



Unbound (Magic Ex Libris)

By Jim C. Hines

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Hugo winner Jim C. Hines's hilarious and clever Magic ex Libris series, where books come alive and libromancer Isaac Vainio combats magical threats that spring from the page

For five hundred years, the Porters have concealed the existence of magic from the world.

Now, old enemies have revealed the Porters' secrets, and an even greater threat lurks in the shadows. The would-be queen Meridiana, banished for a thousand years, has returned in the body of a girl named Jeneta Aboderin. She seeks an artifact created by Pope Sylvester II, a bronze prison that would grant her the power to command an army of the dead.

Michigan librarian Isaac Vainio is powerless to stop her, having been stripped of his power and his place among the Porters by Johannes Gutenberg himself. But Isaac is determined to regain his magic and to rescue his former student Jeneta. With no magic of his own, Isaac must delve into the darker side of black-market magic, where he will confront beings better left undisturbed, including the sorcerer Juan Ponce de Leon.

With his loyal fire-spider Smudge, dryad warrior Lena Greenwood, and psychiatrist Nidhi Shah, Isaac races to unravel a mystery more than a thousand years old as competing magical powers battle to shape the future of the world. He will be hunted by enemies and former allies alike, and it will take all his knowledge and resourcefulness to survive as magical war threatens to spread across the globe. Isaac's choices will determine the fate of his friends, the Porters, the students of Bi Sheng, and the world.

Only one thing is certain: even if he finds a way to restore his magic, he can't save them all....

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Magic ex Libris series:

"An engaging writer who is also greatly entertaining, and I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys **superior worldbuilding**." —Charlaine Harris, #1 *New York Times* bestselling writer

"I picked up the book meaning to read a few pages. My first thought was, 'This is a cool concept.' The second thing I thought was, 'This is **really, really clever**.' The third thing I thought was, 'I should have gone to sleep three hours ago.'" —Patrick Rothfuss, #1 *New York Times* bestselling writer

"This may be Jim Hines' best work. *Libriomancer* is smart, silly, and deadly serious, all at the same time. It's **a book about loving books**." —Seanan McGuire, *New York Times* bestselling writer

"Hines created a system where that magic becomes real, usable, and very definitely not always safe. This is a book **for everyone who has ever wanted to pull Excalibur from the page**." —Tanya Huff, bestselling author

"A **rich backstory and mythology** that weaves history and magic and science fiction across centuries, between cultures, and around the globe." —Wired

"Hines supplies everything a reader needs—werewolves, ghosts, robot insects, a fire spider that eats candy, and homages to classic SF—for **a very good time**." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Bibliophiles and fantasy enthusiasts will enjoy the author's intelligent approach to both **magic and literature**." —*Library Journal*

"**Hines writes joyously**.... *Codex Born* is what would happen if a group of fantasy fans were to hole up in a room trying to develop a system of magic, saying, 'But what if THIS happened?'" —*RT Reviews*

"*Libriomancer* is **any book-geek's dream come true**. It is so much fun and an ode to books." —Book Smugglers

"Isaac's story feels extremely **personal and intimate**, even throughout the world-changing events around him." —SF Signal

"Hines has just scratched the surface of what he can do. And **I can't wait to see what comes next**." —Tor.com

"Equal parts quirky humor and serious emotional dissection.... **Hines is one hell of an author**." —Bookworm Blues

"**Continues to break tropes** and proves that fantasy can be so much more.... Right at the top of my list of favorites along with JK Rowling's Harry Potter, Patrick Rothfuss' Kingkiller Chronicle, Garth Nix's Abhorsen, and Kim Harrison's Hollows." —Bibliophilic Witch

“**Wonderful characterizations.** From a fire spider to Gutenberg himself, [Hines] makes all his characters come alive on the page.” —Errand Dreams

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Jim C. Hines has been a paid juggler, earned a black belt in two different martial arts, performed yo-yo tricks at the top of the Eiffel Tower, and lived with a brain-damaged squirrel. (Only three of those are true.) One of his earliest stories earned first place in the Writers of the Future contest. He’s published more than forty short stories as well as numerous fantasy novels, including the humorous *Jig the Dragonslayer* trilogy, the *Princess* series, which re-imagines traditional fairy-tale princesses as butt-kicking action heroines, and the *Magic Ex Libris* series, about a centuries-old secret society dedicated to the use and control of book magic. In 2012, he won the Hugo for Best Fan Writer. Jim lives in Michigan with his wife, two children, and an unstable number of pets. He can be found online at www.jimchines.com.

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The Finest in Fantasy from

JIM C. HINES:

MAGIC EX LIBRIS:

LIBRIOMANCER (Book One)

CODEX BORN (Book Two)

UNBOUND (Book Three)

THE PRINCESS NOVELS:

THE STEPSISTER SCHEME (Book One)

THE MERMAID’S MADNESS (Book Two)

RED HOOD’S REVENGE (Book Three)

THE SNOW QUEEN’S SHADOW (Book Four)

THE LEGEND OF JIG DRAGONSLAYER:

GOBLIN QUEST (Book One)

GOBLIN HERO (Book Two)

GOBLIN WAR (Book Three)

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Nearly all the designs and trade names in this book are registered trademarks. All that are still in commercial use are protected by United States and international trademark law.

My name is Bi Wei. I was born in the Ming Dynasty, shortly before the alleged death of Johannes Gensfleisch Gutenberg, the man most people today know as the father of the printing press.

We knew this man not as a creator, but as a force of death and destruction. Johannes Gutenberg was a thief, a fraud, and a murderer.

Gutenberg did not die in 1468 as history claims. His body was not laid to rest at a Franciscan church in Mainz, a church later destroyed, conveniently erasing any evidence of his deception.

Johannes Gutenberg, like myself, survives to this day. And he is not alone.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Gutenberg founded an organization known as Die Zwelf Portenære. The Porters, as they are more commonly known, devote themselves to the elimination of all those Gutenberg views as a potential threat, and to the secrecy of magic.

I learned the art of magic from my great grandaunt. I touched the power of printed words my ancestors had passed down for generations. I added what strength I possessed to their work. I served my family and my people. I harmed no one.

Most of my friends and family were killed the day Gutenberg attacked our temple. My teachers fought to give the rest of us time to escape. My brother died to protect me. To this day he walks with me in my dreams. He knew death approached, and he couldn't hide his fear from me, but he was determined to complete his duty.

