

# Reaching for the Stones

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E'ile's mind was on Springfest. She knew that following her Great Uncle Aldur's trail was paramount, yet she wished that she had been able to attend Springfest as well. After the April Gather, E'ile had journeyed to The Grove to visit Brother Bart and seek his help in finding the populated area on the western shores where Aldur was last heard from, centuries ago. Brother Bart did not know what the area might have been, but he allowed E'ile the run of his library to research the ancient geography. E'ile had found an old, dusty scroll that told of a group of villages in close proximity, sharing a central market. The semi circle of villages was near The Westron Sea. The southernmost of these villages was bordered by a line of mountains, and across the mountains was desert.

From the moment E'ile placed her hands upon the scroll, she had felt a sense of urgency. She didn't understand it, but she felt compelled to waste no more time before embarking on her quest. She must locate the populated area and find the desert tribe that Aldur had gone to stay with. She knew that it was a long shot, but maybe he was still with them. She hoped it would be that easy...

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E'ile shifted her pack on her back and turned to speak to Khallil, a step behind her. "We're walking on an overgrown stone wagon path," she observed out loud.

"We've been walking on stone for the last quarter of an hour. If you hadn't been daydreaming you would have noticed sooner," Khallil playfully scolded E'ile.

E'ile chose to ignore his comment, and they continued to follow the path, which had been a faint overgrown trail through the grass and trees when they began their journey many weeks ago. E'ile was grateful to Khallil for coming with her. She knew he had other responsibilities and questions of his own to answer, yet he had offered to accompany her and had not even complained about missing Springfest.

The wagon path eventually led them to the ruins of ivy covered stone walls and archways. They had reached one of the villages. They followed the path through the apparently abandoned village in a respectful silence.

"This must have been beautiful." Khallil barely broke the silence with a reverent whisper.

"It still is." A dark, stocky youth stepped out from behind an archway with a twinkle in his eye.

Khallil had his hand on his sword, and E'ile had her bow knocked and aimed at the stranger before he had even finished speaking. "Who are you?" Khallil asked as he took a step towards the stranger.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" the youth returned. "I come here often. You have obviously never been here before."

E'ile couldn't explain it. She felt as if she had lived this all before. Somehow, as soon as the stranger spoke, she knew he was a friend. E'ile lowered her bow. "Khallil, it's alright."

Khallil looked at her inquisitively, but he did not remove his hand from the sword. "There are those that wish you harm," he reminded E'ile. "We don't know what powers are at work here."

The stranger watched E'ile as she approached him without hesitation. He responded to Khallil's warning, though the words were meant for E'ile as well. "She knows I am a friend. She sees this meeting in dreams. Our Elder dreams the same. He sent me here."

E'ile stepped directly in front of him and reached up to push his hair back, revealing pointed ears. Upon close examination, she saw that he was actually close to her age. She felt that same sense of having done this before. "I *have* dreamt of this. I do not understand. Why would your Elder dream of me?" She wondered if this strange elf was from the tribe she sought! Maybe the Elder was Aldur!

"I was sent to meet you and bring you back. I am called Eitan, and I am of the Makori. I know his name is Khallil, but I do not know how you wish to be called." He grinned, and the twinkle reappeared in his eye.

E'ile glanced over at Khallil. It was evident that he did not trust this convenient stranger, but she felt that he was being overprotective and perhaps even a little bit jealous. She decided to be honest, but cautious. "I am called E'ile. Your Elder's dream didn't tell my name?" she inquired.

Eitan shrugged. "Our Elder is cryptic. He sees much that he does not share with us." He squinted up at the sun, "Well E'ile and Khallil, we should get going if we are to reach the tribe by nightfall." And with that, he started for a nearby alley.

E'ile again looked at Khallil. He nodded, and they started after Eitan. The stranger led them through what seemed to be a short maze of twists and turns through narrow alleyways. They emerged from under an archway and realized they had stepped out of the village directly into a thickly wooded forest.

After a few minutes the ground began to slope upward. It didn't take the couple long to realize they were being lead into the mountains. E'ile attempted to find out more about the tribe, the elder and the village they had just left. Eitan, however, resisted her attempts at conversation and would only raise an eyebrow and place his index finger against his lips. To E'ile's way of thinking, his response left much to be desired.

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The sun was hanging low in the sky as they emerged from the mountains onto a desert of red sand.

Eitan frowned. "It will be dark before we reach the tribe," he said. "We should travel faster."

"We are not afraid of the dark!" E'ile quickly piped up.

Khallil had studied the stranger as they climbed through the mountains. "It's not the dark, he's afraid of. He fears something that can happen after dark."

Eitan turned to look at Khallil. "You are almost correct. Our Elder warned me that we must reach the safety of the tribe before nightfall and that we should keep quiet along the way."

