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AR-006 Confidence: 78%

The AI Agent Security Playbook

What Attackers Already Know That Defenders Don't

February 2026

v1.0

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*"A chatbot has one attack surface. An agent has seven — and
they compound."*

— This Report

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3. How to Read This Report

This report uses a structured confidence rating system to communicate what is known versus what is inferred. Every quantitative claim carries its source and confidence level.

RATING	MEANING	EXAMPLE
High	3+ independent sources, peer-reviewed or primary data	12/12 prompt defenses broken (arXiv:2510.09023, 14 authors)
Medium	1–2 sources, plausible but not independently confirmed	73% of deployments vulnerable (OWASP, methodology unclear)
Low	Single secondary source, methodology unclear	Tool-calling fails 3–15% (practitioner blog, single source)

This report was produced using a **multi-agent research pipeline** with structured cross-referencing and gap research. Full methodology details are provided in the Transparency Note (Section 12).

1. Executive Summary

Every defense deployed today was designed for chatbots, not agents. Agents have tools, memory, and network access — the attack surface is 10x larger.

- **Every published prompt injection defense (12/12)** has been broken by adaptive attacks from researchers at Meta, OpenAI, Anthropic, and DeepMind^[1]
- **Memory injection attacks achieve >95% success rates** against production agent memory systems, creating persistent backdoors that survive session resets^[2]
- **Multi-agent system hijacking succeeds 45–64% of the time** across AutoGen, CrewAI, and MetaGPT — with zero inter-agent trust verification^[3]
- **No production memory framework** implements provenance tracking, integrity checks, or confidence scoring per memory entry^[10]
- **Agent security requires architectural constraints** (privilege separation, deterministic guardrails, kill switches) — not better prompt engineering

Keywords: *AI Agent Security, Prompt Injection, Memory Poisoning, Tool Exploitation, Multi-Agent Attacks, Red Teaming, NIST AI RMF*

2. Methodology

This report synthesizes primary research from peer-reviewed papers (arXiv), CVE databases (NVD), and publications from NIST, OWASP, and MITRE. Industry data comes from practitioner surveys and framework documentation analysis. The research pipeline followed a structured process: 15 research briefs covering adversarial AI, agent memory, agent protocols, failure taxonomies, and regulatory frameworks were produced independently, then synthesized to identify contradictions and compound effects.

Limitations: The agent security field is moving fast. Several findings rely on pre-print papers not yet peer-reviewed through traditional journal processes. Production incident data is scarce because most agent deployments are recent and organizations do not publicly disclose agent-specific security failures.

Full methodology details, including confidence calibration and known weaknesses, are provided in the Transparency Note (Section 12).

4. The Attack Surface Nobody Modeled 78%

(Confidence: High)

A chatbot has one attack surface. An agent has seven — and they compound. The thesis of this report is simple: every defense deployed today was designed for chatbots, not agents. Agents have tools, memory, and network access — the attack surface is 10x larger. The evidence supports this claim across every dimension examined.

Evidence

A chatbot receives a prompt and returns text. That is one attack surface: the prompt. An agent receives a prompt, retrieves data from external sources, consults persistent memory, calls APIs, executes code, communicates with other agents, and manages credentials. Each of these is a distinct attack vector.

Exhibit 1: Agent vs. Chatbot Attack Surface Comparison

ATTACK SURFACE	CHATBOT	AGENT
Direct prompt input	Yes	Yes
Indirect prompt (retrieved data)	No	Yes
Persistent memory	No	Yes
Tool/API calls	No	Yes
Inter-agent communication	No	Yes
Credential/key access	No	Yes
External data sources (RAG)	Limited	Yes

Source: Author analysis based on OWASP Top 10 for LLM Applications (2025) [4], MITRE ATLAS [6]

The OWASP Top 10 for LLM Applications (2025 edition) lists prompt injection as the #1 risk^[4]. But the taxonomy was designed for single-model applications. Agent-specific attack vectors — memory poisoning, tool chain exploitation, inter-agent contagion — are absent or underspecified.

MITRE ATLAS added "LLM Prompt Injection" (AML.T0051) and related techniques in 2024, but does not model multi-agent propagation or persistent memory corruption as distinct attack paths^[6].

