

A TREASURES OF THE NILE NOVEL

MIRIAM



MESU ANDREWS

AUTHOR OF THE PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER

Praise for
Miriam

“Mesu Andrews shines brilliant new light on the epic we only thought we knew, transforming the familiar biblical account of the Exodus with a narrative grounded in a deep love for God and his Word. *Miriam* illuminates the power and majesty of Yahweh, while weaving a story of real people waiting for deliverance from a God they have not yet learned to trust.”

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—TESSA AFSHAR, award-winning author of *Land of Silence* and *Pearl in the Sand*

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The Pharaoh's Daughter

In the Shadow of Jezebel

Love in a Broken Vessel

Love's Sacred Song

Love Amid the Ashes

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P R E S S

MIRIAM

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cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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*To Mary Cooley, my feisty eighty-six-year-old mama,
a woman with Miriam's strength, faith, and passion.*

NOTE TO READER

Research for both *The Pharaoh's Daughter* and *Miriam* sent me into a different world. Historians and archaeologists disagree on many things about Egypt, but on one thing they're utterly united—ancient Egypt was unique, unlike any other nation on earth. Egyptians recorded their distinctiveness. They flaunted it, lauded it, and guarded it.

Until the Ramessid kings came to power.

The Ramessid kings were warriors, explorers, and builders who expanded Egypt's borders, brought the outside world in, and caused Egypt to lose a portion of its distinctiveness. However, under the Ramessid's *New Kingdom*, trade flourished and building projects surged, meaning the need for laborers in Egypt's Nile delta increased a hundredfold.

So they put slave masters over [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. (Exodus 1:11–14)

Bible stories mean so much more when we understand the culture and political climate in which the characters lived. I pray that as *Miriam's* story unfolds, you'll be driven back to God's Word to discover the truth behind the fiction.

PROLOGUE

*When there is a prophet among you,
I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions,
I speak to them in dreams.*

—NUMBERS 12:6

I am Miriam, old but of use. I am a slave, a midwife, a healer with herbs. This is what I do, but El Shaddai makes me who I am.

The Hebrews call me prophetess; the Egyptians, a seer. But I am neither. I am simply a watcher of Israel and the messenger of El Shaddai. When He speaks to me in dreams, I interpret. When He whispers a melody, I sing.

During my eighty-six inundations, His presence has swelled within me like the Nile's waters, quenching my thirst, meeting every need. No relationship imprisons me. No task consumes me. No despair conquers me. I'm His alone, free to love others as He loves me.

But as I dab my parents' brows, creeping dread crawls up my arms like a living thing. Last night's dreams have shaken our divine union. *El Shaddai, Your messages have always been so clear. Why not give the meaning with the dreams?*

I know they portend death. But whose? Fear coils around my heart like a serpent. *Please don't take my parents, Shaddai.* A ridiculous request, I know. Abba Amram has seen 137 inundations and Ima Jochebed, 109. They are the wonder of the tribe of Levi, and even the Egyptians whisper rumors of a slave couple favored by the gods.

Abba's chest rises and falls with shallow breaths. Ima snores quietly. My heart will break when I must say good-bye.

A flash of light, and my mind grows dark . . . until Shaddai shows me

a single soldier walking toward me. It's Eleazar. Last night's dream creatures dance around him, taunting, but he can't see them. My nephew walks quickly, calling my name. As suddenly as it came, the vision is gone.

Abba and Ima sleep peacefully while I lean into the constant presence of my Shaddai. Eleazar will arrive soon with our morning rations, but now I know last night's dreams have something to do with him. *Thank You, my Shaddai, for Your tender consolation.* For though the evil creatures tested and taunted, they could not destroy him. *But I know there's more to the dreams than that. Show me, Shaddai. Show me more.*

A warm breeze stirs the stifling air within our mud-brick house, and I know it's El Shaddai. *All right, I'll try to be patient.* New-found peace grapples with niggling angst. I'll sing. Singing always soothes me, lifts me, transports me deeper into His presence.

