

THE ARM of the STONE

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Chapter One

It was Bron's oldest memory, the telling of the Tale. Throughout his life, if he reached behind his barriers toward those childhood moments, it was as if he were there again, the firelight warm on his family's faces, his mother's husky voice filling his ears with the phrases he knew by heart. She had learned the Tale from her mother, who had learned it from her mother, who had learned it from hers, and so on in an unbroken chain stretching back more than a thousand years. The words never varied; the cadences of her voice, her emphasis on certain phrases and even her pauses, were always the same. Yet each telling made the Tale anew, a vivid and living thing, rebuilding with words a world long since gone to dust.

"Long ago," the Tale began, "when the worlds were one, our family lived in a wondrous palace, high on a rocky cliff above a swift-flowing river. We were not then as we are now. Then, we had wealth and power. We commanded a rich and fruitful land that stretched further than a man could ride in seven days. We were known across the wide world for the strength of our rule, the justice of our governance, and the prosperity of our people. At the time of the Tale, the head of our family was the noblest and most powerful man ever born of his line. His name was Bron."

There was always a pause here, long enough for Bron's mother to smile toward him, long enough for Bron to feel a fierce responsive surge of pride. The ancient name, like the Tale itself, was passed down the generations. It was the task of the women of the line to tell the Tale; it was the task of the men to bear the name.

"Tell us about the lords and ladies, Mother," said Bron's younger sister Elene. The interruptions of the Tale were as hallowed by habit as the narrative itself. "Tell us about the banquets, and how they danced for days and days."

Bron's mother smiled again. She had been beautiful as a girl, and when she told the Tale it could still be seen. Her features were strong and symmetrical, her eyes dark and very clear. Her hair, once ink-black but now as gray as pewter, fell straight and heavy past her waist. She combed it as she told the Tale; it crackled softly as she did so, fighting the comb, wrapping itself around her fingers.

“Our Ancestor Bron had a wife and three sons. He had two brothers and three sisters, all with husbands and wives and children. There were cousins and uncles and aunts, courtiers and ministers, scholars and scribes, soldiers and servants—so many people the palace was more like a town than a dwelling. Every night there was a banquet. Every week celebrations were held to mark birthdays, weddings, christenings, the harvest, a hundred different feasts and festivals. Travelers came from leagues away, from other countries and from across the sea, to receive our Ancestor’s hospitality. All were welcomed with honor and gifts—rich or poor, noble or common, man or woman or child.

“Yet no matter how much he gave, no matter how great the celebrations, our Ancestor’s wealth was never exhausted. His riches were beyond calculation, and because of his wisdom and good governance, they constantly renewed themselves, like a tree that grows new leaves when old ones fall.”

For a moment the family sat silent, the dazzling images filling up their minds: the palace’s soaring towers and spires, its rooms and corridors heavy with tapestry, its tables thick with shining plate and crystal goblets, its banquet halls gilded with torchlight, its lords and ladies turning in the intricate patterns of the dance.

“Now of all the magnificent dwellings and objects and lands and gold and gems our Ancestor possessed, no single thing was as precious as the Stone.”

The whole family—Bron, his two brothers, his two sisters, and his father—breathed in unison: “The Stone.”

“The Stone,” Bron’s mother echoed. “No one knows what the Stone is or how it came to be. We know only that it is the most powerful object in the world. It sees and understands all things—people and animals, stones and trees, cities and towns, storms and avalanches and the changing of the seasons, everything that happens, everything that lives and dies, everything that *is*. There is nothing the infinite focus of its vision does not touch, nor any place the timeless continuum of its contemplation does not reach. He who shares the Stone’s understanding is the wisest man in the world. He who possesses it is the mightiest.”

“And our Ancestor was the wisest and mightiest man in the world,” said Bron’s younger brother, Olesin.

“He was,” Bron’s mother said. “For the Stone belonged to him, and through the strength of his Gift he was able to send his mind along the flow of its perception, and share its knowledge.”

“The Stone,” Elene said fiercely. “The Stone was ours!”

“Now, the Stone’s being contains a paradox. Its power consists wholly of its vision; it has no physical attributes with which to defend or move itself. And so it has always been subject to the will of humankind. For centuries before our family rose to power the Stone passed from hand to hand, sometimes understood and sometimes not, sometimes serving good and sometimes evil. The Stone suffered, for it detests wrongdoing and prizes stability. When at last our Ancestor’s five-times-great-grandfather captured the Stone in battle, it recognized his honor and strength. Here at last was a man fit to hold it, fit to shield and protect it. The Stone and our family swore a

pact. Our family vowed to defend the Stone, never to use its power for evil. The Stone promised that through their Gifts all the descendants of our line would share its knowledge, and gain wealth and prosperity and all good things. There was only one condition. The bargain must remain a secret. Though all the world knew of the Stone, none must know where it lay. The Stone was weary of fighting. It wanted no more battles, no more campaigns, no more transferences. It wished to be at peace.

“For six generations, the contract between the Stone and our family held. But in the time of our Ancestor Bron, a man was born who lived his life by a single burning purpose: to find the Stone and make it his. The name of this man was—”

“Percival.” This was Bron’s interruption. The name was ugly in his mouth, three syllables invested with the entire legacy of hatred that had bound his family for a thousand years.

