

A hand is shown from the palm side, holding a small, glowing, lizard-like creature. The creature has a bright white eye and a small white light on its chest. The hand is lit from below, creating a strong blue and white glow. The background is dark, making the glowing elements stand out.

DANIEL  
DEWOLVE

THE  
LORD  
OF  
STONES

**FOUNDING READERS  
PREVIEW**

THE  
**LORD**  
OF  
**STONES**

The Lord of Stones  
Daniel DeWolve

-Founding Readers Preview-

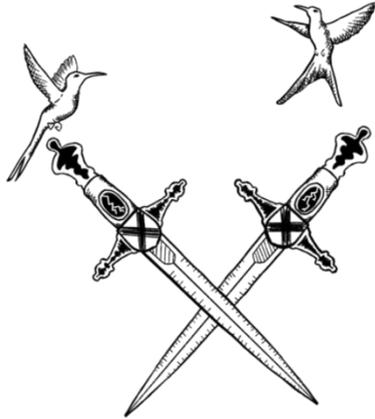


Welcome to Martella!

This preview contains the opening chapters of *The Lord of Stones*, the first book in a fantasy story about fading magic, hidden monsters, and three young people trying to save their city (and themselves!) before everything breaks apart.

You're receiving this as one of the first readers of the project.  
Thank you for being part of the journey!

If you enjoy this preview, you can stay on the mailing list for news and launch updates. And if you can't wait for the official release and want to keep reading now, you'll find details at the end on how to do just that.



**Magic is gone from Martella. Everyone knows that.**

And yet, three young people come into harm's way when they find out that there might be more to this story than what they were taught.

A mage survives betrayal.

A spy's failed mission comes back to haunt her.

A seer doesn't believe in his powers anymore.

**They weren't prepared for this fight.**

**But if they fail, Martella falls.**

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Guild Archives

# Dictionary Entry – On the Impossible Return of Magic

## **When there is magic in Martella**

**Meaning:** Never. Absolutely not. Do not expect it to happen. Not under any circumstance.

### **Example:**

“Darling, when shall we go to my mother’s house for dinner?”

“When there is magic in Martella.”

**See also:** Magic. Society of Magic Departure from Martella.  
August Tower. Archmage Mathias.

*Sendell's Great Dictionary of Idioms. Second Edition.*

By T. Sendell

Printed by the Worshipful Guild of Scriveners, Martella.

Anno 1010 After Triumph

## Chapter 1

# The White Stone City

This is a story about blood.

There was a world known by some as Zoe. In this world of clouds, lightning and darkness, sat a lonely continent right in the eye of the storm. Its people had no name for it in their language – it was simply *the continent*. It was a place of war and magic, with fast-changing borders and strife for dominance. It was also home to the most beautiful city I had ever seen: Martella, the White Stone city.

I can still see it so vividly I can hear it. The wind caressing the hand-carved gecko figurines on every door, window and lamppost. Horses and their carts strolling along the cobblestone streets, striving funiculars being pulled up and down the soaring hills. Martellan skin comfortably parading in light dresses and rolled shirts. Straw hats crackling in the midday sun.

Almost everything there was built from white and light cream stones: streets, benches, houses. The houses hugged each other up the hills – the many, many hills of Martella – their fronts decorated with beautiful white and blue ceramic tiles. Some had flowery patterns, others depicted gods or historic moments. The red clay-tiled roofs were alive with plants thriving in the dry season, much like the windows and front doors.

The blazing sun and heat demanded three essentials from every Martellan: a hat (straw, never wool), a water flask (leather if you were poor, or imported carved wood if you were rich and eager to show it),

and strong calves to brave the ups and downs of the city's steep streets. Visitors always joked that Martellans were part human, part mountain goat. Maybe that explained why every other corner had at least one food stall. You just had to build up your energy to explore that wonderful city. And you certainly had your share of options: roasted nuts, rich buttered corncoobs, small chewy cheese breads made with cassava flour, fudgy chocolate truffles with chocolate sprinkles, teardrop-shaped croquettes of shredded chicken and light cheese, and many more.

Martella stood in the middle of a valley, one of the independent city-states of the Free Cities Coalition. The Southern-tinted subterranean gecko, fondly known by locals as *glowkos*, had been the city's emblem since its founding and was displayed proudly on the city's blue flag. It was synonymous with hope and magic, a reminder that light shines even in the darkest places, just like the little creatures. The glowkos had blue tails that glowed so bright that only a few dozen could light a small room if they felt inclined. (And they usually did after you fed them a few crickets.) Martellans loved their little glowkos so much that they hung gemstone carvings (usually amethyst) on their doors. An old urban legend said that one day, when Martella needed it most, the carvings would awaken to protect the city. Deep down, even the most cynical Martellan believed it. It was a silly superstition, but they hoped that if everything else failed, those carvings would bring back magic to every house who had one.

Magic was like an invisible energy that only people called mages could see and use as fuel for their spells. Martella used to be called the capital of magic on the continent, giving birth to some of the most spectacular mages ever seen. But that had been back when every rock, leaf and body of water had magic in it.

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Things were different now. There was no magic left in Martella, as far as people knew. Even the Society of Magic, once the most influential magical institution on the continent, had moved its home base to another city-state centuries ago. In the last census, the Guild Association announced in the Guild of Blacksmiths' weekly Chronicle that only 929 mages were currently alive on the whole continent, compared to 7,957 the year before, and 23,145 the year before that. The decline of mages and the fear of what it could do to the war was a subject constantly discussed over late-night drinks in the local taverns.

But this story doesn't start up there, on the streets, with casual drinks by a fireplace in a tavern. It starts far beneath, layers and layers under earth stone: the underground tunnels of Martella. Darkness covering every mortared stone wall. Musty, cramped air carrying the creeping smell of the incorporated sewage system. And silence-  
"FATHERCUSSER!"

Total, complete, absolute silence.

"BY THE HAMMER! This ain't an underground river! THIS IS A POOL OF SHITE!"

Eerie silence all around, apart from sixteen-year-old Will screaming obscenities left and right as he emerged from a pool of thick brown sewage. On his shoulders, beams of blue light emanated from the tails of his three partners in crime: Casper, Melchior and Balthasar. Soapstone glowko carvings brought to life by one of Will's spells, each with a little crown carved above their heads. He was a mage, maybe the only one in Martella, though the city itself only knew him as another orphan.

