

The Cat in the Cradle revised edition © 2011 Jay Bell

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www.andreasbell.com



Chapter 3

Blue

Intense blue eyes peered from behind round spectacles, the face welcome and familiar, even the expression of concern. Dylan wanted to whisper his name, as if doing so would make the impossible true, but there was no air left to speak with. The spectacles flashed. A blue light swept into Dylan's mouth and out again, taking the water from his lungs as it went.

"Check him," his father said, stepping out of his line of vision.

The comforting green light of a healer's magic surrounded Dylan, soothing him into a blissful, dreamless sleep.

The roar of twin waterfalls brought him back to consciousness. Dylan recognized their powerful sound as belonging to one of his father's ships. No mere magician could charge a crystal like that. Dylan lifted his head and looked around the cabin. Brass and red velvet dominated the spacious room, luxuries normally reserved for a captain. The cold light outside the portholes said it was early morning. Kio was lying nearby with ears perked toward him.

"Hey, you're awake!" the cat said. "Thank the gods, too. I've been bored stiff for hours. You feeling all right?"

"What happened?" Dylan's throat felt raw and dry.

"You should have seen it! The whole thing was a lake! Under the windmill I mean. Jack used his magic to flood the entire field with water. Instant lake! Can you believe that?"

Dylan's memory of the night's events came rushing back, bringing irrational fear. His eyes darted around the room as if the stone monster would be waiting there. "What about Krale?"

"Just dandy," Kio said sarcastically. "They glued his head back together, and he's been dancing ever since."

Dylan didn't laugh. The image of the creature's beak closing and the resulting splatter of gore made him feel hollow inside.

"It's not funny, Kio."

The cat's ears sagged. "I know. I'm having a hard time dealing with it too, but hey, we came out of it alive. I'm grateful for that."

Dylan nodded. "How did Dad find us?"

"The instincts of a parent, I guess. That, and a little scrying. I didn't have time to ask many questions. After Jack made sure you were okay, he interrogated me for details." Kio adopted an apologetic expression. "I told it all to him straight. I figured it was no time to play coy."

Dylan nodded. "Good."

“Afterwards, your father put us both on this ship, and now we’re homeward bound. Jack stayed behind to figure out what exactly happened.”

Dylan’s muscles tensed. He didn’t like the idea of his father being out there with a stone creature on the loose, even with all of his magic. A loka hadn’t been enough to save Krale’s life. Dylan leaned back in bed and tried to swallow his guilt. If something happened to his father, all because of his irrational need to see Rano, he would never forgive himself.

* * * * *

Three days crawled by. Even though he was glad to be back somewhere safe and familiar, Dylan found little peace. His father had arrived back a day later—to his great relief—but hadn’t spoken to them since. The door to his office was sealed off by a wall of ice, something the Oligarch always did when demanding privacy, but never had he been so distant before. Dylan wondered if this time, he and Kio had gone too far and finally exhausted his patience.

Jack didn’t even show for meals, much to Ada’s chagrin. The old caretaker couldn’t explain his behavior either, and spent most of her time worrying over Dylan and Kio as if they were in harm’s way, even at home.

Unfortunately, Dylan shared her panic. He no longer felt safe in the tower’s protective walls. Situated on a small island in the middle of the Lakeland’s largest body of water, the tower was only accessible by a single bridge that was neither gated nor guarded. There had never been a need before, but Dylan now knew that monsters could come from the air. Seeing the Yellow Oligarch killed in his own home had left Dylan shaken. His father had once told him that magical wards were built into the blue tower to counter-measure any attack. Dylan tried to trust his father’s word, but he kept envisioning the winged beast at his window.

Despite not feeling safe at home, Dylan refused to leave the tower, even to venture out on the little island. Kio stayed with

him, becoming restless, but contenting himself by taking sun naps on the balcony that ringed the tower's highest floor.

On the morning of the fourth day, Ada burst into Dylan's room without knocking. He was about to protest when he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Your father wants you," she said, clutching at him. "Don't you listen to him either. Oh!" She let go of him to wrench a handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose.

"We're not in that much trouble, are we?" Kio asked.

"It's just—" She broke off, again overcome by emotion.

Ada looked miserable. Strands of gray hair had come loose from her normally tidy bun, and she kept wringing her bony hands. Dylan wanted to hug and comfort her, but was afraid that she might burst into tears. Then they would never get the story out of her.

"It's not my place to say," Ada said, her tone becoming angry, "but let me tell you this: You are almost a grown man, Dylan, and you no longer have to do what your father tells you." She nodded as if satisfied, turned, and marched out of the room.