“Percival,” his mother repeated. “Percival the Deceiver. Percival the Traitor. Percival the Destroyer. This evil man spent his life scouring the world for the Stone; he was no longer young when he reached the court of our Ancestor. As was his custom, our Ancestor offered the hospitality of his house. Through the corruption of his power—which was perhaps as great as our Ancestor’s own—Percival divined that his quest had ended. Cloaking himself in invisibility, he stole away into the night. Our Ancestor never recognized who he had sheltered, nor suspected the knowledge that had been stolen. Not until he next consulted the Stone did he learn the truth of Percival’s treachery.

“When Percival returned a year later, accompanied by the army he had raised, our Ancestor was ready. Our forces were strong, as strong as the powers of hand and mind could make them. But the armies Percival commanded were stronger. Slowly, Percival’s troops advanced. Behind them, the once-prosperous fields spread charred and barren. The towns lay crushed to rubble, and the dead rotted unburied in the streets.

“At last Percival reached our Ancestor’s palace and set siege to the walls. It was a terrible battle, fought hand to hand and mind to mind. Our Ancestor used all his strength, but he could not hold against the twisted forces Percival invoked. In the end Percival and his men breached our fortifications and entered the palace no conquering force had ever taken.”

“No!” cried Elene, as if her voice could reach back through time and mend the broken stones.

“Our Ancestor, defending the palace gates, was one of the first to die.” Bron’s mother stared into the flames, the comb idle in her hands. “Percival cut off our Ancestor’s head with his own sword. He impaled it on a pike and gave it to his squire to carry like a banner. They say that when the squire took up the pike the Stone cried out, a shout that was heard to the far corners of the earth, so that for a moment every breathing creature shared its grief.

“Percival’s army slaughtered every living thing in the palace. They raped and tortured, they hacked away arms and legs, they skewered babies on their swords, they even killed the horses and the swine and the ladies’ little lapdogs. At last, when there was nothing left alive, Percival entered the hall where the Stone lay. With his own hands he took the Stone and placed it in a leather bag. He marched his army out of the palace and set fire to the wreckage he had made. He

and his men watched as it burned to ash. Then, their horses' hooves crusted with the blood they had spilled, they rode away across the blackened lands."

The fire hissed softly. The shadows trembled, devouring the corners of the room. Within them, Percival's horsemen seemed to leap and grimace, blood-drenched and brutal, triumphant.

"Now, in the time of our Ancestor the Split was well under way, the violent dividing of reality that was the result of the struggle between the two great powers that shape the world."

"Mindpower," said Olesin.

"Handpower," said Elene.

"Each power, equally, is man's birthright. For centuries they existed in harmony, side by side. But while it is the nature of the skills of mind to be stable and unchanging, it is the nature of the way of hands, the way of tools, to grow and develop. In time a thing called technology was born, a discipline of devices and machines whose capacity to alter the world was so awesome its adherents believed no other power was necessary. Slowly mindpower fell from favor—at first neglected, then pushed aside, at last hated and feared. Those who had ceased to understand it renamed it, calling it magic. They hunted and persecuted its adherents wherever they were found, seeking to wipe them from the face of the earth.

"But mindpower is rooted as deeply in the soul of humankind as handpower is. Man cannot destroy a part of himself, no matter how he seeks to do so—he can only divide it from his understanding, drive it deep within him to a place where he can no longer see it. As the holocaust of handpower's hatred raged, those who clung to mindpower began to vanish from the world, together with the places where their ways survived. A village might disappear with all its people, leaving only empty land behind; a forest that held a sacred glade might overnight be replaced by barren rock, or a lake with a hermit's hut beside it turn to desert from one day to the next. Yet these people and places did not become nothing. How could they? They were living beings, living powers. They simply went...elsewhere. No one truly understands the how or why of it, nor exactly what or where 'elsewhere' is. We only know that in the end, where there had been one world, there came to be two—the original world, now ruled entirely by handpower, and a new world, in which the ways of mind survived."

"Our world," Elene asserted. "Where Percival took the Stone."

"Yes. Those who followed the path of technology were barely aware of the Split, of the falling away of powers that once were as common as tools had become. Many who held to the ways of mindpower, however, understood what was happening. Percival was one of these. Evil he might have been, but he was also greatly Gifted. He saw that the Stone—a thing of power, the greatest Gift that had ever been or could ever be—had no place in a world of tools. He led his followers into the world of mindpower, carrying with him the captive Stone. In the jagged mountain range that rises at the center of the middle continent, he and his men built a Fortress surrounded by high black walls. They placed the Stone at its heart, in a prison-room they made to hold it—a room without doors or windows, a room only they could enter.

"The world of mindpower, just emerging from the Split, was still incomplete. Its people and

places were like leaves scattered across an expanse of water, pieces of familiar territory connected by great expanses of emptiness, flat and featureless and clad in mist. There was no government, no authority; the people were frightened and without direction. Percival and his men used these things, their own Gifts, and the power of the Stone to conquer the world of mindpower as they had once conquered our family. There was no one strong enough to oppose them. As the new world rose to completion, the mists receding and the blank places acquiring detail, they consolidated their dominion. In the end they ruled all the lands, all the nations. They called themselves *Guardians*.” Bron’s mother spat the word, as if it were acid on her tongue. “Guardians of mindpower, Guardians of the Stone. As if they had the right to guard what they had stolen. As if they had the right to protect what was gained by trickery and treachery and bloodshed. As if they had the right to possess what *was not theirs*.”

She stopped, breathing deeply. The family breathed with her. The ancient rage moved in them, shaking them, defining them, making them one.

