

NOT FOR THE
FAINT OF
HEART



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1

The morning the Merry Men came for Old Rosie, Clem was trying to put a hat on a fox.

She felt quite bad about this later.

At the time it had seemed important; the fox had become tame enough to take scraps of meat and twists of hide directly from her hand, and putting a hat on him was the next logical step.

The construction of said hat had somewhat consumed her morning. She had visited the seamstress over by the river and come away with some soiled felt, unfit for trade; she'd swapped a little sage tea with Jon, who had a chronic sore throat, for a single turkey feather, just the right size to accessorise a small vulpine head.

She had been waylaid for a while by the miller's boy, Alfred, who was seven and had scraped both his knees raw but was being very, very brave about it. His elder sister Loos squeezed his hand while Clem blotted his wounds with thinned honey, and then wasted a narrow strip of bandage on him, sending him home a proud, wounded warrior. Rosie always grumbled that Clem was too free with both her compassion and her supplies, but she could

hardly argue that they were in dire need right now. Clem's penchant for *experimenting* was earning her quite the reputation, and had been attracting the sort of customers who paid in actual coin rather than stray bits of ham and pats on the head. They weren't well-off by any stretch of the imagination, but tying linen bows on Alfred's bloody knees wasn't going to tip them over into destitution.

Shaping the offcut of felt into something hat-shaped had taken a sweet half hour, sitting with her boots off in a stretch of buttery sunlight in the far reaches of the garden, among Rosie's ramshackle beds of mint, soft lavender and elder. The fox had made a few appearances, poking his head out of the woods to snuffle for treats and glare accusingly at her when none were to be found. He'd chosen the right garden to frequent; anyone with livestock would have made it their life's mission to see him turned into cloak-lining, but Clem and Rosie had been told very firmly by Jon that their temperaments were "ill-suited to the needs of chickens," so Rosie's beds remained eggless and the fox was free to come and go as he pleased.

When Clem had finally reached a hattish conclusion, she fetched a soup bone, still stringy with meat, and offered it up with an enticing wiggle.

"Good little lads get hats," she said, not bothering to talk soft or low; this fox was used to her by now, and would only have been suspicious of a gentle cajole. "Bad little lads too, I suppose. A hat for every little lad, regardless of temperament—that's my guarantee."

The fox seemed indifferent to the concept of hats, but

very interested in bone meat. He approached. Clem readied the hat. The fox dithered, sensing a trap.

This continued for quite some time. Clem was so engrossed in her task that she didn't notice a knock at the front door, or hoofs on the path.

It was only when she heard something shatter inside the little house, ruining her best hatting attempt so far, that she realized something was amiss.

Her body's reaction to danger at her door was immediate.

Her chest contracted. Her breath caught. She was suddenly sweaty in strange and unexpected locations, like the insides of her elbows and the backs of her ears. For one terrible moment, she was nine again, and the world was ending.

She shook it off.

By the time she had barrelled through the back door, there were two cloaked and hooded figures standing by the hearth. They were armed to the teeth and comically ominous among all the charming clutter, some of which now lay broken and smashed underfoot. One of them had Old Rosie—who wasn't really that old, but had lived long enough to wrinkle around the edges, like she'd soaked for too long in the bath of life—with both hands pinned behind her back.

From the color of their cloaks, it was immediately apparent that these were Merry Men. Merry Men! Standing in Clem's house! Threatening Clem's Rosie!

She would have asked for autographs if she weren't prioritizing finding a weapon.

"Hullo, Clemmie," Rosie said, perky as ever. "Is it my birthday?"

“No,” said Clem, groping around on the table next to her for something sharp. “At least . . . I don’t think so. Is it?”

“It’s not,” said the enormous man who had Rosie pinned. “Well . . . it might be. I don’t know when your birthday is. But to be clear, that’s not why we’re here.”

“It’s just, you’re awfully handsome,” Rosie said, trying to twist in the young man’s grip to get a better look at him. “And *strong*. I don’t go in much for Merry Men, but if they all looked like *you* . . .”

Clem snorted. “He’s not *handsome*, Rosie, he’s kidnaping you.”

“When you’ve been around for as long as I have, Clemence, you’ll begin to understand that these things are not mutually exclusive.”

