

The Cathedral

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Translated by Stanley S. Bill

(excerpt)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Izmirids within reach, seventy days from perilevium, storm in one hundred and twelve hours. Rosemary has almost leveled out the velocity vector with their vector and the Cathedral is within sight. I have it on the ceiling in a real-time image. I close my eyes and open them again and it swoops down upon me like a bird of prey – scrawny neck, the wings of its towers outstretched, bony talons, and a skeleton of a body.

I've taken a double dose of stupak; my head is bursting from the weightlessness. I've been trying to read Feret but keep losing the thread after a few sentences. Token conversations with Mirton. This is a charter flight and it's just me and Doctor Vasofemgoose, who practically never comes out of hypersleep, so it's just me. I dialogue with the Rosemary as I moon about inside her through artificial day and artificial night. She has a very amiable interface. Sometimes during workouts in the fitness room, when I'm high on endocrine secretions, I almost forget she's just a program. She has her priorities. She makes sure I don't get lonely, drawing me into conversations on subjects she thinks might interest me.

"So, Father, you think he wasn't a saint and there haven't been any miracles?" she asks suddenly.

"I don't have a ready answer," I reply.

"Oh, I'm sure you do, Father," laughs Rosemary.

"And what do you think?" I return the ball.

With a moment's silence, Rosemary lets me know she's thinking it over.

"I think," she begins, "that if he was insane in that moment, then it was a madness from grace. And if God ever permits Himself direct intervention, then Izmir wouldn't have been the worst pretext."

"So you believe?"

"In God? Do I believe? Rather... I surmise," says Rosemary.

Who knows – maybe Turing was wrong about this too.

I check the latest data on the planetoid's rendezvous with Madeleine. Still nothing certain. On the computational meadows of the Astronomical Center in Lizonne the crystogen of the equations has grown out to almost a hectare, but still there's no one-hundred-percent result. In the worst-case scenario, I've got a month. Could the Church really afford to move such a large planetoid? And would this phantasmagorical Huan Machine even be capable of moving it at all?

I'm here. First day on the Izmirids. I've seen the tomb and I've spoken with Father Mirton. In the meantime, the storm has boiled itself away on the other side of the planetoid. They had known where to land the Sagittarius. (No, that's got nothing to do with it; everything depends on the time of day, the torque of the rock. Or else the Huan Vector. . .).

The Cathedral stands outside the town's biosphere: it's too tall and it would puncture the dome. The Rosemary's shuttle set us down on the other side. The town itself (town! – that's saying too much: more a hemisphere of air covering a cluster of temporary habitations) lies in a shallow crater, so the black escarpment of its sloping sides blocked our view of it. This Izmirid is called Horn: it's the second largest in the whole cluster, but even here gravity practically doesn't exist. We hopped into the Gruis straight away. Vasofemgoose gave me a hand with my spacesuit. These self-contained pressure suits are real monstrosities – a person has to think for half a minute before he can move a leg.

The Gruis on the route from the landing field to the dome runs along a brightly illuminated line, fastened to it by way of two flexible bow collectors. It looks almost like a cable car.

As we rode along, the doctor pointed out to the right of us:

"There's the wreck," he said.

I figured he was talking about Izmir's tug craft. I gazed in that direction, but couldn't make anything out.

"Just beyond the horizon," said Vasofemgoose. "There's a line running out there as well. On a pilgrimage, Father?"

"No," I replied, trying to make a joke: "On business."

I couldn't really see his face through the plastic of his helmet, but he probably didn't smile.

"I'm just here for a little while," he muttered. "I took advantage of the fact that people were booking charters for the evacuation. Do you think Madeleine will let us go, Father?"

I wanted to shrug my shoulders, but nothing much came of that.

"I don't know. They're still calculating."

"Yeaah."

