

IV CORRECTION

by

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First published in Great Britain by The Book Guild in 2002

Ebook edition published in 2016

Produced by bamboo associates

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PROLOGUE

A disembodied spirit, alone and without a will, soars high above the swirling clouds. The light is dim and cold as if the sun, which has for so long ministered to the needs of an ancient planet, has chosen now to forsake its task and flee. Diving like an eagle, unseen eyes behold a restless land faltering into view through trailing wisps of white and grey. It is a land bereft of life and hope – the sad remains of nature’s once proud creation. Upon the rotting ground nothing stirs save belching putrid gas, forcing a passage through the coagulating mud. The horror of such devastation clings malevolently to the meandering spectre as if the mere presence of a living entity is an abomination to be hunted and destroyed.

Far in the distance the heaving slime begins to yield and, with its easing, remnants of a mighty forest wither and crumble in the sickly breeze. Gone are the leaves of brilliant green, the crooked boughs and solid bark. Hacked and charred, cremated trunks steam and crackle as the fire which wrought their destruction still smoulders deep within. And yet, amid this seething chaos, a sapling, encircled by stricken stumps, clings desperately to life, trembling like a frightened child. Drawn towards this ray of hope, the spirit watches as untouched shoots strive for the dismal light. Abruptly, the sapling petrifies, collapsing into dust as if cursed by the observation. Shocked and saddened, the spirit turns away to resume its journey on.

The forest begins to thin then fades to twilight as the land slopes gently down to the edge of a broiling lake. Its scalding waters bubble and hiss like a giant cauldron, while sprays of mud and rock erupt from deep within its troubled waters, blanketing the shore.

The spirit shies away, rising high into the sky and glides effortlessly far beyond the turmoil to terrain which clearly bears the mark of mankind’s intervention. Here, the ground is hard: baked by a searing heat. White ash coats its surface like a shroud, its composition so fine that the slightest waft of air causes clouds of suffocating dust to billow and swirl. Bordering the sterile plot, deep waterless canals form a latticework across the landscape and wend their way toward the outline of a distant city which rises like row upon row of forgotten tombstones above a rolling fog.

The ghostly presence shudders as it encounters the silent structures, twisted and bent as they are beyond all recognition. Stone and metal, alongside mangled machinery, choke the ruptured carriageways. Every building, every monument has been shattered: their very fabric now a continually decomposing mass.

By the skeleton of a lofty dome, the spirit pauses to reflect on the terrible power responsible for the holocaust. Its perception drifts listlessly through the empty shells and buried chambers of this once majestic city until a sight more tragic than anything it has yet encountered shrieks for its attention. Barely visible beneath a mound of crystal shards, the face of a small girl shines out like a beacon. Her features are miraculously unscathed, her expression serene, as if she welcomed the judgement passed upon her. Across her body, the decomposed torso of an old man lies still – evidence of his vain attempt to shield her.

Pity joins the host of emotions clawing at the amorphous being until at last it shrinks away to confront the goal which has persistently demanded its presence.

At the centre of the ruins, a colossal tower rises intact, like a gladiator standing proudly over his fallen victims. The pale-blue walls of this pyramidal monolith are an obscene vision set in the midst of colourless destruction, yet the spirit accepts their existence without question. Impenetrable doors still stand, defiantly barring the way to all who seek to enter,

but they cannot exclude the wandering soul that, like a wisp of vapour, passes unhindered through their solid framework. The walls within exude the faintest of glows but it is sufficient to light the corridors which thread their way throughout the vast, undamaged interior.

The spirit now roams with purpose, hardly pausing to recall the people and events that had, for countless aeons, been influenced by the great works undertaken within this sacred shrine. It continues on, tirelessly inspecting level after level until, at last, it surrenders to a mounting desire to enter the largest and most imposing chamber of the edifice. Cylindrical in form and surmounted by a clear crystal dome, the great chamber seems to embody a tangible presence. Ten ornately fashioned doors, each bearing heavy mechanical locks, encircle its base which, constructed of black marble, forms the foundation of two arched tiers that comprise the walls.

The spirit moves towards a vermilion crystal rostrum – the centrepiece of the floor space – and settles by the grandiose table encircling it. A flood of abstract images torment it, urging it to delay no longer. It has seen the stark horror of the world outside and all too vividly experienced the pain and anguish of the annihilated population. There now remains only one task to fulfil before the power which has possessed it relents.

The spirit sweeps above the chamber and into the heart of the tower. A green radiance shines out brilliantly as the spectre approaches its destination until the intensity is almost blinding, but it does not falter. At last it stands before the source: a sphere of pulsating light so powerful that a sun could not match its potency, and as if hypnotised by such overwhelming force, it glides into the body of the globe. Absorbed into the very fabric of this awesome creation, the spirit's essence shimmers like countless stars then crystallises into the form of an age-worn man – a man barely able to stand. The man turns to be confronted by his own holographic reflection.

Once-hungry eyes peer out apprehensively through a mass of white unkempt hair which now hangs limply from a wizened and mottled skull. No sign of recognition crosses his startled expression... But then suddenly his eyes flare. His mouth opens in amazement, allowing a name to tumble uneasily from his lips.

‘Forillion Jenor...’

Ancient eyelids flickering then squinting against the morning light, slowly open.

‘My God, the dream! Again it seeks to taunt me.’

Forillion Jenor, Master Guardian of the High Council of Iy, groans.

Chapter 1:

VASDAL GANDRIC

High within the tall, pyramidal tower rising majestically from the vast Iycean Council chambers, one faint light still shone out across the retiring city of Isothea. The day's tasks had long since been completed and yet, as was the case most evenings, one solitary figure still busied himself with the operations-bank series-four continuum array.

