

# **The Wind Reader**

Dorothy A. Winsor



## Chapter 1.

### An Ill Wind

**I**F I HADN'T been dead sure about talking my father into this trip, I might think the Divine Powers had slowed the wind to punish me for nagging. The sailors swore we were making good time, and the lone sail bellied out overhead, but the *Rose of Rin* felt like it was standing still. My hair would turn gray before we docked. I'd grow a beard down to my knees, and I'd *still* be on this wallowing pig of a boat.

Bracing my feet against the slight sway of the deck, I scooped the last handful of salted codfish out of the basin, flung them on the platter, and wiped my palms on my trousers. The job left my hands reeking, but I couldn't complain because it was easier than my father's. He was working on repairs near the stern at the moment, his blond head easy to spot among the lowland sailors. Like most Uplanders, Da was short and slight, so you could miss the muscles in his back and arms. I hoped these lowlanders were learning some respect from seeing him tote a heavy bucket of tar

as if it weighed nothing, while the sailor working with him dragged his feet.

I emptied the basin overboard. Maybe we would be in Marketon by nightfall, as the sailors claimed, and Da and I would be off this tub, ready to negotiate with the timber buyer. Ready to make a deal with him about *my* timber, a notion that made me smile. I inherited the trees when my grandfather died, and now that I was finally fifteen and old enough to manage my own property, I'd be hanged if I'd sit home like a kid and let Da sell it cheap in Merinoic.

"Boy!" Cook called. He didn't seem to realize I had a name or, more likely, didn't care. "Aren't you done yet?"

I'd stopped working for a moment. Can't have that. No sir. Not allowed. Platter of fish in hand, I ducked into the canvas shelter where Cook had laid an iron grill over the glowing coals. I plunked the platter down at what passed for Cook's elbow, a red knob protruding from the mass of black hair furring his arm.

"All the salt is out?" Cook asked.

"I changed the water three times. Why do we have to eat dried fish anyway? That seems—" I stopped myself in time from saying *stupid*—"—odd to me."

As he arranged fish on the grill, water dripped into the coals, hissing and sending up puffs of steam. "You Upland farmers have some other way to preserve fish?"

"You could catch fresh fish." I waved toward the flat, brown water rippling away to either side. "We're on a boat."

"You don't say. You see anyone aboard with time to fish?"

I snorted. The captain didn't give us time to scratch our backsides.

Cook pointed to a wheel of yellow cheese. "Slice that. Then fill the ale tankards." He poked at the fish with a huge knife.

By the time I fetched the ale, the fish were ready, and Cook sent me running around the boat with fish, cheese, and ale for the sailors. At last, everyone else was fed, and I flopped onto the deck next to Da and the sailor he'd been working with. The man leaned back against a barrel, face flushed, dinner only half eaten, while Da lounged beside him, not even sweaty. Ha!

I cradled the shallow wooden bowl of food in my lap and tore into it. My stomach had been rumbling since mid-morning.

Da grinned at me. "Your ma will be happy to know you've taken up cooking."

"Don't tell her," I mumbled around a mouthful of fish, which was pretty good, if I did say so myself. All the salt was out. "The girls can do it."

"I thought you didn't like your sisters' cooking."

"Better them than me." I nodded toward the shore creeping past. "Will we really get to Marketon by dark? We're hardly moving."

"Boat's low in the water." The deck hand spoke as if his tongue were too heavy. Keeping up with Da must have worn him out. I knew the feeling. "All that iron ore from your mountains," the man went on.

"Ore stolen from our mountains, you mean," I said.

The deck hand raised an eyebrow. "Your Lord Grimuld is the one shipping it."

"That's because Lord Grimuld is the one stealing it," I said. "At the market last month, the gossip was all about how he took a farm five leagues west of ours and had his men tear up the earth looking for it."

“You let him talk that way?” the deck hand asked Da. “The boy’ll get himself in trouble.”

“Boys become men, and a man needs to recognize wrong when he sees it. A cat can hiss at a king, we say.” Da threw me a look I’d seen way too many times. “On the other hand, Clever-tongue, I’ve told you more than once that a man of sense talks when it’ll do good but stays quiet when it won’t.”

