

The Soul Snare

By Verna McKinnon

“Bring in the Blood Thief,” demanded Judge Verlia, tapping the floor three times with her wooden staff.

Jason Abbey whispered to his native guardian, “That’s a strange term for a murderer, Shayda.”

“It’s the language of archaic law,” she answered softly. “It’s tradition, that’s all. We rarely have any murders, though when we do, it’s nothing like this. Our priests serve as our judges for such terrible crimes.”

“I thought you said your people had no organized religions or gods, so what faith or philosophy do your priests serve?” he asked.

“Our spirituality is one of universal law,” Shayda answered simply.

Confused by her answer, he decided to let the matter drop until later discussion. Too much to learn in the small allotted time. The Law Temple felt more like a church than a court. The high domed ceiling of amber glass sheltered an immense, elegant hall lined with pale pillars of polished blue marble, intricate mosaic floor tiles, and tall, narrow windows that allowed beams of sunlight to brighten the room.

Only three Judges stood on the low circular dais, draped in long gray robes. He had met them earlier-Verlia, Benjaim, and Tama, the most revered judge-priests in this part of the world, according to Shayda. He glanced across the hall where the families of the victims awaited justice. Jason and Shayda stood on the opposite side, a diplomatic compensation to unusual and dreadful circumstances.

Seven guards dragged the chained man into the great hall to kneel before the Priests for trial. The aura of purity in the vast chamber was sullied by his presence. There was no repentance or fear on the blood thief’s features as he crouched like a feral beast before the judges. Grime and sweat caked his sun-browned skin. The prisoner spat, wiped his mouth with iron-cuffed hands and grinned. Jason Abbey fought the urge to back away from the wild man, not only because of his rank odor, but his violent demeanor disturbed him.

Jason asked, “Couldn’t you have permitted him a bath or change of clothes?”

“We offered,” a guard replied, “But he ripped the garments we offered and refused to bathe...except in blood.”

“Then let the blood thief remain so,” Tama said, rapping his staff once on the stone floor. “Let it be noted that we offered the hand of decency.”

They did not address him by name, only as blood thief, and Jason wondered if crime wiped out personal identity on this world.

The murderer was Thero Rham, an earth native who escaped from a penal world several weeks ago; a serial killer that rehabilitation could not heal or change. Rham had killed over two hundred people before crashing on this world—mostly women and children. Now he added more deaths to his list of heinous crimes. At only thirty-two, Thero Rham was one of history's most vicious killers. Earth banned the death penalty decades ago; all they could do was keep him locked up.

“This is a terrible way to initiate first contact protocol,” Jason said. “An escaped serial killer crashes on an alien world, your world, then murders thirty children before capture.” Jason bowed his head, “My people are full of sorrow and regret for the horrors your people have suffered. I am only here to offer the support and friendship of Earth.”

“We hear and understand, Ambassador Abbey,” Judge Benjaim said sternly.

“I know you mean well,” Shayda whispered. Her dark blue eyes had genuine sympathy. An unusual looking people, the natives of the world Utropa were humanoid, with minor variations. All appeared to be tall and willowy. Shayda stood shoulder to shoulder with him and he was over six feet tall. Slim-boned as birds, with deep blue eyes (he had yet to see any other color), dark golden skin, like honey, and lush, thick black hair. They were an exotic but attractive race. He sorely wished to know more about them, but the stress of the trial kept his inquiries minimal.

Jason Abbey had been fully briefed before they arrived by ship five days ago—as fully as one can expect in a first contact mission with a technologically inferior race. The earth authorities did not care if the Utropans returned Thero Rham, but to make a token gesture for his extradition to an earth prison. They also instructed Jason to limit any offers of technologies to the race, since they were so far behind them. They had no space travel, or even air flight of any kind. Jason's brief tour of their capital, attended by Shayda, revealed a lovely city full of shops, schools, and businesses, but devoid of the nerve jarring noise of earth cities, or even those of the colonies.

Jason arrived by shuttle alone, as was agreed through negotiations. He wondered how they mastered using the stolen ship's communication systems to contact them, though he had noted they were far from stupid or backward either. At age thirty-five, he was one of the youngest diplomats and first contact experts in the Alliance. His diplomatic training, however, did not prepare him for dealing with the criminally insane or primitives that still used theology to judge people

Verlia looked down at Thero Rham and asked, “You have been judged a blood thief for the murders of thirty children and five adults. How do you plead?”

