

An Extract From:

*The City in the Lake*

by

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## Chapter One

The City is beautiful at sunset, almost as beautiful as the Lake itself. The waters of the Lake run with crimson and flame-orange and deep lavender as the sun sinks beyond its farther shore, colors pouring across the water all the way to Tiger Bridge. At that moment the exotic lilies carved into the Bridge, crumbling with age, look whole and alive in the moving light and cerulean shadows.

But after darkness falls, it will be the tigers of the Bridge that look real and alive. They shake themselves out of stone and come down from their pedestals, the lambent fires of sunset in their eyes, to stalk on great velvet paws through the night – so it is said.

At the moment between sunset and dark, the wind off the Lake sometimes dies and the air becomes utterly still. If that pause lasts long enough, it is said, the water becomes a mirror in which a man may see his true face reflected, as well as the reflection of the eternal City. Few would linger at Tiger Bridge to look into the still Lake at that moment, both because truth can be a dangerous thing and because of the tigers that wake out of stone in the night. But that is the story that people in the City tell.

That, at least, is a true story. The Bastard, who did not fear velvet-footed hunters, came to Tiger Bridge sometimes to watch the sun set and look into the glass-still Lake. The face he saw in the water was indeed not the face the simple mirror in his Palace apartment reflected. The Bastard could not have explained even to himself where, precisely, the difference lay. But it was to try to find out that he came to Tiger Bridge.

The Bastard had a name: Neill. He had a place in the court as brother to Prince Cassiel and elder son of Drustan, who was King. But he was not the son of Ellis, the Queen. The Bastard's mother had been a woman who has wandered into the City and the King's bed from some far country beyond the shores of the Lake, beyond the farthest borders of the Kingdom. She had given her son her fine ivory skin, her ash-pale hair, and her dark secretive eyes. And she had given him a heritage that ran outside the bounds of the Kingdom, a mixed blessing at best.

The woman had lived in the City for a season, for a year – long enough to carry and bear the King's son. Then she had walked out of the City. *Though I go, this child will keep my presence always near you*, she had said to the King, laying the baby in his hands – so the tale went. *May he flourish in this Kingdom*.

Possibly the King did not appreciate reminders of his dalliance, especially once he married his Queen. It was well known he did not favor his illegitimate first-born son. Still, if he did not love Neill, he acknowledged him and kept him close to power. Kings have no need to be ashamed of the evidence of their indiscretions, as other men may, and more than one royal bastard has grown up to rule when all the children born on the right side of the blanket have been sickly, or girls. From childhood, then, the court had called the child *Lord Neill* to his face with careful deference, and, behind his back, sometimes with no less respect, *Lord Bastard*.

When the Bastard was twelve years old, the true Prince was born, merry and bold even as a baby and beloved by all the City. By that time, folk in both the Palace and the City had learned well the habit of respect towards his elder half-brother. The Bastard, even as a child, had a way of keeping his own secrets while finding out the secrets of others; and although he spoke softly, he never forgot a slight. So people said, in the court. And that story, too, was true.

The Bastard watched the sun sink below the Lake, sending fire across the water, and waited for the wind to die. But the quiet on this night did not last long enough for the waves to grow still, and so the Lake did not turn into a mirror. The Bastard was, however, philosophical about small disappointments. He turned away from the Bridge, pausing for a brief moment to study the stone tigers before walking away. They were still stone under his gaze. After he turned his head ... who knew what they might become? The Bastard walked back across the City to the Palace. Once he might have heard the soft pad of a great cat, but though he stopped in the street to look patiently into the dark for one shadow softer-footed and more dangerous than others to separate itself from the night, he saw nothing.

The Palace was the heart of the City. Its walls were of cream-colored stone and its wide gates of silver, with brass-bound hinges. Silver tigers lay along the gates, gazing into the City out of emerald eyes. Beyond the gates were the stables and mews, with the graceful lawns and gardens beyond those, where the ladies of the court could stroll in pleasant weather. Early spring flowers dotted the lawns, invisible in the dark but casting their fragrance prodigiously into the night. A couple passed the Bastard. Their heads were bent together, and they did not see him. He knew them slightly and watched them pass, amused. They were young and thought that the love that had woken for them in this spring was the first love the Kingdom had ever seen.

The Palace had been built of the same creamy stone as its walls. Windows of the purest glass poured warm golden light out into the dark. Carved roses climbed along with living ones up its parapets and towers: a spiral stair wove its way up the nearest tower, which existed, so far as the Bastard knew, solely to draw lovers up into its heights to admire the stars. The couple he had seen had probably been heading in that direction.

The main doors of the Palace were made of a creamy wood, carved with intricate shapes that teased the eye with the suggestion of forms that could not quite be made out. The doors were standing open. This was ordinary. But the shouting that came from within was not.

The Bastard hesitated, and then approached. A small crowd had gathered there already; guardsmen and servants, a multitude of young men of the court and a scattering of ladies, all rather pale and alarmed. And the King, voice raised in a roar. That was not, in itself, unusual. But there was a note to it this time that the Bastard might almost have called fear. That was very unusual. The Bastard put himself quietly at the edge of the gathering and listened.

