

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

# BLACK GULCH



**BEN COUNTER**

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The scars made it difficult every time. Chapter Master Midnias had donned his armour on the eves of hundreds of battles, but each time the pain reminded him of everything that had gone before. His back was a lattice of ribboned skin separated by ridges of gnarled scar tissue, and they cried out as if they were newly-made as he buckled the breastplate of his power armour. His shoulder pads chafed the raw flesh on his shoulders, and he felt a shiver of new, cold pain as the armour's interfaces slithered into the ports in the carapace under his skin.

He opened and closed his hands. It felt like his gauntlets were lined with spikes, for of all the punishments Midnias had endured, the worst had been to his hands.

This punishment, he told himself, we shall also endure.

'My lord,' said Scout-Captain Terundel. 'My outriders bring word of the greenskins on the move. They are heading right for our position.'

Midnias fastened the demi-cloak around his shoulder. 'Good,' he said. 'Their warlord could not hold them back forever. The most potent weapon against the ork is the nature of the ork himself.'

'The first count is seventy thousand,' continued Terundel. 'More are landing on the Belishar Flats. Two hundred thousand in number, marching as reinforcements.'

'Then we will have to see our warlord dead before they arrive,' said Midnias. 'Draw in the outriders and have them take their places in the line. We will need every gun here.'

'It will be done,' said Terundel. 'This we shall endure.'

'This we shall endure.' Midnias placed the Crown of Obstiria on his brow before he put on his helmet. The crown was a simple spiked band that symbolised how Midnias was both the Chapter Master of the Obsidian Glaives

and the Planetary Governor of Obstiria. Not that he ruled anything beyond his Chapter – the planet had seen off every attempt to settle it except for the Glaives themselves.

Midnias had chosen the shadow beneath an overhang of rock to spend the time before dawn, praying to the spirits of Guilliman, the Emperor and the ancestors of the Obsidian Glaives. It was not quite grand enough to be considered a cave and had afforded just enough shelter to hide him from the eyes of any orkish fighter craft that might pass overhead. He emerged from the overhang into the bleached irradiated light of Obstiria's sun.

The knot of rocky ridges and crevasses at the head of Black Gulch was treacherous terrain for anyone but a Space Marine. It was broken and trackless, enough to whittle away an army of normal men who marched across it. But four hundred Obsidian Glaives had set up their battle lines there, with bolters and heavy weapons covering the long dark throat of the gulch.

Black Gulch was a deep furrow in the surface of Obstiria, a long canyon carved by a glacier in ages past before the planet had drifted closer to its sun. An army marching across Obstiria, from the landing grounds on the high plains to the fortress of Penumbra Spike, would inevitably follow the path of the gulch. Its soldiers would drain into the gulch like water trickling down off the mountainsides around it, and when they came to the broken ground at the western end they would find themselves bottled in, the front ranks struggling across the terrain as the rear ranks bunched forwards into a formless scrum.

That was the plan.

Midnias answered the salutes of the Obsidian Glaives on the way to the front line. With the losses at Penumbra Spike, including Captain Seharra, the structure of the Chapter had been compromised and battle-brothers from various companies were set up in fire teams together. Devastator-Captain Keshuma was positioned ahead, lying on his front as he scanned the landscape of the gulch.

'I can smell them from here,' said Keshuma.

'Can you see it?' asked Midnias.

'It's in the heart of them,' replied Keshuma. 'It's got plenty of xenos flesh in front of it. But to these eyes it's hard to miss.'

Midnias clambered onto the rock beside Keshuma. The captain hadn't been exaggerating. The radioactive breeze carried on it the stench of alien sweat and blood. It carried the sound of the xenos too, rhythmic chanting and the churning of throaty engines.

Black Gulch was full of orks. The mass of green-skinned bodies stretched

from one side of the valley to the other, a kilometre and a half of seething, furious xenos killers. For as far as the gulch ran, winding across the jagged mountain ranges back to the flats, it flowed like a green river. Obstiria's radiation didn't seem to affect the orks at all. They were difficult to kill.

Difficult, but definitely not impossible.