I kept my eyes on my bowl and chewed hard on the remaining bit of my dinner. I’d heard Da say plenty about Grimuld. He’d been Lord of the Uplands only a year, and in that time, he’d not only stolen land but also tried to stamp out all the ways we revered the wind. Someone needed to talk about that. In my opinion, Da was too careful sometimes.

Farther along the deck, the captain was prodding sailors back to work. As Da dropped his empty bowl into mine and stood, the deck hand grabbed the top of the barrel and dragged himself erect. Or maybe not quite. I peered up at him. Surely he was swaying more than the motion of the boat would account for, and his face was so flushed, it was nearly purple. He took a single step before his knees buckled and he sprawled face down on the deck.

At the *thunk* of his head hitting wood, Da whirled and sprang to crouch on one side of him, while I lurched to the other. The captain came running, followed by a crowd of sailors.

“Is he drunk?” the captain demanded.

Da shook his head and rolled the groaning man gently onto his back. He laid his palm on the sailor’s forehead. “He’s fevered.”

My heart sped up.

Da rubbed his hand on his thigh, hesitated, then yanked the deck hand's shirt out of his belt to expose his belly. A red rash bloomed all around the man's navel. The captain took a step backward. "Mountain Fever," he whispered.

I staggered back a step. I didn't mean to but, Sweet Powers, Fever!

The deck hand's eyes flew wide open. "I have the Fever?"

"Put in to shore," one of the sailors said. "Get him off the boat."

Da looked up sharply. "Abandon him, you mean? No."

"You get off and stay with him then." The sailor's voice shook.

Da looked at the captain, who was silent, gnawing his lip. I choked back the urge to tell Da to get away from the sick man. Or I would have if I'd been able to breathe. Last autumn, while out hunting, I'd stumbled on an empty house with dishes still on the table and a baby's rattle on the floor. That was what Fever left behind. That and graves in the meadow.

"There's a village a mile or so on," the captain said. "They'll have a healer. We'll leave him there." He jerked his head at the sailors. "Back to work." They wasted no time scuttling away. The captain strode after them.

"Go on back to Cook, Doniver." Da pulled the scarf off the sick man's neck.

"What about you?"

"Don't argue with me. Go right now. I'm just going to damp him down, see if I can fight that fever a bit." He moved to a nearby barrel, scooped water into one of the dinner bowls, and came back, dunking the scarf in the water.

"Come away when you're done," I said.

“Go!”

I ran back to where Cook stood, staring along the deck toward Da. When he stayed silent, I asked, “You want me to wash dishes?”

Cook shook himself. “Your father’s a fool, you know that?”

“He’s brave,” I said sharply.

He glanced at me. “Dishes.” He lifted a shoulder to wipe sweat from his jaw, then went to fuss with the stores.

The thing was, part of me thought maybe Cook was right.

I heated water, collected forgotten dishes, and scrubbed them, trying to watch Da and the shoreline at the same time. Da moved back and forth, wiping the deck hand down and then standing near the railing. Where was that village? The sooner the sick man was gone, the happier I’d be.

At last, a scattering of thatched houses straggled into sight, and the boat nosed in to the small dock, where two men sat fishing. Da tried to heave the deck hand to his feet, but the man sagged on his arm and no one moved to help. For a moment, I rocked back and forth. I could do what Da told me and stay with Cook. No one would blame me.

No one but me.

I ran to the man’s other side. At a close sight of him, the air went out of me. The rash had spread. Oozing blisters blossomed on his face.

“Get away,” Da snapped.

“You can’t manage him alone.” It made me queasy to touch him, but I pulled the man’s left arm around my neck. He moaned.

Da set his jaw. Between us, we wrestled the man to where his fellow sailors had just thumped the gangway into place. They shuffled away as we got close.

“You there,” the captain called to the two on the dock. “Get your healer.”

The two villagers rose, their gazes on the deck hand, propped between me and Da. “What’s wrong with him?” one of them asked.