The tune is the same. Haunting, groaning, yearning. But something changes. The breeze dies. A strange chill races up my spine. I hum a familiar melody, waiting for new words of praise that never come—like the dream without a message.

Heart racing, eyes burning, my soul cries out, *El Shaddai, are You there?*

Silence.

I look out our window. The sun still shines. The birds still sing. But a chill breeze stirs in the hot sun, and I know. Change is coming. Change is here.

PART 1



The LORD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.”

—EXODUS 4:21

1

[The Egyptians] made [the Israelites'] lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

— EXODUS 1:14

Dawn's haze barely glowed over the eastern hills when the first injured slave leaned against Miriam's doorframe and peered around her curtain. "I've come from the plateau mud pits and have no way to pay you. Will you tend my wounds?" He averted his eyes, drew a breath, and held it. Was he waiting for rejection?

"Yes, yes, come in." Miriam rocked to her feet and hurried to welcome him before his courage failed.

He stepped over the threshold but hesitated after two steps onto her packed-dirt floor. "Others told me Israel's prophetess offered care for free, but I didn't believe it."

Miriam guided him to her sleeping mat, inspecting his wounds on the way. Besides the obvious cuts and bruises on his face, he bore deep whipping wounds on his mud-caked back. "I'm certainly not opposed to payment, but I can't turn away a child of Abraham in need."

He laughed without humor. "Well then, you'll likely meet several of Abraham's children today. The temperature is rising quickly, and the slave masters' tempers rise with it."

Miriam eased him down on her mat, giving him only partial attention while she listened for El Shaddai's guidance on proper treatment. *Shaddai, You know I can't minister to Your people without Your instruction.*

She'd been trained as a midwife by her friend Shiphrah, but treating injuries and wounds had come through years of experience—and revelations from God, who alone knew the intricacies of the human body.

The man must have noted her hesitation and pointed to his left side. "I think my ribs are broken. The guard hit me in the face and belly after he whipped me and then kicked my side when I doubled over. I need to get back to work before anyone notices I'm gone."

"Let's clean up your back first, and then I'll check your ribs and belly." She could apply honey to his cuts without a vision to direct her, but she needed Shaddai's wisdom to detect internal injuries. Working quickly, she pleaded with God to speak, but He remained silent. Her heart pounded wildly. *Shaddai, where are You? I feel like I've lost my right arm without Your breath on my spirit.*

"Lean back so I can check your belly." Hands shaking, she pressed on the man's abdomen and, though it was obviously sensitive, the tenderness seemed commensurate with a simple gut punch. "I don't think you're bleeding inside. I'll wrap your ribs for support so you can keep working."

Before she could turn to gather the strips of linen, he grabbed her arm. "Thank you, prophetess. I'm sorry I have no grain or milk to give for your services." He dropped his eyes in shame.

Miriam cupped his cheek, as she had hundreds of plateau slaves before him. "El Shaddai provides for my needs. He is the One True God, and one day He will deliver us all from bondage."

The man's look of shame turned quickly to a bitter smile. "I hope your healing talents are better than your prophetic skills. El Shaddai cast us aside when Joseph died."

"But He hasn't cast us aside," she said. "He speaks every day if we will only listen. We must never forget we're His chosen people."

The man winced, struggling to sit up. "If this is what it means to be *chosen* by your God, I'd rather serve Anubis and take my chances in Egypt's afterlife."

"Get out." A deep male voice intruded, and Miriam knew without looking that her nephew Eleazar had heard the slave's comment. "You came to my *doda* Miriam for help, but instead you insult her. Now, get

out.” His size and bearing were even more imposing in Miriam’s small room.

“I’m sorry! I’ll—” The slave tried to stand, but Miriam pressed on his shoulders, forcing him back on her mat.

“You’ll sit there until I wrap your chest, and you’ll listen—without interruption—about El Shaddai and His good plan for Israel.” Miriam waved a finger at her nephew on her way to the basket of linen bandages. “And you will stop frightening my patients.”

Eleazar crossed the small room in four strides. “Pharaoh has summoned you to the throne hall—immediately. You don’t have time to help an ungrateful slave.”