The sky here isn't a sky, but simply the cosmos stretched out over a high hemisphere. Even worse than that: you lose the illusion of two-dimensionality in an instant. It's enough to stare at it for a few seconds and you're crushed by the monstrous abyss. Your mind soon switches to spatial imaging and you're left in no doubt whatever that you're nothing more than a tiny speck in the ocean, a bacterium on a pebble. You can fall into a panic. People going out into open space for the first time feel it almost physically, as their minds lose all points of orientation. The falling begins and they tumble down into infinite emptiness. There have been cases of people losing consciousness, vomiting and sobbing, even cases of madness. On the planetoid itself there's no real danger of that; in spite of everything there's some sort of horizon here, ground beneath your feet, a hypothetical plane of "down." But when you raise your head and lose it from view. . . my God. Indescribable.

We rode up onto the lip of the crater. The airlock of the dome was already opening for the Gruis. The dome presented itself from the outside as a milky white hemisphere and nothing at all could be seen inside it. We entered the airlock and shot straight out again; the doors closed and opened so quickly that I didn't even see them. I raised my head and the stars were raining down upon me once again: the dome is entirely transparent from within.

In spite of all that smoothly-polished blackness, a shadowless light floods the interior.

The buildings stand in four concentric rings - the oldest in the middle, most of them two or three stories high. According to the doctor, the fourth, outermost ring is almost entirely abandoned.

The Gruis detached itself from the line and Vasofemgoose switched to manual. With his left hand he pointed at the crystogen walls as we passed them and began to declaim (no longer over the intercom, since we had removed our helmets):

"That's Matabozza's. They started to leave as soon as it became clear we were on course for Madeleine. They were the first to calculate it. Now they're fighting a lawsuit over the lots on Lizonne's puppies: two thousand hectares of dense analytical forest, puts the Center to shame. At the peak of activity, around five years ago, one third of this forest was apparently grinding out gravitational equations for the Izmirids. While they were testing the control

parameters, they managed to lump in seven heavy-metal meteors with Peanut. That was before critical perilevium and, well, now we've got the Trial of the Fourteen. I can just see the lawyers explaining chaos theory to the members of the jury. Matabozza will probably say it was bifurcation; nobody can prove it's not the truth. So that makes two massive court cases. No wonder they're slashing the budget. They were the first. That row of arcades on the left is the NASA affiliate. In theory, they're limiting themselves to monitoring. Ha! On my last visit, when the proposal to blow the black veins apart with nukes was raised, NASA came out with that veto bill. There was an assassination attempt on their brainiac. If you look from here - you see, Father, the green one - the UL investigation team lives there. At least they used to live there, although it doesn't look like they've moved out yet. And that section's all guest quarters. Honzl rents it to pilgrims; during wide windows, he's full. Now he's praying that Madeleine lets us go."

"He rents it out, you say. Do you know the legal status of the Izmirids?"

"Aha, it's the law of the jungle, virtual land parcelling. Are the rumors true? Is the Church going to save Horn?"

"Mr Vasofemgoose..."

"Okay, okay."

We had already passed through the center of town – a circular place with a fountain in the middle (great drops of water tumbled down from absurdly high parabolas). Vasofemgoose turned off after a white-walled building with exquisite Arabic architecture and brought the Gruis to a halt. He got out, waved his hand at me, and made off towards the shadows of the soaring arcades. I watched as he walked. His knees barely moved at all - it was pretty much all achilles. The guy had skill. He soon vanished into the gloom.

I switched the Gruis into auto and entered the address for the lodgings the Lizonne diocese had rented out at Honzl's. The car shunted off and again I was riding through the silent town. Only now did I become fully aware of its terrifying desertedness. The whole time, right from the very airlock, I hadn't seen a single inhabitant. It looked as if it wasn't just the fourth, but all the circles of crystogen buildings that had long been abandoned.

I only saw that this wasn't really the case when I got to the main lobby of Honzl's hotel. Nothing about it resembled the hotel lobbies of Lizonne or Earth (more of an old-fashioned electronics stall), nothing except for one detail: the receptionist. The moment I crossed the threshold (to tell the truth, I soared over it, and in a much steeper arc than necessary), he got up from behind the wide counter, on which the jumbled-up entrails of a disassembled machine glistened, walked over and held out his hand. I shook it in spite of the glove.

"Father Lavone, I'm so glad you made it after all." He was very young, thirty-five at most. A sure, firm handshake belied the shy smile on his olive-toned face. "Jack – that is, Father Mirton – is waiting for you. Room two hundred and two."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. . . ."

