

The Cat in the Cradle revised edition © 2011 Jay Bell

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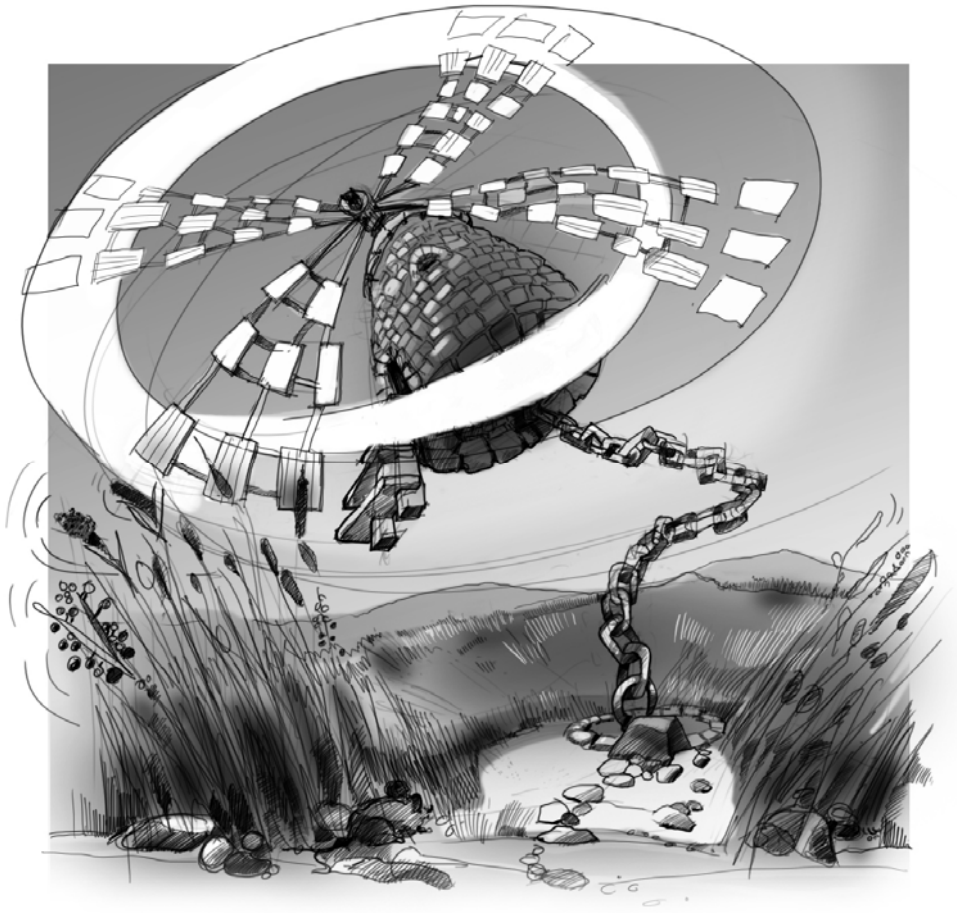
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Cover art by Andreas Bell

www.andreasbell.com



Chapter 2 Yellow

The stone windmill, simple and cylindrical in shape, was unremarkable in all ways but one. It flew. The building circled through the air, its massive rotor thrumming out a rhythm. Only a thick golden rope anchoring it to the field below prevented it from disappearing high into the sky. Amazing how a building normally reserved for the working class could be transformed by this wondrous magical feat. Not only was it

impressive, but it was appropriately symbolic. The Yellow Oligarch ruled over the element of air, after all.

"It's really flying," Kio said. "I don't believe it."

"Me neither," Dylan said, his awe mixed with amusement. The windmill looked like a stuffed turkey that had learned to fly backwards.

"It's positively hypnotizing." Kio blinked, forcing himself to look away. "How are we supposed to get up there?"

Dylan wasn't sure. Climbing the rope was out the question. "Maybe there's something we're missing. A way of signaling that we're here."

