



To Labor for the Hive

A beekeeper finds a new sense of purpose and community after helping to develop a warning system for floods.

By Jamie Liu

Illustrations by Stefan Grosse Halbuer

Huaxin always took pride in telling people she met her partner while doing tai chi in the park. Every other young person nowadays found their relationships through AI matchmaking services or VR mixers. But Huaxin was old-fashioned.

She'd joined the crew of elders practicing, their moves fluid as the stream that ran by the village. She'd spotted him then, the only other face as young as hers: a thin man with glasses, thick curls of hair, and a gentle smile. Naturally, they'd felt drawn to each other, and Huaxin struck up a conversation.

After that, they met up for tea following each tai chi session. He was a lot like Huaxin: opinionated, particular, averse to vulnerability. He was also impulsive. He picked up new topics easily, researched them with relish, constantly talked to her about how the world was changing.

One day he led her back to the park and removed a ring from his pocket. It was no diamond, but Huaxin still gasped when she saw it: a smooth stone, well-worn like a comforting friend. "The world may be changing," he said with a cheeky grin, "but I want you to be my constant."

He moved in with her and she introduced him to her livelihood: beehousing. They shared bowls of noodles, talked about having children, and continued to practice tai chi, nurturing their slowly aging bodies.

And then, nine years later, he left her.



“And why do you need this information again?” Huaxin snapped into the phone.

“Science,” the person on the other end said. This was the third time Huaxin had asked, and now it seemed like the man was going for the simplest explanation possible. “It’ll provide useful data to prevent natural disasters. We know your region is highly flood prone. This will help you prepare for that.”

Huaxin chewed her lip. Did they know how her parents had died? If so, of course they’d come running to her. “And you’re saying the bees will provide this data?”

“Yes. Just click on the link I sent you. Again, I’d like to offer our services to install digital monitoring systems in the hives. It’ll be completely free and will make it easier —”

“No thanks,” Huaxin said, hanging up. On her computer, she clicked on the unread message.

They wanted her to download an app. Didn’t she have enough shit clogging up her phone? Wasn’t there an option to just send an email with whatever observations they wanted her to make? She clicked the “Support” button and typed: *i don’t want your fucking app*

Huaxin’s phone buzzed. She’d received a text.

Support:
hey there, can you explain your dilemma to me?

Huaxin eyed the screen in suspicion. Was this an automated response? Or worse, AI? She didn’t want to talk to a robot.

Huaxin:
are you a human?

Support:
yes, i am.

Huaxin:
who are you?

Support:
i’m a scientist with sichuan resilient. i help implement the nature-based early warning system we’ve partnered with the beijing office of meteorology on. is that what you’re asking about today?

Huaxin:
i guess

Support:
may i ask why you don't want to download our app?

Huaxin:
too many apps on my phone

Support:
i understand. do you prefer another method of reporting data?

Huaxin:
can i just email it to someone

Support:
you can email it to me.

The scientist sent Huaxin an email address, and Huaxin breathed a sigh of relief.

Huaxin:
thanks

Huaxin:
what's your name

Support:
my name is anshui. you are huaxin lin, correct?

Huaxin:
mhm

Huaxin:
so the guy on the phone said i'll get paid for this?

Support:
yes. think of it like a part-time job. we know it takes time out of your day to record these observations and send them to us, so we want to make sure you're compensated.

Huaxin:
i still don't know how bees will help prevent flooding

Support:
several studies show that some species of animals, including bees, exhibit specific behaviors prior to an extreme weather event. this program is two-fold: by telling us how the bees are behaving, we can predict if something like a flood is going to happen, and we can distribute emergency messaging to your region. on the research side, if we collect enough data that connects certain bee behavior to weather events, we'll have more ways of predicting disasters in the future.

Huaxin:
you're telling me you can't predict floods already with your fancy science tools?

Support:

with the unpredictable ways climate events are unfolding, meteorological stations can only do so much. we're testing supplemental methods by using nature-based solutions. nature is very wise; we just have to listen.

Huaxin:

sounds like some hippie bullshit to me

Support:

we're included in that nature. doesn't your body sometimes tell you when it's going to rain?

That was true. If Huaxin didn't smell it in the air, she literally felt it in her bones. She'd brought it up to a doctor once, who told her that sometimes people with joint issues could feel pressure changes in their knees. She didn't like the idea of having weak joints. She was 37, hardly ancient.

