

Mycelium by Vilma Kadlečková

The Cult of the Ship

(part 1, chapter 25)

As Fomalhiwan was sweating on one side of the hermetic wall, James Ranganatan was doing the same on the other. 'I don't know his name,' he repeated in a shaky voice.

You can't possibly expect me to believe that,' replied the Össean. The image wasn't very good quality — when the Ship was manoeuvring after launch and passing the artisatellites between Deimos and Phobos, the signal was sometimes lost, with dark stripes from R-A spatial disruption flickering across the screen — and yet you could see that the extraterrestrial's ears were completely white with rage. But his golden-brown eyes looked like pieces of amber.

'He introduced himself as *Saruman*. That's the name of a...of a literary character.

'So use the on-board computer to connect to his netlog and find out what his real name is!'

'He doesn't have a netlog.'

'Uh,' said the Össean. Nothing more.

Ranganatan felt his knees shaking. The extraterrestrial did not appear on the normal communication line, but on the Spencers' internal channel. In practice this meant that...*it couldn't be switched off*. Motionless, it watched the cabin and engaged him in a conversation which fell well below zero on the scale of pleasantness.

'This Ship is ours,' said the Össean. 'And we don't want people in it whose identities are unknown to us. The hermetic bulkhead between the area for passengers and the pilot's cabin is closed, isn't it?'

'I don't know. I...'

'So check it. Then expel the air from their section of the Ship.'

'But...but that's impossible!' Ranganatan started to get up. 'If there's a problem with his name, then we can fix it! I'll go and ask what his name is and then...'

'Sit down!' the Össean's voice was so abrupt that it literally knocked the young man back into his chair. 'No, the problem isn't with the name. The only one with the real problem is you, James Ranganatan. I can see that you didn't understand me, so I'll say it more clearly. It's against the interests of Össe for these two to get to Earth alive. We'd welcome it if you could take care of it discreetly, because we want to avoid any unnecessary media interest. Naturally, if for some reason you are unable to do it, we will take care of it ourselves. We can live with an alleged accident causing a commotion. It is really so important for us that we'd rather destroy the whole Ship.'

James Ranganatan stared at him in disbelief. My God, this was like a scene from a thriller! His brain refused to accept what was happening to it. 'Then go ahead and kill me too.'

'Only if you do not comply with our wishes.'

'What...what did they do to you?' he asked.

'My boy,' said the Össean. 'That *is not* a good question.'

'I could call the mediators right now,' blurted out Ranganatan. 'You'll have reporters all over you. A murder charge. I'll tell them everything! If they have my story, then you'll never be able to convince them that it was an accident!'

The Össean looked at him in silence. 'It's most imprudent to say such things aloud,' he said at last. 'I assume you did it from sheer naivety, so instead of being angry, I'll just try to teach you something in the spirit of friendship. The moment you try to threaten me, the two of us will no longer *negotiate*.'

James Ranganatan could now feel his hands shaking as well as his knees. 'OK,' he mumbled. 'I'll think about it.' He hoped that this vague promise would satisfy the Össean and the connection would be cut.

In vain.

'You don't know how to kill,' said Össean. 'You would be glad to avoid it. You are agreeing to it now because you think that when my back is turned you can ask those two for help. You think that if you confide in them, that will rid you of your responsibility. But be aware of the fact that if you warn them, you will lose the chance to discreetly carry out what you have to. You will not be rid of your responsibility as you hope, only the opportunity to choose. And then you will die with them.' He fell silent. 'So don't be rash,' he added. 'I'll send you the code which allows you to bypass the Ship's safety systems. When you enter it onto the plasmodial keypad, the transfer chamber will open on both sides regardless of whether there is air in the cabin. The vacuum will pull both passengers into space. It's a clean way of doing it. There is no dirty work afterwards — no removal of bodies or washing away blood. All we ask of you is a few minutes of inconvenience.'

And then you'll leave me alone? I can really save my life doing this...?! was on the tip of James Ranganatan's tongue. But then another voice came from his memory.

Never do it, James. Never ask someone where you stand, because then you give them enormous power over you.

James swallowed hard. *Saruman wouldn't ask*, he realized. *Never. He would never negotiate with such a blackmailer.*

'Decide quickly,' said the Össean. 'You have an hour to do what you have to. Is that clear?'

'Pretty clear,' said James.

The screen went dark. Shaken, James sat in the chair. *Even though I can't see it, it's probably still watching me*, he realized. *My every move. And, of course, my presumed internal struggle. Have a good look at how I'm drowning in it, and if you think that my better side is winning, then detonate a bomb or destroy the computer or reprogramme our course.* It was indeed possible that the Ship could be destroyed from outside with a knowledge of the appropriate order. Legends had been told amongst the pilots about the Össean Ships'

secret codes. When James tried to imagine what they might contain, it filled him with horror.

It was at that moment – long before he had managed to get himself together and stop thinking about the intravenous fungi that were eating him alive as a result of the order from the distant Össeans – that the internal communication system beeped. His mysterious passenger spoke softly, 'James...?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Saruman... I...I've got work at the moment,' stammered James and quickly cut the connection. He couldn't speak to him. God, the bulkhead between them and the cabin was still closed! It was impossible for the passengers to open it from their side, which was his only piece of luck. He couldn't imagine at that moment looking into the eyes of the *slate snake Saruman* and...and at the same time not tell him. First of all he had to go over everything carefully. He had to decide. He had to...

But Saruman guessed that this would happen, realized James at once. He remembered exactly the answer he got when he asked him his name. *It's not that I don't trust you, James. But if you know nothing about me, it will be better for both of us. I don't want you to have to lie to the Össeans because of me.* Who knew what fights Saruman had had with the Össeans! Maybe they had been closing in on him for a long time. But on the other hand...he wasn't afraid of them. He showed he could stand up to them.

James had liked Saruman's attitude from the very start. *Do I seem to you like someone who has come to complain to Robert Travis, and expect him to put things right...?* James smiled when he remembered the amusement in Saruman's voice. No, he didn't trust any authority. And the most important thing was, he didn't take them very seriously. *Have no doubt that in times of need I will tar and feather you with my own hands!* He made fun of them. And it wasn't just foreign authorities which he didn't recognize; he didn't even take his own particularly seriously either.

