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Eternity's Edge

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A STALKER

Nathan strode down the hospital hallway, his brain focused on a single thought—finding his parents. Once mutilated and dead in matching coffins, now they were alive. He had touched his father’s chain-bound arms through the dimensional mirror and felt his loving strength. He had heard his mother’s voice and once again bathed in the majesty of her matchless violin.

Yet, the beautiful duet they had played at the funeral had once again become a solo. He had failed. The dimensional portal collapsed, and there was no word from Earth Blue as to whether or not his parents might still be in the bedroom where they had sought rescue from their captivity.

He sat down on a coffee-stained sofa in the waiting area and clenched his fist. His parents were real. They were alive. And now he had to move heaven and earth, maybe even three earths, to find them.

Staring into the hall, he mentally reentered Kelly’s room and saw her lying on the bed, beaten and bruised from their ordeal, her shoulder lacerated and her eyes half blind. The words he spoke to her just moments ago came back to him. *We’ll search for them together.* But how could she help? With all the dangers ahead, how could a blinded, wounded girl help him find his parents?

A sharp, matronly voice shook him from his meditative trance. “Ah! There you are!”

Nathan shot to his feet. Clara marched toward him, her heels clacking on the tile floor as she pushed back her wind-blown gray hair. Walking stride for stride next to the tall lady, Dr. Gordon stared at a cell phone, his face as grim as ever.

As they entered the waiting area, Nathan nodded toward the hallway. "Tony's with Kelly. Thought I'd let them have some daddy-daughter time."

While Dr. Gordon punched his cell phone keys, apparently typing out a text message, Clara lowered her voice. "Dr. Gordon received a cryptic email from Simon Blue. Solomon and Francesca aren't there in your Earth Blue bedroom, but apparently something very unusual is going on, and we're trying to get details."

"So that's our next destination," Nathan said.

"Yes. We have already alerted my counterpart on Earth Blue. She and Daryl will be ready to pick you up at the observatory and take you to Kelly Blue's house."

"Good. Even if Mom and Dad aren't there, it's the logical place to start looking for them."

"Are you going to break the news to Kelly?"

"I guess I'll have to. She's in no shape to come with me, but convincing her of that won't be easy."

Dr. Gordon closed his phone and slid it into his pocket. Turning toward Nathan, he spoke in his usual formal manner. "There are no further details available. We should proceed to the observatory at once. With Mictar's associates gone, there should be no trouble gaining access. I have dismissed the guards, with the exception of one whom I trust, so we should not run into any unexpected company."

"Okay," Nathan said. "Let me talk to Kelly. I'll be right back."

As he walked down the hall, he wondered about Dr. Gordon's words. It was true that Mictar's goons were gone, giving him free access to the dimensional transport mirror on the observatory ceiling, but what about Mictar himself? He had disappeared

into the mirror with Jack riding on top of him, but where could he have gone? And what could have become of Jack? Even if he escaped, he would be lost, especially after his recent brush with death in the Earth Yellow airline disaster and his subsequent discovery of his own burial site. Since Jack's dimension lagged Earth Red's by about thirty years, he would feel like a time-traveling visitor from the past.

A man in scrubs caught up with and passed Nathan, pushing a lab tray stuffed with glass bottles and tubes. With lanky pale arms protruding from his short green sleeves, he kept his head low as he hurried. He slowed down in front of Kelly's door, but when it opened, he resumed his pace and turned into a side corridor, his head still low.

Nathan could barely breathe. Could that have been Mictar? Would he be bold enough to come into the hospital? And why would he be so persistent in trying to get to Kelly? What value was she to him?

As Nathan neared the room, Tony came out. Bending his tall frame, he released the latch gently and walked away on tiptoes. When he spied Nathan, he jerked up and smiled, his booming voice contradicting his earlier attempts to be quiet. "Hey! What brings you back so soon?"

Nathan kept his eyes on the side hallway. No sign of the technician. "Some news for Kelly. I have to head back to the scene of the crime."

