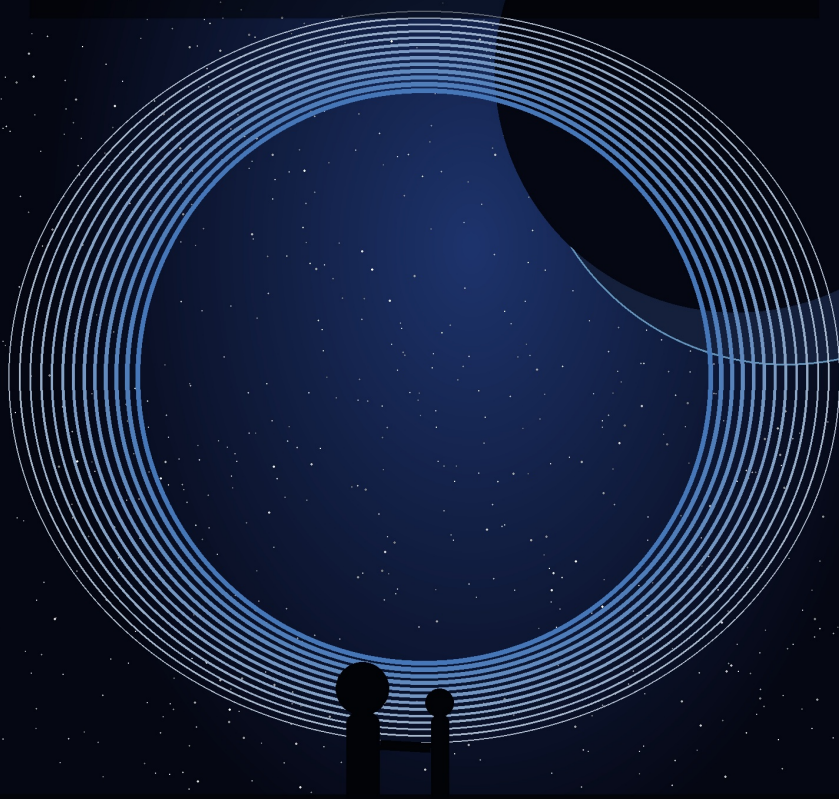


ACROSS THE DARK BETWEEN STARS

*A mother, a daughter, and a universe that learned to
answer*



Original Story Book

Across the Dark Between Stars

A mother, a daughter, and a universe that learned to answer

An original cinematic story inspired by broad genre emotions and themes. It is not affiliated with, adapted from, or a rewrite of any existing film, novel, or franchise.

Created for Shaswat Raj

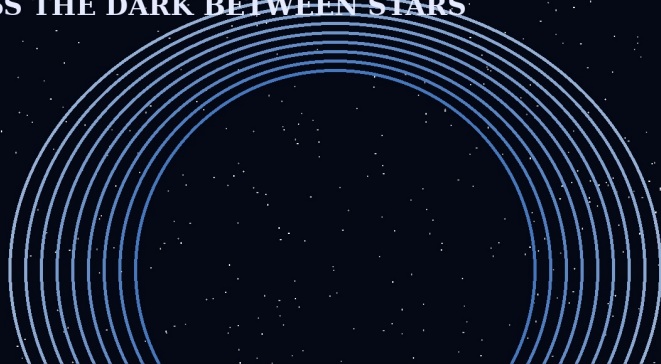
Contents

1. Prologue: The Hour That Would Not End
2. Chapter One: The Last Orchard
3. Chapter Two: The Ananta Mission
4. Chapter Three: A Door Beside Saturn
5. Chapter Four: Niva, the Blue World
6. Chapter Five: The Red Ocean
7. Chapter Six: Tara's Theorem
8. Chapter Seven: The Planet of Bones
9. Chapter Eight: The Long Return
10. Chapter Nine: The Orchard After

Author's Note

This story chases the feeling of awe: the ache of leaving home, the strange mercy of science, and the idea that love can become a map when the universe grows too large for ordinary courage.

ACROSS THE DARK BETWEEN STARS



Prologue: The Hour That Would Not End

The clocks in Devnagar stopped for thirteen minutes and nine seconds. Every wall clock, every school bell, every cracked phone on every plastic table froze at 04:17 in the morning, while outside the wheat fields rippled though there was no wind. Dr. Meera Iyer stood barefoot on her roof, dust on her tongue, and watched the stars bend like light seen through water. Her daughter Tara, ten years old and braver than anyone had a right to be, held her hand and whispered, "Mama, the sky is breathing."