“Now, Percival and his men believed they had slaughtered our entire family, every single person who could lay rightful claim to the Stone. But they were wrong. When he learned of Percival’s treachery, our Ancestor took his little grandson, the child of his heir, and sent him with his nursemaid to a safe place outside our lands. When the nursemaid heard the Stone’s shout, she knew that all was lost. Faithful and true, she guarded both the child and the secret of his heritage. It was she who first told the Tale, so that the boy might know who he was. It was she who, when the boy married, taught the Tale to his wife, so that the knowledge might be passed on. From that time to this we have lived in hiding, guarding the precious secret of our lineage. As Percival robbed us of our wealth and high position, so time has robbed us of our mindpower. The Gift that once filled every member of our line to overflowing is all but vanished from among us. A spark remains, enough to build the barriers that hide the truth of our heritage, but that is all. The greatness that defined us in the time of our Ancestor is lost to us—a shadow, a memory, nothing more.”

There was anguish in her voice. Of all the family’s dispossessions, none was so terrible as this. Wealth could be gained again, land recaptured, but no human endeavor could bring power back.

“But there’s hope, Mother.” Elene’s voice was small. “Tell about the One Who Comes.”

“The One Who Comes.” Bron’s mother took up her comb again; once more it traveled crackling through her hair. “It’s said that some day power will be reborn among us, a Gift even greater than that of our ancient Ancestor, a Gift whose like the world has never seen. The One who owns that Gift will avenge our ancient wrong. He will breach the Fortress’s walls, as our walls were breached; he will cast down the new Percival as the old Percival cast our Ancestor down. He will destroy the prison-room that holds the Stone, and restore it to its proper place among us. No one knows when that day will come. We have waited ten centuries, and perhaps we will wait ten more. But it will arrive. When it does, the Stone will rejoice, for it will be unbound. Our world will rejoice, for the Stone will be free. And we—we will rejoice also. For

we will be again as we were, our Gift reborn and our might restored, without peer among the nations of the world.”

“As we were,” echoed Elene and Olesin, in rare accord. Their faces were rapt; behind their eyes the spires of the Ancestor’s palace rose from the wreckage of the Tale, reborn to the glorious future. “As we were.”

Bron’s mother dropped the comb, and held out her hands. Bron’s father reached to join her, and the others, a small circle gilded and shadowed by the dying fire.

“We call now to the One Who Comes. We call as we have called this thousand years and more, across time and distance, with the power of our minds, the power of our lineage, the power of our hope. Come to us. Come to us. Come.”

Her voice was no longer only a sound, but a thing that could be felt, running like light through the family’s joined hands. It bound them not just to one another, but to all the centuries of their hidden heritage. For an instant it was not merely the seven people in the firelight, but the whole of the ancient line that reached out along the pathways of the future, in search of their promised restoration. For a thousand years they had searched—in houses and hovels, tents and caves, on land and on sea, in a dozen different countries and a hundred different languages. For a thousand years, the future had offered them nothing more than it did tonight: words spoken in darkness, a hope nursed out of sight, another ten centuries, perhaps, of waiting.

“And so the Tale ends in silence,” Bron’s mother said softly. “I have told it this night, as all my ancestresses have done before me, so that we may always, in our deepest souls, know who we are. In secrecy we guard our knowledge; in concealment we preserve our hope. So it must be, until the day of our deliverance.”

It was the signal for the raising of barriers. Their hands still linked, the family began the process of closing the doors they had opened tonight, carefully folding the Tale away behind walls of thought, far below the level of everyday consciousness. It was painful, this disguise, but necessary. The skill of barrier-building had been passed down for as long as the Tale itself; the children of the line began to learn it as soon as they could speak, and not until the skill was perfect in every respect were they allowed to hear the Tale.

Barriers complete, the family went about its bedtime tasks. Bron’s mother mixed the porridge for the morning; his sister Annis banked the fire. His older brother Serle and his father made the rounds of the house and barn. They might have been any ordinary peasant household, preparing for the night. Yet, hidden or not, the secret of their ancestry could not help but mark them. Since their fall from power, the men and women of Bron’s line had been in exile, not merely from their power and their birthright, but from the world in which they lived.

The crowing of the cock in the chicken run outside the barn woke Bron, as it did every day. Beside him, on the straw mattress they shared in the hayloft, Serle was still sleeping. The rising

sun poked long fingers through the unglazed windows, its light almost solid with the dust that hung in the air.

Bron elbowed Serle in the ribs. Serle muttered sleepily and turned over, pulling the blanket over his head.

“Wake up, Serle,” Bron said. He kicked his brother softly.

“Leave me alone,” Serle said.

Bron kicked him again, harder. Serle erupted with a muffled roar, seizing a pillow and pressing it over Bron’s face. They struggled for a few moments, laughing. Then Serle abandoned the pillow and rumbled Bron’s hair.

“Enough,” he said. “You go in—I’ll be along soon.”

Shivering in the early-morning chill, Bron pulled on his clothes. He climbed down the ladder to the main floor and pushed open the wooden door that divided the barn from the house. The house was a single unpartitioned space built of roughly dressed stone, with a thatched roof and a flagstone floor. A huge fireplace took up nearly half one side; opposite, behind a curtain, stood the big bed in which Bron’s parents slept, the truckle bed for Annis, Elene, and Olesin pushed out of sight beneath it. The long plank table and benches had been made by Bron’s father, Jevon, as had the coffer chests near the bed, the wooden cupboards, and the carved armchair beside the hearth where Jevon spent his evenings. Bunches of herbs and strings of dried fruit hung from the smoke-grimed rafters; sacks of grain and barrels of ale and salt meat were ranged neatly along the walls. The air was dim, for there were only the fire and two small windows in the front wall, covered by greased parchment in the summer and wooden shutters in the winter, to provide light.

