



IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD'S ARMY



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Written by Theo Hollander

"A Prisoner Again"

Synopsis

BACK COVER:

"At the age of fourteen, I had killed more people than some of the most notorious serial killers that the world has ever known. But that doesn't mean that I am an evil man, or that I am mentally ill. I never killed anyone out of pure cruelty or because of sheer hatred. I killed them because I had to. I had no other choice. It was either them or me. Or at least, this is what I keep on telling myself..."

In the service of the Lord's army tells the story of how the war in northern Uganda changed my life forever. It will show how, at the age of twelve, I was transformed from cheerful child into a cold-blooded killer in the so-called army of the Lord, otherwise known as the Lord's Resistance Army."

Summary:

"In the service of the Lord's army" is a biography about Norman Okello; a young man from northern Uganda who was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army at the age of twelve and forced to become one of its harbingers of death. This book will tell a true story of epic proportions, about severe hardships and extreme strength and resilience in events that happened in a strange but real world about fifteen years ago.

The book tells the tale of how one of the most brutal rebel groups in the world changed the life of one individual irreversibly. It will show how a young child was able to cope in this hostile environment and navigate through all the hardships. It shows the constant struggles that Norman had with himself trying to keep his humanity, while it is the very loss of humanity and the will to survive at all cost that makes him human. This book will tell about Norman's life and the extraordinary events in which he was directly involved. From his idyllic early childhood which reveals this part of Africa in its full beauty, to his combat, abduction and punishment missions which can be added to the blackest pages of human history.

Chapter 16

After the soldiers had driven away the civilians, a soldier who spoke Acholi came to me and he asked me if I was going to cause him any trouble. I replied that I was there to surrender and that I had no intention of harming anybody, but I also told him that I would defend myself if anyone attacked me.

- "No one will attack you, 'cause you're under our protection now. Now follow me."

My answer seemed to satisfy him since he left me armed as he walked ahead of me. I knew that this was a defining moment. I had just given myself to my greatest enemy of the last two years and I anxiously held on to my gun. Considering what we had done throughout Kitgum for the last two and a half months, they had every reason to execute me on the spot without asking me a single question. This is what we would have done to any surrendering UPDF soldier. We would probably even torture him before doing so, not only to get information, but just for the fun of it.

It was merely two weeks ago that I was still fighting for the LRA and that I shot at the colleagues of the men that now escorted me. Maybe I had even been involved in fire fights with these individuals as well. All the stories I had been told about the UPDF were still fresh in my mind. If the stories were true, they would torture and poison me. Judging from those stories they told us in the LRA, I stood better survival chances with the villagers below than I would up there in the barracks, surrounded by soldiers who had all

lost friends because of little boys like me. But so far my enemy didn't seem to be interested in killing me. I could no longer tell friend from foe. I had run out of options. I was very thirsty and hungry, completely lost, and desperate. I still wanted to reach Kenya, but I simply had no idea where I was. The worst thing was the loneliness. For the last two weeks I had been completely alone, with no one making choices for me and no one giving me any encouragements. Although I still thought a lot in 'we' terms, I realised that there was no 'we' anymore. There was just me.

The LRA had originally taken me against my will. I would never have committed any of the terrible crimes on my own. I was an innocent child trying to survive in a bad situation. It was these thoughts that sparked my hope that they wouldn't execute me. If they hadn't failed to protect me from abduction in the first place, I would have never fought against them. If the UPDF hadn't been defeated in that defining battle that now seemed ages ago, I would have never been abducted. So it was also their fault that I had fought them, and surely they couldn't hold me responsible for their own mistakes. These were the arguments that I planned to use in my defense.

I knew that I had already passed the point of no return when I entered the camp and there was nothing I could do but wait and see what my fate would be. Still fully armed I came to the top of the hill where we entered the barracks. When I looked back I saw that the civilians were pointing at me. I knew that my fate was now fully in the hands of the UPDF, who were the only ones that could protect me from the wrath of the civilians and the refu-

gees below. The barracks consisted of dozens of huts surrounded by mortars and big machine guns pointed towards the green edges of the refugee camp below. From this point they had a good defensive position, but I doubted if this barracks would withstand an all-out LRA attack, especially if that attack would take place at night.

In the middle of the barracks an elder commander waited for me. The soldiers saluted this man and they introduced me as 'another escapee,' meaning that there had been others before me. The commander took a few moments to observe me. He walked around me, just staring at me. The seconds crept by like snails in a sandstorm. When he finally started talking to me, he had already walked several circles around me.

- "Who are you?"

I replied:

- "Norman Okello, sir."

- "When and from where did you escape?"

- "Sir, I escaped maybe two weeks ago, but I don't know from where because I am completely lost."

These were the only two questions he asked me. After the questions he welcomed me to the Lokung barrack. He complemented me on my escape, telling me that it took a lot of courage for a small boy to take this step. He told me that I didn't need to worry about anything and that he would make sure that, in time, I could return to my family. But first he had to take my gun.

I knew that this was going to happen and I

also knew that I didn't have any other choice but to surrender my gun, but I did so with great reluctance. For the last two years this gun had been my lifeline. All this time I had never let it out of my sight, nor had I ever given it to anyone else, with the exception of the Arabs in Juba. This gun was my safety net and especially here, in the lair of the lion, I felt nervous to give it away. My gun was the only barrier here that stood in between me and my enemies. I would feel naked without it, and vulnerable to protect myself against whatever they wanted to do to me. Yet, I knew that it was inevitable. I had chosen to put my fate in the hands of my enemy, and now I had no choice but to follow through.

Reluctantly but voluntarily, I gave the commander my gun, my knife, my hand grenades and all my magazines. As I did so I felt a strange relief coming over me. From this point onwards, my fate really wasn't in my hands anymore. For the first time in a long while, I didn't need to make any decisions, instead they would be made for me. I was completely at my enemy's mercy and that of the Almighty God, who hadn't been very merciful on me for the last few years of my life.

Soon after they took my gun, they brought me some food and some clean water. My last meal was more than two days before, and I wanted nothing more than to drink and to eat, but somehow I couldn't do it just yet. Trust has many different levels and although I had given away my gun and put my fate into their hands, I was not yet willing to eat their food and risk poisoning. I told myself that I hadn't survived all this shit only to die of poisoning at the hands of the cowardly UPDF. Yet, I didn't

want to offend my new captors, so I told them that I wasn't hungry. At that point the commander burst out in laughter.