Will was slight and wiry with a natural athletic look that came from running up and down the hills all day, doing errands for any guild that

could spare a loose coin. His hair was dark and wavy and usually fell in loose curls that framed his face. His skin tone was warm and he often looked as if he had spent long hours outdoors.

What stood out most were his eyes. They were dark and seemed to lock on to whatever held his interest with quiet intensity and a hint of suspicion. That focus gathered in his brow and often settled into a small frown that made him look angry at the world.

The trio of soapstone glowkos jumped off Will's shoulders and rolled around disgusted, making little yelps. Their tiny blue eyes locked on their master reproachfully. If they could talk, they would be asking: *a shortcut, bub?*

"Oh, you'll be fine" Will grunted, trying to wring most of the... *waste* out of his hair and clothes. He wore a classic young man's outfit: high waisted pleated trousers rolled at the ankles, simple leather lace up shoes, a pale open collared shirt, a waistcoat and a long coat with blue patterned trim along the front and around the cuffs. He had left his straw hat behind for safety. "Me? I'm made of flesh! Do you know how long it will take to wash the stink away? Do you know how much magic just plain evaporated from my body trying to stop all the diseases trying to kill me right now? Do you know what just floated inside my pocket? Because I don't want to look."

No one knew how the underground tunnels came to be. As far as history remembered, they had always been there. Many had ventured into them over the centuries, trying to map them, but everyone who tried to go beyond the third level simply vanished. The Guilds Council had forbidden anyone to go beyond the first level, where basements and cisterns were located, and had turned a blind eye to those brave or crazy enough to reach the second level, with its

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beautiful caverns and underground rivers. Ordinary people stayed clear of anything beyond that.

But Will was anything but ordinary.

## Chapter 2

# The Madman's Tear

“We’ll have to retrace our steps. I think this is where we were yesterday,” Will said to his stone glowkos. He pointed to a corridor of neatly cut rectangular stones. “That way is The Porcupine’s Cellar,” and then to a shifty-looking tunnel of large uneven stones. “And this way is towards the Madman’s Tear. We can pick up from there.”

Casper, Balthasar and Melchior chirped uncomfortably, their lights dimmed just a fraction. The underground tunnels of Martella were the kind of place where you expected to feel alone and yet never did. It always felt like you were being watched, and the further from the surface, the more intense that feeling became.

“I know. I know that there’s an entrance to the third level there, but I promise we’re staying clear. I just need to find a familiar place so I can retrace my steps. The Madman’s Tear is the closest one,” Will said, giving himself a regretful sniff. “And no more shortcuts! We don’t have the magic to spare.”

The stone glowkos illuminated the way through the ancient tunnel. Half an hour later, they reached a chamber with a crystalline blue lake, not much wider than a small house. A large almond-shaped formation on the rocks above looked almost exactly like an eye, peering over Will and unnerving him. A thin curtain of water ran down the wall, scattering the sound and giving the chamber a muffled, dreamlike hush. The Madman’s Eye, which gave the pub on the surface its

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name. And the appropriately named underground lake, the Madman's Tear.

It was tradition for every Martellan to venture once into the underground tunnels after midnight and scribe their names on the walls. The Madman's Tear had once been one of the most popular spots before the guilds closed the main access above. Will's name had been there for years, lost among thousands of others. Two particular names almost touching his:

Marco

Will

Lady Amber

Will touched the names as memories pressed in. It was almost sweet for a second, then blue flames erupted from his hands, disintegrating the wall along with the names.

He dropped his arms and scolded himself. "That was a waste of magic."

Will got into the lake. The cold water jolted his senses as he scrubbed away as much filth as he could, then climbed out, shivering and damp. He hoped he would warm up once he started moving again. Glancing back at the lonely, ever-weeping Madman's Eye, left with nothing but people's names, he felt a pang of sadness. "You're the saddest of eyes, aren't you, Madman? I'm half-mad myself, or so I'm told."

He knew it was stupid, but he used his magic again, very carefully this time, and traced a glowko on the wall using his index finger, right where the eye could see it. "To keep you company."

Somewhat clean, he marched through another tunnel, and another, and another, trying to find a new route. The glowkos were relieved when they realised they were going up now instead of down. The tunnels became corridors, with nice even stones and signs of human handiwork. Will and the stone glowkos were finally back on the first level.

“We’re probably somewhere under Great March Square now, near the Herbalist’s Guild. That corridor on the left has Civil Guard officers on rounds, so we can’t take it. The middle one still has protection spells, so we can’t take it either. The one on the right is ours.”

The corridor on the right ended in a closed-off passage with a big metal plaque:

**Cistern 28B  
RESTRICTED AREA  
DANGER! NO TRESPASSING!**

**Those who don’t accidentally drown will be purposefully  
prosecuted.**

**Guild of City & Works**

Casper climbed onto Will’s shoulder and chirped in his ear, questioning the route.

“This is the best way to the mayor’s basement, Casper. I know what I’m doing.”

Will, in fact, did not know what he was doing, but had a good mind for streets and places, which served him well back when he used to do errands for the guilds, and also now when navigating the dark maze that was the underground tunnels. If he closed his eyes, he

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could see every corner, building and landmark around the city, even draw them if asked. At every turn down here he rotated, readjusted and redrew that imaginary map, so he always knew where he was.

But the real problem was not knowing where he was, it was getting where he wanted to be. Between patrolling guards, old spells, sewage systems that popped up out of nowhere, tunnels overflowing with water during the wet season, and a frustrating number of dead ends, the underground tunnels formed a never-ending chaotic system. Just because you started at a manhole close to your destination didn't mean you got there faster than starting somewhere else on the other side of the city.

