



The GREAT CITY of MEANDERMART

← FLYGER MOUNTAINS
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Monster Catcher

Fools' Parting

TRULY TERRIFYING FOREST

Foolsmeat

Tricorn Leap

SQUELJ

Mutt's Boat-house

Smugglers' Hay

Tower of Greeting

Tower of Parting

GREATER RILLIA

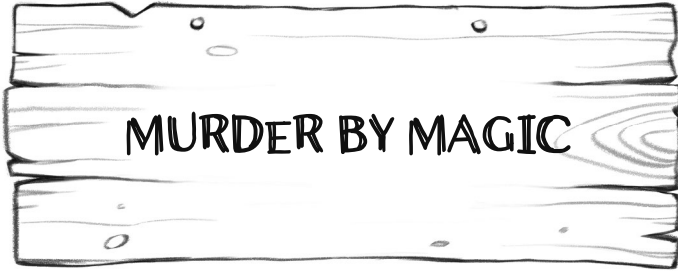
TO THE GREAT SEA
and the TWIN CITIES

To the Kingdoms of SPSS
and INFORMATIA

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PROLOGUE



The wizard had been murdered. To a trained eye, the signs were unmistakable. See if you can untangle any of these clues for yourself.

First clue: there was clear evidence that somebody had forced their way in. The thick wooden front door of the tall, rickety house where the wizard lived had been kicked right down. It had been left lying flat on the floor, with a large muddy footprint clearly visible right in the middle of it.

Second clue: a keen observer might have noticed that somebody had been making threats against the wizard. To one side of his cluttered front room there was a desk piled high with the usual wizardly nonsense: tall green glass phials, dusty old books

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with words written in a language that looked like Latin but wasn't, a few odd-coloured crystals . . . you know the kind of stuff. Anyway, on this desk, half tucked underneath a feather duster, was a large sheet of parchment with the words



picked out in elaborate gothic script in neat black ink. Significant.

Third clue (and perhaps the most telling of all, if you really know what you're looking for): the wizard's head had been cut clean off. Most of him was spreadeagled on the stone floor, legs splayed as if he'd been running away from the door. His head, however, was not in its traditional position on top of his shoulders. Instead, it had been placed on the mantelpiece, from where it overlooked the untidy

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room wearing a floppy blue hat with moons on it and a startled expression.

Yes, the clues were all there if you knew where to look for them. The wizard had been murdered. Even the Meandermart City Watch managed to work that out, and, as you're about to discover, the guards of the Meandermart City Watch are not *generally* selected for their dazzling intelligence.

'Someone's done murdered that wizard,' grunted the armoured woman who walked past in the early hours of the morning during her patrol of the cramped and dingy corner of Meandermart known as the Mages' Quarter.

'What, another one?' grumbled her deputy, a shorter man who had to crane his neck to peer over her shoulder. 'Yep,' he confirmed mournfully. 'You got it in one, Captain. That one's been right killed. Head clean off and everything.'

'He's dead all right,' agreed the Watch Captain. 'Head off,' she repeated, nodding to herself. 'That'll do it for you.' Holding her flaming torch above her head, she leaned into the room and looked around. Dawn was only just breaking, and a pale light cast thick shadows around the room that flickered and

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jumped in the orange firelight. ‘Hmm, look over there.’ Stepping carefully, she moved to the table and examined the parchment, her lips moving soundlessly as she spelled out the message. “‘You will die, Wizard!’” it says here,’ she called back to her companion after a few moments.

‘Hmm. Do *sound* like someone be threatening him,’ observed the deputy guard with a sage nod, reaching under his tarnished helmet to scratch his hair. (They’re very itchy, helmets.)

‘Reckon you’re right,’ his boss agreed. ‘It’s signed “Korg the Destroyer”,’ she went on slowly.

‘You know what *I* think happened here?’ Her deputy sounded excited as he stepped into the room behind her. ‘I reckon this Korg the Destroyer, whoever he is, I reckon he done murdered that there wizard. And the method of the murderin’ that was done,’ he concluded, holding up a stubby yet triumphant finger, ‘was the a-cuttin’ off of that there head what has been placed atop the mantel yonder.’

‘And you know what *I* think?’ countered his boss. ‘I reckon we did done solve this here murder!’ A delighted grin spread across the deputy’s face. ‘I spotted all the clues, I did.’ The deputy’s grin vanished

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as he realized that he wasn't going to get any credit for his clue-spotting. 'Now,' the watch captain went on, rubbing her hands together, 'all we needs to do is track down this Korg the Destroyer person and arrest them. Then we can be back in the castle in time to sling them in the dungeons before breakfast.'

