



KIARA KING AND
THE ENCHANTED
EMERALD

Carol McCracken

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KIARA KING AND THE ENCHANTED EMERALD

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Chapter One

The Queen of Emeraldo sat staring out of the palace window at the square below, daylight reflecting off her green skin. Her emerald eyes were troubled and her beautiful face anxious.

She stood up, her long, jade gown flowing over the bump where her baby lay cozy inside, the hem of the skirt swishing across the floor as she began pacing back and forth across the room.

Time was running out.

She sat down again, feeling breathless, and pressed her green hands to her stomach as she felt her baby stir. She gave a cry. The Queen knew the baby was about to be born.

It was too soon, she hadn't yet finished making plans.

In the next room, her husband heard her cry and came running. He saw the queen bent over and ran to her.

As he helped her toward the bed, she clutched his arm. "There is something..." she gasped, as she fought for breath, "I have to...I need to...tell you."

Kiara lay curled up in her bed, dreaming.

Gown after beautiful gown floated in the air above her. Which one should she choose? They were all beautiful. She reached up to take hold of one but her hand refused to budge. She tried again. Her hand felt as if it had a heavy weight on it. She felt herself begin to shake and the beautiful gowns disappeared.

"Kiara, Kiara, wake up. It's time you were out of bed."

Kiara slowly opened her eyes, looking up into the green eyes of Nurse. She frowned for a moment and then her face broke into a grin.

"Oh Nurse, I was having such a lovely dream." She reached up with her arms and stretched as she took a deep breath. "There were gowns everywhere, such beautiful gowns. I was about to choose one when you shook me awake."

Nurse laughed. Kiara loved her laugh. Nurse was short and podgy, unlike Kiara's mother, the queen, who was tall and slim. Though not yet twelve, Kiara was almost as tall as Nurse. When Nurse laughed, her ample stomach wobbled. Kiara loved the old Nurse; she made Kiara feel safe and content.

Nurse had been in Kiara's life from the very beginning and had looked after her mother before her, too. Nurse and their old servant, Olga, were the only people Kiara knew in Emeraldo with hair so white. Everyone else had dark brown or grey hair. Kiara loved Nurse's white hair and teased her about it constantly.

Nurse was easily the oldest person in the City. Kiara asked her age many times but Nurse always refused to tell her. She was also Chief Healer and was loved by almost everyone.

“You’re far too obsessed with gowns. It’s time you thought of something else,” said Nurse. But Kiara saw the sparkle in her green eyes as she spoke.

“Have you seen my coronation gown yet?” The day when Kiara would be crowned Queen-in-waiting was fast approaching. “Can you give me a hint, just a tiny hint, of what it looks like?” Kiara’s eyes were pleading.

Nurse laughed again. “I’ve told you, Kiara, again and again, the Queen hasn’t let anyone set eyes on it.”

“But what if it doesn’t fit?” Kiara asked anxiously.

“We’ve made sure it will fit.”

Kiara was delighted to have trapped her. “If you know it fits, then you must have seen it.”

Nurse burst out laughing, her stomach jiggling up and down.

“You’re too sharp for your own good.” Then she became serious. “Truly, Kiara, I haven’t seen it. I helped the seamstress and the Queen make a gown but it was only a practice one, made from ordinary material. I haven’t seen the finished gown or the material it will be made of. Now up you get. Breakfast is waiting.”

Kiara laughed as she jumped off the bed. She shook her head and her long, dark-brown, wavy hair flew out in all directions and then settled down her back, almost to her waist. Her green eyes sparkled with the joy of life.

Nurse quickly checked Kiara’s energy levels, was satisfied and left the room.

“Good morning, Mama, Papa.” Kiara smiled at them as she walked in.

“Good morning, Kiara,” Papa replied. He smiled at her and looked to Mama. Kiara knew what he was going to say. “I have my two favorite girls with me.”

Kiara giggled. “Papa, you say that every morning.”

“Because it’s true.”

