

Simon Atherton

(Season six of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 15 - Vesuvius

"Vampires didn't need to eat normal human food, but they did. They could also go for years with no water; purely drinking fresh human blood. They could go for a very long time without sleep. Giovanni had once gone about twenty days without sleep, while watching an enemy of the Medici. He sat by the cold fire pit where some other lucky group of travellers had once cooked a meal. Giovanni half closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping. There was a moment when he was perilously close to dropping off, but he never slept, not even for a second."

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Like everyone else, Vittoria had expected a fight to get off Crete with Esmé Duarty. There had been two guards on the path to the beach where their boats had been left, but they'd been easily dealt with. Apart from them, there had been no resistance to them taking the tied up leader of the assassins onto the Mermaid. As Giovanni had said at the time.

"It seems no one likes assassins, even the pirates of Crete."

Esmé had promised all kinds of terrible retribution against them, but none of them had occurred. The Mermaid was three days out from Crete, heading for the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius. Brother Alberti had interrogated Esmé in the middle of the night on two occasions. As far as Vittoria was aware, everything useful Esmé Duarty had to tell them, had been told. Not that she'd been ill-treated. Esmé was usually locked in the forward hold, but was allowed to exercise out the deck every morning. There wasn't a mark on her. In fact, the leader of the assassins in Crete, looked healthier than when she'd been kidnapped. Why hadn't she been dropped over the side to feed the fishes, as many had talked of doing ? Mia had summed it up, when she'd joined Vittoria for breakfast one morning.

"Saying you're going to drop a prisoner into the sea, is a million miles away from actually doing it. Patsy would cut her throat and dump her overboard in a heartbeat; Esmé had sent assassins to kill Simon and probably her too." Mia had said. "Simon has softened his view on things, as have several others. The fate of Esmé Duarty seems to rest on how good her information turns out to be."

From what Vittoria had heard, the aristocrat who'd hired Esmé was a relative of Juliana; one of the famous Colombo family no less. Juliana had a large family, but Esmé had provided detailed information. Eduino Colombo had turned out to be the guilty party. Alberti had used Brotherhood agents to talk to those who knew Eduino well. Nothing was conclusive, but it was conclusive enough for Simon to visit Florence while the Mermaid was at anchor in the Bay of Naples. Eduino had to die; there had even been a meeting in the main hold about it. Cook had provided some wonderful food and drinks for the meeting.

"Sorry Juliana, your cousin thought you'd given away your honour too easily." Machiavelli had said. "He might have approved of Hassan, though I doubt it. Simon Atherton, a man with no title and no obvious fortune, definitely wouldn't do. Eduino paid for the death of Simon while the Mermaid was still in view from the harbour at Livorno."

"I barely know this Eduino." Had said Juliana.

"There seems little doubt that he wanted Simon killed." Had said Giovanni. "Probably Patsy too, as the woman now sharing his bed."

From Vittoria's memory the meeting became more about enjoying food and wine after that revelation about a relative of Juliana. Simon had sworn that Eduino Colombo would die by his hand. After that it was just a matter of waiting until the Mermaid docked just about anywhere in mainland Italy.

Vittoria was currently on horseback, which she loathed; galloping hard behind Simon and Giovanni. Patsy was on a horse behind her, as was Juliana. It felt to Vittoria as though she was intruding on a piece of family business, but Simon had asked her to be there. It seemed Eduino employed his own magic user, so Vittoria's presence was deemed to be essential. The Bay of Naples to Florence was about three hundred miles on horseback. The time it would take depended on many things, including the weather. So far it hadn't rained, but muddy roads could easily add a day to their journey, maybe more.

"Where are we putting our bedrolls down for the night?" Asked Juliana.

"No sleeping under the stars tonight." Said Simon. "Galeoto knows someone who owns a lodgings house in Frosinone and we'll be there by dusk. A little gold and they'll forget us ever being there."

"Oh, a proper meal and a proper bed.....Wonderful news." Said Patsy.

