

起狮，行礼 (Rising Lion--The Lion Bows)

by Zen Cho

The hotel was not like any hotel Jia Qi had seen before. There was no drive swooping around a fountain featuring little peeing babies, no glass doors opening onto a golden lobby lit by chandeliers, no men in white gloves to open the doors for you.

Perhaps English hotels were different. This one was a blocky old building made of weathered grey stone and covered with ivy. It looked like it should come equipped with knights and pointy-hatted ladies. The manager who came out to greet them looked incongruously modern in comparison--he wore a suit and a bright red tie, but no gloves. His name was Nick.

"Thanks for coming," he said to Tiong Han. Tiong Han was technically the president of the troupe. "The guests are really excited about the performance, really excited. So am I. I've never seen a lion dance performance before. It'll add a touch of culture to the night. Whoop! Need help with that?"

He was already moving forward to help Simon unload the lion head from the taxi, but Coco stepped in front of him before he could touch it.

Coco had been with the troupe for six years. She had never been their official president because she preferred not to deal with technicalities; it gave her more time to actually lead the troupe.

"Are Mr. and Mrs. Yu around?" she said.

It was Mr. Yu who had emailed them to ask if they would perform at a Christmas party that was being held at his hotel. It was a new hotel and this was the first big event they were hosting, so he was willing to pay them a generous fee. They had agreed that the troupe would perform before and after dinner. There were also going to be fireworks, and a disco.

Sensibly, Mr. Yu and Mrs. Yu had stayed indoors, but they were very hospitable when the cold dishevelled troupe poured into the lobby.

"We've got Chinese food, Chinese decorations, lanterns, fireworks," said Nick. "It's all been done up to theme. The company does a lot of business out in China, so they were very keen when we suggested a China night. When we heard about you we thought, well, that's ideal! We're so pleased you could make it all the way out here."

"Very pleased," said Mr. Yu in English. In Cantonese, he said: "*The ghost is in the upstairs cupboard.*"

"Thank you, we're looking forward to it," said Coco to Nick. To Mr. Yu: "*What kind of ghost is it?*"

Mr. Yu hesitated. Mrs. Yu had been overseeing Simon and Tiong Han as they carried the equipment in, but now she turned and said:

"Nick, there is a drum. Will there be space in the dining room?"

"There's a drum? How big is--oh," Nick said, as the drum emerged from the front door. "We definitely haven't left enough space for that. I didn't know there'd be a drum."

"We thought they will use recordings," said Mrs. Yu. This was such a blatant fib that Jia Qi was surprised when Nick only said, "We'll have to clear some space, then. Let's see if we can jam it in the passage from the kitchen. You'll have to tell us whether that'll work."

Tiong Han glanced at Coco, who nodded. He left with Nick and the others followed, their arms full of cymbals, gongs, and cabbages.

Jia Qi stayed with Coco. Even after four months with the troupe, she was still too new to be much help with the setting up, and she wanted to know about the ghost.

Coco had told Jia Qi about the lion dance troupe's occasional secret assignments after she'd been coming to their meetings for a couple of months. It was earlier than Coco would usually have told a new member, but Jia Qi thought Coco felt a bond with her, as the only other girl in the troupe and the only other person capable of going ten minutes without talking about video games.

Besides, it had become obvious, even in that short period of time, that Jia Qi ate, slept, and dreamt lion dance. She was a quiet girl with an unfashionable accent, and British student culture had come as a shock to her system. She was ferociously homesick, she could not drink, and she only did well in classes where she was not required to speak.

The troupe did not seem to notice her quietness. They gave her something concrete to work at and never said anything she did not understand. She found refuge in their unfussy acceptance and reassuring Chineseness.

So she trekked out to Crusoe College for practice sessions every Wednesday. Her lion dance T-shirt went through so many washes that the rearing lion printed on the back faded from black to a patchy grey, and it became difficult to read the words "Christminster University Lion Dance Troupe" on the back even if you could read traditional Chinese. She learnt to relax her knees in the desired horse-riding stance so she felt hardly any pain at all for at least five minutes. During tedious lectures, she tapped out the rhythms of the cymbals on her desk.

