

# FENNECA

by

**Wilanne Schneider Belden**

She was an odd little bit of a child, so tiny the survivors gathered in the burned-out village had no idea of her age, although she seemed far wiser and far more capable than the two-year-old her size indicated. They never knew her parentage, but with so many other children dead, so few people of any age still alive, her very existence made her precious. No one had time or energy left from the desperate attempt to stay alive to inquire into the matter. She never spoke, although she understood—or seemed to understand—whatever was said to her. She attached herself to one after another of the surviving women, wandering away in a day or two to sleep cuddled against another motherly body. At last, she disappeared. They hoped she was all right, but no one could search.

A path, rapidly reverting to woodland, led away from the village. The child walked slowly along it with the caution of the weak. Had the villagers known, they would have benefited. She found and ate several wild, growing things. Fungus. A squirrel's forgotten store. Some roots. She was full-fed for the first time since coming again among people. Food, she must have. People who starved she could do without.

Several days later, she saw the merest thread of smoke. Smoke meant fire, and warmth, and getting dry. It also

usually meant people. She was cold and wet and lonely.

She followed the sign and scent of woodfire to a hidden farmstead. Not well-enough hidden. Here, too, she saw the devastation left by the Hounds of Alizon, who killed for enjoyment—and for power and land (if not inhabitants) over which to claim dominion. But having ruined, they had ridden on.

One room of the house looked lived-in, and the beckoning smoke rose from the chimney. The child went in.

Alone in the house, more than half starved, Janya lay on her cot unthinking, long past weeping and despair. When the tiny being entered, Janya believed it hallucination. But the double handful of shelled nuts the child placed by the woman's hand were real. One half nutmeat at a time, slowly, chewing and chewing, swallowing only a little at time, Janya ate. The tiny ragamuffin, clothed in someone's outworn smock, a strip of something around her waist to hold it close and shorten it, watched her solemnly. She went to the fireplace, put the last bits of wood on the dying fire, and went to the door. A signal with "speaking" hands told Janya she would return. Almost an hour passed. When she came back, she dragged after her a branch far too heavy and long for her seeming fragility to manage. Panting and half crying with exhaustion, she wrestled it all into the room. She looked at Janya for help.

Still unbelieving, Janya found the strength to tip over the (now) three-legged table. A part of the branch might break off. It did, and the child put it into the fire.

Her third return—well after dark, shivering so hard she could hardly drag herself through the door—was with the most miraculous gift of all: a fat coney, its neck broken.

She dropped the body by Janya's cot and sought the fire, now burning brightly, if small, on the hearth. She sank down, and Janya thought she cried.

The child remained with Janya, who, despite the still-present danger, chose to live in the half ruins of the house she and her husband had built years ago—when there was

hope. She might have gone to the village, where perhaps people still existed, but she had no desire to do so. Here lay her life, in graves she had dug out of the near-frozen earth with energy she could have used far better to stay alive longer. She had no wish to live, but live she did.

Perhaps she now knew why.

In their entire first exchanges, the child had not spoken a word, nor, Janya found, did she ever. She was not, however, a true mute, for she sang wordlessly, tunes Janya did not recognize; perhaps she made them up. And she made word-noises, repeating and repeating the same "phrases," never satisfied. She would change a single sound, then two, then three, always searching, it seemed, for exactly what she wanted. Because she understood when Janya spoke to her, the woman did not believe the sounds to be a language, just something the child did to pass the time.

Janya named her Fenneca, calling her Fenny most of the time, and the child responded well. Her surprising smile (flashing through the mask of dirt and despair marking her as one of the few the laughing butchers had missed) was such a delight that, for the first time in months, Janya smiled in response.

Like everyone else, the little girl was bone-thin, ill-clothed in something found—in her case, far too large—and always dirty. Possibly, her hair might be reddish blond (so, Janya thought, it grew in at the roots), but with no way to wash it, one could not be sure. She did have disconcerting eyes, almost green, and the pupils were not exactly circular, although they were close enough to it that Janya did not notice for many weeks. Her dirt-grimed hands were long-fingered and well shaped, and her feet (wrapped in layer after layer of rags) were also long and slim.

Spring was late, preceded by a long month of cold without snow, covered by gray skies, and filled with wolf-teeth winds. Three more of those who had gathered in the village died of starvation, and one more appeared from

somewhere, little less skeletal than they who met him. Seed grain was long since eaten, and even the feral, long-toothed rats found themselves hunted as determinedly as they themselves sought food.

