

# NINE WORDS IN WINTER

by

Caralyn Inks

“By the Marshmist’s seventh daughter,” Mag’ra yelled. “They even stole my false teeth!” She couldn’t remember the last time she was so angry. Danner the Potter made those teeth for her in payment for bringing both his wife and child through a difficult birthing alive. Sure, she never wore them except when she visited the villagers or company called. Even a woman her age had her pride. She’d have worn them more often, but she loathed the taste of the glue-paste that kept the things fixed to her gums. Nothing, she believed, was so repulsive as bare gums in a woman’s mouth. It made one look a crone.

For eighty-one years she’d lived in these hills as Lore Mistress and healer for the small villages strung throughout the long narrow valley called Min’s Hold. Even the brigands who lived in the high places, the Sharoon Hills, came to her for healing and the old knowledge. No one had ever disturbed her privacy, until now.

Mag’ra bent over and picked up a pottery shard. Once it had held an elixir that would ease pain. It was lost. All her healing stores were ground into powder or had soaked into the dirt floor. Such wanton destruction of that which would give succor to all who needed aide was beyond her understanding.

She tossed the shard aside. The fools had stripped the

meat house of the food which would have seen her through to spring. "I'll not eat meat at another's table without my teeth! And I am not so old that I have to suck gruel." She shivered and pulled her cape tight about her.

This winter was the worst she'd ever experienced. Usually the high tors rimming Min's Hold shielded them. Not this season. The cold winds were unrelenting.

Every winter the villagers and the brigands worked together in fairly peaceful coexistence. For the most part, these outlaws had lost their homes and families in the long war with the Hounds of Alizon and the resultant internal strife in High Hallack. If truth be told, all, including herself, had cause to be grateful for their presence. Desperate for a place of their own, they fought to keep the valley free from the Hounds.

But now, the wind of human voices had borne to her the rumors of a shift of power among the brigands. Radnor, the new lord, was said to be one who used the Dark forces to gain a foothold in the valley.

She'd enjoyed working with the old lord, Alesanfar. To keep Min's Hold secure, they each used their own strengths. Alesanfar used his gift of leadership and his men, and she by drawing on the Power of an Old One, Min, to whom she'd given herself a long time ago. But Alesanfar would have no power over forces of the Dark, if this Radnor proved to be. Even without proof Mag'ra knew this to be true. An uneasy feeling rode her, like a bad taste one could not remove from the mouth.

Someone outside shouted her name. She stepped around the shattered remains of her furniture and herb bottles and went to the door. Danner the Potter was running up the hill leading to her home.

"Dame Mag'ra!" He panted, bracing himself on her door. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I was over to Old Stern's and missed the ruckus.

His prized sow went into labor before her time last night. You know how he loves that beast.”

Danner nodded. “The bandits—they raided the town—took all our food.” He grabbed her arm. “You’ve got to do something!”

“I intend to,” she said, holding her lips in such a way that she hoped he did not see her teeth were missing. “Do you know where the raiders came from or who they were?”

“I recognized one of Alesanfar’s men.”

“Alesanfar? That doesn’t ring true. Unless . . .” She was silent a moment, then asked, “Was anyone hurt?”

“No. Surprisingly.”

“Not so surprising. If the villagers were all dead the brigands would have to travel a long distance to find the supplies they need.” She examined Danner. He was hiding something. “Out with it! What are you not telling me?”

“I am sorry, Dame Mag’ra, among the women taken was Zaya.”

“My craft-daughter?” At his nod fury began to build anew in her. This was not Alesanfar’s doing, not the destruction of her home nor her supplies or the taking of her craft-daughter. He respected their friendship and the Power he knew was hers to command. Never would he insult her like this. No longer did she doubt the rumors of a new lord. Alesanfar had been displaced by one of the Dark. Radnor. And in his power was her craft-daughter.

Zaya was fourteen years old. Granted her talent was small, but the girl was the only one she found with any trace of the Gift at all. She must pass on her knowledge. No fool, Mag’ra knew time was running out. She tamped down her anger and stored it. Emotion was a form of energy, energy that she could put to better use than expending it on empty air.

“I will get Zaya.” And, she added to herself, my teeth! “About the supplies, I may not be so lucky. You organize

the people and see what stores remain. The raiders did not have time to get them all. I'll return when I can."

