

CLARITY JONES
AND THE
MAGICAL
DETECTIVE
AGENCY

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CHAPTER 1



May you find what you need, not what you seek.

Traditional Rillian farewell

Mutt was lost, Mutt was hungry, Mutt was alone.

Nothing very unusual about two thirds of that sentence; Mutt was always alone and he was usually hungry. But he had never, ever been lost before. Not until today. He looked around at the unfamiliar alleyway, panic hovering at the edge of his brain like the roar of a distant crowd. Where was he? In all his years of wandering the streets of Meandermart, he'd never got lost before. He knew the city like the back

of his hand. Better, in fact (he wasn't the sort of boy who sat around staring at the back of his hand). He knew his way around the great city of Meandermart as well as he knew the number of pies in the goat-pie man's shop window. And he knew that exactly. There were thirty-seven of them.

'There he is!' With a porridge splat of boots on the muddy ground (when you're as hungry as Mutt was, everything starts to sound like food), a group of people rounded the corner. They were about Mutt's age, but whereas he was undernourished, filthy and scrawny, they were well fed, well scrubbed and hefty. Built for chasing. Mutt, luckily, was built for running away. So, without hesitation, that's exactly what he did, taking off in the opposite direction in his bare feet, zigzagging down the winding streets like a fleeing hare, eyes wide and arms pumping as the hunting party thundered behind in pursuit.

It all sounds very dramatic, doesn't it, but in all honesty this was shaping up to be pretty much a typical Tuesday.

This particular Tuesday had started several hours before, with Mutt standing patiently outside the great eastern gates of the city as dawn picked out the

clouds with streaks of watercolour orange. The winding, potholed road leading up to the gate was almost empty, with just a couple of farmers' wagons waiting to enter. Mutt could see the breath from the oxen that pulled the carts steaming in the chilly air – it was, after all, only a couple of weeks until the exact middle of winter, which would be marked by the great and very miserable holiday known as Moaningtide. Eventually, with much grinding and clanking, the gates swung slowly inwards to reveal a wide street sloping gently uphill towards the castle, perched high on its hill and still veiled in morning mist. Somewhere a ragged horn sounded to signal that the great city was ready to begin another day. The farmers shook the reins to urge their lumbering oxen on, and Mutt waited for them to pass before he slipped inside.

A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO RILLIA

M *MOANINGTIDE* is celebrated on the day that falls in the precise centre of winter. It is a day specially set aside to complain endlessly about the cold, damp weather and the long hours of darkness. For centuries, Rillians have commiserated *Moaningtide* with the singing of gripes and a special feast held during the brief hours of daylight on the shortest day. Family and friends gather round to exchange reasons why they are so very miserable and to point out to each other that spring is still months away. It's one of the most depressing holidays you can possibly imagine.

Instead of following the carts down the main street, Mutt immediately ducked left down a narrow alleyway and began to wind his way through the city towards the great river that flowed along its southern edge. As we know already, Mutt knew the back streets of Meandermart intimately. He knew the four main streets too – those wide streets that radiated out from the hill in the city centre like the spokes of a wheel. He knew the streets that linked them, the narrower, cluttered roads lined with houses and shops. And best of all he knew the winding paths that wove the city together like veins – the small streets the locals called gannicks, and the even smaller ways known as jitties that wound round the city, bending back upon themselves and linking up with each other in a bewildering maze like street spaghetti. It was easy to get lost in these parts of Meandermart. But not for Mutt. Without thinking, he weaved his way towards the river, turning left and right down gannicks, keeping the castle looming high above him to the right. Not many people were about – just a few early risers who eyed him suspiciously, and once or twice he caught sight of a gnanger returning to its burrow after its night's feasting.

