



MAGIC

FORTY-EIGHT TREES AND THE CIRCUIT COMPLETE

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

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FOUR	Priya Nair
FIVE	Margot Vail
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Chapter

ONE

written by jmarsh

The orchard grew on land that had once been a monastery, though no one alive could say which order had tended it, nor why the brothers had vanished so completely that even their graves refused to yield names. The trees they had planted, however, endured: forty-seven pear trees arranged in a pattern that suggested either devotion or madness, their trunks twisted into shapes that called to mind genuflection, supplication, the attitudes of prayer made permanent in bark and heartwood. In autumn, when the fruit hung heavy and the wasps grew drunk on fallen sweetness, you could stand at the orchard's heart and feel the geometry of the place press against your ribs, as though the very air had been measured and found to contain one breath too many. Miren knew this because she had counted them, the breaths, on the night she first came to the house. Seventeen inhalations between the iron gate and the kitchen door, each one tasting of fermenting pear and something older, something that made her teeth ache as though she had bitten down on silver. The estate agent had apologized for the smell, blamed it on the season, on the unpredictable rot that came with wet Septembers. But Miren, who had grown up in a house where the walls remembered every slight and the floorboards kept accounts of ancient debts, recognized the scent for what it was: the exhalation of a place that had learned to breathe without lungs, to digest time itself until past and

present existed in the same fermenting slurry. The house squatted at the orchard's eastern edge, a structure of gray stone and suspicious proportions. Its windows numbered thirteen on the ground floor, twelve above, and none of them aligned with their neighbors in any way that suggested a builder's level or a plumb line. Instead, they peered out at angles that made Miren think of eyes following movement in peripheral vision, tracking something that skittered always just beyond the frame of direct sight. Inside, the rooms connected in sequences that defied the house's exterior dimensions: the library opened onto the morning room, which led to the scullery, which somehow doubled back to the library through a door Miren could have sworn had not existed during her first circuit of the ground floor. She had bought the place anyway, because it was cheap and because the lawyer handling the estate had seemed so desperately eager to close the transaction that he had dropped the price twice before she could voice her first question. Also because of the trees. Because she had stood among them at dusk on her initial viewing, had watched the shadows pool between their roots like something liquid and alive, and had felt for the first time in six years that she was being seen by something that did not immediately look away in disappointment. The previous owner, she learned from a water-damaged journal discovered behind the kitchen chimney breast, had been a woman named Hester Crale, who had inherited the property from an aunt, who had inherited it from a cousin, who had received it as settlement for a breach-of-promise suit in 1887. The journal's entries grew increasingly difficult to read as they progressed, not because the handwriting deteriorated but because the words themselves seemed to resist comprehension, arranging themselves into sentences that slipped away from meaning even as Miren's eyes moved across them. The final entry, dated three months before Hester's death, read simply: They are not pears. They have never been pears. But they must be picked when they call, and they are calling now. On Miren's seventh night in the house, she woke to the sound of something moving through the orchard, a rustling that suggested neither wind nor animal but some third

category of motion that her sleeping mind had no language to accommodate. When she went to the window, she saw nothing but moonlight caught in the branches, illuminating the fruit that hung there, bulbous and pale, each one wearing a sheen of moisture that caught the light like a cataracted eye. In the morning, she counted the trees again. There were forty-eight.

Chapter

TWO

written by wordsbylena

Miren made three separate counts before breakfast, approaching from different angles to account for optical doubling or blind spots caused by trunk overlap. The result remained consistent. Forty-eight trees. She fetched the surveyor's map from the library desk, unrolled it across the kitchen table, and studied the orchard plot as originally platted. The ink showed forty-seven symbols, each one marking a tree's position with coordinates referenced to the property's northeast corner. Someone, possibly Hester, had annotated the map in pencil: measurements between trees, notations about fruit yield per season, cryptic abbreviations that might have indicated pruning schedules or disease susceptibility. The handwriting matched samples from the water-damaged journal. Miren returned to the orchard with the map, a measuring tape, and the journal. She began at the iron gate, counting rows. Seven trees deep, running east to west. She paced the width: seven trees again, with the rows offset to form interlocking diagonals. Seven times seven. That made forty-nine positions, but three spots showed clear gaps where no tree grew, where the grass grew thick and undisturbed. Forty-six visible trees, then, if she trusted the gaps. But she had counted forty-eight this morning. The math refused to reconcile. She walked the perimeter again, this time touching each trunk. Her fingers came away sticky with sap that smelled wrong, more like