Mag'ra brushed her gelding until he glistened; even his gray hairs took on a dull shine. One did not go to battle dirty. The past two seasons she'd had to cut Horse's oats to slim down his middle. Her legs refused to spread as far as they used to.

She glanced down at the earth. Though the snow-laden clouds hid the sun there was enough light to cast shadows. Their length revealed it was close to nooning. If she made good time, dusk would see her at Sharoon Keep, the abandoned hold the brigands had made their own.

It was a good thing Old Stern's sow was in labor last night, even if she had forgotten her teeth in her efforts to calm him. The brigands probably didn't even know the hermit existed or more than likely she wouldn't have the clothes on her back, or Horse to ride this day. She did not doubt that the Old One, Min of the Nine Words, had her hand in that!

The villagers were scared silly. She didn't blame them, but she was too old to be silly. Death no longer frightened her. It only created a sense of loss. To prevent that loss she needed Zaya or, hopefully, someone like Zaya with a stronger Gift. The people needed her lore knowledge and healing skills to survive, but more important, she must pass on to another the Gift of Min and the Power of the Old One's Nine Words. Today she'd use that Power, she knew that by its restless surging inside her. Min would not tolerate the Dark trying root itself in Her soil! As the Old One's Handmaiden she'd go forth to battle to prevent that!

Min's Nine Words directed her life. Her throat and tongue were not formed to utter the Old One's language and of necessity she had had to render them into human speech. Over the years of serving Min she'd come to realize the Power of words, all words. They shaped all life which

spoke, for good or ill. It grieved her to see people destroy themselves by the words they used all unknowing what they did or the forces freed by their utterances. Few were those she found willing to learn this truth.

Mag'ra slapped Horse's neck. "I want my craft-daughter and my teeth back." With a grunt she mounted Horse and directed him toward the heights. Pulling her ankle-length, fur-lined cape around her, she arranged it so the folds, as much as possible, covered Horse. The cold hurt his bones, too.

Mag'ra watched for signs. The Old One would show her what Words were needed. Two of the Words she knew already. Sleep and renewal. The land itself told her. It was covered with snow, the cold sleep. Underneath winter's bounty earth-life slept silently, bearing in its slow beating heart, renewal.

The Old One cared more for life which went winged or on all fours than for those who walked upright. Even so, those who walked Min's ways were protected. Min also loved the earth and the life which rooted itself in soil.

Beneath an evergreen tree, in the late afternoon, the third Word revealed itself—Death. A winter fox, fur-breast spotted with blood, devoured the crow it had killed.

The snow creaked beneath Horse's feet, as with care he set down each hoof. Mag'ra leaned forward to ease his way up the increasingly steep incline. It wouldn't be long before the Keep's posted guards spotted her and gave challenge.

She listened and watched for Min's sign, warning her of the guards. If she was alert enough she'd see it. To her chagrin she'd missed them in the past. Ahead, on a snow-covered bush perched a field mouse, feeding on a small, apple-green berry. Its bright eyes met hers for a moment, then it spun, kicking up a miniature flurry of snow as it darted for cover. Mag'ra smiled. She cherished the Old One's flashes of Humor. Humor. Her fourth Word and Min's warning of the guards.

She drew back on Horse's reins and called out, "Ho, there! Guardians. I am Lore Mistress Mag'ra. Aid from the Lord of Sharoon Keep I come to claim."

Before and behind her two men stepped from their hiding places. They were dressed in white fur and gray leather. The man behind held a bow, arrow nocked and aimed at her. The young man to the fore carried a long staff. She recognized him. Not so long ago he'd come to her for healing.

"How are your ears, Guardsman Lentor?"

"They are well, Healer," he said. "What would you have of us?"

"To be taken to your lord."

"It is no fit place for you, mistress. Ask of me your need. Maybe I can help."

Mag'ra sought his eyes and held them with her own gaze. He was sincere and for that she gave answer. "I seem to have lost two things which are mine. One is my craft-daughter, the other is not your concern. It is said the men of Sharoon Keep know all the hiding places in the high hills and the valley of Min's Hold. I would ask of your lord assistance in finding and returning that which is mine."

"I . . . I can not. I . . . mean." He stuttered. Lentor glanced at the man behind her and his look was answered.

