

"We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. We lived in the gaps between the stories."

- Margaret Atwood,
The Handmaid's Tale

Special Contest Edition 2017



Utah Valley Writers

The Shadow's Mercy

It was the most natural thing in the world, ending a life. One moment, breath, thought, feeling. The next, soul slipping from the body like rain from a leaf. Over the years, it had become almost effortless. Sloanan pulled her gloves back on. She looked over at the woman in the bed and then down at the man she'd just killed. He was middle-aged, thin, balding. He'd been snoring gently a moment ago. It was better this way.

Sloanan closed the house door soundlessly behind her and stepped out into the night, pulling her black coat tight around her. Only three more appointments left tonight, her last night. She avoided the pools of light from the street lamps, keeping to the shadows. That's what they called her, parents who wanted to scare their children into obedience. The Shadow. Be good or the Shadow will find you. The parents didn't believe their own words. But, there she was nonetheless.

Tonight's first appointment had been close to the docks. Leith sprawled around her, a few people still on the streets even at this late hour. Salty wind blew in from the North Sea and she breathed it in, relishing the smell and taste she'd known since childhood. Farther down the road, a drinking song wafted from one brightly lit pub. As she passed by it, two men stumbled out and one almost fell into her.

"Sorry, lass," he slurred, righting himself. "Eh, but you're a bonnie one. Isn't she, Brian?"

Sloanan didn't wait to hear Brian's reply. She didn't talk to people much anymore. They wouldn't recognize her the next night anyway.

She rounded the corner and headed uphill. The second appointment was close by. Leith Links, the biggest green space in the densely populated docks district, lay before her. Sloanan didn't slow down when she stepped off of the sidewalk and onto the grass. Here, the salt taste was gone from the air. Instead, it smelled fresh and green. The damp grass made little shush-shush sounds as she walked toward a small clump of trees.

This appointment would be more challenging. The boy wasn't going to sleep before sunrise, so she would have to encounter him while he was awake. Sloanan sighed. The boy was young, only twenty-one. He sat in the dark under the trees, smoking a cigarette. She'd already seen what he would have done tomorrow. The pill he would have slipped into that girl's drink. The rape back at his apartment. There was no hesitation as she took two last steps toward him, pulling off her gloves.

Sloanan ground the cigarette into the dirt with the toe of her boot. She left the boy's body in the shadows and made her way back across the green. Shush-shush sounded the grass. The darkness



hung around her like a shawl, familiar and close. Darkness ought to be familiar, it had been twenty years since she'd seen the light of day.

The third appointment was on Princes Street. The walk there seemed longer than it usually did. She passed Calton Hill and paused for a moment, looking up. It was up there, twenty years ago tonight, that the Shadow had appeared to her. Sloanan had been sitting against a column of Edinburgh's Disgrace, looking out over the city lights. She'd clenched her fists and her nails had bit into her palms. Hate had rushed through her veins like fire. A man had appeared in front of her, dressed in all black.

In front of her now stood The Balmoral, a luxurious Victorian-style hotel which acted as a temporary home to the privileged. The Balmoral clock rose high above her, showing half past three on its huge face. Crossing the wide road, she walked into the lobby and headed upstairs. She pulled off her gloves and put them in her coat pocket.

Barely ten minutes later, Sloanan walked back into the lobby, gloves in place once again. The woman had been alone in the large hotel room. Too easy, really. When police reviewed the security tapes the next day, the woman in black could not be identified. None of the cameras had captured her face.

Sloanan's last appointment was on a quiet residential street near the Royal Botanical Gardens. She walked slowly along the Water of Leith for a short way, listening to the wet sound it made as it flowed steadily toward the North Sea. Going where it was supposed to go. Where would she go when her turn was over?

This house had a turquoise door. She walked up the steps to it. Inside, the house was messy. Clothes, newspapers, alcohol bottles, and take-out boxes were strewn on the floor. It smelled like beer and Chinese food. She walked into a bedroom. A young woman slept there, curled up in ball. Sloanan stood beside the bed. The girl had light colored hair. Her face was youthful and the bruises Sloanan could see on her face and arm made the girl look even younger. She was really no more than a child. A child whose fate had been chosen. Now all Sloanan had to do was carry it out, to be the Shadow one last time.