Gutenberg has hidden many things from you. He has rewritten history and buried fact beneath myth and legend. He has worked to control magic, to keep it from the larger world, and he has committed atrocities for the sole purpose of "protecting" you from the truth.

He has failed.

Gutenberg and the Porters have brought this world to the edge of destruction. They have awakened the s?? gu?? ju-n duì, the Ghost Army. They are the restless dead, bound as slaves to one who would devour this world. They grow in number and in power, and they are coming. They wait like a tiger in the shadows, unseen as they creep ever closer. Their claws are bared to strike.

No doubt you will laugh and dismiss my story as the fanciful imaginings of a child. For you know that such things are not possible in the real world.

We are descended from a man called Bi Sheng, who explored the magic of books centuries before Gutenberg's birth. The Bì She-ng de dú zhe? survived Gutenberg's assault on our home. We have returned. We ask only to be left in peace. In exchange for that boon, we offer you the gift of truth.

From Gutenberg's computers, we have pulled the location of all Porter archives: secret libraries hidden from public view. They house magical artifacts and books deemed too dangerous for magical use. Those locations are listed below.

Use caution when investigating these archives. The Porters will defend themselves from perceived threats. They will deceive you, twist your perceptions, and alter your memories. We have watched them do all this and worse.

They would kill us for telling you this, but they cannot hide the truth forever. A friend from your time recently said to me, "You can't stop the signal." We will learn soon enough whether he was correct.

To Gutenberg and the Porters, the Ghost Army is coming. Give up your efforts to find and destroy us, and abandon your centuries-old lies. Turn your attention to the true enemy.

Like Shen Yuanzhi, whom stories say slumbered for a hundred years at Lanchang Palace to cheat death, we escaped our fate. We slept for five centuries, trapped alone with our nightmares, and awoke to find the world changed.

It is time for the rest of the world to do the same. It is time for you to awaken.

—From a letter that appeared in
George R. R. Martin's *A Dance with Dragons*

TED BOYER—HUNTER, FISHERMAN, VAMPIRE, and general pain in my ass—was gone.

Dirt and gravel crunched beneath my sneakers as I crossed the empty lot where his yellow doublewide trailer once stood. A rectangle of flattened earth, striped by old, cracked cement, marked the site of Boyer's former home.

There was no sign of the secret basement he had dug to hide his coffin and store his blood supply. Wherever Boyer had fled to, he wasn't planning to come back.

"There are weeds starting to poke through the dirt." Short, heavysset, and stronger than five humans combined, Lena Greenwood looked as tired as I felt. She crouched on the cement and touched one of the tiny green shoots. "He left at least a week ago."

There had been a time, back when I was a field agent for the Porters, when I would have been thrilled to see Ted gone from Marquette, and preferably gone from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Let someone else take on the responsibility of checking in on him and blowing the bomb in his skull if his blood tests ever showed he had gone back to feeding on Boy Scouts.

But Ted was a lifelong Yooper, stubborn as hell and determined to live out his afterlife here in Marquette. I

had resigned myself to sharing the peninsula with him until one of us was dead and buried for good.

“Do you think he left willingly?” Lena asked.

I shrugged. Ted didn’t exactly have a lot of friends, and he had collected a decent list of enemies over his lifetimes. If one of them had used the chaos last month as cover to come after Ted, he could be dead by now. Deader. But why would they bother to haul away his trailer and his truck? More likely, he simply wanted to get away before all hell broke loose.

Some would say hell had broken a month earlier, when my home town of Copper River ended up in the crossfire of a three-way magical battle between the Porters, the Bì Sheng de dú zhe—a group thought to have been wiped out more than five hundred years ago by the aforementioned Porters—and an army of mindless ghosts fighting to return to this world to kill . . . well, pretty much everything.

At least thirty-four of my friends and neighbors had died in that battle. Then there were the Porters and werewolves who had fallen trying to protect Copper River in a conflict that promised to be merely the precursor of things to come.

“Keep looking.” Fossilized beagle shit, half-hidden by weeds, turned much of the grass into a minefield. I crouched by one pile and stared as though I could use the droppings to divine where Ted had gone, but all they told me was that we were too late.

I continued to search. Cigarette butts littered the ground by the woods beyond the driveway, where Ted used to work during the night, skinning and butchering whatever game he brought back. I found a couple of old beer cans by the trees.

“Isaac . . .” Lena studied my face, then shook her head. “Never mind.”

Anger tightened my jaw. I knew what she was going to say, and I didn’t want to hear it.

The manager of the trailer park said Ted had simply vanished. He had left an envelope full of cash to pay off his bills, which was more than I would have expected from Ted. More likely, he had simply messed with the manager’s mind to make him believe everything was squared away. That would better fit Ted’s style and budget. “I need to find him.”

“How? By staring at dog crap all day? This must be a new school of magic I hadn’t heard about. My lover, the fecomancer.”

On another day, I would have smiled. That was before I had lost a fourteen-year-old girl to the Ghost Army. A girl who was potentially more powerful than any libromancer in history, with the possible exception of Johannes Gutenberg.

A girl who had been under my care and protection.

Jeneta Aboderin had the ability to perform libromancy using electronic media. The rest of us needed printed books to shape our magic. We could reach into the pages to create anything from futuristic laser pistols to fizzy lifting drinks from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, as long as we had a physical copy of the book.

Jeneta could pull the mockingjay pin from *The Hunger Games* out of her smartphone, and carried an entire library around on her e-reader. Nobody fully understood how she did it, nor did we know the limits of her power.

I searched the dirt driveway next. This was my third time studying the dark patches of oil that had leaked from Ted's old Ford Bronco. I knew a Porter who could have used that stain not only to track Ted's truck, but to bring it to a screeching halt wherever he might be. Or there were books whose magic could help me to find him myself . . . if I had still been a member of the Porters.

If Johannes Gutenberg hadn't locked my mind to prevent me from ever using magic again.

I closed my eyes and fought off a now-familiar surge of despair.

"There's nothing here," Lena said softly.

"I know." I took a long, slow breath, trying to ease the walnut-sized lump in my throat. "We'll have to find someone else to help me. Ted isn't the only one who can touch people's minds."

