

Dominion Over All

Zak Bates Eco Adventures Book 1

W. Bradford Swift

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“God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” (Gen. 1.26).

But what does “dominion” really mean? It is traditionally interpreted as “to subdue” or “to rule over.” When taken to an extreme, it can include oppression and exploitation. However, an exploited planet Earth does not leave humanity richer. Perhaps there is a deeper, more sustainable aspect of dominion that includes a sense of service to one's fellow creatures and even a compulsion to protect those who cannot protect themselves. (From The Christian Science Monitor)

Dedication

I became an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction as an eleven- year-old boy when my next-door neighbor, who was a children's li- brarian, took pity on my single-parent mom. Bored out of my gourd with no one play with but good 'ol mom, I drove her crazy until Mrs. Crabtree brought home a stack of books she knew would hook a young boy and give my mom some relief. It worked. I've been hooked ever since. This book is my attempt to give back to the many authors who kept me entertained those long hot summer days, and for the past several decades. And I dedicate this book to you, Mrs. Crabtree. Thanks for caring.

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Acknowledgments

My two lovely ladies, my wife, Ann, and my daughter, Amber, give my life so much meaning and purpose. I thank you both for continuing to stand in my corner, rooting me on to the next purposeful

project, even the ones that may sound hair-brained to you when I first share them — like the idea of becoming a world renowned author of visionary fiction and nonfiction. I also acknowledge the Divine who is at the source of it all. Thank you for my blessed life of service, simplicity and spiritual serenity.

Dominion Over All

Chapter 1

The Accident

The squealing tires, sounding like a mink caught in a steel trap, would echo in Zak's mind forever. In a roundabout sort of way, the sound had been the start of thirteen-year-old Zak's biggest adventure — the one that was to shape the rest of his life. Just as a foot race begins with the crack of a gun, and a horse race with a bell and "They're off!", Zak's race to save the animals of the world began with the squeal of tires and a sickening thump.

Zak couldn't remember the rabbit hutch having ever been dirtier. He hated cleaning it. Of all the chores he had in managing his zoo, cleaning the hutch was his least favorite. The hamster cages were easy in comparison and he actually enjoyed cleaning the aquariums. Even the timid guinea pigs weren't much trouble. But the rabbit hutch took far too long to clean, and boy, the smell. It reminded Zak of his Great Aunt Bessie's chicken coops. Perhaps it takes longer and smells so bad because I wait so long before I clean it, Zak thought. Not until it's so bad Calida notices the smell when she walks by the garage. Maybe if I cleaned it more regularly, I wouldn't mind it so much. Zak suspected this was true, but he doubted he would change his routine. Besides, it gave his stepmother something else to complain about.

Zak straightened up from his chore for a moment. Being small for his age, such physical work tired him out. His dad called him wiry,

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and Zak often kidded with his older brother, Luk, that he was "sleeked down for action," but the truth was cleaning the zoo by himself was just plain hard work.

Their new home was situated across the street from a park in a new development in the Guildford College area of Greensboro, North Carolina. Zak thought the homes looked too much alike for his taste, but the spacious two car garage was one of the few good things about the recent move across country. Who'd ever even heard of Greensboro? Certainly Zak hadn't — not until his dad had arrived home from the San Francisco offices of Consolidated Enterprises to inform him they were being relocated for the fourth time in the ten years his dad had been with the company.

Of course, as his dad quickly pointed out, you could get a lot more house in North Carolina than you could in California for the same amount of money, and so Zak's dream of expanding his zoo beyond his bedroom became a reality over the summer.

He paused from the smelly work, brushing a shock of blonde hair out of his eyes as he gazed at the hand-painted sign:

BATES ZOOLOGICAL PARK ADMISSION \$1 50¢ 25¢

He realized, on one hand, he was probably the youngest zoo owner in the world, but on the other hand...well it really wasn't much of a zoo by most zoo standards. His plan had been for the zoo to be self-supporting but so far its only visitors had been his dad, stepmother and Luk, and despite his father's advice to never let emotions or personal relationships get in the way of business, Zak just couldn't charge family members, not even Calida, his stepmom. After all, they had donated the property for the zoo with both family cars being relegated to the elements of the great outdoors. As far as Zak was concerned, his family were lifelong members of the Bates Zoo and would never have to pay admission.

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A short, snippy bark from Angus, an impatient Cairn terrier and Zak's lifelong companion, jerked Zak from his daydream. Small for his breed at less than twenty pounds, Angus more than made up for it with an abundance of spunk. Zak turned around and nodded to his companion.

"Okay, you caught me. I'll get back to work, but it'll still be a while before I can play with you. I need to feed the king snake you were so kind to find for our zoo."

Zak walked across the garage to a large bin of milk bones sitting on the work bench. Angus sat down a few feet inside the open door of the garage and watched his friend with an intent, almost anxious look.

The bone-bin was nearly as old as Angus. It had been a present from a seven-year-old Zak on Angus's first birthday, even though Zak's father had provided the money for the present. Zak had received Angus as a birthday present about a year earlier, just a few months after Zak's mom had died in an automobile accident. The blow had devastated the entire family, but especially six-year old Zak who couldn't understand why it was taking her so long to come home from the grocery store. Finally, in frustration, Wendell, Zak's father, had brought the puppy home in an effort to console his son. It had been one of Wendell's few family ideas that had panned out. Unlike his other ideas, like the one almost two years ago when he had suddenly returned from a business trip in Mexico with Calida in tow, announcing to his two sons that they'd been married while in her country.

