

*Of Keys and Rings: The
Dragon Lord Prince Xallandrian
Volume 1*

446-453



Indru'shy'ev Book

For the sacrifices of love and the hope they bring...

Part I

The Year 44

The Leaving

They say that the Keep is haunted. They say that there were things that happened there that died on peoples lips, they say there was bloodshed beyond wars, they say that the people who came there that summer never left, they say they came to die, they say they came for punishment, they say that dragons flew through the skies, they say there were dark rituals held here, they say a lot of things about the Keep but most of them do not know anything. I know, and I have written it all down for anyone who knows where to look.

My name is Amari Donne and I am the official Chatelaine of the Keep, it never had another name and I am not yet going to speak of its owner. I came to the position in the year 446 after the scourge took my husband and my two children, a son and a daughter, and I could no longer bear to live in the forests of my childhood. I, like many scourge widows and widowers, took a few useless things, compared to the precious things that were lost, and left the pines and the ashes, the cedars and the willows and walked along the River Tot with no plan and little hope of being accepted anywhere at all, let alone the distant and

formidable city of Victoreum. Some of us settled at the base of Meadowfalls hoping it might flood us out or send the things of the swamp beneath us to nip and bite and kill us. If the scourge could not do it, then the swamp might just be able to. Others of us continued east to the sea, I do not not what became of them, others south to the city, so very far away and loathed, which drew them and repelled them like any subject to the Empire that held it subjugated and dependent. I like to think they made it down there, that they found good positions and maybe even found the courage to return home, healed and homesick. I never learned of any.

I went west, alone. I slept in the open air and watched the stars and told myself stories of the first time my first baby smiled or the my second baby took her first little steps. If it rained, I walked and did not sleep. If it was hot, I laid down and thought of nothing until it past.

When I was a little child, Emperor's men came up from the great city of Victoreum in search of wielders, that strange and distant species of people who were too alien from our world, I could scarcely understand what they did. Stories of riding dragons in a place where it never rained and ever inch was covered in scorching sand seemed closer to a hearth story than anything I knew. I was too little to be tested and I remember how grateful my parents were and how they held their breath as I grew. I was what they wanted, I was a natural talent, they said. I heard my family make plans should the recruiters return, send Amari away, they said and I feared their sending me away as much as I

feared the Empire taking me away. It was better not to think about dragons at all. They had little to do with the life of a good sower girl. By the time I was an adolescent the Emperor had all his paddocks filled and wielders were being turned away. I understood better then what I had. They did not come up to the forests for those years and I married a man, my wonderfully sweet Michel, with no natural talent for it at all, better to ensure our children might be blessed without it. I never told anyone that I liked having it, these little gifts that might have qualified me to do the impossible. I liked being able to see flashes through a bird's eyes, or make it more comfortable for one of our own animals to understand why they needed to feel pain in order to feel healing. I found it to be a gift and without the danger of the Emperor taking me from my family and sending me out to the desert to do Sower knows what, it was not terrible to use. Neither of my children seemed to be able to do what I could and that was a good thing. The Empire had not come for me, but it might still come for them.

I loved those children more than I understood what love even was. I should say that at the beginning. They grew within me, changing me in every way a person can be transformed. They changed my body, my mind, my heart, my very essence. When the Sower shared them with me, he was planting the future within me and even now I do not understand why that future could not have involved them, why it meant that it was to cut them down when they were barely saplings, Auda not yet seven and Fisher not yet ten.

Even now, seventy years later, tears still wet my cheeks for them. They were the among best thing I ever did and the only thing I ever left unfinished, the only thing I did not see to the end. I wish they had been the only people I had failed. I wish they had been the only people I had lost, I wish I had never lost any of them at all. All that is to say, however, that the scourge took them in 446 and when it did, as terrible as it was, as much as I wanted it to kill me too, I left that house again changed. The scourge and the massacre it delivered on my home and family also gave me a hide thick enough to live through it, muscles strong enough to carry the grief of them all, anger enough to never let anyone or anything get the better of me, and grief loud enough it called to him.

