Russian Roulette

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Summary

Halloween inspired story. Takes place a few weeks after the jail scene. R&S centric. If I tell you anymore, it may ruin the story ;)

Notes

This was a story inspired by a ficathon challenge that was taking place during the halloween season. It was first posted on 10/31/09 on another site. Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy it! :)

«♥» Russian Roulette «♥»

Running as if demons were at her feet, Scarlett plowed through the forest as quickly as her little feet could take her as dark ominous clouds filled the sky, screening the remainder of the day’s sunlight. Unfortunately, she was not appropriately dressed for this particular marathon, and her velvety green skirt was continuously snagged by loose twigs and branches, slowing down her pace. Her heart was beating wildly, her breathing sporadic, and she thought she might faint if she didn’t pause to catch her breath. But, before she had the chance to slow down, her slipper got caught under an exposed tree root and she went flailing to the ground in one harsh swoop. Luckily, her hands caught her fall, but her dress was ruined by the splattered wet mud. At this point she couldn’t care less; in fact, she wanted to burn the dress and all the horrible memories that came with it. The resounding clap of thunder and flash of lighting made Scarlett shriek with fright and jump up from the damp earth, wiping her stained hands on the skirt of her dress then dashing once more through the shadowed woods.

She hadn’t the vaguest idea where she was or where she was going, but she couldn’t turn back now.
If only the rain hadn’t started to pour, striking her in the face like tiny zooming bullets! She wanted to rest her head against the trunk of the tree and cry herself to sleep, but the terrifying sound of the booming thunder kept her running rapidly. What would she do now? She couldn’t go home to Tara if she didn’t have the money to pay the taxes and she couldn’t go back to Pitty’s after what she’d done, leaving Frank at the small chapel, disposed of yet another O’Hara woman without so much as an explanation, but for all he knew, Suellen was still anxiously waiting to be Mrs. Kennedy. At the thought of being his bride, Scarlett gagged, wondering what had possessed her to think she could endure such a heavy load as being the wife of that old maid in breeches. After only spending two weeks with the man, playing the little helpless woman, Scarlett did not know how much she could endure, but the thought of spending the rest of Frank’s life with his constant irritating presence was still far too long a time to suffer for three hundred dollars. She believed she’d find some other way to get the money, the question was how.

Finally, seeing what appeared to be an abandoned cottage up ahead and believing that there must be a heaven, Scarlett made her way to the door, soaked through her clothes, her raven hair disheveled and flowing wildly around her shoulders. She was anxious to get inside, sheltered from the rain, but she only hoped that the small home was indeed abandoned. As the door slowly opened with a creak at the force of her hand, Scarlett gasped when she saw Rhett Butler with a gun pressed to the side of his head. At the sound of her entrance and shrill intake of breath, there were five pairs of eyes on her, only one of which she recognized.

“Scarlett, what are you doing here?” Rhett said roughly, pushing the man who held the gun to his head away with a quick thrust of his hand.

Rhett’s eyes were alarmingly dark, penetrating hers then taking her appearance in with one swift glance as he walked towards her. She looked down at her dress, hating herself for looking like such a fright in front of Rhett of all people, and she backed away from his approach.

“What am I doing here? What are you doing here?!” she shouted out of fear, thinking she was the one who had a right to ask questions when he had the gun up against his head and was supposed to be in jail at this moment none the less. How dare he question her whereabouts!

“Butler, what’s the meaning of this?” one man with a rusty beard asked in a deep voice.

“I’ll just be a moment,” Rhett said smoothly, swiftly taking Scarlett’s arm in his firm grip, hauling her towards the door and slamming it shut behind them.

“What are you doing? I don’t want to be in the rain. It’s cold,” Scarlett said in annoyance.

“By the looks of it, you’re no stranger to the rain. You’ll survive. Now, tell me why you are here?” he demanded.

“It’s none of your business, let me go,” she said struggling to escape his grasp.

“I believe it is my business now. Shouldn’t you be celebrating your wedded bliss with family and friends?”

“How did you—”

“I have my ways. Well? Should I now be referring to you as Mrs. Kennedy?”

“Stop! I don’t want to discuss it,” she cried out in a rage, recalling just why she’d had to resort to using Frank in the first place.

“Ah, so I see your plans haven’t gone quite the way you wanted them to. Did you not take
the heartfelt advice I left you with at the jail? Don’t tell me you failed at seducing yet another man. What a hit that must have been for your self-esteem.”

“Shut up!” she shrieked, trying to pummel his chest with her fists.

He held her back, his hard hands digging into the flesh just below her shoulders.

“Do stop struggling, Scarlett.”

“No, I hate you! I wish they would have hung you.”

“Many share your opinion I’m afraid. Don’t worry; you might get your wish yet.”

She froze in place then looked up into his dark eyes, and under her scrutiny, the imperturbable mask returned to Rhett’s face.

Breathing jaggedly from both the excursion from the run and the short tussle with Rhett, Scarlett managed to say, in a shaky voice, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you may have the pleasure of knowing I may be dead sooner than you imagined,” he answered apathetically.

“Don’t tell me they are really going to kill you! What’s going on?”

“It’s immaterial Scarlett. I suggest you go home now. This isn’t any place for you.”

“No. Tell me what’s going on,” she urged stubbornly.

“It’s simply a game of chance, my dear. Nothing that would interest you,” he answered nonchalantly, but his dark penetrating eyes proved otherwise.

“You’re gambling! With what? I thought you didn’t have any money, and why would someone hold a gun to—”

“Scarlett, go home. Now,” he ordered emphatically before she could finish.

“God’s nightgown! Don’t tell me you’re—”

“Gambling with my life? Yes, how observant you’ve become darling. Now you have to leave. I can’t concentrate with you here.”

“Concentrate! What’s there to concentrate on? You only have to hope you won’t die, Rhett! No, I won’t let you. You’re insane.”

The grip he held slacked and he took one hand to run it across her cheek in a lover-like gesture.

“Would you care very much if I died? I though you wished to see me hanged?” he asked, his voice now velvety soft and devoid of all previous violence.

This change in behavior had Scarlett’s mind fighting with the need to stop him from making a terrible mistake and the urge to hurt him for humiliating her at the jail. She struggled with the decision, realizing that no matter how much she hated him, and at times even wishing him dead, she could never truly mean it.

