

Prologue



Thrice

I am in darkness.

I am in darkness.

I am in darkness.

Thrice its touch is upon me. Thrice I am protected by it. Past, present and future seem to me now shrouded in shadow, and I can no longer tell one from the other. I have come so far and done so much, yet I am back at the beginning. Time and memory shift and swirl like patterns on a beach. A beach! Blackwater cave flashes before me, his blood on the sand. My legs feel weak, my head spins - I close my eyes and steady myself before I fall. A gull cries, the salt of the sea on my tongue. Am I really here? Is this my Now? I run my hand along the cold stone of the cell. This is what is real. This is Now. Concentrate. Focus on the task at hand.

Long has the black of night been my friend, for years I have done my work in its depths, and so it is now. I must have faith. But tonight's is a dangerous business, my quarry is not to be taken lightly. One small misstep could alert her to my presence and destroy much careful planning. If I am discovered - especially without my token - the risks are great.

It is a delicate thing, working a form like this. To make it nigh-on untraceable takes time, and a great deal of patience. Many lesser than I have been torn apart, their essence scattered across time itself. But I have surpassed such inexpert practitioners of the art. False Witches. Pretenders. I steady myself, slow my breathing,

calm my mind.

I open my eyes to the darkness of my Now, that of the cell they think will hold me. A stinking, rotten place whose cloying rankness threatens to overthrow my concentration with every intake of breath. I shut it away, imprison it within my mind - out of reach, just as they think they have done with me. Not long now and this will be but another memory, one more past to draw upon.

The darkness of my future is harder to see. Great skill is required to form the image, to see the room with unwavering clarity. I picture the arrangement of furniture, the fine stonework of the walls, the Haneilan tapestries hanging upon them, shifting in the breeze from a nearby window. With a slow breath I taste the air of that place, the dampness in the stone, the days-old straw upon the floor. Detail upon detail I build the room in the tower within my mind, as though willing it into existence from nothingness. Nothing is insignificant when so much lies on the line. Soon enough I will be ready. Soon enough they will know their error. I will show them what they have unleashed, when it is too late.

A breath. Patience. Calm. Time is all that is needed.

The darkness of my past lends me its strength. I am there now as then, in all times at once. Through closed eyes I see my mother's room, I am in my mother's room. Vos is high, veiled by wisps of cloud, through which its wan light casts uncertain shapes and disjointed shadows across the ground. It is an old moon now, a moon many years gone. Rega, its twin, is absent this night. I focus, drawing deeper from the well of power this memory provides. It is one I have visited often, but one that has much still to give.

A shout from somewhere in the castle - some servant calling to another perhaps - and my concentration wavers. The memory shimmers, and the room I am building for my future fades like an image beneath water. My heart quickens, I know the risks should this fail. But I am no mere child now, I am a Witch of the Bond.

This will require more power and more time than I had expected if I am truly going to go unnoticed. I cannot not simply draw power from the surface as I had planned, it is necessary to fully enter the memory. Even riskier, of course - should someone enter

my cell, I will be vulnerable. And one can get lost in memory, lose all sense of what is Now, what is past and what is yet to come.

I put it out of my mind, there is little choice left to me. I have come too far, and there is no other way.

I clear my mind. A breath. Patience. Calm.

I sink into the memory.

ONE

Denmae Fain

*Secrets and lies in the hearts of others wound deeply,
but be sure it is your own that will kill you in the end.*

Morina Narr

Chapter One



Secret

1

It was autumn, a glorious day of sunshine and clear skies, and fast approaching halfway wasted on chores. My twelve-year-old self didn't know it yet, but what had started as a day like any other was to be a day I would never forget.

Despite the weather, my hands were bright red and chilled to the bone. Hanging out the washing was a task I hated more than most, and I had put it off until last. At least after this, I could be free - if Mother allowed it. She stood now, talking with old Lady Gren, but always watching me at the same time. If only Nell could come to save me, to take me away.

A cluster of orange-brown leaves blew around my feet as I bent to take the last sheet from the basket, and I rubbed my hands together to try and work some warmth into them. Lifting the sheet to the line, as though my thoughts had summoned her, I saw Nell. She ran across the grass towards our house, a broad grin on a face flushed almost as red as the hair that streamed out behind her. Mother eyed her warily as she came to a stumbling halt.