The older man walked up and took hold of Horse's bridle. "Lentor, she knows who has her property." He looked up at her. "What do you think you can do, Old Woman? Lord Radnor will crush your brittle bones, then throw your remains to carrion feeders!"

"Not necessarily," Mag'ra answered.

"Bah! You," he spat at the snow, "are a fool."

"Bass!" Lentor exclaimed. "Do not speak to Lore Mistress Mag'ra like that. She deserves your respect. She's saved many of our lives."

"Then let her save her own!"

Mag'ra waited until Bass looked at her. She held his gaze as she had Lentor's. His speech betrayed a good education; his face, fatigue and the bitterness that comes from deep grief. A man who'd lost all he held dear. Pity stirred within her. She hesitated, then shrugged. What she planned to do would not permanently hurt him. No one named Min's daughter fool. Mag'ra pointed a finger at him and spoke.

"Silence."

Bass backed away from her, his lips forming vowels of nothingness. He stumbled. Fell. His hands clutched his throat.

"Bass!" shouted Lentor. He knelt beside his friend, supporting his shoulders. "Mistress, what have you done?"

"For a time, sealed a fool's tongue. Now will you take me to Sharoon Keep?"

"On pain of death, we cannot leave our post."

Mag'ra thought for a moment. "You remain behind and watch and ward. Bass can lead me. Though his voice doesn't work, his legs do. You have mounts?" At his nod, she said, "Get one. We'll wait here for you."

"Bass, get up." She reined Horse over to him. Mag'ra chuckled at the look on his face. "You don't much like an old woman giving you orders. Well, I don't intend to continue if you decide to be reasonable." Holding out her hand she said, "Grab hold." Bass hesitated, then clasped her hand and stood. She pulled free and leaned down, touching his throat with her fingers.

"Speak." Mag'ra straightened in the saddle, rearranging her cape. "Haven't you anything to say?"

"I . . . I—"

"Be at peace. I did that to you to demonstrate old I may be—and at times foolish—still I am not without Power.

"You knew I was aware of who took my property and so you might, also, have guessed that I full well know my way to Sharoon Keep?"

Bass brushed the snow off his pants and said, "I have seen you there before when Lord Alesanfar ruled." He turned toward Lentor who led a gray-spotted black mare to him. He mounted.

"Come up beside me." Mag'ra kept careful watch on the sky and land around them. She needed five more Words. Nine Words in winter must be spoken for the Power she intended to invoke to come full circle. If not completed it would turn wild, possibly even seeking the Dark in its need to be complete. "The old lord, Alesanfar, was a good man. How are his children taking his death?"

"He's not . . ."

Mag'ra reined in Horse. "You mean he lives?"

"No. Yes."

"How can you say a man is dead and alive?" Bass had not halted his mount's progress. She urged Horse to once again match paces with him. When he did not answer, she asked, "His son and daughter?" Several moments went by and still he did not reply. She reached out and touched him. "I mean them no harm, only good!"

"Many children were killed when Radnor took the Keep. Alesanfar's son was one of these. Felde, his seven-year-old daughter, lives though she is hidden among the servants. Radnor believes she is also dead."

"Good." Leaving the question of Alesanfar for a moment she asked, "Have you seen Radnor practice sorcery?"

Bass shook his head. "I have not, but . . ."

"Go on. Do not hesitate to speak. I have heard rumors."

"I have led men in my time, mistress, and followed many more. Radnor's disciplines are harsh. What he wants, he takes. That is not so different from other men. Even his dark pleasure in the power he holds over us is like many men I've served under. But, never have I seen a man strip and destroy another's will."

"How does he do this?" She watched Bass's face grow still, then whiten.



"His eyes. Radnor's eyes." He shuddered and looked fearfully at her.

"I took not your mind, but your voice for a time," she reminded him.

"True." Bass sighed, turned, and looked full at her. "You intend to fight Radnor?" At her nod he said, "Alesanfar is tied to the cross beams in the Great Hall. Radnor is starving him to death. Most of the men have no idea how he continues to exist."

"But you do."

"One night, just before cock crow, I saw his daughter crawling across the beams bringing him food and water, which she fed him."

Mag'ra shut her eyes and sighed. Another Word. Courage. "Tell me. How is it that Radnor hasn't taken your will from you? I sense no touch of the Dark on you, except the blackness of grief."

"I obey every order that's given me."

"If Radnor tells you to kill me?"

"I will do it."

