Upon a Tide of Wintry Morn

An Ashen Twilight Short

Rae Lori

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A greater threat looms over the three houses as they move westward for a better life. Shades of the past return as Ariya senses a connection between Alexandru Drago and his prince, Vlad Tepes III aka Vlad Dracul, as she relives their conspiracy to take the throne of Wallachia using a secret army. At the same time, Jace relives his father's burial in the Highlands of Scotland and muses over living with Ariya in the Aziza fairy realm.

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Ariya felt the world slip away like a dusty haze. The droning of the car engine and the low whoosh of the passing cars along the freeway offered an unconventional lullaby rather foreign to her ears. The last image she remembered was Jace's strong profile as he focused on the road ahead. Yellow shadows poured around his visage, wrapping him in a sheet of shadow, outlining his sharp nose, soft lips and strong chin. His azure eyes stared into the distance despite the focus on the drive. His large yet soft masculine hands gripped the steering wheel.

She fell asleep with a smile on her face, thinking of him. The world suddenly slipped away and another time, another world soon replaced it...

Visegrád, a town landlocked in the Carpathian Basin of Central Europe - *1462*

The castle structure stretched across the lands. The normally tranquil green blades of grass were offset by the fading brown stones against the natural greens and blues of the town. This morning the earth based shades were covered under a sheet of snow that had fallen not long ago Alexandru Drago saw the magnificent structure upon diving down toward entrance way. The bright white flashed in front of his face with streams of blood he already knew had been spilt. Vladislav Tepes III, *The Son of the Dragon*, had been taken by force down into the large castle structure. The subjugation of his enemies had earned him the name of *The Impaler.* He was third in the line of his forefathers and thus had carried the family name of Draculea (or Dracula). Both titles he wore proudly like a well worn suit of armor.

Now the prince lay in the home of King Matthias Corvinus. The halls within the Visegrád palace lay before Alexandru as he looked ahead. The massive structure was still lined with guards donning their impressive armor. The large sabers at their side sheathed in large scabbards of gilded metal would have sent any other man into a heightened state of panic. Alexandru himself knew how to disperse of them with a wave of his hand. It was better to remain under their watchful eyes...for now. Soon they would be able to emerge as the true leaders they were. With Vlad's "changing" soon at the hand of his conquering, there would not be long to wait.

Right away he made use of his keen senses, seeing the guards near and smelling the familiar scent of Vlad. It was a thick smell of power laced with sweat and gruel. The scent of blood wrapped around him like a layer,

but this wasn't human blood. It was animals. The lines of the hard stone cell did it's best to block the familiar scent unique only to the prince. A round of guards had gathered around the stone rimmed well of the inner castle courtyard of the lower castle. The banks of the beautiful blue Danube River streamed within the wall, connecting to the tower to fuel the palace with its water supply. A large watchtower offered a view over the muted azure waters to any intruders who may seek the soil of Visegrád on their desperate travels.

The prince was not too far now.

Alexandru felt his body threaten to change as he walked. The clanking metal, warm tunic and soft robes draped around his large form as he walked. The bitter cold worked to reach within his folds and if he had changed, a thick hide would do well. Patience. Once he got to his destination. He would do well to bide his time.

The thick walls offered solace to him as he dodged the guards at the walkway up to the citadel. He was nearly surprised at the sparse amount of guards sprinkled out on the way to the cell within the castle walls.

Alexandru peered up at the massive tall tower peeking out from deep green forestry peeking out from large flakes of snow. He drew closer, careful not to be seen by the surrounding guards' watchful eyes. From here he could see the young boyish visage of one of the two guards. The youthful gaze was presented by dim grey eyes staring ahead as if in a trance. Not only did Alexandru hold the power of age over this one, he could already tell the mental capacity was limiting as well. This was going to be easy.

The dispatch took a few seconds. He got rid of the larger of the two with a crush of the neck, tossing him to the side. The younger raised his sword in defense, freezing once he met Alexandru's hardened gaze. The dazed look now was replaced by a true trance once the older Romanian had hold over him.

"The prince of Wallachia is being held within this structure, is he not?" Alexandru asked with a slight lift of his lips.

The young guard lowered his sword with a nod. "He is."