Nell bent over, her hands on her knees, panting. "You wanna go play?" she asked between breaths.

"Now?" I looked again to where Mother stood, ostensibly deep in

conversation with Lady Gren. "I'm not sure—"

"Come on! It'd be a shame to waste such a perfect day as this!"

"I don't think Mother will let me," I said uncertainly, keeping my voice low, hoping she couldn't hear me.

"Then don't ask! Just come. If we go now, you can be gone before she even notices."

"You know I can't do that!" I said, horrified at the thought.

Nell pulled a face. "Mummy's girl. Well, ask her then - you'll never know if you don't ask."

I bit my lip. Mother had been in one of her Loud moods lately, or so I called them. Loud and Quiet. I didn't like to disturb her when she was in a Loud mood, but she had been a little better this morning.

"I don't know, Nell. She might—"

Nell took hold of my shoulders, turned me around and shoved me towards the two adults. "Go on!"

I walked sheepishly over to where Mother and Lady Gren were talking.

"...well, Harlin said he was going to speak to the—" Lady Gren was saying.

"Mother?" I said quietly.

Mother turned to me, her eyes dark. "I am talking, girl. Do not interrupt. Go and finish your chores."

"But I am finished," I replied.

Mother waved her hand irritably to dismiss me, like she were swatting at some annoying insect. "I will talk to you later, Lady Gren was just—"

"It's all right," Lady Gren said. "I don't mind. What is it, Caya?"

Mother frowned, but said no more.

"I was wondering if I could go to play with Nell." I pointed at her by way of explanation, as if the two of them were not already well aware of who she was.

"That girl is nothing but trouble," Mother said.

"Nonsense!" declared Lady Gren. "She's a good girl, that one."

"She's my best friend," I said proudly, smiling at Lady Gren. She returned my smile warmly.

Mother looked uncertain. "Are you quite sure all your chores are

done? I don't want to find I have half of your work to do as well as my own the moment you're out of sight. Your father won't be back for hours yet, and I don't have time to do your work for you."

"Yes, mother. I just need to put the washing basket away and all is finished."

Mother grunted her reluctant acceptance. "See to it then. And be sure you're back before dark."

"Thank you, Mother!" I said, and smiled again at Lady Gren.

Before Mother had a chance to change her mind, I turned and ran away from them. I quickly stowed the washing basket in its place inside the house and went out to meet Nell. With a grin, she grabbed my hand, and together we ran down the hill under the late morning sun. Nell's hair kept blowing in my face as we ran, it was warm and soft and tickled my nose so that I laughed. This made Nell laugh too, and so we laughed together as we ran, faster and faster. I left my sadness behind me, and did not look back.

Had I known where that day would take me, the path it would set my feet upon, would I still have gone?

2

That afternoon seemed to last forever, as only those of childhood can. As an adult looking back upon that day, it seems impossible that we did all those things in a single afternoon. We chased fish through the Black Brook together, and afterwards lay on the rocks to dry our skirts and told tales of adventures we would have one day. We ran through the long grass behind the graveyard and climbed the tall jae tree that grows there. At the top, Nell bounced up and down on the branch so hard I felt sure it would snap and send us crashing down on the fence that ran below it. But the branch held strong, and Nell just kept bouncing – until we heard the voices below.

"Hey! What do you think you're up to?"

I looked down to see three girls gathered at the base of the tree, staring up at us. I recognised them immediately, Erlea, Samse and Karin. Not friends.

When we made no answer, Erlea repeated more loudly, "What

do you think you're doing?"

"What's it look like? Nell shouted back. "Climbing a tree."

"That's our tree. You best get out," Erlea barked.

"Or what?" Nell said.

"Come on Nell," I said. "We should just go."

"You should listen to the freak," Erlea said. "She probably has to get back to mummy." The other girls laughed.

Nell and I exchanged glances. Nell had that look in her eye, one I knew well, one that often preceded trouble. There was a dull thud, and I looked down to see the girls throwing stones up at us.

"Out you come!" Karin screeched, hurling another stone.

Nell made an animal noise deep in her throat and began climbing down. "Come on, Cay," she growled. As if to spur me on, another stone thunked into a branch near my head. Nell was already halfway down to the ground and I started quickly after her.