“Well?” roared the King at some of the young men, who looked thoroughly cowed. The King was a big man, with shoulders like a bull and wide, strong hands. His voice, too, could be like the bellow of a bull. He had cowed better men than the crowd of daring young courtiers that were the Prince’s companions. “Well? What are you doing here, then? Why did you come back to this house without finding him?”

One of the young men, Jesse, one of the Prince's close friends – a bony narrow-faced man of twenty or so, who was usually sharp-humored but seemed rather desperate at the moment – started to answer.

The King cut him off, jabbing a thick finger in his direction. "People don't simply vanish! Princes don't simply vanish! *My son* doesn't just vanish! Not just in some ordinary little wood along some ordinary little stream! You get your horse and you get your gear and you go out there and you find him, you hear me?"

"But –" said the young man unhappily.

The King spun with unerring accuracy to focus on the Bastard, who came forward imperturbably under his furious stare. "Your Majesty?"

"Where have *you* been?" the King demanded hotly.

The Bastard bent his head slightly. "Walking in the City."

The King dismissed any possible interest he might have had in his older son's evening. His voice rose again to a shout, "Cassiel has disappeared! Something has happened to Cassiel! Go find him!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the Bastard quietly, and looked past the King at the young man. He caught his eye and jerked his head. "Jesse." The young man, with relief, started towards him.

"Thunder and ice! *I'm* not done with him!" bellowed the King.

"I beg your pardon," said the Bastard, with perfect composure. "I shall wait." He assumed a posture of patience.

"I told you to go find your brother!"

"Of course, Your Majesty. I await my chance to obey your command."

"Oh –" said the King furiously – "Take him, then!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the Bastard. He took the young man firmly by the arm, extracted him from the crowd, and swept them both down a wide hall lined with bright tapestries and shining lanterns, towards his own apartments in the westernmost tower.

The young man drew breath before they had gone a hundred feet and started to speak. "Hush," said the Bastard. He turned a corner into a deserted hall that was sometimes used for receptions, ducked through one of the servants' passages, and brought them both to the western tower without passing more than a handful of people or needing to pause for any question.

Once in his own sitting room, the Bastard installed the young man in a cream-colored chair with turquoise cushions and carved legs, gave him a cup of hot spiced wine from a pot a

servant had left at the edge of his hearth, and took a place of his own on a second chair. "Now," he said, "Tell me everything that happened."

The young man looked now rather as though he did not quite know which he least wanted to face: the furious King or the composed Bastard. He was clad in riding clothing of russet and blue, now somewhat the worse for wear; his shoulder-length hair was tangled. His long face looked even longer, drawn with nerves and exhaustion. He picked up his cup of wine, put it down again untasted on a little table at his elbow and protested in a tone that was a little too loud, "I don't know what happened!"

The Bastard looked at him for a moment. Then he leaned back, propped a foot on a stool, laced his fingers around his knee, and said mildly, "Then start at the beginning, and go on until you come to the end that brought you to the King's presence, with him shouting at you. You went riding with the Prince this morning?"

"Yes!"

"Jesse."

The young man stared at him. Then he closed his eyes, took a breath, and opened them again. He started to pick up his cup, but his hand was shaking and he put it down again quickly, before it could spill. But his voice was calmer when he spoke. "Yes. Yes, we went riding. Just as on any day. We went around the Lake's shore, to the west, where the country is empty. I tell you, Neill, everything was ordinary!"

"You didn't go to the great forest," the Bastard suggested. "You might have made it there and back in one day, perhaps, if the road was in a particularly cooperative mood. Or you didn't ride out across country and find the forest unexpectedly there before you. I know Cassiel would have been the first to say, let's all ride in just a little way ..."

"No!" said the young man, shocked.

"Jesse?"

"No! I tell you, we didn't see the forest!"

"Pity." The Bastard tapped his fingertips gently against his knee. "It would have been such a simple explanation. All right, then, Jesse, tell me what did happen."

The young man took a breath. "We rode across the bridge —"

"Tiger Bridge?"

"The Bridge of Glass. We crossed at dawn and rode west, into the hills. Cassiel said he wanted to hunt, but really he just wanted to ride. We had hawks, some of us, but we didn't even fly them." Jesse grew calmer as he spoke. He picked up his cup again and this time drank before he put the cup back down. "We met a stream and turned along it. We rode upstream. We didn't meet anybody. There was a wood, but it was just a wood, Neill, I swear."

“Yes. Go on.”

“Cassiel said he wanted to ride upstream and find the source of the stream. So we did. He wanted to ride alone, really, so the rest of us fell back a little, you know –”

“Yes.”

“At one place the woods opened up. Somebody started a hare and Ponns let his hawk go after it. Then we had to wait for him to get his hawk back. Cassiel was out of sight, but we didn’t think anything of it! Why should we?”

“It seems there was no reason,” agreed the Bastard quietly. “Then?”

