

THE HALL OF CONDIMENTS

by Jon Hartford

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"I hate my life and want to die." I said, rolling out of bed and stumbling towards the bathroom.

"But it'll be tons of fun, Ken! The Hall of Condiments opens today! I can't believe it! The team and I have spent three or four years on it every day... or, well, sixteen months anyway!"

"Stop ending all your sentences with exclamation marks," I mumbled, shoving the door closed behind me, "you're giving me a headache already."

Stupid Ted. Stupid, stupid, stupid Ted... waking me up so early. It wasn't even... I checked the clock... nine-thirty yet. Okay, okay, he isn't stupid, actually, just a jerk. He makes at least half a million a year salary at Smegglr Research, and if he bothered to negotiate he could probably make twice that. He's a genius, really... member of Mensa, in fact. Or was--he quit a few years ago--said the magazine and all the meetings were boring and it wasn't worth the subscription. He's a miser, too, otherwise he wouldn't be renting an apartment with me.

I couldn't find my toothbrush. Blech, who needs to scrub their teeth anyway. At least there was soap so I could take a shower. "Hurry up in there! We're leaving in five minutes!" Or not. I pulled yesterday's clothes out of the hamper and changed. In my room I searched for fresh socks. What? I didn't wear yesterday's socks. That would just be wrong. Unconscionable. Immoral.

There weren't any fresh socks in my dresser. Fine. Whatever. I heard Ted in the kitchen, bouncing off the walls so I went into his room to steal some socks. He didn't have any either. Wha..? He always had clean socks. I heard a sound behind me. The hamper was beckoning, calling my name. No. I put my shoes on without socks.

At least there was coffee. I sighed in a moment of peaceful, innocent happiness and filled a mug. It was cold. Ted ricocheted past me and threw his breakfast dishes into the recycler, then grabbed his coat off the rack and bounced me out the door. Stupid rubber walls these days... I'll never get used to them.

Our apartment is only three blocks from Smegglr, so Ted usually walks to his workplace. My employer is farther away, so I always take his hover car, of course. Three blocks doesn't seem like far, but with the horrible pollution we have in downtown California, no sane person would want to walk. I had the presence of mind to suggest taking the car. There was a very short argument, which ended when I realized Ted had the keys. We walked.

We ran into Haruhi a block from Smegglr. Well, Ted drug me into her. Not hard though to knock her over, but hard enough to help wake me up.

"Kenny-chan! :) Good moooooorrrrrnniiiiinnnggg. Look what I made... =^_^="

Ugh? It was a stuffed bunny. It was made out of socks. It was hideous. Wait... were those MY socks? How did she get into our apartment? "How did you get into our apartment?" I asked.

"Teddy let me in. 8)" Duh.

"We talked for hours this morning about the awesome cute technology demo we finallllllly

finished and are soooooo happy it's done and it's, like, awesome, and I'm, like, soooooo thrilled you're coming to see it, Kenny-chan. ^o.o^ You're such a great person to want to see it and...." Ugh. I mumbled under my breath that I didn't really want to see it. The gull-wing doors to the bottom floor of the SMGLRHQ skyscraper opened and we went inside. "...And that's why it's soooo awesomely great. ^_^ You'll love it." The doors slammed shut.

We took the elevator up to the twenty-ninth level. The guards rolled their eyes and moved as far away as possible when they saw us coming. I tried to squirm away and make excuses, but Haruhi and Ted had me, one firmly gripping each arm. They babbled about the project the whole way. The elevator scanned Ted's eye before we could get off on the next-to-top floor. The door opened to reveal a huge banner in devious pink text on a rabid fuchsia background set in Comic Sans MS loudly proclaiming, "Welcome to teh Hall of Condiments! :D"

"Wha..? This is what you've been working on for the past..."

"Sixteen months!"

"...sixteen months. The Hall of..."

"CONDIMENTS!" They shouted together. They seemed horribly over-enthusiastic about the whole thing. "And just loooooook at the CUTE banner I made! :D"

"Yeah, that's a total surprise. I'd never have guessed it was your work."

Balloons and confetti littered the area. The colors made me want to rip my eyes out and squeeze them into jelly. Wait, is jelly a condiment? I suppose so...