I dropped from the lowest branch to where Nell stood, hands on her hips. Erlea, Samse, and Karin had formed a line facing her, blocking our way. I saw Karin had another stone in her hand.

"Right. We're out of the tree," Nell said defiantly. "Now what?"

"This is our place," Erlea said. "You shouldn't be here."

"Why? What are you going to do?" Nell replied.

"It's our place as much as yours," I said.

"You shut up, mummy's girl. Past your bedtime," Karin said with a laugh. "Unless you want this?" She hefted the stone in her hand, then brought it suddenly forward in a mock throw. I flinched despite myself, and the three girls laughed again.

"Shut up," Nell shouted, stepping between me and Karin. "You do anything to her and I'll—"

"What?" Demanded Erlea. "You'll what? Are you her mum now too? Caya not got enough with one freak of a mother to boss her around?"

I felt my anger rising, but before I could move, Nell stepped closer. "Shut up!" she shouted again.

"Make me!" Erlea said, stepping up to Nell. She was taller than Nell, but skinny. She was trying her best to look scary, but couldn't quite manage it - her face always put me in mind of a rat.

“This is your last warning,” Nell said. “Leave us alone. This place is no more yours than it is ours. And besides, we’re not going to be ordered around by the girl who wet her pants at last year’s”

Erlea’s face twisted into an ugly snarl, and before I knew what was happening she grabbed a thick clump of Nell’s hair and pulled down hard. “Bitch!” she screeched as she stepped back, pulling Nell with her.

I didn’t even know I’d moved forward, something seemed to have taken over my body, almost as if I were just watching events happen. My fist shot out, there was a wet crunching sound as it connected with Erlea’s nose and I felt it give beneath my hand. The taller girl stumbled backwards, releasing her grip on Nell. She lifted her hand to her face and looked surprised when it came away bloody. Karin and Samse looked from her to Nell, to me, back to Erlea. We all just stood there, none of us quite knowing what to do next.

“You’ll pay for that,” Erlea spat through her bloody hand. “You’re dead now!” It came out sounding more like you’re deb, which made me laugh. This enraged her even more, and she looked pathetically to her friends on either side of her for support. Neither of them made a move, and Nell and I just stood there, daring them to try something. When nobody did, Erlea, still clutching her nose with a cupped hand, turned and ran. Karin and Samse, now utterly lost, followed not far behind.

3

As the three girls vanished from sight, I turned to look at Nell, she still had her angry face on. Immediately we burst out laughing.

“Did you see her face?” Nell said. “The shock! She couldn’t believe it! I can’t believe it!”

“Ratface has been in need of a good punch for a long time,” I said.

Nell laughed. “Don’t jobe aboub it, Cay, or you’re deb too,” she said in her best Erlea voice, and this set us to laughing even more.

“But seriously, what made you punch her like that?” Nell asked, when finally our laughter had subsided.

“She made me angry.”

“I’ve seen you angry before. But not like that.”

“She was hurting you,” I said.

“Still. You didn’t have to do that, not for me. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. But you’re my friend, and friends should look after one another.”

“Friends forever?” Nell asked, holding out her hand.

I placed my hand in hers and repeated, “Friends forever.”

“Come on,” Nell said quickly. “Let’s get out of here before they come back and you have to punch someone else.”

Before I could say anything, Nell ran off, pulling me behind her and grinning like an idiot.

4

There was no plan after we left the jae tree, we simply let our feet carry us where they would as we so often did. Nell and I knew the land around the village so well we could have walked it blindfolded. How often had we been so caught up in whatever conversation we were having, whatever game we were playing, that we would look up to find ourselves somewhere totally unexpected? On that day, we found that our feet had brought us right to the edge of the Forbidden Wood.

It wasn’t really forbidden, that was just a name the children of Darrow had given the place, but it was a name that had stuck. Every village, every town has a Forbidden Wood, I think, or a place like it. A place where the stories happen, the dark things, the misdeeds. But not all villages have a resident witch, and in our Forbidden Wood, it was the stories of Morina Narr that people told most often. Even the adults spoke ill of the place and avoided it if they could. All knew it as a place of ill fortune, of witchcraft.

