

Lancefly: Group Uses Custom Backdoor to Target Orgs in Government, Aviation, Other Sectors

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The Lancefly advanced persistent threat (APT) group is using a custom-written backdoor in attacks targeting organizations in South and Southeast Asia, in activity that has been ongoing for several years.

Lancefly may have some links to previously known groups, but these are low confidence, which led researchers at Symantec, by [Broadcom Software](#), to classify this activity under a new group name.

Lancefly's custom malware, which we have dubbed Merdoor, is a powerful backdoor that appears to have existed since 2018. Symantec researchers observed it being used in some activity in 2020 and 2021, as well as this more recent campaign, which continued into the first quarter of 2023. The motivation behind both these campaigns is believed to be intelligence gathering.

The backdoor is used very selectively, appearing on just a handful of networks and a small number of machines over the years, with its use appearing to be highly targeted. The attackers in this campaign also have access to an updated version of the ZXShell rootkit.

The targets in this most recent activity, which began in mid-2022 and continued into 2023, are based in South and Southeast Asia, in sectors including government, aviation, education, and telecoms. Symantec researchers previously saw the Merdoor backdoor used in activity that targeted victims in the same geographies in the government, communications, and technology sectors in 2020 into 2021. Like this recent activity, that activity also appeared to be highly targeted, with only a small number of machines infected.

Merdoor Backdoor

Merdoor is a fully-featured backdoor that appears to have been in existence since 2018.

The backdoor contains the following functionality:

- Installing itself as a service
- Keylogging
- A variety of methods to communicate with its command-and-control (C&C) server (HTTP, HTTPS, DNS, UDP, TCP)
- Ability to listen on a local port for commands

Instances of the Merdoor backdoor are usually identical with the exception of embedded and encrypted configuration, which determines:

- C&C communication method

- Service details
- Installation directory

Typically, the backdoor is injected into the legitimate processes `perfhos.exe` or `svchost.exe`.

The Merdoor dropper is a self-extracting RAR (SFX) that contains three files:

- A legitimate and signed binary vulnerable to DLL search-order hijacking
- A malicious loader (Merdoor loader)
- An encrypted file (`.pak`) containing final payload (Merdoor backdoor)

When opened, the dropper extracts embedded files and executes a legitimate binary in order to load the Merdoor loader.

Merdoor dropper variants have been found that abuse older versions of five different legitimate applications for the purpose of DLL sideloading:

Attack Chain

Evidence from Lancefly's earlier campaign that began in 2020 suggested that in that instance the group may have used a phishing email with a lure based on the 37th ASEAN Summit as an initial infection vector.

In this more recent activity, the initial infection vector was not entirely clear. We saw some indications of what the initial infection vector may have been in two victims, though this was not conclusive.

- In one of the government sector victims, there were indications that the initial infection vector may have been SSH brute forcing. Multiple open-source sources associate one of the IP addresses used by the threat actors in this activity with SSH brute forcing, indicating that the initial infection vector was possibly SSH brute forcing.
- In another victim, a file path (`Csidl_program_files\loadbalancer\ibm\edge\lb\servers\bin`) indicates a load balancer may have been exploited for access, indicating that the initial infection vector may have been an exposed public-facing server.

While evidence for any of these infection vectors is not definitive, it does appear to indicate that Lancefly is adaptable when it comes to the kind of infection vectors it uses.

Credential theft using non-malware techniques

In activity that also aligned with their earlier campaign in 2020/2021, the attackers used a number of non-malware techniques for credential theft on victim machines:

- PowerShell was used to launch `rundll32.exe` in order to dump the memory of a process using the `MiniDump` function of `comsvcs.dll`. This technique is often used to dump LSASS memory.
- `Reg.exe` was used to dump the SAM and SYSTEM registry hives.
- A legitimate tool by Avast was installed by the attackers and used to dump LSASS memory.

The attackers also used a masqueraded version of the legitimate archiving tool WinRAR to stage and encrypt files before exfiltration.

Notable attack chain tools and TTPs

- **Impacket Atexec:** A dual-use tool that can be used by malicious actors to create and run an immediate scheduled task on a remote target via SMB in order to execute commands on a target system. It is used by Lancefly for lateral movement across victim networks, also possibly for shellcode execution and evasion. It may have been used to delete cmdline output files.
- **Suspicious SMB activity:** Suspicious SMB activity is seen on numerous victim machines. This is likely related to the use of Impacket by the threat actors.
- **WinRAR:** An archive manager that can be used to archive or zip files – for example, prior to exfiltration. It is not clear how the attackers exfiltrate the data from victim machines, but it is most likely via Merdoor.
- **LSSAS Dumper:** Allows the attackers to swiftly steal credentials they can then use to gain further access across victim networks.
- **NBTScan:** Open-source command-line [NetBIOS scanner](#). This can be used to gather information on a network.
- **Blackloader and Prcloder:** Loaders used by the group. These loaders were also both used in earlier Merdoor activity in 2020 and 2021. They have been linked to the delivery of PlugX. Both loaders appear to be sideloaded onto victim machines. It is not clear if these loaders are exclusively used by Lancefly or if their use is shared across multiple groups.