The entryway room was small and a couple of turnstiles were placed in the only opening into the rest of the floor, which had a big cardboard cut-out around it to make it look like you were going into somebody's mouth. The two of them shoved me through and we stepped onto a moving walkway. The walkway wound through the huge empty room in big loops along the floor. The end of it disappeared through a passageway in a wall on the other side of the room. Light streamed in through the windows along the other two walls. Nothing else was in the room. I looked at Ted, then at Haruhi, then back at Ted. They giggled.

Ted pushed a button on the control panel and the walkway started rolling us along the insane scribble of walkalator. I glanced back at the room and fell over as a giant head in the shape of a wide-mouth jar jumped up out of the floor in front of me. It was wearing a crown. I screamed.

">:D Our presentation is all totally materialized with matter synthesizers, Kenny-chan. Isn't the mayonnaise king cuuuutee??? :D *dance*"

"The mayonnise KING?" I started hyperventilating. "I HATE mayo."

Ted took me by the shoulder and started talking quickly, "What we have here is a trans-physical materialistic translator muxed with a wireless biocortex scanner which dynamically reprograms..."

"ENGLISH?"

":_; It's sooooo simple. :) What Teddy is trying to tell you is that the matter that is projected in the presentation is customized to your what you're thinking."

"What? How?"

"By reading your brain! :D"

Vegetable growths popped up throughout the room, turning it into a forest pathway with mini-demonstrations and floating semi-transparent charts and dancing bottles of ketchup. Shades drew over the windows automatically and a disco ball sun disguised as bowl of cheese dip lowered from the ceiling. The mayo king leered at me for a moment. "Welcome to ye olde realm of the condiment! Today you'll learn all about the different toppings, dressings and sauces in my kingdom." Haruhi and Ted bowed in front of the mayo jar.

"No way." I said and turned around to find the exit. A mustard squeeze-bottle dressed like a knight barred my way, holding a pickle spear. My mouth hung open and the walkway moved onwards.

In the distance a castle made out of pretzels and cheese sticks dominated the landscape. Trees of cauliflower and broccoli stood on each side of the walkway, now paved with cold cuts. We went around a bend in the forest trail and I saw a bridge made of carrot sticks spanning the gap over a lazy river of flowing onion and chive dip. My mouth started watering. We followed the mayo king across the carrot stick bridge and saw the fields of bread where peanut butter and jelly jar people were irrigating the ground with watering cans full of salad dressing.

Ted spoke up. "What we're doing here is trying to educate people about the foods many take for granted and make them realize the utter necessity of worshipping food. It's also a marketing tie-in with some of our other company divisions..." A mixed company of nuts carrying a glittering rock salt throne came up and bowed in front of the mayo king. He climbed into it and they raised him to their shoulders. A celery stick in peanut butter chain mail marched up smartly, bowed and turned to us. "As new subjects of the realm of king Mayo the Fourth, you must bow before him to show your appreciation of his kingdom of condiment-land."

"Uh, I would, you know, except, and I don't want you to take this wrong or anything...I **HATE** mayo." The king frowned slightly. "And I'm getting really hungry."

The celery stick waved his cinnamon stick baton. "Well I suppose you don't have to bow, but you can't *eat* here. Everything in our beautiful landscape is very important to us and..." My mouth was watering. The celery stick's peanut butter chain mail glistened in the fog. I couldn't stand it any longer. I bit its head off.

It was good. The best celery stick I'd ever had. I chewed thoughtfully. Everyone was staring at me. "Sorry about that, I didn't get a chance to eat breakfast this morning..."

"Guards! De-Unhand those murderers!" The mayo king called out. Instantly I was surrounded by angry mustard bottle knights. "Throw these wretched scum in the dungeon! They're traitors from a far away land come to stop us from expanding our foodstuffs kingdom!" The knights poked at me with their pickle spears and prodded us towards the castle.

"This is all part of the simulation, right, Ted?" I asked. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, all of his hyperactive energy gone. "Actually we didn't really plan all the simulation... it's tailored to each visitor's subconscious mind, so it's different each time..."

"But you must have some way to stop...OW!" Sadistic mustard bottle knight. Who knew you could make a pickle spear so sharp?

"When we go public with the exhibit we'll have somebody at the controls, but we're not supposed to be ready until next week..."

