

WHISPERS OF THE DEAD

Undead Do Tell Tales



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THE PURPOSE

Undead figure prominently in many fantasy settings as both guiltless and heart-wrenching foes for the players to combat. The emotional versatility of these monsters makes them ubiquitous at the table.

The seven undead in this document are intended to tell the story of their life and death through their nature. In this way they can prove an interesting twist on the common zombie while exposing some of the hidden story of your world to the players.

I do not provide many numerical attributes, as these undead are meant primarily to serve the flavor and story of your campaign, though most can be treated as zombies with a small twist. Set their power level as appropriate to your scenario and let the plot govern their behavior.

I. ASHERN

“You what?”

“He was in the way. They were burning the plague dead anyway and it was easy to slip another in.”

“This better not come back down on us-”

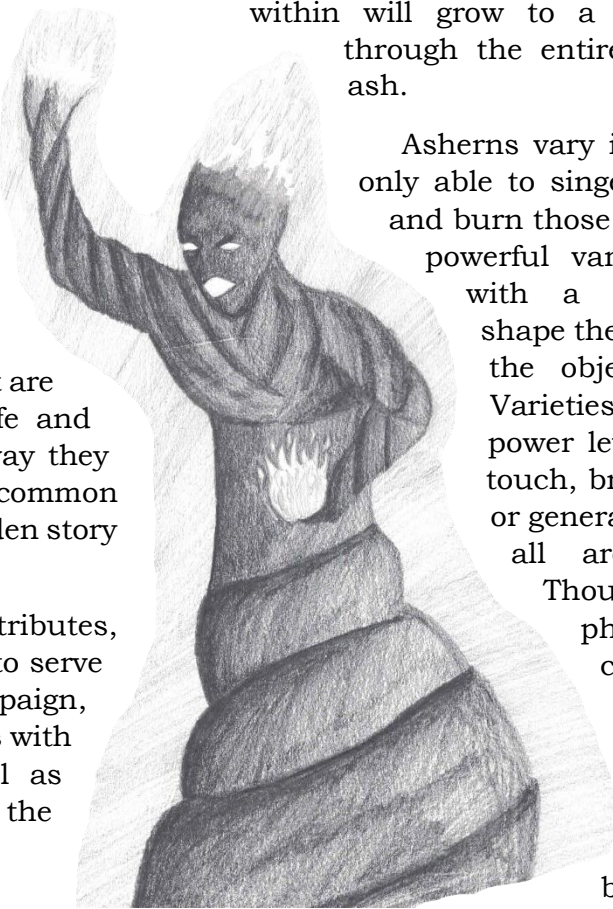
“It won’t. I-”

A rasping like sand on wood caught both their attention and they turned toward the door. It burst open, flames washing into the room.

When a living person is burned alive, they may return full of vengeful rage for the act. These undead created by rage for their suffering are known as Asherns. Whether burned at the stake or accidentally cremated alive, these creatures embrace the flames and wield them to their vengeance.

An Ashern appears from most angles as a swirling column of ash, if vaguely humanoid in silhouette. The Ashern may glow dimly with the fire within, but when it fixes its attention on a target for its wrath, its eyes will blaze in its ashy face with an intense, white-hot flame. The glow

within will grow to a blaze and spread through the entire body of whirling ash.



Asherns vary in power; most are only able to singe those they touch and burn those they envelop. More powerful varieties—those filled with a special hate—can shape the fire and throw it at the object of their hate. Varieties of intermediate power levels can burn at a touch, breathe goutts of fire, or generate a withering heat all around themselves.

Though resistant to physical attacks, they can be destroyed by less mundane means. They will also be reduced to ash once their vengeance has been carried out.

EXAMPLES

Unconscious plague victims burned with the dead by accident.

A rebel leader burned at the stake by the king.

A thief in a house abandoned by his accomplice when a fire breaks out.

II. EXHUMER

“A few days before, a large host of orcs had assailed the fort. So many of them died at the base of the walls that I ordered the men to bury them in pits dug nearby, rather than risk attack dragging them farther away.

“During the next couple nights my men reported seeing orcs out near the mass graves. I instructed them to leave them be as long as their numbers were few.