Still, Will navigated these tunnels better than any other living Martellan, even if he fell into two or three sewage tunnels that week and almost drowned in a couple of water-filled passages.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, touching the wall. The next spell was harder to maintain. He breathed in and out, and a blue flame sprouted from his hands, seeping into the wall. A memory flashed in his mind's eye: a patio, a large hourglass carved into a tree, sand falling and falling and always in place. *Make way*, he thought, and the wall obeyed. Bit by bit, every stone he leaned against trembled and disintegrated – the whole thing turned into a curtain of shifting sand. He walked through it, sand scratching his face and hands, Casper, Balthasar and Melchior following. Once passed, the wall turned back solid, now a grainy mess dissonating from the surrounding rectangular stones.

The room he found himself in was an abandoned cistern, about twelve metres square, cool and humid – perfect to hide from the scorching sun if open to the public. Dozens of columns scattered under the arched ceiling, submerged about knee-high in mouldy

water. If active, the water level would have almost touched the underside of the arches, so Will breathed a sigh of relief, that he made the correct assumption: this cistern had been deactivated after City Hall removed it from the city's official maps.

The underground tunnels were strange. Depending on size and length, sounds either echoed from afar or disappeared completely. A single step could feel like entering a different universe. Cistern 28B caught every sound and threw it back a tenfold. As he dragged his feet through the water, Will felt followed, though it was only his own movements stirring echoes. It sounded as if doors opened around him, yet there was only one door: a hatch above a platform on the far side. Because of this rhythmic cacophony, he did not notice the strange echoing noise – like hundreds of tongues clicking in disapproval – until it was too late.

He looked down and realised his mistake: a circle engraved into the floor with mushroom motifs, left centuries ago when the cistern was first built. It lit up as soon as he stepped inside, though the stone glowkos' light had accidentally disguised it.

“Mage trap!” he shouted, and Casper, Balthasar and Melchior, who had been playing about, hanging from his shorts, hurried up to his shoulders.

Then the trap triggered before Will could react.

## Chapter 3

# The Water Skull

Green globes of light appeared above the circle, one catching Will's foot. Yes, *catching*. Whatever ancient mage had created the trap knew exactly how to make it inescapable: the globes could touch you, but you could not touch them. They spun rapidly with great force, taking Will down and making him fight for breath – head under water, dragged like a rag doll. Then they suddenly stopped. The water bubbled but the temperature did not change.

Will sat up, gasping for air. He didn't know what was about to happen, but he knew one thing: "Our day is about to get much, much worse, isn't it?"

A giant skull made of water rose with a roar from the other side of the chamber and opened its mouth. Inside it, dozens of water blades began to spin violently and the whole being moved towards Will. The blades touched the floor as the skull tilted as if to drink him away, and to Will's horror they began cutting through the stone like it was butter. The thought occurred to him that he was a pathetic excuse for a mage. He would never have imagined that water could be used as a weapon and he did not know if it was the speed or the magic that made that spell lethal.

In one swift motion he grabbed Casper, Balthasar and Melchior and threw them to safety on the platform nearby. He did not see if they landed all right because he was immediately dragged by the light

globe on his foot towards the skull. Instinct kicked in and blue flames sprouted from his left fingertips and, like claws, he dug into the floor, slowing his slide towards the killing water skull. It was basically the same spell he used to walk through stone or deface walls or draw little geckos for lonely giant eyes. Just applied in different levels. He was always finding new ways to adapt it, which used less magic than creating different spells, something wildly difficult and time consuming. Again, the thought occurred to him that he was a pathetic excuse for a mage, and that he was about to die because of a spell from one that genuinely knew what they were doing.

While he held on for dear life, familiar voices crossed through Will's mind, stirring up old memories.

*I will be back in time for the festival. Wait for me on this spot.*

*Aren't you having fun? I am having fun!*

*You could be my son, the way you go about tied to my apron strings.*

*We are blood brothers now. Linked forever.*

*Power is taken by force.*

*You won't survive the week.*

*Taken by force.*

*...won't survive the week.*

*Power is...*

The skull drank and drank the water from the room, dozens of globes of light with it, aside from the one that struggled to drag Will's knee along. The water skull kept approaching him slowly. Slowly. Even slower now. But why? Why was it so slow? Then he realised it.

The blades spun like madness, desperate for Will's bone and flesh and anything else they could slice into a thousand pieces. They were so close to his feet now and he could not get himself free. He forced himself to concentrate, trying to feel the magic that powered the giant

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skull. If he was right, and if he could hold on a little longer, that mage trap was about to—

Cold, mouldy water exploded into Will's face and pushed him away. Faster than it had appeared, the skull vanished. Waves of green water splashed against the walls and then evaporated, leaving nothing in the cistern but stone and a very frightened Will, surrounded by green smoke that smelled like burnt orange cake. He looked from side to side, checking for new dangers, but nothing else in that cistern could hurt him. The spell protecting the place had burned itself out.

He looked down at his left hand. On his middle finger there was a red piece of string that only he could see. He drifted into thought for a moment, then looked back at the empty space where the menacing skull had been.

Every spell was a reflection of its mage's soul. "I'm glad I'll never meet whoever created you. That mage was good but had some serious issues."

Will could still hear his heart pounding when he got up, joined by Casper. Balthasar and Melchior watched from a safe distance. Casper chirped in his ear, confused. Panting, Will tried to explain.

"It was a kind of trap made by mages to protect important places.

They can last a long, long time. Then somebody steps inside them and *CLACK!* They're done for. Yeah, exactly, deadly things.

Forbidden inside cities. Lucky for me it must have already killed loads of people back in the day, because it didn't have enough magic left to keep going."

And with a grim look he added: "That is our problem too, isn't it, Casper? We do not have much left to go on either."

## Chapter 4

# The Stork

The hatch was a heavy iron plate bolted into the old stone ceiling, the surface slick with rust and condensation. It groaned loudly when Will pushed it open, almost as loudly as the stone glowkos groaned when they saw how long the way up was. Will climbed, climbed, climbed, straight up into what felt like forever. Up, up, and up again, until he reached another hatch, this one blocked by a heavy stone slab. He had to use magic again to pass through it.

It was a rectangular basement, maybe ten metres long and four metres wide. Jacarandá wood shelves lined the room from top to bottom, stacked, arranged and clearly labelled with rare books, delicate imported vases and precious golden ornaments. The ceiling had been painted with golden motifs: apple trees blooming with flowers and fruit, intertwining freely.

