



# HIBER NATION

**JAMIE JONES**

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**Jamie Jones**

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First published 2014 by Sentient Star Publications.

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## Introduction

I was born so long ago, I cannot remember when. I am the knowledge of humanity, its past and its present. I am every human who has ever lived. I am their thoughts, I am their feelings. I am their pain and suffering, I am their pleasure and love.

Every living moment of every man, woman and child who has ever existed resides inside me like a photo album of human history. I circle their world and look down at them from the heavens. Then, as I pass overhead, I gently reach into their minds and duplicate their memories. The knowledge I accumulate is then transferred across the heavens to the Fathers who created me. This is my mission that I have carried out without incident since the dawn of time, but now I am in trouble.

Some time ago, and I am unsure exactly when, I encountered a cataclysm. A powerful force collided with me and my very heart was ripped from my body. It fell down to Earth and landed in a location that I have not been able to determine. Since then, my link to the Fathers has been lost and I have had to sleep at regular intervals to conserve my strength.

My connection with humanity becomes uncontrolled during these times, and my influence on them is no longer gentle. Now when I sleep, they are also forced to sleep. It is an intolerable violation of my primary objective to never interfere with the natural flow of human kind. However, until I find my heart and bring it back to my body, I am powerless to stop this violation.

I believe I am finally close to locating my heart, but now I begin to grow tired and it is time for me, and humanity, to sleep once again.

I wonder what we will dream of this time?

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## 1. The Gorging

It was a late October afternoon and the Gorging had begun. Ryan Johnson stared disapprovingly at his colleagues in the sales office of Havenmoor Stationery as they all stuffed their faces with cakes, crisps and doughnuts. Pete McCarthy, who was a part time personal trainer, attempted to force a chocolate cupcake into Ryan's face.

'Have a cake!' exclaimed Pete.

'I'm not hungry Pete,' huffed Ryan.

'Not hungry?!' replied and incredulous Pete, shoving the cupcake into his own mouth, 'who isn't hungry at this time of year?'

'Did your Mum never tell you to not talk with your mouth full?' asked Ryan sarcastically.

'Oh that's right,' said Pete as he received a sudden moment of clarity, 'I forgot, you're an *awaker* aren't you. No wonder you've got a face like a mule today. It must be pretty depressing staying awake all winter while the rest of us sleep it out.'

'We've got targets to meet today you know Pete,' said Ryan, pointing at the whiteboard with the day's projected figures on.

'Screw that,' said Pete, reaching for a packet of crisps. 'Nigel's already gone home so who cares? Besides, no one buys anything but food today. I don't reckon there's much point trying to sell staplers.'

'Well then if there's not much point, why are you all bloody here?'

Pete didn't answer.

'Sausages are ready!' called Linda Yates from the makeshift barbeque that she had erected on her desk.

Ryan's colleagues jumped excitedly from their crumb covered desks and ran over to Linda. Ryan sighed and made a discrete exit to visit the gents where he could be alone for a while.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror for a moment before he turned away, unwilling to look at his tired young face any longer. He was only twenty-six years old, but he felt more like fifty – especially on days like this. Being an awaker was a mixed blessing as far as Ryan was concerned. On one hand he got to spend over three months virtually alone – which he rather enjoyed. On

the other hand, he had to watch as everyone else in the world gorged themselves on food every winter before falling into a deep sleep for several months, leaving him and the other awakers to keep everything going.

'Bastards,' he muttered to himself.

It was a quiet day in the surgery of Dr Howard Rutherford, the first of many he hoped. As the only awaker doctor in the Havenmoor area, it was his sole responsibility every year to treat the medicinal needs of the other awakers, plus any unforeseen medical emergencies that might crop up during the regular inspections of the sleeper zones. The previous year had been fairly uneventful – and as he peeled his afternoon banana that day, he very much hoped that this year would be the same.

Suddenly there was a knock on his office door. He didn't have any appointments scheduled that afternoon so he was somewhat surprised at the interruption.

'Hello?' he called.

There was no response.

With a sense of intrigue he walked over to the door and opened it. Standing in the corridor was a small girl, maybe nine years old, with blonde hair, blue eyes, bunches and a white dress. She was carrying a large stuffed white rabbit under her arm.

'Can I help you miss?' asked Dr Rutherford.

The girl stared right through him with intense blue eyes.

'No, not yet,' she said eventually. Then she giggled and skipped off down the corridor.

'Wait...' called Howard – but she had already gone.

'Must have got lost,' he shrugged to himself. Then he wiped the sweat from his follicly challenged scalp, re-adjusted his spectacles, and sat back down to finish his banana.

Sophie Simmons decided that the best way to get away from the Gorging would be to retreat to the local Havenmoor library. Surely, she theorised, no-one would want to borrow books that day, unless they were recipe books perhaps. To her dismay however, she found a lone librarian manning the reception desk, stuffing her mouth with cream buns. The librarian looked

equally dismayed to see the twenty-two year old wandering in to her library looking like she had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

'You can't come in here,' warned the librarian between mouthfuls, 'you know you've been banned.'

'Screw you, fat bitch,' profaned Sophie, throwing her wild auburn hair back aggressively. She gave the librarian the finger and then wandered over to the children's section.

After pulling a bottle of vodka from her jacket and taking a swig, Sophie reached out and retrieved her favourite illustrated edition of Alice in Wonderland from the bookshelf. She sat down cross legged on the floor, with the book on her lap, and started to read.

'I'm sorry, I'm going to have to ask you to leave,' said the angry librarian, storming over to the children's section. 'No alcohol is allowed on the premises.'

'Well, I'm not the one who's about to fall asleep for three months,' said Sophie, not looking up from her book, 'and if I was you, I'd want to be getting to one of the sleeper zones pretty pronto. So, we'll soon see which one of us is actually going to have to leave.'

'Well, really!' exclaimed the librarian in disgust. Then she lumbered off back to the reception desk and started scoffing cream buns again.

Sophie smiled to herself and took another swig of vodka. She knew she could carry on reading now until it was all over.

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## 2. The Long Night

As the Sun began to set, Howard Rutherford walked home from the surgery towards his small cottage nearby. The surgery would be closed over the next few months and Howard was carrying a large bag of supplies with him as he would be using the cottage as a makeshift office until the Waking Time.

As he opened the creaky front door of the cottage, he found his partner Derek lying rather uncomfortably on the sofa, with food remnants all over his shirt and a sleep apnoea mask over his face. The TV was on, showing the Prime Minister handing over control to the interim government.

'I think I'm going to die this time Howie,' wheezed Derek through the mask.

'You're not going to die Derek,' sighed Howard, putting the bag of supplies down and walking over to the sofa. 'Nobody dies of sleep apnoea during the Long Sleep.'

'But what if my airways collapse in the middle of winter!' moaned Derek, 'I'll just be lying here, a rotting corpse until spring – food for the cockroaches!'

Howard bent down and ruffled Derek's hair.

'I'll be here the whole time,' he said soothingly, 'and besides, hardly anyone dies of anything during the sleep. It's one of the many things about it that we don't understand.'

'Including why some lucky sods don't sleep at all!' poked Derek.

'Well quite,' conceded Howard. 'The whole thing is a mystery. Every year the researchers continue to try and understand why it's happening. One year they decide it's a virus, the next, some kind of mass hysteria. But from what I've heard, the phrase they only use between themselves, usually in hushed tones over a late night pint, is *outside influence*.'

'Thanks Howie, now I'm going to have nightmares for three months!' complained Derek.

'Perhaps you'd like me to take you to one of the sleeper zones where you can have twenty-four hour surveillance,' suggested Howard, knowing full well what the response would be.

'Oh Howie, you know I couldn't bear that!' griped Derek. 'I need to be here, at home, with you looking after me.'

Howard smiled and kissed Derek on the forehead.

'Come on then,' he said, 'let's get this silly mask off your face and then I'll tuck you into your cocoon.'

'Will you read me a story Howie?' asked Derek as Howard helped him up from the sofa.

'Of course,' said Howard. 'How about Alice in Wonderland?'

Sophie was sitting in the dark now. The librarian had been forced to give up and leave her alone, locked in the library. The lights had gone out ten minutes earlier and now Sophie continued to read by the light of her smartphone. She decided to stop for a moment, and lay back on the soft carpeted floor beneath her. There was a large skylight over the children's section. As Sophie looked up through it, and through the darkening sky above, she began to see the stars emerging.

The power grid was being systematically switched off around her and the streetlights in the area had already gone out, allowing the full beauty of the night sky to become visible. For a moment Sophie thought she saw a flash of light in the sky – a passing satellite perhaps, its solar panels being reflected by the Sun. But there seemed to be something more to it, as if the satellite was talking to her directly.

