, and magic plots played a part in bringing them together had Gage opting to fold his hand early.

It was one thing for both Cal and Fox to get twisted up with their women. He just wasn't wired for the long-term deal. Instinct told him that even the short-term with a woman like Cybil would be too complicated for his taste and style.

He didn't knock. They used the rental house and Cal's as bases of sorts, so he didn't see the need. Music drifted—something New Agey—all flutes and gongs. He turned toward the source, and there was Cybil. She wore loose black pants and a top that revealed a smooth, tight midriff and sleekly muscled arms. Her wild black curls spilled out of their restraining band.

The toes of her bare feet sported bright pink polish.

As he watched, she braced her head on the floor while her body lifted up. Her legs spread, held perpendicular to the floor, then somehow twisted, as if her torso were a hinge. Fluidly, she lowered one leg until her foot was flat on the floor, forming her into some erotic bridge. With movements that seemed effortless, she shifted herself, tucking one leg against her hip while the other cocked up behind her. And reaching back, she gripped her foot to bring it to the back of her head.

He considered the fact that he didn't drool a testament to his massive power of will.

She bent, twisted, flowed, *arranged* herself into what should have been impossible positions. His willpower wasn't so massive he didn't imagine that any woman that flexible would be amazing in bed.

She arched back, foot hooked behind her head when a flicker in those deep, dark eyes told him she'd become aware of him.

"Don't let me interrupt."

"I won't. I'm nearly done. Go away."

Though he regretted missing how she ended such a session, he wandered back to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee. Leaning back on the counter, he noted the morning paper was folded on the little table, the dog bowl Cal left there for Lump was empty, and the water bowl beside it half full. The dog might've already had breakfast, but if anyone else had, the dishes had already been stowed away. Since the news didn't interest him at the moment, he sat and dealt out a hand of solitaire. He was on his fourth game when Cybil strolled in.

"Aren't you a rise-and-shiner this morning?"

He laid a red eight on a black nine. "Cal still in bed?"

“It seems everyone’s up and about. Quinn hauled him off to the gym.” She poured coffee for herself, then reached in the bread bin. “Bagel?”

“Sure.”

After cutting one neatly in half, she dropped it in the toaster. “Bad dream?” She angled her head when he glanced up at her. “I had one, woke me at first light. So did Cal and Quinn. I haven’t heard, but I imagine Fox and Layla—they’re at his place—got the same wake-up call. Quinn’s remedy, weights and machines. Mine, yoga. Yours...” She gestured to the cards.

“Everybody’s got something.”

“We kicked our Big Evil Bastard in the balls a few days ago. We have to expect him to kick back.”

“Nearly got ourselves incinerated for the trouble,” Gage reminded her.

“*Nearly* works for me. We put the three pieces of the bloodstone back together, magickally. We performed a blood ritual.” She studied the healing cut across her palm. “And we lived to tell the tale. We have a weapon.”

“Which we don’t know how to use.”

“Does it know?” She busied herself getting out plates, cream cheese for the bagels. “Does our demon know any more about it than we do? Giles Dent infused that stone with power more than three hundred years ago in the clearing, and—theoretically—used it as part of the spell that pulled the demon, in its form as Lazarus Twisse, into some sort of limbo where Dent could hold it for centuries.”

Handily, she sliced an apple, arranged the pieces on a plate while she spoke. “Twisse didn’t know or recognize the power of the bloodstone then, or apparently hundreds of years later when your boyhood ritual released it, and the stone was split into three equal parts. If we follow that logic, it doesn’t know any more about it now, which gives us an advantage. We may not know, yet, how it works, but we know it does.”

Turning, she offered him his plated bagel. “We put the three pieces into one again. The Big Evil Bastard isn’t the only one with power here.”

Just a bit fascinated, Gage watched Cybil cut her half bagel in half before spreading what he could only describe as a film of cream cheese over the two quarters. While he loaded his own half, she sat and took a bite he estimated consisted of about a half dozen crumbs.

“Maybe you should just look at a picture of food instead of going to all the trouble to fix it.” When she only smiled, took another miniscule bite, he said, “I’ve seen Twisse kill my friends. I’ve seen that countless times, in countless ways.”

Her eyes met his, dark with understanding. “That’s the bitch of our precog, seeing the potentials, the possibilities, in brutal Technicolor. I was afraid when we went into the clearing to perform the ritual. Not just of dying, though I don’t want to die. In fact, I’m firmly against it. I was afraid of living and watching the people closest to me die, and worse, somehow being responsible for it.”

“But you went in.”