"Honzl, Stefan Honzl."

And so I met the local hospitality industry magnate. I went to fetch my luggage from the Gruis. My room was number two hundred and three. In the lift, a set of handholds had been fitted: the acceleration could hurl a person into the ceiling and a careless novice might emerge with a lump on his head the size of a walnut.

As far as hotel luxuries went, I ceased to entertain any illusions about the nature of Honzl's enterprise after catching a glimpse of the second-floor corridor. He had used standard crysto and most definitely had not put himself to any great expense over embellishments to the decor. Even the Rosemary was more of a hotel than this place. Bare walls, bare floor, the greenish luminescence of the ceiling, doors cut out in identical rectangles. On Lizonne, such quarters would be rated below the guaranteed social minimum.

I knocked at two hundred and two.

Mirton really was waiting for me. I walked straight into some kind of elaborate 3D visualization. He switched it off as fast as he could and I just managed to catch sight of some complicated symbols for evolutionary algorithms. Mirton is Honzl's age and in the flesh he looks even younger than over the phone. A dreadfully nervous man. Into a welcoming waterfall of ardent words, he slipped in so many affected sighs and signs of indignation that I began to suspect him of putting it on. But that's just Mirton, Mirton *par excellence*.

"Father, you don't have the authority to issue any binding recommendations with regard to places of worship, do you? Uh-huh, because I was just wondering. . . Yes, I know these are unconfirmed miracles, but if the Church were to mobilize its resources. . . Some of the consortia engaged here would certainly be very willing to get involved. I can put you in touch, Father - I mean, excuse me, Pierre - I can put you in touch with some local agents who, on behalf of the decision-makers in Lizonne, have hinted at. . . Why no, no, no, on the contrary, I've already sent out requests and they've even found several candidates for my replacement, but somehow. . . You understand, this is my fourth year already, more or less straight out of seminary, and with the sort of people I'm dealing with here, you must admit that it's high time I went back to Lizonne; if you'd be so kind. . . At your discretion, of course. Nerves? Maybe that's it. You'll find out for yourself. What can I say? Back in the windows when it was the peak of the pilgrimages and I was celebrating such enormous masses that the Cathedral was literally bursting at the seams. . . But now. Even if Madeleine doesn't get

us, there's still about a year of aplevium and then it'll be a hermitage round here, right? I know, I know, I'm complaining. Coffee?"

He went to make the coffee (there's a thermal cooker at the end of the corridor). Honzl peeped in through the half-open door to tell me he'd delivered my luggage. I nodded my head in thanks. Mirton's room (identical to mine, in fact) was crammed full of paper printouts, with the only corridors of empty space through the low-gravity clutter fanning out from the tele-projectors. Clutter at fractional gravity differs from clutter at 1g like French pastry differs from bread. To tell the truth, I was sitting there with some discomfort mostly because on a subconscious level I was sure that one careless movement from me would be enough to demolish the whole asymmetrical scaffolding of Mirton's chaos. I swiveled round on the chair, paying careful attention to the placement of my every limb. Behind my back, on the wall, there was a row of large black-and-white photographs of the Cathedral. In one of them, the blinding rays of Lévie shot through its gills, the great shield of the sun emerging from the Izmiridian Tartarus. Another asteroid had made a crack in it - judging by the shape it must have been Horseshoe. In the second photograph, the Cathedral loomed over the lens straight out of the starry abyss, and the shape of the structure could only be guessed at from the darkness between silvery points. The third photograph was again overflowing with unfiltered light. Mirton came back with the coffee and I asked him about the photos. He became flustered and began to mutter something about a hobby and that he was sort of corresponding with Ugerzo. The man really does give the impression of being under enormous stress.

In the evening (local time is standard Lizonne travel time, so I didn't have to adjust), he took me to the Cathedral, to Izmir's tomb. The place really does have something about it... something incredible. I'll describe it later.

First night on Horn. Izmirids closer and closer to Madeleine, logical crystogen of the Astronomical Center still growing (high system ergodicity).