Nobody believed the first report. The ministers called it a power fault, the channels called it mass hysteria, and the temples filled by noon. But Meera had spent eighteen years studying soil memory: how roots, minerals, rain, and hunger keep records long after people forget. The fields around Devnagar did not lie. In thirteen minutes they had aged as if two months had passed. Seeds sprouted, yellowed, and died before breakfast. A dead river showed wet stones. A mango tree bloomed, fruited, and dropped black pulp into the dust.

By evening a sealed jeep arrived from the Indian Deep Space Archive. Inside was Commander Ishan Vale, a man whose uniform looked less like authority and more like a sentence. He showed Meera a photograph taken by a

telescope orbiting the far side of the Moon. Near Saturn, above the broken glitter of its rings, space had folded into a dark eye. From that eye came a repeating pulse - not radio, not light, but gravity itself knocking on the bones of the planet.

The pattern matched something from Meera's childhood. Her mother had once sung a lullaby in uneven beats: three taps, one pause, five taps, two pauses. It was a village song about sailors returning after the sea had swallowed the moon. The signal near Saturn beat the same rhythm. Meera did not tell Ishan that. She did not tell him Tara had tapped the same rhythm against the roof rail before the clocks began again. She only asked what he wanted.

"A botanist who understands death," Ishan said. "And a mother who understands leaving."

Below them, the world was already becoming a map of goodbye.

Chapter One: The Last Orchard

Devnagar had once smelled of wet soil, diesel, and guava. Now it smelled of metal. The government trucks sprayed silver clouds over the orchards every dawn, a chemical mist meant to keep blight from jumping tree to tree. It settled on Meera's hair when she walked the rows. It collected on Tara's eyelashes when she ran after her with a notebook full of impossible questions. The earth had become a patient that could not be moved, and Meera had become one of the doctors afraid to say the truth aloud.

The truth was that plants were forgetting how to live. Rice refused to flower. Wheat germinated and collapsed. Fungal threads grew in the dark like veins under skin. Humanity had named the condition a thousand things - climate spiral, solar drift, microbial surge - because naming made fear look like research. Meera called it the long starvation. She had seen hungry soil before. This was different. This was the planet closing its hand.

When the Archive summoned her to the subterranean launch city beneath the Thar Desert, Tara refused to cry. That hurt more than tears. She packed Meera's satchel with practical things: a scarf, soil samples, a cracked photo of them at a science fair, and a tin box of tamarind candy. "For when space tastes boring," she said.

Meera knelt before her at the station gate. Around them, soldiers, scientists, and families pretended not to watch the small collapse of a home. "I am not choosing the mission over you," Meera said.

Tara's chin tightened. "You are choosing everyone. That is worse. I cannot even hate everyone."

Ishan waited beside the train, eyes lowered. He had left no child behind, no spouse, no aging parent. It made him look pure from a distance and hollow up close. Tara turned to him with the raw cruelty of children who know grief is coming. "Bring her back before I am taller than her," she said.

Ishan answered as if taking an oath. "I will try."

"Trying is what adults say when they have already forgiven themselves."

The train doors closed on Meera before she could breathe. Tara stood on the platform until she became a small white shape in the window, then a blur, then a memory that hurt more sharply than any instrument reading. In Meera's satchel, the tin of tamarind clicked with the rhythm of the signal from Saturn.

Chapter Two: The Ananta Mission

The ship was called Ananta because someone in government still believed names could make machines holy. It waited under the desert in a hangar so large clouds formed beneath the ceiling. Around its silver body, engineers moved like ants attending a sleeping god. The vessel had no heroic shape. It looked like a spine, a garden, and a blade all forced to agree.

Meera's domain was the green ring: six sealed habitats carrying seed vaults, algae banks, fungal libraries, and a nursery of soil organisms gathered from every continent. The Archive did not want her simply to find a new world. It wanted her to teach dead ground how to become home. She spent the first night labeling trays while the other crew learned each other's voices. There was Ishan, commander and pilot. Dr. Noa Sayeed, temporal physicist, who laughed at danger like it was a rude guest. Pavel Orlov, engineer, who talked to engines in Russian lullabies. Lian Zhou, physician, who had memorized every crew member's pulse before learning their favorite tea.

