

# Lapse



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## Chapter 1

### A Broken Team

Nora waited outside the science building sitting on the thick branch of a barren oak tree. Most of its leaves were scattered along the lawn of the quad below. At the base of the tree was her schoolbag, full of assignments she ignored for the past several days. Two additional textbooks lay beneath the worn-out beige knapsack. A rough, cold breeze made her lose her balance. It tousled her dark brown hair over her eyes. She tugged at her sleeves, covering her palms, then brushed aside the wandering strands. Nora shifted in her spot before resuming her gaze at the double doors.

Shadows danced behind the small window. Students freshly released from their lectures moved through the corridors, eager to leave for a short break. The doors burst open, and college kids of every variety trotted down the steps. They split in different directions—some toward the pavilion for a late lunch, and others darted to the parking lot.

Nora craned her neck quickly, studying each incoming wave of new faces. Nothing. She jumped down from her perch, plucked her bag and books off the ground, and started toward the building. An inkling of worry crossed her mind, but she pushed the doubt to the back corners.

Self-consciously, she reached for the black sundial dangling around her neck. It was second nature to have it in her grasp when she couldn't find what she was looking for. The sundial was small, not much bigger than a dollar coin.

She felt it humming in between her fingers as if it recognized what Nora sought. It yearned to jut forward and lead the way. She pressed her thumb against the flat surface of the sundial plate, trying to soothe the timepiece. Nora opened her hand letting it lay flat in her palm. Its engraved hour lines gleamed white, and the thin shadow of the gnomon almost touched the two mark. The sundial didn't move.

She made her way up the steps, wondering if he had indeed managed to thwart her yet again. He had done an excellent job of doing so for weeks now, but Nora was determined not to let him get away. They were meant to be on the same side, yet he acted as though she were his enemy. She could never be against him. On the contrary, she was doing what she thought was in his best interest.

Only recently he accepted the fact he needed her protection. That didn't mean he wanted her around. That was also a new development Nora had to grow accustomed to. It was something she anticipated sooner rather than later, if she was being quite frank. The texted updates stopped coming, and the unexplained disappearances posed infuriating challenges for her. It forced her to keep him on a tighter leash, whether it was with or without his knowledge. What made her want to pummel him to oblivion was his complete disregard for the danger that loomed over him—the way he would scoff and discredit her warnings.

Nora reminded herself daily to be patient. *He hadn't suffered yet*, she reasoned. Loss wasn't a part of his life. He could try and avoid her—a game he often never won. He just didn't know it.

A tough shoulder hit her arm. The pressure of it made Nora sidestep back and drop her bag. She glanced down the stairs to look for the culprit who bumped into her. Somehow she knew already who had done it. At the bottom of the steps, Mason Lyle glanced over his shoulder as if to claim his wrongdoing. She picked her books up and rushed back down the steps.

He noticed her advance and tore off in the direction of the soccer field. Nora's heartbeat quickened. This was her chance. She clutched her sundial, muttering a prayer. Suddenly, she was a few feet in front of Mason. No one noticed her travel twenty yards without crossing the grass. Mason only rolled his eyes in annoyance and picked up his pace.

“Nice parlor trick,” he scoffed, shouldering passed her again, harder than the first time.

“Mason,” Nora called after him.

He kept his walk brisk, making Nora run to keep up.

“I know what you’re going to say,” he said flatly.

“Good,” Nora huffed. “Because I hate repeating myself!”

“I told you to keep away from me,” Mason hissed. He avoided looking at her, as if she were a younger classman he couldn’t shake. “Go home and wait for me there.”

“You know I can’t do that. It isn’t safe. I’m staying. I’ll be in the library like always, and I’ll be back before practice ends. If you leave, I’ll know,” she said, slowing down to let him walk off. Nora watched him part from the sidewalk to take the dirt path leading to the locker rooms.

He emerged a few minutes later in a university-issued jersey and sweatpants. His teammates whistled and greeted him with enthusiasm. He jogged onto the field, where they passed him the ball. He juggled the ball on his knees with ease for a moment before passing it on to the next.

