

ERETZEL
A PTI Press book

ERETZEL
The Sword of Fire-Book Two
By William R. McGrath

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ERETZEL

CHAPTER 13

MEN OF LETTERS

...My covenant I establish with Isaac...
-The book of Genesis 17: 21

AS was usual in the palaces of the many kings he had known, Grand Mufti Amin

Husseini found this king's meeting chamber spacious and opulent. A high ceiling helped bring warmer air up away from those enjoying the king's favor. A rich carpet covered the floor; multi-colored tiles ran up the walls in a geometric pattern that showed no image of man or beast, as was proper in the house of one of the faithful. Though the chamber was quite large, all talking would be done upon cushions crowded into one corner of the room, the speakers sitting close together as if members of the same family.

The mufti knew he would be given refreshments here served from vessels made from the purest gold. The food served would be the best the land of Persia and its neighbors had to offer. Yet this rich chamber was but one small part of the palace complex; all in all a place that was beyond what the peasants in their hovels could even dream of. But then, it was the God's will that the man who lived within its walls should be king and not they.

Ahasuerus, King of Persia, rose from his cushions to greet the mufti. The two men embraced and turned their faces again and again to kiss each other the four times of the ritual greeting.

"Peace be upon you Mufti, You honor my house," said the king in Ishmaeli with only a slight Persian accent. Like most men of his class, he had learned to both read and speak Ishmaeli during the study of the holy books of his religion, which were written in that language.

"It is I who am honored that you granted me this audience, O King," replied Amin.

"May I present my eldest son, Prince Foruhar."

A young man in his mid twenties rose and greeted the mufti with the ritual kisses, stiffly, but properly.

They were seated, and a servant came and set a covered basin before Amin, but it was Ahasuerus himself who poured water over the hands of his guest. The water fell from the mufti's hands and through the perforated cover—to spare the houseguest having to look upon soiled water—and into the basin. However, when Amin held out his hands to be dried, it was the servant who dried them with scented towels. The king's humility did have its limits.

"Tea?" asked Ahasuerus, and without waiting for a reply, clapped his hands and tea and sweet cakes were set before them.

After half an hour of the necessary pleasantries being exchanged, Amin, having deemed tradition satisfied, broached the subject he had come here to discuss. "My servant Wakfa used to enjoy sweet cakes like these," said Amin.

"And now he does not?" asked Ahasuerus with a studied casualness.

"I do not know; he has disappeared," replied Amin. "I think he left to join one of the Jihadi groups."

"Well, many of the young have done that," said the king looking over a tray of cakes. "Why did he leave? Was he a bad servant?"

Ahasuerus had read the report of the destruction of the temples in Ierosolyma and knew exactly who Amin was speaking of, but he did not keep his head on his shoulders while his half-brothers had lost theirs by speaking too plainly too quickly.

"No, no, he was a faithful man and a true servant of the Prophet," said Amin. "And he was very loyal to me personally, for I gave him work even though his right arm was crippled."

"He was not born that way?" asked the king.

Amin shook his head. "No, if that were so, then it would have been the God's will, and I would not have brought him into service at the Noble Sanctuary. Wakfa lost the use of his arm as a youth, throwing stones at the cursed Eretzeli soldiers. Rather than kill him and thus cause a public outcry, one of those dogs took hold of Wakfa secretly and broke his arm. The arm did not heal properly, and it was crippled for the rest of his life. I took him into service at the sanctuary and made him caretaker there when he came of age."

"Truly, few men would have been so benevolent as you," said the king. "But why then did he run off?"

"Because of the Abramim," replied Amin. "Wakfa was the caretaker of al-Aksa and disappeared the night of its destruction. Even though the collapse of the wall was not his fault, he was driven to leave my service by the cursed Abramim. It was they who destroyed al-Aksa."

"Oh?" Ahasuerus leaned forward, not caring to hide his interest now. "News came to me of course about the collapse, though of the Abramim's hand in I had not heard. So it was not earthquake that caused the destruction of al-Aksa?"

"No, it is as you have heard," said Amin, "but the earthquake alone was not what destroyed al-Aksa and the new temple beneath it: al-Aksa has withstood earthquakes before. The walls that fell were built using mortar bought in a local market, an *Aframim* market."