When Coco told her the truth, she found it easy to believe. She demanded no proof. Jia Qi had already known that there was something magical about lion dance.

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Mr. Yu told them about the ghost on the way upstairs, speaking low-voiced in Cantonese.

"Nick bought it with the business's money. Without our knowledge," he said.

"We hired him because we thought he would understand the British customers better. I suppose it's not his fault. He was very happy about it. He said it was a bargain to get an antique like that in such good condition. He took it well when we told him no more antiques, but he refuses to get rid of this one. He says it adds to the character of the hotel. Matches the surroundings." Mr. Yu looked outraged at the thought. "I can tell you that's not true," he added. "The rest of the surroundings isn't haunted. We got priests to bless the house before we moved in. No ghosts left anywhere, knock wood."

Jia Qi automatically rapped the banister along with Mr. Yu, but Coco was British and did not hold with superstitions. She was only interested in real ghosts.

"How old is the building?" she said.

"It was built in the 1970s," said Mr. Yu. You could tell from the disapproval in his voice that he thought this plenty old already. "The people who built it were interested in history. This is the recreation of some earl's house in Shropshire."

"Wow," said Coco. "They must have had a lot of money."

"Hnh," said Mr. Yu. "Gwailo have no sense. They treat the past like it's just an old movie. Like it's not serious."

The room he took them to looked like an ordinary hotel room, brightly lit and carpeted in beige, with two white beds and Van Gogh prints on the wall. Coco peered in.

"Where is it?"

"Oh, it isn't here," said Mr. Yu. "This is where you can wait before your performance. We try not to go to ... the other room. That's down the corridor. The third door on your right, number 88."

"Wah, good number," said Jia Qi without thinking.

Mr. Yu's face turned suddenly stormy.

"I *know*," he said.

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The others laughed when Jia Qi told them about the room number, except for Alec. Performances always made Alec stressed. If he had his way they would only ever have hunted ghosts, which at least didn't expose you in all your inadequacy to an audience. But as Coco and Simon and Tiong Han pointed out, what sort of a lion dance troupe didn't give performances?

"It would piss me off too," Alec said. "Why did they put it in that room? Why not put it in 44?"

"Nick did it, apparently," said Coco in English. Her accent went funny when she spoke to British people, but when she was with the troupe the familiar Cantonese tones reentered her voice. "Mr. Yu said when Nick found out about eights being lucky, he thought he could pretty it up and make it into a kind of special suite, charge couples more for it. It's larger than the other rooms as well."

"Now only the ghost gets to enjoy the space," said Tiong Han.

"Yeah, Mr. Yu said it comes out and stands around sometimes," said Coco.

"They can't rent the room out. Even Nick feels it. He'll come out all covered in sweat, complaining that the heater in the room is broken."

"Hah," said Simon. "Funny. Ghosts usually make a place colder."

"What is it?" said Alec. "The haunted thing, I mean."

"Cabinet," said Coco. There was a groan from the troupe.

"I hate haunted cabinets," said Tiong Han. "Worse than haunted beds."

"Yah, those doors," said Simon. He winced at some unpleasant memory. "Cabinet door almost took off the lion's horn once. And Alec's hand," he added as an afterthought.

"Worse than chairs," said Tiong Han.

"No, chairs can be even worse," said Coco. "This was before your time, but once a sofa bed almost killed our lion. We had to bring in the Buddha."

"Oh, sofas are different from chairs," Tiong Han. "Sofas are super bad."

"Why are ghosts so nasty one?" said Jia Qi, breaking into the stream of spectral reminiscence.

Coco shrugged. "They can be horrible. It's actually really dangerous sometimes. Once you start a routine, you can't be sure it'll be OK until the lion's eaten the ghost."

"If you were dead you wouldn't feel like being nice to people what," Tiong Han pointed out.

"But weren't any of them good people before they died?" said Jia Qi.

Coco and Tiong Han exchanged a glance.

"We usually don't wait to find out," said Coco.

"So we attack first and ask questions later?" said Jia Qi. She was shocked. "Like that, of course the ghosts are not good mood!"

"If we wait for them to show if they're nice or not nice first, we'd be dead lah," said Tiong Han. "Ninety-nine percent of the ghosts I've met are all not nice. Very violent."