“Here, go munch on this for a while,” Zak said, tossing one of the large biscuits to Angus who caught it in mid-air, thanking Zak with a muffled bark. “Sorry, I’m fresh out of fish heads but this will tide you over for now.” Over the years Angus had acquired an unusual taste for raw fish heads, digging them out of the garbage after Wendell returned from one of his fishing expeditions. It had grown into such a passion that no matter where they moved to one of Zak’s first job was to strike up a deal with a local fish store to save Angus some fish heads each week. Angus’s salt-and-pepper coat had never looked better although, as Luk was quick to point out, his breath could wilt a silk flower.

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“I’ll be finished soon and then we can play catch,” Zak said, as Angus growled in delight and padded out of the garage with his prize. Zak turned back to the rabbit hutch, his face pinched in a look of displeasure.

Twenty minutes, Zak told himself as he glanced at his watch. I’ll have my chores done in twenty minutes. His dad had told him how work always expanded to fill up time and Zak wasn’t interested in expanding work, particularly not this work. Oh, to have a magic wand and be able to whisk away the work with one wave. With a heavy sigh, Zak began scraping off the rabbit droppings from the wire-meshed floor of the hutch.

He was nearly finished cleaning the cage when he heard the frantic yipping that he recognized as Angus’s, although it sounded a long way off. Zak also recognized the particular type of barking. Angus must have snuck across the street to chase the park squirrels. If Calida caught Angus chasing squirrels again, they’d both be grounded for a week.

Zak straightened up from his task and, grabbing an old rag to wipe his hands, ran out of the garage to find Angus. Sure enough, there he was on the other side of Wimbledon Street, prancing at the foot of a large maple, barking at a chattering squirrel above him.

“Angus, stop it!” Zak shouted, smiling in spite of himself. He hated to admit it but he loved watching his little companion chase after the fluff-tails. As far as Zak knew, Angus had never caught a squirrel, but the unsuccessful track record never deterred the vigor with which he pursued them. Angus definitely had a “never-say-die” attitude.

“Come on, get back over here where you belong,” Zak shouted with a laugh. “I’m really not looking to add a squirrel to the Bates Zoo, especially not after you get through with it.”

Angus glanced toward his master and then back at the squirrel. With a final yip, he conceded the match to the squirrel and started home to his master. He’ll be disappointed to find I’m not yet done with my chores, Zak thought as he watched the little dog bound towards

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him. He could tell from the height of Angus's gait he expected to be rewarded for his efforts with a game of catch.

Maybe it was the excitement of the chase coupled with the expectation of further play that kept Angus from checking the street. He had learned early in life to always watch for traffic, but at times even deep-seated lessons are forgotten in the thrill of the moment.

Zak noticed the error but before he could open his mouth, the sight of the gleaming sports car bearing down on Angus froze the words in his throat. The car seemed to have materialized from thin air. One moment the small dog pranced across an empty street; in the next instant a sleek black and chrome missile bore down on him.

Zak ran towards the street. Finally finding his voice, he screamed to Angus to go back, but his little friend ignored his plea. Zak wished his dog out of danger, wishing once more for a magic wand like a real magician. I could cast a bubble of protection around Angus, one that would send the car careening off in some other direction or maybe when the car touched the bubble, it would disappear in a cloud of smoke and sparkles.

But I'm not a magician, Zak thought, as he watched the nightmare play out in front of him. Not really – not yet. He had no magic wand or secret spell. For a moment, it looked as though Angus might make it across the street with only a very close call, but at the last second the car seemed to leap ahead, its bumper striking Angus's right hip, skipping him across the hard pavement like a flat stone skimming across a quiet lake. The car veered to the left and skidded to a stop. Angus finally came to an abrupt stop as his head struck the curb with a dull thump only a few yards from Zak. The little dog hadn't made a sound.

Please God, don't let him die, Zak repeated over and over as he ran to his best friend. I'll do whatever you ask of me, just please don't let him die. Anything God, really, anything.

The next few moments blurred for Zak. Just as time had seemed to slow down only moments before, it now sped up as though catching up with itself. He stooped over Angus's limp, motionless body, gently placing his hand on the dog's chest. He felt the exuberant rush of

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adrenalin as his fingers picked up the faint, rapid heartbeat confirming his prayers had so far been answered. He checked the color of Angus's gums for signs of shock as he'd learned from his Cub Scout manual.

Other people suddenly arrived on the scene — all in a blur. A young lady – Zak learned later she'd been driving the car – was no help at all as she wrung her hands and cried about how sorry she was. There was old man Brown, their next door neighbor. Zak didn't really know his neighbors very well, having moved to the neighborhood a couple months ago, but even in the short time, he'd learned Brown was the neighborhood's grouch. Being retired, Brown spent most of the time on his porch,

rocking, watching and complaining to any other neighbor who would spend a few minutes listening to him.

Zak looked up in time to see Calida bending over him with a look on her face that almost made him break out in tears. But he didn't have time for tears — not while Angus needed him.

"I'll help you pick him up, Zak. Just tell me how," Calida said in a soft, warm voice. "I've called Dr. George. Her clinic is just a couple of blocks away. I'm sure Angus will be all right."

