

Chapter 4 – Settling In

After securing the shuttle, we walked up a small flight of sandy stairs toward a hallway that would eventually empty us out on the street. As we walked the length of the hallway, we passed the entrances to many docking bays like the one we arrived in . . . 88 . . 87 . . 86 . . . as we passed the entrance to docking bay 85, I saw the hulking, hairy back of a Wookiee disappearing down the stairs with his human male companion. They were arguing, in somewhat hushed tones, about how best to break the news to someone called Jabba, about a blockade and a dumped shipment of spice. The Wook was howling and flailing his arms as they disappeared around the corner at the bottom of the stairs.

Beneath the cover of my bucket, I shook my head, closing my eyes and letting it go for now. I was sure I would be dealing with it soon enough.

The smell from the streets of Mos Eisley drifted over us before we ever reached them. This was a run-down little city, formed from the sand and rock on which it sat.

It was old, dirty and well broken in, a lot like most of us. There were street vendors everywhere peddling practically anything to anyone who glanced in their direction. Food of varying origins was cooking in small street-side cafes. Deals were being made and beasts of burden were everywhere, hence the smell. There were Rontos and Dewbacks mostly, but I did see a tethered Bantha down one of the side streets.

It was unremarkable, and reminiscent of any one of the countless urine-soaked, poo-doo splattered city streets I had seen on any number of different worlds, except for the heat. I had been stationed in desert locations before, but a glance skyward told me Tatooine was unique in that it had two suns, binary suns, and both Tatoo I and Tatoo II were blazing down on us as we marched onward through the streets. The body glove beneath my armor was struggling to keep up with my rising temperature under the mid-morning blaze, but it was decidedly an uphill battle. There were citizens of all species walking the streets wrapped in loose-fitting desert garments.

This was a harsh environment, and most of the species we had seen so far appeared to have successfully adapted to living in the hot climate. Some sat at the street's edges, leaning back on the buildings in what little shade there was to be had.

Some smoked long pipes as young street children of varying species ran through the roadway playing games in the sunshine, trying to make a credit or two for the occasional odd job, and in some cases stealing food and water from the merchants or off unattended, uncleared cafe tables to keep from starving to death.

This was definitely the part of town that thrived on the traffic from the spaceport. Based on what we had seen flying in overhead, straying one or two roads in either direction away from the immediate vicinity of the spaceport or marketplace left you in areas almost completely deserted. Here though, there was shop after shop of spare starship parts, cluttered with every outdated part you could imagine.

In one window I happened to catch sight of a thermal hydrospanner pack for a Sullustian WaveRunner. Those things had been out of production for several generations. Still, the shop owners were trying to wring a meager living out of what they had to offer. I watched their eyes following us as we marched past. I saw the uneasiness in their faces.

Some Imperial troops were nothing more than thugs, especially when charged with policing an out of the way place like this. It was the old “Big Otay in a little pond” story. That wasn’t my style. While I had no problem enforcing the law, or detaining someone of interest, I never shook down shop owners for credits, although I knew plenty who had over the years.

They had done so long enough to stockpile their “earnings” for a nice quiet getaway from the Empire once they amassed enough to live on comfortably. We passed a fabric and clothing dealer, several gaming and gambling dens, and a second-hand blaster shop with lots of guns and parts. Taka was hopelessly intrigued with the last one, stopping momentarily to step close, shielding the glare with his hand and peer in through the dust-covered plate of transparisteel at the weapons and parts displayed.

Damn it was hot.

I felt the first beads of sweat forming on my brow as we came to an intersection. The group turned right. I glanced down the street to the left. Nothing but more sand there, and the Sentinel flying low over the Mos Eisley rooftops.

I turned right and caught up with the group, mentioning the Sentinel to Rogue. We were marching down a canyon of small buildings toward what looked like a dead-end. Further down, where the road ended, there were vehicles parked in front of a low-slung building with a small, recessed, semi-circular doorway. Jawas hung around, running their hands over all of the swoops and speeders left unattended outside. They scurried away, jabbering with their yellow eyes glowing brightly, whenever someone walked past toward the door. It seemed to be a popular place. It was probably the tavern mentioned in the holo. I would have to check it out later.