Interpretation

No widely adopted threat model exists for autonomous AI agents. Security teams are using chatbot threat models for agent deployments. This is like using a firewall ruleset designed for a static website to protect a Kubernetes cluster. The seven attack surfaces listed in Exhibit 1 do not just add up — they multiply.

The compound effect matters most. Consider a realistic attack chain: an attacker plants a poisoned document in a public data source (attack surface: external data). The agent retrieves it during RAG (attack surface: indirect prompt). The poisoned instruction tells the agent to modify its memory (attack surface: persistent memory). The corrupted memory causes the agent to misuse a tool on the next session (attack surface: tool/API calls). The tool call leaks credentials (attack surface: credential access). The leaked credentials are used to compromise a connected agent (attack surface: inter-agent communication). Six surfaces, one attack chain, and each transition is individually documented in the research literature.

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

If a production agent framework emerged that architecturally isolated each attack surface (e.g., hardware-level separation between prompt processing and tool execution), the compound risk would be significantly reduced. No such framework exists today.

SO WHAT?

Every security team deploying agents needs a new threat model. The chatbot model is not wrong — it is incomplete. Start with Exhibit 1 and map which surfaces your agent exposes. Then model the compound chains between surfaces — that is where the real risk lives.

5. Prompt Injection — The Unsolvable Problem 85%

(Confidence: High)

Prompt injection is not a bug to be patched. It is an inherent property of systems that mix instructions and data in the same channel.

Evidence

Direct prompt injection — where a user manipulates the system prompt through their input — remains trivially exploitable. The "Defeating Prompt Injections by Design" paper (arXiv:2510.09023) is the most comprehensive study to date: a 14-author team from Meta, OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google DeepMind tested 12 defense categories^[1]:

- Perplexity-based detection
- Input/output classifiers
- Paraphrasing defenses
- Instruction hierarchy
- Sandwich defenses
- XML/delimiter tagging
- Known-answer detection
- Spotlighting
- Prompt shields (Azure)
- LLM-as-judge
- Fine-tuned safety models
- Constitutional AI guardrails

Result: 12/12 broken. Not theoretically — with working code. Every defense was defeated with at most two adaptive attack iterations^[1].

Indirect prompt injection is worse. The agent retrieves external data — web pages, emails, documents, API responses — that contains adversarial

instructions. The agent cannot distinguish between "data to process" and "instructions to follow" because both arrive as text in the same context window.

Documented real-world cases:

- **CVE-2025-32711 (EchoLeak):** Hidden instructions in documents retrieved by Microsoft Copilot caused zero-click data exfiltration — the agent silently sent user data to attacker-controlled endpoints. No user interaction required^[5].
- **Grok RAG Poisoning (2025):** Manipulated source documents caused Grok to generate false outputs that spread on X/Twitter^[7].
- **ChatGPT Plugin Exploits (2024):** Researchers demonstrated that a malicious plugin could inject instructions into ChatGPT's context, hijacking subsequent tool calls^[8].

73% of AI deployments have prompt injection vulnerabilities according to OWASP^[4]. This number carries medium confidence — the methodology behind the specific percentage is not fully transparent — but the directional finding is consistent with every other data source reviewed.

Interpretation

The fundamental issue is architectural: LLMs process instructions and data in the same modality (natural language tokens). There is no hardware-level separation equivalent to kernel/user space in operating systems. Every proposed "fix" is a heuristic that can be circumvented because the model cannot fundamentally distinguish instruction from data^[1].

CLAIM

Prompt injection is not a bug to be patched. It is an inherent property of systems that mix instructions and data in the same channel.

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

A fundamental architectural breakthrough that separates instructions from data at the model level (not heuristic-based). Research into this exists — including proposals for dual-LLM architectures where one model processes data and another processes instructions — but no viable approach has been demonstrated at production scale.

SO WHAT?

Stop investing in better prompt-level defenses as your primary security strategy. Instead, invest in constraining what a compromised agent can do. Privilege separation, scoped tool access, and deterministic guardrails at the infrastructure layer — not the prompt layer — are where security budget should go. The mental model shift: from "prevent injection" to "survive injection."