She reached her gloved hand out to the girl and shook her awake.

The girl woke up with a start, scrambling away from the stranger. "Who are you?" she gasped. She felt around her for something to use as a weapon.

Sloanan spoke quietly, "I am the Shadow. I came because of what you would do tomorrow to Ethan and Kyla."

The girl clambered to her feet on the other side of the bed, brandishing a hairbrush. "How do you know about me?"

Sloanan continued calmly, pulling off her gloves as she spoke. "Instead of killing you, you will take my place. This is the geas I place upon you."

"Geas? What are you talking about? Get out!" the girl screamed.

"For twenty years exactly, you will become the Shadow. It is now your responsibility." Sloanan reached over the bed, quick as lightning. Her cold, bare hand touched the girl's arm. "Geas," she said again.



Manuscript Speed Dating

May 4th @ 6pm

This event is open to anyone who is ready to hand over their entire story to someone else for feedback. It doesn't have to be perfect, just at a point where you feel you would benefit from someone else's opinion. Ok, Ok, you can even bring your manuscript if you think it'll be ready within two months.

If you wish to participate then bring the first 25 pages of your story double spaced, stapled, and numbered. If you have a prologue you may skip it if you

The girl dropped to the ground, unconscious but alive. A first for Sloanan.

Sloanan gave a sigh, relief and release flooding through her. She looked at the gloves in her hand and then dropped them on the bed. The girl would figure it out as she had all those years ago.

Sloanan made her way out of the house, closing the door softly by habit. Outside, she could hear the Water of Leith, still flowing as it was before. The fresh air caressed her face. At the bottom of the front steps, there was a street lamp. And another next to it on either side. And another, a whole line of them continuing in both directions. She stepped into the shine of a street lamp and held her hands in the light, turning them this way and that. It seemed like she saw them for the first time. She let them swing loose as she walked in the line of light, east to the docks. East toward the coming day.



Genevieve Smith
1st Place

Relatively Haunted

Bertha stopped at the red light, grateful for the chance to check her location. She squinted through her bifocals at the street sign. Maple Drive. Left at the next street, then, according to her notes. The light turned green and she eased forward, trying not to tip over her “Bag of Tricks,” as her grandson, Travis, called it.

She was just pulling into the left turn lane a block later when a old, white Cadillac station wagon veered around the corner toward her, siren howling and objects trailing from the overloaded roof rack. She clicked her tongue at their careless driving and made her own proper left turn as they squealed away in the opposite direction. The house should be about half a block down. She searched the house numbers: 123, 129, 135.... there it was. She clicked her tongue again. Someone had dropped a vacuum-cleaner-thing in the driveway. It had the same company logo as that Cadillac.

She carefully maneuvered around the whatever-it-was and parked almost straight in the driveway. She turned off the car and took a deep breath. She had done this many times before, but each time was a bit different. She never knew how hard it was going to be.

She pulled her Bag of Tricks to her lap and unzipped it. There was her Soul Machine that Travis kept in working order no matter what she put it through. All its accessories were there. Her old-fashioned tools were neatly tucked into the side pocket, even though Travis said they were obsolete.

After another breath, she grabbed her cane, then struggled out of the car, cane in one hand, bag in the other. She shut her car door and slid the vacuum-thing over to the grass with her foot as she read the name tag on its back. Hmph. “Egon” should take better care of his tools.

There were a lot of stairs to the front door. She paused halfway and leaned against the railing to rest. The stairs were littered with rosary beads, upside-down books, a yarmulke, a candle, and various other mysterious objects. A spray of salt trailed over the edge of the porch.

It seemed others had already failed. Well, it was good she had more powerful tools at her disposal.

She struggled up the last of the stairs and rang the doorbell. After only a few seconds, the door was yanked opened by a young woman with tear tracks down her face.

“Thank you for coming,” the woman said, “but I’ve decided to sell the house. It’s useless to try anymore. Nothing works. My parents won’t help, either. They say it’s my problem for turning my back on their religions.”

“Oh, Sofia, honey,” Bertha said, remembering the name on her answering machine, “now that they’ve found you, they’ll follow you. You can’t get away from them now.”

