



# THE FRICKSTER

Dorothy A. Winsor

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Published by Inspired Quill: March 2021

First Edition

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Cover Image: Marco Pennaccietti

Cover Design: Venetia Jackson

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-913117-03-0

eBook ISBN: 978-1-913117-04-7

PDF Edition

**Inspired Quill Publishing, UK**

**Business Reg. No. 7592847**

[www.inspired-quill.com](http://www.inspired-quill.com)

## **Praise for Dorothy Winsor**

*The Wysman is a delightful coming-of-age story about finding out who you are when everything about your life is changing; when you can't go back but aren't sure you see a path forward; and when the gifts you've counted on most may turn out to be not to be the ones you need to save the people counting on you.*

– Rachel Neumeier,  
*author of Winter of Ice and Iron*

*A gripping Young Adult fantasy story, brimming with danger, magic and intrigue, set in a richly imagined world, with a superb cast of characters.*

– Mary Simms,  
*BookCraic*

*Dorothy Winsor's novel presents an intriguing and well-drawn world, with a very likeable lead. An exciting, adventurous, and thoughtful YA fantasy novel.*

– Dr. Una McCormack,  
*New York Times Bestselling Author*

*Dorothy A. Winsor is a meticulous writer who expertly balances intelligence and delight.*

– Saladin Ahmed,  
*Hugo, Nebula, and Gemmell Awards finalist*

*Journeys: A Ghost Story, is a very good tale that, without any real surprises, still manages to surprise. There's a well-wrought aura of melancholy that permeates the story, even in the funny moments. Another author I'll keep an eye out for in the future.*

– Fletcher Vredenburgh,  
*Black Gate Magazine*

*[In Finders Keepers], the action is brisk, emotions are deep, and the moral message is subtle but strong, providing excellent depth for all readers, young and not so young. Great story – I loved it as an adult and think it is a wonderful book for older kids and young adults. Five Stars.*

– Melinda Hills,  
*Readers' Favorite*

For Krystal

# Chapter 1

## Dilly

**I**N LAC'S HOLDING, we love the small gods. Unlike the Divine Powers, they aren't all-wise or all-good. They're enough like us to understand our feelings. The stories say that, at Midwinter Festival, they sometimes even walk among us. Of course, despite (or maybe because of) that, they can be jokesters and, let's admit it, pains in the rear. Especially the Trickster, the god Mama always said must look after me. I would pray to be looked after a little less, but frankly, that's the fastest way to make the Trickster sit up and take notice.

So, Trickster in mind, I slipped a thumb under the strap holding the left wing of my butterfly costume and settled it firmly in the hollow of my shoulder before climbing the three steps to the platform. Costume intact, I trotted up next to Jessa, Tira, and Nemay to take my place in the line of Lady Elenia's attendants. I didn't want to look undignified in front of the people jamming Lac's Square, so I smothered a grin. I still couldn't believe I belonged in that line. Against all my life

experience, I felt as if one of the more benevolent gods had opened a window and rained honey drops down on me. Then, showing the Trickster is, well, tricky, Tuc bounded after me, sniffed the hem of Jessa's will-o-wisp costume, and teetered as if he meant to lift his leg and pee on her.

Jessa yanked her skirt aside. "Honestly, Dilly. The opening of Festival is a sacred ceremony. That dog does not belong here."

I can't say I wasn't tempted to let him carry out his threat, but it would have ended badly. "Sit, Tuc," I said, and as if to demonstrate that he really was a good dog, he sank to his haunches next to me. Ignoring Jessa's sour face, I folded my hands in front of me and looked attentively at Lady Elenia, the way a good owner of a good dog would.

Unlike my wobbly wings, Lady Elenia's costume fit as if she was born to wear it, which as the lord's daughter, she was. Silk shimmered with all the colors of fire in the Festival Queen's traditional costume, one I'd seen every midwinter of my life until Mama lost her mind over a man and took me to Rin City. I blinked away the sting of tears. The hole that opened inside me when Mama died would never be filled, but at least now, I was off the streets and had a place to call home.