Ignoring his question, Scarlett said, “Rhett, you can’t do this. Why would you want to? You have enough money. Why only a fool would—”
“A fool, or a man who has nothing else to lose. Do you know how it feels to narrowly escape death? It’s exhilarating. Almost like an adventure.”

“An adventure! Haven’t you had enough adventures, Rhett Butler? Was going off to war not satisfying enough for you! My God, you narrowly escaped the noose just recently. What is your problem?”

Rhett chuckled then took her hands in his. She was worried for his safety, and it gave him a warm and pleasant feeling to know she cared whether he lived or died.

“Yes, and those were all significant experiences. Don’t worry, I don’t plan on losing,” he said with a grin.

“You’re an idiot. Anyone who—” and then she stopped mid sentence, thinking that perhaps he wasn’t so much of an idiot after all. This certainly was a quick way to make money, and she in fact needed quick money. Not only would she be able to pay the taxes if she won, but the thought of beating Rhett at his own game also brought a sparkle to her eyes, not to mention that he’d be furious once she suggested the idea since he seemed so hell-bent on her leaving. This was just the answer she’d been waiting for, and it was as if she’d been led to this cabin by some mysterious force. Rhett watched as the devious smile lit her face, and for once he could not tell what she was thinking.

“I’m going to play too,” she finally said, breaking out of the reverie she had of restoring Tara with all her newly acquired money. Though she only had a vague idea of how the game was played, she knew that luck had to be on her side if chance had brought her here.

“No, you are not,” he said roughly, his hands firmly clasping her arms once more, shaking her slightly.

“Yes, I am, and you can’t stop me.”

“Would you like to see me try?” he asked, his eyes dangerously serious.

Scarlett laughed in his face. At one time his penetrating stare may have frightened her, but now she felt nothing. What could he possibly do to her anyway? Suddenly in one quick swoop, Rhett had Scarlett over his shoulder, effortlessly carrying her away like she weighed next to nothing.

“Put me down you brute!” she screamed at the top of her voice, flailing her legs and batting wildly at his back with her angry fists. Suddenly, her knee jabbed him in just the right place, and she dropped to the ground with a thud.

“Ouch! You cad,” she shrieked.

“Me? Wasn’t I the one who was just viciously attacked?”

Before Scarlett had the chance to reply, the man with the rusty beard came out of the cabin to see where all the yelling was coming from.

“Butler, are you in or out?” the man, who seemed to be the leader of the pack, asked roughly.

Rhett nodded his head and walked towards the cabin, and then he turned back to Scarlett for an instant, watching as she jumped up from the floor, fluffing out her dress.

“Go home Scarlett,” he said once more in an ominous tone that she chose to ignore.

“No. I’m coming with you. I want to play.”
Rhett glared, looking like he wanted to kill her with his bare hands, while the man in front turned around to observe her.

“You, want to play?”

“Yes,” she answered quickly, brushing past Rhett to follow the man into the cabin but her arm was suddenly locked in a tight grasp, pulling her back.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Yes, I do. Let me go you varmint,” she cried out, twisting and tugging her arm so he’d release her.

“Let her play,” the man said, obviously amused and a little deranged.

“No. Scarlett please, for once do as asked and go home,” Rhett pleaded with her in a silky voice, hoping to persuade her with his charm.

She scowled back at him, indifferent to his change in tone, and she looked away.

“No, I’m playing. You’re just afraid I’ll beat you and take all your money. Well go to hell Rhett Butler! I’m going to get my tax money without your help.”

“You are a bigger fool than I previously thought. If this is about the money, I will give it to you. Hell, I’ll—”

“No! You had the chance to help me, but instead you insulted and humiliated me. I don’t want your help. I can find a way on my own thank you, now let me go!”

“And what will you be betting with?” he asked with a grin, knowing very well she had nothing to offer.

“I’ll, well…” Scarlett started then paused. She hadn’t thought about betting, she’d only thought about going home victoriously with the money.

“Well? Don’t tell me you’re going to throw yourself at yet another man, Scarlett. If Frank didn’t want you I doubt—”

Before he could finish, she slapped him across with face with all strength she could muster, and he released the clasp he had on her arm immediately.

“Damn you!”

The mysterious man laughed and appraised Scarlett in an impudent manner, his eyes resting at her cleavage, and he said, “I don’t think I would mind.”

Rhett’s eyes burned through him with fury as he said “No,” in an unmistakably menacing voice that left no room for discussion, but Scarlett thought otherwise.

“I’ll do as I please, thank you very much, and if you are too much of a coward to watch, then maybe you should be the one who leaves,” she stated with a proud lift of her chin as she followed the bearded man into the cabin. In reality she was shaking inside, afraid of the thought of dying or worse, the thought of one those disgustening men touching her. If Rhett hadn’t been so adamant about her returning home, she may have changed her mind, but there was no way in hell she would relent now.
Rhett’s hands turned to fists, and he shoved them deep inside his pockets, realizing there was no hope now that her obstinate mind had been set.

Once inside, the rules of the game were quickly glossed over for Scarlett’s benefit, and Rhett laughed aloud when her green eyes widened with fright. One bullet would be placed inside the revolver with six chambers, which would then be spun and fired at a player’s head while the others bet upon whether that person would live or die, each player receiving a turn. On the wooden table in the middle of the room lay bags of gold coins and spare bullets, in case more than one player was shot and killed during the game.

In a bout of callousness, Rhett offered up the idea that Scarlett should be the first to have her life bet upon since she had been so eager to play, and he volunteered to hold the gun to her head. The men wanted to object, afraid he might somehow rig the game to ensure she wouldn’t die, but they thought better of it when they realized that they did not want her to die, they only wanted her to lose what she would be wagering. None of the men bet that she would die, except Rhett, who received a nasty scowl from Scarlett in return.

He held up the cold steel muzzle to her temple, and she inhaled a deep breath of air, her heart beating wildly out of her chest.

“Am I making you nervous, my dear?” he asked maliciously with a grin.

“You’re a bastard, Rhett Butler.”

“Such loving words. Do you really want those to be the last ones you ever say to me?”

“I wish I could come up with worse. I only hope I get the chance to hold the gun to your head,” she responded with as much malevolence, but her voice trembled, betraying her terror.