Zak nodded, wanting to believe her, but at the same time realizing he knew more about animal medicine than she did. Already from his brief examination he knew Angus was in serious trouble. Angus's normally bright pink gums were pale pink, almost white. Pressing on them had caused no more blanching.

Zak's two passions in life were magic and animals and so far, he was a much better animal caretaker than he was a magician. He knew Angus was going into shock and if they didn't get him immediate attention, he was going to die. Please, God, don't let him die, Zak repeated the short prayer again even as he instructed Calida to fetch a blanket. Please, God, don't let him die.

Zak watched as old man Brown spoke to the young girl as he waited for the blanket. Her frantic movements contrasted with the crisp tidiness of her navy blue business suit. He was surprised when Brown grabbed her shoulders and shook her, demanding she stop crying.

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He heard her tell ol' man Brown, "I never come this way, but for some reason today I had this overpowering thought to try it as a shortcut. Now, look what I've done."

At first, Zak didn't understand what the old man was doing. It wasn't until later as Zak rode to the hospital in the seat next to her with Angus in his arms that he realized it had been Brown who'd brought her back to her senses.

Then Calida was back with the blanket — a bright orange one left over from their recent move. Zak thought briefly how mad his dad would be if they got blood on it. They would have to pay the moving company if they couldn't return it. Calida didn't seem to mind and so he certainly wasn't going to say anything. Zak folded the blanket into fourths and laid it beside the unconscious Angus. Gently, they lifted Angus's limp body onto the blanket, then, using the blanket as a sling, carried him to the sports car. Zak gently wrapped the blanket around the still body of his lifelong buddy, and climbed in the passenger seat, instinctively keeping one hand pressed on Angus's chest. The heart continued its faint rapid beat as Zak continued his litany, please, God, don't let him die. As Calida closed the door on the passenger side, the car pulled away from the curb and sped down the road towards the veterinary clinic.

Meeting Ra-Kit

As they pulled into the parking lot of the Animal Care Clinic, Zak was dismayed at the long line of cars, then realized that since it was a little after five, everyone must be picking up their pets. Calida pointed out the two white-coated technicians standing beside the clinic building with a stainless steel table on wheels between them. They were waiting for Angus.

The young woman drove to within a few feet of the table, and one of the technicians helped Zak move Angus's still motionless body to the dolly while the other technician held the door. As they wheeled Angus into the clinic, Zak noticed the name tag on the technician's coat said her name was Allison George, but clearly she was too young to be the vet. Still, she appeared to know what she was doing so he briefly told her what had happened. She nodded, then assured him they would do everything possible to save his dog.

Calida, who had remained behind with the woman in the car for a moment, rushed into the treatment room. A few moments later a tall woman with gray-streaked hair wearing a light blue lab coat strolled briskly into the room. She looked first at Angus, then at Calida and Zak.

"Hi, I'm Dr. George. I'll be with you in just a moment," she said, and for an instant Zak was afraid she was going to leave and wait on someone else. But instead, she turned to Angus, listening to his chest

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with a stethoscope. As she did so, Zak repeated Angus's vital signs. She nodded, glancing up long enough to give Zak a reassuring smile. "You've done a good job helping your friend," she said, then turned

her attention back to Angus.

"Zak, why don't you come with me to the waiting room?" Calida

asked. "I need to call your father. Dr. George will take good care of Angus."

Zak shook his head firmly and was about to answer but Dr. George beat him to it. "It's okay for him to stay. He can give us the other information we need to know about Angus. You go make your call. Cindy, show Mrs..."

"Calida, Calida Bates," she finished for her. She glanced at Zak and tried to smile. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She turned and followed the technician out.

Zak watched as Dr. George and Allison placed an I.V. catheter in Angus's front leg and started a rapid drip of fluids. Seeing the two working so close together it became clear to Zak that they must be

related — probably mother and daughter. The young girl had the same color hair, minus the gray streaks, and her small, slightly upturned nose could have been a photocopy of Dr. George's.

After making sure the fluids were flowing at a steady rate, they slid a light green vinyl pad under the bright orange blanket. She's probably about my age, Zak thought as she watched the technician's expert hands gently lift Angus. Pretty young to be working in a veterinary clinic, but then again, having a vet as a mom had its perks. Anyway, she certainly seemed to know what she was doing, and that's what really mattered.

"This is a heating pad," Dr. George explained to Zak as she adjusted the pad under Angus. "Angus's temperature is low, but not as low as it would have been if you hadn't thought to use the blanket. You've really helped your little friend out by acting so quickly."

Zak continued to watch with interest, being careful to stay out of the way as the two of them worked on Angus. Dr. George periodically checked Angus's temperature, heart rate and gum colors. Zak glanced

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at the wall clock across the room. They'd been working on Angus for about thirty minutes when Dr. George looked over at him. She smiled at him, but Zak could still see the concern hidden behind it.

"I'm afraid Angus is slow to respond to the fluids and heat, Zak. His temperature has stabilized but the color of his gums is still poor as is his heart rate. He is also having difficulty breathing." Zak had noticed Angus's respiration had become more labored but had hoped it meant he was waking up.

"I'm going to move him into intensive care where we can continue the fluids and place him in an oxygen cage at the same time to make it easier for him to breathe. You can stay with him if you like."