“We went in.” She chose an apple slice, took a stingy bite. “And we didn’t die. Not all dreams, not all visions are...set in stone. You come back, every Seven, you come back.”

“We swore an oath.”

“Yes, when you were ten. I’m not discounting the validity or the power of childhood oaths,” she continued, “but you’d come back regardless. You come back for them, for Cal and Fox. I came for Quinn, so I understand the strength of friendship. We’re not like them, you and I.”

“No?”

“No.” Lifting her coffee, she sipped slowly. “The town, the people in it, they’re not ours. For Cal and Fox—and now in a very real sense for Quinn and Layla—this is home. People go to great lengths to protect home. For me, Hawkins Hollow is just a place I happen to be. Quinn’s my home, and now so is Layla. And by extension, by connection, so are Cal and Fox. And so, it seems, are you. I won’t leave my home until I know it’s safe. Otherwise, while I’d find all this fascinating and intriguing, I wouldn’t shed blood for it.”

The sun beamed in the kitchen window, haloed over her hair, set the little silver hoops at her ears glinting. “I think you might.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, because the whole thing pisses you off. Wanting to kick its ass weighs on the side of you staying, seeing it through.”

She took another tiny bite of bagel and smiled at him. “Got me. So here we are, Turner, two pairs of itchy feet planted for love and general pissiness. Well. I want my shower,” she decided. “Would you mind staying at least until Quinn and Cal get back? Ever since Layla had her ‘snakes in the bathroom’ event, I’ve been leery about showering when I’m alone in the house.”

“No problem. You going to eat the rest of that?”

Cybil pushed the untouched quarter bagel toward him. As she rose to go to the sink to rinse out her coffee mug, she studied the black-and-blue cloud on the back of her shoulder. It reminded him they’d taken a beating on the night of the full moon at the Pagan Stone, and that she—unlike Cal, Fox, and himself—didn’t heal within moments of an injury.

“That’s a bad bruise on your shoulder there.”

She shrugged it. “You should see my ass.”

“Okay.”

With a laugh, she glanced over her shoulder. “Rhetorically speaking. I had a nanny who believed that a good paddling built character. Every time I sit down I’m reminded of her.”

“You had a nanny?”

“I did. But paddling aside, I like to think I built my own character. Cal and Quinn should be back soon. You might want to make another pot of coffee.”

As she walked out he gave the ass in question a contemplative study. Top of the line, he decided. She was an interesting, and to his mind, complicated mix in a very tidy package. While he had a fondness for tidy packages, he preferred simple concerns when it came to fun and games. But for life and death, he thought Cybil Kinski was just what the doctor ordered.

She’d brought a gun along on their hike to the Pagan Stone. A little pearl-handled .22, which she’d used with the cold, calculated skill of a veteran mercenary. She’d been the one to do the research on the blood rituals—and she’d done the genealogies that had

proven she, Quinn, and Layla were descendants of the demon known as Lazarus Twisse and Hester Deale, the girl it had raped over three centuries before.

And the woman could cook. Bitched about it, Gage mused as he rose to put on another pot of coffee, but she knew her way around the kitchen. He respected the fact that she generally said what was on her mind, and kept a cool head in a crisis. This was no weak-kneed female needing to be rescued.

She smelled like secrets and tasted like warm honey.

He'd kissed her that night in the clearing. Of course, he'd thought they were all about to die in a supernatural blaze and it had been a what-the-hell kind of gesture. But he remembered exactly how she'd tasted.

Probably not smart to think about it—or to think about the fact that she was upstairs right now, wet and naked. But a guy had to have some entertainment during a break from fighting ancient evil. And strangely, he was no longer in the mood for Atlantic City.

He heard the front door open, and the quick burst of Quinn's bawdy laughter. As far as Gage could see, Cal had hit the jackpot in Quinn for the laugh alone. Then you added in the curvy body, the big baby blues, the brain, the humor, the guts, and his friend rang all the bells, blew all the whistles.

Gage topped off his coffee, and hearing only Cal's footsteps approach, got down another mug.

Cal took the mug Gage held out, said, "Hey," then opened the refrigerator for milk.

For a man who'd likely been up since dawn, Cal looked pretty damn chipper, Gage noted. Exercise might release endorphins, but if Gage was a better man—and he was—he'd put money on the woman putting the spring in his friend's step.

Cal's gray eyes were clear, his face and body relaxed. His dark blond hair was damp and he smelled of soap, indicating he'd showered at the gym. He doctored his coffee, then took a box of Mini-Wheats out of a cupboard.

"Want?"

