

THE CIRCLE OF SLEEP

by

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Felde looked down at the ruddy puddle in the snow, admiring the pattern the frozen red crystals made. Appalled at finding beauty in Tamar's iced blood, when she lay dead not ten feet away, Felde began to walk. Tamar was the tenth person in her border patrol to die. By the Old One, they were only an hour from home. Would any of them make it back to Sharoon Keep alive, short one horse and with death stalking them?

She glanced at the unconscious prisoner, visually checking his bonds. His feet were securely tied to the saddle stirrups. With his body slumped, face buried in the horse's mane, it was hard to see his bound hands. Felde wondered if her father would consider him worth the price. Lord Alesanfar wanted a live Alizon to question. Felde was not sure what she was bringing him.

Who was this man that his Alizon companions fought to the death to protect him? Obviously not their prisoner for he had fought alongside them, using Power against her border patrol.

Until now no one Alizonian had been known to possess the Gift of Power. Only a lucky blow had knocked him unconscious. Toward the end of the skirmish the Alizon leader had tried to kill him, rather than let him fall into their hands.

Though the Alizonian wore the outer guise of humanity, their essence was completely alien to mankind. All humans experienced total revulsion in their presence. Then why did she not feel that when near the prisoner? What was he? A half-breed? What woman could lie with one of the hated non-humans and not die before giving birth to that unnatural melding?

Questions. They danced in her head, nearly driving her mad. She did not have answers. At the moment all Felde wanted was to get her hands on this four-footed fellow warrior.

That hell-spawned bitch had tracked them for the past six days, trying to free its master. Eleven horses and ten men the hound had killed. It seemed deathless, like one of the undead wrapped in tattered shades of Power. The border patrol had named it Ghost, and not until Felde saw the wounds that they dealt to the great white dog appear on their prisoner did she understand. The Alizonian wizard was not unconscious, but in a trance that allowed him to take on the wounds of the hound and then heal them both.

She set her feet down hard as if she could pound anger and grief out through the heels of her boots. Rage and grief were doors through which the Dark Ones could find entrance. Within her, her Gift for the Power roiled and strained to be unleashed. Felde was deeply troubled. Her distress grew when as she walked past the prisoner, again the talisman she wore beneath her clothing changed size and grew warm. It was the sudden awakening of the talisman that had drawn her and the border patrol to him and the hidden Alizonian war band.

Several years ago she had found the talisman in the ruins of a place of the Old Ones. Though she had tried many times to use it, the force within it slept. All these years she had sought the key that would awaken it. Now the thing would not be still, but constantly shifted, phasing into different sizes and weights as if stretching itself after a long sleep. She wanted to deny the truth, to shout, *NO, the wizard cannot be the key*, but could not lie to herself. He was. Also he was the enemy. So Felde tamped down the Power within, afraid of what would happen if she used it.

"Mount up," she called out. The snow was beginning to fall

in fat, wet flakes. Good cover for Ghost. "Harn, double up with Lanis. Ierdon, you take the prisoner's reins. We all ride."

Behind her she heard the sound of claws scrabbling for purchase on stone. She wheeled about to peer through the falling snow. She saw nothing.

The gates of Sharoon Keep opened. Her father, Lord Alsanfar, and a small company of men rode out to meet them.

"By the Power of Min's Nine Words, Felde," shouted Alsanfar, "what happened to the patrol?"

"Watch and ward. I'll explain once we have the prisoner inside," she said.

Her father nodded, called out to his men, "Surround them, swords out! Prepare for attack."

Felde glanced nervously about. Until they were behind the walls of the keep, she would not feel secure. Tension crawled along her spine and her Gift lapped inside her as if storm-tossed. She knew Ghost was near.

The forefront of their group passed under gate-lintel. Felde glanced up at the face of Min her father had mounted above the gate. Felde herself had carved the likeness out of a blue stone she had found while wandering through the ruins of an Old One's place of Power. The stone still held traces of that Power, a ward against forces of the Dark.

There was a shout. She whirled. The prisoner was awake, standing upright in his stirrups. Behind the half-breed Alizonian, his guard's horses reared. Someone screamed, a mournful wail of anguish. Felde reined her mount around, kicking it in the side. She recognized that outcry. She had heard it several times during the harrowing trek here. Only the dying made that certain sound. She scanned the wildly bucking horses and was not surprised to see a gray-white streak weaving between and under the horses. Ghost!