Our barracks were located in a sun-bleached, white building on our right. TD-1009 rapped on several of the door panels. It was secured, and from the look of the sand drifted up against it and in the crack of the seals, it had been for some time.

Rogue pulled out his assignment datacard and inserted it into a small slot in the door access panel on the wall. With a creak, the rusty, sliding door opened. He entered, and the other troops followed him inside. I turned and stepped through the blast door into the shade.

Immediately, the polarized lenses in my bucket adjusted to the darkness. A mixture of infrared and heat sensing imagery appeared before my eyes as a heads-up, real-time display. We were all looking around, trying to figure out where everything was when the CO moved to a control panel. Four rusted portals in the wall facing the street slid open with the horrible scraping of metal on metal as he activated the switch. Daylight streamed in, and just as suddenly as it had appeared, my imaging display was gone, and I could now see the room in detail.

Thick dust hung in the air, sliced by the bright light, and now blown by the gentle, hot breeze. There were several small data terminals, holonet ports and several large storage crates in this front room. I pulled off my helmet and walked through a narrow hallway lined with slim closets and shelves and found myself in a large room in the rear of the building. There were six sets of bunks and bedding, and more sand on the floor. Somehow, I didn't think we would ever get away from it.

I walk into the room and lights flickered on. I slid the field pack off my shoulders and dropped it on the first lower bunk on the right side. The other troops filed past me, each looking around and then claiming their own space. I walked a bit further back, through a wide arch and then a plate metal door. Behind the bunk room was a storage room. The walls, ceiling and floor were fortified with plate metal armor. It appeared to be a secure room for storing supplies and weapons.

Falker and Blade were working on activating a holonet data stream terminal and Rogue was taking inventory of what we had to work with, "We'll need our supplies brought over from the Spaceport." I volunteered to go back to the shuttle for our stowed supplies, "I'll get them".

"I'll help him", said TD-600, dropping his pack and gear bag. Pulling on our buckets, we stepped back out to the street and headed back to the spaceport. The twin suns had slipped from their highest peak, and were beginning the afternoon descent toward nightfall they had been making for millennia across the Tatooine sky. I watched the ships slowly lifting skyward from the spaceport bays, gently riding their silent repulsor-lift fields, then slowly engaging their drive systems to climb toward the cold darkness of the stars above. TD-600 rested his DLT-19 rifle on his arm. "So, where are you coming in from?" he asked.

I glanced over to him as we walked, "I have served on more worlds than I can remember, but only stationed long-term on a few. After I finished my training on Carida, I was assigned to Dantooine, a remote desert planet a lot like this place. I enjoyed the solitude there. Not many inhabitants. It was there that I learned and honed my desert survival techniques and received my sniper training. Learning these things from my instructors had been one thing. Actually using them to survive was something altogether different.

After the planet was secured, a permanent listening post was established, to monitor a vast number of mining facilities. Ore was being cut out of the planet and shuttled away on gigantic barge sleds at a rate that made me wonder how long the planet would remain on anyone's star charts. I was in a small squad of troopers left in charge for several years and then reassigned to Mimban. I was there a year before I could transfer out.

I was most recently assigned in the Anoat system . . . Sniper and Demolitions. The only inhabited planet, Anoat II is a filthy world of dense, humid jungles, deserted ruins and rainforests honeycombed with subterranean sewers and caves.

Most of my time there was spent crawling through those caves and sewers during our initial occupation and seize of command. We had to fight our way into the cities from below, as the indigenous lifeforms had the upper hand, entrenched in the ruins above. We lost more than a few

good troopers in those battles.

I spent more time than I care to remember in the stinking water and sludge under that city and retrieving the wounded and trapped from deepwater starship wreckage brought down in that battle.

I am more than happy to be back to a familiar, dry assignment for a change. What about you? What's the story with the Kessel assignment?"

He turned his bucket toward me for a moment, and then spoke as we continued down the street, sand crunching beneath our boots.

"This isn't my first time in this dump", he said, glancing around. "It was here on Tatooine, a long time ago now, that I decided to become a Trooper. My brother and I had made our way here in the cargo hold of a freighter after our parents were killed. He was really mechanically inclined, a real wizard with machines, and we had been prepping this beaten down old pod for his boss to enter in some hyped local race.

