

# Go TO Sleep Little Man Being Erased

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The darkness was coming. Near the northern borders of the Empire, the town of Grindt was the last bastion before the frozen lands of The Wastes. The torch fires burned at the road leading out to the icy wastelands of the north. Jalen grimaced as a cold gust of wind hit him as it blasted through the open gate, pitching up the flecks of snow which burned cold as it landed on his face.

“Something for the rag-and-bone man eh boy?” a rough voice addressed him.

He turned to see Tuttle, one of the older men at the gate station grinning at him. “That’s a wives tale and you know it,” he said.

“Pah,” Tuttle responded. “Only ones say ‘tis a wives tale are the ones that ain’t faced him.”

The rag-and-bone man was a legend Jalen had heard since he was old enough to walk. It was said that when the Long Darkness came, outside in the wastes the Rag-and-Bone man roamed, looking for orphans to feast on, tying their gnawed bones around his waist like a belt and adding the rags of their clothing to his own to help keep him warm. It was easy to ignore the legend when the sun was shining high in the sky, but as the daylight hours dwindled to nothing, it became very easy to believe in something like that.

“So you’ve seen him?” Jalen asked Tuttle.

He scratched his head. “I ain’t as such seen him…” the older man started.

“Then don’t be telling me you have then!” Jalen shouted.

“Look boy,” Tuttle said and walked closer to the youth, his iron-clad boots picking up clumps of snow as he moved. “I am the last of my group that came here ere twenty years ago this Darknight, and of the boys that I came with, only three saw out their lives to be men. There are things in the wastes that nobody knows about, and nobody should know about.”

Jalen read fear in the old man’s eyes, but put it at the back of his mind. “You’re just a bully looking to make me scared,” he said, turning away from the man and going back to the wooden huts that stood at the far end of the camp.

“Remember me boy,” Tuttle called after him. “Something big is going to happen!”

Jalen scowled and redoubled his efforts. The snow was coming down heavier now and he got inside the longhouse that the children used for shelter. This year he would be able to leave the longhouse if he was able to prove his usefulness as a man. In the north, eleven was old enough to become a man, and thirteen was old enough to become a father. Jalen’s own father had wed at the age of thirteen, and had had him two years later, before he went off to fight war in the south and was killed. Jalen didn’t even remember his father, so he shed no tears for the man.

The longhouse was surprisingly deserted for the middle of the day. He suspected everyone would be outside; enjoying what little sunlight was there before the Long Darkness fell. It was only a matter of days now. Every year, the Darknight fell and would continue the darkness for many months before the sun came again. During this time the world got bitterly cold and depression and malice rose in the hearts of men. It was a dangerous time, a time when myths and legends came to life. It was the time of the Rag-and-Bone man.

Jalen crept under the warm sheets of the bed he occupied and tried to get some sleep, slipping from

consciousness, his thoughts filled with the moans of the wind along the sides of the longhouse. In his dreams the moans of the wind turned to screams.

Jalen sat up, shocked and almost fell off the bed. It was evening, and he wasn't sure for how long he had napped, but the screams that punctuated his dreams were real. Marion, one of the women in the village sat in a corner of the children's longhouse crying loudly.

She was mumbling something between her sobs, her tears streaking down her pale cheeks and pattering on her apron. Whatever it was that had disturbed her was something big. He remembered what Tuttle had said earlier. Something big was coming.

"What's wrong with her?" Jalen asked Asear, one of the boys his age who had been awake when the commotion had happened.

"Telena's missing," Asear said. Telena was Marion's sister. After their mother died that spring, they were orphans and had to care for each other. Jalen could understand why her heart was breaking so.

"When did she go missing?" Jalen asked.

"This morning," another voice sounded. Jalen turned to face the speaker. It was Kafi, another one of the older boys in the longhouse. Kafi had a scar over his left eye all the way to his ear. When he was younger a stray thrown spear had almost scalped him and the scar had remained. He was older than Jalen and Asear, and had chosen to spend an extra year in the longhouse instead of taking a challenge the previous year to move out.

"Who was the last to see her?" Jalen asked him.

The scarred youth shrugged. "All I know is I seen her going out this morning outside the wall with Felton and Marik. Last I heard they were missing too."

"If they left along the North Road, they're probably lost for good," Asear said and shook his head. "The darkness starts tonight. The Rag-and-Bone man will get them."