“Careful my dear, remember who’s holding the gun.”

“Just pull the trigger,” she answered quickly, closing her eyes and painfully biting down on her bottom lip.

Nauseous with anxiety, her pulse running rapid, Scarlett knew she would faint if he prolonged the moment any longer. Rhett watched, seeing her evident fear, and he almost felt guilty when he placed his finger on trigger. The deafening crack of the gun sent Scarlett spiraling backwards and three men hastily scurrying out of the cabin.

Rhett reloaded the gun with the spare cartridges before Scarlett opened her eyes to see the bearded man lying dead on the floor, strangely unfazed, though it was not the first time she’d seen a man who’d lost his life to a gunshot wound. As Rhett was pocketing the money, Scarlett finally realized that she was still alive, wondering how that could be since she had heard the terrible sound of the crack of the gun, and she was frozen in place out of sheer terror and confusion. When he called out her name and received no response, he laughed and grabbed her by the arm, hauling her out of the cabin and into the woods at a hurried pace. Still in a daze, she followed Rhett in a run without a word, but when she could no longer catch her breath, she begged him to stop and rested against a large tree.

“Scarlett?” he asked softly when she closed her eyes, breathing heavily.

“I just need a minute.”

When she finally opened her eyes, he was smiling down at her, his jet black hair dripping from the pouring rain that washed over them as they stood facing each other in the woods.
“I’m… not dead.”

He chuckled softly then affectionately tucked a wet strand of hair that had found its way to her cheek behind her ear.

“Of course not. Do you truly believe I would have let you die, let them touch you. No.”

“But… you were so mean.”

“Yes I was mean, and you deserved it. This was the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, and believe me, you’ve done a number of stupid things that I have even been witness to.”

Glaring fiercely, she replied, “We got the money, didn’t we?”

“Yes, due to my brilliant ingenuity. I don’t believe you realize how close you came to losing your life or worse today, Scarlett.”

“Why should you care? You wouldn’t mind seeing me dead.”

“You’re such a fool,” he muttered before bringing his lips fiercely down to hers, pushing her up against the tree in a bout of unleashed passion.

Her hands wove around his neck in response, pressing her body into his and kissing him back with hungry unsatisfied lips. This time the rapid pace of her heartbeat, the intoxicating dizziness of his caresses and the tremors he was evoking with his warm wandering hands were welcomed feelings. Not the whipping of the stormy wind nor the rush of falling rain would tear them apart, but the flash of lightening had Rhett reluctantly breaking their kiss, leaving them both panting and staring at each other wordlessly.

“Come along Scarlett,” he finally said, pulling her once more by the arm. “I wouldn’t want you catching your death because I couldn’t restrain myself.”

With a nod, she followed him and did not even bother to shrug off the grip he held on arm.

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Bringing her to his hotel room, which she only agreed to because she had nowhere else to go and because he promised no one would find out, Rhett threw the money onto his dresser then went in search of something Scarlett could change into out of her drenched dress. He brought out towels and his silk nightwear, and she was more than grateful for the change of clothes. Aiding her in the removal of the heavy dress and soaked corset, Rhett pulled the velvet fabric over her head and loosened the many stays at her back, and Scarlett shivered when his hands touched her exposed skin, embarrassed that he should see her in nothing more than a chemise before she could run off to change in another room.

When she emerged from the dressing room, he was already relatively dry and in a new set of clothes.

“Are you still cold?” he asked, noticing how she shook.

She nodded, not wanting to admit that nerves played a part as well.

He brought her to the sitting room in front of a freshly prepared fire and had her sit in front of him as he brushed through her long wet locks, towel drying the dripping ends after he had finished. The
intimate gesture and the warm gentleness of his hands caused a bright pink to flush her cheeks, and she was thankful that her face was hidden with her back to him.

“I assume you’re pleased with the outcome of the day’s events, Scarlett. You have your money and you’re not indebted to me. Seems you have everything you want.”

“Are you really going to let me have the money, Rhett?” she asked uncertainly, thinking there had to be at least a few conditions.

“Of course. I’d have given you the money in the jailhouse if I could have, and I’ll drive you to Tara tomorrow if you’d like. We wouldn’t want anyone to know where you’d been today,” Rhett said casually, as if he were offering her a mere insignificant favor.

“You would… do that for me?” she asked, turning to face him now in utter shock.

“I’d do just about anything for you, my dear.”

Standing up, Scarlett looked down at him, searching his inscrutable face for answers to this uncharacteristic tenderness. It was most unexpected and so unlike him to be this sweet, especially given what had transpired at the jail, and she could not help but feel an overwhelming gratitude. She ran a hand through his hair, bending down to place a kiss on his cheek, but then as her eyes unexpectedly lingered on his lips, she brought hers down to his mouth in a fleeting peck. Rhett instantly pulled her onto his lap, but he only kissed her with slow and longing gentleness, hoping that perhaps there was a possibility at gaining her love after all.

But even when Rhett told himself to pull away, to curb his emotions for the woman who had always escaped his grasp, he could not bring himself to do it. Her mouth tasted so sweet, it would be a crime to leave it unexplored. Her body was of a womanly softness that made him feel cheated if his hands did not caress it a bit longer. And the woman that possessed all these qualities made it almost impossible for him to think with a level head due to her actions. She plied herself in his arms without reservations, her mouth exploring his with wild abandon, her hands caressing the straining muscles on his back with eager curiosity. What was a man to do when the object of his desire was offering herself so willingly?

Her hands, that had been carefully tracing the muscles on his back, transferred their explorations towards his shoulder blades and then higher. When her fingertips massaged that sensitive area at the nape of his neck he finally gave up all reservations; something wild started roaring within him, something so savage that it took some of the coolness that he usually prided himself on. Up until now, his touch had been feather light; one of his hands rested gently on her knee, while the other arm encircled her slender form with only tenderness. But suddenly that arm started trembling; trembling from repressed desire and he held her tighter, something that made him immediately aware of the softness that lay hidden under the fabric of the silk shirt. Expecting her to withdraw he was surprised to notice that she leaned into him comfortably, sighing contently in between her ongoing onslaught of sweet kisses.

