

Chapter One - Early Spring

Around midday, Eran arrived on the outskirts of Eventide.

He'd been following the remains of the broken stone road that still lay between most of the towns he'd visited. The long, open plain of quiet rustling grasses gave way to a forest that smelled of pines and loam. The change in scent was the first thing he'd noticed.

Eran was hunched down, planting the wisPERTONGUE methodically, two paces between each seedling. Eran had planted in a haphazard line at first, but he'd come to realize that it made sense to plant the wisPERTONGUE in the lee of the broken road. The large, angled stones would protect it from the wind, at least. There were no predators. Only the usual Skerricks.

He stood at the edge of the forest and massaged his aching back. He wanted to stop and take a break, to eat some lunch. A single blue Skerrick hovered overhead. The spiky floating ball had followed Eran from the plain, and he glanced at it with some annoyance. Eran continued along the road until he came to a granite sign marking the library: EVENTIDE. After all these centuries, the stone was broken in half and the edges covered in vines and moss.

He brushed off one end of the fallen sign and sat atop it. Unslinging his pack, Eran took out some hardtack and jerky and ate amidst the soughing pine trees.

Footsteps. A young man came down a worn dirt path, carrying a sack. He was built broad and wide like a peasant, tall with a hint of a beard. His hair was brown and shaggy, his eyes deep blue and intelligent. "Are you a pirate?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," Eran replied.

The man pointed to the part of the sign he was sitting on. “That’s my spot,” he said. “I come out here to eat lunch sometimes.” Eran slid along the rough granite surface, and the man sat next to him, taking a sandwich out of the sack. They ate side by side.

How Eventide must have looked 500 years ago. People coming and going. Wagons and carriages carrying scholars and scrolls. The greatest library the world had ever known, Eran’s mother had said. A community of librarians, dedicated to knowledge. And now...

The birds of early spring were already making the song of midday. The man’s food smelled wonderful, and Eran wished he had something besides hardtack and jerky. “I’m Garris,” the man said at last, extending a sun-brown, thick hand.

“Eran.” Garris’s hand was smooth. No calluses from a lifetime of labor. A peasant by family, if not by occupation.

Garris held out the sandwich to him. “Would you like some?” Rough dark peasant bread, with the heavy tang of mustard and preserved vegetables. Eran was not one to accept hospitality from a stranger, but – He nodded and tore off the smallest piece he could politely muster. Eran held up the hardtack and jerky in return, but Garris shook his head.

“Sure you’re not a pirate, then?” he asked. Was he obsessed with them?

“No,” Eran said. “I’m planting flowers.” Garris had no answer. “Are you a pirate?”

Garris laughed, but there was a hint of wistfulness in that laugh. His eyes strayed toward the road out of Eventide. “I’m a scribe.”

A scribe? “Then the library...”

The other man shook his shaggy head. “No library. Only ruins. But even a little village like ours needs a scribe.” Garris’s gaze followed the path of the purple wisPERTONGUE. “Tell me about the flowers.”

At that moment, a series of uneven thuds disturbed the peace of the forest, and another

man stumbled up. Big, fat, bearded and red-faced, he looked back and forth between Garris and Eran, uncomprehending. “Is he a pirate?” he asked, out of breath.

Garris shook his head. “Hass, what is it?”

The man was covered in sweat, and his torn clothes smelled like a barnyard. “Bucket’s stuck. The well bucket. You gotta come. We need the greatstone.”

Garris was off the way he’d come like a Skerrick fleeing a thunderstorm. Not a word to Eran or Hass. Eran tucked the remains of his food into his pack. They had a greatstone that still worked after all this time? Then they were better off than many villages out there in the world.

Hass padded off quickly after Garris down the dirt path, and Eran followed. It seemed that Hass could not go more than a few steps without burping, farting, spitting or scratching himself in various places. “What about the other wells?” Eran asked, trying to keep up.

Hass shook his head. “No other wells.” He speeded up his pace. This was a perfect opportunity to introduce himself. To talk about the wispertongue and his mission.

The smell of pine intensified as they entered the heart of the forest. The dirt path led to a little clearing with other paths. The hub of the town, perhaps. A middle-aged, stooped woman with a seamed face fussed over the workings of a stone well topped with a copper wellhead. She had wide-spaced pale blue eyes that looked as worried as the rest of the townspeople gathered around her. No sign of Garris.

“I could help, if...” Eran’s voice trailed off. He was used to being scrutinized or questioned as a stranger, but here he was being ignored entirely.

Garris entered the clearing from another direction carrying a ceremonial box. Everyone fell silent at once. They were looking to him for direction. He was a natural leader. Those eyes, Eran thought. But it was also the precious box that he held. The greatstone, and what spell scrolls Eventide had left. So much value in that one little container.

The townspeople made way for Garris to approach the well, and he opened the box while the stooped wellkeeper nodded and clasped her hands. Eran thought at first that the greatstone was exhausted, but he was close enough to see the bare flicker of light below its craggy surface. So little magic left. “A spell of reduction, and a spell of adhesion,” Garris said, lifting the scrolls out of the box and placing them beside the greatstone.

Eran had seen the ritual enough times. Not many, but enough. With infinite care, Garris unrolled the scrolls and laid them atop the greatstone. Then he spoke the incantations and the townspeople held their breath.

No response. No flicker. No light. The greatstone was dead.