"But sir, why is that unusual?" asked Foruhar, speaking up for the first time. "Did not the temples sit in the middle of a country ruled by the Abramim?"

Unlike his father, Foruhar held no particular animosity toward the Abramim. In fact, after returning from his studies abroad, he had suggested that a treaty be made to drop the high tariffs on goods shipped between Persia and Eretzel, which would be to the benefit of both countries.

The king would hear none of it though. He told his son that he did not trust the Abramim to keep their word, even bound by treaty. But the true reason was that the craft and farm guilds paid him handsomely each year to keep the tariffs on imported

goods high: these, and like payments from other guilds on other issues, were what enabled the king to afford the great numbers of men in his army. An army he needed to keep his people in check. That all this caused his people to suffer mattered little to him. If The God had wanted them to prosper, He would not have made them poor. It was The God's will.

Ahasuerus turned a hard eye towards his son. "Forgive my son, Mufti; he forgets his manners. I sent him into the West to study their ways, but I think he has learned some things from them *far* too well."

"No, no, he asks a fair question," replied Amin. "Foruhar, no follower of the Prophet would buy mortar for the Noble Sanctuary, the third holiest site of the True Faith, from an Abramim. They would go to a seller among our own people. Through their many spies, the Abramim must have known how far the underground temple extended. And it can only be Shaitan himself who told them that an earthquake and great storm was coming. They sold us week mortar deliberately hoping that the earthquake and floods would destroy our temples."

"Sir, that is a thin thread of logic to hang an entire people with," said Foruhar.

"Bah! Logic, logic! Always you speak of logic," said Ahasuerus. "The words of the Prophet are what matter, not the logic of man. Foruhar, you have not dealt with the Abramim as I have. These... these *Habiru* were once our servants. Now they look down on us and call us savages. They are foul, deceitful creatures that The God, through the words of the Prophet, tells us to fight until the Last Day. In the ninth chapter of The Sayings of the Prophet, it is written, '*Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued.*'"

"But father," said Foruhar, "is it not also written by the Prophet, '*There shall be no compulsion in religion?*'"

"That saying refers to a specific time and place. You cannot take that one verse out of context and make it a principle for all," said Ahasuerus.

"But are there not over one hundred verses where the Prophet speaks of peace and tolerance?" countered Foruhar.

"Ah, you know nothing!" exclaimed Ahasuerus.

"Ahasuerus, if I may," said Amin. "It is not always easy for the young to follow the words of the Prophet without an experienced guide to show them the way." He turned to Foruhar. "Actually, there are one hundred and twenty-four verses that speak of peace in the sayings of the Prophet and one hundred and twenty-three that order us to war. But it is the words in the verse that scholars call 'The verse of the sword' that we should follow today."

"And why is that?" asked the prince. "Should we not follow *all* of the words of the Prophet?"

"Not in all things," replied Amin, "for some verses were written for another, earlier time. But I understand your confusion, Foruhar. You do not know the principle we teachers of the True Faith call *naskh*, which means 'Abrogation.' This principle states that when two sayings in the Holy Book are in conflict, and many are, then it is the latter saying that rules.

"The sayings of the Prophet were not written down in the order in which he gave them, but in order of length, so that a short verse he said just before he died might be

followed by a slightly longer verse that was spoken twenty years before. If you read the sayings in the order that they were spoken, you will find that the verses that advise peaceful relations with unbelievers were given at the beginning of his ministry, when the Prophet had no army. Later, when he had a strong army under his command, we find verses that command us thus:

“Make war on them until idolatry shall cease and The God’s religion shall reign supreme.”

“And, ‘Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and hypocrites and deal rigorously with them.’

“And also, ‘What is the best deed? To believe in The God and his prophet. And the next best? To participate in Holy War in The God’s cause.

“And yet again, ‘The punishment of those who wage war against The God and His apostle and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter.’

“You see, Foruhar, the early saying about not converting the world by force were given when the Prophet had no force to use,” said Amin, “therefore they were abrogated by his later sayings, as thus: *‘Fight those who believe not in The God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by The God and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book, until they pay the tribute with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.’*

“And yet again, ‘I swear by Him who has my soul in his hands, I was sent to you with nothing but slaughter.’