- "So you think that we are trying to poison you, is that what they tell you?"

He drank some of my water and he ate some posho on my plate. When he had taken some large bites, he asked me again:

- "Do you want me to eat all of this, or shall I leave a little for you?"

At that point I started to indulge, licking the plate completely clean once I finished. They brought me some more and again the commander took the first bites just to show me that they had no intention of poisoning me. When I finished the second plate I was really full. For the first time in a very long while my stomach ached, not because of hunger, but simply because I had eaten too much. After this huge meal, they brought me to a shower where they allowed me to wash myself. As the water ran over me, I felt that all the innocent blood that had been spilt over the last two months was cleansed from my body. I stood under the shower for several minutes before they cut off the water. As I came out of the shower they sent me to the army doctor who refreshed the bandage that covered my stomach wounds and he treated my burns with a special cream. Then he cut off my long dreadlocks that had been growing for over two years. It felt like I was undergoing a complete metamorphosis and it felt good. I wondered whether it was possible to invoke the spirit of the civilian inside me

once more.

Several hours later I began to relax. Because they treated me very well, I slowly convinced myself that I might actually survive. This is when they started the hearings. Again, I had expected this to happen. Yet, I didn't really feel like answering any questions just then. I was so tired. Why couldn't they just let me sleep for at least one day?

Above all, it was still not clear who my true enemy was. The UPDF had been my enemy for the last two years, and although my life in the LRA was full of hardships, I still felt sympathetic to their cause. It was the government that marginalized us Acholis. The LRA's cause was to liberate us from them, with whatever means possible. Yet, it was the LRA who had mistreated me so badly, while the UPDF gave me food, medical attention and a shower.

I remembered that much earlier, I had wanted the UPDF to wipe out the LRA once and for all. Back then I had seen the rebels as my greatest threat, not the UPDF. Although this was on the day of my abduction just a little over two years ago, it seemed as if several life times had passed since then.

Because I didn't know who to trust, I told myself that I wouldn't tell the UPDF everything. The hearing was conducted by the older commander who had also taken my gun away from me and who had tasted my food to show me that it wasn't poisoned. At first the commander asked me all the questions in a very friendly manner, but I didn't feel like answering them. When I told the commander that I just wanted to sleep and to be left alone, I

sparked a terrible rage in him. He hit me in the face really hard and he started screaming.

-“You know what I can do to you if you don’t cooperate, don’t you? Remember that you are in the den of the lion and that we can treat you LRA scum in whichever way we want to! Remember the villagers below? They are just craving for your blood and my work here would become much easier if I would have their goodwill. Your head on a stake can give me that goodwill. Now I ask the questions again and you better answer them. With how many rebels were you when you escaped?”

Again I felt the constraints of my freedom. I had never chosen for any of this to happen. I had really hoped to be free once I had escaped the rebels, but it became clear that freedom was still far away. All I wanted was to see my parents again, but I realized that this could only happen if I would cooperate. There was nothing which I could do, but to answer their stupid questions. Yet, I could still answer them in a way which suited me best.

- “Sir, I think we entered Uganda with several battalions, maybe three hundred or four hundred men, but I don’t know how many of them have survived your attacks.”

-“Where are they now?”

-“Sir, they can be anywhere now. The rebels can march more than 100 kilometers a day and I am just a simple recruit. They never tell me anything about where we are going.”

-“So what routes do you follow?”

-“Sir, again, I don’t know these things. I am just a simple recruit and they don’t tell me about routes.”

-“But you walked over them didn’t you? How do you always enter Uganda?”

-“Sir, we cross a river and afterwards we are in Uganda, but I don’t know anything about routes. It is green and it all looks the same to me.”

The commander was clearly unsatisfied with my answers and he kept on persisting and repeating his questions, and threatening me when I told him I didn’t know. He suspected that I was playing a fool and that I knew much more than I was giving him and he was very clear that I would spend the rest of my life in prison if I wouldn’t be more forthcoming. I told the commander that I didn’t feel like answering his questions, and that I wanted to see my parents first. This was clearly something that he didn’t want to hear. At that point he became really irritated and he told me he would kill me right then and there if he didn’t get satisfactory answers with the next few questions. He cocked his gun.

- “So I ask you again, what can you tell me about the place where you cross the border.”

I knew I had to give him something, even though I honestly didn’t know the answer.

- “Sir, I really don’t know, but what I do know is that it is a place with many bees who like the oil in our guns. We always have to run when we just cross the border.”

At that point the commander started to smile

a bit.

- "So you cross the border near Limu then. I thought that Kony could master all beasts so that they wouldn't touch his troops, but it appears that the bees are just as much a nuisance to you as they are for us. Now I am going to ask you again, and you better answer. Who was the mastermind behind the Kitgum massacres?"

I knew that I had to give him something tangible. Although the commander was tough on me, it was the only way in which he could get some information out of me. Compared with the usual treatment that I had grown used to in the LRA, there was nothing that the UPDF could do to persuade me to talk, short of executing me, and this was exactly the thing they were threatening me with. When the older commander told me that he would kill me, there was no doubt in my mind that he could execute this threat. My biggest ongoing challenge over the last two years had been a struggle to survive, and I wasn't going to let this slip just now. Especially considering that the main purpose of my death would be to amuse the civilians below, when they saw my head on a stake. I had to give the commander something to please him.

- "What the fuck is taking you so long? I will ask you this question only once more and if you do not answer me, you will not live to see the coming sunset. Who is the mastermind behind all this madness in Kitgum and who is leading you?"

This time he put his gun against my head. For

a short moment more I was silent, which really agitated the commander. I needed some time to think, but I knew he wouldn't give me much time. Wall Okot and other higher commanders had been the masterminds behind the Kitgum massacres, but Wall Okot had saved my life from Langole, and although he already might have died from the disease he had, I didn't want to make him a target. Langole on the other hand, that motherfucker would have executed me if Wall Okot hadn't saved me. It was at this point that I knew how to answer the question. I suddenly remembered who my true arch-enemies were, Langole and Njogo. I wanted those motherfuckers dead. In the last two months I had constantly thought of ways how to kill Langole and now I got the opportunity to sign his death sentence at a UPDF hearing.

Click... The commander pulled the lever.

- "Delay me for just one more second and I will kill you!"

