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TIDEMAGIC

THE MANY FACES OF ISTA FLIT

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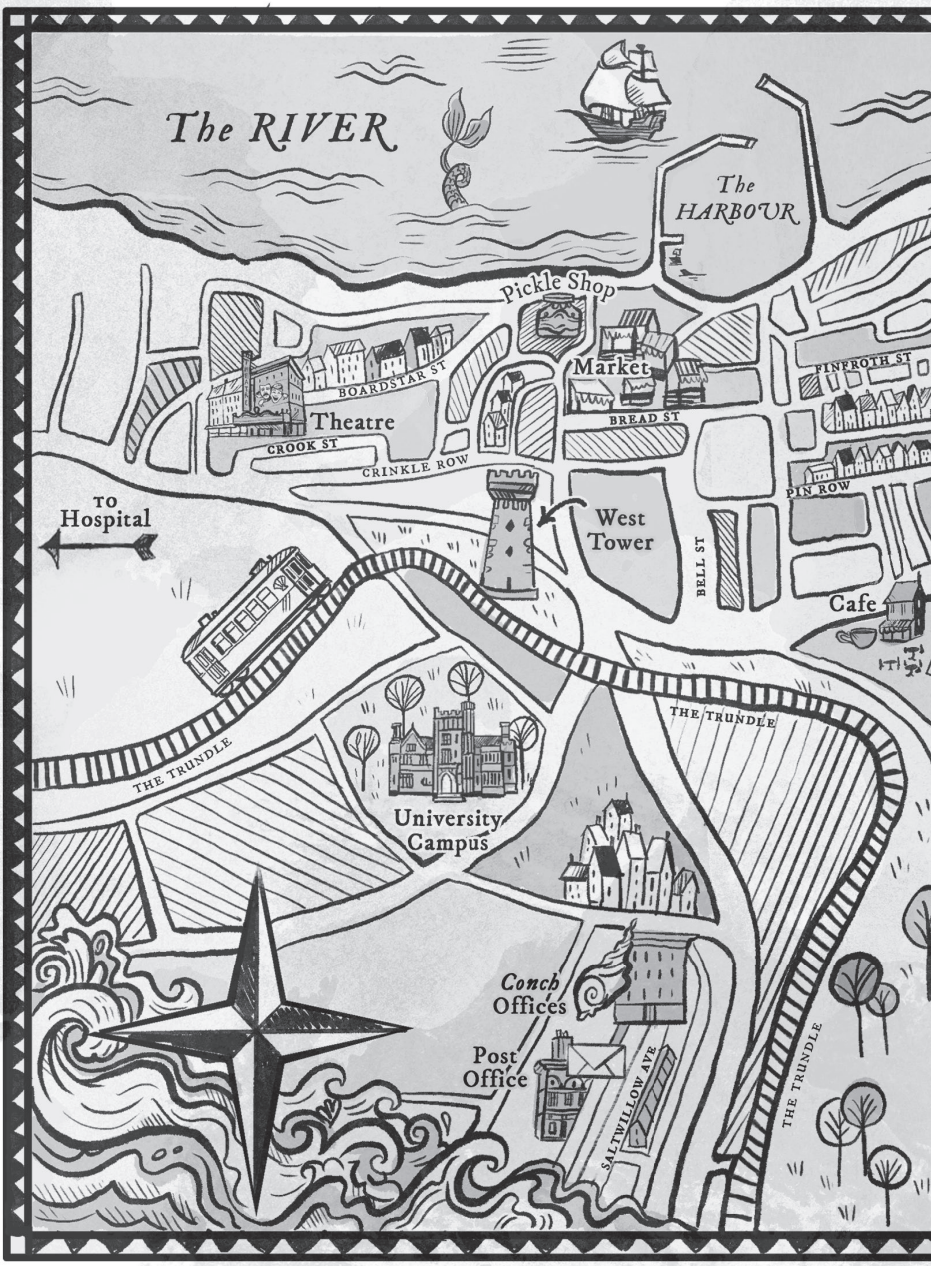
