

THE RESCUE

by Jackie Kapke

They lay together - simply enjoying the sensation of being close. He was almost asleep in that place where, as he once so aptly put it, *'everything shimmers and floats.'*

Her palm rested on his chest, where it rose and fell with his slow, steady and deep respirations.

She opened her eyes to drink in his beauty. *'He was truly magnificent, incredible - her very own Aslan'*, she thought, a smile crossing her lips as she studied his unique face, so calm, relaxed and peaceful.

He was large and powerful, yet graceful and agile. He appeared fearsome at times with his frequently stern countenance, long canines, fur, claws - and a roar that could shake the chandeliers. But he was so very gentle and tender with the tunnel children - everyone - even strangers - but especially her.

She continued the easy stroking of his mane, finding it slightly coarse, but thick, soft and almost silky. Catherine had grown to love these pleasant little afternoon lulls - the time when classes and the day's repair work were ended - and before the tantalizing aromas of the cooking meal wafted about, reminding the tunnel folk of the supper that awaited them.

It had become *'their time,'* and was rarely disturbed, almost as if Father had declared an edict in their behalf. They often read the paper or a favorite book or passage together, or simply napped side-by-side on Vincent's huge bed.

Vincent's lady love had all but moved Below and planned to make it permanent in the next week or so. It had been a gradual, yet very determined process. She still had her own chamber, the one she had first used when her father had died, but planned to rectify that situation as well, in the near future.

After all, many a night had been spent here in Vincent's arms, though as yet they had not consummated their love. There was, however, no doubt in her mind that it would come in good time. They were lovers in every sense but one, and that physical union drew nearer each passing day.

She scanned the little balcony area above the bed - the iridescent stained glass fan window, the many collected treasures and antique tomes on his shelves. Yes - she considered his chamber hers, and even Vincent was growing more accustomed to the possibility himself. Moving permanently Below to spend her life with this man was her intention. To be with him as much as possible and experience all that life had to offer with him, her goal. No more stolen moments - but long stretches and leisurely hours.

She still worked Above, but research took the majority of her time. No more exhausting and dangerous assignments, and this suited her fine. She refused to further endanger her or Vincent's life. Life and time had become too precious. They had grown closer in their relationship, and though he still found it difficult to grasp the idea that she desired him as a lifetime mate, he was becoming more accustomed to the idea, and cherished their time together. He no longer feared a physical union and knew with certainty their time would come. Even Father no longer harbored reservations about Catherine's loyalty or intent.

She had proven herself on numerous occasions, often delving into her own savings to provide tunnel essentials and a few luxuries and treats. She risked her life many times to save Vincent and care for her new family. She had softened Jacob's heart with her kindness and generosity, and her

unconditional love and devotion to his son, and so his days of interference were over. Once he feared Catherine would grow tired of the novelty of Vincent, and break his heart. But he now knew that would never happen.

Four years had passed since their fateful meeting, and Vincent and Catherine had faced many difficulties together - with many more to come.

Vincent stirred beside Catherine. She bent forward, placing a kiss on his mouth. A pleasurable sigh escaped him as he gently took her in his arms. It had taken a long time for Vincent to feel at ease with displaying affection or enjoying the wonderful sensation of it.

"I'm glad you got a little rest," she said, snuggling back into his side. "You've been working too hard."

"Mmmmm," he chuckled. "Where have I heard that before?" He was usually telling Catherine the very same thing.

They were both workaholics, determined to give more of themselves than necessary.

He stretched, enjoying her laughter. "I'd best get moving," he groaned, "though I could stay this way all day."

They shared a mutual embrace before he swung his long legs over the edge to pull on his boots.

"We have those canned goods to collect from Wong after dinner."

"Oh - I nearly forgot." Catherine joined him at the edge of the bed. "Kipper, Zach, Eric and several of the younger children have volunteered their help."

"Good. The boys are definitely trying to make amends after being found playing hooky from Shakespeare."

"Can you blame them?" she asked. "King Lear was certainly never my favorite."

"No, I guess not. I must admit Devin and I were known to frequent the swimming hole on occasion, when we should have been attending class, as well," Vincent confessed.

"You played hooky, Mr. Wells?" she asked accusingly.

Vincent bowed his head in feigned remorse. "I'm afraid so."