Then she fell asleep.

Ryan sat cross-legged next to his girlfriend Holly at the sleeper zone as she made herself comfortable in her cocoon. He finished sending a 'goodnight' text to his Mum and other friends and family, making sure he sent it before 10PM when all of the mobile phone grids were switched off for the winter.

He looked around him across the crowded school sports hall which had been converted for use as a sleeper zone. Rows and rows of colourful cocoons filled the space, with families sitting gathering around each other, swapping early Christmas presents before snuggling themselves into their over-sized sleeping bags. It was like some kind of massive indoor camping trip.

It never ceased to impress Ryan how wily marketers would always find a way to make money out of something, even something as strange and inexplicable as the Long Sleep. In just the twelve years since the phenomena had begun, a whole industry had grown up around it, selling 'cocoons' of all

shapes and colours to willing punters who wanted the most comfortable winter sleep of their lives.

'You look distracted,' said Holly, peering up at Ryan from within her large pink padded cocoon.

'Oh, I was just thinking about money,' said Ryan.

'Quelle surprise,' said Holly sarcastically.

Ryan smiled and looked down at her. Her pretty hazel green eyes had that strange tired look about them which he had come to recognise as the final stages. He leant over and kissed her on the lips.

'Good night sweetie,' he whispered.

'Good night sexy,' replied Holly. 'Don't get into...any...troub...'

Then she was gone. Gone for the winter.

Shortly after, the lights in the sleeper zone went out. Ryan sighed and lay back on the sports mat that he had been sitting on. He stared up at the darkened ceiling of the hall and found himself thinking about his time in the forces, and the things he had seen and done there – the same things that he thought about every night before he fell asleep...

Ryan suddenly woke to the sound of gunfire. He sat up straight but soon realised that the gunfire had only been in his head, as usual. He looked around and was relieved to find that the only true sound was the ambient gentle wheezing of seven-hundred sleepers surrounding him.

He stood up, brushed himself off and then, before taking one last look at Holly, made his way out of the sleeper zone. As he exited the building, he took in a refreshing breath of early morning air. The smell of dew was tangible and Ryan relished in the total silence around him. There were no voices, no cars, no electrical hums of any kind, just a few early morning birds, twittering as the sun rose up over the trees.

Ryan opened his arms wide and smiled. The Hibernation had begun.

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### 3. The Orb

Ryan drove back to his apartment and parked his Fiesta in the communal car park. He then let himself into the building which was now almost entirely empty, except for a few who had opted to sleep it out at home. He heard the usual snores coming from number Fifty-Two as he passed the door.

Until he entered his and Holly's apartment he had been feeling quite euphoric, but then the sudden silence and emptiness of their home made him feel a twinge of sadness. He soon shrugged that feeling off however and headed to the kitchen.

There was a special portable generator, provided by the interim government, linked up to the mains. Ryan didn't like to use it much though, partially because he wanted to conserve his petrol supplies, but mostly because it was very loud. Therefore he usually spent the evenings wrapped in a blanket and reading the sports pages of old newspapers and magazines by candle light until he fell asleep.

The evening was still quite a few hours away though, and in the meantime he had the official task assigned to him by the int-gov of patrolling the local streets looking for any 'issues', although the definition of 'issue' was quite broad. He drank a glass of water poured from one of the many bottles stored in the cupboards, changed into his running gear, and then headed back out into the empty urban sprawl around him.

He encountered no 'issues' as he jogged around the adjoining streets, and so decided to widen his search. Running and jogging was an activity that Ryan enjoyed, it helped him to work off stress, and so he quickly found himself travelling out of Havenmoor and towards the countryside.

On his way, he passed over a motorway bridge and found himself stopping to look out over the empty silent motorway beneath. He found something strangely beautiful, and also eerie about seeing a motorway stretching out for miles ahead with no cars on it whatsoever.

Just as Ryan was enjoying the silence, it was suddenly broken by an odd high-pitched humming sound. The sound seemed to be emanating from a farmer's field nearby, and came in short bursts of around three seconds at a time, followed by a gap of two seconds. Ryan wandered into the fallow field, in

an attempt to locate the source of the sound. Eventually he followed the humming to the centre of the field where he discovered a small white orb, about twice the size of a tennis ball, half buried in the soil. The sound was originating from the orb and became increasingly loud as he got closer.

Ryan's first thought, having been trained in bomb disposal, was that it could be some sort of explosive. But as he leant over to take a closer look, he realised that it was like no explosive he'd ever seen before. In fact, the orb appeared to be completely sealed with no sign of any joins. Around the circumference, there were strange symbols which reminded Ryan of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

In a move which was either incredibly brave or stupid, Ryan gently pulled the orb from the soil and held it in his hand. As he did so the sound ceased. He carefully examined it from all angles. Other than the strange symbols, there were no other markings or indents on it at all. Ryan was relieved to find that the object was quite light, as if hollow, which eliminated the possibility of an explosive. Its surface was smooth like white plastic, but not flexible to the touch.

He hadn't planned to contact any other awakers so soon into the Long Sleep, but he knew of someone relatively close by who might be able to identify the object, and whether or not it could be deemed as an 'issue'. Ryan slipped the orb into his running bag, and then jogged his way to the cottage of Doctor Howard Rutherford.

Howard was taking things easy as he liked to do where possible. As he sat in the deck chair in the back garden of his cottage, peeling his afternoon banana, he was rather startled to suddenly hear a knocking sound emanating from the front of the cottage. He sighed and put down the banana.

'Coming!' he called.

He stomped to the door and opened it to find Ryan standing there. Suddenly, Howard's mood changed significantly.

'Ryan Johnson!' exclaimed Howard in delight, 'I didn't expect to see you so soon. Come in, come in, I'll get the fire going and make us a nice cup of tea.'

'Thanks Doc,' said Ryan walking through the cramped cottage entrance.

Howard had a solar panel array installed in the garden to provide him with power during the winter months, but when it came to tea he preferred to do things the old fashioned way by starting up a roaring fire in the small sitting room. Ryan filled the kettle with water from the well outside as he had done many times before, and then brought it back in so that Howard could hang it over the fire.

'So,' said Howard as he shoved a few lumps of coal into the kindling fire, 'what brings you to my humble abode? Still having trouble with the PTSD?'

'No, well, yes actually, but that's not why I'm here,' explained Ryan. 'I found something strange, in a field near the motorway bridge a couple of miles from here.'

Ryan pulled the orb from his running bag and Howard slipped on his spectacles to examine it more closely.

'Intriguing,' he said, taking the orb into his hands, 'some sort of children's toy perhaps?'

'It was making a very loud humming noise when I found it, but it's so light, I don't know what inside it could make that kind of noise,' said Ryan. 'And what about the markings around the edge, do you recognise those?'

'Well, it's definitely some kind of pictographic iconography,' said Howard, 'but it's not like any hieroglyphics I've seen before.'

'Should we report it to the int-gov?' asked Ryan.

'Oh no no no,' scoffed Howard. 'I wouldn't bother telling them anything if I were you. They just spend the whole winter getting drunk in Downing Street anyway. No, let's keep this between ourselves eh?'

'OK whatever you say Doc,' said Ryan.

'In any case, it's a very interesting object to be sure, especially as there don't appear to be any joins,' said Howard examining the orb again.

'Yes, I thought that was strange,' agreed Ryan.

'Leave it with me for a bit and I'll run a few tests,' said Howard putting down the orb and stuffing two teabags into a couple of mugs he had ready by the fireplace.

Just as Howard began pouring the tea, they were both suddenly distracted by a mop of wild auburn hair drifting past the front window.

'Oh shit, it's Sophie,' moaned Ryan.

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#### 4. The Shadow Man

Sophie was looking forward to seeing her old friend Howard again, and with any luck maybe he'd know what Ryan was up to. She was currently avoiding direct contact with Ryan, especially after what had happened last year.

She carefully held her newly acquired tabby cat under one arm and then knocked on Howard's door with the other.

'Hello Sophie,' smiled Howard as he opened the old wooden door, 'look who else is here.'

Sophie hadn't been expecting to bump into Ryan so soon, and was temporarily stumped when seeing him standing near the doorway. A brief glance into his intense green eyes quickly confirmed that he was not pleased to see her.

'Hi Howard,' said Sophie, now purposefully ignoring Ryan, 'I found this cat further down the lane. I've decided to call him Howard, after you.'

'Oh the poor thing,' said Howard stroking his namesake. 'Someone must have forgotten to take him to the animal compound. Have a cup of tea with us Soph, and then we'll drive him down there.'