At the mission briefing, Noa displayed the impossible thing above Saturn. "It is not a wormhole," she said. "That word belongs to equations that behave. This is a wound in distance. We call it the Kairo Gate. It opens toward a cluster of twelve planets around a quiet star. Three may support life. One has liquid water. One has soil chemistry close to Earth's early history. One is broadcasting the return pattern."

"Broadcasting from whom?" Pavel asked.

Noa smiled without joy. "That is the part that ruins sleep. The signal uses gravitational modulation no known civilization should have. It also contains fragments of human mathematical notation. Some of it resembles Meera's published work on root resonance. Some resembles papers Tara Iyer has not written yet."

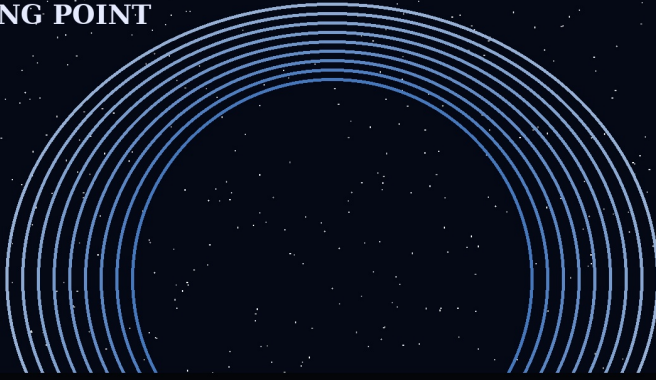
The room went still. Meera felt every eye move toward her.

"My daughter is ten," she said.

"Today," Noa replied softly. "Near the Gate, today becomes negotiable."

That night Meera recorded her first message home. She spoke about the ship, about the seed vault, about how the stars looked colder from a launch cradle than from a roof. She did not mention Tara's unwritten papers. She did not mention fear. At the end she sang the lullaby her mother had sung. Three taps, one pause, five taps, two pauses. In the recording, her voice broke on the final note.

TURNING POINT



Chapter Three: A Door Beside Saturn

Launch was not fire. Launch was pressure. It pressed Meera's bones into the couch, pressed prayer from Pavel's mouth, pressed Tara's name into every dark corner of her skull. Then the atmosphere gave way. The blue of Earth curved below them, scarred brown and gold, still beautiful in the way a feverish child is beautiful to the mother who knows the fever may win.

They traveled for eight months by the clocks aboard Ananta. Earth received their messages with delays that grew longer until conversation became archaeology. Tara sent videos from the orchard. In the first, she had lost a tooth. In the next, her hair had been cut short. In the third, she stood beside the guava tree and pretended the silver chemical snow was real winter. "I am eleven now," she said. "I am still not taller than you. Tell Commander Trying he has time."

Meera watched that line thirty-seven times.

Saturn arrived as a cathedral of ice. The Kairo Gate floated above the rings, a black oval edged in blue fire. Instruments failed when they looked at it too long. Noa called it "a region of polite impossibility." Ishan called it a

navigational hazard. Meera, who had buried her father and delivered her own child and held soil that would never grow again, called it what it felt like: a mouth.

Before entry, the ship received a new pulse. This one was layered with data. Images unfolded on the screens: a red ocean under three moons, a forest of glassy reeds, a desert planet where lightning crawled from the ground into the sky. Then came coordinates and a warning in old Hindi, broken but clear enough.

DO NOT TRUST THE BLUE WORLD.

The message signature was not a name. It was a drawing Tara had made at five: a crooked mango tree with two stick figures beneath it, one tall, one small. Meera's knees weakened so fast Lian had to catch her.

"It could be forged," Ishan said.

"By whom?" Meera asked. "Aliens with access to my refrigerator art?"

Noa looked almost frightened. "Not aliens. Time."

The Kairo Gate opened wider. Space turned inside out. Meera closed her eyes and felt Tara's small hand in hers, though Tara was millions of kilometers behind and perhaps years ahead. Then Ananta crossed the threshold, and all the clocks began to disagree.

Chapter Four: Niva, the Blue World

Niva was too beautiful. That was the first warning.