Could this really be happening, he wondered. Was this the same woman that had slapped him with burning force at Rough and Ready? That had played a cold calculated trick on him when she visited him in jail? She was warm and loving, open to anything he had planned for them tonight.

With her so close his senses filled with the sweet smell of her that mixed with a more earthy scent that the rain had left in her hair. He caressed the moist strands and enjoyed their smoothness under his rough fingers. By now it was Scarlett that was pulling his body nearer, although he could not possibly come closer in the position they were in. This lead to characteristic impatience on her part when she started wriggling in his lap and he wondered if this was his cue to transfer to the more
comfortable areas his hotel room provided. She must have felt his distraction for she made an annoyed sound before she pulled his head down towards her. By now, she had gotten bolder and he forgot about his initial plan to answer the challenge she was so obviously putting in front of him. If her kisses filled with raw passion than his answers were daring, causing her to get out of control. Her little hands found their way into his shirt and as soon as she started caressing his naked flesh, he decided that he needed to possess her. Possess her completely.

She was so entranced in the mad dance their tongues were doing. So entranced in her explorations of his body that she did not notice how he shifted her into a straddling position. However, he had not counted on the fact that this would reveal just how much of an effect she really had on him. When she felt the proof of his own arousal, she interrupted their kisses and, while still panting, she looked at him. From the way she blinked, he could tell she was somewhat confused but he did not give her much time to analyze her feelings because now that he had her right in front of her, he finally had access to two of the most tantalizing attributes that she possessed. Her little erect buds could clearly be identified through the fabric of the silk shirt and he took advantage of that knowledge by placing his warm mouth over one. She groaned slightly and this encouraged him to draw her nearer and pay equal tribute to the neglected breast with one of his hands.

While still having part of her in his mouth he smiled when he felt her pushing him against her with all her might. His warm hands found his way underneath the shirt and she shivered slightly from his touch. His fondling made some of the buttons come undone and when he saw how she was partially revealed to him, he paused to drink in her beauty, causing her to flutter her eyelids open and stare at him in return. And once more she called out to him before she closed those mesmerizing eyes and curved her body in such a way that it left no room for doubt. She wanted him, she wanted all of him. And Rhett realized that he was only a man. If there was hell to pay in the morning he would deal with that then. This was the here and now and the woman whose love had seemed elusive was offering herself to him. Was offering him a night of unbridled passion and he would be a fool to not take her up on her invitation.

“Scarlett,” he whispered but she did not seem to hear him but bent her body backwards instead, thus inviting him to explore her further. He kissed every inch of her naked skin, and realizing that next to the opened shirt she had nothing on, he decided not to stall any longer. While distracting her with a few more kisses he made sure that nothing would hinder their union. He could instantly feel how warm and wet she was down there. More proof that she desired him as much as he desired her. When he entered her she made a primal sound that came from deep within. He felt the impact too because he forgot to breathe for a second before he started moving her up and over him at a steady pace. She felt so good, so warm and inviting and some part of him longed to be selfish and take what he had wanted for so long with a few fierce strokes. But he hoped this coupling would not be their last one and suspecting Scarlett’s limited experience in that area made him hold back somewhat.

That was; until Scarlett got over her initial hesitation, and by the time she rode him with equal zealoulsness, he abandoned the last remnants of self-control. She felt heavenly and what was more, she seemed to enjoy all the things he was doing to her too, so much so that she started calling out his name, hoarsely, desperately. But he knew what she was asking for and, while he did just the right things to push her over the edge, he gloried in the simple knowledge that he was the first to ever give her such pleasure. When her cries died down he was quick let go himself and this time it was his turn to cry out her name. She fell against him, spent but clearly satisfied and he kissed the temple that only a few hours before had felt the barrel of his gun pressed against it.

Was this the result of the trying day she had? What exactly had gone through her mind the moment he placed that gun against her head? Had she trusted fate, had she trusted him? Had that only been an
hour ago? He had lost track of time. Right now nothing else existed but him, her and the passion they had just shared. He felt her body growing limp against his and so he carried her over to the bed. Even before he placed the covers over her, she was fast asleep.

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As promised, Rhett kept true to his word and drove her home to Tara that next morning, though the long winding ride was rather quiet and tense given what had transpired between them the night before. Although Scarlett was clearly mortified by her immoral actions in a moment of weakness—actions that she had first instigated God forgive her!—there was a part of her that she couldn’t deny was clearly drawn to him, something that wanted more though she could not pinpoint what exactly that more was. Being wrapped in his embrace, the feelings he had evoked and the uncustomary ardor mixed with bouts of tenderness of his actions all left Scarlett vaguely puzzled. Not only had her body betrayed her by responding to his every touch and caress with just as much fervor as he possessed but she had also surprisingly enjoyed every moment of it. She wasn’t supposed to feel this way, not with Rhett, and especially not if she loved Ashley. It was an utmost betrayal to that love! But what amazed her more than even her indecent conduct was the fact that she did not feel as though she had been disloyal to Ashley, not even in the aftermath. The thought that the love for her childhood sweetheart could have suddenly dwindled was a notion that was simply too much to bear, so she pushed it to the back of her mind like she did all unpleasant thoughts, hoping she would feel differently tomorrow or at the very least when Rhett wasn’t sitting so close in proximity.

As they drew closer to Tara, Rhett finally spoke up, breaking an awkward silence, and asked, “Well Scarlett, what do you plan on telling your family of this unforeseen arrival? I’m sure they’ll be full of questions once you arrive home unexpectedly with me in the place of Mammy.”

“I…I don’t know. Oh, what am I going to do,” she cried, burying her face in her hands and thinking she made such a mess of everything. If her pride wasn’t so strong, she may have lapsed into frantic tears of hysteria, realizing suddenly that she must have been possessed to behave so foolishly, not only in her mad desire for money but also in her reckless behavior with Rhett.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it, my dear. I’m sure we could come up with a reasonable explanation.”

“We?” she asked, startled and confused, lifting her head from her hands to stare at him quizzically.

“Yes, we. I told you I would help you didn’t I?”

“Well…yes, but I thought that you would—”

“What did you think? Did you think I would drop you off then be on my merry way?”

“No, I thought you’d leave me at Rough and Ready in the middle of a war with a small child, a baby, a sick woman and that simple minded Prissy. Oh wait, you did that already,” Scarlett replied tartly.