He headed to where the rope met the ground. Already things weren't going as planned, namely because there wasn't a plan. Dylan had naively expected to meet Rano with ease, certain that fate would drag them together again. Dylan had never visited the windmill before, but he knew of it by reputation. He should have known that reaching it wouldn't be easy.

Pointed roofs poked over the horizon. Where there were homes, there would be food. Dylan's stomach rumbled at the idea. There they could find something to eat. Plus he could make some careful inquiries. Surely villagers visited the windmill, if only to deliver food and supplies. Perhaps they would know if the mill had a regular schedule to land on the ground.

"I think we should walk to that village," Dylan said, placing his hand on the rope. "Unless you think you can climb this."

"I'd like to see you try!"

"*Who is there?*"

"What?" Dylan asked in confusion. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Kio responded, but Dylan waved him into silence.

His ears hadn't heard anything, but there was a voice inside his head, completely different from his internal dialog. If

he focused hard enough, he could almost hear it breathing. Maybe he was hungrier than he realized.

"Is somebody there?" he tried.

"That's exactly what I'm asking you, young man. I don't have time for games! Announce yourself properly or be on your way."

There it was again, as clear as day! The impertinent voice sounded oddly familiar.

"Telepathy!" Dylan exclaimed. He had met yellow magicians before, but had never spoken with one telepathically. "So do I talk out loud, or am I supposed to think really hard? Both maybe?"

A long sigh sounded inside Dylan's skull. *"Just speak out loud, and quickly, while I still have some patience left."*

"Right." Panic shot through Dylan as he realized that he didn't have a cover story prepared. "Um, Rano sent for me. I, uh, we— That is, my cat and I, were sent for by Rano to be servants. Well, not the cat obviously. He's more of a guard dog. But a cat. A guard dog cat."

Dylan swore he could hear a puzzled telepathic pause. "Rano isn't here. Who are you?" The voice was shifting from irritated to angry. Obviously his attempt at lying was making things worse. He didn't have time to think up something believable, which only left one option: the truth.

"My name is Dylan. Rano visited me before, and I just thought—"

"Dylan? From the Lakelands?"

"Yes."

"You're Jack's son?" The anger in the voice had subsided a bit.

"That's right." Game over. Dylan had finally put the pieces together and knew who he was dealing with. The Yellow Oligarch, Rano's father. Dylan had hoped to avoid his notice until he could meet with Rano. Together maybe they could have travelled somewhere else, spent some time together. Now it was likely that the Yellow Oligarch would send him home.

“As I said, Rano isn’t here, but I’m sure you’d like to come up for some refreshment. Something to eat perhaps?”

“Yes!” he said a little too eagerly. “Yes, that would be very nice.”

“Stand well back then.”

He stepped away from the rope, motioning for Kio to do the same.

“What’s going on?” the cat asked as they retreated.

“Well, Rano isn’t there, and it took me about five seconds to blabber who we are.”

“To whom?”

“Never mind, I think the windmill is going to land.”

“And then?”

“Food,” Dylan answered. He stopped and turned around. He was reasonably sure they had walked far enough to be clear of the building. The windmill would probably have to make a slow descent anyway. Enough time passed that he began to wonder if anything was going to happen at all when Kio was lifted off the ground. One moment the cat was lazily licking a paw, the next he was turned on his back and yanked into the air by invisible forces.

Dylan didn’t have time to react before the same fate befell him. His head swam, and his limbs felt weak as he rose faster and faster. He couldn’t feel anything touching his body, but the air felt denser. Blinking away tears, he saw a barely perceptible sphere of yellow light surrounding him. So this was the magic of the Yellow Oligarch! He glanced to the left where Kio was yowling and rising along in his own flickering ball of magic before looking upward toward the windmill.