Most of the people in the square had their backs to us because, like Elenia, they were watching the sun's orange disk slide slowly lower, becoming a half circle and then a thin sliver before finally vanishing. The crowd released a muted cheer. Lady Elenia turned to the barrels of Winter Fire piled behind us. "Small gods," Elenia said, "we beg your blessing on us and on the drink we use to celebrate the longest night of the old year and the turn of the world to the new one."



For the first time in my life, I was close enough to hear the stuff in the barrels burst into a fizz and then fall silent.

The man in charge of the platform held a mug under the first barrel's tap, filled it, and offered it to Elenia. His helpers drew tiny cups for all four of us attendants, though like everyone else, we had to wait for Elenia's approval of the Fire to drink it. Elenia sipped, then broke into a smile and lifted her mug. "It's excellent! Go and enjoy yourselves!"

There was nothing muted about the crowd's cheer this time. It bounced off the surrounding three-storey buildings. Eager to find out what this year's batch of Winter Fire tasted like, I drained my skimpy share. Fire was only potent for the twenty-four hours at midwinter, from one sundown to the next, exactly one year after it was put in the barrel. This stuff tasted wonderfully of something like pears and threatened to spin my head if I drank much.

The helpers began rolling the barrels down a ramp behind the platform to be distributed to all the alehouses and cafes in town, but the crowd jostled one another to be away. The Festival Queen's ceremonial blessing was a politeness for the gods, but the timing was what triggered the Winter Fire, even if it wasn't on the platform. Other barrels would already be waiting, ready for drinkers to flood in. Sadly, I couldn't join them, because Lady Elenia had to go to the small gods shrine before she, and so we were free to enjoy ourselves. Three months ago, I wouldn't have believed there were disadvantages to living in Elenia's household, but it turns out a girl can be wrong.

Elenia led us down from the platform. As two Royal Fortress guards plowed us a slow path through the crowd, I lifted my face to the soft night. Even on a winter evening, it wasn't cold in Lac's

Holding, which was a good thing given how much arm and chest my costume showed. Shops and cafes hemmed us in on either side, below floors of apartments with fancy, iron-railed balconies draped with flowers and strings of Festival beads. I tugged on my shoulder strap again. Drat the thing.

“Fair night, Lady Elenia,” called a man cooking sausages over a brazier. “Get the best sausage in Lac’s Holding right here.” He poked a fork at a spicy smelling sausage, sending fat spattering onto the coals. Tuc darted forward and sat at his feet. The vendor laughed and tossed a scrap that Tuc snatched from mid-air. “What’s a mutt like you doing with this lot, doggie?”

My eye caught on a man in a huge sea monster headdress slipping close to our party. I stiffened. In Rin City, I’d been working as a messenger when a man slipped up on me like that and trapped me in an alley. I swallowed bile. Then Tira called a greeting and, at Elenia’s nod of permission, slid her arm into the man’s and drifted away to our left.

“Tira’s fool scared you?” Jessa snorted.

Among Jessa’s other annoying qualities, she was perceptive. She should spend a few months living on the streets and see what that did to her nerve. Not that I could tell her that. The last thing I needed was Jessa knowing I’d been homeless.

“Small gods know what time she’ll come home,” Jessa snipped, watching Tira disappear. “She knows Elenia won’t scold, whatever the hour. Elenia’s too easy a touch for a romantic story.”

In the café to our right, a man stumbled against the table closest to us, spilling a bowl of fish chowder to the ground. “Look out,” I said, bumping my hip against Jessa’s so her thin slippers

slid into the chunky mess. She gave a wordless cry. “Oh, how terrible,” I said. “I told you to look out.”

Jessa was so shocked she stood rooted to the spot – or maybe glued by the thick chowder. Her mouth still worked though. “Curse you, Dilly.”

“Walk with me, Dilly,” Nemay called over her shoulder.

I hustled away from Tire. “Come, Tuc.” Enchanted by the presence of sausage, Tuc did his best imitation of a deaf dog.

“Dilly!” Nemay called more loudly. “Tuc will come after you.”

I dodged a juggler about to toss a knife through one of my wings and caught up with her. “What if he gets lost?”

“From what I’ve seen, he knows his way around the city better than I do.” She brushed a dark curl threaded with grey off her temple. “Did you shove Jessa?”

