

# THE LAST KEEPER by J.V. Hilliard

## EXCERPT

“Drenering uderforer dodt,” the blind man uttered.

All the men surrounding him winced in agony, grabbing at their chests and throats. A pain grew in Graytorris’s arms, pulsing through his veins. A magical necrosis drained the energy from the trees and grass around him. The wave of energy inside him morphed from life to death, temporarily becoming one. The spell was working.

“Drenering uderforer dodt,” he repeated, with some difficulty.

The troops writhed and collapsed to their knees, as did Rhron, though Radu had evidently escaped. Graytorris did his best to ignore their groans, as well as the brutal, scorching pain that racked his entire body as the spell took effect.

Almost unable to stop himself, Graytorris repeated the incantation one final time, completing the spell. He fell to his knees, trying not to faint, but the spell had taken something from him, too. He realized that Rhron’s knights were dead, as much from a rising stench as through his own magical senses. But the spell kept moving on to the valley itself, leaching life out of the flora, stilling the limbs of insects, seeming to even deaden the noise of the nearby stream.

He felt the stolen strength of the living things in the hollow rush into his limbs. The pain was still there, but as seconds passed it became less intense and he found he could stand tall.

Before he knew what he was doing, he made his way to his former friend’s corpse, where it lay in the grey and ossified grass. The plants, once green and pliant, now crunched harshly under his feet, and once or twice even broke his skin. Graytorris knelt among them, feeling for Rhron’s body.

When his fingers found the mail-covered torso, it rose slightly under his hand.

He started. One hand flew to Rhron’s mouth to check for breath, and he felt the faintest gust touch his palm. Stunned, he sat back. The captain was clearly on the edge of death, but by all rights he shouldn’t have survived the first wave of the spell, let alone the last.

Graytorris paused, listening to Rhron's quiet, labored breathing. Apologies and explanations sat just under his tongue, but his lips twisted against them.

"You brought this on yourself," he told the dying man.

The two of us must make a grim picture, he thought, sitting in the middle of a stillness born of death rather than peace, surrounded by petrified trees and scorched earth. This hollow will never be a natural place again.

His heart skipped a beat, then slowed to a deathly pace as the spell continued to exact its toll on his body. The pain returned with a vengeance, searing through his flesh like hellfire.

In his agony, a single, wild thought suddenly entered his brain, and he quickly spoke the incantation of another spell—one that would both save and damn Rhron. One that would preserve their friendship, even if only in its most twisted possible form. In that moment, his only wish was to not be alone.

Though still unconscious, Rhron drew in a harsh breath, followed by a loud, keening scream.

The cracking of bone met Graytorris's ears as the man beside him began to transform. At the same time, his own pain intensified so that he too was unable to keep from crying out. His strength finally drained to its limit by the necrotic ravages of the spell that had petrified the hollow, Graytorris lost consciousness and collapsed to the ground.

Moments later, the nameless beast that had once been Rhron Talamare stirred and whuffed quietly, sat back on its haunches, and waited for its master to awaken.