"They're not meant to be here, Jia Qi," said Coco. "It's really a kindness to let the lion eat them."

Simon had a less spiritual view of things.

"Lion's got to eat something," he said. "Cabbage not enough."

"Come on," said Alec abruptly. They could all tell he'd been working himself up over the performance to come. It was going to be a whopper of a performance-- outdoors in the middle of winter, on unfamiliar ground. And it was to involve what, for the troupe, passed for acrobatics. Alec stood up. "Let's *gao dim* the ghost first and get it over with."

"So you can have plenty of time to worry about the performance?" said Coco. She patted his shoulder. "It'll be fine."

"We should have practised more," muttered Alec as they filed out of the room.

"It'll be fine."

#

They were all so casual about the ghost that Jia Qi didn't even feel nervous. She'd never seen a ghost before, much less tried to lion-dance one out of existence. But there didn't appear to be anything to be nervous about when she first saw Room 88.

It was at least twice the size of the room where they'd been put, and furnished in an Oriental style. Rich red hangings draped over the windows. The bedspread was silk and had golden pop-eyed dragons embroidered all over it. Above the bed there was a large painting of a geisha with a parasol standing at the entrance of a Japanese house. Big red and gold vases stood in the corners of the room, containing plastic branches with pink cloth cherry blossoms.

The cumulative effect was awful. The only genuinely beautiful thing in the room was the cabinet. It was a rich dark brown, the sheen of the lacquered wood undulled by age. On its doors were gilded panels with the usual pictures of houses, mountains, clouds, trees. The shapes of the trees were like the shape of an old

woman's body when she stands up and stretches her back, like the shape of slender ghosts with arms reaching out to embrace the living. The humans in the panels were incidental, quaint: peasants carrying buckets on both ends of poles slung over their shoulders, aristocrats standing in affected poses outside squat houses with flick-eared roofs, processions of scholars on bridges arching over a dark river.

Looking at the cabinet gave Jia Qi a creepy feeling up and down her back, but she couldn't tell whether there was anything paranormal about it. Coco gave the woodwork a quick professional look-over, then she got down to business.

She tapped the rim of the drum twice, sharply, with the drumstick. Jia Qi raised her cymbals.

"Remember ah," Tiong Han told her, before she and Coco went in. He already had the shaggy sequinned trousers on, halfway through his transformation into the lion's hindquarters. "No *chiang chiang* until the lion comes in. Follow the signal."

Now the drum gave voice to a deep rumbling. It was the sound of the stomach of a lion just waking from sleep to hunger. The lion came staggering into the room, blinking.

Jia Qi could still see Tiong Han and Simon's legs under the lion's head. The lion always started off as human. In the beginning you could tell it was paint and wood and paper and cloth. At the start it was only a show.

The head darted around, the mouth clacking, as the lion sniffed the air. Jia Qi found herself falling headfirst into the dance. Simon was their best dancer and the movements of the head were lovely, each clearly defined, but following each other with perfect timing, describing a fluid narrative in the air. The lion jumped, nosed the bed, and peered under the table, always casting glances at the cabinet over its shoulder.

Finally it minced over to the cabinet. When it was nearly on it, it paused and looked straight at Coco, blinking twice. This was the signal.

Coco and Jia Qi charged thunderously into 起狮, the Rising Lion. The lion rose and shook its horned head. 行礼--the lion bowed.

The troupe had agreed on the routine before the performance, but as a cymballist Jia Qi did not need to remember any of it. She followed the beat of the drum and every step came as a fresh wonder to her.

As the lion danced an enchantment began to fall on the room. It was as though the dance had made the years turn over on themselves all at once, so that the dust of centuries began to settle on the furniture in a matter of minutes. Outlines grew hazy and the room grew dark, matching the blue-black evening sky outside. Only the cabinet glowed golden, the figures on its doors standing out in sharp relief, so vivid that they seemed about to move. And the lion--

The lion blazed through the room. Jia Qi knew its legs were Simon's and Tiong Han's legs, working in unison. She knew the tossing head and blinking eyes were operated by human hands. And yet she did not know it. The lion had changed; it was not human anymore. The spirit that slumbered in the lion head had awakened. It was a single, strange, live creature, and the beat of the drum was the beat of its heart.

