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Opening extract from

The Magic Thief

Written by and illustrated by

Sarah Prineas and Antonio Javier Caparo

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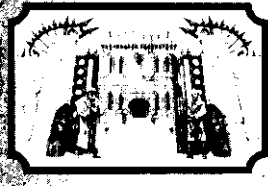
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TO MAUD,
WHO LAUGHED IN ALL
THE RIGHT PLACES

WELLMET





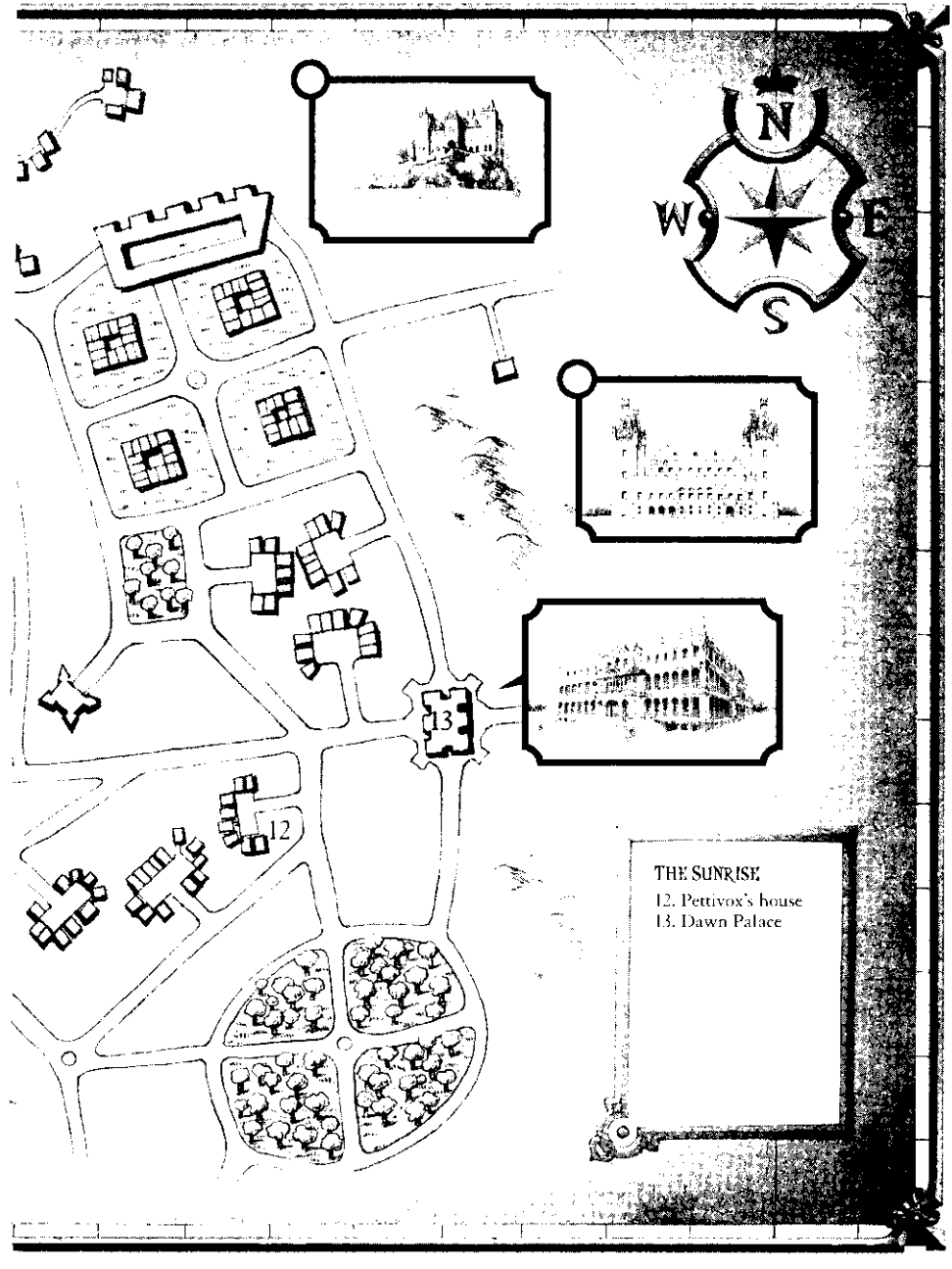
THE RIVER

1. Heartsease
2. Academicos
3. Wizards' houses
4. Magisters Hall
5. Night Bridge

=== tunnels under river to islands

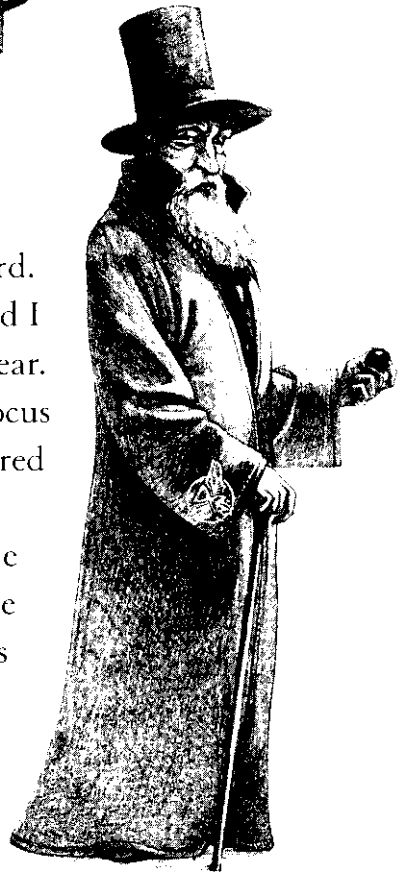
THE TWILIGHT

7. Sark Square
8. Dusk House
9. Factories and warehouses
10. Half Chick Lane
11. Strangle Street


N
W
E
S
13
12
THE SUNRISE
12. Pettivox's house
13. Dawn Palace

The MAGIC THIEF

CHAPTER 1



A thief is a lot like a wizard. I have quick hands. And I can make things disappear. But then I stole the wizard's locus magicalicus and nearly disappeared myself forever.

It was a late night in the Twilight, black-dark as the inside of a burglar's bag. The streets were deserted. A sooty fog crept

up from the river, and the alleyways echoed with shadows. Around me I felt the city, echoing and empty, desolate and dead.

The cobblestones under my bare feet were slick with the evening's rain. No luck that day for my quick, pocket-pick hands, and I hadn't managed to filch my supper or a bit of copper to buy it with. I was hollow with hunger. I might have tried somewhere else, except that the Underlord had a word out on me, and his minions would beat the fluff out of me if they could. Keeping an eye out, I lurked in an alleyway.

They never had any spare money. Now it was late. The rain started up again, not a hard rain, but a cold one, just enough to get into your bones and make you shiver. A good night for misery eels. I hunched into my lurking spot and thought about warm dinners.

Then I heard it. Step step *tap*. Step step *tap*. I edged back into my alley shadows to wait, and along he came. Old man, I thought. A bent,

bearded, cloak-wearing old croakety croak leaning on a cane. Climbing the steep street toward me. Muttering to himself. His purse, I decided, would be paying for my dinner, though he didn't know it yet.

I was a shadow, a breath of air, light-feather fingers and – *quick hands* – I ghosted up behind him, dipped into his cloak pocket, grabbed what I found within, and was gone. Away clean.

Or so I thought. The old man went on, not noticing a thing, and I slipped back into my alley and opened my hand to see what I'd got for my trouble.