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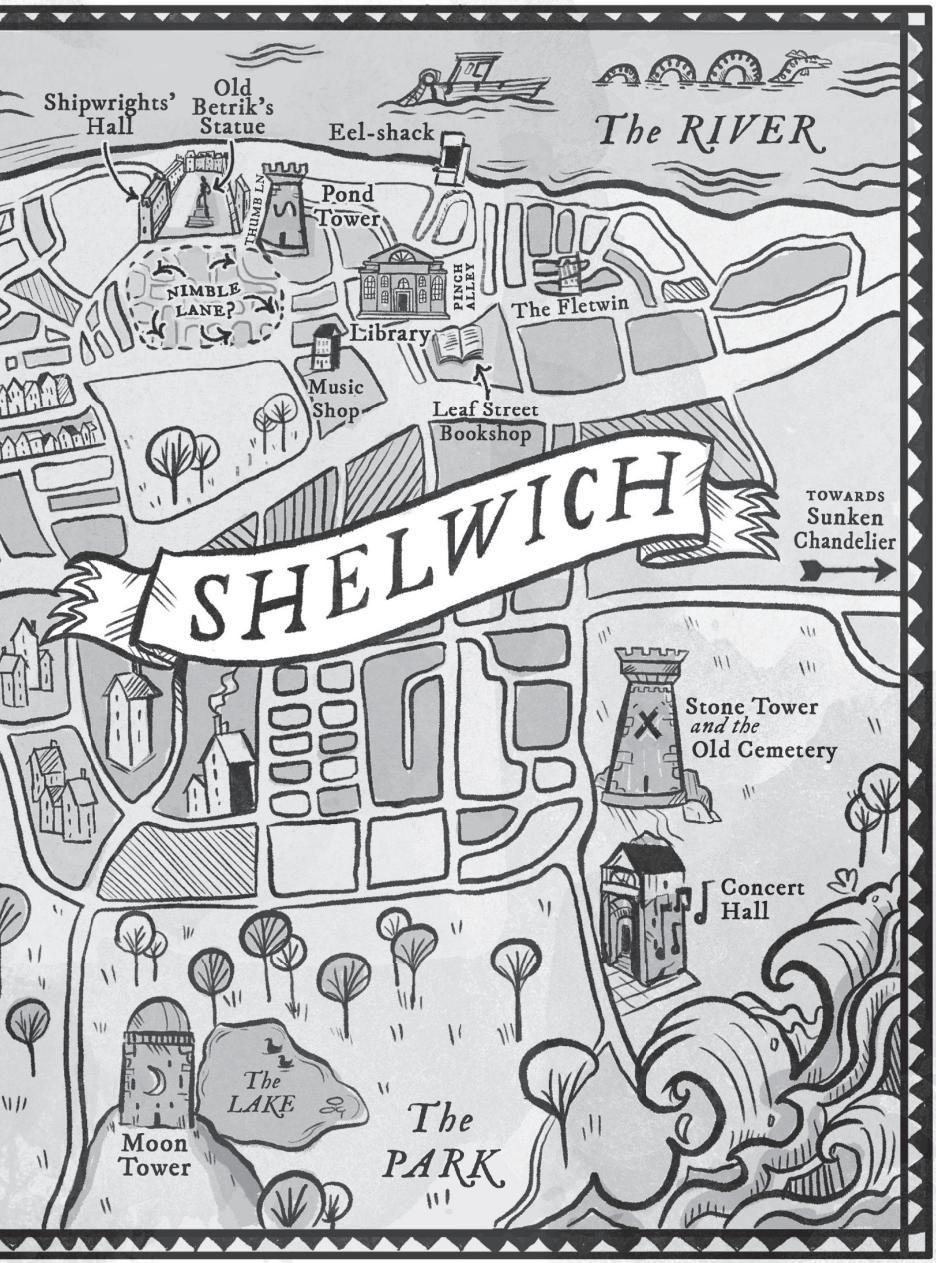
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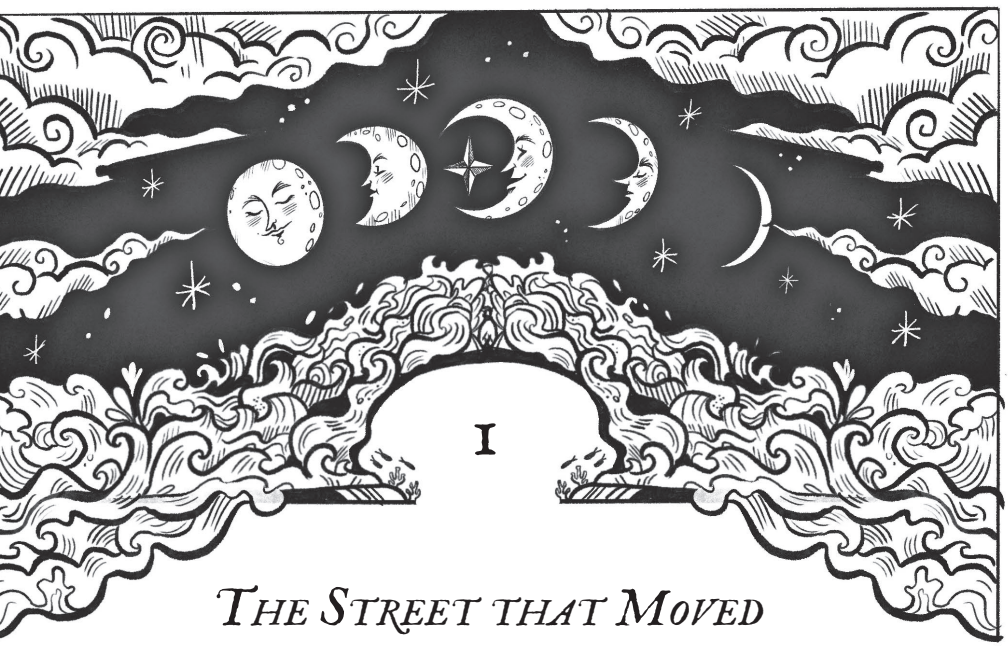


