

ZONDERVAN

Nightmare's Edge

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Summary: With the collapse of the entire cosmos at hand, Nathan Shepherd, in the company of his restored mother and two mysterious beings called supplicants, seeks God's help as he enters the land of dreams to find his father, who holds the answers to what Nathan must do to save billions of lives.

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WAKING UP DEAD

Nathan ducked under a low-hanging branch and pushed a dangling python out of the way with his bandaged hand. The snake hissed, startling him for a moment. With its beady eyes and flicking tongue, it seemed real, as tangible as everything else in this dim, dream-fueled jungle.

Just ahead on the narrow path, Cerulean paid no attention. After all, in the realm of dreams, even the forest was imaginary. To Nathan, however, all the details—from the thick, green foliage of overarching trees darkening their steps to the high humidity dampening his armpits—painted a three-dimensional landscape that felt as real as it looked.

Wiping his brow with a sleeve, Nathan pulled off the gray Iowa sweatshirt he had borrowed from Nathan of Earth Blue and tied the sleeves around his waist. Nathan Blue wouldn't need the shirt back, since not long ago the murderous vision stalker Mictar had burned his eyes out with a life-absorbing touch.

Nathan peered into the murky jungle. Who could tell if that killer now stalked this dream world, ready to leap out from behind one of the tropical trees and repeat the attack? And—a more immediate problem—with just a slender candle in Cerulean's grip lighting their way, how could two awake people find another one of their kind in this enormous, dark land?

He hurried to catch up with Cerulean, Earth Blue's supplicant from the misty world. Keeping his eyes focused straight

ahead and the white candle from Earth Blue held out in front, Cerulean stayed quiet. Only the swishing sound of his dark blue shirt and matching trousers made any sound at all. Nothing seemed to faze him, even the images conjured by frightened sleepers. Earlier, he had ignored the twelve talking chipmunks dressed in purple tuxedos. They had been funny at first, chattering about their political ambitions and the proper way to shave an elephant, but when a six-foot-tall electric razor buzzed into view, Nathan dove out of the way. The razor flew past, chasing a three-headed elephant into the forest. Cerulean merely helped him back to his feet and pressed on without a hint of a smile. He seemed unflappable.

“So,” Nathan said as they marched past an old man wrapped in golden chains who was floundering in a quicksand bog, “this dream world really isn’t all that dangerous once you get used to it. Why did you insist on just the two of us coming? What’s the risk?”

Cerulean replied in a calm tone. “Not everything is a dream. Jack is here somewhere, is he not?”

“True. But what other things could enter this world? No one else knows how to get here in the real world. Even you had to get Kelly to go to sleep to create a portal.”

“When there are no wounds in the cosmic fabric, the dream world can be penetrated only by a supplicant or through a person’s sleeping mind. With interfinity at hand, however, and many holes throughout the cross-dimensional plane, I suspect that passages abound.”

“How can you tell the difference?” Nathan asked. “I mean, if that poor guy in the quicksand was real, shouldn’t we try to rescue him?”

Cerulean smiled, finally breaking his stoic countenance. “As the elephant has taught you, dreams are as real as you allow them to be. Once you train your mind, you will see through

them. The imagined elements in the dreamscape are transparent and whatever is left is reality.”

Nathan glanced around again. “Anything real here besides people?”

“A few things stay whether someone is dreaming or not.” Cerulean nodded at a bent, leafless tree in the distance, illuminated by the dreamscape’s ambient light. Draped with long, hanging vines, it looked like a cross between a live oak and a tropical species from a dense rain forest. Yet, without even the smallest leaf dressing its crooked branches, it seemed frozen in winter dormancy.

“For example,” Cerulean continued, “it is best to avoid the spider trees.”

While Nathan eyed the tree, Cerulean pressed on. “Come. Kelly’s dream has now formed in her mind. Since she sleeps at the edge of a cosmic wound, her vision will be the best place to look for Jack.”

Nathan followed Cerulean’s lively pace. “Whose dream are we in now?” Nathan asked.