Thero Rham shrugged. "I won't deny the enjoyment each death brought me, though it was short lived. I hungered for death's pleasure. More than that, the methods that brought those deaths. There are many ways to kill. I like to experiment. It had been so long since I tasted the flesh of my victims or heard their screams--"

"Silence, Blood Thief!" Verlia commanded.

Jason glanced across the room at the families of the victims that had been allowed to attend the trial. They were silent, though words could not describe the pain and hatred he witnessed on their faces.

"You freely admit your crimes?" Judge Tama asked.

"It doesn't matter. I'm an earth citizen. You're a pack of backward imbeciles. You can't execute me either. I heard you have no death penalty on this world. Earth will take me back. Tell them, Mr. Ambassador."

Jason shook his head, "If we can arrange for your transport with their permission to a penal world, I have been authorized to do so. But since you committed multiple murders on their world, we are obligated to honor their laws, Rham. You can rot."

Not very diplomatic, but it made him feel better.

Thero spewed such foul language at his reply that Jason burned with embarrassment.

Judge Tama grimly said, "Your words invoke no mercy, and your stain as a blood thief is great. More than thirty lives were ended by your hands. Defenseless children killed in the most atrocious ways. You scattered their bodies across our land to torment and frighten us. Families wailed with grief. Five of our people died trying to capture you. You are marked not only as a blood thief...but an evil soul. I wish I could say you were soulless, but all things have souls. Even your human species must understand this."

"Offer me up to the Earth authorities. They can pay you for my return. I have a large price on my head."

Judge Verlia rapped her staff sharply, "Your head is not for sale, Blood Thief. Earth's representative has already spoken." Verlia turned to Jason. "Is that so, Ambassador Abbey?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Jason cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Earth will indeed honor your punishment of Thero Rham. We will not interfere with your just decision. If your punishment is execution, we will abide by your wisdom," Jason assured them.

"We do not take life. Though there is something far worse than mortal death," Verlia said, looking at Rham.

The three judges conferred together and spoke in soft, quick voices. Thero Rham deserved death. When Jason looked at him, feelings of grotesque hatred and revulsion burned

within him. He wished he could kill this monster. Jason never realized such primal feelings could be awakened. He always considered himself a civilized man.

The three judges stepped forward, and each rapped their staves three times. Solemnly, each judge took a stone from their robes, and in turn laid a small, oval polished black stone before Thero Rham.

“What are they doing?” Jason asked Shayda.

“The stones of judgment. Black means soul death.”

“Soul death?” Jason said, confused.

The first priest, Verlia spoke with hard voice, “We have judged you not only a blood thief, but a dark soul. We are in unison in this verdict. You will suffer the most extreme penalty of soul death. Death of the body and death of the soul are two different things, Blood Thief. Your crime demands a soul death, which prevents your soul returning to this world or any other.”

The second judge, Benjaim, added, “Tomorrow, at dawn, you will be taken to the old temple. There you shall be chained to the soul snare to await the old spirits. If the Spirits wish it, they will destroy your soul in the ancient way. The death of your soul, Blood Thief, will prevent its rebirth. Its existence in the universe stains the fabric of life.”

The third Judge finished the decree, “Should the Ancient Spirits, for whatever reason, spare your soul, Ambassador Abbey has our permission to take you from this planet to suffer the punishment of your own laws. That is our last word on this tragedy.”

The families that listened to the verdict looked satisfied. Jason felt only a prick of relief. That final statement gave him a loophole to get Rham off this world should this strange ritual not kill him. Earth preferred this of course. Life in isolation on a barren planet where he could not hurt anyone again. The attempt at rehabilitation and penal colonies was no longer an option. Though the concept of soul killing was unclear to him.

Thero laughed, “Superstitions and fairy tales! Looks like I’m going home to earth after all.”

Jason was confused. “Excuse me, is that a symbolic form of execution? You condemn him to a soul death, so the body also dies, right? I merely ask-”

“That is for the Spirits to determine,” Verlia said. “If they find the blood thief has an evil soul, then they will destroy it. It is the old ways, rarely called upon, but they are our only means of dealing with such darkness, Ambassador.”