Dylan pondered Ada's reaction as he went downstairs. He hadn't seen her that upset in years, and her advice to go against his father's plans was surprising. Jack wasn't a harsh man and had always punished Dylan with lectures instead of beatings. Aside from his father there was only Ada, who had raised Dylan as if he were her own son. He might as well have been, since Dylan's mother had died when he was very young, and he had no memories of her. Ada was hired shortly afterwards to be his nanny, but had long since become an honorary member of the family. A strong woman not prone to emotional outbreaks, Dylan wondered what could make her so distraught.

His stomach churned as he reached the study door. The magical barrier was gone, and the door was ajar, so he pushed it the rest of the way open and went inside.

His father's office looked as it always had. Every flat surface was piled with papers and books. Even the shelves lining the room were stuffed so full as to be on the verge of exploding. A desk was centered in front of windows on the far wall. The Blue Oligarch was sandwiched between them, the daylight from behind lending him an aura of white light.

Dylan sat down, Kio on the floor next to him, and kept his eyes on the desk rather than on his father. The desk too was cluttered by books and other items, in its center a misshapen bowl that Dylan had made when he was six years old. He had painted the clay bowl with so many different colors that they ran together to create an ugly shade of brown. The bowl was filled with water and used by the Blue Oligarch when he scried; images magically appearing on the water's surface. The blue loka hovered just above the bowl, an object of indescribable beauty spinning above a disaster of crockery.

Dylan looked to a shelf where there sat an ornate onyx bowl lined with silver. His father had used this beautiful bowl before receiving Dylan's as a present. Even though the onyx bowl was more befitting his rank, his father had never used it again. With this thought in mind, Dylan raised his gaze and met his father's eyes. Their soft blue depths radiated love and a subtle hint of anxiety.

"I'm really sorry," Dylan blurted out. "We were just out for—"

"It's all right, Dylan. You don't need to explain. Kio did so well enough the night that it happened."

Dylan reached down and scratched the cat behind the ear in thanks as his father continued in a sterner tone of voice.

"Keep in mind, though, that if I hadn't taken it upon myself to scry and find out where you were, you would both be lying dead in a field right now. Heartbreak would put an end to Ada and I shortly after. You're too old to go running off without an explanation."

"Sorry," Dylan said, not knowing how to adequately express his regret. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too. Both of you." His smile promised all was forgiven before he continued. "Now, down to business. I need you to cast your mind back to the events of that night and try to recall any suspicious detail; anything at all that stands out in your mind."

"More suspicious than some rock monster maiming and killing an Oligarch?" His father didn't look amused, so Dylan changed his tone. "No, not really. I've played it all back in my mind enough times to have noticed something. I mean, the windmill went crazy right after he... When the creature—"

"Yes," Jack said softly. "Perhaps Krale mentioned someone that he was having a conflict with?"

"Just you, but he was practically complimenting you at the same time. Wait, why are you looking for something suspicious? It was a wild animal."

His father raised an eyebrow. "Was it? The creature that attacked him was a wyvern. A stone wyvern to be exact, which is an exceptionally rare animal. They are native only to the northern-most point of this continent, a distance of more than five weeks by horse. I don't believe it wandered so far south by accident. No, there's little chance of that."

"So how did it get there then?" Kio asked, his eyes peering over the edge of the desk. "Did someone magic it up?"

"Most likely. It could have been brought by some magical means or perhaps even created. That's what I've been trying to discover for the last few days, but without any luck." Jack removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

Dylan noticed, not for the first time, how thin and gray his father's hair was becoming and tried not to think about how old he was. More than ever he needed to believe in the fading illusion that his father was invincible. "Why would someone do such a thing?" he asked.

Jack replaced his glasses and stared at Dylan. "Haven't you guessed? The yellow loka is missing!"

"So there's a new Yellow Oligarch somewhere out there."

"Unless it was lost in the wreckage," Kio pointed out.

"It wasn't," Jack said. "A loka's magic is easy to detect. Wherever it is, the loka is long gone."

His father turned to note the sun's position. "I'm afraid we must cut to the chase. There's no doubt that Krale's murder was premeditated. Our culprit selected a creature that yellow magic would be ineffective against, thus achieving the first stage of their plan."

"First stage?" Kio's ears flattened against his head. "You mean—"

"That they intend to take similar action against another member of the Oligarchy. In fact, I am to be the next victim."

Dylan's blood ran cold.

"Let them try it!" Kio hissed.

"Why?" Dylan breathed. "Why you?"

"It's the most logical strategy. By killing Krale they ceased communication between all the Oligarchs. We relied on his telepathy to stay linked together. He was the mouth and ears of the Oligarchy, and I am the eyes. If I am killed, the remaining Oligarchs will be mute, deaf, and blind."

