
7-15-2010

The Wisest Wizard

Joan Marie Verba

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Verba, Joan Marie (2010) "*The Wisest Wizard*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2010: Iss. 32, Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2010/iss32/6>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mythic Circle by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



The Wisest Wizard



“The world gives all the truth there is,
If we with skill perceive;
I study it by day and night—
This world I do believe.”

Meanwhile Poseidon chose to speak:
“My brothers twain and I,
Upon this man much interest place;
Through him will worship die.

“These crafty apes will crown themselves,
Nor pray to gods for aid;
We’ll see if they pollute their world,
And all their means abrade.

“We’ll see if they control their births,
Or bring great famine on;

We’ll see if they withhold their bombs,
Or fight till all be gone.

“They’re adults now, sans parent-gods;
No punishments they dread;
Around a million, million stars,
Most sophonts now are dead.”

In harmony the sisters sang,
And Triton smiled at glee;
Perhaps the gods knew more than men,
Beyond all earthly dree.

Poseidon raised his trident high,
Then switched and pointed down—
The court beneath the waves submerged,
That court of fair renown.

The Wisest Wizard

¹ Kathy Edwards writes, “In this picture I have taken images of the ‘Statue of Poseidon at Copenhagen Port,’ some Greek and Roman statuary, the Renaissance painting ‘The Triumph of Amphitrite’ by Poussin, and a photograph of clouds over the ocean to create the effect brought to mind in the poem..”

by

Joan Marie Verba

Penelope had staged the most beautiful funeral I had ever seen. In the glade, the apple trees remained in blossom, and a subtle spicy fragrance enriched the air. Bright sunlight streamed through the leaves. Birds of paradise trilled melodically. The bier carrying Penelope's body—gorgeously arrayed—floated down the aisle created by the seated mourners. Impressive trick, that: getting an article to levitate took months of preparation, and the magic could be executed by only the most powerful of wizards. Of course, Penelope had been The Wise Wizard, but even so, it must have taken years for her to set the spells and time them to work after she had taken her last breath. No doubt she had entrusted her assistant, Adele, walking behind the bier, with the word or gesture to set it all in motion.

I looked around at the spectators, wondering who would become the next Wise One. Sylvia, the obvious choice, had contracted a fever and lay abed at home, sick. Her assistant, Freya, had told Daphne and me that Sylvia had at first shunned the healing potions—which would send her into a long, deep sleep—and attempted to get out of bed twice to come to the funeral. Both times, she had collapsed on the doorstep. Freya had been spared the effort to carry her back to bed—the swordswoman was almost as old as Sylvia was—because of the numerous visitors who had come by and had given Freya a hand. (After the second fainting spell, Sylvia had yielded to Freya's pleas and sipped the medicine.) The visitors all said that they had come to see if Sylvia needed any extra care in her illness; but Daphne told me they came, rather, to see if Sylvia was shamming. Daphne assured me, after we left the wizard's cottage, that Sylvia was not shamming.

Who, then, would replace Penelope? Lola, who had only recently been shown the door by her wizard mistress after her journeyman elevation, was young, but

The Mythic Circle #31, pg. 28

ambitious. Daphne told me Lola might make the attempt, but becoming the Wise One required a certain amount of maturity and experience that Lola had yet to achieve. The only others I could see who had both the desire and the ability to carry out the test were Metis or Urania—and of course, Daphne.

I had assisted Daphne for 17 years now. The common people think that wizards use apprentices to assist them, but in reality, the apprentices are too incompetent and hot-headed to assist until they are able to complete their journeyman tasks, and after that, they're shown the door (with great ceremony and hearty congratulations, of course, but nonetheless, they're out). No, wizards generally choose their assistants from the ranks of women-at-arms. They find us to be seasoned, reliable, and eager—most eager, because the food is good, the pay is outstanding, and the accommodations are cozy. I had not experienced the dubious pleasure of standing at a cold, dank watch post in the pre-dawn hours for quite some time.

I turned my attention back to the funeral. The bier had reached the front of the assembly and turned. Penelope lay there peacefully, dressed in her finest wizard silks (green and gold), her wrinkled face showing an aged beauty that reflected the selfless deeds she had joyfully pursued in life. I would miss her cheerful demeanor. Slowly, as I watched, body, clothes, and bier dissolved into dust that sparkled in the sun—one final brilliant touch from The Wise Wizard.

