

Chapter One

He waited, listening. Satisfied he had evaded his pursuers, he slipped between the pale green saplings and emerged at the far end of the glade. A shower of pebbles clattered through the leaves. Hands on hips, he stared with insolent gray eyes at a pack of younglings, shook his long silver braids arrogantly and grinned. 'Looking for something?'

'Man-spawn!' the tallest youngling yelled. The pack started gathering stones.

The same taunt, the same stupid accusation. Would they never leave him alone? He spat contemptuously and vanished between the trees before the younglings could launch their missiles. He broke out of the green foliage, and sprinted along the fringe of the Aelendyell village, racing past the broad, gray elmoak trunks that soared from their gnarly roots into the dense forest canopy. In the village centre, where swaying ladder vines dangled from the upper level entrances to Aelendyell living and sleeping quarters, he slowed to a jog. Giggling childlings were playing spell games between the great elmoak roots and the supervising adults chatted while they worked. He passed the Warming Stone and the Meeting Ground, and entered the Spell Grove, where the bending tips of giant trees formed a vaulting arched roof.

Beneath the arched roof, nine of the Chosen were listening attentively to the Chanter, the Elder responsible for teaching Aelendyell lore to the Lore Bearers. They

turned as Terin entered, and the Chanter paused, his dark blue eyes patiently waiting for Terin to settle in his appointed place among the Chosen. 'So we know and speak of four Ki of power,' the Chanter continued, 'but only two are bestowed upon our people - one by our heritage, one through our learning.'

Terin's interest was aroused. *If there are four sources of magic, and only two belong to the Aelendyell, what happened to the other two? Why did they only have access to two of the four Ki?*

'We draw the First Ki from the Genesis Stone,' the Chanter explained. 'At the Time of Making, our ancestors were fashioned from the earth and forest of the First Land by Wynowyth and Laeocon, Earth Mother and Sky Father, and in their souls were sealed the Land's secrets and strengths. To these things were wedded the ancient power of the Genesis Stone which came to our people from the sky when the land was still forming. These are the essence of the First Ki, passed down through generations of the Alfyn Great Ones to the Elvenaar, and from them in recent times to our people, the Aelendyell. All things have, within them, their own energy, their own latent magic. As descendants of the Alfyn, we have an innate link with the earth and the forests, a link that inspires the essence of pure magic in us - the First Ki - though what we can do with this source of magic is but a shadow of our Great Ancestors' powers. The First Ki is the magic of Being and Shaping.'

Only a shadow? Terin wondered. *Why only a shadow? Where had the old power gone? What happened to the Genesis Stone?*

'The Second Ki was formed by the great sorceresses of the Elvenaar who discovered the links of power existing between Nature and the fragments of the Genesis Stone that survived the Time of the Great Dragon Burning. This is the magic

of Linking and Recreating. More potent than the First Ki, it requires greater discipline and responsibility.'

'And that's the magic I want to learn,' Terin whispered. 'Powerful magic. Then they'll respect me. Then they'll leave me alone once and for all.'

'Shh.' A Chosen Aelendyell glared at him. Terin frowned and looked away.

'From the writings and wisdom of the Elvenaar sorceresses, the Chosen in every generation are taught the Lore of Magic. When your lessons are complete, you will carry with you, and in you, the First and Second Ki - the strength and the knowledge of every Aelendyell who has passed before you, and of those who will come after you. You will carry great power, and with it even greater responsibility, for the Keepers of the Lore of Magic must be wise in thought and in deed.' The Chanter's deep resonating voice belied the frail, bent figure from whom it came, and Terin was fascinated by the ancient Aelendyell's clever disguise of his deep well of power under a mask of age. He gazed absently into the Chanter's dark blue eyes before he realized the Elder was staring directly at him, following the impact of his words to their mark, as if they were especially intended to spark something in Terin. A message? Or a warning? Lesson over, Terin bolted from the grove before anyone could talk to him.

He skirted a pack of younglings huddled about a hollowed ash, moving with the stealth of a forest cat, a skill he mastered through necessity during his childling and youngling years to avoid trouble. Teasing and hatred directed at him had given him abilities he might never have fostered had the Aelendyell community openly accepted him. They despised him because he was different. Much taller than his peers, as tall as his human father might have stood, his eyes were rounder, less

almond-shaped than the eyes of a full-blooded Aelendyell. He was a bastard child, bred from the rape of an Aelendyell maiden, Solweonyn, who unwittingly went to the aid of a human warrior lost in the dark glens of Meerash. The avenging Aelendyell slew Terin's human father as he staggered from the site of his brutality, and his Aelendyell mother died from a fever contracted during Terin's birth.