Mason was built like the athlete that he was—tall and lean with short black hair and deep, calculating brown eyes. He had a good smile, too, enough to get him out of trouble. Coupled with the right words and a shift in his gaze, Mason charmed his way through school just fine. But none of that was for Nora. His tone with her often wavered between anger and razor sharp sarcasm. It was easy to mimic his mannerisms when he was so openly hostile with her.

The shrill sound of a whistle made Nora jump. The coach walked onto the field, making the team gather around him for instructions, only to have them scatter a moment later as the old man barked out orders for the warm-up drills. She watched Mason move down the field to his position with one of his teammates. He looked around, checking who made it to practice, then his eyes left the field, wandering toward Nora’s direction. Their eyes locked. He raised his head at her in a stiff nod, whether in cool acknowledgment or some kind of warning telling her to leave. Nora couldn’t quite tell. She offered him a weak smile before turning and heading back up to the school.

Nora walked to the library above the lunch hall. She purchased a cold sandwich and chips, courtesy of the vending machine, then headed to the quiet third floor. A lonesome table near the window where she could see the soccer field became her nest for the next three hours.

Her long-awaited neglected homework was itching to be done. Nora pulled open her metaphysics textbook. She began to read the first paragraph and then a bit more until she caught herself scanning words without taking in the meaning. Although it was her favorite course, her heart wasn't in it that afternoon. She decided to leave the reading for another time.

Instead, Nora opted for her astronomy homework. She enjoyed the study of the planetary system and stars—the history of the known universe. It also involved plenty of math. Calculations. Nora could do numbers as easily as she breathed. They were uncomplicated, full of equations, facts, and less abstract theories. The facts and numbers would chase away the thoughts that ran circles in her brain for days now.

Facts were also the reason she was able to take college courses ahead of schedule. When Mason graduated, so did she the following summer as a sophomore. There was no point to remain in high school when he was a town over attending college. Her superb grades and desire for more challenging course work made the transition easy. The school did, however, lament seeing her go. Though it had been a ploy to watch Mason during his sessions, she had done her fair share of tutoring to the struggling upperclassmen.

Aside from those two courses, she was taking a physics course as well. Nora was unsure *which* one, since she stopped attending the class two weeks ago. She lost interest when the professor geared the class toward the subatomic and mechanics. The only bit that interested her was already briefly discussed in the first weeks of school: optics and quantum mechanics. If she was dropped from the class, it suited her fine.

After her assignments were complete, Nora checked the time. It was still early. Mason would not be pleased to see her back, but she didn't have anywhere else to go. All the eating areas on campus by now must be empty with full students poring over notes and textbooks or gathered around for company. And there weren't familiar places for her to go. It was hard to piece



together a social life when Nora had a round-the-clock job that required her undivided attention. She decided to head to the soccer field.

The campus looked emptier now as it progressed into the early evening hours. Cliques of students gathered in different areas of the campus. Those most anxious about midterms sat indoors, their noses deep in their textbooks, while the more relaxed sat outside chatting with friends and listening to music. Here and there study groups congregated to complete projects outside the classroom. The chill of the mid-October day offered little discomfort because most had warm sweaters and drank hot coffees. Lights flickered on along the campus as the sun began to sink toward the west.

When Nora reached the field, she saw a small audience had gathered to watch the practice game. Practice was well over, but the players stayed behind for a game. It was a good call she happened to wander down when she did. Mason may have left without her. She went to stand near a pile of duffel bags.

Back in his day clothes, Mason was in control of the ball. An opponent was right on his tail, trying to take possession of the ball. He made a grab for Mason's shirt, but he managed to slip through the player's fingers and kicked the ball to another teammate. Mason and his guard slowed to a walk.

From what Nora could tell, he was a fantastic soccer player. Mason would score one or two goals in a practice game and usually make at least one in an actual game. His successes on the field translated to the student body. Mason gained popularity fast, especially once he made the team last autumn, his freshmen year. After a particularly good game, his jock status catapulted him to more parties and other places Nora struggled to watch from afar.

Mason moved around, trying to make himself available for a pass. He watched the other players fumble around, inching the ball closer to the goalpost. Out of sheer luck, one of the guys with dyed blue curls managed to kick it away from the chaos.

The ball went soaring back to Mason's side of the field. His opponent tried to block him, but Mason overpowered him with ease, jumping high into the air and making a spectacular header. The goalkeeper dived to no avail. The ball flew passed him, hitting the net.

