

AETHON ARISES



ENDLESS FIRE: BOOK TWO

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EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

EL PRESIDENTE

Puerto Rico! Independencia! Independence! Liberacion! Puerto Rico! Puerto Rico! Puerto Rico! Cheering crowds shouting, musicians playing and horns squawking rattle Robert's windows yanking him from his dreams and tossing him onto the floor. Rubbing his aching head, he wanders to his room's window. Below his Condado district hotel room, Independence Day celebrants fill San Juan's Avenida Ashford for as far as Robert can see.

Heading the parade is the independent nation of Puerto Rico's first President, its former Governor Justo Negocio. Tall and muscular with graying black hair, he is striding ahead of a wall of laser-light banners, Puerto Rican flags with dark-blue, freedom fields and placards carried by a river of his shouting and dancing supporters. Negocio is their champion leading them forward now just as he led them to independence one year ago.

Before these joyous Puerto Ricans fly drones broadcasting their celebration worldwide. Above and behind Negocio, flies a squadron of aerodrones also hauling banners. Robots roll along intermingled in the crowd. Some celebrants parade riding hoverboards or hoverscooters or electric unicycles, but the majority march on foot.

Robert notices that all of the banners and placards are acclaiming Puerto Rico's first year of independence from the United States except for two. Scrawled upon one of the differing banners is *Close Fort Buchanan*. Its sister banner demands, *US Army Go Home*. As the protestors surge closer, he notices a limping, partially uniformed man is carrying one of the anti-Army signs with his prosthetic hand. Next to him a woman carries the other anti-Army sign with her prosthetic hand and arm.

"What are you watching? Why don't you come back to bed?" Asks a young, dusty-skinned, black haired woman lounging naked in the bed.

"I'm watching your President Negocio. I have a meeting with him later today about establishing some special security system for him."

“Good. I’m glad. He needs more protection. Somebody lased at him last week. He’s stirred up a lot of trouble. In America, not everybody is happy about his declaring Puerto Rico an independent nation. They’re calling him a revolutionary and traitor. I think that’s why they sent some more soldiers and other people to that old Army fort.”

“Fort Buchannan?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” The woman pats the side of the bed, “But, let’s not talk about that. Why don’t you bring your boney body back to bed?”

“Well, ok then.” Smiling happily, Robert returns to the bed. “I don’t meet with him until this afternoon”

“Wait. What is this? I didn’t notice this last night in the dark.” The woman probes, as she gently traces her finger tips across a scar on the right side of Robert’s chest. “It looks and feels like the letters M-K.”

“Yeah. You’re correct. The letters M-K. The initials of Mugavus Komfort. She 3D bioprinted the biocompatible nanomaterials for the tissue to repair my bullet wound. She thought she should sign her work. Very funny, eh? She thought she was funny. Anyway, it’s a souvenir of my visit to Ethiopia where a very crazy American who desperately wanted to kill me, missed my heart and only wounded me.”

“Why did he want to kill a sweet fellow like you?” She continues circling the MK with her finger.

“Well, as I remember, he just did not appreciate me trying to stop him from destroying the Washington D.C. Mall, and inadvertently, collapsing his uncle’s government.”

She stops tracing his wound and locks her eyes on his. “Wait a second. Now, everybody knows about the slaughter at the capital, but I don’t remember any stories involving you. What I heard was that a massive military computer failure caused the weapons to malfunction and that’s why it’s been hushed up. Los muertos no cuentan cuentos, you know.”

Robert chuckles while rubbing his shoulder. "Well computers were involved, but it was a man who went crazy and..."

"Robert Goodfellow, are you in there?" A slightly Spanish accented man's voice calls from the hall followed by someone knocking. "Mister Goodfellow, I need to speak with you, immediately."

After struggling into his trousers, Robert hurriedly opens the door.

"Good morning, I'm Justo Negocio." He announces as he strides into the room passing Robert, "How are you this morning?"

"Well I..."

Spying the woman in the bed, Negocio nods toward her and then smiles at Robert, "Oh, I see that you are doing quite well this morning. Muy bueno de verdad."

"Good morning Rita," he steps toward the woman with his hand extended and a broad smile on his face. "How are you this morning? Did you keep our friend safe and out of trouble last night?"