"That's a wives' tale," Jalen scoffed. "There's no Rag-and-Bone man."

"Everything has a basis in reality," Kafi said as he walked off. "I don't think the story would last this long if it didn't."

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Jalen lay awake in his bed later that night. His nap had taken away his desire to sleep, but all the torches in the longhouse were extinguished, so he lay in the darkness thinking about the mysterious disappearances. People had been known to survive through a single darknight and get back to the village, but it was rare. Most times, when people got lost on the North Road for a darknight they were never heard from again. He didn't believe the Rag-and-Bone man story. If it was so prevalent and it happened every darknight, surely someone would remember one of the victims. Surely someone could tell him who was the last one the Rag-and-Bone man took.

"Go to sleep..." a soft whisper came to him.

“Who’s there?” he whispered back.

“Go to sleep...” it said again. He felt a cold digit stroke his cheek and he shuddered at its touch.

“No,” he said to the darkness. “Over my dead body.”

“Soon you shall sleep...” it whispered again. “Everyone sleeps sometime.”

“I won’t sleep,” he said.

“Yes you will...Everyone sleeps sometime.” The voice faded and all that was left was the whistling of the wind outside.

Throughout the night, Jalen lay awake, unable to sleep. Hours passed and eventually he heard the stirring of other youngsters as they woke up. Before long, the lights had been rekindled in the longhouse and he could see the rested faces of the children. The long night had begun and they would not be allowed outside the longhouse aside from doing chores inside the village.

“Tuttle!” Jalen called as he spotted the older man. “Hey Tuttle!”

“Well if it isn’t doubting Joseph,” Tuttle said and grinned his lopsided smile at the boy.

“Can you tell me who can tell me about the Rag-and-Bone man?” he asked. “I mean like real things, not stories and beliefs.”

“You trying to say my stories aren’t real?” the older man said, eyeing the boy beadily.

“No, it’s not that,” Jalen replied. “I just want to know some facts.”

“If you want that, you’ll have to talk to Wikkin, the Apothecary; if I see him I’ll tell you have a few questions for him.” Tuttle scratched his beard. “He should have some spare time, not like we’ve been having much sickness lately.”

“What did you mean ‘Something Big is going to Happen?’” he asked the older man.

“I felt it in my bones that the darknight was coming.” Tuttle grinned at the boy. “Guess I was right eh?”

“I suppose,” he said to the older man. “Do you think the ones that got lost are coming back?”

“Those boys are lost for good methinks,” Tuttle said.

“What about the little girl?” Jalen asked.

“What little girl?” Tuttle responded, a puzzled look crossing his face.

“Telena,” Jalen said. “Marion’s sister.”

“You should get some sleep son,” Tuttle said as he raised an eye brow at Jalen. “Marion’s been an only child as long as I’ve known.” Tuttle walked off, leaving a stunned Jalen staring at his retreating back.

“Are you okay?” Kafi said walking up behind him as Tuttle closed the longhouse door. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“He didn’t remember Telena,” Jalen said in a daze.

“Didn’t remember who?” Kafi asked.

Jalen spun on him. “Telena! Telena! Marion’s sister Telena!” he almost shouted.

“Look, calm down old boy,” Kafi said to him, patting him on the shoulder. “Marion doesn’t have a sister.”

“But she was right there yesterday in the longhouse, right at that corner.” Jalen pointed to where he remembered she was sitting. “She was crying her eyes out over Telena.”

Kafi shook his head. “I want to believe you man, but I’ve never heard of a Telena in my life.”

“We used to play together when we were kids,” Jalen said exasperatedly. “She had deep blue eyes and brown hair that fell around her face. And she had this birthmark shaped like a little heart on her neck. We used to call it her ‘hickey mark’. You just got to remember.”

Kafi looked at him, the youth’s eyebrows raising. “Okay Jalen, you just hang on to that thought, I’ll be back a little later and you can try to convince me again.” The young man walked off, keeping his eyes on Jalen as he backed towards the door of the longhouse, opened it behind his back and closed it. Something was terribly wrong here.

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Jalen had asked all the kids he had met that day if they had ever heard of a Telena. Nobody could remember who she was aside from him. She was a part of the longhouse though, he could remember her face. He even had a flower Telena had given to the Apothecary to press in a book and then gave to him on his birthday a couple years ago. So why didn’t anyone remember her?

“I heard you were looking for me?” a gravelly voice asked and Jalen turned around from what he was doing.