The deputy guard's grin reappeared faintly. It's hard not to cheer up when someone mentions breakfast.

'I wonder where Korg the Destroyer do be?' he pondered out loud, turning to look up and down the deserted street outside. 'They sound scary,' he admitted quietly. 'What if they come back?' His hand tightened round the hilt of his sword.

Just then there came a splashing, pattering sound from somewhere away to the right – the sound of footsteps in the mud. The guard stepped out from the doorway, adjusting his helmet and fumbling for his sword, getting his hand tangled up in his cloak in the process. 'Halt!' he shouted hoarsely. 'Be identifyin' of yourself!' Nightmare visions of a horrific monster called Korg the Destroyer flitted through his mind as the footsteps came closer. A flickering shadow grew on the whitewashed walls of the tightly packed houses.

But what came round the corner in the softly growing early-morning light was not any kind of monster. It was something less terrifying but equally strange. It was a wooden chest, its curved lid bound with thick straps of iron. And the wooden chest was trotting down the street towards the wizard's house on four short, stout wooden legs.

The City Watch guard had seen wooden chests before. He even had a very nice one at home, in which he kept precious things like money and cheese. But he had never seen a walking chest before. It was such an odd sight that it completely robbed him of the power of intelligent speech. Not that his speech up till then had been particularly intelligent, but you know.

'Fleeeh,' garbled the guard as the wooden chest approached him, giving a skittish little leap like an excited dog. 'Beff. Phwaaarp.'

'Why do you be sayin' "fleeeh, beff, phwaaarp"?' asked the Watch Captain, coming back to the door of the wizard's house and holding up her torch again.

'Pweeeep,' he explained, pointing to the wooden chest on legs, which had now stopped in front of them and was emitting a faint panting noise.

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‘Greaalp!’ gurgled his boss, taking a short leap backwards and almost tripping over the eighty-five per cent of the wizard that had been left on the floor.

‘Smyll!’ came a voice from down the street. ‘Where are you, boy? What have you found?’ And, as the two guards of the City Watch watched in the same way they did most things – that is to say, dumbly – three figures strode into view out of the haze. It was very dramatic and should really have been accompanied by some quite stirring music. In fact, it was accompanied by the sound of someone further down the street emptying their chamber pot out of their window, but let’s gloss over that for now as it’ll spoil the moment. Let’s focus. The main characters of this story are about to appear and we don’t want to get distracted by the sound – or indeed the smell – of a chamber pot.

The three figures were advancing along the street, which was made of compacted soil with the odd paving stone placed here and there in front of some of the nicer houses. Leading the trio was a tall woman dressed in a deep blue cloak. She had long, flowing hair that reached all the way down her back.



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She wore high boots and a thick leather belt, and had calm, watchful eyes that moved from one side to the other constantly as she strode towards the guards. At her side, stepping sideways in order to cast frequent, watchful glances behind her, was a small, slight girl dressed from head to toe in black leather. Her eyes were narrowed and full of suspicion, and she moved in a slight crouch, as if constantly ready to spring into action. And behind them both, attempting to pick a way between the muddiest patches of the street, was a hulking figure coated in shaggy white fur. It was fully eight feet tall, and its yellow eyes burned angrily.

‘I absolutely hate coming out when it’s been raining,’ the enormous creature was saying crossly to the woman in the cloak. ‘Look at this!’ It hopped for a few steps, holding up its other foot and pointing to it with a claw. ‘Completely filthy!’ The leg was indeed caked in mud almost up to the knee. And the knee, remember, was the height of most people’s waists. ‘I’ll have to wait until this dries and then comb it out! Can you even *begin* to imagine how painful that’s going to be?’ Tutting crossly, it stepped gingerly on to one of the paving stones, which pivoted

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unexpectedly, sending a plume of filthy water jetting upward. The white-furred monster howled in frustration. 'It's going to be completely impossible to clean this all off!' it wailed.

The tall woman stopped in front of the wizard's house, a slight smile on her face as she turned back towards her tall companion. 'Impossible?' she echoed quietly, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

'You know what I mean.' The huge feet squelched as the gigantic figure stumped down the street to join her. 'This'd better be worth it,' it muttered darkly, wiping its muddy legs ineffectually with a large, clawed hand.

The two guards of the City Watch had been observing this exchange with their mouths hanging open. The deputy was still gawping at the wooden chest on legs; his boss was now pointing with a shaking finger at the huge shape looming above her. 'Monster,' she husked hoarsely. 'It's a monster!'

