

THE LAST KEEPER

BOOK 1 THE IMMORTAL KEEPERS

HM HODGSON

PROLOGUE

One will come who carries the powers of all the worlds, and unto that power comes the strength to kill the World Tree. To kill you. And should the Tree fall on the rise of the black moon, none from the Higherworld, none from the Underworld will ever set foot again in the Mortalworld. You will be stranded. You will be at the mercies of any who dwell in your world at that time. Beware, Keeper, your world faces its most dire fight this night.

~ Freya, goddess of love, sex, and war

1

WARRAGUL, VICTORIA

A waning crescent moon disappeared behind storm-fueled clouds as India Jones shut the hotel room door and sagged against it. The bed was right there ... five short steps away. She just had to force her leaden legs to take them.

Mustering the energy to move, she pushed off the door—and her stomach growled. Of course. Because she hadn't eaten since ... she scowled, when *had* she eaten? She forced her fatigue-fogged brain to think.

Huh. She'd stopped for petrol before the border, over four hours earlier, and had grabbed something greasy and quick to eat. She eyed the bed. Her belly growled again.

Food first, then sleep.

Except, right then, all-too-familiar goosebumps prickled over her arms, and the fresh green scent of her magic tingled in her nose. Her stomach dropped. *Oh crap, what next?*

She pushed off the door, darted into the small bathroom and grasped the edge of the chipped cabinet.

A dash of icy water hit the back of her hand. She jolted, automatically looking up for the leak.

A torrent of water smacked into her face.

Adrenaline shoved through her and she yelped, spluttering. What the hell? Shielding her face, she tried to make out what had to be a bloody big gaping hole in the ceiling of the tiny bathroom.

Except—the ceiling was perfectly normal.

India stifled another cry as more water poured down, echoing the driving rain from the storm outside. Holy crap, the storm might as well have been inside, beneath the perfectly fine-looking ceiling.

Shit, shit, shit. *Not again.* She needed a spell—needed something to stop this screwed up magic.

A knock sounded at her hotel room door. Her heart rammed inside her chest. *Oh no, uh-uh.* No way could anyone come in here.

She darted a look around the small room—towels, she needed towels. Lots of them. But first she had to stop the rain. If only she knew the spell for that. But, crap, India didn't even know the spell to make it start.

Then the rain ended as abruptly as it had begun.

The knock sounded again, slightly louder.

“India, this is Simone, the manager here.” The muffled words filtered through the door. “I just checked you in.”

“Ah, hi,” India called out across the room. She swallowed hard, tried to calm her racing pulse. “Just a moment.”

“No worries. I’ve brought you up an extra blanket. And I know the room’s small, but I hope you find it okay.”

Okay? Okay? India’s chest rose sharply beneath rapid breaths. She swallowed and turned around.

The bathroom was covered in water, the small square

tiles slippery beneath her boots. The once neatly folded and fluffy white towels were now lumpy sodden messes. Water-logged carpet, where the bedroom floor met tile, squelched underfoot as she took a step toward the bed.

No, the room was not okay. *She* was not okay.

Though, thankfully, the water seemed contained—mostly—to the bathroom.

India tiptoed to the door, her dark hair plastered to her neck and shoulders. She slicked the long bangs off her face. With a deep breath, she opened the door a smidge and peeked out from behind it, making sure her drenched shirt and jeans were hidden even as she forced a smile.

Sure enough, the woman who'd checked her in earlier stood there, a thick woolen blanket folded in her arms.

"Hi," Simone said. "Hope you don't mind me coming up, but it gets chilly here at night, even in autumn, so I've brought you an extra blanket. And since the kitchen's closing soon, if you're hungry, I can take your order so you don't miss out on a hot meal."

India blinked. The easy, genuine smile on Simone's face was almost soothing, but India couldn't let her guard down. And she couldn't take the blanket without displaying her wet sleeves. "Thanks for the blanket, but I'll be fine. And I'm happy to come down to order something to eat."