I was washing my clothes and my stinking body at the bend of a river, not as wide as the Tot with none of the sense that the Tot was more than it appeared, all that I did not know that I knew. There was a copse of trees to hide my nudity as if there were eyes who would care to look upon it. The forest was far away and its branches bare of leaves, metaphorically, the people were a fraction of what they had been and we had been well stripped to our bare branches, too. Those I found along the road had not felt there were enough of us to do the work required to keep the region alive at all. We walked away from our homes and our villages and we left them to the trees, the ivy, and the creeping bittersweet. We walked away from each other.

The river water was cold but I endured it to be clean and to feel the numbing of it. I would never have let the children swim this early in the year, never in such cold weather that could steal away their breath and their heat. I would have brought forth buckets and I would have warmed that water for them. Still I kept myself pushed down in it while I scrubbed at my clothes. My courses had come and soaked through my underthings and staining my thighs russet. No single sign of my marriage was left now. I had not expected there to be, Michel had hardly lain with me while he lay dying.

I threw the clothes up over the river bank and lay down again in the water. Were there brigands in this place that might come and steal them? No. Were there wild animals looking for a meal? No. There was me and there was the river.

Then there was the voice.

:Get out of the River, get dressed, walk northwest.: It said. The voice was deep, commanding, and clear. It was not unkind though. :Now.: It said but only so that it left no question as to its meaning. I was not inclined to follow anyone's orders, I thought, but I was also desperate to follow something. I was too much in my mourning to give myself direction and this felt less like a command and more like a rescue. I stood in the shallow and climbed up the bank to lie on the new long spring grasses, bright green in growing in thick patches.

:Now.: It said again. :Dress, if you wish, walk northwest.: It said.

:I think, I will dress, if it is all the same to you.: I told it. The voice seemed to be only in my head and I had to assume it was some part of my own mind, a first sign of my own coming demise and madness, or the Sower himself, though he was not someone I wished to speak to at this time. I felt I could be allowed some disrespectful tone in my own head and even to the Sower if he dared show his face to me. It would take quite a bit for us to reconcile and not yet. I had a dress in my bag and extra small clothes and even rags which I had either had the presence of mind to pack or which had already been in the bag when I threw a few things in it. My other clothes were all wet on the ground. :Leave, them. I will provide you others.:

The Sower was offering me clothes in exchange for the lost babes? What else would he offer? Saplings?

:I am not your Sower. I am not the Sower.: The voice said, velvet, kind, forgiving, welcoming, truthful, endearing, mysterious, forthright. So many traits in a voice!

Dementia then! I looked forward to that losing of oneself. If I lost my memories would I be better off or worse? If I did not remember them at the breast would it cease to hurt? If I forgot them growing in my womb with Michel's hands on my swollen belly and his eyes looking at me with such love would I be able to bear a single day longer?

:No.: The voice said. :It never works that way. :There is a bridge, half a mile north of you, walk to it and then head west.: It said. It was a deeply kind voice. Kinder than a woman who lived through the death of her

child could expect to hear in her own mind. :Just walk. One foot in front of the other.: It said. I did.

Right foot.

Left foot.

Right foot.

To the bridge. I had not even brought my bag with me. I had not realized how much it seemed he was a puppet-master to my weary limbs. I shook myself free of that hazy sense of letting someone else guide me but I still followed the directions. The sound of my shoes on the bridge was different than the sound on the grass. The river was fast beneath me. :Walk,: he said.

I walked. By the time the sun was setting I saw the Keep silhouetted against its bright blazing end of the day. Between me and the square building there was nothing but a single narrow carriage road and endless green grass like a thick pile carpet. When I reached the keep I saw that that grass went right up to the very edge of the stone. The Keep was an old building, second century, I thought, what I had not realized was that I had come south enough to be so close to Victoreum architecture. I turned as if the forest would be right behind me but it was not. I looked down at my shoes, there were holes from wear. They had been new before the scourge. There was a large door in front of me and it was open. The door was twenty feet high and opened into a room that was bigger than any kirk I knew or any inn I had visited. There I was met by a very old man.