Far below, a late-autumn mist had begun to filter through the narrow streets and scattered domiciles which had sheltered beneath the great structure for aeons, and to a casual onlooker watching from the highest reaches of the tower, the appearance of the city at such times resembled a mass of tiny cork fragments floating on a sheltered pool: each piece occasionally appearing then disappearing beneath the surface of the moving waters. Across the gently undulating plateau of green fields and marshland, the Forantean range of rust-brown mountains, which mark the boundary between land and sea, stood firm in their final silhouette as Notik, ancient star of the Iycean heavens, yielded to the night.

On this particular evening Vasdal Gandric, Section Head of the Inner Time Monitoring Commission and member of the High Council of Iy, was less than interested in the mass of data accumulating before him. Impatiently striding back and forth, he was struggling to suppress his anger. Occasionally he paused to contemplate the rising of Lycea and Corethalan, Iy's two iridescent moons, but even this scene of great beauty failed to prevent his self-control from finally evaporating.

'Where in the accursed name of Damlon is he? I'll see to it that—'

Before Gandric could complete his threat, the fluorescent green entrance-request light sprang into life and a trembling voice was asking permission to enter. An instant later, the light ceased to flicker and was replaced by the symbols of a unique recognition code.

'Yes, yes!' Gandric cried, slamming his hand against the clearance mechanism.

A few seconds later a tall, nervous man with jet-black hair and eyes moistened by the cold night air was standing before him. Endeavouring to bow while proffering a small golden cylinder, the man said, 'I'm Kel Tasrol, sir. Have I the honour of addressing—'

'So you're here at last,' Gandric interrupted. 'You no doubt enjoyed a leisurely trip from Corethalan, then. I assume this is the message cylinder I've been waiting for?'

'Yes, sir,' Tasrol muttered, trying to regain his composure. 'I am indeed sorry to have kept you waiting, but flights from Corethalan have been very erratic of late.'

Snatching the cylinder from Tasrol, Gandric slipped it into a small, grey box clamped to the side of a nearby terminal, which caused its contents to flash onto a monitor screen behind Tasrol's head. Gandric made no comment as he absorbed the implications of the message. Suddenly he stiffened inwardly. In the top right-hand corner of the projection, a vermilion indicator flashed ominously, indicating that the cylinder had been tampered with.

'The fool,' Gandric thought to himself, 'the stupid fool.'

'I hope the High Councillor is pleased,' Tasrol said cautiously. 'I was assured you would be... And, in any case, would be appreciative.'

Gandric's piercing blue eyes settled on the messenger.

'Indeed I am, I am. You've done well... Here!' A small white package exchanged hands. 'Now go! And be sure to catch the early-morning flight back to Yorthal Lazulis.'

As the steel-grey doors slid silently back into position behind Kel Tasrol, Gandric returned to his small observation port.

‘Ah, Protrass,’ he muttered to himself, ‘why do you plague me with these rogues. You know the importance of the messages, and yet...’

At that moment the full impact of what he had learnt ignited within him. As he had hoped, the scheduled return of Kef Atalan from Earth had been rendered impossible, and Atalan was completely unaware of it. A desire to view his personal record of the intertwining lives of himself and his one-time friend overwhelmed him. With manic speed he fingered the controls of a strangely iridescent globe located in a small alcove to the left of his desk, and it responded by creating a holographic image within its body while the lines of its own structure became almost transparent. Gandric relaxed in his chair. Like the large desk which dominated the centre of the floor, it was fashioned in a style common on Earth in the eighteenth century from original designs by George Hepplewhite. Discovery of the designs had been particularly pleasing to him, as the emergence of such detail was rare by normal spatial-time scanning techniques. He was especially fond of wooden furniture, and although the harvesting of natural hardwoods was prohibited, the synthetic compound, which he himself had developed, could hardly be distinguished from perfectly seasoned mahogany.

A mixture of self-satisfaction and frustration tormented Gandric’s thoughts. He was recognised as the most accomplished scientist to serve on the High Council. He had made astounding advances in image-recording techniques, time and space shift theory; and he had even improved the safety and reliability of the Sphere of Transference – the enigmatic globe of jade green, unique in its ability to transport matter through time and space, and the focal point of the Council’s power. Yet, despite all this, Forillion Jenor, Head of the High Council, had chosen Kef Atalan to be his successor.

In the midst of his anger Gandric realised that his heart rate had increased and that perspiration was trickling from his brow. Releasing his grip on the chair, he forced himself to marshal his emotions then returned his attention to the amorphous projection before him.

It was several moments before his penetrating voice gave the command, ‘Begin!’

Two figures appeared – young men, rivals yet friends – entering for the first time the high domed lecture hall of the Institute of Time Monitoring Sciences in Isothea... Gandric watched as they progressed through the preliminary science courses – always obtaining the highest merits, always exchanging first and second place. In those early days, Gandric was generally considered the more striking of the two. A mysterious young man, his dark-red hair and sharply carved features had complemented his lightly tanned skin and piercing blue eyes to give him a sinister yet exciting persona.

After a time a third figure entered the hologram: a beautiful young woman with shimmering brown hair which danced as she walked and eyes so deep and soulful they could enslave a man at a single glance. Gandric’s eyes widened as he beheld this miniature vision of Clytra. She had entered his life at a crucial time only weeks before the disastrous final examinations on Civilisation Development. Temporarily assigned to the institute as part of her training as an auxiliary transference technician, Atalan and Gandric had instantly fallen in love with her. The image of Clytra never failed to disturb him. With an involuntary movement of his hand, the holographic figures paused, frozen in space like marionettes at the end of a performance.

Gandric’s expression glazed over as a flood of recollections tormented him.

‘If only she’d stayed with me,’ he breathed. But he knew that, even then, ambition and deceit coloured her soul and that fate had set the pattern of their lives from that time on – a fact which, despite all his knowledge of time science, was unequivocal.

