

# **The Year of Our War**

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## CHAPTER 4

In the Shift, Keziah was hiding in the Aureate with a hacksaw. We were standing in the shadow of a thick, reflective wall, which stretched up as far as I could see. I was handsome if raw-boned, in black and white, which the wall threw back as different shades of yellow. Keziah never wore clothes. He was a man-sized lizard who walked on strong back legs, stunted forearms hanging down in front. His long snout was full of pointed teeth. The scaly plates of his skin were mottled moss-green and grey. I was desperately trying signs and whispers, to make Keziah come back to his pub.

I had started in Epsilon, looking for Dunlin Rachiswater where I left him in the Bullocks Bollocks bar. He was no longer there, and I heard from the punters that Felicitia had left as well. No one could tell me where they had gone, or why. I then tried my palace at Sliverkey, but it was uninhabited and untidy, as usual. Searching for Keziah, in order to ask him, had brought me to the Aureate.

Keziah was of the opinion that fly-by-night bar staff like Felicitia were worthless drifters. He was better off without them, and Awians in general regardless of how royal. ‘They split at daybreak, dude, who knows where they are? Join me and we’ll both be rich.’

‘This is the Tine’s quarter. If they catch us they’ll kill us!’

‘It’s made of solid gold,’ Keziah hissed. He turned to see me since his eyes were at the side of his head.

‘I know that!’

‘So if we cut a piece out we’d –’

‘Cut it! Are you mad?’

‘Ssh! We’d never have to work again.’

‘The pub –’

‘Screw the pub, dude, look at this...’ He gestured for me to crouch down and pointed at two jagged saw-marks that ran into the base of the gold wall, carving out a triangular ingot. The cut surfaces were bright, the wedge connected to the wall by half a centimetre thickness at its apex. ‘Nearly rich,’ whispered Keziah.

‘Greedy bastard.’ I watched as the hacksaw bit into the wall. He grasped the handle with his hind leg and sawed rapidly. The slice of gold loosened and fell. Keziah caught it in a foreclaw and wrapped it in a piece of cloth, ‘Let’s go,’ he said. We crept to the edge of the wall and peered round. A group of big Tine were standing there calmly watching us.

Tattoos spotted their pale blue skin, scarred and tanned to indigo. Each Tine had a flat black shell on his back, pocked with designs and sprouting loops of gold wire. The most immense one had stubby horns grafted on his forehead. Gnarly claws curled into fists. A dozen pairs of pupil-less eyes blinked. A forest of needle-teeth appeared as they all slowly smiled.

Faster reactions than Keziah, I turned and ran. I looked back from the gold cobbled road to see him drop to a fighting stance. He roared.

‘Come on!’ I yelled.

‘Run,’ he snarled, showing his terrible teeth. ‘You coward!’

The Tine clustered round him, the smallest taller than him, muscles crawling under their blue skin. Keziah kicked the nearest one. His claw opened its stomach. Pink guts spilled out over its belt. Another Tine finished it off and began chewing on its backside.

Keziah lashed out with his tail. He struck it across the back of the neck, killing it instantly. It slumped over its meal. The lizard evaded another carnivore, bit at it, driving it back. He kicked again, his talon sinking into a belly, where it was caught. Two Tine dashed forward and seized his leg. He teetered and fell over.

I saw the Tine simply pick Keziah up, clawed hands all over him, and twist him apart. Those at his head twisted left. His legs twisted right. There was a series of sounds like strings snapping, then I heard the wet crack as his spine fractured. Tine clamped their teeth in his scaly tail; another began to pick long fangs from his gums. He screamed and thrashed. Blue fingers pushed into his eye sockets, trying to fish one out. His tongue was ripped and Tine fought among themselves for it. They plucked his fingers with gristly sounds and chewed them like twigs.

A Tine took a length of intestine and squeezed out the contents. Murky slime pattered onto the cobbles. He put one end of the gut to his lips and blew it full of air. He twisted it a few times, held it up. A balloon dog. Tine fell over each other laughing.

Helpless, I kept running, the monsters saw my movement and followed. The gold path shook with their footfalls. They smelt of rotting meat. They couldn't gain ground. They couldn't catch a Rhydanne as shit scared as I was. But they wouldn't give up the chase.

I pounded, slipped and jumped down the gold road. The road narrowed, came to an abrupt bend. This was the knee. Holy buildings with stepped gable ends crowded close on every side. Red gold, white gold. Stench of burnt flesh in the air. Smell of lizard blood and excrement. I set off down the shin of their city.