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For Mum, who told me stories
before I was even born.
And for Ed, who brought me
snacks while I wrote this one.


The RIVER
The HARBOUR
Pickle Shop
Market
BOARDSTAR ST
Theatre
CROOK ST
CRINKLE ROW
BREAD ST
FINFROTH ST
PIN ROW
BELL ST
TO Hospital
West Tower
Cafe
THE TRUNDLE
THE TRUNDLE
University Campus
Conch Offices
Post Office
SALTWILLOW AVE
THE TRUNDLE


Shipwrights' Hall
Old Betrik's Statue
Eel-shack
The RIVER
THUMB LN
Pond Tower
NIMBLE LANE?
PINCH ALLEY
Library
The Fletwin
Music Shop
Leaf Street Bookshop
SHELWICH
TOWARDS Sunken Chandelier
Stone Tower and the Old Cemetery
Concert Hall
The LAKE
Moon Tower
The PARK



I

The Street that Moved

It was called Nimble Lane because nobody ever knew exactly where it was going to be. Some people claimed they'd been led to its entrance by a strange drift of music. Others said the trick to finding it was to stand at the corner of Bell Street and Bread Street and wait for the wind to change.

It was clear to Ista Flit that none of those people had ever been there.

Lucky them, she thought, turning away from the river that unfurled in the afternoon light like a wide grey tongue. Nothing good came of a visit to Nimble Lane at the best of times, and the timing of this particular summons was far

from ideal. The Tide was coming in, sending tingles down Ista's arms and sighing in her ears. Mist was drifting in too.

She gave a shiver that had nothing to do with the chill.

Magic, mist and darkness – that was what the monsters liked.

At least High Tide was over half an hour away, and dusk further off still. Nevertheless, if it had been up to her, Ista would have hurried indoors before the magic climbed any higher. But a blue handkerchief had been pinned to the awning of the eel-shack, and that was the signal, so instead she set out through the honeycomb of streets to the south of Shipwrights' Square, pausing every few paces to take a deep sniff of air so cold it made her shudder despite the thickness of her oversized black coat.