Rhett smothered a laugh at her apt observation. “That was a different circumstance.”
“If you were unwilling to help me then what should make me think you would help me now?”

“You forget that I did steal a horse, at the risk of my own life I might add, all because you had the ludicrous idea of returning home to Tara. Are you really so reluctant to believe that I would want to help you now?”

“You certainly didn’t want to help me at the jail.”

“Did you ever think I may have been more receptive to helping you if you hadn’t come to me, fluttering your lashes and sputtering your lies of false love like I was some country boy you could ensnare in your trap?”

“I don’t want to discuss it.”

“Scarlett, look at me.”

Reluctantly, she met Rhett’s gaze and he continued, “I will tell you this now, even though you hardly deserve it. It was not only pure meanness that kept me from helping you that day. If I could have, I would have helped you, even without that charming collateral you offered.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and now I’ve promised you that I would be of service and I don’t go back on my word.”

This unanticipated sweetness left her baffled yet still filled with a warm sense of gratitude for the second time in two days. How nice Rhett could be at times when he wanted to be! If only she could figure out what his motives were. Was it possible that he really did care about her more than he was willing to admit or was he only hoping to one day lead up to his previous proposition that she become his mistress? Whatever his reasons were, she was still thankful for his support. Facing her family and answering their many questions was not going to be an easy task.

“Thank you, Rhett,” said Scarlett as a genuine smile lit her face, a smile which he returned.

“I assume no one at Tara has had time to hear of your short lived engagement.”

“No, no one.”

“Have you thought about how you will explain how you came into enough money to pay the taxes?”

“No, I haven’t thought about anything. I thought, well I thought they’d just be pleased that I had it.”

“They’ll know you didn’t pick it off a bush.”

“If you’re so smart Rhett Butler why don’t you tell me what I should say!”

“I’ll take care of it Scarlett, that is, if you promise me something in return.”

“What do you want?”

“I would like a detailed description of old Frank’s face when you left him at the altar. I—”

“You’re horrible!”
Chuckling softly, Rhett replied, “I don’t deny it. Well, do we have a deal?”

“I don’t know,” she wavered, suspicious of his plan. “What are you going to say?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I assure you it will be believable.”

“Fine, we have a bargain,” Scarlett agreed then suddenly felt like she had just made a deal with the devil.

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Scarlett could feel the twisted knots in the pit of her stomach while the wheels rolled over the damp red-earthed driveway up to Tara. At the sound of their arrival, anxious household members ran out to greet them, slightly surprised by Scarlett’s unanticipated appearance but even more stunned when it came to the dark featured reprobate who accompanied her.

“Oh Scarlett, Captain Butler! This is unexpected. Has something happened? Where’s Mammy?” inquired Melanie.

“She’s…well she’s,” Scarlett faltered, looking up at Rhett who was supposed to provide the answers.

“She’s still in Atlanta,” Rhett supplied carelessly. “She thought Scarlett and I deserved some time alone.”

Ashley and Melly stared at them, wide-eyed with confusion as well as a hint of fear on the blond gentleman’s part.

“Time alone?”

Scarlett, who was just as puzzled by Rhett’s explanation, peered up at him, and then he wrapped an iron arm around her shoulders.

“Yes, we were married yesterday. Isn’t that right darling?” he caressed with emphasis as he looked down into Scarlett’s stormy green eyes with a dazzling grin. It took all of her strength not to shake off his arm, but she smiled back forcefully. It would be the last time she trusted that scheming blackguard!

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“And Scarlett was in such a rush to head back to Tara in order to inform everyone of our newly wedded bliss.”

Ashen faced Ashley looked horrified by the news, almost as though he had just witnessed his worst fears being realized. It did not escape him that he was the one who had driven her straight into the arms of Captain Butler with his own helplessness, and it shamed him.

Everyone offered their brief congratulations, though Scarlett noted that Carreen and Melanie were the only ones who seemed the least bit sincere in their well wishes. It was true that she had made her deep running hatred for that awful skunk Rhett Butler no secret during the war while at Tara, but what right did they have to judge her decisions now? She would have done worse—no she had done worse, much worse, to get the tax money and they should be grateful that they weren’t living on the street.

Shyly, Carreen went up to Scarlett and said, “But Scarlett, Pa will be so disappointed that he never
had the chance to see your wedding.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to reply tartly that Pa barely knew what year he was in, but she refrained and answered, “That’s why we’re going to have a small ceremony here.” If Rhett wanted to be married to her so badly then he was going to do it officially, marrying man or not!

“And what about the taxes?” Suellen asked.

“I have the money,” she answered sharply, only too aware that this situation was her all of her sister’s fault. If she hadn’t been so stingy and selfish then Scarlett could have depended on her to ask Frank for the money, but she knew that the moment Suellen was a married woman, they would never see a penny of Frank’s earnings for Tara.

“Rhett, can I speak to you for a moment?” Scarlett said, flouncing off in the direction of the house and up to her room to escape the multitudes of questions and curious stares.

“You think you’re pretty clever don’t you?” she asked once they were alone in her bedroom, behind closed doors.

“What? Don’t tell me you aren’t impressed with my solution? I would have thought that this was exactly what you wanted. Didn’t you come to the jail looking for just this? I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I thought you weren’t a marrying man? You’ve reminded me often enough.”

“Scarlett, that look alone on Ashley Wilkes’ face is enough to repay me for a lifetime of matrimonial incarceration.”

“Oh! Always jokes with you! Can you ever be serious for once?”

“I promised I would be of service, did I not? Well, I’m keeping true to my word. How did you think you would pay next year’s taxes, or the year after that?”

“Well that’s why I wanted you to marry me in the first place!”

“Precisely. You’re getting exactly what you wanted, so I fail to see why we were arguing. We should be celebrating our newly established marital bliss.” Rhett remarked, taking a purposeful seat on her bed while he spoke, his dark eyes dancing with amusement.

Blushing to her roots, Scarlett tried to shake the vivid image from the night before from her memory.

“We aren’t married yet.”

“That isn’t what the rest of your family believes.”

“If you think you are sleeping in my room tonight Rhett Butler, you can think again. I–”

“And where do you believe I should sleep? Don’t you think your family might be the least suspicious if I, your husband as far as they know it, am sleeping on the divan downstairs? It hardly seems appropriate.”