Shaking his head to dispel the nagging memories, Gandric reset the controls of the machine, causing the projection to dissolve then reform to depict a scene some 20 years later.

Kef had completed his time at the institute with unparalleled success and had been chosen by Forillion Jenor to enter the College of Time Transference.

For 900 years Forillion Jenor had held the office of Nenus Fortax: Head of the High Council and Master of Time Transference. The history of Jenor and his predecessors inspired such a sense of knowledge and trust that to all those aware of the High Council they were reverently known as the 'Guardians of Time'. In fact to those more closely associated with the Iyceans this title was considered to have been ordained, for it appeared that nature had engineered the race's development to produce men and women with the ability to serve the thankless task of maintaining complex threads of order in an otherwise chaotic universe. Of all known races, only Iyceans enjoyed the gift of longevity, and with a general absence of organic illness or disease, individual ages in excess of 1,500 years were commonplace: a factor regarded as essential to stabilise and unite the Council, allowing its members to pursue their innate desire to monitor the dimension of time with continuity.

To be selected to enter the College of Time Transference by Jenor personally was naturally a great honour. Few were ever admitted, and for those who were, a place on the High Council was assured. Clytra had married Kef shortly afterwards – a devastating blow for Gandric and an action which left her friends and colleagues more than a little sceptical about her intentions.

Gandric's body quaked as he relived the horror. He felt the familiar lump in his throat as he fought to suppress the rage that was already overtaking him.

His own position at the time had been marred by failure. An error of judgement in his ill-fated Civilisation Development examination had caused him prematurely to introduce the knowledge of metal extraction and basic molecular theory to a world under study. He subsequently learnt that, as a result of this action, the planet would have been destroyed a mere 500 years later after numerous minor nuclear wars finally ripped away its atmosphere. Several members of the adjudicating panel had previously expressed concern regarding aspects of Gandric's character when dealing with the elements of life and evolution. These reservations had been borne out by this misjudgement. For the first time he had suffered real failure and, with it, the knowledge that a place in the College of Time Transference would be denied him. Self-recrimination seemed certain to overwhelm him in the days, the weeks, that followed, but this he finally banished by invoking a new objective. He would make himself so indispensable to the High Council that they would be forced to invite him into their ranks. Such a route into the High Council was not without precedent, for some of its greatest leaders had originally been granted a Council position on the strength of their scientific achievements alone. From such a platform he would then devise a way of taking the ultimate position of Nenus Fortax for himself. As part of his plan Gandric ensured that he produced a steady stream of technological marvels, each discovery and advance more brilliant than the last, until finally the offer of a place on the High Council had come. Of course he had accepted the position – Section Head of the Inner Time Monitoring Commission – but only after an appropriate delay.

Firmly established in his new position, and with almost limitless resources at his disposal, Gandric had then set about securing the Council leadership. He ensured, with the aid of an able team of technicians, that his activities remained above suspicion by maintaining a constant flow of ingenious and practical scientific developments, and when confident that his department's success provided sufficient cover, he had secretly begun the construction of an elaborate base on the outskirts of Yorthal Lazulis, the capital city of Corethalan.

Corethalan was the nearest of Iy's two moons and had long ago been made habitable by the provision of a synthetic atmosphere – a gift from a departing Nenus Fortax. People from planets within feasible travelling distance had settled there, including a number of highly-

placed Iyceans, and the satellite had rapidly become a thriving trade and leisure centre, focused in its capital. The Iycean elders had at first expressed concern about the way in which Corethalan was developing, but soon recognised that the many attractions offered in Yorthal Lazulis indirectly helped maintain their own rather staid and peaceful life on Iy.

Gandric smiled as the hologram displayed an aerial view of his beloved sanctuary. His main objective had, to some extent, been placed on hold while he supervised the construction of his apartments and laboratories, but with the installation of his prototype space-time light accelerator, he could finally renew his efforts.

Choosing Yorthal Lazulis as a second home and work place had proved a difficult request on which to gain Council approval, but finally, despite numerous objections, Forillion Jenor himself had intervened and given his blessing. Gandric recalled his amazement at gaining support from such an unexpected quarter, but nevertheless had wasted no time in completing his complex.

Gandric's mood had lightened while viewing these later segments of his life, but before he could recover completely from his lingering depression a series of faint clicks attracted his attention. As he turned to investigate, the main entrance doors trembled then smoothly glided apart to reveal the robust figure of a man silhouetted against the corridor lights.

'Protrass!' Gandric exclaimed, impatiently beckoning him in. 'I wasn't expecting you.'

'A thousand apologies, Councillor,' Protrass replied, smiling, 'but an important matter requires my attention.'

Gandric, still sitting near the light accelerator, gestured Protrass to join him, then activated a switch to reseal the doors.

'How did you bypass my security systems?'

Protrass's smile broadened.

'Just a few tricks of the trade... But don't worry, no one knows I'm here, and I can leave undetected.'

Relaxing back in his chair, Gandric let the topic drop and reflected on this fellow Iycean who he employed to ensure that his lifestyle and experiments on Corethalan could take place in seclusion and without interruption.

Suspected of being a mercenary, assassin, subversive or worse, Protrass was well known to the authorities of many worlds, and only his speed and cunning, originally gained as a commander in the regular Legelian guards, enabled him to avoid arrest. Of medium height and stocky build, on first meeting he seemed a little shy. His face was lined and furrowed – more than expected for a man of his age – but his black, smiling eyes and mass of wiry brown hair intermingled with grey created an amiable impression of youthfulness reminiscent of the seafaring folk that inhabit the many coves and harbours common to Iy's northern hemisphere. Financial gain was Protrass's main interest, and the ample funds provided by Gandric ensured his enduring loyalty. As time passed they had formed a close alliance, which had often proved invaluable to both, and gradually even a sense of trust had developed between them.

