

AIN'T NO GRAVE

A NOVEL



S. A. SOFTLEY

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THE PENANCE OF LEATHER: PART ONE

S. A. SOFTLEY

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This is a work of fiction. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book has been formatted to conserve as much paper as possible.

For my wife Aleksandra.
My best friend, inspiration and support.

There ain't no grave
Can hold my body down
There ain't no grave
Can hold my body down

When I hear that trumpet sound
I'm gonna rise right out of the ground
There ain't no grave
Can hold my body down

Look way over yonder
What do you think I see
I see a band of angels
And they're coming after me

Ain't no grave
Can hold my body down
There ain't no grave
Can hold my body down

Hymn.
Claude Ely.

INTRODUCTION

IT NEVER occurred to me at the time. It always seemed somehow natural. It may have been because I was young then. We were all overwhelmed by everything that was happening. It struck me much later that we never knew his name. Maybe he did not want a name. Perhaps he did not feel he deserved one. A sacrifice; a part of his penance.

I often find myself wondering what he was called before all this; what name his mother whispered to him at night as a child. I suppose I will never know. I have tried to discover what happened to him after he left us. Facts prove illusive. I know that he was purposefully so.

As a child I used to imagine him as a silent, leather-skinned paladin, wandering among the survivors saving the good and casting down the evil. A child's fantasy. I will never know what became of him. Not really.

Every so often a traveller will come and will entertain us with some story out of their childhood about a strange wanderer who came among them and accomplished some act of heroism or bravery before fading away into the night, but the travellers are never sure if they remember the story correctly or if the whole thing had instead emerged from youthful dreams or imagination. Few enough are left that remember The Great Plague first hand and those who remember were so young and times were so dark. Even in the old times; the safe times; the times of plenty, darkness bred nightmare and fantasy.

I have learned that those who swear up and down about the truth of their tales are often the least reliable, although a few... a small few have been very convincing. There were so many wanderers in those days. The tales spread between them, the details altered with each telling as in that children's game of whispers.

Some travellers recall only a terrifying apparition who swept through them swift and silent without stopping, bringing dread and terror. They dismiss it, perhaps, as a parent's tale told only to instil fear in misbehaving children. No one is ever certain.

After the telling, they often laugh and shake their heads dismissively. So few of them know, as I do, the truth of it. None, I suspect, know the truth as completely or as directly as I.

On his story, I have some claim. I may not have known his name, but I knew *him*. He was with us for a time; came to know us and we to know him after a fashion. When he left us, he left his heart. He left his legacy, or at least those parts of it he wished to share; and he shared what he felt to be important with unflinching accuracy.

What follows are the words he left us; the story he left me, in all its raw honesty. I have edited none of his words and have only arranged them, as near as I could, to tell a chronological history. This is his story and as near to the truth as any can claim.

-A.

ONE

I **DON'T** know when it started or why. Maybe something happened to me as a kid. I'd need psychotherapy to get to the root of it, or at least one of those self-help books that were a dime a dozen; the height of fashion back in the old days. Well psychotherapists, though some might say they're much needed these days, are in short supply and self-help books are better used for kindling than for anything else.

But that's neither here nor there. The long and the short of it is that for as long as I can remember I've been afraid of small spaces. Claustrophobic, they called it. As a boy I'd wake up in fits if the blankets got wrapped round me too tight. Used to piss the old man right off. He couldn't understand it. Far as I can tell, he never felt fear a day in his life.

I was born in the South. My father fought in Iraq. The second time, not the first. My dad's dad worked in the coal mines; a career I couldn't begin to contemplate. He went to Vietnam briefly, but was sent home with a bullet wound almost immediately.

"He still earned his medal with blood," my father would say.

My great-granddad fought "the damn japs" as I recall him proclaiming loudly to those who cared and many who didn't, long after such comments had gone out of fashion in favour of political sensitivity.

It's enough to say I came from a proud southern family with a history of military service, populated with strong men. My fears were not well received by those men.

I remember one night, after waking up screaming from another dream in which I'd been buried alive, hearing my father argue with Ma after she'd checked in on me.

"Ain't no cause for it," he'd say, "you think any one of us cried like that in the war? That was *real* fear. Not this 'maginary shit."