Zak nodded, his throat too tight to say anything. He continued the short prayer that he'd been reciting ever since the accident. He watched as they wheeled Angus into the next room, then followed behind them. The intensive care ward was a smaller room with a bank of four cages along one wall. On the opposite wall was a large window that looked into a room Zak guessed must be for surgery. Dr. George has a nice clinic, he thought. That must make her a good vet. Surely, she could save Angus if anyone could.

They gently moved Angus with his blanket and heating pad into one of the cages on the second row. Unlike the other cages, this one had a clear Plexiglas door with rubber around the edges.

"We can pump pure oxygen into the cage that will make it easier for Angus to breathe," Dr. George explained as she closed the door. "Once he is stabilized I'll want to take some x-rays, but we've got to get him out of shock first."

As the door clanked shut, a flick of a black tail above the cage caught Zak's attention. For the first time he noticed the large black cat lounging in the far corner. Dr. George followed Zak's gaze.

"We call her Tip," she explained. "She's an old stray that took up with us a couple of days ago. I didn't realize she was in here. If you like I'll have Allison put her in the cat ward."

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“No, that’s okay. She won’t bother me, and Angus isn’t like most dogs. He likes cats.” He didn’t bother to tell her what Angus liked most about cats was chasing them up trees.

“Allison will stay with you and Angus. She’s fully trained in monitoring the pets. I need to see a few more clients, then I’ll be back.” She hesitated for a moment as though looking for something else to say. She placed a warm hand on Zak’s shoulder and squeezed lightly. “I’ll be back in just a few minutes,” she repeated, then left.

The cat continued to sit on top of the cage watching Allison hook the oxygen to the intake valve on the cage door. Zak stared at the cat as it stretched and yawned, apparently bored by the intrusion. It’s not a very pretty cat, Zak thought, although he suspected it had once been. The cat’s fur, despite being dirty, maintained a sheen, like a piece of expensive furniture with a thick coating of dust over the fine wood.

As the cat yawned a second time, Zak noticed several front teeth missing and at least one broken fang tooth. It’s an old cat, probably a stray for most of its life, he thought, as he studied its gnarled ears and the many scars on its face. Probably came to the clinic to warm itself and get a couple free meals before setting out again. It was one of the things Zak liked most about cats, their independence. Unlike a dog who would take any amount of abuse from its master, a cat would disappear in a flash if mistreated, sometimes even when it received the best of care. If it got the urge to go, it was gone.

The cat began to lick one of its front paws, as though its personal hygiene was still an important matter despite its overall disheveled appearance. Zak’s attention kept returning to the cat, even though he felt he should have all his attention on Angus. Allison adjusted the oxygen flow to the proper setting, then turned to Zak.

“I’m going to go find a couple of towels to place under Angus. When he wakes up, he may need to urinate from all the fluids he’s getting. I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

Zak nodded, opened his mouth to say something wise or clever but then couldn’t think of anything to say, so he just kept nodding. Oh great, I probably look like one of those dumb, bobble-head dolls you

see in the back window of some cars. Say something. . . anything. But still nothing came to him. Now that the initial shock of the emergency had passed, his customary shyness had taken over again.

Still, he liked her positive outlook and wished he could share in it but, as he looked at Angus’s still limp body, a cold chill ran down his back and he renewed his prayer with more vigor. Please, God, don’t let my dog die.

Allison shut the door to the ward behind her, leaving Zak by himself except for the cat who continued cleaning itself. Zak wanted so much to reach into the cage and rub Angus's stiff coat, to somehow send him the healing power the poor dog needed so badly at the moment. But to do so would mean opening the cage door and letting the life-giving oxygen out, so he refrained. Instead he stuck his face against the glass to get as close to Angus as possible.

He stood there with his face pressed against the glass while the first tears pooled along his lower lids. "Please don't die on me, fella," he whispered to the motionless dog. "You've been my best friend ever since I can remember. I don't know what I would do without you. Hang in there, Angus, and I'll get you a new bone-bin filled with those new chew treats I saw on television the other day. Promise."

He heard the door open behind him and stepped to one side as Allison entered with a couple white towels in her hands. She checked the fluid drip and the oxygen, then opened the cage and gently placed one of the towels under Angus's body. She folded one of the others, and placed it under the dog's head. Zak took the opportunity to stroke the wiry fur for a moment. Allison waited patiently behind him. Zak felt a couple tears stream down his face. Oh great, now I'm going to start blubbering in front of a girl. He quickly wiped his eyes, hoping the technician hadn't noticed. Finally she whispered something about going to find the doctor. Zak stepped back so she could close the door.

He continued talking to Angus through the cage, ignoring the other tears as they dribbled down his cheeks. He figured he was losing about one teardrop for every ten drops of fluids Angus received through the I. V. As he watched the drip-drip of the I. V. he heard a new voice.

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"He's going to die, isn't he?"

At first the voice was so soft and strange sounding in the empty room, Zak thought he had imagined it. Then he heard it again.

"He's going to die, isn't he?"

Zak looked in the direction from which the voice seemed to be coming. The black cat licked its whiskers and stared back.

Was he hearing voices? He'd read somewhere that people under a lot of stress occasionally heard voices or had visions. Could it be happening to him?