Tony shook his finger. "Better not. She was so tired, she fell asleep in mid-bite. And if she's too tired for pizza, she's too tired for company."

"You let her eat it? She's only supposed to have—"

"Hey," Tony said, pointing at himself, "I didn't know about her diet until after I brought the pizza. But if you want to tell her what she should and shouldn't eat, be my guest."

"I know what you mean." Nathan glanced between the

door and the other hallway. “Okay if I sneak in and leave her a note?”

He grinned, his eyes bugging out even more than usual. “Just don’t get any ideas, Romeo.”

Nathan returned the smile, though he chaffed at the comment. Tony was joking, of course, but sometimes he blurted out the dumbest things. He wouldn’t dream of touching her inappropriately, not in a million years. His father had drilled that into his head a long time ago—never intimately touch a woman who is not your wife.

“I’ll behave myself.” He reached for the knob and nodded toward the other hallway. “Mind checking something out for me? I saw someone suspicious, a guy in scrubs, head that way. It looked like he was going into Kelly’s room, but when you came out, he took off.”

“You got it.” Tony crept toward the other hall, pointing. “That way?”

“Yeah. Just a few seconds ago.”

“I’m on it.” When he reached the corridor, he looked back, his muscular arms flexing. “Time to take out the trash.”

Nathan opened the door a crack, eased in, and closed it behind him. Walking slowly as his eyes adjusted, he quietly drew the partitioning curtain to the side and focused on Kelly’s head resting on a pillow, her shoulder-length brown hair splashed across the white linen. He stopped at her bedside, unable to draw his stare away from her lovely face.

Black scorch marks on her brow and cheeks and a thick bandage on her shoulder bore witness to her recent battle with Mictar. Her closed lids concealed wounded eyes, maybe the worst of all her injuries, the result of Mictar’s efforts to burn through to her brain and steal her life. So far, no corrective lenses seemed to help at all. If anything, they made her vision worse. Still, even in such a battle-torn condition, she was beautiful to

behold, a true warrior wrapped in the sleeping shell of a petite, yet athletic, young lady.

He searched her side table for a pen and paper. A portable radio next to a flower vase played soft music, a piano concerto—elegant, but unfamiliar. He spotted a pen and pad and pushed the radio out of the way, but it knocked against the vase, making a clinking noise. He cringed and swiveled toward Kelly.

Her chest heaved. Her hands clenched the side rails. She scanned the room with glassy eyes, panting as she cried out. “Who’s there?”

Nathan grasped her wrist. “It’s just me,” he said softly.

Her eyes locked on his, wide and terrified. “Mictar is here!”

Making a shushing sound, he lowered the bed rail and pried her fingers loose. “You were just dreaming.”

“No!” She wagged her head hard. “I saw him! In the hospital!”

“Do you know where?”

She turned her head slowly toward the door. As a shaft of light split the darkness, her voice lowered to a whisper. “He’s here.”

A shadowy form stretched an arm into the room, then a body, movement so painstakingly deliberate, the intruder obviously didn’t want anyone to hear him.

Nathan grabbed the vase and dumped the flowers into a basin. Wielding it like a club, he crept toward the door, glancing between Kelly and the emerging figure. She yanked out her IV tube, swung her bare legs to the side, and dropped to the floor, blood dripping behind her.

The shadow, now fully in the room, halted. Nathan clenched his teeth. Kelly scooted to his side, tying her hospital gown closed in the back.

As the door swung shut, darkening the room, a low voice emanated from the black figure. “If it is a fight you seek, son of

Solomon, I am more than capable of delivering it. In my current form, a glass vase will be a pitifully inadequate weapon. I suggest you give me what I want, and I will leave you in peace.”

Nathan tightened his grip on the vase. Should he ask what he wanted? Even replying to a simple remark seemed like giving in. Mictar was baiting him, and he didn’t want to bite. “Just get out, Mictar. It’s two against one. It only took a violin upside your head to beat you before, and you couldn’t even take on Jack by yourself at the funeral.”