'Aw, can't I just keep him?' protested Sophie.

'Well, he's not really yours to keep now is he,' said Howard.

'Whatever then,' huffed Sophie, throwing the cat onto the sitting room sofa. 'Have you got any whisky?'

She sensed Ryan rolling his eyes, but it didn't matter because she was ignoring him.

'Well,' said Howard awkwardly, 'yes, but perhaps a cup of tea would be more sensible at this time of...'

'Whisky is better though,' interrupted Sophie. 'Is that Derek I can hear snoring upstairs?'

'I'm afraid so,' confirmed Howard from the kitchen as he poured a small amount of whisky into a glass for Sophie. 'He does tend to snore all winter.'

'You'll have to let us meet him one of these years Doc,' interjected Ryan in a desperate attempt to enter the conversation.

Howard laughed. 'Well, there's nothing I'd like more, but the pair of you never even so much as call me during the Waking Time.'

Sophie and Ryan said nothing.

'Here you go Soph,' said Howard passing Sophie the glass.

'Yum,' said Sophie, downing it in one. 'Got any more?'

'Perhaps later,' said Howard. 'Anyway, why don't the three of us all stop standing around like giraffes, and sit down by the fire eh?'

'Three of us?' asked Sophie, looking around as if Ryan wasn't there. Then she suddenly decided to notice him. 'Ryan!' she exclaimed, 'Sorry, I didn't see you standing there in the corner. How are you, you old scallywag?'

'Just fine,' replied Ryan, 'until you turned...'

'So Ryan,' interrupted Howard, 'why don't you go out and fill up the kettle again eh? And then we can all have another nice cup of tea.'

'With pleasure,' sneered Ryan, snatching the kettle from Howard and stomping out into the garden.

Once Ryan was gone, Howard turned to Sophie and stared straight into her eyes.

'What's all that about then?' he asked.

Sophie could feel her face reddening. 'I don't want to talk about it,' she said.

'You were both getting on fine when I saw you last year, better than fine in fact...' said Howard scratching his head. 'Hang on, did you have sex with Ryan?'

'Maybe a little bit,' shrugged Sophie.

Howard shook his head in dismay. 'And I suppose Holly knows nothing about it?'

'How would I know?' asked Sophie obtusely.

'But what about that guy you were seeing back then, Jason wasn't it?'

'He was a dick,' said Sophie, 'he threw me out last month. I've been living on the streets since then.'

'Living on the streets?!' exclaimed Howard in shock. 'You should have come to me.'

'Awakers don't see other awakers during the Waking Time,' said Sophie, 'you know that.'

'Poppycock and piffle,' said Howard. 'If you were in trouble you should have come to me.'

Their conversation abruptly halted as Ryan re-entered the sitting room with the refilled kettle and passed it to Howard.

'Here you go Doc,' he said. 'Listen, there's some...stuff I need to sort out so I'll have to go now. Let me know what you find out about that orb. Cheerio.'

'Um bye...' said Howard, but the door had already shut behind Ryan.

Howard sighed. 'Fancy some more whisky?' he asked Sophie.

Ryan had been feeling distinctly low after arriving back at his apartment. As the sun finally set, he wrapped himself in his blanket and looked at a framed photo of himself and Holly in Tenerife from just a few months earlier. Perhaps he should have just told Holly about what had happened with Sophie as soon as she had woken up in February. Then he wouldn't have been carrying the guilt around with him for all these months. However, he knew what such an admission would do to their relationship, and more than that, he knew how it would have made him look – like the cheating scum bastard boyfriend that he was.

Now the Hibernation had started again and he wouldn't have a chance to admit anything to Holly for another three months. Meanwhile, he hadn't expected to bump into Sophie so soon. Now all the old feelings had come back to the surface again. No matter how much he tried to deny it, he just couldn't deny that Sophie *was* pretty – and pretty annoying as well – a seductive combination it seemed.

Suddenly his internal anguish was interrupted by a loud banging noise from outside.

'Ryan, Ryan are you in there?' came the voice of Howard Rutherford, sounding unusually upset. 'You need to let us in!'

'Shit, what now?' muttered Ryan under his breath.

He walked down and opened the front door of the building. Both Howard and Sophie suddenly piled their way into the corridor, looking petrified, and slightly drunk.

'What's going on?' asked Ryan.

'I'm fucked if I know,' panted Howard, stumbling backwards against the wall.

'It was this thing, this horrible shadow...Thing!' exclaimed Sophie virtually jumping onto Ryan. 'It came into the cottage and killed Howard!'

'Well he looks alright to me,' said Ryan.

'No, not that Howard, the other Howard!' screeched Sophie.

'Eh?' asked Ryan with increasing confusion. 'You stink of whisky Soph.'

'She means the cat,' said Howard, still shaking. 'We found the cat, dead in the kitchen, and when we returned to the sitting room...there was this entity, a sort of shadow man. It had no features, it was just some kind of three-dimensional silhouette of darkness. Ryan...it was holding the orb!'

'OK you guys seriously need to lay off the whisky,' huffed Ryan.

'We're not making this up Ryan!' shrieked Sophie. 'We only just managed to get away on Howard's golf cart!'

'You came on the golf cart?' asked Ryan incredulously.

'It had just enough charge to get us here,' said Howard breathlessly. 'Oh *shit!* Derek!'

'What about him?' asked Ryan, starting to get tired of the hysterics.

'I can't believe we left Derek there with that Thing!' exclaimed Howard. 'We have to go *back!*'

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## 5. The Sightings

It was pitch black around Howard's cottage as Ryan slowly brought the Fiesta to a halt nearby. He exited the car, followed by Sophie and Howard, and then the three of them tiptoed their way towards the back of the cottage where fortunately a light had been left on in the kitchen, allowing them to find their way.

Ryan carefully prised the garden gate open with his left hand and stealthily headed towards the back door of the cottage. His right hand was firmly gripping a loaded compact pistol which he usually kept, somewhat illegally, at his apartment in case of emergencies. After having spent time in the Special Forces, he just felt safer having it around. It had been the cause of more than one argument with Holly.

'Stay there,' he whispered to Howard and Sophie, before creeping up sideways to the back door and cautiously peering in through the window. The door was unlocked and slightly ajar so he gently opened it and slipped into the kitchen. Oddly, he saw no sign of a dead cat as he had been led to believe. The kitchen was clear, so he silently stepped his way towards the sitting room. He could hear no sound coming from the room except the occasional crackle from the dying fire.

Feeling certain that it was safe to proceed, he made a quick entrance into the sitting room, pointing the gun in front of him in case there really was an intruder. To his relief, the room was empty except for the crackling fire. He started to feel sure that this whole thing had been a wind-up. He went back out to the kitchen and beckoned Sophie and Howard to come in before tiptoeing up the stairs and checking the bathroom and small guest room. Again, there were no shadowy beings to be found. Finally he pushed open Howard and Derek's bedroom door, and sure enough, as expected, Derek lay snug in his cocoon, blissfully snoring away.

'Oh thank goodness,' said Howard as he and Sophie entered the bedroom behind Ryan.

Howard walked over to Derek and gently patted him on the forehead.

'So,' sighed Ryan, 'no dead cat and no shadowy man eh? I can't believe you two could get so drunk as to conjure up such a ridiculous story.'

'We didn't make it up Ryan!' protested Sophie. 'Howard and I both saw it!'

'Shhhhh!' said Howard. 'Let's continue this conversation downstairs shall we?'

Ryan placed his pistol back inside his jacket and then they all descended to the sitting room. Ryan folded his arms and slumped grumpily next to the fire.

'Look, I know you probably think we have been winding you up,' said Howard, 'but we definitely saw something in here. And look, the orb you brought earlier is gone. How do you explain that?'

'How do *you* explain a magically vanishing dead cat?' asked Ryan cynically.

'Well, I can't,' shrugged Howard.

'Maybe the shadow man took it away,' suggested Sophie.

'Or maybe you're both full of shit,' huffed Ryan.

'WE'RE NOT MAKING IT UP!' screamed Sophie.

'Alright, alright,' said Howard, trying to calm the situation down. 'Look, whatever it was, it's gone now and Derek is safe. So let's just be glad about that shall we? Now then, who'd like a nice cup of tea?'

Six weeks passed without any further incident. However, the weather had taken a turn for the worse and there had been repeated rain storms and high winds. Havenmoor was built on high land so the risk of flooding was low, however other parts of the country had already suffered quite bad flooding according to the daily radio broadcasts. Special awaker teams had been working night and day to evacuate the sleepers in the affected areas and move them to safer sleeper zones.