Honzl's hotel is empty and the whole so-called town looks deserted. No luxuries here. The dome grew out of the functional crysto they use for military biospheres so the intensity of the light never changes, whatever the phase of the bio-cycle. I woke up after two in the morning with the milky white light pouring in from the windows. White skin takes on a corpse-like hue in its glow. I got up and yanked at the window frame (only dumb appliances here, you can't even chat with the doors). The bottom of the covered crater slopes right

down to the roundabout with the fountain in it and so I had a view of all the circles of this silent hell. Stillness and soundlessness. Awakening in the belly of a ghostly whale.

I couldn't get back to sleep and in the end I decided to take a "nocturnal" stroll. I pulled on some shorts and a sweater. The lobby downstairs was empty - no trace of Honzl. I went out onto the sterile white surface of the street. I had to practise walking. I made my way in a sprawling spiral towards the fountain (I could already hear its murmur in the second ring), circling the crater at least one and a half times. I passed shops of devotional items, which were locked and bolted, a medical center overgrown with crystogen filler, and the vibrant greenery of programmed plants strangling the residential villas of the scientists, most of whom had already abandoned the Izmirids as well (the corporations had sought to minimize their losses by spending as little as possible on fuel and the period of economical windows had now long since passed). Twice I fell over. Near-weightlessness like this is very tiring in the end: your muscles go numb, your head spins.

Eventually I perched myself on the sculpted edge of the fountain. The spray cooled my sweating skin. The blood was rushing in my ears, so I didn't hear her approach. She touched my shoulder. I started and the jolt alone lifted me to my feet.

At first, I thought she was actually pregnant, as she didn't have a vocalizer on her neck or a boompack on her back. Then I noticed the speaker attached to her arm and the CFG logo on her baggy t-shirt.

"Pierre Lavone?" asked the brainiac.

"Yes. And with whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Angii Telesfer *in utero* of Magdalena Kleinert. Perhaps we can take a seat?"

So I sat back down on the sculpture work of the fountain, with Kleinert beside me.

"It's not that he weighs very much here," smiled Magdalena, "but he prefers me not to strain my muscles."

"I'm a bully, just say it," grumbled Telesfer. Kleinert waved her hand.

"Were you expecting my arrival?" I asked.

"Yes," confessed the brainiac. "Of course."

I recalled Mirton's words about the hints of local company representatives.

"If you're all so concerned about the Izmirids," I observed, "you could take care of this much more easily yourselves. I don't know where this idea about the vast riches of the Church comes from."

"From the mysteriousness of its representatives," laughed Telesfer. "And besides, there is no 'us.' I'm just one of CFG's drones. I don't sit on the board, I don't have the right to speak in anyone else's name, and certainly not in the name of the other investors."

"I get it. Horizontal structures. The Izmiridian scientist lobby is busy plotting away behind the backs of the decision-makers."

"More or less. But if the Church were to announce it was undertaking an initiative to save the Izmirids, that would be a different matter altogether. That would open possibilities. The majority would probably get involved then. But on their own account," he snorted, "not on your life."

"Is there any kind of internal surveillance system here?"

"Give me a break, we're just talking. I can't sleep anyway. I woke Miss Kleinert up and we went out to look at the stars."

"I see." While talking with the unseen brainiac my eyes had been wandering over the bright façades of the nearby buildings. Now I winked at Kleinert: "Have you been carrying this egomaniac around for long?"

"Oh boy, it'll be four years already. He's not even that bad. . ."

Telesfer raised a clownish lament.

"Here we go again – now he's going to cite their encyclicals and condescend to take pity on me. 'Prideful child,' he'll say, and once again. . ."

"Calm down, calm down. So what exactly is your proposal?"

"There is no proposal," he broke off. "We can only encourage you, Father. Because they're waiting for your report over there, aren't they? We're not so naive as to believe that one word from you will move the planetoid, but it will certainly weigh upon their decision."

"I can't quite imagine what the means of this encouragement might be," I muttered. "Can you show me any proof of the miracles?"

"So only Izmir's supposed sainthood interests you?"

"No. A great many things interest me. The Huan mystery, for instance. But if you're talking about what interests the readers of my report, then yes, you're right: it's Izmir's sainthood."