I widened my eyes. “Me?”

She laughed. “Try not to annoy her any more than you already do by existing. You have to go back to the Fortress and live with her.”

I liked Nemay. She was in charge of Elenia’s attendants, but she was fair. “Jessa was nasty about Tira. And you know she’s trying to push me out.”

Nemay shrugged. “She wanted your place for a friend.”

*Too bad for Jessa*, I thought, not very sadly. I had been chosen for Elenia’s household, and of course I was happy there. Who could doubt it? I’d admired Elenia from afar since I was seven years old and she was sixteen.

At last, we turned down Sailmaker Street and stopped outside the small gods shrine. It lay three steps down in a cave that had been there when Lac’s Holding was a landscape full of

twisting creeks, tall grass, and sea birds. Shops crowded close on either side of the crude stone entry.

“You and the sergeant wait outside, Captain Jaf,” Lady Elenia said.

“Beg pardon, lady,” the guard captain said, “but I can’t let you go in by yourself.”

“The shrine is small,” Elenia said. “There won’t be room.”

“The sergeant can wait outside,” Captain Jaf said, “but I’m coming in.”

Elenia raised one eyebrow. “I won’t be alone. My attendants will be with me.”

“Good company, I’m sure,” Jaf said, “but not much protection.”

Elenia tossed her head and stomped down the steps, the tap of her high heels announcing exactly how she felt about Jaf ignoring her orders. Jessa, Nemay, and I crowded after her, leaving a harassed-looking Captain Jaf to follow as best he could while the sergeant took up a place outside the entrance. A headache threatened to throb to life behind my eyes. I hated it when Elenia was angry.

Elenia was right about the space. The shrine was even tighter than I remembered. Statues of the small gods lined the cave’s walls and even its ceiling. I searched for the Guardian Dog down near the floor, muzzle hovering over a bowl. Tuc looked like him, right down to the torn ear, but that was the end of the resemblance. Like most Lac’s Holding mothers, Mama had told me I had an invisible Guardian Dog who’d stop me when I was about to be bad. Tuc had been with me when I lived on the streets of Rin City, so I knew he wasn’t big on stopping bad behavior.

Captain Jaf pushed past me to stand next to Elenia on one side of the stone altar in the shrine's center. Across from them stood the Hedge Mage, waiting to perform the ceremonial healing of its Festival Queen. At least, I guessed he was the Hedge Mage. Mages were always here and there around the city. People used them when they couldn't afford the doctors who came from the university. This one seemed young to be serving in the shrine though. I couldn't see his face behind his Festival mask, but his chin below it was beardless and his body was lean inside his open-fronted Mage coat. Dark hair curled untidily over his collar. His ears were gently pointed, the way you sometimes saw in folks from the islands outside the harbor. The old stories said they descended from the elves who once lived there, which was a charming if unlikely thought.

"You're new," Elenia said, by which I assumed she meant "Where's your nursemaid?"

"A new Mage for a new year," he said smoothly. He swept long fingers through the smoke from the glass, globe-shaped lamp on the altar then extended his hands, palms up. An invitation for Elenia to lay hers in them. "Look into the fire, and we'll ask the small gods to ease all the city's hurts and bring happiness to everyone in the new year." The scented smoke pinched the inside of my nose.

Elenia hesitated but then seemed to come to a decision. She glanced at Nemay, who turned to Captain Jaf. Whatever she said to him made him swivel to frown at the entryway. That was odd. In a flash of the insight I'd gradually gained from living with these women for three months, it occurred to me that Elenia had asked Nemay to distract the guard captain. I snapped my attention back to Elenia just in time to see her pull what looked

like paper folded small from her sash and hold it out to the Mage, who blinked, then reached for it.

In a blur, Captain Jaf swooped between him and Elenia and plucked the paper from her hand. “Forgive me, lady,” he said. “I must ask for that.”

The Mage looked from Elenia to Captain Jaf and edged away.

“Ask?” Elenia cried. “That wasn’t asking. That was taking. This is an outrage. My father shall hear of this.”

“Forgive me again, lady, but it was your lord father who ordered me to confiscate any message you might send or receive.” He tucked the note into his pocket.