“No,” Sofia wailed. “They tap on the inside of my computer and distract me from my work.

They talk to me in my sleep and wake me in the middle of the night, saying,

choose. We recommend bringing three copies but it is not mandatory.

Everyone will get a chance to read your 25 pages and request to read more. If you request their manuscript and they request yours then it’s a match. We’ll e-mail you both one another’s information and you two love-birds can work out an exchange. The more manuscripts you request the more likely you are to get a match.

‘Remember me.’ There are so many of them and they’re always here!” She dissolved into sobs. “I want them g-g- gone!”

“Let me in.” Bertha tried to sound soothing and confident. “We can fix this. I’ve done it dozens of times.” She patted her Bag of Tricks. “When we’re finished, they won’t bother you again.”

“Are you sure?” Sofia asked. “Oh, who cares, I don’t have any other ideas.” She stepped aside and held open the door.

As Bertha stepped forward, she caught a glimpse of a face in the window. “Is your husband home?”

“I’m not married. No one’s here but us—and them.” Sofia swallowed. “Have you changed your mind?” Her hand shook on the door.

“Nonsense,” Bertha said. “Let’s do it.” She waved her cane like a sword and stepped through the door.

Sofia showed Bertha to the kitchen table and gave her a glass of water, then slumped in a chair and dropped her head in her hands.

Bertha set her bag on the chair next to her and pulled out her Soul Machine. She set it on the table, unfolded it, and pressed the power button.

“It will take a few minutes to load,” she said, “but we can start without it.” She pulled her old-fashioned tools from the side pocket, mentally laughing at Travis. He never understood the value of low-tech answers.

She looked up to see every previously empty chair in the room now filled. Her eyes widened. She slowly put the papers on the table as more and more people filed into the room until every foot of tile was occupied. The crowd pressed closer to allow more to squeeze in behind.

“Well.” Bertha cleared her throat. “Hello.” She pulled out a pencil and lowered herself slowly into the chair. “Sofia, let’s start with what you know.” She pulled the first pedigree chart toward her and wrote Sofia’s name. “Your parents are living, so what do you know about your grandparents?”

“My father’s parents were Russian Jews.” Sofia lifted her head to speak through her tears. “My mother’s were Italian Catholics. I know where they were born.” Timid hope crept into her voice.

“That’s a great start,” Bertha said, entering the information on the chart as her laptop beeped, connected to her wi-fi hotspot, and automatically opened the FamilySearch website.

The crowd parted to let four of the ghosts move next to the table.



Martha Rasmussen
2nd Place

Blue Night Garden

Krella last saw her father on Seed Morning almost three years earlier. Like most parents, he had lain peacefully, understanding the sacrifice. Every parent, whether father or mother, was required to recline within the hollow of the sandy soil in their family gardens.

When Krella had knelt on the loose soil next to him to say goodbye, his hands had trembled from age as he held her cheeks. “Tally your hours, not the number of flowers,” he said. The cliché that parents told their children had given her some comfort at the time. When the sleeping tea had worked to slow his heart and close his eyes, she had buried him, the seed of their garden. Yet his bone seeds and her countless hours of labor had produced only five flowers, five chances.

Krella stood up on the damp dirt, panting. She looked from her small garden to Hyla, the sister planet, which usually glowed red rather than water blue. A few strands of her yellow hair danced before her face in the warm breeze. A trickle of sweat ran down her small forehead and both of her hands throbbed. Her skin was no longer its natural brown. It was dark from her extra time in the sun during the special plants’ three-year life cycle.

The Godmen would pass through the neighborhoods soon and chant vocally throughout the night until the High Leader and the Council of Three had been chosen. They would repossess the land of every individual or pair of siblings that did not produce the important fruit. She thought about the disadvantage she had, like many households, with just one person to sow the seeds, to weed, and to maintain a water system. She would be punished for not doing the work of a sibling pair. For having just one parent’s bone seeds rather than two.