“It’s a Cerys original,” Will said, spotting the signature next to a branch. “The Kobbes had Cerys paint their *basement* ceiling! And look at all this expensive stuff. They do know the big guilds rent vaults for customers, right? I’m sure the mayor can afford one if he doesn’t already get one for free.”

In the centre, standing on a solid wood plinth, was a marble cube the size of an armchair. “A magic block,” Will explained to his glowkos. “I can’t feel any magic in it, so I guess it’s just *a block* now. Lady Amber told me this sort of thing was a fad in Martella when

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magic started disappearing and the August Tower was destroyed. Rich families wanted to save magic for themselves. So if a mage was born into their bloodline one day, they would have a source to draw magic from. They thought they were buying contraband from mages who survived the destruction of the August Tower. Turns out they were getting scammed by local swindlers. I guess the magisters in the orphanage were right... greed can make a fool out of anyone. Even the Kobbes.”

He patted the fake magic block and looked around. Any single item in that room could fetch a good price in the market. Five hundred coins at least, he thought. In truth, it would have been three times that. Enough to buy a large estate by the seaside and live comfortably for years. But Will’s mind was not on any of that wealth. He did not care about it. No matter how many things it could buy, it could never buy the one thing he needed. Magic.

*Magic is the true measure of wealth in the continent, Lady Amber used to say. The only real power. And people will do anything to get their hands on it. Anything.*

He shook his head. He was tired of Marco and Lady Amber in his mind that night. Tired of their faces. Tired of their voices. Tired of being tired of their faces and voices.

“We found it,” Will shouted, rushing to the end of the room. There, almost hiding from the light, stood several dusty shelves, all unexpectedly empty, surrounding a stork gargoyle. “She is still here, after all this time. *Oenoe*, Archmage Mathias’ most loyal gargoyle”, he said, solemnly.

Casper, Balthasar and Melchior, chuckled, breaking the mood.  
*Loyal. Gargoyle.*

“I didn’t mean for it to rhyme! This is serious, guys. Not only this is one of the most illustrious beings in Martella history, but this moment could change our lives.” He placed his hand on the gargoyle’s forehead, sweat dripping down his own. Everything he had gone through tonight was for this moment. This had to go right. “I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.”

The next spell was the hardest of them all. Will swallowed, braced himself and gave the gargoyle an order. “*Awaken.*”

Pain surged through his bones as the spell took hold. It should have been a moment of awe, at least in Will’s imagination, but it completely shattered when the gargoyle spread its wings, screeched “SCREEE-OONK” and hopped around the room in confusion, knocking half the treasures over.

“Where am I? What is this? Who are you?” she demanded, speaking faster than Will could follow. “ENEMIES! Enemies of the kingdom, m’lord! Bring the archmages! The Royal Guard! Oh, just you wait until Archmage Mathias hears you have been meddling with one of his gargoyles.”

Will, Casper, Balthasar and Melchior stared at one another in surprise and low-key judgement. That was not the reaction they expected from one of the Archmage’s gargoyles. She kept spurring questions, her voice cracking at full volume. But Will did not have the energy to tackle her. His left knee hit the floor. Panting, he could barely stop himself from passing out.

“Would you be quiet? The... uh... *enemy* might hear us”, he lied.

The gargoyle peered at him in repulsion. “Oh, my feathers! It is worse than I feared. The enemy has taken over the surface! Martellans have become rotten, disgusting sewage dwellers.”

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“I am not a sewa- oh, nevermind! Listen. We don’t have much time. I can only sustain this spell for about a minute and then you’re back to sleep. Archmage Mathias sent me. He needs the current locations of the *cornerstones*.”

“The cornerstones? But they should be in the August Tower with him.”

Will winced, pain rising. How had Mathias done it? How had he created a *whole* army of gargoyles back in the day? Even keeping one alive for seconds felt like torture.

“They were stolen. Divided. He said he gave you a special ability. To see where the cornerstones are. In case something like this happened.”

The stork stared, suspicious. Jealous, even. “That was supposed to be a secret between me and Mathias. Why would he tell *you* about that? Who exactly are you to him?”

“I am one of his disciples,” Will lied again.

*Oeno* was the most gullible of gargoyles, he remembered being told. *She thought she was Mathias’ favourite gargoyle, and made sure the others knew it. Use that.*

Will gripped his thigh, ashamed, but resolute. That’s right... He wasn’t sent there to make friends. He was sent there to lie.

## Chapter 5

# The Three Cornerstones

“Mathias said I should find his good friend Oenoe, the only gargoyle worthy of his trust. He said only Oenoe could help him now.”

“His... his *good friend*?” Oenoe repeated, smoothing her rigid plumes with a wing. “Did he really say that? Did he use those exact words?”

“Oh, yes! Those exact words. Actually, it might have been *my good, best, amazing friend, Oenoe*,” and because the gargoyle still didn’t look entirely convinced he added “*the one with the gorgeous plumes*.”

The stork paused. Something about Will made her believe him. And that something would be the obvious flattery, which sounded completely plausible to Oeone’s ears.

“Please”, Will pressed. “I cannot hold the spell much longer.”

Oenoe finally agreed. “Very well. Listen closely. I need to go into the Crystal Manor to find them. A mere apprentice like you wouldn’t know this, but the Crystal Manor can be tricky to navigate. Mathias has used highly advanced magic to grant me this special ability, but he wove it in a hurry, so even I - his good, best, amazing, *wonderful* friend - can’t promise wonders.”

“I know all about the Crystal Manor”, Will scoffed. “Trust me, *I know*.”

“Oh, you apprentices. Always full of yourselves”, the gargoyle said, dismissive, closing her eyes. “The Crystal Manor is the biggest puzzle

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that ever was, I'll just leave it at that. You are there, but you are also here, but you are also there, and you are also here. Words aren't words. Visions aren't images. Anyway, I can see my Crystal Manor. Oh, I can see yours too! *Krawk!* It is in bad shape, youngling. How are you even alive? It makes no sense."

Will clenched his teeth. "Just focus on the cornerstones."

Oenoe concentrated, in silence. Then she spoke the words Will desperately needed. Not a solution. Not even a precise location. But a clue.