Huaxin:

i guess

Support:

if you have any other questions, please let me know.

Support:

have a nice day :)

This person seemed like they had the role of a customer service representative plus IT person. Basically, the worst job ever. She put her phone away and went outside.



It was spring. From her home in the hills, Huaxin could see cracks of color speckling into view as new buds bloomed across the valley. The bees stirred from their slumber, buzzing more than they had in the previous months.

Over the years, Huaxin had departed from her family's traditional beekeeping and veered into beehousing, an emerging practice that was more about providing for bees' needs than managing bees. She still had one Chinese honey bee hive, but she'd also dotted her garden with bee motels, plant matter, and soil mounds to serve as wild bee habitats. Similarly, she'd filled her garden with a diverse mix of native plants: sweetly fragrant lychee and peach trees, traditional Chinese medicine staples like black cardamom and butterfly bush, native pea shrub and milkvetch, and vegetables like sponge gourd and radish.

Other than harvesting honey, Huaxin didn't "keep" any of the bees. Certainly not the wild ones. She provided them shelter and food and they pollinated her plants. The bees were gentle with her. She liked this relationship; it was easy to understand. Give respect and receive respect in return. It wasn't the same with humans.

After collecting data, she sipped homemade jasmine tea with a dollop of honey and took out her phone.

Huaxin:
6am, roughly 50 bees per hive en route to flowers, determined dance, will report on return times in afternoon

Support:
thank you.

Support:
you can send me one report at the end of the day if you prefer, rather than multiple throughout.

Huaxin:
i won't remember all the details if i do that

Huaxin:
would you rather me not text you every hour

Support:
no, this is fine.

Support:
determined dance, i like that.

Huaxin:
thinking of their routes as dances helps me characterize them

Huaxin:
sometimes it's a lion dance, sometimes it's tai chi

Huaxin:
anyways you're right, i don't want to bother you with notifications

Support:
i don't mind. i like the frequent texts, i don't get a lot of messages.

That was ... sad. Or maybe not? Maybe it meant Anshui had a rich social life completely offline. That sounded amazing.

Huaxin:
aren't you texting other bee people

Support:
they're not all beekeepers. and most of them use the app, which automates the data delivery.

Huaxin:
ah so i'm just a high-maintenance bitch

Support:
you like doing things your way. which i admire.

Something tingled in Huaxin's stomach. She bit her lip.

Huaxin:
are you flirting with me

Support:
... no. apologies if it came across that way.

Support:
i can stop if you want.

Support:
texting you things unrelated to the data monitoring, i mean.

Huaxin didn't know what to say, so she stashed her phone.

The rest of the day was like any other, with the addition of her data duties. She tended to her garden. She visited the porch when people rang to buy her products. She made lunch: yellow squash from her garden, stir-fried with fermented black beans and tofu from the weekly market. She texted updates to Anshui, who didn't respond until the end of the day with a "thank you."

Someone knocked on the door. The sun had set by now, so Huaxin already knew who it was. "Hi, Ms. Chen. The usual?"

Ms. Chen gave a curt nod. "And two lychee honey sticks, please. Need something to drown out the medicine tonight."

Huaxin nodded, fetching the jars and sticks. Ms. Chen was her elderly neighbor — well, if one counted a neighbor as someone who lived two hills away. She'd lived a nocturnal life ever since she lost her job decades ago when nationwide protests caused the country to shut down its last coal mines. Their little town had celebrated. Ms. Chen had not. With no family, she'd taken pride in her work and found her purpose lost after that work disappeared. She'd lived in isolation ever since, except to visit town every once in a while to grab groceries, or buy honey from Huaxin.

Huaxin felt a kinship with her.

"Hot today," Ms. Chen said as she took the honey. Their few exchanges of conversation had to do with the weather. As it was with people who never talked to others.

"Yeah."

"I hope it was worth it."

"Sorry?"

Ms. Chen gazed into the distance. "Shutting down the mines. I hope it helped. The heat would be worse, right?"

Oh. She was talking about climate change. Huaxin always avoided the topic with Ms. Chen. It was the global effort to decarbonize that had lost her her job, after all. And yes, shutting down the coal mines was a good thing. But the government had not made sure she'd had another livelihood to jump to after the transition.

