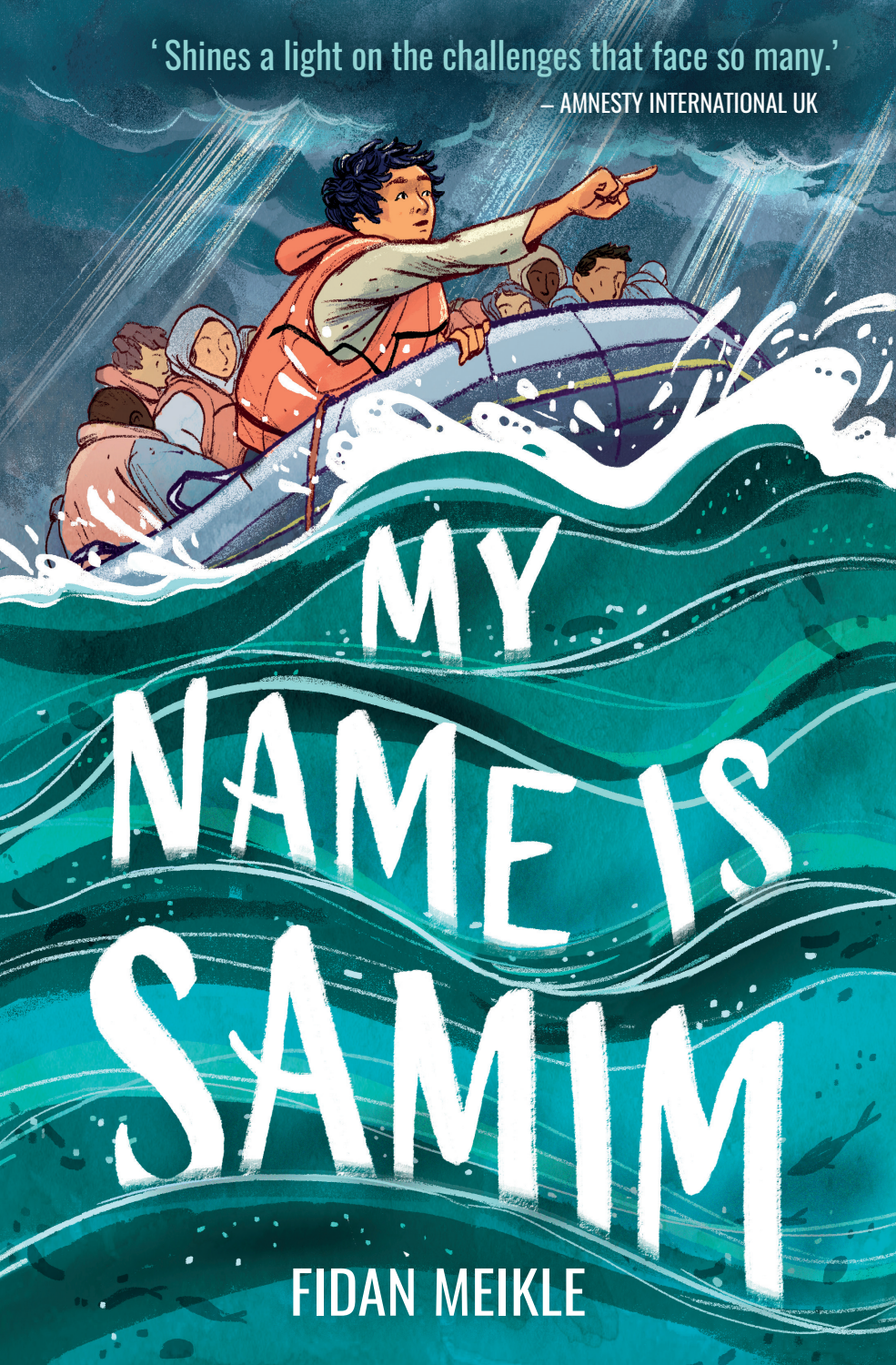
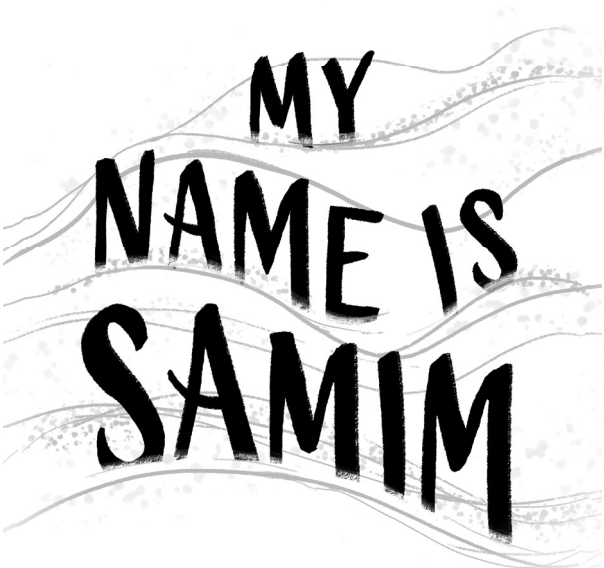
‘Shines a light on the challenges that face so many.’

– AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK



MY NAME IS SAMIM

FIDAN MEIKLE


MY
NAME IS
SAMIM

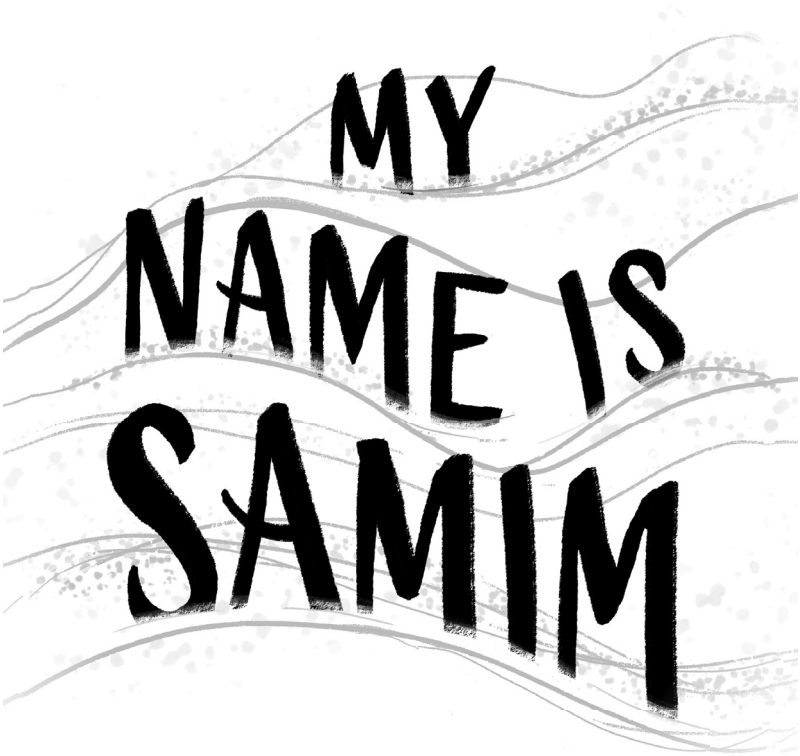
Dedicated to refugee children who
walk the path of those without choice.

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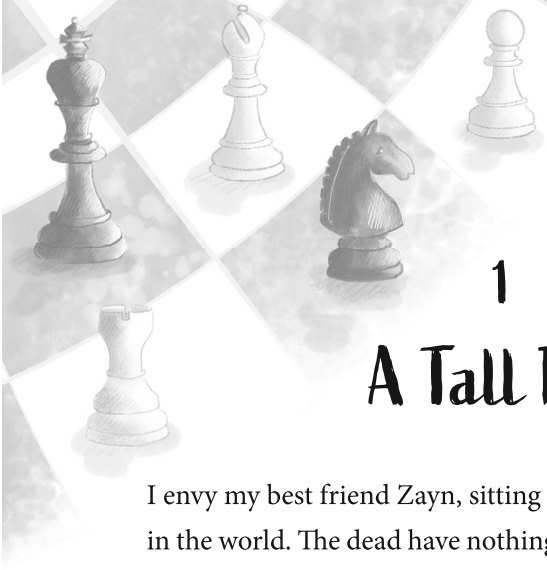