The whistle blew to indicate the game was over. Mason jumped in the air, punching the air before receiving well-earned fist bumps and claps on the

back. Nora smiled a little, proud of his accomplishment. Amused, the coach hollered at them to get off the field and go home.

The team finally dispersed, some drawn to the attention of the crowd that gathered, while others who were more in a hurry headed for the stockpile of belongings. He saw her waiting. Mason's lips almost curved upward as if to smile, but he stopped himself.

"I thought I told you to go home," he muttered, shouldering his bag.

"That's not how this works," Nora replied.

"Look," Mason said, stepping forward so their conversation wouldn't be overheard by his friends. He grabbed her arm and pulled her along. "The guys want to meet up at Gio's. I'll drop you off at home. I'll report in every hour on the hour if you let me go alone."

"How do I know you'll actually do it this time?" she asked. "You've gotten me—no, both of us—killed like that before!"

In what is now present-day Hong Kong, 1372, she wanted to add, but instead her kept mouth shut. She didn't need to blurt that out on campus for all to hear.

"You're gonna have to trust me."

"Well, I don't," Nora said and wrenched out of his grip. She headed to the trail that led up to the darkening campus. "You pull this crap on me over and over again, Mason. Like hell I'm going to trust you to go anywhere."

"So you're gonna keep stalking me?" he snapped.

"Believe me: it's not because I enjoy it," she countered.

Mason followed unhappily.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," he said, taking on the tone of angry exasperation she knew so well. "I'll be fine. I'll be out in public; whoever's out there won't be dumb enough to attack with so many witnesses. Come on, Nora."

They cut through the grass over to the parking lot and crossed the still very full lot to his silver Nissan.

"I've told you already: I'm not taking any chances with you," she told him. Mason popped open the trunk and put his things in the back. Nora did the same. He shut the back, and they got in his car. "What would you do if an anachronism—a time traveler—catches you? I'm the only one with a time key

here. Have you forgotten? You jump into a time warp straight into the Passage, and you can say goodbye to *your* time. And all of what you know, for that matter! Doesn't that mean anything to you? Your lies put you in danger, Mason. Don't you see that? Once I can trust you, you're free to wander!" She buckled herself in.

"That's another thing," he shot back, truly annoyed starting the car. "Why the hell don't you take the train home like the good little college girl you're pretending to be? I'm not your personal taxi service."

"You're not listening to me!" Nora scoffed.

She heard him retort something back under his breath, but she didn't bother to ask him to repeat it. Instead, she clenched the sides of the seat to keep her from landing a swift blow to his head. He was really testing her patience today.

They took their usual route home.

Mason wasn't always so difficult. Up until recently, they got along well these last several years. They were more friends than acquaintances. Nora knew he saw her more as the girl next door than his personal bodyguard. He had over a year to adjust to the information she confided in him—who he really was. He was complacent and open to Nora's wealth of information; then the lines began to blur when she tried to reform the boundaries that changed everything. Now she was left facing the backlash.

The thirty-minute drive past the valleys and ridges led them into the small town of Torch Crossings. Mason took the main road to head toward their neighborhood. Torch Crossings was nestled among the hidden valleys in Oregon's mountain range. Only six other towns were nearby before reaching the reasonable-size city of Valo. Torch Crossings itself was average in size and population. It was fully equipped with a school district, shops and stores, parks, restaurants, and everything else in between to be a fully functioning community. It even had a decent-size theme park near the interstate. It took them about another fifteen minutes to reach their street.

Mason and Nora lived on Wells Drive in the older part of town. The aging, rusting houses stood tall and proud, with brightly lit porches. The meticulously cut lawns looked wet with mildew. Mason drove slow to the end of the street and parked in his driveway.

They got out of the car.

“Is that really where you’re going, then?” Nora asked as he opened the trunk. She hauled out her things and shouldered it. She looked up at him expectantly.

“What does it matter?” he replied coldly. “You won’t believe me. If you really want to know, I’m not going.” He grabbed his things, slammed the trunk, and tore off to his house. Nora watched him cross his lawn and slam his door on his way in, making the wind chimes jingle.