“Welcome.” He said to me, “We have been expecting you.” His was not the voice I had heard leading me, dragging me here.

“You have?” I asked. Was I a fly and this place a web? Was he the spider?

“Yes.” He was older than I, old even by any standing. However, he was also very kind looking, welcoming, well dressed but also humble and seemed to make no claim to be the owner of this place or its chief spider.

“I should be going?” I said turning around before he could reach me.

“Where would you go?” He asked. What a pointed, painful question!

My face must have spoken when I did not want it to.

“It was a cruel way of saying this. I am sorry. I should have said, you need not leave before you have eaten, before you have met my employer, before you have heard his offer?”

“I am not interested in employment.” I answered flatly. I was not interested in anything. He might have said, are you interested in having the most wonderful life of all filled with all your dreams and if he could not restore my family, I would not have been interested.

:Yes, you are.: The voice was smirking in my mind.

:No. I am not.: I argued.

:You are in desperate need of it.: He countered.

:I do not need anything and therefore I do not need to employ myself to its acquisition.: I told him.

:You have been employed in the work of disappearing from the world, from your home, from your memories, from yourself.: He said and I could see the truth of it as if I had thought of it myself, as if I could prove it with all the evidence of these past weeks.

:You do not know that.: I tested.

:You cannot lie to me.: He said. Not as if it were forbidden but as if the very act of it was impossible.

“He is already negotiating with you, I see.” The man said, then his face went slack for a moment as if he was no longer present and then returned cheery and lovely. “Come inside and I will show you the Keep.”

“Who are you?” I asked. I might have wanted the river to freeze me this afternoon but now I would prefer to make it through the night.

“I am Neial,” he said as if all was right. “And you?”

“Amari Donne.” I answered as if this were all very normal.

“Can you read? Can you write?” He asked.

“Of course, I can.” I was insulted.

“Can you write a good hand?” He gestured as if to say it were not enough and also as if the act of holding a pen defined him.

“I think so.” I answered.

“Good, good.” He answered and turned around and brought me through the massive house. We were in the great hall which had doors on all sides, as well as, dangerous and frightening weapons upon the wall some gleaming steel and some light-sucking darkness which even

a poor forest woman knew meant death and mutilation, dragonglass. If one imagined the house, which it was, on a perfect compass orientation, one would say I came in on the east side, this was the largest door, there were smaller doors of just ten feet tall and wide on the other sides, north, south, and west. There was another door in the floor that I did not yet notice. The room itself was thirty feet tall and at-least fifty east to west and seventy-five north to south. In the days that followed I would step it out toe to heel and have a better sense of it. To the west the doors opened to a court yard, itself fifty feet across and another wing of the Keep beyond that. We walked through these and then up a spiral stair to the roof so that I might see the house and all that was around it in the final fading moments of the day. The Keep was stone, square, old, massive, and solid. I did not ask him nor the voice why I receiving a tour let alone one as thorough of this. I almost felt as if Neial were not just giving me a tour of his home but handing me the knowledge of his home, as if we would carry it on together.

On the fifth floor I was shown the east wing where the staff had their quarters. He opened one door and went inside. The room was as big as the house I had lived in for the last eleven years, the one Michel built for us but it this place seemed to be for just a single person. Decadent! There was a large bed, larger than the one we had shared. He showed me a water room with the water that came and went on demand and took away ones waste. He showed me a desk and a wardrobe. The wardrobe was filled with formal but not fancy gowns, well made in a utilitarian,

Victoreum style with elements of northern preferences. Victoreum women sometimes wore very little at all. Fashion meant something there, here in the north, modest and practical were far more valued.