It glittered beneath them, a blue planet veiled in white storms, with islands like emerald fingerprints scattered across a shallow global sea. Spectrometers sang of oxygen, nitrogen, microbial life, and water sweet enough to make the crew cheer. After the death of Earth's fields, beauty felt suspicious. Meera pressed her palm to the observation glass and tried not to love it.

The landing site was a chain of tidal flats beneath a sky that changed color every hour. The ground trembled gently, as if the planet dreamed in its sleep. Meera knelt and opened a sample case. The soil - if it could be called soil - was pale, powdery, and threaded with living crystals. Her instruments found amino acids, mineral scaffolds, water retention, and something stranger: a repeating micro-vibration in the root-friendly range, as if the ground was humming to seeds.

"This place wants plants," she whispered.

Pavel laughed into the wind. "Then give it some."

They planted mustard, rice, millet, algae mats, and a tray of Tara's stolen guava seeds. The seeds cracked open in six hours. Leaves unfurled by sundown. The crew stood around the first green like pilgrims.

Then Noa checked the orbit clock.

Seven hours on Niva had cost Earth four months.

Meera went cold. They had known relativity would distort time near the Kairo cluster, but Niva's elegant storms concealed a dense object in its outer system, a collapsed star looping close enough to pull minutes into months. Ishan ordered immediate departure. The samples were packed with shaking hands. The guava seedlings were too fragile to move, so Meera left them in a sheltered ridge and hated herself for abandoning even plants.

As the shuttle lifted, a storm rolled across the flats. It did not move like weather. It moved like a hand erasing footprints. Through the rear camera Meera saw the ridge where the guava seedlings grew. Around it, thousands of pale crystal threads rose from the ground and bent toward the plants.

The final image before cloud cover showed the seedlings twisting into shapes that looked almost like letters.

Back aboard Ananta, messages from Earth flooded in. Tara was fourteen. Then fifteen. Then sixteen. Her voice deepened in grief. "I know you said time is physics," one message began, "but from here it just feels like you found a faster way to leave."

Chapter Five: The Red Ocean

They named the second planet Vaara. It was the color of rust and pomegranate, wrapped in an ocean so mineral-rich it shone red under the thin sun. It had islands made of black basalt and winds that carved music through stone arches. More importantly, time behaved. One hour on Vaara was one hour on Earth. The crew allowed themselves hope cautiously, as one allows a wounded animal to approach.

Meera found life in the tide pools: mats of copper-colored algae that breathed out oxygen in delicate pulses. They could be engineered with Earth organisms. They could anchor food chains. They could, with decades of work, support settlements. The soil was poor, the storms violent, and the oceans acidic in places, but Vaara did not lie about its danger. Meera trusted that.

For twelve days they built a camp. For twelve days the crew spoke of farms, domes, children, festivals under a red sky. Ishan even smiled once while repairing a drone, and the expression transformed him from monument to man. He told Meera about his sister, who had died during the Chennai heat riots while waiting for a water truck. "I joined the Archive the next morning," he said. "Not because I was brave. Because revenge needed a uniform."

Meera shared the tamarind candy. The packet was almost empty now. "Tara hates when adults turn pain into missions," she said.

"She sounds wise."

"She sounds angry. Wisdom is what adults call anger when children explain it too well."

On the thirteenth day, Vaara's ocean withdrew from every shore at once.

Noa saw the gravity readings first. Pavel saw the horizon second. A wall of red water rose high enough to hide the sun. The planet had a moon they had missed: not in orbit above, but beneath the ocean, a dense wandering core

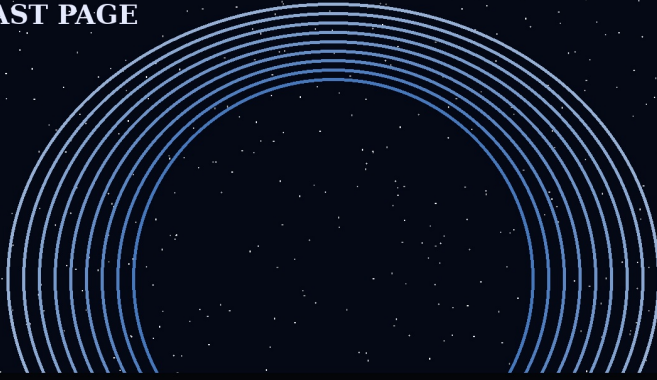
dragging tides around the world like a chain.