Kiara looked over at Mama. She knew she was the image of her mother at the same age; she’d seen images. They had the same long, dark-brown, wavy hair and the same emerald eyes, although Kiara believed Mama’s to be deeper in color. They could have been taken for twins except for one thing: Mama’s skin was green. Most people in Emeraldo had green skin. The one exception was Kiara, whose skin was light pink, the same as her grandmother’s had been. Papa too was green and his hair was a slightly lighter shade of brown. Kiara thought he had the most beautiful smile in all of Emeraldo. His mouth would slowly creep up at the sides and open to show his pearly white teeth. Then his eyes would smile and sparkle.

Kiara sat down, a smile still on her face. It was the most exciting time of her young life. In only a week, she would receive her emerald. She gave a wriggle of excitement.

“What are your plans for today?” Mama asked.

Kiara almost choked as she hastily swallowed the forkful of food she’d just put into her mouth. “I’m meeting Kingsley and we’re going to the museum to look at the gowns.”

“Again? You’ll wear them out, you’ve looked at them so many times,” Papa told her, laughing.

Kiara giggled. “Of course we won’t, Papa.”

“I was only teasing,” he said, still laughing at his joke.

Kiara looked over at Mama, a pleading look on her face. “Could I have just one quick peek?”

“You already know the answer to that,” Mama said as she shook her head, a smile on her face.

Kiara had known Mama would say no but she was happy to hear her laugh. Mama rarely laughed these days. Kiara knew she was worried about Kirsh. These days he strutted around as if he were king. Kiara had mentioned this to Mama but she’d told her not to worry.

Kiara tried hard to look disappointed at Mama’s reply but she was too excited to let it upset her.

“That reminds me, Kiara, I need to check on your emerald. They were shortening the chain yesterday.” Her hand went to the enchanted emerald she wore on a chain around her neck.

Kiara watched it glow as Mama grasped it in her hand. It was the biggest emerald in Emeraldo, a kingdom founded and run on the power of emeralds and was worn only by the reigning monarch.

The enchanted emerald had been found many years ago, by King Krispin, the founder of Emeraldo. Krispin’s village had been attacked by the Romans and he’d led some of the villagers in an escape. Desperately searching for somewhere to hide, Krispin had discovered an opening in a rock face, behind a large stone. Slipping inside, he’d found there was room enough to hide at least some of those with him, so he’d begun helping them through, one by one. To his astonishment, everyone had been able to fit into what he’d thought was a small space. On exploring further, they’d discovered they were at one end of a huge cavern, beside a small underground lake.

Knowing the Romans would be watching for their return, Krispin’s group stayed inside their hiding place, creeping out only to raid nearby villages for food. On one such raid, they came across Krispin’s older brother, Lester, who was still eluding the Romans. Krispin invited him to join those hiding in the cavern and as he showed his brother the cavern, they spotted the emerald, glowing softly on the lake floor. Both went to plunge into the lake but Lester was stopped by a mysterious force and it was Krispin who retrieved the emerald.

That night, while Krispin slept, Lester attempted to steal the emerald, only to be forced back once again. Waking up, Krispin ordered Lester to leave but his brother refused and rushed at Krispin, intending to kill him and take the emerald. Again the emerald protected Krispin and Lester was killed by its mysterious force. Krispin hung the emerald around his neck—as did every king and queen who came after him.

Over time, Krispin discovered the emerald was enchanted and had special powers, which only he was able to use. One such power was the ability to duplicate the little food they had. It also allowed him to read other people's minds—a power that was kept secret from all but Krispin's family and the Chief Healer. Later, many more emeralds were found and while they had some special powers, none was as great as the enchanted emerald.

Krispin used the emerald's energy and power to carve the city of Emeraldo out of the rock. The cavern became a huge square with a palace and library, plus small apartments, each with just two or three rooms, for people to live in. The location of the hidden entrance became lost over time, known only to the reigning monarch and a chosen few.

Over the years, the population of Emeraldo grew until it could no longer support all those living there. Two groups left to look for places to build new cities. The first group discovered sapphires and built their city on the power of those sapphires. The second group discovered rubies and founded their city with those.

To stop the city becoming overcrowded again, women were only able to conceive by taking a special potion. When someone died, the potion would be given to the couple next on the list, so ensuring that the population never exceeded twenty thousand. If a woman had twins or triplets, one child would be chosen to live and the others put to death. No one living could remember a multiple birth.

