**Royalty Amid an Empty Nothing**

Helia awoke with a gasp. Sweat ran down her face suddenly, and her vision was blurred beyond recognition.

Where was she?

Her hands shot out reaching blindly around her. They touched something cold and metal.

“Ah. You are finally awake.” A cold voice said from what seemed like miles away.

“Where am I?” She asked, still feeling around.

The metal was smooth and curved but not part of an object she recognized. She knocked her hand against it, but it didn't make any recognizable noise.

“Oh. You might have a couple of moments of disorientation. I take it this is your first cold sleep?” The voice asked.

She stopped flailing around and turned red as she remembered where she was. She was heading towards the Scion of the Entity the Alliance had assigned to her. This was a great honor, one of the greatest a scientist of any race or nationality could ever experience. And here she was, blubbering and flailing around…

“There is no need to be embarrassed. I'm sure there was some… reason the Alliance chose you for this exchange.” The voice said. Helia was having trouble understanding its cadiance, but there was a layer of sarcasm she thought she detected in that statement that she didn't like.

She got to her feet, the world still a dull gray blur around her, and straightened her clothing.

“So we are out of sleep then. How close are we to the Scion?” She asked the general direction of the voice she had heard.

“By your perception? Simply a few minutes longer. The engines must recharge.” The voice said.

Her eyesight seemed to be returning. As she rubbed her hands against her eyes her surroundings came into view.

She was in a tiny cell, barely big enough three people. The walls were curved at odd geometric angles, and seemed to move slightly before her eyes. There was no sign of any cold sleep device or any trace of the other speaker.

She frowned, looking around the cell a second time, looking for some sort of latch or doorway that she had missed. There was none. She took a breath and ran her hand through her hair, happing to stare at the ceiling as she did so. It as well was bleak and featureless, however, there was some trace of illumination coming from its featureless angles.

Is this some sort of test? He hadn't seemed too pleased when they had presented her as the exchange candidate. That was hardly her fault though right? She grimaced. When she thought of how many years she had slaved at her work, just to be subjected to such an impassionate acceptance…

She consciously tried to dismiss those thoughts. She had of course spent months studying what the Alliance knew about this Entity. All machine. The memories came back to her.

She shook her head and sat down on the floor, staring at the wall. Hell it was surprising that it even spoke to her.

She tried to think back on the meeting and found that the memories were coming quite clearly now. She remembered The Conference, and her own nervousness to be included in such an event. Now more than memories came back to her, a flood of emotions, disgust at the Entity known as Megareeth, or at least its clone, and hatred at the Heronians for their deception.

She clenched her hands. Gods, she had never anticipated how powerless she would feel so far away from the conflict. True, she had never been on the front lines, but she lived in the Alliance, and all worlds had felt the effect of the thing the Ebrin Collective had devolved into.

A sudden thought occurred to her. There was something that she could do, her entire purpose here infact, at least in the eyes of the upper Alliance. She felt through her pockets but was shocked to feel nothing in them.

A voice suddenly came from the walls. “I warned them against any espionage the last time. But I'm not surprised they didn't listen. I will assume for now that you were only tacitly involved...”

She got to her feet quickly and looked around for a hole or speaking device, but it was clear there was none. She felt the need to defend herself.

“I knew nothing about...”

“Don't lie. The devices have been repurposed. There is no need to worry about them any more.” The voice said.

She thought hard, wondering what she was supposed to say to that. Her fingers twisting themselves around a lock of hair. Her hand came away in shock. Unsure whether she was feeling things right, or for some reason was still disoriented from the sleep, she tossed her hair in front of her face.

No, it could not be denied. Her hair was a good inch longer than it had been.

The Entity, or its representative had been fine in responding to her questions up until now. There was no reason not to ask, yet for some reason she felt very out of control of the situation. It seems there was no amount of studying one could do for coming into contact with an Entity.

“How long was I in cold sleep?” She asked.

“We were in cold sleep for a year.” The voice replied uncannily fast after the question had left her lips.

Shock ran over her and she covered her mouth with her hand to keep back a cry. A whole year? A whole year? How many people had died on countless worlds? How many discoveries had been made without her? What would her colleagues think, knowing she had spent a whole year doing… nothing!

“But your Scion then, its here? A light year away?” She asked. She didn't know what she would do if it replied that more cold sleep was necessary.

