



CHAPTER I

IN THE FORGE OF THUNDER

There was only Jen. Jen alone.

His favorite game was to blow his flute and imagine other Gelfling, from just beyond the first trees, summoned by his music, creeping up behind him as he sat beside the waterfalls. They would be smiling because they would think they were hidden from Jen by the rocks. And when he stopped playing his flute and quickly turned around and caught sight of them moving, they would be obliged to stay with him then, and live with him forever, in the valley of the urRu.

It was only a game he played, on his own.

Below the waterfalls were the green pools in which he swam. He dived down to the weeds, then turned face-upward and floated very slowly back to the surface, watching the sunlight above him dance and shatter and dance again, like the hot metals in the pans urTih the Alchemist used. The creatures of the pools swam past him, unafraid, knowing him: the yellow and brown Myrrhie, the long, wriggling Krikids. Jen had always swum with them in their pools, ever since the urRu had brought him to their valley to live with them. He pretended



that the creatures in the pool, and those on the land and of the air, were his friends. As they were, indeed, but friends with whom he could not converse. Only the urRu could speak Gelfling to him, and they always did, because their own language was too difficult for him to learn. The urRu were his real friends, of course, but it was difficult to think of them as friends: they were so immensely old and slow and huge and abstracted from everyday things.

Jen squinted at the sky. It was behaving strangely today.

They were kind to him, the urRu, even though they never cooked food he liked. He could not remember what Gelfling meals were, could only remember his mother as a shadow over his small body, but he was convinced that somewhere there was food he would relish. It did not grow in the valley, the urRu would answer if he questioned them. When he pointed to berries he would have liked to eat, they forbade him to, in fear he might be poisoned.

“Wise Ones,” Jen would say—that was what their name meant, *urRu*, the old and wise ones—“won’t your wisdom tell you if these purple berries are poisonous or not?”

They would shake their great mournful heads, thin grey hair brushing over their ears. “Wisdom is not for knowing but for understanding” was their answer. “Our food is good for you. It will suffice. We cannot know what is bad for a Gelfling. Eat up, and grow strong.”

The urRu loved him, Jen knew that.

Outside the valley, with its rocks and cascading pools, its trees, berrybushes, flowers, and grasses, outside, beyond the boundary of the outer Standing Stones, there must be, he thought, a place where Gelfling food grew; a place where Gelfling had once lived, where he had lived when his mother and father were alive. He thought he could remember being among many Gelfling. Where had they all gone? He

would ask, “Why may I not explore outside this valley?”

“You might lose your way,” the urRu would reply.

“One of you could come with me.”

“No, little one, we cannot leave the valley.”

“Not ever?”

“Not yet.”

“When, then?”

“Not yet.”

“One day, will you? And may I come with you?”

“One day,” they would say, “yes, one day you will leave here.”

“When?”

At that they would raise their old, lined faces, look pensively at the sky, and walk slowly away.

Oh, how sad they seemed to Jen, those weary, kind faces of theirs.

“I would take my flute with me,” he offered. “I would play it all the time I was outside the valley so that you could always come and find me again.”

“Not yet, little one.”

And so he stayed in the valley and played his flute. It was a double flute, and he had learned to play harmonies on it. The urRu encouraged him to practice, and he thought they must have given him the flute in the beginning. Anyway, he could not remember a time when he did not have it. Sometimes urSol the Chanter sang while Jen played. He was a fine musician, urSol, and could sing a third row of harmony, holding Jen cupped in his hand, by his head. The only difficulty they had was that urSol’s voice was loud and deep, sufficient to make the rocks vibrate. To accompany quietly enough so that Jen’s flute could be heard, he had to keep his mouth almost closed, in a sort of humming, and that, he said, was hard work.



The sky today disquieted Jen. The wind kept changing its direction, as he could easily tell from the different patterns of ripples fleeting across the surface of the pools. He had been woken up by thunder, although it was far away, and all day the sky had been rumbling. The Krikids were agitated in the pools. Once Jen had thought he felt the ground move, and had glimpsed something like a spark traveling across the valley and over the rim of rocks above it. It had gone so fast he could not be sure what it was. He had run along the spiral path, past the eighteen caves halfway up the cliff, to survey the valley. He thought he saw two or three more sparks flash across the land.

He wanted to ask his Master, urSu, what it all was. But urSu had not yet come out of the cave they shared, and Jen did not want to go in and disturb him if he was thinking.

The sky was turning black. Jen had seen storms before but none as dark as this. He remembered the day his mother had died. He was frightened of the darkness.

The ripples had altered again, and the thunder was getting louder. Only one sun was visible, and that was hazed by cloud. Jen decided that he would play on his flute. Harmony is the sound that goodness makes, urSol the Chanter said. Jen had to do something to answer the storm.

In a distant land, the storm raged across the sky above a brooding castle. Clouds boiled, purple, yellow, grey, black. Eerie lights glinted and vanished in momentary cloud caverns, lightning concussed the ground, and stray beams of sunlight swept across it like moving spokes. To the bleak crag on which the castle stood, now and then a pulse, a flash, surged across deserts, forests, ravines, craters, rivers, and mountains, along ley-lines of energy from the Standing Stones in the valley of urRu. It was as though the castle were sucking up the land's