They quickened their steps and reached the tribe just as the sun disappeared over the horizon. They approached a fire ring where the desert elves had just finished eating and were beginning to enjoy an evening's merriment. When the Makori saw Eitan with the two strangers, a hush fell upon them. The Elder stood and stepped forward to greet them.

"Well done, Eitan." The Elder addressed the youth. He then turned to E'ile and Khallil, placing one hand on her shoulder, and the other on his. "Welcome and well met. I know you both seek answers to your questions. Eat and relax first. When the moon rises, Eitan will bring you to me, and the four of us shall speak of what we need to." He walked past them, and continued out beyond the circle of light cast by the fire.

The Makori were not naturally hospitable to outsiders, but their Elder had welcomed this couple, and so they followed his lead. E'ile and Khallil were handed plates of food and they seated themselves off to the side of the circle, so they might be able to discuss their impressions of the day's events.

"You're not suspicious anymore." E'ile wasn't asking. She knew Khallil well enough to know it to be true. She just wanted to know what had convinced him that these were friends.

"I can't fully explain," Khallil said. "I spent the better part of today studying Eitan. He is very hard working and earnest. He is mischievous, perhaps, but duplicity is not within his capabilities. And then there is the Elder..." Khallil's voice trailed off.

E'ile sat patiently waiting for Khallil to finish formulating his thoughts.

“He is very old,” Khallil stated abruptly. “He is not the oldest being I’ve ever met, but he is definitely in the top few.”

“Do you think he’s Aldur?” E’ile held her breath. She felt the hope welling up within her.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know. His magic is very strong. He has years of energies and learning beyond his natural talents, which are considerable. He wraps himself in an impenetrable cloak or a shield of mystery, so you can’t get a reading on his origins. Perhaps he will share some of that information with us tonight.”

“Not very likely.” E’ile and Khallil had watched Eitan wander over towards them. “Do you mind if I join you?”

Khallil motioned with his hand to indicate that Eitan should sit next to him.

“Our Elder does not explain much to anyone,” Eitan explained. I told you earlier that he was cryptic. Cryptic doesn’t even begin to cover it. I believe that his dreams show him far more than anyone has a right to see. When I was a child, I asked him once about the dreams. He explained that using the knowledge of the dreams is dangerous. It can upset the balance of nature. He told me never to question him about the dreams again. Sending me to the village for you, is out of character for him. That was a strong action to take. He does not explain himself, so we may never know his reasons.”

The three sat in silence for a time. They listened to the Makori sing songs around the fire. Eventually the moon rose and they stood wordlessly. E’ile and Khallil followed Eitan as he led them beyond the circle of light. The three paused for a moment as their eyes adjusted to the soft moonlight. Eitan led them past the large tents serving as communal housing for the tribe, to a large, flat rock. The Elder sat upon the rock, waiting for them.

He motioned for the three younger elves to join him on the rock. Eitan climbed up and seated himself to the Elder’s right, Khallil to the left, and E’ile sat down directly across from him. The Elder motioned for them all to hold hands, he raised his face towards the moon and shut his eyes. Eitan bowed his head, though his eyes remained open. Khallil and E’ile continued to watch the Elder. The air around him seemed to shimmer in silver waves. Eventually the Elder lowered his head and opened his eyes.

“Before we became the Makori, we were many small tribes. Each of the small tribes kept to themselves, except for an annual visit to the human market across the mountains. On one of these visits, Kyla, daughter to a clan chief of a small tribe, met a wood elf from across the continent.” The Elder paused and fixed his gaze on E’ile. “This wood elf was called Aldur.”

E’ile held her breath as the Elder continued. “He was running away from something. He returned with Kyla and eventually he became as one with the tribe. His past life was all but forgotten as he enjoyed the simple life of a desert elf.”

E’ile could hold her tongue no longer. “And what became of Aldur? Are you my Great Uncle?”

The Elder frowned and admonished her. “You must learn patience. The dreams have shown me much. If you do not learn how to hold your tongue, your ultimate task may never be accomplished. Some things you are not meant to know. But I will provide a brief response to your query. Aldur is no more.”

E’ile’s shoulders slumped forward. Khallil squeezed her hand.

The Elder continued, “When the great plague came, the small tribes banded together. We held the Council of Unity and decided to merge into one tribe in order to survive this threat. This was no ordinary plague. Our greatest healers and mages were ineffective against it. The dreams showed us a way to enhance the restorative powers of the springs in the mountains. Four specific stones needed to be placed on a hidden, naturally occurring shelf behind a waterfall flowing into one of the springs. The stones appearing in the dreaming are not native to our region. When the dreams were discussed at the Council and these stones were described, it was discovered that Aldur possessed stones such as these.

