



KEEPER OF THE STONES

AERYN RUDEL

Ragnor came out of the cave opening and found Crag, his troll bouncer, with one foot on the prostrate body of a trollkin.

“Eat?” the troll asked when he saw Ragnor.

Ragnor recognized the trollkin’s quitari pattern as belonging to one of the nearby mountain kriels. Her axe and shield were within reach on the ground, though she made no move toward them.

“Ragnor . . . Skysplitter?” the trollkin said, laboring to speak with nine hundred pounds of troll on top of her.

“Eat?” Crag asked again, more insistently.

Ragnor paused. He hated being distracted from reassembling a tantalizing piece of shattered krielstone, but he didn’t want Crag to get in the habit of eating trollkin. “Let her up, Crag.”

“No eat,” Crag said, his disappointment obvious. Had he wished, Ragnor could have forced the troll to back away, but he had found it best to instruct when possible. The troll lifted his foot and stepped back, letting the pinned trollkin climb to her feet.

“I am Ragnor. Who are you? Why do you disturb me uninvited?” Ragnor asked.

“I do not do so lightly,” the trollkin said, drawing herself up. “I am Teshar of Nortol Kriel. I have come to ask for your help. My village is beset by enemies, white-skinned elves accompanied by scaled beasts. Many of my kriel have died.”

“Blighted Nyss and dragonspawn,” Ragnor said, scratching at the stony growths on his chin. “I thought we had rid this area of them.”

“We have heard the tales of your battles, of your power over earth and stone. We know you command our full-blood troll cousins. With your strength and theirs we could—”

“No,” Ragnor said. “I like my solitude and am not seeking a fight.”

“But the Nyss have set up a camp in the valley beyond our village and are raiding almost daily, dragging the bodies away for—”

“Wait,” Ragnor said and stepped toward her. “Which valley?”

Teshar’s brow furrowed in confusion. “South of our village, at the Teeth of Horrum.”

Anger kindled in Ragnor’s belly. The Teeth of Horrum were five ancient krielstones that dated back to the first runes ever carved by trollkin on stone. It was their proximity, and that of several other sites, that had drawn Ragnor to settle here. They were sacred, part of the first bond between Dhunia, the stones that were her body, and her favored children. The thought of blight-infected monstrosities befouling them churned his stomach. “I will deal with them,” he said.

Teshar inclined her head. “Thank you, Skysplitter.” She recovered her axe and shield under the watching eye of Crag. “I will gather my warriors at once.”

Ragnor shook his head. “You would only get in the way and imperil the stones. Keep your warriors where they are needed—protecting your village. I will deal with this foe myself.”

Teshar hesitated only briefly, and Ragnor saw relief in her features. She was not eager to battle dragonspawn—not that the warlock could blame her. She thanked him again and left quickly, rushing back to her people.

Ragnor said, “Ready yourself, Crag. There are dragonspawn to fight.”

Crag shook his head, looking doleful. “Taste bad,” he said, but he went to get his shield and the length of chain attached to a spiked ball he used as a weapon.



The valley was old, a rift in the mountains that had once held a thriving trollkin kriel. The stones after which this place was named jutted from the

earth at the northern end of the valley like great grey fangs. It was a holy place, steeped in the forgotten energies of an age when runes of arcane power were new. To Ragnor, who had painstakingly preserved the site for many years, the presence of the intruders was unforgivable. He knew the enemy: Nyss corrupted by the fell energies of a dragon. Their bodies were twisted and malformed, studded with scales and spines, and their eyes were soulless black orbs.

High above the valley floor, Ragnor could count perhaps a dozen infantry below, armed with long blades. With them walked a massive carnivore. This scaled horror had six limbs, a large head, and a vast maw lined with rows of blade-sharp teeth. Like other dragonspawn it was eyeless, yet it could sense its surroundings through other means, in some ways better than a natural beast.

Ragnor reached out and touched the minds of his trolls. His strongest, these three were tough, resilient, battle-tested, and always hungry. Juk and Grash, an axer and impaler that had been with him for years, waited near the entrance to the valley. Crag was closer, just a few paces away staring down at the enemy with growing rage and hunger. He gripped his shield in his left hand and his spiked ball and chain in his right. At nearly ten feet tall and half a ton, he could split a boulder with that flail. All three trolls were simple, direct, and without guile—traits Ragnor appreciated. He trusted them with his life.

“Come, Crag,” Ragnor said. “I have need of your strength.”

“Fight now,” Crag said. He was hungry and angry, and battle satisfied both.

Ragnor made his way through the trees lining the cliff above the valley and rejoined Juk and Grash. They were gripping their weapons tightly and pacing, also eager to fight. His plan was simple. He would go at the enemy directly and kill them all. He would hit them hard and fast, relying on surprise and his own power to protect him and his trolls. It should be enough.

The warlock hefted his formidable stone hammer, Rumbler, and began moving toward the entrance to the valley. The trees provided ample cover, and the enemy had posted only two sentries, each armed with a long sword and armored in ornate steel plate.

He mentally reached out to Grash to urge the troll forward and followed, leaving Crag and Juk behind for now. Stealth wasn't Grash's strength, but

he just needed to get the impaler within a dozen paces of the guards. When they were close enough, Grash pulled a heavy spear from the huge quiver on his back. Ragnor closed his eyes and drew on the troll's essence to strengthen his arm. Looking through the troll's eyes, the warlock helped guide his aim. Grash drew back his arm and hurled the spear at the nearer sentry, sending the massive weapon farther than it could have gone unaided. The spear struck its target with a meaty thud, and its momentum pushed the Nyss backward and pinned him to a nearby tree.

