

EFFORT

A story
about beating the odds
through hard work.



By Nick Marvin

EFFORT BOOK

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Written & Published by

Nick Marvin

www.nickmarvin.com

Typesetting by Tasha Hutchinson

Illustrations by Sharon Grey

Chapters and illustration editing by Sonya Demourtzidis

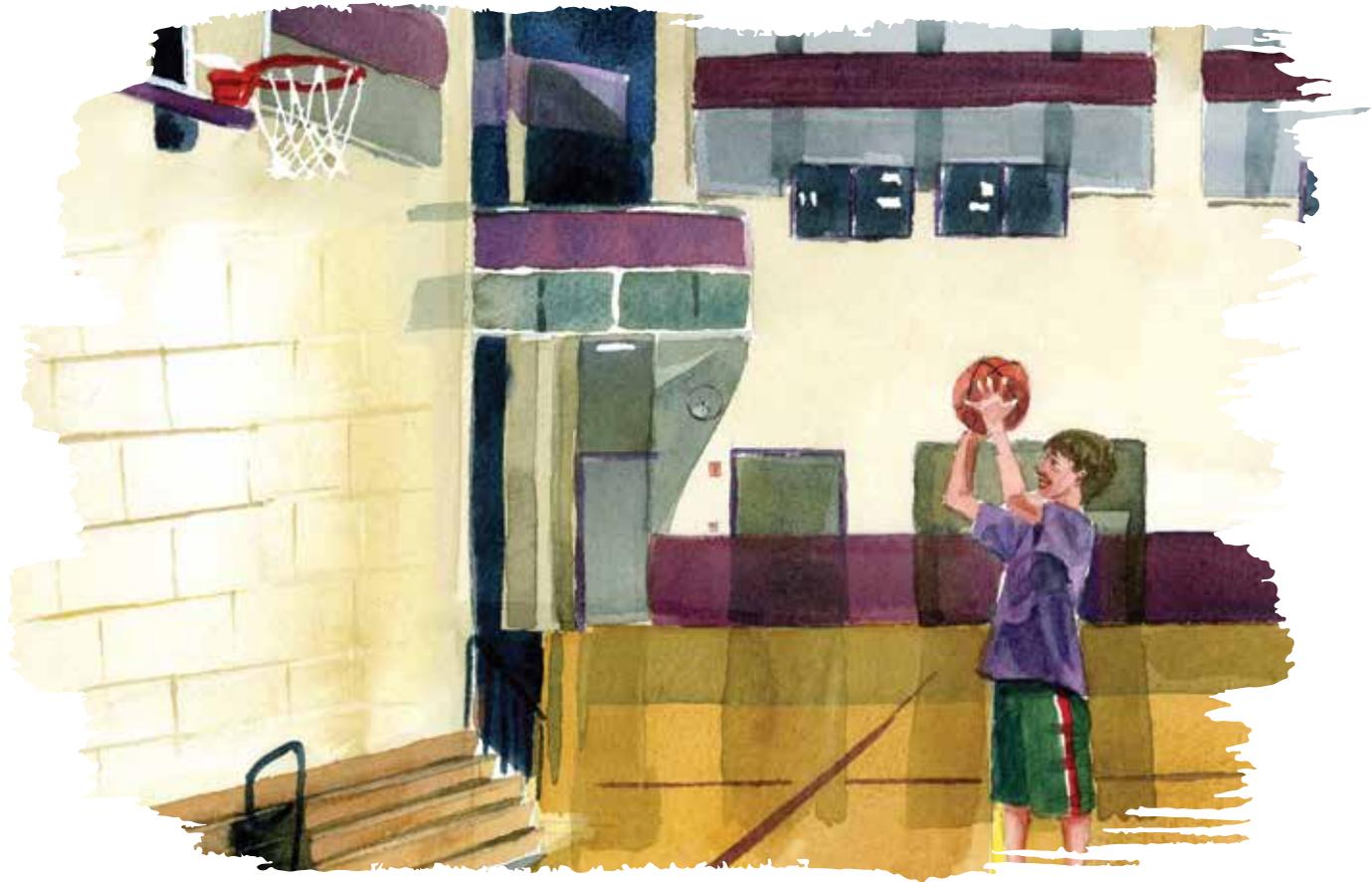
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Dedicated to the Seat of Wisdom of whom all words fall short



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Water-boy

Thomas was an average boy. He was of average height and weight, and not too athletic.