The brother and sister in the next home, who hadn’t worked at all that day, had grown nine flowers with thick, red buds. They hadn’t seemed to have used any special methods, either. Across the communal plot, though the reeds growing in the ditches blocked most of the view, the sisters tended to their nineteen flowers. Nineteen. They had buried two parents, but she didn’t know of any garden with that many plants. Their slave birds were the same as everyone else’s. They said the same chants as the rest of the community. How was it done?

Krella crouched and drank from her bowl. The warm water was topped by a thin layer of dust that she noticed when the strange light reflected off the surface. The bitter liquid flowed into her as she gazed at the few friends she could see who were gathered together at the central gazebo. Deeper shadows formed in the dull blue, and everyone looked like ghosts or dreams.

The neighbors’ adjoining gardens formed a great circle surrounded by their reed homes. Each plot was set apart by ditches through which flowed the rain waters.

Krella had walked their small nation’s pathway through each circular neighborhood enough times to learn a few things by watching the other citizens. Of course, she had never asked anyone about their methods. She always tried to follow the Sacred Laws.

Everyone she saw on her daily walks and those she ate with every Starlight Night, were so far away from her heart this momentous night. They were strangers. Yes, they may have been feeling or worrying just as she, but her connection was

with the giant flowers near her feet.

Though no one fully experienced Blue Night more than once in their lifetime, Krella was more afraid than excited about it. She hadn't joined any neighbors for their special Blue Morning meals. She had focused on her garden instead.

What if all her efforts had been in vain? Her plain, orange eyes attempted to distinguish her garden's new weeds from the defensive herbs. The evening's blue light caused by Hyla distorted the vegetations' shades of green.

The Godmen taught that the close approach of the two planets allowed Hyla's atmosphere to combine with theirs. This created a passage from the Spirit World. The rare glow it caused would be bright and shine for most of the night, so she didn't think her house candles would be necessary.

Krella's work had taken almost every spare moment since her father had been planted. His bone seeds had produced healthy flowers. Yet, she did not feel ready for nature's momentous event, but it didn't matter. The large triennials with blue stems and buds in the form of wide, dense discs had survived drenching winters and torrid summers. They were ready to give fruit or die.

She tried not to compare her scars or her darkened skin to that of her neighbors. Krella simply hoped she had labored earnestly enough. Weeds hiding within the shadows of her beloved greenery were apparently endless. She crouched to pull the roots of twin grass and a darting sprout.

During the hottest months, she had found dozens of cracked bone seeds. And despite her constant care, monster worms from the deep soils had stolen many of the bones.

The High Leader and Council might care about her sacrifice, but she would still be banished to Fossil Island if her garden did not generate the vital fruit. She needed to do more. She looked around and no one was watching her, so from her pocket she pulled out a little bag containing oil. She applied two drops to the center of each flower for the last time; oil her father had created from the flowers of the current High Leader and Council. No one else knew and she had sworn never to reveal her father's secret.

The oil in the gynoeceum sack was almost gone, but she had promised to get the plants of whomever became the High Leader if she could. Then she would make more oil and more containers. Like her father had done, she would preserve it until the next Seed Morning.

Nourishing the plants with oil made more sense than the garden chants and bird slaving. Repetitious phrases and wild birds tied to the garden trees didn't seem to accomplish anything. Most everyone paid special alms to the Godmen, too. Krella did it sometimes because it was expected, but she no longer believed that those actions had any power. Her father had taught her to observe the many types of magic and note the varied results that seemed to indicate their uselessness.

Krella hid the oil bag in her clothing and knelt. She packed black dirt against two of the short stems, further staining her one-piece work suit. The mild scent of the stiff buds mingled with the odor of blue juice someone was making nearby. The compact blossoms emitted a spicy odor which signified that the harvest would soon begin.

The floating world above, so close that night, filled a corner of the sky. Its light brightened the entire land and had often allowed her to escape torturous daytime weeding sessions. For that, she was thankful.

Krella stared at Hyla's faint continents and scattered clouds which gradually disappeared into her world's shadow. Yet, she found herself musing over her use of the tree hop's watering technique. The tight arrangement of living leaves from two small vine trees funneled extra water to her plants.

She ached to do something more, but as they said, "To stack bread, knead it less." So as the night air cooled and people went to their own gardens, she stopped cultivating to sit and wait alone like hundreds of others.