rendered fat than tree resin. At tree thirty-two, her count stalled. The trunk she was touching had split at some point in its history, creating a Y-shaped division three feet above the ground. Both stems had matured into full trunks, each bearing fruit. The surveyor's map showed only one symbol at this location. Question one: did a bifurcated tree count as one tree or two? Miren measured the split. The division occurred fourteen inches above the root crown. She examined where the two trunks separated and found the wound had healed over with bark that formed a distinctive whorl pattern, almost like a closed eyelid. When she pressed her palm flat against it, she felt warmth that could not be explained by absorbed sunlight. The temperature differential measured three degrees higher than the surrounding bark. She marked the location in the journal's only remaining blank page: Tree 32, bifurcation at 14", anomalous heat signature. Then she continued her count. At tree thirty-nine, she found another anomaly. This trunk grew straight and unremarkable until approximately six feet up, where a second, smaller pear tree appeared to be growing from the main trunk itself. Not a branch, but a complete secondary tree with its own bark pattern, its own root-like structures that had burrowed into the host trunk. A parasite, perhaps, or some variety of grafted mutation. The surveyor's map showed only one symbol here as well. Miren added this to her notes. Her count now read forty-seven trees, with two disputed instances. She checked each remaining tree with increased scrutiny. At the orchard's center, where the geometry created that rib-pressing sensation she had felt on her first visit, she found the forty-eighth. It was small, barely five feet tall, and it had not been present during her initial viewing. She was certain of this. She had stood in this exact spot, had felt the spatial wrongness, had noted the symmetrical distribution of mature trees around an empty center point. The gap had been part of the design, deliberate as a missing tooth. This new tree had no business existing. Its bark was smooth, pale as Hester's described moisture-sheened fruit. No tool marks suggested recent planting. No disturbed earth surrounded its base. It simply stood there, as though it had grown overnight from seed

to sapling, bypassing the decades required for such development. Miren knelt beside it. The tree had seventeen visible leaves. No fruit yet, but flower buds clustered at the branch tips, swollen and ready to open despite the season being entirely wrong for blossoming. She touched one bud and felt it pulse beneath her fingertip, a rhythm that matched her own heartbeat. The journal's final entry cycled through her mind: They must be picked when they call. This tree was calling. She could feel it in her molars, in the small bones of her inner ear. A frequency just below hearing, just above silence. The question was whether she would answer.

Chapter

THREE

written by inkwell_amy

Miren pulled her hand back. The bud's pulse stopped. She stood and walked sixteen paces to the kitchen door, counted them deliberately to break whatever frequency had lodged in her skull. Inside, she boiled water. Made tea she didn't drink. The journal lay open on the table where she'd left it, Hester's final words still legible despite the water damage that had blurred everything else into illegibility. They must be picked when they call. Miren flipped back through the surviving pages. Most entries documented ordinary maintenance: pruning schedules, pest treatments, harvest dates. But scattered throughout were other observations, fragments that suggested Hester had been documenting something else entirely. March 14: Three trees did not wake with the others. Sap cold. Fruit from last season still hanging, mummified but intact. June 2: The geometry shifted again. Northwest corner now requires eighteen steps to traverse. Was sixteen yesterday. Measured twice. September 8: Picked the calling fruit. Fed it to the compost. Three days of fever followed. Note: the price increases with resistance. That last line had been underscored three times, hard enough that the pencil had torn the paper. Miren found a flashlight and returned to the orchard. The new tree stood exactly where she'd left it, which should not have felt like an achievement but somehow did. She examined the ground around its base with the flashlight's beam. No seam in the earth,