Midnias could pick out the foremost bull-orks. The largest and most brutal of their kind, they had shouldered their way to the front to reach the battle first. They wore the colours and symbols of many tribes – a gouged eye, a clenched fist, a rack of horns, several variations on a skull. Once they had probably been at war with one another on whatever world spawned them. Now they were united and fought as one, most on foot, some from the crudely looted and adapted Imperial tanks that ground along in the middle of the horde.

They were firing off their guns in celebration of the battle to come. Most orks sought to kill up close but they loved the noise and devastation of gunfire too, and the more powerful of them sported enormous multi-barrelled cannons that competed in the shows of fire and noise they made.

It was a horde with no discipline or plan, funnelled inevitably down Black Gulch towards the Obsidian Glaives position. It could no more turn back the way it had come than take flight to soar over the mountains.

'It's working, so far,' said Keshuma. 'We'll only fight a thousand of them at once instead of a hundred thousand.'

'Even so,' said Midnias, 'this is not a storm we can weather. *It* must die. That is the only way.'

'There,' said Keshuma, pointing.

Midnias saw it. It towered over the horde, wearing armour that looked like it had been nailed onto its frame: an ork of immense size, its face a mass of scars and its bare bloody fists wrapped with spiked chains. Its brutal skull was crowned with horns, but Midnias could not tell if they were a natural growth or if they, too, had been bolted onto the ork's skeleton. Its armour was festooned with captured prizes. Whole corpses of Imperial Navy crewmen hung from wooden gibbets fixed to its shoulders. Dozens of skulls rattled on its chest. It was a walking monument to the hatefulness and fury of the ork.

Grukk. The greenskins called it Grukk. It was the lord of an army that had come to the Sanctus Reach to despoil everything in its way, an army that had to go through the Obsidian Glaives first.

But it was also the horde's greatest weakness. Grukk's underling, Flamegut, had fallen to Midnias at Penumbral Spike, and the orks besieging the fortress had

broken. With Grukk's death this horde, too, would fall apart. If Obstiria was to stand, Grukk had to die, and again it would be Midnias who killed it.

'Lord Midnias! *Darkest Hour* here.' Midnias recognised the voice of Captain Draegan of the Second Company, and the vox-echoes that told him the message was coming from the void far above. 'We are in position in low orbit. Ready to deploy at your mark.'

Midnias glanced upwards. Against the blue-white sky he could make out a dark splinter. 'Then stand by,' said Midnias. He switched vox-nets. 'Chosen brethren! To me! The battle is too long awaited.'

The Obsidian Glaives that Midnias had chosen joined him at the front. One of them buckled a jump pack onto Midnias's back. They included members of Squads Benilar, Voken and Gaerdigan, assault units whose sergeants had been lost in the fighting at Penumbra Spike. It was a tradition among many Chapters for battle-brothers who had lost their leaders to form the forlorn hope, the first assault through the breach. Midnias was their squad leader now.

'Ready?' asked Midnias.

The assembled Obsidian Glaives saluted. There were eighteen of them in the markings of three different companies. None of them said anything. There was no need to.

'Your objective is the alien known as Grukk,' said Midnias. 'With its death, the greenskins fall. Have faith that your brethren will be at your side, but fight as if you fight alone. Keshuma, cover us! Elhalil, ready the charge! Chosen brethren, with me!'

Midnias stepped forwards. Below, the greenskins let up a cry to see the first Obsidian Glaive standing in their way. They were close enough for Midnias to see the blood-flecked anger in their eyes.

Midnias leapt off the edge. He activated the jets of his jump pack and his fall was arrested, the momentum switched forward. He hurtled down Black Gulch over the heads of the foremost greenskins. Eighteen Obsidian Glaives were right behind him, the sound of their jump packs like the air itself being torn apart.

The jump pack would take him far, but not all the way to Grukk. Midnias and his brethren would come down in the middle of the horde. Before Grukk was to fall, there were a great many greenskins to kill.

It could be strange, the thoughts that came to a mind in the most extreme of circumstances. Even with the sleep-taught discipline of a Space Marine, even with the experience of a Chapter Master, Midnias still had a part of him that was

very much human.

