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DELAY OF SIGNAL



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DELAY OF SIGNAL

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Synopsis

Seven people take part in a one year experiment in an isolated biodome, recreating potential conditions on Mars. As the year progresses and a series of near catastrophes test the resolve of the crew, professional boundaries break down and interpersonal relationships are strained.

Cast of Characters

All parts may be played as either male or female with minor adjustments to names/lines.

CAMILLE	Captain, tries to be official yet maintain her humanity
TERRY	Communications officer, Good atured, a jokester, self-aware
JACQUELINE	Medical officer, very professional and straight laced
O.B.	Botanist, disconnected but friendly
ELAINE	Biologist, Sweet, mousy
MALACHI	Technical officer, very dry and unassuming
ABBY	Journalist, tries to be unbiased

Place

A semi-futuristic interior of a cramped biodome habitat. All action takes place in the common room. A large, hatch-like door leads to the outside and a hallway leads off to the rest of the habitat.

Props

Various books
Computer equipment
Communication equipment
Papers
Drinks
Med-kit

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: the common room of the biodome habitat

At Rise: Lights down. The seven crew members stand on stage in the dark, unseen. Spot up on CAMILLE in her uniform.

CAMILLE

Mission report. Day 1. The crew was seen off by family and friends at 0900 hours. The research team had also gathered to wish us well, but barring a few who we interacted with at training, they were just nameless faces and hands to shake. There were lots of pictures taken of the crew with various lead researchers and sponsors for posterity and to show the corporations that their money was being well spent. On a personal note, my parents flew out to see us off. My mom cried and my dad looked proud. My brother is a lawyer and my sister a doctor. But my dad now gets to say, "My daughter went to space." Well, simulated space. But still, who else gets to say that?

(spot up on TERRY)

TERRY

It felt like there should have been a band playing or something, ya know? Like, we had all these people waving and crying and shaking our hands and telling us good bye and good luck, it felt like there should have been confetti flying and a band playing nearby, classic Americana right out of the movies. Then the mayor stands up and gives a speech and everyone cheers. I mean, there were speeches, but they were by Vicki… I mean Dr. Hays, one of the main research people heading up the project. But she's a scientist, so it was less of a speech and more of a data report. Very dry. Especially since we weren't allowed any alcohol.

(Spot up on JACQUELINE)

JACQUELINE

One year is a long time, I don't care what anyone says or thinks. A full year without regular access to one's emotional support system. I'm a medical doctor, a physician, not a psychologist. But I do know that mental and emotional health directly affects one's physical health. I worry what such a big send-off like this one will do to the crew's emotional state; specifically if the emotional high of this will give us a boost here at the beginning that we can sustain by engendering good feelings towards the mission. Or if it will have the same effect that a surplus of sugar has on a child… big rush, then big crash.

(spot up on O.B.)

O.B.

This is not the first simulation I have been invited to join. We did a survival training in Arizona a few years ago. It lasted three months and was meant to assess how future space colonists could use various instrumentation. Part of the simulation was an unexpected breakdown of all the equipment and assessing how well the crew could repair it given limited means, in other words, whatever we had on us. Three months with the same five people is… difficult. And here we have a full one year simulation of living in a habitat like those we will hopefully one day have on the moon or Mars. One year with seven of us in a small dome. And my last simulated mission? Technically, we failed in the second month.

(spot up on MALACHI)

MALACHI

All communication from outside the biosphere will come with an automatic delay to simulate communication coming from Earth to a station in space. Each week, the delay will be set at a random interval, from 20 minutes, which is about how long it takes to send a message to Mars, to four and half hours, which would be Pluto. Not that we'd travel to Pluto, but we might one day be able to colonize some of the moons of the outer planets. In about a hundred or so years. Because of the delay, we'll be essentially cut off from humanity, no phone calls. We'll only have each other.

(spot up on ELAINE)

ELAINE

I fully expect to leave this project with 6 new best friends. That's part of it, isn't it? The human aspect? That's what is really being measured. Sure, the biosphere's systems are being tested for reliability and viability. But really, they're testing the most important and unpredictable thing about space travel and future colonization: the people. We're going to be filling out surveys basically every day asking about the events of the day and how they "make us feel." We're required to keep detailed journals of interactions and observations about behavior. The basic question we are going to be answering with this simulation is: Can seven strangers live together in a space can? It's like a bad reality show.