"Would you really want that man messing around in your nightmares?"

"I *saw* her, Lena." Two nights before, I had jerked awake, my body dripping with sweat, my hands reaching helplessly for power I no longer possessed. For two days that memory had stalked me, taunting me from every corner.

"Jeneta?"

"The woman who took her." The name darted into view like a dragonfly and vanished again before I could grasp it. "I know who she is, but something's blocking the memory. I need help. Someone who can help me remember."

Wisps of black hair hung over Lena's red-veined eyes. Her lips pressed together with worry and helplessness, along with a dash of skepticism. It was an expression I had come to know well over the past month.

She wore a snug green T-shirt with the sleeves and collar cut off. The words "Tree Hugger" were written in yellow block letters across her chest. She was armed with a pair of curved wooden swords—Japanese bokken—thrust through the belt of her cutoff jeans.

Heat flared at my hip. From inside the rectangular metal cage clipped to my belt, Smudge watched the road like he was expecting a horde of zombies to claw up through the pavement and devour us. Faint red flames rippled across the fire-spider's back. A layer of fire-resistant black fiberglass on the side of the cage prevented him from burning holes through my pants.

Lena moved to the opposite side of the lot while I returned to the relative safety of my car. The protective enchantments on the black TR-6 convertible were stronger than anything I could have prepared myself, even when I could still manipulate magic. I waited by the passenger door and searched for whatever had set Smudge off this time.

There were no zombies, only a lone man carrying an aluminum baseball bat. He had a good five inches and fifty pounds on me, and a scowl like I'd just pissed in his Budweiser. "What are you folks snooping around for?"

Normally I would have tried to talk my way around this guy, making up a story that explained our presence without raising suspicions. But I no longer had any reason to care about keeping a low profile, and in the words of a coworker, my give-a-shit gauge was stuck on Empty these days. "Ted Boyer. Have you seen him?"

He rested the bat on his shoulder, wrapping both hands around the black-taped handle. “Ted said there might be people nosing around in his business, looking to give him a hard time.”

“Do you know where we could find him?” Lena hadn’t touched her weapons. Against a man armed with a bat, she wouldn’t need them.

“What I know is that you’d better get the hell out of here by the time I count to five.”

I reached into the car, popped the glove box, and pulled out a gun. The man’s eyes went huge. “Do you know where Ted Boyer went?” I repeated.

He shook his head. “He wouldn’t say.”

“And did Ted ask you to threaten anyone who came along, or was that your idea?” I pulled the trigger without waiting for an answer. Lightning spat from the barrel, spinning a cocoon of electricity around his body. He collapsed face-first in the grass, the bat dropping to the ground beside him.

“Isaac, what the *hell*?” Lena ran toward him.

“The gun was on setting one.” I blinked away the afterimage of jagged light. Ozone bit my nostrils. “He’ll be fine.”

I had created my sidearm from a novel called *Time Kings*, back before Gutenberg locked my magic. Disguised to look like an ordinary revolver, the shock-gun had a two-stage firing mechanism. First, it shot a tiny ionized pellet toward the target. A split second later, it brought the lightning, which could deliver anything from a light stunning burst to a full-on, Earth-shattering kaboom.

“You’re sure about that?” Lena was checking the man’s pulse and respiration. “You checked to make sure he didn’t have a pacemaker before you electrocuted him? Reviewed his medical records for any preexisting conditions?”

I felt like she had reached into my gut and tied my intestines in a knot. “He looked healthy . . .” That was a stupid excuse, and I knew it. “Is he all right?”

“He seems to be, considering you just *shot him with a lightning bolt*.” She brushed her fingers over the singed spot on his shirt. “What were you thinking?”

“That he didn’t know anything, and we didn’t have time for this.”

“Oh, do you have plans tonight? Another exciting evening of hiding in your office with your books and shutting away the rest of the world?”

I wanted to apologize and I wanted her to keep arguing with me and I wanted her to leave me the hell alone. I didn’t know *what* I wanted anymore, except to find Jeneta and fix the things that had gone so damned wrong.

I circled around to the driver’s seat. “There’s nothing here. Let’s go.”

Like a paroled felon, Ted was supposed to let the Porters know if he moved, but I no longer had access to the Porter database. He might not have bothered, trusting them to be too preoccupied with the Ghost Army to worry about a lone vampire. If so, he’d better pray he found a black-market magic-user to deactivate the bomb in his skull before anyone else noticed he was missing.

I unclipped Smudge's cage and let him climb onto the dashboard. A stone trivet protected the dash from his heat. He watched me closely, his body low against the trivet. For a big black-and-red spider with a penchant for setting things on fire, Smudge could be surprisingly expressive. He wasn't worried about random strangers with baseball bats anymore. *I* was the one making him anxious.

Tension drained from my body, guilt and exhaustion replacing anger. I let my head thump against the steering wheel. I should apologize. For scaring Smudge. For snapping at Lena.

For a lot of things.

"We'll find someone else." Lena sat down beside me. "You've got other vampires who owe you favors, not to mention the Porters—"

"None of the Porters are allowed to talk to me," I reminded her. "I'm not exactly on the best of terms with the undead, either. The last time I asked them for help, I got several of their people dusted, including a rather powerful ghost-talker."

"The Porters are searching for Jeneta, too." She didn't say anything more, but those seven words carried the weight of hours of previous arguments.

What could one librarian with no magic of his own do that Gutenberg's people couldn't? The Porters had magic and a worldwide network of hundreds of libromancers and other magic-users to help them track Jeneta down.

To which I always replied, "*Then why haven't they found her yet?*"

I gunned the engine and got the hell out of there.

Driving into Copper River meant passing one reminder after another of the damage the Ghost Army had done to my home. The Porters had repaired much of the destruction, hoping to bury evidence of werewolves and wendigos and magic. They couldn't bring back the dead, but they had rebuilt homes and rewritten memories.

Sometimes I wished they had rewritten mine. To the right was the drugstore, where Becky Luhtala's body had been found behind the counter. A block away was the intersection where Phil Gutzman had died when his truck collided with a metal dragon made of magically animated mining equipment.

Every road conjured memories of metal insects, their serrated pincers tearing my skin, or white-furred monsters smashing through doors and windows. I remembered every detail save the identity of the one responsible.