Simone tucked the blanket under her arms and chuckled. "No way, that's not how we treat visitors in the country. And hey, any chance you're related to Liz Jones? I source some of my produce from her and heard through the local grapevine—it's a reliable source of info here in town—that her granddaughter was visiting."

Butterflies took flight in India's stomach. She shifted her feet and ran a hand over her hair. The damp material of her

sleeve brushed against her cheek, and she dropped her arm fast. But Simone's gaze only moved over India's hair.

"Oh, wow, you were having a shower," she said. "I'm so sorry for interrupting you. How about I save you a plate of tonight's special? It's chicken schnitzel with mash. The mash is made from Liz's potatoes."

"Um, that'll be great, thanks. I'll just finish up here and then come down." India managed to keep the smile on her face until Simone left. Closing the door, she sank against it.

Her grandmother—"Nan" to the family—was the reason India had reluctantly returned to her childhood home. Nan was India's only hope of understanding her magic. No way would she have come back otherwise.

Because, holy crap, did she need help with her magic!

Hot tears welled, but she dashed them away, stared up till they stopped. A single light bulb hung from an ornate ceiling rose in the center of the room. Her witchcraft used to be the polar opposite of that intricately detailed rose. Magic for India had always been an easy, minor, spell-driven part of her life. Magic-lite.

Until three weeks ago, anyway.

Now her witchcraft was wild.

Thunder still crashed outside, and lightning flashed through the window. India shivered, the cold of the night making itself known. Crap, she needed to get dry. But questions jammed inside her head, refused to go away—why had her magic changed so much? And how the hell was she meant to control it?

Her batshit magic had to have something to do with her mother. India wished for the thousandth time that she could ask for her advice. Her gentle, gifted mother would've known how to stop the rain—and how to start it.

If only there was a spell to raise the dead.

But even witches knew death couldn't defy the laws of nature.

The tears returned, as they had almost every day in the weeks since her mother's death. India knuckled them away. Tears weren't going to get her anywhere. What she needed were answers. That was why she'd driven twenty hours to this tiny town in the middle of nowhere, to the family that hadn't even bothered to come to Mum's funeral.

She pushed off the door. Worrying about magic would have to come later—right now she had to clean this room. No way was she leaving the wet, messy bathroom for someone else to clean. And she had to do it with manual labor, not magic, given how useless she was with spells.

The small hotel had probably once been grand, with a wrought iron balcony wrapping around the upper two levels. Her room was one of six on the first floor, and after locking the door behind her, she made her way down softly creaking, carpeted stairs, which were bordered by a dark timber balustrade. Just as India reached the last step, Simone walked out of the public bar, the black stenciled lettering above the door indicating its purpose.

"Perfect timing," Simone said, drying her hands on a dish towel with that same warm grin on her face.

India couldn't help the smile that spread over her own cheeks. Wow, she hadn't smiled in a long time. It was ... weird. And nice.

"Hi. Sorry I took so long," India said.

Simone waved a hand through the air.

"No worries there. I put a plate away for you. Come on through to the back room, it's the warmest at this time of night." Simone led the way to a dining room that had

exposed brick walls and was filled with a mix of trestle and small square tables. “Here you go. Grab a seat anywhere you like, and I’ll come back with that meal. Like I said, Liz’s potatoes make great mash.”

“Potatoes. I didn’t know Nan farmed those,” India said.

Simone tilted her head.

No magic was needed to read the question on her face. India swallowed hard, somehow managed an even expression.

“I grew up in Hill End but haven’t been back in a while. It’s a long story.”

“Wow,” Simone said, her grin becoming tentative. “So you don’t know it’s only an hour out to Hill End? Not that I want to lose the business, but this storm popped up out of nowhere. It’s not even a blip on the radar, so it should pass soon. You could be out at your grandmother’s tonight.”

The butterflies returned, only this time with wings of lead. India forced a laugh.

“It’s lovely that you’re honest, but I’m almost out of fuel. I didn’t realize petrol stations closed so early out here. No, I’d rather stay here tonight, fill the car up in the morning, and not risk getting lost on a stormy night in the middle of nowhere.”