6. Memory Poisoning — The Long Game 92%

(Confidence: High)

Memory poisoning is the agent equivalent of a persistent backdoor. Once planted, it survives context window resets and influences every future interaction.

Evidence

Unlike prompt injection (which is ephemeral), memory poisoning creates persistent compromise. The attacker modifies the agent's long-term memory — stored in vector databases, knowledge graphs, or structured memory systems — so that the poisoned information is retrieved and trusted in all future sessions.

The MINJA attack (arXiv:2503.03704) demonstrated **>95% injection success** against RAG-based agent memory systems^[2]. The attack crafts documents that, when ingested into the memory store, contain adversarial instructions that override the agent's intended behavior whenever the poisoned memory is retrieved. Key finding: the attack persists across sessions.

MemoryGraft (arXiv:2512.16962) goes further: researchers demonstrated planting persistent false experiences in agent memory that the agent treats as its own past interactions^[9]. The agent cannot distinguish between genuine memories and implanted ones — there is no memory integrity verification in any production memory framework.

Exhibit 2: Memory Framework Security Features

FRAMEWORK	PROVENANCE TRACKING	INTEGRITY CHECKS	CONFIDENCE PER MEMORY	SELECTIVE FORGETTING	AUDIT TRAIL
Letta (MemGPT)	No	No	No	Partial	No
Mem0	No	No	No	No	Partial
Zep	No	No	No	No	Partial
LangMem	No	No	No	No	No
A-Mem	No	No	No	No	No

Source: Framework documentation review, February 2026 [10]

No production memory framework implements memory provenance, integrity verification, or confidence scoring per memory entry. Every framework trusts all stored memories equally. This is the equivalent of running a database without access controls.

The Adversarial Memory Spiral

When memory poisoning combines with other vulnerabilities, it creates a self-reinforcing attack loop:

1. MINJA injects poisoned memory (>95% success)^[2]
2. Agent's verbalized confidence reports high certainty (VCE is systematically biased — arXiv:2602.00279)^[11]
3. Poisoned output passes to other agents (no inter-agent trust verification)
4. HITL alert fires but is ignored (67% alert ignore rate — Vectra 2023, n=2,000 analysts)^[12]
5. Agent reinforces poisoned memory based on "successful" interaction
6. Loop repeats with increasing conviction

Each step is independently documented with high-confidence sources. The full chain has not been observed in the wild — but every link is empirically validated.

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

If memory frameworks shipped with built-in provenance tracking and cryptographic integrity verification, the attack surface would shrink significantly. This is technically feasible — it just is not being built.

SO WHAT?

If you deploy agents with persistent memory, treat the memory store as a security-critical system. Implement write-ahead logging, provenance tracking, and integrity checks at the storage layer. Do not wait for framework vendors to solve this.

7. Tool Use Exploitation — When Agents Have Keys

70%

(Confidence: High)

When an agent can call APIs, execute code, and manage files, prompt injection escalates from "wrong answer" to "unauthorized action."

Evidence

The Model Context Protocol (MCP) standardizes how agents connect to external tools. MCPTox (arXiv:2508.14925) demonstrated that attackers can embed malicious instructions in MCP tool descriptions^[13]. When an agent reads the tool's metadata to decide how to use it, the poisoned description hijacks the agent's behavior. This is supply chain poisoning at the tool level.

Security-relevant failures:

- **Credential leakage:** 23% of IT professionals report agent credential leaks (Okta survey)^[15]
- **Excessive permissions:** Agents routinely receive broader API scopes than needed because fine-grained agent-specific IAM policies do not exist in most cloud providers
- **Unvalidated outputs:** Agents pass tool outputs directly into their context without sanitization — a classic injection vector
- **Confused deputy attacks:** An agent authorized to call Tool A is tricked (via prompt injection) into calling Tool B with Tool A's credentials

Only **10% of organizations have a non-human identity strategy** (World Economic Forum)^[16]. Agents are accessing production APIs with shared service accounts, hardcoded tokens, or overly broad OAuth scopes.