“On the fourth night, I awoke to screams inside the fort. I ran into the marshalling yard where I encountered zombified orcs. I cut down several, but found myself vomiting and trembling. Fearing for my life, I ordered an



abandonment of the fort and made my escape on horseback.”

-Major Dansby

When bodies are buried close together, they may awaken with a taste for the rotting flesh of the dead. These dead become Exhumers, ravenous undead with a talent for digging and a hunger for necrotic flesh. These kinds of transformations take place most often in mass graves and sometimes in large numbers, though they can sometimes happen when graveyards start to get crowded. The awakening of the corpse can take place days or weeks after burial.

Once awakened, Exhumers seek out flesh to consume. If food is plentiful enough, they may spend months below the ground eating corpses in the immediate area. Their hunger is so great, they may even prey on each other before surfacing. When they do come to the surface, it is often out of curiosity about some sound or vibration above them. The activity can draw them out to hunt more lively prey.

When on the hunt, they quickly close in to grappling distance and bite. Their ragged breath is putrid with the stench of rotting flesh and is enough to incapacitate the average living person with vomiting. They are highly resilient under physical abuse and can sometimes wipe out whole villages after emerging from a mass grave after a battle nearby. Everything is food to their powerful appetite, though they prefer long dead flesh to the flesh of the living.

EXAMPLES

A plague has wiped out a village, and the baron’s men dig a pit for the bodies.

An old church graveyard is getting full; the pastor starts making room in the narrow paths.

After finally breaking a bloody siege, the garrison buries the fallen foes in trenches nearby.

III. HAUNT

The ship still appeared empty as they approached by rowboat. The glaring figurehead was eerie—not a beast or woman as was common, but the bearded and scarred face of a

seafaring man, a captain's hat upon his head. Pylus flinched when he thought he saw the wooden grimace turn up in a smirk.

They pulled the oars into the boat as they drifted up alongside. Pylus was first up the torn sail and onto the deck. The ship was rotting, and skeletons littered the deck. Tied to the mast, one of the skeletons wore a hat like that on the figurehead. The moment Pylus's boots touched the deck, he felt it: a shiver. The ship itself seemed perturbed at his intrusion. As the other sailors boarded, a snarling wail surged across the deck. Bundles of rope and rusted cutlasses flew toward them in a typhoon that hurled most of them overboard. Those who weathered the barrage dove overboard as a wind picked up and the ship began to move.

When a person dies building a building, working a field, or protecting a thing, and then becomes a part of that thing (i.e. through burial), that person may become a Haunt. Haunts are undead that possess their sustaining entity and have varying levels of power over it. The extent of their power depends both on their power in life and their devotion and claim to the entity. For example, a slave who dies and is buried in a wall he was building will have a relatively low level of power because he was weak in life and was only one of many building the wall against his will. By contrast, a mighty ranger who dies protecting the glade where she has buried many of her companions will have vast powers due to her power in life and her great dedication and emotional and physical claim to the glade.

Haunts are fully disembodied undead, though a part of their power may include embodying themselves as part of the entity that sustains them (e.g. the figurehead of a ship changes to resemble the Haunt's living form and speaks for it). A Haunt can be destroyed either by the destruction of the entity they possess or by removing its mortal remains (if any still exist) and giving them a proper burial. They cannot wander from the entity they possess, but will answer a necromancer's call if the object of their possession can be moved to him.

Haunts come in two distinct varieties: benevolent and malevolent. This distinction refers to their behavior toward the entity they possess and is determined by the intent of their sacrifice. Those who die willfully for the entity will be benevolent and use their powers to preserve and improve the entity they possess. Those who die unwillingly for the entity or willfully opposed to the entity will possess it malevolently, seeking to degrade it and render it unusable with their powers. These malevolent Haunts will not often exercise their power to the complete destruction of the object of their possession, as that would lead to their own destruction.