Daphne tapped my arm, her usual way of drawing my attention. "Let's go, Isabel," she said softly. I nodded and followed her. I already saw that Lola and her assistant, Radnir, had gone, as had Metis and Esme, Urania and Nyla. The others remained in the glade and gathered to talk, probably about us. Being The Wise Wizard meant having an honorable title, and possession of the ancient artifacts from the dawn of time, allowing the

owner to perform the most powerful and intricate spells known. But the ancient artifacts themselves had been bound with a spell before the dawn of time. Once the current Wise One died, they hid themselves, and no one but a wizard pure in heart could find and use them. Even then, the finding would be risky and dangerous, and not many wizards would take on the pursuit. Indeed, most found the very idea a foolish one.

“Pure in heart”—aye, that was a mouthful. I told Daphne on one occasion, when I was feeling brave, that I did not think I ever met anyone who was truly pure in heart. Daphne, who seemed not in the least insulted by my remark, explained that perfection was not required, else no mortal could take them. Rather, she said, the accumulation of selfless deeds left an imprint on the soul much as an accumulation of selfish deeds left a stain on the soul. The preponderance of selfless deeds, no matter what mortal errors one may make in life, would make a soul shine as the moon on a clear night.

Sylvia possessed such a soul. Everyone expected that once Penelope died, that Sylvia would be drawn to the ancient artifacts—and they to her—as metal to a lodestone. Still, a wizard did have to exert some effort to find the artifacts, and it was clear that Sylvia could not walk out her front door. Daphne, and apparently others, felt the artifacts too important to be left untouched until Sylvia regained her strength.

In my estimation, Daphne was the strongest candidate among the other seekers. She was honest, truthful, and caring. She trained apprentice after apprentice who left her home and honorably served the ladies and lords in their estates, making sure the babies (human and animal) were sound of health and grew strong and wise. None of Daphne’s apprentices, to our knowledge, had ever used magic for power or gain. Daphne, however, did not have the seniority, and therefore, the experience of a wizard such as Sylvia.

Metis, a skilled and precise wizard, nonetheless had the disadvantage of growing up unloved. A need to prove her worthiness

The Mythic Circle #31, pg. 29

continually drove her to accomplish great and noble deeds, but her upbringing meant her deeds lacked warmth. She could be pleasant, but her manner often seemed harsh, particularly when she was frustrated, simply because no one had ever bothered to teach her manners (and whenever anyone tried, they found themselves the objects of her frustration, and quickly gave up). Other wizards, as well as other common folk, avoided her for those reasons, making her feel more rejected and driving her further to prove that she was worthy of being included in society. I (and Daphne) had no doubt she saw becoming the Wise One as a way to finally be included and loved.

Urania, on the other hand, had become the most social of butterflies. Everyone loved to see her coming—until one of her whims took over. Then visitors could find that their ale had suddenly turned to water, or water to ale. To Urania, this was harmless buffoonery, and because of her affable manner, she easily received forgiveness. No one suspected that Urania would ever use the ancient artifacts for anything evil, but Daphne, for one, could easily see that with them, a colossal joke could turn into a colossal mess.

Without Sylvia’s brilliant integrity, the best that the others could do in the search was to check the most potent centers of magic (the wizards’ country was defined as the territory where these magical centers were found) in the hopes that the artifacts would be drawn to them, as they had in the past. Nothing was more potent in magic—and more dangerous to life and limb—than a firedrake’s lair; I quickly saw that Daphne was headed to the nearest one. I loosened my sword in its sheath. Firedrakes were notoriously hard to kill; nonetheless, over the eons, men had hunted them for sport, and now only a handful of families lived in wizards’ country. I did not wish to kill one, but I was not going to let one harm me or Daphne, either.

Daphne glanced back, seeing my gesture. “You won’t need that. I’ve set protective spells for us.”

“Just being prepared.”

Daphne stopped at the edge of a clearing—the border between the forest and the mountains. I could smell burnt twigs and leaves, as well as a faint odor of sulfur. Before us yawned a huge cave mouth. At the top of the cave, peering over the rocks, we could see Metis and Esme. To our left, again, where forest met rocks, stood Lola and Radnir. Urania and Nyla stood just beyond them.