Over the years, the green glow emitted from the emeralds caused the skins of those in the city to take on an olive green color. The kings and queens, however, lacked the pigment that gave Emeraldo's inhabitants their green skin and instead retained King Krispin's pink skin. The one exception was the present queen, Queen Krystal, who had been born with pale-green skin. Kiara, her daughter, had inherited the skin of her ancestor, King Krispin.

Chapter Two

Kiara walked slowly down the stairs, step by step, her head erect, trying to look majestic. She slipped slightly on the final step and would have fallen, had Kingsley not put his hand out to steady her. Kiara laughed and skipped into the center of the Square. She looked up at the dome above as she twirled. It made her dizzy, so she stopped.

“I love the dome and I love the flowers in the middle of the green ring. When I see them, they remind me of the gardens and I love all the colors.”

Kingsley laughed. “You love everything.”

Kingsley was two years older than Kiara and was the son of Mama’s closest friend since childhood, Julianna. While Mama and Julianna were still close, their friendship had waned slightly when Julianna married Kirsh, the strong and ambitious Chief Administrator. He’d inherited the position, which was second in importance only to the monarch.

Kirsh longed to be king and it was no secret he felt his claim to the throne was stronger than Queen Krystal’s, being descended from the elder of the founding brothers. But the monarchy was always inherited in direct line from the second son. With the birth of his son, Kingsley, Kirsh had become almost as important as the Queen, save for one thing—the three things, in fact, needed to become the reigning monarch. He would never possess the enchanted emerald, the staff and the ring.

The Queen appeared in public with her emerald and staff but only she knew the location of the ring. All those Kirsh had questioned claimed no knowledge of the ring and try as he might, he’d been unable to find out any clues as to its location. Even Nurse had denied knowledge of the ring but the wary look in her eyes had suggested otherwise.

When Kiara was born, Kirsh had devised a plan for his family to gain power—he would marry his son to the daughter of the Queen. Kiara and Kingsley had become best friends and everyone assumed they would one day marry. Recently however, Aidan, the official in charge of the emerald treasury, had whispered an alternative plan to him. With the help of Aidan and a man from the Land Above, Kirsh would overthrow the present Queen and set himself up as King.

“I can’t believe my coronation’s next week,” Kiara said. “You know Mama still won’t let me take a peek at my gown? She says it’s to be a surprise.”

Kingsley smiled to himself. They had this conversation daily, sometimes more than daily. “You’ll get to see it soon enough.”

“But I want to see it now.” Kiara frowned. “I’ve looked at the gowns in the museum so many times but I still don’t know what mine will be like, they’re all so different.”

Kingsley laughed. “Maybe because there are only three. There have only been three queens.”

“And I’ll be the fourth.” Kiara giggled. “Maybe there will never be another king. The family only seems to produce girls these days.”

“Maybe our child will be a boy.”

“That’s if we get married. I haven’t said yes, yet,” she reminded him.

“And I haven’t asked you,” he replied.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Kingsley truly loved Kiara, she was like his little sister. They both knew they would marry in the future.

“Let’s go take one more look.” Kiara ran off with Kingsley following.

“They look as if they were made for each other.” Queen Krystal smiled at her two friends, Julianna and Emily.

Julianna had been the Queen’s best friend but when she’d married Kirsh, Emily had taken her place.

Julianna knew why—the Queen mistrusted the husband she’d chosen. It tore at Julianna’s heart. She too was now beginning to distrust the man she’d married. She’d seen him and Aidan whispering together and she feared for her friend Krystal and her family.

Julianna nodded and moved closer to the Queen so she could watch through the palace window. “Krystal,” Julianna began tentatively.

The Queen turned, her attention taken from Kiara and Kingsley for the moment. The look on Julianna’s face was one of apprehension.

“I’m worried. I think Aidan might be plotting something and Kirsh may be involved. What with the coronation so close...”

The Queen looked at her, startled. “What do you mean?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know. But I have an uneasy feeling.”

The Queen smiled again but Julianna glimpsed anxiety in her eyes. “I’m sure everything is fine.”

Julianna stared at the Queen for a moment and then turned and slowly walked away.

The Queen watched her go. Thanks to the power of the emerald around her neck, she was able to listen to Julianna’s thoughts but there was nothing in them other than a feeling of anxiety.