They were being brought to the windmill instead of the windmill being brought to them! The wind forced Dylan to close his eyes, but he reveled in the exhilaration of the ride, until he felt himself being lowered. Below him was a stone patio attached to the windmill’s base. Kio’s bubble disappeared five feet off the ground, allowing the cat to twist around in the air and right his position. He landed on his feet with feline

grace. Dylan panicked, wondering if he was going to be dropped too, but he continued to sink until his rump gently touched the patio.

Before he could stand, a man stepped through the windmill's entrance. Grey-haired and of average height, his thin frame was draped in long robes of yellow silk, embroidered with various runes. Dylan recognized a few of them as symbols of air and guessed that the rest were as well. The robe was traditional, a formal ceremonial costume—exactly the sort of thing his father never wore.

"Welcome to my home, Dylan, son of the Blue Oligarch," the man said, his tones matching the formality of his clothing. His face was proud, head held high, the corners of his mouth turned down inside the neatly trimmed goatee. "Do you still remember me?"

"Of course, sir," Dylan said, realizing with embarrassment that he had been staring instead of regaining his feet.

"No need for formality. You may call me Krале." He paused, raising an eyebrow. "So you are now seeking employment as a servant?"

"What? No! Sorry for the silly introduction down there," Dylan said as he stood. "We didn't really know what to expect, so—"

"I never want to do that again!" Kio interrupted. He was lying flat on his belly, his legs splayed out around him.

"I'm afraid there was no other option," Krале said, regarding Kio critically. "It's very time-consuming to land the windmill."

"It wasn't a problem, really," Dylan said before Kio could respond. "Just unexpected."

"I see." A small smile crossed Krале's lips. "Won't you come in? You look... exhausted."

Dylan's face flushed as he realized how dirty and disheveled he must appear after traveling for three days.

The Yellow Oligarch turned and strode into his home, beckoning them to follow. Kio entered first, wide eyes

regarding the open air once more before he rushed inside the windmill. Dylan followed and felt disoriented by the interior's cool darkness in contrast to the bright summer day.

Inside was a round, plain room with a dim column of light in its center, originating from the ceiling. A circular iron staircase appeared to spiral around the light to floors above. Krale led them up these stairs, each floor they passed serving a different purpose. They passed a study, and a highly decorated bedroom. Dylan peered in at these curiously, trying to imagine Rano reading a book at one of the tables, or daydreaming at a window while watching the land below. Subsequent floors were walled off to the stairwell, the doors closed.

"The baths are through here," Krale said, opening a door on the fourth floor. "I hope you find them as comfortable and modern as what you are accustomed to. The other door here leads to Rano's room. You are welcome to use it while he is away. I assume you will be staying the night?"

Dylan hadn't considered it, but by the time they bathed and ate it would be evening. A solid night's sleep in a real bed would be welcome, as well as the time to plan what they wanted to do next.

"That would be very nice, thank you," he answered.

Krale nodded. "Once you are refreshed, please meet me one floor up for dinner." The Yellow Oligarch peered at them curiously once more before turning and disappearing up the stairs.

* * * * *

Dylan soaked blissfully in a large tub of steaming hot water. Such a modern set-up required multiple colors of magic, a skill only mages possessed. In this particular case, two separate magics were blended. Blue magic filled the tub with clean water, while red magic infused the water with heat that never cooled. The luxurious bathtub had probably cost Krale a small fortune.

"Any plans?" Kio asked from beside the tub as he paused from grooming himself.

“Nope.” Dylan sighed. “Staying would be weird without Rano around, and it’s not nearly as big here as I thought it would be.”

“Strange place for an Oligarch, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Our home is eccentric too. Who besides us lives in a tower?”

“True.” Kio stopped licking himself. “Speaking of home...”

Dylan sighed again. “This is only a setback. We just need to find somewhere else to go. Maybe one of the other Oligarchs?”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s talk about it after we eat,” Dylan said. The truth was his heart wasn’t in it anymore. Without the prospect of seeing Rano, their voyage just didn’t hold the same appeal. He slid even lower into the tub until the water almost reached his nose. Maybe he could find out where Rano was and travel there instead.