- "Sir, it was the commander called Langole, who was responsible for all the massacres."

I told him the entire story of the Kitgum massacres as I could best remember it, with the only difference that I replaced Wall Okot's name with Langole's. I told them that the whole mission was Langole's idea and that he was the prime suspect behind all of the massacres that had been taking place. This actually wasn't too far from the truth. Langole was the one in charge of Stockree, and Stockree was responsible for the massacres. He was the one who had enjoyed the massacres and without his direct orders; none of us would have killed anybody.

I even brought up Njogo and explained that he had played a vital role in the Kitgum massacres. Of course this was all bullshit. Njogo was just a lieutenant first-class and he wasn't even part of the mission. Nonetheless, I started to cast all the blame on these two gentlemen, hoping that they would become the prime targets of any UPDF military campaign. As I told this story in so much detail, the commander finally seemed to be satisfied with my answer.

Dozens of questions followed.

- "What are the routes that you follow?"
- "Where are the weapon depots hidden?"
- "Who is supplying you with the weapons?"
- "Are there anymore who have attempted to escape?"
- "Who was your commander?"
- "How long have you been with the rebels?"
- "Where do you treat your wounded?"
- "Where is the new rebel camp?"
- "Tell me everything about the rebel camp?"
- "Where are the girls from Aboke? What happened with them? Who are they married to?"

The older commander asked me the questions, while a soldier noted my answers on a piece of paper. One of the most important topics of my questioning concerned the Aboke girls. They wanted to know everything about them. Again I started to curse those girls. They almost seemed sacred. Whenever they were brought up, I always wondered why they were so damned

fucking special. I just wished that I had also been on their priority list, but no one ever pitied me. I was just a boy who could simply be killed because I didn't give the right answers. Why hadn't there been a white lady who had come to my rescue? What about the thousands of other kids who had been abducted over the past years? The whole LRA was composed of people my age, why didn't the commander ask about their fate? Instead, he just kept on asking about the Aboke girls. I just told the commander what I knew, which wasn't very much, but he seemed to be satisfied. Throughout the questioning session, I never mentioned my own role in the abduction of the Aboke girls.

The commander continued asking about the arms depots, but on this point I just kept persisting that I didn't know these things and after a while he started to believe me. So, next, he started to question me about our camp at Aru Junction. The commander wanted to know everything.

- "How large is the camp?"
- "Is it located on top of a hill?"
- "How do you get the water from there?"
- "Where is Kony staying?"

There were many other questions as well. I answered some of the questions which I obviously had to know, for all the other questions I just kept on persisting that I was just an innocent abductee, a low ranking recruit that didn't know anything.

When the questioning stopped, it was sometime in the afternoon. Finally they allowed me to sleep in one of the huts. They never

bothered to put a guard on me, because they knew that the vengeful civilians of the surrounding refugee camp offered better protection than any guard or prison wall.

I stayed in the hut until the next morning. Although I was dead tired, I could hardly sleep. This was the first night in two weeks that I didn't need to be on high alert. What kept me awake was the uncertainty of what would happen next and the fear that crept into me at the thought of seeing my parents again. Although there was nothing I wanted more, I had no idea what to tell them or even how to greet them.

When sleep finally caught up with me, my dreams were very troubling. The moment I fell asleep all the images of the last two months came back to me. In particular, the image of a big, brown lady who was killed in an extraordinary brutal way kept on haunting me. This recurring dream always started friendly. She was cooking food, while I was observing her from the bushes, just as it had actually occurred several weeks earlier. But then we came out of the bush and the whole village turned into chaos. In my dreams, the big lady came for me and she started choking me. I kept on shooting her but the bullets went straight through, as if they never even touched her. I tried to stab her with my knife, but again it went through her like she was made of air. In the meantime her grip on my throat got stronger and I almost choked. It was at this point that I woke up, sweating like crazy. I decided that I wouldn't fall asleep again and I was really grateful when the first light lit the horizon once more.

Even before the sun appeared in the sky, the camp woke up and all around me there was activity. I got out of the hut and no one even bothered to check up on me. I was free to do whatever I wanted to do. I saw a large group of soldiers who made themselves ready to go on patrol. They all got some eggs and chapatti, and finally, when every one of them had eaten they started to march off. From the top of the rock I watched them, until they disappeared in the bush. I was happy that I wasn't in their shoes. This was my first day in a while with limited worries. I still didn't know what would happen to me, but at least there was no fear of running into the rebels or the patrols, that had just departed. While I was still sitting on the edge of the rock, the commander suddenly called my name.

- "Norman, please come here and have some breakfast."

He served me the leftovers of the patrol, which I ate with several of the soldiers who had stayed behind to guard the barracks. The commander, who only yesterday had threatened to kill me, was very friendly this morning. After the breakfast, the commander took me aside and he told me that he still had a few questions he wanted to ask me, but he did so in a really friendly manner, as if he regretted his earlier approach. The first topic of my questioning was my uniform.

- "This is a very fine uniform that you are wearing. Surely, an innocent recruit who has never done anything and who doesn't know anything would not be rewarded with such a nice uniform. Tell me how you got it."

The commander wanted to know about my position in the LRA, and he played it through my uniform. So I started to tell him the story about the uniform, which had nothing to do with my rank. I told the commander that I had traded it at one point for some marijuana that I was growing myself. This was when we were still in Palataka. In the LRA it was strictly forbidden to smoke anything, but they didn't mind us growing marijuana. The Arabs on the other hand, they didn't have our restrictions and their desire for marijuana, which they called Quat, was boundless. Since we didn't have a money economy I had to trade the marijuana for something and if there was one thing that the Arabs had in abundance, it was military gear of all kinds. Uniforms, guns, compasses, boots. They had everything. So I traded several small plastic bags of marijuana with a very nice Arab uniform.

It was the smallest uniform that they had found, but still it was several sizes too big for me. Nonetheless it was indeed a very nice uniform and I was extremely happy with it once I got it. It was back in the days before I was given a rank and when I enjoyed next to no respect with anybody. So when I traded the marijuana for the uniform, I felt so extremely proud. I decided that no-one would ever take it from me. I was so proud to show everybody my new uniform, that I had even marched into the other brigades, which wasn't allowed for new recruits and for which I had received a mild punishment. Since that time I had been through so much with this uniform. The uniform wore the same marks of war as I did. It had burns from the tank attack and it was shredded by the

bullets that whistled just past my body on the day when I was almost gunned down by my own colleagues.