I’d seen Morina Narr before, all in Darrow had. From time to time I would catch a glimpse of her in her house when I walked along the cliffs, something I was fond of doing. But like everyone, I gave that house a wide berth. Occasionally, I fancied I had seen her walking through the village, perhaps on her way back from

some dark errand or other. But she was always cloaked and hard to see. And ever afterwards I had the sense that I could not really be sure if I had seen her, or if it was just a memory of someone else, or if it might have been no one at all. The images I had of her were like waking from a dream, the more I tried to recall them the further they retreated from my grasp.

The tales of her deeds were bloody and macabre, often terrifying and always unbelievable. She took children from the woods, they said. She bathed in the blood of the animals she slaughtered. She kept men prisoner in Blackwater Cave, slaves for her depraved rituals.

I looked over at Nell. She was still catching her breath from the run, and her hair was hanging all about her face, stuck down with sweat. Her eyes were alive with curiosity and that energy that I loved so much about her. “Shall we see if the stories are true, Cay?” she said.

I laughed, but Nell just looked at me. “You actually want to go in?” I asked in disbelief.

Nell shrugged. *Why not?* she seemed to say.

The day had been warm for the time of year, but by now the air was cooling, the sun dropped low and the trees on the edge of the wood cast their shadows out to our feet like slender fingers trying to draw us in. I could feel the sweat turning cold down my back. I knew we should turn back. More than that I felt it, it was as if the air inside the wood was different somehow, changed. I had not the experience then to understand what I was feeling, but I knew enough.

“We should go,” I said.

“Oh come on Cay,” hearing the note of fear in my voice. “You’re not scared of a few trees are you?”

“No, it’s not that, just—”

“You are! You’re scared!”

“I am not! We’ve been out too long, and we still have to walk home. I just think maybe we should start back, that’s all.”

“Come on, Caya. You protected me once already today, and now I’m here to protect you. I’ll even hold your hand if you like,” Nell said with false concern, and then she laughed and ran into the

trees before I even had time to reply. For a moment I stood, not sure what to do. I knew I did not want to stay there alone, and I couldn't simply run home and leave Nell. So, in the end, cursing her impetuousness, I followed her into the woods.

I caught a glimpse of Nell a short way into the trees, standing waiting for me. I was about to protest again, to make her understand why we should turn back, but as soon as she saw me she turned and carried on running. "Keep up!" she called over her shoulder.

"Slow down!" I called back, but all I could do was try to keep up.

It was damp and dirty in the woods, and with every step I felt myself getting deeper into trouble. Truly I wasn't afraid of the wood any more, I was afraid of what Mother was going to do when I finally got back home. Witches may or may not be real, but my Mother certainly was, and she would not be pleased. I had to catch up to Nell, make her turn back. I could see her ahead, stopped at last, crouching behind a bush. I caught up to her, breathing hard. Nell didn't look up, didn't move. I stooped down to join her. "What are you?" I began, but she grabbed hold of my arm and pulled me down before I could say any more.

"Quiet!" she hissed. Her eyes were wild, and the carefree fun of the day was banished by that single word. "Look - there," she pointed beyond the bushes we were now both crouched behind.

I saw them then, two men, not a dozen breadths from where we hid. My heart froze - if not for Nell I would have run straight into them. Beside me, I felt Nell breathing, and I slipped my hand into hers. I felt her grip tighten.

The two men were standing facing one another, and I could only see the face of one of them from here. He was young, clean-shaven, and dressed in a uniform I did not recognise, some kind of leather armour, with a blue sash at the waist. And he had a sword! A guard, or soldier perhaps? But from where? Occasionally such men would pass through the village, or stop for a drink at The Drop, but they were rare enough as to warrant gossip. The second man had his back to me, but I fancied I could make out a blue sash at his waist also. He was stockier than the first, and his hair was long and dirty-looking, a sword glinted on his hip as he

shifted his weight.

Nell squeezed my hand more tightly, and I followed her gaze. A third man emerged from the trees to our left and moved to join the others. He too wore the same blue sash, and with a pang of fear, I saw that he too had a sword at his belt. Three men. Three soldiers, most likely. In the middle of the woods near sunset. Why?

I didn't care, I didn't want the answer. I knew that we should be away, that we needed to flee this place before whatever was about to happen happened. But how? It was only by sheer luck we had avoided being seen already. And now we had stopped so close to these men that they could not fail to see us should we run, and I feared they would hear us even if we tried to crawl. I sensed Nell had the same thoughts, I could hear her breathing quicken, and would've felt the tension in her body even if we hadn't been holding hands. I pulled her gently to me. As one we slowly lowered ourselves until we were fully lying on the ground, desperate to make as little sound as possible. Inwardly I praised the bond between us that allowed us this silent communication.