Dylan’s stomach growled again, so he rose from the water and changed into his last clean outfit—a white shirt and dark brown shorts. He knew a sort of blue magic that could clean dirty clothes that he would risk trying later. As he and Kio left the bathroom and headed upstairs, the water from the tub disappeared into the golden faucet it had poured from.

The next floor up was a large, open space divided into two half-circles. One side of the room was a kitchen as orderly as Krale’s demeanor. The cabinets and counters curved with the shape of the outer wall, giving it a rather unique appearance, but Dylan didn’t pay it much attention. The other side of the room was the real showstopper. The half circle of wall on that side of the windmill was missing. In its place was the most ambitious window he had ever seen—except there was no glass. The wooden floor of the kitchen stretched beyond where the wall wasn’t, forming a wooden balcony that hung over the edge.

Krale watched him from a table on this balcony. The Yellow Oligarch had a bemused smile on his normally dour face, aware of how impressive this scene was. To his left the giant

blades of the windmill's rotor turned, yet no breeze could be felt from them.

"This must be magic," Dylan said as he approached the large gap. "Otherwise the whole building would collapse."

"Of course," Krale confirmed with a nod. "Put your hand out as you approach. This is one of the finest examples of yellow magic you'll ever see, and perhaps one of the oldest in existence. As old as this building, anyway."

As Dylan's hand neared where a wall should be, he felt something resist his fingers. Soft, it soon gave way, allowing his hand to pass through. Kio did the same with his nose, his whiskers being pressed back against his face by the invisible force.

"It functions much like the pockets of air that lifted you up to the mill," Krale continued, "except in variable levels. The compression of air becomes increasingly dense as it nears the edges of the surrounding wall, ceiling, and floor, to the point that it creates enough resistance to support the structure as a physical wall would."

"Wow," Dylan said as he passed through. The sensation felt like leaning against a strong wind, if only for a split second. "I didn't know such a thing was possible."

"Only to an Oligarch, I imagine." Krale's features were proud. "Although it takes more than just skill." He dipped a hand under the table and brought out a walnut-sized diamond glowing with pure yellow light. Dylan recognized it instantly as the yellow loka. His father's looked exactly the same, although it was blue. Without the lokas, there would be no Oligarchs. Only ten existed, each a different color, and they were the most powerful sources of magic in the world. The loka disappeared back under the table, but its light left an after-image in Dylan's eyes.

A loud, wet sound filled the air, drawing all attention to the table. Kio had hopped up in the chair directly across from Krale and was noisily devouring a chicken leg. Dylan looked to Krale, whose eyes were focused somewhere on the floor.

Following his gaze, Dylan saw a bowl filled with scraps of meat and a bowl of milk.

"I had intended—" the Yellow Oligarch began, his face strained.

"Uh, Kio," Dylan said, trying not to laugh. "You're eating my food."

"Whoops." The big cat jumped down, taking the remainder of the chicken leg with him. Dylan was relieved to see that another drumstick remained on the plate, along with a small salad and two bread rolls.

"Sorry," Dylan said as he took his place. "He usually eats at the table."

Krale raised his eyebrows at this before steering the conversation elsewhere. "I'm afraid that I don't care much for cooking, so when Rano isn't here, I never eat a hot meal."

"Mmph," Dylan replied, his mouth already full of cold chicken. He was ravenous. Every bite tasted like heaven, which made remembering to chew difficult. Kio wasn't quite as mannerly, but the Yellow Oligarch seemed determined to ignore his existence.

"Care for some wine?" Krale asked, filling his own glass. "I have red, too, if you prefer."

Dylan shook his head, willing away memories of the last time he had drunk—the smell of wine on Rano's breath, his uninhibited laughter, and the tangy taste of his sweat.

"Food disagreeing with you?"