"Ierdon, the hound!" she yelled. He did not hear her over the noise. She was relieved to see he still had a firm grip on the prisoner's mount.

The Alizonian! What *was* he doing? He stood in his stirrups, his mount unnaturally still in the midst of the melee. Though his wrists were bound, the half-breed held his arms stretched

upward to their limit, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists as if they were indeed weapons. Felde looked at his face. His concentration was focused on the image of Min. He was speaking words—words of Power. Bits and pieces of information she had suddenly fell together.

Felde shouted in warning, "He's a Power shaper! Stay back." She fought to reach his side. She gained an inch, then a few more. Again Felde called, "Iredon!"

He glanced toward her. In that instant of distraction Ghost appeared. The hound leaped upon Iredon's horse, paws scrabbling on the leathers. With a movement almost too rapid for Felde to see, the hound slashed Iredon's throat and whirled to face its next opponent.

Felde freed her feet from the stirrups and leaped from the saddle, drawing her dagger. She crouched, readying herself to leap onto Iredon's horse when the hound's eyes met hers. They were a hot, blazing blue. In the instant their gazes locked, Felde felt a buried, atavistic response rise inside her, a corresponding wildness that matched the Ghost's feral intelligence. She fell back, as if sword-struck, grabbing her mount's mane to keep balanced. Felde stretched forth a hand to the blood-splattered dog. Ghost whined, shook its head, and fell back to the ground to crouch beneath its master's horse. The hound's movement jerked her back into awareness of her surroundings. Felde yanked her hand back.

Iredon's body slid to the ground. She had changed from her horse to his, shoving aside all thoughts of the strange confrontation with Ghost. She whispered a word of Power into the horse's ear, lending it the ability to stand still among the carnage and confusion.

The Power the Alizonian manipulated densified the air. She labored to breathe. Felde raised her inner defenses to shield against his Power. Her responses were turning sluggish, as if wrapped in a heavy shroud. Felde forced herself to grab at the reins of the Alizonian's mount. She missed. Tried again. The moment she touched the mane of his horse, the half-breed shouted words of release. The smothering Power surrounding them shifted and the talisman on Felde's breast leaped in response, straining against the clothes that concealed it. Felde

looked from the wizard's extended fingers to the stone face of Min. The spell exploded on the Old One's image. Silver-gray sparks showered like shooting stars. The wood surrounding the blue stone burst into flame.

What was he doing? Felde strained to see through the smoke and dust. When the air cleared she saw a gouge in Min's cheek. It could not be! The wound was bleeding!

"By the Nine Words," she whispered, "the Alizonian can use the inanimate to make contact with the live Power it represented."

The half-breed wizard shouted in triumph and kneed his horse. Her hold on its mane broke. She lost her balance, fell to the ground, and froze. Above her loomed Ghost. The hound placed a paw on her arm and growled.

Felde gripped her knife. Its point rested between the hound's large, foremost pair of teats. Once again she met Ghost's eyes. The empathy that had been there before leaped between them again, stronger.

"Why can't I kill you?" Felde whispered. She felt bewildered by the strength of her response to this female beast. This was her enemy. Ghost had killed many of her men.

The huge dog leaned forward, pushed its nose through her hair, and sniffed her ear. Ghost whined. Then with a lunge it leaped over her, to nip at the heels of its master's horse, herding it away from Felde. The falling snow quickly hid them from view, and the men who gave chase.

"Felde!" Her father grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Are you all right?" He sounded angry but she knew he was really frightened.

"I'm fine." She let him help her up. "Have someone sound the homing call. The men who followed the Alizonian will only be killed." She allowed herself to lean against him.

"No! I must have him. How else will we discover why the Alizonian are constantly attacking our valley? We cannot hold out much longer! Your mind must be fatigue-mazed to suggest such a thing."

She moved back and bowed formally. "Lord Alesanfar, call your men back. I know why we have been attacked and where the Alizonian is heading."

"Why and where."