By the time I reached my street, my neck and shoulders were tense as steel. I felt like I was driving through a war zone. This was where the trees had turned against my neighbors, crushing roofs and ripping through homes. A dryad named Deifilia, another servant of the Ghost Army, would have tortured and murdered everyone on my block if Lena hadn't killed her.

Despite everything the Porters had done to erase the damage, "For Sale" signs had appeared in five different yards.

My own home was untouched. From the outside, the dirty aluminum siding and metal roof showed no sign of anything unusual.

It was another story entirely once you stepped inside. Books, maps, and haphazardly organized printouts covered the kitchen table. My laptop sat in the center, a single orange LED blinking wearily. It looked like the laptop had gotten drunk and vomited up a copious amount of paperwork and sticky notes.

I returned Smudge to his tank, a large terrarium sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter. I dropped a pair of crickets in with him, replaced the lid, and turned on the heat lamp. He raced over to dig a little nest in the obsidian gravel in the center of the light.

Lena grabbed a package of Twinkies from the freezer. She took the majority of her sustenance through her tree, and as far as anyone could tell, her human diet had absolutely no effect on her health or physique. She took shameless advantage of that fact. Though why she preferred her Twinkies frozen was a mystery. She tore open the package and held one out to me.

“I’m not hungry.” At the edge of my vision, a red light blinked at me from my phone’s base unit, signaling a waiting message.

Lena followed my attention, and her forced cheer vanished. “You don’t have to listen right now.”

“Yes, I do.” We both knew who the message was from. I considered deleting it, but I owed them at least this much. And the longer I waited, the longer that blinking light would taunt me. I jabbed the button.

The machine beeped, and then a woman began to speak in a British accent. It was a voice I had come to know as well as my own. “Mister Vainio, this is Paige Aboderin again. I know you said you’d call if you learned anything more about Jeneta, but it’s been weeks since we last heard from you.”

Buried somewhere on the kitchen table was a copy of the paperwork Paige and Mmadukaaku Aboderin had signed earlier this year, giving their daughter permission to spend the summer at Camp Aazhawigiizhigokwe. Another form allowed Jeneta to work with me as part of a “summer internship” at the Copper River Library, an internship that had mostly involved sitting around in my backyard practicing magic while I tried to understand her power.

“We’ve hired a private investigator to look for Jeneta. He has copies of everything you’ve shared with us, but he might be calling you to follow up.”

Jeneta should have been safe. Camp Aazhawigiizhigokwe was far enough from Copper River to keep her out of the fighting, and the Porters had assigned a field agent named Myron Worster to keep an eye on her, just in case.

They had found Worster a day later, wandering aimlessly through the Detroit Metro Airport with no memory of who Jeneta was or where she might have gone. He recalled picking *someone* up from the camp, but the details were wiped so thoroughly from his mind that not even the strongest Porters had been able to retrieve them.

“I’m hoping to come back to Michigan by the end of the month,” continued Paige Aboderin. “We think . . . we hope the police might do more to find her if we meet with them in person again.”

They had flown out immediately following Jeneta’s disappearance. Paige stayed in Detroit, while Mmadukaaku rented a hotel room here in Copper River so he could talk to everyone who had seen or interacted with Jeneta in the days before her disappearance.

Every time I spoke to them, it got harder to lie, to pretend I knew nothing about what had happened to their

daughter, or to try to reassure them that Jeneta would be all right.

They never blamed me. Even though I was the reason Jeneta had come to Copper River. I was the Porter assigned to work with her, to try to understand her magic and teach her to control it.

I was the reason the Ghost Army had found her. Whatever she became, whatever they did with her power . . .

“The investigator thinks Jeneta is still in Michigan. We know she didn’t get on any departing flights.”

No, we didn’t. We knew only that the airport had no record of Jeneta boarding a flight. Given her magic, and the power our enemies commanded, that meant nothing. She could be anywhere in the world.

I forced myself to listen to Paige’s slow, precise words. I could easily imagine her standing at the front of a classroom, lecturing her college seniors about poetry.

“Mmadukaaku believes—” Her voice broke. “He said there could have been a mistake when the coroner was identifying the bodies in Copper River last month. He thinks our daughter might have been buried. I’m planning to look through all of their reports and photographs. I hoped you might be willing to help. You’re familiar with . . . with what happened, and Mmadukaaku said you read faster than anyone he’s met.”

She sounded as determined as ever to find her daughter, but the strength in her words had grown brittle. I couldn’t imagine how hard it must be to go to bed each night without knowing. To pour every resource you had into trying to find your child, knowing it might not be enough to bring her home. To admit it might be too late to save her.

This was the first time I had heard either of them acknowledge the possibility that Jeneta could be dead. They might be right. But if so, it hadn’t happened during the attack on Copper River.

“Please call if you learn anything at all.” She left her number. I had memorized it weeks before.

The message ended. The machine saved it automatically, along with the rest.

“It’s not your fault,” said Lena.

I sat down at the table, started up the laptop, and dug out a wrinkled list of all departing flights from Detroit Metro Airport on the day Jeneta vanished. Tiny check marks covered the list, along with notes about my conversations with flight attendants, pilots, and a handful of passengers I had managed to track down.

There were too many possibilities, particularly when you looked at connecting flights. I had no way of knowing the Ghost Army’s plans, and without more information, no destination was any more or less likely than the rest. All I really had was an eight-second clip from a security camera, showing Jeneta swiping an enormous cinnamon roll from the Starbucks shop in the airport.

I studied one of the printouts, a grainy photo showing Jeneta reaching for the roll. She wore the same clothes she had at camp, and I didn’t see that she had brought any luggage, though it could have been outside of the camera’s field of vision.

Jeneta had her phone in her other hand. The people around her appeared dazed, staring in random directions at nothing in particular, suggesting she had used magic. Or that whatever had taken her was able to use her magic, which was far more frightening.

“How long since you’ve eaten?” asked Lena.

I looked at an airline map, trying to match the location of the Starbucks to terminals with flights that departed after these images were taken. “I grabbed a sandwich at lunch.”

“You mean this sandwich?” She picked up an abandoned plate from beside the sink and poked at a sad, barely-touched stack of bologna, cheese, and lettuce on wheat bread. “I’m ordering pizza. You’re going to eat some. End of discussion.”