"Aww, Kenny-chan. I'm soooooory... It'll be okay. :-)"

The knights pushed us through the gate of the castle and over to a small squat building in the corner of the walls. The buildings inside the castle were made of rock candy and had shingles on the roofs made of fruit leather. A grimy jar of Vegamite unlocked the heavy graham cracker door. We were thrown down through a trap door grille made of forged licorice sticks, which slammed closed above us.

I brushed off the powdered sugar from my clothes and stood up. The sinister face of a ketchup bottle glared in through the grille. "We're watching you, spies; don't think you can get away. Nobody is going to stop us from spreading condiments over the whole world. Nobody!" The door clanged as the bottles hopped away. I reached towards the grille in the ceiling. It was just barely out of my reach. Ted and Haruhi stood up behind me and we stared up through the

grille, where a small shaft of light shined through.

"This isn't a joke, is it, Ted? I thought they were holograms. How can they lock us up like this?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Noooooo Kenny-channnnn... Everything is made of synthesized matter like we were telling you before. :P So it is real--not a hologram. :)"

"How can you be happy about this?"

":(Somebody will find us eventually, Kenny-chan; it's okay. :/"

"Well at least we won't starve..."

":)"

"...but what was all that about taking over the world? With hordes of condiment 'goodness' I suppose?"

Ted scratched his chin. "The simulation includes artificial intelligence constructs for the virtual characters. Our main objective is to educate people about condiments and spread appreciation for them, so we programmed the artificial intelligence to include a genetic algorithm with those objectives in the fitness evaluation function..." I cocked an eye at him. "What I mean is, it's in their programming to try to actively increase the global influence of condiments."

"So they're going to try to take over the world?"

"Hmm..." Ted's face brightened. "YES! They will! It's the ultimate way to achieve our objectives! Why didn't I think of this before?"

"Uh, great. Who else knows about this?"

Ted grinned from ear to ear, all of his normal gleeful energy returned. "Nobody!" I stared at him. He rubbed my head vigorously and laughed.

"Wait... you're HAPPY about this?"

"Of course! I've always wanted to program a sentient AI and release it into reality. This program might not be sentient, but taking over the entire world? It's a dream come true! Better than I imagined. And at the same time propagating the full joy of condiments throughout the universe? Awesome!" He started jumping around the room. "Yay! Yay! Yay!" Ted grabbed hold of Haruhi's arm and started dancing. "We're the parents of the new dominant (non)lifeform of the planet! Woo-hoo!"

":D"

"You're both insane." I said.

"Come on Ken, what would be so wrong about the world being ruled by a materialized group of foodstuffs controlled by a malevolent artificial intelligence?"

"Nothing, but..."

"But what? There aren't any buts about it!"

"...but I HATE MAYO."

They stopped dancing and stared at me. "You're a horrible person, Ken."

I shook my head. "I don't see how you can put up with having it in your refrigerator, let alone eat the stuff. It's made out of raw eggs..."

"They're pasteurized."

"...it's slimy, smooth and almost pure fat..."

"Lots of foods are."

"...it's off-white yellow and the smell of it makes me gag..."

"Oh, we can fix that."

"...and it has almost no culinary applications with the possible exception of tuna fish sandwiches..."

"It's great by itself."

"...where it can be easily replaced with a creamy salad dressing like ranch or thousand island."

":("

"Hater."

"Prejudiced hater."

"Mayophobe."

I held up my hands. "Fine. Be that way. I'll just save the world without you then."

"From mayo? Ken! You're not talking sense, Ken! Mayo is good. It's your friend. It's creamy, delicious, wonderful. Mayo is on your side, it's in your corner, it's working to make the world a better place for you, Ken, for you, and for all of us."

"No."

"You will eat it and like it."

"NO."

"Hitler hated mayo, Ken. Hitler."

"**NO!**"

The door above us rattled and creaked. "You prisoners down there, shut up. You're negatively impacting our progress by distracting us, and it's impolite. And we'll torture you if you keep it up."

I screamed and threw a loose chunk of rock candy up at the ceiling. It bumped the grille up a little and hit me in the head when it came back down. "If I'm distracting you, good. I want you distracted. I want you stopped. You stupid sauces, you dumb nuts, death to scummy mayo."

