

Defender of the Forge
A Deleted Scene from Rise of the Deva'shi

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“So you were a mercenary?”

Aeolmar glared at Latera. In his opinion, mercenaries were the lowest form of warrior, and he had little respect for those who killed for gold and little else. “I was employed to hunt and kill demons,” he clarified.

“A hired warrior. A mercenary.” Latera lounged beside him, her back to the fire as she lay propped up on one elbow. The orange glow outlined her lithe form and illuminated the curls tumbling across her shoulders like liquid fire. Her loveliness made it difficult for Aeolmar to maintain his irritation, but he tried.

“Mercenaries are the vilest of thugs,” he stated firmly, and went on to give a litany of reasons as to why he should not be put in the same category with such ruffians. He only realized he was shouting when he saw Latera’s shoulders shake.

“I’m only teasing,” she said around her laughter. “I know you’d never do anything dishonorable.”

Aeolmar sighed, and gathered her against his chest. From the day he’d found her in Brennus, Latera’s trust in him had never wavered; indeed, even when the demons that he assured her weren’t there attacked them, her faith hadn’t faltered. As he cast his memories back to the time before he’d been Grek’s guard, he wondered if he deserved such faith. He wondered if he deserved Latera.

“Perhaps... perhaps I was a mercenary,” he said at length. “It wasn’t long after my family died. I’d been tracking demons, hoping to kill the one who...” His voice trailed off; even now, so far removed from that wicked day, he found it difficult to speak of. He tightened his arms about Latera, and continued, “I’d had some success, and a landholder offered me some coin to exterminate a few lessers that had taken up near him. I only took the job because my boots were about to fall apart, and I didn’t have the means to purchase new ones, or supplies to mend the old ones. That job led to others. Eventually, I made my way here, to the troll lands.”

“How long had you been alone before you took that first assignment?” Latera asked. Another innocent question, but not one he wanted to answer. The winters immediately following his family’s death had been a time of despicable acts, coupled with soul-numbing pain. Aeolmar was certain that if Latera knew of his behavior during that time she would never let him touch her again, and rightly so. He’d been nothing more than a common brute.

“A long time.” Something in his voice told Latera about his old pain, and she moved to lie on his chest. Aeolmar loved it when she did that. As he buried his face in her hair, the time he spent with the trolls seemed like nothing more than a tale told ‘round the campfire.

And now he was once again within Grek’s dens, but this time as an honored guest instead of a hired sword. The Thurndian elves had taken to his lessons faster than he’d anticipated, and Latera, sensing that he had grown weary of elfin hospitality, suggested that they

visit the troll lands. Grelk was happy to accommodate the pair, and had laughed heartily at Aeolmar's expense once he learned that the surly fae had taken a mate.

"I think it had been eight winters," Aeolmar continued, launching into the tale of how a farmer's boy from the west ended up in the frozen north. He went on, describing how he had tracked an elusive group of demons for nearly a full season. Their numbers began dwindling, and Aeolmar couldn't determine if they were being killed, or dying off.

"You didn't come across any bodies?" Latera asked.

"No, and that was what confounded me," he replied. "There were no tracks leading away from the group, no burned or buried bodies. They were just less."

"Odd."

"Very. I kept tracking that set of vermin and the trail led me all the way through Tingu and to Grelk's land, and then it went cold. Since I didn't know what else to do, I presented myself to the troll king."

Presented was possibly too strong a term for what had actually happened. After Aeolmar informed the guard of his purpose, he waited for half a day while Grelk finished up in his forge. When he complained, he was informed that trolls were smiths, and would never leave off their work at an inopportune moment. For their work ethic, if nothing else, Aeolmar respected them.

At last, Grelk lumbered into his hall with nary an apology for keeping his guest waiting. When he saw the grungy, battered boy that was Aeolmar, he demanded to know why the fae had sent warriors to his home.

"No one has sent me," Aeolmar insisted. "I tracked a group of demons here, and have lost the trail. I thought you should know."

"Eh," Grelk said, or maybe it was a belch. "You no good tracker?"

"I am an excellent tracker," Aeolmar snapped, forgetting that he was speaking to a king.

"Eh." Grelk sat back with his hands across his enormous girth. "See sword." Aeolmar immediately unsheathed the blade at his side, but the troll shook his head. "No. Sword on back."