Alexandru stepped forward, fully aware of his height over the young guard. "You are under strict orders to take me to him. A special assignment we shall say that is blessed by our fair King Matthias."

The guard led him up the citadel, carefully explaining his situation to each guard that stood at the head with a question. Alexandru would keep his gift to himself, making sure to keep his face blank as he nodded and wandered through. The smell of blood, thick crimson and bitter copper, filled his lungs with the dank, rusty aged stone structure. The moment he wandered upon the cell housing his prince, he stopped. The cold wintry morning was visible under the rise of the new day outside Vlad's window. The brown wooded slopes, deeply chiseled grayish russet valleys overlooking the Danube River.

The windowsill, carving the view like the frame of a painting, sat decorated with the dead carcasses of spiders, roaches, and mice. Their bodies propped up like small towers on thick splintered wood. Alexandru followed the dark shadows moving against the stone ground.

"*Printul meu*." Alexandru's deep voice elicited a slight movement. The hunched over figure turned to look over his shoulder, leaving behind a twitching mouse against another splinter.

The elongated features of a sharp nose, wide penetrating eyes and a thin mouth beneath a thick mustache still held a semblance of the royal curtain. The months that passed had done well to wear on him but still he held the strong determined gaze of a ruler set to reclaim his kingdom. Alexandru was proud as he looked upon him.

"My refuge has turned into a sort of asylum," Vlad said peering around him as he stretched out his hands. "Radu has overtaken my mind as well my home."

Alexandru lowered his head slightly at the name of his prince's half brother. Radu the handsome had used his army to reclaim Wallachia shortly after their leave. Despite the welcoming of the peasants in the area, Matthias was not so eager to house and align with a dethroned prince.

"The walls of Poenari still stand," Alexandru said softly. "But your wife..." He thought back to the frail body that fell from the open window down toward the Arges River and lowered his head. "She does not live."

Vlad's thin form beneath his tunic stiffened before he fell into a pace. "And the creatures?"

Alexandru dismissed the sly remark with a smile. "Death. Few escaped with reinforcements but there were not many."

"They still roam the countryside in numbers. You know the vast number of them that walk this Earth, do you not?"

The shorter Romanian of the two nodded. "I do. The gift that was bestowed upon me is like no other. There are certain strains of us with various abilities that will do well to your liking."

Vlad turned and approached the gated irons standing between the two. His thin, spindly fingers wrapped around them despite the nearly frozen bars. His deep eyes bore into Alexandru as he leaned forward. "You will continue forward."

"My prince?"

"You will continue what I have started and gather them. My immortality will be enough to regain my throne for eternity. An army of my own immortal creatures to do my bidding, to make me one of them."

"A creature of the undead that walks the night? Or one that haunts the moon in its beastly form? Or..." Alexandru lifted his chin slightly. Or someone like him.

"Bring me my army that I may rise again."

"My liege, we bring you the throne. An army under my orders will easily overtake Radu and his Ottomans. If you so choose, I may raise my army-"

Vlad waved his hand with a huff and turned away, silencing him. "I will be the one to take back my throne from my brother's deceitful acquisitions once I leave these captive bars. You shall form your army under a leader of your choosing. Choose a man you trust with your life and in Wallachia you will await my return."

Alexandru wasn't sure about the prince's wishes. He knew he could bring his own army of immortals and take down Radu's men as swiftly as he saw the reinforcements break through the Poenari walls. But as he looked at his ruler's determined gaze within a strong set visage, he knew to trust him.

"An army I will gather to away your return." With a bow, he excused himself with the promise.

* * * *

A loud horn awoke her once again. Ariya sat up in her seat trying to focus on her surroundings and separate imagination from reality. She turned to Jace who looked at her with a sly smile on his handsome face.

"Sleeping pretty heavily there, huh?" he said reaching over to pull him close to her. "Must have been pretty exciting."

She settled into the concave of his arm. Normally his cold skin would have bothered her but the soft cotton fabric of his shirt offered a comfort along with the unique feel of him. She slipped her hand up to his chest and imagined, for just a moment, the sound of his heartbeat beneath the cold thick skin. A sound or feeling that would say he was alive. "Why do you say that?"

"You were saying Vlad."

Another blaring car horn broke into the atmosphere from the opposite highway. The loud siren craned to a high pitch before dying to a strained sound within the distance. What exactly was she dreaming? And why did it feel like someone's memories?