"My name isn't Tip," the voice continued matter-of-factly. "It's Ra-Kit. That's spelled R, A, hyphen, K, I, T. So you won't confuse it with 'rocket' or 'racquet'."

Zak stared at the black cat and noticed for the first time the tiny patches of white on each foot and the small six-pointed star of white fur on its chest. Someone is playing a very sick joke, Zak thought.

He straightened up and looked around but could find no wires or speaker. He glanced at the door which was still shut, then at the ceiling. No one was around and he couldn't find an intercom in the room.

"Yes, it's me."

Zak jerked his gaze back to the cat, this time fast enough to see the cat's mouth moving in time to the voice. Perhaps he'd passed out; had been overwhelmed by his fear of losing Angus. At this very moment, he was probably lying on the cold linoleum of the clinic floor, Allison kneeling over him wondering what had happened to him. In a few seconds he'd come to and have an awful headache from where he'd cracked it on the floor as he fell.

"Oh, come now. Surely someone who believes in magic shouldn't be so shocked."

There could be no mistaking it this time. The voice came from the mangy black cat sitting before him. He might be dreaming, but if so, it was the most vivid dream he'd ever had. Zak pinched the back of his hand, wincing at the sharp pain. Nope, not dreaming, he thought.

"Your friend is in bad shape. Looks like he's going to die."

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"He's not going to die!" Zak shouted at the cat who continued to sit, unaffected by Zak's sudden outburst.

"Well, I've been around for quite a few years and if there's one thing I've seen plenty of, it's dying animals, and this one certainly has all the symptoms."

Zak glared at the smart-aleck cat. How dare it talk to him like that, like some know-it-all? Come to think of it, how dare he talk at all? "You're Zak Bates, right?" The cat suddenly changed the subject.

Zak stared at Ra-Kit in amazement. How could this animal know his name? Not only is it talking, but it appears to be clairvoyant. Zak pinched himself again just to be sure he hadn't made a mistake the first time. He hadn't.

"I do wish you'd quit pinching yourself," Ra-Kit said as she stood up and took a couple of steps closer to Zak. "You'll have a big bruised place and your mom will wonder how you got it. With my luck, she'll blame me."

"She's not my mom; she's my stepmother," Zak pointed out.

"Whatever. She still cares about you and no one wants a son who goes around inflicting bruises on himself. It's time you face reality. Point one. You have the great good fortune of being one of the few boys in history to talk to a magic cat. Point two, you have the misfortune of having your dog on the verge of dying from an automobile accident. That's right, isn't it? It was a black sports car, right?"

"How do you know all that?" Zak asked with a note of awe in his voice.

Ra-Kit hung her head for a moment and in a soft voice said, "I was on my way to stop it."

"You were what?" Zak asked.

"I was supposed to have been at your house yesterday but I was unfortunately detained – unfortunately for Angus and you. I planned to save Angus from the accident and if I wasn't killed in the process, I was going to ask a favor of you in exchange. But I was detained by Kaos."

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"You could have saved Angus?" Zak asked. "What's this about chaos stopping you?"

"It's a long story; one I'm afraid I don't have time to go into right now," Ra-Kit said. "I need you to do something for me if we're going to save your dog."

Zak stared at the cat, unsure whether to believe what he heard. Everything was happening too fast. First the accident, then the trip over. Now, a talking cat who claimed to have known the accident was going to happen and somehow knew Angus's and his name. On top of all that, the cat now claimed to be able to save Angus's life.

"Come on, snap out of it," Ra-Kit said with a note of impatience. "Your dog is going to die if we don't act quickly. I was too late to stop the accident; let's not be too late again. I'm a magic cat, the last one remaining, and I'm darn good at what I do. But I can't bring him back from the dead, so let's snap to."

Zak nodded, at the same time trying to clear his muddled thoughts. If the cat thought it could save Angus, what did he have to lose? "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Open the door and lift me into the cage," Ra-Kit instructed.

"But if I do that the oxygen will..."

"Darn the oxygen! Do what I tell you, boy, if you want your dog

to see another day." Ra-Kit's tail flicked with angry impatience. Zak jumped to do what he was told, wondering as he did so whether his actions would help Angus or speed his death.

He opened the cage door and lifted Ra-Kit into the cage, surprised at how light she was. Under her thick black coat was nothing but skin and bones. The cat strolled over to Angus and placed her gnarled left ear against his chest.

"Tch-tch, not good; not good at all." She turned back to Zak.

"It's worse than I thought. We haven't much time to complete our negotiations. I can still save him but we must be quick about it."

"What are you talking about? What negotiations?" Zak suddenly thought of running for Allison or Dr. George. Maybe they'd be able to help figure this whole mess out. But even as he thought it, he knew

the cat would refuse to talk with them around. It had obviously waited until he was alone before saying anything.

“You remember I just told you I was coming to save Angus from the accident and had a favor to ask of you in return?”

Zak nodded.

“Well, I’m asking you to agree to the favor now. I’ll save your dog – I can still do it – in exchange for granting me this one favor.”

“But what favor is it?” Zak asked, exasperated by Ra-Kit’s vagueness. “What do you want me to do?”

“Ahhh, there’s the catch. I’m not allowed to tell you until you agree to do it, no matter what.”

“This is ridiculous!” Now it was Zak’s turn to snap. “You want me to agree to do something but you won’t tell me what. And you won’t save Angus unless I agree to it. Why, that’s blackmail!”