True spring came within a week of Fenny's arrival, and the child slid out of the one room into the pale sunshine as if released from a dark cave. She was gone most of the day every day, and came home with her mouth green, her hands full of strange things she insisted were food. Janya doubted, but, as Fenny did not die, the woman chewed and swallowed her portion with grim determination. And lived.

One morning, Fenny returned with her ragged "skirt" so filled with lumpy somethings that she could hardly stagger. She dropped her burden at Janya's feet. They had had no food the day before. Janya, foodless for several days that the child might eat, was hardly able to move, hardly able to think. She reached out a trembling hand. Whatever-it-was could be eaten. Fenny held the hand away. She went to the hearth and held up a pot. She mimed water, cooking, then ran out to the stream to fill the pot.

Janya dragged herself to the table and watched the little hands as they scrubbed the roots, cut out each indentation (leaving a fat cone of the root attached), chopped the rest, and put it into the pan. Fenny picked up a fork, mimed poking, waiting, poking again. Janya nodded. "Yes, when they are soft."

Fenny nodded extravagantly, smiled, and scraped each of the pieces she had set aside into her skirt. She took them outside. Janya could not follow. She could only wait and occasionally poke. The roots took some fifteen minutes to become soft. The odor was minimal, certainly not mouth-watering, but Janya salivated with the mere thought of food. Carefully, carefully, her weakness making the job dangerous, she spooned the diced bits onto a plate. In the moments she waited, anxious, for the roots to become cool

enough to try, she wondered. Would she die? If so, she really did not mind, but there was Fenny, and living for Fenny seemed worthwhile, a thought that surprised her.

They ate the roots, wishing for a scraping of salt. Not too much food at once, for Janya. It was sin to waste, and more than a few mouthfuls would come up again from a stomach so shrunken. The taste was bland but pleasant. Later, she ate another mouthful or two from her portion. After a third helping, near twilight, Janya felt strong enough to go outside to find out what so involved Fenneca.

In the old garden, a space some three feet long by six inches wide lay clear of weed and rock and detritus. What an effort for so small a child! Fenny noted Janya's coming, ran to take her hand, and led her to the place. She showed how she had dug and pulled and dug more, until the earth was ready to be planted. For seed, Fenny used the eye-buds she had prepared.

Almost daily, Fenny returned with the results of her foraging. One day she presented Janya with a sort of bouquet. Her mouth was green again, so the woman nibbled at a broad leaf. The taste was a little bitter, but her body craved it. She ate the entire bunch. Fenny found two other roots, also to be boiled, and saved the top half inch, with the leaves, to be planted in her expanding garden. One day, well after dark (Janya was nearly out of her mind with worry), the child returned with a freshly dead ground-fowl and a smeared, teary face. She was not hurt, she mimed, just sorry for what she had had to do.

They feasted that night, and Janya made the meat go far.

Having food, and hope, Janya prepared the soil, making ready for when the next food-crops from the wilds would appear.

Fenny brought little plants, each taken carefully with soil around the roots. Janya expected them to die, but they struggled valiantly, drooped and spread, then began to flourish. They ate wild salads until they nearly burst. Their

sores healed, and Janya's gums tightened around her teeth. Fenny's increased rows of the root crop burgeoned. Below the ground, future meals lay growing.

Another fowl, then a rabbit! Tears, always, in Fenny's eyes, but she brought the meat. The next time, the fowl was a hen, and alive. Janya restrained herself from wringing its neck by clutching one hand with the other. Yes, let it live. They could have eggs. Perhaps Fenny might bring more hens. If they did not eat the first eggs, the hens might raise broods. By saving the strongest cockerel, they could start a flock. She did cut off the wing-tips (Fenny cried) so the bird could not fly. In a month, they had five hens, and the first two were brooding.

Stunned rabbits, which Janya penned, made another source of meat.

Still, there were days when they went without, but they could now afford to do so. No longer were they in danger of starving, and to eat their crops and breeders would mean death when winter set in.

As she seemed so well able to do it, Janya let Fenny handle the matter of food. She set to work rebuilding another part of the house, cannibalizing the rest of it for unburned, unbroken pieces of board, whittling pegs to hold them together, and digging again through the rubble for anything usable. She went farther afield, searching other lonely houses. Under a hearth-stone in one she found such treasure as she could hardly believe. A whole leather bag of grain-seed! A new axe-head! Weapons. A small knife she could give to Fenny. She bore them home in triumph. They planted the seed the next day, hoping, hoping that it would grow, that the summer would prove long enough for it to come into seed and ripen.