A typical Merdoor attack chain, as seen in one of the victims, appears to be:

- Merdoor injected into either perfhost.exe or svchost.exe.
- Suspicious SMB activity is then normally observed, and the backdoor connects to its C&C server.
- This is often followed by suspicious living-off-the-land activity, such as the execution of commands like mavinject.exe (which can be used for process injection) and createdump.exe (which can be used to dump a process e.g. LSASS).
- A masqueraded WinRAR (wmiprvse.exe) file is then used to stage and encrypt files, presumably prior to exfiltration. We do not actually see the files being exfiltrated from victim networks, but we presume the Merdoor backdoor itself is used to exfiltrate them.

ZXShell Rootkit Technical Details

The ZXShell rootkit was [first reported on by Cisco in 2014](#), but the version of the tool used by Lancefly is updated, indicating that it continues to be actively developed. The source code of this rootkit is publicly available so it may be used by multiple different groups. The new version of the rootkit used by Lancefly appears to be smaller in size, while it also has additional functions and targets additional antivirus software to disable.

Loader

The loader for the rootkit is a 32-bit DLL with the export directory name "FormDll.dll" (SHA256: 1f09d177c99d429ae440393ac9835183d6fd1f1af596089cc01b68021e2e29a7).

It has the following exports:

- "CallDriver"
- "DoRVA"
- "KillAvpProcess"
- "LoadSys"
- "ProtectDllFile"

Export "Loadsys"

Whenever the export "LoadSys" is executed, it drops one of the following files based on the processor architecture:

- "[WindowsDirectory]\system32\drivers\TdiProxy.sys"
- "[WindowsDirectory]\system64\drivers\TdiProxy.sys"

These files are a malicious Windows Kernel driver. This is a variant of a driver that was [first documented in an RSA](#) blog several years ago.

It has the PDB filename: "c:\google\objchk_win7_amd64\amd64\Google.pdb"

The sample creates the device: "\Device\TdiProxy0".

It also creates the symbolic link "\DosDevices\TdiProxy0", so that it can be controlled using the pathname "\\.\TdiProxy0".

After this, the loader timestamps the dropped file by copying the timestamps from the file "[WindowsDirectory]\system32\drivers\http.sys".

Then it creates a service with the following parameters:

- ServiceName = "TdiProxy0"
- DisplayName = "TdiProxy0" (later replaced with "TdiProxy")
- BinaryPathName = "[WindowsDirectory]\system32\drivers\TdiProxy.sys"

Export "CallDriver"

"CallDriver" opens the following device, which was created by the "\\.\TdiProxy0" malicious kernel driver.

It communicates with it using the *DeviceIoControl* API.

The export expects two arguments. The first argument determines the *dwIoControlCode* parameter to use when calling the *DeviceIoControl* API and it should be one of the following strings:

- "-init",
- "-file",
- "-pack",
- "-port",
- "-removetcpview",
- "-tcpview",

- "-clearall",
- "-clear",
- "-transport",
- "-waitport",
- "-kill",
- "-antiscan",
- "-removeprocessnotify",
- "-setprocessnotify",
- "-antiantigp",
- "-hideproc",
- "-hidekey",
- "-hidefile",
- "-setprotect",

Any other values result in what looks like a buggy `dwIoControlCode` value. The second argument is a string to pass as an `lpInBuffer` parameter when calling the `DeviceIoControl` API, after conversion using the `MultiByteToWideChar` API.

Export "DoRVA"

Whenever the export "DoRVA" is executed, it reads the following file:

- "[file_directory_of_the_DLL]\Form.hlp"

The file should start with the magic string "AP32" and contains shellcode to execute in compressed form.

Export "KillAvpProcess"

This enumerates running processes and for selected processes and calls its own export "CallDriver" with the following parameters:

- first parameter: "-kill"
- second parameter: "[ProcessID]"

The export expects a single string parameter to compare with the executable file of running processes for selection.