“A mixture of several.” As Cerulean passed by a leafy vine that hung from a branch, he gave it a shove, making it swing. “Dreams about jungles are often created by souls who feel lost. They struggle through vines, snakes, quicksand, and many other obstacles of their own making, thus illustrating their lives of desperation. When I saw this vision, I thought it would make sense to search for Jack here while we waited for Kelly to dream. Even though he is blind, Jack might have found his way to this place of troubled thoughts.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Nathan said, “at least as dreams go.”

After following a meandering path for several minutes, they entered a suburban neighborhood darkened by storm clouds overhead. Now walking on rubberized streets, they passed a headless woman on a bicycle who was trying to find a place to insert her earbuds. In front of a mansionlike house on a perfectly

manicured lawn, a man in a clown costume juggled a woman, three children, and a briefcase. As if on a treadmill, he ran in place, huffing and puffing, but getting nowhere.

Nathan stared at them, knowing they couldn't possibly be real. When they faded into ghostlike images, he shuddered. This was just too weird.

With each change of scenery, they passed through a soft membrane, a dry, gelatin-like substance about ten feet thick that sent a buzzing sensation across Nathan's skin. Although the transparent wall raised a tickle for a few moments, it seemed harmless. During each passage, however, a precipice appeared on the right, and a vague pull forced Nathan to lean to the left to keep from walking over the side and into the dark void. The membrane obviously marked a boundary of some kind—perhaps the wall between different dreams or alternate realities a dreamer could visit. But the dark hole seemed different; something dangerous, something to be avoided.

After a brief walk through a sandy, cactus-filled desert, they penetrated a third membrane, again entering the buffer zone between dreams. Nathan slowed his pace for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust. Ribbons of light swirled into the void from every direction, as if it were a drain. The pull this time was harder, but not unbearable. Yet Cerulean seemed oblivious to it. A strange sound emanated from the depths, like a song—a soft, familiar song. Nathan craned his neck, listening. Could it be? Yes, it sounded like someone humming “Be Thou My Vision.”

“What’s that dark place?” he asked.

Cerulean paused and looked toward the abyss. “The void. This world of visions surrounds it. Every dream eventually crumbles and is pulled in there.”

“Why is it pulling me? I’m not part of a dream.”

Cerulean turned his head abruptly toward Nathan. “The void affects you?”

Nathan gave him a half nod. "Is that bad?"

"I am not sure." Cerulean stared at Nathan for a long moment, then marched on.

Soon, they entered the darkest place yet, a cemetery with old tombstones rising at odd angles from grave plots. Bones littered the weed-infested ground. Gnarled oak trees with hanging moss painted twisted shadows on the path that coursed through the abandoned yard. A large raven perched atop one of the burial markers, staring at Nathan as he passed by.

"Read," it croaked, its red eyes shining. "Read. Read."

Nathan paused and leaned closer. "You mean the tombstone?"

"Read! Read!"

Cerulean grabbed his arm. "It is not wise to heed the words of the dream creatures."

"But if they're not real," Nathan said, "why would it matter?"

Cerulean inhaled deeply, his bright blue eyes sparkling in the candle's glow. "A vision stalker is close. I fear that he has manipulated the environment, and our safety may very well be compromised."

"Just reading the tombstone won't hurt." Nathan took the candle from Cerulean and shuffled to the side of the grave. With the raven still leering at him, he held the flame close to the stone and read, "Here lies Kelly Clark, murdered by Nathan Shepherd and unable to rest in the glare of her killer's light."

"What?" Nathan leaned back. "How could a tombstone know I'm here?"

Cerulean stared at the raven. "Three possibilities. Kelly sees us in her dream, so she created the inscription even as you drew close. Second, a stalker could have manipulated this place, and he is trying to intimidate you to keep you from proceeding. Third, and perhaps the most dangerous of all, is the possibility that you are becoming part of the dreamscape."

“How is that possible?”