The pictures on the cabinet's face came alive. A peasant put his buckets down and rolled his shoulders. The aristocrats giggled and flirted, passing each other jars of rice wine. The scholars found good spots on the riverbank and settled down to read or make up poetry.

The cabinet began to shake. Its doors rattled. Jia Qi closed her eyes in terror. With her eyes closed, she was in a thudding, crashing world, all cymbals and drum. She could feel the lion move around the room, its heavy footsteps dancing closer and

closer to the cabinet. A gust of wind on her face meant that the lion had just swept past her. It would be opening its mouth, it would be rising over the cabinet, ready to devour, ready to swallow the ghost back into the darkness whence it came--

There was a shriek and a thud. Simon said,

"Eh, si gina lai!"

Jia Qi's eyes snapped open just in time for her to see the cabinet jump a whole two inches off the ground. It resettled on the ground with a thump that she felt in her feet. The lion was gaping, Simon goggling through the open mouth. The lion's back deflated as Tiong Han crawled out from under the train to stare at what had come out of the cabinet.

It was indeed a child. A curly-haired black boy, about ten years old. He blinked sleepily and did not seem to know they were there at first. Then he opened his eyes wide.

"Where did *you* come from?" he said.

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George had not heard of Malaysia. They drew him a map by committee:

"Is Laos between Myanmar and Vietnam? It is, right?" said Tiong Han.

"I don't think Hong Kong is so high up," said Coco, leaning over his shoulder.

"And your proportions are all wrong! Singapore's not bigger than Hong Kong!"

"In ego it is," said Tiong Han, who was from Johor.

"See," said Simon to George. "It's on the end of Asia. Half is a peninsula. The other half is stuck to Indonesia."

The little boy bent his head over the map. It was touching to see how seriously he studied the scrawled picture. Tiong Han was studying architecture but that was apparently no guarantee of his draughtsmanship.

"The Golden Khersonese," said George softly.

"No, no, Ma-lay-sia," said Tiong Han.

"Where are you from, George?" said Jia Qi.

"I would say nineteenth century, going from the clothes," said Coco. "Or maybe late 1700s. I'm not very good at telling this kind of thing."

"I was brought to this country when I was a little boy," said George. "My father was a king in Africa, but he lost his kingdom to the British soldiers. He gave me to one of the soldiers so that I would be safe, and so I could be educated, and learn to be a Christian. A captain of the Navy brought me to England with him when he returned home."

He recited this as if it were a story he had heard many times.

"Oh," said Simon. "So you're adopted by a British?"

George's forehead wrinkled.

"Your new mother and father are English now?" said Coco.

"I am sorry. I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said George.

"Who do you live with, George?" said Jia Qi.

The child brightened, looking relieved to be asked a question he could answer.

"When I was alive, I lived with my master, Captain Joseph Pennywhite, and my mistress, his wife," he said. "Now I am dead, I live there."

He pointed.

They stared at the cabinet. George was gazing at the map.

"Are you all from this ... Malaysia?" he said.

"Almost," said Simon. "Me, Tiong Han, and Jia Qi are. Alec is from Hong Kong and Coco is from here."

"My parents are from Hong Kong," said Coco. "But all my friends are Malaysian. Alec and I are like honorary Malaysians."

"And you are all together," said George.

"Yah," said Simon. "The lion dance troupe has always been like that. We tried to diversify but the ang moh--I mean, the Westerners don't really feel so comfortable. Because usually when a Westerner comes to a training session, he ends up being the only one. It's a bit lonely for them."

George was fiddling with the edge of the paper they'd drawn the map on. He didn't say anything, but Jia Qi felt she could see right through his head into his thoughts.

She touched his shoulder.

"Do you like fireworks?" she said.

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Alec let George hold the stick to which they'd tied a head of cabbage. They were the only ones staying in the hotel room: the others trooped down the stairs, Coco holding the lion's head and Simon and Tiong Han carrying the drum. Their room overlooked the courtyard where the performance was to take place. The partygoers were already spilling out of the dining room, bringing the smell of alcohol and food with them into the cold night air.