Their horses couldn't talk, but Vittoria had no doubt that they'd enjoy a night in the lodging's stables. Decent feed and shelter from the cold of the night. Simon pointed out Frosinone when they were on a hillside, looking over the town. It looked pretty, but like Patsy, her main thoughts were on a decent bed for the night and a properly cooked meal. They made good time and were at the lodgings well before dusk. The owner was shown a note from Galeoto and that seemed to be enough to get them a promise of the best rooms in the establishment. A lad took their horses to the stables and a maid showed them to their rooms. Maids had to become experts at such things; she put Simon and Patsy in the same room without being asked.

"A meal will be served in about an hour." Said the maid. "A gong will be rung."

Vittoria was the last to be shown her room and it looked very cosy and clean. She'd carried her own bags, as they contained magical devices which might have caused too much interest in the staff of the lodgings. She flopped back on her bed as soon as the maid had gone, the way she'd flopped back on her bed as a child. The mattress was wonderfully comfortable.

"Oh, please.....Let the meal be really good." She muttered.

The maids comment that a meal would be served wasn't that alarming. A choice of meals was rare in such places and many lodgings only offered feed for the horses. Human travellers were often expected to find a tavern that offered food and drink. The meal was three courses of traditional Italian food, the sort of thing most families in Frosinone would recognise. It was delicious and there was plenty of it. By the time Vittoria went to bed, she felt wonderfully full. Before she'd packed her bags the next morning, Patsy was at her door; asking if she'd seen the view from her window.

"It shows the hillside where we looked out at Frosinone." Said Patsy. "I saw a group of horsemen there just after dawn. Might be nothing.....Or; I did tell Simon but they'd move on by the time he looked."

"How would they know where we're heading?" Asked Vittoria.

"We did grab Esmé Duarte and I doubt if she has that many aristocrats as clients." Said Patsy.

"Yes, that makes a kind of horrid sense." Said Vittoria. "I'm pleased that we can summon Karkengara if we need him."

"I'll help you with your bags." Said Patsy. "Simon wants to get back on the road as quickly as possible."

"What's tonight's place to sleep rough?" Asked Vittoria. "I'm assuming this wonderful lodging house will be a rarity?"

"We'll be dropping our bedrolls on the ground in woods near Avezzano." Said Patsy.

"Good, I can set a few traps and alarms in the woods." Said Vittoria.

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Rain was no respecter of plans and the need to hurry and it began to rain when they were barely two miles away from Frosinone. Not the sort of rain that brings down hillsides, or turns good roads into bad ones, but there was a lot of rain. Giovanni didn't mind the rain; he'd ridden miles through heavy rain during his employment by the Medici. He'd been an assassin in those days, paid to kill whoever annoyed the Medici. As assassins seemed to be generally out of favour, he rarely mentioned that part of his career. No one seemed to like an assassin until they needed one; had been Giovanni's experience.

"To think, there were weeks in Mesopotamia when I prayed for rain." Said Simon.

"It'll be as bad for those following us.....If anyone is following us." Said Giovanni.

"Patsy said she saw them and she's rarely wrong." Said Simon.

The horsemen might be nothing to do with them of course, but it was always safest to assume the worst. Until Eduino Colombo was dead and they were all alive and looking at Mount Vesuvius, Giovanni would assume Patsy was right; and believe a dozen well-armed fighters were following them across Southern Italy.

"I was hoping the rain might ease up a bit." Said Juliana.

"No.....It's got worse." Said Vittoria.

The woods around Avezzano had been in darkness when they'd arrived, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. If they were on foot and leading their horses in the dark, so were whoever might be following them. If Esmé Duarty had found a way to send fighters after them while she was on the Mermaid, Giovanni would kill her himself. An enemy that clever and versatile was too dangerous to leave alive.

"This will do, there's plenty of cover from the trees." Said Simon. "We're also nearly a mile from the road. We just need Vittoria to place her bangs and whizzes and we can settle down for the night."

"No food?" Asked Giovanni.

"Just the dry food we all have in our packs." Said Simon. "Help Vittoria to get her equipment unpacked.....She is going to be keeping us safe."

"Thank you, Simon." Said Vittoria.

"Crap, no hot food." Muttered Giovanni. Of course everyone ignored him.