Every other day Janya went into the edges of the woods for branches to build a huge woodpile. More and more, it seemed that they would live.

None of the other survivors came to their out-of-the-way

homestead. It was several miles from the remains of the village in which they huddled, and few had more energy than enough to keep alive. All did not have that. Janya prayed, almost ceaselessly, that none would come. She and Fenny were so rich in the necessities of life that anyone who came would kill to take them. With terrible shock she discovered what Fenny brought home one night.

She held the hand of a child so distorted with lack of food that he could hardly be recognized as human: eyes gigantic in a huge, hairless head, body covered with the sores of starvation sickness, a belly distended to the size of a giant melon, and filled (Fenny gestured) with dirt to still the hunger pangs.

He could not live, but he did. Janya fed him broth and roots until he had a little strength, then purged him again and again to rid his body of the only thing he had found to fill it. Then more food, a tiny mouthful at a time, and, at last, he began to notice that he lived.

Having brought him, Fenny paid him little attention, as if the bringing was her only responsibility. Janya wondered, but she accepted the new burden. Fenny brought more food. Early berries. Old honey (she had stings, but she just cried and went on). Nothing she brought failed to nourish. The boy filled out, his belly flattened. He even began to grow hair, and his head no longer appeared too large for the rest of him.

Once he had begun to look and act human, Janya reveled in conversation. He spoke seldom while he was so weak and ill, but made up for it almost at once. They talked and talked. His accent indicated his birth to be in one of the Great Houses, but something had happened to his memory. He remembered only his name—Labram—and having had parents, though he did not seem to feel their loss greatly.

Labram's recovery triggered a new need in Janya. She saved every bit of fat, and one windy day, using lye from

wood-ashes, Janya made soap. She spent the next week washing things. The first three, of course, were the people.

She had rather expected Labram to wash up well, and he did. With his hair cut off short—it was, of course, impossible to do anything else, so filthy and matted was it—his skin scrubbed with lye soap and sand, his nails trimmed as neatly as they could manage with Fenny's little knife, and clean clothes, Janya had proof of his birth. He had a striking resemblance to a man she had seen only once, but remembered. He and his men had tried to repel the invaders. Dead now, no doubt, but his son lived. It gave her another reason to live. Labram must not be buried away here. Somewhere were people who could educate him, train him, give him a new life, perhaps a new purpose. In a year or two, when they were ready, she would have to find those people.

The change in Fenny astounded Janya. With adequate food, she had grown nearly six inches, and her age now seemed to be about eight, little less than that of Labram, who thought he was ten. Clean (and shorn) she was beautiful in a way that sent strange shudders up Janya's back. All this time, she should have known. A child of no other heritage could have done what—and as—Fenny had done. An old rhyme, two-thirds forgotten, tried to emerge from her welter of earliest memories. Something about . . . "Witch got, Witch borne." She could not resurrect the rest.

She hoped she showed none of her uneasiness. Fenny was hers now, and whatever her people had or were, this beautiful little one had proved beyond doubt that only good could come from such. Janya loved both the children, she finally admitted to herself, as much (if differently) as she had loved her own two. Nothing evil that she could prevent would happen to Fenny, regardless of who/what had got and borne her.

Cleanliness delighted Fenny. When the soap ran out, she came home with armloads of soap-roots, some of which



she planted along the edges of the nearby stream where they got their water. With cleanliness came a different life-style. They were a family, and Janya, once an immaculate farmwife, returned to her normal ways. The children reacted to the change as if they had expected it. They washed up before entering the house.

By fall, Labram was outdoors most of the days, with Fenny, who accepted his presences as, Janya was sure, she would never have accepted any adult's. When they came back, he told of learning and teaching. Learning to creep so quietly that no woodland creature knew he was there. Hiding from the few men with strength enough to hunt, and so well that they passed within a foot and never knew. Searching for growing thing to take to Fenny, who knew if they were food. He taught Fenny to hand-catch fish and to spear frogs. The children brought back wild onion and garlic, half a dozen fruits, late berries, many different plant-parts, and, latest of all, backload after backload of nuts.