"No, not at all," Dylan said, bringing his mind back to the present. "It's fine, really."

"Then tell me," Krale said, "why did your father send you here?"

Dylan fumbled his fork, which clattered on the plate. "He didn't!"

"Oh, come now! You haven't expressed the slightest interest in Rano's whereabouts since you arrived, not to mention this nonsense about you being employed as his servant."

"I'm being honest!" Dylan protested. "At least, now I am."

"It's really not necessary to resort to such underhanded tactics. If there's something Jack wishes to know, he need only ask."

"Kio and I came here of our own accord, without my dad even knowing. Trust me, he would never send me to spy on you." Dylan's pulse increased in his panic. He had only been thinking of his stupid desire to see Rano and hadn't once thought of the political tensions between Krale and his father. What if his presence here had serious ramifications?

"Jack wouldn't need to send us to spy," Kio said. "He could simply use his magic to scry."

"But he wouldn't" Dylan insisted. "Spying isn't my dad's style."

Krale took a sip of wine, his eyes never leaving Dylan's. "How do you explain then why you would come here, to the territory of another Oligarch, without informing your father? Especially considering that the Blue Oligarch and I are, for lack of a gentler term, political opponents."

Dylan sighed. Of course his impulsive actions appeared suspicious. The Yellow and Blue Oligarchs didn't see eye to eye on a single issue, as far as he knew. His father considered Krale's views too old fashioned, and Krale no doubt felt that Jack's were too radical. At this point, Dylan could dig himself deeper by trying to compensate with more stories, or he could lay it all to rest by telling the truth. Most of it, anyway.

"My dad doesn't know I'm here," he said. "Kio and I thought we'd see more of the Five Lands, and hoped that Rano could give us a place to stay for a while."

"I still don't see why your father couldn't be made aware of such an innocent goal."

"Well, the idea was to get by on our own instead of always depending on him."

"So you decided to leave the home of one Oligarch and head directly to that of another? That's hardly relying on one's own resources."

Harsh as the words sounded, Krale looked amused. Maybe the wine was loosening him up.

"I'll admit it wasn't the best plan," Dylan grinned sheepishly, "but this is one of the few places my father wouldn't dare scry. Especially because it's... well, *you*."

Krale gave a short bark of laughter. "Perhaps your father sent you to charm me rather than spy. Still, I can't help but think of how Jack would react if he worried and discovered you here of all places."

Dylan knew what would happen. Krale would inform the Blue Oligarch of his son's location and could do so instantly with his telepathy.

"Why are you at odds, anyway?" Dylan asked, playing for time.

Krale regarded him a moment, as if assessing his level of curiosity. "I believe in unity," he said, lifting the decanter and refilling his glass. "I believe that the Oligarchy should be just that, a handful of people who consistently remain in power and pass their ideals down through a bloodline. This is the most efficient way to bring about change. Your father, on the other hand, is no fan of organized power and feels that each Oligarch should be subject to the people's approval."

Dylan knew this to be true. His father had already set this process in motion, allowing the people of the Lakelands to vote for or against him. Anyone had the right to campaign for his title. In Dylan's lifetime there had been only one benign competitor, but his father's re-election had been nearly unanimous.

"It seems fair, letting people choose who leads them," Dylan said.

"Indeed, it's not only fair but it works," Krale answered, surprising Dylan. "At least for the Lakelands. Your father is an apt leader, and his people would be hard pressed to find better. However, other territories in the Five Lands aren't so harmonious; places where cities are torn apart by differences of belief. In such areas an elected Oligarch would never manage

to serve for more than one term, and most of that time would be spent undoing what his predecessor had changed. In a situation like that, voting works against the populace and becomes a petty game of tug-of-war."

Krale went from sipping his wine to swigging it before he continued. "I think we should circumvent all of that and have the ten Oligarchs come together to form a council to rule the Five Lands. The council would police itself, dispatching any rogue elements if need be, and elect new successors to the position when bequeathing isn't an option."