“Pharaoh can wait. There will be more wounded today because of this heat. I’m sure Pharaoh would rather see bricks made than talk to a simple midwife.” She stepped around her towering nephew and began binding the slave’s chest as tightly as he could bear. “Now, this is why we are called Shaddai’s *chosen* people. When He chose to bless Abraham, He promised that all nations would be blessed through him and that Abraham’s descendants would one day possess the land of Canaan. But our bondage isn’t a surprise to El Shaddai. He warned Abraham that his descendants would become slaves for four hundred years in a country not their own before they inherited the Land of Promise.”

“Doda, now.” Eleazar tapped his sandal on the packed-dirt floor. “Pharaoh said you must come *now*.”

Miriam eyed her nephew beneath a scornful brow and returned her attention to the wayward slave. “If my abba Amram’s calculations are correct, we will see the end of the four hundred years in our lifetimes.” A shiver of excitement raced through her. “Can you imagine being free from this place?” She tied the last bandage and expected the slave to share her joy.

Instead, she saw only anger.

“Your family lives in Goshen, in the valley, which means long life and plenty of provisions. Not so with families on the plateau. My abba died when I was four, and no doubt I’ll die before my son grows to manhood.” He turned to Eleazar. “I mean no disrespect to the prophethess, but

I cannot trust a God who not only allows His people to suffer, but allows such disparity among us.”

Miriam’s heart plummeted. She knew Eleazar’s response before he spoke it.

“I don’t trust such a God either, friend. Now, get out.”

*Amram married his father's sister Jochebed,
who bore him Aaron and Moses. Amram
lived 137 years.*

—EXODUS 6:20

Eleazar's patience was wearing thin, but Doda refused to leave until he visited with Saba Amram and Savta Jochebed. "We appreciate that you share your palace rations with us each day," Doda said, "but your grandparents are more interested in seeing you than your food."

She was right, of course. Saba and Savta would be terribly disappointed if they woke and found both he and Doda gone, and Eleazar would rather face the Hittites in battle than disappoint his grandparents.

Slipping through the dividing curtain into the adjoining room, Doda knelt beside two sleeping forms. Saba Amram lay on his side, back facing the door, arm over the frail frame of his beloved Jochebed. They'd been married, as near as they could remember, almost ninety inundations.

Doda Miriam had lived in this two-room dwelling all her life—except for the time she'd served as handmaid to the pharaoh's daughter, the same woman who had saved Doda's brother Moses and raised him as a prince of Egypt. When Moses's heritage was discovered, the pharaoh's daughter was saved from execution by the king's merciful bodyguard and hidden among Hebrews. She was given a Hebrew name—Bithiah—and married the Chief Linen Keeper, a slave named Mered, who shared adjoining rooms with Doda, Saba, and Savta in this long house. Mered's family had grown and moved to another village, but Doda had remained here to care for Saba and Savta—and everyone else too poor to afford Egyptian physicians.

Eleazar ran his fingers over the marks on the doorway, lines drawn to measure his height as he grew up. His younger brother Ithamar's growth was measured on the opposite doorframe. They'd always been Doda's favorites—no doubt because Abba Aaron and Ima Elisheba were too busy doting on his older brothers, Nadab and Abihu. A sigh escaped before Eleazar could recapture it.

Doda jostled Saba Amram's shoulder. "Eleazar brought his rations for us. Your favorites, nabk-berry bread and boiled goose eggs." She waved the delights in front of his nose as he woke, and Eleazar chuckled at the sparkle in Saba's rheumy eyes.

The commotion woke Savta Jochebed, and her sweet smile welcomed Eleazar like a warm hug. "Good morning, our sweet boy."

Eleazar was forty-seven years old, bodyguard of Pharaoh's second firstborn, and as a war-seasoned military slave, had been given the position of slave commander at Rameses. Would he always be Savta's *sweet boy*? An unsanctioned grin assaulted him. He hoped so. "Good morning, Savta. Are you well?"

"Of course we are well." Saba bounced his eyebrows. "We have nabk-berry bread!"