All of us watched the firedrakes. The father, resplendent in shining orange and silver scales, used his nose to scratch at the joints where his stubby legs and wormy torso met. The mother, all silver and no orange, lovingly nosed the five offspring in her nest—imps, we called the little ones. I saw 3 males and 2 females. With their heads held high, the imps were about as tall as my shoulder; they weighed almost twice as much as I did. The nest they played in consisted of jewels and mud that the adult firedrakes had used their fiery breath to harden.

The jewels resembled opals or diamonds, but actually they were rocks or crystals, eaten and digested by the firedrakes, who ate anything—animal, vegetable, or mineral. Somehow the process of digestion imbued the stones with magic. Daphne once attempted to explain how the solids absorbed the magic that animated the firedrakes, but I was a little too fastidious to pay much attention. Daphne had magical firedrake stones, and assured me they were entirely clean from being burned by the firedrake's breath (after the firedrake deposited the droppings), and washed, just to be on the safe side, but I was reluctant to handle them, nonetheless.

The firedrake stones varied in magical power. Some had very weak power; I had seen Daphne put them in a cradle to ease a babe's tooth pains. Others had tremendous power; Daphne said the most potent could bring down a mountain, or even better, could cause an object or objects to disappear from one location and reappear at another. But those were rare and only a wizard could scry one to see how much power any of them had. Generally wizards got the stones by visiting an abandoned nest, but one hardly found any of

The Mythic Circle #31, pg. 30

those in these times. The stones Daphne or any other wizard had were few, and old.

I saw a motion to my left. Radnir held up a large melon and motioned to the imps. "Here, baby, come here, see what I've got!"

I rolled my eyes. It appeared that Lola wanted Radnir to lure an imp to her. The other imps would follow, and the parents would come to be sure the imps came to no harm. Then Lola would search the cave while the firedrakes were distracted. Again, that seemed to be the plan, but it was a bad one—even if they had magical Roc bird feathers to protect them from injury, this would not prevent a firedrake from grabbing or trapping them.

Radnir and Lola could not have anticipated what happened next. The first imp left the nest and ran straight to Radnir, amazingly fast. The other imps rushed forward at a breakneck pace, tackling not only Lola and Radnir, but Urania and Nyla as well, rolling them playfully on the ground. The parents scuttled over to supervise, trumpeting encouragement.

Daphne shook her head. "They'll live—they're well protected, but they're not going anywhere for a while." She took a drawstring bag out of her own shoulder sack and threw it to me. "Gather all the stones you can. I'm going to search the cave." She ran into the cave, kindling a handlight as she went, while I searched around the nest for anything that looked magical and clean. I had almost filled up the bag when I felt a nudge on my arm.

"One moment, I'm almost done."

"Who are you talking to?"

I looked up to see Daphne standing in front of me. Then who nudged me? I turned to find an imp cooing at me. Its breath was uncomfortably warm, and smelled of melon. Without thinking, I picked up a nearby rock and tossed it at the imp. The imp caught it with its mouth and began crunching it.

"Don't feed it!" said Daphne. "It'll follow us!"

"But...."

The damage done, she rolled a large piece of quartz in its direction to keep it there a few moments more. She touched my arm. "After

me.”

I always did exactly what Daphne said, even if it made no sense to me at the time. I learned the hard way that Daphne knew what she was doing even if I did not. And it did not make sense that Daphne was running to where the other imps were still rolling the women, apparently amused by the noises they made. We ran uncomfortably close to Father Firedrake’s legs, and into the forest. Daphne stopped next to a tree, turned, and made a motion as if throwing a rock a long distance. A tongue of fire sprouted up by the nest. The imp I had fed screamed, and the other firedrakes raced back to the nest.

“You didn’t hurt it?” I asked. One less firedrake meant even fewer firedrake stones.

“No, imps scream with excitement when they see fire.”

The other women were badly shaken and had grass and twigs and pebbles in their hair and clothes, but they were largely unhurt. After helping them to the nearest forest path, Daphne and I left them there to gather their wits again.

Once we were a safe distance from the other women, I handed Daphne my bag. “This is all I could get.”

She took it but did not open it. “I’m sure they’re fine. Any firedrake stone will have a use.”

“Did you find the ancient artifacts in the cave?”

She shook her head. “But I found a number of firedrake stones.”

“Powerful ones?”

“I won’t know that until I’m able to get home and examine them.”

“I don’t think that Urania or Lola will become The Wise One.”