Then it fell silent.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a heavy, irritated sigh. She longed for the day when they weren’t enemies on the same team. She hated being estranged. Nora turned to her own home next door to his, waiting a moment before entering. His bad temper would bring out the worst in her soon enough.



## Chapter 2

# Time Quake

Nora walked toward the back end of the house to enter her room. On her way through the gate, it let out a loud creak. She glanced at the windows. Surely it announced her arrival if anyone was listening. It swung shut behind her as she fished out her house key from her bag. The glass French doors were covered with thick white blinds, just how she left them that morning. Nora unlocked the door, opened it a partially, and wiggled past the blinds, sliding the door to a gentle close.

As she stepped into the large remodeled living room, Nora turned on the lights. The large space that was once a secondary living room now served as her bedroom. Her unmade bed, nightstand, clothes rack, and pile of laundry were in the farthest corner of the room diagonal of the television and an old teal recliner. Across was her desk and empty bookshelf. For the most part, it was a clean space, except for the stray pieces of newspaper and articles of clothing. Nora didn't spend much of her time here, but it suited her needs when she wasn't trailing after Mason.

She kicked off her shoes on the rug and set down her bag. Her sweatshirt came off too, landing in a heap on the wooden floor. Nora walked further into her room, running a hand through her windswept hair. She stepped over to her cluttered desk to rummage for the tablet she left earlier in the day.

It blinked on when her hand hovered over the screen. There were no new alerts, only junk mail from her school email. Nora swiped her fingers across the display, tapping her way back to the home screen.

A knock at the door made her jump, pulling her hand away from the tablet. The screen went dark once more. Nora quickly buried it under a stack of papers. She turned just as the door opened.

Nadine Hartley's familiar blond pixie cut poked into her room. "Hi, I heard you arrive next door with the neighbor boy again," she said, letting herself in.

"Oh yeah, Mason gave me a ride home."

"Good, sometimes I worry how you will get home from school. The train at this hour can be sketchy," Nadine said. "You two get along well?"

Nora shrugged a little. "Yeah, sort of. I mean, we're friends, I guess."

If only Nadine knew she got on his last nerve.

"I'm glad," she said with a smile. "I left your dinner in the microwave to reheat if you're hungry."

"Thanks, I'll be out in a second," Nora said. She waited until Nadine closed the door behind to exhale. With her gone, Nora rifled through her desk again. She grabbed the tablet and shoved it into her schoolbag. She dumped her assignments on the bed. Those were unnecessary and didn't need to be carried around anymore. The tablet on other hand needed to be with her at all times. The possibility of Nadine or anyone else getting a hold of it was dangerous. It revealed all her secrets as well as Mason's.

She cleared off her bed. After supper she intended to finish the metaphysics reading she began at the library. Nora liked the idea of turning in early for the night. It was a rare event when she did so.

Nora opened the door to peer down the hall. There was no sound coming from the rest of the house, meaning the Hartleys were in their room for the night too. She hurried out of her room and walked down the hall, passing two closed doors. The pair of empty rooms used to belong to the two Hartley boys, Andy and Michael, before they moved away for good after college. Nora met them once three months ago, when they came to visit during the summer.

Further along she passed their bedroom followed by the bathroom. The hallway led to the formal living room, with a well-maintained modern beige

sofa and the fifty-inch flat screen television hung from the wall. The faint glow of the lamp and book on the end table told her Nadine had been up reading.

To the right, the kitchen light was still on. The counter-height table was clean as well as the sink and stove. Nora opened the microwave door to see what was inside. A plate of mashed potatoes, a short ear of corn, and pulled pork sat waiting for her to devour. She shut the door and pressed the on button. In two easy stretches, she grabbed a glass from the cabinet over her head and opened the refrigerator to search for the carton of orange juice.

As she waited, Nadine strode in dropping off an empty mug in the sink. “Will you be going out with Mason tonight?” she asked.

Nora coughed into her glass, the juice burning the back of her throat when it threatened to make its way through her nose. “I don’t think so.”

“I know he’s a friend of yours, but do be careful,” Nadine went on. “He is slightly older than you, and Anna says he can be a tad reckless—”

“I know, Nadine. I know.”

Even his mother and Nadine recognized he was a bit of a wild card.

“And you come home so late,” she finished.

“Sorry, I’ll try not to make so much noise.”

