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## THE MAN IN CRYSTAL ARMOUR

by

R. DEGALA

### Synopsis

Tunaan Anosa has lived too long. An ancient spell called forth the demon Ashurth from his realm to destroy Tunaan and his people. The spell cursed Tunaan to live until the demon had achieved his task, locking them both into centuries of wars. Now Ashurth has once again sent the armies of the people of Gatraan to conquer the lands of Eela Meyeeracin. This time Gatraan has a new ally, and stands on the brink of realising victory at last. All that would remain for Ashurth would be to see to the destruction of Tunaan.

In the time of his nations greatest need, comes the mysterious Kalil. A young man enveloped in a dark power, Kalil has one purpose, to kill the King of Gatraan. With Kalil's desire, his dark power, and Tunaan's help, there is a slender chance of defeating Ashurth's plans and ending the war quickly.

### Chapter One

*I should have died centuries ago*, thought Tunaan Anosa, one of the most ancient beings in the world. There were many who would have agreed with him.

He was sitting in his tent thinking about what he had done. It was only natural that all his doubts should come to the fore now. There were so many spanning his unnaturally long life. They had been slowly filling his mind one after the other from the moment he had started his journey to the battlefields.

The war was with Gatraan, the old enemy. Tunaan's nation was Eela Meyeeracin. The two nations had been at war before many had even heard their names. The enmity between Gatraan and Eela Meyeeracin was well known even in distant parts of the world. The enmity had existed from the time when Tunaan's people had known him by a different name, the name his parents had given him. A name he had given up so that he might be free to discover who and what he really was. The rift between the two countries should have been closed long ago. Their grievances should have been forgotten and their wounds healed. But none of this had been allowed to happen. The hatred had been kept alive century after century and war after war.

When Tunaan had been a young man, his nation had warred with Gatraan for the first time. Towards the end of those brutal days, strange events had come to pass which had changed his life. At that time the king of Gatraan had been King Sanesan. He had ordered

his wizard to take drastic actions. In his desperation Sanesan ordered his wizard to call forth a demon to destroy Tunaan.

Tunaan remembered clearly the day when the demon had been summoned. It was one of his clearest memories. He remembered his mental torment as he had been bound to the demon, by an ancient spell. He was struck down by the power that grabbed at his mind. Separated from the world, he had been like a ghost. Faces came before his eyes, but he could not hear them. Touch and feel had lost any meaning. With great effort he had struggled to shape his own mind. He was confused and did not know what was happening. The experience lasted for two days and soon after Tunaan had recovered, the demon made his first attack upon him. It had happened whilst he had been discussing with his teacher, Sher Qu, wizard to the first king of Eela Meyeeracin, what could have caused his recent malady. The attack had been furious, involving both body and soul. The demon had attacked from the air, with so much power that it made Sher Qu tremble. Fear had also gripped Tunaan upon seeing the demon in the sky, outside the windows of his teachers' chambers. Ashurth had been bodiless, but not without substance. He could be seen approaching from the distance at great speed, smashing through the wall without slowing. Tunaan had been the first to be attacked. The blow that Ashurth delivered was sudden and sent him reeling across the room. His touch had scorched Tunaan's flesh. Tunaan had to push beyond the limits of his knowledge to survive.

Before the demon had smashed the wall Sher Qu had been thinking and had started to prepare. As the demon closed on Tunaan, Sher Qu took the guards beyond themselves to attack the mighty creature. He had then attacked the demon with as much power as he could muster, but it was a mere distraction to the demon as it destroyed Sher Qu, and the guards who were present with ease. But their sacrifice had given Tunaan an essential moment to gather himself. In the ensuing struggle Tunaan's mind stretched to meet the threat. Acting on instinct, Tunaan was catapulted to new levels and abilities. They had released great energies as they fought, exchanging blow after blow and smashing themselves upon the earth.

While they fought the demon had told Tunaan its name. "I am Ashurth," it had said, "and I will destroy you."

But Ashurth the demon did not destroy Tunaan on that day. Instead that first fight between the two of them had left them both weak and incapacitated, for many months afterwards. When Tunaan finally recovered from the wounds, he discovered the devastation that his fight with Ashurth had caused and he went in search of answers, but found very few. There were long years of searching. What Tunaan learnt was that the wizard who had summoned Ashurth had been killed during the ceremony. He could find little information about the ceremony itself. Sher Qu had not completed Tunaan's training. As much as Tunaan had grown beyond Sher Qu's teachings in some areas, in others he was ignorant. Skills that would have been invaluable at the time were still unknown to him. The one place Tunaan could look for direct answers safely was barred to him. The only other source was Ashurth, and Ashurth closely guarded his knowledge.