Aeolmar hesitated; the sword on his back had been his father's, and was all Aeolmar had left of him. Aeolmar had never fought with it, or done anything other than lovingly oil and polish the blade. "I show it to no one," he said.

"You in my home, want my help, you show me sword," Grelk stated, neither as a challenge or demand, but as a statement of terms. Aeolmar nearly pointed out that he'd requested no assistance, but why had he come to the trolls if not for help? He frowned, and reluctantly handed over the blade. The troll slowly unwound the blackened oilcloth, and Aeolmar felt a surge of pride when Grelk whistled at the sight of it. His father once told him that he'd commissioned the sword as a tribute to his mate, and the result was a true work of art. Images of Alluria's favorite flowers were etched into the blade, and a sapphire the color of her eyes served as the pommel stone.

"I make," Grelk murmured, turning the blade so the engravings caught the firelight.

"You did?" Aeolmar was astonished. How his father ever could have afforded a sword made by the troll king was beyond his ken; he had always wondered how his father afforded it at all. Once he'd gotten up the courage to ask, and his father claimed to have had heaps of coins before there were so many children to feed, whereupon his mother suggested they sell the gem to replenish his stores.

"Where you get?" Grelk demanded, his rough voice cutting through Aeolmar's confusion.

"It was my father's," Aeolmar said.

“Was?” Grelk asked.

“Was.” Grelk grunted his understanding, and handed the sword back to Aeolmar.

“You have eyes like gem,” Grelk continued. “Like mother.”

“You knew my mother?”

“No, no,” Grelk said with a dismissive gesture, “I only make sword. Come, I show you now.” The troll lumbered off and Aeolmar followed, thoroughly confused because he hadn’t asked to be shown anything. That, coupled with Grelk’s claim to have made the sword, had turned Aeolmar’s world upside down.

“Wait,” Latera said, and Aeolmar sighed. Not once had he completed a tale without her interrupting him. “The troll king knew your parents? I thought Grelk never left his forge.”

“He only claimed to have made the sword,” Aeolmar clarified.

“That makes no sense,” Latera murmured, drawing a length of Aeolmar’s hair through her fingers. “He must be responsible for tens of thousands of swords. How could he remember one so clearly?”

“It is a very unique sword,” Aeolmar said, then fell silent. He had never shown Latera his father’s sword, or the other remaining bits of his youth. Most of the items were boxed up in the recesses of his chamber, and he couldn’t remember when he’d last set eyes on them. It got to be depressing, even for him, and since there was no one he had been willing to share his memories with they just gathered so much dust. Then Latera came into his world and he wanted to share everything with her, but they spent the bulk of their time in her chamber, only retreating to his tower room to escape the bustle of court. On those lazy afternoons, a few boxed mementos were the furthest things from his mind.

A fiery curl slipped onto Aeolmar’s chest, and he tucked it behind Latera’s shoulder, pausing to caress her neck. He imagined his mother’s pendant, the blue gem resting in the hollow of Latera’s throat, and he smiled. “I’ll show it to you, when we return to Teg’urnan,” he promised.

“You will?” she asked, her eyes brightening.

“Promise, beloved.” Latera grinned her silly grin, and tucked her head beneath his chin as if she was drifting off to sleep, but Aeolmar knew better. Neither of them would sleep a wink until Latera heard the rest of the story.

“So I followed Grelk,” Aeolmar continued, and described the steep, winding stairs hewn from living rock, and the utter lack of light. Aeolmar surmised that trolls were either able to see in the dark, or that Grelk enjoyed tormenting his guests. At last he saw a speck of light in the distance, which led to a battlement cut into the side of a mountain. It was close to the peak, and Aeolmar felt that he stood higher than the World’s Spine.

“You look.” Grelk swept his arm toward a valley nestled high amongst the rocky peaks. There was a great deal of activity in the valley, but Aeolmar could not discern what sort.

“What am I looking at?” Aeolmar asked.

“More kind of troll than me,” Grelk said. “I smith. I forge, I live in ground. Mountain troll, they not like smith.”

Aeolmar leaned against the stone railing, straining to catch a better view of the goings on in the valley. “I thought mountain trolls were a myth.”