Gandric's prolonged scrutiny had no effect on Protrass, who remained impassive until the Councillor was ready to resume.

'Tell me, Commander,' Gandric said at last, 'what's so pressing that you've seen fit to leave Corethalan at such a crucial time?'

Never at ease unless in a position to act freely, Protrass left his seat and walked over to the observation glass.

'As we agreed, the couriers we use are ordinary folk in need of a little extra money,' he began. 'They think they're employed by the institute and don't ask questions. Unfortunately my agents misjudged Kel Tasrol. By chance one of my men saw him with a well-known dealer in extortion. Needless to say after a little gentle persuasion the dealer admitted Tasrol's plan to sell details of the message cylinder's contents.'

‘And what then?’ Gandric asked, smiling to himself.

Protrass shrugged.

‘I terminated the dealer... Naturally... Then bought the information from Tasrol myself.’

‘Wasn’t he suspicious?’ Gandric probed.

‘At first, perhaps,’ Protrass replied. ‘But he relaxed when I paid up and added a big bonus.’

‘Did he meet anyone else?’ Gandric followed on, enjoying the narrative.

‘No,’ Protrass stated. ‘I’m satisfied he was working alone. I’ll deal with him on his return to Corethalan.’

‘I’m grateful,’ Gandric grinned, ‘but that won’t be necessary.’

With the mirth suddenly draining from his face, Protrass marched over to the entrance door then halted.

‘You already knew of this?’ he asked sternly.

‘No, not at all,’ Gandric moved to relieve the tension. ‘I knew nothing of the events you’ve described. But each message cylinder has an inbuilt security seal, so I was aware that it had been tampered with. Forgive me for not telling you earlier. I merely wanted to know the background.’

Protrass’s boyish grin returned.

‘I assume you’ve made your own arrangements then.’

‘Yes,’ Gandric replied with an insincere gesture of resignation. ‘His payment will be more than he can handle.’

Protrass raised an eyebrow and snapped to attention.

‘With your permission, I’ll return to Yorthal Lazulis and await your instructions.’

Gandric depressed the door release button and gave an affirmative nod.

‘Oh, one more thing,’ he added dryly. ‘You’d be wise to miss the early-morning shuttle.’

Without further comment Protrass departed, and, alone again, Gandric returned his attention to the light accelerator, advancing the recording to the time when Protrass had first encountered his duplicate Sphere of Transference.

Gandric had been working late one night when he heard footsteps approaching, and realising he had not fully closed the laboratory’s heavy outer shield doors, he had waited silently for the footsteps to pass. They had not. Instead, the sound of running followed by a crash was followed almost immediately by the body of a man sprawling into the chamber. In a lightning motion the man had risen on one knee, ready to fight – it was Protrass. His suspicions aroused by the partially open doors, he had decided to investigate, especially since the area was generally off-limits.

‘Unfortunately some packing cases won the argument,’ Protrass had complained.

Relaxing after the startling encounter, Gandric had jokingly asked Protrass for his opinion on the duplicate Sphere of Transference, even though Protrass could know nothing of such things; and he remembered being more than a little amused by his response, for it seemed to Protrass’s untrained eye that the silently pulsating sphere, suspended above the ground without visible means of support, was incapable of serving any useful purpose at all.

In that pose Gandric halted the ghostly images of the hologram. He poured himself another draft of wine. He was tired. After years of preparation the final act of the play he alone was writing and directing was at hand.

Glancing at the holographic image of himself and Protrass with the awesome, gossamer-like sphere towering behind them, he allowed a chuckle to rise in his throat. Suddenly struck by the levity of that long night when he had decided to place his trust in Protrass, he focused on his attempts to explain the Sphere and its purpose to his bewildered new friend.

‘So if I understand correctly,’ Protrass had whispered, feeling that the almost reverential nature of the enigmatic globe demanded considerable respect, ‘courtesy of information

gleaned from your space-time light accelerator, this is a duplicate of the Sphere of Transference in Isothea – the legacy of each Nenus Fortax – even though no one has ever completely understood how it works or, indeed, its original purpose?’

Gandric recalled having the greatest difficulty in convincing the Commander that although the Sphere of Transference was the focal point of the High Council’s power, its potential was strangely limited.

‘Only time travel into the past of other civilisations is possible,’ he had stressed, inferring that this failing would soon be rectified. ‘Transference into the future, or any period of Iycean history, isn’t yet possible. The Guardians’ ability to “see” into the future lies exclusively in their skilful manipulation of instrumentation in order to create a basis for prediction and probability.’

It was approaching dawn before Protrass wearily attempted to summarise Gandric’s explanation.

‘So, by entering the Sphere, Forillion Jenor – or anyone with his consent – can travel back through space and time... But only because of some magical link he has with the mechanism serving the Transference Sphere chambers... And you need a special metabolism-adjusting agent otherwise you fry!’

Gandric had then been forced to admit that his Sphere was only able to send and retrieve inanimate objects, although at present that was sufficient for his needs. Only the complete control possessed by Forillion Jenor could operate the Sphere of Transference to its full potential. He had then explained that he would soon return to Isothea, and that over the coming years he wanted Protrass to send him any message cylinders which arrived in the Sphere. Only Protrass was to know of this and the task was of paramount importance.