While Tunaan searched, Ashurth took the Gatraanii people and focused them on the task of Eela Meyeeracin. Many conflicts followed and Tunaan discovered that the spell was more powerful than he had suspected. Having seen so many die before him, he had hoped that a natural death would end the struggle with Ashurth, but even death was denied to him.

With time Ashurth had made his task a part of the religion of the people of Gatraan. He redefined their beliefs, and preached a way of life that they accepted, because they believed it came from a divine source. Though Tunaan knew that Ashurth was a demon, the people of Gatraan did not. Ashurth told them his name and that Sanesan no longer

occupied his body. He told them Sanesan had given up his body so that Ashurth could lead Gatraan to glory.

Ashurth removed himself from the throne so that he might better lead the people of Gatraan, and allowed a new King to take the throne and serve.

Who could contest Ashurth? He spoke with the strength of his conviction. He could perform miraculous acts, and he lived on and on. With the passing of each century, his position grew stronger. Ashurth carried his message to generation after generation, telling them he lived to ensure their eternal faith and giving them purpose. Ashurth told them their lands had been stolen by the nation of Eela Meyeeracin, and that the lands belonged to the people of Gatraan, by divine right.

When the attacks came, Gatraanii warriors fought with religious zeal, they were servants of Ashurth, who spoke for '*The One Who Rules In The Next World*'. The name was inexpressible in the spoken tongue. Despite Gatraan being greatly outnumbered, victories against it were hard won.

After his first search for answers, Tunaan focussed himself on the task of protecting his people, and to better serve he became the Gowesh of Eela Meyeeracin and in time he became known as the Gesh. Tunaan served as the Gesh for many centuries. With each passing century he saw the price of his past. To add to his suffering, Ashurth taunted Tunaan with his knowledge. The demon showed he had a deeper understanding of mankind than Tunaan. The demon manipulated and manoeuvred expertly.

Time made Tunaan's place in the world harder to understand. Eventually, when it came, even Tunaan could not keep the madness from taking him. A madness made by Ashurth. The madness drove Tunaan from his people. While he had been gone many more attacks had followed. Eela Meyeeracin was a far larger nation than Gatraan, and its size gave it security against a potent enemy.

After many years Tunaan returned to his people, and retook the seat of Gesh, though few understood the position anymore. Tunaan watched and waited. The people of Eela Meyeeracin had learnt from the past and while it had stood by the principles that The Great Prince had given them, it had not been foolish, at least where Gatraan was concerned. Eela Meyeeracin better understood that danger.

Ashurth sought to turn the world against Tunaan's people, and Tunaan wanted to strike at Gatraan with all his might, but with all his power he could not. He had to make his actions more subtle. He discovered he had to be more and more patient with each passing century.

Other moments of madness came and went, and Tunaan learnt he had to stick to his task as closely as Ashurth had stuck to his. Only his people mattered, and he worked for their greater success and security, but always with the knowledge that Ashurth was waiting in the back of his mind.

Over time Tunaan had worked more and more in the background, while Ashurth continued to be the heart of Gatraan. Ashurth separated state from religion but wrapped the two around one another.

Then there was a great silence from Gatraan. For so long there was no war, but neither was there a peace declared, and only a minimal contact existed. In Tunaan's long life it was more than a moment. Tunaan had wondered if Ashurth himself had given up their struggle. Then he had to push aside his doubts again and remind himself of his purpose.

In the most recent history of his people, new wars came with the kingdoms to the west and new struggles at sea. King Urshaan could do nothing to end the Western Wars, or prevent the problems at sea from becoming any greater. He had been an embattled King, who had been pulled along by events beyond his control.

Urshaan had passed away and then had come Ephemerus. Tunaan was amazed by Ephemerus. Everyone was amazed by Ephemerus. Early in his reign, Tunaan discovered Ephemerus was a far greater gambler than he had ever been. Ruling with cool confidence and certainty, he was fearless. It was Ephemerus who led them out of the wars in the west, reducing them to border conflicts, before finding peace, and sating the kingdoms across the seas. The trade routes were safe once again.