“Nah, absolutely don’t want that to happen,” Simone said, chuckling. “Well, I’ll go and grab your dinner.” But she stopped and turned around, held out her hand. “I really should introduce myself properly since you’re practically a local. I’m Simone Morris, but call me Sim. I’m newish to town too, and I’m the owner and manager here.”

India smiled and shook Sim’s hand. A warm prickle shivered through her palm as a gentle spice tingled in her nose. The spicy scent of magic. For a split-second, India stopped

breathing. She clamped her jaw to keep her mouth from dropping open. Her mother had taught her circumspection when acknowledging both her own and another's magic.



With her stomach full and body warm, India locked her bedroom door with the simple hook and catch. A yawn rolled through her as she changed into leggings and a well-worn shirt.

Man, she needed this day to be over, but at least she was warm and dry.

She dropped onto the bed. Even if she'd wanted to think about the reason her magic was out of control, and how in the world she was supposed to contain it, she didn't have the chance, as sleep claimed her.

Her eyes had barely closed when she had the dream again.

She was riding the wind—no, she *was* the wind. Racing deep into a forest, she was pulled ever faster by an amazing force. She swerved around giant trunks, darted low under towering limbs, soared high over enormous boughs ... until she reached it.

The heart of the forest.

The dream wind surged like a roller coaster gaining momentum, only to stop with ferocious speed, sending her hurtling into space.

Then, for the first time, someone else appeared in her dream. Smelling of spicy musk and oozing masculinity. A solid torso and strong arms that caught her at the bottom of the surge.

The friction of warm hard muscles against her chest

ignited a wildfire. Her dream lover rubbed hot, capable hands over her breasts, her belly. Between her legs. Sent her blood to rise and boil. At her core, heat and pressure grew, expanded. The dream touch quickened. An orgasm began to build, stronger, stronger still—

India jolted awake. Heart racing. Pulse pounding.

The heat and pressure stopped. Right on the precipice of boiling over.

Her breath short, her body restless, India tried to recall the face of her dream lover. But no matter how hard she pushed, her memory halted at the hot, deeply tanned skin of his torso.

She took a deep breath, her pulse still racing. Dream lover aside, what did the dream mean? Every night for the past three weeks, her dreams had taken her into the forest—the one that had bordered her childhood home.

She hadn't seen that forest for eighteen years. Not since her mother had packed the two of them into their family car and driven for days and days, eventually arriving in Queensland.

A chill prickled over India's neck. She rubbed it away, rolled onto her side.

The dream didn't matter. The dream lover didn't matter. India had enough on her hands trying to figure out how to deal with her batshit magic without worrying about a recurring dream.

And with the rain hitting her window now a soothing patter, she gave the ceiling a cautious glance and sank back into sleep.



Hill End, Victoria

Thrane jolted awake, his body taut, his heart racing. He whipped around, scanned his library.

The remnants of a fire gently crackled in the hearth. Soothing moonlight filtered through the large windows and played across the book-filled shelves. Their mellow tones were a stark contrast to the fire that raged inside him.

By the gods, that had been one hell of a dream.

He'd been working late into the evening and must've fallen asleep. But given the supple leather couch was one of his favorite places to write and he'd fallen asleep there often enough, that wasn't anything new.

Waking up on the verge of orgasm *was* new.

Thrane muffled a curse and stood up, tried without success to recall who else had featured in his dream. He couldn't capture her face, but the deep mysterious fire of her eyes stayed with him, and slowly, one by one, the hairs along the back of his neck rose.

Gods, this wasn't a normal reaction to a hot dream.

His mobile phone rang, and he scowled. Bloody late for a call. But when he saw the caller ID, he answered straight-away. A minute later he thumbed the end-call button, muttered an oath as he pushed dark curly hair out of his eyes. Fuck, that was one call he wished he'd never received.

A churning roiled through his gut. His gaze shot to the window, but he saw nothing except the silhouettes of trees —trees that stretched for days behind his house.

The same trees that hid the reason for his entire existence.