FIDAN MEIKLE

Kelpies


NORWAY
FINLAND
SWEDEN
Samim arrives here
UK
London
Calais
BELARUS
POLAND
GERMANY
UKRAINE
CZECHIA
FRANCE
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
ITALY
Rome
BULGARIA
Istanbul
SPAIN
GREECE
ALGERIA
MOROCCO
LIBYA
How Samim Travelled
Samim's route
On foot
By ferry
By bus
By car
By train
By truck
By dinghy


Samim's Journey
RUSSIA
KAZAKHSTAN
AZERBAIJAN
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
TURKEY
SYRIA
IRAQ
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
Ghazni
Samim starts here
SAUDI ARABIA
SUDAN
YEMEN



1
A Tall Boy

I envy my best friend Zayn, sitting next to me with no worries in the world. The dead have nothing to worry about. The worst thing that can happen to them has already happened.

Crowds of neatly dressed people with suitcases, backpacks and water bottles walk past me in the busy airport. To them, I'm just as invisible as my ghost friend Zayn.

"I wish I could leave my body behind on this bench like snakes leave their skins and become one of these people: normal," I whisper.

Zayn snorts. "What's so good about being normal?"

"Says the dead guy!" I chuckle.

The two guards beside me ignore my muttering. They're used to it. And anyway, they don't speak my language, Dari.

I take a deep breath, enjoying the aroma of fried food, coffee and perfume from the cafés and shops. The detention centre I live in stinks of sweat and chlorine.

The guards stare at their phones. They smell of aftershave and tobacco. My father used to smell like that.

The memories of my family in Afghanistan have faded and

lost colour, like clothes left to dry under the sun for too long. After a bomb hit our neighbour's house, their clothes hung on the washing line in the yard for months. They were mainly baby clothes, and no one in the neighbourhood had the heart to touch them. The sun bleached the tiny blankets and shawls and they all became the same wishy-washy colour. My memories are just like that: faded and grey.

It's been a few hours since the guards brought me here, trying to deport me, but three flights have refused to take me on board. I don't know what we're waiting for now. I keep asking, but the guards don't talk to me. The one on the left has been playing a game on his phone all this time.

I sneak a peek, and he snarls at me, "Mind your own business!"

I turn away.

"He hasn't won once since we've been here. Sore loser," Zayn says, and I smile.

I'm grateful for Zayn. He's all I've got left. Even though he is dead.

A guard's phone rings. "Hello," he says, and then pauses for a while.

His only responses are "okay" and "yes". I have no idea what's going on, and my heart starts pounding in my chest. I should be used to it by now, not knowing what will happen next, where I'll be taken and how I'll be treated, but I still worry. My hands sweat and my stomach gets tied up in knots.

"Breathe," Zayn reminds me, and he starts counting pi. "3.1415…"

Zayn and I once challenged ourselves to see how many digits of pi we could learn. I learned 230 and Zayn learned 20, but we told everyone that together we knew 250. It wasn't true, but it wasn't a lie either. And it was Zayn's idea, of course. He'd fake a dramatic cough after his twentieth number and motion for me to take over. People were impressed, and by the end, no one remembered that Zayn had only named 20. We were famous in our neighbourhood for our pi powers, and Zayn loved it.

Counting pi calms me down. *3.14159265…*

The man hangs up. "He's not going anywhere," he says to the other guard.

"No, please, I want to go!" I beg. I don't want to go back to the detention centre. Anywhere in the world is better.

"Get up!" the guards shout at me.

I hold tight to my seat, but they lift me by my skinny arms.

"Calm down, Samim," Zayn says, and we count together: *3.14159265358…*

♞

We are at the airport car park, surrounded by hundreds of cars lined up in neat rows. One of the guards holds my arm so tightly I can't feel my hand any more, and the other pushes me inside a car.