There was a gap in the undergrowth here, and I could just see the three men through it. Nell lay beside me, her head on the bare earth, looking at me, her eyes wide with fear. I smiled what I hoped was a reassuring smile, full of a warmth and confidence I did not feel. Nell smiled wanly back.

I turned back to observe the soldiers. They stood in a small circle now, exchanging confused looks. At length, one of them, the stocky one, broke the silence. "Something is amiss here," he said.

"Aye. What is this?" replied the younger man.

"Why have you come here?" asked the third.

"Why have you?" said the younger, and I thought I saw his hand twitch near his sword.

"Be quiet!" barked the stocky one. "It's the girl, and ye know it."

"I told you we shouldn't have-"

"Hold your tongue, Aric. Someone has conspired to bring us here, who knows if they listen," the larger man spoke again.

The three men scanned uneasily around them now, looking for hidden watchers. A crow cawed loudly from somewhere within

the trees behind them, and they spun to face it. My heart skipped a beat.

“How? How can it be the girl?” demanded the third man. “Nobody saw! We were careful.”

“I told you!” said the one called Aric, his voice breaking. “She was the daughter of a Lord. No good could come from it, and here see - I was right!”

“You were right? Right about what? All I see is the three of us standing in a wood, what is there to fear from that? Unless the dark frightens you?”

“Shut up, Deral. Aric may be a moron but he has not missed the mark by much,” this from the stocky one again. I became convinced he was the leader of this group, such as it was. “Something is amiss I say. Speak plainly, each of you - tell how you came to be here tonight, for strange as it may sound, I cannot recall now why I came.”

The other two shifted uncomfortably, looking from one to the other. It was Aric who spoke first, “I do not know,” he said, embarrassed.

They both looked to the one called Deral, his face was very pale, and he shook his head over and over, as if by doing so he could change the truth. “Witchcraft!” he hissed, and he backed away from the others.

Aric made a dismissive grunt, waved his hand at Deral. “Who’s the moron now?” he said.

“Then how is it we do not remember? Answer me that!” Deral was becoming hysterical now, his voice rising as he continued to back away from the other two.

I became aware then just how dark it had become in the woods, as if time here had passed more quickly. A ghostly light seemed to filter through the trees, and the air had become suddenly cold - the soldier’s breath fogged the air before them.

The leader held his hands out in a gesture of peace, “Calm yourself, Deral. Stay this mad talk of witchcraft.”

“Children’s tales!” said Aric.

“Mad you say?” Deral said. “I think not. I see it plain, she is coming for us. We must flee before she gets here.”

“Who is coming?”

“Morina Narr! The witch lives here, all know it. And now she is coming for us!”

A sigh came from the trees then, I know no other way to describe it. A slow exhalation, as if the trees themselves had drawn a breath that was now softly released by some invisible presence. The leaves fluttered, branches shifted, and the three men who had frightened me so before seemed all of a sudden small and somehow pathetic. Some way behind the one called Deral I saw a shadow spill out between the trees. It poured out from the night and into the night, a darker shape in the darkness. And from out of it stepped the witch.

“But you are too late,” came her sonorous voice, a thin smile playing about her lips. “I am already here.”

A very different woman she was now. In all my glimpses of her before she had appeared older, weak, slow of movement. I knew now that I had never *truly* seen her before, only the images she had intended for me to see, shadows of her real self. Here and now she was altogether different. Tall, slender, and more regal in her long green dress than any woman I had seen before. Her dark hair fell past her shoulders, reflecting that strange light like a knife, and her eyes burned with an inner fire. Moon and moon! She was beautiful!

The witch moved with natural grace, silently, swiftly - allowing the soldiers no time to react. In a heartbeat she stood behind Deral, and I saw she was more than a hand taller than he. With a movement so sudden and fluid that I could not be sure I even saw her move, she drew a blade across his throat. No! My eyes had tricked me - there was no knife, only her bare hand! Yet dark red blood drained down the soldier’s chest, more blood than I had ever known could be inside a person. I bit down on my hand to stifle my gasp. Deral’s already lifeless body slid to the floor like a discarded cloak, and the witch smiled.