"Jace?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Do you know Alexandru Drago?"

His body stiffened and his grip on the steering wheel tightened as he shifted in his seat. "Where did you hear that name?" he asked, clearing his strained voice.

Ariya slowly sat up and looked at him. "He was in the dream with Vladislav Tepes III. I think it was him whose eyes I was seeing through."

"What did you see?"

She shrugged, sitting back in her seat and staring at the line of cars ahead. "The past. He was working with Vlad to somehow bring him in an army against his brother. I remember reading about that. A political push and pull between Vlad, his brother and Matthius Corvinus. But why am I dreaming about it now?" She sighed. A strange pressure grew in her forehead and she closed her eyes.

"Hey, relax Ariya," Jace said, reaching over to her.

The pain began to subside when she felt his grip on her back, massaging the tension growing within her body.

"Lower."

She leaned back into his massage and felt the pressure drop to her lower back.

"Mmm, lower."

A soft chuckle fell from Jace's lips. Despite the pain slowly lessening, she felt a tingle of pleasure spread through her body from the relaxing massage.

"Lower?" This time Jace had said it, and from the delightfully hopeful sound of his voice, she was sure he was smiling.

Before she could answer, his hand dipped below to her skirt clad hip and pulled her closer. She gave in, leaning in toward his open free neck and placed a soft kiss on it.

"You trying to make me forget my dream, Archane?" she asked softly.

His lips rose in a smile, making him seem more handsome. "Is it working?"

Ariya chuckled softly, brushing his shoulder length wavy brown hair away from his neck to give him another kiss. She thought about what it would be like to bite someone there. To drink their essence and taste their blood on a daily basis.

"You don't have to think about it, dear," Jace said taking her hand and kissing it softly. "You've already done it, remember?"

She sighed, falling back into her seat again. "I remember." It had been the first time they shared each other. Jace had taken too much in the height of the excitement and drove her over the edge. He thought she had died but thankfully he gave her his blood to revive her just in time. It had been the sweetest taste she ever had and it had sealed Jace to her forever. At the same time, it had made her slightly uncomfortable. They didn't know what effects it would have on her, but they knew to keep watch in the mean time. Would her people know what she had done? Would they sense something different about her when she returned?

"Hey." Jace wrapped his fingers within hers and looked at her, swinging a look at the road ahead from time to time. "Don't worry yourself, Ariya. Everything's fine. So far you're all right. Once we settle in Los Angeles we'll get everything sorted out with the Houses and we can have a quick checkup on you there. Maybe Daoine can sense something strange before it happens."

Ariya leaned on the head of the back of her seat. She brushed a dark cinnamon curl away from her face and smiled at Jace through the darkness. "You gathered all of that from my single thought and you didn't sense any part of my dream?"

"I was thinking about something else. Thought I'd give you your privacy." He peered at her again and gently tapped her nose before grinning. "How much fun would it be if we climbed into each other's thoughts all the time?"

"Mmm. How much fun indeed." She gripped his free hand and gently ran her fingers along his pale skin, contrasting with her smooth dark chestnut complexion. "Alexandru Drago," she said softly.

"Hasn't been seen for centuries. I figured he was dead after he tried to wipe us out."

"He's an immortal?"

Jace nodded. "Not really sure what type. He seemed to have the traits of all three houses. Some think he may be like Daoine. Who's a mystery within himself."

"Why would he try to take the blood of his own brethren? At the mercy of a mortal, a bloodthirsty ruler, like Dracul no less?"

Jace shrugged and reached over to scratch with his free hand to scratch his shoulder. "Don't know. Perhaps the bond of man and country is strong or he had another agenda. We never crossed paths after my father's death in Wallachia."

"What did you do?"

"We went back to Scotland to bury him." Jace's voice fell softer and a sullen smile crept upon his face. "He would've wanted it that way. Return to the land of his country to remain forever."

Ariya snuggled up to Jace again, listening to the sound of his voice like a distant memory. His arm gripped her as he spoke and she closed her eyes to imagine the world that was...

Highlands, Scotland - *1462*

When lately we parted, how sad the farewell,

Our words were but few, but our thoughts who can tell?

When lost to my vision, afar on the brine,

I drank thee success in the goblet of wine.