"Well, we're just have to decide on your punishment later tonight." Catherine tickled his ribs, and then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him fiercely.

Vincent laughed out loud. "I also need to get the sewer pipe plans from Samuel, so I'll meet you and the children at the Kelly turn-off."

"That sounds fine," she exclaimed. "Now let's eat. I'm starved."

A few hours later, Catherine led the band of children down the tunnel way, the older boys carrying the lanterns. The new little girl, Marie, had decided to join them. Kipper had discovered her about a month ago, near death - dirty, malnourished and insufficiently clothed for the harsh winter weather. She was abandoned behind a bowling alley in the bitter cold. Although she was five years old, she was small and slight for her age. Catherine had been unable to ascertain any information about the girl or her family. They only knew her as Marie.

She had recovered quickly, gaining weight and confidence in the people in her new home. She was energetic, with huge hazel eyes and golden brown curls about her face. She had become Kipper's shadow, following him everywhere, still shy, but venturing out more and more. The only problem... She had been frightened of Vincent, so he had to stay out of her way during her recovery. Catherine

did not realize the matter remained unresolved until she casually mentioned to the group that they would be meeting Vincent soon.

Marie stopped dead in her tracks. "I didn't know he was coming," she cried, apprehension in her voice.

Catherine knelt down before Marie. "I want to go back." And she frantically tugged at Kipper's sleeve as he looked to Catherine in desperation.

"But Marie, Vincent is our friend. He won't hurt you. He...."

But Catherine's attempt to reassure Marie failed. The child's eyes burned brightly with panic as she begged, sobbing, "I want to go back. I want to go home. Please."

"All right, Marie. All right," Catherine whispered to the hysterical child. "Kipper will take you back. Okay?"

The little girl nodded, gulping as she wiped her tears on her sleeve. Catherine rose to her feet as Kipper took Marie's hand, shrugging silently to Catherine at the girl's reaction to Vincent.

"Come on," he said, trying to ease her fears. "I'll take you back. No problem."

When they were out of earshot, Catherine asked the others, "Do any of you know why she's so frightened of Vincent?"

Little heads shook rapidly from side to side. "We like Vincent," they chorused in unison.

"For a while, she was afraid of everybody," Eric said.

"She's still afraid to even look at him," added David.

"I know people who are like that with spiders, bats and snakes," offered Rachel.

"Yeah. Like Father," Eric said. And that got a rise out of the group.

"Eric, we all have things that frighten us, and it's nothing to laugh about." Catherine reprimanded. But she secretly smiled, remembering the time Jacob furiously combated a small spider in his study.

"I don't care much for spiders either," Catherine told her group. That sobered the children a little.

Vincent appeared from around the corner with a wheelbarrow and a small wagon load of canned fruit, soup and vegetables. The children quickly came forward to help him, and then all headed home, taking command of the wagons. He chuckled at their eagerness, lagging behind to take Catherine's hand. She stood on tiptoe to greet him with a proper kiss, but noted the frown creasing his brow.

"I thought Kipper and Marie were coming," Vincent said with concern.

"They were," Catherine hesitated. "But...."

Vincent nodded. He understood. "But Marie was afraid."

"Yes. I'm sorry, Vincent. I didn't realize there was still a problem."

He squeezed her hand. "Well, at least we tried."

Catherine could sense his pain. She knew how much Vincent loved the children, and abhorred frightening anyone with his appearance. It was something that would cut him deeply.

His voice reflected his remorse. "I only wish I could allay this child's fears."

She hugged him, sharing the comfort of his warm cloak as they walked.

"I took care of Marie in the infirmary when she was so near death," he continued, "held her in my arms and prayed for her recovery. As soon as she regained consciousness, she refused to allow me close, became hysterical. Everything I've tried to bridge the gap between us has failed. I'm very grateful that so few children react to me this way."

Catherine kissed his cheek tenderly - then leaned her head on his shoulder.

Eric had slowed his pace, listening to the couple's conversation as Vincent went on. "They usually accept my appearance far more easily than adults."

Catherine reached out to ruffle Eric's hair, saying. "I'll never forget Eric's reaction."

The boy beamed as Vincent added, "Nor will I."

"You didn't scare me," Eric said proudly.