Protrass had then expressed a wish to see the space-time light accelerator in operation. The machine had been a prototype of the one Gandric was now viewing, and although not as sophisticated or versatile, it still possessed the remarkable ability, when correctly adjusted, to collect light reflections from the past. These light rays aligned to reproduce an exact image of any particular instant in time in the form of a holographic projection. It was a machine of inestimable value, and, since its invention, it had provided Gandric with the key to becoming the next Nenus Fortax. Gandric vividly recalled the expression on Protrass’s face as the machine adopted its characteristically transparent appearance then displayed the holographic spectre of two miniature figures engaged in deep conversation. Protrass immediately recognised himself and his second-in-command, Heeran Sorkaneese, discussing how best to extract the maximum amount of profit from their new employer, the eccentric High Councillor. Realising the gravity of being caught out, the Commander had seemed about to explode, but Gandric, quick to appreciate the danger, successfully made light of the situation and had offered Protrass his hand to seal their alliance.

Gandric returned to his favourite chair and sank heavily into it. The night was half over and, although he had intended to view the complete recording, his weary limbs demanded rest. In spite of the carefully controlled atmosphere he felt stifled, and the pressure which invariably built up across his temples at such times had developed into a pounding, nauseous ache. Feeling that a walk in the cold night air might provide a cure, he switched off the light accelerator and donned his cap and silver-grey cloak.

Corridor after corridor of dark, empty offices and laboratories almost seemed to stir as one of their most famous occupants strode towards the antigravity lift. Tiny red lights on thermostatically-controlled experiments ignited then dimmed, and the characteristic whirring of resetting time mechanisms interrupted the constant low hum of extractor fans as if each sound, each light, sought to inform its fellows of his progress. As Gandric stepped gingerly onto the lift’s invisible platform, a shiver ran down his spine. He had never liked this

particular mode of transport, fearing that one day he would surely plummet to his death. However, that day had not yet come, and he found himself gently descending the long cylindrical shaft to the floor housing the Council chambers.

‘Good evening, Councillor Gandric,’ a loud but wavering voice echoed from the darkness. ‘Working late as usual, sir? You know, my wife says it’s not at all good for a man to be always working and never relaxing. And I for once agree with her. No offence meant of course, sir.’

Peering into the shadows, Gandric recognised the round balding head and rotund figure of Penamin Dorfa. Although designated Chief Security Officer, a position Dorfa greatly cherished, he headed no more than a token force. In reality there was little call for an armed guard to police the institute, as a plethora of internal and external security doors provided more than adequate protection against any would-be intruders, and, apart from the odd student prank, few incidents of a criminal nature ever occurred.

‘I trust all is well?’ Gandric asked, ignoring Dorfa’s comments. ‘I’m going for a walk to clear my head. I’ll be back within the hour.’

‘As you say,’ Dorfa replied. ‘I’ll inform the other duty officers. We can’t afford to mistake a High Councillor for a villain now, can we?’

Gandric brushed past the age-worn guard and left the building by the main entrance.

Although the evening mist had persisted into the night, moonlight still occasionally penetrated the haze, transiently illuminating one or more of the small statues dotted about the grounds. After strolling for some time, Gandric paused at the edge of a nearby canal to reflect. It was one of many such waterways which criss-crossed the Iycean landscape, providing an important link between towns, villages and cities.

In and around Isothea, water travel was not only a tradition but also the only method of transport readily available. It was felt by townspeople and academics alike that retaining the old ways in this matter and restricting air travel to a minimum would ensure a far more peaceful existence for all. No one knew when the complex of channels had been constructed, by whom, or for what purpose, but designs of watercraft could be found in some of the oldest texts. The majority of Iyceans loved the seas and inland waterways, which covered close to 70% of the planet’s surface, and water was by far the major theme running through Iycean art and folklore.

Gandric was about to make his way back to the institute when he felt a humid breeze touch his cheek. Almost, he thought, as if someone was breathing close by. Then, without warning, a soft, yet determined voice spoke out to him.

‘You cannot continue, Vasdal Gandric. You will achieve only misery.’

Gandric recoiled violently.

‘Who is it? Who’s there?’ he cried, his words filled with alarm. ‘Where are you? What do you want?’

‘I have not awaited this opportunity to answer unnecessary questions,’ the voice continued. ‘You know me well enough. Relinquish the foolish plot you think so brilliant. Allow Kef Atalan to return.’

Gandric’s complexion paled, his whole body tensed. Unable to determine the source of the voice, he edged backwards. The mist was now impenetrable, and within seconds he lost his bearings. Relentlessly – as though within the fabric of his brain – his tormentor continued.

‘This will be your only warning. Heed it well. Keep your toys and tinsel palace, and play your little games, but do not meddle with destiny lest destiny meddle with you. Do you understand me, Gandric? Do you?’

‘Where are you? What do you want?’ was the only reply Gandric could muster. He whirled around, catching his foot on a large stone and crumpled to the ground. Fearing that the voice might belong to an assassin, he fumbled desperately for his staff of office, which

had slipped from his hand as he fell. His grazed fingers located its rounded handle. Swiftly he retrieved it and released a trigger mechanism hidden within its ornate insignia, allowing its lower half to fall away. Staggering to his feet, he activated a second control and a hail of short energy bursts shot from its tip. Two bolts hit a nearby statue, instantly reducing it to rubble. Another struck a decorative bush, which exploded in a blinding sheet of flame. The remaining bolts dissipated harmlessly.

Gandric heard footsteps rapidly approaching and saw light beams dancing urgently back and forth. A moment later the reddened face of Penamin Dorfa was staring at him quizzically.

‘What is it? Are you injured, sir?’ Dorfa panted, as several other security officers arrived, all equally startled.

The small group fell silent, mesmerised by the flickering flames of the stricken bush.

Gandric took advantage of the confusion to regain his composure, then, brushing the mud from his cloak and tunic, answered calmly.

‘Nothing to worry about. I was returning from my walk when the mist suddenly thickened. I thought I saw someone running towards me. I called out but there was no reply, so I fired a few warning shots. Clearly it was my overactive imagination aided and abetted by this infernal fog. I’m sorry to have disturbed you... And I will, of course, pay for the damage.’