Dylan's stomach sank. Without his father's ability to scry anywhere in the Five Lands, finding the culprit would be near impossible. "Are you sure Krale was the first to be killed?"

"Some Oligarchs have taken great precautions to ensure their privacy, so I can't be certain. However, I was able to successfully check up on many, which brings us to the most important point. I'm sending you to stay with the Red Oligarch. Both of you," he added before Kio could protest.

"So you can stay here and face your fate alone?" Dylan said, his voice rising. "Never!"

"I won't be here either," his father assured him. "Nor will Ada. She'll be staying with her sister, and I'll be pursuing my own line of investigation."

"Then we'll go with you!" Dylan shouted.

Jack didn't reply. Instead, he stared patiently at his son. Dylan hated it when he did this. He wouldn't reply to anything Dylan said until he calmed down and spoke in a more

appropriate tone. This method of discipline frustrated Dylan, but was inarguably effective.

"Please take us with you," Dylan said once he had gotten himself under control. "We can help."

"I won't under any circumstances, and I'll explain why. In the last three days, I've managed to see into the future no less than four times."

Dylan leaned forward, understanding now what his father had been so preoccupied with. Seeing into the future took tremendous magical effort, and was very time-consuming—much more so than normal scrying. Doing so once within two days was impressive enough, but more than once a day was quite a feat.

"I will not reveal the gruesome details, but in the first vision I saw you die, Son. You died trying to defend me. Armed with this knowledge, I knew how to prevent this. I looked into the future again. In the second vision, the fate befell me instead. I saw myself die defending the both of you." Jack stopped and breathed in heavily, the memory of the visions disturbing him.

"I decided then to leave this place, to hunt the killer down. The resulting vision showed my own magic being turned against me, leading to my demise."

"How?" Dylan asked.

"The details are my own," Jack said. "Finally I decided on yet another plan of action. The fourth vision I had must remain a secret if it is to come true, but is the only chance for us to survive."

"So what are we going to do?" Kio asked.

"I'm passing the blue loka on to you, Dylan."

"But that will leave you defenseless!"

"It will save my life! I'm still a skilled blue magician with or without the loka. I might not pack the same punch, but I will be fine."

"I'm not ready for it," Dylan said, shaking his head. "Squirrels make better magicians than I do."

“All the more reason for you to take it. It will see you safely to the Red Oligarch, whom I trust implicitly.” He turned again to check the windows behind him. “It’s time to go.”

“We’re leaving today?” Kio asked.

“You are leaving this moment.” Jack stood and pushed a cloth bag toward Dylan to the familiar clinking of coins. “A boat stocked with provisions is waiting for you. Now, take hold of the blue loka.”

Dylan wanted to refuse, to put an end to this nonsense just as Ada had suggested, but his father’s expression stopped him short. Hand shaking, he plucked the loka from the air. He had handled it before and wasn’t surprised to feel it vibrating with an inner warmth that made it feel alive.

“Good,” Jack said. “Now you know what you must say.”

“Give me a minute!”

“Say it.”

Dylan sighed and promised himself this would be undone as soon as this ordeal was over. He already felt uncertain about wielding one of the most powerful magical treasures in the world, but accepting the responsibility of being an Oligarch was unthinkable.

“Blue loka, awaken for me,” he said in tones that were anything but triumphant.

“Very good,” Jack said.

“That’s it? The loka isn’t going to flash, or speak, or something?”

“Not all magic is accompanied by fanfare,” Jack lectured as he rounded the desk and embraced his son. Then he stooped to hug Kio. “Take care of each other.” Jack stood and looked Dylan in the eye. “One more thing. You mustn’t return here, either of you. I’ll come for you when all of this is over. Don’t come back here for any reason, understood?”

A moment later, Dylan was standing with Kio in an empty and silent hallway, the only sound a soft humming from the glowing blue gem in his hand.

* * * * *

"It's inconspicuous," said Dylan.

"It's crap," Kio replied.

"It's running faster now," Dylan countered.

"It's still crap," Kio reiterated.

Dylan beamed. "It's ours!"

Kio sighed heavily. "Do you suppose this is his way of punishing us?"

"It might be."

They were aboard the same shoddy boat they had stolen a week ago. A letter from Dylan's father explained that Mr. Boyo, the original owner of the boat, had reported it stolen and asked the Blue Oligarch to investigate. Mr. Boyo was so delighted to be compensated in gold for his loss that he hadn't asked who the thieves had been. Attached with the letter was a new title of ownership, with Dylan and Kio's names scrawled at the bottom.