Clem’s fingers had closed around a heavy stone pestle, still dusty with crushed fennel.

“If you came to woo her, then be my guest,” she said to the large man, “but it’s a little presumptuous to grab first, and it’s *very* telling that you had to bring a friend along for moral support.”

The other hooded figure, who was approximately a third of the size of the first, made a brief, choked noise that Clem thought might have been a laugh. This held promise.

“Now, why don’t I make some tea?” Clem said brightly, with a smile. That sounded nice. Tea. Tea with actual Merry Men. A bit of a misunderstanding, followed by laughs and bonding over biscuits. “Then we can all sit down for a moment and talk about why you’re here, before anybody does anything—”

The door flew open, smacking against the wall and

then coming to an undignified stop, and a third person—also anonymised by a long, mossy Lincoln green cloak—entered. Their associates straightened up slightly; the tall one tightened his grip on Rosie, who said “Goodness!,” not sounding nearly as upset as she should have been.

“What’s this?” said the newcomer. She had a low, no-nonsense voice with a little rasp to it. “Stop dicking around.”

“Not dicking,” the tall man protested. “What part of this says *dicking*? Just didn’t expect there to be two.”

There was a brief pause, during which Clem felt the unseen eyes of this new authority upon her.

“Who is she to you?” she said to Old Rosie.

“Not sure that’s really any of your business,” Clem said, still friendly as ever, at the exact same time that Old Rosie said, “Well—that’s my *Clem*.”

The newcomer did not seem particularly moved. “We don’t have time for this. Let’s go.”

It finally dawned on Clem that they really were going to take Rosie with them; Rosie, who never left the village of Oak Vale if she could help it, and had a bad knee, and drank her nettle tea at the same time every morning standing with her hand on her hip surveying her garden. She’d hate that. It wasn’t very Merry of them at all.

“Take *me*,” she said quickly. “If you need a healer. I’m good . . . ish. Young too. Sprightly, even.”

“Could do, Captain,” said the tall man, addressing the hood in charge. “If she’s offering.”

“Leverage,” said the smaller person, speaking for the first time. “Right?”

“Yes,” said the captain. “That’s what I was about to suggest. Knock her out. Bring some of . . . this. Whatever looks useful.”

“Now hang on a minute,” Rosie said, struggling against her captor, finally having the good sense to sound concerned. “You can’t just be *taking* people. That’s not on.”

“I don’t like being knocked out,” added Clem. “That’s just a personal hang-up of mine, you understand.”

She raised her pestle, readying for a fight she had no chance of winning; before she could take a single step forward, someone new grabbed her from behind, squeezing her wrist until she was forced to release her weapon. Clem hadn’t even heard the back door creak. She felt a heavy blow to the back of her knees and immediately crumpled to the floor.

The only advantage of this was that she could see her pestle where it had rolled away and become wedged in the dust under the nuts, seeds and berries cabinet. She reached for it, but was stopped by a foot, which landed firmly on her forearm and pressed her gently into the floor.

“What are you even going to do with that?” said her unseen assailant, irritatingly wry. “Ask me to lie still and grind me into a fine powder?”

“Enough,” snapped the kidnapper-in-chief. “Let’s go. And you—” Clem could only assume that Rosie was being addressed now, as she was at entirely the wrong angle to see for herself—“you know why we’re here. We must all act in the best interests of the people of the wood.”

“That’s funny,” Clem said into the packed dirt of the floor. “Because I sort of thought I was one of *the people of the wood*, and I’m over here being pummeled.”

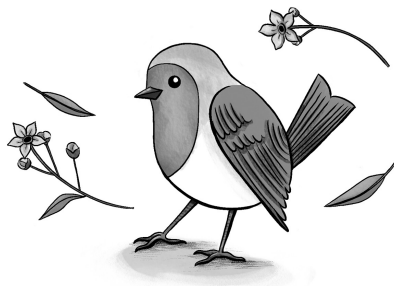
Her attacker removed her foot, and then hauled Clem to her feet. “This wasn’t a pummeling,” she said in a low, amused voice. “It was closer to a massage.”

Clem glimpsed the young woman under the hood—umber skin, a black braid and a flash of a smile—before a blindfold was slipped neatly over her eyes.

“No offense, but I wouldn’t like to be the receiving end of—”

“Bye now.”