Jace stared at the mound of brown dirt against the seat of green that held his father beneath the lands. His Uncle Julian's voice stretched across the land in the Scots Gaelic tongue singing a song he had heard from funerals growing up. The language swelled his heart which still stung. Apart of him died as he held his father's lifeless form in his arms. The once bright eyes that stared at him as he was taught how to tame the lands, to fight, to love and to be a man had now dimmed to ruin . They could die. It had hit him then. The blood flow of life that beat within his veins could perish just like mortals.

His calloused fingers gripped the warm hilt of his sword against a sweaty palm.

The part of the song ended with the captured lyrics still floating within the air. He lifted his head slightly to watch his uncle reach out and shake the salt and soil onto the large mound. Before placing Jace's father Gerard beneath the pile of burial rocks, Jace had watched him do the same upon his brother's chest. The last visage he saw of his father was that of peace as the soil would retake him once again while the salt, a representation of his soul, would remain forever.

His tall, strong form now wore the same green shaded quilted armor garments that matched Jace and his uncle's. Thick padded quilts of cotton served as armor as a front to whatever mortals crossed their way. If their speedy defenses would fail, the thickness of the material would surely block any sword cuts their way.

A long brown leather tunic-like coat reached below the knees and quilted vertically, worn draped over an over-coat of mail armor. Peace full upon the handsome face lined with a dark shadow of a beard. Dark brown wavy hair fell over the large broad pair of shoulders. Large calloused hands crossed over his chest holding the broadsword his father, Jace's grandfather Cailean Archane, had made for Gerard. The shiny metal was broad near the hilt, tapering into a long design that stretched the length of his body toward a pointed end. The cross-section of the blade offered an indentation like Jace's own Gaelic inscription on his blade: *Na sir's na seachainn an cath.* Neither Seek Nor Shun the Fight. It was a motto his father had taken to his death.

Jace finally arched his chin upward to where his uncle stood next to Daoine. Their faces were still, grim with the events of the day. The trek had been longer this time as Jace wished to cross the lands by foot rather than make use of Daoine's large eagle-like form. He used the sword to pull himself to standing. With a brush of his hand to wipe the green grass clinging to his trews he stepped forward and offered a hand to help place his father in his final resting home.

"Alas, death finally does claim us," Jace said softly.

"Yes, Jacinus," Daoine said moving toward him. "The hands of war can still take lives no matter if run by mortal or one of our own."

"Gerard shouldn't ha' to die like that," Julian said. He peered ahead at the vast mounds of green. "We lost the

battle and we lost my only *brathair*!"

Daoine held his hand up. "Peace, Julian. I did not forsee this occurrence."

"No, you didn't. You can shift your bones, change into a great animal of your choosing but you canna stop a massacre. What is the purpose of making us like this? A life of immortality...what reason if ye canna stop death from climbing up and seizing your life?"

Jace peered up at Daoine, awaiting the answer for his own curiosity.

"The hands of death still stalk us, watching from the dark corners," Daoine's dark eyes focused on Julian as he approached him. The long dark blue robes that seemed to float around his body brushed against the green grass. "But it does not wear the cloak of age any longer. It kills...more discriminately now. It's up to us figure out how to live under its watchful eyes. That is the point of all this, Julian. That is why they need a leader. There are more like you out there. Some like myself but not of the same blood and some others like the wolves that stalk the night. They will need a home, a sanctuary to come to when the wars continue to wipe them out."

"And thus is our purpose," Jace said causing both men to turn his way. He pulled his eyes away from his father's grave and looked up at them. "Is that not correct, Daoine? The purpose you have brought us together?"

"Yes. It was my goal."

Jace felt his jaw tightened as he sighed, trying to compose himself. His mother was lost to him years ago in the plague and now his father had followed. What life would it be if he lost his Uncle now and the new ally they had both trusted to make them into the creatures they were now? Life was frivolous and the fear and doubt he had about living it slowly slipped away. Now he would live life as it should be and while he remained within this immortal shell, he would make others answer to him.

"Protection would be scarce now that we are hunted creatures," Jace said aloud. He sheathed his sword with ease and folded his arms, standing tall. "I agree with Daoine, Uncle. Tis better to join than let our numbers fall in its division."