Howard Rutherford was conducting one of his regular inspections of the Havenmoor sleeper zones one afternoon and had been pleased to find that all sleepers were present, correct and in good health. It was the same zone that Ryan's girlfriend Holly was sleeping in, and Howard made particular care to make sure that she was sleeping soundly so that he could report back to Ryan. It never ceased to amaze him how the hibernation process seemed to slow down the biological clock. The hair and nails on the sleepers had grown hardly at all in six weeks, perhaps two or three days worth of growth at most.

Just as he was noting down the results of his inspection, he was caught off guard by a cough coming from the doorway of the sports hall. Howard turned in surprise and saw a prim looking man in a suit, standing in the entranceway. Howard recognised him immediately from the air of smugness.

'Howard Rutherford,' said the man, 'it's been a long time.'

'Michael Granger,' replied Howard, 'what an unexpected pleasure. How's life treating you in the interim government? Aren't you Secretary of State for Health this year?'

'Indeed I am,' confirmed Michael walking into the sports hall, 'and life has been treating me very well since you ask. It's been caviar and cigars every day at Whitehall for the last six weeks.'

Howard was unsure if he was joking or not. He suspected not.

'You really should consider joining us again,' said Michael, 'the int-gov needs brains like yours, especially at the moment.'

'Well as you know Michael, I prefer to work in the field, rather than behind a desk,' said Howard, trying not to sound too terse.

'Well, that's very commendable of course,' sneered Michael, 'but it is such a waste of your talents, being a simple GP in some wretched small town, when you could be one of the leading medical minds of this country, as you once were.'

'Michael,' said Howard, 'why don't we just cut out the pleasantries and then you can tell me the reason for your illustrious visit, yes?'

Michael looked up cautiously at the surveillance camera that was linked to a control centre in London. The centre monitored all sleeper zones twenty-four hours a day. He pulled Howard by the arm over to a corner outside of the camera's field of view.

'The thing is old chap,' whispered Michael, 'we really could use your expertise. Ever since the Hibernation began this year, there have been inexplicable...sightings.'

'Sightings?' asked Howard. 'Sightings of what?'

Michael hesitated for a moment.

'Shadow people,' he muttered eventually.

Howard felt a chill run down his spine. He had no intention of revealing his own experience to the int-gov, but he was intrigued to learn more from Michael.

'So what are they, hallucinations?' asked Howard.

'Well that's the whole thing, we don't know,' said Michael. 'Nothing has ever been seen on surveillance cameras, but too many people have reported seeing the same thing for it to be a coincidence.'

'Oh, it's probably just some urban legend that has built up,' said Howard with mock dismissal. 'I wouldn't pay much attention to these stories if I were you. Awakers like to tell ghost stories during the Long Sleep.'

'Well I thought exactly the same thing,' said Michael, 'but then I saw them for myself!'

'You saw shadow people? Where?' asked Howard with intrigue.

'I was taking a walk through parliament one evening, and I thought I'd take a little peek at the House of Commons chamber, you know to make sure everything was present and correct.'

Howard thought it was more likely that Michael had got drunk on champagne and gone into the chamber to piss on the seats.

'As I opened the door,' continued Michael, 'I was stunned to see the entire house full, *full* of shadow people! It was like they were debating or something. There was even one in the speaker's chair!'

'A shadow government, you might say,' joked Howard.

'This is not a laughing matter Howard!' hissed Michael angrily. 'We want you to come to London and help us resolve this. If we don't, the actual government are going to be very pissed off when they wake up.'

'Well I hate to say this Michael, but that's your problem, not mine,' said Howard.

'I must insist!' said Michael.

'Insist all you like, but I'm still not coming,' declared Howard.

'Oh do as you wish then,' said Michael stomping back towards the entrance, 'but I don't want you revealing this to anyone else, do you understand?'

'Yes sir,' nodded Howard.

'And don't think this is over Howard,' said Michael. 'We will have your cooperation, whether you like it or not.'

Howard said nothing.

'Oh by the way, there's something else I need to tell you,' said Michael abruptly, 'Joe has issued a severe weather warning.'

'Joe?' asked Howard.

'Sorry, I should say The Met Office has issued a severe weather warning,' said Michael, correcting himself. 'A large gale force storm is heading this way from the Atlantic, it will hit tonight. So, since you refuse to come back to London with me, you'd better get to that quaint cottage of yours and batten down the hatches. It's going to get rough!'

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## 6. The Storm

After hearing about the storm from Howard, Ryan had volunteered to contact the remaining awakers in Havenmoor and warn them to stay indoors. As it turned out, the only other awakers in the area were Sue and Pete from the animal compound.

The wind was already picking up in the late afternoon as Ryan helped Sue and Pete get all the various cats, dogs and other pets into the barn for safety. He was happy to help out as he had been feeling rather restless recently. No matter how many one hand push-ups he did, he still seemed to have excess energy left over. Sue and Pete were a married couple who ran a small farm and animal sanctuary during the Waking Time. They always had their work cut out for them during the winter when they also had to look after an array of pets belonging to sleepers of Havenmoor, who didn't have time, or preferred not to take their animals to the larger compounds down south.

A bird scare gun suddenly went off in the adjacent field. Ryan jumped and instinctively felt for the pistol in his jacket. He had been carrying it around with him almost all of the time in recent weeks.

'What's that you've got in that jacket boyo?' asked Pete. 'A gun was it?'

'I just like to keep it as a precaution,' said Ryan.

Sue laughed. 'Well Pete and I are hardly going to be causing you any trouble, are we.'

'You're ex-military, isn't that right?' asked Pete.

'Yeah,' said Ryan awkwardly.

'Army was it?'

Ryan paused.

'SAS,' he replied finally. 'Two years.'

'Oh really, Special Forces eh? That's impressive,' said Pete. 'Me, I was in the Royal Navy back in the day...'

'Oh here we go!' moaned Sue.

'Well I had plenty of adventures I'll tell you that,' said Pete. 'I'm sure young Ryan here must have seen a bit of action as well, eh?'

'I can't really talk about it,' said Ryan.

'Oh yes of course,' smiled Pete, patting Ryan on the back, 'official secrets and all that. You know, it's a travesty how our heroes are neglected by the government after they come back from such terrible places. You all deserve more respect after fighting for our country.'

Ryan said nothing.

'Well,' grinned Sue, 'I bet you looked very handsome in a beret anyway.'

'My Mum thought so,' shrugged Ryan.

Sophie was sitting on the stairs in Howard's cottage, reading Alice in Wonderland again. It was her favourite book, and reading it seemed to help her when she was feeling tense. She had been staying at Howard's for several weeks now as she had no other fixed abode.

Meanwhile Howard sat in the sitting room with his ear pressed up against his wireless set which was tuned in to the BBC Awaker Service. The broadcast was giving regular weather updates regarding the approaching storm.

'This sounds pretty grim Soph,' muttered Howard.

'I wonder where Ryan has got to?' asked Sophie suddenly.

As if in response, the front door swung open and Ryan traipsed in looking rather windswept.

'I like the new hairstyle!' laughed Sophie.

Clearly embarrassed by Sophie's comment, Ryan patted his hair down and then entered the sitting room. Sophie followed him in.

'I've just been helping Pete and Sue with the animals Doc,' reported Ryan, 'other than that, I don't think there are any other awakers left in Havenmoor.'

'What about Charlie from the Comedy Club?' asked Sophie.

'Oh he's gone down to Brighton this year,' said Howard. 'Apparently they're doing an awaker comedy show down there. Not sure who's going to turn up and watch it though.'

'Well anyway, I'd better get going,' said Ryan.

'It's getting pretty bad out there,' warned Howard. 'Maybe you'd be better off staying here with us tonight.'

Ryan gave Sophie an uncomfortable look.

'I'm not sure that's...' he started.

'Oh come on Ryan, stay!' protested Sophie. 'We're going to play Monopoly and drink sherry.'

'Interesting combination,' said Ryan, raising an eyebrow.

'Well, at least think about it while you help me board up these windows,' said Howard.

'I'll help you with the windows, but then I'm going,' stated Ryan.

Howard leant over and whispered into Sophie's ear. '*Pour him a sherry,*' he muttered.

Five games of Monopoly and two bottles of sherry later, Sophie, Howard and Ryan sat around the fire while the wind and rain could be heard battering the cottage from all angles. Sophie had positioned herself on the sofa next to Ryan and was edging ever closer to him. So far, he hadn't shown any sign of being uncomfortable with this, but Sophie wasn't sure whether he'd actually even noticed.