Tunaan had felt more out of place. This was not the world he had been born into, and having seen so many others born, live and die, had made him even more aware of his unnaturally long life. Within himself, Tunaan hoped Ephemerus was a sign that maybe soon his long war with Ashurth would finally be coming to an end. He hoped Ephemerus would lead him to an answer. Save Tunaan from the weariness that had been penetrating deeper and deeper, day after day, and return the meaning to his life that was beginning to elude Tunaan.

Ephemerus had come and like a great blast that changed everything around it, was now gone, having died in this latest clash with Gatraan. Ephemerus had been a peacemaker who hated war, but had willingly led his people head long into another conflict with the old enemy. On the surface it appeared King Ephemerus had a choice and every one expected him to seek a peaceful solution, when they had first discovered Gatraan's plans. But he had done the unexpected, and Tunaan came to understand that Ephemerus had no choice at all.

With Ephemerus gone, Tunaan could see no other possibility than Ashurth finally gaining victory. He had seen his failure charging towards him like a massive beast and knew not how he might turn it aside, or escape it. Then a slender chance was placed before him and he grabbed it with both eager hands.

If his gamble worked then the war would end immediately. If the mysterious Kalil could make it to the centre of the Gatraan camp and complete his mission.

## Chapter 2

Sat in his tent, Tunaan was with what was left of the Northern Army. He had arrived with the War Council and fresh troops. The army was camped in the Great Northern Forest, which stretched all the way to the territories of southern Gatraan, and ran the length of the northern border. The forest extended from the coast to the east, across to the kingdom of Terrosi, the silent neighbour, to the northwest. The forest had grown in the last three and a half centuries as wars with Gatraan had faded and become occasional whispers of hate. It had remained relatively undisturbed until now.

The camp Tunaan was in was huge, although it comprised of less than half of the original Northern Army, pulled away from the fighting and told to hold their position. Since their arrival the War Council had followed Tunaan's instructions closely. The fresh troops had been sent to the west to another part of the main pass between Gatraan and Eela Meyeeracin, to form another front. Those troops would soon be needed, but they would hopefully have to do very little fighting.

Outside Tunaan's tent the soldiers waited patiently. They casually stood guard against an enemy that was far enough away to the north to allow them a little drop of the shoulders and to shift a little more weight onto their spears. An air of confidence had filled the camp since Tunaan had arrived. As always the soldiers had put their faith in him. The mystery

was among them and Tunaan could sense the relief that had rapidly spread from one man to the next. He remembered that since his youth he had had this effect.

A small group of warriors had been sent along with Kalil to make sure he arrived at the Gatraan camp without having to take any action himself along the way. From there he would continue alone. Tunaan guessed he would be just about preparing to make his attack. It would be a simple and direct attack, straight at the heart of the enemy, there was no other way. Kalil would never have been able to make it through the camp quietly, even with his abilities and the dark power that accompanied him. It was now time for Tunaan to go out and make sure the final stages of the plan to kill the King of Gatraan and his commanders were completed successfully.

‘Cut off the head and the body shall fall’, a simple strategy that would work. The attack also had to be swift and devastating enough to bring about a quick end to the war.

Tunaan took long and deep breaths. The air felt crisp and clear and the light mist that rose up from the ground was cool and refreshing. It drifted through the open front of Tunaan’s tent, returning a clarity to his mind that had eluded him in the recent past.

Tunaan was sitting cross-legged upon a sheet of the thinnest material, tightly woven from the strongest and finest fibres. The material was flexible and transparent enough to clearly show the intricately designed carpet underneath it. He was sat amid a circle of empty chairs, recently occupied by the War Council. They had left for their own tents to await the outcome of Tunaan’s plan. It would be a terrible time for them all. They would know nothing until either the enemy attacked or a signal of Kalil’s success reached them. Almost all of them had reservations. They rightly believed that to assassinate King Akras would be hard enough, but to kill the King and his lords and generals too and in a time of war, while an entire army guarded them, was foolish hope. No assassin had the stealth to get so close.

Tunaan saw what they thought. He didn’t even have to read their minds. If anyone else had come forward with the plan they would have scoffed at him. But he was Gesh Tunaan Anosa, he could not be ignored and they allowed a fragment of their opinion to consider the possibility that Tunaan could succeed. So Tunaan had started his preparations, working quickly.