When there were team games at school he was always at the end of the line, picked last or near last.

Thomas loved basketball. But he knew he would never make the school team – St Jude’s Boomers – as a player, so he spoke to the head coach Mr Wilson about becoming the water-boy.

This way, even if he couldn't play, he could still be involved with the team.

When the coach said ‘yes’, Thomas was very excited.





Every day he would arrive at least an hour before practice. He would sweep the court and wipe down the team bench. He would check all the balls to ensure they were inflated and then stack them on the rack. Then he would clean and fill all the player water bottles, as well as the big blue reserve tank.

When the players arrived, he would help them get ready and then watchfully stand behind the team bench waiting to top up water bottles for the two-hour session.

If a player fell, and the floor got slippery with their sweat, Thomas was ready to wipe it dry.

When players came off the court for a break, he would have a towel waiting for them.



Private Practice

Once practice was over and everyone left, it was Thomas' job to pack up and put away everything. It usually took a good hour, but he didn't mind. He felt that it was his way of helping the team.

Before he turned off the lights and went home, Thomas would take a spare ball and practise shooting. He could dribble well but he wasn't great at shooting. So he would set a goal of making five three-pointers each night.

He remembered what the head coach said to the players during training and practised it when everyone left. He would picture the action and keep repeating it until he got it right.

When he reached his goal he would try to get three in a row – without missing. This wasn't easy but Thomas was in no hurry. His mum didn't finish work until six at night and she would pick him up from school on her way home. So rather than sit and wait doing nothing, he would spend his time shooting.

After a few months of being water-boy and practising his shots each night, Thomas had become a reasonably good shooter – especially from the three-point line.

He now had a goal of shooting 10 three-pointers in a row each night and often he would do it at his very first attempt. He would then aim for 15 and some nights even 20.

It took a lot of effort to run and retrieve the ball every time he shot it as there was no one around to rebound the ball for him.

Before long, not only was he getting to be quick on his feet, he was making at least 25 three-point shots without missing.

But no one knew! He'd never dare shoot during the team's practice session. During practice he was the water-boy... and that was it.



Working through holidays

When the school year had finished, Thomas asked Mr Wilson if he could come in during the holidays and shoot baskets. Mr Wilson was surprised.

“I didn’t know you played,” he said.

“Ah...well, I don’t. I just like to shoot hoops,” said Thomas. “Something to do whilst mum is at work. I have the key to the courts and I’ll be sure to keep it clean.”

“I suppose,” Mr Wilson said. “I’ll be around every few days with some of the juniors, so as long as you can help out with them, I think we have a deal.”

Thomas was thrilled. He could continue his shooting and didn’t have to stay home watching TV or playing computer games. All he wanted to do was play for the Boomers – even though that seemed impossible.





Every day Thomas would come to school, clean the courts, fill his own water bottle, get a towel and even put on an old Boomers uniform. Then he would shoot until he made 30 shots in a row - mainly from the three-point line. He imagined he was in a game and would describe what he was doing like a TV commentator as he dribbled and shot. Then he would run for the rebound, dribble back up and shoot again.

“Scores are tied,” he would shout, “LeBron has the ball...he’s not going to pass, he fakes to the left, then the right and up it goes...another buzzer beater from the superstar...”

When he was done he would pack everything away and wait for his mum.

Getting noticed

Soon school started and Thomas was excited about practice starting up again. He loved being part of the team. Mr Wilson was a good coach but also a very good man. He reminded him of his dad who died a few years ago when Thomas was only 10 years old.

Mr Wilson would always chat to Thomas before the players arrived about how he was going with his studies and at home. After training he would walk up to Thomas, shake his hand and say “Thanks Thomas for helping us today – you’re an important part of our team.”

One night, Thomas was shooting hoops after training, as he always did, when he was startled by Mr Wilson who had returned to get his phone that he had mistakenly left behind.

He saw Thomas shoot and was impressed.