Lady Elenia held herself so tensely that I saw a tiny quiver in the hand no longer gripping a note, a quiver that made me think she might grab for it. Captain Jaf must have seen trouble too because he took a step back, the heels of his boots scraping the toes of my slippers. Elenia popped her lips scornfully, then strode up the steps, towing Jessa and Nemay in her wake. Apparently, we were dispensing with the ceremony.

Caught behind the captain, I hesitated. Elenia had asked for Nemay’s help, not mine, but if I dared, I was the one who could get Elenia what she wanted. The only barrier was I’d have to do what I swore I’d never do again once I was off the streets. Was I the respectable girl living with Elenia or the somewhat more... hm, let’s say flexible girl with the skillful fingers?

“Stay with them, sergeant,” Captain Jaf called up the steps before taking a moment to loom over the Mage. “The lady was right. You’re new. What’s your name?”

“Magus,” the Mage said evenly, “the name we all bear.”

“Right.” The captain snorted. “From what island?”

So Captain Jaf had noted the pointy ears too.

“None,” the Mage said. “I’m a stranger.”

“If I had time, I’d make you choke on that lie,” Captain Jaf said. “Don’t accept messages from the lady again.”

“Fine by me.” He opened his arms, spreading his multi-colored Mage coat like bright wings.

“We’ll be watching.” Captain Jaf spun to go after Elenia.

I managed to stumble in front of him. “Sorry,” I said at the same time he did. I dipped my fingers in his pocket, pinched the note, and ducked away. I had to do it in order to serve Elenia, I reasoned, and even if I thought of the excuse after I acted, not before, it was still a good one. Captain Jaf took the steps in one leap and hurried after Elenia. I turned back to the Mage.

His gaze locked on the note in my hand. “Shall I take that?” He reached for it.

I’d run into street hustlers who used that casually careful tone. I saw again the surprised blink he’d given when Elenia held out the note, heard again her puzzled voice to see this boy here. I curled my fingers around the paper. “I don’t think so.”

“You saw how eager your lady was for me to have it,” he said.

“She’s eager for someone to have it. I’m just not sure it’s you.”

His laugh sounded relaxed and unoffended. “Have it your way, but I really am a Mage, and I really was hired to perform a healing tonight, ceremonial though it might be. How about I truly earn my coin with you?” He extended his hands again.

I glanced up the stairs Elenia had taken and saw only the skirts and trouser legs of passers-by. I rubbed my throbbing eyes. *Don’t be stupid.* I could walk back to the Royal Fortress on the hill by the river and be let in. Besides, they’d wait for me as soon as they missed me.

“You have a headache?” the Mage asked, making me snap my thoughts back to him. “You’re frowning like an old lady. Shall I ease it for you?”

“Thanks so much for the compliment. It truly makes me want to listen to you.”

He grinned. “At least you know I’m not trying to flatter you. Come on. Let me earn my pay. Otherwise, as an honest man, I’ll have to give it back.”

I rocked from foot to foot. I’d had this headache on and off for days. It would be nice to be rid of it. Elenia and the others were gone anyway. I tried to stow Elenia’s note in a pocket before remembering that my butterfly costume had none. So I tucked it down my front where I’d also put my purse, lovely and plump with coins Elenia had given me. “I don’t need charity. I can pay for my own spell.” I wriggled my fingers into my purse. “How much?”

“I told you I’ve already been paid.”

“I insist.” I slapped two gulls onto the pedestal next to the lamp.

“Give me your hands,” he said, holding out his own again.

I laid the backs of my hands in his and felt calluses that never came from healing. *An island boy*, I thought again. They all spent half their lives handling boats, and the other half, rumor said, smuggling goods past the customs officers. He gripped my fingers lightly, turned them toward the globe lamp, and held them an inch or so away from the glass, far enough that the warmth felt pleasant rather than painful.

“Look into the fire. Let it fill your vision.”

I did as he said. The flame inside the globe flickered red and yellow. I felt the push of energy I’d felt every time a Mage spelled



me, so at least this boy hadn't lied about being one. I was having trouble letting him work, though. I hadn't been near a Mage in three years, and I was no longer used to letting one help my body right itself.

"Look at the fire, not what's in your head." The Mage shook my hands. "Let go."