“Call it what you like. It’s the rules I must follow. Believe me, it’s not easy being a magic cat. We have a lot of silly rules. They don’t always seem to make sense but for the magic to work, they must be followed. It’s like some of your silly laws. They don’t seem to make sense, yet at the same time someone says they have to be there for society to work.” Ra-Kit glanced over to Angus and back to Zak.

“Meanwhile, as we sit here and debate the fairness or unfairness of the universe, Angus is on his way out of it. What will it be?”

“Can you really save him?” Zak asked, as a new set of tears streamed down his face.

Ra-Kit nodded.

“Okay, then do it,” Zak answered.

“And you’ll perform the favor?”

Zak took a deep breath then let it out with a heavy sigh. How could

he say no? If he did, Angus would surely die. He felt trapped, and more than a little angry at Ra-Kit for cornering him like this. “Yes, whatever it is, I’ll do it. Just save my dog.”

Ra-Kit nodded again. “Okay, it’s a deal. I must warn you, don’t try to skittle out of this. A deal with a magic cat is sacred. Not fulfilling it would bring much bad luck on you and your entire family.”

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Zak only nodded, his throat too tight to say anything further.

Ra-Kit, apparently satisfied that Zak's silence meant agreement, turned her attention to Angus. She sat down next to him in the small cage and reared back on her haunches. She passed her two front paws over Angus's body a few inches above his wiry coat. As she did so, Zak could see tiny sparks flick from her paws to Angus's body. At first nothing happened. Angus continued to lie motionless, but she continued the task, whispering a strange incantation in a language foreign to Zak's ears.

Finally, as Ra-Kit appeared to weaken from her efforts, Angus's body twitched as the blue energy coursed into his broken body. Each spark brought a stronger muscle spasm. Ra-Kit finally collapsed beside Angus, exhausted but not before Angus's breathing took on a renewed strength.

After a minute or so, Ra-Kit turned her head and looked at Zak through glazed eyes. "Put me back on the top of the cage before some- one comes in. He'll be all right now."

Zak did as he was told and, as he lifted her out of the cage, he felt certain she weighed even less than before.

"Will he be ok? Are you sure?"

Ra-Kit nodded, apparently too exhausted to speak at first. Finally, she lifted her head. "Go home and get some rest. You'll need it. We have much work ahead. Return tomorrow after school. You can visit with him then, and we'll start evening the score."

Zak checked Angus's gums before shutting the cage door and was encouraged to see their pink color had returned. The door had only been shut for a few moments, when Dr. George and Calida returned.

"We can go home now," Zak said to Calida. "He's going to be all right."

Calida stared at her stepson, a stunned look on her face, then at Dr. George who opened the door and listened to Angus's heart. She took his temperature and checked his gum color also. When she straightened up, there was a smile on her face.

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"I'd say your son is right. Angus's vital signs are much stronger. He's still comatose but his breathing is much more regular as is his heart rate. I'll continue to monitor him through the evening and call you if there's any change. Go on home and get some rest."

Calida thanked her for her efforts, then placed her arm around Zak's shoulder. "Let's go call us a cab. We'll visit Angus tomorrow."

Zak turned to leave. He stopped at the door and glanced back at the black cat lying on top of the cage. As he did so, she opened her eyes for a moment. Zak noticed for the first time they were a misty light green. Ra-Kit winked once then closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.

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Meeting Ra-Kit

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Ra-Kit continued resting on top of the cage for several hours, too tired to even lift her head when Dr. George or Allison came in to check on their patient. It had been a difficult day and her powers were temporarily drained, but a few hours of catnapping would restore them.

She awoke around ten in the evening to find one of the technicians adjusting Angus's fluids. Evidently, the hospital staff had set up a rotation for checking on their critically ill patient. Ra-Kit made a note of their dedication. She would be sure to place a welcoming hex on their door so animals in need would know this was a safe haven.

Ra-Kit stood up and stretched. She still needed more rest but first she had an appointment to keep. She jumped down from the cage, wincing as she landed on the floor. Oh, how she hated returning to earth and her old arthritic body. It seemed unfair that with all her magical powers she had to suffer so. She strolled over to the bowl which had recently been restocked with fresh kibble and a couple of heaping teaspoons of shrimp feast. Perhaps she'd use a hex of good fortune as well — one that would bring in more business. They deserved it.

After taking a couple bites of shrimp, she walked over to the exterior concrete wall. She sat for a moment and cleaned her whiskers. She thought about waiting for one of the staff members to return to let her out, but then reconsidered. It was no telling how long she might have to wait, and she didn't plan on being gone long. If they came in and

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found her missing, they would just think she was in some other part of the hospital. A little magic would make it easier on everyone.

Having made the decision, she reached into the invisible pouch under her belly and pulled out a small purple sachet, her private stock of catnip. It would boost her powers as long as she didn't over-indulge. She took a couple strong whiffs, surrendering to the euphoric feeling she so much enjoyed. She considered taking a couple more, but then remembered the mission she was on. Better not, she thought as she returned the sachet to her pouch, then patted the fur to seal it closed.

She must thank her kangaroo friend for suggesting the pouch. It had made her life on earth so much more bearable. As long as she was discrete, she could enjoy the many benefits of her special spice without worrying about it being confiscated. Besides, the belted pouch she'd once used had drawn undesired attention to her here on earth. Humans were not used to seeing stray cats wearing any type of adornment except possibly a tattered collar.