A little distance away from his tent was old Follis, only just managing to control his nerves, but as ever hiding it well. Bursts of energy were quickly dulled as Follis calmed himself after random thoughts shot to the surface. Follis had been full of doubts about Tunaan’s plan, which he never voiced in public, for he was wise enough to know that Tunaan’s gamble was a chance that needed to be taken. His reasons for worry were justified. Apart from Tunaan’s questionable tactic, one fear was that if Kalil should fail, the weapon that could make Kalil’s mission possible would fall into the enemy’s hands.

Then Follis’ other fears had to be considered. One of his greatest fears being that should Kalil’s mission succeed, they would go from defender to conqueror. ‘*The principles the Great Prince gave us must never be forgotten*’, he would say and Tunaan was always grateful for these reminders. Follis’ moral and ethical questions had, on occasion, forced Tunaan to hide behind the reply “I am the Gesh.” He wondered what Follis would say if he had known ‘the Great Prince’. Tunaan wondered if he should have told him the truth about the prince – History as it had really happened. But he had always refrained from answering any questions about the Prince. The Prince had been a troubled man.

The war had not gone well after King Ephemerus’ death either. The armies were held in an awkward stalemate and despite all of Warlord Mamoon’s brilliance in holding the enemy

at bay, the advantage was still with Gatraan. And it was Kalil who had arrived in Shaundhar, enveloped in his dark cloud, offering hope as their choices were becoming fewer and fewer.

Kalil was immensely talented, with abilities so rare that Tunaan was reminded of the good fortune that had led him to Shaundhar, however unfortunate the man's situation was. A fertile young mind had been attacked, then twisted and torn and strangely silenced. *Almost like it was empty*, Tunaan had thought. He knew he would never be able to repair it. Then he thought, *Perhaps it's not really damaged at all*.

Tunaan remembered his amazement at what he had seen, when he had first entered the audience chamber of the council buildings, to greet Kalil. He had been watching a council meeting and remembered being glad to get out of the hot room. Happy for the relief, he had been keen to hear the news from the front.

Arlaan's communications had made mention of Kalil many times. He had great hopes for his pupil and was eager to bring him to Tunaan. He had believed firmly that Kalil would have been a great asset, so much so that he had taken Kalil as his pupil, against Tunaan's wishes. Tunaan's own interest grew however, as Arlaan had reported on Kalil's rate of development.

In the audience chamber of the Council buildings, the sun streamed through the glass of the domed ceiling and the plants glowed under its warmth. The wide doors were perched open to let the air flow freely. The smooth stone floor reflected the light up the marbled pillars, patterned by many brightly coloured stones. It was an impressive greeting for any visitor. The colours and emanations appeared brighter in contrast to Kalil's presence. He stood in the middle of the chamber, sucking in the light like a black vacuum. Tunaan saw nothing, save the subtlest of emanations from the body and mind of Kalil. Slender waves of colour were visible through his inner eye, a sign that the body at least was alive. The emanations were pure and simple.

Around kalil's head was a sphere of intense colours, sharp and distinct, the colours moving to their own steady rhythm within the sphere. The brightness of the colours was dimmed by the shadow that hung malevolently around Kalil, the shadows' shape constantly changing, flowing back and forth. To Tunaan's inner eye it was like looking through a black veil. It was dark and powerful, filling the atmosphere with its desire to touch another being. Strangely the darkness seemed to be drawn to Tunaan. A tendril like line flicked at Tunaan, drawing on his curiosity. When Tunaan dared to look more closely he sensed only a single thought, a single desire, within Kalil's mind. There was a dark and sinister need in him. Tunaan edged his mind closer, more tentatively than he had intended.

Suddenly Tunaan's mind was filled with images of a mutilated face. Dark images of a person destroyed were blasted into him. He recognised the face. Then Tunaan discerned a feeling that hung like an ugly scent in the room. He realised quickly that Kalil should have been dead. It was a need that held him in the world.

Then the darkness tempted him further, Tunaan was startled when he sensed recognition. The darkness knew him and Tunaan wondered, *How is this so?* After searching for answers for so many years, he felt hints of knowledge and understanding, he only had to reach out. He was stopped from going any further by a sharp warning from the pit of his stomach.