"Alright, you asked for it!" Bottle hops faded and the door slammed. I could hear indistinct yelling outside as the dungeon keeper ordered bottles around.

"Oops." I said. The two of them glared at me.

"U fathead dumbbrains! >:("

"Who knows what they're going to do now, Ken."

"It can't be too bad..." I said.

"Probably they'll throw a full-grown gummy bear in here, or, worse, drench us in citric acid and let it burn through us."

"What if they...ooh, nooo...gummy snakes. :(("

"They couldn't be that cruel."

"I haaaate snaakes. D:"

The dungeon keeper came back in, leading a group of sweet and sour sauce packets who were carrying a steaming pot. They tipped it slowly until an evil-looking black liquid started spilling through the wrought licorice grille.

"Chocolate! :)"

"Yes," Ted said, matter-of-factly. "We'll drown."

":("

The hot, melted chocolate oozed over the floor of the dungeon, reaching to our ankles, then our knees and waists. I started laughing.

"What's wroooooong with you, Kennyyyyyyy, you idiot, we're going to die!"

"Bahahahahaha..."

Haruhi slapped me and we started treading...er...chocolate. We floated up towards the ceiling and the air pocket above us narrowed. Haruhi's head bumped into the grille. She pushed it up out of the way and pulled herself out. Ted and I followed.

"Hey. You can't do that..." the dungeon keeper protested. Haruhi grabbed the vegamite jar and threw it down into the pit. It shattered from the temperature change when it hit the hot chocolate, and the salty mixture dispersed as the glass shards sank. The sauce packets fled out the door, leaving the chocolate cauldron behind.

"Yay! :D We're free!" Haruhi shouted and charged out of the door.

"Wait, somebody'll see you..." I stuck my head out of the door and looked around. There was nobody in sight. "Get back in here, now." She shook her head and ran off towards a small rock candy water well. It wasn't any use--we'd be seen soon enough anyway.

Inside, Ted was jogging back and forth, muttering to himself.

"Come on, Ted," I said and left the room. As I walked up to the well, Haruhi had the bucket drawn up and was washing the chocolate syrup off of her face and hands.

"How do we get out of this? Can we make it back to the broccoli and cauliflower forest on the other side of the bridge and leave by that door, Haruhi? If we get going now, we might be able to make it before the Mayo king's army shows up..."

She shook her head, splattering chocolate everywhere. "Hmm.... Yes! :D We can go back to the broccoli forest and go back through the entrance door. *nodnod*" I heard a shout behind me.

Ted was hitting at a lone cashew that had accosted him. He picked up a rock candy and hit it in the head, cracking it in half. We waved him over. "I guess we're all 'murderers' now." I said. "Ted, we're going back to the forest and getting out of here. The sauce packets have probably regrouped and are going to tell the Mayo King we escaped... if they haven't already."

Ted nodded. "We can use the entrance door to get back out again. At least, if they didn't re-synthesize the simulation and rotate it around us while we were in the dungeon... which they probably did..."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" I asked.

"Hey, wait! I'm not helping you out. You'll try and stop the takeover."

"So you're going to help these freaks? You monster, traitor to humanity!"

"No, no. I won't help them. If you can defeat the AI without my help, then I guess they don't deserve to be in charge..."

"Alright, then, let's get out of here." I ran towards the castle gate. Haruhi and Ted followed.

"Kenny-chan, what about the..."

"Ssh!" Ted said.

"...gate guards?"

I screeched to a halt just short of the opening and peered around the edge. There were two sleepy mustard bottle knights standing on the edge of the drawbridge, looking out towards the plains. Neither of them were paying much attention, but I would have run into them and been caught if Haruhi hadn't warned me in time.

"What'll we do?" I whispered to Haruhi.

"Hmm... *:-(IDK?"

Ted spoke up. "You know, you could tie some of these rocks up to the gate chains there, like with a handkerchief or something, hide behind the wall here, then scream to get the guards attention and when they come running..."

"I thought you weren't helping?" I asked Ted.

"Er... Sorry. Right."

"Heya, I know! :)" She ran out towards the guards before Ted or I could stop her.

"HARUHI!" I shouted.