A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO RILLIA



GNANGERS are small, scaly creatures distantly related to the dragons that inhabit the Draconian Wastes to the north of Rillia. Gnangers are nocturnal and omnivorous, meaning that during the night they roam the streets of cities such as Meandermart, eating any refuse. Gnangers have extremely strong teeth, so they are able to chew up almost any substance. Rillians are now in the habit of simply throwing their household waste on to the streets at sundown, knowing it will have been eaten by dawn. Gnangers may just be the most useful creature you will ever encounter.

The streets around the Merchants' Quarter in south Meandermart were much busier; most wagons arrived from the south and trundled over the great stone structure of the Oxenbridge into the city. The smartly dressed Meandermartins hardly noticed Mutt as he dodged through the crowds, working his way towards the wide stone street that ran alongside the river, with the shops and stalls of the Merchants' Bazaar clustered along its northern edge. The air began to fill with the smell of cooking as he grew closer, and the masts of the ships tied up at the wharves speared the sky above him.

The ships that were tied up at Meandermart's docks and the wagons that rolled across the Oxenbridge brought goods from right across the Three Kingdoms and even, sometimes, from the lands beyond. At the stalls of the Merchants' Bazaar you could buy pretty much anything you could imagine – rich cloths woven in Spess to the south, rare books from Informatia, or swords and armour forged in the Twin Cities far to the east. Mutt passed a table laden with fresh vegetables and paused in front of a shop boasting 'REAL magic artefacts! Best prices!' He snorted. There wasn't much magic left – everybody knew that. And the few rare

magical items that remained were guarded jealously by their owners – they certainly wouldn't be on sale here. Next to the magic shop was a smaller store selling lifna, the small, carved wooden figures that Rillians traditionally gave to each other at funerals. When someone died, a lifna would sit on the mantelpiece in the house where they'd lived, watching over those they'd left behind. Mutt passed quickly by and walked on, blinking.

Right in the centre of the bustling market, occupying a prime position opposite the largest wharf, where the biggest ships could moor, was the goat-pie man's shop, and of all the delicious smells that wafted around that part of the city, the smell coming from his spotless bakery was the deliciousest. The goat-pie man's goat pies were the finest in Meandermart – indeed, the finest in all of Rillia. Mutt could see them, neatly arranged on wooden shelves in the window, steaming up the glass with their delectable meaty aroma. As well as being the finest pies in the kingdom, they were also the most expensive, which was the reason Mutt had never tried one. He could see the goat-pie man standing in the doorway, his striped apron neatly ironed and his bald head catching the

morning sunlight as he bellowed out over the heads of the passing crowd: 'Finest goat pies in all of Rillia! Simmered with a blend of eleven secret herbs and spices! Enjoyed by the crowned heads of all three of the Three Kingdoms! Only for the discerning! Only for the very best!' He caught sight of Mutt loitering on the corner and added, out of the corner of his mouth, 'Certainly not for the likes of you, street dog! Get out of it!' He reached behind him for a broom, but by the time he turned round again Mutt had vanished. 'Watch your pockets, lords and ladies!' yelled the goat-pie man. 'There's a street mutt in the neighbourhood! A nasty little pie-dog!' Round the corner, Mutt frowned. It was the goat-pie man who had given him his nickname in the first place, and he never seemed to tire of warning people about the boy he called a 'street mutt', implying he was some kind of thief or pickpocket. Mutt had never stolen anything in his life, even though he had nothing. 'We do not steal,' his father had always told him, and 'We do not beg,' his mother would always add. *Not that it had done them much good*, Mutt thought to himself glumly as another waft of fragrant goat-scented steam made his empty stomach wince.

I do not beg, Mutt repeated to himself as he carried on squeezing through the crowd, *and I do not steal*. So what did this lonely, barefoot boy do for food? The answer lay by the wharves, where the sides of the great riverboats rose up from the docks like wooden walls, strewn with ropes as their cargoes were loaded and unloaded. Here, there were always things to carry, things to be delivered. And, if you were fast, like Mutt, and you knew the city inside out, like Mutt, you could earn a few small copper coins for helping with that carrying and delivering. And so, by spending his day sprinting from one end of Meandermart to the other, clutching a letter or a parcel in his hands, Mutt was able to earn enough to buy himself something to eat for his supper. Not enough to buy a pie from the goat-pie man, which was far, far too expensive. Not enough to buy shoes either. But most days he scraped together just enough for a bowl of watery stew or a stale half-loaf from one of the smaller, shabbier shops that could be found towards the edge of the market.