“Well, then we went on. Ponns was complaining that his hawk had a broken feather and Sebes was saying if a hare could tear up his hawk it wasn’t much of a bird and we were all listening to the two of them. Nobody was worrying about the Prince. We came out of the wood finally and found the head of the stream: there was a cliff, and a spring came out under the cliff and made a pool. Cassiel’s horse was there by the pool, but Cassiel wasn’t with it.” The young man stopped.

“Tracks? Broken branches? Signs of a struggle, of anyone else there?”

“No.” Jesse looked at him earnestly. “Really. Nothing like that. The horse wasn’t hurt or alarmed, and you could see the place by the pool where Cassiel had knelt to drink.”

“Mm.”

“So we searched. We really did. All the rest of the day. We only rode back because we knew we’d never find him in the dark ...”

“Perhaps,” the Bastard suggested, “the Prince drank from the pool and became a white stag and ran into the woods, or a golden lizard with rubies for eyes, that hid from you for fear of what you would do if you saw its eyes shine in the sun.”

“We looked for tracks,” Jesse said tersely. “Man or stag or fox or any creature. And do you think that we would be so stupid as to pluck the ruby eyes out of a golden lizard by the pool where the Prince disappeared? Do you think Cassiel would think that of us?”

“It does seem unlikely.”

“I drank from the pool, and nothing happened to me. So we thought, maybe a crowd keeps the magic quiet. So everyone went back into the wood and Ponns drank from it, but he was still there when we went back. So then we searched out in a circle from the pool. I swear we covered every inch of ground and looked at every tree and rock and lizard – none of them were made of gold – for miles around that place, but we found nothing. Nothing!”

“All right,” the Bastard said quietly. He made a little calm-down gesture and sipped his own wine. Then he picked up a bell by his chair and rang it.

“What will you do?”

The Bastard did not answer. When a servant came to the bell, he told the man, "Send for Trevennen. Or has the King already sent for him?"

The servant ducked his head. "Trevennen is with the King, Lord Neill."

"Ah. Then, do you know, did Marcos come with Trevennen?"

Servants always knew everything that happened in the Palace. The man said, "Yes, Lord Neill."

"Then, if it would not disturb the King, perhaps you would ask Marcos to come to me?"

"Yes, my lord," murmured the servant, and disappeared as quietly as he had come.

"At least Trevennen may be able to calm him," Jesse suggested hopefully. The King was famed for his temper in the best of times, which this night would assuredly not be, and when the King was in a rage the whole Palace knew it.

Marcos was a round-bodied man, a man who loved soft living and good food. His face was also round, his eyes as long-lashed as a girl's. He wore rings on every finger and loose robes of cerulean blue, like the waters of the Lake at dusk. He was not old, though older than the Bastard by a year or so. He looked light-hearted and lazy, which he was, and also a little doltish, which he certainly was not. He was a mage: one of three who lived in the City.

The Bastard rose. "Marcos."

"Neill," the mage said warmly. "And have you been getting the true account?"

"I think I have part of it." The Bastard gestured the newcomer towards a low couch, more suitable for his bulk than the narrow-legged chairs. "Sit, please. May I offer you wine?"

"Yes, yes," agreed Marcos fervently. "The King is in a fine temper, more likely to offer a man a blow than a cup. I'm grateful you summoned me." His eye fell on Jesse, who perched on the edge of his chair as though he might at any moment take flight. "Well, then, Jesse?"

The young man went through the tale again while the Bastard listened carefully and the mage nodded and rubbed his chin.

"Well," Marcos said at the end. "Well. Hmm."

"You are baffled," the Bastard diagnosed wryly.

"Frequently, yes. In this case ... well, yes. Hmmm. Jesse, was the water clear? Could you see the bottom of it? Was it sand or pebbles or mud?"

The young man looked surprised, and then thoughtful. "Well ..." he said, and frowned. "I don't ... I don't quite ... it was all sand around the edges, you know, but ..." He frowned some more, looking inward at memory. At last he said, "I suppose it was sand, but though the water

was clear, I don't think you could see the bottom, you know. All you could see when you looked in was your reflection."

"Hmm," said the mage.

"Hmm?" inquired the Bastard.

"A clear pool can be more than water," said the mage, thoughtfully. "Perhaps the Prince drank a mouthful and turned into a shower of light, or a snow-white bird with a cry that could pierce your heart like a golden arrow. If that's the case then we can expect to get him back, eventually."

"Or ..." the Bastard invited him to continue, while Jesse leaned forward anxiously with his eyes on the mage's round face.

"Or perhaps the pool was a mirror. They sometimes are, you know," said the mage mildly. "But in that case, what did the Prince see? And why, in that case, did he disappear? Did he flee from what he saw?"

"How did he disappear, even if he fled?" said Jesse. "*We searched.*"

"Well, but a mirror can also be a door," said Marcos. "But a door leading where?" He rubbed his chin again, thoughtfully.

"Or to what?" said the Bastard.

