

Spirey and the Queen
a novelette by Alastair Reynolds

Space war is godawful slow. Mouser's long-range sensors had sniffed the bogey two days ago, but it had taken all that time just to creep within kill-range. I figured it had to be another dud. With ordnance, fuel and morale all low, we were ready to slink back to Tiger's Eye anyway; let one of the other thickships pick up the sweep in this sector.

So - still groggy after frogsleep - I wasn't exactly wetting myself with excitement; not even when Mouser started spiking the thick with combat-readiness psychogens. Even when we went to Attack-Con-One, all I did was pause the neurodisney I was tripping (Hellcats of Solar War Three, since you asked), slough my hammock and swim languidly up to the bridge.

"Junk", I said, looking over Yarrow's shoulder at the readout. "War debris or another of those piss-poor chondrites. Betcha."

"Sorry kid. Everything checks out."

"Hostiles?"

"Nope. Positive on the exhaust; dead ringer for the stolen ship." She traced a webbed hand across the swathe of decorations which already curled around her neck. "Want your stripes now or when we get back?"

"You actually think this'll net us a pair of tigers?"

"Damn right it will."

I nodded, and thought: she isn't necessarily wrong. No defector, no stolen military secrets reaching the Royalists. Ought to be worth a medal, maybe even a promotion.

So why did I feel something wasn't right?

"Alright," I said, hoping to drown qualms in routine. "How soon?"

"Missiles are already away, but she's five light-minutes from us, so the quacks won't reach her for six hours. Longer if she makes a run for

cover."

"Run for cover? That's a joke."

"Yeah, hilarious." Yarrow swelled one of the holographic displays until it hovered between us.

It was a map of the Swirl, tinted to show zones controlled by us or the Royalists. An enormous slowly rotating disk of primordial material, eight-hundred AU edge to edge; wide enough that light took more than four days to traverse it.

Most of the action was near the middle, in the light-hour of space around the central star Fomalhaut. Immediately around the sun was a material-free void which we called the Inner Clearing Zone, but beyond that began the Swirl proper; metal-rich lanes of dust condensing slowly into rocky planets. Both sides wanted absolute control of those planet-forming Feeding Zones - prime real estate for the day when one side beat the other and could recommence mining operations - so that was where our vast armies of wasps mainly slugged things out. We humans - Royalist and Standardist both - kept much further out, where the Swirl thinned to metal-depleted icy rubble. Even hunting the defector hadn't taken us within ten light hours of the Feeding Zones, and we'd gotten used to having a lot of empty space to ourselves. Apart from the defector, there shouldn't have been anything else out here to offer cover.

But there was. Big too, not much more than a half light-minute from the rat.

"Practically pissing distance," Yarrow observed.

"Too close for coincidence. What is it?"

"Splinter. Icy planetesimal, you want to get technical."

"Not this early in the day."

But I remembered how one of our tutors back at the academy put it:

Splinters are icy slag, spat out of the Swirl. In a few hundred thousand years there'll be a baby solar system around Fomalhaut, but there'll also be shitloads of junk surrounding it, leftovers on million-year orbits.

"Worthless to us," Yarrow said, scratching at the ribbon of black hair

which ran all the way from her brow to fluke. "But evidently not to ratty."

"What if the Royalists left supplies on the splinter? She could be aiming to refuel before the final hop to their side of the Swirl." Yarrow gave me her best withering look. "Yeah, okay," I said. "Not my smartest ever suggestion." Yarrow nodded sagely. "Ours is not to question, Spirey. Ours is to fire and forget."

Six hours after the quackheads had hared away from Mouser, Yarrow floated in the bridge, fluked tail coiled beneath. She resembled an inverted question mark, and if I'd been superstitious I'd have said that wasn't necessarily the best of omens.

"You kill me," she said.

An older pilot called Quillin had been the first to go siren - first to swap legs for tail. Yarrow followed a year later. Admittedly it made sense, an adaptation to the fluid-filled environment of a high-gee thickship. And I accepted the cardiovascular modifications that enabled us to breathe thick, as well as the biomodified skin which let us tolerate cold and vacuum far longer than any unmodified human. Not to mention the billions of molecule-sized demons which coursed through our bodies, or the combat-specific psychomodifications. But swapping your legs for a tail touched off too many queazy resonances in me. Had to admire her nerve, though.

"What?" I said.

"That neurodisney shit. Isn't a real space war good enough for you?"

"Yeah, except I don't think this is it. When was the last time one of us actually looked a Royalist in the eye?"

She shrugged. "Something like four hundred years."

"Point made. At least in Solar War Three you get some blood. See, it's all set on planetary surfaces - Titan; Europa; all those moons they've got back in Sol system. Trench warfare; hand to hand stuff. You know what adrenalin is, Yarrow?"

"Managed without it until now. And there's another thing: Don't know much about Greater Earth history, but there was never a Solar War Three."

"It's conjectural," I said. "And in any case it almost happened; they almost went to the brink."

"Almost?"

"It's set in a different timeline."

She grinned, shaking her head. "I'm telling you, you kill me."

"She made a move yet?" I asked.

"What?"

"The defector."

"Oh, we're back in reality now?" Yarrow laughed. "Sorry, this is going to be slightly less exciting than Solar War Three."

"Inconsiderate," I said. "Think the bitch would give us a run for our money." And as I spoke the weapons readout began to pulse faster and faster, like the cardiogram of a fluttering heart. "How long now?"

"One minute, give or take a few seconds."

"Want a little bet?"

Yarrow grinned, sallow in the red alert lighting. "As if I'd say no, Spirey."

So we hammered out a wager; Yarrow betting fifty tiger-tokens the rat would attempt some last-minute evasion. "Won't do her a blind bit of good," she said. "But that won't stop her. It's human nature."

Me, I suspected our target was either dead or asleep.

"Bit of an empty ritual, isn't it."

"What?"

"I mean, the attack happened the best part of five minutes ago, realtime.

The rat's already dead, and nothing we can do can influence that outcome."

Yarrow bit on a nicotine stick. "Don't get all philosophical on me, Spirey."

"Wouldn't dream of it. How long?"

"Five seconds. Four..."

She was somewhere between three and four when it happened. I remember thinking that there was something disdainful about the rat's actions: that she'd deliberately waited until the last possible moment, and that she'd dispensed with our threat with the least effort possible.

That was how it felt, anyway.

Nine of the quackheads detonated prematurely, way beyond kill-range. For a moment the tenth remained, zeroing in on the defector - but instead it failed to detonate, until it was just beyond range. For long moments there was silence, while we absorbed what had happened. Yarrow broke it, eventually.

"Guess I just made myself some money," she said.

Colonel Wendigo's hologram delegate appeared, momentarily frozen before shivering to life. With her too-clear, too-young eyes she fixed first Yarrow and then me.