‘That’s a dangerous weapon you have there, Councillor,’ one of the guards said suspiciously. ‘Such things are forbidden in Council buildings.’

‘Quite so,’ Gandric responded, glaring at the guard. ‘I’ve a collection of such pieces in Corethalan. As you can see, this particular one resembles my staff of office and was a gift from a friend. I often favour it because of its lighter feel.’

‘We understand, sir,’ Dorfa interjected, trying to prevent the conflict from developing further. ‘I’m sure that’s fine.’ He could see that the Councillor’s patience was wearing thin. ‘With your permission, sir, we’ll return to our posts. I’ll have one of the men extinguish the fire then I’m sure nothing more need be said. Come along now, men. The excitement’s over.’

‘Yes... Thank you,’ Gandric said in a more relaxed tone.

The guards disappeared into the darkness and Gandric could hear Dorfa quenching the protests of the suspicious guard with a strong rebuke. He was fortunate to have the old man’s loyalty, which clearly outweighed any personal animosity he might have toward him: a reaction Gandric had brought upon himself because of his much-resented aloofness towards all institute staff.

Profoundly disturbed by his experience, Gandric made his way to the observation room on the uppermost level of the High Tower. The events of the past hours had caused him to lose track of time and he still had one thing he wished to do before retiring for what remained of the night.

The observation room now formed part of the institute’s recreational facilities for Councillors and senior staff. Originally used to house ancient artefacts, which had later been moved to the Museum of Antiquities, the room was particularly popular with those working late, and some had even claimed in all honesty that one hour’s stargazing there was worth a day’s study in the technical archives.

As Gandric prepared the televiewer scope for short distance operation, the memory of the accusing voice haunted him. What had really happened? How had it known so much, and by what means had it spoken to him, apparently out of thin air? Was it Protrass playing some trick? Was he himself going mad? Amid all these unanswered questions, one in particular puzzled him. The voice had declared that he knew its source. Who could it be?

Gandric focused his attention on the task at hand and strove to banish the incident from his mind. With his preparations complete, he slid open a protective screen to reveal the starlit sky. He glanced at the chronometer on the side of the televiewer and quickly trained the

scanner on an area of space halfway between Iy and Corethalan. As the display read 4 a.m., a tiny flash appeared transiently on the viewing scope.

Gandric frowned.

‘If only you hadn’t tampered with the message cylinder.’

He terminated the session leaving only the glittering stars as witnesses to yet another act of mankind’s violent nature. Kel Tasrol, the tragic victim of a space-shuttle explosion, had now been paid in full.

Gandric arose late the next morning to a bright and clear day.

‘Unusual for the time of year,’ one of the secretaries commented as he passed briskly through the Council offices.

His head still ached but his facial expression gave no indication of his real concern. The remainder of the morning was taken up in explaining his actions with regard to the destruction of institute property and his illegal possession of a firearm to the relevant authority, but by midday he was free; and, asking two of his senior staff to supervise the departmental work for the afternoon, he returned to his quarters.

Suppressing his excitement, Gandric dressed in his silver-grey ceremonial robe and maroon overgown. Within hours he would be reunited with Clytra. In his eyes Atalan had stolen her from him: a personal affront, which he would soon be able to repay. Clytra’s letters made it clear that she had at last realised her mistake. If this was true, nothing could stand in his way. He would possess her once again. As he prepared to leave, he admired himself in the mirror, and, with mockery tingeing his words, spoke past his reflection.

‘Soon you’ll know that your precious Kef Atalan is trapped. Then we’ll see how you attempt to thwart me, Forillion, futile though your endeavours will be.’

Satisfied with his appearance, Gandric walked with great gusto to the entrance hall where the evening before he had encountered Penamin Dorfa.

‘I’ll be away till morning,’ he called to a departmental aide as he left the building.

He followed a narrow footpath down to a small private mooring dock where his craft, a medium-sized hydropeller, was already prepared for departure. He settled himself at the controls, released the drive mechanism and selected one of its slower speed settings. At the press of a button the boat glided silently into the centre of the canal and on towards the western reaches of the Council grounds.

The day had continued to develop from its early promise into a splendid afternoon and, appreciating the solitude, Gandric allowed himself to slide down in his seat to rest.

The hydropeller had its own navigation controls, which held the craft on a straight course and at a set distance from either bank of the canal. In the event of obstacles or other craft approaching, it automatically made the necessary adjustments until it could resume its original path. One of Gandric’s technicians, much to the credit of his department, had been responsible for inventing the hydropeller propulsion unit, which was now incorporated into almost all water-borne vehicles on Iy. The principle was remarkably simple. An eccentrically-shaped cylinder passing through two propellers was coated in a highly hydrophobic compound and was housed in a watertight outer casing. This casing could be adjusted to reveal slits of various sizes, thus permitting water to enter the inner core at different angles and rates. As the water was repelled by the chemical coating the propellers were forced to rotate, and the rapidly circulating water was directed through an exhaust port producing a forward thrust. The equipment was maintenance free, and this, in conjunction with its silent operation, had done much to further the use of water travel throughout the Icyean system.

The combined effects of the sun's warmth and the undisturbed peacefulness of the infrequently used channel had almost drawn Gandric to the verge of sleep when a soft undulating buzzing broke the silence. Rallying with a start, Gandric realised it was the navigation-control warning emitter. To his surprise he was already far beyond Isothea and had reached the point where the waterway divided. He hastily reset the controls and the craft adopted a south-westerly heading, travelling in the direction of the snow-capped peaks of the Forantean Mountains. Turning once again to regard the distant city, he could barely make out the pale-blue outline of the High Tower, now almost invisible against the backdrop of the sky. The sight triggered the memory of his ghostly visitation. Who was behind it? He must speak to Protrass at the earliest opportunity.