“These stones were placed on the shelf centuries ago, and there they remain. Recently they appear in the dreams - different versions, different outcomes. Sometimes the same actions have different outcomes.

Uncertainty is in the ground we walk on and the air we breathe.” Again he fixed his gaze on E’ile. “You seek these stones.”

E’ile remained silent but she nodded her head in affirmation.

“You will leave tomorrow. The spring where the stones are located is called Makor. Eitan will take you. The smallest details can change everything.” And with that, the Elder motioned for them to climb down off the stone.

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At dawn, the three set off to back track along the path they had taken the day before. They followed it until they reached the mountains, and then they veered off along a different mountain pass. They followed this trail in silence, each one lost in thought. Eitan could not believe the amount of information the Elder had shared with these strangers. Many in the tribe were not even aware of those parts of the history. Those stones protected the Makori. Removing the stones could be dangerous. Eitan wondered what the repercussions would be for the tribe.

Khallil was worried about E’ile. The warning from the Elder about E’ile needing to hold her tongue was especially worrisome. She had grown more patient in the months after learning of her mother’s death, but from the moment she had placed her hands on the scroll, her impatience and impudence was back with a vengeance. He knew this would only lead to trouble.

E’ile’s thoughts were on her ancestors. Niamh and Melusine. Now she was about to move one step closer to rededicating the Sacred Scrying Pool, their legacy to her. Her thoughts were also on Aldur. E’ile wondered how he had met his end. Meleah. Had she played a role in Aldur’s demise?

It was shortly before midday when they began to hear the waterfall. They eventually emerged from the wooded path at the edge of a small spring. Three sides of the spring were bordered with a lush green landscape. This was in stark contrast to the barren cliff rising across the water from them. The sheer rock face provided an ominous backdrop for the rushing waterfall.

Eitan pointed to the cliff. “We must climb about two thirds of the way up. The shelf is just below that outcropping where the angle of the waterfall becomes extremely steep.”

They walked around the spring and stood before the cliff. On closer examination, E’ile realized that the wall towering in front of them was not as sheer as it had appeared. There were not a lot of hand and footholds, but there were enough that she felt confident that she could reach the stones.

Khallil put his hand on E’ile’s shoulder, “I will retrieve them for you.”

“I can do it,” E’ile protested. “I’m not afraid to climb.”

Khallil turned her towards him, “I know, but let me do this for you.”

Eitan interrupted them, “E’ile must go. It is her search.”

Khallil thought for a moment about everything the Elder had conveyed to them the night before. Eitan was right. “I understand.” Khallil said finally, still looking at E’ile. Then he turned to Eitan. “You don’t have to come, though. You’ve already taken a great deal of trouble for us.”

Eitan smiled at the two elves in front of him. He shook his head. “It has only been a day, yet we are bound together. I will see this through with you. Somehow, this quest is entwined with the fate of my tribe.” Eitan reached for the first handhold and began to pull himself up. “I will lead. When we are just below the shelf, I will explain how we must do this.” He tossed a small leather pouch to E’ile. “It’s for the stones. Put it around your neck.”

The three climbed along the left side of the waterfall in silence for what seemed like many hours, but was really less than two. Finally, Eitan stopped.

“Khallil,” he called over the roar of the waterfall, “climb over me and then a little to the right. E’ile you need to follow Khallil and climb as far over to the right past him as you can without actually being in the water. Then reach behind the waterfall. You will find a stone ledge there. Carefully feel along the ledge until you reach the stones. There should be four. One each of Blue Calcite, Moonstone, Obsidian, and Ruby/Zostite.”

Khallil and E’ile carefully followed Eitan’s directions. E’ile shimmied her arm behind the water and discovered a hollowed out dry area. Slowly, she continued to reach back into the hollow until she found the ledge. She gently placed her hand on the ledge and started softly patting along it to find the stones. It wasn’t long before her hand came down on a smooth, circular, bump. Her fingers closed around it and she knew she had one of the stones. She quickly discovered the other three and carefully gripped them in her palm as she withdrew her arm from behind the water. E’ile gently dropped the stones into the pouch Eitan had given her and smiled broadly in relief as she turned to look at Khallil and Eitan.

Suddenly, the cliff began shaking. It wasn’t just the cliff. Everything began to shake. There were loud cracking sounds. E’ile’s ears began to fill with a huge roar. She saw Eitan mouth the words, “Hold on!” He must have been shouting but E’ile couldn’t hear anything. She felt her grip loosening as the violent shaking continued. She couldn’t hold on anymore. Suddenly, E’ile felt herself falling. She stared up at Khallil and Eitan, seeing the terror in their eyes as they watched her fall. She saw Khallil let go and push himself off the cliff after her. They were both falling, falling...