“You’re enjoying yourself aren’t you?”

“Not in the least.”

“Liar. You know what I don’t understand is why you would agree to marry me at all?”
“Those reasons are my own.”

“Oh, you’re impossible!”

“Cheer up, my dear. Being married to me won’t be so bad. In fact, I would go as far as to say that it might even be fun.”

“Marriage fun? Fiddle-dee-dee, fun for man you mean.”

Rhett unleashed roar of laughter, and Scarlett glared at him in response, failing to see what he could possibly have found so amusing. “Hush your laughing you know it’s true.”

“Scarlett, you have very little knowledge of men or of marriage for that matter.”

“Oh, and I suppose you know all about it! You’ve never even been married.”

“And you have?”

“Who do you think Charles Hamilton was!” she cried out.

“I wouldn’t call that a marriage.”

“Oh, and what would you call it?”

“An error in judgment, on both your parts I’m afraid,” Rhett remarked with a grin. “Now, shall we let the bugles sing truce? It is after all our honeymoon and we shouldn’t be quarreling.”

She rolled her eyes at the absurdity of his response. The man simply could not be serious. “You do realize we have to get married before Mammy catches wind of all this and shows up here. She’ll know we weren’t married yesterday.”

“An apt observation, my dear, though if you were so eager to make this marriage official, you only needed to say the word and—”

“Hush up, you conceited thing, you know that’s not what I meant.”

“I was only teasing, and I suggest you learn to get used to it. You won’t be so easily rid of me once we’re married.”

“Why are you doing this for me? I don’t understand.”

“And you don’t need to understand. All you need to know is that I’m here, and as long as I am, you should know that you’re no longer alone. I’ll make sure a minister arrives tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Rhett,” Scarlett said softly for the second time that day. “For everything.”

“Everything?”

“Well, yes. You know what I mean.”

He rose from the bed, placing two gentle hands at the side of her face and then brushed a fleeting kiss across her forehead, knowing he had made the right decision. “You’re welcome.”

~***~

Rhett and Scarlett were married the next day by a local minister in a brief ceremony, thankfully
before Mammy showed up later that afternoon. Although Mammy gave the newlyweds knowing glances now and again, glances Scarlett painstakingly tried to avoid noticing, she never called either of them out on their trick, and life at Tara went on much as it had prior to Scarlett’s trip to Atlanta. However, married life did bring about one noticeable change at Tara, and that was the lift in Scarlett’s spirits upon discovering how much of a help Rhett could be. Matters that she could never trust with anyone else, she could trust with him to get accomplished in a timely matter with very few mistakes. When she used to feel that there was no one to turn to in a time of crisis, now she had Rhett, someone she could rely on, someone who would never fail her, and it eased the considerable load she carried. In fact, if Scarlett were being entirely honest with herself, she would have to admit that Rhett was an equivalent of four Ashleys, especially when it came to physical labor, not that she would ever say this aloud.

Not only was Rhett’s presence of great assistance, but his vast wealth also contributed quite a bit to household. Where once they worried about where their next meal might come from, with Rhett’s money that was no longer an issue of concern. The payment of the taxes on Tara dissipated Scarlett’s primary fears as well as those of the other family members, which also brought about a sense of calm and relief to the household. This, however, was not the case when it came to Jonas Wilkerson, who having heard the news was beyond furious that his plans had been thwarted. Even though the loathsome old overseer never came back to Tara himself, he found other various ways to stir up trouble in the county, and it was this very trouble that caused Ashley and Rhett to come across Tony Fontaine passing through Tara on his way to Jonesboro in a dangerous rage after Jonas Wilkerson. When they had stopped him, Tony had swiftly explained what had happened to Sally, and then the unlikely pair decided to join him without first telling the women at Tara of their plans, a decision they would later come to regret.

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It was only when Scarlett and Melanie heard the loud racket of the wagon’s wheels speeding down the driveway to Tara that they realized Rhett and Ashley were even gone, and then they both hurried out onto the veranda, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. When they saw Tony Fontaine lifting Ashley out of the carriage, they noticed the large red splotch staining the shirtfront near his abdomen and realized that he had been wounded.

“Ashley!” Melanie and Scarlett cried in unison as they rushed over to him, fear gripping their hearts.

“What’s happened?” Melly asked with panic in her voice as she trailed behind Tony while he carried her husband up the steps to the house.

“He’s been shot, and I reckon you should fetch a doctor right quick.”

Will, whom having heard the commotion, rushed over and was quickly delegated to fetching the help of Dr. Fontaine.

Scarlett watched wordless, stunned and unable to puzzle the pieces together as Tony carried Ashley into the house to place him on a bed. What in the world was going on and where was Rhett?

“But where’s Rhett?” she shouted then caught sight of a dark figure at the bottom of carriage and ran over to it, the sound of her heartbeat drumming in her ears as the blood rushed to her head. What would she do if he was dead? No, she wouldn’t think of that now. He wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be.
Oh dear god he’s been shot, Scarlett thought when she reached the carriage, looking down and noticing the red oozing wetness just below his right shoulder, forgetting Ashley entirely. The rain, which had been drizzling lightly all day, started to pour with a vengeance, and her immediate impulse was to pull him out of carriage, but then she realized she couldn’t very well carry him on her own. Had adrenaline not been running rapid through her veins, she might have fainted from the shock of seeing Rhett so uncharacteristically vulnerable, his face unnaturally pale compared to his usual swarthisness. This wasn’t like seeing the many wounded men she had treated as a nurse during the war, this was Rhett, the man who was always so self-assured in his abilities, the man who had cheated death on a number of occasions, the man who she had grown to depend on for strength, and now he lay helpless and unconscious. This couldn’t be happening. He couldn’t be shot, he was supposed to be invincible! What would she do if she lost him? Life would not be the same without Rhett in it, it would be…unbearable.

“It’s only through the shoulder. I think he’ll be fine. Help me lift him out,” Tony said from behind, startling her out of her reverie.

“You think he’ll be fine! What happened? Where were you?”

“Jonas Wilkerson happened the—” he started then stopped himself short of cursing a string of vulgarities. “We were hoping to take him by surprise, but I guess he’s the one who surprised us. We weren’t expecting him to have a gun handy.”