Mag'ra nodded in satisfaction. "To save your true lord and Felde, you will do anything?"

"I would."

Loyalty. The seventh Word was now hers. Ahead Mag'ra saw the open gates of Sharoon Keep.

"What have you there, Bass?" One of the men called out as they entered the inner ward of the Keep. "A spy?"

"No. A visitor for Radnor," answered Bass, dismounting and then helping her down from Horse. "Come with me."

They passed between two guards standing at attention just inside the Great Hall. Mag'ra was surprised to see how immaculate it was. More so than during Alesanfar's time. The rushes covering the stone floor were clean, the tables were stacked neatly against one wall. Fires burned in relatively ash-free hearths at the far ends of the oblong

room. The only sound in the room came from the rustling of the rushes they walked on.

She preferred the noisy activity and the homey clutter of before.

The discordant notes in the Hall came from the emaciated, naked body, arms outstretched and lashed to an oak girder, hanging in the middle of the cross beam above them, and from the man sitting in the lord's chair on the dias.

Radnor was clean-shaven and dressed in a yellow, fur-trimmed robe. The light from the twin fires reflected off his dark hair and set the white streaks in it aglow.

Mag'ra focused her gaze on Radnor's nose, not ready to test her powers against his. She'd caught just a glimpse of his eyes when she stepped into the room. Yet even that was enough. For a moment she had almost faltered. His eyes were as yellow as his robes—completely yellow. Where white-rimmed irises and dark pupils should be was an abnormal, nearly complete blankness. Across the expanse of his saffron orbs swirled moving ribbons of red. Mag'ra shuddered at the thought of what the Sorcerer gazed upon, for she did not doubt that he could indeed see. A stench, that she associated only with the Dark, came from him, permeating the room.

She moved away from Bass and stood directly beneath Alesanfar, silently speaking the eighth Word Min revealed to her. Sacrifice.

When Radnor began to speak, the sound of his voice not only echoed throughout the room but his words set up a pounding wave of Power inside her that sought out her own. Mag'ra let his seeking Words meet one of Min's: Silence. And his Words were swallowed up.

"Radnor. I am Lore Mistress Mag'ra, and I come seeking aid from you and yours."

"Aid?" he asked.

"Yes. Early this morning our village was raided by brigands. Two of the things taken belong to me. I want them back."

"Are you saying that I have these things?" Radnor asked, the sardonic tones of his voice a sharp contrast to hers.

"Not at all. But the men of Sharoon Keep know the hills and valley as no others. I hoped you might ask them to watch for my belongings."

Radnor leaned forward in his chair. "What are these things? My men went on a foraging run this morning, maybe they have already discovered what you seek?"

"My craft-daughter Zaya. A girl of fourteen. She has brown hair and eyes."

"You only mention one item," Radnor said. "What is the other?"

"A gift."

"And what might that be? I insist on knowing."

By the tone of his voice Mag'ra knew he meant it, but she was not about to reveal it was her false teeth she sought. Even before one belonging to the Dark, a woman had her pride and more important, the lack of his knowledge might help defeat him.

"You may insist," she answered, "but I do not intend to tell you."

"Enough of this verbal fencing! You know my men raided your village. What I take I keep." He leaned forward. "Look at me!"

"No."

"Seize her!" he shouted.

Bass reached for her.

Before she could be restrained Mag'ra raised her hands and formed them into a small, cauldronlike hollow, cupping them around her lips and nose. The Old One's daughter whispered into them. As if she were presenting a most precious gift Mag'ra opened her hands, keeping the

edges of the palms close together and her wrists touching her chin. She breathed upon the Power she held and dispersed Min's Word into the room. All heard the Word. Sleep. All responded to Min's command and slumped to the floor except for herself and Radnor.

"So," Radnor said, drawing out the small word. He stood. "You are more than a Lore Mistress. I was hoping to flush out one such as you."

She must be cautious. Each word they now spoke would carry deeper meaning.

Mag'ra thought of the snow fox she'd seen on the way here. The red blood of its prey on the fox's white breast had betrayed its presence. If she was to succeed by no gesture or word must she reveal the source of her Power. Each small bit of knowledge Radnor gained he could use against her. But that went for her, too. Mag'ra smiled, and spoke not.