Returning his attention to the controls, Gandric increased the speed of the hydropeller. He was impatient to see Clytra. This would be their first meeting since Kef entered the College of Time Transference as Jenor's protégé, and all other matters fled his thoughts. Presently the small picturesque village of Cockonnora came into view: built in the shadow of Mount Votak on the edge of undulating green fields and flanked on two sides by frothing mountain streams. Gandric was consumed with anticipation. He entered the barely adequate docking bay, carelessly moored his craft and made his way quickly along the cobbled streets to the address he had been given. As he approached, he saw a slender figure tending a small patch of garden outside a modest dwelling. His heart rate increased.

'Good afternoon, Clytra,' he said in an authoritative manner, hoping to disguise his apprehension. 'I had not imagined you a gardener.'

Rising from her work, Clytra smiled.

'Vasdal Gandric,' she purred, slowly surveying him. 'You're every inch the dynamic High Councillor I'd imagined. I'm grateful that you could accept my invitation. It's been many years since... Since we last...'

Gandric realised that he was staring. He gestured towards the impressive collection of plants and shrubs, mumbling something about their apparent rejuvenation due to the unexpected spell of warm autumn weather. The shock of seeing Clytra again was far greater than he had expected. She had hardly changed. Her radiant hair, glistening green eyes and tantalising smile were, if anything, even more alluring.

His reverie was interrupted by the strains of her captivating voice.

'Are you unwell, Vasdal? You're quite pale. Perhaps you'd prefer to be inside after your journey.'

'Please don't concern yourself,' he replied promptly. 'But you're right. The sun is a little bright.'

When seated and provided with a cool drink, Gandric began to feel more relaxed. Clytra begged his leave to change and returned wearing a full-length gown of shimmering white silk that seemed to be moulded to her figure rather than worn by it. After a brief exchange of social pleasantries, Gandric could contain himself no longer.

'I have little time, Clytra,' he began, suppressing his need to seize her. 'I must be certain that I've understood your letters correctly. Do you really want to return to me?'

'My dear, whatever you might think of me, I'm no fool,' Clytra replied, smiling. 'I'd hardly commit myself to paper if not absolutely sure of our respective positions.' She left his side to refill her glass then positioned herself in front of the window so that the late afternoon sunlight could accentuate her figure. 'I made a mistake when I left you for Kef. I make no excuses. I soon realised that his only interest lay in the libraries and laboratories of that boring institute. While he prepared for his future in the High Council, you had already become a powerful man: a man of distinction. Inevitably we drifted apart, and then came the final insult. Without warning he announced he'd be away for some 30 years or more on some

secret mission for that old relic Jenor.’ Pausing briefly, Clytra drained her glass and wiped away a single tear from her cheek. She sighed deeply then, in keeping with her abilities as an actress, forced herself on. ‘I was expected to remain here until he returned. A major change in the Council would then take place and I would rejoin him in Isothea. Of these so-called changes I know nothing. Thirty years have passed. I’ve spent much of the time with friends on Collecial III where I was at least able to retain my sanity. I feel nothing for Kef. At one time you and I were lovers – I’ve not forgotten. I, I...’

Before Gandric could respond Clytra ran sobbing from the room.

Gandric felt a sense of triumph. The moment he had craved for so long was at hand. Nevertheless, in deference to the lady’s distress he remained seated and awaited her return, his experience having taught him that in such circumstances patience is a virtue. His wait, however, proved much longer than he had anticipated.

It was dusk, the clear sky was filling with grey clouds, and spots of rain were making their way erratically down the sloping window panes – the prelude to a storm. Gandric rose to switch on the wall lights, and at that very instant Clytra reappeared like an apparition, apparently none the worse after her ordeal. The artificial light made her eyes sparkle with even greater beauty.

‘I apologise, Vasdal my love, but you can understand my position,’ she said with uncharacteristic shyness.

‘Think no more of it,’ Gandric said sympathetically. ‘I understand perfectly. We have much to discuss but, if I’m not mistaken, your invitation was for dinner.’

‘Of course,’ Clytra nodded. ‘Everything’s prepared. If you’ll come this way.’

Clytra moved forward and linked Gandric’s arm, guiding him into an adjacent room. Her close proximity filled him with a thousand memories. How had he lived without her for so long? All those wasted years!

The dining room, together with the remainder of the house, was like any other rural Iycean dwelling. Few pieces of furniture occupied the floor space and those that did were of utilitarian construction. An occasional picture or tapestry adorned the walls, and these, coupled with a single ornately carved mirror, gave the only clues about the occupant’s taste. The dinner Clytra had prepared was, by contrast, particularly splendid. Gandric was surprised by her domestic accomplishments and took every opportunity to express his appreciation. As they ate their conversation centred mainly on Gandric’s impressive career. Clytra skilfully discussed his scientific discoveries with a knowledge and understanding he found refreshing, and by the end of the meal any tension or anxiety which had existed between them seemed of little consequence. When they returned to the lounge, Gandric decided that the time had come to reveal certain details of his plan.

‘Clytra, my dear,’ he began in a low voice. ‘What would you say if I told you I’m to be the next Nenus Fortax?’

Clytra’s eyes widened and an electrifying smile lit up her face. Gradually, however, her expression darkened.

‘I’d ask you what Forillion Jenor has to say about it. One thing I’m sure of is that he’d never stand down in favour of you, especially in view of your lifestyle on Corethalan.’

‘Very perceptive,’ Gandric replied. ‘Should I go on?’

‘By all means.’ Clytra’s seductive voice swelled with interest.