That's real inner freedom, he thought. *Not to kowtow to those who are stronger, and not to lord over those who are weaker. That's how I would like to live. Why in God's name is he not sitting here now, but just...me? Why can't you deal with this horrible situation for me?*

He smiled bitterly. *But that's just it. If I were like him, I'd never even think about throwing someone into such a quagmire in my place.*

With one quiet stroke, a strip of paper emerged from the printer: the promised numerical code. James Ranganatan took it and smoothed it out on the table. Five fifteen-digit numbers.

Maybe it's not possible to do everything from outside. Even though the Össeans have the right codes, evidently they can't control this Ship over the transmitter as they'd like, he realized. *Otherwise they'd have opened the transfer corridor themselves ages ago and I'd be of absolutely no use.*

The course was now almost stable. From habit James checked the automatic track correction, but it didn't require much attention. He took out the netlog and tried to recalculate the coordinates to make sure that the Öscean wasn't trying to reprogramme the Ship's course. Then he realized he was just doing all of this to put off making a decision.

Well, not the decision, no. He'd already made that.

He was postponing the consequences.

They had already contacted him.

Lucas leaned back in his chair and slowly pulled his arm back from the keyboard onto the armrest. *Now that's fast*, he said to himself. *Almost two hours after leaving Deimos!* Judging by James's tone of voice, it was obvious that contact had been made with the Össeans. The pilot had also quickly switched off the intercom to prevent Lucas from calling him again...which was more indirect evidence.

The next thing he saw was the red curtain in front of the pilots' cabin. As was to be expected, the hermetic bulkhead was sealed. Lucas could only wonder what was happening behind it. *Negotiations? Blackmail? Promises or threats?* At the very least this young man was being spared the trëighrù, as it didn't work through cameras and screens. Nevertheless, he had to quickly close off all communication channels to prevent the Össeans contacting the Ship again.

Not that Lucas wanted to get involved.

Because *he didn't know* the quinary system.

In the quinary system all the secret orders went to the Ships. This was another Össean achievement, a kind of local cabal: an archaic machine code developed thousands of years ago for communication with the Ships' computers. Every symbol from an Össean Ship could be precisely transcribed to a fifteen-digit number in the quinary system. Then using a special fan keyboard with only seven keys — numbers, space bar and enter — it could be entered into the Ship's computer if someone wanted to communicate with the Ship. All of the Össean pilots knew this method so well that they were able to transcribe the symbols fluently. Precision was vital. As with all religious matters, a correction key was also missing.

Although Lucas knew the algorithm, he wasn't very proficient at transcribing the symbols to quinary codes. His father had dismissed the whole matter with a brief lecture one day at breakfast when he smiled mischievously and declared that it wasn't necessary for his son to learn this by heart. And Lucas never *had* needed it. For a long time now, modern Ships — in particular those which flew in the Solar System — were supported by an alternative voice-controlled system, and they had an ordinary Terron keyboard with Latin and Arabian numerals. Naturally, with zürëgahles at your back, you'd start to get a little paranoid in your thinking. Lucas knew that if he needed the Ship to listen to him and not to the Össeans, it would require a function that wasn't duplicated. And so on the second day after leaving Earth, he climbed into the hideaway behind the varnished blinds and secretly unwrapped the red tube with the Össean symbol which he had smuggled into the pilots' cabin. From the manual he copied excerpts from the liturgical texts used in this particular Ship for opening various escape routes and finding the location of the *sacred points*. Then he used the moment when Ranganatan was in the bathroom to return the Ship's Soul. To transcribe one symbol into numerical form had taken him a good five minutes due to his lack of practice; alongside it he had to draw sub-symbols to guide

him, which he hadn't needed for years, and then try to focus on them like an avid crossword fan. He then learned the codes by heart. In other words, for the whole three days it took to reach Mars, there was no shortage of lovely intellectual entertainment.

But now he was in a situation which he hated with his whole being. If he was going to need a symbol which wasn't from the manual, he wouldn't be able to just transcribe it in his head. And as he was up against a machine and not a person, he wouldn't be able to improvise.

He breathed out deeply. *So get to it, Lus; and quickly before you all perish horribly...or at least before Fomalhiwan gets drunk on over-filtered water and starts staring at you over your shoulder.* He gathered up what was left of his sang froid and carefully rolled up his sleeves. He went over to the wall of varnished teak and from a panelled siding counted out the third panel from the right and slid his finger along its edge. Here was one of the *sacred points*. The panel pushed back smoothly to reveal an interactive plasmodial display. The fan keyboard shone from below, some thirty centimetres beneath the layer of the translucent, yellowish plasmodial. Lucas shook from involuntary disgust, but there was nothing for it. He had to put his whole arm into this thing, which looked like a large cube of aspic, where inside it would be like an egg or herring. He subconsciously ran his left hand over his wrist. A fork would also be needed.

His fingers delved into the plasmodial. Then his hand. Then his wrist. And nearly his elbow too, but fortunately it came to below the edge of his sleeve. The matter was viscous, cold and just as disgusting as all other Össean equipment. Lucas's fingers had barely reached the fan keyboard when two sickle-shaped metal bands wrapped themselves around his wrist like the arms of a spiral galaxy. He could still pull out his arm...still, maybe; but instead he only looked on as needles sprung out from all along the metal hoops and attached themselves to his wrist. They were like predatory snakes.

And then the lights went out.

Lucas felt drops of cold sweat slide slowly down his back...one after another, right down his spine. Usually he wouldn't take these things too seriously, but the thought wouldn't let go that, apart from his memory, this obscure device might also fail and shoot poison into his veins.

Next to the keypad glowed an inscription in the Össean Ship which had to be answered, and a countdown — it was at exactly one hundred and fifty seconds. Lucas's fingers raced across the keypad. As had been the case on Össe, it once again paid off that he had studied so hard — it was true that there were no priests standing behind him, but in the dark and with his left hand there was no way he could have even unfolded any notes. Despite the fact that his hand was almost steady and he entered the numbers without any hesitation, he still only finished a few seconds before the time-limit ran out.