They dug the root crops, delighted to discover how much larger were these they had cared for than were the wild-grown originals. Backload after backload of ripe grasses were spread on the roof, dried, then stored away for winter food for the fowl and rabbits. All summer long, they saved the seed of the best plants. Next year, they would not have a hungry day. Even this winter, with the fowl and the rabbits, the smoked fish, they should make it through.

The work was endless, and enervating, and frightening to Janya. Alone, she worked desperately to make yet another part of the half-burned house into a place wherein they could pen their animals. She knew of living with animals underfoot, their stench and voidings a constant presence. She would not allow her family to live that way! The children, who worked as endlessly and were driven as hard, seemed not to be children at all. Their whole lives were involved with saving their lives. Had it

not been so, they would all have died.

Autumn brought shorter days, but this was the only change from the summer weather. Janya accepted the long, late summer as a gift from the goddess. Their grain ripened. They cut and threshed it, putting by the best and saving every straw. They made new mattresses for themselves and stored the rest to bed the beasts.

Winter arrived overnight, as hard as sudden. When the snows came, and the wolves, and the last but one of those in the village died, the three of them lived snug. In days, no one could pass through the snow-filled, furious cold. The farmstead disappeared beneath a thick, white blanket. They kept openings for air only with difficulty, and melted potful after potful of snow for water. In its own way, the snow was a blessing. Janya, always fearful of someone coming and riving her, again, of what made life worth living, relaxed.

The wolves were another matter. Desperate, they discerned life they could feed upon beneath the snow, and, nightly, they made efforts to dig through to sustenance.

Janya feared. Labram prepared. Fenny ignored.

When the first of the wolves threw himself against the door, Janya shuddered. She had reinforced it, and its hinges, and she could only pray that her work had been adequate. In horror, she watched Labram take the weapons she had found, that day that seemed so long ago, position himself, and nod to Fenny. The woman could not even cry out.

Fenny threw the door open! Labram discharged his weapon. Leaping, the wolf fell dead.

Janya's stasis broke, and she, too, threw herself against the door to prevent entry to the next wolf.

Wolf was not an eatable flesh, but the thick pelt, tanned, would make a warm blanket they sorely needed. In the cold of the morning's weak sunlight, the children dragged the body out and skinned it. By the firelight in the evening,

they scraped and scraped and scraped, cleaning every vestige of flesh from the skin. Nightly, another wolf died, although not all were killed as quickly as the first. Daily, another corpse was ready for the remaining wolves. The pile of wolfpelts, frozen stiff as so many slabs of stone, grew higher. Janya scrubbed and scrubbed the wooden floor, trying to eliminate not only the blood, but the odor, and, worse, the sight of Labram's unchildlike skill with a weapon she could hardly put name to.

At last, the pack was no longer a nightly presence. Janya still scrubbed.

When the weather break came, the temperature rose, and the snow developed a heavy crust. They feared for the roof. Desperate, they swathed themselves in every garment, rag, and blanket they owned, stuffing handful after handful of straw between every layer. They cleared the roof, throwing the last basketsful of snow higher than their heads on every side. For the first time, Janya realized that they might not make it through the winter. Food and water they had in plenty, the blanketing snow actually kept them warmer than they would have been without it, and the tremendous woodpile did not disappear into smoke too rapidly. But the snow itself, heavy, turning to ice wherever the warmth inside allowed it to melt during the day, to freeze solid during the terrible cold of the nights, might defeat them.

Fenneca's verbalizations, which had never bothered Janya in the least, became constant. The sounds made an undertone to their lives, never absent, never realized. No longer did these not-speeches seem purposeless—and they had never been random—but the child progressed through impatience to concern, to worry, to what seemed the first evidence of fear she had ever shown. Janya could offer no comfort and became increasingly disturbed. One night, long after Fenneca should have been asleep, the sound continued. Gritting her teeth, Janya endured. "Witch!

Witch! Witch!" pounded through her head. If only the child would be silent! What was she trying to do? Why?

As if in answer, the old rhyme flooded full into her mind. When it poured out of her mouth, however, she knew she spoke the original words, those that frightened, envious people had changed into the parody she had learned. Even in her terror, Janya understood why (if not how) she "knew" the true words of the Call. Need required them of her.

"Witch borne from Witch get,/Witch she is, the pattern set." She spoke more, much more, but she knew she would never remember the words.

Fenneca sat up. Her verbalizations suddenly changed. They flowed, a fully realized, rhythmic, rhymed chant, into the darkness, into the still, windless, starlit night outside and, it seemed to the listening woman, on to the ends of the earth. The triumph behind, beneath the Call sired so clear that Janya shuddered.