Export "ProtectDllFile"

This calls its own export "CallDriver" with the following parameters:

- first parameter: "-file"
- second parameter: "[file_path_of_the_DLL]"

Next, it sets the following registry value:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\.ptdf\ptdffile" = "[file_path_of_the_DLL]"

Loadpoint

This is a 32-bit executable with the PDB filename: "M:\Project\database\10.0.18362\Form\Release\Form.pdb". (SHA256: 180970fce4a226de05df6d22339dd4ae03dfd5e451dcf2d464b663e86c824b8e)

Whenever the sample is executed, it loads the following DLL:

- "[file_path_of_the_running_executable]\FormDll.dll"

It also calls its export: "DoRVA".

Installation and Update Utility

The installation and update utility is a 32-bit PE executable (SHA256: a6020794bd6749e0765966cd65ca6d5511581f47cc2b38e41cb1e7fddaa0b221) that shares small but distinctive fragments of code with the Merdoor loader, which is what indicates they are part of the same toolset.

Whenever the sample is executed, it attempts to read and delete the following file containing its configuration data:

- "[file_directory_of_running_executable]\res.ini"

Update functionality

Next, it checks that:

- "\\.\TdiProxy0" device is available, and
- That its own process was started with the command-line parameter "-up".

If both checks pass, the sample attempts to tamper with various antivirus products using the "\\.\TdiProxy0" device. For example, it may terminate the processes "egui.exe", "ekrn.exe", and "msmpeng.exe".

Next, it attempts to rename the file "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\res.dat" as one of the following (depending on the Windows version):

- "[SystemDrive]\Users\All Users\Windows Defender\temp.temp"
- "[WindowsDirectory]\temp.temp".

Based on the structure of the code, the above file should start with the magic string "AP32" and could contain a DLL file in compressed form. The sample then decompresses the renamed file "temp.temp". When decompressing, it may create the temporary file "temp.temp.pack" in the same folder.

Next, the sample appends a certain marker followed by the content of "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\res.ini" (partially transformed using the XOR algorithm with the byte key 0x12) at the end of the decompressed file.

Additionally, it also creates the following registry value:

- HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT\.udf"BINTYPE" = [content of "[file_directory_of_running_executable]\res.ini" (partially transformed using the XOR algorithm with the byte key 0x12)]

Then the sample checks if the following file exists:

- "[SystemDrive]\Users\All Users\Windows Defender\DefenderSvc.dll"

If so, the sample renames the updated "temp.temp" file to replace it.

Otherwise, it checks the following registry value for the pathname to replace:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\.ecdf"ecdffile"

If that fails, it uses a default from configuration data.

Finally, it checks the following registry value for a service name:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\.tudf"tudffile"

It restarts the referred service.

Installation functionality

The sample attempts to decompress the following file:

- "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\google64.p" (64-bit processor architecture), or
- "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\google32.p" (32-bit processor architecture)

as:

- "[WindowsDirectory]\Microsoft.NET\Framework64\iesockethlp.dll" (64-bit processor architecture), or
- "[WindowsDirectory]\Microsoft.NET\Framework\iesockethlp.dll" (32-bit processor architecture)

Then it may modify one of the following registry values to hijack the corresponding service:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Services\exfat"ImagePath" = "\??\ [PATHNAME_OF_FILE_DECOMPRESSED_ABOVE]", or
- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\Services\RDPWD"ImagePath" = "\??\ [PATHNAME_OF_FILE_DECOMPRESSED_ABOVE]"

Next, it starts the corresponding service and then removes the registry value. It then attempts to tamper with various antivirus products using the "\\.\TdiProxy0" device.

It then creates a service with the following parameters:

- ServiceName: "[PER CONFIGURATION DATA]"
- ImagePath:
 - "%SystemRoot%\System32\svchost.exe -k netsvcs", or

- "%SystemRoot%\System32\svchost.exe -k ntmssvcs"
- Parameters:
 - ServiceDll:
 - "C:\WINDOWS\Microsoft.NET\Framework64\{PER CONFIGURATION DATA}", or
 - "C:\WINDOWS\Microsoft.NET\Framework\{PER CONFIGURATION DATA}"

Then it creates the following registry value:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\tudf\tudffile" = [NAME OF CREATED SERVICE]

It then deletes the following registry values:

- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\ptdf\ptdffile"
- HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\SOFTWARE\Classes\ecdf\ecdffile"

Next, it renames the following file:

- "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\res.dat"

as:

- "[WindowsDirectory]\Microsoft.NET\Framework64\{PER CONFIGURATION DATA}.back" (64-bit processor architecture), or
- "[WindowsDirectory]\Microsoft.NET\Framework\{PER CONFIGURATION DATA}.back" (32-bit processor architecture)

Based on the structure of the code, the above file should start with the magic string "AP32" and could contain a DLL file in compressed form (using aPLib for compression).