Another symbol appeared on the display and Lucas started typing. And more and more. The time-limit corresponded to the length of the answer so precisely that he could only manage it with supreme effort. The plasmodial was horribly cold. Lucas's fingers were starting to go stiff. Finally the last symbol, the fifth. Lukas cursed inwardly at the harökhüny, which were known to be five, as well as at the whole quinary system, but he wasn't surprised — after all, he was fighting an Össean Ship, the most sacred thing the Össeans possessed. And it

was going well enough. It seemed he had reached his objective because the needles were beginning to retreat. Lucas's trapped arm had another chance to make a break for freedom.

For a while he seriously considered it.

But instead he entered another code. He asked the Ship for one more service. Again five digits. Lucas's hand was now completely numb with cold - he typed from memory as he could no longer feel his fingers on the keypad. Added to that was the nervous strain. Suddenly he felt so cold that his teeth started chattering loudly. But he managed to finish typing.

From the corner of his eye he spotted light from behind the red curtain. The partition which separated the pilot's cabin disappeared into the wall. 'What the...? Mr Saruman...?' came Ranganatan's surprised voice.

Lucas heard the young pilot get up. *Flickering shadows: looking into the cabin...trying in vain to put on a light... talking to himself, panic rising in his voice.* 'But they were here.... For God's sake, where are they? Both of them gone! They've killed them. Abducted them...'

Here I am, said Lucas. Somehow he didn't notice his lips moving.

He wanted to take his arm out from the plasmodial, but the fungus offered unexpected resistance. With his left hand he groped along the teak wall, leaned his head against his forearm and tried to make out the symbols on the display. Suddenly he noticed that the circle of predatory needles was no longer there. It was slightly blurry in the plasmodial... *but all of them had definitely been buried into his wrist.* Wearily he tried to free his arm. The effort completely exhausted him.

What's more, it was too late.

More symbols. *You are putting up a fight! You haven't in the least understood the essence of this sacredness,* said the Ship.

Lucas was unable to answer it...and not just because he didn't know the quinary system. Everything within him seized up with the violent shock of emotion. *Unfortunately there's no poison in it. I'd be happily dead by now. There's gömershaül in it,* he thought.

Gömershaül. His consciousness looked over maliciously from a distance. *A massive dose of gömershaül. You'll like that the most, Lus. A sentimental melodrama! And not just that: going by the weight in your legs you've imbibed another sacred Öscean drug - evidently ökrë or laëgühr or both. Rë Akkütlix. At least there wasn't any rawë, the drug of the Enlightenment, the most disgusting thing of all, at least not that! Even so, you're in big trouble. More sweat and tears! After all those years of being abstinent, that cocktail's really going to bring the house down.*

He sobbed. For a moment he was suffocating from a giant dose of self-pity: the typical lump in the throat, the eternal problem of all women betrayed and tattooed down-and-outs. He could see his father's face right in front of him. That close. That clearly.

– Another one, Lucas, says Giles Hildebrandt, pressing hard down on his shoulder. – Both glasses, if you don't mind. Right to the bottom. Just try and spill it like you did the last time and I swear I'll inject it into you!

From the wild centrifuge of emotions which Lucas's brain had become, a monstrous anger suddenly rose to the surface. Lucas furiously pushed his father's hand from him. 'No!' he screamed. 'I've had enough of this! I don't want it any more!' At the same time, he burst into tears. Just as would be expected given the circumstances — they were tears of powerless, childish rage. And, naturally, not just at his father. There was also anger at himself...that he was no longer in control of himself.

The fragrance of an unknown soap and shampoo emanated from his father from all sides. 'Lucas. I can try to open this thing, but you have to stop struggling.'

A strange smell. *No, that's not him*, realized Lucas. Suddenly he saw that there was light all around him. That he was in the Ship. That Giles Hildebrandt had been dead for fifteen years.

Very nice, he decided sourly. He looked closely at the smooth surface of the teak wood. He leaned his face against it and wondered what was going to happen next. The first onslaught from the gömershaül subsided, like the dispersal of the first waves. They were only toxins, not active spores, but to get a dose directly into the blood is far more effective than drinking it. It was possible to stand and cry for half an hour and not remember anything about it. But that was neither here nor there now. Soon the ökrë would kick in, which had far more stable effects. And then the laëgühr had more of a physical than emotional effect. It had to be part of the mixture —that was the sharp feeling in the spine, the numbness of the tongue. In a moment everything would become unbelievably blissful. A bittersweet mood. Amazing physical relaxation. And it would last a long, long time.

The prospects were in fact not so bad.

He shook his head slowly. 'There's no need, Ash~shad,' he said hoarsely. 'If I screamed something at you, I'm sorry. It wasn't directed at you.' He noticed that Ranganatan was standing on the other side and he shuddered — the shame! But he was too dazed to be bothered about it. 'Leave me. I'm OK now. I'll read what my Ship is saying to me.'

With immense effort he focused on the new symbol. So the last time he had obviously managed to enter a meaningful answer. After all, he knew the Össeans and the system of transcription, so his subconscious, freed from its chains by the devilish mixture of alien drugs, managed somehow to put all of this knowledge together.

My name is Angaëdaë. Thank you for your sacrifice, Slate Snake. The creatures of your species normally only use me as a machine, the Ship told him.

Lucas wearily searched through his memory to see if he knew a code with a suitable phrase. *I thank you. We stand in the shadow of Akkütlixë*, he finally keyed in. If he had been honest, he'd have written something like, *You disgusting box of fungus, what gave you the idiotic idea that I won't use you as a machine?!* Fortunately, however, he didn't know the right codes for that.

The needles were gone. He slowly withdrew his arm and dried it on the velvet curtain without any scruples. His wrist was lacerated and covered in

bruises. He reckoned he wouldn't turn down a glass of water, or even some cognac, but he didn't even have the energy for that. He was really quite spaced out.

'What happened?' asked James Ranganatan. 'Who forced you to put your arm in there? The Össeans?'

Lucas's lips twisted — he wasn't ready for a proper laugh. 'Quite the opposite, James,' he said. 'I did it so that the Össeans couldn't do it to us. I talked directly to the Ship. All the external communication channels are closed. You can go...and check it.' His tongue had stopped listening to his brain. 'You can call dispatch, but no-one from outside can repro... reprogramme the Ship's brain.'