"He's just a boy" she'd reply quietly.

“He ain’t,” I heard him say once; “he’s sixteen. Shit, I enlisted at seventeen.” Ma had no reply to that. There was never any reply to father’s life in the army. As a child, embarrassing unmanly fears could be dismissed; I’d grow out of them, but the older I got the harder it was on everyone and the less Ma could think of in the way of excuses. She told me I’d get past it someday. I never did.

Maybe it was out of some macho-masculine need to prove myself, to have myself thought of as a tough guy. Fearless. I had no other fears. You could say I was reckless. I would engage in all sorts of risky behaviour. Heights, dark places, dangerous animals, speed, isolation; hell even public speaking... These were no problem for me. I’d look for a new hit of adrenaline daily. I’d find new and increasingly more dangerous activities and none of it bothered me, but no matter what I did, no matter how I tried to face it, I couldn’t stand tight spaces.

Elevators were a challenge and whenever possible, I’d wait for a crowd to go and catch the next one, if I ended up being able to get in at all. It kept me fit at least, taking all those stairs. I never took a subway a day in my life; the aisle seat on planes required a couple pills and two fingers of bourbon, no ice. I couldn’t even think about boarding a plane if I’d been issued a window seat or, God forbid, the middle seat.

And that’s how it happened. Or, at least, that’s *where* it happened; no one quite knows *how* and I’m not one to theorize. I don’t know if we were the first; we sure as hell weren’t the last...

We were high over Northern Canada, but it wasn’t the height that bothered me. I’d been working up in the oil sands and was heading back south for my month off. I liked the north. It was wide open and empty. No crowds, no noise, just space.

I spent most of my time trekking through nothing but wilderness, keeping an eye on pipelines and equipment, making short runs to nearby towns for supplies and doing survey work. I didn’t actually work on the oilrigs themselves; I was sort of the on-call jack-of-all-trades. I’d do some maintenance work on the

buildings, clear brush for pathways and airfields and drive trucks, quads and snowmobiles around, taking survey teams of engineers and scientists to various sites. Often, I'd live in little trapper's cabins, managing the local wildlife. I always liked that the best.

I'd generally spend two months on the job and one month off. Normally I wouldn't go far on my month off, maybe to the nearest city, Fort McMurray. Usually no further than Edmonton, about six hours away if the roads were good. Occasionally I'd just sort of travel and wander, taking an aimless road trip, finding a quiet bar, a cheap motel and some amiable company. This time I was headed back to The States. I had promised my mother I would visit, though I dreaded just about everything about the trip.

I was on one of those short-haul flights; the kind I usually flat-out refuse to take. We were en route from a tiny regional airport up north, basically a rough field that had been packed down and smoothed out, to Springbank airport just outside of Calgary. I'd take a quick cab-ride through the unpleasantly crowded streets of Calgary to the international airport, where I could catch a flight back home.

I hated those regional flights. The struggling airlines usually tried to cram as many people as they could into the oldest and smallest plane still running. This particular flying death trap was an aged prop plane with a wheezing ventilation system that trickled stale air through the overhead nozzles and every square inch of cabin was filled with people or luggage.

Each of the fifteen rows had two seats on either side of a narrow aisle with a low ceiling. The flickering and yellowed fluorescent lights that ran above the aisle threatened to plunge the aircraft into darkness with each temperamental blink. I was lucky to have received the aisle seat; otherwise I'm sure I would have demanded hysterically to be released from the aluminum tube soon after sitting down.

The seats themselves were crammed together so that it was barely possible to squeeze into them and contort into something that resembled a seated posture. Though it was uncomfortable and the arm rest pressed into my thigh, giving me a mean Charlie horse, I felt a little better having my knee and leg sticking out

slightly into the aisle on my right, feeling that any space I could gain would help to calm me. I was protective almost to the point of aggression of that sliver of space and became irrationally angry when the flight attendants pushed past forcing me to squeeze my leg back in between the seats. It took a great deal of manoeuvring just to get my tray table down so I'd have a place to put my empty once I'd thrown back my third Jack Daniels - I'd had two at the tiny dive bar near the airport before the flight. Forty minutes in, I was sweating, shaky and red-faced, my breathing fast and shallow. The middle-aged flight attendant asked me if I was feeling all right.