'Rude,' countered the creature in its deep, rumbling voice. 'Never seen a snow goblin before?' Eyes wide, the guard shook her head.

At this point, the blue-cloaked woman broke into this exchange, calling, 'Good morning, friends,' and

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giving the two guards a friendly smile. ‘My helper there, Smyll, seems to have sniffed out a mystery.’ She gestured towards the wooden chest, which was now using one of its legs to point inside the wizard’s house and emitting a slight jingling sound as it quivered with excitement. ‘We’re here to help,’ the woman went on in a reassuring tone.

‘And just who might you be?’ asked the captain sternly, wiggling the hilt of her sword in what she vainly hoped was an intimidating fashion.

‘Clarity Jones, M.I.,’ replied the woman confidently. ‘That’s Magical Investigator,’ she added, leaning forward and lowering her voice slightly. ‘I’m a detective.’

‘What in the name of all three of the Three Kingdoms is a “detective”?’ responded the guard with a mixture of scorn and confusion. Scorfusion, you might call it if you’re short of time and can only digest one word.

‘A detective,’ explained Clarity Jones, ‘is somebody that detects things. You know –’ she waved her hands in a circular motion – ‘when something *strange* has happened, a detective works out what’s gone on. Detect the truth – detect – detective. Get it?’

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The Watch Captain screwed up her face in an even more extreme display of scorfusion. **'Whaaaaa!'** she screeched. 'What in all of Rillia do you be going on about?'

Now, a few questions might be occurring to you at this point, perhaps along the lines of: 'Where is Rillia?', 'What are the Three Kingdoms?' and 'Why has nobody heard the word "detective" before?' So perhaps a brief explanation is in order. Oh look, here comes one now! That was lucky.

A BRIEF EXPLANATION

We find ourselves in the great city of Meandermart, the easternmost city of the kingdom of Rillia. Rillia was one of three neighbouring countries known as the Three Kingdoms, for the simple reason that there were three of them. (Spess and Informatia were the names of the other two, if you're interested.) Meandermart was a great trading centre. It lay alongside the wide, slow waters of the River Rill, watched over by the castle that sat on a high hill right in the centre of the city. The castle features heavily in this story but not just yet. Be patient.

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Anyway, why did nobody in Meandermart, or indeed in Rillia, or indeed in any of the Three Kingdoms, know what a detective is? For the simple reason that there had never been one there before. There were many career options available to the inhabitants of the Three Kingdoms. You could be a wizard, doing strange things with potions and incantations. You could be a guard of the City Watch. You could be a duke or duchess, as long as you were born in the right place at the right time. Or you could choose any of the professions you usually find in this kind of kingdom: rustic villager, plump jolly innkeeper, assassin, ranger, mud-caked hermit, knight, barbarian, mysterious person in the corner of an inn who presents the hero with a side quest . . . you know the kind of thing. But not a detective. Not until then. Clarity Jones was very much a trailblazer in that regard. She had decided to become the very first solver of mysteries, and had invented the word 'detective' to describe her chosen career in a format that was both snappy and easily understood. To her slight frustration, however, it was proving a little slow to catch on.

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'Dect-ecter-ist?' queried the deputy guard, screwing up his face around the unfamiliar sounds.

'De-', enunciated Clarity Jones carefully, 'tect-ive. My friends and I,' she went on, hoping to make things clearer and thinking to herself that she'd get better at this speech as time went on, 'are the Magical Detective Agency. We solve mysteries. And this morning we're here to solve -' she stood up on the toes of her high boots to look over the guard's shoulder - 'the Mystery of the Mage on the Mantelpiece.'

'Good title,' said the girl in black leather approvingly. She had been circling around on cat-like feet at the back of the group, casting suspicious glances left and right along the street and up at the rooftops above. 'Looks like a good mystery,' she added, peering through the doorway.

'There ain't no mystery 'ere to be solved!' burst out the City Watch boss. 'We done solved it already,' she went on proudly, puffing out her chest. 'That there wizard was murdered by Korg the Destroyer.'

'There's a note and everything,' added the other guard. 'Open and shut. Nothing else to say.'

'I see,' replied Clarity Jones in a level tone of voice.

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It was best not to antagonize the City Watch. (To her way of thinking, the combination of large weapons and small brains was usually a dangerous one.) ‘And have you asked Korg the Destroyer about this?’

‘And how,’ snapped the captain, ‘would we do that? We don’t even know where he lives!’