"No, indeed I didn't," confirmed Vincent, patting the boy's shoulder. Eric once again picked up his pace and joined the other children.

"Perhaps with time," Vincent sighed wistfully.

A plot was forming in Catherine's mind. "Maybe we need to give time a little nudge."

Vincent looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I have an idea," Catherine stated simply, although Vincent could hear the wheels turning. He paused in mid-stride, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"I plan to talk with Kipper and the other children this evening while Marie is having her bath."

Vincent stared at her. "Am I invited to this.... er.... discussion?"

"Of course. You're the main topic!"

Together they snuggled beneath the cloak, warm and contented, as they continued homeward.

That evening they returned to Vincent's chamber, smiles on their faces. Catherine looked especially pleased.

Vincent tried to sound matter-of-fact. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary," he observed.

"Do I now?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Seriously, I think your plan will work."

She murmured softly as she returned his embrace. "So do I. You just be your lovable self, and Marie will be unable to resist you and all your charms."

He gave her a doubtful look.

"Well, it happened to me." She whirled from the room. "See you at breakfast," she purred, tossing him a kiss as she ducked her head around the corner.

"I love you," he whispered, a smile on his lips.

"I want to sit next to Vincent."

"No. I want to."

"No. Me. Meeee!"

"That's not fair. It's my turn."

"No. Mine. Mine."

It was the worst hubbub the dining hall had witnessed in years. Several normally well-behaved and quiet children were fighting over the privilege of sitting next to their unique friend.

Vincent was blushing, more than a little surprised by the children's enthusiasm. Of course this was all part of their plan, but even he felt things were getting out of hand.

Catherine said nothing, but smiled to herself as she looked to the table where Marie sat, pleased that the little girl was closely watching the commotion. Her attention was quickly diverted, as Father stood at his seat. Oh, no. In all the excitement, they had forgotten to include the worthy patriarch in their plan.

"Children, children. Please! This behavior is intolerable!" he exclaimed in shock. "Where are your manners? I have never seen such an outrageous display!" He puffed and huffed before taking his seat---the children quiet now, slightly embarrassed by the reprimand, but eyes still twinkling mischievously as they watched Vincent lean over to whisper something to Father.

"The children are only doing what Catherine and I have asked of them," he explained. "This is a plan to help Marie get over her fear of me. Please bear with us just a bit longer."

"Hmmp," Father replied. "Well, at least next time you might have the courtesy to inform me of your plans."

"We will make certain of it," Vincent assured him. From several tables away, Marie was still watching as lots were drawn, and it was decided the children would take turns sitting next to Vincent over the next few days.

Later that morning, Samantha, Jessica, Zach and Eric came rushing past, rolled towels under their arms, as Marie was heading to class, escorted by the ever-present Kipper.

"What's the hurry?" Kipper asked.

"Vincent is going to teach us to dive at the falls," Eric said.

"It's a special treat because we've gotten straight 'A's' on our last two exams," added Jessica.

"Oh, yeah. I only got a 'B,' " replied Kipper discouragingly.

"It's going to be so much fun," Samantha exclaimed, doing a little pirouette.

Marie looked at them all with disbelief. "But with Vincent? He's so.... scary."

"Oh no. Don't be silly. He's great," said Eric.

"He's the best swimmer around," confirmed Zach.

Catherine and Vincent listened from a small widened area about twenty feet around the bend in the tunnel path. Vincent shook his head as Zach went on and on, boasting about his friend's aquatic prowess.

In all seriousness, Catherine agreed. "It's true." She kissed him and then proclaimed. "It's time to make my appearance."

"Are you guys ready for your lesson?" Catherine inquired as she approached the small group.

"Yes," answered Jessica. "Vincent has promised to teach us a special dive."

"Oh, really," Catherine said with a conspiratorial wink. "I wish I could go along. It sounds like fun."

"Marie doesn't," said Samantha. "She thinks Vincent is scary and ugly."

"Oh?" Catherine sounded as shocked as she could, glancing toward little Marie.

Marie blushed, attempting to hide behind Kipper. Her face was turned downward, and she shuffled her feet in the dust.

"Catherine doesn't think he's ugly. She loves him," observed Samantha.

Now it was Catherine's turn to blush. She wanted the children to think she and Vincent were merely good friends.