“No myth. Real.” Grelk was silent for a time while Aeolmar contemplated this latest foe. Mountain trolls were said to have hides as tough as rock and some sort of toxic ichor in lieu of blood; if the stench alone didn’t kill you it would burn straight through your flesh and bones. As

far as Aeolmar was aware, no mountain trolls had been sighted in Parthalan since well before the old king's time, and many thought they were a myth.

"Troll capture demon," Grelk continued. "They make orc."

Orcs. Gods, it would have to be orcs, the one creature so terrifying even demons fled.

"How are they making them?" Aeolmar asked.

"Wait, wait, wait." Latera had been silent for so long, Aeolmar half hoped she'd fallen asleep. Yet again, she surprised him. "What do you mean, they were *making* orcs?"

"Orcs aren't natural beings, like you and I. They are created, rather than born." Latera got up on her elbows, but Aeolmar continued before she could ask. "Orcs are a creature of darkness; Nibika'al, goddess of night, created them to cleanse her land of evil, and made them the most despicable creatures in the realm. Olluhm destroyed them, but Nibika'al still held the knowledge of their creation, and shared it with those fool enough to ask."

"What are they created from?" Latera asked.

Aeolmar made a face. "The way Grelk explained it, demons and mountain trolls."

"Why would she create something so foul? Don't the gods love us?"

"I know not the mind of a god," Aeolmar said, then continued his tale. According to Grelk, the mountain trolls had come across a sorcerer who claimed to wield more power than Rahlle, and knew the particulars of Nibika'al's beasts. His boasts got the better of him, and for the past season the sorcerer had held captive demons in the vale below, creating orcs and terrorizing Grelk's people.

"So that's what happened to the demons," Aeolmar said.

"Need demon," Grelk rumbled. "Need flesh tainted with death, blood tainted with evil. Sorcerer carves meat from demon, takes ichor from troll," he made a few motions as if he was adding items to a pot and stirring, "shapes into orc."

"Then they are breeding a new evil," Aeolmar murmured.

"Something your king try once," Grelk said.

"That king is long dead," Aeolmar said wearily.

"I know. Sword help." Grelk turned to face the fae, his eyes muddy brown pools beneath scrubby brows. "I make sword for Solon's son, and he save us from your king. You save us now, I make you sword."

Father, when our spirits meet I'll have much to ask you. Aeolmar sighed heavily and let his hair fall in front of his face, obscuring his view of the vale; his father had worn his hair long, and he and his brothers followed suit. It was a nuisance more than anything else, but the thought of shearing it was like cutting off his father's memory, something he would never do.

As Aeolmar watched the creatures in the vale below, he realized that Grelk had made a request of him. More, he had offered a sword as payment. A weapon crafted by the king of the forge was worth a king's ransom, and blades were the most sought-after of his handiwork.

"How can I save you?" Aeolmar asked.

"Mountain trolls want my den. Want my forge." Grelk turned toward the vale, and Aeolmar understood that this war had likely raged on for centuries. "We strong, but not stronger than orc."

"I've no idea how to fight an orc," Aeolmar said.

"No fight," Grelk said with a shake of his head. "Just kill."

Hands balled into fists, Aeolmar used every iota of his willpower not to rail at Grelk. "I gathered that I should kill them"

“You can do?” Grelk smiled at the simplicity of his plan, revealing rows of acorn-like teeth. “Make orc go, I make sword.”

With that, Grelk turned and descended the stairs, going on about metalwork and the details of forgery. If their conversation happened at any other time Aeolmar would have been fascinated, since he once entertained the notion of apprenticing as a smith. But he hardly heard Grelk, for all he knew was that he had just been hired to exterminate the one beast viler than demon.

“You wanted to be a smith?” Latera asked. The fire had burned low, but their small room held the warmth well. She took full advantage of the balmy air and stretched languorously in the half light.

“It would have been a great help on the farm,” Aeolmar explained as he tugged the blanket up to her shoulders, pausing to caress her back along the way. “The closest smithy was a day’s walk, and costly.”