Below are some guidelines for the abilities of Haunts at various power levels (1-10):

- **Level 1**
 - 3x /day move a small object
 - 1x /day move a medium object
 - 1x /week move a large object
- **Level 2**
 - 5x /day move a small object
 - 1x / week throw a small object
 - 2x /day move a medium object
 - 1x /day move a large object
- **Level 3**
 - 10x /day move a small object
 - 1x /day throw a small object
 - 5x /day move a medium object
 - 1x /week throw a medium object
 - 2x /day move a large object
- **Level 4**
 - At will move a small object
 - 2x /day throw a small object
 - 10x /day move a medium object
 - 1x /day throw a medium object
 - 5x /day move a large object
 - 1x / week throw a large object
- **Level 5**
 - At will move small or medium objects
 - 5x /day throw a small object
 - 2x /day throw a medium object
 - 5x /day move a large object
 - 1x / week throw a large object
- **Level 6**
 - At will move small or medium objects
 - 10x /day throw a small object
 - 5x /day throw a medium object
 - 10x /day move a large object
 - 1x / week throw a large object
- **Level 7**
 - At will move small or medium objects
 - At will throw a small object

- 10x /day throw a medium object
- 5x /day move a large object
- 1x / day throw a large object

• **Level 8**

- At will move or throw small or medium objects
- 5x /day move a large object
- 1x / day throw a large object
- 1x /week atmospheric change

• **Level 9**

- At will move or throw small or medium objects
- 10x /day move a large object
- 1x / day throw a large object
- 1x /day atmospheric change

• **Level 10**

- At will move or throw small or medium objects
- 10x /day move a large object
- 2x /day throw a large object
- Total Atmospheric control

Small Object: A Pebble or Twig

Medium Object: Rock, Branch, or Length of Rope

Large Object: Cannon, Bundle of Rope, Large Stone, or Tree Trunk

Level 3 and higher are able to make their voices heard.

Level 5 and higher make a physical change to the entity when they come into existence that represents them and can be controlled, such as a face or other recognizable emblem.

Atmospheric control refers to the Haunt's ability to cause fog, wind, rain, and such phenomena.

EXAMPLES

A king who renews his reign each year by visiting and eating the fruit of a tree as part of an ancient tradition never returns, having died from eating the poisoned fruit. The space is too sacred for his followers to go retrieve his body and he possesses the tree. (Benevolent, 6)

A common slave who dies building a wall and is buried in the brickwork. (Malicious, 1)

A farmer who dies working his field and is never found and buried. (Benevolent, 2)

A mighty warrior who dies, tormented, in the dungeons of his lifelong foe and is left there. (Malicious, 8)

A powerful priest who dies protecting the temple of his deity and is buried therein. (Benevolent, 10)

IV. PRAXIST

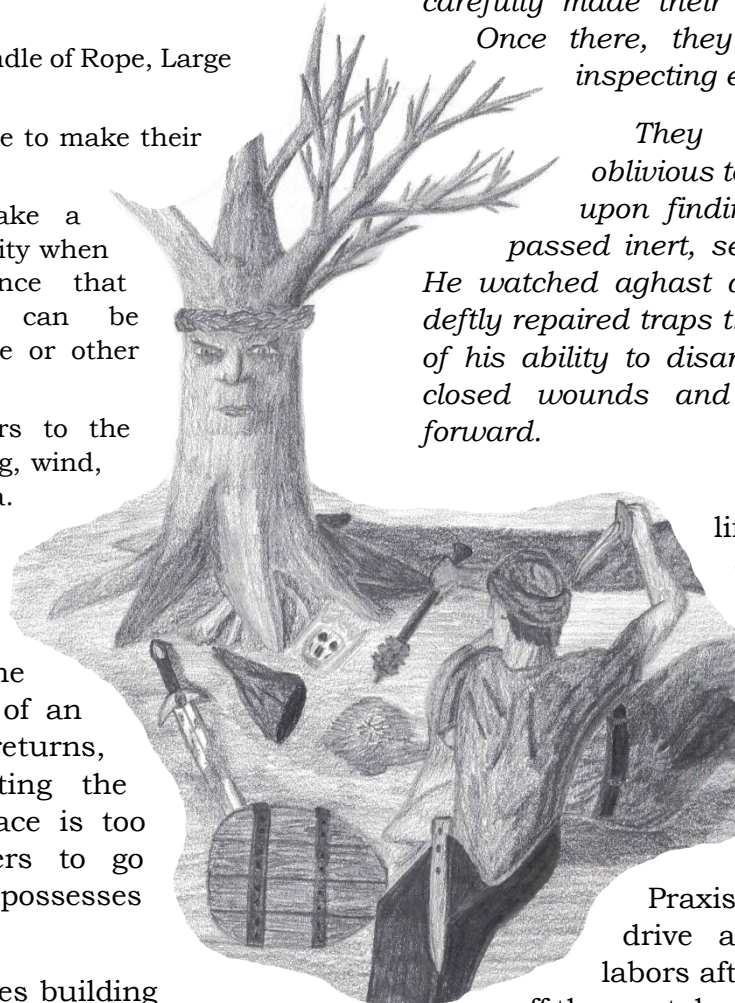
Fablis pulled his cloak up over his head and leaned into the shadows. Those were definitely footsteps, not even being careful. Looking back down the corridor he could see three of them, brazenly carrying a lantern. They moved quickly but carefully, stepping over the triggers of all the traps Fablis had disarmed on his way in. They passed him, and he could see the rotting flesh on their faces. Undead. They continued to the end of the corridor, exposing more traps as they carefully made their way past their triggers.