'Secret Össean codes,' said the pilot.

'I see that you...you know all about it,' muttered Lucas, heading for the chair. He collapsed into it. Just in time.

Fomalhiwan immediately came up behind him. 'This doesn't seem logical to me.'

'I'm very sorry,' chuckled Lucas. 'It seemed to me to be *quite* logical not to let ourselves get killed.' From the obtrusive scent of wet hair he knew that Fomalhiwan was leaning over him, but he didn't bother to open his eyes. Instead he focused entirely on trying to operate his tongue smoothly. 'All of you, leave me alone. The sacred Össean drugs are not life threatening. There's probably no yantrün in it, and no rawë either. And you can't talk either, Ash~shad, considering what you do to your body. So please accord me the same right.'

The fragrance stopped harassing him. He heard Ash~shad resignedly repeat his favourite speech about free will and then ask who those Össeans were, and then how Ranganatan tried none too successfully to explain to him. He fell into a blissful slumber.

And then Ranganatan was shaking his shoulders. 'Mr Saruman! Look at what the Össeans sent me. These are Ship codes too. They wanted me to enter them.'

With his numb fingers, Lucas took the strip of paper. He struggled to focus. James's face slowly came out from the mist.

'They told me I had to kill you. This code opens the transfer chamber to the passenger area,' said the young pilot.

'And you believe that?' mumbled Lucas.

'What's that?' blinked Ranganatan. But soon this leading question began to sink through. He also went quite pale. 'Are you trying to say... They... They would happily sacrifice me too?'

'You can't expect scruples from people who are planning murder.' With great effort Lucas lifted the paper to his nose and read the numbers. 'This code does indeed open the transfer chamber. As well as all of the other partitions at the same time too. It's simply logical.' He dropped his arm. 'You'd find yourself in the vacuum with us. It's better to get rid of an inconvenient witness straight away.'

'I didn't want to do it.'

'That does you credit.' Lucas let the paper drop to the floor and closed his eyes once more. It caused him increasing effort to speak coherently. He felt

cold drips of sweat on his brow, but he didn't feel ill — in fact the opposite. The second of the sacred drugs, laëgühr, was now having an effect. The lethargy that was spreading through his body was incredibly pleasant.

'What if the Össeans destroy the Ship now?'

'That'd be hard.'

'But they told me they would!'

'They were bluffing. The Ships are sacred. No Öscean would threaten them. Anyway...they cannot *destroy Angaëdaë*. They can't make contact with Her.' Lucas smiled. He placed his arm on the armrest, put his head back and enjoyed the perfect bliss. 'They can't do anything.'

'But if it's their Ship...'

'It isn't, James,' said Lucas, correcting him from his infinitely distant shore. 'Now its *my* Ship.'

A Time of Sacrifice

(part 4, chapter 20)

The Össeans aren't happy. That's for sure now.

Lucas watched the live broadcast on the religious channel – in the original version, in Össein, without a Terron translation and without a presenter. He saw Maëwënë fall. When it happened, there was almost half a minute when the telewall was blank before religious singing came from a recording. Lucas set the volume at one and waited. The music was neutral — a new-age hymn to verses from the Book of Distant Visions, nothing that would be part of a traditional mass. He saw it as an expression of embarrassment. The leading Össeans were also waiting — just as nervously as him. And that wasn't all. No-one had delivered the final incantations. The mass wasn't yet over. Everyone was aware of this.

Would Maëwënë be able to give the final words? And most importantly – would she be willing to ignore all of those apparent divergencies?

Or would she decide that – *never*?

Lucas caught himself inadvertently dragging his fingernails across the gel bandage on his forearm. *A compulsive, unconscious movement. Like when an alcoholic reaches for a glass. Obsession! Neurosis! Like when...*

No! He quickly pulled his hand away and clenched his fist. *No, this'll never happen again!* He purged himself of the disjointed images of the Ship's arched corridors, the opening spaces, the obtrusive voices. *I don't need this – to succumb to the heresy that this in some way has to do with me!* he repeated to himself, meanwhile swallowing the fear. *Never again. I'll never do it again. I don't want to know anything about it...*

Pinky arrived. She appeared from the bedroom in another of her brightly coloured t-shirts. 'I'm off. I'll bring sushi for dinner. Do you want me to get you anything?'

Lucas looked at her absently. 'No.'

'Fine.' She reached into the wardrobe for a jacket, but just then he sprang from his seat. 'No,' he repeated. '*Rë Akkütlix!* Wait. Don't go anywhere.' He blocked her way. When he saw her expression he felt he was crazy, but he didn't move from the door. He attempted a smile. 'If you left it a couple of days, maybe we could go together.'

When he saw how she lit up, a wave of despair swept over him. He had just ordered sheer hell. Pinky was capable of spending hours wandering around shopping centres looking at baby clothes. In the literature they wrote that —*the nesting instincts are caused by hormones*. He didn't have those hormones so he never went on her trips, and he was comforted by the thought that this deviant behaviour was only temporary and wouldn't leave any lasting damage, providing a sensible limit was set on the credit card. But this was now a fear of a completely different kind. Lucas had the dreadful feeling that Pinkerton shouldn't leave the house, and he knew that only a promise of that magnitude would stop her.

He led her back to the sofa and then called her favourite restaurant for some takeaway sushi to get her ready for the rest of his argument. The religious channel continued to broadcast pictures of the choir singing, interspersed with

artistic views of the interiors of well-known temples, but across the right edge of the screen ran a vertical line with an inscription in symbols: *Mass interrupted – – – wait – – – a special speech by Her Eminence the Most Honourable High Priestess will follow.* Lucas didn't wait for the food and poured himself a cognac.

'We'll go to the Central Plaza...and then we could go to the South Terraces, there's a new furniture shop there. You have to order a cot a while in advance if it has organic components, self-regulation and a microclimate, but...' Pinky took out an interactive list with a catalogue. 'I've already looked at it. They have several different models, but we have to ask ourselves whether we want there to be... Listen, can you turn off the telly?'

'No.'

Pinky was taken aback. She listened to the monotonous melody.