(spot up on ABBY)

ABBY

The original specifications of the mission called for six people to go into the habitat. One of the magazines I write for got wind of the mission and asked if I would cover it. Originally, I was going to be able to read the surveys coming out of the habitat and send in some questions the crew would answer for me. I had exclusive rights to it and was able to see the transcripts from the interviews and talk about why they chose these six people. Then two months ago, the research firm decided that having a journalist inside might give them better observational data. And so, the plans changed and I was added to the mission. One year in a space habitat simulation. It's… exciting. Stories like this don't come around often for journalists. This could make my career. The only hiccup is that I have to postpone my wedding. But my fiance understood, he's a journalist too. So, here we are, on the first day. We kissed our loved ones, took a bunch of photographs, laughed and cried a little and climbed inside. Then they closed the hatch. And it was just us.

(lights up on the group inside the habitat, walking away from the main airlock and spreading out, looking around)

CAMILLE

Alright team, airlock is sealed, pressure is holding… welcome to Mars.

(they applaud and laugh)

MALACHI

So, that's what we're going to say?

CAMILLE

What are we saying?

MALACHI

That we're theoretically on Mars.

CAMILLE

Well, yeah. Why not?

MALACHI

The purpose is to simulate a bio-habitat on a planet or moon, it was never really stated which one, specifically.

CAMILLE

Well, Mars would be the most likely candidate for the first settlement.

MALACHI

That's true…

TERRY *(loudly)*

So welcome to Mars!

ABBY

This place seems a lot smaller than it did during the training exercises.

O.B.

We only did a limited number of exercises as a whole group. You'll adjust.

ELAINE

It'll seem small at first, then it'll feel bigger as we settle in.

TERRY

Then it will feel like nothing else exists except these walls, then they start closing in… and before long, you'll forget what life was like before you came here…

CAMILLE

Terry, stop messing with her.

ABBY

O.B., you've done these types of simulations before. Is that true?

O.B.

He's not far off from the truth… but it's not that bad.

JACQUELINE

Shouldn't we hold a meeting? Go over the rules? Review protocols, establish the chain of command?

ELAINE

Camille, you're the mission leader. That's under your purview, right?

CAMILLE

The Institute is actually giving us almost complete control over stuff like that.

MALACHI

Really? We have carte blanche?

CAMILLE

Here's the basics: to simulate a colony settlement on a distant body as close as possible, we will have a limited amount of water, food drops will happen on a regimented schedule, and that door…

(points to airlock)

…is not be opened except for planned EVAs for missions and cargo retrieval. Opening the door outside the scheduled times or without an EVA suit will result in mission failure. Other than that, we fill out the surveys they send us, do the individual experiments we've been given, record some interviews with Abby over here, and try not to kill each other.

O.B.

That's it?

CAMILLE

That's it.

JACQUELINE

We should establish rules.

TERRY

Why?

JACQUELINE

Excuse me?

TERRY

Why should we establish rules? We're all adults. We can make mature decisions and get along without a complicated list of rules. Besides, who's gonna police us? You, Jacqueline? You're a doctor.

ELAINE

It would be nice to have some guidelines at least…

MALACHI

Elaine is right, we should have something.

JACQUELINE

How will we know what's acceptable and what's not?

O.B.

As long as we behave kindly to one another and show each other respect, we should be fine…

JACQUELINE

(starting to shout)

But an established set of rules…

TERRY

(getting louder)

Will just waste time!

MALACHI

(louder than both)

We should let the captain decide!!

(Everyone looks to CAMILLE.)

CAMILLE

(after a beat)

I think… we should have a toast.

(grabs some glasses from the kitchen area offstage and passes them out; she pours a drink as she speaks)

We'll have plenty of time to debate rules and protocols later. Right now, we should acknowledge the fact that we are doing something no one else has done before. Ladies and gentlemen, we are the first people… to live on Mars. To life on Mars.

ALL

(different levels of intensity)

To life on Mars.

ABBY

(a look of disgust after she drinks)

What is this?

MALACHI

I think it’s the protein supplement they gave us.