Once there, they began the return trip, inspecting each trap as they went.

They passed Fablis again, oblivious to him watching them, and upon finding the last trap he had passed inert, set about arming it again. He watched aghast as the undead creatures deftly repaired traps that had been on the edge of his ability to disarm. He rubbed magically closed wounds and reconsidered his path forward.

When a person dies in a life so routine they could do it in their sleep, they may awake on the morrow after their death and continue about their work as if life had not left them during the night. These undead driven by the force of habit are

Praxists. In order for habit to so drive a body to continue its labors after the soul has shrugged off the mortal coil, the daily routine must be truly rote. Usually for a lifestyle to be sufficiently routine, it cannot include much



interaction with other people because of the dynamic nature of conversation and human behavior. Particularly tedious conversationalists, however, may still make the transition due to the memorized nature of their conversations.

Praxists differentiate themselves from other undead by their retention of any abilities they possessed in life that were used in their routine. A guard of a forgotten watch tower will remember how to operate the gate and other mechanisms of his stewardship, an enslaved maze maintainer will retain knowledge of how to navigate the winding corridors and set the traps, and a paranoid wizard will still be able to cast his daily wards and protections on his tower. In general, all other abilities from life will be lost. Most lose the ability to speak, and those who spent their days in the same spot are unable to walk.

The routine is the sustaining power of a Praxist. If something happens that in life would have required much troubleshooting beyond the routine, this power is shaken. The Praxist becomes disoriented and may flee the scene of the change, looking for a return to familiarity. If the Praxist cannot find its way back to routine or if the change is great enough, it may be destroyed by the shock.

EXAMPLES

A gardener who continues to maintain the estate grounds after his death, preventing the estate master from adding buildings that might lose him the free labor.

A preacher who delivers the same sermon every day, turning the pages of his scriptures idly.

A teacher of history who proceeds through his texts at his lectern without recognizing class participation.

A sage who translates from the seemingly endless backlog of texts on the tables surrounding his cot.

A widget builder who assembles parts as they come from dawn to dusk and lies in his bunk during the hours he used to sleep in life.

An organ grinder who takes to the streets every day soliciting money for food he no longer needs.

V. PROCESSIONER

"Do you hear that?"

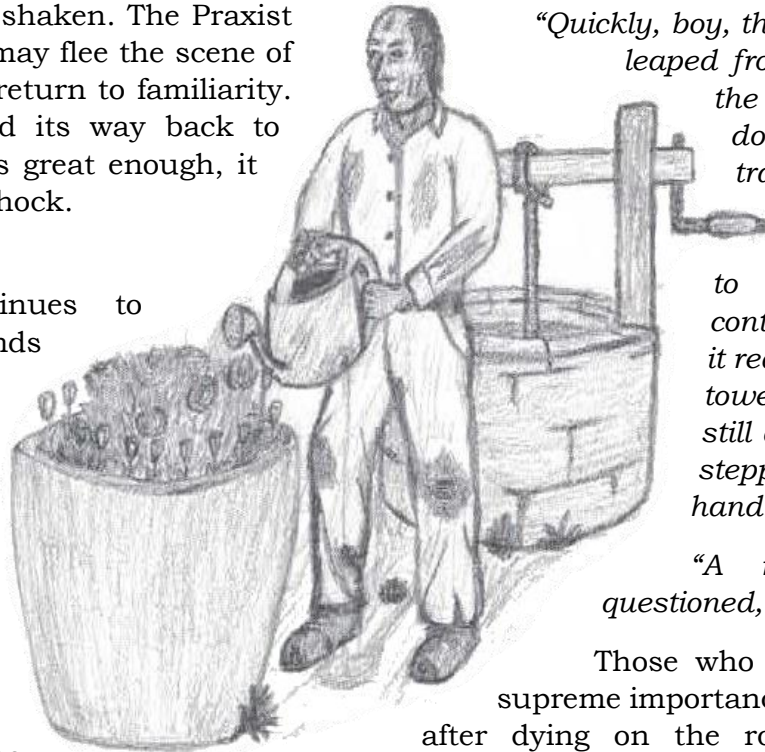
"Hmph, something tripping traps. We'll check it out in the morning."