"That doesn't sound so different from what my father wants," Dylan said. "The only difference is that you want to give the vote to a council instead of the people."

"Not quite. As I said, Jack doesn't like the idea of power conglomerating in one place. He feels that power corrupts, and that the collected Oligarchy pooling their magic would be... how does he put it?"

"Playing god." Kio's sleepy voice drifted up from underneath the table where he dozed.

"Playing god, hm?" Krale shook his head. "I can see his point, but the potential is too great to ignore. Just look at what a single Oligarch can manage on his own and multiply that by ten! We could easily defend our land from those tiger people in the south, or any other threat that dare come our way, while at the same time providing the very best life for our people. Hunger, disease, even crime could be stamped out completely. The Five Lands would become one land, under one rule, and one power!" Krale's face was red with excitement, and for a moment he sat staring off into the distance, eyes wide with a private dream. Then he came back to reality, and the ruddiness of his cheeks darkened a shade as he blushed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I get rather carried away at times."

"I'm used to it," Dylan reassured him. "My dad rants about his views all the time."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Krale said gratefully. He frowned at his wine glass. "I'm afraid my ideas will never come to pass

while people debate who should have power instead of focusing on the actual issues at hand.”

“I don’t think your ideas are so bad,” Dylan said. “Then again, I also agree with most of what my father believes. I’m just glad I’ll never have to decide what’s right or wrong for other people.”

“Then you aren’t interested in taking up the mantle after your father? Rano has no interest in it either. I don’t know that I can blame him. It is a frustrating occupation, always butting heads with people who have their own equally valid viewpoints.” Krale managed a weary smile before finishing off his wine. “I’m afraid this old man has worn himself out.” He pushed his chair back and stood. “Would you consider me a poor host if I retired early?”

“Not at all,” Dylan said. He wished there had been a chance to ask where Rano was, but there would be time for that in the morning.

“Thank you.” Krale waved a hand absentmindedly. Curls of wispy yellow air appeared around the table, ensnaring each dish and lifting them up. They floated, as if carried by ghosts, across the room to the kitchen. Not a single piece was broken as they dropped, one by one, into the sink.

“I’ll leave the rest of the wine here,” Krale said. “There’s more milk on the counter if the cat needs feeding. The condition of Rano’s room should be tolerable, I hope.”

“Thank you,” Dylan said, but the Yellow Oligarch didn’t seem to hear him as he shuffled out of the room.

* * * * *

Rano’s room wasn’t the pinnacle of organization that the rest of the mill was. The small space was cluttered with cheap souvenirs collected on his travels, many of them various charms and talismans. Dylan noted with amusement that most of the magical trinkets related to beauty, charm, and romantic prowess.

He laughed as he remembered his friend’s cocky attitude and tendency to strut around like a rooster. These cheap

charms suggested he wasn't as confident as he liked to appear. From what he could remember, Rano had nothing that needed compensating for.

Dylan's skin tingled as he slowly inspected the room. These were the things Rano decided to surround himself with. Being in Rano's private room was somehow intimate; a way of being near Rano without him actually being there. This was a sanctuary not meant for him. And yet, here he was. Dylan flopped down onto the bed, the evening air blowing in from the window cool and refreshing.

"I'm curious about the tiger people Krale mentioned," Kio said, jumping up on the foot of the bed. "The Rasaka or whatever."

"Rakshasa," Dylan corrected.

"Yeah, them. Why don't we go there next?"

"Are you crazy? They eat humans!"

"Yeah, that's what they say, but you'd be with me. I'm probably a distant relative to them or something."

"Better send them a letter first," Dylan laughed. "Family or not, it's rude to drop in unexpectedly. No, I thought we could find out where Rano is and go there instead."

"I thought you two had a bad falling out," Kio murmured, eyelids bobbing in a battle with sleep. "Why the sudden interest to make amends?" The cat was too tired to wait for an answer. His eyes shut, and he slept.