Still, it wasn't bitterness in Ms. Chen's voice. Instead there was ... guilt? Regret?

No. Ms. Chen's eyes were watery. She'd been forgotten. Abandoned. She wanted to know her abandonment was worth it. It wasn't the income she would have missed the most; the country's social programs meant no one needed to work to survive. But Huaxin knew that for Ms. Chen, her job had also provided her a sense of routine, of camaraderie. Ms. Chen mourned the loss of that.

"Yes," Huaxin said. "It would be worse."



The next morning, Huaxin woke up feeling empty. She texted Anshui.

Huaxin:
hi

Huaxin:
you can talk to me

Huaxin:
i don't want this to be weird

Support:
ok, thank you.

Support:
sorry again.

Huaxin:
don't apologize

Huaxin:
how did you sleep

Support:
not bad. it was warm but i have good AC. you?

Huaxin:
no good AC but i'm used to the heat

Huaxin:
gonna get started on the bees now, will report in a bit

She went through the motions faster today and poured herself another cup of tea before going back to her phone.

Huaxin:
6:15am bee workday start. lazy bastards. 40 bees per hive, more like tai chi

Support:
the bees deserve to rest too.

Huaxin:
i'm joking, i like bees more than humans

Support:
what's wrong with humans?

Huaxin:
we made the mess that's making you have to do this whole early warning thing, right?

Huaxin:
selfishly polluting and not caring about nature

Support:
we also realized our mistakes and put ourselves on the path to healing the planet. isn't that a good redemption arc?

Huaxin recoiled. Some people didn't deserve a redemption arc. But she couldn't say that. Not good to come off as a bitter divorcee.

Huaxin:
i guess

Support:
such as you. i read your hive setup and it's interesting. one honey bee hive, 3-4 wild bee hives.

Huaxin:
having too many honey bees can actually hurt wild bees. they outcompete them for the same resources

Support:
that's mostly the case with european bees, isn't it? asian honey bees are threatened, even here in china

Huaxin:
yeah and the invasion of european bees are the reason for that lmao

Huaxin:
but wild bees have it worse. people don't care about them because they don't make a marketable product like honey

Huaxin:
wild bees are better at pollinating native plants, but that's a service that goes unnoticed

Huaxin:
ok you're right, i'm biased toward wild bees, what can i say

Support:
you like supporting the underdog, that's a good thing.

Huaxin realized that no one had let her ramble on about bees like that in a long time. Her heart was beating fast from the flurry of typing. Or perhaps there was another reason.

Huaxin:
eh, i'm not the only one beehousing. more people are seeing the benefit of it

Support:
so there are others. humans aren't so bad after all.

Huaxin:
so eager to stifle my inner misanthrope

Huaxin:
but true. at least humans aren't robots

Huaxin:
that AI shit is what's really going to destroy the world

Huaxin:
anyways thanks for listening to me monologue

Support:
anytime. i like hearing your thoughts.

Support:
make sure those bees stay hydrated.



Huaxin hated to admit it, but she was getting horrifically, deliciously addicted to texting Anshui.

Her routine had changed. After her morning data collection, she'd sit outside for a few hours, sipping her tea and texting. She learned more about Anshui's role as a scientist — not that she understood all the technical aspects of it — and she answered Anshui's many questions about bees.

Once, they shared a meal together. At least, they did it the best they could digitally; Huaxin wanted to have a video chat, but Anshui refused. Instead, Huaxin sent Anshui a recipe and they made it individually before eating together. Anshui, who in their words was "vaguely Buddhist," taught Huaxin how they gave thanks for their food: consider the land it grew on, the hands that touched it, the human and nonhuman creatures who helped nurture it to harvest. Think of it as providing sustenance and strength for your body. Now use your newly given energy and put that care back into the world.

Huaxin:
that's hippie as shit

Huaxin:
but i like it

Support:
i thought you might.

Support:
this recipe is really good by the way. you should share it with the center, i'm sure they're always looking for new vegetarian meals with locally grown produce.

Huaxin:
the what

Support:
you haven't been to the community resilience center in your town?