Bron’s mother, Also, stood by the hearth, stirring a kettle of porridge for the morning meal.

“Where’s Serle?” she said. “Not still asleep?”

“He’s coming.” Bron sat down at the table. Also portioned out a bowl of porridge, adding milk still warm from this morning’s milking and a generous dollop of honey from the family’s hives. She set it before her son and returned to the fire.

“Mother, make her stop!” It was Olesin, his voice plaintive. “She’s pinching me again!”

“Stop it, Elene,” Also said, without turning around. “Or you’ll feel my hand on your backside.”

Elene assumed a wounded expression. “I didn’t do anything! He’s a horrible little toad to say I did!”

Eight-year-old Elene was a strong and vibrant child, with rosy cheeks and a shining mass of red-brown hair. Olesin, two years younger, was fairer and more slender, with translucent skin beneath which the blue tracery of his veins showed like a map. Different in most ways, in the strength of their wills Elene and Olesin were much alike. Disciplining them, separating them, or silencing them was a constant task.

“Be quiet, Elene,” said Annis. At seventeen, she was a plumper version of her sister, with a glossy braid that nearly reached her knees. She was engaged to be married next November to the younger son of the village innkeeper—a match much better than the family, with its uncertain

position in the community, had a right to expect. “Eat your breakfast, and leave the rest of us in peace.”

Serle came in at last, his hair wild, his eyes puffed and bloodshot from lack of sleep. He was apprenticed to the town’s blacksmith, who had offered him a partnership if he could pass the Trade Examinations and gain membership in the Blacksmiths’ Guild, and for the past few weeks he had been laboring long hours to complete his Master’s project. Neither Else nor Jevon had dared hope for so much for their oldest. Serle was handsome and clever, a loving son and a kind brother, but he was also willful and impulsive, with an intolerance of discipline and an explosive temper that had gotten him in trouble again and again during his school years. His parents had feared he might spend his life as a wastrel, or worse, that the attention he brought upon himself might turn toward the family as a whole. But smithing, for which he had a talent, seemed to have given Serle a focus. Since his apprenticeship he had settled down considerably.

“I’ll be late again tonight, Mother,” he said, through mouthfuls of porridge.

Else nodded. “I’ll keep something warm for you.”

Serle laid his spoon beside his empty bowl, took the packet of bread and meat his mother had prepared for his midday meal, and was gone. Jevon pushed back his chair and got to his feet, moving with care. Else spoke quietly.

“Shall I pack up some of my cordial for you today?”

“No, no,” Jevon said. “It’s only a twinge. The walk will ease me.”

Jevon suffered terribly from pain in his joints, which swelled and ached in spite of the liniment Else applied each night. Like his father and grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he was a copper miner. He had been handsome once, with the reddish hair and blue eyes all the family but Bron had inherited, but his trade had taken all but the memory of it away. One side of his face was badly disfigured by a narrow escape from a mineshaft fire, and welts of scar tissue marked every part of his body, attesting to slips of the pick, falls, flying slivers of rock, and the myriad other hazards of a life spent underground. He had always been unshakably determined that none of his sons would follow him into this brutal trade, and for years had put a portion of his tiny wage aside in order to buy apprenticeships for them. For Bron, who was clever with his hands, he had purchased a weaving apprenticeship, to begin next autumn when his schooling was complete.

Else’s eyes rested on the door as it closed behind her husband. Bron could read the worry on her face as if she had spoken it aloud—which, of course, she would never do.

“Come, the rest of you,” she said briskly. “Bron, Elene, and Olesin, it’s time to be off to school. Annis, I’m going to take the eggs to market today. You can stay here and take care of the house.”

Annis’s lips curved in a small, secret smile. Bron knew she would take the chance to see her fiancé; the bread would be burnt tonight, and supper overcooked.

Else handed out lunch packets, and Bron, Olesin, and Elene set off. Half an hour’s walk brought them to the village. Greshing was the largest habitation for many miles, boasting four

cobbled streets, a central square with a fountain in the middle, a Town Hall, several shops and an inn, the smithy where Serle was apprenticed, a Guardian Residence, and a Guardian School. The School, to which the Residence was attached, took up two sides of the square. Like all products of Guardian architecture it was massive, a precise assemblage of straight lines and pure angles. The unyielding symmetry of its design, dictated by Guardian law, was duplicated in thousands of other towns and villages across the world.

Bron and his brother and sister joined the procession of children trooping through the School's big double doors. Once inside, they separated: Elene and Olesin to the Babies' Class, for children between six and eight, and Bron to the Seniors' Class, for eleven- and twelve-year-olds. There was also an Intermediate Class, for children of nine and ten. Every child in the world was required to attend Guardian School three days a week, six months a year, from the age of six until the age of twelve. The Schools taught basic reading and writing and figuring, the history of the world and of the Order of Guardians, the Guardians' language, rudimentary mindskills for those who could master them, and most important, the Limits—the Guardian-authored rule of the world that, since the time of Percival, had protected mankind from the consuming evil of handpower.