CAMILLE

Well… that’s disappointing.

(TERRY goes to pour it out in the sink.)

JACQUELINE

Don’t pour it out!

TERRY

Why not? It’s disgusting.

O.B.

Remember, we have limited supplies until the next cargo drop.

ELAINE

So, first rule is… don’t waste food?

TERRY

Seems that way…

(They all sip their drinks and give mildly disgusted looks for a moment.)

CAMILLE

As duly appointed commander of this mission… I say we make an exception this one time. All in favor, say "Aye!"

ALL

Aye!

(They all pour out their drinks as lights go out. After a moment, solo spot on MALACHI.)

MALACHI

For the first week, the delay of signal is set at 10 minutes to get us accustomed to having a delay in communications and so that any early problems can be addressed by ground control quickly. The delay will get gradually longer every week. In week 5, the DOS will be randomized. I believe the Delay of Signal will be one of the hardest obstacles to overcome at first. As a society used to instantaneous communication, having to wait a few hours to communicate will be difficult, especially when something inevitably goes wrong. And it's automated by the computer and can only be bypassed by a password that only ground control and the commander, Camille, possess. It is to be used ONLY for life threatening emergencies.

(solo spot out, lights up on TERRY, pacing, as O.B. sits by the communications desk)

TERRY

How much longer?

O.B.

5 more minutes.

TERRY

Geez, this thing is infuriating!

O.B.

Terry, my friend, go find something to work on. The message will come through when it comes through.

TERRY

I want to be here. This is very important.

O.B.

Yes, but it is not mission critical. They may not reply immediately.

TERRY

O.B., it is day two of our mission and the shower is broken. It might not be mission critical now, but in a month, it will be, I promise.

O.B.

I sent in the ticket and the station's systems function reports. Ground control has to sift through all of the data and put together a report to send back.

TERRY

Right, then its supposed to be a ten minute long delay to get to us… there's no way to hack the system… speed things up?

O.B.

You want me to hack a computer and destroy the data for our highly sensitive research trial… on day two?

TERRY

Ugh, c'mon man…

O.B.

Did you check the shower head?

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TERRY

I DON'T KNOW!!! I don't know how long we'll have air, I don't know how we communicate with the outside, I don't know if the toilets work, I don't know if we even have water! My job is to operate the COMMS and the only thing I know is that THE COMMS ARE DEAD!!!

(The lights go out.)

TERRY

And so are the emergency lights!!

ABBY

Ok, everyone, we need to stay calm. Can everyone feel your way to a seat or a wall?

ELAINE

I touched something!!

JACQUELINE

That was me, Elaine.

ELAINE

Sorry…

JACQUELINE

Ok, so who am I touching?

TERRY

That's me… then I must be holding Abby's hand…

ABBY

Um, that's definitely not my hand…

TERRY

Um, then who's-

CAMILLE

It’s mine.

(everyone screams, all the lights come back on to reveal it’s CAMILLE)

ABBY

Camille?

CAMILLE

Sorry sorry sorry. It’s ok it’s ok it’s ok…

JACQUELINE

Captain, how did you…

CAMILLE

Emergency hatch override on the back of the habitat. I don’t think I broke decompression, but I can’t tell.

ELAINE

We’re just glad you’re alive!

TERRY

And not an alien!

(He starts powering up the comm panel.)

CAMILLE

Malachi found a frayed power cable and was trying to patch it. He and O.B. needed me to do a reroute on the inside panel.

(the comm panel clicks to life and overhear O.B. and MALACHI talking on the radio)

MALACHI

-the cable is patched, O.B.. If they don't have power, it's because the gophers hit another wire deeper.

TERRY

(into comm)

MALACHI! I hear you loud and clear! Over!

MALACHI

(from offstage)

TERRY! It's actually good to hear your voice! O.B. and I are finishing the patch and coming in! Over!

ELAINE

Captain, permission to go to my bunk?

CAMILLE

Why do you need permission?

ELAINE

Well, you kind of scared us… a bit… I need to change my pants…

CAMILLE

(beat)

Request granted. Anyone else? Good, we have work to do.

(lights out, then solo spot up on O.B.)

O.B.