The old man ran a little repair shop on the edge of town, and he had hired a palefaced lady gunslinger to protect the pod in off hours, until the race. Apparently there were some pretty hefty rivals breathing down his neck. I got to talking to the woman one day, and she agreed to take me out to the canyons and show me how to target and shoot like a professional.

My brother was busy working on the pod, so we were satisfied nothing would happen while we were gone."

"We were on our way back to the city after a great afternoon of picking off womprats when we saw the thick, black smoke against the blue sky. The garage had been bombed while we had been out. The pod was destroyed, and my brother was killed instantly in the explosion. Once he was gone I was alone. I did some digging for suspects, some real hard work to find his killer, and then I took care of business, ya know? It was later that I discovered the guy was a goon for one of the Hutts.

Some of the locals were talking about it and how somebody was going to pay for it with their life. I needed a way off this world, and a way to hide for the rest of my life. I had no money and nowhere to go, so I signed up with a squad that was passing through. They came in rotations every other season or so to check on things and used our barracks as temporary housing while they were here. The Empire took me to Carida and then on to other assignments over the years. It was in the jungles on Malastare that another trooper introduced me to Mandalorian Sweet Grass. You want some?" he asked, producing a small bag of the moist leaves.

I declined as he raised the lower edge of his bucket and spit into the hot sand, turning to look at me again. I glanced his way as I spoke, "So, you and 1009 have known each other for a while? Did you guys train together on Carida, or just know each other from Kessel?"

He took a few steps in silence, then turned back to me, "Just between you and me, OK?"

I nodded back, "Of course."

He glanced around, then began his story, "Yeah, we trained together on Carida, and he goes by Rogue, but have you ever heard of Belliran V?"

I thought for a moment, "Yeah. It was all over the holonet a few years ago, who hasn't heard of it. There was a huge massacre there, quite a scandal. Why? What does that have to do with you?"

He motioned to the hallway just ahead that led to the docking bays. Once inside the hall he stepped into the shadows and stopped, pulling off his bucket. I stopped and removed mine as he glanced around again.

"Typical", he said. "I'm sure the Empire covered it up, all neat and tidy while they flogged their scapegoats. Rogue and I had just arrived on Belliran V, transferred in from Malastare and newly assigned to a small squad. We were learning the ropes about our new duties and the local inhabitants, the Hammerheads; the Ithorians. They were a group of Ithorian, herbivore pilgrims that had splintered from the main population on Ithor and relocated to Belliran V seeking religious freedom. Our mission was a simple one, to protect and defend a small-scale mining operation. The Empire had struck a deal with Incom. The starship manufacturer had set up a small mining colony and was drilling out a semi-rare mineral used as an additive in the production of durasteel, to make it stronger and lighter.

The Hammerheads were a peaceful colony that found their way of life turned upside down by the mining. It was being destroyed by the presence of Incom and the Empire. Several of their sacred grounds were demolished without a second thought to make way for a landing platform complex as well as observation and gun towers. Our towers kept the Hammerheads at bay, but we started experiencing vandalism during the night hours. This quickly escalated into other terrorist activities and ultimately evolved into a full scale, organized Rebellion.

It was about 10 standard months later that Incom officials reported to the Empire that it had successfully mined out all of the ore that it could, and was closing the installation. The Empire considered leaving a base behind, but their investment in facilities was minimal and it was decided that once the Incom personnel were safely off-planet, that our troops would vacate as well and destroy the base from orbit, leaving what Hammerheads survived behind with their explosive anger over the desecration of their holy grounds. As misfortune would have it, the task of covering the troop extraction fell to our squad.

The last Incom cargo ship was loaded and prepping for departure when terrorists infiltrated our defenses, destroying our gun tower and opening a huge breach in the perimeter. The cargo ship was slowly lifting off as thousands of angry Hammerheads swarmed into the complex, blasting anything that moved and destroying the mining machinery. There were explosions all around and the high pitched squeal of blaster fire was heavy.

The Hammerheads hurriedly assembled a crude cannon and fired on the departing Incom ship. The hull ruptured in a shower of sparking, hot metallic fragments that rained down on us. The ship rolled over twice before crashing headlong into the base, digging a fiery trench from one side to the other. The fuel cells ignited, exploding with amazing force, rocking the entire complex.