Even in the shadows, the thing I'd stolen was darker than dark, and though it was small, a stone no bigger than a baby's fist, it was heavier than the heart of a man on his way to the gallows tree. It was a magical thing. The wizard's locus magicalicus. As I stared down at the wizardly stone, it started to glow. Soft at first, with the red warmth of coals in a winter hearth. Then, a sudden fierce flash of light-

ning and the alley was alive with dancing, flashing light, the shadows fleeing like frightened black cats.

I heard the wizard coming back. Step step *tap*. Step step *tap*. Quickly I fisted the stone and shoved it down deep into my pocket. Darkness fell again. As I turned, blinking the brights from my eyes to look, the old man came tip-tapping around my corner, and, reaching out with a big hand, grabbed me by the shoulder.

'Well, boy,' he said. His voice was strong and gravelly.

I stood still. I know trouble when it grabs me.

The old man looked down at me with keen-glancing eyes. Silence for a long, dark moment. In my pocket, the stone weighed and warmed. Then he said, 'You look hungry.'

Well, yes. I was. Carefully, cautiously, I nodded.

'Then I will buy you some dinner,' the old man said. 'Roast pork, perhaps? Potatoes and pie?'

I swallowed. My head was telling me this was not a good idea. The old man was a wizard, clear

as clear, and what kind of fool sits down to eat dinner with a wizard?

But my empty-since-yesterday stomach was telling me even louder that it wanted pork and peppered potatoes and pie. It told me to nod and I did.

'Well then,' the old man wizard said. 'The chophouse on the corner is still open.' He let me go and started step-tapping down the street, and I went with him. 'I am Nevery,' he said. 'And your name?'

Telling wizards your name is generally not a good idea. I didn't answer. Just walked along beside him. The wizard seemed to be looking ahead to the chophouse on the corner, but I caught a glimpse of his keen-gleam eyes, watching me from under the brim of his hat.

The chophouse was lit by a coal fire in the hearth and was empty except for its keeper. 'Dinner,' the wizard ordered, and held up two fingers. The chophouse keeper nodded and went to

fetch the food. We settled at a table, me with my back against the wall, Nevery blocking my way to the door.

'Well, boy,' the wizard said, taking off his hat. In the brighter light I saw that his eyes were black and his hair, beard, and eyebrows silver gray. Beneath his dark gray cloak, he wore black trousers and a black frock coat with a velvet collar and an embroidered black waistcoat, all of it just a bit shabby, as if he'd once had more money than he did now. He leaned his gold-knobbed cane against the table. 'A cold, wet night for travelers, is it not?'