“Always putting others first,” Latera murmured. “Never yourself.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No. It’s one of the many reasons why you’re my *nalla*.” Aeolmar laughed aloud; he had begun teaching Latera the ancient tongue of *ahm’ri*, albeit in a far different manner than his mother taught him. The lessons started with ‘I love you’ (*j’hi nall a’te*), and then moved to the many pet names he had for her: beloved (*nalla*), beauty (*rihka*), sweetest girl (*dea comora*).

“*Nall*,” he corrected. “You are *nalla*.”

“*Nall, nalla*, I love you either way,” she said. She gazed down into his face, her crystal eyes reflecting the firelight. “And I’d love you just the same if you were a grubby smith.”

“Would you?”

“Of course. After all, you’re my grubby warrior.”

“Grubby!” He rolled her beneath him, and restrained her wrists with one hand while the other hovered above her side. “Take that back,” he demanded, his fingers close to her soft, ticklish flesh.

“I’ll not,” Latera said indignantly. “Everyone knows that warriors are dirty men. Dirty *k’na*,” she arched her back and kissed his chin, “dirty *n’heh*,” she nuzzled his neck, “dirty *or’eh*.” She attempted to catch his earlobe between her teeth, but couldn’t quite reach and ended up grazing her teeth across his neck. This display was further evidence of Aeolmar’s unconventional methods of teaching the old language: he’d taught her the word for kiss, *t’si*, then made her repeat as he kissed her hand, then her wrist, and the lesson progressed along its natural course. Latera took to her lessons well, but her conversational skills would only be of use in a brothel.

A stream of unfamiliar words tumbled from Aeolmar’s mouth, halting Latera’s gentle exploration of his jaw. “I haven’t the slightest idea what any of that meant,” she stated. He knew how she disliked it when others spoke in unfamiliar tongues around her, and he enjoyed how her nose crinkled when she was perturbed.

“I said that I would slay a thousand orcs, for just one night in your arms,” he replied.

“That wasn’t the word for arm.”

“Wasn’t it?” he murmured. “Show me what you think I said.”

After a long, satisfying time, Latera slept in Aeolmar’s arms while he stared at the ceiling, contemplating the time he’d spent in service to Grelk. Initially, he had concentrated on

defending the forge from orcs. They were terrifying beasts, their manner akin to a boar walking upright, with protruding tusks and cloven feet. They bore the thick, roughened hide of the mountain trolls, and dripped a foul moisture far more caustic than any troll ichor or demon's blood.

That fetid ooze caused a host of problems for Aeolmar, beginning when he stepped in a puddle of ichor that ate straight through his boots. He barely managed to save his foot, and couldn't walk for a sennight while the seared flesh of his sole healed. Worse than the pain, the wound stunk like an orc for nearly a moon.

Not wanting to be scorched and smelly again, Aeolmar managed to behead one of the beasts and drained the ichor into a stone basin, and began testing it against different substances. He knew that leather was no match for the slime, and nor was the metal armor Grelk provided. He then tried different alloys—those too heavy to be hammered into plate, or to brittle for a blade—yet all dissolved instantly upon contact with the ichor. It seemed that the only substance strong enough to withstand the orcish ooze was stone.

"Maybe I get mason," Grelk rumbled when he saw Aeolmar affixing flat stones to the soles of his boots. "He carve nice shoe."

Aeolmar glared at the troll; while he knew full well that putting stone on his boots would like as not cause him to stumble and save orc and troll alike the trouble of killing him, he could conceive of no other way to get close enough to kill the beasts. He knew that once their tough skin was open a sword would pierce the soft innards, and he could care less if the weapons dissolved as long as the creatures died. Still, he had to get close enough to strike one of them, and the ichor flowed freely from their many repugnant orifices. If a beast stilled long enough to sustain a strike, the ichor welled into stinking puddles around its feet, and they tended to leave acidic pools in their wake. At least they were easy to track.

These facts of orcish physiology plucked at Aeolmar's last, frayed nerve. He struggled to keep his temper in check; while Grelk had been a gracious host, fulfilling Aeolmar's every request without question, he was tired of the troll's constant jests at his expense. He flung aside the ball of yarn he'd used attach the stone tiles to his boots and began to tell Grelk exactly how he felt about chasing those stinking beasts just to protect these stinking dens, when Grelk held up a hand.