Children learned of Percival in Babies' Class: how, battling the chaos and anarchy of the splitting worlds, he and his men rescued the Stone from those who held it prisoner and carried it safe into the emerging world of mindpower; how these first Guardians came to understand the true cause of the Split, and banded together to bring their wisdom to others. Today everyone knew that it was the uncontrolled pursuit of technology that had ripped the worlds apart, nearly destroying the powers of the mind in the process; a thousand years ago, however, there were few who grasped this fact. It took nearly a century, a hundred years of tireless traveling and teaching and sacrifice, for the Guardians to convey to the new world the truth they had always known.

High in their mountain Fortress, Percival and his men swore a solemn oath to the Stone. Never again would the ways of mind be threatened by the lust for technology. Never again would the pursuit of the lesser power be allowed to tear the world in two. In this new world, the proper order would be preserved: mindpower would be first, handpower a distant second. To that end, all use of tools must be rigidly bounded, vigilantly overseen—not simply to prevent the dangerous proliferation that had led to the Split, but to place a guard upon the human imagination, upon which the way of the hands exerted a deadly pull. Thus the Limits were born. Rhodri, Percival's kinsman and trusted lieutenant, spent nearly forty years in their creation: twenty thick volumes identifying and defining the boundaries within which tools could be safely manufactured, employed, modified, repaired, and developed. There was a section for every tool and trade then known to humankind; there were sections on handpower's application to life, work, thought, government and learning; there were sections, many of them, on methods of oversight and punishments for transgression. So comprehensive was Rhodri's work that over the ensuing centuries few new Limits had needed to be created, though enormous numbers of commentaries, glosses, and interpretations had been written on nearly every phrase and

paragraph of the original volumes. In the Guardians' Fortress an entire wing was given over to a great library of these, maintained by the Suborder of Searchers, one of the four branches into which the Order of Guardians was divided.

Bron reached the seniors' classroom, and took his place on one of the benches. The shutters on the long unglazed windows stood open to the spring sunshine, admitting both light and chill. The room was loud with the voices of children. Amid the hubbub, Bron sat alone.

The teacher entered the classroom, clapping his hands for quiet. The gold medal of Guardianship gleamed on his breast; around his waist he wore the green sash of the Suborder of Journeymen. If the Fortress was the heart of the Guardian Order, the Journeymen were its body. In addition to overseeing the orthodoxy of the populace and teaching at the Guardian Schools, Journeymen conducted the Novice Examinations, headed the Trade Guilds, supervised trade apprenticeships and examinations and adherence to the Trade Limitbooks, provided counsel to governments, and often became governors themselves. The map of the earth was a patchwork of Journeyer Dioceses, each overseen by a Journeyer Orderhouse; the Dioceses were divided into Parishes, each with a Resident Journeyer to administer it and a varying number of Ordermen to serve as assistants and teachers. It was said, without much exaggeration, that there was not a task in the world that did not have a Journeyer to do it.

"Stand, class," the teacher said. The students obeyed. The teacher allowed the silence to gather a little before he began the catechism that started every schoolday.

"In the beginning was the Stone. The Stone is the fount and substance of all power, the start and finish of all knowledge. The vastness of its contemplation sustains the world. In its mighty Gift all human powers have their source."

"Blessed be the Stone," the students chorused.

"In the beginning was mindpower. Mindpower is the first power, the noblest power, the power that shapes reality. Without it there is only chaos."

"Blessed be the ways of mind."

"In the beginning was a single world, ruled by the power of the mind, with the power of the hands held in thrall. So it was meant to be."

"Blessed be the original order of the world."

"But a time came in which corrupt and foolish men sought to break that ancient order, to set the ways of tools above the ways of mind. All things Gifted wither and die under the rule of tools, for the power of hands and the power of mind are the deadliest of enemies."

"Cursed be the ways of hands."

"Nor can existence sustain such alteration. So rose the Split, the tearing of the original world in two. On one side of the Split, the ways of hands ruled absolutely. On the other, the ways of mind took refuge. There did Percival bring the Stone. There did the Guardians build their Fortress, and set themselves to soothe the frightened people with news of the Stone's release."

"Blessed be the wisdom of Percival."

"In time the chaos of the Split receded. Beneath the eye of the Stone, our half-world became

whole. It is now as it was in the beginning: mind rules and hand is subject, and the Stone watches over us all. So it has been for a thousand years. So it will be for a thousand more. The Split will never come again.”

“Blessed be the Order of Guardians, which guides and protects against the corruption of the hands. Blessed be the holy Limits, which preserve and defend the Gifts of mind.”

“Let us pray. O Great Stone, receive our thoughts, as You receive the thoughts of every living thing upon the earth.” The pupils followed raggedly along, mumbling words spoken so many times before that they were little more than noise. “For this moment we join our small minds to the vastness of Your understanding, seeking to share the harmonies of existence that You both contemplate and sustain. Help us to be good citizens of this world, to guard the precious powers that are our birthright, the powers that have their source in You. Help us to resist the foul seed of weakness that lies waiting in us all, tempting us to the pursuit of tools. Help us to walk the proper path of mind, so that we may never stray into the wilderness of the hands, so that we may be Your servants and Your defenders, and this world shall endure forever. Amen.”

There was a rustling of clothing and creaking of benches as the students seated themselves.

“Today Group One will concentrate on nearspeech,” the teacher said. “Group Two will continue its review of agricultural Limits. Comyn Miner!”