Questions filled Tunaan's mind and he hungered for clear answers. He wanted to probe into Kalil, to enter the darkness and discover why this power held itself to Kalil and how Kalil had become the way he was. But for the first time in many years Tunaan himself had been afraid. He did not feel the higher kind of fear that daily troubled him, but a basic, child like

fear that terrified him. The darkness had swirled about sensing his curiosity, threatening to pull him into its web. Behind Kalil's dead eyes was a promise of so many things. A place where he might have felt reconciled. Tunaan steeled himself. If he had been weak and entered the mind of Kalil unprepared, he would have surely been destroyed there and then.

He tried to find something to focus on, he reminded himself that Kalil had come with information. Looking away he asked quietly, "What do you have to tell me?"

Kalil gave Tunaan the information simply and mechanically, explaining how the war was going, all that he could remember about the movements of the enemy from observations during his escape, and insights that went beyond even the most intricate field reports. Kalil explained he had been captured by the Gatraan Army and did not elaborate much beyond that. A few moments explaining what had happened to Arlaan had brought back to Tunaan the sadness of his loss. He knew Arlaan was dead, but had allowed the possibility of Arlaan's survival to stay with him.

Then there was the single ray of hope in the message from Sarn, in the form of a scroll that Kalil handed to him. The leader of the Northern Tribes was putting himself and his people in deeper danger. Ashurth and Akras had not fully mastered the Tribes, and Sarn had awoken to the full nature of Ashurth. He had taken an opportunity to send a message to Tunaan without risking his own people, by freeing Kalil. Sarn was committed to removing his people from the alliance they had entered into with Gatraan.

When Kalil had finished he sat in silence awaiting a response. Tunaan shuffled about feeling uncertain and uncomfortable. He wanted to leave the room, but it was Kalil who was in control. Kalil had given him only what he had needed, Tunaan had asked a few questions to clarify some points, but that was all. He had only asked the questions because he felt he should.

In his uncertainty, Tunaan turned to leave. Kalil looked directly at him, holding him with a sudden intensity, "You know my desire, will you help me?"

Gesh Tunaan was amazed at the power behind the look Kalil gave him. This young man had abilities that could make the powerful cower before him. He, Gesh Tunaan Anosa, who was equalled only by Ashurth, who had power to devastate armies and who could create a spear in his hand with a thought and drive it through Kalil's heart where he stood, was held by only a look, while Kalil awaited his answer. Tunaan's burst of fury dissipated in the air and was sucked in by the darkness.

"I only know you have a hunger that I cannot feed," said Tunaan.

Kalil then released him and said, "I am here because I am compelled to be here. I must return to the Northern Forest and I must ultimately kill King Akras, this is all that remains for me to do. This body has limits, it only allows for a small chance. My need is great." Again he asked, "Will you help me?"

Tunaan did not think about his answer, another fear overcame him. "Yes," he whispered.

Tunaan turned again, eager to leave, it was hard to stay in Kalil's presence. He was unbalanced by Kalil and as he was about to walk away Kalil spoke again, "I will need food, and a place to rest."

Yes. *Of course*, Tunaan had thought. *How foolish of me. I can't leave you here.* The looks on the faces of the guards and of those passing through the audience chamber made

that very obvious. He arranged quarters for Kalil, and then arranged food. He promised to return to him the next morning and told him to take his rest.

Tunaan distracted himself for the rest of the day by routinely attending meetings and then excusing himself to help the Weapons Masters. Everyone he came in contact with would have noticed the unfamiliar look on his face. Those that could see with the inner eye would have seen the tremor he felt in his centre, at the fringes of his aura. It wasn't until he was finally alone, that he managed to regain control of his own mind and the intense desire to probe the mind of Kalil.

Once everything had sunk in, pieces started falling together. Tunaan had formed his plan by the evening and was sat in his private chambers contemplating what Kalil might have signified. Tunaan had been looking for signs in all the places he could. When he had looked to the stars long before, he had seen the complex conjunction that was taking place, and a second, even larger one that would occur centuries from now, but he had been unable to translate it. So he had awaited a further sign, something that would add meaning.