"He is a Power shaper. He has the ability to find an Old One through their outer semblance. I fear he may then discover their inner name and take their Power to himself. That's why the Alizonians have been at our borders for so long—to allow their wizard-warrior access to Min of the Nine Words. That's where he's headed. Min is not dead like so many of the Old Ones, nor has she withdrawn from our world." She pointed at the stone face. "He reached her through the carving. Look! It bleeds. If the Alizonian has the Power of a living Old One at their command, not just the keep will fall, but the Dales as well."

White-faced, Lord Alesanfar gave the order for the homing call to sound. Alesanfar drew her close, "At ease. It is done. How soon do we leave?"

"Father, you cannot come with me." She gripped his arm. "Let me speak. It takes one with the Gift to track a Power shaper and hope to survive."

"I don't like it," Alesanfar said. He led her over to his own horse and tossed her into the saddle. "About the hound. When you fell to the ground there was a moment when you could have killed it. You did not. Why?"

Felde looked away. How to explain so that this man, her father and her lord, would understand? How to explain even to herself? She sighed and met his gaze. "Ghost fought to free its master just as I once sought to free you from Radnor the Dark One. The dog did everything it could to save the half-breed. I did the same for you. We are alike, that beast and I." Silence grew between them as Lord Alesanfar moved to adjust the stirrups to her shorter legs, each lost in the memories of the past. At last he spoke.

"It did not kill you when it had the chance either."

She nodded, and as she spoke unbidden tears came to her eyes. "I will not stay my hand a second time."

Felde pulled a glove off with her teeth and opened the bag of provisions her father had given her. Inside was a small stone bottle. Eagerly she opened it and took a single sip. The fermented brew was a welcome streak of warmth. Though she

wanted more, she put the bottle back and pulled out a strip of jerked salmon. She needed the long-term energy it would provide.

Late afternoon the sky cleared, except for a few fast-moving clouds. Sunlight reflected off the snow in a sparkle of mirror-bright colors giving the muffled land a sensuous look that burned the eyes. She cupped a hand over her brow and scanned the area. She was at the westernmost tip of the valley that was Min's Hold. No one human lived there. The land was barren, riddled with boulders and funneled into a boxlike canyon surrounded by granite walls. She reined the horse into the canyon. Wind pushed at her back, whipped the horse's tail against her thigh. Constant gusts and cross-currents blew snow across the hard ground until it danced on the surface like white sand.

Felde slid to the ground and led the horse to a pair of boulders that formed a V-shaped windbreak. In the bag of supplies was some grain. She poured some onto a flat stone. The horse lipped at it and she knotted the reins, then let them fall free. The well-trained horse would stay here while she traveled the rest of the way on foot. The rugged land presented dangerous footing for a horse.

Her inner tension grew as she came closer to the Old One, Min of the Nine Words. The blood coursing through the pathways of her body thrummed with an anticipatory beat. Over her heart the talisman quivered.

Despite the cold, beads of sweat formed on her upper lip. Felde pulled the scarf up over her nose to prevent it from freezing. She couldn't afford frostbite now.

It wasn't just the confrontation with the Ghost and the Alizonian that disturbed her, but coming face-to-face with the embodiment of pure Power—Min. She was not Min's handmaiden, though the one who taught her how to use the Power was—Mag'ra the wise woman, channel for the Power of the Nine Words.

Felde had grieved, angry that she was not chosen to become the next wise woman. The Old One had given to Zaya, one with a lesser Gift than she, the use of Min's Nine Words. Mag'ra had comforted her, saying her destiny lay elsewhere.

Since then, Felde had sought that destiny in places where remnants of Power still clung, gathering knowledge to develop and nurture her talents.

Driven by curiosity she had come to this part of the valley several times. But she had never gone any farther. A gentle barrier arose each time and she had not tried to breach it. Now she felt a sense of urgency. Rounding a group of high-standing slabs of rock, Felde saw the Alizonian's mount. Disbelief flooded her. She had been certain she would arrive before the wizard for she knew the land as he did not. A cold knot formed in her chest. The contact he had forged through the stone image must have led him here. She touched the half-breed's horse. The skin was hot, minute flecks of sweat lay under its mane. Ghost and the Alizonian were not far ahead.