The other’s eyes rounded. He grabbed his companion’s arm. “Fever!”

The first villager took a step backward. “Get him away! You can’t leave him here!” He shouted toward the houses. “They want to leave a man with the Fever!” The second villager darted into the lane, shouting an alarm, sending up puffs of dust with every footfall.

Da and I stopped at the top of the gangway, the sick man hanging between us. “He’ll get no help here,” Da said. “The Powers only know what they’ll do with him.”

The captain rubbed his jaw. “Stone them.” For a long moment, he was silent.

I braced myself against the deck hand’s limp weight, the heat of his fever burning my side right through my clothes. *Hurry. Make up your mind, I silently urged. I don’t want this man touching me.*

At length, the captain said, “Put him back where he was. We’ll try the next village.”

“Captain!” one of the other sailors protested.

“He’s my wife’s nephew,” the captain said. “I won’t leave him. Get the gangway up.” He strode away, giving orders to sail on.

I helped Da lug the feverish man back to his corner of the deck and lower him in a boneless heap. Da looked up, deep lines between his brows. "I'll stay with him, but you keep away, Doniver."

"I could take a turn," I offered, unsure whether I wanted him to say yes or no.

"No, you couldn't. Go."

I felt a terrible relief. When Da used that tone, arguing was an invitation to big trouble. At the kitchen, Cook was nowhere in sight, so I ducked under the canvas shelter, then had to stop to take in what I saw. Cook lay on the deck, his shoulders propped against a sack of onions, his head thrown back. He turned glazed eyes toward me, and when he did, I saw the rash on his cheek.



BY THE TIME we reached the next village, two more men had collapsed. Word of what we carried must have galloped down the road more quickly than the *Rose of Rin* had sailed, because a knot of men with clubs warned us off from the dock.

Crouched between Cook and the deck hand, I watched the village slip behind us. *Maybe at Marketon. That's a big town. There'll be a sickhouse.*

When Cook moaned, I put a cup of water to his cracked lips, but he didn't even notice it was there. Where I touched him, he felt hot enough to burst into flame. On Cook's other side, two more men lay stretched out. Another sailor bent over them, and one more had been willing to help too, but the captain said he needed everyone still on their feet to help sail the boat.

"Doniver."

I looked over my shoulder at Da, still tending the deck hand he'd worked with.

"Let the crew do this," Da said one more time. "You go see if the captain needs help."

For a horrible moment, my legs twitched with the urge to walk away. Instead, I forced myself to meet Da's worried gaze. "I can't. I'm fifteen. I'm a man. You've been saying I should act like one. Isn't that what you're doing?"

Da made a noise somewhere between a moan and a laugh, then gave a curt nod, and I turned back to Cook. A moment later, the first man who'd fallen sick rattled out a noisy breath and didn't draw another. I spun to find Da with his ear pressed to the man's chest. A moment stretched into forever before Da straightened and swept his hand down the man's face, closing his eyes. He rubbed his temples as if his head ached, which scared me, but he walked steadily enough to the side of another sick man, patting my shoulder as he passed.

I bent over Cook, heart racing. *Sweet Powers, we're people of the wind. Send us one now. Blow us along to Marketon. Someone there will help us.*

The day slowly faded, and the captain came and set two oil lamps on the deck. Their flickering light cast an orange glow over the sick and well alike. When two sailors dragged another sick man into the light's circle, the dancing flames made them all seem to stagger. At least the night was warm, though Cook shivered even after I spread a blanket over him.

Finally, ahead on the right, the dark was pierced by the lighted windows of houses. I leaped to my feet so fast that I stumbled and had to steady myself before I hastened to the rail. "It's Marketon. I never thought I'd be so happy to see a place."

All the sailors along the rail were quiet.

“It’s Marketon, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” the one next to me finally said. “They’re waiting for us.”

I snapped around so quickly I made myself dizzy again, but I still saw the torches held by the crowd on the dock. I still heard when a man shouted, “Keep off, *Rose of Rin!*”

“No!” My hands tightened on the rail. “They have to help us.”