Past the courtyard were fields of grass as far as the eye could see, no buildings to interrupt the flat, rolling vastness. In the daytime it would have been pretty; at night, there was something frightening about those looming fields.

The sky in the countryside seemed larger than it was in town. Jia Qi craned her head, shivering as the air hit her bare neck. Above her a handful of stars glowed white around a yellow moon.

"I thought there's more stars in the country," said Jia Qi.

"England's too cloudy," said Coco. She rapped the side of the drum. The lion's head snapped up. It blinked. The dance was on.

Their audience seemed eager to be pleased--Jia Qi had never felt more grateful for the existence of alcohol--but she could still sense Coco tensing as they reached the denouement. A stick emerged from one of the windows and the cabbage dropped down. It bounced a few times as George waggled the stick to make sure everyone in the audience had noticed it.

The lion dropped into a crouch, shaking its behind in anticipation.

Why did lions like eating cabbage? Perhaps, being magical creatures, they could taste metaphor, and eating cabbage was like having the golden flavour of prosperity lying on their tongue. Lions were also fond of wine, but this was an inclination that did not require explanation.

Jia Qi wimped out and closed her eyes at the pivotal moment. When she opened them the lion was standing upright, the cabbage right next to its gaping maw. Inside the lion, Simon had managed to climb onto Tiong Han's shoulders.

The audience broke out into impressed applause. Jia Qi clanged as hard as she could, her hands aching from clutching the cymbals too hard. The lion wobbled--*please don't let Tiong Han lose his grip, don't let Simon slip*--the lion's head lunged forward, the cabbage vanished, and the tower of lion collapsed, but in a way that almost looked purposeful. The next moment the lion was itself again, Simon and Tiong Han back in control.

The lion staggered. The cabbage was not suiting its stomach. Why did lions have such delicate stomachs? Jia Qi understood the artistic usefulness of a storytelling device that enabled things to be thrown out of the lion's mouth to an appreciative

crowd, but it still seemed funny to her that so many lion dance routines revolved around vomit.

Traditionally one showered the audience with shredded greens, indicating that it was now covered with prosperity, but there was a risk with this audience that it might just think it had been covered with cabbage. The troupe had therefore come up with an alternative. Jia Qi had suggested it, and she swelled with pride as the gold chocolate coins filled the air, accompanied by the laughter and cheering of the crowd.

"Wah, close one," said Tiong Han afterwards. "Simon almost fell, man. I thought *habislah*, sure die already."

"I don't think the audience noticed," said Jia Qi.

Alec dismissed the audience with a wave of his hand. "The audience doesn't know how to see what's right or what's wrong. We are the ones who know whether it was good or not," he said. "What did you think, George?"

George's eyes were shining.

"It was the most wonderful thing I have ever seen," he said.

"George is your number one fan," said Coco to Simon.

"You were also very good," Simon told him solemnly.

"Yah, good cabbage-holding," said Tiong Han. George glowed.

"It wasn't bad lah," Alec conceded. "Apart from the slip, not bad. Eh, did you keep any of those chocolate coins?"

They ate the chocolate coins while watching the fireworks. George was enthralled--he barely glanced at the chocolate when it was offered.

"Thank you, but I don't do that anymore," he said.

Jia Qi withdrew into her hoodie, crimping her sleeves closed with her fingers so the air would not come in.

"Are you cold?" whispered George. Jia Qi nodded. "Here, take my hand."

"Oh," said Jia Qi. "You're so warm!"

George was watching the sky. Red sparks bloomed against the clouds, were reflected in his enchanted eyes.

"It's always been warm," he said. "Since I died."

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They were packing away the equipment when Jia Qi said, "What are we going to do about George?"

The troupe stopped and looked at one another.

"We can't take him away from here," said Coco. "Ghosts have to stay with the object they're haunting."

"Then?" said Jia Qi. Her chest felt tight. "We just leave him here, is it? Never mind that this small kid is lonely. It's none of our business also."

No response, though everyone looked uncomfortable. Jia Qi ploughed on. "Like that we might as well finish the job. Go back to the room and make sure the lion eats him this time. Otherwise we've just left it dangling."