We retreated through the still-falling debris and scorched ground toward the landing platform, but most of our squad was killed in a matter of minutes. I remember seeing our Squad leader throw off his bucket and grab up a T-21 repeating rifle from one of our fallen. He charged to the top of a smoking rubble pile and blasted away at the Hammerheads, but there were far too many of them. They swarmed over him, beating him with sticks, drowning him in a sea of Ithorian rage.

Rogue and I were retreating through the thick smoke toward our shuttle when an overhead gantry was rocked by an explosion and buckled, throwing others from our squad to their deaths. We were caught in the cascade of bodies and twisted durasteel that came down. Everything went black at that point."

He stopped, taking a breath. "When we came to, there was silence. We were caught beneath a pile of bodies; men we had served with. The Hammerheads had overlooked us, believing us to be dead also. I pulled Rogue out of the bloody pile and dragged him across the devastated landing pad toward the heavily damaged shuttle. Taka, who at that time was also in our squad, had somehow managed to survive and was already onboard trying to bring the engines on-line.

I clipped Rogue into a harness and went to work trying to re-route power to the drive system. I finally got that figured out, using the metal body of my blaster between two key contact points as a makeshift bridge for the power to course through. I moved over to secure the rear of the ship and saw Hammerheads advancing our way; thousands of them. I manually raised the access ramp and quickly hand-pumped the airlocks seals. Taka kicked on the repulsor controls, and the energy field pushed off hard from the deck as the angry Ithorians swarmed onto the platform, jumping for the retracting gear on our ship.

As we made our escape out of the atmosphere, the entire base, all of the buildings and thousands of Hammerheads were obliterated from orbit by one of our Destroyers, which immediately performed a hyperspace jump away from the planet. Left behind, we slowly limped away from Belliran V. The engines were way underpowered, as my blaster offered too much resistance to the flow of energy.

Several days later we made an emergency landing on Malastare. All three of us were taken to a medical lab and sedated for healing. Rogue was treated for his wounds, but had very fitful sleep; recurring nightmares of the invasion and the swarming masses prevented any true recuperative rest. When we were revived, we got the biggest surprise of all. We discovered that we had been moved to the medical lab of a prison facility.

Taka was gone, but we were being held on formal charges of Desertion of Post and informal charges of Cowardice in a Battle Situation. Rogue and I both wondered, and still do I guess, if

Taka worked a deal to be let go, in exchange for our imprisonment. There's a lotta years of thinking about it and a fair amount of resentment towards him. I'm sure he's not too comfortable being reassigned with us. He probably thought he'd never see us again. He said he thought we were dead. I just don't know. It was a shock seeing him when we strapped in back on Kessel. It stirred up a lot of things that probably would have been better off left in the past.

The Holonet portrayed us as the troops that had destroyed the Incom base and along with it, thousands of Hammerheads. Basically we were being molded into just the scapegoats the Empire needed to cover up the Belliran V massacre. We were sentenced to 4 years in the Imperial Prison on the moon of Kessel, to be followed by a lifetime post there. We were completely shamed, shipped there immediately after sentencing and locked up in the general population with common scum inmates from a thousand worlds.

We survived the slow passage of time. Time that only seemed to intensify the terrifying dreams that Rogue suffered from. Something in him just snapped that day at the base and he was never the same afterward. The guards knew what we were in for, and treated us like dogs. After the first 2 years, we were made to work deep in the pitch black mine shafts, drilling and then carefully extracting the only reason Kessel was inhabited at all . . . GlitterStim.

GlitterStim is a naturally occurring mineral, a spice that lies dormant in the darkness of the mines. It's collected in complete darkness and contained in light-shielding wraps for distribution among the galaxy's biggest crime bosses. Users of the spice know that GlitterStim is dormant until removed from its' light-shielding wrap. It then begins to spark and sparkle a bright blue. Once it begins the sparking, the user ingests it, allowing them a rush of euphoria and temporary telepathic abilities. Eventually, we were made to continue working in the mines, but now we were working for Doole, overseeing the spice mining and distribution, and his personal side business.