“Amber spoke of this when she heard about Jack’s entry. If Patar sent Jack here to keep him alive, then he likely expected the poor man to become part of the dream world, a living phantom who wanders in people’s nightmares. Jack would be alive, yes, but only Patar would know how to extract him without killing him.”

Nathan pointed at himself. “Then can I leave safely? I mean, I’m not becoming part of this place yet, am I?”

Fixing his gaze on Nathan, Cerulean shook his head. “You appear solid, so one of the other two options is more likely. I suspect that a vision stalker is present.”

Nathan peered behind the tombstone, but nothing was there. “Who? Mictar?”

“He would be powerful enough.” Cerulean took a quick step and grabbed the raven by the throat. It choked out a squawk and flailed its wings under the supplicant’s grip, vainly trying to claw his arm. “Where is your master?” he demanded.

“Read!” it croaked again. “Read!”

Cerulean shook its body. “You have a voice. Tell me who sent you.”

“Read! Read!” The raven broke free and in a scattering of feathers flew into the darkness above.

As a black pinion floated to the ground, Cerulean took the candle back from Nathan. “Come. We must hurry. The longer we stay here, the greater the danger.”

“The raven wanted us to read the inscription again. Maybe there’s a new one.”

Cerulean held the flame high and wrapped a hand around Nathan’s arm. “It is of no consequence. If the message has been written by the stalker, it is likely a lie. If it is a product of Kelly’s nightmarish fears, it will only work to heighten your own. And if you are becoming part of this world, deep emotions will only hasten the process.”

"Not knowing will drive me crazy." Nathan squinted at the tombstone, but it was now too dark to read. "Taking a second won't hurt."

Cerulean held fast. "The risk is too high. Your unwarranted insistence demonstrates that the effect this place is having on you is escalating rapidly. You are losing your ability to reason."

"But I have to know." As Nathan pulled against Cerulean's grip, the supplicant's blue hair grew fuzzy, like reeds waving under restless waters. "Let me go."

"Nathan!"

The shout sounded like a thunderclap. Nathan spun toward it. Ahead on the path, a man stood with his fists set against his hips, his face bent into a deep scowl.

Nathan blinked. "Is it Mictar?"

"No," Cerulean said, loosening his grip. "It is Patar."

Patar walked three steps closer before halting, the candlelight gleaming on a plastic bag in his right hand. "You should not have come here. It is far too dangerous."

Nathan glanced from Patar to the tombstone, then pointed at the inscription. "I have to know what it says. Kelly might be communicating with me."

"As you can see, Cerulean . . ." Patar's voice grew distant, warped, as if he was speaking from the midst of a cave. Nathan could barely make out the words.

"He is already being absorbed." The stalker's slender form now seemed foggy as well, distorted, more like a dream than reality.

Cerulean nodded. "I can see that now. He is showing signs of fading."

"I'm fading?" Nathan pointed at Cerulean, then at Patar. "You two are the ghostly looking ones."

"It's only going to get worse," Patar said. "His mental defenses are withering, and Kelly's nightmare is reaching a climax."

A sudden gust of wind blew away a blanket of clouds. A full

moon, at least five times its usual size, hovered in a purple sky. Its glow illuminated the cemetery, allowing a clearer view of the dozens of tombstones.

“Shall I take him out immediately?” Cerulean asked. “Or should I find Jack first?”

A low rumble sounded at Nathan’s side. At the gravesite where the raven once perched, a hand pushed out of the earth, then a second hand and a head. Finally, an entire body, short and feminine, climbed up and shook dirt from her shoulder-length hair. She looked straight ahead and called, “Nathan! Are you here?”

“Kelly?” Nathan stared at her. “It really *is* you!”

Wearing a knee-length nightshirt, she brushed off the soil, revealing letters on the front that read “Sanity Is Overrated.” Then, extending her arms, she staggered toward him, feeling for obstacles in her way. “Nathan? Where are you? I hear your voice.”

As she drew closer, he stiffened. Kelly had no eyes, only vacant sockets. Could she be the Earth Blue Kelly, somehow resurrected? Or was she Kelly Red, a new victim of Mictar’s cruel, electrified hand?