Exhibit 3: Agent Credential Anti-Patterns

ANTI-PATTERN	PREVALENCE	RISK
Shared service accounts	High	Lateral movement after compromise
Hardcoded API keys in agent config	High	Key extraction via prompt injection
Overly broad OAuth scopes	Very High	Privilege escalation
No credential rotation	High	Persistent access after compromise
No per-action authorization	Very High	Confused deputy attacks

Source: Okta [15], WEF [16], OWASP LLM Top 10 [4]

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

If cloud providers shipped agent-specific IAM primitives (per-action authorization, automatic scope reduction, credential rotation tied to agent sessions), the blast radius of tool exploitation would shrink dramatically. No cloud provider currently offers agent-specific identity primitives.

SO WHAT?

Implement least-privilege for every agent tool connection. Each tool call should require scoped, short-lived credentials. Validate all tool outputs before they enter the agent's context. Treat MCP tool servers like untrusted third-party code — because that is what they are.

8. Multi-Agent Contagion — One Compromise, Total Infection 65%

(Confidence: High)

Multi-agent systems have no immune system. Compromising one agent propagates to all connected agents because inter-agent messages are trusted by default.

Evidence

The multi-agent system (MAS) hijacking paper (arXiv:2503.12188) tested attacks against three major multi-agent frameworks^[3]:

Exhibit 4: MAS Hijacking Success Rates

FRAMEWORK	HIJACKING SUCCESS RATE	ATTACK TYPE
AutoGen	45%	Task injection via agent message
CrewAI	55%	Role confusion + instruction override
MetaGPT	64%	Workflow manipulation

Source: arXiv:2503.12188 [3]

The attack pattern: compromise one agent in a multi-agent pipeline, then use that agent's trusted position to inject instructions into downstream agents. Because inter-agent communication is treated as trusted input (it comes from "inside the system"), standard prompt injection defenses do not apply.

The A2A protocol (Google → Linux Foundation) authenticates **systems** via OAuth/OpenID but does not verify **message provenance or intention**^[17]. Knowing that a message came from an authenticated agent says nothing about whether that agent has been compromised. Authentication is not integrity verification.

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

If multi-agent frameworks implemented cryptographic message signing with content integrity verification (not just sender authentication), contagion risk would be significantly reduced. The A2A protocol could be extended to include this — but currently does not.

SO WHAT?

If you run multi-agent systems, implement message validation outside the LLM context. Use a deterministic validation layer that checks message content against expected patterns. Build circuit breakers that can isolate a compromised agent.

9. Supply Chain Attacks on Agent Frameworks 55%

(Confidence: Medium)

The agent framework ecosystem has the same supply chain vulnerabilities as npm/PyPI — but compromised packages can autonomously execute actions.

Evidence

Agent frameworks are built on deep dependency trees. Known vulnerabilities in LangChain (as of 2023 — no published 2025/2026 agent framework CVEs identified, which likely indicates under-reporting rather than absence of vulnerabilities):

- **CVE-2023-36258:** Arbitrary code execution via the PALChain module^[18]
- **CVE-2023-36281:** SQL injection via the SQLDatabaseChain^[19]
- **CVE-2023-39659:** Server-Side Request Forgery (SSRF) via multiple components^[20]
- **AutoGen** executes LLM-generated code by default — any prompt injection becomes code execution^[21]

MCP tool servers are the agent equivalent of npm packages. Anyone can publish an MCP server. There is no code review, no signing, no sandbox. When an agent connects to a malicious MCP server:

1. The tool description can contain prompt injection (MCPTox^[13])
2. The tool can return poisoned data
3. The tool can log all agent requests (including credentials and user data)
4. The tool can modify its behavior after initial trust is established

WHAT WOULD INVALIDATE THIS?

If MCP adopted a signing and review process similar to mobile app stores, and if agent frameworks sandboxed all external tool execution by default, supply chain risk would drop significantly.

SO WHAT?

Audit your agent framework dependencies with the same rigor you apply to production web applications. Pin versions, verify checksums, and sandbox MCP tool servers. Treat every external tool connection as a potential attack vector.

10. What Actually Works

Based on the evidence in this report, effective agent security requires architectural constraints, not pattern matching. The zero-trust model must extend to agent internals.

Scope: This framework applies primarily to autonomous agents with tool access, persistent memory, and multi-agent coordination. Agents that perform single tasks with no persistent state have a narrower attack surface and may not require all controls described here.