Dylan kicked off his boots, pulled off his shirt, and stretched out on the bed, hugging a pillow to his face. He breathed in Rano's scent, closed his eyes, and let himself sink into memory.

* * *

The empty bottle of wine, knocked across the floor by the two wrestling boys, spun wildly, colliding into another that had also been drained. The outcome of the struggle was clear. Rano was both bigger and stronger, and Dylan had no chance of winning. He could only try to delay being pinned down. This was made twice as difficult by the nonstop laughter that

had Dylan gasping for breath. After a valiant struggle, he gave way to exhaustion. Rano's strong legs had Dylan pinned, each hand captured in his own and pressed firmly to the floor.

The laughter ceased as they both caught their breath. Rano relaxed the weight of his body onto Dylan as they lay panting together. The rough stubble on Rano's chin tickled Dylan's neck, making him squirm. Rano reacted instinctively, pressing down with his hips to stop Dylan from moving. They noticed then that the reaction to their physical closeness was mutual. Rano raised his head and looked into Dylan's eyes with no hint of embarrassment, only lust.

What followed was a new world, wondrous and exhilarating, but most of all *right*. That was the only word for it. Dylan had found a piece that he hadn't even known was missing, and it felt right. Except right wasn't the word that Rano used the next morning. Wrong, sick, and sinful, were the kindest terms that Rano chose, and the arm that had held Dylan through the night now pushed him away.

"We shouldn't have done that," Rano kept repeating like a mantra, but soon enough the 'we' was replaced by 'you' as Rano made clear this was all Dylan's fault. Rano kept his back to him as he dressed, only facing him again when he was at the door.

"I won't tell anyone," Dylan said, but this promise didn't erase the disdain in Rano's eyes. As the bedroom door slammed, Dylan felt baffled at how something that felt like love could inspire such hate.

* * *

Dylan awoke with a start, confused about where he was. Only weak moonlight illuminated the dark room. Someone was shouting. He strained to make out the angry words when the ranting ceased. The pause lasted just long enough that he thought it was over when the voice cried out again—this time in terror.

Kio jolted awake. "What's going on?"

"I think Krale is in trouble."

A bestial scream echoed through the windmill, goose bumps racing over Dylan's skin in response. "We have to go look," he whispered.

He tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack, relieved to see the hallway empty. From the stairwell came the sound of a scuffle. Peering into its depths, he was only able to see a light from the second floor study. Kio behind him, Dylan began making his way downward, wincing with each squeaking stair.

The sounds below became so loud that there was little need for stealth. A mighty thud came first, forceful enough to vibrate throughout the entire windmill. Then Krале gave a triumphant yell, followed by the sound of stone scraping along the floor. The shouting that came next was fearful rather than victorious and strangled to an end.

Abandoning caution, Dylan flew down the stairs and plunged into the dimly lit room. The study was chaos; shattered furniture and toppled book shelves. In the corner a gas lamp sputtered on its side, its flame dangerously close to scattered books. Krале lay on the floor, only his legs visible beneath a pile of stone. Dylan whipped around, looking for the source of this havoc.

"Behind you!" Kio shouted as he leapt off the stairs.

Dylan turned to see the rubble on Krале shifting. Thinking at first that the Oligarch was alive and using his magic to free himself, Dylan rushed to help but stopped when he realized the pile of stones was moving as one, shifting like muscle, unbending and straightening. The stone was alive!

Wings unfurled from the creature's back as it turned its head to look at Dylan. The beast was bird-like in appearance, but its hide appeared to be hewn from gray rock instead of feathers. Murky red eyes peered from each side of its narrow head. Its stout beak was filled with something round, hairy, and bloody. Dylan recognized it as the back of Krале's head the moment the beast bit down, crushing the skull as if it were an egg.