No, Nathan told himself, *she’s only part of a dream*. Yet, she looked so real.

Kelly stopped and touched Nathan’s cheeks with her icy fingers. “There you are. Why didn’t you answer me?” She shivered and rubbed her arms. “I’m cold and scared. Will you get me out of here? I can’t see a thing.”

Nathan reached for her hand but then jerked his arm back. “You’re just a mirage. I can’t take you anywhere.”

“You are correct.” Cerulean lifted his candle higher. “Stay in the light, Nathan. Do not be deceived.”

“This is no time for joking around,” Kelly said. Bouncing on the toes of her sock-covered feet, she shivered harder. “You can’t leave me in this horrible place. It’s so cold, so terribly cold.”

Please take me home." She reached out and fumbled for him. With missing eyes and a dirty face, she seemed like a pitiful waif as her voice broke into a lament. "Nathan . . . please . . . I'm scared."

"I'll get you out." He grabbed her hand. "Just hang on."

Her chilled fingers wrapped around his upper arm. She was solid, real, without a hint of fading.

"Oh, thank you." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I told you never to leave me, not even for a minute. I felt so alone. So scared."

For a moment, dizziness flooded Nathan's mind, but he shook it off. "Just stay with me. Cerulean will get us out of here."

"Nathan!" Cerulean warned again. "If you continue—"

"Let him go for a moment." Patar's voice was fading even further. Turning his attention away from Nathan, Patar poured out the contents of his bag into Cerulean's hand. "When I wrestled with my brother, I recovered these from his energy reserves and was able to reconstitute them. You will find Jack approximately one hundred paces ahead. Restore these and get him and Nathan out of here with all speed."

Nathan stared at Cerulean's transparent palm. Two eyeballs lay there, perfectly formed, with nerves and moist tissue attached. Nathan nearly gagged.

"Have you found your new charge?" Patar asked.

Cerulean gave him a pensive look. "So soon?"

"Have you not been listening? She calls for help from this dream world. If I can hear her, surely you can."

"I have heard the song, but I was unsure of my responsibilities."

Patar laid a hand on Cerulean's shoulder. "You are a supplicant. You chose this duty; you must complete it."

"Then my work with Nathan is finished," Cerulean said. "I will have to find this new gifted one."

Patar gave him a firm nod. "Because Nathan broke the portal mirror, he will not be able to travel to my world to play the violin at Sarah's Womb, at least not right now. You can, however, send him to Earth Yellow to find other options."

"Yes," Cerulean replied. "As we speak, Nathan's mother is playing 'Foundation's Key' to see which mirror is the correct portal. While we were waiting, we decided to try to find Jack, since he entered the dream world from Earth Blue. I was unsure of how the dreamscape would affect Nathan, so this was a test."

"And he failed, just as he did when he allowed his desire for revenge against my brother to outweigh his wisdom. He had the power to escape with the mirror intact."

"Nathan," Kelly said, her fingers growing warmer on his skin. "Don't let him talk about you like that. You did the best you could. You were under a lot of pressure."

"You're right." Nathan stared at Kelly. Even with dirt smeared across her cheeks, black holes where her brown eyes should be, and grungy, tangled hair, she seemed lovelier than ever. "But I really didn't have much of a choice."

"Then don't listen. We'll find our own way out."

"Go now," Patar said, "before that rotting cadaver becomes more real to him than life itself. He will soon bond with it beyond all hope of reason." With that, Patar faded out of sight.

Cerulean put the eyeballs back into the bag and stuffed the top into his waistband. Then, lifting the candle, he pulled Nathan's elbow. "Jack is ahead. Let us get him and flee this place."

Leading Kelly by the arm, Nathan followed Cerulean, now a blue ghost in his sight. "Did you hear that, Kelly? We'll be out of here soon."

"Thank you, Nathan." She staggered along, her empty sockets still wide. "I knew you wouldn't leave me here."

With the moon shining brightly, the going was easier. It took

only a few seconds to find Jack sitting on the ground, leaning against a tombstone. He seemed solid, though Cerulean was now as transparent as thinning fog.