‘Well, I don’t want to teach you your job,’ said Clarity gently. ‘But do you think he might live over there?’ She pointed to the other side of the street, where a large wooden sign above the door read:



‘Well, it’s very easy to be all *clever* about it,’ huffed the captain, marching over the road and hammering on the door, bellowing ‘OPEN UP IN THE NAME OF THE CITY WATCH!’ in a needlessly loud voice. There was a scuffling and a scraping of bolts behind the door and it creaked open. For a moment it looked like there was nobody there, but when everybody

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looked down slightly they saw a tiny, stooped old man standing in the doorway. He had a pair of thick glasses balanced on his nose, which was large and criss-crossed with red veins.



‘Yes?’ he fluted in a high, quavery voice. ‘Korg the Destroyer at your service. How can I help you this fine morning?’

‘Did you cut yon wizard’s head off?’ demanded the captain, gesturing curtly back across the street.

‘Oh dear,’ said Korg the Destroyer, peering past the Magical Detective Agents and catching sight of the wizard’s head on the mantelpiece. **‘Poor old Prookin!’** he quavered, leaning against his door frame and pressing a hand to his forehead. ‘That looks very nasty. Oh dear, very nasty indeed.’

‘Did you do it?’ she repeated, grabbing the hilt of her sword and wiggling it for emphasis.


‘Of course he didn’t do it, you idiot!’ snapped the girl in black leather, losing her patience. She sidestepped towards them, gesturing angrily. ‘Look at him! He couldn’t reach that wizard’s neck, let alone cut off his head! He looks like he’d run out of energy just crossing the street. How do you think he kicked the door in?’

‘Well, why’s he called a destroyer, then?’ countered the deputy guard, unwilling to dismiss their nice, tidy murder-solving theory quite so easily.

‘Well, in this magic business, being a mage – it’s all

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about image, you know,' said the tiny old man apologetically. 'I used to be plain old Korg, but since I added "the Destroyer" part, I've had so much more interest.' Thus proving that even though the inhabitants of Rillia had been unfamiliar with the concept of a detective, they did have a firm grasp of the concept of branding. Korg pointed a shaking finger to the smaller sign beside his door, which read as follows:



KORG THE DESTROYER

ALL MAGE AND WIZARDING SERVICES CONSIDERED.

WEAPONS ENCHANTED, POTIONS CONCOCTED.

STRIKE FEAR INTO THE HEARTS OF YOUR ENEMIES!

'Thanks for your time, Mr Korg,' said Clarity Jones kindly. 'We'll call again if we need you.'

'Don't leave town in the meantime,' added the captain of the City Watch threateningly, in a vain attempt to stay in charge of the situation.

'Leave town?' muttered the leather-clad girl, shaking her head. **'He looks like he'd keel over if he tried to leave a chair!'**

'Right,' said Clarity decisively. 'Let's have a proper

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look at the crime scene, shall we?’ She recrossed the street, clicking her fingers. The wooden chest, which had been waiting patiently, sitting back on its haunches, now leaped into life and followed her into the wizard’s house. It stopped just inside the doorway and, with a click, its lid flipped open to reveal a neat array of different-coloured jars, bottles and wooden boxes. The first-ever detective in all of Rillia looked around, feeling – as she did every time she encountered a mystery – a flutter of excitement in her tummy. She took in the door with the footprint planted on it. She read the note on the cluttered desk. She looked at the wizard’s head on the mantelpiece. And she nodded to herself. ‘Well,’ said Clarity Jones, ‘let’s see if we can detect what happened here.’

‘*Detect*,’ said the huge shaggy white creature to the guards. ‘Get it now?’ But they both shook their heads.

‘Smyll,’ said Clarity Jones, clicking her fingers. And like a dog that’s just heard the word ‘walkies’, the wooden chest gave a little jump and trotted over, the bottles and wooden boxes packed inside jiggling excitedly. ‘Let’s see about this note first of all, shall we?’ continued Clarity. ‘Something about it doesn’t seem right.’

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'It's obvious!' exclaimed the deputy guard from the doorway.

'Yes,' agreed Clarity Jones, 'that's probably it.' Bending down, she plucked a small silver disc from a slot on one side of the chest. As she waved it close to the note signed 'Korg the Destroyer', a vague design appeared on the disc – the shape of a fish began to form, outlined in faint red lines. 'As I thought,' said Clarity Jones in a satisfied tone. 'Red herring.'

'What in the Three Kingdoms be *that*?' demanded the guard, pointing at the disc.

'A misleader reader,' the detective explained. 'It tells me when something's designed to throw me off the scent. Right, let's hear what really happened, shall we?'