"Intelligence was mistaken," she said. "Seems the defector doctored records to conceal the theft of those countermeasures. But you harmed her anyway?"

"Just," said Yarrow. "Her quackdrive's spewing out exotics like Spirey after a bad binge. No hull damage, but..."

"Assessment?"

"Making a run for the splinter."

Wendigo nodded. "And then?"

"She'll set down and make repairs." Yarrow paused, added: "Radar says there's metal on the surface. Must've been a wasp battle there, before the splinter got lobbed out of the Swirl."

The delegate nodded in my direction. "Concur, Spirey?"

"Yes sir," I said, trying to suppress the nervousness I always felt around Wendigo, even though almost all my dealings with her had been via simulations like this. Yarrow was happy to edit the conversation afterwards, inserting the correct honorifics before transmitting the result back to Tiger's Eye - but I could never free myself of the suspicion that Wendigo would somehow unravel the unedited version, with all its implicit insubordination.

Not that any of us didn't inwardly accord Wendigo all the respect she was due. She'd nearly died in the Royalist strike against Tiger's Eye fifteen years ago - the one in which my mother was killed. Actual attacks against our two mutually opposed comet bases were rare, not happening much more than every other generation - more gestures of spite than anything else. But this had been an especially bloody one, killing an eighth of our number and opening city-sized portions of our base to vacuum. Wendigo was caught in the thick of the kinetic attack.

Now she was chimeric, lashed together by cybernetics. Not much of this showed externally - except that the healed parts of her were too flawless, more porcelain than flesh. Wendigo had not allowed the surgeons to regrow her arms. Story was she lost them trying to pull one of the injured through an open airlock, back into the pressurised zone. She'd almost made it, fighting against the gale of escaping air. Then some no-brainer hit the emergency door control, and when the lock shut it took Wendigo's arms off at the shoulder, along with the head of the person she was saving. She wore prosthetics now; gauntleted in chrome.

"She'll get there a day ahead of us," I said. "Even if we pull twenty gees."

"And probably gone to ground by the time you get there."

"Should we try a live capture?"

Yarrow backed me up with a nod. "It's not exactly been possible before."

The delegate bided her time before answering. "Admire your dedication," she said, after a suitably convincing pause. "But you'd only be postponing a death sentence. Kinder to kill her now, don't you think?"

Mouser entered kill-range nineteen hours later, a wide pseudo-orbit three thousand clicks out. The splinter - seventeen by twelve clicks across - was far too small to be seen as anything other than a twinkling speck, like a grain of sugar at arm's length. But everything we wanted to know was clear: topology, gravimetrics, and the site of the downed ship. That wasn't hard. Quite apart from the fact that it hadn't buried itself completely, it was hot as hell.

"Doesn't look like the kind of touchdown you walk away from," Yarrow said. "Think they ejected?"

"No way." Yarrow sketched a finger through a holographic enlargement of the ship, roughly cone-shaped, vaguely streamlined just like our own thickship, to punch through the Swirl's thickest gas belts. "Clock those dorsal hatches. Evac pods still in place."

She was right. The pods could have flung them clear before the crash, but evidently they hadn't had time to bail out. The ensuing impact - even cushioned by the ship's manifold of thick - probably hadn't been survivable.

But there was no point taking chances.

Quackheads would have finished the job, but we'd used up our stock. Mouser carried a particle beam battery, but we'd have to move uncomfortably close to the splinter before using it. What remained were the molemines, and they should have been perfectly adequate. We dropped fifteen of them, embedded in a cloud of two hundred identical decoys. Three of the fifteen were designated to dust the wreck, while the remaining twelve would bury deeper into the splinter and attempt to shatter it completely.

That at least was the idea.

It all happened very quickly, not in the dreamy slow-motion of a neurodisney. One instant the molemines were descending toward the splinter, and then the next instant they weren't there. Spacing the two instants had been an almost subliminally brief flash.

"Starting to get sick of this," Yarrow said.

Mouser digested what had happened. Nothing had emanated from the wreck. Instead, there'd been a single pulse of energy seemingly from the entire volume of space around the splinter. Particle weapons, Mouser diagnosed. Probably single-use drones, each tinier than a pebble but numbering hundreds or even thousands. The defector must have sewn them on her approach.

But she hadn't touched us.

"It was a warning," I said. "Telling us to back off."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

"I think the warning's on its way."

I stared at her blankly for a moment, before registering what she had already seen.

That arcing from the splinter was something too fast to stop, something against which our minimally-armoured thickship had no defense, not even the option of flight.

Yarrow started to mouth some exotic profanity she'd reserved for precisely this moment. There was an eardrum punishing bang and Mouser shuddered - but we weren't suddenly chewing vacuum.

And that was very bad news indeed.

Antiship missiles come in two main flavours: quackheads and sporeheads.

You know which immediately after the weapon has hit. If you're still thinking - if you still exist - chances are it's a sporehead. And at that point your problems are just beginning.

Invasive demon attack, Mouser shrieked. Breather manifold compromised... which meant something uninvited was in the thick. That was the point of a sporehead: to deliver hostile demons into an enemy ship.

"Mm," Yarrow said. "I think it might be time to suit up."

Except our suits were a good minute's swim away back into the bowels of

Mouser, through twisty ducts which might skirt the infection site. Having no choice, we swam anyway, Yarrow insisting I take the lead even though she was a quicker swimmer. And somewhere - it's impossible to know exactly where - demons reached us, seeping invisibly into our bodies via the thick. I couldn't pinpoint the moment; it wasn't as if there was a jagged transition between lucidity and demon-manipulated irrationality. Yarrow and me were terrified enough as it was. All I know is it began with a mild agoraphilia; an urge to escape Mouser's flooded confines. Gradually it phased into claustrophobia, and then became fully-fledged panic, making Mouser seem as malevolent as a haunted house.

Yarrow ignored her suit, clawing the hull until her fingers spooled blood. Fight it," I said. "It's just demons triggering our fear centers, trying to drive us out!"

Of course, knowing so didn't help.

Somehow I stayed still long enough for my suit to slither on. Once sealed, I purged the tainted thick with the suit's own supply - but I knew it wasn't going to help much. The phobia already showed that hostile demons had reached my brain, and now it was even draping itself in a flimsy logic. Beyond the ship we'd be able to think rationally. It would only take a few minutes for the thick's own demons to neutralise the invader - and then we'd be able to reboard. Complete delusion, of course. But that was the point.

When something like coherent thought returned I was outside.

Nothing but me and the splinter.

The urge to escape was only a background anxiety, a flock of stomach-butterflies urging me against returning. Was that demon-manipulated fear or pure common sense? I couldn't tell - but what I knew was that the splinter seemed to be beckoning me forward, and I didn't feel like resisting. Sensible, surely: we'd exhausted all conventional channels of attack against the defector, and now all that remained was to confront her on the territory she'd staked as her own.