Chuckles around their small circle released Eleazar from the shroud of Pharaoh's morning tantrum but reminded him of his duty. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but Ramesses has summoned Doda Miriam to the throne hall to interpret his nightmares."

"Nightmares." Doda whispered reverently. "Those must be the dreams El Shaddai showed me last night." With a wistful sigh, she set aside the food and reached for Saba and Savta. "Pharaoh can wait until we help your grandparents sit up against the wall to eat their fine meal."

Eleazar sprang into action, lifting them gently and stuffing straw behind their backs to make them more comfortable.

When he glanced around the room, Doda was returning with a bowl of water and cloths. "I'll just give them a quick bath before we go."

"Absolutely not!" His heated reply startled his elders, and the gentle rebuke in Saba Amram's knitted brow silenced him.

Saba searched Eleazar's face as if mining for copper. "You're frightened for Miriam to appear in front of Pharaoh. Why?" Saba Amram had always been able to read him like a scroll.

"I mentioned to Prince Ram months ago that Doda interpreted dreams. It was stupid of me to ever mention my family. Now he has a weapon to use against me." Eleazar held Doda Miriam's gaze. "Simply interpret the dreams and leave. Say nothing to antagonize Ramesses."

"If El Shaddai tells me the meaning, I'll give the interpretation."

The floor seemed to shift beneath him. "If? You always know the meanings of dreams. What do you mean *if*?"

Doda waved away his question like a fly from her stew. "Shaddai showed me the dreams, so we must believe He'll give the interpretation when I stand before Ramesses."

Eleazar opened his mouth, but no words came. Groping in the silence, he looked to Saba Amram for help. "I can't take her to Ramesses if she can't interpret the dreams. He'll kill her."

"Come here, daughter." Saba extended his blue-veined hand and pulled Doda close. "El Shaddai has been faithful to us our whole lives. But you must be careful. Egypt's kings once dealt shrewdly with the Hebrews, but Ramesses abandons all pretense. He needs no reason to kill a Hebrew."

Doda bowed on one knee and pressed her forehead against Saba's hand. "Pray for me, Abba. I don't feel El Shaddai's presence this morning."

Fear sucked the wind from Eleazar's chest as he watched his three elders bow their heads in prayer. He felt like an outsider—as he always did when they spoke of their God—but worse, he felt responsible for leading his *doda* into danger.

With a wink and a kiss, Doda received encouragement from Saba and Savta, rocked to her feet, and grabbed her walking stick on her way out of the long house. Barely a few steps outside, Eleazar could stand it no longer. "What do you mean you don't feel Shaddai's presence? He's invisible. How can an invisible God be any more present one day than another?"

She answered without slowing her pace or looking his direction. “El Shaddai’s presence is more real to me than the Nile. He is the air I breathe. He is the beating of my heart. I converse with Him all day long, and He replies—in His own way. But this morning was different. He is silent.”

Eleazar swallowed a growing lump in his throat and halted his doda. “I can’t take you to Ramesses unless I *know* your God will give you the interpretation. I can’t keep you safe when we’re surrounded by Egyptian guards in the throne hall.”

“*You* can’t keep anyone safe, dear.” She patted his cheek. “That’s up to El Shaddai.”

The look in her eyes was sincere, but sincerity wouldn’t save her from Ramesses. “If I had left you and Saba and Savta in El Shaddai’s care all these years, you would have starved by now.” How many hundreds of times had they had this conversation?

With a snort, she began marching toward the city again, but Doda needed to face the glaring truth. “Half of my rations barely keep you, Saba, and Savta alive. Why don’t you tend to the injuries of people who can pay you?”

“Sometimes the slaves bring me grain or a loaf of bread, and I have a small garden. El Shaddai always provides for us.”

“Why can’t Abba Aaron share a loaf of bread once in a while? Or my selfish ima give you some of her grain rations?”

Doda stopped and planted both fists on her hips. “You will not speak disrespectfully of your parents. Regardless of their shortcomings, you will honor them because they gave you life.” She cocked her head, waiting for Eleazar’s acknowledgement.

With his single nod, they resumed their walk. Eleazar reached inside his leather breast piece for his portion of rations and handed his bread to Doda. “You didn’t have time to eat before we left. Eat.”