"It's getting closer. Dragging the chains."

"It won't get far. Strange it doesn't cry out, though..."

"There! There's something there."

Argus and Remus looked on in horror as a human figure crawled out from the brush into the light of their lamp atop the tower. It dragged chains as it crawled, its legs horribly maimed by the trap.



"Quickly, boy, the bandages." Remus leaped from his seat, opening the trapdoor to climb down. He rushed to the traveler's aid, but its eyes were glassy and it didn't seem to see or hear him, continuing to crawl until it reached the base of the tower, collapsing quite still at Argus's feet as he stepped out, medical kit in hand.

"A messenger?" Argus questioned, aghast.

Those who die in a journey of supreme importance to them may, even after dying on the road, continue their sojourn to their vital destination. Those driven by such determination that they continue in death become Processioners. Such a transformation requires that the deceased consider the journey more vital than life or death (the desire alone to live is not motivating enough to continue despite death). Whether a

journey to rejoin a loved one, a pilgrimage to a sacred site, or an expedition to uncover a world-saving artifact, the Processioner persists in its journey until it reaches the destination, at which it collapses, satisfied despite vital components of their mission being left undone.

Though dead to all that does not pertain to their journey, Processioners can be just as inventive as a living traveler in overcoming obstacles. This innovation does not, however, extend to efforts at diplomacy. They will climb, batter, and fight their way past obstacles, but their silent determination will often bring them into conflict with forces too great for them to overcome, leading to their destruction if they cannot find another way.

If at any point a Processioner becomes sure that it cannot surmount the obstacles blocking its journey or that it has become too damaged to continue, it will collapse, resigning to ultimate death in the face of defeat. This behavior makes Processioners all but impossible to keep, for they will, upon finding themselves trapped, become useless to the keeper. Those who know of Processioner behavior will do their best to stay out of their way while guiding them to their destination where they can harmlessly collapse.

EXAMPLES

A sailor who escaped in a rowboat from a lost battle at sea seeks desperately to make it to shore to deliver word of the battle. He dies at sea in the effort.

A pair of explorers
dreaming of

discovering a way to the far sea die of exposure one cold night and on the morrow continue their traversal.

A caravan of pilgrims are plagued with disease after being bitten by flies in the swamps they had to cross. They die one by one but continue, the procession eventually arriving at the temple with not a living soul among them, only to collapse on the steps.

VI. VIGILER

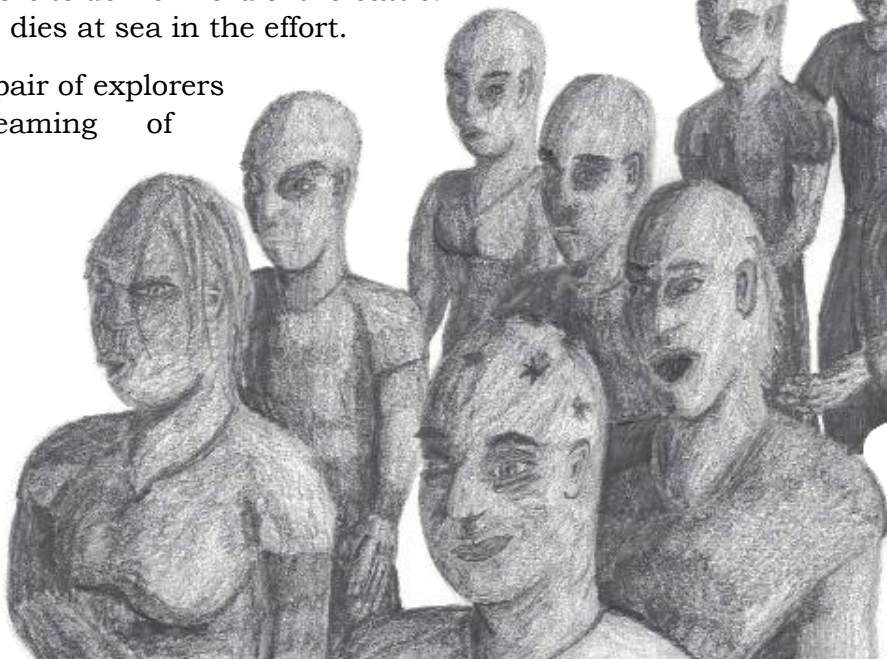
Hallen checked his map again. The rendezvous point was beside the river just down this ridge, but they had arranged to meet before the snows; Cale had probably moved his camp up out of the floodway now the thaw had begun. Hallen scanned the far ridge as he descended toward the ford point.