Bron got to his feet. Comyn was the name by which the world knew him, a shield for his dangerous ancestral name.

“You’ll supervise Group Two today. The lesson will be Chapter Three of the Condensed Limitbook, Limits 125 through 222. You know the ones I mean?”

“Yes, Master,” Bron said, his eyes not quite meeting the teacher’s. The Condensed Limitbook, extracted from the original Twenty Volumes, was the standard text of all the Schools. Bron knew it better than the teacher did, a fact of which the teacher was well aware.

“Be sure to discuss each Limit thoroughly.” Though Bron had supervised Group Two a hundred times, he was always given these same instructions. “I don’t want you only to know the Limits word for word, I want you to understand their meaning as it applies to your daily life, and as it contributes to your spiritual fitness. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I’ll examine you at the end of the day. Work diligently. Remember, the eye of the Stone is upon you.”

The members of Group Two shuffled to their feet, turning toward the back of the room as Group One moved toward the front. The inequity of this arrangement, in which the Gifted received the warm benches near the fire and the unGifted were banished to the cold reaches at the rear of the schoolroom, was too habitual for notice. So it was, not just in the schoolroom, but in life. The best of the Gifted became Guardians, while the rest found positions of importance within the world. Anyone who owned a business or headed a Guild or acquired a position in government was either Gifted or had a Gifted family member. For the unGifted, a good trade or a secure service position was the most that could be hoped for.

Mindskill, as classified by the Guardians, fell into five basic categories. There was mindspeech, subdivided into nearspeech, farspeech, and, rarely, heartsensing; prescience, which included both recollection, the faculty of looking into the past, and true foreseeing; divination, most often manifested as neardivining, through which an object's properties could be sensed by touch, but sometimes taking the form of fardivining, the apprehension of events occurring at a distance; making, usually some combination of creative, uncreative, and transformative abilities; and transportation, the capacity to convey objects from place to place or to project force. Though any reasonably Gifted person could master a range of basic abilities, most Talents tended to concentrate within a single area of competence, and true multiple Gifts were rare. Had he been able to reveal it, the small spark of mindpower Bron owned might perhaps have been classified as a making Gift. But for the thousand years of their exile the family had kept their power, like their heritage, hidden—not simply because of the need to protect their secret, but because the kind of barriers their power sustained, capable of eluding even Guardian mindprobes, were illegal. From earliest childhood Bron had been classified with the mass of the unGifted, relegated to Group Two. He possessed a quicker intellect than most, however, and was often called to supervise his fellows, sparing the teacher to work with the mindskilled. In this, his final year, it had become almost a daily occurrence.

Group Two finished assembling at the back of the classroom: fifty-three of them, out of a class of sixty-five.

“All right,” Bron said, launching into a routine so familiar he could follow it with only a quarter of his attention. “Before we begin, I want someone to tell me what Chapter Three of the Condensed Limitbook is about. You, Erda.”

“Farming tools,” Erda said tonelessly. Her face was closed and sullen; already, she was numb with boredom.

“And now you tell me, Masrich, what Limits 125 through 222 deal with.”

“Hoes and rakes and hand tools,” Masrich singsonged.

“Right. Now, who can recite Limit 125? Johan. I know you know this, we did it just a few weeks ago.”

“Uh... ‘He who makes a hoe shall, shall take a handle no longer than, than...’” Johan trailed off, his face blank.

“Than fifteen handspans,” Bron prompted.

“‘Than fifteen handspans, that shall be made of good oak or ash wood, and he shall obtain, shall obtain...’ Oh, it’s no use. I don’t remember the rest. It’s something about the metal part.”

Bron resisted the impulse to sigh. “Avelein, you finish it.”

“‘And he shall obtain a forged tongue from a blacksmith who forges according to the Limitbook of his Guild, and he shall affix the tongue to the handle with rivets of good iron, as many rivets as shall be needed to hold the tongue firm.’”

“Good. Since you did so well, you can give me the next one.”

“‘He who uses the hoe shall use it according to need.’” The words slid smoothly off Avelein’s

tongue, memorized by rote without thought to their meaning. ““He shall use it in order to cultivate crops, or to weed the fields and other areas of cultivation...””

And so it went for the rest of the day, Limit by Limit, through the entire range of agricultural hand tools, progressing from their proper construction through their proper use, proper storage, proper repair, and proper replacement. All of this was easy for Bron, who from the age of eight had known by heart every word of the Condensed Limitbook. It was far less easy for his classmates, who stumbled and paused and searched vainly for the correct phrasing. In their boredom, however, they were united—and in their dislike. Bron was well aware that his superior intelligence was mistrusted. The students considered it a sign of sycophancy, the teachers an indication of instability. For as long as he could remember he had moved within a shell of isolation, without friends or companions other than his brothers and sisters. It was a situation that suited him very well. What need had he, with his thousand-year heritage, of the ordinary people among whom he was forced to live?

In public, of course, he never let himself think of this, nor considered the irony in the teachers’ choice of him to instruct his fellows in Guardian law. Only in the privacy of his home, in the dying firelight, when the barriers fell and the Tale was told, did he allow his hereditary hatred to take its rightful place within his soul. Only then did he passionately reject all he had been taught and taught in his turn. Only then did he feel the rage of his subjugation to Guardian rules, Guardian teaching, Guardian Limits.