Julian turned to Daoine who merely nodded, closing his almond shaped eyes to enhance his agreement. After sheathing his own sword he moved between them to head back to Gerard's gravesite. He kneeled, placing his hand on the mound and bowing his head once more.

* * * *

"Julian agreed then that it would be better to stay together," Jace said as he continued to drive. "He took his rapier out and we each took turns breaking the skin of their open palms to seal their oath with their life's blood. And from that day forward the House of Blood began under the Archane line."

"And here we are." Ariya looked ahead, thinking about what brought them here to this point. The moment she met Jace, she couldn't believe he was a Nightwalker. Too much like the Asiman blood drinkers at home in her lands in the Aziza realm, she deemed him a threat despite saving her from the Shifter Rens. Strangely enough he didn't believe she was who she was. A fairy from another realm. He knew stories of her kind from his homeland in Scotland but her and her people were a far cry from the mischievous Fey herself as she would come to learn from his stories. After dodging an elemental under the guise of Liam Blakedon, a former guard in the Archane house a long time ago, she had faced her own death twice and was brought back by Jace both times.

And yet until then, she hadn't felt love before in its truest form. She read about it, saw it as her sisters were paired off with their potential husbands and dreaded the time when she was going to have to face the same. But it hadn't been until now that she actually felt a romantic love for a man. Jace had been her protector since she arrived. Sure there had been that one time when he cast her out after disbelief that a fairy had been in his very living room.

"Hey you can't-"

Ariya quickly reached up and covered his mouth. "I understand why you did it, but don't think I won't make you pay later." With her other hand, she poked him in the side.

"So then. About this love thing."

She squeezed his arm. "Yes?"

"I never grasped the idea of a feeling wrapped up in one word. It's been tinkered with, abused, used, overused and outdated itself more times than I can focus on at the moment. But the feeling...the feeling itself has never been something to describe. What I will say is that...every time you leave my side, I feel like a part of me has somehow died. And when you're near I can't think of a better place to be. One moment I feel like holding you and the next I want to make love to you, feel you beneath me until we're both exhausted from the act."

Ariya chuckled, poking his side again. "Jace!"

"I mean it. You're apart of me now Ariya. And I'm apart of you. I can sense when something's wrong and when you're in danger. Your blood is always calling out to me."

"Mmm, I bet you've said that before to many female acquaintances," Ariya mused.

He turned to her, not a hint of a smile or amusement on his face. "Partly. But the things I've told you about me and the things you know are only known by you. My feelings are true, Ariya. Julian knows this and I want you to know it after everything we've been through."

Ariya reached up on impulse and pulled his face to her. She placed a hard passionate kiss on his lips causing him move, taking the care with him.

"Ariya!"

"Oh!" Remembering where they were, she slid back down into her seat and watched Jace swerve the car back into his lane, despite the many angry horns that blew off from the surrounding cars. "Sorry." She smiled despite feeling her face grow hot.

Jace laughed and leaned back before reaching to pull her close. "Believe me I would have done the same if I weren't driving. It's a good thing we are because you'd be in trouble about now."

Ariya giggled thinking about his words. "And what sort of trouble could we get in if we stopped between here and California?"

Jace's smile dropped for a moment into seriousness. He turned to for a moment, the sly smile returning as an idea hit him. "Wait a minute. I'll do you one better."

He checked his rearview mirror before blinking and pulling into the lane next to him. With a quick look over his shoulder, he grinned and waited a moment for the car behind to catch up. Once it was in tow, he took a

drive off the side of the road, leading a short succession of cars behind.

Ariya remembered Gael Almadovar coming to them earlier that evening. With the Ashen Twilight House's outing, all of the Patriarchs felt it was better to move everyone West for better safety. They had packed everything in and started together, but soon Gael traded cars with a pretty lady friend of his Ariya hadn't seen before. She imagined she may have been another Shifter Elf like him. That left Ariya and Jace in one car together for the duration of the trip. Not that she was complaining or anything.

Now Jace lead the line of cars off the side of the road. She imagined they would have a lot of explaining to do when they climbed out. The ride had been on a bit of a schedule and the sooner they got out of the Southwest area of America, the better.