Bedrolls out in the open on a rainy night, there may not be a more uncomfortable way to sleep under the stars, or more accurately under the rain laden clouds. Giovanni helped Vittoria set up her bangs and whizzes alarms and traps; two full circles of them. If anyone came into their camp in the night, they'd know they were there. A few of the traps could be fatal if they hit the right spot on an unwelcome night time visitor. Patsy cheered everyone up by skewering a rabbit in the dark. A huge buck rabbit, she'd promised to cook it up for their breakfast.

"That's more like it.....A proper cooked breakfast." Said Giovanni.

Vampires didn't need to eat normal human food, but they did. They could also go for years with no water; purely drinking fresh human blood. They could go for a very long time without sleep.

Giovanni had once gone about twenty days without sleep, while watching an enemy of the Medici.

He sat by the cold fire pit where some other lucky group of travellers had once cooked a meal. Giovanni half closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping. There was a moment when he was perilously close to dropping off, but he never slept, not even for a second. Somewhere in the time between midnight and dawn, Vittoria was in his head.

"They're here, about a dozen of them." Vittoria muttered into his mind. "They'll soon hit my alarms and traps.....Be ready."

Simon moved in the dark, probably getting a good grip on his blade. To anyone watching from a distance, he'd have just looked like a tired traveller turning over in his sleep. Giovanni felt visceral excitement when the first bang and whizz went off.

"Here we go !" Yelled Giovanni.

Some of Vittoria's alarms had a sparkle effect, which lit up the wood with a rainbow of sparkling colours. Their enemies were coming straight at them and Giovanni saw one of them roasted on an inferno trap.

"Careful of our own traps." Shouted Vittoria.

Things went crazy after that, as all real battles do. Giovanni saw Vittoria use a blade rather than spells. After that a spell, a few hand movements and one of their enemies became a yelling ball of flame. Giovanni cut the throat of a man in a leather jerkin, with a Colombo family insignia on the front. There was no doubt about it now, the fighters had been sent by Eduino Colombo. Giovanni drank a little from the fighter's throat, but there wasn't enough time to drain him dry.

"Colombo sent them.....Their clothes have his insignia." Yelled Giovanni.

"Then they shall all die for Eduino Colombo." Shouted Juliana.

No matter how good a group of fighters are, someone will always get wounded, perhaps even killed. It helped if the enemy were poor fighters, but the men wearing the Colombo insignia weren't bad fighters. Giovanni had fought better, but they weren't bad. After two more of them became soot and ashes thanks to Vittoria's traps, the rest of them became more cautious. Poor Patsy, it was always her left arm that was cut. She was a good fighter, just better at attack than defence. Giovanni saw the flash of red on Patsy's left arm and knew she'd survive. Patsy always survived, always.

"No mercy.....Kill them all." Shouted Simon.

Giovanni automatically used his fangs if the enemy was close. No feeding this time, just tear out the bloody throat of his enemy and move on. That agitated their enemy; Giovanni could feel their anxiety hovering around them like morning mist.

"Bite them, Simon." Shouted Giovanni. "Use your fangs.....It worries them."

Strange really, they must have been briefed that the group they were following had two vampires in their number. Being told something was different to seeing it with your own eyes. Watching as throats were torn out was eventually too much for the fighters sent by Eduino Colombo.

"They're running.....The cowards are running away." Yelled Juliana.

Juliana's blade was bloody; Giovanni could see blood on the darkest of nights. It seemed to glow in a way that only vampires could see. Not that the woods were totally dark. With moonlight and starlight there was enough light to fight by, even under rainclouds. A dozen fighters had arrived in the night to kill them. Now just five of them still lived and they were running for wherever they'd left their horses.

"Don't let them escape !" Shouted Simon.

Giovanni gave Patsy a glance and Vittoria was applying some kind of spell to her arm. The two of them then hurtled off after the fleeing Colombo fighters.

"I knew she'd be fine." Mumbled Giovanni. "The indestructible Patsy Smart."

Soldiers running away in a panic is a rout; they didn't even try to retrieve their horses. The Colombo soldiers didn't last long and the honour of the last kill went to Juliana and her long sword. Not that she looked happy, as she stood over the corpse of a man twice her size.

"They're wearing my family seal.....I'm a Colombo." Said Juliana. "Their disgrace is mine.....I can only apologize and promise that if at all possible; Eduino Colombo will die by my blade."