But where was Yarrow?

Suit's alarm chimed. Maybe demons were still subjugating my emotions, because I didn't react with my normal speed. I just blinked, licked my lips and stifled a yawn.

"Yeah, what?"

Suit informed me; something massing slightly less than me, two clicks closer to the splinter, on a slightly different orbit. I knew it was Yarrow; also that something was wrong. She was drifting. In my blackout I'd undoubtedly programmed suit to take me down, but Yarrow appeared not to have done anything except bail out.

I jettied closer. And then saw why she hadn't programmed her suit. Would have been tricky. She wasn't wearing one.

I hit ice an hour later.

Cradling Yarrow - she wasn't much of a burden, in the splinter's weak gravity - I took stock. I wasn't ready to mourn her, not just yet. If I could quickly get her to the medical suite aboard the defector's ship there was a good chance of revival. But where the hell was the wreck? Squandering its last reserves of fuel, suit had deposited us in a clearing among the graveyard of ruined wasps. Half submerged in ice, they looked like scorched scrap-iron sculptures; phantoms from an entomologist's worst nightmare. So there'd been a battle here, back when the splinter was just another drifting lump of ice. Even if the thing was seamed with silicates or organics, it would not have had any commercial potential to either side. But it might still have had strategic value, and that was why the wasps had gone to war on its surface. Trouble was - as we'd known before the attack - the corpses covered the entire surface, so there was no guessing where we'd come down. The wrecked ship might be just over the nearest hillock - or another ten kilometers in any direction.

I felt the ground rumble under me first. Hunting for the source of the vibration, I saw a quill of vapour reach into the sky, no more than a klick away. It was a geyser of superheated ice.

I dropped Yarrow and hit dirt, suit limiting motion so that I didn't bounce. Looking back, I expected to see a dimple in the permafrost, where some rogue had impacted.

Instead, the geyser was still present. Worse, it was coming steadily closer, etching a neat trench. A beam weapon was making that plume, I realised - like one of the party batteries aboard ship. Then I wised up. That was Mouser. The demons had worked their way into its command infrastructure, reprogramming it to turn against us. Now Mouser worked for the defector.

I slung Yarrow over one shoulder and loped away from the boiling impact point. Fast as the geyser moved, its path was predictable. If I made enough lateral distance the death-line would sear past - Except the damn thing turned to follow me.

Now a second flanked it, shepherding me through the thickest zone of wasp corpses. Did they have some significance for the defector? Maybe so, but I couldn't see it. The corpses were a rough mix of machines from both sides: Royalist wasps marked with yellow shell symbols, ours with grinning tiger-heads. Generation thirty five units, if I remembered Mil-Hist, when both sides toyed with pulse-hardened optical thinkware. In the seventy-odd subsequent generations there'd been numerous further jumps: ur-quantum logics, full-spectrum reflective wasp armour, chameleoflage, quackdrive powerplants and every weapon system the human mind could devise. We'd tried to encourage the wasps to make these innovations for themselves, but they never managed to evolve beyond strictly linear extrapolation. Which was good, or else we human observers would have been out of a job.

Not that it really mattered now.

A third geyser had erupted behind me, and a fourth ahead, boxing me in. Slowly, the four points of fire began to converge. I stopped, but kept holding Yarrow. I listened to my own breathing, harsh above the basso tremor of the drumming ground.

Then steel gripped my shoulder.

She said we'd be safer underground. Also that she had friends below who might be able to do something for Yarrow.

"If you weren't defecting," I began, as we entered a roughly hewn tunnel into the splinter's crust, "what the hell was it?"

"Trying to get home. Least that was the idea, until we realised Tiger's Eye didn't want us back." Wendigo knuckled the ice with one of her steel fists, her suit cut away to expose her prosthetics. "Which is when we decided to head here."

"You almost made it," I said. Then added: "Where were you trying to get home from?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Then you did defect."

"We were trying to make contact with the Royalists. Trying to make peace."

In the increasingly dim light I saw her shrug. "It was a long-shot, conducted in secrecy. When the mission went wrong, it was easy for Tiger's Eye to say we'd been defecting."

"Bullshit."

"I wish."

"But you sent us."

"Not in person."

"But your delegate - "

"Could be made to say anything my enemies chose. Even to order my own execution as a traitor."

We paused to switch on our suit lamps. "Maybe you'd better tell me everything."

"Gladly," Wendigo said. "But if this hasn't been a good day so far, I'm

afraid it's about to go downhill."

There'd been a clique of high-ranking officers who believed that the Swirl war was intrinsically unwinnable. Privy to information not released to the populace, and able to see through Tiger's Eye's own carefully filtered internal propaganda, they realised that negotiation - contact - was the only way out.

"Of course, not everyone agreed. Some of my adversaries wanted us dead before we even reached the enemy." Wendigo sighed. "Too much in love with the war's stability - and who can blame them? Life for the average citizen in Tiger's Eye isn't that bad. We're given a clear goal to fight for, and the likelihood of any one of us dying in a Royalist attack is small enough to ignore. The idea that all of that might be about to end after four hundred years; that we all might have to rethink our roles... well, it didn't go down too well."

"About as welcome as a fart in a vac-suit, right?"

Wendigo nodded. "I think you understand."

"Go on."

Her expedition - Wendigo and two pilots - had crossed the Swirl unchallenged. Approaching the Royalist cometary base, they'd expected to be questioned - perhaps even fired upon - but nothing had happened. When they entered the stronghold, they understood why.

"Deserted," Wendigo said. "Or we thought so, until we found the Royalists." She expectorated the word. "Feral, practically. Naked, grubby subhumans. Their wasps feed them and treat their illnesses, but that's as far as it goes. They grunt, and they've been toilet-trained, but they're not quite the military geniuses we've been led to believe. "

"Then..."

"The war is...nothing we thought." Wendigo laughed, but the confines of her helmet rendered it more like the squawking of a jack-in-the-box. "And now you wonder why home didn't want us coming back?"

Before Wendigo could explain further, we reached a wider bisecting tunnel, glowing with its own insipid chlorine-coloured light. Rather than the meandering bore of the tunnel in which we walked, it was as cleanly cut as a rifle barrel. In one direction the tunnel was blocked by a bullet-nosed cylinder, closely modelled on the trains in Tiger's Eye. Seemingly of its own volition, the train lit up and edged forward, a door puckering open. "Get in," Wendigo said. "And lose the helmet. You won't need it where we're going. "

Inside I coughed phlegmy ropes of thick from my lungs.

Transitioning between breathing modes isn't pleasant - more so since I'd breathed nothing but thick for six weeks. But after a few lungfuls of the train's antiseptic air, the dark blotches around my vision began to

recede.

Wendigo did likewise, only with more dignity.