Shin, calf, the Ankle Plaza. A rounded edifice stood in the centre, full of Tine. They had blue loincloths and thongs round their legs. Their custom was to drop molten gold onto their legs and feet, which set in their skin. It seemed as if they had grown from the golden road, gradually changing to blue. I skidded to a halt in front of them. The Tine chasing me piled in behind. They reached out with transplanted fingers. They made a stinking wall of muscle.

I put a hand to my sword hilt and found that it had gone. I tried to spread my wings but was rooted to the spot. The Tine tensed to rush me.

A skein of voices on my left – 'Shira!' I looked to where a woman was standing – a blonde woman, wrapped in a cloak. There had been no girl there a second ago.

The Tine didn't like her one bit. Forgetting me, they closed in on her and I screamed because I thought they would rip her apart. She threw back the cloak; underneath she was completely naked and very lovely. The Tine sniggered and licked their chops. As the cloth hit the cobbles her body followed it, disintegrating, flowing down and spreading like the twisted trunk of a tree, then like its roots, running out in thick strands over the floor. The broken facade of her face was last to go. And then silence.

Some Tine went down on one knee. Some backed off. I just kept screaming. Her body became a thick cable of flesh, made from smaller threads. It snaked across the plaza and over to a gold drain covering, where she reassembled into a beautiful girl and beckoned to me. She raised the grating, although Tawny himself couldn't have budged it, and slipped through.

The Tine began to recover and looked around for me. I pelted across and followed her down the drain, grazing my arms as I eased through. I retched at the stink.

We were in darkness. Blue arms wedged through the hole and waved about, but they couldn't grab us. A scimitar was poked down. The Tine began to howl. The girl took my arm and we walked a little way along the edge of a deep gold trough, running with blood and dirty water, a few fragments of splintered bone carried along, organs and knots of hair and Insect shells; some other pieces I was glad I couldn't recognise.

'This is the main drain,' said the girl sweetly. 'I advise you not to take a swim.'

'What? Who? Who are you?' I panted.

'This is just a bad dream, Jant,' she said.

'How do you know my fucking name?' I tried to shake free of her grasp, it was impossible.

'You have to go back to the Castle and forget all this,' she said. She spoke Awian perfectly. She had a very mellow voice, very high pitched, and as if lots of voices were speaking together. A couple of gaps appeared in her cheek, with a shifting of flesh they closed again and I suddenly saw that she wasn't solid at all. I peered closer and recoiled with disgust. She was made up of thousands of long, thin worms. Knotted together and constantly moving, they gave the impression of skin. She smiled, or rather, the worms that were her lips parted briefly and I saw the worms that were her teeth.

'It's a shame to see such a seasoned traveller so lost,' she said.

'Who are you?' I repeated, terrified. I was stuck between this creature and the blood-filled canal. Her faint smile reappeared, as if she had no need of a name and I was being stupid. She must have come from a very distant place, to be so alien. 'If you think I'm strange,' she said, 'You should see the rest of the court.' She put her hand through her chest and scratched the back of her head.

'Court? What court? The only court is the Castle!'

'The Royal Court is concerned. I think the Tine are not very happy with you,' she said, understating in a studiedly feminine way. Her calm voice stroked me. If she was invisible I'd be in love. 'Never come back to the Aureate. Never talk to the Saurian.'

'Keziah's dead.' I told her. Another faint smile.

I recovered what few shreds of courtesy I could. 'Thank you... Thank you for saving my life. Maybe in the future I may have the honour of performing the same

service for you, my lady. In the meantime, is there anything I can do to repay you?'  
(Singular or plural).

'You must go home and stay there.'

'Apart from that!'

'How about a kiss?' she said, sticking out a tongue which unwound into a cluster of worms and waved at me. The end of the tassel suddenly bloomed red, as all the worms opened their tiny mouths and stuck their tongues out. I backed away.

The girl laughed and dissolved, writhing down as before and separating out into individual creatures, which squirmed between the cobbles and, clump by clump, plopped into the drain, where they swam away upstream. The last of them merged together to form a floating disembodied arm, which cheerfully waved farewell. I returned the gesture, wondering if she could see me.

I then sat down by the gory canal and waited to be pulled back. I would have a hangover on my flight to the Castle. When perfectly sober, anticipating a hangover is a bitch. I hated the thought of my useless body lying on the chamber floor, back in cold Lowespass where the Insects swarmed.