The brainiac was silent for a long moment. Magdalena churned the water in the fountain basin with drowsy movements of her hand.

"Please visit me tomorrow," replied Telesfer at last. "In the main CFG laboratory. The computer will be notified. After six pm. So long as you're really interested in 'a great many things' . . . Well, I wish you pleasant dreams."

Kleinert shook my hand (her fingers were wet from the cold water), then stood up, turned round, and with a stately, measured step went off towards one of the streets that radiated out from the circular place.

I went back to the hotel and recorded a report of the conversation.

Now the Cathedral. Enormous, magnificent. You emerge from the biosphere airlock and you see it – the Cathedral – in front of you and above you: a jagged shadow upon a background of stars. You need light to appreciate its architecture and it's precisely light that you don't have: Lévie is too far away, Madeleine not yet close enough. Now, in the long period of cosmic interhelium, the Cathedral is more than ever a Mystery. A winding track leads down the slope of the crater from the airlock to the main portal and you descend upon a path hacked out of the cold rock, with a mandatory safety line fastened to your belt by the machine at the external gates. Curiosity usually gets the better of a person as he goes down and so he switches on the powerful reflector on his spacesuit. But the white finger of light can only touch individual, separate fragments of the construction, shifting from one to another in a bright cuticle that slides across the surface of the Cathedral: here and there, here and there. On the way down it's hard to keep the light fixed on one and the same point, so a person stops, and stares, and runs the warm finger over the rocky creation. The descent from the airlock (two hundred meters) can take a full hour. I know, because that's precisely how long it took in my case - Father Mirton was waiting by the tomb. He told me later that he'd been expecting this. Some people just sit down on the slope and fall into a kind of catatonic trance: only the alarm on their spacesuits wakes them. Small wonder. It's not a building, it's a sculpture. But it's not a sculpture either. Ugerzo knew when he ordered the spec-crysto that what he was cultivating here wouldn't serve any normal purpose, that the Cathedral's functionality had no significance in comparison with its symbolism. There was only one limitation: Izmir's tomb and the altar, which were both placed inside, encompassed by an autonomous mini-biosphere. Some space had to be left over for the faithful, but the rest had been left to the imagination of the designers and the ergodicity of the growth algorithms applied. The sowing encompassed a circular area around the grave - some four hundred square meters. In the near-weightlessness of the planetoid, the crysto had shot up nearly a quarter of a kilometer. When you look at it from the direction of the crater biosphere's airlock this is how it appears: a hyperboloid body with vaulted ribs in the middle unfolded into crooked wings, the asymmetrical towers on its flanks tipped with rocky efflorescences of ragged leaves, like pieces of carbon shrapnel frozen by the black vacuum at the very moment of explosion. The form seems to speak of the flight of a soul wrenching itself away in terrible agony from the fetters of matter towards the starry void. When the light begins to trace a line – an edge, a recess, a rib of the cupola – it soon wrings sharp details

from the gloom, dripping heavily with hard shadows, and the eye falls into a spiral of curiosity. There's no end to these details. The fractal algorithms of the crystogen have lent any possible shapes seemingly fractional dimensions and the eye quickly loses itself. Escher-like spirals of stairs climb around the towers towards freeze-frames of death. From a certain angle they even look like paths that a man might actually tread, but in reality, when the light illuminates a greater part of the Cathedral, you find that it would have to be more of a spider than a man, and even then it'd finish up nowhere in the end. The asymmetry of the towers creates the impression that the whole latticework of the crystogen is tilting towards the crater, towards the onlooker, towards the right side. At the same time, the perversity of the recursive algorithms responsible for the shape of the main nave's external surfaces gives the sense that the Cathedral is being eaten away by some cancer of the stone, or that the viewer is actually beholding the final, dying form of the building, and that before long – in a day or two – it will cave in on itself, subside, decay; the soaring ribs will crack and splinter under the burden of tortured stone; the spine, crowned with a cross, will collapse into the shadowy space of its internal organs, and a slow avalanche of the Cathedral's brittle blood will pour out through the gaping jaws of the protruding portal. The form speaks of the anguish of dying alone, of the feebleness of matter, which poisons the invisible spirit with despair. And if you put out your light and sit for a moment on the slope, or perhaps walk backwards and forwards along the safety track, if you do this your hungry eyes will catch a few isolated rays of light shooting out from the tall mass of shadow. The stars shine straight through the Cathedral. After all, it has neither walls nor roof, since they're of no use to such a building – in any case, it's not a building – and the transparent hemisphere covering Izmir's tomb and the altar fulfils all the necessary functions. The fact is that it's not an ergonomic structure. The interior isn't empty – though a person cannot see this – but rather it's filled with the same mysterium of crypto transformations that has sculpted the visible parts. And so at certain hours certain stars are able to send their light straight through the Cathedral. A person descending towards it registers flashes of luminosity coming every so often from the gigantic stain of darkness, almost like disintegration signals in a vacuum chamber: shots out of nothingness. Then he enters the shadow of the portal, the curtains of frozen waves close around him in a thicket of iron bushes, and he wades into the flood of a lake of pain. A turn of a corner, light – and he stands in front of the tomb.

