

The Cat in the Cradle revised edition © 2011 Jay Bell

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1463765149

ISBN-10: 1463765142

Other available formats: PDF, ePub, Nook, Kindle, iBook

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Chapter 1 Departure

Humid night air danced across the rippling green waters of the lagoon, bringing with it the smells of summer and the sounds of night. Crickets competed with frogs in a contest of song, the two very different instruments blending together into a rhythmic pulse. Fireflies glided lazily through the pines and weeping willows that circled the lagoon, haunting lights that vanished before reappearing elsewhere. Sitting together on a blanket of fallen pine needles, a boy and his cat silently observed these surroundings.

The boy could hardly be called a boy anymore. Dylan was nearing his seventeenth year, and although his features were becoming more masculine, his steel-gray eyes still shone with innocence. His tanned skin hinted at a life spent outdoors, but the lack of muscles on his lean frame and the smoothness of his hands suggested that this time wasn't spent working. Messy brown hair covered most of his ears and reached halfway down his neck, adding to the evidence of a care-free soul.

Unlike the boy sitting next to him, the cat wasn't so easy to read. Kio's size made him stand out, an impressive two and a half feet from the top of his head down to his paws. He often was mistaken for a large dog. The cat's body was narrow and tight, his pure white fur short and neat. The feline mouth appeared to smirk beneath high cheekbones. Long, gently curved ears that ended in small tufts of fur twitched occasionally, orienting on distant sounds. The great golden eyes hinted at intelligence, something made plain when the cat opened his mouth and spoke.

"Out with it," Kio said, a slight purr lacing his voice.

"Out with what?" Dylan responded defensively.

"There is clearly something on your mind," the cat answered.

Dylan seemed about to say something, then shrugged, ran a hand through his tousled hair, and looked across the water's calm surface.

"You're going to make me guess?" Kio asked. "Very well. Considering that you've sighed more than six times since we arrived here, I can deduce that you are discontent with something. You've been chewing your bottom lip, which you do when mulling over some great decision, and your posture reveals to me that it quite possibly has to do with travel."

Dylan's head whipped around. "You got all that just from observing me?"

Kio snorted. "No, I got all that because you are extremely predictable. I know exactly what you are oh-so dramatically on the verge of suggesting because you do this every month."

"I may not be as predictable as you think," Dylan said, cocking an eyebrow and pursing his lips in what he hoped was a mysterious expression.

"Can you honestly say I was wrong?" Kio pressed.

Dylan struggled within himself before his shoulders slumped in defeat. "I want to leave the Lakelands," he confessed.

Kio's grin was victorious.

"Don't smile like that! I mean it this time!"

The big cat sighed. "We've been over this before. Do we really need to rehash it all?"

"Just one more adventure," Dylan said. "That's all. My lessons are finished, and Dad keeps pressuring me to train more with him so I can take over one day. If we don't go now, we might not have another chance."

"But—"

"I know, I know," Dylan waved his hand at the cat. "We have it better than anyone. I'm the son of the most prominent man around and everything is provided for me on a silver platter. I'm spoiled and the last thing I should do is take it for granted."

"So don't," Kio said with good humor.

"I won't, but before we settle down for a life of respectable maturity and constant responsibility, let's go out with a bang. Another adventure, but this time further than we've ever gone before."

"Think carefully about this," Kio said, fixing him with a gaze. "Think of the lush meals Ada always cooks for you, the silk sheets on your bed, or those lazy mornings where we don't bother rising until lunch. You really want to leave those things behind?"

Dylan didn't hesitate. "Absolutely!"

Kio groaned, dramatically falling to one side.

Dylan ignored the cat's antics. "I'm sure this has nothing to do with a certain litter box filled with pure white sand

imported from the southern desert. And all this time I thought you were looking out for my best interests.”

“Your welfare and mine are intertwined,” the cat protested.

“No, you’re right. We shouldn’t take our lives for granted, but what better way of gaining appreciation for what we have than to strike out on our own?”

“You’re really serious?” Kio, who had found his feet again, cocked an ear. “I have to admit the idea doesn’t sound terrible. We’ve always had fun before. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen? Aside from the time you fell into the ravine overgrown with stinging nettles. Or the time I chased that stupid rabbit into a hunter’s trap and you had to buy me back from him.”

Kio continued to rattle off other injuries and grievances, but Dylan didn’t let it dissuade him. This was it! He could feel it in the night air. In the winter evenings, when he was returning home through the snow and heading toward warmly lit windows, there was nowhere else he wanted to be. But when the cold weather retreated and life crept back into the world, he felt a stirring in his soul; the pure potential of summer. He wanted to set out into the world, to be surrounded by the unknown and become a stranger. Only then would he be free to reinvent himself.

“Just you and me, Kio. No money, no food. A few changes of clothing and nothing more.”

“All right,” Kio conceded. “I’m game if you are.”

Dylan scratched the cat’s head affectionately. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. So where are we going? I’m assuming that we’re doing this in secrecy, right?”