Clem’s mouth was prised open with firm precision; she tasted the sharp, vinegary tang of dwale on her tongue before the world blinked out.



2

There was something wrong with one of the front wheels of the wagon, and Mariel had already lost half a fingernail trying to fix it. She was regretting removing her leather gloves, which had been necessary to get a proper feel under the hub; she was having second thoughts about jamming her fingers in there again at all, now that she was lightly bleeding.

Unfortunately, she had declared that it would be an easy fix and shoved Morgan aside to do the thing properly; anything less than perfect future rotations from the wheel in question would be unacceptable.

“It’s probably because this is more of a potato wagon,” said Morgan, who was now kicking sullenly around the back wheels, “and not a potatoes-and-dead-bodies wagon.”

They were parked in the trees, out of sight of the village; Mariel was grateful for the small mercy of not having to try to fix a wagon in full view of local urchins, farmers and lollygaggers, who would have been suitably intimidated by their green cloaks at first, but might have been less so as they watched her trying to jam a wheel back on to the axle with a bleeding hand and a hood that

kept falling over her eyes as she worked. The horses were standing about looking politely bemused, but they were disciplined enough not to wander away or start grazing the shrubs. If only her people were quite so well-behaved.

“She’s not dead,” said Josey, leaning over to check their cargo. “She’s just resting her eyes.” One of Josey’s older sisters had spent hours meticulously combing and braiding her hair back at camp, and she had taken those hundreds of tiny braids and pulled them into one tight, single plait that started at the top of her crown and brushed her shoulder blades as she straightened up.

Morgan’s hair was a self-shorn shag of dark feathers, and they liked to glare sullenly out from underneath their fringe like a wildcat sizing you up from under a bush, as they were doing now; the effect was ruined slightly by the fact that they were a foot shorter than Josey, who was lithe and rangy and made no effort to look threatening at all. This made it all the more satisfying when somebody underestimated her so thoroughly that they were unconscious before they realized she had stopped smiling.

If Mariel had been allowed to pick her own company, Josey Abara was one of the only names that she would have written willingly on her list.

Morgan, on the other hand, had been assigned to Mariel’s company because absolutely nobody else was willing to take on a green fourteen-year-old who had managed to pack enough rage and apathy for a lifetime into just a decade and a half. Mariel was constantly weighing up how incompetent she’d look if she “accidentally” left Morgan behind one day on a patrol—or let them fall into a

fast-running river, or sent them on an errand and then instructed everybody else to run away very fast—against how peaceful and orderly she might find a Morganless existence.

Alas, Baxter would never stand for it.

He came to crouch next to Mariel by the wheel now, his bulk so substantial that it was like a big, blond hillock had taken up residence at her shoulder. Despite her previous insistence that she could fix a goddamned wheel by herself, he wedged his enormous hands under the bed and lifted the entire front half of the wagon from the ground.

“Reckon there’s a stone jammed in there,” Baxter said, his voice as even as always and barely strained. “You might want to poke it with a knobby stick, Captain.”

Mariel was not going to do anything as undignified as *poking it with a knobby stick*; she poked it with her finger instead, despite the risk of further violent de-nailing, and when it came loose, Baxter gently lowered the wagon back down on to the ground. He at least had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed by this latest in a long line of Herculean feats.

He leaned in, darting a glance at their cargo and then aiming soft concern in her direction. “She *isn’t* dead, is she?”

“No,” Mariel said, not bothering to lower her own voice. She’d checked that herself, when they’d loaded the oddly cheerful girl up next to the supplies. The healer’s companion was shorter than she’d looked in the cottage, but she was by no means small. She had spring-curled hair the color of milled flax, rosy pink-and-white scars on her palms, and legs that looked so capable of kicking

that Mariel had been glad that she was unconscious, even if knocking her out had been a little overzealous on Josey's part. She had definitely been breathing.

"Good. Cos it was good of her to offer to come."

"Good of her?" said Mariel, wiping her finger impatiently on her tunic, the blood mostly vanishing among the dark, mottled green. "She's not on a summer jaunt, Scarlet. This was a tactical decision. We're killing two birds with one stone: healer for us, and it sends a message."

"Right," said Baxter, frowning. "And the message says . . ."