She turned to Emily. “The coronation is soon and when that has taken place, there’s nothing Kirsh can do. I know how he covets my position; he believes he should be king. You know Kirsh asked me to marry him?”

Emily looked at her in surprise, shaking her head.

“I might have thought about it. We’d always been good friends but...” she smiled, “I’d just met Matthias and fallen in love. Soon after, he asked Julianna, so it seems fitting her son and my daughter should marry, which I think they will. You just have to watch them together.” She reached up and grasped the emerald around her neck. “Besides, as long as I wear this, I’m safe from his interference.”

Emily shuddered. She didn’t trust Kirsh. “I hope you’re right, Krystal. I’d hate anything to happen to you or Kiara.”

“Kiara?” The Queen looked startled at the mention of her daughter’s name.

Emily nodded. “I’m not so much afraid for you, as for Kiara.”

Kiara led Kingsley to the museum.

“I still like that one the best, it’s so beautiful.” She pointed to the gown in the middle. Her head inclined to the right as she twisted a strand of her long brown hair. She gave a sigh. “I’d better go to my duplication class.”

He nodded. “I wish I could come and watch,” he said eagerly. “I’d love to be able to duplicate.”

Kiara laughed. He’d asked so many times and the answer was always the same. “You know you can’t. Besides, don’t you have a class with the scientists?”

“Oh yes, they’re teaching us some exciting things. You should—” he began but Kiara had already run off.

The Queen and Emily arrived at the museum just as Kiara and Kingsley were leaving. They heard a movement and turned to see Kirsh watching them.

“Queen Krystal.” He inclined his head. “I trust all is well with you?”

“Everything is ready for the coronation, if that’s what you’re asking,” she replied.

He stared at her, saying nothing.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to go to the treasury to check on the emerald Kiara is to receive at her coronation.” She thought she saw a look of panic flit across his face but searched his mind and found nothing to cause alarm.

Kirsh thought quickly. “I was looking for you—I needed to let you know there’s a problem with the crops,” he said. “They appear to be failing.”

The Queen looked at him in surprise. “I was there only a couple of days ago and the crops were fine.”

Kirsh shrugged. “I’m only relaying a message.”

The Queen knew she’d need to check, the crops were too important to the city for her to not.

When King Krispin had first founded Emeraldo, there had been little food available to them. All he’d managed to steal in the raids were vegetables. Almost starving, the little group had contemplated leaving the safety of the cavern and returning above, knowing they faced a stark choice: starvation or the Romans. Then Krispin had found the emerald, at first unaware it would be their salvation.

One day he’d been staring at their few remaining vegetables, knowing there was little he could do to replenish their supplies, the village gardens were already bare, when he’d felt the emerald vibrate. Krispin had watched, incredulous, as the few vegetables multiplied until they became a pile.

Over the years, the descendants of those who first fled to the cave had established gardens, with emeralds situated at points around them. Crops grew abundantly—the

emeralds gave out the light and energy the plants needed to grow, drawing their power from the large emerald that now hung around the Queen's neck. The nutrients in the crops were such that nothing more was needed in their diet.

One of the Queen's duties was to ensure the crops grew, so those in the city never starved. "I'll go and check," she said, hurrying out of the museum. She paused to make sure no one was watching and then disappeared.

Damn it, thought Kirsh. He'd devised the story of the crops to keep the Queen away from the emerald storehouse but she was going there anyway. He turned and ran to the nearest teleportation room.

"Quick. We have to replace the coronation emerald," Kirsh called to those in the room as he burst in.

Aidan looked up. "Why?"

"The Queen is on her way to check it's ready."

Aidan shook his head. "But it's been promised to Hunter."

"I know that. Has it gone yet?" Kirsh's expression was panicked.

"No, not yet. It's packed and about to go with the rest." He pointed to a suitcase on the other side of the room. "I'm waiting on Damian, he's coming today to pick them up."

Damian was one of the few people from the Land Above who knew about and visited Emeraldo, a soldier who for some years had been entering Emeraldo illegally to trade in emeralds with Kirsh and his men.

"You need to unpack it—all of them."

"What? The lot?"

"Any the Queen might want to see."

"Have you any idea how long it took me to pack them?"

"Just do it and quickly. She'll be here any minute." Kirsh knew that if the Queen noticed any emeralds were missing, their plans would come to nothing.