Nadine grinned, amused by her apology. “I don’t want to see you in trouble.”

“You won’t,” Nora promised.

Nadine padded back to her room, and the door shut a moment later.

A seed of doubt planted itself in the pit of Nora’s stomach. Nadine’s sudden interest in her activities made her nervous. Why did it matter if she stayed in or out that evening? More so if she hung around Mason or not. Nora tended to come and go as she pleased; then another seed of doubt followed after.

Nora rushed to the front window to check if Mason’s car was still parked in the driveway. Her heart pounded against her chest as if she already knew the answer.

It was gone.

The microwave behind her beeped, announcing her food was ready. The aroma made her mouth water, but she was no longer hungry. Nora clenched and unclenched her fists in red-hot anger. It was the only thing keeping her

from punching a hole through the window. He dared lie to her again. How could she trust him?

Nora ran over to the foyer to snag a pair of keys off the line of hooks on the wall, then ran back to her room. She reached for the sundial. Just as she suspected, it hung suspended in front of her neck, directing her fury in the right direction. It pulled her along like an angry leash. As quickly as she could, Nora retied her shoes and tugged a sweatshirt over her head. She picked up her bag, taking that too. She darted out of her room.

"Heading out!" she hollered as she passed the Hartley's bedroom. "I'm borrowing the car."

Nadine shuffled out of her room. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Nora said in a rush.

"Nora—"

"I'll be back soon."

Nora ran out the door. The blue Honda blinked its lights as it unlocked. She hopped into the vehicle and readjusted the seat to fit to her stature. Once she got herself situated, Nora tore out of the driveway and down the road.

There were no words to describe how angry she felt. Nora clutched the wheel so tightly her knuckles turned white. She let it go briefly to slap the wheel with her palm as hard as she could. If he were within her grasp, she didn't know what she'd say to herself to not strangle him like a filthy rag. It was like everything she warned him about didn't matter. On the contrary, he did the complete opposite. If he didn't care for his own fate, Nora could fix that. It was a problem she ran into before. If he was doing it out of spite, they were in trouble.

The sudden rumble shook her out of her thoughts. Everything around Nora began to quiver and shake. The streetlights trembled in place. Stores and streetlights crackled madly as if an earthquake threatened to tear them in two. Parked cars along the streets rumbled without lurching out of place. A billowing darkness erupted like a firework causing one grand shake.

Nora yelped and slammed on the brakes.

The quaking came to an abrupt stop. She looked around to make sure everything had truly settled. No sirens wailed in the distance; no one came out



to question the bizarre tremor. Nora calmed her breathing and continued driving until she reached Gio's Restaurant on Julius Road.

She pulled into the parking lot as two men in gray wool coats crossed the pavement. One clutched a bowler hat to his head as if afraid it would fly away. The second pocketed a small, dark item into his coat. Nora's heart tightened at the sight; it finally found something to be concerned over. That had not been an ordinary earthquake; it was a time quake. Someone arrived in this time period.

Nora parked next to Mason's car and darted toward the entrance. She searched for the two men in wool coats that walked in only a minute ago. She saw them sitting up by the bar talking silently. Up close, the time travelers didn't look so intimidating. They looked out of place like foreigners lost on a trip. But that didn't mean they were any less of a threat.

Next, she looked for Mason. He wasn't hard to find. Gio's was full of college students—namely, the soccer team, their fan club of freshman girls, and others who gravitated toward that circle. Mason was walking back to the table with a large, meaty pizza balanced in his hand. The people gathered at the table applauded at his arrival. They cleared a path for him and a chair. He took a seat beside a pretty blonde sipping her drink. She offered it to him, and he took a portioned swig.

Anger flared again, briefly clouding Nora's cohesive train of thought built on strategy. She was so mad she almost wanted the time travelers to take him; he deserved it after he ditched her like that. But her instincts told her otherwise. She had to protect him.

She stood near the door to keep watch over Mason and the time travelers at the same time. She caught glimpses of the conversation going on inside. Combined with her skill of lipreading, Nora thought she had a decent picture of what was being said.

"He's here," she managed to make out. The bowler hat man pointed to the table for emphasis. He had taken the hat off indoors to mop his balding head with a napkin as if it cost him a great deal to sit. He was thinner than his companion.