It said: pick your side, and then stay on it. Remember what's being fought for. Remember who the good guys are. Don't fuck with the good guys.

The message was for Mariel's father too. If he thought she couldn't handle anything more than a company of dull-witted children and easy retrieval missions, she'd show him that she could think like a leader; that she could be bold, and enterprising, and ruthless. He'd have no choice but to respect her, when all her victories were laid at his feet.

Ultimately, it was a very good thing that it wasn't the sort of message that needed to be written down, because it was too bloody long.

"People often demonstrate a troubling lack of self-preservation," was all Mariel said in reply. "Threaten somebody they love, and suddenly they're all ears. She offered herself instead—that means they care for each other. We can use that. Do you think the old woman is going to step out of line again, knowing we have her ward?"

“I do love it when you talk like that,” said Josey, from where she was strapping some of the non-human cargo down. “Brutal. Bloodthirsty. It makes me feel so warm and fuzzy inside.”

Such insubordination from anybody less useful would have pushed Mariel from generally perturbed to very pissed off. Josey had earned a generous helping of leniency.

Mariel glared at her anyway. “I’m just being practical.”

The wheel was fixed, the cargo secured. They were expected to rendezvous with other companies shortly to trade off supplies with those traveling elsewhere in the wood, and then it’d be back to camp to deliver the miniature healer and receive further instruction. “Where the hell is Chisaka? I told him not to go far.”

The last member of her small troop appeared instantly. Apparently he’d returned from the wood while she’d been elbow-deep in wheel, and had since been talking to the horse harnessed to the wagon.

“Was she like this when you took her?” he said, leaning over the wagon to look at their captive; she watched him extend a hand as if he might be about to touch her neck to check for her heartbeat, and then stop before he made contact. “Or was she more . . . you know. Upright? Conscious?”

“She’s fine,” Mariel said, taut with impatience. “*Leave her.* We need to go.” Kit had a haphazard bouquet of weedy-looking yellow flowers in the other hand. When he saw Mariel looking, he smiled.

“The St. John’s is out,” he said, waving it at her. “First blooms.”

Mariel sighed, because it stopped her from shouting. She'd been told that *shouting* was not conducive to a healthy working environment.

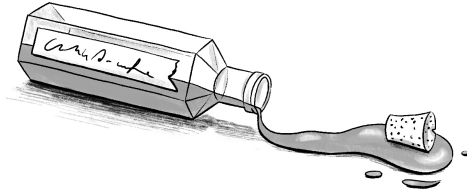
Whatever. She needed a tightly knit unit of trained, disciplined fighters; what she had was infants, gentle giants, aspiring florists. She would very begrudgingly admit that most of them could fight well enough, but at what cost?

For example: instead of hopping to it and taking charge of the wagon so that they could depart, Kit was now showing Morgan the flowers, and repeating excitedly, "St. John's wort."

Morgan said, "St. John's what?"

And Kit said, "Exactly!"

This was the sort of thing that, quite frankly, made Mariel want to kill them all.



3

Clem came back into her body slowly. She could see something bright and green overhead (most likely trees). She could feel the trundle of wheels below her, smell the sweet hay-and-earth of horses (all signs pointed to a wagon). Her hands were tied, and she was lying on her back, which was so medically irresponsible she would have screamed if it weren't for the fact that something had been shoved into her mouth. The blindfold had at least slipped, so she could squint out of one eye. Never skimp on blindfolds! What kind of kidnapers were these?

“Squirrel,” said someone to her left. “That’s fifty-seven to forty-nine. You’re screwed.”

“Could have been a pigeon,” someone grunted. Clem knew *that* voice. It was Rosie’s tall, handsome birthday present.

“*You* could have been a pigeon,” said the first voice sulkily.

“You can’t just say words in any order like they’re an insult. You have to make it personal. Like, what are my insecurities? My hang-ups? Start there.”

“Morgan. Baxter. Enough.”

Clem rolled over very slightly on to her side. The enormous young man was riding on her right, astride what must have been a draft horse. His hood was down, revealing a generous quantity of floppy blond hair, which bounced cheerfully as he rode. His nose had been broken and badly set, or likely not set at all, and he was lightly tanned. There was a long, thick scar running from his temple and tapering out just under his right eye, where he'd clearly had a near miss. *Baxter*, Clem decided. *Baxter* was a good name for a very large man.