"None of us are responsible for the actions of our kin." Said Simon.

"I agree.....My family have been responsible for things I don't want to think about." Said Vittoria.

It was the rule of vampires and everyone knew Simon would make them keep to it. The dead were searched for anything useful, or valuable; and there was nothing more valuable than gold pieces. No burying them, there simply wasn't time; or much inclination. The men's horses were useful though, as spares in case any of their own began to struggle with fatigue. Not that the spare horses seemed to mind the instant and rather violent change of ownership.

"So.....Where do we drop our bedrolls next, Giovanni?" Asked Patsy.

Giovanni had ridden along many roads in Southern Italy while in service to the Medici. Maybe not all the roads, but he'd ridden along a lot of them and his memory was good. Who had good cheap lodgings, where was it safe to sleep in the woods. Plus many more priceless pieces of information; filled his memory. He'd also been scribbling notes as they'd set up camp for the night. He looked at his untidy notes and smiled.

"We can reach Santa Rufina by nightfall." Said Giovanni. "No lodgings, but I know one of the Brotherhood there who will loan us a clean barn, some hay to sleep on.....And with luck give us a good meal."

"Sounds like paradise after a night in the rain." Said Vittoria.

"He's a good man who knows how to keep a secret." Said Giovanni. "Simon knows him, he won't tell all in sundry about our movements and destination."

"Santa Rufina.....You must mean Gérard." Said Simon. "Yes, a good man who can be trusted."

"Looks like our next place to sleep will be a clean barn in Santa Rufina." Said Juliana.

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It would have been nice to summon Karkengara and send him on ahead; but people not expecting a visit from a huge dragon can get a trifle terrified and anxious. As it was Gérard and his family were sociable types, who were more than happy to provide a few home comforts for the night. There was even the promise of decent feed for their horses. Gérard's wife had thick black hair, which she put down to being descended from gypsies. Their two small children, both girls; took after their mother when it came to gypsy looks. Patsy was grateful to get a bed for the night, even if it was a damp bedroll put down on clean hay. For the most part Gérard left them in peace, but one of the young girl children occasionally poked her head into the barn. The child seemed excited and puzzled by all the activity in her father's barn.

"How is the wound, Patsy?" Asked Simon. "I can ask Gérard to put up with us for two nights, if you need more time to heal."

"That depends on Vittoria; she is my physician on these matters." Said Patsy.

In truth she felt much better, but an extra night in a nice clean barn and a decent cooked meal.....It sounded a bit like paradise. Sadly Vittoria hadn't picked up the looks Patsy kept giving her, the ones craving an extra night in Gérard's wonderful barn.

"Patsy is healing well." Said Vittoria. "She won't suffer any ill-effects from us getting back on the road in the morning."

"I need a good scrub, Simon." Said Juliana. "Not a cat-lick in a bucket of cold water."

"Me too.....Could that be arranged ?" Asked Patsy.

"I'll ask Gérard if we can leave here at midday tomorrow." Said Simon. "I can't see him objecting. That'll give a chance for everyone to get a scrub before leaving. Is that acceptable ?"

It was, of course it was and even Giovanni said he was getting fed up with the odour of his own armpits. It was irresistible; Patsy had been picking at the dressing over her wound since Simon had mentioned it. As she looked up Gérard's youngest girl child was staring at her with eyes the size of dinner plates.

"Boo.....What's your name ?" Asked Patsy.

Whoosh the child was gone, but not that far. There she was, sort of hiding behind a crate near the barn door. The eyes were there observing Patsy, the largest and darkest eyes she'd ever seen.

"You've made a new friend, Patsy." Said Vittoria.

"I'm not sure about that." Said Patsy.

"Dark eyes, dark hair.....And there is something about Gérard's youngest." Said Vittoria. "I sense a lot of gypsy in her ancestry and the magic to go with it."

"Be her friend, Patsy." Said Simon. "You never know when gypsy magic might be useful."

The food prepared by Gérard and his wife was excellent and the youngest girl child wasn't averse to nibbling at some of Patsy's meal. By the time Patsy was shooing the child to go back to the main house, she'd learned her name. Sabina was named after a grandmother who'd been skilled in the craft, which Vittoria thought was very interesting. Sabina had the unnerving habit of pointing a hooked index finger at Patsy, as though she was reading her in some way.