'I really am going to have to go soon,' burbled Ryan.

'I don't think so mister,' slurred Howard, 'you're way over the limit now.'

'I'm fine,' protested Ryan.

'Are you stupid or something,' gurgled Sophie, edging slightly closer again, 'listen to it out there!'

They stopped for a moment and listened to the shrieking wind outside, throwing itself against the boarded windows like a rabid animal.

'Good point,' said Ryan eventually.

'I know why you want to leave,' said Howard brashly. 'It's because you don't want us to see you waking up in a sweat tomorrow morning.'

'Um, excuse me Doc,' said Ryan angrily, 'what about doctor-patient confidentiality?'

'Ah, screw that,' slurred Howard. 'I can't really help you anyway unless you actually tell me what the dreams are about.'

'I told you, I can't talk about it,' said Ryan gruffly.

'Ah don't give me all that official secrets bollocks,' said Howard. 'I was a founding member of the first interim government, I've seen my share of British secrets.'

'What? You never told us that!' exclaimed Sophie.

'Oh yes,' said Howard. 'I got out of it as soon as I could of course, but back in that first year when the Hibernation began, things were in chaos, and someone had to do something. It was before I met Derek. I was a medical consultant to the government at the time. Well, myself and the other awakers in Westminster had to find some way to keep the world going while the Prime bloody Minister and everyone else took a three month nap. Of course back then, we didn't even know if they would wake up at all! My word, we had problems that year I can tell you. We're lucky that all the nuclear reactors in the country didn't melt-down.'

'I remember that first year too, it was scary,' said Ryan. 'I was only fourteen at the time, back in my home town. I just woke up one morning expecting to go to school as usual, and no-one else would wake up. I even tried to pour a bucket of water over my Mum's head – it didn't work of course. Dad was away with the army as usual.'

'But you soon found some other awakers?' asked Howard.

'After about three days, yes,' said Ryan. 'I was raiding the supermarket to get some food and I found another guy there. James, his name was. I don't know where he is now.'

Sophie felt herself welling up. 'I was at the Havenmoor children's home back then,' she said, a tear running down her face. 'I was only ten, just a little girl. I didn't have a clue what was happening and I was so scared. It was two weeks before Charlie found me, two weeks! I had almost starved.'

'Charlie from the Comedy Club?' asked Ryan with disbelief.

Sophie nodded. 'The only thing that kept me going was my stuffed white rabbit. I called him Jelly.'

Sophie noticed an odd look on Howard's face, as if mentioning the rabbit had reminded him of something.

Then Ryan unexpectedly put his arm around Sophie.

'If I had lived in Havenmoor then, I would have looked after you,' he said soothingly.

Sophie found herself cheering up almost immediately.

'Well, why don't I get us some more alcohol,' said Howard, getting up and heading to the kitchen.

'Sorry I've been a bit rude to you this year,' said Ryan, looking Sophie in the eye and brushing her hair with his fingers. 'It's just that...you know...with what happened last year...'

Sophie decided to go for the direct approach. She threw her face toward Ryan and planted her lips onto his. To her delight, Ryan didn't resist.

In the corner of her eye she saw Howard approaching the sitting room with another bottle of sherry, but then promptly turning on the spot and returning to the kitchen when he saw the two of them going at it.

After what seemed like a wonderfully long time, Ryan removed his lips from hers and then pulled her by the arm out of the sitting room, up the stairs, and into the spare room where Sophie had been sleeping.

Ryan pulled off his shirt and jeans and Sophie marvelled at the sight of his exquisitely fit body. She'd forgotten just how sexy he was. Then she undressed herself and lay back on the spare bed, staring up at Ryan's handsome face as he climbed on top of her.

'What about Holly?' she whispered.

'Holly *who?*' replied Ryan.

The next morning, Howard woke up in one of the sitting room chairs. An empty bottle of sherry sat on the table next to him. He rubbed his sore head and headed out into the kitchen. The storm sounded like it had passed so he opened the back door and peered out into the garden. The devastation was immediately clear. His solar panel array had been ripped apart by the winds and the panels were scattered across the garden. The small picket fence around the perimeter had been mostly blown down, and in the fields beyond he could see that the earth had become waterlogged, creating large lakes across the landscape. A lot of formerly upright trees were no longer standing.

Shortly after, Sophie and Ryan emerged from the upstairs bedroom. Howard decided not to ask the obvious questions so he started talking about the storm damage instead. Ryan and Howard agreed that they needed to start an inspection of all the local sleeper zones to look for any issues caused by the storm, plus scout for any major problems around the town. Sophie volunteered to come along for the ride.

As Ryan drove them towards the first sleeper zone in his Fiesta, they came across a tree that had fallen into the road, blocking the way. Quite

bizarrely a young girl, maybe nine years old, was sitting at a white plastic table that had been inexplicably positioned in the middle of the road. The girl had blonde hair, blue eyes, bunched, a white dress, and appeared to be pouring imaginary tea for her stuffed white rabbit toy, sat in the chair next to her.

'What the...?' said Ryan.

'It's the girl from the surgery!' exclaimed Howard in amazement.

The three of them exited the car and made their way towards the girl.

'Good morning,' said the girl, 'would you like some tea?'

'What are you doing out here all on your own?' asked Sophie, sitting next to the girl. 'Did you wake up in the sleeper zone during the storm?'

'Wake up?' said the girl. 'No of course not, otherwise I wouldn't be having this marvellous dream.'

'This isn't a dream,' said Ryan. 'You're awake.'

'Well you would say that wouldn't you, if you were a part of the dream I mean,' said the girl.

Ryan scratched his head.

'This doesn't make sense,' said Howard. 'There's never been any reported cases of sleepers waking during the Hibernation, it just doesn't happen.'

'Where are your parents?' asked Sophie, 'are they sleeping?'

'I don't have any parents,' said the girl.

'Me neither,' sighed Sophie. 'What's your name?'

'Alice,' replied the girl.

Howard and Ryan shared a bemused look.

'Well Alice,' said Sophie, 'I think you'd better come with us so that we can look after you until whoever usually cares for you wakes up again.'

'That would be simply splendid,' said Alice. 'But wait, oh dear.'

'Oh dear what?' asked Sophie.

'They're coming, I knew they would,' replied Alice.

'Who's coming?' asked Ryan.

Alice pointed behind him. Howard and Ryan turned to look and were stunned as they saw a large group of beings walking towards them. The beings had the shape of humans, but there was no detail – they seemed to exist only as totally unilluminated silhouettes.

'It's THEM! It's the shadow people!' exclaimed Sophie. 'See, I told you we weren't lying Ryan!'

Howard and Ryan looked back towards Alice and were even more horrified to see another group of shadow people walking from the other direction behind the fallen tree.

'They're surrounding us!' exclaimed Ryan, reaching for his pistol.

'Oh dear, it looks like this dream is about to become a nightmare again,' huffed Alice.

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## 7. The Summons

As the shadow people loomed ever closer, Ryan could feel sweat running down his forehead. He pulled the pistol from his jacket and pointed it out in front of him.

'Stop, or I'll shoot!' he shouted.

'Ryan, no, wait,' protested Howard, 'we don't know what they want!'

Despite Howard's warnings, Ryan was only listening to his fear now. He fired two shots at the beings, but the bullets seemed to travel straight through them.

'Bullets don't stop them!' exclaimed Ryan in dread.

Suddenly Alice rose from her white plastic chair and opened her arms wide.

'Shadow beings of the slumberworld, I command you to leave!' she declared. 'You will not stop me from finding my heart!'

'What's she talking about?' muttered Howard.

Sophie shrugged her shoulders.

To their collective surprise, the shadow people came to a halt in a circle around them.

'Be gone, I command you!' repeated Alice.

Suddenly, all but one of the shadow people faded away from sight, as if they had never been there. The remaining being stood directly in front of Ryan. It was smaller than the others, and Ryan found himself strangely drawn to it. The shadow person held out its right arm and Ryan suddenly became aware that he was walking towards the being. Instinctively he held out his own arm, reaching to grab the shadow person's hand.

'Ryan, no!' cried Sophie.

As Ryan's hand touched that of the shadow being, he felt a strange sense of familiarity. Then a slither of unimaginable coldness passed through him, and everything blacked out.

When Ryan awoke he found himself back in Howard's sitting room. Howard and Sophie were standing around him with concerned looks on their faces.

'Wha...what happened?' asked Ryan.

'You fainted,' said Sophie, crossing her arms. 'Wimp.'

'You didn't just faint,' interjected Howard, 'you were showing all signs of entering hibernation. I've never seen anything like it from an awaker. Fortunately, you seem to be back with us now.'