The heat of the jump pack jets behind him was like a slab of hot metal against his back, very much like that of a cramped, stifling cell in the belly of a spacecraft. The brig was next to one of the reactor housings to keep it swelteringly hot. The prisoners kept there would sweat out all their defiance, so when it came to interrogation and sentencing they would admit to any evil in exchange for a glass of water.

It was Midnias's first memory. Some Space Marines retained nothing at all of their lives before their recruitment, as sleep-doctrination tended to force out previous memories to be replaced with battle-lore and tracts of the Codex Astartes. Midnias remembered the cell where he had been imprisoned, the prayers of admonition and penance inscribed on the steel walls and the hourly sermons from the brig chaplain. He remembered the manacles on his wrists, ankles and throat.

His name had not been Midnias then. It did not matter what it was.

A dark shape had stood in front of the cell door. Midnias was amazed at its size. It seemed too big to fit into the cell block corridor. It wore massive glossy black armour trimmed with white, the image of crossed swords on one shoulder pad. Its helmet had a faceplate in the shape of a skull. The sockets were set with green lenses and the teeth were picked out in silver. It wore a black half-cloak and around its waist were buckled the implements of a priest – books, an hourglass, prayer beads and ritual silver knives.

'You are punished,' said the armoured giant. It had a low, metallic grind of a voice.

Midnias looked up at the apparition, but there was no expression to read from the skull. Perhaps this was some strange shipboard tradition. Perhaps this was his executioner, dressed up like a horror from a child's cautionary tale. Whatever it was, answering it could hardly put him in any worse a spot.

'Executed,' Midnias said. His throat was raw and hoarse.

'Are you punished enough?'

Midnias smiled. Cracked lips pulled back over broken teeth. 'For what I have done?' he said. 'No.'

'What if you could be punished?' said the giant. 'Not killed here, but to live an entire life of punishment. Not pain, for pain can be adapted to and ignored, but a punishment of service that will never end. Even at your death it will not be finished. A true punishment as befits your crime against the Imperium of Man. What would your answer be?'

‘My answer would be, if you have the guts to imagine a worthy punishment then I have the guts to take it on.’

‘You see a challenge, then? That is interesting. Perhaps if we grind you down and break you, we can rebuild you into something worthy. Something to stand among the heroes of the Imperium. Perhaps you can be a Space Marine.’

Midnias looked up at the dark shape, squinting in the half-light to make out the details of the ornate armour. ‘A what?’

In the press of greenskin flesh it seemed Obstiria was gone, replaced by an endless, hellish plane of ork bodies stretching out forever.

Midnias hacked left and right with his power sword. Flesh parted and more orks poured through. The air was thick with the stink of their blood. Around him the battle-brothers he had chosen to join him fought to keep up. Some of them had already been left behind in the charge, bogged down fighting the orks who sought to swamp and butcher them with cleavers and jagged blades.

‘To me!’ he yelled into the vox as he mounted a low rise and cleared the orks from around him with a wide two-handed sweep of his sword. ‘Form up! We strike as one or we strike not at all!’

The Obsidian Blades struggled towards him. Behind them, up on the ridge, Captains Keshuma and Elhalil led the battle-line in firing volley after volley into the orks, forcing them back down the gulch and turning the ork advance into a brutal scrum. Grukk could not manoeuvre out of Black Gulch now, not with the entire army backed up around it. It was as vulnerable as a creature like it could be.

Midnias grabbed an Obsidian Glaive’s hand and hauled him out of the melee. The battle-brother was slick with ork blood. His armour was nicked and scored all over by cleaver blows he had turned aside and his chainblade was almost clogged with stringy ork flesh.

The Obsidian Glaive’s faceplate turned to the sky. Midnias allowed himself a glance upwards.

‘It’s the *Darkest Hour*,’ he voxed. ‘Our brethren have arrived. Onward, sons of Obstiria! While the horde fights a dozen battles at once, we shall win victory in ours!’

The other Obsidian Glaives were reaching Midnias’s position. Most of them had made it this far. All of them were covered head to toe in gore. All of them had enough fight left in them for the final stretch.

The orks would be busy facing the new threats raining down on them from

above. Midnias had to strike now. There would never be another chance to save his Chapter.

He opened up the exhausts on his jump pack. Blue-white flame roared behind him.