Wikkin the Apothecary of Grindt was a wizened old man. His face was marked by deep furrow

and wrinkles. His skin had the color of old parchment and his eyes were watery. His hair was thinning and his beard was long and flowing, reaching down to the middle of his chest. Even though his eyes watered, Jalen could sense some light in it, some kindness that put him at ease.

“Can you tell me what you know about the Rag-and-Bone man?” Jalen asked him.

The old man smiled. “Tuttle’s been spinning his tales again, has he?”

“So it really is a wives’ tale?” Jalen asked.

“Yes and no,” Wikkin said. “Back when Grindt was first founded, the Empire’s army displaced a small tribe of Northerners from this spot. For years afterwards, the Northerners engaged in a stealthy struggle with the outpost; killing horses, stealing grain, small things that would have eventually affected the army if it had gone on. Eventually the Empire allowed settlers to come here and the amount of people seemed to deter the Northerners from their attacks. That is until the Darknights came. While it was Darknight, the Northerners would wage this war on the village as best they could, sometimes even kidnapping children.

“The children never returned and so they took it to mean that they were either killed or frozen to death out in the wilderness. Some would propose that they even went to live with the Northerners, but parents found that a bit hard to accept.”

“Parents?” Jalen asked.

“Oh yes, that bit about it only being orphans was a wives’ tale,” Wikkin said. “They took children indiscriminately.”

“When was the last time a child was taken then?” Jalen asked.

“Many many years ago,” Wikkin said. “So you don’t need to worry about the Rag-and-Bone man coming for you. The old man patted Jalen’s head and he felt better. “The only thing though is that they claim that the Northerners left a curse on this valley. It’s said that their spirits come to claim the children until the Empire leaves the valley.”

“What?” Jalen asked, alarmed.

“The wording they have for it is ‘Kah-ley’”, Wikkin said. “From what I’ve read it translates as ‘Sleep-beast’. They say that the spirits take the children as they sleep and wipe their memories from their parents so they don’t come searching for them. But that’s definitely an old wives’ tale.”

The old man turned to leave. “Wikkin,” Jalen said and the Apothecary turned to face him, an eyebrow arched in query. “Do you remember a little girl named Telena?”

“Not that I remember my boy,” Wikkin said as he spun away again. “Must have been before my time.”

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That evening as the torches were extinguished, Jalen lay in the silence. Nobody remembered Telena. Either he was going crazy or it was all just a dream. No, don’t be silly, he told himself. How could it be a dream when he had all those memories of them as children? How could he even doubt himself like that? His eyes began to close in sheer tiredness, knowing he hadn’t slept since the night before.

“Someone’s son or Someone’s Daughter...” the ghastly voice from the night before came to him.

Jalen’s eyes sprang open. “Who are you?” he whispered to the darkness.

“This is how you end up getting sucked in...” the voice whispered again.

“Who are you? Jalen whispered again, his voice shaky. Something about the sound of that voice sent chills

down his spine and make his knees tremble, even under the blankets. The wind whistled outside.

“Go to sleep, little man...” the voice whispered again.

“What do you want?” Jalen said, his voice trembling.

“We want you to wake the monster...” the voice whispered.

“What monster?” Jalen said.

“The Rag-and-Bone man comes...” the whispers stated.

“You...you’re not real,” Jalen said.

“May pretty horses come to you as you sleep...” the whispers said.” Go to sleep little man...”

A sudden drowsiness took the boy and he felt his eyes droop. “I’m not going to sleep,” Jalen said. “I’m not going to sleep. I’m never going to sleep.”

“Dream...horses...sleep,” the whispers encouraged. “Let this wash all over you...”

“Can’t...stay...” Jalen said with the last of his will and closed his eyes.

“Go to sleep little man...go to sleep...” the whispers said as they enveloped him.

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As the torches were lit the next day, Kafi looked over to Jalen’s bunk but it was empty.

“Asear,” Kafi said, ‘have you seen Jalen for the morning?’

“Who?” Asear asked.

“Jalen, the guy who sleeps there?” Kafi said pointing.

Asear shrugged. “No one sleeps there. Sheets are ruffled because one of the adults must have spent the night. I got to go.” Asear hopped off his bunk and Kafi looked at the boy walk off.

Slipping down from his own bunk, he walked over to Jalen’s cot and looked at the ruffled sheets.

“Go to sleep little man...” a whisper sounded in his ear.



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