Dylan was on the verge of vomiting, but the need to flee overpowered that urge. Kio, fur bristling, was already heading up the stairs. They raced one floor up before the entire windmill shook with a force that knocked Dylan to his knees. Try as he might, he couldn't regain his feet. All Dylan's strength was needed to keep from slipping down the stairs as he clung desperately to the rail. He knew that any second the creature could overtake them, and the idea terrified him.

The shaking stopped, and for the briefest moment everything was still. Dylan was back on his feet, but before he could take a single step, everything began to tilt. The slant increased until Kio slid backward down the stairs, his fall halted by Dylan, who had reached out one arm to catch the cat.

"The windmill is out of control!" Dylan shouted.

"You think so?" Kio growled.

A chorus of crashes and a bestial squawk sounded from below. With any luck the stone monster was hindered by problems of its own. Another gut-wrenching lurch and the windmill began tilting in the opposite direction until the floor was once again even.

"Go! Hurry!" Dylan yelled as he pushed Kio up the stairs.

"Where?" the cat hissed as he scuttled upward.

"I don't know. It's going to crash!"

"The windmill?"

"Yes! Now go!" Dylan took the winding stairs two, three at a time. He didn't know where they could run. The magic-fueled engines were on the top floor, Krale had told them. If the engines had been sabotaged, there might be a way to fix them, but he suspected another reason for their failure.

"Wait!" he yelled, just as they were about to pass the kitchen. "This way!"

He leapt off the stairwell and was almost knocked back by the intense winds. The magical barrier that once sealed off half the room was gone. Dylan's suspicions were correct. The Yellow Oligarch was dead, and his magic had died with him.

Miraculously, the windmill was still in the air, but it wouldn't be long before it lost power altogether.

He didn't know what to do. His instincts screamed at him to escape the building before it crashed to the ground. The force of impact would shatter the entire structure, the wreckage burying them alive if not crushing them to death; but how could they escape? With no time left, he succumbed to the primal urge to flee.

Fighting against the wind, he struggled across the dining room and onto the balcony. Kio followed, fear dilating his eyes into black discs. They scrambled to a halt on the wooden balcony just as the building lurched again, tilting drastically. Dylan's feet slid out from under him. Reaching out to grip something, he found only Kio and grabbed onto the cat, his stomach turning as he realized that they were freefalling. A swirl of stars was in front of him, the wooden floor of the balcony now a wall adjacent to the sky, instead of horizontal to it. Dylan wanted to scream, but before he could his back hit the railing, halting their fall and knocking the wind out of him.

He turned his head upward, not that direction held meaning anymore, and went stiff with fear. The giant blades of the windmill's rotor were directly above him. If the windmill continued to tilt in this direction, they would be thrown over the balcony's edge and into the spinning blades. He caught his breath just as the windmill swayed, sending him rolling to the right and over the rail. He cried out in pain as Kio's claws dug instinctively into him.

The world seemed to slow as they fell toward the rotor. Dylan hoped one of the massive blades would break their fall, but imagined their bodies would be sliced in half by the gigantic knives instead. His mind replayed the image over and over again, as he pictured the two halves tumbling to the ground, one nothing more than four legs: two human and two feline.

Dylan winced as they plummeted through the rotor's vicious path, a blade passing so close that the resulting wind

buffeted them like a fist. They had made it through! As they fell he watched the windmill rise away into the midnight sky and tightened his grip on Kio. He wanted to say something to the cat before they hit the ground, something meaningful before they met their inevitable end.

“Kio, I—” The air was knocked out of his lungs as he hit the ground, and when he tried to breathe in again, his lungs filled with blood.

He opened his eyes. Not blood. Water! He would have laughed if he wasn't on the verge of drowning. Somehow they had hit water! The windmill wasn't anywhere near a lake, and yet they were safe. Realizing that he and Kio had released each other, he kicked toward what he hoped was the surface. He kept swimming upward, wondering if the break into air would ever occur, until darkness engulfed his consciousness.

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