“I still don’t understand,” Jason said.

“We know, but this is not the time for explanation of ancient ways. You have said you will not interfere.”

“Of course, we will not-”

“Then nothing more need to be said.” Verlia finished, with a hard rap of her staff. “You are welcome to witness the soul death, as we have stated.”

Jason bowed his head. “I apologize, Judge Verlia.”

He looked up, and silently watched the judges and the families depart from the vast chamber.

“You can’t take a soul if they don’t exist, can you?” Thero ranted as he struggled against the firm grip of the guards as they dragged him back to his cell.

Jason was disturbed by the ruling, and excused himself from Shayda’s side, “Give me a moment, I just need to contact Captain Darin. He’s been anxious about the outcome of the trial.”

“Of course,” she nodded.

He retrieved his palm-sized communicator from his coat pocket. He signaled Captain Darin. After brief formal greetings, Jason leapt into a recap of the trial...

“The judges decreed something called soul death...whatever that means. They did say that if the spirits don’t kill his soul, we can take him back to one of our prisons. Unless soul death means execution of course. They are very symbolic, so I can’t be sure. The ceremony is at dawn at some old temple. I will contact you afterward to make arrangements for Rham’s transport should he still be alive.”

The Captain replied, “This might be one time when non-technos will make things easier for us. Contact me after the ceremony and I’ll send troops to take him back. This soul killing must be some primitive ritual. Shame they won’t kill that monster and take him off our hands.”

“I agree, Sir. But let’s allow them their rites. Afterward, they will transfer custody to earth.”

“Which is more than we hoped for. Have they asked for restitution?”

“No, Sir. I offered, but they politely replied that nothing can replace the loss of their children.”

“I agree with them. Damned tragedy. Still, make arrangements for future talks with them. Remember, they’re a simple race.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll contact you tomorrow.”

The chamber was empty when he finished, except for Shayda who waited for him patiently by the large double doors. He joined her and they left the great hall. Stepping into the afternoon light, Jason basked in the warm beams, wishing it would take away the stain of contact

with Thero Rham. They strolled slowly through the streets. After a few moments, he asked. "What exactly is soul death, Shayda? What is a soul snare?"

"The death of soul. The soul snare calls the Old Spirits. I will take you there later, if you would like to see it," she assured him. "I need to stop thinking about all this for a time. I need a drink. Would you like to join me?"

"More than you know."

They walked to her home, which only took half an hour. He was glad of the exercise, fresh air, green trees...and of Shayda's company. Despite the horrors of his reason for being here, he enjoyed her friendship. They reached her house, a simple one level constructed of smooth golden stone, designed with artful simplicity, the low, slanted roof tiled in teal. Green vines decorated the side of the house in abundance.

She opened a wooden door and led him to the central room. "I'll get some wine. You do drink wine?"

"Wine sounds great, thank you."

"Make yourself at home. I'll just pop into the kitchen."

The living room was wonderfully normal and messy. A strange comfort. Piles of papers, books, and a couple of dirty glasses scattered on a low wooden table. A green sofa was piled with plump cushions, an overstuffed chair was covered with rumpled clothes and shoes. Thick green drapes of a velvet-type fabric were tied back, allowing the sun to shine through the large oval windows, making the small living room bright. He sat down on the sofa and waited. She returned in a few minutes, carrying a tray with a slim bottle of midnight blue glass and two matching glasses, a plate of sliced pale bread, and a bowl of brown oval crackers. She poured the wine, which was peach-colored, and handed him a glass.

"I'm sorry about the clutter. I've been so busy, and with the recent tragedies, I've hardly been home for weeks except to shower and change. That's why you can't see my kitchen. It's a wreck of dirty dishes and overflowing trash bins."

He sipped the wine. It was good, dry but slightly sweet. It didn't taste like peaches, more like grapes and currants. "Don't apologize Shayda, it's actually welcome after all these formal meetings in plain, austere offices. I spent two weeks traveling here on a large military space vessel. The living compartments are quite cramped and sterile on those ships. The food isn't so good either."

She took a long drink and leaned against the pillows, "Then relax. Tell me, how do I understand your language and you understand us so well?"

He shrugged, "It's a new translator technology. I have a small implant in my head."

She looked horrified.