“What do you mean? What does he have anything to do with—”

“I’m sure your husband will explain all the glory details once he regains consciousness. Suffice it to say Wilkerson won’t be a problem any longer.”

“But…I want to know now! Tell me!”

“Help me bring him up to his room and I’ll try to explain, but I don’t have much time, Scarlett. They’re probably after me now as we speak.”

They carried Rhett to the bed in Scarlett’s room and propped his large body against the pillows, then she scurried about the house to fetch towels and a pair of scissors to cut away the fabric of his shirt from the gunshot wound. Hands shaking, she pressed a towel onto the wound, soaking up the deep crimson sticky dampness that would not stop leaking no matter how much force she exerted or how much she willed it with her mind.

“Don’t you dare die on me, Rhett Butler”, she mumbled, exchanging the stained towel for a fresh one once the blood seeped through and drenched the material entirely.

While Scarlett attended to Rhett, Tony hastily explained how the three of them had gone to Jonesboro to deal with Wilkerson after all the trouble he had caused for the folks at Tara, along with an unfortunate circumstance involving Sally that had pushed him over the edge. They had found Wilkerson in the barroom, but it wasn’t until he started firing that they realized the despicable man had a gun.

“He got Ashley first by surprise, then Rhett, but your husband has a wicked shot. He still let me finish Wilkerson off, though. Let me tell you I—” Tony started then stopped before he went into too much detail. “Well, anyway Scarlett, Rhett seemed fine until we were riding home, and then he went out cold.”

Scarlett wanted to shout at the top of her lungs that men were such fools, but before she had the chance, Dr. Fontaine entered the room. Tony looked the doctor straight in the eyes, searching for an
answer, and his reply was a short shake of a head before the doctor hurried to Rhett’s side to examine the wound.

“I need to go Scarlett. I’ve stayed long enough as it is. Give me a kiss, I may never see you again.”

“Where are you going?”

“Texas, if I can make it there in time before the Yankees catch up with me.”

“But surely you don’t—”

“I have no choice. They’ll hang me if they get the chance,” he replied carelessly then placed a swift peck onto her cheek and dashed out of the room and into the pouring rain, mounting his horse before galloping away in a mad race to escape the noose.

Scarlett focused her attentions back to Rhett where the doctor was carefully bandaging the wound, wondering how everything could have changed so suddenly and thinking that if she never saw another gun in her life, it would still be too soon.

“Is he…will he be all right?” she asked tentatively, afraid of the answer.

“As long as the wound remains uninfected. The bullet did not strike any bones as far as I can tell, so the damage isn’t extensive, but he’s lost a lot of blood. If he starts a fever come get me immediately, but for today there is nothing much else I can do. I’ll come back to check on him tomorrow in any case.”

“Thank you,” Scarlett mumbled, turning her face away to hide the tears that had formed at the corners of her eyes, betraying her terror and weakness. She had seen enough men who had suffered through amputations at the hand of bullet wounds, and all the more who had died of infection or loss of blood long before a doctor ever reached them.

Catching sight of a small wooden chair in her room, Scarlett dragged it over to the side of the bed and sunk into it with a heavy sigh, only wishing she could crawl into bed next to Rhett, to have his strong arms wrap around her tiny frame and soothe away her fears, to hear him say that everything would be fine. She was not the type of woman who was used to being afraid or even admitting to those fears, but she was indeed afraid now. Deeply afraid that she might lose the only man she could trust and support her through all her struggles, the only man who seemed to understand the heavy load she carried and wished to relieve her of some of it. It was not very long ago that she had discovered that the only person she could trust and count on was herself, but somehow during their brief marriage, Rhett had managed to prove her wrong, and the thought that she might lose the one person she truly needed was a thought too agonizing even to contemplate.

The pungent metallic smell of blood was heavy in the air, but Scarlett never rose from her seat by Rhett’s side, not that she could open a window in any case for the rain was coming down hard, smacking the sill by the rough force of the blustering wind. His hand was limp resting by his leg, and she reached for it, half expecting it to be as cold as her own but finding calming warmth instead. The tears she fought so determinedly to ward off brimmed her emerald eyes and then escaped in two long trails down over the soft curves of her cheeks. A free hand came up to her face and swatted away the traces of weakness. It was foolish to cry for a man who was not dead—no—a man who would not die, not if she had any say in the matter.

There was a faint rumbling in the room and Scarlett looked up, startled to find Rhett’s eyes fixed on hers as a small smirk played at the corners of his lips.
“Were those tears for me?” he asked dimly with a gleam dancing in those dark inscrutable depths.

“I wasn’t crying,” Scarlett denied, a flood of relief filling her heart at just the sound of his voice, as faint as it may have been.

“You weren’t? Oh, it must be my mistake,” he replied, eyeing the soft hand that still held his.

“How are you feeling?”

“Well, I won’t deny I’ve felt better, but it isn’t so awful. How are you feeling?”

“Me? I’m fine.”

“You’re lying, but we’ll let that pass for the time being. How’s Ashley?”

“I—I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since…”

“Don’t tell me that your beloved was wounded and you failed to inquire about his condition?”

“I wasn’t thinking about him because I was worried about you, damn you!” she shouted then jumped up from her seat, pulling her hand away.

“Scarlett, don’t leave.”

“Why?”

“Please?”

“Fine,” she mumbled then sat back down and Rhett smiled, but it was most sincere and not the least bit mocking.

Feeling lightheaded, Rhett rested his eyes, and a renewed sense of worry swept through Scarlett, erasing the momentary relief.

“Rhett?”

“Hmm?”

“If you even dare to think about dying, I’ll kill you myself and save you the trouble.”

At her words, he laughed freely, and then his face contorted with pain at the tension that laughter put on his shoulder. “I have no intention of dying,” he answered carelessly as though he had control over the matter.

“Oh don’t you? I suppose that’s why you ran off to confront Wilkerson?”

“Are you sincerely worried about my safety Mrs. Butler, or are you only worried you might be reduced to wearing black again?”

“Could you ever be serious? This isn’t any time for jokes.”

“I’m completely serious.”

“Of course I was worried about you, you fool. Why else would I be here. You know I hate
“True enough. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?”

“Yes, you should be resting.”

“That’s not quite what I meant. I’m fine.”