I shrugged the tension out of my shoulders and concentrated on the fire. After a moment, it expanded to fill the globe. The shrine and the Mage faded away. My mind drifted. As it did every night when I tried to sleep, my heart contracted with grief and guilt over Mama's death, but the feelings didn't sharpen the way they sometimes did. In the fire, I saw Elenia, who looked much like Mama did when I was small and she was Elenia's age. I wished so hard I could please her. If I did, I'd be safe. I'd never again go hungry or be so filthy people edged away from me. But also, Elenia would be happy. I wanted to make her happy. I should give her note to the Mage.

The street kid in me leaped to life. I jerked my hands out of the Mage's. "What are you doing?"

He lifted his mask a finger-width away from his face as if it had become uncomfortable, then settled it back in place. "What do you mean? All I did was cure your headache. Would you rather have it back?"

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. My headache did seem to be gone. Like doctors, Mages healed. The difference was they did it by using their energy to steer *yours* on the right path again. Nothing about that should have let this boy fiddle with what I wanted. But that urge to give him the note felt way too much like what he'd been asking for.

Claws clicked behind me, and Tuc bounced down the stairs into the shrine. He growled at the boy, who sensibly backed up a half step. “I’m not going to hand over Lady Elenia’s note,” I said. “I’d never betray her like that. All us attendants are like her family.”

With a short laugh, he dropped his hands to his sides. “And that makes you happy?”

“Is there something wrong with being like family?”

“It looks to me like your *family* just left without you. That hurts. And I personally find kin make as many problems as they solve.”

I snatched the two gulls off the table and shoved them in the breast pocket of the shirt he wore under his open coat. “Dishing out that kind of wisdom must leave you with mighty few patients. You’ll need those.”

When I spun to leave, my left wing caught the lamp, making it teeter. The Mage spat something that sounded distinctly like a curse. I glanced back to see him steady the globe and then twitch his fingers off and shake them. Good. Burned fingers were the right punishment for him. With Tuc at my heels, I skipped up the steps, then headed toward where Elenia and the others would have missed me and surely be waiting.

The crowd was thick and rapidly growing drunk. My heart pattered a warning. I’d seen crowds like this in Rin City, and I’d stayed out of them when I could. I kept an eye out for side streets I could duck down if things got out of hand. I needed to find Lady Elenia and get home. Making progress wasn’t easy, though, because when I tried to ease between slow-moving Festival goers, my wings kept getting in the way. I was considering whether to take them off and carry the awkward bundle they made when

two men stumbled in front of me, forcing me to halt. One of them lurched toward me, reeking of Winter Fire. He gave a stupid grin. “Well, look at you! Fresh and ripe as a peach. Never been kissed, I’ll bet.”

“Do it,” his companion urged with a snort.

My heart stopped pattering and jumped into my throat, but I knew better than to show fear. “Get out of my way,” I said, voice as firm as I could make it. The fur rose on the back of Tuc’s neck.

When the man reached for me, I managed to twist out of his grasp, but his drunken momentum carried him forward, and he grabbed my left wing to steady himself. I stumbled as he fell to his knees, pulling me off balance. Then, bless the tricky shoulder strap, it slipped off. With a shake, I shed the whole harness. He sprawled on the cobbles, tangled in the torn contraption. His friend braced his hands on his thighs, howling with laughter. I barely caught Tuc’s collar when he tried to lunge.

“It’s just a game,” the sprawled man said. “A Festival game.”

“It’s not game,” I shouted. “Forcing a kiss on someone isn’t a game.” The friend’s laughs sputtered to guffaws. “Come, Tuc.” I whirled and pushed on. When we got free of the crowd, an almost empty street opened ahead of me. No one had waited. My shoulders drooped.

I looked toward the Royal Fortress on the rise near the river. I could see the multi-colored dome of the Glass Chamber topping Elenia’s quarters, glowing from the light inside. When I was little, I’d been dazzled by the sight of it. Now I lived there, and I was about to deliver Elenia’s note, which would please her, so that next time, she’d wait for me. My past was past. I drew a deep breath, and with Tuc trotting ahead, I headed through the dark toward the Fortress.

No.

Toward *home*.