“No, it will be some time before they fully recover their senses. They’re only barely capable of walking home as it is.”

“What now?”

“I’m going to check on Sylvia and then go home.”

“You’re giving up on seeking the ancient artifacts? Aren’t you afraid that Metis will get them?”

Daphne smiled. “Metis knows less than she thinks. I’ll be more useful against her if I work my magic from home, at least for now. You’ll continue the search.”

“You have great confidence in me,” I said, implying with my tone that the confidence might not be merited.

“I do,” she said with a grin.

Daphne left a small firedrake stone on Sylvia’s blanket; Sylvia had not awakened, Freya said, since we had last been there. My next task, Daphne told me before we parted, was to climb the Tower Tree. That, too, contained a magical center, and attracted Rocs, which nested in the highest branches. I stood at the base of the tree—as wide as a cottage—and considered my path upward. I could not see the top through the myriad branches and countless leaves, but I heard rustling and the cry of a Roc. If one caught me with its beak or claws, I could be its dinner. Still, with the tree so large, I could conceivably get up to the top without the Roc or I ever setting eyes on the other.

I started the climb. I would ascend about the height of a city wall, rest a few minutes, and go up again. The Roc screamed every now and again, but I knew from the sound I remained at a safe distance.

Once I was high enough to view the entire valley, I heard a heavy rustling—too heavy for a squirrel or bird of paradise, many of which I had already seen. But it was not loud enough to be a Roc, either. I craned my neck to look up. Identifying the source of the sound, I called out. “Well met, Esme. What are you doing here?”

“The same thing you’re doing here, presumably,” she called down. “I see you survived the firedrakes.”

“Quite nicely, thank you,” I said. “Daphne set magical wards to protect us.”

She nodded. “Metis determined the ancient artifacts weren’t there and we should move on.”

I refrained from asking how Metis knew that without making a search, as Daphne had. Wizards generally did not tell their assistants such secrets, and even when they did,

assistants generally would not share them with

other assistants. “Is she with you?”



“No. I need to get a Roc feather for a magic spell, and then move on.”

That told me that Metis did not think the ancient artifacts were here, either. If so, I should move on, too. But perhaps Metis was

wrong and they were here. I kept climbing. Esme did too, but went to the other side of the tree, out of my sight. I kept an eye out for Rocs, but did not see any. Eventually, I came to a hole in the tree. I knew it to be a magical

locus due to the lack of bird or squirrel droppings. The hole was large enough for me to grasp the edge with my gloved hands and pull myself inside. Cracks in the bark let in some sunlight, but I saw nothing but...Roc feathers. Drifted down from the nests and pulled in by the tree's magic, I guessed. I pulled out a handful and sat on the branch with my back to the trunk, considering. I would take them with me—since they were magical, Daphne would find a use for them. I placed them inside my vest. But should I tell Esme, to spare her a dangerous encounter with the giant bird? As I pondered this question, I looked out over the valley. Who should I see, but Metis walking along the forest path to...the enchanted pool. When I looked down to contemplate my path to the ground, I saw Esme descending beneath me. I almost laughed. Misdirected! Metis and Esme were nothing if not clever.

An unearthly screech startled me, causing me to nearly lose my balance. A Roc hovered near me, peering at me, screaming at me. Fortunately, the branches and foliage were so thick in this part of the tree that it could not reach me, though it lashed out with beak and claws, tearing at the leaves and smaller outer branches. As long as I stayed close to the trunk, I ought to make it to the ground safely. With the feathers in my jacket, it could not harm me, but it could grab me if it got close enough. Sure enough, once the Roc got too low to maintain its flight—a Roc could not fly from the ground, it had to stay in the heights—it gave up and ascended to its nest.

Even with the head start, Metis and Esme could do little at the enchanted pool before I got there. A den of snakes guarded the grottoes, and I knew neither of them could swim well. I, on the other hand, had been an expert swimmer from my youth, and practiced charming magical snakes long before I ever met Daphne. Besides, I had Roc feathers in my jacket.

Once I hit the ground and cleared the tree, I looked up just to make sure the Roc was not about to swoop down on me. But I saw it circling in the distance, apparently intent on

other prey. I turned and took the path to the pool. I did not immediately see Metis or Esme, but they could be behind any of the rock formations. They were not the objects of my search, in any case. I knelt and pounded on the ground. Soon after, a snake appeared, thick as my arm, long as I was high. It slithered to my hand. I allowed it to taste and smell my fingers with its forked tongue, then I stroked it under the jaw. Now it was my friend. I picked it up and carried it underneath the rocky overhang, and set it at the edge of the pool. It would attack anyone else who came near.