I've been to visit CFG.

The main laboratory occupies three two-storey buildings arranged in a horse shoe around a mini-garden in which some deeply reprogrammed trees are growing. The computer really had been notified, and it let me in through the main gate into the garden. The sprinklers sprayed me with salvos of cool drops. I could hear birds, but their chirping was probably coming from speakers.

A thin black man in a checked shirt came out to meet me. He introduced himself as Mood, Telesfer's assistant. From the garden we went down into a shadowy basement. Glass crystogen divided the expansive room into a dozen or so office cubicles or display cases. In one of them Magdalena Kleinert was sleeping on a divan. Mood pointed towards her with his chin and then handed me a headset.

"I've temporarily switched the audio," he whispered.

I put on the headset.

"Good morning, Father," said Telesfer. "Have you heard the news? The Astronomical Center's logical crysto has stopped growing."

"Yep."

"Go over to the table beneath the palm. There's a spectacle case. Please be so kind as to put them on."

I took out the glasses and put them on. Telesfer visualized as a violet-colored elf in a purple jacket. He was smoking a cigar; he beckoned with it for me to follow him. Steering well clear of the softly snoring Kleinert, he led me to the last row of display cases. Some small, misshapen lumps were turning black in blocks of crystogen by the wall. The Telesfer elf pointed at them with the smoking cigar.

"The number of boreholes drilled by CFG on all the Izmirids has exceeded one thousand. You know what we've been looking for: the Huan Machine. Well, we haven't found it. These are fragments of some of the planetoid cores. What's so interesting about them? After all, you're looking for things of interest, aren't you? Well, here's something interesting: the structure of the iron macro-particles of these cores. This one's from a depth of one kilometer, this one's from almost two, this one's from the very, um, heart of the planetoid."

Telesfer waved his hand, and a cloud of dark brown smoke unfurled in the air above his head from some under-dimension. I straightened the glasses and moved closer, squinting my eyes. The cloud seemed to be composed of multiple heavily-compressed layers: brown, yellow and black blotting paper, one after another. Not only that, but each successive layer had unfolded its zones of denser and less dense material in different patterns, so that the whole thing gave the impression of something in the nature of a random filter.

"That's more or less how it looks," said Telesfer. "While in the larger Izmirids – those like

Horn, for instance – we find this structure everywhere below a certain depth. We planted crysto for the logical interpolation of these macromolecules, but it fell into starvation and we didn’t learn anything. There’s no such thing as a natural path for something like this to come into existence, and in any case we don’t know the right boundary conditions. It isn’t a mineral or any form of life according to the Hawaiian definition. It doesn’t display any capacity for self-replication. We call it Black Wool.”

“The Huan postulates?” I asked.

“Nothing,” replied Telsefer, perching himself on one of the transparent crystogen blocks, in which a lump of Wool in the shape of a kidney was lodged. “There’s no mechanism for converting the energy, there’s no general power source of any kind, it doesn’t react on any level. It doesn’t fit the Machine at all.”

“Huan postulated active space-time bending,” I murmured. “Of course, the energy cost would have to be enormous here. But in that case maybe it’s something else.”