Ra-Kit rose and looked around to be sure she was alone, then walked through the wall to the outside. She stood for just an instant, with only her head sticking out of the wall, and glanced in both directions.

Assured that the coast was clear, she completed her passage through the wall. The last thing she needed was for someone to find her rump sticking out of the wall on the other side.

She strolled down the drainage ditch towards the back lot of the hospital. The catnip had taken its full effect by now and she struggled to remember her mission. Oh yeah, it was time for her meeting. How could she forget so easily? She didn't bother answering her own question for she knew the answer all too well.

At the end of the ditch was a thick cluster of trees. She climbed out of the ditch and sat at the edge of the small forest and meowed a couple of times, trying to imitate a tomcat in heat. After a few moments, she heard a soft rustle in the underbrush. She repeated her signal.

"You've been at the catnip again, haven't you?" The deep husky voice from the bushes asked.

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"I have not," she replied quickly, and after a moment asked, "How did you know?"

"It's the only time you use that silly cat call," the voice replied.

"I've been forced to use a tremendous amount of my powers the last couple of days. I only use it for medicinal purposes."

The deep bass voice chuckled. "How many times have I heard that excuse? Although I suspect you might be right for once. How has it been going?"

Ra-Kit heard more rustling in the bushes. "Don't come out," she said quickly. "I don't know how safe it is."

"Don't worry, I'm only getting comfortable. I'll be glad when we get on the road. Any idea when it will be?"

"Tomorrow, the next day at the latest, and to answer your previous question, everything has gone well, although it's been very draining." Ra-Kit realized the questions were clearing her head and was disappointed the catnip's effect wore off so quickly.

"He bought it?" The voice sounded surprised. "The whole pack of lies?"

"Of course he bought it. He didn't have any choice in the matter. And as for it being a pack of lies, Sampson, I had to do it this way. We've been turned down by a dozen other kids. No one else on the list would take on such a dangerous assignment. Zak was our last chance, the only other kid who even remotely qualified for this mission. The stakes are too high to risk having him not accept."

“Ra-Kit, have you no conscience? You almost killed his dog. I know your magic is powerful, but it’s also been somewhat unpredictable the last fifty years or so. You had no way of knowing for certain whether that car would crush his dog into the next life or not. It was a huge risk.”

Ra-Kit could feel her temper flare despite the catnip and knew it was because her companion was right. It had been a big risk, although a necessary one. She had been able to swerve the car at just the last instant, and it had been enough. She didn’t enjoy hurting animals, not even a dog, but their mission was too important to be overly concerned with what she liked and didn’t like.

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“Listen Sampson, his dog will be fine. I promise. It’ll take him a while to heal, but he will with time. Meanwhile, we have Zak’s promise to help us. We couldn’t get that with any of the others.”

“You haven’t told him what it is he promised to do, have you?”

“No, crazy, I haven’t,” Ra-Kit shouted, then in a calmer but strained voice, “I told you that was my plan. If I had told him up front, there was too much of a chance he’d turn me down. He might have decided to take a chance and let the vet save his dog.”

“Would she have been able to?” Sampson asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. The injuries were more serious than I had anticipated. I admit it. For a while, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to bring him back, but he’s fine now. Really.”

“And now what?”

“Zak will be back tomorrow to visit. I’ll tell him about our mission. Then, I’ll bring him out here and introduce you.”

“What’s he like?” Sampson persisted.

Ra-Kit didn’t answer at once, but considered the question. “It was no mistake he was twelfth on the list. Oh, he has a great love of animals, at least as strong as the others, and he does believe in magic. No problem there. But it’s all covered with a thick coating of self-doubt and low self-esteem. On top of that, he’s shy as the dickens. He won’t believe he can do what we ask him. That’s why we must make him think he is the perfect choice.”

“It doesn’t get any easier does it?” Sampson asked with a sigh.

“No, it sure doesn’t.” Ra-Kit suddenly felt very tired. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ve got to get some rest.”

Zak finished brushing his teeth and placed his brush back in its receptacle. It had been a long day. Normally he would enjoy the chance to stay up until this late at night but not under these conditions.

Zak walked down the hall to his room. Anyone walking down the hall would be able to instantly recognize which room was his. The

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door was decorated with a collage of animal faces. Scattered through it were a couple of his favorite magicians, including an old picture of Houdini, the greatest magician of all time as far as Zak was concerned. For some reason, magic and animals just seemed to go together. Zak had always thought there was something magical about animals. One of his greatest wishes had been granted today. He'd finally been able to talk with an animal, although he would have preferred if it had been under different circumstances.

Even so, remembering his conversation with Ra-Kit excited him. At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder what trouble she had talked him into. What type of favor would a magic cat expect for saving the life of a loved one? Zak suspected it would not be a small one.

Zak pulled the covers back on his bed. It felt odd getting ready to go to sleep without his trusted companion, but he knew Angus was in good hands.

What if I can't do it? What if that blasted cat asks me to do something impossible? It would be just like a magic cat to do something like that. If I can't accomplish it, what happens then? Will she try to take my soul away? After all, she is a black cat. Okay, not all black, but it might not matter.