It appeared that the story of my uniform amused the commander. When I finished the story the commander told me that it was a good story, and also that he wanted this uniform for himself.

- "Your uniform is really so nice and now that you are a civilian, you don't have any use of it anymore. Why don't you give me your uniform, and I will give you another one?"

The moment he said this I thought of the pact that I had signed with myself that no-one would ever take my uniform. Apart from my gun, the uniform had been my second life line and now I was being asked to give this up as well. Yet I knew I didn't have much of a choice. The commander could still do with me whatever he wanted and refusing to give up the uniform might be interpreted as not giving up my soldiers' life. This whole morning the commander had been friendly, so I didn't want to raise his anger again. When I gave him my uniform I told him of the promise which I made with myself little less than two years earlier, and I asked him to take good care of the uniform. The commander laughed and told me I shouldn't be so attached to things that I got in the LRA. In return he gave me a uniform of the Local Defense Units. After the exchange, the commander was so happy with his new uniform that he stopped the questioning all together. The rest of the day I could just do whatever I want, as long as it didn't involve leaving the rock or killing people.

I decided to sit on the rock again to observe the civilian life below. The refugee camp below me was quite big and extremely densely populated. From the rock I could almost see the entire camp. It appeared that everyone wanted to be as close to barracks as possible. From my own experience I knew that it was useless to be in the center, because whenever we attacked a camp, this was where we would round everybody up. However, with a very quick hit and run attack in a camp this large, the civilians in the middle might actually stand a chance.

Around the camp there was still some farmland, yet the people no longer farmed as much because of the fear they had, and with good reason. Attacking a camp like this took some advanced planning, but killing and abducting people from farmlands was always an easy undertaking.

I found that I enjoyed watching all the activity below me. There was a little market in the camp and several shops. Even though there was nothing to do in the camp, it still bustled with life. Men were drinking and playing cards. Children were playing all kinds of games. Women were busy grinding millet and cleaning their huts. In front of the borehole stood a long line of women and girls with the large twenty liter jerry cans. Although I heard an occasional laughter from the playing kids or the drunken men, the general mood in the camp was of depression.

After I sat on the rock for a while, people started to notice me. Even from a distance, I saw people pointing at me. They were hav-

ing some kind of discussion about me. The finger pointing of one individual attracted the attention of the next, and within several minutes dozens of people were looking at me. They started to scream all kinds of hateful things at me. I decided to leave this place on the edge of the rock and return to my hut. I didn't need their hatred.

It was around the same time that an army helicopter landed on a bare strip in the middle of the barracks. When the doors opened I saw a small boy step out being guided by two older soldiers. From his uniform and his dreadlocks I immediately realized that he also came from the LRA, although I didn't recognize who he was. The boy screamed in pain when a soldier grabbed his arm, and then I saw that it was badly wounded. The boy was brought to the doctor and the few soldiers who were still present shifted their attention to him. I went back to the edge of the rock to see whether the civilians had gone back to their normal lives, but instead I saw that the entire camp had shifted their attention to the rock. I think that the helicopter had attracted their attention. When I peered over the edge, the civilians started to scream again, and to finger point once more. I knew all too well that they wanted me dead, and this was an unsettling feeling. They were screaming terrible things at me.

- "Rebel, why don't you jump? Look at him, staring at us, probably planning to have us all executed."

I couldn't stand it anymore. Why did they hate me so much? Yes, I had been a rebel and I had done terrible things. But who could blame me? Didn't they understand that I had only

done what I was forced to do, and I had never liked the killing, unlike some of the boys of my unit? But they knew nothing of this.

With nothing else to do and no opportunity to stay at the rock, I went to the other boy to see who he was. After some minutes the doctor was done with him and he was brought to the same hut where I had tried to sleep the previous night. As I went in the boy looked at me with great suspicion. From his look it was clear that he wanted me to leave, but I wasn't intimidated that easily.

I introduced myself as Attiena Mortar, but he didn't recognize my name. I told him that I had been in Stockree and that I left the LRA because they wanted to kill me. I continued talking to him, because I didn't have anything else to do. After a while the boy opened up. His name was Victor and he had been in Control Altar. Although he had just gotten a new bandage, he was still bleeding seriously from his arm. Victor hadn't been given any medicine, so he was still in a lot of pain. Nonetheless we started to talk to each other and we shared our stories. While Victor was talking I started to get the feeling that I knew him, but I was unable to pin-point exactly how, since I was always in Stockree and he in Control Altar.

So I decided to ask him. He told me that he didn't know me either, but that he was well known in the LRA because he had been a singer in the LRA choir. Then I remembered. I saw his face every Friday and Sunday during the prayers. It felt good to have someone around who understood what I had been through.

Although he was in a terrible pain, we chatted throughout the day. He told me about his escape story, which was even worse than mine. He had escaped from Aru with three others when they went to the so-called 'river' to collect water. From the start they had done what I hadn't dared to do. They left their weapons behind, so that they wouldn't be seen as soldiers. On the second day this had already caused them a lot of problems when they were attacked by wild pigs. Pigs can be very dangerous animals if you don't have a weapon. After the attack of the wild pigs, they were nearly captured by two Arabic soldiers. Luckily they were faster than the Arabs who never bothered to shoot their rifles at three unarmed children.

After several days they had stumbled upon a village and decided to enter it at night to steal some food, not knowing that this village was actually a barrack of the SPLA. Once the SPLA detected them they came under serious fire, but luckily none of them was hit. It was only at the border of Uganda that they had walked into a real ambush and that they were all shot by the UPDF even though they were completely unarmed. Victor was simply lucky that he had blacked out when they shot him. When he regained his consciousness, he was on the helicopter heading to this base.

It was slowly starting to get dark and eventually the commander came in to bring us some food and water. We still didn't trust our captors, and Victor was especially terrified of them. So we made sure that others took a few bites and sips before we ate or drank. When it was finally dark, we tried to sleep.

This second night was pure agony. Not only did the same terrible dream reoccur, which caused me to wake up sweating all over, but lying awake was also a source of agony. I tried to rest without falling asleep, but Victor was crying all night long because of the horrific pain. It reached the point that a soldier came in and told us that he would kill us if Victor didn't stop crying. Victor was in such terrible pain that even with this warning he couldn't help himself. So he just kept on crying, despite the clear threat that we were given. As the night wore on, a previous wound in my armpit began to swell and ache. I had slit it open a few days previously. Initially it was nothing, but the wound was never treated and now infection was setting in. It was a rough night.