The village adults and Elders fostered the orphaned Terin through his childling years. He knew little of his origins, although he recognised at an early age that he was different from the other childlings because his peers and their siblings taunted him. At first, it was because he looked a little different. Then they taunted him because of his increasing height. Finally, somehow, the older ones learned the truth as to why he was different and deeply scarred him with their barbed insults. 'Man-spawn,' they whispered. 'Half-made.' He hated them for it. Hated them all. When the taunting became unbearable, he lashed out. His unusual size and strength made fighting easy, and he quickly punished individual tormentors, but they resorted to gang attacks to counter his physical superiority, and the adults all too eagerly sided with the smaller younglings when fights broke out. Recognising the value in avoiding confrontations, he rejected the attempts of his foster adults to appease him and resorted to building a sleeping place beyond the fringes of the village at the end of his youngling years, driven out by sneering contempt. He lived apart and practised silent movement, speed, efficiency, and spells. Taunt as much as they might, his tormentors would never catch him. He could hate them with passion, loathe them, return taunt for taunt, appear and disappear in the forest at will, and always be one step ahead.

The female Aelendyell avoided him, warned by others that their status in the village would be ruined by a relationship with the half-made being, so he watched jealously as his peers partnered and crept into the forest to enjoy the pleasures of sexual exploration. Aelendyell custom forbade full sexual relationships until both partners were of age and the pairing approved by the Elders, but there were no restrictions on sensual pleasure at any age so the discrete liaisons were overlooked as long as the major taboo was heeded. For Terin, it was just another form of deliberate torture devised by his tormentors to make him suffer for being a bastard. As he matured, he wanted to touch and be touched by a female, fascinated as he watched them bathe naked in the stream, but they shied away and ignored his advances, and his frustration took darker paths.

When the Elders ranked him among the Chosen to learn the Lore of Magic, his enemies were more shocked than he was. Not only did his human body size and strength mark him as a potentially powerful Weapon Bearer, there was the question of his impure blood. Lore Bearers had always been pure Aelendyell because they were entrusted with the duty of maintaining and passing on Aelendyell sacred lore. No one dared to protest his selection, because the Elders' choice was final, but he knew from his peers' spiteful stares that silent discontent brewed. He relished the Elders' choice. As much as he despised the contemptuous Aelendyell society, he wanted to acquire magic because magical skill was more highly respected among the Aelendyell than a warrior's prowess. Lore Bearers rose ultimately to the highest rank of Elder, and it would give him the greatest pleasure to rise in authority above those who tormented and mocked him. His selection was no accident. He meticulously learned the lessons all Aelendyell childlings and younglings were expected to know.

He reveled in exploring intricacies and variations of simple spells that sprang naturally from his Aelendyell heritage. He mastered their power and experimented with embellishments, until none of his village peers could perform spells with his flair and accuracy, or ease. He knew the Chanter couldn't overlook his potential. The Elders couldn't ignore it either. What they didn't know when they presented him with the amber ring of the Chosen was that his prowess stemmed from two inner needs - his deep and driving fascination for magic, and a burning desire to heap calculated revenge upon his peers.

Beyond the village margin, Terin left the narrow pathway to the Meeting Stone and travelled a hundred paces deeper into the forest along his own path, artfully hidden in the treefern groves. At every turn, he paused to listen in case others were following - a habit grown from his mistrust and hatred of the younglings. He knew his Chosen peers could find his sleeping place if they really wanted to track him, but he knew their arrogant disinterest would keep them away. Silly younglings were the real threat, and although they lacked the finer tracking skills of their Aelendyell race he made certain he was safe. At four points along his faint path, he moved and replaced camouflaged false trail endings, and listened.

He had fashioned his sleeping place from the heart boughs of an old ash-elm, a tree smaller than the lofty elmoaks of the Aelendyell village, but thicker foliated, and much better suited to hiding. At its base, between roots that twisted and groped at lush grass, he listened a final time. Then he conspiratorially whispered, made an upward motion with his hands before his chest, and rose gently from the ground as his spell took effect. A moment later, he disappeared into the midst of the ancient tree, ten spans above. He cupped his hands before his face in the darkness and saw

their heat as his eyes adjusted to nocturnal vision, a trait common to all Aelendyell. The sparse interior took form in the darkness and shadow before he spoke softly. 'Leoht.' Heat quickened in the curve of his palms. A vague opalescent sphere shimmered into existence, lingering briefly in a ghostly half-world of faint luminescence before expanding in depth and brilliance to become a floating ball of soft white light spreading its mantle across the leafy sleeping place interior. Terin smiled, pleased with his magical talent.

He nudged a rolled light green parchment back into position on a branch shelf with his fingertips, before leaning forward to draw a small dark wooden casket from behind a wall of leaves. His eyes rested on the intricate laurel leaves and vines, intertwined with figures of ancient tree giants whose knotted faces were full of texture and character, carved in the casket's lid. A magical emanation from within the casket tingled along the nerve webbing in his fingers and down his spine, and he drank in the magical sensations as he lowered the casket to the floor. Squatted on his haunches, he reverently opened the lid to gaze on the object within - the sacred Aelendyell *Book of Lore*. If the Chanter or Elders knew he had the book - he couldn't imagine their response. But he had the *Book of Lore*, and all of the Aelendyell secrets of the Second Ki.

Terin's eyes ached from poring over the ageless arcane enchantments painstakingly written by a hundred hands, committing to memory what he could; committing to parchment what he could not remember. Sheets of scabbled notes lay scattered about the floor. The floating sphere of light waned with his exhausted energy.