"Which one is he?" his partner asked, glaring around. He looked around, not sure where to begin their search. His eyes were sunken in, and his

complexion was gaunt. Nora thought they looked sickly or like newly released prisoners of war.

The time travelers stuck out like sore thumbs among the youngsters in the pizzeria. Their ragged clothing under their coats contained layers of patches, and their worn-out shoes looked like they would need to be stapled together soon. Nora couldn't exactly pinpoint from where or when they came from, yet she knew how they were going back.

They clearly didn't know who they were looking for. They pointed and stared, but they didn't move right away. The thin man put on his bowler hat with a harsh string of words. He reached into his pocket, and the other joined him. Deciding she didn't want to find out the hard way what was in his pocket, Nora straightened and grabbed the handle.

Nora stepped into the warm building. The smells of leather, old paint, and pizza filled her nose. The vintage music box was spewing out an old tune she only caught bits of. She watched the pair stride over to a booth of kids. With their backs turned, she made a beeline for Mason's table.

"Mason."

He looked up with dread and shock. "Nora—"

"Come on, we have to go," she pleaded. "Now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

She looked over at the two men. They were wading from table to table, glancing at a device in their hands. They pointed at the customers, who glared at them in suspicion. They would move to their section of the diner soon and spot them. Nora moved fast. Ignoring the disdainful glances of his friends, she yanked Mason out of his seat and pulled him to the back exit near the bathrooms. Nora forced him out the door, shoving him along the parking lot.

"You're a lunatic!" he snapped. "What is your problem?" He jerked away from her angrily.

"You!" Nora shot back. "You are my problem! You lied to me!"

"I had to. I can't go anywhere without you following me!"

"Because you refuse to listen!" She forced herself to focus. "We can't argue here in the open like this. You need to go."

"Forget it." Mason turned to leave.

“You aren’t going anywhere except home,” Nora almost shouted. She caught him by the arm and flung him around.

He glared at her, his eyes full of fire.

“Mason, please, you have to go,” she tried again, gentler this time. She let go of his arm. “Right now, you’re not safe. Anachronisms made it into our time. They came here to look for you.” Nora waved over to the men still inside. “Do you want to be killed in front of your friends? Or swept out of time? This is why I insist on going everywhere with you. They keep getting closer to you.”

“How do you know they’re even time travelers?” Mason challenged.

“Look at them,” she demanded. “Do they look like they belong here? I’ve been fighting them in every life cycle—the eighties, fifties, twenties, and hundreds of years before that. You really don’t think I know how to spot them by now?”

The men hovered over the college kids Mason was with seconds ago. Nora pushed him toward their cars down the parking lot. His weight against her hands didn’t help. “And there was a time quake. I felt one on my way here.”

Mason stopped dead in his tracks. “A time quake?” he asked, a tinge of curiosity in his voice.

“It’s a giant tremor shaking our time,” Nora replied, pushing him along again this attempt much easier. “It’s the effect time travelers have when they arrive in a new time period.”

“Like a loud explosion rattling everything?”

She stopped shoving. Her eyebrows came together in surprise, then stepped beside him. It had been a long time since he could feel time quakes. “Yeah. You felt that?”

Mason nodded. “It only lasted a second. I blinked, and it was over.”

“Did anyone see you react to it?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

Mason pulled out his keys from his pocket.

“Go straight home and stay there,” she urged. “I’ll take care of this.”

“You?” Mason asked, his tone thick with skepticism. “What are you going to do?”

It didn't surprise her Mason questioned Nora's ability to protect him; he always did. Much of what she did was without his knowledge. She kept him safe in more ways than she could count.

Nora opened the trunk to Nadine's car and reached under the mat of the wheel well. Years ago she hid instruments in case an emergency like this ever surfaced. She pulled out a dagger and small black film container.

"Mason, I'm a time guard," she told him, stuffing the container in her back pocket. She nodded over to his car to indicate it was his cue to leave. The faster he left, the better. "I'm just sending them the way they came."

"Which means?" he pressed on, looking nervous for the first time.

"It means I got this, so go."

Mason looked past her to the restaurant, then back at her. She did her best to make her expression serious and determined. Slowly, the anger in his eyes faded to something else she recognized: worry.

"Okay," he agreed.

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