The boat was running three times faster, if not more. That had everything to do with the loka and nothing to do with Dylan's skill. He was nervous about using the loka for the first time, but he needn't have worried. Going about his usual method of magic, but willing his energy through the loka instead, made the engine crystal glow like a miniature blue sun. The first time the two powerful streams of water shot from the crystal, the ship almost broke apart as it launched forward.

They made good progress, winding with the curving river to the southeast where the Red Oligarch lived. The sun was now setting on the second day of their voyage, and they likely would reach their destination early the next morning. With that thought in mind, Dylan steered the boat to the river bank, performed the anchor spell, and lit the back lamp to alert other boats to their position. He didn't need to light the front lamp, not with the crystal burning so brightly. They settled down inside the little cabin, which was still cramped and shoddy, but much more comfortable now thanks to a mattress, blankets and pillows.

"It's ironic, isn't it?" Kio said as he settled down on an old favorite blanket from home, crumpled up in a corner.

"What is?" asked Dylan, who was stretched out on his back with his hands behind his head. His mattress was thin and not very well stuffed, but compared to their sleeping conditions during the last trip, it felt luxurious.

"Ironic because last week we were running away from home, and this week we've been exiled. Makes you wonder if this is all some sort of cosmic punishment."

Dylan snorted. "Be careful what you wish for? That kind of thing?"

"Exactly." Kio scratched one of his ears. "Have we ever met the Red Oligarch?"

"Long time ago, yeah. Big woman, like opera singer big." Dylan curved each arm at his sides to indicate girth. "Loud too, but nice. You were just a kitten."

"Jack said 'him' so you must be thinking of someone else."

"Did he?" Dylan strained to remember.

"I'm certain. He was shoving us on the boat and told us to trust him."

"That's odd."

Frogs began their nocturnal croaking, causing Dylan to lapse into thought. He felt more at ease now that they were traveling. He had felt like a sitting duck back at the tower, but now that they were on the move, they would be harder to find. On the other hand, he was uneasy that he didn't have a home to return to. The tower was still there of course, but his family had gone, and he wasn't supposed to return until summoned. His dad had seen something coming, maybe the creature that killed the Yellow Oligarch. Dylan wondered if the wyvern was at the tower already, lurking in the now-empty rooms, its stone wings scraping along the floor as it patrolled hallways, searching for signs of life.

"There's something on the deck," Kio whispered.

The hair on Dylan's neck stood up when he saw that Kio was serious. The cat's ears turned as they tracked whatever

was out there. Dylan didn't hear anything, but he had complete faith in Kio's hearing.

"Sounds like a human,"

"Only one?"

The cat nodded. Heady with adrenaline, Dylan eased off the mattress and crawled toward the door of the cabin. A small round window was set at head's height in the door, so he rose up from the floor and peeked out.

The man on deck was old, judging from the sparse hair on his head. Despite the shadows, Dylan could see that his clothes were ragged and his skin dirty. He shuffled around the deck in a slow clumsy circle, as if trying to get his bearings. Dylan caught a brief glimpse of his line-worn face, which was screwed up in effort or confusion.

"There's some old hobo out there," Dylan reported.

"What's he doing?"

Dylan shrugged and looked out once more. The man had finished circling and was now shuffling toward the crystal engine, his hands already raised in anticipation.

"He's going to steal the engine!" Dylan hissed. "Come on!"

Kio padded silently over to the door.

"Do your wild animal act, all right?"

"Yup."

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

Dylan threw the door open and bellowed, "Hey!" in his deepest, most aggressive voice.

As soon as the man turned around, Kio was out the door, hissing and growling as he leapt toward the stranger. He landed a few feet in front of the man, who reacted with almost comical terror as he stumbled backward and choked on his own scream. His eyes bulged like two fat grapes as he began to grasp at his throat with both hands.

"I think he's choking," Dylan said from behind.

"Or maybe he's just nuts," Kio replied.

The stranger lurched forward, falling to his hands and knees, vomiting dark syrupy fluid all over the deck. Kio's sharp instincts saved him from being sprayed as he sprang backward and landed near Dylan. He hissed and flattened his ears. "Crazy *and* drunk!"

Dylan burst out laughing, and Kio soon joined him. This guy was a nuisance, not a threat. Hopefully the shock Kio had given him would sober him up. The stranger retched again, unleashing even more bile. Dylan stopped laughing, his stomach turning at the acrid smell.

"Hey, there's something in his puke that's..." Kio trailed off.

Alive. Dylan saw it, too. Slithering back and forth in the puke was what looked like a huge snake—more than one, in fact, and they were growing longer by the second, their thick bodies still slithering out of the man's mouth.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Kio asked.