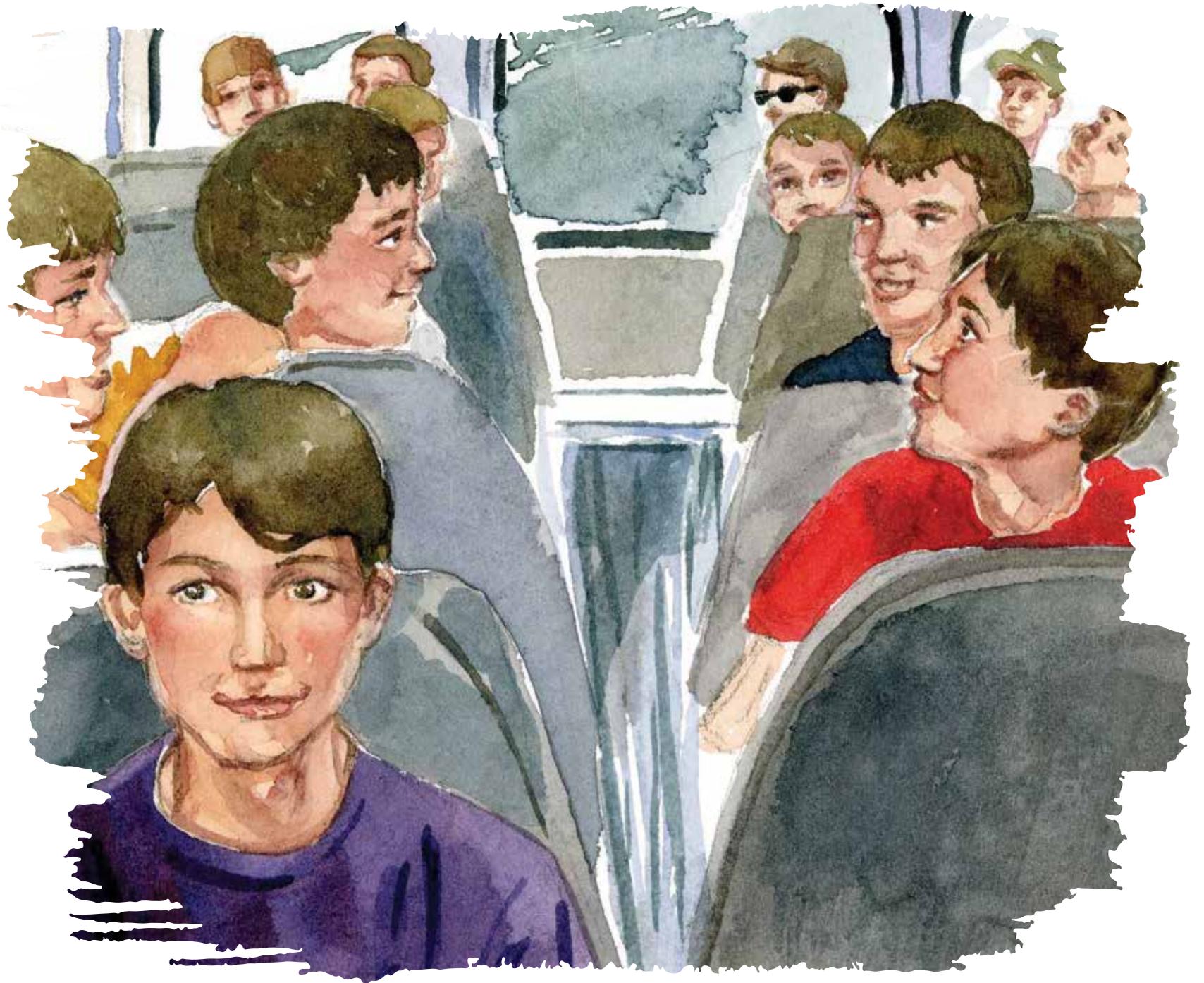
“Who taught you to shoot like that?” he asked from the other end of the court. “It’s nothing,” said Thomas, “I just listen to what you say to the players and repeat it at night.”

“Well, keep it up,” Mr Wilson said. “You’ve got an almost perfect style. I wish some of the players on our team would pay as much attention as you.”

“Will I ever be good enough to play for the Boomers?” Thomas asked.

“To be frank, it’s unlikely,” Mr Wilson replied. “The guys we have are great athletes. I expect at least four of them to play professionally one day. But keep practising, especially if you’re having fun...I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Thomas was sad that he was not as strong or tall or athletic as the players on the team, but he didn’t care, as he shot the ball up and ran for the rebound. “32,” he counted not forgetting his goal of making 40 shots for the day.