"I'm fine," I replied in little more than a grunt, "space is a little tight."

"You're telling me." I could see his point, as he pushed his tin cart through an aisle two inches smaller than what the cart was designed for.

"I couldn't do it," I replied, "don't know how you manage." I tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace.

"Pays the bills." He pushed a little further down the aisle. I nodded. Jobs were still scarce these days; at least compared to the boom years. A guy could do worse... at least *he* could do worse. I couldn't manage.

The guy in the window seat beside me was a big guy. And I mean big. Big voice, big gut, big legs. Big. I suppose he was fat, but fat in a more proportionate way than many. He looked like the type of guy who used to play linebacker before he let himself go, but could still handle himself in a pinch.

I didn't know him; he looked like a roughneck, but not on any site I'd worked. I didn't know anybody that well anyway. There were a few guys I worked with; they were like me: lonely wanderers who liked it that way. The scientists and engineers I met came for a week or two and left. If I saw them again it was usually months or a year later. I didn't see much of the grunt workers, the multitudes of welders and electricians, drivers and crane operators, drillers and excavators.

The big man spilled over the armrest into my seat. I couldn't imagine being him. The seat belt had barely adjusted to his girth; his head just avoided being struck against the overhead compartments as he sat, his legs uncomfortably folded. I sympathized with how uncomfortable he must be, but at that moment, I was incapable of much compassion. He was leaking into my already restricted space, and that was something, which, under the circumstances and given what you already know about me, was intolerable. I closed my eyes; tried to take ten deep breaths.

The panic subsided. I'd been doing that for years. Forcing air into my lungs until my body realized that I was not drowning, was not suffocating despite what my brain might believe.

I pulled a newspaper out of the seat pocket in front of me and began to flip idly through it looking for something to distract me. I flipped past headline after headline about impending doom. It was all the usual media scare-fare. There was about to be a new super-flu outbreak, the Earth teetered on the edge of complete ecological meltdown, social unrest was gripping Egypt. A clan conflict in Africa was about to become the next Rwanda or Darfur, and *'is your food really as safe as you think?'* It was all too overwhelming. It was why I strove to avoid civilization for as much of the year as possible.

One headline caught my eye at last: *Our Universe A Hologram?* I flipped to the article picking out words and sentences here and there. A philosopher, physicist or mathematician had postulated that the laws of the universe could be explained if our universe was, in fact, a holographic projection. I skimmed on, amused and distracted at last, but disbelieving. Some asshole got paid an awful lot of money... probably had received research grants and tenure for the rest of his life just for coming up with a steaming load of horseshit. The article carried on to describe other similar thought experiments.

Earlier this year it was shown that there is a mathematical probability that our universe is a computer simulation... Some genius had manipulated numbers so that the odds showed that humanity

was unlikely to have developed on our own outside some kind of ancient alien computer game.

Is it possible that the universe only exists because we perceive it? It asked. *If a tree falls in the forest...* The fabled 'Schrodinger's Cat' analogy. The cat in the box is both alive and dead until a person sees it. As if we're the only creatures capable of perceiving life and death. As if everything didn't just tick right along without us.

I chuckled to myself. Those trees go on falling across pipelines and trails whether I hear them or not. I knew that it was just a metaphor, meant to explain some strange quantum test results that showed particles being in two places at once until they were observed at which point they'd have to choose a place and stick to it... or something like that... I'd heard it somewhere, I thought.

I chuckled again, glancing over the part about 'anthropic theory', the idea that nothing much mattered until we lofty humans saw it. The idea that the only reason the universe existed was because we gave it meaning, because we were here to perceive it. The self-centered idiot who'd thought that one up had obviously not gone out of the office much to see that the world didn't much care whether we were here or not. In fact, in those days, if the Earth had had a preference, I'd guess it'd rather we weren't.

The man beside me shifted, breaking my concentration. Up and down the aisle, flight attendants had blocked the way with their beverage carts. The plane shook. *Just turbulence*, I told myself. The plane rattled again and the lights flickered. The air nozzle above me, my only source of fresh oxygen, was producing barely a trickle. I felt my throat thicken and swell.