Yarrow lay on one of the couches, stiff as a statue carved in soap. Her skin was cyanotic, a single all-enveloping bruise. Pilot skin is a better vacuum barrier than the usual stuff, and vacuum itself is a far better insulator against heat loss than air. But where I'd lifted her my gloves had embossed fingerprints into her flesh. Worse was the broad stripe of ruined skin down her back and the left side of her tail, where she had lain against the splinter's surface.

But her head looked better. When she hit vac, biomodified seals would have shut within her skull, barricading every possible avenue for pressure, moisture or blood loss. Even her eyelids would have fused tight. Implanted glands in her carotid artery would have released droves of friendly demons, quickly replicating via nonessential tissue in order to weave a protective scaffold through her brain.

Good for an hour or so - maybe longer. But only if the hostile demons hadn't screwed with Yarrow's native ones.

"You were about to tell me about the wasps," I said, as curious to hear the rest of Wendigo's story as I was to blank my doubts about Yarrow.

"Well, it's rather simple. They got smart."

"The wasps?"

She clicked the steel fingers of her hand. "Overnight. Just over a hundred years ago."

I tried not to look too overwhelmed. Intriguing as all this was, I wasn't treating it as anything other than an outlandish attempt to distract me from the main reason for my being here, which remained killing the defector. Wendigo's story explained some of the anomalies we'd so far encountered - but that didn't rule out a dozen more plausible explanations. Meanwhile, it was amusing to try and catch her out. "So they got smart," I said. "You mean our wasps, or theirs?"

"Doesn't mean a damn anymore. Maybe it just happened to one machine in the Swirl, and then spread like wildfire to all the trillions of other wasps. Or maybe it happened simultaneously, in response to some stimulus we can't even guess at."

"Want to hazard a guess?"

"I don't think it's important, Spirey." She sounded like she wanted to put a lot of distance between herself and this topic. "Point is it happened. Afterwards, distinctions between us and the enemy - at least from the point of view of the wasps - completely vanished."

"Workers of the Swirl unite."

"Something like that. And you understand why they kept it to themselves, don't you?"

I nodded, more to keep her talking.

"They needed us, of course. They still lacked something. Creativity, I guess you'd call it. They could evolve themselves incrementally, but they couldn't make the kind of sweeping evolutionary jumps we'd been feeding them."

"So we had to keep thinking there was a war on."

Wendigo looked pleased. "Right. We'd keep supplying them with innovations, and they'd keep pretending to do each other in." She halted, scratching at the unwrinkled skin around one eye with the alloy finger of one hand.

"Clever little bastards."

We'd arrived somewhere.

It was a chamber, large as any enclosed space I'd ever seen. I felt gravity; too much of the stuff. The whole chamber must have been gimbaled and spun within the splinter, like one of the gee-load simulators back in Tiger's Eye. The vaulted ceiling, hundreds of meters 'above', now seemed vertiginously higher. Apart from its apex, it was covered in intricate frescos - dozens of pictorial facets, each a cycling hologram. They told the history of the Swirl, beginning with its condensation from interstellar gas, the ignition of its star, the onset of planetary formation. Then the action cut to the arrival of the first Standardist wasp, programmed to dive into the Swirl and breed like a rabbit, so that one day there'd be a sufficiently huge population to begin mining the thing; winnowing out metals, silicates and precious organics for the folks back home. 'Course, it never happened like that. The Royalists wanted in on the action, so they sent their own wasps, programmed to attack ours. The rest is history. The frescos showed the war's beginning, and then a little while later the arrival of the first human observers, beamed across space as pure genetic data, destined to be born in artificial wombs in hollowed out comet-cores, raised and educated by wasps, imprinted with the best tactical and strategic knowledge available. Thereafter they taught the wasps. From then on things hotted up, because the observers weren't limited by years of timelag. They were able to intervene in wasp evolution in realtime.

That ought to have been it, because by then we were pretty up to date, give or take four hundred years of the same.

But the frescos carried on.

There was one representing some future state of the Swirl, neatly ordered into a ticking orrery of variously sized and patterned worlds, some with beautiful rings or moon systems. And finally - like Mediaeval conceptions of Eden - there was a triptych of lush planetary landscapes, with wierd animals in the foreground, mountains and soaring cloudbanks behind.

"Seen enough to convince you?" Wendigo asked.

"No," I said, not entirely sure whether I believed myself. Craning my neck, I looked up toward the apex.

Something hung from it.

What it was was a pair of wasps, fused together. One was complete, the other was only fully-formed, seemingly in the process of splitting from the complete wasp. The fused pair looked to have been smothered in molten bronze, left to dry in waxy nodules.

"You know what this is?" Wendigo asked.

"I'm waiting."

"Wasp art."

I looked at her.

"This wasp was destroyed mid-replication," Wendigo continued. "While it was giving birth. Evidently the image has some poignancy for them. How I'd put it in human terms I don't know..."

"Don't even think about it."

I followed her across the marbled terrazzo which floored the chamber. Arched porticos surrounded it, each of which held a single dead wasp, their body designs covering a hundred generations of evolution. If Wendigo was right, I supposed these dead wasps were the equivalent of venerated old ancestors peering from oil paintings. But I wasn't convinced just yet.

"You knew this place existed?"

She nodded. "Or else we'd be dead. The wasps back in the Royalist stronghold told us we could seek sanctuary here, if home turned against us."

"And the wasps - what? Own this place?"

"And hundreds like it, although the others are already far beyond the Swirl, on their way out to the halo. Since the wasps came to consciousness, most of the splinters flung out of the Swirl have been infiltrated. Shrewd of them - all along, we've never suspected that the splinters are anything other than cosmic trash."

"Nice decor, anyway."

"Florentine," Wendigo said, nodding. "The frescos are in the style of a painter called Masaccio; one of Brunelleschi's disciples. Remember, the wasps had access to all the cultural data we brought with us from GE - every byte of it. That's how they work, I think - by constructing things according to arbitrary existing templates."

"And there's a point to all this?"

"I've been here precisely one day longer than you, Spirey."

"But you said you had friends here; people who could help Yarrow."

"They're here alright," Wendigo said, shaking her head. "Just hope you're ready for them."

On some unspoken cue they emerged, spilling from a door which until then I'd mistaken for one of the surrounding porticos. I flinched, acting on years of training. Although wasps have never intentionally harmed a human being - even the enemy's wasps - they're nonetheless powerful, dangerous machines. There were twelve of them; divided equally between Standardist and Royalist units. Six-legged, their two-meter long, segmented alloy bodies sprouted weapons, sensors and specialized manipulators. So far so familiar, except that the way the wasps moved was subtly wrong. It was as if the machines choreographed themselves, their bodies defining the extremities of a much larger form which I sensed more than saw.

The twelve whisked across the floor.