In the morning we ate the leftovers of the patrolling units again. As we watched them disappearing into the bush, Victor and I were discussing all kind of things up on the lookout rock. In the meantime another large group of the villagers were once again looking at us and finger pointing.

- "Look at them. They have killed a lot of people and now they are eating while we are starving here."

The civilians were enraged at us. If it weren't for the few remaining UPDF soldiers, they would have ripped us to pieces. The civilians couldn't have known that rebels could have a heart. They looked at Victor and me as if we were the embodiment of evil. When we were halfway through our meal we decided to eat the rest in our hut, because we couldn't stand those hateful eyes and in-

sults and threats anymore. Soon four soldiers came to us, among them the Acholi who had been so friendly towards me the day I had surrendered. They told us that we had to go to the camp hospital for proper treatment of our wounds. This was a terrifying thought, since it meant that we had to face the crowd below. The hospital, if you can call it that, was at the other side of the camp. We would have to walk through all the enraged refugees unarmed, with only four soldiers protecting us. Except for the Acholi, I was really doubtful at their dedication to protect us.

It was still early in the morning when we started to walk down the hill. Below us the civilians gathered and their intentions were clear. I completely despised them. These were people of my tribe who were supposed to protect their young, but instead they wanted us dead. Many of them probably had children of their own who were now fighting in the LRA. Instead of blaming their own children for the Kitgum massacres, we were the central focus of their hatred.

When we reached the foot of the hill the people all started to shout at us. It was really intimidating. I became very frightened. As the people drew closer, the soldiers closed in around us. From the rumble of the crowd, I heard very distinctive threats:

- "Make them pay!"
- "Let's kill them!"
- You have killed my baby, it was you, I recognize you!"

These were the things that I heard among the thousands of horrors that they screamed at

us. They started to throw stuff at us. When a big rock hit Victor's shoulder the soldiers had enough. The Acholi fired into the air and he screamed very loudly that anyone who touched us would suffer the consequences.

- "What is wrong with you, these children could be yours. Whatever they did was against their will and they had the courage to escape. You should embrace them instead of hate them."

It was surreal to hear this out of the mouth of a UPDF soldier. For so long we had been told that they were the soldiers of the devil and that they would do everything in the power to hurt us as much as they could. Instead he was telling the civilians to embrace us instead of stoning us to death. These were the civilians on whose behalf we had been fighting for the last two years and the only reward we got for putting our lives in the balance thousands of times was unconditional hatred.

After this outburst the civilians stopped screaming and throwing things at us, but the way they continued to look at us remained very threatening.

Even though the atmosphere was very volatile and the civilians could turn against us any minute, it was actually good to have a short walk and to be out of the barracks for just a little while. I had been observing the camp from above, but now that we walked through it I had the sense that I was among the civilians again, even though they hated me. We walked past the little market, past the men drinking and playing cards, and

past the little children playing. I enjoyed the children the most, both because of their happiness and their laughter, and because they were the only ones who didn't care about Victor and me.

At the hospital I could clearly see the brutal evidence of our campaign in Kitgum. This gave me perspective on why the civilians hated us so much. What I saw there was terrible. There were people with missing limbs, people whose lips were cut off and eyes cut out. One mother held babies who were already dead for some days. She was completely traumatized; unable to accept the deaths of her children. There was a terrible stench surrounding the hospital and the sound of screams and cries was deafening. The hospital was one of the few stone buildings, but otherwise it clearly wasn't equipped to deal with the level of death and mutilation that we saw. This was a place of complete misery; a perfect example of hell on earth.

My little infection was minimal compared to these other traumas, but the lead soldier demanded that we would be helped first. The nurse that came to help me looked me straight in the eye exactly the same way the villagers did, with sheer hatred and contempt. At first she flat out refused to help me, but the soldiers strongly insisted that we needed medical attention. She screamed at me.

- "So you are more important than all the innocent victims over there."

She pointed at the man who had lost one leg and who was slowly bleeding to death.

-“Did you hack off that leg? You are probably the one who caused all of this aren’t you?”

She pointed to all the victims around me and she made such a scene that everybody shifted their attention to me. One of my escorts told the nurse to treat me, instead of lecturing, and then went away to check up on Victor.

I was completely alone with the nurse and the fresh war victims and this was terrifying.

- “So you want me to treat your wound don’t you?”

At this point she just started to use her scalpel to slash my arm which was already completely swollen. The pain was unbearable. I was screaming her to stop, but she just wouldn’t listen. I was on the point of taking her scalpel away from her to stick it into her throat, when the soldier ran back, alarmed by my screams. When he saw what was happening he became incredibly angry.

- “What the fuck do you think you are doing? These boys provide us with important intelligence and you are butchering them like they are cattle. They have been captured recently and now they managed to escape. They deserve pity, not torture”

She defended herself by stating that she was cutting open my wound to let the pus out. The soldier accepted this, but he also said that he would remain present for the rest of the operation. So the sister made one more cut and she squeezed out all of the pus. There was a stench coming out of my

wound and the nurse squeezed me as hard as she could. The more she squeezed the more it hurt, but this was also the way to treat it. Afterwards she put a bandage around my arm. While she walked away, I knew that she was silently cursing me.

At the same time they were treating Victor in another room. I could clearly hear his screams as they removed the bullet from his arm. I suspected that his treatment wouldn’t be any better than mine, and it even appeared that his screams somehow offered satisfaction to the other patients in the hospital. With every scream Victor assuaged some of their vengeance towards us. While my operation was a matter of minutes, Victor’s took much longer, maybe half an hour. All this time I had to listen to his screams and watch the dying patients around me. I was very relieved when the soldiers finally escorted us back to the barracks

We stayed in Lokung barracks for over a week. Two days after Victor was flown in, two other combatants joined us. I knew these boys, because they were both in Gilba and they were involved in the same mission as I had been. One was called Lamson, and the other was called Vincent. The four of us were free to move around in the barracks, but our leisure time was occasionally interrupted by questioning. They tried to verify my story with the others, which worried me since many of the things I said about the last mission had been a lie. They first tried it with Victor, but since he had escaped straight from Sudan, he didn’t know anything about the Kitgum mission. Yet, the other two boys knew more of the details, and that worried me the moment I saw them getting out of the helicopter. Luckily,

they didn't start to question the others immediately and I had some time to brief them on my story. As I outranked both of them, I still enjoyed their respect. So when I told them to cast the blame on Langole, who wasn't popular with anybody, they happily agreed.