'Lucas, is something wrong?'

He didn't answer. He just squeezed her hand and leaned forward because Maëwënë had just appeared — earlier than their sushi. She was still wearing her ceremonial outfit; a display of overly elaborate technical gothic, ragged wings and precious metals. The cameras captured her within the pointed arch of an open observation window in one of the support vessels: the dignified high priestess under the arch of the starry sky, the personification of the Church...and at the same time the devout worshipper of something, which judging from the serious expression on her face, was going to be anything but pretty.

'I am speaking to you, sisters and brothers.... I turn to those of you who have the will to stand in the shadow of Akkütlix and listen to His Laws,' she said to the Össein Ships with all the gravity of the head of the Church. 'The sacrament has been trampled upon, the act of faith destroyed, the word rent asunder. The mass has not been completed. The sacrifice not yet accepted.' She raised her arms. 'Listen! In the spirit of the sacred Books I curse the Ship *The Green Shell*, I curse her to darkness, in the name of Akkütlix! Let her be called *The Renegade!* Let her be called *The Damned* and *The Cursed!* Let us not expect compassion and peace, because she is alive again and now she is a being without a Soul.' Her voice thundered and trembled with emotion. 'Hear me for a second time! A fissure remains in the Cosmic Circle of the Perfect Being. It is up to those of us who have not lost faith to heal the wounds left behind by *The Cursed*. And hear me for a third time! Sisters and brothers, I call upon you to join in the Sacrament of Death! In these difficult hours, the Church asks for your help and expects your extraordinary devotion.' She lowered her arms and suddenly it seemed as though she had been engulfed by grief. She continued to speak without bombastic ceremony, but this made her sound all the more urgent. 'Give what you wish and what you can. Give yourself and others. That is the will of the Church! That is the duty of everyone.' And then a final greeting, her hands on her shoulders. 'Let us welcome into eternity Akkütlix's comforting shadow,' she ended quietly as music swept over her fading words.

At that moment the bell rang — the delivery man with the dinner had arrived. Lucas automatically reached for the remote control for the telewall and

turned down the volume. While Pinky was getting the food organised, he opened the netlog.

Yourself...and others...?!

He called Sophia to tell her not to leave the house under any circumstances.

They're going over it again and again. Endless debate.

And making arrangements.

Are they planning something?

Julie Loth saw the whole group from behind two layers of safety glass and wire-screen; and despite the fact that she couldn't make out a word, she was able to guess something was going on from their rigid ears and excited gestures. A trëighrû flashed from the shadows and harmlessly struck the first of two blackboards. It was far away. A straight three metres! Outside in the corridor and behind the disinfection zone, not here in the nursery garden. It hadn't affected her, so she didn't have to resist anything, not yet, but she couldn't help noticing.

That's really what this is about? Julie didn't watch the mass, not just because the celebration was on at three in the morning in her time zone, which was that rare moment when she was able to sleep. She wouldn't have bothered watching it at five in the afternoon because she believed she had already experienced in her life too many of the Elephants' perversions; naturally the scene of Maëwënë's inglorious fall had been recorded on the netlog by the team of biologists next door before the Össeans had managed to delete it from the Network, and they came to see if she wanted to enjoy the highlight from this event with them. It was clear to her that the mass had gone badly. For the Elephants it would mean trouble on a national scale – something like a football team losing the Champions' Cup. It could even lead some from the old guard to suicide. But she hadn't expected it to be so upsetting for the youngsters in her lab.

There were three Össeans in her project – all graduates in science, all from the generation which was born on Earth and had studied there; rational, reliable, officially vetted many times. Of course, they didn't know everything – for example, *who* they were in fact working for, but the security services had recommended they work on the project, as this was a risk-free way to help allay any suspicions the Össean Church might have. They didn't seem to be dangerous. They had much more in common with their peers on Earth than with the fanatical priestly rabble from Perthün, who Julie absolutely despised. Fäes, who had been her assistant since the start of the research, was a beautiful girl with a mind like a computing centre and a wacky earthly fondness for knee-high lace-up boots. The two young men, Naënghörxos and Yärchaël, had been sent here three months ago from the assistance headquarters, when as a result of Parlüxöel's intervention the supply of original seedlings had been halted and cloning was no longer enough. As foreign nationals, Össeans were only allowed

to work in the nursery on the preparation of raw materials and were forbidden access to particularly sensitive research data, but even so, their presence was of great help. They had a wonderful feeling for working with the mycelian seedlings. Whenever Julie tried to plant the seedlings she would carefully follow the prescribed method — everything was properly measured and rechecked a hundred times — and still it often happened that the seedlings didn't take. Meanwhile *they* were always successful, even if they were just using guesswork. Julie certainly didn't love the Össeans, but this never ceased to impress her. From an early age they were used to handling mycelium and she'd have said that *they had it in their blood*, if it didn't sound so morbid in their case. Their estimates were as accurate as a virtuoso chef's.

Now, of course, they had stopped working.

Really quite unbelievable, said Julie to herself, *how a stupid political matter can bring our warring youth together*. The arrival of the two boys in spring had muddied the waters somewhat. Naënghörxos and Yärchaël could be pitied in a way because Fate had violently wrested them from the shelter of academic life and threw Fäes at their feet, which in the case of studded high boots was not such a delight. In turns they had tried coming on to Fäes and in turns had received the cold shoulder, which led to a certain animosity. As the boss, Julie spoke only Terron with them, so the two cavaliers as well as the long-eared *femme fatale* probably never imagined that she could understand Össein, so they tried to seduce each other and later insult each other in front of her. But they didn't get into fights — although Yärchaël was the more irascible of the two suitors, he was also a head smaller, while his opponent went canoeing and had more sense and bigger muscles. Even so, their relationship wasn't exactly a shining example of cooperation.

But now it seemed that everything had been forgotten. Julie saw how the three Össeans were putting their heads together. Though their discussions were animated at times, probably over some small detail, they were otherwise obviously united.