On this particular Tuesday, Mutt returned to the Merchants' Quarter towards the end of the afternoon, looking for one last delivery before he

went home. He wandered along the wharves, idly kicking his toes in the dirt as he gazed up at the busy sailors on their boats. ‘Ah, there he is!’ A voice broke into his reverie. ‘That’s the boy, the fast one. Hey! Come here!’ A plump man in richly embroidered robes was beckoning to him from a booth on the other side of the street. ‘I need this taking to the Mages’ Quarter as quickly as possible,’ the man said dismissively, holding out a thick piece of folded parchment between two of his sausage-like fingers. ‘You know the way?’

Mutt nodded, but slightly reluctantly. Of course he knew the way to the Mages’ Quarter – he knew the way to everywhere. But it meant going past the Knights’ Academy, and classes would just be finishing for the day. The rich kids from the Academy never missed an opportunity to chase him if they saw him running past, and, although they didn’t always catch him, it meant a beating and a ducking in the water trough if they did. Mutt silently weighed up the risks against the two tarnished coins the merchant was holding out along with his letter. After a few seconds he nodded again, more decisively. Snatching the letter along with his payment, he took off back through the market.

The Mages' Quarter was in the north-west of Meandermart, right on the other side of the city from the bustling wharves. Mutt knew it would take a good hour for him to weave his way there, even with the shortcuts he knew through the winding jitties and gannicks. He took the first forty minutes or so at a brisk pace, the looming shape of the castle showing itself between the buildings on his right from time to time. But, when he got close to the Knights' Academy, he slowed his pace, walking casually by on the other side of the street, desperate to avoid attracting attention to himself. Here and there he could see the red tunics of the trainee knights as they swaggered along in groups or pairs, their arms draped round one another's shoulders and their loud, confident voices ringing up and down the street. Mutt kept his head down, clutching the letter tightly and trying to hurry as fast as possible without breaking into a run, which would be sure to get him spotted.

It might sound rather glamorous and exciting, the Knights' Academy. But, in fact, the Knights of Rillia rarely did anything particularly useful. The golden, chivalrous days of fighting and rescuing were in the past, and the average knight was now more interested

in keeping his or her armour shiny, and hanging around saying useless things like ‘pritheer’ while waving a handkerchief. It was basically a handy career for people with very full purses and rather empty heads – somewhere for the rich merchant families to send their children if they didn’t show much aptitude for anything in the merchanting line. As such, you won’t be surprised to learn that the Academy was not exactly full of Rillia’s finest brains. On the other hand, though, as its high towers and gleaming white walls would suggest, it was financed by some of Rillia’s fattest wallets.

‘Street mutt!’ The braying voice made every hair on Mutt’s body stand on end. He glanced over his shoulder to see a gaggle of Academy students pushing their way across the street towards him. Immediately, he broke into a frantic sprint and heard the braying cries of excitement as the kids in red tunics gave chase – **‘There he goes!’**

‘Looks like he needs a bath!’

‘Get him!’

Through the winding streets Mutt ran, away from the Academy and into the Mages’ Quarter, where the buildings were taller and more rickety, their

street-facing walls leaning drunkenly out so that they seemed to close in above him like a tunnel. Left and right he weaved, the sounds of pursuit ringing in his ears, his bare feet slapping on the cold, damp ground. He dimly registered that he was about to pass the house to which he'd promised to deliver the letter and remembered the two coins he'd been paid. *I do not steal*, he reminded himself sternly, and wasted three valuable seconds tearing the door open and yelling 'Delivery!' before flinging the letter at the astonished-looking mage behind the counter. When Mutt tore off down the street again, the mage peered curiously after him from his door. He ducked quickly back inside as the gaggle of trainee knights thundered past, then leaned out again, twiddling his thin beard thoughtfully, following Mutt's fleeing form as it ducked round a corner and into the narrow, winding gannicks that made up most of the Mages' Quarter.