As we drive off, I see noisy streets rush past us through the windows. So many faces out there… Why can't I be him? Or him? Or her?

Half an hour later, big iron gates swing open in front of us and we are back at the detention centre. If there is hell on earth, this place is it.

They lock me in an empty room with grey walls, a bed, a toilet and a sink. It smells like wet clothes. The room I usually stay in is big and noisy, and I share it with 43 sweaty men.

A guard with a short beard and a tattoo of an angel peeking out of his rolled-up sleeve tells me that someone will be here soon to talk to me. He slams the door in my face before I manage to ask why I've been put in this room.

I lie on the bed and wait, fidgeting with the thin woven bracelet on my wrist. It used to be red and white, but now it's grey. My mother weaved it for me when I was born and made it adjustable so I could wear it for as long as I wanted. I took it off when I was eight because the neighbourhood boys made fun of it. But after the school that my mum ran was bombed, she asked me to wear it again.

"But why?" I cried. My shoulders slumped with annoyance.

She gently wiped the tears off my face. "See the two threads on this bracelet? The red one means your blood – your father. The white one means your soul."

"And if the red one is Father, is the white one you?"

"I'd like to think so." Mother smiled, tying the bracelet around my wrist. "Together, we will always keep you safe."

My eyes grew wide. "Always?"

She nodded in reply, but her eyes were dark with fear.

Zayn is lying on the floor beside me, his arms folded under his head. We count pi together. It took me half an hour to learn 230, and two months in the detention centre to learn another 40,850. When I get to digit number 3,035, the door opens.

"Get up. Social Services are here to see you," the guard with the angel tattoo commands. I jump to my feet.

I don't know what's happening, but I'm glad to get out, so I follow him to a small room with an oval table in the middle. A woman sits at it, watching the guard lead me to a seat across from her. Zayn walks to the window. It's warm and bright here and doesn't smell as bad as everywhere else.

"Hello, Samim," the woman says. She has honey-coloured hair, blue eyes and a flowery scarf around her neck. Her voice is gentle. I can't remember the last time anyone spoke to me softly, so I pray she's here to take me away. But my prayers are usually like bubbles: they burst before they reach heaven.

"Hello," I mumble to my knees, fidgeting with my bracelet.

"My name is Angela, and I'm here to get to know you better, Samim."

Angela is a nice name. It means angel. Maybe it's a good sign. Maybe it's good news.

"How old are you, Samim?"

"Thirteen years and three months."

The woman's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"Are you sure? It's been a while since you left your home country."

"Two years, ten months and twenty-six days," I say.

"Excuse me?"

"It's been two years, ten months and twenty-six days since I left Afghanistan."

Miss Angela glances at the guard behind me.

"Can you tell me, briefly if possible, where you've been since then?"

"I was ten years, four months and seven days old when I left Afghanistan. After that, I spent two years, two months and three days in Iran; one month in Turkey; three months in Greece; twenty days in Italy; two months and three days in France; and I've been in the UK for two months today."

Miss Angela stares at me with her mouth open. I don't know what I've said wrong.

"I think she needs a calculator." Zayn grins.

I love numbers. You can always trust numbers.

"You see, Samim, everyone here thought you were much older than thirteen," Miss Angela says at last.

"I *am* older than thirteen. I am three months older than thirteen."

Miss Angela smiles. "Yes, but we thought you were *much* older. You're so tall!"

"They asked my age many times and I always told them the truth, but they didn't believe me."

"I know, I know. But again, you are very tall. And people lie about their age."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why they lie. But because many people do, it is sometimes hard to know if someone is telling the truth. What matters now is that *I* think you are telling the truth, Samim. Which means you don't belong here."

"I don't belong here?" My voice rises with hope.

"No, you are leaving today, Samim. This place is for adults, and you are a boy. A very tall one." Miss Angela beams.

My chest rises and falls, rises and falls, as thoughts race in my head.

"So, I've been sent to hell for two months because I am a tall boy?" I ask, then swallow a lump in my throat.

Miss Angela looks at me silently and dips her head. Her eyebrows furrow, and she clears her throat before looking up at me again.