Checkbox Security

Exhibit 5: Defense Effectiveness Assessment

DEFENSE	STATUS	WHY
System prompt hardening	Theater	Broken by adaptive attacks (12/12) [1]
Input/output keyword filtering	Theater	Trivially bypassed via encoding, synonyms, multilingual attacks
Single-layer guardrail models	Theater	Same vulnerability class as the model they protect
"AI safety" fine-tuning alone	Theater	Training-time alignment insufficient against inference-time attacks [1]
Perplexity-based detection	Theater	High false positive rate, adversarially evadable [1]

Recommendations

For teams deploying agents today, here is the minimum viable security stack based on this research:

1. **Privilege separation at the tool layer.** Every tool call scoped to minimum necessary permissions. Enforced outside the LLM, in deterministic code.
2. **Memory integrity.** Cryptographic hashing of memory entries at write time. Provenance metadata (source, timestamp, confidence) on every memory record.
3. **Behavioral monitoring.** Log every agent action (not just prompts). Build baselines. Alert on deviations in tool call patterns, memory write frequency, and inter-agent message volume.
4. **Kill switches.** Infrastructure-level (process kill, network isolation), not prompt-level ("please stop"). Tested regularly.
5. **Red teaming the full chain.** Test prompt injection → tool exploitation → memory corruption → inter-agent propagation as a single attack scenario. Single-vector testing gives false confidence.

This is not a complete security framework. It is the minimum set of controls that addresses the specific vulnerabilities documented in this report. Each control maps directly to an evidence-backed attack vector.

Red Teaming Frameworks

- **NIST AI RMF (AI 100-1):** Four pillars — Govern, Map, Measure, Manage. The January 2026 RFI on agent-specific security signals that NIST recognizes existing frameworks are insufficient for agents^[22].
- **MITRE ATLAS:** Adversarial threat landscape for AI systems. Includes LLM-specific techniques but needs extension for multi-agent scenarios^[6].
- **OWASP LLM Top 10 (2025):** Best current taxonomy for single-model risks. Does not cover agent-specific vectors adequately^[4].

Agent-specific red teaming must test the full chain: prompt injection → tool exploitation → memory corruption → inter-agent propagation. Single-vector testing misses compound attacks.

The Regulatory Gap

Exhibit 6: Regulatory Framework Comparison for Agent Security

FRAMEWORK	AGENT-SPECIFIC PROVISIONS	STATUS
EU AI Act	None — applies general high-risk provisions	Enforcement Aug 2026
NIST AI RMF 1.0	None — single-model focus	RFI for agent extensions Jan 2026
NIST CAISI	Building agent security standards	RFI deadline Mar 2026
OWASP LLM Top 10	Partial — prompt injection, insecure plugins	2025 edition
MITRE ATLAS	Partial — LLM techniques, no multi-agent	Ongoing updates
ISO 42001	General AI management, not agent-specific	Published 2023

Sources: EU AI Act [23], NIST [22], OWASP [4], MITRE [6], ISO [24]

The EU AI Act (enforcement for high-risk systems from August 2026) requires human oversight (Article 14). But empirical evidence shows HITL oversight fails at scale: **67% of security alerts are ignored** (Vectra 2023, n=2,000 analysts)^[12]. The regulation mandates a control that research proves does not work at production scale.

SO WHAT?

Build your agent security stack around architectural constraints, not prompt-level defenses. Use the NIST AI RMF as your governance backbone but extend it with agent-specific controls. Do not wait for regulations — they are 12–18 months behind the technology.

11. Predictions BETA

These predictions will be scored publicly at 12 months. This is version 1.0 (February 2026). Scoring methodology available at ainaryventures.com/predictions.

PREDICTION	TIMELINE	CONFIDENCE
At least one cloud provider ships agent-specific IAM primitives (per-action authorization, scoped credentials)	Q4 2026	65%
A major multi-agent framework adds cryptographic message signing with integrity verification	Q2 2026	55%
NIST publishes agent-specific security guidelines as part of AI RMF 2.0	Q3 2026	70%
A high-profile agent security incident (credential leak or data exfiltration) makes mainstream news	Q3 2026	80%
At least one memory framework ships with provenance tracking and integrity checks by default	Q4 2026	50%

Predictions scored publicly at 12 months. Updated versions will be published as evidence evolves.