The lane was a sneaky thing, but it was around here somewhere. She could smell it – smoky and brackish all at once, as if someone had blown out birthday candles beside a silty tide pool. *A sharp nose*, her aunt had once said, not so very long ago when Ista's life had still included such uncomplicated things as aunts and birthdays. *You've a sharp nose for trouble, girl, and your sharp tongue will do little to get you out of it*. Which was probably true. Yet, funnily enough, it was Ista's actual nose, a slightly longer than average one that conspired with her raggedy limbs to make her look like a startled heron, that led her into trouble these days.

Well, that and the talents the Tide brought her.

She took another step. Another sniff. *There*. At the very edge of her peripheral vision – where a split second earlier there had been nothing but an unremarkable row of merchants' houses – an impossible pathway came into view, like a dark throat opening. The mouth of it dripped with shadows, and a voice at the back of Ista's skull whispered, as it always did when she found Nimble Lane, that this was all a very, very bad idea.

Another more practical part of her, however, knew that she didn't have any choice. There were not many things left that she cared about, but one of them was down there, and so was the person who was holding it hostage.

Ista squared her shoulders and walked into the gloom. The path widened; cobbles sprang up under her feet and dark-beamed buildings crowded in on either side. A door creaked open as she passed, closing again with a *snick* when she turned to see who was there.

At the end of the lane stood the Shrieking Eel inn. Tide-lanterns lit the way to it, their blue glow strengthening by the second in the rising magic, casting a watery sheen over the wonky timber frames and limewashed walls. Over the porch, the rusty sign squeaked on its pole, as if rocked by an invisible hand. The front door was completely bare: no handle, no bell, no knocker, no letter box. No hidden latch or pull cord or even a keyhole. Anyone who didn't know better would have assumed it only opened from the inside.

Ista did know better, though. She placed her palm on the wood. Above her fingertips, a faint line appeared, like the scratch of a well-sharpened claw. The line lengthened, curving to form a jagged circle around Ista's hand. When the circle was complete, the door swung inward, a low voice rumbling in greeting.

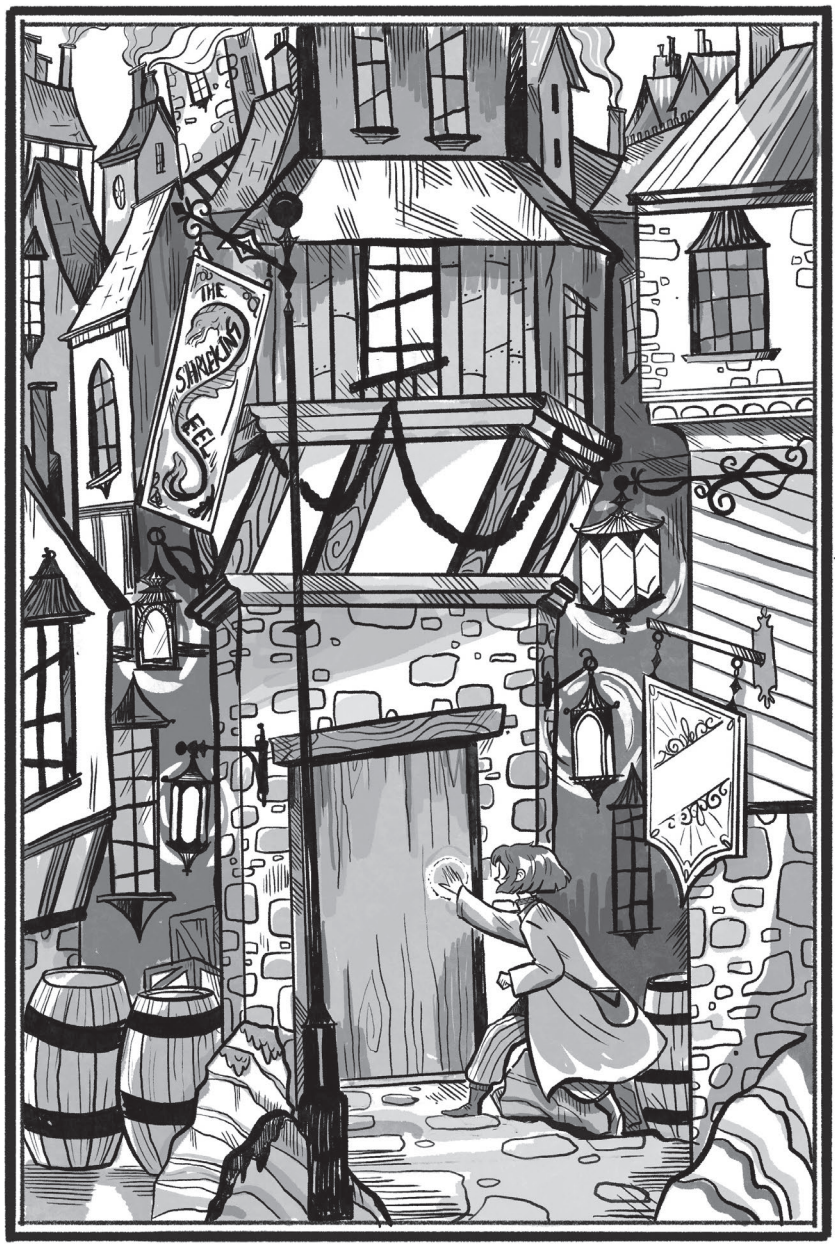
'*Welcome, wanderer. Enter and make your choice*.'