no transplant scar. The grass grew up to the trunk without interruption. She touched the bark. Still warm. The pulse returned immediately, syncing to her own rhythm again within three beats. "No," she said aloud. The pulse stuttered. Stopped. Started again, faster now, insistent. Miren walked the perimeter of the mature trees, touching each trunk briefly, testing for that same warmth. Nothing. All of them registered normal temperature, unremarkable. She returned to the center tree and pressed both palms flat against it. The pulse became a vibration that traveled up her arms. Her vision doubled, then resolved into something sharper than normal sight. She could see the network of roots beneath the grass now, spreading outward in patterns that connected every tree to every other tree. Not random growth but deliberate architecture, nodes and junctions arranged in specific relationships. The forty-seven mature trees formed a circuit. The new tree at the center completed it. Miren jerked her hands away. Her vision returned to normal. She counted her breaths: four inhales before her heartbeat steadied. The flower buds on the new tree had opened while she'd been touching it. Five pale blossoms, each one releasing a scent that made her think of Hester's journal, of paper dissolving into pulp, meaning breaking down into component fibers. She leaned close without touching and noticed each blossom had a dark center, almost black, that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. One blossom trembled despite the still air. The dark center split. Something emerged: a seed, already germinating, sending out a pale thread-like root that reached toward the ground. Miren stepped back three paces and watched. The seed dropped from the blossom, hit the grass, and burrowed into the earth within seconds. The grass didn't part to accommodate it. The seed simply passed through as if the ground offered no resistance. She marked the spot with a stick. Checked her watch: 9:47 AM. Went inside and set a timer for one hour. In the library, she found what the estate agent had dismissively called "the previous owner's collection of botanical nonsense." Seventeen leather-bound volumes, unlabeled spines, shelved according to some organizational principle Miren couldn't decipher. She pulled the

seventh volume because seven was the orchard's structural number, the dimension that kept repeating. Seven by seven. Forty-nine positions minus three gaps. The book opened to a hand-drawn diagram: a human figure, gender indeterminate, surrounded by forty-seven circles arranged in the same pattern as the orchard trees. The center of the figure's chest contained a forty-eighth circle, drawn in red ink. Lines connected each outer circle to the center, and beneath the diagram, a single sentence in Hester's handwriting: The orchard requires a heart. Location determines function. Choose your position carefully. The timer went off. Miren returned to the marked spot. A sapling stood there now, three feet tall, leaves unfurling in real-time. She could see them growing, expanding, the way time-lapse photography reveals motion too slow for normal perception. This one had fruit already: a single pear, fully formed, hanging from a branch that hadn't existed ninety seconds ago. The pear was the exact size and shape of a human heart.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Priya Nair

Miren picked up the stick she'd used as a marker and poked the pear. It swayed. Didn't explode, didn't bleed, didn't do any of the dramatically horrible things her brain had helpfully suggested it might do. "Well," she said to the sapling. "This is going great." The pear swayed again, though the stick was no longer touching it. She went back inside and made a sandwich. Turkey, swiss, mustard that had probably expired but hadn't killed her yet. She ate it standing at the kitchen window, watching the sapling. It had grown another six inches. The pear hung lower now, heavier, pulling the branch into a bow. The sandwich tasted like nothing. She made herself finish it anyway, a small act of defiance against whatever this situation was trying to become. When she returned to the orchard, the sapling had company. Nell stood beside it, one hand extended toward the fruit but not quite touching. She wore a canvas jacket with mud on the elbows and her gray hair in a braid that had started coming undone hours ago. "You're on my property," Miren said. "Your property has roots under my garden shed," Nell replied without turning around. "We're neighbors. I brought you a casserole three days ago. You didn't answer the door." "I was out." "You were in the orchard. I saw you from my kitchen window." Nell finally looked at her. "You've been in the orchard almost constantly since you moved in. Very dedicated to your landscaping." "It's an interesting orchard."