"Or to whom?" added the mage. "Well, well ... we shall have to ride out to this pool tomorrow, Jesse, at dawn, I suppose –" he looked mildly sorry for himself – "and take another look about. Never you mind," he added, when Jesse shook his head disconsolately. "We'll find him. It's the way things are: Princes get lost and are found. Cassiel will be fine, be sure of that. In the meantime –" he glanced at the Bastard – "the King is going to be a little upset."

The Bastard shrugged. "It's the way things are."

Jesse said, "You're not afraid of him at all, are you? How can you not be?"

The Bastard paused. He said after a moment, "I know how to move through the tempest." He eyed the younger man. "So would you, if you paid attention to anything but your friends and your gambling and your games. That's why the King disturbs you: he reminds you of your father and you feel he disapproves of you."

"He does disapprove of me," Jesse muttered. He got to his feet and lifted his chin arrogantly. "I'm going," he stated, but waited despite himself for leave from the Bastard.

The Bastard gave it with a slight tilt of his head. "At dawn, be at the Bridge of Glass."

The young man produced a jerky nod and was gone.

“He’s afraid of you,” Marcos commented. Rising with a low grunt of effort, he poured himself another cup of wine.

“Is he?”

The mage gave him a look both penetrating and, in an odd way, amused.

The Bastard shrugged minutely. “Should I speak to Trevennen?”

“I shall.”

“And Russe?”

“Will, I am certain, search in her own way. Don’t disturb her.”

The Bastard half-smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Have you any guesses yourself?”

The mage opened a thick hand, looking apologetic. “Not yet.”

“Mmm. The City is the heart of the Kingdom, the King is the heart of the City ... and my brother Cassiel is the King’s heart.” The Bastard spoke without bitterness: it was simply the truth. “If Cassiel turned into a bird with a cry that can pierce your heart, well, as you say, these things happen and we shall surely reclaim him in time. But if someone wished to strike at my father, than in this he has wielded a blade with a fine edge.”

Marcos nodded. “And if someone wished to strike at the Kingdom, the same. I know.”

“Well?”

“I don’t think it likely. The Kingdom generally protects itself adequately. No, I think Cassiel has simply got himself into a bit of difficulty. And I think we can assume that Cassiel, of all people, wherever he may be and whatever may have happened to him, will land on his feet.”

Cassiel, wherever he had gone, might have done. But though the Bastard and the King and the mages of the city and all the men of the Kingdom searched for him for many weeks, no one found him.

## *Chapter Two*

Timou was a child of winter, which in the villages, where most children are born in the spring like lambs, was worthy of some slight notice. A winter child: in the villages the phrase might also mean a young one more solemn than most, just as an apple-blossom child is a merry, laughing child and a harvest child is practical and motherly. Timou was a winter child in both senses: serious and quiet even in her cradle, which was an exotic object carved of rosewood and inlaid with the paler woods of apple and thorn.

Her father had brought the cradle from the City with her already nestled in it, a tiny infant carried through the depths of winter. "Imagine carrying a baby all the way from the City in that weather!" said the villagers. "Over the Lake and through the great forest!" Who knew where Kapoen had gotten a baby, or why he had brought it out of the City to the distant village? Mages, everyone knew, had whims. Nobody minded. The people of the village were proud of their mage and trusted him, even when he came back from a journey with an inexplicable baby.

Every village has a midwife, of course, and usually the midwife is also a witch who can be relied upon for dependable charms to settle a colicky infant or cure milk-sickness in a goat. If the village is fortunate, it may also have an apothecary, who, of course, is usually also a witch. Anyone can make willow-bark tea for a fever or elderberry syrup for a cough, but simply taking medicine from a jar marked with the apothecary seal makes it work better, as everyone knows. Timou's village was unusual, because in addition to a midwife and an apothecary, it had Kapoen.

The presence of a mage made the folk of the village feel secure and safe, even on the most violent storm-tossed summer nights when the blind Hunter loosed his hounds. Even on brisk autumn days, when the calm and generally prosaic woodlands surrounding the village might grow restless and begin to press against the pastures and fields. Even on winter dawns so cold and brittle that the very air might shatter from the light striking through it and let through glimpses of a sharper-edged and perilous brilliance. From all these mischances and dangers Kapoen protected the village, with a patient composure that itself lent an air of security to everything that he did.

Kapoen was dark himself: dark of hair and eye and skin as well as mood. So probably, the village folk estimated, it was the fair, pale winter which had made so fair and pale a child. "The cold bleaches the color right out of the womb," said the midwife wisely, helping Timou charm tangles and twigs out of her buttermilk-pale hair. Silky-fine, it was hard to keep in order.

"I'd rather have dark hair," Timou answered restlessly, her eyes on the gaggle of village children who were piling up great heaps of leaves and jumping in them, shrieking. Even her eyes were pale: a blue so light they were almost silver. The color frozen out of them, they said in the village. And yet somehow there is something of her father in her eyes, ah? A thought or a mood hidden there, not quite in sight for the rest of us. But the villagers did not mind. They were glad to have Kapoen in their village, and glad to have his daughter also, who with luck would become a mage like her father.