“Not quite. Its actually five hundred and twenty six light years away.”

Five… hundred? She collapsed to the ground.

No. She had signed up to help the cause. She had signed up to learn from the most intellegent being known. She had signed up to help people. Five hundred light years… even at the speed of light… Everyone she ever knew or loved, her parents, her brother, they would all be gone. The war, hell even the whole Alliance might not be there after five hundred years. And that was one way! And to say nothing of the time dilation….

A chill ran through her entire being and she could not keep silent, even if the Entity was offended.

“No!” She cried. “Don't put me back to sleep!” She said, running to the wall and pounding on it in desperation. “Don't make the jump!”

However, this time there was no reply.

The hair on her neck started to raise, and palpably, yet invisibly she felt something shift in the room.

The engines!

“Entity, whatever you call yourself! You can't jump! It would ruin everything! You can't do it!” She cried again, still hammering on the wall in the vain hope that the thing was still monitoring her. Tears were now streaming down her face uncontrollably.

“There is no need to worry.” The voice responded, sounding somewhat distant.

There was a further click and a mosquito hum started, soon reaching inaudible levels. The floor shook just slightly, the only indication that they were actually moving she had felt since becoming conscious. The build up was more than palpable now, it was oppressive. There was nothing visual that she could see, no sound except the previous hum, no smells or feel or any change in the complexion of the craft's walls, but she felt an invisible force close in on her, as if threatening to destroy her.

The wall in front of her bulged and a somewhat human face emerged from the wall slowly. Following it was a humanoid shell, the same form the Entity had taken at the Conference.

She started to throw herself on the ground, ready to plead to the neigh god to not make the jump if needed.

As she did so, she felt restrained by some invisible force and remained on her feet.

The shell stood in front of her pale emotionless eyes watching her. It hands were raised, possibly the source of the force, but they were bent, not outstretched as it asking her to stop. Overall it almost seemed like the shell felt… awkward?

“I said there is no need to worry. I no longer need to use such primitive tools. We will be traveling by instantaneous displacement for the rest of the journey.” The shell said, lowering its hands.

She coughed, and shamefully wiped the tears from her face, painfully aware of how stupid she must look to the being. “Truely? You have such technology?” She asked in wonder.

The shell looked at the corer of the cell for a moment as if not wanting to make eye contact with her.

“For centuries. Your own Alliance has it as well, if only in its infant stage...” It said, now cocking its head as if trying to hear something faint.

She frowned, staring at the shell. “The Alliance doesn't have that kind of technology. The best we have is close to C and cold sleep...” She said trailing off. She realized she just disagreed with the Entity, and gulped. The shock and fear had already ruined all the lessons she had tried to synthesize about interacting with the being.

The shell shrugged. It was decidedly human reaction, but it was so unexpectedly so, that she again found herself unable to respond. It was clear that the information that the Alliance had on this Entity was either completely false, or only applied to some subcomponent of it.

“W-when are we going to jump?” She asked, unable to keep the emotion from her question.

“We just did.” The shell said, straightening to its full height.

“What!” She cried, looking around for windows which obviously didn't exist to confirm the statement.

The Entity stared at her for a brief second, during which an uncomfortable silent hung in the cell. She started to notice how close she was to the thing…

Suddenly the world around her unveiled itself, the walls shimmering then disappearing into nothingness. She and the Entity hung in space, surrounded by pinpricks on all sides. Directly behind them she could feel the heat from a star. Her mouth opened in awe.

The shell stepped forward and looked beyond her.

She turned around, a shimmer of the material betraying its presence as it filtered the light to viewable levels. The background was brilliant white, running past her and what seemed like through her, in violent searing purity. Even through whatever shielding the craft had, she could just barely feel the tremendous heat of the star hovering what seemed like mere miles away.

Pitch black against the churning plasma hung an amorphous crescent, what she could only assume were sensors appearing and disappearing briefly around its body. Her mouth remained open as she her mind tried to comprehend just how large it was. There was nothing to compare it to. There was no fixed point on its body to observe as they got closer. She could only stare and watch as they moved closer and closer, until the darkness of the Scion's shadow engulfed them, dwarfing them in its unimaginable size.

“We have arrived. Welcome to Scion prime. Welcome home.” The shell said. And for a brief second, Helia thought she could make out a smile on the thing's face.