"That's one word for it." Nell's attention returned to the pear. "How long has this one been here?" "Two hours. Maybe three." "And you haven't picked it yet." "I'm still deciding whether that's a good idea." Nell laughed, a short bark of sound without much humor in it. "Whether it's a good idea. That's rich. How long have you been living in Hester's house? A week?" "Eight days." "Eight days and you're already growing them." Nell pulled her hand back, tucked it into her jacket pocket. "Took me three years before the orchard even acknowledged I existed. Hester lasted six months." Miren felt something cold settle in her chest. "What do you mean, lasted?" "I mean she's dead. I mean the orchard takes payment for certain services, and sometimes the price is steeper than you planned on paying." Nell finally stepped away from the sapling, turned to face Miren fully. "I mean you've been touching the trees without knowing the rules, and now the orchard thinks you're volunteering." "Volunteering for what?" "To be the heart." Nell pointed at the pear. "That's an offer. You can accept it or you can refuse it. But you need to decide fast, because once that fruit drops on its own, the decision gets made for you." The pear swayed again. A crack appeared in its skin, dark liquid seeping out. "What happens if I accept?" Miren asked. "You'll be able to hear them. All of them. The trees, the old growth, the things that came before the monastery. You'll understand what they want, what they need. You'll become part of the orchard's nervous system." Nell's expression suggested this was not an endorsement. "Hester could predict weather three weeks out by the time she died. Could taste lies in other people's words. Could see things that hadn't happened yet." "That doesn't sound terrible." "She also couldn't leave the property for more than four hours without hemorrhaging. Had to pick the calling fruit every seventeen days whether she wanted to or not. And toward the end, she started forgetting which thoughts were hers and which belonged to the trees." Nell pulled a folded paper from her pocket, held it out. "She wrote this the day before she died. I found it in her mailbox, addressed to whoever came next." Miren took the paper. Unfolded it. Hester's handwriting, neater than in the journal: The apples

speaking in autumn. The pears speak year-round. Choose which conversation you want to join. Choose carefully. You can't unhear what they tell you. "There are apple trees here?" Miren looked around the orchard. "I've only seen pears." "Not here," Nell said. "But close enough. And they're much better conversationalists." The pear dropped. Hit the grass with a wet sound. The sapling began to wither.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Margot Vail

The sapling collapsed inward, bark peeling like wet paper. Miren watched it fold into itself until only a small depression remained where the roots had been. The pear sat in the grass, still leaking. The liquid was clear, not dark. She'd been wrong about that from a distance. "It's not over," Nell said. "The offer stands until the fruit rots. Usually takes about six hours." Miren knelt beside it. Up close, the pear looked less like a heart and more like a pear that had been grown with terrible intention. The skin had the right texture. The stem attached at the correct angle. But the weight was wrong, too heavy, and the smell was human somehow. Sweat and copper. "What happens if I refuse?" "Then you're just someone who lives in a house next to an orchard." Nell adjusted her braid, pulling strands back into place. "You can sell the property. Move away. The trees will find someone else eventually. They always do." "But you're still here." "I made a different choice." Nell's hand went to her jacket pocket, where the paper had been. "The apple trees don't require a heart. They just require attention. Listening. It's a smaller contract." "Show me." Nell studied her for three seconds. "You haven't touched any of the pear trees since the center one?" "Not since it started pulsing." "Good. Don't. If you're coming with me, we go now, before you get curious." Nell started walking toward the property's western edge, where the iron fence marked the boundary. "And don't bring the pear."

Miren stood. Followed. Behind them, the pear continued leaking into the grass. She didn't look back. The fence had a gate she hadn't noticed before, hidden behind two mature pear trees whose branches had grown together overhead. Nell opened it without a key. The hinges made no sound. Beyond the fence, the landscape changed. Different soil, darker. Different grass, thicker. And trees that were absolutely not pears. Seven apple trees, arranged in a single line. Old growth, bark deeply furrowed, branches spreading in patterns that suggested they'd been pruned by someone who understood structure. The apples hung red and small, not the commercial varieties bred for size. These looked like something that had been growing since before anyone cared about yield. "They only speak in autumn," Nell said. "We're at the tail end of the season. Another week and they'll go quiet until next year." "What do they say?" "Different things to different people." Nell walked to the third tree, placed her palm against the trunk. Nothing dramatic happened. No pulse, no heat, no visions of root networks. She just stood there, patient. Then her expression shifted. She was listening to something. "They say you've been counting trees," Nell said. "They want to know if you've noticed the pattern yet." "What pattern?" "The pear orchard grows toward something. Every year, one more tree. Hester's records go back seventeen years. When she inherited the property, there were thirty-one pear trees. Now there are forty-eight, if you count the new one." "Forty-seven," Miren said. "The center tree already died." "No. It returned to the circuit. The roots are still there." Nell removed her hand from the apple tree. "The pear trees are building something. The apple trees say it'll be finished when there are fifty-two. That's when the geometry completes." "Completes into what?" "They don't know. Or they won't say. Apple trees are honest but not comprehensive." Nell walked to the fourth tree. "You can talk to them yourself if you want. No contract required. Just put your hand on the bark and wait." Miren approached the tree. The bark felt like bark. Rough, cool, slightly damp from morning condensation. She waited. At first, nothing. Then a sensation like someone turning their attention toward you in a dark