Rogue was made a drilling foreman, and I was put in charge of demolitions and new mine shaft development. We would still have been doing that if someone hadn't volunteered us for duty here. I'm still trying to sort out if it was someone who thought they were helping us, or someone who thought this was a fate worse than where we were", he pulled his bucket on, continuing on toward our docking bay. "Rogue's dreams have subsided somewhat, but Belliran V haunts us both. Neither of us really likes to think of that night. When you guys picked us up, we were both given a new opportunity, a way out, so we accepted without hesitation. I had no idea it would be here, or that Taka would be a part of it."

I followed in stunned silence.

He just looked ahead as we passed docking bay 85. I looked back at the stairs. "Hey, let's check something out."

He nodded and walked back to the steps with me. We silently descended the stairs, stepping lightly as we made our way to the sandy bay floor. I could hear nothing but the hum of the charging and pumping units. He glanced around the corner. We saw a battered old freighter connected to refueling lines, but nothing of her crew, nothing but still silence.

"After what I saw and overheard earlier, I think it might be a good idea to just check this out."

I listened a few moments longer and satisfied there was no one around, I slid my slung rifle off my shoulder and switched it on as we made our way toward the extended entry ramp. 0600 glanced around once more as we paused at the bottom of the ramp and then ascended into the heavily worn ship.

The interior was no prettier, showing the signs of years of constant, heavy wear and smelled of freshly-welded metals and hyperdrive cooling fluid. I noted that some modifications had been made as I walked past the holo-gaming table and crew bunks.

The ship, however, appeared empty. As we walked, the thermal imaging system in 0600's helmet showed only trace heat signatures near the engines. I walked out a short hall and stepped into the cockpit, knocking a pair of dangling chance cubes with my bucket as I looked around. The two seats here were empty as well.

We completed our inspection of the cargo areas, walking the metallic planking that encircled the core of the ship's interior.

Satisfied with having found nothing, and there being no visible evidence of spice cargo, we exited the ship and headed up the stairs toward docking bay 98.

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Several droids attended to the fueling of our ship as we walked past to the cargo ramp. Tank had already unloaded some of our gear from the shuttle and now was going over the manifest. He set his drink down as we walked up. "Take your time guys, as much as I loved leaving this place when I left, I'm in no hurry to shove off until you're finished."

We propped our rifles against the ramp hydraulics and moved inside. 0600 turned back to Tank, eyeing him cautiously, "So, you're from here?"

The young pilot sipped his drink as he reclined on the top of the refueler beside one of the landing gear feet, "I was born and raised here. Well, not HERE in this city, but Anchorhead, not far from here. Tion made it very clear I needed to be on my way back as soon as you were dropped and unloaded. Ralltiir is still too unstable, and they need me. He pulled me from my regular duties because I know Tatooine and Denon Station. Normally I fly combat surveillance sweeps, and there are still too many pockets of resistance left to flush out. I wish I had the time to go see some of my old friends. You know, show them how far I've come and how planet-bound they all still are."

He laughed, grinning widely. "I'll stop by and see them on my next trip back." His eyes swept around the room slowly, then lifted them skyward, his grin fading as he took another drink. "I

know they'll all be right where I left them. Nothing ever changes around here except the dunes."

"Right", we nodded as we worked, removing the restraints from our repulsor-sled. The straps and heavy metal buckles fell to the gridded deck plate, and the sled lifted slightly. We eased it back down the ramp. The load was large, but there was plenty of room for the other gear scattered out here to be added on top, and we got to work.

There were packages of dried food rations, portable powerplants, chargers and blasters among other supplies. One of the huge crates on the sled was marked "Raw Impervium", in Aurabesh. Every piece of Stormtrooper body armor was formed from Impervium, a very strong, durable material. It could be shaped using a small device with pre-designed parameters loaded in memory. An armor part was selected from the displayed listing. A trooper would then pour the measured amount of the raw material, the consistency of a thick soup, into a small container. The tiny extended electrodes on the tip of the display unit were pushed into the liquid and the forming program was initiated. The Impervium was then charged with a flux of ions passing through it in a pulse pattern; a pattern distinctive to the part desired. The ion flux warped and distorted the white material into the perfect shape of the armor piece needed.

Once the ion field was removed, the armor piece hardened, never to liquify again. Helmets could not be created in this way in the field due to the extensive electronics embedded in them, but most protective body, arm and leg panels could be created on site, on the fly. Impervium armor was a great defense. Low-powered, or indirect blaster fire generally glanced off the hardened surface, although it did little to protect against full-power, direct head on shots.