"Yes, he was never in danger. I made sure that he was out of Club Kronos early and safely in bed."

Grabbing Negocio's hand, Robert snatches his attention away from Rita and back to him, "Sorry sir, I wasn't expecting you. I didn't think we were scheduled to meet until this afternoon."

Two quick shakes and Negocio drops Robert's hand, "That was your schedule, not mine. Plans change Mister Goodfellow. Plans change. I need for you to start now. Throw on your clothes and let's go."

"But, I..."

"But, what? Do you want this gig or not?"

"Well yes, I..."

“Bueno. Meet you down in the lobby in ten minutes, then. Say your goodbyes, quick and let’s go.” Waving his hand at Rita, he backs toward the door, “Pleasure seeing you. Good work Rita.”

After Negocio is gone Robert angrily reproaches Rita. “So, you’re a prostitute he hired for me?”

“No! I most certainly am not!” Rita retorts indignantly. “I am a patriotic citizen of the independent nation of Puerto Rico. I was instructed to protect you, and that’s exactly what I did.”

“Now wait...” Rita’s statement startles Robert. “...why do I need protection?”

“You don’t realize how precarious it is here right now, Robert. If you think all of those aerodrones and robots surrounding President Negocio during the parade were just to haul banners then you’re naïve. They aren’t for show. They are laser armed and deadly.”

“To protect Negocio. That I understand.” Robert taps his chest. “But, I’m no threat.”

Puerto Rico is still struggling to free itself. Separate itself from the mainland. So it’s a bit of a mess with legal and political disputes and infighting. Some American businesses that had property here are actually sending in goons and criminals. They’ve been attacking visitors and residents. Extortion, you know. Threatening to embarrass us and scare away our tourists, if we don’t give them what they want. So, I did what I needed to do to get you away from the two men I suspect were following you last night.”

“Two men? Following me?”

“Yes, two men.” Rita motions uses her hands to indicate the size of the men. “Very large, too. Heavy. Strange reddish skin and they seemed to be sweating a lot. The clothes they were wearing and their uncomfortable appearance made them impossible to miss. They watched us the entire time we were at Club Kronos. I’m surprised that you never noticed.”

Then with a coy smile, Rita adds, "But by then, I do believe I had won your undivided attention. You certainly didn't seem to mind my protection plan last night."

Robert returns her smile and winks. "No. No, I didn't. I must admit. And you? Was it all work for you?"

"I wouldn't have invited you back to bed this morning, if it had been. It was a pleasure doing the business of pleasure with you." Rita stretches and sighs with satisfaction. "Estás bueno! I may have to protect you again, real soon mister Goodfellow."

"Really? Me? Is that you speaking or just Negocio's money talking?" Robert points toward himself. "I must tell you that I'm normally not pursued by beautiful women...well...or any women...actually. I'm a bit of a computer geek, you know."

Smiling and shaking her head in exasperation, Rita points toward the bathroom. "You are such a manganzon. Just get dressed geek. They're waiting for you."

With his right fist raised victoriously, Robert struts toward the shower. "As Star Trek movie star LeVar Burton once said, I fly my geek flag proudly. Absolutely."

ALERT AND NERVOUS

Robert arrives in the lobby to find Negocio chatting with two women. He has them enthralled. Near the hotel entrance stand two broad-shouldered, muscular men eyeing everyone approaching or entering. As Robert nears Negocio, one of the men suddenly appears in front of him blocking his path. He is surprised. The big man moves with the light-footed speed and agility of a cat.

“He’s with me Hector,” Negocio raises his hand to calm his bodyguard. “Go with Rubio and summon our glider.”

“You’re a little late Mister Goodfellow. We don’t have time to waste. Come with me.” Pivoting, he begins striding toward the exit.

Without hesitating or skipping a step, Negocio exits the hotel and steps directly into his arriving autonomous, electrigrade human transport. Following him, Robert is not nearly as coordinated. Stumbling upon the transport’s entrance’s curved threshold, he tumbles into the transport’s cabin. Only Hector’s strong-armed assistance saves him. Groaning and rubbing his scraped shin, he climbs onto the seat across from Puerto Rico’s leader. He starts to buckle his safety restraints, but when he notices none of the others are wearing them, he drops his.