‘Charge!’ he ordered. As one, his chosen Obsidian Glaives rocketed into the air, making another leap across the horde towards Gruk.

As the rise receded below him, a strange thought caught light in a corner of Midnias’s mind. He had been here before.

Black Gulch was one of the few routes by foot into the foothills around Penumbra Spike – a bleak and brutal path, but one that a Space Marine could weather. For someone without the augmentations of an Obsidian Glaive, or whose augmentations had not yet begun to fully function, it was little better than a death sentence.

Midnias had walked it in the night when the radiation was less severe. Even so it had covered his back, shoulders and newly-shaven scalp with burns that wept and cracked as dawn rose over the mountains.

There was barely any shelter down there. If a recruit did not find shade from the radioactive sun, he would die. It was that simple. The Obsidian Glaives did not welcome new recruits who were willing to lie down on the scalding rocks and accept their death.

Midnias shielded his eyes from the early morning rays. He had stumbled almost unthinkingly through the night and only now stopped to take proper stock of his surroundings. The knife-sharp ridges up either side of the gulch were out of the question – even if there was a cave or an overhang up there he would be dead before he reached it. A short stumble away was a rise in the ground, and perhaps on the other side there would be enough of a hollow for him to crawl into and wait out the day.

His feet left bloody footprints as he walked to the rise. He rounded it to see that the stone overhung enough for a man to roll under it and, perhaps, escape the sun. He could tell this because there was already a man there.

Another recruit. Midnias had known he was not alone on this pilgrimage from the flats to the Penumbra Spike, but this was the first fellow he had seen since he had crawled blindly into the glare of the sun upon being dropped from a gunship. Both men had been dropped onto the flats with orders to reach Penumbra Spike, a test that had to be passed before he could call the Obsidian Glaives his brothers and walk amongst them as a Space Marine.

There was not enough room in the hollow for both of them.

Midnias caught his heart before it sank.

He crouched beside the hollow. The recruit noticed him and the two looked at one another. The other recruit – Midnias had never seen him before – was as fit and muscular as Midnias himself, his body just starting to adapt to the new organs promoting bone and muscle growth. His shoulder and face were burned maroon with the sun's glare. He wore nothing but a loincloth. In all respects he looked just like Midnias himself must have done.

Midnias grabbed the other recruit's arm and dragged him out of the hollow. The recruit wrapped an arm around Midnias's neck and forced his chin down to his chest, trying to cut off his air and throttle him. Midnias kned the recruit in the groin and pushed him back against the lip of rock. The recruit hit hard and his grip relaxed. Midnias wrenched his head out and drove an elbow into the recruit's shoulder.

Bone broke. The recruit sagged. Midnias only had a second. He grabbed the wrist of the wounded arm and twisted it around. The recruit cried out as the broken shoulder bones were torn out of place. Midnias spun on a heel and threw the recruit over his shoulder.

The recruit fought back. He was staring up at death twofold – Midnias, and the burning sky above. He kicked out at Midnias's leg and it buckled. Midnias fell on top of the other recruit and they wrestled on the rocks.

Midnias forced an arm free and drove the heel of his hand into the recruit's jaw. He felt his bones break. Ripples of pain and numbness ran up his arm. He found his footing and lifted the recruit off the ground, slamming him again into the rock. The recruit growled as he held on and Midnias hit him again, again, until both hands were unfeeling clubs of bloodied bone.

It was only when Midnias smelled his own skin burning in the rising sun that he paused. The recruit did not move. His face was split open and gushing blood. If he was not dead, he would be soon.

'We are here for punishment,' said Midnias through cracked lips. 'Yours is over. The next I shall endure.'

He crawled on his belly into the fold of rock. The shade was barely any relief at all, but the sizzling from his burned back stopped.

Midnias's life from now on was punishment. The other recruit had deserved only death. Midnias deserved more.

The battle-brothers from the *Darkest Hour* hammered into the orkish lines.

Where their drop pods landed, great plumes of pulverised rock and ork bodies were flung into the air. Some pods split open to reveal deathwind missile launchers and hurricane bolters blasting fire at everything that moved around them. Most, however, carried Obsidian Glaives.

These battle-brothers had been too late to fight in the siege of their fortress. They owed the greenskins death.