Fifteen minutes later, Huaxin heard a knock on her door. She opened it, and then stared at the young woman who stood on her patio, grinning under a thin layer of sweat. "Hi!" the woman said. "Huaxin? I hear you're overdue for a tour of the center."

"How," Huaxin said, numb.

The woman laughed. "Anshui called me and said you hadn't heard of us. And then they said you're a beehouser, and I was like ohhh, I totally know where she lives, I buy honey from her! I can't believe you've never made it down to the center. My bad for not advertising it better."

Huaxin plastered on a fake smile as the woman talked, all the while discreetly texting.

Huaxin:
what the fuck

Support:
go with her.

"It's only 10 minutes away," the woman said, pointing over her shoulder. Behind her stood a solarbike with a passenger cart attached to the back. "I can give you a ride."

And not have a way to leave early if she didn't like it? "I'll follow you," Huaxin said, grabbing her keys.

They biked down the hill, veering toward a large, elevated building near the edge of the town center. As they parked, Huaxin examined the building in surprise. She'd passed this hundreds of times, but always assumed it was some government office. It looked very boring, nondescript save for the giant gong beside it.

"It's bland, but we have plans to spice it up," the woman, who introduced herself as Min, said. "We've only been running the center for two years. This used to be a utility office, but after they shut down the coal mines, it stood empty."

"Oh, right. That explains the gong," Huaxin said in realization. Back when the mines still ran, the gong rang every morning to signal the start to the workday.

Min nodded. "Yes! Now we use the gong to supplement the early warning messaging, for people who don't have phones. The town agreed to give this whole place to us after communities around here petitioned to repurpose it."

Huaxin hadn't heard of any such petition. Had she isolated herself that much?

Inside, the center felt much cozier. It had a huge open space with tons of tables and couches, kitchens, bathrooms with showers, libraries, private rooms for sleeping or other activities, power stations, a clinic, recreational activities like ping pong, playsets for children, and both an indoor and outdoor garden. It felt like a home but meant for hundreds of people.

"Who lives here?" Huaxin asked, examining the photos pinned to a corkboard.

"Anyone who wants to," Min said. "People who need a temporary place to stay. People who need help. Visitors. Those displaced by — well, anything. We built it initially as a gathering space if another natural disaster happens. Like a flood. That's why the whole thing's elevated. Or a heat wave, since we know AC penetration here is low."

"You don't have to live here to visit, either," another voice said, and Huaxin looked up to see a young woman in a wheelchair rolling toward them. Min made a noise of delight and ran over. "The center is a general gathering space. We have all sorts of events here. Open mics, dinners. You can come if you're just bored."

"This is Huaxin. She's never been to the center before, so I was showing her around," Min said to the woman. She gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Huaxin, this is Kunyi, my fellow cofounder. And my wife."

The affection with which she uttered "my wife" bit the tender meat of Huaxin's heart; she tried not to show it. "This is a great place," she said. She meant every word of it. She was trying to tamp down her jealousy. Couldn't this have existed eight years ago, after she'd been discarded?

"Please spread the word," Kunyi said. She touched Min's hand, and Huaxin had to look away. "It looks like we haven't reached everyone, despite our best attempts. We'd love for everyone to feel connected."

Huaxin's thoughts went to Ms. Chen. She wondered if she could get that hurting old lady to come here.

She zipped home on her bike. She still had data to record.

Support:
have any pictures of the center to share?

Huaxin:
i thought you would have seen it already

Support:
i haven't been in a while, i bet it's changed.

Huaxin:
how do you know what's going on in my own town and i don't

Support:
min is my friend from secondary school. i used to live nearby, you know.

Support:
i'm glad you got to visit, it's a special place. somewhere that makes you feel less lonely.

Right. Huaxin felt something bitter in her throat and grabbed a honey stick to swallow it down.



Bees never stopped working. Huaxin liked that about them. They knew the value of discipline and all played a role in their community. One day, as the haze of summer approached, Anshui asked her why she never took a vacation.

Huaxin:
who will take care of the bees

Support:
i know a few beekeepers near you who would be happy to send staff your way.

Support:
there are also ecology students here who would love an opportunity to shadow your farm.

Huaxin:
i don't trust them. no offense

Support:
that's fair. i suppose the bees are like your family.

Support:
you could also try digital beekeeping? that way you can watch them remotely.