The sample then decompresses the renamed "[PER CONFIGURATION DATA].back" as "[PER CONFIGURATION DATA]".

Next, the sample appends a certain marker followed by the content of "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\res.ini" (partially transformed using the XOR algorithm with the byte key 0x12) at the end of the decompressed file.

Additionally, it also creates the following registry value:

- HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT\udf\BINTYPE" = [content of "[FILE_DIRECTORY_OF_RUNNING_EXECUTABLE]\res.ini" (partially transformed using the XOR algorithm with the byte key 0x12)]

Finally, when the configuration data includes the option "OneSelfKey", it makes a compressed copy of its own executable as (using aPLib for compression):

- "[WindowsDirectory]\SysWOW64\nethlp.hlp" (64-bit processor architecture), or
- "[WindowsDirectory]\system32\nethlp.hlp" (32-bit processor architecture).

Some samples include an embedded archive with the final payload:

- "Msrpcsvc.dll"

This is a variant of the ZXShell backdoor (SHA256:
d5df686bb202279ab56295252650b2c7c24f350d1a87a8a699f6034a8c0dd849).

Possible Links to Other Groups

The ZXShell rootkit used by Lancefly is signed by the certificate "Wemade Entertainment Co. Ltd", which was previously reported to be associated with APT41 (aka Blackfly/Grayfly). However, it is known that Chinese APT groups, such as APT41, [often share certificates](#) with other APT groups. The ZXShell backdoor has also previously been used by the HiddenLynx/APT17 group, but as the source code of ZXShell is now publicly available this does not provide a definitive link between these two groups.

Also notable is that the ZXShell rootkit loader component has the name "formdll.dll" and it has the ability to read the file "Form.hlp" and execute its contents as shellcode. Those same files were mentioned as being used in a previous report [detailing activity by the Iron Tiger \(aka Budworm/APT27\) group](#). In that case, the attackers used these filenames when loading the PlugX backdoor onto victim machines. The prevalence of such files is very low, which may indicate a potential link between that campaign and this more recent activity.

PlugX is also seen being used by Lancefly. PlugX is a remote access Trojan (RAT) with multiple functionalities including backdoor access and data exfiltration. PlugX has existed for well over a decade. It was originally used by Chinese APT groups, but its use is now very widespread, meaning it is difficult to use it as a way of attributing activity.

ShadowPad is also used by these attackers. ShadowPad is a modular RAT believed to be exclusively used by Chinese APT groups. Its capabilities are similar to PlugX, and it is often referred to as a successor to that malware.

While these overlaps and shared tools may indicate some links between Lancefly activity and activity by other APT groups, none of the overlaps are strong enough to attribute this activity and the development of the Merdoor backdoor to an already-known attack group.

Noteworthy Backdoor, Targeted Activity

This recent Lancefly activity is of note due to its use of the Merdoor backdoor, but also the low prevalence of this backdoor and the seemingly highly targeted nature of these attacks. While the Merdoor backdoor appears to have been in existence for several years, it appears to only have been used in a small number of attacks in that time period. This prudent use of the tool may indicate a desire by Lancefly to keep its activity under the radar.

The tools used and sectors targeted all point to the motivations of this attack campaign being intelligence gathering. The similarities between this recent activity and earlier activity by Lancefly indicate that the group perhaps did not realize the earlier activity had been discovered, so it was not concerned about links being made between the two. Whether or not the exposure of this activity will lead to any alteration in how the group carries out its activity remains to be seen.

Protection

For the latest protection updates, please visit the [Symantec Protection Bulletin](#).

Indicators of Compromise (IOCs)