Though Felde could feel the emanation of Power from the Old One nearby, she did not know where Min's shrine actually lay. Among the rocks she saw a small stone pointed at one end. She picked it up and placed it on her palm and summoned a thread of Power. She breathed upon it. The rock-arrow quivered, lifted to point upward.

The sheer walls seemed to embrace the sky. Felde began to climb and soon found she needed both hands. She leaned against the cliff face and checked her guide. It still pointed upward. She placed it in her mouth. It was so cold it burned. The stone spun on her tongue until the point rested upward, supported against the back of her front teeth.

Felde reached for the next handhold and pulled. The small ledge crumbled. Unprepared, she slid downward. Wildly she searched with hands and feet until they found security. Legs trembling, she leaned against the snow-dusted rock until her heartbeat slowed. The fatigue that fought her driving will had made her careless. With more caution she began to move, testing each knob of rock before moving on.

It seemed a long time until the stone in her mouth shifted. Now, it lay flat on her tongue, its point turned a few degrees to the left. Felde turned her head and saw—a pawprint in the snow. Ghost! At that place the rock face curved. She inched her way around it and beyond the bend; on a ledge at eye level,

she saw the beginnings of a narrow pathway leading to a crevice in the cliff face.

The arrow in her mouth shoved against her teeth. Felde spat it out and it skimmed into the dark gap, leaving a small narrow furrow in the snow. She followed. Enclosed by stone walls on either side, the path continued, relieved from total darkness by a crack in the granite above that allowed dim light to seep through. Felde did not think it happenstance the narrow band of light only fell on the footpath; it was the Old One's handiwork.

Felde strode through the opening ahead and found herself on a knoll, overlooking a small valley enclosed on all sides by sheer cliffs. At the far end was a desolate and long-abandoned keep. Bare-limbed trees and a swiftly moving stream were a framework for the Old One's place of Power.

Below was a large circular wall formed of glowing, translucent bricks. At the center of the circle, on a bier formed of the same metal that shaped Felde's talisman, lay Min of the Nine Words. The Old One was curled up on her side, hands under her head, asleep. On the exposed cheek Felde saw an injury outlined in dried blood. The half-breed's Power was as great as she feared.

Within the circle of Power others also slept: dark-haired men and women wearing crownlets of red metal. A horned, furred man (who had the look of the legend-told bear-kin) lay nearest to Min.

A touch of crimson drew Felde's attention. She saw a woman clothed in snow, with quiffs of scarlet feathers for hair—Archerydon! The Old One of Feathers and Fire. Next to her lay a slender winged form with foxfire scales for skin. Many of the hibernating dreamers were so covered in snow that Felde could not make out their true shapes. *Legends lived and breathed in that circle!*

Snow, icicles, and sheets of frozen rain draped the brick circle, lending to its glow an eerie quality. Each row of bricks forming the wall was a different color, one shading into the next: rich, earthy brown, bright greens, yellow, blues, the scarlet and golds of autumn—the last, white. It gave her the

feeling she was looking at the true essence of each of the four seasons.

With heightened senses she glimpsed, for a fleeting instant, the essence of Min of the Nine Words. The Old One had immersed this valley in her Power until she became an integral part of the earth's natural forces, changing with the seasons until she was now vulnerably tied to the earth-sleep of winter.

At the northern curve of the circle was the wizard and Ghost. The half-breed moved slowly, hands extended flat as if against an invisible wall. He was testing Min's shielding Power.

Felde ran down the hill toward them, drawing on her Gift and all the knowledge she held. Whether he could influence her Gift, she did not know. She must chance it or Min, the Dales, and these wondrous dreamers would surely fall to the Alizonians.

Beneath her clothes something weighed against her breast, growing heavier the closer she came to the circle. The talisman! Maybe its Power could augment hers. Felde fumbled at the fastenings of her jacket, fingers searching for the chain about her neck. She pulled it forth, then dug in her heels and came to a halt. The hearts of the flowers vining about the horseshoe-shaped talisman glowed like small burning coals of fire. The flowers' threads of light were braiding into a radiant spear. In a hot streak of Power the weapon of light leaped from the talisman on Felde's palm to the circle. There came an answering flash . . . not from the Old One or the half-breed wizard but from the stone circle itself.