Mictar’s voice rose in a mock lament. “Alas! Poor Jack. He was a formidable foe . . . may he rest in peace.” His tone lowered to a growl. “You can’t take me by surprise this time, you fool. Your base use of that instrument proves that you have no respect for its true power. And now you have neither a violin nor a Quattro mirror to provide a coward’s escape.”

Nathan peered at Mictar’s glowing eyes. The scarlet beacons seemed powerful and filled with malice. Yet, if he had as much power as he boasted, why hadn’t he attacked? Nathan set his feet and lifted the vase higher. Maybe it would be okay to find out what this demon wanted. “Why are you here?”

“To finish my meal. I have enough energy left to fight for what I want, but I would prefer not to expend it. If you will turn the girl over to me freely, I will consume what I merely tasted at the funeral and be on my way. In exchange, I will leave you with two precious gifts. I will tell you how to find your parents, and I will relieve you of that handicapped little harlot.”

Nathan flinched. Kelly gasped and backed away a step.

“Ah, yes,” Mictar continued, his dark shape slowly expanding. “That word is profane in your ears, yet I wager that it rings true in your mind. Kelly Clark is not the paragon of virtue your father would want for your bride. She clings to you like a leech, because she is soiled by—”

“Just shut up!” Nathan shouted. “I don’t want to hear it!”

The humanlike shadow swelled to twice its original size.

"Oh, yes, you do. You want to know every lurid detail. She is your dark shadow, and you will never find your parents while you entertain a harlot at your side."

"No!" Nathan slung the vase at Mictar. When it came within inches of his dark head, it stopped in midair. Nathan tried to reach for Kelly, but his arm locked in place. His head wouldn't even swivel. Everything in the room had frozen ... except for Mictar.

The shadow continued to grow. His dark hands drew closer and closer. "I saved the last bit of my energy," Mictar said, "to perform one of my brother's favorite tricks, motor suspension of everything within my sight. Now I will take yours and the harlot's eyes, and I will need no more to fill Lucifer's engine."

A knock sounded at the door. "Nathan? Is everything okay?"

Tony's voice! Nathan tried to answer, but his jaw wouldn't move. His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. A dark hand wrapped around his neck and clamped down, throttling his windpipe.

Another knock sounded, louder this time. "Nathan, the nurse says it's time for vitals."

Another hand draped his face. Sparks of electricity shot out, stinging his eyes.

"I'm coming in!" Light flashed around Mictar's hand, but Nathan still couldn't budge. Pain jolted his senses. His legs shook wildly as if he had been lifted off the floor and rattled like a baby's toy.

Suddenly, the darkness flew away. Mictar's body, a black human form with no face or clothes, zoomed past the nurse and crashed against the back wall. "Stay right there," Tony shouted, "or I'll introduce your face to the other wall."

Like a streaking shadow, Mictar pounced on Tony, wrenched his arm behind him until it snapped, and slung him against the

wall. Tony staggered for a moment, then slumped to the floor, dazed.

Mictar grabbed the nurse from behind. As she kicked and screamed, he laid a fingerless hand over her eyes and pressed down. Sparks flew, and Mictar's body lightened to a dark gray, details tracing across his gaunt pale face and bony hands. His white hair materialized, slick and tied back in a ponytail. The lines of a silk shirt and denim trousers etched across the edges of his frame, completing the full-body portrait of the evil stalker.

Nathan tried to help, but his feet seemed stuck in clay. He slid one ahead, but the other stayed planted. Kelly hobbled toward the melee and helped her father to his feet. While she cradled his broken arm, Mictar's body continued to clarify. The nurse sagged in his clutches, but he held on, light still pouring into his body from hers.

His legs finally loosening, Nathan stumbled ahead and thrust his arms forward. He rammed into Mictar, but, as if repelled by a force field, he bounced back and slammed against the floor. New jolts sizzled across his skin, painful, but short-lived. He looked up at the stalker's pulsing form, now complete and radiant.

Mictar dropped the nurse into a heap of limp arms and legs and kicked her body to the side. Tony crouched as if ready to pounce again, but his movements had slowed. Wincing, he picked up an IV stand and drew it back, ready to strike.