The child lay back, her need, at last, fulfilled. She remained, utterly still, breathing but unconscious, for three days.

The silence following Fenneca's constant trials at "finding" the words of Call she needed should have been a relief to Janya. Instead, she would have called them back, could she. What would follow?

She was unsurprised when, with the last of the light, the man beat against their door. Janya let him in.

He spoke—in what Janya now realized was a language, a language she could never hope to understand—to the still body of the child.

She sat up smiling. That smile still penetrated Janya's innermost being. Now it was directed at the gaunt skeleton of a man who summoned her.

"Father!" she said, and held out her arms. He collapsed into them.

Fenneca began to hum, then to sing.

Janya, desperate, looked at Labram. His face held an expression the woman could not read, his whole being one she did not know. He went to his pallet and lay upon it. He turned to the wall.

Janya, too, sought her bed. Like Labram, she turned toward the wall, shut her eyes against the knowledge that, in the air, there hung a turquoise mist. She pulled her rabbit-skin pillow over her head. She lay awake long, long, hearing the ragged breathing of the man who, unconscious, sprawled across Fenny's bed. Fenny's voice, penetrating through all with which Janya could barrier her ears, was singing again, singing those little melodies Janya had thought only the wandering tunes of a creative, musical child.

She knew the man heard them, wherever his spirit had flown, and that they would bring him back from the place where spirits go when they should die. Her own spirit warred. She could not wish him dead. Not one more life should be given to those who had so treated this land. She could only wish him absent, never to have found his child. *Her* child! Would he take Fenny? Of course he would, and she could do nothing to stop him. Fenny was his.

No! Fenny was *hers*. She would find a way.

And with this, to her own surprise, she was satisfied. She slept.

In the wind-screaming, snow-blowing, sun-deserted morning, Janya woke before the others. She rose, performed her morning activities as if this were any other day, holding to the simple things—the warmth of the water in which she washed, the pleasure of the animals she fed and whose quarters she cleaned (Labram's job, but he, too, remained so alertly asleep that she knew he dreamed dreams the man sent). She refused to allow that thought to do more than pass through her mind.

With what did she have to fight?

She smiled. Going to the hearth, Janya pulled the crane

holding her always-filled pot of hearty broth. She removed the cover.

The man made an inarticulate sound. Janya did not turn; she smiled.

At his awakening, the children roused, too.

Janya ignored him. "Up, slug-a-beds," she called. "Wash and dress. Breakfast is nearly ready."

She crumbled rough bread into four wooden bowls, added a measure of broth, and set them on the table.

When the children came to the table, the man still sat, utterly quiet, utterly spent, upon Fenny's pallet.

"Come, stranger," Janya said. "Break your fast with us. Sit here." She pointed to a stool.

The man could not rise. Fenny and Labram helped him to do so, to shuffle across the room to the table, to collapse upon the stool.

They seated themselves, one on either side, close, that should he topple, they might prevent it. Janya took her own seat. She passed the blessing which always, always, no matter what they placed upon the table, no matter how little, she gave to the goddess who had provided. The children attacked their food with their usual enthusiasm and good manners. Nothing else did Janya allow at her table.

The man stared at his bowl as he might have at Deliverance. Janya remembered how it was to end starvation. She watched him carefully, that he should not gulp. He nodded to her, sipped, waited, sipped again. Slowly, slowly, he drank the broth. Half a mouthful at a time, he spooned up the semisolid in the bottom of the cup.

Fenneca jumped to her feet. She went to her own store of dried herbs. Selecting several, she crumbled them into a pan, poured hot water over them, then poured off the brew into their one whole cup. She blew on it to cool it, then bore it to the man. He sniffed, nodded in recognition, and drank.

When he had eaten, Labram led him to their "convenience," then back to Fenny's pallet. He fell, too deeply unconscious for dream, before he could utter a sound.

Janya nodded to herself. She dared not smile when they could see. She and the children began their morning as if he did not exist.

So the next two days continued. Nights, Fenneca sat by the man's side, her hand in his, and sang the night-shadows from his mind. She slept on Janya's cot during the daytime, lightly, alert, it seemed, to the man's passage into dream. When he slept, she returned to her vigil.