“I must say that I expected a little better from you, Robert. I need speed to succeed. I require surprise to keep my opposition off balance. So far they still think I’m just a joke. So, I have to stay a step ahead. Move before they do. Puerto Rico must become completely self-reliant to overcome their meddling. We have to be ready...no...we are ready to stand on our own as a nation. Puerto Ricans just have to realize it and act like it.”

“Well...yes...ok. But, where do I fit into this?”

“My friend Dame Gutefrau of SPEA recommended you. I understand that you are known to have a particularly valuable set of skills in cyber and physical security which you will provide when paid the proper price. You’re a digital mercenary. Is that not true?”

“Well, it’s a living, yes...”

“And you’re also Canadian. Aren’t you? Canadian military in fact? Not American? Not restricted directly by US Science Suppression laws? You’re working in an independent, foreign nation now, you know.”

“Uh yes, I’m an officer in the Canadian Air Force Reserve...but...”

“Good. We have a deal then.” Looking away, Negocio runs his hand across the inside of the transport’s door, massaging the padding. “What do you think of my new ride, Robert? Just received it yesterday.”

Robert surveys the interior. “It’s different. I feel like we’re sitting in the yoke of an enormous, pearl-colored, boiled egg. Having an egg shaped exterior with contoured solar panels as its upper half is a new design to me. I don’t recognize it.”

“It’s Chinese, Robert. Beijing Transport Innovations delivered it yesterday. It’s an all-electric, gliding, autonomous automobile. I call it my auto-auto. It’s just what we need here. We can’t produce oil or gasoline, but we have bountiful sunlight, wind and waves, which can produce electricity. So, why should we send our money to some environment-wrecking, oil company? Makes no sense. Does it? No. So, I’ve mandated that Puerto Rico will use only what it produces. Self-sufficiency is the truest form of independence and freedom. That’s my philosophy of Economics.”

“Well, you’re not the first to see the wisdom in that. Small self-supporting states are proving stronger and more secure than large dependent states. Estonia for example is...”

“Whap!” Proudly, Negocio slaps the seat. “Now that Puerto Rico is finally no longer forced by America’s hydrocarbon laws to use internal combustion engines, I’ve banned the import of all non-renewable-energy fueled engines. No more internal

combustion engines. No ICE in Puerto Rico. America's oil companies are fighting it, but they cannot stop us now that we are independent and free of them. Congress can pass all the laws that they want mandating Americans to use their gasoline, but here the petroleum power period has passed. Fossil fuels are for fossil fools living in the past. Finally! Puerto Rico is joining the fossil fuel free world!"

Animated and excited, Negocio bounces in his seat. "And since it is Chinese manufactured, US security can't hack it and grab control of it. Last month, somebody in the US hacked the Ponce police and shut down all of their equipment. A very dangerous and nasty hack attack. So, this auto-auto is another successful step in our escape from American control."

There is no denying that Negocio is a man with plans. Robert decides that he is just the type of person Puerto Rico needs to steer it into the future. Intelligent. Innovative. Imaginative. A leader dedicated to advancing his people.

"By the way Robert, three dozen of these auto-autos will arrive tomorrow. They're government property, so I'm assigning one to you for your use while you're here." Negocio smiles and hands Robert an auto-auto control fob.

Ahead, at the edge of the street, workers are replacing a miles-per-hour speed sign with a sign stating kilometers-per-hour. Negocio points toward them. "It's taken longer than I expected, but we've also converted to the metric system. Time for Puerto Rico to abandon another obsolete US practice and join the rest of the world."

"Well, we use both systems in Canada. But personally, I'm a fan of the metrics. It's more science based." Robert smirks, "I think we keep miles and feet and pounds around, just so visiting Americans won't whine and get lost."

Placing his finger against his lips and cupping his other hand behind his ear, Negocio whispers, "Shh. Just listen to that. Beautiful battery power. No exhaust fumes. No noisy engine. And thanks to aerodynamic lift engineering, its spherical tires barely touch the pavement. Breathe deep our exhaustless air. Soak in the silence."

Robert smiles enjoying Negocio's enthusiasm. Obviously, he is his nascent nation's biggest fan and promoter.

Negocio leans close to the auto-auto's window. "What's that? I believe I hear the song of our national bird, the Puerto Rican Spindalis. That is definitely the sound of Puerto Rican progress. Shh."