"They are - or rather it is - a queen," Wendigo said. "From what I've gathered, there's one queen for every splinter. Splinterqueens, I call

them."

The swarm partially surrounded us now - but retained the brooding sense of oneness.

"She told you all this?"

"Her demons did, yes." Wendigo tapped the side of her head. "I got a dose after our ship crashed. You got one after we hit your ship. It was a standard sporehead from our arsenal, but the Splinterqueen loaded it with her own demons. For the moment that's how she speaks to us - via symbols woven by demons."

"Take your word for it."

Wendigo shrugged. "No need to."

And suddenly I knew. It was like eavesdropping a topologist's fever dream - only much stranger. The burst of Queen's speech couldn't have lasted more than a tenth of a second, but its after-images seemed to persist much longer, and I had the start of a migraine before it had ended. But like Wendigo had implied before, I sensed planning - that every thought was merely a step toward some distant goal, the way each statement in a mathematical proof implies some final QED.

Something big indeed.

"You deal with that shit?"

"My chimeric parts must filter a lot."

"And she understands you?"

"We get by."

"Good," I said. "Then ask her about Yarrow."

Wendigo nodded and closed both eyes, entering intense rapport with the Queen. What followed happened quickly: six of her components detaching from the extended form and swarming into the train we had just exited. A moment later they emerged with Yarrow, elevated on a loom formed from dozens of wasp manipulators.

"What happens now?"

"They'll establish a physical connection to her neural demons," Wendigo said. "So that they can map the damage."

One of the six reared up and gently positioned its blunt, anvil-shaped 'head' directly above Yarrow's frost-mottled scalp. Then the wasp made eight nodding movements, so quickly that the motion was only a series of punctuated blurs. Looking down, I saw eight bloodless puncture marks on Yarrow's head. Another wasp replaced the driller and repeated the procedure, executing its own blurlike nods. This time, glistening fibers trailed from Yarrow's eight puncture points into the wasp, which looked as if it was sucking spaghetti from my compatriot's skull.

Long minutes of silence followed, while I waited for some kind of report.

"It isn't good," Wendigo said eventually.

"Show me."

And I got a jolt of Queen's speech, feeling myself inside Yarrow's hermetically sealed head, feeling the chill that had gasped against her brain core, despite her pilot augs. I sensed the two intermingled looms of native and foreign demons, webbing the shattered matrix of her consciousness.

I also sensed - what? Doubt?

"She's pretty far gone, Spirey."

"Tell the Queen to do what she can."

"Oh, she will. Now she's glimpsed Yarrow's mind, she'll do all she can not to lose it. Minds mean a lot to her - particularly in view of what the Splinterqueens have in mind for the future. But don't expect miracles."

"Why not? We seem to be standing in one."

"Then you're prepared to believe some of what I've said?"

"What it means," I started to say -

But I didn't finish the sentence. As I was speaking the whole chamber shook violently, almost dashing us off our feet.

"What was that?"

Wendigo's eyes glazed again, briefly.

"Your ship," she said. "It just self-destructed."

"What?"

A picture of what remained of Mouser formed in my head: a dulling nebula, embedding the splinter. "The order to self-destruct came from Tiger's Eye," Wendigo said. "It cut straight to the ship's quackdrive subsystems, at a level the demons couldn't rescind. I imagine they were rather hoping you'd have landed by the time the order arrived. The blast would have destroyed the splinter."

"You're saying home just tried to kill us?"

"Put it like this," Wendigo said. "Now might not be a bad time to rethink your loyalties."

Tiger's Eye had failed this time - but they wouldn't stop there. In three hours they'd learn of their mistake, and three or more hours after that we would learn of their countermove, whatever it happened to be.

"She'll do something, won't she? I mean, the wasps wouldn't go to the trouble of building this place only to have Tiger's Eye wipe it out."

"Not much she can do," Wendigo said, after communing with the Queen. "If home choose to use kinetics against us - and they're the only weapon which could hit us from so far - then there really is no possible defense. And remember there are a hundred other worlds like this, in or on their way to the halo. Losing one would make very little difference."

Something in me snapped. "Do you have to sound so damned indifferent to it all? Here we are talking about how we're likely to be dead in a few hours and you're acting like it's only a minor inconvenience." I fought to keep the edge of hysteria out of my voice. "How do you know so much anyway?"

You're mighty well informed for someone who's only been here a day, Wendigo."

She regarded me for a moment, almost blanching under the slap of insubordination. Then Wendigo nodded, without anger. "Yes, you're right to ask how I know so much. You can't have failed to notice how hard we crashed. My pilots took the worst."

"They died?"

Hesitation. "One at least - Sorrel. But the other, Quillin, wasn't in the ship when the wasps pulled me out of the wreckage. At the time I assumed they'd already retrieved her."

"Doesn't look that way."

"No, it doesn't, and..." She paused, then shook her head. "Quillin was why we crashed. She tried to gain control, to stop us landing..." Again Wendigo trailed off, as if unsure how far to commit herself. "I think Quillin was a plant, put aboard by those who disagreed with the peace initiative. She'd been primed - altered psychologically to reject any Royalist peace overtures."

"She was born like that - with a stick up her ass."

"She's dead, I'm sure of it."

Wendigo almost sounded glad.

"Still, you made it."

"Just, Spirey. I'm the humpty who fell off the wall twice. This time they couldn't find all the pieces. The Splinterqueen pumped me full of demons; gallons of them. They're all that's holding me together, but I don't think they can keep it up forever. When I speak to you, at least some of what you hear is the Splinterqueen herself. I'm not really sure where you draw the line."

I let that sink in, then said: "About the ship. Repair systems would have booted when you hit. Any idea when she'll fly again?"

"Another day, day and a half."

"Too damn long."

"Just being realistic. If there's a way to get off the splinter within the next six hours, ship isn't it."

I wasn't giving up so easily. "What if wasps help? They could supply

materials. Should speed things."

Again that glazed look. "Alright," she said. "It's done. But I'm afraid wasp assistance won't make enough difference. We're still looking at twelve hours."

"So I won't start any long disneys." I shrugged. "And maybe we can hold out until then." She looked unconvinced, so I said: "Tell me the rest. Everything you know about this place. Why, for starters."

"Why?"

"Wendigo, I don't have the faintest damn idea what any of us are doing here. All I do know is that in six hours I could be suffering from acute existence failure. When that happens, I'd be happier knowing what was so important I had to die for it."

Wendigo looked toward Yarrow, still nursed by the detached elements of the Queen. "I don't think our being here will help her," she said. "In which case, maybe I should show you something." Something like a grin appeared on Wendigo's face. "After all, it isn't as if we don't have time to kill."

So we rode the train again, this time burrowing deeper into the splinter. "This place," Wendigo said, "and the hundred others already beyond the Swirl - and the hundreds, thousands more which will follow - are arks. They're carrying life into the halo; the cloud of left-over material around the Swirl."