“Yup. It’s more fun that way.”

“Well, where do you plan on going that we can’t easily be found?”

A yearning leapt into his chest, one that Dylan had entertained often enough in the midnight hour. Memories from two years ago rushed back at his summons; the feeling of a hand tightly gripping his, the smell of wine, a rough chin

against his neck. He wanted to experience that again, to confront it instead of always hiding it away in his mind.

“Let’s go see Rano,” he suggested casually.

“Rano?” Kio looked surprised. “What in the world made you think of him? Although... the home of another Oligarch is probably the one place your father can’t easily pry.”

Kio was, of course, referring to his father’s skill at blue magic. Scrying was child’s play to him. Wherever Dylan went, all his father had to do was peer into his ceremonial bowl of water to see an image of Dylan’s location—or anything else he wanted to observe.

“Exactly,” Dylan said, happy for an excuse. “Rano is still living with his father, and Dad wouldn’t dare scry there. We’ll leave him a note saying we decided to camp out on the marshes like we always do. If Dad looks for us there and can’t find us, he’ll think his magic is on the blink or that we’re already heading back. Think that will work?”

“Honestly?” Kio considered the question. “No, but when has that ever stopped us?”

The frogs let the crickets sing solo for a moment as the two conspirators silently considered their plan. Leaves rustled on the wind as if they too were impatient to break free.

“Ready?” Dylan asked.

Kio was incredulous. “You want to leave tonight?”

“Now or never.” Dylan launched himself off the ground toward the trees. The cat stared after the boy for a few moments before hurrying to follow.

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The moons were two small slivers in the sky, scarcely casting enough light to see by. A troublesome wind had picked up within the last hour, blowing in from the west and disrupting the waters of the otherwise calm Lake Albatross. These were ideal conditions for criminals, providing a thief with shadows to hide in and wind to mute any sounds.

Two such thieves made their way toward a rickety old dock jutting over the western edge of the lake. Stealth was not one of

their concerns, as they didn't walk lightly enough to prevent the ancient dock wood from creaking. Indeed, one even burst out laughing when his companion stumbled over a loose plank and fell face-down.

"Shut up!" Dylan hissed before laughing. "We're going to get caught before we even steal the damn boat."

Kio pulled himself together enough to ask, "Is that even a crime?"

"Sure it is," Dylan answered as he stood. "Intent to steal."

"But how can they prove that we intended to?"

"Well, they can't, but what else would we be here for? They'll know we were thinking about it at any rate."

"Thinking isn't a crime," Kio replied.

"No, but in your case it probably should be. Come on."

A lonely boat bobbed in the water, bumping morosely against the dock. The boat was barely large enough to justify having a deck, the limited space dominated by a leaning cabin that looked as though it wanted to jump overboard. Its wood was weather worn, but the deck and hull were still intact.

"She's seen better days," Kio said. "Like when she was still a bunch of trees."

"She'll do fine." Dylan beamed at the boat as if it were fresh from the shipyard and patted it affectionately, causing a shower of shredded wood. "Well, maybe not exactly fine, but she'll get the job done."

"Maybe we should reconsider not using your father's resources. At least his ships have engines."

"This one might." Dylan hopped on board. Where a crystal usually sat nestled in the prow was a hole partially clogged with grass and dried mud. A little effort removed the clog, and brushing the remaining grime away revealed part of a multifaceted crystal. "It's still here!"

Dylan brought it to the shore, cleansing it in the lake's water to reveal a perfectly clear crystal, before returning to show Kio the results of his labors.

"Wow, it's really, uh..."

“Small,” Dylan finished for him. “I know. The boat is too, so it all equals out.”

He clambered back on board and Kio followed, his claws sending shreds of rotten wood into the air as he scrambled for purchase. Dylan ignored his friend’s muttered swearing as he wiped out the empty hole and replaced the crystalline engine.

Dylan’s stomach went tight as he considered the next step. The engine had not been charged for some time, meaning he would have to do so. He glanced toward the center of the boat, wishing that he had somehow overlooked a mast that could support a sail. Not that he knew how to sail, but he would have attempted it rather than use his magic.

“Don’t over think it,” Kio advised. “Remember what you were taught. Blue magic is fueled by intuition. Just let loose and go for it!”

Dylan knew the cat was right. After all, Kio had attended every lesson that Dylan had struggled through. It wasn’t that his spells never worked, but rather the meager results that disappointed him. As son of the Blue Oligarch, the ultimate master of blue magic, Dylan couldn’t help feeling that his skills were seriously lacking.

He forced the negative thoughts out of his mind, closed his eyes, and tried to silence any inner dialog. This wasn’t easy with the buzzing anticipation of the voyage they were about to begin. One paltry magical feat was the final obstacle between them and adventure unknown. Taking a deep breath, he focused on building up energy within himself. He cupped both hands over the small crystal before pushing the accumulated power through his torso, down his arms, and out his hands. Dylan pushed with all his willpower until he felt purged of the force that he had created within himself.