Security guard Hector hesitantly clears his throat and quietly attempts to correct Negocio. "Actually the Spindalis lives in the bush not in old San Juan sir. I doubt that you..."

"Yes Hector, I know that. I was exaggerating for effect...oh...just be quiet." Frustrated, Negocio freezes his attention on the street scene.

With a grimace and an audible groan, Negocio watches an internal combustion engine vehicle approach and pass them heading the opposite direction. He sniffs the air, snorting as if the vehicle had filled the city with fumes. Exaggerating his discomfort at the vehicle's engine noise, he covers his ears.

With his hands still protecting his hearing, Negocio instructs the auto-auto. "Play Lamento Borincano by Marc Anthony."

As the music begins, he uncovers his ears and describes the music to Robert. "This is one of my favorite old songs. It was originally written by composer Rafael Hernández Marín in 1929. In his song, he describes the harsh conditions impoverished Puerto Rican farmers had to face on a daily basis. So long ago, but still a lot of similarities to today. My favorite part is the last line when he sings Yo te adoro, Puerto Rico, y eso nadie lo va a quitar, which roughly translates to, I adore you, Puerto Rico, and no one can take that away."

"I imagine you would agree with Bob Marley, who said that one good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain." Robert reinforces Negocio.

Negocio smiles. "True. No pain here. I'm alive in my Puerto Rico or as Raul Labrador once said, I'm proud of who I am, and I'm proud I grew up in Puerto Rico."

Negocio closes his eyes and leans back to enjoy the music. Having him cease his rat-a-tat chatter for a few moments is a welcome relief for Robert. He rests his ears while engaging his mind. With Negocio not talking, this is a perfect time for some mental meandering. Like most gig workers these days, he never has time for vacations. He cannot afford them. He simply takes short breaks between assignments. This is his first visit to Puerto Rico, probably his only visit. So why not enjoy this Caribbean escape?

As they noiselessly glide above the seaside street of Avenida Luis Munoz Rivera, Robert watches the Atlantic Ocean's waves slap the shore. Surging in and slipping out. Rushing and retreating. Flooding and flowing. Hypnotic. Relaxing. But, Robert is an analyzer. He never just sees. He witnesses.

Spellbound by the sea, his mind wanders - drifts in and out with the tide. With the water he momentarily slips away, happily escapes today for yesterday. He envisions the island as it once was, pristine and pure. He imagines how relieved and happy Christopher Columbus and his Spanish sailors must have been to see this lush island. After so many months at sea, finally land and safety. They must have rejoiced at finding fresh water, trees, grass, food and a protected bay. After months of stormy seas, Columbus dropped anchor and completed his second ocean crossing. Robert wonders if they thought they had found the paradise of Eden.

Still absorbing his music, Negocio remains silent. His eyes are closed. Hector is also enjoying a relaxing, semi-sleep swim in the soft guitar sounds and singing.

Massaging his wound from his Africa attack, Robert envies them their tranquility. He hopes he will also be able to enjoy a little serenity in this Puerto Rican paradise. Too much of the time, his mind is as turbulent and troubled as the storming seas Columbus crossed. So much of the reality he knows is disappearing. The world is changing too fast to understand, even for a cyber citizen like him, and he is a person who can be held responsible for changing it.

Abruptly, Robert's peacefulness ends. Zipping in from behind, a drone pops up next to his window. A small turret on its top rotates toward him. Is it a camera or a

laser? Instinctively, Robert leaps into the seat next to Negocio shielding him from the drone. Startled, Negocio squirms and slowly begins opening his eyes. A searing, bright light flashes. Zip, the threatening drone disappears, racing away ahead of a police drone.

Just as fast as he jumped next to Negocio, Robert hops back into his own seat. Quickly looking away from Negocio, he returns to studying the seashore scenery. He is embarrassed by his panic. Yet, he remains unsettled by that drone's sudden threatening appearance. Was it attacking them or observing them? In Puerto Rico for less than twenty-four hours and already under attack, twice. He does not consider this a good beginning.