She heard a shout. Looking up, Felde saw the Alizonian jump to the top of the brick wall. Her talisman had destroyed the ward the Old One had placed around the circle!

Her heart pounded faster than her feet could run as she raced to meet him. With that shattering Min had not awakened. Was the Old One so united with the sleeping earth that she was trapped?

Desperate thoughts lent her speed. Had she unknowingly brought death here? She glanced at the object in her hand. The flowers shone like night stars. With a jerk of repudiation she tried to pull the chain over her head and toss that which betrayed her aside and met—resistance. She could not remove it.

In revulsion and fear she let go, and the talisman drifted down to lie on her breast.

When she was only a few feet away, she saw Ghost leap to the top of the multihued bricks. With a burst of speed Felde followed to land on the surface of the circle. Her feet slid on ice and she sat down hard. Opposite her, Ghost whimpered. The great dog faltered, then slowly folded, sliding down into a limp, ungainly heap among the sleepers. With tremendous effort the hound began to crawl slowly along.

Felde looked for the Alizonian. No longer were his movements sure and powerful. Now, he staggered among the sleepers toward Min. For a moment she was confused, then she, too, began to feel what he and the hound were experiencing—drowsiness. Whatever force kept the dreamers dreaming affected all who entered here.

Felde pushed off the wall. If the Alizonian managed to reach Min, he would gain the Power contained in all who lay here. Nothing could stop him then. Fear urged her onward but the Power in the circle forced her eyelids down. Her legs wobbled. Sleepy. So sleepy. A melting coldness, oozing down between the gap in the clothing about her neck, half roused her. Now she was facedown in the snow.

There was a burning sensation at her breast. Irritated, she turned on her side and brushed at the annoying heat. As her fingers touched fine chain, the talisman all but leaped into her palm. From its flowers came a bittersweet odor that banished the fog binding her thoughts.

She leaped to her feet. Keeping the talisman close to her nose, she stepped on or over those prone on the ground. The light from the center of the flowers increased, taking on the colors of the circle, matching and augmenting them! She took heart, maybe she had not brought betrayal here. Assurance welled up within her—the Power residing in the talisman had a purpose all its own!

The weight of the talisman continued to increase until she was barely able to carry it. Felde staggered to the bier. Across from her were the Alizonian and his hound. He pointed at her, then shouted at Ghost, "Attack!" For an instant the beast hesitated. Then Ghost leaped.

At that moment the talisman tripled in size. Felde was yanked forward, her forehead cracked against the metal edge of the bier. She felt the wind of Ghost's passage over her back. She tried to move, but could not. The weight of the talisman pinned her down. The chain it hung on rolled over her head, tearing out some of her hair. With an audible clang the talisman fell onto the bier, next to the Old One. It rose into the air, multiplying in size until it arched over Min's body. The U-shaped legs of the talisman extended down, fused to the bier with a hiss that echoed back and forth between its legs.

Min opened her eyes.

"No!" yelled the half-breed. "I will *not* be cheated." He began to chant. The Power behind those words slammed into Felde. She would have fallen but for her one-handed grasp on the talisman.

Behind her, Ghost growled and leaped onto the bier. Felde ducked, but the bitch ignored her, lowered its head, and advanced on the Old One. Before Felde could act Min pointed a finger at the dog. Ghost's muscles locked. No matter how the bitch strained, she could not move.

The Old One now wrought against the Alizonian in the same manner. With him immobilized, the forces he had been building sprang free to hover above them. Felde knew that if the forces were not contained they would implode, but her concern was wasted. In awe, she watched the Old One open one hand beneath that mass of Power. Slowly Min closed her hand. The force diminished, then was gone. Though the Old One did not use wands, elaborate gestures or words to call Power to her, even so it answered. Min shimmered with Power, like hot sunlight causes air to visibly ripple.

Felde gathered her courage and braced herself. Min of the Nine Words turned, rose up on her knees, and rested her long-fingered hand over Felde's. For the first time Min spoke.

"We have waited an eon of seasons for your coming and that which you carried over your heart. Welcome."

Felde swallowed fear and asked, "If you have waited so long, why did you put the barrier in the outer valley?"

"Child, I felt your presence on the edge of my dreams but the talisman you carried still slept. I could not call you here until it

woke." Min pointed at the half-breed. "Did it not awaken when in his presence?"