Good — that suited her. No-one was looking. She went past the tanks with a set of the individual elements of the Group of Five to the rear corner of the nursery. There was a battered desk with a filing cabinet on wheels — her occasional workplace where she sometimes typed in notes or looked at something under the magnifier so that she didn't always have to take everything straight to the lab or to her office. *A suitable secret base; a kind of advanced guard!* Julie unlocked the filing cabinet and energetically — like a proper research leader — reached into the folder where she kept a litre of bourbon. She didn't intend to pull it out to the light and admire the picture of four roses. She had it well organised. All she had to do was unscrew the top, raise the enclosed straw and tilt her head as though she was looking at some papers. There was something delightful about burning your throat with some proper whiskey. Even for a lady.

She swallowed several liberal measures and finally smiled. She straightened up, her hand once again blindly groping about in the hiding place, attempting to close the bottle again, when the door flew open behind her.

She didn't even manage to turn round, let alone think or act. It happened *immediately*. They ran those couple of metres and caught her by the elbows

from both sides. They pulled her out of her chair. She wanted to scream, but they had already stuffed a bunch of tissues into her mouth. Naënghörxos, the canoeist, also held her by the chin with his hand over her mouth. Yärchaël hung from her other elbow like an angry pinscher. She wriggled and tried to kick, but at that same moment Fäes grabbed her legs. Julie soon found herself in the air and then on the table.

On the table! Her brain tried to black out the horror, but not enough that she wasn't able to form, present, evaluate and quickly establish the working hypothesis that they were going to rape her. *Why would they want her? She, who was twenty years older, when Fäes was here? Really? Seriously? What could they need her for? Were they going to abduct her? Did they want to destroy the research? Did they find out that this laboratory was used by the Earth's secret services? Where were the damned security guards?!*

Julie sputtered.

Security. They COULDN'T CARE LESS about the security guards!

They're not interested in any escape routes.

Which means...that they're not planning on getting out alive.

Fäes took out a large roll of sticky tape and with several loops bound Julie's ankles and shins. She moved the filing cabinet out of her way and took the tape a few times around the foot of the table. Now she couldn't kick out, but she still had her fists. Julie wriggled as if she was at a snake-dancing course and tried to free her hands, at least the left one which Yärchaël was clinging to. Even with her elbows trapped she managed to grab him by the shirt and dig her fingernails into his belly, but it wasn't enough to deter him. She had always thought that the miserable imp had no strength. She was probably right, but he was mean enough to immediately kneel down on her hand with the unsporting help of gravity. Meanwhile, Fäes had quickly wrapped the tape round her and the table, like a pupating larva, loop after loop, from her knees to her waist. Then she bit off the tape, moved to the top, gagged Julie and also taped her head and tufts of hair to the table. Now any attempts at a left hook were hopeless. The imp Yärchaël hung from Julie's wrist. Fäes rocked about in her disgusting clodhoppers, disappeared under the table and waited for the two boys to dislocate her arms in such a way that they could fold her wrists against each other under the table and neatly tape them together. That was everything. *Almost.*

Fäes surfaced from beneath the table and dusted off her knees. 'Lock the door, Yärchaël,' she hissed in Össein. She leaned over Julie's face, fixed her eyes in a trëighrù and spoke briefly in Terron. 'In the name of Akkütlix! I am sorry, Professor Loth. Do not take it personally. We think highly of you and we worked very well in your team. But we considered this rationally. You on Earth have given us no choice. If we do nothing, the consequences will be terrible.' She did not bother to undo Julie's lab coat, she simply took a pair of scissors and cut across it. 'The seedlings, Naënghörxos,' she said in Össein.

Naënghörxos shuffled over. 'Are we going to give her everything?' he asked. 'Without the support of the first Three...' Her rigidly stiff ears stuck out sideways - she wasn't as on top of things as she tried to let on. 'If you start to make it easy for her, only then will there have to be more of them. *What about you? Will you lie on the aiö yourself?!*' In the meantime, she was already cutting

Julie's blouse. Her fingers were obviously trembling. 'Get on with it! Damn it, move yourself! *She only gets yantrün. Yantrün! As we said! Bring it!*

Naënghörxos ran off. Julie heard a ringing and the noise of a fan which automatically went on when an Össean switched on a radiator. *He's activating the spores! Yantrün!* Her fear changed to waves of absolute, hysterical terror. And the terror had a very specific form – microscopic images of Bärxaen tissue. *No! Not that! Not to me!* Julie tried desperately to move her bound arms, or at least to raise her head, but all that happened was that the tape dug even further into her skin. If only she had those scissors, it'd be no problem. But Fäes was also clever. She cut through her bra and then threw the scissors to Yärchaël, who placed them safely out of reach. Yärchaëla passed her the scalpel they kept for dissecting cloned rats. Fäes hesitated again, but it was impossible to say if it was because she was summoning up her courage, or because she was merely gauging the cut.

Julie went crazy. She slashed at the taping. *This isn't possible. This can't be real,* she shouted inwardly, *this can't happen here to me!* She strained with silent effort. Then she saw an indistinct movement behind the glass beside her. She strained to look over in that direction. One of the biologists would have to walk past here — a few steps from her! *Help me! Somebody help me!* she screamed in her mind. It awoke a wild hope within her, mixed with mad, futile effort — but there was no-one in the corridor of the nursery and it immediately hit her that Yärchaël would have definitely closed the polarizing walls when he locked up, so she was now completely invisible from the other side. No-one knew about her. No-one *would know* about her! Again she tensed all of her muscles, as though by doing this she could toss and jolt the table to the ground, perhaps she could make a loud enough noise to attract someone. But it was too late. The blade sank into her flesh, cut down her chest, and a second later her mind was filled with burning insanity and burning blood.

But she was still conscious. She wasn't so far gone that she would faint immediately. Now that she had reconciled herself to her task, Fäes seemed to have acquired a certain professional distance. After the superficial caudal section came another transversal one. Yärchaël took away the scalpel and handed her the clamps. Naënghörxos appeared from the other side and gave her a bowl with the seedlings. Fäes pulled away some skin, took some mycelium into her hand and put it into the bloody lake between her breasts. And now that really was everything. *Absolutely everything.*

They left her to lie there. They were no longer interested if she could free herself or not, if someone would find her there or not, or whether she died immediately of blood loss, or from an embolism after a while, or in two or three weeks from sepsis once the spores in her body had started to grow. The pain was overwhelming and cut her off from the world — it was as though a drill was pounding in her mind, but her self-preservation instincts were still intact and roused all of her senses. Julie heard one of the Össeans unlock the door. Then came a ping as the sliding panel moved to the side, the pounding of feet, a distant cry. What was going on out there? Had that sly menage-a-trois attacked the biologists? Was there fighting out there? *Where were the damned security guards?!* The sound of rapid shooting at least immediately answered *that* question.