“They get twigs, too,” the midwife pointed out. She charmed out the last twig and swept a brush through the resulting fall of clean hair.

“Not like I do,” said Timou, which was true.

The midwife gathered up Timou’s hair, twisted it up into a knot, and bound it firmly with leather ties. “There,” she said. “That should last a little. I wonder if your mother had such fine hair.”

“I didn’t have a mother,” Timou said, startled. She had known all her life that she did not have a mother as other children did, and that this lack was cause for pity from those who did. Thus she had spent her whole young life watching other girls’ mothers. She liked Taene’s mother best: a small kind woman, quick to laugh and to draw laughter from others, who always took care to draw her daughter’s friends into the closeness of her family. But it had never occurred to Timou that she might have once had a mother like that herself.

“And your father made you out of silvered grasses and hoarfrost, ah?” said the midwife. “Very likely. No, I expect there was a woman. Isn’t there always, where there is a man and a mystery? A woman in the City, I expect, who captured your father’s heart for a day and a night and another day, and gave you life, and then gave you to your father ... for whatever reason a woman might do such a thing.” If she guessed what that reason might be, she did not share her guess with Timou.

Timou went and sat at the foot of the tall flat-topped stone at the edge of the village to think about this startling idea.

Had a woman in the City caught her father’s heart for a day and night and another day? Why? How? Timou was not quite clear on what it might mean to capture someone’s heart, but she could not quite imagine anyone capturing her father’s. She could not imagine her father marrying a woman, sharing his house with a wife, speaking her name as, say, Taene’s father spoke the name of her mother.

Timou pictured a slender woman with white hair standing upon the arch of a shadowy Bridge, holding out a baby in a rosewood cradle to Kapoen and then standing alone to watch him ride away. Timou could not clearly see the woman’s face, but somehow she thought the expression on it was calm: even when Timou tried, she could not quite any kind of extravagant grief. Was that how it had been: merely calm regret for the child given up? Why would a woman give up her child? What about a baby would make a mother give it away?

There were no answers she could find in her own thoughts. But that was the day Timou understood that there might be questions.

The other girls found her then. Ness had realized she was not with the others and sent Manet and Taene to find her. “Come on,” Taene begged, sweet and beguiling. “There are chestnuts to roast, and Sime’s mother is making butter candy.”

Timou gazed at Taene. Sime’s mother was a round cheerful woman who, in addition to butter candy, made fruit pies that melted in the mouth and toffee that stuck wonderfully in the teeth. Her kitchen was always warm and filled with light and good cheer, and it was Sime’s mother

who was the source of that warmth and bright cheer. Had Timou's own mother been like Sime's mother? Timou did not know. Her throat swelled suddenly with a startling sense of loss.

"And Ness wants you to help pick the right leaves for the King's Crown," Manet put in when Taene paused, clearly not noticing anything unusual in the quality of Timou's silence. Manet, the magistrate's daughter, was always trying to push past Ness and lead the other girls. She said in a commanding tone, "You know we need you to ask the tree for acorns for the Crown, Timou. Come on!" It was always the girls of the village who made the King's Crown in the autumn.

"Come on, Timou, please?" added Taene, catching Timou's hand.

The questions did not go away, but Manet's demanding tone and Taene's pleading made them seem less important. Timou jumped to her feet. But the questions settled to the back of her mind, along with the sense of loss she had learned suddenly to feel, and after that neither quite left her. In the slow quiet days of winter, when the snow came deep upon the village and people stayed mostly to themselves, the questions came back to trouble her.

Timou asked her father these questions one cold evening, when they both sat by the fire after supper. She did not mean to ask him. Timou sat on a rug on the floor – her favorite rug, with a maze of red leaves that wove into the center of the rug and out again, if you knew how to trace the pattern with your finger just the right way. She was leaning her elbow on the hearth and looking into the fire, but she was not seeing the coals or the burning wood. She was seeing a stone Bridge and a woman with frost-pale hair holding out a rosewood cradle. And a tall somber man with her father's face, who reached out his hands to take it.

"Timou?" asked her father, watching her, wondering what was behind her silence, and when Timou looked at him she forgot to veil her thoughts. He saw the questions in her eyes.

"Ah," he said, softly.

Timou, since she was discovered anyway, asked him, "Is there always a woman, where there is a man and a mystery?"

Her father sighed and looked away from her, into the fire. "Likely so. And where there is a baby, there is likely a woman." He was not angry, but he had become somber. He added, speaking carefully and slowly, "Your mother was a beautiful woman, very fair, as you are, with winter-pale hair, as you have, but her eyes were dark as the winter sky."

It made Timou uncomfortable that her father should speak so carefully. She did not understand the shape of the secret she saw in his eyes. She asked tentatively, "Did she ... did she die, then? Having me? Like Nod's mother?" She held her breath waiting for his answer: she was suddenly certain he would say Yes, your mother died as Nod's mother died. No white-haired woman had given away her baby: there had only been the birthing struggle and then silence. That was why her father had brought her away from the City ...