After about a week a convoy came with several large white vehicles with the letters UN printed on the sides. It was not announced to us that the UN would be coming so when we saw those white vehicles entering the camp we became very excited, especially when those cars came up to the barracks. When the doors of the vehicles opened, the four of us were all looking to these new people with awe and great expectations. Several blacks were there and there was also one Filipino woman, called Fe Guevara, and a white man who introduced himself as Hervé Cheuzeville from France, who worked as the Head of the Emergency and Relief sector of the World Food Program. Back then we had no idea what this tittle actually meant, but I still remember the excitement we felt when he told it to us. It sounded like it was very important. Although we knew little about the UN and what they were doing in this country, we had the feeling that these were the good guys who would set us free.

Before the UN shifted their attention towards us, Hervé talked with the commander for a while. Afterwards they came to check up on us and ask us a few questions. While the woman inspected Victor's arm, Hervé conversed with the three of us. As he didn't speak Luo, he used a translator. The translator told us that the UN had come especially

for us and that it was their mission to help us return back to society and to be reunited with our family again. The translator continued to talk, but I lost focus, as my thoughts started to dwell on my family. When I heard about the possible reunion, I became excited and nervous at the same time. I hadn't seen my parents now for so long, that I doubted if we would still remember each other. So much had happened since I last saw them and I wondered whether they were still alive and, if so, whether they would still recognize me and accept me as their son.

After Hervé had addressed the four of us, he separated us for questioning. He started with Lamson and afterwards with Vincent. While I waited for my turn I experienced my first intense and joyful daydream for a very, very long time. It was as if long and imprisoned thoughts were being released. For the first time in two years I dreamed about my parents without any reservations. The thoughts came without the fear that the spirit Lakwena would read my dreams and use them against me, and that I would be forced to kill them if I would ever see them again. I pictured my mum digging in the cassava field and making us dinner, while my dad was plucking a chicken for our reunion meal. I dreamed of a big feast in which all of our family was invited and in which there was enough to eat for everyone. I dreamed of my uncles, my aunts and my grandfather. I dreamed of going to school and telling my schoolmates about all my adventures, after which they would respect me and I would become the most popular guy in school. I even dreamed of my younger siblings, whose images were very blurry.

- "Norman... NORMAN!"

Hervé abruptly woke me up from my dream and started to question me.

- "Tell me about your family, where can we contact them? When were you abducted? How did you escape?"

-
Hervé asked me a lot of questions, but he asked them very differently than the commander had done. Not that the commander was a bad man, but Hervé was so much more patient. It felt like he didn't judge me for what I had been forced to do. It appeared that he was the only one who didn't care so much about all the bloody details and that he was genuinely interested to connect me to my family. He never pushed me for more information or threatened me if I didn't want to answer.

The only thing that unnerved me about Hervé was that I didn't understand his kindness. Although there had been quite a number of people who had been kind to me when I was still in the LRA, this was a different type of kindness. In the LRA, any display of kindness usually accompanied the fact there was something to be gained by being kind. That was the kindness that I understood. With this French man I couldn't figure out what it was. All the time I was wondering how he would benefit from all of this. But I had little to lose and this man represented my best opportunity to be reunited with my family. So I told him about my abduction, which now seemed ages ago, and about who my parents were and where they could be found. I never told him anything about atrocities that I committed or the rank that I had achieved. In fact, Hervé never asked

about these issues. While our conversation went through the translator, Hervé was writing everything down. After we had answered everything they had asked us, Hervé started to explain what would happen next.

- "We will take you to another barracks in Kitgum, where you will find hundreds more of your former colleagues and where there are much more soldiers to protect you from possible attacks of the LRA. The camp that you are going to is called Pajimu. In Pajimu we separate the escapees and start the process of reuniting you with your families. The ones who are from Kitgum will remain in Pajimu for a while, and the rest must wait for transport from the UPDF, which will take you to Lira and Gulu. Here another department of the UN will take over and in cooperation with the UPDF, we will try to reunite you with your family. However, be aware that the war is still not over and that this process can take time. Furthermore, it is possible that we will not be able to find your direct family. In that case you will be brought to other places where we can take care of you."

Hervé Cheuzeville continued to explain the procedure and afterwards we were told to step into one of the big UN vehicles. It was now around three or four in the afternoon. While we entered the back of a car in the middle of the convoy, Hervé and the Chinese woman went to a vehicle in the front. There were three UN vehicles and no armed convoy of the UPDF.

Our drive down the hill set off a massive commotion when hundreds of civilians ran towards the UN cars. They were armed with

panga's and all kinds of crude weaponry, and even though we were in the hands of the UN they still wanted to kill us. They tried to force open the doors of our vehicle but we had quickly locked the doors from the inside. Some soldiers were escorting us through the camp and it required them to use considerable violence to get the civilians away. They knew very well that this was their last chance to hurt us, and they desperately wanted revenge. It took us a long while to clear the camp as the civilians tried to stop us with every opportunity they got. Finally a soldier fired an entire round into the air scaring the civilians away, and we could continue. Eventually we came to the dirt road at the outer edge of the camp, and the soldiers, our escorts, returned to their barracks.

As we left the camp a new kind of anxiety washed over me. We were still in LRA territory and these convoys were very dangerous. The LRA could be hidden anywhere. From experience I knew how well a landmine could be hidden. I sensed that Lamson, Vincent and Victor were feeling the same thing, and we scouted the surrounding bushes very carefully. When we saw a fallen tree in front of us half way over the road we all held our breath. This was a classic way that the LRA prepared their ambushes. The tree blocked only half of the road, so I quickly scanned the other half to see whether the earth had the same color everywhere, and luckily it did. As the first vehicle passed it at a high speed I expected to hear a big bang, but nothing happened. Maybe the ambush had been deserted some time ago or maybe it wasn't even an ambush, but just a fallen tree. Anyway, we were safe. The trip took several

hours and although we had all expected the worst, nothing had happened. At times we had to slow down because of the extremely bad roads and then we would nearly shit our pants, but the trip remained uneventful. At dusk we reached our new destination, which was a large military camp in the vicinity of a trading center.