Road trip

The next day, Mr Wilson walked into training early as Thomas was setting up, to have his usual chat.

“Hey Thomas,” he said. “What’ll your mum say about you coming on the road with us next week?”

“I think she’ll be OK with that,” said Thomas, “I’ll ask her tonight and let you know in the morning.”

“David has injured his ankle and Peter, who usually backs him up is sick with the flu, so we have a spare spot and I think it’d be fun to take our water-boy with us on the trip,” Mr Wilson said. “Think of it as a little ‘thank you’ for all the work you’ve done for us over the last year and a bit.”

Thomas was thrilled. He couldn’t wait to get home and ask his mum if he could go. He wouldn’t get to play but he would get to travel on the team bus just like a player.

“Mum said yes!” he screamed at Mr Wilson when he walked into school the next day. “I can’t wait!”

Thomas was quiet throughout the bus trip. He listened to what everyone said. He was new and was unsure what the water-boy was expected to do. So he just sat up the front and took it all in.

When they got to St Marys, the school they were to play the next day, Thomas was first off the bus. He followed Mr Wilson with a bag of balls in one hand and the water bottles in the other – ready to set-up and get to work.

Mr Wilson smiled. He loved the effort Thomas always put in with everything he did. He wished his players worked as hard.

Making the team

The team practised and then went to their hotel where they would stay the night. Thomas had to bunk with two other players – Brad and Greg. They were both good guys, but not really his friends. The three played a board game for a while and then went to bed.

The St Marys basketball team won the championship the previous year and seven players from that year were still on the team. It would be a tough win – especially on the road.

Thomas didn't understand why it was harder to win on the road – he was just excited to be with the team in a new place.

But he would find out soon enough.

When they got to the game, the same stadium they trained at the previous day was now full with students. Some even had signs and posters to cheer their team on.





Thomas ignored them and started organising the water bottles and towels. He turned to Mr Wilson and was surprised to see him unusually upset.

“Is everything OK?” Thomas asked.

“Brad’s feeling very ill and says he can’t play,” Mr Wilson said. “We have to field ten players and without David and Peter, I’m down to nine.”

“Well, why don’t you make me the tenth player,” Thomas replied. “You don’t have to play me, but at least we won’t get disqualified.”

Mr Wilson hadn't even thought of that.

“Great idea Thomas,” he muttered, ashamed. “Now you’re a Boomer!”

Thomas was thrilled but he knew he would never hit the court so he kept doing his usual jobs.

Game time

“You better wear this,” Mr Wilson yelled as the game was about to start, handing him Brad’s number 8 singlet. “Just stick some tape over the name.”

Thomas ran into the locker room and put on his singlet and shorts, laced up his old shoes, excited but sad that his mum wasn’t there to see him play.

The game started just after Thomas returned from the locker room. But rather than sit on the bench with the team he handed out towels and water bottles to the rest of the players.

The Boomers weren’t playing very well. They were down 18-12 at the end of the first quarter.

Things didn’t improve in the second. Greg, the team’s shooting guard, had three fouls and Mr Wilson’s frown was getting worse.

At half-time the Boomers were down 40 to 26 and the mood in the locker room was sombre.





Thomas didn't know what to do or say to make Mr Wilson and the team feel better. It was strange enough being on the road in a different town and a different school, but here he was listed as a Boomers' player – one of the team. It was a lot to take in.

To get his mind off things, Thomas did what he knew best – hand out water bottles.

Greg had a fourth foul to start the third quarter and Mr Wilson was furious.

“We don't have a back-up in your spot,” he yelled at Greg in the team huddle after calling a time-out. “One more foul and you're out of the game. There's 18 minutes of basketball left and I need you to finish the game.”

The scores were 51 to 38 at the start of the fourth quarter and St Marys opened with a long-range three pointer that made everyone on the Boomers team sigh.

Hitting the court

“We can still win this,” shouted Thomas from behind the bench. Everyone turned to look at him.

Thomas was startled. He didn’t mean to yell out loud. He was just talking to himself like he did when he was alone after training imagining he was LeBron.

At that very moment the deafening sound of the referee’s whistle was heard across the stadium. Greg was called for his fifth foul. This meant he was out of the game – with three minutes to play.

Mr Wilson used his final time-out.

