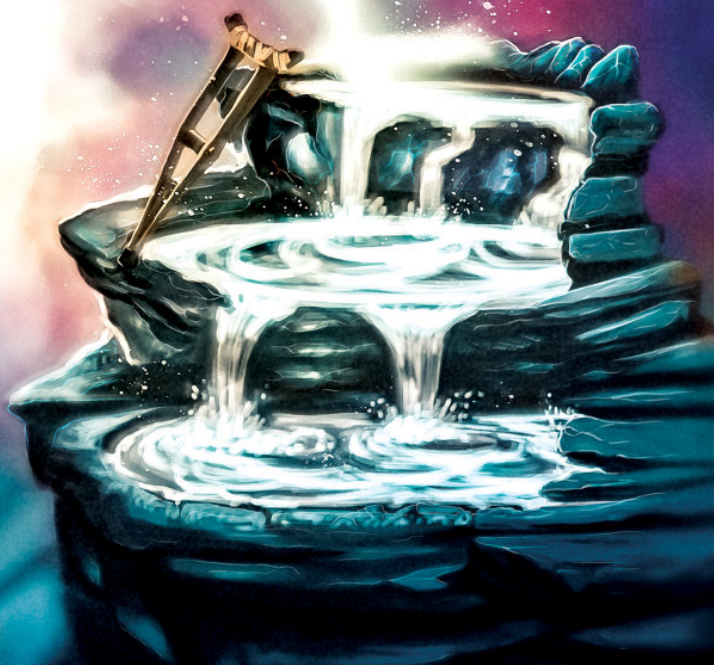


THE WYSMAN



Dorothy A. Winsor

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Wysmen and Wyswomen arise in every generation. The faithful know them by their courage and wisdom, and by their selfless care for the weak and the needy.

– The Book of the Wys

Chapter 1

AS SOON AS I stepped out into the empty castle courtyard, I felt it. The wind puffed through my clothes and walked a chill finger down my back. It wanted me, and it wanted me now. It had things to tell me, then. My heart sped up. I hitched across the courtyard, amid signs of the castle household just beginning to stir. Smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. A boy was just vanishing into the stables carrying a bucket of whatever horses need in the morning. Other than the boy, the wind and I were the only ones around.

I hobbled through the gate from the main courtyard into the keep around the old tower. Damp shadows pooled inside the keep's mossy walls. In the dawn quiet, my crutch thudded even more loudly than usual as I crossed the flagstones toward the stairs leading to the top of the castle wall.

“Stop right there, boy.”

I jumped, then caged my teeth around a curse. Absorbed in the feel of the wind, I hadn't even noticed the baby-faced guard looking down at me from the walkway. If I'd been that dozy when I lived on the streets, I'd be shivering in just my skin while

some thief sold my clothes—fleas and all—on the other side of town.

“Stop? Why?”

“You’re not allowed up here.” The guard rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. I’d not seen him before, so he was new and nervous as a fresh gang recruit guarding his territory. His accent said he was from somewhere deep in the farm country of Longrass.

I hesitated. The castle was still new territory for me, too. How hard could I push? “Horse spit. Prince Beran himself picked me to be his Wysman someday because I can read the wind. I do it up there every morning.”

“When I’m on duty, you don’t.” A smudge of struggling moustache quivered on the guard’s upper lip. “As a matter of fact, I’m banning you from the keep while I’m guarding it. That stuff you fool with is dangerous.” He shuddered. “Sorcery.”

“Don’t call it that. The divine Powers move in all the elements. When I read the wind, I just channel their energy. All our ancestors used to do it.”

“I don’t care. We’re civilized now.”

A gust of wind slapped my hair against my cheeks. *Hurry*, it demanded.

“I’m coming up,” I said. “Move away if you don’t like it.” One eye on the guard, I set my good foot on the first step and dragged the crooked foot and my crutch after me. The guard watched for a wild-eyed moment, before backing away to give me room. My shoulders eased. The guard and his sword should just stay over there where the wall turned.

I heaved myself up the last step and looked over the parapet. The fields on the other side of the river still lay quiet in the new

day. A yellow-green haze of shoots blanketed the recently planted earth. Once again, the world was reborn. There'd be much worth celebrating at the feast of Darklight four days from now, assuming you had the coin. But then, most days were worth celebrating if you had the coin.

The wind flung grit into my face. *I'm coming*, I thought. *Keep your trousers on*. When I reached the place where the crenellations were wider apart, I slid the leather bag off my shoulder onto the flat stone between them, undid the flap, and pulled out the bundle of carved wooden pieces. One tug on the leather thong, and the pieces snapped erect to become my wind-reading box. I brushed my fingers reverently over one rune-carved side, still awed by the box's beauty, even now, half a year after Prince Beran had given it to me. The runes dated from the long-ago time of the Wys Ones. Since then, Rinlanders had acquired learning and a holy Faith, or as the baby-faced guard would put it, the country had become "civilized." Underlying it all, though, the wild force of elemental energy still lingered. I'd felt it in the streets of Rin City, and here in the castle, it was so strong it shocked me that most folks didn't even notice it was there. Beneath my fingertips, the box throbbed with it, making its earthy taste pool in my mouth. My heart pulsed in my throat.