“You are not fine, you’ve been shot.”

“Your concern warms my heart.”

There was a teasing tone to his words but there was also a lingering sincerity in his eyes that he hadn’t troubled to mask, making Scarlett wonder if he truly thought that she cared so little for his safety. Timidly, she reached for his hand again, hoping that actions would speak louder than words, not that any particular words came to mind to begin with. How was she supposed to put into words what she did not even understand herself?

“You feel warm,” Scarlett noted then blushed, thinking that the touch of his skin always felt warm against her own.

“That’s because your hands are cold. You seem tired. I think you are the one who needs rest.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not tired and I’m not leaving. You should try to rest, Rhett. Please.”

Hearing the genuine concern in her voice, Rhett gave her hand a gentle squeeze before closing his eyes. “Can I assume you will be here when I wake up?”

“Yes. I promise.”

~***~

Seeking solace from the eerie stillness that consumed the household at Tara, Scarlett stepped out onto the veranda that next morning, afraid of falling to pieces if she met anyone’s gaze or heard his name spoken. The fog was heavy, surrounding her skirt like a murky cloud as she searched for the front step to sit down, and she hugged her arms to her chest in hopes of warding off the chilling humidity that clung to her bones. Despite the cold, there was something comforting in the distinct scent of the morning country air after the previous night’s torrential downpour, something that eased her tired mind and assured her that once again she would prevail through the hardships life handed her. Funeral arrangements would have to be made, and the thought sent a shudder through her body. It wasn’t fair that she would have to lose yet another loved one. Was losing her mother and the majority of her childhood friends not enough?

There was a soft creek, and Scarlett turned around to see the front door cracked open with Carreen peeking from the side. Did no one understand that she wanted to be alone?

“Scarlett, are you all right?”

With a sigh, she rose from her seat and moved to where her sister stood by the door. “Yes, I’m fine. I’ll just be in my room if anyone needs me. I want to be alone.”

Brushing passed her sister, Scarlett started up the stairs to her bedroom, knowing it would be the only place where she might find a moment’s peace. She would never understand why it was that everyone looked to her for answers, why she should be the one to carry all the burdens when the only thing
she wanted was to lean against someone else and relieve herself of the heavy weights on her shoulders.

There was a short pause before she eased the door open and tiptoed into the bedroom, but Rhett was already awake and staring intensely in her direction.

“What’s happened?”

“Ashley… he’s…gone,” she mumbled, fixing her eyes down to the floor in order to avoid his gaze.

“I’m sorry Scarlett,” Rhett said with genuine sympathy. Even if he himself was never particularly fond of the gentleman, he still empathized with the pain she must be feeling at losing yet another childhood friend. “How’s Mrs. Wilkes?”

“She’s…I don’t know Rhett. She’s doing better than I thought she would be.”

“When did it happen?”

“Last night. No one came to tell me because it all happened so quickly and I—”

“You were with me.” There was a bitterness coloring his tone, and Scarlett looked up, vaguely puzzled. Seeing the lost look in her eyes, Rhett’s voice softened as he smothered the hint of jealousy which consumed him, a jealousy he hoped would gradually disappear now that the man who haunted his future happiness was no longer with them.

“Come here my dear,” he beckoned, motioning to the side of the bed, but she hesitated, frozen in place.

“But I can’t. I’ll hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me, I’m hardly fragile. Come here.”

Tentatively, Scarlett climbed onto the bed by Rhett’s left side, keeping her distance in fear of jostling the tender shoulder. With a light chuckle, he wrapped his good arm around her waist and edged her closer to his body until her head was resting against his chest. Despite her initial worries, Scarlett could not help but be reassured by the feel of warm body pressed against her side or the sound of the steady beating heart just beneath her ear that told her he was alive. Thank God for Rhett. Without him, she would be going through this whole mess alone, with no one to confide in or lean on.

“What would you say to leaving Tara for a short trip? I think we could both use the change in scenery.”

“What kind of trip?”

“Well, we never had a proper honeymoon. I think it might be time that we had one. What do you think?”

“That sounds lovely,” she agreed, more than willing to escape the reminders of death for a short spell. “Only, should we go so soon after…”

“I think we should leave as soon as I’m able to travel.”

“Wait,” she started, forcing herself to look up at him, “do you mean to tell me that you’re worried that the Yankees might be after you as well as Tony?”
“I’m not certain, but I would prefer not to wait and see. My short-lived venture in jail is far from one of my fondest memories, and I’m not as trusting in my abilities to escape the noose once again.”

“Why did you go after Wilkerson? Do you have a death wish Rhett Butler?”

“Would it matter much to you if I did? I seem to recall at one point you wished me hanged.”

“Well…that was before, and I didn’t really mean it you know.”

“You could have fooled me. I believe your exact words were, I wish they would have hung you. That leaves very little to interpretation.”

“Well, you deserved it at the time!” Scarlett huffed, recalling that fateful day and momentarily forgetting her sorrow at the news of Ashley’s death. “And may I remind you that you held a gun to my head that very same day! You’re far from innocent.”

“I tried to dissuade you to play that game, though now that I think about it, I have to say I may actually be thankful for your stubborn nature. I believe that gamble was well worth the rewards, don’t you?”

Meeting his dark eyes that were dancing with mischief, Scarlett knew he was not referring to their tangible winnings, and a giggle accidentally escaped her lips.

“Was that a laugh Mrs. Butler? Do I take it that you might truly enjoy my company and no longer feel as hopeful for my demise?”

“No, I couldn’t lose you now, Rhett. I need you.”

A grin played at his lips for he knew how hard it was for Scarlett to admit that she needed someone, let alone him.

“You needn’t worry,” Rhett whispered into her raven locks before brushing a kiss at the top of her head. “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, love. I promise.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Rhett’s heart stopped and he tried to conjure up a way to explain his slip of the tongue, if Scarlett even noticed it at all. But as he waited anxiously for the fallout, she only snuggled closer to him, smiling to herself before closing her eyes to sneak in a few needed hours of sleep and wondering if perhaps she had actually fallen in love with her own husband. With Rhett by her side, there was nothing she couldn’t face, and she could not help but agree with his previous words. The rewards reaped from a lethal and reckless game of chance far exceeded their gamble.

♥ ~The End ~ ♥

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