After chasing away their menace, the San Juan police drone settles into position just outside Negocio's window. Awakening, Negocio waves toward the drone. A green light on the drone's side flickers as acknowledgement. On the opposite side a second police drone flies into escort position. Robert notes the drones' significant array of laser weapons. He determines they are sufficiently armed to provide formidable protection.

All is not peaceful in Puerto Rico.

POOR RICH PORT

Fully awake now, Negocio is also enjoying viewing the ocean, but he regards the kissing of sea and shore as a proud Puerto Rican, not as a Canadian tourist. He shatters the silence with his purely Puerto Rican observation. "You know Robert, Christopher Columbus didn't really discover America, he discovered Puerto Rico. We were here long before they were there. In 1493, the indigenous Tainos of this island met him with open arms and open hearts and he enslaved and raped them. History proves that some things never change when it comes to outsiders and our islands. America never treated us much better."

"Play Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo sepas!" Negocio orders as the song, Lamento Borincanto ends. "This is another of my favorites. Tainos called this island Boricua, just so you know. It means, I'm Puerto Rican. Of course, I'm a proud Puerto Rican."

"Yes sir, I've heard that about you." Robert snidely remarks, before he puffs out his chest. "Well, I'm proud I'm Canadian. As actor Daniel Gillies once said, 'tell people you're a Canadian or a Kiwi when you travel and they'll adore you.' I appreciate adoration."

Where Calle Norzagaray replaces the Avenida Rivera, the ocean view is abruptly blocked by the stout stone walls of historic Castillo de San Cristobal and the tourists surrounding it. After hundreds of years, silent San Cristobal is still standing guard. Stoically, protecting San Juan. Of course, mankind goes nowhere without making war, Robert mulls. From the beginning of time until now, man is always fighting with himself. Clubs to cannon to cyber. Now digital death. Civilization is still so far from civilized.

Mankind will also always have poverty, he realizes as the proud, strong Castillo de San Cristobal gives way to a section of crumbling, slum housing. Squeezed into a low spot below the street's cliff and the rising Caribbean, surging seawaters surround and swamp the row of houses nearest the ocean. Higher up on the beach, the ramshackle houses stand on rotting wooden stilts, out of the water's reach, for the

moment. Floating trash, rubbish and garbage swirls between the collapsing shacks. Blight blocking beauty.

"I see you're staring at La Perla, Robert. Hard to imagine something looking that bad is actually called the pearl. Ironic, isn't it? Still, looks can be deceiving. The La Perla neighborhood may not look like much, but the people living there refuse to live anywhere else, even with the rising sea threatening to wash it all away. When I tried to clean it up, I almost started a small war. My advice to you, though, is stay out of there. Most of the time, La Perla residents are no problem, but it's also a haven for drug dealers, smugglers and other criminals."

"La Perla looks like something from last century. I understand, of course, that you keep your oldest buildings for tourists. But, almost everything that I've seen here so far, looks out of date...behind the times."

"That's because it is Robert. Most of Puerto Rico is so far behind." Negocio sadly shakes his head. "And just think, Puerto Rico is Spanish for rich port. It's a poor rich port. Just look at those shacks. Look at those people sitting there with nothing to do. No work. No future. The majority of my people are just subsisting. They're Sists barely able to meet their day to day needs. I'm fighting to improve their lives and save Puerto Rico. Raise my people above those rising seas of poverty. I will do whatever is necessary."

"Blink your eyes and the present is past," Robert mumbles.

Negocio nods his head in agreement. "Yes, and I am afraid that Puerto Rico is starting the race from far behind. We will leap forward. I refuse to allow my nation to be a future failure."

Just past the Instituto de Neurobiologia, their auto-auto turns left onto Calle Del Cristo and enters the heart of Old San Juan.

"Here we are, Robert." While their auto-auto is rolling to a stop, Negocio is stepping out its door. "Now to reconnoiter and prepare before tourists flood the plaza."

Having fallen into this oddly shaped conveyance, Robert is in no hurry to now fall out. He navigates his exit through the auto-auto's multi-curved, access panel only when their transport is fully stopped. Silent and stalwart, Hector and Rubio follow him out to establish security. Their two accompanying police drones disappear into the flock of drones hovering above the plaza.

Robert finds Negocio impatiently waiting for him at the base of the Ponce de Leon Statue centered in San Jose Plaza. It quickly becomes apparent why he hit the pavement before their vehicle stopped. As soon as the popular Negocio is sighted, regular routines halt and a crowd of workers begins gathering.