The sailor walked away. I turned to watch him vanish into the wavering dark. I took a step, and then I was falling, falling, falling.

“Doniver!” Da’s voice cried, but it was somewhere far away.



HEAT FLAMED ON my skin. My blanket was on fire! I pushed but was too feeble to shake it off. My head pounded. Demons with tiny pincers for hands scabbled up from my feet. I moaned and dove into the dark. I swam up, and the demons came after me again, red-faced and snarling with malice. The dark closed me in.

The darkness paled to gray, and I came awake because my neck itched with sweat. I smelled bread baking, which meant Ma already had it in the oven, and I was late for chores. Why hadn’t anyone shouted at me to get up? I opened my eyes to see a thatched roof rising overhead and a wall on the wrong side of my bed. Something scraped on the floor, and I turned my head to see a small, dark-haired boy who’d just jumped up from a stool.

“Ma!” The boy darted through a doorway. “Ma! He’s awake!”

When I tried to prop myself up on my elbow, my arm gave way, and I flopped back. Where was I? Abruptly, the image of the

boat and the fevered men tumbled into my head. Da! Where was he?

“So you’re awake.” A tall, gaunt woman came into the room, wiping her hands on her apron. She put one of them on my forehead. “Good. Your fever’s down.”

I licked my dry lips. “Is my father here?”

She offered me a cup of water from the bedside table, steadying it as I drank. “He would have been on that boat?” She looked at the cup, rather than me. “No, lad, he’s not here.”

“Where is he? Did he go home?” That couldn’t be right. Da would never leave me sick with strangers.

She set the cup back on the table. “I don’t know.”

“But—”

“Rest now. Rigan, my husband, found the boat. He’ll be home in a while, and he’ll tell you what happened.”

Before I could protest, she was gone.



A WEEK LATER, I struggled up the rise to see the river stretched across my path. Just to my left was the small cove Rigan had described, its shore marred by the burned remnant of the *Rose of Rin*. For a long moment, I stared at it, breathing fast. The smell of phantom smoke nipped the inside of my nose. Then my shaky legs gave out, and I sank down heavily into the damp grass. I hugged my knees and thought about how we’d been on that boat only because I kept after Da until he gave in.

A step stirred the grass beside me, sending a tiny shower of dew flashing into the morning sun. I squinted up at Rigan, who stood looking soberly at the blackened boat.

“Are you sure they were all dead before you burned it?” My voice came out like a croak, and I swallowed hard.

“Aye. All but you.”

When I could speak around the grief choking me, I opened my fists and let go of the last wisp of hope. “You were good to chance taking me in, Rigan. I thank you.”

“My wife would have kicked me out if I’d left you, and truth be told, you lay in the barn for the first week. None of us is sick, so the Powers rewarded us.” Rigan smoothed the grass with his toe. “We can’t keep you, though. I’m sorry, but we have too many mouths of our own to feed.”

“I know. I need to find work on a boat heading home anyway. My ma will be worried.” Sweet Powers, how was I going to tell Ma that Da would never come home again?

Rigan grimaced. “I’m afraid you can’t, not just yet. Fever’s bad in the Uplands. King Thien put it under quarantine. No one’s allowed in or out.”

My heart burst into a frantic gallop. “Bad? Where? Our farm’s near Merinoic. Is it bad there?”

Rigan shrugged. “Bad pretty much everywhere, I think.” He squatted by my side. “Here’s what we’ll do. Next week, one of our neighbors is delivering a horse to a woman in Rin. He says he’ll take you, too. You can maybe get some sort of work and wait for the quarantine to end. All the boats fetching iron start from there, so you’ll have a good chance of finding one that’ll take you on as a deck hand and carry you north.”

“Rin?” I felt stunned to stupidity. The city of Rin lay to the south. I’d be going farther from home, not closer. And what would I do when I got there? Where would I stay while waited? How could I manage on my own in a strange city?

Rigan rose. "It's the best I can do, lad. I'm sorry." He plodded away, head down.

I sat and stared at the burned boat, swimming in a watery blur into which the world slowly dissolved.