They'd barely finished unpacking and replacing the stones, when there was a knock at the door. Kirsh ran to check who it was.

The treasury was the only place in the city with security. The city's existence depended not only on the power of the emerald worn by the king or queen but also on other emeralds. There were emeralds set at intervals along the city corridors to light the way; the lighting in the houses came from the emeralds' energy and the large emerald around the Queen's neck drew much of its power from the larger emeralds in the treasury. The staff, with another emerald set at the top, also drew some of its power from those held in the treasury. Thus the Queen made sure the treasury was carefully guarded.

Kirsh opened the door, surprised the Queen had come so quickly. Those in the treasury stood and bowed as she entered. She smiled and nodded her head in acknowledgment.

"I've come to check the emerald is ready for the coronation."

“Ready and waiting, my Queen,” Kirsh told her, hoping she would leave quickly. Damian was due to arrive within the hour and it would be catastrophic if he were to arrive while the Queen was here.

He watched as she walked over to the cabinet which housed not only the coronation emerald but also many of the larger stones.

The emerald around the Queen’s neck was the most precious of all and held magical powers. She picked up the emerald she’d be giving to Kiara at her coronation ceremony. Its power was strong, so she knew it to be genuine. Breathing a sigh of relief the emerald and treasury were safe, she felt her earlier unease disappear.

“Thank you,” she said.

As the Queen left, Kirsh turned with a sigh of relief. “Pack everything up. They go as planned. Make sure Damian gives you the package for me when you hand over the stones.”

Kirsh felt excitement begin to well in his heart. Everything was going according to plan.

Chapter Three

Kiara woke from a deep sleep. It was still early but she was too excited to lie in bed. Today was her twelfth birthday and the day of her coronation.

She jumped up and hurried into the main room of the palace, stopping as she saw a gown—her gown—displayed across a chair. Kiara couldn't tear her eyes from it. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. It reminded her of the beauty of the gardens she so loved. It had the colors of all the flowers that grew there.

Kiara walked slowly toward it, almost dragging her feet, worried that if she got too close, it might suddenly disappear. She reached out tentatively and touched the material. It was so soft. She touched it a second time and a smile spread across her face. She'd spent hours in front of the coronation gowns in the museum wondering what her gown would look like but nothing she'd imagined was as beautiful as this.

Kiara looked up to see her parents watching her reaction. They were smiling at each other.

"It's soooo beautiful." The look on Kiara's face was one of sheer delight. She brought the skirt of the gown slowly to her cheek; it felt soft, so soft. She heard Mama laugh at her reaction.

"It's your special gown for tonight, when you will be crowned and receive your emerald." A look of slight apprehension flicked over the Queen's face but it was quickly gone. She smiled at Kiara. "I've waited for this day since you were born. You like the gown?"

Kiara clapped her hands together. "Like it? I love it. I've never seen anything so beautiful. Where did you get it? Can I try it on now? Please?" she implored.

But Mama shook her head. "Tradition says you may wear the gown only at the time of your coronation. After that it will go into the museum with the other coronation gowns."

"But what if it doesn't fit?" Kiara's face was anxious.

"It will be a perfect fit," Mama assured her. "The seamstress and I have made sure."

Kiara closed her eyes. She imagined herself dressed in the gown, walking down the steps to the square with the high dome, where coronations always took place. She'd practiced it so many times. She gave a sigh. "I wish it was this evening already."

"This evening will soon be here." Her mother's smile was again replaced by a look of apprehension. Kiara saw her glance at Papa. He nodded. Kiara watched, puzzled, as Mama put her hands behind her neck. As they came forward, Kiara saw that she had undone the chain that held the precious royal emerald. She watched, transfixed, as Mama walked toward her, the emerald held in front of her.

"This will one day belong to you. Let's try it on."

Kiara felt a lurch in the pit of her stomach. She looked at Mama, confused. "But I can't, it belongs to you. You can't give it to another. It's your protection."

“Of course it’s mine. But just for today I’d like you to wear it. You can give it back before your coronation, when you will receive your own emerald, which will protect you. Tomorrow we’ll begin lessons on to how to use the power of the necklaces.”

Kiara wasn’t totally convinced but she stood still as Mama placed the emerald around her neck. The clasp closed immediately and Mama stepped back.