"Well, don't you?" Samantha asked defensively.

"Yes, I do. To me, he's not ugly - different perhaps, but very handsome in his own special way. I wouldn't change a thing about him."

Marie was silent for a moment, and then she spoke up. "But his nose and mouth. Those teeth and hands," she stammered.

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "They're different. But as fierce as he may seem, Vincent is the gentlest of men. Don't you agree, children?"

Everyone nodded in the affirmative.

"He is so gentle and kind," Catherine continued, "that he wouldn't hurt a soul. Have you noticed how blue his eyes are, or how beautiful his voice is when he reads? None of us can help the way we look, and Vincent is no exception. It's what's inside that counts, you know."

Vincent bowed his head as he listened to Catherine's defense of him. How he loved her. Her sincerity touched him deeply.

"He can't change the way he looks, but must depend on our acceptance of the kind of person he is. There is far more to consider than just outward appearance," continued Catherine. "Don't you all agree?"

Again, there were unanimous affirmative nods.

"Okay. Now that that's settled, you four better get going or you'll be late for your swim." And with that, Catherine turned to Kipper and Marie. "And you two don't want to be late for your lessons. Are you prepared?" The children explained the day's assignments as they continued down the hall.

Vincent congratulated the children after stepping from his hidden location. They hugged Vincent as he thanked them for their help.

"We do get to swim now, don't we?" asked Marie, perhaps fearing that part of their story was just for little Marie's benefit.

Vincent held his rolled towel aloft. "You most certainly do!"

On the way home from class, little Marie raced up to Catherine, shouting. "I got an 'A' on my test!"

"Very good. I know you studied hard. Maybe you'll get a diving lesson some day if you keep up the good work."

Catherine studied the child's reaction. A few days ago, Marie might have fled in terror at the mere suggestion of such a thing. But now she pondered the possibility and asked if Vincent was really the best swimmer around.

"Yes. An excellent swimmer and diver. I think he could have made the Olympian team at one time."

"What's that?" Marie asked innocently.

As Catherine explained, they continued down the hall.

The next day, Catherine walking between Father and Vincent exclaimed to the group of children in the play room, that the three of them were going on a picnic. Marie was wide-eyed. Vincent raised the picnic basket for all to view. There was to be a soak in the hot springs following the meal. Marie's eyes continued to register astonishment. After the threesome left, Samantha stated, "Gee ... I sure wish we could go."

"Yeah," Kipper said. "I love picnics."

Story time was that evening. Marie would never attend in the past when Vincent was the storyteller. Yet, tonight she was there. Father was finishing his tale of *'B'rer Rabbit,'* and Marie knew Vincent would be next. Marie sat between Catherine and Kipper.

Vincent took his place at the head of the room and began the story of the *'Velveteen Rabbit.'* Several children were so entranced by the story, they came to sit in a circle just in front of Vincent, and two tots had the privilege of sitting on his lap.

Catherine was deeply moved by the story. It brought back memories of her childhood, as well as a painful reminder of the death of her parents - and especially her father's funeral where she quoted several of her favorite passages from the story. She borrowed Jamie's hanky to dab at her eyes, as Marie asked why she was crying.

Catherine bent to hug the little girl. "I love this story so very much. My parents used to read it to me. Vincent tells it so beautifully."

"Oh," the child replied, still uncertain as to the reason for Catherine's tears.

Throughout the story, Catherine noticed Marie studying Vincent's face more and more. She avoided direct eye contact when he would gaze out in the audience, but would take quick peeks when his head was bowed to the page.

The next few days continued uneventfully, and Marie was becoming bolder in her attempts to get a glance at Vincent, and lingered to listen longer when he spoke or read to the children.

That evening, Catherine and Vincent worked in the comfort of their bed beneath the stained glass window, pillows propped up behind him. Vincent looked up from the lesson book as Catherine pushed aside the English papers she'd been correcting. He put down his book and collected the papers in his huge hands, carefully stacking them on the end table.

"I can't read another word," Catherine groaned, squeezing Vincent around the middle. A huge yawn escaped her as she snuggled into his side. He chuckled, wrapping her in his embrace, and rested his chin on her head.

"It's working with Marie," murmured Catherine. "I don't think it will be much longer." She sighed

contentedly.