We were brought to a high commander in this new camp. This man was in charge of all the escapees and just like the commander of the other camp, he welcomed us with open arms. Hervé and the Chinese woman addressed us one last time, saying that we had to be patient and that eventually they would come for us. Afterwards they re-entered their vehicles and together with Victor who was being brought to a hospital, they left back into the direction of Kitgum Town.

Very quickly, the commander ordered some soldiers to put us with the rest of the escapees. What I saw next was simply overwhelming. As we were marched through the barracks, I saw that there were hundreds of us. Now I realized why the LRA had to constantly renew their abduction efforts.

The camp wasn't very different from the one that we just came from, except that it was much bigger and there were hundreds of us rather than just a few. I was immediately greeted by two boys whom I knew very well. One of them had been part of my unit and he was present when my former colleagues had trapped me in the hut. I knew the other boy from several fighting missions, including the abduction of the Aboke girls. I was extremely glad to see them and we exchanged stories

about how we got there. They asked about my escape and I told them everything.

Although the conditions in this camp were much worse than the previous one, time passed much faster here. We received very little food once a day, but at least I had the company of many of my former colleagues. We were free to move around the barracks and nobody imprisoned us. Every day we played cards, we conversed and we even laughed with each other. Initially, the kind of topics we conversed about were certain battles that we had narrowly survived, but after some time we also started to tell each other about the lives that we had before we were abducted. With the boy from my unit, I often talked about the day that they had cornered me in the ghost village. He told me that when Langole gave the command to shoot me, he had deliberately aimed around me. He said that was also the case for many others in the unit. He stated that it was on that day that he also decided to escape.

The conditions in this camp were quite bad. We only received food once a day, and it was usually served late at night. This one meal was barely enough for us to regain strength. The water situation was even worse. Although there was a borehole in this camp, it was reserved for the soldiers and their wives, and others who were strong enough to compete for it. In our weakened conditions we had no access to this borehole. Instead, we had to get our water from a pond which we shared with several groups of domestic pigs. Whenever we wanted to drink, we first had to chase away the pigs, and then wait for the water to settle so that it was at least a little

bit fresh. We drank this water where the pigs swam and shit, and we also used this dirty pool to wash ourselves.

I developed an eye infection. Several days after the itching began I could hardly see anything. Every day I washed my eyes with the dirty water and it seemed that they were only getting worse. Luckily my friends took good care of me while I was blind. I couldn't compete for the limited food, but my friend always shared his food with me. He also guided me to the pond and sometimes he collected water for me. Even when we were playing cards, he would help me when I could no longer distinguish the hearts from the diamonds. My friend has asked the commander several times to send me to the doctor, but he had constantly refused, saying that the eye sickness would resolve itself, and so it did. Just as fast as it had come, within a week it disappeared again and I regained my vision.

I waited patiently for Hervé to come back to reunite me with my parents. After two weeks he did come back, but only as a bearer of bad news. He explained that his organization had not yet located my parents and they also hadn't found another place for me, so I just had to stay here. To comfort me, he had brought me some clothes that he had bought at the market. The same day that Hervé left, I took my friend to the nearby trading center. Although I was terrible afraid of the civilians in the center, nobody ever bothered us, probably because they didn't know that we were former rebels. In the trading center we sold the new clothes. With the money we each bought sodas and a good meal.

This was my first time that I had walked among civilians as their equal and it felt good. Here nobody pointed at us. They probably thought that we were the children of the soldiers. We decided to stay in the trading center until it was late in the afternoon. After that we decided to go to the trading center more often, to observe how the civilians acted and to mimic their behavior.

In the meantime, the conditions in the barrack also improved a bit. One day I collected some water at the pig pond into a small plastic bottle. While I walked back to our quarters, I met a soldier's wife who urged me to come over. When I came close she took the bottle from me and she told me:

- "Please boy, you shouldn't be drinking this dirty water, this will make you sick."

Then she emptied the bottle and she took me with her to the borehole. From that day forward the woman always helped me to get the clean water from the borehole. With the little money I got from selling the clothes, we sometimes could afford to buy some cassava and g-nuts in the trading center. This additional nutrition to the food we received in the camp, was critical, since more escapees came in every day and the food was decreasing. Eventually there were at least three hundred of us, and there was a serious challenge in feeding us.

Amongst the escapees there were high ranking individuals, such as lieutenant's first class and even a captain, but most of us were simple recruits. After about a month, a large truck of the UPDF came to finally

bring us to Gulu. When the truck moved in we were all lined up. Those of us that came from Lira and Gulu district had to enter the truck. There were 169 of us. I was forced to leave my friend behind because he came from Kitgum. Although it was a really big truck, everybody was doubtful that we would all fit in it. To make matters even worse, the truck was carrying the bodies of several dead soldiers who also had to be transported to Gulu. We had to share our space with them. The truck also contained all the weaponry and ammunition that had been taken from all of us, so we were forced to stand on top of our own guns. We were pushed into the truck, and it quickly moved out.

The soldiers who were guarding us were extremely unfriendly and they forced us to remain standing. We had nothing to hold on to but each other. With the bumpy road and the terrible speed, and the fact that we had to remain standing, people were pushed against the soldiers and the soldiers pushed back with the points of their bayonets. This really hurt and caused some of those in the truck to start bleeding. We once hit a really deep bump at a crazy high speed and some people fell onto the dead bodies. This angered our guards. A guard came to pull the boys off the dead bodies while he was hitting them with the butt of his gun. The attitudes of the soldiers towards us caused tempers to flare. Didn't they realize that they were pushing the wrong people around? We weren't on the road for half an hour before the atmosphere deteriorated to the point where people could get killed.

I started the commotion. Among the escapees, all the commanders had been forced to

remain in Kitgum. I saw that I was the highest ranking individual on the truck. When we hit another bump I fell against a soldier who immediately started to threaten me and to sting me with his bayonet. At this point I had taken enough abuse, and I addressed my former colleagues.

- "Friends, the way that we are treated on this truck is unacceptable and I will not take this. Let us take our guns and show these soldiers a lesson."

Most of the children on the truck knew very well who I was and my words had a huge impact. All around me my colleagues started to scream and the situation became rebellious.

- "Let's go back, we don't need to be treated like we are animals."