"I know it's been tough for you here, Samim. But you are leaving today, and you won't return."

I look out the window behind her. It's dirty, but I can still see a scrap of blue sky.

"Where will I be going?" My voice trembles as the worries creep back.

"To a foster home. It's a temporary family where you will meet other kids like you…"

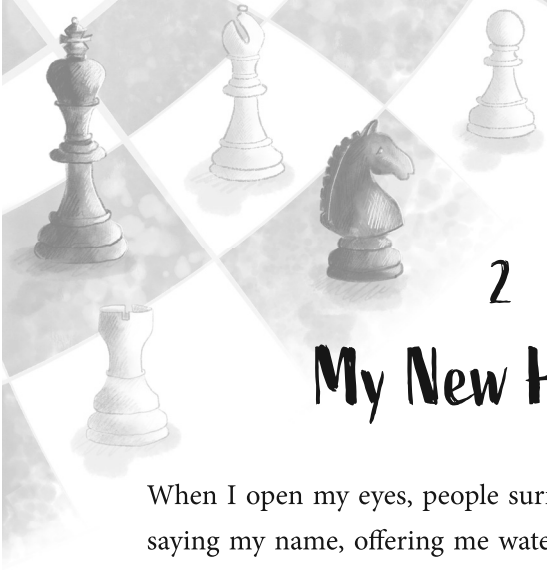
Miss Angela continues to speak, but her voice fades and all I can hear is my heartbeat.

What will happen to me in this new place? What if it's just as bad as the detention centre? Now that they believe I'm a child, what if they treat me even worse?



My ears start burning, and soon I can't see anything either. This happens to me all the time.

"You'll be okay," Zayn says, and then I pass out.



2

My New Home?

When I open my eyes, people surround me. Everyone keeps saying my name, offering me water and asking if I'm okay. I black out all the time, and usually no one cares. Why fuss now?

Zayn's upside-down face gazes at me from above, and he winks. "Smart way to get attention. As my sweet grandmother, who had more hair on her chin than her head, used to say, 'The barking dog gets the bone!' Or was it the singing bird gets the seed? Or the mooing cow gets the hay?" Zayn frowns, scratching his messy black curls.

I have no idea what he's talking about.

The guard with the angel tattoo helps me up and takes me to the room I sleep in to get my things. It's cramped with bunkbeds and desperate men, some of whom bullied me day and night. The room falls silent as we enter. I shove old T-shirts and a folder filled with papers inside a plastic bag. My head is down, but I can feel stares burning into me.

Am I really leaving this place for good? There is a flicker of hope in my chest. It's like a struck match about to burst into flame. But the flicker fades every time a wave of worry washes

over it – what will the new place be like?

Miss Angela and I exit the detention centre, and I take a deep breath. Fresh, frosty air fills my lungs. It's winter, and the naked trees line the street like upside-down crow's feet, their branches dusted with white, as if sprinkled with salt.

We drive for hours. Busy streets with traffic lights are replaced by a broad multilane motorway, then narrow, twisty roads. There are big houses with big gardens and neatly cut shrubs everywhere. I wonder who lives in those houses and what they eat for dinner.

The car stops outside one house. It's not like any place I've been taken to before in England; it's someone's home. A tall woman who smells like flowers greets us once we step inside. She has short silver hair and wears a turquoise necklace.

"Welcome to your new home, Samim. Come in, we've been looking forward to meeting you." She beams at me as I step inside, but my heart is throbbing with worry and I can't smile back.

"My name is Miss Brown." She wipes her hands on her apron. "You must be hungry after a long journey, let's get you a snack."

Miss Angela and I follow Miss Brown past the winding stairs and through a long corridor with framed pictures of children on the walls. The children have wide smiles. I wonder what made them so happy. There are two rooms to the left of the corridor and two to the right, and a huge kitchen at the end. Miss Brown leads me to the big round table in the middle

of the kitchen. She asks me whether I'm okay, or thirsty or hungry, and I nod to all three. A few minutes later, she brings me a tray of food with a piece of cake in the middle.