His first day here in Gippsland had shown him that the hardiness and tempered beauty of this land made it the

perfect place for his mission. The deep forest was filled with ancient mountain ash and gum trees that speared tall and true into the sky, gentle foothills led to a sweeping mountain range, and rivers sang a silvery song as their waters slipped by.

On that day, as he'd packed down earth—his calloused hands more used to handling heavy swords than soil and fragile seedlings—he'd vowed to guard his secret, to see it safe for all the world's sake.

Thrane was not going to break that vow. The lives of all those who had gone before him deserved that honor, and the lives of all who would come after depended on it. But right now, that phone call meant he needed to get to Liz's, so he grabbed his car keys and a thick jacket, quickly locked up and jogged to his car.

He drove along the winding valley road for ten minutes, a blanket of stars his only company, to get to the Jones's farmhouse. Once there, out of habit, he ignored the formal entry and entered through the kitchen door.

Illuminated only by the dim light of a lamp, Liz Jones, wrapped up in a thick cardigan, stood at the island bench and held a cup of tea to her mouth. Her papery cheeks were drawn tight and her brow was furrowed. Thrane gently placed a hand on her arm.

"Your family confirmed they sense her?" he asked.

"They have all felt her," Liz said, well-worn creases deepening about her blue eyes as she met his gaze.

"Then others will have as well." Thrane scowled. "They'll come for her, Liz. Any of them—maybe all of them."

"We need to get her here as soon as possible." Liz shot him a glance. "A black moon rises in six days."

Ice slithered down Thrane's spine. He bit back a curse. A fine tremor shook Liz's hand as she placed her cup on the kitchen island.

"I knew going to Annette's funeral wasn't an option. But, damn it, if someone else had gone, maybe they could've talked India into doing this our way. She's just so ... so damned wary. Though who can blame her?"

Thrane blew out a slow breath.

"Calm, Elizabeth," he said.

"Don't tell me to be calm. And *don't* call me Elizabeth."

He cocked a hip against the counter. "Liz, focus on what you can accomplish here and now. What can you do?"

He straightened to his full height, his gaze steady, but she didn't back down. No surprise there.

"India's made it to Warragul and insists on staying there tonight, then driving up in the morning," Liz said.

"What? Why?"

"Apparently my granddaughter is worried about running out of petrol in the middle of a storm. Her words. It's not even raining here—how much of a storm can there be in town?" Liz snorted. "But she's Annette's daughter, and mercy knows Annie was the second-most stubborn person I've known."

"Well, she's come by that honestly, at least."

"You don't know India. Don't try to guess her motivations."

"Liz, neither do you anymore," Thrane said, forcing his voice to remain even. "You know I have one task only. *Nothing*, not even your granddaughter, is exempt from what I have to do to fulfill that." The ice returned to his veins. "And you said it yourself, there will be a black moon in less than a week."

“Bah, you won’t harm her.”

Thrane shook his head, but Liz was back to ignoring him. Her brow furrowed once more as she stared out the darkened window.

“But I agree we need to find out what’s going on,” she said. “If Annette was right, India is in terrible danger.”

Thrane bit back the urge to argue the alternative. His view that India was as much “*a danger*” as “*in danger*” had been a constant point of conflict between them.

“All right, Liz, what do you want?”

“She’s alone, Thrane. Right now, in town. You need to go in. Keep an eye on her.”

“She’s what, twenty-seven? I’m sure she’ll be fine for one night.”

“She’s twenty-eight. And Thrane, this is India. Jev’s daughter.”

Thrane’s chest tightened and he stared at Liz for one moment. Clenching his jaw to avoid cursing, he forced himself to exhale slowly.

“Fine. I’ll go in.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “I hate going into town.”

“I know, I know. We just need to get her to the farm safely and keep her here until I can cast a shrouding spell like Annette’s. And pray that with the strength of the second new moon, my magic is strong enough.”

Those damn hairs on the back of his neck rose once more. But he hated seeing one of his oldest friends clearly worried.

“Liz, I’m sure she’ll be fine.”