With a sigh, I set the map aside and pulled a book on self-hypnosis from another stack. I had picked it up yesterday morning from the library. Torn scraps of paper—makeshift bookmarks—protruded from the top like tiny white feathers, each one marking a technique I thought might help me to retrieve the elusive memory from my dreams. None had worked yet.

I needed to hack my own brain. I *knew* I had seen the face of our enemy, the person or thing behind the Ghost Army, but that image had been cut out of my thoughts, leaving only a ragged-edged pit filled with frustration.

Had our enemy hidden themselves from me, or was this a side effect of the invisible padlock Gutenberg had snapped through my mind to stop me from using my magic? I was only aware of one person who had successfully bypassed one of Gutenberg’s locks, and I wasn’t quite ready to try that technique. Not yet. I preferred to save do-it-yourself trepanning for a last resort.

“Did you want bread sticks?” Lena asked.

“Whatever.” I stood and fetched Smudge from his tank. “I’ll be out back.”

If I stayed inside, I’d end up taking my frustrations out on her. Better for both of us if I spent this time alone. I would have left Smudge behind too, if not for the fact that his presence repelled the mosquitoes.

A ring of oak trees transformed the ground into a wrinkled tangle of roots and dirt. If they grew much more, the roots would start to undermine the foundation of the house. Lena’s oak stood at the center of the circle, a queen protected by her guardsmen.

Her tree bore the scars of last month’s battle in the form of broken branches, gouges in the bark, and blackened streaks of dead, cracked wood.

It was here Lena had killed the dryad she called her sister. She had stabbed Deifilia with her sword, pinning her to the central oak. She stayed with Deifilia as she died, as the tree slowly enveloped her body, a reclamation that was simultaneously touching and horrifying.

And it was here that rabid minds of things long gone from our world had clawed at my thoughts. Where I had lost the ability to distinguish fiction from reality. Where I had seen . . . something. *Someone*.

I stepped between the outer trees. The air within was warm and still. The grove muffled the sounds of the outside world, though I had never figured out exactly how or why that worked. The leaves turned the sky a deep green.

What had the Porters been doing for the past month? They had all but vanished after completing their repairs to the town. I wasn’t exactly getting their newsletter anymore, and the few friends I had tried to contact said Gutenberg was threatening to personally turn anyone who spoke to me into a garden gnome. I suspected they had somebody keeping an eye on Lena and me, possibly from one of the now-vacant homes on my street, but beyond that, I knew nothing.

Given the letter Bi Wei had written to the world, revealing the existence of magic and the Porters, they were probably busy increasing security on their archives or transferring the books to other locations. How many Porters were busy working damage control when they could have been out looking for Jeneta, or coming up with ways to stop the rest of the Ghost Army from entering our world?

I understood Bi Wei's reasoning. The Porters weren't just hunting Jeneta and the ghosts. They were looking for her as well, and for every surviving student of Bi Sheng. The more Bi Wei did to divert the Porters' energies, the safer they would be.

I touched a pale scar running down the side of Lena's oak. The bark peeled back, revealing a red cloth-bound book. I gently slid the book free, then sat with my back against the trunk of her tree. Smudge scurried from my shoulder to stalk a purple-tinged moth.

With a sigh, I opened the book and began to read. The first section of the book was in Mandarin, and had been block-printed onto the rice paper pages centuries ago. Lena had penned the rest by hand.

Bi Wei and her fellow students had used books like this to preserve themselves after Gutenberg's attack five hundred years earlier. Bi Wei had given this one to Lena in the hope that it might preserve her as well.

Lena Greenwood was literally magic brought to life, having been "born" from the pages of a lousy fantasy novel called *Nymphs of Neptune*. The nymphs in that book were little more than sexual wish fulfillment for overly hormonal teenaged boys. The nymphs were written to mold their personalities to the desires of their lovers.

Years after her creation, Lena had found and fallen in love with Doctor Nidhi Shah. They were together for years before they learned the truth about Lena's origins. By then, Lena had become exactly what Nidhi fantasized about: a magical superheroine, strong and clever and powerful.

Enter Isaac Vainio, magic-using librarian. Lena's relationship with me had introduced an element of conflict into her existence. For the first time, she wasn't defined solely by one lover, but was shaped by us both. Pulled between our overlapping desires, she discovered choice. It was the closest thing she had known to true freedom.

Nidhi and I both struggled with the ethical implications of our relationship. Nidhi might not have known Lena's origins in the beginning, but she *had* been Lena's therapist. She had chosen to begin a romantic relationship with a former patient. Had Lena been human, that choice could have cost Nidhi her license. As it was, she had been severely reprimanded by the Porters, something she hadn't admitted to me until recently.

Lena was what she was. Not even Gutenberg could change that. If not Nidhi and myself, she would have no choice but to find someone else, perhaps someone who would use her as cruelly as her first lover had.

Lena said she had pursued me deliberately, knowing me well enough to guess at my desires, and choosing to let those desires shape her. But the fact remained, she was bound to the two of us, and when we died, the person she had become would die with us, subsumed by whoever she became next.

This book from Bi Wei might change that. If it worked, the things Lena had written in these pages would one day define her, allowing her to choose for herself who she would be.

But the basic tenets of libromancy still applied. A book had no power without a reader. I had read this book almost every night for the past month, trading it back and forth with Nidhi. We had no way of knowing if our efforts made a difference, or if the book could truly change Lena's nature, but it was the best hope she had

found.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to focus. Every time I opened a book, part of me expected to touch the power humming within the text, waiting to be used. Instead, the book was dead, a stiff corpse of paper with dried ink for blood.

“That image is too damn depressing, even for me.” I thumped the back of my head against the tree, as if the impact might reset my mood or jar loose my missing memories. When that failed, I turned the page and started reading.

I had gotten through about fifty pages when I heard footsteps beside me. I dropped the book and yanked my shock-gun from its holster, even as my brain pointed out that Smudge would have alerted me to any true threat.

“A librarian should be more careful with rare and valuable texts.” Nidhi Shah stopped a short distance before the grove and nodded pointedly at the fallen book. She wore a black blazer over a blue shirt, with a necklace made up of interlinked copper disks the size of silver dollars. The cuffs of her black trousers brushed blue sneakers. She must have come straight from the office. I hadn’t realized she was working weekends now.