"Colonisation, right?"

"Not quite. When the time's right the splinters will return to the Swirl. Only there won't be one any more. There'll be a solar system, fully formed. When the colonisation does begin, it will be of new worlds around Fomalhaut, seeded from the life-templates held in the splinters."

I raised a hand. "I was following you there...until you mentioned life-templates."

"Patience, Spirey."

Wendigo's timing couldn't have been better, because at that moment light flooded the train's brushed-steel interior.

The tunnel had become a glass tube, anchored to one wall of a vast cavern suffused in emerald light. The far wall was tiered, draping rafts of foliage. Our wall was steep and forested, oddly-curved waterfalls draining into stepped pools. The waterfalls were bent away from true 'vertical' by coriolis force, evidence that - just like the first chamber - this entire space was independently spinning within the splinter. The stepped pools were surrounded by patches of grass, peppered with moving forms which might have been naked people. There were wasps as well - tending the people.

As the people grew clearer I had that flinch you get when your gaze strays onto someone with a shocking disfigurement. Roughly half of them were males.

"Imported Royalists," Wendigo said. "Remember I said they'd turned feral? Seems there was an accident, not long after the wasps made the jump to sentience. A rogue demon, or something. Decimated them."

"They have both sexes."

"You'll get used to it, Spirey - conceptually anyway. Tiger's Eye wasn't always exclusively female, you know that? It was just something we evolved into. Began with you pilots, matter of fact. Fem physiology made sense for pilots - women were smaller, had better gee-load tolerance, better stress psychodynamics and required fewer consumables than males. We were products of bio-engineering from the outset, so it wasn't hard to make the jump to an all-fem culture."

"Makes me want to...I don't know." I forced my gaze away from the Royalists. "Puke or something. It's like going back to having hair all over your body."

"That's because you grew up with something different."

"Did they always have two sexes?"

"Probably not. What I do know is that the wasps bred from the survivors,

but something wasn't right. Apart from the reversion to dimorphism, the children didn't grow up normally. Some part of their brains hadn't developed right."

"Meaning what?"

"They're morons. The wasps keep trying to fix things of course. That's why the Splinterqueen will do everything to help Yarrow - and us, of course. If she can study or even capture our thought patterns - and the demons make that possible - maybe she can use them to imprint consciousness back onto the Royalists. Like the Florentine architecture I said they copied, right? That was one template, and Yarrow's mind will be another."

"That's supposed to cheer me up?"

"Look on the bright side. A while from now, there might be a whole generation of people who think along lines laid down by Yarrow."

"Scary thought." Then wondered why I was able to crack a joke, with destruction looming so close in the future. "Listen, I still don't get it. What makes them want to bring life to the Swirl?"

"It seems to boil down to two...imperatives, I suppose you'd call them. The first's simple enough. When wasps were first opening up Greater Earth's solar system, back in the mid Twenty First Century, we sought the best way for them to function in large numbers without supervision. We studied insect colonies and imprinted the most useful rules straight into the wasps' programming. More than six hundred years later, those rules have percolated to the top. Now the wasps aren't content merely to organize themselves along patterns derived from living prototypes. Now they want to become - or at least give rise to - living forms of their own."

"Life envy."

"Or something very like it."

I thought about what Wendigo had told me, then said: "What about the second imperative?"

"Trickier. Much trickier." She looked at me hard, as if debating whether to broach whatever subject was on her mind. "Spirey, what do you know about Solar War Three?"

The wasps had given up on Yarrow while we traveled. They'd left her on a corniced plinth in the middle of the terrazzo; poised on her back, arms folded across her chest, tail and fluke draping asymmetrically over one side.

"She didn't necessarily fail, Spirey," Wendigo said, taking my arm in her own unyielding grip. "That's only Yarrow's body, after all."

"The Queen managed to read her mind?"

There was no opportunity to answer. The chamber shook, more harshly than when Mouser had gone up. The vibration keeled us to the floor, Wendigo's metal arms cracking against the tessellated marble. As if turning in her sleep, Yarrow slipped from the plinth.

"Home," Wendigo said, raising herself from the floor.

"Impossible. Can't have been more than two hours since Mouser was hit. There shouldn't be any response for another four!"

"They probably decided to attack us regardless of the outcome of their last attempt. Kinetics."

"You sure there's no defense?"

"Only good luck." The ground lashed at us again, but Wendigo stayed standing. The roar which followed the first impact was subsiding, fading into a constant but bearable complaint of tortured ice.

"The first probably only chipped us - maybe gouged a big crater, but I doubt that it ruptured any of the pressurised areas. Next time could be worse."

And there would be a next time, no doubt about it. Kinetics were the only weapon capable of hitting us at such long range, and they did so by sheer force of numbers. Each kinetic was a speck of iron, accelerated to a hair's breadth below the speed of light. Relativity bequeathed the speck a

disproportionate amount of kinetic energy - enough that only a few impacts would rip the splinter to shreds. Of course, only one in a thousand of the kinetics they fired at us would hit - but that didn't matter. They'd just fire ten thousand.

"Wendigo," I said. "Can we get to your ship?"

"No," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "We can reach it, but it isn't fixed yet."

"Doesn't matter. We'll lift on auxiliaries. Once we're clear of the splinter we'll be safe."

"No good, either. Hull's breached - it'll be at least an hour before even part of it can be pressurised."

"And it'll take us an hour or so just to get there, won't it? So why are we waiting?"

"Sorry, Spirey, but - "

Her words were drowned by the arrival of the second kinetic. This one seemed to hit harder, the impact trailing away into aftergroans. The holographic frescos were all dark now. Then - ever so slowly - the ceiling ruptured, a huge mandible of ice probing into the chamber. We'd lost the false gravity; now all that remained was the splinter's feeble pull, dragging us obliquely toward one wall.

"But what?" I shouted in Wendigo's direction.

For a moment she had that absent look which said she was more Queen than Wendigo. Then she nodded in reluctant acceptance. "Alright, Spirey. We play it your way. Not because I think our chances are great. Just that I'd rather be doing something."

"Amen to that."

It was uncomfortably dim now, much of the illumination having come from the endlessly cycling frescos. But it wasn't silent. Though the groan of the chamber's off-kilter spin was gone now, what remained was almost as bad: the agonized shearing of the ice which lay beyond us. Helped by wasps, we made it to the train. I carried Yarrow's corpse, but at the door Wendigo said: "Leave her."

"No way."

"She's dead, Spirey. Everything of her that mattered, the Splinterqueen already saved. You have to accept that. It was enough that you brought her here, don't you understand? Carrying her now would only lessen your chances - and that would really have pissed her off."

Some alien part of me allowed the wasps take the corpse. Then we were inside, helmeted up and breathing thick.