Midnias was just able to see the ripple of the drop pods' impact running right across Black Gulch before he landed again. He had aimed his last jump at a patch of blood-streaked rock momentarily free of orks. He landed running, impaling the nearest ork with his blade. His fellow Obsidian Glaives landed a moment later.

'There!' cried Midnias. 'The warlord! We are nearly there, my brethren!'

Warlord Gruk had leapt into the fray as the battle-brothers from the *Darkest Hour* made landfall. A drop pod had slammed into the gulch a short run from the xenos leader. Gruk threw other greenskins aside to get at it. The pod was the size of a tank with grav-dampened restraints inside to hold a full squad of ten Space Marines. Gruk leered bloodily as it reached the drop pod before its explosive bolts fired to split it open. The warlord clambered on top and wrenched one of the steel plates aside.

Midnias sprinted into the wall of orks between him and the warlord. The mass of flesh gave but did not break. He threw one ork aside even as he cut another clean in two. Cleavers hacked at him – he caught one on a shoulder guard, spun in place and drove a reverse thrust into the belly of the alien trying to kill him.

Gruk laughed. He reached into the drop pod and ripped out a handful of mangled ceramite and flesh. Bolter fire stuttered up at him from inside but the impacts didn't seem to register on the enormous ork. It roared in anger and delight and crammed a handful of Obsidian Glaive into its mouth. It tore another side off the drop pod and dived into the battle-brothers inside. It ripped at them in a fury, its claws throwing chunks of armour and meat into the air as the other greenskins cheered.

There was no room in Midnias's mind for anything but hatred. For an alien to kill an Obsidian Glaive was an obscenity. For it to do so as sport, with thousands of other xenos cheering it on, was blasphemy.

And it was a failure. Every Obsidian Glaive who fell was a crime laid at Midnias's door. As Chapter Master it was his responsibility and he would be punished. But the ork would be punished first.

Midnias left the other Obsidian Glaives behind as he roared through the orks.

He swung his blade two-handed, ignoring the blows that came his way. Grukkl tore out another handful of broken limbs as Midnias rose on a rampart of butchered orks to reach level with the top of the drop pod.

Grukkl clambered out, spattered with the gore of ten dead Obsidian Glaives. It turned greedy eyes on Midnias and pointed a talon at him.

‘Are we but sport to you?’ demanded Midnias, not caring if Grukkl understood his words. ‘Then take this prize, alien! Wear this corpse on your armour! But cut me down first!’

Grukkl bellowed a war cry in the orkish tongue. The other orks nearby cowered back, for Grukkl had marked out Midnias as his to kill alone.

A punishment would be meted out here. The Emperor alone knew which one would suffer it.

Midnias ran right at the towering ork. The ork charged, horns down like a bull. In the heart of the swirling bloodshed of Black Gulch, they collided.

Every drop of shed blood was a failure. That counted no matter which Obsidian Glaive shed it, from a newly-inducted scout to one an ancient with a thousand years of battle experience. But some, when they fell, put a greater stain on those responsible than others.

It had been thirty years before, when Midnias fought in the Chapter’s First Company, that he last walked the labyrinth of passes and gulches that led to the foothills of Penumbra Spike. Three other brothers of the First Company walked alongside him, their armour stripped off, as they carried their burden on their shoulders.

‘I should have taken the bullet myself,’ said one, Brother Varas.

‘I should have warned him,’ said Brother Madrilar. He walked with a limp, as a stray round in the battle for the Hargraven Basilica had hit him in the meat of the thigh.

‘His wounds were too grave,’ said Brother Kess, the First Company’s Apothecary. ‘There was more shrapnel than I thought. I should have saved him.’

‘I killed the traitor who took the shot,’ said Midnias. ‘But I was a second too late.’

Ahead of them, the peak of Penumbra Spike broke through among the mountain peaks. A flock of predatory birds circled the peak as if waiting for the four penitents. The sun was directly overhead, baking the rocks with radiation.

‘It is noon,’ said Varas. ‘Set down your burden and pray.’