He nearly fell when he saw the desiccated head staring from just above the level of the roaring river. Cale? There he sat in the floodway, gazing as if at a fire just below the current. Hallen stared in wonder until Cale looked up at him, nodding curtly. Hallen averted his eyes before descending to retrieve his friend's body.

Those who die awaiting
something so highly
anticipated it



transcends life may continue their watch when that life has left them. Those who keep their vigil even throughout their traversal of the veil of death become Vigilers. This transformation does not come upon those who die merely longing after some coming dream. A Vigiler must be one who dies watching steadfastly for the hoped-for change, such that the





elements, starvation, or age overcome their strength while they do nothing to stave them off.

Vigilers are incredibly passive, though often disturbing to come upon. Just as in the hours before their death, they remain very still, watching for the awaited event, perhaps speaking softly. Even when the awaited sign manifests, their reaction is reserved and tempered by their loss of life. With their wait ended, they may murmur a few words or offer a brief sign before slumping peacefully into a restful death.

Vigilers are known on occasion to become more active, becoming violent when confronted with the threat of their wait being for naught. This violence can be triggered by attempts to interrupt their wait or by evidence that their hopes will never be fulfilled. In the latter case they will be violent for only a minute before becoming resigned and collapsing into death.

EXAMPLES

Sailors on a ship find themselves without a wind. Desperate for land, they watch off the port bow while starvation kills them one by one. The ship drifts into port with the sailors still watching. They wave calmly to the onlookers and collapse.

A lighthouse keeper dies awaiting the return of a ship that carried his son on a distant campaign. He leans gently over the railing as a ship approaches, looking for his son. He becomes violent when the colors of his son's enemy come into view flying over the ship. He upsets the shelves in his room before falling dead.

A starved hunter, obsessed with a mythical hart, crouches in his hunting blind, still watching for it to pass this way.

VII. WATER PHASM

"About time we're reopening this mine. The collapse was six months ago."

"Dams take time, Galdin," Vilgem answered. "Let's just get this place pumped and the bodies buried. Is that one of the miners there?"

Vilgem dropped into the waist-deep water and waded toward the floating corpse. It stirred suddenly, rushing toward him through the water and dragging him under. More followed and Galdin fled.

When a person dies in the water, but not from drowning alone, and their body remains in the water thereafter, they may become a Water Phasm. Water Phasms are nearly liquid undead, able to pass through spaces only inches wide. Because those who become Water Phasms die almost exclusively in a captive state, in undeath they are very passive, hardly moving from the place where they died. However, if there is a disturbance or change in currents that may indicate an escape, they will chase the current immediately toward the promise of freedom. Once on the move, they become vicious, attacking anything they perceive as a threat to their freedom. They will respond to a necromancer's call with a half-hearted effort to drift toward the call. They will not leave the water to answer.

Water Phasms will do anything they can to remain in the water, and will not leave it willfully. They take gradual damage from being out of the water. Water destruction magic also deals great damage. Their primary form of attack is to grapple people who stray into the water, attempting to drown them.

EXAMPLES

Prisoners in a flooded dungeon die of hunger and hypothermia.

Miners are trapped in a tunnel collapse that floods the mine. Those that make it to air pockets eventually suffocate.

Bodies dead from the ocean cold still cling to flotsam after a shipwreck on the reef.



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