"It did," said Felde, "but you cannot use him, he is of the Dark!"

"He is not. He walks a narrower road, that of Shadow. Light always casts shadow so we need him even more."

Rage swept away all the fear Felde felt toward the Old One. "Need him! He and his hound killed ten of my border patrol. He is of Alizon."

"Not completely," said Min. "The talisman is a Gate—one we have waited for all this time. You found our only means of attaining freedom and a new world. This world is only a shadow cast by our hopes. For it to become reality we need the Alizonian to call forth its true Shadow. Where there is an image the real is within grasp."

Gate? Felde was stunned. She had heard of such, whispered by those who followed the Light. All believed the Gates had long vanished.

Felde looked at Min, then shook her head. "Use him, then, but you'll have no part of me."

"Felde," said Min, using Power to underscore the word until Felde felt her name stirring the marrow of her bones. "Would you loose upon the land that which make the Alizonians appear as children?" The Old One pointed at the dreamers. "Look, they stir. It is the talisman that disturbs their slumber. Soon they will awake. Once again they will walk the earth that was their home. With their hopes in ashes they will loose their Power on the land that now rejects them. And woe to those who seek sustenance from this world for they will receive that which is worse than death."

As Min spoke Felde experienced each word Min of the Nine Words uttered; the grief of each of the awakened dreamers and their final descent into rage. She saw the destruction of her world. Felde heard someone sobbing and realized it was herself. She looked at the Old One. "What must I do?"

"Accept the unacceptable. Little sister, rise above personal grief and desire for revenge so greater good may be achieved. Set aside all hatred for the Alizonian. Remember Iredon? You called his name and he died. Power called the Alizonian's name

and others died. He is no more guilty than you are. Think on this."

Min turned. "Shadowborn, will you lend yourself to the opening of the Gate."

"My people?" he asked.

The Old One looked deeply into his eyes, "Are they in truth your people? I don't believe so. They wanted you to walk the path of Darkness. You could not have the Light, would not choose the Dark, and so took the hard way, Shadow. You are more your mother's child. The Alizonian lord who forced your begetting upon a witch woman of Estcarp had no idea what he forged.

"This I can give in return. I will let down all the barriers to this valley and the circle. The Gate will remain open from moonrise to dawn. The Alizonians are world-walkers, trapped on this world. Those within hearing distance of the summoning will come, and once anyone responds to the song of the Gate they can't break away. Will you do what I ask, cast Shadow for the Light?"

He looked from Min to Felde. Felde gasped at what was in his eyes, a glimmer of a smile. To her surprise she found herself nodding at him in encouragement.

"Old One, I will do it." His chest rose and fell with the depth of his sigh.

"Then stand here," she said, positioning him so he faced away from the sleepers. "Call on your Gift and cast the true Shadow of the Gate, not upon the ground itself, but level with the Gateway. Lend support to the Light. Do not falter, for if you do the Gate will explode, destroying the valley and all within it. When you are called, grasp the Gate and begin." At his nod she left him and came to Felde.

"Have you considered what I asked of you? Without your consent and aid, the Gate cannot be used and we will be trapped here on this world. Now, little sister, will you stand for the Light?"

As Felde made to answer, the Old One held up her hand, "Wait. I am Min of the Nine Words. Words are the base of the Power I wield. You do not understand, yet, the definition that lies behind my words. Nor are you aware that when you picked

up the Gate and chose it for your talisman, you became its soul Guardian.

"Long have I guarded this place alone, resting only during winter while my brothers, sisters, and mate dreamed. In ages past we began to fade." She pointed to those on the ground. "No longer was there balance between the Powers, and our time on this world drew to a close. We wished to find a world that would welcome us, so we forged the Gate. Before we could use it war erupted between Dark and Light. The talisman was lost. We built this place, a sanctuary against time and sent out the call that would eventually bring the talisman to us. So all were bound in sleep, except myself. I guarded the sleepers through the eons. I wish to leave, but how can I." She gestured with a wide-sweeping movement to the valley. "This land has sheltered us, absorbed a portion of our Power. Without someone to protect it and wield the circle wisely, there will come a time when one of Dark Power will make it their own. That must not happen!