I began to panic. I could feel my breath becoming increasingly strained and shallow. I looked over at the man beside me, a bead of sweat trickled down my forehead, a vein in my neck pumped, pumped, *pumped...*

The big man looked as bad as I felt. His face was red and flushed. His eyes were bloodshot and clouded. Some sickly darkness shone from him, lighting the edges around his presence

like the thin glow of a black light that shines brightly but seems to illuminate nothing. He was feverish; he seemed to shimmer with unhealthy heat; his breathing ragged. He glared flame into the back of the seat in front of him as we rode out a bout of turbulence.

"You got it worse than me," I said, mainly to myself, trying to distract myself from my increasing sense of dread.

"Huh?" he replied hoarsely.

"I get freaked out in tight spaces." I replied, taking a few deep breaths before mustering the strength to speak again. "Looks like you ain't doing too well yourself." The big man grunted at me. A hiss escaped his tightly sealed mouth that sounded something like *m'ssssick...*

Great, I thought, I'm crammed next to the guy with the biggest gut on the plane and he's gonna be sick. I imagined how much that great belly could hold. I glanced worriedly at the little paper bag peaking out of the seat pocket and looked back at the man's gut, grimacing as I considered the difference in volume. The man began to shudder.

"Hey... you, uh... gonna be alright?" I asked, trying to force a little of the tight apprehension out of my voice. The big man groaned a wordless reply. I spent a moment wondering what I should do, uncertain. The big man grasped his head between his thick hands, looking as though he was using all his trembling strength to hold his own fragmenting skull together.

"Oh God, oh God," he murmured clutching his temples as he rocked back and forth. The seats groaned under his weight. That about did it for me. I decided I had to do something. I hoped that maybe there was a doctor on board. I reached up with my own unsteady hand and jabbed at the call button. The light turned on with a ding.

"Need some help over here," I called down the aisle, as though the button alone might not be enough.

The other flight attendant on the plane came quickly down the narrow aisle from the forward section of the plane. She was young, in her mid-twenties maybe, with a slight build, not much

more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds or so. Alone, she wouldn't be much help if it came to moving the big guy.

"Yes sir?" she asked kindly, official and proper through and through.

"This man is sick," I said, "he needs help." She looked at him and flushed. And then she blanched. I looked back at him and could see why. His face had turned an angry shade of violet, his jaw was clenched and frothy white foam was bubbling between his exposed teeth. Still his hands gripped his skull in an effort to hold it together. His breathing remained ragged and heavy with an almost animal edge to it.

"Sir, can you hear me? Can you tell me what's wrong?" the flight attendant asked him, leaning over me. I took a deep breath and held it as though in preparation for a descent into deep waters. I could not breathe as she hovered over me on the aisle side and the suffering man consumed what little space and air I was allotted from the other side.

"Ma'am, perhaps I could move..." I rasped, my lungs aching with the effort to speak while holding in as much air as possible; air which I felt was being positively devoured by the huge man and the diminutive flight attendant.

"Please just stay where you are for the moment, sir, I'm sorry for the trouble" she said, half polite and entirely dismissive.

"What's the problem Anna?" asked the middle-aged flight attendant, returning with his cart in tow upon noticing the look of concern on the face of his co-worker. I felt entombed with the aluminum drink cart blocking the only aisle of escape and two flight attendants leaning over me, using up my thin air supply which puffed from the solitary nozzle dedicated to that purpose. The large man encroached ever further upon my territory with his unknown and mysterious affliction.

"This man is ill," she said in a hissing whisper, a subtle note of panic in her voice and he, as she had, paled. The faces of nearby passengers swirled around me as they turned in their seats casting furtive glances toward the commotion and I was at last overcome by the instinctual need to breathe. Reluctantly but

forcefully, as one who is about to take the deathly gulp of water that is the last drink of a drowned man, I swallowed a mouthful of the heavy, crowd-polluted air that surrounded me. I was forced to gasp again as I looked into the face of the sick man. Capillaries had burst and dark blood appeared to have congealed within his eyes, staining the white sclera a dark crimson. The foam around his mouth had changed as well, becoming pink with flecks of increasingly violent red. A string of glistening scarlet spittle hung from his oversized chin. The male flight attendant hissed inward harshly, using up more of the air I had mentally apportioned for myself and rushed to the back of the plane.