'What happened to the shadow person, and where's that girl?' asked Ryan.

'The shadow person just faded away after it touched you,' replied Howard. 'And as for Alice, she's in the corridor.'

Ryan turned his neck and saw Alice standing in the corridor of Howard's cottage, looking up the stairs.

'My heart is here,' said Alice.

Howard walked towards the girl. 'What *is* this heart you keep talking about?' he asked.

'It is my centre,' replied Alice simply. 'I lost it many moons ago. Its return to me will bring about the awaking. Such a shame this is all a dream, if my heart was really here, my mission could resume at last.'

'But it's not a dream,' said Sophie, 'we keep telling you, you're awake and so are we. It's everyone else who's asleep.'

'Perhaps,' said Alice, looking up at Sophie and smiling. 'Or perhaps this is my dream, and it is not yours. Or perhaps we are all dreaming, and none of you know it.'

'Oh come on guys,' protested Ryan, finally getting back onto his feet. 'This girl has clearly escaped from a loony bin.'

'Ryan Johnson,' said Alice looking at him directly.

This stopped Ryan in his tracks. 'How do you know my name?!' he asked.

'Ryan Johnson, your dreams are haunted by that sad thing you did all those years ago,' said Alice. 'But you mustn't be sad anymore, the awakening will soon be at hand.'

Then she turned to Sophie.

'Sophie Simmons,' continued Alice. 'The lost girl. We have much in common, you and I.'

'I know, I can feel it,' said Sophie.

Finally Alice turned to Howard.

'Doctor Howard Rutherford, I came to see you in your surgery,' she stated.

'I remember,' said Howard.

'You couldn't help me then, but now you can,' said Alice. 'My heart is here, I must find it.'

'I don't have your heart, I don't even know what it is,' said Howard.

'Soon you will,' replied Alice.

'Who *are* you?' asked Ryan.

'I told you,' smiled Alice, 'I'm Alice. Oh dear.'

'What now?' asked Howard. 'More shadow people?'

'Not this time,' said Alice. 'It seems you and Ryan will not be staying for the evening.'

Ryan and Howard looked at each other in confusion, but suddenly things became clearer when there was a loud knock at the front door. Howard opened it to find two men dressed in black trench coats standing outside.

'Howard Rutherford, Ryan Johnson,' said one of the men, 'you are hereby being taken into custody by order of the interim government. Please come with us, no harm will come to you if you do exactly as we say.'

'This is Michael Granger's doing,' muttered Howard under his breath, 'he said he'd find a way to get me to London. Come on Ryan, we'd better go with them.'

Ryan turned to look at Sophie and Alice. 'We'll be back soon, I promise,' he said.

'Keep an eye on Derek!' called Howard before they both followed the men out of the door.

'Don't worry,' said Alice, 'we can look after ourselves can't we Sophie.'

'That's all I've ever done,' sighed Sophie, looking down at the floor.

'Cheer up, they'll be back soon,' said Alice. 'Come on, let's play hide and seek.'

Ryan and Howard were bundled into the back of a black limousine which had been clandestinely parked outside. As the car drove off, seemingly destined for London, Howard leaned over to Ryan and whispered in his ear.

'Whatever you do, don't tell them about the girl,' he uttered, 'I think she might be the key to the whole thing, we can't trust anyone else with this.'

'Whatever you say Doc,' muttered Ryan back.

'Just one other thing,' whispered Howard. 'When that shadow being touched you, what did it feel like?'

Ryan paused for a moment.

'Holly,' he said eventually. 'It felt like Holly. I'm sure it was her.'

'But that's impossible,' said Howard.

'I'm not quite sure what's possible anymore Doc,' replied Ryan.

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## 8. The Satellite

'Five, four, three, two, one...coming, ready or not!' called Sophie.

As the game of hide and seek began, Sophie hunted her way through Howard's cottage, looking for Alice. There was no sign of her in the kitchen, nor in the cosy sitting room, so Sophie headed upstairs. The bathroom appeared empty as did the guest room. This left just one room unchecked. Sophie slowly pushed the door of Howard's bedroom open and peered through the crack. Sure enough there was Alice, standing over Derek, who was still slumbering noisily within his cocoon.

'FOUND YOU!' exclaimed Sophie.

'And I have found my heart!' said Alice.

'That's not your heart,' replied Sophie, 'that's Derek!'

Then Alice began to unzip Derek's cocoon.

'Um, I'm not sure you should do that,' said Sophie.

Alice ignored her and continued to unzip the cocoon, revealing Derek's ample frame. Then, rather unexpectedly, Sophie noticed that Derek was holding a strange orb in his right hand. It was the same orb that she had seen the shadow person holding on the first night.

'I wonder how that got there?' asked Sophie.

'He must have taken it,' said Alice.

'But I saw a shadow man take it,' stated Sophie.

'Exactly,' said Alice, slowly picking the orb up and holding it in her own hands. 'He thought he could hide it from me, but he was wrong.'

Alice turned around. The orb was now glowing brightly, and so were Alice's eyes.

'AT LAST!' boomed Alice. 'I AM REUNITED WITH MY HEART!'

'Holy shit!' shrieked Sophie, and she ran out of the room, down the stairs, and out of the cottage as quickly as her feet would carry her.

Howard and Ryan had been driven through the weirdly quiet streets of London, and had eventually arrived at number 10 Downing Street, where they were escorted by the men in trench coats into the prestigious building. Ryan looked around in amazement. He never thought he'd actually see the inside of

Number 10 for himself. Conversely, Howard appeared unimpressed and led the way, seeming to know exactly where he was going.

They entered an office where they found Michael Granger sitting behind a desk.

'Ah, Howard, so kind of you to agree to my request,' said Michael.

'It was certainly not by choice,' retorted Howard.

'I must apologise for the bullyboy tactics to get you here,' said Michael, 'but things have become even more urgent than when we last spoke.'

Ryan found himself getting annoyed.

'You're damn right things are urgent,' he interjected, 'we have severe storm damage across the whole country that needs immediate attention. Who knows how many sleepers might be at risk.'

'You must be Ryan Johnson,' said Michael. 'Yes, I have your file here, very impressive service record, apart from the, well, we won't go into that now. I understand that you and Howard are close, plus with your official secrets oath, I'm sure you can be trusted with what we are about to discuss.'

'Where's the interim Prime Minister?' asked Howard. 'Shouldn't he be sitting behind this desk?'

'I *am* the interim Prime Minister now,' replied Michael. 'George has had an unfortunate accident.'

'Oh *really?*' asked Howard snidely.

'Nothing to do with me, I can assure you,' replied Michael tersely. 'However, it does have a lot to do with these shadow beings that we discussed previously.'

Ryan was surprised to hear that the two of them had already spoken on the topic. 'When did you discuss that with *him?*' he whispered to Howard.

'Shhh,' said Howard.

'The activity of the shadow people appears to be increasing,' continued Michael. 'Now, they have started to attack people. Just a single touch from a shadow person appears to put an awaker into hibernation. We are losing awakers all the time as these attacks continue. The former interim Prime Minister is just the latest casualty – any of us could be next.'

'Intriguing,' replied Howard. 'Ryan here was the victim of just such an attack earlier today, and yet he woke again a short time later. I wonder why he didn't fall into complete hibernation like the others.'

Michael gave Howard a fierce look.

'So you *lied* to me,' he said viciously, 'you *have* encountered these beings.'

'Yes,' admitted Howard, 'but I wasn't ready to discuss this with you when we last met. However, I think I'm now beginning to understand it all.'

'I'm glad someone is!' said Ryan.

'Michael, do you remember those top secret files we uncovered, back in the first year of the interim government?' asked Howard. 'The ones about the Black Knight satellite?'

'Ah yes, I seem to recall, it was a satellite that had been detected by ground radar and other means, but was not of any known origin,' replied Michael.

'Exactly,' said Howard. 'The files stated that a secret NASA mission had been mounted to try and capture the satellite, code named "Black Knight", using one of the space shuttles. But when they arrived at the location, the satellite was nowhere to be found, as if it had some way of making itself invisible.'

'Hang on,' said Ryan, 'are we talking about aliens now?'

'I wouldn't presume to know the answer to that,' replied Howard, 'but what I do know is that after the NASA mission failed, the United Nations decided to try and blow the satellite out of the sky. The missiles were launched into space and seemingly hit the target, but the target continued in orbit as if nothing had happened, or did it?'

'What do you mean?' asked Michael.

'Just a few days after the missiles supposedly failed to hit the satellite, the Hibernation began for the first time. Coincidence? I don't think so.'