The pain was suffocating her. The ceiling swam before her eyes. But then several things came to her. *They don't know about her. Even if the security guards stop the Össeans, there'll be a lot of confusion and it'll take them a while to find her round the corner. The mycelium was cold and slowly flowing down her neck. The paper tissues in her mouth were turning into lumps and she'd probably soon swallow them. Damn it — and this week she had forgotten to shave her legs — what rotten luck!*

And she had something in her right hand.

The whole time she had instinctively held on to it in her clenched fist. Her mind had noted that it was something valuable to be kept secret, but then hadn't had the time to assess whether with what was going on it wouldn't be simpler to just let it drop to the ground. It was the metal screw-top from her dear friend, the four-year-old, four-rose fairy godmother. A nice bonus from boozing on Four Roses at the workplace.

Julie held her breath. Whenever she tried to move her hand to get the sharp side of the cap into the tape on her wrist, another flood of tears welled up in her eyes. Her arms grew tired, but she forced herself to go on slowly. This was not a time for rashness! If that piece of metal were to slip through her fingers, she'd never forgive herself! But now the edge was digging into the band of tape, causing it to loosen. What had been impossible to tear with force before could now be ripped easily. Julie tugged at her arms and in one movement was free.

After that everything went quickly. Her free hands removed the gag. Although she could barely sit straight, she managed to push the table and herself away from the wall to the nursery table where the scissors were, and the rest was routine office work coupled with depilation. Julie then collapsed rather than climbed down from the table. And she remained under it. A scream came from outside. The pounding of feet. Shooting. The sirens from the police gliders. She had to admit that the stock moments from action films were actually very unnerving in real life. But she couldn't concern herself with that now, she had to look after herself first.

Yantrün. My God. The same as with Bärxaen...

Clots of mycelium slid down from her chest and the bleeding had almost stopped — the wound was not very deep, just enough to put the spores into. The pain subsided, though this wasn't much of a consolation to Julie. She knew too much about the biology of funghi-forming progression; for example, when mycelium began to form analgesics, this meant that the spores were becoming more active. She ignored the icy trembling of horror and in her feverish speed ripped off the remains of her sorry lab coat, and with a piece of material began to scrub off from her tattered bra everything that could still be removed by hand. Blood started to flow again and poured over the greenish slime of yantrün fungal fibre. The local anaesthesia now no longer worked as well. Julie grimaced painfully. She threw off her coat and took some gloves made from non-woven material, which were more sterile, and opened the container with her trusted friend. *A half-full bottle: the symbol of all optimists!* First of all she threw away the straw and took a good gulp. Then she leaned against the table and poured the rest of the bottle onto her wound. *Goddamn it! Alcohol kills the spores. It must!* In the debate with the forty-per-cent whiskey, the mycelian

anaesthetic lost its power. And so did she. She whined quietly and tears came to her eyes, but she was willing to sacrifice many of her erythrocytes if in return everything foreign was killed off. She left the last dregs of the miracle antidote for oral use, which was also immediately effective. She then slumped to the floor, completely exhausted. *The spirit will burn it from outside and in. It'll work. It will work! It must!* She would get that crap out of her!

The alternative was unthinkable.

She sat for some time on the ground in a complete stupor. Then voices came closer, different ones.

From behind the sliding doors the wheels of a stretcher rattled and the reflective stripes on the suits of the rescue workers flashed. That roused her. She scrambled to her feet. *Who?! Did they kill someone?* She staggered into the corridor. The main tent was at the biologists' workplace. The rescue workers removed the stretcher and lifted onto it an unresponsive Arthur Tung Nguyen with a provisionally treated open fracture and an unspecified number of cuts, and went straight back to the elevator. Two men from security shifted away from the door. A sombre older police woman secured her weapon. Steve Forrester, an immunologist, was sitting on a plastic chair amongst milky-violet drifts of shattered glass, while an emergency woman doctor patched up an injury above his eye; the glass was shatter-proof but it had been blasted by a Bunsen burner. The others huddled together at the back in varying degrees and phases of shock depending on their character and level of fortitude. Vanda Sabatini enthusiastically explained to all those around her how she in particular was in a *terrible state of shock*. Keira Smith sobbed hysterically. The majority though just trembled silently, in particular the Japanese team which had Samurai self-control as part of their national identity. And all of the Össeans were dead.

Dead. It suddenly occurred to Julie that the violet shade in the glass was Össean blood, specifically Fäes's. Fäes lay under the table with her head practically severed from her body, her face transformed into a homogeneous mixture — the direct impact of a pulse projectile, if Julie's rusty memory of forensic pathology was anything to go by. She sniggered. What did it matter. Another completely different and entirely banal fact impressed itself on her mind like a scalding iron – the shoelaces were undone on one of Fäes's horrible lace-up boots; and it struck her even then that this image might now and again waken her from her sleep. Well, better that than something even more horrible. The imp, Yärchaël, had collapsed at the doors to the prep room; as he fell he had jammed the doors open, as though Akkütlix wouldn't want to let his faithful servant go quietly to his grave. There was nothing much left of his face, but beside his flabby fingers lay a roll of sticky tape. Julie sniggered again. She thought that she might even start to have a fit of laughter. She would laugh at how she had managed to free herself. How it was that she was now walking here with a loose bra and a cut in the shape of a cross, while Akkütlix was an insect. *That she was supposed to die on the altar* – in her own lab and during work hours! But she had kept control of herself. The canoeist Naënghörxos managed to calm her down because he did not inspire laughter in any way. He lay on his stomach, quite naturally, with a clean shot through the middle of his muscular back. Would such a simple sacrifice be enough?

Her legs buckled under her. She leaned against the wall and gathered her strength to go inside and face the questioning. What could she say about it all? How could she calm people down?