A cold, wet night for anyone, I thought. I nodded.

He looked at me. I looked back.

'Yet you seem healthy enough,' he said, as if talking to himself. 'No ill effects that I can see.'

Ill effects? What was he talking about?

'You never did tell me your name,' he said.

And I wasn't going to, either. I shrugged.

Nevery opened his mouth to say something else, when the chophouse keeper delivered our food, plunking down full plates before us.

The pork chops were fragrant and crisp, the potatoes swimming in butter with a sprinkling of black pepper over their shiny brown backs. The chophouse keeper returned briefly and added a plate of pie oozing with berries and dusted with sugar. The wizard said something, but I didn't hear him. I picked up my fork and cut open a potato. I let it soak in for a second and then took an enormous bite.

'I said,' the wizard said, staring at me, 'that my locus magicalicus will likely kill you, boy, very soon. I'm astonished it hasn't done so already.'

I gulped. My bite of potato slid like a lump of lead down my throat and I heard the echo as it dropped into my empty stomach.

Kill me, did he say? The locus stone would kill me? I slid my hand into my pocket. And then I watched myself pull out the stone. It lay in my

palm like a soft-edged bit of night.

I blinked, and the stone swelled, and a heavy, night-dark mass filled my hands. The firelight flickered out.

In the distance, I heard the chophouse keeper scream. The wizard snatched up his knobbed cane and leaped to his feet.

In my hands, the stone's warmth turned to ice. It grew larger, and though I tried to put it down, it wouldn't let me go. The freezing heaviness grew and expanded until it was all around me, dragging me down into a seething black pit where the wind stabbed me with needles of ice and roared with a voice that rumbled in my bones.

I peered up through the lashing darkness.

The wizard Nevery loom-doomed up before me.

'Tell me your name!' he shouted.

I shook my head. The wind shrieked and tore with icy fingers at my hair and clothes.

Nevery shouted again; I could barely hear his

voice above the wind. 'If you don't tell me your name, fool, I cannot save you!'

The wind whipped around me. Cold air flowed from the stone, reaching out with icy fingers, pulling me in, and I pushed it away and shouted my name, 'Connwaer!'

In the distance, I heard Nevery's strong, gravelly voice shout my name along with other words, a magical spell. Then I felt his hand, warm, solid, close over mine and take the stone.

The wind died. The air warmed. All was quiet.

After a while, I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the wooden floor of the chophouse, the fire flickering in the fireplace and Nevery at the table taking a last bite of berry pie. He wiped his mouth on a napkin and leaned back in his chair, looking down at me.

The stone was nowhere to be seen.

'Well then, boy,' he said, his eyes gleaming. 'My locus magicalicus ought to have killed you the

moment you laid your thieving fingers on it. But it did not. And because you are not dead, you interest me.'

I blinked and climbed shakily to my feet. On the table, my plate of pork chops and potatoes waited for me. And the berry pie dusted with sugar. I could have made a run for it, then. He couldn't have caught me. Quick-dart for the door and back out into the steep, rain-dark streets of Wellmet. But I didn't. Because I interested the wizard.

The thing is, I make a good thief, me and my quick hands. But I'll make an even better wizard's apprentice.



Arrived back in this accursed city after nightfall. Dratted city guards tried to arrest me. Prison if I'm caught here. Used remirrimer spell, eluded them. Forced to retreat to Twilight, west of river.

Dangerous place.

Banishment from Wellmet a long misery, travel from city to city, my grimoire lost, my magic weakened. Would not have come back but for letter from Brumbee.

My dear Nevery,

I know that when you left you swore never to return to Wellmet, but dire events are taking place in the city. We have been monitoring the magical levels and have made an alarming discovery. The level of magic in

Wellmet is ebbing. This has been going on for years, but lately the level has fallen rather alarmingly and abruptly, and we magisters can discover no reason why this should be so. The duchess is no help, of course. You must return and aid the city in its time of need. Please tell no one that I have written to you.

Really, Nevery, I do not know what to do. You must help.

Very sincerely yours,
Brumbee, Magister,
Master of Wellmet Academicos, &c.

Letter did not mention fact that I have been banished from Wellmet for past twenty years. Typical of Brumbee. Man's too worried to think about consequences of inviting me back to city.

To do:

1. Find accommodation in Twilight.

2. Meet Brumbee

3. Meet with Underlord Crowe

4. Hire muscle. Benet?

After arrival in Twilight, went in search of dinner.

Note to self: check locus magicalicus for adosyncratichi, be sure it's unaffected by tonight's adventure.

Was not planning on taking on servant. Will probably not keep him, as most likely not worth trouble. Boy thief is wrapped up in a blanket on the hearth, sound asleep. From here, looks like bundle of rags with dirty bare feet sticking out one end and shock of dirty dark hair out the other.

Only time for short entry tonight. Am weary from the journey and must think on what is to come.