Some people actually bent over to reach for their guns. The commander who was sitting in the co-drivers' seat noticed all the commotion. He ordered the driver to stop the truck and came out to see what was going on. To make us quiet he shot several rounds into the air with his pistol and demanded to know what was going on. I told him what happened and what was going to happen if the soldiers wouldn't let us sit like normal human beings. The commander fully realized the volatility of the situation and he knew that he was vastly outgunned. He gave us what we wanted and even more. Now we were allowed to sit down while the soldiers had to stand the rest of the way. Within a matter of minutes the situation calmed down and we started to move again. We

saw the shivering knees of the soldiers who were now standing, now fully aware that we wouldn't take their mistreatment. They were scared shitless.

The rest of the journey was uneventful and after several hours we reached Lira. As it was getting late, the commander offloaded the Lira people as quickly as possible. More than forty people got off in Lira which made the rest of the ride much more comfortable. We left Lira at dusk and when we reached Gulu it was pitch dark.

In Gulu we were taken to the barracks of the fourth brigade, one of the largest barracks in Uganda, where we were ordered to line up once more.

- "Name, place of birth, your unit in the LRA."

Again more questions. It took a long while before they had noted all our details. Although we were really tired from the long journey we all had to remain standing. By the time we were allowed to sleep in some prison cells, it was already well into the night.

After just several hours of sleep we were woken up again. The condition of this place was even worse than the previous barracks. Here we were put into prison cells which were drastically overcrowded, and filled with cockroaches and other vermin besides. The cell had a tin roof which meant that it would get blazingly hot during the day, and so it did. In the morning several of my colleagues were taken out of their cells for further questioning. After they returned it was my turn. I was

taken to a stone building where I was seated opposite to an older commander.

- "So, they call you Attiena Mortar. Sergeant Attiena Mortar if I am not mistaken."

It was at that point that I knew that this would be a long day and that it would still be a long while before I would ever see my parents again.

- "Just an innocent recruit that doesn't know nothing are you? Give it up. We know that you have been lying."

Someone had told on me, probably to improve his or her own situation. A whole new round of questioning started and I knew that this time I wouldn't get away with my lies so easily. The rest of the day was hell. They kept on asking me questions to which I didn't know the answers or questions which I simply didn't want to tell them. Whenever they weren't satisfied, which was with almost every answer, they slapped and threatened me. At the end of the day I was taken to another cell where they kept the more senior soldiers and the commanders. The conditions in this cell were even worse than the previous one. It was overcrowded, dirty, blazingly hot and had a lack of food and water. If that weren't enough, some of the people around me were indeed among the worst people within the LRA.

For two weeks the questioning continued and my reluctance to answer their questions grew with each day. The harder they hit me, the more the fire came back into my eyes. They told me that I would spend the

rest of my days in jail if I wouldn't cooperate and I responded that there was nothing they could do to touch me. The more unfriendly they became, the more my defiance was sparked. Whenever they told me that I was responsible for the death and destruction in Kitgum, I told them that it was their failure to protect me which got me into this situation in the first place. Eventually, my only goal was to defy them. They slapped me and reduced my food and water rations to an absolute minimum, but I didn't care. There was nothing which they could throw at me that I hadn't already encountered in the LRA. They told me that they were going to enlist me in the army so that I could repay all the suffering I had caused. I told them that if they did so, I would escape and return to the LRA. This line of thought was real. After two weeks of unending questioning, I actually hoped that they would enlist me and give me a gun. I was extremely angry and aggressive at that time and actually willing to join the LRA once more to take my vengeance. Luckily things didn't get that far.

After two weeks, a couple of people from World Vision came to visit the army barracks. They inspected all the cells and the moment they saw me they demanded to be allowed to talk to me. They asked me how I was treated and I told them the blunt truth. They asked me about my age, when I was abducted, when I escaped, and other questions. Like Hervé., they asked the questions in a friendly way and they were very patient. When they took me aside I was still extremely defiant, but they quickly managed to calm me down. After they questioned me for half an hour, they asked a soldier to escort me back to my cell,

and to give me some food. They ensured me that they would talk with the commanders to get me out.

When they left, no soldier came to question me again. It was pointless anyway. They knew very well that they couldn't extract any more information from me. Another few days passed in which my food rations were back to normal again. Then the two people from World Vision returned accompanied by Hervé Cheuzeville.

The moment I saw Hervé I felt a calm coming over me. His reassuring smile gave me the strong feeling that things would be okay again. For the previous two weeks Hervé was the one person that I had hoped to see more than any one else. So far, he was the only stranger who appeared to be genuinely interested in my welfare and what was more, he was a leader for an organization called World Food. Considering my constant state of hunger, it was a title that had a magical sound to it.

Hervé asked me how I was doing and I told him what had transpired since I last saw him. One of the others from World Vision acted as a translator. When I finished my story Hervé told me that he had good news this time. He handed me a piece of paper, but I was clueless as to what it said. My puzzled look gave me away.

- "It is your release form boy. You're finally free. You're no longer a prisoner. These two people are from an organization called World Vision, and they will take care of you now. In their hands you will be well off and you can rebuild your life once more. In the meantime we are still looking for your parents, but I am sure we will find them soon."

Freedom! I could hardly imagine what this meant. The first thing I wanted to do was to run all the way to my former home, but my legs went numb. I remained speechless for more than a minute, after which the lady from World Vision broke the silence.

- "Come on boy. Let's get you to a shower and a good bed."

About National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC)

The National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC), a collaborative initiative of the Refugee Law Project, School of Law Makerere University and the Kitgum District Local Government.

The NMPDC is located in Kitgum district town council in Northern Uganda an area ravaged by over two decades of armed conflict and is struggling to recover in the post-conflict era.

As a country emerging from conflict, Uganda remains highly divided, with a weak sense of national identity, low societal solidarity amongst constituencies, a lack of information and transparency about historical events and little or no accountability for past wrong doing and acknowledgement for suffering. Uganda has a fragile democracy where unaddressed divisions and grievances can easily ignite new conflict. These deficiencies pose significant obstructions to national reconciliation, transitional justice and rule of law in the country; this is what the NMPDC aims to primarily address.

About Refugee Law Project (RLP)

The Refugee Law Project (RLP) seeks to ensure fundamental human rights for all, including; asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons within Uganda. RLP envision a country that treats all people within its borders with the same standards of respect and social justice.

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