"Old woman." Radnor laughed mockingly. "You have defeated yourself by betraying that which you sought. Two things you said. Your craft-daughter Zaya and something else. A thing?" He snorted. "I doubt that as you called it a gift. The chance you took in coming here to retrieve it indicates the gift is of great value. This I would indeed see for only Power wrapped in flesh and blood could be worth such a risk."

The Sorcerer lifted his hands and began to chant. His words slurred one into the other, until they sounded like the off-key drone of many hornets. The words, bound tight to one another, began to spiral outward as would the spinning waters of a whirlpool. A suck, drag, pull of force.

Mag'ra heard the doors to the Great Hall open, but she did not turn from Radnor. Footsteps sounded on the stone floors, barely stirring the rushes, and passed her, halting to one side of the steps leading to the dais. It was Zaya. Her

clothing was disheveled and bruises marked her face; otherwise she appeared unhurt.

Beneath the sound of the sorcerer's chant came a small noise—a clattering and then a scraping on the stone floor behind her. Mag'ra listened intently. It was moving closer.

She was distracted by the sound of another set of footsteps moving through the doorway, though this person fought the summoning. These feet stumbled and dragged and at one point fell over one of the sleeping guards. Who could it be? Mag'ra silenced her instinctive urge to call the child's name as she came into view and halted just behind Zaya. It was Felde, Alesanfar's daughter. Piled up on child's feet, clear to the ankles, were rushes—mute evidence of her fight against Radnor's will.

The moment Radnor stopped chanting Mag'ra felt something bump against her foot. With a quick glance she looked down. She nearly laughed. It was her false teeth! The "thing" had responded. Radnor was deceived. Two young girls stood in answer to his summoning, not the true gift. Somehow she must find a way to use this hidden knowledge as a weapon against him.

"I have what you came for. Foolish woman, why a kitchen drudge?" When Mag'ra refused to answer he bent his thoughts upon the girl. "Lord Alesanfar's daughter. Thank you, Mistress Mag'ra. You have placed in my hands tools which I will wield. Two virgins. And one holding within her great untapped Power of her own. A gift indeed, of great price!" he exclaimed.

For a moment his words confused her. Zaya? She has but little of the Gift. What can the man be speaking of? Then she, too, looked at Felde with the Power. The girl, though immobilized by Radnor's summoning, still fought. Her eyes burned with rage. It was she who held a full Gifting! One such as Felde Mag'ra had sought for many years. The

extremity of Felde's situation had forced an early birth of her Gift; usually the onset of womanhood brought that about.

The Dark will not have her. I claim Felde for the Light!

Mag'ra breathed in and tapped the reservoir of anger-induced energy she'd stored for this moment. She moved toward Radnor, sliding her teeth along with her foot.

"Halt!" Radnor commanded.

Mag'ra kept moving.

"I was drawn to this valley," the Dark's Sorcerer spoke, "because of the Power I sensed here. Though I sought, I did not find. You are its receptacle. And now it and you are mine! Be seated and bound to my will." He moved his hands in a sweeping motion.

Mag'ra staggered as his Power sought to draw her feet from beneath her. She regained her balance, and again slid her false teeth another few inches.

Radnor frowned. He raised clenched fists to shoulder height and looked fixedly at her. As if he were fighting against an unseen resistance Radnor began to move his fists together.

In response to the Sorcerer's action an invisible force pushed against either side of her head. Her ears felt as if they were being slowly pulverized by a vise. Mag'ra spoke the Word Courage in her mind. A fresh surge of Min's Power blossomed in answer. Mag'ra channeled that down her leg and into the teeth.

The Power focused on the teeth, she began to chant the Nine Words Min had given to her for this task. The teeth moved! She continued to chant. Renewal. Death. Humor. Silence. Loyalty. Sacrifice. Courage.

She faltered. The teeth slowed. Stopped. There was a gap in the circle of Min's Power. One Word was missing! Mag'ra fought off fear, not allowing herself to foster it, claiming Hope in its stead. In the opening moves with Radnor she'd forgotten that somewhere she'd missed the

sign pertaining to the Old One's ninth Word. Without it, all would fail.

Min's Power and the Dark's met inside her and she rocked with the unleashed forces.