This meant that the short, scowling, fair-skinned brunette person on the much more reasonably sized horse next to him was Morgan.

Morgan made direct eye contact with Clem and jumped.

“Ugh! Is she meant to be awake?”

There were general noises of interest; the cart slowed slightly and curved to the left, as if the driver had turned their whole body to look and confused the horses.

“Nah. I dwaled her.” This was clearly Clem’s wry as-sailant.

“*Dwaled* her?” said a new voice. “Was she threatening you?”

“She was trying to pestle me.”

“To *what* you?”

“I could tell she wouldn’t have gone quietly. And I was told in no uncertain terms to bring her quickly and quietly. No fuss.”

“All right. Take the reins, will you? I’m going back.”

A young Nihonjin man with blue-black, closely cropped hair and freckled fawn skin dropped into Clem’s field of

vision. His movements were controlled and precise despite the fact that the cart was moving; even in her half-addled state, there was something about the way he used his hands that scratched pleasantly at the back of Clem's brain.

"Hello," he said, peering at her, a frown wrinkling his forehead. He pulled her blindfold down so that it was resting around her neck. "Are you experiencing any stomach cramps, nausea or violent hallucinations?"

Clem shook her head. She was feeling a little gently poisoned and woozy, but it was nothing to write home about.

"Are you thirsty?"

Clem nodded an emphatic yes. He helped her up into a sitting position, back against a sack of something lumpy, and then paused.

"There's no point in screaming, all right? No dramatics. We're miles from anywhere. You'll just get me into trouble, so . . . you know. Don't."

He eased the rag out of her mouth and then smoothly lifted his waterskin to her lips. She took a few awkward gulps, water streaming down her neck and beading in her curls, before leaning back and frowning at him.

"Dwale isn't for knocking people out on a whim, you know. It's for *surgery*. And only to be used in the most dire of circumstances. It's hemlock soup!"

"Yeah, well. You don't have to tell *me* that," said the young man affably, with a quick glance upward. "The captain likes efficiency. Josey's sorry."

"Kit, you idiot. Don't tell her names," said Morgan.

Clem catalogued this away. The captain gave the orders. Josey was her efficient right-hand woman. This guy was

Kit. Despite herself, she was intrigued. It was like being invited to join the best circle with the most popular kids at a dance—if the popular kids knocked you out first and then trussed you up with rope (which, for all Clem knew, they did). The Merry Men had always been folklore, myth and legend; they were a flash of green in the wood that you hoped might be a cloak, and the distant sound of hoofbeats at night as you lay in bed dreaming of brave deeds and wildwood adventures.

Over the years, the reality of the Merry Men—silent figures who barely seemed to exist to the people of a small village like Oak Vale, distant players in a war for Nottinghamshire that had been going on for decades—had somewhat dampened her dreams of donning a green cloak of her own, but they hadn't quite been extinguished.

It was all just a *little* bit exciting.

“You haven't asked if I have muscle pain, an increased heart rate or excess salivation.”

Kit sat back on his heels. “Well, you aren't screaming in pain, your breathing seems fine and you aren't drooling. Plus, you're a regional healer—”

“Assistant to a regional healer.”

“Fine, *assistant* healer, so I imagine you'd be sounding the alarm if you suspected you were dying of hemlock poisoning.”

“If I were dying of hemlock poisoning there'd be no cure.”

Kit reached for a large, dented chest and pulled it toward him. When he flipped the latch and opened it, Clem recognized a jumble of her and Rosie's supplies. Some of it

made sense; bandages, bottles of tincture, the little bag Clem took with her for on-the-go emergencies. Some of it was leftovers from yesterday's lunch. "What do you prescribe for yourself then? Ginger?"

"You know about ginger?"

"The concept of ginger? I'm familiar," said Kit. "I know a fair bit about plants. Mostly the ones you eat for fun, but I can do practical, if pushed."

"There should be a bottle of barley water in there, if it's not already broken. And . . . give me some peppermint."

"Kit," said Baxter, putting one enormous hand over the edge of the cart and tapping the wood. "Coming up to the rendez-point."

"Just a second," Kit said, picking through the contents for Clem's barley water.