'What be she going to do?' said the senior guard to her deputy. 'Ask the walls whether they did see anything suspicious?' She elbowed her colleague in the ribs and they both chuckled at this fine witticism.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Clarity Jones told them. 'I'd never ask the walls. They're much too thick to be of any help.'

'They're not that thick,' replied a muffled voice from next door.

‘I’ll ask a chair,’ declared Clarity. **‘Witness powder please, Smyll!’** And, as the guards’ laughter dried up like a puddle in a heatwave, Clarity bent down once again to the wooden chest and selected a box full of bright orange powder. Straightening up, she looked around the room once again. ‘That looks like a good viewpoint,’ she decided, striding over to a wooden chair that stood in the opposite corner. And, taking a generous pinch of the powder, she sprinkled it carefully all over the chair, paying particular attention to the high back where an elaborate pattern was carved into the dark, polished wood.

‘What’s she doing?’ asked the City Watch woman suspiciously.

‘Finding a witness,’ explained the girl in black leather over her shoulder. She was standing with her back to the room, casting more watchful glances up and down the street and toying with a long, slim dagger that she seemed to have pulled from the complicated hair braid on top of her head.

A strange sound filled the wizard’s house – a long, deep creaking like very old timbers being bent and contorted. And, as the sound turned into a huge yawn, the chair flexed its arms and legs like someone

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stretching after a satisfying sleep. The carved area at the top of its back began to move and swirl, two lines raising like eyebrows. And, beneath them, two deep green eyes opened sleepily. ‘Who’s there?’ grumbled the chair in a croaky, grumpy voice.

‘I’m very sorry to wake you,’ said the detective in the blue cloak politely. ‘My name’s Clarity Jones, and I’m a . . .’ She hesitated. The witness powder wouldn’t last long, and she didn’t want to waste time explaining what a detective was all over again. ‘I’ve got some quick questions for you,’ she said. ‘It won’t take long.’

‘I’m so tired,’ the chair complained, closing its eyes again.

‘Just very quickly,’ urged Clarity. Behind her, the guards of the City Watch were gawping in amazement. ‘The wizard who lives in this house . . .’ Clarity went on.

‘Oh yes, *him*,’ said the chair moodily. ‘Always sitting on me, he is.’

‘Somebody’s cut his head off,’ broke in the girl in black leather, moving across to stand at Clarity’s shoulder.

‘I know.’ There was a hint of smugness in the chair’s voice now. ‘Might make him a bit lighter, at

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any rate.’ (OK, the chair isn’t coming across as a very sympathetic character, but just think for a moment about what a chair’s life is like. Nothing but bottoms, all day long, and never a word of thanks. It’s enough to make anyone slightly grumpy.)

‘Did you see who did it?’ asked Clarity loudly. Already the carvings on the chair’s back were moving more sluggishly.

‘Were it Korg the Destroyer from over the road?’ bellowed the Watch Captain, still desperate to take the credit for solving the murder. Clarity frantically shushed her with a hand, but it was too late.

‘The little tiny man?’ said the chair through another huge yawn. ‘Oh . . . no. This person was much bigger. Kicked the door right down, he did. Makes me tired just thinking about it. So . . . tired.’ And, with that, the carved eyes closed and the chair went back to being a chair.

‘Wake it up again!’ urged the deputy. ‘That were brilliant! Wait till I tells the wife about this! Talking chairs? I never seen the like!’

‘Silence!’ hissed the black-clad girl, adding the words ‘you fool’ under her breath.

‘What is that stuff, anyway?’ asked the captain.

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‘Proper magical, that is! Not like most of the stuff they peddle round here.’

‘Witness powder,’ said Clarity Jones, snapping the box full of orange powder shut and kneeling to replace it neatly inside the wooden chest on legs. ‘Very, very rare. Allows me to question the furniture. But it can only be used once at each crime scene, and it doesn’t last very long.’

‘Which is why it’s extremely important that she’s not interrupted while she’s working,’ went on the girl in black leather, shooting the guard a look that, if looks could kill, would have run her through with an icicle. (Luckily for her, looks *can’t* kill. Not unless you run into the very rare and dangerous pharmodrile, a lizard-like creature that weeps tears of a powerful poison. But that’s another story.)

‘Well, we found something out, at least,’ said Clarity with a sigh, getting to her feet. She had a small phial of blue glass in her hand. ‘The chair told us that whoever kicked in the door is also the killer. And they left us a very convenient footprint.’ She walked to the wooden door and uncorked the phial. ‘Let’s see what the blue print has to tell us.’

‘Is the footprint going to wake up and start tellin’

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