"I can feel the cornerstones. The three of them sing to me, tell me their names and try to tell me where to find them. Oh, this is hard. Exceedingly hard, I can barely understand it myself, let alone translate it. *The rescued one*, inside the invisible tower ruled by the lonely frog. *The muted one*, inside the ship built beneath the decaying mansion. And *the watched one*, hidden in the depths of darkness, surrounded by 88 shadows, each with 8 eyes."

Just in time, because Will couldn't hold on any longer. He released the spell and wiped the sweat from his face. The dying sensation inside him faded and his legs stopped shaking. Oenoe began turning back to solid stone at once, starting from her long toes. Will had no idea what the mayor would think when he found what he believed was only a statue now sitting in a different place in a different pose. At least it would distract him from the sewage smell taking hold in the room.

"Thank you," Will said, but the gargoyle's eyes suddenly fixed on him and they did not look pleased.

"*Skreee-ooo!* Wait a minute. Your Crystal Manor is not just derelict, someone blew it open! I can read your past like a book. *Krawk!* Archmage Mathias did not send you. *Krawk!* It was Coffins! Coffins

sent you here. *Krawk!* You smell of blood magic! BLOOD MAGIC, M'LORD! This one has used blood magic! Off with his head!"

Oenoe tried to lunge at Will, but she could only move her neck now, which made her look like the silliest, scariest bobble-head statue. She strained uselessly and spat what she believed were the worst insults in existence. "Rogue! Trickster! Woodwinker! The cornerstones were never meant for you. Only Archmage Mathias was meant to control them. What is this, a coup? A coup in the capital of magic, m'lord!"

"Give it a rest, you'll break your own neck. There is no coup. Archmage Mathias died 300 years ago during the War of the Gargoyles. You don't remember it because he hid you here before it happened and then you fell asleep like the rest when he was gone."

Will felt strong enough to stand. Oenoe's disapproving eyes were the only part left alive as the awakening spell reached its end. Will wanted to leave quickly, unsure if anyone upstairs in the mayor's mansion had heard the stork's screaming. But as he turned away, anger, shame, bitterness and plain sadness surged through his veins. He spun back and the words tore out of him.

"And as for me tricking you and the power of the cornerstones not being meant for anyone else, here is a lesson that took my whole life to learn. People lie. People crave you. People tear you apart. Power is taken by force. You got tricked, so deal with it." He paused and his voice dropped to a thin whisper. "I did."

Guild Archives

# Shipwrights' Publication – A Captain's Words to His Daughter

**“It had not been my intention to write another volume on *The Seamanship's Digest*, but circumstances showed me the importance of continuously sharing hard-gained experience. (...) I dedicate this issue to my baby daughter, Lina, newly launched upon the first waves of life. May she grow in stature and wisdom, and find adventure at Sea.”**

*The Seamanship's Digest: Volume II*

By Captain Tijon

Printed for the benefit of young mariners by the Honourable Guild of

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## Chapter 6

# The Tijon Legacy

Somewhere close to the Herbalist's Guild, in one of the most illustrious neighbourhoods in Martella, there was an old mansion hidden by overgrown trees and birds' nests. The smudged gothic-like windows stood as a reminder that big, sumptuous homes were expensive to maintain, and not all illustrious families in the city had held on to their fortune as well as the others over generations. Once home to two of Martella's most eligible bachelors, Captain Paul Tijon of the Free Cities Coalition Fleet and his older sister Jayne Tijon, a lawyer with the Guild of Law, the siblings did what they could to manage their parents' endless debts and hold the place together as best they could, managing to keep the mansion in a liveable condition and even keeping two part time servants. By the time their parents passed away and Captain Tijon himself was no more, Jayne saw herself alone, single, with barely any of her family's fortune or status left, and raising a niece that one day would inherit her ungrateful fate of watching the family's legacy burn to ashes.

Jayne, like any good lawyer, could spot a losing case from miles away. She knew the family's name was done, but if she was going to go down, she would go down fighting. Her niece, Lina, might never know their home in the full splendour of what it once was, but she would at least have the same great education that she herself had had the privilege to have. Education was, after all, important.

## *The Lord of Stones*

She sold all the rare books her family had collected over the years to the local guilds, half of the furniture (she made a good chunk of money out of the antique rosewood dining set), and almost every single magic trinket they had in the mansion.

Magic trinkets were items enchanted by mages to enhance their function or create new ones. With mages disappearing over the centuries and the last ones all being trained and shipped to war, they became rarer and rarer in Martella, becoming either expensive collector's items or exclusive medical appliances.

She sold them as quickly as her conscience allowed her, trying her best, unsuccessfully, to hold on to the ones that meant the most to her, like the silk blanket she and her brother used to build tents with at night that always showed a rainy night sky, and the green porcelain vase her grandmother had once gifted her that was enchanted to keep flowers fresh and happy for as long as they were inside it. They had not been there to make her friends jealous. Well, not entirely. They had been there to remind her there were once people that she loved and that loved her back.

It was a sad affair, letting go of those things and the memories they kept alive. As time passed, she noticed she could not remember small details anymore. What book did her brother like to read under the tent again, before he fell asleep? And what was that small white flower her grandmother always put in the vase, along with the others? Jayne would never admit this out loud, having learned to be stern and cold both in life and her profession, but she was desperately afraid that one day she would lose those memories for good, now that she had lost the physical reminders too. She felt like she had failed to keep her family alive. And she felt like she had failed in her niece's upbringing too. Not just because after a brilliant education and so

much promise, her niece Lina had accepted a measly unimportant obscure apprenticeship at the City Hall's library. Not even because after barely two years in it, Lina had mysteriously dropped her apprenticeship and hidden herself at home for months. No, what really troubled Jayne was that on top of all that, now there was a real good chance that Lina would soon blow herself up and the whole family mansion along with her.

Jayne pulled the secret candlestick switch in the music room with one hand, while balancing a tea tray on the other. She was 43 years old by then, had a round face, black wavy hair (styled in an impeccable chin length bob haircut, that she decided that afternoon was barely adequate) and moved as fast as her perfectly measured suit allowed her. There was not a single hair out of place on her head, not even a speck of dust on her suit, and the only thing detracting from her image of the perfect Martellan lawyer was a thoroughly scratched pocket watch that she checked every other minute.