Deep inside, Tunaan had been excited when he discovered the conjunction. He had been excited because his own position among the stars put him in the conjunction, and he was now certain Kalil was a sign, as well as an opportunity. Tunaan wondered again how Kalil had become the way he was and why he had sensed recognition. He asked himself, *what is this darkness?*

Again he tried to turn his mind to other matters. He looked about his room, noticing how well it had been preserved, new items having been added purely for practical reasons. Some of the bookshelves were new and the books were mostly original. Selected volumes saved from a collection that had long since grown so large it needed its own building. The hangings and decorations traced a history going back to the very year the room was built, and a little beyond. The large fireplace was original, made from smoothed granite, it was the focus of the room, its ferocious warmth roaring out towards those who entered. Above it hung an original picture of the Great Prince and his bride, always bringing back memories whenever the Gesh looked at it.

Yes, he thought, *a significant event is about to occur.* He took a sip from his drink. *Will this finally end? I pray it will.* Then he wondered, when it did end, would he care much for the outcome?

On either side of the fireplace were two very comfortable seats, in one sat Tunaan, the other had been prepared with refreshments on a side table, awaiting the arrival of Follis.

Tunaan sat staring at the empty chair, contemplating their meeting and wondering how long he would be kept waiting. Finally the door flew open as Follis burst into the room, "Why did you leave the meeting early?" he demanded. Pleasantries had long since been forgotten. Tunaan had allowed Follis into his confidence many years back. The still overly energetic old man threw his coat onto a hook by the door, dropped into his chair and helped himself to the snacks and beverages. Tunaan's confessor had arrived, and Tunaan was glad to see him. He found he needed the company on this night.

"I have been busy forming a plan," replied Tunaan.

Tunaan had known Follis since his youth, when he had come to Shaundhar as the council representative for the Kukundu territories to the south. It was the first ever council and all the territories of Eela Meyeeracin had been told to appoint a new individual to represent them. Almost unanimously the elders of Kukundu had asked that Follis be their representative. This was astounding since Follis had barely come of age. Every other

councillor was either wealthy or a member of the traditional aristocracy, mostly quite elderly. *The people of Kukundu could not have taken the council seriously, they thought, and said.*

A few councillors from Kukundu's surrounding territories had maintained a knowing silence. Follis was so idealistic the majority concluded he was a dreamy, naive young man not yet ready for the world. And Follis' jittery mannerism's only helped to make him the focus of private jokes. Those that could see with the inner eye would joke about the sudden bursts of energy that would erupt from him on occasion.

For Tunaan, Follis was like a breath of fresh air, rekindling memories of a time long past. His intelligence sparkled, and with his profound sense of honour and his fearless nature, he bore those early years. His immense dignity ultimately took him to the head of the council. The achievement all the more impressive since his third eye had never opened.

Without the inner eye, Follis was unable to see the many energies of the people around him, nor the energies of the animals, the trees and woods and the glow of the earth itself. He could not see the moving emotions of crowds. Nor could he see the truth in people, or the rare few who could see and manipulate the body's energy, to carry out some falsehood. But Follis could, like everyone, feel such changes. His instincts were well honed. With experience he had become formidable. Only the Truthsayers could, with any confidence, hope to pass off a lie as the truth.

The Truthsayers were the most highly gifted of all. They could cut through the fabrications and see the heart of a matter. They were capable of shifting their energies to the point of bringing out whatever emotions and reactions they might want from another. A group of them could create an entire fiction in a person's mind. They could sense activity beyond the physical world and kept watch should Ashurth once again attack through the higher plains.

"What plan?" asked Follis, throwing some bittersweet nuts into his mouth, and then washing them down with a sharp liqueur. Tunaan saw his curiosity. Follis could not hide from him.

"The kind of plan that could end the war," Tunaan smiled.

Making no attempt to hide anything this time, Follis froze midway to picking up some more nuts and looked hard at Tunaan. "Please explain."

So Tunaan explained and as he neared the end of his explanation Follis' face turned ashen and twisted in disgust at what Tunaan proposed. When he heard of Kalil, he was furious that Tunaan had not even tried to repair the man's mind.

"I can't help him," Tunaan shot back at Follis' unfinished protest. "I'm afraid to even try."

"*You* can't help him?" said Follis incredulously, as he climbed out of his seat, glaring at Tunaan, his hands now resting on his hips.

"No. And I don't think he wants to be helped. The only reason he is here is because he needs to kill Akras, and I can help give him the opportunity." Pausing for a moment, he added, "And possibly because through this act he must be certain it will help us."

"Needs?" Follis' aura thrust his reproach and righteous indignation at Tunaan. They cut at Tunaan for more reasons than just Kalil. Follis sat back down.