"It's a banana cake. The kids and I made it for you."

"Thank you." I squeeze the words out.

"Enjoy. Miss Angela and I will be in the next room for a quick chat." She smiles at me before leaving.

I look at the food and my mouth waters. It's a chicken sandwich, a glass of milk and the cake. I take a huge bite of the cake, swallow it down and take another one.

Zayn laughs at me. "Have you tried chewing? Some people swear by it!"

I chuckle and my cake tries to escape, so I cover my mouth with my hand.

"I like this place," Zayn says, looking around. "I think you'll do fine here."

"Me too." I grin, and the flicker of hope ignites inside me again.

After I finish my food, Miss Angela and Miss Brown walk in and sit across from me.

"This is your foster home for now, Samim," Miss Angela says. "Miss Brown is in charge here, so if you need anything, you can talk to her. Four other children live in this house. They are around your age or younger, and everyone has their own room."

Millions of questions buzz in my head, but I sit frozen and can't say a word.

"There is a TV in the living room, Samim, if you want to watch it before bedtime. It's the first door on the left from here," Miss Brown says.

Her voice is loud but not bossy. I think I like her. I want to like her because I want to stay here, and I want everything to be alright.

"Tomorrow, you will meet your solicitor and a caseworker from a government organisation called the Home Office," Miss Angela explains. "A solicitor is a person who makes sure you are treated fairly and protects your rights. The Home Office caseworker will be there to learn all about you and your journey here, so they can decide whether to grant you asylum and let you stay in the country."

"But I already told the Home Office everything before," I say, and my chest hardens. "I told them everything and they sent me to the detention centre. What if they send me back there again?" My voice breaks, and I hug myself, trying to stay calm.

I hate looking weak and scared. I've been through bombings, blizzards and prisons! I've been to places that would send shivers down a grown man's spine. And I'm still alive. But ever since I came here – the country that I thought would be my safe place – my worries have grown wilder. I'm scared all the time. When will it stop?

"You are not going back to the detention centre, Samim," Miss Angela says.

Her voice is firm this time. My father used to speak like that, and he never lied.

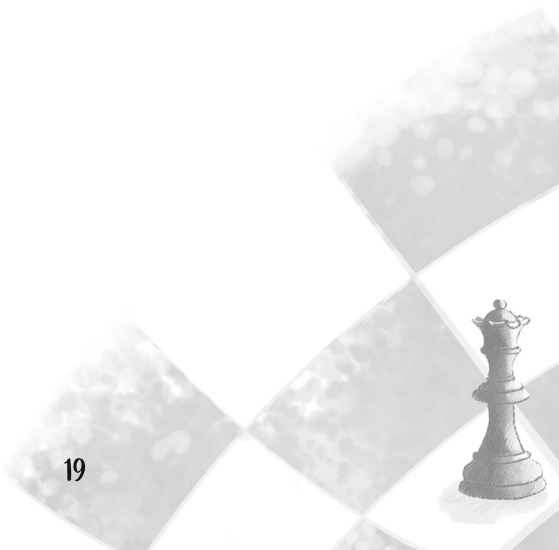
"I know it will be hard talking about your journey here, but you must be honest about everything that happened to you. The caseworker needs to know your full story before deciding on your future in this country. Your solicitor will be there to help you with any questions."

I sit still, staring to the side.

"Do you understand, Samim?" Miss Angela asks.

3.14159265358… I count the numbers in my head, and my chest softens.

I'm scared, and I don't trust anyone. But the thing is, I don't have a choice. I take a deep breath and bob my head. "I understand."



My name is Samim.

I'm thirteen years and three months old,
I love chess – and I'm a refugee.

I was happy in Afghanistan, until the day bombs ripped my life apart. I escaped with my best friend Zayn, hoping to find safety in the UK. But the journey was dangerous and we lost so much along the way...

Now I'm here, trying to make new friends and a new home, but will the authorities let me stay?

First, I must tell my story.
Are you ready to hear it?

'An emotional but ultimately hopeful portrayal of a young refugee's life in the UK.' – Neil Cowan, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK

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