"Who wants to take first watch with me ?" Asked Simon.

"I will.....Of course I will." Said Patsy.

Vittoria had placed a few traps near the barn, but nothing that might harm Gérard and his family. There was the sound of foxes fighting, or maybe fornicating just before the end of their watch, but nothing more serious than that. By the time Patsy cuddled up to Simon and went to sleep, she'd have slept through a buffalo stampede.

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Several more nights had been spent sleeping in bedrolls, getting hot meals where they could find them. No more attacks though, wiping out the fighters wearing Colombo insignias had definitely paid off. What could have been a dangerous ride became fun, or at least almost fun. There were days when the rain refused to let up. Patsy seemed to be daydreaming a lot, but Simon had a pretty good idea why.

"She got to you didn't she, Patsy ?" Asked Simon. "Sabina I mean, she became a bit special to all of us."

"Gérard told me a bizarre tale." Said Patsy. "When Sabina was very tiny, he swears she killed a bear that was about to attack her mother. Used her eyes in some way and disintegrated the brute."

Simon wanted to say something flippant, but he too had heard stories about gypsy girls with particularly large and dark eyes. Sabina was just a kid though, they could hardly have asked her to join them.

"I've heard similar stories, but not from Gérard." Said Simon. "Gypsy girls usually, the ones with very large dark eyes. Being a little fey it's often called. Sabina seems to have a lot of fey in her."

"One day we need to go back there." Said Patsy.

"Fine.....Once I've complete my quest." Said Simon.

Sabina was a child with inexplicable gifts, but Simon wasn't about to start making dates to visit Gérard and his family again. Sometimes such gifts vanished as the girl reached puberty. Anyway, the quest now had to come first, second, third and probably fourth too.

"Wow, I've never arrived on horseback from this direction." Said Juliana.

Simon had arrived at the hills to the south of Florence before, but the view always made him stop and stare for a while. The rain had stopped, the sun had come out. Despite him sneezing in the sunlight, he thoroughly enjoyed the view. Some people loved Rome, some were obsessed with Venice. For Simon Florence was the most beautiful city in the world. Looking down on Florence from the hills, gave them a magnificent view.

"It's a nice view.....But I prefer Rome." Said Giovanni.

"You would." Said Vittoria.

"What do you mean by that ?" Asked Giovanni.

They'd arrived at the opportune moment; their horses needed a good rest. Even though they had spare horses, it was a long way from the Bay of Naples, a hell of a long way for a horse carrying someone on its back. Simon took it slowly down the road into Florence, while enjoying the view.

"Look, I can see our house." Said Patsy, while pointing.

Simon could see the church on the corner from where he lived, the church he'd thundered past on horseback with Giovanni. They'd put the fear of God into quite a few of the clergy, but none of them seemed grateful for that. There had been numerous complaints pushed through his door, one or two of them in Latin. There, to the right of the church and down the street a little, was the house that he and Patsy thought of as home.

"I can see it.....Well, I can see the windows and a bit of the garden." Said Simon.

"It's been a while since we terrified the local clergy." Said Giovanni.

Down the hill and although it had been a while since they'd seen Florence, not much had changed. Past the church and Simon opened the stables so that the horses could be off the street. His neighbours would soon realise he was home, but there was no need to let the entire city know. Through a door into the garden and then into the house, all of them clutching their bags and belongings. Not that it mattered; the house was empty and had been for quite a while. Servants cleaned the worst up, but there was still a little dust on the furniture. The surprise came in the kitchen.

"I hope you don't mind.....Karkengara brought us here." Said Hassan.

"As he was coming here, I came too." Said Mia.

Juliana took Hassan away, which wasn't a surprise. Being polite about it, they had a lot to catch up on. Simon looked at Mia, who still managed to look flamboyant; even in clothes deliberately worn to look ordinary.

"Mia.....You're the last person I expected to find here." Said Simon. "Hassan I almost expected to be waiting for us, but not you."

"Do you mind ? Have I ruined some great plan ?" Asked Mia.