"We are making progress," Vincent agreed.

"Are we now?" she teased, tilting her head for his kiss, which he granted.

"Yes," he whispered, a hint of laughter in his voice.

"It's late," Catherine commented, "but I don't feel like moving."

"Then don't." Vincent nuzzled her perfumed hair.

Catherine sighed, looking into his face - forgetting to breathe for a moment as she watched the flickering candlelight reflected in his eyes. He softly stroked her cheek, never taking his eyes from hers, then grasped her chin and soundly kissed her. The room seemed to spin.

Dizzy when the caress finally ended, Catherine settled her head on Vincent's massive chest, thinking that Marie wasn't the only one making progress. This was certainly not the Vincent of years past.

"Goodnight, my love," she whispered.

"Goodnight," echoed Vincent, kissing the crown of her head and smiling contentedly. He pulled up the comforter and blew out the bedside candles.

The next morning, Vincent and Catherine exited the dining hall when Kipper nearly knocked them over in his haste.

"Vincent," he croaked, out of breath. "She's slipped off the ledge near Fat Man's Narrows."

"Who has?" Vincent asked urgently.

"Marie. I know we're not supposed to play there," the boy explained. "But Marie was having such a good time, I didn't see the harm until the board broke."

Catherine was alarmed. "Is she hurt?"

"No. But plenty scared. I can't reach her though, so I came back here to get a grown-up and some rope."

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Vincent attempted to reassure the boy. "You did the right thing, Kipper. Now, let's hurry."

Vincent ran to his room where he lit a lantern and grabbed a coil of rope. They continued on to the Narrows as he explained the area to Catherine.

"She's in no danger. The pit is only ten or twelve feet deep and she can fall no further. We try to keep boards across the opening, but children either remove them or walk across them like bridges - *'despite'* the warning signs." He looked sternly at Kipper, as the boy bowed his head. "Marie is not the first child and probably not the last to fall into the pit. I just hope you have learned your lesson."

"Oh, I have. I promise." Kipper was very contrite.

Vincent affectionately tousled the boy's hair. He was certain the child was feeling bad enough that his little friend had fallen, than to admonish him any further. They were rapidly approaching the site when Vincent outlined his plan.

"I will lower you down to Marie, Kipper, and you can tie...."

Catherine interrupted. "No. Wait." She grabbed Vincent's sleeve. This may be the chance they'd been waiting for. "Vincent, *'you'* have to rescue Marie by yourself."

But Vincent shook his head. "No, I don't think the child is ready for that. It could undo all the progress we've made, Catherine."

"Or it could be the turning point for you two."

"I don't know. I still frighten her."

"I think it's worth a try. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. If it doesn't work, Kipper and I will be within shouting distance."

Vincent looked to the boy who had remained silent. "Kipper?"

Kipper hesitated only a moment. "Well, she talks about you all the time now, and asks questions. I'd say, go for it."

"It's settled then," Catherine said. "Tell her you're the only one available to save her and take it from there."

Vincent exhaled audibly. "Very well."

"Good luck," Catherine told him, placing a kiss on his forehead.

Taking another deep breath, Vincent squared his shoulders and pushed onward. A few feet from the pit, he heard the small child sobbing. She was not in total darkness, because a torch was burning several yards away. Yet, he knew it must be a frightening experience for her, and feared he might compound her distress even more.

Breathing a silent prayer, he called out softly. "Marie ... are you all right?"

He heard a small whimper, and then, "Yes."

He held the lantern above the pit, careful to stay back from the side, out of sight, as he said in his gentlest voice, "Marie, this is Vincent. I've come to get you out."

There was no response, which Vincent felt was more encouraging than hysterical screaming. "Is that okay with you?" he went on. He paused a moment, then added. "There was no one else around at the moment."

A shaky little voice asked, "Where's Kipper?"

'Poor thing,' he thought. *'She thinks the boy abandoned her.'* "He's with Mary and Catherine, helping a sick child. I'm a friend, Marie, and I'd never harm you or any of the other children. Please trust me."

There was silence again.

He knelt on the edge, whispering in his softest voice. "I know I scare you, and I'm sorry. I can go back and see if there's someone else who can help you." He turned to leave, frustrated at not being able to win the child's confidence even now.