Many hundreds more waited side by side with a brother or sister.

Time crept. Hyla moved through the sky. The eager rays bathed the garden. The occasional bug whirred through the hallowed light. She stood up with difficulty, and her exhausted legs wobbled under her light frame.

If her gardening did not preserve her father's essence, she would regret the occasions she didn't make extra trips to the well, quitting early when the blisters on her feet burst, and waiting for the sun to set before working on the most difficult gardening tasks. She stood over a precious stem, pretending wishes could spawn some impossible magic, just like the chants were supposed to do, according to the Godmen.

Then they appeared. The Godmen marched through the circular neighborhood in single file, dressed in short pants and high cloth hats, each of their assigned color. They softly chanted "How Great Blue".

Krella rubbed her hands together and though her insides were twisted with worry, she wiped her face and bowed to the religious leaders as they promenaded by on the dirt pathway. They ended their inceptive parade at the village hall a short distance away.

Moments later, the village's juice man gave a loud and joyful cry. "A child! I have a child! Hyla has blessed me!"

"It's begun," Krella said, startled.

The man laughed and ran to set the child down on the path, though he took care that the baby not step on Krella's fertilized soil. She could only nod and fake a smile. The new little creature walked with his father from one polite neighbor to another, teetering on his first steps.

The stem under her shadow was unchanged. Nevertheless, she made up her mind to wait with hope rather than dread. Krella visualized one of her plants yielding the fruit.

Hyla rose toward the zenith and seemed to have gotten smaller as the night deepened. Krella's mental images were interrupted by vocal glee from new parents several times. Many of them joined together in dancing on the walkway and parading the new children. They held the little ones up toward the beaming light while Krella and the rest of her neighbors waited at their plots for some result.

One of her shoots stirred, her agonized wait ending. She knelt next to it and her knees sunk into the soft soil, already dry. All other sights and sounds were lost to her in that moment. The stem's top, almost an arm's length across, released a scarlet liquid with its pungent odor. It dripped the nasty fluid between the buds Krella had worked so hard to protect. It was dead, though the flower would take weeks to rot away.

Krella wiped her eyes of the tears, feeling grains of soil against her skin. She didn't bother cleaning the red stain from her knees.

No baby. She had four more chances to succeed...or fail. There was a chance, wasn't there? She could still earn what she had worked so many days and nights for. What would take place if they all died? Yes, she would be banished and that would be disgraceful. But what would that mean for her father? Forever gone,

destroyed? Had his essence simply melded into the particles of the ground. Had his spirit been twisted and broken until he thought no more and his memory was erased by rock and soil? She didn't even know if the Godmen could really discern such things.

Another flower bent and excreted its red fluid up through the white buds. This time it was translucent and it drained out slowly to pile loosely upon the ground.

Was it really happening? She laughed at herself out loud and shook her hands for a moment.

The outer edge of the plant broke apart into several pieces and peeled outward as the substance continued to escape. Krella did not dare touch it until she saw the buds part and the head of the baby appeared. She placed her soiled hands among the stringy, moist fibers. Wiggling her fingers through the filaments and letting her weight do the rest, her arms descended into the stem until she was reaching under the baby's arms. To pull it out, she rested one elbow on the ground and lifted the newborn to the top of the birth gel.

The tears that remained in her parched body made their way down her face to clean away more dust. She poured drinking water onto her daughter and watched her wiggle and squirm while the warm air dried her red skin.

Krella's father was not gone. His strong bones were now a child whose each movement she observed carefully and thoughtfully. She lay the baby down, but the red-haired girl turned over and lifted herself to her hands and knees. Hyla's light reflected off the new-born as if she was also a heavenly body. The baby smiled at Krella, who gently held the little face within her hands.

So there would be two in the tiny house a few lengths away. Krella would gather the flowers of the new High Leader before they decayed and would teach her daughter how to use the oil. Was it the oil? Others had children without it.

The unnamed child patted the messy pile beneath her and watched Krella. Another flower expelled the nasty after-bloom that signified a failed germination. Krella knew that her daughter would have a harder time without a sibling when the next Seed Morning arrived, but her heart couldn't be saddened. The baby shook its arms and laughed at the slave bird in the neighbor's tree.