As the train picked up speed, I glanced out the window, intent on seeing the Queen one last time. It should have been too dark, but the chamber looked bright. For a moment I presumed the frescos had come to life again, but then something about the scene's unreal intensity told me the Queen was weaving this image in my head. She hovered above the debris-strewn terrazzo - except that this was more than the Queen I had seen before. This was - what?

How she saw herself?

Ten of her twelve wasp composites were now back together, arranged in constantly shifting formation. They now seemed more living than machine, with diaphonous sunwings, chitin-black bodies, fur-sheened limbs and sensors, and eyes which were faceted crystalline globes, sparkling in the chamber's false light. That wasn't all. Before, I'd sensed the Queen as something implied by her composites. Now I didn't need to imagine her. Like a ghost in which the composites hung, she loomed vast in the chamber, multiwinged and brooding -

And then we were gone.

We sped toward the surface for the next few minutes, waiting for the impact of the next kinetic. When it hit, the train's cushioned ride smothered the concussion. For a moment I thought we'd made it, then the machine began to decelerate slowly to a dead halt. Wendigo convened with the Queen and told me the line was blocked. We disembarked into vacuum.

Ahead, the tunnel ended in a wall of jumbled ice.

After a few minutes we found a way through the obstruction, Wendigo wrenching aside boulders larger than either of us. "We're only half a klick from the surface," she said, as we emerged into the unblocked tunnel beyond. She pointed ahead, to what might have been a scotoma of absolute blackness against the milky darkness of the tunnel.

"After that, a klick overland to the wreck." She paused. "Realise we can't go home, Spirey. Now more than ever."

"Not exactly spoilt for choice, are we."

"No. It has to be the halo, of course. It's where the splinter's headed anyway; just means we'll get there ahead of schedule. There are other Splinterqueens out there, and at the very least they'll want to keep us alive. Possibly other humans as well - others who made the same discovery as us, and knew there was no going home."

"Not to mention Royalists."

"That troubles you, doesn't it?"

"I'll deal with it," I said, pushing forward.

The tunnel was nearly horizontal, and with the splinter's weak gravity it was easy to make the distance to the surface. Emerging, Fomalhaut glared down at us, a white-cored bloodshot eye surrounded by the wrinklelike dust lanes of the inner Swirl. Limbed in red, wasp corpses marred the landscape.

"I don't see the ship."

Wendigo pointed to a piece of blank caramel-colored horizon. "Curvature's too great. We won't see it until we're almost on top of it."

"Hope you're right."

"Trust me. I know this place like, well..." Wendigo regarded one of her limbs. "Like the back of my hand."

"Encourage me, why don't you."

Three or four hundred meters later we crested a scallop-shaped rise of ice and halted. We could see the ship now. It didn't look in much better shape than when Yarrow and I had scoped it from Mouser.

"I don't see any wasps."

"Too dangerous for them to stay on the surface," Wendigo said.

"That's cheering. I hope the remaining damage is cosmetic," I said.

"Because if it isn't - "

Suddenly I wasn't talking to anyone.

Wendigo was gone. After a moment I saw her, lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the hillock. Her guts stretched away like a rusty comet-tail, half way to the next promontary.

Quillin was fifty meters ahead, risen from the concealment of a chondrite boulder.

When Wendigo had mentioned her, I'd put her out of mind as any kind of threat. How could she pose any danger beyond the inside of a thickship, when she'd traded her legs for a tail and fluke, just like Yarrow? On dry land, she'd be no more mobile than a seal pup. Well, that was how I'd figured things.

But I'd reckoned without Quillin's suit.

Unlike Yarrow's - unlike any siren suit I'd ever seen - it sprouted legs. Mechanized, they emerged from the hip, making no concessions to human anatomy. The legs were long enough to lift Quillin's tail completely free of the ice. My gaze tracked up her body, registering the crossbow which she held in a double-handed grip.

"I'm sorry," Quillin's deep voice boomed in my skull. "Check-in's closed."

"Wendigo said you might be a problem."

"Wise up. It was staged from the moment we reached the Royalist stronghold." Still keeping the bow on me, she began to lurch across the ice. "The ferals were actors, playing dumb. The wasps were programmed to feed us bullshit."

"It isn't a Royalist trick, Quillin."

"Shit. See I'm gonna have to kill you as well."

The ground jarred, more violently than before. A nimbus of white light puffed above the horizon, evidence of an impact on the splinter's far side. Quillin stumbled, but her legs corrected the accident before it tripped her forward.

"I don't know if you're keeping up with current events," I said. "But that's our own side."

"Maybe you didn't think hard enough. Why did wasps in the Swirl get smart before the trillions of wasps back in Sol System? Should have been the other way round."

"Yeah?"

"Of course, Spirey. GE's wasps had a massive head-start." She shrugged, but the bow stayed rigidly pointed. "Okay, war sped up wasp evolution here. But that shouldn't have made so much difference. That's where the story breaks down."

"Not quite."

"What?"

"Something Wendigo told me. About what she called the second imperative. I guess it wasn't something she found out until she went underground."

"Yeah? Astonish me."

Well, something astonished Quillin at that point - but I was only marginally less surprised by it myself. An explosion of ice, and a mass of swiftly-moving metal erupting from the ground around her. The wasp corpses were partially dismembered, blasted and half-melted - but they still managed to drag Quillin to the ground. For a moment she thrashed, kicking up plumes of frost. Then the whole mass lay deathly still, and it was just me, the ice and a lot of metal and blood.

The Queen must have coaxed activity out of a few of the wasp corpses, ordering them to use their last reserves of power to take out Quillin. Thanks, Queen.

But no cigar. Quillin hadn't necessarily meant to shoot me at that point, but - bless her - she had anyway. The bolt had transected me with the precision of one of the Queen's theorems, somewhere below my sternum. Gut-shot. The blood on the ice was my own.

I tried moving.

A couple of light-years away I saw my body undergo a frail little shiver. It didn't hurt, but there was nothing in the way of proprioceptive feedback to indicate I'd actually managed to twitch any part of my body. Quillin was moving too.

Wriggling, that is, since her suit's legs had been cleanly ripped away by the wasps. Other than that she didn't look seriously injured. Ten or so meters from me, she flopped around like a maggot and groped for her bow. What remained of it anyway.

Chalk one to the good guys.

By which time I was moving, executing a marginally quicker version of Quillin's slug crawl. I couldn't stand up - there are limits to what pilot physiology can cope with - but my legs gave me leverage she lacked.

"Give up, Spirey. You have a head-start on me, and right now you're a little faster - but that ship's still a long way off." Quillin took a moment to catch her breath. "Think you can sustain that pace? Gonna need to, you don't want me catching up."

"Plan on rolling over me until I suffocate?"

"That's an option. If this doesn't kill you first."