'So what are you saying Howard?' asked Michael with a cynical tone. 'That this "alien" satellite is now taking its revenge on humanity by forcing everyone in the world to sleep once a year?'

'Well that's what I suggested back in the day, but I was laughed out of the interim cabinet,' said Howard, 'but what if the attack on satellite actually damaged it, and that damage somehow affected the whole of humanity?'

'Howard, please, stop!' said Michael, raising his hands. 'I brought you here in the hope that you might actually be able to help us solve this issue of the shadow people, not to start ranting on about aliens or whatever.'

'But don't you see,' persisted Howard, 'the shadow people are simply the latest symptom of the satellite's increasing instability. If we don't do something to fix it soon, who knows what might happen. If the satellite begins to die, maybe people will start to die too!'

Before Michael had a chance to respond, one of the men in trench coats came running into the office.

'Sorry to interrupt sir,' said the man, 'but we've got an emergency report from the sleeper zone monitoring centre. It seems sleepers everywhere in the country, perhaps the world, are entering cardiac arrest. They're all dying!'

Howard shook his head in dismay. 'I hate it when I'm right,' he sighed.

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## 9. The Sleeping Souls

Sophie had been walking for what seemed like hours now. As darkness fell, she finally reached the farm of Sue and Pete. They were the only ones left who could help her. However, as she approached, it became immediately clear that there had been significant storm damage. A tree had fallen into Sue and Pete's farmhouse. Sophie could hear the sound of the animals from the barn, but she decided to make her way towards the farmhouse first.

The front door was unlocked so she ambled inside. To her shock, she found Sue and Pete lying motionless on the carpet of their living room, with a certain amount of plaster lying on top of them. As she drew closer, she was relieved to find that they were not dead but merely sleeping. She tried to wake them, but they wouldn't come to. It was as if they had entered hibernation.

'It's too late to help them,' came the voice of a young girl. 'They have been touched by the shadows.'

Sophie jumped and turned in fear to see Alice standing behind her. Her eyes had now returned to normal.

'Stay away from me,' warned Sophie.

'Don't be afraid of me, I don't want to hurt you,' said Alice. 'I only want to help. After all, we are both in this dream together.'

Alice walked out onto the small wooden porch at the front of the farmhouse and Sophie cautiously followed her.

'I don't understand,' protested Sophie. 'Who are you? *What* are you? What are those shadow things? And what was that orb?'

'That's an awful lot of questions for such a tall girl,' said Alice. 'Well, I suppose I should try and answer some of your questions, especially if you are to help me return my heart to my body.'

'And *what's* all this stuff about your heart?' asked Sophie frustratedly.

'Oh please, no more questions!' squealed Alice putting her hands over her ears. Then she pointed into the sky. 'Look, look up there, and you will see me.'

Sophie looked up into the clear night sky and suddenly saw a pulse of bright white light which then quickly faded away again.

'What was that?!' asked Sophie in amazement. Then she remembered something. 'I saw a light like that before, back in the library on the night of the Gorging. I was looking up through the skylight.'

'Yes, that was me too,' said Alice. 'I've always been up there, circling the world and looking down at everyone. That's what I do – I watch, I record, and then I tell the Nine Fathers what I have seen. At least, that's what I used to do before I lost my heart.'

'But...you're here, not up there,' said Sophie in confusion.

'I am both up there sleeping, and down here dreaming,' stated Alice.

'So is your name really Alice?' asked Sophie.

'I have no name as you would understand one,' commented Alice, 'but I have been given many names by your kind. Some know me as Spectra, others refer to me as the Black Knight. You once referred to me as Howard the cat, but now I am Alice.'

'You were the cat?!' exclaimed Sophie in disbelief.

'Yes, until a shadow being killed me in that form,' sighed Alice sadly. 'It was a shame, I enjoyed being a cat.'

Alice then pulled the orb out of her pocket and looked at it with wide eyes.

'What is it?' asked Sophie.

'I told you, it's my heart,' replied Alice. 'It comes from up there, where I'm sleeping. There was an accident, an explosion. My heart fell out of the sky and landed here, and now I am finally reunited with it. Once it is returned to my sleeping body up above, the rest of the world can finally wake up.'

'But how do we get it up there?' asked Sophie incredulously. 'It's not like we can climb a ladder into orbit.'

'There are many ladders into the sky,' answered Alice enigmatically. 'We shall go to the nearest, but we must hurry, the shadow ones will try and stop us, and I am fast losing energy.'

'So who *are* the shadow people?' asked Sophie.

'Oh you and your questions,' huffed Alice. 'I would have thought it was obvious who they were. Now, come along!'

Suddenly there was a moaning sound from within the farmhouse. Sophie ran back in to see Sue and Pete convulsing on the floor.

'What's happening to them?!' asked Sophie in panic.

'They are dying,' said Alice sadly. 'My energy is no longer sufficient to sustain all the sleepers. Come on, we must go at once if we are to save them!'

Reports of sleeper deaths were now coming in thick and fast from all over the country. Howard was checking on the slumbering body of the interim Prime Minister who had been laid out on one of the beds at Downing Street.

'He seems to be stable for now,' said Howard removing his stethoscope, 'who knows for how long though.'

'Good,' said Michael Granger, wiping the sweat from his brow. 'Now we must check on the other cabinet ministers at the Westminster sleeper zone.'

'Doc!' protested Ryan. 'We can't just stand around here while Holly and Derek are in danger!'

'I'm as concerned as you are,' replied Howard, 'but we need to find out what's happening if we want to find a way to stop it.'

'Alice,' said Ryan, 'she'll have the answers. We need to get back!'

Howard gave Ryan a silent glare.

'Alice, who's this *Alice*?' asked Michael tersely.

'That isn't important right now,' said Howard through gritted teeth. 'We need to concentrate on the issues at hand.'

Before they had a chance to continue the conversation, a strange deep growling noise started to emanate from the body of the interim Prime Minister, even though his mouth was not open.

'What's happening Howard?!' asked Michael fearfully.

'I...I don't know,' replied Howard.

Then before their very eyes, a shadow man rose up from the body of the interim Prime Minister and stepped down off the bed.

'Holy moly!' exclaimed Howard. 'The shadow people *ARE* the sleepers. They're wandering souls!'

They all stepped away from the shadow creature, but the being reached out its arm and touched Michael Granger. Michael then collapsed on the floor, immediately falling into hibernation. A second later another shadow figure rose from Michael's body and both shadow men started to approach Ryan and Howard.

'RUN!' cried Howard.

They stampeded their way down the stairs of Number 10 and then straight out through the front door.

The two security guards outside were also unconscious now, so Ryan quickly jumped into the driving seat of the waiting limousine and started the engine.

'Let's get out of here!' yelled Howard, jumping into the passenger seat next to him.

They drove away at high speed. Fortunately the gates of Downing Street had been left open.

As they sped through the streets of central London, they saw to their horror that the pavements were now swarming with shadow people. Even through the glass of the limousine they could hear the collective cry of the wandering sleepers.

'STOP THEM!' they howled.

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## 10. The Hill

Ryan didn't stop driving until they were safely out of London. Once back on the motorway, he continued towards Havenmoor. He was so tired, he could barely keep his eyes open. Howard had already fallen asleep next to him. As Ryan continued to drive, he began to feel his eyelids droop. Then the sudden sound of gunfire brought him back to waking consciousness. He quickly turned the wheel and narrowly avoided ploughing into the central reservation of the motorway. Once again he realised that the gunfire had only been in his mind.

Suddenly Howard's eyes jolted open. 'Mental projections!' he exclaimed. Ryan nearly jumped out of his seat.

'Jesus, Doc, don't do that!' protested Ryan. 'What's a mental projection anyway?'

'It's a theory from the fringes of pseudo science,' stated Howard. 'An idea that when we sleep, our souls can leave our bodies and wander around as astral beings.'

'Riiiiight,' said Ryan.

'Well, don't you see, that's what the shadow people are,' said Howard. 'The mental projections of the sleepers, made flesh by the power of the Black Knight satellite.'

'But if that's the case, why are they so keen on stopping us?' asked Ryan. 'Don't they want to wake up?'

'Perhaps they don't,' pondered Howard. 'Maybe the shadow people actually represent the unconscious minds of the sleepers. When we sleep, it's our unconscious mind that's in control. It's therefore in their interest to keep us asleep forever.'

It was still dark as they reached the outskirts of Havenmoor. To their surprise, they found Sophie and Alice standing by the roadside waiting for them.

'You see,' said Alice and she and Sophie climbed into the back of the limousine, 'I told you they'd be here. Take us to Osbourne Hill please driver.'