The question made Huaxin flinch. She forced down the coldness rising up in her, but her fingers trembled as she typed.

Huaxin:
eh.

Huaxin:
i don't trust tech

Support:
i've noticed.

Huaxin:
remember that flood? my parents were trying to evacuate and they used one of those dumbass navigation tools

Huaxin:
drove right into a flooded road and drowned

Huaxin:
wouldn't have happened if the tool actually knew our roads. but no, its fancy algorithms got people killed

Support:
i'm very sorry to hear that, huaxin.

Huaxin:
whatever, i'm over it

Support:
i don't fault you for not trusting tech. we should create a world where tech works with people. if it just tries to replace them, things go very wrong.

Huaxin:
tell my ex-husband that

She paused. She didn't know why she brought that up. She hated talking about him. It was a shame that always hung in the back of her mind, made her wonder if she was unlovable. Replaceable. Worse than that — trash.

Hell. She couldn't hide it forever.

Support:
what were his opinions on tech?

Huaxin:
we fought a lot about it. he wanted to, among other things, digitize my beehousing

Huaxin:
he said tech would save the world and anyone who didn't adopt every new innovation was going to fall behind and be forgotten

Huaxin:
and then he proved that prophecy true by leaving me for someone better hahahahaha

Support:
i'm sorry, that's shitty of him. you didn't deserve that.

Huaxin felt her cheeks grow warm. She felt drunk on something. Anshui's attention, maybe. Unearthed rage from the hurt she'd tried to bury for so long.

And at the same time, something else. A seed of a feeling that nagged at her.

Huaxin:
why are you being so nice to me

Support:
i don't think i am? no one deserves to be treated that way. if he wanted a better future, that should have included a world where no one gets abandoned

Huaxin:
holy shit

Huaxin:
you're not real

Everything slammed into place. Anshui always being so friendly, so available. Anshui never sharing personal details. Anshui refusing to video call.

Anshui was not human.

Support:
what?

Huaxin:
you're a fucking AI

Huaxin:
godDAMMIT

Huaxin:
you LIED to me

Huaxin:
i'm so stupid

Support:
...

Support:
are you serious?

Support:
i am definitely NOT AI.

Huaxin:
i don't know anything about you

Huaxin:
you never want to call

Support:
i'm sorry for trying to maintain my privacy.

Support:
i thought YOU would understand given how untrusting you are of the internet.

Huaxin:
yeah but we've been texting for weeks now???

Huaxin:
send me proof that you're real

Support:
i do not owe you anything.

Support:

if you think the only reason someone would show kindness to you is because they're a computer program, then i'm sorry that's your worldview.

Support:

but honestly i'm disappointed that after all this time you don't even see me as human.

Huaxin forced herself to put her phone down and take several deep breaths. She didn't know what the truth was anymore. All she knew was that she'd broken something that had felt so rare and precious, and she wasn't sure she could get it back.



Summer arrived in a wave of bright orange feeling, but Huaxin still felt stifled in the gloom of winter.

By habit, she still took bee behavior notes in a long-ass document interspersed with apologies, observations, and recipes for Anshui. Obviously, she never sent it. The last texts between the two were still Anshui's searing words that made Huaxin's throat close up every time she read them.

She began to notice more the changes around her: the bees slowing down, Ms. Chen's visits becoming less frequent as she blamed the heat, more people staying at the center, which Huaxin visited often now. People murmured that this was the longest heat wave in a while, and Min and Kunyi's team were busy making sure the center was prepared to take care of everyone.

One morning Huaxin trudged into the garden. The eerie silence almost knocked her over. She ran to the hives and checked each one.

Huaxin:

anshui help

Huaxin:

the bees aren't moving

Support:

are they okay? what do they need?

She couldn't control her swell of emotions at seeing the first words from Anshui in a long while, but she didn't have time for that now.

Huaxin:

i think they'll be fine if i get a continuous stream of water going

Huaxin:

but they've collected a ton of water for their hives. they stopped fanning the entrances and now they're clumping outside. they know a huge temperature spike is coming

Support:
take care of them. i'll tell min.

Support:
have you been continuing to take notes?

Huaxin:
yes, i'll send them to you

She navigated to the document where she'd been keeping all the notes, apologies, and recipes, and without making a single edit, sent it over.

Then she ran to the hose.