Sickeningly calm, his voice came from the intercom: "Hi folks, no need for alarm, but we have a small medical emergency on board. If there is a doctor or medical professional on board, could you please make yourself known to the flight crew, thanks and enjoy the rest of your flight."

Right before my eyes I watched the life drain out of the big man. A solitary ruby tear trickled down his cheek as his eyelids drooped. As though reluctant to permanently give up the sense of sight, his eyes remained only half veiled, an unseeing crescent still glistening like a red moon beneath his thin blonde eyelashes. His tortured breathing ceased and the foam in his mouth stilled. I sat and stared at the lifeless, disease ravaged body, forgetting for a moment my great discomfort and fear.

"Sir?! Sir?!" the female flight attendant shouted, reaching over me to prod and shake the constituent flesh that had once been a man. Her voice shrilled with the fear that comes with being in the presence of a human body that no longer breathes. It's different now, of course; now that there are so many dead, but in those days it had been rare to encounter a dead body. Many went their whole lives without seeing one. The experience reminded a person of their own mortality, a truth that the modern west had done their best to fight against and forget.

They locked the old and senile away in hospitals, those dying of disease met the same fate. Every cause of death that could be eradicated had been and the mortality that struck

everyone eventually was sterilized and hidden behind locked doors, white rooms and closed caskets.

For my work, I'd needed wilderness first aid training and medical training... first responder type stuff. Through the fog of my panic attack, some of the training came back to me.

"Sir, I'm trained in first aid and CPR," I said mechanically and in vain to the lifeless man beside me. My voice quavered slightly. "Would you allow me to assist you?" It was a phrase that had been drilled into me by the CPR instructor; a phrase meant to absolve the responder of guilt or wrongdoing. I shook him to provoke a response, but his head rolled away. I held his wrist in my own trembling hand but could not tell if the erratic surging I felt was caused by his heartbeat or by my own blood surging through my fingertips. I shook my head.

"LOCPRESS," I muttered to myself, the acronyms that I'd been taught coming back. "Level of consciousness, pulse, respiration, eyes, skin color, skin temp... SAMPLE. Signs, symptoms, allergies, medical history..." I couldn't recall the rest at the moment. It didn't seem to matter. The man was sick and had stopped breathing. It wasn't as though I could ask for a medical history. Thinking was costing me precious seconds. Seconds that could save the man's life.

"Grab me the first aid kit, will ya?" I said to the woman flight attendant. While she hurried off, I turned my cheek to his mouth, feeling and listening for breath. I pressed my ear against his barrel chest. He was firmer than I'd thought, not so flabby after all. There was lean, hard muscle under that shirt. I realized that he would weigh even more than I'd quickly guessed by looking him over. It would be tough to move him. I listened carefully but couldn't hear a heartbeat.

I clenched my two fists together and tried with all my strength to press violently against his chest, the already overtaxed seat back rocked under the assault. It wasn't working. He sprayed bloody foam against the headrest in front of him, but no life came to him. Thirty seconds passed with no response, then ninety.

The flight attendant returned with the first aid kit. Somehow, despite the trembling and the panic of claustrophobia, which had begun to manifest itself as a disconcerting feeling of spinning vertigo, and a red haze that set in from the periphery of my vision, I managed to open the kit and tear up an alcohol wipe package, hastily mopping up the pink foam from his lips and nose.

“Don’t you guys have an AED or something?” I growled in alarm. The flight attendant stared at me blankly. “An automated external defibrillator?” I explained, “They restart your heart. Is it even legal to fly without one these days?” She shrugged, her eyes wide like a startled deer. She was clearly traumatized. I wasn’t sure she was even hearing me. I turned away taking a deep breath. *It’s not the woman’s fault, I reminded myself. If the airline skimps on everything as much as it does on cabin space and cabin furnishings, they’ve probably decided to save the hundred bucks or so on an AED hoping this situation would never arise. Hell, they probably scaled down the poor woman’s training as well. Wonder if they ever prepped her for an emergency like this.*

I took out the clear rubber mouthpiece and placed it tightly around his chin and nose. I wasn’t sure what the first aid operating procedure was on an aircraft but the man had been unconscious for at least a couple minutes by my count and likely hadn’t been breathing the whole time so I wasn’t about to waste time moving the big guy into the proper position. I silently thanked the airline for at least keeping a proper kit; a kit that included the mouthpiece and a squeeze bottle to pump air through. There had been an Ebola scare a few years back and the last thing I wanted to do was give this guy mouth to mouth while he was bleeding and foaming all over. I tilted his head back to help the flow of air and began to squeeze the pump to fill his lungs.