Baxter tapped again, harder. "Captain is coming back, Kit."

The wagon pulled off the road and into the trees, still going slightly too fast for comfortable forest-maneuvering. It was not doing Clem's roiling stomach any favors. The wheel hit something hefty and they bounced, the bottle in Kit's hand making a bid for freedom. He snatched it out of the air with impressive dexterity, then uncorked it with a flick of his thumb and began the undignified process of pouring more liquid into her mouth. The wagon rolled to a bumpy stop. It was while Clem was in this position, mouth agape, barley water flying, that the aforementioned captain returned.

"What are you doing, Chisaka?"

She was riding a dignified black horse, and was the

only one still hooded; her cloak had looked the same as the others back at Rosie's, dyed the verdant, dappled greens of the wood, but now Clem noticed that it was slightly darker, more pine than pasture, and fastened at the throat with a dull bronze pin in the shape of an oak leaf. Underneath, a glimpse of dark boiled leather armor and yet more green. They were all *very* committed to the theme.

Kit didn't remove the barley water, but he did shift uncomfortably in his squat.

"She didn't need to be knocked out."

"Josey was following my orders."

"I gathered that. To be clear: I was questioning your initiative, not hers. Anyway, she's a healer, so she—"

"I don't care, Chisaka. You shouldn't be back here having a juice picnic. And if she's conscious, she needs to be blindfolded."

"It's barley water," said Clem, knowing she had some dripping down her chin. "It's good for dehydration." Nobody seemed interested, but Clem pressed on, even attempting a smile. "When you poison somebody, sometimes they get a bit thirsty. Other times they die, horribly, writhing in a pile of their own shit. That's what makes it so fun! It's the luck of the draw!" She would have added a little flourish with her hands to really drive the point home, but they were tied.

Both Kit and the captain stared mutely at her for a moment, and then the latter abruptly turned her horse to leave.

"She was gagged for a reason."

Kit re-corked the empty bottle with care, and then gave her an apologetic shrug, reaching for the gag.

Clem weaved to avoid him like a baby ducking a spoon. “Can you tell me why I’ve been taken?”

“Er . . .” Kit glanced over his shoulder. “I’ll let the captain tell you.”

Clem had been trying to puzzle it out, and had decided that there was no way the Merry Men had carried out a cold-blooded kidnapping for no reason, even if Rosie *was* right that they were not the cheerful bandits of yore (for some reason Rosie didn’t like it when Clem referred to her childhood years as “yore”). There must have been a plan; a higher purpose that had not yet made itself known.

“Do you need a healer for an important mission? Have you heard tell of my excellent innovations and experiments? People misattribute those to Rosie—maybe they think I’m too young for genius, I don’t know . . . She does help a bit, but the ideas are mine. I don’t have my things here with me, but if you’ll get me something to write with, I can—”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” said Kit. “But, uh . . . for now, you’re our captive.”

“Your captive?” said Clem, her brow furrowed. “I have to be honest. That doesn’t sound merry. And you aren’t all men. So there’s been a bit of marketing confusion at some point down the line.”

Kit treated her to a very small smile.

“It’s easier to write on the pamphlets than *A collection of people experiencing a full range of emotions.*”

Clem just had time to say, “Yes, but think of the wanted posters,” before he carefully replaced the gag. He also re-jigged the blindfold back into place, but it had clearly been

tied too loosely in the first place; Clem immediately discovered that she was able to shift one eye slightly free again via vigorous blinking. She watched him dust off his hands and glance around, reorientating himself, before bending to pick up a sack of something almost the same size as him. He managed it—he must have been packing some serious lean muscle under that cloak—but it was obviously a bit of a strain; Baxter the friendly giant stopped him with a gentle hand to his shoulder and then easily hauled it out of the cart one-armed. Kit looked slightly wrongfooted and ducked his head, grabbing a smaller bag at random and then hopping lightly off the end of the wagon and carrying it out of Clem's sight.

Clem tested the rope at her wrists. Annoyingly tight. She wasn't actually attached to anything, but none of her kidnappers seemed particularly worried. Perhaps they thought she was still too woozy. Maybe they imagined she'd be too afraid of the fathomless, creeping reaches of the greenwood to try.

If so, they were idiots. Clem and the greenwood were old friends.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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