While I picked up the book, she entered the grove and sat down across from me, crossing her feet at the ankles. I could feel her studying my posture, the tension in my neck and jaw, the way I had jumped when I heard her approach. Nidhi had been my psychiatrist for years, and even though that relationship had changed, old patterns continued.

“Lena told me about Ted,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t blame him for running. A lot of people—and non-people—have gone into hiding to wait for things to blow over. Trouble is, I don’t think it’s going to. Not this time.”

“Gutenberg likes to say most people have no concept of change. Our ‘short-lived perspective and poor intergenerational memory’ create the illusion of stability.” She twisted a braided silver ring on her right hand, a gift from Lena. “How long do you think you can continue—”

“Don’t.” I stared at the dirt, fighting to keep my temper under control. “I’m not a Porter, and you’re not my therapist.”

“I know that.” A hint of pain and reproach edged her next words. “I don’t *have* any Porter clients anymore, remember?”

More than half of Nidhi’s client base had been magical, from a werewolf with crippling anxiety disorder to libromancers who played God so often they started to believe in their own divinity. But in the eyes of the Porters, Nidhi was part of my family. The lover of my lover is my . . . I don’t know exactly how they classified her, but they had kicked her out the same day they did me.

“If I was your therapist,” she continued, “I’d probably talk about how you’re grieving for your lost magic. Or point out that your insistence on blaming yourself for what happened to Jeneta suggests an unrealistic sense of power, as well as an overly developed ego. I’d also start you on at least fifty milligrams of Zoloft.”

This wasn’t our first time through that particular script. “I’m not suicidal, and if I’m a little depressed, I’d say I’ve got good reason. Right now, the last thing I need is drugs messing up my brain.”

“You think depression hasn’t already done that?” she asked gently.

“If anything screwed up my head, it was Gutenberg.”

“Oh, good. Then we agree your head is screwed up.” Her delivery was perfectly deadpan. She waited a beat, then sighed. “How long has it been since you laughed?”

I shrugged.

“Lena says you’ve been having trouble sleeping, and I can see that you’ve lost weight. How are things going at work?”

“I’ve read the *DSM-V*. I know the diagnostic criteria for depression, too,” I snapped. “This is different.”

“I’ve read *Gray’s Anatomy*. That doesn’t make me a surgeon.” She stood to go. “Oh, I almost forgot what I came out to tell you. I’ve found someone who might be able to help you uncover those dream memories.”

I set Lena’s book aside—carefully this time—and jumped to my feet.

“I haven’t worked with her in a while, but I’ve been keeping up on her research. Best of all, she’s only a few hours away.”

“Who is it?” When she didn’t answer, I folded my arms. “Come on, Nidhi.”

“First, put that book away and come eat. Then I’ll tell you.” She headed toward the deck.

“Since when do therapists use blackmail?” I called out.

She turned around and cocked her head. “Like you said, I’m not your therapist anymore. See you at dinner.”

BEIJING—Additional details are finally being released about what appears to be a burglary three weeks ago at the National Library of China. Authorities have confirmed that six people were killed, and another thirteen hospitalized.

Initial accounts described the perpetrators as “inhuman.” One was said to have hair like living snakes, similar to the legendary Medusa. Her companion was allegedly twelve feet tall, strong enough to smash brick with his bare hands. Some eyewitnesses claimed the pair was accompanied by a teenage girl.

Social media site X?nlàng Weībó, a Chinese microblogging Web site similar to Twitter, has been abuzz with speculation. Theories range from terrorist activity to an American CIA mission gone wrong. However, the library is now announcing that the attackers’ primary target seems to have been the Rare Books Restoration Center. Most of the books and scrolls stored there are centuries old.

The library’s Web site provides a partial list of missing items, including works of religious, historical, and mythological significance. A fire that began in the rare books section damaged hundreds, perhaps thousands of other works. It’s not known whether the attackers deliberately set the fire.

Some are speculating that this break-in and the supernatural appearance of the perpetrators are somehow related to a message that appeared in a popular fantasy novel last week purporting to reveal the existence of a magical secret society headed by Johannes Gutenberg.

The library is closed indefinitely for repairs. The U.S. Library of Congress has offered to send a team of rare

book librarians to Beijing to assist with restoration efforts.

“HER NAME IS EUPHEMIA SMITH,” said Nidhi. “She’s a siren.”

I set my pizza crust down on the top of the box. Given the state of my kitchen table, we had elected to eat on the deck instead. Nidhi and I sat on old plastic chairs, while Lena perched on the railing, her bare feet pressed to the wooden post.

Nidhi had refused to share any information about her mysterious lead until I finished at least three pieces. She looked pointedly at the crust, and I crammed it into my mouth.

“A siren?” I chewed fast. “As in, Odysseus binding himself to the mast so he could listen to their song, sailors throwing themselves overboard to drown, ships run aground on the rocks, and all that jazz? How is that supposed to help me?”

Most magical creatures these days were book-born, like Lena. Libriomancy had brought hundreds of new species into our world from the pages of books. Intelligent beings generally couldn’t make the transition from fiction to the real world—in part because they simply didn’t fit through the pages—but there were other paths. Lena had been created as an acorn that grew into her first oak. Vampires—so many different flavors of vampires—spread to our world when overimaginative readers reached into the stories and got themselves bitten.

Other species had evolved naturally. Or supernaturally. There were ongoing debates among the Porters whether sirens and their cousins the merfolk were a result of natural selection or deliberate magical manipulation from millennia ago.

Nidhi sipped her iced tea. “Euphemia and her husband Carl run a hypnotherapy clinic in Marinette, Wisconsin. Neither mental discipline nor magical barriers are proof against a siren’s song. She lulls clients into a trance and helps them face the roots of their problems. She and Carl generally help people to quit smoking, lose weight, things like that. I was one of three Porter therapists assigned to supervise the first five hundred hours of her work while they were getting licensed. Nicola wanted to be sure there was Porter oversight.”

Nicola Pallas was the Midwest Regional Master of the Porters, responsible for keeping tabs on all things magical for much of the United States and a chunk of Canada. “Marinette isn’t that far,” I said. “Why haven’t I heard of this siren?”

“Because Euphemia works very hard to keep quiet and out of sight. The Porters have a long file on her, of course, but as long as she doesn’t hurt anyone or openly use her power, they consider her harmless. She has a speech impediment that limits the more dangerous aspects of her power. She’s not strong enough to lure ships to their death anymore. But she and her husband have an impressive success rate. I believe she could help you recover your fragmented memories.”