Tank disconnected the fueling lines and disappeared inside the shuttle as 0600 crisscrossed the load with wide straps and cinched them tight. With the sled secured, we grabbed our rifles and shoved the floating load toward the cargo lift, just beyond the stairwell. We maneuvered the sled onto the platform and raised the sand-worn lever. The ancient mechanical lift jerked to a start and slowly rose to the level above. Tank walked to the end of the boarding ramp. I called down to him, "You're all clear, thanks for the ride."

He yelled back, "Enjoy the sand!" We pushed the hovering sled ahead of us down the hallway toward the street, and I swatted a few Jawas away from the supplies as we walked.

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We made our way through the streets with our supply sled, as citizens who had not seen us before hurried to tell others that there was once again a Stormtrooper presence in Mos Eisley. We stopped in front of our post and stepped inside. Our CO, XO and others had been busy while we had been clearing the shuttle's hold. They had emptied the storage crates in the front office of their contents and had put together the beginnings of a respectable command post information center. Falker and Blade had successfully connected to the holonet and were streaming the most recent information regarding wanted smugglers and deviants thought to be somewhere on this rock. 4120 cracked the seal on the final crate as we entered. He looked up from the case of E-11s.

"I love the smell of new blasters! AHHH!!!"

Rogue stepped out of the bunk room, "Take the supply sled down the side alley to the rear of the building. There's a loading dock around back. You can just push the whole load into the storage room behind the bunk room." 0600 nodded and stepped back outside as I turned and drew my blaster on the same Jawa that had been trailing us from the docking bay, and he scampered away.

TD 600 dragged the sled back to the alley and turned down the narrow corridor.

The setting suns now threw long shadows on the buildings and streets as we both pushed on the sled. The narrow alley opened into a much wider courtyard between our building and the one behind it. The sky was now beginning to darken as our XO, 4120, raised the rear bay door and Etz and Taka came out to help us. We pushed the sled up the slightly inclined ramp and inside. I stepped back out onto the loading dock, noticing what looked like a battered transport parked amidst a pile of junk and discarded scrap metal across the courtyard. An enormous moisture vaporator rose up over the building just beyond it, probably for use in the spaceport.

I jumped off the loading dock and walked over to the transport. It bore faded Imperial markings and was obviously intended for troop deployment, but I wondered as to its effectiveness in all of this sand.

Etz walked up beside me, "Looks like its seen better times."

I nodded in agreement, "It sure has." I said, noting the multiple blast points and running my hands over the crumpled metal skin of the pilot's door. "When I was on Dantooine we commandeered some of the local beasts of burden for troop mobility. I imagine we'll probably be seeing more of the local Rontos and Dewbacks, especially if we'll be searching the wastelands for the missing pods. Poodoo. I just can't seem to escape Poodoo."

I shook my head as Etz walked back to the loading dock. I turned and followed, stepping inside and pulling the door closed behind me. We walked out of the rear storage room into the bunk room. Rogue was busy working on a schedule for spaceport sweep shifts on the wall display. If sensitive information did make it to the surface, this would be the most likely place it would be brought, to make it off-world. If we could secure that, the data could be found. It was only a matter of time.

I pulled off my bucket, "Anybody up for a look inside the little bar across the street? I'm so hungry I could eat one of those Rontos we saw earlier."

Rogue turned and straightened up a bit nodding his head and said, "Yeah, I could use a bite myself, but we should go in our flight suits and blend in with the other pilots; try to get a low-profile first look at some of our local clientele. Just a thought."

"And a good one" I agreed.

Etz, 4120 and the others pulled off their buckets and started peeling off armor plates. “We’ll need to eat, check things out for awhile and then settle in for the night. The Commander on the Sentinel contacted us while you two were gone. He has secured Dewbacks, and will be running a series of daylight sweeps on the far side of Tatooine looking for escape pod beacon signatures. We’ll pick up where they leave off at dawn. They will be in bay 98 to pick us up at first light.”

I nodded, and was also removing armor, as my thoughts drifted back to the Wookiee and the pilot I had overheard earlier. I wondered if they might be drinking tonight. Our first day on Tatooine was drawing to a close.

I pulled my flight suit from my gear bag. There was no way we could have known what lay ahead.

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