“See, it fits perfectly. Tomorrow I’ll show you where to find the ring and I’ll explain its powers.”

“The ring? Tell me now,” Kiara begged.

“Tomorrow will be soon enough,” Mama replied. “You need to know how all three objects govern: the staff, the emerald and the ring. I know you’ll be a great queen one day, Kiara, just like your grandmother.”

Wearing the emerald, Kiara felt more sensitive to her surroundings. She stiffened and a look of terror came over her face. She could hear Kirsh and others outside and they sounded angry...very angry, and hostile.

“What’s the matter, Kiara?” Mama asked.

Before Kiara had time to reply, the door burst open and Kirsh stood there, several men at his back. He was holding an unfamiliar metal object, which he pointed at her. Kiara heard a loud bang and something whizzed past her, missing by inches. Kiara turned to see where it had gone. Mama stood slightly to one side of her, a red stain beginning to spread across her green gown. Terrified, Kiara looked to Papa.

Run. Run...through the secret door. Mama’s thoughts were little more than a whisper in Kiara’s head and she saw her mother crumple to the floor. How could whatever it was have hit Mama? Surely the necklace should have protected her? And then Kiara remembered—she was wearing the necklace.

Kirsh raised the evil-looking metal object again and pointed it at her.

“Go Kiara,” she heard Papa scream. “Run.”

Kiara did as she was told. She heard a bang and a thud and knew whatever had killed Mama had killed Papa too.

Without thinking, Kiara did as she’d been told and ran. A door appeared in the wall in front of her and Kiara pulled it open and ran through, stumbling as it slammed shut behind her. There were stairs and while she had no idea where they led, there was nowhere else to go.

Kiara ran up them into a barrier of mist, which she burst through. Bright light blinded her and she put her hands over her eyes, removing them slowly after a moment. Looking down, she thought she might still be in Emeraldo. The ground was the same color green but it felt prickly under her feet. She looked up and saw tall trees—many tall trees. Nowhere in Emeraldo were there tall trees in such numbers. Above her there was blue, as far as her eyes could see. She was looking up at the sky. Only the Land Above had blue sky. The barrier she had burst through had taken her from Emeraldo into the Land Above.

Chapter Four

Kirsh watched Kiara disappear through the door. *She's gone*, he thought. He snatched the staff from where it lay. "It's mine, it's finally mine." He held it up, a triumphant smile on his face. "I'm finally King."

He looked down at the body of the Queen and reached down to her neck. His smile faded as he saw it was bare. He looked around desperately. "Where's the emerald?" He kicked the body of the Queen, turning it over with his foot. She wore no emerald. He grabbed at her neck again, then began frantically searching around the floor to see if it had fallen off when she fell. But there was no emerald. Kirsh felt sick in his stomach. He needed the emerald to be king.

"Search the room," he screamed. "Search everywhere. Find that emerald."

Several of the men began running around the room. One sent Kiara's beautiful coronation gown tumbling to the floor as he overturned the chair. Aidan ran toward the other side of the room, where Kiara had vanished through the door.

"Stop," Kirsh screamed at him. "Leave her, she's not important. We need to find that emerald."

"There's no point in searching," Aidan replied calmly. "The Queen wasn't wearing the emerald necklace. You saw the bullet hit her. If she'd been wearing the emerald, she couldn't have been killed. It would have protected her. The girl has it. I saw it around her neck. And now you've let her escape."

"It's not possible." Then Kirsh recalled a glimpse of green light flashing at the girl's throat. Aidan was right. Kiara, not the Queen, had been wearing the emerald.

Kirsh's frustration and fury built. "No. No," he screamed. "I had it all planned and she's ruined it." He'd been prepared to let her go but now he couldn't. He needed the emerald before he could be crowned king.

"After her. Now," he bellowed.

Kirsh ran to the wall, the men following. He banged at the spot where the door had been but the wall held. He stepped back and pointed the staff at it. Immediately light blazed out but the wall remained blank.

"No. No," he yelled in frustration.

It should have been easy. He'd planned it so carefully. He'd killed and betrayed friends to get hold of the emerald. Without it, he could never be king—and nothing was going to stop him from being king, especially not a twelve-year-old girl.

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