

SAM'S NIGHTMARE

“Snap my fingers,” Solaris says, getting to his feet, “and all your friends die.”

His black body armour is dull, no longer shimmering, as though seen through a heat haze. But the menace in his voice remains as frightening as ever.

I gasp for breath, doubled over in agony. His shadow looms over me as he stands, prepared to resume the fight. I take a step back, struggling to get upright, and almost slide over the edge of the dusty stone surface. I glance backwards over my shoulder, trying to see another way out. We are so high up, it seems as though thousands of rough stone steps cascade away beneath us.

I look down, searching for my friends. I can see them, standing in a circle at the base of this impossibly high pyramid. They look up, watching us.

Why aren't they climbing up? Why don't they help me?

But I catch sight of something else down there, shock coursing through me. It's a body, lying sprawled on the ground. I can't make out who it is.

Are they unconscious or . . . dead?

"See, Sam?" Solaris says, his sick humour evident in his voice. "Don't think I won't do it . . . again."

I turn to stare at the soulless black mask. "I'm not afraid of you," I whisper, my voice hoarse.

"Your Gears," Solaris says, with another, different edge to his voice now. "Give them to me. Don't play games with me, boy. Be thankful that I am giving you this chance."

I touch the straps of my backpack, feeling the weight of the precious Gears inside.

"And then what?" I ask, still defiant. "Then what will you do with us?"

"Oh, I don't know," Solaris says, walking around the top of the pyramid. I mirror his movements, keeping as much distance between us as I can. "Cold desert night like this, I could give you all a little . . . heat."

He shoots a stream of fire at the stone at my feet. I feel the unwelcome warmth running up my body. I force myself not to react, but I'm tense, frozen to the spot. I am overwhelmed by visions of all the fire that has ever scared me. I clench my fists and grit my teeth.

"Sam, Sam, Sam . . ." Solaris says. "Still frightened of a little fire?" He laughs.

Another jet shoots out, this time rushing by my head. I turn and duck. The heat flushes my neck. I open my eyes and in the early evening sky, I see the moon. It's full, its glow both beautiful and haunting.

"Are you really going to keep me waiting, boy?" he says.

I say nothing.

A kaleidoscope of images flashes through my mind—from another time, another place.

I'm dreaming, but is this really my dream? Is he manipulating the dream, manipulating me?

Solaris lunges at me and I move quickly, more easily now, keeping out of his way. I close my eyes and blink out the gritty sand that's been kicked up.

"You *are* dreaming, Sam," Solaris says. "You've managed to figure that out. But ask yourself—whose dream is this? Hmm? Maybe you should have stayed in school at the Academy a little longer . . . oh, that's right, you couldn't, could you?"

Again, I look down at my friends, clustered around, barely visible in the dim light. I look at Solaris, standing there, his arm raised. The realization hits me suddenly, like a blow to the head.

I can't run anymore. The race is ending.

"Maybe I did need to spend more time at the Academy," I say to him. "Or maybe I already know how to find out whose dream this is."

"Don't even try it!" Solaris says. "I'm in your head, boy, you don't stand a—"

I run hard, fast, right at his towering black form. I charge with my shoulder down low, just like my high school football coach taught me. Before he can react, I plough into Solaris' stomach and we go flying through the air—off the

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edge of the pyramid, out into darkness, falling through an empty sky.

I close my eyes and concentrate.



We hit the water hard.

I plunge down into the inky depths, my arms pushing out in front of me, my legs kicking fiercely to propel myself upward. When I reach the surface, my screaming lungs suck in air and I spit out the cool water as I look around.

It's night now. The moon is high and a handful of stars are sprinkled across the sky. I catch sight of a black shadow close to me in the water and I strike out for the shore, eager to put distance between us. I have caught Solaris by surprise with the sudden change in my dream but the advantage won't last long.

We're in a city—I can see buildings and streetlights surrounding us from above. I smile as I catch sight of the Eiffel Tower looming high over me, lit up against the night. To the right is the bridge where I'd landed on top of a tourist bus after Zara and I made our crazy BASE jump from the Tower.

This is my dream. I brought us here—to Paris.

"Argh!" I shout out as Solaris grabs hold, reaching out to me with impossibly long arms. His hand grips my backpack,

dragging me to shore with long, powerful swim strokes.
“Get off me!”

He’s silent as he swims. I twist and turn, trying to pull against him, to swim in the opposite direction, but he’s too strong for me. The backpack straps tighten as I struggle, I cannot get free.

Think . . . it’s my dream, so I can control it.

Go somewhere else . . .

“Don’t do it!” Solaris snarls, stopping to drag me around to face him, his voice still rasping and metallic through his mask.



I blink hard against the blinding daylight. I’m momentarily stunned by the heat in the air. Water pours off me as I scramble to my feet.

I’ve been here before, too—it’s the Grand Canyon.

My last 13 tour, huh.

“You can’t escape me,” Solaris says. He’s standing, facing me. He’s still and menacing, yet I can tell he is impatient, all humour gone now as he chases me through *my* dream.

“Give me the Gears, Sam!” His voice is piercing, ripping into the very centre of my mind. “You know that I will follow you, wherever you go. Paris, New York, Cairo, Arizona, Sydney—it doesn’t matter. I’ll be right there. And when you wake up? I’ll be there, too. You have nowhere to go. There’s

nothing you can dream that I won't see. You've lost, Sam. It's time to give up."

He holds up something in his hand. It is a small, shiny silver disc—it glints in the sun as it spins gently on the end of a linked chain. It looks like an old pocket watch. Solaris is looking at it meaningfully. "It was made a long time ago. Now, it's mine."

"Nice story," I say. I scan the desolate scene around us.

If I can get away, lose him in my dream . . . then I can find the last Dreamer.

"You still don't understand what's going on here, do you Sam?" Solaris says. He takes a step forward, the antique timepiece in his hand. "Your destiny is my destiny, one way or the other, until this is finished."

Solaris turns to stare out at the expansive sky. Suddenly, everything changes. We are not in the desert anymore.

What the . . . ? I didn't do that.

But this is my dream.

Isn't it?

I stare, bewildered, at the rolling green hills around us, snow-capped mountains in the distance. I shiver and my breath swirls in front of me in the cold mountain air. We're standing at the top of a long valley, with a small, picturesque village nestled at the bottom of it, ringed by a dense forest.

"Maybe you don't know everything after all," Solaris sneers under the mask.

I gasp, the full realization of what's happening dawning on me. "But, if we're sharing a dream, like I did with the others . . . ?" My mind reels, grappling with an unthinkable possibility.

"That's right, Sam," Solaris whispers. "Do you understand now? The last 13 is complete."

No! It can't be.

But it is.

There is nothing now but the inescapable truth that our worst enemy is one of us. There can be no way to win this.

We are all going to—

Die.