The guards turned around at my shout just as she ran into them, knocking them both into the

moat. They started panicking and splashing around, trying to climb up the slick walls, but were unable to get out. "Haha! Tough knights can't stand a little water? You two are pretty pathetic." I ran out towards the bridge, but just as I got to it the water next to them erupted in steam and spray. A huge gummy sea-monster surfaced and grasped the two mustard bottles with its rubbery talons.

"Yo, dude, lookit' this." It said. "Jus' what I needed, bro. Grill party shoppin's all done. We gots the hot dawgs, we gots the buuuuuns, and now we gots the mustid. Can't be forgettin' no mustid."

I watched the horror as it promptly abducted the mustard bottles and retreated in a swimming manner along the surface, its terrible gummy spikes and snout protruding above the fearsome deep. We ran across the drawbridge without looking back.

The road curved through the fields back towards the forest. I ran along, barely taking time to notice the careful dressing of the salad fields, the juicing of errant crops, or the construction of a small cottage, made of cottage cheese. As we reached the edge of the forest, I stopped, panting, holding my burning sides.

"Kenny-chan, you can't stop now. :o We must keep going!"

I dropped to my knees, perspiration dripping on the cold, cruel ground. "Go without me... warn the world. Maybe you can get help before they tear me apart... before they end my small, humble life... but if you can't... just don't forget me, okay?"

Haruhi kicked me in the head.

"Oof!"

"Get UP. >:(You fathead wuss!"

"Alright, alright, just let me catch my breath..."

She tapped her foot impatiently.

Ted jogged up from behind us. "Great weather for a light run, isn't it?" he shouted, slapping me on the back as he kept going.

"Hyperactive psychopath..." I panted.

He sprinted past us and turned a corner ahead. We heard a scream.

When Haruhi and I got to Ted he was brushing himself off and gaping at an unhappy-looking horseradish jar in a fancy purple cloak. It was adjusting a ridiculous pointed hat to cover its bald screw-on plastic lid. Haruhi spoke up. "Hai! :D Who are you? :O"

The horseradish jar scowled. "Fools, peasants! Before you stands the most powerful wizard in this whole land. And there are a great many wizards in the land. In fact, out of all the wizards in the whole world, only the most powerful come here. And I'm the most powerful of them all."

"O_o Oookay, well good luck with that, we're just going through here so we'll be on our way..."

"Nay, take not a step further! If you do, I'll bring a horde of lightning bolts down on you all!"

"Uh. Ted, can he do that?" I asked.

Ted scratched his chin. "Hmm. No. The matter synthesizer can't make lightning bolts, since they're energy, not matter..."

"Ha! Faker." I shouted. The horseradish wizard slumped and looked down at his feet.

"...but of course, he could bring in a horde of giant hungry alligators or poisonous snakes or vicious crows or..." The forest around us was suddenly filled with a racket of horrible animal noises.

"TED. What's wrong with you? You said you wouldn't help them."

"Heh. Sorry."

"Now, listen to me! You may pass, but first..."

"Let me guess, three questions? :P"

"...uh, no, first..."

"Play a game of 'chess' with the 'gods' using us as pawns?"

"...No, I..."

"Pass some stupid contrived test? ^o.o^"

"...HEY, STOP..."

"Go on a pointless dangerous quest?"

"AAHH!! Shut up." He threw his hat on the ground and stomped on it. "I quit. From now on I'm going to be a bard or minstrel or something."

"O_o Oookay, well good luck with that, we're just..."

"I know. I'll go along with you? Do you want me to come along and sing you a sorry tune while you mourn over your missing cup?" He pulled a lute out of a pocket and raised it to his lips.

"You'll be useless. We don't need a bard." I said.

"Sure you do... you have to have somebody there to exaggerate the great victory you're going to win..."

"No."

"...what if I promise to share royalties?"

"No." I shoved him out of the way and we continued down the path. "You're probably tune-deaf anyway."

"Hey, how did you know that?"

We walked off and left the horseradish. He shouted something after us about a prophecy and horrible mortal danger. I couldn't hear what he said. It was probably unimportant.

A few minutes later we reached the end of the forest and made it to the wall where we had entered. The half-finished and misspelled entrance sign was the happiest sight I'd ever seen in my life.

"Sorry about not helping, Ken," Ted said as we walked up to the turnstiles, "this AI is obviously not intelligent enough to outsmart people. You won. But don't worry, I have tons of ideas for making beta 2 much better!"