Two breaths. Three breaths. I could see his chest rise as I squeezed. I took away the mouthpiece and pounded his chest more, sending spittle, now more deeply red in colour, spraying out onto his lips and chin.

I lost track in those moments of how long I went on, alternating between checking for a pulse, compressing his chest and squeezing into the mouthpiece, but at last I stopped and wiped sweat from my brow. There was just no way. It had been too long.

Aside from the bright red splotches of haemorrhaged blood, his face and neck had become grey and waxy. His lips and eyelids had taken on a deep shade of blue. I cursed to myself for failing to check the time when I'd begun CPR, but I felt confident that I'd been at it for long minutes; probably more than half an hour. I distantly recalled that there was legally a minimum length of time that a responder had to continue before giving up once they had begun to administer CPR. I could not remember what that time limit was. Time limit or not, There was no use in carrying on. I was mentally and physically exhausted and the man was dead. Not a flicker of life remained within him. I was sure that no one could fault me for stopping. I'd tried. I really had.

"Let me get to him," said the flight attendant frantically. I blocked her with my arm.

"It's too late. He's gone. There's nothing you can do," I said, trying to console her with my eyes.

A woman seated in the row in front of me peered at us through the crack between the seats. Her eye widened and then she let out a whimper and turned back around.

"He's dead!" she whispered to the man in the seat beside her. The whispers were spreading throughout the plane.

The flight attendant stood in shock, the dark mascara around her eyes beginning to smudge and smear. Sweat and tears cut dark streams from her hairline down her face, washing away powdery makeup like rainwater trickling through a desert. She stared at the dead man as though transfixed, as though silently willing him back to life using some divine art that was secret to all but her.

"Ma'am," I said after a time, as calmly as I could, "I wonder if I might change seats now." The flight attendant jumped

as though noticing me there for the first time, her horrified gaze broken.

“Yes of course, sir,” she said, admirably returning to her previous professionalism. “I’m very sorry about all this, this is very... unusual.”

“Not your fault, ma’am,” I replied, trying once more to smile, but there was nothing to smile about.

“Would you be alright waiting just a few more moments while I open up a seat for you somewhere? It’s a full flight,” she added, apologetically. “It won’t be long now; the pilot is making an emergency landing at the nearest air field.”

“That suits me fine. Thank you.” She walked back down the aisle, whispering quietly with the other flight attendant and then busied herself with finding a new spot for me. One of the passengers asked to know what was going on.

“Please just be patient sir, we’ve had an emergency and we’re sorting it out,” replied the male attendant. The pilot came on the intercom.

“Hello folks,” he said calmly in the pilot voice that must be issued to everyone who graduates flight school, “I’m afraid we will be putting down unexpectedly due to a medical emergency on board. Please offer your full cooperation to the flight crew at this time. We will be landing at Lac d’Hiver Regional Airport in approximately eighteen minutes. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The plane rocked slightly for a moment as the pilot changed course and began to descend. I unclipped my seatbelt and reached down for my bag, which was stored beneath the seat in front of me.

The rest only comes in flashes; images; feelings. I remember a piercing scream, though it may have been my own. I remember feeling sharp knives rip into the flesh of my left arm, cutting deep into muscle. I remember the searing heat that spread slowly up and down my arm, as though travelling through my blood from the wound.

I remember that same heat fading gradually until my veins felt ice cold. I remember feeling as though my nerves were dying off cell by cell until I was left with a chill numbness like frostbite without pain. Like when you sleep for too long on your arm and in the morning your arm acts as though it no longer belongs to you. Only there was no tingling to signal that soon the limb would reawaken, no painful return of blood flow to restore feeling and use.

I remember many vague faces around me, though I can recall none of their features. They were shadowed; as though behind a veil or mist of scarlet. Faceless, nameless people. After that, everything went dark. I had no memory, not so much as an image, from the time between.

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Thank you!

-S.A. Softley