“And finally, the prophet of The God is recorded as saying: ‘I was sent by the sword proceeding the judgment day and my livelihood is in the shadow of my spear and humiliation and submission are on those who disobey me.’

“To the pagans we are to give them this choice: convert or die,” continued Amin, “and as for the Yeshuans and Abramim, the ‘People of the Book,’ since they are *Dhimmi*, ‘protected,’ they are to be given the choice of conversion to the true faith, once we subdue their lands, or paying the *Jizyah*, the tribute tax.”

“Yes, all this is true, but the Abramim are our main enemy,” said Ahasuerus. “The great friend of the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq, wrote that the prophet said, *‘Kill any Abramim you can lay your hands on.’* And is it not written of them: *‘When in their insolence they transgressed all prohibitions, We said to them: “Be you apes, despised and rejected.”’*”

Foruhar shook his head. “But the time when we were stronger than the Dhimmi passed many ages ago. Seven countries of the faithful could not defeat even a country as small as Eretzel when they came against it. And for what? So our people could die trying to conquer a land of no importance?”

“No importance!?” said Amin. “The Noble Sanctuary is the third most holy site of our faith.”

“Only since *your* family was appointed Grand Muftis of Ierosolyma,” replied Foruhar. “For hundreds of years after the Prophet’s death, our scholars taught that he took his night journey and received the holy word at Medina. How could he have been speaking of Ierosolyma when he said he received the holy word ‘at the farthest temple’ when there were *no* temples in Ierosolyma during his lifetime? And did the great scholar

Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya not write, ‘in Ierosolyma, there is not a place one calls sacred, and the same holds true for the tombs of Hebron.’ No, Ierosolyma did not become important to the True Faith until *your* family took an important position there, Mufti.”

He turned to the king. “If one must look for the third most holy place of our faith, then it is here in Persia, father, at one of the tombs of the Twelve Imams or perhaps the shrine of Fatimah at Qom; not in some Dhimmi country like Eretzel.

“Father, why must our first thought always be to fight with the West? You know that the West is now far stronger than we are. Should we not follow the example of the Prophet in his early years and make peace with a stronger foe? Is that not better than walling ourselves off from the outside world while our people live no better than they did a thousand years ago?”

“At least they live no worse!” countered Ahasuerus. “What would you have us do, follow the decadence of the West? Our people may live in houses of mud bricks, but at least our women know how to dress modestly when they go to market and they do not sleep with every man they meet. And you do not see our young men lying drunk upon our streets each night as you do in Western cities.”

“Father, to say that that is all the West is, is like saying that we are no more than goat herders and farmers, and you know that is not true. Yes, traditionally we have always divided the world in two parts: ‘The House of Submission,’ those countries ruled by the True Faith, and ‘The House of War,’ those countries we strive with because they are now ruled by unbelievers. But to these two some scholars have added a third, Dar al-Sulh, ‘The House of Treaty,’ in which peace with a powerful unbelieving country is made necessary by events. And events have changed of late.” He looked pointedly at Amin. “Changed more than many thought possible in our lifetime, whether they wish to acknowledge those changes or not.

“As for the principle of abrogation, is it not written “No change can exist to the words of The God,” and did not the great scholar al-Asfahani give the opinion that ‘ayah’, the word the Mufti translates as ‘verse’ in what he calls the ‘the verse of the sword’ is better translated here as ‘miracle’ or ‘example,’ so you see—”

“Al-Asfahani never said that!” interrupted Amin.

“Perhaps you are thinking of ‘Imad al-Asfahani,’ said Foruhar, “but I am speaking of Ibn Hajar al-Asfahani, who lived three hundred years before Imad. You see, Mufti, I may have gone into the West, but I brought our great books with me, and more importantly, I read them for myself instead of relying on the interpretation of men who see through a glass clouded by their hatred. Oh you pick and choose so carefully among translations of the writings you quote from, using only those that support your ideas even when those translations are considered the least accurate among scholars. You accuse me of quoting from a verse out of context, but you take your ‘verse of the sword’, when the Prophet was fighting the pagans at the battle of Bandr, and expand it to include how we should fight all the world!”