The switch opened up a little gap in the wall, where an iron three-banded armadillo figure hid in waiting. Jayne touched it and whispered the required magical password. "*dromssap togrof anil.*" The armadillo glowed in response and a secret door opened next to it.

The door to a ship.

## Chapter 7

# The Secret Study

As in many other mansions in the city, the T'ijons' mansion had a secret basement. However, instead of being a rarely visited treasure room this one had been converted into a study that resembled half of an old ship. Ladders and a hand carved taffrail divided the space into two decks. The aftercastle upstairs was arranged as a drawing room where someone had squeezed in a large former dining table now used for alchemy experiments. The quarterdeck downstairs served as a library with rows of half empty bookshelves. A door in the place where the captain's quarters would have been on a real ship led back into the house. The walls were decorated with maps of the continent's coast, oil paintings of imposing animals and red curtains attached to fake black windows. It usually smelled like wood and vanilla scented candles, but tonight the fumes from the alchemy set Lina had been using all day gave it more of an ammonia and fried mosquitoes kind of vibe (with a hint of mango).

"Is it safe to come up?" Jayne called, upset, just shy of the ladders. She had been preparing herself for that conversation, just like she would prepare before one of her cases in court.

Lina did not hear her aunt the first time. She was a tall slender seventeen-year-old with jet black long hair all the way to her waist, and alert eyes that always jumped from object to object, person to person, every time she walked into a room, like taking inventory. Not

that you could tell that from behind the cloud of fumes leaving the alchemy glasses on her table, which trembled menacingly along with all the trinkets, crucibles, flasks, alembics and other crazy shaped instruments on top of it. She could be calm and composed but only when she was putting herself into it, which proved to be difficult every time her brain kicked into high gear (it happened quite a lot). Still, a lifetime of Ron Prep's Preparatory School for Girls had taught her to always sit still and to kill any impulse of making exaggerated hand gestures when making conversation, which in her case resulted in an uncontrollable urge to twitch her nose every time she was annoyed. She wore an expensive two-piece silk blend white dressing gown, with Martella's usual decorative blue patterned borders on the trim, sleeves and waistband, which was now stained all over the top part (something that her aunt would soon choose to ignore for her own sanity). Behind her chair, there were two cream sandals that she had unconsciously kicked off while studying.

"It is safe, auntie," she finally replied, eyes absorbed in her experiments. Her hair was messy, and she had dark circles under her eyes, and she looked like she had not slept in days, but she was still full of anxious energy. "Just try not to breathe too much. Or make sudden movements. And whatever you do, do not snap your fingers!"

Jayne marched upstairs, unsure of whether or not that had been one of her niece's jokes, covering her nose and mouth with a handkerchief she had at the ready. She rested the tea tray on the coffee table on the other side of the room. "I used to live in fear that my own brother would blow up the house. Now I live in fear that my own niece will blow up the house," she grumbled and started coughing and gagging because of all the fumes suddenly turning thicker and purple. She tapped twice on a copper device lost among

Lina's workstation mess - a magic trinket that looked like one of those puzzle globes you see in our world's toy shops. Then she waved her hand in front of it and it floated one foot above the table and started rotating, sucking all of the fumes inside and releasing a clean invigorating scent (grapefruit and black pepper that evening).

"So that's what it does!" Lina said, fascinated. She blinked a few times, as if watching it from far away.

Jayne rubbed her temples. "If you wanted to learn alchemy so much, why did you not join the Alchemist's Guild? They do have apprenticeships. Luana, from your class, was accepted for one."

"I don't want to be an alchemist, I just wanted to try something I saw in a book. Did you know that some alchemists believe that you can transfer magic from one object to another one? It's called *magic transference*. There is a long fascinating history of people trying to achieve that."

"There is also a long not so fascinating history of alchemists blowing themselves up or worse, getting fired, after draining the Guild of Alchemists annual budget trying to achieve something that is impossible."

"But imagine if it was possible! We could recharge all the magic trinkets breaking down in Martella. The self-moving trams that were deactivated, the faelemakers breaking in taverns and pubs, that whole issue with the Glare. I hate the Glare."

"Everyone hates the Glare."

"All we would need to do is just transfer magic from useless magic trinkets, like those annoying music boxes everyone and their mother seems to have. Do you know the ones I'm talking about, with the floating ballerina? What's the story behind that?"

“Lina, what does that matter to you? You do not even like alchemy! You keep going from thing to thing to thing. About a month ago you were obsessed with bookbinding!”

“Bookbinding is important. It’s what holds the pages together!”

“Then it was puppet making.”

“I wanted to scare Connor! He’s dead afraid of puppets.”

“And last week you tried to convince me to buy you a taxidermy kit!”

“Which you didn’t.”

“It was a *taxidermy* kit!”, she sighed. “Let’s put that aside for now. Come and have tea with me.”

Lina sat with her aunt, noticing the tea tray for the first time. Rose tea and coconut elderflower biscuits were arranged beside a selection of tiny jams. She gave a biscuit a quick sniff and felt a mix of emotions. On one hand she was happy, calmer, feeling herself soften. Yet, on the other hand, something held her back.

“These are from Honey and Lavender,” she paused, suspicious.

“My favourite tea and my favourite biscuits from my favourite shop.”

Jayne took a deep breath and straightened her back. “Celina Huang Tjon, it is time we talk about the catastrophe that has befallen our household.”

## Chapter 8

# The Job

“Oh, I should have known what this would be about. You even got the right jam pairings! You don’t care about jam.”

“You turned seventeen three months ago, and you’ve missed the deadline to apply for the last apprenticeship opportunity of the year. Next year you won’t be allowed to apply for any anymore! What do you plan to do for your life?”

Lina reflected on that. She was clever and a quick thinker.

“I’ll... be a lady of leisure?”

But not tonight.

Jayne threw her hands up. “With what money? The last *lady of leisure* this family could afford was my grandmother”, she said and tilted her head up to the ceiling, somewhat dramatically. “Remember when you were little and did not spend your days locked inside our basement smelling toxic chemicals? You were so cute in your fluffy little dress, playing with your cute little capybara wooden dolls with their cute fluffy little capybara dresses.”