Mission report: Day 297. The damage done by the gophers, or aliens as Terry would say, was more extensive than anticipated. Three unscheduled EVAs to fix, two more to get systems fully functional. Diagnostics show that when Camille entered the habitat via the emergency entrance, she broke decompression protocol, mostly due to the power outage and no fault of her own. We are trying to glean from mission

O.B. (CONT)

control as to her status. But control isn't responding. At all. DOS is… unknown. We thought it might be an extended delay, but we're now at 14 hours with no response. When the power went out, we also lost a lot of our data from experiments and projects that was stored locally on the computers. We've been going through all of our documentation and manually entering as much of the data as we believe was lost before the breach.

(lights up on the group all gathered and sprawled out with laptops and papers all over the floor)

ELAINE

Terry, do you have form DJKTY-5946-KTG?

TERRY

(shuffling through forms)

Um… yes? Here.

CAMILLE

O.B., I'm not seeing your after mission report for day 146.

O.B.

I didn't file one because I was in the habitat for that one.

CAMILLE

Um, I have that you were on Away Mission team B, working on an extraction.

O.B.

That was…

(checking papers)

…Mission day 137.

CAMILLE

No, we didn't do a mission that day, it was raining…

TERRY

Ah, the rains of Mars, how I will miss them…

CAMILLE

Shut up, Terry.

O.B.

It was raining on day 138, not 137.

CAMILLE

No, I remember specifically that it rained on-

MALACHI

Guys!! It doesn't matter.

CAMILLE

It matters that we get these reports correct so that-

MALACHI

I know I know, but your argument doesn't matter because those records were already backed up to Command.

JACQUELINE

Then how do we know what they're missing?

MALACHI

Wait for them to respond and uplink from their servers.

ABBY

But we haven't heard from them in 2 days.

TERRY

ABBY, what experiment data did you have to back up?

ABBY

All the interviews I've been conducting. I had the transcripts typed up and annotated. All your surveys you've been filling out.

JACQUELINE

Well, heaven forbid you lose all that precious information about what we said.

ABBY

It's important to me! It's the whole reason I'm on this mission!

JACQUELINE

Yes, and completely untrained and unprepared!

ABBY

I know that I didn't go through training like all of you and that my surveys and interviews get on your nerves, but I was told that I'm part of this mission, like it or not!

JACQUELINE

And we don't like it! You're a liability! Right, Malachi?

ABBY

You said that?

MALACHI

It was late… and hot…

ABBY

You think I'm a liability?!

MALACHI

You are very nice and my friend… but yes, your presence here could have cost us the mission on several occasions with your inexperience…

ABBY

So, I'm a burden!

MALACHI

(getting flustered)

Sometimes! But…

(ABBY storms out.)

MALACHI

(turns on JACQUELINE)

Great job!

JACQUELINE

I only stated the obvious. We all thought it.

ELAINE

I didn't! That was just mean!

JACQUELINE

No, it was the truth!

ELAINE

But truth doesn't have to be mean!!

JACQUELINE

So, I'm expected to spare your feelings?!? Fine, your lilies were wonderful and totally didn't waste water!

O.B.

Leave her alone!

MALACHI

Hey! Don't go yelling at Jacqueline just because you and Elaine are all shacked up!

ELAINE

What?!

O.B. *(icy)*

You want to say it? Go ahead…

MALACHI

Well, it's kinda obvious that you two are a bit more than crewmates!

ELAINE

We're what?! Oh my… you think…

(she runs off, O.B. gives MALACHI an icy stare before following her)

CAMILLE

(after a long, silent beat, to TERRY)

I wish you'd never taught them to yell at each other.

ABBY

(storming in with a huge armload of paper)

I may not be vital to you, but these are! Because, do you know what I've figured out after looking through my notes?! At the heart of every failure we've had is an error, a HUMAN error. A small mistake caused by small oversights of months.

(she tosses individual papers at JACQUELINE and MALACHI)

Maybe not enough sleep, or low morale due to bland food, or not communicating because you don't like how someone says omelet! These are things I am keeping track of! And sure, the articles I write about this may leave out those things, but the Institute wants to know, needs to know because the next crew to live in one of these might not be able to leave after a year because they might not be able to EVER leave!