"Look." Grelk indicated the pool of ichor, and Aeolmar turned to see the ball of yarn floating in it. Not dissolving, not smoking or contorting, just floating.

"Wool is immune to ichor's bite" Aeolmar murmured, only to curse loudly when he tried to fish it out and the green slime dripped onto his wrist. Grelk was there with a bowl of cool water—indeed, it was the fastest the troll had ever moved—and as Aeolmar rinsed the ichor from his skin he contemplated his discovery.

"No stone shoe for you, eh?" Grelk asked with his acorn-toothed grin.

"No stone," Aeolmar agreed, returning the smile in spite of the pain. "Nothing but wool for me."

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Aeolmar left immediately for the nearest elfin village, and purchased every woolen blanket and scrap of cloth they would sell him. The village had no tailor, so he journeyed on to the next and convinced a skeptical woman to fashion him a woolen suit, complete with a helm and boots. Of course, the gear was so stifflingly hot rivulets of sweat poured down his back, but he didn't care. He just needed to get close enough to kill them, then he'd burn the blasted suit.

Under cover of darkness, Aeolmar crept toward the vale. He didn't don his protective woolen boots until he reached the stagnant pools of ichor that covered the ground where the orcs frequented; he wondered if the ichor was meant as a trap for the unlucky few who strayed too near. *No matter*, he thought as he pulled on the heavy boots that were really more like thick, cumbersome stockings. After a few hesitant steps he was assured that the wool held back the burning liquid, then he slogged forward to meet his foes.

The mountain trolls that stood guard at the narrow passage to the vale nearly doubled over in laughter when they saw Aeolmar's tottering approach. He was so thickly swathed in wool he resembled nothing so much as a ball of yarn. Then his moningstar, the spikes sharpened by Grek himself, sank into their skulls and they laughed no more.

Once he had penetrated the vale, Aeolmar found that the orcs didn't pose much of a challenge without their deadly ooze. They seemed newly formed and sickly, and Aeolmar wondered if the mountain trolls had a difficult time keeping them alive. But it mattered not, for in less time than it had taken him to don his wooly armor all the orcs lay scattered about the clearing. Aeolmar stood panting for a moment, then carefully stripped the ichor soaked wool from his body. The mountain air was so frigid his sweat froze on his back, but he didn't care. He heaped up the ruined wool near the bodies, and with a few murmured words set the pile alight.

The flames leapt toward the sky, just beginning to lighten as first dawn approached. Aeolmar turned to greet the elder sun, but halted when he heard a soft, scratching noise. Following the sounds, he found where the captured demons were held: chained together underneath an overhang in the rock. Lesser demons, all of them, they were puny for their size, and had likely been starved or beaten by their captors.

Sympathy is not for such vile creatures. He murmured the command for fire again, and the demons shrieked in agony. They deserved no less.

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"And the orcs were gone after that?" Latera asked.

"There were a few outside the vale," Aeolmar replied. "Within a few moons, they were gone." They were crossing the vast expanse of Grek's hollow mountain to his great hall; their sojourn with the trolls had ended, and it was time for the First Hunter and his mate to return to Thurnda, and then Teg'urnan. While Aeolmar would deny it if anyone asked, he had enjoyed the times he spent as the troll king's guest, and considered Grek a good friend. He would miss the crusty old fool.

"What of the mad sorcerer?"

"I found no trace of him," Aeolmar replied. "I suspect the trolls ate him before I arrived." Latera crinkled her nose at the thought, much to Aeolmar's delight.

"And Grek gave you that sword as payment?" she asked.

"Yes, but he took his time making it." Aeolmar had waited nearly a full turn of the seasons for Grek to complete the promised sword before he left without it. At first the waiting wasn't so bad, and Aeolmar spent the days killing stray demons, and mountain trolls that ventured too close to Grek's den. Then, either all his foes were dead or Aeolmar's reputation as a mad, sword-wielding fae had spread far and wide, and he was left with nothing to do, no one to fight, and still his sword wasn't complete.

Grek understood, but did not strive to work any faster than absolutely necessary. So Aeolmar moved on, and within a few short seasons he arrived at Teg'urnan and became a hunter.

When next he found himself in the frozen north it was as First Hunter, not a scruffy vagabond, and Grellk finally delivered the promised sword. It was truly a work of art, with vines etched down the length of the blade and a sparkling blue stone set into the pommel, just like his father's.