The four Obsidian Glaives set down the litter they were carrying. It was

covered in a black silken shroud. Midnias flexed his hands – even now, after so many years, he felt the pain of the fingers he had broken when he had killed the other recruit. Every time the ghost of that pain rose in his hands he remembered what he had done to survive, and every one of his failings since then.

The burden he helped carry was one such failure. Perhaps the greatest.

Midnias pulled back the corner of the shroud. It revealed the scarred face of Chapter Master Lukal who, until the Battle for Hargraven Basilica, had led the Obsidian Glaives. He had died there, and the four battle-brothers who carried his corpse to Penumbra Spike had condemned themselves as most responsible.

‘We will see you to the vaults, my lord,’ said Midnias. ‘We will hold vigil at your tomb. This too we shall endure.’

‘This too we shall endure,’ said the other Obsidian Glaives.

Midnias drew the shroud back over Lukal’s face.

‘They say,’ said Varas, ‘that you will one day wear the Crown of Obstiria, Brother Midnias.’

‘Me?’ asked Midnias.

‘I was one of Lukal’s honour guard,’ said Varas, ‘and most Chapter Masters once served there. But I am too impulsive to lead my brothers, and no other among us is suitable. A new Chapter Master will probably be appointed from among the company captains, but is any of them a strategist or inspiration as Lukal was? No, they will merely serve until one more able is found. It is said that with time, that may be you, Midnias. You will one day be Chapter Master, if your potential is realised and fate spares you death until then.’

Midnias looked from the shrouded corpse to Penumbra Spike. The fortress was still distant. It was a long and gruelling walk.

‘Then my punishment has only just begun,’ he said.

Midnias’s sword arced down in a blur, its edge aimed for Gruk’s neck.

The ork turned at the last split-second and the blade hacked deep into the meat of its shoulder. The power field ripped through muscle and bone but the ork was so massive the wound was not mortal.

Gruk grinned, its tiny red eyes glimmering. The foulness of rotting meat and old blood washed over Midnias. Midnias wrenched the blade free and drew it back for another strike. If he caught Gruk’s neck he could take the warlord’s head off. If he struck the same place he might cut through an organ the greenskin could not live without.

Gruk dropped to one knee and raised a massive fist. It caught the blade in its

hand. The edge sliced deep through its palm and into its forearm but the ork registered no pain – it just laughed as Midnias fought to wrench the blade out of the bone.

Grukk's other fist pistoned up in a massive uppercut that slammed into Midnias's chest and face.

Blackness spun around Midnias's head. All the old pains ghosted up through his body – the burns across his back, the bullet and blade wounds across his chest, the surgical scars all over his body. His hands hurt worst of all, as if they were full of needles or immersed in scalding water.

He took the pain and held on to it. The pain meant he was not dead. No, he was still to be punished for his crimes and his failings. He forced a hand beneath him and pushed himself up.

Midnias's helmet had been torn from his head. The Crown of Obstiria lay on the stone beside him.

Grukk wrapped a massive hand around Midnias's body, pinning his arms to his sides. The ork's mouth yawned open, revealing rows of gory fangs leading to a hungry black throat.

It could be absurd, the thoughts that came to even a Space Marine, even a Chapter Master, in times of crisis. Midnias was back in the cell again, before he had ever met the Chaplain who recruited him into the Obsidian Glaives. This time he was looking at himself as if he was hovering in the corner of the cell, and saw not a Space Marine but a scrawny, filthy criminal, the lowest of the dregs who plagued that spaceship's crew. Nothing but a condemned man, waiting for a well-deserved bullet in the back of the head in punishment for...

For what?

Midnias no longer remembered what he had done to be put in that cell. It was the crime that had led to him becoming an Obsidian Glaive, and suffering the endless punishment that was the Emperor's gift to that Chapter. Yet he did not remember what he had done.

As Midnias's head was forced down into Grukk's maw, he tried to draw out some flicker of memory about his crime.

The mouth closed. Fangs bored through the back of his neck and up through his jaw into his skull.

To deserve a death like this, thought Midnias, to have served so unflinchingly and yet to be a trophy kill for an alien, he must have done something terrible indeed.

Grukk's jaws closed, and Midnias's execution was carried out at last.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the six-volume Soul Drinkers series and The Grey Knights Omnibus. For Space Marine Battles he has written *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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