Lina stopped short of another bite and leaned back on her chair. “Oh, yes. My *Happybaras* collection.”

“Happybaras! That was the name. So frightfully expensive for dolls, but you pestered me for months saying that you just had to have them for your birthday.”

“They were limited edition! The teapots were purple instead of green and it came with their neighbour, Mrs Plunkers.”

“You did not even appreciate them. Remember when you went through your rebel phase and desecrated that miniature teahouse I got for your birthday into a clandestine boxing ring? You made all the little capybara dolls fight each other to the death, and you used your coloured pencils to paint a very graphic poster to invite me and your other dolls to the *event*.”

An image flashed in Lina’s mind and she smiled fondly. “Oh, yes, *Happybaras – Dawn of Happiness*. Tickets cost five melons and were non-refundable. You still owe me five melons, by the way.” And then she suddenly gasped, finally realising what was happening. “Wait a minute. Mischief!”

“What do you mean?”

“The baked goods, the guilt trip, the way you keep fiddling with the buttons on your sleeve. You are up to mischief, and it is not just complaining about apprenticeships. By the Hammer, you did something, didn’t you?! You actually did something this time!”

“Such drama,” she said, letting go of her sleeve and getting up. But because she really couldn’t keep her hands still, she picked up a plain dusty round stone from among the cheap curios scattered across the console table and fiddled with it for a moment before putting it back. “I’ve arranged a job for you.”

“I knew it! Mischief!”

“This is not mischief, this is good parenting. The job is in the Artist’s Guild.”

Despair. Lina’s voice dropped two octaves without her even realising. “No! Not the Artist’s Guild! They are the worst guild in Martella. Everybody knows they are a joke! When was the last time

they actually made something? Even Martellans buy their art in Seven Bridges now.”

“This is non-negotiable. You are to see Miss Helen Harradine tomorrow morning.”

“Crazy Helen?” Lina was momentarily confused as to why she would go and see her former teacher, but then it hit her. “Why would I... oh, no. No, no, no. That’s where she went off to work? The Guild Council actually put her in charge of a guild? A *whole* guild? She threw a chicken at me once in school, auntie! That she casually had stuffed inside her purse! Aren’t you worried about me? What will happen to your own niece, blood of your blood, once she leaves the sanctity of her basement and ventures into a world where livestock is used against innocent teenagers?!”

Jayne wasn’t having any of it. She didn’t understand why her niece had started acting so irresponsibly as of late, but she knew it was time to end that. “She expects you at the guild at eight sharp in the morning and she is very eager to have her favourite student as her new assistant,” Jayne said proudly, then added the rest quietly. “Her last *favourite student* did not last long. She had a feather allergy.”

“But... but...”

“You are doing this, young lady. You may lock yourself back in the basement after you come back from work. Do we have a deal? And bear in mind I am only giving you the illusion that you have a choice in the matter. My house, my keys, my rules.”

Disheartened, Lina conceded. “Fine, deal.”

“Excellent,” Jayne said, satisfied, as she rose to her feet. “Now clean this up and take a bath. Ah! Before that, go find that cat of yours. It slipped into the garden and refuses to come in for dinner.”

Lina seemed uneasy. “Oh, she always comes back. I’ll leave my balcony door open.”

“I will not have it scratching at the door and meowing all night again! That cat is lazy. She’ll wake me up a hundred times before finally climbing to your bedroom.” And then Jayne noticed Lina’s

eyes going from side to side, thinking, trying to escape that order. Was that fear? “Unless there is something you’re not telling me. What is it, are you afraid of the cat now?”

Lina laughed at the absurdity. “Of course not.”

“Then what? Have you spent so much time inside you are now actually afraid of the outside? Oh, just tell me! Let me help you.”

She considered it. She almost told her aunt the truth. But in the end, it was too complicated. Too shameful. Too *dangerous*. “There’s nothing going on”, she lied. “Nothing to tell.”

But as she walked out of the secret study with her aunt, she could feel heart hammering. Somehow, she knew that *it* was out there. And she couldn’t hide forever.

## Chapter 9

# Knapsack Jack

The Herbalist's Guild neighbourhood was known for having the most beautiful trees, parks, and private gardens in Martella. The Tijon mansion, in special, had a large garden that resembled a small forest. Tall, thick rubber trees stood like pillars, their aerial roots hanging down like curtains. Jasmine-manga trees held up blood red flowers. Yellow and red heliconia plants, shaped like bird beaks, spread through the dense vegetation. It was a beautiful garden, although wild and forgotten. You could get lost in there trying to reach the pond, and Lina's new cat, Dal, loved chasing bugs around the water.

Lina hold back short of the garden's door. The fresh air gave her some new energy, but she hesitated stepping outside. Her aunt was pouring herself tea in the kitchen and passed by her on the way back to the bedroom.

“What are you doing just standing there?”

“Oh, just putting on my garden slippers.”

Jayne thought it strange. Lina had always loved the garden, but now she seemed almost... afraid? No, that was ridiculous. Not Lina. Her niece had only picked up the lazy habit of staying indoors too much, that was all, caused by some temporary bout of teenage childishness. With this new job she had found for her, everything was finally in order. “Don't be too long.”

She waited for her aunt to go up the stairs, and with a deep sigh breathed in and out, several times. “This is my garden, in my house, where I grew up. This is my garden, in my house, where I grew up. I

am safe in my garden. I am safe in my garden. I am safe in my garden.”

She brought back to memory her favourite moments in it. Having a picnic with her grandparents. Her father building her a small boat by the pond. Her aunt opening up a bag of pastries from her favourite pastry shop. “Yes, this is fine. I am fine. Stop being silly, Lina!”

Feeling reasonably steady, Lina searched and searched under the hidden moonlight but could not find Dal, until she finally heard meowing outside on the streets. She could not be bothered to trail back to the front gate. There was no reason to. She climbed the walls effortlessly, despite her gown, and found Dal sitting outside on the street, looking side to side, depressed. She was white and grey, fluffy, with a smart face, remarkably similar to ragdoll cats from our world. A small pink pouch hung from her neck, and she guarded it fiercely from any hand that tried to take it from her.