The crew ran. Lian fell. Pavel went back. Meera screamed at him not to, but he was already lifting the physician over his shoulder with the impossible tenderness of a man saving the only future he could reach. The shuttle took off as the wave struck the camp. Red water swallowed the habitats, the instruments, the little flags that marked where farms might have been.

Pavel made it to the ramp. His hand closed around Ishan's. Then the water hit again.

When they reached orbit, Pavel's seat was empty.

Meera recorded a message to Tara and deleted it six times. What could she say? That planets were cruel? Tara knew. That courage was costly? Tara knew. In the end she sent one sentence: "I am still trying to come home with more than apologies."



Chapter Six: Tara's Theorem

Earth replied with winter dust.

Tara was twenty-two in the next transmission, standing in a laboratory Meera did not recognize. The child had become a woman with tired eyes and her mother's sharp mouth. She wore an Archive badge. Behind her hung a chalkboard filled with equations that made Noa sit forward so quickly her harness snapped.

"Mama," Tara said, "if this reaches you before the third landing, listen carefully. The Gate is not a path to somewhere else. It is a looped instrument. Someone is using it to teach us how gravity stores information. We thought the signal pointed to habitable planets, but the coordinates are lessons. Niva taught growth under time distortion. Vaara taught ocean-core resonance. The third planet will teach the final step. Do not settle there. Bring the data back."

Meera gripped the edge of the console. "How is she sending through the Gate?"

Noa's face had gone pale with wonder. "She is not. Not yet. This message was recorded on Earth and routed through normal relays. But the math... Meera, these equations are built on measurements we have not transmitted."

Tara continued, voice unsteady. "I know what you are thinking. I did not become a physicist because I forgave you. I became one because missing you was a question nobody else could solve. There is a way to restart Earth's magneto-root cycle. Plants are dying because the upper atmosphere is bleeding charge into the soil. The Gate can lens a controlled gravity pulse through the Moon. It could reset the planetary rhythm. But we need what you have seen. We need all of it."

Then Tara smiled, and the child returned for half a second. "Also, I am taller than you. Commander Trying failed."

The transmission ended.

For a long time nobody spoke. Beyond the window, the third planet waited: gray, cloudless, circled by rings of dust that flashed like blades.

Ishan broke the silence. "We go down. We get the final data. We come back."

Noa looked at the fuel numbers. "Coming back may not be possible."

Meera opened Tara's old science fair photo. In it, Tara stood beside a cardboard volcano, proud as a queen of fire. Meera had written on the back: Ask better questions than the world is ready for.

"Then we make possible feel embarrassed," Meera said.

Chapter Seven: The Planet of Bones

The third planet had no name, so Lian called it Asthi - bones. It was a world of white plains, black mountains, and electrical storms that crawled silently across the ground. There was no air worth breathing, no water on the surface, no softness anywhere. But beneath its crust lay veins of superconducting mineral arranged in natural spirals. A dead planet, shaped like an antenna.

They descended into a canyon where lightning climbed upward from the rocks. Every bolt struck the sky and vanished. Noa danced from sensor to sensor, laughing and crying at once. "This is it," she said. "A gravity harpsichord. A planet-sized way to pluck spacetime."

The data extraction required someone to place resonance anchors by hand across the canyon floor. Drones failed in the electrical field. Suits glitched. Ishan volunteered before the problem was fully explained. Meera stopped him with one look.

"You promised my daughter you would bring me back," she said.

"I promised I would try."

"She hates that word."

"So do I."

They went together.

The canyon sang through their boots. Each anchor sank into the mineral crust and woke a tone too deep to hear but strong enough to move memory. Meera saw Tara at five with mango juice on her chin. Tara at ten on the roof. Tara at sixteen saying leaving felt faster than love. Tara at twenty-two turning grief into equations. The planet played them not as hallucinations but as coordinates. Love, Meera understood, was not a force because poets said so. It was a map the mind refused to throw away, even when distance made the map useless.

At the final anchor, Ishan's suit cracked. A thread of lightning had found a fault in his oxygen line. Meera sealed it with both hands while alarms screamed in her helmet. He looked at her through the visor, face calm.

"If one of us goes," he said, "the other returns."