I downed the last of my Pepsi. “I’ll grab my keys.”

“You’ll want to grab your checkbook, too.” Nidhi didn’t move from her chair. “The Smiths aren’t cheap, and I doubt your insurance covers this. I made you an appointment for tomorrow afternoon.”

I was already in the doorway. “Tomorrow? But—”

“If we left now, it would be close to eleven when we arrived,” Nidhi said. “I’m sure you’d happily pay extra for a late-night session, but they have concert tickets tonight. Carl is taking Euphemia to see Big Daddy Kane in Green Bay. They’ll be exhausted, and Carl tells me his wife’s song gets rather *intense* after two hours of live rap.”

I wondered briefly if Euphemia and Nicola had ever done a duet. Nicola was a bard with a preference for jazz-based magic. I had once seen her knock a man unconscious with a single bar of music sung over a cell phone.

“Is it dangerous?” Lena asked.

Nidhi hesitated. “It shouldn’t be. Usually, Carl does the intake. He meets with Euphemia afterward, and she tailors a recording for him to use in follow-up sessions. But given the nature of Isaac’s mind, the magical and psychological barriers he’s dealing with, we both agreed this needed to be a ‘live’ session with Euphemia present.”

I slid the door closed and turned around, resting my back against the glass. “You’re saying you don’t know what will happen?”

“Lena and I will be there to keep an eye on things.”

My boss wouldn’t be happy about me calling in sick again. I’d used up most of my leave time over the past month. Jennifer had pulled me aside on Friday to discuss my less than stellar job performance. I should check the schedule to see if anyone was available to cover. Alex might be willing to pick up the extra hours. He was trying to save up for a new electric guitar. “I’ll see you both tomorrow. What time do we leave?”

Lena and Nidhi looked at one another, and I saw pages of unspoken discussion pass silently between them. “I thought I’d stay here tonight,” said Lena.

“But you normally stay with Nidhi on Sundays.” I hesitated, double-checking my mental calendar. This wouldn’t be the first time I had lost track of the date.

“Not tonight.” Lena gestured at the pizza box. “I’m not going to let half a deep-dish sausage and pepperoni go to waste.”

I should have been happy. Instead, I found myself resenting that they believed I needed a babysitter. Guilt immediately followed resentment. They were only trying to help.

It might be better for all of us if they left me alone. Given Lena’s nature, what was my recent mood doing to her? How much had I dragged her down with me? It was one more reason she should go with Nidhi tonight, to get away from my negativity. It wasn’t like I was going to drive to Marinette to track Euphemia down myself, showing up on her doorstep at midnight to demand she dig the answers out of my brain.

Probably.

I rubbed my eyes. Maybe Nidhi was right about the Zoloft.

The laptop baked my thighs as I sat on the couch, searching the Internet while *Star Trek* reruns played in the background. Online, librarian circles were buzzing with speculation about the attack on the National Library of China. I found plenty of theories, but not a single photograph of the attackers.

A gorgon, a giant, and a teenage girl. No mention was made of the girl’s appearance, but who else could it

have been?

On another day, I would have been fascinated by the prospect of a living gorgon, a creature thought to exist only in myth. I would have loved to see an MRI scan of her head. I had always been curious about how the serpentine hair might work. Each snake presumably had a brain of its own. Did they have independent thought, or was it more of a hive mind? And did the snakes eat? If so, what happened to their meals? Either their intestinal system needed to link into the gorgon's, or else the gorgon would need some truly potent shampoo.

I switched Internet windows and pulled up a list of my preprogrammed search spiders. I had customized more than a hundred automatic searches, monitoring the web for any information about the Porters, the students of Bi Sheng, or Jeneta Aboderin.

I found two more reports of people digging up the sites of old Porter archives, working from the information in Bi Wei's letter, but in both cases the excavations turned up nothing. The Porters must have either cleared out the contents or found a way to trick the searchers into forgetting what they found.

Lena settled onto the couch beside me and studied the screen. "What are you looking for?"

"Anything I can find." Almost as bad as losing my magic was being shut out of that community, cut off from every reliable source of information and gossip. I might have been sent to the sidelines, but I still wanted to know what was happening in the game, dammit.

I switched to a report from South Africa. "A lightning storm two weeks ago fried every electronic device in a five-mile radius near the edge of Polokwane. That sounds like a magical EMP, one of the tricks the Porters use to avoid being recorded. But I have no idea what they might have been doing there."

I was more certain about the next thing I showed her, an e-mail from one of six publishing-related lists I was on. I opened the attached press release and read, "'Rose Hoffman takes over as CEO at one of the top UK publishing houses.' I don't know the name, but the photo is familiar. I'm pretty sure I met her three years ago. She's a Porter researcher. She was trying to prove the existence of magical resonance between different translations of the same books. Her findings suggested there could be some minimal resonance, but it wasn't conclusive, and she wasn't able to point to the mechanism that would explain it."

Lena's smile made me realize I was beginning to ramble.

"Sorry. The point is, she's almost certainly a plant." The Porters had always had people in New York and other publishing hubs, but it sounded like they were working to take more control of what books—and what potential magic—got into readers' hands. How many books made the bestseller lists not because they were particularly original or well written, but because they included something the Porters wanted to use?

Another open folder contained copies of scholarly articles I had downloaded for review, primarily about the development of printing technology in Asia. Gutenberg's press and the invention of libromancy had launched a new era in magic, at least in Europe, but China had been working with book magic for centuries before Gutenberg came along. If I could uncover more of that history, I might find clues as to where Bi Wei and her fellow students had disappeared to. If the Porters wouldn't help me, maybe they would.

"Time for emergency measures." Lena bounced to her feet and grabbed the remotes. A minute later, the opening notes of Christopher Franke's *Babylon 5* soundtrack blasted from the television speakers, making me jump.

Lena yanked the laptop away from me, set it on the coffee table, and plopped down beside me. She turned sideways, leaning her body against mine and crossing her legs on the arm of the couch.

Annoyance and amusement fought it out and decided to call it a draw. That alone should have been enough to make me realize how far gone I was. When a bright, fun, beautiful woman resting against me was a source of frustration, I had a problem.