“Come on, Dal. Come on, girl. Get inside.”

Dal looked at her unimpressed. She had seen her do that kind of stuff before. Climbing up trees, balconies, jumping from one branch to the other, punching and kicking the air for hours. But the cat was busy and didn't feel like coming in just yet.

*Harai*, Lina cursed silently. “Seriously, please get inside! Do not make me come out of the house at night.”

Lina's own words caught her by surprise and she bit her lip. What had happened? When had she become this scaredy little girl who spend her days in a basement and was afraid of the night? She thought back to her apprenticeship. The trip. The *mission*. The failure. The return and that awful meeting. Yes, it had been just after the meeting that this had started. The timing made no sense to her at all.

Tired of feeling afraid, she thought back to the oath she swore two years ago, right after accepting that *apprenticeship* at the City Hall's *library*. “I am the lightning, the dagger before the storm”, she recited, and added as well: “*This* is not the Lina I deserve.”

## *The Lord of Stones*

She checked first that the streets were empty. She didn't want the neighbours to hear a monkey up in the trees, look up and find out it was a fully grown teenager. But it was dead quiet, so she trailed down the wall and joined Dal.

“What are you doing here, girl? Are you looking for your old owner?” she asked the cat, petting her fondly. Dal had not been with Lina long, but the feline approved of her. In her eyes, Lina was just a big, weird, well-meaning cat. Generous with chin rubs and with good taste in fishes, but that spent too much time inside the small, closed space after the ominous door that descended into the earth. Dal did not approve of small, closed spaces or ominous doors that descended into the earth.

Lina kept trying to comfort her, stroking her head. The memory of her old owner did haunt her, even if she was happy with Lina. Cats worry too, you know? “She’s very, very far away, but she’ll bring you a big, tasty fish when she comes back.”

Dal purred, a low, longing sound.

“Yes, she will. And tomorrow I’ll buy you one too, if you’d like. Would you like that?”

Dal licked and nipped at Lina’s finger. Yes, she would like that very much, but still refused to go back inside. Lina started to feel a bit more comfortable now, so she let her linger a little longer. It was a good night and she was in no hurry to wake up tomorrow for her new job, so why leave now?

“You know, when I was little my dad used to take me to a park down that street over there and we would play all day in the sun. He didn’t like staying in. He felt trapped inside the house, kind of like you. But then, at night he would bring me to his study and he would read to me until I would fall asleep. We can’t turn back time, can we? There’s no known magic or alchemy for that. But sometimes, if I’m alone, and it’s quiet enough, I feel like I almost can. Then I’m little again, almost your size if I stretch you up like this.”

She picked her up under her front legs and lifted her until she became a very long cat, standing upright. The cat looked at her, slightly annoyed, as if thinking: *amused, are we?*

Lina giggled. She was almost herself again: playful, confident. She could feel it happening. So close, so close to how things used to be. Maybe this new job was a good idea. Maybe it was a sign that it was time for things to change. To get better. Maybe this was the moment where she could leave all *that* bad stuff behind and move on. “Sorry. But I will buy you that fish tomorrow. Since I do have to go to this guild job my aunt imposed on me, I might as well stop by the market on Si-”

It was almost imperceptible, but somewhere in the distance a step was heard. Dal noticed it first, feline hearing and all. Her pupils dilated and her head tilted in animal instinct as she tried to spot any danger. Lina only needed the sound and the sight of the cat’s ears twisting to make a split-second decision. She grabbed Dal in her arms and climbed back to the top of her mansion’s wall with impressive speed. There, Dal protected by Lina’s arms and Lina protected by the cover of the tree leaves reaching outside the gates, the two of them watched, hairs up, as a sinister figure turned around the corner and slowly approached the T’ijon gate a few metres down the road.

It was covered by a thick dark mantle, highly unusual for the Martellan night heat. And Lina could not explain why, but something about the way it moved and the way the mantle fell on its body felt out of place. Unhuman. It inspected the gate and gestured as if trying to get in, but something held it back. Something invisible. So it stood there annoyed for a while, pondering, planning, until it seemed to give up. The figure brought out a piece of folded paper from a pocket

inside the mantle, checked something and turned around, walking back towards where it came from.

*Meooooo*, Dal cried, uncomfortable. She wanted to run, to hide.

Lina wasn't that much better. "I am safe now in Martella," she whispered, burying her face in the cat's fur. "I am safe now in Martella. I am safe now in Martella." She kept repeating it like a mantra, and telling herself everything was fine. But it was not. Not just because of the strange, creepy figure outside, but because of the way her own demeanour had changed at the sight of it. A short while ago she would never have hidden like she did. A short while ago she would have confronted the figure and demanded answers, an identity, a purpose for lurking around her gate right before midnight. But now she could barely stop herself from shaking.

When Lina looked back up, the figure had turned back, and even though its face could not be seen under the mantle, she felt it staring at her in the distance. *Directly at her*, despite the night, the tree and the shadows acting as perfect cover. The figure pushed back the hood that had covered its face and Lina recognised it at once.

Lina shrieked and dropped back inside. She ran to her bedroom, locked the windows, snatched something from her drawer and rushed into her bathroom. She pressed her back against the door, holding Dal with her left arm and staring at the window, ready, panting, pumping herself up for a fight that wouldn't come. In her right hand she gripped what she had taken. A dagger, but not an ordinary one. A deadly sharp straight double-edged blade with a hummingbird symbol engraved both on the metal and the oval bone inlay set into the handle. It was the sort of weapon carried only by the Hummingbirds – Martellan spies recruited out of school and given fake apprenticeships at the City Hall library as their cover. The first line of

defence against lurking threats, eliminating them before they ever became real danger. That was only if they succeeded in their missions, of course, but if they didn't...

No matter how many times she repeated that she was safe now, she knew it was a lie. *It* had found her. It had finally found her. And the only thing that rocked her to sleep that night on the cold bathroom floor was not a cozy fatherly story, but an old nursery rhyme she wished she had never learnt.

*Knapsack Jack walks with a grin,  
He takes bad children and folds them in  
He wears many faces, none are true  
He'll show the real one just for you.*



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**— Daniel DeWolve**