You know something — the new generation of Össeans is much more dangerous than the priests from Perthün, drifted through her mind. The old Össeans were openly and unashamedly repugnant; but now they have a terrestrial veneer. Öscean fanatics in terrestrial boots. A trap for mammoths under the leaves. It hasn't gone away. It's just more difficult to see. It has lost its original cohesion.

It is amongst us.

It is everywhere.

Having know the Össeans in their pure form, she couldn't help but notice a certain change in style. Fäes's gang had attacked her and chopped up poor Arthur instead of removing him to the aiö themselves according to the old larhdökawöar traditions. It was different now for the youth. They no longer bothered about the Öscean mass, so no-one had knocked the meaning of *their own* sacrifice into their heads ; while the terrestrial respect for life was still absent. On the other hand, they were very good at learning about terrestrial pragmatism. Why spill your own blood when it can pour from others.

Naturally, there was an interesting consequence. *At such moments it was much easier for Earthlings to shoot them in time.*

She smiled inside. Nicholas Varga ran over to her, took her into the room and sat her down on a chair. 'Julie, are you all right?' Kneeling down in front of her, he took her hand. 'What happened to you? What have they done to you?' He looked into her eyes and was immediately afraid. 'I guess I don't want to know, do I? *It's that Ship.*'

She sniggered again. She could feel this expression engraving itself upon her face, transforming into a permanent wrinkle...in the crust of bitterness and age, and another layer of stone. Niki was always interested in the Össeans. He was the only local person who knew that she had spent five years at the embassy. He was the one who had got up early today to record the mass. And apparently he was the only one who had guessed what the Össeans were up to – meanwhile the others were saying that those three must have gone mad – and in blissful ignorance congratulated themselves that it was all over, when in fact it was just beginning.

'Yeah,' she half whispered. 'Get yourself a weapon.'

The rupture was healing. The divergence was converging. But the threat remained.

Maëwënë watched silently through the observation window as the sacred Circle acquired its shape. There had only been twenty standard hours since the requiem mass and its appeals – a very short period in terms of cosmic constructions, but it was already possible to see the area come alive with feverish activity. The Öscean Ships from nearby artisatellites immediately set off towards the destroyed temple. All of the Össeans from the surrounding areas left their homes and jobs and offered their help to the Church. They brought drüein, if they had it, or they sent money. The priests in the ministrant ships

coordinated the repair work and took charge of the thousands of volunteers. The temple arose once again according to the old, immutable plans...just as it should, as was inevitable. Grains of dust from Össe coalesced, scattered in a foreign world. The mirrors of drüein glittered once more in the Sun.

And at the same time – and this was even more fundamental – many were trying to avenge the shattered sacrament. From the planetary temples, the high priests were getting reports of the first hundreds of dead and injured. The victims were usually volunteers, mainly Össeans, but the priests were also forcibly dragging people to the altar more than before. Around twenty Gerdan tourists had died as Gerdans were traditionally the easiest target. But there were also Earthlings amongst the fallen. More Earthlings than would have lost their lives in the Ship, if no-one had intervened in the mass.

But would it be enough?!

With difficulty Maëwënë tried to allay her fear...a fear that all of this strenuous effort would not be enough to restore the balance and return the world to its original state. The Össean believers felt threatened — this was clear from how quickly and spontaneously they rushed to help, but she could offer them no guarantees, no promises, not even any hope. What had happened was irreversible. *The Cursed* was gone. It was now further from Earth's reach and no-one knew if the martyrs would be able to stop her. Perhaps the foreign influences would prevail. They had on this occasion.

This did not concern the Earthlings. They suffered from their own spiritual short-sightedness, which prevented them from seeing the boundary between the individual soul and the individual body. Even the most astute of them thought at most in terms of their own civilization...to the extent of a few light years and a few decades. They were unable to look beyond the edge of the Galaxy. And they were not *willing* to contend with eternity. When it came to faith, the most that could be expected from them was a blasé tolerance: *yes, please, if it amuses you: we won't laugh at you!* They quite seriously believed that Össeans were *pleased* to die on the altar, that they *enjoyed* living their lives in the shadow of a death which was dictated by necessity. If she indeed felt any regret about the *Renegade*, it was mainly regret for the dead colonists and the people from the crew; and if she felt fear, then it was fear of another similar catastrophe. For them the Soul of a Ship was a piece of paper, a mass was a folk performance. And if they had seen this unplanned epilogue when the temple collapsed and she herself fell from the ceremonial vessel, it is probable that they would have just laughed spitefully at it.

No-one on Earth would comment on the fact that the *Cursed* had immediately disappeared. Having decided that it was better to keep matters at arm's length, there was nothing simpler than to continue with this silence. If it concerned them at all, then they were probably pleased about it. They concluded that these six people had evidently freed themselves and taken control of the Ship, and now they sincerely hoped that they'd be able to escape – just as they hoped that the Össeans would be left empty handed. It was incomprehensible to them the nightmare which the idea of a thwarted sacrifice could summon up in the Össean faithful.

She was being crushed under the weight of responsibility, while being accompanied by an immense loneliness. She had to face what was

approaching, trapped between Össean fear and Earthly loftiness. The Össean believers looked up to her and waited respectfully for her decisions, but her status in no way comforted her, quite the opposite. And there was no-one on Earth who had the same interests as her. You could find there people like Hildebrandt, who saw danger in Össe, and people like the journalist Craig, who saw sensation in danger, and both of them were the better cases. The majority of Earthlings focused on their own games and cared nothing about cosmic matters. They didn't understand why it was necessary to fight hard against the Aurigiáns, why it was necessary to die on the altar, why it was necessary to be on good terms with the Ships. They did not believe in God as a real person. Yes, they were told that Akkütlix was apparently immortal, but the thoughts which should immediately come from that were never followed through to their conclusion. They never asked the simplest question.

If Akkütlix is immortal, that also means that he is still alive. If he is alive, he must be dwelling somewhere. If he is dwelling in a specific place, then it is possible to meet him.

Where was Akkütlix now?!

Perhaps they had heard that Akkütlix was supposedly sleeping, but they didn't trouble themselves with the thought that maybe he could...awaken for breakfast.