He exhaled, removed his hands, and without opening his eyes asked, “Did it work?”

“Well, it’s glowing,” Kio answered.

Dylan opened his eyes, but instead of brilliant blue radiance, the crystal flickered with a dull glow as if it were about to go out.

“It’s a good start,” Kio said, rubbing up against Dylan’s legs and trying to bolster his spirits. “I’m sure it’s enough, too. Draw the water and let’s get this trip started.”

With a half-hearted sigh, Dylan untied the boat before placing the tips of his index fingers on either side of the crystal. This part he could handle. He frequently steered the boats at home without difficulty, although they all had fully precharged engines. With a minimal amount of concentration, he directed the crystal’s energy toward the water in front of the boat. After a brief moment, pale blue light extended from the crystal to the lake. Water coursed through the light, as if flowing through an invisible pipe, until it reached the crystal and gathered there. Dylan moved his hands away just before water exploded out from where his fingers had been. Splitting into two streams, the water arced off to each side of the boat, launching into the lake and providing the vessel with propulsion.

The engines Dylan was accustomed to usually produced powerful, roaring jets but this crystal—or perhaps the weak energy he had filled it with—created wimpy streams that sounded more like someone using the toilet. Thankfully, termites had ensured that little boat was extremely lightweight, and the streams were enough to lurch the boat forward toward the center of the lake. They were finally on their way.

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The boat chugged along the river, kicking up waves that rocked the sleepy fishing vessels they passed. Dylan indulged in a satisfied smirk. His skills, although far from the caliber of his father, had improved. Twice a day he refilled the little crystal engine with energy. Each time the light had been a bit brighter and the resulting propulsion streams thicker and more powerful. The necessity of putting his magic to practical use

over the last two days reinforced his opinion that this trip was a good idea.

His stomach growled in complaint, reminding Dylan that not everything was going according to plan. Living off the land, or the river as the case may be, wasn't as easy as he had expected. Preparation tripped him up the most. He had caught a fish the first morning following their successful theft of the boat—or salvaging as Kio preferred to call it. The cat insisted that stealing something nobody wanted was impossible. Regardless, when the fish had stopped thrashing on the deck, Dylan realized he had no idea how to gut it and decided to cook it whole. The end result was partly crunchy, mostly squishy, and entirely foul-tasting.

Later that day they brought the boat to shore so Kio could hunt them an alternative. He caught two large pheasants, happily digging into his own while Dylan puzzled over this even more complex animal. When he considered plucking the feathers, cutting off the head, and gutting the poor creature, he found his appetite had fled.

Instead he brought the bird back on the boat and flagged down the first merchant ship they passed. After some amateur haggling, the pheasant was traded for a loaf of dry bread and a flavorless block of cheese. He suffered them in silence, preferring them greatly to hunger, and reminding himself that better meals awaited him at the home of the Yellow Oligarch.

Thoughts of food fled, chased away by memories of Rano. They had been childhood friends, even though they didn't see each other that often. Both sons of Oligarchs, they were always paired up when Blue and Yellow met for business. When the meetings came to an abrupt end, so did the visits. Only when Rano was old enough to travel on his own did Dylan see him again, barely recognizing the handsome man as the pudgy playmate he had once known.

Dylan's pulse quickened, his mouth dry. There would be consequences to seeing Rano again, but whether they were good or bad remained to be seen. As they drew near their

destination, his mind returned to the anger and regret of their ugly parting. If Dylan could recreate that night with any other, he would steer the boat elsewhere, but he didn't believe it possible. He and Rano were unique, two of a kind. There was no one else.

Then there was the letter, the one Dylan had read so many times that the paper had gone soft around the edges. He had every word memorized. Rano had written him months ago, and Dylan had poured over his words countless times, trying to decipher the reason why. The letter didn't say much of anything, simple pleasantries that were neither praising nor condemning, but these neutral words hinted that Rano was no longer angry. While the letter expressed no invitation, Dylan couldn't help but interpret it as such. If he was mistaken, confrontation lay ahead, but beyond that was the hope, however desperate, of reconciliation.

"You know, we could simply jump overboard and leave this pile of termite food to its fate."

The cat's voice startled Dylan back to the present. His subconscious had been doing the sailing, and he was surprised to see the boat gliding toward the shore. The trees lining the river had thinned and disappeared, marking the beginning of the Longlands' rolling plains. According to his map they were to head inland five miles before turning north. Yellow's home would be a few hours by foot after that.

"You really want to get wet?" Dylan asked.

"Not really. I just wanted to express my disdain for this ship one final time."

Dylan grinned and guided the boat in a diagonal line until the starboard side bumped the shore. He used the crystal one last time to fix the boat in place, sending a pole of energy straight to the shallow river bottom. He wasn't sure if the energy anchor would last for more than a day and wasn't concerned. All he could think of was how he was setting himself up to be hurt again.

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