“But what?” Telesfer shrugged his shoulders. “There’s no doubt that it manipulates gravity. Apart from that, without knowing the mechanism itself – and ultimately we haven’t the foggiest idea about it; our spokespeople can say what they like, but really none of the companies investing in research here in the hopes of finding the Holy Grail of physics have advanced even a single step - so, as I say, without knowing the mechanism we can’t even speculate about the forces required to engage in manipulation. Huan’s default corrective vector was never as large as it might appear; all you have to do is skillfully manipulate the control parameters of the system. You need constant, long applications, but relatively weak, as long as they’re well targeted and at the right times.”

“Yes, very interesting indeed,” I conceded, first looking at the lump of Black Wool, then at the fancy simulation of its molecular structure.

“And that’s not all.” Telesfer got up, walked past several display cases, and pointed with his cigar at a large diorama depicting a geological cross section of an Izmirid named Kolos (as it appeared from the illuminated caption).

“Take a look at that, Father. Aha, here, this layer.”

“Mmhmm?”

“The path of the analysis. . . Aha, and this distribution.”

“A gamma-ray burst?

“Precisely.” Telesfer nodded his head. “Rozvorsky, mid-spectrum.”

“How long ago?”

“It’s hard to tell. You can’t rely on planetary geology here, nor on epoch clock or solar clock dating either.”

“Isotopes?”

“Unfortunately, that gives a large and very blurred spectrum, since we do the dating by layer, and after all the whole thing is just flying through a vacuum. One hundred to twelve million years.”

“Phew. Of course. Any known exploded neutron stars in the realm of ninety million light years? Any matches?”

“And what would we feed the crysto?” grinned the violet-skinned elf. “The diameter of the Milky Way comes to one hundred thousand light years. Several hundred billion stars. Give me a break.”

“Right. Have you found this trace on all the Izmirids?”

“Ah, you see, Father, in fact we haven’t. Only on the four largest, as well as on Whistle.”

“And the Black Wool? Is there some kind of relation?”

“The Black Wool is everywhere; more here, less there.”

“The interpolation of the system’s trajectory.”

“With the Huan Vector. . .?” Telesfer burst out laughing. “How?”

“Oh, I see.” I’d gotten confused, forgetting in all this that the tests had been abandoned shortly after Huan. This kind of mechanics only has an effect on macrodeterministic systems in which no unanalyzable moderating factor appears. “In any case a few passes over Madeleine would give the same results. But what could the Izmirids’ maximum speed be in the interstellar vacuum? In a ball-park figure. If this gamma deluge had come from so far away, it would have left analogical traces all over the area. And here. . .” I pointed at the diorama, “I can see it’s damn heavily blasted. Lizonne would be a sterile planet, a muon crematorium, zero life. So, no, it must have hit them a considerable distance from here. And quite a long time ago. Does anyone here believe in intergalactic migrations? I don’t think so. *Ergo*: let’s look along the arm. Maybe you could even derive a rough formula: a relation exists. . .”

“Very nice, very nice,” Telesfer nodded his head. “But where would that get us? Even if we did definitively identify the source neutron star in the end. Since the distance is so great that it didn’t toast either Lizonne or Earth, then it’s by definition a distance many times beyond the range of our snail ships. Not to mention the distance in time: light from thousands of years ago. The mystery is here, deep in the Izmirids.” Telesfer stamped his foot and pointed at the floor with his cigar. “And it’s here that we have to find the answer. But how much time do we have? Two months, then Madeleine, then the devil knows what.”

“It’s not in my power. . .”

“Maybe it isn’t, maybe it is. How can you know that, Father, since you haven’t tried? Yes,

it's true, I admit it: they sent you here only out of bureaucratic meticulousness. The Church is an institution like any other, and it's had plenty of time to ossify. . . But that doesn't change the shape of things."

"You don't understand, Mr Telesfer!" I confess that he'd managed to irritate me. "None of this is of any significance to the ruling on the alleged miracles of Izmir Predú! Even if you dug up a whole UFO full of mummified aliens. It doesn't have the slightest significance!"

The elf blew out a series of smoke rings.

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. How can you know that, Father?"