Inside the stone-floored entrance hall, two lift carriages waited, their safety grilles formed of ornately patterned metalwork shaped into snake-like river weeds and curling tentacles. Next to each lift was a brass plaque: one engraved with an arrow pointing down and the word BUSINESS, the other with an upward arrow and the word PLEASURE.

The only other object in the room was a hooded leather porter's chair. A large white cat dozed on the seat. He opened his green eye – he only had the one – to squint at Ista as she bent to offer him a stroke.

'Hello, Terrible,' she said, because Terrible was the cat's name and she always had the sense that he liked to be spoken to. 'No prizes for guessing which option I'll choose.'

Terrible raised his chin, granting her access to the thick fluff at his throat. Ista allowed herself a few seconds of his purring and warmth, then straightened and turned to the lifts. She had never set foot in the carriage on the right, which supposedly led upward to food and music and rooms for weary revellers who needed a place to lay their heads.


THE
SHRIEKING
EEL

In the carriage on the left there were no buttons to press. The grille and doors swished closed, sealing her in. You had to be desperate or dangerous to come to the Shrieking Eel on business – everyone in Shelwich agreed on that.

I am dangerous, Ista thought fiercely as the carriage rattled downward. *I am dangerous*. *I am dangerous*.

She emerged into a hallway lit by a single shivering Tide-lantern that swayed from a chain. Ahead was a door. *I am dangerous*, she told herself again. But deep down she knew it was desperation that had brought her here.

Before she could knock, a breeze swept up, blowing the door open and carrying her across the threshold as easily as a wave carries a piece of kelp to shore. The room in which she landed could have been labelled a study, a library or even a workshop, depending on who was doing the labelling. Under different circumstances Ista might have said it was cosy. The space was crammed with ancient-looking books and mismatched furniture and shelf after shelf of what she thought of as Curiosities – all kinds of trinkets and gadgets, from chutney spoons to microscopes to a whole menagerie of mechanical animals.

Ista edged through the clutter, careful not to knock anything. 'You summoned me.'

At times like this, it was as though someone else was controlling her mouth. Someone older and much, much braver. They must have had control of her hands too, because

she didn't wipe her clammy palms on her coat or flatten the tuft of her short brown hair that was sticking out at an angle – no matter how much she wanted to.

The reply came from the shadows on the far side of the room. 'Hello, little thief. I have an errand for you.'

There was nothing cosy about Alexo Rokis. He was fox-faced and wolf-eyed; sharp all over, particularly at the chin and elbows. Everything else, from his age to how long he'd lived in the city, was slippery, but it was generally agreed that he had a finger in every black-market pie in Shelwich and a knack for letting silences stretch uncomfortably long, just as he did now.

Ista felt his smirk like a burn. She kept her own face blank – or at least she hoped she did – and after a few slow ticks of the clock, his voice curled out to her again.

'I want you to steal me a telescope. Only a small one. It's on display at the Moon Tower. In the Hall of Maps.' He peeled away from the wall, the smirk widening into a hard slice of smile. 'Governor Hettle's making a speech tomorrow night. In the Great Hall, a few corridors away. You're going to be one of the guests.'