"You grieved because I did not choose you to be my handmaiden; how could I? You are my heir."

Transfixed by Min's words, Felde said, "Heir? I am not an Old One."

"Not yet. Since finding the talisman you have been in the state of gestation. Today is your birth. Do not fear for there will come to you teachers to guide you. Now, answer. Guardian of the Gate, will you stand for the Light?"

Felde thought deeply. Concerned that she might never see her father again she asked, "Will I be bound to this valley as you were?"

"No. Not until those of Power come to you—those who must dream in the circle until the Gate opens again. This I can tell you, that time will not come again for many, many years."

Felde could hardly grasp what Min offered her—the fulfillment of a long-sought destiny. She stepped up onto the bier. As the Old One gave way, Felde took her place.

"Open the Gate, Guardian!"

Felde looked at the altered talisman and for a moment wondered how. She watched the energy flowing through the metal vine, flowers, and leaves that adorned the talisman Gate.

A glitter of gold caught her attention: the chain she had worn about her neck. At the apex of the arch it lay entangled about a leaf. She stepped forward to remove it, then halted. It felt right to leave it there. The longer she watched, the clearer came the pattern of Power governing the Gate. No longer hesitant, Felde touched first one flower, then another, brushed fingertips over vine and leaf. They took on life! Flowers came to bud and bloomed, leaves rustled to a melody Felde heard in mind and body. Now, as she could not before, she sensed why the half-breed Alizonian was needed. The song of the Gate was not complete.

"Shadow Wizard, take your place," Felde said.

Felde strained to hear the change that must come over the Gate when the Alizonian joined with her. It came so gradually she was never afterward sure if she could pinpoint the exact time of merging. His song was gentle and inexorable as twilight swallowing daylight. Between the sides of the Gate she could see a shadow of the talisman that was not there before. Just above that insubstantial, gray-silver arch there came a shimmer, a melding of Light and Shadow that formed a path—the Gateway!

Behind her she heard soft cries of hope-tinged greetings. Felde faced the awakened Old Ones. Felde was not surprised to see, standing beside Min, an arm lightly clasping her shoulders, the furred man who had lain close to the bier. His eyes were red, filled with a glow of unsurpassed joy.

Felde grasped a portion of the vine. At her touch a flare of brightness came from the flowers and leaves. It spread across those waiting, caught on the gems and silver weapons they wore and flowed outward to fill the walled circle. The pool of light lapped the top row of bricks, but not beyond their edges. Outside the circle all lay in the white darkness of falling snow.

"Well done, little sister," said Min, and pointed to the sky. Above, the exact circumference of the circle, was an invisible tunnel. It walled out the snow and reached far above them to a clear night sky.

"My brethren, the long wait is over. The moon is full and in the heart of the sky! Come, our new world awaits. The door is open."

Awe filled Felde as she watched the Old Ones line up to walk through the Gate. They were the stuff of fireside tales come to life. A part of her yearned to keep them in the valley so she could know them, learn from them. Then she remembered Min had promised her other teachers.

For now the avian woman stood before her. Somehow it didn't surprise Felde that Archerydon would be first.

"May I enter?"

Felde nodded. Archerydon started through and a clamoring of notes smote Felde's ear. "Hold!" she screamed. The man behind the bird woman dragged her back.

Min shoved her way to Felde, "What is wrong?"

"The Gate. It is not finished." Felde pointed at the red-feathered woman. "If Archerydon had gone through, she would have died."

Grim-faced, Min touched Felde's forehead. "May I listen through you?" At her nod Min shut her eyes. A fine line appeared between the Old One's eyebrows. "The Gate is no longer mine. I cannot tell what is wrong. You must listen instead."

Felde opened herself to the Gate. She felt its notes vibrating through the metal framework. The tune was as before. There! A small gap in the melody. She extended her awareness to include all in the circle. The one she needed lay behind and to the right of her. She turned. Ghost! The hound was still bound by Min's will. Felde had forgotten about the dog.

"Min! Release the hound." As the Old One gestured, Ghost gave a strangled whine and leaped off the bier. Felde leaned out, but could only see the Alizonian's hand that grasped the vine and part of his shoulder. She looked at Min.

"The dog that is more than beast is with its master pressed as close to him as flesh will allow," said Min.