Janya fed the man (whom she refused to think of as her Fenny's father) several times during each day. He received food from her hands, thanking her with his eyes, his gestures, but did not speak. Janya kept her face impassive, her manner pleasant—but that of one who needed no further contact. Labram behaved as if he did not exist. Janya did not allow herself to wonder why.

On the fourth day the man was more alert; he slept less, ate more. Janya continued to treat him as she would any other starving stranger who offered no menace.

But on the following day, he showed clearly that he had business he must transact. With Fenny. They spoke long, if quietly, and did certain things that Janya refused to watch. Labram, still, observing but never a part of what they did, might have been the silent, suffering child Fenny had brought home.

Late in the afternoon, Fenny asked Labram to help her to bring in the wolfpelts. Janya ignored them. The man performed an action resulting in the skins becoming soft, supple, and fashioned into four sets of travel-clothing. The children immediately pulled off their ragged garments and dressed.

The man pointed to a third set of garments and addressed Janya for the first time. "Join us or die," he said, "for so you will if you remain until they come again. We

would that you make the first choice, but it is your decision.”

His words destroyed all of Janya’s barriers to loss and bear. She stared, desperate and terrified, across the space between them, then glanced around, willing her gaze to fall upon anything else, anything.

Labram seemed so wolflike in his silver-gray garments that Janya could hardly recognize him. She cried out. “Why? Why you, too? You’re not Witch!”

“I am the guardian, the champion. Why else did she save me? Why did you?”

Janya could not answer.

“I have to accompany her, to walk with her wherever she walks, to guard her sleep, to do what must be done so that she may come to . . .” He paused, then went on. “I do not know where we shall come, but without me, she cannot make it. And she must. For all of us yet alive. For the land, for the right. I did not choose this, nor did she choose me. Our destinies were written in blood and tears long before we were conceived. We must, or we shall die, and all the land with us.” Ten, perhaps eleven he might be in body, but his mind, his spirit, were ageless and committed.

“Why should I go with you? What reason is there for me to live?”

Fenneca turned. “Because we love you, and we would not that you should die.”

The man nodded. “Without you, the land would have lost one of its last remaining hopes. We would that you go with us to teach what we cannot: mother-love and succor and humanity. Will you deny her what she will need as much as that we can teach? Will you deny him?”

Slowly, half of herself protesting terror, Janya walked over to the garments. Standing aside from her reality, she seemed to watch herself step into a different world, a world where only she was truly human. She bent down and stroked the warm, light, protective clothing. She observed



it, then the boy for whom she had planned . . . Labram, too, was full-human. What she had meant to find for him had, instead, sought them out, although she would never have chosen—never known to choose—the course destined.

The truth of the man's statement filled her. She took a deep breath, preparing to speak, though she did not know what she might say. The odor of broiling rabbit, the scent of fresh bread, the spicy aroma of the dried fruits she had concocted into a delicious complement to their meal! Those filled her nostrils—and her mind. Yes. She had the answers to his questions.

She smiled up at him and rose.

"Oh, yes. I will go. But not until we are properly prepared. The Hounds do not travel in winter. They wait for late spring, after the earth is dry, the days long. So long, we are safe here."

The man looked as if he would speak, but Janya overrode whatever he might have upon his lips. "You may believe your Power will enable you to reach wherever it is we go. I know better. We go when all are strong and rested. Do you believe that five days of food after months of starvation will restore you? If so, you are a fool, and I do not believe any of your race are condemned as such. Evil, occasionally, when the need to know more, to step beyond the bounds, yes. Stupid, no. We wait until the weather is friendly. We pack provisions, clothing, supplies, weapons. Whatever is necessary. Or we will not make it. Witch or not, you live in a body, and that body needs care and sustenance, as do ours. Oh, yes, I am needed. And my need tells me of yours."

She turned to the fireplace. Wrapping her hands in rags, she seized the spit, held it over a ready trencher, and pushed off the succulent rabbit. Without further comment, she portioned and served their meal. "Dinner is ready," she stated. "Come."

To the man, she said, "Fenneca has provided food. I have prepared it. When you have eaten, you shall rest. When your strength begins to return, you shall exercise by taking your part in our daily work. Then you shall teach us all to use the sword you wore, the bow . . ." she pointed ". . . you had slung across your back. Even the knife at your side. Perhaps we may even find pack animals—I do not doubt your skill at locating whatever we may need that is not already at hand."