Dylan gagged, unable to answer while fighting back his own nausea.

The stranger stood, pushing himself up with renewed energy. The two serpentine bodies, each eight feet long, rose into the air in front of the man like new appendages. What were they, some sort of parasite? Were they part of him? Their heads were flat and featureless like an eel's, their skin black and slimy. They hissed in unison, weaving back and forth as if swimming. The man glared fiercely before returning his attention to the crystalline engine.

Dylan and Kio looked at each other in shock.

"Now what?" Dylan asked.

"We can't let him take the crystal! We need it!"

"Right." Dylan fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the blue loka. He held it before him with the tips of his fingers and thumb so it could be seen. The loka was a symbol of authority, hopefully one that this creature would respond to. "Leave our ship," he said. "Now."

The eel-man whipped around. His eyes lit up in recognition of the loka, but instead of leaving, he advanced. The eels stretched out eagerly, the mouths of each serpentine creature clicking open and shut excitedly, their sharp little teeth shining in the moonlight.

“I am the Blue Oligarch, and I command you to stop!”

The eel-man didn’t even pause.

“Screw that, just use it!” Kio yelled.

How? His father had taught him nothing about magical combat, not even defensive maneuvers, and the eel-man was closing in. Near to panic, Dylan summoned all the magical energy in his body and shot it through the loka. Water exploded in front of him, knocking Dylan backwards until his back hit the wall of the cabin. Ignoring the pain, he wiped the water from his eyes with the back of an arm to see the results of his magic. The entire deck was flooded with water that drained off the side of the ship. The eel-man had been knocked backward, but not as far as Dylan had been. Kio was a wet rag, hanging over one of the rails.

The eel-man stood, pushing himself up with both his arms and his eels. A deep gurgling growl came from the creature’s throat as he launched himself toward Dylan, the eels stretched out arrow-straight, eager to reach him. Dylan found himself unable to move, staring numbly at the chattering triangular teeth. To hell with the loka! He shoved it back in his pocket and struggled to unsheathe his pocket knife, but he was out of time. The eels were inches away from his face when a white streak barreled into the eel-man’s side.

The creature and Kio were airborne for a moment, the serpents trailing along behind like two slimy banners. The eel-man landed on his knees and skidded over the deck, stopping just short of the rail. Kio landed on all four feet and immediately sprang again, this time pouncing on the eel-man’s back. The creature fell forward, knocking its head on the rail with a loud crack. After its body slid to the side and hit the

deck with a thud, Kio landed gracefully and turned to face Dylan.

“You see that? I showed that little fu—”

The eels sprang to life, hissing and writhing, even though the rest of the body was unconscious. One was pinned underneath the eel-man’s torso, but the other whipped out and lashed itself around Kio’s neck.

The eel lifted the cat off the ground and slammed him downward toward the deck, but Kio managed to twist around so that his feet hit the wooden floor first. Snapping out of his stupor, Dylan scrambled to his feet to help him.

Dylan tried stomping on the middle of the serpent’s body to stop it from rising again. It writhed under his bare foot, its slimy skin making it impossible to pin down. He slipped backward and fell to the deck, but scrambled up when Kio hissed out in pain. This time Dylan used his hands, his fingers barely connecting around the serpent’s torso. He wrestled with it, Kio’s claws digging into the deck as he struggled, the eel nipping at his fur but not yet his flesh. The cat wouldn’t last much longer. Kio would run out of energy if he didn’t run out of air first.

Dylan lifted one hand in order to reach his knife—a mistake that allowed the eel to escape his grasp. He struggled to grab it again, recognizing that holding it with one hand while cutting it with the other would be impossible. The eel was much too strong, and Kio was running out of time. Doing the only thing he could think of, Dylan bent over the eel, opened his mouth wide, and bit down. Its skin was tough and oily and difficult for his teeth to penetrate, but he kept biting. When he seemed to have broken through the outer skin, he bit down once more, this time grinding his jaw back and forth, sawing into its flesh with his teeth. A shrill screech filled the air as blood poured into his mouth, but Dylan kept gnawing into the raw meat of the eel until he heard Kio gulping in air.

Dylan looked up to confirm that Kio was free before releasing his grip on the eel. Still high on adrenaline, he stood

and heaved the eel-man up by his waist. The bitten eel was almost completely severed, the other in a state of panic. Before it could recover, Dylan stepped forward and pushed the entire body over the railing where it splashed into the water.

Without hesitation, he ran to the front of the boat, magically released the anchor, and sent the boat lurching toward midstream. Kio, still panting, limped over to his side. When they were at full speed and safely away, they both began laughing.

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