From my bag, I pulled the velvet pouch and dumped a heap of bright confetti into my palm. I closed my eyes and stilled my thoughts. *Hush...Let go...Make space for the Powers...Let go*.

Like water pouring into an empty pitcher, an energy that wasn't mine flooded me from hair to heel. My eyes snapped open. I glimpsed the guard edging closer, but I fenced out all thoughts of anything else, stared into the wind box, and chose the invocation.

“The Powers move in the wind,” I murmured. “Wind sweeps between Earth and Sky. It whispers of where it’s been and where it’s going. I humbly beg you, Mother Earth, Father Sky. Use the white of the North Wind—”

I flung some of the paper bits into the box, and a faint wisp of pine woods tickled my nose.

“—the blue of the East Wind—”

I threw a second pinch of paper. In my mind’s eye, a pheasant soared from a field into endless sky.

“—the red of the South Wind—”

More paper bits. Heat and the smell of salt water brushed across my face.

“—the green of the West Wind.”

I tossed the last of the colored paper. The trees of a great forest rustled in my ears.

“Tell me what lies ahead, behind, and beyond for your child, Jarka.”

A finger of wind slid through the holes in the runes and swirled the paper in the wind box. I puffed out my cheeks and blew, mixing my breath with the wind, tuning it to my life and the things that mattered to me.

The wind-blown world jumped to life so strongly my head spun. All things that had ever been or would be left their marks, and I felt as if the wind was trying to blow them all into my brain at once. It spun itself into a tight whirl, and blew a sharp, flowery scent up my nose just before my head exploded in pain. Stark terror froze my heart, then vanished into a cold dark. I twisted away and from the outside now, I saw a tall figure fling a shorter one to the ground.

With a wordless cry, I jerked all the way free of the vision.

“What have you called up?” The guard tripped closer, his eyes wide enough to show white at all the edges, his round cheeks drained of color. “Stop it!”

Struggling for enough air to speak, I shook my head. Finally, I managed to choke out, “Believe me, if I could, I would.”

I peered into the wind box, swearing under my breath. The only thing I saw now was fluttering paper. I wouldn’t be able to read for myself again until the wind had something new to show me. I stood over the box, breathing hard. Someone had hurt or would hurt a smaller person. My mind raced. This was my reading, so the vision must be connected to me somehow. Who would I care about? My thoughts flew like an arrow to Cousin Lyssa and her daughter Izzy. Could Lyssa’s new husband, Clovyan, have hurt one of them or be about to? As far as I knew, Clovyan had never hit Izzy, but he slapped Lyssa around and had once beaten me savagely enough to make me head out the door. Not that I cared. Life on the streets had been better. Come to think of it, could that beating be what I saw? The Powers knew I relived it often enough in my nightmares, and the wind mixed up past, present, and future, like a cook stirring stew.

A familiar flush of shame washed through me at the memory. I’d been fifteen when Clovyan beat me bloody. I should have been able to fight him off, should have been able to keep him from hitting my cousin, too. I lifted the tip of my crutch and thumped it down again.

From the main courtyard came the sounds of running boots and the stable master shouting for a groom. Perched on the wall, I could see the city sloping down the hill outside the castle gates in a rolling sea of golden thatched roofs. The streets were beginning to stir too. I should check on Lyssa. If Clovyan had hit

her again, maybe I could finally convince her to leave him. Not right away though. Clovyan would take an hour or so to open the tailor shop and then be off to the Broken Cart for his morning mug of ale. If I waited, the coast would be clear. I realized I'd crushed the velvet bag in my hand. That cold blank near the vision's end made me nervous. I'd never felt it before, and it was too much like...well, like how I imagined death would feel.

I scraped up the paper bits, collapsed the box, stuffed it into my bag, and worked my way slowly down the steps. From the corner of my eye, I could see the guard making shooing motions to hurry me along. When I passed through the gate to the main courtyard, I found stable hands, kitchen workers, and guards all streaming toward the Great Hall for morning prayers. I sped up, meaning to stow my bag in my room and hustle to the Hall. Serving at morning prayers was one of my apprentice duties. If I was late, everyone would know, and at morning prayers, "everyone" included the king. All I needed was for him to decide I was useless and kick me out the way Clovyan had.

I shook my head. I wished Clovyan out of it almost as much as I wished Lyssa out of his house. Stone me if I didn't make sure both wishes came true the first day Beran named me his Wysman and I could borrow his power to turn the Tower Guards loose on people like Clovyan.