Her father moved a hand restlessly. But he said after a moment, "No. She did not die."

“Oh.” Timou was silent for a moment, reordering her thoughts once more. “Then ... why did she give me away to you? Wasn’t she sorry to watch you take me away?” She wanted to ask, but was not brave enough, *Were you glad to take me with you?*

The secrets in her father’s eyes moved and shifted like firelight, but did not take on any recognizable shape. His mouth thinned, not with anger, but with something even less familiar that Timou did not recognize. He said at last, “She could not keep you with her, and I ... would not let her give you to anyone else.”

Timou looked quickly into the fire so that the reflected light would hide the leap of her heart. When she thought she could keep her voice calm and the press of her questions secret in her eyes, she looked up and said, “Do you think she will ever – do you think I will ever meet her?”

There was an infinitesimal pause. Then her father said only, “I don’t know, Timou.”

He spoke this time with a kind of restraint that made Timou wonder what he wasn’t saying. She thought it was important. She looked into the fire again, wondering what kinds of secrets might make her father sound that way. “Was she a mage, like you?”

“She was a mage, of sorts. But not like me,” said her father, and stood up decisively to add another piece of wood to the fire. That was all he said, and Timou saw that he would not say anything else, so she did not ask. The questions, she understood, had not been answered, but they had been changed. But then her father began to ask her about the nature of fire, and Timou saw that she was expected to let the other questions wait.

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One year was very like the next in the village. The children wandered without really noticing into the adult world. Ness sometimes took the sheep out with her father and sometimes wove the wool into cloth with her mother. Manet, who had looked bored all through her childhood as her father tried to teach her the intricacies of law and justice, suddenly took an interest in the magistrate’s business and learned to write a clean record of his adjudication. Jenne, the miller’s daughter, kept the accounts at the mill. Taene spent her days helping her father, who was the apothecary, make decoctions and tinctures and herbal oils.

And Timou learned to follow the stars as they moved through their measured courses in the sky, and listen to the dark wild power that rolled behind the thunder of the spring storms. Once or twice she tried to tell Ness or Taene about these things, as they told her about their days. She found the other girls listened with wide-eyed interest, but that they listened as though Timou was reciting poetry. The mention of storms frightened them. Not even Taene understood the beauty that Timou saw in the wild magic of the Kingdom.

So one spring progressed much like any that had gone before. One year, when Timou was sixteen, Tair, Taene’s eldest brother, began to sometimes leave his work and go up beyond the hillside pastures. And sometimes Ness would leave her weaving to walk with him through the woods. Neither Tair’s father nor Ness’ mother seemed to mind; indeed, all the village watched the young couple with tolerant pleasure. Ness married Tair in the long slow days of

full summer, first of them all to marry, as she had always been the first at everything. Her mother put Ness' hand into Tair's and then whispered something into her daughter's ear that made Ness blush and laugh out loud.

Ness' mother kissed Tair maternally on the forehead – she was a tiny woman, and had to drag him down quite far to do so – and he gave her the single brass coin that a bridegroom gives the bride's mother as a token to show that he can support her daughter. Whatever she said to him made him laugh as well and kiss her back, on the cheek as a son should.

Timou, standing with her father at the edge of the village commons, wondered what it would be like to stand out in front of everyone with a young man by her side. Would she be as happy as Ness looked? She felt her father's gaze fall on her and dropped her eyes. Then Manet caught Timou's hand and dragged her forward with the other unmarried girls to tease Ness, and the moment passed.

In the fall, when chestnuts ripened and the air occasionally tasted of the coming frost, Jenne left the mill accounts to her three brothers and married the dyer's son. The dyer built them a house next to his own. Dyes stained Jenne's fingers in different colors, but she moved smiling through her days and did not seem to mind. Nod and Sime married after Jenne, and Sime's mother, along with Nod's sisters, baked hundreds of tiny iced cakes to give away at their wedding, each with a single rose petal hidden in its heart.

Timou went to Jenne's wedding, and Sime's, and ate her share of the rose cakes. But she did not walk through the woods with any of the young men from the village. Sometimes a young man turned up again and then again in her way, finding chances to speak with her, assuring her that he saw only her face reflected in every drop of rain on leaf or flower. But Timou found that usually such young men did not really like to hear about the measures the stars traced in the heavens, or about the silence that lived at the heart of the fiercest storm. Even if a young man did not mind talk that turned toward mystery and magic, Kapoen's quiet impassive gaze falling on him usually chilled his interest. One young man and then another decided instead to court girls who knew how to talk about ordinary things, and whose fathers were not so intimidating.

Timou let them go with only the mildest regret. She learned instead to find the quiet air hiding behind the sharpest wind, to listen to the word whispered by each dying leaf as it fell, to send her mind through the rings of slow time that enclosed the heart of the old trees of the woodlands, to follow the brilliant flight of the falcon across the sky and the glitter of the minnows in the stream. She learned as well the limits of her own patience, and how to go beyond those limits so that she might come to the bright clean purity of knowledge and understanding.