“I’ve got no options,” he said to the team calmly. Almost as if he’d lost the game. The rest of the team seem rejected as well.

“We’re down 63 v 48. I think we should save ourselves for tomorrow night. What do you guys think?”

The team was silent. A few players nodded. They had to travel 100kms the next day and play St Joseph’s – a team that was good, but one that the Boomers had a fair chance of beating.

“Let’s run the bench and see what we have,” Mr Wilson said. He then looked at Thomas and said something no one expected.

“Thomas, I’m putting you in. Give me whatever you’ve got on defence and just spread the floor on offence.”

Thomas couldn’t believe it.



The first basket

“He wants me to play!” thought Thomas.

The rest of the team were astonished. They looked at Mr Wilson perplexed.

Thomas?

“The game’s over,” Mr Wilson exclaimed.

The Boomers had possession and Thomas ran to the end of the court and stood in the corner by the baseline. He was replacing Greg and knew every play. That’s where Greg was meant to be and his job was to catch and shoot.

But Thomas knew his team mates would not pass him the ball. The opposition didn’t bother guarding Thomas either. They knew he was just there to make up numbers.

The shot clock was running down. With just three seconds to go there was no other option but pass and suddenly Thomas saw the ball come in his direction.

He stopped thinking. He started talking out loud again like a TV commentator: “He gets the ball, he’s not passing it, he shoots...”





Thomas took the shot and it went straight into the basket touching nothing but the net.

No one could believe it. Thomas was still talking to himself.

In defence Thomas knew he was neither strong nor athletic, but he was going to give it his all. Just like he rebounded for himself alone each night after training, he would run back as fast as he could after the ball. The St Marys' point guard slipped and the ball went loose, Thomas threw himself at the ball, to get to it before anyone else. But all he could do was tap it to his team mate. That was enough.



Six in a row

He picked himself up and ran to the same corner. This time he didn't have to wait. The ball was in his hands and up it went in a second and he made another three-pointer.

Both teams were spellbound. The St Marys players had never heard of Thomas and the Boomers team knew little more than his name.

Just to see if it was beginners luck, the Boomers point guard passed Thomas the ball a third time hoping for a miracle from the water-boy and sure enough ...another three.

Thomas did it a fourth and a fifth time to level the scores 63 – 63.

There was only 30 seconds left in the game.

After a time-out, St Mary's dribbled up the ball and took the entire 24 seconds to shoot and made two points.

With just six seconds left in the game, Mr Wilson yelled out to Thomas to take the final shot.

Thomas could not believe his ears. Mr Wilson now believed in him and his ability. He took a deep breath as he shot and made his sixth three-pointer on the buzzer to win the game 66 v 65. It was unbelievable!

The entire St Marys' school was quiet. They had lost an unlosable game.

The Boomers were dumbfounded too. The players looked at Thomas in awe.

HOME	3:31	GOALS
65	PERIOD 4	66
FOULS	PLAYER-FOUL	FOULS
4	44 4	4
SCORE	MATCH	SCORE





Effort pays off

“We didn’t know you could play,” Thomas’ team mates said to him in the locker room.

“I can’t,” said Thomas. “I just practise some shots after training each day while I wait for my mum to pick me up.”

“For how long?” Greg asked.

“Usually about two hours each day,” Thomas replied.

“Two hours a day! That’s more than what we do at training!”

“Well I don’t have much else to do or too many friends to hang out with. So I just practice.”

Mr Wilson interrupted the conversation.





“Maybe I was wrong all along,” he said.
“Sometimes effort and hard work are more important than talent. We all saw you shoot six straight three-pointers tonight, but I also saw the best defensive intensity I’ve seen on this team all season.

“Thomas, you may not be the tallest or the most athletic guy on this team, but the long hours you’ve spent practicing and training has made you one of the best players the Boomers have produced.

“I want you on the team for the rest of this season.”

The whole team nodded. They stood up around Thomas and put their hands together in unison over his, and shouted “1, 2, 3...Boomers” as they welcomed their newest team member.

EFFORT

Thomas did not have the talent or the athletic ability to make his high school basketball team. Instead he was relegated to being the water-boy.

But that did not deter him from being the best at his job.

When training was done, and the players had long gone, Thomas stayed back and practised alone, trying to get better every day.

Read about his journey in this heart-warming tale of a young boy's determination to beat the odds.



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