"It is an exquisite weapon," Latera murmured, grazing her fingertips across the hilt. Aeolmar caught her hand and squeezed it, then wondered how she would react if he gave her the sword to wield. He could always put his father's blade to use; after all, it was of no use to anyone boxed up in his chamber, and the both of them armed with troll-forged weapons would truly be a force to be reckoned with.

"Solon-son!"

Grellk's greeting ended Aeolmar's contemplations. When he and Latera arrived at the den she questioned why Grellk referred to Aeolmar as the son of a god, but he had come to understand that Solon-son was just how Grellk referred to faerie warriors. The troll king ambled across his hall, bowing once he stood before the two.

"Lady," he greeted Latera, and Aeolmar struggled to suppress a grin. Grellk had been quite taken with Latera since the moment he met her, and why shouldn't he? She was a beauty, unlike any woman he had ever come across in his long, lonely life. Well, lonely no more.

"Gift for you." Grellk beckoned Latera to follow him; she cast a questioning glance at Aeolmar but he merely shrugged. Aeolmar did not presume to know the workings of the troll king's mind any more than he understood the gods. He led them across the whole of the hall to the stone slab Grellk called a throne. Upon a length of velvet (*Where did Grellk acquire velvet?*) lay two gleaming short swords.

"For Solon-son's lady," Grellk explained. Latera hesitantly touched one of them; both of the blades were thin as parchment, and Aeolmar knew they were deadly sharp; like all of Grellk's work, these swords would never lose their edge. Each hilt was set with a yellow stone that blazed like the sun, surrounded by smaller blue gems. They gems were set flush, so as not to interfere with the sword's grip. Latera turned over one blade and saw it was etched with the swirling patterns of a snowfall, while the other sword depicted a cloudless night.

"I cannot," Latera began, but Grellk shook his head.

"Solon-son's mate deserve sword as fine as his," Grellk said solemnly. "After all, mate need to put up with him!" Grellk said something else at Aeolmar's expense but it was lost to his guffaws, loud enough to rattle the foundations of the mountain.

"Thank you," Latera said sincerely, inspiring what might have been a blush beneath Grellk's many layers of grime.

"When did you make these?" Aeolmar demanded. "I waited for my sword—which you owed me, don't forget—for nearly twenty winters, yet we've been here less than a sennight!"

"Sword done day after you left," Grellk replied with a shrug. "No my fault you wait so long to collect." Aeolmar shook his head, since he was not likely to get a better answer from the troll.

"You made Aeolmar's father's sword, did you not?" Latera asked, and Grellk grunted an affirmation. Aeolmar shot her a sharp glance, which she ignored. "Why did he request one of you?"

"No request. I offer," Grellk replied. "He so worry for his mate, he think of nothing but her. That why sword have flowers. Flowers she like. Pommel stone blue like her eyes."

"Why was he so worried?" Aeolmar asked, wondering how an ornate sword could help a farmer and his mate.

“Because, Solon-son, he love her, like you love this one,” Grelk replied, earning a flush in Latera’s cheeks. “All he want was get back to her side. Swore he never leave again.”

“He didn’t,” Aeolmar murmured. “He was with her until the end.”

Grelk nodded. “As lover should be.”

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They took their leave of Grelk once the child sun rose, Latera with her new swords packed in a box lashed to Enna’s saddle. She exclaimed that she couldn’t imagine using objects of such beauty against a demon, but Aeolmar knew that she would change her mind once she saw how well a troll-forged blade sliced through demon flesh.

“There is one thing I’d like to know,” Latera said. “Whatever possessed you to think wrapping yourself in wool was a good way to attack an orc?”

“I told you, the ichor doesn’t burn wool,” Aeolmar replied.

“Why didn’t you just shoot arrows from a distance?” she asked.

Aeolmar pulled Myrnnhe to a halt, remembering the sweltering layers of wool, the foul stench of orc that lingered on his skin for days. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Latera gave him a cloying smile. “My First Hunter would truly be lost without me.”

He grasped her hand, gently squeezing her fingers. “You’re right,” he agreed. “I’ve no idea how I’d live without you.”

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