I wrapped my arm around her and tried to relax, to ignore the part of my brain that refused to stop obsessing. We were five minutes into the episode when I realized how tightly Lena was holding my arm. With my other hand, I combed the thick, black hair from her face.

She caught my hand and kissed my palm, never taking her eyes from the show.

I ended up drifting off about halfway through the episode. But I jolted awake when Lena switched off the TV and set the remote on the table.

“Damn,” she whispered. “I was trying not to wake you.”

I smothered a yawn. The sky outside was black. “How long did I sleep?”

“Two and a half episodes.”

I slid my hand around her waist, feeling the warm skin of her back. She tilted her head to kiss my chin. A second kiss, this one to the base of my neck, carried an unspoken question. I kissed the top of her head in response, but nothing more. After that, neither of us moved for a long time.

I mentally checked off another box on the list of diagnostic criteria for depression: anhedonia, a decrease in enjoyment of most day-to-day activities, including a loss of interest in sex.

Eventually, she stirred enough to ask, “Walk me out to my tree?” Her breath tickled my neck.

“Sure.”

The air outside had cooled, and the night was quiet save for the whisper of leaves. We walked hand-in-hand to her grove. I tensed as we approached. Memories of sharp-featured metal constructs and white-furred monsters flashed through my thoughts.

“We’re alone here,” Lena said.

She would have known had anyone violated her grove. I knew that, but it didn’t help my heightened sense of wariness. We were safe tonight. How long would that last?

Jeneta knew about Lena’s grove, as did the Ghost Army. Even if Lena transferred herself into another oak tree, a process that was a hell of a lot harder than moving into a new apartment, they had found her tree once before.

I had watched one dryad devastate an entire block. If they took Lena away, turned her into another Deifilia . . .

“I’m sorry about Deifilia,” I said suddenly. I couldn’t recall if I had ever spoken the words.

“Thank you.” She pulled away, her movements tight. One hand touched her tree where Deifilia had died. “I

can still hear her sometimes. Only whispers and shadows, impressions of who she was, preserved in the wood like insects in amber.”

I wasn't sure how to react to the revelation that Lena's oak contained the echoes of a woman who had been prepared to kill us both.

She must have seen my concern. “They're little more than memories, Isaac.”

“I'm glad you have them.”

It was the right thing to say. She smiled and kissed me. “Do me a favor,” she said as she pulled away. “Don't stay up until three in the morning again searching for answers that might not exist.”

“There are always answers,” I said automatically.

“That doesn't mean you'll be able to find them,” she shot back. “Or that the cost of those answers is worth paying.” She pulled me in for another kiss, ending the argument quite effectively, and in a way that left me with no complaints.

“Promise me?” she asked when we broke away. “If you can't sleep, fine, but no reading anything related to ghosts, Jeneta, Gutenberg, Bi Sheng, or the imminent end of the world.”

“I promise.” I waited while she entered her tree, her flesh merging into the wood like the bark was clay molding itself around her. I put a hand on the tree once she had disappeared, but felt nothing of Lena or the power in her oak. “Good night, love.”

After a brief debate the following morning, we ended up taking my pickup truck to Wisconsin. Neither my convertible nor Lena's motorcycle could comfortably carry three, and the last time we used Nidhi's car to do something magic-related, wendigos had pretty well totaled it. Nidhi was still fighting the insurance company over that one.

Lena drove, giving me time to read. I had kept my word the night before, trying to lose myself in an old Terry Pratchett novel and finally falling asleep around two in the morning. But I hadn't made any such promise about today. I leaned against the passenger door, books and papers around my feet, trying to track down any references to the Ghost Army from the past five hundred years.

Nidhi sat in the back, working on what I guessed to be case notes, though I couldn't be certain since I didn't read Gujarati. Smudge rode on the dashboard, contentedly watching the passing scenery.

I doubt any of us said more than a dozen words until we reached Marinette. Nidhi guided us to a large house less than two miles from the Michigan/Wisconsin border and even closer to the waters of Green Bay. Twin spruce trees stood in the middle of a circular driveway. The American flag flew from a pole in the front yard.

“Euphemia and Carl work out of their home,” Nidhi said.

There were no signs to distinguish it from the other extravagant houses along the road. Most people who worked a magical day job tended to do most of their business through word of mouth, since it wasn't the kind of thing you could advertise.

They seemed to be doing quite well for themselves. A brick walk led past beautifully precise landscaping, full of purple coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. To either side of the house, decorative spruce trees grew along the front of a brown privacy fence, blocking the backyard from view.

I could see Lena studying the flowers and taking mental notes. Her garden had been destroyed by the oak grove in our backyard, but she had hinted about plans to turn my front lawn into a floral jungle.

Tall, etched windows framed the storm door, which was a single rectangle of stained glass showing a sailing ship on the waves. A disproportionate amount of the glass was devoted to the water, showing plants and fish of every color imaginable. The ship appeared cramped in its relatively small rectangle of sky at the top.

Nidhi rang the doorbell. A silhouetted head peeked through the blue glass, and then the door swung open to reveal a middle-aged man in plastic flip-flops and a green Speedo. His wet hair was slicked back, and water dripped down his well-rounded stomach, creating random swirls in his graying chest hair. He grinned at Nidhi. "Doctor Shah! How long has it been?"

"A little over a year." Nidhi stepped to the side. "Carl, this is Lena Greenwood and Isaac Vainio."

I shook his hand, then dried my palm on my jeans.

He beckoned us to enter. "Euphemia's been in the pool all morning. How was the drive? Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Cherry Coke?" Lena was staring unabashedly at our host. He was hardly swimsuit model material, but then, neither was I. Lena had much broader standards of beauty than most.

"You got it. Isaac, if you need privacy, you can change in the sauna."

I blinked. "Change into what?"

"Your swimsuit." He paused. "Didn't Doctor Shah tell you?"

I folded my arms and turned toward Nidhi. "No, Doctor Shah forgot to mention anything about needing a suit."

Nidhi looked like she couldn't decide whether to apologize or laugh. "Euphemia didn't say anything . . ."

"No sweat," said Carl. "I used to be closer to Isaac's size. I'm sure I can find him something that will fit."

He ducked through an arched doorway. As soon as his back was turned, Nidhi mouthed the words, *I'm sorry*.

Users Review

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