“Come now. Where are your manners? Aren’t you pleased to see me? Surely you weren’t this shy when you visited Namani’s daughter?” The witch stepped over the crumpled form of Deral as she spoke, as if stepping over a dirty puddle she wished to keep

her dress away from.

The remaining two soldiers drew their swords, backing away from the advancing witch.

“Back witch!” Cried the leader, and he held his blade out at arm's length to ward her away - even in the dim light, I could see it shake. “Stay back, or I'll run you through!”

“You don't deny it then?” The witch asked, not slowing.

“We know nothing of what you speak,” said Aric. “I have never laid eyes on Namani's daughter.” I did not need the witch's power to hear the lie.

“Come now. You laid far more than eyes on her. Didn't you, Aric of Norolna? And you Strindon of Calliess, where was your honour when she screamed for you to stop? Where then your famed Ranguard sense of justice?”

Ranguard? They were from Rangerron then.

“Still your foul tongue, whore of the woods. Why should we listen to the words of one such as you? I could slay you where you stand and not a man would mourn you,” Strindon declared.

The witch let out a laugh, long and shrill. “Good! Good. Your fear betrays you. Your lack of remorse only makes this easier for me.”

Strindon barked a laugh of his own in return. “You mistake me, woman!” he said. “I do not fear your kind. You disgust me! You hide, you scheme and you work your dark magics and mistake people's scorn for fear. But you will not have the satisfaction of fear from me, witch!”

A frown came upon the face of the witch then, her eyes narrowed and she seemed to shiver with a barely repressed rage. In the silence that followed, I fancied could hear Nell's heart beating out the seconds as she cowered next to me. Her face was turned away now, pressed to the ground. I doubted she had seen anything that had happened. When at last the silence was broken, I gave a jump so sudden I felt sure I had given away our presence.

“Enough!” Shouted the witch. Her eyes blazed anew, their fire rekindled by the men's defiance of her. She took two steps forward as she spoke, and the men retreated clumsily from her. “Tell me I'm wrong! Convince me you did not do this thing, and I

may yet spare you."

The two men looked at each other, not knowing what to do. Here they stood, two soldiers of Rangerron against one woman. Pride and fear warred within them.

Strindon spat on the floor. "Time to end this," he said and lunged forward.

The witch moved her hand before her, palm out as if waving, and Strindon stumbled to his left, his sword flashing uselessly past her. The witch turned, her movements slow and deliberate, almost calm. She laid her hand on his back, and exhaled a long breath, almost as though she were blowing a kiss. Instantly Strindon crumpled to his knees, shuddering. His sword clattered from his grip, and he belched a great gout of blood onto the ground. He turned to look up at his killer, his eyes very wide and very white in the darkness.

"Now you realise. Only now," the witch said, her voice thick with disgust.

Strindon was gasping now, gargling and clutching uselessly at his throat. Again he wretched blood. The witch moved aside to avoid being caught by it and turned to face her remaining victim.

Aric dropped to his knees, threw his sword aside. "I beg!" he declared, "I beg!" And to my surprise, he began to sob.

"Too late," declared the witch. She pointed a long, slender finger at Aric, and brought it down in a quick slashing motion. A thin, dark red line appeared across the man's throat, and with a look of utter surprise, he fell forward into the dirt with a thud. As he landed, his head rolled away from his neck, a trail of dark blood behind.

I should have been afraid, I know I should. But I wasn't. I could not have said why, but at no point during this whole encounter had I felt fear. Nell lay on the ground beside me, her face still pressed to the dirt, shaking. I wondered what images her mind had conjured up for her, and whether they were a match for the reality. I doubted it.

The witch remained a moment, looking about her as if to make sure her work was done. Seemingly satisfied, she walked away into the gloom of the trees.

And here was the key, the source of the memory's power. A memory can have power in many ways, for this memory it was the secret it kept. It need only be small, such as this one, but it must be significant. In that final moment, right as she was stepping out of sight, the witch turned and looked at me. She did not look in my direction. *She looked at me.* Something passed between us in that moment. She knew I was there, just as she knew Nell was there. But she did not look at Nell, she looked at me. Nell did not see her look, and I never told her.

And the memory's power grew.



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