Amin’s face darkened like an approaching sandstorm, but he said nothing.

Foruhar leaned in closer to the king. “Father, what happened to us, to our people, to our religion? Our universities were once the envy of the world. We led in mathematics, science, engineering and poetry. Now look at us: where once we led, now we do not even attempt to follow. We sit hiding from the world behind our borders, hoping for the impossible, that the world will never change. Meanwhile the West moves forward, in

knowledge, in commerce, in freedom for its people. We should open our doors to what is good in the West. Not wide open, just a crack perhaps, but enough to let in what is good of their world."

"But that cannot be done," said Amin. "It is impossible to bring in only the good from the West and keep out all of their sins, for they are attached one to another. It would be like allowing the camel's head to enter the tent, and deny that you will soon have the whole animal inside with you. No, we cannot allow the West to corrupt our people."

"The Mufti is right, Foruhar," added the king. "The West is *built* upon corruption: corruption and sin!"

Foruhar came to his feet, his voice barely controlled. "And what are *we* built upon, father, and what is more corrupt—a woman leaving her face uncovered in public or a child living on a dirt floor so that his rulers may sit upon silk!"

With that he turned and, without bowing to his father, strode from the room.

"Foruhar. Foruhar!" his father called after him. He turned to Amin. "This is what I wasted my gold on: so that a son could learn to speak such things to his father and an honored guest!"

"Do not trouble yourself, my friend," said the mufti. "He is young and still full of thoughts he has learned in the lands of ignorance. By the time you are old and ready to pass the rule of this land onto his shoulders, he indeed will be ready to rule according to the ways of the True Faith."

Amin did not add, but was thinking, *And if not, a man like myself will see that such an unbeliever does not rule, but pays the price for his unbelief.*

"I pray that you are correct," said Ahasuerus. "Foruhar is right though when he says that the West is more powerful than we are, but that they are so powerful is an affront to our House. *We* should be their superiors and *they* our subjects, as the words of the Prophet command."

"That these Dhimmi-ruled countries exist at all, so many years after the prophet's words to us, and with such riches and power, is an affront to our religion and to our mandate to subjugate the world," replied the mufti. "A state of Holy War has always existed between us and the infidels, from the first days of the Prophet, through this day and until the pagans are destroyed and the Dhimmi are brought under our control. It is mandated by The God that the True Faith completely subdue the earth, by words if they will listen to the truth, but if not, then by conquest."

Amin took a sip of water to calm himself.

"That is what I came here to speak to you about, O King: to finally conquer the accursed Abramim."

"When I heard about the destruction of the shrine, my first thought was that we must call for a war upon the Abramim to punish them," said Ahasuerus. "I knew that they must have had a hand in it somehow, though they were clever enough to make it look like The God's will through the earthquake. But my son is also correct when he said we cannot defeat the cursed Abramim in open war. I thought perhaps quick raids on their borders, kill and plunder, then leave before their army arrives. Raids but no battles, for we have no match for the weapons they purchased from the West."

"That is why we should let the West destroy them for us," said Amin.

"What, the West destroy the Abramim? Asulon is their protector, and the men of Unicornia care more for fattening their treasures than bloodying their swords. No, my friend, it will never happen."

"I did not say Asulon or Unicornia would do it," said Amin, looking pleased with himself, but not offering anything more.

"Must I ask, who then?"

"The Magog," replied Amin. "Word has been sent to me that the Magog plan to invade Eretzel."

"Why would the northern Infidels do that? To travel all that distance to take a few farms in a small land. What would it profit them to do such a thing?"

"The Magog will not stop in Eretzel," answered the cleric as he withdrew a scroll from his robes and opened it upon the low table before them to reveal a map showing Eretzel and all the lands around it. "That country is only their bridge. After Eretzel they intend to try for Dedan and its gold."

"But that is forbidden!" cried Ahasuerus. "The Holy Cities are there. We cannot let the infidel invade Dedan!"