But surely there were rivers, lakes, other wells. As Eran looked from one face to another, he saw that no matter what he thought, this well was vital. The silence spoke volumes. He had seen an entire town come to an end. If something as simple as this could fell Eventide...

Eran stepped forward. “I can help,” he said. He’d made this offer a few times before, but never in such dire circumstances. Usually, he was coming to help a town who had gotten by without a greatstone, or whose greatstone miraculously still contained some power.

“He’s not a pirate,” Hass said helpfully.

The wellkeeper turned her pale blue eyes to him. “Do you have a greatstone then, dear?”

Hass rolled his eyes. “How could he have a greatstone? They can’t leave the villages. Skerricks get ‘em.”

“I have something else,” Eran said. “Wait here.”

He turned around and started back along the dirt path toward the granite sign. Eran wasn’t sure at first whether the townspeople would follow him, supplicating or chasing him out of town. But in the souging of the forest winds, he was alone. Until Garris caught up beside him, matching his stride.

The tall man was a study in contrasts. His clothes, skin and hair were differing shades of brown, the brown of the forest. But it was those eyes – blue, like the water of the coast – that defined him. A man who would rather be anywhere else. Right now, Eran could not blame him.

When they reached the sign and the end of the forest, Eran knelt down by the end of the line of purple wisPERTONGUE. “Help me gather the flowers, and only the flowers. Leave the stems and roots.” They were already difficult to pull out. Even in the couple of hours since he’d planted them, the magic of the wisPERTONGUE had taken root in the soil.

Garris knelt down and looked at him in confusion. “If you’re planting them, let’s just use the seedlings. Or saplings, whatever they are.” He gestured to Eran’s pack.

Eran started to use his hands to twist off the flower of the first wisPERTONGUE. “It doesn’t work that way,” he said, shaking his head. “They’re part of a chain. Magic, conducted from one plant to the other.” He pointed to where the line of wisPERTONGUE followed the broken road around a corner.

Garris was now gently pulling off the flowers himself. His fingers were stubby, but he had a precise touch. “How far back do they go? Where does the magic come from?”

“Great Mountain.”

Garris’s fingers stopped. His eyes were wide. “Have you been there?”

Eran shook his head. “My mother went, a long time ago. But let’s get this done fast.” He was not worried about Eventide running out of water in an afternoon. The memory of what had happened when his own town had lost its greatstone was never distant. Confusion turned to fear, and then to panic...but he and Garris had soon collected enough wisPERTONGUE flowers. What Eran hoped were enough.

Back at the well, it was as if nobody had moved. They all watched him place the pile of flowers by the well, then the reduction spell scroll. “Let’s try it on its own first,” Eran said.

Garris spoke the words, and Eran said them silently with him. The wind changed direction then, blowing a stray whisper-tongue flower out from under the spell scroll. Eran plucked it from the ground. A moment later, the letters on the spell scroll began to glow.

A release of captured breath. Sighs. Garris rewrapped the scroll and tied it to a length of leather twine, then carefully lowered it into the well. Now came the activating words. Then, he nodded to the wellkeeper. "Try it, Sueanna."

With practiced hands, Sueanna turned the green copper windlass, slowly at first and then with increasing speed. At last, the copper-and-iron bucket appeared at the top of the well shaft. "Only a bit smaller!" she said. "We can still use it."

"The pirate saved us!" Hass said.

Garris shook his head. To Hass, he said: "Take the bucket and the chain. Go find Bagby and have him check them out before we use it again." He turned to the wellkeeper. "If that's all right with you, Sueanna." She nodded.

They all looked at Eran. This was his moment. He needed to speak about the marvels of whisper-tongue, about his mission, his late mother's mission. But Eran suddenly felt tired. The hopes of an entire village had been weighing on him, however briefly.

"What can we give you?" Garris asked. "We don't have much of anything, but..."

The taste of the lunch was still in his mouth, the rustic bread and root vegetables. "Some food. If you don't mind. I'm a bit tired of hardtack and jerky."

Garris sighed. The relief was etched across his face, and Eran could see how used the other man was to being asked to do things for the village.

Garris clapped a massive arm around Eran's slight shoulders. "Tell Lina we'll be at our cottage," he told the group. "Whenever she gets back from her rounds." There was no arguing with that arm. Eran did not want to argue with the arm, or the burly man who possessed it.

Then it was only him and Garris, walking along another dirt path through the forest. He heard the gentle babbling of a stream in the distance and wanted to ask the other man about it. But Eran did not wish to disturb the afternoon. Tree branches creaked around them. He smelled the earthy smell of decomposing leaves and fresh loam.

Heading through an unknown forest to a stranger's cottage, alongside a man he'd only known for a little while, Eran did not feel afraid. He did not feel concerned, or even questioning. He felt safe, somehow. There was no threat, no fear, no worry. Only the resinous smell of spring pines and the humming of cicadas around them.

He still had the purple flower he'd picked up from the ground. As they walked, Eran twirled it back and forth in his fingers, spinning it like a pinwheel. "Now will you tell me about the flowers?" Garris said. There was a note of sweet reproach there. An invitation to share.

Eran dared to tuck the flower behind Garris's left ear, laying it flat against the man's shaggy hair. He was no pirate, but perhaps his story was even stranger. "I'm bringing magic back to the world," Eran said at last with a smile. "Would you like to help me?"