"Oh, no, it's not like it sounds," he laughed. "It's just a tiny chip, like a small computer. If you do any space travel, it's recommended. If you're in the military or diplomatic services, it's required. Do you use computers, Shayda?"

"We have computers, of a sort. Though it's not quite of the same design your people use, I think." She ate some bread, "We do have flushing toilets. Does that make us civilized?" she teased.

"You're more civilized than many we have met with advanced technology." He took another sip. "Your world is unique. A planet of small continents, like scattered islands, is amazing."

"That's why we travel a great deal by sea and river. We trade, visit, explore."

He relaxed a little, enjoying the warmth of the wine in his blood. He tried a little brown cracker. "It's chocolate," he laughed.

"Don't all civilized worlds have chocolate?" she asked.

"Yes, I think it's a main qualification," he grinned. They nibbled the crackers and sipped wine. "How were you chosen as my guide?"

"I work in the diplomatic division. My job is greeting and taking care of visiting dignitaries and officials. I make sure they are comfortable. I speak twelve languages, and have a degree in from the University in Cultural Law."

"Twelve languages? Manually learned?"

"Yes, Jason. But don't be too impressed. We have over thirty-five hundred languages and dialects on our planet."

"Still, it's very impressive. What's cultural law?"

"The knowledge of various laws, etiquette and customs of our people from the various lands. I was a bit put out when you were assigned to me, since I had no knowledge or experience with earth customs."

"You're doing splendid. I will make sure your people know this."

"Good. Maybe I will get a raise."

"I'm sorry your first contact with earth was under such wretched beginnings."

"It's not your fault, Jason. Nor is it earth's. It is a cruel twist of fate that sent Thero Rham here. But because of that, his soul will be destroyed, never to stain the universe again."

“Do you really believe that? That a soul can be killed? How can you tell if anyone has a soul? You can’t see a soul. It’s invisible.”

“Normally, a soul is invisible to the naked eye,” she agreed.

“But then how-”

“The soul snare will make it so. All living things have souls. Most souls are good. Some are misguided. Some neutral. Then there are souls that are so evil, so black, that the only justice is to eliminate it from rebirth and soiling another life. Don’t you believe you have a soul?”

“I don’t know. Many of my people believe in some sort of faith that involves the belief of a soul or spirit. They also have penalties for sins, heavens and hells, but I don’t follow any faith. I believe the soul is the mind, and even that dies.”

“We believe souls know no race, no species. They are beyond that. They fill the universe with life. The core of all living things. We are taught that souls are always being created by the universe. Souls inhabit life because the universe made them for that purpose. But in the chaos of creation, when the universe was born, some evil souls were made too. The battle of light and dark, if you so choose to see it that way. There are many beautiful things, amazing things, in the universe-but there is also evil so heinous and ugly, that should it be found, the only decent, responsible thing to do is kill it.”

“I cannot argue with that,” he replied sleepily.

“You’re tired.”

“I’m fine, Shayda.”

“Our wine is strong. You won’t be able to walk back to town on your own.”

But he was already asleep.

A repetitive ringing in his ears woke him before dawn with a dreadful headache. He sat up, tangled in a blanket, realizing he fell asleep on Shayda’s sofa. She must have covered him with a blanket. He felt miserable, like a bad guest that overstayed his welcome.

Shayda ran into the room, wearing a blue dress, her hair awry, zipping up her boots. The look of panic on her face concerned him. The sound of bells outside also made him realize it wasn’t exhaustion that caused the ringing.

“What’s happening, Shayda?”

“I’m not sure. It’s the warning bell. Something is wrong. They only ring the city bells in an emergency. We need to get back to my office and find out what’s wrong.”

They walked briskly to town, which was dimly lit and void of people, except for several tall Utropan in their dark gray uniforms he recognized as their police walked the streets with urgency, carrying long clubs.

She stopped one of them, “What is happening. I’m Shayda from the Diplomatic Circle. This is Ambassador Abbey. Why are the warning bells sounding?”

“The Blood Thief, Thero Rham, escaped about half an hour ago. I would suggest you get to safety, Mistress Shayda. You too Ambassador.”

“Damn,” Jason said. “I should have known he could have found a way to break out.”

“Let’s get to my office now,” she said.

“Let me inform the Captain of my ship. He can send men to help hunt him down.” He felt in his coat pocket. It wasn’t there. “It must have fallen out at your house.”