More parents, a sibling pair who lived three houses down, approached with their own stumbling child. The man and woman stared at Krella's garden while their son attempted to balance on his unstable legs. The woman pointed at another of Krella's flowers.

A fourth stem was open, unveiling another baby. "Oh, what a miracle! I have two!" She crawled to the plant, helped the other baby girl out of her stem and laid her next to the first child. Krella poured the last of her water over the tiny girl. It was more than she had dared hope for. Sisters. Of course, about half of all births were siblings. There had been no reason to hope for less.

The girls poked at each other and grabbed each others' tiny hands. Their smiles and giggles captured Krella's heart. This was worth all the pain and heat. It was worth the long days. The moment was priceless and Krella felt she would remember it perfectly until she sacrificed herself in the garden one day.

Gradually, she became aware that a multitude, gleaming blue, had gathered. They were watching the scene, unique to her that night. Many weren't focused upon her two washed fruits delivered by the soil and light. She twisted her bony back and turned to find the focus of attention.

The far stem in her garden was reacting in the blue-tinted light. She crawled to it and glanced at her active daughters. Was it really happening? Those little people had been there in her garden for so many days and she hadn't had an inkling. Krella reached into the plant and pulled the youngest child out into her lap. His purple and bruised body was covered by mucus but it was seemingly perfect. She had earned the Council of Three?

How had her father known that the oil would work? Three years of chants and bird slaves had not helped

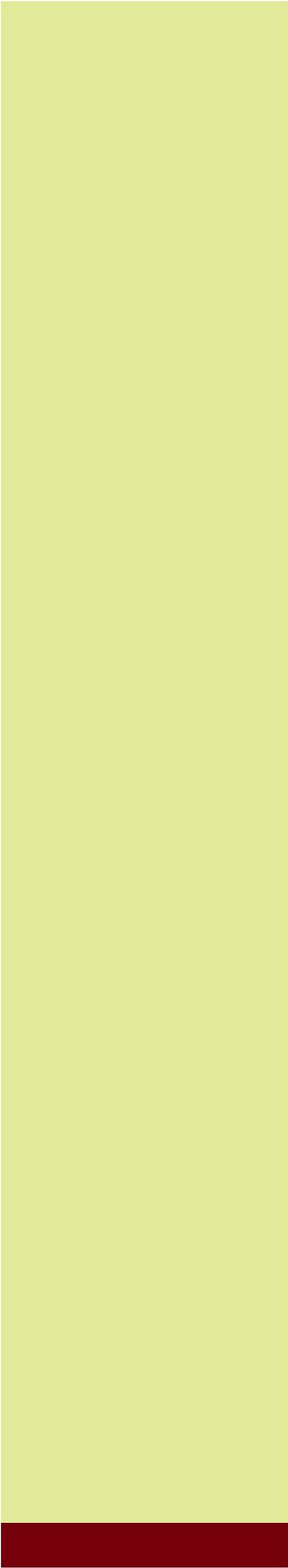
anyone. It was the oil. Krella needed to decide if it would remain secret. But she was being too bold to even consider it. Her children's thoughts, games and sayings would be her guide as the High Leader of the small nation. She would see her father within their faces and hear him within their voices.

Krella savored the words as neighbors sang the "High Hymn". A few citizens ran to signal the rest of the nation. As people approached her garden, they joined the group, with their new children or empty-handed, in praising Krella as the new High Leader and her babies as the Council of Three.

Krella dug her feet into the garden soil, held her babies, and though her voice faltered at the waves of joy and relief, she led the chorus on Blue Night.



Jerry Timothy
3rd Place



Acknowledgements

To all the participants in this year's contest, thank you. The quality of stories submitted was excellent. They all have the potential for publication in magazines and anthologies. I hope to see them in print soon.



To the judges, thank you. It takes time and energy to judge your peers' work. Thank you for your honesty and expertise as readers.



To the members of Utah Valley Writers, without you, this would not exist. It has been my pleasure to serve as your president.

Thank you,

Daphne Higbee



"It's none of their business you have to learn to write. Let them think you were born that way."

Ernest Hemingway

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