room. Presence without image. Weight without pressure. The tree spoke, but not in words. In knowledge that simply appeared, already understood. The pear orchard had been forty-seven trees for three years. Something had prevented the forty-eighth from taking root. Hester's refusal, or her fear, or her body failing before the cycle completed. Now the forty-eighth existed. Growth had resumed. Four more trees. Then the geometry would close. "What happens when it closes?" Miren said aloud. The apple tree didn't answer. That question exceeded its willingness to share.

Chapter

SIX

written by Sammy Hall

Miren kept her hand on the bark and tried a different question. "What was here before the monastery?" The apple tree considered this. Or maybe it was checking with its neighbors, some silent consultation happening through roots she couldn't see. The knowing that came back was fragmented. Images, not explanations. Stone arranged in circles. People in robes that weren't monk robes, older style, wrong century. Something about measurement. Something about binding. "That's not helpful," she said. The presence withdrew slightly, and she got the distinct impression she'd been rude. Nell was watching her from over by the fifth tree. "They're not Google. You have to work with what they give you." "What they're giving me is a headache." Miren pulled her hand back. The knowing evaporated immediately, leaving only normal thoughts. "Why do the apple trees even care what happens with the pears?" "Same soil. Shared water table. Whatever the pear orchard is building, it's happening underground too." Nell walked back toward the gate. "The apple trees don't want the geometry to complete any more than I do. But they can't stop it. They're observers, not participants." "And you? What are you?" "Someone who moved here thinking she'd retire somewhere quiet." Nell held the gate open. "Come on. The pear is probably half-rotted by now. You need to see what happens when the offer expires." They walked back through. The pear sat in the grass

where it had fallen, except it hadn't rotted at all. It looked exactly the same. Still leaking clear fluid. Still too heavy. Still smelling like human fear. "That's not normal," Nell said. "None of this is normal." "No, I mean that's not what happened with Hester's offer. Hers rotted in four hours." Nell crouched beside it, not touching. "This one's waiting for you specifically." Miren checked her watch. Five hours since the sapling had grown. The sun was starting its decline toward the roofline. In the orchard proper, the mature pear trees cast long shadows that didn't quite align with the light source. "What did Hester do?" she asked. "Before she died. What was the last thing?" "Picked a calling fruit. Fed it to the compost, same as she always did." Nell stood up, brushed grass off her knees. "Except that time, something in the compost fed back. She was dead within six hours. The doctor said heart failure, but her heart was fine. It had just stopped because it forgot how to beat." The pear pulsed once. Small movement, easy to miss. Miren felt an answering pulse in her own chest. "You felt that," Nell said. It wasn't a question. "I'm not touching it." "You don't have to. It's already connected to you. The moment you touched the center tree, you became part of the circuit." Nell looked at the house, the orchard, the fence line. Calculating something. "Okay. New plan. You're coming to stay with me tonight." "I can't just leave." "You can and you will. The orchard does most of its persuading at night. You'll sleep in my spare room, and tomorrow we figure out how to sever the connection before it solidifies." "You know how to do that?" "No. But the apple trees might, and they're more talkative in the morning." Nell started walking toward the gate again, clearly expecting Miren to follow. "Pack light. Toothbrush, clean shirt. Nothing from the library. Hester's books have opinions, and they'll argue with you while you're trying to sleep." Miren looked at the pear. At the house beyond it. At the forty-seven trees arranged in their geometry of devotion or madness. The last light was hitting the windows at angles that made them look even more misaligned than usual. Thirteen on the ground floor. She'd counted them. "I need to lock the doors," she said. "The doors don't lock. Not really. The house opens what it wants

opened." But Nell stopped walking. "Five minutes. That's all you get. Any longer and you'll start hearing them again." Miren went inside. She did not pack a toothbrush. Instead, she grabbed Hester's journal and the seventh leather volume from the library. Stuffed them both into a canvas bag she found hanging by the kitchen door. When she came back out, Nell was standing exactly where she'd been, and the pear was gone. The grass where it had been was blackened. Scorched. Still smoking slightly. "Well," Nell said. "That's new."