She heard and felt Jace take a deep breath as he stretched his arms forward on the steering wheel. Right away she knew why he had become nervous. Whatever it was he was going to tell, she had a feeling he had to face his Uncle Julian first. Although the Nightwalker was indeed his Uncle, perhaps more so he was his Patriarch and any major decisions would have to go through him. She couldn't decipher what exactly Jace was thinking due to his clouded mind toward her, but whatever it was she knew it was, to use a contemporary mortal expression, heavy.

Ariya suppressed the questions cropping up in her mind. Instead she watched Jace pull to the side of the dark road. Absent of the calming light of the highway. The engine died beneath them and Jace pushed the door open with one shove. He turned around and peered at her, grinning. "Come on," he said with a nod of his head.

She felt her own heart racing as she opened the side car door and stared into the black night. Already she heard the chorus of car doors opening and closing behind them.

Julian's handsome broad features were stern. A vertical crease formed in his forehead and as his large frame grew in size as he drew closer, he became more imposing. "Jace, what is going on? We'll lose too much time if we stop at every turn."

"We won't be going right away," Jace said, peering up at his Uncle.

All eyes fell on Jace, especially Ariya's.

"What?" Julian cocked his head to the side as if he didn't hear right.

Jace held his ground, straightening his back to declare his stance was set. "Ariya and I will be taking a detour before heading to L.A. I'd like to see her world. She's already seen ours and I think it's time for a little change." He turned to her. "If that's alright with you."

Ariya quickly closed her mouth and slowly licked her lips once she realized all the eyes looking upon her. If Rich, Jace's best friend- and also a newly married Lycan- was here, she was sure he would be grinning and silently nodding for her to go for it. If Joanna wasn't nudging her in the side first. She peered up at Jace's other best friend, Gael whose large arms were folded as he idly leaned against the car. His dark chocolate eyes peered at her and even through the darkness of the night she could tell he was nodding.

"Ah...yes. That would be fine," she finally said. Her heart skipped a beat once she felt Jace's arms around her. A quick thought flashed in her mind and she made sure to cloak it with other thoughts of happiness. But still she wondered how her people would welcome him. If she thought he was an Asiman, how would her people accept him knowing he shared the same traits as those demonic creatures? And even more so how would she get him across the realm into the brightness of the day when his skin shunned it? Despite all that, she didn't

know how her own people would take her. After drinking his blood, there was a chance that she had become part Nightwalker herself, if the slightly elongated fangs and slight pale blush of her dark skin proved so.

She focused on Julian's hard gaze at his nephew. Right away she remembered that same tense flex of his jaw he shared with Jace as he tried to keep himself under control. She didn't dare try to read his thoughts, knowing from Jace's experience in fearing the same. The stoic tinge of emotions running across his hard expression was more than enough. She half expected him to go off in a rant those next moments but instead he nodded and turned away from them.

"You'll return soon, I trust," he said over his shoulder.

A few months in the Aziza realm equaled a few weeks in the mortal realm. She had a feeling Julian didn't know this, but still he didn't stand around to ask any questions. Gael pushed off the side of Julian's car and walked to them.

"I guess I'm taking back my car," he said with a grin. A slight hint of his Spanish accent trickled into his words before he chuckled. He held out his dark hand and waited for Jace to place his keys in his open palm. Gael turned to Ariya and gave a slight bow. "I trust you'll take care of our Nightwalker Regent in the mean time?"

He headed for the car and again the chorus of engines started again.

Jace wrapped his arm around Ariya and pulled her off to the side to dodge the cars heading back toward the highway. The dark blotches of red lights soon disappeared in the blackness around them. And then they were alone in the silence.

Ariya peered up at Jace, feeling a strange warmth around them despite his cold skin. She looked up, forcing herself to strain and see the deep blue of his eyes focused on her.

"You're not angry?"

She shook her head and smiled. "I was hoping there would be a chance to take you back home with me."

"No time like the present then." Before she could respond he reached down and kissed her. She melted against the hard lines of his chest and strength of his body. Her hands caressed his shirt and trousers, his mouth brushing against her coaxing him for entrance.

The warmth grew around her and she felt it make way for him as if it were a strong light source. His kiss grew passionate, wanting and desiring her as he held her.

Ariya closed her eyes, held him close and gave into the desiring heat surrounding them.

Within the Shadows of Mortals (Book 2 in the Ashen Twilight Series)

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