Daphne had taken me here before. Wizards often used the pool to store objects because of the snake guardians, and because the pool's own enchantments made it easy to set spells. One lingering spell allowed a swimmer's clothes to stay dry while in the pool. I counted on that as I took off my boots, stepped in the main pool, and sank. I still had to hold my breath but did not have to do that long. The first shelf was not far. I surfaced, looked, and found that empty. I drew breath again, sank, and surfaced at another location. I only put my head and arms above water. Learning on the shelf with my arms, I saw some magical objects, but ordinary ones, not the ancient artifacts. Searching further, I found two other empty areas, and three areas filled with more objects. I almost submerged again at the third area when something caught my eye. At first glance, these had appeared to be ordinary magical objects, similar to the ones in the shelves I had seen in Daphne's and every other wizard's dwelling I had ever entered: a crystal globe, a walking staff, a wooden bowl, among other items. But as I gazed at them, they seemed to take on...a glamour, a sanctity. These were the ones! I had found them! I tentatively reached for them, then drew my hand back. Should I touch them? Perhaps I should just leave them and report my find to Daphne. As I mulled over the options in my mind, the objects dissolved before my eyes.

I blinked. No! They had been there. I would have sworn it. Now they were...gone? How? This I had better report to Daphne.

I swam back to the main pool and

surfaced. As I climbed out of the water, I saw Metis sitting on a stone bench, stuffing a wooden bowl into an almost-full pouch. Esme stood beside her. I looked toward my snake friend. He coiled there still, asleep.

“Wizards are even better at charming snakes,” Metis observed.

I sat on a rock, speechless.

Metis stood. “You needn’t worry. I’m not going to use these to steal, or conquer territory. I just want to be recognized for my genuine abilities. Now everyone will have to agree that I’m not the worthless wretch they thought I was.” She left the grotto, Esme following.

I trudged back to Daphne’s cottage, wondering what I should say. To forestall explaining the painful details, I first showed Daphne the Roc feathers.

Her face brightened. “Oh, Roc feathers. I can’t have too many of those.” She took them and put them away, then she turned to me again. “Did you see the ancient artifacts?”

Startled, I simply said, “Yes.”

She said excitedly, “You must tell me what they look like.”

I shrugged. “You can probably ask Metis.”

Daphne picked up a firedrake jewel and held it to the window, to the light. “Oh, she doesn’t know.”

“But she has them.”

Daphne smiled. “She thinks she does. She knows less than she thinks.”

I gasped. “Did you get them after all?” I said eagerly.

She laughed—not mocking me, but expressing joy. “No, Sylvia has them.”

“Sylvia?”

“Yes, she recovered enough to claim them.”

I remembered the firedrake stone that

Daphne had left on Sylvia’s blanket. It must have healed her, awakened her from slumber. “But Metis has...?”

“Ordinary magical artifacts, from one of the other shelves in the grotto. Well, not so ordinary, they’re rather powerful, but nothing she can’t be trusted with.”

I considered that. I did see more than one wooden bowl in the grotto. Metis must have taken one of those, mistaking a very potent artifact for an ancient artifact.

Daphne held up the jewel in her hand. “But what I have here has an even greater power than anything Metis gathered.”

“What is it?”

“Something that I think will affect Metis for the better. She thinks that she can earn love through acts of courage, when she needs to add acts of kindness. It may change Urania, too. She will be easier to live with once she knows that she doesn’t have to trick people to get their attention.” She put the jewel down. “Some barriers are almost impossible to break, even with magic. But this jewel can help people understand themselves better.”

I gestured to the jewels. “They can do all that.”

She put down the one in her hand. “With the proper care and attention, this one can.” She waved a hand over all the other accumulated jewels. “We collected quite a cache, you and I. There are some exceedingly powerful stones among these.”

“You don’t mind Sylvia getting the ancient artifacts?”

“Not at all.” She picked up another jewel and held it to the light. “When Sylvia reaches the end of her natural life, I think we will be ready.” She turned to me with a cheerful expression. Exactly how I would expect the next Wise One to act.