Through pain-filled eyes Mag'ra saw Radnor's fists move a fraction closer. She screamed. The pressure building within her head threatened to burst through her skull; frantically she diverted it to her nose. Blood spurted from it in response. A piece of her ear fell onto her shoulder and stopped its downward slide on her breast. Her eyes closed and she fell to her knees. To keep the Dark from taking root in Min's Hold she'd gladly Sacrifice both her ears. As with any strong emotion Mag'ra knew pain generated energy, too. She gathered the pain-induced force Radnor was battering her with and channeled it toward her teeth.

Mag'ra opened her eyes. The teeth had reached Radnor and they hung from the fur edging his cloak. The small silver rings hinging them sparkled in the firelight as they made their way upward. She must keep his attention solely on her.

"Young man, why are you having such a hard time defeating an old woman? Or didn't you realize just how withered I am. Of course you couldn't know," Mag'ra said in mocking tones of pity. "You are blind, aren't you?" She watched Radnor's yellow eyes through lowered lashes; she wasn't ready for a direct locking of will, yet. Across his orbs the red threads twisted in agitation.

Radnor grunted. His face contorted as he twisted his fists back and forth.

Mag'ra gasped. She had no breath to scream. More flesh and blood spattered from her ears. She fought to keep open the outlet that she was using to direct the pain's intense power toward the teeth.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Felde move jerkily toward Radnor. The child was watching the teeth! With Radnor expending energy on their battle, less of his will

went to binding the girls.

Mag'ra dared not look at her false teeth nor the child, or she'd betray them both. Her physical strength was nearly gone. Summoning her will she lifted her hands, cupping them. A full circle of Power she did not have; even so she must act!

"Min. Min," she mouthed desperately. "Hear this Word and let it be used as your Handmaiden wills it!" Across the hollows of her hands she spoke, making full eye contact with Radnor for the first time, locking his gaze to hers. She breathed upon the Word, willing the Power up through her body, out of her eyes and across the invisible bridge that connected Radnor's eyes with hers. Using the pain he'd dealt her as a springboard she screamed.

"Death!"

He staggered, his hand dug at his eyes! Now it was her turn to hear Radnor scream. The Power he had used against her abruptly ceased.

Felde! The child had climbed up on the chair behind Radnor. Mag'ra watched her pluck the false teeth from his back. Radnor turned. Felde threw them!

In the firelight Mag'ra could see those porcelain fangs, the tips of the teeth Power changed! They gleamed in the light like shards of pointed ice. False no longer they became in truth Min's weapon.

The teeth latched onto Radnor's throat, sinking deep into his flesh and ripping it out! Blood stained his yellow robes. The Sorcerer fell to the floor, Min's Word taking full possession of him.

Mag'ra felt like laughing but did not have the strength. Who'd have guessed that a seven-year-old child and a pair of false teeth could defeat one of the Dark? She lay full-length upon the floor and fought to retain consciousness long enough to chant each of Min's Words one more time, to set the Power free to act. "Renewal. Death.



Humor . . .” Pain and fatigue overcame her; she could speak no more. Just for a moment she’d shut her eyes.

Someone kept shaking her. The side of her head pressed to the floor rocked on the rushes. She wanted to scream at the fool who touched her. Instead she opened her eyes. It was Zaya. She forced herself to focus on the girl. Her cheeks were wet from tears and her eyes revealed fear and confusion. As always, Zaya needed direction, something to do to keep her busy. Action shaped her life, inactivity made her feel uncertain. What can I give her to do? Ahh!

“Zaya, find Danner and tell him I need a new pair of teeth.” At the look on her face Mag’ra chuckled. Above Zaya she saw Felde walking the beams to her father. Maybe Alesanfar would allow Felde to become her craft-child, too. But for now, that could wait.

Just as welcome sleep claimed her, Min’s Ninth Word revealed itself. This was one of Min’s touches of humor. An Afterward. Mag’ra laughed dryly. Humor could be painful at times. But she was the Old One’s Handmaiden and across the years she’d come to appreciate these wry moments. Mag’ra smiled and as she whispered the last Word, felt the Old One’s healing touch upon her ears.

“Triumph!”

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## Afterword

*The title “Nine Words in Winter” came first and the tale emerged from it. It was a story that told itself.*

*Historically the setting is near the time of Ully the Piper. Min’s Hold is not too far from Coombfrome.*

*I grew up on the fruit of Andre's imagination and her Witch World tales stimulated mine. In that special place of "what happens next," I yearned to continue her stories. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity of doing just that.*

—CARALYN INKS