MALACHI

(looking past CAMILLE and TERRY)

Guys-

ABBY

Camille told me to follow my instincts and be part of the crew, conduct my own experiments and contribute, so THIS-

(dropping papers on floor)

-is my contribution.

MALACHI

Abby-

ABBY

My project was the human element of this mission, and how we rose to the challenge.

MALACHI

Captain—

CAMILLE

Let her finish…

ABBY

So here. You want to call me useless, a burden, go ahead. Take over my work. It's all right there. I'll go back to taking up space!

MALACHI *(pointing)*

The comms!

TERRY

What?

MALACHI

The comms are up! There's a message from ground control!

(they all rush to the monitor)

TERRY *(reading)*

"…temporary connection terminal…" blah blah blah… "Reset system and update servers"…

ABBY

What's that mean?

MALACHI

They unplugged it and plugged it back in.

TERRY

(reading under his breath)

…AH! "After receiving stored local data, it is our conclusion that the captain did NOT break contamination protocol and" blah blah…

CAMILLE

We're still active!

(a cheer/sigh of relief from all)

CAMILLE

Ok, Terry, forward that to all crew. We can all read it on our own time. Everyone, go back to your bunks and rest. Crew meeting tomorrow at 0900. Dismissed.

(to ABBY and JACQUELINE, quietly)

A word, you two.

(MALACHI and TERRY exit.)

ABBY

I'm sorry, Camille. I just… I've felt like a burden and interloper for most of the trip. When I heard it out of their mouths, I guess I snapped…

JACQUELINE

You were right though.

(CAMILLE and ABBY look at her, puzzled.)

JACQUELINE

Your notes will be invaluable to the success of future missions.

ABBY

Um… thanks, Jacqueline. That means a lot. Really.

(goes to exit)

CAMILLE

Um, Abby? One more thing.

ABBY

Yeah?

CAMILLE

We're getting close to the end of our mission. Which means that pretty soon, you're going to have to start writing your article, if you haven't already. You need to start thinking about the kind of narrative that you're going to tell about what happened in here. Do you remember what you and I talked about at the beginning of the mission?

ABBY

(thinks for a moment)

You told me to be kind when writing about the events, but I don't see…

CAMILLE

Think about tonight. When you write the report for the institute, I have no doubt it will be unbiased and fair. But when you are working on your articles in the upcoming months, I hope that you will remember us as actual people, not… characters in a story.

ABBY

Camille, if you're worried that I'll make anyone look bad, I assure you-

JACQUELINE

She's saying don't make me out as bad as I've been.

(a beat)

I've not always gotten along with everyone and I know that I can be disagreeable. But I've only done what I thought was best for the mission. Like you.

ABBY

I'll be kind in my re-telling, I promise. Thank you.

CAMILLE

Don't be too kind, Abby. It's like you said, our flaws, our disagreements, our small resentments, all those small things are important in the big picture. I expect you to reflect those things.

ABBY

While still being kind…

CAMILLE

That's your problem, not mine, thank god.

ABBY

…Thanks, cap.

(exits)

CAMILLE

Jacqueline? Next time, if you don't want to be seen as a villain, don't act like one so much.

(exits, lights out)

(solo spot on TERRY)

TERRY

Mission report day 335. DOS is at 2 hours, 15 minutes. One more month to go. 30 days. That's it. Now the end is so close, the energy in the habitat has definitely perked up. We've all started a mad dash to finish experiments and wrap up projects and find lost socks. Everyone is also being weirdly nice to each other. Like, we know this is the end so we want to have fond memories of our time. We only have two more EVAs scheduled, a few final surveys and reports, then I am getting a cheeseburger and a beer in the outside world.

(solo spot up on ELAINE)

ELAINE

Mission report day 346. DOS is at 45 minutes. We are almost done! I'm sad my lilies didn't make it, but I'm glad we all made it. Well, Terry would argue that Jacqueline didn't make it out alive, but who cares. We went over exit protocols today. We're supposed to talk to the press when we exit, but we have to watch what we say. Keep it simple and non-specific. I… just want to see my family. Even though my dad won't… It'll be good to be out.