When he first opened the leather-bound text and felt its silken touch on the first page, and smelt the fragrant friendliness of time smoothed into the ancient script, he was disappointed by the volume's brevity, its lack of bulk. Instead of a mighty tome too great to comprehend at a cursory glance, the *Book of Lore* was lightweight and thin. But as he started reading, moving cautiously through the word currents, the pages seemed to expand, to grow in number as he turned each one, unfolding fluidly before his seeking eyes, exposing theorems and truths, names and relationships, strengths and weaknesses, histories, secret words and combinations, the heart of the Second Ki, until he was adrift in an ever-expanding sky of knowledge, with no guide for direction, no promise of end, no rookery for rest.

Terin closed the book. The weight of exhaustion pressed in as he slumped against a cool bough and tucked his knees beneath his chin. He let the last theories wash over his mind. On the floor, the *Book of Lore* was reduced in stature again to a thin text, but he knew its secret, the strong illusion binding the expansive Aelendyell knowledge within the tiny boundaries of green leather. And it held a mystery he had never imagined. The First Ki, the source of Aelendyell magic, was dependent not only on their heritage as descendants of the Alfyn Great Ones, but also on a tiny sliver of the original Genesis Stone embedded in an amber ring each of the Chosen received when they were named. And there was more. When the Chosen finally graduated to become Lore Bearers they received a silver necklet with another sliver of the amber Genesis Stone embedded to enhance their magical powers. He wanted a necklet now.

Beyond the leafy walls of his hide-away, faint fingers of light traced soft golden patterns across the forest. Terin flicked back his silver locks and concentrated on the

will-o'-the-wisp rays silently dancing on their leaf and bark stages, and the empty beauty soothed his tired mind. Then he flinched into sharp awareness. Light - it was morning! He scrambled to his feet, snatched up the *Book of Lore*, and returned it to the casket. He had tarried too long. He had to replace the casket in its niche in the Chanter's Well before the theft was discovered.

There was still no light at the forest floor, as Terin ran along the dark invisible paths, quickly, silently, racing towards the village. He veered off the path near the outer fringe, startled by a sound to his left, but a glance told him that a nocturnal creature was scurrying home to beat the light. Relieved, he continued cautiously traversing the village centre to the Spell Grove. Beyond the Spell Grove, he melted again into the edge of the forest to let two Night Watchers pass, and he smiled smugly as they walked by, their patches of body heat shimmering beneath their jerkins and breeches. Less fortunate than he, because they hadn't been chosen to carry the Lore, they were warriors, condemned to a life of training and toil in the physical arts of fighting. A Lore Bearer carried far greater respect into old age among the Aelendyell than a Weapon Bearer. He'd been chosen to hold a position above them, and they hated him for it, and that pleased him. Once the Night Watchers passed beyond vision and hearing, Terin slipped across a tiny clearing to the base of a thick elmoak whose twisted roots gripped the earth like wooden anchors. The old tree boughs cradled the tree-home of the Chanter, and guarded the Chanter's Well between its roots. He scanned for warning sounds from the lodging overhead in the last moments of darkness. High in the forest canopy, sensing the approaching sun rising just beyond the curve of the distant peaks that formed the ragged spines of

the Andrakian and Ureykyeu mountains, the first tentative bird calls invited others to join them in songful appreciation of impending day.

Terin momentarily listened to the birds, and then slid between the great roots to find the Cover Stone. The Stone sat in place, guarding its secrets from everyone but the Chanter and the Lore Bearer Elders. And Terin. He focussed on the dark circle on the ground, and deftly ran his fingers across its polished granite surface, tracing the finely chiselled rune in its face. The Cover Stone was heavy, too heavy even for a team of warriors to dislodge, and it was held in place by a spell, recreated anew by successive village Chanters. The sealing spell was kept secret from those who sought to learn the lore without authority, but he watched and waited, patiently hiding for several afternoons to observe the Chanter work his magic. And then he practiced the opening spell so that he, too, could draw from the Well.

He placed his palm firmly over the rune once he finished tracing its form and whispered to the Stone. *'Un-tynan stith stan sinc-gyfa ond mund-bora.'* Warmth grew beneath his flattened palm. When he lifted his hand from the Stone, he saw the rune glowing white in the semi-darkness. The flat disc of granite slid silently, gracefully aside, uncovering a well, two spans wide, descending into the earth beneath the tree. He pulled the small casket from under his cloak, his fingers tingling with memories of the potency as he caressed the intricately carved wood. It was his to have, his to use. No one could deny him what he was meant to have. Lying on his stomach, his heart racing anxiously, he lowered the casket into the well, found the niche in the granite wall and slid the casket into place. As his fingers released the forbidden object, a deep, resonating voice filled the darkness - a voice of authority, tinged with sadness.

'Why, Terin?'

There was no escape. The Chanter was too powerful to fight. And the sheer shock of discovery rooted him to the lip of the Chanter's Well and stole his initiative. He was caught. He had to bear the consequence. He hated knowing that those who taunted him for his difference would gloat at his capture.