"Yes 'needs'," Tunaan bit back, "because it is not just a simple desire for revenge. I don't know how or why, but it goes beyond any basic emotion. And there is power in him the likes of which I have not seen before."

A moment of silence followed, there was a note to Tunaan's voice that Follis had never heard before. Follis contemplated his drink before asking,

"What troubles you old man?"

Tunaan smiled wryly, he looked much younger than Follis. He had watched his friend age over the years, whilst he had not changed at all. In the time he had known him he had seen Follis grow as a man, fall in love with the councillor from Esh'Ta, the memory of which always made Tunaan smile, marry and father a family.

"Time troubles me," said Tunaan.

"Oh?"

"The weight of my age bears down on me, Follis. A vigour and energy I once had are now gone and Ashurth keeps driving on. There are moments when I feel stretched beyond my means and now this...." He searched for an appropriate word and found none.

"This *person* has arrived and suddenly I feel like a child lost in the woods, with strange sounds coming from the dark. Uncertain of where the path lies. And yet I am also excited about what may come to pass."

As he spoke Tunaan revealed more of himself than he had ever done before. He let Follis feel the turmoil within him. "In recent times I have felt like I have become detached, unmoved, when I should throw my hands up in fury, or celebration. More recently I have been plagued by doubts about my own purpose. After so long my understanding of my own existence is no closer now than the first day I sought the answers and Kalil stands before me, burning with that dark passion of his, and he frightens me. And the darkness recognises me and pulls at my need for knowledge." Tunaan's face twisted with the description, his fingers clawed before his eyes with the thought of his frustrations.

Follis had listened in silence. A long moment passed as Tunaan stared at his drink and Follis thought deeply. Eventually Follis got up from his chair, put his hand upon Tunaan's shoulder and said regretfully, "I do not know how I may help you my friend. As always you are ambiguous. You have told me so much and at the same time you have told me very little. On one level you are the open and warm friend who has played with my children and grandchildren, and on another you are truly the *Gowesh* of Eela Meyeeracin. On this occasion I do not have the knowledge that would help me to help you.

"It is strange that this Kalil should emerge from the middle of the war, surrounded by a power that promises answers, but you should fear it. The emotion you share with me now fills me with sorrow. A reflection of the troubles we now face, maybe. In recent years I have seen changes in you. You are still the man I met when I was so young, but you are eroded in a way that I cannot explain. It would seem that what ever may come to pass, you will have to face this fear alone."

Tunaan thanked Follis for his sympathy, with all the warmth he could convey. He wanted to press him to explain his comments in more detail, but instead he gathered his thoughts and asked quickly. "So you don't like my plan then?"

"No," said Follis firmly, bringing his focus back, and sitting down again. "But I'll go along with it, if you promise me you'll destroy the armour and everything connected with it immediately afterwards."

"Don't worry about that," Tunaan said, to which Follis cocked an eyebrow, but did not utter a word in question. *I will tell you more as times goes by*, thought Tunaan, *when we near the end of this road.*

“Just remember how much it is you ask of me,” said Follis, “You know how the consequences of my agreements will grow in me.”

Follis searched the air with his eyes and focussed directly on Tunaan’s. “This war now asks ultimate questions of us, Tunaan. My certainty in who we are is thrown into doubt.”

Tunaan changed the subject to something mundane and Follis happily followed the lead. They did not discuss the world or its problems any further, but instead talked about the past.

Follis stayed for longer than usual that night. Tunaan answered the questions about the past that had nagged Follis for some time, but only with respect to subjects Tunaan was happy to discuss. Did they really do that? Did this really happen? Who did kill that King? By the end of the night and with conversation flowing easily, Tunaan caught up with what had been happening with Follis’ children, his grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. As the two became tired, Follis got up to leave and Tunaan rose wearily to see him out of the door. As Follis walked away Tunaan thought, *I owe you so much, my friend. For all the plans you have hated, and the forgiveness you have always given me.*

He did not sleep straight away that night, instead Tunaan stayed up reading old history books, tutting at the inaccuracies. When a lamp went out he quickly recharged it. From the pitch black of his window he heard the sounds of the forest over the night sounds of Shaundhar. As an animal rubbed its horns against a tree, Tunaan gazed into the dark. When the sun finally came up, he lay upon his bed under its warm light, and took another look at the portrait of the Great Prince and his bride. He felt a tinge of sorrow before he fell asleep.



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