"No speeches. Help me lock the clamp."

The ground convulsed. Above them, the Kairo Gate appeared in the sky though it should have been light-years away. It opened like an eye recognizing them.

Noa's voice burst over comms. "Data complete. But the Gate is collapsing. You have nine minutes to launch."

Ishan rose unsteadily. "Then run."

They ran across a planet that had never known footsteps, carrying in their instruments the rhythm that might teach Earth to breathe again.

Chapter Eight: The Long Return

Ananta reached the Gate with one engine dying and every alarm awake. Behind them the Kairo cluster folded in on itself, not exploding but becoming less permitted. Noa stayed in the physics bay, fingers flying over controls, converting Asthi's data into a gravitational chord. Lian kept Ishan conscious with injections and insults. Meera held the seed vault straps and whispered apologies to every species sleeping inside.

The Gate took them badly.

Time did not pass. It broke into rooms. In one room, Meera was a child under a monsoon roof, hearing her mother sing the sailor's lullaby. In another, Tara was being born and refusing to cry until Meera touched her cheek. In another, Pavel sat in the red ocean camp, eating tamarind candy and telling a joke he had never finished. In another, an old woman with Tara's eyes stood before a machine built around Moon rock and said, "Again. Send it again. She will hear us."

Meera understood then. The signal had not come from strangers. It had come from Earth's future attempts to save its past. Tara had grown old enough to build the instrument, old enough to aim grief through gravity, old enough to send her mother's lullaby back to Saturn and turn a child's song into a door.

When Ananta emerged near the Moon, Earth was not the planet they had left. Twenty-six years had passed.

Devnagar was half buried. Coastlines had changed. Cities wore domes like scars. But the planet was alive, stubbornly, barely. The Archive caught them in lunar orbit and routed Tara's live signal to the bridge.

She appeared on screen at thirty-six, hair threaded with silver too early, eyes bright with a hope that looked painful. For a moment neither mother nor daughter spoke. Language had not been designed for this kind of wound.

"You are still younger than me," Tara said finally.

Meera laughed once and covered her mouth. "I brought seeds."

Tara's face crumpled. "I built you a machine."

Noa launched the Asthi chord toward the Moon. The lunar lens caught it, bent it, and sent a deep, invisible note through Earth's wounded magnetosphere. Across the planet, clocks stuttered. In Devnagar, beneath poisoned dust, dormant roots felt the old rhythm return.

Chapter Nine: The Orchard After

Reentry burned gold across the windows. Meera had imagined homecoming a thousand times, but imagination had been kinder than reality. Tara met her at the edge of the new Archive field station, not as the child Meera had left but as the woman who had carried the world while waiting. They stood two steps apart. Tara's hands shook. Meera wanted to reach for her and feared the right had expired.

Tara solved it by stepping forward and striking her lightly on the chest with both fists. Not hard. Not gentle. A child's punishment delivered by an adult. Then she collapsed into Meera's arms.

"You were gone," Tara said.

"I was coming back."

"Those are not opposites."

Meera held her tighter. "I know."

Spring did not return all at once. The world was not healed by one beautiful equation. People still rationed water. Cities still mourned. The dead stayed dead. Pavel's name was carved into the first Vaara research dome, which would never host farms but would teach oceans for centuries. Ishan survived and retired to train pilots who understood promises were heavier than ships. Noa became famous and hated it. Lian planted a clinic garden and refused interviews.

Meera and Tara rebuilt the Devnagar orchard from the seed vault. The first guava tree grew crooked. Tara insisted it looked exactly like her childhood drawing. Meera argued that no tree deserved such an insult. They fought often. They ate together more often. Love did not erase the years. It gave them somewhere to put them.

On the first night the new orchard bloomed, every clock in Devnagar stopped again. This time, nobody panicked. The pause lasted thirteen minutes and nine seconds. In the silence, wind moved through leaves that had not existed the year before. Tara took Meera's hand.

"Do you think the future is still sending messages?" she asked.

Meera looked at the stars. Near Saturn there was no black eye now, only distance.

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe some doors close after they bring you home."

Tara leaned her head on her mother's shoulder. "Sing the song."

So Meera sang the sailor's lullaby to the orchard, to the dead, to the daughter who had become her compass, and to the dark between stars where love had once learned to knock.

The End

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