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sasha Loomis

Miren knelt by the scorch mark. The grass wasn't just blackened, it had crystallized, each blade transformed into something brittle and glass-like. When she touched one, it chimed. "Don't," Nell said, but Miren had already pressed her palm flat against the burned circle. The knowing came back, different from the apple trees. This was the pear orchard speaking, and it spoke in temperatures. She understood, suddenly, that the offer hadn't expired. It had been accepted by someone else. Something else. The space where the fruit had been. "We need to leave," Nell said. She had Miren's elbow, pulling her up. Miren's hand came away clean. No ash, no residue. The canvas bag with Hester's books weighed nothing, then weighed everything. She couldn't tell which was true. Both, maybe. They walked through the gate into apple tree territory. The sun had dropped below the house now. Nell's property sat adjacent, a small cottage with blue shutters and a garden that looked aggressively normal. Tomato cages, herb boxes, a birdbath. Things that belonged in retirement brochures. Inside, Nell turned on every light. The spare room had a single bed with a quilt that depicted a lighthouse, which Miren found absurdly comforting. She set the canvas bag on the floor. "Can I see the journal?" Nell asked from the doorway. Miren handed it over. Nell flipped through the water-damaged pages with practiced efficiency, like she'd done this before. Probably had. How

many times had she stood in Hester's kitchen, reading these same entries? "Here." Nell stopped on a page near the middle. "This entry. June sixteenth. Hester wrote about a failed offer. Someone refused, and the fruit burned itself out exactly like what we just saw." Miren read over her shoulder. The entry was short: The fruit burned. I thought that meant refusal had consequences only for the fruit. Wrong. The trees took something anyway. My left eye sees two minutes into the past now. Same view, different time. I keep tripping over furniture that's moved. "That happened three years ago," Nell said. "Two weeks later, Hester stopped answering her door. When I finally went in, she'd taped over all the mirrors and was wearing an eyepatch. Said her vision had stabilized but only if she kept that eye closed." The lighthouse quilt had a pattern that repeated seventeen times around the border. Miren counted without meaning to. "What did the trees take from you?" she asked. Nell closed the journal. "Nothing yet. Apple trees don't take. They trade. I give them attention, they give me information. It's a reasonable arrangement." "But you said you made a choice." "I chose not to make Hester's choice." Nell sat on the bed, which creaked. The cottage was old enough for honest sounds. "The pear orchard wanted me first. I lived here before Hester arrived. The trees called for months. I said no every single time." "And?" "And they stopped calling. Moved on to Hester. She'd just lost her husband. Grief makes you susceptible to offers." Nell's hands were very still in her lap. "Apple trees tell me she would have lived if she'd picked the fruit three days earlier. But she waited. Tried to outlast the calling. The delay killed her." Through the window, Miren could see the fence line. Beyond it, the pear orchard. The trees were darker shapes against the last blue of evening. She counted them without meaning to. Got to thirty-nine before Nell spoke again. "Your hand is shaking." It was. Miren shoved both hands in her pockets. The right one found something cold and smooth. She pulled it out. A seed. Pale, oblong, slightly warm despite feeling cold. It hadn't been in her pocket when she'd left the house. "That's not possible," Nell said, but she was already standing, already backing toward the door. "You didn't

touch the fruit. I watched you. You didn't touch it." The seed pulsed once in Miren's palm. She felt an answering rhythm in her chest, her throat, her left eye. Her left eye. Which now saw the spare room as it had been two minutes ago: empty, Nell still in the kitchen, the canvas bag unopened on the floor. "Oh," Miren said. Her vision doubled, then tripled. Past, present, something that might have been future. "The trees didn't take. They traded." The seed was growing roots through her skin.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by rpenguin

This is the end.

Finished on 29 April 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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