She accepted, took her first bite, and lolled it to the side that still had a few teeth. “Why don’t you talk while I eat?” Her smile was full of mischief.

He tried to maintain his stern bearing, but a chuckle betrayed him.

They walked on a narrow path between canals that had been swollen

by the Nile's inundation. Slaves lined both sides, making mud bricks for the city's extensive building projects, while Egyptian slave drivers cracked their whips and shouted orders. Eleazar kept his voice low and his eyes averted. "These dreams have made Pharaoh even more unpredictable. You must be careful. Ramesses may tolerate some of your antics because he respects our family's longevity. Age means blessing even to Egyptians, but please, none of your impudence."

"I think that's more than I've heard you say since last year's inundation." She raised both eyebrows and took another bite of bread. "I'll interpret the dreams, and then we'll leave so you and I can talk about your marriage."

That grin of hers broke him every time. He laughed and squeezed her arm tight against his side. "I'm not getting married—ever. You're relentless."

"I learned it from your saba Amram. Why do you think he's 137 years old?"

The reminder both warmed and terrified Eleazar. Doda, Saba, and Savta were his life. The thought of losing them haunted him day and night. Why had he mentioned to Prince Ramesses that Doda Miriam interpreted one of his dreams years ago? He'd been so careful never to reveal family members' names. Too many Hebrew women were punished for a husband's or father's sins.

He pulled Doda closer as they walked. "Doda, just interpret his dream. Nothing else. No more words. Then I'll take you home."

Popping the last bite of bread into her mouth, she clapped bread-crumbs from her hands. "I promise I'll say only what my Shaddai tells me to say."

No matter how much he begged, she'd never promise anything else. *Her Shaddai*, as she called Him, had been the single light in her dark world. Since his first battlefield, Eleazar had seen the folly of trusting any god, but he would never begrudge Doda or his grandparents their archaic traditions. In fact, their beliefs were undoubtedly what had kept them alive through the changes they'd seen in their lifetimes.

He watched Doda's expression change to deep sadness as they left the

canals and entered the thriving industrial section of the city of Rameses. She'd often told him of the single linen shop her friend Mered oversaw before the quiet Avaris estate grew to become the capital city of Rameses. Now this industrial section boasted multiple buildings, eight of which housed the finest byssus-linen production in the world.

The city of Rameses was the last stop on the Way of Horus—the world's most lucrative trade route. In addition to weaving the byssus linen, Hebrew slaves kept the king's brewery, winery, and metal shop producing other quality products that were traded in markets from Elam to Hatti.

Pharaoh Ramesses had built this namesake city on the backs of his Hebrew slaves. After using their blood for mortar and crushing their bones with its bricks, he made the city his home.

"Keep your head bowed as we go through the gates," Eleazar said as they approached the palace complex. "The guards know I'm Prince Ram's guard, but they'll use any excuse to beat us both."

She bowed her head and remained silent.

"How long since you've visited the palace complex?" He wasn't certain when she'd last served the king's harem as midwife.

Head still bowed, Doda spoke in barely a whisper. "I haven't left the slave village since Pharaoh Sety died, almost thirty years ago. When Ramesses became king, he wanted only Egyptian midwives attending his harem."

They passed through the gates unmolested, and Eleazar breathed easier. Doda tugged at the sleeve of her robe, and Eleazar tucked her under his arm. "No one will see your harem brand. They use a different symbol for Ramesses's concubines anyway."

Her eyes glistened. "Do you really believe people would think I'm Ramesses's concubine?" She shook her head with a derisive grin. "Women with a harem brand today could be concubines or simply slave girls, but when I bore this brand, it meant the master possessed a woman *completely*." Doda looked up to impress her meaning. "The master who owned me was my brother Moses—posing as an Egyptian prince."