Hector and Rubio hurry to form a buffer zone between him and his adoring public. Admirers shout his name and wave. Other devotees pose for selfies with him in the background. Excited and adoring, his worshipping throng swells forward.

Negocio smiles and waves and then motions with his hands for the crowd to step back. Thrilled to be near him, they ignore his request and hug him tighter. Robert begins to experience the uneasiness of claustrophobia. He struggles for breath, suffering an anxiety attack. Too many too close. Squeezing tighter and tighter. Just in time, San Juan police arrive to help restrain the crowd.

"There is simply no escaping the grip of social media, Robert. I don't announce my movements, but wherever and whenever I appear a crowd materializes. Forces me to move fast and often. Drives the police crazy, but I believe surprise is my best security."

With barrier tape and police in place, Robert and Negocio are no longer being squashed by his fans. But, that does not make them safe. As the San Juan police push the observers away, a fist fight erupts. Robert watches two men and a police officer knock an angry, screaming man to the pavement. He cannot hear what the man is shouting clearly, but to Robert, he appears to be threatening Negocio. The police shock him silent before Robert is certain.

Although no longer threatened by spectators, above and around them small aerodrones and biobots are swarming like flies. Standing much taller than Negocio, Robert finds them buzzing distressingly close to his head. After his visit from the drone during their trip, he is fearful. He swats at a bio-bee drone buzzing too close to his eyes. A second later he feels a sharp burn on his left hand. Immediately a fiery, welt appears. He has been bio-bee stung.

"I believe I just learned the painful lesson that I should never mess with your fan's drones." Robert shows Negocio his throbbing hand.

Negocio chuckles. "Oh well, welcome to the club. I've made the same blunder myself. Only it wasn't a fan's drone, it was my own. That one may have been mine too. I never know whether to swat or not."

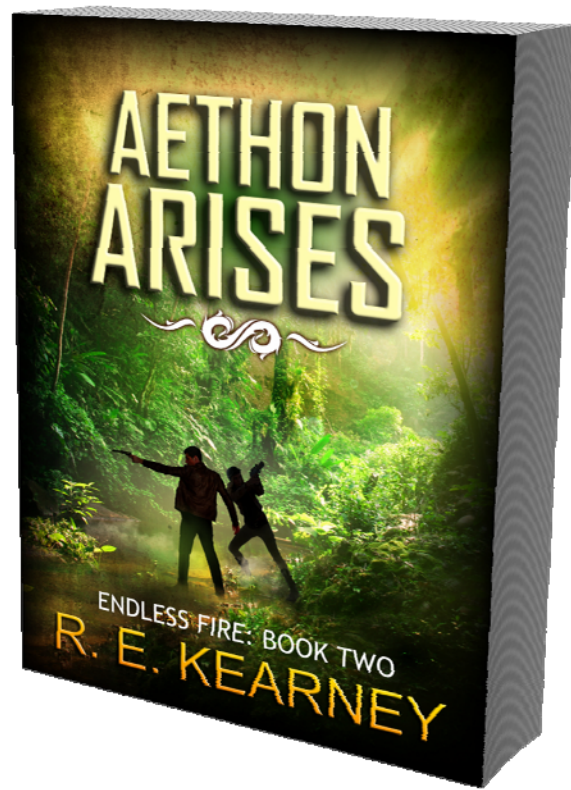
"So it was a mistake?"

Negocio flexes his right hand. "Oh, I didn't say that. I'm just telling you not to trust anybody or their drones."

Shadows from the increasing number of aerodrones speckle the blazing hot pavement. Although, he is covered above and surrounded below, Robert takes Negocio's warning to heart. He ducks and dodges instead of swinging and swatting at any of the growing swarm of drones and bio-bots.

"In these times of capricious loyalties, I treat drones and bio-bots the same way that I treat Pit bull dogs." Negocio scans the cloud of flitting and flying electronics above him. "I've learned by painful experience that once I see them I never turn my back on them. You never know if they're going to lick you, bite you or rip out your throat."

CONTINUE READING...



This Exclusive Preview is taken from *Aethon Arises*, the explosive second book in The Endless Fire Series.

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