(solo spot up on MALACHI)

MALACHI

Mission report day 354. Delay of signal is 1 hour, 30 minutes. We reviewed acceptable answers sent by the Institute. They don't want any damaging sound bytes before they release their final reports. Which makes sense, I guess. Besides, how can we possibly put all of this into words? I think we're going to be so excited to get out of here and see our families, we won't be able to think of a decent response.

(solo spot up on O.B.)

O.B.

Report day 360. DOS is 25 minutes, a kindness by the Institute. All experiments are effectively wrapped up, all projects concluded. Our bags are packed, all we're doing is finishing surveys and paperwork. Lots of final reports asking us all sorts of questions about how well everyone did their job. The dilemma is how to be kind, but also honest.

(solo spot up on JACQUELINE)

JACQUELINE

Day 363, DOS is 25 minutes. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not effective and 10 being most effective, I am rating most of my crewmates as a 5 or 6. Camille tops the list with an 8 for being an effective and humane leader. Abby, despite our camaraderie towards the end, rates a 3. Myself, for failing to diagnose a nearly fatal allergic reaction and my generally terrible attitude, I gave a 4. On a scale of 1 to 10, for how well the team performed together… I gave us a 9.

(solo spot up on ABBY)

ABBY

I've had a rough draft of my article that I've been working on since day 1. But it reads more like a journal. I'll make my report for the Institute, submit all the surveys and interviews, and let them piece it all together for their report and press release. But as for what I'm going to say? No idea.

(lights up on the entire group gathered, excited)

CAMILLE

Ok, ok, listen up crew! This is it, ladies and gentlemen. In just a few moments, that door will open and the real world is going to hit us like a truck. I hope you're ready.

MALACHI

So ready!

ABBY

We can't open it now?

CAMILLE

No, they're still making speeches out there I imagine. Let me just say it has been an honor and a pleasure to embark on this adventure with you all.

O.B.

Same here captain, you've been wonderful.

ELAINE

Hear, hear!

CAMILLE

I know we still have a few days together, but this is the last few moments we have alone together. Anything to say?

(a long beat)

TERRY

Ok, I've been waiting months to ask and I'm not even sorry. What is going on between you two?

(indicating O.B. and ELAINE)

O.B.

(looking at ELAINE and smiling)

We don't know yet.

ELAINE

But maybe we can find out… out there.

TERRY

Fair enough…

CAMILLE

Anything else?

ABBY

This was fun, but I'm ready to see my fiance!

TERRY

Anyone want to be in charge of planning a reunion?

MALACHI

I have one thing to say.

(Everyone looks at him.)

MALACHI

Jacqueline… do you want to have dinner with me one night?

(Everyone stares at her.)

JACQUELINE

I'm flattered… but I'm married. Did I not mention my husband at all this entire year?

MALACHI

Well… worth a shot, anyways. How about you Camille?

CAMILLE

How about we all have a big meal tomorrow night with all of our friends and families in town?

(Everyone nods.)

CAMILLE

Sounds great. Well, crew, it is now time… to open the door. Want me to count it down?

ALL

NO!!!

(She opens the door and everyone exits. CAMILLE is left at the door by herself.)

CAMILLE

Mission report, Day 365. Delay of signal, 0. Never thought I'd get to say that. With the mission behind us, the only thing left is to look ahead. We have three days of debriefing, interviews, and analysis of data. Then, we head our separate directions. I think O.B. has already signed on to a short term botany experiment hosted by the Institute. No word on whether Elaine will join him. Malachi has expressed interest in teaching classes. Jacqueline will go back to… being a doctor I guess. Abby is getting married and we are all invited to the wedding. Even Jacqueline. I haven't decided whether to go or not. Terry is going to Oregon to do… whatever it is Terry does. I've been approached by the Institute to come aboard as a consultant and possibly work on a protocol handbook based on our experience and future expeditions. There was actually talk about me being on an actual Mars team if that happens. I don't know. I missed the fresh air, grass, mountains, forests, my dog. Before I take any more assignments, I am going to turn off my electronics and go camping. In a tent. Without an EVA suit… I will miss these people. I will miss omelets on Saturdays and tuneless humming and even Terry's dumb jokes. I will not miss the smell. Or the EVA's. Or staring every day at this door, knowing that my life waited on the other side.

(She looks around, then exits. Lights out.)

(END)



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