Which brings us, more or less, to the point where this chapter started. Because, after flinging himself round a few more corners – left, left, right, right, right, left – Mutt realized something rather alarming. For the first time ever in all his years of criss-crossing the enormous city of Meandermart, he had

absolutely no idea where he was.

Mutt was lost, Mutt was hungry, Mutt was alone.

With the hunters from the Knights' Academy in hot pursuit, Mutt did the only thing he knew how to do really well. He just kept on running, knotting himself deeper and deeper into the winding ways of the Mages' Quarter, scanning frantically for familiar landmarks and clinging on to the hope that before long he'd realize where he was and work out a way to throw off his pursuers. But it didn't happen. No familiar landmarks presented themselves. The buildings were too tall and tightly packed for him to catch even a glimpse of the distant castle and work out which direction he was headed in. Mutt was lost.

Presently he ran at top speed into a small, deserted square. The few rapid corners he'd managed to throw in had gained him a bit of distance, but he could hear the clumping of feet not too far behind. Mutt's panicked eyes scanned the square for other exits and became even more panicked when he completely and utterly failed to find any. He dug his heels into the ground in a desperate attempt to stop himself, but his left foot hit a hidden stone and he found himself tumbling head over heels, getting

coated in mud as he rolled across the square, before finally coming to a halt against a ramshackle wooden building that occupied the far side of it.

Throughout his fall, Mutt had been frowning in puzzlement. The building was strange for a number of reasons. Firstly, he had never seen it before – and he'd thought, up till now, he had seen every single building in Meandermart. Secondly, the building had a very odd, unfamiliar series of words written in neat black lettering above the door.

MAGICAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

Mutt didn't have issues with the first or the third word. 'Agency' – that was clear enough. And this was the Mages' Quarter, so it was not unusual for shops here to claim they were 'magical' in some way (even though, with so little magic left in the world, the word was usually being used to cover up some cheap sleight-of-hand trick or coloured powder). No, it was the middle word that was causing him a problem – that word 'detective'. It was a word Mutt had never heard before, for the simple reason that practically nobody had ever heard it before. It had, in fact, only

been invented the previous month.

From his vantage point, lying flat on his back on the ground, Mutt squinted up at it, trying to work out what it could possibly mean. He was familiar with the word ‘defective’; he knew that meant something that didn’t work properly. But why on earth would someone write that above their door? Was it some kind of badly named repair shop? As he lay there, Mutt became aware of something else. Closer to him, on the wall to one side of the door, was a wooden sign with more writing on it. Wriggling backwards slightly on his shoulders, he managed to read:

**Conundrums untangled.
Mysteries demystified.
Riddles resolved.**

And just beneath that, someone had painted in different, slightly more untidy writing:

NO LOST CATS

None of this seemed to make things any clearer. But there was something else, too – more letters,

picked out in the strangest of places. They were written along the bottom edge of the wooden sign, so nobody would ever see them unless they were, like Mutt, lying on the floor right in front of the building. He lifted himself up on his elbows to peer more closely at the neat letters written in that strange, inaccessible place.

**Apprentice needed. Apply within.
Must look in unusual places.**

This message was so strange and unexpected that it needed pondering. But pondering is a luxury only granted to those who aren't being chased. Mutt scrambled to his feet as the thundering of boots grew louder. And, as the trainee knights burst into the square after him, he wrenched open the door with that baffling word

DETECTIVE

written above it and plunged through, slamming it shut behind him.

MAGICAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

Conundrums untangled.
Mysteries demystified.
Riddles resolved.
NO LOST CATS

*Apprentices needed. Apply within.
Must look in unusual places.*