Merdoor Backdoor

SHA256	Filename	Description
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13df2d19f6d2719beeff3b882df1d3c9131a292cf097b27a0ffca5f45e139581	a.exe	Merdoor Dropper
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8f64c25ba85f8b77cfba3701bebde119f610afef6d9a5965a3ed51a4a4b9dead	chrome_frame_helper.exe	Merdoor Dropper
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8e98eed2ec14621feda75e07379650c05ce509113ea8d949b7367ce00fc7cd38	siteadv.exe	Merdoor Dropper
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89e503c2db245a3db713661d491807aab3d7621c6aff00766bc6add892411ddc	siteadv.exe	Merdoor Dropper
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c840e3cae2d280ff0b36eec2bf86ad35051906e484904136f0e478aa423d7744	siteadv.exe	Merdoor Dropper
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5f16633dbf4e6ccf0b1d844b8ddfd56258dd6a2d1e4fb4641e2aa508d12a5075	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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ff4c2a91a97859de316b434c8d0cd5a31acb82be8c62b2df6e78c47f85e57740	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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14edb3de511a6dc896181d3a1bc87d1b5c443e6aea9eeae70dbca042a426fcf3	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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db5deded638829654fc1595327400ed2379c4a43e171870cfc0b5f015fad3a03	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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e244d1ef975fcebb529f0590acf4e7a0a91e7958722a9f2f5c5c05a23dda1d2c	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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f76e001a7ccf30af0706c9639ad3522fd8344ffbfdf324307d8e82c5d52d350f2	chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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dc182a0f39c5bb1c3a7ae259f06f338bb3d51a03e5b42903854cdc51d06fced6	smadhook64c.dll	Merdoor Loader
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fa5f32457d0ac4ec0a7e69464b57144c257a55e6367ff9410cf7d77ac5b20949	SiteAdv.dll, chrome_frame_helper.dll	Merdoor Loader
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fe7a6954e18feddeeb6fcdaaa8ac9248c8185703c2505d7f249b03d8d8897104	siteadv.dll	Merdoor Loader
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341d8274cc1c53191458c8bbc746f428856295f86a61ab96c56cd97ee8736200	siteadv.dll	Merdoor Loader
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f3478ccd0e417f0dc3ba1d7d448be8725193a1e69f884a36a8c97006bf0aa0f4 – siteadv.dll – Merdoor Loader

750b541a5f43b0332ac32ec04329156157bf920f6a992113a140baab15fa4bd3 – mojo_core.dll – Merdoor Loader

9f00cee1360a2035133e5b4568e890642eb556edd7c2e2f5600cf6e0bdcd5774 – libmupdf.dll – Merdoor Loader

a9051dc5e6c06a8904bd8c82cdd6e6bd300994544af2eed72fe82df5f3336fc0 – chrome_frame_helper.dll – Merdoor Loader

d62596889938442c34f9132c9587d1f35329925e011465c48c94aa4657c056c7 – smadhook64c.dll – Merdoor Loader

f0003e08c34f4f419c3304a2f87f10c514c2ade2c90a830b12fdf31d81b0af57 – SiteAdv.pak – Merdoor encoded payload

139c39e0dc8f8f4eb9b25b20669b4f30ffcb2197e3a9f69d0043107d06a2cb4 – SiteAdv.pak – Merdoor encoded payload

11bb47cb7e51f5b7c42ce26cbff25c2728fa1163420f308a8b2045103978caf5 – SiteAdv.pak – Merdoor encoded payload

0abc1d12ef612490e37eedb1dd1833450b383349f13ddd3380b45f7aaabc8a75 – SiteAdv.pak – Merdoor encoded payload

eb3b4e82ddfdb118d700a853587c9589c93879f62f576e104a62bdaa5a338d7b – SiteAdv.exe – Legit McAfee executable

1ab4f52ff4e4f3aa992a77d0d36d52e796999d6fc1a109b9ae092a5d7492b7dd – chrome_frame_helper.exe – Legit Google executable

fae713e25b667f1c42ebbea239f7b1e13ba5dc99b225251a82e65608b3710be7 – SmadavProtect64.exe – Legit SmadAV executable

File hashes, simplified list

13df2d19f6d2719beeff3b882df1d3c9131a292cf097b27a0ffca5f45e139581

8f64c25ba85f8b77cfba3701bebde119f610afef6d9a5965a3ed51a4a4b9dead

8e98eed2ec14621feda75e07379650c05ce509113ea8d949b7367ce00fc7cd38

89e503c2db245a3db713661d491807aab3d7621c6aff00766bc6add892411ddc

c840e3cae2d280ff0b36eec2bf86ad35051906e484904136f0e478aa423d7744

5f16633dbf4e6ccf0b1d844b8ddfd56258dd6a2d1e4fb4641e2aa508d12a5075

ff4c2a91a97859de316b434c8d0cd5a31acb82be8c62b2df6e78c47f85e57740

14edb3de511a6dc896181d3a1bc87d1b5c443e6aea9eeae70dbca042a426fcf3

db5deded638829654fc1595327400ed2379c4a43e171870cfc0b5f015fad3a03
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f76e001a7ccf30af0706c9639ad3522fd8344ffbf324307d8e82c5d52d350f2
dc182a0f39c5bb1c3a7ae259f06f338bb3d51a03e5b42903854cdc51d06fced6
fa5f32457d0ac4ec0a7e69464b57144c257a55e6367ff9410cf7d77ac5b20949
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