"There was a reason to bring who rode here." Said Simon. "I know there was a damned good reason to come the way we did on horseback. Now you're here though, it is very good to see you."

"Yes, it is very good to see you." Said Patsy.

"We've no horses; Karkengara drew the line at carrying them here." Said Mia.

"That's fine.....We have spare horses." Said Vittoria.

"Food.....Before we discuss anything else, we need food." Said Giovanni. "Proper food, even if we have to get one of the maids to loan us her mother; to make sure it's edible."

"I hate to say it, but I agree with Giovanni." Said Patsy.

Getting a good meal that evening looked impossible, there weren't even any ingredients in the kitchen. Patsy managed to find somewhere to buy the essentials, while Simon begged one of the maids to help them make a rather grand meal to celebrate their return to Florence. Of course the maid begged her mother to show her how to cook the celebratory feast. By the time everyone was far from sober and heading for bed it was agreed; it had been a wonderful meal.

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Hassan wasn't going to make a huge thing about it, but he felt he had a right to be there; as Simon took them through the back lanes of Florence in the gathering dusk of evening. Juliana was with him now, sharing the intimacy of the same bed most nights. A few of her relations wanted her dead for giving up her virtue too easily. They wanted Simon dead for taking the virtue of Juliana Colombo. No doubt they'd want Hassan dead too, if they realised he existed. Wanting someone dead and carrying out the deed were very different, Hassan realised that. Assassins were expensive, as were private family guards and warriors. If Eduino Colombo hadn't possessed the resources to get the deed done; it's unlikely her other aggrieved relatives would have posed any threat to Juliana.

"That is a beautiful house." Said Mia. "Eduino Colombo obviously knows how to live."

"He's a crazy monster.....Always has been." Said Juliana. "But as you say, he appreciates the finer things in life."

The house was on a square, a little distance from yet another church. To Hassan, Florence seemed to consist of just places of worship and palatial houses. Half a dozen cats ran across the square; it seemed that like them, cats liked to hunt their prey as dusk started to become darkness.

"Hassan and I missed the planning." Said Mia. "Is there anyone in the house we should avoid killing?"

"The children and servants will be in their beds by now." Said Juliana. "Kill anyone who is up and awake."

"Good, nice and easy to remember." Said Mia.

As the church clock struck some God forsaken hour when all good souls should have been in their beds, or least heading for bed; Simon nodded at them all.

"Let's get this done." Said Simon. "Then we're heading back to the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius."

"I want my blade to kill Eduino." Said Juliana.

"No.....Whoever gets the opportunity to kill him; should take it." Said Simon.

Juliana nodded at Simon and they were on their way. No fake documents or persuasion for guards to open doors, everything had to be done fast. Giovanni banged on the servants door to Eduino's house and when a guard opened a flap to see what was there; Giovanni drove his small assassin's blade through his eye and into his brain. The guard moaned and fidgeted for a few seconds, before falling to the ground. His body made quite a thump as it hit the floor on the other side of the door.

"He's dead, time to work your magic, Vittoria." Said Giovanni.

A simple cantrip from Vittoria and when she shoved at the door, it opened an inch or so.

"Shove the door, Giovanni." Said Simon. "The dead guard will be blocking the door."

Hassan watched as Giovanni pushed hard on the door, until there was enough space for them all to enter Eduino Colombo's home. It didn't look that grand, but they were in the servants area. He suspected the servants quarters in most great houses; looked far from impressive.

"Right, you all know the plan." Said Simon.

"We don't know the plan, Simon." Said Mia. "Consider Hassan and I as being fresh off the boat."

“Kill anyone who seems to be a hostile.” Said Simon. “If you get into serious trouble, call for the bringer of fire.”

“Have fun.” Added Patsy.

That was the great plan, which the others had probably been discussing all the way from the Bay of Naples. Hassan roared the way he’d roared before other battles. It seemed unfair to attack at night without roaring to let your enemy know you were inside their defences.

“For Juliana Colombo.” Shouted Hassan.

“For Juliana.” Yelled Mia.

Doors were crashing open somewhere in the house, the occupants were yelling at one another. Footsteps began running in their direction, a hell of a lot of footsteps.

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