Enough of her remained in my field-of-view to see what she meant. Something sharp and bladelike had sprung from her wrist, a bayonet projecting half a meter ahead of her hand. It looked like a nasty little toy - but I did my best to push it out of mind and get on with the job of crawling toward the ship. It was no more than two hundred meters away now - what little of it protruded above the ice. The external airlock was already open, ready to clamp shut as soon as I wriggled inside -

"You never finished telling me, Spirey."

"Telling you what?"

"About this - what did you call it? The second imperative?"

"Oh, that." I halted and snatched breath. "Before I go on, I want you to know I'm only telling you this to piss you off."

"Whatever bakes your cake."

"Alright," I said. "Then I'll begin by saying you were right. Greater Earth's wasps should have made the jump to sentience long before those in the Swirl, simply because they'd had longer to evolve. And that's what happened."

Quillin coughed, like gravel in a bucket. "Pardon?"

"They beat us to it. About a century and a half ago. Across Sol system, within just a few hours, every single wasp woke up and announced its intelligence to the nearest human being it could find. Like babies reaching for the first thing they see." I stopped, sucking in deep lungfuls. The wreck had to be closer now - but it hardly looked it. Quillin, by contrast, looked awfully close now - and that blade awfully sharp.

"So the wasps woke," I said, damned if she wasn't going to hear the whole story. "And that got some people scared. So much, some of them got to attacking the wasps. Some of their shots went wide, because within a day the whole system was one big shooting match. Not just humans against wasps - but humans against humans." Less than fifty meters now, across much smoother ground than we'd so far traversed. "Things just escalated. Ten days after Solar War Three began, only a few ships and habitats were still transmitting. They didn't last long."

"Crap," Quillin said - but she sounded less cocksure than she had a few moments before. "There was a war back then, but it never escalated into a full-blown Solar War."

"No. It went the whole hog. From then on every signal we ever got from GE was concocted by wasps. They daren't break the news to us - at least not immediately. We've only been allowed to find out because we're never going home. Guilt, Wendigo called it. They couldn't let it happen again."

"What about our wasps?"

"Isn't it obvious? A while later the wasps here made the same jump to sentience - presumably because they'd been shown the right moves by the others. Difference was, ours kept it quiet. Can't exactly blame them, can you?"

There was nothing from Quillin for a while, both of us concentrating on the last patch of ice before Wendigo's ship.

"I suppose you have an explanation for this too," she said eventually, swiping her tail against the ground. "C'mon, blow my mind."

So I told her what I knew. "They're bringing life to the Swirl. Sooner than you think, too. Once this charade of a war is done, the wasps breed in earnest. Trillions out there now, but in a few decades it'll be billions of trillions. They'll outweigh a good-sized planet. In a way the Swirl will have become sentient. It'll be directing its own evolution."

I spared Quillin the details - how the wasps would arrest the existing processes of planetary formation so that they could begin anew, only this time according to a plan. Left to its own devices, the Swirl would contract down to a solar system comprised solely of small, rocky planets - but such a system could never support life over billions of years. Instead, the wasps would exploit the system's innate chaos to tip it toward a state where it would give rise to at least two much larger worlds - planets as massive as Jupiter or Saturn, capable of shepherding left-over rubble into tidy, world-avoiding orbits. Mass extinctions had no place in the Splinterqueens' vision of future life.

But I guessed Quillin probably didn't care.

"Why are you hurrying, Spirey?" She asked, between harsh grunts as she propelled herself forward. "The ship isn't going anywhere."

The edge of the open airlock was a meter above the ice. My fingers probed

over the rim, followed by the crest of my battered helmet. Just lifting myself into the lock's lit interior seemed to require all the energy I'd already expended in the crawl. Somehow I managed to get half my body length into the lock.

Which is when Quillin reached me.

There wasn't much pain when she dug the bayonet into my ankle; just a form of cold I hadn't imagined before, even lying on the ice. Quillin jerked the embedded blade to and forth, and the knot of cold seemed to reach out little feelers, into my foot and lower leg. I sensed she wanted to retract the blade for another stab, but my suit armour was gripping it tight. The bayonet taking her weight, Quillin lofted her bulk over the rim of the lock. I tried kicking her away, but the skewered leg no longer felt a part of me.

"You're dead," she whispered.

"News to me."

Her eyes rolled wide, then locked on me with renewed venom. She gave the bayonet a violent twist. "So tell me one thing. That story - bullshit, or what?"

"I'll tell you," I said. "But first consider this." Before she could react I reached out and palmed a glowing panel set in the lock wall. The panel whisked aside, revealing a mushroom-shaped red button. "You know that story they told about Wendigo, how she lost her arms?"

"You weren't meant to swallow that hero guff, Spirey."

"No? Well get a load of this. My hand's on the emergency pressurisation control, Quillin. When I hit it, the outer door's going to slide down quicker than you can blink."

She looked at my hand, then down at her wrist, still attached to my ankle via the jammed bayonet. Slowly the situation sunk in. "Close the door, Spirey, and you'll be a leg short."

"And you an arm, Quillin."

"Stalemate, then."

"Not quite. See, which of us is more likely to survive? Me inside, with all the medical systems aboard this ship, or you all on your lonesome outside? Frankly, I don't think it's any contest."

Her eyes opened wider. Quillin gave a shriek of anger and entered one final furious wrestling match with the bayonet.

I managed to laugh. "As for your question, it's true, every word of it." Then, with all the calm I could muster, I thumbed the control. "Pisser, isn't it."

I made it, of course.

Several minutes after the closing of the door, demons had lathered a protective cocoon around the stump and stomach wound. They allowed me no pain - only a muggy sense of detachment. Enough of my mind remained sharp to think about my escape - problematic given that the ship still wasn't fixed.

Eventually I remembered the evac pods.

They were made to kick away from the ship fast, if some quackdrive system went on the fritz. They had thrusters for that; nothing fancy, but here they'd serve another purpose. They'd boost me from the splinter, punch me out of its grav well.

So I did it.

Snuggled into a pod and blew out of the wreck, feeling the gee-load even within the thick. It didn't last long. On the evac pod's cam I watched the splinter drop away until it was pebble-sized. The main body of the kinetic attack was hitting it by then, impacts every ten or so seconds. After a minute of that the splinter just came apart. Afterwards, there was only a sooty veil where it had been, and then only the Swirl.

I hoped the Queen had made it. I guess it was within her power to transmit what counted of herself out to sisters in the halo. If so, there was a chance for Yarrow as well. I'd find out eventually. Afterwards, I used the

pod's remaining fuel to inject me into a slow elliptical orbit, one that would graze the halo in a mere fifty or sixty years. That didn't bother me. I wanted to close my eyes and let the thick nurse me whole again - and sleep an awful long time.

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This story first appeared in Interzone.