The second sentry reached for a war horn at his belt, and Ragnor knew Grash didn't have time for another throw. He hefted Rumbler and charged, reaching the Nyss just as the horn touched his lips. Ragnor smashed the huge stone maul into the elf's chest, releasing a magical shockwave of energy that shattered the sentry's bones, pulped his internal organs, and flung him through the air. The elf landed in a pile a few paces from Grash, still twitching, and the troll brought one heavy foot down on his skull with a satisfying crunch.

Ragnor summoned Crag and Juk and pushed them forward as they entered the valley. The axer and bouncer had heavier armor, and he wanted to hold Grash back to use his spears against threats the other two trolls couldn't reach. He could see the stones now, surrounded by Nyss tents. The enemy hadn't reacted to their intrusion yet, but it wouldn't be long. He urged Crag and Juk to run.

A war horn sounded, then another, and the tents disgorged a score of defenders. The enemy warriors at the fore carried swords like the sentries had, and they formed up into a tight line as Ragnor and his trolls approached. The carnivore moved out ahead of the Nyss soldiers, urged forward by a female elf wielding a barbed staff.

The warbeast was the greatest threat. He'd seen creatures like it in action and knew it could kill Crag and Juk in a straightforward clash. He drew in a deep breath as he ran behind his trolls, summoning the most potent ward he knew. He let the power fill him, lend strength to his will, and fuel his magic. The ward flowed into him and through his connection with his trolls, granting their flesh the resilience of the mountain.

Crag and Juk hit the carnivore seconds later, axe and flail slashing in murderous arcs. Ragnor guided their strikes, and the pleasant shock of steel biting into scaled flesh flowed back through his connection with them. Black ichor splattered their armor, but the wounds they'd inflicted

were not mortal. The beast pulled back, drew in a deep breath, and spewed a jet of blue fire at the trolls. The flames licked over them, making their armor glow red with heat, but the primal magic he'd invoked protected them from the worst of the hellish fire.

The two trolls attacked the carnivain again, and it staggered as their weapons tore into its flesh. Its handler had retreated, and the swordsmen were advancing. Ragnor commanded Grash forward to help them and again summoned his magic. Runes flashed in the air, and the strength of Dhunia flowed through the earth toward the advancing enemy. The ground shook and then burst upward beneath the elven swordsmen, flinging bodies in all directions.

Ragnor felt the protective ward he'd placed around his trolls fading. The carnivain was badly wounded—but not dead. Summoning a last burst of energy, the blighted beast surged forward and locked its mammoth jaws around Crag's torso. Ragnor could feel the troll's bones crack and internal organs burst beneath that terrible pressure, and he siphoned fury away from Juk and Grash to heal the wounds. Crag's anger at being mauled bloomed in Ragnor's mind, and he pushed that rage into the troll's return attack. Crag whirled his flail around his head to gain momentum and then brought it down on the carnivain's skull like a falling meteor. Bone fragments and brain matter splattered in a wide arc, and the enemy warbeast collapsed, releasing Crag from its jaws.

The troll fell to his knees, and through their mental connection Ragnor could feel the blood and energy draining from him. There wasn't time to deal with that now; the Nyss were reforming into a line. Ragnor and his remaining trolls charged forward. Juk and Grash hit the Nyss first, their weapons sweeping out to smash armor and rupture flesh.

Ragnor ran to the left of his trolls, away from the line of Nyss warriors and toward the beast master. Spell runes flared to life around her staff, and before he could reach her a cloud of roiling green mist formed over Juk and Grash and then burst into a rain of caustic yellow fluid. The trolls howled in pain as the acid ate through their armor to burn skin.

The Nyss saw her peril just before Ragnor reached her. She brought up her staff to ward off Rumbler, but the hammer was descending with all Ragnor's strength and momentum behind it. It smashed through the staff and crushed the beast master's head like an overripe gourd.

Ragnor pulled Juk and Grash back with a thought and summoned his magic again. Runes glowed above the ground, and the earth erupted beneath the enemy warriors and hurled them into the air. He then urged Juk and Grash back into the fight, letting them attack with renewed fury. Soon only one Nyss warrior remained, and he bravely faced both trolls.

The elf ducked Juk's first axe blow but wasn't quick enough to avoid the backswing. He had moved closer to Juk, so it was the haft of the axe and not the blade that smashed into his body. He was flung to the ground, his sword flying from his hand, and Grash moved forward to impale him with a spear.

"No," Ragnor called out. "Hold him."

The troll put one huge foot in the center of the elf's armored chest, pinning him to the ground. Ragnor touched the minds of each of his trolls, taking stock of their wounds. Juk and Grash were not badly wounded, but Crag was fading fast.

Ragnor looked to the ancient stones he had come here to protect, some splashed with Nyss blood, then back to Crag, who was close to death. Only troll hardiness was keeping the bouncer alive. The warlock made his decision. He reached down and tore away a large piece of the dead beast master's tunic, then strode to the nearest krielstone and began cleaning away the enemy's blood. He moved from one to the next, his anger at the sacrilege growing with each smear of blood he wiped away. When he was finished, Ragnor pointed to the remaining Nyss warrior.

"Pick it up," he said. Grash grabbed the Nyss by an ankle and hauled him up. Ragnor walked over to where Crag lay on his back. The troll's wound was horrific, a gaping hole in his midsection through which his ribs and viscera were visible. "Bring it here."

Crag looked up at Ragnor. "Eat?" he said weakly. Trolls could heal rapidly from wounds, but they needed to consume large quantities of food to do it—especially if the food were blighted. Grash dropped the wounded Nyss next to Crag. The elf tried to crawl away, whimpering, but Ragnor pinned him to the ground with his hammer.

Ragnor smiled at Crag and nodded. "Yes, Crag. Eat."