“We can’t go back. It’s too risky,” she said.

He put his arm around her, “I agree. Let’s get inside somewhere safe.”

They ran hand in hand down the street. The darkness and low lights of the street lamps made Jason edgy. A foul, familiar odor alerted him as they turned a corner. “Wait,” he said, stopping. Rham stepped out of the shadows of an alley, wearing a gray Utropan uniform, long club in one hand, a knife in the other. Thero struck him hard with the wooden club before Jason could react. He fell backward, his jaw flaring with pain. Shayda started to scream but he punched her in the face. She fell unconscious. He scrambled to his feet and attacked, avoiding the swing of his knife. He grabbed Jason by the throat and rammed him against the wall. Thero Rham was very strong. In the struggle Thero brought down the blade, piercing his right hand. Jason howled with pain. Two officers sped into the alley. Thero’s rage and strength as a killer was unbound, and he snapped the neck of one and stabbed the other in short time. Jason crumbled to his knees, and tried to crawl to Shayda’s side, who was stirring awake. Thero quickly pulled her up and held her with one hand and pressed the tip of the bloody dagger at Shayda’s neck. Jason froze, unsure of what to do.

“Make a sound and I’ll slice her open.”

“Don’t hurt her, Rham. I’ll cooperate. Let her go.”

“Good boy,” he whispered. “I’m leaving this world. We’re taking your ship. Both of you are my insurance. You fail to pay up, you both die. You will anyway, but how soon or how painful is up to you.”

“My ship is outside the town in a field. I’ll take you there, just let her go-please-I’m begging you.”

“No. She may be useful to me in many ways until I am done, but for now she will keep you honest. Right now the law is hunting me. I don’t like being hunted.”

“I can lead you to his ship, without anyone seeing us,” Shayda said in a thin voice, her eyes pleading with Jason. “In the temple there is an old secret tunnel that will take you directly to the field where his ship is. We will avoid the officers. No one else needs to die.”

She wanted to lead the way. He had no chance or way to ask why, so he had to take it on faith.

“Take us there- before I get impatient and start carving.”

They entered the Law Temple. It was dark, but she managed to guide Rham to a wall near the dais. She pressed against three wall tiles. True to her word, the wall opened into a tunnel. They entered it, the musty smell and dust clogging his nostrils. Several long cylinders hung on the wall.

“They are light wands. We will need them to see.”

“Take one, Jason. Make yourself useful,” Rham ordered.

He took one, but there were no switches or buttons. It did nothing.

“Shake it,” she said.

He did and it began to glow with blue light.

They walked for nearly an hour. Jason had never been so tense, or afraid, in his life. Not for himself, but for Shayda. After a time, Rham got antsy; and he feared for Shayda’s life. Finally, they came to the tunnel’s end. Keeping the knife at her throat, he said, “Now what? Is this some trick?”

“No. The right tile with the three moons on it, press it.”

“You press it.”

She obeyed. A door popped open. He made Jason push it wider. The rush of clean air revived him. When they stepped outside, it was dawn, the sun rising in the distance. Rham still pressing the blade close to Shayda’s neck, followed him into the open. Little trickles of blood from where the point broke skin ran down her throat. Jason could kill Rham for that alone.

But of course, they were not where he landed his small shuttle. Instead, an open temple of white stone glimmered in the sunrise. Pillars, quite old but still standing, framed a pyramid shaped floor of multi colored stone. There were also several smaller, waist-high stone shapes of slim design, all were encrusted with what looked like valuable gems-rubies, diamonds, sapphires,

emeralds, rare smoke diamonds of iridescent black, onyx, and opals sparkled in the growing light. A treasure trove that made the even this killer greedy, Jason was sure. Some of the jewels were massive, big a dinner plates.

Damn, Shayda-what are you doing? Jason wondered.

“Nice place. I think I will take a few baubles for a nest egg.” He looked around. “Where the ship?” he asked angrily.

“About a half mile from the temple,” she lied calmly.

“Lying alien bitch,” he flared.

“Don’t hurt her! She’s telling the truth!” Jason pleaded. “Let’s just get to my ship and leave.”

Thero Rham licked his lips as he approached one of the jeweled columns. A large black diamond glittered in the center as large as his head.