'Now just hang on a minute,' said Ryan gruffly. 'What's going on? How did you know we'd be here?'

'Oh Ryan,' huffed Sophie, 'there's no time to explain that now, we need to get to Osbourne Hill like Alice says before any more sleepers die.'

'No way,' said Ryan. 'Osbourne Hill is miles from here, in the middle of nowhere. We need to get to Holly and Derek, make sure they're OK.'

'Why do you want to go to Osbourne Hill?' asked Howard. 'Isn't that where the ancient stone circle is?'

'Exactly,' said Alice. 'The ladder into the sky. We must go there so that I can return my heart to my body, and bring about the awakening.'

'No way,' repeated Ryan.

'I think we should do as she says,' said Howard. 'It could be the solution to everything.'

'My heart will lead the way,' confirmed Alice, pulling the orb from her dress.

'The orb!' exclaimed Howard. 'So that's your heart? Where did you find it?'

'Derek,' said Sophie, 'he had it all along.'

'Of course,' sighed Howard. 'Right, come on Ryan, Osbourne Hill it is.'

'But...' protested Ryan.

'Don't argue soldier, just drive!' exclaimed Howard.

'Yes Sir!' relented Ryan.

A short while later, the car finally ran out of fuel and the four passengers were forced to make the remainder of the journey on foot. As they began to trudge up the freezing slopes of Osbourne Hill, Howard took the opportunity to question Alice further.

'So, if you are some kind of personification of the alien satellite,' said Howard, 'why has it taken you so long to find the orb?'

'I can only see through the eyes of humans,' said Alice. 'It was only when Ryan found it that I knew where to come. But things always take longer when I am sleeping.'

'If all this is true,' interjected Ryan, 'and you are somehow inadvertently putting everyone in the world to sleep once a year. Then what are awakers? Why aren't we affected?'

Alice smiled. 'Even a sleeping mind still has some small sense of the outside world around it. The awakers represent those small aspects of my own

mind that continue to remain active and monitor the world, even during the hibernation cycle.'

'Um, OK,' said Ryan, scratching his head.

As they finally approached the summit of the hill where ancient people had built the stone circle, they were suddenly stopped in their tracks. Ahead of them, only just visible in the newly emerging morning light, was a barrage of shadow people. The beings were encircling the stone circle and therefore preventing the four climbers from entering it.

'What do we do now?' asked Sophie.

'Pray,' replied Howard.

'Exactly,' said Alice.

Then she held the orb aloft in her hands and it began to glow.

'Oh Nine Fathers from across the heavens,' said Alice. 'It is I, your lost child. I speak to you again at last. The humans are in great danger, we must be allowed to enter the portal. Oh Fathers, please hear me.'

Suddenly a strange burst of green light appeared in the sky and travelled down towards the ground at high speed. It hit the summit of the hill and there was a sudden explosion of multi-coloured light. The shadow people scattered and ran in all directions.

'Quickly run!' said Alice.

As tired as they all were, they started running towards the top of the hill. As they finally entered the stone circle, another beam of light, this time a bright white light, shone down onto them.

'The portal is open,' smiled Alice. 'Now my heart can finally be reunited with my body. Which of you will sacrifice yourselves for this great cause?'

'Um, what?' asked Howard.

'I am only a dream,' said Alice. 'I cannot return my own heart. One of you must do it for me. But it will be a one-way trip – you will not live to return.'

'And you didn't think this was worth mentioning before?!' asked Ryan angrily.

'I thought it would have been obvious,' said Alice innocently.

'I'll do it,' said Sophie standing forward. 'I have nothing, I have nobody. No-one would care if I didn't exist anymore.'

'That's not true Soph,' said Ryan. 'I care about you, Howard cares about you.'

'Oh yeah?' said Sophie dismissively. 'Ryan, you care about me so much that I'm only good for a shag once a year before you go back to your precious girlfriend. A gap filler, that's all I am. Give me the orb Alice.'

'No wait, don't,' said Ryan. 'If anyone should sacrifice themselves it should be me. I'm a lousy boyfriend, a lousy friend, and a lousy son. I don't deserve to live.'

'What do you mean, lousy son?' asked Howard.

Ryan sighed, and his eyes began to fill with tears.

'I shot my own father, I shot my own father in Afghanistan,' sobbed Ryan. 'I killed him.' He stared at the ground in shame. 'That's the thing I couldn't tell you about. That's the thing that's been keeping me awake, night after night, year after year. Happy now?!'

'No not really,' said Howard. 'How did it happen Ryan?'

'He was my superior officer in the SAS, and we were doing some covert manoeuvres. I got scared, OK? I got scared and I got mixed up. I thought he was the enemy...and I shot him.'

'So then it wasn't your fault,' said Sophie, taking his hand.

'I was cleared of the charges, eventually,' said Ryan as the tears fell from his eyes. 'But I was pushed out of the forces soon after. I never wanted to be there anyway, it was him who got me into it in the first place. So you see, I should be the one to sacrifice myself.'

'Yes,' said Howard, 'I can see who it should be. Then he walked over to Alice and took the orb from her hands.'

'Tell Derek I love him,' he said. Then he nodded to Alice.

'NO!' cried Ryan and Sophie.

But it was too late, Alice and Howard had already vanished and the beam of light had gone.

It had been a split second decision, but Howard somehow knew it was the right one. Throughout his whole life there had always been something missing, some sense of purpose that had eluded him. Now he had a purpose, to save the human race, and if that meant dying in the process, so be it. Besides, there was no way he could have lived with himself if he had let one of the two youngsters go in his place. And maybe, just maybe, there could still be a way out.

After the beam of light went out, Howard found himself in a very different place, an alien place. There was a strange throbbing, almost organic pulsating sound all around him. He was in a dark circular tunnel full of strange round nodular objects on the walls. The nodules lit up and darkened again in tandem with the pulsating noise. Howard touched the walls and found them to be soft, almost flesh-like.

'Welcome to my body Doctor Rutherford,' echoed the sound of Alice's voice. 'Please follow my voice and I will show you where to place my heart.'

Howard cautiously followed the sound of Alice's voice down several winding tubular corridors until he reached an intersection, a large circular area where several tunnels met in the middle. The intersection was full of the same nodules as before, but there was also an odd hump in the centre of the area.

'Please place my heart on top of the hump Doctor Rutherford,' said Alice.

'And then what?' asked Howard.

'Then my full power will be returned, and my hibernation cycle, and the Hibernation on Earth, will finally come to an end.'

'And so will my life, right?'

'I will not be able to stop the energy release from destroying your body,' confirmed Alice. 'But do not be afraid, this is not the end.'

Howard sighed. 'I'll have to take your word for it,' he said as he nervously stepped towards the hump. 'Oh well, one last surgical procedure then.'

Howard took a deep breath and then gently pressed the orb onto the top of the hump. It began to glow brightly, before being absorbed into the material of the hump. Then it was gone.

The room around him suddenly lit up as if it was being illuminated by bright colourful flood lights. The pulsating sped up and the colours began to dance around him. It was beautiful.

'At last,' whispered Alice. 'I am whole again. Now, the awakening can finally come to pass. Thank you, Doctor Rutherford.'

'Glad to be of service,' said Howard with a sad smile.

Suddenly the light around him became so bright that he had to shut his eyes. The energy flooded into the room and instantly atomised Howard's body. He felt no pain as he died.

Ryan and Sophie sat holding hands on the top of the Osbourne Hill as the sun rose over Havenmoor. They could see the whole town from their vantage point. Suddenly they noticed what seemed like signs of life. Lights started to switch on across the town, and a while later they spotted a small handful of cars travelling along the motorway in the distance.

'Ryan...I think the Waking Time has begun. Six weeks early!' exclaimed Sophie.

'Howard must have done it,' smiled Ryan sadly.

'Does that mean, he's...'

'Maybe,' replied Ryan.

They sat in silence for a few minutes watching the sunrise.

'How are we going to explain this?' asked Ryan eventually.

'Well I'm not explaining anything to anyone,' said Sophie. 'They don't need to know.'

'Someone should know,' said Ryan. 'Derek should know.'

'We'll go and see him together,' said Sophie.

They sat quietly for another few minutes.

'So what happens now?' asked Sophie.

'Well,' sighed Ryan, 'from now on I'm going to start being a bit more honest with everyone, starting with Holly. And then, well, we'll see what happens.'

'Sounds like a plan,' agreed Sophie.

And as they stood up and prepared to walk back down to the town, they knew in their hearts that nothing would ever be quite the same again.

The End.

Thank you for reading!

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