

BREAKING NEWS

In recent weeks, a group has emerged with what can perhaps be described as a special “gift” or “ability”: their dreams come true.

Although unaware of it now, these individuals will not only save the world, but change it forever. They are our last hope in a battle of good versus evil.

This transformation from ordinary to extraordinary, this journey, will not occur overnight. Every story has a beginning.

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“Snap my fingers,” the deep, scratchy voice says, “and everyone around us dies.” I struggle to focus on the dark, imposing figure before me. Behind, there’s a crater of shattered paving, as though it has crashed down to earth from the sky. Concrete dust coats its black full-body armour which shimmers slightly as though in a heat haze. The face is completely masked. Even the eyes and mouth are hidden behind wire mesh, the only chinks in the sleek metal facade. The whole being vibrates like it’s not completely solid. A shiver runs down my spine.

Is this what death looks like?

I instinctively turn toward my red-headed companion, Lora. At first, I think she’s frozen like the rest of the world around us. While birds have paused mid-flight and a torn out page of a discarded newspaper is suspended in the still air, she has remained motionless, facing away from this hideous apparition. But then I realize, *she can’t see it.*

“Ah, I see . . . *especially her,*” the figure says, seeing my gaze flicker to Lora. It moves closer, now only ten paces away, and the mask glints reflectively as it catches the sun’s

rays. The monster looks as if it's been drawn with sharp, scratchy pen work, like moving lines of black ink tattooed viciously onto a human shape. The sight of this being makes my eyes hurt and my head scream with its repulsiveness.

"This is between us," I say through gritted teeth.

Lora looks around. Her green eyes penetrating, but yet unseeing. "Who are you talking to?" she asks.

"Stay where you are, Lora, just keep looking the other way," I caution her, my instinct telling me to keep her away, keep her safe, even though she is much older than me.

"Ah, yes, the great Sam, finder of the last 13, the supposed *hero* who shows others the way."

What is this thing, and what kind of hero does it think I am?

"So brave, right until the end . . ." Its voice rattles around inside my skull. "At the final battle, just like the prophecy says, you will lead me to my rightful power, thinking all the while that you are saving these foolish people."

"Prophecy?"

"Enough! You know why I'm here, boy . . . hand it over."

I have no idea what it is talking about but then I sense a weight in my pocket. I have something important that this thing wants . . . this heavy, round object. So now I know why it is here.

"I have what you want."

"Yes, you *do* . . . where is it?"

I reach into my pocket and retrieve a dark crystal sphere.

"Yes, that's it . . ." The blurred figure seems to shimmer at a higher frequency as though excited. "Give it to me."

"And then?"

"Then . . . then I *might* let your friend live."

"And everyone else?"

The figure shrugs and every movement of its form leaves a slight disturbance in the air around it, a smoky haze. It's as though I can sense a grisly smile behind the mask.

"One *snap* of my fingers," its voice quietens, becoming even more ominous, "and everything around us *burns*. Think about that, golden boy. Everyone. Gone."

Black gloved hands mime snapping fingers and I shudder.

"Good . . . you're scared. Now, hand the crystal over," it steps closer. "Give it to me and your friend will be spared."

I open my hand.

"Yes, that's it, hand it to me," the black figure commands.

I hold it out with a tenuous grip, as if it may fall at any second.

"What are you doing?" it says, the amplified voice more urgent.

"You'll kill us all anyway."

"No!" The tall figure takes a stride toward me. "Don't be a fool!"

"I will if you don't promise—"

It steps toward me again and I toss the crystal up into the air.

The figure moves in a blur, diving forward, reaching out

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for the falling sphere.

I lunge toward Lora, pulling her to me.

"Sam, what did you—"

"Get down!" I yell as we hit the ground.

The figure grasps the crystal. As it does, it raises its other hand.

I am too late.

Fire radiates out.

Everything around us—people, cars, buildings—glows from within and then explodes in quick succession.

Ash and debris fill the air as Lora begins to glow and grows warm in my embrace. I close my eyes and before she has a chance to flash brightly, both she and I are—

Gone.