Of course, everyone knew the story of Eleazar's uncle, Prince Mehy. Best friend and vizier to Ramesses's father, Pharaoh Sety, Mehy had been a Hebrew infant rescued from the Nile by King Tut's sister and raised as the Egyptian master of the Avaris estate. Tut's sister, Amira Anippe, had hidden his Hebrew parentage but secretly allowed Miriam to call him *Moses*. When Eleazar was a boy of seven, Prince Mehy had come knocking on Saba's long-house door in the night, begging help to flee. Pharaoh Sety had discovered his Hebrew heritage and ordered his execution. Prince Mehy stood at Saba's door, trembling in a filthy rough-spun robe flung over his pristine linen *shenti* and Gold of Praise collar. Eleazar recognized Hebrew fear on his Egyptian-looking uncle before the man ran into the night. *Good riddance, Prince Mehy.*

"Are you listening?" Doda Miriam shook his arm. "My brother Moses owned this estate before anyone knew he was a Hebrew."

"I know, Doda." Eleazar pointed toward the palace bathing room at the base of the entry ramp and steered her toward it, hoping to distract her from the rest of the oft-told story. It didn't work.

"Moses branded me so the estate guards would think I was his concubine. The mark made me untouchable. It protected me until I was past the age of the guards' interest."

Eleazar nodded but kept silent. Why did his elders insist on telling the same stories again and again? He drew her close and kissed the top of her head as he led her into the public bath chamber.

Ceremonial washing had become mandatory since the days when Doda visited the palace. Every slave, merchant, criminal, or king must now be cleansed before bowing to Egypt's god on his throne. Eleazar grabbed a clean robe and guided his *doda* toward a stone sink. "Splash your hands, arms, face, and neck." He kept his head bowed, but Doda gawked at the crowd of male and female bathers. Some disrobed completely in the open, while others stepped behind the curtained partitions lining the inner wall. Eleazar shook Doda gently from her trance. "Keep your eyes downcast and bathe quickly."

He waited as she took a stone wash basin behind one of the curtained

partitions. Though he'd visited the bathing room a dozen times, even he found it hard not to stare. Nubians, wearing nothing but strings and feathers, splashed cool Nile water over their deep black skin. Merchants from the Far East carefully avoided getting water on their oiled and curled beards, and chained prisoners from Hatti winced as the water grazed open wounds.

Doda reappeared wearing the simple but luxurious white linen robe, her rough-spun robe draped over the brand on her forearm. After emptying her small basin into the gutter that funneled the dirty water back to the river, she nestled under his arm. "I'm ready."

Eleazar's chest constricted. He'd never realized how much the brand bothered her. "Doda, you must leave your old robe in the dressing room. You can't take it into the throne hall."

"The sleeves are too short." Her eyes pleaded, but her jaw was set like stone.

"Doda . . ." Eleazar glanced at the crowded bathing chamber and guided her to a secluded corner. "You're eighty-six. Everyone knows Prince Mehy's story—"

"But not everyone knows I was his sister," she said too loud, gaining the attention of several bathers. Doda took a deep breath and lowered her voice. "Those who do know I was Prince Mehy's sister may think the worst. The only Hebrews who knew the truth, other than your grandparents, are dead." Her eyes pooled with tears as she searched Eleazar's face. "Gossip and this brand made marriage impossible. But my devotion to Shaddai made marriage unnecessary."

Stunned, Eleazar had never realized the brand caused Hebrews to believe Doda was defiled by her own brother. He burned with new hatred for his dohd Moses—a man he vaguely remembered. "I didn't know you wanted to marry."

She wiped her eyes and waved off his answer. "Well, of course I didn't want to marry. What man could ever fill my heart like El Shaddai?" She poked his chest with her bony finger. "But it would have been nice to be asked, I tell you. Come now, Pharaoh is waiting."

Eleazar shook his head. Some things weren't worth the battle. As

they began their march up the palace ramp, Eleazar contemplated the imminent confrontation. His seemingly undaunted doda would address Egypt's most capricious Pharaoh with a rough-spun robe draped over her arm. For the first time in years, Eleazar wished he believed in a god that heard his prayers.



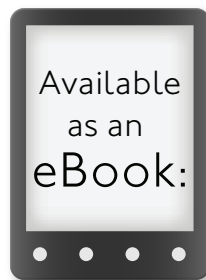
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