"I did not say that we would allow the invasion, only that they would try," said Amin. "An emissary of Antiochus, the Unicorn emperor, came to me wishing to make a secret treaty with the kings of the countries of our faith. It seems that Antiochus hates the Abramim as much we do and wishes to see them destroyed to the last man. But he also wishes to remove the Magog, which he sees as a threat to Unicornia's dominance of the west. His plan is to lure the Magog into a trap set in Eretzel. Once they have lost strength fighting the Abramim, Antiochus will send his army to destroy the Magog. Then we ourselves can attack Eretzel, finishing the accursed Abramim once and for all."

"Even then," said Ahasuerus, "will Eretzel be weak enough to be defeated by our armies?"

"True, it would have been better to have all the countries of the Faithful join us in this war, but too many now put prosperity above faith. Two will be with us in this though; two kings, Cush of Nubia and Phut of Lybyos are with us in this," replied Amin. "Cush is a true follower of the prophet and hates the Abramim as much as we do, and Phut has reached that age when a man begins to think of the afterlife and what he can do to secure his place in it. They will join us in the war."

"And there is more." Amin lowered his voice just enough so that the king found himself leaning in closer to hear better. It was a trick Amin learned when he first began preaching. Speak loudly at first; then gradually lower your voice to make your audience pay attention.

"Antiochus has just made a treaty with Eretzel promising to aid them in war if they are invaded," said Amin. "The justification was to protect Yeshuans making pilgrimage to Eretzel, but the real reason was to get Eretzel to let down its defenses and entice the Magog to invade."

"And why would the Abramim agree to this?" asked Ahasuerus.

"So that they can rebuild their temple on the Noble Sanctuary."

"Impossible. No king of the faithful would ever allow that," said Ahasuerus. "Must I remind a teacher of the faith that such a thing is forbidden under the law of the Prophet? Is it not written that once we have conquered a land it belongs to the True Faith forever and that it is forbidden to relinquish it to either the pagan or Dhimmi, that

if the infidels try to retake the land, the word of The God calls upon all His followers to rise up in Holy War and reclaim the land!"

"Calm yourself, my friend, calm yourself," said Amin. "Am I not the mufti of the Noble Sanctuary? Who knows better than I the requirements of our religion when it comes to that holy place? Here is the plan that the emissary of Antiochus proposed to me. When the Magog invade Eretzel, the army of Antiochus will be delayed in giving them aid—you know that Westerners have no stomach for long wars, and Unicornia has seen many. Therefore, it will not take long before the Abramim and the Magog become so weak from killing each other that they can be easily defeated by another force: the Unicorn army from the west and our armies from the east and south."

"And what does Antiochus want from us in exchange for our aid in this?"

"The same thing that the Magog want, the gold of this region; though he says he only wishes a mining concession so that he may take a percentage of the profits."

"Of course you do not trust him."

"Of course not. He will see how the wind blows after the war and decide if he has the strength to invade Dedan himself. But he does not know our people. They would rather die than let the infidel invade the land most holy to us. Did Omar Ibn al-Khatab, the friend of the Prophet, not write: *'I heard the prophet of The God saying: 'I will cast Abramim and Yeshuans out of the peninsula and I won't leave anyone in it but the Faithful.'*"

"And is it not also written," said Ahasuerus, '*O ye who believe. Take not the Abramim and Yeshuans for your friends and protectors. They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them is of them.*' 'And also, *'Seize them and slay them wherever you find them: and in any case take no friends or helpers from their ranks.'*"

"That is true," replied Amin, "however it is also written, '*Let not the believers take for friends or helpers unbelievers rather than believers; if any do that, in nothing will there be help from The God—*'"

"See, you prove my point," said Ahasuerus.

Amin raised a finger as if instructing a schoolboy. "Hear now the end of the verse, for it is on this that I base my argument: '*...except by way of precaution, that ye may Guard yourselves from them.*'"

"You see, it is permissible to *pretend* to be their friends if in doing so we may guard ourselves from them. Remember, the prophet himself said, '*War is deception.*' So when I say we shall call a truce with the infidels, I am not speaking of a permanent truce. Not Dar al-Suh or, as you would say here, aramesh. No, I am speaking of a temporary and tactical truce, of a *hudna*, as in the treaty of al-Hudaybiyya, when the Prophet declared a ten-year truce with the city of Yathrib, but captured the city two years later when he had the strength to do so."