"No."

With a grunt, Cal shook cereal into a bowl, dumped in milk. "Team dream?"

"Seems like."

"Talked to Fox." Cal ate his cereal as he leaned back against the counter. "He and Layla had one, too. Yours?"

"The town was bleeding," Gage began. "The buildings, the streets, anyone unlucky enough to be outside. Blood bubbling up from the sidewalks, raining down the buildings. And burning while it bled."

"Yeah, that's the one. It's the first time the six of us shared the same nightmare, that I know of. That has to mean something."

"The bloodstone's back in one piece. The six of us put it back together. Cybil puts a lot of store in the stone as a power source."

"And you?"

"I guess I'd have to agree, for what it's worth. What I do know is we've got less than two months to figure it out. If that."

Cal nodded. "It's coming faster, it's coming stronger. But we've hurt it, Gage, twice now we've hurt it bad."

“Third time better be the charm.”

He didn't hang around. If routine held, the women would spend a good chunk of the day looking for answers in books and on the Internet. They'd review their charts, maps, and graphs, trying to find some new angle. And talking it all to death. Cal would head over to the Bowl-a-Rama, and Fox would open his office for the day. And he, Gage thought, was a gambler without a game.

So he had the day free.

He could head back to Cal's, make some calls, write some e-mails. He had his own research lines to tug. He'd been studying and poking into demonology and folklore for years, and in odd corners of the world. When they combined his data with what Cybil, Quinn, and Layla had dug up, it meshed fairly well.

Gods and demons warring with each other long before man came to be. Whittling the numbers down so that when man crawled onto the scene, he soon outnumbered them. The time of man, Giles Dent had called it, according to the journals written by his lover, Ann Hawkins. And in the time of man only one demon and one guardian remained—not that he was buying that one, Gage thought. But there was only one who held his personal interest. Mortally wounded, the guardian passed his power and his mission to a young human boy, and so the line continued through the centuries until there was Giles Dent.

Gage considered it as he drove. He accepted Dent, accepted that he and his friends were Dent's descendants through Ann Hawkins. He believed, as did the others, that Dent found a way, twisting the rules to include a little human sacrifice, to imprison the demon, and himself. Until hundreds of years later, three boys released it.

He could even accept that the act had been their destiny. He didn't have to like it, but he could swallow it. It was their Fate to face it, fight it, to destroy it or die trying. Since the ghost of Ann Hawkins had made a few appearances this time out, her cryptic remarks indicated this Seven was the money shot.

All or nothing. Life or death.

Since most of his visions featured death, in various unpleasant forms, Gage wasn't putting money on the group victory dance.

He supposed he'd driven to the cemetery because death was on his mind. When he got out of the car, he thrust his hands into his pockets. It was stupid to come here, he thought. It was pointless. But he began to walk across the grass, around the stones and monuments.

He should've brought flowers, he thought, then immediately shook his head. Flowers were pointless, too. What good did flowers do the dead?

His mother and the child she'd tried to bring into the world were both long dead.

May had greened the grass and the trees, and the breeze stirred the green. The ground rolled, gentle slopes and dips where somber gray markers or faithful white monuments rose, and the sun cast their shadows. His mother and his sister who'd died inside her had a white marker. Though it had been years, many years, since he'd walked this way, he knew where to find them.

The single stone was very simple, small, rounded, with only names and dates carved.

CATHERINE MARY TURNER

1954-1982
ROSE ELIZABETH TURNER
1982

He barely remembered her, he thought. Time simply rubbed the images, the sounds, the *feel* of her to a faded blur. He had only the vaguest memory of her laying his hand against her swollen belly so he could feel the baby kick. He had a picture, so he knew he favored his mother in coloring, in the shape of his eyes, his mouth. He'd never seen the baby, and no one had ever told him what she looked like. But he remembered being happy, remembered playing with trucks in the sunsplash through a window. And yes, even of running to the door when his father came home from work, and screaming with fun as those hands lifted him up high.

There'd been a time, a brief time, when his father's hands had lifted him instead of knocking him down. The sunsplashed time, he supposed. Then she'd died, and the baby with her, and everything had gone dark and cold.

Had she ever shouted at him, punished him, been impatient? Surely, she must have. But he couldn't remember any of that, or chose not to. Maybe he'd idealized her, but what was the harm? When a boy had a mother for such a brief time, the man was entitled to think of her as perfect.

"I didn't bring flowers," he murmured. "I should have."

"But you came."

He spun around, and looked into eyes the same color, the same shape as his own. As his heart squeezed, his mother smiled at him.

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