"Oh, we can't do that," Coco exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"*You* said they all are not meant to be here," said Jia Qi. She hardly recognised her own voice. "At least if the lion eats him then he's free. Maybe he can go to heaven, or be reborn, or--"

"Jia Qi, spirits don't go free after they get eaten," said Alec.

"Oh," said Jia Qi, taken aback. "What happens to them?"

"What d'you think happens after a lion eats you?" said Tiong Han.

"Digested," said Simon briefly.

"Yes," said Coco. She seemed embarrassed. "Sorry, Jia Qi, I should have explained that to you in the beginning. We're not priests. We're just an extermination service."

"Doesn't seem so right to eat George," said Simon. "He's smaller than my little brother also."

"But if we all leave him stuck here, what we gonna tell Mr. Yu?" said Jia Qi. From Tiong Han's face it was clear he had been hoping to avoid this question.

"I thought if we just left, maybe he won't notice," he ventured.

Coco rounded on him. "Tiong Han! He paid us an extra £100 for the ghostbusting! You weren't going to tell him we didn't do it?"

"OK, OK, fine," said Tiong Han. He looked wistful: their lion head was becoming somewhat tattered in its old age, and he'd been eyeing new ones on the Internet. "But you tell him, can or not? I feel shy. They gave us free dinner some more."

"I will tell him," said Jia Qi.

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Mr. Yu was not pleased. "Lion dance is supposed to get rid of evil spirits. Why should I hire you if you're not going to bring good luck?"

"He's nine or ten only," said Simon. "He can't be an evil spirit at that age, right? Naughty at the very most."

"Mr. Yu, the ghost is a child," said Jia Qi. "How is he going to bring bad luck?"

"Yah, he can't even drive," said Tiong Han helpfully.

"Old or young, ghosts are bad for business," said Mr. Yu. "You can't have this kind of supernatural thing in the hospitality industry. People go to hotels to relax, not to pretend they are in a horror movie. I'll have to get a priest in--or burn the cabinet--"

A cry of protest rose from the troupe.

"You can't do that!" said Coco.

"Mr. Yu," said Jia Qi. "Give us the cabinet. We'll get rid of it for you."

"We will?" said Tiong Han.

Mr. Yu hesitated. "What will I tell Nick?"

"Tell him we stole it," said Jia Qi recklessly.

"Oh no, don't say that," said Tiong Han. "Say you lost it."

"We can't take the cabinet," whispered Alec. "Where are we going to keep it?"

Jia Qi left the others to argue it out between themselves. She had more important things to worry about.

The air in the hotel room was cold. The lights took a while to brighten after she flipped the switch, and in their dim glow the cabinet looked like nothing more than a dead piece of wood. Maybe George wasn't there anymore?

But when Jia Qi knelt down and asked her question, she felt the room grow warm. A breath of humid air brushed her cheek. George was sitting on the floor next to her.

"Could I help with the dance again? If I came with you?" he said. "Tiong Han said I held the cabbage well."

"Of course. You can do other things also if you like," said Jia Qi. "We'll teach you how to play the cymbals. And--" George was probably too small to be the lion. "And you can learn how to be the Buddha. You'll be the youngest member of the troupe ever."

"Would I be a member of the troupe?" said George, wide-eyed.

"You won't be on the mailing list," said Jia Qi. "But yah. Only if you want lah."

"Oh *yes*," said George.

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There wasn't any space left in the back of the van, so they put the cabinet on the back seat. Jia Qi sat next to it, promising to make sure it didn't fall over. The rest of the troupe sat in the front and talked all the way back, but in the back it was quiet and stiflingly warm. Jia Qi felt herself blinking, her eyelids trying to gum her eyes shut.

The drive back seemed longer than the drive to the hotel had been. They went deeper and deeper into the darkness, hedges rising up outside the window and falling away, the country a slumbering mystery behind them. Jia Qi stretched out an arm across the front of the cabinet. It would wake her up if it so much as wobbled. She could let herself drift.

As sleep veiled her eyes, she felt a small warm hand grasp hers. She slept and dreamt of sunshine; she dreamt of home.

Appeared in Strange Horizons, March 2011.

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