“This will be your room.” He said as he took a piece of jewelry from the dresser. He looked at me and my much more simple country dress and shook his head. He went to the wardrobe and drew out a gown in a very pleasant light lavender and a thick metal girdle. He showed me where other items were kept as well. “Change your dress, put up your hair, or braid it down your back or whatever you like to do with it and we will continue when you are done.”

He stepped out of the room and I did as he said. I put the country dress down on the floor almost as a silhouette of who I had been and dressed anew. Amari Donne of Derbyshire was laying in that dress on the floor but Amari Donne of the Keep was dressed in heather lilac standing over her. The dress fit as its fabric had a stretch that compressed against me. The girdle was an open work, hinged thing with claw shaped clasps in the front. It fit as if it were made for me. It was not uncomfortable in the least which still to my mind perplexes. I brushed my tangled long hair, until it was a waist length cloud of chestnut and then twisted it to my head at my temples drawing it back to the nape in a bundle which I folded up twice and pinned. I looked at the mirror and saw that I was neat enough for kirk if I needed to attend. I walked out looking like a new thing. He hooked the jewelry to a ring on the girdle

intended for it. It was a wide piece of filigree silver, much like the girdle itself. It flared out to hold the tools of some occupation I had not accepted.

“You are perfect!” He announced. In that moment when anyone else would have run I stood up taller. I touched the chatelaine, it held keys and he showed me as we toured through the rest of the house, what each was for. The house had four stairs, each at the half way points between the compass points, or the corners of the house. I thought there might be one hundred bedrooms though I learned later there were only sixty, two kitchens, multiple pantries, tool rooms, two halls, one court yard, three storage rooms, one library, two sewing rooms, a dish room, two dining rooms, a counting room, a records room, a chapel, a games room, a music room, and many rooms that seemed only for sitting around, as well as many others.

When we reached the second dining room, it was clear to me that I was no longer a guest, I had wandered into the web and I had not so much as been bitten by the spider, but wholly consumed by its web. In this dining room, smaller and not so formal as the first, there sat more than thirty people. When we entered they all turned to see us enter.

“Good evening, everyone. I believe I have the honor of introducing you tonight to our new Chatelaine, Amari Donne.” Then he took off his own version of the hip side jewelry with its curls and tools and laid it down on the table. Everyone looked at it with a sadness and then looked at him with a smile of deep and abiding love and respect. “I expect

that with all of your help she will step easily into my place.” He was warning them against any hazing or chicanery. But their expressions did not suggest it was in their nature, they were looking at me with outright curiosity and uncertainty.

“Has she met him yet?” A young woman with a very full pregnant belly asked Neial.

“He is out until later this evening. She will meet him tomorrow.” Neial did not seem to be concerned.

“I am afraid I have only met Neial.” I answered trying to be gracious but more so trying to find out who I would be here. I was being reborn and it was not easy. I was now something who had never brought forth life, who had never shrieked in the ecstasy of conceiving life nor in the terror of delivering it. I was stripping away my marriage, my family, my identity of mother and I was pouring myself into this silver form and becoming, like liquid, the shape of my vessel, instead.

“Then we should remedy that.” Neial said and went about the room introducing each person. I would learn them, in time, their names and their role. The two, or more, seamstresses, the three cooks, the ten landscapers, two valets, five servers, three musicians, and ten men and women of menage.

“All of you to serve one man? One family?” I inquired.

“No.” One of the maids laughed. Her name was Elsa and she was quite prone to an ongoing happy laughter.

“We serve the Keep, Chatelaine.” One of the men, one of the servers, though I believe Neial said he was the

senior-most server and that meant something, Dilven answered me.

“And Him,” Neial answered.

“And Him.” They echoed softly.

“Is he terrible?” I asked as if I could leave should I not like their answer.

“He is the most honorable employer one could ever wish for.” Crysta answered and they all agreed to that.

Crysta took up her fluted glass and lifted it, “To Him!” She toasted and we all did. From that moment on, I was one of them. No matter what was going to happen, no matter what the next seventy years would bring, I served the Keep.

There is much more to come....