The afternoon dragged to a close. The Prayer to the Stone was repeated to end the day, and the children streamed out of school, jubilant with release. Bron waited by the steps for Olesin and Elene. Like Bron, they were marked with separateness; Olesin, slight and delicate, had been bullied at first, but was left alone after it became clear that Elene would beat senseless anyone who threatened him. In this she took after Serle, who had defended Bron in a similar fashion.

The three children set off for home. Bron walked in front, his mind far away; Elene and Olesin tagged behind, arguing in short but intense bursts. Gradually it penetrated Bron’s consciousness that Olesin was calling after him. He turned, impatiently.

“What is it?”

“My foot.” Olesin’s fine features were puckered with pain. “I have a blister. Can you carry me?”

Bron sighed. “All right. Come on.”

He stooped so that his brother could climb onto his back, and set off again down the track. Elene trotted alongside.

“Why are you carrying him?” she demanded. “I get blisters too, but no one carries me. It’s not fair.”

Bron ignored her; she fell silent after a while, and began to dawdle, falling further and further behind. Olesin tightened his arms around Bron’s neck and leaned his chin on Bron’s shoulder. Bron could not see his face, but he had no doubt it wore a smug expression.

“I heard a story in school today, Brother,” he said. All the family called Bron this, to avoid the

possibility of speaking his true name in public.

“Did you?” Bron asked, without interest.

“A girl in our class told about her cousin, who went on pilgrimage to the Fortress to ask the Stone a question. It took him a whole year to get there, and he nearly died from getting caught in an avalanche. Then he had to come all the way back, and that took another year. I just wondered...why do people have to go all the way to the Fortress to ask a question? Couldn't they ask a Guardian instead?”

“Some questions can only be answered by the Stone.”

“But couldn't you tell your question to a Guardian, and he could farspeak it to the Fortress, and they could find out the answer, and then they could farspeak it back?”

“No. You have to go to the Fortress. You have to stand before the Stone. Those are the rules.”

“Oh.” Olesin was quiet for a little while, his arms hanging loose across Bron's chest. In spite of his slowness he was heavy; Bron's back was beginning to ache.

“Brother.”

“What is it now?”

“When we get the Stone back, and live in a great palace again, will people come to ask us questions?”

Bron jerked to a halt. He swung Olesin off his back and grasped him by the shoulders.

“Are your barriers down?” he demanded, glaring into his brother's startled eyes.

“I...I don't know,” Olesin stammered.

“They *are* down.” As Bron's own barriers were down; they had flashed open the moment the question was asked.

“What did Mother teach you about barriers? What did she teach you, Olesin?”

Olesin's lips had begun to tremble. “Never...never to let them down, unless the family is alone or the Tale is being told. But we *are* alone, Brother! There's no one here but us!”

“How do you know? How do you know there isn't a Guardian around the next bend? The only time we can be sure we're alone, absolutely sure, is when we're all together in our house. I thought you understood these things, Olesin!”

Tears overflowed. “I'm sorry.”

“Outside our house, your barriers must be up, every minute of every day, for your entire life. Otherwise”—Bron looked into his brother's face with all the sternness he could muster—“otherwise the Guardians will surely find us. They'll see what's in our minds. They'll discover the secret of our ancestry. And do you know what will happen then? Do you?”

“They'll...they'll kill us.”

“That's right. Exactly the way they killed our Ancestor. And they'll torture us first. Is that what you want?”

“No-o-o,” Olesin sobbed. “Oh, Brother, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it! Please don't tell, please don't!”

In spite of himself, Bron was moved by his brother's distress. “Stop crying, you'll make

yourself sick. I won't tell, if you swear not to do it again."

"I swear, Brother. I swear, I promise."

"Good." Bron used the hem of his shirt to wipe Olesin's cheeks. "Now put your barriers up. And keep them up this time."

Elene had dawdled her way up to them. She looked at Olesin's tearstained face and opened her mouth to make a remark; Bron shot her a look that stopped the words unspoken. He swung his brother up onto his back again, building up his own barriers once more as he walked.

When they reached the house Annis was nowhere to be seen, as Bron had expected, but at least he was in time to save the stew from burning. She returned a little while later, her face flushed and secret. It was not worthwhile to say anything. Bron accepted the smile she gave him as she began to lay the table for supper.

As he had promised, Serle did not return until late. Elene and Olesin were long asleep when he burst into the house, bearing a wrapped bundle in his arms. He carried it over to the table and set it down. Else, Bron, and Annis gathered round the table as Serle began to pull aside layers of cloth. Jevon, in his chair by the fire, hot poultices on his knees, turned and watched.

"This is what I've been working on all these late nights," Serle said, breathlessly. "It's for you, Mother."

"I thought you were working on your Master's project." Else's brows were creased.

"I am. But I wanted to give you something, now that spring is coming." Serle looked into his mother's face. "You never complain, but I've seen how hard it's been for you the last few years, turning over the earth for the crops. And so I thought of a way to make it easier." He pulled aside a final wrapping. "What do you think?"

It lay on the table, new metal covered with a light sheen of oil: a plow head. It was a forged plow, just like every other plow Bron had ever seen, except for one thing: it had two blades.

The heat of the fire was at his back, but Bron felt suddenly cold. Beside him, Annis had stiffened. Jevon, in his comfortable chair, was as still as if he had turned to stone.

"What is this?" Else's voice was hushed.

"A plow." Serle's face was bright with pride. He seemed entirely oblivious to his family's reaction. "But not just any plow. The two blades will do the work in half the time—and because it's heavier it'll turn the earth deeper."