Mictar tilted his head up and opened his mouth, but instead of speaking, he began to sing. His voice, a brilliant tenor, grew in volume, crooning a single note that seemed to thicken the air.

Dropping the IV stand, Tony fell to his knees. Kelly stumbled back and pressed her body against the wall. A vase exploded, sending sharp bits of glass flying, and a long crack etched its way from one corner of the outer window to the other.

Fighting the piercing agony, Nathan rolled up to his knees and climbed to his feet, but the latest shock had stiffened his

legs, and the noise seemed to be cracking his bones in half. He could barely move at all.

Mictar took a breath and sang again. This time, he belted out what seemed to be a tune, but it carried no real melody, just a hodgepodge of unrelated notes that further thickened the air. Red mist formed along the floor, an inch deep and swirling. As Mictar sang on, the fog rose to Nathan's shins, churning like a cauldron of blood. With the door partially open, the dense mist poured out, but it wasn't enough to keep the flood from rising.

A security guard yanked the door wide open. With a pistol drawn, he waded into the knee-high wall of red. Dr. Gordon and Clara followed, but when the sonic waves blasted across their bodies, the guard dropped his gun, and all three covered their ears, their faces wrinkling in pain.

The window shattered. Mist crawled up the wall and streamed through the jagged opening. The floor trembled. Cracking sounds popped all around. The entire room seemed to spin in a slow rotation, like the beginning of a carousel ride.

"Nathan!" Dr. Gordon shouted. "He's creating a dimensional hole! He'll take us all to his domain!"

"How can he? There's no mirror!"

"He can stretch one of the wounds that already exists."

The spin accelerated, drawing Nathan toward the window. "How do we stop him? He's electrified!"

Dr. Gordon staggered toward Nathan, fighting the centrifugal force, but he managed only two steps. "Neutralize his song!"

Nathan leaned toward the center of the room but kept sliding away. "I don't have my violin!"

The outer wall collapsed. Fog rolled out and tumbled into the expanse, six stories above the ground. The floor buckled and pitched, knocking everyone to their seats. While Nathan pushed to keep from being spun out of the room, the nurse's

body slid across the tile and plunged over the edge with the river of red mist.

Too weak to fight, Nathan slipped toward the precipice. He latched on to the partitioning curtain and hung on with all his strength.

Mictar took a quick breath and sang on.

The bed's side table bumped against Nathan's body. The pen fell, bounced off his shoulder, and disappeared in the fog. Still hanging on to the curtain with one hand, he looked up at the wobbling table. The radio! With his free hand, he shook the supporting leg and caught the radio as it fell. With a quick twist, he turned the volume to maximum.

Now playing a Dvořák symphony, the radio blasted measure after measure of deep cellos and kettle drums. Trumpets blared. Cymbals crashed. Violins joined in and created a tsunami of music that swept through the room.

As if squeezed toward him, the mist swirled around Mictar's body. His song weakened. He coughed and gasped, but he managed to spew a string of obscenities before finally shouting, "You haven't seen the last of me, son of Solomon!"

The mist covered his head and continued to coil around him until he looked like a tightly wound scarlet cocoon. The room's spin slowed, and the cocoon seemed to absorb the momentum. Mictar transformed into a red tornado and shrank as if slurped into an invisible void.

Seconds later, he vanished. Everything stopped shaking. Nathan turned off the radio and crawled up the sloping floor to where everyone else crouched. Dr. Gordon latched on to Nathan's wrist and heaved him up the rest of the way. His voice stayed calm and low. "Well done, Nathan."

Kelly threw her arms around Nathan from one side and Clara did the same from the other. "Don't ever leave me alone again," Kelly said, "not for a single minute."

Sirens wailed. An amplified voice barked from somewhere

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below, but Nathan paid no attention to the words. He just pulled his friends closer and enjoyed their embraces.

Tony, sitting on his haunches in front of Nathan, clenched his fist. "Now that's what I call taking out the trash!"