‘Just over 40 years ago I developed a technique which allowed me to use my space-time light accelerator to monitor certain functions of the central transference room. Not to any great extent, you understand, but sufficient for me to piece together some interesting facts, the most significant of which is that Jenor had chosen Kef to be his successor.’

‘Kef, Nenus Fortax!’ Clytra gasped. ‘Oh, I should have guessed. It all makes sense now! All those secret projects and endless discussions.’

Gandric struggled to retain an air of indifference.

‘As a prelude to his accession Kef was sent to the planet Earth, initially as a child. There he grew up like a normal human until at the age of 25 he remembered who he was and, more importantly, his purpose there. His objective was to plant the seed of some scientific discovery into the mind of someone close to him. The nature of this discovery and the reason why Jenor saw fit to interfere in human destiny are of no consequence. But, having achieved this goal, Kef was to see that the idea took hold before returning to Iy.’

Gandric watched as Clytra absorbed this revelation.

‘So that was the secret task. And you say he was placed on Earth as a child? I assume this was possible because of the Sphere of Transference?’

Gandric nodded.

‘In conjunction with certain drugs, yes’.

‘When Kef returns to Iy, what then?’ she asked hesitantly. ‘Will he be older, younger, or the same age as 30 years ago?’

Gandric drew a hand slowly through his hair.

‘A good question,’ he replied thoughtfully. ‘Due to the nature of the transference process, he’d have to undergo certain biophysical changes before returning. However afterwards he’d be exactly as he was when you saw him last.’

Clytra, who had been pacing back and forth during the explanation, suddenly re-seated herself and said abruptly, ‘Enough of this! Tell me *your* plan.’

With his confidence growing, and just a little irritated by Clytra’s demanding tone, Gandric bided his time, allowing her curiosity to reach fever pitch. Then, not a moment too soon, he replied.

‘All in good time, all in good time, Clytra. I still have much to attend to before I can risk divulging such sensitive information – even to someone with your obvious charms.’

‘Don’t patronise me!’ Clytra snapped. ‘Do you trust me or not?’

Gandric, realising that their exchange was drifting out of his control, quickly apologised.

‘Forgive me. It’s so easy to forget I’m not talking to one of those imbeciles at the institute. Of course I trust you. Why else would I have already revealed so much?’ After a further deliberate pause, he continued. ‘Please appreciate my position. Every aspect of my plan needs meticulous attention to detail in order not to arouse suspicion. If you can remain patient a little longer, I’ll explain everything. Just now, though, all I can tell you is that Jenor will soon realise what has happened and will call a full emergency meeting of the High Council.’

‘I don’t follow!’ Clytra interjected. ‘What *has* happened? What’s wrong?’

‘He’ll learn that his beloved protégé is marooned on Earth forever,’ Gandric explained, his eyes burning with malice. ‘He’ll learn that Kef will die within the normal lifespan of a human being. And he’ll be in no doubt that his own days as Nenus Fortax are numbered.’

‘You mean you’ve killed Kef?’ Clytra queried.

‘No, my dear’ Gandric replied in a strangely reassuring voice. ‘I’ve merely arranged for him to live out his life elsewhere. Did I mention he even has a mate? I’m reliably informed that he’s very happy on Earth – nice home, friends, respected at work; not forgetting his beautiful spouse of course. Really, I can’t accept “kill” as a fair description. Besides, it’s essential to my plan that Kef lives... But I must stop there,’ Gandric added, with all the assurance of an accomplished liar. ‘I’ve already revealed too much.’

‘One riddle after another,’ Clytra moaned. ‘But I suppose if Kef’s unharmed and his being trapped on Earth helps you become Nenus Fortax, then I’ve no objection.’

‘So I can count on you?’ Gandric asked.

‘I imagine so,’ Clytra replied, giving a slight shrug. ‘But first I’d like to know what my position will be in all this?’

‘Oh, certainly!’ Gandric moved closer and took her delicate hand in his. ‘You know I’ve always loved you. Nothing’s changed, except now you can become my wife.’

‘I see!’ Clytra exclaimed, allowing him to retain her hand. ‘And, naturally, the High Council would have no choice but to accept your will. I’d be officially widowed and you, as his closest friend, would assume responsibility for me. If, as you say, Kef has a wife on Earth, then I think I can say we have an understanding.’ Clytra sighed deeply before adding, ‘Perhaps you’ll excuse me for a moment. I’m unaccustomed to such intense conversation.’

Gandric was filled with satisfaction as he watched Clytra disappear into the bedroom. Who could have believed that, given so few details, she would agree so readily to be part of his treacherous scheme and then, in the same breath, accept his proposal of marriage? True, he had presented her with a twisted version of events, but she would hardly have agreed if he had explained that Atalan must return to Iy, and in the very near future.

Gandric’s thoughts were interrupted by the wall lights fading to a dull glow, and glancing warily about the room, he saw the silhouetted figure of Clytra standing at the bedroom door, draped in a transparent green negligee which clearly covered no other garments. She remained still while Gandric, as if mesmerised, slowly approached her. For a moment their eyes locked in complicity and silent understanding. She was his at last. He kissed her urgently as she relinquished her token attire. He swept her into his arms and onto the bed and, as their limbs entwined, the pressure and heat of their embrace released a flood of pent-up frustration greater than either had thought possible. In those intimate moments, as their bodies writhed and mingled, a higher union took place: the union of kindred spirits for too long parted. Reunited by the bonds of body and soul, they were as one. A mutual lust for power and domination flowed between them as they bonded in a frenzy of carnal lust. Ecstasy mounted, intensified then exploded into the open arms of peaceful satisfaction.

Meanwhile, outside the growing storm which had earlier threatened had dispersed without incident. It was now a dark starless night, an infinite vastness, in which the destiny of one man – a man whose knowledge and understanding could continue to bind the universe – shuddered.