"No. Don't go," came the plaintive reaction. "I want out of here now." The child was near tears once more.

"I won't go," Vincent assured her. "Please don't cry, Marie. I'll have you out of here in a second. I'm setting the lantern down right now. All right?"

"Okay," came the timid reply.

"Now then. I can come down there and help you, or you can hold on to a loop of rope and I can pull you up. Which sounds better to you?"

He could see her pacing, biting her fingernails, but doing very well considering the circumstances. "I'll hold the rope," she said finally.

"Very well then. I'll pass it down to you in a moment." He fashioned a loop, tying the knot securely, then lowered it down the twelve feet to the girl. "Hold the loop tightly in both hands above your head.

Marie. do you have it?"

"Yes," she answered in a trembling voice.

"Now I will slowly pull you up. Hold on tight and don't let go until I have your wrists. Okay?" He peered over the edge to see the nod of her curly brown head. Within seconds, the little girl was up, and he gently took her wrists in one hand, setting her on her feet beside him. Her eyes were still tightly closed, and the knuckles of her tiny hands were white from clutching the rope.

"You can let go now, Marie," he assured her. "You're safe."

She released her hold on the rope, but kept her eyes closed. Vincent assessed her injuries which appeared to be mere scratches and abrasions.

"You're a very brave girl, Marie," he told her. "I'm proud of you."

He bowed his head as she opened her eyes, avoiding direct eye contact. He sensed some of her fears subside, and felt a slight touch on the crown of his head. He raised his face and returned the shy smile she gave him. It was the most gracious thank you he had ever received.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. The little girl's eyes were wide open once again as her gaze traveled from the middle of his thigh upward to the lofty height of him. He was careful not to make any sudden moves, or do anything that might frighten her again.

"Shall we head home and wash up some of those scratches?"

She nodded, smiling.

He indicated with a flourish of his hand that she lead the way and was surprised when she slipped her tiny hand into his - the ultimate gesture of confidence.

From their hiding place, Catherine and Kipper emerged, exchanged a *'high-five,'* and in unison shouted, "All right!"

Father confirmed Vincent's diagnosis and gently scolded the little girl, making her promise to never play around areas marked *'stay out'* again.

That evening, Marie sat in front near Vincent with the rest of the children during story time, displaying no fear whatsoever. After saying their goodnights to the children, Vincent escorted Catherine to her chamber.

"Well, you did it," she told him, squeezing his hand tightly. "I knew you would."

"You had more confidence than I," Vincent observed.

"But now, I'm worried," she told him, a frown on her face.

"Whatever for?"

"I'm going to have even more competition for your attention," she said with a giggle as she skipped away.

He caught her then, pulling her close and pressing her against the wall. His lips were only inches from hers. "You have nothing to fear. Nothing at all." They were both breathless when the kiss ended.

Catherine knew the next day that Marie had totally accepted Vincent, when she entered his chamber to retrieve a book for Father. Vincent sat on his bed with two of Marie's friends at his side, and two of their dollies in his lap. Marie was kneeling behind him, busily brushing his hair, all the while telling him in her high-pitched voice how unruly it was, and how he should take better care of himself. Catherine had heard Mary deliver the same lecture many times.

Marie had fastened several barrettes and bows sporadically about Vincent's mane, and no doubt planned to attach several more, as her little friends voiced their encouragement. His posture displayed embarrassment as Catherine crossed the room, and he seemed to dare her to utter one word, seeing the smirk on her face.

She stifled her laughter and merely said, holding up the volume she sought. "Just getting this for Father. You're doing great, Marie. Keep up the good work, girls." And then she started to saunter out of the room.

Vincent rolled his eyes, but a grin found its way to the corner of his lips. Catherine bumped into Father on her way out.

"Oh, you found it," he exclaimed. "Thank you, Catherine." Father started to enter the chamber, saying, "Is Vincent in? I need to ask him something."

Catherine said, "Yes." But she decided to spare her love any further humiliation. She was certain he'd show his appreciation later. "But you can't go in right now," she stammered, holding up her hand.

Father paused, a puzzled look on his face.

"He's busy. You see.... he's getting his hair done."

"He's what?"

"Come on. I'll explain on the way to tea," Catherine said gently, slipping her arm into the crook of his elbow.

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