"Amin, what are you not telling me?" asked Ahasuerus, studying his guest carefully. "All the things you have said so far still do not add up to an argument that would move you to make a treaty with the Abramim."

The Mufti leaned in to the king, his eyes bright, and said, "I have seen the *Dajjal*."

"You have seen that demon, the Great Deceiver?" gasped the king, all the color drained from his face.

"Perhaps not the Great Dajjal, but certainly one of the lesser deceivers that will proceed him and bring tribulation to the world before the Last Day."

"And how do you know this man is a dajjal?"

"He can do miracles," replied Amin. "I have seen him do things that no mortal man can do."

"But it is said that holy men sent by The God can also do miracles."

"This man was not sent by The God," said Amin. "He is an Abramim."

"Yes, you are right, then," said Ahasuerus, "for The God would never give such power to an Abramim; at least none since the days of Isa-Yeshua. This man's power must come from Shaitan."

Ahasuerus thought for a moment then said, "But how do you know that this man is not the Great Dajjal and therefore the Last Day is nearer than we think?"

"The Great Dajjal will be blind in one eye, so that the eye is dark as a ripe grape, while this man—he is called Immanuel bar Abbas—has both his eyes intact," said Amin.

"Then it is only the beginning of the end and not the end itself," said the king. "But how shall we deal with this news? What shall we do?"

"There are other prophetic interpretations that may guide us in this," replied Amin. "Some scholars say that before the Last Day, we will join our forces with those of the Yeshuans to wipe the Abramim from the face of the earth. After our victory, we shall then turn upon the Yeshuans and slay them as well, along with all the pagans. Then complete victory will be ours. The scholars who wrote these things were not trained clerics, but engineers and mathematicians, so I dismissed their interpretations in the past. But now one like a Dajjal appears from the West, bringing with him a treaty that proposes all that the interpretation of the scholars suggests."

"Again I ask, what shall we do?" asked Ahasuerus.

"I am going to issue a edict allowing the Abramim to rebuild their temple upon the Noble Sanctuary, just to the north of the Shrine of the Stone," said Amin.

"What, are you mad!" cried Ahasuerus.

"No, Ahasuerus, I am not mad; I am just well read in the words of the Prophet. For it is he who said that when the Dajjal comes his way will be deception. He will offer fire disguised as water and water disguised as fire. Knowing that the Dajjal will be a deceiver, the prophet has advised us thus: *'Then the Dajjal will come forth accompanied by a river and fire. He who falls into his fire will certainly receive his reward, and have his load taken off him, but he who falls into his river will have his load retained and his reward taken off him.'*

"This means that when a Dajjal offers us something that seems evil, it is really good, and when he offers us something good, it is really evil. Now an Abramim ambassador of the West comes doing miracles like a Dajjal and offering us both seeming good and seeming evil, the good being the destruction of the Abramim and the evil being our allowing the rebuilding of the Abramim temple."

"But with both good and evil being in his offer, how shall we know what to do?"

"Because there is more seeming risk to us in his offer than easy gain, therefore I say that it is good disguised as evil," said Amin.

"This is all too complex for me," said Ahasuerus heavily. "Why can't you clerics interpret things simply for simple men like me? Give me a sword and an enemy to kill. That I can understand!"

"And that I shall give you, my friend. A prophecy given by the Prophet speaks of conquering the two Yeshuan capitals, first Byzantium and then Rema," said Amin. "Byzantium we have taken seven centuries ago, but Rema is still in the hands of the Dhimmi. However, if the army of Unicornia is destroyed fighting in our lands, and our own armies remain intact..."

Ahasuerus's eyes opened wide in realization.

"Then we shall be free to invade Rema and fulfill the prophecy," he said. He drew forth his dagger and pointed to the map set before them. "The southlands of Iberia and Gaul and all the islands of the Internal Sea, all these the warriors of the Truth Faith once conquered. We shall reclaim these from the Infidel and return them to our House. The Dhimmi once again shall pay us tribute and know that our faith is true and our God is above all others!"

Amin nodded and smiled. He picked a pomegranate up from the tray set before them and turned it in his hand examining it as it were a globe. "That day will come, my friend; that day will come."

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