The man stared at her. He crossed the room slowly. Janya watched him, a knowing expression on her face. What he had done with his Power (Janya accepted that he had it, despite her lifelong belief that only women were Witches) had exhausted him again, made him awkward. He slumped onto the stool.

His voice, formerly so strong, was a mere whisper. "You have—full-humans have—always believed us more than we are. I fear that we have believed you less. Is this the time we come together in understanding? Why?"

Fenny laid her arms around his neck, her head against his. "Love," she said quietly in their language—but Janya understood. "And need. Because we love and need each other."

The man nodded against her head. "So be it. So may it be. If we make such a beginning, in love, nothing can stand against us in the end. We may only begin the change, but it will continue."

Labram, garbed in the skins of wolves he had slain to protect them, stepped toward the two at the table. Close, but not too near. "I come for love," he whispered, "not because I am Called."

Fenneca turned to him.

"Then we shall succeed," she said.

After the cleaning up was done, Janya sought her bed. She lay upon it and covered herself. "Come, Fenny. Your father is himself again, and fights his own night-battles."

That might not be true, but Fenny's turquoise eyes had sunken into deep pits. The Power she expended whenever the man dreamed had thinned her, and no amount of food restored the flesh or the energy. The child must sleep, and if he must lie sleepless, so must it be. She did not turn to observe his expression. "We shall share a bed, that he may use yours."

The strange, beautiful child, her red-gold hair now shoulder length, free, and flaring as she turned, nodded slowly. She ran over to the bed, shed her pelts, and danced upon them to keep her toes from the icy floor.

Janya held up the cover. Fenny slipped under and curled herself against the motherly body. She sighed, and in that instant she was asleep.

Unafraid, recognizing why she lived—and why she loved—and welcoming both, Janya sighed, too. She held the little body in her arms, smiling.

The man swayed to his feet, supported himself with strong, hardened hands against the scrubbed-white tabletop. He looked first at the hands, then at Janya across the room. He smiled, too, and the expression filled Janya with the same delight she had felt when the child she had named Fenneca first smiled at her.

The man smiled at Labram. "Sleep, Champion. You, too, are necessary."

The boy smiled, but a different, a lost and left-out smile. "I know," he said. "I know it all."

Janya cringed beneath his weight of loneliness, of aloneness. Human, he could never hope for his love, as mature as his other knowledge, to be returned. Inside her soul, she wept for him.

The boy-man crossed to his pallet, removed his wolfskins, and crawled under the thin blanket.

The man pulled the skins over him. "Perhaps not all. Here, now, we make a new beginning, in hope. Sleep warm tonight, Protector," he said.

More hope, more comfort than she could provide La-

bram stirred in Janya's heart. Perhaps his future held more than the satisfaction of a job done to the limit of his strength of heart and body. She would hope, too, for him.

Last of all, the man lay upon Fenny's pallet. He seemed to need no covering.

Fenny opened her eyes. "Goodnight," she whispered.

"A good night and good tomorrows to us all," someone said.

Janya never knew whether it was her voice that spoke.

\* \* \*

## Afterword

*For me, an invitation from Andre Norton to contribute to Witch World acted like a Spell of Enabling. I've lived there for years, off and on. I am intimately involved with its people and places, with many lives—both of her devising and of my own—lived under its laws. How else? Women my age who came to science fiction early had no other woman author to turn to. Our good fortune in finding her our guide (and, later on, our mentor or our most-positive critic, and our friend) is too great to be unintentional. It all started with André, and because she did it—and does it—well, the door is ajar. To have her open it wide "turned on my head."*

*All my writing begins with characters. Why a woman and a child? Children matter to me. I taught in elementary school for nearly thirty years. I write principally for the juvenile and young people's market. "My children" are the different ones, the kids with too many brains, too much (or too many) talents, and too little understanding of why they don't fit in. The "What ifs . . ." of "Fenneca" began with*

*“What if this child found herself alone after a major disaster? Whom would she contact? How would she be helped—or hindered?” In Witch World, the disaster could be the passage of the Hounds of Alizon. It could then occur in any of a score of places. Good. The place is only representative; what matters is the consequences of the Hounds “missing” a child and an adult. Other questions that shaped the story were: “As Fenneca is one of the ‘different’ ones, in what way is she different? Aha! What importance has this in the development of the story? It is the story!” Because this one of André’s worlds is a witch world into which humans come, I wrote about how, and why, and under what circumstances a witch child and a human woman might discover they loved and needed one another.*

—WILANNE SCHNEIDER BELDEN