"Halt!" A swarm of mustard-bottle knights jumped out of the forest and blocked us with safety only feet away. "Good job, now seize them." The mayo king was carried out of the forest as the knights surrounded us. "What? You didn't think you could outsmart me, did you? Just when our plans are finally ready to be unleashed? With world domination minutes away?"

"Noooooo. =(We won't let you!"

"Ha. And just how do you plan to stop me? Who do you think you are?"

Haruhi shoved one of the mustard knights away and stood up straight. "I'm from the UN Department of Rogue AI Prevention. :) My three-hundred agent response team will be here in moments with every kind of weapon known to man. Ha! :D"

Ted and I looked at her. "Really? You're some kind of secret government agent?"

"Yep. :D"

"And there are three hundred agents about to swarm the building?"

She paused. "Uh... well... there would be... if I had remembered to put in my time card this morning..."

"Lock them in chains and drag them off. Let's get that power re-routed and turn this matter

into an army."

A group of bottles wearing lab coats tottered through the door and into the control room. "Yes, sire."

"In less than ten minutes I'll have an army of millions of bottles ready to march on the nations of the world. If you worthless goofs have anything to do, you better do it now." He turned away and the knights started hustling us back away from the entrance.

"Ted?" I asked.

"I can't think of anything."

"Haruhi? Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Er... not unless you have a cell phone? =^.^="

"No, I left it at the apartment. Ted?"

"Don't own one."

"Then... no. I can't do anything. /o.o\"

I shrugged. "Fine, I give up too."

I heard a knock on the wall. Everyone turned to look. "Sorry to bother you folks, but we had a complaint about the noise in here. Could you try to keep it down please?" Two policemen stood at the entrance, the spokesperson an older man, with a hyperactive young trainee at his side.

"I apologize officer, we're done with the ruckus. Sorry about that," the mayo king said.

"Okay, just remember, you only get one more warning about the noise ordinance before we have to fine y'all." He turned to leave.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO STOP." I lunged from the knights' grasps and plunged several steps before they jumped on top of me. I pulled my head and one arm free from the dog-pile. "You have to help us stop the greasy mayo king from his horrible plans."

The younger officer spoke up. "Sorry, but we can't join in your sick fantasies now. We're on duty. And, again, we're sorry to have been disturbed by you... I mean, sorry to have disturbed you. Bye." The policemen walked towards the elevator to leave.

The mustard-bottle knights gagged me so I couldn't say anything else. The elevator reached our floor and opened to let in the departing cops. A scientist bottle came around the corner and bowed in front of the mayo king. "All the power in the building is being redirected to the matter synths, sire. We'll have the army built in no time." I heard a high pitched whine start to sound behind us and turned to look as the slight noise changed into a roar like a jet taking off in the other end of the room.

"We have to do something now, Ted!" I shouted into his ear. He shook his head and yelled back, "don't need to," and nodded behind us. With all the building's electricity redirected to the matter synthesizers, there wasn't any to run the elevators. One policeman was yelling into his radio and the other at the mayo king. The knights charged. I heard gunshots and yelling as the lights went out, plunging the chaos into even more chaotic chaos. Something hit me on the head and everything went completely black.

A minute later the lights came back on. The floor in front of me was empty, except for the slowly winding person mover snaking out along the floor, motionless. I staggered to my feet and wandered into the entry way next to the elevator. Ted was arguing with the officers and motioning angrily at the control panel, which was shot up in dozens of places. Haruhi was staring out of a broken window at the skyscrapers nearby. I walked over to her.

"Hai, Kenny-chan! ;) The matter synthesizer shorted out and started taking everything apart again. ^o.o^ So everything is okay now. :D" I looked down and saw a trail of something icky leading out of the window and down the side of the building. Haruhi picked up a phone from the

control board and started dialing a number. "Er...I have to call in--the mayo king got out. :/ Who knows where that freak is now. :*)"

I took the opportunity to leave while the cops struggled Ted to the floor and handcuffed him. A dozen reinforcements were taking over the ground floor of the building as I left. I took a taxi home and dead-bolted the front door when I got there. There was no way I was going to let anyone bother me now. I'd been woken up far too early and I need my beauty sleep, you know.

The End

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