Jack looked around with his empty sockets while running his fingers through his thick beard. "Who's there?" he asked.

"He is losing his grip on reality as well," Cerulean said as he crouched next to the tombstone. "I will have to work quickly."

"He looks fine. He's not fading at all." Nathan turned to Kelly. He almost said, "Right, Kelly?" forgetting for a moment that she couldn't see anything.

"Take this." Cerulean handed Nathan the candle. "Watch me through the flame."

"Okay." Feeling dizzy again, Nathan held the flame close to his nose and peered around both sides. Cerulean pulled the eyeballs from the bag. Then, while singing unintelligible words at a high pitch, he laid his palm over Jack's empty sockets and pushed the eyeballs into place.

Nathan stared, trying to focus as blue light seeped around the edges of Cerulean's hand. Strange; the supplicant appeared to have an ability similar to Mictar's, a powerful light that flashed from his palm. Would the mysteries surrounding these citizens of a misty world ever be explained?

With every second Nathan peered through the candle, Cerulean grew more solid while Jack stayed the same. Nathan looked back at Kelly. Her face seemed fuzzier, distant. She angled her head as if listening.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Everything's okay." As he spoke, her features clarified again. "Cerulean is repairing Jack's eyes. We'll leave in a minute."

Nathan turned back to Cerulean, lowering the candle to see him better. Now ghostly blue again, Cerulean helped Jack to his feet.

"Can you see?" Cerulean asked.

"Very well, thank you." Jack pulled a rumpled fedora from

beneath his jacket and straightened it out. "Everything is clear, except for you."

"Your normal sight will be restored very soon."

"Excellent! Excellent! The end of a nightmare at last!" He put on his hat and turned toward Nathan, his restored eyes glistening. "Nathan! I'm so glad to see you."

"Same here." Nathan gave the candle back to Cerulean and shook Jack's hand with his left, grimacing at the older man's grip. "Now let's all get out of this place. I have to figure out what happened to Kelly and get some eyes for her, too."

"Nathan." Cerulean pushed the candle closer. "You and Jack will come with me. You must leave Kelly behind."

"What?" Nathan shook his head hard. "I can't leave her here."

Kelly's arm locked around his. "No, Nathan! No!"

Cerulean pulled Jack and Nathan together and held the candle's flame near their eyes. His voice mellowed to a soothing chant. "Stare at the flame. It is the light of reality. The images around you are mere phantoms. Bring what is real back into focus, or you will not return to the ones you love." He blew a puff of sweet-smelling air into Nathan's face. "Think of your mother. Listen to her music. It is riding the breeze. She waits for you in the Earth Blue bedroom. You must go back and search for your father. The real Kelly is there as well. We must awaken her from this nightmare so the two of you can go to Earth Yellow and save two world populations from disaster."

The flame's glow spread over Cerulean's face, making his features clearer, almost crisp. He compressed Nathan's chin with his hand, forcing him to keep his stare locked on the flame. "You must let this Kelly go, Nathan. She is not real. Night is over and dawn is breaking."

"No, Nathan!" Kelly's voice spiked into a wail. "You promised to stay with me. This place is cold and dark, and I'm scared."

Ever so gently, Cerulean pulled on Nathan's chin, drawing

him forward, his voice now hypnotizing. "Release her, Nathan. All will be well. You will see the real Kelly in mere moments. We will awaken her, and she will escape this torture."

Heaving and exhaling shallow breaths, Nathan pried Kelly's fingers loose and pulled away.

"Nathan!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

He turned. Kelly, now ghostly and floating backwards, reached for him with open hands. "I'll be alone again. All alone in this cold, dark place."

"I . . . I can't leave her," Nathan said. "She's—"

Cerulean twisted him back. His voice sharpened again. "She's . . . not . . . real!"

His mind now swimming, Nathan repeated the words in a whisper. "She's not real."

Cerulean blew out the candle. As the light faded, Kelly's voice faded with it. "I'm so cold . . . so cold."