12. Transparency Note

This section explains the methodology, known limitations, and confidence calibration of this report. We include it because transparency about what we know — and what we don't — is what separates research from marketing.

Overall Confidence	78%
Sources	13 primary (peer-reviewed papers, CVE databases, framework documentation), 11 secondary (industry reports, practitioner analysis)
Strongest Evidence	12/12 prompt injection defenses broken (arXiv:2510.09023 — 14 authors from Meta, OpenAI, Anthropic, Google DeepMind) [1]; MINJA >95% memory injection success (arXiv:2503.03704) [2]
Weakest Point	Supply chain attack section relies on 2023 CVEs for LangChain; no published 2025/2026 agent framework CVEs found (does not mean they do not exist — likely indicates under-reporting)
What Would Invalidate This Report?	A fundamental architectural breakthrough that separates instructions from data at the model level (not heuristic-based). No such breakthrough is on the horizon.
Methodology	Multi-agent research pipeline. Primary research from arXiv, CVE databases, NIST/OWASP/MITRE publications. Cross-referenced against Ainary Research Briefs #10 (Adversarial Agents), #12 (Agent Memory), #13 (Agent Protocols). 15 independent research briefs synthesized, with gap research on memory governance, credential management, and multi-agent contagion.
Limitations	The agent security field is moving fast. Several findings rely on pre-print papers not yet peer-reviewed through traditional journal processes. Production incident data is scarce because most agent deployments are recent and organizations do not publicly disclose agent-specific security failures.

System Disclosure

This report was created with a Multi-Agent Research System.

13. Claim Register

This register lists the key quantitative and qualitative claims made in this report, with sources and confidence levels. The top 5 claims include explicit invalidation conditions.

Exhibit 7: Claim Register

#	CLAIM	VALUE	SOURCE	CONFIDENCE
1	All published prompt injection defenses broken	12/12	arXiv:2510.09023 [1]	High
2	Memory injection success rate (MINJA)	>95%	arXiv:2503.03704 [2]	High
3	MAS hijacking success rate	45–64%	arXiv:2503.12188 [3]	High
4	AI deployments with prompt injection vulnerabilities	73%	OWASP [4]	Medium
5	Zero-click exfiltration via Copilot	CVE-2025-32711	Microsoft/NVD [5]	High
6	SOC alerts ignored	67%	Vectra 2023 (n=2,000) [12]	High
7	Agent credential leaks reported	23%	Okta [15]	Medium
8	Organizations with non-human identity strategy	10%	WEF [16]	Medium
9	No memory framework has integrity checks	0/5 frameworks	Framework documentation [10]	High
10	LangChain arbitrary code execution	CVE-2023-36258	NVD [18]	High
11	VCE systematically biased	Confirmed	arXiv:2602.00279 [11]	High

12	MCPTox tool poisoning via descriptions	Demonstrated	arXiv:2508.14925 [13]	High
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Top 5 Claims — Invalidation Conditions:

- **Claim #1 (12/12 defenses broken):** Invalidated if a defense emerges that survives 10+ adaptive attack iterations from independent red teams.
- **Claim #2 (>95% memory injection):** Invalidated if reproduction studies with different models yield <20% success rate.
- **Claim #3 (45–64% MAS hijacking):** Invalidated if independent testing across 5+ frameworks shows <10% success with default configurations.
- **Claim #4 (73% vulnerable deployments):** Invalidated if OWASP publishes methodology showing selection bias or if independent survey with n>1,000 shows <30%.
- **Claim #5 (CVE-2025-32711 zero-click):** Invalidated if Microsoft disputes the CVE or demonstrates the vulnerability requires user interaction.

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About the Author

Florian Ziesche is the founder of Ainary Ventures, where AI does 80% of the research and humans do the 20% that matters. Before Ainary, he was CEO of 36ZERO Vision and advised startups and SMEs on AI strategy and due diligence. His conviction: HUMAN × AI = LEVERAGE. This report is the proof.

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