Jevon rose painfully to his feet, his compresses falling unheeded to the floor. "What about the Limits?"

Serle looked at him. "Do you think I don't know my trade? There's nothing in the Guild Limitbook that proscribes two-bladed plows."

"Do you have a Journeyer-approved plan for this plow?" Else's eyes were steady on Serle's face.

“It can take years to get Journeyer approval, Mother. You need this plow now, not five years from now!”

“How could he have a plan, Alse?” Jevon said. “You know as well as I do that only a licensed Modifier can submit plans for approval.”

Serle made an impatient gesture. “I don’t need a Modifier for this. It’s not a different blade, just two approved blades forged together. People make changes like this all the time. Remember that cupboard you built, with drawers that tip out instead of sliding on runners? Or the hoe, with the carved grip to make it easier to hold?”

“My cupboard was still a cupboard when I was done, and so was my hoe. But this thing...this thing is no longer just a plow. It’s something else, something no one has ever thought of before. I’m no Journeyer, and still I can see that.”

There was a silence. Serle’s gaze was locked with his father’s. Between them on the table the plow gleamed dully in the firelight. Bron watched it as he might a dangerous animal, halfway between awe and horror. He sensed, instinctively, the lightness of what his father had said; yet there was a strange power to the object, a deadly fascination. He had to put his hands behind his back, so strong was the urge to touch it.

“It can never be used,” Jevon declared. There was utter finality in his voice.

“What are you talking about?” cried Serle. “Do you think I made it just to sit on a shelf somewhere?”

“A shelf? You must destroy it entirely. It’s an abomination. A crime.”

“You’re not a blacksmith.” Serle’s face was flushed. The muscles of his neck and shoulders were bunched with anger. “You know nothing about forging or the Limits that govern it. I tell you, this plow does not violate any specific Limits—”

“It’s not just the specific Limits, it’s the intent of the Limits, their spirit and their purpose, and well you know it!”

“What do I care for spirit and purpose? The letter of the law is all that counts—isn’t that what we’re always told? All I’ve done is to read between the lines—people do the same thing every day, just to survive. Who uses an ax just for chopping wood? Who uses a spade just for turning earth? Look at the world, Father. Look at the suffering in it. Can you blame me for wanting to make things better, if only just for Mother?”

“You can’t say white is black and make it so!” Jevon was shouting now. “The ways of the world don’t change just because you want them to, you impulsive, thoughtless boy! All the world must live by the Limits. Especially, *we* must live by the Limits. You’ve jeopardized us all by your heedless actions! It is inexcusable!”

“Be silent, both of you!” It was Alse, her voice clear and cutting. “You’ll wake Elene and Olesin. I don’t want to have to trust them to keep this hidden.” She looked at Serle. “Who else knows about this thing?”

He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. “No one. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Not even your Master?”

“No. I worked on it after he had left for the day.”

“No apprentices? No curious passers-by?”

“No one, I tell you! I made sure it was secret.” Suddenly Serle’s anger was gone, like water slipping through cupped fingers. Bron knew his brother. He saw that in his heart Serle had known what he was doing. Yet because he wanted so much to make this thing, he had ignored his own understanding. Bron watched the changes that passed across his brother’s features as Serle faced, for the first time, the danger his actions had brought his family.

“Good,” said Alse. “Only we five know this thing exists. We must keep it that way.”

“I can melt it down again,” Serle said. His voice was subdued.

“No. I don’t want it to leave the house, it’s too dangerous.” She was silent for a moment, thinking; the family waited, as they always did in a crisis, for Alse to find a solution. “We’ll bury it in the pigpen. No one will think of digging there.” She began to replace the cloth wrappings. “Jevon, you stay by the fire and watch Olesin and Elene. Brother and Annis and Serle, come with me. We’ll all dig.”

And dig they did, under a moonless sky, not daring to use even a candle for illumination. With the pigs snorting around them and the night air sharp against their skins, they burrowed down through the foul muck of the pen to a depth greater than Serle’s height, and dropped the plow into the darkness of the earth. It thudded when it hit bottom, more a feeling than a sound, as if it were far heavier than its actual weight. For a moment they stood still, staring into the flat blackness of the hole; then they filled it in again. Exhausted, they left the pen and cleaned themselves at the well. By morning, the trampling of the pigs would have hidden the signs of their activity.

Inside the house, Serle looked at Alse. His eyes were full of tears. “Mother, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m truly sorry. It’s just...it’s just that I wanted...”

Alse held out her arms. Serle bowed his head onto her shoulder. She gripped him tightly. “I know. I know you meant no harm. But—” She took his head between her hands and lifted it so she could look into his eyes. “I’ve told you so often, you must think before you act. We all must. More than anything in this world, our safety depends on that.”

She kissed his forehead, and let him go. He turned toward Jevon. “Father...”

Jevon had gotten to his feet again. He put his hand on Serle’s arm. “It’s as your mother said. We’ll never speak of it again.”

Bron’s mother held out her hands. “We can learn from this. The dangers we face are not only outside us. We must keep the habit of vigilance as we keep the habit of breathing.”

The family formed a circle before the hearth, the shadows of the dying fire moving upon their faces. Linked, they began the process of packing what had happened tonight away behind their barriers, where, with the Tale, it would reside forever in perfect secrecy.

They sought their beds. Bron’s eyes remained open long after Serle had begun to snore softly beside him. He did not close them until after the moon had set, and the sky was paling in warning of the coming day.