Felde nodded, then listened again. The gap in the melody filled. Ghost's notes expressed deep abiding love. Felde let it fill her and knew the Gate complete.

"It is finished. The way is now truly open."

The Power in the Gate coursed through the Shadow wizard and Ghost, with Felde its focus. It expanded her awareness until she could sense those Gate Summoned walking the path in

the cliff. Not all were Alizonian, though many of those did pass through. It took all of Felde's determination not to let go of the vine. Power surged through her, vaster than any she imagined. It stripped her of the Gift, then filled her again with more, until she felt she would burst asunder. Her skin glowed, took on the pearlized colors of circle and talisman.

At last, only Min and her mate remained. The Old One bent and kissed her forehead. With that kiss came blessings and a new gift, understanding of the circle. Beyond Min, Felde caught a glimpse of the furred man, his horned head bent as he talked with the Shadow wizard. Then, as he joined hands with Min and stepped from this world, the sun crested the horizon.

The Power in the Gate ceased. The way closed. Talisman was once again talisman. Felde staggered as she bent to pick it up and fell to her knees. The last she remembered, before falling asleep, was clutching it in her fist.

Beneath her was a fur robe and at her back warmth from a living body pressed against hers. She could hear the comforting snap and pop of burning wood. Between her lashes Felde looked about. Across the barrier of a small fire was the Alizonian, drinking a liquid that clouded his face with steam.

Though he had not harmed her while she slept and had lent his aid with the Gate—he was the enemy. Felde stiffened. Behind her the body that warmed her growled. Ghost!

“So, you're awake. We were beginning to think you'd sleep through another day. Didn't we, girl,” he said, patting Ghost as the beast came to lie beside him. “My name is Janydon. Would you like some tea?” When she did not respond he added, “If we had intended harm, you'd already be dead.”

He was right and hunger twisted in her. Felde sat and took the tea he offered.

Janydon leaned toward her. “The Alizonian who answered the call were part of the clan who bound us. Now that they are gone, we are free.”

“We? Oh. You mean Ghost.”

Janydon chuckled. “She is indeed ghostlike. Her name is Neve, my companion and birth sister. She was whelped at the same moment my mother birthed me. The clanlord felt that

held great portent so we were raised together. She is more than beast!"

"I agree. Now, why all this?" Felde pointed at the fire. "Why didn't you leave?"

For the first time he looked her directly in the eyes and sustained it. She was startled to see that his eyes were the same intense blue as Ghost's—Neve's. She saw truth in them and listened intently.

"The Old One said teachers would come to you. I would like to be taught, if they will accept me as pupil, too."

He fell silent. The trembling of his fingers, pulling at Neve's ears, betrayed how much her answer meant. She thought about the changes she would undergo as she became an Old One. The years stretched before her, seeming empty of companionship. No one among her acquaintances, including her father, would understand the coming changes, or live to see them completed. Only this man and his companion knew. But she did not fully trust him.

Iredon's death flashed through her mind. Guilt welled up inside her, an inner wound more vicious than any injury of the flesh. She bit her lip, forcing herself to stifle a moan.

What had Min said to ease her? Yes, she remembered . . . "The Alizonian's name was called and others died. He is no more guilty than you are." Why that had comforted her and now did again, she did not know.

Felde looked at Janydon. Min had trusted him and her mate had spoken to him too. She could accept the Old One's faith in him and build on that for now.

They were warriors for Light and Shadow. Felde laughed, and answered the look of inquiry she saw in Janydon's eyes.

"Some Power has had its hand in bringing us together. Who am I to part us now?"

Janydon leaped to his feet and shouted in relief. Neve barked and nipped at his ankles in excitement.

Felde stood and looked about the valley. In the distance she could see the old keep. Exploring it would be a good way to start an adventure. And she would have two companions. Hadn't she, from the first hot blue-eyed glance, been drawn to Neve? She looked at the dog, then up at the bitch's master and

met his blue eyes. For some reason she felt blood rushing to her cheeks and did not turn away as Janydon reached out to hug her. The hound braced its front paws against them, pushed its cold nose under her chin. Their bodies felt good. Felde did not question, just accepted, that for a time, she was not to be alone. This—was Min's and her horned mate's final gift.