Huaxin had never seen the whole town like this: buzzing with determination, working tirelessly as bees.

By the time she arrived at the center, Min was already waiting out front. “How are the bees?” she asked, handing Huaxin a cold water canister.

“They’ll be fine.” Huaxin was worried, especially for the wild bees; they were more sensitive to heat. She’d set up more shade and hydration stations and just had to trust they could take care of themselves. “How is everyone doing?”

Min grimaced. “Chaotic, but we’ve trained for this. Everyone’s been prepping on what to do if we get a warning, so they all knew to come here. Some volunteers also went to fetch anyone who might have passed out in their homes. The hospital in town and our clinic here is stuffed, but we’re making do.”

Huaxin glanced over at the bike parking, which was fuller than she’d ever seen it. Something occurred to her, and she looked back at the hills. “Has an elderly woman named Ms. Chen showed up?”

Min’s face furrowed in immediate concern. “I don’t think so.”

She began to run toward the bikes and Huaxin grabbed her arm. “No. You stay. I know where she lives.”

“But —”

“Min,” Huaxin said sternly. “Listen to your elders.”

Then she ran toward the gong and struck it with three reverberating strikes: the signal for the start of the work day.



That day, the temperature spiked to 45 degrees C for a sustained five hours. The next day was even worse, with both the mercury and humidity climbing to record highs.

Huaxin had reached Ms. Chen in time. The old woman had been sleeping, but her body had reacted to the familiar sound of the gong, and she was awake by the time Huaxin reached her house. The two had zipped back to the center.

Meanwhile, Anshui had been texting updates.

Support:

temp should begin to dip tomorrow evening. thanks to you and other monitors in your area, we were able to contact everyone and avoid a lot of deaths.

Huaxin:

thank god

Support:

i appreciate the notes you sent over. i retroactively input all the data and the temp-dance curves provide a lot of new information. this will be really helpful for our research.

Huaxin:

temp-dance curves huh?

Support:

your metaphors were too useful not to use.

Huaxin:

i hope you uhhh ignored all the other stuff in my notes that wasn't bee data

Support:

how could i?

Support:

i've already tried the recipe for longan honey iced tea, it was delicious.

Huaxin:

ughhhh

Support:

but really, thank you for the apologies.

"Who're you texting?" Kunyi asked as she and another person wheeled by, pushing a cart of wet towels. "You're blushing like crazy."

"Shut up," Huaxin snapped, which only made Kunyi chuckle more. Huaxin retreated to one of the center's indoor balconies before daring to turn to her phone again.

Huaxin:

i know this is a sensitive point but you really don't have to be nice to me. i was an asshole

Support:

i could have been more open myself. i'm always bad at that.

*Support:
but like i told you, people deserve redemption.*

*Support:
i'm not going to leave you for making a mistake. love is labor and labor is love.*

From this high up, Huaxin could watch the action of the center below: people handing out food, refilling water bottles, playing with each other's pets.

Everyone, a role. Everyone, now, including her.

She finally broke down and cried.



In autumn, for the first time in years, Huaxin walked to the park to practice tai chi.

She'd been spending a lot of time at the center, teaching others the basics of beehousing. She went there every day now. It had even become more beautiful, thanks to Kunyi hiring Ms. Chen to come up with a mural design that both covered the drab walls and created an albedo effect.

But today, Huaxin needed a break from the place. Sometimes it just had too many people.

She found a shady spot to dance. Every now and then she checked her phone to see how the bees were doing — because she had to admit, being at the center so often meant that some digitization was useful. Just a little.

She remembered to take time to close her eyes and listen. To the stream, the trees, the way the wind caressed the lines of the mountains around her. Nature is wise.

It wasn't long before she heard a set of footsteps approach, and then a voice said, "You dance just like the bees."

Huaxin looked up at the unfamiliar face before her and smiled.

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Stefan Grosse Halbuer is a digital artist from Münster, Germany. In over 10 years of freelancing, he worked for brands like Adidas, Need for Speed, Samsung, Star Wars, Sony, and Universal Music, as well as for magazines, NGOs, and startups. Stefan's art is known for a love for details, storytelling, and vibrant colors, and has been exhibited and published all around the globe. Recently, he released his first solo book, *Lines*, a coloring book with a selection of his art from the last years.

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