She did not learn the limits of her father's patience. He would show Timou how to find the secret burgeoning heart of a dormant crocus, and how to wake it without harming the flower; and show her again when she found herself lost in the slow cold silence of the corm. And show her again after that, until she at last found the way to slide past the chill to the living kernel within. Then he would give her an approving little nod and move on to some other exercise of magecraft.

So Timou learned how to catch fire and the memory of fire in glass, how to contain the quick fire in a coal and how to let it loose again, how to find the fire that waited to spring eagerly

forth from the heart of dry wood. And how to try again and again to find such fire when at first she could see nothing but wood, trusting that eventually she would find the heart of it that wanted to burn because her father said it was there.

Then she finally learned the way of it, and for a while she could hardly walk past a stack of dry firewood without flames bursting out of it. “Better than burning someone’s house,” Kapoen said, shaking his head, more disturbed at Timou’s tears than at the inadvertent fire. He patiently taught her to smother fire as well as call it, and how to keep from calling it in the first place, and how to be calm.

“The heart of magecraft,” her father told her, “is to be still and let the world unveil itself in its own time. There is no need to force it. It is very difficult to force anything against its own nature. But it will offer itself to you if you are patient. Clarity – and control, and precision, and good judgment – come to the calm mind and the still heart.”

He meant that none of those qualities could be expected from a mind disturbed by shock at an unexpected fire. But he also meant, Timou knew, that they could not be expected from a mind cluttered with the thousand small daily thoughts of the village. She flushed.

Kapoen noticed, of course. He smiled his composed smile. “You are part of this village,” he told her. “And so you must be. But the heart of magecraft is stillness. Learn to be silent. Learn to love solitude.”

“But –” said Timou.

“Fire is part of the world,” her father said. “But stillness is stronger.”

He meant more than fire. And more than stillness. Timou wanted to ask him about mages and love. *Did my mother love me?* she wanted to ask, but she did not dare. She knew that this question might come too close to asking, *Do you love me?* And how could she ask that? She rose instead, abruptly, to go settle her heart by walking in the woods alone.

The woods were not as solitary as Timou had expected, however, for when she came to the grove of nut-trees above the village she found Jonas there before her.

Jonas was a long-legged man who had drifted into the village several years past and who had as yet shown no signs of either really settling down or of moving on. By no means old, he seemed somehow older than the young men of the village who were actually about his age.

Jonas had a curious way of pausing in the midst of the most ordinary tasks and gazing, apparently bemused, at whatever he held in his broad competent hands, as though he had never seen anything more strange in his life than a hammer or hoe or hen’s egg. Thoughts moved behind his eyes that were not the familiar thoughts of the village. Timou had wondered about him; about what life he might have left behind to come to this small village. Sometimes when he spoke, she thought she heard behind his speech an echo of words he did not say – but he had never gone out of his way to speak to her.

Jonas boarded with Raen, who was elderly and growing frail in these years. Raen’s husband had died many years ago, so Jonas helped her with the tasks that took male strength. The widow said he was polite and thoughtful, as so few boys were in these days. She said this

most pointedly to her own sons, who all lived on their own farms a day's walk or more from the village. They only laughed and invited Jonas to the inn for bitter ale when they came in from their farms.

Jonas also helped the apothecary blend his elixirs. He was careful and methodical, and he could read a little, so he did not have to depend on the scents of the herbs to know what he was mixing. The apothecary liked him, too, and wanted him to settle down and get married, preferably to his Taene. Timou happened to know that Taene thought that every drop of dew reflected the face of Chais, who was the third son of a man who raised tall golden goats and black-faced sheep several miles from the village. Taene had not yet, however, mentioned Chais to the apothecary.

But what Jonas might think of Taene, or of any girl in the village, was hard to say. Timou had always found his habit of keeping his distance and his own counsel restful, particularly during this year, when she had so often felt restless and uneasy herself.

Jonas was whistling, swinging a wide-mouthed basket casually by its cord as he gathered nuts. But he saw at once that Timou did not want company and gave her a little nod of apology. "I'm sorry, Timou. I'll go. I can gather nuts another time."

Timou, embarrassed at his ready deference, flushed. "It doesn't matter," she said. "You needn't – you walked all the way up here, and you were here first –"

"An easy walk on a pretty day," said Jonas, with casual, dismissive wave of his hand. "And it will be just as pretty a day tomorrow, I'm sure. I don't mind." He hesitated a moment, and then added, "But if you feel more inclined for company this evening, and if Kapoen lets you loose to join the dancing, you might think of me."

Timou had never noticed that Jonas was especially eager to lead girls out at the village dances. Surprised, she asked, "Do you dance?"

He smiled, a little tentatively. "Well, not often. But I do know how."

Timou thought Jonas would probably dance as he hammered shingles on a roof or hoed in Raen's garden: with a kind of preoccupied, faintly bemused competence. As though he surprised himself by dancing, as he surprised himself by hoeing weeds out of the parsnip rows. She found herself smiling at the image she'd created.