The knife still at her throat, Shayda lifted a booted foot and brought it down hard on the diamond. A flash of dark light infused both Thero and Shayda.

“Shayda!” Jason cried.

“Get off the temple floor!” she cried. “Now!”

He looked at Thero, but he seemed frozen, unable to move.

Good.

The desperation on Shayda’s face propelled him to get her away from Rham now that they had the chance. He rushed to her, but a flash of light stunned him and threw him back.

“Damn it! What is this! I’m going to kill you” Thero cursed, unable to move or kill.

Jason got to his feet and ran toward them again. He had to get Shayda away from him. The other gems began to light up, and a low hum vibrated within the temple’s pyramid.

“Jason, stay away!” she cried.

He would not and could not. He leapt into the multitude of lights that danced within the ancient ruins and reached for Shayda.

A bright, crippling light erupted, throwing Jason back again. His body pulsed with strange energy and fear. He crawled up the steps to see a terrible vision emerge within the dark lights that flared.

A strange creature, enormous, emerged from the lights. Its essence seemed to be made of liquid and white fire. Sheer to the eye, its outlined form was immense, standing over twenty feet high. Terrible transparent eyes that had seen the rim of the universe and knew its secrets burned

with power. Completely alien, this life form was also bestial. Thero looked up at the monster with rare terror. For the first time the human monster knew fear. The alien looked down on Thero with what Jason could only describe as hunger. It looked down on Shayda too.

He ran into the temple again as it reached its enormous clawed hand down on Thero and Shayda. Her screams made him run harder. Thero was still frozen, so Shayda was also prisoner of the power. The heat of the temple drained Jason, but he grabbed for Shayda just as the beast touched Thero. It ripped Rham from Shayda's side and she fell into Jason's arms. The hand of the creature brushed Jason's shoulder. He felt a strange, eerie awareness at the alien's touch.

They fell outside the ring of light. Holding each other in terror, they watched the alien beast lift Thero Rham high. His screams rattled Jason's bones. It lifted its other clawed hand, and reached into Thero Rham's body. No blood or organs were ripped away, but a black, foul, sheath of energy was extracted instead and it dropped Rham's physical body. But in the alien's claws, that oozing, sinister soul quivered. Jason had never seen anything as hideous as that wad of dark spectral energy-Rham's evil soul. With claws and teeth it ripped apart the soul, its shrieks of agony piercing the air. Then the alien creature devoured the dark, tattered bits of soul until nothing was left.

Shayda wiped tears from her face and knelt before the creature. "Ancient Being, forgive me for calling you in this way. The soul you took was marked as evil for your judgment. But he held me and my friend captive."

It looked down at them. "I have not been called in centuries. The people of Utropa have not needed me. This soul was evil. It is no more."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Your souls are clean. You are spared."

"Blessings on the Universe," Shayda cried.

"Blessings," it replied, and faded into the air.

The lights dimmed, and all returned as it was, except for the dead body of Thero Rham.

"My God, what was that?" Jason gasped.

"One of the beings from another realm, or dimension, as you might call it. There are many dimensions. The universe is so big, it's hard to explain. We have walked with many-ethereal beings, beings of flesh and bone, and other much stranger things than you could imagine, Jason."

"Your temple is a conduit?"

"Its design and use of gems is only part of it. The soul snare was our only chance. Forgive me for risking your life."

“Don’t apologize, Shayda. You did the right thing. But how do you travel through-”

“Our minds travel streams of energy. It’s difficult to enlighten an outworlder about how we do it. It may take a great deal of time teaching you.”

Jason sighed, “You must think us very arrogant.”

“Not at all. We prefer to keep our connection with the universe quiet, so it will not be abused.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” He touched her hair gently, “Are you all right?”

“I am now, Jason. How’s your hand?”

“Rippling with pain, but I’ll survive.”

“We need to get back to the city. The people need to know the soul death on Thero Rham was done, that he is dead, both body and spirit.”

“I think I’m going to need a lot of wine,” Jason said.

“We’ll get drunk together.”

Jason had no idea what else to say or think, but he suddenly felt smaller than ever in this vast universe. A thousand thoughts filled his weary mind, about justice, fate, other worlds. He also had the comforting, yet disturbing knowledge, that he did indeed have a soul.

The End

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