Ista did not smile back. She trusted him least of all when he was in this kind of mood, handing out orders as if they were tickets to adventures.

'Who?' she asked. She hoped the guest was someone around her own age this time. It was tricky acting like a grown-up. They hardly ever said what they meant.

Alexo just grinned as he stood before her. He held out his hand, palm to the ceiling.

Magic scuttled down Ista's spine.

An inch above his fingers, a marble-sized bubble blinked into being. It hung in the air like a tiny moon. Then it began to grow, its surface misting over, swelling bigger and bigger, until it was as large as the globe that balanced precariously on a nearby stack of books. Through the mist, leaf-like shapes swirled then snapped together, lengthening into the outline of a figure.

Alexo clenched his hand into a fist. The bubble cleared. The figure was a boy, captured perfectly, as if they were looking at him through a window.

'Oh,' Ista said. For a moment, it was all she could say. 'But that's Jarmak Hettle!' Disbelief lifted her voice embarrassingly close to a squeak.

Alexo nodded. 'The governor's son. What better cover?'

No. The word sparked in Ista's throat. As if he'd heard it, Alexo raised an eyebrow, then threw a glance at a glass-fronted cabinet near the hearth.

Ista tried not to follow his gaze but failed. Behind the glass, locked away with a key that Alexo wore strung on his belt, was a clarinet case. Her pa's clarinet case – with her pa's clarinet inside it. The only piece of Pa that she had left.

She swallowed. 'If I get caught . . .'

'They'll chain you up in Shipwrights' Square and leave

you for the grilks? Yes, probably.' Alexo's smirk was back. 'But you won't get caught.'

Ista fought a shudder. As a rule, she didn't let herself think about the time she had seen a grilk up close, but the memory crashed over her now. Wings like torn sails, sword-sharp teeth and the wide black void of the creature's mouth opening behind them. Worst of all, the awful feeling of her magic draining away.

That had been her first night in the city – and were it not for Alexo, she would never have escaped. The rescue was such a blur in Ista's mind that she couldn't say what had happened exactly, but somehow his arrival had scared off the grilk, and in the process he had taken her pa's clarinet. *Run a few errands for me*, he'd said when she'd realized and demanded that he return it to her, *and you can earn it back*.

He'd saved her and then stolen from her, almost within the same breath. And Ista, frayed with exhaustion and fear, had seen little choice but to shake his hand. Only afterwards did she think to ask what he'd meant by 'a few'. *Let's say twenty*, he'd said, shrugging. He was most likely planning to sell the clarinet if she didn't prove useful. He hadn't known then what she could do.

'Well?' he said now.

Ista returned her attention to the boy in the bubble. She'd seen Jarmak Hettle from a distance before and knew that he was about her height, although a fair measure

broader, but this was the first time she'd observed him up close. His features were soft, his hair a little longer than Ista's short crop, slicked back from his face, and his skin was a rosy pinkish white with a small birthmark on his right cheek.

Not that the details mattered. Magic pulsed in her fingertips and whispered in her blood. The Tide was racing towards its peak. It would do the work for her.

She closed her eyes – and *changed*.

As it always did, it started with a prickle at the nape of her neck and ended with a twitch of her toes. When she finished, her head felt too heavy and her feet felt too flat and she knew that if she glanced into the gilt-edged mirror on the wall she'd see an exact copy of Jarmak Hettle staring back at her.

'That'll do.' Alexo waved his hand.

He could sound a pinch more impressed, Ista thought, scowling at him as she changed back.

A Tide-blessing, people called it – any gift that came in with the Tide.

And hers turned him a handsome profit in stolen valuables.

She examined her nails. 'I'll need smart clothes.'

'I'll send them.' Alexo turned away.

The bubble shrank in on itself and vanished, leaving behind nothing but a faint whiff of snuffed candles and salt.

That's me dismissed, then, Ista thought, meeting her own brown eyes in the mirror. She let her gaze stray to the clarinet case once more, just for a heartbeat, before she left.

Twenty errands. That was the bargain they had made. Tomorrow would be nineteen.

She only hoped he would keep his word.