Pleased, Jonas smiled more warmly himself. "I'll see you there, perhaps," he said offhandedly. He gave her another little nod and walked away, swinging the basket in a gentle arc at the end of its cord, whistling. It took a surprisingly long time for Timou to remember that the name of the song he whistled was "Meeting By the Lake," and that it was a love song.

"Do you like him?" Taene asked, wistfully, later, when Timou told her about meeting Jonas in the woods. Taene's Chais did not get in to the village very often in the evenings, even when there was dancing. Her father wanted her to dance with Jonas. "He's like a brother," Taene told Timou. "I like him – of course I do. But when he sees my face, it's not rain either of us thinks of. But how can I tell my father that?"

Timou nodded in sympathy. "I imagine he'll discover it for himself, in time."

"You're always so calm, Timou."

Timou looked at the other girl, surprised. If her father had been present, she knew he would not think she was especially calm. He would shake his head and ask her to make her heart still. She said after a moment, as her father had told her many times, "You live in the moment you have, Taene. The future will unfold as it will, and you have to be calm to watch it unfolding."

"Yes," said Taene, doubtfully, and went back to the original question. "But do you like Jonas at all?"

Timou did not quite know. She thought he was *interesting*. Jonas was the only adult in the village who hadn't lived in it her whole life; the only person whose eyes sometimes held echoes of memories that had nothing to do with familiar places. But she did not know whether she liked him, exactly. She did not know how to say anything of this to Taene.

But she went to the dancing that evening, and danced twice with Jonas. Then she left early, walking back to her home through the gathering dusk with a fat white candle to light her way. Jonas gave her the candle, but he didn't offer to walk her back to Kapoen's house. He didn't pay her any extravagant compliments either, but he said, "I'm glad you came, Timou," in a way that sounded like he meant it.

Timou was not certain she was glad she'd gone to the dancing. She felt unsettled, unmoored from the calm that her father had tried to teach her. She tried to recapture it by spending the rest of her night learning to hear the names of stars in the faint music of their glittering dance. Kapoen lifted a resigned eyebrow at the echoes of music and laughter, and the unsettled questions, in her mind. If he saw Jonas' name behind her eyes, he did not mention it. He merely taught her how to set her thoughts and memories and questions aside so she could hear the voices of the stars.

The stars' voices were clear and clean and remote. By dawn Timou had become so entranced by them that she had forgotten ordinary concerns; her father had to carry her to bed in the end because she could not bring herself to turn from the slow measures of their crystalline music. She did not think of Jonas again, or the ordinary life of the village, for days. When she did, it was with a kind of distant shock: it seemed strange to her that the music of the stars could exist alongside the music of the village dances. And it seemed unlikely, and perhaps not really desirable, that she should care for both.

Nevertheless, Timou met Jonas twice more that winter at village dances. Taene came to her house and pulled her bodily out of doors once, laughing at Timou's half-hearted protests. "You'll wither away if you don't get some air," Taene told her. "It's a beautiful night. Come on! Your father won't mind if you leave your studies for one evening!"

Jonas wandered by the dancing a little while after Taene and Timou arrived. He danced with Taene once and Timou twice. He certainly did not put himself constantly in Timou's way, but Taene took a moment to whisper to Timou that somehow Jonas seldom appeared at a dance if she was not there. Timou did not know what she thought about this.

But Timou had a great deal to think about besides Jonas. That was the winter she learned how to ask a falcon or a fox for its true name, and how to catch and hold the light of the sun or the moon in a mirror, and how to lay a path before her feet that would take her unfailingly home if she'd lost her way. She learned to stand beside her father and send trees that had begun to walk back to their long slow sleep, and she learned to read the advance of the Hunter's imminent storms in the ragged movements of the clouds across the sky, and how to guide his storms safely around the village and its environs. And she learned that people were sometimes unwilling to ask a mage for what they truly desired, and so a mage had to what they meant behind the words they spoke.

But though she listened carefully all that winter to what her father said and did not say, she did not learn the name of her mother, or the reason her mother had given her up.

In the depths of winter, on Timou's seventeenth birthday, her father took her by the hand and led her to the great stone marker at the edge of the village. Kapoen gave her name to the stone and laid a coiled strand of her hair at its foot. Then he released her hand, symbolically releasing her into the world. "You are become beautiful," he said softly. "May your beauty become light. May your light become joy. May your joy become wisdom. May your wisdom be beautiful."

He looked into Timou's face. "You have learned no trade nor art but mine, and need not, if you choose to follow my path. Is this what you wish, my daughter?"

"Yes," Timou agreed. She knew this was what her father expected her to say, and besides, it was true. She found, meeting her father's eyes, that she barely had to lift her head to do so. She had grown tall, and never noticed till now. The realization sent an odd feeling down the back of her neck. Time had passed, and she had not even thought to notice.

*The City in the Lake* is available now, published by Random House in the US.

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