Well, so what? What choice did I have? Was I going to let Angus die? Of course not. I made the only choice there was. Like Luk always said, "Make a choice, then make it work." His older brother was always saying stuff like that. What was more irritating to Zak, Luk lived his life the same way he spoke.

Boy, it would be great to be able to walk across the hall and talk to Luk right now, but his older brother had decided to stay at Appalachian after his sophomore year to take a couple summer courses. The recent move to North Carolina had been an improvement. In California, a whole country had separated them, but when you're a teenager without a driver's license or your own car, a three hour drive to the mountains was still way too long a trip.

Zak had just shut off his light next to his bed when the phone rang. Probably Dad calling, he thought. Let's see, was he out of town tonight

or just working late? Zak couldn't remember. His dad's schedule was just too busy and confusing for Zak to keep straight. He heard the sound of Calida's footsteps coming down the hall and then stop in front of his door. She knocked lightly.

"Zak, are you asleep yet?" she asked in her nearly perfect English. It was one of the things that irked Zak the most about his stepmother. Her dark complexion and jet black hair contrasted sharply with Zak's nearly white blond hair and blue eyes and clearly revealed her Mexican blood, but she spoke

with only a trace of an accent which Zak found disconcerting even though he knew it was from her training as an interpreter.

Zak wondered what she'd do if he answered yes, but decided not to test it. He hated to admit it but Calida had really come through for him and Angus today.

"No, ma'am. I'm still awake," he replied as he turned the light back on.

"It's Luk on the phone. He'd like to talk to you."

Zak jumped out of bed. "I'll be right there. Don't let him hang up." Ignoring the slippers at the end of the bed, he ran barefooted down

the hall into his dad's bedroom. He still couldn't think of it as where Calida slept as well.

"Hi, Luk, what's happening?" he asked breathlessly.

"Hey, dude, what's happening with you?" Luk returned their customary salutation. "I hear you've had a rough day?"

"Yeah, I'll say," Zak replied as he climbed on the bed and tucked his feet under his legs. "I was just wishing you were here so I could talk with you. You must have felt my energy."

"That I did, Zak-my-boy. Plus, Calida called me earlier and left a message on my voicemail."

"Oh," Zak said a little disappointed. He had hoped Luk had called because of some secret brain signals they shared. Oh well, sometimes it seemed they had a knack of knowing what was up with each other.

He told Luk about the accident but left out the part about speaking with a magic cat. He wanted to tell Luk but it seemed too complicated

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to go into over the phone. Before he realized it, twenty minutes had passed and Luk had to get off the call.

"Listen, I can't talk much longer. I'm about to run out of minutes, plus I've got a huge exam tomorrow in biochem. I sometimes think it would be easier to switch my major from pre-med to phys-ed but we Bates are always up for a good challenge, right Zak?"

Zak said yes, although he wasn't sure he'd count himself as one of those Bates.

"I wanted you to know I was thinking about you. Try not to worry about Angus. He's a tough little dog. He still has a lot of cats and squirrels to chase."

Zak thought again about telling Luk about Ra-Kit, but knew it would take too long to explain. Besides, he was less sure with each passing moment whether he'd really spoken to a magic cat.

"I know he's tough. I taught him to be that way. When are you coming home?"

"Not sure, but until I get home don't give Calida a hard time. She really wants to be your friend, Zak."

Zak didn't answer at once. His relationship with his stepmother was a sore subject and not one he liked to talk about with Luk. Luk just didn't understand. He'd been almost grown when their father had re-married, and he wasn't around the house like Zak was. He didn't understand that Calida couldn't replace Zak's mom. As hard as she tried, she couldn't. And Luk didn't know what it was like going to school and having everyone laugh at him when they saw them together.

Zak had tried explaining how strange he felt whenever other kids saw Calida and him together for the first time. "She's your mom?" they would always ask. Then Zak would have to go into this long speech about how she was his stepmom, then they'd ask what had happened to his mom, usually guessing that his parents had been divorced.

Zak would have to go on to explain that his mom had been killed in an automobile accident and then someone would always ask for details and, in no time at all, Zak was right back there on the day his dad broke the news to him that his mom wasn't ever, ever coming

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home. All because his dad had gone off and married Calida without so much as talking with him first.

"Maybe I could come visit you," Zak said.

"I'd really like that but I believe Calida told me your first day of school is tomorrow. I don't think starting out the New Year missing your first several days is a good idea. You don't want to have to repeat another grade, right? Besides, don't you think you better stay there and look after Angus?"

Sometimes it infuriated Zak how right his older brother could be. Of course he didn't want to repeat another grade. He didn't want to go through them the first time. He just wanted out of school, or at least to stay at one long enough to make a few friends. Not that he really needed friends as long as he had Angus. The thought reminded him how close he had come to losing his only friend and of the pact he had made with God. He figured whatever it was Ra-Kit asked he would have to do. He'd agreed to it with a magic cat and with God. There would be no backing out.

"Well, I just thought I'd ask. Study hard, Luk. Learn enough for both of us," Zak said, but his mind was still on the promise he'd made. He said good-bye and hung up the phone.

As he returned to his bedroom, he thought about what lay ahead — a new school year at yet another new school. Ugh! Oh well, he'd worry about that in the morning. Tonight, he needed to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his worry machine had already cut on, and he ended up tossing and turning for over an hour before finally falling asleep.